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## Special Issue on Alai

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# Alai and Nostalgic Lyricism

Dian Li

(Sichuan University, University of Arizona)

**Abstract:**

In his poetry and fiction, Alai creates a historiography of Eastern Tibet complete with the grandeur and magnificence of the past. It is a historiography motivated and energized by nostalgic lyricism, which helps to locate and construct a symbolic Tibetan ethnicity. Nostalgic lyricism is the inversion of the loss, the compensation of the lack, and the articulation of alternatives against the discontent of the present. Such is the meaning of Alai's writing to his readers and to the world.

**Key words:** Nostalgia, lyricism, symbolic ethnicity, minority literature

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The Twentieth Century Began with a Futuristic Utopia and Ended with Nostalgia.

— Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

In a recent essay[1] meant to introduce to western readers the theme of the transformational change in Chinese society over the last fifty years, the novelist Yu Hua (who held the esteemed title of "writer in residence" at Beijing Normal University's International Writing Center before Alai) first offers a series of mini-narratives, some news reporting and others personal anecdotes, of the new life in China, covering areas such as housing and digital money, and then he goes on to describe how a "mood of nostalgia" has swept through the country. Two kinds of people are the hardest hit by nostalgia, according to Yu Hua, those of the poor who yearn for the simpler and more equitable past because they have reaped few benefits from waves of economic prosperity, and those of the successful who constantly worry about the status of their newly accumulated wealth, ill-gotten or otherwise, and wish they could start over.

1 Yu Hua, "'Human Impulses Run Riot': China's Shocking Pace of Change," *The Guardian,* September 6, 2018.

Thus, by way of his acute intuition as a fiction writer and his uncanny perception as a cultural critic, Yu Hua measures—quite accurately, in my opinion—the societal pulse of China in one broad stroke. However, Yu Hua is hardly alone to unmask the "mood of nostalgia" as an articulation of discontent with the present. He is adding a voice to the past-looking trend of thought among some Chinese intellectuals, provisionally named "Re-experiencing the 1980s" (*chongwen bashi niandai*), whose key motivation is reconstructing the decade as a compensational therapy. The 1980s, on the other hand, had its own "mood of nostalgia," which embodied the literature of "search for roots" (*xungen wenxue*), and which produced writers such as Mo Yan and Han Shaogong who, by reenacting history with spectacles of the wonderous and the magical, convinced us that the lives of our grandfathers were more exciting and more fulfilling than our own. Obviously, nostalgia is not the exclusive purview of the writers of the 1980s either, because its traces can be found in the mapping of literature everywhere, such as in the lyrical tradition of classical Chinese literature as demonstrated by David Wang,[2] or as in Lu Xun's foundational texts for modern Chinese literature. In a masterful close reading of "My Hometown" (Guxiang), Tang Xiaobing uncovers how nostalgia serves to motivate a paradigmatic narrative about the anguish and despair of first-generation modern Chinese intellectual while negotiating "the historical conflict between different realities and knowledge systems." (Tang 200) Nostalgia as psychobiography of the consciousness torn between the past and the present, Tang Xiaobing further argues, is the very condition of modern Chinese realist fiction.

Tang Xiaobing's framing of nostalgia as psychobiography brings up the hidden connection of nostalgia with lyricism, which is the lens necessary for us to look at Alai's works, because the fictional world that he has created is entirely set on time gone by. This is a world that Alai builds with poise and style, complete with grandeur and magnificence; it is the work of rich historical imagination, less concerned with verisimilitude to past events, but rather a sort of invested exploration of the tension between what has been and what could have been. From *Red Poppies* (*Chen'ai luoding*, 1998) to *Empty Mountains* (*Kong shan*, 2005-2009), we see Alai repeatedly engaging a narrative strategy that emphasizes the spatiality of history against its linearity in order to produce a kind of "synchronic

2 David Der-Wei Wang, *The Lyrical in Epic Time: Modern Chinese Intellectuals and Artists through the 1949 Crisis* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015), 1-41.

historiography"[3] that challenges the ideology of history writing as total rupture. The key to untangle Alai's elaborate historiography is the profound sense of loss and the rumination of its meaning, as he somewhat ruefully reveals his motivation to us in the following passage:

> I wrote Red Poppies in this small, remote town, which is actually its setting. The town is terribly Sinified, although it is surrounded by the villages and places in the story. ... But I know, the entire process of writing this novel filled me with nostalgia: I was homesick while being at home. Not only because the small town already offers a different life, even if in the wilderness, in the deepest of the mountains, life has also changed shape. My native place has totally lost its original look. Its heroic times of romance, courage, and bravery have long gone . . . and it has been going through a transitional period from one civilization to another while the mentality of its people is murky and dark. This novel, therefore, is the effort of a native in search of his spiritual home. (Alai 2002)

In a significant way, Alai continues the homebound journey started by Lu Xun. This is a journey built into the cultural logic of change and reform in twentieth-century China through the relentless pursuit of modernity in its various forms and understandings. Once a familiar view of cyclical history is replaced by that of linear history, nostalgia is a natural and, one could argue, necessary response in its function of articulating the sense of loss, which, as irrevocable as loss is, still commands meaning in the construction of an individual's subjectivity and his or her new relationship with a changing social order. In this connection, the function of nostalgia is the questioning of the ideology of history writing as progress for its own sake; nostalgia imagines ways of escaping the trappings of historical writing on a more personal and experiential dimension.

Of course, I am aware of how some existing scholarship has judged nostalgia rather harshly, viewing it as conservative or even reactionary for its narrative impulse of looking at the past for answers to the problems of the present, such as Frederic James's well-known critique of nostalgia and postmodernism. (Jameson 1991) On the other hand, the Hegelian version of linear history and its

3 I borrow this term from Howard Choy, see his "In Question of an 'I': Identity and Idiocy in Alai's *Red Poppies,"* in Lauran R. Hartley and Patricia Schiaffin-Vedani, eds., *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change* (Durham: Duke UP, 2008), 225-235.

underpinnings of European modernity are not without their own critics.[4] That the ideology of progressive history should not be exempt from scrutiny is beyond question, and more important, when nostalgia is faulted for a utopian tendency against the march of history, we may not forget that progressive history always yields to the lure of utopia in its own legitimation. The difference is between rational certainty and affective vacillation when coming to the employment of utopia. Consider the metaphor of "chen'ai" (dust) that Alai has used repeatedly in the titles and the texts of his works. A conventional trope that conveys the passage of time and the transience of history, Alai skillfully reemploys it to suggest the irrevocability of historical progress and the consequent regrettable implications in the present by alternating between "settled" and "unsettled" dust (chen'ai luoding and luobuding de chen'ai). It is within this fissure that Alai is able to construct a fresh historiography against history as we know it by invokes strong nostalgic emotions on the basis of traditional aesthetics of the past and the modern sensibility of loss.

Evidently, the history we know of Eastern Tibet and its people is an "embittered history" in the sense that it is replete with omissions, errors, and even suppressions, to which Alai responds with lyrical re-articulation that focuses on the experiences of "subjectivity encountering itself," as Hegel would say, which is defined by Jonathan Culler as a sort of lyrical performance that "acts iterably through repeated readings" which inscribes itself on personal and cultural memory. (Culler 2015) We can trace Alai's readings of his people and culture of the Aba region in his poetry, which began his literary career. From the onset, such readings are based on a complicated relationship with the native place in which the question of "who am I" figures prominently. This stanza comes from the poem "Mountains, or A Hymn about Myself," which opens Alai's only collection of poetry:

> I am myself
> But I am not myself
> I am my brother, my lover
> And my son, my blood relatives
> I am my compatriots in the mountains
> And those connected to the villagers of my birth

4 See, for example, Marcos Piason Natali's article "History and the Politics of Nostalgia," *Iowa Journal of Cultural Studies,* 5 (Fall 20014), 10-26. For nostalgia and English literature, see John J. Su, *Ethics and Nostalgia in the Contemporary Novel* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2005).

I am myself when I use the name given by my father
I am not myself when I am called Alai
Which is a gift from Fate (Alai, 2016)

The pathos of the poem reminds one of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," but the celebration of oneself is not egoistic but meditative, revealing the complexity of the speaker's self-identification, which is rendered into a reflective discussion of his multiple names. The concealment of his birth name[5] suggests, among other things, the vast unexplored cultural memory that the speaker has started to feel weighing upon him, from which "Alai" exists to measure the distance. An identification must have a name, for naming is the way we acquire meaning by the power of language, but language can reveal as well as conceal. It is the suspected concealment of his multiple selves that motivates Alai to embark on a journey of seeking and finding in his poetry. A lonely traveler looms large as Alai counts his steps from village to village across the Grand Ruoergai Prairie, marveling at the magnificence of life unfolding in its singular moment and pondering the possibility of engendering a frozen history. But Alai offers his most potent lyrical enunciation in his sightings of the common and the familiar, such as the experience of epiphany described in the poem "Those Wild Grown Flowers." After a detailed depiction of some nameless flowers randomly climbing up the hills, Alai writes: "Today, when I read an illustrated pharmacopoeia / An outage occurred at Barkam, which enabled me to see / How those wild flowers struggled free from dust / Teeming with the minerals from the hidden springs / They flash the brilliance of fire." This pharmacopoeia, the speaker notes later, is written by Tibetan Lamas. The allegory of recovery and reconnection embodied in those lines is abundantly clear. Equally illuminating is the idea that the mind's eye sees what the physical eye cannot, but what the mind's eye sees is the result of the accidental rupture of a modern convenience. We read again Alai's favorite metaphor of dust, which is given a meaning encased in another round of metaphors.

What makes Alai unique in his nostalgic journey to find himself is his rising awareness of himself as a minority subject and of the challenge of constructing such a position with Chinese, the language of the majority. He is writing a minor literature, which, according Deleuze and Guattari, must exhibit the characteristics of "the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the individual to a

5 One suspects Alai's birth name is not Chinese, because his father is Hui and his mother is Tibetan.

political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation."[6] The minority subject thus naturally assumes a posture of defiance but can easily subject himself to essentialist narrative closure, a temptation that Alai seems to resist in his nostalgic lyricism. While he inscribes himself into the cultural geography of his birth place by recounting in vivid detail the land-bound life of his ancestors and their descendants, foregrounding religious rites and mythicized nature, he does not recognize any one of them as an essence of Tibetan cultural identity. In fact, it is the distance from those cultural practices—in time and of space—that helps to produce the emotions of admiration and longing that radiates from his every poem and every fictional or historical narrative.

If a nostalgic longing is at the heart of Alai's lyricism, it does not necessarily compel us to emulate the cultural practices in toto, but it does form a central component of his construction of a symbolic Tibetan ethnicity. Symbolic Ethnicity is a term invented by the American sociologist Herbert J. Gans to explain new ethnic identity formations in the contemporary Unites States, which is defined as "a nostalgic allegiance to the culture of the immigrant generation, or that of the old country; a love for and a pride in a tradition that can be felt without having to be incorporated in everyday behavior." (Gans 9) In most cases, the process of symbolic ethnicity involves a person's willful association of his ethnicity with iconic elements of the culture from which he originated. In this way, ethnicity is symbolically modified and deployed as one is becoming an ethnic subject. Despite the vastly different political contexts, the condition of writing for Alai is not dissimilar to that of a contemporary American minority writer, say Toni Morrison: they write in the language of the majority, they come from a minority culture that must constantly justify its own legitimacy, and they inherit a past that always seeks historical reckoning. Most importantly, they migrated internally within their country and share the experiences of living interculturally yet with the acute sense of their own ethnicity under the threat of erasure. Therefore, that the theory of symbolic ethnicity is transferrable is beyond argument, and to see how it works in Alai's writing, let us take a close look at his short story "Sophora Blossoms" (Alai 2005)

"Sophora Blossoms" is a story of internal migration set against the background of China's rapid urbanization in recent times. The theme of homesickness for people moving from the country to the city is a familiar one but Alai's blending it with an ethnic content adds layers of narrative complexity. Xielaban was an aging Tibetan

6 Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Kafka: Towards a Minor Literature,* trans. Danna Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 18.

man just reluctantly resettled in a city with the help of his younger son, who was a local police captain. The story opens with Xielaban waking up from his sleep, not knowing "where his body is at the moment." But he was very aware where his mind was—the unnamed village where he came from. The flashing of memories of a life left behind filled his day—the scent of soil, the rustling grass, and the bear under his gunsight, against which he despondently took stock of his confined living in the city. Then a young man showed up at the parking lot where Xielaban was its lone watchman. The young man was Tibetan and spoke a hometown dialect that immediately endeared him. They bantered and made the hometown food "Sophora blossom buns" together, but the young man left as quickly as he came, and Xielaban appeared to have returned to his lonely life, but I would argue, with a totally new sense of self-awareness.

The central theme of the short story is how Xielaban—the only character with a name—is consumed by nostalgia and how nostalgia changes him. This theme progresses along the narrative tension that Alai builds with a series of incidences that highlight Xielaban's awkwardness in urban living. The excessive lights and sounds made him dizzy, he felt sick from the oppressive smells of rubber and gasoline in the parking lot, and he would rather sleep on a bearskin on the floor than on an elevated bed. His respect for his Chinese daughter-in-law was forever lost when he discovered that her shining teeth were fake and when she selfishly paraded him like an exotic curiosity before her colleagues. He even demonstrated a visible disdain towards his son, who had a job of law and order that he was reluctant to accept and whose crack down on the unsavory elements of the night took away what little pleasure he had. While Xielaban was voicing his grievances as a new urban resident, he was quick to realize that there was no return as his son reminded him of the restrictive force of the Hukou (residence registration) system.

Xielaban's unexpected encounter with the young man is a turning point from nostalgic lyricism to symbolic ethnicity. That the young man is not given a name is not an insignificant detail. The incident is an index to Xielaban's memory as he stimulates his nostalgic imaginations for both concretization and abstraction. It is also not insignificant that their encounter starts with a passing conversation conducted in a Tibetan dialect, which Xielaban only recognized after the fact, reflecting a double alienation from Chinese and standard Tibetan languages.[7] Most

7 Carlos Rojas gives an interesting reading of the story on the notion of signifying silence in Alai's use of Chinese. See his "Alai and the Linguistic Politics of Internal Diaspora," in Jing Tsu and David Der-wei Wang, eds., Global Chinese Literature: Critical Essays (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 115-132.

interestingly, the friendship of Xielaban and the young man was cemented by their communal preparation and partaking of "Sophora blossom buns" deep at night, which seems less about the food itself but more about the cultural rites to which it is indexed. We notice that Sophora blossom is emphasized in the process, which suggests a point of transition with Xielaban's ethnic consciousness. The next day with the lingering scent of the flowers in the air, Xielaban made a makeshift ladder and collected a bundle of Sophora blossoms from over the walls of the parking lot, an action that concludes the story. As we know, Sophora trees are common in many parts of China and Xielaban's acceptance of local flowers—not in the beginning but at the end of the story—means his changed mind still upheld their symbolic power but abandoned their place-bound authenticity. Symbolic ethnicity, as we discussed above, is an ethnic subject's willful association of his ethnicity with iconic elements of the culture from which he originated, and this association is made necessary in the context of multicultural living where a minority's sense of ethnicity is always at risk and under erasure. Xielaban has found such an icon in the Sophora flower.

There is no telling whether Xielaban will find happiness after his reconstitution of the Sophora flower as one iconic symbol of his Tibetan ethnicity. The way of constructing one's ethnicity, much like other elements of one's self-identity such as race and gender, is always a process of becoming, not of closure. We may reasonably speculate that his feelings of nostalgia will always stay with him, and they will only get stronger as the pace of changes accelerates around him. The experiences of re-union with the past activated by nostalgia, as the American scholar Susan Stewart argues, "is a narrative utopia that works only by virtue of its partiality, its lack of fixity and closure: nostalgia is the desire for desire." (Stewart 1993) The desire of nostalgia is the loss and the lack, which are inevitable in any discourse of historical progressivism and the necessary exchange for the convenience of modern life. Nostalgic lyricism is the inversion of the loss, the compensation of the lack, and the articulation of alternatives against the discontent with the present. Such is the meaning of Alai's writing to his readers and to the world.

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# Alai and I: A Belated Encounter

Patrizia Liberati

(Italian Institute of Culture)

**Abstract:**

This paper attempts to analyze the reasons for the scanty presence in translation of Alai's literary production. Probably the most important motive is that this author's narrative does not correspond to the idealized Western idea of Tibet as Shangri-la, and of its people as noble savages. It will then make some observation on Alai's pictorial "thangka style" of narration, his unique use of language and his poetic realism. Finally, it will identify cinematic productions as a successful medium to spread knowledge and deepen the understanding of contemporary Tibetan literature.

**Keywords:** cultural misreading, inter-religious studies, poetic realism, Shangri-la, stereotypes, thangka, transcultural contact, visual culture.

## 1. A Western Collective Delusion: Alai's Tibet is Not Shangri-la

In November 2018, the Sichuan Writers Association invited me to the symposium "Borderline Books, Naturalis Historia and Epics", an international occasion to study Alai's works. This presented me with the long overdue occasion to reflect on the writer's literary creation.

I soon realized that the number of Alai's works in translation—at least in the Western languages I am able to understand—compares very badly with the abundancy and richness of his creation.

I found English, French and Italian translations of *Cheng'ai luoding* and English translations of *Gesair Wang* and *Kong Shan*. There are some short stories like *Wind over the Grasslands*; *Three Grassworms*; *Aku Tonpa*; *The Hydroelectric Station* and *The Threshing Machine* in English. Now I am pleased to add to the list the translation in Italian of *Yueguang xia de yinjiang* (*L'argentiere sotto la luna*, tr.

Silvia Pozzi, Caratteri 2018.1)[1]. Personally, I did not find any other contribution and I thus welcome researchers to point out any oversight.

The feeling that this "absence" was not simply coincidental made me look for reasons. After reading many research papers and book reviews, my conclusion was that this was a clear case of cultural misreading.

When we talk about European interpretation and imitation of Chinese and East Asian artistic traditions, we use the terms "chinoiserie" which entered European art and decoration in the mid-to-late 17th century and "japonism" as used to refer to Japanese influence on European art. Now I would like, with a tongue in cheek, to play with a new word: "tibetism" or tibetmania, which I will take to represent the obsession for Tibet, the Himalayas and all things Tibetan or, should we say, that pertain to the Western idea of Tibet.

I found in my readings that "the story of the Western reaction to Tibet and its religion is far wider than the limited circle of Buddhologists and Tibetologists. It embraces the concerns of imperialism, psychotherapy, science, theosophy and alternative religions, psychadelics, adventure travel, exploration, montaineering, and the ecology movement" (Bishop 11). In Western collective imaginary, Tibet has long been the perfect Utopia, a place everyone wanted to escape to, where everyone could realize any of his dreams.

Throughout history, humanity has fabricated myriads of fabulous lands, places that could be intended as physical or mental *loci* in escapist attempts. In these beautiful imaginary mindscapes we would find spiritual refuge and solace from our sorrows, enlightenment and wisdom: there we would prove our capacities, effectively "find ourselves".

Here I would like to mention few of these *fabulae mirabiles* to get us in the mood.

If we do not count the Garden of Eden, I guess we should start with Atlantis, mentioned in a minor work by Plato and then taken up by Francis Bacon and Thomas More in their writings. I believe that crusaders and templars in the 12th century, while liberating or pillaging Jerusalem (whichever way you prefer to look at it) would have probably had in their minds the majestic richness of the kingdom of Prester John, where they would also find the fountain of eternal youth, a legend later connected to that of the Holy Grail. Then there is Arcadia, a creation of the mind of Sir Philip Sydney[2] towards the end of the 16th century that later became a

1 *Caratteri – Letteratura cinese contemporanea* is a journal of Chinese contemporary literature in Italian language, published in Beijing by *People's Literature* magazine.

2 *The Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia* is a long prose pastoral romance written towards the end of the 16th century, also borrowed by Shakespeare for a subplot in *King Lear*.

synonym for any delightfully pastoral and peaceful setting. The city of El Dorado, was Voltaire's creation mentioned in *Candide* (1759). An interesting Oriental addition is Xanadu, the summer capital of Kublai Khan, described by Samuel Taylor Coleridge[3] and later a metaphor for splendor and opulence and the name of Charles Foster Kane's palatial refuge in the movie *Citizen Kane* by Orson Welles (1941). We should not forget also some utopias of Chinese invention such as Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring" and the city of Datong, described probably for the first time in the Book of Rites.

There has been and there still is a plethora of mysterious and fascinating places to go to, something for every taste and that could satisfy everyone. In substance, all the lands and waters that in Medieval maps were marked as *hic sunt dracones* (here are dragons) could be evoked to represent our physical and spiritual objectives.

Comparatively more recent, and probably one of the latest entries[4] in the gallery of utopias is Shangri-la, a fictional valley first mentioned in James Hilton's novel *Lost Horizon*[5], which subsequently came to be connected in people's minds to another mythical land, the kingdom of Shambala, mentioned by Jesuit priest Estevao Cacella for the first time in his writings in 1627. These two (or one, if we espouse the theory that they are the same location) have been thought by many to be located somewhere on the high Tibetan Plateau and searched for by many expeditions, some even as recent as the 21st century.

The Italian Jesuit Ippolito Desideri that accomplished the first religious mission[6] to Tibet (1716-1721) was arguably the first European to become fluent in Tibetan, and apparently the first to engage in religious debates with Tibetan Lamas. His greatest achievement apparently was his fabled translation of passages of the *Great Stages of the Path to Enlightment* (*Lam rim chen mo*) by Tsongkhapa into Latin, but unfortunately what could have been a first contribution to the birth of inter-religious studies seems to have been lost. Desideri is now considered the "first Tibetologist in history"(Petech XV), "Tibetan Studies was born with Desideri"(Tucci 444) thus we can consider him one of the first propagators of the myth of Tibet. Besides, Desideri's manuscripts had been the most extensive and accurate accounts of

3 *Kubla Khan*, written in 1797 and published in *Christabel, Kubla Khan, The Pains of Sleep*, London: John Murray, 1816.

4 After these times, utopias either became dystopias like *Brave New World, Animal Farm*, the city of Los Angeles in the movie *Blade Runner*, The Republic of Gilead in *The Handmaid's Tale* or moved very far away, into space.

5 Hilton, James. *Lost Horizon*. New York: Macmillan, 1933.

6 Claims by another Italian Odorico da Pordenone, a Franciscan friar and religious explorer, of his passage through Tibet in the 14th century, have yet to be adequately substantiated.

Buddhist philosophy in the West, until the twentieth century. He experienced the horrors of the persecution of the Nyingma sect Buddhists, the "Ancient Ones", by the strictly celibate and relatively young monastic order of Gelug, and described closely the conflict between "the red hats" and "the yellow hats" in his *Relazione*, whereby "condemning the cruelty of the central Tibetan Geluk for their complicity in the Zunghar invasion, he consistently expressed his admiration for the piety and virtue of the Nyingma who remained steadfast during the persecutions" (Pomplun 126).

In 1745 the ruling prince Polhané Sönam Topgyé "ordered all foreigners out of Tibet beginning its political isolation and sowing the seeds of Europe's fascination with the mythical land of Shangri-la" (Pomplun 197). Later in the 18th century, we saw the first contacts of the East India Company that dispatched George Bogle to Tibet in 1774. His journey was the followed in 1783, by that of Captain Samuel Turner, also representing the Company with the apparent intent of undertaking commercial exchanges and establishing a firm connection with the Panchen Lama. Starting from this, other Europeans followed with various attempts to enter this legendary kingdom.

Often they were not received as they would have hoped. Isabella Bird records, in her travel diary first published in 1911, her arrival to Suomo (today in Aba Ngawa county) in 1897:

> The Chinese officer rode up saying, "There is now no more fright", (who was frightened I know not), and passed on to Somo, saying he was "going to make things smooth for us," but, as I think, carrying orders to the Tu-tze from headquarters to bar my further progress (Bird 437).
>
> The climb brought us to the centre of a Man-tze crowd, and of a cluster of mean and dirty Chinese hovels, huddling against the rocks, in which we were told that the Tu-tze "had provided lodgings". This was an insult. The lodging of the whole party was one small, dark, dirty room, filled with stinging wood-smoke from a fire in the floor (Bird 438).
>
> "Passports and recommendations are no use here", replied the haughty ruler to a request for furtherance, and when a polite message was sent asking at what hour Mr. Kay might have the honor of an audience, the proposal was rudely negatived (Bird 441).

The sorrows of Isabella only managed to increase the fascination with Tibet as a mysterious, unreachable land. Some people even used their connection with Tibet to augment their own prestige, like in Victorian times the occultist Madam Helena

Petrovna Blavatsky, founder of the Theosophical Society, who allegedly entered Tibet through Kashmir in 1856, a claim never substantiated. Lieutenant Colonel Sir Francis Edward Younghusband in 1903 won the race to Tibet killing many in the process, according to some accounts, over 5,000 Tibetans. This was an incident that not only greatly embarrassed the British Government but also led to his spiritual enlightenment and the invention of a new pseudo-New Age religion.

Later one person did manage to go to Tibet several times in the period between 1916 to 1945 and, more specifically, reached Lhasa disguised as a beggar in 1923 when entry was still forbidden to foreigners. She was one of Madam Blavatsky's students: Alexandra David-Néel.

The interest of Europeans in Tibet gained momentum throughout the 19th century and continued right into the 20th. Our reading—or, should we say, our misreading—of Tibet from then on continued to inflate, blowing it out of proportion into an imaginary landscape, a place awaiting Western defloration.

As far as the Western people were concerned, Tibet became one of the places everyone dreamed and longed for. The reasons and the times were many and diverse. In the 18th and 19th century people tried to get away from the horrors, alienation and mechanization of life brought by the industrial revolution. Between World War I and World War II, we ran to it to escape violence and post war traumas. In the 1960s and 1970s, we longed for Tibet while running away from the worship of money, hedonism and materialism—not to mention the Vietnam War—in order to experience a primitive and purer way of life, and possibly get stoned in the process.

The hippie movement of the 1960s and 1970s contributed to romanticizing the idea of the East, particularly of India, Nepal, Tibet, and Bhutan. Timothy Leary, Harvard professor and psychedelic guru, in 1964 co-authored The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual based on the *Tibetan Book of the Dead*,[7] contribute to making his version of the sacred Tibetan classic a best seller amongst the flower children. In 1966 John Lennon by chance found a copy of the book in the Indica Books & Gallery[8] and then wrote the song "Tomorrow Never Knows", capturing his LSD experience with some lyrics paraphrased from *Book of the Dead:* "Turn off your mind, relax and float downstream, it is not dying"[9]. Bob Thurman, actress

7 Leary, Timothy; Metzner, Ralph; Alpert Richard. *The Psychedelic Experience: A Manual Based on the Tibetan Book of the Dead*. New York: Citadel Press, 1964.

8 The Indica Books & Gallery opened in March at 6 Masons Yard, London. John Lennon and Paul McCartney went looking for a copy of *The Portable Nietzsche*, but *The Psychedelic Experience* caught John's eye and he bought it instead.

9 Miles, Barry. *Paul McCartney: Many Years From Now*. London: Secker & Warburg, 1998.

Uma Thurman's father, after an accident decided to refocus on his life, so he went to Tibet and afterwards studied with Tenzin Gyatso, the 14th Dalai Lama. He was then ordained in 1965, the first American Buddhist monk of the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. He went on to create in 1987 Tibet House US, with actor Richard Gere and composer Philip Glass, amongst others. In 1994 he published his own translation of the *Bardo Thodol*[10] and, with many other members of the artistic community, has been a strong supporter of the Dalai Lama.

Could Hollywood's dream factory, famous for its penchant for imaginary world-building, be absent in this scenario?

They started in 1993 with the *Little Buddha* directed by Bernardo Bertolucci, where Lama Norbu (interpreted by Han Chinese actor Ying Ruocheng) sets off to Seattle where the prophecy has identified a boy as a candidate for the rebirth of Lama Dorje. It is interesting both as an exposition of East-West culture muddles and stereotypes and notable for the "kitsch" casting of a young Keanu Reeves in the role of prince Siddharta (Buddha before the enlightenment).

Going on to 1997 with *Kundun* (directed by Martin Scorsese) on the life of the 14th Lama, the spiritual guide of Uma Turman's father. As in the previous movie, here we also have the reenactment of the practice of the identification of next Dalai in bud, through some puzzling tests. This is actually a late adaptation of the highly politicized Gelug sect, an apt move that often gained them the alliance and favor of wealthy or powerful families through their offspring.

*Seven Years in Tibet* (directed by Jean-Jacques Annaud also in 1997) narrated the experiences in Tibet of Austrian mountaineer Heinrich Harrer[11] between 1944 and 1951 and the Chinese People's Liberation Army entering Tibet in 1950.

All of these movies contributed some visual structure to our mental landscape, the needed illustrations for travel-writing narratives, and further fueled our fantasy thanks to Hollywood's romanticized half-digested bits of Buddhist lore. Hugely famous movie stars such as Richard Gere, Steven Seagall, Brad Pitt, and Oliver Stone all were interested in Tibet and contributed to the cause. During what might be considered Hollywood's "Tibetan decade", utopia gained an additional veneer of sanctity, through its visual representation on the silver screen.

10 *The Tibetan Book of the Dead*, as popularly known in the West; known in Tibet as *The Great Book of Natural Liberation Through Understanding in the Between* composed by Padma Sambhava; discovered by Karma Lingpa. London: Harper Collins, 1994.

11 When the movie was in post-production the investigations by Gerald Lehner, a young reporter with the Austrian National Broadcasting Corporation led to the discovery of Harrer's past in Hitler's SS, an interesting twist to the story considering that he had been the tutor of the 14th Dalai Lama. For more details see Orville Schell's *Virtual Tibet*.

As in every transcultural contact and cultural exchange, misreading and misunderstandings are the bases upon which we build our knowledge. At the root of Western fantasies of Tibet we find a mirror-like "play of opposites, between the pristine and the polluted, the authentic and the derivative, the holy and the demonic, the good and the bad" (Lopez 4).

In this apparently innocuous search for Utopias that Westerners now and then seem obliged to undertake, there is one major flaw in Shangri-la. Whereas all the other places we previously mentioned, the Arcadias and the El Doradoes of the past, are imaginary places of the mind, Tibet is real and so are its people yet very few have taken the trouble to go and really meet them.

Against this enormous background that we created in our minds, on that frightening and fascinating stage next to the sky where the gods abide peacefully and look upon us, where we are dreaming to find the meaning of our existence, there is no room for real Tibetans. Also, probably because they do not look like what we imaged.

Very rarely can we listen to their voices, or to the tales of their lives. Real Tibetans live in Alai's novels. But since we do not recognize them, his stories so far have not gotten the attention and the translations they deserve. This responsibility does not lay entirely on us translators. Often the situation is that we do propose them, but Western publishers do not take them up, deciding that contents, narrations and characters are not sufficiently interesting to the reading public, that they would not respond to the interests and the expectations of Western readers, and thus they have been left in obscurity and practically unknown.

## 2. Not-so-noble Savages and Impressive Lady Chieftains

Another interesting myth, created by Western thinkers and philosophers for the betterment of the masses, was the noble savage. Epitome of the idealized concept of the uncivilized man, endowed with the innate goodness of those unexposed to the corrupting influences of civilization, this modern fable has been commonly attributed to Jean Jacques Rousseau.[12] He believed that the original man was free from sins or appetites, and that those deemed "savages" were not brutal but naturally endowed with nobility. They are individuals that retain a pure and simple soul and lead a life uncontaminated by modern civilization. Personages like

12 Rousseau, Jean-Jacques. *Emile, ou de l'Education,* Republic of Geneva and France: Jean Neaulme, 1762.

Friday, Robinson Crusoe's servant and faithful companion,[13] Rudyard Kipling's Mowgli,[14]and Edgard Rice Burroughs's Tarzan[15] all share the same characteristics. Compared to the decadence and corruption of the Western world, they are strong, pure; they have natural moral values, are full of good conscience and sincere motives. Undoubtedly, in the minds of the admirers of the Tibetan idea, similar personages could be found in the unspoilt nothingness of Tibet, amongst blue glaciers and green pastures, so close to the divinity on the roof of the world, living in the respect and veneration of the gods.

Unfortunately, in Alai's creation our expectations to find some similar characters are not fulfilled. The inhabitants of his novels are not serene, longevous lamas and innocent believers satisfied in spiritual beauty. In his stories you often encounter tricksters and outcasts,[16] greedy and crafty religious schemers, power-thirsty Tusi chieftains and formidable Tusi headwomen.

One intriguing addition to this interesting arrail of mugshots is the idiot son of the Maichi chieftain in *Chen'ai luoding*. As the narrator—hence Alai's alter ego—it is through his eyes and from his point of view that we witness the vicissitudes of the people in this corner of the world. Since he is the fool, he is the one who dares to say what others do not. In my view, the following description of the Shakespearian Fool could very well apply to him: "The Fool does not follow any ideology. He rejects all appearances, of law, justice, moral order. He sees brute force, cruelty and lust…He has no illusions and does not seek consolation in the existence of natural or supernatural order, which provides for the punishment of evil and the reward of good… The fool knows that the only true madness is to recognize this world as rational".[17]

The fortunes of the two Buddhist sects, that Ippolito Desideri mentioned in his *Relazione*, later on seem to have changed. In *Chen'ai luoding*, we find echoes of the apparently religious but mainly political struggle between them and then we encounter Wangpo Yeshi. He is probably the only positive religious figure in the whole novel, a monk of the Gelug sect that is about to have his tongue cut out by order of the Tusi chieftain, believer in the traditional and more ancient Nyingma

13 Defoe, Daniel. *The Life and Surprizing Adventures of Robinson Crusoe of York, Mariner*. London: W. Taylor, 1719.

14 Rudyard Kipling. *The Jungle Book*. New York: Macmillan, 1894.

15 Burroughs, Edgar Rice. *Tarzan of the Apes.* Chicago: A. C. McClurg, 1912.

16 Thurston, Timothy O'Connor. "Tricksters and Outcasts in Modern Tibetan Literature: An Examination of Folkloric Character Types in Alai's Novels". MA Dissertation. Columbus: Ohio State University, 2007.

17 Kott, Jan. *Shakespeare Our Contemporary*. New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1974.

sect.

In my journey to Alai's homeland, I visited one of the most important temples of the Nyingma sect, Changlie Temple, and I learned that there the Nyingma Buddhists have kept a stronghold, in spite of the actual prominence later gained by the Gelug in the world.

Wangpo Yeshi in his wisdom sees clearly through the idiot. We read that during their last encounter before he meets the executioner who will cut out his tongue, Wangpo Yeshi sighs: "Everyone says the young master is an idiot. But I know you are smart. You are smart because you are an idiot." (Goldblatt 2003: 138-139).

The day of the arrival of Wangpo Yeshi to the Tusi residence, another guest also made his appearance: Charles the foreign missionary. Let us read the idiot's reaction:

> He had placed a nearly naked human figure on the windowsill, so skinny that his ribs showed.
>
> I figured he must be the person who had made the two women cry. He was strung up like a criminal, his bloody hands nailed to a piece of wood. Blood dripped from his wounds. The thought that he was about to bleed to death made me laugh. Why else would his head be slumped onto his chest, as if his neck were broken?
>
> Charles said: "My Lord, the ignorant must not be considered irreverent. Please forgive the ignorant young man. I'll convert him into one of your lambs".
>
> I asked: "Who is the guy bleeding there?"
>
> "Lord Jesus."
>
> "What can he do?"
>
> "He suffers for you and gives you salvation."
>
> "But he looks to pitiful. How can he help anyone?"(Goldblatt 2003: 86)

Here we have another emblematic exposition of the so-called idiot's way of thinking, as well as an example of female representation in Alai's novels. This is the first time he comes across the Rong Gong female chieftain:

> Any mention of Chieftain Rongong (sic) leads to a discussion of an interesting phenomenon on our land. We all knew that chieftains were, to a certain degree, emperors, regional monarchs. They all had more than one woman, but none of them had many children. Siring eight or ten kids

was unheard of. Mostly they married one woman after another, without producing a male heir to their title. Every chieftain experienced the same fateful problem, and the Rongong family was no exception. For generations, no matter how many women the Rongong chieftains married or how hard they tried in bed, the could sire only one son. To remedy the situation, they traveled north to Lhasa and east to Mount Emei, but to no avail. Eventually, even that one son was denied them. And that was how a fearless and clever woman became head of the family.

Initially, the female chieftain was to be a transitional figure. Her first duty after assuming the title was to bring a husband into the family and produce a son who would then assume the title. At the time, any chieftain with more than one son saw this as an opportunity not to be missed.

But even after the first female chieftain assumed power, neither her or any of her successors was able to produce a son with one of the Rongong sons-in-law. I was told that the female chieftain who came to see me was the fourth. She was said to be so good in bed that her first man wasted away within three years. The one who followed lived longer, eight years, long enough to give her a daughter. She then decide not to remarry, which caused an uproar among the other chieftains, who said that a woman must not head the Rongong family permanently. By threatening to attack her land, they forced her to marry a man they had chosen. Her new husband was as strong as a stud ox.

"Now she's finally going to have a son," they said.

Then came news that the man had died.

I heard this female chieftain was in the habit of bedding some of her more powerful headmen, her military officers, even lamas. She lived the carefree life of an emperor, which, in my eyes, made her a smart woman. But she too had planted only poppies, which had plunged her people into famine during a time that was free on natural disasters.

As my anticipation swelled to the bursting point, she showed up. (Goldblatt 2003: 183-184).

Through the musings of the idiot, we are able to perceive this formidable woman's power and prestige. She is probably the fictional version of some historical figures. I have looked into this and I would like to mention some of them. We have records of the empowerment in ages past, in the city of Zhuokeji (Barkam administrative division) of a number of widows of Tusi chieftains like Dolma Tso

(1737-1757). Then there was Sonan Dolma that held power together with her son Sdan-ba, from 1757 to 1798, during what was probably Suomo's most prosperous era. Followed by Sanglang Dolma, another widow, from 1799 to 1814. In particular, Renqing Wangmo (1873-1891) was the 13th Tusi and the last directly appointed in this area.

In 1716, Ippolito Desideri also seems to have encountered an interesting woman of that sort, on his way across the western deserts to Lhasa. "Soon they learned about a remarkable woman whom Freyre called Casal. The widow of a recently deceased district governor, Casal commanded a strong body of Tibetan and Mongol troops that defended the Trashigang fortress from bandits. Lhazang Khan, the Khoshud Mongol chieftain who ostensibly ruled central Tibet, had recently summoned the widow to Lhasa, but she did not intend to leave anytime soon… The widow obtained an astrological day to depart and the Jesuits joined her retinue on the way to Lhasa… Having seen her charges arrive safely, the widow quit the world for a convent in Zhigatze… Later Desideri recounts her many kindnesses" (Pomplun 67).

In the 20th century there were many powerful female Tusi in the Tibetan region of Khampa, for example. These women were well versed in letters and martial arts, good at military affairs, and some of them wore man's clothes and personally fought on the battle grounds. Dechen Wangmo, the last female Tusi, has become famous for her marriage with one of the Panchen guards Yeshe Dorji against the will of the Liu Wenhui, the Sichuan warlord, that had other plans for her. She died in 1953.

*The Political and Religious History of Amdo*, albeit not comprehensively, has recorded the stories of the Gyarong Tusi and of these powerful women; some of their photographs can be seen in the Aba (Ngawa) District Museum and are on display in the last extant Tusi residence, the Zhuokeji Tusi Official Manor. There have been many female Tusi in the area and, according to some people, one of the reasons is because Mount Murdo is a maternal sacred mountain. There are many maternal mountains in Gyarong, the birth area of Alai and this could be why his female figures are so interesting and strong.

We also must not forget that Gyarong area was also probably the seat of the mythical Eastern Queendom, existing in the 6th or 7th century according to different sources. The *Book of Sui* and the *Old and New Tang History* all have records of this place where women had absolute control in the socio-political sphere and held official posts, leaving men with lowly positions such as aides and soldiers. Correspondingly, Gyarong women are said to enjoy high status at home and in society (Tenzin 12).

Alai, besides being a great writer, has also the invaluable merit of having contributed to "reminding" Tibetan people of their history and for this is loved and widely respected in the area. As we have seen, his stories are not aimed at filling up our Western spiritual void with legend and dreams. On the contrary, he displays many instances of controversial issues and poses questions that from various points of view often manage to make us uncomfortable.

### 3. Alai's Secular Thangkas and Meditations on Tibet

Tibetan art oscillates between the body that is the temple, creative rhythms of nature, and the awakening of the mind: from the form to the absolute of non-form. The scrolls, the sculptures, and mandalas were the iconic representation of the transcendental meditation. Icon is the embodied Divine, the un-manifest (*amurta*) concretized into the manifest icon (*murti*) of a two dimensional painting or a three-dimensional image. The scrolls are called thangka, painting on a flat surface: *than* means "a flat plain" with the specifying suffix *ka*. The images are known as *sku* or bodily form in the sacred round (Chandra 13).

The name in Tibetan means "display, show", "things that one unrolls", "rolled up image". Some also believe it derives from the words thang yig "written record". They are intended to serve as a record of—and guide for—contemplative experience, to convey iconographic information in a pictorial manner. A text of the same meditation would supply similar details in written descriptive form. The composition is usually symmetrical, with the main figure in the middle of an imaginary vertical axis (Meulenbeld 2).

The point of view is set and decided before the artists draws the outlines of various parts of the figures in different sizes. There are group paintings and portraits of Buddhas. The figures are in various postures: some are symmetrical with each other, others widely different: some in a still yet animated posture and others in a moving posture but calm (Zhou 148).

In his novels, Alai also sets a point of view before starting to "draw."For example, in *Chen'ai luoding* the idiot wakes every day saying the same two phrases: "Where am I? Who am I?" Slowly then the silhouettes of the other characters start to emerge, big and small, and not necessarily according to any rule of perspective or narrative hierarchy. They are often arranged in a specular manner. Thus, we find the mild and inquisitive idiot son of the Maichi chieftain set against his heroic and fierce brother. Then we have the newly arrived monk Wangpo Yeshi of the Gelug sect next to the Monpa Lama of the more shamanistic Nyingmapas that uses magic to bring about rain and win battles for his lord. Also there is the maid turned lover

standing next to the powerful female Tusi chieftain. In the picture, the image of every character has its own place: some are neat and poised, some blurred and in motion.

Thus, I started to view Alai's characters as the figures in a secular thangka, and his language as the fil rouge taking us through a path of meditation, inspired by his stories.

Alai's language is very special, full of rhymes and tonal patterns that are specific to Chinese traditional poetry. These peculiarities, although not easily translatable into other languages, certainly increase the attractive qualities of his creation, building up a meditative atmosphere, a hypnotic trance, and a soul-searching exercise. In *Red Poppies*, we often find paragraphs, such as the following one, that have the singsong ringing of prayer recitations.

> Another spring arrived.
>
> Now, let me see, may be it wasn't the second spring, but many springs later. But what does that matter? The only thing the chieftain's family had more than silver was time. Lots and lots of time, maybe too much time. We awoke in the morning, and then waited for it to get dark; we looked forward to harvesting as soon as we sowed the seeds. Our territory was so vast that time itself seems never-ending.
>
> Yes, our vast territory gave us the feeling that time was never-ending.
>
> And, yes, the combination of vast territory and never-ending time gave us the feeling that the Maichi empire was unshakable and would last forever.
>
> Yes, everything was unreal. From the distance, it all looked like a floating dreamscape.
>
> Ah, well, let me return to the springtime morning. (Goldblatt 2003: 134-135)

In this beautiful passage, the Maichi chieftain's idiot son reflects on the very profound, philosophical matters of time and space. The linguistic structure is similar to a mantra: stressing an idea and full of alliterations, repetitions, and echoes.

Another connection that I found between Alai's novels and thangkas, is in his choice to rewrite the story of Gesar. One of the four main types of Tibetan thangka is the Zongthang (from the balladeer "Zongken" in Tibetan) recounting episodes of the saga of King Gesar. They were used by monks and secular performers in

temples and on the streets, as a medium for storytelling. Very much like the stone carvings in Indian temples that preserved the ancient culture of the Mahabarata and the Ramayana and helped to etch in the collective imaginary the glorious past of its gods and heroes, thus contributing to the oral tradition. In Japan we find also the etoki, originally performed by monks and nuns using emaki (illustrated scroll) or kakejiku (hanging picture) that may explain for example a biography of Shakyamuni, and later from the twelfth century became a performing art for commoners and was developed as a form of entertainment.

Coming to the *Song of King Gesar,* we find probably the most accessible rendering in English by Alexandra David-Neel.[18] Her version nowadays still retains a great deal of credibility in spite of her close association with the occultist and visionary Madame Blavatsky.

Alai, our modern storyteller, spent three years studying the saga of King Gesar, interviewing folk artisans, collecting materials and books, and investigating the legends. His narrative was praised by writer Tie Ning, the president of the Chinese Writers Association: "I am deeply impressed by the writer's attitude. These kinds of books requires painstaking effort. It is all about persistence and faith".

Going back to the idea of language as an aid for meditation, I found an interesting definition of Alai's style of narration as "poetic realism" (*shiyi de xianshi zhuyi*). Alai is very realistic and precise in describing the life of people of Tibet and their fight for survival. Nevertheless, above his descriptions always hovers a kind of poetic glow. This is what makes his stories in today's Chinese literary arena so very unique.[19]

I find myself totally in agreement with this point of view. To demonstrate the meaning of this expression, I will quote two passages from his *Mogu quan*:

> …and so it was that Shi-jiong went back to J-un Village. Many village stories ended in that way. For example, the story of the god of the Snow Mountain A-wu-ta-pi concluded with him one year coming to this place together with his two courageous sons. Which year was that? Must have been one day in a year of a thousand years ago. Then Si-jiong's son Sdan-ba asked her: "Mum, which was the year you came back to village?" And

18 David-Néel Alexandra. *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling, the Legendary Tibetan Hero*. London: Ryder & Co, 1933.

19 For the full text see: Zhu, Xiangqian. "Shiyi de xianshi zhuyi yu tuibai de jingshen jiayuan – yu Fu Yichen tan Alai changpian xiaoshuo" (Poetic realism and decaying spiritual gardens – talking with Fu Yichen of Alai's novels) chinawriter.com.cn. Web. 13. March. 2009.

Si-jiong answered: "Eh, long ago. I can't remember exactly". (Alai 2015: 19, my translation)

At the New Year Festival of the fifth year, mother Si-jiong was unhappy, because she had lost a fairy ring (…). In the evening of the New Year, she said to Sdan-ba: "What has become of the heart of the people, what has become of it! Those small mushrooms were like infants, they hadn't yet grown head and limbs! Their umbrellas and stems had not opened yet; they were just small lumps of confusion". Saying that, she cried. (Alai 2015: 137, my translation)

When I read these two passages, my immediate reaction was that, although everybody knows that in old age memories are easily lost or fragmentary, one does not normally explain these loopholes and the voids in one's head bringing into play gods and sacred mountains. I felt that was a tradition that we have already lost, but that it is probably typical of the Tibetan way of thinking. I also thought: here we have an illiterate old woman afflicted by the greed and selfishness of humanity, grieving over the impoverishment of natural resources and on how modernity and industrialization impact de-pauperizes our natural world. So, this is Alai's poetic realism. These problems are real but his treatment manages to make them so full of poetry.

Reading Alai's prose contributes to bringing us to experience the phenomenon of synesthesia, which is "joined perception" (a word that comes from the Greek *syn* for "together" and the root *aisthe* for "to feel"). A constructive process of the mind, when a sense triggers another. Although in this instance the reader might not visualize the text in colors, as it happened to Vladimir Nabokov (Nabokov 35), we would still find ourselves entering into a meditative state. Between the lines of Alai's stories, we see and feel the indigo blues of the Tibetan skies, the brown hues of mushrooms, the peaceful greens of pastures, the saffron yellow or dark red of the monk's kasayas. Or, as Carl Jung would say, in our mind we create a true mandala, an inner image built through active imagination (Jung paragraph 123).

In my view, the images evoked by Alai's narration are a reflection of the mandala of true Tibet.

In thangkas, colors are used primarily for their conventional symbolic significance, and their powerful emotive effect. The pigments are chosen and adopted according to tradition, because color hues and arrangements tend to provoke different responses. They are not only combined to meet prescribed

symbolism, but also juxtaposed skillfully to produce visual and emotive effects.

In Alai's novels we find several main colors:

—Red, for poppies, blood, violence and passion.[20] This color is connected to life, the preservation of vital force, and to fire with its two characteristics (warming lifesaver and uncontrollable destroyer). In Tibetan culture, red is very auspicious being the color of powerful rituals and deeds. Red is one of the colors of the five Buddhas and the color of the garments of the monks of the Nyingma sect. Believed to have protective qualities, is often used to paint sacred buildings and shines forth in Buddhist aesthetics through the red thangkas art;

—Yellow, the color closest to daylight, linked to the saffron robes of the Gelug monks, it also signifies renunciation, "desirelessness", and humility. It is the color of earth, hence the connection to the roots and origins of man;

—Gold, to enhance the precious aspect of the deity and symbolizes the sun. Is also the color of the prayer tools;

—Blue, the color of the Medicine Buddha, since it is venerated as bringing good health; in Alai's work we find it in the Tibetan skies, rivers, lakes and glaciers.

As we read in Schafer: "The Chinese were not alone among the Far Eastern people in their admiration for the blue mineral. The Tibetan valued it above all others, even ahead of gold, and those highlanders saw in it the image of the azure sky, and said that the hair of their goddesses had its color. Both men and women there wore it on their heads" (Schafer 232).

—Green, for nature, trees and plants, in Buddhist thought is also the color of action.

—Brown, as the mantle of the animals, and the color of the arid and dry earth.

Reading *Mogu quan*, the novel that just obtained the Lu Xun Literature Prize in 2018, added some more colors to the palette of the writer's depiction of Tibetan life: greyish brown for the color of mushrooms.

The writer uses these colors and a two dimensional medium—that of thangka painting—to give three-dimensional fullness to his characters, in a multidimensional mindscape. Augmenting some imagistic aspects and lightening unnecessary details, he gives texture to his plots and rhythm and movement to his tales.

20 For a treatment and analysis of the color red in Alai's *Red Poppies* see Draggeim Alexandra. "A Complex Identity: Red Color-coding in Alai's Red Poppies." *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 35 (2014): 75-101.

We the readers, just like young adepts facing a thangka, let this narrative be the map that guides us through the path of his creation.

## 4. A Visual Conclusion

While Hollywood concentrated on the visual representation of idealized Tibet only in the Nineties, communist China had obviously started its own exploitation of the Tibetan trope many years before. *Serfdom* (*Nongnu*, 1963) and *Tears of the Snowy Mountains* (*Xueshan lei*, 1979) are two fine examples of revolutionary romanticism and dramatic tales of Tibetan slaves in chains and heroic Chinese liberators.

Arguably the first movie to tell the Tibetans' side of the story, albeit by the Han Chinese Tian Zhuangzhuang, was *The Horse Thief* (1986), the story of a man resorting to theft in order to feed his family and, in spite of his devotion to Buddhism, ostracized by the elders of his village. Tian Zhuangzhuang also went on to produce the documentary *Delamu* (2004) shot on the Tea Horse Road, one of the oldest caravan routes in Asia.

Another interesting example of Han Chinese discovering Tibet and narrating it for and together with the Tibetans, is the documentary *N.16 South Barkor Street* (1996) by Duan Jinchuan, produced by writer Tashi Dawa, of half Tibetan and half Han background. It depicts the everyday workings of the Barkhor Street Neighborhood Committee, the most basic unit of the Party and government in the area, while they implement Chinese governmental policies, measures, and directions.

Lu Chuan's movie *Kekexili: Mountain Patrol* (2004) contributed to bring to the world's attention the problem of poaching of the Tibetan antelope, introducing some environmental and social Tibetan issues to the national Chinese agenda.

Two contributions by Zhang Yang, now in his "Tibetan period", are the docudrama *Paths of the Soul* (2015), a very different road movie following the pilgrimage of a group of eleven people through 1200 miles all the way to Lhasa, and *Soul on a string* (2016), based on some short stories by Zhaxi Dawa.

Recently, young director Pema Tseden, the first Tibetan graduate of Beijing Film Academy, has become a leading voice in the Tibet's New Wave. His movie *Jinpa* (from Tsering Norbu's novel *The Killer* and Tseden's own story I run over a sheep) won the Best Screenplay Award in the Horizon section at Venice Film Festival 75$^{th}$ edition (2018). His past movies *The Silent Holy Stones* (2005), *Old Dog* (2012), *Tharlo* (2015) all obtained awards at international film festivals.

Sonthar Gyal directed *The Sun Beaten Path* (2011) and his *Lhamo and Skalbe*

has just obtained the Best Film Award in the Work in Progress Lab section at Pingyao International Film Festival 2018.

I remember it was Zhang Yimou's adaptation (1988) of Mo Yan's novel *Red Sorghum* that introduced this Chinese writer's creation to the world. A story of success eventually brought him the Nobel Prize for Literature in 2012.

This is the era of visual culture so let us not underestimate the power of cinema in the promotion of literature. Surely, Alai will gain the recognition he deserves and we will be able to see more Tibetan writers on the literary stage and to watch more movies about real Tibet and real Tibetan life.

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# The Translation and Dissemination of Alai's Works in the English-Speaking World

Ji Jin (Suzhou University)

**Abstract:**

Alai's works are known for their mysterious and mystical Tibetan stories, which have drawn great interest from the Western world. His important works have enjoyed high quality translations and received positive feedback from the English-speaking world. In particular, the translations by Howard Goldblatt and his wife capture the aesthetic quality of the original works, allowing readers a unique aesthetic experience. However, it is undeniable that translation is constrained by ideology, which influences the texts of translation, and even makes the works of Alai objects of ideological imagination, which in a way diminishes the textual significance and authorial intention of the original works. Only when we fully respect heterogeneous literature, and the translational ethics of cultural values, allowing contemporary Chinese literature and world literature to communicate and strengthen each other can we highlight the unique value of Chinese literature, and enrich the discursive space of the republic of world letters.

**Keywords:** Works of Alai, English translations, ideology

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Within the contexts of the contemporary Chinese literary world, Alai is not a prolific writer. However, from the internal perspective of an ethnic minority, he has successfully deployed a subtle tone, a light and Zen-infused style in order to chant ecological epics taking place in a Tibet posited between history and reality, tradition and modernity, and nation and country, presenting the cultural charms of Tibet along with its vicissitudes and hardships, thus creating a unique writing style that stands out against the context of the Chinese-majority literature.

Looking at his reception in the West, Alai's works have been characterized as distant and oriental, showing the snowy frontiers and mysterious and legendary

stories of Chinese minorities, a theme which has garnered great interest and attention in the Western world.

During the 1980s and 1990s Alai wrote twelve novellas: *Akhu Tenpa, Dance of the Soul, The Silversmith in the Moonlight, The Fish, A Swarm of Bees Fluttering, The Loba, The Locust Blossoms, Gela Grows Up, Life, The White Mountain Range: Like Galloping Horses, Bloodstains from the Past,* and *Blood Ties.* These shorter works were collected in an English-language anthology titled *Tibetan Soul: Stories,* which were collaboratively translated by Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping, and published by Merwin Asia Press in 2012. The Tibetan landscape, customs, and narrative techniques featured in these novellas were further exhibited in later novels such as *Red Poppies* and *King Gesar.* In 2005, the British publishing house Canogate Books launched at the global level a cultural exchange activity of "retelling myths," aiming at drawing ancient myths from different countries or regions, mixing in the contemporary contexts and furnishing them with new meaning in the current times. Well-known publishers from more than 30 countries and regions including the United States, France, China, and Germany participated in the event. Participating authors included many Nobel Prizes and Booker Prize winners. Chinese writers and their respective representative works were also among them with titles such *Binu and the Great Wall*: *The Myth of Meng* written by Su Tong, *The Myth of Lady White Snake* by Li Rui, *The Myth of Hou Yi And Chang'E* by Ye Zhaoyan, and *The Song of King Gesar* by Alai. In 2013, through Canogate Books, Howard Goldblatt and his wife Lin Lijun published the English-language translation of *The Song of King Gesar.* Afterward, journals like *The Times, Wales Arts Review,* and *Fantastic Fiction* published relevant reviews to introduce the book to the West. However, the dissemination and influence of *The Song of King Gesar* are far behind *Red Poppies,* whose English version was also translated by Mr. and Mrs. Goldblatt and published by Houghton Mifflin in the United States in 2002. In the following years, *Red Poppies* was translated into more than ten languages, such as French, German, Spanish, Portuguese, Norwegian, Hebrew, Polish, Slovenian, Vietnamese, Korean, and Hindi. It is noteworthy that the Hindi version published in 2018 is translated from the English version, which is a common phenomenon in the translation and introduction of exported Chinese literature. Similar examples would be the German and Norwegian versions of *Wives and Concubines* by Su Tong being translated from the English version; or the Spanish and Turkish versions of *The Moon Opera* by Bi Feiyu being translated from the French version. Because there are fewer foreign-language translators who are proficient in Chinese and understand the essence of Chinese culture, the translations of contemporary Chinese literature

sometimes have to be based on versions from English, French, German or other major languages that have successfully recreated the original and are thus fitting to become the blueprint for a new translation. How many Chinese elements and Chinese experiences can Chinese literature retain after it has been translated and retranslated between different languages? What is the readerly experience of readers from different languages? Chinese literature has undergone multiple instances of having gone through the linguistic and cultural transformations imposed by a "Chinese-Intermediate Language-Target Language" model of translation. In the process of eliminating or deriving multiple, complex textual meanings, these issues are worthy of our consideration.

Alai has mentioned how the literary style and a character, the second young master in *Red Poppies,* were the leading forces in promoting the development of the story of the novel. The two factors alternate and complement each other, bringing constant surprises and peaks to the creative process behind the novel (Chen 2016). It can be said that Mr. and Mrs. Goldblatt captured the aesthetic characteristics of the original text clearly, its purity and lightness, especially the exotic customs of Tibetan folk songs, and uttermost profoundly poetic language of Alai, not only introducing this work to English-speaking readers but also inspiring the West to think about Tibetan culture, society and history. American novelist Francis Goodman praised *Red Poppies* in the following way: "This wonderful novel is full of amazing textual brilliance, its vibrant and vivid depiction of the cheerful and cruel reality of the world, highlighting the author's commonality with human beings and his deep insight into the human condition. Alai's *Red Poppies* is a shocking work." (Alai 2002: cover)

Tibetan folk songs are one of the unique characteristics of Alai's works. There are eight simple, intelligent and concise Tibetan folk songs in *Red Poppies*. Folk songs are the psychological sedimentation of an ethnic nation and the representation of its collective unconsciousness, reflecting the history, culture and the complex spiritual world of a people. The mountains and snows of Jiarong, its vast flora and fauna, objects and the hardships of its life all collaborated to create the spiritual space of the tribe. The nature, the grass, the flowers and the flowers have integrated into the spiritual world of the Tibetans. The sounds have special meaning and feelings for the Tibetans who make the snowy plateau their home. Thus, when Drolma fell in love with the silversmith, she couldn't help but quietly sing a love song full of Tibetan flavor:

她的肉，鸟吃了，咯吱，咯吱，

她的血，雨喝了，咕咚，咕咚，
她的骨头，熊啃了，嘎吱，嘎吱，
她的头发，风吹散了，一绺，一绺。(Alai 2005: 100)

Her flesh, eaten by the birds, gezbi, gezbi,
Her blood, drunk by the rain, gudong, gudong,
Her bones, gnawed by bears, gazbi,gazbi,
Her hair, loosened by the wind, one lock after another. (Alai 2002: 115)

The onomatopoeia “吱，吱，嘎吱” (“gezbi, gudong, gazbi”) combines nature (birds, rains, bears) with human elements, and integrates auditive and visual elements. It has a strong sense of synesthesia and enhances the aesthetic appeal of the expressions. The love of the world and the heavens and the earth, forever and everlasting, a beautiful girl’s sentimental map can be sublimated into a long-lasting narrative poem thanks to the imitative power of the onomatopoeia. Goldblatt used the method of transliteration to create a new onomatopoeia in English: “gezbi, gazbi, gudong,” vividly conveying Drolma ‘s strong love for the silversmith. This kind of animated words with musicality and rhythm not only aptly evokes the original style of the folk song, but also brings its auditory enjoyment to English readers. It introduced the sounds, its perceptions, and its rich related imaginary, all of which added to the evocative appeal and power of the text.

The act of translation is a process of decoding and re-encoding. The conversion between two languages will inevitably lead to the disappearance or appreciation of the original text’s content and meaning. According to Andre Lefevere, an American translation scholar, “patrons, ideology and poetics are key elements when translators dealt with original words and expressions” (48). Among them, the influence of ideology is the most notable, as aspects such as the choice of which text to translate, which translation strategy to use, and the addition, subtraction and rewriting of text content are subject to this ubiquitous “hidden” power, that is, the constraints of ideology, which are deeply rooted in the generative mechanisms of the text, manipulating the activity of translators from their consciousness. Being a famous translator, Howard Goldblat also inevitably has ideological biases when examining and translating Chinese literary works, which also affected the creative process behind the English translation of *Red Poppies*.

*Red Poppies* takes place in the Hengduan Mountains area on the eastern edge of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, the Jiarong Tibetan Area. The Jiarong Tibetans are a famous people with a long history and rich cultural heritage, which descends from

the line of the other peoples of the three Tibetan districts. Historically, the Jiarong Tibetan Area is an important area of passage for the ancient Tibetan-Burmese language family and other ethnic groups and tribes to the north and south. It is now an important border area in the northwest of Sichuan Province. Geographically speaking, Jiarong Tibetan Area is located on the eastern edge of Tibetan culture. Historically on the western edge of Chinese Han culture, it is a "transition zone" or "marginal zone" that is influenced by both Chinese and Tibetan culture. Alai, having been born in the Jiarong Tibetan area, has a deep understanding of the Jiarong Tibetan area, this "transition zone" between the Han and Tibetan cultures. Its complex entanglements of cultural, political and economic relations are also deeply influential on his work. In the novel *Red Poppies*, Alai elaborated on the power of space of the Jiarong Tibetan Area from the perspective of geographical features:

> 有谚语说："汉族皇帝在早晨的太阳下面，达赖喇嘛在下午的太阳下面。"
>
> 我们是在中午的太阳下面还在靠东一点的地方。这个位置是有决定意义的。它决定了我们和东边的汉族皇帝发生更多的联系，而不是和我们自己的宗教领袖达赖喇嘛。地理因素决定了我们的政治关系。（Alai 2005: 17-18）

> As the saying goes, the Han emperor rules beneath the morning sun, the Dalai Lama governs beneath the afternoon sun.
>
> We were located slightly to the east under the noonday sun, a very significant location. It determined that we would have more contact with the Han emperor to the east than with our religious leader, the Dalai Lama. Geographical factors had decided our **political alliance**. (Alai 2002: 20-21)

"The Han emperor rules beneath the morning sun." In the morning, the sun rises from the east, this means that the person we call the "emperor" comes from the east; "the Dalai Lama governs beneath the afternoon sun." In the evening, the sun falls in the west, thus, the religious leaders of the Jiarong Tibetan area came from the West. This passage gestures to the fact that in the Jiarong area the political and economic realm is subject to China, while the religious realm is subject to the Tibet. In the original text, "Geographical factors determine our political relationship" ("地理因素决定了我们的　政治关系"). This "political relationship"("政治关系") refers to the "suzerain relationship" between the Jiarong Tibetan Area and the Han Dynasty regime in politics and economy. But in its English-language translation

("Our political alliance"), the word "alliance" is interpreted as an association, connection, or union amongst equals; eg. a union of states or countries in alliance. This kind of translation changed the relationship between the Jiarong Tibetan Area and the Eastern Han Dynasty regime from one of a subsidiary or subordinates to another one of equivalent state alliance. The translation's rewriting here is in line with the "expected imagination" of some people in the West who are sensitive to Tibetan politics. The rewriting of this relationship in translation under this ideological manipulation is faintly visible in the translation.

| 原文 | 译文 | 回译 |
| --- | --- | --- |
| 我说，"对一个吐司来说，这已经够了。土司就是土司，土司又不能成为国王。"<br>书记官当时就把我这句话记下了。因此，我知道自己这句话没有说错。*麦其家强大了，凭借武力向别的土司发动过几次进攻*。如果这个过程不停顿地进行下去。有一天，天下就只有一个土司了。拉萨会看到，南京也会看到。而这两个方向肯定都没人乐意看到这样的结果。（*①所以，麦其家只要强大到现在这样，别的土司恨着我们而又拿我们没有一点办法就够了。*）（*②在我们家里，只有哥哥愿意不断发动战争。只有战争才能显示出他不愧为麦其土司的继承人。*）（*③但他应该明白历史上任何一个土司都不是靠战争来取得最终的地位。*）虽然每一个土司都沿用了国王这个称谓，却没有哪个认真以为自己真正是个国王。*（④在这些雪山下面的谷地里，你不能太弱小，不然，你的左邻右舍就会轮番来咬你，这个一口，那个再来一口，最后你就只剩下一个骨头架子了。我们有一句谚语说：那样的话，你想喝水都找不到嘴巴了。）*而我哥哥好像从来不想这些。他说，"趁那些土司还没有强大，把他们吃掉就完事了。"[1] | I said, "This should be enough for any chieftain. A chieftain is a chieftain; he can never be a king."<br>The historian copied down my words, so I knew I hadn't said anything wrong. The Maichi family had waged several wars against other chieftains and had grown powerful in the process. If that continued, one day there would be only one chieftain left in the world, which would not escape the attention of Lhasa or Nanking, and neither would be happy with that. But in the valleys beneath the snow mountains, one could not be too weak either, or his neighbors would take turns picking him apart. A bite here, another bite there, and pretty soon he would be nothing but skeleton. Then, as one of our savings goes, you could not even find your mouth to drink water. So the Maichi family had to be powerful only to the extent that other chieftains hated us but could do nothing about it. Yet one of this seemed to register with my brother, who should have known that throughout history not a single chieftain had ever succeeded in inheriting the title through wars. In my family, he alone sought constant warfare, since war was the only way he could show he was the chieftain's worthy heir. "Before the other chieftains grow strong," he'd say, "we should gobble them up and everything will be fine." | 我说，"对一个吐司来说，这已经够了。土司就是土司，土司又不能成为国王。"<br>书记官当时就把我这句话记下了。因此，我知道自己这句话没有说错。<br>麦其家向别的土司发动过几次进攻，当武力强大以后。<br>如果这个过程不停顿地进行下去。有一天，天下就只有一个土司了。拉萨会看到，南京也会看到。而这两个方向肯定都没人乐意看到这样的结果。<br>（④在这些雪山下面的谷地里，你不能太弱小，不然，你的左邻右舍就会轮番来咬你，这个一口，那个再来一口，最后你就只剩下一个骨头架子了。我们有一句谚语说：那样的话，你想喝水都找不到嘴巴了。）<br>（①所以，麦其家只要强大到现在这样，别的土司恨着我们而又拿我们没有一点办法就够了。）（③但哥哥应该明白历史上任何一个土司都不是靠战争来取得最终的地位。）<br>（②在我们家里，只有哥哥愿意不断发动战争。只有战争才能显示出他不愧为麦其土司的继承人。）<br>"趁那些土司还没有强大，"他说，"把他们吃掉就完事了。" |

Notes: Italics mark adjustments of word order in translated text, and dotted underlines mark abridgements.

1 David-Néel Alexandra. *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling, the Legendary Tibetan Hero*. London: Ryder & Co, 1933.

“麦其家强大了，凭借武力向别的土司发动过几次进攻.” In this sentence, the original text conforms to the standard Chinese language grammar rule of putting “cause” before “effect,” which is in contrast to the English-language practice of putting the “effect” first before introducing the “cause.” Therefore, the translator changed the word order of the sentence: “The Maichi family had waged several wars against other chieftains and had grown powerful in the process.” （“麦其家向别的土司发动过几次进攻，当武力强大以后”）. In addition, “effect” is usually introduced before “cause,” according to the Western people’s “consequence-oriented” thinking mode. However, translators usually rearrange “cause” before “effect” in order to make logic clear when sentences are too lengthy or written in groups or paragraphs. Thus, Howard Goldblatt rearranged the word order of the content of ④ and ① in the original text; “Yet” in ③ leaded to “brother” to link with ②.By paying attention to the linguistic conventions of the target language, rewriting in the translation above makes the logical order clearer and enables English readers to more easily accept and understand the content of the phrase. Furthermore, the translated text suppressed two sentences “我哥哥好像从来不想这些” (My brother never thought about these) and “虽然每一个土司都沿用了国王这个称谓，却没有哪个认真以为自己真正是个国王” (although every chieftain adopted the title of king, no one took it seriously.) Because “my brother” never considered the reasons above, therefore he came up with the idea of “gobbling other chieftains.” Taking into consideration the communicative power and expressiveness of the passage, Howard Goldblatt deleted these sentences, thus conforming to the briefness and directness of English-language usage. Because of this, the translated text reads more fluently and smoothly.

We have seen that the words and psychological monologues of the second idiotic young master revealed that he saw through the internal relations of the chieftains in the Jiarong Tibetan area, as well as through the power games played between the Jiarong Tibetan area as a “marginal zone and the Han Dynasty. “One day there would be only one chieftain left in the world, which would not escape the attention of Lhasa or Nanking, and neither would be happy with that,” a sentence that shows us that the Jiarong Tibetan Area is an extremely complicated “marginal zone” in its geographical, political, military, economic and cultural dimensions.

If a chieftain and his tribe want to survive, the tribe can only expand in economic, political, and military terms in order to escape “being gobbled up.” Nevertheless, chieftains had to find a balance among their peers, lest the internal Tibetan conflicts spill over and turn into external conflicts with the Han regime

if ever the strongest tribe were to eliminate the other chieftains. This is because the Han regime never wished for any single tribe to rise up and be on a par with itself and out of its control. The second idiotic young master had a very clear and objective judgment on the political situation at this time. "虽然每一个土司都沿用了国王这个称谓，却没有哪个认真以为自己真正是个国王" correlates with "土司就是土司，土司又不能成为国王", which further emphasizes the young master's understanding of the chieftain system that is subordinated to the Han regime. However, the translated text deleted this sentence, thus weakening the fact that Jiarong was a suzerain of the Han Empire. We don't know whether the translator disposed of the politically sensitive wording subconsciously or intentionally, however these ideological "hints" in the translation react or cater to the novelty-prone tastes and the Orientalist ethno-political "imagination" held by some Westerners.

The process of translation is a process of constant selection, from "what to translate,'' or "translate for whom," to "how to translate." As the concept of translation shapes a translator's overall understanding of the language and his understanding of translation activities, the process of translation always both tangibly and intangibly restricts the translator's choices during the translation process, affecting the translation strategy at the macro level and the discourse processing at the micro level. In a sense, translation is a so-called "contact zone," to borrow Mary Louise Pratt's expression. It not only uses a variety of political, historical, and cultural concepts that have a spatialized form of existence, but also witnesses the coexistence and interaction between them, especially the "essentially unbalanced power relations" between its constituents. The "contact zone" refers to the "colonial frontier" and is a derivative of imperialist expansion. However, in recognition of the colonial conquest and the rule of force, recent research has repeatedly also revealed the high amounts of energy that the colonized have used in their parody and appropriation of various colonial discourses, which has resulted in the creation of a highly efficient anti-exploitative discourse.

Certainly, in the post-colonial view, the "contact zone" emphasizes how "the colonized subjects try to express themselves in combination with the terminology of colonists." In fact, many historical realities also reveal how the colonial subjects used the language of the colonizer in order to carry out the other side of political management. Therefore, in a more holistic way of thinking, the "contact zone" represents the cross-cultural phenomenon of mutual learning and self-othering (Pratt 11). Specifically, in relation to translation, it not only initiates a variety of operational functions that a cultural system deploys in the face of a foreign text, but

also initiates its own process of discourse. The process of facing the other is also the process of facing the self. Because it needs to mobilize all existing protocols and norms of "literary diplomacy" for the overall planning and layout of its strategy, and to mobilize more micro-level social and cultural memories in order to explain the details in the text, thus recognizing how the seemingly ordinary concepts breed a vitality of dialogues.

Translators whose first language is English lead the way in the translation and introduction of the exported Chinese literature, which is an established pattern at present. They are familiar with the cultural traditions, customs, and statutes of the target language, and have a clearer understanding of the aesthetic taste, reading habits, cognitive level, and receptiveness of the target language readers. To a large extent, their translations can satisfy the readerly expectations of readers in the target language. Goldblatt's translation of *Red Poppies* has sold well abroad, which also illustrates this point. Judging from its reception, the English version of *Red Poppies* dovetails nicely with the imaginary of the ideology of a portion of Western readers, which has somewhat supplanted the textual meaning in the original work along with the author's creative purpose. While interpreting the context of the text, some Western readers are carried away by their ideology, interpreting the politics in literature or the literature in politics through its lens, which is a common phenomenon in the spread of Chinese literature in translation abroad. Dedicating many pages to her analysis, Alexandra Draggeim tried to link the color "red" with the identity of the author Alai, in order to decode the textual imagery surrounding the color "red" and the textual meaning of *Red Poppies*, while in fact dealing with sensitive political issues (75-101). Similarly, Barbara Crossette praised the beautiful, magical natural scenery and human customs of Tibet, but she could not help but reveal her misunderstanding of Alai's political writings. One article worthy of our attention is Nimrod Baranovitch's "Literary Liberation of the Tibetan Past: The Alternative Voice in Alai's *Red Poppies*," which on the surface is a long analysis of the literary nature of *Red Poppies*, but by its end reveals itself to still feature a debate on ethnic and political issues (170-209). Nimrod believes that *Red Poppies* is a historical and geographical novel that reveals complex human characteristics and multiple social features. The love of men and women in Tibetan society is free, they have the right to choose their own lover; this is the embodiment of Tibetan autonomy and pride. According to Nimrod, the deaths and violence caused by the wars between chieftains show the bravery, loyalty and national glory of the Tibetans, but the main purpose of the article is still to introduce the territorial and political issues surroundings Tibet.

These overseas perspectives of literary criticism that mix in political interpretation give way to many reflections on our part: the various literary criticisms from overseas Chinese literature studies can provide many insights to local research; but in comparison with politically biased articles featuring simple, ill-natured, and direct criticisms of ideology, the ideology found in the politics of literature or in the literature of politics have a hand in making it into a more secretive and complex discourse. We must clarify and be alert to such issues in order to make a correct judgment about their value. Of course, generally speaking, the dissemination of contemporary Chinese literature has already changed from a political to an aesthetic basis, and in particular a considerable amount of professional criticism has increasingly presented a position of academic rationality and aesthetics valuation. As Sara Canby has pointed out, *Red Poppies* is a historical novel.[2] In a strict sense, the story and characters are separated from reality. It is as if Alai wanted to show us his hometown's people's livelihood and their local customs using the most authentic language possible. In Canby's view, the characters in the novel are more human and more realistic than in his memoirs. Unlike most Western pieces of criticism that seize on some pretext or other in order to distort the record and attack the Han dynasty regime's rule in Tibet, Canby thought that leaving behind the society of the past was an inevitable phenomenon in the historical development of Tibetan society and lacks any relationship to ideology. Thus, Canby's research is able to objectively look at the pervasive process of social civilization that is common to all human beings, and from there develop a reflection on human culture and historical development. This kind of academic criticism is worthy of recognition. Similarly, Gang Yue interprets the meaning of temptation, destruction, sexuality, violence, and death in the *Red Poppie*s from the political, economic, and historical dimensions, and explores the significance of the second young master being both an idiot and a seer. He also points out that the connotations in the English-language meaning of the *Red Poppies* in the title are more readable and accessible, and easier for Westerners who have little knowledge of Tibetan culture to accept and understand.

In conclusion, there are many journals and articles focusing on readability, literariness and human values in overseas spread of *Red Poppies*, so that the meaning of the text expands as it travels abroad, digging out deeper and broader values and providing new perspectives for domestic researchers. It also provides new perspectives for local research. We have also noticed the existence of multiple

2 https://tibetanhistory-20thcentury.wikischolars.columbia.edu/Red+Poppies

"misreadings" in the works of scholars and critics under the influence of Orientalist ideology, and how these have gradually shifted from direct and ill-meaning political noise to the secretive sophistication of literary studies. We can only cautiously discriminate and clarify the issue, endeavor to open up the wall between "China" and "Overseas," establish a dialogue between the China and the West in relation to contemporary literature and the study of contemporary literature, and subtly influence and shape the imaginary and knowledge that Western readers have about Chinese literature, while promoting the acceptance of contemporary Chinese literature of the ordinary Western reader. At the same time, when engaged in the practice of translation, we should fully respect the heterogenous and foreign literature and the ethics of translating cultural values, thus letting contemporary Chinese literature and world literature collide, and gain and integrate through these exchanges, thus expanding and enriching the discursive space and understanding of the world literature community. As the contemporary French theorist Francois Jullien has stated, when faced with the problem of the "separation and the in-between" ("L'écart et l'entre"), we must think about the cultural Otherness between China and the West, precisely because of the "separation" and "in-betweenness" which is shared by the translated and original text and by the act of translation itself. Only by doing this does world literature have the possibility of being established, only by doing this can literary discourse become more diverse and richer.

（Translated by Chen Weiwei and Manuel Azuaje-Alamo ）

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## Author Profiles

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# Being the Other: The Ethos of Alai

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(Jawaharlal Nehru University)

**Abstract:**

The paper would seek to highlight Alai's secular approach towards his own ethnic identity while retaining certain distinctive characteristics of the Tibetan culture through diction. Through his different narratives as reflected in interviews and interactions, a unique trend of thought is mirrored in the psyche of Alai, especially his poems and fictional proses.

**Keywords:** Poetry of Alai, Tibetan ethos, Sino-Tibetan dialogue, non-Han Chinese-language writer, non-religious thoughts in Alai's composition.

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In June 2018, I was invited to join a two-week study tour of the Chinese Buddhist caves along the Silk Road in Gansu and Xinjiang. Every day on the tour I saw how profoundly the people cherished their intangible culture and experienced the spiritual life of the peoples in the far western corners of China, including Tibet. In a time when our mammonistic society breaks away from the traditional culture of philanthropy, I see how Alai's works reconnect us with what has been disappearing. This is the reason why I translate him for my Indian readers.

My interest in Alai started with his poetry because I myself had been a poet and a translator well before I became a professor of Chinese culture and literature at an Indian university. Till date, I have translated a number of works from the original Chinese, which include *An Anthology of Poems by Lu Xun* (1991), *A Collection of Contemporary Chinese Verses* (1998), *Poems and Fables of Ai Qing* (2000), *The Complete Poems of Mao Zedong and the Literary Analysis* (2012), *Prison Dairy of Ho Chi Minh During Captivity in China* (2013); I also published an anthology, *Cross-Cultural Impressions of Ai Qing, Pablo Neruda and Nicolás Guillén* (2004), which compiles works of these three literary giants that reflect the understanding that each one of them had about their cultures at the intersection of eastern and western perspectives. In conducting these translations and studies, I work between

Chinese, Bengali, Hindi, and English.

Most readers of Alai are more familiar with his novels. But as Alai himself explains, his literary expression began with verses. The emotion that emerges from his writings also started in his verses. He composed most of his poems during his youth—his first publication, which is a collection of poetry, came out in 1989. Although later he switched to writing novels, nonetheless his passion for poetry did not disappear.[1]

During his years of adolescence, Alai began his literary production by writing poetry in both the silent wintry nights and the boundless caress of spring. He has stated that, "The golden gate of the Kingdom of Poetry was unfolded in front of me with the poems of the Southern Song Dynasty poet Xin Qiji (1140-1207), the Chilean poet Pablo Neruda (1904-1973), and the American poet Walt Whitman (1819-1892)." [2]

In 1982, Alai won the first literary award of his life with his first poem "*Mother, the Shining Statue*." Later, he composed a few hundreds of poems in two series under the titles *Romance of the Grassland* and *The Suomo River*. From *The Poems of Alai* onwards one can find examples of a concrete manifestation of Sino-Tibetan dialogue in terms of emotions and thoughts. Alai, known to the world thanks to his novels, has had a profound attachment to poetry as poems were his first love.

Born in 1959 in the northwestern Kham regions of Sichuan, Alai's representative works comprise mainly his anthology of poems *The Suomo River*; fictions such as *Bloodstains of the Yesteryears* and *Silversmith in the Moonlight*; novels such as *Red Poppies*; and full-length prose works such as *Earth Ladder*; among other works. Besides the above, there are other novels such as *Hollow Mountain* and *The Song of King Gesar*; non-fiction such as *Zhandui: A Kham Legend of Two Hundred Years*, etc. His language is poetic and heterogeneous, perfectly matching the natural life of the Tibetans that he depicts. Alai unfolds the transformations taking place in the closed and isolated society of the Tibetans—often the mysteries of which are on the verge of being unraveled. His works are steeped in a vigorous artistic sensibility.

For example, *Red Poppies* describes the Tibetan society of epic times, in which immense transformations took place amidst varied periods of turmoil, sometimes spontaneously, sometimes through the passive course of action. Alai is a Tibetan

1 Article: "Alai releases his new poetry anthology in Chengdu" in *Huaxi Dushibao* (Western China Metropolitan Daily), 12 November 2016.

2 Article: "Complete Poems of Alai published" in *Shenzhen Business Daily*, 20 November 2016.

writer but his works do not have any strong political connotations— his is a writing with a different angle of vision: pure and unsophisticated, sensitive, revealing an amazing and perplexing history and the realities of the Tibetan-inhabited regions through his poetic diction. Alai thinks that the reason why non-Han Chinese-language writers—coming from the linguistic background of ethnic minority communities or far-flung frontiers— have a painful experience is because of their linguistic awareness. Many feel that they must satisfy others with their writings through portraying "the feelings and emotions of ethnic minorities." Alai says, "Once we are conscious about our being located in the margins, either we turn ourselves into a spectacle, or are turned into spectacle by others. It is necessary to guard against such a possibility, especially not to turn ourselves into wonders in order to beg for others' attention." [3]

While talking about his experience on dealing with the differences between the Chinese and Tibetan languages, Alai has stated that, "In terms of writing, Chinese certainly becomes dominant. But while writing about Tibet, I often think in Tibetan. While writing the novel *Red Poppies*, I could not go on writing in Chinese. I designed the plot of the story while thinking in Tibetan. Then I translated it into Chinese. And in that work there were certain sentences with non-Chinese expressions." [4]

Alai expressed his views by saying, "The development of Chinese to this day is not due to it being the language of a particular ethnic community. In fact, it is a public space for expression built up jointly through pluralistic diversity. The term 'Hanyu' literally means the language of the Han Chinese community. This meaning instantly appears to be too parochial. Actually, there is a better nomenclature: *Guoyu* (national language), or *Huayu* (the language of China). Such new formulation of words can create intimacy and cohesion among greater number of people. It transcends the ethnic and national boundaries." [5]

As to the centrality of language in writing, Alai candidly airs his views of regional linguistic differences in contemporary Chinese literature, "I am quite opposed to the supreme status accorded to Mandarin Chinese in literary works. To speak the truth, our current works—those with distinctive dialectal characteristics—are evidently of a high standard in terms of linguistic realism.

3 Article: "Alai: Do not turn yourself into spectacle" in *Zhongguo Xinwenwang* (China News Net), 8 April 2015.

4 Interview: "Writer Alai vehemently opposes Tibetan independence" in *Guanchazhe* (Observer), 4 November 2015.

5 Interview: "Writer Alai vehemently opposes Tibetan independence" in *Guanchazhe* (Observer), 4 November 2015.

Mandarin Chinese is too insipid and prosaic. And the northern dialects based on Mandarin Chinese are relatively flat and monotonous. Speaking in terms of creative practice, the literary achievements of the southern Chinese writers transcend those of the northern Chinese writers." [6]

In August 2018, while attending a conference organized by the Chinese Writers' Association at Guiyang, I raised similar concerns as did Alai. I brought forth the issue of the ethnic minority writers in China being made to mark their ethnic identity next to their names in official publications and documents, a common practice that both Alai and I feel is a sign of the marginalization of ethnic minorities in China.

Alai sounded quite unhappy when he said, "Since the founding of the PRC to this day, China has witnessed great changes in economic policies. Even the political system too has gone through certain changes. But only where we see no iota of change—is the ethnic policy. Originally China followed Stalin's ethnic policy. The ethnic communities of China were roughly categorized into 56 groups. Leaving aside the question whether such groupings were science-based or not, what I dislike the most is that even now we need to mark our ethnic identity in different types of household registers and forms. This completely hinders national harmony and integration. Every one of us is being constantly reminded and questioned about our ethnicity. If your parents come from different ethnic communities, you have to choose one as your own identity, and reject the other. Selecting students from ethnic minorities for enrollment in Han Chinese schools probably had been right in its original intention. However, after arriving at these Han Chinese regions those students usually isolate themselves into separate groups, and even go to as far as forming ghettoes that are much more isolating than where they had lived back in their original environments. Thus, they feel even more unwilling to freely mix with others. Of course, this is because they had been deprived of opportunities for a natural growth environment in which they could have participated and competed as equals. This policy defeats the objective of forming a common national consciousness. Such bridging policies, to one's surprise, have not been changed in more than six decades. Now, all these call for urgent introspection." [7]

In November 2018, during my visit to his village, Matang, in Sichuan province, Alai candidly told me that he dislikes putting on his ethnic Tibetan attire while attending the National People's Congress at Beijing. He reiterated that such outward

6 Ibid.

7 Interview: "Writer Alai vehemently opposes Tibetan independence" in *Guanchazhe* (Observer), 4 November 2015.

display of one's ethnicity actually alienates one ethnic group from others instead of achieving national integration. [8]

While speaking about the ethnic mooring of his emotions and attachments, Alai stated that, "One's emotions, sentiments, and feelings come from one's own locality or region to which one belongs. It's a regional concept constructed through family and clan." [9]

Many years ago, while writing my Ph.D. thesis, titled *Chinese and Tibetan Societies through Folk Literature*, and later while turning it into a book, a similar question of locating Tibetan ethnic culture came up in my mind. Today it seems that the very question has motivated Alai in his life and writing.

On being asked what hope he held for the future of Tibetan culture and Han Chinese culture, Alai said, "What I like the most is Tibetan culture in its natural conditions, in its non-religious state of affairs. There one finds a world with mountains and rivers in complete harmony with nature. I often go there camping." [10]

Alai critically observed that "in dealing with Tibet foreigners invariably think of religion in the first place. Tibet's population is 2 million, out of which 300-400 thousand are Han Chinese. Among the Tibetans, there are 60,000 monks and priests who do not do anything productive. This figure exceeds the 50,000 people in Tibet who receive free education from primary school all the way up to university. These monks are mostly teenagers. Let's think about the shortage of manpower in Tibet. There are more monks than students. How can you expect Tibet to develop? Throughout history, the Tibetan dynasty was extremely formidable and it conquered territories up to Chang'an. How many armies were able to fight till Chang'an? But after the introduction of Tang Buddhism into Tibet, basic development in Tibet came to a standstill. Places with too much of a religious influence cannot possibly be modernized. I resolutely oppose Tibetan independence. Independent Tibet, with such natural conditions, simply cannot survive independently. It can only be a theocratic nation but it has no possibility of becoming a modernized state. Is there any sense in having such a state?" [11]

I believe that Alai's literary works have the potential to fascinate Indian readers.

8 My personal interview with Alai, 20 November 2018 at Matang, Sichuan province, China.

9 Interview: "Writer Alai: Thinking in Tibetan, Writing in Chinese" in http://www.360doc.com/content/15/1118/07/15549792_513978271.shtml: 18 November 2015.

10 Interview: "Writer Alai vehemently opposes Tibetan independence" in *Guanchazhe* (Observer), 4 November 2015.

11 Interview: "Writer Alai vehemently opposes Tibetan independence" in *Guanchazhe* (Observer), 4 November 2015.

If the non-religious aspects of Tibetan culture— as reflected in the works by Alai— are translated into the various languages of India, the fragrance of his works would permeate everywhere. Generally speaking, non-Tibetan researchers across the world assume that Tibetan culture is solely concerned with Lamaism, Vajrayana, Tantric Hinduism, Kalachakra, Mandala, etc. These all are associated with the belief systems of the Tibetans, which are essentially religious. The non-religious aspects of Tibetan culture—such as traditional medicine, folk knowledge systems regarding ecology and preserving the ecological balance, architectural construction and building designs in the permafrost environment, the socio-linguistics of different regions of Tibet, and many such areas of study—have hardly been emphasized. Indians can greatly benefit from these Tibetan experiences in all such spheres of knowledge.

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## Author Profile:


Priyadarśī Mukherji has been a poet and polyglot since his childhood. He has authored eleven books, out of which six have been translations of Chinese poems with annotations. Since 1989 he has been the senior-most Professor in Chinese and Sinological Studies in India. His doctoral research was on folklore and folk literature which he initially pursued in China while studying at Fudan University

and Beijing Normal University. Apart from Chinese literary translation, he has also authored books on Chinese folk literature and society; contemporary Indian history from the declassified Chinese archival documents; and two books on Chinese phonetics for Indians in eight different scripts of India. Priyadarsi Mukherji has a postgraduate and a doctorate in Chinese language, literature and culture studies of the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU), New Delhi, where he has taught since 1989. Apart from other prizes, he won the Special Book Award of China in 2014.

# Novel Creation, Literary Modernity, and the Era of Globalization

# ——An Interview with Alai

Alai (Writer)

Zhang Yue (Beijing Normal University)

Translated by Zhang Yue

**Abstract:**

In this interview, Alai explores a series of relationships in the creation of novels, including the relationship between original works and adaptations, between fiction and non-fiction, between authorial and readerly experiences, between the "oral epic" and the "written words" in *The Song of King Gesar (Gesa'er wang),* between time and space, between "telling" and "singing," and between inside and outside. On the basis of these relationships, Alai reflects on the issues of literary innovation, modernity and cultural spirit. Then he explores issues of cultural differences, integration and literary translation problems in the era of globalization.

**Keywords:** Novel writing, modernity, cultural spirit, the era of globalization

## I. Multiple Relationships in Novel Creation

**Zhang Yue (henceforth ZY)**: Thank you for participating in this interview. Congratulations on your new work *Mushroom Circle(Moguquan)* winning the Lu Xun Literature Prize. Please allow me to start our interview with the topic of novel creation. The first question is about the adaptation of novel texts and cross-media texts. Your work has been adapted into some stage plays, film and television dramas, such as the *Red Poppies (Chen'ai luoding)* in opera version in November and December of this year. In fact, there was a TV adaption of *Red Poppies* in 2003. As far as I know, *Red Poppies* also has versions of Sichuan opera and dance drama.

How do you understand the interaction between the stage play, film television and fiction?

**Alai:** I think as novel writers, we are supposed to use basic structures of story and relationships of characters to connect these art forms together. Each of them has a different form and each form also relies on its own basic vocabulary to express something, so I will not say that the concrete plots, characters and scenes will be exactly the same as the original novel. Many writers hope that any forms of literature will be the same as their original work. In fact, I think the reason why a work is worthy of adaptation is that it has a space and a developmental direction in another form. So, I hope my work can have some developmental changes, because literature itself is an art exploring possibilities. Through being adapted into other art styles, it also offers a different possibility. We should be more encouraged by this viewpoint. I am just the creator of the novel. The possibility of the dramatical version needs to be done by the person who creates the drama.

**ZY:** Regarding the relationship between imagination and reality, you have talked about this topic, for example: "If a novelist builds a stage, all the components of the stage are real. But the activities of people on the stage can play to the fullest."[1] You also mentioned in another interview that the imagination in *Red Poppies (Chen'ai luoding)* is based only on the relationships between characters: "Others in the novel, such as the system of rules, customs, clothing and food are all authentic" (Chen and Alai 19). So, what's your state of mind when you are dealing with this fictional and non-fictional relationship in writing?

**Alai:** I think that writing different themes requires the new ways and forms we are talking about. But the basic principles you have talked about are unchanged. Some of the literary researchers are somewhat over-emphasizing the so-called "imagination." Imagination is definitely needed, as refactoring scenes, details and character relationships even allows surreal expression. But what we might overlook is something outside the novel—the "era" that we need to be concerned with. The "era" is not an abstract expression. It has a specific way of existence, including language, appearance and tolerance. All of these can be restored in the novel. And it doesn't occur just to me. If we want to trace certain things in the literary classics,

1 See Alai and Wu Huaiyao 阿來，吳懷堯. "Interview with Alai: Business is Part of Culture, and the Chairman of the Association is Idle 專訪阿來：商業為文化的一部分，作協主席是閒職（Zhuanfang Alai: shangye wei wenhua de yibufen, zuoxie zhuxi shi xianzhi）". *Sohu Culture* , 08 April. 2000. Web. 11 Jan. 2019. < http://cul.sohu.com/20090408/n263260514.shtml>.

I believe that literary creation commonly has such a situation. For example, people can study the status quo of Qing dynasty society and the lifestyle of people in the era of writing through *A Dream of Red Mansions (Hongloumeng).* They can also infer the social conditions in late Tsarist Russia through novels like Tolstoy's *War and Peace.* So, literature not only provides stories and striking emotions, but more importantly provides a higher level of understanding of the times.

Moreover, in fact, novels as well as all narrative literatures, such as TV series and movies, have this kind of problem: that we are always looking for "jokes" or things that will excite people, but we are not fundamentally paying enough attention to something more valuable. One of the three principles of classic fiction proposed by the critic Harold Bloom is "the power of cognition."[2] But now we don't own enough recognition about an era; instead, we just think of imagination as a structure of emptiness or delusion, or even plagiarism between different texts. As for plagiarism, for instance, rural novels are not only about writing rural areas, but also about the prototype of several kinds of rural novels. Some "anti-Japanese TV dramas" are also a recombination of many prototypes of "anti-Japanese TV dramas." They rarely rely on the full depth of life in the rural area to create narrative works. Such things may only provide an entertainment function for people to spend time with after dinner.

**ZY:** As a reader, when reading novels, whether it is a full-length novel such as *Red Poppies (Chen'ai luoding)* and the "Hollow Mountain" (Kongshan) series or a short story, the characters are like people standing in front of us, facing and talking to us. Readers can form a dialogical relationship with the characters in the novel. As an author, when you are writing, how do you think of this kind of experience?

**Alai:** This is required. First of all, it is necessary to observe the characters and grasp them overall. The so-called "sense of reality" is not to shape the characters in accordance with the vulgar principle of realism, but to make them rooted in their era and in their specific environment. As for a character, there are many factors that contribute to their traits. But we don't pay enough attention to them. The geographical and cultural traits of the characters are basically different. More importantly, there are differences in professional identities, and their perceptions and understandings of the world are even more diverse. Characters also express themselves not only in writing, but also in every aspect of life. Based on this norm, the character must become real and sensible, appearing in front of us like the image

2 Bloom says in the preface of *Novelists and Novels:* "I accept only three criteria for greatness in imaginative literature: aesthetic splendor, cognitive power, wisdom." See: Bloom, Harold. *Novelists and Novels*. Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2005, p. xiii. Print.

of a real person. This kind of writing process can be called "true writing."

**ZY:** Fiction creation, and even literary creation, can combine two different groups together—the author and the reader. They can also link the experience of two different groups. Similarly, Walter Benjamin mentions two terms in *The Image of Proust:* "voluntary recollection" (*mémoire volontaire*) and "involuntary recollection" (*mémoire involontaire*). Benjamin's so-called voluntary recollection or involuntary recollection in a sense means that the author's experience is constantly summoning himself, while the reader's experience is also infiltrated and integrated with the author's experience (Benjamin 9).[3] So, in your novel creation, what is the interaction between the readers' experience and the author's? How can you use your own experience as an author to fuse into the readers' experience?

**Alai:** Definitely, in my writing, the author often moves to understand others based on his own experience. We often say, "plunge into the thick of life," but how deep is the life of others? So, I think that life should not be "plunged into." Rather, life is supposed to be experienced. We try to make our life experience wider in society and gain more complicated experience in all walks of life. Only in this way can we have different emotional experiences, and then you can create fictions "in reality." Writing is definitely not just a matter of a subjective "I want to express anything." When we talk about Chinese novels and Chinese literature, one of the problems is that we seem to deal with literature too narrowly. It seems that literature always bears a strong subjectivity and we are always pursuing something like a theme or an ideology. Of course, these things are important, but my consideration is that if there are only these factors, the novel will not become a novel. The things involved in the writing of the novel are still as rich as possible. This kind of richness is mainly created by different characters. So, it is necessary to have a deep understanding of these characters.

**ZY:** It is still about the relationship between "telling" and "singing." In the construction of the novel *The Song of King Gesar (Gesa'er wang)*, the characters are from the epic *King Gesar*. The story of King Gesar was previously circulated through oral transmission. The content of "telling" is a very important part. However, the part of "singing" is also not negligible. How did you deal with the process from "singing" to "writing" and the relationship between the two elements?

**Alai:** First of all, I wrote this book at the invitation of a British publisher. They were doing a "retelling myth" plan, so the first edition of this book was published in

3 See Benjamin's *Zum Bilde Prousts*. Benjamin, Walter. "Zum Bilde Prousts." *Medienästhetische Schriften: Mit einem Nachwort von Detlev Schöttker.* Berlin: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2002, 9-21. Print.

English and then in Chinese. When I wrote this, I considered that we had possessed some expressions of literary classics, such as the ones in *A Dream of Red Mansions (Hongloumeng)*, *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms (Sanguo yanyi)* and *Journey to the West (Xiyouji)* at that time. Unfortunately, what we were conceiving later on was almost the same as the original structure, which has reappeared again and again till now. In consequence, nowadays many works, including writing with many historical themes and a few mythical factors, are nothing new if they are written in this "recorder" mode.

I use two clues in this novel series. For an epic, it has a special way of existence that I should present in the first place. So the epic itself is the main line of the story. Another one is the existence state of the oral narrators. What I am thinking about is how it is related to the epic. What effect does the epic have on him or her? Not only thought, I feel that even the emotion and personality of "he" or "she " have an impact. With long-term contact with such a subject, the actor of oral literature may also become the person in the drama. I hold the viewpoint that what we have to write is actually a situation of ancient culture under the impact of present modernity. I am not a person who is particularly nostalgic and feels that all the old things are good. So, we can use this norm to see the social and cultural changes under the influence of modern phenomena. I think the word "change" is very important to us. This is the first thing.

The second clue concerns our treatment of the characters in history when we are writing historical subjects. Myth is also a kind of history, but when we are writing about people with certain images in the past, it is difficult for us to make any new breakthroughs in the works. For example, I am afraid that Sun Wukong always invokes some specific images. So does Tang Sanzang. But we have to add some modern understandings to them. Of course, in the story of King Gesar, it's hard to see what the original image of him was like. So, in my viewpoint, I added two elements to it. But some old-fashioned people may think this is not good since something has changed. What does change? To give an example, the model of "Monk Tang to fetch scripture" (Xitian qujing) is also a bit like King Gesar's experience. He comes to earth and helps everyone defeat demons. Gesar is primarily like Tang Sanzang and Sun Wukong, in the sense that when there is always a monster they can't beat, the gods will help them. Then they will be invincible. My story uses this model and designs a scene where Gesar later feels more and more bored. In fact, in the ordinary narrative mode, he is not facing a real challenge, as someone will definitely come to help when he is not able to beat demons. When others think that he is a hero, he will have doubts: "Am I a hero?" If he is a hero in this sense, does he

also have some "fake things"? Does he also master enormous power through fake things? When this power comes, of course, a lot of things will come with power, such as glory, money, wine, beauty, and so on. Gesar knows that in the whole chessboard of God, he is a small step or a part, or just a layout. In the layout, he seems to also be a piece of chess that is going to be the king. Consequently, he may have a sense of nothingness about the hero and the power that we see positively. In a word, with so many beautiful women and wealth, he feels a sense of nothingness rather than a sense of accomplishment.

Moreover, this kind of epic has a strong religious nature, but those who engage in religion may also show great interest in power and wealth. This is also true today. The eminent monk is talking about letting everyone "lay down the burden," and I often laugh at them. I say that they go to the monastery to eat vegetarian food and use these various ingredients to imitate chicken, duck, fish and pork, just because they are forced by the religious perception and can't eat meat. Isn't that still not "laying down the burden"? Do people who always make fake meat secretly eat real meat? Art also needs some different expressions to face different conservative forces. As a result, I think that our literature should also be put on the most basic level.

But in fact, we may rarely engage our intellect now on this level, either we have no vision or we are not brave enough and have no courage. Therefore, when we create art and literature, we cannot think of enjoying "clap and applause" as well as "wine and love" in all places. But now we are actually very narrow-minded. Does criticizing the system mean that a writer has courage? Actually not. There are many things worthy of exploring among our culture and those traditional ideas. Hence, I think that a writer's courage in showing himself is actually multifaceted, because if a writer wants to challenge some bad things in traditional culture, he actually needs more courage. It may be bitter when he offends the bad aspects in traditional culture.

**ZY:** There is a relationship between time and space in your novel. In the flow of time, space seems to be changing. For example, *Red Poppies (Chen'ai luoding)* may be considered a more holistic work that forms a space from a single perspective, while there is a petal-like structure in the "Hollow Mountain" series and rural life is more of a piecemeal puzzle. The narrative space with "orange petal mode" has a wider pattern, which actually also has a wick-like mechanism to screw parts together. Time doesn't seem to have changed, but the pattern of space has become larger. Does the narrative space of the novel form a mutual relationship with its own structure?

**Alai:** That's true because of the trend that modern society itself has become more complex and more fragmented, as many things today have different movements. A society was relatively stable in the old times. For example, it seems like twenty years or even only ten years have gone by psychologically while one hundred years have passed in reality. But today we may have been going through ten years in reality while it feels like we have experienced life for a hundred years. One of the biggest signs of the arrival of modernity is that psychological time has accelerated. That is to say, new things are continuously appearing in life, and the concept of technological innovation makes everything constantly change. But time is a constant. The actual passage of time is still constant in its speed from the day it was born and is continuously going away in its way. Our feeling of "fast and slow" is decided by the number of things appearing in constant time. The more new things, the more we are overwhelmed, and the higher speed of time we feel. In the current specific space, the old things disappear faster and faster while new things appear more and more in number, which brings about huge social changes. So social speed is actually a psychological speed of time, which is not a real one. We feel that time is accelerating, but in the real world, there has not been any change in physical time.

**ZY:** Therefore, under the condition that objective physical time is constant, a change in mental time is caused by the change of space.

**Alai:** Right. Taking the "Hollow Mountain" (Kongshan) series and *Red Poppies (Chen'ai Luoding)* as examples again, we find that they are written down together concerning 100 years of the last century. *Red Poppies (Chen'ai luoding)* concerns the last 50 years of the last century. At that time, time seemed to be "slow," and everyone had done so few things in only a few decades. In most cases, time still seemed "stagnant." But after the 1950s, after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the continuous political and economic movements quickly transformed the structure of society. After the 1980s, various economic activities also brought about an intermediate transformation from a planned economy to a market economy.

Social development is not a one-step process. It is a process that is constantly broken and rebuilt, cycling between these two processes. People break the old order, and they continue to break it just after forming a new order. This will inevitably bring a huge sense of oppression and discomfort to present people, as every day they have to face such a situation: they have just adapted to a lifestyle but must adapt to the next one. Nowadays life is broken with increasing consistency. Therefore, the "Hollow Mountain" series has to adapt to such a mode where there

is no longer a stable society, which is constantly being crushed: we smash it just after rebuilding it. We call such a process "reform" while in the past it was named "revolution." Both have brought about social upheaval. When there is a specific change in society, the change in humanity is accelerated.

So why does the "Hollow Mountain" (Kongshan) series concern several past and stable societies? Because in the past, if one family dominated the villages, they would be at the center of country life and lead their life for hundreds of years. However, in the state of "chaos" today, as the saying goes, "All's strife and tumult on the stage, as one man ends his song the next comes on."[4] Nowadays, one person has undergone a change and has become a leader. After three or five years of new economic or political changes having emerged, he will be quickly replaced by someone who is more accustomed to the new situation. Social changes in the past few years have brought about a lot of people in ups and downs. Therefore, we can't get all the stories into one single narrative mode just because we have found a seemingly successful one in *Red Poppies (Chen'ai Luodiing)*. This is a tricky way. Of course, I could write novels like *Red Poppies* forever, but I think that our literature should not just be considered for the market. I need to deal with different themes, such as the story of King Gesar and the ones in the "Hollow Mountain" (Kongshan) series, etc. I have to write other subjects requiring different forms. We often say that art is innovative. Art is not an external, superficial and whimsical expression and is based on the different themes and stories written to get the most appropriate structure and expression. Each of my books is looking for new ways. Each book is innovative of course. Some pieces require a little more, some require less.

**ZY:** We found that in the view of the protagonist in *Red Poppies (Chen'ai luoding)*, there are two kinds of titles regarding his father: "chieftain" (Tusi) and "father," which means the transformation of perspective. Some people also notice that *Red Poppi*es and the "Hollow Mountain" series contain more emphasis on the issue of multiple perspectives, both of which are "a kind of emphasis on internal and external perspective" (Dan 157). "This kind of viewing mode, which is combined with the external/internal viewpoint, has obtained a similar perspective of self-review" (Dan 157). How do you consider this conversion of perspective in your creation?

**Alai:** In fact, these are some specific small problems as well as technical ones.

4 See Tsao Hsueh-Chin and Kao Hgo 曹雪芹 高鶚, *A Dream of Red Mansions紅樓夢*. Trans. Yang Xianyi and Dai Naidie 楊憲益 戴乃迭. Beijing: Foreign Languages Press, 1994 , p.17. Print.

In my view, as for technical problems, I may think over them in college. I have never thought about them in writing. I write somewhere and need to write like this, then I do it. Just as I have said, the form is always subject to the expression of the content. The insights of an idiot alone seem not enough to fully understand the world. Isn't he a bit mad and silly? On one hand, when you look at the world from his perspective, you will often see some absurd and bizarre things different from that of normal society. On the other hand, this society also needs a person to look at it in a more normal way at the same time, who can make a more realistic presentation of this society. But it does not seem to be within the consideration of writers. Of course, I have also been a teacher. I know that sometimes we need to find some topics in teaching. In other words, just like Cook Pao, we have to write something in a manner akin to the dissection of cows, figuring out the joints, meridians, muscles and blood vessels.[5] But when one person has to ask why he grew up like this, he certainly has never thought about it.

## II. Modernity and Cultural Spirit of Literature

**ZY:** So, what do you think of "innovation" in writing?

**Alai:** For example, I think few people see novels like the "Hollow Mountain" series as innovation. Because people regard it as still adopting a realistic narrative language. But they do not consider certain structures and forms to correspond to this social change. We recognize innovation as an item with narrow meaning today, as if it just meant "some formally different expressions." Let's take, for example, painting. You desire to draw the representational art initially and then turn to abstract art. Later, if abstract art doesn't work, you will proceed to decorative art or even to performance art. This may carry the risk of turning to innovation for the sake of innovation though it is also a kind of innovation. I insist that the fundamental innovation should make people break away and let us forget what innovation is for.

**ZY:** You have just referred to the modernity of literature, which is a long-standing controversial topic. You also mentioned in another interview that what you wrote was "the process of modernity in Tibet," was more precisely "the northeast of Tibetan areas" (He and Alai 29). We know you attach great importance to the value of oral material in your writing. So, in your opinion, what is the significance of oral material in the process of literary modernity?

5 The story of Cook Pao comes from the chapter "Nourishing the Lord of Life" in *Zhuangzi*, meaning "After long-term practice, one has mastered the rules and is comfortable with his own work."

**Alai:** We also want to look at something of value from traditional culture. Now it seems that the word "value" has become equivalent to just looking for things from the old days. What is called "intangible cultural heritage" has also become something informal, such as foods. Even some of those are obviously very bad; we have to keep them. And we distort these things into something that meets the challenges of modernity. However, if all these things are reasonable, modernity will not come, nor will it be so powerful. It does not have such tremendous power in itself. Instead, it lies in today's society and people. People are willing to accept new things, and everyone's willingness will become a power to transition them into the field of modernity. However, there are some old-fashioned people holding old habits and not willing to change. This is not right.

I think what makes the traditional culture more important is the emotional and spiritual power inside it. If one wants to hold on to something traditional, it is better to read the *Book of Songs*（*Shijing*）, the poems in ancient time and the expression in Chinese language. Moreover, Chinese language often contains the emotional expressions of people, which are what we need to inherit. We can reflect on our philosophical perception or introspection about what is more important in our history. I think it is these spiritual, cultural and emotional elements that are the most positive part of culture or the true core of it. We keep them and try to maintain them in the new cultural context, and these things just happen to be sustainable. For instance, if there are people spending more time comprehending the implicit and beautiful things in Chinese poetry, how will they take so many "kuso things"? If they know that literature and art are something serious and fine, they will take them seriously. This is a simple example. Otherwise, what we call the "protection" of traditional culture or "to respect traditional culture" is to eat something weird and to find some old objects to hold onto, or to make Kuso movies tomorrow.

**ZY:** That's true. The spirit of the age is indeed changing. And in regard to the changing rural area, we can always feel a sense of vicissitudes and sadness in the process of reading.

**Alai:** I think this trauma and sadness is born with people. The progress of our society has changed; of course there will be some successful people. But behind them there are a lot of failed people, or ones who are not successful enough. Therefore, as the ancients said, the achievement of a general costs many lives. For most people, in this sense, there are a large number of unsuccessful people in society. Only a small number of them can be successful. People who forever progress with the age are in the minority. Most people will be slowly forgotten. Isn't it a tragedy?

However, the nature of life determines that no one wants to be full of vicissitude. Especially when thinking about our individual lives, I often want to think like this: assuming that we live to be eighty years old, which is relatively a long period, we do not know much in the first ten or twenty years while later on we understand most things before the age of seventy. But in our seventies we are unable to do what we hope to do. Breaking off both ends, we can do something valuable in the middle of our fifties. In these periods, you often make mistakes before your life disappears. Buddhists say that all people desire to be reincarnated. I say to those who advocate "reincarnation" that I don't want to deny reincarnation, but it is too tempting if I can remember my original life. The problem is that the people who are reincarnated don't remember their original life and what they did in their previous life. Now that memory, a cultural item, cannot be circulated, it has been abolished since the reincarnation of life. It is equivalent to cancelling the meaning of reincarnation once you have no memory. So, what we know is the limited accumulation of about fifty years. We come to the world by chance and live for decades. No matter what we obtain, success or failure, it is ultimately due to silence, disappearance and being forgotten. Isn't it in this sense a tragedy?

**ZY:** Thus, is the price of this life and success a "tragedy" in essence?

**Alai:** I think it is the case for most people. Otherwise, without such a sense of tragedy, the religions we understand today could not be produced. The reason for the appearance of these religions is to be able to respond to this kind of tragedy, which gives us a comfort with religious songs and even promises to give us salvation. It actually deals with this kind of tragic core in the heart of people. When people face the idea that life is dying after decades, there may be a tragic essence in life itself. But the question is that we still have something positive in literature. When people ask me these questions, I can say that I am an "optimistic pessimist." I am optimistic since life is so precious. Therefore, I am willing to be as active as possible in my life for decades and make my life with more solicitude. This also belongs to what Bloom called the "cognitive power" of the literary power, whose first essence, I deem, is the light of aesthetics. It seems to be a huge self-comfort when we let our life shine with a little light of life.

**ZY:** You just mentioned a kind of salvation and redemption. We see that this kind of redemption is also reflected in your novels.

**Alai:** I think that is ubiquitous, but the ways of presenting it are different. This is also the special nature of human beings.

**ZY:** You also mentioned that the 1980s was an era of literary reading. As readers or literary recipients, what can we do for literature in the age of

fragmentation?

**Alai:** We have already talked about the myth of time. When I say "fragmentation" now, at least for me, time is still constant and complete. When is time "fragmented"? People are willing to be fragmented, but not for me. My daily life is complete. As the recipients of literature, in this case, people are grasping themselves. If people have to believe in the myth of fragmentation, then there will be no more persuasion. Reading is the most long-standing tradition of Chinese traditional culture. One core of education in China is reading. At least since the time of Confucius, it has continued for thousands of years. In this case, when do people want to persuade others to study?

## III. Cultural Differences, Integration and Literary Translation in the Age of Globalization

**ZY:** "Marginal writing" seems to be a controversial issue in contemporary literature, especially in the process of elements in traditional narrative literature being gradually deconstructed. How should we regard this phenomenon?

**Alai:** I don't think there is any difference between the mainstream and the maginal. In fact, every writer regards himself as at the center. In the age of the Internet, the world itself has no center. The Internet reflects the appearance of multiple nodes. Each terminal is a center as well as a node. So, I don't think the single center of literature exists. Otherwise where is the center? In Beijing? Or in New York? Or in Paris? As for the so-called "central writing," in addition to the fact that these writings will give me some inspiration, it will not interfere with my own writing. Now that my world is the center, we are all creating a world. How can there be a worldwide culture in this sense? It's just because we feel ourselves on the edge, and we think that others are in the center. But I don't have this feeling.

**ZY:** The Tibetan culture you write about is a kind of "urban-rural combination" viewed by outsiders. Is there a view maintaining "defamiliarization" in the writing process?

**Alai:** I don't think there is such a defamiliarization. What we call the "center" or "familiarity and unfamiliarity" are the consequence of an assumption that we believe there are some centers. We assume that something is the center and try our best to learn from the center, as if there was no stranger after believing this assumption. But you are actually still very unfamiliar to "centers." So, the "defamiliarization" does not exist. For example, as I just said, you are very strange to Paris and to Hollywood. If Hollywood is the center, you are also unfamiliar with what Hollywood writes, such as *The Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Therefore, cultural identity is a process in which you recognize yourself. Of course, today's culture is undergoing a lot of changes. In fact, more often, I believe that most people live in such a world: there is no fixed cultural model that can self-proclaim "I am a constant center" in the midst of different cultures and the era of globalization. Culture itself is a flowing form. We can deem that in different places, culture is just the pattern of change and flow that comes out in the form of flow. You write about your flow and change while I write about my flow and change. Thus, the center or the edge does not exist.

**ZY:** Regarding the cultural transition zone, many researchers nowadays like to talk about the "third space," which implies a "differential space" between different cultures and a space where different cultures are mixed and blended. It is important to mention Homi Bhabha when we discuss the problem of cultural differences. The term "hybridity" used by Mr. Bhabha to interpret the "third space" theory means a miscibility to resist essentialism as well as the single discourse space and to deconstruct cultural imperialism. Some researchers will use "urban" and "rural" as opposites with mutual resistance when exploring the literature and culture of cities and villages. Some use the term to explain the rural-urban continuum. Is it possible for you to have a cultural connection between the city and the countryside?

**Alai:** I don't make this judgment; at least I do not make this kind of judgment in culture. This judgment doesn't mean much to me. Some cultures are not only purely cultural issues, but are attached to economic, scientific, technological, military, political and institutional factors. But we are only writing about a state of culture. If we want to distinguish a level of culture and then determine what value it has, it will be meaningless. The present world is not simply a cultural issue. You can say that the difference between foreign countries and us is not a purely cultural issue. It may be an institutional issue that makes the system bring about the strength of its economic military science. Of course, there are some cultural factors behind these changes. Any culture is the result of moderate changes on the foundation.

**ZY:** Indeed, when we read some research materials, we find that the consequences of this cultural difference sometimes may be aggravated in cultural studies. In fact, cultural differences are not, as we tend to think, so serious that they cannot cross borders or establish comparability.

**Alai:** Right. In fact, it is just like we are discussing writing skills. The colleges and the critics need to have an entry point of discussion for literary works. But when we deal with literature today, we may pay too much attention to two things. One is culture; the other is the form of writing technology or skill. In fact, literature exists to express society. The society it expresses is more comprehensive. That is, the

common factors I just mentioned play a role in this society. Of course, culture exists longer. It may be more powerful from a longer-term perspective. But in the short term, it is not the culture itself that directly causes social change, but something else, such as a political system, science and technology, capital, and so on. If we reduce the scale of space a little bit, as just discussed, when psychological time goes by faster and faster, the physical time where things exist is shorter and shorter. Then the role of capital, institution and technology is obviously greater.

What I insist on is that it is inadequate for many current cultural criticisms to overemphasize "cultural identity." Everyone knows that it is an outdated concept. Where did postcolonial theory start? It was indeed originally not meant for discussing all cultural issues. After the two world wars, that is, after the establishment of the nation-state, the traditional colonial powers began to decline. The theory was originally intended to explore colonial issues and was used for these original colonial countries that wanted to obtain national independence and to establish a nation-state. They needed someone to provide theoretical support in order to have cultural identity, cultural politics and cultural identity. But for China, postcolonial theory obviously cannot be applied to Chinese literature. At least the theory I just referred to can't be used to discuss the issues within China's multi-ethnic condition. But some of us are now inadequately using this theoretical formula to discuss China's national issues.

**ZY:** It is indeed the case. When I was reading some materials, I felt that it was a little discomforting to wholly "assemble" this theory in China, especially regarding Chinese literature. Indeed, this case is partly true in other cultures. Some writers actually have a special identity, but this identity does not affect another identity of a writer. When it comes to translation, we find that the meaning of Tibetan literature becomes more and more difficult to define in the process of text translation, as the text infiltrates other cultural meanings. In regarding this kind of translation problem about your work, I have seen some people pointing out the translation problem between "Tibet-Han-Foreign" language, which is also a cultural translation problem. Because your novels need to be transformed from Tibetan culture into Chinese by writing in Chinese. Therefore, some people will also question the identity of this translated literature.

**Alai:** This is what I don't think about. As a writer, if I have strong capital or strength to support writing and translation, I will build a huge promotion system. But I don't have it. I am not a translation agency, and I am writing alone. For example, if someone likes you, or someone thinks that your writing is valuable and willing to translate it, then he can directly translate it. What quality does the

translated version present? I will not go into special research. Although I have confidence in translation, I have not specifically studied contemporary translation. My confidence in translation is mainly from religious literature. I am not a Buddhist, but when I want to read some Buddhist scriptures, I will also read it carefully if it is translated.

As for translation, there is no such thing as "translatable" or "untranslatable." We always say something is untranslatable, but if so, how can people translate another set of cultural products so well? Conversely, I often read the Bible and collect different versions of it. When we read it, it seems that these translators have never discussed the issue of whether it is easy to translate or not. The translator just thinks that this is a must-do and a mission-oriented action. In this sense, we have read so many classics as well as foreign literature, even foreign schools of thought like philosophy, science, history, sociology, anthropology, etc. But we are not able to read any works in any language. Therefore, writing and language at present do not have a single cultural attribute. In fact, the number of attributes only belonging to a single country or a single nation has been reduced, as language and words become more and more public. As a result, it is not worthwhile to always ask what is behind a language, or to tangle with the issue of whether a writer or a translator writes in one's native language or not.

**ZY:** Thank you very much.

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**Author Profiles:**

Alai was born in 1959 in Maerkang county, Sichuan province. His main works include the poetry collection *Rang Mo River (Lengmohe)*, the novel collections *The Blood of the Old Year (Jiunian de xueji)* and *The Silversmith under the Moonlight (Yueguang xia de yinjiang),* the novels *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet (Chen'ai luoding), The Song of King Gesar (Gesa'er wang)* and the "Hollow Mountain" (Kongshan) series. In 2000, he won the 5th Mao Dun Literature Prize (Maodun wenxue jiang) for his novel *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet* and became the youngest winner in the history of the prize. In March 2009, he was elected chairman of the Sichuan Writers Association (Sichuansheng zuojia xiehui) and concurrently serves as a member of the 8th National Committee of China Writers Association (Zhongguo zuojia xiehui dibajie quanguo weiyuanhui). On December 8th, 2017, Alai won the 17th Bai Hua Literature Prize for Fiction (Baihua wenxue jiang xiaoshuo jiang) and Bai Hua Literature Prize for Prose (Baihua wenxue jiang sanwen jiang) with the novel *Three Cordyceps*(Sanzhi chongcao) and the essay *The Last Meeting of the*

*Scholars and the Landlords* (Shi yu shen de zuihou zaofeng). He was the first one to win the double prize in the history of the Bai Hua Literature Prize (Baihua wenxue jiang). In August 2018, the work *Mushroom Circle* won the 7th Lu Xun Literary Prize (Luxun wenxue jiang) for Novellas.

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# Alai's Reception in the English-speaking World

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**Abstract:**

After one of Alai's most influential novels, *Red Poppies*, was translated for the English-speaking world, some scholars and critics have yielded relatively comprehensive academic insights about Alai's complicated identity and his unique creativity in literary writing. But for the limited accessible sources to Alai's other works and through more or less oriented and even distracted lenses to look into Alai as a Chinese-Tibetan writer, Alai's reception in the English-speaking world may not be adequately inclusive. The question of how we can receive Alai from a culturally diverse perspective without narrowing Alai down to some specific issues still requires further contemplation.

**Keywords:** Alai, reception, identity, Chinese-Tibetan writers, historical narratives

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Alai, one of the most significant and representative figures in Chinese Tibetan literature, earned his literary reputation initially in the second half of the 1980s after his shift from poetry composition into fiction writing. His first full-length novel *Chen'ai luoding* (translated as *Red Poppies* afterwards into English) made him the youngest winner ever and the first awarded Tibetan author of the Mao Dun Literary Prize. Though gradually upraised to his height of fame in local and national belles-letters circles as well as among the public, there incessantly emerged discussions, debates and even disputes over how to subsume Alai under certain categories and how to appraise Alai and Tibetan writers in a more comprehensive and consolidated manner.

Alai's equivocal positioning in contemporary Tibetan and Chinese literature not only leads to his problematized reception inside the People's Republic of China, following his works being adapted to other languages, his multifaceted

ambiguities, including his geographical sense of belonging, cultural orientation, linguistic identity and historical recognition, etc., yet also makes him more or less an inapplicable case to some conventional or even stereotypical research paradigms employed by Western scholars. Actually, when western critics[1] at the commencing stage rendered Alai's image to their readers, it seemed that Alai's interpretability did not necessarily hinge on his "inherited" traits with respect to his ethnic identity or cultural background. As Wu suggests that Alai should not be narrowed and reduced down to a sort of "anti-" literature, the very aesthetic kernel of *Red Poppies* is "simply a reflection of life with its inexplicable ending." (Wu 92) Though cautiously extracting some provokingly sensitive issues from the light cast upon Alai, Wu does not succeed in maintaining the author's role solely as one with high literary achievement. Alai's image in later critics' articles or essays is more similar to an exotic model or embodiment of a typical identical hybridity which Tibetan writers are presupposed to possess. When talking of "presupposed," I mean that in western academic groups, there exists a sort of conceptual "division" between "Chinese literature" and "Tibetan literature." Though this division is shown apparently as a traditionally shared consensus among scholars in Tibetan studies, actually it is not a relatively long period since this chasm emerged to the surface.[2] Rediscovery of "modern Tibetan literature" is a concurrent phenomenon accompanied by translation of some modern Tibetan literary texts[3], while it is undeniable that expected horizons of western scholars may be an indirect derivative outcome of traditional western Shangri-la imagination. Regardless of disparate critical sources, textual or contextual, in the process, given limitedly accessible texts and scarce exemplary cases for further studies in this field, Alai's translation makes a non-negligible contribution to establishing western understandings of modern Tibetan literature as a work of "literary integrity."

Moreover, it is this very "integrity" that in one way develops and at the same time "dwarfs" Alai's reception in English-speaking circles (and the larger western-language circles). Alai is not introduced as a literary figure "outside" the very

1 Here I use the term "western critics" mainly to refer to critics in English-speaking circles, for Alai's first translated novel *Red Poppies* has laid the textual and research groundwork for most Alai-concerned studies that I have access to now. According to Ji Jin, it was after the publication of Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin's translation of *Red Poppies* ensuing versions in French, German, Italian and Spanish and so on (in total more than 10 languages).

2 It is partially because of a delayed reception of modern Tibetan literature since the end of the 20th century.

3 Apart from Alai's works, for another important publication please see: *Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses*..

language in which he is translated. On the contrary, he is a new face inseparably bound with an old land—Tibet. His novel is applied as an exotic monocular telescope for more accurate focal adjustment when observing an imagined land lacking a physically substantial supplement. In this regard, Alai is somehow forced to bear a role of not only an "introduction" of a new world but more importantly an "incarnation" of the world itself. Alai's translation keeps a synchronous pace with the emergency of designating Tibetan literature as a specialized and self-contained literary whole.

As a correlative consequence, *World Literature Today* put forward several reviews about Tibetan literature in 2003 (Wu 92; Lussier 101) in a section called "literature in review," which aroused a discussion on where Tibetan literature should be placed in the sphere of world literature. This article mainly focuses on finding a perspective of re-interrogating the relationship between Chinese literature and Tibetan literature under a global context, in which what should be strengthened is not a uniform reception of literature but a consciousness that "it is the worldliness of world literature that poses the most vital challenges." (Venturino 52) And Venturino stresses further that he believes readers of world literature can better approach Tibetan literature via seeing it as "Tibetan national literature," (Venturino 52) wherefore he compares Tibet to some sovereign nation-states to indicate their analogous similarities (for example, sense of identity or accepted language), while he is fully conscious of the fact that Tibet is not an independent country. Indeed, major themes that later studies tend to take advantage of have already been proposed in this article and the like, especially one such as the "colonizer-colonized" axis between China and Tibet, which is nailed down as a widely accepted pre-understanding amid western scholars when mentioning Chinese-Tibetan literature interactions.

According to Kamila Hladíková, Tsering Shakya is crucial in determining the nature of Tibetan literature as a colonized kind. (Hladíková 11) When we resort to Shakya's argument to find the grounding thesis, his reasoning, however, appears problematically inadequate in deciding Tibetan literature's colonized core. Shakya draws his conclusion in light of the so-called "similarities" between western colonial rule and Chinese governance over Tibet: "In both cases, colonialism caused a dislocation of identity and traditional epistemology in the indigenous social system and culture." (Shakya, "Waterfall" 29) In this regard, Chinese "colonization" over Tibet is embodied in the regime's propagation of its Marxist and materialist ideologies, which "set out to control the minds of the natives." (Shakya, "Waterfall"

29) [4] His assertion that China-Tibet relations should be viewed as a counterpart of western colonization has overlooked a determinate factor for denominating so particular a relation as a colonial one, that is, economic oppression and exploitation imposed upon the colonized. Though the discursive barycenter of post-colonial criticism may not strengthen an economically colonized relationship, while their fierce castigation of Eurocentrism and Occidentalism is still an exuviated form of the previous colonial relationship, for example, between some western countries and some third-world countries in Asia or Africa. As a new critic method in a new global trend, post-colonial theories may be well applied to analyses of regional relationships with a historical legacy of former economic colonialism. However, when it comes to a fundamentally different place, this set of prepositions should await a more prudent and delicate re-examination and explanation. Unfortunately, Shakya, together with some other critics,[5] did not provide sufficient evidence to validate a Chinese "takeover" of Tibet as a process of colonization in this sense. And a similarity-based assertion will in turn muddle future clarification over Alai's coordination in Chinese-Tibetan modern literature.

Admittedly, it is profoundly intricate why Tibetan literature will be mostly perceived in such a skeleton, a "ruptured" framework, in which heterogeneity, peripheral-ity and otherness are the prominent attributors when describing authors and works in this region. But even if we suspend the contention between different narratives about Tibet, when it comes to Alai himself, if similar research methods are adopted without modification, without being based on more insights into authors' local experiences along with their literary selves, other considerable problems may arise. The recent ten years have witnessed a gradual deepening in Alai's scholarly exploration, which, on the other hand, still to some degree falls short of making Alai manifested through more dimensions in the English-speaking world, instead of being dominantly absorbed in the cultural or political labelling game pivoting around Alai's geographical, historical, cultural, linguistic, ethnical and social origins.

Alai's miscellaneous experiences continuously put challenges to those who are

4 See also Shakya, Tsering's article "The Development of Modern Tibetan Literature in the People's Republic of China in the 1980s." Some scholars also borrow Shakya's conclusion, for example, see Hladíková's article "The Soul of Tibet: Representations of Landscape in Chinese-medium Literature about Tibet from the 1980s."

5 For instance, Wang Yiyan thinks that even if Alai writes in Chinese, his cultural identity should not be directly adjuvant to his writing language. Tibetan writers writing in Chinese have "striking" similarities with, say, Indian writers writing in English. In this way, those writers who are unable to utter out by means of their own language are deemed as a consequence of colonization.

apt to fixedly grid him in a mechanical category. Carlos Rojas' analysis on Alai may serve as a good illustrative case. At the beginning of his essay, he chooses Alai's short story "Huai hua 槐花" (Sophora Flower) as the target text. After the protagonist Xielaban's dialogue with a young man, he recalls later in surprise that the young man speaks in Xielaban's "home speech," which has long been thrown into oblivion in his daily life. His astounded reminiscence of his previous dialect is therefore considered a good starting point to manifest the narrator's cleavage in his linguistic identity. On account of this linguistic separation, Rojas further deduces that when Alai intends to address the drastic confrontation between his native tongue and standard written Chinese, he would choose a specific strategy to involve himself into this confrontation. For Alai, different languages designate their respective identities (nations), and "Alai uses the language of one 'nation' to represent another […] a homeland positioned at the interstices of the two nations and their respective societies and cultures." (Rojas 116) Thus, Alai's story is not a mere replicate of Chinese mainstream narratives about the history of those ethnic minorities, and "his works not only are the product of a 'translation' of local subject matter into written Chinese." (Rojas 118) Therefore, Alai's primary concern in writing his autobiographical stories is the action of "translation" itself, whose function is the "linguistic politics" mentioned in the title.

Nevertheless, Rojas may ignore the fact that in Alai's story, the "home speech" of Xialaban is neither standard Tibetan nor Chinese Putonghua, but a local dialect, which is not a suitable example to entrench the perceived conflicts between Tibetan minority groups and Chinese-speaking circles. Noticeably, he translates an excerpt from the original novel as follows:

> a local dialect ( jiaxiang fangyan 家鄉方言) that very few people understand, while in this city Chinese (Hanyu 漢語) and standard Tibetan (biaozhun Zangyu 標准藏語) are the norm (Rojas 116)[6]

From this quote, we can find it is not a careless pitfall in the author's reading on "Huai hua," but rather, the local dialect is in a broader sense merged into a larger Tibetan language pigeonhole, which attenuates diversity and even incommunicability (since very few people understand) between marginal dialects

6 Original text is noted by the author: Alai 阿來, "Huai hua 槐花" (Huai blossoms), in Alai, *Chen'ai feiyang* 塵埃飛揚 [Dust Blowing in the Wind] (Chengdu: Sichuan wenyi chubanshe, 2005), 81–88, 83. As the author cites it in traditional Chinese characters, I did not transform them into simplified Chinese in the article.

and the central normalized language (standard Tibetan). Reclassifying the dialect into the broader Tibetan language family, perhaps, is aimed to further perform adaption of the duality between Tibetan identity and Chinese identity. Whereas, this adaption seems relatively reluctant and to some degree untenable. A critical reason is that the author may find it difficult to appropriately advance forward the typical post-colonial research paradigm in this case, as other-ness, in-between-ness or translatability that are frequently emphasized by post-colonial researchers are not just twofold when it comes to Alai. Tibet, including the greater Tibet areas, is far from a consistent cultural and historical whole when scrutinized in various scales. For our readiness to discuss Alai's self-identity, it should be high priority that we firstly be aware of how to position Alai in a feasible framework. If we individualized Alai's Tibetan identity to be non-subordinate of his Chinese identity, how about his blood ties with Hui ethnicity as Alai's father belongs to Hui ethnic groups? How about his relationship with other Tibetan communities, especially those who live in Lhasa or write in standard Tibet rather than Chinese? Should his identity be further divided into several other sub-groups, like a Tibetan Chinese writer, or a Chinese Tibetan writer or even a Chinese-Tibetan writer in a "particular" sub-community? And if so, where should we set the boundary of our classification for fear that we may fall into a trap of infinite subdivision? Even if we put all these problems aside, the China-versus-Tibet framework is far less stable than it seems. Rojas' article is collected in *Global Chinese Literature*,in whose introduction Alai and Chinese ethnic writers are not abundantly mentioned, especially on how they can be located in the ambiguous "global Chinese literature," which may infer that when juxtaposing Chinese ethnic writers along with diasporic or overseas Chinese writers, theories may not always be articulated and similar consequences drawn.

Many scholars and critics actually have noticed Alai's unsettled identity is beyond the inconclusive capability of a static and simple dualism between China and Tibet. As a hybrid of Hui and Tibet ethnicity, Alai was born in the northeastern part of Sichuan, a marginal part of the greater Tibet area as well as a junction point between Tibetan culture and Han culture. Sichuan-born writers like Alai and Tashi Dawa share common identity issues as to whether or not they should be regarded as Tibetan writers. Wang Yijian reveals that in Alai's work, Alai is at the same time questioning either Chinese mainstream narratives of Tibet or Lhasa-centered monolithic Tibetan identity. (Wang 98) These identity issues are elaborated in Maconi's studies in more detail. He thinks that Tibetan writers actually belong to two different intellectual circles "sharing literary affinities and experiences," (Maconi 177) namely one circle mainly consisting of authors or critics writing in

Tibetan and the other in Chinese. Besides linguistic distinction, Tibetan authors' writing also differs geographically. In Lhasa, inhabited Tibetan writers can be divided into two less proximate groups, the ones who are not capable of speaking Tibetan (like Tashi Dawa) and the others who insist on writing in standard Tibetan language. Outside Lhasa we can see two other groups. In Amdo, Chinese and Tibetan writers tend to collaborate more than those in Lhasa, while Kham contemporary literature is "better represented by the so-called 'Khampa Sinophone" literature," (Maconi 180) wherein we can see a name list of Alai, Jiangbian Jiacuo and so forth. It would be generally doubtful to think of all Tibetan writers to be in a homogenously amalgamated Tibetan literary community. Tibetophone writers may reject Tibetan Sinophone literature being viewed as "Tibetan literature," and though Tibetan Sinophone writers may accept, some of them may feel sensitive about their Tibetan-ness and sense a sort of "incongruity" in their national identity. (Maconi 192)

According to previous studies, we can find discrepant identifications in Tibetan literary groups, as aforementioned, may in some sense disintegrate the Tibetan identity as a whole, if we resort to individualizing this identity as a concrete one and independent from Chinese nationality. As a result, it may seldom suffice to provide a divergent perspective in reading Alai and Tibetan literature other than within the set discourses of colonial criticism.

Another point that attracts predominant scholarly attention is the contention between Chinese mainstream narratives about Tibet and Alai's alternative narrations of that period of history. Many critics are well aware that Alai's works are not aiming at catering for a long-standing western imagination about Tibet. Yue Gang has noted that the represented history of the Jiarong area in Alai's texts "defies any simplistic reading of the Shangri-La myth into the novel." (Yue 550) In *Red Poppies*, Alai's literary ambition lies in his endeavor to reproduce a local history of Jiarong. Yue thinks that *Red Poppies* is "a historical novel of an apocalyptic order," (Yue 547) which is an "epic" and "poetic" nostalgia of Alai's historical memories. Those hereditary memories descend from hundreds of years ago, long before Tibet's communication with the modern world, such as the Nationalist Party or CCP. Though several important events are unexclusively referred to, Yue's sketch of Tibetan history, especially modern Tibetan history, is not politically bound to a certain specific period of time, such as the PRC's governance of this area, which bears relatively negative remarks from western intellectuals.

Yue's expounding of Alai's historical concern is actually not on the surface and is a more text-restricted interpretation than other critics' context-oriented criticism.

Yue successfully exposes the difficulty to "locate" Alai's history at a tangible point due to his complicated experiences and views of where he grew up. However, in another aspect, this article is also not at the "bottom" when discussing the historical relationship between Tibet and China. Actually, Yue and some other western scholars would more or less tend to view the China-Tibet relationship as "chaotic," in which chaos is sustained by a supposition that the change of Tibet is the source of the chaos in this regional relationship. What does it mean? It suggests a comparably weird setting that China is a historical continuum while Tibet is to some degree self-disassembled in front of historical upheavals. This is also a theoretical foundation for Chinese-Tibetan colonialism, namely China's inherited "imperial" rule over Tibet from Qing Dynasty all the way up to the PRC today. The unchanged Chineseness (as the ruler of Tibet) is the essential "wedge" to stabilize this Chinese-Tibetan colonial narrative, which perhaps is also a big hurdle against a more fluid and non-biased interpretation of Alai. Without noticing that China itself is also a beholder and bearer of a hundred years of radical and revolutionary transformations, it may be inevitable to generate some one-sided reflections on Chinese-Tibetan history and its impacts on later generations. Though, from Alai's reception in other languages, we can still hear some thought-evoking voices in their close reading of Alai's works.

Howard Choy delivers an earlier discernment into the historical pictures deeply buried under Alai's lines. Choy takes three authors as parameter-like examples, whose works delineate diverse versions of Tibet compared to the mainstream narrative: Alai, Tashi Dawa and Ge Fei. What he values in his studies is far less a rigid confirmation of an author's identity (for Ge Fei himself is undoubtedly a Chinese writer) than a rejection to CCP's then propaganda about Tibet. It is made by a new generation of writers consisting of both Tibetan and Chinese persons of letters. This group of writers attempt to suspend the traditional "teleological historiography" in the depiction of their recreated Tibet. Hence, he chooses five complementary texts of a characterized Tibet covering nearly all of the 20th century, and concludes that these three writers all supply "alternative modes of historical writing." (Choy, "Historiographic" 84) What Alai conveys is "the identity vacuum created by history," (Choy, "Historiographic" 84) in contrast to Tashi Dawa's cyclical historical views as a substitute for a progressive view and Ge Fei's skepticism of traditional banality of Tibetan history. The crucial years of 1951 and 1952[7] blanked out in Tashi Dawa's works are re-filled and "bridged" by Alai, who "opens up a dialogue between a declined noble family and its ex-servant."

7 It is the moment China succeeded in taking sovereignty of Tibet.

Alai's attitude towards emancipation of Tibet is complicated in his elegy of that old time. And Choy further discusses Alai's sense of historical identity in another article. According to his point, Alai experienced an identical confusion between "Chineseness" and "Tibetanness," resulting in his taking a roundabout measure to shape an idiotic protagonist in *Red Poppies*: "Idiocy is a way of denying that one is identical or identifiable with any single group."(Choy, "Quest" 223) Inasmuch as Alai felt discomfited by the two questions "where am I" and "who am I,"(Choy, "Quest" 226) his writing is aimed to present, commemorate, record and rediscover a certain origin where Alai's literary meaningfulness could gush out.

Notwithstanding his delicate reading into Alai's identity issue and Alai's own strategy in coping with the mutant historical alteration, Choy's interpretation is still to some extent incomplete. He mirrors Alai in a relatively passive way that Alai is trying to "escape" from a certain kind of historical discordance so that he decides to display himself in the guise of an idiot. Alai does not end up in just putting on a seal for a full stop of pre-modern Tibet but successfully re-creates an open space for further elucidation. It means that though *Red Poppies* is in the common sense a complete "novel" with its well-designed beginning and ending, it is not in a literary sense a complete "practice," an experiment Alai undertakes to put something together. Wokar Rigumi points out that Choy "misreads" Alai since "the idiot does not display anxiety over the issue of his ethnicity anywhere in the novel." (Rigumi 1) In his view, Alai's idiot-stance narration is a legitimation of his bi-racial identity and the "identity politics of reclaiming the ambiguous and polyethnic historical past." (Rigumi 2) Distinguished from other researchers, Rigumi considers that Alai obscures the mainstream historical writings about Tibet to be camouflaged in his inversion from traditional nationalist discourse to an economic one. In his argument, it is the opium trade that "draws the chieftains into dependency with larger circuits of commerce of Chinese markets" (Rigumi 7-8 ) and eventually metamorphoses Tibet into another social form. Correspondingly, changes of Tibet are not merely contemplated by Alai as a "result of a simplistic struggle of one nation against another." (Rigumi 8)

Rigumi's emphasis on the role of economic factors in Tibet's revolutionary transformations is rarely found in other criticism about Alai. With nationality-centered issues being desalinated, Rigumi's interpretation generalizes Alai's Tibet on a more globalized scale. What he suggests in the title "a localist counter-narrative to nationalist histories" is thus fulfilled from the other way around, namely from a global perspective, which takes in the confrontation between different "nations" to separate them into smaller "local communities." However, it is somewhat

inexplicable whether or not the PRC is in this sense a "colonizer" anymore. Tibet's economic ties with Han groups (poppy trade) were actually interrupted by the PRC after its "emancipation" of Tibet. If we attempt to universalize the Chinese-Tibetan relationship both in the pre-PRC and PRC era, we must firstly encounter some urgently important questions Rigumi does not give a full solution to: how to create a periodization of the Chinese-Tibetan relationship and in each phase how to make a qualitative definition of their interactions? When we talk of a "colonizer" or a "colonized," we start from a global vision. Thus how can we justify a return back to a localist perspective with maintaining the allegation that the colonial relationship is still theoretically legitimate? Rigumi notices a spatial relation between China and Tibet, while he does not fully grasp the Chinese-Tibet relationship in a historical and chronological aspect, therefore he stops before answering how his "local Tibet vs global China (or other agents involved in Tibetan modernization)" can be altered into "local Tibet vs local China" and "global Tibet vs global China."

This is another difficult point for us to understand Alai's cognition and evaluation of Chinese-Tibetan history in different phases. Some scholars have exerted effort in delving into the changing nature of this trans-regional history. Nimrod Baranovich provides a more dynamically interactive relationship between the PRC and Tibet since the 1950s. What he holds interest in is the PRC's developing attitude toward Tibetan history and people from the establishment of the country to the eve of a new century. Alai in his novels, as Baranovich reflects, not only reveals a kind of incongruity when positioned between his own senses of Chinese-Tibetan history and mainstream Chinese narratives of that period of time, but he also attempts to make a complementary conglutination between two different discourses. On the one hand, Alai rather "repeats" some set discourses of old sayings and stereotypes about Tibet than just breaks with the PRC's former historical narrations, and on the other hand "presenting a subtext with alternative narratives." (Baranovich, "Literary" 174) Baranovich sees the relationship between Alai's own novel and the PRC's propaganda about Tibet in the 1980s on a condition that the post-Mao political climate may have changed to make history writing limitedly more liberate. In Baranovich's opinion, the PRC's history writing on Tibet differs in different historical stages. Right after the establishment of the Republic, Chinese history textbooks did not immediately and thoroughly annihilate an exclusive Han-centered history narrative inherited from the pre-1949 era. In the 1950s, the Chinese history books tend to consider ethnic non-Han groups as "Chinese others," and from an

inter-exchangeable use of the term "Han people" and "Chinese people,"[8] we can infer that they are subconsciously identical in that period's perception of the relation among Han and ethnic minorities. After 1956, with systematically reconstructed Marxist history views fully applied to history writing, class categories veil and diminish dominance of a nationalist description. In his analysis, the notion that "China is a multi-ethnic state"(Baranovich, "Others" 92)first came to its first place in Chinese history textbooks. Although most extremely negative representations of non-Han people had been deleted, the 1956 version of the history book still remained a strong Han-centered tendency. And this unevenness between Han and non-Han groups of people in their elaboration in history textbooks, in the author's eyes, had not been finally eliminated till the turning point of the new century.

From this account, we may have a clearer idea where Baranovich will locate Alai's novel in traditional Chinese-Tibetan narratives. Alai's alternative narratives are not purposed to serve as a "subversion" of his received history education about Tibet. Actually, upon the publication of *Red Poppies*, Maoist indoctrinations had already faded from its dominant influence upon history writing. For Baranovich, Alai stands at a transitional point between Maoist views of history and views in the 21st century, in both periods of which China as a multi-ethnic state is set as a prior political consensus. What Alai challenges in traditional discourses thus becomes less a simplistic interrogation or even refusal of their validity than a more detailed supplementary transformation of traditional stereotypes about Tibet from mainstream ideologies. Alai challenges the textbook's expounding of old Tibet as a cruel and dark place and at the same time challenges the depiction of the region "as a place full of humanness." (Baranovich, "Literary" 176) The irreconcilable conflicts between tribe rulers and un-liberated serfs recorded in textbooks are also softened and mitigated in the relationship between two fictitiously designed characters: the narrator "I" and his maid servant "Dolma." And "serfs in 'Old Tibet'" did not necessarily feel oppressed, did not necessarily hate their masters." (Baranovich, "Literary" 183) In Baranovich's essay, the reason why Alai will set two kinds of narratives in "Red Poppies" is due to a strategy in coping with possible political censorship and also a consideration upon the commoditization of his works. Apart from other critics' inclination to regard Tibetan literature as intrinsically centrifugal from its Chinese center, the author points that Alai "does not even hint at the possibility of Tibetan independence or struggle in the future" (Baranovich, "Literary" 198) as a proof for Alai's assertion of his Chinese-ness.

8 More details can be found in Baranovich's second article published in 2010.

But there are still problems in Baranovich's understanding of Alai's literary practice. First and foremost, his analysis of the evolution of the Chinese official presentation of Tibetan history in the history textbooks, helpful and reflective as it may be, the periodization seems too broad. He doesn't propose a good exemplary case when he mentions the ideological changes occurring in the post-Mao era, especially from the end of the 1970s to the beginning of 2000s, when Alai embarked on his literary career and a broader cultural milieu of that period. Second, for Alai, he still lacks more comprehensively biographic studies on himself, which is an extensively existing phenomenon in the English-speaking world.

In conclusion, Alai's reception in the English-speaking world has visibly become deeper. But his reception is in several senses awaiting further improvement and more profound excavation. If we visualize the structure of Alai's reception, it may be an unbalanced top-heavy one. An overweighing majority of critics and scholars just pay focus on the "origin" of Alai's works, in other words, his ethnicity-nationality befuddlement, historical cognition and recognition, politics and strategy in identity confirmation and so forth. Alai himself has become a "background" of the background where he grows up and undergoes his maturation in his literary deeds. There are three volumes of Alai's work being translated into the English-speaking world,[9] but only *Red Poppies* stirred up enough academic concentration. But when handling issues in the Chinese-Tibetan relationship across cultural, historical and political spheres, many scholars may find Alai is not an easily manageable author that can flawlessly embrace their conventional analytic and critic tools. How Alai himself can give out his voice after penetrating cultural filtration and distortion to a new language circle? This problem will still haunt us in Alai's future introduction to the English-speaking world and its solution may lie in more in-depth communications amid scholars from different regions.

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9 Apart from *Red Poppies*, for other two volumes please see: Alai. *The Song of King Gesar*. Trans. Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin. London: Canongate, 2013. And also: Alai. *Tibetan Soul: Stories*. Trans. Karen Gernant and Chen Zeping. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2012.

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# The Study of Alai and His Works in China

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**Abstract:**

Alai's works have been discussed in China for the twenty years since the publication of *Red Poppies*. During this time, critics and researchers mainly focused on three dimensions of Alai's works—ethnic identity and culture, history and modernity, and poetic temperament including language and narrative techniques. From *Red Poppies* to *Hollow Mountain*, Alai tended to let people look away from his identity and search for human universality. He adopted a new structure and hoped to create an epic-like work. While rewriting the epic *King Gesar*, Alai brought the ethnic identity problem back on stage, and his expression set in the second narrative line in *The Song of King Gesar: A Novel*. *ZhanDui—A Kamp Legend of Two Hundred Years* highlighted the non-fiction creation and Alai's fieldwork writing method. *Trilogy of Delicacies* provided a new dimension for the study of ecology. Alai's works are comprehensive and rich in meaning, and Alai himself has many concerns and ideas about the reality, history, and the image of modern Tibet, etc. By summarizing Chinese studies on Alai, this review attempts to show the changes in the focus of researchers and their deepening understanding of Alai and his works, and then raises some questions on current studies in order to provide a more nuanced understanding of Alai's works.

**Keywords:** Alai; *Red Poppies*; *Hollow Mountain*; *The Song of King Gesar*; Tibetan identity

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Since his first full-length novel *Red Poppies*[1] was published in 1998 in China,

1 Translated by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Lichun Lin, together with *The Song of King Gesar: A Novel*, *Hollow Mountain Part I* translated and published by China Translation &Publishing House. Other translations of titles of the novels come from *Borderland Books, Natural Historia and Epics — A Collection of International Symposia on Alai's Works* in 2018.

and then won the Mao Dun Literature Award in 2000, Alai has received an impressive amount of attention. After that, none of his novels such as the *Hollow Mountain* series, published in its entirety in 2009, *The Song of King Gesar: A Novel* in 2009, *ZhanDui—A Kampa Legend of Two Hundred Years* in 2014, and his latest work *Trilogy of Delicacies* in 2016 have disappointed the critics. The critics have discussed many topics and some reviews have summarized the significance of the research. However, in the two decades of studying Alai, few have tried to link the development of the research results to Alai's publication process, which is of great importance and deserves our further exploration. The criticism and studies come along with the creation of the author. The more the author writes, the more he grows and changes and the more we know about him, especially when Alai is willing to talk about his literary creation in interviews, which brings us more opportunities to investigate whether the researchers and the authors will influence each other. Following the sequence of the publication time of Alai's major works, this review discusses how the publication of the later works influence the understanding of the former and the change of the study perspectives on the author.

## *Red Poppies* and Study Dimensions of Alai: 1998 to 2005

The study of *Red Poppies* opens up several dimensions of Alai's works. Among them, the author's dual identity, the poetic temperament, historicity-modernity, and the universality in his works have become the main aspects of the researchers' discussion. These aspects intersect with and promote each other, presenting a complex and diverse picture of the research.

The discussion starts with dual identity, which means the dualism of Alai's Tibetan identity and Chinese writing. This issue arose with criticism of Alai's short stories and caused great controversy in the first few years after *Red Poppies* came out. One side believes that Alai's works reflect Tibetan characteristics; the other side, including Alai himself, believes that his works point to universal significance (Ran, Alai 8), while Tibetan researcher Dekyitso feels sorry that Alai did not write in Tibetan (Dekyitso, To Understand Alai 62). On this issue, the discussion of how to define Alai's writing reflects the identity anxiety of both the author and the critics. Wang Yichuan takes Alai's work as a kind of cross-ethnic writing and connects it with Chinese modernity. He believes that cross-ethnic writing exists "to seek the universality of the differences between the life experiences of different global ethnic groups through the description of one specific ethnic group (Wang 10)." In this way, this writing can interpret the life of ethnic minorities, and thus provide a new moving aesthetic specimen for the whole process of Chinese

modernity (qtd. in Wang 10). Yet Xu Xinjian believes that if Alai's writing is called "bi-ethnic writing," then it could embody both nationality and universality; thus we might find a better way to understand Alai and his works (Xu 21). The issue of ethnic identity lies in almost every stage of studies on Alai, and the argument on the definition of Alai's writing calms down. The questions on how Alai's works intersect with modernity and by what means he shows it has become the broader issue, which is also consistent with the future direction of Alai's writing.

Xu Xinjian is the first critic who paid attention to the historical and fictional problems in Alai's works. He believes that "the height of the book at least includes the deconstruction and reconstruction of 'history' from the perspective of time and fate (Xu 23)." Xu asserts that the expression of fate and the concern of reality tears "the idiot" in *Red Poppies* and Alai himself in two (Xu 24). The culture regression mentioned by Dekyitso represents the first group of researchers who connected Alai's works with cultural roots. The topic contains both historical and ethnic elements, which leads to the folklore that is associated with the study of Alai's creation theory. Some early researchers believe that *Red Poppies* offers the possibility of writing national epics, but Alai himself declares that *Red Poppies* is not a national epic, but a more personal one. However, its epic character is beyond doubt. Wang Lu believes that it presents a major historical event, a Tibetan national heroism of universal significance, and the narrative of history and fiction, so *Red Poppies* could be regarded as an epic (Wang Lu 124). This issue has been discussed continuously with Alai's new work.

To explain how poetic features are made, the researchers find some clues in Alai's narrative techniques and contents. Liao Quanjing considers *Red Poppies* a "fantasy" (Liao, Mirror 10). In his opinion, *Red Poppies* shows the intersection of Alai's cultural consciousness and life consciousness as well as the intersection of doubled narrative viewpoints (Liao, Mirror 9). The former is the existence of reality; the latter is the virtual fantasy. They build a world together. Liao calls it a poetic Oriental fable (Liao, Mirror 9). The poetic Oriental fable turns into a symbol of deconstructed allegory in Qin Hong and Shu Bangquan's article (Qin and Shu 59). The use of "deconstructed" has connected to the demise of history and time in the story. Hu Lixin believes that the key point of Alai's poetic narration was to overturn the common sense of reading. He uses multiple perspectives to narrate, weakens the characteristics of narrative perspectives, erases the typicality of narrators, and subverts the tradition in narrative logic, making the novel a decentralized and non-subjective lyric narrative poem. Hu refers to his narrative method as irrational narrative or perceptual intentionality narration (Hu 69). Huang Shuquan believes

that the poetic character of *Red Poppies* is similar to the poetic character of Bakhtin's evaluation of Dostoevsky's novels. It has the characteristics of dialogue, double-speaking narrative, and polyphonic novels. The reason is that the cultural heritage of Alai's Han and Tibetan combination is similar to that of Dostoevsky's primitive and religious thinking. Thus in this way, Alai's novels have the possibility to communicate with world literature (Huang 79). As Alai himself always says, he thinks in Tibetan but writes in Chinese (Alai, Diverse Cultures 23). Another prominent poetic feature of Alai's works is his unique language, which is widely believed to have some connection with his Han-Tibetan language integration, but few have done in-depth research.

Why does Liao mention the "fable"? Because the author himself writes this down at the end of *Red Poppies*, and he is willing to pursue a fable-like effect. Hu Lixin's study represents a group of researchers who tend to link the poem-writing experience to Alai's novels. In the meantime, this article reflects the narrative problems *Red Poppies* might have. That is to say, *Red Poppies* is not convincing and stable enough. Li Jianjun criticizes the idiot as an unreliable narrator who brings inevitable narration confusion, and at the end of the novel, the author's involvement as the third narrator makes the narrative's flaws more serious. The poet's lyric language has become a hindrance in the writing of novels. In *Red Poppies*, Alai's language is poetic but fragmented, unsuitable, unrealistic, and unclear (Li Jianjun 36). He also believes that the theme of the work was not successfully constructed, and the author does not achieve the universal pursuit he wanted. Obviously, Li's criticism, though different from other voices cheering for Alai, actually relates to the writing tendency of Alai himself. Some articles compare *Red Poppies* and *The Sound and the Fury*, not only because the narrators all show up as idiots, but also because Alai admitted the influence of some western authors, including Faulkner. From the discussion of whether the work has shown Tibetan nationality, to the argument on the epic character of *Red Poppies* and then to the study of poetic quality, we can see that the early research has already shown a tendency to interact with the author, while the author's self-reported writing intention has become the research direction of the researchers. Before Alai's subsequent works, researchers depended quite highly on his own words.

### *Hollow Mountain*: the Epic of Ji Village: 2005 to 2009

In an interview with Yi Wenxiang in 2004, Alai talked about his negative attitude towards the emphasis on his Tibetan identity and again stressed his intention to make his works contain universal expression. He said he would focus

more on national destiny, historical progress and the epic narrative which caught the attention of researchers. With the publication of *Hollow Mountain,* the researchers have to admit that it is not enough to confine Alai's works merely to Tibetan literature. *Hollow Mountain,* together with *Red Poppies* has shown that Alai intends to investigate the universality and significance of the individual.

Regarding the relationship between individuals and the progress of history, some researchers have thought about modernity problems. Jiang Fei connects *Red Poppies* with *Hollow Mountain* by the same attitude towards the acceleration of history; he believes that Alai mourns for those beautiful old things that vanish in history, and will continue to write about the collapsible parts of history (Jiang 17). However, as to the release of the rest of the series, more researchers agree that this novel is about the future. Nan Fan believes that Alai showed the resistance to modernity as a way of cultural expression. In investigating the collapse of the old society, Alai has certainly realized the complication of history, thus hesitating when facing the impact of knowledge in the revolution of history (Nan 123). Zhang Xuexin sees Ji village as a huge metaphor, which he believes Alai tends to find as a possible order for civilization (Zhang, Dimension 29). Zhang and Yan Yingxiu both believe the novel shows the anxiety of existence of human beings when they lose their spiritual motherland (Yan 173) and thus leads to ecological problems in Alai's works. While the researchers agree with the historical part of the novel, their opinions differ vehemently on the epic writing structure Alai chose.

In *Hollow Mountain*, Alai tends to realize "epic writing," for which he offers a fragmented structure style, hopefully to build a grand village history. From this point of view, the intention and method already conflict with each other; also, the implementation of his intention in the novel, in the eyes of some critics, is not quite satisfactory. Gao Yuanbao believes that *Hollow Mountain* is not "fragmented enough," which it should have been, because according to Gao's research, Alai writes short stories better than novels. The primary cause of the problem, according to Gao, is Alai's rush to make a macroscopic grasp of culture and history for the life of the complex Han and Tibetan cultures in the form of novels for decades, with an unclear cultural identity. In accounting for this, he could not investigate deeper on culture and human nature, which explains why the characters in *Hollow Mountain* and *Red Poppies* lack the manifestation of the spiritual world and the story does not feel real. In Gao's opinion, the New History writers, including Alai, avoid a true object in their work, thus avoiding their true identities and losing history and cultural support when they tend to describe the reality. Gao considers Alai a "contemporary young man who lives on the border of Tibet, forgetting his national

culture and completely Sinicized (Gao Yuanbao 120).” However, in Alai’s short stories, he did not pursue national epic writing. Gao discovers the individual voice hiding in the progress of history, which in his view is worth more than so-called epic writing.

Sharing similar thoughts with Gao Yubao, Shao Yanjun’s criticism considers *Hollow Mountain* as part of the “epic writing craze.” She emphasizes the attribute of “pure literature” in Alai’s works, and questions its conflict with “epic writing” in *Hollow Mountain*. She points out that Alai’s de-revolutionization and the lack of national cultural identity could not support him to complete an in-depth work, so the whole conflict between the old and the new could only take place in the fields of human nature and fate. Deeper inside is Alai’s vacant post of continuous reflection, on how the Chinese language combined with state power or on how science and technology modernize the society while damaging nature (Shao 24). With the addition of the vacancy of standpoint on ethnic protection, *Hollow Mountain* lacks the power to resist decomposition from hegemonic culture. From this point, Shao believes Alai should consider himself more a pure literature writer than a writer with the burden to write an epic for his nationality, and writing tales from his own perspective would fit him better. Gao Yubao and Shao’s criticism could not stop Alai from writing an epic for his nation. In 2009, *The Song of King Gesar: A Novel* (abbreviated as *Gesar* in the following discussion) was published. As a novel rewriting the old epic, Alai connects his work more to folklore, which is the literary nourishment he got from his Tibetan identity.

In 2002, Alai wrote an article about his ethnic identity and *Red Poppies*. In this article, he called on the critics and researchers to focus more on Tibetan folklore, which he studied when writing *Red Poppies*. Meanwhile, he asserted that the critics and researchers should believe that his works are comprehensively affected by many aspects, rather than only one stressed aspect (Alai, Folk Resource 5). With this perspective, some researchers went back to find the folk issues in *Red Poppies*, especially those concerning Tibetan Buddhism (Zhao Shuqin and Long Qilin 96), and reconsidered the influence on Alai’s poetic language because of his identity. Some articles compared Alai with other writers who own their ethnic identity, such as Zhang Chengzhi (Wang Quan 308). In 2009, Yang Xia’s doctoral dissertation used space theory and the “comparative study of the nature of parallelism in literature” to analyze *Red Poppies*, becoming the first group of researchers who use western theories to analyze Alai’s works independently, rather than comparing him with other western writers.

With the publication of *Hollow Mountain*, more researchers tended to consider

the two novels as a whole. In addition to Jiang Fei, Gao Yuanbao and Shao Yanjun, Li Kangyun explores another aspect; he continues what Xu Xinjian emphasizes, which is the power of the Tusi system and the metaphor behind it. He considers the two novels as the disintegration and criticism of human spiritual ecology and ecological civilization, but not merely some epic or fable (Li Kangyun 176). Shao's opinion is quite different from other critics in those years, and through his conclusion, we can see a tiny link to Alai's intention to face the future and the concern with human nature. He Ping argues about the "us" and the "other" in *Red Poppies* and *Hollow Mountain*, pointing to Alai's ethnic identity. Through the way people describe "other things" in Ji village, He founds the conflict of the old world and the new, including the conflict about moral standards, and the heterogeneity of culture hidden in different languages. He used the words "the whisper of history" to define the writing about Ji village, and believed that it is an effective way to maintain the realistic tradition (He Ping 51). Meanwhile, he believes that "return to the motherland" is a worldwide motif, and as for Alai, it means to return to the nature of the human mind. Through simple writing and expressions, he thinks, Alai has begun to approach the worldwide expression of folk literature. Neither of these critics makes a more in-depth exploration of epic writing. Perhaps it is because, in their minds, Alai can do a better job than simply writing a Tibetan epic.

The discussion of "epic writing" of *Hollow Mountain* is somehow relevant to the publication of *Gesar* in 2009. As a part of the whole "rewriting myth" project, the existence of this novel is quite different from Alai's other works. However, if we put *Gesar* together with *Hollow Mountain* and *ZhanDui—A Two-Hundred-Year Legend of Kampa* (abbreviated as *ZhanDui* in the following discussion), we can see the evolution of the conflict between historical and fictional writing in Alai's works.

## *The Song of King Gesar* and *ZhanDui—A Two-Hundred-Year Legend of Kampa*, from national epic to non-fictional writing: 2009 to 2016

When researching and criticizing *Gesar*, scholars mainly focus on the following aspects: ethnic identity, human nature, and narrative techniques. These focal points are understandable because *Gesar* is a rewriting of Tibetan epics, so grand that some researchers tend to compare it with the Homeric epics. Unlike with other "rewriting myth" series that have only some pieces of tales and stories, King Gesar existed in real history and the epic about him has lasted over thousands of years. Therefore, to carefully recognize which part belongs to Alai and which belongs to the old epic is the work that the researchers and critics must be engaged in.

Referring again to the issue of ethnic identity, Alai reemphasizes his views. He

believes that the idea that "the nation is the world" should not be overemphasized. His writing sets out to give up his personal identity and to regard himself as a part of all human beings, and then to find a way to communicate with the whole world (Liang and Alai 27). Despite Alai's claim, Liang Hai believes this work enhanced the group identity of the Tibetan people and shows the folk beliefs and national consciousness of a nation (Liang, Myth Retold 34). Besides, double narrative clues show the intersection and collision of historical and modern life, represented by the storyteller Jigmed's conflicts between his dream and the real world. Meanwhile, the emotions and the narrative structure built on the national epic make this work the most poetic one. Liang also believes that *Gesar* shows the concern of humanity by presenting the fight between God and the Devil (Liang 35). The meaning of this fight and the religious meaning in *Gesar* are discussed deeper in Huang Yi's article. He and Hong Zhigang both believe the dialogues between God and Devil, between Gesar and Jigmed, are all about the thoughts of human nature.

Wang Rong shares similar opinions with Liang but places more emphasis on how Alai turns a public oral story into a written novel. He holds the standpoint that Alai used Jigmed's searching to fill the war part of the story, unfolding the folded part of the oral epic. However, at the same time, how Alai successfully translated Tibetan into Chinese remains a question Wang does not explain clearly. Wang believes Alai intends to describe more of Jigmed's wandering. On historically tracing the old time, he presents pity and grief to humanity. Finally, Wang's discussion settles on Alai's return to the Tibetan homeland, which belongs to the trend of "seeking roots" (Wang Rong 162). Several researchers also approve of this viewpoint. *Gesar* brings fresh power to Chinese literature. The tradition in it shows a possibility to resist modern energy, the disenchantment of modernity with history, western imperialism and cultural output. While Liang's research might confuse Alai's intention with the traditional epic, Wang shows a better way for researchers to pay attention to the transition from oral epic to novel, which contains the narrative structure, the language, and the adjustment of the traditional story.

For example, Dolma analyzes *Gesar* from the perspective of folklore and narratology. She believes Alai chose three important plots——"Birth," "The Horse Race" and "The Lion Returns to Heaven" and uses them as three "verbs," then expands by adding narrative marks. Meanwhile, he sets Jigmed's story as another narrative clue, making Jigmed another narrator. From the perspective of narratology, the novel uses three theme codes shared by the narrator and reader, that is lust rampant/the emergence of conscience, good/hypocrisy and exile/punishment. Motifs such as "hero", "exile" and "punishment" are the plot units familiar to the

narrator and the reader. Through these similarities, the author reveals the meaning of the text. From the perspective of the action of the characters, the three characters of King Gesar, Jigmed and Agu Thonpa, starting from their action positions, respectively carry out their own action sequence in the mode of helper, sender and antagonist, and their common action is doubt and questioning. The three characters in the text constitute the characteristics of intersubjectivity, so as to reveal the ultimate meaning of the action of the characters in *King Gesar* with their co-existence. This narrative situation breaks through the ancient story coding, replaces the subjectivity with intersubjectivity, and obtains the modernity significance of the text(Dolma 84).

The publication of *ZhanDui* in 2014 quickly caught the attention of the critics and researchers. The new form and objective language style clearly present the most significant feature, non-fictional writing. In consideration of consistently historic issues present in Alai's work, people tend to connect *ZhanDui* with *Hollow Mountain* and *Red Poppies*. However, the style and form of these works, including *Gesar*, are almost different. Alai has always sought breakthroughs and changes. This is why Chen Siguang calls Alai a "stylist" (Chen, Stylist Alai 1).

Gao Yu conducts deeper research on *ZhanDui*'s historical aspect; he calls *ZhanDui* a "novel text in historical style." In his point of view, Alai uses a large number of references to historical documents but writes like a novelist with personal emotions and tendencies (Gao Yu 206). On the one hand, there is the literary manifestation in the subjectivity of data selection. On the other hand, it is manifested in the addition of a large number of folkloric elements, literature, and oral materials, forming a mixed discourse of official narrative with a folklore one(Gao Yu 208). The dual structural feature of *ZhanDui* also frequently appears in Alai's other novels. With Alai's own commentary voice, *ZhanDui* is believed to become Alai's most critical novel by Gao Yu. Exactly as Alai has said, he is writing the reality rather than history (Zhu Weiqun and Alai 29). However, Gao Yu believes non-fiction writing cannot gain universal promotion value. Alai has made his breakthroughs but this is quite meaningless from the aspect of both literature and history study. As a novel, *ZhanDui* lacks coherence and is not renowned for its readability (Gao Yu 210).

Ding Zengwu chose to analyze another aspect of *ZhanDui*. He believes that Alai intended to write an "atypical Tibetan text" to observe the evolution of Sino-Tibetan relations and the construction of ethnic identity in the era of a multinational republic (Ding 69). This corresponds to Alai's intention to review and reflect on social issues in the Tibetan area（Alai and Tong Fang 29）. Wu Baojuan holds a

different opinion. She believes Alai builds a "space-time body" by giving *ZhanDui* history a spatial structure, providing a human geography view for Kamp history, thus presenting a search for the fate and living circumstances of various human civilizations in the historical context of globalization. To summarize, Ding discusses in a political way, while Wu believes the true meaning lies in human nature. What they agree on is that ZhanDui village, as well as Ji village, can no longer simply be seen as a place in Tibet. Alai's purpose is to seek a human universality, which is clearly expressed and conveyed.

During this period, some researchers tended to investigate *Red Poppies* and *Hollow Mountain* from other perspectives. This turn might have been inspired by Alai's new works. They discuss less about poetics, but continue to find epic narrative issues or the "spiritual homeland," and dig for sources from folklore. It is noticeable that a few more articles pay attention to the translation of and introduction to *Red Poppies*, such as the articles of Huang Danqing and Gao Bohan & Cheng Long. By the way, Wang Zhiguo first discusses the translation of *Gesar* by Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Lichun Lin, who translated *Red Poppies* in 2002 and *Gesar* in 2013. Meanwhile, Qiu Huadong discusses Alai's turn from fictional to non-fictional writing from *Hollow Mountain* to *ZhanDui,* emphasizing realistic concern in Alai's work, and the influence of Latin American literature, saying they both drew inspiration from folklore. Interestingly, in Qiu's article, nearly all the discussions were fully from Alai's interviews or speeches. As a writer, Qiu might understand more about the writer's intention to have the right to speak of one's own works.

## Novella, Short Stories, and Poems

*Trilogy of Delicacies* contains three novellas—*Three Cordyceps Sinensis*, *Mushroom Ring*, and *A Cypress Shadow over the River*. Serialized in 2015 and published completely in 2016, the publication of this *Trilogy* stressed Alai's research on ecological study. The concern of ecology and environment shows up in Alai's essays and is taken into consideration by the critics soon afterward. The intention to call on the attention to ecological problems is also admitted by Alai in his speech ( Alai, Why 78).

The cordyceps sinensis, matsutake and cupressus chengiana are three special local products produced on the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and strongly pursued by today's consumer society. From Cheng Depei's view, Alai's three stories present the conflict between culture and nature, which simultaneously become each other's reflection. When a culture produces goods in modernized society, it will cause

inevitable harm to nature. The culturally educated person is lost in confusion and self-examination when facing the real appearance of nature. By showing this, Alai brings back the principle of questioning new life, while stressing the unbreakable chain between humanity and nature. Cheng also notices the characters Alai built all along; they share the common anxiety of identity for living between two opposite cultures or societies, which often represents as the struggle between history and modernity or Han and Tibetan nationality (Cheng 20). In addition, Cheng finds the similarity of Cain and Prometheus's stories in the character and plots in *A Cypress Shadow over the River* (Cheng 18). Through these metaphors, Alai expresses the concept of human universality. Both Cheng and Bai Hao mention and discuss the worship of knowledge, which they believe to be a serious problem of Alai's creation transformation since *A Cypress Shadow over the River*.

From Bai's point of view, the fact that Alai is becoming a scholar has damaged his artistic expression (Bai 24), specifically in *Mushroom Ring* and *A Cypress Shadow over the River*. This transformation is the fundamental change above all. Rational narration takes the place of emotional expression. Besides, Bai believes that humanity and nationality cannot be separated and it is meaningless to oppose them. In Bai's discussion, Alai's attitude of resistance to nationality had already affected the quality and style of his work, especially in *Trilogy of Delicacies*. Furthermore, Alai has turned into an urban inhabitant (Bai 26). Even if he continues his creative method to do field trips, his work has become a mixture of nostalgia and middle-class taste. Compared to *Gesar* and *ZhanDui,* the attempt to set historical pursuance on *Trilogy of Delicacies,* especially on *Mushroom Ring* and *A Cypress Shadow over the River*, could not match the daily life theme of the work (Bai 27).

Li Changzhong offers a different perspective on *Trilogy of Delicacies*. He uses literary geography theory, and take *A Cypress Shadow over the River* as the main research object. Li argues that the aim of landscape ethical narrative is to let readers see and reflect. The narrative also reflects Alai's anxiety on the "Tibetan as an adjective" phenomenon with the intention to "show a real Tibet" (Li Changzhong 56).

Even some critics claim that Alai is better at writing short stories; the studies on that are quite a few compared to those on novels. Before *Red Poppies* came out, some critics had noticed Alai's short stories, together with his poems. In the preface to Alai's short story collection, *The Distant Horizon,* in 1988, Zhou Keqin says Alai seems to be writing a poem rather than a novel and chooses to observe the mental journey of his nation at the intersection of history and reality (Zhou 101). In 1989, Yang Dehua highly praised the poetry expression of a novel collection,

*Bloodstains of the Old Year*. In 1993, Liao Quanjing took Alai as a representation to young Sichuan writers, and concerns "unique modern sense of home in double motherland" (Liao, Dual 120) in his short stories and poems. Using double-culture characteristics in Alai's work as a background, Liao analyses how Alai presents his thoughts on fate and national psychology. Liao also notices the time travel plot in Alai's works by putting this with his double-nation background. Liao believes in the modernism in Alai's work, which he learned from American Southern novelists whom he prefers.

Renewed interest in Alai's short stories came almost at the same time as the publication of *Hollow Mountain*. With *Hollow Mountain* as a contraction, we can discover that according to some critics Alai tends to use different techniques in creating short stories. Zhang Xuexin uses "simple and ordinary but poetic" to describe Alai's short works, that is, to present the character in his or her real appearance, using simple structure and narrative technique. Zhang believes that poetic expressions should have connections with Alai's poetry (Zhang 44), and he agrees that Alai is seeking for a "Greater Voice" (Zhang 41), which Alai has mentioned before (Alai, Folk Resource 5), and Alai uses this to discuss the deep meaning and free space in his work.

*The Poetry of Alai* was published in 2016 and this collection contained 67 poems written from the 1980s to the 1990s. The critics love to differentiate Alai's poetic style from other poets of the time. It is worthwhile studying this because, despite the heat of misty poetry writing, Alai chooses to write about nature and strong feelings, seeking the answer on how to settle one's spiritual mind. Tendrontsok (Yang Xia) connects Alai's poems with the area of Tibet where he grew up and discusses his poems with "root-seeking" consciousness, which could represent the dimensions of Alai's poetic studies. She believes Alai inherited the troubadour tradition from traditional Tibetan folksongs, proverbs, and epics. Meanwhile, reading of Pablo Neruda and Walt Whitman helped Alai to create poems with not only local characteristics and historical depth but also modern characteristics and human care.

Through the investigation of the creative process of Alai's literature and its research, we can see that there are several directions and fixed creative methods, especially on doing fieldwork to collect materials based a lot on historical writings. Alai's personal style and writing tendencies are becoming more and more prominent, especially after the publication of *ZhanDui.* Together with the research on Alai's short stories and poems, we can see some common meaning existing in Alai's works. What Chen Siguang and Zhang Ying mention when reviewing the acceptance problems of Alai's novel is also useful in summarizing the aspects

of Alai's study. Chen and Zhang believe that poetic temperament, history-reality, and nationality-culture are three key words in understanding Alai's work. "Poetic temperament" includes Alai's personal qualities and narrative strategies. "Nationality-culture" includes the study on ethnic identity, writing Tibetan culture and reflection. Some researchers put forward the spatial writing recently.

Meanwhile, Chen and Zhang point out the current problems in the study of Alai's work. Firstly, the study of poetic temperament situates in some pattern with too grand views such as history/nation/human nature. The concepts of "poetic feature" and "poetization" need to be clarified. Further reading of the text is also needed. Secondly, the assumed position when discussing national identity issues has confused the opinion of the researchers. Thirdly, the study of the history-reality dimension needs to consider Alai's work as a whole, and further investigate the modernization issue while defining this concept more clearly. Finally, the hesitation and entanglement in Alai's experience of writing also influences the critics and researchers. Chen and Zhang believe that the problems raised by this anxiety, such as misreading and sadness that he cannot write in his mother tongue are all worth deeper investigation. To summarize, they believe the study should be refined and the researchers should be more subjective and avoid using grand but meaningless conceptions.

## News and Some Problems

In 2018, Alai renamed *Hollow Mountain* as *The Epic of Ji Village*, according to what he has said, to avoid the misunderstanding between his work and Wang Wei's famous poem in the Tang dynasty, which is intangible and leisure-oriented, and has the opposite meaning to Alai's work (Alai, My *Epic of Ji Village* 3). In fact, the discussion or the "misunderstanding" existed even before 2009, when *Hollow Mountain* was published as a whole series, and Alai has explained for almost ten years that this "hollow mountain" has nothing to do with the ancient Chinese poem. However, He Shaojun, who has been concerned with Alai's work since *Red Poppies*, continues this doubt: "Is that really irrelevant to Chinese ancient poetry? (He Shaojun, Three novels, Triple realm 119)."

He Shaojun's study is worth mentioning because he is one of those who analyze the relationship between Alai and traditional Chinese art theories. For example, in 1998, he discussed the creation of *Red Poppies* as an "awakening" (*wu*), which is an intuition that skips the logical. He connected the figure of "the idiot" with *Dream of the Red Chamber* and Lu Xun's *A Madman's Diary* (He Shaojun, The Idiot; the Awakening; the Wonder 37). He also believed the "wonder" (*you*) of thoughts give

Alai the ability to "awaken." Ji village regards as a mixture and collision field of many cultures for a long time, so there is no wonder why he tends to relate the word "hollow mountain" to Wang Wei's poem. Through He Shaojun's study, the first question is that the researchers paid attention to the influence of Tibetan culture and western literature on Alai's works. Meanwhile, the Chinese cultural elements rarely caught critics' attention. Alai considers himself an author who "thinks in Tibetan and writes in Chinese"; however, when emerging from the environment of Chinese discourse and becoming a part of world literature, the Chinese cultural elements inside Alai's work will be taken into consideration more or less.

The name change of *Hollow Mountain* brings up another question, which is also mentioned by Chen Siguang and Zhang Ying, that is, the problem of preset position. Take the study on Alai's poetic language, for example: when discussing *Red Poppies*, many researchers and critics linked the poetic style in it with Alai's former experience. In 2011, Alai was asked whether the presence of his poetic style has relations with poem writing, and he seemed quite hesitant about this issue (Jiang Guangping and Alai 45). However, when talking to Chen Xiaoming in 2016, Alai admitted that it has nothing to do with his poetry, and the language style derived more from his "translating" work between Tibetan and Chinese (Chen and Alai 34). Even so, the value of the old studies cannot be denied. How should the researcher respond to changes in the author's creative intention? From the author's perspective, it doesn't matter whether one chooses to follow the changes, reading and analyzing beneath the author's own words, or to stay objectively with one's judgment. One thing to avoid is to turn literary research into the discussion of whether a work fits the author's creative intention or not.

After starting a professional magazine on *Alai Research* in 2014, Chen Siguang, as editor-in-chief, published *The Research Material of Alai* on July 1, 2018. This contains not only articles on novel studies but also studies on translation, TV and play adaptation, and communication studies. Meanwhile, the International Symposium on Alai's Works themed Borderland Books, Natural Historia, and Epics was held in November of 2018, which reflected some aspects worth attention. On the twentieth anniversary of *Red Poppies*' publication, it is easy to find the canonization problem, which was mentioned five years ago by Wang Yichuan. Wang believes the readers canonize the novel in three dimensions, that is, the classic figure of "the idiot," the historical reflection, and the point of modern China. Soon after Wang's discussion, Liang Hai drags *Hollow Mountain* into this consideration. Aside from the weak persuasion on this canonization movement and despite the plentiful meanings in Alai's works, the urgent eagerness to canonize Alai's works

is quite confusing, not to mention the doubts on Alai's abilities to manipulate a full-length novel. Furthermore, on what standards and from what dimensions could a work become canonized? It is better for the urgent critics to settle down before making any hasty movement on this issue.

To summarize, during the twenty years of studies on Alai's works, these studies and Alai's works present and expand from two dimensions. On the one hand, the critics and researchers' attention to history-modernity, ethnic identity-culture, and poetic temperament appear in almost every work. Consequently, the Tibetan identity becomes the most controversial problem of all, and this problem relates to modernity and human concern at the same time, while some researchers hold the opinion that literary-geographical study might remove the conflict. On the other hand, Alai shows his effort on exploring more possibilities in writing. Sticking to his fieldwork method on creation, Alai tries new things each time when creating new works; in the meantime, the concern of social and political problems has penetrated all his works. In this way, Alai keeps the freshness and energy in his novels and stories.

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