

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

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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