

Novel Creation, Literary Modernity, and the Era of Globalization

——An Interview with Alai

Alai (Writer)

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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 Poppies* 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 高鹗, *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 marginal. 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 discomfoting 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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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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