

Being the Other: The Ethos of Alai

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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 proeses.

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

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 ghettos 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.