Alai and I: A Belated Encounter

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Abstract:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

sect.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Then came news that the man had died.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

3. Alai's Secular Thangkas and Meditations on Tibet

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

In Alai's novels we find several main colors:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

4. A Visual Conclusion

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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