

Alai and Nostalgic Lyricism

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Abstract:

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

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

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

— Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*

In a recent essay¹ meant to introduce to western readers the theme of the transformational change in Chinese society over the last fifty years, the novelist Yu Hua (who held the esteemed title of “writer in residence” at Beijing Normal University's International Writing Center before Alai) first offers a series of mini-narratives, some news reporting and others personal anecdotes, of the new life in China, covering areas such as housing and digital money, and then he goes on to describe how a “mood of nostalgia” has swept through the country. Two kinds of people are the hardest hit by nostalgia, according to Yu Hua, those of the poor who yearn for the simpler and more equitable past because they have reaped few benefits from waves of economic prosperity, and those of the successful who constantly worry about the status of their newly accumulated wealth, ill-gotten or otherwise, and wish they could start over.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

The pathos of the poem reminds one of Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself," but the celebration of oneself is not egoistic but meditative, revealing the complexity of the speaker's self-identification, which is rendered into a reflective discussion of his multiple names. The concealment of his birth name⁵ suggests, among other things, the vast unexplored cultural memory that the speaker has started to feel weighing upon him, from which "Alai" exists to measure the distance. An identification must have a name, for naming is the way we acquire meaning by the power of language, but language can reveal as well as conceal. It is the suspected concealment of his multiple selves that motivates Alai to embark on a journey of seeking and finding in his poetry. A lonely traveler looms large as Alai counts his steps from village to village across the Grand Ruergai Prairie, marveling at the magnificence of life unfolding in its singular moment and pondering the possibility of engendering a frozen history. But Alai offers his most potent lyrical enunciation in his sightings of the common and the familiar, such as the experience of epiphany described in the poem "Those Wild Grown Flowers." After a detailed depiction of some nameless flowers randomly climbing up the hills, Alai writes: "Today, when I read an illustrated pharmacopoeia / An outage occurred at Barkam, which enabled me to see / How those wild flowers struggled free from dust / Teeming with the minerals from the hidden springs / They flash the brilliance of fire." This pharmacopoeia, the speaker notes later, is written by Tibetan Lamas. The allegory of recovery and reconnection embodied in those lines is abundantly clear. Equally illuminating is the idea that the mind's eye sees what the physical eye cannot, but what the mind's eye sees is the result of the accidental rupture of a modern convenience. We read again Alai's favorite metaphor of dust, which is given a meaning encased in another round of metaphors.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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