

## FOR OUR STUDENTS

*The following article has been excerpted from a longer paper produced by Mr. Duckler as a result of his study in Sichuan with Professor Li-hua Ying, supported by their 2008 ASIANetwork-Freeman Foundation Student-Faculty Research Grant.*

### Alai's *The Mountain Stairway*: A Grassroots Conception of Tibet

David Duckler  
Bard College

#### *Surveying the Literary Landscape*

It seems that the current literature regarding Tibet is quite impoverished as a true cultural indicator of the region and its people. The West writes of Tibet as an exotic solution to its own malaise, or as the last refuge of Hermetic wisdom. The Han Chinese have used Tibet as a muse and as an antidote to materialism. The current literary criticism brushes over cultural and stylistic concerns to cut right to politics. In every case, Tibet as a cultural concept is simply used to complement something external to it, to stand in contrast to something else. The Tibetan writer Alai specifically rejects these negative and meaningless definitions of Tibet.

When I choose books about Tibet, my standards are not the same as with other books. I understand that this is a bias, but I am unable to alter my instinctual feeling towards such a book. The most important element lies hidden between the lines: a feeling for whether the writer anchors the text within Tibetan culture, or whether it floats somewhere on the outside.<sup>1</sup>

Our search for a positive and self-existent conception of Tibet such as Alai describes must continue.

Buried beneath layers of misinterpretation lies the literature of Tibet written by Tibetans themselves. Tashi Dawa and Alai are the most prominent examples, almost household names in China. Tashi Dawa's writing is highly mythical in nature and extraordinarily concerned with the act of writing itself. Consider his short story, "Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong." This is the story of an author who is given the task by a dying lama to find and help two of the characters from his story. He takes the old story out of a box and relates it. Where it ends, the author's story begins. He finds his characters in a mythical land, the imprint of the Buddha's palm where the remains of an epic battle from a legendary Tibetan folk story are scattered about. The female protagonist, whose father was a bard who sang the legendary folk story, finds the author and brings him to the dying male protagonist. The author replaces the protagonist and promises the female that he will write her a better life.<sup>2</sup> This work, so rich in Tibetan religion and mythology, so writerly, is not a one-dimensional use of Tibet as a mirror for some nonliterary agenda. It is a story that can hold its own on the international literary stage.

Alai, like Tashi Dawa, makes use of Tibetan culture in a way that elevates his writing beyond that of either a quaint regional literature or a literarily impoverished storytelling useful only in understanding Tibetan history or politics. Our goal is to uncover what Alai draws from his homeland to lend his work such power. It is in Alai's generation of writers that an answer to that almost childish question, "what is Tibet?" may lie. If Tibet, like the Dalai Lama claims, is culturally dead or at least dying, then what do the formidable Tashi Dawa and Alai draw upon for inspiration?

### ***Alai The Tour Guide***

Alai's *The Mountain Stairway* is at times a work of history; it is also a cultural meditation, an epic journey, a collection of folk tales; it can strive towards the objectivity of an anthropological work and can occasionally soar to the subjectivity

of poetry. The work is not located firmly within the sphere of Lhasa or Beijing. Even the format of the work as an apparent travelogue lends it fluidity, as the point of view is in constant motion through physical space. It is difficult even to classify the work as fiction or non-fiction, travelogue or legend.

Alai was asked in interviews, “How would you describe this book to your publishers, your critics and your general audience? What words would you use to define and classify the piece?”

“This need to place a work within such and such a genre... I find it limiting. Perhaps the reason I left the work so ambiguous was to escape the critics.” Alai laughed aloud at this point. “Once they know where a work is located they seize the moment and move in to attack. I like to confound them every once in a while.” Such a response seems apocryphal from an author who wrote the internationally acclaimed *Red Poppies* before his *Mountain Stairway*. *Red Poppies*, firmly a novel, a historically-based fiction, made Alai a household name throughout China. To follow *Red Poppies* with such a difficult-to-place text suggests that the structure of the work has a higher purpose than as a safeguard against the critics.

A closer examination of *The Mountain Stairway*'s first section reveals Alai's intent. In this section's final chapter, Alai launches into an offensive against tour guides. He describes local guides that offer an introduction to Ngawa, his native land, as such: “I am all too familiar with these flag-brandishing, megaphone-touting shepherds tending the flocks of sightseers. These so-called ‘tour guides’ think nothing of accuracy, and they respect neither history nor culture. They esteem tips above all...”<sup>23</sup> Such a comment in a larger piece that never again mentions tour guides may seem offhand, except that he follows this observation by comparing himself to the very guides he has just insulted:

This makes me reflect, could my own writing become another form of misrepresentation? Everyone has a personal bias, but I place greater trust in my love and sense of responsibility for Ngawa and my people. If I

do not do justice to Ngawa in this book, then in the next book or project I will render the area more beautifully and completely and offer that as a gift to my land and my people. At the very least, I can hope to do better than those supposed “tour guides.”<sup>4</sup>

Alai intentionally makes himself into a tour guide before the second section of the book, which marks the beginning of his voyage home, the start of the reader's “tour.”

This text is not history, nor is it the record of a personal journey. It is an intentional literary guide to Alai's Tibet. In an era of Chinese inspiration-seekers and exoticizers writing about Tibet, Alai gives us an alternate perspective from which to understand a land that is altogether shrouded in mystery for the average outsider. The question to ask at this point is, Why? Why did Alai follow up his internationally acclaimed novel, *Red Poppies* with a piece lacking in the exotic appeal and novelistic tone that made his first bestseller? If his fictional work provides a portrait of the region, why did Alai follow it up with a memoir-style cultural and literary guide to Ngawa.

An article Alai wrote for the *Kawagebo Culture Society Journal* gives us insight into his motivations for writing *The Mountain Stairway* when he did. This article is largely devoted to criticizing the obsession of the Chinese literary critics with Gabriel Garcia Marquez and his *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. This critique stems from the fact that many people have analyzed *Red Poppies*, claiming that it draws heavily from Marquez's magical realism. Alai mocks these critics, asking them why they think only of Marquez and not other magical realists. He mocks them for their focus on magical realism and not on other possible literary influences.<sup>5</sup> We must keep in mind that Tibetan literature, Alai's included, makes heavy use of the fantastic. Recall Tashi Dawa's story of an author finding his character in a hidden land called The Imprint of the Buddha's Palm. Alai's *Red Poppies* makes use of magical occurrences, like epic battles between sorcerers on behalf of their chieftains. This use of the fantastic also extends to Chinese writers like Ma Yuan and Ma Jian who draw upon Tibet as an influence.

The particular way that magic is incorporated into the text, both formally and thematically, seems to be one of the defining characteristics of Tibetan literature.

The accusation that Tibetans are stealing the fantastic elements of their work from the Latin American magical realist tradition is a serious one. Such claims take away part of what makes the literature of Tibet unique. Alai insists that while magical realists (Marquez as one among many) were important influences on Tibetan literature, so were other authors like Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Margaret Yourcenar and Pablo Neruda.<sup>6</sup> These influences provided stylistic tools added to the Tibetan arsenal in the same way that they were for all Chinese authors in the 1980s, but they did not fundamentally change what made the literature of Tibet uniquely Tibetan.

The fantastic elements in works by Tibetan authors draw their inspiration, Alai argues, from the native Tibetan folk tradition.<sup>7</sup> This tradition, passed on orally, is rich in magic and extraordinary occurrences. Wendy Faris writes in *Ordinary Enchantments*,

...Latin American magical realist writing grew out of the first wave of postcolonial romantic primitivism, which affirmed the sense of a usable, natural, and indigenous past but had not yet articulated a distinctive style in which to portray that sensibility. It thus developed as a response to the conjunction of indigenous and avante-garde modes...<sup>8</sup>

Alai argues that the unique style of Tibetan literature, like magical realist work in Latin America, is a fusion of the primitive folk tradition and the avante-garde, utilizing magical realist form to contain stories that draw from the oral tradition.

Of course, once an author has released his work to the public, it is no longer his to remake. Alai has not been able to interpret his own piece for the general public, as much as it seems that he would have liked to in his critical article. Therefore, he began work on another piece, *The Mountain Stairway*, which, in the light of his comments regarding tour guides, can

be seen as his navigation through a physical space and a literary realm. Alai does not become both traveler and storyteller for our amusement. Instead, he writes to create a positive construction of Tibetan culture that embraces the folk tradition and the fantastic, to which his writing is so indebted. In an environment of exoticized and biased literature regarding Tibet and unproductive or even truth-distorting literary criticism, Alai takes on the responsibility of the tour guide in hopes of presenting something that strives towards a truthful and respectful representation of Ngawa Tibet.

### ***The Collision of Literary and Physical Landscapes***

In the Tibetan language, the land we know as Tibet is alternately called “The Land of Snow.” This is not without good reason—understanding Tibet begins with an understanding of its landscape. Ngawa Autonomous prefecture, Alai’s homeland, is situated in northern Sichuan province. Alai calls it a “transitional land,” for it is neither firmly a part of the Sichuan basin, nor the “Great Mountain Stairway” of the Himalayas. The land is gouged deeply by rivers: the Tatu, the Xiaojin, and the Dajin.

In interviews, Alai was asked about the land of Gyalrong, where nature still commands awe and inspires fear in man. He said,

In the past, crossing a mountain may have been a once-in-a-lifetime affair. A person was likely to die of cold, avalanche, starvation, anything. The greater fear and respect for nature meant more religiosity in people. Now the same journey takes only a day by car and it is unlikely that the passengers will die, so people fear nature less. In the future, perhaps we will have technology that makes travel easier yet and we will forget about the landscape entirely.

Alai was asked in response, “With the mountains on all sides, nature must be a major inspiration in your work and the work

of other Tibetan writers. Do you feel it plays a powerful role in your thinking?”

“Well... Of course. If I was a New Yorker, I would write about the cityscape, about urban life, but I am not. Every writer should use what they know, and Tibet is still a land where nature prevails. It cannot be ignored.” Alai’s contemporary Tashi Nyima, a Tibetan writer, sums it up more romantically,

As a poet I am constantly searching for new inspiration.  
Some journey all over the world for such inspiration,  
but I need only look outside. Every day is different.  
The colors in the sky at sunset, the way the leaves  
move in the wind—everything is always changing, and  
always beautiful.

Although Alai is not a fervent devotee of Buddhism, he shows an enormous amount of concern and respect for the environment. Alai mourns the cultural decline around the holy mountain Molto in *The Mountain Stairway*:

Molto marks the center of Gyalrong culture, but the natural devastation has brought about an irreversible decline of culture. Take for example the path around Molto. Bön and Buddhist disciples believe that winding around holy mountains accumulates good karma, but Molto’s path has been consumed. No...perhaps it is imprecise to say consumed in such a case. “Consumption” implies a beaten path slowly overwhelmed by green grass, vines and trees.... Fierce mountain wind and rain have stripped the topsoil layer by layer. Plant life will never again find a clump of dirt in which to take root. The last bits of green were waiting for the goats whose tongues were covered in sand. This path, formed by travelers feet treading over the grass and decomposed trees, is gone, faded away with the erosion of the land. I have never been one to circumambulate a mountain in prayer, but seeing a road

both ancient and holy sink into nothingness, my heart was seized by a wave of bitterness.<sup>9</sup>

It is important to note that he says cultural decline, not environmental decline. The bitterness he feels inside is not only because the land was stripped of trees, sliding day by day into the river to be washed away, but because the culture of the Gyalrong people is inextricably tied to the environment.

The idea of nature as both a spiritual landscape and a physical one is emphasized in Alai's discussion of General Panre, a conqueror from western Tibet who brought Gyalrong under the control of the ancient Tibetan empire. Consider Alai's treatment of the conqueror's castle: "The castle of the history books, the castle of legend, has disappeared in the weeds. The houses of the villagers, neglected by history and legend, looked down upon by the mighty rulers, still stand in the canyon where the weeds spread out like stars in the sky, waving in the gentle breeze."<sup>10</sup> The land consumes the castle over time, but Alai glorifies the village, the land and the people. "Everyone knows that conquerors, those high and mighty monarchs, are only temporary, fading away in time. Only the land itself, the ancient villages and their people, truly persist through the ages."<sup>11</sup> The people and the village itself are tied to the land. They are unchanging and powerful. They represent an essential spirit of Tibet. It is the people and the land itself that Alai honors in his personal tribute to Tibetan culture.

The moments of remarkable beauty in *The Mountain Stairway* make Alai's discussions of desolation all the more bleak. Alai recalls his childhood, playing in the birch forest outside his village and drinking water from a sweet spring. But this discussion is cut short by his memory of deforestation: "...saplings and flowers were crushed to death in seconds, the slender white birch were scarred by the many collisions, and the village's loose fertile topsoil was pounded flat. The rain fell non-stop, washing mud and gravel down the slopes. That year, the sweet fountain of spring water was buried in the flowing sand."<sup>12</sup> His text is filled with this kind of lament for the destruction of the environment. While the bitterness he felt for

the disappearance of the mountain trail was due to the loss of a cultural relic, his anger towards deforestation in general seems to stem from his association between nature and the Tibetan identity:

When the birch forests disappeared, so too did the fear and love of nature passed down through the generations. People took their axes to the few remaining trees, seeking a little cash. Once when I returned home for the spring festival, I heard the villagers bustling about on the highway, loading stolen timber onto trucks under the cover of midnight darkness. It is in this way that I witnessed the absolute dissolution of the forests and the degradation of heartbroken souls into immorality.<sup>13</sup>

For Alai, nature is not only an essential element of religion, but also an upholder of morals. Once the landscape is removed, people lose the fear and love of the landscape that is so important to his understanding of Tibet.

Alai's love of nature can be seen from another, more literary perspective. He devotes ample narrative space to telling the many legends he hears about bear-men.<sup>14</sup> Alai's preoccupation with the bear-men, or Yetis, of Tibet is not mere superstition. These Yetis represent the roots of mankind. They are the most primitive kind of humans. Even their existence itself is tied to the land when Alai links their disappearance with the deforestation.<sup>15</sup> Seen in the context of the larger movement of the 1980s of root-seeking fiction, or the literary attempt to return to the roots of civilization, the discussion of the Yetis is more a discussion of the primitive roots of humanity and its originally intimate connection to the land itself.

By emphasizing the power of nature and its importance to the spiritual identity of Tibetans, Alai is giving it a position of privilege in his text. Importantly, this positioning of nature does not only manifest itself in Alai's thematic concerns, but also in his style of writing. Alai's text does not move through a traditional narrative line, but rather flows along the currents of

the rivers, and soars over the mountains. A traditional story or an average travel journal is apt to skim over the transitional moments between event locations A and B. Alai, however, makes the transitional spaces into moments of their own. The beauty, the desolation: These are the foundations of his text. The question then becomes, what will be built from this foundation? Where does the mountain stairway lead us? Keep in mind Alai's comment about fear and awe-inspiring religiosity. The grandeur of nature makes humans minute. If Alai is successful in his descriptions, then he is generating an awe inside the reader. While this may not make Buddhists out of all of us, it is likely to firmly support the addition of the next critical element in understanding Tibet and the folk tradition: spirituality

### ***Faith and Making the Magical Real.***

Tibet is undeniably a land of religion. As Tsering Shakya puts it, "Related to the question of modernization, another difficult subject for Tibetan writers was, and still is, religion.... It is through their religion...that Tibetans have always found their identity."<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the landscape of Tibet is capable of inspiring a religious awe. Consider Alai's musing,

As I wandered the villages of mountain gods, I was hoping I could get my hands on an ancient pear wood block carved in the hands of some nameless artisan, but this wish has yet to be fulfilled. Though I have never been an antique collector, the idea of a carved wind-horse block tempts me. I want to find a lake reflecting the brilliant blue sky, nestled between snow-capped mountains on a warm spring day with blossoming flowers. By the lake there would be a carpet of green grass where I would sit to make rubbings from the wooden board and scatter them in the wind.<sup>17</sup>

This is not mere poetic fancy. Alai is showing us the power of the landscape and the legends to inspire spirituality.

Understanding the religiosity of Tibet is critical to unearthing the true nature of Tibetan literary culture.

Religion as a thematic influence in literature is a simple matter. Of course, much of the body of literature surrounding Tibet makes religion a central concern of the text. Of much deeper interest are the formal influences that religion lends to Tibetan storytelling. These influences all lead neatly to a literature based heavily on the spirit of the oral tradition from three different angles. The shamanism of the native Bön religion instills credibility upon the fantastic stories of multitudinous gods of nature, validating a high level of spiritual and magical language in the modern text. Second is the Buddhist concept of cyclical time played out through reincarnation, which disrupts the tendency towards picturesque fiction and moves storytelling towards tales of spiritual development. Third, and perhaps most complicated, is the influence of the four noble truths of Buddhism as a sort of medical prescription, diagnosing suffering and offering a cure. This scientific and non-religious, but still highly spiritual approach to the fundamental issues of life leads to an incorporation of the fantastic into the realm of believability. Such a phenomenon plays out as a sort of mirror to magical realism in that a text may incorporate magical events, but in the context of their culture, these events are believable. Still, these events remain extraordinary enough for the moment of hesitation needed in literature to separate fantasy from the fantastic. Together, these three elements of Tibetan spirituality manifest themselves in a unique literary culture.

### **Shamanism and the Fantastic**

It is best to start with the most straightforward of spirituality's influence on literature. This is the shamanistic and animistic tendency of the native Bön religion, a tendency that persists even today in making Tibetan Buddhism internationally recognizable and highly distinct from Chinese, Indian or Japanese Buddhism. Alai is generous in the number of his stories regarding the clash between Bön and Buddhism in *The Mountain Stairway*. The most prominent example can be found

in Alai's account of Vairochana, a missionary who brought Buddhism to Gyalrong:

This region had always been the center of Bön, yet stories of Vairochana, the great disseminator of Buddhism, reached even this land between cypress-covered mountains. In caves, the master is believed to have left miraculous signs such as inscriptions and footprints, as well as many wonderful legends.... While struggling against the power and influence of Bön, Padmasambhava used his magical powers to defeat Bön sorcerers. He combined these magical contests with a second important strategy— after each victory, he would bring the local gods under his control by conferring onto them various titles.<sup>18</sup>

It is easy to make the mistake of separating all that is shamanistic from Tibetan Buddhism and calling it Bön, but Alai reminds us that even the great Buddhist Vairochana had to use magical powers and recognize the local gods in order to gain a foothold for his Nyingma Buddhist sect in Gyalrong.

Alai is equally generous in his animistic stories of those mountain gods that Vairochana tried to tame:

Slender fir trees strung with fluttering prayer flags and tapered to a point are arrows offered to the mountain god during the annual pilgrimage. Though the god is ancient, more distant than a thousand years of seclusion coalesced into mystery, local Tibetans living around Molto believe the god can still ride a horse-drawn chariot on the frigid winds, journeying between heaven and earth. The mountain god is locked in fierce battles, for not only does it require the yearly offering of arrows, but it also demands an endless supply of war horses.<sup>19</sup>

This mountain, Gyalmu Molto, was never successfully integrated by the Buddhists through Vairochana's title-conferring strategy. Thus the people appease it and help the god in the

wars that it constantly wages by sending it wind-horses, little scraps of paper with printed horses on them.

Alai is not content simply to tell us the stories of legendary mountain gods; he also relates the stories to the people to be sure that we understand their compelling influence in Tibet. Consider his discussion of Tibetan Buddhist sage Vairochana, responsible for bringing Buddhism to Gyalrong:

The most famous spot where the master meditated is a cave known as “Vairochana Grotto,” nestled in a verdant green forest ten miles outside of Chami village in Bar-khams County. Some vague marks on the walls are said to be imprints of his palms left behind from his meditative practice. At least, that is the firm belief of the locals who pilgrimage to the site in an endless stream. In this bright, spacious cave, there is a dead tree trunk six meters tall and seven wide with its roots still intact. Locals say that while Vairochana was disseminating Buddhism in Gyalrong, he also went to teach at the sacred Emei Mountain. When he returned, he plunged his walking stick into the bottom of the cave where it took root and grew into a sturdy tree. Today this tree trunk is a magical relic; the masses who come to worship Vairochana often take scrapings of the trunk and burn them with leaves to bring good luck and wealth.<sup>20</sup>

The reader learns the legend of Vairochana’s hermitage but also reads that the legend still lives on as endless streams of pilgrims travel to the site and take scrapings from the tree trunk. This inclusion of legend into the present day, a legend that continues to affect people’s lives, shows that the fantastic lies close to people’s hearts not simply as literary genre but more, as truth. The living nature of these legends makes a literary reference to them particularly potent. When Gyalrong writers incorporate Gyalmu Molto, they bring connotations as immediate and unavoidable as we would find in a Western writer who places a fruit tree in the back yard of a character named Eve.

As a secondary example of the pervasive influence of shamanism in Tibetan literature, we need only to look to the epic of Gesar. If written in its entirety, this story would be the longest epic in the world. It is recited by specialized bards who consider themselves possessed by the spirit of Gesar or one of his cohorts. According to tradition, these storytellers are not born as bards, but instead wake up one morning and suddenly remember, word for word, the entire epic. The appearance of Buddhism has likely caused the current version of the epic to depart from its original meaning. Gesar is considered to be a Buddhist hero sent down from heaven with magical powers to rid Tibet of demonic influences (namely, non-Buddhist rulers). Gesar accomplishes this task through many feats of magic and trickery, then ascends back to heaven for a well-earned rest.

Consider the following passage from Alexandra David-Neel's summary of the legend. Gesar murders the demon-king Lutzen and faces Lutzen's loyal subjects:

Never can we kill such a magician, they thought despairingly. However, remaining faithful to their dead master, they attempted to avenge him by shooting poisoned arrows at the hero. Not one of these reached him, but he, carried away by anger, drew his sword of flame from its scabbard. Terrified at the sight of this supernatural weapon, the warriors prostrated themselves in token of submission, protesting their readiness to become his subjects and accept the Religion.<sup>21</sup>

This episode of the Gesar tale captures the violence and magic of pre-Buddhist Tibet, but puts it to the service of Buddhism. The Gesar epic is filled with tales of the hero using heavenly powers and triumphing over his enemies. Throughout the many stories, Gesar hovers tentatively in the intermediary space between human and god. At times he triumphs using power far beyond that of a mortal. At other times he is defeated and tricked, experiencing doubt or grief like a human being. This unique tone is a definite influence on Tibetan literature today.

Alai feels so indebted to the epic that he has undertaken the project of collecting and recording an abridged version himself.

The unique fusion of shamanistic and magical elements into Tibetan Buddhism gives a broad literary license for imaginative storytelling. Tibetan authors like Alai, through his use of the fantastic, and Tashi Dawa, in his direct reference to Gesar in “Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong,” are aware of their debt to a storytelling tradition steeped in Tibetan Buddhist legends.

### **Samsara and the Non-linear Narrative**

There is an overwhelming sense in the West that we are *going* somewhere. The destination is not always the same, but we are moving forward to some distant, perhaps unreachable point called *progress*. This is clearly apparent in our politics, but also in literature and philosophy. For example, we have historical materialism and linear development of history. We also have the picturesque novel that privileges a single character and his or her personal growth. Christianity ends with final judgment and revelation. In such a goal-oriented and end-oriented society, it is sometimes hard to recognize that time need not move in a straight line, that people may amount to more (or less) than the sum of their life’s labor as they look back at the moment of their death.

Buddhism does not privilege the straight line. In fact, Buddhist time is cyclical. Buddhists believe that we have lived through countless previous lives and that most will live through countless more. We inhabit *samsara*—a process of birth and rebirth based on karma that continues until the soul reaches enlightenment.<sup>22</sup> Everything that is done has been done in previous epochs. Everything that has been said has already been uttered countless times over the generations. Such an outlook admits linear development only in regard to spiritual and religious matters. All else is cyclical and thus illusion.

This Buddhist notion of time creates a hierarchy of significance that is different from the Western literary hierarchy. A story may gloss over the captivating struggles of a character to gain power or wealth, but dwell on moral and

spiritual matters. This tendency is tied closely with the shamanistic influence, for spiritual matters are not necessarily abstract in the way we tend to think of them in a monotheistic world, but are often tangible battles between gods or the encounter of a ghost. Alai embraces the hierarchy of the spiritual before the material in the route he chooses to follow throughout his travelogue: "...I began in Lhasa, the very heart of the Tibetan plateau, and followed the staircase down, tracing the veins of history as I descended step-by-step along the route of the conqueror, the route of cultural dissemination."<sup>23</sup> This route is the route along which Buddhism spread to Gyalrong. Thus the idea of *samsara* privileges a non-traditional narrative in which plot may be secondary to larger overarching ideas.

The boundlessness of time also lends to an association of the boundless landscape as holy, particularly in regard to mountains. A mountain is a symbol of the unmoving and unchanging. Its vast structure existed before we did and will exist long after we die; this reality gives it an air of importance as something that transcends *samsara* and thus becomes a god. In this way, Buddhist conceptions of time support the literary effects of the overwhelming landscape and of shamanism..

### **Becoming Familiar with the Fantastic**

Alexandra David-Neel explains the Tibetan attitude towards fantastic occurrences:

None in Tibet deny that such events take place, but no one regards them as miracles, according to the meaning of that term in the West, that is to say, as *supernatural* events. Indeed, Tibetans do not recognize any supernatural agent. The so-called wonders, they think, are as natural as common daily events and depend on the clever handling of little-known laws and forces.<sup>24</sup>

This is not surprising, given the main tenets of Buddhism. Gotama Buddha formulated the four noble truths not as a god, but as a sort of doctor. First, he observed that people suffer, then he

found the origin of the suffering. Next, he claimed that there was a way to end suffering, and lastly he showed how to end suffering.<sup>25</sup> He astutely diagnosed a problem in human nature that prevents us from reaching a higher state of being and then offered a prescription in the eightfold path.

This tradition of viewing religion or spirituality as a practical means to an end is evidenced by the development of the Tibetan sciences. Consider the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* as an example of formulating a practical guidebook to increase the chances of a better rebirth. This guidebook does not view the after-death experience as supernatural. It is a part of life and is as real as can be. Western thinkers such as Carl Jung have described Tibetan beliefs outlined in the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* regarding what we consider “supernatural” as “psychic science.”<sup>26</sup>

This willingness to incorporate the magical into the everyday leads to a complex relationship with magical realism. As has already been mentioned, many critics pass off Tibetan literature that uses the fantastic as an emulation of Marquez’s magical realism. Alai vehemently rejects this idea, as was discussed earlier. The source of such accusations is easy to see. Tibetan culture is steeped in a religion that prompts the literary use of what we consider magic, but incorporates this magic into everyday and otherwise realistic settings. The fantastic elements have the requisite moment of hesitation on the part of the reader and the characters in the story because, while an extraordinary occurrence is explainable, it is still extraordinary and tied to powerful natural forces.

Nevertheless, it is important to remember that Tibetan magical realism is not Latin American magical realism. The political connotations of Marquez’s style do not carry over to the Tibetan use of magic. Alai and his contemporaries like Tashi Nyima, the Yunnan Tibetan poet, consistently assert that the fantastic is a positive defining element of their culture that stands alone as opposed to a negative opposition that relies on the concept of a colonizer and its linear/rational perspective.

Shamanism, *samsara*, and the four noble truths together forge a strong aesthetic in Tibetan literature that upholds the

essential folk tradition. The Gesar epic is the clearest example of this fusion, with its fantastic plot based on spiritual development that is reinterpreted over the generations by storytellers. It is important to understand that religion in Tibet is almost second nature. An old woman may sit all day spinning her prayer wheel with the most fervent faith in the Buddha, but not know the four noble truths. A seasoned monk may have devoted his entire life to religion, but be unable to explain the fundamental differences between Buddhism and Bön. Religion is an enormous shaping force, but a largely unconscious one. A person need not study the sutras to believe in the Buddha. Religion is an innate part of Tibetan culture, and, as Alai describes, culture lives through the people and within the land itself.

***Folk Tales and Grassroots Literary Anthropology  
(Rewriting the Center)***

As described, both a root-seeking focus on the land and people and a spiritual vision of the universe affect Tibetan literature in their own ways. However, they also mutually support a third element that defines what makes Tibetan literature essentially Tibetan: the folk tradition. *The Mountain Stairway's* entire first section is devoted to the folk stories that surround Gyalrong and its origins.

The root-seeking movement in Chinese literature sought out the origins of the Chinese people, looking towards the primitive pre-Confucian Chu culture as well as the ancient cradle of Chinese civilization in the Yangze river valley. However, some authors, like Ma Yuan, saw Chinese culture as degenerate and overly corrupted by materialism. These authors flooded Tibet in the 1980s searching for a culture that would inspire nativist and primitive literature. While the Confucian cannon largely co-opted and replaced the older, more animistic traditional literature of China, Buddhism embraced and incorporated the animistic and shamanistic legends of the Bön. Thus, Tibet proved to be an excellent literary source for the root-seekers.

Recall the discussion of Alai's article defending *Red Poppies* as a work of literature independent from Latin American magical realism. Alai explains that the idiot in his story is based on a

famous Tibetan folk hero, Aku Tunpa. The constant speculation concerning which *external* source inspired Alai is jarring, considering the rich cultural landscape of folk stories that he describes in *The Mountain Stairway*. It is no wonder, then, that Alai feels obligated to so thoroughly introduce the reader to the native tradition from which his own and many other author's work derives.

### **Folk Tales as Historiography**

Alai's *The Mountain Stairway* is an important text in helping us to understand the literary sources that Tibetan and Han Chinese authors alike are referencing in their work. One of the most predominant themes of *The Mountain Stairway* is the tension between "empirically verifiable history," as Alai puts it, and folk history. Alai shows that folk history and the oral tradition are still alive and well in Gyalrong, occupying perhaps a greater psychological space in people's minds than historiography. Consider the folk tale of the monkey and rock-ogress. There was once a devout Buddhist monkey, whose layperson's vows were conferred by Avolokiteshvara himself, meditating in the land of Tibet. Unfortunately this pious and upright monkey became the object of carnal desire to a rock-ogress. She issued an ultimatum: if the monkey would not marry her, she would find a rock-ogre husband and create a race of rock-ogres to smite all living things. Avolokiteshvara approved of this shotgun marriage and blessed them, predicting the spread of Buddhism throughout the land. The monkey and the rock-ogress bore children of each Buddhist class of being, from hungry ghosts to gods. Avolokiteshvara then cast crop seeds on the earth to feed the monkey's children. This marriage explains the presence of evil forces in the world, since the rock-ogress' lineage carries all the faults of mankind and the monkey's lineage carries all that is good.<sup>27</sup>

It is a historian's instinct to discard this tale as worthless because it contributes nothing to a greater understanding of the Tibetan people's "true" origins. The tale is devoid of what one may be apt to call "historical fact." Yet such a dismissal is premature. John Powers, author of *History as Propaganda*, argues that Tibetan historical writing is all so biased that it

approaches fiction, but that it is valuable in understanding ideological struggles. He quotes Foucault, “The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language, relations of power not relations of meaning. History has no ‘meaning.’”<sup>28</sup> Powers does not argue that we must consider all sources to be equally true, nor does he debunk the various histories as false. Instead, he is interested in how these histories reflect a greater struggle. Powers calls history “the ideological battle of the production of historical ‘truth.’”<sup>29</sup> Herein lie the absolute facts of history. While each story may not capture the facts of a situation accurately, it will capture the interpretation of said situation on the part of the authors. Historical documents can be used to map out ideological struggles over the centuries. In a land where the development of spiritual capital has largely outpaced the development of material capital, historiography viewed as the footprint of conflicting ideologies seems especially relevant.

The creation story of the monkey and rock-ogress may not give us any clues as to the origin of the Tibetan people, but it does document a yearning by the author for a divine blessing on and approval of his people. It also shows an ideological refusal to connect evil with Buddhism, attributing it instead to an irreligious rock-ogress who suffers under the grip of carnal desire. This story of creation also gives the Tibetan people a divine claim to the land of Tibet, due to the fact that it was blessed by Avolokiteshvara as the land of Buddhism.

Alai uses folk tales in much the same way that John Powers presents history. The empirical truth of the folk tales is irrelevant. The important part lies in what clues the stories give us about the thoughts and emotions of the people who conceived of the story and passed it on for generations. It is important to remember that Alai’s grand scheme is not to present a history, but rather to present a portrait and a tour of his homeland. The following passage is an example of Alai’s folk storytelling:

The legend goes that early on the second morning after the birth of Trisong Detsen, his father the king went outside the palace to visit the mother and the baby, only

to discover that another consort who claimed to be the true mother had taken the boy. In order to determine which consort was the mother, the court officials put the little prince in a room and asked the two consorts to pick him up at the same time. The Chinese Princess Jincheng picked him up first, but Consort Nanang ferociously pried at the child in an attempt to rip him from Jincheng's arms. Jincheng, afraid for the baby's life, let go. Because of this, the officials were convinced that Princess Jincheng was the true mother. However, it is written in those history books that are based upon empirical evidence that Trisong Detsen was born in 742 AD even though Princess Jincheng had died in 739 AD. Trisong Detsen was in fact Consort Nanang's child. Why then do the folk tales contain so blatant a discrepancy?<sup>30</sup>

Alai goes on to explain that this story is evidence of a fierce struggle between Buddhism and the native Bön religion. An examination of folk tales dealing with the issue of Trisong Detsen's birth may not reveal who his mother was, but it will more importantly indicate the ideological tensions of the time. The story is imbued with further meaning by the fact that it has survived as part of the oral tradition. It is being passed on even today, bearing witness to the fact that some element is still emotionally and spiritually resonant for the Tibetan people.

Alai tells another story of Vairochana in which he was exiled by the king on suspicion of slandering the king's wife. Driven away, he comes to Gyalrong, Alai's homeland, and escapes death and imprisonment through his miraculous yogic powers. Alai writes, "Of course, this is a folk interpretation of history, latent with the emotions of the people. Through their stories, the common folk shape history. Verifiable history itself remains unchanged in spite of folk revision."<sup>31</sup> Alai honors the folk tradition, but he is not trying to assert it as the ultimate *objective* truth. Rather he presents it as a beautiful *subjective* truth: not a historical one, but a cultural one. The story is latent with "the emotions of the people." This is the kind of material that a true guide to Tibetan culture relies upon.

### **Folk Tales and Cultural Centrality**

Tashi Tsering claims that writing in the language of a colonizer is a way to “write back to the center,” in effect a method to disrupt the cultural colonization and assert the centrality of the colonized entity.<sup>32</sup> This concept takes on immense gravity in regard to a place that is fundamentally far from the center. Alai’s homeland, Gyalrong, was never under the solid political or religious control of Lhasa. In fact, Alai’s *Red Poppies* documents the final years of the chieftain system in the area and shows the complex power interplay between the local chieftains, the Chinese, and Lhasa. The question to be asked in such a land is therefore, upon what cultural center do authors base themselves and to what cultural center do they write?

Tashi Nyima related in interviews that he is opposed to the very idea of cultural centrality. In a lively evening salon, he and his literary colleagues—a Lisu minority poet, a journalist, and others—expressed their disdain for the assumption that all Tibetans, or even all of any ethnicity, can be grouped under the same heading. Asked where he would locate his own cultural center if he did not locate it in Lhasa, he stood up and gestured to his heart. “I am my center; you are your center.”

Alai would agree with Tashi Nyima; his extensive use of the folk tradition takes on another important role beyond a simple tribute to the source material of his literary inspiration. Many of the tales he tells are highly subjective and localized. For example, Alai relates the legend of a mountain god convention called to order to determine the hierarchy of gods. The meeting is about to convene when

...the sky darkened and a deity approached the convention on a cloud from the east. He lowered the cloud with a movement of his hand and walked imposingly towards the assembly with a leopard skin tied around his waist. Surveying the field, he saw that no seats were empty except for the dragon throne... so he simply strutted up to the front and sat straight down on the throne. The assembly erupted in outrage, but the

newcomer made a slight bow and stated with the utmost composure, “I am aware of the debate over scriptures and contest of martial arts, but since there are no seats below, it seems that I was pushed here. How can I oppose the will of the crowd?” He stood and bowed to the assembly. The other gods were unswayed and challenged him to an immediate debate on the scriptures. None could have known that this god from the east was so erudite, his speech so eloquent.... They challenged this upstart to a clash of arms. The god of the east demonstrated every form of martial arts conceivable.... After eighty-one days of struggle, he defeated every god. As a result, the assembly was convinced to let him once more ascend the throne.<sup>33</sup>

Alai goes on to say that this story represents the desires of a marginalized people to be central, for

the legend of Molto’s enthronement convolutedly signifies a desire of the local tribes to become a cultural center. In truth, Molto appears nowhere among the names of holy guardian mountains on the Tibetan Buddhist roster. This does not stop the Gyalrong people from elaborating on their Molto mythology.<sup>34</sup>

This tale cannot be seen as a Tibetan myth but rather a Gyalrong myth, or more specifically, a Molto myth. Cultural identity can be fragmented further and further until, like Tashi Nyima spiritedly demonstrated, the individual is the center. Recounting the many folk tales Alai encounters along his journey is a way for him to grant centrality to a marginalized land.

Alai said in interviews that the concept of culture as a uniting entity is an invention of academics. He argued that if one asked peasants from his hometown what culture they belonged to, they would respond with a blank stare. Even the legend of Molto, the pride of the local people, cannot be counted as a unifying force, for Alai prefaces it with the following, “I moved into the path of the shepherd and asked her about Molto. The

question seemed not to register on her blank face. I tried dropping the name Vairochana. She broke into a smile, pointing to the tree-lined midsection of the mountain.”<sup>35</sup> The Shepherd is unaware of Molto and the glorious legend that lends centrality to her village, but she is aware of Vairochana and the legend that he meditated in caves on Molto Mountain. This account demonstrates the absolute subjectivity of cultural conceptions. Alai gives us a legend to upset the Lhasa-based centrality of a “unified” concept of Tibet, but he also gives us a personal story to upset a regional idea of unity. Through folktales, Alai respects culture as it is expressed through the autonomy of the individual. This is the very nature of the oral tradition—stories passed on, reinterpreted, and retold by individuals, sometimes adding and sometimes subtracting, based on the audience. This is the beautiful and subjective tradition that *The Mountain Stairway* honors.

### ***A Tour Guide's Final Remarks***

Alai's *The Mountain Stairway* pays homage to three intertwined elements of Tibetan culture that give the literature of Tibet its unique identity: the landscape, the religion, and the folk tradition. Each element is important individually for its effects on writing, but also critical in supporting and magnifying the effect of the other two. The vast landscape inspires religiosity while at the same time isolating people, allowing them to develop a unique oral tradition. The religion inspires a respect for the landscape, based on the shamanistic roots of Tibetan Buddhism, while also providing inspiration for a creative folk tradition. Storytelling incorporates both religion and landscape as dominant themes and thereby keeps them a part of the living tradition. Alai is able to include all three of these elements in his cultural tour of Gyalrong Tibet. In doing so, he gives us a relatively comprehensive picture of how Tibetan literature has developed towards the use of the fantastic, and why the imagery of nature and religion dominate the landscape of the text.

Despite those who doubt that culture survives in Tibet, Alai brilliantly delivers his own documentation of a living tradition in Gyalrong. We began with the question of what is Tibet? Alai

transcends the question itself, mapping Tibet without geographical boundaries, etching in topographical lines to indicate routes of religious and linguistic dissemination, marking locations by the stories they have to tell. In the end, “Tibet” is a straw man. What Alai presents is not the summation of culture within the bounds of geography (Tibet) but rather a mapping of geography in terms of culture. He constructs a literary image on the grassroots level, reveling in the minutiae, celebrating the glory of a people and their stories.

Alai’s Tibet is not constructed simply as a foil for some idea like colonialism, or materialism. Considering the amount of literature that subsumes Tibet into the dichotomy of oppressor/oppressed or into the Chinese dichotomy of feudal serfdom/liberation, Alai’s construction of Tibet makes his book unique. It does not subvert or abstract the culture of Gyalrong for the sake of literature but rather brings the literature closer to its inspiration, allowing Gyalrong culture to manifest itself untethered.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, (The Mountain Stairway), trans. David Duckler. Nanhai chuban gongsi, 2007, 67.

<sup>2</sup>Tashi Dawa, “Tibet, a Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong,” from, *Tales of Tibet*, ed. Herbert J. Batt, (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), 1.

<sup>3</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, 59.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Alai, “Wenxue chuanguozhong de minjian wenhua yuansu,” from *Kawagebo Wenhua She*, 2008 5<sup>th</sup> edition.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid.

<sup>8</sup>Faris, Wendy, *Ordinary Enchantments*, (Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2004), 33.

<sup>9</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, 106.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>11</sup>Ibid., 45.

<sup>12</sup>Ibid., 70.

<sup>13</sup>Ibid., 72.

- <sup>14</sup>Ibid., 87.
- <sup>15</sup>Ibid., 87.
- <sup>16</sup>Shakya, Tsering, "The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers," from *Manoa Online Archives* 12.2.2000. <<"[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2tsering\\_shakya.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/manoa/v012/12.2tsering_shakya.html)>>
- <sup>17</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, 95-96.
- <sup>18</sup>Ibid., 54-55.
- <sup>19</sup>Ibid., 94.
- <sup>20</sup>Ibid., 54.
- <sup>21</sup>David-Neel, Alexandra, Lama Yongden The Lama Yongden, Albert Arthur Yongden, and Violet Sydney, *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*, (Whitefish, Montana: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 132.
- <sup>22</sup>Samsara." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. 2009. Encyclopædia Britannica Online. 23 Apr. 2009 <<[www.search.eb/eb/article-9065236](http://www.search.eb/eb/article-9065236)>>
- <sup>23</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, 45-46.
- <sup>24</sup>David-Neel, Alexandra, et al., 289.
- <sup>25</sup>McDougall, Gordon and Tashi Tsering, *The Four Noble Truths*, (Somerville, Massachusetts: Wisdom Publications, 2005), 13.
- <sup>26</sup>Evans-Wenz, W.T., *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) xxxv.
- <sup>27</sup>Gyaltsen, Sakyapa Sonam, *The Clear Mirror: A Traditional Account of Tibet's Golden Age*, (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications, 1996), 75-79.
- <sup>28</sup>Powers, John, *History as Propoganda*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 3.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, 37.
- <sup>31</sup>Ibid., 41.
- <sup>32</sup>Shakya, Tsering, "Language Literature and Representation in Tibet," from, *Tales of Tibet*. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001), xx.
- <sup>33</sup>Alai, *Dadi de jieti*, 103.
- <sup>34</sup>Ibid., 105.
- <sup>35</sup>Ibid., 91.