

TRICKSTERS AND OUTCASTS IN MODERN TIBETAN LITERATURE: AN
EXAMINATION OF FOLKLORIC CHARACTER TYPES IN ALAI'S NOVELS

THESIS

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for

the Degree Master of Arts in the Graduate

School of The Ohio State University

By

Timothy O'Connor Thurston

The Ohio State University
2007

Thesis Committee:

Prof. Mark Bender, Adviser

Prof. Kirk Denton

Approved By

Adviser
Graduate Program in East
Asian Languages and Literatures

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ABSTRACT

Southwestern China's Sichuan province is an culturally diverse area in which people from several different ethnic groups share daily contact. In Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture, the Gyarong people, a sub-group of the Tibetan ethnic group, live on the cultural borders between Han Chinese, Hui (Chinese muslim), and Tibetan cultural areas.

Since the last decade of the twentieth century, one author, Alai, has burst onto the scene writing about Tibetan life in this ethnically diverse area. His novel *Red Poppies* has earned international acclaim for its depiction of Tibetan life in the years immediately preceding the establishment of the People's Republic of China, and many of his short stories have also gained recognition both in China and beyond. His writings tell of Tibetan experience during times of intense cultural change, and draw heavily upon his own experience of growing up in a Tibetan community, exposed to Tibetan culture and folklore.

This thesis examines the presence and use of character types derived directly from the Tibetan oral tradition in Alai's novels. Through examining trickster character types and other social pariahs both in collections of Tibetan folktales, and in two of Alai's novels (*Red Poppies* and *The Tale of Jicun*), two distinct categories of outcasts and tricksters are visible. The first category is composed of more traditional character types,

and include characters who are directly related to the protagonists in many folktales, such as the legendary trickster Aku Tonpa, as well as fools, poor people, and clever younger brothers. These character types help to relate the writings to a specifically Tibetan experience and understanding. The second category includes more innovative character types, such as clergy, and half-bloods. Although they do not directly relate to the greater Tibetan oral tradition, these characters are outcasts and tricksters nonetheless, and speak to the unique experience of Gyarong Tibetans.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I am deeply indebted to all of those who have encouraged me along this road less travelled. For my family, friends, and mentors who have taught me all about perseverance, hard work, and shown me unswerving love and support, I owe a debt of gratitude that I shall never be able to fully repay. Among them, I am especially grateful to Caroline Chao, my parents, my brother David, Kevin Walsh, Jeff Jordan, Avery and Jaclyn Zerkle, Tim Morton, Sam Johnson, Gary Garber, and others who although unnamed have influenced me in ways that they may never truly know. Academically, this thesis would not be possible without the extensive patience and aid of Mark Bender and Kirk Denton who have lent me their time and their knowledge to turn this thesis from random ideas into a scholarly work. Also, I am thankful to Fu Ping and Mark Hansell who were the first to guide me down this academic path in the fall of 2001. Additionally I would like to thank Aku Wuwu, Kevin Stuart, and Alai, all of whom were kind enough to meet with me and share their insights into Tibetan culture specifically, and ethnic nationality culture in China as a whole. Finally, I thank Debbie Knicely, without whom, it seems like nothing would ever get done.

VITA

Born February 20, 1983..... Washington DC

June 2005..... B.A Carleton College

September 2005-June 2006..... University Fellow
The Ohio State University

Septmeber 2006-September 2007..... Teaching Assistant
The Ohio State University

FIELD OF STUDY

Major Field: East Asian Languages and Literatures

Area of Emphasis: Chinese Literature

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Since the early 1980's, an increasing number of ethnic minority authors in China have begun to utilize folk traditions of their ethnic groups and their experiences of being ethnic in their written works (Li 2004: 60). Authors of many different ethnic minorities have engaged in this practice, with many Tibetans among them.¹ Through writing their own experiences and those of their elders, and utilizing aspects of folk traditions that are rapidly being lost, these Tibetan authors have become key mediators of the discourse of Tibetan ethnic identity in modern China (Schiaffini 2004: 84-5). Among them, Tashi Dawa and Alai write in Chinese. Others, like Guhrub and Gongboo Sayrung, whose works are personal narratives or re-writings of parents' stories, write in English. Still others, such as Dorje Tsering and Tondrub Gyal, write in their native language.

Within this social and historical context, Alai has risen to prominence in the People's Republic of China.² Alai was born in the town of Maerkang (*T: 'bar khams*) in the Aba (*T: rNga-ba*) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) of Sichuan province in 1959 (Alai 2000: 122), and was educated in Chinese language schools during his youth, before wandering for several years. When he settled down, he became a middle school teacher, and later began to write. His first collection of stories, *The Ancient Bloodstain* (*Ch: Jiu nian de xie ji* 旧年的血迹), was published in 1989. It was his 1998 work, *Red*

Poppies (Ch: *Chen'ai Luoding* 尘埃落定), however, that catapulted him into national and international celebrity. His works have been translated into several languages, including English and Tibetan, and he has since published several novels and collections of short stories.³ At present, Alai lives and writes in Chengdu, in Sichuan province, but frequently travels back to the city of Maerkang and other areas of Aba TAP, in part to seek inspiration for his writing.⁴

Alai has lived a life heavily influenced both by Tibetan culture and by the various cultural campaigns and policies of the PRC government. Like many of his protagonists, and many people who live in ethnically mixed areas in cultural border regions, Alai is from an ethnically mixed background, growing up in a Tibetan and Hui family.⁵ Alai self-identifies as Tibetan, suggesting that he is keenly aware of the issues of identification as they exist in present-day Chinese society. This background may also contribute to his interest in, and use of social pariahs and tricksters in his works, which will be a focal point of this thesis.

This chapter presents the background and context in which Alai's works have been written. It will provide an overview of Gyarong Tibetan (a group of Tibetans hailing from his home area of Aba TAP) history and culture, as well as other relevant divisions of Tibetan culture. In addition, it will discuss the folkloristic and ethnographic theory necessary for analyzing the elements of folklore in these novels.⁶

CHAPTER 1.A TIBETAN HISTORY, GEOGRAPHY AND CULTURE

The Chinese term “*Zangzu*,” used to indicate the Tibetan ethnic group, as well as the western term “Tibetan” are both umbrella terms for a group of people that covers a

vast geographical area well beyond the borders of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), into the Chinese provinces of Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan.

The Tibetan areas are host to fertile rolling grasslands, imposing deserts, and mountains. Some of the longest rivers in the world, including the Yellow River (Ch: *Huang He*), the Yangzi River (Ch: *Chang Jiang*) and the Mekong River (Ch: *Lancang Jiang*) find their sources on the Tibetan plateau, which is home to a wide range of animal and plant life. There are three basic groupings among the people considered to be ethnically Tibetan, hailing from three general areas: U-Tsang, Kham, and Amdo, each with its own unique culture (Danzhu Angben 2000: 15). U-Tsang generally denotes the areas of central and western Tibet including the cities of Lhasa and Shigatse. Amdo refers to the northern areas of TAR, Northern Sichuan, Gansu, and Southern Qinghai provinces. Kham covers the Eastern part of TAR, as well as Northwestern Yunnan, and Southwestern Sichuan provinces.

The three major Tibetan groups are distinguished from each other by linguistic and cultural markers. Each group has advanced along different historical and economic trajectories and is generally characterized by distinct dialects, clothing, food ways and other aspects of culture. Those areas that lie along the cultural borders between the Han and Tibetan ethnic areas, and further away from the religious center of Lhasa, have traditionally placed less emphasis on religious rule and followed secular rulers. In these areas, extensive cultural interaction with Chinese groups has continued down to the present day (Yang 2006: 147).

While this is the most basic way of looking at the traditional Tibetan cultures, it neither tells the whole story, nor adequately portrays the situation as it exists in China's

southwestern cultural border regions. There are many other groups currently classified as Tibetan who do not identify as Amdo, Kham, or U-Tsang. For instance, several groups of ethnically and linguistically distinct peoples, such as the Gyarong people of Northern Sichuan, and the Namji people of the Liangshan Yi Autonomous Prefecture in Yunnan province, have been classified as Tibetan through the PRC's ethnic classification project.⁷

In the case of the Aba Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, a majority of the people inhabiting many areas of Aba are Gyarong, which may be alternately spelled as rGyarong, Gyalrong, Chyarong, Jiarong, and rGyalrong (Sichuan sheng 1994: 384-8). Through the Chinese ethnic identification process, they were classified as Tibetan, however they are linguistically distinct from Kham, Amdo, and U-Tsang Tibetans. The former daughter of the Wasi chieftain once noted that (my translation):

“The language of the Tibetans in the land of the Wasi chieftain, Gyarong language, belongs to the eastern Tibetan dialects, also called, *Situ*. This dialect is very different from the U-Tsang, Amdo, and Khams dialects, and except for the lamas who can intone Tibetan language sutras, not many understood Tibetanfurthermore there was a tradition of marrying Han people. The Wasi land also used Chinese: stone tablets and publications all used Chinese to write. Many Tibetans could speak the Sichuan dialect.” (Yang 2006:147)

This serves to further illustrate the vast cultural and linguistic differences between those Tibetan living in Gyarong and in other areas.

1.A.i GYARONG GEOGRAPHY AND HISTORY

The Gyarong people traditionally inhabit areas of what is now the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture and number around 200,000 people (Lin 1993: 1). Their spoken language, on a taxonomic level, may be an off-shoot of early written Tibetan (Nagano 1983: 1). Some scholars, however, contend that it is heavily influenced

by Qiangic language, and since the establishment of the PRC, by dialects of Mandarin Chinese as well (Nagano 1983: 10-11). As such, the Gyarong dialect is generally not mutually intelligible with other Tibetan dialects. Additionally, Tibetan-style Buddhism, especially the well-known Geluk sect,⁸ came to these areas relatively late, and did not take hold for some time. As a result, the animistic Bon religion, which predates the arrival of Buddhism in many Tibetan areas remains important in this area (Sichuan sheng 1994: 385).⁹

Gyarong origins are generally attributed to origin myths, and to the genealogies kept by the local chieftains, many of whom have traced their ancestry back to parts of Tibet. (Sichuan sheng 1994: 384-5). According to a myth related, the Gyarong were the offspring of a giant roc that left a number of eggs when it left the earth. Out of these eggs came the people who would establish the lines of the 18 chieftains (Yang 2006: 142-3). Alai also writes of this myth in *Red Poppies* (Alai 2002: 102).¹⁰ This element seems directly related to other Bon creation tales of western Tibet (see Mukherji 1999: 39-41), though Alai suggests that many of the chieftains were from the northwestern part of an area he calls “Qiong” (Alai 2000: 110), which Yang identifies as being near present-day Naqu in Central Tibet (Yang 2006: 142). When they came to present-day Aba TAP, the area that would later become their home, it was already inhabited by a “primitive and wild” people (Alai 2001: 75-6). In a dream, a deity advised them to use a certain kind of stone to battle these wild people, while at the same time advising the primitive inhabitants of the area to fight them with snowballs. They were, of course, successful (Alai 2002: 101). Later, however, the Tibetan origins of the Gyarong people were contested by the authors of the *Dzam-gling rgyas bshad*, who stated that “the inhabitants

under the 18 royalties of rGyal-mo-rong are not Tibetan” (Nagano 1983: 11). Still other authors state that these people originally hailed from Ali prefecture (*T: mnga'-ris*) in Northeastern Tibet. (Gang 2005)

As evidenced by the relation of the creation myth reported above to Bon influences, the animistic Bon religion has been extremely influential in the Gyarong Tibetan areas, and Aba remains a stronghold of Bon religion to this day. According to Alai, the Bon religion had its center in Xiao Jinchuan (小金川), which was also the traditional center of the local areas under control of the *tusi* (土司) style of government.¹¹ This type of rule, once common in southwestern China, featured a local chieftain who was empowered by the Chinese emperor in exchange for fealty to the Chinese throne (Herman 2006: 137). From the Yuan dynasty to the end of the Republican period, Mongolian, Han, and Manchu rulers considered it easier to allow the feudal rulers of Gyarong areas to rule rather than to subdue them. In total, there were traditionally 18 *tusi* who ruled this mountainous area at any given time, although the number varied at different times (Yang 2006: 142).

The fact that local religion and government were both centered in the area is not a coincidence, as the original Gyarong *tusi* rulers were also considered to have been powerful Bon magicians (Alai 2000: 130-1). The Bon religion arrived in Aba by migrating with some clans of those who would later become Gyarong peoples (Nagano 1983: 12-13; Sichuan sheng 1994: 385).

Culturally speaking, the geographic distance between Lhasa and Gyarong was one important factor that left a rift between the two areas that created differences in language, governance, and religious practices. Furthermore the people of this area were and remain

a primarily agricultural society living in the mountainous areas of present-day Aba TAP. The Gyarong people have traditionally raised wheat, barley, and corn (Sichuan sheng Aba zangzu qiangzu zizhi zhou difang zhi bianzuan weiyuan hui 1994: 911). Alai also mentions that apples are an important crop around his hometown of Ma'erkang (Alai 2000: 19). The Gyarong economy, however, is not limited to farming; the geography in the northern areas is also well suited to herding, and many Gyarong Tibetans herd yaks and goats in addition to their farming.

When the PRC was established in 1949, things changed very rapidly for the Gyarong Tibetans, and Tibetan people as a whole. At that time, the *tusi* system of government was formally abolished (although many local rulers were given positions in the local government), temples were closed, and the government began to plunder the area's abundant natural resources, including a massive de-forestation project that has left many mountainsides barren even today. In fact, by 1998 Sichuan had lost a large percentage of its forest reserves as a result of excessive logging (Kolås and Thowsen 2006: 161), beginning in the late 1950's in the era of The Great Leap Forward. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), almost everything "ethnic" was placed under the category of the "four olds--old ideas, old culture, old customs, old habits" (Fairbanks 1998: 393). and many Tibetans (both clergy and lay) were persecuted for their adherence to any or all of these four olds. Ethnic language use was also repressed. In the 1980's however, with economic reforms, came a general relaxation of previous policies toward cultural knowledge. During this period, the Chinese government began to sponsor research on ancient books, folk literature, art, Tibetan medicine, and astronomy.

Moreover, many temples were re-opened, both Bon and Buddhist (Kolås and Thowsen 134).

Since the 1980's, eco-ethnic tourism has transformed Aba TAP. The fortresses and towers that previously housed the *tusi* are now popular sites for many Chinese tourists, as well as Jiuzhaigou (九寨沟), Huanglong (黄龙), and other nature reserves. Hotels, tourist shops, restaurants and other businesses (such as horse-trekking in Songpan) have cropped up to support this burgeoning industry.¹² In addition to the fortresses, old monasteries in Aba also generate some income from tourists.¹³ Still other locations are famous because of their significance to PRC history, as the Chinese Communist Party made its way through this area during the Long March in June of 1935 (Alai 2001: 107-8).

It is within this cultural sphere that Alai and other Tibetan authors hailing from the border areas were nurtured. As will be seen below, Alai's writings often deal with Tibetans living either in the period immediately before the establishment of the PRC, or with people living during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution. Living and experiencing life in Aba during this period of drastic change, and the questions of identity, culture and ethnicity that arise from this situation are unmistakable characteristics of Alai's writings.

The story of Tibetans in these border areas is not just that of Amdo, Khampa, Gyarong and other “minority” ethnicities. It is also the story of their interactions with the Han Chinese. In these areas, Tibetan ethnicity and culture is constructed largely in relation to its difference from neighboring ethnic groups. The notion of a distinct Gyarong Tibetan ethnic identity is jointly constructed through extensive cultural interaction with Han, Hui, and Qiang inhabitants of Aba, as well as other Tibetans.

Harrell points out that “a civilizing project seems to... engender, develop, sharpen, or heighten the consciousness of the peripheral people as an ethnic group” (Harrell 1995: 7). Since the establishment of the PRC, this has become an unavoidable consideration for those attempting to understand China's cultural politics and minority peoples.

Alai was heavily influenced by the parts of Gyarong culture he observed and heard growing up and then again during his wanderings around Aba and southwestern China. Many of his writings reflect traditional Gyarong culture, and also how traditional culture, storytelling, and values functioned in the context of PRC society during the Cultural Revolution and other political movements.

1.B THEORETICAL BASIS

With this brief historical and cultural background in place, it becomes necessary to discuss how to approach a literature that is heavily grounded in folklore and oral traditions. I begin by examining the relevant approaches to folklore in literature, and how I adapt them to my methodology. This study of folklore theory will be two-pronged. It begins with a discussion of text-centered ideas on folklore in literature proposed by folklorists like Richard Dorson and Alan Dundes. Then I examine the performance approach to folklore. This body of theory, advocated by scholars such as Dell Hymes, Richard Bauman, and Barre Toelken, is very useful to approaching depictions of oral performance, folk and culture in written literature. Finally, I will end with an introduction of the present western approaches to minority literature and culture in China, examining the works of several post-colonialist ethnographers, most notably Stevan

Harrell, whose idea of the civilizing project will inform much of the analysis that is to come.

1.B.i FOLKLORE IN LITERATURE

Recognizing, understanding, and interpreting the use of folklore in literature is a complex pursuit, requiring the researcher to draw on multiple theoretical ideas and concepts. One of the most important of these concepts is that of the “folk idea” proposed by Alan Dundes (Dundes 1971: 95). This term is defined by Dundes as “traditional notions that a group of people have about the nature of man, of the world, and of man's life in the world” (Dundes 1971: 95). As I investigate the influence of the Tibetan oral tradition on Alai's novels, this concept of the folk idea becomes important because it relates to the folkloric influences in these novels and the way they serve to both navigate issues of ethnic identity in China, and reflect on the ways Tibetans traditionally understand certain kinds of people through these folktales and their characters.

Building on this concept of the folk idea, other folklorists have discussed ways of recognizing, defining, and discovering these approaches. Richard Dorson argues for three main criteria in judging and approaching instances of folk ideas in literature: biographical evidence, internal evidence, and corroborative evidence (Hoffman et al. 1957: 5-7). Dorson asks the researcher to look toward the author's personal experience, examples of folklore in the works themselves, and statements concerning the influence of folklore upon a given work for ensuring that the work in question has actually been taken from folklore or is indeed indebted to the folk tradition.

Accurate identification and definition of these folkloric influences is, however, insufficient. Dundes argued in a 1965 article on folklore in literature for folklorists to go beyond the mere description and identification of folkloristic elements in literature, and into analysis (Dundes 1965: 136). The proper study of folklore in literature requires interpretation of the way in which these elements are indicative of and enhance our knowledge of the culture in question.

More recently, other folklorists have presented different approaches and methods for understanding folklore in literature. Toelken, for example, has proposed a separate dual approach through which one can analyze the influence of folklore in the writings of a given author. To begin, he distinguishes between “modes” and “metaphors.” He says that “a traditional mode would be a conventionalized ordering of literary design according not to the demands of verisimilitude but to the expectations of tradition” (338), meaning that the text contains certain themes taken directly from the oral tradition. The smaller more localized units are metaphors. He notes that “the traditional metaphor is the suggestive, highly charged vocabulary in which the traditional mode reaches expression” (339). In the analysis that is to come, these ideas, especially those of the traditional mode, will be very important. Through extracting some of these traditional modes, these structural similarities, it will also be possible to identify the ways in which Alai's writing has been influenced by the oral tradition.

Taking these words to heart, this thesis focuses first on identification, and then on interpretation. As discussed above, identification will center around the various folk ideas, motifs, and themes found in Alai's writings, and on the tripartite criteria of biographical, textual, and corroborative evidence suggested by Richard Dorson.

1.B.ii PERFORMANCE APPROACH TO FOLKLORE

To move beyond identification of folklore and into interpretation, one must take into account the performance approach to folklore. The performance approach begins with the concept of the ethnography of communication, advocated by Dell Hymes (Hymes 1972). Additionally it draws upon several other important concepts, particularly those of speech community and the inseparability of text and context.

Until the latter half of the twentieth century, many scholars viewed the speech community as a group of people who all spoke the same language or used the same speech patterns (Morgan 2004: 6). The homogeneity of the speech community, however, is insufficient for describing the complexities of many communities, include minority communities in China. Moreover, it seems that there are further sub-divisions of speech communities. Gumperz defines the speech community as “any human aggregate characterized by regular and frequent interaction by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language usages” (Gumperz 1972: 219). Hymes, Bauman, and others build upon this definition and work toward a re-formulation of this concept by viewing the speech community as extending well beyond linguistic boundaries into cultural attitudes, values, morals, and the like (Morgan 2004: 8). Specifically, Hymes mentions that the speech community is the “fundamental concept for the relation between language, speech, and social structure” (Hymes 1964: 385), a notion that feeds directly into his ideas of communicative competence. Beyond this, Labov has theorized that the speech community can also exist upon class lines (Morgan 2004: 9).

In light of these understandings of speech community, it became clear that the text and context were two interrelated concepts. This general trend began with Dell Hymes' studies on the ethnography of communication, Richard Bauman's landmark work *Verbal Art as Performance*, and others (Bauman 1977; Hymes 1975; Hymes 1972). It became apparent to Hymes that language was not merely the sum of its parts, but had metaphorical meanings that would remain completely foreign to the outside listener, who lacks the necessary cultural and communicative competence to perform in a given context.

Since the development of this theory, many folklorists have come to understand that “performance-based study challenges dominant Western conceptions by prompting researchers to stress the cultural organization of communicative processes” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 61). Like many elements of discourse within a given speech community, oral literature relies upon the cultural context of performance and also an attached context for its meaning. Foley describes this attached context as relating to the performer by serving as “an implied background of values, heritage, and myth that he could access merely by dialing to the proper communicative channel” (Foley 2002: 64).

The idea of attached context leads to Foley's notion of “traditional referentiality,” which can be defined as the “implied, unspoken tradition, the proverbial context of the speech act” (Foley 1998: 26-7). This is to say that the storyteller draws upon a long established tradition that provides the culturally competent reader or listener with extra layers of meaning. Folklore in certain sorts of literature can be viewed in a similar way, especially in works such as Alai's that consciously draw on tradition.

Some theorists have also explored the processes by which authors incorporate folklore into their written works. De Caro and Jordan suggest that the process begins by

first de-situating folklore, removing it from its original performance context through somehow recording the performance itself and thereby removing it from this original context. The piece of folklore is then resituated, a “process by which folklore is somehow taken from its position in a socio-cultural context (de-situation) and placed into a literary or artistic context, whether by description, textual quotation, or some other means” (DeCaro and Jordan 2004: 6). According to De Caro and Jordan, there are two basic forms in which the place of folklore in literature is manifested. The first is structural, in which an author will mimic what was originally a folk genre. The second is thematic or plot-related. In this regard, “insofar as folklore is a part of culture and society, and writers provide a re-creation of culture and society, so folklore will appear in literature simply as part of the life reflected there” (De Caro and Jordan 2004: 9). When combined with ethnographic approaches towards ethnic minorities in China, these theories of folklore and folklore in literature will aid in the discussion of folklore in Alai's novels, by providing a useful way of understanding the presence and role of folklore in these works.

1.B.iii ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACHES TO ETHNICITY IN CHINA

Much of the study on China's ethnic minorities is seen through some form of the lens of the self-other binary, viewing the PRC government as self and the ethnic minority as other. This binary became influential among post-colonialist theorists after the writing of Edward Said's *Orientalism*.¹⁴ Said views this dialectic as a way of understanding Western approaches to the East. Recently, some scholars have begun to see a form of internal Orientalism occurring in the way the PRC viewed its own minorities (Schein 2000:

100-31; Blum 2002: 1287). In terms of the discourse on ethnicity in China, this dialectic places the minority-other in opposition to the Han Chinese-self, which, in reality, is only part of the equation.

Stevan Harrell extends this self-other dialectic, conceptualizing the relations between the Han majority-self and minority other (be they Tibetan, Yi, or any minority ethnic group) in terms of what he calls “civilizing projects.” A civilizing project is “a kind of interaction between peoples, in which one group, the civilizing center, interacts with other groups (the peripheral peoples) in terms of a particular kind of inequality” (Harrell 1995: 4). Within this schema, the majority group sees the minority as uncivilized, backward, and barbaric; it is the duty of the majority group to civilize the minority other.¹⁵ Since the 1950s, when the PRC established and solidified its control in Tibetan areas of China, the Chinese communists, acting as the majority-self have seen their civilizing project in terms of modernizing the minority-others and developing their culture.

In practice, this approach has often taken the form of a re-definition of local ethnic culture (Kolås and Thowsen 2006: 3-4). In the communist civilizing project, one important way in which this re-definition has been accomplished is through linguistic and religious control. In dealing with Tibet and Tibetan culture as a whole, these two are intimately interrelated. Prior to the establishment of the PRC, there were over 26,000 monks in the Aba TAP alone, and even more in other areas (Kolås and Thowsen 2006: 191-6). Furthermore, monasteries were the traditional locus of education for Tibetans from Lhasa to Xining in Qinghai province. When the PRC began to establish its dominance in western Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai, it did so in part by closing

monasteries, forcing monks to leave the priesthood, and regulating education. After the end of the Cultural Revolution, monasteries began to re-open, and many lamas, tulkus (incarnate lamas), and monks returned to the monastic life. Many others, however, suffered and died during the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, or were forced to marry and give up any chances of returning to their previous way of living (Kolås and Thowsen 2006: 47). Finally, the CCP took control of the selection process for major Tibetan religious leaders.

The situation of Tibetan Buddhist monks is just one instance of how the construction of a Chinese nation-state and its civilizing project has, at times, been accompanied by violence. Mueggler, basing his observations on groups of Yi in Yunnan province, notes that people “manipulate memory, language and ritual to deal with memories of past violence...[and so] a narrative of the relations between daily life and the distant image of the state has emerged” (Mueggler 2001: 287).

Interestingly, ethnic consciousness and knowledge of difference develops as a response to a civilizing project, and a “peripheral” group will be unaware of their own ethnicity without the pressure being exerted by the civilizing center (Harrell 1995: 27-34). For many Tibetans living throughout China, the civilizing project can also give rise to a more unified, pan-Tibetan identity. Each area still carries its own regional traits; however, a sense of unique ethnic identification springs up almost in opposition to the PRC's civilizing project. Harrell points out that “it is likely...that assigning a *minzu* [ethnic nationality] identity to these groups promoted their historical and perhaps their genealogical consciousness, and thus prolonged the existence of in-group solidarity (Harrell 2001: 315). In the same vein, Sara Davis points out that the Dai people in

Southwestern Yunnan are composed of groups who speak dialects not mutually intelligible, and traditionally had very little interaction in the past, yet they have nevertheless been grouped together in a single ethnic minority group, the Dai. She goes on to note that two processes helped in the construction of ethnic identity: “the creation of national Chinese culture and the categorization of ethnic groups as part of the new nation-state” (11).

Language and language use are both intimately related to folkloric and sociolinguistic notions of culture in addition to notions of agency and empowerment. Traditionally, to be conversant in a given culture or speech community, one must be able to use the culturally appropriate conversational and linguistic norms of that group. Furthermore, the speech community is not necessarily defined by political or even geographical boundaries, but by cultural and linguistic limitations. The PRC has changed the understanding of the speech community in China by creating a situation in which many Tibetans (including many authors) are unable to write about their culture in their own language, but rather, can do so only in Chinese, the language of the government, and of the dominant social group (Schiaffini 2004: 81).

The theories for folklore in literature discussed earlier and the concept of Harrell's civilizing project will be utilized in my analysis of the folkloric influences in Alai's novels. Specifically, the folkloric theories apply to the identification of elements of oral tradition that have been re-situated in these literary works, and help to provide an understanding of the traditional cultural elements present in Alai's novels. They also deepen the analysis of Alai's extensive use of traditional Tibetan character types and myths, particularly the appearance of tricksters.

The ethnographic and performance theories discussed here, especially Harrell's concept of the "civilizing project," help extend the study beyond identification of folk ideas and folkloric elements in Alai's writings and provide a framework for understanding the cultural discourse in which these novels were created and to which they contribute. They will also help to understand the way Alai writes about a unique subgroup of the Tibetan people in the language of those instituting the civilizing project that, in many ways, is the source of the dynamics of assimilation that put pressure on Tibetans and other ethnic minority groups into the larger Han ethnicity (Dayton 2006: 26-30). Use of folklore elements is as an essential part of understanding how Alai navigates this linguistic and cultural problem as he writes about Gyarong Tibetan culture.

1.C THESIS

Social pariahs and trickster characters feature prominently in traditional literature throughout China, including early philosophical works (Myhre 2001: 138), and vernacular novels including *The Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, *Outlaws of the Marsh*, and *Journey to the West* (Blum 2007: 96-100; Macauley 1998: 279-80). Despite this, Alai's ethnic status requires one to also look towards other sources to study character types in his novels. This thesis looks primarily at how these character types are derived from and related to the Tibetan oral tradition. As this relation to the Tibetan oral tradition is established, it becomes evident that these character types play an important role in Alai's understanding of Gyarong Tibetan identity and culture. In order to do this most effectively, it is important to look at the major facets of his writing that serve, in some ways, both as cultural markers and as context creating devices, and then to analyze how

they index Gyarong experience, culture, and identity, and differentiate from a pan-Tibetan and Han Chinese experience.

Alai's writings create a context for the selective use of orally based histories and stories of the people of Aba TAP. He provides an inroad into the culture of the Gyarong people and the areas in which they live. Each of Alai's novels is full of instances of material culture, rumors and gossip turning into folk tales, and stories that become part of an area's local lore. Alai places these tales back into their proper context of the Gyarong people.

In the process of telling the story of a place and time, Alai relies heavily upon local folklore. He often tells of how a story becomes a part of the local lore, and sometimes, even includes the story in his own words. He is, then, part of the folklore process both as ethnographer/collector and as storyteller, in that his own re-telling (and translating into written Chinese) creates a different context for the tale itself. At the same time, through attempting to keep the stories in a specific cultural context—that of the people living on the cultural border regions between Han and Tibetan areas—he is situating them within a Gyarong Tibetan experience.

In order to narrow the scope of this thesis, I focus my analysis on the novels *Red Poppies* and *The Tale of Jicun* (Ch: *Kong Shan*). There is a relative dearth of English language scholarly literature on these works, limited primarily to reviews of the works themselves (Gang 2005; Whipple 2003; Sonam 2002). These reviews focus on the brutality evident in the novels, and the way in which they differ from the romanticized Shangri-la narratives so often found in Western representations of Tibet.

I use several of Alai's other works to support my analysis, by providing further examples of outcast and trickster characters. I focus on those novels and short stories that are considered some of Alai's best-known works, and that use the outcast characters to describe the Gyarong Tibetan experience and folk culture.

The following chapters first examine four collections of Tibetan folktales that suggest the inherent complexity of the greater Tibetan oral tradition and provide examples of the character types prevalent in this tradition. I then emphasize the character types that commonly occur in the folktale collections. In the third and fourth chapters, I provide a brief synopsis and review of previous analysis of the novels in question, and I analyze Alai's works themselves. The third chapter is dedicated to discussing "traditional character types," while the fourth examines those character types that are considered to be innovative.¹³ The fifth and final chapter summarizes my findings regarding Alai's extensive use of these character types and how they operate in areas of Han-Tibetan cultural interaction.

NOTES: CHAPTER 1

1. For example: The artist and intellectual Liyuan Xiaodi, who self-identifies as a Bai, Aku Wuwu and Jimu Langge of the Yi ethnic group, poet He Xiaozhu of the Miao ethnic group (See Li 2004; Bender 2005; Dayton 2006).
2. Henceforth, PRC stands for the People's Republic of China.
3. A television and VCD miniseries of *Red Poppies* has also been filmed, and was very popular in many parts of China. Many Tibetans, however, dislike it, due (at the very least) to its casting of non-Tibetan actors and actresses to play many of the important roles.
4. I obtained this information in a meeting with Alai at a teahouse in Chengdu on August 12, 2007.
5. The Hui ethnic group is the largest of the Muslim ethnic groups in China (Gladney 2004: 120). Many Tibetan areas, including, Aba TAP, have large Hui populations, and intermarriage between the two ethnicities sometimes occurs.
6. This paper takes into account terminologies from several different languages. Since Alai writes solely in Chinese, Tibetan terms in this thesis that are not in common usage are written in *pinyin* Romanization. Those terms that are in common usage as well as proper nouns are given as they are commonly written. The appendix includes a table of Tibetan names and terms, their Chinese, *pinyin* forms, the Wylie Romanization used for them, and an English gloss where necessary.
7. "Immediately after the found of the People's Republic, many minority groups, long oppressed by Han chauvinism under the Kuomintang regime, openly stated their identities and proposed names for themselves. By 1955 over 400 names had been registered with the government authorities...beginning in 1953, extensive field work was carried out to ascertain the claims..." (Fei 1981: 60-1). Although the process of identifying China's ethnic nationalities is not yet complete, the PRC officially recognizes 56 ethnic groups. The basic criteria for identification of an ethnic group are a common language, territory, economy and culture (Gladney 1991: 66-7).
8. The Geluk (T: *dge lugs*) tradition began with the scholar Tsongkhapa and his two most famous students, the first Dalai and Panchen lamas. Known as the "yellow hat" sect due to their distinctive headwear (Tucci 2000: 37), the Geluk sect has several monasteries throughout cultural Tibet including Tashi-lhunpo and Labrang. "In the period

immediately following fifth Dalai Lama a sovereignty which could be described as theocratic became more and more consolidated (Tucci 2000: 42).

9. Bon is the name of the early, animistic religion native to Tibet and predates the arrival of Buddhism (Jaschke 2003: 372). The original meaning of the word *Bon* has been lost (Jiangbian 1999: 77), and it seems to just refer to the religious practices. Founded by Tonpa Shenrab, Bon is an animistic religion that was later heavily influenced by Buddhism and its doctrine contains many similarities to Tibetan Buddhism (Baumer 2002: 86).

10. Any quotations from Alai's works that are not attributed to *Red Poppies* (Howard Goldblatt's translation of *Chen'ai Luoding*) are my own translations.

11. This style of government was implemented during the Yuan dynasty, for controlling areas that were not as easily accessible or subdued. According to the Aba Prefecture Gazetteer, however, it was not used for Gyarong areas until the Ming Dynasty (A.D 1368-1644). The *tusi* system of government was also used to govern other peoples in Southwest China, including those currently recognized as being of the Dai, Yi, and Miao.

12. I have made two separate month-long journeys through Aba. These trips have highlighted for me the increasing importance of the both ecological and ethnic tourism to the people of this area. In Songpan, horse treks catering primarily to Westerners take people to scenic lakes and mountains. Hundreds of tour buses bound for Jiuzhaigou pass through the town on a daily basis, and shops line its bustling streets. Some buses stop at a fortress for having been a stopping point for Tang dynasty Princess Wencheng on her way to Tibet and allow travelers to purchase a range of goods from ice cream to Tibetan *chuba*-style jackets.

13. Despite the many tourist options open to those travelling in Aba TAP, most tourists stick to the Chengdu-Jiuzhaigou route, seeking out some of China's most beautiful natural reserves in Jiuzhaigou, and stopping at famous locations in between.

14. Louisa Schein, in studying the Miao ethnic group in southeastern Guizhou province, terms the minority-other as the "subaltern," following Said (Said 1978). She notes that "[China's] status of subordinate vis-a-vis the rest of the world was assiduously displaced onto peasants, minorities, and women, consolidating a masculinized urban elite that could disavow its painful subalternity on the global scale by redirecting the focus onto internal difference" (Schein 2000: 233).

15. This is not altogether dissimilar to the concept of "manifest destiny" employed by the United States Government to justify its historical policies towards Native Americans (Brown 1971: 8).

16. The term "innovative character type" refers to those character types less commonly found in the Tibetan oral tradition. Thus, the term "innovative" is used simply as a way

of distinguishing them from those that appear frequently in the existing collections of folk story texts.

CHAPTER 2

FOLKLORE AND CHARACTER TYPES

Oral literature and traditional material culture heavily influence the way in which Alai describes Tibetan culture in the sphere of intense Han, Tibetan, and Hui cultural interaction. In order to identify these folkloric elements, this chapter begins with a brief introduction to some of the major themes of Tibetan folklore and an overview of several relevant collections of Tibetan folklore. Following this foundation, I examine and analyze of the social pariahs and sub-types of pariahs in the collections which will allow insight into comparable features in Alai's works

Due to the limits of available material, this study relies primarily on three collections of Tibetan folktales (Song Xingfu: 2004; Benson 2006; Tshe-Dbang, et al: 2006), each by other ethnographers collected under varying circumstances. Most of the tales are not from Gyarong areas, but the tales will prove useful in this chapter, as well as in chapters three and four in the way that they help to draw out certain character types. Additionally, it will be beneficial to examine two major characters of the Tibetan oral tradition—the legendary epic hero King Gesar, and the trickster Aku Tonpa—because of their importance to the Tibetan oral tradition as a whole, and because they will aid in further defining these trickster character types. The chapters that follow connect Alai's

novels to the greater Tibetan oral tradition and lay the foundation for discussing the use of the tradition upon his works.

2.A COLLECTIONS USED

Writing entered Tibetan society as early as 650 A.D. (Denwood 1999: 14-5); however, by 1949, the literacy rate was still extremely low (Schiafinni 2004: 84). Writing was a privilege that belonged primarily to those engaging in the religious and governmental realms of society. Writing entered the monasteries so early after its introduction to Tibetan society that it became largely equated with religious texts. At that time, Tibetan monks were focused on translating Buddhist texts from Sanskrit into Tibetan, as well as creating their own original documents, and much secular literature remained part of the oral tradition. Since the establishment of the PRC, the government has engaged in several extensive folklore projects that involved collecting, translating, and publishing hundreds of thousands of folktales from many of China's fifty-five ethnic minority groups.¹ Many collections of these folktales, previously un-published in written form at all, have been translated and published in Chinese and in English (Benson 2007; Tshe-Dbang et al 2006; Song 2004; Sichuan sheng min jian wen yi yan jiu hui, Sichuan min zu chu ban she 1980; Rinjing Dorje 1997).

Three such collections will be used to form a general background about character types in Tibetan folktales: the three volume *Tibetan Folk Stories* (Ch: *Zangzu minjian gushi*), Sandra Benson's *Tales of the Golden Corpse*, and Kevin Stuart's *English-Tibetan Folktales*.² In addition to these three, I use collections of tales about certain folk

characters, such as Rinjing Dorje's *Tales of Uncle Tompa*. The ensuing discussion of these collections forms the basis for this chapter.

A quick look at the three volume *Tibetan Folk Stories* reveals several key aspects of Tibetan folktales. The stories are drawn almost exclusively from Kham areas of Tibet. Many are taken from Tibetan areas of Sichuan province that border the Gyarong Tibetan cultural areas from which Alai hails. These tales help provide a unique glimpse of some of the folklore that is popular in these cultural border areas, especially those in Sichuan. Many of the tales provided in this collection feature animals as protagonists.

Beyond this, these stories are mostly legends, with their plots revolving around characters who are either idiots (Ch: *shazi*) or poor people. Four stories have the Chinese word *shazi* in their titles. Additionally, many deal primarily with poor outcasts, who typically live on the fringe of society,³ are the beneficiaries of fortuitous events, and often benefit from their lack of guile.

Sandra Benson's *Tales of the Golden Corpse*, taken primarily from the Amdo area of Tongren (T: *Reb gong*), in Qinghai province (Benson 2007: ix), shows the importance of social pariahs, as well as many other character types popular in the Tibetan oral tradition. The collection is framed within a tale of a boy who is tasked with bringing his master a golden corpse that can end the suffering of the world. He is not allowed to say a word to the corpse, but the corpse continually gets him to speak by telling him stories, thus prolonging the cycle, and allowing another tale to be told.⁴ In the tales that are framed by this tale, many topics are covered, introducing the listener to many morals and proper ways of being.

The third collection is Kevin Stuart's *Tibetan-English Folktales*, a text of Tibetan folktales collected and translated into English by some of his students at Qinghai Normal University in Xining. While most of the stories feature animal characters, the work also includes many tales with human protagonists. Among these, the trickster Aku Tonpa is very common, while poor and idiot characters often make up the remaining characters. In some cases itinerant monks and pilgrims feature as protagonists as well.

2.B. TRICKSTERS

The trickster is a popular character type among “marginal” peoples throughout the world (Babcock-Abrahams 1975: 147-8). The most famous Tibetan tricksters include Aku Tonpa and King Gesar, who at times resorts to misdirection to defeat his demonic foes. African American folklore is famous for trickster characters including the signifying monkey and StagoLee (Gates 1988; Fine 1994: 11). Coyote tales of the Navajo and other Native American groups have been studied extensively by Barre Toelken, Dennis Tedlock, and others (See Toelken 1981; Toelken and Scott 1987; Tedlock 1999; Luckert 1984; Ballinger 2004). In China, the Mongols also have their own version of the Gesar epic (Gesser Khan) and make extensive use of foxes as tricksters (Stuart 1993). Many of these Mongolian trickster tales bear striking similarities to those detailed in this section. Folktales of the Daur ethnic group are marked by many similarities with the Gesar epic with stories of talking and flying horses and demons, such as the story of the trickster Mengongnendo (Bender and Su 1985).

In studying the trickster figure, some have noted that “tricksters and trickster energy articulate a whole other, independent, cultural reality and positive way of negotiating

multiple cultural systems” (Ammons and White-Parks 1994: xi). Though often exhibiting these positive traits, tricksters also tend to have a dark side. Trickster characters are almost always marginal characters, peripheral to the society in which their stories are told (Babcock-Abraham 1975: 147-8; Ballinger 2004: 23-6), and their actions often represent the violation of serious cultural norms. The Native American coyote tales, for instance, portray the coyote in a negative light, as his trickery sometimes causes his own demise. Additionally, a tale entitled “The Guileless Man and the Trickster” of the Primi ethnic group that has strong affiliations with Tibetan culture (Guo Xu, Lucien Miller and Xu Kun 1994: 228-231) is also a good example. In this tale, the trickster and the guileless man go hunting. In an attempt to take all of the musk deer they catch for himself, the trickster tries to kill the guileless man. Through acting on his own behalf, the trickster accidentally helps the guileless man on the path to wealth and success. It is “in the disorder of such violations that... order is validated” (Ballinger 2004: 23), and it is in the breaking of a rule that the rule itself is defined. Thus, these trickster figures can be regarded as ambivalent. The trickster's actions are both altruistic and self-serving, and they defy and define the social order.

That tricksters play an important role in Tibetan folklore is evidenced both in the numerous Tibetan trickster tales, and also the many different trickster characters popular in Tibetan areas (Kun Mchog, Dpal Ldan and Stuart 1999). The most popular of tales, however, are certain exploits of the mythical hero-king Gesar and those of the wily Aku Tonpa (Ch: Agu Dunba). Despite their popularity, Tibetan trickster tales and their characters have remained largely unstudied by scholars both in China and in other

countries (Kun Mchog, Dpal Ldan and Stuart 1999: 6). The following section introduces two major trickster characters in Tibetan oral literature.

2.B.i AKU TONPA

The name Aku Tonpa literally means Uncle Tonpa. He is important to Tibetan oral tradition on several levels, and is well-known throughout the Tibetan world. Many of the stories recounting his exploits are not limited to a single location. As Kevin Stuart points out, “[Aku Tonpa] stories are widespread throughout regions where Tibetans live, including Sikkim and Bhutan” (Kun-Mchog, Dpal-Ldan, and Stuart, 1999: 6).

Aku Tonpa works his tricks within a specifically Tibetan-style framework, and is important to Alai's understanding of Tibetans in general, as well as the Gyarong Tibetans more specifically. Through discussing a collection of tales published in Sichuan entitled *Stories of Aa ku Bstan pa*, whose stories were all collected from Aba, Stuart shows that Aku Tonpa is also an important and vital part of folklore among the (presumably Gyarong) people living in Alai's home area of Aba TAP (Kun Mchog, Dpal Ldan, and Stuart 1999: 7).

There are many stories surrounding Aku Tonpa and his exploits. Although this study will limit itself to those exploits in translated collections, it is vital to remember that these stories are primarily oral tales. As is expected in the oral medium, episodes vary from collection to collection, though some versions are thematically similar across collections. Certain episodes that are shared across almost all collections belong to what the late Finnish folklorist Lauri Honko terms, the pool of tradition. “Whatever is shared

by more than one singer belongs to the pool of tradition” (Honko 2000: 18). This may include rules, storylines, images, or any other elements shared across performers.

In addition to those episodes belonging to this greater pool of Tibetan tradition, there are local pools of tradition as well. In these local pools of tradition, other episodes are singular to specific collections, and details even within those episodes that are similar across compilations and performances have become quite varied in their details. With texts both oral and written, which vary widely, there is no definitive version of the tales. Instead, it is useful only to recognize that the character and some basic features of the tale belong to the larger Tibetan pool of tradition.

Kevin Stuart notes that many accounts of Aku Tonpa's deeds, at least in the Tongren (T: *reb gong*) area of Qinghai province, are not really appropriate for telling inside the household (Kun Mchog, Dpal Ldan and Stuart 1999: 8). In some of his exploits Aku Tonpa has sex with nuns. In others, he attaches the stomach of a goat to his genitals, and dresses up like a woman in order to marry a wealthy man and steal his belongings. In still other episodes, he defecates on a king. In each case, these actions transgress proper protocol in Tibetan culture.

In line with the ambivalent nature of tricksters, there appear to be two sides to Aku Tonpa's character. “One is the advocate for justice, who uproots social oppression and uproots landlords and tyrants. This [Aku Tonpa] assists the powerless populace and provides a role model in terms of resisting social oppression and striving for justice. The other side of [Aku Tonpa] is destructive towards religion and [he is] a clever swindler” (Kun Mchog, Dpal Ldan and Stuart 1999: 7). The side that makes Aku Tonpa an advocate for justice may explain the

PRC's support for his tales, as he is a model of behavior fully in line with the needs of social agents in the socialist value system that was being touted in the early decades of the PRC. This binary opposition of altruistic good and personal attainment in Aku Tonpa's character and the ambivalent nature of the trickster in general seems to inform Alai's own interest in and affinity with this trickster.

2.B.i.a AKU TONPA AND ALAI

So how exactly is the outcast tradition mediated through Aku Tonpa's exploits?

The following tale is from Rinjing Dorje's "Tales of Uncle Tompa"

One day, by accident, the man ran into Uncle in Lhasa. On seeing him, Uncle immediately grabbed hold of a very tall religious pillar which stands right in the center of Lhasa. He looked intently at the top of the monument. The man came up to Uncle and shouted, "You're a liar and a thief. You robbed my horse and everything I had."

Uncle Tompa kept looking at the top of the religious pillar and said, "Ah! I've been looking for you to return your horse and goods, but the Tibetan government has appointed me the Religious Pillar Watcher to see that this monument doesn't fall down, so I didn't have time.

The man said, "Well, I'll take your place as Religious Pillar Watcher if you just go and bring me my horse and things.

Uncle instructed him, "All right. Just remember! It's very important to shout if you see the pillar start to fall down." The man agreed to do so. He grabbed the pillar which was eleven stories high and Uncle went away" (Rinjing Dorje 1997: 33-35).

In comparison, look at an excerpt from Alai's *Red Poppies* and the way it tells the same episode in quite a different circumstance.

"I recalled a story about a wise man named Aku Tonpa. One day he came to a sacred place, also located in a square. Wanting to play a trick on a serious monk, he told him to embrace a flagpole in the center of the square to steady it. Even though the monk didn't believe that the pole would fall, still he wrapped his arms around it. The monk held on to the tall pole and looked deep into the sky, where clouds billowed just like flags. In the end, the pole seemed to move and the monk strained to keep it from toppling..." (Alai 2002: 312).

Further complicating the oral and written textual histories of this set of folktales is the fact that Alai himself re-wrote many of Aku Tonpa's more famous exploits into a short story that pre-dates the publication of *Red Poppies* by nearly a decade (Alai 2002: Translator's Note).⁵ Some of the episodes in Alai's short re-telling of Aku Tonpa's life seem to be unique to his own imagination (although it is quite possible that they are episodes from the oral tradition in Aba TAP that simply have not been published in written form), while others are famous within the Aku Tonpa cycle of stories. Even these familiar episodes, however, appear out of order, and function quite differently when compared with other written re-tellings of the same general event.

Although the events in the two narratives are similar, the details differ. This is one of the most famous exploits of Aku Tonpa, and it may be found in many different situations. In these two particular examples, the contexts surrounding the two exploits are very different. In Rinjing Dorje's version, Aku Tonpa is found hugging the pole, after having scammed a merchant in order to avoid punishment for having sex with nuns. Alai's telling of "The Story of Aku Tonpa" eliminates this act of sexual impropriety, and instead focuses entirely on his having tricked a merchant out of his wealth. In *Red Poppies*, Alai mentions this episode yet again, except in it Aku Tonpa is cheating a monk in the holy city of Lhasa.

Alai's short story version of Aku Tonpa shows a very different and much tamer side of the cycle of stories commonly attributed to him. In Alai's short story, while many episodes are very similar to the folktales, many others deviate widely from the more vulgar exploits that seem to have been originally attributed

to Aku Tonpa. Although this may have something to do with his having been exposed to a different or much more limited, set of stories, it may also be completely intentional in order to conform to editorial or other needs.

2.B.ii KING GESAR

The great epic of King Gesar is one of the most prized elements of the Tibetan oral tradition. Told for centuries by Tibetan storytellers, the epic of King Gesar has transformed into one of five great epics of the world (Jiangbian 1999:21-8). Beyond this, the character has become a folk hero, a champion of the people, and his name is known by Tibetans in most areas of Kham and Amdo. There is a comparable figure--Gesser Khan--in Mongolian oral literature, and the story is known among other steppe peoples as well. Hailing from the land of Ling (T: *gLing*), Gesar is generally considered to have been from Kham (Samuel 1996: 358). This notwithstanding, his name is constantly invoked by Tibetans in Amdo and U-Tsang areas of Tibet as well. People all over the Tibetan areas will say that they are related to Gesar, but this does not mean that they are Khampas--but merely that they identify with this hero. Still a living part of the Tibetan oral tradition, storytellers in Tibetan areas often recount parts of the epic, especially in Kham, where the tradition is most developed, and the nomadic areas [of Amdo] (Samuel 1996: 358).

In the epic, Gesar is both hero and trickster.⁶ In fact, many of his heroic accomplishments are achieved solely through using his wit to trick opponents. The epic itself focuses on Gesar's childhood, ascension to power through tricking his avaricious and power-hungry uncle, and then his conquests of the demon kings. These demon kings

are Lutzen, the demons of the state of Hor, King Satham of Jang, and King Shingti. Each of these mythical demons rules in the areas surrounding the country of Ling. Beyond these “most prevalent” episodes,⁷ there are several episodes that feature him conquering more worldly foes, including Persians and Chinese enemies. In the end, he does not die, but rather ascends into heaven. In fact, as recently as the earlier part of the twentieth century, many Tibetans have adamantly expressed their belief in this concept (David-Neel, and Lama Yongden 1987: 32-33).

Episodes of the Gesar epic tend to be very formulaic (Jiangbian 1986: 376-80).⁸ The general pattern is as follows: Gesar often begins in seclusion, hidden away from his people, meditating; after a long time away, the hero is confronted by one of a number of deities, usually his sister deity, Manene, and is reminded of a task that he must fulfill. Next, he informs the people of Ling of the task with which he has been entrusted. Afterwards he either musters an army or sets off alone in the direction of his enemy. It is not often that he is able to simply defeat the enemy strictly through violence, because these demons are often protected by various forms of magic, but he finds out about the enemy’s weakness, and generally through some form of trickery exploits this weakness in order to defeat the enemy. Afterwards, because he is a benevolent hero, he guides his victim's soul to one of the many paradises acknowledged by Buddhist religious practice.

The trickery Gesar employs in this epic is more magical than some of his more worldly counterparts, but the trickery, nonetheless fits well into this category of Tibetan trickster character. In those episodes where Gesar acts more like a trickster than a warrior, he defeats these demons and other enemies through first discovering their weaknesses. Then he tricks these foes into bringing about their own demise. While his

position as a great warrior separates him from most other tricksters, some of his exploits fall distinctly into this category, including the horse race through which he assumes the kingship of the country of Ling and obtains his beautiful wife (Kun Mchog, Dpal Ldan and Stuart 1999: 19). This shows that the Tibetan trickster tradition can take multiple forms. Whereas Aku Tonpa was certainly a social pariah, the trickster can also be a member of the aristocracy.

2.C PARIHAHS IN THE TIBETAN ORAL TRADITION

Collections of Tibetan folk stories make it apparent that Tibetan oral storytelling traditions rely heavily upon outcast characters as protagonists who often also act as tricksters. These outcasts can be broken into four separate sub-categories. Most prominent among these are the poor, the idiots, and the younger brother. The fourth category, the clergy, is a newer one chronologically. In this section, I first define these three traditional character types, and then briefly discuss the role that these three traditional outcast character types play in Tibetan folktales. It is important to understand the significance of these character types in these folktales and the values each character-type is often meant to convey.

2.C.i SOCIAL PARIHAHS IN FOLK LITERATURE

Through examining a few folktales taken from the collections mentioned above as in some ways representative of a larger body of Tibetan folklore, it is possible to further understand and identify some of the character types popular in Tibetan oral and secular literature. This section will largely ignore the tales featuring animals as their main

characters because Alai does not write narratives featuring non-human protagonists. This section will focus instead on representative tales that revolve around human interaction. The tales to be discussed, two from each collection, are “The Idiot's Knife,” and “The King's Son and the Poor Man's Son,” both taken from the first volume of the *Tibetan Folk Stories*.⁹ I use “Boxing a Monster” and “The Birth-giving Pot” from Kevin-Stuart's *Tibetan-English Folktales*, and finally, “The Poor Man and the Serpent's Daughter,” which may be found in Sandra Benson's *Tales of the Golden Corpse*.

2.C.i.a TIBETAN FOLK STORIES

The two examples from *Tibetan Folk Stories* are both collected from the Kham Tibetan areas in Derge Prefecture, which abuts the Gyarong Tibetan areas of Aba. The protagonists in these stories tend to fall into three important types of characters. First, they are often poor, destitute, and have no way of changing their own status. Second, which will be very important to the later discussion of Alai's writings, many of these characters are idiots, or fools (Ch: *shazi*).⁹ Third the protagonists of these folk tales are often younger siblings.

These three traditional character types are not mutually exclusive, and many tales rely on characters who may fit equally well into one or all of these categories. Many stories will feature a protagonist who is both an idiot and a younger brother (as may be clearly seen in *Red Poppies* and “The Idiot's Knife”), while others will feature a character who is both poor and an idiot. Still other tales feature characters who embody all three of these main types. These three character types are useful in understanding many Tibetan folktales and especially for understanding the folk elements prominent in many of Alai's

novels and short stories. These categories are by no means exhaustive, and fail to represent many characters that may be commonly be found in the Tibetan oral tradition, such as the hare, the fox, and other animal characters that play primary roles in many Tibetan folktales.

Where and how do these character types appear in the folktales? The first character-type, the poor person, is ubiquitous in these folktales. The protagonists in both “Prince and the Servant's Son” and “The Idiot's Knife” live impoverished lives. Beyond this, some of these stories even have been given titles with the word “poor” in them, such as in “The Poor Man and the Serpent's Daughter.” Additionally, the famous trickster Aku Tonpa is often viewed as a poor person, despite the fabulous wealth he often manages to obtain through his trickery (which is often then distributed among the people).

Although the idiot character type appears less frequently than many of the others, the idiot does, however, represent an important figure in many Tibetan folktales. While among the folktales mentioned here, the fool only appears in the story of the “The Idiot's Knife,” this theme also appears in many other folktales in the *Tibetan Folk Stories*. The idiot character in “The Idiot's Knife,” unwittingly paves the way for his family's re-union and ultimate success. He is not just an idiot, but also a younger sibling. Tibetan folktales often have elder brothers who have more defined roles in the established social order than their younger siblings, presumably because they are either guaranteed an inheritance or because they are bound to more traditional ways of thinking. In contrast, younger brothers are often more resourceful and ultimately more successful than their elder siblings.

The social conditions out of which these folktales were recorded and published are also worth noting. Having been recorded, translated into Chinese, and published in post-1949 China, tales of impoverished commoners have been emphasized (Stuart et al 1999: 7-8), in order to fit with the dialogue of feudal oppression encouraged under the Communist civilizing project. Furthermore, these narratives were often recorded in a county seat's governmental culture bureau by cultural cadres and Han researchers. It could be said, then, that the conditions in which these folktales were elicited and published may have also affected the speaker's choice of themes and narrative, and character types. This situation, however, does not discredit these folktales or make them unusable, but may in fact make them more applicable to an analysis of the traditional character types in Alai's literature, as Alai grew up in, and now writes under similar social pressures and circumstances. Furthermore, these character types appear in works published outside the PRC, as witnessed by many of the tales selected in both Sandra Benson's *Tales of the Golden Corpse* and Kevin Stuart's *Tibetan-English Folktales*, both of which present tales collected primarily from Amdo Tibetans living in Qinghai province.

Many of folktales serve an educational purpose in Tibetan society. In fact, many Chinese scholars focus on the theme of morality and say that “it can be said that all of China's national minority literary works either directly or indirectly serve to promote and express some kind of moral viewpoint and bringing unequal levels to bear” (Tong 24). Understanding these tales as having a largely moral viewpoint, it is possible to begin discussing the function of these character types in Gyarong Tibetan culture in general, and, by extension, on Alai's written works.

By invoking each of these character types, the storyteller is using the culture's traditional referentiality, which may be coupled with new perspectives brought on by “socialist” education, to evoke certain ideas for the culturally attuned reader. The idiot, for example, is a comic character. People know that the character is going to do and say many silly things. Ultimately, however, they know that the very same fool whose actions initially seemed so silly will, either through sheer luck or through unique insights that betray an unnatural wisdom, benefit in the end. A listener who is in tune with the tradition will know that the poor characters will generally be humble and sincere. Additionally, the audience can expect that the younger sibling is clever and can use his wits to earn success.

2.D CONCLUSION

In the above examination of several Tibetan folk tales, one can see these three important character types. Each of these outcast and trickster character types informs the analysis of the next two chapters. Chapter 3 examines how traditional outcast characters function in Alai's novels, focusing primarily on the idiot character and the trickster character. Chapter 4 focuses on Alai's innovative outcast characters, which are less explicitly related to those discussed in this chapter but are outcasts nonetheless.

The impoverished peasant, the idiot, and the younger brother are all important characters in Tibetan folklore. To some degree, they are all tricksters. They are outcasts in terms of the social hierarchy, and yet they are able to transcend their social status through their wit, intelligence, and benevolence. In a multi-cultural venue, the trickster allows a peripheral group to re-negotiate their relation to the dominant society, and Alai

uses these tricksters in precisely this fashion. The remainder of this thesis discusses the trickster and outcast character types as used in Alai's writings, and the way in which they help to negotiate the unique cultural situation in which Gyarong Tibetans live and in which Alai writes.

NOTES CHAPTER 2

1. This is not to say that Chinese collections are necessarily unfaithful to the originals due to the political environment in which they were published, though there is no doubt that at certain periods, tales have been routinely tweaked or rewritten (see Bender 2006: xxvi). By saying they have been de-situated from their performance contexts, and translated into another language, does not suggest that they were created solely for the sake of politics or oppression. Each case, however, must be examined individually in an attempt to understand the “process of textualization.” (Honko 2000: xx; Bender 2006: xxxix)
2. I use these collections due in part to their availability and in part to the fact that, like the folk tales to which Alai was exposed as a youth, every one of them are drawn from areas that are the cultural border areas of Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan provinces.
3. Since the establishment of the PRC, there has been a preference for publishing stories featuring the poor. This is especially true during the 1950s and 1960s (Shakya 2000: 31; Schiaffini 2004: 84; Kolås and Thowsen 2006: 138;). Some works on Tibetan literary history published in China after 1949 assert that the most important themes in post-feudal Tibetan literature is that it is largely anti-imperialist in nature (Ma, et al 1994: 649).
4. A frame tale is “a fictional narrative composed or the purpose of presenting other tales” (Irwin 1998: 391). The frame tale as a narrative convention has been traced back to India almost three thousand years ago. At the beginning of each episode, there may be a short introduction that summarizes the framing tale in order to place the tale back within the framework of the original series of stories
5. I do not have exact dates for the publication, but it may currently be found in Alai 2004. *Aba Alai* 阿坝阿来. Beijing: Zhongguo gongren chubanshe, pp. 88-100.
6. Trickster-hero characters can be found elsewhere in world folklore. The character of Odysseus from the *Odyssey* is one.
7. The term “most prevalent” means that this episode completes the series of stories that appears in almost every translation. There are also “variant” episodes that may appear in one version or another but not in all.
7. Chao Gejin's approach is useful for distinguishing some of the formulaic elements in similar epics including characters, horses, utensils and locations. For further information

see Chao 2000. Additional research more specific to the Gesar epic may be found in Jiangbian 1999.

8. The two tales from *Zangzu minjian gushi*, “The Idiot's Knife, and “The King's son and the Poor Person's Son,” are translated in full in Appendix B

9. According to the *Cihai* the Chinese word *sha* can have several possible definitions. The first it gives is *yuchun* (愚蠢) meaning stupid, foolish and idiotic, as in *shazi* or *shagua* (傻瓜), both of which are alternately used in *Red Poppies* to describe the idiot narrator. The second definition is simple-minded and not knowing how to change according to the situation, as in the Chinese word *shagan* (傻干), and the final definition is witless, as in to scare someone witless (Ch: *xia sha le* 吓傻了) (*Cihai bianji weiyuan hui* 1999: 742). Additionally, there are several words in Tibetan for idiots or fools. For fool, Jaschke provides *blun-pa*, *glen-pa*, and *blun-po* (Jaschke 2003: 631). While he does not include “idiot” in his English-Tibetan vocabulary section, other words are approximate, such as *'thom-pa* meaning to be dull of the senses (Jaschke 2003: 246), *byis-pa* meaning “plain, ignorant person” (Jaschke 2003: 377), and *lkug pa* meaning dull, stupid (Jaschke 2003: 18).

CHAPTER 3

TRADITIONAL SOCIAL PARIAHS

As noted in the previous chapter, Carvell strongly advocates analysis of themes of oral literature appearing in a literary text as a primary way of determining the oral/folkloristic basis of a work (Hoffman 1957: 9) This section is the first of two chapters that will seek to examine some major folkloric motifs in *The Tale of Jicun* and *Red Poppies*, by examining the roles played by several different character types in these novels, how they further describe Gyarong Tibetan experience, and also how many of these character types are taken almost directly from the Tibetan oral tradition. They will also allow us analyze how Alai has used these character types to his own purposes in his literature.

Alai's narratives are structured around the outcast or social pariah of the type described in the previous chapter. Although other character types are prominent in his writings, the trickster takes on many forms in both of Alai's novels. Generally these social pariahs serve as the protagonists in Alai's narratives, and are the subject of ridicule and discrimination by Han and Tibetan alike. The next two chapters, then, take up the task of examining this character type and several of the important sub-types in Alai's works. Examples from his works will be provided to show how these various types of outcasts operate as both reflections of the greater folk tradition of Amdo and Khams

regions, and also as original literary variations on a traditional theme. It will then be possible to discuss how the use of these character types in *The Tale of Jicun* and *Red Poppies* allow Alai to write in what Dayton calls “ethnic voices that resist the monopolizing narratives of the CCP and the Han cultural center”(2006: 104). In the end, I seek to examine how Alai contributes to a larger discourse on minority ethnicity within the cultural sphere of modern China.

3.A ALAI'S WORKS

Alai's most acclaimed novel, *Red Poppies* has been translated into over twelve languages, including Tibetan, and been praised for its narrative style and its portrayal of Gyarong Tibetan culture during the early and middle parts of the twentieth century, ending shortly after the CCP's entry into these areas of Sichuan (Li 2004: 690-1). The story follows the idiot son of a tribal chieftain, *tusi*, from his youth, to his eventual crowning as chieftain over his “smart,” but bellicose brother. The idiot son of the Maichi chieftain is unique. He is seen as an idiot by those around him, and yet he is remarkably astute in his abilities to foresee what is best for the people. He introduces a market economy to the region, and increases the chieftain's economic and political influence greatly. Throughout the story, he is belittled as an idiot, but consistently proves himself to be more astute and adept than his more intelligent counterparts. His fiefdom's rise to power coincides with a confluence of many factors, not the least of which is the importation, growing, and selling of poppy flowers for opium. Through this business the Maichi family gains great wealth and power, and exposure to greater Western and Chinese ways in a fashion that rapidly changes their understanding of the world and of

daily life. In the end, the Red Army comes, the chieftain's fortress is destroyed, and the “idiot” son is killed as part of a blood feud with another family. The story is narrated by the idiot's spirit immediately after his death.¹

The novel, even though it is set in the years immediately prior to the establishment of the PRC, equates its Chinese characters with the greater Han civilizing project described in Chapter 1. This is seen most explicitly in the way that the Han Chinese “help” the Maichi chieftain, first with military aid, and then through supplying them with poppies, to make them wealthy. Underlying all of these interactions, however, is the same sort of civilizing goal that has marked Han-minority relations for many years, as shown through the following passage: “...the Nationalist Government, like the emperors before them, were supporters of the Maichi family. Already proudly displayed in the room was an imperial plaque bestowed by a Qing emperor, with a four-word inscription, INSTRUCT AND ASSIMILATE BARABARIANS (emphasis in the original)” (Alai 2002: 42).

Winner of the Fifth Mao Dun Prize for Literature, the novel's portrayal of a barbaric pre-communist Tibetan society has won widespread acclaim among PRC scholars and been roundly lambasted as a part of the PRC propaganda machine by the Tibetan community in exile (Sonam 2002). The graphic detail and barbarity with which the chieftain acts make it a natural lightning rod for critics from both the PRC and abroad working from a political agenda.

Li Hongran, a PRC literary scholar, downplays the distinctly Tibetan character of the narrative, instead placing emphasis on its unique literary qualities. Rather than looking at the discourse in these novels as both creating and reflecting attitudes towards

the current state of Gyarong Tibetan culture or Gyarong Tibetan identity within the larger PRC framework, Li looks at Alai's narrative style and his portrayal of a more universal human experience, saying “describing the natural and human situation in the Tibetan areas, as well as showing the reactionary nature and historic fate of the *tusi* system in Old China's Tibetan areas is not the ultimate goal of Alai's *Red Poppies*. The ultimate goal of Alai's *Red Poppies* is to describe humanity” (Li 2004: 692).

While praising the universality of the novel, Li places the distinctly Tibetan elements of the text in terms of the portrayal of a barbaric Tibetan society with greedy and jealous leaders. One line in which the narrator's mother gives him advice about servants, is frequently quoted by Li, Sonam, and others to drive this point home. “Son, you must remember that you can ride them like horses or beat them like dogs, but you cannot treat them like people.” (Alai 2002: 13) Nonetheless, judging from the importance of the Gyarong experience in Alai's other writings, it would seem that the Tibetan nature of this narrative is far more important than Li conveys.

This quote and others like it have caused Tibetan critics to argue that, with the barbarity of the people and the overall negative attitude towards Tibetan Buddhism, it “is a depiction of Old Tibet that could have rolled straight off the Communist Party's propaganda machine,”(Sonam 2002). Sonam Tenzing also compares the novel to a “grotesque caricature” (Sonam 2002). Not devaluing the importance of the author's Tibetan ethnicity and the novel's distinctly Tibetan themes, these critics look at the portrayal of Tibetan life and focus on the fact that it portrays Old Tibet in a negative light. They view this novel as a discussion of pan-Tibetan identity, not noticing the ways in

which the author takes pains to distance the Gyarong areas it describes from the areas of Old Tibet.

The Tale of Jicun follows the story of a generation of children, growing to adulthood during the early years of PRC presence in the Tibetan areas of China. Beginning in the 1950's, the story is split into two sections. Both sections are set in a small town, presumably in Aba TAP, called *Jicun* (机村). The first part of the novel follows the story of two children, their lives and their deaths. The one is the son of a prostitute, while the other is a small pale child, called Rabbit by others in the town, who is the son of a former monk and his wife. These two weak children are looked down upon by others in the community. In the end, the smaller of the two children is killed by a stray firecracker that has been lit to celebrate the opening of a new road and the coming of civilization. The older child is wrongly held responsible for his death. After being blamed by Rabbit's family and neglected by the entire town, he dies as well.

This first section of the novel shows the entrance of the Communist civilizing project into the Gyarong Tibetan experience. Through the narrative of these children, the reader is exposed to the various policies and movements that characterized the early years of the PRC and how they influenced the Gyarong people living in the Sino-Tibetan border areas. These include the beginning of the de-forestation projects, the opening of a new road that would connect them with the outside world, and the introduction of the first telephone in the area.

Set nearly a decade after the first part of the book, the second part shifts in focus from discussing the town as an isolated community to discussing its place in terms of the

nation. To do this, it begins with the Bon magician, Dorje, lighting a fire to clear land for local farmers. He is jailed because of his adherence to the old ways, but this is no new occurrence for him and he goes peacefully. The jailing lasts longer than before, and in his absence a large blaze erupts that threatens to destroy the town. When the fire gets out of control, Dorje escapes from prison to help the people of the town. Believing that Dorje is behind the blaze, the government launches a massive effort to capture the escaped magician and to save the area and its woodlands. In the process the government brings hundreds of workers and cadres into the area.

Through all of the hype and the fanfare, the government is largely powerless to stop the destruction, and eventually only succeeds in cutting down large expanses of forest and draining a lake that, according to local lore, once held two golden birds, the protective deities of the area (although they had long since left). The magician dies of wounds sustained in his escape and a Buddhist lama, who has been forced to leave the monastic life, takes up the magician's mantle as others begin to join the cause. The state's approach to the fire is ineffective because it largely focuses around political education, as people spend almost as much time in political meetings and struggle sessions as they do fighting the blaze.

In the end, after the fire subsides, the government representatives leave, and the people of the town continue their lives in the aftermath of this “natural” disaster. The animals are gone, the habitat has been destroyed, and the forests are no more. The people of the town returned to their normal lives, and government support is largely withdrawn. Attempts are not made to return the area to its previous state, and re-forestation or rebuilding the lake are never even mentioned.

While *Red Poppies* and *The Tale of Jicun* are the primary focus of this thesis, Alai's literary contributions also include many other works that can help one to further understand the way in which folklore, folk ideas, and material culture combine in the discourse of culture and identity among the Gyarong people, especially the travelogue *Upward Steps of the Earth* and certain short stories from the collections *The Dust Flies Away* and *Aba Alai*.

Upward Steps of the Earth is written largely from the first person perspective. It is a travelogue and memoir describing Alai's experiences traveling through Aba Prefecture. He describes a journey from Chengdu to his home in Maerkang, and many elements of his days as a wanderer he also uses asides to discuss the history of certain regions, and experiences he has had on other trips through the area. Elements that are important to his other novels find their ways into this work; it justifies and describes the labors and lives of the Gyarong Tibetan people. It also allows the reader to directly understand the inspiration for many of his short stories. He also tells many stories of the Gyarong Tibetans, including creation-type myths, historical stories, and stories of famous Tibetan personages coming to the area in which the Gyarong people now reside.

Through this work, Alai clearly believes that Gyarong people have an important relation with the area from which they come. He writes that “[g]eography was originally related to culture. The complex multi-faceted geography often predicted the different kinds of methods of existence and different kinds of humanity that constituted the many attitudes of culture. To an individual, different geographies and cultures also often imply a kind of new spiritual attitude and territory” (Alai 2001: 6). He is interested in the history of the area, both through writing about his own experiences in addition to the

lives of people he has met. Simultaneously, a vast repertoire of folklore becomes available to him. While he does rely on some books in order to understand the historical details, he also relies heavily upon what he experiences and the stories told to him by others.

Aba Alai and *The Dust Flies Away* are both collections of short stories. In some instances the stories overlap. Some of the stories from *The Dust Flies Away* are very similar to parts of *Red Poppies*, though they utilize a different perspective. Stories in these two collections cover a wide range of styles and time periods. They all deal with either Gyarong Tibetans, or Aba prefecture. Some of them deal with the lives of Tibetans after the establishment of the PRC, some deal with life during the *tusi* period, and still others deal with traditional Tibetan stories. One of the more interesting stories from these collections, in terms of its use of folklore, is “Aku Tonpa” (Ch: *Agu Dunba* 阿古顿巴). This short story re-tells a folktale about the popular Tibetan trickster introduced above. Versions of this story appear in both collections. The other stories are sometimes less closely drawn from folk literature, and are local character anecdotes, or local lore being created in a village. For Alai, these tales are repositories of cultural knowledge, and give insight into the way a given society structures itself. As such, the character types in them will provide important background information and corroborating evidence for this paper.

3.B CHARACTER TYPES IN ALAI'S WORKS

All three of the traditional outcast character types put forth in Chapter 2 are commonly used by Alai. In some cases, these different traits manifest themselves in the same characters. The social outcasts in these writings range from nobility, to executioners, to children who are simply quiet or different from everyone else. They have different views and roles in society.

The vast body of short stories and novels attributed to Alai is full of these outcast characters. In some cases these characters are central to the narrative exposition. Less frequently, there are some stories in which these social pariahs seem to be entirely secondary. In some novels, they are the narrators, while in others they are simply a way of momentarily furthering the narrative.

Alai takes these outcast character types, especially those who are derived almost directly from the greater Tibetan oral tradition, as an important way for narrating about Tibetan life in Gyarong areas and remaining within the Gyarong Tibetan tradition. He also, in response to the times, adds to and builds upon these character types. In adding to the traditional character types, he understands that the social pariah has taken on new forms partially as a result of the new order instituted by the post-1949 government, and also as a result of the unique cultural situation facing people in the cultural border regions of China in which he himself, and other Gyarong Tibetans grew up. I will first identify and explain some of these innovative outcast characters upon whom Alai heavily relies, and then continue with showing how the traditional character archetypes heavily influence his narratives.

The first innovative character type is the mixed blood character, and it probably stems from Alai's own up-bringing in a mixed Tibetan-Hui household. Many of Alai's protagonists and characters are of “mixed blood” (Ch: *hun xie* 混血). These characters are often treated differently, and their cultural background is never fully forgotten by other characters, no matter how much they try.

The second innovative category in many of Alai's novels and short stories is that of the de-vested and former clergy member. Although many folktales, especially in the *Aku Tonpa* cycle of tales poke fun at the clergy, the Tibetan Buddhist and Bon clergy held positions of great respect in many areas of the Tibetan world. After the establishment of the PRC, however, many temples were closed until after the Cultural Revolution. The monks, nuns, and lamas from these temples had never been required to do manual labor because of the special position that had been afforded to them in pre-PRC China. With the doors to the monasteries closing, however, they were forced to return to secular life. The transition was not an easy one, and in Alai's novels, they are often viewed as non-contributing members of society, and yet are treated with great reverence.

3.B.i THE NARRATOR IN *RED POPPIES*

Most prominent among the outcast characters in Alai's writings is the idiot narrator from *Red Poppies*. In this narrator, the Maichi chieftain's youngest son, one may easily see two of these traditional character types and one of the innovative types that is more specific to Alai. Like these characters in the oral tradition, he benefits from circumstances and rises from the obscurity of being the youngest son and, in spite of (and

in some cases because of) his well-documented idiocy, to make his father's region the most powerful among the eighteen chieftains. At times quite remarkable and prophetic, he is seen by all to be a fool, and uses this perception to gain power and influence.

Alai's focus on wisdom found in stupidity is an important part of understanding the tradition out of which Alai's narrator comes. The narrator's wisdom often confuses people, and causes them great consternation. At the same time, the people who consider themselves the wisest are often the most foolhardy. These sentiments are clearly thought out, in relation to the narrator, in the following passages from *Red Poppies*:

Fortunately Father had a better understanding of the world we lived in. What puzzled him were his two sons. The smart one loved war and women; obsessed with power, he was short on judgment where important matters were concerned. The idiot son conceived amid drunken passion actually seemed smarter than anyone. (Alai 2002: 178)

This quote is taken from the mental ramblings of the novel's narrator. The quote below, however, comes from the mouth of Special Emissary Huang, the Han Chinese man who comes first as a government official, and then later is humbled and works as the narrator's advisor. In relation to the wisdom and stupidity of those who are "smart," he says that "Do you know why I've fallen so low, Young Master? Like them, I believed I was clever. That was the cause of my downfall" (Alai 2002: 382).

Through these traditional character types the Maichi chieftain's idiot younger son is cast in a specific light. The relation to these character types seems to both inform his actions, and also allow a Tibetan to infer how the character might act. In addition it clues the audience on how to judge and evaluate his actions. In this case, by creating him as a fool, he might be expected to benefit fortuitously from many things and to appear wise by

the end of the novel. Being a younger sibling, furthermore, sets this character up for greatness of a kind that is rarely seen amongst older siblings in Tibetan folklore.²

Additionally, in terms of Alai's newly created outcast character types, the narrator was not born purely Tibetan. He is the son of the second wife of the Maichi chieftain. His mother was of Han Chinese birth and was a prostitute prior to marrying into the chieftain's family. The narrator of *Red Poppies* is related to the larger Tibetan oral tradition through being an idiot and a younger sibling in a tradition that clearly values the roles of these two character types. In spite of this, the character's mixed ethnic background seems to separate him, and many other Gyarong Tibetans, from Tibetan peoples who do not live along the cultural border areas between Tibetan and Han areas as the Gyarong people do.

3.B.ii AKU TONPA AND THE FOOL IN *RED POPPIES*

Over a decade prior to publishing *Red Poppies*, Alai wrote a story about Aku Tonpa that was a re-telling of some of this legendary trickster's exploits.³ This short story, drawing heavily upon the Tibetan oral tradition, provides a useful point of departure for an exploration of the idiot in *Red Poppies*, serving as an example of Alai utilizing traditional character types in Tibetan folklore.

The stories in the Aku Tonpa cycle focus on his trickery, and describe the ingenious methods by which he tricks people either for personal gain or for the greater good of the Tibetan common people; in writing about Aku Tonpa's trickery, Alai's narrative about Aku Tonpa emphasize two major character traits. First among these themes is his idiocy. It is not merely his own intrinsic idiocy, but the way in which

people believe that he is an idiot, and the way in which he is able to manipulate this misconception to his own benefit. It is exactly this “wisdom masked by stupidity” (Alai 2002: Translator's Note) that Alai finds most intriguing about this particular folktale, and is the focus of his short story. Aku Tonpa uses other peoples' conceptions of his idiocy to fool them. The second theme is his tendency to do good deeds for the people as described above. At one point, Aku Tonpa cheats a businessman of his wealth, and then “took all of [the businessman's] wealth and dispersed it among the poor common people” (Alai 2005b: 100). These types of actions shape Aku Tonpa into a classic Robin Hood-type character.

Many of the episodes in the Aku Tonpa cycle of stories can operate independently of the others, nor is a chronological order particularly necessary. As such, most of these cycles leave out discussions about his birth and childhood, instead beginning when he is a grown man. Alai's short story, however, begins with the early years, most specifically, his birth. According to this story, “when Aku Tonpa was born, no miraculous signs appeared” (Alai 2005b: 96).⁴ Aku Tonpa is born with an abnormally large head, which causes his mother to die in labor. His father, blaming him for his mother's death, raises the unfortunate boy as an outcast, thus making him into an object of ridicule within his own family. Upon reaching adulthood, he leaves the family estate to find his own way. He then proceeds to trick many wealthy landlords, rulers, and corrupt clergy for the good of the common people.

Among other exploits, he uses the teeth of a sheep to cut through the walls of a prison. In using the teeth of a sheep to escape captivity, Aku Tonpa invents the first saw in Tibet. “At that time, there were no saws in Tibet, the land of snows. Because of his

time in captivity, Aku Tonpa had invented the saw, and brought his invention to carpenters in his travels” (Alai 2005b: 100). Afterwards he “uses his wisdom to make a king receive punishment. He also used his wisdom to kill a lama who did not respect the law and who did not walk the path. These are all things that the common people wanted to do, but did not dare to do” (Alai 2005b: 100).

Although Alai's version of “The Story of Aku Tonpa” predates *Red Poppies* by approximately a decade, its influences and the legend of this famous trickster character remain an obvious and important feature for Alai in his creation of the protagonist narrator of *Red Poppies*. This connection is primarily a thematic one, as is indicated by the idea of wisdom masked by stupidity. It can be seen in the way that both Alai's Aku Tonpa character and the idiot son of the Maichi chieftain, are not only both idiots, but both were incredibly successful in spite of, or perhaps because of, their idiocy. The following scene from *Red Poppies* is just one example of how the idiot narrator's wisdom is often masked by stupidity.

...I heard myself say instead, “Because your son will be the last chieftain.”
Father was stunned.
I repeated, “It won 't take long before all the chieftains are gone.”

...

Chieftain Maichi knelt before me. “Where does this prophetic spirit come from, if I may ask?”

I said, “There's no spirit. It's just your son and his ideas.”

Father got up, and I brushed his knees as if they were covered in dust even though the floor was spotless. Servants cleaned the room with a white oxtail duster every morning. But I brushed the nonexistent dust off his knees anyway. The idiot's trick worked, as a smile reappeared on the chieftain's face, replacing the gloomy look of knowing he'd been tricked. He sighed. “I really don't know if you're an idiot, but I'm sure that what you've said is rubbish.” (Alai 2002: 372-3)

In overlooking the idiots, normal people miss the straightforward wisdom that is sometimes beyond the complex thinking of the “smart” person.

The life of the narrator in many ways closely mirrors that of this legendary trickster Aku Tonpa. Examples begin with the fact that they are both younger siblings, and that even within their own family are an afterthought, treated as idiots. In the case of Aku Tonpa, his father says “I never treated you well, because you caused your mother's death” (Alai 2005b: 97). For the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies*, he is always considered second to his older brother. When the older brother dies, the chieftain does not even make him an heir to the throne (Alai 2002: 338), fearing that he would not be a competent ruler. These basic similarities suggest that they belong to a single character type. These character types are not merely symbols, however, but also index certain “folk ideas,” such as the idea mentioned above that wisdom is often masked by idiocy.

The similarities between these two characters continue as both characters grow older: they both only truly begin to show their unique abilities after leaving the security of the family fortress. For Alai's own creation of this trickster Aku Tonpa, this is after his father's death, when he begins to wander around the country doing good deeds for the common people. In his family home, he often walks around the garden alone (Alai 2005b: 96). After leaving home, however, his “wisdom and his righteous name spread to lands very far away” (Alai 2005b: 100). For the narrator of *Red Poppies*, the liberating event is when he is dispatched to work at a castle along the northern border of his family's lands selling the Maichi chieftain's surplus food stores. Although the narrator had been displaying flashes of brilliance prior to this, the time away from his family allows him to shine as an administrator and ruler. In doing so, he is “the creator of the first fixed market on any chieftain's territory.... [people] were puzzled by how an idiot could have produced something so innovative (Alai 2002: 275).

Like Alai's Aku Tonpa, the Maichi chieftain's idiot son is able to win the respect of many people, his name becomes known far beyond the confines of his own territory, and he finds a way for himself to be successful in spite of people's general disregard of him. Ultimately, through what others perceive to be idiocy and stupidity, these characters each show great wisdom. "Within a short period of time, I'd given a new and much broader meaning to the word *idiot*. Now, because of me, the words *idiot*, *fate*, *good fortune*, and *destiny* had all become synonymous" (Alai 2002: 263).

There are many ways of reading this notable similarity between Alai's representations of Aku Tonpa and the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies*. First, it is an implicit attack on the Chinese civilizing project of the 1950's. It is implicit, in that it works much within the realm of what constitutes acceptable implicit criticism in post-Cultural Revolution China. *Red Poppies* draws upon the examples of scar literature (Ch: *shanghen wenxue* 伤痕文学) and root-seeking literature (Ch: *xungen wenxue* 寻根文学), to criticize within the framework of what is acceptable at the time (Shakya 2000: 34). Additionally, it also speaks to a larger cultural understanding of Gyarong culture and Tibetan culture in general. Wisdom is masked by the facade of idiocy, and this motif has been co-opted by Alai as a way of understanding *Red Poppies*. Additionally, this motif is a way of understanding the social pariah--and especially the idiot--as a greater motif of Tibetan folklore, and not merely a literary device isolated from its larger cultural context.

Some of the same motifs are recognizable in Rinjing Dorje's collection of tales entitled *Tale of Uncle Tompa*: "His chicanery is a guise. Uncle Tompa accomplishes the impossible; he transmutes submission into mastery, absence into abundance, and foolishness into wisdom" (Rinjing Dorje 1997: xv). This statement, at least in part, sheds

further light upon the relationship of idiocy and genius, described by Alai above. In the novel itself, Alai writes, “[m]ore and more people were thinking that while he was the smart one, good luck was always on the side of his idiot brother” (Alai 2002: 249). Looking at the stories told of Aku Tonpa and the tradition surrounding him, it is possible to see how the individual characteristics of the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies* are influenced by the character types found in many Tibetan folktales. It is also possible to notice how this character draws upon established legends of Aku Tonpa. As Aku Tonpa “grows from having a big head with a small body to having a small head with a large body” (Alai 2005b: 97), he thwarts the suspicions of others through his ridiculous build. Similarly, the narrator of *Red Poppies* can transmute foolishness into wisdom simply being an idiot and acting foolishly in the first place. At one point he notes that “[s]ometimes I offered my views on things. If I was wrong, it was as if I had said nothing. But if I was right, people treated me with respect. So far, I hadn't been wrong on anything important” (Alai 2002: 179).

This re-telling of “Aku Tonpa,” allows the reader to notice that, for Alai, this trickster character is created as a combination of many other character types. Although Aku Tonpa is born into a very wealthy family, he wanders for many years after his father's death and in the process his “clothing wore thin, and had many stains. Because of the sun, wind rain, and earth, the color of his clothing had faded. His face had grown gaunt” (Alai 2005b: 100). Aku Tonpa clearly embodies the poor character type. Additionally, he is looked down upon by his family members, and is treated as an outcast both in his youth and as an adult. Furthermore, he is the youngest of several brothers. And finally, he is also a

trickster, using his wits to make the best out of otherwise difficult situations, including the time when a businessman whom he had already cheated caught up to him in Lhasa.

“At this time, Aku Tonpa was on the square in front of a temple, grasping a flag pole. The flag pole pointed directly into the sky, as the white clouds floated above. Aku Tonpa wanted the merchant to look up the flagpole towards the heavens, with the passing clouds making it seem like the flagpole was slowly falling. Aku Tonpa, said that he wanted to return the merchant's money, but a lama from the temple had entrusted him with the task of holding the pole upright, and not let it fall. The merchant said that if he [Aku Tonpa] could return his belongings, then he would be willing to hold the flagpole for Aku Tonpa.

“Aku Tonpa left, and took the merchant's wealth and dispersed it amongst the poorer people.” (Alai 2005b: 100)

As a younger brother, social outcast, trickster, and champion of the common person, then, Aku Tonpa is a character that embodies several different character types important in Tibetan folklore. Many of these same characteristics can be seen in the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies*. Like Alai's Aku Tonpa character, he is the youngest child in his family, as is often the case in folktales, being the son of the Maichi chieftain's second wife, and also is, in the eyes of his compatriots, an idiot. This element, while not explicit in Alai's Aku Tonpa character, makes them both outsiders within their own homes. This places Alai's Aku Tonpa, as well as the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies*, very much within the larger Tibetan oral tradition.

These similarities lay the groundwork for an analysis of Alai's use of folk characters in his own novels. Through this analysis, and providing textual, biographical and corroborative evidence, it is clear that Alai is drawing heavily upon the greater Tibetan oral tradition in creating the idiot narrator in *Red*

Poppies. This insight allows one to grasp how Alai is approaching ethnicity. Moreover, understanding the narrator of *Red Poppies* in this way appears to be evidence of Alai's attempt to write a specifically Gyarong identity into his writings, or at least take part in the creation of some form of what Benedict Anderson calls, an “imagined community” (Anderson 1991). While Anderson uses this term more for documenting the creation of a unified identity of larger heterogeneous community as a key component to the rise of the nation-state, it may also be applied here in understanding the creation of a kind of Gyarong Tibetan identity in which Alai would seem to be a participant.⁵ By providing examples of chieftains and outside Chinese influence, he depicts the experience of a specific, local sub-grouping of Tibetans, Gyarong Tibetans, and not the greater Tibetan community.

Realizing that the novel's protagonist is a composite of several different character types popular in the oral traditions of Tibetan culture, will allow for a deeper understanding of how Alai writes folklore into his novels. But, in order to further examine this facet, it is beneficial to examine other facets of the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies*.

3.B.iii THE OUTCAST AS NARRATOR

The idiot in *Red Poppies* serves as more than a younger brother or chieftain's son. He is also a storyteller, a transmitter of Gyarong lore, myth, and legend. Through his status as an outcast, he is both an outside and objective observer and also an insider to the culture, who is privy to many creation myths and stories of the Gyarong peoples' origin.

Interestingly, except for *Red Poppies*, Alai uses the first person narrative almost exclusively in writings that have a protagonist named “Alai.” Whether or not these works are autobiographical, is enticingly unclear.

Only at one point in *Red Poppies* does the narrator explicitly refer to the tales of Aku Tonpa. In this passage, he refers to a story about Aku Tonpa tricking a man into holding a pole upright, as discussed earlier. This explicit reference, however, is largely secondary to the thematic similarities created between this legendary trickster and the narrator. Instead, it may be best to examine the narrator's role as having a self-reflexive function, meaning “literature that is openly aware of that fact that it is written and read within a particular culture having as much to do with the literary past as the social present” (Hutcheon 1998: 1), and he is consciously placing his own work within the framework of the oral tradition, and simultaneously contributing to the pool of tradition from which it was taken.

The self-reflexivity of the narrator can further be shown through Alai's own documented similarities to the narrator: most specifically the mixed ethnic heritage that has been such an important part of both of their lives. The author, through this character, is acting as a storyteller and is, possibly, self-reflexively projecting his own image as a half-Tibetan, half-Hui, one-time wandering outcast in Chinese and Tibetan society. At the same time, by assuming responsibility to a large literate audience, he is performing a role as storyteller and, in a sense, showing his communicative competence both to a Chinese audience through his skill as a writer of Chinese literature and to a Tibetan audience through his knowledge and use of the Tibetan oral tradition—at the same time, he has also stated that he writes for himself.⁶ These folkloric elements are re-

contextualized in a new language and in a new fashion accessible to a much wider range of readers throughout the PRC, and (via translation) throughout the world.

Looking at the description of Aku Tonpa and the tradition surrounding him provided in Chapter Two, as well as Alai's own retelling of the story, we can begin to see how the individual characteristics of the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies* are not only influenced by the outcast, idiot, and younger brother character types found in many Tibetan folktales, but also draw upon the established legendary character, Aku Tonpa.

3.B.iv OTHER OUTCASTS IN *RED POPPIES*

Beyond the idiot, Alai relies heavily upon other social pariahs of both the traditional and more innovative types to further his narrative. These characters are primarily poor and often, at least in the “feudal” setting of *Red Poppies*, slaves. The outcast clergy in this novel often represent the new type to be discussed in the next chapter, while most explicit among these traditional types are the executioner Aryi, and his son, bearing the same name. Another social pariah playing an important role in *Red Poppies* is the other of the idiot narrator's two closest companions: his ultra-violent slave-friend Sonam Tserang. Having already discussed the narrator of this novel as an outcast in the traditional mold, I will briefly treat the other characters who also serve as social pariahs. Through noticing that almost every character is a social pariah in one respect or another, it is possible to see Alai's imagined Gyarong Tibetan community at work.

Throughout the narrative, this idiot surrounds himself with others who would normally also exist on the margins of society. These friends and advisors come from all different stations in life. The executioner's son, Aryi, will one day inherit the burden of

his family's profession. The very nature of his position in the cultural fabric of pre-PRC Gyarong Tibetan life makes the executioner an automatic outcast. He is made an outcast both through the physical location of his family's dwelling within the chieftain's fortress, and secondly through the nature of his family's profession. "The executioner's house was located on a hill, lower than the estate but higher than other houses" (Alai 2002: 90). The location of this house sets him apart from both the chieftain's household, and those of the commoners. He lives as an outcast from the other members of society. Furthermore, the position of the executioner is the only hereditary position in the land other than that of the chieftain (and many other chieftains had long since done away with the position) (Alai 2002: 32). Previously, there had also been a historian, but that line of work was terminated when the fourth Maichi chieftain objected to the content of the historian's writings. Alai also discusses life from the executioner's vantage point in a short story collected in "The Executioner Aryi" (Ch: *Xingxing ren eryl* 行刑人尔依) (Alai 2005b: 200-274).

The executioner is almost always described in the shadiest of terms. He is quiet, and contemplative. He does not enjoy punishing, it is merely his job. The profession itself is quite advanced, and each executioner's son must learn to use each of the many hooks, knives, and other instruments at his disposal as well as their applications. Beyond this, he also must have a detailed knowledge of salves and herbal medicine for numbing pain or for successful healing. All others members of the community learn to fear his quiet approach, even in social situations, as much as they feared the sound of his whip.

The narrator's other companion, the petulant Sonam, is even lower than the executioner, he is a slave and was designated so by birth. This in itself places him as an

outcast. Sonam, to a certain extent, represents one of the possible reactions to slavery. He is full of anger and hate, and chafes against both the ruling class and the class into which he has been born. Other characters bear their slavery more passively than Sonam, and yet they are outcasts, nevertheless. Sangye Dolma is one such example of a more passive outcast slave. Still others, such as the silversmith Choedak, willingly become slaves. Each of these slaves is an outcast through class status, and yet they bear their slavery differently.

For social pariahs such as those mentioned above, the class status to which they are born is key to creating and maintaining their status as outcasts. For others, it is the ethnic differences that keep them apart. This is most clear in the characters of the chieftain's wife, and Mr. Huang, the Han Chinese advisor. The Maichi Chieftain's second wife, mother of the narrator, is of Han ethnicity and became a prostitute after her family fell into ruin and the army looted her father's shop (Alai 2002: 31). At the end of the novel, she considers herself more Tibetan than Chinese (Alai 2002: 424), despite the fact that every Tibetan in the area refers to her as the Han wife of the Maichi chieftain. Although this would seem to be opposed to Harrell's idea of the civilizing project, he acknowledges that "in remote areas at least, acculturation often went the other way" (Harrell 2001: 306).

In another case, Mr. Huang is out of favor with his own government, and so flees to the Maichi chieftain's territory. He had once been a powerful politician, and had brought military sophistication, poppy seeds, and wealth to the Maichi chieftain, now he is aged and decrepit, and on the wrong side of both the Guomindang and the CCP. As a Han Chinese, his exile to the periphery is the most tangible evidence of his outcast status.

For still others, there is an opposite effect. For these characters, there is a conscious decision to make oneself an outcast within the framework of Tibetan society. This is seen by his sister who completely abandons Tibet, goes to England, and marries a British aristocrat. When she returns home, she makes no effort to hide her disgust at the barbaric lifestyle led by her family. She ultimately makes a choice about her ethnicity and her identity. She chooses to ignore her birth, and therefore lacks a sense of Gyarong identity.

Each of these characters is an outcast in his or her own way. Through presenting several different types of outcasts, many of whom are derived directly from Tibetan folklore, Alai is able to more skillfully navigate the various issues of identity and community facing Gyarong Tibetans living in these areas. It appears that, for Alai, identity is to a degree subjective. Moreover, Harrell notes that identity in some multi-ethnic areas is based not simply upon history or language, but also by kinship and cultural markers (Harrel 2001: 144).

In the case of these characters in Alai's novels, cultural markers appear to be the defining feature. While the narrator's mother is Han, and his sister is Tibetan, both of them have chosen to reject the ethnicity they inherited at birth, and at least view themselves as Tibetan and English respectively. In this regard, Alai is distancing himself from the kinship element of Gyarong identity. At the same time, however, Tibetans in that area do not recognize the chieftain's second wife as Tibetan, and her self-identity conflicts with the perception of others. He uses these outcast characters to grapple with issues of identity that would be different in other areas. Furthermore, Alai also adapts the traditional character types and uses them in innovative ways. Through employing these

established character types, Alai locates his narrative in a specifically Gyarong Tibetan experience and better illuminates the place of the Gyarong Tibetan people in modern China, both in a political and ethnographic sense.

3.C THE TALE OF JICUN

The Tale of Jicun describes a very similar geographic location and peoples, from an entirely different perspective than *Red Poppies*. This is due, at least in part, to the fact that the era in which the novel is set has changed from the period immediately preceding the establishment of the PRC, to the period shortly thereafter. This shift of only 15-20 years markedly changes the social landscape of the novel, and reflects the drastic social transformations implemented by the new socialist state after 1949. Nonetheless, this novel is replete with folkloric references to myth, ballad, tales about place, and traditional outcast characters that both draw upon the larger Tibetan folk tradition and that also poignantly describe the unique cultural situation of Gyarong Tibetans. While a majority of the social pariahs in this novel are of the newer set of character archetypes, there is still a pronounced use of traditional folklore and character types within this novel.

First, almost every character in this novel is a poor peasant, and it is a poverty that exists throughout the entire *Jicun* community. There are, however, degrees of poverty evident within the novel. The main character in the first section, Gela, is among the most impoverished of these, and the following excerpt shows that his house is in such bad condition, that no visitor is willing to enter:

[Gela's mother said]: “Son, go invite our guests to sit inside.”

Gela eyes were fixed fiercely upon Enbo: Ama, our home is both small and in shambles, nobody wants to sit inside, it's just a place for people like us to stay.” (Alai 2005a: 47)

Gela is commonly referred to as a wild child (Ch: *ye haizi* 野孩子), and the town's inhabitants are loathe to let their children play with him (Alai 2005a: 13). Not only is Gela an outcast through his poverty, but he and his mother are also not originally from the town itself, and are forced to leave the town by Rabbit's father (Alai 2005a: 25).

In the second part of the novel, the poverty of the community is highlighted in contrast to the wealth of the government and the nation. As a forest fire threatens the town, the national government steps in to help the efforts. With the government's arrival, food, technology and slogans appear in amounts that were unknown prior to the fire. Additionally, the forests around *Jicun* are said to belong to the country and not to the people of the town, further impoverishing them in relation to the government. This places the entire community as the social pariah, and helps to emphasize the issue of identity by creating the people of *Jicun*, as a group, in the outcast category.

Possibly most interesting in its absence is the lack of characters representing the younger sibling mentioned above. Although the novel takes place prior to the enacting of the “one child policy” in the PRC and despite the fact that this policy does not actually apply to many Tibetan households, the lack of characters who fit into the “younger brother” mold is most noticeable through its absence. Every child in the story is an only child. Gela and Rabbit are both only children in their families, and adult characters greatly outnumber youth characters.

Within the framework of this study, it seems as if these traditional social pariahs are an important part of this narrative, but these outcast characters serve two quite

disparate functions. Instead of simply being employed as a way of alerting a culturally competent reader to certain aspects of the novel, it is also a statement on the changes that have taken place in Gyarong areas of post-PRC Sichuan. As one movement leads onto another, the lives of the Gyarong people have changed dramatically, and this is reflected in the movement away from and general change in the nature of the traditional character types in the novel. The lack of traditional social pariahs in this novel may be indicative of the vast cultural and societal changes that Gyarong society has experienced since the establishment of the PRC. Characters who would not be pariahs prior to 1949 are now pariahs in the terms of the communist civilizing project. This will be discussed more extensively in Chapter 4, as Alai's innovative outcast characters influence the narrative by showing the changes occurring in Gyarong culture.

Nonetheless, through drawing upon these traditional character types, Alai is also able to utilize Tibetan traditions to discuss the identity of Tibetans living in this border area. He is also able to use the poorest characters to highlight some of the cruelty of human nature. Additionally, though, he shows some townspeople as poor outcasts in relation to others, and then emphasizes how the community as a whole is an outcast in terms of the Chinese civilizing project. This, then, helps further define a Gyarong identity in relation to the cultures around them, based not only on folk ideas, but also on socio-economic status.

3.D CONCLUSION

This discussion of the social pariah is what DeCaro and Jordan described as a thematic re-situation of folklore within the novel, or what Bauman and Briggs would

consider to be the re-contextualization of a text into a novel. This discussion has shown how Alai's use of the social pariah--idiot, trickster, younger brother, and impoverished person--draws thematically upon the way in which the Tibetan folktales use these general character types. These traditional character types provide Alai with a ready-made tradition upon which he can call in order to discuss Tibetan culture within the modern Chinese cultural context. Each of these types, with the backing of the tradition, provides the culturally attuned reader with a way of better understanding the novel itself, and the cultural context upon which the novel draws.

Through using the traditional outcast character as a staple in his writing, Alai further introduces several aspects of Tibetan experience to his stories. The use of traditional outcasts and tricksters links his literature to a greater Tibetan tradition, and helps to align his work Tibetan culture and society. Through writing about specifically Tibetan experience, Alai is also able to make a comment on the social situation facing many Tibetans who currently reside in the Aba TAP. In this way, the outcast and trickster characters show how many Tibetans, especially Gyarong Tibetans, live on the margins of both Tibetan and Han culture.

As each of these larger traditional character types, so important to Tibetan storytelling, works its way into Alai's novels, the thematic relation between the folkloric character type and Alai's literature becomes more and more apparent. These character types can occur in relative isolation in some instances, such as the idiot's ultra-violent sidekick Sonam in *Red Poppies*. In other cases, they occur simultaneously in the same character, as has already been examined in relation to the narrator of *Red Poppies*. As these characters are shown operating within a distinct and unique culture, they provide a

view of a culture in flux. They help create a distinct view of the Tibetan people living under the pressures of the PRC's civilizing project. In his writing, Alai's outcast characters both index the larger Tibetan oral tradition, and show how these outside civilizing projects effect Gyarong culture over time.

The next chapter will move from an examination of the traditional social pariah as defined and discussed in greater detail in this chapter, to Alai's use of several new types of social pariahs to discuss the life and culture of specifically Gyarong Tibetans in Aba TAP. These new character types will reflect, in some ways the Communist civilizing project as it has been employed in Tibetan areas of China. Beyond this, it will be possible to examine Alai's creative use of tradition, in writing these innovative types and how these innovative social pariahs function in a modern social discourse.

NOTES CHAPTER 3

1. As noted earlier, *Red Poppies* has not been very well received in the Tibetan exile community, for the way in which it depicts Tibetans as barbaric and non-religious. See Sonam 2002 for details.
2. None of the folktales I have read feature an older sibling as a protagonist.
3. See Alai 2005b: 96-107 for more details on this re-telling of the already firmly established trickster tale.
4. Miraculous signs often accompany the births of important personages. For example, when Gesar was born, it snowed in several different colors and his mother's animals all give birth (David-Neel and Yongden 1987: 77).
5. Modan's examination of how discourse is used in Mt. Pleasant to create a community identity draws upon this notion of the imagined community in her definition of the "spatialized community." (Modan 2007) Gladney also draws upon this concept in his discussion of "the politics of representation in China" (Gladney 2004: 51).
6. Personal communication with Alai in Chengdu during the summer of 2007. For more information on the way a performer assumes responsibility to an audience, see Bauman (1974: 11).

CHAPTER 4

INNOVATIVE SOCIAL PARIASHS

Beyond the traditional outcasts commonly found in Tibetan folklore, Alai utilizes certain novel character types to partially re-define the role of the social pariah in the context of the contemporary novel. This chapter will focus on two additional types of social pariahs. The first is the religious character. Almost any narrative about Tibet features religious clergy, few, however, portray the clergy in as ambiguous a light as Alai. The *Aku Tonpa* cycle of stories also tend to portray the clergy in a similarly negative light, but these religious characters are not central to the narratives themselves. In most other sources, however, Tibetan clergy are afforded places of esteem. An examination of the clergy, and the de-vested clergy will be instrumental in understanding how this character type functions in Alai's literature. This sub-category will be useful in discussing the way in which Alai constitutes his narrative as specifically concerning Gyarong.

The second innovative character type is the character of mixed-ethnicity. This character, within the context of Tibetan ethnic literature, seems to be unique to Alai's written works. Being of mixed-background himself, this character type comes directly from Alai's own experience of growing up and living in a Tibetan and Hui household, and also raising a son with a wife who is Han Chinese (Alai 2001: 122). In many ways,

this distinguishes between the innovative and traditional character types seemingly rare or absent in that the Tibetan folktales do not have this character type. This type, however, will be shown as helping to speak to the specifically Gyarong Tibetan experience found in Alai's writings.

4.A RELIGIOUS CHARACTERS AS OUTCAST

Earlier in this chapter, I noted that the “former religious clergy” is a newly formed character type that can be seen in many of Alai's prose writings. While the phenomenon of the Tibetan clergyman as outcast (not a hermit, but an outcast) is rare in traditional Tibetan folklore, it is common in Alai's works. Within the folk tradition, clergy are often given a position of honor, and are considered to be generally good people with an interest in benefiting the people. For a large part, they are afforded no such station in Alai's repertoire. This section will examine how Alai uses this new type of outcast both as a traditional outcast as well as for the purpose of more accurately portraying post-“liberation” Tibetan culture, and the specific cultural situation of the Gyarong people, in a fashion that is acceptable in the post-1949 discourse of ethnicity.

Tibet's two main religions, Buddhism, and the Bon religion that predates it, have been incredibly influential elements on Tibetan secular, political, and cultural life. Despite this, part of the officially atheistic PRC's civilizing project has been to de-emphasize Tibetan religion, and to attempt to limit its influence in Tibetan culture (Kolås and Thowsen 2006: 44). Many monks were forced to return to secular life, a difficult adjustment for them. Religion, then, is an especially contentious part of the experience of Tibetans throughout Tibet over the last sixty years.

Many of Alai's writings of his own experience growing up, as well as those fictional accounts of the life in the newly established PRC, focus on clergy who have been forced to return to secular life by the communist government. Alai's writings shed a great deal of light on the role of clergy along Tibet's border regions both before and after the incorporation of Tibet into the People's Republic of China. Since Aba TAP is a primarily Bon religious area, the religious persecution of the post-Liberation era extends beyond Buddhist clergy to include Bon clergy who were no longer able to practice. Former clergy from both religions play a crucial role in many of Alai's narratives.¹

Since *Red Poppies* is set in the period of time immediately prior to the establishment of the PRC, the situation for religious characters is slightly different than it is during the years following the establishment of the PRC. Despite this different cultural atmosphere, the message remains largely consistent throughout Alai's works that clergy, especially Buddhist clergy, exist on the periphery of Gyarong society, as they are in the minority in this largely Bon area. It may also be a comment on the place of Tibetan clergy in the greater PRC social order at different points after 1949.

In *Red Poppies*, the clergy live a very precarious existence. Like the state historian, they can only go along with the chieftain, and must tell the chieftain what he wants to hear. To do otherwise and to speak out against the chieftain would likely subject the individual clergymen to violent reprisal.

Three main characters fit into this category in *Red Poppies*. First, there is the Monpa lama. He is not really a lama at all in the Buddhist sense, but a Bon magician or shaman who prefers to be called a lama and benefits from the blessing of the chieftain. He treads softly, and at one point refuses to inform the chieftain of an impending natural

disaster that has been predicted in order to avoid incurring the chieftain's wrath, saying, "I cannot report this to the chieftain. Since we cannot escape disaster, it is useless to talk of fate. Besides, do you think the chieftain is a man who takes advice from others?" (Alai 2002: 72). He is in good graces with the chieftain, and tries hard to maintain that position. Second, there is the Living Buddha Jeeka, a Buddhist of the Nyingma sect,² whose monastery is supported by the chieftain, although he is not. This is because he does not play the proper political game, and often finds himself out of favor for telling the truth.

The third religious clergyman, and possibly the most important of them, is Wangpo Yeshi. Trained in Lhasa, he is a highly educated Buddhist monk of the Geluk sect.³ Wangpo Yeshi had a dream and has been sent, by his teacher, to convert the people in the western areas of Tibet. His arrival in the Maichi chieftain's territory meets with both suspicion and hostility. Despite his best evangelical efforts, he is successful only in having his tongue cut out by the chieftain (a second time after it miraculously grew back), and becoming the scribe for the chieftain's family, thus renewing a position that had ceased to exist long ago.

One of the important aspects of religion and clergy in Alai's depiction of Gyarong Tibetan culture is the way in which they link with mainstream, secular Tibetan culture of the Tibetan plateau. They make an important point about the disconnect between Gyarong Tibetans living on the cultural border areas, and those living in and hailing from Lhasa.

Wangpo Yeshi is an interesting character for the way in which he comes to represent Lhasa and the traditional Tibetan government. His presence and his strict

adherence to the rigorous dietary codes of the monk, shows how removed the Gyarong people are from Tibetan culture and religion of areas closer to Lhasa. Religion, in this cultural context, is highly politicized, as those monks under the direct support of the chieftain and living in his fortress enjoyed privileges that were not afforded to other monks.

Wangpo Yeshe's religious attitudes differ greatly from the Nyingma Buddhist practitioners directly supported by the chieftain. Although the idiot narrator takes a liking to him, the chieftain and others keep him at arm's length, showing their political distance from Lhasa. The elder brother even stuns Wangpo Yeshe by stating, to his face, that "I don't believe a word you say. I don't trust you or any other lama" (Alai 2002: 95). This makes it clear that this distancing was an intentional one. The incendiary comments Wangpo Yeshe made about religion in that area, further solidified that stance, and caused him to lose his own tongue.

At one point he tells the Maichi chieftain, "One day, when you establish connections with the Holy City [Lhasa], your family enterprises will truly become your eternal heritage" (Alai 2002: 94). This emphasizes the geographical and ideological distance between Lhasa and the Gyarong border area. The Gyarong, due in many ways to their geographic location, are not considered fully Tibetan by those in Lhasa. Furthermore, it shows how Alai views the Lhasa center somewhat skeptically in its relationship to the Gyarong people.

In essence though, Wangpo Yeshe's task was also going to be an uphill battle. The traditional validity of the authority granted to the chieftain comes not from the Dalai Lama or from some Tibetan source, but rather from the Chinese emperor. Furthermore,

because Aba TAP is a center for the native Tibetan Bon religion, Buddhist practitioners have trouble even gaining a foothold in Gyarong Tibetan areas. He has much difficulty obtaining the support of the people, and is constantly an outsider in this area, because he preaches a less magically-based, more austere doctrine.

This new kind of outcast then is not a marker of Tibetan folklore, but rather a marker of difference. The character serves to separate the Gyarong people and the Tibetans of this area from the Tibetans of Lhasa. It also distinguishes the focus of this novel as not being a pan-Tibetan experience, but a more specific, local experience. Distinguishing between Gyarong and Lhasa Tibetan attitudes, are part of what caused the fourteenth century author of *The Extensive Explanation of the World* (T: *Dzam-gling rgyas-bshad*) to comment that “the inhabitants under the 18 royalties of rGyal-mo-rong are not Tibetans” (Nagano 1983: 11). Many Gyarong Tibetans, however, self-identify as Tibetans, and did so long before the beginning of the communist civilizing project in this area. Several *tusi* chieftains trace their lineage back to central Tibet (Yang 2006: 147; Sichuan sheng 1994: 384-5) Additionally, Nagano notes that one reason they were identified as Tibetan was their apparent willingness to be called Tibetan (Nagano 1983: 9). Upon arriving in this place with a largely different set of cultural norms and understandings of religion, the monk from Lhasa is, naturally, viewed with great suspicion. In part, this is due to the fact that his allegiance is first to the Dalai Lama, as opposed to the Maichi chieftain. He is often persecuted for his out-spokenness on many issues, and his dissent eventually finds him jailed.

Like the traditional social pariahs in *Red Poppies*, these clergy exist on the margins of society. For example, out of favor with the chieftain, both Wangpo Yeshi,

and the Living Buddha Jeeka both clearly exist as outcasts. They are Buddhist holy men trying to live in an area where a majority of the population follows the Bon religion. In doing so, they allow the author to highlight the way in which the local culture he describes is radically different from the rest of Tibetan society, and the ways in which it cannot be equated with Tibetan society in other areas. Alai also achieves this through locating these characters as physically living on the periphery. For example, prior to his punishment and subsequent secularization, Wangpo Yeshe lives in caves in the surrounding mountains, writing and meditating away from the common people. The other clergy in this novel live in monasteries.

Alai's writings set after the establishment of the PRC, often feature clergy who have been de-frocked by the state. These *huansu* (literally, "becoming vulgar," meaning that they have been de-frocked) lamas are often fatherly figures who, like many other characters in his works, exist on the fringes of society. They are no longer allowed to pursue their religious interests and are struggling to find a place in the new society. They are still venerated by the local people, but are often afraid to practice their religion for fear of reprisal from the government.

In *The Tale of Jicun*, due to the anti-religious policies enacted during the early years of the PRC's civilizing project in Sichuan, many of these de-frocked clergy no longer serve an active religious or cultural function. Instead, these former lamas and monks live with pupils who are still young enough to learn a trade. They still command respect within the community, but in general serve no purpose. Every time a character tries to practice his religion, or perform any sort of culturally Tibetan activity, they are arrested and called reactionaries, as religious activities are part of the "four olds."

The two main clergy and former-clergy in *The Tale of Jicun* are the former lama Jiangcun gongbu and the Bon magician Dorje. In addition to these two characters, Rabbit's father, Enbo was also a Buddhist monk before the PRC government shut down or destroyed the temples. Each of these clergy are social pariahs in unique ways. Dorje is considered eccentric and strange in the new post-liberation Chinese world, he has no family, and is underappreciated wherever he goes. In the end, though, only he seems able to keep the forest fires at bay. His control over the elements makes him the only one who can save the town. Like the executioner in *Red Poppies*, nobody wants to marry him. During and prior to the Cultural Revolution, people known to be active religious clergy were in high demand among those of marriageable age. Dorje realizes this when he says, "Now nobody is willing to marry a magician. I do not have a son, in the future, when pastures become overgrown, you will have to deal with it yourselves." (Alai 2005a: 141).³

Jiangcun Gongbu is more fortunate. Enbo and his family take care of him, and yet, there seems to be nothing for him to do. He sits all day without purpose. Many of Alai's defrocked clergy in other writings show a similar trait. All of the years that could have been spent learning a trade had been spent in a monastery. When the monasteries were closed, there was very little he could do to help as he had no trade or skill with which he could benefit the community. The only time he actively takes part in something that benefits the greater community is when he takes up Dorje's cause after the magician's death.

As has been shown clearly in this section, such defrocked, forcibly removed from their holy duties either by chieftains or by the PRC, work their ways into the landscapes

of Alai's literary works along with other outcasts. Novels and short stories alike feature these types of characters who struggle to come to terms with the massive and radical reworking of society that all Gyarong Tibetans experienced.

4.B CHARACTERS OF MIXED ETHNICITY

As introduced above, characters of mixed ethnicity are sometimes quite prominent in Alai's literature. Written in these texts with the Chinese word *hunxue* (混血), which can be literally translated as “mixed blood,” these characters, often protagonists, closely follow the path of Alai's own life by being born to parents of different ethnicities, and being forced to choose one of these ethnicities to self-identify.⁵ These choices then follow them for their entire lives. In Alai's case, he chose to live as a Tibetan as opposed to Hui. Like the author himself, these characters also choose to live as Gyarong Tibetans. For these characters, however, their status is defined by their birth. Even though they fully accept and immerse themselves in Gyarong Tibetan culture, these characters are unable to shake the stigma attached to their births.

The most notable among Alai's “mixed-blood characters” is the idiot narrator from *Red Poppies*. His mother was a Han woman who married the Tibetan chieftain. The mother is constantly referred to as Han Chinese; at the end of the novel, when she is dying, she is, as noted previously, described as having completely taken on the Tibetan life: “She'd been born a Han, but had become acculturated into Tibetan culture. When she sniffed herself, she could tell she smelled like a Tibetan from head to toe” (Alai, “Red Poppies” 424).

Meanwhile, her half-Tibetan half-Han idiot son is completely Tibetan in terms of his cultural and linguistic competence. Nevertheless, He is never truly a member of either group, and his outcast status is a result, at least in part, of his bloodline. Despite sometimes “passing” (Goffman 1963: 73-90) as Tibetan, people change the ways they speak of and to him as a result of his background. When other chieftains speak with him, they often mention his background as if it is an insult, which he, being an “idiot,” shakes off with little or no ill-effect.

Although not nearly as prominent as the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies*, a few characters in *The Tale of Jicun* originally hail from outside the township, and are treated differently as a result. The ethnic background of the character Gela is one whose identity is unknown due to his mother's dubious reputation as a tramp. The pair of them seem to come and go as they please, and they sometimes disappear from the town for long periods of time.

This mixed-blood character type is also evident in several of Alai's short stories. Alai's short story “Blood Ties,” for instance, tells the story of a man whose Han Chinese grandfather encourages him to go to school and study Chinese, which sets him on a path that will change his life. In the end, the man's identity crisis is mirrored by his the location of his residence. In the city he is considered to be Tibetan, and his apartment has yak skulls and all of the ethnic markers of what urbanites consider a “Tibetan house” should have. When he returns to the countryside from which he originally comes, however, he is not accepted as being fully Tibetan.

A corollary to this category worth mentioning are the characters in Alai's novels who are pure blooded Tibetan, but through their own conscious rejection of Tibetan

culture, society, and views, are no longer part of the community. This is clearly shown through the narrator's older sister in *Red Poppies* described earlier.

The subjectivity of ethnicity in Alai's writings may stem from his own experience of choosing ethnicity. Being born into a mixed household, he was given the opportunity to choose his ethnic classification. While this, at first, affords people some ethnic fluidity in PRC society, Harrell notices that over time, this becomes increasingly crystallized as “it is no longer possible to be just Buddhist... or just a subject of a particular *tusi*; one must be a member of a *minzu* and roll all one's identities into one” (Harrell 2001: 212). At the same time, at least for the Prmi ethnicity in Liangshan prefecture in Sichuan province, the fluidity of ethnicity remains, and the politically negotiated ethnic identity is “yet one more aspect of their identity that they can manipulate, whether for identification with the larger entity of the Zang [Tibetan] *minzu*, for fostering local pride in the history and traditions..., or for both at the same time” (Harrell 2001: 214).

In a sense, the characters of mixed ethnicity almost make being Tibetan into a choice, and for them, ethnicity is both fluid and negotiated. Having ties to Tibetan culture, one must decide whether or not to be Tibetan. Although Han and mixed characters will not have their unique heritage forgotten by others in the community, they assume a Tibetan role through their attitudes and their actions. Simultaneously, the negotiation of identity can go in the opposite direction, and characters who are originally Tibetan may choose to reject the identity that comes with kinship, relying on other cultural markers, such as language, clothing, and customs to identify with a different group (Harrell 2001: 194). One such ethnic marker that is important to Alai's negotiation of ethnic identity is storytelling (see also Shuman 1986). As such, through stories and

other ethnic markers, Alai is both discussing ethnicity and coming to terms with changes in Gyarong Tibetan society.

In *The Tale of Jicun*, Alai takes this character-type a step further. The character of Gela and other outcasts are used by Alai to make comments on the effects of modernization of Gyarong Tibetan life as a direct result of the Chinese communist civilizing project. Almost every character, by virtue of living in the town, is an outcast in relation to this Han Chinese modernizing force. From the first part of the novel to the second, Alai subtly shifts between the more local and more national narrative strands to show how the people of *Jicun* and Gyarong Tibetans in general are marginalized while at the same time marginalizing others. The non-outcast characters in the first half of *The Tale of Jicun* actively work to marginalize Gela and his mother. Not letting their children play with Gela, and generally ignoring his mother until the two of them left. In the second half of the novel, however, one of Gela's and later Dorje's cruelest tormentors, and the most zealous of *Jicun's* communists, Subo, is degraded by his Han superiors, and his girlfriend starts dating a Han worker. In this case, he has gone from in-group to outcast as the focus of the novel shifts from the isolated community to its place in terms of the nation. Even collaboration with the Han center, then, does not exclude characters like Subo from this outcast status, as those who buy into the communist civilizing project are also considered outcasts on the periphery when placed in relation to the Han center. (Alai 2005a)

Similarly, when the first telephone wires come to town, they marvel at how many miles have been covered, and yet no inhabitant of the town has any use for the device.

“Every time something new arrived, it was proof or a forebear of the arrival of a better life. When the People's commune was erected, the people were informed like this. When the first car arrived in the town square, the people were similarly informed. When the young Han Chinese teacher arrived in a car, they were informed... when the first telephone line was pulled into town, the people were also informed. The telephone line was very long, but there was only one telephone... There was not a single towns person who had used this telephone. The townspeople did not have any information to tell people pass on into the ears of people with telephones. Their news was always told to people who did not have phones” (Alai 2005a: 57).

Later, when they begin to cut down their trees and build the road, they are told that the road will bring them prosperity, and that with money they can travel and buy bus tickets. The only problem is that none of them have money, and therefore they can not capitalize on the many advantages promised by the PRC. The following quote from *The Tale of Jicun* illustrates the way in which Alai is positioning the Gyarong community as a whole along the periphery of Han society and represents its members all as social outcasts:

“If the cars come, taking us to place where we couldn't go before, everyone will be happy.

Gela walked over, clapping his hands and shouting 'Bus tickets! Bus tickets! Money, Money, buy bus tickets!' That....

After laughing, the people all got quiet remembering something. That the vehicles would come was certain, but, they didn't have money and didn't have identification, this truth was also certain...” (59-60).

In the second part of the novel, this ceases to be a subtle dynamic, as the people are very explicitly portrayed as outcasts once the government decides to directly control their lives as part of the effort to save “the nation's forests.” This also mirrors the level of control that was exerted by the PRC government at a level that was previously unknown. The government takes over administration of the land that for so long belonged only passively to the Chinese emperor and more directly to these Gyarong Tibetans and their neighbors.

In this discourse of marginalization, there is also a very disempowering aspect that *The Tale of Jicun* portrays quite vividly. The Gyarong people are not only bound to the land through their own traditional ties, but also through governmental restriction. This government restriction is most clearly expressed when Enbo, Rabbit's father, tells of his experiences traveling outside of the town, and being detained for not having identification papers. This experience was completely new to him, and he had never been detained for such a seemingly trivial infraction in the past. This pariah status is not only in relation to the outside Han Chinese society that imposes policies afar, but, as the examples of the Bon magician Dorje and the various former clergy show, they are also pariahs within Tibetan society. These characters, the former clergy as character types in Alai's writings, although not directly derived from the Tibetan oral tradition, are still very much social pariahs, and as such reflect the Tibetan tradition itself. They are an offshoot of this tradition, and are used in a novel way, not simply to create Tibetan identity, but to also show the separation between Tibetans and other Chinese citizens.

4.C CONCLUSION

As this chapter has attempted to make clear, these innovative character types serve a different function from those I have labeled as “traditional.” Specifically, awareness of these character types provides the reader with extra insight for understanding some of these characters. While the trickster character types presented in the third chapter serve as a reminder of the Tibetan oral tradition and show how much Alai has drawn upon these traditions in constructing his narratives, these innovative character types provide a distinct variation of that traditional theme. This type is not

found in the oral tradition itself, and so must be analyzed differently in the way that they affect Alai's narratives.

The question becomes, then, how does one view these social pariahs. These innovative character types, and the way they are portrayed in the novels often work against many of the more traditional character types. Alai may, then, be using this larger folkloric category of the social pariah in an original fashion in order to implicitly distinguish the narratives as not being pan-Tibetan.

Tibetan critics of the exile community often condemn Alai's literature as being untrue to Tibetan culture, when in fact he is just representing his experience in a particular part of the greater Tibetan cultural area. These innovative character types serve to further define and locate the narratives to a specific part of Tibetan experience: the Gyarong Tibetan experience. The mixed-blood characters are the most transparent examples of this, as they reflect a type of experience that is more specific to people of the border areas. The prominence of Bon religious practitioners and magicians furthers this view that he is describing an experience that is more exclusive to these areas. They also mark the difference between Tibetan experience and Han Chinese experience. Therefore these innovative character types serve as cultural markers both for internal distinctions and external ones. Through re-interpreting this larger character type, and formulating new incarnations of it, Alai provides an insight into some of the attitudes and experiences of people living and working along in the cultural border areas such as the area presently known as Aba TAP.

NOTES CHAPTER 4

1. Since the end of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), monasteries have re-opened throughout cultural Tibet, and monks have begun returning to the monastic life. Religious practice is accepted within the PRC with some stipulations, and “mechanisms of control are in place in almost all monasteries and nunneries” (Kolas and Thowsen 2006: 90). Monasteries also offer Tibetan language education for young Tibetans (Kolas and Thowsen 2006: 112).
2. Also known as the Red Hat sect, the Nyingma (T: *rNying-ma*) sect of Buddhism is considered to be the oldest sect of Tibetan Buddhism. Founded by Guru Padmasambhava, who is said to have written many tantric works known as *gter-ma* or treasure literature, the term *rNying-ma* means “old ones” as distinguished from the “‘New Ones’ (*gsar ma*), that is the followers of the ‘new Tantras’, improved and selected after the second diffusion of the doctrine...” (Tucci 2000: 38).
3. Additionally, Dorje is treated in a fashion similar to some of Lu Xun’s characters, especially in the short story “Kong Yiji.” Lu Xun was a May Fourth movement thinker and author who is considered to be the greatest modern Chinese writer. His work was lionized by the communists following his conversion to their cause in 1929 and his death in 1936 (Hsia 1999: 28). In “Kong Yiji,” Lu Xun describes a man who is a marginal member of the literati and has become a book thief. He is unaware of his own status in traditional society. Having been educated in the PRC, it is quite possible that Alai has been influenced by Lu Xun's writings, and there are many similarities between Kong Yiji and the character of Dorje who is also an outcast clinging to old ways and unaware of the changes in society.
4. In the PRC children of mixed-ethnic parents may choose their ethnic identity. This identity is placed on their national ID card. Through self-identifying as a minority one can receive the benefits of the PRC's affirmative action programs designed to help modernize China's ethnic minority population (See Mackerras 1994; Kolas and Thowsen 2006; Hansen 1999).

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

This thesis has sought to show how Alai utilizes character types drawn from or related to the Tibetan oral tradition to construct a specifically Gyarong Tibetan narrative. Through relating his literature directly to the Tibetan folklore to which he was exposed living in the Aba TAP, Alai is able to approach issues of Gyarong identity and ethnicity in relation to the modern Chinese civilizing project. This is accomplished through drawing upon character types that are held in common with the larger Tibetan oral tradition, and also through character types that, while still outcast and trickster characters are largely different from those found in the larger oral tradition.

Through dividing the character types into two general sub-categories, the traditional trickster social pariahs, and Alai's innovative social pariahs, it is possible to examine how Alai approaches the place of Gyarong Tibetans in relation to the rest of the world in these novels. Through the traditional social pariahs, Alai places the novel within a specifically Tibetan experience. The idiot, the younger brother, and the trickster, are important parts of the folk tradition, and are important cultural markers in Alai's literature.

Those outcasts that I consider “innovative,” however, do not merely relate the larger Tibetan experience. They also, more specifically, relate the experiences of a people living along China's cultural border areas in the twentieth century, such as the

Gyarong Tibetans of the Aba TAP. These innovative outcast character types (such as the Buddhist and Bon clergy-members, the former clergy, and the characters of mixed ethnic background) reflect the experiences of Gyarong people in a time of intense cultural assimilation and change.

The two novels in question also create these characters as social pariahs within Gyarong Tibetan society as well. The Gyarong people live on the peripheries of predominantly Tibetan and Han Chinese areas both geographically and culturally. The characters of mixed ethnic background such as the idiot son live on the periphery of even that group, and Alai's re-appropriation of folkloric texts and traditions may reflect a desire to show that even these pariah characters, through their deeds, language, and customs, as well as through their own self-identification are Gyarong Tibetans as well.

It is important to note that “[l]ocal character anecdotes are a part of the oral tradition of a community and reveal more about society's reaction to deviance than about the deviant” (Mullen 1978: 116). Through character anecdotes about social outcasts, deviants, tricksters, and social pariahs, Alai is using the deviant in just such a fashion, to shed light on society and its reaction to deviants. Additionally, Alai's outcast characters are part of an already marginalized sub-grouping of Tibetans, who, through interaction with them, shed light on both Tibetan and Han Chinese societies.

In some novels, a single character fits into several categories of social pariahs. In fact, the idiot narrator of *Red Poppies* is shown to fit several categories of those examined in this paper. The second son of the Maichi chieftain is a social pariah in the sense of having been born of mixed-ethnicity, being an idiot, and being the younger sibling. He is also clearly related to the Tibetan trickster tradition of Aku Tonpa, Through creating

such a character who is an exemplar of both traditional and innovative character types, the author is simultaneously aligning the Gyarong people with Tibetan culture, and also noting the different experiences that make their culture unique in relation to those Tibetans who associate themselves with the social and political culture of the plateau and particularly Lhasa.

Alternatively, *The Tale of Jicun*, while more explicitly concerned with the connection of folklore and place in these novels, also makes extensive use of the trickster and social pariah as a character type. Among the innovative character types in this novel, the Bon magician Dorje and the former lama Jiangcun Gongbu stand out. They are outcasts in different ways, yet the fact that they are outcasts primarily because they adamantly support traditional culture very poignantly shows the Chinese civilizing project at work in these areas. Nonetheless, Alai is still writing about a specifically Gyarong experience. He is writing about the Gyarong Tibetan peoples' response among several different levels of social hierarchy to the increased presence of the Han Chinese and their cultural influences in the tiny town of *Jicun*.

Ultimately, Alai is writing about culture in these border regions. By setting both of these novels, *Red Poppies* and *The Tale of Jicun* in the same cultural border areas in which he was raised, he is attempting to write a specific kind of Tibetan experience. This is similar to the way that Dayton describes Woese as being “on a quest to reconstitute an identity and cultural relationship she feels she has lost in her absence from Tibet, but additionally accentuates reconstituting the 'place' that contains her mixed identity” (Dayton 2006: 44-5). In Alai's case, the place containing his mixed identity is Aba TAP, and the cultural relationship is his relationship most specifically to Gyarong Tibetans in

this area, and this new kind of outcast then is a marker of ethnic difference. Because of the way that Alai writes this specifically Gyarong identity into his novels, the experience described in his writings often does not ring true with many of the novel's critics, both Tibetan and Western, who are more comfortable with the Shangri-la image of Tibet and its people, or who hold other objections based on events since 1949 (Sonam 2002; Whipple 2003).

Beyond this, Alai's use of folklore and character types as he engages in the process of de-contextualizing and re-contextualizing traditional Tibetan folklore into a static, Chinese language text extends the issues of political power and agency. Indeed, “to decontextualize and recontextualize a text is thus an act of control, and in regard to the differential exercise of such control, the issue of social power arises” (Bauman and Briggs 1990: 76). Thus through his decontextualization and recontextualization of folkloric themes, Alai is exerting control over the Tibetan oral tradition, and wresting social power from the grips of, at the very least, the Han Chinese who, since the establishment of the PRC have, to varying degrees, regulated expressions of ethnic religious beliefs, folk traditions, ethnic identity, social memory, and--importantly for the purpose this paper--language (See Kolas and Thowsen 2006; Harrell 2001; Gladney 2004; and Mueggler 2001). Additionally, through uses of folklore, Alai is able to “manipulate memory...to deal with memories of past violence, to seek relief from their continued effects,” (Mueggler 2001: 287)

In some ways, through his extensive use of Tibetan folklore and character types derived from that tradition, Alai also may be attempting to wield social power over those Tibetan scholars who do not accept Chinese-language literature as Tibetan literature.

Since the 1980's, Tibetan intellectuals have debated whether or not a Chinese language text can accurately portray Tibetan experience. When the Cultural Revolution first ended, there were very few Tibetan authors, and even fewer who were literate in Tibetan. Many of the Tibetan authors at this time who wrote in Chinese were actually of Tibetan and Chinese ancestry. Luo Qingchun (also known by his Yi name as Aku Wuwu), a scholar of the Nuosu sub-group of the Yi ethnic group discusses the use of Chinese in the writings of modern ethnic minority poets, stating that, “more ethnic minority poets have lost the ability to communicate in their native tongue and to write poetry, and so they use their 'second language,' Chinese, to write...” (Luo 2001: 40; Bender 2005; Aku and Bender 2006). This is not, however, regular Chinese, but rather what he calls, “Second Chinese.” (Luo 2001: 56) Second Chinese, in terms of Yi poetry written in Chinese is “no longer the Chinese that means Han culture, but is a type of new Chinese that, after Yi ethnic Chinese language poets completely changed its form, has been used to express and accept the setup of Yi cultural progression.” (Luo 2001: 56). Dayton concurs with this concept noting that ethnic minority authors “create a new language, literally a 'Chinese language' beyond the traditional assumptions of a Han defined China” (Dayton 2006: 6-7).

Despite using this form of Second Chinese, many ethnic hybrids in the Tibetan community are not fully accepted by their Tibetan colleagues (Schiaffini 2004: 86). Many Tibetan intellectuals feel that the Chinese language is insufficient for writing Tibetan experience (Shakya 2000: 30-1). As such, “the way Tibetan writers perceive themselves, as well as the way they are perceived by other Tibetans, depends largely upon whether they write in Tibetan or Chinese” (Schiaffini 2004: 86). Speaking on this

issue about Tibetan poet Wooser, Dayton states that “Wooser is intoning her Tibet in the language fluent to her, yet is attempting to reach beyond its limitations” (Dayton 2006: 45).

This is also what Alai is attempting in his writings, intoning his Tibet, his experience of Gyarong Tibet in his writings, and what Luo means by the term Second Chinese. As a result of the reluctance on the part of some Tibetan intellectuals to accept Chinese language literature as Tibetan literature, ethnically mixed authors like Alai are social pariahs in their own way, and Alai is a product of this time and this social situation. Like many of these authors, Alai also seems to be re-constructing a Tibetan identity after living a life heavily influenced by the Han ethnicity and within the parameters of official publishing houses (Schiaffini 2004: 85).

Although some members of the Tibetan community take issue with Chinese language artistic creation, many Tibetan authors are empowering themselves by learning Chinese (Schiaffini 2004: 90). Dayton argues that “[b]ecause Chinese carries increasing currency in the world, ethnic poets... can reach far beyond their isolation and inscribe an ethnically centered worldview onto the world stage” (Dayton 2006: 10), and this is the source of that empowerment.

Ultimately, this study discusses how Alai uses folklore character types to define an identity within the discourse of ethnic relations along the cultural border areas of Aba TAP. The trickster and social outcast characters in his stories often exist on the periphery of both the Tibetan society and Chinese society. Alai uses them to comment on and work to create a distinct Gyarong Tibetan identity in the context of a multi-ethnic area, such as Aba TAP. His ability to manipulate the folklore tradition in this fashion also empowers

him to wield power both over the tradition and over those who criticize the fact that he writes in Chinese.

5.A Further Directions

This thesis, however, is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the folkloric elements in Alai's literature. Throughout this paper, entire “genres” or analytic types of folklore have been left virtually untouched, especially the way in which almost every occurrence becomes a part of local legend. This observation holds for both of the novels, and many short stories as well.

One particular item for future study is the way in which Alai writes about place, and how he uses folklore to help lend cultural meaning to geographic landmarks throughout *Aba TAP*. While this phenomena is most explicitly seen only in his travelogue, *Upward Steps of the Earth*, there are also several instances of it in which it arises in *Red Poppies*. It is an even more potent theme in the second-part of *The Tale of Jicun*, as Alai describes peoples' reactions to a forest fire that threatens the entire community of *Jicun*. Additional angles from which Alai's other writings may be examined include looking at the use of material culture, rituals, ballads and proverbs in these novels.

Beyond this, future studies may also opt to take a comparative stance, looking at literature written by author from other peripheral groups throughout the world and the way in which they use outcast characters. There may be some interesting parallels to explore in analyzing these novels next to novels like Richard Wright's *Native Son* (African American themes), N. Scott Momaday's *House Made of Dawn*, and Leslie

Marmon Silko's *Ceremony* (Native American themes). Additionally, studies of Alai's works in comparison with those of other ethnic minority authors in China would likely be fruitful, including Tibetan writer Tashi Dawa whose Chinese language writings about Tibetan culture make for an interesting comparison to Alai's literature, and Yi ethnic poet Aku Wuwu whose poetry in both Chinese and Yi draws heavily upon traditional Nuosu Yi culture, as well as other ethnic minority authors (Bender 2005; Dayton 2007). These are only two examples of areas lying either beyond the field of the current study. Nonetheless, it is hoped that this paper has shown Alai's repertoire is a brand of literature that utilize folklore to comment extensively on the situation of a certain "minority" peoples in China. As such, it certainly merits further examination.

APPENDIX A

TIBETAN WORDS AND NAMES

In the text	Wylie	Chinese characters
Lama	bla-ma	喇嘛
Tulku	sprul-sku	活佛
Aba	rNga-ba	阿坝
Dolma	Drol-ma	卓玛
Lhasa	lha-sa	拉萨
Aku Tonpa	A khu ston pa	阿古顿巴
Dorje	rDo-rje	多结
Lobzang	bLo-bzang	洛桑
Gela	rgan-lags	格拉
Gesar	Ge-sar	格萨尔
Gyalpo	rgyal-po	王
Thangka	thang-ka	唐卡
Jiangcun Gongbu	rGya-tsho gong-po	江村贡布
Sonam	bsod-nams	索朗
Naqu	nag-chu	那曲
Shigatse	gzhis-ka-rste	日喀则
Gyarong	rGyal-rong	嘉绒
Sky Burial	bya-gtor	天葬
Geluk	dge-lugs	格鲁
Nyingma	rNying-ma	宁玛
Bon	Bon	苯
Ma'erkang	'bar khams	马尔康

APPENDIX B

TWO TIBETAN FOLKTALES

“The Story of the Idiot's Knife”

Once there was an elder brother, a younger brother, and their younger sister. The younger brother was an idiot. Because their father and mother had both died, they borrowed two of the king's cattle to plow a small piece of land, plant some crops, and support their livelihood.

One day, the younger sister suddenly disappeared. The two brothers asked everyone, but no one knew where she went. They looked everywhere, but could not find her trail. The two brothers pondered a bit and decided that the older brother would work in the fields, while the younger brother would take care of household matters.

One day, the elder brother said to his younger brother, “I am going to the fields to plant crops, you should make some clean food and bring it to me.” At noon, the younger brother according to his brother's orders, he cleaned the pots and bowls, and prepared a meal. On the road to his brother, he came upon a dirty, smelly pile of dog scat. The idiot brother said, “Dog scat, please move, I want to take food to very clean to my brother who is in the fields,” but the dog scat did not move. The idiot younger brother became angry, picked up a rock, saying, “If you don't I will beat you, for not listening. After saying this, he hit smashed the dog scat, and it splattered onto the idiot's body, some also splattered

on the food. The idiot saw that the dog scat had scattered, became happy, and continued walking past it. When he arrived at the fields, the elder brother asked him, "Is this food clean?" The idiot younger brother responded saying "the food is clean, just a little bit of dog scat splattered on it." The older brother said, "If this food has dog scat on it, I cannot eat it. You stay here and watch the cattle; don't let them run around. I am going back to make some clean food!" Then the elder brother went home.

The idiot younger brother opened his eyes wide, and watched over the cattle with an unwavering eye. Suddenly, the cows were eating grass, their mouths opening and closing, their tails were also moving back and forth. The idiot brother shouted to them, "Don't move, my brother's orders! Why don't you obey?" The oxen simply continued eating the grass, and wagging their tails. The younger brother became angry; drawing his knife he cut off the cows' mouths and tails. Then, the cows began running around in pain. Seeing this, the idiot younger brother was incensed. He then used his knife to cut off their hooves. As a result, the two strong draft animals lay quietly on the ground unmoving.

When the elder brother brought his clean food back to the field, he saw the two cows did not have their mouths and tails, and were missing their legs, and asked his brother, "What happened? Why did you do this to the cows?" The idiot younger brother replied that, "These two cows disobeyed your orders, their mouths were moving, the tails were moving, and so I punished them, and they still wouldn't obey, running around and such, so I punished them even more heavily, this is the truth."

The elder brother agitatedly said, "These are the king's cattle! We are going to have our mouths cut and feet and hands chopped off by the king. I don't think we can

stay here any longer, we should go somewhere else fast.” The idiot younger brother said “If we cut off the king's hand, won't that be good enough?” The elder brother said, “Don't talk bravely, hurry up and go, if we go later, we will be punished.” The younger brother said no more, he just asked to return home to pick up some things. His brother told him to make it quick.

The idiot younger brother did not go home, but rather ran to a window outside the king's castle, and called, “Your majesty, I have an excellent jewel that I want to give to your highness, please stick your hand to take it.

As soon as the king heard the word jewel, he immediately stuck his hand out the window. Seeing this, the idiot brother raised his knife and struck forcefully; in one swipe he cut off the king's hand. One hand holding the knife and one hand holding the king's hand, he ran to his brother and reported, “I took off the king's hand, from now on, he won't be able to lift a knife to hurt us!” Shocked, the older brother grabbed his brother's hand and fled.

The two brothers fled day and night. They went for one hundred ninety-nine days crossed countless green mountains, forded countless rivers, large and small, that were not. They conquered raging winds, torrential rain, and driving snow. Finally they saw a beautiful house, and happily ran in its direction anticipating a break.

When the brothers looked into the house, the walls were gold, and the pillars were silver and they shone brightly. There was but a single girl inside staring blankly. When the girl saw that people had entered, she raised her head and recognized her older brother. “Brother, how did you get here? This is a demon's house, and demons eat people! Hurry up and leave!” When the elder brother heard this, he became scared. The idiot brother

asked his sister, “Where is this demon? If we kill him, then there will be no problem, right?” “He's inside.” The sister replied softly, “the demon is sleeping in his room! You can't kill him!” Having said this much, she looked at the sky, and said “You can't leave today, stay here, but be careful! No matter what, you cannot pee!”

The two brothers slept until midnight. The younger brother then said, “I have to pee!” “No way,” the older brother hastily replied, “if you pee, the demon will come eat us.” The idiot younger brother, however, as usual did not pay attention to this, and began to pee. The urine dripped down into the demon's bedroom, and he opened the window and looked at the sky, there was not a cloud in sight, then he asked the sister, “Hey, it isn't raining, how come there's water falling down here?” “Maybe the cask of alcohol I put in the attic broke, I'll go check!” she replied. Then she went upstairs and asked her brother, “Why did you go to the toilet? Go downstairs!” The sister took them downstairs, and intentionally told them, “Tomorrow, the demon will go out, he will stick his tail out first. No matter what, don't move his tail! If you move his tail, he will get angry and want to eat people.”

The second day, the demon stuck out his long tail. The idiot wanted to touch it, but his brother said, “Don't do it, otherwise the demon will hurt you.” The idiot didn't listen to his brother, and raised his knife and forcefully swiped at it, cutting the demon's tail right off. The demon couldn't bear the pain, and fled. He dashed his head against a stone, causing his grey matter to seep out, and he died immediately.

After this, the three, the two brothers and their sister, became the rulers of this place, and lived happily ever after.

Translated by Tim Thurston from:

Song Xingfu 宋兴富, ed. *Zangzu minjian gushi* 藏族民间故事 [Tibetan Folk Stories] (Vol. 1). In *Kangba Minjian wenxue ji cheng congshu* 藏族民间文学集成丛书. Chengdu: Ba Shu shu she, 2004, pp. 62-65.

“The King's Son and the Beggar's Son”

Once, there was a king who had a son. The king's family had a servant whose family was poverty-stricken, and she also had a son. The king's son and the servant's son played together from a very young age, and they became inseparable.

One day, the king's son wanted to go out and begin his studies, but he didn't dare do it alone, so he said to the servant's son, “I wish to go out and ask a teacher to tutor me, would you like study with me? You won't have to worry about the tuition, my father has given me some silver, I can take of it.”

The servant's son went home and talked it over with his mother. His mother hoped her son could gain some knowledge and have some accomplishments so that later he could have something on which to rely. When she heard that the prince wanted to pay for her son, she happily acquiesced.

Thereupon, the prince and the servant's son set out. They walked and walked, climbing 99 mountains and fording 99 rivers. One day they walked into a monastery, and met a lama whose magic was excellent, and decided to ask him to be their teacher and ask to be trained in magic. The prince took out the silver and gave it to the lama saying, “I respectfully give this master as a signal of my intent. It is the tuition money that my family has prepared for me. I wish for you, my teacher, to pass on useful magic.” In speaking, he never once mentioned the servant's son. At this moment, the servant's son realized that he was only being treated like a servant, and that he should resist speaking and sit to one side.

The lama said to the prince, “This amount of money is only enough to teach you one kind of magic, so I will teach you the way of *Po wa zhong ben*. If you master this

form of magic, your soul will be able to do what it wants, leave its own flesh and inhabit the corpse of any dead animal or person, make it die and be reborn.” Then the lama began to teach the magic to the prince. Although the servant's son desired to study diligently, because he didn't have the money to pay his tuition, every time he taught the technique, the lama threw him out into the courtyard, and would not let him listen in. The servant's son was deeply disappointed, thinking in his heart that his mother was sitting at home waiting for him to return with some understanding, but in this way, I haven't accomplished anything, how can I return with face? Therefore he stood outside the window every day and listened, when we was hungry, he begged food from the lamas in the temple, afterwards he would quickly return to the window and return to his spot beneath the window to listen, everyday he persisted unceasingly. When the magic finally was taught, the servant's son was just like the prince, and had also mastered this art, but he didn't mention it, and pretended that hadn't learned anything. The prince's son proudly said to him, “I have already mastered the *po wa zhong ben* technique, what skill have you mastered?” The servant's son said, “You cheated me to get me to come here, it was only to benefit yourself. I don't wish to study magic, I just want to always be satisfied, but never full, and I just want to go every day begging, no I haven't a single accomplishment to my name, I should go back.”

The two of them headed homeward. On the way home, they saw a dead Bonpo¹ by the side of the road. The servant's son said to the prince, “How about you show the magic you learned!” The prince did it and his soul left his own body, and alit on the body of the Bonpo, making the Bonpo live again, and walked again to the place for the sky burial on the mountain, leaving the body there for the vultures, and his soul returned back

down the mountain, and entered his own body. The servant's son said, "You spent that much money and only learned how to do this, I don't think that's anything special. I also can do this kind of magic." The prince however did not believe it.

After walking for awhile, they also discovered a small child's corpse by the side of the road. The servant's son said to the prince, "Today I'll show this magic technique for awhile, please take care of my body." Having said this, he carried out the magic, leaving his body on the ground, and alighting upon the child's body, making him live again, and also taking the child's body to the sky burial area and feeding him to the vultures. He then returned down the mountain and re-entered his own body. The prince was floored, but couldn't do anything, and the two people continued walking.

On their journey, they also saw a dead pigeon. "I still haven't mastered the method of entering a bird's body in this technique," the servant's son said to the prince. "You, however, spent so much money, you certainly have mastered everything. Please show me using the body of the pigeon." The prince said, "That's not hard, I'll be back in a bit." Saying this, he then dropped his own body and his soul alit on the pigeon's body, and it came back to life, and afterwards flew towards the sky burial site atop the mountain.² The servant's son immediately left his own body and entered the prince's body, and then threw his own body in the fire and walked on alone.

When the prince's soul returned from the mountain top, it discovered that the servant's son had inhabited his own body and disappeared. The soul had nowhere to rest, and could only come and go around the mountain. With no other recourse, he re-inhabited a dead pigeon's body and from then onwards could rest its feet only on the bleak and desolate mountainside. After the servant's son had returned home, he walked

straight into the palace and said to the king, “I’ve already mastered the magical technique and have returned home.” The king was very pleased, and then asked him why he and the servant’s son hadn’t come back together. He responded saying that he was drowned while trying to cross a river. The king believed this to be true.

The servant’s son stealthily came to his home, and explained to his mother all of the things he had experienced. He also told his mother to wear a pained expression in front of everyone else, and not to make a fuss to the king. He told her to be patient for awhile, and wait until he ascended to the throne, and then he would take her into the palace, and redouble his filial efforts.

Afterwards, the old king died, and the servant’s son ascended to the throne, and welcomed his mother into the palace. The real prince’s soul stayed on the mountain top forever.

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NOTES APPENDIX B

1. A *Bonpo* is Tibetan for a believer in or practitioner of the Bon religion.
2. Sky Burial (Ch: *tian zang* T: *bya gtor*) is a traditional Tibetan burial rite in which, after a person dies, their body is given to nature to be devoured by vultures and other creatures. “When a person is alive, he gives his labor, abilities, and wisdom (everything he has) to society. When his life ends, and when the soul has left this body...the body that the spirit has left is his final contribution, by allowing crows and other animals to take his corpse as food, these animals then will not hurt other young lives” (Danzhu 2000: 245-6).

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