



Echoes of Fate: The Cultural Allegory of the Tusi Area

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Abstract. This study takes the novel *Red Poppies* by Tibetan writer A Lai as the research object to explore the cultural allegory and masculinity embodied in it. The research starts with the influence of A Lai's dual cultural identity on his writing perspective, and through the analysis of the main male characters in the text, studies the specific manifestations of the integration of Han and Tibetan cultures. Specifically, this paper analyzes the characters and fates of the protagonists "I" and "my brother", reveals the different masculinities in Han and Tibetan culture - the wisdom and benevolence masculinity in Han culture, and the bravery and fighting masculinity in Tibetan culture, and discusses how these gender roles become the carriers of cultural allegory. The paper effectively analyzes the manifestations of Han and Tibetan culture in the power struggle, providing a new perspective for understanding the construction of cultural identity in Chinese literature. Hence, it has important theoretical and practical significance in exploring cultural identity, ethnic relations, and literary expression.

Keywords: Cultural Allegory, Masculinity, Han-Tibetan Identity, A Lai, *Red Poppies*.

1 Introduction

A Lai (1919–) is a world-known contemporary Tibetan writer from China [1]. From *Red Poppies* to *Notes from the Clouds*, he records the historical process in the Jiarong region, an zone where Han and Tibetan cultures blend. Among his works, *Red Poppies* is the most widely circulated one, with the most readers, the greatest impact, and the highest reputation, which was first published in 1998 [2].

The story mainly revolves around a Tibetan chieftain in the Jiarong region gave birth to a foolish son (referred to as "I") with his Han wife after a drunken night [3]. As "my" self-awareness gradually awakens, "I" participate in a struggle with "my brother" for the chieftain inheritance. After "my brother" is assassinated, "I" return to the northern frontier and take a series of measures to adapt to the times. Thus, I become the ruler of among the chieftains (Ibid).

As a literary text that won the Fifth *Mao Dun Literature Prize*, *Red Poppies* has received widespread attention at home and abroad for its unique subject matter, perspective, and power relations [4]. When talking about themes and forms of expression, A Lai repeatedly refers to the "allegorical nature" of his novel: "*Some critics have*

suggested the allegorical nature of the novel I also often have heartfelt associations when I write.” Many researchers have also interpreted this “allegory”. In the field of gender studies, the perspective corresponding to women’s studies is the study of masculinity. In the book *Theory of Masculinity*, Lei (2012) uses the binary combination of “cultural cultivation and courage” to explain gender identity expression, especially Chinese masculinity [5]. On this basis, Song (2024) went further and chose the cultural imagination of “talented scholar” in pre modern Chinese culture to explore the complex relationship between gender and modernity [6].

Researchers often analyze masculinity from the Confucian discourse system of pre modern Chinese culture, but rarely pay attention to masculinity outside the pre modern Chinese cultural system, especially the masculinity of ethnic minorities. In fact, the research on masculine temperament in Tibetan culture by Hillman & Henfry (2006) is still in its preliminary stage [7]. This research believes that a comparative study of masculinity in Chinese and Tibetan cultures can effectively broaden the research scope of masculinity in China.

Based on this, the article focuses on the cultural allegorical nature of *Red Poppies* and tries to find an entry point through the analysis of the masculinity of the main male images in the text. The character and fate of “I” and “my brother” with the corresponding cultural situation of Han-Tibetan culture will be connected in the paper, thus help analyze the internal logic and construction mechanism of the cultural allegory of the novel, and make a judgment on the cultural identity tendency shown by A Lai in *Red Poppies*.

2 Masculinity and Cultural Allegory

2.1 The Cultural Context of A Lai’s Work

A Lai’s birthplace is the Aba Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, which is called “Jiarong” in Tibetan. As the border area between the Han and Tibetan areas, it is also a channel for the mutual influence and integration of Chinese and Tibetan cultures [8]. For A Lai, this blend is first reflected in language life:

“In the schools we attend, from elementary school to middle school to higher schools, we learn Chinese and use Chinese. Returning to daily life, we still communicate in Tibetan to express everything we see and all the feelings caused by it... Most Tibetan intellectuals of our generation are like this. They can speak and write in Chinese, but their mother tongue Tibetan, however, is still a spoken language just like in childhood.” [9].

The thinking habits and aesthetic characteristics in Tibetan oral literature provide Alai with a sense of heterogeneity and alienation in his writing, while the education of Chinese culture also influences him, allowing him to enter the cultural context of the Han region. The nourishment of two ethnic cultures has contributed to the “dual ethnic identity” of A Lai, thus constructing his unique cultural perspective. On a historical level, he witnessed firsthand the process of Han culture breaking through Tibetan cultural traditions through politics. In this process of cultural convergence, revolutionary

changes have destroyed the old culture. With a compassionate attitude, A Lai writes about the disappearance of culture in his novels:

"My novels naturally focus on the disappearance of culture (some special ways of life and production), record this disappearance, and use a compassionate tone when describing this disappearance. This is because I do not believe that a life can exist in any culture. The disappearance of a culture, or more precisely, the way of life and production, must be tragic for some individual lives that reside within it." [9].

2.2 The Allegorical Structure in A Lai's Novel

After Alai's cultural attitude is determined, it is not difficult for people to understand the cultural context he constructed in *Red Poppies*. In his imagination, Jiarong during the Tusi era was a region under the rule of Tibetan culture, but after the invasion of Han culture, Tibetan and Han cultures blended, fought, and lost, ultimately settling like dust. In fact, A Lai chooses to present the process of cultural struggle to readers through "cultural fables". He has mentioned multiple times that he uses allegorical structures in his novels to achieve thematic effects, and he also appreciates the critics' evaluation of this work as a fable novel.

2.3 Analyzing Cultural Allegory with Jameson's Theory

To interpret cultural fables, the first step is to clarify the carrier and direction of the fables. Jameson's *Third World Literature in Transnational Capitalism* believes that:

"Third World texts, even those that seem to be about individuals and libidinal tendencies, always project a kind of politics in the form of national allegory: stories about personal destiny contain allegories of the impact on the popular culture and society of the Third World." [10].

In Jameson's theory, the "Third World" itself is an ideologically imposed definition, in stark contrast to the "First World" and "Second World". He believes that when Third World literature is oppressed and in pain, it does not belong to the projection of psychology and individual subjectivity, but rather retains the perspective of fables [10].

In A Lai's cultural context, Tibetan culture, as a weak culture, is undoubtedly more in line with the cultural positioning of the Third World, while Han culture, as a strong culture, presents the image of a superior in cultural relations. Therefore, this paper can use Jameson's theory to examine the novel text.

In fact, "Allegory" itself supports a complex interpretation of characters in a cultural relationship. Jameson believes:

"Our traditional concept of allegory is that allegory exaggerates characters and personifications, and compares one-to-one corresponding objects. However, this corresponding object itself is in every eternal existence of the text and constantly evolves and transforms, making the one-dimensional view of the signifier process complicated." [10].

Jameson did not further discuss the characteristics, quantity, and relationship of the carrier of allegory. As the carrier of allegory, the existence in the text must have a direction. In other words, the corresponding carriers needed for the establishment of

cultural allegory are two antagonistic characters representing Han culture and Tibetan culture selected from this land.

2.4 Masculinity as a Cultural Expression

As a male-centered literary practice, the paper believes that the relationship between “I” and “my brother” as allegorical carriers of Han culture and Tibetan culture reflects the relationship between Han and Tibetan cultures through their personal destiny and struggle. And this cultural relationship is largely represented by the masculinity of the two.

Song (2024) believed that masculinity refers to the norms, rules, and patterns that men in a specific culture follow when interacting with others according to etiquette [6]. Its connotation includes three aspects: male gender roles, stereotypes of male temperament, and gender ideals, namely: general behavioral norms of men, stereotypes of male groups by people, and society’s imagination of ideal men (Ibid). Specifically, masculine temperament includes two levels: biological and cultural. It accepts cultural imprints and undergoes changes under cultural trends. It can be said that culture is manifested in men with masculine traits, and a person’s masculine traits are a reflection of culture.

The research method of analyzing male traits can deconstruct the cultural structure of characters. Lei (2012) believes that the significance of masculinity is neither a priori nor universal in culture, but rather presents differences in different cultural forms and migrates over time in different cultures [5]. Therefore, masculine temperament has certain cultural differences, and studying the masculine temperament of male characters means effectively analyzing the cultural structure of the characters. Therefore, from a gender perspective, the study can better separate the masculine traits of “me” and “my brother” to analyze their cultural identity and structural tension.

3 The Embodiment of Masculinity in Han and Tibetan Culture

3.1 Cultural Identity of “I” -- Wisdom & Benevolence

The sentence “*I am a fool*” is emphasized many times in the novel. But through the deconstruction of “my stupidity”, the essay could discover that it is more probably from the absurdity of “my” being unable to control myself in the early life instead of an intellectual defect, like “*I was adamant not to laugh at the first month. At the next two months, no one could make my eyes respond to any call.*” [3]. After the germination of the 13-year-old self-awareness, “I” have controlled the stupidity and let those with whom “I” communicate take off their guards by the semblance of my stupidity consciously. “My stupidity” is not the opposite of wisdom but its protective color.

Then it can be turned to the analysis of the “my wisdom”. The basis of “my wisdom” is the ability of gaining insight into people’s hearts, which help “me” understand Mackey Toast’s policy to establish a market at the border and let “me” get the chance to compete with “my brother”. And when “I” capture the nervousness of these toasts who came to trade with opium but no food, “my wisdom” translate into strategy, which

helps “me” win in the competition: “I” provide hungry people with food and make them submit to Mackey Toast. And “I” offer food to the weaker side of the two toasts to attack each other, and then take advantages of the balance.

From wisdom to strategy to prophecy, “I” is portrayed as one of the wisest people in the novel and there is no counterpart to this kind of wisdom in Tibetan culture, but we can find a similar paradigm of masculinity in Han culture, like the Strategist in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, Zhuge Liang. In Confucian discourse, Zhuge is one of the combination of the discourse of “Junzi” and the heroic characteristics of the traditional Han people. As the acting ruler of the Shu Han regime, he was loyal to the first emperor Liu Bei and benevolent to the people of Shu Han [11]. Different to the traditional Han heroism, Zhuge is portrayed as a perfect character who is wise and close to a demon. In the text, his wise masculinity from wisdom to strategy and then to prophecy is particularly evident, which concentrate in the prediction of the future of the Shu Han regime. In contrast, the masculinity of “my wisdom” in *Red Poppies* goes beyond the traditional image of a male hero in the style of a man-king, and instead approximate the Confucian ideal of “inner sage and outer king”.

“I” also shows the benevolence and filial piety in the masculinity from Han culture, and “my benevolence” includes not only the benevolent government for the people, but also the benevolence and righteousness for the subordinates, which keep “me” equipped with the absolute loyalty of subordinates and a deep friendship with them. Sanji Zhuoma, “my” first woman, chooses to accompany “me” when “my” power is about to end [3]. The tax officer, Suo Lang Zelang, hunts down the woman who betrays “me” and is killed eventually. At the risk of death, “my” clerk incites the people to support “me” by artificially creating a miracle of man without tongue speaking after half of his tongue is cut off (Ibid). On the contrary, the traditional toast like “my father and brother”, doesn’t value the benevolence relationship with their subordinates. “My brother” says: “By the time he was a toast..... Many people will lose their role and place under him. It is enough for him to bring only a team of soldiers and a good winemaker.” It means that the traditional Tibetan Tusi lacks the awareness of benevolence and righteousness, while the traditional Han concept of benevolence and righteousness is particularly obvious on “me”. Compared with *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, it can be found that “my” masculinity of benevolence is close to Liu Bei, which also manifests that “my” masculinity is close to the heroic trait of Han culture. As analysis above, “I”, the Tibetan ruler, embodies the masculinity of wisdom, benevolence, and love. And all of them are representing Han culture. The masculinity is combined with the traditional heroic male image of the human monarch in Han culture and the holy king ideals in Confucian construction.

3.2 Cultural Identity of “My Brother” – Bravery & Fighting

Hillman and Henfry summarized traditional Tibetan masculinity as follow: “Broad-mindedness and narrow-mindedness, tradition and unique gender relations, physical strength and risk-taking, courage and sexual conquest.” [7]. “My brother” is a typical Tibetan cultural hero who is brave and martial. He cherishes heroes and wages war to maintain his identity as a war hero and solidify his position as the heir to the Toast. He

loves women and his masculine qualities also have a fatal attraction to women. There is no doubt that “my brother” is the carrier of Tibetan culture in the allegorical structure of the novel.

The allegorical structure of the novel is thus complete. It can be seen that, Han culture and Tibetan culture are represented by different masculinity on “me” and “my brother”, and the power struggle between “me” and “brother” is actually an allegory of the cultural situation of Han culture and Tibetan culture in the region.

4 Conclusion

This paper, through an in-depth analysis of A Lai's *Red Poppies*, reveals its internal structure and significance as a cultural allegory. The study finds that “I” and “my brother”, as representatives of Han and Tibetan culture in the novel, embody different masculinities. “I” combines the ideal male image of Confucian wisdom and benevolence in Han culture, while absorbing the characteristics of the mysterious spirit in Tibetan culture, becoming a ruler with a composite cultural identity; while “my brother” shows the heroic temperament of traditional Tibetan culture such as bravery and bellicosity. This opposition and conflict of cultural identity not only reveals the complexity of the integration and struggle of Han and Tibetan cultures, but also symbolizes a larger cultural narrative through the fate of individuals.

In order to deepen the breadth and depth of cross-cultural comparison, future research can further explore masculinity in other ethnic minority literary works to enrich the diversified understanding of Chinese masculinity. In general, the method of reflecting cultural identity and conflict through individual masculinity presented in this paper has strong theoretical significance, which can provide readers with a reference for understanding the impact of the integration of Han and Tibetan cultures on the construction of gender roles and cultural identities in modern society, and also provide a reference for the cultural analysis of other literary works.

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