6 Tibetan stories with transcultural perspectives and experimental styles

Chinese avant-garde fiction as an example

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Introduction

During the 1980s, China witnessed a surge of far-reaching modernist explorations and trends in the fields of literature, theatre, cinema, and art. Here I take the term 'modernist' to denote non-realist, experimental, and self-consciously provocative artistic innovations in the Chinese cultural sphere which have been influenced by global modernism. Among them, 'root seeking' (*xungen* 寻根) and 'avant-garde' (*xianfeng* 先锋) represent two highly influential literary schools that experimented with modernist themes and forms. Influenced by postmodern literature from Latin America and Europe, the 'avant-garde school' experimented with postmodernist innovations to challenge the dictates of realism in Chinese fiction writing.[1] Yu Hua, a representative author of the 'avant-garde school', states in his essay 'Xuwei de zuopin' 虚伪的作品 ('The Deceptive Works'), which some critics have described as the manifesto of this school, that 'the past writing style of considering-something-as-it-stands (*jiushi lunshi* 就事论事)

only leads to *superficial reality* (*biaomian de zhenshi* 表面的真实)'.[2] 'When I begin adopting a *deceptive form* (*xuwei de xingshi* 虚伪的形式) which subverts the order and logic provided to me by the present world, I nevertheless reach the Real (*zhenshi* 真实)'.[3] Corresponding to Yu Hua's concept of 'deceptive forms', bold ventures in literary forms and narrative techniques became the most salient artistic features of these avant-gardists' literary creations from the mid-1980s to the early 1990s.[4]

In terms of thematic concerns, literary avant-gardists – such as Can Xue 残雪 (b. 1953), Mo Yan, Su Tong, Hong Feng 洪峰 (b. 1959), Bei Cun 北村 (b. 1965), and Yu Hua – touch on diverse and strong subject matter such as the social, historical, psychological, abstract or mysterious, and focus on topics like death, sex, evil and violence.[5] However, none of them engages in writing any rational or realist stories informed by the grand narrative of socialism or the ruling party's official historiography. Instead, they develop alternative views towards individuals in China's history. They show no interest in establishing a direct nexus between their bizarre stories and the real world, and even acknowledge the artificiality of storytelling itself. As a result, anti-traditional and non-conformist topics and styles appear as the hallmarks of this literary movement, earning it the label of 'avant-garde'.

For a few avant-garde authors, the borderlands of central China and ethnic minority cultures serve as key literary motifs, and also as the impetus for new aesthetic forms. For instance, both the Chinese author Ma Yuan and the Chinese-Tibetan author Tashi Dawa (or Zhaxi Dawa) are noted for their prolific Tibetan-themed fictions. Other Chinese writers also focus on such themes. In the 1980s Ge Fei 格非 (b. 1964) wrote a fictional narrative entitled 'Xiangyu' 相遇 ('Encounter', publ. 1993) about the colonial history of Tibet at the beginning of the twentieth century. Inner Mongolia and Hui 回 culture are the cultural homeland and spiritual source for author Zhang Chengzhi. Western China repeatedly serves as the theme of fictional stories in Yang Zhengguang's 杨争光 (b. 1957) works. The well-known avant-garde woman author Can Xue has even penned a full-length novel entitled *Bianjiang* 边疆 (*Frontier*, 2008), which features fictional geographical and cultural borders.

The contrast between 'central China' and different borderlands, between Han culture and non-Han cultures, provides fertile ground for the

imaginative power and literary possibilities of avant-garde authors. Their various literary forays into crossing geographical, ethnic and cultural boundaries offer the possibility of innovations in both literary themes and forms. Previous research on avant-garde fiction mainly focuses on the influence of Western literature and the literary manifestations of modernism and postmodernism.[6] Few studies discuss 'cross-cultural' features in avant-garde fictions, such as boundary-crossings between cultures of different ethnicities within China.[7] In addition, there have not been enough comparative readings of two representative writers of this literary trend, namely Ma Yuan and Tashi Dawa.[8]

This chapter therefore aims to explore how the encounter between Han and non-Han cultures within China influences Chinese avant-garde literature. It addresses the following research questions: Do non-Han territories and cultures provide authors outside those territories and cultures with unique perspectives and heterogeneous elements in these authors' pursuits of the literary style of 'magic realism' or the cultural logic of postmodernism? Do these heterogeneous elements act as the mysterious, primitive, or exotic Other in avant-garde rewritings of history, perceived reality and human experiences, and if so, how? Does Chinese avant-garde literature provide us with any example of transculturality within different cultures that promote narrative revolution and textual experimentation? How do geographical, ethnic and cultural boundaries become important sites for reflection on the dichotomy of tradition vs modernity, centre vs border, insider vs outsider, orthodox vs unorthodox, religious vs secular, self vs other, reality vs fiction, and so on? What is the relationship between the postmodernist representation of non-Han territories and cultures and the 'deconstructive' characteristics of avant-garde literature? This chapter will investigate these questions by using two representative Tibetan stories written by avant-garde authors Ma Yuan and Tashi Dawa as case studies.

Ma Yuan and 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' (1985)

Alongside Can Xue, Ma Yuan is one of the earliest exponents of the avant-garde school.[9] He is known as 'the earliest formalist fiction writer in post-

Mao China'.[10] Ma Yuan adopts the style of Borgesian metafiction and explicitly indicates in some of his works that his fiction is a fabrication. During the 1980s, when Tibet became a popular focus of artistic interests and an inspiration for Han authors, Ma Yuan worked there as a journalist for several years. In a 2006 interview with *Xin shiji zhoukan* 新世纪周刊 (*New Century Weekly*) Ma gave a very positive account of his Tibetan experience:

> Tibet made manifest my former highly individualist tendencies, and what I wrote was henceforth enlivened and ignited. Tibet is an unusual place; it can provide you with imaginative power and a unique perspective and mindset. No place can compare to Tibet.[11]

The transcultural knowledge and experience Ma gained in Tibet serve as both resource and impetus for his boundary-crossing and deconstructive style of writing. Distinct motifs from Tibetan religion and culture interlink with labyrinthine narrative styles in his fiction. 'Xugou' 虚构 ('Fabrication'),[12] 'Xihai de wufan chuan' 西海的无帆船 ('The Boat without a Sail on the Western Sea'),[13] and 'Gangdisi de youhuo' 冈底斯的诱惑 ('The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' or 'Lure of the Gangdisi')[14] count among the best-known of his unconventional Tibetan stories. Taking the first piece of his fiction that centres on narrative forms, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains'[15] as an example, the explicitly declared 'fabricated' nature of the text lies in the multiple, changing narrative points of view and the use of disintegrated, unreliable narrators in four sub-stories: a veteran writer's personal history; Tibetan hunter Chungbu's encounter with a 'Himalayan snowman'; the abortive trip of two Han Chinese writers named Lu Gao 陆高 and Yao Liang 姚亮 to see a sky burial; and the legend of two Tibetan brothers, Dhondup and Dhonyo. The veteran writer's story is told from a first-person, reflective perspective while the hunting story is structured as a second-person narrative. The two stories of the Chinese writers and Tibetan brothers are narrated from a seemingly objective third-person point of view, but the narrator is frequently interrupted and

challenged, either by the characters in the narrative or the voice of the narrator itself to reveal the instability and unreliability of the narrative.

As the most important avant-garde writer to shift the attention of readers from *what* to write to *how* to write fiction, Ma Yuan also induces the critics to focus on analysing the structure and form of his works. Henry Zhao argues that Ma Yuan's 'use of Tibetan loci is so superficial and casual that Tibet is only the convenient anchorage of his fiction rather than an object of observation … What makes him unique is something beyond themes or subject matter'.[16] Wu Liang notably commented that the main achievement of Ma Yuan's fiction is the narration process.[17] Li-Hua Ying also emphasises that 'Ma's stories are concerned less with Tibet than with his personal vision of fiction and his Borgesian metafiction style accentuates a new awareness of narrative technique'.[18] However, is the topic of Tibet really unimportant for Ma Yuan? Is form nothing other than form and is it created only for its own sake? A new reading of 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' with attention to its cross-ethnic and cross-cultural subject matter serves here to re-examine the significance of Ma Yuan's experiment with form.

In the first part of the narrative, a veteran writer presents from a first-person point of view his reflections on different Chinese and Tibetan customs, beliefs and cultural values based on his cross-cultural experiences. He reconsiders and questions the Han-centrism in the popular perceptions of Tibetan 'traditions' among Chinese people. He also criticises the popular touristic discourse on Tibet in 1980s China, which often treats Tibet as an exotic, alluring spectacle like Disneyland:

> Newcomers gather round, take pictures, and pretend to take it all seriously – I suppose you're the same – but you have to realize that all this isn't something new and strange. People here have been living this way for thousands and thousands of years. For a short while here visitors come face to face with the recollection of those remote myths. They have no way to comprehend it, but they feel it's interesting, like a Disneyland

castle. It's not everybody who gets to stand face to face with a memory from the past.[19]

The third part of 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' depicts a group of outsiders and describes the journey of Lu Gao and Yao Liang to see a sky burial. This theme echoes the Chinese tourists' fascination with the most 'exotic' aspects of Tibetan customs. Their journey ends with the violent objections of local Tibetans, who refuse to let their customs and cultures be 'orientalised' and turned into the Other, or a spectacle. The old writer believes that the most attractive aspect of Tibet as a 'wonderland' is its well-preserved 'remote myth', a concept far removed from Han Chinese who 'are living in the scientific age'.[20] The first-person narrative voice of the old writer encourages the newcomers to Tibet to develop a more respectful understanding of Tibetan 'mysticism', rather than using the framework of 'civilised vs primitive' or 'science vs superstition' to look at Tibetan cultural practices:

> I've lived in Tibet for over half my life, but I'm not one of the Tibetans. Even though I can drink yak butter tea with our Tibetan brothers, eat handfuls of roast barley with them, drink barley wine, even though my skin is bronzed by the sun like theirs, I'm still not one of them, even if I've worshiped with them and left offerings in the temple. I can't understand life as they do. All those things are just forms to me – I respect their customs, but I can only guess what it is to live them. I can only use my logic and my miserable reason to try to deduce what it is to experience those things – that's as close as we can get to the people here. And still we suppose that we're clever and civilized, and they are stupid and primitive, and they need us to save them and enlighten them. …

> My one million eight hundred thousand Tibetan countrymen use running water (in the cities), they wear rubber boots, they

drive cars, they drink Chinese white liquor from Sichuan, they dance to music from tape decks, they sit in front of televisions and watch the news of China and the world, but still they go on living in their own unique world of myth.

All this makes me think it's not just enough to follow their customs and forms. I love them, and I want to understand them genuinely, so I want to enter their world. Their everyday life is indistinguishable from myth. Myth isn't a decoration of their life, it is their life, their reason and foundation for living, the reason they're Tibetans, and not somebody else.[21]

The old writer challenges the 'rational' and 'logical' way of understanding Tibetan myth and related religious beliefs. He understands them as both a sort of 'yearning for the perfect life' and Tibetans' 'reason and foundation for living'.[22] He argues confidently that even though Tibetans now live in a modernised society in the scientific age, they still stick to 'their own unique world of myth'.[23] The old writer believes that modern urban life has not interfered with their long-held customs and beliefs at all. The 'scientific', 'rational' way of thinking and living, and the 'mythologised' or religious way of thinking and living are seen as two equal value systems. He sees no hierarchy between them.

The old writer's personal narrative is followed by three 'mysterious' or 'legendary' stories, none of which are intelligible from the perspective of science or logic. The first story describes the old writer witnessing 'a pathway to the blue curtain of night, a gate to the stars';[24] the second narrates the encounter between Qiongbu 穷布 and a Himalayan wild man or snowman; in the third story, Dhondup acquires the ability to sing *The Epic of King Gesar* overnight. From a logical or rational angle, all of these stories would be mere fabrications or fantasies born of a 'nervous disorder' or 'a crazy mind'. The narrator asks readers not to 'dismiss all such legends with a laugh',[25] but to read them in the ways Tibetans do: what Han Chinese see as mythological and abnormal may be ordinary and normal for Tibetans. This echoes the view of the author Ma Yuan himself. In an

interview, Ma described the blurred boundaries between 'myth' and 'realities' according to the Tibetans, by stating that 'mystery (*shenmi* 神秘) is neither an ambience nor something that could be created or constructed by humans. Mystery is abstract but also something real, an entity (*shiti* 实体) outside the ideas of humans'.[26] When Wu Liang examines the 'fictionality' that is central to Ma Yuan's works, he associates it with Ma Yuan's particular worldviews as a theist, especially his reverence for mystery.

> A fiction author who is fascinated with narration itself has real imaginative power. The best writer usually unites the ways of narration with the world he lives in. … Narrating stories is the only effective way for Ma Yuan to get close to the gods he believes in. His beliefs and his narrative skills have something in common.[27]

As a theist, Ma Yuan tries to offer a new understanding of 'mysteries' not as perceptions but as substantial entities. Only in this way can we read Tibetan myths and legends from a non-conventional perspective.

> There were several other less popular versions of what happened to Dhondup. According to one, Dhondup and Dhonyo's dad was a blacksmith who wandered around singing ballads, and Dhondup inherited his father's genes. This version smacks of modern science. But most people would rather believe a beautiful myth, and besides it's not suitable to season legends with rationalism.
>
> Thoroughgoing materialists dismiss all such legends with a laugh. They have a rather convincing explanation: that in order to embellish the folk epics, ballad singers deliberately make up these mysteries. They claim that it's the natural penchant of Tibetans to produce beautiful myths.[28]

None of the stories are 'logical', 'rational' or coherent. After his description of witnessing a magical natural spectacle is not believed or responded to by other people, the old writer decides: 'so I myself do not take it seriously anymore. I take it as a joke, I tell it as a story, that's all'.[29] At the end of the story about the hunter and a Himalayan snowman, the narrator ironically comments that 'the snowman of the Himalayas is known all over the world, but people don't take this fantastic legend seriously'.[30] The narrator also explicitly points at the element of uncertainty after telling the story of the Tibetan brothers:

> I don't know what should come after this 'so'. Three dots to mark something omitted? A few words to connect it to what comes after? I can't find anything suitable. I don't know what moral, rational standard to weigh this ending by.[31]

Readers are asked by the narrator not to make judgments on the basis of any scientific knowledge or superior 'moral and rational standards'. Moreover, the very process of reading legends in Ma Yuan's works is confusing and challenging. Logic is useless not only in deciphering the content of these stories, but also in understanding the style in which they are written. In the essay 'Fangfa' 方法 ('Method') Ma Yuan states that writing fiction for him

> is to create and present new experiences, the experiences that some readers have never had before. Empiricism in its broad sense should also apply to transcendent experiences. My emphasis is that transcendent experiences occupy a great part of the totally new experiences of creative artists.[32]

Ma Yuan's stories, rather than being rationally grounded in ordinary experiences and methods of reasoning, are fantastical, fabulous or surreal, and concerned in particular with transcendental experiences.

The authoritative and confident narrative voice disappears as the complete and coherent plot vanishes. Yang Xiaobin contends that

> Ma Yuan dissolves the rigid model of plot and the integrity of flawless narration. … He departs from narrative totality by showing fragmentation, lacunae, and incoherence in narration by way of self-interruption and self-referentiality that question the legitimacy of the homogeneous grand narrative.[33]

The narrative labyrinth challenges readers' expectations and conventions of reading. One cannot find popular exotic Tibetan stories informed by ethno-tourism in this fiction; instead, one has to unlearn them in a process of de-familiarisation. Multiple voices and perspectives in these stories encourage readers to engage with and rethink the dominant discourses on Tibet which emerge from the privileged position of a modern Han Chinese. 'Through this de-familiarisation of subjectivities the narrative not only exposes the fictionality of the text but also the fictionality of discrete "cultural identities".'[34] The admittedly artificial nature of the fiction supports the non-rationalised way of perceiving Tibetan traditions and culture. By doing so, Ma Yuan's fiction challenges a 'rationality' that stems from cultural hegemony in the consumption of both the content and the forms of popular Tibetan stories.

Although the veteran writer in the fiction reflects on the hegemonic discourses on Tibet as a primitive, exotic Other for Han Chinese, his narrative voice, and those of others in the fiction, are by no means unproblematic in understanding and interpreting Tibetan culture as a whole. The old writer attributes a homogeneous and changeless nature to Tibetan 'tradition', positing that 'people here have been living this way for thousands and thousands of years'.[35] He also believes that even in modern times Tibetans 'still go on living in their own unique world of myth'.[36] For him, Tibetan society is monolithic, mainly static and unchanging, exempted from the invasion of modernity, and thus offers an appealing alternative to contemporary Chinese society.

One male protagonist, Lu Gao, also emphasises the 'spirituality' symbolised by Tibet. He associates the beauty of a dead Tibetan girl with the meaning of human life. 'She was a symbol like a flower, an eagle, the ocean, a snow-capped mountain, a symbol of something spiritual. The view of a beautiful girl tells you that life is real, precious, meaningful'.[37] Lopez

has discussed how Tibetan culture was viewed by Tibetan refugees as 'unified, complete, and coherent' 'in the elaborately framed mirror of Western fantasies'.[38] Here, Lu Gao's imagination of Tibet as pure, spiritual and meaningful originates from 'Han fantasies', which in this story appear quite similar to the 'Western fantasies' discussed by Lopez. These are all constructions disconnected from the realities and needs of other cultures.

At the end of the original Chinese version of this fiction, one finds a poem entitled 'Muge zouxiang muge' 牧歌走向牧歌 ('From Pastoral to Pastoral') and attributed to Yao Liang: 'In this way / I earnestly lay my heart bare to this highland / only to show my respect *as an adult who was once a child*.'[39] For Yao, Liang Tibet is like the imagined childhood of Han Chinese – primitive, pure, innocent, and therefore not sufficiently 'mature'. Looking back at the 'non-rational' perspective promoted by the old writer, it is clear that behind the cultural relativism lies an implicitly biased discourse on Tibet. As the complexity and plurality of Tibetan religion and culture vanish, only an essentialised, abstract image of Tibet and a homogenised Tibetan 'tradition' remains. Peter Damgaard offers an excellent analysis of this in a 2012 article where he argues that:

> On the one hand, then, the old writer is in opposition to the public and official narrative in the PRC insofar as he questions the rhetoric of progress and liberation – the civilising project; on the other hand, however, he is implicated by his very narrative in the construction and exoticisation of the 'authentic' other. While seemingly celebrating the other, the old writer is also implicated in the production of new forms of power by 'translating' the exoticised other from a privileged position.[40]

Both explicit and implicit biases in understanding and presenting Tibetan culture and traditions are exposed in this fiction. In an interview with his English-language translator Herbert J Batt, Ma Yuan also shows an interest in using an abstract concept of 'culture' to define a person: 'When I wrote that story' – i.e. 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' – 'I was thinking of

what makes a person a person – really a person. That's culture.'[41] This may be related to the mid-1980s context, in which cultural reflection became a central concern of the literary field. Influenced by the 'root-seeking' literary movement, Ma Yuan also engaged in assessing differing cultural values in response to the cultural crisis of 1980s China, specifically the 'collision' between Eastern and Western cultures. As a result, elements of minority cultures such as Tibetan culture – e.g. 'spirituality' – were employed as resources to question a Westernised modernity characterised by the materialism, development, and progress pursued by China in that decade.

However, different essentialised ways of seeing and narrating Tibetan culture are strategically revealed and challenged in this work. Ma Yuan's postmodernist style distances the cultural reconsideration and assessment expressed in his fiction from Han Chinese cultural hegemony. The non-conventional, fragmentary, incoherent stories to a great extent delegitimise the confident Han Chinese narrators, including the old writer, Lu Gao and Yao Liang. The old writer is writing a story about a Tibetan hero but, unable to finish it, he finally admits that he cannot truly understand the lives of Tibetans. Lu Gao and Yao Liang find no spirituality in photos of sky burial and are not even allowed by locals to see the actual burial. Yao Liang admits at the end of his poem that one finds hope and aspiration only during the journey to a destination, but not at the destination itself. The real Tibet and Tibetan culture are more complex than these outsiders' imagination and the projection of their own needs. Moreover, by acknowledging the fictive nature of the story the narrator helps the reader to maintain a critical distance from the Han-centred narration. As Yang Xiaobin writes:

> Ma Yuan's Han Chinese narrator never becomes a dominant figure to whom the Tibetans are subject or a culturally detached spectator of the exotic province as the other but, rather, a person who relinquishes his fixed identity as a Han Chinese and mingles himself with a different ethnic group. Ma Yuan's attempt to expose his identity as a Han Chinese narrator is always implicated in the self-incurred interruptions

of the narrative continuity and destined to deviate into 'self-engulfing' impasses.[42]

The authority of all three Han Chinese narrators is questioned and dismantled in the deconstructive, experimental narrative styles. Revolution in literary forms therefore contains radical significances beyond form itself. Ma Yuan reveals and interrogates the unequal power relations embedded in representational conventions. The self-conscious fictionalisation and de-familiarisation adopted by his narrative voices finally leads to a critical and reflective 'transculturality' between Han and non-Han cultures. This transculturality is based on a new style of complicating and de-essentialising the Tibetan culture in narratives about it. It questions the popular ways of treating Tibet as the Other of Han people in terms of symbols of underdevelopment, mystery or spirituality. Therefore, the fictionality in Ma Yuan's works serves as an effective approach to achieving such transculturality.

Tashi Dawa and 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong' (1985)

Tashi Dawa is a Tibetan-Chinese writer who was educated in a Chinese cultural environment and later actively sought his Tibetan cultural roots through Tibet-themed fictions during the 1980s. If Ma Yuan, a Han Chinese, is a Tibet outsider and his cross-cultural reflections stem from a Han Chinese standpoint, during his writing career Tashi Dawa has gradually evolved into a Tibet insider who speaks from within a 'turbulent' Tibetan society. 'While Tashi Dawa's early stories' – i.e. those published until around 1985 – 'portrayed Tibetan reality in Han terms, he now makes a conscious effort to understand how Tibetans perceive their surrounding world', argued Schiaffini-Vedani.[43] Tashi Dawa's later works start from where Ma Yuan's protagonists failed – 'I can't understand life as they do'.[44] Tashi Dawa's famous fictions about Tibet include 'Xizang, jizai pishengkou shang de hun' 西藏，系在皮绳扣上的魂 ('Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong'),[45] 'Xizang, yinmi de suiyue' 西藏，隐秘的岁月 ('Tibet:

The Hidden Years')[46] and 'Saodong de Xiangbala' 骚动的香巴拉 ('Turbulent Shambhala').[47]

Tashi Dawa's Tibetan-themed stories are frequently described as magical realism.[48] He is considered a master of this literary style, which originated in Latin America and greatly influenced Chinese 'root-seeking' literature in the 1980s, including works by Mo Yan and Han Shaogong. Although Tashi Dawa did admit to being influenced by North and Latin American authors such as Gabriel García Márquez and William Faulkner, his focus is on the effect of the subject matter – a Tibet that is both real and magical. 'Tibetan culture and traditions are able to provide a writer with all the reality and magic s/he wants; we do not need to look for them abroad; we just need to look outside the window.'[49] If in Ma Yuan's works like 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' Tibetans who live in their unique world of myth do not think of their life as 'mysterious' or 'legendary', Tashi Dawa uses his fiction to break down the distinction between magic and reality. He looks at Tibetan cultural paradigms as an insider and invites readers to think about 'reality' not only as 'rational' but also as 'magical'. Like Ma Yuan, Tashi Dawa uses his works to circumvent a logical or 'rationalised' way of viewing Tibetan culture.

While at the centre of Ma Yuan's works, we find an abstract, mysterious and formless 'culture' that exists as 'myth' for its outsiders, for Tashi Dawa what constitutes the most representative dimension of Tibetan tradition is religion, and specifically Buddhism. He regards Buddhism as the cardinal influence on Tibetan customs and beliefs, and some literary critics have picked up on this as a major influence on his writing. The peculiar conceptualisation of time and space, and the idea that everything constitutes merely a projection of the mind, both add to the philosophical dimension of Tashi Dawa's works.[50] Lu Tonglin contends that Buddhism emerges as a powerful resource for Tashi Dawa to negate the cultural and ideological domination of Communist China.[51] Tashi Dawa explains in an interview: 'I am not a member of the Communist party [and] I am not interested in politics. … I am not a Buddhist believer. I am more interested in the role of religion in Tibetan culture than in religion per se.'[52] Rather than writing Tibetan stories with an explicitly political or religious objective, Tashi

Dawa explores how different religious beliefs influence the ways in which Tibetans think and live.

Let us consider, for example, how the narrator in Tashi Dawa's most famous work, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong' (1985) appears uncertain about the future of religion and, at the same time, surprised by its lingering and profound influence on a Tibetan society undergoing profound changes. In this work, the reader encounters two types of people, one leading a traditional way of life with religious fervour, the other leading a 'modern' life. The difficulty of mutual understanding between these groups epitomises a transforming Tibetan society caught up in the strong tension between tradition and modernity, between the local and the global. For Tashi Dawa, Tibetan Buddhism not only offers a mirror image for us to reflect on a transitional Tibetan society, but also represents a useful tool to question the concepts of modernity and linear history.

In 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', while the narrator appears concerned that 'Tibetan Lamaism' will gradually deteriorate, an Incarnate Lama expresses a strong belief in its continuity regardless of the disappearance of some of its external forms:

> Now that one of the most profound and mystical of all the world religions, Tibetan Lamaism (with it various sects), has no more reincarnated heirs, and so no more leader great or small, it appears to be nearing its last day. 'External form determines consciousness', I said. Incarnate Lama Sangye Dhapo shook his head in disagreement with what I said. His pupils were slowly dilating. 'Shangri-la …' His lips trembled. 'The war has begun.'[53]

It is this Incarnate Lama's great confidence in Tibetan Lamaism that stimulates the narrator's interest in exploring the impact of Tibetan religion in modern times.

The entire story revolves around the tale of two young Tibetans, Tabei and Chung, and their long journey to the 'Pure Land among humankind'. It starts as a fiction about two young people embarking on a journey,[54] but the narrator ignores their exact destination and even doubts whether the two

characters actually know where they are going. This incomplete story is at times narrated in a matter-of-fact tone, at times very uncertainly:

The farther they went the more the village evenings lost their natural peace and quiet, the noisier and more raucous they became, full of the roars of engines, songs, shouts. The road he was following *didn't lead to* an even noisier city filled with pandemonium. *Definitely not*. The way they wanted to go was … .

…

'Go on alone. I don't want to go on following you every day, walking, walking, walking. You don't know where you're going, so you just roam around forever'. 'Woman, you don't understand anything'. On the contrary, he *was one who did know which way to go*.[55]

'Where do you mean to go?' the old man asked.

'I … I don't know'. For the first time Tabei *felt uncertain about* his destination. He *didn't know* which way he should continue.

The old man understood what was on his mind. He pointed out the window to a mountain behind him and said, 'Nobody's ever gone that way. … They say there's only one way out of all those gullies. All the other roads lead to death. And the road to life has no markings'. Tabei looked gravely at the old man.

'That's a legend. I don't know what kind of world that road leads to'. The old man murmured, shaking his head.

Tabei *decided to go that way.*[56]

In the narrator's story, Tabei's aspiration to reach a religious dreamland is not shared by the people of 'X', a modern Tibetan village, because they have already entered the dystopian time that followed the failure of communism. Instead, villagers are now fascinated by a new 'myth' of social development and progress marked by material gains. What embodies this new 'myth' is a tractor – a symbol of modernisation – that fatally injures Tabei, a firm Buddhist believer. The metaphorical meaning of the story is clear: the communist paradise promoted in the Mao era is proven to be an illusion, while Buddhist salvation and religious belief have been excluded by the dominant discourses of modernity in the post-Mao era.

Only after Incarnate Lama Sangye Dhapo re-tells his entire story does the narrator begin to understand that it has a religious trajectory with a clear direction:

As you climb across snowcapped Kelong Mountain and stand in the lines of the palm print of the Lotus Master, do not pursue, do not seek. In prayer you shall understand, in understanding you shall see a vision. In all the lines of the wrinkles in Lotus Master's palm print there is only one path of life that leads to the Pure Land among humankind.[57]

The narrator then decides to go to Kelong Mountain on his own to search for his characters. But on his way to find Tabei and Chung in the Lotus Master's palm print he has to experience a dreamlike time and space – something entirely opposite to linear time and rational spatial arrangement:

At first I suspected the entire phenomenon before my eyes was an illusory change in the shape of external objects, an effect of my prolonged solitude. But immediately I rejected that notion. My thoughts were still logical, my memory and analytical faculties were still functioning. The sun was still traveling from east to west, the universe was still following

the laws of physical motion, day and night still followed one another. But my watch was still racing backward, and the day of the week and the date were still reversing, and all this must have confused my biological clock and given me the sensation of disembodiment.[58]

After mysteriously experiencing non-linear time and a reconfigured space at odds with the idea of modernity, the narrator finally finds his two characters and communicates with them. Similar to the story in Ge Fei's 'Encounter', after his experience of Tibetan religion and culture the British coloniser Younghusband's 'most fundamental, deep-seated notions had somehow incomprehensibly changed – even his notion of time itself'.[59] The notion of time lies at the heart of the tension between tradition and modernity. Peter Osborne, in his book *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde*, asks a key question: 'what kind of time does "modernity" inscribe?'[60] He finds that,

> [I]nsofar as 'modernity' is understood as a periodizing category … it sets up a differential between the character of its own time and that which precedes it. This differential formed the basis for the transformation in the late eighteenth century in the meaning of the concepts of 'progress' and 'development', which makes them the precursors of later, twentieth-century concepts of modernization.[61] …

> Such histories are modernizing in the sense that the results of synchronic comparisons are ordered diachronically to produce a scale of development which defines 'progress' in terms of the projection of certain people's presents as other people's futures, at the level of the development of history as a whole.[62]

Here Osborne explains how the concept of progress is projected onto an understanding of a homogenised time. This provides the basis for colonial discourses that convince some people to accept other people's presents as

their futures. In this story by Tashi Dawa, however, the notions of progress, development, and linear history are suspended. There is no normative concept of 'tradition' as backward and therefore opposed to 'modernity' – understood as characterised by economic development and linear progress. In another of Tashi Dawa's stories, 'Tibet: The Hidden Years', circular time – seen as central to the Tibetans' concept of history – is deliberately employed to structure the storyline.[63]

As a modern citizen, the narrator in 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong' shows an ambiguous attitude towards the protagonists who have inherited religious beliefs. At first, he wants to use logic and rationality to downplay their faith:

> Finally, trusting to luck, I lowered my lips to Tabei's ear and tried to persuade him, whispering explanations he could almost understand, that the place he wanted to find didn't exist, that it was only like Thomas More's Utopia, nothing more.
>
> Too late. It was impossible now, at his life's last instant, to persuade him to cast aside a faith forged over so many years. He rolled over and laid his ear to the ground …
>
> 'This isn't the voice of God, my child. It's a summons to struggle for all the world – bells, horns, a chorus'. This was all I could say. I don't know if he heard me or not.[64]

Schiaffini argues that in some of Tashi Dawa's works, the 'same representations that seem to encourage tolerance and respect for Tibetan culture sometimes cast a shadow of pessimism and passivity, as characters appear trapped in a circular dominium that forces them to repeat their progenitor's lives'.[65] My analysis shows that the modernist narrator in Tashi Dawa's most famous magical realist fictional narrative, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', offers his religious protagonists no way out into modern society. This is the case with Tabei. His curiosity about a

tractor, which symbolises modern technology, only causes him to suffer a fatal injury. It appears that there is no reconciliation between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

As the story proceeds, the narrator finds the fatal ending arranged for Buddhist believer Tabei to be arbitrary and begins to reflect on it. He reconsiders the authority and power he has, and sees it as stemming from a privileged position as a modern person living in a 'great age'.

> Now too late, I discovered the truth: these abandoned children of mine were endowed with a life and will of their own. Letting Chung and Tabei walk out of that manila envelope had been an irreparable mistake. Why to this day have I been unable to portray the image of the 'new man', the 'new woman'? Now that I've created these characters, their every action has become an unalterable fact. If someone were to call me to account as to why in this great age I've permitted them to exist, what could I answer?
>
> Maybe he understood everything. He curled up as if he were cold and closed his eyes as if he was going to sleep. I laid Tabei down, knelt at his side, and smoothed out his tattered clothing. Beside his body I arranged stones in an 'Om'. My right hand had left a bloodstain on his shirt. I felt guilty. Was I the one who had killed him? More than once in the past I've sent other protagonists of mine off on the road to death. It's something I have to examine myself about.
>
> 'Now there's only me. I'm all alone', Chung lamented.
>
> 'You are not going to die, Chung', I said. I looked up at her. 'You've endured the ordeal of this journey, and I can gradually shape you into a new human being.' And in her sincere eyes I saw hope.[66]

The narrator begins to realise that his characters have wills and agency of their own. They have gone through 'the ordeal of this journey', they were attracted to the modern world, but still adhered to their faith. In the story, they are fated not to find a way out in the modern world, and this simply represents a projection by a modern narrator onto a 'primitive', 'traditional' Other. Tashi Dawa adopts a style of metafiction similar to Ma Yuan's and such a style exposes the hierarchical relationship between the narrator and the people represented in the fictional narrative. What sort of 'new human being' the narrator wants to construct is not clearly explained in the story. It also remains ambiguous whether he is attempting to rewrite the fate of Chung according to dominant discourses of modernity. When the narrator shows his sympathy and respect for these characters who hold fast to an ideal of traditional Tibetan culture, does the idea of a 'new human being' change? The question of whether it is possible for the experience of modernity to merge with a persistent faith in a cultural ideal and become a new type of identity remains unanswered. In this story, the characters intervene in the representational regime and engage in self-representation – although this is still conveyed through the voice of the narrator. These characters could represent active social agents imagined by the author to be able to search for their own fate, to reflect from within current Tibetan society, and to reimagine a new Tibet. In this new Tibet, traditional and religious culture could still find a significant place and play an indispensable role in constructing a new human being who may have a different understanding of the future of Tibet.

The category of postmodernism is one seldom used by literary critics to interpret Tashi Dawa's writing, but if one compares it to Ma Yuan's fictional narratives it becomes clear that postmodernist techniques, like de-familiarisation and metafiction, are employed by both these authors of avant-garde fiction. The voices of the narrators in many of Ma Yuan's works deliberately reveal the fabricated nature of the stories they tell. In the representative work by Tashi Dawa analysed here, this voice appears to acknowledge the arbitrariness of characterisation and plot structure. It also reflects on the way it is used to describe and handle its characters, and gradually admits that the Lamaist believers might have more agency and power than it was previously assumed. The strong religious beliefs of these characters invite the readers to re-examine their normative notions of

progress, happiness, life, and even notions of space and time, informed by discourses of modernity.

Conclusion

The narratives on Tibet examined in this chapter acknowledge and highlight the artificiality of fictional writing itself. The authoritative and confident voices of what can be described as Han Chinese narrators or modernist narrators are deconstructed in the process of storytelling. The alienating effect created by these works leads readers to question the narrative voice itself. This clarifies the position of the narrator as an ethnic-majority subject – a modern, normative, and rational Han Chinese in the act of objectifying a primitive, non-modern, exotic, minority Other.

In both 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains' and 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', the narrators present their self-reflections on dominant discourses of Tibet and these are challenged by the active participation of the characters in the telling of these stories. By renouncing a rational or logical way of representing Tibetan culture and a linear historiography, the narrative voices are able to enter the story and redefine the 'new human being' based on new understandings of Tibetan culture. In this way, the dominant, normative, essentialised way of seeing and narrating non-Han culture is challenged. The reform of narrative techniques finally facilitates transcultural reflection.

Chinese avant-garde fiction writers as exemplified by Ma Yuan and Tashi Dawa are pioneering in their representations of cross-cultural subject matters, that is, across cultures of majority and minority ethnicities within China. They invest not only in the content, as in the representation of a non-Han culture and encounters between Han and Tibetan people, but also in narrative forms of how to represent non-Han cultures. They turn their reflective attitudes towards history and culture into experiments in literary form and narrative strategy. Their challenges to dichotomous thinking about traditional and modern, a normative Han and a heterogeneous Tibet, are supported by unconventional, de-familiarised and deconstructive ways of writing. Tibetan religion, customs and culture are objects of observation and inspiration for their adoption of the storytelling mode. Their postmodernist

literary skills help them problematise and deconstruct the othering and objectified manner of representation from the perspective of a rational, normative, Han Chinese narrator. These techniques also support the author's interrogation of normative notions of progress, happiness, life, history and even notions of space and time informed by discourses of modernity.

This chapter has argued that both Ma Yuan as a reflective outsider, and Tashi Dawa as a reflective insider in Tibet, display transcultural literary experiments informed by their Tibetan experiences and Western modernist and postmodernist literary practices. They use innovative literary forms to negotiate both Han-centrism and dominant discourses of modernity in the literary representation of non-Han Others. If one can find an element of transculturality in the writings of these avant-garde fiction authors, it lies in the deconstruction of the power relationship in a series of binary oppositions: tradition vs modernity, centre vs border, rational vs mysterious, religious vs secular, self vs other, as well as reality vs fiction. The boundaries of different ethnic cultures are actually structured by the operation of these binary oppositions within hegemonic discourses of Han-centrism and modernity. These critical and reflective transcultural perspectives supported by innovative literary experiments represent a key contribution to contemporary Chinese literature by writers of avant-garde fiction from the 1980s.

Notes

1. Andrew F Jones, 'Avant-Garde Fiction in Post-Mao China', in Kirk A Denton, ed., *The Columbia Companion to Modern Chinese Literature*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2016, 313–19.
2. Yu Hua 余华, 'Xuwei de zuopin' 虚伪的作品, preface to *Shishi ruyan* 世事如烟, Taipei: Yuanliu chuban gongsi, 1991, 5. Translations from the Chinese are mine unless otherwise indicated.

3. Yu Hua, 'Xuwei de zuopin', 5.
4. Editors' note: on the literary avant-garde of the 1980s and 1990s, see also Andrea Riemenschnitter's chapter in this volume.
5. Jing Wang, 'Introduction', in Jing Wang, ed., *China's Avant-Garde Fiction: An Anthology*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998, 1–14.
6. See Henry YH Zhao, 'The Rise of Metafiction in China', *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 55.1, 1992, 90–99; Tonglin Lu, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism and Oppositional Politics: Contemporary Chinese Experimental Fiction*, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1995; Wang, 'Introduction'; Xiaobin Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern: Trauma and Irony in Chinese Avant-Garde Fiction*, Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2002; Wang Ning, 'A Reflection on Postmodernist Fiction in China: Avant-garde Narrative Experimentation', *Narrative* 21.3, 2013, 296–308.
7. See Leo Ou-fan Lee, 'On the Margins of the Chinese Discourse: Some Personal Thoughts on the Cultural Meaning of the Periphery', *Daedalus* 120.2, 1991, 207–26; Yao Xinyong 姚新勇, 'Bianjiang de cedong: xianfeng xushu zhong de bianjiang wenhua' 边疆的策动: 先锋叙述中的边疆文化, *Minzu wenxue yanjiu* 民族文学研究 2, 2003, 85–92.
8. See Bai Hao 白浩, 'Wenxue zangqu de xianfeng qizhi yu hunxue rentong' 文学藏区的先锋气质与混血认同, *Minzu wenxue yanjiu* 民族文学研究 5, 2011, 139–45; He Jinghong 何京鸿, 'Mayuan yu Tashi Dawa xiaoshuo de shenmixing bijiao' 马原与扎西达娃小说的神秘性比较, Master's thesis, Shenyang: Liaoning University, 2011; Wu Xueli 吴雪丽, 'Shilun 20 shiji 80 niandai yilai de Xizang shuxie yu dangdai wentan de duihua – yi Ma Yuan, Tashi Dawa, A Lai wei kaocha duixiang' 试论20世纪80年代以来的西藏书写与当代

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9. Wang, 'Introduction', 1–14.
10. Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*, 154.
11. Peter Damgaard, 'The Narrator in Transit: Writing Between Self and Others in Ma Yuan's "Lure of the Gangdisi"', in Denise Gimpel, Bent Nielsen and Paul Bailey, eds., *Creative Spaces: Seeking the Dynamics of Change in China*, Copenhagen: Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, 2012, 133.
12. Ma Yuan 马原, 'Xugou' 虚构, *Shouhuo* 收获 5, 1986, 48–69. For an English translation by J Q Sun, see Ma Yuan, 'Fabrication', in Henry YH Zhao, ed., *The Lost Boat: Avant-Garde Fiction from China*, London: Wellsweep, 1993, 101–44.
13. Ma Yuan 马原, 'Xihai de wufan chuan' 西海的无帆船, in *Xihai de wufan chuan: Ma Yuan Xizang xiaoshuo xuan* 西海的无帆船：马原西藏小说选, Lhasa: Xizang renmin chubanshe, 1987, 1–83.
14. Ma Yuan 马原, 'Gangdisi de youhuo' 冈底斯的诱惑, *Shanghai wenxue*上海文学 2, 1985, 49–69. For an English translation, see Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', in Herbert J Batt, trans., *Ballad of the Himalayas: Stories of Tibet*, Portland, ME: MerwinAsia, 2011, 195–255.
15. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains'.
16. Henry YH Zhao, 'Ma Yuan the Chinese Fabricator', *World Literature Today* 69.2, 1995, 313.
17. Wu Liang 吴亮, 'Ma Yuan de xushu quantao' 马原的叙述圈套, *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 3, 1987, 46. Wu Liang's research represents the earliest detailed analysis of Ma Yuan's artistic skills in Chinese-language literature.
18. Li-hua Ying, *The A to Z of Modern Chinese Literature*, Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press 2010, 125.

19. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 205.
20. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 205.
21. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 206–7.
22. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 207.
23. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 207.
24. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 208.
25. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 247.
26. Ma Yuan, 'Guanyu "Gangdisi de youhuo" de duihua' 关于《冈底斯的诱惑》的对话, *Dangdai zuojia pinglun* 当代作家评论 5, 1985, 92.
27. Wu Liang, 'Ma Yuan de xushu quantao', 46.
28. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 246–7.
29. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 210.
30. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 206.
31. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 253.
32. Ma Yuan 马原, 'Fangfa' 方法, in *Lasa Ditu* 拉萨地图, Lhasa: Xizang renmin chubanshe, 2005, 96.
33. Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*, 154.
34. Damgaard, 'The Narrator in Transit', 147.
35. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 205.
36. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 206–7.
37. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 221.
38. Donald S Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*, Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1998, 200.
39. '我这样 / 郑重剖白只是想向高地 / 表示一个曾经是孩子的 / 成年人的崇敬'. This poem only appears in the original Chinese version of the story. See Ma Yuan, 'Gangdisi de youhuo', 69. Italics are mine.
40. Damgaard, 'The Narrator in Transit', 138.
41. Herbert J Batt and Ma Yuan, 'Going Beyond Reason: An Interview with Ma Yuan', *Mānoa* 7.2, 1995, 171.

42. Yang, *The Chinese Postmodern*, 154.
43. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, 'The "Condor" Flies Over Tibet: Tashi Dawa and the Significance of Tibetan Magical Realism', in Hartley Lauran and Patricia Schiaffini, eds., *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2008, 209.
44. Ma Yuan, 'The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains', 206.
45. Tashi Dawa 扎西达娃, 'Jizai pishengkou shang de hun' 系在皮绳扣上的魂, *Minzu wenxue* 民族文学 9, 1985, 11–29; for an English translation see Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', in Herbert J Batt, ed. and trans., *Tales of Tibet: Sky Burials, Prayer Wheels, and Wind Horses*, Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2001,105–26.
46. Tashi Dawa 扎西达娃, *Xizang, yinmi de suiyue* 西藏, 隐秘的岁月, Wuhan: Changjiang wenyi chubanshe, 1993.
47. Tashi Dawa 扎西达娃, *Saodong de xiangbala* 骚动的香巴拉, Beijing: Zuojia chubanshe, 1993.
48. See Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, 'Tashi Dawa: Magical Realism and Contested Identity in Modern Tibet', PhD dissertation, Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania, 2002; Franz Xaver Erhard, 'Magical Realism and Tibetan Literature', in Steven J Venturino, ed., *Contemporary Tibetan Literary Studies*, Leiden: Brill, 2007, 133–46; Howard YF Choy, 'Historiographic Alternatives for China: Tibet in Contemporary Fiction by Tashi Dawa, Alai, and Ge Fei', *American Journal of Chinese Studies* 12.1, 2005, 65–84; Zhang Qinghua 张清华, 'Cong zhege ren kaishi – zhuilun 1985 nian de Tashi Dawa' 从这个人开始 — 追论1985年的扎西达娃, *Nanfang wentan* 南方文坛 2, 2004, 32–7.
49. Schiaffini-Vedani, 'The "Condor" Flies Over Tibet', 209.
50. See Lu, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics*, 104–28; Schiaffini-Vedani, 'The "Condor" Flies Over

Tibet'; Eva K Neumaier, 'The Fleeting Windhorse: Tibetan Cultural Identity and the Challenge of Modernity', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 30.3–4, 2011, 542–55.

51. Lu, *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism, and Oppositional Politics*, 114.

52. Schiaffini-Vedani, 'The "Condor" Flies Over Tibet', 213.

53. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 106.

54. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 110. Italics are mine.

55. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 115. Italics are mine.

56. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 115–9. Italics are mine.

57. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 107.

58. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 122.

59. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 104.

60. Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde,* London: Verso, 2011, 5.

61. Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 16.

62. Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, 17.

63. See Schiaffini-Vedani, 'Tashi Dawa'; Zhang Qinghua, 'Cong zhegeren kaishi'.

64. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 123–4.

65. Schiaffini-Vedani, 'The "Condor" Flies Over Tibet', 212.

66. Tashi Dawa, 'Tibet: A Soul Knotted on a Leather Thong', 124–5.