Spelling out the Hyphen:

Articulations of Bicultural Identity in Three Tibeto-Chinese Writers

A thesis submitted in complete fulfilment of the requirements
for the degree of Masters of Arts (Communication Studies)

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February 2010
Declaration

I certify that except where due acknowledgment has been made, the work is that of the author alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award; the content of the thesis is the result of work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged; and, ethics procedures and guidelines have been followed.

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Feb 2010
Abstract

The relatively liberalised cultural atmosphere of post-Mao late 1980’s China saw the emergence of a generation of writers seeking to reconnect with their ethnic background in a literary movement largely known as “root-seeking literature”. This dissertation explores how three of the most prominent writers of that generation in contemporary Tibet, who share a Tibeto-Chinese ancestry, undertake this journey to define their bicultural identity. It seeks to amend previous descriptions the identities of these writers as an admixture of two cultural identities. Drawing from the concept of hybridity defined by Homi Bhabha, I argue that hybridity is a problematic of indeterminacy of identification through which they then articulate their identity.

Adopting the metaphor of the hyphen (-), literally a punctuation mark of conjunction without any content to be spelt out, the study underscores its argument that the cultural identity each Tibeto-Chinese writer articulates can be apprehended in the mode they negotiate their position between the two dominant cultural identifiers and not in the content that is fused. This use of hybridity not only reveals markedly different manifestations of their bicultural identity; but it attests to the theoretical premise of the study to adopt hybridity not as passive description but active articulation.

With his metropolitan sensibilities, Tashi Dawa assumes the satirical stance of a detached observer, to reject the larger markers of social identity and dwell in the individualistic space of the hyphen itself as a cosmopolitan. Woeser conceives of the hyphen in her identity as a divider that splits her selfhood, to reject this in-between status and reclaim a Tibetan identity in a nativist stance. Alai recreates a pseudo-history of his border homeland against the grain of larger nationalist histories and projects his Tibeto-Chinese ancestry as an older creole identity, to negate the hyphen and the cultural-nationalist notions that fracture his identity.
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Chapter I

Introduction

The challenge of the hyphenated reality lies in the hyphen itself … the realm in-between, where predetermined rules cannot apply.¹

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the “thirdspace” which enables other positions to emerge.²

In a poem entitled “Of Mixed Race” (1993)³, the Tibeto-Chinese writer Woeser dramatises the dilemma of her identity as a person of biracial ancestry. Presenting her condition as that of someone without even a sense of tangible selfhood, she writes, “She’s but the shadow of a dream whose tints have faded.” This question of personal identity can be heard with varied resonances in the works of a generation of Tibeto-Chinese writers in the late 1980s, who sought to reconnect with their ethnic Tibetan background, after the repressive era of the Mao regime had ended. Woeser continues her search by saying, “Please grant a world of soil and stream / Where she may sing with pathos the anthem / She once improvised for no clear purpose.” (13-15) While Woeser’s plea is for this mixed-race romantic muse to find a world she can belong to; in Tashi Dawa’s short story “A Soul in Bondage” (1992), the voice we hear is that of a returnee attempting to find his bearings in the remote countryside of the Tibetan heartland. He says, “I am not sure whether I have actually been there, or merely dreamt of those mountains. I cannot be sure, for I have been too many places to keep reality and fantasy separate.” In Alai’s novel Red Poppies (2002), the biracial idiot protagonist is even more adamant about his disorientation. Unsteadied by his mental disability, he cannot

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³ Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart: Selected Poems, trans. A.E. Clark (Dobbs Ferry: Ragged Banner, 2008), 80.
even wake up in the morning, without asking, “Who Am I? Where am I?”

Poised to take advantage of the more liberal socio-political environment ushered in by the Deng Xiaopeng regime, these writers belong to a generation who sought to reconnect with their ethnic Tibetan background over the chasm left by the repression of high socialism under Mao Zedong’s rule. Across the spectrum of this literary scene, from Tibetophone writers to Han Chinese writers settled in Tibet, I have chosen to look at these three Tibeto-Chinese Sinophone writers Tashi Dawa, Woeser and Alai, who straddle an uneasy position of being an outsider and a native. In contrast to Tibetophone writers, whose use of Tibetan marginalises them in terms of readership and publication, it is these Sinophone writers who are also patronised as minority representatives in the mainstream Chinese cultural sphere. Sharing the same predicament as individuals of mixed ancestry, these three writers not only evoke this search for cultural roots with the most interesting nuances, they are also the most prominent literary personalities in contemporary Tibet. The texts through which I have chosen to analyse these writers are – Tashi Dawa’s short fiction in *A Soul in Bondage* (1992), Woeser’s poetry in *Tibet’s True Heart* (2008) and the novelist Alai’s *Red Poppies* (2002). The choice is also strategic owing to the fact that these writers have been published in English outside China. This might be counted as a limitation of the study, but it validates the significance of these works that have found avenues for translation in English and reached a global readership.

By putting these texts together in this study, my primary aim is to delineate the wider significance of how these post-Mao writers of mixed ethnicity relate to Tibet and their ethnic background. This overarching question aligns the study with the field of cultural studies. My approach towards these texts is not so much along the lines of classical literary criticism. I

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6 The publication dates of these particular books vary, but all the writers began their literary career in the late 1980s. The English volume of Woeser’s poetry was published in 2008, but the works compiled within this volume date from 1988. Alai began writing from around the late 1980s too and the novel *Red Poppies* that I study here amalgamates elements from his previous works. Only Tashi Dawa’s short fiction were published as early as 1992.
analyse them as cultural artefacts to make interpretations of the cultural identity that the
writers project in their works. Indeed, it is the socio-cultural context from which they arise
that not only lends significance to these works of otherwise minor literary worth; it also holds
these texts of disparate genres and thematic concerns – Tashi Dawa’s short fiction, Woeser’s
poetry and Alai’s novel – together in a study.

Due to their relative anonymity in the global literary field, except for a Tibetophile
readership in China and outside, criticism relating to Tibeto-Chinese Sinophone literature is
quite limited. A few critics have analysed their works, but these writers have not been brought
together under one composite study. In her analyses of the cultural politics of misogyny and
oppositional politics in some of the most prominent writers of post-Cultural Revolution
fiction, Lu Tonglin devotes an entire chapter to Tashi Dawa.\textsuperscript{7} Cai Rong examines Tashi
Dawa’s work as an example of the larger crisis of representing the subject in Chinese
literature after the restrictions of Maoist propaganda literature.\textsuperscript{8} Howard Choy assesses
selected works by Tashi Dawa and Alai as minority fictions that subvert official Chinese
historiography.\textsuperscript{9} In the only work done on Woeser, D. Dayton (sic) positions her as part of a
conglomerate of ethnic poetic voices from the South-West periphery of China.\textsuperscript{10} While these
studies make probing analyses of their works, they have only been examined in relation to
themes pertaining to Chinese nationhood. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani’s biographical study of
Tashi Dawa, discussing his literary career and adoption of a magical realist style, is the only
one that looks at the issue of Dawa’s mixed ethnicity and cultural hybridity in relation to his
engagement with Tibet.\textsuperscript{11}

\textsuperscript{8} Cai Rong, “The Subject in Crisis in Contemporary Chinese Literature” (PhD thesis, Washington University, St.Louis, 1995).
\textsuperscript{10} D. Dayton, “Big Country, Subtle Voices” (Masters thesis, University of Sydney, Sydney, 2006).
My dissertation builds further on this dimension by placing these three bicultural writers in a composite study to explore how they reconnect with Tibet and define their cultural identity. Objecting to previous descriptions of the identities of these bicultural writers as hybrid in the sense of being an admixture of a Tibetan and Chinese identity, I argue that hybridity is instead the scene of indeterminacy of identification between social groups through which the writers then articulate specific conceptions of the cultural identity they adopt. This approach enables a more nuanced reading of the writers to reveal markedly different manifestations of their bicultural identities and iterates the twofold premise on which the study is based. Firstly, it attests to its theoretical premise that hybridity is the indeterminacy of performing identification between two dominant cultural identifiers rather than an admixture of those pre-given identities. Secondly, it shows that cultural identity is not a matter of passive description, such as their biracial ancestry, but active articulation of how the subject conceives of their identity.

In this introductory chapter, I will establish the historical background and theoretical context to elaborate this overarching argument. I will begin by presenting a brief account of the socio-political context against which this generation of writers, who sought to reconnect with their ethnic background, emerged in a movement called the “root-seeking literature”. Then, I will elaborate the theoretical framework for the study with the concept of hybridity, defined by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha, as a condition of indeterminacy of identification and not as an admixture of pre-given identities.

**Beginnings of minority literature in Tibet**

Since the takeover of Tibet in 1959 by the Chinese Communist armies, the political community and cultural identity of Tibetans has been re-formulated to become one of the five major ethnic populations amongst the fifty-six that constitute the modern nation of People’s
The Chinese government has broken up and re-organised the traditional territory of Tibet, such that only the central province of U-Tsang is accredited as the Tibetan Autonomous Region, while the other regions of Kham and Amdo have been disintegrated and amalgamated into other Chinese provinces. Current processes of modernisation – mass immigration of Chinese workers into Tibet, transport networks such as the recently completed Qinghai-Lhasa railway line, a rapidly expanding economy and internal tourism – are working to seal Tibet’s assimilation into the mainstream course of Chinese socio-political life more resolutely than ever.

Under the authoritarian single-party governance of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP from hereon), fields of cultural production such as minority literature were patronised in the state’s overarching strategy of nation building. In the absence of a platform for political activism, the literary sphere also operate as a major arena for minorities to negotiate their place and identity within the nation. Minority literature can be seen as a “contact zone” between the nation and its minorities, a grey area that can be simultaneously transfigured as a space of collaboration or resistance, but one that is nevertheless a field of active negotiation between the centre and the minorities. Mary Louise Pratt coined the term “contact zone” as a space that is heavily determined even facilitated by colonisation, but which also creates a...
“spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures whose trajectories now intersect.”

In Tibet, state sponsored literary journals such as Xizang Wenxue (Tibetan Literature) provided accessible avenues for publishing that may have been out of bounds for works of emerging minority writers that perhaps have little saleable value in the market as literature for popular consumption. As such an organ for the state’s nation-building project, the first wave of cultural production in Tibetan minority literature began as a means to catalogue folk traditions. Collection of folklore, songs and local legends by the brothers Grimm to constitute a national tradition in the German Romantic Movement had its parallel in China where intellectuals were sent out to collect folk traditions for nation building. In Chinese-occupied Tibet such an enterprise to forge a cultural identity is best exemplified by Dondrup Gyel, who attempted to modernise classical epics to renovate the longstanding classical literary tradition in Tibet from its traditional prerogative as religious discourse to forge a modern literary culture. Due to the paucity of known styles of literary expression and the larger socio-political environment, writing in such a mode resembled a kind of recuperative scholarship focused on recouping old classical texts and composition styles.

With the ideological ascendancy of the Communist regime, another layer of literary

14 The notion of folk found its coinage in German Romantic Movement with the German philosopher Johann Gottfried von Herder (1744-1803). He advocated the specificity of each culture bound by commonalities of cultural heritage such as language, religion underlying which was the authentic spirit of a people – the Volksgeist. A progressive idea for that time, the Volksgeist justified the existence of ethnocratic states by defining the oneness of a people as a nation corresponding to a unitary spirit, once que monarchs had lost divine justification. For an exploration of the cultural politics of folk literature and its contribution to nationalism in early 20th century republican China, see Chang-Tai Hung, Going to the People: Chinese Intellectuals and Folk Literature 1918-37 (Cambridge: Harvard University Asia Center, 1985).
15 This is not to suggest that these writers like the poet Dondrup Gyel undertook the task under the influence of the state’s directive. On the contrary, Dondrup Gyel’s intent to recoup classical texts was driven by a protean nationalism to assert a Tibetan cultural identity against its marginalisation by the Chinese state. The first major poet to have emerged in post-1959, most of Gyel’s works attempted to either Tibetan-ise literary texts that had origins in India or to reduce archaic, convoluted verbiage of old composition styles to make them viable for modern literary practices. However the resultant work is a recuperative scholarship attempting to re-invent a traditionalist style and canon. See Nancy G. Lin, “Dondrup Gyel and the Remaking of the Tibetan Ramayana” in Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change, ed. Lauran Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 86-112.
activity was added in the form of communist propaganda literature. Espousing the socialist rhetoric of the party, these stories categorised minority cultures as belonging to a lower “primitive” stage of cultural evolution to be led to the higher rungs of secular modernity under the guidance of the state.\(^\text{16}\) Parable-format short stories with a Tibetan protagonist learning to awaken from a social evil (like excessive faith in religion, superstition) to become a productive comrade, proliferated in state sponsored journals and publications.\(^\text{17}\) This utilitarian tendency of employing literature reached the heights of state control during the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) when all literary and artistic activity fell under the sole control of Mao Zedong’s wife Jiang Qing. Writers were patronised by the state as intermediaries to only write propaganda pieces; and all works produced before 1966 were banned as being feudalistic or reactionary. According to Cai Rong, all literary activity ground to such a halt under these severe restrictions that for almost the entire decade, apart from one novel no full-length novels of any weight were published. Only eight model plays were revised and replayed continuously for propaganda purposes.\(^\text{18}\)

**A new paradigm**

“Search for origins” is a slogan that burst on the Chinese cultural sphere as Mao’s death signalled the end of the immediate event of the Cultural Revolution and the advent of a more broad sweeping change in the socio-political atmosphere. After witnessing the disasters caused by the Cultural Revolution’s ideological instrumentalisation of culture and history for engineering an ideal society, the more liberal market-oriented governance of the Deng Xiaopeng regime relaxed the state’s hold on literary and cultural production. According to


\(^\text{18}\) Cai Rong, “The Subject”, 38.
Leo Ou-Fan Lee “search for origins” became the catchword for a new generation of young writers from mid-1980’s known as Xungen Wenxue or “root-seeking literature”. These writers of the root-seeking movement sought to reclaim their cultural origins, which they saw as being “severely ruptured by the ideological campaigns” progressivism and modernisation under the Maoist regime during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁹

The actual term Xungen Wenxue (root-seeking literature) was coined by a Chinese writer called Han Shaogong. While he did not consciously position himself as the proponent of a movement, Han Shaogong is credited with starting this debate on the need to return to cultural origins in a theoretical paper he wrote on the subject.²⁰ Although quite rudimentary and simplistic in its romanticisation of minority cultures as repositories of qualities like “primitive energy” and “innocence”, Shaogong’s essay however captured the dominant mood of the writers of this period. Reacting against the extreme ideological strictures of high socialism, the writers enacted a symbolic reversal – from modern centres to remote countryside, from straitjacketed narratives of nationalism to minor histories their minor histories of their own regions, from of a modern future to nostalgia for the past, from mainstream Han Chinese culture to that of ethnic minorities.

This literary movement especially influenced a whole generation of minority writers during the late 1980s, as it ushered in renewed prestige for people of ethnic minorities. Even mainstream Han Chinese writers, consciously turned away from their cultural background to take literary sojourns into minority areas and even settle there, as a few Han Chinese writers did in Tibet too. With this shift, minority cultures that were earlier derogatorily framed as inferior or backward were now romanticised and elevated as possessing a spiritual or cultural superiority to Han Chinese culture.

However, Dru C. Gladney has pointed out that this “culture fever” among elite writers hankering for a source of romantic inspiration can be seen as another symptom of a marketised economy, which has also fuelled the phenomenon of “ethnic chic” in Chinese popular culture. Gladney goes on to argue that this shift in attitudes towards minorities is not only a matter of change in popular perceptions but was also component of government’s preferential policies towards minorities – relaxing the stringent nation-wide one-child policy for minorities, increasing quotas in employment and higher education for minorities. These preferential policies have attached a cultural capital to being a minority, such that a child born of a mixed ethnicity would choose the minority ethnicity as his identity marker, to take advantage of these policies. As members of an elite class, the writers who form the subject of this study are far from the dire compulsions of choosing a Tibetan identity for such prosaic matters.

What can be gleaned from this larger context is that the political atmosphere has given minority writers more legitimacy and even valorised their search for cultural roots. This broad-based impetus of “root-seeking” may be defined by what Fredric Jameson calls “ideologeme”. According to Jameson, “ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to maniest itself as a pseudoidea – a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice – or as a protonarrative.” As Jameson’s notion of ideologeme suggests, “root-seeking” can then be grasped as such a proto-narrative about the urge to reclaim one’s cultural roots from the specific historico-cultural juncture of making a reversal from the ideologies of socialist progressivism under the repressive era of high socialism.

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Although none of the writers examined here in this study consciously positioned themselves as exponents of this “root-seeking movement”, it must be understood not so much as a conscious school of thought but a broad-based ideological shift triggered off by the particular complex of socio-political conditions in China as it distanced itself from ideologies of high socialism. This cultural shift of “root-seeking” is not a popular mass movement but a wave sweeping the elite sphere of writers and intellectuals. Rebelling against their position as mere scribes for the state’s propaganda machinery, they sought to resuscitate the severely repressed autonomy of the writer to produce literature as an individual artistic pursuit. From socialist realism to magical realism, from populist proletariat poetry eulogising Maoist comradeship to a deliberate obscurantist style – this chain of reversals manifested itself in an explosion of literary styles and creative works that were antithetical to the frugal aesthetic norms of utilitarian Maoist literature.

Writing in Chinese: Returning to Tibet

The issue of literary innovation is not merely a stylistic concern. It is an element crucial to the political vitality of the movement and holds particular significance for these bicultural writers who made their quest for cultural roots through new literary idioms. Alai’s whimsical saga of the downfall of an eastern Tibetan chieftain family attempts to decentre the dominant Chinese historical discourse to tell a subaltern testimony of the Chinese takeover. But Steven Venturino notes that in some reviews, critics have denounced the novel as a pro-Chinese liberation narrative. For example, he cites Barbara Crosette from The New York Times who finds the novel to be no more than “a parable about the superior civilisation of the Communist Han Chinese, who put an end to a brutal Tibetan warlord society wallowing in decadence and living on the backs of abject serfs.”

On the other hand, Tashi Dawa’s works adopt the literary style of magical realism, which in the works of its proponents like the Latin American writer Gabriel Garcia Marquez or the American writer William Faulkner, has been largely recognised as a subaltern literary idiom challenging the dominant worldview. But the absurd, fantastical stories that he wrote in the magical realist style have been critiqued for the accuracy of their representations of Tibet. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani notes the diverse reactions that Dawa’s works have received on this account. According to her, one Tibetan writer argued that it was Tashi Dawa’s partial outsider status which enabled him to capture the realities of Tibet with more depth and complexity “because he is not too close to Tibet”; another writer claimed that this was due to “the closeness that is given by the Tibetan blood that flows in his body.”

I will address the specific details of these negative appraisals of their works in the individual analyses of the writers. But suffice it to say that their literary styles have been judged on norms, such as the accuracy of their representations of Tibet premised on an essentialist understanding of Tibetan culture as a fixed monolithic entity. This is compounded by even more jejune readings reflected in Tashi Dawa’s reception that Schiaffini-Vedani calls “ethnic determinism”, where it is assumed that “the degree of Sinicisation of the Tibetan author” and “the quality of his Tibetan-ness” can be judged to ascertain if Dawa is Tibetan, only partly Tibetan or not Tibetan at all.

Further, the political debate over Tibet’s situation has also influenced the reception of their works at large. While Tashi Dawa has received a completely negative appraisal from Tibet-related circles outside China for his political ambiguity; the poet Woeser a state-employed editor, who was completely unknown until 2003, has suddenly found a great audience in exile and Western readership due to her recent dissident activity. On the other hand, Alai who is perhaps the most important contemporary Tibetan writer in China is still
As opposed to such literal readings, Deleuze and Guattari outline their concept of “minor literature” to allow a more critical appraisal of the nature of such writings. According to them, “A minor literature doesn’t come from a minor language; it is rather that which a minority constructs within a major language.”

Deleuze and Guattari outline three characteristics that define such a literature – it is necessarily deterritorialised from having to inhabit the dominant language, inescapably politically-oriented and composed of collectivist value. Although this is more of a normative definition of what constitutes a minor literature, by making such a distinction Deleuze and Guattari wish to draw attention to how the consciousness of inhabiting another’s language and being dispossessed of one’s own affect the writer under conditions of dislocation or domination. The distinction that a minor writer has from other minority literature is that while minority literature is written in the minor language, confined within its own milieu has nationalistic themes of a minority people and is not necessarily imbued with a politics of opposing the dominant culture, minor literature is forged out of a perpetual sense of dislocation and cultivates a circumstantial marginal voice in the dominant language. It is writing in the dominant language of Chinese and within the institutional Chinese literary network that permeates the marginalised tenor of these minor writers – with Tashi Dawa adopting magical realism to oppose the dominant worldview and Alai recreating a minor history to decentre dominant discourses of official history.

The “hybrid” label

As such dislocated people placed inside/outside Tibet, their journey back to Tibet is a fraught and complex process. But instead of an objection to these writers not corresponding to


some pre-conceived notion of what a Tibetan is; the question then shifts to how they define their identity as people of bicultural ancestry. The question then shifts to understanding how these writers of biracial ancestry find the resolution to their individual quests and define their cultural identities.

Along these lines, Patrcia Schiaffi̩ni-Vedani in her biographical study of Tashi Dawa argues that Dawa comes to assume the detached stance of a magical realist style to opt for the ambivalence of his hybrid identity. A few other scholars from the West also employ the notion of hybridity to conceptualise how these Tibeto-Chinese writers define their bicultural identity. Dayton interprets Woeser as a hybrid poet for her biracial ancestry. In a similar way Alai who is of Tibetan and minority Hui Chinese ancestry, is described by Howard Choy as “hybrid twice over” because his identity is a mix of two minority ethnicities that is doubly removed from the dominant Han Chinese culture. Thus, previous studies categorise these writers as a priori hybrid for their mixed ancestry, with a somewhat superficial understanding of the term as an admixture of two different cultural identities. I cite this issue not just to point out it as a weakness in these studies, but also to discuss a broader problem endemic to the concept of hybridity when it is used in such descriptive ways as a term to define certain identities as products of mixture.

Hybridity has emerged as one of the central concepts in postcolonial criticism. However, in its most simplistic adaptations it is too often limited to be used as a term to indicate the amalgamation two pre-existing cultural locales. For these Tibeto-Chinese writers too, hybridity is again used to categorise these writers on the premise that their identity is a mix of Tibetan and Chinese lineage. Such a usage undermines the concept of hybridity, the nature of cultural identity and leads to a host of problems that prevents a clearer understanding of these writers.

Firstly, to categorise these writers as hybrid on the basis of their mixed race, relies on a fusionary notion of hybridity to imply that there are static essential traits to describe cultural identities of a Tibetan or Chinese, which commingle to produce a Tibeto-Chinese identity that is then automatically hybrid as a result. In fact, Homi Bhabha the postcolonial critic associated with the concept of cultural hybridity, makes a direct rebuttal of such an interpretation of hybridity. He says, “Hybridity is not merely a problem of genealogy or identity between two different cultures which can then be resolved as an issue of cultural relativism.” 29 For Bhabha, hybridity is not a term to categorise certain cultural identities as a mixture of pre-existing ones, whose anomalies can then be traced back to the original identities.

Further, when used as a label to allocate a certain type of an identity per se discussions are halted at the point of description. They draw upon a passive feature such their mixed race to define the identity that the writers assume. This can be seen in an argument Dayton makes when he describes Woeser as a hybrid poet but astonishingly rejects the applicability of postcolonial criticism for his subject of Woeser. 30 It detracts from the conceptual import of hybridity which has deeper potential for application to provoke such questions related to the matters of agency and subjectivity of the subaltern writer.

Thirdly, the use of hybridity in this descriptive mode as a label for their biracial status also obfuscates the particularistic ways in which they position their identity. Without unravelling their individual subject-positions, the label “hybrid” becomes a blanket term that makes them appear homogenous. Anne McClintock makes an objection against such a generalised use of hybridity by saying that, “The transitorical ubiquity of ambivalence” loses sight of “historically variant cultural practices are collapsed under the ahistorical sign of the

29 Homi Bhabha, Nation and Narration. (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 314.
And this reductive collapsing of disparate conditions of hybridity becomes a problematic issue, when we consider the various and potentially contradictory meanings with which an abstracted and ahistoricised terminology of hybridity is employed in literary and cultural criticism. A cursory survey of immigrant literature in the West reveals that hybridity is mostly deployed in the service of an inclusionist discourse positioned to give the immigrant writer equal legitimacy of belonging. In contrast, the usage of hybridity prevalent in literatures from the Third World is often to resist the ties of the postcolonial nation, exemplified by this statement form the Indian novelist Salman Rushdie,

*The Satanic Verses* celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, the transformation that comes of new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics, movies, songs. It rejoices in mongrelisation and fears the absolutism of the Pure.\(^{32}\)

Thus, I have objected to the categorisation of the identities of these writers of biracial ancestry as *a priori* hybrid for mixing a Tibetan and Chinese ancestry for the problems listed above, which ensue in succession from this core issue. It enforces a facile understanding of their identities as an *admixture*, halts analysis at the point of *description* and used as a *blanket term* also suppresses the heterogeneity with these writers. (Emphases mine) My intent behind recalling these problems is to engage a more nuanced use of the concept of hybridity as defined by the postcolonial critic Homi Bhabha.

**Homi Bhabha, hybridity and hyphenated identity**

Homi Bhabha’s theory of hybridity begins by taking to task the essentialist notion of cultures and the ensuing misconception of viewing hybrid cultures as admixtures. Examining cross-cultural encounters and the politics of cultural change in various historical junctures of colonisation, globalisation and immigration, Bhabha’s complex theorisations defy a singular

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interpretation.\(^{33}\) But at the heart of his theories is the fundamental view that cultures are not monolithic, hermetic entities defined by a set tablet of traditions, which then come into contact and produce hybridity. To cite an example, a fusionary notion of hybridity would perceive forms of Latin American Catholicism, as a mixture of European Catholicism amalgamated with indigenous practices, which would only enforce a facile sense of thing-ified culture and produce a futile reading of authenticity. What Bhabha’s notion of hybridity is foregrounds is the politics of the coloniser culturally coding the indigenous Indian populations as heathen and converting them using a cultural product of the Christian faith; and the colonised submitting to this conversion but re-signifying the coloniser’s practice and re-inventing their own practice too. This example reflects Bhabha’s statement that “culture appears not as an epistemological object but a site of enunciation”, a product of contested authority riven with the effects of asymmetric power relations.

Although, theories of hybridity posited by Bhabha along with some other scholars like Paul Gilroy is principally examine cultures as holistic systems instead of individuals of hybrid heritage; this perspective of rejecting the notion of cultures as thingi-fied, essentialist objects applies equally to individuals as well. Citing example of a hybrid cultural identity such as Chica-riricuas, a name used for people of Puerto-Rican mulatto and Chicano-mestizo ancestry, Homi Bhabha points to the futility of understanding these identities as a matter of tracing their origin from categorisable lineages. The fusionary notion of hybridity leads to the futile task of comparing these new identities, and consequently hybrid identities such as the question of Tibet-Chinese identity not corresponding fully to a Tibetan identity. Bhabha says, “The problem is not of an ontological cast, where differences are effects of some more

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33 Scholars often overlook the fact that Bhabha’s seminal book on cultural hybridity *The Location of Culture* is actually a collection of essays. The analyses can roughly be summarised as progressing from discussion of historical circumstances in colonial India to contemporary artistic and literary texts. The essays weave a web of terms like mimicry, ambivalence, thirspace which defy one final definition of hybridity, as if to reiterate the fluidity of the concept of culture itself.
totalising transcendent identity.”34 The problem of hyphenated identities is not in essence of them being less than or anomalous to some more authentic entity that they derive from. In order to have a better understanding of hybrid identity, what is required is to avoid the epistemological error of considering an type pf cultural identity, defined in terms of race, ethnicity or nationality are taken as authentic essences rather than socially constructed categories.

Robert Young traces the terminology of this actually quite ancient concept of hybridity to its older usages as a biological category for people of inter-racial mixes with the implication that races were different species altogether, with a disturbing history used to justify practices of colonialism and slavery.35 Bhabha’s contribution has not just been in producing a more nuanced albeit complex understanding of cultural encounters, but in using that very word which was once used to flag fears of miscegenation he has turned it around to implode it from within to produce a better understanding of cultural identity of people of hybrid heritage. To merely describe the hyphenated identities of bicultural writers as a priori hybrid would be to detract from Bhabha’s conceptual advances and relapse into the antiquated notion of hybridity merely to refer to a mixed-race person.

To provide such an alternative view, Bhabha argues that hybridity of such new identities “is not an admixture of pre-given identities or essences”, it is instead “the perplexity of the living as it interrupts the representation of the fullness of life.”36 In this quite poetic statement of “the representation of fullness off life being interrupted”, what Bhabha is implying that because social reality is comprehensible in static monological name of social groups like Tibetan or Chinese, hybridity is the perplexity when that representation of one’s identity is interrupted by this lack of a transparently referrable name.

34 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture (London: Granta/ Penguin, 1990), 313.
36 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 313.
Hybrid hyphenations in their indeterminacy of identification straddle those names in unusual combinations show that hybridity is the condition of not having complete identification to a certain name. As Bhaba says, “Hybrid hyphenations emphasise the incommensurable elements – the stubborn chunks – of cultural identification.”\(^{37}\) In a reverse logic, to claim complete identification as a Tibetan is also a condition of being able to perform to such a name. In this condition of not being definable within those proper nouns of social locales paradoxically reveals the contingency of any cultural identity at large, which denoted as such a name, is not an essence but a text of cultural practice. Identification is not the matter of possessing an essence but the ability to lay claim on a name. Cultural identity as Stuart Hall outlines in his extensive theorisations is only manifest when a subject takes an active positioning to a cultural locale. He says, “Cultural identities are points of identification, unstable points of identification that are made in the discourse of culture and history, there is no essence, but a positioning.”\(^{38}\)

Such an understanding of hybridity also goes a certain distance in rectifying the charge against the concept that it promotes a facile notion of these hybrid identities blurring boundaries in easy cohesion, with situation that Ien Ang has called “happy hybridity”.\(^{39}\) While some social theorists have expressed reservation against hybridity for etherealising discussions of issues of socio-political urgency by retreating into obtuse critiques of the cultural, I would argue that while making the “cultural” his locus of analysis Bhabha in fact places it firmly as an artefact and discursive effect within machinations of power.\(^{40}\) Ang also

\(^{37}\) Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 313.


\(^{40}\) For example, social theorist Jonathan Friedman mount a scathing critique against theories such as Homi Bhabha’s cultural hybridity, as the rhetoric of elite intellectuals without any capacity for social criticism. See Jonathan Friedman, See “Global Crises, the Struggle for Cultural Identity and Intellectual Porkbarrelling: Cosmopolitans versus Locals, Ethnicns and Nationals in an Era of De-hegemonisation,” in Debating Cultural Hybridity: Multi-Cultural Identities and the Politics of Anti-Racism, eds. Pnina Werbner and Tariq Modood (London: Zed Books, 1997). It must be argued that as a sociologist Friedman focuses on the social dimensions of
voices a similar opinion supporting the concept when she says, “What we need to question then is not so much hybridity as such, but the depoliticisation involved in reduction of hybridity to happy fusion and synthesis.”41 It does not remove boundaries since it does not subscribe to the notion of any cultural identity as a static categorisable essence but a name to which one performs identification. Instead, it shows how boundaries are contested and defined within the fraught exchanges in a chain of cultural politics of identity and difference. Indeed, new forms of fundamentalist sectarian identities are also not continuation of pre-existing cultural groups but more often produced in modern processes of hybridisation, where cultural difference is re-articulated and hardened against others within new encounters.

**Spelling out the hyphen (-)**

With this brief appraisal of Bhabha’s theorisation, hybridity of the Tibeto-Chinese identity results not so much from the fact that they mix a Tibetan and a Chinese identity. It is instead a condition of indeterminacy of being suspended between the collective cultural identifiers “Tibetan” and “Chinese”, what Bhabha calls the “stubborn chunks”, which don’t accommodate them completely. Consequently, the identity that these Tibeto-Chinese writers assume is not the matter of the content that is fused but the conjugative effect to which the hyphen is used by the individual writer to resolve this indeterminacy.

As such a process of negotiating indeterminacy between names of dominant social locales, it rejects the use of the term as a descriptive label to merely categorise identities *per se*. Their hybrid condition is not in itself the final explanation of their identity; it is I would argue the intermediary stage through which they then define their identity. That is to say, enquiry doesn’t merely stop at describing these writers as hyphenated identities but to ask how they manipulate that hyphen to define that static label of Tibeto-Chinese. As Bhabha

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says, “What is at issue is the performative nature of differential identities.”42

This negation of the descriptive label also shifts focus to their hyphenated identity as an individuated experience rather than a stock social description. According to Stuart Hall heed to be paid to the process of articulation of identities, “Looking at new conceptions of identity requires us to look at redefinitions of the forms of politics which follow from that: the politics of difference, the politics of self-reflexivity.”43 This view of hybridity also shows that Tibeto-Chinese writers may be in the analogous situation of being in-between two cultural groups but they articulate their position in completely different ways.

Thus, this nuanced concept of hybridity resolves the problems that ensue from the core problem of explaining these Tibeto-Chinese writers as a priori hybrid for their mixed ancestry with a fusionary sense as an admixture of two cultural identities, in a descriptive mode as a blanket term for all the writers.

The analyses that I present below make it their primary aim to nuance the position that each writer takes to articulate the conception of their cultural identity by negotiating its hyphenated status. While describing the disparate trajectories of their journey of “root-seeking”, I also note the varying political currency of their works in asserting subaltern agency against the domination of the Chinese state. This approach is underscored with a twofold aim – to make a more cautious reading of how the subject actively articulates its identity without collapsing them under a descriptive label and to highlight how a conceptual term like hybridity must be used, after clarifying the theoretical premises it entails. To put it in Anne McClintock’s words, the study seeks to show that, “The slippage between difference and identity is present in all these cases, but the psychic toll and political consequences vary dramatically.”44

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42 Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 313.
44 McClintock, Imperial Leather, 67.
In my reading of Tashi Dawa’s anthology of short stories, *A Soul in Bondage* (1992), I will argue that Dawa rejects the larger markers of social identity to dwell in the ambivalent, individualistic space of the hyphen itself, as a cosmopolitan. Showing his indifference to issues of collective identity, Dawa defines his social location as a metropolitan returnee who does not seek belonging but circumscribes his difference from the native land he loves to depict. The authorial persona he adopts in some stories is that of an urbane subject who feels equally fascinated and repulsed by the bucolic world of the Tibetan hinterlands. With such metropolitan sensibilities, Dawa depicts cultural difference merely as a matter of social class and education without any racial connotations, which is dramatised in encounters between rustic and urbane figures. Further showing his ambivalence towards matters of ethnicity, Dawa finds the fullest potential of his literary voice as a detached satirical commentator, in the vein of the famous cosmopolitan auteurs he emulates. Without committing himself to a particular political agenda, Dawa makes subtle political commentary from his individualist position against larger social groups, irrespective of their denomination.

In the English anthology of her selected poetic works in *Tibet’s True Heart* (2008), Woeser articulates the hyphen in her identity in agonistic terms as a psychic split that fractures her sense of selfhood. She conceives of collective cultural identity in reified notions of “Tibetanness” and “Chineseness” which are defined by insurmountable differences of race and culture. Standing in sharp contrast to Tashi Dawa on all counts of literary practice and political stance, Woeser’s works reveals what could be called a nativist identity. In the earliest phase of her poetry, the rootlessness of her biracial status is depicted not as a liberating unattached existence but a state of insular crisis of selfhood. Scrutinising her hyphenated identity from the lens of the larger history of Tibet’s invasion by China, she sees her familial
story of Tibeto-Chinese ancestry as a sign of racial impurity and moral ignominy. Drawing binaric oppositions between Tibet and China on ontological differences of racial essence, she virulently rejects her Chinese heritage to seek an absolutist belonging with Tibet. She re-inscribes the distinction between the larger social locales in an antagonistic us versus them equation, with the nativist stance of elevating Tibet as a sacred arcadia. The allegorical mode of reading her own personal life as intrinsically tied to the larger history acquires greater resonance as she adopts a Tibetan cultural identity in an act of solidarity. Finally the dissident phase of her poetry cements her opposition to the Chinese domination as she erases individualist themes out of her poetry to take on the role of a voice of testimony for collective concerns.

In his novel *Red Poppies* (2002), Alai articulates his bicultural identity by negating the hyphen that fractures his identity, to reclaim the organic entity of his border identity over the monolithic markers on either side of the hyphen as cultural-nationalist notions. Unfolding from the minor historical event of the opium trade circuit, the novel recreates the pluralistic historical background of the autonomous polyethnic borderlands, which had existed in the interstices of the Tibetan theocracy and the Chinese empire for centuries. Placing the conflict in the prosaic context of the rise of the nation-state, Chinese expansim, the dissolution of ambiguous political contracts and a commercialising economy, the story undercuts any pretensions to framing the takeover of these borderlands as a hyper-racialised, mythic confrontation between two nations. The novel adopts the form of a hybridised counter-history of the local, allegorised in the whimsical saga of a chieftain family, with a somewhat ironic and fragmented version of the past in a “carnivalesque” tale with irreverent denouements that subverts the teleological heroic nationalist narratives. It plays on the reader’s prior knowledge of the larger nationalist histories to subvert them through its “double-voicedness” – whether it is that of the exile Tibetan understanding of the invasion of a unified nation or the wilfully
belligerent Chinese version of re-unification of Tibet under the Chinese motherland. With the biracial idiot protagonist of the novel, Alai further legitimates his own border identity as an older creole pre-existing in these regions, indicating that cultural-nationalist notions of identity that now split his identity, were only forged later.

Adopting the metaphor of the hyphen, literally a punctuation mark without any content to spell out, this study underscores its argument that hyphenated identity is not a static admixture of pre-existing cultural identities it is instead the consciousness of being lodged in-between two cultural identifiers. Nikos Papastergiadis to consider the hyphenated identity, “From this perspective, the identity of the hybrid is not found in the sum of its hyphen, but from the power of the hyphen. It is thus neither the negative result of partial definition nor the triumphal synthesis of opposites.” Consequently, the identity of the Tibeto-Chinese writer can be apprehended in the mode each writer negotiates his or her identification between two nodes of cultural identity.

“Spelling out the hyphen” thus underscores the foundational premise and aim on which the study is based. In terms of the aim of the study, the title reiterates its focus on reading the articulation of their hyphenated identities by the individual writers. By elaborating the processes through which each writer exercises agency, this study attests to its theoretical conviction to adopt hybridity not as passive description but active articulation.

Chapter II

The satirical outsider: Cosmopolitanism in Tashi Dawa’s short fiction

From the contemporary literary scene in Tibet, no other writer has stirred up as much controversy or attracted the level of attention from critics in China and the West as Tashi Dawa. Despite the relative scantiness of his body of works, which only comprises of some short stories and novellas, he has not only accrued credibility as a prominent minority literary voice, but is also one of the most well-known Tibetan cultural personalities in China. In fact the state-sponsored Beijing Literatures Press translated and published his works of short fiction into an English anthology called *A Soul in Bondage: Stories from Tibet* as early as 1992, to market his works to Tibetophile audiences overseas.

Born to a Tibetan father and a Han Chinese mother, Tashi Dawa was raised and educated in his mother’s hometown, the provincial Chinese city of Chongqing in Sichuan. He was actually named Zhang Niansheng but reverted to his childhood Tibetan name of Tashi Dawa at the advice of an editor of the *Xizang Wenxue* (Tibetan Literature) journal. Starting his literary career at a young age in 1979, Tashi Dawa gained recognition and a certain level of notoriety in literary circles in mainland China from 1985 onwards, for his fantastical often grotesque stories. This has partly been due to his use of magical realism, which was seen as quite a startling literary innovation in Tibetan literature. Apart from a study on his life and works by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani, he has also received detailed critical attention in a few other studies which place him in the same rank as some of the most important writers from contemporary China.  

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46 Cai Rong and Lu Tonglin’s respective studies on post-Mao experimental fiction place Tashi Dawa in the same category with some of the most influential writers of the generation, such as Han Shaogong (the writer accredited with coining the term root-seeking movement) and Can Xue (the most prominent woman writer in China known for her radical literary style echoing that of the European existentialist and absurdist schools). See the last chapter where I discussed previous research on Tashi Dawa’s work. See Lu Tonglin, “Quest in Time and Space as a New History of Ancient and Modern Tibet,” in *Misogyny, Cultural Nihilism and Oppositional*
There has been a flurry of contradictory debates mostly revolving around Tashi Dawa’s political stance and his identity, especially from some of his early critics who accuse him of either deliberately defaming Tibetan culture or not taking a more defensive stance as a minority representative. In one of the earliest critical responses to his works, Geremie Barme and John Minford in their book on dissidence by intellectuals in China allege that, “Tashi Dawa is a Tibetan imbued with the ideology and literary trendiness of the Chinese and uses Tibet’s religious culture in the service of Marxist-Leninist modernism.”47 On the other hand, a Chinese feminist critic Lu Tonglin does not accuse Tashi Dawa of direct collusion with the Chinese state, but finds his ambivalence problematic in itself. She says “Tashi Dawa renounces his Tibetan identity and in this desertion of his Tibetan roots,” and “lack of resistance, his marginality mainly serves as a decoration for the Chinese cultural centre.”48

More recently, a few critics have taken a more judicious stance towards Dawa’s works. They show that there lies more complexity in his ambivalence towards Tibet that cannot be categorised as explicit collusion or hidden complicity with the Chinese state. For example, in a selective reading of Dawa’s stories, Howard Choy shows how the fantastical stories of his characters and their accounts of certain tumultuous periods of recent Tibetan history, construct an alternative view of historical events against the grain of official Chinese historiography to subvert its grand narratives of liberation.49 Cai Rong places Dawa’s work with some of the most radical writers of post-Mao experimental fiction, whose subversive literary innovations and aesthetic excesses manifested the most outright rebellion against the utilitarian nature of socialist propaganda literature.50 Rather than simplistically seeing him as a puppet writer of the Chinese regime, as Barme and Minford do, the above-mentioned

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48 Lu Tonglin, “Quest in Time and Space”, 128.
studies conduct probing analyses of Dawa’s works. They reveal the subtle political commentary as well as hidden indictment of Chinese rule beneath his ambivalence that allowed him to maintain deliberate obfuscation of his allegiance.

Reverting to the second issue of Tashi Dawa’s putative renunciation of his Tibetan identity raised by Lu Tonglin, even if Dawa does not display any personal anxiety for reclaiming a cultural identity, this must not be indicted on the basis of a normative expectation imposed by the critic. Dawa’s ambivalence towards adopting a Tibetan identity must be analysed on its own terms as a valid reaction to deconstruct the writer’s subject-position. Schiaffini-Vedani notes that while other contemporary writers and Chinese critics seem to raise Dawa’s mixed ethnicity above all other concerns, Dawa himself did not seem especially preoccupied about ethnic issues. Indeed, in a personal interview she notes that Dawa was not only hesitant about answering the question of how he viewed his bicultural status, but deliberately rejected being moored to a collective identity by saying that he considered himself “a citizen of the world.”

Apart from this explicit admission, the question of cultural identity that Dawa deliberately eschewed in actual life is also resoundingly absent as a theme in his fictional works, which instead reveal what could be called a “cosmopolitan” identity. A term with roots in ancient Greek Stoic thought with a philosophical lineage of being committed to the universal, the word “cosmopolitan” roughly translates into “citizen of the world” too. By adopting such a cosmopolitan identity, Dawa not only marks his ambivalence towards collective identifiers of ethnicity but accentuates his own difference by taking a position of individualist detachment. This specific argument about Dawa’s subject-position iterates the theoretical contention of the study to not use hybridity as a descriptor of mixed-race identities. Hybridity, as Bhabha had argued, is better understood as a condition of indeterminacy.

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between dominant cultural identifiers which is then resolved after the subject takes active positioning to define its identity. It also shows that we must not make conclusions about the cultural identity the subject adopts from a passive feature, such as their biracial status, but procedd to unravel their self-positioning. To put it idiomatically in terms of the title of the thesis, Tashi Dawa articulates his biculural identity, by rejecting the larger markers of collective identity to dwell in the detached space of the hyphen itself.

In the following sections, I will explore aspects of Dawa’s literary journey of “seeking his roots” where his ambivalence towards the larger markers of cultural identity and his individualist stance result in the adoption of a cosmopolitan identity. At the start of his literary career coinciding with his move to Tibet, it was confronting the traditional way of life and culture in Tibet which piqued his metropolitan sensibilities, prompting him to advocate the socialist rhetoric of embracing modernity and material progress. As he grew out of the naïve socialist didactism of his early stories, he adopted a more detached ironic view in his writings where he severed himself from collective concerns. Dawa’s adoption of magical realism cemented his gravitation towards aesthetic concerns and individualist detachment, aligning him with a global clique of cosmopolitan Third World writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez and Salman Rushdie, who also write in this literary style.

With such metropolitan sensibilities, Dawa depicts cultural difference merely as a matter of social class and education without any racial connotations. Further showing his indifference to issues of collective cultural identity, Dawa defines his social location as a metropolitan returnee who does not seek belonging with the native land he loves to depict but marks his difference from it. The authorial persona reflected in some of the stories is that of an urbane subject who feels equally fascinated and repulsed by the bucolic world of the Tibetan hinterlands.

Dawa finds the fullest potential of his literary voice as a detached satirical
commentator, in the vein of the famous cosmopolitan auteurs he emulates. Without committing himself to a particular political agenda, he makes subtle political commentary from against larger social locales, irrespective of their denomination.

**Learning to disengage**

While I made a brief note on the definition of “cosmopolitanism” earlier on, it has now proliferated into a complex term with multiple connotations in contemporary debates over globalisation, transculturalism and the unsure predicament of the nation-state. To cite one instance, the dizzying debates over the concept extend from cosmopolitanism being championed as an ethic necessary for a shrinking world to it being rejected as the rhetoric of universalism of the imperialist project of Europe over other parts of the world. For the purpose of this study, I will use one specific connotation of cosmopolitanism relating to the situation of Third World intellectuals or writers. These cosmopolitan writers from the Third World display metropolitan cultural influence in their artistic practice and adopt a position of deliberative distance from the locality of their origins, to eschew any kind of cultural identity – ethnic, national or religious – as restrictive definitions of their entity as individuals. In this section, I will elaborate how Dawa’s particular journey to reconnect with his ethnic background resulted in scepticism about attaching himself to a particular cultural identity and writing for collective concerns, which then paved the way for his cosmopolitan stance.

Instead of evoking a sense of belonging, Tashi Dawa’s return to Tibet piqued his urbanised sensibilities. As a young adult educated in the provincial Chinese cities, he was disoriented and dismayed by what he saw as the stranglehold of Tibet’s traditional culture on

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53 Timothy Brennan defines the three main features of this ilk of cosmopolitan third-world intellectuals – their social location is based on the topoi of exile of the writer as an alienated insider, their works are infused with a metropolitan cultural influence and they cater to target reading publics in metropolitan centres of Europe and North America. See Timothy Brennan, “The National Longing for Form,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 63.
its people. This prompted Dawa to take a stance of socialist advocacy and regurgitate the didactic content of socialist propaganda literature of earlier decades. In her extensive analyses of those stories, Schiaffini-Vedani calls this phase the “Tibetanization of Tashi Dawa”\(^\text{54}\) where Dawa saw himself as a modern educated Tibetan who owed responsibility to his homeland and committed his literary practice to collective concerns. While the English anthology of his selected works has excluded those earliest stories, Dawa himself confessed his embarrassment about these works later on in life.

But notwithstanding their aesthetic poverty, these stories provide a vital background to establish a trajectory of how his worldview and literary practice evolved. Dawa’s literary vision matured from the propagandist stance of advocating the need for material progress in Tibet to take a more detached, ironic stance. With this ideological shift, Dawa not only rejected the socialist rhetoric but distanced himself from issues of collective concerns and retracted from his earlier stance of adopting a Tibetan identity. I will show this movement by sampling two stories, an early story that adopted a propaganda storyline to advocate the need for Tibet’s progress and a later one that re-narrated the same situation in a diametrically opposite manner.

Amongst the many narratives used in propaganda literature from the Maoist era, there is a popular storyline where the minority figure, usually a young almost prepubescent female or even an infantilised male, lacking in social skills or education, rises to his/ her full potential as a good comrade under the patronage of a benevolent Han Chinese person. These stories actually have an antecedent in classical Chinese literary tradition called “scholar-beauty fiction” narrated around archetypal characters of a young, beautiful but petulant female and a distant, learned, sedate male intellectual.\(^\text{55}\) The sexual tension between the two characters and

\(^{54}\) Schiaffini-Vedani, “Contested Identities”, 104-38.

\(^{55}\) Martin Huang traces the history of this storyline from its longstanding roots in first century Han literature to late seventeenth century Qing China, when it first emerged as a specific, standardised genre called “scholar-beauty fiction”. See Martin W. Huang, “Qing and the Virtuous Body in Three Scholar-Beauty
the difference in their personalities create the scene for a social drama. This is then finally resolved in an amicable ending of romantic love and mutual self-improvement, generally on the woman’s part who benefits from the relationship. Modified for propaganda literature, this storyline became a popular format for minority fictions, where the male-female dynamic is desexualised and the tension between the characters is used to incorporate morally explicit lessons about casting away ignorance to become a good citizen. Dawa had himself adopted this format in one of his earliest stories “The Director and Sezhen”, which revolves around a middle-aged Han Chinese theatre director who struggles to turn a young Tibetan girl into a serious actress. The Tibetan girl’s latent talent hidden beneath her petulant childish behaviour is reined in under the Chinese theatre director’s paternalistic guidance. He finally leaves her an accomplished actress who now having understood the “sacredness of art … will surely win honour for Tibetan art.”

This story is paradigmatic of Dawa’s early propagandist stance when he committed his literary practice to collective concerns and adopted a Tibetan cultural identity. His reversal from this stance of naïve advocacy to a more detached ironic view can be read most transparently in a later story, which makes a subtle ironic revision against the propagandist narrative of the last one. One can read hints of subversion in this later story that subtly problematises the very premises of social progress of the coloniser’s rhetoric that Dawa had earlier taken to heart.

“The Plateau Serenade” also puts a couple together, in the form of an extroverted truck driver and a shy country girl who hitches a lift with him on her way to Lhasa. Desperate to impress the country girl, the truck driver simultaneously mocks her rusticity as well as shows off his superiority by singing pop ditties or quoting from some romance novel. When he

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kisses her, she flares into a rage, bolts out of the truck to sit in the wagon and refuses to return to the truck even in the bitter cold wind of the winter night. She finally relents when instead of imperiously commanding her, the driver shows genuine concern by getting out and pleading with her to come back into the truck.

Schiaffini-Vedani offers quite a simplistic analysis of the story by reading it as a parable about the lure of modernity drawing two young Tibetans on their way to the city. Instead, I argue that the story reveals a completely different and more complex meaning when we probe beneath the obvious storyline of their journey to Lhasa. Although it is one of Tashi Dawa’s mid-career works written in a realist mode, when he had yet not cultivated the fantastical style of magical realism so prevalent in his later works, the story takes on a completely contradictory narrative from the overtly didactic nature of his older story. In the present story, instead of being enamoured by the urban male’s patronising attitude, it is the country girl who resists the advances made by the truck driver who is now on the other end of this battle of courtship. In the end, the girl does relent to the truck-driver’s overtures when instead of his bravado he shows a gesture of genuine warmth. Thus, the two are reconciled on grounds of equal recognition.

The portrayal of the truck driver in the story is also of interest here. All the features of urban modernity are completely deflated and satirised in his character. In place of an urban sophisticate with intellectual superiority to the country girl we have an urban subaltern, perhaps a country boy himself, who had been drawn to the city and had now ended up as a lowly truck driver. All he has to show for his worldly knowledge are snatches of popular songs and trivia from some sentimental novel; or garish pretences to urbanity in his sunglasses and jeans. The dominant culture’s enshrinement of superior human qualities in the modern individual that were always advocated in opposition to the backward, ignorant ways

of the country folk are being rejected.

While my interpretation of “The Plateau Serenade” has been to read the story as running counter to the typical scholar-beauty storyline that Dawa had himself adopted, it is not so much a self-conscious critique of the genre on the writer’s part. It is instead reflective of his move of disengaging from collective concerns to a more non-committal stance. This maturation in his worldview resulted in Dawa subverting, even if unknowingly, the stock conventions handed down by earlier literary traditions of elevating the modern individual and questioning the socialist rhetoric that he had earlier advocated.

Thus, this development in Dawa’s position can be read as a refinement of his sensibilities in a dual movement – showing his scepticism for the socialist rhetoric as well as his disengagement from collective concerns about Tibet – an ideological shift that laid the groundwork for how he came to assume a cosmopolitan identity.

As he slowly retreated to a more ironic stance, this idiom of socialist didacticism of his early stories was finally upturned in the fantastical idiom of magical realism, which became the mainstay of his literary practice. Without propagandist overtones, all of his later stories reflect this sensibility of a metropolitan outsider not preaching to his bucolic subjects but fascinated by them. In the next section, I will show how his adoption of magical realism can be seen as Dawa aligning himself with a cosmopolitan literary practice as well as retracting from his earlier stance of adopting a Tibetan identity to defining his position as a partial outsider.

**Global call of the aesthetes**

The most scathing attack on Tashi Dawa, not just for his political allegiance but the literary worth of his work and particularly his use of magical realism, has come from the exiled Tibetan essayist and novelist Jamyang Norbu, who says
his ostentatiously magical-realist novella is essentially a vehicle for the recapitulation of age-old Chinese racist calumnies about Tibet ... It is no wonder that this essentially trite, posturing, and derivative piece of writing should have become a great hit with the Chinese some years ago.\textsuperscript{59}

The uneven prose and shoddy use of the magical realist style in Dawa’s short fiction may have irked an accomplished writer like Jamyang Norbu, steeped in a colonial literary tradition from the British missionary school education he had in India. Yet it must be remembered that owing to the socio-political environment in China, Tashi Dawa had a limited or late access to literature from other parts of the world, especially of writers from Latin America whom he held as his role models. One may also add that his fragmented short stories, rustic settings and unpolished writing reveal the perspective of someone quite original in vision if lacking in style.\textsuperscript{60}

In her study of Tashi Dawa’s works, Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani rejects such views that hold Tashi Dawa’s works as derivative imitations or his use of magical realism as merely having avant-garde pretensions. She argues that Tashi Dawa’s adoption of magical realism undoubtedly sprung from the influence that Latin American writers such as Gabriel Garcia Marquez had on him. However, she says, the key to understanding Dawa’s usage of magical realism is not in dismissing it as a conscious imitation of these writers but as a literary idiom that Dawa found suitable for writing about Tibet. Magical realism provided an apt idiom for Dawa to write about Tibet as a subaltern presence that could decentre the Chinese state, just as it did for colonial writers from Latin America writing against the dominant Eurocentric worldview. Schiaffini-Vedani argues that it was these similarities of cultural antecedents and historical preconditions with these Latin American writers, which predisposed Tashi Dawa to

\textsuperscript{59} Norbu quoted in Schiaffini-Vedani, “Contested Identities”, 95.

\textsuperscript{60} The English translation of his stories lend to quite an uneven and patchy reading. This may partly be due to the fact that the translation process has disrupted the flow of the narrative from the original Chinese version. On a different note, this issue of pitting originality against imitation is perhaps a naïve romantic view of the creative genius of the individual writer, given postmodernist critique of the autonomous author and intertextuality of all artistic works. Even Jamyang Norbu’s own major work \textit{The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes} (2003) is a pastiche novel that has principally been lauded for its brilliant mimic portrayals of characters from Rudyard Kipling’s novels. See Jamyang Norbu, \textit{The Mandala of Sherlock Holmes} (New York: Bloomsbury, 2003).
adopting a literary style which would elevate “the magical to the category of accepted truth.”

Although I find this distinction between imitative and authentic literary practice, which forms the crux of Schiaffini-Vedani’s thesis, quite problematic in its suggestion that they are two different things; because finding literary precursors to follow is as much a matter of imitating them as it is of finding inspiration from them. Yet, her argument that magical realism must be seen as a literary idiom that Tashi Dawa found appropriate for writing about Tibet as a result of his hybrid identity does resonate with significance.

While Schiaffini-Vedani argues that Dawa’s adoption of magical realism results from his hybrid identity, I will expand on that broad position to show how it is more specifically the refinement of a cosmopolitan sensibility that found an apt idiom for expression in this style of writing. Firstly, the adoption of magical realism marks Dawa’s retreat into the creative process of writing and literary imagination; cementing his transformation from the socialist evangelist of his earlier works to a postmodern aesthete who was now indifferent to collective concerns about Tibet. Secondly, magical realism enables him to express greater appreciation for the local worldview, conserve his sense of wonderment about Tibet as a metropolitan returnee and iterate his status as a partial outsider.

The titular short story “A Soul in Bondage” of the English anthology, which has attracted the most critical attention from scholars, gives a clear example of the two implications of this contention. In this story, the narrator, who is a journalist by profession, is interviewing the last remaining lama of a remote monastery on his deathbed. While the narrator pragmatically sums up the situation as the end of this petty sect bound to face demise without an immediate heir to take over from the old lama, the aged monk thinks otherwise. This lama tells the narrator that the end of his lineage is, in fact, an event of cosmological

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62 In their respective studies on Tashi Dawa, Cai Rong and Lu Tonglin look at this story alone.
significance linked to a prophecy that would begin with a young couple from the east travelling in the quest of the mystical kingdom of Sangbala. Yet, as improbable as the old man’s legend sounds, the narrator realises that it is actually a story that he had himself written a few years ago and abandoned midway due to the lack of a suitable ending. He returns home to the manuscript to revisit what he had written in the story. While reading the story the narrator is transported into the fictional world of story where he finds the male protagonist of the story has been fatally injured on the journey to Sangbala. We realise that the aborted journey of the couple within the narrative and the fatal injury of the male protagonist are due to the writer having left his story midway as an unfinished manuscript.

In this story, Dawa’s abstract even esoteric meditations on the act of authorship, the intertextuality of fiction/reality and his own decentered presence melding within the multiple narrative reveals his growing obsession with the creative process of producing literature. Cai Rong also concludes that this story is paradigmatic of the extreme stylistic experimentation of self-reflexive post-Mao literature that showed a crisis in the representation of the subject, so easily dispensed of in the social realist genre.63 Distinguishing it from other fantastical genres and crucial to its literary worldview, magical realism does not seek to transcend reality and create another realm but to subtly meld the unbelievable with the commonplace, so as to make that magical seem banal and the everyday seem magical. It is such stylistic innovation of a postmodern aesthete in Dawa’s literary practice that indicates his affinity with cosmopolitan writers like Rushdie and Marquez.

Another point to be made is that the narrator listens to the old man’s prophecy with incredulity but then later elevates it as a veritable literary story in his own work. Dawa seems to hint that if the modern reader accords literary fiction with purposeful attention, a prophecy should also not be abjured as being too fantastical or superstitious. As Wendy Faris notes,

63 Cai Rong, “The Subject”, 201-30.
“The affirmation of the local, together with its attachment to the cosmopolitan, with which magical realism began, continues to characterise it.” Dawa has access to indigenous belief systems but can play with these with a detached irony. But he also takes the rational educated perspective as a limited worldview that co-exists amongst the equally valid worldviews of the native. Mediating between the fantastical worldviews of the local and the abstract speculations prompted by philosophical explorations, the magical realist style defines Dawa’s position as someone who is within/without. From his earlier stance of adopting a Tibetan identity and preaching to his compatriots, Dawa now circumscribes his position as a metropolitan returnee on the threshold of his bucolic world. Thus, his adoption of a magical realist style has a double significance – firstly, it provides a rhetorical mode to upturn his early stance of socialist didactism with its collective concerns; secondly, it circumscribes his position as an observer on the margins of his native homeland in his magical realist universe.

But this experimentation of the writer of magical realism infusing and validating local myths has been criticised by the anthropologist Michael Taussig who sees the literary form as the appropriation and repackaging of the “native” in exotic forms by an elite intellectual. According to him, “too often the wonder that sustains” the works of Latin American magical realism writers like Carpentier, Marquez,

is represented in accord with a long-standing tradition of folklore, the exotic, and indigenismo that in oscillating between the cute and the romantic is little more than the standard ruling class appropriation of what is held to be the sensual vitality of the common people and their fantasy life.\(^\text{65}\)

While Taussig’s remark is a rebuke to writers of magical realism for perpetrating class domination, this negative appraisal however strengthens my argument about Tashi Dawa’s cosmopolitan stance, who positions himself as a metropolitan intellectual and not as “one of the natives”. The next section will attempt to cull some faint echoes of Dawa’s authorial

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personae in his short fiction where he positions himself not as a Tibetan compatriot, but as such a distanced observer on the periphery of the bucolic world of his magical realist vision.

**Expressing un-belonging**

I ended the last section by stressing that Dawa’s adoption of magical realism cemented his move away from the naive advocacy of socialist realism to adopting the position of a metropolitan returnee experimenting with what he perceived as the mysteries of bucolic Tibet. Thus, his journey of reconnecting with his ethnic background almost worked in a reverse way – committing himself to Tibet and adopting a Tibetan identity in the beginning, then later distancing himself from Tibet and making aesthetic concerns the mainstay of his literary practice. This issue also prompts us to ask how Dawa then defined his personal identity in the wake of such an ideological shift.

If there are some hints of Dawa self-consciously positioning matters related to his own personal identity in the midst of his literary work, they revolve around not seeking a belonging with Tibet but instead in dwelling upon his position as a metropolitan returnee stranded in the native land that he loves to depict. This self-positioning can be discerned in traces of self-representation in some stories in an individual expressing his alienation from the bucolic countryside of the Tibetan hinterlands.

While all of his stories are set in rustic locales, in the story “The Banished Prince” we can read Dawa’s frustration with the remoteness of provincial Tibet. The protagonist in this story is an aristocrat who has fled his own homeland for some unspoken reasons and relocated to the remote town of Luoda, a provincial backwater cut off from all other places. In order to fit in with the natives of the town, the prince also cuts his hair in an unbecoming bowl cut and wears an ill-fitting jacket to blend in with them. The only contact he has with the outside world is through a transistor. One day a European couple with a baby arrive on the outskirts
of the village and ask the villagers to let them through, so that they can travel on to the capital Lhasa for their pilgrimage. The villagers institute a ridiculous prohibition against the Europeans for trespassing; and block their passage through the village with unstinting interest and energy for six whole months. The banished prince is appointed as the emissary to negotiate a deal with the foreigners to coax them to decamp and return to wherever they came from. The prince actually has a good time during these negotiations, discussing the Olympic Games and news from outside world with the intruders and taking pleasure in the only source of civilised conversation he can have in the village.

In this figure of the banished prince Dawa reflects his own position as an urbanised intellectual bred in the metropolitan areas. He inhabits this strange world of the remote Tibetan countryside but feels an intense estrangement from the bucolic country people he lives with. He only finds companionship and intellectual sustenance in the transistor that links him to the outside world; and sees the intruding foreigners as a fortunate opportunity for interesting conversations.

Finally, the Europeans relent to the demands of the villagers and disband from their camp, abusing the villagers as they leave,

I have travelled all over the world, including the most primitive places and have had talks with the chiefs of many tribes. I’ve failed too, but this time is beyond comprehension: the talks have gone on longer than a marathon, without any result whatsoever!  

Later we learn that the prohibition against the Europeans’ passage through the village was not given because the villagers doubted the honesty of their intent for a pilgrimage to Lhasa or suspected the foreigners of having any hostile political motives. They were just upholding an age-old injunction given to them from powers at Lhasa, as guardians of the borders to keep out foreigners at all costs. This had now turned into a mythic duty of such significance for the villagers that the departure of the harmless European couple is commemorated as the purge of

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“the foreign gods of pestilence” with celebrations unseen in years. However, soon after their eviction the villagers hear that the Europeans have not only been granted passage in the next village, but some people from Lhasa have travelled to the border to receive them. They are at a loss to understand why the rulers in Lhasa have not only allowed the trespassers to enter but acted in such deference to these foreign intruders, when once upon a time their ancestors had died upholding their duty as border protectors. Thus, Dawa rebukes the isolation of these Tibetan backwaters cut off from the rest of the world and expresses his sense of un-belonging in this place, by portraying these country people in an unflattering light.

Soon after the foreign couple’s departure, the prince finally leaves the village too and defects to another country. It is on a news broadcast on the old transistor the prince had left behind for his lover in the village that we hear about the prince’s secession and escape to a neighbouring country. The broadcaster says, “To date the reason of his capitulation has not been revealed.” But from his stay in Luoda we can surmise that it is the alienation, entrapment and frustration he felt in the remote isolated town that provoked the prince’s yearning to escape from Tibet. And the mobility represented by the European couple who were intrepid enough to travel the whole world and come on a pilgrimage to Tibet, emboldened the prince to make that final move to expand his own horizons, even if such a move meant exile. Thus, we can read Tashi Dawa’s cosmopolitan sensibility breaking through the surface of this story in not only rebuking the isolation of the bucolic Tibetan hinterlands but expressing his desire to escape from there.

In the story “Invitation of a Century” there is another clear example of Dawa expressing his sense of un-belonging from Tibet. In this story, a shabby old mendicant comes to remote village claiming, “He had roamed and preached all over Tibet to enlighten

67 Tashi Dawa, A Soul in Bondage, 233.
68 Tashi Dawa, A Soul in Bondage, 234.
While the villagers watch on, expecting him to take out the usual paraphernalia of curious objects that travelling mendicants in Tibet peddled, the old man starts telling them the tales of his exploits around the world instead. He tells them tales about travelling on a pirate ship on the Atlantic, dallying with a creole girl in the plantations of Havana, surviving the scarlet fever in an African jungle etc. He even takes off his clothes to show them the map of the world imprinted on his body. Unable to comprehend the mendicant’s stories the country folk stare vacuously at him, causing the old man to respond with irritation and curse under his breath, “Why was it everywhere he went he met people who were ignorant, stupid and bereft of knowledge of the outside world?”

Dawa’s old mendicant echoes a more famous character called Melquiades from Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s seminal novel One Hundred Years of Solitude. A clear imitation of Marquez’s gypsy who also visits the town of Macondo with magic and books, this mendicant character is an extraneous detail, which actually has nothing to add to the main narrative of Dawa’s story. Yet, even this somewhat unnecessary addition, in spite of its stylistic affectation or rather because of it, helps to re-emphasise the contention of this section about Dawa’s personal sense of estrangement from Tibet.

These sequences revolving around a lone, often alienated individual, iterate Dawa’s cosmopolitan stance of not attaching himself to a collective cultural identity. He defines his personal identity not by asserting a belonging but circumscribing his position as someone disconnected from the people he encounters in the Tibetan countryside. Displaying complete indifference to matters of ethnicity, Dawa depicts this sense of alienation as a result of his social class and metropolitan sensibilities not his mixed ethnicity. In the next section, I will show how his indifference to matters of ethnicity is re-iterated in the way he defined cultural difference at large. Instead of positioning an opposition between Tibetan and Chinese culture,

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69 Tashi Dawa, A Soul in Bondage, 209.
70 Tashi Dawa, A Soul in Bondage, 209.
his metropolitan sensibilities again emerge as the defining factor behind his view of cultural difference.

**In-essential differences**

For Tashi Dawa, the primary lens through which he projects his sense of cultural difference is in the clash between modernity and tradition. Of course, these two terms are both socially constructed notions. But for Dawa this binaric distinction of tradition versus modernity is representative of what he saw as the fundamentally opposite values of cultural difference. And he dramatises this opposition between educated, modern, ostensibly rational characters and rustic, superstitious people.

Not only is he completely ambivalent towards larger cultural locales to define his personal identity, here we see that he does not even distinguish between Tibet and China to define cultural difference. Indeed, there are no characters of mixed ethnicity in any of Tashi Dawa’s stories, nor are there any sequences that outline issues of race or delineate cultural difference on bases of primordial claims of blood or ethnicity.

In the story “Tibet: The Mysterious Years”, some communist officials come to visit the Bangdui commune to laud its successes in building an irrigation project. The young communist cadres and students write with pieces of chalk on a sacred cave to mark their excursion through the remote country. Instead of prayers that are traditionally carved or painted on rocks across Tibet, these young cadres scribble marks of conquest or communist slogans on the caves, in their juvenile enthusiasm over what they saw as the success of communism in developing a backward village. “Signed by Chungta, from the Farming and Stockbreeding Division of Shigatse Prefectural Committee”; “Learn from the Bangdui people”; “Wu Weihong, from Beijing, has visited this place”.

Amongst these signatures of...
cadres, is both a Tibetan name “Chungta” and a Chinese name “Wu Weihong”. Taking these markings on the cave as sacrilegious to the deity within it, an old village woman Cering Gyamo washes them off by pouring water over the rock with an old brass ladle from the newly built reservoir.

In this scene, the writer juxtaposes cultural difference not as a racial issue but fundamentally one of worldview brought about by social class and education. The young cadres, whether Tibetan or Chinese, speak the same language of conquest and progress. Living in the hamlet all her life, it is Cering Gyamo, for whom these letters seem like ominous signs of sacrilege. Tashi Dawa does not take a firm stand in mocking the old woman’s superstition or the young men’s self-regard, but merely outlines the cultural difference between them in this ironic depiction. This distinction is not made on the basis of some essential cultural difference between Tibetan religiosity and Chinese materialism. It is instead a more ambivalent, even mystical meditation on the cultural act of inscribing symbols; and he shows how people understand such an exercise in diametrically opposite ways due to their social class.

There is one instance among Dawa’s stories, of a singular confrontation between a Chinese and a Tibetan. Yet, as I have argued, the difference is outlined not in racial terms but as an opposition between people from two different worlds. In “Tibet-The Mysterious Years” a scene unfolds between a young Chinese student scouting for evidence of extra-terrestrial activity in a field and an old Tibetan herdsman who threatens to shoot the student for trespassing on his land.72 The Chinese student does not imperiously order the herdsman to not bother him, but addresses him as “old Apa”, an affectionate term for “old father” in Tibetan and entreats him to let him carry on his research. On his inability to communicate his intention to the old man, the student does not speak derogatorily about the old man’s

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ignorance. He expresses genuine anguish about how he could convince the old man, who not only has no clue about extraterrestrial beings but does not even speak Chinese. Having found a rock that could help him prove his research about extra-terrestrial activity in this region, the Chinese student pleads to the old herdsman to let him pass. But the old man accuses him of witchcraft, takes the rock away from his hand and throws it in the lake. Distraught about the loss of the invaluable rock, the Chinese student walks away in a delirium, completely oblivious to the farmer’s final entreaties or threats to stop.

While a Tibetan character is positioned against a Chinese in this story, Dawa does not digress to make any distinction about how their cultural identity may have played into creating the confrontation. The different social locales from which they come is the fundamental reason behind the difference in the worldviews of the herdsman and the scientific scholar; and that becomes the source of confrontation between the characters and provides the drama of the story.

Later in the story, it is precisely this difference of the Chinese student’s gentle demeanour of learning and humility that the herdsman in his jumbled way is able to recognise as a unique quality. Impressed by the air of scholarly detachment the student exuded and the bravery he showed at the end in his complete heedlessness to the threats made at gunpoint, the old herdsman thinks that he had never met anybody like him before. It is with fondness that the old herdsman thinks of the Chinese student and pledges that he would let him have access to all his land next time. And thus, a resolution of sorts is established to the initial conflict which leaves a sense of tragi-comic sentimentality to the pair.

Thus, from his de-racialised view of cultural difference, Tashi Dawa mainly engages with these binaries of modernity and rusticity, dramatised between such archetypal urban and rustic characters, to generate the drama of his stories. And in order to create such juxtapositions of cultural difference his characters are not portrayed with racial connotations –
the figure of the modern presence is variously a Tibetan cadre engraving socialist slogans on a sacred cave or a Chinese UFO scientist trying to convince a herdsman about the usefulness of his research. Depicting cultural difference merely as a matter of social class and education without any racial connotations, Dawa further shows his ambivalence towards matters of ethnicity.

Yet, this ambivalence to matters of collective cultural identity has invited censure from some critics who accuse Dawa for being indifferent to immediate political concerns of Tibet’s situation. Schiaffini-Vedani argues that Dawa adopted the magical realist style to eschew any “political or ethnic responsibility” to retain an apolitical stance. I would argue that while Dawa adopted magical realism as a literary style for aesthetic reasons, one cannot necessarily categorise his works as apolitical per se. While Tashi Dawa deliberately avoided making a political stand on Tibet in his actual life and his works do not necessarily reflect a nativist resistance to the Chinese state, his use of this technique of writing cannot entirely be validated by such an argument. This would be to read his works according to a simplistic understanding of political value as an openly manifest allegiance to some cause, in the absence of which Dawa’s works may then be deemed as being apolitical. Instead, I would argue that from his detached position, Dawa harnesses his literary voice as a satirical commentator on the sidelines without committing to a collective political project. In the next section, I will show how Dawa reflects such a voice replete with the subversive potential of satirical criticism, associated with many Third World cosmopolitan writers.

Postnativist politics

Dawa’s ambivalence towards Tibet’s political situation is paradigmatic of the cosmopolitanism of many Third World intellectuals, who are indicted for as being no more than postmodern aesthetes lacking any moral core or tangible political stance towards the
immediate socio-political matters of their homelands. This issue of political inefficacy of the Third World cosmopolitan intellectual has led to heated debate over Salman Rushdie, who has often been criticised for his irreparably bleak portrayal of the vicissitudes of postcolonial India. While Rushdie’s excoriating critique of postcolonial India in his fantastical novels may seem exorbitant and irresponsible, his satirical stance highlights the delusions and bigotry of cultural nationalism in India in the most poignant light, that would perhaps be lost without the hyperbolic style of his writing. Kwameh Anthony Appiah, theorist of cosmopolitanism also views magical realism as a style of “postrealist writing, postnativist politics, a transnational rather than national solidarity and pessimism, a kind of post optimism.” In a similar vein, I would argue that Dawa’s literary style is inauguration of a far more cynical, sceptical politics, loaded with a more politically potent value because of its subversive potential. In this section, I will focus on how the emergence of such a satirical voice is tapped to its fullest potential in Dawa’s works that reveal what Appiah had called the “postnativist politics” of the cosmopolitan Third World writer.

“The Old Manor” provides a rich field for such a subversive reading that reveals Dawa’s satirical voice in its prime. While the revision of the scholar-beauty fiction of the Han male and Tibetan female discussed earlier, manifested Dawa’s move away from social didactism, it was in a nascent stage of evolution of his ironic view on things. In this story, the propaganda narrative is deliberately resurrected in a parodic form to be subverted in the most startling fashion to question the foundational values of progressivism and rationalism of the socialist rhetoric. Derived from the Greek word “parodia” meaning “counter-song”, the etymology of the word already hints at the subversive or oppositional quality of the act of parody, which is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as, “an imitation of a work more or less closely modelled on the original, but so turned as to produce a ridiculous effect.”

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The story borrows the skeletal narrative-plot of the serf liberation story that formed the core of Communist propaganda literature in Tibet. In this ubiquitous stroyline a long-suffering, morally upright slave is freed from the tyranny of an evil landlord by the CCP forces. Threading a more fantastical version within this narrative, the novella “The Old Manor” completely subverts the original social-realist version to create a parody, in the fashion of Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses*, which reads the Koran against its authoritative grain. In the story, Langqin the protagonist is the lowliest servant of the devastatingly beautiful feudal chieftain Lhamo Quxen. Langqin’s position is that of a night slave; his only duty is to be chained up in the corner of his mistress’s bedroom to watch her beautiful body in disarray at night and then be thrown away in a dark dungeon in the day. The oppression inflicted upon him by his feudal mistress is to be tortured by insane lust for her body.

With the onset of the Communist Revolution, Lhamo Quxen flees the village to escape the retribution meted out to feudal lords by the villagers and the Red Army. Freed from servitude, Langqin can only think of his absconding mistress and sets off to recapture Lhamo Quxhen to bring her back to the village. Although, he captures his mistress due to his morbid sexual obsession, Langqin’s revenge against his mistress is applauded as a great feat of idealistic rebellion of the liberated serf against his former owner. The story of lust that is threaded as the dark undercurrent within the bare plotline of the serf liberation narrative, mocks and subverts it in multiple ways.

For his reward Langqin asks to be allowed to sleep with her. Just the sheer outrageousness of this audacious request is interpreted as courage of the liberated serf. He is not only allowed to have sexual intercourse with her, but is also anointed as the chairman of the commune for this act of sexually conquering her body. Becoming the chairman on account of such misplaced resistance and misconstrued bravery, Langqin assumes ownership
Yet, as the headman he does not become a model supervisor guiding his commune into prosperity but lapses into the life of luxury that his former mistress had led as a feudal chieftain. He does not contribute to the commune in any productive way, except assuming this pseudo-responsibility as the chairman. From his bedroom, the domain of his sexual conquest Langqin gazes out of the window at his former fellow serfs who are still working in the fields while “he had become the village’s most respected citizen.” He realises that there is no greater aetiology of cosmic merit or sociological reason behind such inequality. It is just sheer coincidence that some persons gain access to a life of privilege and remain oblivious to the suffering of other people.

Langqin also begins sleeping with the women in the village commune, paying them back a piece of butter or meat at night. But these rewards are just the dog-ends of the village’s communal produce actually produced by the hard-working husbands of these women and given to Langqin during the day. Dawa seems to intimate that a person with authority accretes more power not by any credible merit but by his symbolic position in an inherently hierarchic human society, which just perpetuates the capacity of an actually ordinary, in fact, economically redundant person to exploit others.

Langqin’s rise to power is a snide remark at the naïve altruistic longing of the socialist struggle for egalitarianism, communal living and cooperation. The Communist Revolution did not create a more just society in place of the feudal system. The village just relapses into another exploitative system under the liberated serf who has now taken the place of his former mistress. Undercutting the revolutionary narrative that vilified traditional Tibetan feudal societies as being despotic, Dawa hints that social inequity is not an anomalous situation of human affairs that can be rectified, but hierarchy and arbitrary obedience is ingrained in the

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way human societies are structured.

Yet, as his former mistress’s fortunes were upturned in the takeover of Tibet by the Communists, Langqin’s own downfall comes when the political climate changes with the onset of the Cultural Revolution a few decades later. Under the Cultural Revolution, a system of vilification and struggle sessions ensued where anyone who could be indicted as anti-revolutionary or anti-state, was picked out and punished for posterity. In search for such victims to carry out this charade of revolutionary justice, people pick on Langqin for no reason, apart from the fact that as the chairman of the village he was a figure of authority. But unable to find Langqin guilty of any culpable crime, they book him for his sexual misconduct since he had indulged in sexual dalliance with all the women in the village. He is criticised for his moral degeneracy, paraded in front of the village, demoted from his position as chairman and thrust into penury as a lowly worker. Unable to understand the reason for his punishment, the women of the village for whom Langqin had become a charismatic virile lover, wail in despair to have him released. But a stranger misinterprets their cries as a sign of moral indignation of the poor victims of the degenerate Langqin, who are finally rejoicing in justice being meted out to their oppressor.

In the final twist of fate, Langqin is sentenced to become the lowliest menial worker on a granary commissioned by the state for the progress of the people. Instead of proper dispensation of labour, he is given the backbreaking and utterly futile job of ladling water out of a pit with a broken brass basin, only because of the vindictive whims of people caught up in the furore of the Cultural Revolution. This vindictive indictment comes upon him not for sake of justice, but merely due to a change in the political status quo and enflamed political atmosphere in the Cultural Revolution. The Cultural Revolution with its skewed yet altruistic ideals of not letting the revolutionary spirit abate had translated into arbitrary punishment and public spectacles of such grotesque justice.
The illogicality of the regime is further highlighted because the crime of sexual deviancy was also the very reason for which Langqin was promoted to the position of chairman. A pawn within these political upheavals but outside their value-systems, he not only holds onto the old law of the land but proceeds to critique their flimsy justice with the native worldview, “so sleeping with women was a crime was it? An unforgivable crime! He had never heard of it referred to as such before, neither in the history of his own forefathers nor in any of the traditional social customs or statutes.”

By painting quite a bleak anti-humanist picture, this story is in its ironic subversion of the serf liberation story lays bare the mundane, petty, amoral denouements that entail the grand rhetoric of human endeavour and modernity championed by the Communist Revolution. This deliberate parody of the serf-liberation story shows Dawa’s mastery of his literary voice to the fullest potential, cementing his complete reversion from the didactic to the satirical voice.

**The satirical outsider**

In the last section, I argued that while Tashi Dawa deliberately avoided making a political stance in his actual life and showed indifference to matters of ethnicity, the literary style Dawa chose has its own brand of “postnativist, postoptimistic politics” synonymous with such cosmopolitan writers like Salman Rushdie. He did not attach himself to an explicit project of nativist resistance for Tibet, but revealed a more devastating subversive potential as a satirical commentator instead. This was shown in a sharp critique of the Chinese nationalist discourse and socialist rhetoric that exposed the bigotry of those narratives. Building further on this issue of postnativist politics, in this section, I will argue that he explicitly adopts this position as a satirical voice on the sideline as his literary identity.

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75 Tashi Dawa, *A Soul in Bondage*, 190.
If the relative autonomy to literary activity in post-Mao era had allowed the writer the freedom to exercise a role beyond being a scribe for the state, it is this position of a satirical commentator replete with acerbic cynicism that Dawa had finally chosen. He employs his literary voice as a satirical outsider who engages in ironic criticism of the larger social locales, regardless of their denomination, whether Tibetan or Chinese. In this section, I will elaborate this argument by showing that writing his stories in this ironic style, Dawa embeds subtle political commentary on all accounts without committing himself to a political agenda.

“An Invitation of a Century” is one such story that has a political undercurrent threaded through its fantastical narrative, which reveals Dawa’s “postnativist politics” as a detached satirical observer. In the story, the narrator is on his way to the wedding of a friend. But walking to the venue he finds himself transported to an alternate universe of his previous life. This alternate universe is a remote village where its residents are waiting in a ceremonial parade to greet their lord who is supposed to return from Lhasa. When the lord eventually arrives at the venue, it turns out to be his own friend whose wedding he was supposed to attend. The friend, it seems, was actually an aristocrat in his former life, the time that the narrator has now been transported to. The carriage bearers complain that the aristocrat has been physically shrinking on their journey home and now remained no larger than the size of an infant on the verge of turning into a foetus. The infant-aristocrat says that he would like to escape this time that he lives in and be reborn in a time where there was no feudal hierarchy in the world. He literally turns into a helpless foetus and a young girl is magnanimous enough to suck it into her womb to assuage its cries. She is immediately cast out of the community by her kinsfolk and evicted from the village.

Dawa creates an ironic portrayal of the aristocrat here who spouts magnanimous words of egalitarianism but shirks the duty he owes to his people. As if to iterate his impotency he literally turns into a flailing foetus. This predicament of the aristocrat can be read as a
comment on the incapacity of the Tibetan aristocracy in delivering effective leadership in Tibet, which caused their downfall and forced them to wander the world in exile now.

But with this critique of the Tibetan aristocrat, the story also hints disparagingly at the Chinese rhetoric against the oppressive feudal system of Tibet. In his present life, the incarnation that the aristocrat has now taken is that of a state employee, whose only ambition in life with his bride, a tourist guide, is to climb up the social ladder in Lhasa. The future time of a modern world of egalitarianism and material advancement, which the state valorises and the aristocrat in the story yearns for, is also not a utopia. It is a disappointing time where the prince is no more than a grovelling state employee and his bride a peddler selling Tibet to foreign tourists.

The magical realist frame of the narrative invokes the local Tibetan belief in incarnation and recreates a multi-layered world of the story to incorporate this critique. Other than the specific narrative arc of this story, in his reading of “Tibet - The Mysterious Years”, Howard Choy finds that the magical realist conception of time problematises the colonialist master narrative. In that story the narrative is told in a circular family saga and all the years of contentious historical events such as the Chinese conquest of Tibet are erased out of the storyline. According to him “first the circularity exposes the sameness of all colonisers; second, the hiatuses imply the unspeakableness of the colonised.”

After the girl leaves the village with the foetus of the aristocrat within her womb, the villagers turn to the narrator and take him as the substitute for the absconding aristocrat for their ritual. Contrary to the elaborate ceremonial preparations with which the villagers were painstakingly waiting for the aristocrat, the villagers do not initiate any ritual of veneration but lock him up in a prison cell. Instead of castigating the aristocrat for relinquishing his duty towards these country people, whom we mistook as faithful subjects in the beginning, this

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76 Choy, “Remapping the Past”, 133.
denouement makes us think that his reluctance to live amongst them may even be justifiable. The village turns out to be not only metaphorically but literally a prison house for the aristocrat, a punishment that the narrator now has to bear in his place, as a hostage imprisoned in the cramped prison that his rustic compatriots have thrown him into.

This story rebukes the isolated condition of these remote villages and their rustic Tibetan country folk. Tibet’s remoteness and deliberate isolation has often been cited as the historical reason behind its avoidance of outside influences, prior to the Chinese takeover. While devised as protectionist strategy from the imperialist advances made by the British during the early twentieth century, this isolationism was also a result of the conservatism of the governing elite in the theocratic centre of Lhasa. By depicting the native country people in this unflattering light, Dawa also makes a larger remark on the isolationist stance through which Tibetans avoided contact with the rest of the world.

In this story, a host of such elements attest to the satirical mode through which Dawa launches a critique on all accounts, without committing himself to a specific political agenda. He iterates his position as a detached individualist observer, who eschews attaching himself to a collective group to engage in such discreet political commentary.

To conclude, in this chapter, I have argued that the literary journey that the Tibeto-Chinese writer Tashi Dawa makes to retrace his relationship with Tibet can be summated as his adoption of what could be called a cosmopolitan identity. I have explored this issue in terms of the content of what is represented in his stories as well as paratextual issues around

77 A few political leaders in fact contested this conservatism in early twentieth century Tibet, who saw isolationism as detrimental to Tibet’s future and urged for modernisation policies. Foremost among them is the peripatetic monk Gedun Choephel, who was critical of the doctrinal conservatism of the monastic academies and travelled to India to discover other intellectual horizons. For an overview of Choephel’s life see, Donald S. Lopez Jr., “The Life,” in The Madman’s Middle Way: Reflections on Reality of the Tibetan Monk Gendun Chopel (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 1-47. Another prolific figure was the founder of the Tibetan branch of the Communist Party, Bapa Phunstso Wangye, who is said to have warned the Dalai Lama to pursue modernisation policies to maintain Tibet’s sovereignty in face of the growing Chinese nationalism under Communist regime. For Wangye’s biography see, Melvyn Goldstein, Dawei Sherap, and William R. Siebenschuh, A Tibetan Revolutionary: The Political Life and Times of Bapa Phunstso Wangye (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2004).
his literary practice. The genre of short fiction gave him the apt literary form to write random vignettes of life as a detached observer; and magical realism gave him the style to define his vision. Given these particular aspects of his literary career – the trajectory of the development of his voice from a didactic to a satirical one and his adoption of magical realism – his works incline him to the global clique of Third World cosmopolitan writers.

The preponderance of issues of urbanity versus rusticity as the primary thematic continues to persist in spite of the dramatic changes in his literary vision. This shows that he viewed cultural difference as a matter of social class, education and cultural influence and not as racially inherent to a people. That criterion of cultural difference is also how he distinguishes his own position directly in some instances, where the authorial persona can be read in a character alienated from the bucolic world of the Tibetan countryside. His urbanised sensibility as a metropolitan intellectual defines the location from which he speaks throughout his fiction. By adopting such a stance, his works may not reveal an anxiety for claiming a Tibetan cultural identity to displace the ambiguity of his bicultural identity. Instead, he accentuates the sense of difference he felt as a metropolitan intellectual finding his bearings in the native land, to dwell in the detached space of the hyphen of his identity beyond the markers of collective cultural identities.
Chapter III

Of an affinity predestined: Nativist in Woeser’s poetry

Perhaps the first dissident writer in occupied Tibet, the Tibeto-Chinese poet and essayist Woeser came to the notice of the Chinese state censorship authorities for her book Xizang Biji (Notes on Tibet, 2003), which was banned on account of its criticism of the government’s policies of promoting Han Chinese immigration, mass tourism and commercialisation in Tibet. On her refusal to apologise for her critical stance, Woeser was compelled to resign from her job as an editor of the official Tibetan minority literary journal Xizang Wenxue (Tibetan Literature) based in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa and live in voluntary exile in Beijing. This incident marked the beginning of her open dissidence against the Chinese government which consequently brought her into international limelight, as she became a prominent figure in the Free Tibet movement in exile. From an obscure state journal editor she has now come to be known as a well-known personality in Tibetan activism in the diaspora.

If Woeser had not been brought into the public view due to her political dissidence, her works of poetry would perhaps still be relegated to the relative anonymity of state-sponsored journals and official literary awards. It was perhaps Woeser’s dissidence which also brought her to the attention of her American translator A.E. Clark, who published her selected works in an English anthology called Tibet’s True Heart in 2008, when she had been practising as a poet and been published in the last two decades in mainland China. In fact, the benefactor company Ragged Banner Press behind this volume appears to have been

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79 Woeser won the “Courier Horse Awards”, the highest literary prize for minority writers in China, for a collection of her poems called Xizang Zaishang (Tibet Above, 1999) in 2001.
established for the sole purpose and only has this book on its publication list to date.\textsuperscript{80}

Woeser was born in the Tibetan capital of Lhasa in 1966, to a half-Tibetan and half-Chinese father and a Tibetan mother. Her family background actually comprised of quite a longstanding involvement with the CCP – both her Chinese grandfather and father were Communist Army officials and her parents were members of the CCP too. She was brought up and educated in the Chinese province of Sichuan and only returned to Tibet as an adult in the late 1980’s, when she joined the official Tibetan literary journal \textit{Xizang Wenxue} as an editor and her family moved back to Lhasa. The story of her “marginalised experience”, as a Sinicised Tibetan child who later came to recognize and embrace her Tibetan roots, can be found on numerous websites.\textsuperscript{81} These articles retell a poignant almost fantastical fable of her personal transformation in an anecdote about her encounter with a Western book on Tibetan history. Reading John Avedon’s \textit{In Exile from the Land of Snows} (1994), she was startled by its account of the Chinese invasion of Tibet and Tibetan history that differed from the standardised historical narrative of a feudal Tibetan society liberated by the CCP. On asking her father, she is supposed to have been hesitatingly told that Avedon’s account was 70% correct; an uncle was more forthcoming in his opinion and put the figure at 90%.

This fable of self-transformation also reflects Woeser’s journey of “root-seeking” to define her bicultural identity, where discovery of the knowledge of Chinese domination of Tibet propels her to reject her biracial heritage and claim identification as a Tibetan. Standing

\textsuperscript{80} The early works in the volume, dated between 1988 until her ban in 2003, are from the time when she was a state sponsored editor. Presumably some of these poems were published in the official literary journal and some as part of the book \textit{Xizang Zaishang} (Tibet Above, 1999). The later works marking her dissident stance after 2004 were either posted on her blogs or are from a larger collection of manuscripts that are being published for the first time in this English volume. I can only make this speculation and not give confirmed details about previous publication history of all the poems, due to lack of access to these original resources as well as language limitation since I cannot read Chinese. Her translator A.E. Clark informs that a complete collection of her poetry called \textit{Xueyude Bai} is being published soon by a company in Taiwan. More information about her life, poetry and activism is available on the website of the Ragged Banner Press. See www.raggedbanner.com, (accessed June 22, 2009).

in sharp contrast to Tashi Dawa, in terms of literary practice as well as political stance, Woeser’s works reveals what could be described as a “nativist” identity. Quite self-explanatory, Laura Chrisman explains that the term nativism in postcolonial criticism is associated with a cultural phenomenon of “seeking return to the source … of an elite that has become alienated from its community” and is “essentially a move of political resistance marking anticolonialist identification.”

This specific argument about Woeser’s nativist stance again highlights the two elements that constitute the overarching contention of this study. Firstly, it foregrounds its driving theoretical premise that hybridity of these new identities is not a matter of mixing two pre-existing identities, but it is the indeterminacy between nodes of cultural identification represented by the names of dominant social locales. Secondly, it shows that the cultural identity a subject adopts must not be concluded from a passive feature, such as their biracial status, but we must unravel how they articulate their identity from such a position.

In contrast to Tashi Dawa’s complete ambivalence towards matters of cultural identity, Woeser presents the collective social identities as the definitive locus of cultural difference defined by insurmountable forces of race and culture. She makes an active definition of her identity to resolve the indeterminacy of her hybrid condition, by rejecting her biracial status and claiming complete identification with Tibet. To iterate this argument in terms of the title of the thesis, Woeser articulates the hyphen as a split, on the either side of which lie reified notions of “Tibetan-ness” and “Chinese-ness”, where she rejects her in-between status and claims identification with Tibet.

In the following sections, I will elaborate this argument of Woeser’s nativist stance of identification as a Tibetan, by tracing a trajectory of the thematic development in her poetry through the two decades of her poetic career. In its earliest phase, the rootlessness of her

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biracial status is depicted as a state of crisis for her personal identity. Scrutinising her hyphenated identity from the lens of the larger history of Tibet’s invasion by the Chinese, she sees her familial story of Tibeto-Chinese ancestry as an allegory of that public history and reprimands it as a sign of racial impurity and moral ignominy.

Then coinciding with her move to Tibet, her biracial status, which had constituted the uncertainty of her personal identity, is elided as she disavows her Chinese heritage and claims the discovery of an innate Tibetan self. The allegorical mode of reading her own personal life as intrinsically tied to the larger history acquires greater resonance as she adopts a Tibetan cultural identity in an act of solidarity.

Projecting abstract qualities of sacred and profane in a nativist politics, she elevates Tibet as a sacred arcadia to further heighten the antagonism between the either/or of the collective social locales. The dissident phase of her writings that propelled her into prominence marks the emergence of voice of collective political resistance where all the individualistic concerns are phased out, as she turns against the Chinese occupation of Tibet in complete opposition.

**Crisis of anonymity**

Although I categorised all the texts in this study, as belonging to the category of minor literature, defined by Deleuze and Guattari as marginal works written in a major language, Woeser’s poetry calls for the discussion of her works in an older literary context of minor poetry. A topic of quite antiquated literary discussions, poetic works of inferior quality judged on the bases of figurative language, rhythm amongst others was often referred to as “minor poetry”. In the early half of the twentieth century, T.S. Eliot established a more psychologised criterion of judgment, arguing that the great poet achieves “extinction of personality” whereby the immediate concerns of the empirical person are dissipated, to the extent that the
writer’s mind functions as a neutral receptacle for the conveyance of intense poetic emotion. With such a criterion of judgment, Eliot argued that, “Poetry is not a turning loose of emotion, but an escape from emotion; it is not the expression of personality, but an escape from personality.” In Eliot’s view, minor poetry lacks the poetic genius to transcend the confines of the individual person, which becomes an impediment to such sublime poetic expression.

Building further on this issue of the individual concerns of the writer in minor poetry, Woeser’s works resembles a specific genre of such personal poetry called confessional poetry that emerged in post-Cold War late 1950s America. These works of confessional poetry were characterised by “the first-person voice with little apparent distance between the speaker and the poet; they were highly emotional in tone, autobiographical in content and narrative in structure.” Confessional poetry was disparaged by some critics on the basis of their definition of poetic talent as the capacity for capturing a more universal human condition similar to Eliot’s definition of “impersonality”. But some others saw this self-absorbed poetry as a specific historical phenomenon, reflective of the interiority brought about by the increasingly urbanised conditions of post Cold War America in which the personal “I” re-emerged with a vengeance. Deborah Nelson’s defence of confessional poetry echoes this argument. She says, “the sudden visibility of privacy was produced by the excesses of cold war security”; and confessional poetry as a literary phenomenon of this historical period “imagines ways in which privacy can be obtained or conserved in disclosure”.

Woeser’s poetic style of romantic eulogies and monologues lacks the psychological and metaphorical complexity attributed to the confessional poets, like the renowned American poetess Sylvia Plath. But comparing Woeser’s works with the genre of confessional poetry is not merely a matter of formal similarity. A parallel can be drawn between the re-invention of

individual privacy in post-Cold War America and the recuperation of the private individual reaching out for self-definition but trammelled by a sense of emergence from the repression of high socialism under the Maoist regime.

Replete with obsessive self-referentiality and sentimentality, Woeser’s poetic voice in the earliest phase of her career when she had not yet moved to Tibet, echoes this strain of the confessional poetry where indeterminacy of her personal identity becomes the central thematic of her works. The concept of “liminality” captures the situation that Woeser professes for her personal identity in these early poems. Derived from the Greek word “limen” which literally means threshold, the anthropologist Victor Turner defines the concept of liminality as a “no man’s land between and betwixt” which is “ritualised in many ways, but very often (with) symbols expressive of ambiguous identity.” In a poem self-consciously entitled “Positioning” (1988) Woeser expresses the dilemma about her private self as an ambiguous being in such a liminal phase at a threshold, contemplating about returning to Tibet. The actual physical distance from Tibet is configured as being one of psychic separation, marking her position as a lone, un-affiliated castaway looking on from a distance.

Those far-off places
Teem with legend, but have nothing new
Yet when sometimes a wing stirs in the mind
They vaguely feel familiar. (4-7)

Not even naming Tibet she elusively refers to it as an indistinct horizon of “far-off places” that “teem with legend.” (5) Instead of eliciting any emotional connection this strangeness results in confusion and even rejection, as she foregoes returning to Tibet, when she says they have “nothing new for me”. (5) She tentatively tests her unformed relationship with Tibet, but already hints at it as some preternatural connection drawing her as “a wind that stirs in the

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87 Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart: Selected Poems, trans. A.E. Clark (Dobbs Ferry: Ragged Banner, 2008), 79.
mind”. (6)

On her move to Lhasa, she sees her position as a lone subject without a collective identity as a condition of anonymity fraught with indeterminacy and exclusion. In “Strange Light” (1993)\(^8\), she stands amidst a throng of people but her sense of isolation makes her feel even more alienated. She says, “Can you ever go back to that place of shadows / In this strange light my long hair / Fades, strand by strand, as it slips to one side.” Referring to the harsh sunlight of the central Tibetan plateau, she speaks as if relocating to Tibet almost etherealises her physical being. Her sense of isolation of not belonging to Tibet is presented almost as a metaphysical condition of not having a tangible presence in the world.

Instead of celebrating the vantage point of detachment and individualism, normally characterised as the liberatory potential of hyphenated identities, the condition of rootlessness and mobility is repudiated by Woeser as a crisis of selfhood. We can already see traces of a protean nativist stance hankering for a sense of belonging in this early phase of her poetry. In this quest for personal identity, the crisis of anonymity of her ambiguous status makes her turn to the larger history to seek answers. In the next section, I will show how she recovers a private history of her familial ancestry entangled in the larger history of the Tibet-China conflict, which heightens the dilemma of her in-between status.

**An allegory of oppression**

The confessional nature of her poetry, its autobiographical content and lack of impersonality may be read as a sign of inferiority in formalist criticism. But Deleuze and Guattari make a point about the lack of talent in such minor literature that exists on the margins of high literature. They say, “Indeed because talent isn’t there in a minor literature, there is no possibility for an individuated enunciation that would belong to this or that

\(^8\) Woeser, *Tibet’s True Heart*, 55.
‘master’ … what an individual author says already constitutes a common action.” They suggest that such minor writings cannot create stupendous literary creations of originality because they cannot supersede the collective, common concerns of the locale they are based in.

Along similar lines, Fredric Jameson had also argued that most works from the Third World are nationalistic allegories, where in his words, “the story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public Third World culture and society.” This incessant self-referentiality and autobiographical content of Woeser’s poetry, which conflates all aspects of her personal life in this quest for a cultural identity is not that of a unique individualist voice with Eliot’s criterion of “extinction of personality”. It is indeed better appreciated as such a nationalistic allegory, where the political context of the Chinese occupation of Tibet impinges upon and overdetermines how she views her situation as a private individual.

In this allegorical mode, Woeser sees matters relating to all aspects of her personal identity as being inextricably conjoined to the public cause. “Parents” (1989) is the only poem where she talks about her family, but she is strangely unable to address her familial history as her own story. She does not invoke her parents as actual individuals with any inkling of personal details. Instead, she remembers them through the overarching lens of the historical conflict between China and Tibet, as characters in a drama wrought by larger

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89 Deleuze and Guattari, Kafka, 17.
91 While there has been criticism of Jameson’s argument for the somewhat sweeping hypothesis that he makes. The most direct rebuttal of Jameson’s stance for homogenising all cultural texts from the Third World has come from the Indian critic Aijaz Ahmad. Ahmad argues for diversity of the literary texts in colonial India that defy such generalisations and cites some Urdu romances from the period which were completely detached from nationalistic concerns. But in spite of the existence of such “apolitical” texts as well as the reductive nature of Jameson’s own argument, in my opinion the general thrust of his contention still stands. It highlights the tendency in most Third World texts for the private story to be completely overtaken by the public culture as such nationalist allegories, Woeser’s poetry being a case in point. See Aijaz Ahmad, “Jameson’s Rhetoric of Otherness and ‘National Allegory.’” Social Text 17, 1987: 3-25.
92 Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 71.
historical forces whose story she tells from a distance. “Fateful mischance, that a girl (in the old order) to the manor born / Should meet, just when another flag unfurled, / A youth at ease with weapons.” (1-3) Such immediate linkage of all matters of the individual’s life to the political context demonstrates this claim of Woeser recreating her personal story into something like a nationalist allegory.

To further emphasise this link, Woeser only seems to be able to gauge, comprehend or even sympathise with her own private dilemmas when they are placed within the larger historio-political context. “Derge” (1992) follows the format of an elegy mourning her father’s death and reminiscing about her ancestral home. But even the private grief moves imperceptibly beyond the bounds of her familial concerns and culminates in a lament about history. The elegy reaches its end with this line, “In the next life, we shall know justice together.” (24) The cathartic climax that ends the emotional lament building through the poem is not a consolation of personal recovery after mourning her father’s death. She imagines a future of larger political reckoning for her father who she portrays as being unwittingly thrust into the position of a CCP soldier against his choice.

Her sense of personal marginality directly opens to the political terrain and fuse as the source for her writings, so much so that her private life and its frustrations are only acknowledged as mere after-effects of the larger historical circumstances. This is the condition of the inescapably political nature of minor literature, which Deleuze and Guattari describe as its defining feature. They say,

> Minor literature is completely different; its cramped space forces each individual intrigue to connect immediately to politics. The individual concern becomes all the more necessary, indispensable, magnified because a whole other story is vibrating within it.  

In this mode of seeing her personal story as an allegory, the knowledge of that larger history not only has resonance to retrace what she perceives as the anomalous situation of her

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93 Woeser, *Tibet’s True Heart*, 20-22.
94 Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka*, 17.
familial history it becomes the determining factor behind how she defines her personal identity. In the next section, I will show how she locates her Tibeto-Chinese identity as a sign of racial impurity and moral ignominy within the larger history of Chinese domination over Tibet, which heightens her sense of crisis to seek a resolution to ascertain whether she belongs here or there.

Of mixed race

From hereon, this condition of anonymity of not having a collective belonging leads Woeser to categorically designate herself as a person of mixed race, which is located as the reason behind the crisis of her identity. The poem “Of Mixed Race” (1993)\(^5\) is perhaps a little amateurish in its overt romanticism, with allusions of her ordination as a priestess in a mystical valley. But it is significant because she makes a direct allusion to her biracial status, which has now occurred to her as a perturbing fact of her life, for the first time in this poem.

Invoking the metaphor of bodily dissolution she did in the last poem “Strange Light”, she goes on to present it not so much a matter of the environment but a fault within herself as someone who has no specificity to her being at all. She says, “She’s but the shadow of a dream whose tints have faded”. (1) The mixed-race muse of her poetry is not only depicted as one without a clear name to acclaim who she is, but she is almost a shadowy being with no tangible physical presence. Speaking in the third-person with a tone of self-alienation, Woeser refers to herself as an anomalous creature she observes from a distance and hopes that a poetic vocation will lead her to attain a belonging. She says, “Please grant a world of soil and stream / Where she may sing with pathos the anthem / She once improvised for no clear purpose.” (13-15) The metaphor of place was used in the first poem to mark off her distance as an unaffiliated person in the first poem “Positioning”. Now with the realisation of her biracial

\(^{95}\) Woeser, *Tibet’s True Heart*, 80.
status, she seeks a stable ground for her indeterminacy, in the metaphorical allusion to the earthiness of “soil and stream”. (13)

Reading her personal life in the allegorical mode, we see direct references where she not only reflects unease with her biracial status but also proceeds to admonish it as a sign of racial impurity and moral ignominy in light of the larger history. “In Lhasa Nights” (1996) she says,

And certain bloodlines gradually mixed,
Yet there’s a man, perhaps just one – what kind
Of lightning bolt? – Who makes a stifling fate
Serve as the hinge of reconciliation. (20-24)

Her biracial heritage had constituted the theme of her romantic meditations to set herself apart as a unique individual in the last poem. It now dramatically metamorphoses to become a slur on the collective history. The ethereal space of the mixed-race priestess is now seen as a “stifling fate”. (23) It is a dubious inheritance of her family’s past that looms over her conscience, which will only be remedied when the one man “of lightning bolt” (obliquely referring to the Dalai Lama) could return home to end the current political impasse over Tibet. It is only with his validation that her particular predicament of being a person of biracial heritage would be magically transformed into a “hinge of reconciliation.” (24) Raising this notion of “bloodlines being mixed” (20), she defines race as the locus of cultural difference between the collective identities on either side of her hyphenated identity. As a consequence, she perceives her situation of being a person of mixed race as an unfeasible existence of racial impurity and even political culpability. From realising her biracial status as an anomalous condition to disparaging it as an inheritance of a larger history of political oppression, she is prompted to take a dramatic turn to elide her biracial ancestry altogether.

With my own race

Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 37.
With its biological connotations, invoking this notion of racial essence as an insurmountable division created by nature gives her a reason to argue for a primordial difference. In the last instance, this may have been used to castigate the culpability of her familial lineage and the impurity of her ancestry. Now claiming her identification with Tibet, that same criterion of primordial difference offered by race is paradoxically cited to argue for her natural gravitation to Tibet and to position herself as having “always already” belonged here.

“A Mala that was Meant to be” (1994)\textsuperscript{97} is a lengthy eulogy about Woeser reclaiming her connection with Tibet. In the beginning of the poem, she says, “A woman whose hair is burnished at the temples, / Clad in the garb of her race”. (5-6) The burnished hair refers to some golden highlights that she had dyed into her black hair. The reference to this cosmetic change to her physical appearance in the fashion of urban Chinese women is acknowledged as a mark of her old identity. Yet, it is a mark which is superficial and transitory whereas the clothes that she wears is “the garb of her race” (6), something biological and undeniably natural. Later in the same poem she says, “In other provinces, mixed with people of another race”. (147) The same provinces outside Tibet, where she actually grew up are depicted as places belonging to people of another race altogether. The geographical and cultural differences are again given ethno-biological overtones as divisions defined by nature. While it is a socially constructed category invoking racial essence as a definer of cultural identity, gives Woeser a rhetorical basis to argue for a primordial difference between being a Tibetan and Chinese. With a nativist stance she positions herself as possessing this racial essence that makes her a Tibetan.

Bringing up this ethno-biological notion of race cements the rejection of her biracial status as a fact of nature that was only interrupted by manipulative forces of history. She

\textsuperscript{97} Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 22-29.
presents her identification with Tibet not as a matter of a deliberate construction or artifice but something inherent within her that she must re-discover. She says,

    Her clothing blends unnoticed in the crowd of her own people
    But when will her long silence reach its own end?
    In this turn of the great wheel
    She found herself encircled
    By a mala foreordained.” (215-219)

While it is only her clothing that blends in with the people in Tibet, they are her people already because they are of the same race. For Woeser, claiming her identification with Tibet becomes a quest of ethnic absolutism, where the notion of purity becomes the definitive moral prerogative. In addition to reclaiming a Tibetan identity as a result of “natural” biological fact of race is also cemented as an inevitable fate that was “foreordained”.

    The desire to find a belonging with Tibet and recover her racial essence as a true Tibetan under the layers of the Sinicised individual is seen by Woeser as a spiritual quest that has been foreordained by destiny. The primordial connection is heightened in the metaphor of the rosary or the “mala” with its sense of circularity and continuity, where her return to Tibet and quest for belonging with its people is elevated to the unquestionable stature of a cosmological law.

**Stepping over the hyphen**

Apart from arguing that she contains the racial essence that makes her Tibetan, this mode of claiming identification is depicted by Woeser as a matter of re-discovery of a relation to the source of her origin. This peculiar imagistic trope of a quest for an origin, depicted in the circularity of a “mala” in the last instance, heightens the assurance of recovering an identity, not as a matter of artifice but returning to the lost source from which one had only been separated for a while. As Stuart Hall says

    It is because this New World is constituted for us a place, a narrative displacement, that it gives rise so profoundly to a certain imaginary plenitude, recreating the endless
desire to return to “lost origin”, to be one again with the mother, to go back to the beginning.\textsuperscript{98}

In a similar vein, from a fractured present of contingency, indeterminacy and loss of history as a displaced person, identification with Tibet is not assumed by Woeser as a matter of deliberative positioning but recovery of a sacred source. Woeser now has the sacred revelation of a sense of instantaneous self-transformation. Continuing in the same poem, she says, “It settled in her heart, an unexpected conversion / For this woman who had frittered away twenty-eight years.” (22-23) All the previous years of her life seem futile now that she has found the true place and meaning of her life; meaning that she discovers in an instantaneous moment of transformation which throws everything else into clear perspective.

On considering the trope of epiphany in literary discourse, a new light is thrown on how it amplifies the primordial connection for Woeser to claim her identification as a Tibetan. In an epiphany the meaning is discovered anew by the subject as a revelation not constructed by her active mediation. The instantaneousity with which epiphanic meaning appears is taken by the subject as an indubitable thing that lay dormant, ready to be harnessed in a moment of miraculous awareness and clarity. Leo Ou-Fan Lee also remarks that epiphany is the central discursive theme of “root-seeking literature” where the disillusioned, urbanised subject comes to rediscover herself in the native land and experiences a magical self-transformation.\textsuperscript{99} With such a rhetorical force the epiphany emerges as an apt figural device to frame the discovery of a primordial belonging.

This sense of recovery enables her to assuage the crisis that she had experienced as an individual without collective belonging. In “Dreamshadow”\textsuperscript{(1999)}\textsuperscript{100} she speaks emotionally about returning to the native land and meeting a family relative.

\textsuperscript{100} Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 58-60.
Oh my kinsman, many hills and streams away,
Why was it here, in this deep red land
That we crossed paths unsuspecting? Tears stand
Hidden in my eyes. I bear without complaint the weight
Of an affinity predestined, which came to light so late
We know it’s there but don’t know what it is. (48-54)

She feels an instant overpowering affinity with this person that she has never seen before, an affinity which however was always a “predestined” (53) connection and has only just been late in coming. This sense of unmitigated moral and emotional solidarity is not something she establishes but arises naturally out of eternal bonds. Also, this connection with a blood relative is again put in the service of circumscribing her larger belonging with Tibet.

Thus, the vacillation in her early poetry give way to such acclamations of belonging when her biracial heritage which was an ambiguous but a unique trait of her individual identity is finally willed out of existence. She finds an innate Tibetan self that she excavates from beneath the layers of the Sinicised urbane woman of the early years.

Woeser’s move of claiming absolute identification with Tibet again shows that the identity a subject adopts must not be assumed from some passive feature of social appellation, but be seen as a matter of active positioning. As I noted in the last chapter, Tashi Dawa’s complete ambivalence to collective identity markers prompts him to define cultural difference as a matter of urbanity and rusticity, to inaugurate his own subject-position as a cosmopolitan returnee. Standing in sharp contrast to Dawa, Woeser conceives collective markers identity in the terminology of insurmountable difference of racial essence. She rejects her mixed ethnicity to claim identification with Tibet as her true identity. It shows Stuart Hall’s argument that the act of defining one’s cultural identity is not merely a matter of bearing some social appellation, but an active positioning. Cultural identity, Hall says is “an overdetermination, not a subsumption … It requires what is left outside, its constitutive
outside, to consolidate the process. Woeser defines her identity by rejecting her biracial heritage, the constitutive outside to consolidate her claim of being a Tibetan to the core.

In keeping with the overall contention of the study, it again shows that the condition of hybridity is not the fusion of two pre-existing identities merging to produce an admixture, but a condition of indeterminacy of identification between social locales. Her hybridity is conceptualised here by Woeser as a matter of being stranded between being a Tibetan or a Chinese. This indeterminacy is not only an ambiguous space of not having a tangible identity, but even repudiable as a sign of collaboration with the Chinese oppression.

To conclude, Woeser construes Tibetan identity as an innate, primordial essence that she shares with other people and discovers as a “true” self under the layers of the Sinicised woman that was imposed on her by the dominant Chinese culture. According to Stuart Hall this is an essentialist conception of identity which defines “cultural identity” in terms of one, shared culture, a sort of collective “one true self”, hiding inside the many other, more superficial or artificially imposed “selves”, which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common.

But this act of recovering an essentialist identity through invocations of racial purity and primordial belonging has been rejected by poststructuralist critique for their simplistic understanding of cultural identity as a static thing or an essence inherent to certain people. In the following section, I will elaborate how the debate of such reclamations of cultural identity needs to be examined beyond the essentialist/ non-essentialist debate, with a greater reckoning for the role of cultural identity in the indeterminacy of the hybrid condition.

**Learning from cultural identity**

While a critical perspective may reject such conceptions of social identity as an essence, Stuart Hall notes that we should not underestimate “the importance of the act of

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102 Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 225.
imaginative discovery which this conception of a rediscovered essential identity”; and that it acts as “a very powerful and creative force in emergent forms of representation amongst hitherto marginalised peoples.” Along similar lines the postcolonial critic Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak especially coined the term “strategic essentialism”, which is often invoked to negotiate the theoretical objection against the essentialism of such positions as well as the need for such identity politics for subaltern subjects. Spivak’s own brand of activist-oriented theorisation has made the term so popular that it has proliferated to the status of a slogan for valorisation of such identity politics. Amongst its other critics, this has irked Spivak herself, who has berated its wholesale use as a theoretical framework to declare, “a strategy suits a situation, a strategy is not a theory.”

In my opinion, this problem has occurred not due to some lack in the concept itself but due to the misuse of the term from its original context of coinage. The concept was actually coined by Spivak to address a reading practice adopted by certain Indian historians who were reading British imperial records of scattered peasant rebellions against the grain in order to reconstruct a voice of the subaltern agency of peasants in colonial India. Spivak argued that such a reading practice, which assumed that there was not only a referrable entity of peasant agency but it could be recovered, made a “strategic use of a positive essentialism in a scrupulously visible political interest”.

A critical perspective that was valorised as a reading practice for a critic has now been conflated with such identity politics. This fundamental disjunction has led to the concept being misinterpreted. Thus, invoking this concept of strategic essentialism to vindicate such claims made by subjects like Woeser, who adopts a Tibetan identity not as a fabricated position but rather from her absolute belief in the essentialism of that identity, would be to

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103 Hall, “Cultural Identity and Diaspora”, 224.
misinterpret the act of the subject on the ground. I insisted on calling her nativist stance of claiming Tibetan identity as something she recovers in an essentialist position, yet did not refer to this concept for this precise reason.

Rather than this concept of strategic essentialism, the literary critic Satya Mohanty enables an alternative perspective to conceptualise such reclamation of collective identity beyond the essentialist idiom and the problems associated with it. According to Mohanty, beneath the refusal of anti-essentialists to accede to the truth of any essence paradoxically lies the foundational tendency of seeing truth as something to be discovered from the position of pure objectivity. Beyond the impasse of this entrenched opposition, in Mohanty’s view the concept of strategic essentialism has only offered weak theoretical compromise.

Mohanty argues that we need to displace strenuous demands on objectivity from abstract theoretical debates of essentialism. He advocates a more ethics-oriented stance that is attuned to the interpretative capacity of the subject caught within the web of sociality, for what he calls the “epistemic status of cultural identity”. In his view cultural identities are socially constructed and mediated. However this need not be merely be examined as a matter of essence, but more importantly as an issue of social learning. According to him, “Identitarian politics becomes a necessary form of social struggle, even of social inquiry since identity-based politics becomes a necessary first step in coming to know what an oppressive social or cultural system obscures.”

In “Dreamshadow” (1999) commiserating with a person who had been a victim of violence during the Cultural Revolution, Woeser ponders over such pain as simultaneously being a thing of the past, yet something that cannot be forgotten. “What’s now a dream: the truth about our past? / But in the decade when the fiends rampaged / How he endured the

108 Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 58-60.
utmost ignominy!” (12-15) In empathising with a stranger she is not just extending solidarity but covertly inveigling her own stake in his private story of a traumatic past by imagining a narrative of collective suffering. The intonation of “our past” re-inscribes the particularities of what that person went through and re-moulds it as part of a collective past. She then says, “We must have some connection, / A vague one. No why do I feel so sad for him?” (21-22) The fact that she can sympathise with him is also not a general human emotion, but arises from the specific matter of her having a connection with that person and a stake in that history too, as a Tibetan. Asking this question is not professing an uncertainty but establishing a rhetorical argument that already assumes this connection. Cultural identity emerges as a means to learn about and lay a claim on the larger history in an act of solidarity which would not be possible if Woeser did not position herself as a Tibetan.

Positioning herself as a Tibetan and disavowing her Chinese ancestry is thus not a matter of her strategically adopting a Tibetan identity in a fabricated position. Firstly it emerges from a complete belief in the essence of a Tibetan identity that she rediscovers within herself. Secondly, it is also a matter of claiming such identification as a Tibetan to specify her position in the larger political context.

Thus, such an act of identification is not merely a matter of assuming an essence one shares to recreate a sense of belonging, the political positioning one takes is also involved in aligning oneself with a certain social group in a larger political conflict. In the poem “Remembering a Battered Buddha” (2007)\textsuperscript{109}, she extends her identification to an object, a broken Buddha statue being sold on the streets of Lhasa. The melancholy that the object incites is framed by the author’s depiction of the battered Buddha statue, where its denigration is even more pronounced as it stands in the detritus of banal consumer goods from mainland China. Lamenting its denigration, she assumes that this statue thrust out on the streets for sale

\textsuperscript{109} Woeser, *Tibet’s True Heart*, 3-5.
was perhaps venerated in the sanctity of a shrine. On talking to the peddler who goads her to buy it: “‘When did it get beat up like this?’ I asked. / ‘Cultural Revolution obviously!’ he glanced up, ‘Had to be the Cultural Revolution.’” (30-34) Not only is the statue hacked and broken, wrenched from its deserving place as a sacred object, even the tacit materialities of history are also reduced to tourist ephemera. However it turns out that the statue is a fake souvenir deliberately broken in that way to be sold to tourists.

But the statue, even if a fake one, becomes a symbol of the travesty that history has wrought as well as a testimony to the present ignominy where that past has been trivialised as a souvenir. “As I looked on in grief, I sensed a story being played out / That had both a present and past / I was moved by the shadowy fate that had brought us together.” (25-26) Enjoining her own individual story with the broken statue, the sense of violation is heightened by re-imagining a shared story where it becomes more than an object of sympathy but a trigger to recollect and evaluate her own fate too. Mingling her individual story with broken statue to recreate a larger history of oppression, this scene also shows the imaginative element involved in the act of identification which shows the futility of seeing it as an act of strategic essentialism. Not only does it misread a subject like Woeser, who conceives of a cultural identity as an essence; also undermines the political positioning involved in such instances of identification that move beyond the matter of merely assuming an essence to recreate an ancestry.

In “Tibet’s Secret” (2004) Woeser takes such a position which leads to the most drastic transformation in her personal identity. Looking at accounts of political prisoners whom she has heard about but does not know personally, she says, “If you think about it carefully, what’s the connection between them and me? / Palden Gyatso locked up for thirty-three whole years; / Ngawang Sangdrol, imprisoned from the age of twelve”. As she later

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110 Woeser, *Tibet’s True Heart*, 43-51.
castigates her personal identity,

From birth I grew up to the bugle calls of the PLA,
A worthy heir of communism.
But the egg under the red flag got crushed.
I generally keep my mouth shut, since I know so little.
As one reaches middle age, a fury late in coming rises in the throat. (35-39)

The transformation here is not the naturalistic, epiphanic moment of realisation of Woeser claiming identification as a matter of an essence that she rediscovers. It is instead a stance of making a deliberate positioning, by an antagonistic act of dis-identification from her biracial heritage that enables her to implicate her position in the political resistance. The connection that she can make to such acts of resistance is by this process of self-transformation, “a fury late in coming” that “rises in her throat”. (39)

These instances reinforce what Satya Mohanty has called the “epistemic status of cultural identity” as a political positioning in a world that is comprehensible in terms of names of cultural identity and social location. The constructed nature of cultural identity must not be dismissed in ontological speculations of an essentialist/ non-essentialist debate but an ethical reading must also remain attentive to the mode in which that identity is constructed. Claiming a cultural identity is not merely a matter of assuming a shared essence for creating an ancestry, it is also such an act of active positioning in a larger political equation. This also echoes Homi Bhabha’s notion of identity as a text to which one must perform identification. Woeser then resolves her hybridity by assuming identification with Tibet to align herself in a position of resistance to the Chinese domination. In the next section, I will show that Woeser re-inscribes the distinction between the larger social locales in an antagonistic us versus them equation to initiate a nativist politics of resistance.

Native to the core

Unlike Tashi Dawa, Woeser’s position is to see the collective social identities as the
definitive locus of cultural difference marked by insurmountable forces of nature and culture. From his position of the detached outsider, Dawa undertook a politics of launching a satirical project at the larger social locales, irrespective of their denomination, as part of what I categorised as “postnativist politics”. In her nativist stance, Woeser not only adopts a Tibetan identity and disavows her biracial status, she also re-inscribes the distinction between the larger social locales in an antagonistic us versus them equation. Projecting abstract qualities heightens her perception of cultural difference as insurmountable distinctions of race. Her poetry is imbued with the nativist stance of elevating Tibet as a sacred arcadia to inscribe its superiority to the oppressor.

Woeser writes her poems from many locations around Tibet and China. Even among the poems that she writes from Beijing or Chengdu, the physical experience of being in that place is effaced. They are empty locations that just figure in the postmark, as date and place, at the end of the poem. Of the 42 poems in the volume, “I saw a Fish Flying in the Sky” (2005) is the only poem where a non-Tibetan location and experience of place actually figures in direct reference of the textual narrative. Travelling on a bus around Beijing, she says “so I know in my bones the sprawl of Beijing”. (2) However this rare reference of a non-Tibetan place being is not an enthralled exploration of how it feels to be there in Beijing, but only sets the stage for what is to follow. Thus set on a nondescript bus ride in Beijing, the poem is actually a chatty account of an incident where a paper kite in the form of a fish suddenly comes into sight, and in that instantaneous evanescent moment she thinks she actually sees a fish. Although that feeling dissipates as soon as it emerges, the lifelikeness of its form and the powerful resonance of that fleeting mis-cognition stuns her, she says “I felt I had to consider it a fish.” (25) This confused reverie on perception is resolved with a quip on the Buddhist concept of non-duality that all distinction is illusory. She solemnly invokes this

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111 Woeser, *Tibet’s True Heart*, 18-20.
as wisdom of “the Vajrayana of far-off Tibet”. (33) Although physically located in Beijing it is effaced as a mere scene for the action. On the other hand, Tibet is elevated as the place within her mind that helps her have an elevated and masterful view of the quotidian world.

This stance of elevating one’s homeland is a prominent feature of nativism of the colonial intellectual, an example of which is the concept of Negritude coined by African writers like Aime Cesaire, Leopold Senghor who elevated Africa as a spiritual arcadia. With reference to the nativist stance of proponents of the concept of Negritude, Pal Ahluwalia notes that, “the danger of these nativist intellectuals is that they do not recognise that they construct a static, reified, romanticised image of the culture they seek to rejoin.”112 In the poem titled “The Past”113 Woeser constructs such a romanticised image of Tibet. She says,

The past, the past … such a past!
A host of divinities sheltered our homeland
As a lama keeps watch over souls,
As a mastiff stands guard by the tent.
But the host of divinities is long gone now. (11-15)

Here she constructs an idealised picture of Tibet in the image of a sacred arcadia protected by deities and the pastoral scene of a mastiff keeping guard by a nomadic tent. This idealised image of a past is recreated from her nostalgic longing. As Laura Chrisman notes, nativism is an anachronistic idea constructed by the disenchanted elite intellectual, reifying a romanticised image of their homeland as a sacred origin. In this situation, we then have a manifestation of hybridity where cultural difference is made anew in the idiom of nativist championing of Tibet as a sacred arcadia constructed by the nostalgic longing of the intellectual. Constructing this idyllic image of the native land from her own imagination, she laments that it has now disappeared from Tibet as it has been de-sanctified by the desertion of its holy deities under foreign invasion.

This nativist stance of reifying a romanticised, static image of the homeland may seem

113 Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 81.
naïve. But Trinh T. Min-Ha makes a positive appraisal of nativism, saying that nativism from the margins is in fact characterised by more than just a parochial romanticisation of one’s origins. She says that it has an oppositional quality driven more by a need to decentre the primordial claims of the dominant centre and struggle against the denigration of marginality that is imposed in a people.114

Woeser too takes this nativist stance of reifying culture in resistance to the colonial domination. Reading like a piece of travelogue “Return to Lhasa” (2005)115 launches a lengthy tirade against the changing face of Tibet’s capital city. Walking around the city centre in Lhasa she says, just as she expected the square in front of the Potala Palace has, “been enlarged. / So that it looks even more like a copy of any public square from inland /” (23-25) She complains that the mass redecoration of public spaces to package the city of Lhasa has denuded its quaint charm. The crass aesthetics of these decorations grate on her sensibilities. “They’ve added a few more gates, brightly coloured like wine-pots: / Huge, imposing, incongruous” (26-27) Looking more like any provincial city in mainland China she reads this as a loss of the cultural identity of the city she is infuriated and outraged a sacrilege to the “true” identity of Tibet.

In the jammed avenues every kind of vehicle careened insanely, Belching black exhaust, horns blaring. I made it across Beijing East Road and reached Jokhang Square. Was this the world of Tibetans? (59-62)

Passing through the bustling streets of the city she enters a temple courtyard where people are spinning prayer wheels and making circumambulations. Its serene and placid environment is juxtaposed in the very next line to contrast with the bustle of the city that she has left behind. And this enclave of peace and serenity is iterated as a true but endangered remnant of the Tibet that is in sharp contrast to the commercialised city. Here the conditions of

115 Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 64-68.
modernisation and tourism are seen as eroding a “true Tibetan world”, her own romantic vision of a never-changing world of Tibetans sabotaged by Chinese imperialism. In situations of an outside threat as a marginalised group, the word “culture” is brought up as a referent to the myriad of fears or aspirations they project on to it. As Roger Keesing says, “our conception of culture almost irresistibly leads us into reification and essentialism,” and the construction of culture as “thinglike” has created “an ideal rhetorical instrument for claims to identity, phrased in opposition to modernity, Westernisation, or Neo-colonialism.”

Woeser’s nativist politics extends to asserting the Tibetan identity she has adopted against outside presence almost at any given opportunity. “You must Remember this” (2006) could be seen as an example of such a nativist politics. Here we see the transformation of the poet from the hesitant, probing newcomer of the poems to a self-assured subject post-assimilation. The poem begins, “I can never forget Baijiao Street / ‘Er, no,’ she says, ‘It’s Barkor.’ / ‘Barkor? OK, so it’s Barkor, then.’” (1-3) She is in conversation with a non-Tibetan, who calls the main Barkor market in Lhasa “Baijiao street” using the Chinese transliteration of its name. In occupied Tibet, the Chinese domination has extended to areas of life where some traditional Tibetan names of places or landmarks have either been discontinued or warped by the Chinese transliteration. She corrects him and asks him to call the street with its Tibetan name.

Adding to this nativist politics, she assumes the local parlance to speak like a Tibetan too. In the second stanza, the stranger says that his time in Tibet and meeting her has been memorable. “‘I can never forget you’ / ‘Er, no,’ she says, ‘It is destiny that brought us together.’ / ‘Destiny? OK, so it’s destiny, then.’” (7-9) Spinning a Tibetan idiom of destiny on a banal meeting between two people she speaks in the local Tibetan parlance of using allusions to destiny in everyday conversations. Although she was educated completely in

117 Woeser, Tibet’s True Heart, 36.
Chinese and could only read, write and speak Chinese and in late adulthood was still struggling to learn Tibetan, she speaks as if the local Tibetan parlance has become ingrained in her speech. In this antagonistic us versus them, Woeser becomes, as it were, more nativist than the native, almost flaunting her “native-ness” to the stranger. This nativist resistance culminates in the dissident phase of her poetic career, where the individualist concerns that had formed a persistent theme of her poetry are completely phased out, as she uses her poetic voice as a medium for collective concerns.

**One with the people**

The allegorical mode of linking the “I” to the political situation after such a process of learning about the larger oppression marks the emergence of a new “I”. Her individualist concerns are not only completely determined by collective history, but in the dissident phase her poetic persona becomes a voice for the collective where the individualist concerns are completely phased out. Beyond the private realms of the individual her poetic persona as a voice for the collective her works in this phase resemble the genre of testimonial literature. Testimonial literature is also a kind of minor literature referring to autobiographies, novels, poems or any other form of writings that are written by persons from subaltern communities, as witnesses to their individual experiences and their community, under some situation of political or social oppression. They are normally co-authored with an elite or Western benefactor who will help write the testimonies of her illiterate witness.

Acting as a confidante to a monk in a prison in “Tibet’s Secret” (2004) the extension of her subjectivity, even takes on physical terms as she attempts to imagine the pain of the prisoners. “When each minute, each second is a torment, each day and night is grim /
The body! I can’t repress an inward shudder / What I fear most is pain: one slap and I’d crumble” (58-61) The “I” is just a means to imagine the prisoner’s experience, attempting to empathise with their situation and reprimanding her own inaction. She says, “With shame I count down their practically endless prison terms.” (62)

But in her position of not being an outside sympathiser helping to co-author an account or a grassroots activist, she berates her position of being an intellectual. Such self-castigation gives way to Woeser questioning her own vocation as a poet, a subject that she had romanticised with fervour in all of her early poetry. Cataloguing the tribulations of actual dissidents in the same poem, she almost shamefacedly says, “This shall be the author’s pitiable claim to righteousness”. (127) In the face of political exigencies she can only sheepishly acknowledge its legitimacy, a trivial position for writing as only a way to communicate these far greater tragedies.120

Most of Woeser’s poems written in this dissident phase are shorn of any kind of linguistic ornamentation or wordplay and adopt the style of prose-poems with long sentences running across the page. They have a direct outward address which eschew the romantic soliloquies of her early poetry to focus on issues of mundane everyday life as if writing a piece of reportage. Beverley says, “Testimonio involves an erasure of the function and thus also of the textual presence of the ‘author’, which by contrast is so powerfully present in all forms of bourgeois writing.”121 All bourgeois forms of literature, he says, are built on the condition of a subject who appropriates literature as a means of self-expression and in turn creates the liberal ideology of a unique, free autonomous ego as the natural form of being and public achievement. Now leaving concerns of literary vocation and individualistic achievement behind, this testimonial voice is completely overtaken by the collective

120 While some other writers or grassroots activists have been promptly jailed for quite minor offences, the authorities have still not taken any drastic action against Woeser in spite of her vocal opposition to the Chinese state.

121 Beverley, Against Literature, 76.
concerns. Consciously she refers to this in the same poem. “There’s another Tibet concealed behind the Tibet in which we live / This makes it hard to write any more lyric poems.” (188-189)

This movement in a sense establishes the effacement of Woeser’s stance from a self-absorbed poet to a comrade, which is cemented in this phase of her writings. This transformation of the “I” from the early poetry to this dissident phase can be summarised as the change from the confessional, self-absorbed “I” to the testimonial voice of the collective in. While both are written from the first person point of view of the “I”, Beverley points out that there is a crucial distinction between the testimonio and other forms of autobiographical discourse. Beverley says, the ideology of individualism colours very convention of the autobiographical form (such as the confessional stance of Woeser’s early poetry), the value of the “I” in testimonio lies not in the uniqueness of the self, but in its ability to stand for the experience of her community as whole. 122

Positioning herself as a dissident voice, she pointedly refers to those Tibetans in the service of the Chinese government, to disparage their insensitivity and accuse them of lacking moral integrity. She says, “Yet in the Old Town’s sweet-tea shops, pointless gossip fills the air, / And in its tea-gardens, retired cadres play mahjong gaily / until dark”. (165-167)

Recalling a confrontation that she had with one such Tibetan employed by the state, she speaks directly about their collusion with the Chinese regime. She says, “Scion of herdsmen from North Tibet, his breath reeking / with liquor, / Lit into me like the Party mouthpiece he was.” (207-209) Derogatorily calling him a “scion of herdsmen” (207), she pointedly refers to his background to indicate that he had only reached a position of power in the employ of the Chinese state as a news reporter. On being attacked for her political activism by the uncouth and ill-mannered “Party mouthpiece” (209), she wants to retort but thinks that to be beneath

122 Beverley, Against Literature, 83.
her, as in his face, “I could make out only the truculence of a lackey.” (216) From her own beginnings as a CCP child and state employee, Woeser has indeed come a long way where she now sits on the opposite side of the fence, berating people like this news reporter for being in collusion with the Chinese state. This transformation underpins Woeser’s identity where she rejects her bicultural status and adopts a nativist stance for political resistance.

To conclude, the “root-seeking” enterprise that Woeser undertakes to define her bicultural identity is reflected in the trajectory of her poetic voice over the last two decades of her career. The transformation of this voice can be broadly categorised as a move from the romantic self of the early confessional poetry writing eulogies to the testimonial voice writing reportage prose-poems. This style of writing is now the mainstay of her literary output, published on her blogs, through which she communicates to her audiences. In fact, it is as a dissident blogger rather than as a poet that Woeser is more popularly known; and exploring her poetry shows how this Tibeto-Chinese writer has come to be such a voice of political resistance.

Woeser’s poetry revolves around seeking cultural authenticity and identification with Tibet, a quest that is elevated to almost an existential dilemma that governs all intelligibility or control she seeks over her life. It is this desire for belonging that defines all aspects of her poetic enterprise leading her to eschew what she sees as racial impurity and moral ignominy of her mixed heritage. But Benita Parry argues against the easy dismissal of nativism as a naïve quest of “a category of epistemological error, of essentialist mystification”.\(^{123}\) Parry says that in the light of embeddedness of all narratives of decolonisation, nativism must be seen more an act of anti-colonialist resistance of dis-identifying with the dominant culture. Woeser’s position of assuming a nativist identity is essentially such a move of anti-colonialist resistance instigated by the political urgency of that larger situation, where she rejects her

biracial status to challenge the one-nation narrative under which the Chinese state subsumes its invasion of Tibet. As a result, Woeser articulates the hyphen in her identity in agonistic terms as a psychic split that fractures her sense of selfhood, on the either side of which lie reified notions of “Tibetanness” and “Chineseness”, defined by cultural difference and racial essence. This is then re-inscribed for her political opposition to the Chinese state where she claims identification with Tibet in a nativist stance.
Chapter IV

Excavating a counter-history between nations: Border identity in Alai’s Red Poppies

The only Tibeto-Chinese writer to win the Mao Dun prize, the highest award for literary excellence in China, Alai was born in 1951 of Tibetan and Hui Chinese\textsuperscript{124} parentage and hails from the far eastern Tibetan region of Amdo Gyelrong, which has now been assimilated into Sichuan province by the Chinese government. Criss-crossed by ancient trade routes and composed of polyethnic enclaves, Amdo Gyelrong like many other eastern Tibetan border regions, existed independently of either central Tibetan or Chinese suzerainty for centuries, as semi-autonomous provinces with their own chieftains and rulers.

Alai’s literary interests have hovered around chronicling the history of these regions in fictional and ethnographic works – like the novella Jiunian de xueji (Bloodstains of the Past, 1987) which tells the story of a clan of fallen eastern chieftains during the Cultural Revolution, and Dadi de jieti (Upward Steps of the Earth, 2000) a book on the local history of the Amdo Gyelrong region.\textsuperscript{125} Hailed as his magnum opus, the novel Red Poppies amalgamates elements from these previous works. Melding fiction with minor histories, it is an ambitious work of historical fiction that seeks to retell the story of the dissolution of the chieftaincies of these border regions with the arrival of the Communist regime.

 Originally titled Chen’ai luoding (The Dust Settles, 1998) in Chinese, the novel was translated into English by American academics Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin and published as Red Poppies in 2002 by the prominent American publishing company Houghton-Mifflin. The Chinese edition of the novel was already a bestseller in Mainland China and its

\textsuperscript{124} The term Hui is used in contemporary China to refer to Sinophone Muslims. First used as a term to designate Muslim Chinese of Turkic origins, it was later expanded to include all Sinophone Muslims of different racial origins, who didn’t have a cohesive group identity and were scattered in communities across China. In contrast to the Uyghyur Muslims who share a distinct language or culture or history, the Huis do not have any cultural distinctiveness except the fact that they follow Islam, due to centuries of travel and assimilation.

English edition has also received a considerably wide readership in the West. This has now propelled Alai to the position of the most important Tibetan writer in contemporary China. He has followed up his success with *Hollow Mountain* (2009), which was published as the second volume of a trilogy after *Red Poppies*.

Although a prolific writer with a number of books (as mentioned above) to his credit, Alai has not received the extent of critical appraisal for his works as Tashi Dawa. This may perhaps be due to the fact that his success came late with *Chen’ai luoding* in 1998 and even later for its English translation *Red Poppies* which was published in 2002. To answer the question of how Alai undertakes the journey of “seeking his roots” to define his bicultural identity, Howard Choy makes a remark which provides an apt launching point to begin my analysis. In his reading of Alai’s short novella *Jiunian de xueji* (*Bloodstains of the Past*, 2000) Howard Choy says,

> Alai represents his post-liberation generation in pursuit of a selfhood between their Chineseness and Tibetanness. He has not provided us with an outcome of this search … because he has not yet come out of the politics of ethnicity. Nevertheless, his stories sadly convince us that something lost in the past is for ever (sic) irrecoverable.\(^\text{126}\)

Choy’s suggestion that Alai is caught in a conflict between his “Tibetanness” and “Chineseness” not only erects a simplistic binary to explain the dynamics of cultural identity as repositories of some essential qualities, it misreads Alai’s works as exemplifying a search for identity born out of such a putative crisis. In contrast to Choy’s reading, I will argue that Alai’s works do not intimate confusion or conflict over his cultural identity. It is, in fact, his border identity that Alai legitimates by showing how it pre-existed these larger cultural-nationalist notions of identity.

Choy’s statement would perhaps be applicable to interrogate Woeser’s stance on her bicultural identity, which as I explained in the last chapter was to erect reified notions of

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“Tibetanness” and “Chineseness” split between which, she intimated an agonistic conflict over her cultural identity. This again proves my contention that the subject’s identity must not be concluded from a passive feature of their social identity. A critical reading must unravel how the subject actively articulates their position from the social appellation attached to their identity. Rather than collapsing such discrepant cases by merely using “hybrid” as a label for people of mixed race, the conceptual premises that the term entails must be elaborated in order to have a more astute understanding of these hyphenated identities. Hybridity, as Homi Bhabha defined it, is an overarching matter of indeterminacy when representation of one’s own identity is interrupted between the dominant names available for identification. Alai’s indeterminacy ensues from not finding the right idiom to argue for the existence of the border people, who pre-existed these cultural-nationalist notions of identity, which later emerged as insurmountable demarcations to designate people.

Alai resolves this situation of indeterminacy by writing against the grain of the nationalist histories to recreate a plural, impure and internecine historical background of his native region. By subtly invoking the reader’s prior knowledge of the official nationalist narratives of the Tibet-China conflict – the Tibetan claim of invasion of the unified Tibetan nation and the Chinese claim of re-unification of the Chinese motherland – Alai subverts their accounts to reconstruct the existence of his autonomous border identity. To iterate this argument aphoristically in terms of the title of the study, Alai articulates his bicultural identity by negating the hyphen that fractures his identity and the dominant names constituting it as cultural-nationalist notions, to reclaim his border identity.

I will outline a short synopsis of Alai’s novel, after which I will list the issues through which he resolves the indeterminacy of his border identity. *Red Poppies* recreates a fictional account of the last days of the eastern chieftains who had ruled the borderlands between the Chinese empire and the Tibetan theocracy for centuries, before they were annihilated by the
advance of the CCP army in 1949. The story traces the rise and downfall of the fictional Maichi chieftains and their cohorts through the voice of the idiot son of the chieftain Maichi’s second marriage to a Han Chinese woman.

The events of the story unfold when a Han Chinese emissary of the ruling Kuomintang party (who were in power in China before the arrival of the Communists) comes to the Maichi clan and persuades them to plant poppies in their lands and profit from the flourishing opium trade in mainland China. While the Maichis are easily seduced into taking up the scheme at the lure of silver promised by the Chinese emissary, a rival chieftain family called the Wangpos belligerently defy the emissary’s offer out of spite. For tactical reasons of usurping the Wangpos’ land for opium production, the Chinese emissary arms the Maichis with modern ammunition to wage a battle against the Wangpos. The Maichis gleefully undertake this battle to avenge an enmity with their old rivals. The Wangpos are defeated in the battle and forced to cede a large piece of land to the Maichis, which the Maichis use to grow more poppies at the emissary’s advice. With their increased military prowess, silver from the poppies and increased land holdings, the Maichis become the most powerful chieftaincy in the region. However, this feverish ascent to power also carries the seeds of their impending downfall within it. The growth of the poppies brings sexual deviance amongst the chieftains and famine in the region as the chieftains allocate all of their land to opium production. Their dalliance with the Kuomintang automatically pits them in a futile battle against the Communists, which finally brings the chieftains to their inevitable end.

In the following sections, I will explore how Alai highlights the autonomous existence of these borderlands in the interstices of two larger states and depicts the nation as a later invention, which swept away other forms of political community like the chieftaincies. Unfolding from the minor historical event of the opium trade circuit and allegorised in the Maichi family, the novel recreates a pseudo-history of his border homeland to establish their
pluralistic historical background.

Magnifying the larger geo-political factors at play, he places the takeover of these borderlands in the prosaic context of the rise of the nation-state, Chinese expansionism, the dissolution of ambiguous political contracts and a commercialising economy. He positions the fictional story of these border people as an alternative testimony of history, as lived by the common folk, to write against the grain of the dominant historiographies – whether it is that of the exile Tibetan understanding of the invasion of a unified nation or the wilfully belligerent Chinese version of re-unification of Tibet under the Chinese motherland. By adopting a mixed narrative form, part folkloric/ part historical fiction, he presents a somewhat ironic and fragmented version of history in a “carnivalesque” tale with irreverent denouements that subverts those heroic nationalist narratives. And finally, in the biracial idiot protagonist of the novel, Alai again legitimates his Tibetan-Hui Chinese ancestry as an older creole identity pre-existing in these border regions.

**Mapping the borders**

In the opening episode of the novel, Alai has his idiot protagonist declare with a tone of gravity quite unbecoming of his supposed mental disability:

> We were located slightly to the east under the noonday sun, a very significant location. It determined that we would have more contact with the Han emperor to the east than with our religious leader, the Dalai Lama. Geographical factors had decided our political alliance.\(^{127}\)

By foregrounding the fractious conditions in which these Tibetan borderlands existed, right in the beginning of the novel, Alai unequivocally declares the historico-political status of his homeland as an autonomous enclave between the Tibetan and Chinese centres. Like the fictional territory of the Maichis and his fellow chieftains in this novel, Alai’s own home province of Amdo Gyelrong was one amongst the many semi-sovereign eastern Tibetan

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territories that had broken off from central Tibetan governance. More than any of these other eastern provinces, Alai’s Gyelrong homeland had a longstanding history of such autonomous existence, as a separate kingdom with a markedly different cultural heritage and language from other Tibetans.

The Gyelrong areas were actually borderlands of the Chinese empire, which were conquered and resettled by legions of central Tibetan armies in the seventh and eighth centuries A.D. Establishing their dominion in these areas, the descendants of these Tibetans gradually assimilated with the native Chinese people to develop their own culture and speak a dialect that is unintelligible to Tibetans from other areas. The Chinese had not only always been present in these regions; these regions were actually Chinese territories that Tibetans had resettled as a domain, separate from the Tibetan empire to the west or the Chinese empire to the east. With the aggressive political advances made by the Manchus during their reign in Beijing in the eighteenth century, the Gyelrongs along with some other Tibetan border regions developed stronger ties with the Han Chinese centre. They entered into pacts of various kinds as protectorates or partners with the Chinese empire in order to maintain their autonomy. This further propelled these Tibetan borderlands away from the control of Lhasa. The polyethnic status of their inhabitants results from the pluralistic historical background and complex political status of these border regions.

Establishing the autonomous existence of these borderlands, Alai goes on to clarify that the autonomous political status of the land however cannot be defined within the modern terminology of a nation or nationality. There is an awkward interjection about the use of the word “nation” to clarify that it does not carry the appropriate meaning to clearly delineate the status of a chieftain’s dominion. This is purportedly spoken by the idiot protagonist but actually reads like an additional note made by the author to make this point. The idiot says,

Please note that Father used the word nation. That doesn’t mean that he really believed he ruled an independent nation. It’s all a matter of language. The word thusi, or
chietain, is a foreign import. In our language, the closest equivalent to chieftain is gyalpo, the term for “king” in ancient times. Chieftain Maichi had used the word nation instead of other terms, such as territory.  

On one hand, Alai concedes that being under the Chinese sphere of influence the sovereignty of these borderlands was not a complete one. The chieftain thought of himself as the ruler of his fiefdom. But he did not necessarily think of it as a sovereign state since he did not have a distinct understanding of what a nation is. The idiot remarks that truly in these regions “not even a single chieftain had thought or talked about being a nation or nationality,” and that “All we knew was that we were the kings of the mountains.” This comment intimates that the chieftaincy was an antithetical even inferior form of socio-political community to the nation because it was constructed on amoral, unidealistic bonds of ownership and hierarchy, without humanistic concerns such as oneness as a people. Since the chieftaincies in these borderlands had not aspired to such higher forms of community, they were bound to be annihilated by modern forms of social cohesion, like the nation with its capacity to interpellate disparate people into a stronger form of communion.

On the other hand, with this statement Alai also seems to argue for the autonomy of these border regions as they had their own indigenous system of governance in the chieftaincies, which pre-existed the nation-state. He implies that while the nation-state with its strict demarcations of boundaries and jurisdictions had now become the only legitimate mode of community, it is also a particular form of social governance brought about by processes of modernity. It swept away indigenous systems of political existence, such as the chieftaincies of these border regions and the patron-client relation that the Tibetan theocracy and the Chinese empire had maintained for centuries prior to the invasion.

But to affirm the autonomous pre-national existence of these regions and how they existed in the interstices of the two larger empires for centuries, Alai needs to resurrect their

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internecine pasts and their accounts of the historical era, which have been completely effaced by contemporary nationalist discourses of the Tibet-China conflict. The quest driving Alai’s root-seeking enterprise is not so much to seek out a resolution to the confusion over his cultural identity. Instead, self-assured of his own ancestry he proceeds to recuperate the stories of these borderlands to further validate his border identity.

Unlike Tashi Dawa or Woeser, who were brought up in Chinese provincial towns and returned as young adults to the Tibetan heartland, Alai was educated in neighbouring Chinese towns, but had lived in his ancestral homeland of Amdo Gyelrong and returned there to work as a teacher. With a keen interest in local culture and background of his homeland, Alai travelled into the rural hinterlands of these border regions to study their folklore, history and social life. He is neither a bewildered young adult on a quest for belonging like Woeser poetry nor does he wish to craft his impressions of country folk as a bemused observer like Tashi Dawa. Instead, Alai’s root-seeking enterprise can be explained as the return of an educated native to his homeland of the Tibetan border country, in a quest to rediscover their history.

As an ethnographer/historian of his border homeland, Alai writes on issues that were taboo to touch upon until the more liberal political atmosphere of the Deng regime. In this vein, his novella *Jiunian de xueji* (Bloodstains of the Past, 1987) tells the story of the ravages of the Cultural Revolution from the point of view of a fallen landlord in the eastern borderlands. This was a radical counter-perspective to the literary treatments of the subject in socialist propaganda literature, where the figure of the landlord would always be fixed in the role of the villain to be ousted by the predictable triumph of the opposed serf.\(^{130}\) As the most ambitious work of his literary career *Red Poppies* takes this project further. It retells the story of the Chinese takeover of these borderlands from the point of view of the chieftains who were decimated in the process. It attempts to recreate the historical background of these lands.

\(^{130}\) Choy, “Remapping the Past”, 137-40.
against the larger narratives of official history that leave no room for these border people to tell their account. It is this definition of his novel as a fictional history written within the interstices of nationalist versions that I will address in the next section.

**Counter-history of the local**

In order to legitimate the existence of these autonomous borderlands, the project of Alai’s root-seeking enterprise is to resurrect stories that will help establish their pluralistic historical background. Official narratives of history, which are always written in nationalist terms, efface the presence of any ambiguities that may put their versions at risk. In the Chinese version of history, Tibet’s past is completely cannibalised by the socialist narrative of liberation of a feudal society. On the other hand, the Tibetan version portrays the events as the usurpation of a sovereign unified nation by the Chinese. Finding no space to articulate their perspective in the official narratives and without the purported legitimacy of historical resources, Alai recreates the historical background of the borderlands in fiction. By telling the account of the cataclysmic historical era from the point of view of his fictional characters, he authors a counter-history in *Red Poppies*.

Recreating history in such a counter-narrative, Alai’s novel can be placed with a literary genre called “historiographic metafiction”. Distinct from historical fiction, historiographic metafiction is not merely a fictional account based in a certain historical period or event. It invokes some larger historical narrative surrounding the period or event it depicts and makes that history a thematic subject of its fictional world. Linda Hutcheon, the theorist who coined the term “historiographic metafiction” says that this genre “puts into question, at the same time as it exploits, the grounding of historical knowledge in the past real.”¹³¹ Both strains of historiography, whether the exile Tibetan version of a sovereign

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unified Tibet or the triumphalistic Maoist version of unification of the great Chinese motherland, interpret the historical era in categorical terms. Invoking contemporary nationalist discourses, historiographic metafiction then throws focus on the act of historiography that is governed by the need to produce such linear ideological narratives of nationalist struggles.

The relevance of such a postmodern genre for a subaltern writer like Alai is not in its abstract, metaphysical vacillation about the failure of any narrative to hold. It does not so much as reject history wholesale as a futile project or claim that there can be no narrative. The postmodern tendency of suspicion towards such categorical, linear narratives as that of the official histories gives the subaltern writer the opportunity to rewrite minor narratives that can barter with those larger histories and fracture their accounts. By engaging in this dialogue, it shows historiography itself to be a means of systematising events in a narrative emplotment and official history to be just another narrative produced under ideological constraints of nationalism. As Hutcheon notes, by pointing towards history as another narrative it “enact(s) the problematic nature of the relation of writing history to narrativization and, thus, to fictionalization.”

In textualising history and fiction, Alai then recreates a counter-narrative that builds on the scepticism that it generates for official historical narratives as ethnocentric versions of dominant groups and positions the pseudo-history of his fictional characters as an equally valid testimony.

This act of subversive reading against the grain of nationalist history also sidelines the emphases of official narratives on glorifying major political events and personalities, to focus on the ephemera of private lives of common people and minor narratives of familial and regional history. Allegorising his pseudo-history in the family saga of one chieftainship, he recreates a fictional account that retells the historical era from a localist perspective on how it

unravelled in the lives of the common people in place of the abstract narratives of official history. Excavating the events of the opium trade and Kuomintang-Communist civil war as the locus of his counter-history of the local, Alai then takes an alternative perspective on how the eventual takeover of his borderlands occurred. He focuses on these events, which have had as much to contribute to Tibet’s takeover, but were submerged by the more catastrophic events that unfolded with the Communist takeover of Tibet.

The Chinese critic Gang Yue finds that the original Chinese title is actually more relevant to the subject matter of the novel since, “‘The Dust Sets’ the original title of the novel, is an expression that evokes a sense of the end of a historical cycle and the distanced point of view of the historian reflecting upon that history.” This note on the title of the book holds two ramifications. Firstly, the novel belongs to the genre of a fiction that questions official nationalist versions of history through which Alai writes back a counter-chronicle of the border regions to give their version of the invasion, as argued earlier. Secondly, the metaphor of “dust settling” indeed evokes the sense of an end of a historical era, the culmination of the Kuomintang-Communist civil war and the rise of the resurgent Chinese nation. With this second factor, Alai implicates the undeniable role that this larger geopolitical shift had in contributing to the chain of events that finally lead to Tibet’s takeover. This section will elaborate how he tells the pseudo-history, written from the margins of the nation, to construct a view of the takeover of these borderlands as such a change in the scheme of things under the prosaic contexts of globalisation, commercial and territorial expansionism beneath the gloss of heroic struggles told in nationalist histories.

**A change in the scheme of things**

After the first year of a bumper harvest of poppies, the news of the Maichis’ good
fortune prompts all the other chieftains to consider poppy-cultivation on their lands too. They ask the Maichis to share some of their seeds with them for the next season, but the Maichis refuse to do so in order to maintain their monopoly over the profitable opium cultivation. However the seeds from the poppy plants are blown by the wind and inevitably find their way to the estates of other chieftains, who are then able to cultivate and participate in the trade. The incident of the poppy seeds being blown across the country in the wind signifies the fluidity of capital, which unleashes the unstoppable expansion of the trade and draws in the whole of the border country into its ambit. In the following year, prices drop dramatically due to the huge surplus in production, causing huge losses to all the farmers. Since they had utilised all of their land for growing poppies instead of food grains, they face the grim prospect of starvation.

While the Maichis brokered a deal with the Chinese for a very shortsighted purpose of making some quick income, they had unwittingly made the first intrepid steps into a market economy. The opium trade draws the chieftains into a dependency on larger circuits of commerce and consumption in the national Chinese markets and even the international arena of opium trade. The self-sufficient autonomous existence of the chieftains is derailed by activities of commerce. The story thus outlines the vagaries of a self-subsistent agrarian economy being transferred to the volatility of a larger cash-based economy and places the downfall of the chieftains in the prosaic context of what Gang Yue calls “sino-globalization”. Although Yue does not go on to elaborate what he exactly means by the term, in my opinion, “sino-globalization” can serve as a meaningful term to explain the factors behind the downfall of the chieftains. It is the expansionism of the Chinese nation in an emerging historical phase of globalisation that is actually the reason for the decimation of these territories. In the immediate context of the story that the novel tells, it is the expansion

134 Gang Yue, “Red Poppies”. 
of the opium trade that brings the Han Chinese emissary on to the scene of the local politics of
the Maichi borderlands. More broadly, it implicates the global processes of Western
imperialist expansion and commerce specifically that of the opium trade with the British that
triggered China’s retaliation to its semi-colonised condition. The final factor in this process of
“sino-globalization” is the resurgence of the territorial ambitions of the Chinese nation under
the Communists that resulted in Tibet’s invasion. Alai underscores the inevitable fate that
awaited the Maichis, who were to be decimated by this conglomerate of factors building up in
the larger processes beyond their control.

When a Geluk monk, belonging to the same sect of Tibetan Buddhism as the Dalai
Lama, the hierarch in Lhasa, turns up in the border country to proselytise the Maichis, the
chieftain cuts his tongue and takes him as a hostage, in an unnecessary act of cruelty. Trapped
in the dungeons of the Maichi prisons, the monk is fascinated by the early history of the
Maichis recorded in some of the ancient documents left behind by the family historians and
offers to be the scribe to write their history. Curious about why he wanted to continue the long
terminated tradition of writing the Maichi history, the chieftain asks the monk if the present
situation foreboded some significant event he would want to record or if there was some
imminent catastrophe in the near future. To this, the monk-historian responds with a mystical
solemnity, “Because it won’t be long before chieftains disappear from the land … Everything
is predestined. The poppies will only make what must happen arrive sooner”135

In this comment, the Geluk monk relinquishes hope of bringing the border chieftains
into the fold of central Tibetan influence. Instead, he forecasts the inevitable end awaiting the
chieftains as an event wrought by the larger historical shift already underway, which has only
been hastened by the advent of the opium trade in the region. The Geluk monk’s
prognostication threads the story of the downfall of his border chieftains with the opium trade.

Through this comment, Alai seems to suggest that the prosaic context of commerce, the cornerstone of the globalisation process, has much to contribute to how history unfolded in the eventual downfall of Tibet.

Alai’s contextualisation of the downfall of the chieftains of his borderlands against these circumstances rejects the view of the takeover as battle of one people against another. Between nationalist histories of both creeds, Alai’s novel entangles the ramifications of the eventual takeover within a larger tenuous web of connections. It focuses on the pragmatics of the immediate socio-historical realities, as a matter of changing political scenarios, economic causes and territorial skirmishes. This defies the reductive collapsing of the event in a monolithic ideological narrative of one nation versus the other. As Hutcheon points out, re-invoking official narratives of history with such scepticism, the genre of historiographic metafiction enables it to collapse their ideologically driven narratives.

Not only to restore history and memory in the face of the distortions of the “history of forgetting”. But also, at the same time, to put into question the authority of any act of writing by locating the discourses of both history and fiction within an ever-expanding intertextual network that mocks any notion of either single origin or simple causality.136

This recreation of an internecine past resurrects and makes precarious connections between events that are forgotten in the nationalistic amnesia of larger histories, which Benedict Anderson has called “the act of forgetting” under which nations forge their myth of an eternal, single origin.137

Thus, Alai’s modus operandi of adopting this genre of historiographic metafiction enables him to write a pseudo-history that legitimises his border identity and refuses to be bastardised by purist nationalist histories. By emphasising the takeover of the borderlands as the result of a larger geo-political shift encompassing the rise of the nation-state, globalisation and China’s territorial expansion, Alai refuses to present the events leading up to the takeover

136 Hutcheon, A Poetics of Postmodernism, 129.
of the borderlands as a mythic hyper-racialised war of one nation against another. In doing so he negates the myth of the sovereign unified Tibet and places the takeover of the region as a result of those larger circumstances. In the next section, I will argue that Alai presents the invasion as the arrival of a new kind of Chinese presence in these borderlands and the modern nation-state that obliterated these ambiguous border territories.

The dissolution of autonomy, not the loss of a nation

Given their fractious conditions, this inevitable change of circumstances in the borderlands is caused by the larger social upheaval brought about by changing political ideologies. Alai intimates that the Chinese were not an inherently hostile presence but in fact existed in ambiguous relations as neighbours, patrons and subjects, in his border homeland where the Chinese empire seated in Beijing have always maintained a sphere of influence. The arrival of the Communists cannot simply be interpreted as the foreign aggression of the Chinese against the Tibetan nation, but arrival of a new kind of Chinese presence into these borderlands. The country folk of the borderlands, in fact, see the situation as the takeover of a more virulent creed of Red (Communist) soldiers who have come in the place of the conciliatory White (Kuomintang) soldiers.

When the end is around the corner, the Han Chinese emissary and the Tibetan monk-historian stare into the sky in deep contemplation. The idiot with his characteristic impunity asks the two to tell him their thoughts. The monk-historian continues to stare at the sky and comments on the events with an obscure rumination saying “everything will disappear one day” and “in his eyes the idiot can only discern the blank clouds.” Instead, the adviser closes his eyes and meditates on a historical prophecy about how a revolution of the common people would make China a powerful nation. He fumblingly asks, “Could it be soon … That’s sooner
than I expected." By eliciting opinions from the Tibetan monk-historian and the Chinese military general through the idiot, the author is able to juxtapose their views. He shows how the inevitable end is something that the Tibetan theocracy in the west, represented here by the Geluk monk, is incapable of preventing. The resurgence of the Chinese nation that the emissary forecasts is the eventual reason that will lead to the dissolution of these border kingdoms. Thus, the takeover of these borderlands with their ambiguous state of polity signals a shift in to a new order of things, where a more coercive and pervasive type of social community in the form of the modern nation-state subsumed these minor political entities as the chieftaincies of these borderlands under the Communist Republic. It is the resurgence of China defining itself as a modern nation under the Communists that demolished the autonomy of these peripheral regions and subsumed them within the new republic.

While Alai intimates that the takeover of the borderlands cannot be interpreted as the usurpation of a sovereign unified Tibetan nation, the persistent target of his subversive pseudo-history is the re-unification of the motherland narrative under which the takeover of these borderlands is subsumed in the Chinese nationalist discourse. In the next section, I will elaborate how Alai proceeds to subvert the liberation narrative to argue that it was not the re-unification of the motherland, but invasion of these peripheral borderlands that brought them into the fold of the modern Chinese nation.

Debunking the re-unification narrative

The Chinese state rhetoric portrays Tibet’s invasion as the liberation of a feudal society and re-unification of a peripheral region under the motherland. It is this liberation narrative that Alai proceeds to subvert through what the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin called the double-voicedness of the intentional hybrid form. For Bakhtin,
A hybrid construction is an utterance that belongs, by its grammatical and compositional markers, to a single speaker, but actually contains mixed within it two utterances, two speech manners, two styles … two semantic and axiological belief systems.\textsuperscript{139}

On the other hand, authoritative discourse is in its very nature linear and singular or else it loses its authority.\textsuperscript{140} Such juxtaposition for Bakhtin is the crucial effect of the “intentional hybrid form” as it aligns two different worldviews or perspectives within a single discourse, where one voice is able to unmask the other through the juxtaposition of the two utterances. Through such an intentional hybridisation, the single-voiced thrust of the authoritative discourse is challenged to expose official meanings and oppositional interpretations at the same time. In the following section, I will show the various instances through which Alai recreates such a double-voiced discourse to negate the Chinese nationalist claim of re-unification of the motherland.

The emancipatory narrative that forms the core rhetoric through which the Chinese regime legitimated its invasion of Tibet is problematised. Alai shows that for the country folk this is not so much the heroic arrival of a liberatory Communist army. Unable to grasp the significance of the political ideologies that the Chinese proclaim, the only distinction the village folk seem to be able to make is to call the two different political parties by the symbolic colours that they identified themselves with – red for the Communists and white for the Kuomintang – and throughout the story they are referred to as such without actually articulating their names. When the Communist soldiers are making their way into the chieftain territories near the end of the novel, they disband the fiefdoms expelling the headmen and releasing the serfs. The idiot recounts how the slaves wailed in confusion and sympathy for their masters. “That upset the soldiers for wherever they went, they had been greeted by loud cheers … But not here, where the slaves opened wide their foolish mouths to

\textsuperscript{140} Bakhtin, \textit{The Dialogic Imagination}, 360.
cry for their masters.” The slaves were so entrenched in the system of the feudal hierarchy that they do not understand the liberation that the Communist soldiers think they have granted the serfs and cry out in despair for their masters. This putative liberation is made to seem as a thing outside the logic of the country folk. But is it merely the serfs who are so foolish in their incapacity to understand the value of liberation? This incident prompts the suspicion that egalitarianism may not be a universal value to evoke a naturalistic reaction of jubilation from the serfs. It is itself a particularistic political ideal or system just as this feudal system that had actually sustained and maintained a life-world for the past few centuries.

Further, the claim of cultural and intellectual superiority under which the civilising mission of the coloniser makes it advances into other territories, is shown to be a masquerade too. In the beginning of their encounter, the Kuomintang emissary retreats in aloof disdain from the chieftain and his village folk. He sits in his tent with his half-closed eyes, making the chieftain wait impatiently for an audience. The valet informs the chieftain that the emissary is in pensive meditation over a poem he is writing to record this trip to Maichi country, when he is actually in an opium-induced stupor, a fact given away by the beads of sweat lining his forehead. When the partnership between the Maichis and the emissary is sealed in the joint contract to plant poppies and the conquest over the Wangpos, the emissary tells the chieftain that he will compose a poem to commemorate their victory. But the serious purposefulness of the grand tradition of writing poetry to imperial conquests is parodied. The event celebrated in the emissary’s poem is the defeat of a petty chieftain, that too for such an inglorious reason of furthering the opium trade. The parodic twist is taken further when we realise that the emissary’s poetic skills are dubitable, as he does not produce any original writing describing the actual incident. He just churns out a few flowery lines imitated from grand imperial poetry, which makes the whole situation appear even more preposterous and ridiculous. Near

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141 Alai, Red Poppies, 428.
the end of the story when the Chinese Kuomintang emissary is forced to escape again to the Tibetan regions as the Communists slowly close in on the Nationalists, he asks the idiot for refuge. The idiot agrees to hire him as an adviser on the condition that he may not write any more poetry. To this the emissary replies with honesty, “I don’t need any more posturing” acceding that this act of with which he distinguished himself as superior from the chieftain was nothing but a charade.  

The chieftain however sees the poem as another token of his great collaborations with the Chinese. He hangs it on the wall in his castle with the “Instruct and Assimilate Barbarians” plaque that his family had received from the Qing emperors and put up as a trophy without knowing its meaning. According to Gang Yue this plaque can be read as more than just as symbol of Chinese cultural imperialism. The Qing emperors from whom the chieftains supposedly got this plaque are of the Manchurian lineage who had taken power at the Chinese centre but were themselves considered barbaric by the anti-Manchu elite in Beijing. For the Qing, who were themselves considered as barbarians, to ventriloquise those edicts, shows that the civilising mission of the coloniser is merely a hollow symbol, no more than a superficial front for war calls and territorial ambitions. The meaning within these mementoes is lost to the chieftain who cannot read Chinese who is ignorant of the grandiose messages of imperial benevolence on the plaque and the poem. But it is the chieftain’s treatment of these artefacts merely as boastful souvenirs of his petty conquests, which makes the most truthful acknowledgement of what they actually stand for, without the gloss of cultural superiority or moral righteousness.

Alai creates scenes that invoke such themes as the civilising mission of the coloniser and the liberation of serfs in which the invasion is recorded in the annals of Chinese nationalist history. But juxtaposing them with figments of his pseudo-history, like the

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143 Gang Yue, “Red Poppies”. 
chieftain’s petty territorial ambition and the unwillingness of the serfs to commemorate their “liberators”, he punctures those narratives. It reflects the character of the intentional hybrid form, in which Bakhtin says, “the important activity is not only in (in fact not so much in the) mixing of linguistic forms … as it is in the collision of two differing points of view on the world that are embedded in these forms.”

By pointing to the violent ramifications with which the Communists coercively subjugated these borderlands and demolished their autonomy with their own territorial ambitions, Alai negates the Chinese nationalist claim that they liberated an oppressed people or that there was some primordial unity that the motherland was re-attaining. Instead of grandiose historical narratives of revolution and conquest, the novel thus presents a counter-history that runs against the very tendency of historical narratives to interpellate events in such narrative values. In this subversive vein, he offers a subaltern history that forgoes idealised accounts of human endeavour and grand historical projects, whether that of the civilising rhetoric of the coloniser or the heroic nationalistic resistance of the colonised.

However this pseudo-history is not to be taken as the true recovery of a past that was repressed by dominant histories. As a work of historical fiction, the novel imaginatively reconstructs a pseudo-history where there were no historical resources in the official sources to validate the identity of these borderlands. It deliberately positions a story that is primarily inspired by a perverse need to deconstruct the prevailing interpretations of the events offered by dominant historical discourses. Without having a claim to veracity as official histories, it invokes documented historical incidents and fabricates them through fiction to conjure up a fractious “counter-narrative”. After its negation of the nationalist histories that I corroborated in the last few sections, I will show how the language of historical writing and a folktale infuse each other to write in their place a bawdy, folkloric, hybrid quasi-history.

Unheroic denouements: A subaltern testimony from the margins

The life-world of these border regions that Alai recreates in his novel is filled with lurid descriptions of despotic violence, blood feuds and intermittent sexual depravity, which could easily cause critics to denounce Alai as a pro-Chinese propagandist. Since the work has not attracted much critical attention, this still remains a matter of speculation. But given the negative criticism that Tashi Dawa’s relatively benign stories have occasioned, it would be safe to assume that Alai’s depiction of a Tibet of loose sexual mores and belligerent violence would not fare any better in its critical reception. Indeed scenes of sexual promiscuity, decapitations, tongues or ears being lopped off pepper the narrative, not merely as incidents that are necessitated by the story but deliberately contrived to excessive proportions as if to shock the reader.

In his review of the book, India-based Tibetan filmmaker Tenzin Sonam takes issue with Alai’s picture of life in the days before the Communists came. According to him, it is so crude, violent and exaggerated that it loses any sense of reality and becomes a grotesque cartoon creation resembling old propaganda literature. But Sonam goes on to ask, “Is Alai simply a victim of his Chinese upbringing, faithfully spewing out the party line, unable to distinguish the truth from lies?”

He argues that although on a surface reading it may seem like a depiction of Old Tibet, there is perhaps a more insidious reason. He says,

There are intimations that this exaggeration is deliberate and that Alai may have a deeper, more subtle agenda, which is to show that the downfall of the chieftains and their loss of humanity and spirituality stems from the time when they forgot that they had originally come from Tibet proper, and instead, turned to the east, to China, the source of their titles and material wealth.

By looking beyond the surface of what is depicted in the novel to the totality of what the narrative seeks to intimate, Sonam is able to interpret Alai’s exaggerations beyond the


simplistic argument of deliberate misrepresentation by a propaganda writer to “defame” Tibetan culture. Yet the distinction he is able to read, while creating a more perspicacious understanding of the novel, places its driving assumption on a putative Tibetan spirituality or humanity that has been lost from being in contact with the Chinese empire. Of course, Alai does seem to hint that the moral degeneracy in the chieftains may have been inculcated from their contact with the Chinese. As he notes, the chieftains “had always preferred the worldly empire of the east, not the land of western deities.”147 Yet, this hidden moral indictment of the Chinese influence cannot be explained entirely by Sonam’s reading. Not only does this reinforce the stereotypical sanctimonious image of devout Tibetans, it also reduces the historical interchange intimated in the novel to a simplistic dynamic of “spiritual Tibetans corroded by the corrupt Chinese”.

In concurrence with Sonam’s understanding, I find that this world of the chieftains needs to be read beyond the simplistic misrepresentation thesis. But diverging from Sonam’s evaluation of these grotesque Tibetans merely as “Tibetans corrupted by Chinese influence”, I will argue that the grotesque narrative is more than a question of the writer’s intent in portraying his characters in a particular light. Instead, I will argue that this grotesque narrative, which is a defining feature of the novel, can be read more fruitfully as a narratorial trait integral to the genre of fictional history that Alai is writing. The grotesque Tibetans and deliberate exaggerations are neither a product of misrepresentation nor a hidden indictment of the Chinese. It is a part of the deliberate stance of anti-realism taken by Alai to write this counter-history. The exaggerated scenes of moral degeneracy, sexual deviance and rampant brutality are integral to the genre conscious of its own position as a counter-history. Coupled with certain tendencies to exoticise the minorities in contemporary Chinese culture, the era that Alai belongs to, was buoyed by the creative license allowed to writers who took this

147 Alai, Red Poppies, 419.
liberty to some extremes with the deliberately non-realistic tendencies. Its incoherence and instability become a significant force of asserting opposition to teleological discourse of dominant histories or the definitive moral characters of simplistic good versus evil schema of socialist realism.

Most of the lurid incidents depicted in the novel can perhaps not be verified on the basis of their historical correctness at all. The custom of decapitation as corporal punishment is not a historical fact that has been documented in Tibetan areas. In fact, in some of the border regions, chieftains did not rule with despotic autocracy. Many hereditary houses maintained their lineage in a hegemonic coalition while there were others where the chieftains were even elected into power in some forms of proto-democratic arrangement. The random sexual misadventures and excessive promiscuity leaves much room for speculation, if not for their historical veracity, but just for the incessant repetitiveness with which they appear in the novel and the semi-pornographic details with which they are described.

The novel instead resonates with the notion of the “carnivalesque” as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais’s fiction. For Bakhtin the scenes of lurid bodily acts, irreverent language and joyous lawlessness which fill Rabelais’ fictional world is a literary tendency called carnivalesque that drew from folklore and medieval carnivals to generate an alternative vision against the serious truths of order and piety under the increasing dominance of official ecclesiastical culture.148 Rather than celebrating the a priori resistance value of such a carnivalesque narrative, I want to show how it actually serves as an indispensable narrative tool for this novel to recreate this alternative counter-history. Particularly the sexual metaphor, which is a prominent feature of the carnivalesque trope, is not merely an added feature it provides the narrative frame through which Alai can write his story against the grain of official history.

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Although portrayed as wild-mannered despot, the chieftain is never shown to be an adulterer. But on one of his walks through his fields, when the fiery red poppies are in full bloom and their overpowering smell intoxicates the residents, he belligerently takes the wife of one of his subordinate headmen. In a convoluted digression, a lackey who helps the chieftain in taking this concubine is killed and the family of the slain man banished from the country. It is the sons of this slain man, who return later at the end to avenge their father’s death. The idiot son, the last surviving member in the Maichi lineage is killed not by the Communists, but by the son of a victim of an old blood feud. The other son of the victim becomes the only Tibetan from the village to join the Communists and returns to the village with the army, bringing the inescapable doom for the Maichis. The end of the Maichi clan is entangled within the sexual sub-history woven within the narrative, without laying the blame on the arrival of the Communists or making a direct reference to the Communists in the story.

Also, at the end of the story when all the chieftains have been incorporated into the opium trade circuit, a travelling troupe of Chinese dancers arrives in the area and is hired by the chieftains to provide entertainment. This group of women travelling across the country as dancers are actually prostitutes. While there are quite misogynistic depictions of women in many places throughout the novel, it is within a market economy and commercialisation trickling into these regions, which introduces a form of women who have truly become objectified as commodities. It turns out that the prostitutes suffer from syphilis and pass the disease on to all the chieftains, signalling a descent into moral and physical degeneracy that will eventually culminate in their annihilation. This attack on the virility of the chieftains becomes a metaphor to foreshadow their impending decimation at the hands of the Communists. This image of the emasculated chieftains hints that the martial prowess and masculinity, which the eastern chieftains had traditionally been known for, will come to nought in the face of the organised modern army of the Red soldiers.
Thus, the literal death of the last person in the Maichi line and the metaphorical end of
the world of these borderlands is linked to these subplots of sexual deviancy that the
carnivalesque narrative helps to underwrite as its pseudo-history, where official histories erase
their presence from any kind of factual existence. The arrival of the Communists is only
broached tendentiously and hinted at throughout the novel as a looming event that is to follow
after this story ends, but Alai deliberately evades making any direct allusions to them.
Deliberately negating the role of the Communists, he tells a counter-history that instead
recreates an account that avoids linking events to the nationalist actors in a linear story.
Employing the bawdy, sexually charged tone of the carnivalesque narrative it defies the
linear, orderly narrative of official histories to plot incidents in a direct aetiology of each
nationalist movement leading to a particular end. While tangentially invoking these issues of
the Communist Revolution and the opium trade, the novel weaves a sub-history of its own
activated by the characters of the story caught in those larger currents through subtle
interconnections. It creates denouements that ensue from fractious incidents, chance accidents
not necessarily inspired or instigated by righteous political action.

The carnivalesque narrative rife with these exaggerated details of sexual perversion
and moral depravity is best grasped as a narrative form with fin de siecle connotations. It
provides an apt frame of narrative for this liminal phase of history at the cusp of an emerging
modernity with a centuries-old lifestyle at the brink of annihilation. Depicting events
enflamed to a feverish pitch of excessive debauchery and mindless cruelty, Alai conjures the
deranged unrealistic world of the Maichis hurtling towards self-decimation in a whirlwind
descent brought on by the opium trade, prostitution, syphilis and the arrival of the Communist
forces. This bawdy story of the borderlands is told from the point of view of the biracial idiot
protagonist of the novel. In the next section, I will outline how Alai uses this biracial idiot
protagonist to re-affirm his own Tibeto-Chinese ancestry as an older border identity that
predates the nationalistic lines drawn later as insurmountable forms of political community.

**Playing the idiot in the middle**

By creating this idiot figure with a biracial ancestry as the protagonist of his novel, Alai also implicates his own status as a person of mixed ethnicity. Howard Choy in his reading of the biracial status of the idiot says, “Disoriented in the identity crisis between Chineseness and Tibetanness, the self of such a Chinese Tibetan as the writer Alai (Tib. A legs) is so confused that he can only present fictionally and fictitiously his identity in idiocy.” But Choy’s statement doesn’t take cognisance of the fact that nowhere in the novel does the idiot hint at any anxiety over the issue of his ethnicity.

In contrast to Choy’s reading, I will argue that the character of the biracial idiot, who tells the story of his border homeland, in fact, seeks to legitimate the creole identity of the novelist. The idiot is the second child of the Tibetan chieftain from his marriage to a Han Chinese woman, who is sold to the widower chieftain as a gift but whom he gradually accepts as his wife. His mixed parentage is not a source of confusion to belong to the larger cultural-nationalist identities. Instead, Alai points to the presence of polyethnicity in the autonomous status border country with their own local historical background. Also, it is his Han Chinese mother sold to the chieftain as a gift, who due to her gender and lower social status is a victim to the chieftains’ power. This points towards inverse power relations where oppression cannot be marked as an exclusive domain of one race.

The character of the idiot allows Alai to incorporate a folkloric Tibetan trickster figure called Aku Tonpa, who under the guise of a shabby delinquent sage is actually the emanation of the Buddha of Compassion, whose lewd exploits actually have hidden moral lessons for people. A trend associated with “root-seeking literature” reviving local folkloric elements

helps Alai to accentuate the earthiness of his story. Adopting this persona is, in fact, a further legitimation of the biracial person. It shows that he is not as an anomalous new entity but one born from the native soil. Other than being employed as such an indigenising technique, this characterisation of the protagonist as an idiot is principally a narrative device to tell the story of his borderlands, not a sign of his confusion over his cultural identity. As the last section outlined, excluded from dominant discourses of official nationalist histories, this localist counter-history as lived by subalterns is a subversive narrative form in itself. Enlisting the idiot resonates with the trickster, a familiar figure in literary or folk traditions across the globe that has been extensively re-formulated in colonial situations, especially in Native American literature, as such a figure of political resistance and cunning of the disempowered.

The mental disability of the idiot also echoes that of the grand mal in Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *The Idiot*. The inability of the grand mal to comprehend the guiles of a corrupt world in Dostoyevsky’s novel, paradoxically, becomes the means through which the writer can accentuate the monstrosities of moral decay that sane people in the novel heedlessly conform to. Although Alai’s idiot does not share the idealistic moral distance from the world as the grand mal, it is also his idiocy, which puts him at a certain distance to view the world he cohabits with the other characters, with a detached and incredulous perspective. As the idiot self-consciously declares,

> I was just a passer-by who came to this wondrous land when the chieftain system was nearing its end. Yet heaven had let me see and let me hear, had placed me in the middle of everything while having me remain above it all. It was for this purpose that heaven had made me look like an idiot.150

Unlike the works of such a canonical literary predecessor like Dostoyevsky, Alai’s novel lacks finesse in melding the idiot’s voice within the narrative. Since I only read the English version, it is possible that translation may have also stilted the flow of the narrative from the original Chinese edition. But the idiot character intermittently acclaims his own

stupidity or self-consciously draws attention to his mental disability throughout the novel, which jars against the flow of the narrative. The most striking example of such a contrived reminder of the idiocy of the protagonist occurs in a crucial scene in the story. In the scene, the chieftain is holding a referendum with his family and advisers over whether he should follow up the current year’s good fortune by continuing to plant poppies in the next season. Contrary to the suggestions made by his first son to plant poppies, the idiot says that the chieftain must plant grains—a decision which in hindsight turns out to be the crucial mitigating factor for the Maichi family in the following year. The Maichis are not only able to avert the catastrophic famine that befalls all the other chieftains who had chosen to plant poppies; they become the most powerful family in the region as they hold all the other chieftains hostage to their demands and sell them their grains at hugely inflated prices. This makes such acclamations of idiocy seem more like a compensatory afterthought especially when the preceding action committed by the idiot is decidedly far from being idiotic. It would seem unfeasible to explain the Maichis’ choice to plant grain as a conscious, calculated decision by a sane person. Thus, in order to incorporate this event crucial to the story into this narrative, Alai attributes this choice to the belligerent and eccentric demand of the idiot. The chieftain takes up the idiot’s demand to keep his promise without making sedate calculations of profits.

The idiot dispenses the function of such a trickster figure to rewrite a pseudo-history. It also enables the writer a certain amount of immunity in telling this carnivalesque counter-history, which adopts an irreverent, subversive attitude to the hallowed tones of heroic achievement and nationalist struggle of official histories. These awkward interjections with undue emphases on the protagonist’s mental disability are not only due to the lack of Alai’s technical lack to let the idiocy speak for itself. They are principally such narrative devices used for writing a carnivalesque folk-history, which positions itself merely as “an idiotic
tale” and not as an overt challenge to the state. They can also be seen as a case of self-censorship for Alai while writing on such contentious topics as Tibeto-Chinese history.

Even as Tenzin Sonam rejects the simplistic misrepresentation thesis of Alai’s bawdy story as mere collusion with the Chinese state, there still lingers a strain of reservation against this in-between stance taken by Alai. He says,

The ambiguity of Alai’s attitudes towards his native land can be heard, echoed in the idiot’s final thoughts before life ebbs away from him, “Dear God, if our souls can really be reincarnated, please send me back to this place in my next life. I love this beautiful place.\(^{151}\)

It is quite surprising that Sonam reads an explicit expression of Alai’s attachment to his country, guised here in the idiot’s dying words, as an ambiguity on Alai’s part. Why such an obvious misreading? Although Sonam does provide a more trenchant reading of Alai’s novel, this exile Tibetan presumption about a Sinophone Tibeto-Chinese writer being a pro-Chinese defector somehow surfaces in this statement; such that these words of obvious love for the country is read as being ambiguous. Sonam seems to suggest that Alai’s stance throughout the novel is that of a pro-Chinese writer, in contrast to which this pronouncement strikes an ambiguous note because he diverges from his more pervasive Chinese allegiance.

What we instead need to take note of is that Red Poppies attempts to recreate an alternative pseudo-history of these borderlands as a subaltern testimony against the grain of official histories. It hints that history may only be recorded in the grand narratives of nationalist struggles, but was actually played out in the lives of people who only knew their own immediate community and may not have necessarily subscribed to modern notions of national identity. Refusing to be bastardised by purist notions of race and nationality, Alai makes use of the genre “historiographic metafiction” to resurrect a localist pseudo-history to reconstruct the roots of his Tibeto-Chinese identity. And in doing so Alai legitimates his own forgotten compatriots, as having a veritable history in their own right, even if that has to be

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written retrospectively as a counter-history in a fantastical fictional form.
Conclusion

What has been a cliché about Tibet as a Shangri-La of spiritual attainment is not only a popular perception that has been the focus of much cultural criticism pertaining to Tibet; it is a stereotype that is predominantly linked with cultural and literary texts about Tibet in the West.\(^{152}\) Sixty years of Communist Chinese regime in Tibet has produced a new breed of Tibetan writers who now write about Tibet in Chinese to audiences within China. Not only are these works read within elite literary circles or academic institutions, they also cater to a growing audience of urbane, literate Chinese increasingly interested in Tibet.

Looking at the works of three of the most prominent of these Sinophone writers in contemporary Tibet, who also share the pedigree of a mixed Tibeto-Chinese ancestry, my purpose in this thesis has been to explore how they articulate their identity and relationship to Tibet. Given the specific history of the Tibet-China conflict and the continuing situation of Tibet’s occupation by China, the question of how these biracial Sinophone writers perceive their identity acquires a poignancy and urgency. As cultural representatives for Tibet in the national arena of Chinese literature the significance of the question is further heightened. With these questions in mind, the subject of this study on this phenomenon of post-Mao bicultural writers recuperating from the strictures of state control, to reconnect with their ethnic background may seem a little dated. Yet it is also timely, in that there has not been a composite study addressing this literary phenomenon. This study serves to set a benchmark in

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\(^{152}\) Peter Bishop outlines the imaginative practices of disparate generations of eighteenth and nineteenth century Western explorers and missionaries who projected their own constructs of Tibet as a sacred landscape in their travel writings. See Peter Bishop, *The Myth of Shangri-La: Tibet, Travel Writing and the Western Creation of Sacred Landscape* (London: Athlone Press, 1989) Donald Lopez explores how the image of Tibet as an idealised, otherworldly place in Western popular culture has recursively affected the self-conception and identity of exile Tibetans who have been caught in this cycle of unwittingly pandering to the stereotype of a devout spiritual people. See Donald S. Lopez Jr., *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998). Dibyesh Anand prises the question of this regime of representation linked with Tibet from matters of perceptions in popular culture to more entrenched reasons of Western hegemony in international relations that has entrenched interests in creating a poignant image of Tibet under siege by Chinese aggression. See Dibyesh Anand, *Geopolitical Exotica* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008).
the burgeoning field of literature produced in Tibet. It foregrounds issues, pertaining specifically to a class of Tibeto-Chinese writers, in a comprehensive study. And finally, it undertakes a literary exploration on issues of cultural politics of identity in Chinese-occupied Tibet that have mainly received extensive examinations in anthropological studies so far.

In my reading of their works, these writers do not necessarily toe the line of the Chinese regime, as a few of their critics are quick to conclude. Not only is this expectation from these writers to marshal a political resistance for Tibet quite unwarranted; it also foreshortens the possibility for a more cautious analysis of their works. A more nuanced approach is also needed, given the constricting factors of state sponsorship and rigorous censorship, under which minority literature is published in China.

My approach throughout this study has been to examine Tashi Dawa, Woeser and Alai as belonging to a cultural phenomenon of Chinese writers in post-Mao China known as “root-seeking literature”. This was located as a cultural shift that emerged after the failure of the Cultural Revolution led to an overt rebellion and dramatic reversal against the ideological extremism and repressive control of state over all aspects of social life. Given the fact that these works of arguably minor worth may not hold much significance in the classical sense of literary appreciation, the meaning of these texts acquires significance when read against the socio-historical context. Such a grounded approach of historicising the texts within this particular context of post-socialist cultural life in China, also offers clarification on other questions like – why there has not been a significant output of literature in occupied Tibet in the previous decades, and why these writers pursue a quest for cultural roots, a somewhat antiquated theme in the wider global literary context. These writers have only emerged due to the relatively liberal attitude taken by the state, as it sought to make reparations for the ideological failures of high socialism and the impoverishment of the Chinese literary world. Thus this reversal must not be seen in isolation as a form of resistance but also as a cultural
shift sanctioned by the party-state.

When studied against this historical context, further clarification on literary matters of style and authorship can also be made. Rather than etherealising that discussion in some romantic notion of an innate artistic creativity, the literary style that each writer adopts can be analysed with a more rigorous understanding of the literary ambience of the era. From Western writers like Gabriel Garcia Marquez whose works were imported in this era, magical realism appealed to Chinese writers for its radical literary style because it flouted the normative requirements of social realism imposed stringently in the preceding decades. While magical realism slowly disappeared from the works of mainstream Han Chinese writers, it found a more lasting presence in Tibet in the works of Tashi Dawa. This longevity of the style in Dawa’s works can be attributed to the similar predicament he shared with Latin American magical realist writers of writing about a marginalised culture. On the other hand, Alai’s lengthy four hundred-pages long epic novel recuperates a pseudo-history of his border homeland against the grain of official histories in a genre called “historiographic metafiction”, which blurs the boundaries between fiction and history. This use of historiographic metafiction in Alai’s work can be understood, not so much as a literary genre adopted from established Western works, but a style of writing that evolved from specific conditions in the Chinese politico-cultural sphere. Although there had been a pervasive obsession with history in the modern Chinese literary sphere, this was compounded by post-Mao intellectual rebellion against the ideological instrumentalisation of history by the state. Woeser’s antiquated style of early romantic poetry and Chinese verse culture celebrating the poet as a prophet is unlike the more ebullient postmodern literary experimentations of the other two

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153 Magical realism found a more lasting presence in the works of Tashi Dawa, to the extent, that it is his name, which is still associated with the literary style in Chinese literature. See Franz Xaver Erhard, “Magical Realism and Tibetan Literature,” in Contemporary Tibetan Literary Studies: PIATS (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 133-145.

writers. But it points towards a revival of the genre after Maoist strictures limited poets to only recuperate folk songs or compose propaganda ditties that common people could hum. Further, her later poetry with its ethnographic content is a type of reportage literature, a phenomenon that evolved in post-Mao China, where the writer exercises her relative freedom to act as an alternative journalistic source in the face of state-controlled media.\textsuperscript{155}

Thus, I have attempted to a mode of reading that engages with the works on their own terms. I have explored how given the larger political scenario and historical circumstances, these people caught in between Tibet and China articulate their bicultural identity. I have objected to previous critical appraisal of the identities of these writers as \textit{a priori} hybrid for their biracial ancestry. This view enforces a facile understanding of their identities as mixture of a Tibetan and Chinese identity, halts analysis at the point of description and also suppresses the differences within the writers. Taking that as its point of contention, this study has sought to offer a more nuanced reading of these writers as well as a more incisive conceptual understanding of hybridity.

Through a holistic exploration of their individual literary journeys – content, self-representation and genre – I have shown how they conceive of the markers on either side of the hyphenated status and resolve the indeterminacy of their hybrid condition to define their identity. To re-iterate the conclusions to my analyses in terms of the epigrammatic title of this study, the hyphen of their Tibeto-Chinese identity is then spelt out by these writers in the following ways: Tashi Dawa rejects the collective social identities on either side and dwells in the detached individualistic space of the hyphen itself as a cosmopolitan; Woeser conceives of the hyphen in her identity as a divider that splits her selfhood, to reject this in-between status and reclaim a Tibetan identity in a nativist stance; finally, Alai negates the hyphen and the cultural-nationalist markers that fracture his identity to project his Tibeto-Chinese ancestry as

\textsuperscript{155} Helmut Martin, Jeffrey C. Kinkley, and Jin Ba, \textit{Modern Chinese Writers: Self-Portrayals} (New York: ME Sharpe, 1992), xxx.
an older creole identity pre-existing in the autonomous borderlands.

These readings not only present a more nuanced understanding of the process through which the writers define their identities, they also highlight a caution that while using a concept like hybridity one must also elaborate the theoretical premises it entails. Moving to this notion of hybridity not as a static state of mixture but a tense scene of negotiation also shifts the focus towards questions of agency and subjectivity of these Tibeto-Chinese writers. As Bhabha says, “Hybridity is a problematic of colonial representation and individuation that reverses the effects of colonialist disavowal, so that other ‘denied’ knowledges enter upon the dominant discourse and estrange the basis of its authority – its rules of recognition.”

Even a so-called “pure” Tibetan like Dondrup Gyel, who was rewriting classical texts like the Hindu epic of Ramayana as a means to forge a modern Tibetan literature for a marginalised culture in China, was producing hybrid texts. The bicultural writers in this study call for an examination of how they inhabit their space of hybridity. What is at stake here is how under the larger cultural and political constraints of the dominance of the Chinese state, these writers enact strategies of “individuation reversing the effects of colonialist disavowal” through which they remake their identity. Such a direction is also suitable for deepening the investigative approach for Tibeto-Chinese writers in future studies, which in all likelihood will gloss over the influential theories of hybridity in their explorations.

156 Homi Bhabha, The Location of Culture, 114.

157 The Ramayana was itself a highly diffused, hybrid text in itself; circulating through global circuits of intellectual and cultural exchange from centuries ago.
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