

A localist counter-narrative to nationalist histories: Alai's *Red Poppies* as historiographic metafiction

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Popular understandings of the Chinese occupation of Tibet are rigidly lodged between the interpretations propagated by nationalist histories on either side – the Tibetan [in-exile] version of Chinese invasion of a sovereign nation or the CCP's version of re-unification of the Chinese motherland. In this paper, I will examine how the Tibeto-Chinese writer Alai's novel *Red Poppies* creates a fictional account of the historical conflict from the perspective of the chieftains of the eastern Tibetan borderlands as a counter-narrative to these linear, ideological narratives of nationalist histories. Presenting an alternative view of the historical event through the fictional testimony of the eastern Tibetan border people, the novel is aligned with the literary genre called historiographic metafiction. Linda Hutcheon has defined historiographic metafiction as a fictional account of an historical event that subverts dominant understandings of the event and also unsettles historiography's claim to objective knowledge of the past. While concluding that the novel presents an effective counter-narrative to the nationalist histories, Alai, however, falls a little short of tapping the full potency of the subversive quality of historiographic metafiction achieved by a writer like the Japanese-Canadian novelist Joy Kogawa who grapples with the impossibility of accommodating the past through the act of historiography.

The only writer of Tibetan ancestry to win the Mao Dun prize, the highest award for literary excellence in China, Alai's novel *Red Poppies* has been hailed as the most important literary work to have emerged from contemporary Tibet. Born in 1951 of Tibetan and Hui Chinese parentage, Alai 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 as semi-autonomous provinces for centuries. 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. The descendants of the invading Tibetans gradually assimilated with the native Chinese people, developed their own culture and a dialect that is unintelligible to Tibetans from other areas. With the aggressive political advances made by the Manchus during their reign in Beijing in the eighteenth century, the Gyelrongpas along with some other eastern Tibetans entered into pacts of various kinds as protectorates or partners with the Chinese empire, which further propelled these Tibetan borderlands away from the control of Lhasa.

Alai's literary interests have revolved 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. Hailed as his magnum opus, *Red Poppies* amalgamates elements from these previous works, melding fiction with history to tell the story of the Communist regime's subjugation of these border regions in 1949. The story traces the rise and downfall of a fictional clan called the Maichis and their cohorts through the voice of chieftain Maichi's idiot son, born from his second marriage to a Han Chinese woman. 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 American publishing company Houghton-Mifflin. The Chinese edition of the novel was already a bestseller in mainland China and its English edition has also received a [considerable]/ wide readership in the West.

In the only scholarly analysis of the novel, Howard Choy comments on the biracial identity of the idiot protagonist to say, "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.”¹ 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 stance towards his biracial identity as being riddled by such a putative crisis when the idiot does not display anxiety over the issue of his ethnicity anywhere in the novel. This discrepancy makes an apt launching point for my analysis of the novel. In my view, Alai legitimates the idiot’s biracial identity and by extension his own, as having pre-existed larger nationalist markers of identity which have now come to govern notions of belonging. In this paper, I will argue that the novel is built around [such] an identity politics of reclaiming the ambiguous, polyethnic historical past of these border regions that has been erased by Tibetan and Chinese nationalist histories.

Alai’s novel belongs to the radical literary culture that emerged in the liberalized post-Mao cultural environment in reaction to the stifling of artistic freedom in the era of socialist propaganda literature. In this vein, his novella *Jiunian de xueji* (Bloodstains of the Past, 1987) revolves around the travails of a fallen landlord in the eastern borderlands during the Cultural Revolution. 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 oppressed serf. In particular, many scholars have noted that this subversive post-Mao literary culture is driven by an unswerving preoccupation with interrogating historical discourses of [the] recent Chinese past. There have been a few studies which have examined this increase in number of fictional works those are contesting with the official historiography. Lin Qingxin says that the subversive tone of these New Historical Fictions is directed towards the naïve assumptions of progress, destiny and telos underpinning statist narratives of modern Chinese

¹ Howard Yuen Fung Choy, “In Quest(ion) of an ‘P’: Identity and Idiocy in Alai’s Red Poppies,” in *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, ed. Luran Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), p.225.

history.² Howard Choy notes that these fictional works attempt to re-appropriate the past from the stronghold of statist narratives through intensely personal narratives that are ‘merged as inscriptions of subjectivity onto history’ which are ‘based on debris in the ruin of former times and on personal perceptions of the past’.³ This driving impetus is discernible in most prominent writers of the post-Mao Chinese literary culture. Wang Anyi, a female novelist whose family was persecuted in the heyday of Communist Revolution, writes novels which revolve around quotidian life through the lens of private ethnography. For example, her novel *Patrilineal and Matrilineal Myths* privileges familial experience as the medium for interrogating the past over public histories. In the novel *A History of the Soul*, the Hui Chinese writer Zhang Chengzhi documents 172 years of history of the Muslim Sufi Jahriyya clan in China’s North-West provinces by interweaving it with personal commentaries of his own conversion [to the sect], to expose the Chinese state’s brutalization of this sect in the past and denounce the rejection of the Jahriyya way of life by mainstream Chinese culture. Other eminent examples include Wang Xiaobo’s *Age of Gold* trilogy which presents a seedy sexualized account of the Cultural Revolution and Yu Hua’s bleak tragic-ironic account of the misadventures of collectivist policies during the Cultural Revolution in the novel *To Live*.

Situated within this arc of literary works which use interrogative and subversive textual strategies to question and dismantle perceptions of history, I will argue that Alai’s *Red Poppies* can be examined as a counter-narrative to nationalist histories of the Tibet-China conflict, which consequently aligns it with the 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. In doing

² Lin Qingxin, *Brushing History Against the Grain: Reading the Chinese New Historical Fiction (1986-1999)*. Hong Kong University Press: Hong Kong, 2005.

³ Howard Y. F. Choy. *Remapping the Past: Fictions of History in Deng's China, 1979-1997*. Leiden: Brill, 2008, pp.9-10.

so, it subverts the version of events proposed in that narrative by showing the very act of historiography to be a subjective situated mode of recollection and advocates fictional reconstructions as a rival discourse with equal legitimacy as an inscriptive practice of the past. Linda Hutcheon, who coined the term “historiographic metafiction” says that such works

... employ parody 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.⁴

With the term history I do not specifically refer to narratives written in a particular text, but to the discursive understanding constructed by states through school textbooks, curatorial practices et cetera that shape our perceptions of the past. In the Chinese version of history, Tibet’s past is completely cannibalized by the communist narrative of liberation of a feudal society. On the other hand, the Tibetan version portrays these events as the usurpation of a sovereign unified nation by the Chinese. In other words, I want to imply that in popular understandings of history nationalism operates as a metanarrative, “a global or totalizing cultural narrative schema which orders and explains knowledge and experience”⁵. Metanarratives are the larger narrative frameworks which sustain social custom or worldview, for example, the metanarrative of the male in quest of the beautiful female as prize in fairy tales or seeking redemption for his original sin in Christian faith. The metanarrative of nationalism underpins histories of the Tibet-China conflict and gives meaning to such retellings of the past in collective cultural memory for the dominant groups. However these nationalist narratives of history efface the presence of any ambiguities that undermine their image of national sovereignty, thus, erasing contentious historical facts such as the

⁴ Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), p.129.

⁵ Stephens, John, and Robyn McCallum. *Retelling Stories, Framing Culture: Traditional Story and Metanarratives in Children's Literature* (New York: Garland Pub, 1998).

autonomous status of borderlands and the complex relation of mutual interdependence between the two larger states.

Without the purported legitimacy of a historical text or access to the domain of history-making, Alai resurrects the past of these borderlands in fiction. Invoking the reader's prior knowledge of the official nationalist narratives of the Tibet-China conflict, Alai proceeds to subvert them 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.⁶

Aligning two different worldviews or perspectives within a single discourse, in an intentional hybrid form 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 subverted to expose official meanings and oppositional interpretations at the same time. By invoking dominant perceptions of the event Alai inveigles his oppositional story to deconstruct and disrupt the narratives of nationalist histories. In the following sections, I will highlight such instances of subversion of nationalist histories through which Alai creates his counter-narrative.

A change in the scheme of things

This act of subversive reading against the grain of nationalist histories in the genre of historiographic metafiction also sidelines the emphases of official narratives on glorifying major political events and personalities. Instead, it focuses on the ephemera of private lives of common people and minor narratives of familial and regional history. Alai allegorises his pseudo-history in the family saga of the Maichi chieftains and tells the account of the conflict as it unraveled in their lives, in place of the abstract narratives of official histories. 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

⁶ Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p.304.

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, a rival chieftain family called the Wangpos belligerently defies the emissary's offer out of spite. For tactical reasons aimed at 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 who use it to grow more poppies at the advice of the emissary. 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 within it seeds of their impending downfall. 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.

Establishing the opium trade and the Kuomintang-Communist civil war as the loci of his counter-history, Alai retraces this fictional history through events that had much to contribute to the eventual takeover of Tibet, but are not acknowledged in official histories of nationalist struggles. In the immediate context of the story, it is the opium trade which draws the chieftains into dependency with larger circuits of commerce of Chinese markets and brings the Han Chinese emissary on to the scene of the local politics of the borderlands. More broadly, it alludes to the global processes of Western imperialist expansion and commerce, specifically the opium trade with the British, which triggered China's retaliation to its semi-colonized condition and the Communist Revolution.

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 proselytize the Maichis but having failed in his mission says in resignation, "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."⁷ The Geluk

⁷ Alai, *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet*, trans. Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), pp.167-8.

monk not only relinquishes hope of bringing the border chieftains into the fold of central Tibetan influence but foretells the inevitable end awaiting the chieftains which has only been hastened by the advent of opium trade in the region. Thus, Alai seems to propose a more expansive view of the takeover of these borderlands, hinting that it was the result of a change in the scheme of things under the prosaic contexts of globalization, commerce and territorial expansionism and not the result of a simplistic struggle of one nation against another. These larger historical circumstances disappear in an “act of forgetting” under which nations forge the politicized rhetoric of univocal nationalist struggles of one people against another.⁸

Ambiguous borderlands

In the opening episode of the novel, the idiot protagonist speaks at some length about the political status of his homeland. He says that his father the chieftain thought of himself as the ruler of his fiefdom, but not necessarily as the ruler of a sovereign state since the chieftain did not have a distinct understanding of the nation as a concept. The idiot further says that 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.”⁹

Perhaps Alai wants to imply that the chieftaincy was an antithetical even inferior form of socio-political community to the nation because it was constructed on amoral, non-idealistic bonds of ownership and hierarchy, without humanistic concerns of oneness as a people. Since the chieftaincies 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 community.

But Alai also implies that while the nation-state with its strict demarcations of boundaries had now become the only legitimate mode of community, it is also a particularistic form of social governance brought about by the processes of modernity. It swept away indigenous systems of political existence, such as the chieftaincies of these border regions and the patron-client relation

⁸ Benedict Anderson, “Memory and Forgetting.” In *Imagined Communities* (London: Verso, 1983), pp.187-206.

⁹ Alai, *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet*, p.374.

that the Tibetan theocracy and the Chinese empire had maintained for centuries prior to the invasion.

In particular, Alai highlights the fact that these eastern borderlands existed under the Chinese sphere of influence and were composed of ethnic Chinese populations. The Chinese were not an inherently hostile presence but had existed in ambiguous relations as neighbours, patrons and subjects. He implies that the invasion marks the arrival of a new kind of Chinese presence in these borderlands, the Communists who brought with them the ideology of a resurgent China redefining itself as a modern nation. The dissolution of the autonomy of these peripheral regions and their ambiguous state of polity resulted from the shift to a new order of things, as a more coercive and pervasive type of social community of the modern nation-state took over.

Debunking the liberation narrative

While Alai implies that the takeover of the borderlands cannot be seen 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 Tibet’s invasion is subsumed in Chinese nationalist discourse. The Chinese state rhetoric legitimates its invasion of Tibet as the liberation of a feudal society and re-unification of a peripheral region under the motherland. This emancipatory narrative which forms the core rhetoric of the Chinese version of history is problematized and parodied.

When the Communist soldiers make their way into the chieftain territories near the end of the novel, they disband fiefdoms, expelling the headmen and releasing the serfs. The idiot recounts how the slaves wailed in confusion and sympathy for their masters. He says, “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 cry for their masters.”¹⁰ The country folk so entrenched in the system of feudal hierarchy remain impervious to the Communist rhetoric of liberation. But is it merely the serfs who are so foolish that they cannot understand the value of liberation? It prompts the suspicion that the Communist ideal of egalitarianism may not hold universal currency and that it is in itself a particularistic

¹⁰ Alai, *Red Poppies: A Novel of Tibet*, p.428.

political system, just as this feudal system which had actually sustained a life-world here for centuries. The country folk of the borderlands do not see the invasion as the heroic arrival of a liberatory Communist army, but the takeover of a more virulent creed of Red (Communist) soldiers who have replaced the conciliatory White (Kuomintang) soldiers. Even the political importance of the contest between the two armies is lost upon the villagers, who can only distinguish them by their symbolic colors – red for the Communists and white for the Kuomintang.

When the partnership between the Maichis and the emissary is sealed with a joint contract to plant poppies and decimate the Wangpos, the emissary tells the chieftain that he will compose a poem to commemorate their victory. But the serious purposefulness of the tradition of writing poetry to laud imperial conquests is parodied. The emissary imitates some grandiose lines from an old imperial poem that appear ridiculous, given that the event being celebrated is the defeat of a petty chieftain and that too for such an inglorious reason as furthering the opium trade.

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. According to Gang Yue, this plaque can be read as more than just as symbol of Chinese cultural imperialism. The Qing emperors who had taken power at the Chinese centre are of Manchurian lineage, but were themselves considered barbaric by the anti-Manchu elite in Beijing.¹¹ For the Qing to ventriloquize such edicts when they were themselves considered barbarians, shows that the civilizing mission of the colonizer 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 and remains ignorant of the grandiose messages of imperial benevolence on the plaque and in the poem. But it is the chieftain’s treatment of these artifacts 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 of the colonizer.

¹¹ Gang Yue, “Red Poppies”.

Alai creates scenes based on such historical themes as the civilizing mission of the colonizer and the liberation of serfs around which the invasion is recorded in the annals of Chinese nationalist history. But juxtaposing them with figments of his pseudo-history, like the 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 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."¹² By juxtaposing the Communist rhetoric of liberating an oppressed people and civilizing a feudal society with the oppositional worldview held by the country folk, Alai creates such a collision which subverts that rhetoric.

Unheroic denouements

The life-world of the borderlands in this novel abounds in incidents of despotic violence, blood feuds and intermittent sexual depravity, deliberately contrived to excessive proportions as if to shock the reader, something that could easily lead readers to denounce Alai as a pro-Chinese propagandist. 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 deliberate stance of anti-realism taken by Alai to undo the heroic officious tone of nationalist histories. It resonates with the notion of the "carnavalesque" as defined by Mikhail Bakhtin in his study of Rabelais's fiction.¹³ For Bakhtin the scenes of lurid bodily acts, irreverent language and joyous lawlessness which fill Rabelais' fictional world represent 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. By adopting such a "carnavalesque" form, Alai's tale culminates in irreverent denouements to subvert the pious discourse of heroic nationalist struggles that champion the telos of a grand collective destiny. The chaotic tone of this carnivalesque narrative captures the

¹² Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, p.130.

¹³ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1984).

fin de siècle nature of this liminal phase of history, at the cusp of an emerging modernity with a centuries-old lifestyle on the brink of annihilation. The metaphor of sexuality, in particular, enables this carnivalesque tale to write its irreverent illogical counter-history.

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. The victim's son becomes the only Tibetan from the village to join the Communists and returns to the village with the Red army. The idiot son, the last surviving member in the Maichi lineage is killed by this ex-serf in a drunken brawl in a tavern. Although this storyline faintly resembles the Communist narrative of the righteous revenge of the liberated serf, the event is correctly seen as a blood feud prevalent in the warlike chieftaincies of the east. While employing the stereotypical Communist propaganda character of the liberated serf-turned- communist soldier, Alai subverts it by suggesting that the ex-serf's revenge on the chieftains is actually inspired by age-old custom of avenging blood feuds through generations.

Also, at the end of the story when all the chieftains have joined the opium trade circuit, a travelling troupe of Chinese dancers arrives in the area. These women are actually prostitutes who suffer from syphilis and they pass the disease on to all the chieftains. This attack on the virility of the chieftains becomes a metaphor to foreshadow their impending decimation at the hands of the Communists.

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. While invoking events like the Kuomintang-Communist civil war and the opium trade, the novel weaves subplots about the characters who are caught in those larger historical currents but reach their end through denouements that ensue from chance incidents. The reasons that motivate the characters and the manner in which the events unfold remain equally inscrutable, thus, defying the linear logic of ideologically driven nationalist narratives.

Red Poppies and historiographic metafiction: Concluding notes

With its skepticism for history the genre of historiographic metafiction not only casts doubts over historiography and its claim to objectivity but unsettles any act of narration. As Hutcheon states, “the loss of the illusion of transparency in historical writing is a step toward intellectual self-awareness that is matched by metafiction’s challenges to the presumed transparency of the language of realist texts.”¹⁴ Metafiction reflects the broader postmodernist ethos of self-reflexivity where fictional works submit their own narratives and meanings produced therein to unceasing interrogation laced with self-doubt and irony.

Displaying this self-reflexivity of the metafictional, the writer of historiographic metafiction does not just challenge known versions of history by creating an alternative view of the past, she also scrutinizes her own version and in doing so highlights a more fundamental question about the inscrutability of the past. The Japanese-Canadian writer Joy Kogawa’s novel *Obasan* is a fine example of this epistemological crisis that the historiographic metafiction grapples with. In Kogawa’s novel, the protagonist Naomi seeks to recreate the story of her family’s tribulations under the Canadian government’s persecution of its citizens of Japanese ancestry during the Second World War, an event that is marginalized in mainstream Canadian history. But in doing so she constantly questions and doubts the capacity of her narrative to accurately retrieve the past. As Goellnicht notes,

That Naomi maintains the self-consciousness to recognize the uncertain - ties in epistemology is her abiding strength, as well as Kogawa’s: in this self- reflexive fiction, she makes no attempt to “write the vision and make it plain,” for she remains too aware of the impossibility of such a task.¹⁵

¹⁴ Linda Hutcheon, “Historiographic Metafiction: Parody and the Intertextuality of History” In *Intertextuality and Contemporary American Fiction*, ed. Patrick O'Donnell and Robert Con Davis (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University), p.10.

¹⁵ Donald C. Goellnicht, “Minority History as Metafiction: Joy Kogawa’s *Obasan*”, *Tulsa Studies in Women’s Literature*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Autumn, 1989), p.294.

Thus, historiographic metafiction not only treats the dominant history with skepticism, but adopts a stance of strategic self-reflexivity to unsettle the writer's own alternative story. In doing so it posits a more fundamental question about the epistemological crisis of the split between representation and reality, history and past, narrative and meaning.

However, while Alai plays on such skepticism to subvert nationalist histories he does not adopt the same self-reflexive stance towards his own narrative to touch upon this fundamental question of the inscrutability of the past. The relevance of such a postmodern genre for a subaltern writer like Alai is not in its abstract, metaphysical vacillations about the contingency of any version of history or the failure of any narrative to capture the past. The postmodern suspicion of categorical, linear narratives and the subversive potential of historiographic metafiction are utilized by Alai to depose official histories as ethnocentric versions of dominant groups to create his counter-narrative.

To conclude, Alai implies that history of China-Tibet conflict may have only been recorded in the grand narratives of nationalist struggles, but it actually played out in the lives of people who only knew the bonds of their own immediate community and did not necessarily subscribe to modern notions of national belonging, particularly in the borderlands. Placing the takeover of these borderlands within a tenuous web of larger geo-political shifts encompassing the rise of the nation-state and commercial globalization, Alai defies the reductive collapsing of the event into a mythic hyper-racialized war of one nation versus the other. In this subversive vein, he offers a subaltern history that forgoes idealized accounts of grand political struggles, whether that of the civilizing rhetoric of the colonizer or the heroic nationalistic resistance of the colonized.