Mobile Singer: Ahlai's Theory of Creative Writing
— from literary anthropological approach

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Writer, Poet and Singer

Ahlai (1959—) is a writer, poet as well as a singer of contemporary Tibetan people. In his early poems, he depicts his "predestine life as a melancholy singer". In tranquillity he would "sing for sadness and cry for blissfulness". After publishing full-length novels, Ahlai expressed his love toward folklore by claiming that "Being close to folklore is being close to the soul." Why is it so?

The answer is: in his hometown, there are many folk songs so "simple and unadorned, but able to touch your soul easily". Just like this one—

*When a flock of sheep is spreading out on the slope covered with shrubs, the shepherd's song is all so melancholy. When the spring breeze is stroking green wheat, cuckoos are chirping among the far-away mountains. Women's songs are so cheerful while they are plucking grass in the field. Tribal history is being sung on the horseback, and timely bloomed love is being sung at the riverside.*

Ahlai once wrote: "No one ever knows when or under what circumstances the first melody began. To me, before I learnt to speak, that melody had been planted in me deeply". Once those folk songs are
in existence, “hard times and suffering lives are shined by the divine light”. So, a novelist's goal is “to express the essence of folk songs and the power of this essence at the maximum limit.”

Outside critics have commented on him from region, culture and ethnicity. Some claim to hear human's recounting and the “songs from the faraway heaven” from Ahlai's works. Others directly address him as a singer — a “singer of KangBa (Tibetan area in Sichuan)” walking on a mountainous Tibetan road.

**Civilization, Foreign Land and Dialogues**

As a folklore — lover and a would — be singer, Ahlai fills his works with various sounds by “listening” with both his ears and his heart. As traditional singers who express themselves by singing instead writing, he manages to describe visual scenes clearly and lively.

Ahlai faces the loss of oral tradition in his native language and has no choice but to write in Han Chinese. With a central concern on nature, history and soul and positioned himself in the multilateral “blending of culture”, he writes in Chinese as a way of connecting changes, setting free the caged soul and letting his turbulent feelings flow. By writing in Chinese, Ahlai starts a dialogue with “foreign custom”.

_I said, Mama they are coming/At the same time, in the wide—open heart/ Woo—, Woo—/ The wind sounds like a horn/

In the internal world forced opened by storms, drums, dance steps, and ancestral souls are blended with his own blood, all of which compose a scene so disturbing:

_Listen——/ Dance steps are slowing down/ On the tired earth, Drums are becoming quiet/ .../ At Such a night/ We believe our ancestral souls fills the air all around/ With propitious butter on our foreheads put by them/ We hear our own blood boiling and stretching_
So he produced the following novels: *Evening of Soul - Guarding*, *The Old house*, *Blood of Old Years*, *The light of Mountain's Snow*, *Faraway Horizon* to sing alone at a time and place which is moving away from his native traditions. At the same time, he was to some extend predestined to join the literary clans divided by areas and ethnicity, and to become a “Sichan Tibetan writer” who writes in Chinese. But although classified those writing in Chinese, Ahlai cannot hind his differences from others. Living in a time of great changes, he faces his native heritages from the past history and his former self. His favorite scenes include the towering remains, deserted post roads, haunting dreams and all kinds of people and feelings in the dreams. They are dreams, because past events have vanished like the smoke, existing only as “stories” and “legends”.

**History, Narrating and Singing**

*The Old House* (1989), one of Ahlai’s early novels, is the representative of this kind of legendary stories.

The overlap relationship between the door - guard Modorenqing and the hostess are like quick shoots in a dream. Incredible pictures in reality have become commonplace, even indispensable in the dream. As segregated Modorenqing attempts to speak, his artificial teeth paid by his master 45 years ago fall down. Then, following a stranger’s greeting, a corner of the wall which covered with pink by bryophyte collapses.

So you must carefully hold back your breath, and try to merge into the wonderland before your eyes in order not to let the crumbling old house fade away. Because of different perspectives and feelings of different people, originally clear plots and events have become obscure. But because the orally handed down folklore has taken the form of a
written novel, readers can possibly trace all the clues and read repeatedly. Only if they feel like to do so, they can restore the historical "truth" which is in accordance with the rational logic.

In this way, the story in The Old House can be reconstructed: On the eve of liberation before 1950s, headman Bai Modai left his young wife home to receive an education in the city. The hostess was gang-raped by soldiers of Hu ZhongNan's defeated troops, and then had sex with the door-guard Modorenqing. Her baby died of dystocia. After headman Modai becomes a cadre of the new government, he wanted to divorce his wife. Finally, the hostess committed suicide in the culture revolution. Moderenqing grew into an insane old man who was not able to welcome all the investigators...

But this is just your reconstructed version after repeatedly detailed reading. The novel itself does not say so. From the beginning to the end, Modoredqing does not know whether he is dead or still alive, whether he is sane or in dreams, whether he has any offspring with hostess, and how come the powerful headman would become a cadre and want a divorce. To him, "wrinkles of so many years overlapping together make it hard to sort out the original order". The alternatively visible and invisible hostess seemed to be dead but still alive. She died of dystocia at first, and then committed suicide. But to Modorenqing, she was always so noble and proud. Unnamed guests with remote message of the changing world failed to tell whether Modorenqing is a ghost or insane beggar in front of remains. As to headman himself, he is just an indistinct existence throughout the novel. People can't figure out his feelings and thoughts.

This, again, turns back to folk songs.

Folk songs are not history. They are stories in the forms of telling and singing. In them, instead of dry logic or abstract principles, you see the process of events and the singers' sighs and laughter. In this
sense Ahlai notes, "Stories in my novels are more like my imagination of a certain historical moment than a record of real history". Why do we need imagination? Because in the tradition that most people don't use written literature, the "past" comes from legends instead of chronologically ordered written history. In this system of oral tradition, both the event happened ten years ago and that happened one hundred years ago seems to be equally mysterious and faraway in the depth of time. Precisely because of this, we need folk songs. They bring with them the remote "past", Moreover, "it is only genuine folk songs that can easily combine narration with flows of emotions". In a different occasion, Ahlai held the idea that that although it is hard to tell truth from fabrication in folk songs because of their flexibility, in Tibet, where literature has been under the control of a few monks, "oral culture outweighs written literature" and can usually be taken as the complete local history.

In this sense, the works of Ahlai is a song written in words, or to use his term, history consisted of epics (epic history) instead of epics recording history (historical epics).

Region, Ethnic Groups and Culture

In the Snow Light Around the Mountains (1989), the employment of epic history not only adds plots, but also gives more poetic descriptions to the narrative environment. Jin-hua, a young Tibetan girl of the novel utters only two words at the beginning of the story. One is "listen". But listen to what? The other is "Snow". She turns around and sees:

There are no hawks. The sunlight is flow swiftly on the peaks of snow-covered mountains, reflecting gorgeous radiance. And at the basin-like paired glass leaves shake striking bright light. The little lake at the basin is so calm and tranquil. And she is becoming more
and more pompous with the gurgling water flowing into it constantly.

This is the sight before the eyes of the protagonist Jin-hua. It is also the living environment where her ancestors have locate. She says: Listen, snow slide. The sound of snow water is splashing down the hillside. The unlimited prairie stretches afar. The herds are drinking water by the lake peacefully. No one else is there besides Jin-hua and her lover Mai-le. In the distance, “The snow smoke is flying high in the blue sky, higher and higher”.

This is a peculiar Tibetan scene — extremely lofty and pure.

Ahlai successfully distinguishes Tibetan stories from those of plain and low land by his vivid portrait of the local scenes. The differences are natural and geographical, as well as cultural and humane. The “snow slide” scene is the harbinger an exciting, fantastic, and exceedingly sentimental story. Flare up with sexual passion, Jin-hua shows her earnest and courage in the entanglement with three men—so courageous that even she herself smells her animal-like flavor. But in the end, she loses all of her lovers as predestined. Dao-fa leaves her. Mai-le gets tetanus for her and dies. The art teacher, the first one who aroused her desire is hit by Jin-hua’s knife...

Just like you can't figure out people living on the plain from the perspective of plateau-dwellers, it is impossible for a people from the plain to understand the lives of plateau with simple and plain imagination. The only thing we can do is to communicate with and understand each other by situating ourselves in each other's places in the process of mutually involved narrative. On this, Ahlai has made his own choice. He wants to become “a Tibetan writer writing in Han Chinese.” What he shows us in his works is right this kind of narratives. In this sense, he is a Tibetan singer facing Han Culture. His songs are sung for not only Han but also Tibetan people.
Fortunately, some careful listeners respond to his singing. Some comments that Ahlai had accomplished the "cultural journey back home", that is, to reveal the mystery of KangBa culture from the perspective of cultural conflicts and mingling. Only because of the regional limitation, it has not reached the remote main stream.

Soon after that, some changes have taken place. The singer Ahlai started his grand epic singing. He finished the novel *Dust had fallen Down* (1998) in Chinese. At this time, what he hopes to show us is not only alienation from foreign lands or the peculiarity of the local place but also the blending and comparison between the "local" and "foreign".

Because of this, he has been involved in all sorts of opinions and commentaries ever since.

However, from literary anthropological approach, we can say that even being in the time of modernization and among the majority, Ahlai is still a singer singing his Tibetan traditional songs.

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