

# Negotiating with the tradition: representations of fish in Alai's fictional writing<sup>1</sup>

Mario De Grandis, Filippo Costantini

**Abstract:** Tibet has long been orientalized in fictional representations. Taking as a case study two texts by Alai, this paper investigates how a traditional Tibetan cultural trait—the fish taboo—is mobilized to complicate the representation of Tibetan culture. By describing the fish taboo Alai points at Tibet's cultural specificity, which in virtue of its exoticism can catch the attention of non-Tibetan readers. At the same time, however, Alai equips his characters with psychological depth, showing their contrasting inner emotions of attraction and repulsion toward fish. In this sense, Alai subtly points at the fallacies of flat representations of Tibet, thus dismantling them from within.

**Keywords:** Chinese ethnic minority literature, Alai, disgust studies.

**摘要:** 在中国小说形象中, 西藏长期被“东方化”。本文以阿来的两篇文本为例, 检视其中捕鱼食鱼禁忌的运用对藏族文化表征的复杂化。通过对捕鱼食鱼禁忌的描写, 阿来指向西藏的这一文化特殊性。其异域情调能够吸引非藏族读者的注意。而与此同时, 阿来赋予他的人物以心理情感的深度, 揭示他们对鱼既亲近又斥拒的复杂内心感受。从这个意义上来说, 阿来巧妙地指出对西藏扁平化描写的谬误, 并将其从内部消解。

**关键词:** 中国少数民族文学, 阿来, 厌恶研究。

Fish is delicious,  
I ate it when I was in prison  
with lard, scallions,  
salt and the fresh ginger.  
(Alai 2004, 258)

When I got closer to the fish,  
I felt like I was approaching a carrion.  
(Alai 2015, 4)

## 1. Introduction

The two quotes above highlight opposing views about fish within a Tibetan context. The first one describes fish as delicious; conversely the second quote

<sup>1</sup> The authors are grateful to Kamila Hladíková and Diana Lange for their comments and suggestions on earlier drafts of this essay.

Mario De Grandis, University College Dublin, Ireland, mario.degrandis@ucd.ie, 0000-0001-9709-4821  
Filippo Costantini, University of Costa Rica, Costa Rica, filippo.costantini@ucr.ac.cr, 0000-0002-5799-0004  
FUP Best Practice in Scholarly Publishing (DOI 10.36253/fup\_best\_practice)

Mario De Grandis, Filippo Costantini, *Negotiating with the tradition: representations of fish in Alai's fictional writing*, pp. 111-125, © 2021 Author(s), CC BY 4.0 International, DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-506-6.11, in Miriam Castorina, Diego Cucinelli (edited by), *Food issues 食事. Interdisciplinary Studies on Food in Modern and Contemporary East Asia*, © 2021 Author(s), content CC BY 4.0 International, metadata CC0 1.0 Universal, published by Firenze University Press (www.fupress.com), ISSN 2704-5919 (online), ISBN 978-88-5518-506-6 (PDF), DOI 10.36253/978-88-5518-506-6

describes it as repellent. Both quotes are taken from two distinct works by Alai 阿来 (1959–), arguably one of the most well know “Tibetan” authors.<sup>2</sup> Analyzing these two fictional works written by Alai, this essay investigates divergent representations of fish and how such representations counter stereotypes associated with Tibet. To this end, we find it necessary to first provide some background information about representations of Greater Tibet.<sup>3</sup> For long, this area has been idealized as a paradise out of the flow of history, yet also described as a primitive and backward (Lopez 1998). Literary authors have emphasized the beauty of Tibetan sceneries while simultaneously appealing to readers’ thirst for the exotic. This dynamic can be traced, for instance, in the oeuvre of the Chinese author Ma Jian 马建 (1953–). Ma’s (1987, 112–16) short story *Guan ding* 灌顶 “The Final Initiation” opens with a majestic sunset on a Tibetan mountain ridge, it continues detailing the life of a young Buddhist female apprentice, to eventually culminate in a ritual rape that leads to the apprentice’s death. The juxtaposition between breathtaking landscapes with scenes of violence, brutality, and sex is a common orientalizing device (Dickson and Romanets 2014; Meltzer and Williams 2008). Although these types of fictional representation are widespread, alternative and perhaps more veritable portrays of Tibet have also emerged in the last two decades or so.<sup>4</sup> Alai’s works fall within this latter type of representation. Literary scholars have praised Alai’s *Red Poppies* (*Chen’ai luoding* 尘埃落定) for breaking down the stereotypical representations of Tibet by painting “a picture [...] that is neither a paradise nor a human hell” (Yue 2008).<sup>5</sup> Building on Gang Yue’s insight, this essay interrogates how Alai’s deploys an element from traditional Tibetan culture—the fish taboo—to counter cliché about Tibet.

In Alai’s works, the display of Tibetan cultural elements aims at reaching a Chinese (i.e., Han) audience. This is evident from two literary choices. First, Alai writes in Chinese, not in Tibetan. Second, in his fictional writing Alai ex-

<sup>2</sup> Alai’s ethnic identity is particularly complex. First, he is of Tibetan and Hui parents (Choy 2008, 230). Second, Alai is originally from Kergu (Matang 马塘, in Chinese), which is part of the Jiarong territory (Leung 2017, 12). The language, culture, and identity of Jiarong people is distinct from that of the Tibetan plateau ecosystem, particularly in terms of landscape and diet. Despite a multifaceted ethnic identity, “Alai’s status as a “Tibetan writing in Chinese” has been endorsed by “authorities in Beijing” (Wang 2013, 96). It is in this sense, that we refer to Alai as a “Tibetan” writer.

<sup>3</sup> The Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR), often abbreviated, as Tibet is only a portion of the larger geographic area inhabited by Tibetan speaking groups. This area is referred as Greater Tibet and it includes, besides the TAR, parts of Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan (Yeh 2013, 18).

<sup>4</sup> For in depth study about literary representations of Tibet, see Kamila Hladíková (2013), especially 236–45; and the essays collected in the volume co-edited by Luran Hartley and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (2008).

<sup>5</sup> For a translation of this work in English, see Alai (2002), translated by Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt.

plains to the reader elements of the Tibetan culture.<sup>6</sup> Didactic passages are in fact present—more or less overtly—in both the primary texts analyzed in this essay. These two texts are both titled “fish.” Given the confusion that might arise from the homonymous titles, we will refer to the shorter text as the short story (Alai 2015) and to the longer as the novella (Alai 2004). Both texts engage with the popular narrative that Tibetans must avoid anything related to fish. Based on the close reading of these texts corroborated by anthropological scholarship about the fish taboo, this essay argues that Alai’s portray of the fish taboo aims at subverting essentializing portraits of Tibet.

To support our argument, we organize this essay in three sections. Section one illustrates how Alai deploys the fish taboo, a staple in the discourse about Tibetaness. Common rationales mobilized in the scholarship explain such taboo calling upon the Buddhist principle of not-killing (*bu sha sheng* 不杀生) and connecting it to the Tibetan practice of water burials (e.g., Wen 2012). Alai’s texts explicitly engage with such Tibetan practices putting them at the forefront of the narration to appeal primarily to a Han readership. Nonetheless, as elucidated in the following two sections, this seemingly orientalizing representation moves away from common narratives about Tibetaness by teasing out Tibetan characters’ ambivalent relation toward fish. This point is developed in sections two and three, which respectively explore how main characters display disgust and attraction toward fish.

## 2. Fish Taboo

The idea that Tibetan communities must avoid any contact with fish is the leitmotif in the aforementioned two texts by Alai. In the novella, when the protagonist Dukar dreams of fish, his uncle scolds him “How could you dream of fish? This isn’t a good omen” (Alai 2004, 253). Similarly, in the short story, the narrating “I” relates that within Tibetan society “People’s look at fish as they would look at a beggar with leprosy” (Alai 2015, 227–28). These two examples illustrate that fish is regarded in a negative way within a Tibetan “traditional” worldview.

Alai, an author who writes uniquely in Chinese (Rojas 2013), appears to be aware of this cultural trait. For this reason, he includes elements to contextualize the fish taboo within the Tibetan cultural norms:

Water burials are popular out on the grasslands. [In this type of burial] water and fish dispel the soul from its mortal body. This is why many Tibetans regard fish as a taboo. (Alai 2015, 2)

<sup>6</sup> The term “Tibetan cultures” might be more accurate in capturing differences that exist within Tibetan communities. Nonetheless, for the purpose of this article we focus on the representation of Tibet vis-à-vis other Chinese cultures, and thus opt for the singular form “Tibetan culture.”

traditional rituals for exorcising ghosts and other unclean entities, it is key to direct the incantations at invisible malevolent objects, driving them off [ ... ] straight into water. (Alai 2015, 2)

Fish deserve pity. Being without a zoologist, [the Tibetans] had no idea of what fish ate. So they thought that fish are alive yet without food, and they must therefore be tortured by hunger all the time. They must be animals that have been punished by Heaven, for sins in the previous life such as having accumulated too much wealth, having been too cruel, deceitful, and so forth. (Alai 2015, 227)

These three passages provide elements to explain the fish taboo to a Chinese readership. This specific taboo is connected to Buddhist and Tibetan folk practices.<sup>7</sup> In what follows, we focus on two rationales provided by Alai. The first one, perhaps the most well known in popular discourse, concerns the disposal of bodies through water burials. According to scholarship on the subject, during a water burial “the corpse is dismembered and thrown into the river” (Goss and Klass 1997, 384).<sup>8</sup> Fish then eat the corpse. The eating of a dead body makes fish impure.<sup>9</sup> Fish are thus seen as dangerous because they can act as a vessel to transfer impurity to humans. The fish-taboo comes into play to shield from this potential contamination. Consumption—the ingestion of food—is the main vehicle of contamination because it is essentially the way in which humans incorporate the outside world into the self.<sup>10</sup>

This same idea is also channeled in Alai’s novella, when one of the characters—Ngawang Chogyal—remembers having “seen fish eat dead people, and because of hunger, he himself had eaten those fish” (Alai 2004, 258). It is important to notice that these grisly images are only voiced through the omniscient narrator and not verbalized in the novella. When Ngawang Chogyal is about to relate of this eye-witness experience “He cuts himself off abruptly” (258). Alai’s does not provide a rationale to explain the character’s self-censorship. Nonetheless, from the context of the novella, it is clear that Ngawang Chogyal avoids relating his memories to his Tibetan interlocutors who might find the description of fish-eating corpses disturbing.

A second rationale voiced by Alai to explain the fish taboo relates to the notion of reincarnation.<sup>11</sup> In simple terms, reincarnation is the belief that following biological death, the non-physical essence of a living entity begins a new life

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the fish taboo in Tibetan culture, see Ci Dun (2019).

<sup>8</sup> The practice of water burials has been documented in the Western scholarship along with earth burials, cremation, and ‘sky burial’ (Kolmaš 2003, 24; Goss and Klass 1997, 384). To these practices, Tibetologist Turrell Wylie adds desiccation (1964, 232).

<sup>9</sup> Description of water burials is also related in travelers accounts, as for instance MacDonald (1932, 151 and 178).

<sup>10</sup> Paul Rozin and April Fallon (1989) have pointed out that this idea derives from the traditional culture’s belief called “the magical law of contagion.” According to this law, the contact between two entities inevitably leads to cross-contamination.

<sup>11</sup> On the subject of reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism, see Tanya Zivkovic (2014).

in a different body. When good karma has been acquired throughout one's lifetime, a better reincarnation will be achieved in next life. On the contrary, poor karma will result in being reincarnated in an inferior social position. Following this logic, the condition of being a fish is explained according to the principle of poor karma. In Alai's novella fish are believed by the Tibetans to be tormented by hunger, a suffering interpreted as "heaven's punishment" for the sins fish have accumulated in the previous life (Alai 2014, 227).

The two rationales here analyzed tap into othering strategies of Tibet, described as a backward land in which bodies are disposed into rivers and to a mystical land where Buddhist principles pervade one's being in the world. Elements reminiscent of exoticizing representation of Tibet, such as "water burial" and "ritual exorcisms" are coupled with the suggestion that Tibet is a remote land, afar from the modern civilization.<sup>12</sup> With these two examples, we aim to point out that Alai's works indeed include othering elements. Nonetheless, in contrast with purely exoticizing works such as, for example, the aforementioned Ma's "The Final Initiation," the othering element in Alai's fiction serves to establish a middle ground with his intended audience to then debunk stereotypical representations of Tibet.

"Water burial" and "ritual exorcisms"—it needs to be pointed out—are not merely a fictional fabrication. Anthropological and sociological scholarship indeed provides detailed information about these two rationales for fish avoidance (Altner 2009; Chen 2005). Alai himself makes use of this body of knowledge in his fiction. In the short story, in fact, the narrating "I" refers to a specific scholar: "During this trip, I took a manuscript sent me by Dangzhu Angben, a professor at Central Minorities Institute, which mainly discussed Tibetan folk taboos and worship of nature. It also discusses the taboos about fishing and eating fish" (Alai 2015, 2). Dangzhu Angben is indeed a scholar at the Central Minorities Institute and he has published extensively on Tibetan culture and traditions (e.g., Dangzhu Angben 2003, 326).<sup>13</sup>

At the narrative level, the use of a factual scholarly work has two related yet divergent implications. On the one hand, referring to a scholarly work by an established academic (instead of creating a fictional character) advances a claim of factuality for the fish taboo. On the other hand, the fact that a self-proclaimed "Tibetan" narrator breaks the fish taboo—eating and catching fish—suggests that the short story aims at complicating widespread popular and academic narratives about the fish taboo and, by extension, about Tibetan culture.

A brief digression in the scholarship about Tibetan folklore, which Alai himself is at least partially familiar with, points at the complexity of fish taboo.

<sup>12</sup> In Alai's short story, Tibet's underdevelopment is particularly pronounced in the claim that as a group, the Tibetan lacked a zoologist (Alai 2014, 227). The lack of specialists in a particular domain of knowledge—zoology—suggest that as a group Tibetan rely on folk (i.e. without scientific basis) beliefs.

<sup>13</sup> For the academic profile of Dangzhu Angben, see [www.cuaes.org/scholarldetail-47.htm](http://www.cuaes.org/scholarldetail-47.htm). Accessed 4/13/2021.

First, archeological records indicate that fish was part of the diet of proto-Tibetan communities. The fish taboo was indeed introduced during the Yarlung dynasty, around the seventh century C.E. (Yong 2015). Second, although after the seventh century fish taboo has become widespread across Tibetan communities (eg., Yeh 2013, 189), there are also exceptions. Robert Ekvall (1964), Laurance Waddell (1929), and Fosco Maraini (1998) have reported of occasional consumption of shark's fin soup by Sinified Tibetan nobles in Lhasa. More recently, Kongshao Zhuang (2002, 81) and Diana Lange (2010) have documented that some restaurants branded as "Tibetan" serve fish. These scholarly works point out that the fish taboo has not been consistent throughout history. More broadly, the scholarship also documents important variations related to water burials, a funerary practice intimately interconnected with the fish taboo. In comparison to other types of traditional Tibetan burials, water burials appear to have a negative stigma. Water burials had normally been reserved to lower strata of the society and ill-fated deaths (Li and Jiang 2003, 119; Waddell and Lamers 1963, 81–2). A notable exception is the case of Tibetan communities situated along the shore of the Yar-'brog lake, communities where water burial was considered more honorable than sky burial (Das and Rockhill 1902, 139–40). The cited scholarly sources allow to conclude that the fish taboo and connected practices are not homogenous across Tibetan groups, rather they vary diachronically, across space, and across social classes.

The question we raise is, how does Alai represent such complexity and to what ends? Rather than providing counter examples to debunk widespread representations of the fish taboo, Alai's characters display an ambivalent positionality in respect to activities involving fish. These activities provide the barebones to unfold the main narrative of the novella and of the short story. Dugar, the novella's protagonist, is obsessed with fish: he spends most of his time staring at fish in the river to the point that he knows their habits. Similarly, the protagonist of the short story describes his first experience as a fisherman. Characters in these two texts are both disgusted and attracted by fish. The tension between the emotions of disgust and attraction is mobilized in Alai's fiction to complicate the representation of the fish taboo, which is emblematic of Tibetan culture. Tibetans' relation with fish, at least as portrayed in Alai's texts, oscillates between these two contrasting emotions. The following two sections highlight respectively the repulsion and the attraction displayed by Tibetan characters vis-à-vis fish. The ambivalence created by the wavering between these two opposite emotional responses, we argue, serves to counter stereotypical representations of Tibet.

### 3. Hooking the Reader

In Alai's text, most of the Tibetan characters perceive anything related to fish as dangerous. At the emotional level, their response to fish is feeling disgusted. Anthropologists and sociologists have shown that the feeling of disgust has emerged as a protective mechanism against pathogens, poisons, and other contaminating elements (e.g., Rozin and Fallon 1987; Miller 1997; Haidt 2006).

More specifically, Paul Rozin and his colleagues (1999) have pointed out that the feeling of disgust involves simultaneously the sensory and the cognitive spheres. The physical proximity with contaminating elements elicits disgust. Similarly, the thinking about contaminating elements also elicits a sense of disgust in the individual. From an evolutionary perspective, disgust prevents contaminating substances from entering the body. Although the feeling of disgust has a biological origin, typical disgust elicitors are mainly culturally specific (Rozin 1997). Fish constitutes a disgust elicitor within the Tibetan traditional culture for reasons that, based on available archeological records, cannot be fully explained. Plausible hypotheses, as already suggested in the previous section, hinge on the Buddhist connected practices. What is interesting to notice, however, is that Alai draws from explanations—such as water burials, exorcisms, and more loosely to the notion of karma—that well resonate with the perceived mystical and arcane aura common in representations of Tibet. It is equally important to notice that Alai forgoes other explanations of the fish taboo that would lessen the reader's curiosity. In the scholarship about the fish taboo, this practice is almost ubiquitously related to the Buddhist principle of not killing (*bu sha sheng*; e.g., Wen 2012; Chen 2005). This explanation is not convincing, especially given that Tibetan Buddhism does not require to practice vegetarianism.<sup>14</sup> In any case, Alai avoids touching on this point: debunking the widespread idea of Tibetans as primarily living off a vegetarian diet would make the avoidance of fish meat less curious from the standpoint of a Chinese reader. Moreover, avoidance of fish is a distinguishing cultural trait, especially when one considers that within Chinese cultures fish is normally an auspicious symbol (Laing 2017). The word for “fish”—yú 鱼—has the same pronunciation of the word for “abundance/surplus” (Sullivan and Sullivan 2021, 192).<sup>15</sup> In addition, it is not a coincidence that fish is normally served at Spring Festival banquets.<sup>16</sup> From a Chinese worldview perspective, the fish taboo is thus a striking cultural difference. Because of Alai's intended Chinese audience, repulsion for anything related to fish serves as a narrative device to “hook” the reader's attention.

In the texts analyzed, fish elicits two types of negative responses: somatic disgust and psychological disgust.<sup>17</sup> In the novella and in the short story, interacting

<sup>14</sup> On consumption of meat consumption by Tibetan Buddhists, see Johan Elverskog (2020), especially chapter 3.

<sup>15</sup> The Chinese character for “fish” is 鱼; the character for “abundance/surplus” is 余.

<sup>16</sup> On the consumption of fish during Spring Festival banquets see, for example, Mary Fong (2000, 227) and Huang Yusheng (2015).

<sup>17</sup> Within the field of what could be termed “disgust studies,” scholars have mapped disgust elicitors proposing different taxonomies (e.g., Rozin *et al.* 2010; Strohminger 2014, 481). Even though there is not a general consensus, the most accepted taxonomy recognizes four macro-categories: core disgust (food, body wastes, animals); animal reminder disgust (sex, hygiene, mortality); interpersonal disgust; and moral disgust. A recent synthesis and modification of this taxonomy has been proposed by Tybur *et al.* (2009) who recognizes three categories of disgust, respectively related to pathogens, sex and moral.

with and thinking about fish are both disgust elicitors. Regarding contaminated object, William Miller has observed that: “What the idiom of disgust demands is reference to the senses. It is about what it feels like to touch, see, taste, smell, even on occasion hear, certain things. Disgust cannot dispense with direct reference to the sensory processing of its elicitors” (Kolnai 2003, 14). Somatic and psychological disgust are thus inextricably interwoven and mutually reinforce each other. While acknowledging the overlap between somatic and psychological disgust, for analytical purposes we consider them as two distinct categories.

Somatic disgust manifests as a physical reaction through sensory engagements. In the short story, the catching of a fish by the narrating “I” is described in these terms: “This time the fish [...] flew through the air and landed in the grass. By the time I reached it, the fish was lying there without moving. Looking at the glare in its bulging eyes, I felt chills down my spine” (Alai 2015, 6). In the same story, the narrating “I” recalls the rancid taste of the fish in his mouth (Alai 2015, 2), and the lament of dying fish described as similar to the sound made by “walking on a corpse” (Alai 2015, 8). These three examples illustrate how proximity and contact with the fish elicits in the protagonist intense body reactions. Similarly, in the novella, aversive body reactions emerge when characters come in proximity to or in physical contact with fish. To provide two examples: touching a fish induces terror in the narrator (Alai 2004, 223), and fish are said to be nauseating creatures (Alai 2004, 227). All these body reactions appear to be involuntary, as if repulsion for fish was coded in Tibetan genes.

Beyond doubt, the most prominent disgust elicitor in Alai’s texts is the smell of fish.<sup>18</sup> For instance, in the novella, the narrator describes the stench of fish in a detailed manner: “The stench of fish came from the stream. This stench is like rotten green grass in the water” (Alai 2004, 221). Likewise, fish smell is associated with images of “corpses of fish” covered with buzzing flies (Alai 2004, 262). Moreover, the stench of fish is also a premonition of death: by the end of the story, all the members of Dukar family die destitute.

Physiological disgust hinges instead on the cognitive/imaginary spheres. This type of disgust is represented in the novella primarily through analogies. In the novella, Alai compares fish with typical disgusting creatures such as mollusk (snail, leeches, toads), snake (Alai 2004, 227), earthworms (Alai 2004, 256);<sup>19</sup> with illnesses such as leprosy (Alai 2004, 228); and with unpleasant items such as mucus (Alai 2004, 226) and mud (Alai 2004, 221). Alai also widely depicts fish as defiled creatures who eat insects such as mosquitos (Alai 2004, 257), earthworms, and even corpses. In addition, the author shows that just the mention of fish (Alai 2004, 239), or even the word for fish, leads to feeling disgust-

<sup>18</sup> Olfactory experiences are one of the strongest disgust elicitors. On the primary role of smell in disgust see Aurel Kolnai (2003).

<sup>19</sup> These are all elements that elicit core disgust. For a list of such disgust elicitors see McGinn (2011, 27).



ed. When Dukar asks one of the adults in the village where the fish went, he notices that the adult “as all the other people he had asked to, looked disgusted at him” (Alai 2004, 239). Similarly, also in the short story the word “fish” provokes a series of negative emotions in the narrator: “Fish! This word carries the slimy dark gray of fish. Without any apparent reason, it gives people a sense of decay” (Alai 2004, 4). Simply hearing the word for fish terrifies the narrator, to the point that he feels a “sense of decay”.<sup>20</sup>

The representation of repulsions toward fish—both at the somatic and at the psychological levels—needs to be understood in relation to the specificity of Tibetan culture, a context in which fish is considered taboo. Breaking the taboo elicits what Jonathan Haidt (2006) defined as moral disgust, the emotion that arises when one witnesses moral transgression. In this sense, breaking the taboo is perceived by Alai’s fictional characters as a moral violation that mines the integrity of the Tibetan-self and, by extension, of the entire Tibetan community. The disgust that emerges from interaction—physical or imaginary—with fish serves as a protective mechanism: it shields the individual from transgressing the taboo. By protecting the individual, the taboo preserves the order and the integrity within the community.<sup>21</sup>

At the narrative level, the emotion of disgust aims at catching the envisioned Chinese reader’s attention. In this sense, Alai deploys othering strategies in a way that aligns the aforementioned widespread representations of Tibet. Nonetheless, we claim Alai’s works ultimately challenge such othering strategies through descriptions of Tibetan main characters’ attraction for fish. By focusing uniquely on characters that deviate from the fish taboo, as illustrated in the next section, Alai emphasizes the inherent diversity within Tibetan communities, thus unsettling reader’s expectations.

#### 4. Unsettling the Reader

In Alai’s texts, the attraction to fish is what sets main characters apart from their travel companions (in the short story) and from their fellow villagers (in the novella). In the short story, the narrating “I” is part of a religious survey team composed of two Tibetans and two Han. During the expedition, the four men decide to take a leisure break. The Han, who appear to take the lead, go hunting marmots, assigning the two Tibetans the task of fishing. One of the Tibetans—with a pretext—refuses to go fishing and joins his Han companions; the

<sup>20</sup> Here Alai emphasizes the sense of decay elicited by fish with a reference to the practice of the True Word Buddhist doctrine. This practice consists in visualizing a gleaming image or word during meditation (Yasuda 2011, 248). In Alai’s short story, while fishing the narrator has a sort of enlightenment experience that, however, degenerates into a feeling of decay.

<sup>21</sup> In her seminal work—*Purity and Danger*—Mary Douglas (2002) interprets taboos as devices for protecting the order of the universe and the local consensus on how the world is organized. The transgression of this order provokes a sense of disgust within a certain community.

narrating “I” —although reluctantly—goes fishing. In this sense, the short story protagonist stands out challenged the perceived normative “Tibetan culture” (*zangzu wenhua* 藏族文化).

A similar dynamic can be traced in the novella. In this case, the setting is a Tibetan village. Unlike their fellow villagers who all appear to be disgusted by fish, three family members (all of whom occupy central roles in the development of the narration) have direct contact to fish. These three characters can be mapped along a spectrum in which their position depends on the level of attraction to fish. The far more conservative character in the novella is Shaja, the uncle of Dukar. Shajia often thinks about fish. For instance, Alai recounts that “That night, Shaja dreamed of his uncle. In the dream, the uncle became a fish. He kept moving his mouth, but couldn’t speak.” (Alai 2004, 227). What stands out is that Shaja is not fully aware of his own desires. Evidence of this unconscious desire appears most prominently in the passage when “Shajia went to look at the dead fish that died in the wheat field. For the remaining part of his life, he could not understand why he had made the effort to overcome his fear and go look at that fish” (Alai 2004, 228). As other villagers, Shajia considers fish disgusting creatures, yet—without understanding his own actions—he also goes to look at a fish that had been dopped in the fields by an eagle. Shaja’s character exemplifies a controversial relationship between local traditions and outside influences brought in by a community of Han tree fellers.

Such tension between attraction and disgust reaches its climax in the story’s protagonist, Dukar. Dukar is obsessed by fish: he spends his days at the riverbank watching fish, he dreams about fish (Alai 2004, 245), and he talks about fish with villagers and family members (Alai 2004, 239). However, Dukar is aware that his attraction for fish is cause of suffering in his own life. This is particularly pronounced in the passage in which Dukar realizes that when he talks about fish, people are “disgusted” with him (Alai 2004, 239). Dukar’s relation to fish is—to put it in Aurel Kolnai’s terms (2003, 21)—that of a “macabre attraction” in which a revolting element—fish in this case—exerts over the individual a magnetic seduction.

The third Tibetan character that explicitly engages with fish is Ngawang Chogyal. Ngawang Chogyal is, in some respects, an archetypal Tibetan character who consumes *tsampa* (Alai 2004, 250), is a skilled hunter (Alai 2004, 259), and successful with women (Alai 2004, 260). In other words, Ngawang Chogyal is described with hypermasculine traits, a representation that echoes the those of Tibetan characters in popular discourse (Hillman and Henfry 2006). In addition, he conforms to local Tibetan tradition, as for instance informally taking a widow as his wife “in a way that everyone [in the village] could approve” (Alai 2004, 263). Part of Ngawang Chogyal’s charisma derives from the unique experiences he had gained while serving under the army. Through this set of experiences, Ngawang Chogyal has embraced some traits of Han cultures, including that of regarding fish as a delicacy (Alai 2004, 258). By considering fish meat as any other type of meat, Ngawang Chogyal shatters the fish taboo.

These four characters—the narrating “I” in the short story, and the three men in the novella—illustrate how Alai decides to filter his narration through the eyes of those who do not conform with stereotypical representations of Tibet, thus pro-

viding an alternative view of Tibet. In fact, within the two texts analyzed, actions related to the fish taboo—such as talking about, eating, and catching fish—occupy a central point in the narration. In the short story, it is worth restating it, the narrating “I” defines himself as a “one of those fish-eating Tibetans” (Alai 2015, 2). Despite admitting that he occasionally eats fish, the narrating “I” appears initially reluctant to catch fish. Having no viable alternative, however, he eventually decides to take this opportunity to break his own taboos: “I was fishing to master myself. In this world, we are often given incitements of many kinds, including mastering oneself. Mastering one’s temperament, one’s shyness or a fear of the unknown, mastering cultural or individual taboos” (Alai 2015, 2). The act of catching fish is presented as a necessary step in the process of transforming the self, by completely abandoning what the narrator regards as “superstitions” beliefs. After an initial hesitation characterized by emotions of physical and moral disgust, the narrator begins enjoying fishing and wants to share his success with his Han companions and with the other Tibetan in the group: “I wanted my companions to know about this victory, so I began waving my arms and shouting” (Alai 2015, 6). The protagonist’s eagerness to share of his success can metaphorically be read as an attempt to self-assert one’s emancipation from the taboo.

In the novella, all the three main characters eat, at some point, fish. The relation with fish is completely normalized only in Ngawang Chogyal, who finds laughable his fellow villagers disgust for fish. In a conversation with Dukar, in fact, Ngawang Chogyal explains: “Child, in lots of place people catch and eat fish. There are very few places where people don’t” (Alai 2004, 257). It is key to notice that, in virtue of his *de facto* relationship with Chuchu, the mother of Dukar—Ngawang Chogyal takes the role of a stepfather. His words are thus imbued with paternal authority and can be interpreted as directed, by extension, to the entire village. In Ngawang Chogyal’s vision, one informed by life experience outside of Tibetan inhabited regions, eating fish is the norm.

For Dukar and Shajia, the ingestion of fish happens by accident as they are offered fish soup by a group of Han people. The two men enjoy the soup, describing it as “delicious” (Alai 2004, 261). When they find out what they ate, however, they have opposite reactions. Shajia walks home by himself and on route falls, most likely intentionally, in the river where he drowns (Alai 2004, 272). This act of self-annihilation points at the tension underscoring traditional modes of life with external influxes. On the contrary, Dukar appears to be indifferent to the fact that he has eaten fish. In the days following the event, Dukar’s attraction for fish escalates to the point that he builds a worm farm, steals a fishing rod, and goes to catch fishes at the river. In this sense, Dukar appears to incarnate the openness toward non-local modes of life. Shajia and Dukar’s opposing reactions show two divergent attitudes toward fish ingestion, which lead either to accepting the new-self or repudiating it in toto.

If by ingesting and catching fish the two texts’ protagonists—the narrating “I” and Dukar—break away from the fish taboo, the resolution of the taboo itself is, however, incomplete. In the short story, the narrating “I” reacts to the catching of fish by crying:

When the sleet turned into a rainfall, I lay on the ground and happily, let it pour over me. It felt to me that I was having a good cry, one that no one else would witness, and that I did not fully understand myself. To this day, I wouldn't be able to say whether those tears meant that I had mastered myself or whether I had cried for things I should ever cry over but hadn't. (Alai 2015, 8)

In this passage, Alai describes the main character's flow of emotions, emphasizing how he ultimately fails to understand what motivates his own reaction. Similarly, in the conclusion of the novella, Dukar has a nervous breakdown while at the riverbank. He "cries soundlessly," then takes a wooden club and starts clubbing at fish, which die instantly. The killing of fish thrills him to the point of feeling "crazy" (Alai 2015, 270). On his way home, however, Dukar sobs saying repeatedly "I don't won't fish anymore" (Alai 2015, 271). As these excerpts highlight, Alai leaves to the reader uncertain deliberately not stating whether the protagonist was eventually able to master his own taboo. By juxtaposing disgust with attraction, Alai's texts highlight the complexity of the Tibetans relationship with their tradition, beliefs, and taboos, thus shattering simple representations of Tibet.

## 5. Conclusion

The texts analyzed center around Tibetan's relation vis-à-vis the fish taboo. This taboo marks the Tibetans in contrast to those groups who do eat fish, Han above all. Considering that Alai addresses primarily an envisioned Chinese audience—the texts are in fact written in Chinese (not in Tibetan) and include didactic passages that fill knowledge gaps for a non-Tibetan audience—this type of representation resonates with popular narratives of Tibet as a mysterious yet underdeveloped area. Some of the themes treated in the novella and in the short story—as for instance references to water burials and ritual exorcism—cast indeed a magic aura around Tibet. However, the use of such themes cannot be simply dismissed as an opportunistic form of self-orientalism mobilized to gain a readership. In fact, Alai's representation of the fish taboo and of related practices sets the stage to complicate stereotypical representations of Tibet.

Alai's texts show a way in which an ethnic author can appeal to a national readership without passively perpetuating dominant stereotypes. On the contrary, it is precisely by engaging with stereotypes about Tibet that Alai is able to debunk them from within, shedding light on the heterogeneity of Tibetan culture and thus providing readers with alternative representations of Tibet.

## References

- Alai 阿来. 2015. "Yü 鱼" [The fish]. In *Fang shengyang: xiaoshuo yuebao shaoshu minzu zuojia jingpin ji 2001–2015* 放生羊: 小说月报少数民族作家精品集 2001–2015 [Grazing Sheep: Collection of Ethnic Minorities' Fiction in Xiaoshuo yuebao 2001–2015], edited by Zhongguo shaoshu minzu zuojia xuehui 中国少数民族作家学会, Zhongguo shaoshu minzu zuojia xuehui 中国少数民族作家学会, and Xiaoshuo yuebao bianji bu 小说月报编辑部, 1–8. Tianjin: Baihua wenyi chubanshe.

- Alai 阿来. 2004. "Yü" 鱼 [The fish]." In *Alai zhongpian xiaoshuo xuan* 阿来中篇小说选 [Alai's selected novella], 216–72. Chengdu: Sichuan minzu chubanshe.
- Alai 阿来. 2002. *Red Poppies*. Tr. Li-chun Lin and Howard Goldblatt. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Altner, Diana. 2009. "Fishery in Southern and Central Tibet: An Economic Niche is Going to Disappear." In *Contemporary Visions in Tibetan Studies. Proceedings of the International Seminar of Young Tibetologists*, edited by Brandon Dotson, Kalsang Norbu Gurung, Georgios Halkias, and Tim Myatt, 45–67. Chicago: Serindia Publications.
- Chen, Ye 陈焯. 2005. "Zangzu de yinshi jinji ji qi xiandai jiazhi 藏族的饮食禁忌及其现代价值" [Tibetan Diet Taboo and Its Contemporary Value]. *Xizang minzu wenxue xuebao* 5: 32–5.
- Ci, Dun 次顿. 2019. "Zang minzu yinshi jinji wenhua chengyin fenxi—yi guibi shiyong yulei weili 藏民族饮食禁忌文化成因分析——以规避食用鱼类为例" [Analysis on the causes of Tibetan food taboos: Edible fish as a case study]. *Wenhua changye* 1: 53–5.
- Howard, Choy F. 2008. "In Quest (Ion) of an 'I': Identity and Idiocy in Alai's Red Poppies." In *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*, edited by Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani and Luran R Hartley, 225–35. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Dangzhu, Angben 丹珠昂奔. edited by. 2003. *Zangzu da cidian* 藏族大辞典 [The Dictionary of Tibetan Culture]. Lanzhou: Gansu renmin chubanshe.
- Das, Sarat Chandra, and William Woodville Rockhill. 1902. *Journey to Lhasa and Central Tibet*. London: J. Murray.
- Dickson, Lisa A., and Romanets Maryna. edited by. 2014. *Beauty, Violence, Representation*. New York: Routledge.
- Douglas, Mary. 2002. *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge.
- Ekvall, Robert B. 1964. *Religious Observances in Tibet: Patterns and Function*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Elverskog, Johan. 2020. *The Buddha's Footprint: An Environmental History of Asia*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Fong, Mary. 2000. "'Luck Talk' in Celebrating the Chinese New Year." *Journal of Pragmatics* 32 (2): 219–37.
- Goss, Rober E., and Dennis Klass. 1997. "Tibetan Buddhism and the Resolution of Grief: The Bardo-Thodol for the Dying and the Grieving." *Death Studies* 21 (4): 377–95.
- Habenstein, Robert Wesley, and William Mathias Lamers. 1963. *Funeral Customs the World Over*. Milwaukee: Bulfin Printers.
- Haidt, Jonathan. 2007. *The Happiness Hypothesis: Putting Ancient Wisdom to the Test of Modern Science*. London: Arrow Books.
- Hartley, Luran R., and Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani. edited by. 2008. *Modern Tibetan Literature and Social Change*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Hillman, Ben, and Lee-Anne Henfry. 2006. "Macho Minority: Masculinity and Ethnicity on the Edge of Tibet." *Modern China* 32 (2): 251–72.
- Hladíková, Kamila. 2013. *The Exotic Other and Negotiation of Tibetan Self: Representation of Tibet in Chinese and Tibetan Fiction of the 1980s*. Olomouc: Univerzita Palackého v Olomouci.
- Huang, Yusheng 黄钰生. 2015. "Chunjie chi yu zenme xuan? 春节吃鱼怎么选?" [How to choose fish for the Spring Festival?]. *Xiaofeizhe baodao* 1: 26–7.
- Kolmaš, Josef. 2003. *Smrt a Pohřbívání u Tibetanů* [Death and Funeral Practices of Tibetans]. Brno: Masarykova univerzita.
- Kolnai, Aurel. 2003. *On Disgust*. Chicago and La Salle: Open Court Publishing.

- Laing, Ellen Johnston. 2017. "Carp and Goldfish As Auspicious Symbols and Their Representation in Chinese Popular Prints." *Arts Asiatiques* 72: 97–109.
- Lange, Diana. 2010. "From Water Radish to Fish Restaurant: Recent Developments of Fisheries in Central Tibet." In *AAS Working Papers in Social Anthropology* 18, 1–13.
- Leung, Laifong. 2017. *Contemporary Chinese Fiction Writers: Biography, Bibliography, and Critical Assessment*. New York: Routledge.
- Lopez, Donald S. 1998. *Prisoners of Shangri-La: Tibetan Buddhism and the West*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ma Jian 马建. 1987. "Guan Ding 灌顶" [The Final Initiation]. *Renmin Wenxue* 1–2: 112–16.
- Macdonald, David. 1932. *Twenty Years in Tibet*. London: Seeley, Service.
- Maraini, Fosco. 1998. *Segreto Tibet*. Milano: Corbaccio.
- McGinn, Colin. 2011. *The Meaning of Disgust*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Meltzer, Donald, and Williams Meg H. 2008. *The Apprehension of Beauty: The Role of Aesthetic Conflict in Development, Art and Violence*. London: Karnac The Harris Meltzer Trust.
- Miller, William I. 1997. *The Anatomy of Disgust*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Rojas, Carlos. 2013. "Danger in the Voice: Alai and the Sinophone." In *Sinophone Studies: A Critical Reader*, edited by Shumei Shih, Chien-hsin Tsai, and Brian Bernards, 296–303. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Rozin, Paul, Haidt, Jonathan, and Clark R. McCauley. 1999. "Disgust: The Body and Soul Emotion." In *Handbook of Cognition and Emotion*, edited by Tim Dalgleish and Mick Power, 429–45. New York: Wiley.
- Rozin, P. Paul, Nemeroff, Carol, Wane, Marcia, and Amy Sherrod. 1989. "Operation of the Sympathetic Magical Law of Contagion in Interpersonal Attitudes among Americans." *Bulletin of the Psychonomic Society* 27 (4): 367–79.
- Rozin, Paul, and Fallon April. 1987. "Perspective on Disgust." *Psychological Review* 94 (1): 23–41.
- Sullivan, Lawrence R., and Nancy Y. Liu-Sullivan. 2021. *Historical Dictionary of Chinese Culture*. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield.
- Tybur, Joshua M., Lieberman, Debra, and Vlaslas Griskevicius. 2009. "Microbes, Mating, and Morality: Individual Differences in Three Functional Domains of Disgust." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 97 (1):103–22.
- Wang, Yiyang. 2013. "The Politics of Representing Tibet: Alai's Tibetan Native-Place Stories." *Modern Chinese Literature and Culture* 25, 1: 96–130.
- Waddell, Laurance A. 1929. *Lhasa and Its Mysteries: With a Record of the Expedition of 1903–4*. London: Methuen.
- Wen, Mengyu 温梦煜. 2012. "Zangzu shiyu guibi de chengyin yu yanbian 藏族食鱼规避的成因与演变" [The Causes of Tibetan Fish Avoidance and Its Changes]. M.A. thesis, Lanzhou: Lanzhou daxue.
- Wylie, Turrell. 1964. "Mortuary Customs at Sa-Skya, Tibet." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 25: 229–42.
- Yasuda, Rijin. 2011. "A Name but Not a Name Alone." Tr. Paul Watt. In *Cultivating Spirituality: A Modern Shin Buddhist Anthology*, edited by Blum, Mark Laurence, and Robert F Rhodes, 239–65. Albany: State University of New York Press.
- Yeh, Emily T. 2013. *Taming Tibet: Landscape Transformation and the Gift of Chinese Development*. Columbia University. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Yong, Zhong 拥中. 2015. "Sanjie shenling guannian xia de zangzu jinji shiyu xianxiang" 三界神灵观念下的藏族禁忌食鱼现象 [The Tibetan Taboo Phenomenon of

- Eating Fish under the Concept of the Three Realms of Gods]. *Zhongguo minzu bao*, April 14.
- Yue, Gang. 2008. "As the Dust Settles in Shangri-La: Alai's Tibet in the Era of Sino-Globalization." *Journal of Contemporary China* 17 (56): 543–63.
- Zhuang, Kongshao. 2002. "The Development of Ethnic Cuisine in Beijing: On the Xinjiang Road." In *The Globalization of Chinese Food*, edited by Wu, David Y. H, and Sidney C. H Cheung, 69–85. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Zivkovic, Tanya. 2014. *Death and Reincarnation in Tibetan Buddhism: In-Between Bodies*. London: Routledge.