

KATARZYNA SAREK

GENRE TROUBLE IN TIBET: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND LITERARY LABELS IN TASHI DAWA AND MA YUAN

Abstract. This article examines how the ethnicity of Tashi Dawa, a Sino-Tibetan writer, influences the perception of his works. He is most often categorized as an “ethnic” or “magic realist” writer, despite his narrative style aligning closely with avant-garde literature. This perception arises from a focus by both Chinese and Western critics on Tibetan cultural elements in his stories, shaped by his mixed ethnic background. By contrast, Han Chinese writer Ma Yuan, who also writes about Tibet and his texts also contain elements of magic realism, is viewed as purely avant-garde, underscoring the role of ethnicity in literary categorization. This paper analyzes Tashi Dawa’s narrative construction and metafictional frameworks to argue for his recognition as an avant-garde writer.

Keywords: Tashi Dawa; Ma Yuan; *Souls Tied to the Knots on the Leather Cord*; *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains*; ethnic writer; avant-garde; Chinese literature

PROBLEMY Z GATUNKIEM W TYBECIE – TOŻSAMOŚĆ ETNICZNA I ETYKIETY GATUNKOWE DOTYCZĄCE TWÓRCZOŚCI TASHI DAWA I MA YUANA

Abstrakt. Artykuł analizuje, w jaki sposób etnos Tashi Dawy, twórcy z kręgu kultury sino-tybetańskiej, wpływa na sposób postrzegania jego twórczości jako „etnicznej” lub w nurcie „magicznego realizmu”, mimo że jego styl narracyjny jest bliższy literaturze awangardowej. Chińscy i zachodni krytycy koncentrują się bowiem na tybetańskich elementach kulturowych obecnych w jego opowiadaniach, związanych z jego mieszanym pochodzeniem. Ma Yuan, który również pisze o Tybecie, a w jego tekstach występują elementy realizmu magicznego, jako Chińczyk Han jest postrzegany wyłącznie jako twórca awangardowy, co uwypukla rolę etnosu w procesie kategoryzowania literackiego. Artykuł bada konstrukcję narracyjną oraz ramy metafikcyjne w twórczości Tashi Dawy, argumentując na rzecz uznania go za pisarza awangardowego.

Słowa kluczowe: Tashi Dawa; Ma Yuan; *Węzły duszy*; *Zakłęcie Gór Gangtise*; pisarz etniczny; awangarda; literatura chińska

Dr KATARZYNA SAREK, Assistant Professor at Jagiellonian University, Institute of Oriental Studies, Department of Japanology and Sinology; katarzyna.sarek@uj.edu.pl; ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4298-6301>.

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INTRODUCTION

The mid-1980s marked a shift in Chinese literature, from social commentary or an instrument of liberation to the exploration of pure literary aesthetics. This era saw the emergence of “pure literature” (*chun wenxue* 纯文学), which included root-seeking literature (*xungen wenxue* 寻根文学), modernist literature (*xiandaipai wenxue* 现代派文学), and avant-garde literature (*xianfeng wenxue* 先锋文学). Writers began to focus on “how to write” rather than “what to write”, reshaping literary criticism and historical perspectives. The concept of “rewriting literary history” (*chongxie wenxueshi* 重写文学史) encapsulated this transformation. Thus, the second half of the 1980s was marked by a new perspective not only on writing (literary practice), but also on literary criticism and literary history (Zhu et al. 2000, 78–82).

During this vibrant period, the young Sino-Tibetan writer Tashi Dawa, also known as Zhaxi Dawa (扎西達娃), gained national fame for his short stories. Although his works were criticized by some Tibetans for their exoticism, they provided Chinese readers with insights into Tibetan culture. His exposure to Chinese and Western literary traditions allowed him to reimagine Tibetan narratives. Despite the avant-garde narrative style and metafictional features of his works, he is primarily recognized as a “magic realist” or an “ethnic writer”, which I believe is largely due to his ethnic background – though this may not be the sole explanation.

1. MATERIALS AND METHODS

My analysis draws from literary texts of Tashi Dawa and Ma Yuan, secondary literature on Tibetan literature and Chinese avant-garde fiction, and theoretical frameworks on magic realism and metafiction. Key works include two short stories: Tashi Dawa’s *Souls Tied to the Knots on a Leather Thong* (*Xi zai pisheng jie shang de hun* 系在皮绳结上的魂) and Ma Yuan’s *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains* (*Gangdisi shan de mozhou* 冈底斯山的魔咒), and critical studies by Schiaffini-Vedani, Hladíková and other scholars on hybrid identities in literature.

Magic realism is a literary genre that blends magic or supernatural elements with the real world, making the extraordinary seem ordinary. The term was originally coined by the German art critic Franz Roh to describe post-expressionist art, but has evolved to describe literature in which the boundary

between fantasy and reality is deliberately blurred. Associated mainly with literary texts from Latin America in the 1960s, the genre gained prominence as a response to post-colonial realities. More recently, it has become a term for marginal literature that challenges Western, rational, linear narratives by embedding them within indigenous forms of storytelling that reclaim pre-colonial cultural traditions. Although this approach highlights diverse cultural perspectives, some critics argue that the broad use of the term to refer to any mythic or non-linear narrative has diluted its meaning and turned it into a generic label for non-Western narrative techniques (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 2007, 118–19).

Key features of magic realism include the juxtaposition of the realistic and the fantastic, complex narrative structures, sudden and inexplicable events, and a abundant use of dreams, myths and surreal descriptions. This approach emphasises the surreal aspects of everyday life, often creating a narrative that feels at once familiar and extraordinary (Cuddon and Habib 2013, 416–17).

Metafiction is a form of fiction that is self-aware, drawing attention to its own artificiality and the nature of storytelling. Unlike realistic fiction, which aims to create an illusion of reality through techniques such as detailed description and linear narrative, metafiction disrupts this illusion and underlines that it is a work of art. It often includes elements such as the author appearing as a character, characters acknowledging their fictional status, or commentary on the nature of writing itself (Cuddon and Habib 2013, 431).

While magic realism emphasises the constructed nature of literature and blends magic elements with realistic settings, metafiction is a deliberate technique that draws attention to the artificiality of narrative and integrates storytelling and self-reflexivity. It underlines the untruth and constructed nature of storytelling, in line with postmodern ideas about the illusory nature of truth and the instability of meaning. Metafictional techniques, present in many Chinese avant-garde works, are very often perceived as their main characteristic. Rather than referring to a clearly defined historical period, the term “avant-garde” here should be understood primarily as an aesthetic designation. It captures a moment in Chinese literary history characterized by a departure from dominant realist modes. As Yu notes, it was “the only period in the history of the Chinese Party-state during which Chinese literature was not dominated by any kind of realism – the only literary form sanctioned by the Party” (Yu 2017, 215).

I will show that although there are indeed elements of magic realism in Tashi Dawa's works, the metafictional traits are equally important and visible. I will compare the work of Tashi Dawa with that of Ma Yuan, a Han Chinese writer who shares a similar style and employs comparable narrative techniques. Unlike Tashi Dawa, however, Ma Yuan is primarily recognized as an avant-garde writer, largely due to his innovative use of narrative devices. This comparison will focus exclusively on structure and narrative techniques, as these elements are central to understanding Ma Yuan's avant-garde reputation and the literary strategies he employs.

2. PROFILES OF THE WRITERS

Born in Batang in 1959 to a Tibetan father and Chinese mother, Tashi Dawa was given the Chinese name Zhang Niansheng. He grew up in Chongqing and was educated in Chinese, and he could not read or write Tibetan. After moving to Lhasa in the mid-1970s, he began publishing short stories in 1979, influenced by the Western literature he studied during his scholarship in Beijing. In the 1980s, he shocked the Tibetan and Chinese literary scenes with a series of powerful and innovative short stories in Chinese. In the 1980s, a group of young Chinese artists founded the Lhasa Salon. This gave rise to a new genre of Tibetan literature in Chinese, called "new fiction from Tibet" (*Xizang xin xiaoshuo* 西藏新小说), and Tashi Dawa was seen as its leading voice (Schiaffini-Vedani 2008, 204). The imposition of martial law in Lhasa in 1989 marked the definitive end of the city's literary scene. By the late 1980s and early 1990s, most Han Chinese writers had left Lhasa, and many had stopped writing altogether. Sinophone Tibetan literature occupied a marginal position and remained largely unnoticed by Chinese literary critics and readers. Only Tashi Dawa, and later Alai, managed to be published in prominent national magazines such as *Zuojia*, *Shouhuo* and *Renmin Wenxue*. Tashi Dawa became a professional writer in the mid-1980s, held high positions in the TAR Writers' Association, and took a break from writing in the 1990s, but remains active in TAR cultural activities. He divides his time between Lhasa, Chengdu and Beijing, concentrating on work in the film industry. Tashi Dawa is known for bringing magic realism to Tibetan literature. His multicultural background and creative style have helped him to become a successful writer. He has even been described as the Chinese Gabriel García Márquez (Barmé and Minford 1988, 452). Schiaffini-Vedani (2002,

155–65) argues that Tashi Dawa's works are inspired not only by magic realism but also by classical Chinese fables about supernatural phenomena, while Batt (2001, 264) points to the inspiration of techniques found in Tibetan chronicles, where facts are enriched with mythical elements.

Tashi Dawa became one of Tibet's most controversial and acclaimed contemporary writers, drawing significant attention from critics in China and the West. Although his works consist mainly of short stories and novellas, he is widely recognized as a prominent minority voice and influential Tibetan cultural figure in China. In 1992 and 2009, Beijing Literature Press translated his stories into English in *A Soul in Bondage: Stories from Tibet* to appeal to international audiences.

Ma Yuan was born in Jinzhou, Liaoning Province, in 1953. His father was an engineer, and during the Cultural Revolution Ma Yuan was sent to the Bohai Bay area for re-education. He returned in 1974 and was allowed to apply to university. He first graduated in engineering and then, in 1977, began studying Chinese literature at Liaoning University. In 1982, he moved to Tibet, where he worked as a journalist at the Tibetan People's Radio Broadcasting Station. After three years in Tibet, he became an editor at the literary journal Tibetan Literature (*Xizang wenxue* 西藏文学) (Wang, Jiang, and Ma 2015) and began to write. In 1985, he published the short story *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains* (*Gangdisi shan de mozhou* 冈底斯山的魔咒), which is one of Ma Yuan's most representative and discussed works. The novella has been characterized as "a milestone marking the rise of avant-garde fiction in China" (Zhao 1995, 312). For health reasons, Ma Yuan left Tibet in 1989, and from 1991 he abandoned prose writing in favour of screenwriting. As Henry Zhao (1995, 312) notes, Ma Yuan's work was abruptly interrupted during his heyday, much like the plots of his short stories. In 2000, he began his academic career as a lecturer in Chinese literature at Tongji University in Shanghai. For the next dozen years he did not write any fiction, and only in 2012 did he begin to publish again, mainly novels. Tibet became his inspiration, and he often described its customs or landscapes in the convention of magic realism. In Ma Yuan's stories, this region exists in the form of a legend, sometimes featuring goddesses or yeti, but Tibet becomes not only the backdrop for the plot of his stories, but also another character who participates in the narrative (Zhang 2011, 174–75). As a member of China's dominant Han ethnic group, Ma wrote about Tibet from the perspective of an "outsider". As Kamila Hladíková observes, Ma Yuan's portrayal of Tibet contributes to its image as a place where the primal forces of nature persist in the physical world, a place

that is dark, enigmatic, and resistant to modernity. Hladíková characterises this perspective as a manifestation of colonialism, whereby Tibet is portrayed as defying logic and reason (in a manner analogous to the portrayal of Asian countries by Western colonialists), and its inhabitants are depicted as strange, primitive or impaired (Hladíková 2013, 65–69).

Ma Yuan's novella *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains*, published in 1985, immediately attracted critical attention and is now regarded as proof that Ma Yuan was the first writer of metafiction (*yuanxiaoshuo* 元小说) in China. From the outset, critics were struck by the singularity of Ma Yuan's fiction, which was identified as belonging to the category of "three withouts" (*sanwu* 三无) literature. This designation, first proposed by Li (1985, 54), refers to works that eschew conventional plot, characters, and theme. The most influential critique of Ma Yuan's work was Wu Liang's concept of the "narrative trap" (*xushu quantao* 叙述圈套). Wu describes Ma Yuan as "an author skilled at playing with his intellectual Rubik's cube" crafting texts that appear "aimless", "unknowable", and "lacking cause and effect" (Wu 1987). In many sources Ma Yuan is defined as the "initiator" of Chinese "avant-garde fiction" (e.g. Hong 2007, 293).

3. TASHI DAWA'S ETHNIC CATEGORIZATION

The perception of Tashi Dawa as an "ethnic writer" is largely driven by an emphasis on his Tibetan origin and the cultural artifacts, myths and beliefs that permeate his work. His ethnic background makes his stories a subject of cultural exoticism that overshadows his avant-garde literary techniques. In Chinese coursebooks, Tashi Dawa is frequently characterized as a creator of literature imbued with ethnic and mystical elements (e.g. Chen 2013, 347), and in some cases, he is excluded altogether (e.g. Hong 2001; Zhu et al 2000; Chen 2015; Zhang 2023). In many Western sourcebooks or compendia devoted to China's literary production in the 1980s, Tashi Dawa isn't mentioned at all (e.g. Wang 1998; Stewart and Batt 2003). While some, such as Kubin (2005, 318) and Bender (2023, 267), call him an ethnic writer, others identify him with the root-seeking literary movement (e.g. Li and Tam, 2018). Even when his work is recognized as avant-garde, it is then framed within a transcultural or peripheral perspective. For example, Liu (2023, 147–57) describes him as a "reflective insider" of Tibet, contrasting him with Ma Yuan, a Han Chinese writer characterized as a "reflective outsider".

Tashi Dawa's position as a Sinophone Tibetan writer has generated considerable debate, particularly with regard to his political stance and identity. Early critiques have been sharply divided. Some accused him of either intentionally defaming Tibetan culture or failing to take a more assertive position as a representative of a minority group. Geremie Barmé and John Minford (1988, 416) argue that he "uses Tibet's religious culture in the service of Marxist-Leninist Modernism", presenting his works as emblematic of the sinification of Tibetan culture. Conversely, Chinese feminist critic Lu Tonglin (1995, 128) argues that his perceived ambivalence is a symbolic renunciation of Tibetan identity. She suggests that his "marginality serves as decoration for the Chinese cultural center", highlighting a tension between his Tibetan heritage and his alignment with Chinese literary circles.

A notable feature of Tashi Dawa's work is his fusion of Tibetan and Chinese literary aesthetics, often conveyed through magic realism. Scholars such as Grünfelder (1999) and Schiaffini (2002) note that his approach mirrors Latin American magic realism, blending indigenous and external perspectives to make Tibetan cultural experiences understandable and appealing to a Chinese audience. This hybridity allows him to navigate the political sensitivities of the PRC while addressing issues of Tibetan identity, cultural tension, and historical memory much like Latin American magic realists who straddled indigenous and colonial perspectives. Like other Sinophone Tibetan writers, including Alai, Tashi Dawa employs strategies such as unreliable narrators and "Tibetanisms" to both appeal to Han audiences and subtly counter dominant tropes. These techniques serve as a response to the dual pressures of censorship and cultural exoticization (Hladíková 2023, 439). Other critics point to a different use of magic realism in Tashi Dawa's works to challenge traditional historical narratives. By blending shamanistic with Buddhism's cyclical view of time, his work reflects themes of reincarnation, karma, and timeless rituals like prayer wheels. Tashi Dawa further disrupts linear history by omitting significant colonial periods, highlighting both the repetitive nature of colonial oppression and the silence surrounding Tibet's colonized past. This approach critiques colonial narratives by revealing their sameness and the unspeakable trauma they impose (Choy 2005, 76). In an interview with Patricia Schiaffini, Tashi Dawa addressed the issue of the language he chooses to write in. He justified his use of Chinese by pointing out that a significant proportion of Tibetans remain illiterate, and that writing in Chinese allows him to reach a much wider audience. In addition, Tashi Dawa holds the controversial view – not widely shared among Tibetan intellectuals – that the Tibetan language

lacks sufficient vocabulary to adequately describe contemporary realities (Schiaffini 2004, 90).

Despite his acclaim in China and the West, however, Tashi Dawa's reception among Tibetans remains mixed. Patricia Schiaffini-Vedani (2008, 219) notes that his depictions of Tibetan life are often criticized by educated Tibetan readers as overly exotic or misinformed. For example, his use of magic realism is seen by some as pandering to stereotypes of Tibetan mysticism rather than authentically representing Tibetan culture. This criticism reflects broader tensions surrounding the representation of Tibet in Sinophone literature, where narratives often cater to external expectations of "otherness".

The question of what constitutes Tibetan literature and who qualifies as a Tibetan writer was particularly debated in the 1980s and 1990s, during the early stages of Sinophone Tibetan literary development. Some critics and scholars argued that for a work to be considered Tibetan, it had to be written in the Tibetan language, while others maintained that the content—its themes, cultural references, and narrative perspective—was more important than the medium. This debate was further complicated by the fact that many Tibetan writers, especially in the reform era of the People's Republic of China, were not sufficiently literate in written Tibetan. The choice to write in Chinese allowed for wider publication and access to a national readership, but it also raised questions of authenticity and representation. The choice of language and authorial identity was not merely artistic, but deeply political. Ethnic Tibetan writers had relatively more space to criticize or satirize their own culture without facing state retribution, while Han writers who challenged official narratives about ethnic minorities were more likely to face censorship or political consequences (Schiaffini 2004).

Tashi Dawa's evolving literary identity is evident in his work. His early stories, influenced by Chinese "scar literature", depict Tibet from a Chinese perspective. In *Silence* (*Chenmo* 沉默 [1979]), for example, the protagonist is a Chinese girl, while Tibetan characters remain peripheral. Similarly, *Pilgrimage* (*Chaofo* 朝佛 [1980]) critically portrays Tibetan religious practices (the death of an elderly local woman during a pilgrimage), which it frames as superstition. In contrast, his later works show a deeper engagement with Tibetan subjectivity, reflecting a shift in his narrative focus.

Despite his complex positioning, Tashi Dawa remains overshadowed by double standards in literary criticism. Unlike Ma Yuan, whose Tibetan-set stories are never viewed through an ethnic lens, Tashi Dawa's work is persistently categorized within an ethnic framework. This disparity underscores

the bias in the reception of minority writers, where their cultural identity often eclipses their literary contributions.

While Tashi Dawa is often categorized as a “magic realist” because of his ethnic and cultural positioning, it is important to recognize that this label is not exclusive to ethnic minority writers. Han Chinese writers such as Mo Yan and Yan Lianke have also been widely described in similar terms. As M. Thomas Inge notes, Mo Yan blends myth, memory, and narrative ambiguity – particularly in *Red Sorghum* and *The Republic of Wine* – through nonlinear structures, metafictional framing, and allegorical themes that transcend historical realism (Inge 2000). Yan Lianke, on the other hand, has sought to distance his work from the “magic realist” label, proposing instead the concept of “mythorealism” (*shenshi zhuyi* 神实主义) to describe a narrative mode that seeks to reveal internal, invisible, or censored truths beyond surface reality (Yan 2022). Can Xue has similarly been associated with both avant-garde and magic realist styles, although she actively resists all forms of literary categorization, describing her fiction as closer to performance art or dream logic than to allegorical realism (Suher and Hua 2015). Authors such as Yu Hua and Su Tong, while primarily associated with postmodern or historical fiction, have occasionally been interpreted through the lens of magic realism, particularly because of their use of surreal imagery, fragmented narrative structures, and temporal disjunctions (Wedell-Wedellsborg 2018).

These examples illustrate that ethnicity alone does not determine literary categorization. Instead, stylistic, thematic, and institutional factors also play a crucial role in how authors are labeled and interpreted. Thus, perceptions of “magic realism” in Chinese literature – while sometimes filtered through ethnic frameworks – are also grounded in broader aesthetic and narrative considerations.

4. SIMILARITIES IN NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES AND THEMES

Tashi Dawa’s *Souls Tied to the Knots on a Leather Cord* (1983) and Ma Yuan’s *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains* (1985) share structural and thematic commonalities, exploring the tensions between tradition and modernity, spirituality and materialism, and individual quests for meaning. Both texts employ fragmented narratives, interwoven perspectives, and episodic storytelling which deepen their metafictional qualities and thematic richness.

In Tashi Dawa's story, Tabei's doomed quest for Shambhala – a symbol of both spiritual fulfillment and utopian ideals – reflects the broader Tibetan struggle to reconcile tradition with modern life. In contrast, his counterpart, Chiong, embraces consumer culture and modernity. Ma Yuan's work similarly uses fragmented narratives but intensifies this complexity with multiple narrators, often indistinguishable, who explore Chinese-Tibetan encounters. This kaleidoscopic narrative structure challenges conventional continuity, emphasizing metafiction and thematic depth.

Both authors structure their works episodically, presenting interconnected yet distinct vignettes that prioritize thematic exploration over linear plot development.

Tashi Dawa begins with a narrator encountering Sangjie Dapu, a living Buddha, who predicts the world's cyclical destruction and renewal. He tells a story about two wanderers, in which the surprised narrator recognizes his own unpublished short story. The narrative then transitions into a story-within-a-story about Tabei and Chiong, whose aimless journey symbolizes spiritual and existential searching. When Tabei decides to leave the girl in the village and travel alone to the Place of the Palm Lines, where the final battle will take place, the manuscript ends, and the narrator resolves to find the place and his protagonists. The narrator meets Chiong – the girl can't live without her partner, who "took her heart and tied it to his belt" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 37) – and together they find the injured Tabei. When the young man dies, the narrator admits, "I am filled with remorse. It is I who have brought Tabei to this. And my other protagonist before him – how many of them, too, have I led to their deaths? It is time for some rigorous soul-searching" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 168). The narrator then takes Tabei's place and moves on with Chiong. As the narrator blends with his characters, he becomes both creator and participant, acknowledging his role in their tragic fates.

In *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains*, the chapter sequence does not follow a coherent timeline, as the individual narratives are arranged out of order. In addition, the hierarchy of these narratives, particularly the relationship between the main story (diegesis) and its sub-narratives (hypo-diegesis), is unclear. Further complicating the matters is the ambiguity surrounding the focalizers – the perspectives from which the story is told. The text features multiple voices that not only analyze and interpret the narrative, but also contradict individual sections and even the entire story. This multiplicity creates a fragmented sense of authority, as different "author" figures appear throughout the text. As a result, readers are left searching for a reliable

narrator and struggling to decide which voice to trust. This ambiguity raises questions about the realism of the text and challenges the reader's ability to suspend disbelief and engage with the story.

The structure of Ma Yuan's *The Spell of Gangtise Mountains* is complex and multi-layered, as analyzed by Will Gatherer (2021, 20–23), who says the narrative structure consists of four distinct levels. Chapter 15 occupies the highest level, commenting on and framing the other elements of the text. Below it are three subsequent hypo-diegetic levels, which house fragmented narratives – each with its own focus and chapter sequence.

The first narrative (chapters 3 and 6) focuses on Qiong Bu, a Tibetan hunter who has seen the yeti. An old Chinese writer, who also reflects on his life and views of Tibet, recounts an expedition with Qiong Bu and two other Chinese men, Lu Gao and Yao Liang, as they attempt to find the yeti but fail. The second narrative (chapters 4, 8 and 10) follows Yao Liang, Lu Gao and Little He on their unsuccessful quest to witness a Tibetan celestial burial. Before their expedition, Lu Gao and Yao Liang meet a young Tibetan woman, who tragically dies in a car accident before they leave. The third narrative (chapters 11 to 14) is a modern retelling of an ancient Tibetan legend. It recounts the story of twin brothers, Dhondup and Dhonyo, one of whom joins the army while the other becomes a renowned singer of the Epic of King Gesar. Finally, chapter 16 consists of two poems by Yao Liang and Lu Gao about Tibet, which serve as an appendix to these main narratives.

The fragmented narrative includes ambiguous segments that blur distinctions between plots and perspectives. This structural complexity mirrors Tashi Dawa's multi-tiered storytelling style, where the narrator intrudes and even transforms into a protagonist.

Both stories have open-ended plots. In Tashi Dawa, the narrator takes over from Tabei and becomes active in the story. "I take Tabei's place. Chiong follows behind me, and we set out on the journey back. Times begins again, from the beginning" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 169). Ma Yuan's story also has no clear ending. The last part is two poems by Lu Gao and Yao Liang about Tibet. In the penultimate chapter, the narrator introduces Lu Gao and Yao Liang as poets. There is no plot connection to the rest of the story. The only things that connect them are the two protagonists and Tibet.

While Ma Yuan's structure is more intricate, both works share a reliance on episodic storytelling to delve into identity, cultural collisions, and spiritual dilemmas.

Both narratives achieve coherence through symbolic motifs and layered storytelling, with Tibetan beliefs serving as a narrative and thematic cornerstone. The symbolic elements transcend ethnographic detail, integrating deeply into the narrative fabric.

Tashi Dawa's *The Soul Tied to a Leather Cord* is a text that operates on multiple narrative layers. At first glance, the narrative appears to be an account of the aimless journey of two characters, Tabei and Chiong, who wander, driven by impulses that are incomprehensible even to themselves. The two characters represent young people who are unable to establish a sense of purpose and direction in their lives, resulting in a tendency to drift aimlessly. On a deeper level, the text makes reference to spiritual journey and Tibetan beliefs, particularly the concepts of karma and cyclical return, which leave a fatalistic mark on the characters' behaviour. At the most profound level, it is an existential quest for identity, a challenging choice between modernity and tradition, spiritual life and a modern culture inundated with material values and the pursuit of comfort, pleasure, and prosperity. Characters' drifting lives reflect not only existential aimlessness but also spiritual yearning and the tension between materialism and tradition.

During the journey, the girl ties a knot on the string each day. Upon counting them, the narrator discovers that there are 108 knots – mirroring the beads of a Tabei's prayer string, which symbolizes interconnected souls and karmic cycles. This number also has another symbolic meaning. As legend has it, for that many days there was a battle between the Lord of the Lotus and the demon Shibameriru eons ago. The metaphorical leather thong serves to link individual stories into a cohesive spiritual narrative.

The varying levels of narration serve as a primary determinant of the multi-level narrative structure evident in Ma Yuan's short story. Nevertheless, an examination of specific passages reveals that the narrative in this work encompasses a greater number of levels than those determined by the shifts in perspective. The plot vectors in the individual threads do not merely progress; they also revisit past experiences. For instance, Qiong Bu's memories of hunting and his father's death enhance the narrative, while subtly introducing additional layers. The absence of a dominant thread results in the stories appearing to be on a similar level. Furthermore, the continuous interweaving of diverse narratives makes it challenging to discern a connection between them.

Both authors use a journey motif as their structural backbone, intertwining physical movement with internal or spiritual exploration. For Tashi Dawa, a journey is metaphysical, exploring reincarnation and karmic bonds. Ma Yuan,

on the other hand, presents a physical journey through Tibetan landscapes, which doubles as an allegory for exploration, identity, and cultural exchange between local people and outsiders.

Another similarity is the fluidity of time in both stories. In Tashi Dawa's story, time goes backwards at one point, "after I climbed over the top of Mount Kalong, time had begun to run in reverse ... at a speed five times normal" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 162), and the narrator finally goes back to the opening day of the 1984 Olympics in Los Angeles. Time in Ma Yuan's story is also non-linear, the fragmented timeline constantly moving the action to another moment in the narrative. There seems to be a mixture of two dimensions – the present, in which, for example, the wild man search expedition takes place, and the other, in which time is cyclical and present and past merge. There is also a manipulation of time when, on contact with something supernatural, the passage of time seems to be suspended.

Western material and cultural elements in both texts are interwoven with Eastern traditions, creating a cross-cultural dialog. They appear as useful tools symbolizing modernity and progress, such as a truck imported from Germany, a calculator, a walkman with headphones in Tashi Dawa's story, or cameras, guns in Ma Yuan's story. Both authors directly mention or quote Western artists and writers, such as Constable and Dali in Tashi Dawa's story and the opening quote from Selma Lagerlöf and mentioning Faulkner in Ma Yuan's story.

Both texts incorporate elements of magic realism, though they do so in varying degrees. For example, in the first short story, the narrator suddenly sees the site of an ancient battle in the mountains – "relics from a long-forgotten era: golden saddles, bows and arrows, lances, suits of armor, prayer wheels, horns". Under the influence of the heat from the hot springs, these objects soften and merge, transformed before the narrator's eyes until they "rearranged themselves into hieroglyphs as abstruse as Mayan writing" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 163). This vivid imagery illustrates a key moment where the boundary between reality and imagination blurs, a hallmark of magic realism.

Ma Yuan's story, on the other hand, weaves elements of magic realism even more intricately into its narrative. The journey of the expedition, the main axis of the plot, is in search of the "wild man", a legendary being said to live the high mountains. Along the way the protagonists encounter inexplicable natural phenomena, such as a glowing mist over a lake, and frequently refer to local legends and myths. The expedition members try to get a close-up view of the sky burial, an uncanny method of funeral in which a body is left for

wild animals to devour. These moments blur the line between the mystical and the real, drawing the reader into a world where myth and reality coexist.

Both narratives embrace a certain level of ambiguity, allowing readers to interpret events and symbols through their own lenses. In Tashi Dawa, the boundaries between reality and myth are deliberately blurred, leaving readers in a liminal space where the two coexist. The implied author and narrator is similarly uncertain of his own spatial position. "I am not sure if I once saw it in a dream or if I have actually been there. I can't remember anymore. I've been to too many places" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 137). In *Souls Tied to the Knots on a Leather Cord* Tashi Dawa intertwines multiple narratives, creating a layered and self-referential text. It features a narrator who becomes part of the story, blurring the lines between fiction and reality. The narrative showcases Dawa's skill in using metafiction to reflect on storytelling and the author's role in shaping reality. Author's self-awareness as a narrator is evident. He frequently breaks the fourth wall, reflecting on his characters and his creative limitations: "Once characters are created, their every move becomes an objective fact. In letting Tabei and Chiong come out of that numbered manila envelope, I have clearly made an irreparable mistake.... If someone demands to know why, in this great and heroic era, I still allow characters like Tabei and Chiong to exist, how shall I answer?" (Tashi Dawa 1989, 166). This metafictional approach emphasizes the constructed nature of his narratives, aligning with postmodern critiques of truth and meaning.

Ma Yuan's narratives, exemplified in *The Spell of the Gangtisei Mountains*, are characterized by a kaleidoscopic distribution of subjectivity and frequent shifts in narrative voice. The narration's sparse, understated style leaves much unsaid, encouraging readers to derive meaning from the silences and pauses in the text. The story begins with a first-person account, transitions to other characters narrating their own perspectives, and includes an implicit narrator recounting events from Lu Gao's viewpoint. This fluid transfer of narrative authority eliminates a single dominating voice, creating a participatory storytelling approach where characters can even challenge the main narrator (Zhao 1995, 313). The text creates a fragmented structure of logical parts within an overall illogical background, immersing the reader in a labyrinth of uncertainties, and the narrative confounds any kind of conclusive interpretation. This effect is created by shifting points of view, narrative traps, loose characters, and deliberate inconsistencies, which are intensified by anachronistic plot developments that keep the reader disoriented throughout.

A layered narrative technique accumulates uncertain events, creating a sense of language speaking for itself. Unexplained events in Tibet puzzle both Chinese and Tibetans; while the Tibetans integrate them into myth, the Chinese search for rational explanations. Ultimately, the novella contrasts the Tibetan and Chinese worldviews, inviting readers to perceive reality through a Tibetan lens that embraces contradiction.

This short story showcases Ma Yuan's signature techniques, including self-deprecation and a deliberate pursuit of the unknown, cultivating a sense of unfulfilled desire. His narratives reject traditional conclusions such as catharsis or happy endings, instead embracing incompleteness and unresolved storylines. This structural ambiguity parallels the thematic longing in the story, teasing the reader's expectation of closure (Schweiger 2016, 485). The narrator even directly mocks the audience's desire for resolution, as exemplified by the line "What, you want another 'And then,' dear reader?" (Ma Yuan 2011, 255). Ma Yuan's works often feature the same characters – Lu Gao and Yao Liang. They appear as authors, characters, and narrators, but it's not really clear if they exist in the novels, or if they are just reflections of the actual author Ma Yuan. Zhao calls them a "pseudo-couple" and explains that they are in fact two halves of one character who sometimes appears as "I" and sometimes as Ma Yuan (Zhao 1995, 313). In their most "ontologically stable" form, Lu Gao and Yao Liang appear in *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains* when their experiences are recounted from a third-person perspective (Gatherer 2021, 29–30). "Now I'll tell another story. First let me make one thing clear: it is not really certain there's any such person as Yao Liang. But there is no reason why a Yao Liang couldn't come to work in Tibet" (Ma Yuan 2011, 217).

CONCLUSIONS

This comparative analysis of Tashi Dawa's *Souls Tied to the Knots of a Leather Cord* and Ma Yuan's *The Spell of the Gangtise Mountains* illustrates how narrative structure, thematic depth, and critical reception reflect broader cultural and literary dynamics in Chinese literature. Both writers challenge traditional literary forms through fragmented narratives, metafictional techniques, and exploration of identity and cultural hybridity.

Both authors use episodic storytelling, fragmented narrative structures and fluid timelines to explore cultural identity, spirituality, and the intersection of

tradition and modernity. Their works blur the boundaries between reality and myth, incorporating many Tibetan cultural elements while maintaining a universal appeal through allegorical and symbolic motifs. Tensions between the traditional Tibetan way of life and the influence of modern culture also appear in them, especially through the metaphor of travel as both physical and metaphysical.

Both authors use magic realism to create worlds in which the mystical and the real coexist. Metafictional techniques engage the reader in a self-reflexive discourse about the constructed nature of the narrative. Both authors incorporate Western cultural references, such as quotations and images, alongside Eastern traditions, creating a rich transcultural narrative landscape.

Ma Yuan's complex narrative structure and Tashi Dawa's multi-layered narrative emphasize the constructed and elusive nature of truth. Both authors leave their narratives open-ended, challenging the reader to grapple with ambiguity and the interplay of multiple perspectives.

This comparison shows how Tashi Dawa and Ma Yuan push the boundaries of traditional Chinese narrative forms. Both authors redefine the literary representation of Tibet by blending cultural authenticity with experimental narrative styles. Critical reception, however, reveals inherent biases in the way ethnicity influences literary categorization. Recognizing Tashi Dawa's avant-garde credentials along with his ethnic and cultural contributions offers a more nuanced appreciation of his literary significance, bringing his work closer to that of his Han Chinese contemporary, Ma Yuan.

Tashi Dawa's mixed heritage and focus on Tibetan cultural themes have led to his categorization as an "ethnic writer", often overshadowing his avant-garde narrative techniques. Such a label reflects a bias in literary criticism that tends to emphasize ethnic identity over the stylistic innovations of minority writers. In contrast, Ma Yuan, a Han Chinese writer, is widely regarded as an avant-garde innovator, even though he uses similar themes and techniques to Tashi Dawa. This discrepancy suggests that ethnicity plays an influential – though not exclusive – role in shaping critical and academic reception.

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