

Tibetan Women's Identification with the Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation: A Case Study of Wind

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Abstract: This article investigates Tibetan women's identification with the consciousness of the Chinese national community through the characterization of Samdan and Gelak in Alai's novel *Wind*. Samdan, marginalized by bodily stigmatization and social exclusion, reconstructs her subjectivity and achieves emotional integration into the community through maternal experience and the revaluation of life. Gelak positioned between traditional ethics and modern lifestyles, embodies an active form of identification with the national community through her resilience and sense of responsibility. Their lived experiences reveal the complex intersections of gender, ethnicity, and social structures, while also illustrating how minority women contribute to strengthening national belonging through everyday practices. By analyzing these female figures, this study deepens the understanding of minority women's experiences and offers literary insights into the cultivation of a shared the sense of community for the Chinese nation.

Keywords: The Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation; Ethnic Identity; Tibetan Women; Alai; *Wind*; Samdan and Gelak

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1.Introduction

In the contemporary strategic context of consolidating the awareness of the Chinese national community, minority literature and its criticism must move beyond the simplistic “ethnic-symbolic” representations and instead delve into the values of a “diverse yet unified” national community through in-depth exploration and artistic expression. Alai, as an eminent Tibetan writer, consistently combines profound “ethnic representation” with broad “cross-ethnic imagination”: his works are rooted in the folk culture and regional memory of the Gyalrong Tibetan areas, while simultaneously addressing universal issues arising in the process of China's modernization through Tibetan narratives. This creative orientation allows his works to retain a strong ethnic character while transcending the limitations of a single ethnic perspective, thereby manifesting universal humanistic concerns. It is precisely this characteristic of “writing China from Tibet” that renders his works an important literary vehicle for bridging ethnic cultural identity and national identity (Wang, 2022), providing a paradigmatic case for studying the representation of Chinese national community consciousness in literature.

Within Alai's literary corpus, Tibetan female characters often play dual roles as both “cultural inheritors” and “intercultural mediators.” From Zhuoma's witnessing of the decline of the Tusi system in *Red Poppies* to Amas Jiong's steadfast guardianship of ecological and cultural values in *Mushroom Circle*, the fate of women forms a central lens through which Alai observes historical change and reflects on cultural interaction (Deji Cao, 1998). These female figures not only

carry the deep-seated memory of ethnic culture but also demonstrate remarkable adaptability and creativity amid social transformations. By narrating individual female experiences, Alai effectively translates the abstract concept of community consciousness into tangible lived experience, avoiding the “tourist gaze” of exoticizing the other’s culture (Said, 1978) and enabling readers to grasp the complexity and necessity of community-building through concrete character trajectories.

Scholarly research on the relationship between Alai’s creative works and Chinese national community consciousness has produced substantial findings, primarily focusing on two directions: first, emphasizing his historical narratives (e.g., *Red Poppies*) in their macro-level expression of national identity and historical reflection (Zeng, 2019; Wu, 2006); second, analyzing the communal ethics and critiques of modernization embedded in his ecological writing (e.g., *Three Cordyceps and Mushroom Circle*) (Zhou, 2018). These studies reveal, from various perspectives, the intrinsic connection between Alai’s work and community consciousness, providing a critical theoretical foundation for the present study. However, most existing research approaches the topic from a macro-level lens, offering limited exploration of the specific narrative mechanisms at the micro-level.

Existing scholarship predominantly adopts holistic or thematic perspectives, often neglecting how female characters—and particularly their identity narratives—embody community consciousness in concrete narrative terms. Many studies treat female figures merely as annotations for macro-level thematic arguments, failing to fully articulate the constructive power inherent in their embodied experiences, emotional trajectories, and acts of agency. This gap provides the entry point for the present research. This study argues that female identity narratives are a crucial dimension for understanding how the “diverse yet unified” concept of community takes root in Alai’s works and necessitates close textual analysis to elucidate their distinctive narrative strategies and cultural functions.

1.2 Research Objectives

Building on the aforementioned research gaps, this study aims to investigate the relationship between the narrative construction of Tibetan female identities and the concrete articulation of the sense of community for the Chinese nation through close textual analysis. Specifically, this research addresses three core questions: First, how does Samdan’s “body narrative interweaving divinity and demonism” embody the folkloric and cultural heritage of the Gyarong Tibetan region while concretely representing the core value of “pluralistic coexistence” within the Chinese national community? Second, how does Gelak’s “transgressive narrative challenging gender taboos” reflect Alai’s creative characteristic of “cross-ethnic imagination,” dynamically demonstrating Tibetan women’s dual identification with both ethnic and national identities? Third, in light of Alai’s practice of writing in Chinese and his engagement with national identity consciousness, what unique role do Tibetan female identity narratives play in the construction and dissemination of the sense of community for the Chinese nation?

2. Materials and Methods

Materials

This study selects the film *Wind* (Based on *The Bastard Child Gelak* by Alai) as the core case for analysis, given its irreplaceable representative value within Alai’s literary corpus. Its significance lies in three aspects. First, the narrative concentration: the film focuses on two marginal figures—Samdan (an unwed mother) and her daughter Gelak—whose intertwined fates serve as a microcosm of survival within the cultural interstices of the Jiarong Tibetan region. Their life trajectories reveal the dilemmas and choices individuals face amid cultural encounters, transforming grand narratives of identity into tangible lived experiences. Second, the cultural interaction: the film reconstructs traditional Tibetan gender taboos (e.g., the prohibition against women ascending sacred mountains), while simultaneously highlighting Han-Tibetan cultural dynamics through characters such as Zhang Luosang, a Han-Tibetan descendant, and the enlightenment offered by Han teachers. These dual perspectives underscore the historical inevitability and contemporary dynamics of interethnic interaction (Ma, 2018). Third, the fusion of faith and ideas: Alai organically integrates Bön animistic beliefs (e.g., Samdan’s sensitivity to nature) with modern egalitarian values rooted in Han cultural discourse. The identity formation of both Samdan and Gelak thus becomes a vivid example of the interweaving between “ethnic culture” and “national mainstream culture” (Shi, 2013). Rather than a superficial cultural layering, this process demonstrates a negotiation of differences toward value

consensus, embodying the intrinsic logic of the “pluralistic unity” of the Chinese national community.

Methods

To address the research questions, this study employs close textual analysis as its primary method. The analysis proceeds in three steps. First, key narrative elements—including dialogue, bodily depictions, symbolic motifs such as “sacred mountains” and “tsampa,” and recurring cultural codes—are systematically examined to trace how identity and community consciousness are articulated. Second, symbolic patterns are thematically coded and contextualized within the socio-cultural realities of the Jiarong Tibetan region, including gender discipline, folk belief, and historical Han-Tibetan interaction. Third, the cinematic adaptation is analyzed for its audiovisual strategies—such as framing, performance, and sound design—that mediate or amplify the textual representation of women’s identity and community belonging. By combining narrative and filmic analysis, the study aims to uncover how the film translates abstract notions of community consciousness into embodied experiences, particularly through the voices and struggles of Tibetan women.

3. Theoretical Framework

In examining the interaction between minority women’s identities and the consciousness of the Chinese national community, it is necessary to draw upon major theories in sociology and cultural studies to uncover the mechanisms through which identity and collective consciousness are generated. This study builds its theoretical framework primarily on three approaches—social construction theory, cultural identity theory, and the theory of the “imagined community.” Together, these perspectives provide an effective interpretative lens for understanding how Tibetan women’s identity narratives intertwine with the construction of collective consciousness in Alai’s works.

3.1 Social Construction Theory

Berger and Luckmann (1966), in *The Social Construction of Reality*, argue that social reality does not exist naturally but is continuously constructed through human interactions, institutions, and linguistic representations. This perspective offers a crucial vantage point for analyzing the identity of Samdan and Gelak. Their female identities are not solely determined by biological sex but are reshaped within the intersection of local cultural regulations in the Jiarong Tibetan region (such as the taboo against women entering sacred mountains) and national discourses emphasizing equality and education. This constructive process positions individual identity at the convergence of cultural traditions and state recognition, thereby providing a concrete pathway for the embodiment of the sense of community for the Chinese nation (Ma, 2018).

3.2 Cultural Identity Theory

Hall (1996) emphasizes that cultural identity is neither fixed nor singular, but rather fluid, multiple, and dynamically shaped within historical contexts and social relations. Applied to the analysis of *Wind*, this theory elucidates how Samdan and Gelak negotiate their identities amid cultural interactions. As an unmarried mother, Samdan bears the weight of gender taboos and stigmatization within traditional society, yet through her engagement with nature, she manifests a cultural power that transcends gendered discipline. Gelak, on the other hand, gradually develops a dual sense of identity through exposure to modern ideas and education provided by Han teachers. These processes reveal both the tension and generative potential of cultural identity, demonstrating that women are not merely passive carriers of a single ethnic culture, but active agents in constructing identity.

3.3 Theory of the Imagined Community

Anderson (1991) posits that the nation is an “imagined political community” sustained through the construction of cultural symbols, narratives, and shared memories. From this perspective, *Wind* situates the local narratives of the Jiarong Tibetan region within the broader framework of the Chinese nation conceived as a “pluralistic unity.” Through the individual experiences of Samdan and Gelak, the novel presents scenes of Sino-Tibetan cultural exchange and interactions of beliefs and ideas. These depictions not only reflect the complexities of cultural identity but also enable readers and viewers to imagine and identify with a national community that transcends ethnic differences. Such a “local-to-national” narrative logic constitutes a key mechanism in the formation of the sense of community for the Chinese nation (Shi, 2013).

In summary, social construction theory highlights the interactive generation of identity, cultural identity theory underscores its fluidity and multiplicity, and the theory of the imagined community reveals the cultural construction of national belonging.

Collectively, these three perspectives complement one another and provide a robust analytical framework for investigating how Tibetan women's identity narratives in Alai's works contribute to the formation of Chinese national community consciousness.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Findings

The analysis reveals that female narratives in Alai's works collectively embody a multilayered negotiation of identity and community. Samdan's embodied experience demonstrates how stigmatized bodies become a microcosm of communal "plural coexistence," while Gelak's narrative of breakthrough reflects the tension and reconciliation between ethnic identity and national belonging. At the same time, Alai's adoption of Chinese writing grants women's stories the function of a cultural bridge, linking local traditions with the broader national community. Together, these findings highlight how women's struggles and representations serve not only as individual expressions of survival but also as symbolic mediations of collective identity and cultural integration.

4.2 Discussions

From the very beginning of the novel, Samdan's body is inscribed with the label of "demonic," as her act of bearing a child out of wedlock is perceived as a violation of traditional Tibetan marital ethics (Alai, 2001). Her "unstable mental state" further stigmatizes her as an ominous figure. This process of "bodily stigmatization" essentially represents the ethical mechanism through which traditional Tibetan society disciplines and regulates the female body. Such discipline is not an abstract principle but rather operates through everyday micro-practices: villagers deploy gossip and epithets such as "unclean" or "inauspicious" to pass moral judgment on her; they exclude her from material distribution, thereby imposing implicit economic sanctions; and they even attempt to expel her from the village space, thus enforcing physical segregation. As Foucault (1977) argues in *Discipline and Punish*, the body is a crucial site of power, where disciplinary techniques inscribe ideology upon the individual. In *Wind*, Samdan's body becomes a "disciplinary carrier" of traditional ethics, with villagers continuously inscribing and reinforcing the label of "demonic" upon her body through these micro-practices, thereby safeguarding the boundaries of traditional order. This logic bears a parallel to *Red Poppies*, where the *tusi* system delineates human value through the classification of "bone rank," both functioning through mechanisms of categorization and exclusion to consolidate power structures.

However, Alai does not render such disciplinary practices as absolute. The episode in which several elder women secretly provide aid to Samdan reflects a form of empathetic recognition embedded within Tibetan culture. According to Gele's (2002) ethnographic study of the Jiarong Tibetan region, which historically functioned as a core area of the "Han-Tibetan corridor," the long-standing cultural plurality of the region has fostered an enduring tension within Tibetan ethical systems that allows space for the inclusion of heterogeneity. This inclusivity is evident in the grassroots ethic of mutual assistance: although many women remain publicly silent under collective pressure, some clandestinely leave *tsampa* at Samdan's door. Such gestures extend beyond acts of charity; they represent a silent resistance to rigid disciplinary norms and reveal the community's capacity for self-regulation rooted in survival wisdom. This dynamic underscores that the value of "pluralistic coexistence" is not an externally imposed concept but an inherent potential within local cultural traditions.

Samdan's body also embodies a distinctive dimension of "sacredness." She demonstrates an intuition that transcends ordinary perception, such as the ability to "smell the coming of snow" and accurately predict sudden shifts in weather (Alai, 2001). In moments of extreme deprivation, she exhibits an almost obsessive guardianship of life—for instance, reserving the last mouthful of *tsampa* for her daughter Gelak while subsisting on wild vegetables herself. This "sacredness" does not originate from institutionalized symbols of Tibetan Buddhism but is instead deeply rooted in the Bon tradition of the Jiarong region. Bon posits that "all things have spirit," regarding mountains, rivers, vegetation, wind, rain, and thunder as animate entities, and designates women as unique mediators between nature and humanity (Shi, 2013). Samdan's heightened sensitivity to the natural world reflects precisely this animistic worldview: her body functions as a receptor of natural forces, while her maternal resilience in preserving life resonates with the Bon cosmology, which emphasizes the sanctity of life, cyclical regeneration, and transformation. As Alai himself has emphasized in his reflections on creative practice, his works draw

inspiration not from institutionalized religion but primarily from Bon traditions and oral folk culture (Wu, 2006). The figure of Samdan emerges as a literary embodiment of this creative orientation.

Gelak challenges the taboo that “women cannot ascend the sacred mountain to perform rituals,” thereby demonstrating a form of critical adherence to her ethnic culture. Her stance of “believing in the sacred mountain but not in gender restrictions” reflects Alai’s dialectical approach to cultural tradition (Alai, 2001). This narrative resonates intertextually with the figure of the shaman Dorje in *Hollow Mountain*, as both characters seek a balance amid the tension between tradition and modernity. Such balance is not a simple compromise but rather a reflective reconstruction: it honors the cultural heritage while simultaneously interrogating and rejecting its unreasonable elements, embodying the internal dialectics of cultural development. Through this narrative strategy, the work avoids the reductive binary of cultural conservatism versus radical modernism, instead presenting the complexity of cultural innovation. Anderson’s (1991) notion of the “imagined community” emphasizes the constructed nature of cultural identity. Gelak’s act of questioning can thus be understood as a process of deconstructing and reconstructing the traditional gender order: she retains the cultural essence of the sacred mountain belief while discarding the outdated, discriminatory gender restrictions. In this process, the individual is not a passive recipient of cultural tradition but an active participant in its reinterpretation and innovative transformation through conscious thought and choice.

Gelak’s process of identity transgression is closely intertwined with the dissemination of Han Chinese modernist values. Through her interactions with a Han Chinese teacher, she becomes exposed to state-endorsed cultural principles, such as gender equality. Alai emphasizes that “Mandarin serves as a communication tool shared across multiple ethnic groups,” a perspective validated within Gelak’s narrative, as language functions as a medium for cultural transmission and facilitates the awakening of her national consciousness. Drawing on Anderson’s (1991) theoretical framework of “language–print capitalism–national imagination,” Gelak’s acceptance of modern values marks the expansion of her identity from that of a “Tibetan girl” to a member of the broader Chinese nation. This formation of national identification is not imposed externally; rather, it emerges organically through cultural interaction, reflecting the intrinsic logic underpinning the construction of Chinese national community consciousness.

Gelak’s successful participation in the sacred mountain ritual carries symbolic significance that transcends individual narrative. The villagers’ shift from opposition to tacit acceptance, and even to actively offering khatas, reflects the Tibetan community’s receptivity to the integration of ethnic culture with state-sanctioned mainstream culture. This collective attitudinal transformation aligns with the discourse that national identification is fundamental to enduring social stability, and it demonstrates that the construction of community consciousness requires not only changes at the individual psychological level but also recognition and enactment at the societal collective level. This process illustrates the adaptability of traditional culture under the pressures of modernity, as well as the complex social mechanisms involved in forming communal awareness. Drawing on Honneth’s (1995) theory of recognition, the villagers’ acceptance of Gelak effectively constitutes an acknowledgment of the state-endorsed value of gender equality, signaling the translation of communal consciousness from abstract ideology into collective practice. The unification of ethnic identity and national identity thus not only facilitates individual acts of identity negotiation but also promotes the concretization of communal consciousness at the grassroots level. Through this narrative, the work vividly demonstrates how Chinese national community consciousness is realized in everyday cultural practices, offering a compelling literary example for understanding the mechanisms of community formation.

Conclusion

Wind materializes Chinese national community consciousness through the “embodied narrative” of Samdan and the “emancipatory narrative” of Gelak. The dual characteristics of “demonic” and “divine” embodied in Samdan are rooted in the Bon traditions and local wisdom of the Gyarong Tibetan region, while simultaneously reflecting the pragmatic logic of Han-Tibetan cultural interactions. Gelak’s gendered resistance dynamically constructs a dual identification with both ethnic and national identity, signifying the translation of communal consciousness from abstract ideology into lived practice. Tibetan women’s identity narratives play four interrelated roles in shaping community consciousness: first, as “concrete carriers,” they render communal values tangible through individual experiences, challenging stereotypes; second, as “emotional

connectors,” they evoke cross-ethnic empathy by transmitting shared values such as motherhood and human dignity; third, as “cultural bridges,” they facilitate cultural integration amid the interaction of tradition and modernity; and fourth, as “agents of practice,” individual actions catalyze collective conceptual change, embedding communal awareness into social life. Alai’s use of the Chinese language and his “cross-ethnic imagination” further empower these Tibetan women’s narratives, enabling them to transcend ethnic boundaries and serve as pivotal mediators of community values. His works combine the distinctiveness of ethnic culture with universal humanistic values, thereby fostering identity integration through intercultural engagement. This narrative strategy offers valuable insights into how minority literature can actively contribute to the construction and reinforcement of Chinese national community consciousness.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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