

A Study on Ethnic Identity and National Identity in “Sui Feng Piao San”

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Abstract: In previous studies on ethnic minorities, there has been insufficient exploration of the correlation between ethnic identity and national identity. To address this gap, this paper adopts the method of textual analysis on Alai's novel “Sui Feng Piao San” and proposes a three-stage model of “ethnic group - nation” dual composite identity. The study finds that the ethnic identity of the characters in Alai's works exhibits the characteristic of dynamic reconstruction, while being influenced by both the traditional culture of their own ethnic group and national ideology. Furthermore, the characters in the novel have unique paths of identity construction. The research findings on contemporary ethnic minority literature further confirm this point. Finally, the results of this study can provide a brand-new perspective for subsequent research on Alai.

Keywords: Group Ideology; National Ideology; Alai

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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background and Significance

Alai is a well-known ethnic minority writer. His full-length novel “Chen'ai Luoding” is the first work in the history of Tibetan literature to win the Mao Dun Literature Prize, breaking the long-standing limitation of Tibetan literature to regional narratives. Meanwhile, Alai is also a writer who possesses both a sense of ethnic cultural identity, modern national identity, and state consciousness. After winning the prize, he created works such as “Sui Feng Piao San”, “Zhandui”, and “Mogu Quan”, covering various genres including novels and non-fiction works^[1]. Among these, “Sui Feng Piao San” is set in Tibetan areas and reflects the identity issue of “the symbiosis of ethnic identity and national identity” during the period of ethnic cultural transformation through the survival stories of grassroots individuals, providing a typical textual sample for the study of ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity and national identity have been important theories in the research on ethnic minorities in recent years, and ethnic identity exerts a profound impact on national identity. Guo Lishuang points out that dislocations and contradictions may arise between national identity and ethnic identity. Particularly in multi-ethnic countries during the social transformation period, if planned identity and resistant identity play a dominant role in society, they will challenge the previous legitimate identity—namely, challenging the legitimacy of the original national identity^[2].

The “deconstruction and reconstruction of identity” in ethnic minority literature is a current hotspot in academic research. However, most existing studies only focus on the interpretation of ethnic identity; even research on Alai has fallen into

interpretive frameworks such as “Tibetan area writing” and “Tibetan civilization identity,” which overshadow the significance of his literary creation for the construction of the connotation of the Chinese nation community^[3]. Fortunately, Alai’s works embody the value pursuit of the diversity of Chinese culture, and his literary creation is of great significance to the construction of the connotation of the Chinese nation community. This paper will study Alai’s novel “Sui Feng Piao San” to explore the in-depth connections between individuals, ethnic culture, and the national community, thereby making up for the deficiencies in existing research.

1.2 Review of Research Status

In a letter to Yi Wenxiang, Alai once stated that he intended to write a full-length novel titled “Gela’s Growth”. Although this full-length novel has not been published to date, we have “Sui Feng Piao San”, whose protagonist is exactly Gela^[4]. The novel mainly centers on the conflicts between Gela and his mother and the external world, presenting the unavoidable pain and disasters faced by individuals in society. There are two layers of society on which Gela and his mother depend for survival: one is Jicun Village, and the other is the world outside Jicun Village, i.e., the new society at that time. These two layers of the external world simultaneously surround and put pressure on Gela and his mother^[5]. Wang Rong argues that Alai roots his literary practice in the land of the Jiarong Tibetan area, and his creations highlight a strong sense of locality and the principle of integration^[1]. Alai is a writer with a sense of ethnic cultural identity, modern national identity, and state consciousness. His choice of “non-mother-tongue writing” style, the expression of national concepts, as well as the specific details and plot settings in his novel narratives, fully demonstrate his awareness of national identity and sense of responsibility to safeguard the national community^[6]. Alai’s choice to deny rather than nostalgia for the feudal serfdom in Tibetan areas reflects his rationality and democratic thoughts^[7]. However, current research still lacks in-depth discussions on the “interactive relationship between ethnic identity and national identity” in “Sui Feng Piao San”.

1.3 Research Methods

This study adopts a threefold approach of “theoretical construction - textual verification - material support.” Based on theories related to ethnic identity and national identity, combined with close reading and cultural research methods, it realizes in-depth integration of theories, texts, and documentary materials. By in-depth interpreting Alai’s novel “Sui Feng Piao San”, integrating ethnic identity theory with research on national identity, this study aims to improve the dual-perspective identity research path of “ethnic group - nation” in ethnic minority literature. From the perspective of literary research, it also provides a reference basis for the inheritance of ethnic culture in contemporary Tibetan areas, the coordinated development of ethnic identity and national identity, and the integration of ethnic cultures.

1.4 Research Objectives

- 1) Theoretical Objective: Integrate ethnic identity theory with research on national identity, and improve the dual-perspective identity research path of “ethnic group - nation” in ethnic minority literature.
- 2) Practical Objective: From the perspective of literary research, provide a reference basis for the inheritance of ethnic culture in contemporary Tibetan areas, the coordinated development of ethnic identity and national identity, and the integration of ethnic cultures.
- 3) Innovative Objective: In-depth analyze the identity dilemmas of grassroots individuals in Tibetan areas amid cultural changes and national development, and reveal the symbiotic logic between ethnic identity and national identity.

2. Theoretical Construction of Ethnic Identity

2.1 Definition of Core Concepts: The Relationship between Ethnic Identity and National Identity

Ethnic Identity The famous British scholar Bronisław Malinowski extended the concept of “ethnic identity” from the term “identity” in the field of ethnology. He believed that an ethnic group or ethnic community consists of a group of people who share the same culture and recognize each other. Ethnic identity also includes four elements: group consciousness, group cognition, attitude, behavior, and sense of belonging. It refers to an individual’s recognition of their own ethnic identity and expresses the individual’s attitude and beliefs towards their ethnic group^[8]. Ethnic identity is the core of the inherent soul of an ethnic group, which is gradually formed in the long-term social changes and historical development. Since no ethnic group can develop without ethnic identity, its connotation is not static^[9].

National Identity National identity refers to the sense of belonging and recognition of members of a country towards the politics, economy, culture, and other aspects of the country to which they belong. It implies that national identity is an elevation of ethnic identity and cultural identity. Existing studies on the definition of “national identity” can be divided into two categories: the first category, from a functional perspective, holds that national identity is a kind of identity consciousness in which an individual belongs to a certain country and has relevant connections with other people in that country; the second category, from a content perspective, argues that national identity is a comprehensive identity confirmation from two dimensions, namely the cultural dimension and the political dimension^[9]. National identity includes an individual’s confirmation of the community to which they belong and has political attributes.

Now we introduce the Interactive Relationship between the Two in Alai’s Novels In Alai’s view, China is an integrated multi-ethnic national community, a “republic composed of diverse cultures and multiple ethnic groups”^[10], and the Tibetan ethnic group is a member of this cultural community that is larger than an ethnic group. He once said, “Even ethnic minorities do not live an alternative life”^[11]. In Alai’s novels, he often depicts (ethnic) minorities and the nation as a community with a shared future: under his pen, the past history of the Jiarong Tibetan area is always closely linked to the vicissitudes of the nation^[6]. Therefore, in Alai’s novels, ethnic identity and national identity present a relationship of “symbiosis and mutual construction”: ethnic identity is the cultural foundation of national identity, while national identity provides political and developmental guarantees for ethnic identity.

2.2 Dynamic Evolution Logic

By interpreting Alai’s novels, this study proposes a three-stage model of “ethnic group - nation” dual composite identity. The first stage is the “static symbiosis stage”. In the “traditional ethnic society,” individuals form ethnic identity through the cultural inheritance of families and communities; at the same time, they form a simple national identity based on the “national sovereignty subordination relationship” (such as the dependence of chieftains on the central government, as reflected in Zeng Lijun’s discussion on the national identity of the Maiqi Chieftain in “Red Poppies”) ^[6]. The two identities are mainly characterized by “stable symbiosis” (for example, the elderly in Jicun Village recognize both their Tibetan identity and their identity as citizens of the nation) ^[12].

The second stage is the “conflict adjustment stage”. Changes in the external context, such as the in-depth integration of Han and Tibetan cultures and national institutional reforms, break the original balance of identity. Individuals experience identity confusion due to “cultural differences” and “the tension between ethnic traditions and national development” (such as Enbo’s sense of alienation from ethnic culture and the external world ^[12]). They need to resolve conflicts through “active adjustment” (accepting national systems) to achieve the coordination between ethnic identity and national identity.

The third stage is the “integration and elevation stage”. In the coordinated development of the “ethnic group-nation” individuals form a dual composite identity of “ethnic cultural confidence plus firm national identity”—they not only adhere to the foundation of ethnic culture (such as safeguarding Tibetan customs and beliefs) but also actively integrate into national development (such as participating in modernization drive and safeguarding national unity), embodying the “openness” and “integrity” of identity. This is consistent with Zeng Lijun’s statement that “Alai reveals the interconnected and symbiotic state of the destinies of the ethnic group and the nation” ^[6].

3. Findings and Discussions

3.1 Research Findings: Interpretation of “Sui Feng Piao San” Based on the Theoretical Framework

By combining the theory of ethnic identity with the framework of national identity and conducting a textual analysis of “Sui Feng Piao San”, this study finds that: against the background of modernization and cultural collision, the ethnic identity of the characters in the work presents the characteristics of dynamic reconstruction—they not only retain their attachment to the traditional culture, religious beliefs, and lifestyle of their own ethnic group but also inevitably encounter the impact of external culture and the influence of national ideology. At the same time, the infiltration of national identity, through means such as education and policies, engages in dialogue and integration with ethnic identity at the individual consciousness level, enabling the characters to explore a unique path of identity construction amid the tension between tradition and modernity, and between locality and the nation. The research results on contemporary Tibetan literature further confirm the complexity

and symbiosis of this dual identity, providing new theoretical support and case basis for understanding identity construction in ethnic minority literature.

3.2 Discussions

(1) Gela: Identity Awakening and Integration in the Trajectory of Individual Life

As the vibrant core character in the novel, Gela's growth process profoundly demonstrates the interweaving of ethnic identity and national identity. Gela was originally an uncivilized child growing up in Jicun Village: "He spent his days bustling about in the forests, tracking the footprints of various animals and skillfully setting all kinds of deadly traps. He had almost become a wild person himself. Every day, he only watched people bustle about from the gaps between the trees"^[12]. Nurtured in the natural and cultural environment of the Jiarong Tibetan area, the language, customs, and beliefs of the Tibetan ethnic group became the foundation of his life, and he had a strong sense of ethnic identity. However, his thoughts began to change in the process of contacting the outside world. For example, when Gela walked out of Jicun Village again: "Gela ran outside the town, slowed down, and with a cunning smile on his face, began to enjoy the things he had just obtained. This Gela was different from the one who stayed motionless in Jicun Village. On the road, the Gela with rich wandering experience was back again. Or rather, the Gela who had grown tired of staying in Jicun Village once again felt the most pleasant aspect of a wandering life"^[12]. "Gela would definitely keep walking like this and never return to the narrow, poor Jicun Village that clouded people's minds"^[12]. At the same time, as Gela grew up and gradually contacted the outside world, he also began to have doubts about the Tibetan ethnic group and the customs and beliefs of Jicun Village: "Gela lay on the ground, surrounded by extreme silence. At that moment, he really wanted to believe that there were flower goblins in this world. But at the same time, he knew that such beautiful mysteries could not exist in this world at all. A world that people were reluctant to live in would not be inhabited by immortals; since goblins had boundless powers, they presumably would not be willing to live here either"^[12]. Gela's dynamic balance and active integration between the two identities embody the symbiotic logic of ethnic and national identity at the individual level.

(2) Enbo: Identity Persistence and Adjustment of a Traditional Guardian

As a steadfast guardian of traditional Tibetan culture, Enbo's daily life and behavioral choices fully demonstrate his profound identification with his ethnic identity: "In his youth, Enbo became a monk under his uncle Jiangcun Gongbu, who was a lama at Wanxiang Temple. In 1956 of the new calendar, he was forced by the government to return to secular life together with Jiangcun Gongbu. He was one of the few people in the village who could read and write. The only person more knowledgeable than him was Lama Jiangcun Gongbu"^[12]. "Enbo was once a monk and believed in fate. He believed that the firecracker was not intentionally thrown by Gela. If Gela had really thrown it, it must have been the mysterious power in the dark that made him do so"^[12]. Even years after returning to secular life, Enbo still maintained his reverence for and guardianship of traditional culture and religious beliefs: "After the rabbit recovered from its illness, Enbo and his family all felt a heavy weight in their hearts. Enbo was once a monk; if it were not for the compelling situation, he would still be devoting himself to Buddhism in the temple"^[12]. He abided by the ancient customs of the Tibetan area, adhered to the traditional production and lifestyle, and held a devout respect and sense of mission to inherit his own ethnic culture. However, Enbo was not conservative and rigid. After his son passed away, Enbo and his wife Le'er Jincuo did not indulge in excessive grief but instead adopted a positive and optimistic attitude towards life: "In Jicun Village, indifference and suspicion between people constituted the main theme of life. Therefore, the overly affectionate relationship between this couple made them outliers. But they had made up their minds to live a good life regardless of others' opinions"^[12]. During the labor in the production team, Enbo also gradually transformed from initial resistance to an optimistic and accepting attitude: "The Enbo who was a monk was dying day by day in his heart, while the Enbo who strived for secular survival was growing day by day." It can be seen that Enbo's attitude of active adjustment while adhering to traditions demonstrates the mutually promoting relationship between ethnic identity and national identity.

Conclusion

The Tibetan ethnic identity in "Sui Feng Piao San" does not exist in isolation but forms a relationship of "symbiosis and mutual construction" with national identity—ethnic identity is based on the culture of Tibetan areas, while national identity

takes the “community with a shared future” as its core, and the two evolve dynamically in the interaction between individual experience and external context. Through his novel writing, Alai not only highlights the unique value of ethnic culture but also conveys a sense of responsibility to safeguard the national community. This writing of the “ethnic group - nation” dual composite identity provides important references for the identity narrative in ethnic minority literature and the development of contemporary nation-states.

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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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