

A Comparative Study of Literary Narratives from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Taking the Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains and Dad Dad Dad as Examples

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Abstract. Based on the interactive tension between narrative structure, cultural stance, and literary trends, this paper conducts a comparative narrative analysis of Ma Yuan's *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* and Han Shaogong's *Dad Dad Dad* within the context of China's New Era literature in the 1980s. It aims to demonstrate that the former, through formal experimentation and fragmented narration, employs an "othering" perspective to deconstruct the fixed attributes of Tibetan culture, focusing on a detached pursuit of literary innovation that implicitly reflects the metaphorical crisis of postcolonial writing. In contrast, the latter, via allegorical storytelling and linear narration within a confined space, dismantles the inherent flaws and continuity of Chu-shamanic culture, presenting a critical yet compassionate stance that explores the possibility of reconstructing national cultural identity. The narrative tension between these two works mutually illuminates the complexity and anxiety of cultural identity construction within a globalized literary and cultural landscape. This study transcends the singular narrative framework of individual texts, examining and revealing the interactive dynamics between narrative form and cultural positioning. It holds methodological significance for expanding research on New Era literature and cross-referential studies, marking another academic debate on trans-ethnic, trans-regional, and cross-cultural dimensions in New Era literature.

Keywords: Cross-cultural perspective, avant-garde literature, Roots-Seeking Literature, postcolonial narrative.

1. Introduction

The New Era literature of the 1980s progressed as an artistic form caught in the tension between cultural root-seeking and the exploration of modernity. Against this backdrop, writers of the period continually returned to the origins of traditional culture while maintaining a self-driven pursuit of modernist (avant-garde) narrative techniques. *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* and *Dad Dad Dad*, two seminal works from this era, jointly exemplify New Era literature's modernist reflection on national culture. Although both novels share a thematic concern with cultural retrospection (a shared creative motif), they exhibit distinct heterogeneities in narrative technique. The former examines Tibetan culture through an outsider's gaze, while the latter employs an insider's perspective to craft an allegorical narrative of Chu-shamanic culture.

Currently, research on these two works predominantly focuses on symbolic metaphor or technical craftsmanship within individual texts—such as Ma Haoran's study on the deconstructive cultural context of *Dad Dad Dad* and Li Zheng's dismantling exploration of the narrative structure in *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* [1, 2]. While academic scholarship has produced abundant directed studies on each work, comparative research examining their cultural dimensions remains scarce. Building upon existing narratological analyses of both texts, this study investigates how the authors' cultural stances shape textual construction and further explores the effects of different narrative modes on cultural reflection. By doing so, it expands the scope of single-text research, offering a new theoretical entry point for analyzing literary narratives through a cultural lens in the era of globalization.

2. Comparative Analysis of Narrative Structures

In the 1980s, avant-garde literature and the Roots-Seeking Movement developed side by side, together shaping the unique artistic character of New Era literature. This section will compare *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* and *Dad Dad Dad* in terms of three key aspects: their storytelling techniques, handling of time, and the authors' narrative interventions."

2.1. The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains: Avant-Garde Experimentation Against Tradition

As a representative writer of avant-garde literature, Ma Yuan is credited with pioneering the trend of "form as content" in Chinese fiction. He believed that the plot of a novel was not as crucial as the way the story was narrated. Consequently, Ma Yuan's works often feature fragmented and ambiguous narratives, blurring the line between truth and fiction. While this narrative mode poses significant challenges to readers, its avant-garde experimentation holds groundbreaking significance in literary history.

Published in 1985, *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* epitomizes Ma Yuan's signature "narrative traps." In this novel, he deconstructs the stability of traditional storytelling through formal experimentation, deliberately challenging readers' habitual expectations [3]. The narrative mode of this work can be summarized by two key traits: "fragmentation" and "disorientation." The novel employs an open-ended, multi-threaded structure, interweaving three disjointed storylines—Qiongbu's search for the yeti, Lu Gao and Yao Liang's witnessing of a sky burial, and Nim's marital saga—into a fragmented collage. Beyond dismantling conventional narrative coherence, the text frequently engages in self-referential commentary on its own techniques. For instance, the opening line declares, "Believe it or not, it's up to you," foregrounding the text's fictionality and undermining narrative reliability—a radical departure from traditional fiction. Furthermore, the author abruptly interrupts the flow with metafictional interrogations of structure and plot, even directly addressing the reader with questions like "how to resolve the unresolved." These strategies dismantle the closed nature of traditional novels, establishing an egalitarian relationship between text and reader.

In terms of temporal treatment and narrative chronology, Ma Yuan deliberately constructs a sense of disorientation and temporal instability through his sophisticated employment of analepses (strategically placed flashbacks) and prolepses (carefully positioned flashforwards). This complex temporal manipulation is particularly evident in chapters 3 through 10, where the author artfully intercuts and juxtaposes two distinct yet parallel plotlines—the profound spiritual encounter of Lu Gao and Yao Liang witnessing the solemn sky burial ritual and their simultaneous, more earthly pursuit of the elusive yeti legend. Throughout this narrative sequence, Ma Yuan consciously and systematically omits crucial explanatory details and connective narrative tissue, creating intentional gaps in the storytelling fabric. These carefully crafted omissions and elisions remain persistently unexplained within the textual framework, thereby transferring the full burden of interpretation and meaning-making entirely onto the active engagement of readers. This fundamental rupture and persistent discordance between the chronological timeline of the story (story time) and its actual presentation in the narrative (discourse time) serves to maintain the entire textual construct in a state of deliberate, dynamic incompleteness—a purposeful aesthetic choice that reinforces the work's overarching themes of uncertainty and open-ended interpretation.

On the Level of Authorial Intervention, as "an observer of Tibetan life," Ma Yuan deliberately avoids delving into characters' psychological depths, opting instead for an external perspective that captures only surface behaviors. For instance, when documenting Lu Gao and Yao Liang's search for the yeti, the narrative merely records their actions and dialogues without accessing any internal monologues. Throughout the work, most events remain unprocessed raw material that the author further fragments and rearranges within a so-called narrative framework. The distant, outsider's viewpoint plays a key role here, it keeps the Tibetan stories deliberately unfinished, creating space where ancient beliefs, folk tales and contemporary realities can all exist side by side in the same story.

2.2. Dad Dad Dad: Allegorical Writing in Heterotopic Space

In contrast, Han Shaogong's *Dad Dad Dad* also shows creative storytelling techniques. Instead of starting with the main plot right away, the novel first creates an isolated, strange world — Chicken Head Village. This made-up village is primitive and superstitious, cut off from the outside world. By setting most of the story in this closed environment, the writer intentionally leaves out some realistic details to strengthen the narrative effect.

The novel employs a linear timeline, skillfully weaving in historical myths like the legend of Xingtian and the ancient tale of the water god Panhu through the village's "chanting the past" ritual. This creates a constant interplay between reality and mythology. Characters and events—such as Bingzai's eternal childhood, Renbao's escape and return, and the village's relocation—all carry deeper cultural symbolism. Notably, the isolation of Chicken Head Village isn't just geographical. The author portrays a self-contained world governed by its own rules, completely cut off from the outside. Within this closed space, Han Shaogong embeds profound reflections on Chinese cultural identity.

Unlike *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains*, Han Shaogong writes about Chicken Head Village in *Dad Dad Dad* as someone who's part of the community. This comes through in two important ways.

First, the story feels very present and immediate. Instead of just describing the village like a map, the author focuses on showing the villagers' everyday lives, bringing the place and people to life with rich details.

Second, the narration stays limited to the villagers' perspective. Rather than looking down on their ignorance, the storyteller seems to share their worldview. For example, when Renbao comes back after two weeks away and says "Hello" (a modern greeting), the narrator responds in local dialect: "What's so 'good'? Unless you're sick, of course you're fine."

By telling these everyday stories in such vivid detail, the novel digs deep into cultural roots. The way the story is told itself becomes a powerful form of cultural commentary.

2.3. Fundamental Divergence in Creative Intentions

Both novels use experimental storytelling techniques, but they come from different literary traditions and show completely different author perspectives.

Ma Yuan focuses on literature itself - his creative techniques aim to free and redefine what literature can be. Han Shaogong uses storytelling as a tool - his narrative structure serves his examination of culture. This approach makes *Dad Dad Dad* immerse readers in a powerful cultural experience.

3. Cultural Perspective Analysis

3.1. The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains: An Outsider's View

Ma Yuan once said in an interview: "I came to see the show, to watch how they live. To me, their everyday life was like an endless theater performance [4]." This approach directly shaped how *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* portrays its characters as "Others." As an outsider, Ma Yuan looks at Tibet with emotional distance, creating a cultural perspective that feels intentionally separate and unfamiliar.

A close reading reveals how the writer presents Tibetan culture in broken pieces, turning its unique traditions into scattered displays. This becomes especially clear in how cultural symbols are handled. The book includes many Tibetan elements - stories about yetis, sky burials, and the Epic of King Gesar. But while these symbols appear often, they serve more as background decoration than meaningful cultural exploration. The author's "observer" position keeps the cultural understanding at surface level.

Edward Said's influential work *Orientalism* (1978) examines how Western writers often portray Eastern cultures through oversimplified stereotypes [5]. While *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* represents important experimental fiction, its portrayal of Tibetan culture shows similar problematic tendencies through symbolic but shallow representations. Said demonstrates how Western narratives position Eastern cultures as permanent "Others" to strengthen their own cultural identity [5]. Ma Yuan's novel appears to follow this pattern in its depiction of Han-Tibetan relations, using modernist techniques to present a one-sided view of frontier culture, revealing potentially postcolonial narrative tendencies.

3.2. Dad Dad Dad: Incisive Self-Reflection

In complete contrast, Han Shaogong's *Dad Dad Dad* takes a fundamentally different cultural approach. The novel examines traditional Chinese culture with a very rigorous attitude.

Han transforms the mythical figure Delong - traditionally celebrated as humanity's ancestor after the great flood - into an unfaithful man who deserts Chicken Head Village with a green snake when Bingzai is born. This intentional reimagining leaves Bingzai as a fatherless, deformed child who never grows up, only able to repeat "Dad dad dad" and "Fck mother" through this bold reinterpretation, Han sharply criticizes traditional culture, using these symbolic characters to expose its oppressive and backward aspects.

The novel's critique contains deeper layers of complexity. While exposing cultural flaws, Han Shaogong simultaneously reveals subtle ambivalence through the persistent Xingtian worship and Bingzai's mother's unwavering care for her disabled child. This emotional tension between condemnation and compassion runs throughout the narrative.

Cultural critique naturally focuses on shortcomings, yet *Dad Dad Dad* risks crossing into excessive dramatization. As scholars note, "roots-seeking shouldn't serve as exoticism, nor purely objective display of primitive, backward, barbaric or bizarre cultural forms [6]." Chicken Head Village's portrayal leans heavily toward the savage - from Bingzai's physical deformity to the graphic sacrificial rituals. The unrelenting violence and ignorance create such overwhelming bleakness that it occasionally overshadows thoughtful cultural analysis, making the critique appear somewhat extreme.

Though Han constructs his cultural examination within an isolated historical setting, this artistic choice doesn't fully explain the novel's subjective perspective. More importantly, Han's critique serves a deeper purpose - not merely to showcase cultural backwardness, but to unearth buried cultural identity and reassess traditional values through an authentic local perspective [7].

Historically contextualized, *Dad Dad Dad* represents Han's earnest attempt at cultural roots-seeking. However, constrained by its era's limitations, the work ultimately fails to construct a positive interaction between tradition and modernity, falling short as an exemplary model of cultural reflection.

4. Interplay of Literary Trends and Cultural Reflection Pathways

Chinese literature in the 1980s was permeated with a complex sense of anxiety. Though belonging to avant-garde and Roots-Seeking movements respectively, both *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* by Ma Yuan and *Dad Dad Dad* by Han Shaogong ultimately adopted desolation as their narrative undertone. Beneath this lies Chinese writers' collective self-doubt and identity crisis amid cultural clashes during the globalization wave of the Reform and Opening-up era.

4.1. The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains: Identity Dislocation in Radical Experimentation

In an interview, Ma Yuan remarked: "Though superficially present-tense, it actually isn't. The direction it encompasses is exceptionally vast and distant [4]." This reveals the work isn't merely narrative experimentation—it incorporates the author's philosophical contemplations. The sky burial

ritual engages with mortality, while the yeti hunt explores human origins, these grand themes lend the work mystical yet desolate qualities.

However, the author deliberately avoids grand narratives, even obscuring authorial subjectivity by positioning himself as co-inquirer with readers. The text thus presents him only as an "external observer" without clear stances, rendering the treatment somewhat superficial. Technically, this adopts the Western modernist "zero-degree writing" approach—emotionally detached composition [8]. Yet culturally, such radical formalism exposes Chinese writers' dislocation of subjective consciousness amid globalization.

4.2. Dad Dad Dad: Cultural Self-Abasement Through Modern Lens

As a canonical text of the Roots-Seeking (Xungen) literary movement, *Dad Dad Dad* should theoretically articulate a profound sense of cultural rootedness and offer a reaffirmation of indigenous identity. Notably, though, Han Shaogong's allegorical construction of Jitou Village predominantly exhibits closed, atavistic, and barbaric cultural traits. While the village's inhabitants do demonstrate a certain tenacious resilience—a quality that could be interpreted as embodying the stubborn persistence of cultural memory—this is decidedly not the primary narrative focus. Rather, the work remains overwhelmingly critical in its anthropological gaze, presenting traditional culture as a site of irrationality, violence, and epistemological imprisonment rather than as a source of redemptive value.

This critical approach aligns with broader intellectual currents of the late twentieth century. In the 1960s, Jacques Derrida proposed his seminal theory of deconstructionism, which emphasized textual indeterminacy and sought to reveal the inherent contradictions within seemingly stable meaning systems [9]. The novel extensively deploys this deconstructive logic toward traditional culture: reducing its complex manifestations to stark symbolic representations (e.g. the eternally stunted and mute Bingzai, who functions as a grotesque embodiment of cultural stagnation and congenital defects). While this strategy proves effective for excavating the collective psyche and exposing pathological elements within cultural inheritance, such radical deconstruction simultaneously damages the very possibility of stable cultural meaning by systematically destabilizing foundational concepts. When the stability of cultural referents is negated through relentless critique, identity itself becomes ungrounded, leaving characters—and by extension, readers—adrift in a world of fragmented signification.

Han Shaogong stated in the "Roots" of Literature: "Our duty is to harness modern concepts 'energy to recast and polish this self [10]." Thus, Roots-Seeking writers ultimately sought transformation of national spirit," yet had to confront the irreconcilable rift between tradition and modernity.

4.3. Convergence and Interaction of Literary Trends

Against the backdrop of globalization, Chinese writers in the 1980s found themselves deeply entangled in the predicament of cultural identity reconstruction. Avant-garde literature, adopting a posture of "deconstruction" challenged traditional certainties, while Roots-Seeking literature attempted to "reconstruct" by exploring traditional culture's modern transformation. Together, they manifested the crisis of cultural identity, yet simultaneously, through innovative narrative modes, both movements provided aestheticized pathways for expressing this cultural anxiety.

At its core, the 1980s "cultural fever" was a New Era reincarnation of the May Fourth Movement. The pervasive melancholy in both *The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains* and *Dad Dad Dad* constitutes the most profound notes in this cultural variation - simultaneously documenting the birth pangs of collapsing traditions while hinting at possibilities for cultural reinvention.

5. Conclusion

The Temptation of the Gangdise Mountains uses fragmented storytelling and an outsider's perspective to deconstruct Tibetan culture. While its experimental style breaks new ground in literary form, its emotional distance risks reinforcing postcolonial stereotypes. *Dad Dad Dad*, meanwhile,

critiques deep-rooted flaws in Chinese culture through its closed-off village setting, but its dramatic portrayal of cultural "spectacles" sometimes overshadows thoughtful analysis. Though both works approach cultural critique differently and imperfectly, they ultimately reflect the shared cultural anxieties of Chinese writers in the post-reform era.

This study moves beyond single-text analysis, offering fresh insights into how narrative techniques interact with cultural perspectives. Future research could expand to compare other works from the same period, deepening our understanding of how storytelling shapes cultural identity, and revealing the rich, multifaceted value of contemporary Chinese literature in global contexts.

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