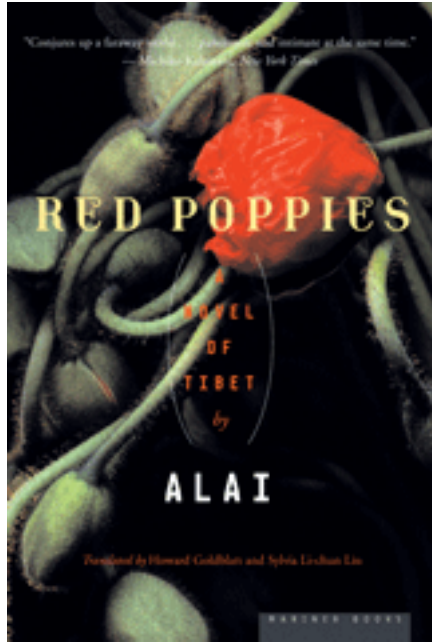


A Reader's Guide



Red Poppies

by Alai

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About Red Poppies

"Panoramic and intimate at the same time." — Michiko Kakutani, *New York Times*

"Lavish . . . A magnificent journey to another time and place [and] a scathing observation of power, brutality, and corruption." — Helen Mitsios, *Philadelphia Inquirer*

"Shrewdly satiric and wonderfully entertaining . . . A lusty tale of federal power struggles." — Donna Seaman, *Booklist*

A lively and cinematic twentieth-century epic, *Red Poppies* focuses on the extravagant and brutal reign of a clan of Tibetan warlords during the rise of Chi

nese Communism. The story is wryly narrated by the son of the chieftain, a self-professed "idiot" who reveals the quarrels, sibling rivalry, adultery, murder, torture, secrets, lies, and scheming behind his family's struggles for power. When the chieftain agrees to grow opium poppies with seeds supplied by the Chinese Nationalists in exchange for modern weapons, he draws Tibet into the opium trade and unwittingly sows the seeds of his — and Tibet's — downfall.

Red Poppies, Alai's first novel, was rejected by numerous Chinese publishers for a number of years due to its sensitive political content. It finally made its way to China's prestigious People's Literature Publishing House, where an editor championed its publication. The novel was an immediate bestseller in China and was awarded the nation's highest literary award, the Mao Dun Prize. In America, it was selected as a Los Angeles Times Book of the Years, owing a Book Sense 76 Top Ten pick, and a finalist for the Kiriya Prize.

About Alai

Alai is an ethnic Tibetan living in Chengdu, in Sichuan pProvince. An award-winning author of a number of short story collections, he is also the editor of China's largest science fiction journal, *Science Fiction World*.

About the Translators

Howard Goldblatt and Sylvia Li-chun Lin previously translated Chu T'ien-wen's *Notes of a Desolate Man*, which was named the 1999 Translation of the Year by the American Literary Translators Association.

Questions for Discussion

We hope that the following questions will stimulate discussion for reading groups and provide a deeper understanding of *Red Poppies* for every reader.

1. *Red Poppies* is the first major literary novel by a Tibetan about Tibet. Julia Lovell of the *Times Literary Supplement* wrote, "Alai offers Western audiences a new and thought-provoking perspective on Tibetan history." How does Alai's portrayal of Tibet compare to or shed light on your image of Tibet?
2. The narrator proclaims himself an idiot and believes that "an idiot has no strong loves or hates, and can see nothing but the basic truths." How does his definition of an idiot differ from his family's? Is this an accurate description of the character?
3. The chieftain's wife is preoccupied with maintaining her youthful appearance. Is this merely a matter of vanity? In the world of the chieftains, how much does a woman's status depend on her physical appearance?
4. The narrator explains how bone, or *shari*, "separates people into high and low." How strict is this separation in the world of the novel? How acutely does *shari* affect the trajectory of the characters' lives? How will the significance of *shari* change once the chieftains disappear?
5. The Living Buddha warns that the poppies are bad luck and have a "corrupting influence," while the narrator remarks that Chieftain Maichi "liberated his people with this unprecedented, wondrous thing." Which claim is more accurate, and why?
6. Why are Wangpo Yeshe and the Christian missionary's attempts to convert the Maichi people such a failure? How closely are religion and politics connected in the power structure of Tibet at this time?
7. The narrator observes that while some of Chieftain Lha Shopa's subjects had abandoned their master, "that did not mean they desired no master." In fact, "that idea would never cross their minds. Even if someone tried to force it into their heads, they would simply frown and push it away with little effort." Why would people want to subject themselves to the dictates and possible cruelties of a master? Is the narrator's observation skewed by his

position as the master's son?

8. Sexuality and desire are strong forces in the novel. In what ways does desire serve as a source of both weakness and power for the characters?

9. The issue of barbarity emerges repeatedly in *Red Poppies*. The Han Chinese consider Tibetans barbaric. The English consider the Han Chinese barbaric. The narrator's sister even considers her native country barbaric. What does it mean to be barbaric? How does the meaning change across time and across borders?

10. According to the narrator, "People are all the same, whether they're silversmiths or chieftains or slaves. They think only about what they want, not daring to ask themselves if there is any reason to be hopeful." How accurate is this statement throughout the novel and in the world around you?

For Further Reading

The following books may be of interest to readers of *Red Poppies*.

[Becoming Madame Mao](#) by [Anchee Min](#)

[Wild Ginger](#) by [Anchee Min](#)

[The Far Field](#) by [Edie Meidav](#)

[The Caprices](#) by [Sabrina Murray](#)