

Sovereign and Servant

Tibetan Gesar Epic as Ideological State Apparatuses in China



Master Thesis

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Abstract

In recent years, there has been a resurgence of attention towards the Tibetan oral epic *Gesar* in the People's Republic of China (P.R.C.). On the surface, it appears that *Gesar* re-enters the sight of the general public in China after the Chinese application to UNESCO was successful in 2009, by which the *Gesar* epic tradition is accepted and inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Immediately following the recognition from UNESCO, the Chinese publication of, on, and about *Gesar* exponentially thrived. All these celebrations of *Gesar* sounded so merry and joyous that it almost seemed a natural gesture by UNESCO, without taking into account the role of the Chinese State Apparatuses.

Therefore, it is necessary to contextualize this event within the long and winding six decades of history of *Gesar* study in China, which has always been impossible to separate from political intentions. Constituted and powered by a gigantic and complex socio-cultural and political mechanism, which has been in motion behind the scenes long before 2009, many of these seemingly natural and spontaneous progressions of the modern image or representation of *Gesar* as a collective whole have always been carefully crafted.

The main goal of the thesis is to identify the national ideology governing *Gesar*, and to show how the three main active sectors, which consist of the government, academia, and the publishing world, interact, function as, and formulate themselves into what Althusser describes as Ideological State Apparatuses, in order to reterritorialize Tibet and Tibetan culture through representing *Gesar*. Lastly, the final chapter is dedicated to efforts made, no matter how feeble, scattered, or spontaneous, struggling to deterritorialize the Chinese representation supported and endorsed by the hegemonic Ideological State Apparatuses.

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Introduction

...une présentation générale de la geste épique tibétaine du Roi Gesar de Gling, nous réfléchissons à l'élaboration, de la part de Pékin, d'un discours politique et littéraire visant à faire de Gesar de Gling le héros de cette épopée <panchinoise> que l'Empire du Milieu n'a, peut-être, jamais possédée. (Maconi, 2004:371-2)

The history of the *King Gesar* epic can be traced back to as early as the 11th century. In the P.R.C., it is often revered as “the longest epic of the world”, despite the fact that *Gesar* being an oral tradition somehow contradicts the implication of a fixed length embedded in the claim itself. As a living tradition, it is still performed nowadays, mainly in the pastoral areas of Tibet, especially in *Yul-shul*, the rumoured birthplace of King *Gesar*. The epic has been constantly enriched and developed throughout history mostly in the pastoral areas, but not quite in the urban centres, such as Shigatse and Lhasa. It is recognized by the Tibetans, those in Tibet and in exile, as an extremely important tradition that has shaped the socio-cultural character of Tibet for centuries, since it contains and exhibits many fundamental beliefs and symbols of Tibetan culture, such as the mountain cult and the subduing of animistic demons.¹ Therefore, associated rituals and practices are also highly influential within Tibetan communities. The *thangka* depicting *Gesar* on the cover photo (left) is one example.

The storyline tells of the superhuman and heroic feats of King *Gesar*, “the elected king, [who] is in fact the personification of the ideal Tibetan man, ... who can perform supernatural feats when engaged in battle. When he is not so engaged, he simply goes into retreat in order to practice meditation as if he were a man of religion” (Karmay, 1994:114). The epic can be divided into three parts in terms of plot development, of which the first part covers his descent from heaven up to his enthronement and his marriage with his twelve consorts, including *Drukmo* the queen and *Meza* the chief consort, the second his conquest and campaigns against different countries, and the third his return to heaven after his triumph over all the enemies on earth. In the second part, every episode tells *Gesar*'s victory over a different country

¹ This introduction paragraph of the *Gesar* epic is adapted from my term paper for the course Oral Tradition.

respectively. The episodes follow a certain narrative structure, in which *Gesar*'s country gets into conflict with a belligerent state and his triumphant campaign against it. He then claims the treasures of that state and shares them with his people, while taking the prettiest girl of that state, usually the princess, as his consort. This explains why the second part is where the vitality of the living tradition lies since bards can always improvise based on this narrative pattern to create a new episode. In contrast, the first part and the third part are more or less fixed.

The *King Gesar* epic tradition is inscribed on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. However, studies and research on *Gesar* are always, although sometimes nominally, in motion since the establishment of the P.R.C. in 1949. Numerous scholars and government officials have conducted extensive research, survey, and fieldwork to acquire knowledge of the “ethnic minority” groups. Among these groups, the Tibetans are, without a doubt, the most intricate yet interesting case. And among Tibetan culture and traditions, it is not an exaggeration to say that the Chinese have the most long-lasting and perpetuating interest in the Tibetan *Gesar* epic, with particular regard to the distant echo between its pastoral and therefore “proletariat” nature and the Party’s socialist doctrines.

The representation of the *Gesar* epic in the P.R.C. mainly consists of three actors, namely the government, the academia, and the publishing world. There is always an inseparable connection and interplay between the three, who, through these interactions, constitute and function as the collective and sole authoritative spokesperson to posit and interpret *Gesar* in line with the national discourse of the central government: the Tibetans are a Chinese ethnic minority group; and that Tibet is a “sacred and inseparable part” of the great Chinese nation.

Not much comprehensive study has been dedicated to the academic representation of *Gesar* in the P.R.C. other than Li Lianrong’s article in 2001 and that of Lara Maconi in 2004. Li made quite an effort to present a scholarly article up to international standards, steering clear of the ornate nationalist tone prevalent and necessary in Chinese publications, while carefully circumventing the sensitive zones that might bring him personal trouble. Maconi, free from these bounds, exhibited excellent scholarship and very effectively utilized her personal connections in Chinese

academia, enabling her to present a holistic description of the development of *Gesar* studies in relation to government initiatives.

Regrettably, there has not been any further investigation for ten years after their publications. Therefore, the main aim of this thesis is to fill in this gap. In the last update in 2004, Maconi notices a revamp of *Gesar* studies and representation. Since no concrete goal of the Chinese government was visible, Maconi was obliged, frustratingly, to resort to the ambiguous and too general model answer of “developing soft power”. However, with UNESCO recognition officiated in 2009, it is now possible to contextualize this so-called “third renaissance” into the larger picture of the rise and fall of *Gesar* representation throughout the P.R.C. era.

Limitations

It is necessary to acknowledge several possible shortcomings of this thesis due to logistic and temporal constraints. Featured primary sources and materials published in the 20th century might appear inadequate, since the access to the archive of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the reservoir of Chinese *Gesar* studies material, is highly restricted compared to the relatively free flow of academic articles online since the early 21st century. In this case, I decided to rely largely on Li Lianrong and Lara Maconi concerning the history of *Gesar* studies in China before 2000. Primary materials I gathered are mostly published in the 21st century, highlighting the inheritance of discourses, instead of indulging in the 20th century, which Maconi and Li have already studied comprehensively.

I could not afford to carry out fieldwork in Tibet or China. Therefore I could only try my very best to incorporate voices that *were* once subaltern before reaching the international media and that very possibly still are so in China. This was also why a large part of the thesis is dedicated to demonstrating how the three actors cooperate as Ideological State Apparatuses. It was a forced choice taking time constraint and practicality into consideration. However, I constantly reminded myself to bring in resistant voices as much as possible, while employing official and publicly available sources and materials.

Theoretically speaking, some might find my hypothesis more an announcement than a deduction of the existence of State Apparatuses in *Gesar* studies since they are not always visible when not activated. Therefore, I strived to present as much factual evidence as possible in the subsequent chapters to prove my points.

Another possible question is the apparently rigid boundaries between categories. First, there seems to be a binary opposition between Han Chinese and the Tibetans, who assume the role of the oppressor and the oppressed. This is of course, not a totally correct reflection of the reality. There is always space to operate and express oneself, which is noticeable among some scholars, who will be mentioned in the “academia” and the “publishing world” chapter. However, a structuralist approach to the topic is still fruitful, since, structurally speaking, the oppression is very visibly in an authoritative regime.

Second, the demarcation between different sectors - the government, academia, and the publishing world - is not as clear-cut as it seems. Their function and workings are endlessly intertwined. Hence, the purpose of this thesis is not to delineate how a particular sector functions individually, but how it achieves more far-reaching results by collaboration.

Theoretical Background

While there is one Repressive State Apparatus, there is a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses. Even presupposing that it exists, the unity that constitutes this plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses as a body is not immediately visible. (Althusser, 1971[2008]:18)

The theoretical framework of this thesis is adapted from the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser's concept of Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). As a scholar of the Marxist tradition, Althusser inherited the classical Marxist theory of class and class struggle, and a critical attitude towards capitalism. He further expanded the concept of ideology and proposed how it functions within societies by means of ISAs. In this essay, the concept of ISAs is adopted as the backbone of the thesis. Building on the concept, the main objective is to demonstrate how the government, academia, and the publishing world together function as such. Hence, it is essential first to explain how these elements are adopted and applied, and which adaptations, however slight, are needed for Sino-Tibetan cultural representation, if not tension.

Although the case of *Gesar* does not deal with the typically Marxist relations between the bourgeoisie and the proletariat, I assert that the relation between Han Chinese, as the dominating "class", and the Tibetans, as the proletariat, in terms of political power, is very similar to that of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Therefore, the concerned entities are slightly altered from "class" to "ethnicity", or better "*minzu*" (民族), which in itself is a very tricky word. Both the hypothesis and the term *minzu* will be further discussed and substantiated in subsequent chapters.

State Apparatuses

Every State Apparatus, whether Repressive or Ideological, functions both by violence and by ideology. (Althusser, 1971[2008]:19)

In his ground-breaking essay *On Ideology*, Althusser acknowledges the existence of two categories of State Apparatuses, namely the Repressive State Apparatus (RSA) and the Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). There is only one Repressive State

Apparatus, as it is a manifestation of the sole central authority, which monopolizes power in order to discipline its citizens. It “functions massively and predominantly *by repression* (including physical repression), while functioning secondarily by ideology” (19). This secondary function is in part a derivation of the first, since it involves the fear of repression. This particular aspect of Repressive State Apparatus is later picked up by Michel Foucault and expanded in his book *Discipline and Punishment*. The definition and function of the Repressive State Apparatus is quite straightforward, since it is the hard-line disciplinary body of the authority itself.

In contrast, there is a plurality of Ideological State Apparatuses. There are numerous categories, such as “the legal ISA, the political ISA (the political system), the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, censorship)” (17), just to name a few which are relevant to our case. They are “a certain number of realities which present themselves to the immediate observer in the form of distinct and specialized institutions” (17).

The legal ISA corresponds to the legal institutions, as well as the general legal scene and the unspoken rules. The political ISA corresponds to the political system. The unshaken one party rule as stated in the Chinese constitution is self-explanatory enough to reflect the political reality of an authoritative state. There is no entity that is able to provide a decent challenge to the discourse and direction of the Chinese Communist Party. In the P.R.C., authority and politics often override the legal system. Policies can always bypass or even alter the legal ISA. This reality refrains individuals and groups from affiliating themselves with sensitive topics, in our case the Tibet question. These ISAs ensure the smooth execution of an unassailable authority of the RSA.

The cultural ISA is especially critical for this essay, since the three active sectors of the Chinese representation of *Gesar* mainly operate within this particular ISA. It works as a propaganda machine to preach the official ideology and to inject it into the consciousness of the public through “state-sponsored production or reproduction, in nationally distributed media” (Gladney, 1994:94). While the government acts as the mastermind of the cultural ISA, academia and the publishing world are employed and disciplined as agents of the public, but also constitute and function as the cultural ISA. Without deviating from the ideology, they produce works that reciprocally

reinforce the ISA. We will investigate this topic more deeply in the following chapters.

From the above-mentioned examples, we can observe that “the ISAs function ...by ideology, the ideology of the ruling class” (20), the same ruling class who are Han Chinese officials within the core of the Communist Party, who control the power of the state, “has at its disposal the Repressive State Apparatus” (20). The RSA and ISAs complement each other as “the Ideological State Apparatuses function massively and predominantly *by ideology*, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attenuated and concealed, even symbolic” (19). One may argue that repression is a lot more visible than it is concealed or symbolic in the P.R.C. Yet, one must also be reminded that power is reserved exclusively for the ruling class in authoritative states, in which class mobility is even more difficult, as in capitalistic states in the original idea of Althusser.

This concludes the repression aspect in both the RSA and ISAs. Nevertheless, at this point we are only able to observe a general hard line that delineates *vis-à-vis* the people what *not* to do, but not what to do. This precisely is the division of labour between repression and ideology, where the former disciplines what *not* to do, and the latter instructs what to do. In the next chapter we will delve deeper into the ideology governing issues concerning Tibet and *Gesar* in particular, while supported by the theories of various scholars.

The Government

We love this great epic and we feel proud for its existence among the Tibetan people today. In the meantime, we have to face sadly the grim reality: the Tibetan people and their life styles have remained stagnant for a long time. The Tibetan society needs advancement, the Tibetan culture should further be developed. Reform should be carried out and the ‘epic era’ should become the past history. (Jiangbian Jiacao, 1998:224)

Although the government is the master of the RSA, controlling domains such as “the administration, the army, the police, the courts, the Prisons” (Althusser 1971[2008]:17), it functions as the mastermind in the ISAs. Now, let us first examine the official ideology governing ethnic minorities, including Tibet.

Official Ideology

Ideology is the system of the ideas and representations which dominate the mind of a man or a social group. (Althusser, 1971[2008]:32)

Althusser claims that “Ideology has no history”. It “does not mean there is no history in it, but that it has no history of its own”. (34) In other words, it is not a product of historical progression but an *a posteriori* construct, a self-affirmation that reinforces itself by selectively including approved historical facts while ignoring those that are not. An ideology “is endowed with a structure and a functioning such as to make it non-historical reality, i.e. an omni-historical reality, in the sense in which that structure and functioning are immutable, present in the same form throughout what we can call history.” (35)

Althusser also argues that ideology only “expresses class position”, and “is determined in the last instance of the class struggle, not in a negative sense, but in an absolutely positive sense.” (34-5) Thus in our case, when was this “last instance of the *minzu* struggle” that determines “*minzu* position”?

This last instance can be traced back to the 1890s, when the term *minzu* was first introduced to China via Japan and used as a tool for anti-Qing revolutionaries to alienate and delegitimize the Manchu court. The categories *Hanzu* (Han race) and

Manzu (Manchu race), promoted by Chinese nationalists such as Liang Qichao (1873-1929), “marked a departure from traditional cultural conceptualization of identity”. It “exhibited a level of essentialism and mutual exclusivity characteristic of racial categories”, “result[ing] in ... a form of ‘Han racism’” (Mullaney, 2011:23). Minorities, not limited to the Manchus, were branded as barbarians who usurped the Han’s right to rule China. “Han racism” later on further lent itself to the birth of the concept of “China proper”, “a geographical formulation...excluding the territories of Xinjiang and Tibet” (24). However, the concept of “Greater China-ism” overtook the concept of “China proper” after the collapse of Manchu rule and the establishment of the Republic of China in 1911. The “Greater China” position “argued for the need to prevent imperial forces from infiltrating these (the frontier) regions and mobilizing local national sentiments against the Chinese regime” (24-25). This echoes what Benedict Anderson suggests, “the character of official nationalism (is) an anticipatory strategy adopted by the dominant groups which are threatened with ... exclusion from an emerging nationally-imagined community.” (Anderson, 1983[1991]:101)

This “Greater China” position verifies how Anderson defines nationalism, where “it is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness: it invents nations where they do not exist.” (6) It “stretches the short tight skin of the nation over the gigantic body of the empire” (87). This invention, where geopolitics trumps history, is exactly the *Hanzu* ideology Communist China has inherited from their Republican predecessors. It presents a hierarchy of two categories of China: the orthodox Han-Chinese China proper on top, while frontier China, only included due to practical political considerations, at the bottom. The “subordination of nationalities in China leads to the promotion of the Han as the vanguard of the peoples of P.R.C.” (Gladney, 1994:98)

After essentializing the Han as the “normal” and the general equivalence of being “Chinese”, Han Chinese authority attempts to project a certain “self”, a twofold concept of China. It can be illustrated by the “Symbolic-Imaginary-Real” triad of Lacanian psychoanalysis, which emphasizes pertinent issues such as self-recognition, identity, and the “other”. The symbolic refers to the stern and rigorous system of rules whose discourse is “there is difference”. It corresponds to the “China proper” position, constantly reminding there is a difference between Tibet and Han China. The imaginary attempts to bridge this difference as pronounced by the symbolic, but

quite futilely so, since the imaginary is a projection of the symbolic. Its existence is induced by the difference, and is thus fundamentally bound by it (Žižek, 2006: 8-9). Its discourse, “there is similarity”, corresponds to the concept of “Greater China”, since both frontier and “proper” China are “similar” because they belong to the same Chinese nation. However, “Greater China” is built upon and cannot exist alone without the concept of “China proper”. The real’s discourse is “there is”. It refers to where the true *Geist* of Han China and Tibet lies. However, it is irrelevant to how an ideology functions since it deals with relations but not definitions, and aims at maximizing political advantages of the authority by gliding between differences and similarities. This is exactly what Althusser argues, “[i]t is not their real conditions of existence, their real world, that ‘men’ ‘represent to themselves’ in ideology, but above all it is their relation to those conditions of existence which is represented to them there.” (1971[2008]:38)

Han racism has greatly affected the approach to represent minorities, including the Tibetans. It brings rise to the exoticizing of minorities, the reinforcement of stereotypes in frontier China. It is what Gladney (1994) criticizes as a form of “oriental orientalism”, or Michael Hechter (1975) “internal orientalism”, articulated by Maconi as follows:

Par rapport aux autres genres populaires tibétains, l'épopée présentait des atouts non négligeables pour les autorités. Le soutien du modèle épique contribuait à entretenir une certaine image exotique des populations des frontières, braves et romantiques, enclines au chant et à la danse, héritières d'une culture orale plutôt qu'écrite. (2004:401)

Internal orientalism creates the scenery where the minorities happily accept objectivized identity because of “modernization” and “democratic representation” brought by the government. Unsurprisingly, Tibet has to be the “most willing among all” (Gladney, 1994:96). It justifies the authority’s discursive power to reinterpret and represent minority cultures since the former is “modern” and “scientific”, thus providing a perfect cover for the government’s underground utilitarian agenda. Thus, the government can make frontier China and its culture useful to its political intentions as it pleases. This is exactly what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari branded as “movements of deterritorialization and processes of reterritorialization”

which are “always connected [and] caught up in one another” (1987:10). The subjectivity of Tibet is deterritorialized, wiped out, and detached from its origin (some might argue it has transmigrated to Dharamsala and other overseas communities), while the Chinese ISAs designate a new narrative and representation and initiate the reterritorialization process of Tibet.

National Policy

En général, si ce n'est pendant la période de la Révolution Culturelle, on constate un certain soutien à la recherche sur *Gesar* de la part des autorités chinoises, soutien motivé davantage par des raisons politiques que par des raisons artistiques. (Maconi, 2004:391)

The government has played the most crucial role of all throughout the history of the representation of *Gesar*, which has always been highly politically charged. It acts as the authoritative patron, supporting the academia and the publishing world, and drafting clear objectives and guidelines in accordance with its political interests. One extreme example is that “...la récupération politico-littéraire du mythe de *Gesar* aurait atteint ses formes les plus radicales pendant la Révolution Culturelle, quand des chants de *Gesar* célébrant Mao auraient été composés” (402). Now, let us first focus on how the government approaches *Gesar* in the political scene.

Before the adoption of the Open Door Policy in 1978, there were no clear objectives for *Gesar* scholars and researchers other than the basic act of collecting and recording. There was more freedom to study the epic as long as the approach was interesting and fruit bearing, since there was a lack of basic knowledge on *Gesar*; plus there were no immediate political interests that demand its utilization. However, after 1978 we witness a centralizing turn of *Gesar* studies. In 1979, the Ethnic Literature Research Institute of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and the Chinese Research Society of Folk Literature and Art were established to study the literature of all ethnic minority groups, and was largely inspired by *Gesar* studies. Meanwhile, officially sponsored *Gesar* research institutes were set up in Lhasa (1979) and the China Northwest Ethnic University (1981).

The centralizing turn also resulted in the establishment of the *Kanze* school of New Tibetan Painting in 1980. The most significant painting from this school was exactly “King *Gesar* of Ling” (top right part of cover photo), which “has remained the classic

piece in this tradition of New Tibetan Painting. The central figure, that of King *Gesar* mounted on a fiery, raving steed, is that of contemporary Chinese fairy-tale illustrations.” “This combination of elements of traditional painting and modern Chinese art is typical of the New Tibetan painting.” The government later selected this image to be “transferred to the Cultural Palace of Minorities in Beijing” (Kvaerne, 1994:168). These two examples stood witness to the government’s increasing desire to develop and capitalize on its discursive power to represent and reinterpret *Gesar* and its related culture.

Five-year plans are very important for the Chinese government, since it is the basic unit of a nationwide comprehensive development plan. During the drafting stage of the 6th five-year plan in 1983, the authorities set a definite target for *Gesar* studies scholars. They were required to “edit and publish a comparatively comprehensive abridged version in Tibetan” (要編纂出版一套比較完善的精選本). This task was subsequently recognized as the “national highlight of the R&D project” (國家重點科研項目) in the 7th and 8th five-year plans. In the 9th five-year plan, this publication, together with its Chinese and “foreign language” translation, were selected as the “national highlights of books” (國家重點圖書) to be published within the timespan of the plan (Jiangbian & Wu, 1985[1997]:ii-iii). It was the first time ever for the Chinese government to include research of an ethnic minority culture into a five-year plan (Yang, 1990[1996]:163). Approaching the end of the decade, the target further expanded into the field of translation. The government demanded a decent Chinese translation of the *Gesar* epic (Maconi, 2004:399). The aforementioned abridged version served as the source text for the translators to work on.

Nevertheless, we should note that an “abridged version”, or the original Chinese term *jingxuan* (精選), literally suggests a process of “extracting or selecting the essence”. The publication of an abridged epic uplifted a certain part as the canon, while sentencing the not-chosen parts to the periphery. It created a false orthodox status of the selected part as the “essential”, while there had never been such a distinction historically. It also went against the oral tradition, wherein new chapters and stories should constantly be created to keep the tradition living. Therefore, this publication marked the shift of discursive power, the power to determine what should be

considered important and essential. The collective oral community is now disempowered, while the government and its sponsored agencies obtain a discursive monopoly on the *Gesar*. They have the sole authority to monitor what is to be included in future editions, if there will be any.

The publication of the abridged version also unveiled another façade of the central authorities. The government wields the power to discontinue a politically undesirable academic trend, and to encourage any research or school it deems politically profitable, not in a repressive but in a forcefully positive way. Because the government considered the abridged version as the definitive version of *Gesar*, which enabled the government to represent the *Gesar* however they wished, the political use value of *Gesar* had been exhausted. Further studies on the *Gesar* were still welcomed, but the government decided not to sponsor and support *Gesar* studies as much as it had. Thus *Gesar* studies were at their second ebb:

Privée du soutien de l'État dans les années 1990, les études sur *Gesar* en R.P.C. perdent beaucoup de leur vigueur jusqu'à la fin du XX^e siècle. Les équipes continuent à exister nominalement, mais les surtout à la révision et à la correction des matériaux travaillés jusqu'alors. (Maconi, 2004:399)

However, the government did not announce its withdrawal from *Gesar* studies. Instead they celebrated the great success and conclusion of the project and praised the scholars involved, which implicitly hinted a hiatus of government support.

Such a “carrot and stick” approach is prevalent throughout the cultural ISAs, especially when it involves monitoring *Gesar*. Whenever the government senses a threat to its national ideology and intended representation of *Gesar* from scholars and writers, the ISAs will immediately respond with such approach. They would not be silenced by the RSA, since they usually have made their name and their threats are mostly ideological. Instead, they would be encouraged to deviate from the perceived potential threat, while adding stakes and responsibilities on their shoulders to restrain their chances to speak through a personal and individual perspective. We will come across several examples in the later chapters.

UNESCO – Towards International Recognition

Le sort des études chinoises de *Gesar* pour le XXI^e siècle s'annonce néanmoins prometteur. La recherche sur la Gesariade semble obtenir à nouveau une place de choix dans le cadre des nouvelles lignes politiques de la <grande exploitation de l'Ouest> chinois et de la <construction de la civilisation de l'esprit au Tibet> car <l'exploitation économique de l'Ouest n'exclut pas l'accomplissement culturel de l'Ouest>. (Maconi, 2004:399)

In the beginning of the 21st century, *Gesar* studies made a considerable comeback. Maconi owed its resurgence to a favorable political atmosphere brought by the new national strategy, the development of vast Northwestern China. However, I argue that the reason for this resurgence was even more specific. The government gave academia a new political mission, that the international community should now consider *Gesar* as a Chinese tradition instead of a Tibetan one. The best way to achieve this goal was to have *Gesar* recognized as a Chinese heritage by UNESCO, through an application submitted by the Ministry of Culture of the P.R.C. As solid scholarly works were required for the mission, *Gesar* studies had a golden opportunity to bounce back from oblivion.

When the P.R.C.'s application for the inscription of the Potala Palace was actualized in 1994, there was a huge outrage among the international community, who considered the act as a betrayal of the Tibetans in exile and in the diaspora (Harris, 2013). Robert Shepherd even condemned it as “a complicit partner in the reworking of culture as a development resource in contemporary China, particularly in ‘minority’ areas” (2006:246). It might be bewildering that the inscription of *Gesar*, another important pillar of Tibetan culture, was not responded with an opposition at any comparable scale. It was because the inscription of *Gesar* fully capitalized on the internal tension between *Gesar* and the theocratic establishment, since at one point in history “[e]pic literature was forbidden in monasteries and looked down on by the Buddhist clergy, but it has become the most popular reading in many parts of Tibet.” (Karmay, 1994:115)

A few years before the UNESCO Turin round table in 2001, the growing international interest in intangible cultural heritage must also have caught the eye of the P.R.C. Riding on the current, the Chinese government presented the *Gesar* epic tradition to

the committee on the 31st annual conference in Paris. The committee “decides that UNESCO will be associated with the celebration of the following 47 anniversaries in 2002-2003”, including the “1,000th anniversary of the creation of the epic poem King *Gesar* (China)”. (UNESCO, 2002:83) This marks the first encounter between *Gesar* (as represented by the Chinese government) and UNESCO. After years of effort from the Chinese *Gesar* scholars (whom we will come across in the next chapter), the epic tradition was finally inscribed in the Representative List of intangible cultural heritage in 2009.

It is necessary to take a look at the description of the *Gesar* epic tradition on the UNESCO website, since it is a polished version of the description on the application form submitted by the P.R.C.:

“The ethnic Tibetan, Mongolian and Tu communities in western and northern China share the story of the ancient hero King *Gesar*, sent to heaven to vanquish monsters, depose the powerful, and aid the weak while unifying disparate tribes. The singers and storytellers who preserve the *Gesar* epic tradition perform episodes of the vast oral narrative (known as ‘beads on a string’) in alternating passages of prose and verse with numerous regional differences. Tibetan masters carry bronze mirrors and use facial expressions, sound effects and gestures to enhance their singing, while Mongolian performers are accompanied by fiddles and intersperse improvised, melodic singing with musical storytelling and oral narrative. Epic performances, often accompanied by rituals such as offerings and meditation, are embedded in the religious and daily lives of the community. For example, when a child is born, passages about King *Gesar*’s descent into the world are sung. The hundreds of myths, folktales, ballads and proverbs handed down as part of the tradition not only serve as a form of major entertainment in rural communities but also educate listeners in history, religion, custom, morality and science. A continuing inspiration for *thangka* painting, Tibetan opera and other art forms, the *Gesar* epic imbues audiences both young and old with a sense of cultural identity and historical continuity.” (UNESCO, 2009)

There are several noteworthy undercurrents if we conduct a discourse analysis of this description, which is now the official stance of UNESCO on *Gesar*. In general, it deliberately plays down Tibetan significance, while emphasizing the *Gesar* epic as a collective tradition shared by several ethnic minorities in China. It is not a false statement, but an attempt to dilute the distinct Tibetan-ness of the epic. *Gesar* is now yet another tradition of the minority communities within frontier China. This creates a

contradiction *vis-à-vis* the Chinese academic and scholarly publications, where only “the Tibetan comrades” (藏族同胞), but not “the ethnic minority comrades”, are acknowledged as the ones who contributed to this “great Chinese epic” (Yang, 1990[1996]; Jiangbian & Wu, 1985[1997]:ii). However, this contradiction can be considered irrelevant to the UNESCO application, since these sources aim to address a totally different audience. It is only painful in the eyes of Tibetan studies researchers who read it. All these manipulations of the image of *Gesar* paved the way to legitimize the seal on the webpage of *Gesar* tradition: “Country: China”.

The negotiation with Tibetan Buddhism, such as the presence of Padmasambhava as *Gesar*'s mentor and the existence of *Gesar* as a treasure text (*gter-ma*), were totally ignored. By the same logic, *Gesar* rituals and associated ritual texts, which are still very much active and practiced in Tibetan religious communities, are not mentioned in the UNESCO application. The same applies to the communal function of *Gesar* bards, who are regarded as wielding magical power to heal the sick. Since Chinese academia approach *Gesar* more as a literature and a story, the scholars regard such emphasis on religion, sometimes considered witchcraft and superstition, as hampering the “prestige” of the epic.

The government's effort as mentioned in this chapter is by no means exhaustive. It always communicates closely with the academia and the publishing world, instructing and monitoring them to work in accordance with the general political line. In the next chapter, we will turn our attention to academia, whose rise and fall is largely determined by the will of the government.

Academia

Gesar studies can be generally divided into two parts: collecting, recording, and translating of the corpus of the epic; and understanding, contextualizing, representing, and interpreting the epic. The former is usually less political and while the latter is more political. The government has strengthened its presence in *Gesar* studies since 1978, ideology became more and more central to the discipline. The increasingly political nature of *Gesar* studies created a scholarly brigade to reinforce and rationalize the national ideology. Occasionally some scholars take on a more spontaneous and individual approach to the epic, yet the government often considers these attempts a disruption, if not a threat. Thus the academia, as a cultural ISA, isolates and discourages these approaches, then encourages and diverts these scholars to pursue other research topics they deemed more suitable. After all, many distinguished scholars also hold semi-official or official government posts, which constantly reminds them to speak and publish cautiously, exemplifying the effectiveness of the “carrot and stick” policy.

In this chapter, we will visit the history of *Gesar* collection, the “orthodox” *Gesar* representation, which is always ideologically safe and politically correct, and a new and developing trend since 2000. Because Maconi and Li already did a comprehensive retrospective research, I will instead focus on explaining how the present-day academic representation of *Gesar* in the P.R.C. came into being, and how younger generations attempt to innovate and shake off the surly bonds of this representation and its underlying ideology.

Collecting, Recording, and Translating the Epic (1950-)

The founding of *Gesar* studies was a product of recognizing the culture of the *masses* (Maconi, 2004:391). However, actual practices and operation during the discipline’s early years were relatively independent and less politically oriented. Scholars mainly focused on collecting and recording the epic, while enjoying a certain level of intellectual freedom as long as they did not explicitly violate socialism, which justifies the importance of the epic.

The most prominent figure in this period was Wang Yinuan (王沂暖). Born in 1907, he is recognized as the founding father of *Gesar* studies in China. After graduating from Peking University in 1931, he started learning Tibetan and working in the cultural department in Chengdu. His works could be considered philological, since he also did some research on Tibetan Buddhist classics and literature although mainly focusing on *Gesar*. He was a pioneer who dedicated his whole career to collecting, translating, and editing the gigantic *Gesar* corpus.

In 1956, *Gesar* and “heroic tales” as a genre were brought forward in a plenary directive of the China Writers’ Association. “L’épopée de *Gesar* devient, ainsi, officiellement un sujet de discussion politico-littéraire parmi les intellectuels de la R.P.C.”. As a result, the Qinghai provincial committee of the Chinese Communist Party officially launched the campaign to collect and to manage *Gesar* in 1957, as reflective in the directive “On the compilation and proliferation of the artistic heritage of various ethnicities within Qinghai province”, bestowing Qinghai the center of *Gesar* studies at the time, before Beijing took over during the centralizing turn (Maconi, 2004:391).

Li summarized this period as follows:

“After the founding of New China, early frontier scholars assisted in the great state project of conducting nationwide surveys, research, and identification of minority nationalities with regard to their culture, customs, social history, population, organization, and other characteristics. Hence surveying and data collection were the major tasks for this period.”

“Under the new art guidelines, the slogan ‘All in the interest of the laboring masses, all for the purpose of serving the people’ became the basic principle motivating academic activities. As a project of vital importance to the new socialist society, folklore studies received more attention in this period. Nationwide collecting of folklore began in full swing. The newly established Chinese Research Society of Folk Literature and Art played a leading role in the collecting. A top-down approach was instituted for China’s folklore studies, resulting in the standardization of academic activities. It was in this atmosphere that a grand-scale collection of the epic *Gesar* was launched.” (2001:323)

Up to 1966, there were more than 40 collected volumes of *Gesar*, among which “the living tradition of this poem is represented by its latest chapter, or rather volume,

which is reported to be the ‘*Ja’gling gyul’gyad*’, the story of the Jews and the Germans, and the Second World War” (Stoddard, 1994:144).

Unsurprisingly, *Gesar* studies and tradition suffered a devastating blow during the Cultural Revolution. In 1966, the bureau of propaganda in Qinghai issued a notice on the discontinuation of the sales of the *Gesar* epic. During the following decade, “the work of collection suffered from anti-superstitious and anti-feudalist movements during which a great quantity of *Gesar* cantos was thrown on the flames” (Li, 2001:323). Destructions befell the scholars, the chanters, and the research documents. Wang Yinuan was condemned and purged for being a “reactionary academic authority” (Northwest University for Nationalities, accessed May 2015). Both Yang (2012:5) and Maconi (2004:394) mentioned that the epic was regarded as a “representative work of poisonous weeds” (大毒草). The once “proletariat epic of the people” fell prey to the extreme leftist purge. Any literary work involving superstition was regarded as backward and was to be criticized and abandoned. After the Cultural Revolution, *Gesar* was rehabilitated along with many traditions and cultures. In 1978, the “Official Demand for the Rehabilitation of *Gesar*” (格薩爾平反的請示報告) was submitted to the central authorities. This marked the end of the purge of *Gesar*. (Maconi, 2004:394)

Immediately after its rehabilitation, the campaign to salvage *Gesar* was launched in order to prevent its possible extinction. Around this time, *Gesar* was in a grave and threatened position. This was also the time when Beijing stepped in to assume the leading and central role in *Gesar* studies. Such a decision had a practical side, since the threat of extinction was imminent and a resourceful command center was necessary. To record and document the performances of prominent *Gesar* chanters, thus creating a national archive, and subsequently translate the epic into Chinese was considered the most effective way to salvage *Gesar*. The mission statement of the officially sponsored *Gesar* research institute in Lhasa, established in 1979, was and still is “to rescue, record, document, and translate the *Gesar*”.

Later on, the translating of *Gesar* started to play a more important role in *Gesar* studies. The government’s thirst for a fixed and translated corpus in the national

archive has been unquenchable, thus it asked the new centers of *Gesar* studies and the scholars involved to produce a definite translation which was to be superior to the pre-1980 ones. This explained why there was an academic trend in the late 1980s to analyze the quality of the Chinese translations of *Gesar*. The scholars severely criticized the old translations and requested for new translations (Maconi, 2004:396-7).

However, it should be noted that the existence of a fixed text signals the death of an oral tradition, whose living nature stems from its vitality and constant productivity. According to Lauri Honko (1996), an oral epic is a “community of truth”, where a fellowship of authority maintains the authenticity of the tradition. The very fact that an epic’s every component is theoretically changeable entails the interaction between tradition and contemporary historical events. Such incoherence between an archived corpus and a living tradition revealed the sore point of the desire for a fixed and translated text, and which I term “textuality complex”.

Sinocentric Representation (1978-)

Gesar’s tragedy in the Cultural Revolution revealed its powerlessness against Chinese authorities. Its commendation and condemnation all stemmed from the same ideology. It could be praised as the product of the masses and of the people, but could also be criticized for being superstitious and feudal. Its fate was completely in the hands of the authorities, which can always justify its choice through different selective interpretations of socialism. This reflects that *Gesar* is inescapable from sinocentric representations of the ISAs.

In 1978, Deng Xiaoping, the *de facto* head of state at the time, adopted an “Open Door Policy”, and put forward the concept “socialism with Chinese characteristics”. The former signified the introduction of a market economy and a higher degree of economic freedom, while political power remained centralized in order to cope with possible challenges brought by such freedom. The latter was the first instance where socialism and nationalism, although mutually contradictory, became the two constituting elements of the sinocentric approach. Together with the centralization of the discipline, internal orientalism heightened since the national ideology

appropriated socialism as the culture of “China proper”, which represents prosperity, modernity, growth, and development. “Frontier China”, once again, represented backwardness and the need to be “civilized” by the progressive Han Chinese as represented by the central government.

One of the most distinguished scholars of the field at present is Jiangbian Jiacao (‘Jam-dpal rGya-mtsho), and he is significantly influenced by this particular mindset. Born in 1938, Jiangbian is one of the few Tibetan scholars in *Gesar* studies. When Jiangbian was only twelve years old, he joined the People’s Liberation Army when it was marching on Tibet in 1950. In 1952, he attended the cadet school established for training Party committee in Tibet, and which was the precursor of today’s Tibet University. He started his career on *Gesar* studies around 1980, and conducted a lot of research on *Gesar* as folklore. In his one and only English publication (1998), he accused the epic for “exercising restraint on the ethnic community”, which supposedly caused the stagnant development of the Tibetan society (224).

This echoes the claim that *Gesar* studies was established “for the sake of Tibet”, as suggested by the mission statement of the *Gesar* institute in the Northwest University for Nationalities (1981), “to create a harmonious society for China, and to exhibit the concept of scientific development for the ethnic minorities”. It is a witness to the socialist-nationalist ideology. The “China proper” and “frontier China” stereotypes was overtly employed here, where frontier China was backward and in need of the leadership of and guidance from modernized and civilized China proper.

However, the underlying ideology suggests otherwise. The work by *Gesar* scholars is hardly directed at a Tibetan audience. Translations are mostly Tibetan-Chinese, and there are no Chinese-Tibetan translations of academic articles and reports. This one-way linguistic traffic reveals the Chinese are actually importing instead of exporting. Jiangbian Jiacao, together with another scholar Wu Wei, finished the first compilation of the epic, entitled “Complete Tale of King *Gesar*” (格薩爾王全傳) in 1985. Like most translation work, this groundbreaking compilation is only available in Chinese but not Tibetan. The book presents itself in a form of an ordinary Chinese novel, where the title of each chapter is a couplet that summarizes the plot. This arrangement

is reminiscent of the interesting fact that the *Gesar* was actually first named as “Romance of the Three Kingdoms of the Barbarians” (蠻三國) in the early 1940s (Maconi, 2004:388). Han cultural racism just grows stronger and stronger.

However, some scholars traced back to early socialist representation of *Gesar* as the culture of the *masses*, and attempted to apply the nationalist ideology in this respect. In this case, the epic is definitely not backward, contradictory to the minority stereotypes. For example, Lan Yang (1998) claimed that *Gesar* possesses the same “romantic” and “revolutionary” characteristics many socialist and Soviet epics do. Since revolutionary romanticism is the cornerstone of Maoist aesthetics, it is evident that Lan deliberately added a socialist flavor to *Gesar*. Likewise, Bai Congren (1992) argued that long epic poems “constituent la nouvelle mythologie socialiste ancrée dans la tradition nationale” (Maconi, 2004:401). Another scholar, Geng Yufang (1985) claimed that *Gesar* represents the democratic spirit (民主性), the “national” (*minzu*) spirit (民族性), and the revolutionary spirit (革命性) of the Tibetan people. It embodies the “resistance against external enemies and the unity of the army and the political”, revered as a symbol of all values that ensures “stabilité sociale, le développement économique, et le bonheur dans la vie quotidienne du peuple”² (Maconi, 2004:403).

Claiming that socialist-nationalist ideals were always inherent and embedded in Tibetan culture has paved way for the “nationalization” of the *Gesar* epic. Chinese scholars, including Jiangbian and Yang Enhong, expressed their excitement in the proclamation that “there is an epic in China”. In the introduction to their publications (Jiangbian, 2007; Yang, 1990[1996]), they both regarded the absence of “epic tradition” in Chinese culture as an issue. With the emergence of *Gesar* studies, the Chinese can finally stand up proudly and refute Georg Hegel’s claim that “there is no epic tradition in China”. Refuting Hegel with a Tibetan epic is problematic, since it involves a temporal displacement and a disguised replacement of concepts from “China proper” to “Frontier China”. However, the underlying attitude of these two scholars is more noteworthy: why must the absence of an epic tradition be an issue?

² The examples in this paragraph were first presented in the article by Maconi.

I argue that national pride and nationalist ideology is the fundamental reason for this attitude. For this reason, *Gesar* is nationalized as a Chinese epic, not just a Tibetan one. Ma Jinwu (2001) even suggested that the promotion of *Gesar* among young Tibetans could develop their national pride as a Chinese. Since *Gesar* is now shared by the whole Chinese nation, blandish descriptions of the epic swarmed the field. *Gesar* is now introduced as “the Oriental Homeric Epic”, “the Chinese Iliad and Odyssey”, “the Chinese Mahabharata”. Under these circumstances, *Gesar* was also recognized and celebrated as a “patriotic hero” (Liu & Sun, 1999:169). By the same logic, a large number of articles published after 2000 adopted a similar format in presentation, which always starts the article by claiming that *Gesar* is a “great Chinese epic” and concluding with “*Gesar* facilitates ethnic harmony and national unity” (Jiangbian (ed.), 1989; Jianzan 2009; Wang, 2011; Yang, 2012; Zaxi, 2002; et al.).

To conclude, although the existence of two images of *Gesar* and Tibet, backward and progressive, might seem bewildering, they make perfect sense when we connect it to the targets that the Chinese government wishes to achieve. The “backward” representation of Tibet justifies Chinese involvement in Tibet and the assimilation of Tibetans, while the “progressive” *Gesar* epic refutes Hegel’s claim that there is no epic in “China”. This is a typical example where frontier China is made useful to the Middle Kingdom. The minorities happily accept their “backwardness” and offer their epic as “tribute”. In return, the P.R.C. embraces and welcomes *Gesar* as a glorious part of “Chinese” culture and “exhibits the concept of scientific development to the ethnic minorities”.

International Encounter (2000-)

Starting from the 21st century, there were more opportunities for Chinese *Gesar* scholars to engage in international academic activities, possibly motivated by the increasingly vocal discussion of intangible cultural heritage within UNESCO at the time. In academic publications directed at an international, these scholars wrote in an utterly different manner. The propaganda and ideological side was totally submerged while they presented a decent level of scholarship.

A notable example is Jiangbian's two (re)publications in Taiwan. One of them was a new book (2007) on *Gesar* bards (which dedicates more than half of its pages to introduce the plots of the epic), while another one was the republication (2006) of his "Complete Tales of King *Gesar*" (co-authored with Wu, 1985[1997]). In these two publications, the old prefaces, which praised the Chinese government's support on *Gesar* studies, were replaced by a new preface, in which he simply expressed his eagerness to introduce *Gesar* to the Taiwanese audience. It should also be noted that the "Complete Tales of King *Gesar*" was renamed "The Legend of King *Gesar*" in its new version. It was presented as an ordinary novel and there was no mentioning of government sponsorship of the first edition.

Yang Enhong, another esteemed scholar in *Gesar* studies, was the leading figure of the internationalization movement. Yang, born in 1946, was a university student in Beijing when the Cultural Revolution broke out in 1966. She was sent to Tibet in accordance with Mao's general direction to send students to rural areas from cities. There she developed her Tibetan language skills and cultivated an interest in *Gesar*.

Unlike Jiangbian, who affiliated himself with the Communist Party at a very young age, Yang was trained in a university. As a female intellectual, her background enabled her to approach *Gesar* more critically. She is the first scholar to investigate the unequal status of women in traditional Tibetan society as reflected by the narrative of the epic, where beautiful women are always one major initiative to wage a war. She was particularly inspired by the character *Drukmo*, the first concubine of *Gesar*, who was captured by an enemy prince for twelve years, forced to bear him a child, and was forced to kill her bastard son once *Gesar* had defeated the enemy prince.

Since Yang was very familiar with the western academic tradition, she was sent to work as the visiting professor of the International Institute of Asian Studies in the Netherlands from 1998 to 1999. She was one of the few Chinese scholars who was aware of the French *Gesar* academic tradition, and was the main informant of Maconi when she wrote the article in 2004.

In 2001, Yang Enhong published an article in the international journal *Oral Traditions*, demonstrating capable scholarship without excessive propaganda.

Regrettably, she has not published any subsequent articles in international journals after that. More so, she somehow disappeared from *Gesar* studies, in which she had spent more than three decades doing research. It was rumored that the government did not welcome her critical and feminist stance towards the epic, which went against the “praise-only” attitude of a “national treasure”. She was “encouraged” to switch her study field to pure feminist history instead of feminist criticism of the epic. She later published a book titled “An Oral History of Tibetan Women” (藏族婦女口述史) in 2006. Yang Enhong’s case exemplified the “carrot and stick” policy of how potential challenges or threats within the ISAs are dealt with.

Although Yang Enhong and her junior *Gesar* scholars attempted to not be tied to propaganda and ideology, we must concede that they were doing the exact opposite when they wrote and published in Mainland China. The standardized “glorious Chinese epic *Gesar*” introduction and “*Gesar* demonstrated national unity” conclusion were still present. There is hardly an escape from the ISAs since they are always a part of them and interpellated by them.

The Publishing World

It...sees popular culture as a site of struggle, but, while accepting the power of the forces of dominance, it focuses rather upon the popular tactics by which these forces are coped with, are evaded, or are resisted. (Fiske, 1989:20-1)

From the perspectives of the government and academia, we can observe that ISAs largely function in the public domain. However, Althusser reminds us that “private institutions can perfectly well function as ISAs”, since “the distinction between the public and the private is a distinction internal to bourgeois law” (Althusser, 1971[2008]:18). In our case, we need to substitute bourgeois law with authoritarian law. However, this statement becomes even truer after the adjustment, since it is tremendously easier for an authoritarian government than a bourgeois one to traverse between the public and the private spheres. Through its involvement in the publishing world, the public extends their reach to the relative private, which is the popular culture.

According to Althusser, “ISAs may be not only the stake, but also the site of class struggle.” “The resistance of the exploited classes (ethnic communities) is able to find means and occasions to express itself there, either by the utilization of their contradictions, or by conquering combat positions in them in struggle.” (21) Cultural studies scholars also acknowledge such a struggle, “...the cultural field takes place in a cultural struggle between dominant or official culture and popular culture abstracted from economic and technological determination, but ultimately over-determined by them” (Storey, 1998:218). Since the publishing world is largely sponsored and censored by the government, resistance within popular culture to repel propaganda is almost futile. The authorities would never spare the cultural field, as Maconi remarks that “... à l'échelle nationale chinoise, c'est la divulgation de Gesar au niveau populaire qui intéresse davantage les autorités de Pékin” (2004:397).

Beijing and its ideology and propaganda have been all pervasive in the popular realm. Karmay visited Amdo and Kham back in 1985 and 1987. He recalled that “[p]osters showing different characters from the epic were also available in bookshops and markets, although some of this proliferation reflects to some extent the

interest of the propaganda machine in this epic. The most glamorous printed posters was often not of King *Gesar* but of his elder half-brother, *Gyatsha Zhalkar*, whose mother is supposed to be Chinese, as is clear from his name.” (1994:115) This justifies Beijing’s omnipresence in the representation of *Gesar*.

According to D.E. Bielby and W.T. Bielby, popular publications are characterized by “cultural meanings and creative practices underlying the production and reception of cultural objects”, the “recognized differences in style and the aesthetic expectations of those styles, in turn, embedded in production context” (2004:295). Therefore, it is necessary for popular publications to strike a balance between creative interests and commercial interests. While creative interests are intensively monitored, censored, and disciplined by the official ideology of the Chinese authorities, I argue that commercial interest is the only possible aspect to engage the ISAs, since commercial success depends more on the audience.

There have been countless popular productions serving as representations and adaptations of *Gesar* in the P.R.C. since the 1980s. There was a Peking Opera adaptation premiered in Beijing in 1980, a TV series produced by and aired on Qinghai TV in 1990, numerous stage musical performances on various television channels, and abundant recordings aired on various Tibetan radio channels (Maconi, 2004:397). While these examples are at least twenty years old, there are two key publications, which retold the *Gesar* epic after UNESCO officially recognizes *Gesar* as an intangible cultural heritage in 2009. Since they are both published in Chinese, we can safely assume that the target audience is mainly Han Chinese. These two publications are perfect objects of study since they provide us with an up-to-date picture of how the publishing world operates in recent years.

Alai’s The Song of King Gesar (2009)

Before we start analyzing *The Song of King Gesar*, it is probably interesting to first look at Alai’s biography, which sheds some light on his general approach to and thought conveyed through the novel.

Alai, born 1959, is an ethnic (half) Tibetan writer and poet. He was born and raised in a Tibetan village in Kham. Drawing inspiration from his background, he wrote about rural Tibetans and their struggle in urban areas in his novels. As a Tibetan writer who uses Chinese as the language of his literary work, he serves as an “ethnic spokesperson” who introduces Tibet and Tibetan culture to Han Chinese (Ren, 2013:3). In 2000, his novel *Red Poppies* (塵埃落定) won the 5th Mao Dun Literature Prize, which is considered the most prestigious national award for Chinese novelists. *Red Poppies* tells the story of a Tibetan noble family, which planted poppies under the direction of the Republican government and thus making a lucrative profit. Red implies the ending of the story, in which the Communist Party’s army seized the area and burned all the poppies. Although the novel has an ideological outlook, the main idea is to unveil the misery of the serfs in contrast to the degenerate and luxurious life of their nobility masters, whose legacy Alai personally experienced in his youth. Following his nationwide fame after the award, Alai’s subsequent works all enjoyed great commercial success.

Although *Red Poppies* brought him high regard from the central government, Alai is no ideological mouthpiece for the government. His attitude made him a victim of the “carrot and stick” policy. In his book *Stairs of the Earth*, republished and widely circulated in 2008, he accuses the government’s overdevelopment of Tibet and challenges the national ideology of Han Chinese’s “civilizing burden”, which has caused irreversible damage to the ecology of Tibet (Ren 2013:63). As an acclaimed and national award-winning writer, he was appointed as the president of the Sichuan Writers' Association and thereby also as one of the presidents of the China Writers' Association in 2009. By putting heavy stakes on his shoulders, Alai’s inauguration becomes a censorship with the outlook of promotion. He needs to retreat from an acute approach to a fable-like one in order to voice his resistance, while employing the *Gesar* epic as a shield to fend off possible accusations from the authorities. His works demonstrate the distinctive characteristics of a minor literature: a “strong coefficient of deterritorialization”, politically elevated, and an emphasis on collective value (Deleuze & Guattari, 1983:18). They all provide a revolutionary condition for the “established” Han Chinese literature.

The Song of King Gesar is a work imbued with such complex layers of symbolism and critique that there are numerous studies dedicated to this work. Hence, I will only highlight certain topics that are relevant to our case. In this novel, Alai reconstructs and challenges the existing conception of the Tibetan epic by adding a contemporary storyline of a chanter, the protagonist ‘Jigs-med. As a *bab-sgrung* (god-endowed chanter), ‘Jigs-med encountered *Gesar* in his dreams, where *Gesar* obliged him with the gift and the responsibility to sing the story of *Gesar* to his people. Thus, the epic is retold in alternating segments in ‘Jigs-med’s dreams, interrupted by ‘Jigs-med’s experiences in reality. While largely keeping the plots intact, Alai expresses his personal view on *Gesar* and Tibetan culture through the interaction between ‘Jigs-med and *Gesar*. I argue that “the real” of Alai mainly lies in the character ‘Jigs-med and his contemporary events. As printed on the back cover of the novel, “Alai said, ‘I am ‘Jigs-med’”. By way of ‘Jigs-med, Alai highlights several critical issues about *Gesar* in contemporary society. He expresses no overt political or ideological statements but, instead, anxiety and melancholy regarding the future of Tibetan culture.

The first issue Alai touches upon is the *Gesar* epic as a living tradition. Should the epic era be a thing of the past, or should new episodes be made continuously? Alai clings towards the former by putting his thought into *Gesar*’s words during his conversation with ‘Jigs-med,

Right on this bed, King *Gesar* of *Gling* descended into his (‘Jigs-med’s) dream. The confused *Gesar* asked (him), “I thought all the demon countries are destroyed. How come there is now a new *Ka-qi* country?” ... “So there will be other new demon countries appearing out of nowhere fighting against me?” (Alai, 2009[2011]:373-4)

Alai presents a new perspective to understand *Gesar*. He presents a reluctant *Gesar*, who has no idea of his own future other than that he will eventually return to heaven. In the novel, *Gesar* even asks ‘Jigs-med about his own future in ‘Jigs-med’s dreams. Alai sympathizes with *Gesar* on the grounds that the king is destined to fight ceaselessly. To Alai, *Gesar* is condemned to an endless series of war; he conquers new countries that arise infinitely as long as chanters create new episodes of the epic, over and over.

By the same logic, Alai is not a fan of *Gesar gter-ma* (treasure text) and *gter-stons* (treasure finders). In the novel, 'Jigs-med is asked of his opinion of a *Gesar gter-ston*, who is also a lama. 'Jigs-med gets a little angry and says, "These tales are deeds performed by King *Gesar* a long time ago, not something written by a lama." When the scholar explains that he is digging the treasure, the new untold episodes, buried by *Gesar* in one's heart, 'Jigs-med retaliates and asks, "So you are not writing books, you are digging your own heart's treasure?" (342). 'Jigs-med argues that the tales of *Gesar* are exhaustively told for a thousand years and that everybody is familiar with all the parts. After that, he says, "Do you think the birth of a country is as easy as a mushroom popping out from the ground? In my stories, all the belligerent countries had already been destroyed!" (343)

Although Alai keeps the traditional ending, in which *Gesar* promises that he will return when *Gling* needs him, other parts of the novel tend to dismiss such millenarianism, and which Maconi regards as a Tibetan nationalist projection (2004:383). On one occasion where *Gesar* enters 'Jigs-med's dream and talks, they have the following conversation:

The upset *Gesar* said, "Don't address me *you!* I am the *King!*"

"You are the King of *Gling!* Not *my* King!"

"Are you not my people of the land of *Gling?*"

"The land is still here, but there is no *Gling* anymore."

"What? There is no *Gling* anymore?"

"No, there is not."

(Alai, 2009[2011]:331)

Here Alai expresses his grief about the demise of *Gling*, the collective utopian vision of the Tibetan people, but also calls for a forward-looking attitude, a realization that the Tibetans should not cling to the past but look to the future. This can be seen as another interpretation of his advocacy for the conclusion of the epic.

Although he leans towards the conclusion of the epic, Alai does not always agree with official ideology. While the authorities are busy collecting and recording the epic through chanters (*sgrung-mkhan*), Alai does not agree that recording should be the

way a chanter lives. For Alai, a chanter's responsibility is to sing the *Gesar* epic to the community, constantly travelling from one area to another. This is reflected in 'Jigs-med's encounter with a *Gesar* scholar:

The scholar said, "If you are the best chanter, the state will give you money, build you a house, and feed you!"

He ('Jigs-med) said, "A *sgrung-mkhan* is destined to wander over the land. What is the use of a house?" (219-20)

All in all, it might be best to summarize that Alai does not agree with an endless production of new *Gesar* episodes, yet he supports the preservation of the traditional social function of chanters. This reflects that Alai himself is a troubled mind, torn between tradition and modernity.

Alai's novel is considered a largely successful project, with sales of over 200,000 copies. There are many reasons for the popularity of this book: Alai is an established figure in the "cultural root" (郷土) literary genre. He made his fame and earned the national award by writing about Tibet, empowered by his ethnic Tibetan cultural background. In his writing career, more than twenty years, Alai cultivated his unique yet sincere style, which is widely recognized and celebrated by critics. Commercially speaking, Alai was an editor for a fantasy fiction monthly magazine, *Fantasy World* (科幻世界), based in Chengdu since 1989. When he left the magazine, after having served as its president, he boosted the monthly sales from 700 to over 400,000. With such an outstanding report card, one does not simply doubt his capability to produce a commercially successful novel.

The Song of King Gesar was translated into English and presented to the Canongate Myth Series initiated by Canongate Books. The series consists of novels that reimagined and represented the mythology from different cultural backgrounds. It is necessary, though, to pay some attention towards the Chongqing Publication House, the handler of both Chinese and English version of the novel. The Chongqing Publication House was managed by the city committee of Chongqing and organized by the city government. This suggests significant official involvement in the publication process. Such involvement is very much visible, since what is chosen to

be promoted is largely in line with the official ideology, while the content of the novel was more or less ignored.

In the English version, it is regarded as “the first English translation of the Tibetan heroic epic”. Also, on the back cover, there is a review that reads “A thrilling beautiful and moving epic, reminding us again of the timeless and exhilarating magic of pure story-telling. Alai opens up a world previously unknown to us, a foreign and yet strangely familiar world.” Other than the fact that the review can be applied to any foreign epic, there is much more to discuss regarding what has been put in the spotlight. First, this is not the first English translation of *Gesar*, since Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden already did that back in 1959 as *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*. Shambhala published another popular edition of the book in 1987. What I consider more problematic is how the publishers, both Chinese and British, perceived the novel as a publication of the *Gesar* epic, but not a novel inspired by and attempted to retell the epic in a personal way.

Such an approach is echoed by the numerous book reviews published in various Chinese academic journals. Many book reviews (Yao, 2010; Liang, 2010; Luo, 2013, Lü, 2011 etc.) addressed the novel as a retelling of the epic, and went on explaining and introducing the plots, significance, and characteristics of the *Gesar* epic at length, while totally ignoring the literary creation of Alai, which is the interaction between ‘Jigs-med and King *Gesar* and the contemporary storyline. This reveals that a number of scholars may not have even read the novel, but simply started writing something about the *Gesar* epic. The effort paid to distinguish the novel as a literary creation was minimal. The absence of differentiation between the novel and the epic suggests the possibilities of a singular management by the authorities.

Alai and *The Song of King Gesar* demonstrate the difficult situation of a Tibetan intellectual. He constantly negotiates with the authorities, trying to voice an opinion in a safe way without being branded as anti-government. However, he is also largely bound by his position and fame as the president of a provincial and national writers’ association since he is a part of the ISAs himself. Ren (2013:140) aptly concludes Alai’s situation:

“Alai is a famous and commercially successful writer who actualizes his symbolic capital within the Han Chinese cultural circle. Together with his role as the chief editor of the fantasy fiction magazine and as the president of writers’ associations, they endow Alai with a ticket to voice his opinion in the center of the circle as an ‘other’. However, it is this position, which includes Alai into the official system (the ISAs). When he faces the hegemony he recognizes, he cannot criticize it with an acute and energetic attitude. He is forced to compromise, and is only able to serve as a witness and documenter to describe how the hegemony dominates the subject. Therefore, the way how Alai describes the hegemony is abstract and fable-like.”

Quan Yingsheng’s Comic Adaptation (2012)

Although commercial interests play a role in every type of publication, it is certain that they are more central to comics than novels. If Alai’s commercial strategy of his *Gesar* novel is to attract more audience into his circle of existing readers, who are interested and experienced in serious literature and Tibetan culture, Quan’s comic targets almost every Han Chinese from a child to an elderly, since graphics play a larger role than words.

In this sense, the audience plays a significantly larger role in the comic sphere than they do in the novel sphere. In the comic industry, “audience aesthetics” prevails. It is “a set of stable values which help regularize practice” (Bielby & Bielby, 2004:297). In other words, the popularity of a comic series is directly reflected in its sales. There are definitely more decent novels than decent comic series that did not sell well. Hence, the rule of thumb of comic industries is to manage the expectation of audience since they dictate the survival of a comic series. “Audience, as well as creators and critics, can legitimately make judgments about the value of cultural objects” (296). A successful comic series must be “essentially a conventionalized art which restates in an intense form, values and attitudes already known, which reassures and reaffirms, but brings to this something of the surprise of art as well as the shock of recognition” (Hall & Whannel, 1967:66).

Quan did attempt to balance surprise and recognition. As a critically acclaimed Chinese painter and comic artist who burst onto the scene first due to his neo-classicist ink paintings of *Zen koans*, Quan is renowned for incorporating elements from Chinese ink painting into comics. He applied the same model to the *Gesar*

project, depicting the foreign *Gesar* epic (surprise) by his unique yet familiar ink painting style (recognition). He also inherits the base color tone and *mise en scène* from the wider genre of Chinese animated mythology series in his *Gesar* comic.

Nevertheless, surprise does largely outweigh recognition in Quan's rendition. While Alai creates a contemporary storyline to further his agenda, the comic version truncates and simplifies traditional plots and characters substantially. Moreover, Quan attempts to bridge the large temporary gap by introducing contemporary utterances. For example, when *Gesar* defeats two enemies in one shot, he screams "Double Kill" (Quan, 2012:80). When *Sheng-ngon*, the minister of the demon country, challenges *Gesar* to wrestle, he asks *Gesar* whether he has watched WWE before (71). When *Gesar* uses magic to confuse *Lutzen*, the demon king, during their final showdown, *Gesar* showers cooking knives and frying pans on *Lutzen* to create a "party of holy light" (140). Quan also names *Gesar*'s every fighting move, such as "holy lightsaber slash" (55). All these treatments do constitute an innovative approach, but it brings a huge incongruity and turns its back on the classical image of *Gesar*. It seems to be an ordinary Chinese mythology cartoon adopting a Tibetan storyline instead of a Tibetan *Gesar* comic.

Quan Yingsheng's *Gesar* comic project appears to be an individual and spontaneous project published by a privately owned publication house, Dolphin Books. However, the project received unparalleled attention and support from both the government and academia, suggesting an implicit yet intimate relation with the ISAs. The comic was listed on the "Originality Motion" (原動力) scheme of the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, and Television in 2013. The scheme aimed at providing assistance to the nominated works by rewarding them with official promotion by the government. Other than official spotlight and marketing, it is unclear whether monetary assistance is involved, but such a possibility remains. As for academia, Jiangbian Jiacao and Wu Wei, the two distinguished *Gesar* scholars who compiled and edited the "complete" *Gesar* epic on which we discussed in last chapter, were chief editors of the comic project. It is possible that Jiangbian and Wu piloted the abridgement of the epic and passed the simplified story to Quan, who drew the comic

based on the story received from the two scholars. If that was the case, the creative freedom of Quan was even more restrained.

Surprisingly, the *Gesar* comic project might be the largest underachiever in contemporary Chinese comic history, considering that it received unimaginably large-scale direct support from the government and academia, the two main sectors of the cultural ISA. On the website of *Tencent Comic*, the most popular comic website in China, the *Gesar* comic has been viewed 42,174³ times. While *China Mr. Surprise*, a detective thriller comic also by Quan, in which he once again employed ink painting elements but tells the story of a Taoist practitioner solving spirit-related criminal cases, has a view count up to 2,038,799,522⁴. The massive difference in the view count testifies to the undeniable reception failure of the *Gesar* comic.

I argue that the failure of the comic owes to its eccentric leading concepts. Many aspects of the comic project appear incoherent with the convention of the comic industry. It is highly uncommon for a veteran comic artist such as Quan to consciously ignore and violate the rule of thumbs of survival of the genre. If we compare *Gesar* comic project to *China Mr. Surprise*, we can observe several incongruities.

Commercially speaking, *Gesar* comic is hardly a profit-seeking project since it is a one-off project that came in just five volumes. It excludes the audience's participation and interaction, which is crucial in audience aesthetics. Ironically, the *Gesar* epic, "the longest epic in the world", definitely possesses more than adequate materials for a long running series. The producers somehow decided to shut the audience out. The difference is stark when it is compared to *China Mr. Surprise*, which has been running for more than two years and published more than 250 volumes since its first release in 2013. Considering the fact that the two comics came out almost back-to-back, it is almost impossible that Quan consciously employed totally opposite marketing strategies. Since the heavy involvement of the ISAs in the former is the outstanding variable, it is unsurprising to suspect it as the main reason for the difference, which suggests "an organizational distinction between non-profit cultural

³ Number retrieved 27/5/2015.

⁴ Number retrieved 27/5/2015.

institutions run by private individuals or boards of trustees and the commercial, profit-seeking culture industries” (Storey, 2012:33).

As for cultural perception, Quan’s many artistic choices do not accord with the general projected image of Tibetan culture. The leading female characters, *Drukmo* and *Atag Lhamo*, who are *Gesar*’s consorts, wear exposing clothes. However, the fundamental contradiction lies in art style. Ink painting and the *New Menri* style, the most recognized art style in Tibet, clashes on basic principles. Ink paintings use fewer colors and more tone variation of one color, while the Tibetan style is the exact opposite. *Menri* style has very thin and distinctive lines to construct a figure, while ink paintings use irregular brushes and non-unitary lines. In this sense, the expected Tibetan image was unrecognizable in the comic. Nevertheless, the insistence of employing ink painting style bears a whole new meaning if we shift our angle of analysis. In the promotional texts for the *Gesar* comic, the rhetoric is that the comic shows the synthesis of a Tibetan story and a Chinese art style.

To conclude, the incongruities and the heavy involvement of the ISAs in Quan’s comic project arouses suspicion. It deviates from an ordinary comic project and displays a number of characteristics of propaganda work. These deviations to a certain extent testify to the failure of the comic project to impress the audience.

Intertextual Readings

Honko (1996) suggests that epics are “tales of identity” and epic characters represent some kind of “typicality”. In other words, epic characters are the reflection of a cluster of traits, or even a stereotype. *Gesar*, in the traditional description, is the manifestation of warriorship and virtue. His superhuman abilities are innate and eternal, from his birth to his return to heaven. Therefore, the traditional *Gesar* demonstrates his transcendent power and ability instead of having developed it throughout the storyline. Presenting *Gesar* as a flat character justifies its transformation as a cultural symbol for the Tibetans.

The traditional image and personality of *Gesar* are reflected by his self-introduction to the queen of the demon king *Lutzen*. This passage has shown the most important

features of *Gesar*. He is an incarnation of a god, confident and almighty. He has a majestic and unassailable aura, as expressed by his authoritative tone. His power, rightfulness, and determination all crown him as the ideal king:

“I am *Gesar*, King of Ling and Sovereign of the world, ...the son of *Korlo Demchog* and *Dorji Phagmo*. Leaving the abode of the gods where I was *Thubpa Gawa*, chief of the magician sages, I incarnated by command of *Padmasambhava* for the purpose of destroying the enemies of the Religion. *Lutzen* must perish by my hand; the hour has come and nothing can save him. O Queen, thou canst secure him an easier death by helping me in my purpose. Tell me what I must do that I may slay him at one blow”. (David-Neel, 1981[1987]:126)

Alai basically retains the traditional image of *Gesar*, but then adds a human touch to it, especially before his enthronement, making him a round character. Unlike the traditional concept that *Gesar* is destined to be the savior of *Gling* who never forgets his purpose from his birth onwards, Alai suggests that his endowed godly power enables him to complete his divine mission, yet his power is not to be taken for granted. He is no born leader and he needs to convince his people to follow him by performing feats (2009[2011]:68-9). When he is expelled before his enthronement, he complains to *Padmasambhava* that he does not want to suffer and he wants to return to heaven instead (71). After a certain time in the secular world, he gradually forgets his heavenly life and his holy attributes dissolve. When his people wrong him, accuse him, and curse him, *Gesar*'s elegant and handsome appearance fades into filth (74). While he is constantly hunting demons, *Avalokitesvara* reminds him that he should not kill for fun, like “a merchant sees gold” (116).

After he is proclaimed king, *Gesar*'s interaction with ‘Jigs-med raises the question of his own subjectivity. He is caught in an existential crisis, as he is unsure of his future. He is anxious about his destiny and what has been written about him, especially when ‘Jigs-med refuses to spill the beans (440). Therefore, he starts to seek a form of liberation from fatalism. He attempts to change the story by sentencing his villainous uncle to death in a way different from the epic, and considers it a triumph when he succeeds (330). He is also disheartened to learn that there is still warfare after he has subdued all the demons (389). From these examples, Alai is determined to present *Gesar* in a perspective different from the traditional one.

Quan overturns the traditional image of *Gesar*. His *Gesar* is an energetic teenager, brilliant and innocent, yet childish. In the comic, he does not age after puberty, although the traditional epic suggests *Gesar* was eighty when he returned to heaven. *Gesar*'s character setting follows a certain stereotype, where the protagonist is always energetic, sometimes clumsy yet truthful, and kind to everyone. He feasts without manners, shouting gibberish while eating (44-5), and wears a dinosaur plush costume when told to wear a disguise to stealth into *Lutzen*'s country (90).

Within this setting, the plots of comic *Gesar* are highly sanitized. Violence has been minimized and brutality has almost disappeared. As for the female characters, the twelve consorts are condensed into one *Drukmo*, even the second important consort *Meza* has been excluded. The romantic rendezvous of *Gesar* are presented in forms of innocent teenage love. For example, *Gesar* and *Drukmo* confirm the end of magical mirage by pinching each other's cheeks (2012:114); *Atag Lhamo* feels loved when she thinks that *Gesar* notices her (44); *Drukmo* and *Atag Lhamo*'s mutual jealousy is expressed by lightning bolts shooting from their eyes (115).

In a nutshell, the government cannot easily manipulate the reception of publications due to the heavy involvement of the audience. Thus, there are still contingent spaces in the publishing world, as reflected by Alai's novel. However, the existence of a highly propaganda-like comic project reveals the heavy involvement of the ISAs, which reinterpret almost all *Gesar*-related publications at will. Therefore, the ultimate image of the publications can hardly be solely artistic or commercial. "It is a matter of consequence, not merely of connoisseurship" (Harris, 2002:46).

Resistance

Both Yang Enhong and Alai have challenged the national ideology of *Gesar* and Tibet. Since they themselves are a part of the ISAs, they do not aim at overthrowing the regime, but only creating discords within the ISAs to inspire new ideas. Thus, the ISAs respond by the “carrot and stick” policy, which aims at regulation instead of punishment. But how about the bards, who are not a part of the ISAs? Compared to scholars and writers, whose careers largely depend on the ISAs, *Gesar* bards might be the only ones who can relatively freely resist against Chinese reterritorialization of Tibet. This section attempts to outline how the bards strive to preserve the authentic image of the epic tradition, especially in a local context, and to deterritorialize the Chinese ISAs’ grand narrative on *Gesar*.

Since the protagonist of Alai’s novel is a *Gesar* bard, it serves as an appropriate introduction to our discussion. Alai’s decision to name the protagonist is perhaps the most politically heretic decision of the novel. Although ‘Jigs-med itself is a popular name in Tibet, in modern Tibetan history there is only one famous ‘Jigs-med who is largely associated with the *Gesar* epic, ‘Jigs-med Phun-tshogs (1933-2004). ‘Jigs-med Phun-tshogs was a *tulku* (reincarnation lineage of a master) “se souvenait d’une de ses réincarnation précédentes où il était un fameux général associé au roi *Gesar*” (Maconi, 2004:385). During the Cultural Revolution, he meditated on the warring deities of *Gesar* in order to reinforce and develop his force of interior and exterior resistance against the “demons” (ibid.) After he had visited the Dalai Lama while he toured overseas, he was constantly under scrutiny by the Chinese authorities. His institute was later razed to the ground after refusing to cut the number of attending students. ‘Jigs-med Phun-tshogs’ tragedy revealed that the Repressive State Apparatus has no mercy towards any opposition from without the ISAs.

Coincidentally or not, there is a recurring *tulku* character in the novel, who constantly guides ‘Jigs-med through his critical moments as a *bab-sgrung*. The most notable occasion being the ending of ‘Jigs-med story, where he feels that it is about time to chant the finale of the epic, knowing that he will lose all his chanting ability because he is going to finish the story:

The *Tulku* ... said, “*Sgrung-mkhan*, I smell something from you.”

“A smell?”

“The smell of conclusion.”

“Am I dying?”

“I feel the finale of the story. Do you wish to sing the final episode of the epic?”

“Looks like it.”

...

Many *sgrung-mkhan* are reluctant to sing the final episode of the epic, because the story will leave them afterwards, since the mission is considered finished.

The *Tulku* corrected, “It is not finished. It is *Great Perfection*.”

(Alai, 2009[2011]:477-8)

Since ‘Jigs-med Phun-tshogs is a Nyingma master, that sentence from the *tulku* seems almost too suggestive of a connection. Together with Alai’s claim that “I am ‘Jigs-med” on the back cover of the book, it leaves the readers who possess relevant background knowledge room for interpretation and imagination. However, of course, these all stay on the speculative level.

However, to one’s surprise, Jiangbian Jiacao did include him in his book (2007) on *Gesar* bards. The title of this book, *Gesar Bards in Tibet: From Beggars to National Treasure*, suggests a clear ideological message, that the bards should be grateful and indebted to the government, who elevated their status and salvaged them from poverty. In this book, Jiangbian selectively leaves out these sensitive topics, in which ‘Jigs-med Phun-tshogs’ constantly resisted against the regime and kept his close relation with the Dalai Lama.

While ‘Jigs-med Phun-tshogs is an exceptional example, since he was a *tulku* who lived and taught in a monastery, another *Gesar* bard, Dawa Drakpa (1978-), might represent more ordinary chanters, namely those who focus solely on chanting and are not closely related to Buddhist setups. As the most distinguished among the younger generation of *Gesar* bards, Dawa Drakpa features in the Finnish-produced documentary *A Gesar Bard’s Tale* (2013). The back cover reads as follows:

“Now, at 35, Dawa receives a salary from the Chinese government as a guardian of national cultural heritage, and is regarded as a holy man by his community. Apart from this incredible

gift, he is like any other 30-something, interested in cars, music, and a comfortable family in his newly built house.”

This paragraph highlights a number of central issues and genuinely presents a *Gesar* bard's life. Dawa receives salary from the government for his government-sponsored recordings. This shows that *Gesar* bards, especially the excellent ones, are in a position where negotiations with the government and compromising are inevitable. It also means that 'Jigs-med's insistence that a chanter should stick to the traditional form of living, to wander and sing the epic wherever they reach, is a romantic imagination only existing in novels. It is impractical to demand a bard to reject a stable life for his family.

However, Dawa does attempt to fulfill his traditional duties by conducting rituals for local communities since he is regarded as a holy man. In the documentary, a sick old woman refused to go to the hospital to get injections, but insisted to have Dawa come over to conduct healing rituals for her. Similarly, after the great earthquake in 2010 struck *Yul-shul*, he was busy performing rituals for the injured. This particular communal function of a *Gesar* bard is conspicuously ignored in the official representation of *Gesar* since it is regarded superstitious and backward.

Like Alai, Dawa also criticizes the government's overdevelopment and industrialization of Tibet. He said in the documentary that the earthquake happened because pollution and ecological damage angered the gods. It was also more difficult for him now to communicate with nature now due to environmental degradation.

The documentary ends with Dawa's argument with the local government, who attempted to evacuate his family from his newly built house, which actually endured the earthquake. Although reports have shown that the house only needs minor repairs, the local government plans to tear down and rebuild the whole town. He is offered a negligible compensation of repatriation, which does not even cover half of his construction costs of the house. Although he is a "national treasure", he stands powerless against the RSA, which threatens to send in bulldozers if he refuses to move.

Gesar and its ritual texts were officially admitted into the Tibetan Buddhist corpus during the non-sectarian (*ris-med*) movement. The community page of *Ling Gesar* on Facebook shows clips of bards and the people, both in Dharamsala and in Eastern Tibet, participated in the *Gesar* rituals to celebrate the 80th birthday of the Dalai Lama. However, it is generally confined to an internal audience while Dharamsala and the communities in exile, who regard themselves as the true heir and carrier of Tibetan culture, have not brought the *Gesar* epic to the international spotlight. Jan Mangusson solves this strange phenomenon by pointing out that, "...to win our sympathy the Tibetans have to deliver what we expect from them" (2000:200); "a soft power" that is "both a prison and a power for Tibet" (211). The *Gesar* epic, full of violence and gore, is more a burden than an asset for the reverend lamas, since it goes against the peaceful and serene outlook of Tibetan Buddhism on international stage. This view is verified by the way Shambhala publications, the leading publisher of the exile community, introduces the two only publications of the *Gesar* epic throughout its history of almost half a century. In David-Neel's version, Chögyam Trungpa's said in the foreword "*Gesar* represents the ideal warrior, the principle of all-victorious confidence. As the central force of sanity he conquers all his enemies, the evil forces of the four directions, who turn people's minds away from the true teachings of Buddhism, the teachings that say it is possible to attain ultimate self-realization" (1987:5). For Robin Kornman's version (2007), the introduction text on its Amazon page reads, "The example of King *Gesar* is also understood as a spiritual teaching. The "enemies" in the stories represent the emotional and psychological challenges that turn people toward greed, aggression, and envy and away from the true teachings of Buddhism." These introduction texts testify to the fact that even the community in exile is representing and reinterpreting *Gesar* to their own advantage.

By and large, *Gesar* bards are the true fighters who rage against the state machine. While they need to fulfill their communal and social duties, they also need to satisfy the government by supplying their recordings in return of pensions and salaries. They need to be extremely careful when expressing their opinions, especially criticisms. They cannot get in touch with or receive assistance from Dharamsala since they might be arrested for treason. Their delicate and difficult situation reflects how dangerous it is to escape from the dominant social mode, the Chinese grand narrative planted by the ISAs.

Conclusion

In this thesis, we have learnt that the hype of *Gesar* never comes innocently and naturally. It is the result of calculations, motivated by political interests and intentions. We too have come across the official ideology of representing the *Gesar* epic in China, which is largely dominated by three actors: the government, the academia, and the publishing world. They form a top-down three level hierarchy, empowering the ISAs threefold. For the government, we witness its strong involvement in *Gesar* studies since the end of the Cultural Revolution. In the 2000s the authorities successfully have the state-represented interpretation of *Gesar* epic tradition inscribed in the UNESCO intangible cultural heritage list. Academia operates closely *vis-à-vis* government policies, merging the socialist and nationalist discourse to reinforce the sinocentric discursive hegemony of the Chinese authorities and institutions. However, there is noticeable discord between some *Gesar* scholars, such as Yang Enhong, who are more determined to connect with international academia, and Jiangbian Jiacao, who closely follow the national ideology. They attempt to produce academic articles in a less political and propagandist way. In the publishing world, the government is often heavily involved as the spokesperson for any *Gesar*-related publication. Sometimes it participates in the post-production period, such as Alai's novel, while at other times they may possibly even participate in the planning phase together with academia, such as Quan's comic series. Such hegemony of discursive power reflects an alternative kind of censorship, since the ISAs mechanism leads people's attention towards the direction it desires.

Resistances, attempting to deterritorialize the Chinese reterritorializing representation the *Gesar* epic, both internal and external of the ISAs, are highly restricted and disciplined by the RSA and ISAs. In academia, paradigms other than the mainstream ones are isolated and discontinued, such as Yang Enhong's feminist critique. In the publishing world, Alai expresses his anxiety about the future of Tibetan culture and tradition through his literary works, but his protests have been overwhelmed by the ISAs, the most authoritative promoter and marketer of his works. As for those unaffiliated with the ISAs, such as 'Jigs-med Phun-tshogs, are relentlessly wiped out by the RSA. Countless unheard voices have never been faithfully conveyed with

proper publicity in the P.R.C. The communal and social functions are inconspicuously forgotten to safeguard the credibility of the official representation of the *Gesar* epic.

The relative absence of the epic in the exiled community further testifies to the political nature of *Gesar*. Although *Gesar* has reconciled with and become a part of Tibetan Buddhism during the non-sectarian *ris-med* movement, Dharamsala does not step up to promote *Gesar* as a part of their religious tradition, since *Gesar* has no political value to them. In this case, as the Chinese assimilation of Tibet accelerates, the hegemony of the ISAs and the Chinese representation of *Gesar* prevail unchallenged.

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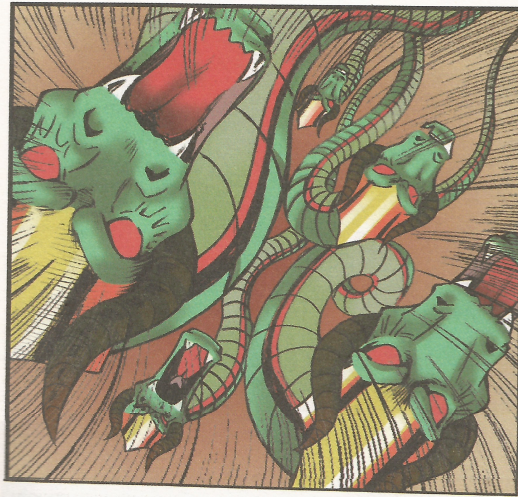
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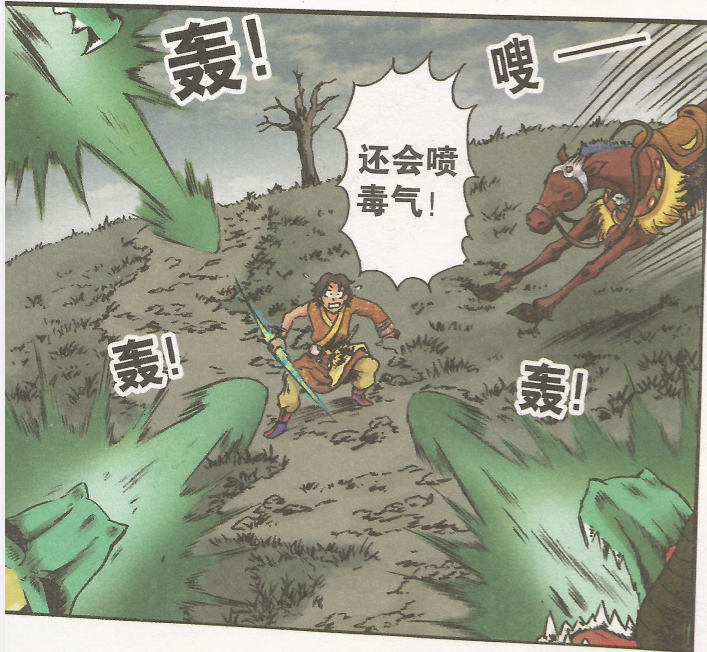
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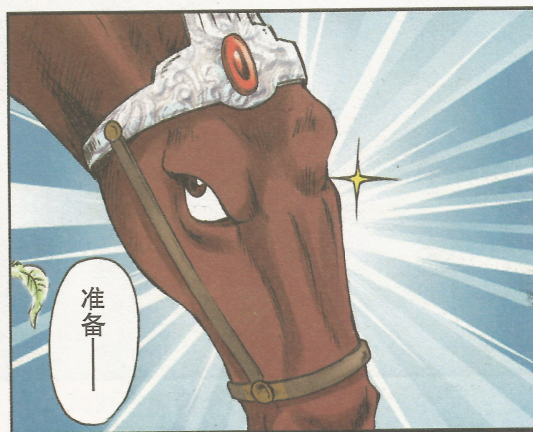
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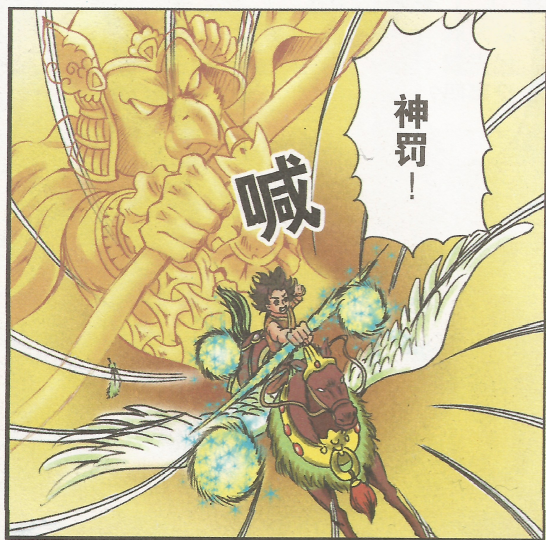
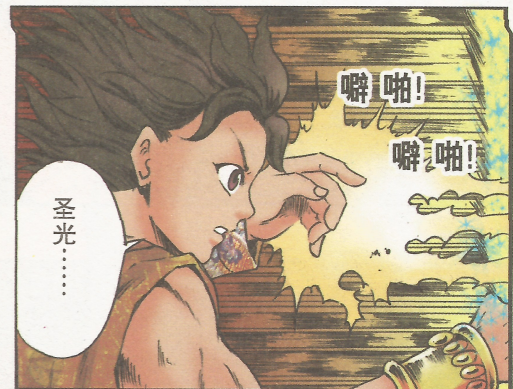
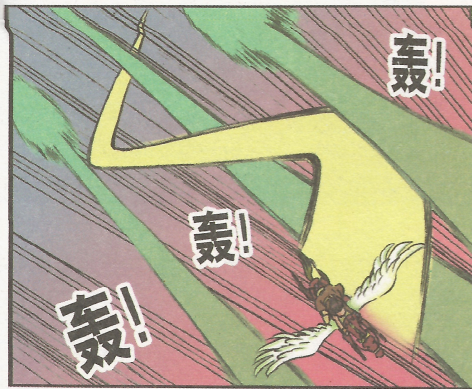
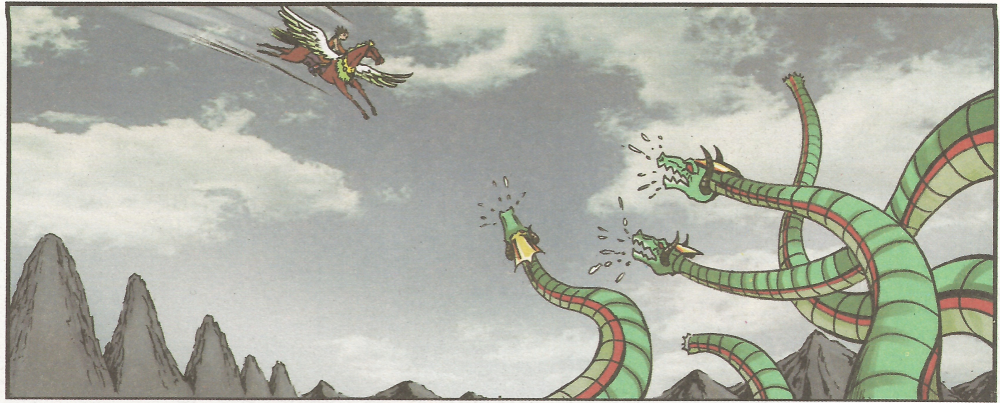
Appendix: A Segment of Quan's *Gesar* Comic (Vol. 2:80-83)



※注：Double kill，同时击倒两个目标，俗称“双杀”。







※注：Hat trick，帽子戏法，在此表示同时击倒三个目标。