Article:
Thurston, T (2019) The Tibetan Gesar Epic Beyond its Bards: An Ecosystem of Genres on the Roof of the World. Journal of American Folklore, 132 (524). pp. 115-136. ISSN 0021-8715

https://doi.org/10.5406/jamerfolk.132.524.0115

The Tibetan Gesar Epic beyond Its Bards: An Ecosystem of Genres on the Roof of the World

Timothy Thurston

Journal of American Folklore, Volume 132, Number 524, Spring 2019, pp. 115-136 (Article)

Published by American Folklore Society

Timothy Thurston

The Tibetan Gesar Epic beyond Its Bards: An Ecosystem of Genres on the Roof of the World

This paper examines the Tibetan Gesar epic beyond its text and bards. It begins with a synopsis of the epic itself and reviews some of the multilingual literature on the Gesar tradition with attention to translations, storytellers and poetics, and questions of historicity. But heritage regimes shape broader knowledge of traditional practices. Using proverbs and localized micro-narratives, this paper recognizes an ecosystem of Gesar-related genres, suggesting how epic knowledge extends beyond heritage epistemologies.

Keywords
AFS ETHNOGRAPHIC THESAURUS: Genre, heritage, narrative, proverb

མི་ཚེ་སྐྱོང་བད་ན་སྒྲུང་ཤོད།

If you want to waste your life, tell the epic.

—Tournadre and Robin (2006:139; Tibetan Proverb)

Introduction

The Tibetan Gesar epic, often considered the longest epic in the world, is a thrilling tale of an outcast prince who reclaims his throne, pacifies his kingdom's neighbors, and lays the groundwork for Buddhist conversion in Tibet. Its rich poetic language, performed by *sgrung mkhan*[1] (storytellers or bards), the most famous of whom are inspired by dreams, has drawn scholars and translators from around the world. At the same time, research on Gesar has tended to focus overwhelmingly on the long-form, prosimetric versions of the epic, inscribed in the UNESCO lists of world intangible cultural heritage. And yet, Gesar lore exists, and epic knowledge is transmitted in a variety of other, less frequently studied forms, ranging from mentions in everyday conversation to features in the natural landscape to narratives told informally to pass long winter evenings. My goal in this article is to examine the Gesar phenomenon as an ecology of genres that extends beyond its epic text and bards. That is to say,

TIMOTHY THURSTON is a lecturer in Chinese Studies at the University of Leeds

Journal of American Folklore 132(524):115–136

I am interested in looking beyond the epic tradition in its most narrowly defined sense and the frameworks most commonly used to analyze it. Similar to Roger D. Abrahams' "continuum of genres" (2005), the metaphor of ecologies draws on work from "cultural sustainability"[2] to recognize the dense, dialogic, and multidirectional ties between related expressive genres. To accomplish this, I will begin with a brief synopsis of the Gesar epic. Next, I will review some of the multilingual literature in Chinese, Tibetan, English, and French on the Gesar tradition, focusing particularly on translations, storytellers and poetics, and questions of historicity. Due to constraints of space and linguistic ability, this review covers only a small fraction of the massive corpus of Gesar-related scholarship. I focus on the Gesar epic in primarily Tibetan regions of the People's Republic of China.[3] This is a matter of convenience, as any topic of this magnitude must be delimited in some fashion. I then examine some other speech genres in which the Gesar epic continues to manifest itself. Together, these help to suggest a large, multi-generic "pool of tradition" (Honko 2000:18–9)[4] relating to the Gesar epic and its prosimetric performance tradition, but also extending well beyond the confines of the epic tradition itself.

The Gesar Epic

The Gesar epic centers on the life and exploits of King Gesar, a reincarnated Buddhist deity, born into the family of the King of Gling. Blessed with supernatural abilities, protected by a retinue of deities who have pledged him their aid in accomplishing the tasks set forth to him, and surrounded by a number of heroes, he came to the kingdom of Gling to defeat the demonic enemies surrounding the region and thereby prepare Tibet and its people for the spread of Buddhism in the Land of Snows.

Though sgrung mkhan may perform individual episodes at any given time, there is a generally accepted chronology of Gesar's life (Karmay 1993). In more Buddhist versions, he consents to take human form and makes several preconditions for his doing so, including but not limited to his earthly parentage, the weapons and tools to be made available to him, and the deities who must reincarnate to be part of his retinue. Even with these many advantages, things are not always easy for the future king. Exiled by his jealous uncle, Khro thung, the boy—then named Joru—spends his childhood roaming the Tibetan countryside. One day, when the time has come for Joru to begin his religious and martial work, the goddess Manene appears to him, commanding him to go to Gling. Taking the form of a raven, he goes to his uncle, the avaricious Khro thung, and convinces him that by holding a high-stakes horse race in Gling, Khro thung will certainly win the throne of the kingdom.[5] On the day of the event, Joru shows up on his mystical flying and talking steed Kyang Go-karkar, though horse and rider are disguised as donkey and beggar, respectively. The other contestants all laugh at Joru's slovenly appearance, until he wins the throne and the hand of the beautiful 'Brug mo in marriage in an exciting horse race.

After ascending to the throne of Gling, he discards the name Joru and becomes King Gesar, Seng chen nor bu dgra 'dul, the Great Lion, Jewel Tamer of Enemies. He then proceeds to lead the kingdom on several campaigns against their neighbors in the four cardinal directions: 'Jang, Mon, Hor, and the Kingdom in the North. Often,

these wars are in retaliation for some heinous crime perpetrated on the people of Gling while the king is in meditative retreat. The king of Hor, for example, destroys the kingdom of Gling and takes Gesar's wife 'Brug mo for his own. In reacting to these demonic aggressors, Gesar combines spiritual attainment with martial prowess, leading the people of Gling in waging compassionate holy war on the demonic forces surrounding the kingdom. Aided by a retinue of 80 warriors, including a core group of 30 main generals, and with the help of deities who actively work to aid him in ensuring favorable conditions for the spread of Buddhism in Tibet, he defeats these demonic powers through a combination of martial prowess and cunning. In addition to this series of core episodes, there are also other episodes in which Gesar leads his subjects on other conquests against enemies as far away as Iran.

Itinerant sgrung mkhan traditionally wandered the countryside seeking invitations to perform the epic (Stein 1981). Performances to individual households or a group of households aimed to both entertain and provide moral instruction to the audience. Epic performances are prosimetric, mixing rapid-fire storytelling sections with formulaic songs, sung in a set number of tunes (Helffer 1979). Songs voice the speech of a variety of characters from the epic who "call upon their deities to guide them, introduce themselves and the place of action, greet their friend or foe [present in the narrated event], and then make requests and demands, ask questions, give instructions, and announce plans" (FitzHerbert 2007:8–9). The resulting style is a complex, entertaining performance that has been transmitted for centuries.

In 2009, the Gesar epic was inscribed on the UNESCO list of intangible cultural heritage. At present, many provincial, prefectural, and county level units, particularly in China's Western regions, maintain Gesar research offices, as do a number of higher education institutions. These offices are responsible for identifying, recording, and sometimes paying salaries to Gesar performers. The Chinese government officially recognizes the most famous performers as "tradition bearers" (Ch: *chuanchengren*), who receive stipends in exchange for performing and recording their epic repertoires, as well as working with interested researchers.[6] There are only six such officially recognized tradition bearers in China. They are spread across Western China's Sichuan, Gansu, and Qinghai Provinces, as well as one each in Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region and the Tibet Autonomous Region.[7] Qinghai Province is the only provincial-level entity with two transmitters of the Gesar epic.

At the same time, it is worth recognizing that Chinese scholarly interest in and governmental support for research on the Tibetan epic pre-dates UNESCO's involvement. During the Qing dynasty, the Kangxi emperor sponsored a print edition (published in 1716) of the Mongolian version of the epic that is often taken as a sign of the affinity the Manchu rulers had for Mongolians and their culture (de Rachewiltz and Narangoa 2017:1–2). Han Chinese attention to the Gesar epic, meanwhile, dates to at least the 1920s, when scholars like Ren Naiqiang (任乃强, 1894–1989) began conducting research on what was then considered to be China's frontiers. Chinese governmental support for research really took off after the establishment of the People's Republic of China. Li Lianrong, however, points out that "none of these early scholars who conducted *Gesar* research in the 1930s and 1940s assisted with the later collection work" (2001:323). Though Li does not provide the reasons for this, it seems possible

that these scholars fell afoul of the turbulent political climate of the Maoist period. Ren Naiqiang, for example, was labeled a rightist in the 1950s and was forced into supervised labor. Despite this, Zang Xiaowei notes that the government "mobilized 566 libraries and 163 museums to collect, translate, and study *Gesar*, an oral Tibetan epic, *Jangar*, a Mongolian epic, and *Manas*, an epic of the Kirgiz people" (2015:167). Since the end of the Cultural Revolution, moreover, the epic was listed as a key, national-level research project in the sixth, seventh, eighth, and ninth "five-year plans" (1980–2000). The work continues apace, and Gesarology is now a vibrant component of several fields in Chinese academia, including translation studies, literature studies, folkloristics, and anthropology.

The Gesar Epic, East and West

With tellers in Mongolia, Baltistan, Ladakh, and across the Tibetan Plateau, as well as scholars in China, Mongolia, Russia, Europe, and the United States, Gesar research is a veritable multilingual industry unto itself. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, "over 1,000 academic theses and 30 research works have been published" on the Gesar epic (Zhang 2004:136).[8] This is in addition to the many manuscript-length analyses and translated editions available in China and the number of Gesar-related publications in English, Tibetan, Chinese, French, German, Russian, and Mongolian.

Unfortunately, the plethora of languages in which Gesar research is conducted often prevents scholars from holistically engaging in this immense body of literature. This leads to a situation in which Western sources very rarely engage Chinese-language scholarship (though they almost all approach Tibetan-language sources), and Chinese sources only occasionally take Western scholarship into account. This section surveys some of the Gesar-related scholarship produced in English, Tibetan, and Chinese. For the sake of simplicity and brevity, however, I focus on three thematic issues around which much of this research has focused: historicity, sgrung mkhan and poetics, and translations.

Historicity

Where is the character of Gesar from? Is he better considered a mythical hero or a historical figure? At the meta-level, what is the importance of interest in Gesar at different historical moments? One of the earliest and still unresolved debates about the Gesar epic relates to the historicity and origins of the great king himself. In Tibetan regions, this is a question that has vexed scholars going back at least to the eighteenth century, when Sum pa Mkhan po spoke of empirical evidence supposedly attesting to Gesar's historical and unequivocally Tibetan origins in correspondences with the Sixth Panchen Lama (see FitzHerbert 2015; King 2016).

And yet, many Western scholars remain unconvinced. Noticing that some versions of the epic speak of "Khrom Gesar," some scholars see etymological links with Caesar of Rome (see, for example, Stein 1959; Mortensen 1999; Schaeffer, Kapstein, and Tuttle 2013:309) and with similar terms like the German "Kaiser" and Russian

"Czar." Scholars in China tend to remain unmoved by these arguments. Xu Guoqiong, for example, suggests a variety of alternatives, including the Gilgit region of Kashmir and a location in Xinjiang, before unequivocally stating that Khrom cannot refer to Rome (1993:360–7). Jiangbian Jiacuo[9] (perhaps the most famous of China's Gesarologists) provides a common critique of this view, stating "there are no materials showing in what way 'Caesar' became Gesar. Between these two, there is no inherent connection" (2003:54). He also critiques a handful of other standpoints that suggest a non-Tibetan origin of the term (though never citing specific works) before proffering his own feelings about the unequivocally Tibetan name of Gesar. Jiangbian concludes by positing a philological perspective on ancient Tibetan in which Gesar might mean either "stamen" or "to take power." He then points to manuscript versions of the epic in which, after Joru wins the throne of Gling, people say "Joru ge sar song!" [Joru has come to power!], and he posits that the new king might have used this as his title (2003:54–6).

In an earlier work, Jiangbian argues that the name Gesar appears in texts dating back to Tang Dynasty-era documents found in the Dunhuang caves, but that it was not until the eighteenth century that Tibetan religious leader and scholar Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal 'byor (1704–1788) linked Gesar—as a real historical figure—and the kingdom of Gling to Sde dge (1999:418–24). He even exchanged correspondence on the matter with the Sixth Panchen Lama, including when Gesar had lived.[10] And, yet, the debate rages on. Xu Guoqiong asserts that the king was a historical figure who lived in the eleventh century AD (1986), the same time that Yang Enhong says the epic itself began to be performed (2001).

An additional point of concern is identifying the "authentic" sites of the Gesar epic. Government recognition of one location's claim to having been the actual location of this or that event from the epic may provide tremendous financial benefits in the form of both government subsidy and tourist dollars. Tibetans in China generally accept Sum pa mkhan po's take, arguing that the king is from Sde dge, a region in the Eastern Tibetan region known as Khams.[11] His childhood, it is said, was spent wandering around Qinghai Province's Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and the monastery of his guru Phag mo grub pa is Rta rna Monastery (literally "Horse ears," for the peculiarly shaped mountain peak behind the monastery) in Yul shul (Ch: Yushu 玉树), Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture's southernmost Nangchen (Ch: Nangqian 囊谦) County, where one can find relics and reliquaries attributed to Gesar and his heroes (Grüschke 2004). Regardless of the historic truth of the king's life and deeds, the lion's share of scholarly effort over the last 20 years has been on the epic's storytellers, who have acquired their skill by miraculous means and who continue to breathe life into the epic, and on the poetics of epic performance.

Sgrung mkhan and Poetics

Since the beginning of the twenty-first century, the early emphasis on historiography and origins has largely given way to a concern with performance, development, and cultural importance of the Gesar epic over time. Han scholars like Yang Enhong (b. 1946) and Tibetan scholars like Jiangbian Jiacuo (b. 1938) and Gcod pa don grub

(b. 1949) (the former publishing in both Chinese and Tibetan, the latter publishing almost exclusively in Tibetan) shot to the forefront of Gesar studies with their work on the epic and its sgrung mkhan performers.[12] Much of this research has focused on *how* storytellers acquire their ability to tell the epic, for which Tibetans maintain a sophisticated classification system.

The most famous class of sgrung mkhan are the *'bab sgrung*, dream-inspired storytellers. *'bab* means literally to fall or descend and refers to the fact that a 'bab sgrung is able to perform after a deity (usually a character from the Gesar epic) either possesses the singer or endows the singer with the ability to perform large sections of the epic. Specific competences vary, but the best can often perform vast tracts of the epic (Zhambei Gyaltsho 2001). *Dag snang sgrung* are suddenly inspired to perform the epic, though the skill can fade just as quickly. *Thos sgrung* possess a relatively restricted repertoire and learn from listening to others. *Don sgrung* are literate performers who chant from a book. *Dgongs gter* are performers who suddenly gain the ability to write and tell several episodes of the epic, although they might otherwise be illiterate. *Pra phab*, "artists by circular light," see the epic or epic texts in a bronze mirror or other blank object (such as a piece of paper) and tell it. Finally, *gter ston*, "treasure excavators," tend to be more educated and often write (or find previously written) versions of the epic.

In addition to the emic classification of storytellers in terms of how they acquire their skills, some scholars have also examined the traditional and idiosyncratic elements available to storytellers. Tibetan scholar Gcod pa don grub, in just some of his far-ranging research into the Gesar epic, for example, examines the special characteristics of dream-inspired storyteller Tshe ring dbang 'dus' epic performances by focusing on prayers and offerings made before every performance; the use of props and gesture, and how they have changed over time; his ability to lengthen or shorten performance based on audiences; and the variety of tunes he sings (2007). Gcod pa don grub suggests that these are all relatively unique to this performer. In doing so, he recognizes the tremendous space for individual creativity available to storytellers.

Finally, folklorists in China have also recently begun using oral-formulaic theory (see Lord 1960) to examine the poetics of epic in performance (see Chao Gejin 2000 for one notable example). Some Gesarologists have also begun testing the theory's application to Tibetan sgrung mkhan. Comparing the songs in two editions—the first an edited version of a singer's manuscript, the second based on a recording made from famous sgrung mkhan Grags pa—Yang Enhong recognizes that each episode of the Gesar epic consists of five parts, including prelude, prayers, introduction, body, and conclusion (2001). Looking specifically at the metric portions of the texts, Yang then notes a number of common formulas connecting the two editions, including formulas between one and four sentences in length to open songs, rhyming patterns, reiterative endings, and parallelism. She then further links this to characteristics of Tibetan traditional narrative more generally, dating as far back as the Dunhuang manuscripts.[13] Despite this, Solomon George FitzHerbert cautions that, with the exception of a small store of such stock epithets and formulaic phrases, a majority of formulas are unique to the performers themselves (2007:86). Regardless, a need remains for attention to both unedited performance in context and the processes behind creating and editing written editions.[14]

Textualization and Translation

The Gesar epic also boasts a robust religious and textual tradition dating back several centuries and continuing into the present in a variety of media. FitzHerbert argues that the Gesar epic, "until the very recent past, has not been the object of anything more than a sporadic and weak scribal tradition" (2010:218), but this has changed significantly since at least the mid-1950s, with the epic now entextualized in written versions, literary recreations, and a variety of multimedia forms. Indeed, there are dozens of compilations and translations of the Gesar epic presently circulating in a number of different languages. Some of these present the epic as a combination of prose and verse, thus preserving the prosimetric style of epic performance. Others are exclusively prose versions that privilege plot over style. Some are based on earlier Tibetan editions. Others are based on epic storytellers' versions.[15] Still others are tradition-inspired literary fantasies based more or less loosely on the epic or its storytellers.

The most highly regarded of the print versions is the prosimetric Gling tshang xylograph. Coming from the famed Sde dge publishing house, the Gling tshang xylograph has influenced the performances of Tibet's most renowned storytellers (see FitzHerbert 2016), and it also forms the basis of several prosimetric entextualizations, including Dge 'dun (1999) as well as Kornman, Chonam, and Khandro's English translation (2015). The Gling tshang manuscript was written under the patronage of the Gling tshang kings in Sde dge, who claimed direct descent from Gesar's nephew and heir, Dgra lha tshe rgyal, and even credits several bards who were consulted in its creation (FitzHerbert 2015).

In the nineteenth century, the Rnying ma sect's influence on the Gesar epic began to grow considerably.[16] This occurred most prominently in Sde dge, this time with the support of 'Ju mi pham. 'Ju mi pham composed prayers to Gesar ('Ju mi pham 1996) and oversaw the editing of an explicitly Buddhist version of the epic (see Kornman 1997), playing an important role in incorporating him into the Rnying ma pantheon of protective deities.[17] This was to have a significant influence on later entextualizations of the epic, as many also emphasize the Buddhist nature of Gesar's mission and particularly his connection to Padmasambhava (Pad+ma 'byung gnas), the great saint who would eventually introduce Buddhism to Tibet. At the same time, Gesar began to take an increasingly important role in Tibetan folk ritual practices, which Makley reads as an attempt to "mandalize the mobile and militaristic force of Gesar's lay masculinity *outside* both the parochial interests of monasteries and the radically localized purviews of regional lay protector gods" (2007:239). In this context, the nineteenth-century codification, entextualization, and ritualization of the Gesar epic took on increased importance for Tibetans in the turbulent sociopolitical contexts of the Sino-Tibetan borderlands.

The creation of new Tibetan versions of the Gesar epic did not, however, cease with the establishment of the People's Republic of China. In fact, the Chinese Communist Party sponsored an extensive program to collect and produce new versions of the Tibetan epic. The methods for entextualization, however, may vary. FitzHerbert, for example, in critiquing the composition of the 40-volume *Gling sgrung gces btus* (The Essence of the Gling Myth) ('Jam dpal rgya mtsho and Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs

2000), notes: "The method is one of simply splicing together non-duplicating narratives—from modern bards and older texts—to make a single narrative which doesn't go back on itself" (2010:217). In addition to this more aggregate version, there have also been multivolume textual versions made from the individual spoken versions of a variety of modern bards (though the recordings themselves seem to be less freely available), as well as republications of the Gling tshang manuscript (Dge 'dun 1999).[18]

The publication of Tibetan-language versions has also been accompanied by a parallel effort to translate episodes into Chinese. Most of these Chinese translations have not recreated the prosimetric form of performance but instead retell the plot in Chinese prose. Two such works include Jiangbian Jiacuo and Wu Wei's two-volume translation, which purports to tell the entire epic in Chinese prose (1997), and Liu Liqian's, which retells the opening episode of the Gesar epic, also in prose (2000). In addition to these versions, all of which preserve the Gesar epic's fantastic plot, though often at the expense of the performed epic's prosimetric art, a number of authors have offered their own literary reimaginings of the epic in a variety of new genres. Tibetan author Don grub rgyal's *Sgrung pa* (The Bard), first published in 1979, revolves around the experiences of a local epic storyteller during and after the Cultural Revolution (see Lama Jabb 2015:71–3). In 2009, Sinophone Tibetan author Alai (b. 1959), winner of the Mao Dun Literature Prize, wrote his own version of King Gesar, which moves dream-like between the Gesar epic and a *sgrung mkhan*'s life, initially as a dream-inspired performer of the epic on the Tibetan grasslands and later as a "national treasure" protected by the Chinese state. Eventually, the two narratives merge, and the storyteller interacts directly with the epic hero.

Beyond Chinese and Tibetan, there have been a number of versions translated into Romance languages as well. Perhaps the most famous and widely circulated of these translations is celebrated theosophists Alexandra David-Neel and Lama Yongden's *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling* (1934).[19] Toward the end of the twentieth century, Douglas J. Penick also adapted his own prose version (1996). Most recently, Kornman, Chonam, and Khandro have completed a massive (albeit partial) prosimetric translation based heavily on the religiously redolent version of the Gling tshang manuscript (2015).

This literature review provides only the briefest introduction to research on the Gesar epic tradition. Due to constraints of space and time, I have introduced only the Tibetan version of Gesar, and I have focused almost exclusively on the epic tradition, narrowly construed. This expansive multilingual entextualization and translation project has also been a key facet of Tibetan epic research to date. At the same time, this research corpus focuses overwhelmingly on the long form of the epic. It should be recognized, however, that this elides a less common but important corpus of scholarship examining other Gesar-related phenomena, like Gesar's incorporation into the Buddhist pantheon of mundane deities as a local protector (see Reb gong pa mkhar rtse rgyal 2009) and Gesar's impact on the natural landscape (see, for example, Gcod pa don grub and Bkra ba 2013). In the following section, I will suggest that this long-term, transnational focus on the epic and its star performers overlooks a variety of important oral genres that draw on knowledge of Gesar-related culture and therefore make information about the epic a part of Tibetan everyday life.

Beyond Sgrung

The overwhelming scholarly focus exclusively on Gesar as an epic tradition in heritage regimes, academic literature, and popular discourse shapes epistemologies of this Tibetan tradition, as do the Chinese and Tibetan terms most often used to refer to this network of Gesar-related cultural practices. In Tibetan, the Gesar epic is often called *Gling sgrung* (The Myth of Gling), which is itself a shortened version of *Gling rje ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung* (The Myth of King Gesar the Lord of Gling). Scholars writing in Chinese, meanwhile, frequently translate *sgrung* as either *shenhua* (commonly used to translate the analytic type Western scholars call "myth") or as *shishi* 史诗 (literally "history poem"), the term used to translate the English "epic." And yet both the Tibetan and its various translations (Chinese shishi 史诗, English "epic," French *l'epopée*, etc.) are somewhat misleading in that they all focus on the prosimetric performance of the tale by a handful of specialist storytellers.

This focus on prosimetric performance and sometimes miraculous transmission, however, fails to encapsulate the extensive penetration of Gesar into an ecology of cultural forms, from the *gtam dpe* "proverb" to *thangka* paintings (a form of religious painting often featuring a deity at the center; see Li Lianrong 2016; Jambian Gyamco and Zhou 2003), operatic performances (FitzHerbert 2007:9), new literary and filmic works (see Lama Jabb 2015; Alai 2009), Gesar-related landmarks in the natural environment (see Sman shul rin chen rdo rje 2009; Gcod pa don grub and Bkra ba 2013), government-sponsored Gesar-related performance and constructions, and even critiques of the practices behind the translation of the Gesar epic (see, for example, Wang Hongyin and Wang Zhiguo 2011).

In recent years, conference titles have begun to address this seeming disconnect by broadening their purviews to "Gesar culture" (T: Ge sar rig gnas; Ch: Ge sa'er wenhua 格萨尔文化). Nevertheless, the lion's share of talks at these conferences (and of Gesar-related academic publishing) remains focused overwhelmingly on the epic in a narrow, textual sense.

For the remainder of this article, I wish to discuss two additional forms in which Gesar-related lore appears: proverbs and informal micro-narratives. These oft-overlooked genres force us to look beyond Tibet's dream-inspired bards to fully

Figure 1. A Gesar opera performance during the Yushu horse race festival in 2014 being held at "Gesar Square," overlooked by the Gesar statue the government has erected in Yushu County, Yushu TAP, Qinghai Province, China (photo by Timothy O'Connor Thurston).

comprehend the Gesar epic's import to everyday Tibetan life and identity. In doing so, they also refocus our attention away from the Gesar epic on the grand scale and toward recognition of "Gesar culture," while revealing how Gesar exists as part of a broader ecology of expressive genres.

Proverbs

Though the Gesar epic is famous for being a repository of proverbs (Kornman, Chonam, and Khandro 2015; Gcod pa don grub 2007:335–43; Wei Renzhong 2008), reference to the epic *in* proverbs is less frequently found in scholarly literature. Yet a number of proverbs make explicit and implicit reference to the Gesar epic. Some examples of these proverbs include:

གླིང་སེང་ཆེན་བཟང་རུང་མི་གཅིག་རེད། རྟ་རྐྱང་དེ་བཟང་རུང་རྟ་གཅིག་རེད།

Gling seng chen bzang rung mi gcig red / rta rkyang nge bzang rung rta gcig red

The Lion of Gling [this is an epithet for King Gesar] is good, but he is only one person, [his steed] the horse Rkyang nge is good, but he is only one horse (Tournadre and Robin 2006:66; English translation from the French is by the author)

In this example, *Gling seng chen* is a combination of the Gling, the kingdom Gesar ruled, while the second and third syllables of the epithet (*seng chen*) are a shortened form of *seng chen nor bu'i dgra 'dul*, an epithet often used to identify King Gesar. In this case, the literal translation, "The Great Lion of Gling," can only be King Gesar. While this example relies on knowledge of the epic's contents, the following examples rely on experience listening to epic performance.

ཐང་ཡངས་མོའི་ཐོག་ལ་ཨ་ལ་ལ་མོ། འཕང་གཟར་མོའི་ཐོག་ལ་བླ་མ་དཀོན་མཆོག

Thang yangs mo'i thog la a la la mo / 'phang gzar mo'i thog la bla ma dkon mchog

On the open plain, sing A la la mo, in the narrow defiles, take your *bla ma* [religious guru] and the three jewels (Tournadre and Robin 2006:176; English translation by the author)

འགག་དོག་མོར་སླེབས་དུས། བླ་མ་ཨོ་རྒྱན་པད་མ།
ཐང་བདེ་མོར་སླེབས་དུས། གླུ་ཨ་ལ་ཐ་ལ།

'gog dog mor slebs dus / bla ma o rgyan pad ma
thang bde mor slebs dus/ glu a la tha la

When you arrive at the dangerous path, take the Lama Guru Rinpoche
When you arrive at the flat plain, sing the song A la ta la (Tournadre and Robin 2006:176; English translation by the author)

Here, *A la tha la* and *a la la mo* both represent opening formulas of songs sung when characters speak during a performance of the Gesar epic (see Fedotov 1994). They are an important "key" to performance, and here they refer metonymically to the practice

of singing songs from the Gesar epic. The proverb also suggests that the *thang bde mo* (the flat plain) or *thang yangs mo* (the open plain) is a safe place where one can relax and enjoy the Gesar epic, in comparison with the relatively dangerous narrow defiles where one must pray instead. As we see from these examples, reference to the Gesar epic in everyday conversation is frequently implicit, referring only obliquely or metonymically to the Gesar tradition (and sometimes to specific forms of the tradition) through reference to one of the epithets by which Gesar may be known, or through mentioning specific practices related to the epic storytelling tradition.

In some cases, however, the reference may be more explicit:

ནང་དཔའ་བོའི་དབའ་གྲལ་མ་ཞིགས་ན། ཕྱི་གེ་སར་དམག་ལ་སྐྲག་དགོས་མེད།།

Nang dpa' bo'i dba' gral ma zhigs na / phyi ge sar dmag la skrag dgos med

If the inner spirit of the warriors faces no division, then there's no need to fear the outer battle wrought by King Gesar (Lhamo Pemba 1996:98)

In this example, Gesar is mentioned explicitly *as* King Gesar. This list of four proverbs is meant to be representative rather than exhaustive. Indeed, it comprises just a few of the Gesar-related proverbs in the Tibetan corpus; nevertheless, it suggests the thorough penetration of Gesar culture into all aspects of Tibetan discourse, from its longest form (the epic) to one of its shortest (the proverb). Immediately, then, we must recognize that the scholarly tendency to focus on the epic form tells us only a small part of how Gesar influences Tibetan daily life in Western China.

Informal Gesar Narratives

Although informal micro-narratives are sometimes included in collections of Tibetan folktales (see, for example, Song Xingfu 2004), scholars rarely analyze them in relation to the Gesar epic. Despite these informal narratives being infrequent objects of scholarly concern, one might argue that the Gesar epic reaches folk culture far more often in them than in the prosimetric stories of sgrung mkhan. These informal prose narratives often have a didactic function and are told to simultaneously entertain and teach children about proper behaviors. They may be told in free evenings or when passing a specific site that locals associate with the epic.

Autobiographies of English-language students from Qinghai Normal University's (Ch: Qinghai shifan daxue; T: Mtsho sngon dge thon slob grwa chen mo) English Training Program, for example, provide an interesting window into the role of informal Gesar narratives in everyday Tibetan life. These moments of informal narrative suggest that many Tibetans learned stories about Gesar not only from public performances by dream-inspired bards, but also from relatives in their homes. Kondro Tsering, for example, writes:

> Grandmother taught me scriptures by telling them to me over and over again. It was strange, too, that she admonished me not to kill living beings, but praised me when I helped her kill lice. The redder my thumbnails became from squishing them, the

> happier Grandmother was and the more stories she told. Stories about King Gesar were most interesting of all. (2012:17–8)

The same author remarks again that listening to his grandmother's Gesar stories was his favorite form of entertainment (Kondro Tsering 2012:19). Later, however, he also tells how, after television was introduced to his village, people stopped telling Gesar stories and began watching popular offerings like *Journey to the West* (Ch: *Xiyouji*, T: *nub phyogs la spyod pa'i rnam thar*) and films starring Jackie Chan (Kondro Tsering 2012:95–8). From these mentions, we see how—although his grandmother was probably not an "official" performer of the epic, and her stories about King Gesar were probably not prosimetric narratives—these stories still left an indelible mark on this young Tibetan man.

Another student, Stobs stag lha, quotes a local resident named Gan Gagao, who cites the Gesar epic to explain why the number 13 is considered lucky in Gansu Province's Tianzhu 天祝 (T: *Dpa' ris*) Tibetan Autonomous County:

> King Gesar once came to Dpa' ris to fight his enemies. After many violent battles, King Gesar finally defeated his foes and celebrated victory with locals, competing in a horse race with them and coming in thirteenth place. Afterwards, locals believed that thirteen was a lucky number. (2013:66)

Rdo rje tshe brtan, meanwhile, fondly remembers his time in elementary school, saying "Sometimes Teacher Agon taught us Tibetan songs and told us tales about ghosts and King Gesar. We sang Tibetan songs we had learned while groups of us were going or coming to school. Villagers applauded proudly when they heard us" (2013:29). Rdo rje tshe brtan's memories also show how elders emphasize learning Tibetan traditions in this rapidly changing world.

Gesar and the informal narratives attributed to him, his exploits, and his retinue are also associated with individual landmarks in Tibetan geography (see, for example, Mortensen 1999). A great number of locations on the Tibetan plateau are locally believed to be associated with Gesar. In a small village called Rdo ra, in the hills above Khri ka (Ch: Guide 贵德) County, Mtsho lho (Ch: Hainan 海南) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, for example, there is a stone where locals

Figure 2. The hoofprint said to have been left by Gesar's horse (photo by Timothy O'Connor Thurston).

say King Gesar napped while on the run from a host of murderous enemies. There is an indentation in the rock that is said to have been where he laid his head. Above this is a mark shaped like a horseshoe, where his horse is said to have stomped to wake up Gesar when advancing enemies threatened to overtake them.

In a small valley behind Seng ze (Ch: Xingzhai 兴寨) Village, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai Province, meanwhile, there are two spots associated with the Gesar epic. As one walks up the valley from Rewopo Village, the first site is an indentation in a rock face. The rock face itself is said to have been *Gesar pho brang* (Gesar's palace), and the indentation is believed to be a relief of his wife 'Brug mo's back. Walking in that area provides people the opportunity to tell how these features came to be. One of the associated narratives was recounted to me first in October 2010:

> Our people, in Rewopo, so in the old time they called it [that place] Dge mtshon dmar mo. It was a great *gnas sgo*.[20] You could find a lot of natural images there that you can see, one after another. This one, in the old time, they say that Lhasa Jowo[21] [speaker to someone else: "It's the Jo bo, right?"] started to form there in the old time. It was supposed to have been during Gesar's time, the Lhasa Jo bo *gnas sgo* was supposed to open there [in the valley near Rewopo Village]. And next to it, there was even a window. And when the auspicious time started it already had the shape of the door and it was going to open, and from down there, in that area, a woman who was in that area brought an empty basket on her back coming up, and the *rten 'brel*[22] did not happen, from down there in that area. . . . So *rten 'brel* in Tibetan history is very

Figure 3. The relief of 'Brug mo's back, in the wall of a rock face in Yushu County (photo by Timothy O'Connor Thurston).

Figure 4. Close-up of the relief of 'Brug mo's back (photo by Timothy O'Connor Thurston).

> important. *Rten 'brel* makes things happen well. . . . So yeah the old woman did the wrong thing, [when she] carried the empty basket and did not make the *rten 'brel* happen. . . . When 'Brug mo saw that, she got scared. She had the key in her hand, but got scared and backed into the door, and left the image of her back. But the *gnas sgo* had already become rock, and the *rten 'brel* did not happen. If we talk about *lo rgyus* "history," that was so momentous. (translation by author)

This site has never been included in even prefectural level lists of Gesar sites. Later, I was surprised to learn that even Gesarologist Kar+ma Lha mo of the Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture Gesar Research Office, and Zla ba grags pa—a native of Yushu TAP, China's youngest nationally recognized 'bab sgrung and Intangible Cultural Heritage *chuanchengren* of the Tibetan Gesar epic—were also unaware of the location. And yet, to local villagers in Rewopo Village, this narrative is authoritative.

What are we to make of these and other place-bound micro-narratives? In some cases, these micro-narratives are completely irrelevant to the linear plot frequently associated with the Gesar epic, and yet they remain quite relevant to how local communities understand and interact with the world in which they live. Attention to emic genre classifications ascribed in the final narrative—in which the speaker ends by referring to this narrative as *lo rgyus* (history)—may help us better understand this.

In 2011, I had a conversation with a Tibetan scholar in Qinghai's capital city of Xining. He had recently completed a master's degree at Qinghai Nationalities University (T: Mtsho sngon mi rigs slob grwa chen mo; Ch: Qinghai minzu daxue), and the university had subsequently employed him as a Tibetan teacher for foreign students.

In one conversation, I tried to describe Richard Bauman's definition of "performance" as a verbal artist taking responsibility to an audience for an act of verbal competence (1977). To illustrate the theory, I used the example of these Gesar-related micro-narratives, but our conversation broke down when I employed first the Tibetan gtam rgyud (story) and then *gna' gtam* (folktale, or literally "old story") for the discussion of micro-narrative performance. My teacher emphatically told me that gtam rgyud and gna' gtam were the wrong terms for these narratives. Instead, he said, these micro-narratives should be considered *lo rgyus*: history.

This conversation, and the way in which it engendered a discussion of the emic differences between lo rgyus "history" and gtam rgyud "folktale," as well as *sgrung* "epic/myth," has important implications for our understandings of both this particular narrative and how Tibetans understand the Gesar tradition. For example, in his study of the famed yogin Milarepa (T: Mi la ras pa), Andrew Quintman (2014) recognizes an implied correspondence between biography (T: *rnam thar*) and historical record (T: lo rgyus) in Mi la ras pa's biography. Peter Schwieger, meanwhile, suggests that lo rgyus is also more authoritative than sgrung (2010:127–54). Seen as history, the links between these micro-narratives and the landscape draw on a larger Tibetan tendency to physically and discursively inscribe the natural landscape with narratives about the actions of charismatic individuals (Quintman 2008) and with speech about the place's deities and auspiciousness (Thurston 2012).[23]

In viewing these place-based, non-canonical micro-narratives as "history," narrators from Rewopo and other marginal regions of the Tibetan Plateau deploy the authority of this genre to incorporate these distant locations, and the Tibetans who inhabit them, into the Tibetan cultural sphere. Gesar's palace was there, they say, and the famous Jo bo statue should have been there were it not for this momentary bad omen. In this way, this tiny valley is not simply a place within the Tibetan cultural sphere, but really one of the important centers of the Tibetan world. From Yushu and Sde dge (in Khams) to Khri ka (in A mdo) to Dpa' ris (in Gansu), then, Gesar is encoded in micro-narratives associated inescapably with the larger Tibetan cultural landscape.

Conclusion

These examples of Gesar lore in a variety of expressive genres are not meant to completely fill the gap between scholarship and lived realities or to present any firm conclusions. Instead, my goals have been twofold: first, to suggest the value of viewing Gesar culture as an ecology of interrelated genres including, but not limited to, the prosimetric epic, place-related micro-narratives, and proverbs. These links between genres are multidirectional, and point to the transmission of cultural knowledge through multiple, mutually reinforcing genres. My second goal has been to indicate some useful directions for future Gesar-related research, which I hope that scholars in both China and the West will develop more completely and significantly than I have here.

Through focusing specifically on Tibetan versions of the Gesar epic, I have shown that Gesarology is a large and vivacious transnational and multilingual field of research

that focuses overwhelmingly on the study of the epic and its performers. This field is particularly robust in the People's Republic of China, where a complex array of passionate individuals, cultural organizations, and local, provincial, and national government offices all engage in some sort of Gesar-related work. At the same time, I have suggested that the focus on epic, while quite natural, fails to recognize how Gesar-related knowledge also exists in a number of other folklore forms.

Having identified a lacuna within the existing corpus of research on the Gesar epic (narrowly defined), I have focused particularly on proverbs and on the importance of informal micro-narratives that tie Gesar and Gesar-related knowledge to individual locations across the Tibetan Plateau, and these locations to a greater Tibetan cultural sphere. Proverbs make Gesar-related knowledge a part of everyday verbal practice outside of formal performance contexts. Micro-narratives, meanwhile, link the epic to locations and narratives often omitted from more canonical versions. In doing so, they help to articulate a community's inclusion within a greater Tibetan cultural sphere. Taken together, these forms point to a variety of verbal practices—critical to the epic's continued importance in Tibetan life—often overlooked by scholars of the Gesar epic.

Acknowledgments

Research for this article was conducted at the Library of Congress and was facilitated by Susan Meinheit and other staff of the Asian Reading Room. Comments from You Ziying's on an earlier version of the article, and the helpful revisions suggested by two anonymous reviewers and the JAF editors have improved the article and helped it reach its current form. Any mistakes remaining are entirely my own.

Notes

1. Unless otherwise stated, English translations are by the author. In this article, I use the Extended Wylie Transliteration System (EWTS) to render Tibetan terms (see Anton-Luca 2000), and the Pinyin system of romanization for Chinese terms. For terms that have currency in both Chinese and Tibetan, alternative romanizations are provided in parentheses with either T, to indicate Tibetan, or Ch, to indicate Chinese.

2. See especially Schippers and Grant (2016).

3. Gesar also circulates among several other groups. For example, some Tuzu (T: *hor*) groups tell the epic (see Wang 2010; Yang 1995b; Richtsfeld 2006) and several of the Tuzu villages of the Reb gong Valley venerate the king as a protector deity (Reb gong pa mkhar rtse rgyal 2009). Tuzu Devotees of the deity Baghari, however, do not tell Gesar epics, as the deity was a fierce rival of King Gesar (Limusishiden 2014:166). The epic is also told in Inner Mongolia. Mongol versions of the epic, however, are quite different. The structure of individual episodes and the descriptions of the king's demonic foes are instead similar to other Mongol epic traditions. Finally, the epic is also told in Ladakh (see Francke 1905; Herrmann 1991; Wahid 2004) and in Northern Pakistan and Sikkim (Stein 1981:3).

4. Lauri Honko describes the pool of tradition, stating that "whatever is shared by more than one singer belongs to the pool of tradition. The pool holds a multiplicity of traditions, a coexistence of expressive forms and genres, mostly in a latent state, only parts of it becoming activated by the individual user" (2000:18–9).

5. Tibet has a long history of raven augury (see Mortensen 2003).

6. For more on the experiences of chuanchengren in China's heritage regime, see Rees (2016).

7. Information was obtained from the Chinese Culture Bureau's official Intangible Cultural Heritage website: http://www.ihchina.cn//show/feiyiweb/html/com.tjopen.define.pojo.feiyiwangzhan.ChuanChengRen.chuanchengrenList.html?pici=frist&leibie=minjianwenxue (accessed August 23, 2016).

8. See Li Lianrong (2008) for an overview of this scholarly work.

9. For decades, Tibetologist Jiangbian Jiacuo has published in Tibetan, Chinese, and English, leading to a number of differences in referencing his work. In this article, citations in-text and in the References Cited follow the original spelling in the texts; thus, he is cited as Jiangbian Jiacuo (Chinese Pinyin), 'Jam dpal rgya mtsho (Wylie Tibetan), Zhambei Gyaltsho (English), and Jambian Gyamco (English). Although listed separately, these are all the same person.

10. For further discussion of this, and other views on Gesar as a historical figure, see Gcod pa don grub (2007:125–47). Recently, Western scholars have shown more interest in the historiographic implications of Tibetan and Chinese interest in the Gesar epic. A close analysis of this is beyond the scope of the current essay. For more information, see King (2016); FitzHerbert (2007, 2010).

11. Sde dge County (Ch: Dege 德格), Dkar mdzes (Ch: Ganzi 甘孜), Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, PR China.

12. See, for example, Yang (1995a, 1998). It is also worth noting that, although almost exclusively male, there are a small number of female storytellers (see Samuel 2002).

13. See also Suonancuo (2010); Zhou Aiming (2003); Nuobu wangdan (2014); Zang Xueyun (2013).

14. In recent years, Wang Hongyin and Wang Zhiguo have focused increasingly on the translation of the oral epic (2011), while Gcod pa don grub (2007:362–80) has provided some thoughts on the need for well-edited versions of the Gesar epic based on his own experiences working on the *Gling sgrung gces btus*, (The Essence of the Gling Myth) ('Jam dpal rgya mtsho and Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs 2000).

15. Since the establishment of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese government has also sponsored the recording and publication of the epic's greatest performers on the Tibetan Plateau. See Bsam grub (2001) for a 34-volume example of one such series.

16. The Rnying ma "old" sect of Tibetan Buddhism is said to have been the original form of Buddhism introduced to Tibet during the dynastic period. For more on the Rnying ma sect, see Powers (1995:367–98).

17. Ma Xueliang, Qibai Cidanpingcuo, and Tong Jinhua (1985:246–7) confirm that the Rnying ma sect highly values the Gesar epic, while also noting that the Dge lugs pa (Ch: Gelupai 格鲁派) was more suspicious of the epic.

18. Examples of texts made from the recorded versions of Tibetan bards include Bsam grub (2001); Grags pa (1998); Kar+ma Lha mo (2013); and Tshe ring dbang 'dus (1997).

19. Originally published in French (1931) and later translated into English (1934).

20. Literally "place door," *gnas sgo* refers to a sacred site. See also Punzi (2013).

21. Lhasa Jo bo (pronounced *jowo*) refers, in this case, primarily to the great statue brought to Tibet by Princess Wencheng. Secondarily, it appears to refer to the Jokhang, the building in which the Jo bo is housed.

22. *Rten 'brel* refers to an emic Tibetan concept that is an important part of Tibetan "economies of fortune" (Da Col 2007), variously translated as "interdependence" (Kunsang 2003:1080), "happenstance" (Da Col 2007), "omens" (Ekvall 1964:269), "material prosperity" (Clarke 1990), "fortune" (Sa mtsho skyid and Roche 2011), and "connections that are not visible on the surface" (Samuel 1993:447–8). In this narrative, the definition seems to be most similar to Tucci's "karmic relationship" (1980). For more on *rten 'brel* in other Tibetan oral traditions, see Thurston (2012).

23. Examples of charismatic religious figures inscribing the landscape through their tremendous karmic power include footprints and handprints of powerful *bla mas* (see Dkon mchog dge legs 2009) and the landscapes associated with the ascetic Mi la ras pa (Quintman 2008). This seems similar to how Western Apache in the United States also use narrative to inscribe their landscapes with meaning and use place names and associated narratives to accomplish important social work within the community (Basso 1996).

References Cited

Abrahams, Roger D. 2005. *Everyday Life: A Poetics of Vernacular Practices*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Alai 阿来. 2009. *Gesaer wang* 格萨尔王 [King Gesar]. Chongqing 重庆: Chongqing chubanshe 重庆出版社.

Anton-Luca, Alexandru. 2000. Teaching THDL Extended Wylie Overview. http://www.thlib.org/reference/transliteration/teachingewts.pdf.

Basso, Keith H. 1996. *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language among the Western Apache*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.

Bauman, Richard. 1977. *Verbal Art as Performance*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press.

Bsam grub བསམ་གྲུབ། 2001. *Sgrung mkhan Bsam grub kyis phab pa'i Gling rje Ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung* སྒྲུང་མཁན་བསམ་གྲུབ་ཀྱིས་ཕབ་པའི་གླིང་རྗེ་གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོའི་སྒྲུང་། [The Epic of King Gesar of Gling, recorded by the Storyteller Bsam grub]. Lha sa ལྷ་སා: Bod ljongs bod yig dpe rnying dpe skrun khang བོད་ཇོངས་བོད་ཡིག་དཔེ་རྙིང་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Tibet Ancient Tibetan Publishing House].

Chao Gejin 朝戈金. 2000. *Kouchuan Shishi Shixue : Ranpile "Jianggeʾer" Chengshi Jufa Yanjiu* 口传史诗诗学 : 冉皮勒 《江格尔》 程式句法研究 [Oral Poetics : Formulaic Diction of Arimpil's Jangar Singing]. Nanning 南宁: Guangxi renmin chuban she 广西人民出版社.

Clarke, G. E. 1990. Ideas of Merit (*bsod-nams*), Virtue (*dge-ba*), Blessing (*byin-rlabs*), and Material Prosperity (*rten-'brel*) in Highland Nepal. *Journal of the Anthropological Society of Oxford* 21(2): 165–84.

Da Col, Giovanni. 2007. The View from Somewhen: Events, Bodies, and the Perspective of Fortune around Khawa Karpo, a Tibetan Sacred Mountain in Yunnan Province. *Inner Asia* 9(2):215–35.

David-Neel, Alexandra, and Lama Yongden. 1931. *La vie surhumaine de Guésar de Ling*. Paris: Éditions Adyar.

———. 1934. *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling: The Legendary Tibetan Hero, as Sung by the Bards of His Country*. New York: Claude Kendall.

de Rachewiltz, Igor, and Li Narangoa. 2017. *Joro's Youth: The First Part of the Mongolian Epic of Geser Khan*. Acton: Australia National University Press.

Dge 'dun དགེ་འདུན།, ed. 1999. *Gling rje Ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung* གླིང་རྗེ་གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོའི་སྒྲུང་། [The Epic of King Gesar of Gling]. Chengdu ཁྲིན་ཏུའུ: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang སི་ཁྲོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Sichuan Nationalities Publishing House].

Dkon mchog dge legs. 2009. The Seng ze Village *Ma Ni*. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 1:295–312.

Ekvall, Robert B. 1964. *Religious Observations in Tibet: Patterns and Functions*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Fedotov, Alexander. 1994. Versification in the Epic of Gesar of Ling. *Tibet Journal* 19(1):17–23.

FitzHerbert, Solomon George. 2007. The Birth of Gesar: Narrative Diversity and Social Resonance in the Tibetan Epic Tradition. DPhil Thesis, Oxford University.

———. 2010. A Modern Version of the Birth of Gesar. In *Tibetan Studies: An Anthology*, ed. Saadet Arslan and Peter Schwieger, pp. 215–54. Halle: International Institute for Tibetan and Buddhist Studies GmbH.

———. 2015. On the Tibetan Ge-Sar Epic in the Late 18th Century: Sum-Pa Mkhan-Po's Letters to the 6th Pan-Chen Lama. *Études Mongoles et Sibériennes, Centrasiatiques et Tibétaines* 46. https://journals.openedition.org/emscat/2602 (accessed September 22, 2018).

———. 2016. Constitutional Mythologies and Entangled Cultures in the Tibeto-Mongolian Gesar Epic: The Motif of Gesar's Celestial Descent. *Journal of American Folklore* 129(513):297–326.

Francke, A. H. 1905. *A Lower Ladakhi Version of the Kesar-Saga: Tibetan Text, Abstract of Contents, Notes and Vocabulary of the New Words and Phrases: Fasc. I [–IV]*. New Delhi: Asiatic Society.

Gcod pa don grub གཅོད་པ་དོན་གྲུབ། 2007. *Gcod pa don grub kyi ched rtsom phyogs bsgrigs* གཅོད་པ་དོན་གྲུབ་ཀྱི་ཆེད་རྩོམ་ཕྱོགས་བསྒྲིགས། [Selected Works of Gcod pa Don grub]. Pe cin པེ་ཅིན། Beijing 北京: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang ཀྲུང་གོའི་བོད་རིག་པ་དཔེ་རིགས་པ་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe 中国藏学出版社.

Gcod pa don grub གཅོད་པ་དོན་གྲུབ།, and Bkra ba བཀྲ་བ། 2013. *Gangs ljongs ge sar rig gnas kyi pha sa khams yul shul* གངས་ཇོངས་གེ་སར་རིག་གནས་ཀྱི་ཕ་མ་ཁམས་ཡུལ་ཤུལ། [Yul shul in Khams, the Home of Gesar Culture in the Land of Snows]. Zi ling ཟི་ལིང་། Xining 西宁: Mtsho sngon mi rigs dpe skrung khang མཚོ་སྔོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། Qinghai Minzu Chuban she 青海民族出版社.

Grags pa གྲགས་པ། 1998. *Gling Ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung: Bha ka la 'phrul gyi rgyal po* གླིང་གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོའི་སྒྲུང་: ཧཱ་ལ་འཕྲུལ་གྱི་རྒྱལ་པོ། [The Epic of King Gesar of Gling: The King of Bha ka la]. Ed. Blo bzang don ldan བློ་བཟང་དོན་ལྡན།. pe cin པེ་ཅིན། [Beijing]: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Nationalities Publishing House].

Grüschke, Andreas. 2004. *The Cultural Monuments of Tibet's Outer Provinces: Kham*. Vol. 2: *The Qinghai Part of Kham*. Bangkok: White Lotus Press.

Helffer, Mireille. 1979. Reflexions Concernant le Chant Epique Tibetain. *Asian Music* 10(2):92–111.

Herrmann, Silke, ed. 1991 *Kesar- Versionen aus Ladakh* [Versions of the Gesar Epic from Ladakh]. Asiatische Forschungen Band 109. Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz.

Honko, Lauri. 2000. Text as Process and Practice: The Textualization of Oral Epics. In *Textualization of Oral Epics*, ed. Lauri Honko, pp. 3–56. Trends in Linguistics 128. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.

Jambian Gyamco, and Aiming Zhou. 2003. *Thangka Paintings: An Illustrated Manual of the Tibetan Epic Gesar*. Beijing: China Pictorial Publishing House.

'Jam dpal rgya mtsho འཇམ་དཔལ་རྒྱ་མཚོ, and Bstan 'dzin phun tshogs བསྟན་འཛིན་ཕུན་ཚོགས, eds. 2000. *Gling sgrung gces btus* གླིང་སྒྲུང་གཅེས་བཏུས [The Essence of the Gling Myth]. 40 vols. pe cin ཞེ་ཅིན། Beijing 北京: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Nationalities Publishing House].

Jiangbian Jiacuo 降边嘉措. 1999. *Gesa'er lun* 格萨尔论 [Gesar Theory]. Zhongguo shishi yanjiu 中国史诗研究 [Chinese Epic Research]. Huhehaote 呼和浩特: Nei menggu daxue chubanshe 内蒙古大学出版社 [Inner Monglia University Press].

———. 2003. *Zoujin Gesaer* 走进格萨尔 [Approaching Gesar]. Chengdu 成都: Sichuan minzu chubanshe 四川民族出版社 [Sichuan Nationalities Press].

Jiangbian Jiacuo 降边嘉措, and Wu Wei 吴伟, eds. 1997. *Gesa'er wang quan zhuan* 格萨尔王全传 [The Complete Epic of King Gesar]. 2 vols. Beijing 北京: Zuojia chubanshe 作家出版社.

'Ju mi pham འཇུ་མི་ཕམ. 1996. *Gling ge sar rgyal po'i gsol mchod skor phyogs bsgrigs* གླིང་གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོའི་གསོལ་མཆོད་སྐོར་ཕྱོགས་བསྒྲིགས། [Collected Prayers about King Gesar of Gling]. Chengdu ཁྲིན་ཏུའུ་: Si khron mi rigs dpe skrun khang སི་ཁྲོན་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Sichuan Nationalities Publishing House].

Kar+ma lha mo ཀཱར་ལྷ་མོ་, ed. 2013. *Mthing mu ni lha rdzong gnam lcags thog gi rang sgra* མཐིང་སྨུ་ནི་ལྷ་རྫོང་གནམ་ལྕགས་ཐོག་གི་རང་སྒྲ [Self-Resounding Azure Saint]. 2 vols. Lan gru'u ལན་ཀྲུའུ། [Lanzhou]: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang ཀན་སུའུ་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Gansu Nationalities Press].

Karmay, Samten G. 1993. The Theoretical Basis of the Tibetan Epic, with Reference to a "Chronological Order" of the Various Episodes in the Gesar Epic. *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London* 56(2):234–46.

King, Matthew W. 2016. Knowing King Gésar between Buddhist Monastery and Socialist Academy, or the Practices of Secularism in Inner Asia. *Himalaya, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies* 36(1):44–55. http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss1/10 (accessed August 19, 2018).

Kondro Tsering. 2012. A Zorgay Tibetan Childhood. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 17:1–238.

Kornman, Robin. 1997. Gesar of Ling. In *Religions of Tibet in Practice*, ed. Donald S. Lopez, Jr., pp. 39–68. Princeton Readings in Religions. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Kornman, Robin, Lama Chonam, and Sangye Khandro, trans. 2015. *The Epic of Gesar of Ling*. Boston: Shambhala.

Kunsang, Erik Pema, ed. 2003. *The Rangjung Yeshe Tibetan-English Dictionary of Buddhist Culture, Version 3*. Delhi: Boudhanath.

Lama Jabb. 2015. *Oral and Literary Continuities in Modern Tibetan Literature: The Inescapable Nation*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

Lhamo Pemba. 1996. *Tibetan Proverbs*. Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives.

Li Lianrong 李连荣. 2001. History and the Tibetan Epic *Gesar*. *Oral Tradition* 16(2):317–42. http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/16ii/lianrong (accessed August 19, 2018).

———. 2008. *Gesaer chulun* 格萨尔刍论 [Initial Studies of Gesar]. Beijing 北京: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe 中国藏学出版社.

———. 2016. Sichuan bowuyuan cang 11 fu Gesaer tangka hua de chubu yanjiu: guanyu huizhi shijian wenti 四川博物院藏11幅格萨尔唐卡画的初步研究—关于绘制时间问题 [Initial Research on the 11 Gesar Thangka Paintings Held by the Sichuan Museum: On the Question of Dating]. *Minjian wenhua luntan* 民间文化论坛 [Folk Culture Forum] (4):81–8.

Limusishiden. 2014. An Abandoned Mountain Deity. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 35:159–93.

Liu Liqian 刘立千, trans. 2000. *Gesaer wang zhuan: Tianjie pian* 格萨尔王传：天界篇 [The Epic of King Gesar: The Heavens]. Beijing 北京: Minzu chubanshe 民族出版社.

Lord, Albert B. 1960. *The Singer of Tales*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Makley, Charlene. 2007. *The Violence of Liberation: Gender and Tibetan Buddhist Revival in Post-Mao China*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Ma Xueliang 马学良, Qiabai Cidanpingcuo 恰白 次旦平措, and Tong Jinhua 佟锦华. 1985. *Zangzu wenxue shi* 藏族文学史 [History of Tibetan Literature]. Chengdu 成都: Sichuan minzu chubanshe 四川民族出版社 [Sichuan Nationalities Press].

Mortensen, Eric. 1999. Pasum Tso: The Tributaries of Tibet's Religious Folklore. *Harvard Asia Quarterly* 3(2):36–42.

———. 2003. Raven Augury in Tibet, Northwest Yunnan, Inner Asia, and Circumpolar Regions: A Study in Comparative Folklore and Religion. PhD diss., Harvard University.

Nuobu wangdan 诺布旺丹. 2014. *Yiren, wenben he yujing: wenhua piping shiye xia de Gesaer shishi chuantong* 艺人，文本和语境：文化批评视野下的格萨尔史诗传统 [Storyteller, Text, and Context: The Gesar Epic Tradition through the Lens of Cultural Criticism]. Xining 西宁: Qinghai renmin chubanshe 青海人民出版社.

Penick, Douglas J., trans. 1996. *The Warrior Song of King Gesar*. Boston: Wisdom Publications.

Powers, John. 1995. *Introduction to Tibetan Buddhism*. Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion Publications.

Punzi, Valentina. 2013. Physical, Cultural and Religious Space in *A myes Bar dbon*. Written and Oral Traditions of a *gnas ri* in A mdo. *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 26:93–114.

Quintman, Andrew. 2008. Toward a Geographic Biography: Mi la ras pa in the Tibetan Landscape. *Numen* 55(4):363–410.

———. 2014. *The Yogin and the Madman: Reading the Biographical Corpus of Tibet's Great Saint Milarepa*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Rdo rje tshe brtan. 2013. A Tewo Tibetan Childhood. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 23:1–150.

Reb gong pa mkhar rtse rgyal རེབ་གོང་པ་མཁར་རྩེ་རྒྱལ། 2009. *'Jig rten mchod bstod: mdo smad Reb gong yul gyi drug pa'i lha zla chen mo'i mchod pa dang 'brel ba'i dmangs srol rig gnas lo rgyus skor gyi zhib 'jug* འཇིག་རྟེན་མཆོད་བསྟོད། མདོ་སྨད་རེབ་གོང་ཡུལ་གྱི་དྲུག་པའི་ཟླ་ཆེན་མོའི་མཆོད་པ་དང་འབྲེལ་བའི་དམངས་སྲོལ་རིག་གནས་ལོ་རྒྱུས་སྐོར་གྱི་ཞིབ་འཇུག [Worldly Ritual: Research about the History of Folk Culture Related to the Sixth Month Ritual of the Reb Gong Region in A mdo]. pe cin པེ་ཅིན། [Beijing]: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang ཀྲུང་གོའི་བོད་རིག་པ་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང། [China Tibetology Press].

Rees, Helen. 2016. Intangible Cultural Heritage in China Today: Policy and Practice in the Early Twenty-First Century. In *Music as Intangible Cultural Heritage: Policy, Ideology, and Practice*, ed. Keith Howard, pp. 23–54. London: Routledge.

Richtsfeld, Bruno J. 2006. Birth and Youth of the Hero in the Monguor Version of the Gesar Epic (PR China, Qinghai Province). *Anthropos* 101(2):473–97.

Samuel, Geoffrey. 1993. *Civilized Shamans: Buddhism in Tibetan Societies*. Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press.

———. 2002. The Epic and Nationalism in Tibet. In *Religion and Biography in China and Tibet*, ed. Benjamin Penny, pp. 178–220. New York: Curzon.

Sa mtsho skyid, and Gerald Roche. 2011. Purity and Fortune in Phug Sde Tibetan Village Rituals. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 10:235–84.

Schaeffer, Kurtis, Matthew T. Kapstein, and Gray Tuttle, eds. 2013. *Sources of Tibetan Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Schippers, Huib, and Catherine Grant. 2016. *Sustainable Futures for Music Cultures: An Ecological Perspective*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Schwieger, Peter. 2010. History as Oral Tradition: The Construction of Collective Identity in Brag gyab (Khams). In *Khams Pa Histories: Visions of People, Places, and Authority*, ed. Lawrence Epstein, pp. 127–54. Leiden: Brill.

Sman shul rin chen rdo rje སྨན་ཤུལ་རིན་ཆེན་རྡོ་རྗེ། 2009. *Ge sar sgrung gi sa ming zhib 'jug* གེ་སར་སྒྲུང་གི་ས་མིང་ཞིབ་འཇུག [Toponym Research of the Gesar Epic]. pe cin པེ་ཅིན། [Beijing]: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang ཀྲུང་གོའི་བོད་རིག་པ་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང། [China Tibetology Press].

Song Xingfu 宋兴富, ed. 2004. *Zangzu minjian gushi* 藏族民间故事 [Tibetan Folktales]. Vol. 2. Chengdu 成都: Sichuan chuban tuanji bashu shushe 四川出版团集巴蜀书社 [Sichuan Publishing Group Ba Shu Press].

Stein, R. A. 1959. *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet*. Vol. 13*: Presses universitaires de France, 1959*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.

———. 1981. Introduction to the Gesar Epic. *Tibet Journal* 6(1):3–13.

Stobs stag lha. 2013. A Multiethnic Village in Northeast Tibet: History, Ritual, and Daily Life in Chu cha. *Asian Highlands Perspectives* 24:1–131.

Suonancuo 索南措. 2010. "Gesaer" shuo chang yi ren biaoyan chengshi de waibu yingxiang 《格萨尔》说唱艺人表演程式的外部影响 [External Influences on the Performance Formulas Gesar Prosimetric Artists]. 青海民族研究 [Qinghai Nationalities Research], no. 3.

Thurston, Timothy. 2012. An Introduction to Tibetan Sa Bstod Speeches in A Mdo. *Asian Ethnology* 71(1):49–73.

Tournadre, Nicolas, and Françoise Robin. 2006. *Le Grande Livre des Proverbes Tibétaines*. Paris: Presses du Châtelet.

Tshe ring dbang 'dus ཚེ་རིང་དབང་འདུས།. 1997. *Gling Ge sar rgyal po'i sgrung bkra shis smon lam lnga* གླིང་གེ་སར་རྒྱལ་པོའི་སྒྲུང་བཀྲ་ཤིས་སྨོན་ལམ་ལྔ། [Five Auspicious Prayers of King Gesar of Gling]. Ed. Chab 'gag rdo rje tshe ring ཆབ་འགག་རྡོ་རྗེ་ཚེ་རིང་། and Gcod pa don grub གཅོད་པ་དོན་གྲུབ།. Lan gru'u ལན་སྒྲུའུ། [Lanzhou]: Kan su'u mi rigs dpe skrun khang ཀན་སུའུ་མི་རིགས་དཔེ་སྐྲུན་ཁང་། [Gansu Nationalities Press].

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1980. *The Religions of Tibet*. Trans. Geoffrey Samuel. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Wahid, Siddiq. 2004. Kesar Travels to China. *India International Centre Quarterly* 30(3–4):43–56.

Wang Guoming. 2010. The Tuzu Gesar Epic: Performane and Singers. Trans. Xianting Li. *Oral Tradition* 25(2):381–90. http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/guoming (accessed August 19, 2018).

Wang Hongyin 王宏印, and Wang Zhiguo 王治国. 2011. Jiti jiyi de qiannian chuanchang: Zang Meng shishi de fanyi yu chuanbo yanjiu 集体记忆的千年传唱：藏蒙史诗《格萨尔》的翻译与传播研究 [An Ageless Song as Collective Memory: The Translation and Transmission of the Tibetan/Mongolian Epic Gesar]. *Zhongguo fanyi* 中国翻译 [Chinese Translators Journal] 2011(2):16–22.

Wei Renzhong 伟仁忠. 2008. Lunshu "Gesaer" Yanyu de ziliao jiazhi yu aiguo qingxu 论述《格萨尔》谚语的资料价值与爱国情绪. [On the Value of Proverbs in King Gesar as References and Patriotic Complex]. *Xizang daxue xuebao* 西藏大学学报 [Journal of Tibet University] 23(1):85–7.

Xu Guoqiong 徐国琼. 1986. Lun Ling Gesaer de Shengnian Ji "Gesaer" Shishi Chansheng de Shidai 论岭.格萨尔的生年及《格萨尔》史诗产生的时代 [On Gesar's Year of Birth and the Dating of the Gesar Epic]. *Xizang Minzu Xueyuan Xuebao* 西藏学院学报 [Journal of the Tibet Nationalities Institute] 3:43–52.

———. 1993. *Gesa'er Kaocha jishi* 格萨尔考察纪实 [Records of Investigating "Gesar"]. Kunming 昆明: Yunnan renmin chubanshe云南人民出版社 [Yunnan Peoples' Press].

Yang Enhong 杨恩洪. 1995a. *Minjian Shishen: Gesaer yiren yanjiu* 民间诗神： 格萨尔艺人研究 [A Study of Artists Performing Folk Poetic Hero Gesar]. Beijing 北京: 中国藏学出版社 Zhongguo Zangxue chubanshe [Tibetology Publishing House].

———. 1995b. *Zhongguo shaoshu minzu yingxiong shishi gesaer* 中国少数民族英雄史诗格萨尔 [The Chinese Minority Peoples' Heroic Epic Gesar]. Hangzhou 杭州: Zhejiang jiaoyu chubanshe 浙江教育出版社 [Zhejiang Education Press].

———. 1998. A Comparative Study of the Singing Styles of Mongolian and Tibetan Geser/Gesar Artists. *Oral Tradition* 13(2):422–34. http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/13ii/enhong (accessed August 19, 2018).

———. 2001. On the Study of the Narrative Structure of Tibetan Epic: A Record of King Gesar. *Oral Tradition* 16(2):294–316. http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/16ii/enhong (accessed August 19, 2018).

Zang Xiaowei. 2015. *Ethnicity in China: A Critical Introduction*. London: Polity Press.

Zang Xueyun 臧学运. 2013. Pali-Luode Koutou Chengshi Lilun—Shishi "Gesaer" de chengshihua tezheng jiedu 帕里-洛德口头程式理论——史诗《 格萨尔》 的程式化特征解读 [Parry-Lord Oral-Formulaic Theory—Understanding the Special Characteristics of the Formulas in the Gesar Epic]. *Jilu Shifan Xueyuan Xuebao* 齐鲁师范学院学报 [Journal of Jilu Normal College] 1:99–102.

Zhambei Gyaltsho. 2001. *Bab Sgrung*: Tibetan Epic Singers. *Oral Tradition* 16(2):280–93. http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/16ii/gyaltsho (accessed August 19, 2018).

Zhang Xiaoming. 2004. *China's Tibet*. Beijing: China Intercontinental Press.
Zhou Aiming 周爱明. 2003. Shishi yanjiu de disan zhi yan—"Koutou shixue: pali-luode lilun" de pingjia 史诗研究的第三只眼——《口头诗学: 帕里-洛德理论》 的评介. [Epic Research's Third Eye: Evaluating "Oral Poetics: Parry-Lord Theory"]. *Xizang daxue xuebao* 西藏大学学报 [Journal of Tibet University] 18(2):80–3.