

History and the Tibetan Epic *Gesar*

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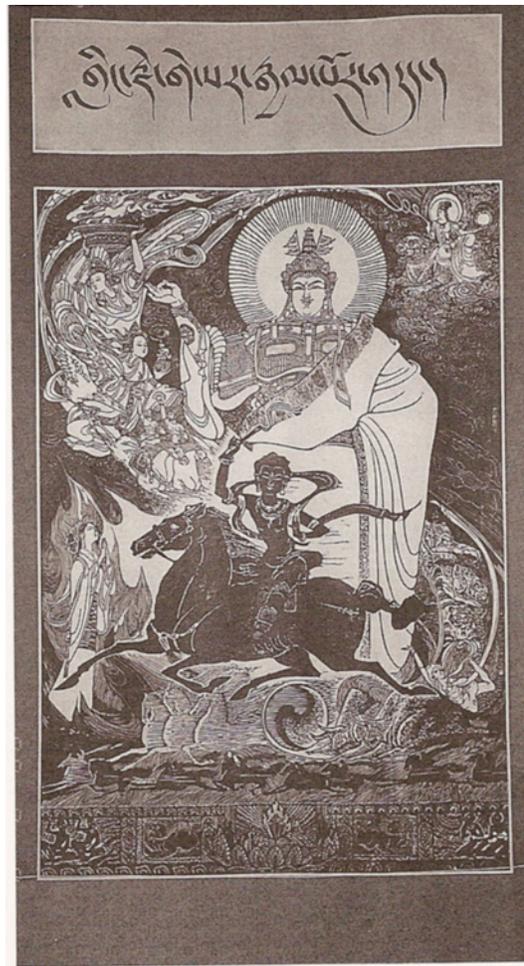
Looking back on the achievements of half a century devoted to studying the Tibetan epic *Gling rje Gesar rgyal povi mam tar* (later *Gesar*), one finds a particular school of research whose province is the relationship between the epic and historical truth. This is a school that should not be neglected. I believe a historical study of the epic ought to research written records under the assumption that King Gesar and his deeds could have existed. Was there a person called Gling Gesar? Where is Gling? What is the particular time of origin of the hero's story? Who is the author? What is the relationship between the Tibetan *Gesar* and versions popular among other ethnic groups? Because this school has spent much of its energy on the question of the epic's diachronic origin, this kind of study is called historical research on the origin of the epic.

The approach embodied by the questions above was common for early epic researchers of *Gesar*. There is also evidence of this approach among foreign scholars, who were studying the epic before most Tibetan, Mongolian, and Chinese scholarship on this subject began. To be more precise, before 1959 most of the publications on *Gesar* outside China centered on the historical problems of the epic (Stein 1993:12-14; Khomonov 1986:1-38; Nekljudov 1991:1-85¹). In China, without exception, this problem has been the focus since the first explorations into the Tibetan *Gesar*. After nearly a half-century of research, scholars have reached basic agreement on the following three points. 1) Either the epic's protagonist Gling Gesar was a real person or he is a synthetic character created by the combination of historical figures. 2) Tibetan versions of the epic serve as

¹ These are the seminal works on *Gesar* outside of China. With the exception of the origin and variants of the Mongolian and Tibetan *Gesar*, which is the focus of Stein's work, many non-Chinese authors have given less attention to the authenticity of *Gesar* and its time of origin. However, by the 1980s, as Nekljudov comments, this problem "is no longer worth pursuing . . . ; for most specialists, it is crystal clear [that both the Mongolian *Gesser* and Tibetan *Gesar* originated in Tibet]" (1991:192).

the source for branches of *Gesar* found among other ethnic groups. Being branches, they have features of their own. 3) Though many views exist, there is basic agreement about the time of the epic's origin. However, with regard to Gling Gesar legends, research into folklore—rather than history—is the appropriate avenue.

This paper provides a review of the scholarly discourse on problems of the Tibetan epic *Gesar*'s time of origin, in hopes of summarizing the achievements and shortcomings of the previous generations, finding a basis for solving problems, and showing how basic agreements have been reached.



King Gesar.

Early Theories About *Gesar*'s Time of Origin

In the 1930s and 1940s pioneering Chinese Tibetologists (largely Han scholars) gathering in Sichuan began to notice this great epic. Those who gave attention to the epic in varying degrees or promoted its exploration included Li Anzhai, Peng Gonghou, Xie Guoan, Liu Liqian, Zhuang Xueben, Chen Zongxiang, Li Jianming, and in particular Han Rulin and Ren Naiqiang. Others contributed to *Gesar* studies in a number of ways: by collecting handwritten copies and photocopies of *Gesar*; by translating and thus introducing the achievements in collection of and research on *Gesar* at home and abroad; by offering relevant information and materials; and by giving guidance to the scholars who devoted themselves to the cause of *Gesar* studies. All of these often uncredited scholars and researchers influenced the study of *Gesar*.

In fact, these early Tibetologists should be categorized as borderland specialists. They came from different professions; some were merchants, teachers, officials, and even religious believers (such as Li Jianming mentioned above), but most were sociologists, anthropologists, or ethnologists, such as the renowned ethnologist Li Anzhai. Li encouraged Chen Zongxiang, who planned to translate *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling* (David-Neel 1984:1²). At the same time, Li provided assistance to this book's author, David-Neel, and her colleague Yongdun Lama while they were investigating *Gesar* in Sichuan, as well as wrote an article in praise of their scholarship (Li 1945, 1992:149; David-Neel 1984:1).

During this period, teachers from the Department of Frontier Languages of Lanzhou University, following in the footsteps of their colleagues from the Tibetan Research Society in Qinghai, actively pioneered China's Tibet Studies (called "Frontier Studies" at that time). Tibetologists should not forget those pioneers, such as Yang Zhifu, Wu Jun and others, who made decisive contributions to the cause of collecting, translating, and researching *Gesar* after Tibet was incorporated into China. Wu Jun in particular delineated important arguments concerning the historical research of the epic *Gesar*.

In the nascent stages of Tibet Studies, *Gesar* was treated as a work of literature; however, due to circumstances this direction has received little attention. When Tibet Studies became Frontier Studies, the aforementioned scholars treated *Gesar* as historical fiction: "This book is a record of Gesar of Ling. The Han people call it a Tibetan version of *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Gesar Langte* in Tibetan, or *A Record of Gesar* in translation. It

² Originally written in French.

can also be translated as *A Poetic History of Gesar*, because it usually relies on a form of poetic narration similar to our *Xujuan Tanci*” (Ren N. 1944:1). From this attitude it may be inferred that in the ethnically mixed northwestern Sichuan province people consider the epic *Gesar* equal to *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*.³ Thus, those scholars who devoted themselves to borderlands research found that on the one hand *Gesar* was not *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*; on the other hand, driven by interest at that time, they sought to study the epic from the perspectives of folklore and history.

According to Ren Xinjian, when his father Ren Naiqiang returned from fieldwork in Xinlong in 1928, he included his first notes on *Gesar* in his *Xikang Guiyilu (The Peculiar Things in Xikang)* (1931), and had it published under the titles of *A Tibetan Version of the Story of the Three Kingdoms* and *Samples of A Tibetan Version of the Story of the Three Kingdoms* (1934). Later, Ren Naiqiang included these pieces on *Gesar* in his chapter on folklore in *A Pictorial Record of Xikang*, a book he devoted to the historical geography of Xikang Tujing (Ren X. 1991:54-55). Though Ren N. noted that *Gesar* is a “poetic history,” a “historical romance,” “Like the *Baijuan* in the Han dynasty,” “a novel that develops Buddhist ideals,” and a work replete with absorbing literary features, his main interest remained historical research of the epic. In his writings, Ren N. included collections of the epic’s remnants and sayings about the epic. He also gave a very valuable preliminary textual analysis of the number of its parts. But it must be pointed out that he paid little attention to the epic as verbal art, although it is certain that he read David-Neel’s *The Superhuman Life of Gesar of Ling*, which more than once emphasized its nature as an epic. Ren N. used the term “epic,” but he considered *Gesar* to be history and did not attend to its artistic value.

He made large conceptual leaps when analyzing the historical authenticity of *Gesar*. He claims that there was such a person in history, but has trouble settling on a historical personage. In his initial paper Ren N. proposes for the first time in the history of *Gesar* studies that Kings Gesar and Gu si lu⁴ are one and the same (Ren N. 1944:7). He later describes Gesar as the offspring of Gu si lu’s enemy Danxiang (Jiangbian 1986:15).

³ *The Story of the Three Kingdoms* is one of four very famous fictional stories about Chinese history. It first appeared during the Ming Dynasty. Because the name of one of the main heroes, Guan Gong, sounds like “Gesar,” some believed these characters to be one and the same.

⁴ The Tibetan King Gu si lu established his kingdom in the region of Qinghai in the eleventh century.

But he eventually explains away this opinion derived from Tibetan sources by saying that “Tibetans did not have a correct sense of epoch and should not be trusted for such a conception” (*idem*). Finally, he returns to his original position and asserts that Gesar was in fact Gu si luo (Jiangbian 1986:19). In order to discover the epic’s date of composition, he surmises that “the Tibetan version of *The Story of the Three Kingdoms* seems to be written by the lamas from the Sakya sect in the Yuan dynasty” (Jiangbian 1986:16). The possible span of time for the epic’s origin is further narrowed on the basis of his argument that it must have appeared before Bsod nams rgyal mtshan began writing, because in his *Rgyal rabs gsal bavi me long* (1982) the king speaks of the militant King Gesar as he proposes to the Princess Wenching. This text can be traced to the close of the twelfth century. Ren N. conjectures that the loss of any printed copy as evidence for his position may be blamed on the turbulent change from Bon shamanism to Tibetan Buddhism.

Ren N. laid the groundwork for exploration of the epic *Gesar*. His research called attention to the role of *Gesar* in Han culture and his work in epic studies was also groundbreaking. In addition to his introduction to and analysis of literature, history, and folklore noted above, he also objectively and scientifically reviewed a number of the epic volumes, their core content, and the view of the so-called “hesitant Guan Yu” put forward by foreign scholars.⁵ Ren N.’s argument that Gesar and Guan Yu had separate origins was not accepted until 1959, when Stein published his summary of the studies in the West over the past one hundred years. On the whole, it may be asserted that the greatest contribution on the part of Ren N. is that he established a precedent for Chinese *Gesar* studies.

Another famous frontier researcher, Han Rulin (1988), also deserves mention. Han was a contemporary of Ren’s, and similarly possessed great insight into the Guan Yu problem. His 1941 paper on Guan Yu in Tibet was not lengthy, but the problems he raised were quite valuable. It provided a very good summary of *Gesar* research outside of China, which for the last one hundred years had posited that King Gesar and Guan Yu were the same. Han reveals that this was a mistake by referring to the principle of variation in folklore,⁶ and attributes the cause of such a mistake to the features of

⁵ Guan Yu, the hero of *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, is commonly called Guan Gong and has many temples in China. Some foreign scholars believed that King Gesar was related to Guan Yu.

⁶ He observed that “storytellers among the folk like to ‘worship heroes,’ so they will not only build temples for Gesar and offer him joss sticks, but also confuse him with different gods and mistake him for the Sacred King Guan Yu” (Han 1998:3403).

Tibetan folk culture. According to this theory, the association of the two figures may be linked to the historical changes in the Manchu and Han cultures in the course of their exchanges with Tibetan culture. In addition, Han criticizes the far-fetched claim that *Gesar* was Caesar of Rome. However, his criticism did not reach *Gesar* researchers outside China, who continued to follow in their predecessors' footsteps (see Stein 1993:396). Han's perspective has served as the primary vehicle for epic researchers to criticize the association of *Gesar* with Caesar. He noted that their conflation is very influential in the West and that this fact would anticipate the epic's reemergence as an object of study.⁷

Han did not concentrate specifically on the time of origin of the epic; however, like the Tibetans he believed that *Gesar* was a man of the early Tang dynasty. For him, this theory was given credence by "The Legend of the Wedding of Princess Wencheng" in *Ma ni bkav vbum* and *La dwags rgyal rabs*.⁸ That Han could put forward such a view is really quite reasonable when one considers that he had no access to reference materials and that the *Gesar* fragments provided by Ren Naiqiang were his only available evidence.

On the whole, Tibetologists in the 1930s and 1940s were inclined to research the historical origin of the epic, an agenda that was inextricable from the core problem of frontier studies at that time: opening up the frontier and consolidating the state. Of course, the roles played by religious and ethnological researchers should not be overlooked. Generally speaking, however, Ren N. opened new horizons for historical epic studies with an eye to the home country and fieldwork. For his part, Han criticized foreign scholars for misguided historical research, summarized the achievements and shortcomings of historical epic studies outside China over the past hundred years, and opened up new prospects for Chinese *Gesar* studies.

⁷ He cited the Peking edition of the Mongolian *Gesar* that was popular in the West as an example and remarked that "European Mongologists believed that this book had something to do with the contacts between the East and West, and thus I. G. Schmidt, W. Schot, and P. Pelliot would have studied it for a hundred years to come" (Han 1998:3404).

⁸ *La dwags rgyal rabs* also mentions *Khrom gesar vdan ma* (Anonymous 1986:5). Both *Ma ni bkav vbum* and *La dwags rgyal rabs* are very famous books in Tibetan history. *Ma ni bkav vbum* is a Tibetan historical document concerning the twelfth through the fourteenth century. *La dwags rgyal rabs* is a history from approximately the eighteenth century. "The Legend of the Wedding of Princess Wencheng" has been popular in Tibetan and Chinese areas; the history reflected in this legend began to be recorded in the Tang dynasty's document.

However, due to limitations at that time and the unsteadiness of the situation, this exploration into the historical origins of the epic failed to find a foothold. It did not reemerge until conditions matured again.

In addition, there were a few Tibetologists who concentrated on the study of *Gesar* as an epic per se. Most were invested in the more traditional forms of religious and historical research and approached *Gesar* using the rubrics of myth and ritual studies. Scholars like Dge vdun chos vphel, who used innovative scholarly approaches and discussed the epic's variation and its transmission, were few in number (cf. 1990 vol. 1:182; vol. 2:96).

Emergence of New Approaches

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. In a matter of a few years, surprisingly great achievements resulted; however, to our sorrow, 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. As those who assisted the collection work commented, "We were competing with the fire god for treasure" (Xu 1993:183). To add to our dismay, none of those early scholars who conducted *Gesar* research in the 1930s and 1940s assisted with the later collection work. As a result, such work suffered many drawbacks.

After many cantos and records relevant to *Gesar* had been amassed, these new scholars were faced with the problem of interpretation. *Gesar*'s time of origin did not receive much attention at this point, but as an unavoidable issue it was included on the agenda for discussion. It was not that scholars and researchers were too busy to investigate such a problem;

rather, they lacked the proper conditions and techniques for such research. Some individual scholars did their best to cope with the question of origins in a truthful way, making every use of their available resources and knowledge and performing basic preparatory work. Because scholarship is a cumulative process, the current level of understanding could not have been reached without the explorations of the 1950s and 1960s.

In 1956 Lao She published the abstract of his report at the second council meeting of the Association of Chinese Writers under the title “A Report on the Literature of Ethnic Groups in China.” This article appeared simultaneously in the *People’s Daily* and *Folklore* and registered a strong impact on the scholarly community. As a result, some collectors, such as Xu Guoqiong, made *Gesar* their lifelong study (Xu 1993:1). The importance of Lao’s report lies in the fact that it directly inspired a large-scale effort to collect the epic *Gesar* and served as a touchstone from then on. The power of his comments may be attributed partially to his status as vice-chair of the council for China’s Research Society of Folk Literature and Art.

In this report Lao demonstrates that the Tibetan epic *Gesar* had formed in the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties, the earliest time of origin that had been proposed since the incorporation of Tibet into China (Lao 1956:3). With respect to the Mongolian version of the epic, he remarks that “the *Story of Gesar*, came into being two centuries prior to the time when Chinggis appeared on the historical stage!” (*ibid*). According to Lao, the materials cited in his paper were provided by 11 colleagues from eight minority nationalities and by two Han colleagues well acquainted with the varieties of brotherly ethnic literature.⁹ Among these collectors there were Mongols but no Tibetans—a discrepancy also common outside China. When the Mongolian *Gesar* was searched for associations with Chinggis Khan, either the ethnic scholars assisting Lao She believed that *Gesar* was Chinggis Khan, having been influenced by the perspective of Soviet scholars, or they knew the outcome of the seminar on *Gesar* held in 1953 in Ulan-Ude of the Soviet Union and did not equate *Gesar* with Chinggis Khan (Khomonov 1986:21-22). What were the grounds for placing the origin of *Gesar* between the late Yuan and early Ming periods? It seems either that Lao was well versed in Ren Naiqiang’s perspective, or that he was familiar with *Gesar* and its history in the Tibetan Dege District, Sichuan, or that the fieldwork conducted by David-Neel had influenced him. No matter the

⁹ It is customary for the Chinese to regard themselves as “elder brother” figures to their minority populations. Thus, ethnic verbal art is referred to as “brotherly ethnic literature.”

source, a time of origin between the late Yuan and early Ming periods did not vary far from that proposed by Chinese scholars in the 1930s and 1940s. It marked a good starting point for the study of *Gesar* in the New China.

When *Gesar* was being researched in the Qinghai province, some pre-liberation scholars were included in the team. They were largely teachers at the Department of Frontier Languages of Lanzhou University, and their most important job was to translate the collected handwritten manuscripts. Due to their special status as data providers, they introduced Tibetan culture, especially folk culture and *Gesar*. The Qinghai Union of Writers and Artists compiled and published the *Reference Materials for Collecting and Researching Tibetan Literature in Qinghai* (1959:1-2)¹⁰ as “inside only” materials. With regard to the time of its origin, Yang Zhifu argues that if *Gesar* has been written by Rdo ring sras chung (commonly known as Rdo ring bandita), its date of composition should be set between the late Kangxi of the Qing dynasty and Qianlong—or between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. His evidence derives from the historical records of Rdo ring bandita. Yang Z. adds that *Gesar* might have been written by the Red-sect Lamas in Xikang, but this view and the previous one are based primarily on oral legends. He believes that there are no records of *Gesar* in Tibetan literature (Yang Z. 1959:9).

Wu Jun, similarly attributing the composition of *Gesar* to Rdo ring bandita, sets the date of its origin in the early Qing dynasty, or the seventeenth century. His perspective somewhat differs from Yang, who thinks that Rdo ring bandita was a contemporary of the Seventh Dalai Lama; Wu believes, in accordance with popular legends, that he was a contemporary of the Fifth Dalai Lama. Both Wu and Yang Z. cite cases in which parts of the Tibetan *Gesar* were recorded by various parties; thus we may infer that the entire epic had not been written down in one place and time. Even a single copy of *Gesar* could sustain notable scribal inconsistencies—“it was not written by a single hand nor was it written at one time. Its content was gradually shaped by folk legends and the interests of individual artists and their audiences” (Wu 1959:1).

With reference to the process of compiling and composing, Wu points out that “people continually blended the contents of *Gesar* stories with popular legends and myths, using the rich, demotic language to enliven its drama. By fixing the epic in written form, it became the nine-part, twelve-part, and twenty-four-part versions that are now popular in Xikang, Qinghai, and Tibet” (*idem*). Wu’s understanding of *Gesar* reflects not only his grasp of the rules of folklore but also his personal involvement with the epic. He

¹⁰ Collected by Yang Zhifu and Wu Jun.

writes that “fifteen years ago, I was in Yushu, Gansu, and Qinghai, where I heard this printed version of the *Record of King Gesar* recited many times” (*idem*). This simple statement influenced later generations of scholars to seek out and experience live performances of *Gesar*.

In their articles Yang Z. and Wu criticize Ren N. and Han for linking *The Barbarous Version of the Story of the Three Kingdoms*¹¹ with *Gesar*, as well as for believing that either Caesar or Guan Yu could be *Gesar*. Yang Z. also argues against the proposition that *Gesar* could have been Gu si luo, but Wu supports this idea until the 1980s. Though Yang Z. and Wu criticize the perspectives of Ren N. and Han, they participate in the same scholarly tradition: if all views, including those of Lao, stemmed at last from Ren Naiqiang’s work, then a tradition of historical research has always underlain the study of *Gesar* in China.¹²

One month after Yang Z. and Wu had contributed to the Union of Writers and Artists of Qinghai, *Folklore* published Shan Chao’s “Notes on Tibetan Folk Literature” (1959). In the article Shan states that “among the long stories that are spreading, the most well known is the *Record of King Gesar*. It was collectively created in the eleventh century, and its hero, *Gesar*, was an ideal figure among the masses” (81). Shan does not supply evidence for his argument, but it probably was influenced by the Tibetan scholars he encountered during his fieldwork.¹³ In the 1980s many Tibetan scholars insisted on the validity of this perspective.

In the late 1950s and early 1960s the folklorist Xu Guoqiong was more concerned with *Gesar*’s time of origin than any other scholar. Xu devoted himself to the development of epic studies in the New China, giving his life to the work of collecting and compiling early versions of *Gesar*. He pursued field work among the Tibetan people and actively popularized

¹¹ *The Barbarous Version of the Story of the Three Kingdoms* (or *Zang San Guo*, the “Tibetan” Three Kingdoms) was created by scholars in order to equate the Chinese *The Story of the Three Kingdoms* with *Gesar*.

¹² Although some of Yang Z. and Wu’s ideas may not be entirely persuasive, they tried their best to introduce their criticism and scholarship during a period of time when the political climate was not friendly to the study of “feudalist” literature. They maintained an objective attitude and used an epistemological approach in their papers. Their responsible methodology has some value in the academic history of our *Gesar* studies.

¹³ Citing Shan’s perspective, Xu Guoqiong observed (1959): “After liberation, comrade Shan Chao worked in Tibet for a long time collecting and compiling Tibetan folklore.” From this we may infer that Tibetan scholars influenced Shan Chao’s perspective.

Gesar, ensuring future exploration of the epic. To some extent, his work directly determined the fate of *Gesar*. Xu was determined to brave all difficulties, even death, to save the tradition, and this devotion has influenced and inspired much of the subsequent work on the epic, even to the present day. Stories about his efforts to compile such a great magnitude of cantos and documents not only advanced the preservation of *Gesar* in writing but also served as a powerful model for the development and recovery of folklore throughout China.

Xu played a strong role in early epic preservation, frequently traveling between Beijing and Qinghai, a trip that other scholars seldom if ever made at the time. Scholars serving jail sentences, such as Yang Z. and Wu, obviously had little opportunity to travel. In this way Xu's voice set the tone for the study of *Gesar*. His first article, a comprehensive introduction to *Gesar*, has retained its position in the *Selected Papers on Chinese Folk Literature, 1949-1979*, and has been widely quoted (1959). This paper secured his position in the academic history of *Gesar* studies both then and now. Xu devoted two subsections to the time of origin of the epic, summarizing all the perspectives common during that period. He agreed with the argument that the epic came into being in the eleventh century, and provided his own support (305-10).¹⁴

By the end of the 1950s¹⁵ *Gesar* researchers at home and abroad subscribed to one of the following four theories about the origin of *Gesar*. First, some European scholars traced the epic's origin to the seventh or eighth century—in his work Han appears to agree with this opinion (1988). This argument was largely based on the Tubo legends (“The Wedding of the Princess Wencheng”) and “historical memory” of the Tubo wars. Second, according to Ren N. the thirteenth century was *Gesar*'s time of origin. Lao continued in the same vein by speculating on the time of the author's birth and death. Third, some scholars from the former Soviet Union insisted that the seventeenth or the eighteenth century was the period of genesis; Yang Z. and Wu concurred, also founding their arguments on the author's dates of birth and death. Finally, Xu argued for the eleventh century, a time of origin earlier proposed by David-Neel.¹⁶ Shan agreed with this opinion, and Ts. Damdinsüreng gave the most persuasive argument for the eleventh century

¹⁴ The following paragraph paraphrases Xu's summary (1959).

¹⁵ Before the work of R. A. Stein became known.

¹⁶ “During the tenth or the twelfth century there were probably only two or three songs” (David-Neel 1984:2).

in the papers he published around 1957. At that moment Ts. Damdinsüreng was studying in the Soviet Union, where he closely followed the theoretical trends concerning the epic. He was influenced by Soviet theories on the historical origin of epic and its creation by particular people.¹⁷ That Xu agreed with this perspective probably had something to do with the predisposition of the Chinese academic community at that time to Soviet theories—learning from the Soviets was a nationwide trend.

Xu cites Ts. Damdinsüreng's grounds for arguing against the seventh and eighth centuries, making use of the basic perspectives of Tibetan scholars and artists whom he had encountered while collecting *Gesar* cantos. The character of Gesar himself serves as the main point in his discussion of the epic's time of origin, as it had for Ts. Damdinsüreng. Xu, however, has new evidence: a description of the birth of *Gesar* in *Mdo smad chos vbyung* by the nineteenth-century historian Brag dgon pa dkon mchog bstan pa rab rgyas mentioned that the hero was born on the very first day of the Tibetan traditional calendar in 1027 (1982:234). It was later discovered that this was commonly believed by Tibetan scholars in the Qing dynasty.

In addition, Xu lists three dates close to those in the *Politico-Religious History of Amdo*. It is important to note that these dates were mentioned in the text in accordance with the epic's attempt to present Gesar as a historical figure. The accessibility of copies of the epic, which before the 1950s had not been available for scholarly research, enable Xu to introduce these dates. Based on the text's own assertions he argues that Gesar was a man of the eleventh century: his fame spread after his death, leading his contemporary Nor bu chos vphel to perform his story as an epic. Subsequently, oral performances and written versions of *Gesar* have influenced each other up to the present moment. In making this argument, Xu draws upon his knowledge of the characteristic variations inherent to folklore. The role of variation and recognition of its importance were gradually surfacing in the works of a later generation of researchers.

It was Huang Jingtao who brought an end to various origin theories in early *Gesar* studies and provided a correct line of thinking. He believed that scholars from different disciplines needed to cooperate in order to analyze the epic from all angles; only in this way, he argues, can we reach reasonable conclusions. Noting the epic's common folklore features, Huang determines that it was a folk creation and recognizes that it is problematic to speak of a "primary draft" or a "present draft" (Huang J. 1962:323-24). He warns against confusion and simplification without sidestepping the issue

¹⁷ Cf. Propp 1956; 1999:Foreword; and Chicherov 1961:68-84.

itself. Huang's line of thinking—in particular, the importance of a multidisciplinary approach and of *Gesar*'s folk characteristics—took root among Chinese researchers, resulting in the strength of present-day *Gesar* studies.

The Evolution of Theory from the 1970s Onward

In the late 1970s, after *Gesar* research and collection had been suspended for twelve years due to the Cultural Revolution and its aftermath,¹⁸ scholars bravely stepped forward and reasserted the value of epic studies (Xu 1978:16-18; Wang Yinuan 1979a:6-16). There had been a similar gap of nearly twelve years when *Gesar* studies halted in the 1940s and began again in the late 1950s. During these periods Chinese scholars endured many hardships with respect to the collection and research of this great epic; it is through such vicissitudes that our epic studies have gradually been set on course.

Wang Yinuan had completed the first Chinese translation of *Gesar* in 1981 (see Wang Yinuan and Huajia 1981), reentering the arena of *Gesar* studies with great relish. In a succession of four articles published between 1978 and 1981, he vigorously expresses his understanding and recognition of this epic. Like previous researchers, Wang Yinuan mistakenly applies literary methods to the study of an oral epic. Of course, it was not without great difficulty that he used such methods to determine the time of origin: he attempted to locate a single author in order to ascertain the date of the epic's composition, and eventually comes to share the opinion of other scholars that this author was the fifteenth-century Tibetan figure Nor bu chos vphel (1980:353-55).

Although Wang Yinuan's inference violates the basic principles of transformation and variation in folklore, his research has been valuable in that it provided a later generation of researchers with important clues about how the epic had been compiled, recorded, and composed by scribes and learned men in the past. Searching for an "author" has assisted researchers who wish to learn more about the time of recording and to identify a scribe for a variant of a certain part of the epic. Xu adopts Wang Yinuan's methods in his discussion of the author and compiler of the epic and of the chronological background of its particular parts and chapters (1984:76;

¹⁸ Huang Jingtao (1962) emphasizes the difficulties suffered by *Gesar* studies during this period of history.

1985:108). However, this search is limited to a particular manuscript from a particular period, and even these results are uncertain.

Shortly after Wang Yinuan published his theories, Wang Yingchuan and Shangguan Jianbi (1981) approached the problem of origin by considering the epic's historical background. Wang weaves Marxist literary theory into her argument, contending that typical environments create typical characters (1986:174-75). This perspective was adopted and elaborated by Tong Jinghua, who points out that the epic has absorbed the rich heritage of ancient Tibetan folklore (1985:192).

In his "On Discussions of the Historical Contents of *Gesar*," Huang Wenhuan surmises that *Gesar* closely reflects history, based on the epic's representation of social reality during the Tubo period, its attitude toward the royal family, and its representation of both Han-Tibetan relations and great and small wars. Characteristics of the Tubo period form the core of the epic; for this reason, "we can say that *Gesar* is basically a long poetic work created by the Tubo people according to the basic historical facts of the Tubo period" (Huang W. 1986:148). In addition, Huang claims that *Gesar* has historical authenticity, and is an "epic about the Tubo," a treasure house for the study of Tibetan society (1985:90-102). His perspective, however, represents a step backward in *Gesar* studies (Stein 1993:8-9). The theory that epics serve as "historical memory" was proposed by European scholars and later criticized by both Mongologists and the European scholars themselves. Nevertheless, in the process of championing his perspective Huang outlines the basic constituents of the epic and pioneers work on its historical features. From this point of view his paper establishes a new arena for historical study.

Following Huang's article, many papers on the historical content of the epic appeared, influenced by his method. For example, Danzhu Angben reached the conclusion that *Gesar* developed from historical fact to story to epic (1985:133). He Feng adopted this approach in his monographic study and achieved similar results (1995:1-20). In addition, scholars made inferences about the epic's time of origin from a related perspective. For example, based on the idea that the social milieu is reflected in the epic, Jianbai Pingcuo argued that the *Record of King Gesar* originated during the thirteenth century, when it is believed that the Tibetan people hoped a hero would rescue them from a fragmented society (1982). This theory has been included in *History of Literature of Chinese Minority Nationalities* (Mao 1984:424).

With the discovery of the huge field of Tibetan verbal art, research and criticism began to be more closely scrutinized (cf. Xu 1986:1046). As explorations into all aspects of the epic grew more sophisticated, it became

clear that no absolute time of origin could ever be established; on the contrary, epic is cumulative. The search for an Ur-text ceded to a desire to understand its ongoing process of formation. How did *Gesar* develop? Jiangbian Jiacao was the first Chinese scholar to fully address this question, and his work remains the greatest advance on the issue of *Gesar*'s origins. *The Historical Fate of Gesar* (1989) makes use of popular epic theories and a basic knowledge of folklore, and investigates the epic by periods against the rich background of Tibetan culture. The basic concepts developed by Jiangbian were likewise included in the authoritative two-volume *A History of Tibetan Literature* (Ma 1994:185-200).

One may well ask how, after Chinese scholars had pursued the idea of an Ur-text for more than half a century, Jiangbian was able to set aside this question in favor of asking how *Gesar* formed and changed through the centuries? No doubt he was influenced by V. I. Propp's discussion of the Russian "Song of the Hero": "To raise the question about when (in which year and which century) the 'Song of the Hero' was created is itself probably wrong, since its formation might have lasted for centuries. The question of its origins calls for a special study on the part of researchers of folk literature and art" (1964:131). In addition, Jiangbian's perspective was affected by Huang Jingtao's "Preface" to *Gesar 4* (1962), which highlights *Gesar*'s status as a collective work that undergoes continual recomposition, and by Mao Dun's comments (1981) on the formation of the Homeric epics. Both of these authors regard oral poetry as a dynamic process and return it to the reality of folk culture for discussion.

To put it another way, before considering the problem of origin, the nature of *Gesar* ought to be defined. Is it literature written by an author or a work belonging to the oral tradition of a people? Though many scholars regarded the epic as a creative work of the folk, they took too narrow a view when investigating the issue of authorship. Centuries after the composition of a literary work its authorship may grow obscure; we know even less of the epic as part of an oral tradition whose roots extend deep into the past. To locate the epic's origin in time by making use of its authorship is an errant methodology. As Propp observed, "for any discipline, methodological correctness is the determining factor among many. Wrong methodology could not lead to a correct conclusion" (1955:353).

Jiangbian first defined *Gesar* as folk art characterized by inheritance and variation. Such a work may embody the span of thousands of years, and any performance heard today cannot be equated to a written record from another century. As Jiangbian has put it, "*Gesar* is really a spectrum that reflects the ancient history of Tibet" (1986:50) and "a running river" (1994:76). Furthermore, folk creations keep changing and no version is the

ultimate version—as the Tibetan saying goes, “every group of Tibetans has a version of *Gesar*.” In the context of an oral tradition one need not be so concerned about whether or not *Gesar* was a real historical figure, or try to pin down the date of his existence in order to determine when the epic first was composed. Jiangbian has shown why this train of thought leads nowhere.

Instead he turned his attention to identification of the sociocultural influences on *Gesar*, using his familiarity with ancient Tibetan culture and his detailed knowledge of the history of exchange between the Han and Tibetan peoples. In order to locate the core content of the epic, he analyzed the typical scene “Horse-racing and Claiming the Kingship,” studying both oral and written versions. He describes the epic’s ancient content and aesthetic appeal, noting that these serve as “an important marker for a clan society” (1985:50) and reaches the following conclusions about *Gesar*’s historical development (37-38):

The origin, development, and evolution of *Gesar* has undergone several important stages. It took shape in a historical period when Tibetan clan society started to fall apart and the state power of slavery was forming. This period fell between the birth of Christ and fifth to sixth century CE. During the reign of the Tubo Dynasty, or the seventh to ninth centuries, *Gesar* gradually took shape. The epic further developed and spread after the collapse of the Tubo Dynasty, or tenth century CE.

Jiangbian pointed out that the foundation for the origin of epic is ethnic folk culture. He conjectured that before epics came into being, the Tibetan people “already had a corpus of stories that described the formation of the heavens and the earth, their ethnic origin, and ethnic heroes; these stories provided a foundation for creating the character *Gesar*, also known as *Sgrung* in early history. After further polishing by the oral poets, especially the ballad singers, *Gesar* became a great epic” (1986:51). As to the complicated cultural contents of different eras in the epic, the early part centers on *Sgrung*, *Rdevu*, and *Bon* consecutively. Other elements of the plot were later woven into the epic, serving as “clues” for misguided time-of-origin guesswork (41, 51). In 1994, Jiangbian gave full expression to his exploration of the epic’s origins in Tibetan culture in *Gesar and Tibetan Culture*, which provides strong evidence for his claims about the epic’s various sources.

During the mid-1990s certain Tibetan scholars also freed themselves from the issue of the epic’s time of origin by approaching the subject from other angles. Their efforts were strongly influenced by Jiangbian’s summary in Tibetan of the common features in *Gesar* (1988:59). *Blo gros rgya mtsho*,

Gcod pa don grub, Rta mgrin, and others made bold inferences by analyzing the epic's rhetoric and by comparing it with *Snyan ngag me long*¹⁹ and folk ballads. Blo gros rgya mtsho (1996:33) suggests that based on its rhetorical structure, the epic may have been finished after 1883. Gcod pa don grub and Rta mgrin (1994:52) proposed that the epic took shape between the Song and Yuan Dynasties (tenth to eleventh century), when people were thirsty for a more settled life and looked to Srong btsan sgam po and other great heroes for hope. These scholars believed that *Gesar* synthesizes many folk ideals and develops continually. Though their conclusions are still affected by viewing the epic as a form of history, their methodology has taken a new direction and their study is in-depth. If they can bypass the shortcomings of "epic-historicism," their work will do much to promote research on the formation and development of oral epic and on the emergence of epic manuscripts.

Many Tibetan scholars have regarded the epic as a historical record, but this viewpoint is shifting. In general these scholars have achieved a great deal, especially with multi-perspective discussions that have been emerging since the early 1990s. Work by scholars like Chab vgag rdo rje tshe ring (1995) on the relationship between "mother-epic" and "son-epic" is worth our attention. No doubt the growth of Tibetan scholarship will create many possibilities for *Gesar* exploration.

The Death of Theory on a Specific Time of Origin

Looking back at how *Gesar* has been explored at home and abroad, we can see that the theory on the epic's origin has come a long way. Not many scholars realized the complexity of the epic; in fact, generally they have clung to their own theories and in the process of seeking historical evidence have remained blind to the nature of the epic as folk art. However, we must recognize that their work has also contributed to the deeper level of understanding we have today.

For historical reasons, Chinese epic study in its true sense has not existed for very long, and herein lies a great discrepancy with research outside China. Epic research began only 70 years ago, while the period devoted to in-depth analysis has been even briefer—approximately 20 years.

¹⁹ A famous seventh-century Indian classic known throughout Mongolia and Tibet and also known as "The Mirror of Poetry" (*K'avy'adarsah*), composed by the Indian philosopher Dandin (cf. Zhao K. 1989). Translated into Tibetan in the thirteenth century, it deeply influenced Tibetan literary theory and literature.

Achieving progress and surpassing prior research are time-consuming, and it is a fact that some scholars are not fully qualified. We must recognize that research is a gradual process.

In addition, we need to shift our methodology away from treating the epic as a history whose content may be used to determine its time of origin.²⁰ This kind of methodology first took root in the Russian poetic circle with regard to the Russian poem entitled *The Hero's Song*. Russian scholars tried to locate the time when the epic poem originated in actual history:

When trying to prove that a heroic ballad belongs to this or that historical period, they used a method of far-fetched association on the basis of personal and place names. Their conclusions are thus untenable. When defining the historical layers or sediments, V. F. Meller and his followers tried to find the oldest text of heroic ballads without taking account of the distinctive characteristics of folk art (Sidorova 1955:69).

This critique remains pertinent for Chinese *Gesar* researchers. From the point of view of folklore studies an epic does not equal historical reality; in many cases, authenticity exists in only a figurative sense—it cannot solve the basic problem concerning origin. Of course, place-names, historical figures, and history in the epic may themselves be real: a people's history is an endless resource for verbal art. But when history enters the domain of traditional art, it does not submit to documentation; historical figures in an epic no longer belong to history, but to art and culture.

Another method belonging to the “epic-as-history” school involves locating the epic's time of origin according to the actual biographies of its heroic figures. Researchers begin with an epic character and look for his or her prototype in real life; conclusions about the epic's origins are drawn by reference to the era of that prototypical figure. With the further discovery of epic texts and the “history” that records *Gesar* in Tibetan literature, things have grown more complicated. Due to textual confirmation of historical figures in Tibetan and Chinese literature, the view that the epic *Gesar* originates among the Tibetans has become inarguable. For this reason scholars unanimously concentrate attention on the tenth and eleventh centuries, or even later. However, one may still find fault with this approach

²⁰ *Gesar's* representations of events have long been treated as faithful history by Tibetan scholars. We cannot neglect the force of tradition, and yet we need to adjust ourselves to a new academic atmosphere and actively promote deeper exploration into the epic, combining the typically strong analytical skills of Tibetans with a new methodology.

because the epic itself reveals a long history of development. By narrowing the period of its creation to the tenth and eleventh centuries, the dynamic of literary composition is erroneously attributed to an oral epic. Furthermore, the epic reflects Tibetan society during the sixth to ninth centuries rather than the tenth century. Thus a satisfactory conclusion about the epic's origins cannot be drawn based on the lifespans of historical heroic figures.

Still another method has been to pinpoint the epic's time of origin according to its authorship. Though scholars may have freed themselves from the restrictions of viewing the epic as straightforward history, they still confuse oral poetry with written literature. Generally speaking, oral epic has no particular author; so-called authors are those who record the epic and those who disseminate it. The common bearers of folk art are those who enjoy traditional culture, while the bearers of the epic are professional or semi-professional bards. Therefore the claim that Nor bu chos vphel, who was the historical King Gesar's contemporary, created the epic should be revised to admit that even he was merely someone like Bu thub dgav—a scribe.²¹

Only when *Gesar* is returned to the vast context of Tibetan culture, especially Tibetan folk culture, and considered stage by stage and century by century can our methodology be defensible. And only via a defensible methodology can we come to correct conclusions; this is Jiangbian's main point. As for stage-by-stage research on *Gesar*'s possible origins, there is no single investigation that can serve as a model.²² To make a breakthrough, we need to study each stage of development. Only after an analysis of many aspects of the epic can a new level of understanding be reached.

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²¹ Bu thub dgav of Qinghai, Yushu, was well known as the “non-stop *Gesar* scribe” because he copied copious amounts of *Gesar* cantos. Cf. Yang E. 1995:330-48.

²² See Lang Ying's chronological approach to *Manas* (1991:26) and Rinchindorji's similar approach to *Jangar* (1999:203).

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