



ORAL TRADITION

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Oral Tradition seeks to provide a comparative and interdisciplinary focus for studies in oral literature and related fields by publishing research and scholarship on the creation, transmission, and interpretation of all forms of oral traditional expression. As well as essays treating certifiably oral traditions, *OT* presents investigations of the relationships between oral and written traditions, as well as brief accounts of important fieldwork, a Symposium section (in which scholars may reply at some length to prior essays), review articles, occasional transcriptions and translations of oral texts, a digest of work in progress, and a regular column for notices of conferences and other matters of interest. In addition, occasional issues will include an ongoing annotated bibliography of relevant research and the annual Albert Lord and Milman Parry Lectures on Oral Tradition. *OT* welcomes contributions on all oral literatures, on all literatures directly influenced by oral traditions, and on non-literary oral traditions. Submissions must follow the list-of-reference format (style sheet available on request) and must be accompanied by a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return or for mailing of proofs; all quotations of primary materials must be made in the original language(s) with following English translations. Authors should submit two copies of all manuscripts. Most contributions will be reviewed by at least one specialist reader and one member of the editorial board before a final decision is reached. Review essays, announcements, and contributions to the Symposium section will be evaluated by the editor in consultation with the board.

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Chinese Oral Traditions

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Editor's Column

This special issue of *Oral Tradition*, a joint production of the cooperative project between the Center for Studies in Oral Tradition (CSOT) at the University of Missouri-Columbia and the Institute of Ethnic Literature (IEL) of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS) that was initiated in 1999, is the first collection of papers published in English on the oral traditions of minority ethnic groups in China.

Having shared a common interest in promoting Sino-U.S. discourse on oral traditions, we planned as the very first step in this bilateral project to introduce recent North American scholarship to Chinese readers, as well as to present Chinese research on ethnic verbal art to English-language readers. In 2000, seven English papers recommended by Professor John Miles Foley were translated and published in *Studies of Ethnic Literature*, a quarterly journal founded in 1983 under the sponsorship of the IEL to encourage study of the oral and written literature of ethnic groups in China. In that special Chinese issue, subtitled *American Scholarship on Oral Tradition*, we were fortunate in assembling contributions from groundbreaking scholars in the United States. We also had the honor of including Professor Foley's succinct headnotes to each paper, and his insightful perspectives on the discipline in an addendum in order to show our readers new directions in the field. It is worth mentioning that the issue has been warmly welcomed by Chinese scholars from relevant disciplines. Now we are very happy to see the counterpart publication appearing in the United States. The authors whose work is represented herein are all my colleagues, and the great majority of them either come from minority ethnic groups themselves or have a specialized knowledge of indigenous traditions and ethnic verbal arts.

From the green grassland of the north to the lush jungles in the south, from the coastal areas along Taiwan Strait in the east to the "top of the world" in the west, there are 56 official ethnic minority groups residing in Mainland China. The largest group, the Han, make up over 92% of China's enormous population, and thus it is somewhat understandable that when the rest of the world talks about "Chinese culture" they often refer implicitly to "Han culture." The other ethnic minorities, largely living away from the major population centers on China's vast frontiers but still inhabiting 64% of China's territory, have been struggling to maintain their own languages, oral traditions, and cultural identities for centuries.

In this special issue, thirteen authors examine oral traditions from various perspectives. Quite obviously, no single collection of papers could adequately cover the extensive range of traditional expressive arts observed

in the diverse cultures of a country as huge and complex as China. Nonetheless, some important genres are represented here—among them epic, myth, sacred songs, and incantation epos—as practiced by the Tibetan, Mongolian, Kirghiz, Manchu, Nakhi, Yi, Miao, and Dong peoples. These papers reveal, in a sort of composite thumbnail sketch, the diversity, multiformity, and complexity of oral traditions in China. But we are also aware that the present collection merely provides a close-up picture, illuminating current Chinese scholarship and exploring the roots of human expressive cultures.

We are confident that international scholarship on oral tradition has a promising future. One leading arena, the journal *Oral Tradition*, has been keen on broadening our vision to include other cultures and on discovering and reexamining the rules of verbal art. We hope that this volume will help to inaugurate a new stage of our common discipline, moving toward a wider and deeper dialogue. We aim to foster exchanges with others who seek to better understand the expressive culture of human beings in general and the oral traditions of ethnic groups in China in particular.

Hearty thanks must go first to Professor Foley; it was his suggestion that made this volume possible. Much credit for the publication of the collection should go to the translators and the editors. Not only is the subject matter difficult, but there is also the matter of style: original texts in the Chinese academic format do not easily translate into Western academic style. My old friend Dr. Naran Bilik and his comrades have expended enormous effort in translating the majority of the papers into English. As for the editing process, I myself worked together with Dr. John Zemke, Michael Barnes, Kristin Funk, Heather Hignite, and Heather Maring for many months, during my year-long residency as a Ford Foundation fellow at the CSOT. I know how demanding the job was for them. Aaron Tate also helped me in some ways with the editing of the papers. I extend special gratitude to my colleague Ms. Bamo Qubumo for her generous and timely assistance to the CSOT editors. Finally, we would also like to acknowledge the Foreign Affairs Bureau of CASS, especially Dr. Pei Changhong and Mr. Zhang Youyun, and to thank them for the subvention applied to the preparation of this landmark issue.

*Chao Gejin, Special Editor
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A Preliminary Analysis of the Oral Shamanistic Songs of the Manchus

Song Heping

Shamanistic oral traditions in the form of primitive religion have come down to the present from ancient societies in the remote past, and have already become standardized as folk religions and beliefs among various ethnic groups. In this article I address Manchu shamanistic songs in Northeastern China, with an analytical eye to their oral form and content, looking at how they are represented.¹ Shamanistic songs are also divided into “home” shamanistic songs and “wild” shamanistic songs by type. The term “home” identifies a god or rite or song closely associated with a particular clan, whereas “wild” designates a god or rite or song outside the sphere of any clan.

Transmission and Morphology of Shamanistic Songs

The transmission of Manchu shamanistic songs has not been limited to the oral traditional *Uyun*,² or ritualized instruction through performance, but has also made use of shamanistic books³ copied and handed down to

¹ The Manchu term for shamanistic song is *angga gisun*. When a shaman holds a sacrificial rite, he sings about the characteristics of the gods, their dwelling places, and the presenter's piety, among other matters. The songs are sung for the gods, hence the name “shamanistic song.”

² *Uyun* is a Manchu term for “nine.” It takes nine days for a complete course of learning, provided that the trainees have mastered the skill of singing and dancing. However, the larger task can never be accomplished in one nine-day course. Instead, it usually takes seven, eight or even dozens of *uyun* courses to complete instruction, namely, three to four months' time.

³ Shamanistic books: called *enduri* (god) *bit'he* (book) in the Manchu language, or *dele* (above) *bit'he*, that is “shamanistic books” or “books from above,” popularly known as *tele benzi*, a Manchu-Han mixture. Such books are of two kinds: the home shamanistic books (*boo mukūn I bit'he*) and the great shamanistic books (*amaba bit'he*).

each successive generation. The author will concentrate on the content of shamanistic songs that appear in shamanistic books in the present paper, while hoping to have a chance to discuss problems concerning performance sometime later.

Apprentices who attend the *Uyun* class learn to sing shamanistic songs in addition to learning to dance and conduct sacrificial procedures. The teacher of the *Uyun* class may be the clan leader (*mukūn*) or an old shaman (*Sakda Saman*). It is the leader's responsibility to teach shamanistic songs to the apprentices and see that they have mastered them. Unsuccessful apprentices drop out. The *Uyun* class actually amounts to a folk school for teaching Manchu culture and conducting popular education. Such schools are in session until students master the songs, perhaps two to three months, and may open (as needed) every one to three years. When a sacrificial rite is held, the shaman is responsible for teaching shamanistic songs secretly and at a particular time.

For a dozen years, according to many Chinese Manchurologists who have conducted fieldwork in the tightly connected Manchurian communities—the Guan clan on the Ula Street of the Jilin province, the Guan clan in the Ning'an county of the Heilongjiang province, the Lang clan in the Shulan county of the Jilin province, and so on, totaling about 50—home shamanistic songs represent the largest percentage of the songs recorded. There are fewer than ten wild shamanistic songs in existence among the folk or among the songs recorded. For example, the Shi clan and the Yang clan each have wild shamanistic songs, and naturally they also have home shamanistic songs. If, however, a clan has the latter variety, they do not necessarily have the former.

The latter books are also known as “wild” shamanistic books (*bigan bit'he*), or “shaman's handbooks,” and they serve as a memorandum for a shaman in his or her oral teaching at an *Uyun* study session of a sacrificial rite, where novices give their fullest attention and learn everything by heart. Roughly speaking, the shamanistic books originated during the reign of *Huangtaiji*, that is, about 1632, when Manchu literati or shamans made a record of all items such as shamanistic gods and sacrificial procedures in the Manchu script. Copies of these records, called shamanistic books, made their way into popular circulation. Later they were divided into Manchu shamanistic books and then transcribed with Han characters. Before 1632, the Manchu shamanistic culture was singularly distinguished as an oral tradition. Even after the appearance of shamanistic books, its contents were largely passed down orally, since many shamans and apprentices did not know the Manchu writing. This is especially the case with the Manchu populace in the middle and late periods of the Qing dynasty, who all depended on oral teaching by a particular shaman.

The Content of Home Shamanistic Songs

The shaman and the assistant⁴ should state their clan names clearly as well as their *shuxiang* (any of the twelve animals representing the twelve Earthly Branches used to symbolize the year in which a person is born) and residences. For example, the content of the Shi clan's shamanistic songs for declaring the clan name is as follows:

hasuri hala hala oci, šekderi hala erin de omolo tomorrow, gūlmahūn aniya
bingkūn saman, angga gisun hulafi jalbarime, jalin de buraki na de bukdari
hengkilefi

Which is the one among many clan names? The children from the Shi clan are here to pray and sing shamanistic songs; the home shaman who possesses the *shuxiang* of a rabbit bows down to the earth on his knees.

The process is similar for other clans such as the Guan, the Lang, and the Xu on the Ula Street and the Yang and the Zhao in the Jilin province. All of them record clan identity at the outset of the shamanistic songs.⁵

As for the declaration of residencies, the shaman from the Shi clan, for example, will sing: "We live in the Small Han Village, and hold sacrificial rites on the Ula Street." This is the very first line the shaman sang when we made a record of the shamanistic culture from the Shi clan. The parallel line in a shamanistic song from the Yang clan is: "The old shaman settles down in Huichun," or, in other words, "He comes from the village of Huichun." Moreover, some shamanistic songs also declare the *shuxiang* of the host.⁶ Among the Guan clan on the Ula Street, for example, the following verse is recited: "The host who possesses the *shuxiang* of a mouse stands by." Some other declarations adopt the form of dialogue: "What is the *shuxiang* of the host?"

⁴ An assistant is called *jari* in Manchu language, or "god's attendant." Besides singing prayers and shamanistic songs during performances, he should also assist the master shaman in completing the performance. The word derives from *jaribi*. See Song 1998.

⁵ Here the home shaman is a counterpart to the master shaman, who used to be an assistant in sacrificial rites in honor of wild gods. In the case of home sacrifices, some assistants become home shamans.

⁶ "Host" here means the head of the family in which shamanistic rites are held.

The Timing of Sacrificial Rites

The timing of sacrificial rites is highly regarded by the Manchus because it involves important issues such as the safety and prosperity of family and village after the rites are held, ceremonies that are given full expression in the shamanistic songs. Except for particular festivals and the making of vows on lucky days, such annual rites usually take place after the autumn harvest. When the fresh millet is husked and put away, the first thing people need to do is make offerings to the gods. For example, the Southern *kang* shamanistic song from the Shi clan observes: "Now we bid goodbye to an old month and welcome a new month. It is on a lucky new day and in a clean, auspicious month that we hold our sacrificial rite." The Yang and Zhao clans do the same as the Shi clan. Shamanistic songs often lay special emphasis on the seasonal niche of a sacrificial rite. Ceremonies held for the constellations are more focused, as, for example, the constellation song from the Guan clan on Ula Street:

uce fa be ukufi,	When the door of the house is
	closed, and the curtains are unfolded,
hulan i sanggiyan gukufi,	Cover the fire in the stove,
jun tawa yaha gidafi,	Stop the smoke from the chimney.
niyalma jilgan gidafi,	People become speechless.
dai yaha didafi,	Put out the lights.
aisin koko meifen bukdaifi,	The golden cock folds its neck and
	retires to its nest,
indahun jilagan micufi,	The dog lies down without barking,
ihan morin huwejefi erin kai,	The cow and the horse are driven into
	their kraals out of sight,
deyeme gasha dekdehe hayaha	Birds fly back to their nests,
erin kai,	
feksime gurgu fekun erin kai,	Beasts and pheasants return to their
	resting places,
tumen usiha tusike erin kai,	Thousands of stars make their
	appearance,
minggan usiha mitaha erin kai,	Hundreds of stars climb up the night
	sky,
ilan usiha ilha erin kai,	The three stars are twinkling,
nadan usiha naraha eren kai,	The seven stars are sentimentally
	attaching to each other.
eriku usiha eldehe eren kai,	When the comet is shining,
... ..	
enduri usiha soliki	A sacrificial rite is held for the
	constellation gods.

This long piece deals with the timing of constellation rites. Other clans perform similar passages but not of the same length. In fact, the Yang clan is distinguished for its way of expressing time in the sacrificial rites held for the stove gods. Its shamanistic songs include lines like: “When the sun is covered and when the sun goes up and down,” a phrase that narrates the nightly rite held for the stove gods. In a word, no matter what the season or moment, the shaman has ready options to match the particular timing.

Offerings

An important part of a sacrificial rite is the making of offerings, which is given detailed description in the shamanistic songs. First comes the incense, which involves a Chinese joss-stick (*bazi*) and incense powder made from a kind of thorn. In the Shi clan songs they say: “Burning the *ayan* incense, burning the Good-year prayer incense” or “Burning *bazi* incense.” The Zhao clan from Xilin uses *ancun* incense.

Next come sacrificial offerings. The Manchu shamans give many kinds of offerings, including fish, sheep, oxen, horses, ducks, chickens, and especially pigs. As part of the process, they sing the following shamanistic song:

Cautiously we bought sacred pigs,
Kept them carefully in the sty at home.
The sacred pig is strong and nice-looking,
And is black all over.
Today we set out to divide the sacred pig according to its joints,
The sacred pig dies immediately.

This sort of detailed, realistic, and vivid description is what we read in the Southern *kang* shamanistic song from the Shi clan. Though the descriptions vary in different Manchu clans, all groups use pigs.

Next come cake-offerings. Similarly, each clan has its own particular expression of the ritual. The Yang clan’s song proceeds as follows: “On the occasion of this rewarding autumn, taking one ear of millet out of twenty, taking one ear of millet out of forty, for the sake of a feast in honor of our gods.” Some clans have special shamanistic songs for “millet washing,”⁷ which elaborate on the preparation of sacred millet, the process of making

⁷ In order to show respect for the gods, glutinous millet should be washed and made into various kinds of offerings for the gods. Every Manchu clan has its own millet-washing song.

cakes for offering.⁸ Other provisions are also used for the offerings. The shaman uses a rich stock of offerings like cereals, millet, and water, among others. In shamanistic songs we also find millet wine and strong liquor. In order to show respect for the gods, the Zhao clan from Xilin uses one-hundred-year-old cereals, spring water from the wooded mountains, and ninety-year-old millet wine, and then offers them to the gods three times. The Guan clan on Ula Street uses glutinous millet wine and liquor. On the whole, offering liquor to the gods is also a part of shamanistic songs.

Invoking Gods

Old Manchu shamans would say, “For home gods, sacrificial rites are collective; for wild gods, such rites are held for each at a separate time.” That is, in the case of home gods, songs of invocation are sung to let them all descend together. The repertoire differs according to individual clans; some have thirteen to fourteen pieces, while others have only five. But no matter the clan, the repertoire always includes western *kang*,⁹ lock-replacement¹⁰ (in honor of Omoshi Mama), blackout,¹¹ the constellation rite, and the sky rite.

First come the western *kang* gods. The Guan clan on the Ula Street holds shamanistic song feasts and invites the following gods: the god Tangzitaili, the god Zhusebeile, the god Choha Zhangjing, the god Mang’eseifu, the god Abukazhuse who descends from the sky, and Beise Enduri.¹² The invitees also include the god Nekeliansefu and Wocheku, god of the twin thrones. Some clans also add Buddha. In the Shi clan’s western

⁸ The Shi clan offers a good example; see Song 1993.

⁹ A *kang* is a Northern Chinese bed whose mattress is filled with bricks or soil and which can be heated in wintertime. The Manchus hold the “west” in high regard because there is an ancestral shrine on the western *kang* in the household.

¹⁰ Lock-replacement: sacrificial rites are held for Omoshi Mama (namely the Grand mummy god in charge of offspring) for the sake of the prosperity of later generations. During the rite the old thread-lock worn on the body is replaced with a new one, using a length of colored thread blessed by the shaman.

¹¹ This entails switching off or putting out the lights and the fire in the stove. Sacrificial rites are generally held in darkness.

¹² Beise Enduri is an ancestral god of the Manchu people. This god is located on the western side of the house. His central function is to serve the ancestral gods, though he is one himself.

kang shamanistic songs, only one white-mountain master god is invoked, whose name is Chohaye. Other invitees are all masters, all *manni*,¹³ and all *fucihi*.¹⁴

In second position is the lock-replacement rite held for the protection of infants' health and the propagation of offspring under the sponsorship of the mother-god of origin, namely Omosi Mama, sometimes known as "god mother." Next comes the blackout rite, often confused with the constellation rite although they actually have different content and address different gods. There is one similarity, however: both are held without lights. The blackout rites held by many Manchu clans all have something to do with the western *kang* gods. Other clans invoke the gods Beile and Mama.

The fourth in sequence is the constellation rite, which is especially popular among the Manchus. The number of gods invoked differs from one clan to another; more than ten or a very few can be summoned. They usually include the Big Dipper, the Lunar Mansions, and the Three Comets. Here is an excerpt from the Yang clan's shamanistic songs, which invoke the largest number of gods and are the most comprehensive in content:

wasibume soliki	Please come down, <i>yuebo</i> Star,
biyai dasuran usiha,	Please come down, Vesper,
sanggiyan usiha,	Please come down, Tricuspid Star,
orin jakun tokton usiha,	Please come down, Lunar Mansions,
gimda usiha,	Please come down, <i>jiaomu</i> Dragon Star,
kamduri usiha,	Please come down, <i>yuanjin</i> Dragon Star,
...	...
geren usiha be soliha	Please come down, all Star-gods.

The full roster numbers fifty gods in all. Every animal and plant and life on earth is included in the Yang clan's shamanistic star songs, and all exist in heaven with different names.

Fifth comes the Sky Rite, which appears in every Manchu shamanistic book. As long as there is a sacrificial rite, there is a Sky-sacrificial song. However, the names of the heavenly gods may vary among different clans. The Shi clan calls the heavenly gods "The High Sky," "The Blue," "The Nine-layer Heaven," "The Heavenly God *mafa*," "The Heavenly Khan," and so forth. Only in the Sky-sacrificial song of the Guan clan on the Ula Street are the gods invoked largely similar to the western *kang* gods of the clan, including five from the western *kang*. The invitees at the Sky-sacrificial rite

¹³ *Manni*, or *mangga* in Manchu, here means heroic ancestral gods.

¹⁴ A *fucihi* is a local Buddha.

also include Crow-Magpie God, who is worshipped widely among the Manchus.

This is a list of gods specifically invited to various rites, but it is well to remember that the home sacrificial rites are by nature collective. Phrases such as “all gods are invited” and “all our ancestors” demonstrate that collectivity.



The Shi clan's shaman conducts a divination with a steel mirror and a pearl (1985). Photograph by the author.

Piety

Pious attitudes are mentioned in every shamanistic song; they are embodied between the lines that the performers cherish and actively express. This kind of piety is evident not only in the choice of timing, offerings, and washing of sacrificial utensils, but also in the performer's humility and modesty. For example, the shamanistic songs of the Guan clan on the Ula Street observe: “We servants do not know how to respect gods, / Please show us how to carry it out, our gods. / We are sure to learn by heart the teachings from the gods, / Learn by heart the revelations from the gods.” Many repetitions are devoted to “ritual obeisance” in order to express

respect. The Shi clan says: “Fold our body and kneel down and touch the earth with your forehead.” The shamanistic songs of every clan are full of such phrases.

Rationales for Holding Shamanistic Rites

Shamanistic songs explain themselves as follows: “The one who speaks out by knocking his upper teeth against the lower has to be accountable, and the vows that have been made many times must be accepted. Here we hold a sacrificial rite.” In this way the Shi clan expresses itself in the shamanistic song, also intoning phrases widely used by the Manchus when making a vow. These vows involve annual sacrificial rites, the treatment of a patient, and harvest or other celebrations.

Although the wording differs from one clan region to another, the fundamental purpose for holding sacrificial rites is everywhere the same: to pray for peace. For example, the Yang clan’s shamanistic song goes:

gereb saman baturu,	The group of shamans would not
	give in to each other,
hutu be hokobumbi,	Competing,
uju hutu be uksalabumbi,	Without any fear,
hutu jugun be faitame,	Drive away evil ghosts, devils, and
	wild spirits,
yabure hutu yala be niorombi gaji.	Cut off routes of those evil ghosts,
	devils, and wild spirits.
akū hutu i duka be yaksimbi.	Leave no leeway.

The Guan clan on Ula Street speaks the same message from another perspective: “Please protect us, our gods; protect me, the servant, so that I may live to an old age. No problems for one hundred years, no illness for sixty years, and no bad years. Also, please protect others from disasters, safeguard their families and cattle.”

The purposes of other Manchu clans for holding sacrificial rites are likewise to pray for “peace and health forever,” with the same sentiment being expressed via other similar phrases. Due to differences in historical transformation, geographical environment, and cultural background, the perspectives, modes of expression, and emphases may vary.

The Content of Wild Shamanistic Songs

Besides these seven parts outlined in the home shamanistic songs, the wild songs have their own particular form and content. Even so, the seven parts contained in the home shamanistic songs have also changed a bit. The wild gods are invoked not only in front of the western *kang*, but also in front of the Big Dipper after a temporary altar is set up in the courtyard. Hence, one often finds a line such as “The shaman kneels down in front of the Big Dipper.” What is more, the seven parts of the home shamanistic songs have become more specific, more detailed, and more vivid in the wild variety. This is especially so with regard to offerings; some clans form the body of the sacred pig into the shape of an arch, strip off its hair, and wash it clean. The specifics of the processes are recorded in the songs.

The wild shamanistic songs cover in particular four parts: the invitation of the gods and their appearance, the sacred utensils, the gods’ residences, and, finally, the gods’ ceremonial dismissal. Adding to these four the seven parts of the home shamanistic songs yields eleven parts total. This is the entire content of the wild shamanistic songs.

The Appearance of the Gods

Something should be made clear. Except for the Shi clan’s shamanistic song on the “red-faced white-mountain *mafa*,”¹⁵ which describes the white-mountain regional commander and the ancient heroine Odu mama who travels “a thousand *li* a day and eight hundred *li* at night,” shamanistic songs that contain descriptions of the gods’ features are infrequent in other clans. In the wild shamanistic songs, however, such descriptions are rich and stirring. All of the clans that have wild shamanistic songs have one wild song for each god; as a result, there exist many wild shamanistic songs, between 20 and 150 or more. Here we choose for discussion only a few of them.

First we consider the *manni*, or heroic gods. Doholon *manni* is a lame god, whom the Yang clan’s shamanistic song describes as walking with a gold stick and a silver stick that allow him to cover vast fields and high mountains. In the Shi clan’s shamanistic song, he appears as the *manni* god on a three-pronged fork who hops along on one leg. Maksi *manni* is a dancing ancestral god who carries a sacred bell in his hand; the golden god

¹⁵ Mafa (literally “grandpa”) is an ancestral god of the mountains and the forest.

descends playfully shaking and ringing the bell. In the description of the *manni*'s features, there are also Baturu,¹⁶ Amba,¹⁷ Juru,¹⁸ Ilan ari,¹⁹ and others from the Shi clan, as well as Nadanju²⁰ and Ulgiyan²¹ from the Zhao clan. There are also many founding fathers.

Second, we deal with the animals and the plant gods. The Manchu ancestors who lived as hunters knew perfectly well the habits of animals and the characteristics of plants, which they preserved and transmitted in enthralling descriptions. For example, the Yang clan's shamanistic songs describe the eagle god as being able to cover the sun and the moon with its wings, and to fish at the bottom of the sea with its tail. In another song this creature sticks up its tail like overhanging clouds. The Shi clan's shamanistic songs describe not only actions but also appearances, comparing the vulture god's head, for example, to a stone, a golden mouth, a silver beak, and a copper neck that looks like an iron axle. The Shi clan's leopard god has copper threads all over its body and singers speak of its memorable dancing skills. They describe the leopard god in this way: "With red-flaming coal in the mouth, / The sparks fly everywhere, / Being red all over the body, / Like a big fireball." Quite different from the leopard of the Yang clan, it comes from a thousand miles away, stretching itself out and lying on the ground. The wild shamanistic songs also describe the features of the tigress, the tiger, and all kinds of bird gods and python gods. In a word, based on the appearance and action of the *manni* god and the animal gods, the wild shamanistic songs represent the features of the wild gods from various angles and aspects through vivid, detailed, rich, and realistic descriptions.

¹⁶ Baturu ("brave hero") is a hero among the heroic ancestral gods.

¹⁷ Amba ("giant") is an ancestral god.

¹⁸ The god Juru ("double" or "two") carries a spear in each hand.

¹⁹ Ilan ari is a trinity of omnipotent and omnipresent gods.

²⁰ Nadanju is a seventy-year-old ancestral hero.

²¹ Ulgiyan, or the "pig" hero, was the first ancestral god to record human knowledge on a pig skin.

Sacred Utensils

When the shaman performs a rite involving the home gods, he holds a hand drum and a stick and dances to the beat of the drum. As for the wild gods, different sacred utensils are used for different targets; for some he holds a knife, for some a fork, and for others a stick or a copper bell. These items are combined with shamanistic gestures. For example, as we mentioned above concerning the Yang and Shi clans, Doholon *manni*²² holds a stick or a fork, while Maksi *manni* holds a sacred utensil with copper bells. The Shi clan also has a great god, Amba ali, who plays with a long fiery rope while dancing. The description of sacred utensils in the wild shamanistic songs shows not only the great theurgy of the gods, but also the Manchu military experience and warrior spirit.

Residences of the Gods

Changbai Mountain and the Heilongjiang River are the cradle of the Manchu people. The mountain is a touchstone of their existence, prosperity, and development. Therefore, many gods who appear in the Manchu shamanistic songs live on the mountain, and the songs depict specific rivers, valleys, and high peaks. For example, Amba *manni* lives on the peak and Juru *manni* in the golden mansion and silvery cabinet on the fifth peak. Among the animal deities, the boar god lives in the silvery den in the golden valley, while the eagle god lives in the golden mansion and the silvery cabinet, and so on. In summary, the Shi clan's gods live in different parts at different altitudes according to their variant theurgy. The Yang clan's wild gods live in a different pattern, primarily on hillsides or in ravines. For example, the swan god lives in a nest made from twigs on a small hillside, the bear god lives in his den deep in the mountain, the tiger god lives in the ravines of flowers and grasses, and so forth.

The patterns of the Yang and the Shi clans reveal that the residences of the Yang clan gods do not differ by altitudes, and that theurgy of one god distinguishes it little from another one, reflecting the primitive life of the Manchus. By contrast, the Shi make clear differences according to status and have a strong sense of hierarchy. Second, from the descriptions of these rivers and mountains we can derive important values and meanings for the study of ethnohistory.

²² Although the heroic god Doholon *manni* is lame, he is characterized as a messenger.

Sending off the Gods

According to the Manchu primitive representation, the great gods are wild gods: so long as they are invoked and offered sacrifices, they will retire to their own respective resting places and will not linger in people's homes and villages. Therefore, ceremonially dismissing the wild gods is an important part of the shamanistic ritual. In fact, every clan that has wild shamanistic songs also has dismissal songs. Some are attached to the end of each chapter, and some constitute special chapters. The Shi clan has both types, while the Yang clan has special chapters that make a plea invoking the gods to retire after accepting the offering of incense and sacrifices. The Shi clan has long chapters, called "Flying Tigers," dedicated to seeing the gods off. Here is an example of such an emotional and touching address:

Oh Flying Tiger God, you can descend now! Oh beautiful tiger god Mafa! It is now nearly midnight, in the freezing and snowy winter cold; your children kneel down on the hard and icy earth. We are afraid of cold and want to go home. Please come down! The prayers are trying very hard in chorus with beautiful words. The people who are lined up on both flanks can hardly hold the drums any longer with their left hands, and can hardly hold the drumsticks with their right hands; they are losing their voices. The shaman has only a single coat on. The dew has dropped from the sky and winds are blowing on the ground. The people who are lined up on both flanks have lost their voices, and they cannot chant loudly or cry even in a small voice. Please, Flying Tiger God, come down from the branches! Lose no time, go back away from the branches! Flying Tiger God, you can no longer play; now you can come down and go back!²³

The passage above exemplifies the major content of the Manchu wild and home shamanistic songs. The wild songs also involve shamanistic costumes—for example, the double-bird magic hat, the nine-bird magic hat, the site for such performances, the layout of offerings, and so forth. Another form of shamanistic songs consists of formulas available in sacrificial rites; also known as "common talk," these are short phrases used during rites held for a particular occasion. Such formulas cover many areas, such as praying for the safety of people at war, promotion in military rank, sending messages back home, building a new house, looking for a lost horse, and maintaining a family tree. Thanks are given to the gods for their blessings over people's safety and good fortune. This phenomenon shows how shamanistic culture finds its way into every aspect of Manchu life.

²³ This paragraph is an abbreviation based on an old shaman's performance.

As a general principle, the shamanistic songs have somewhat standardized coverage as well as a fixed pattern, but they preserve flexibility and the capacity for improvisation. Their contents can be expanded or reduced to suit the situation.

The Organization of Shamanistic Songs

The home shamanistic songs have seven aspects of primary content, while the wild songs have eleven. These orally expressed features follow no determined order and may be freely combined. There is, however, sequencing and combination by habit. Shamanistic songs usually begin with identification of the shaman's clan affiliation and *shuxiang* and of his or her residence, and end with wishes for safety and the dismissal of the gods. Other dimensions such as offerings, pious attitudes, and the appearances of the gods, occur in the middle of the song.

From the brief and partial citations given above, we can see that the orally transmitted contents of the Manchu shamanistic songs and their meanings are clearly determined. If we view them from the perspective of folk culture, they have a history of occurring as long folk narrative poetry with an integral structure. The Shi clan has a shamanistic song entitled "First Generation Great-grandfather" of 150 lines. It starts with the first-generation great-grandfather and then comes down to the fifth generation, relating the story of how the ancestor became a shamanistic god of the Shi clan. The descriptions are vivid and detailed. Every shamanistic song is a complete narrative poem, differing from its counterparts only in length and looking like a story, a myth, or a legend. The Shi clan's "First Generation Great-grandfather" recounts the legend of how he became a god, and a certain Yang clan describes Muli Muligan as a god who herds on horseback and becomes a herding hero and a horse protector. There is also a Wujiansi *manni*, a knowledgeable god who makes the first record on a pigskin manuscript of work skills accumulated by human beings.

In addition, the shamanistic songs are quite dramatic. All of them are sung by shamans during performance and are accompanied by dances, especially in the case of the wild songs. The Shi clan's "Lying Tigress Goddess" is a fine example:

The candle lights up everywhere, and we raised our heads and spotted her coming down from the hut up on the southern mountain, from the thatched house up on the northern mountain, climbing over the mountain ridge, over the peak, out of darkness, with many tiger cubs.

While singing, the shaman gets down on all fours, imitating the movements of climbing a mountain and of caressing and feeding the tiger's young. During performances of the "Bird God of Golden Tongue" and the "Bird God of Silvery Tongue," the shaman not only imitates the spreading wings and act of flying, but also moves his or her lips, meaning that the lips are red. The shaman's physical movements thus accord with the particular characteristics of the song. For every wild god, there is a simple and brief set of dramatic movements.

When we examine these songs from the perspective of their orally transmitted contents, we find numerous reflections of human concerns, including religion, folklore, music, dancing, clothing, and ethnology. For such reasons, because they function as a sort of cultural encyclopedia, the shamanistic songs are especially valuable for cross-disciplinary study.

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The Bard Jusup Mamay

Lang Ying

Manas is an oral epic popular among the Kirghiz that recounts the deeds of the hero Manas and the seven generations of his progeny who fought against their enemies. This spectacular epic of over 230,000 lines has survived for hundreds of years through performances by epic singers. *Manas* can be found across the face of central Asia, where it is widely known throughout Kirghizia, Kazakstan, China's Xinjiang, and even parts of Afghanistan and Tadjikistan.

In China, *Manas* exists primarily in the four counties of Atushi, Aktau, Wulukqar, and Akqi in the Kezilsu Kerkez Autonomous Prefecture. More than 90 percent of 140,000 Kirghiz live in these four counties. There are also singers on the Tekes steppe and in the Tiacheng mountains around Xinjiang. In the Xinjiang region of China performances of *Manas* were once very popular. When a comprehensive survey was conducted in the early 1960s in the southern part of the Tianshan Mountains, over 80 *Manas* singers were found among the Kirghiz (Liu 1990). While doing fieldwork in September of 1998 in the three townships of Akqi county, I visited nine singers (ranging from ages 20 to 78), many of whom often performed sections of *Manas* at the invitation of the local people.

The Kirghiz call epic singers *jomokqi* ("storyteller") and the most talented singers *qong jomokqi* ("great storyteller"). The great *jomokqi* have an extraordinary memory, unbounded imagination, and an amazing capacity for improvisation: they can usually perform three or more sections of *Manas* and can recount the origin and genealogy of the heroes as well as the context of the epic. The capacity for improvisation is one of the major factors that distinguishes a *qong jomokqi* from a *keqik* ("small") *jomokqi*. After 1930, the Kirghiz began to call the *Manas* singers *manasqi*; a great *manasqi* is called *qong manasqi* or *kara manasqi*.¹

¹ *Kara* means "black" and "strong and powerful." Many *manasqi* can perform *Manas*, but few are distinguished by the honorific *qong manasqi*.

The number of *qong manasqi* has rapidly decreased—only four have been found in China in the twentieth century. The first is Jusup Ahong (1884-1922), who was born in the township of Karaq, Akqi county, and could perform five sections of the epic cycle *Manas* (from the first section called *Manas* to the fifth *Saiyt*). The second is Ebrayin Akunbe (1882-1959), who was also born in the township of Karaq, Akqi county, and could perform eight sections of *Manas* (from the first section to the eighth, *Qigtaiy*). The third is Eshimat Memet (1880-1963), born in the township of Karabulak, Wulukqar county; he claimed that he could perform seven sections of *Manas*.² The fourth is Jusup Mamay (1918-), born in the township of Karabulak, Akqi county, who could perform all eight sections of *Manas*. He is the only living singer in the world who deserves the title of *qong manasqi*. Though these four are few in number, they are important inheritors of Kirghiz culture who could not only perform *Manas* but were also thoroughly versed in Kirghiz myths, legends, ballads, sayings, and folk customs.

The Life Story of Jusup Mamay

Jusup Mamay was born in the At jay lo pasture of the village of Mirkaiq. The pasture lies on a mountain remote from the county seat, a distance of at least two to three days journey by horseback. Akqi is a small county where the Kirghiz live in compact communities situated at an altitude of over 2,000 meters in the cold and rugged southwestern part of the Tianshan Mountains. The Toshigan River cuts across the county from west to east. For a long time people here have practiced animal husbandry, supplemented by agriculture. Akqi county is a remote region without good transportation; as a result, it has had little contact with modern civilization. For that reason, Kirghiz folk culture has survived well.

Performances of *Manas* are very popular, and whenever celebrations are held people gather for its performance. Competitions between singers are even more exciting. After the October Revolution in Soviet Russia, many Kirghiz from Kirghizia came to Akqi county, among them the great master Sagenbay Olozbakof (1867-1930), a famous *Manas* singer from the former Soviet Union. Olozbakof once entered an intense match against the

² He died soon after a recording was made of his performance of the first section of *Manas* and its second section *Saimaitaiy*.

famous *manasqi* Jusup Ahong from Akqi county, which continued without pause for five to six days and was judged by an elderly person from the community. Both performers were well-known masters of *Manas* and each had his own special style. The audience, however, unanimously believed that Jusup Ahong from Akqi county had won. The long tradition of *Manas*



Jusup Mamay, *Manas* epic singer. Photograph by Guo Xiaodong.

and a social context that encourages frequent performances have cultivated and shaped one generation of *Manas* singers after another. Akqi county is important for the development of master singers of the epic and its dissemination; in the early twentieth century, the renowned master *Manas* performers Jusup Ahong and Ebrayin Akunbe both hailed from Akqi county. Jusup Mamay has also lived among his adoring *Manas*-loving public from a very young age, within a rich milieu of folk culture.

Jusup Mamay's father, Mamay, was a simple and honest nomad; his mother Burul was a well-known singer, who raised twenty-seven sons and daughters (twenty-four died as infants and only three survived to adulthood). The eldest son was Balbai, followed by a daughter Rphan and the youngest son Jusup Mamay, who is clever, smart, and endowed with an extraordinary memory. His father paid much attention to the children's education. He sold his only horse to pay for the education of his two sons, Balbai and Jusup Mamay. They were both sent to a locally revered scholar for instruction in the culture.

There is a mythical story about Jusup Mamay's birth: after Burul had Balbai and Rphan, she lost a dozen sons and a dozen daughters in childbirth. This legendary story bears a resemblance to the hero's birth in the Turkic epic. According to the story, the mother was weak, exhausted, and in despair because only two of her twenty-six children had survived labor. Mamay took his wife to the towns of Turpan, Aksu, and Kashir to recover. They also traveled to a hot spring and a sacred mausoleum to pray. Amazingly, the sixty-year-old Burul became pregnant again. She dreamed that an elderly couple passed by and that the old woman gave a parcel to her saying: "you have suffered a great deal, here is a gift for you. The yak is a sacred animal and the yak god will protect you!" With this, the old couple disappeared. Burul opened the parcel and found a meatball in the shape of a yak. She awoke with the scene still fresh in her mind, believing that it must be a good omen for the fetus. In the spring of April 1918, the sixty-one-year-old Burul bore her twenty-seventh child—Jusup Mamay. He was born with dense hair covering his body that fell off after forty days. Thinking they were too old, the parents decided to give the baby to their eldest son Balbai to raise. Balbai was twenty-six years older than his newborn brother.³

It is important to note that Jusup Mamay was born into a typical folk artist family. His father was a great fan of *Manas* and his mother and sister were locally renowned folk singers. Although the entire family steered him toward becoming an epic singer, it was his brother Balbai who most influenced him, since he was given to Balbai the moment he came into the world and was then cared for by his sister-in-law. Balbai himself was a collector of Kirghiz folk literature who often accompanied caravans along the Silk Road. Whenever he traveled, he would pay a visit to storytellers and singers, making a record of the narrated stories and sagas that they performed. He never missed the chance of seeing *manasqis* and taking

³ Jumaturdi and Shayik 1997.

down their songs. Balbai's greatest accomplishment was to make records of *Manas* performed and narrated by the master epic balladists Jusup Ahong and Ebrayin Akunbe in Akqi County and to have transliterated these into a complete eight-chapter manuscript of *Manas*, treating it with artistic finish.⁴

Balbai passed his recorded and compiled collection of *Manas* to his younger brother. Under the guidance of his older brother and surrogate father, Jusup began learning to perform at the age of eight. Every night, the parents would light a candle and let the young Jusup Mamay perform *Manas* for them. Balbai also asked his brother to recite sections of the epic in order to test his knowledge. Balbai taught him performance skills, instructing him to add certain gestures and facial expressions and to modulate tones according to the development and changes of plots in the epic. When the hero is in the heat of battle, the tone should rise and the facial expression should be serious. When giving advice or comfort, he should use many proverbs and aphorisms. Beautiful and loving words must be reserved for the representation of women, and the tone and voice should be modulated to express sadness and depression. Gestures and tones accompany each other in an appropriate manner, creating a perfect cosmos of emotional communication.⁵

It took eight years for Jusup Mamay to learn by heart all eight parts of *Manas*, more than 200,000 lines from his brother's record and compilation. He learned everything: from the accomplishments of the eight generations of *Manas* to over one hundred characters and dozens of events, great and small. He can recite everyone's genealogy and his forefathers' relationship to the *Manas* family. He can give detailed descriptions of what a particular figure did in his lifetime, as well as the experiences of later generations. Balbai's influence was great and Mamay remains full of respect and gratitude for his brother. When he mentions learning to perform *Manas*, he first mentions Balbai.

When asked to tell how he mastered the skill of performing the epic of *Manas*, however, Jusup Mamay insists on the role of "dream-teaching," like other famous *Manas* singers. When I visited Mamay in September 1989 and asked him to tell how he had learned to perform *Manas*, he recalled his brother's influence and then continued:

⁴ Here "artistic finish" means editing by adding and deleting according to the editor's preferences.

⁵ See further Mamay 1994.

One morning when I was thirteen, I slept and dreamt that five mounted men appeared with their backs to me. I went up to the last of them and saw he was riding without a saddle. He told me that the hero Manas was first and that he was followed by Old Man Bakay, who in turn was followed by the hero Almaibet, who was closely followed by great general Chuwak. Behind Chuwak was Ajbay, the man who speaking to me. Without finishing his speech he disappeared. I awoke from the dream feeling restless. My parents asked whether I had had a dream, and I told them everything. They instructed me to remain silent about the dream and not mention it before reaching the age of forty. Since that dream I have been able to remember the lines of *Manas* upon my first reading of them.

Jusup Mamay has told others about the dream, but it is somewhat different with each telling. For example, he said that when he was eight years old he had dreamed about the heroes Manas, Bakay, and Almbet, who told him not to perform *Manas* before he reached age forty, but that after forty he would become a great *manasqi*. He was able to perform immediately upon waking. In the 1960s he told Sakai Yumair, who was responsible for making a record of *Manas*, that when he was small, he was sleeping in the yurt with a few nomads when he dreamed of a man mounted on a white horse who asked him to perform *Manas*. Mamay answered, “I cannot sing.” The rider said, “You can sing if you open your mouth.” He sang and awoke singing. From then on he could perform *Manas*.

There are some common points in the different versions. First, Mamay insisted on “dream-teaching” between the 1960s and the late 1980s, even though the dream came to him at different times (at age eight and at thirteen) and in different places (beside his parents or with the nomads). He saw the epic hero in different places (beside his parents or with the nomads), and immediately afterwards he could perform *Manas*. Second, Mamay mentioned on several occasions the prohibition against performing *Manas* before forty. Sometimes he said his parents warned him not to disclose the content of the dream before forty, while sometimes the prohibition came from the hero. He offered the following explanation (Mamay 1994:238):

My father often told me not to perform epics before an audience. Because *Manas* is a sacred piece, it would evoke ill omens if performed at a young age. I followed my father’s advice and never performed *Manas* in public even though I had learned everything by heart.

The idea of “dream-teaching” is popular among *Manas* singers.⁶ Traces of its sacredness and mystery survive in oral epics and offer an interesting subject worthy of further exploration.

Not yet twenty, Jusup Mamay lost two relatives, his father and his brother, in the 1930s. Their deaths came as a tremendous blow to him, and, in order to rid himself of solitude and sadness, he sang *Manas* when herding in the mountains or hunting with falcons. He sang *Manas* in dreams and woke the family, who upon seeing him sweating profusely were reluctant to wake him up. On workdays he would sing the epics to himself in a low voice. He was so obsessed with the song that he would not hear those who greeted him. The villagers thought that he had mental problems (Jumaturdi and Shayik 1997).

Jusup Mamay has had a challenging life in other respects as well. He was a nomad who herded sheep deep in the mountains, rode and trained horses for racing, trained falcons and went hunting on the Gobi desert and in the forest, and taught Kirghiz children to learn to read and write. These laborious experiences and life events have helped him to raise his performance level. He told people around him (Turdu 1994:223): “Anything you do not see with your own eyes would be difficult to narrate well. Direct experience cannot fail to influence you. My life experiences have no doubt influenced my way of performing *Manas*. For example, those stories about *Manas* planting wheat in Turpan, Saimaitay’s courser Taitol, Taitol’s falcon, Saimaitay’s white falcon, and others would appear more exciting than when I first learned to perform them. I believe the adage that hearing one hundred times is no better than witnessing just once.”

Mamay has not distanced himself from his Kirghiz roots; he lives among and associates with other Kirghiz people day and night. His technique of performing *Manas*—inherited from the oral tradition embodied by the *manasqis* he heard perform on countless occasions, *manasqis* with no less creative input than his own—makes use of his work experiences, his taste, and his perceptions about life. All these elements add color and variety to his versions of the epic.

⁶ Some *manasqi* say that they learned to perform *Manas* in a dream. The great *manasqi* Yusup Ahong, who was famous in the early twentieth century, once said that he fell asleep and dreamed of the hero Manas and ever since could perform *Manas*. The famous singers Sagenbay Olozbakof and Dinibaik from Kirghizia spoke about the dream revelations in which they met with epic heroes and upon waking could perform *Manas*. The taboo against performing *Manas* before the age of forty also exists among other *manasqis*.

Mamay's marriage was arranged at the age of nine by his parents, who, at over seventy years of age, were eager to see that he begin his own family. Though the bride, Sailihand, and bridegroom were very young, their marriage was spectacular; three years later they began to live together as husband and wife. At twenty-four, Mamay fell in love with Aytbb, a beautiful young girl who was mute, and proposed to take her as a second wife. However, her family reproached him for this proposal. With the acquiescence of the girl and the help of friends, Mamay abducted Aytbb. The two wives treated each other like sisters and got along well. After liberation (in 1949, when the Chinese Communist Party took power), the Marriage Law⁷ was in force, and Mamay chose to keep Aytbb, who was childless, and divorce his first wife Sailihand, who had two children by him. Mamay remains in close touch with his former wife and their two children, looking after them. He now has three children (including an adopted child), seven grandsons, six granddaughters, and one great-grandson. They all live in his hometown in Akqi County. Some are doctors, some are teachers, and some are officials; most, however, are nomads living deep in the mountains. Mamay is a kind patriarch to his large family and cares for the growth of every one of them.

Jusup Mamay came to the attention of scholars during a vast survey of *Manas* epic singing conducted in 1961. At that time he was forty-three and was working half the day and singing the other half. To ensure that he could concentrate on performing epic, it was arranged for him to stay at Atushi, capital of the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture. Yusaiyn, who took part in collecting and translating *Manas*, told others that "Jusup Mamay was in his prime at that time, full of enthusiasm; whenever asked, he would sing for three to four hours. The notekeeper's hand was too tired to carry on while he continued, ever enthusiastic and indefatigable." Liu Fajun, who was in charge of this collecting process, has observed that "Jusup Mamay sang eight to twelve hours a day; the notekeeper's hand was numb from working too long, and he could ask for a replacement, whereas the singer could not." For over six months he sang continuously, and five parts of the epic were recorded, about 90,000 lines.

In 1964, the Chinese Society for the Study of Folk Literature and Art set up the *Manas* Work Group in collaboration with the Xinjiang Federation of Literacy and Art Circles and the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture. Jusup Mamay was a member of the group, and during that time he supplemented the five sections, adding 61,000 more lines. He also sang a

⁷ One of the famous new laws imposed by the People's Government of China to eradicate old marriage customs with roots in feudalism.

new sixth section of 45,000 lines, *Asilbaqa Bekbaqa*. With this supplement, Mamay's 196,000 lines of *Manas* in six parts had all been written down.

During the Cultural Revolution (1969-71) the five sections, including the notes and Chinese translations, were lost; only the second section, *Semaitaiy*, was preserved. At the end of 1979, Jusup Mamay was invited to Beijing and he performed the epic from the beginning. In comparison with the versions of 1961 and 1964, this one increases some passages and reduces others. The most noteworthy achievement is that at this time he sang the seventh section of *Manas*, *Sombiraik*, and the eighth, *Qigtaiy*.⁸

Jusup Mamay's eight-part *Manas*, originally written down in the Kirghiz language, was compiled and published in eighteen volumes (Mamay 1984-95). His extraordinary accomplishment of preserving *Manas* has been honored many times. For his eightieth birthday the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture and the Ili Kazak Autonomous Prefecture held a spectacular ceremony. On 10 September 1998, in Atushi, the capital of the Kezilsu Kirghiz Autonomous Prefecture, the birthday celebration for Mamay was held—it has since become an important festival for the Kirghiz people. They sang and danced to pay their heartfelt respects to this revered man who has become a folk hero, a figure of whom the Kirghiz people are justly proud. In a solemn ceremony the head of the prefecture presented Mamay with a horse and a gown.

The Epic *Manas* as Sung by Jusup Mamay

The Origin of Jusup Mamay's Eight-Part Manas

The origin of Jusup Mamay's eight-part *Manas* is an important subject for *Manas* research and there are different views on it. Mamay's own authoritative account proceeds as follows: "My brother Balbai was a student of Jusup Ahong and Ebrayin Akunbe, who passed *Manas* orally to him for the purpose of making a record of it. The version of *Manas* I sang is based on my brother's collection, but it is enriched and improvisation is added" (Mamay 1994:234-39). In 1934 Balbai gave his collection and notes on *Manas* to his brother Mamay and told him: "Here is the complete story of the eight generations of *Manas* for you to keep. I hope you can learn and memorize the whole epic" (*idem*). He also told him, "From the Kirghiz at

⁸ In 1979 Jusup Mamay sang the first section, *Manas*, the third, *Saiytek*, along with the fourth, the fifth, the sixth, the seventh, and the eighth; he noted them down himself after returning to Urumqi.

the riverside of the Yenisey to Saimaitai and Saiytek, this part was narrated by Jusup Ahong, the famous *manasqi* from Kakxal in our country; I wrote down and modified it in some parts” (*idem*).⁹ About the last five sections, Balbai observed (*idem*):

Someone named Ebrayin Akunbe, who was a *manasqi*, said to me after attending the singing contest between Sagenbay Olozbakof and Jusup Ahong, “I do not think they are yet great *manasqis*, because they cannot sing the story about the five generations after Saitek; *Manas* should consist of eight sections and they can sing only the first three. At my request, he sang the last five sections of *Manas*, partially story-telling, partially ballad-singing. When I was sorting out the notes, I changed them into poetry.

From the above narrative, we can infer the following points: first, Jusup Mamay’s eight-part *Manas* comes directly from the notes that his brother Balbai edited; second, his brother’s first three sections, namely, *Manas*, *Semaitai*, and *Saiyiek*, stemmed from Jusup Ahong’s performance. The last five parts, *Kenenim*, *Saiyt*, *Asilbaqa-bekbaqa*, *Sombirek*, and *Qigtaiy*, however, were based on the singing script and story script of Ebrayin Akunbe.

Balbai, who has studied the origin of the eight-part *Manas* by Jusup Mamay, is a key figure: an accomplished collector and editor of *Manas* who also participated personally in re-creating *Manas*. Especially with regard to the compilation of the last five parts, his wisdom, talent, and creativity influenced the performance and representation of all the deeds of the five generations of *Manas* in poetic form; Balbay’s preservation of *Manas* is meritorious service.

Though Jusup Mamay’s performance of *Manas* originated with his brother Balbai’s edited notes, his eight-part version is somewhat different from that of his brother. Jusup Mamay is an extremely bright and versatile folk artist with an extraordinary capacity for improvisation. During the process of learning to sing *Manas*, he read not only written versions by three *manasqis* of Qaoyukai, Sapak, and Tabadel from Kirghizia, but also the manuscript of *Saimaitay* by the renowned *manasqi* Dinibek, as well as the *Manas* by Sagenbay Olozbakof. Mamay’s performances of *Manas* are enriched by his absorption of the striking contents and plots from various manuscripts. He has no prejudice against other schools and often exchanges ideas and experiences with other *manansqis*. A Kirghiz who knows him well commented, “During the years from 1961 to 1964, Jusup Mamay

⁹ Kakxal is now known as the Akqi area.

performed not for performance's sake, but as the Kirghiz folk saying goes, 'a chicken thinks of millet even in dreams'." He never forgot to share skills and experiences with other *manasqis*. He always listened to comments from the audience and other *manasqis*, and willingly accepted their judgment in order to improve and perfect his story-telling. Mamay's written version of the *Manas* epic-cycle has become a brilliant and unique variant of *Manas*, composed with great artistic skill and wisdom.

Jusup Mamay's Text as One Variation of *Manas*

Variation within limits is a distinguishing feature of oral traditions. As an oral epic, *Manas* has produced many variants during the long period of its oral inheritance. There are now about seventy known versions of *Manas*, forty in Xinjiang alone (Manbet 1997). It is commonly accepted that the most influential *Manas* variants are four in number: those of Sagenbay Olozbekof (1894-1971) and Sayakbai Kalakayef (1894-1971) from Kirghizia, and those of Jusup Mamay (1918-) and Eshimat Memet. These four manuscripts share the same basic traditional cantos: the birth of Manas, his youthful military exploits, his marriage, the sacrifice to Kokotai, the hero Almaibet's allegiance to Manas, the expedition of Manas, and, finally, Manas's death. The hero's description is largely the same in all variants, but their sections, plots, and performance styles differ slightly.

Jusup Mamay's *Manas* is particularly noteworthy. His eight-part epic is the most complete text known today. When the collection and recording of *Manas* began in the mid-nineteenth century, the first and second sections were collected and the master performer Sayakbai Kalalayef from Kirghizia was the only person who could sing the first three sections. But Mamay is unique in that he can sing all eight. His *Manas* is grand in scale and has a great driving momentum that is reflected in his representation of battle scenes rarely seen in other variants. Besides expeditions, he also provides charming descriptions of both weddings and funerals. In the sacrifice to Kokotai, for example, Mamay begins with the preparations by the seven Khans for a sacrificial ceremony in honor of the Kazak Khan Kokotai; then envoys carrying invitations are sent to the four corners of the world, and thousands upon thousands of distinguished guests from various countries and tribes arrive for the ceremony. The head of the Kalmucks, a common foe for Kirghiz and Kasak alike, makes his appearance and the Kalmucks plunder whatever they find. Under these conditions the ceremony cannot proceed. With his forty warriors, Manas punishes the Kalmucks and presides in person over ceremonial activities honoring the dead. Horse

rites, competitions testing military skills, wrestling, archery, and other activities create a scene of grandeur and highlight the tension between enemies. Almost all the epic protagonists attend the ceremony. The revered Khan Koshoy, together with thousands of people, holds a solemn prayer for the fecundity of Kanikai, Manas's wife, who has not given birth since marriage. This scene relieves the narrative tension a bit. Mamay uses magnificent and complicated descriptions for a scene involving thousands of people.

The structure of Jusup Mamay's version is also unique. All eight sections are named after heroes from Manas' family: Manas, Saimaitaiy, Saiytek, Kenenim, Saiyt, Ashbaqa and Bekbaqa, Sombirek, and Qigtaiy. Every pair of heroes is a father and son. Moreover, the sections are connected by figures and events. For example, because the old man Bakay lives to be 380 years old, he serves as a wise counselor for four generations of heroes from the Manas family and appears in four sections of the epic. Manas' wife, Kanikai, plays an important part in three sections. Each epic section is complete in content and narrative structure and may be performed independently. Among the eight sections of the epic, the first (*Manas*) and the second (*Saimaitaiy*) both took shape long ago; because they are well-known, they are more popular than the others. This genealogically developed structure is rarely seen in other epics.¹⁰

Jusup Mamay's version of *Manas* (*Saimaitaiy*) preserves many archaic components. The concept of the worship of earth and water (*yersu*¹¹), high mountains and woods, springs, milk, beasts and birds, and all natural beings permeates *Manas*. For example, heroes take oaths such as the following:

saga kilsam jammandik / oylonsom saga aramdik / tuxu tuktuu jer ursun! /
obosu aqik kok ursun! / ziya, qalkar ko! ursun! / jayilhan jer de qop ursun!
/ asman dahi ay ursun! / jerdin betin jaxartkan jamhir menen kar ursun! /
jata ordun saktahan / ala tao koxop dahi ursun! / uqsa appak kalkildap /
kokto uqkan kuu ursun!

If I have evil intentions for you, I will be punished. Let the grass-laden earth punish me! Let the firmament above punish me! Let great rivers and lakes punish me! Let the uninhabited wasteland punish me! Let the

¹⁰ The Armenian epic *David from Shashun* is also structured genealogically and describes the deeds of the four generations of heroes from the Shashun's family.

¹¹ This term specifies a specific type of "ground" or "surface" water (versus water that wells up from the earth or falls from the sky).

wild grass on the ground punish me! Let the moon in the sky punish me!
 Let the rain and snow punish me! Let the Alatao Mountain punish me!
 Let the hovering white swans punish me!¹²

Elements of nature, the firmament, the earth, high mountains, rivers and lakes, and snow are mentioned in these oaths; they are not only powerful but also divine in the eyes of the Kirghiz ancestors. These oaths reflect nature worship, with homeopathic magic playing an important role in *Manas*. Whenever Manas and his warriors kill a strong enemy, for example, they decapitate him, cut open his stomach, and drink his blood in the belief that ingesting the enemy's blood will transfer his power to them. People call Manas *kaiho* ("a blood addict") because he frequently performs this ritual. Manas also has other fixed epithets: *kok jao* (blue-maned wolf), *arslai* (lion), and *ayko* (moon-lake).¹³

In contrast to the Tibetan epic *Gesar* and the Mongolian *Geser*, Jusup Mamay's *Manas* is sung entirely in verse, without spoken parts. His manuscript consists of 230,000 lines or more; most are heptasyllabic or octosyllabic verses with alliteration, mid-rhyme, and end-rhyme. Many stanzas are alliterated and also end-rhymed. Although alliteration is an archaic rhyme scheme that has disappeared from the poetry of many ethnic groups, it remains vital and operative in Mamay's *Manas*. The poetic preface of *Manas* performance, where alliterated lines represent 74 percent of the total, offers the following examples:

jarimi togun jarimi qin (A),
 jaraidardin konu yuqun (A),
 janinda turhan kix jok (B),
 jalhani menen jxi jok (B),

Half-fiction and half-truth,
 No one has ever experienced it.
 For the sake of satisfying people's wishes,
 It does not matter if we invent a little bit.¹⁴

¹² Cf. Mamay 1984-95:vol. 2, sect. 2, 465-66 and vol. 1, sect. 1. 1.

¹³ The blue-maned wolf and the lion are traditional symbols for a fierce, courageous, and powerful person. The moon in Moslem culture is an image for beauty and calmness.

¹⁴ See note 12.

In the main body of the epic, a large percentage of lines alliterate, mainly in a combination of head-rhyme and mid-rhyme. A paragraph from a four-line poem that describes Manas' father Jakip illustrates this construction:

kara neet jakip bay (A).
kayrrilip atin jeldirdi (A).
karbalastap ayilha (B).
karanghida klgani (A).

The evil-hearted Jakip Bay,
 on a trotting horse,
 towards a herding village,
 comes home in the dark.¹⁵

Jusup Mamay is highly accomplished in language arts. His rich and expressive vocabulary integrates graphic and imaginative epic language with rhythmic and elegant music, producing strong artistic effects and provoking profound emotional responses in the audience. His performance entralls audiences with its rich and archaic content, conserving the most ancient original rhyming forms of the Turkic people.

Mamay began his apprenticeship in epic performance by learning *Manas* from his brother's notes. However, he never memorized it mechanically, but kept in mind the epic's basic narrative patterns, its main contents, its plots, its context, and the mutual relations between characters in each chapter. With his brother's arrest in 1937 by Sheng Shicai (1895-1970), governor from 1933-42 in Xinjiang, the notes of *Manas* were lost. For over sixty years, Jusup Mamay has thus performed *Manas* from memory and by improvisation. Though the main contents and plots of the traditional chapters remain the same each time, a careful study of his versions of 1961, 1964, and 1979 shows that there are small differences in their degree of elaboration. For example, the 1964 and 1979 versions of the sixth section, *Asilbaqa Bekbaqa*, differ in respect to their plots and characters.¹⁶ This

¹⁵ Mamay 1984-95:vol. 1, sect. 1, 66.

¹⁶ The sixth section as performed in 1964 totaled 45,000 lines, with the main plot as follows. While Bekbaqa is out hunting, a Kalmuck Madle, a Turkment Kaldek, and the giant Ayinjar ransack the Kirghiz base camp Talas. Bekbaqa tracks them and exterminates them. His wife poisons old Bekbaqa to death. Since he has no children, the Manas family line ends. In the 1979 version, the sixth section has 37,000 lines, with the main plot unfolding somewhat differently: Mang'et and Haohan, combining forces, invade Talas. Bekbaqa is joined by Shache and Hotan in fighting the aggressors. He

variation can be ascribed to many factors: in his prime he performed very passionately, with all his talents; in old age he composed in a more mature way. Factors such as health, emotions, and the nature of the audience and their reactions also affected his performance. He began with the elegant myth of “Kerek Kez” (“Forty Maidens”) in the 1961 and 1964 performances; however, in the 1979 version he replaced this myth with another tale of origin.¹⁷ This example reinforces the observation that features of variation in the oral epic should not be neglected. Performances by singers trained by different masters of the same period, and even by the same performer on different occasions, will always differ in content and style. In this respect, we can say that there are as many variants of *Manas* as there are *Manas* singers, or even *Manas* performances.

Jusup Mamay, Tradition-bearer of Kirghiz Culture

Jusup Mamay is different from other epic singers in that he is a knowledgeable, educated *manasqi* with rich life experiences and high artistic qualifications. He is versatile, and his extraordinary memory and improvisation are unprecedented. He knows well the social history, astrology, geography, folk customs, and religious beliefs of the Kirghiz. He is familiar with every genre of Kirghiz folklore—mythology, legends, epics, narrative poems, folktales, and folk sayings, which he uses freely in his performances. More remarkable yet is that in addition to *Manas* he produced another eleven epics of history in narrative style. Among them are *Ertoshitu* (8,000 lines), *Kurmaibeck* (8,000 lines), *Baeshi* (8,900 lines), *Toltoy* (1,470 lines), *Saykal* (9,400 lines), *Mamak-shaopok* (925 lines), *Kobai* (9,400 lines), and *Jetkahan* (14,700 lines). There are three more yet to be released: *Ajbay* (5,800 lines), *Jangermurza* (7,000 lines), and *Tutano* (3,000 lines). Especially worth mentioning is the Kazak epic, the *Jetkahan*,

marries Akemangdake, who gives birth to Somubilaike, the hero in the seventh section of *Manas*.

¹⁷ I conducted an investigation of this change in 1989. The fact is that some Kirghiz intellectuals interpreted the content of the “Forty Maidens” myth in an overly modern way, believing that it suggests that the ancestors of the Kirghiz knew only the identity of their mothers but nothing about their fathers. This interpretation offered an excuse for other groups to belittle the Kirghiz. They communicated their opinions to Jusup Mamay, and the myth of “Forty Maidens” disappeared from his performances from that point forward.

which caused a stir when it was published by the Xinjiang People's Publishing House in 1993. The Kazaks gave their heartfelt thanks to Jusup Mamay for preserving this epic at a time when it was on the brink of extinction, presenting him with a horse and a gown as the highest gifts to show their respect and worship for this master singer.

Mamay began to learn *Manas* at the age of eight, and became a master *manasqi* known at home and abroad who has worked hard for the promotion of *Manas* and Kirghiz folk culture. He is a keeper and transmitter of Kirghiz folk culture and regarded as its protector. The leading authority on folklore in China, Professor Zhong Jingwen, has praised him as a "modern Homer" and a "national treasure." Many international experts on epic have visited Mamay. They have been deeply impressed by him; they never thought that such a singer capable of singing the whole *Manas* epic would be found in China, and they regard him as a wonder. On the three occasions he visited Kirghizia, he was received as a state guest and accompanied by the foreign minister. In August 1995, at the opening ceremony of an international conference on *Manas* held in Pishpek, the capital of Kirghizia, Jusup Mamay was seated next to the president of Kirghizia, who gave him a gold medal in honor of his everlasting contribution to the promotion of Kirghiz culture.

In the hearts of two million Kirghiz, Jusup Mamay is a great master *manasqi* and a cultural hero and sage. Mothers hold their babies tight and compete to have their babies' foreheads touched by his hand as a blessing. They believe that children blessed by him will be sure to possess wisdom and fortune in the future. It is said that people in his hometown try to obtain the clothes that he brings with him from Urumqi in the belief that wearing them will transmit his wisdom and extraordinary magic power. Stories about him are widespread among the people. One elderly Kirghiz woman, for example, told a young man from Urumqi that "Jusup Mamay is not an earthly man; I met him and could see behind him that there are burning candles on both of his shoulders, the symbols of a sage. You must obey his teachings. When you meet him, you should pass sideways and never directly approach him."¹⁸

Many believe that Mamay has the power of prophecy and healing, and this belief is attested by vivid description. Junus Nural and his wife from Akqi County commented on his legend as follows: "Why can he remember *Manas* so well? Because characters in the epic show up like TV pictures in

¹⁸ Adili provided me with this comment in Akqi County on September 12, 1998. He said that he had been a guest in the home of Nurdun Jnus, deputy director of the Standing Committee of the People's Congress in Wushi County, and that his mother-in-law (seventy years of age) told him that Jusup Mamay is a sage.

his mind's eye.” It is said that he saw his countryman Kadili in such pictures, and prophesied that he would become a *manasqi*; as things turned out, Kadili sang the whole day and the whole night. They also said that Jusup Mamay can cure people by putting a chopstick into water, and that the illness is dispelled when the chopstick stands upright. Junus Nural claimed that Jusup Mamay can dream or predict what will happen beforehand. For example, when he was in the worst situation of his life in the 1970s, Mamay dreamed of traveling on a plane around the world. He told Junus Nural it was an omen that he would become known throughout the world. Another person said that women who could not conceive would ask the epic singer to pray for them. He would then chant formulas and help them to conceive through the agency of his magic power.

The legendary Jusup Mamay is like a powerful shaman. A legend about the magic power of the nineteenth-century *manasqi* Keldibekm is still popular today among the folk. However, living performers like Jusup Mamay, who should be the subject of so many legends among the folk, are rare indeed. As a member of the work group on *Manas*, I participated in the translation of the epic in Atush in 1965, where I worked with Jusup Mamay for nearly a year. For over thirty years after that, I have been in close contact with him. He is both extraordinary and common: he is common in that he is kind and loving, but extraordinary in that he sings without pause when he performs *Manas*, his eyes shining, with extraordinary memory.

Epics are different from other oral traditional genres—myths and legends, folktales, ballads, and so forth. In the scholar's eyes epics are a literary work, while ordinary people consider them to be a national bible, a spiritual touchstone possessing divinity. The popularity of *Manas* among the folk tells us that the epic, full of artistic charm, holds an extraordinary position in the hearts of the Kirghiz and that a master *manasqi*, Jusup Mamay, is their sage.

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Nakhi Tiger Myth in its Context

Bai Gengsheng

Tiger belief is popular in the Tibeto-Burmese language family. In recent years, academic circles at home and abroad discovered it among the Yi, Hani, and Lisu. However, tiger belief among the Nakhi,¹ one of the most important Tibeto-Burmese language families, is still largely unknown, a fact that impedes our general understanding when we consider the language family as a whole. To make up for this deficiency, the author will try to sort out the background of Nakhi tiger myth and provide a general perspective for the Tibeto-Burmese, or even China's, tiger cultures.

A Brief Introduction to the Dongba Myth of *The Origin of the Tiger*²

Tigers are known as [la³³]³ in Nakhi, a term similar or close to the words for tiger in related languages: [lo³¹] in Achang, [lo⁴²] in Bai, [la⁵⁵] in Nu, [lo³⁵] in Pumi, [la⁵⁵] in Yi, [lo⁵⁵mo³³] in Jinuo, [xa³¹la³¹] in Hani, and [la⁵³qa⁵³pM³¹] in Lahu (*Tibeto-Burmese* 1991:124). This shows that the Nakhi and many other Tibeto-Burmese groups, who believe in the tiger, share the same linguistic stock.

¹ The Nakhi, also known as the Naxi, are a minority group in China with a population of 309,500. Most Nakhi live in the mountainous region of Yunnan Province and in Lijiang.

² *The Origin of the Tiger* : (la³³ t'v³³ la³³ pM⁵⁵ in Nakhi) a *domba* (to³³ mba¹¹), the Nakhi ritualist, would chant this story during such rites as "Empowering with prowess" and others; a newly inaugurated *domba* chants the myth to absorb the tiger's power.

³ The Nakhi language has several dialects. The most representative one is the west dialect, which has four tones: 11 indicates a low falling tone, 33 a mid-flat tone, 55 a higher-flat tone, and 31 a lower rising tone.

Of the Nakhi tiger myths *The Origin of the Tiger* is the most famous. It explains the tiger's ancestry, its birth, and its appearance, origin, and powerfulness. It goes something like this (trans. from He Z. 1963):

The heavenly blue dragon is grandfather to the tiger, / the white-faced cat is grandmother to the tiger, / the tiger's father is called Lusigebu, / its mother is called Lusigemu.

The tiger's head is granted to him by the heavens. / The tiger's skin is presented to him by the earth. / The tiger's lungs are given to him by the moon. / The tiger's bones are granted to him by the stones. / The tiger's flesh is given to him by the soil. / The tiger's breath is given to him by the wind. / The tiger's blood is given to him by the water. / The tiger's heart is given to him by iron. / The tiger's eyes are given to him by the stars. / The tiger's voice is given to him by the blue dragon. / The tiger's claws are given to him by the vulture. / The tiger's gallbladder is given to him by the white yak. / The tiger's ears are given to him by the jackal.

There were no stripes on the tiger's body at first. / Those stripes on the tiger's cheeks, face, ears, head, back, arms, sides, waist, legs, tail, and eye sockets / are all drawn as an expression of gratefulness to the tiger by the crow who has enjoyed the tiger's leftovers. / The stripes represent prowess.

Thereafter, / the wasp stole one of the tiger's stripes. / Hence it has tiger stripes all over its body. / The horse stole one of the tiger's roars, / and it neighs like a tiger. / The frog stole one of the tiger's claws, / and its webbed foot looks like a tiger's claw.

The stripes on the tiger's forehead look like bright pearls; / they can bring longevity to man. / The stripes on the tiger's face look benevolent; / they can give a *domba*⁴ longevity. / The stripes on its shoulder look like treasure; / it is granted to the ritualist who releases the souls of the craftsmen of longevity from purgatory. / The stripes on the left should look like a sharp knife; / they symbolize ingenuity. / The stripes on the right arm look like a mirror; / they grant beauty, wealth, and prosperity to people. / The stripes on the waist look like the moon; / they shine as much as the moon. / The stripes under the left armpit look like a golden plow; / they are capable of opening up the land. / The stripes on the left leg look like a gold-plated bell; / they are at the disposal of Dingbashiluo.⁵

⁴ *Domba* (to³³mba¹¹): the ritualist of the *domba* religion among the Nakhi. *Domba* is a loan word from Tibetan meaning "wise man." All *domba* are male and inherit their office patrilineally. A *domba* participates fully in the daily life of the village, acting as a holder of spectacular ceremonies or rites for curing diseases in neighboring villages. They possess a multitude of scriptures in the *domba* pictographic language, and are good at singing, dancing, music, crafts, smithing, disease-curing, and divination.

⁵ Dingbashiluo (ti³³mba¹¹sI⁵⁵lĕr⁵⁵): master god of the Nakhi *domba* religion. It is said that he is the founder of this religion. Since his name is close to ston-pa-shes-rab in

/ The stripes on its right leg look like *jinjizi*; / they are available for the *zoba* ritualist's use. / The stripes on the tail look like iron pins⁶; / they are a magical weapon for vanquishing enemies.

The tiger befriended Chongrenpandi⁷/ and helped him to fight the western monster Leqinsipu.⁸ / After Chongrenpandi's death, / the tiger was killed by Taomabenli⁹ / to redeem his lost soul.

The tiger died with its head towards the east. / Its skin has been divided into 99 pieces. / Miliduzhu¹⁰ has received one piece; / as a result he killed Milishuzhu,¹¹ / and won worldwide fame. / The nine unvanquishable men received their share; / as a result they killed nine *zhixu* ghosts,¹² / and won worldwide fame. / The nine men from the Ha tribe¹³ had their share; / as a result they killed nine Su ghosts¹⁴ and won worldwide fame. /

pronunciation, as are his experiences, it is commonly believed that he combined *bon* religion dogmas with the early Nakhi primitive religion and created the *domba* religion.

⁶ Gold-plated bells (*jinjizi*) and iron pins belong to the magical paraphernalia of the *domba* religion.

⁷ Chongrenpandi (ts'o³¹ze³³p'Èr³³tv¹¹): a Nakhi legendary hero. To cure his father's disease he went to the ghost world to steal the elixir of life; he is respected as an ancestor of medicine.

⁸ Leqinsipu (le⁵⁵ti³³si³³p'v³³): a legendary western monster.

⁹ Taomabenli (t'a⁵⁵ma³³pM³³IM³³): a legendary tiger-shooting hero.

¹⁰ Miliduzhu (mM³³IM⁵⁵du¹¹dzu³³): chief of the Du tribe in the Nakhi mythology. The territory under his rule looked like the white heaven, white earth, white sun, and white moon, representing brightness, justice, kindness, and other divine merits.

¹¹ Milishuzhu (mM³³IM⁵⁵su¹¹dzu³³): chief of the Su tribe in the Nakhi mythology, whose territory looked like the dark heaven, dark earth, dark sun, and dark moon, representing darkness, evil, ugliness, and other demonic qualities.

¹² Zhixu (sy¹¹di³³ts'I¹¹): a type of demon in the *domba*, who deliberately brings disasters and diseases to mankind.

¹³ Ha (xa³³): a divine tribe in the Nakhi mythology. It is said that the Ha tribe and the Su tribe were half brothers, with different mothers. They later separated. The Ha occupied social space, while the Su inhabited wild and mountainous space. At last a war broke out between the Ha, who represented civilization, and the Su, who represented barbarianism. The Ha tribe had a decisive victory.

¹⁴ Su (su¹¹ts'I¹¹): Since the Su tribe lived under a dark heaven and on a dark earth, symbolizing darkness, evil, and ugliness, they were called the "ghost tribe."

Youlaodingduo¹⁵ got his share; / as a result he killed seven “*meng* ghosts”¹⁶ / and won worldwide fame. / Laobutuogou¹⁷ got a piece; / as a result, he killed *du* ghosts¹⁸ / and won worldwide fame. / Tuogouguru¹⁹ got a piece; / and as a result he killed nine *tuoma* monster-kings²⁰ / and won worldwide fame. / Puluolaobu²¹ got a piece; / as a result he divided gods from ghosts, / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien²² got a piece; / as a result he killed the yak and tiger with arrows / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien’s eldest son [Tibetan] got a piece; / as result he could ride a lightning horse / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien’s second son [Nakhi] got a piece; / as a result he destroyed ninety-nine enemies’ fortresses and ninety-nine rocks / and won worldwide fame. / Chongrenlien’s third son [Bai] got a piece; / as a result he was capable of building tiled houses / and won worldwide fame. / Gaolequ²³ got a piece; / and he gave birth to four able sons²⁴ / and won worldwide fame. . . .

¹⁵ Youlaudingduo (jÈ¹¹la³³ti³³do³³): a spirit in the *domba* religion, who could distinguish right and wrong, perform justice, and suppress demons.

¹⁶ “*Meng* ghost” (mu³³ts’I¹¹): the hungry ghost in the *domba* religion who distinguished himself by his lasciviousness, his gullibility, and by his fear of the neighing of horses, the roaring of oxen, the barking of dogs, the sound of a *domba* praying, the noises a rich man makes while drinking soup, the bleating of goats, the sound of goats splashing in water, and so on.

¹⁷ Laobutuogou (la³³bv³³t’o³³kÈ⁵⁵): an ancestor eight generations above the *dingba shiluo* god-ancestor. It is said that he specialized in holding ceremonies to welcome the god of victory and that of prosperity.

¹⁸ *Du* (dv¹¹ts’I¹¹): monsters in the *domba* religion. They were born from nine pairs of eggs laid by the ghost-master, who was born from a primitive black egg. They were 360 in number, lived up in heaven, and were used to prevent people from moving back to earth.

¹⁹ Tuogouguru (t’o³³kÈ⁵⁵kv³³z’I): a spirit in the *domba* religion.

²⁰ *Tuoma* (t’o³³ma¹¹ti’I¹¹): a master of evil ghosts in the *domba* religion.

²¹ Puluolaobu (p’v³³lo¹¹a¹¹bv⁵⁵): a spirit in the *domba* religion who has endless magical power and can divide ghost from gods.

²² Chongrenlien (ts’o³¹ze³³IM⁵⁵M³³): human ancestor in the Nakhi mythology, who was a survivor of the floods, and who married with a heavenly maiden, Chenhongbaobai (ts’e⁵⁵ho¹¹bu³³bÈ³³), giving rise to the ancestors of the Tibetan, Nakhi, and Bai peoples.

²³ Gaolequ (ka³³le³³ty⁵⁵): in the genealogy of the narrative Nakhi mythology Gaolequ is the fifth-generation offspring of the human ancestor Chongrenlien, and the fourth-generation offspring of the Nakhi’s founding ancestor. His four children, Ye

The Cultural Interpretation of *The Origin of the Tiger*

How should we interpret *The Origin of the Tiger* (cf. He Z. 1963)? I believe that this work above all belongs to the tiger worship of the Nakhi. With its supernatural themes and lively wording, *The Origin of the Tiger* graphically expresses both the Nakhi belief in their tiger origin and their strong aesthetic sensibility. It depicts the objects of worship that have fully absorbed people's spiritual beliefs, even to the level of a totem. Therefore, the tiger is perfect inside and out, in appearance and in essence; it is full of dignity whether dead or alive.

The tiger's genealogy is a noble one: the ancestor on his father's side is the blue dragon in heaven, and the ancestor on his mother's side is the white-faced cat. The constituent parts of the tiger's fleshy body are sacred: his head, skin, lung, liver, bones, flesh, breath, blood, heart, eyes, voice, claws, and ears are all granted by nature, enabling him to absorb the essential spiritual properties of heaven and earth and of the sun and the moon. The shape of the tiger is beautiful: its sides, face, ears, head, back, forelegs, waist, hind parts, paws, tail, and the area around its eyes are all replete with beautiful and solemn stripes. It can either grant people longevity or put its enemy to death; it can either open up heaven and earth or compete with the sun and the moon to see who is brighter; it can bestow people with wisdom and strength; it can give people beauty and wealth or serve as the ritualist's magical talisman for conquering ghosts. Even after its death, the tiger's skin will make the god who possesses it famous and the man who possesses it a hero.

Such descriptions in *The Origin of the Tiger* have made an ordinary animal into an object of worship endowed with perfection and endless power, and in harmony with the Nakhi tiger worship in the Nakhi religion, language, folklore, and arts. What constitutes such worship? It can only be explained by reference to the Nakhi view of nature, their ethics, and their sense of self-understanding.

Worship of animals reflects the fact that animals' relation to man is one of the basic relations between nature and mankind. Man not only conducts everyday interactions with the animal world, but also uses it as the main staple for livelihood. Man satisfies his needs for fat, protein, and fibres by hunting and fishing and the domestication of animals. In fact, animals

(jĕ¹¹), Shu (su¹¹), He (ho¹¹), and Mai (mĕ¹¹), each became an ancestor of the four great Nakhi tribes in remote antiquity.

²⁴ Ye, Shu, He, and Mai.

that interact with human beings differ in rank. Among all mountain animals, the tiger is the king because it is large in body, quick in movement, fierce by nature, and powerful. Its existence not only influences other animals, but also threatens human life. Therefore, the Nakhi ancestry worshipped its unique dignity and ferocity, as well as its superiority in bodily build; awe lies at the core of their tiger worship. As the clan gradually became aware of its collective identity, its members desired to trace the clan's origins to a powerful genesis; thus tiger worship rose to the level of totemism. People began to regard the tiger as the symbol for their own tribes or clans, an icon to distinguish themselves from other communities. The Nakhi have many totems, such as yaks, bears, golden turtles, goats, and dogs, that played cognate roles alongside the tiger. This is nothing surprising, because the Nakhi are a community consisting of many subgroups that practice totemism.

These worshipped animals among the Nakhi involved two specific beliefs: first, the elements of the universe either create the totemic animal or the universe is created from the animal; and, second, the totem belongs to the clan's genealogy. The totemic animals usually create the universe through transformations of their bodies. For example, the *domba* scripture *Chongbantu* describes the process of transformation of the yak into the universe. After the yak has been slaughtered (He F. 1963:17),²⁵

Its head became the heavens,
 Its skin became the earth,
 Its lungs became the sun,
 Its liver became the moon,
 Its bowels became roads,
 Its bones became stone,
 Its flesh became soil,
 Its blood became water,
 Its sides became rock,
 Its tail became the trees,
 Its wool became grass.
 Its head points to the north,
 Its tail to the south.

Not only the yak but also the golden turtle transformed in this way, with the only exception being that the latter transformed into the five elements²⁶ and

²⁵ *Chongbantu* (ts'o³¹mbÈr³³t'v³³): a Nakhi epic that describes the origin of the universe and mankind.

²⁶ Metal, wood, fire, water, and earth.

five directions, a discrepancy that seems to stem from assimilating foreign myths (He Z. 1964a:37-38).²⁷ In *Lamumengtu*, this transforming principle has been reversed to work on human figures. It is said that after the human figure was formed, the sun gave him lungs, the moon liver, the stone bones, the soil flesh, the water blood, the *pan* god eyes, the *dong* god head and feet, the *sai* god hands, the *chan* god teeth, and the *heng* god heart, giving soul and flesh to the lifeless wood figure, enabling it to return to the ancestral world (He S. 1987:122-24).²⁸ Thus, the way the human figure acquired soul and flesh mirrors the way the yak transformed into the universe, the only difference being the direction of transformation.

The Origin of the Tiger, like *Lamumengtu*, has adopted the theme of combining all elements. It is said that the tiger got its head from the heaven, its skin from the earth, its lungs from the moon, its bones from the stones, its flesh from the soil, its breath from the wind, its blood from the water, and its ears from the jackal. *Chongbantu*, *Lamumengtu*, and *The Origin of the Tiger* all employ a series of transformations, no matter what combination or type, and make relevant adjustments based on whether the hero is the yak, the tiger, the human, or whatever. For example, the mutually transformative relations between the sun and the lungs, the moon and the liver, stone and bone, water and blood, soil and flesh, earth and skin, stars and eyes, wind and breath, the road and the bowels, and so on are somewhat stable, except that the yak in *Chongbantu* includes the road and the bowels, the rock and the sides, the tree and the tail, and the grass and wool, while the tiger in *The Origin of the Tiger* has the sun and the eyes, iron and the heart, the blue dragon and the voice, the eagle and the claws, the white yak and the gallbladder, the jackal and the ear, and wind and breath. These transformations are all based on two principles of likeness in appearance and nature. For example, the tiger's ears resemble those of the jackal and the tiger's boldness is like that of the yak's. Unlike *Chongbantu*, both *The Origin of the Tiger* and *Lamumengtu* picture all natural elements transforming into the tiger or human figures. These two latter works, especially *Lamumengtu*, came into being at a time far removed from that of *Chongbantu*. The difference is significant: *Chongbantu* appeared during totemic times, while the *Lamumengtu* and *The Origin of the Tiger* came into

²⁷ From *Bibaoguasong* (py¹¹p'a¹¹kua⁵⁵su¹¹): also translated as *The Record of the White Bat's Getting the Scripture*, a Nakhi myth about the origin of divination.

²⁸ *Lamumengtu* (la³³mu³³mM³³t'v³³): a Nakhi *domba* scripture, read at the rites for redeeming lost souls, which includes mythological parts.

being during the period of ancestral worship. Both do, however, preserve some totemic traces of the past.

The Nakhi totems as universe-transformers, or integrators of all elements of the cosmos, possess supernatural distinctions, spiritual importance, and grandeur of appearance, as well as uniqueness of origin. Without these characteristics, the yak, the tiger, and the sheep would not have become totems that could arouse feelings of awe in the hearts of Nakhi ancestors.

Totemic animals usually belong to a clan's genealogy and serve as human ancestors in a broader sense. It is same with the tiger. In the *Chongbanchongsha* (ts'o¹¹bÈr³³ts'o¹¹sa⁵⁵), there are detailed descriptions about the origin of man and his genealogy that have later been used by the Nakhi rulers and included in the famous *Mu Shu Family Genealogy*. Its basic contents are as follows (Lijiang County 2002):

<u>Chinese Pinyin</u>	<u>Nakhi pronunciation</u>	<u>Translation</u>
cao gu tian neng gu	ts'o ¹¹ kv ³³ mM ³³ nM ³³ kv ¹¹	The heavens gave birth to a human egg.
cao feng di neng feng	ts'o ¹¹ bv ¹¹ dy ¹¹ nM ³³ bv ¹¹	The earth hatched the human egg.
cao xian gu fu gu	ts'o ¹¹ ze ³³ gv ³³ fv ⁵⁵ gv ³³	Albumen and yolk began to mix.
gu fu gu lu gu	gv ³³ fv ⁵⁵ gv ³³ lv ¹¹ gv ³³	It was getting warm then;
gu lu qi lu gu	gv ³³ lv ¹¹ sa ⁵⁵ lv ¹¹ gv ³³	The egg created warm air.
qi lu lu lu gu	sa ⁵⁵ lv ¹¹ dzer ³³ lv ¹¹ gv ³³	The warm air condensed to dew.
lu lu liu dian gu	dzer ³³ lv ¹¹ ts'ua ⁵⁵ tie	There were six drops of dew.
yi dian hal niang ding	dw ³³ tie ⁵⁵ hM ⁵⁵ nie ¹¹ die ³³	One drop fell into the sea;
hai shi hai xian gu	hM ⁵⁵ sl ⁵⁵ hM ⁵⁵ ze ³³ gv ³³	Changed into hai shi hai xian,
hai xian la xian gu	hM ⁵⁵ ze ³³ la ³³ ze ³³ gv ³³	Changed into hai xian la xian,
la xian tian xian gu	la ³³ ze ³³ mM ³³ ze ³³ gv ³³	Changed into la xian tian xian,
tian xian cong cong	mM ³³ ze ³³ ts'l ³³ tx'l ¹¹	Changed into tian xian cong cong,
cong cong cong yang	ts'l ³³ ts'l ³³ ts'l ³³ jy ¹¹	Changed into cong cong cong yang,
cong yang cong jiao	ts'l ³³ jy ¹¹ ts'l ³³ tcy ¹¹	Changed into cong yang cong jiao,
cong jiao jiao xian	ts'l ³³ tcy ¹¹ tcy ¹¹ ze ³³	Changed into cong jiao jiao xian,
jiao xian bi xian	tcy ¹¹ ze ³³ bi ³³ ze ³³	Changed into jiao xian bi xian,
bi xian cao xian	bi ³³ ze ³³ ts'o ¹¹ ze ³³	Changed into Bi xian cao xian,
cao xian li wei wei	ts'o ¹¹ ze ³³ IM ⁵⁵ γM ³³ γM ³³	Changed into Cao xian li wei wei,
li wei nuo yu	IM ⁵⁵ γM ³³ no ⁵⁵ γo ¹¹	Changed into Li wei nuo yu,
nuo yu ban pu	no ⁵⁵ γo ³³ bæ ³³ p'v ³³	Changed into Nuo yu ban pu,
ban pu yu	bæ ³³ p'v ³³ γo ³³	Changed into Ban pu yu,
yu gao lai	γo ³³ ga ³³ la ¹¹	Changed into Yu gao lai,
gao lai qiu	ga ³³ la ³³ tcy ⁵⁵	Changed into Gao lai qiu,
ye, shu, he, mai ²⁹	je ¹¹ su ¹¹ ho ¹¹ me ¹³	Changed into Ye, Shu, He, and Mai.

²⁹ This genealogy is contained in the *Mu Shu Family Genealogy* of the Nakhi rulers. The quotation, however, is from the *domba* scripture *Chongban chongsha*. Since it is transcribed with Chinese characters, some words were transliterated and some were freely translated with sound transcriptions difficult to understand. For that reason, the author has added Chinese Pinyin transcriptions, together with international phonetic symbols of the whole text.

In this very long genealogy, from *cao gu tian neng gu* to *hai shi hai xian gu*, the heavens gave birth to the human egg and the earth hatched it; then it warmed up, became dew, and dropped into the sea. From *hai xian la xian gu* to *jiao xian bi xian*, the genealogy of the birth of animals is told, among which *la*, the tiger, first appears, followed by *tian* (“oxen”), *cong* (“goat”), *yang* (“sheep”), *jiao* (“horse”), and so on. It is only with *bi xian cao xian* that the genealogy of human origins unfolded. Conjecturing from the features of the genealogy, which consists of the Tibeto-Burmese patronymic system, we would say that *hi xian cao xian* is father to the human ancestor *cao xian li wei wei* (also called Chongrenlien). Of course, another view would say that the human ancestor appeared right from *tian xian cong cong*. However, the tiger (*la*) is held to be the earliest animal that has ever appeared quite close to the remotest human ancestors. In his grand work *A Dictionary of Nakhi Pictographs* (1981), Fang Guoyu revealed that there are sayings claiming that “the tiger is the human forefather” among the Nakhi folk.

The relationship between man and tiger can be proven in the *Chongbantu*. In this work, the human ancestor Chen hongbaobai’ming (ts’e⁵⁵ho¹¹bu³³be¹¹mi⁵⁵) was originally a heavenly maiden, whose parents were heavenly gods, called *Zilaoapu* (dzI³³la¹¹a³¹p’v³³) or *Zilaoa zu* (dzI³³la¹¹a³¹dzI³³). Here *lao* is same as *la* in the *Official Genealogy of the Mu Family* and the *Origin of the Tiger*; both mean “tiger.” The pictographs *zi lao a pu* and *zi lao a zu* even look like a tiger. If man did not regard the tiger as an ancestor, this kind of pictograph and sound-to-meaning correspondence would be inexplicable.

Due to the symbiotic relationship between man and tiger, the ancient Nakhi people widely practiced the custom of using “tiger” as a surname. For example, the headman of Zuosuo of Yanyuan, Sichuan, was from the Nari, a sub-group of the Nakhi. He called himself La la, which means tiger.³⁰ Not only the headman of Zuosuo, but also the headman of Zhongsuo was known by the surname of tiger (*la*). For example, in the Hongwu reign of the Ming dynasty, Lawu was appointed head of a thousand households. From La Ruilin, who entered office during the Kangxi reign of the Qing dynasty, to La Chengjie, who was murdered by the Black Yi slave owners in the 1940s, and including La Junrong, La Yongzhong, La Tingxiang, La

³⁰ “Before liberation, the hereditary headman of Zuosuo and the 480 households of Nari under his government were known by the surname of La [‘tiger’]” (Guo and He 1996:210).

Yinghan, La Wenqing, La Bangzuo, and La Shutong, all used the same name (cf. Guo and He 1996).³¹ Again, among the four ancient sub-branches of the Nakhi to which the hereditary headman of the Mu family at Lijinag of Yuiinan belonged, the sub-branch Ye usually regard their first ancestor as being born to the tiger, called *Yebeyela* (jÈ¹¹pM⁵⁵jÈ¹¹la³³) (Guo and He 1996). In the *Record of the Lijiang Fu*, there is even a legend about a man transforming into a tiger (Guanxu Reign): “It is said that in the early Yunan dynasty, Baishali moududi was brave and determined by nature. Whenever there was injustice, he would lie on the huge rock, transformed in a second, roaring and jumping, leaving traces on the rock, which we can spot even today” (*ibid.*:443).

Because humans and tigers share common ancestry, the *Origin of the Tiger* tells that the human ancestor Congren Pandi befriended the tiger and the tiger took his body to his original ancestral burial ground after his death. Here the author emphasized the similarity of the human ancestor and the tiger. However, since the *Origin of the Tiger* is not the first version of the tiger myth, the story adopted the plot in which Taomabenli (t’a⁵⁵ma³³pM³³IM³³), the hunter, killed the tiger. Some might doubt that the tiger is a totem for the Nakhi ancestors, for why would a people kill their own totem? However, in Asia, America, and Africa, many peoples have the habit of killing and eating their totems, believing that this practice will allow them to absorb the totems’ power and will give them lifelong protection. The same idea is at work when people dress in tiger skins, hoping to glean their magical power. For example, although the Ewenkis in China regard the bear as their totem, they do not refrain from shooting it. However, they will hold a ceremony for their victim, crying at the top of their voices, as if they had lost a parent. Those bear-hunters will not be condemned for the killing; on the contrary, they will be considered true heroes. Whether an adult can become a real hunter largely depends on his ability to hunt big game, such as bears and tigers (cf. Zhu 1999).

The *Origin of the Tiger* narrates that the primordial tiger’s skin was divided into 99 pieces and allocated to many gods, human ancestors, and ritualists, who killed and conquered their enemies, thus making contributions to society and winning world fame. In this case “99” is only an estimated figure; the Nakhi lay emphasis on the *yang* (odd) number and “99” signifies multiplicity. The important gesture here is the division of the tiger’s skin. What cultural meaning does dividing tiger skin have? What does it aim at?

³¹ Among the Nari of the Nakhi in the Ningliang County of Yunnan “the hereditary headman at Yongning takes the tiger as his root-ancestor and prohibits people from killing it” (*ibid.*).

First of all, it is a reflection of an ancient Nakhi hunting custom. In early times, Nakhi hunters abided by the old rule of “everyone on the spot should have a piece”—whenever they brought down game they would share a piece with anyone they met on the way, besides sharing equally among themselves. If they failed to observe this custom, they believed they would bag no game later on. It reflects a conception of communal distribution. According to this convention, it was a great shame to own anything privately; collective ownership was most honored. Dividing the tiger skin also means dividing its power and strength, bringing its magic to many. Since the tiger is not a personal totem and belongs to all members of the clan, enjoying the protection of the tiger is a collective right. Due to the influence of the theory of the soul’s immortality, people believe that the tiger’s soul and power inhabits every piece of its skin. As a result, just as the Ewenkis would share within their clan the meat of the bear they had killed, the sharing of tiger skin meant collectively distributing the totem’s magic and its benevolence. The aim of sharing tiger skin is no doubt implied in the *Origin of the Tiger*. However, based on other peoples’ customs and mythology, its direct purpose is probably to have a coat made from tiger skin.

The act of wearing a tiger’s skin embodies the history of the symbiosis between man and tiger. This is also the transforming meaning we read in the Nakhi mythology. For example, the warrior god, Youma, whose egg was hatched by the tiger, has a tiger-like head, fur, and ferocious power (He Z. 1963). In Nakhi mythology not only the tiger but also some gods and monsters, after transforming into certain animals, develop correspondent inclinations, abilities, and functions. According to the *The War Between Dong and Shu* (du¹¹æ¹¹sv³¹æ¹¹) (He Z. 1964b) and other accounts, the mythological Nakhi ancestor Mili dongzhu once led his tribe against the tribe of Shu. His nine warriors all wore tiger skins (He J. 1984). In the *Chongbantu*, the Nakhi ancestors’ high regard for tiger skin has been graphically depicted: when Chongrenlien was asked by Zilao apu, who dwelled in the heavens, to milk a tigress, he journeyed to the high mountains and penetrated the tigress’ den wearing a cub’s skin in disguise—he later returned successfully with the tigress’ milk. In doing so, he foiled Zilao apu’s designs to get rid of him. What is more, after marrying the heavenly maiden Chenhong baobaiming, he returned victoriously to the earthly world wearing a tiger’s skin, whereupon he built a beautiful home and gave birth to the ancestors of the three peoples: the Tibetan, the Nakhi, and the Bai (He S. 1987). It is said that the ancestor Gao laiqiu of the four ancient Nakhi tribes—Ye, Shu, He and Mai—was also a great hero who wore a tiger skin. As Lévy-Bruhl has observed (1986), when the heroes in Nakhi mythology

wear tiger skins, both tigers and men grow more powerful than they would have been without each other.

Traces of Tiger Worship

While the *Origin of the Tiger* clearly shows the Nakhis' reverence for the tiger, traces of tiger worship appear as well in their language, toponyms, customs, political organizations, and medicine. By investigating these aspects of Nakhi culture, we can deepen our understanding of the character of the tiger and its worship in the *Origin of the Tiger*.

Language

Language is the most stable element in an ethnic culture. Though the lexicon may undergo changes, this happens more slowly than economic developments and shifts within social institutions. The core vocabulary in a language enjoys great stability, and can preserve information within an ancient culture longer than inscriptions on marble stones and copper columns. As far as tiger worship is concerned, the Nakhi language has preserved a rich variety of references.

For example, in Nakhi language “healthy” is *la la* (la³¹la¹¹), which literally means “tiger, tiger”; a free translation would be “strong as a tiger.” This example shows that the tiger symbolizes health and strength according to ancient Nakhi aesthetics: a healthy person's condition is understood as equivalent to that of a tiger. Another example comes from a Nakhi saying, “at first there were no sages and all sages were taught by the tiger.” This proverb reveals how much the Nakhi ancestors' regard for the tiger had risen from the level of biology to the arena of spiritual, mental, and moral issues, a level of regard expressed in the *Origin of the Tiger*. Similar phrases found in Nakhi speech are *la shi gan mei shi* (la³¹si³³gæ¹¹mĕ³³sM³³) and *jing jiu la la dui* (dzi³³dziĕ¹¹la³³lĕr³³dy¹¹). The former, meaning “the tiger does not lose its prowess even after death,” expresses praise and respect for the tiger, whose soul and power will survive death. The latter, translated as “the fierce tiger roars in the human world,” represents the wonderful landscape where man and tiger live together.

Toponyms

In the Nakhi-populated areas there are many places named after the tiger, including mountains, rivers, regions, and individual villages. Evidence

of tiger worship is everywhere. Mountains and rivers named after the tiger include the Lancang, Hutiao Xia, and Lapu. Where the Lancang river meets the Hengduanshan Mountains there are many Nakhi people. Some place-names refer to the tiger's movements. "Lancang" originally comes from the Nakhi *la³³ts'o³³*, meaning "tiger jumps," because where the Lancang river rushes through the valley is grows narrow enough for a tiger to leap over it. The Jinshajiang valley between the Yulong Snow-capped Mountain in Lijiang and the snowy Haba Mountain in Zhongdian, Yunnan, is known as Tiger-Jump Valley, or Lancang ge (*la³³ts'o³³ko¹¹*), because of the narrow river running through it and the small river island called Tiger-Jump Rock (*la³³ts'o³³lv³³*). It is said that in the past tigers crossed the river using the Tiger-Jump Rock. In addition, in the Weixi County of Yunnan there is a river called Lapu (*la³³p'v³³*). According to the *Toponyms of the Weixi Lisu Autonomous County of the Yiinnan Province* (Weixi Lisu County 1987), *lapu* is a Nakhi word meaning "tiger's den."

Many other places have toponyms incorporating the Nakhi word for tiger. The Nari tirbe's original homeland in Yanyuan County of Sichuan is called in Nakhi "Latuo" (*la³³t'a⁵⁵*); the Lugu lake beside it is called "Latuo hai" (*la³³t'a⁵⁵hM⁵⁵*) in Nakhi. Here again the syllable *la* in Latuo means "tiger." During the Tang dynasty, the Yongning area of the Ninglang County of Yuiman was called Tanlan or Santanlan. It is possible that Tanlan is a mistake for Lantan, while Lantan might be the transcription of *latao* in the Nakhi language at that time. In addition, during the Ming dynasty the Lancang Guard was established in the Yongsheng County of Yunnan, where Yonghshen was ruled by the Nakhi headman from the Mu family and the Nakhi continue to live. *Lancang* is a Nakhi word meaning "the tiger jumps." In Lijiang and Ninglang of Yunnan, there are many neighboring places named after the tiger; for example, Lashi County's Nakhi name is Lashi (*la³³sI⁵⁵*), meaning "new tiger"; Baoshan County's Nakhi name is Labo (*la³³pÈ¹¹*), meaning "the springing tiger"; the southern end of Baisha Ba is called Lake (*la³³k'o⁵⁵*) in Nakhi, meaning "killing tiger." It needs to be pointed out that Shigu's Nakhi name, Laba (*la³³ba¹¹*), has nothing to do with tiger worship, because *laba* comes from the Tibetan word *luopo* (*lo¹¹p'o¹¹*), a name given to this area by Tibetans during the Tang dynasty. *Luopo* in Tibetan translates into Chinese as "Shenchuan" ("sacred river"), which is exactly the same name given to the Jinshajiang river in the *Tang Shu* (*Record of the Tang Dynasty*).

Villages named after the tiger are widespread. For example, there are two places where the Nakhi live in the Muli County of Sichuan: one is the Laoluo (*la³³lo¹¹*) village—or meaning "the place where the tiger visited"—in the Eya township, and the other is the Nabu (*na⁵⁵pv⁵⁵*) village of the

Wuxiang township. Here *nabu* is a modified form of *labu* (la³³bv³³), meaning “the place the tiger visited.” The name of the Nakhi village Laluge (la³³lo⁵⁵kv³³) of the Tuoding Township means “the village the tiger visited” (Deqin County 1986). There are six Nakhi villages in Zhongdian County of Yunnan bearing the word for tiger in their names: Lake (la³³k’o⁵⁵) village—or “the place where the tiger was killed”—of Shangjiang township; Lazhigu (la³³dzI¹¹kv³³) village—or “the place the tiger frequents”—of Shangjiang township; Lalaixi (la³³lĕr¹¹xi¹¹)—“the place where the tiger roars”—of the Shangjiang township; Lariluo (la³³zI³³lo¹¹) village—“the wooded mountain valley of the tiger”—of Jinjiang township; and Labiaozhi (la³³bM¹¹dI³³) village—“the place of tiger-slaughtering”—of Hutiaoxia township, where it is said that people hunted and shared a tiger. Other examples are as follows: Laha (la³³ha³³) village—or “the place where the tiger rests”—of Yongchun township; Lalongge (la³³lo⁵⁵ko¹¹) village—“the place the tiger comes and goes”—of Yongchun township; and Lari (la³³zI³³) village—“the village of tiger path”—of Yongchun township (Weixi Lisu County 1987). Names of villages relevant to the tiger appearing in the agreement signed by the Yunnan and Sichuan governments with the Yongning and Lijiang local governments include Lawuwa (la³³u³³uo³³), Laruowa (la³³zI¹¹uo³³), Laerwu (la³³γĕr¹¹uo³³), Lakewa (la³³k’o³³uo³³), Laziwa (la³³tsI³³uo³³), and Lamiewa (la³³mi¹¹uo³³) (Guo and He 1996). Two Nari villages in Yanyuan County of Sichuan are named after tigers: Nawa (na⁵⁵uo³³) of the Yanhai township, where *nawa* is the same as *lawa*, meaning “the village that has tigers”; and Nakua (na⁵⁵k’ua³³), where *nakua* is the same as *lakua* (la³³k’ua³³), meaning “the tiger’s footprints” (Yanyuan County 1985).

Villages named after the tiger are even more widespread in Lijiang County of Yunnan. *La* in all of the following names means “tiger”: Laquwu (la³³ts’y⁵⁵uo³³) (Wutai village) of the Huangshan township; Lamaojiu (la³³ma⁵⁵dzIĕ¹¹), situated between the Jinshan and the Qihe townships; Lazhemai (la³³dzĕ¹¹mæ³³) in the Lashi township; and Lake (la³³k’o⁵⁵) at the southern end of the Baisha township. Concerning Laquwu village, it is said that once the Nakhi hereditary headman from the Mu family appointed the people of Laquwu village to raise a tiger, but when the tiger escaped as a result of their negligence the Mu family asked for compensation. Hence, *laquwu* means “the village of paying the tiger back” in Nakhi. After the tiger’s escape, the villagers rushed out in search of it and finally found the animal in Lamaojiu. After being chased, the tiger ran from the Qihe township, climbed over the South Mountain to the Lashi township, was caught in the village of Lazhemai, and was killed at Lake, not far from the city. Hence, *Lamaojiu* means “the spot where the tiger was found

escaping”; *lazhmai* means “the spot where the tiger was caught”; and *lake* means “the spot where the tiger was killed.”

The same prevalence of tiger names exists in the Judian township. It is said that the area around the Wuhouqing of Judian that used to be inhabited by tigers is called Lazhuluo ($la^{33}dzI^{33}lo^{11}$) in Nakhi, meaning “the place with many tigers.” Once a tiger went down the valley to the banks of Jinshajiang river in search of food and was spotted by a hunter. The hunter chased it to the west of the valley, where it disappeared. Therefore the location is called Lapigu ($la^{33}p'i^{55}kv^{33}$), or “the place where the tiger disappeared.” After the tiger’s disappearance, the hunter continued his search along the valley. The place where he rediscovered and caught the tiger is called Lamogu ($la^{33}mæ^{33}kv^{33}$), “the spot where the tiger got caught.” The considerably flatter place where the hunter dragged the tiger in order to kill it is called Lakeluo ($la^{33}k'o^{55}lo^{11}$), “the spot where the tiger was killed” (Su 1997).

Villages with tiger-influenced toponyms in Lijiang of Yunnan are as follows: Laru ($la^{55}sI^{33}$), *laru* meaning “tiger cubs,” in the Baoshan township; Laben ($la^{33}be^{33}$), “village of tigers,” in the Daju township; Layoutui ($la^{33}jÈ^{11}dy^{11}$), “the place where the tiger was sent off”; and Lasazhi ($la^{33}sa^{11}dzI^{33}$), “the village where tigers escaped in all directions.” There is a village called Mulake ($mu^{11}la^{33}k'o^{55}$) in the Dadong township, meaning “the village that slaughters oxen and tigers.” One must conjecture from these place-names that there must be some inspiring stories or special beliefs behind them.

Customs

In Nakhi marriage customs, architecture, games, costumes, arts, and other cultural activities, tiger worship is expressed in vivid detail, corresponding with the records about tiger mythology in the *domba* scriptures and thus forming an intriguing landscape of Nakhi tiger culture.

In the marriage custom, the go-between is known as *milabu* ($mi^{33}la^{33}bu^{11}$), meaning “the tiger who holds a maiden in its mouth.” According to He Shicheng, this title originates from a story told by Gonta, a Nakhi *domba*, who lives in the Baidi village of the Zhongdian County of Yuiman (He S. 1993):

In the olden times, a father and a son lived in a mountain village. They were so poor that the son could not get married at the appropriate age. One day, a tiger came and asked, “What do you live on?” The father answered, “We live by working for the landlord in the village.” The tiger

then asked, “What kinds of jobs do you do?” The father answered: “All kinds, from cutting firewood to carrying water. The three daughters of the landlords wear damask and silk and we wear only sackcloth and eat feed for dogs and pigs.” The tiger then asked the father, “Would you like me to find a wife for your son?” On hearing this the father said, “We are too poor for any girl to be willing to marry into our family.” Several days later, the eldest daughter of the landlord was suddenly carried away to the father and son, secretly. The tiger told the daughter, “Your family is far too rich and their family is far too poor. You’d better stay put and be a good wife. Otherwise I will eat you up alive.” She was so frightened that she had to stay and live with them. She asked her husband to get the weaving machine and she labored at it every day without stopping. The husband was asked to sell the damask and silk on the market. The family was faring better and better. One day, when the damask and silk were sold to the landlord’s family, the landlord asked, “Are these stolen wares?” The son from the poor family answered, “My wife wove these.” The landlord’s two other daughters examined the texture and found that it was identical to their elder sister’s handiwork. The landlord then asked how it was that poor son had found a wife. He was forced to tell the truth and the landlord learned that his long-term hired hand had become his son-in-law! He had no choice but to recognize him. From that time forward, the poor father and son lived a better and better life. Since it was the tiger who brought husband and wife together, people call the go-between *milabu*.

According to traditional architectural styles, the Nakhi set up a stone on each side of the gate, called the Dong³² stone and Se³³ stone, respectively; these are also known as the *yang*-god stone and *yin*-god stone, and the tiger-stone and yak-stone. The gate guardians in the *domba* picture scrolls depict Dong riding on a tiger, Se on a yak. Dong is male and belongs to the *yang*, while Se is female and belongs to the *yin*. Hence the three names agree with each other. The main function of the gate guardian is, of course, to protect the household.

In traditional games, Nakhi children everywhere would play the game of “a tigress protecting her cubs” (la³³ me³³ la³³ zo³³ gæ³³). It goes like this: a boy will play the tigress and stand in front; a group of people play the cubs and stand behind him in a line. When the game starts, another boy plays the “evil beast” and tries to avoid the tigress in order to catch her cubs, while the tigress will do all she can to protect them. The cubs follow the tigress in

³² Dong (du¹¹), whose full name is Milidong (mM³³IM⁵⁵du¹¹), is a *yang*-god in the Nakhi *domba* religion, the male gate guardian.

³³ Se (se¹¹), whose full name is Milise (mM³³IM⁵⁵se¹¹), is a *yin*-god in the Nakhi *domba* religion, the female gate guardian.

order, in case they should fall into the hands of the evil beast. Once a cub is caught, the game is over and another one begins.

As for clothing, it is said that the Nakhi ancestors liked to wear tiger skins. In recent years, however, the tiger population has been decreasing rapidly and they are now on the brink of extinction. As a result, the supply of tiger skins has dropped, making it impossible for officials and commoners alike to wear them. The skins passed down by ancestors now serve primarily as symbols of power and status, and are displayed only on special occasions. For example, among the Youngning Nari of the Nakhi in the Ninglang County of Yunnan, on every first and second day of the lunar new year, the headman will reveal the tiger skin normally kept from view, draping it over a chair in honor of his ancestors and for the subjects, commoners, and household slaves to pay homage. On the third day he will put the skin away.

With regard to folk arts, many stories represent the tiger conquering an evil beast. There are also many other legends, stories, and parables; for example, “The Story of the Tiger and the Leopard Drawing Stripes on Each Other” describes the origin of the markings on the bodies of the two animals; “The Story of the Twelve Animals” (Li 1984) explains why the mouse and ox outrank the tiger; “A Hunter in Name Only” (He J. 1984) tells about tiger-hunting; “The Story about Tiger-Jumping Valley” (*ibid.*) reveals how the place-name came about; and “The Rabbit and the Tiger” (Nationality Studies 1978) narrates the rabbit’s competition with the tiger in the arenas of wisdom and bravery. Of course, in these folk traditions, the representations of the tiger are quite complex, differing at times from its sober depiction in myths, language, marriage customs, architecture, costume, and games. Presumably these folk stories appeared after man’s status had risen and the tiger had separated from the gods and ancestors, losing its former dignity.

Political Organizations

As far as social organization is concerned, the tiger is used to characterize political institutions, as may be seen in the military institutions of Wei and Suo, established by the central government during the Ming dynasty within Yanyuan County of Sichuan. Among the five Suo and four Si set up then,³⁴ the Nari headmen from the *zuo* (left), *you* (right), *zhong*

³⁴ Five Suo and four Si: administrative units in Nakhi (Moso) areas of southwestern Sichuan, established in the Qing dynasty. The four Si include the Guabie Pacification Commission, the Muli Pacification commission, the Gubaishu Pacification Commission, and the Mala Chief’s Office. The five Suo refer to the Zuosuo Battalion

(middle), *qian* (front) and *hou* (rear) identify with the tiger. It is said that the five *suo* originated from the same tiger, becoming its claws, its teeth, the head, the tail, and the stripes. In 1983, the author of this paper was there in person while doing fieldwork. According to a local ritualist, the ancient Moso and their cultural “offspring” found in Qiansuo, Housuo, Zhongsuo, Zuosuo, Yousuo, Yongning, Langqiu, Lijiang, and Yezhi were compared to a tiger and its nine cubs, embodied by the local headmen from each group. It is difficult at present to clarify the organization of the military democracy of the Nakhi headmen at Lijiang during the Ming and Qing dynasties. However, they were always popularly known as having adopted a system of “Nine-Tigers and Eighteen-Young Tigers.” The Mu Family ranked at the top of the power structure, with nine military and civil departments under it, each with two further sub-departments, making eighteen departments and sub-departments all together.³⁵ In a word, the tiger is a symbol of political power and its institutionalization.

Medicine

The Nakhi have a long history of relying on tiger skins and bones for medical treatment. Using the skin as a mattress is one such usage. Sleeping on it evokes the same totemic identification that wearing it evokes; moreover, it has medical efficacy—people believe that tiger-skin mattresses ward off cold-related diseases. The Nakhi also drink homemade tiger-bone wine profusely in order to have brighter eyes and a sound brain, treat *yin* deficiency, and strengthen the body.

We can see from the aforementioned aspects of Nakhi culture that tiger worship permeates material, spiritual, and social realities. Its variety, importance, and history betray the fact that the tiger is no common animal, but a special totem. Without such a grounding in Nakhi belief systems, mythological works like *The Origin of the Tiger* could never come into being.

Origins and Development of Tiger Worship

Commander for the La Family, the Zhongsuo Battalion Commander for the La Family, the Zuosuo Battalion Commander for the Ba Family, the Qiansuo Company Commander for the A Family, and the Housuo Company Commander for the Bai Family.

³⁵ In the biological taxonomy, the tiger and the cat are of the same family, which explains why in *The Origin of the Tiger* the matriarchal ancestor of the tiger is held to be a white-faced cat.

There are many factors that contribute to an ethnic belief system. Among these factors, however, only a few play a major role. As for causes of Nakhi tiger worship, we can point to the environment, historical traditions, and the ancient Nakhi use of animal resources.

In much earlier times, human beings inhabited a variety of environments: hilly land, plains, steppes, desert oases, and islands. Different living conditions influenced the development of different cultural patterns—"culture" here defined as a product of humanity's adaptation to nature and establishment of a particular relationship with it. The Nakhi and its four sub-groups live in mountainous regions, except for a small percentage who inhabit the flatlands. Even those plain-dwellers build their villages at the foot of a mountain, in order to make plowing, grazing, and hunting easier. The majority of the Nakhi have spread out in the Hengduan Mountains at the intersections of the Yunnan-Guizhou Plateau and the Qinghai-Tibetan Plateau. Here, at an altitude of thousands of meters above sea level, the mountains are high and forests dense, with a plentitude of rivers and streams. In this bounteous land the flora and fauna are plentiful, exhibiting a variety of species and forming a special mountain ecology. In this ecological enclave the tiger is "the king of all animals" and "master of the mountain." As the highest ruler of this hilly land, it has a large expanse to exercise its abilities. Only in the deep mountains and on steep peaks can it thoroughly demonstrate its bravery and power. It roars and leaps there at will.

After the Nakhi ancestors entered the mountains, they established a complicated relationship with the tiger, with whom they have since competed for the control of biological resources. As animists, human beings naturally regard the conquering of the tiger as the highest glory. People have built up a rich tiger culture, materially and spiritually, by recognizing its propensities, creating tools for conquering it, inventing methods of catching it, making aesthetic evaluations of it, and authoring a variety of myths about it. Tiger worship and the tiger totem are the essence of such cultural activities.

Historically, beliefs about the tiger were a common part of the ancient culture and these traditions survive into the present. According to historical records, the Chinese deity Fuxi³⁶ was born in Western Qiang, and its image, with a human head and a snake's body, appeared on a large number of Han

³⁶ Fuxi is the deity who created the Eight Diagrams and who oversees the crafting of fishing nets and magical instruments, the composing of music, matrimonial customs, the art of hunting, and so on.

dynasty bricks. Fuxi could also have had a tiger's body, a logical alternative for those ethnic groups of the ancient Qiang family who revered the tiger as ancestor, god, and totem. The Yi, Lisu, Hani, Jinuo, Lahu, Tujia, and Bai, all of whom descend from the Qiang, still are keeping alive various traces of tiger worship and relevant customs. These traces are particularly evident among the Yi and Lisu, who belong to the same language group as the Nakhi. The Yi used to be called Luoluo (lo³³ lo³³) ("the tiger"), suggesting that the Yi's ancestors believed the tiger was their forefather.

Like the Nakhi epic, *The Origin of the Tiger*, the Yi epic *Mei Ge* (me¹¹ko³³) depicts the tiger as a totem that transformed into the universe. In *Mei Ge* the head of the tiger became the heavens after its death; its skin became the earth; its left eye became the sun; its right eye became the moon; its sides became the road; its waist became the stones; its blood became water; its stiff hair became trees; its soft hair became grass; its teeth became stars; its bowels became rivers; its oil became vapor; its body hair became rice seedlings; its marrow became gold; its small bones became silver; its lungs became copper; its liver became iron; its membranes became tin; its shoulders became ponds; its upper arms became the direction of north; and the big lice on its body became buffaloes (CIFY 1959). This series of cosmological transformations is similar to that in *The Origin of the Tiger*, with the only exception being that the description in the *Mei Ge* is more detailed.

Furthermore, mountains, rivers, villages, and regions are named after the tiger in the Yi and Lisu areas. The Lisu have clans with the name of the tiger even today. We can see therefore that the Nakhi, Yi, and Lisu, all of whom are offspring of the Qiang, share the same cultural origin. Of course, as these groups separated their tiger cultures developed along different lines, showing different characteristics. *The Origin of the Tiger* also differs from the *Mei Ge* because at the time of its first written record, Nakhi society had already completed the transition from totemic worship to ancestor and hero worship (He Z. 1963). However, no matter how much these two societies diverged in their evolution of tiger worship, their shared primordial "birth-mark" is indelible.

The ancient Nakhi used to live as nomads on the northwestern steppe, where they depended heavily on animals, living largely on domestication, hunting, and nomadism. Animal resources were used for transport, food, warmth, and even tribal war and religious rites. This mode of existence and production continued without fundamental change even after the Nakhi ancestors had been settled in the southwestern hills and mountains for quite some time. Many sources have clearly shown that until the early twentieth century the Nakhi's livelihood was supported partially by agriculture and

partially by herding. However, for self-sufficiency the Nakhi relied primarily on animals rather than on the land and plants. Their aesthetic focus was also the animal, as the Nakhi language clearly shows. For example, “delicacy” is *e* (ɣM³³) in Nakhi, literally meaning “ox”; “capable” is *ruo* (zua³³), literally meaning “horse”; “beauty” is *zhi* (dzI³³), literally meaning “leopard”; and “kindness” is *gu* (gv³³), literally meaning “bear.” Since the tiger is the king of all animals, it became the most salient in animal aesthetics.

Among Chinese minority groups, the wolf plays a major role in the grasslands, the dog in hilly regions, the tiger in mountains, the yak in snowy lands, and the dragon and snake in watery places. All have close ties with the geographically determined activities of each ethnic group concerned. The wolf is a key factor in the maintenance of grassland ecology and influences animal husbandry. In the hilly regions, the dog plays an important role in hunting. In mountainous regions, the tiger is both a wild animal to be subjugated and a source of food. The yak is indispensable to the economy and life of the more northern peoples because of its large build, resistance to cold, longer wool, high-quality milk, mighty horns, and delicious meat and fat. In the watery places the snake links material life and the spiritual universe because it dominates the waters, deciding the fate of planting and fishing.

Thus the Nakhi culture centers on tiger worship and is represented by tiger mythology. This culture has very close ties with the tiger cultures of other Tibeto-Burmese groups; at the same time, however, it preserves its own features. Understanding the relationship between the tiger and Nakhi culture and learning more fully the dynamics of the Nakhi spiritual universe will secure a deeper and more accurate understanding of this people, whether the focus is on nature, war, or peace.

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A Brief Account of *Bensen Ülger* and *Ülgeren Bense*

Zhalgaa

I

The Mongols have a long tradition of oral literature. About the first half of the nineteenth century, a new member came into the family of Mongolian oral tradition, namely *bensen ülger*. *Bensen ülger* first appeared in the southeastern Mongolian areas, where the influence from the Han culture has been stronger, and then spread to other areas of Inner Mongolia and Outer Mongolia.¹

Bensen ülger are a variety of *huurchi*. *Huur* is synonymous with *huqin*, and a *hurchi* is a *huqin* player. *Hurchin ülger* means all kinds of stories narrated by the artist, who tells a story while playing the four-string *huur* with changeable melodic sounds, an instrument popular among the Mongols. *Hurchi ülger* mainly comprises epic (also known as Manggus stories), *bensen ülger*, and narrative stories that are based on real life in Inner Mongolia. *Bensen ülger* have enjoyed a prominent position among *hurchi ülger* in modern times.

Bensen ülger stories are usually long. Compared with traditional Mongolian oral epics, they have two distinctive points. First with respect to subject and content, *bensen ülger* stories describe events that took place in the heartland of China, for example the suppression of turmoil by successive dynasties and wars, struggles between devoted and deceitful ministers, magic competitions between gods and monsters, complicated legal cases, and love affairs and civil life. Exemplary war stories include *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Shuotang Qianzhuan*, *Shuotang Houzhuan*, and *Shuotang Sanzhuan*. Exemplary magic competitions between gods and monsters are *Canonization of the Gods*, *Journey to the West*, and others, while heroic legends include the *Water Margin*. Complex legal cases are related in stories such as *Jigong Zhuan* and *Shigong An*; all have been very

¹ Also known as Khalkha Mongol, that is, the present Mongolian Republic.

well received. Just as the word *bense* is at root a loan word, so the *bensen ülgër* derive from other, non-Mongolian regions.

The *bensen ülgër* also differ from Mongolian epic because they rely on *benzi*. The word *bensen* is a transcription of a Chinese word, *benzi*, that has two meanings. One refers to stacks of paper made into a book, the other to editions of books, including handwritten and printed copies. In Mongolian, the equivalent of the Chinese word *benzi* is *debter*, denoting both stacks of paper made into a book and handwritten copies and printed books. This term does not, however, include Buddhist scriptures and other important classics. For its special term *bensen ülgër*, *ülgër* can also mean the original written copy of a story, similar to the way the Chinese storytelling tradition claims that written texts by literary artists are the original versions. Therefore, the exact meaning of *bensen ülgër* refers to stories originating from storybooks that were told by artists. Though *bensen ülgër* are alive orally among artists, their contents are based on *benzi*. These *benzi* may consist of long stories (like the aforementioned *The Story of Three Kingdoms* and romances that have all been created in the heartland), or they may simply outline a story. Artists became familiar with the stories in *benzi* and developed them into orally performed and inherited stories. Of the cantos and contents known to us, many are widely available in Mongolian handwritten copies. The traditional Mongolian epics differ from stories describing local life and originating in the nineteenth century in that they came from artists' oral creations and did not rely on handwritten copies for dissemination; there were few handwritten copies before we started to collect them in the twentieth century.

So-called *bensen ülgër* rely on *benzi* and demonstrate the properties of both relativity and universality. In fact, not all artists read *benzi*. Some artists are illiterate and some are blind. They have to rely on a teacher or ask others to read *benzi* for them in order to master the contents of the story.² Besides, there have been individual stories for which no original copies have been found, and that exist only orally. However, these works that deal with

² In August of 1995 the author visited an artist by the name of Togtoga, then 61, from Fuxin in Liaoning province. He lost his eyesight at age three and started to learn storytelling. His father could read Mongolian and tell stories such as *Sizhuang*, *The Story of the East Han Dynasty*, *Liu Xiu Zouguo*, *Xue Rengui Went on an Eastern Expedition*, *Hua Mulan Conquered the North*, *The Story of the Sui and Tang Dynasties*, *Luotong Conquered the North*, and many others. Most of these stories he learned by listening to his father read them. Togtoga could usually remember a story after hearing it read three times, and after a month he could reorganize the story into rhyming verse and perform it for an audience. According to him, many artists in the past could not learn *benzi* by themselves.

stories about China's heartland are not fictions fabricated by Mongolian artists. They can only be copies of other popular *bensen ülger*, or created on the basis of knowledge of other works of a similar kind in this region of China.

The term *bensen ülger* is often used by people to refer to two phenomena that are both related and different, namely *bensen ülger* and *ülgeren bense*. So-called *ülgeren bense* are the original copies of the aforementioned stories that artists sing, but do not include the handwritten copies that outline the stories. Mongolian *ülgeren bense* can be classified into two large categories according to their different origins.³ The first, for example, includes translated and adapted Mongolian versions of *Canonization of the Gods*, *Water Margin*, and others. The second category involves newly created works in Mongolian regions that deal with stories from the Chinese civil wars, works like *Wu Zhuan*, *Hanfeng Zhuan*, and so forth. As far as *ülgeren bense* discovered at present are concerned, whether they are translated and adapted versions of Chinese stories or new works in Mongolian, they are composed in prose and structured according to parts and subtitles of Chinese classic stories, with subtitles at the beginning of each canto. In form the subtitles mostly imitate the poetic parallels that are adopted by Chinese classics. *Ülgeren bense* belong to the category of romance in written literature, while *bensen ülger* to the category of oral traditions. In style *bensen ülger* combine prose with verse, adapting well to the way artists both sing and narrate them, a different vehicle from the prose style that *ülgeren bense* adopted.

Functionally, *bensen ülger* are a comprehensive art. During the performance, the audience will enjoy not only its complicated stories but also its rich and charming language, moving music and voices, and the drama of the performance. *Ülgeren bense*, however, can be enjoyed only by relying entirely on reading. They can involve the original copy and be directly appreciated by literati themselves, who can also read them to others. The latter scenario is called *bense dagudahu* ("reading books"). It is said that in the past in southeast Mongolia, *bense dagudahu* was very popular. What is special about *bense dagudahu* is that it can be read word by word

³ *Bensen ülger*, in its original sense, should also include the original stories in Chinese popular in Mongolian areas. Many masters of *bensen ülger* know Chinese and the stories they sing often come directly from the Chinese originals. Having said that, however, for most artists, the original copies they rely on are still *bensen ülger* in Mongolian. Therefore here we give emphasis to the handwritten *ülgeren bense* in Mongolian when we deal with the relationship between *ülgeren bense* and *bensen ülger*.

without either singing or musical accompaniment, a completely different mode from oral performances by folk artists.

In terms of dissemination, *bensen ülger* also differ from *ülgeren bense*. Until the mid-twentieth century, the printing industry was quite backward, which meant that most of the preservation and spread of *ülgeren bense* was dependent on handwritten copies. In fact, most extant copies have no authors' names. Quite a few of them, however, contain the names of their copyists and date of copying. The majority of copyists were adolescents, who might have used the opportunity to practice their handwriting. Another reason adolescents who were learning to write liked to copy *ülgeren bense* was that they could earn money in the process; handwritten copies sold quite readily. *Ülgeren bense* seldom experienced variation as a result of dissemination. Except for different translators, different copies of the same story usually remained basically stable.

Bensen ülger, however, inherited the distinctions of Mongolian story singing arts, largely depending on individual relationships between teacher and apprentice for broadening the scope of their dissemination. A future artist, before he starts to learn the craft, must acquire from his master the basic skills of story singing, a rich knowledge of music, and the ability to sing impromptu. The master should pass his best stories to his disciple. These stories often differ greatly from those that have been recorded in *ülgeren bense*, and could only be spread through apprenticeship. In order to raise the standard and tell more excellent stories, some artists also formally acknowledge several masters as teachers and learn their strong points. In fact, many excellent stories have continually been enriched in the process of spreading. Due to the fact that they were passed down from masters to disciples and sung by different artists, they are bound to have a great gap between versions. An artist with superior performing skills can sing more movingly. Even when the same person sings the story, there will inevitably be a difference between one version and another.

During the prosperous period of *bensen ülger*, many well-known artists appeared. It is said that they sang many wonderful stories. However, we cannot find any copies of *bensen ülger* that spread according to the style of folktale singing. Handwritten copies of *ülgeren bense*, however, have been preserved in large numbers, and the stories as told by artists are largely suitable for audio and visual appreciation of the story sung on the spot. Although we can read handwritten copies of the story, it would be more fascinating to read *ülgeren bense* in the style of prose.

Bensen ülger were popular, a status that on the one hand encouraged more artists to emerge and on the other hand increased the need for *benzi* that were more suitable for singing. This situation has promoted the

translation of Chinese stories by literati. Many stories were translated into Mongolian for *bensen ülger* singing, such as those that have been passed down to us: *Canonization of the Gods*, *Dongzhou Lieguozhi*, *Donghai Yanyi*, *Xihan Yanyi*, *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Suitang Yanyi*, *Luotong Saobei*, *Xuerengui Zhengdong*, *Xiliang Zhuan* (*Shuotang Sanzhuan*), *The Water Margin*, *Jigong Zhuan*, *Shigong An*, and so on.

The singing activities of *bensen ülger* have also motivated some educated Mongols to create new *benzi* that deal with wars in the heartland. In this cultural atmosphere, the Five Stories of the Tang Dynasty—*Kuxi Zhuang*, *Quanjia Fu*, *Shangyao Zhuan*, *Qipi Zhuan*—and other new and long *benzi* such as *Pingbei Zhuan*, *Hanfeng Zhuan*, *Wanceng Lou*, *Shangshu Ji*, and *Zijin Zhuo* emerged in response to the times.

II

Folk singers are the key factor for bridging *ülgeren bense* and *bensen ülger*. Without their creative work there would have been no oral *bensen ülger*. From the excerpts cited below from the *Water Margin* as sung by artist Pajai, we can appreciate the important role his talent played in the transition from *ülgeren bense* to *bensen ülger*.

Pajai (1902-62) was the most distinguished Mongolian *huurchi* in the twentieth century. People praise him as the master linguist of his generation for his outstanding contributions in unearthing the richness of Mongolian language and unfolding its artistic aesthetics. Pajai was born in Örgentala Gachaga, Modo Söme, Jarud Banner, Inner Mongolia. He had an extraordinary memory and was extremely talented. Even in childhood, after listening to the singing of the then-famous artist Choibang (1836-1928), he could repeat the whole performance; for this he was highly appreciated by Choibang. Pajai was chosen as a prodigy at age nine and sent to the Noyan Temple in the Banner to become a lama. While in the temple he showed outstanding talent in learning scriptures. However, he retained his love for the singing art and was punished many times by the lama-manager for pursuing it. At age 18 Pajai was finally able to leave the temple and become an artist who lived by singing. Panjie sang not only *bensen ülger* but also epics and stories that were based on Mongolian life. Among his repertoire of *bensen ülger*, the most influential were *The Story of the Three Kingdoms*, *Water Margin*, *Suitang Yanyi*, and *Xihan Yanyi*. Pajai studied under Choibang, whose master was the great master of a generation, Dansannima (1836-89). Both Choibang and Dansannima were well known for singing *Water Margin*. For that reason, creative elements from the performances of

Choibang and Dansannima also turned up in Pajai's version of *Water Margin*. Pajai himself trained many artists, including such famous bards as Sampilnorbu and Choijigowa. Losor, who is still actively devoted to his singing art, was a disciple of Choijigowa.

We have translated below an excerpt from the twenty-second cycle, "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death," in Pajai's *Water Margin*. *Water Margin*, a Chinese romance that emerged in the fourteenth century, describes a group of heroes during the Song Dynasty of China who joined together and revolted against corrupt officials on Liang Mountain. The novel speaks highly of devotion between friends, and unfolds many scenes of acrobatic fighting and war. Because of the similarities between it and the Mongolian epic, the novel was suitable for artists' singing and well received by the masses. In the Qing Dynasty, *Water Margin* was translated several times into Mongolian. Here the author's reference came from a version of late eighteenth century or early nineteenth century, and is the earliest known translation. The handwritten copy is now preserved in the Library of Inner Mongolia University, and was printed and circulated by the Institute of Inner Mongolian Language, Literature, and History in 1977.

"The Story of Wu Song Beating to Death the Tiger," sung by Pajai, was recorded, compiled, and subsequently included in *One Hundred Works of Mongolian Classic Literature*. In his postscript, Ts. Damdinsüren highly praised Pajai's "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death," commenting that its "'feature of combining prose with verse' is quite similar to *The Secret History of the Mongols*, and has had a long tradition" (1979:1694-95). He also said, "artists who sing and play *huur* always have the threefold task of drama, music, and reading everywhere in the Mongolian region. When they sing the Chinese stories, they would add or deduct and turn them into pieces of prose and verse, making them a newly created work suitable for the Mongolian audience" (*idem*). For "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death" sung by Pajai, there are more than ninety pages of rhymed text with over 1,500 lines, and more than ten pages of prose with over 160 lines, totaling 100 pages in large script. In the present letter-printed version of *Water Margin* that was translated into Mongolian during the Qing Dynasty the relevant story comprises only twelve pages in small script.⁴ The modern Mongolian translation, based on the original and published by Inner Mongolia Publishing House, contains only sixteen pages in large script. Therefore Pajai's "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death" is not only far more lengthy than the Mongolian version from the Qing Dynasty, but also considerably longer

⁴ This translated version makes quite a few cuts to the original and is much shorter.

than the modern Mongolian translation; it exceeds the Chinese original. Like the Mongolian version from the Qing Dynasty, the contents that did not suit the Mongolian audience were left out when he performed; however, when it came to length, Pajai's version still doubled that of the original, due largely to the addition of many details during singing.

As far as the major development of the story is concerned, Pajai's "Wu Song Beat the Tiger to Death" is roughly similar to the Chinese original and the version of the Qing Dynasty. Wu Song, seeking his elder brother, came to an inn in front of Mount Jingyanggang, where he had a brawl with the owner and drank too much; without listening to the owner's advice he continued over the mountain, where he ran into a ferocious tiger and beat it to death; he met a hunter who proved that the ferocious tiger was beaten to death by Wu Song and reported it to the county magistrate and accompanied him down the mountain; they came to the county town where Wu Song was rewarded, favorably spoken of by the townspeople, and so on. Here we translate, as sung by Pajai, an excerpt describing the scene in which Wu Song arrives at Mount Jingyanggang and enters the inn. In the Chinese version of *Water Margin* the telling of this event uses fewer than 100 Chinese characters (Shi 1990:165-66):

It was midday that day; [he] trekked and felt hungry and thirsty, and saw an inn in front of him, where a sign with five characters read: "No one should pass over the mountain if three bowls of wine are drunk." Wu Song went inside and sat down, leaning his stick against the wall, and yelled out: "Master, get some wine to drink and quickly!"

The aforementioned Mongolian version of *Water Margin* goes like this in an approximate translation (Qing Dynasty 1977):

That day [he] traveled far and felt hungry when [he] saw a shop in front of him, where a sign was hung in front of the door that read: "No one should pass over the mountain if three bowls of wine are drunk." Wu Song went into the shop, put down his *buluu*, and sat on the stool, calling out: "Owner of the house, come with the wine and quickly!"

Comparing the two versions, we notice some changes: 1) "It was midday that day" versus "That day (he) traveled far," 2) the stick, used for fighting in the remote regions of China, versus the *buluu*, used by the Mongols for hunting, and 3) "Master" mistranslated as "Owner of the house." Their lengths, however, are roughly the same.

This same scene in *Water Margin* has been developed into a very long passage that combines prose and verse styles in Pajai's performance. In translation it proceeds like this (Damdinsüren 1979:1596-1607):

The day was fine, the sun was bright.
 Wu Song, who was traveling on foot,
 was looking at the boundless universe,
 looking for his elder brother
 without knowing he was about,
 looked pitiful and helpless.
 [Wu Song] took time off during his travel,
 looking around while walking
 at those towering mountains,
 those vast plains.
 He traveled the whole day,
 could not help feeling
 in his stomach
 both thirsty and hungry.
 Only a fully fledged bird
 can fly high;
 food should be enough,
 tea should be enough
 for the distinguished youth
 to be full of energy.
 Out of nourishment,
 short of tea,
 now Wu Song
 was going around to look for food and tea.
 The moment [he] entered those
 vast and beautiful
 great mountains and plains
 where towering peaks
 were hidden [by fog],
 he saw right in front of him
 heavy with clouds and fog,
 observing carefully,
 though early October
 it was a winter scene:
 at the foot of the cliff
 a faint sight could be seen—
 dry trees lying here and there
 withered and broken.
 Young Wu Song,
 stalking forward
 toward the cliff,
 observed carefully

over the mountain
facing the hollow
out in the sunny place of the great plains
heavy with smoke and fog
there were houses and families.
The man was thirsty and needed water,
the man was hungry and wanted food.
The scene in front of you,
there should at least be one family here.
Wu Song saw this
and went up there,
crossed many plains
came close
watching carefully again;
it was such a big house.
After careful observations
he continued forward.
A big shop
came in sight again.

A hungry man thinks of food, and a dead man thinks of rest; a poor man thinks of owning. In order to find his elder brother, Wu Song was walking along, feeling both hungry and thirsty; he ran into a larger inn. He went up and observed carefully again; what he saw was:

In front of the door
a sign was raised high up.
He looked at it repeatedly and carefully,
at those words and his surroundings,
beside the door
a sign hung.
He looked at it carefully;
there were words on it.
Wu Song came from afar
stared at it
and observed repeatedly.
On the sign
it was clearly written
that people who pass by
and all others
who stay in the inn,
walk into the restaurant
though the best wines are available
as good as honey,
one should never drink too much;
if three bowls were drunk,
it would be impossible to climb over

the towering Mount Jingyanggang in front.
Wu Song read it,
observed carefully,
walked up
close to the door.
The owner of the inn
was called Zhu Fu.

At that time, traveling people came to have a rest here; they either ate and drank and left, or stayed for the night. The inn was located on a big plain at the foot of the mountain. Zhu Fu, the owner, received travelers passing by, providing accommodation and making money for his livelihood. That day he was looking around and saw a person come up. As for his appearance, he was wearing a straw hat, carrying a stick, with brightness in the face, sharpness in the eye, a strong build, and was tall and broad in the back and waist. He did not look common, but was special instead. He was really a big fellow with a back like a tiger, a waist like a leopard, and a head like a lion. When he was observing, the boy-waiter rushed out to serve him, with a broad smile, and invited him to come inside. You could see

The diligent boy-waiter
came up warm-heartedly;
looking at the man of large build
he invited him to come inside.

Many waiters
clustered around him,
observed [him] carefully,
he seemed to be a nice man.

His face and appearance
looked like sculpted white jade,
his ability and power
like those inborn to a tiger.

People from that side
peeped at him out of curiosity.
Even white-headed Zhu Fu
looked at him out of instinct.

Wu Song from this side
looked at them with a smile.
Just because he was hungry
he had no heart to enjoy other things.
This inn
looked safe.

Wu Song went inside.
The boy-waiter came up to him
to greet him with respect,
asked him to sit in seats for distinguished guests,
with kind words
and all smiles:
“Our distinguished guest,
what would you like,
our honorable guest came from afar
and arrived here tired?
What would you like now?
What meal do you prefer?
The distance is great.
You came here tired.
Could I ask you
what you want to eat?
With a basin
I bring water
with a white towel and soap,
I put them down and invite you to wash
with kind words,
hero Wu Song.”
Quickly boy-waiters
ran here and there.
In the water that was brought up
[Wu Song] washed his burly-looking face,
wiped off sweat,
used the soap,
sat back again
on the stool behind him.
The light-paced
and quick-tongued
boy-waiter in the inn
came up immediately,

wanted to serve
this invited guest,
wiping the purple sandalwood table
clean and shining.

All kinds of sweets
were put on the table;
strong flavored
tea was poured ready,
and he was asking in time
“what do you want to eat?”

Now let's return to Wu Song. Though he was born into a poor family, he had some good points. First, he was not a womanizer; second, he was not deviant and observed social customs; third, he was strong but not proud, and could get along well with friends. Therefore [seeing the owner come to greet him] Wu Song also smiled and spoke:

"I came from afar and for some time now walked in the wild with an empty stomach, so please get me something to eat. Is there agreeable wine in this inn? If so, get it and quickly."

What required more than 100 words in both the original and the Mongolian translation from the Qing Dynasty has become a very long scene in Pajai's version, enlarged to more than ten times its length. It is said that when they sang such stories as *Canonization of the Gods*, *Zhongguo Qu*, and *Water Margin* many excellent artists could continue for several months. Comparing Pajai's passages with those from the original offers evidence for this statement.

Pajai enlarged the original mainly by the additions of contents to a roughly outlined narration. Such plot factors as the time setting (noon), Wu Song's hunger and thirst, his seeing an inn, the sign hanging in front of the inn and the words written on it, Wu Song's entry into the inn, putting down his stick, and calling for the owner to come with wine are all still pictures that appeared only momentarily; there were almost no detailed descriptions. In Pajai's version the scene followed the original narrative frame, except that he changed "midday" into "early winter in October." His major innovations consist of adding more detailed descriptions to each plot factor. For example, when it came to the description of Wu Song's journey, he incorporated such details as "those towering mountains," "those vast plains" and "dry trees lying here and there." When Wu Song felt hungry and thirsty, Pajai used the metaphor of "only a fully fledged bird / can fly high," referring to the importance of tea and food for such a "distinguished youth" as Wu Song. Likewise, he employed the narrative style of "drawing near" to describe the moment when Wu Song saw the inn. First he spoke of the air "heavy with clouds and fog," then of sighting a household, which he went up and observed; when he came closer, he finally saw clearly that it was an inn. Following that is the phrase "a dead man thinks of rest, a poor man thinks of owning," used to describe the psyche of Wu Song, who was in a hurry to find a place to eat because he was hungry. When he approached the inn, Pajai's version again notes that he saw the sign and the words written on it, and finally walked in front of the inn's door. After such enrichment, each still picture, which had passed by instantly in the original, has become a set of animated galleries in a spatio-temporal continuum. The roughly outlined story of the original has become a much richer and more complex story.

III

However, mere length is not the crucial consideration. An outstanding artist would not for the sake of simple expansion make his piece tediously long and frustrate his audience. The core issue is why he should add to or adapt the story's contents. What do such changes mean to the artist? Herein lies one of the meaningful distinctions between *bensen ülger* and *ülgeren bense*.

Ülgeren bense belongs to written literature. When a reader reads *ülgeren bense*, he or she can control the process and has the time to think over the contents, independently bridging the distance between him- or herself and the work. *Bensen ülger*, however, are a singing art. The audience connects with the work through the artist's performance. An audience member follows the artist's singing closely to control his or her own thinking. Someone listening to an oral performance has no time to think back over the contents of the story. This situation requires that the artist actively adapt to the audience's speed of comprehension, making the sung story richer in real life and more concrete in feeling. Furthermore, *bensen ülger* are also works that are based on stories from hinterland China. In the past, the cultural differences between the Mongol and Han people have increased the difficulty of communication, so that the singing artist needed to reform *ülgeren bense* on a larger scale when performing.

We can find these important features in Pajai's singing. In the translated passages above, Pajai has increased the density of details in the following aspects. First, he repeatedly sang about the natural environment with phrases such as "The day was fine, the sun was bright," "those towering mountains," "those vast plains," "dry trees lying here and there," "heavy with clouds and fog," "towering peaks," "vast and beautiful" great plains, and so on. The nomadic way of Mongolian life relies on nature: the Mongols cherish a unique love for nature, feel a deep connection with it, and observe it with special care. Pajai repeatedly sang about how Wu Song gazed at the surrounding mountains and their peaks on his journey, portraying a man who loves nature. Such moments betray the feelings of both singer and audience.

Second, Pajai sang repeatedly about how Wu Song walked closer to the inn step by step, observing it. For example, he notices that "out in the sunny place of the great plains / heavy with smoke and fog / there are houses and families," and he "came close / watching carefully again / it was such a big house." This description embodies the singer's as well as the Mongols'

common life experiences. The population in Inner Mongolia has been sparse since ancient times. When people traveled the Mongolian region either on horseback or on foot, they would feel extremely pleased to run into a household, and would keep watching it from afar with a particular feeling. In the past, singing artists had to travel extensively in order to earn their livelihood; when they found signs of human habitations on their long journey, they would be most impressed.

Third, Pajai concentrated on Wu Song's entry into the inn, his and the owner's mutual observation, and the waiter's warm reception. For example, in the eyes of Zhu Fu, the owner, Wu Song appeared to have "a back like a tiger, and a waist like a leopard," while "his head looked like a lion."⁵ To the boy-waiter, the new arrival "seemed to be a nice man," and in Wu Song's mind "this inn / looked safe." The waiter also expressed an interest in Wu Song's journey, asked him what he wanted to have, brought water and soap, and wiped the table on which he laid sweets. On the one hand, such detailed descriptions reflect the fact that, due to the sparse population in Inner Mongolia, people would closely observe the strangers they met; on the other hand, it also imaged their hospitality.

If we explore further, there will be many similar instances, of course. From the few examples we have cited we can already get a sense of the massive addition of details by Pajai, details he introduced to make his stories closer to the life experiences of his Mongolian audience and rich in Mongolian cultural flavor and aesthetics. It would also be correct to infer that this enlarged passage reflects a singing artist's expression of his own feelings during his long journey.

In the original Chinese text, Wu Song's story also started with his leaving Song Jiang and going to Yanggu County on foot in search of his elder brother. Before that point there is little description of him. However, after he drank wine in the inn, he was soon thrown into the plot of beating the tiger. This sudden development would seem improper to the ear of the Mongols, who are used to the slow pace of epic singing. Thus, in order to let the audience evolve some concrete ideas before Wu Song fought the ferocious tiger, it was necessary to add the above details.

Both Pajai's libretto and the Mongolian translation from the Qing Dynasty have eliminated the mention of midday in the original. In the

⁵ "With a back like a tiger, and a waist like a leopard"—such descriptions should bear the influence of Han culture. In Chinese there is the description: "with a back like a tiger and a waist like a bear," which is used to describe the strong body of a hero. The Mongols seldom use "bear" to describe the hero and therefore it was replaced by "leopard."

Mongolian translation it was replaced by the phrase “that day [he] traveled far.” Pajai’s libretto does not use these actual words, but describes how Wu Song climbs over mountain peaks, which amounts to describing how he “traveled far.” In the original work, “it was midday that day” was followed by “[he] trekked and felt hungry and thirsty”—the reason why he entered the inn. In both Pajai’s libretto and the Mongolian translation, the cause of Wu Song’s feeling hungry and thirsty was “traveling far.” Though the change is not a great one, it mirrors the different customs of the Han plowing culture and the Mongolian nomadic culture. For peasants plowing in the central plains the work was very intense, and they made lunch the most important meal of the day; they were accustomed to this schedule and felt hungry at noon. On the other hand, the nomadic Mongols enjoyed less intense labor, herding their animals in remote pasturelands; they often ate only breakfast and supper, supper being the more important meal. This difference in customs is probably the reason why both Pajai’s libretto and the Mongolian translation have eliminated “it was midday that day” from the original: they both trace the cause for Wu Song’s hunger and thirst to “traveling far.”

Singing *bensen ülger*, like singing traditional Mongolian epic, demands great linguistic talent on the part of the artist. The bard will make use of this talent to adapt the prose style of *ülgeren bense* to the prose-and-verse combination that characterizes *bensen*. Eloquence and improvisation are basic for a distinguished artist. In Pajai’s libretto the genre of verse has taken up more space, and even the prose constituent has the flavor of verse. The language is simple, fluent, and natural, revealing the linguistic charm of a master story-singer of a generation.

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***Bab Sgrung*: Tibetan Epic Singers**

Zhambei Gyaltsho

Like oral epics from countries around the world, the heroic epic of King Gesar found among Tibetans is mainly popularized in two ways: through oral song and through handwritten copies and woodcuts. However, the most common and the most important factor is reliance upon each singer to hand the tradition down from one generation to the next. Through the process of spreading King Gesar's story, singers and storytellers who are especially gifted play a very important role. They directly create, transmit, and propagate the epic. They are "the people's artists," the artists of the masses; they incarnate the ability and intelligence as well as the spirit of the common person. Those singers who naturally possess extraordinary talents have made contributions to the continuity and development of Tibetan culture. They will always be cherished and held in highest esteem by our children and our children's children. Without their exceptional skills, this great epic could quite possibly disappear from the mainstream of history and from all of Tibetan culture; future generations would lose a precious cultural treasure. In researching the *Gesar* tradition, careful consideration of singers and storytellers is essential.

Different Types of Singers and Storytellers of *Gesar* Epic

Inspired through dreams

Called *bab sgrung* in Tibetan, this type of performer is able to recite *Gesar* epic solely through the medium of dreams. Most of those who are gifted in this way say that when they were young they had a mysterious dream once or twice. Some say that it was so intense that they dreamed continuously and did not wake up for several days. During this time they experienced hallucinations that seemed like their own experiences, as if they had gone on all of King Gesar's expeditions themselves. When they woke up, most were seriously ill for a while. After recovering, they suddenly

changed into another person. They radiated buoyancy and had a quick, agile creativity; it was as if they were watching a film of Gesar playing in their minds. In their hearts they had an uninhibited passion and impetuosity; in the pit of their stomachs they felt extremely depressed. They had an overpowering urge to tell the story of Gesar: indeed, if they did not recite it they would feel unhappy and uncomfortable. Once they started, it was as if the narration were a mighty river flowing quickly—never exhausted, and neither deviating from nor hesitating to follow the storyline. This pace would be kept up for a few days, a few months, or a few years, to the point that even if they were to continue for a whole lifetime they still could not finish the story.

Some people are puzzled and not entirely convinced when encountering this type of phenomenon. Is it mysterious? Is it impossible to believe? Most of the singers and storytellers themselves have thought as much in the past and think as much presently. Thrapa, Samthrub, Ngangring, Gyumen, Tsering Wangdu, and Tsedon—all of these talented artists, perhaps unknown to readers of *Oral Tradition*—have lived among their own people. Is it believable for them? We do not have any scientific means or method of proving the phenomenon true.

Old Man Thrapa chanted 25 cantos in his lifetime. Due to the efforts of the Gesar Research Institute at the University of Tibet, a total of 600,000 lines of poetry and 6,000,000 words have been transcribed and acoustically recorded. What is the point of counting all these lines and words? His recorded repertoire corresponds to 25 times the length of Homer's epics, 15 times the length of the Indian epic *Ramayana*, three times the length of *Mahabharata*, and five times the length of the classic Chinese novel *The Dreams of the Red Chamber*. These numbers are remarkable. They enumerate the most systematic, most complete set of singing and storytelling that we have in writing today. It is a legacy and a brilliant tribute to the wisdom and talents of singer Old Man Thrapa.¹

Gyumen, a young female artist, has already told more than 20 cantos and an old performer, Samthrub, has recited more than 40—more than Old Man Thrapa—or approximately 700,000 lines and 7,000,000 words. Tsering

¹ The recordings of Thrapa are stored in the Gesar Research Institute of Tibet University. He sang *The Divine Celestial Kingdom* (Chinese: *Xian jie zhan bu*). There are also portions published by Beijing Minorities Publishing House and the People's Publishing House of Tibet.

Wangdu, from Zikanggula Mountain, is able to tell 120 cantos and has already performed seven of them. These are not rumors, but actual realities.²

Inspired through enlightenment

In Tibetan *dag snang sgrung* means to suddenly “see the light.” Since it is sudden enlightenment, the singer has only a very short recollection that quickly passes away. This sort of artist is not called *bab sgrung* (which implies one able to recite many cantos for long periods of time). Usually those who experience sudden awareness can tell only one or two cantos for a short period of time. While they are telling the story they do so vividly, dramatically, and passionately, and then after a while they simply stop speaking. If others ask them to tell the story, they are unable to do so and say that they do not have any knowledge. Sometimes some of them perform with true gusto and excitement, but at other times they are totally unable to perform at all. It is as if they changed into altogether different people. The example of this type of artist significantly increases the mysteriousness of the phenomenon of *Gesar* epic singing.

Inspired through hearing

Thos sgrung means listening or hearing in Tibetan. Those who are skilled in this way listen to others tell the story and then themselves are able to tell it. Usually, however, they are able to perform only one or two cantos or a portion of one, such as the “Ode to the horse,” “Ode to the mountain,” “Ode to the hat,” and so on. Most of these bards recognize that their abilities are not supernatural or exceptional; they simply learned by listening to others.

Inspired to chant

In Tibetan the term is *don sgrung*, which simply means to chant. These performers have two characteristics: (1) they are literate and are able to chant from a book, and (2) their vocal quality is fairly good and their

² The recordings of Gyumen and Samthrub are presently stored at the Gesar Office of the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, and are being prepared for publication.

chanting is magnificent. Most of those who appear on radio and TV and as part of other public media performances are of this type.

Inspired through discovering “Hidden treasure”

A literal translation of the Tibetan *dgongs gten* is “a treasure hidden in the heart.” This means that within the heart of this type of performer is concealed a valuable treasure, namely *Gesar*, which they are able to excavate in the same way that a miner digs treasure out of the dark recesses of a mountain. The methodology involved in this excavation is dependence on their own ideas; as a result they are able to perform a lengthy epic that eventually becomes a book of *Gesar* narrative.

This style of propagation is similar to Bon’s “Oral Dissemination of the Scriptures” and Buddhism’s “Hearing Secrets Hidden in the Heart.” According to the translation, Buddha or Xian gave the Buddhist scriptures to certain predestined people for the purpose of the next generation’s fate. Some of these hid the scriptures in their heart (“virtue”) and were grasped at once by the master. Next the Door of Wisdom (*rtsa sgo phye ba*) began to open, and they were able to write books from their continuous inner sources.

As regards this type of storyteller or singer, there is an example that will explain the uniqueness of “artists with hidden secrets.” In the Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, there is a young man by the name of Guru Jianzan who belongs to this particular class of artists. Guru’s hometown is located in Chunte region. He was orphaned at a very young age and grew up in his uncle’s home. He never attended school and eventually left home to become a lama. When he was in the temple, he studied a little Tibetan, but could only recite simple texts; he was unable even to write a letter in Tibetan. When he was eighteen he married a girl who was a year or two older than he. She very much liked to listen to people recite *Gesar*, and every time a singer came through her area she would rush out to listen to him.

Sometime in 1983, her husband suddenly said to her, “You like *Gesar* so much, I’ll write you a canto. You don’t need to go out to listen to it anymore.” His wife incredulously asked him, “You can tell *Gesar*? When did you study that?” He answered, “There’s no need to study. I’ve always been able to. If you don’t believe me, I will write it out for you to see.” And he actually wrote down a canto entitled *The Prophecy of Dongshi*, the clan from which *Gesar* traditionally descended. When Guru’s fellow villagers saw it, they thought it was well-written and remarkable, so they recommended it to the office that handled *Gesar* in the Golog Tibetan

Prefecture. When the experts saw what he had written, they thought that it really was a unique canto of *Gesar*. They also thought that it was very strange that a person who had never attended school, never written an article or even a letter, could create such an excellent piece of literature. They encouraged him to continue writing now and then, and recently he has completed six or seven additional cantos. The first was formally published by Qinghai Nationalities Publishing House in 1992 and consists of more than 200,000 words.

There are others who think this so-called “tribute to virtue” is strange and do not quite understand it. But Guru Jianzan looks at his ability as though it were perfectly ordinary; he says that perhaps he was one of *Gesar*’s generals wandering the world. In addition, he has claimed that he can write down all of *Gesar*, and has already committed about ten cantos to written form.³

Artists by “circular light”

Pra phab is a Bon technical term in Tibetan. When sorcerers are subduing gods or working divination, they are able to see good or ill luck by looking into a bronze mirror. The entire process is referred to as the “circular light.”

This particular method came to be used by artists telling the epic. Standing before the audience, the narrator places a bronze mirror on a pile of fragrant eucalyptus, and, after reading scripture and praying, begins to sing facing the bronze mirror. It is said that he can see all the exploits of *Gesar* in the mirror. These artists often say that they themselves do not understand *Gesar* at all, but are able to sing his story to the audience from the contents revealed to them. If they do not have the mirror to gaze into, they cannot tell any of the story. However, if any other person looks into it, all he or she will see is his or her own reflection. People explain this reality by maintaining that it is not their “predestination”; only those who are “fated” are able to view King *Gesar*’s exploits in the bronze mirror. There are three types of artists inspired by “circular light”: those able to recite but unable to write *Gesar* epic; those able to write, but unable to recite it; and those able to do both. The last type of artist usually writes the canto and then recites it while looking at what was written. In Leiwuqizong of Chamdo region in

³ The writings of Guru Jianzan are stored in the *Gesar* Institute office in the Golok Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and presently are being prepared for publication. He himself says that he is able to write down all of *Gesar*, a total of 120 books.

Tibet, Khacha Zhapa is a performer of this sort; he has so far written more than ten cantos.

Artists who “excavate treasure houses”

These “excavators” are called *gter don* in Tibetan, meaning “one who digs for the story of *Gesar*.” These storytellers who discover, excavate, and compile *Gesar* become known as “middle virtue.” The greatest distinction of these people is that they are educated and belong to the upper class; there are many who are monks and do not lead the poor lifestyle so typical of singers and storytellers. It could be added that these are a small group of people who come from within their own communities: they are warmhearted, cultured people who are able to organize and pass on *Gesar*.

Some of these excavators may really have found earlier transcripts that they themselves did not—in fact, could not—write. But most of them take notes and organize their story according to the structure and methodology used by singers and storytellers. Afterwards they literally bury these texts and later “excavate” them in the presence of other people, all on the pretense of discovering ancient texts and certifying themselves as authentic. *Gesar* versions as told by this class of artists reveal substantial differences from the original singers’ performances; any new performance will therefore require modifications in the form of additions, deletions, or substitutions.

The last four types of performers all belong to the oral tradition, *kha sgrung*; the fifth and sixth use both orality and literacy. Only the excavators are literate and able to arrange their stories according to the notes they take; most of the transcripts are a result of their own hard work.

If we look at the situation up to the present, more than 200 cantos exist in all China. In addition to the main texts, there are about 120 other cantos. Some of these have been started but not completed, while others include only a few very simple overviews; altogether the incomplete performances number about 40 cantos. Publishers believe that these may be worth examining or using for research, but do not have enough value to publish; at this point, none have appeared or are being considered for publication. Those that contain fairly complete stories, albeit simplistic plots and plain language, reveal that the level of the transcriptions was not that high, but they have enough merit to be published. Finally, there are about 40 cantos that contain complete stories, interesting plots, and rich language that are considered the best of this type. Over the last ten years Old Man Zhapa and more than ten other storytellers have produced about

60% of the total. If we look at the transcriptions of these cantos, the plot, character development, content, and language all are fairly complete, rich, and lively.

From this simple statistical overview, we can see that singers and storytellers still constitute one of the main cultural sources within the communities involved. Of all of the different types, *bab sgrung*, the “dream-induced” performances, are the most critical to *Gesar*; they are also the focal point of our research.

An Ancient Legend

There are many different kinds of storytellers, but in spite of differences in age, origin, life experiences, background, and so on, all of them tell the same story. Take *King Saimacheng* as an example. Old Man Zhapa, from Chamdo, told this canto more than 60 years ago. The bard Yumei Zhengzheng is 60 years younger than he and comes from Nagchu (Black Water), more than 1,000 kilometers away. Most of her life was spent around Kanggula Mountain, where she often tended sheep and yaks. Even farther away on the grasslands of Golok is Ngaring. There are also others whose situation is just as singular, yet when they tell the story of *King Saimacheng* the basic plot and the main characters are mostly the same. They all say that their gift of storytelling came to them via dreams rather than from instruction or influence by any teacher or master. How could such a long, complicated story be committed to memory? Even if it were taught, not every performer would be able to remember it. What do the artists themselves say about this phenomenon? Without prior consultation, they all told this ancient legend:

During the time when King Gesar’s mighty army practiced Buddhism, his concubine, Weisa, was stolen away by a black demon. In order to rescue her, Gesar went to the demon world. Once there, his precious horse happened to step on a frog and Gesar felt terrible. Even though he was the king of a great army, to kill a frog was still a sin. He jumped off his horse, picked up the frog, and began rubbing it gently; he blessed it and begged the gods to protect it. Then he asked that he himself be delivered to the evil demons and the frog be allowed to live among men, saying “May you become like the hairs on a horse of many colors.” But when the frog turned into a man, he became known as Zhongken, Gesar’s own singer. This was the first singer recorded in Tibetan history, and it was the frog incident that brought the two of them together. Later, he became the peripatetic singer for

the huge audience of this vast, snowy land. In fact, all singers are thought to be reincarnations of that frog.

What did Gesar mean in the story when he wished that the frog would be “just like the hairs on the horse of many colors”? Many singers say that there are two levels of meaning. One interpretation begins from the fact that horses have a great deal of hair. Just like the proverbial hairs on one’s head, or grains of sand on the seashore, this phrase implies that no matter how many times the story of *Gesar* is told there will always be more to tell. The other perspective holds that a “many-colored horse” means that horsehair is not just one color, but many and very diverse. If there are discrepancies among the artists who recite *Gesar*, that should not be considered strange; such variety was forecast by the invocation Gesar spoke many years ago.

The Skills of Memory

How can a totally illiterate person, an artist who cannot even write his or her own name, compose multiple cantos, thousands upon thousands of lines of poetry, millions of words? If all this were written down, it would be the equivalent of many very thick books. The world does not boast a poet, writer, or researcher who could recite the tomes of another person. How could these minstrels learn or remember so much? It was mentioned above that there are a few singers who belong to the *bab sgrung* group, the “dreamers.” All of them reported that when they were young they had a mysterious dream; afterwards, they were inexplicably able to recite *Gesar*. What are the ins and outs of the intrinsic relationship between the dream and the epic? Some people think that this explanation is not credible, or even that it is nonsense, superstition, or idealism. When singers discuss such dreams, some people consider what they say to be superstitious religious belief or propaganda; in the past that kind of speech was the subject of much criticism.

How can this confusion revolving around memorization be unraveled? Is it something that can be scientifically explained? We can analyze it from a few different perspectives as seen below.

Environmental factors

There are many ways in which a singer could have obtained the ability to recite *Gesar*. The most important one is environmental factors, including natural, social, cultural, and familial. It is necessary to consider the

interwoven relationships between the singer, his or her culture, and the epic itself. For example, concentrations of present-day *Gesar* singers are found in Ali, Hei He (Nagchu), Golok, and Yushu, as well as regions like Chamdo, Gannan, Gyantse, and Aba. Of these, half of Chamdo and Gyantse is agricultural and half is pastoral (nomadic); the other areas are all pastoral. In addition, all of them have an average elevation of above 4,000 meters. This is not to suggest that there are artists in all of these areas, but to say that the regions where the artists do live are fairly uniform.

Most of the artists are herdsmen; a few are farmers. They come from places with an underdeveloped economy and disadvantaged educational conditions. More than 80 percent of herdsman are illiterate, for example. They live scattered across a vast region where transportation is a major problem, and there is little communication among various communities. Many of them are nomadic, thus meeting a requirement for spreading *Gesar*. Children in these areas are nurtured in an ancient, traditional culture from birth, within which the story of *Gesar* becomes their daily textbook. From the epic they learn culture, astronomy, religion, and their own history; whatever they desire to study, they are able to study in *Gesar*. This kind of experience, from generation to generation, permeates their blood and their soul. On the other hand, Lhasa, Xigatse, or Yadong, powerful and prosperous areas with fairly strong economies and powerful religious structures, have not produced any outstanding singers.

The influence of the home is also a very important factor. Although *Gesar* singers have not had formal education, their families (including distant relatives) have a major influence on their upbringing. For example, Yumei's father, a famous chanter, no doubt had a great influence on her. When she was seventeen years old, he passed away and she took up the mantle. Of course, she did not simply memorize each line and each word, but she was deeply influenced by listening to his chanting from a very early age. Guru Jianzan was eighteen or nineteen when he began to write *Gesar*. Although he had previously neither written nor sung *Gesar* epic, his uncle, with whom he lived for most of his childhood, was also a famous chanter and no doubt heavily influenced Guru. Although Old Man Thrapa did not have any chanters among his immediate relatives, his hometown has several very famous ones. When he was younger, Old Man Thrapa often accompanied them and offered them his help.

Extraordinary art, innate intelligence, and ability

Although environmental and hereditary factors may be present, they do not guarantee that one will be a talented singer. Usually these artists also combine a natural talent and intelligence with an artistic temperament and rich creative skills. In addition, an artist's memory must be above average. Repeating from memory more than ten, not to mention scores of cantos, is extremely difficult for the average person, but for one who has the inborn ability it is possible. Modern science tells us that there is substantial unused storage capacity in the human brain. When we add the cultural atmosphere in which a child grows up, he or she has the potential to be deeply influenced by an adult who is telling a story, and in fact can subconsciously commit the whole mysterious story to memory just through the process of listening. From a scientific point of view, this is plausible and possible, and it means that it is people, not gods, who are creating and passing on the great epic.

Historically, Tibetan religious culture places much importance on reciting memorized texts. Both monks and lay scholars must memorize and recite numerous ancient books and records. Many scholars do not use books or notes to teach others; everything is committed to memory. In order for the listeners to understand the speaker or teacher, they too must memorize many classics and Buddhist scriptures.

Singers and storytellers who grow up in this type of culture can develop a great capacity for memorization as a matter of course. The most important factor is that they travel all around and are able to take in the vast plateau regions, tall mountains, and river valleys. This experience helps to broaden their thinking, open up their minds, and strengthen their memory skills.

Mysterious dreams that open the Door of Wisdom

What special stage must a gifted artist—one who possesses extraordinary innate talents and surpassing memory skills—reach in order to achieve the full development of his or her artistic abilities? According to traditional Tibetan thought, it must first be one's fate; then, one must depend on the gods to open the Door of Wisdom (*rtsa sgo phye ba*). Through dreams they obtain the skills to recite *Gesar* and so fulfill this fate. Then they ask a teacher or lama to read scriptures and pray for them in order to open the Door of Wisdom. Old Man Thrapa, Samthrup, Tsering Wangdu, and the others all went through this sort of process.

This ceremony of reading the scriptures and praying has a psychological as well as sociological benefit (recognition in the sight of the audience). Before this point, they have already acquired the ability to recite *Gesar*. But what exactly was the catalyst that opened that Door of Wisdom? It was the dream, that mysterious dream. In earlier times dreams were associated with gods, ghosts, and spirits (the most important being the association between dreaming and the spirits of the dead); it was thought that these spirits were either prophesying, giving direction, or trying to hurt somebody. The singers were the only avenue people had to try to understand dreams. With the rise of modern science, especially the development of psychology, medicine, and biology, there are of course other ways to understand such phenomena.

The results of modern scientific research tell us that the human brain is like a tape recorder: all previous experiences, even unconscious ones, are recorded and remembered. The human being is in fact characterized by the potential ability to remember all information, but there is also the phenomenon of forgetting (imperfect recall); the individual does not even know what it is that he or she is “recording.”

With this type of “recording” in mind, we can see that there are many different ways for memories to surface. Perhaps those who learn *Gesar* through dreaming or through other ways are really only recalling childhood recordings. This is a more scientific way to talk about the same phenomena that others would refer to in religious terms such as “enlightenment” or opening the Door of Wisdom.

Singers say that it is through these mysterious dreams that the Door of Wisdom was opened and that they are able to chant *Gesar*’s story without stopping and without deviating. One could also describe this phenomenon as a “dream-induced method.” If this point of view is tenable, it could help us to fully understand the uniqueness of these singers and the phenomena of dream-induced epics from a traditional philosophical stance.

The structure of Gesar lends itself to memorization

The structure of Tibetan *Gesar* epic is fairly simple and holds to a consistent pattern that is easy to grasp and commit to memory. First, the structure is a syllogism. In *Gesar*, with a few exceptions, the stories are about a war; each story breaks down into the following three parts: the genesis of war, the narrative of the war (the main portion of the story), and the end of the war. The participants come from three areas: the kingdom of heaven, the kingdom of men, or the kingdom of dragons. Each country

involved in the war also regularly focuses on three aspects: King Gesar, thirty heroes representing all the high-ranking officers, and the ordinary people. Regardless of what canto is recited, three groups of names must be memorized: those of characters (including gods), places, and things (e.g., weapons of warfare, horses, and so on). Some of the specific details can be forgotten or changed. But the main characters, place-names, and names of important things cannot be forgotten, changed, or mistaken. The literary form of the epic likewise has three features: rhyme or verse, prose, or a combination of prose and rhyme. The main canto consists of the beginning, the body (the main content), and the conclusion. There are many other examples that could further illustrate this structure, but these exemplify the main structure and content necessary for reciting *Gesar*. Without these basic ingredients it is impossible to give a correct rendering.

Impromptu creations are also a common characteristic of folk literature. Because the structure of an epic is grand in scale, involving many different characters and stretching over a long period of time, it is important that it have an extemporaneous element. This becomes especially clear during performances. Since it is not possible for singers to recite the epic completely in one performance (they usually are able to chant only one passage or incident), they remain flexible as to what they perform and how they recite it. Usually they take cues from what they think the audience desires, adding their own individual style. The story may be long or short, involving many or few characters, adding to or subtracting from the customary content—this is all typical of the way the singer “creates” as he or she goes, sensing the mood of the audience.

Looking at this audience-inspired medium, it is important to understand that no telling is identical to another. Performances are not simple repetitions, but dynamic re-creations that spring from the singer-audience interaction. For this reason the singer’s artistic skills, natural talents, and intelligence are crucial, as are the contributions of generations and generations of previous audiences. Without the cooperation of many audiences, the whole energy and vitality of the transmission process would be lost.

Repetition

The repetition of one style or form of chanting is also an important way for the singer to enhance his memory. A distinct characteristic of folk oral literature is that it does not allow the audience the opportunity to see and read the written production, but only to hear it. Written literature can be

pored over, researched, and examined repeatedly, but oral performance provides only the actual instance of chanting or reciting for the audience to understand or take in the story. In order to bring the audience along, the singers or chanters use repetition; in an exciting way they build to the main part and then repeat it. In a story as complex and as vast as *Gesar*, this recurrent style plays an important role both in keeping the audience involved and in helping the singer to recall the storyline. Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and other ancient epics, though much shorter than *Gesar*, also make use of this sort of repetition.

Singers and their Tradition

The story about the frog illustrates that the spirit of the singers has not been destroyed, but is changed and wanders the earth. Not a few of these artists believe that they are roaming the earth in the form of the frog that Gesar encountered or that they have some sort of predestined link to Gesar. Old Man Thrapa also believed that men have spirits that can wander the world, but that he was not fortunate enough to be the descendant of a famous general of Gesar; instead, he saw himself as descended from that famous frog who moved through the world. He always told his friends: "After I die, please take my body to Balasehou Mountain; that mountain has much energy and it is only there that my spirit can return to wander the earth." According to his relatives and the sky burial attendant, there was a very obvious horse trail ribbon painted on the top of his skull when he passed away. The idea of the spirits communicating with one another also reflects the attitude towards the artist's creative process. One of the deepest feelings of those who sing *Gesar* is that they are not creating or telling a story, but narrating history. To tell the story of *Gesar* is thus the same as rehearsing the history of Tibetans. For this reason, they want to be a little less entertaining and a little more mysterious.

In the process of contacting *Gesar* performers, I discovered that they are as a rule open-minded, intelligent, and emotional. They have not pursued much in the way of material gain, and are content with a simple, unpretentious lifestyle. They have a philosophy that advocates "never too full and never too hungry," meaning simply that if they were "too full" they would begin to be lazy and indulgent, and if they were "too hungry" they would be too concerned with their next meal to be able to tell *Gesar*. In this world there are not many who are able to achieve this sort of balance. These singers are both subconsciously and self-consciously aware of their responsibility as links in the generations of storytelling. They also have a

profound belief that this ancient epic can be handed down for generations to come. Some performers, when beginning to recite the “Ode to Ballads,” often declare with pride:

Even if one day
A wild, racing horse could change into a withered tree,
A herd of spotless sheep could change into a rock,
A mighty snow mountain disappear without a trace,
If streams and rivers should cease to flow,
If the stars in the heaven should lose their twinkle,
Even if the sun would not rise in the morning,
The telling of *Gesar* will still go on
From generation to generation.

Through researching these outstanding singers of *Gesar*, we can understand the greatness of the epic itself. It is the creation not of just a few people, but of whole generations of Tibetans throughout history. Tibetans have a saying: “In every person’s mountains there is a canto of *Gesar*.” That is, *Gesar* lives in the memory and oral traditions of the people themselves. The existence of such artists is a priceless contribution toward research on the origins and development of literature; all of them offer immeasurable insights. The great heroic epic of *Gesar* created by Tibetans reflects their brilliance, their wisdom, and the treasure of their knowledge.

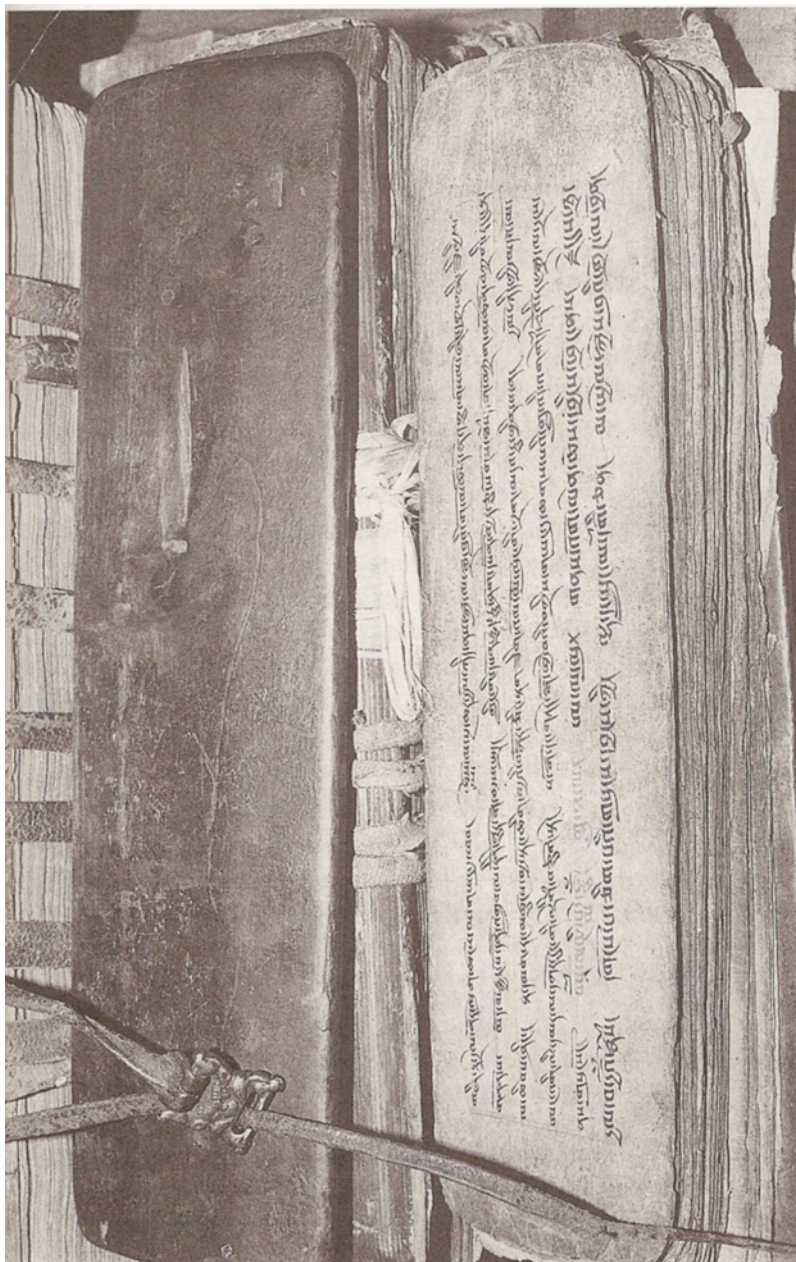
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Trans. by Ellen Bartee

On the Study of the Narrative Structure of Tibetan Epic: *A Record of King Gesar*

Yang Enhong

The Tibetan epic *A Record of King Gesar* (hereafter *Gesar*) has been passed from generation to generation, largely through two channels of transmission: singing and the printing of manuscripts and woodblock prints. Printed editions of the epic, especially woodblock editions, appeared only in the last several hundred years.¹ This, together with a high rate of illiteracy among the Tibetans, means that the scope of epic transmission was quite limited and relied heavily on the memory of men and women, illiterate folk artists. The riddle of memorized epics is a subject of concern for the scholarly community. With an eye to the traditional Tibetan religious conception and modes of narration—their particular oral traditions are a means of keeping records of scriptures—the author of this paper has visited nearly 40 living Tibetan artists in order to study the artists' lives and performing milieus, their learning processes, and their ways of memorizing (Yang 1995b:96-105). Such research perspectives place emphasis on the epic inheritors and transmitters, their social backgrounds, and similar humanistic aspects; not enough attention is given to the aspect of literature, to the narrative logic of the epic itself. Inspired by Oral-Formulaic Theory, or Parry-Lord Theory, the author undertakes an empirical study of the narrative structure of *Gesar* in order to generalize the normative features and

¹ Coexisting with the ballad forms, the origin and development of epic editions follow a trajectory from master copies to handwritten copies to woodblock copies. They crisscrossed each other in development, and coexist on occasion even now. The author, based on the collections of manuscripts and woodblock copies from various places within the country, calculates that there are 289 copies, which comes to 80 kinds all together if different editions of the same kind are excluded. The earliest handwritten edition known is by Rdo rin brtan vdzin dpal vbyor, an eighteenth-century Tibetan writer who finished *The Story of Gesar: Conquering the Hor* in 1779.



laws that govern the ways Tibetan epics and oral traditions are kept in memory and to explore further the riddle of how artists memorize epics.

This paper bases its discussions largely on two editions of *Gesar*. The first is *Conquering the Demon Canto* (*bdud vdul*) (TLED 1980), the Tibetan edition. It was edited according to the manuscript of Dkon mchog tshe brtan, who himself was a singer (cf. Yang 1995b:238-43), and Yu Xixian.² The other is *Conquering the Northern King Klu btsan* (*byang klu btsan rgyal po vdu ba*) (Grags pa 1997), based on a performance by the artist Grags pa (1906-86) in Tibetan.³

These two editions, being two variants of the same story, share basically similar content. The story goes as follows. On the northern border of the Kingdom of Gling, there is a demon king who is especially fond of eating small boys and girls. He is by nature brutal and brings disaster to commoners. Once he carried off Gesar's second concubine Man bza. In order to slay the cannibal monster and save his sweetheart, Gesar went on a singlehanded expedition. With the help of Man bza, he finally killed the monster. Man bza, however, did not want to return home but wished to be together with Gesar, to receive his love and care, and so she gave him drugs of forgetfulness; these kept him in the northern monster kingdom for twelve years. During the twelve years the Kingdom of Gling suffered greatly: enemies attacked from both inside and outside. The Kingdom of Hor to the north invaded and abducted Gesar's beloved concubine Vbrug mo.⁴ This passage is placed after the three parts of "Necromancy on the Heavenly Mountain" (*lhagling gab rtse dgu skor*), "The Birth of the Hero" (*vkhrungs*

² It was published privately by the Northwestern Institute of Nationalities in 1963, and later formally after Dkon mchog tshe brtan cross-checked and corrected it.

³ Grags pa, a famous Tibetan *Gesar* singer, born in the Dbal vbar county of the Chab mdo district, spent his life in the mountains and lived by singing epic. He could perform 34 complete cantos of *Gesar*. He went to the Tibet University at Lhasa at their invitation to make the recordings. Before his death in 1986, 26 cantos of the epic were recorded, totaling 998 hours of tape (Yang 1995b:146-57).

⁴ Grags pa's version has several differences: (1) Man bza was taken away before Gesar was inaugurated as the king; he vowed to get her back after becoming king. Therefore there is no such plot in which Man bza was taken away by force in this part. (2) On the way to conquering the monster in the north, Gesar bid goodbye to Vbrug mo and prophesied to her that the Hor would launch an invasion. (3) The General Manager told him about the invasion by the Hor and the discussions by Gling military generals on counterattack on his way home and after his return. The handwritten copy places it under the section on "Counterattacking the Hor." Actually, "The Invasion of the Hor," the first part of the *Hor Gling*, took place at the same time as *Conquering the Demon*.

gling me tog ra ba), and “Becoming King in a Horse-race” (*rta rgyug rgyal vjog*), which is the last expedition for Gesar; all together, these constitute the first part of this exciting four-part monster-conquering epic.⁵

The Subject of the Epic and its Overall Structure

The epic of *Gesar* is admirable, praiseworthy for its rich content and great length, clearly defined subject, and inclusive, open structure. From beginning to end the epic centers on Gesar’s conquest of demon kings, the release of innocent people from oppression, and the establishment of a united, stable, strong, and prosperous state. This is the subject of the epic and it is also the major dimension that links together all of its cantos and chapters.⁶ Among the massive variety of plots and characters in the numerous parts and cantos of the epic, Gesar’s conquests of various demon kings is the central element and stands out clearly. The making of stories and plots in the epic always centers on this focal point.

The epic poem starts with the descent of Gesar to Middle Earth, where he is reincarnated among mankind, and continues by narrating his birth and the struggles and hardships of his life. The epic does not recount any battle scene until after Gesar has proclaimed himself king by virtue of winning a horse-race. From this point on, most of the epic, and almost every canto, involves battle scenes that are centered on the main story-line. Demons are killed, evils are exterminated, and wise kings are sworn in to rule the states that are subjugated to the Kingdom of Gling. The treasures of the defeated states are distributed among the commoners or taken back to the Kingdom of Gling. Having fought many wars, and with the universe restored to peace, Gesar has fulfilled his mission to Middle Earth. He has saved his mother,

⁵ The other three parts are: “The War in Hor Gling” (*hor gling gyul vgyed*), “The War in Vjang Gling” (*vjang gling gyul*), and “The War in Mon Gling” (*mon gling gyul vgyed*).

⁶ The popular editions of *Gesar* are of two kinds, namely chapter-editions and part-editions. Chapter-editions break all, or only the main plots, into chapters, making up a book. This kind of edition is distinguished for its simple plots and clear contexts; therefore people can read it through in a short time. The part-editions provide a single copy of a particular war or an important plot. These stories are complete and can make a series or be performed separately. Some chapters of the chapter-editions correspond with some sections of the part-editions, evolving sometimes into a system of its own when they merge with each other. By comparing the corresponding parts and chapters, we have found that the part-edition is much more detailed than the chapter-edition.

his wife, and others from the land of the dead, and he returns to his heavenly world.

On different singers' lips the story has different details, yet the main story-line of *Gesar* has maintained its integrity even though the epic has snowballed in size. The many wars—involving all aspects of the peoples' lives and complications in the relationships between the characters—are expressed in thousands and thousands of words.

The main form of the epic *Gesar* is an open structure. In this sense, generations of artists from various regions have capitalized on their talent and directed one lively play after another on the *Gesar* stage. The whole epic can be divided into three parts: the first tells the birth of Gesar and his life until he is proclaimed king; the second, the core of the epic, narrates various expeditions and several wars, great and small; and, finally, the third part describes the pacification of the three worlds, the rescue of Gesar's mother and wife out of the land of the dead, and his return to the heavenly world. It seems that the epic sets rigid bounds for the first and third parts; the artists differ little from each other in their performances of these. The second part, however, is variable and the number of its cantos can be large or small.⁷ The cantos that narrate battle scenes are not subject to a strict order; instead the singer arranges them at his or her discretion. After the artist concludes the second part, he or she simply picks up the third part.

Some talented artists realize their full artistic capacity in the second part. In addition to the major plots, they insert small interludes that are not independent wars but rather the ending of the previous part or the prelude to the next part. The more details the artist gives, the more the length of the interlude increases. There are individual artists who create new plots by cleverly making use of their rich knowledge of society, history, and geography. In this way, the second part of the epic differs in a variety of features from one artist to another.

Prosimetric Epic Form

The *Gesar* epic adopts a song form that consists of prose and verse; the Tibetan people are fond of this form. The prose relates the contents and plots of the story, while the verse mainly deals with dialogue and the

⁷ It is said among the folk that there are eighteen big *rdzong*, namely fortresses, for the epic. Each war Gesar fought to capture a fortress is counted as one *rdzong*, which adds up to eighteen warring parts all together. Artists from different regions may perform different plots, though the main frames are the same (Yang 1995b:42-45).

expression of emotions. Usually, the proportion of verse is larger than that of prose. The verses are not a repetition of the prose: they provide their own separate content. The prose sounds very emotive and fluctuates in tone and rhythm. The versification usually follows closely either the widespread *glu* style⁸ or the free style of folk singing; in both styles each verse consists of seven or eight syllables, with occasional exceptions, in a form that is relatively free.

This prosimetric epic medium is traditional among the Tibetans, and was popular as early as the Tibet Dynasty (c. 600-850 CE). The classic Tibetan genre detailing the biographies of their kings illustrates this style. After making an oath, the Tibetan King sings (Wang and Chen 1980:63, 137-38):

<i>yar mo ni chu thungs kyis,</i>	The <i>yar mo</i> river is short and shallow,
<i>mdo nas ni rtsang bo</i>	From inside outward it is deep and far,
<i>bsring,</i>	
<i>yar mo ni zheng chungs</i>	The <i>yar mo</i> valley is small and narrow,
<i>kyis,</i>	Extending from south to north,
<i>lho nas ni byang du bskyed,</i>	Gather up the dispersed (tribes)!
<i>vtham vtham ni vdu vdu na!</i>	There are endless anecdotes to tell.
<i>ngag rjes ni myis myi brjod.</i>	Going on a tour of inspection everywhere,
<i>vgro vgro ni vcham vcham na,</i>	The soles of the shoes are not thick enough to wear,
<i>chags lham ni chus myi snang,</i>	From today on,
<i>da nas ni phan chad du,</i>	Don't you betray me please,
<i>khyod gyis ni nga ma gtang,</i>	I will not abandon you!
<i>nga vis ni khyod myi gtang!</i>	If I give you up,
<i>da vis ni khyod gtang na,</i>	The blue heaven will protect you!
<i>dgung mthav ni srung du rung!</i>	
<i>khyod kyis ni nga gtang na,</i>	If you betray me,
<i>ngas po ni rmad du rung!</i>	I will punish you!

Like *Gesar*, the above sample combines prose and verse. In terms of narrative style, we can see the embryo of the epics in the literatures of the

⁸ *Glu* is a kind of Tibetan folk song, also known as a mountain song. It has several stanzas, usually three, and each stanza consists of two or more lines. Each line, in turn, consists of from seven to nine syllables.

Dunhuang Grotto.⁹ A convention of *Gesar* epic is the singer's self-introduction, including his family origin, genealogy, and the environment and locations at the time of singing. The following example illustrates these elements (Tibetan language: Gun chog tshe brtan 1981:117-18; Chinese: Wang and He 1985:109):

<i>sa vdi dang sa ngo ma shes na,</i>	If you do not know this place,
<i>rma klung dal vbebs gyas zur</i>	This is the right corner of the slow-
<i>dang,</i>	going Yellow River,
<i>ri sbrul mgo vdra bavi gyon zur</i>	The left side of the Snake-Head
<i>na.</i>	Mountain.
<i>dpon jo ru sprul bavi srin gling</i>	It is the Kingdom of Raksasa that is
<i>red.</i>	changeable like gods.
<i>bu nga dang nga ngo ma shes</i>	If you don't know me who stands
<i>na,</i>	like a true man,
<i>blon tsha zhang vdan ma spyang</i>	I am the minister Tsha zhang vdan
<i>khra zer.</i>	ma.
<i>Gling(??) chung rgyud mu bavi</i>	I am a small chief of the Mu ba
<i>blon chung yin.</i>	Tribe.

We find the same special feature in the biographies of Tibetan kings (Wang and Chen 1980:79):

<i>kye rje vi ni mtshan ba vdi</i>	Aha! Do you want to know who the
	king is?
<i>khri vi ni srong btsan zhig</i>	I am Khri vi srong btsan.
<i>blon gyi ni mying ba vdi</i>	Who is this minister?
<i>stong rtsan ni yul zung zhig</i>	He is Stong rtsan yul zung.
<i>chibs kyi ni mying ba vdi</i>	Do you want to know who
	the horse is?
<i>rngul bu ni gtsang gtsang lta</i>	It is Rngul bu gtsang gtsang.
<i>gtsang gtsang ni yang yang lta</i>	Gtsang gtsang is a tamed horse.

The prosimetric style has a long tradition. It is a common form in Tibetan folk literatures and dramas, widely adopted even today in contemporary epics, narrative poems, stories, and local dramas. It features plot orientation, concise prose, and the musical and lyrical characteristics of verse. The epic tells stories as the prose does, bridging different parts, while the musical rhyming pattern of the verse creates strong artistic effects: setting off the

⁹ Situated on the Silk Road, the city of Dunhuang collected and preserved thousands of scrolls from various cultures and traditions. The peak of Dunhuang's glory was during the Tang Dynasty (618-906 CE), but the city continued to play an important role until the end of the Mongol Yuan Dynasty (1368 CE).

characters' psychological activities, playing up the warring scenes in their intensity and grand scale.

The Narrative Structure of the Words

The narrating process of *Gesar* combines prose with verse: the performer reads out the prose and sings the verse. During the performance the artist adapts the libretto to different characters and various backgrounds to appropriate music. Some artists have a great variety of repertoires.

The epic story has a fixed structure that consists of five independent parts: (1) Prelude, (2) Prayers, (3) Introduction, (4) Main Body (the core of the story), and (5) Conclusion. The main body expresses the thinking of the character and recounts dialogues or instructions. Different characters and plot developments have different libretto subjects. Having said that, let me add that the main body still follows the Tibetan traditional narrative formula and has some logical connections. The other four parts are relatively stable by virtue of a somewhat fixed formulaic expression. Different characters have their own expressive style. Even libretti for the same individual character will differ within a confined scope determined by the ways in which the artist combines different elements and creates his work. The study of these libretti that have both a narrative logic and certain flexibility is the key to learning the mechanics of how the epic is remembered.

Prelude

The prelude is the beginning of the libretto. There is a folk saying among the Tibetans that you cannot perform without singing *a la*, and you have no melody without singing *tha la*. Therefore each stanza of libretto should have a prelude, which can be either long or short, from one to four sentences; the artist decides on an impromptu basis. Here is an example of the four sentences (TLED 1980:2):

<i>ao na ae. glu a la la mo a la len,</i>	<i>ao na ae.¹⁰ glu a la la mo a la</i>
	<i>len,</i>
<i>tha lala mo tha la len,</i>	<i>tha lala mo tha la len,</i>
<i>tha la thengs gsum ma blangs na,</i>	If you do not sing the <i>tha la</i>
	melody three times,
<i>gling mkhas pa rnams kyis mi go</i>	The sage in the Kingdom of
<i>gi.</i>	Gling will not understand.

¹⁰ Good wishes.

A three-sentence formula usually consists of the first two sentences of the four-sentence formula with another sentence added after them:

glu thengs gsum ngag gi vgugs lugs red

Singing a song three times is a way to attract attention.

Such three-sentence formulas occur most frequently in the canto called *Byang klu btsan rgyal po vdul ba* (*Conquering the Northern King Klu btsan*) by Grags pa. Of the 120 stanzas, 85 have a three-sentence formula as a prelude. However, there are also quite a few cases of a shortened prelude, mostly the first two sentences of the four-sentence pattern, or, in the case of the one-sentence formula, the first or second sentence.



Grags pa (1906-86) performing *Gesar*. Picture provided by Jiangbian Jiacao.

Among the manuscripts that belong to the same part, except for a few preludes that consist of three or four sentences, there are 32 stanzas beginning with a one-sentence prelude (TLED 1980:50, 52, 53, 55, 105), which represent almost half of the total number of preludes. I believe that this structure is related to cuts and changes made by the editors.¹¹

Prayers

The prayers immediately follow the prelude. In this section, the epic characters pray to the gods from the three worlds and to their own god for protection before they perform their roles. The prayers differ according to the singer; each one has different beliefs and different guardian gods. In different performances a single singer may use different prayers; some are simple while others are very detailed. There are three kinds of prayers: folk prayers incorporated into the epic, ritual songs that accompany a sacrifice to a god, and traditional Tibetan blood offerings invoking the gods' protection.

For example, because Gesar is the son of Lha tshangs pa dkar po¹² ("White Heavenly God")—that is, his first father who represents Heaven—and his blood father is a human incarnation of the god Ger mdzod gnyan po who represents the Middle World, and his mother is the daughter of the Dragon God Klu who represents the Lower World, Gesar prays to gods from the three worlds. He is a hero of three aspects and always prays to the gods from the three worlds for protection and assistance.

As noted, prayers may be simple or complicated. Examples of simple prayers include (TLED 1980:132-33):

*glus mchod do lha gnyan klu sum mchod
nga ge sar rgyal povi glu rna drongs*

¹¹ The manuscripts are based mostly on oral performances but are edited by literati. People introduce changes during their dissemination, making the manuscripts more literate. Those parts and sentences that people recite repeatedly—especially the preludes, prayers, or the introduction—are often changed. Our folk literature circle frequently encountered this problem when editing the oral traditions. Some editors believe that there are too many meaningless and redundant sentences in the folk literatures, elements that merely take up space, and they cut them out at will. I would argue that such "condensation" will make it difficult for later generations to see the original formulas of the oral traditions as they first appeared among the folk. Editorial suppression is a very impractical way of dealing with the repetitive material.

¹² In Tibetan Buddhism, one of the eight fierce protection deities.

I offer my songs to the heavenly god, Gnyan, and the dragon god.
Oh my Gods, please lead me to sing.

Examples of complicated prayers include (*idem*):

<i>steng dag pa lha yi zhing kham</i>	In the peaceful heavenly world up
<i>nas</i>	there,
<i>lha tshangs pa dkar po dam</i>	The white Buddha is a god who
<i>tsheg can</i>	made an oath.
<i>thugs dgongs pa ga ru yengs</i>	Your prayers are everywhere.
<i>nas yod</i>	
<i>de ring skyes buvi grogs la byon</i>	Today you are invited to protect
	me.

<i>spu gri rlung gi dbyings rim nas</i>	In the world of wind as sharp as a
	knife,
<i>gnyan chen drag rtsal vphrin</i>	Gnyan is a god of martial cause.
<i>las can</i>	
<i>dgongs pa gang du yengs nas</i>	Your prayers are everywhere.
<i>yod</i>	
<i>de ring skyes buvi grogs la byon</i>	Today you are invited to protect
	me.

<i>ma dros klu yi pho brang nas</i>	In the Dragon King's cool palace,
<i>klu dung skyong dkar po mthu</i>	The conch-protector White Dragon
<i>rtsal can</i>	King is a powerful god.
<i>dgongs pa gang du yengs nas</i>	Your prayers are everywhere.
<i>yod</i>	
<i>de ring skyes buvi grogs la byon</i>	Today you are invited to protect
	me.

The three stanzas above are prayers to the heavenly god, Gnyan, and the dragon god, respectively. The last two sentences of each are similar. The last syllable of the first sentence of each stanza is *nas*, and the last syllable of the second sentence of each stanza is *can*; therefore, the endings of correlating sentences in each stanza are similar.

In addition, whenever Gesar faces an enemy he calls upon the warrior god Dgra lah wer ma to help fulfill the cause of conquering the monsters. Gesar's concubine Vbrug mo is believed in the epic to be the incarnation of Sgrol ma dkar mo, and she prays to Sgrol ma dkar mo for longevity. Gesar's uncle Khro thung appears in the epic as his opponent, and since he believes in the *bon* religion, he prays to many *bon* gods in his cantos. Consider the following example (TLED 1980:79):

<i>bon sku ston pa gshen rab</i> <i><u>mkhyen</u></i>	I pray to ask help from the <i>bon</i> master-founder of <i>ston pa gshen</i> <i>rab</i> ,
<i>a bon stag lha me vbar <u>mkhyen</u></i>	I pray to ask help from the flaming god A bon stag lha,
<i>ma gcig srid pavi rgyal mo</i> <i><u>mkhyen</u></i>	I pray to ask help from Ma gcig srid pavi rgyal mo.
<i>dpon stag rong glu la len rogs</i> <i>mdzod</i>	Please help me, Dpon stag rong, to sing the song.

The above three verses all end in *mkhyen* (the honorific form of “know, understand,” showing respect for the *bon* religion).

In the epic there are also occasions when blood sacrifices are offered to the gods for protection, for example, in Gesar’s prayers (TLED 1980:134):

For father the White Buddha King, I offer white brains that look like the white conch. For Gnyan and Btsan, I offer the essence of vital organs. For Dingbao Water Dragon King, I offer purple kidney and liver. For the Guardian god Ger mdzod gnyan po from the Kingdom of Gling, I offer blood-flesh-bone with a stream of energy.

The structure of each sentence is the same. Therefore we see that sentences or stanzas of prayers have some set formulas, which largely occur in formulaic stanzas, with rare exceptions in sentences where the artist transfers names of different gods into the sentences of the stanzas.

Introduction

The introduction is the part of the libretto that follows the prayers; it is also relatively stable in form and content. It introduces place, setting, and the character’s origin and history, as well as melodies. Since descriptions of the place and character’s origin are specific, the singing artist chooses within a certain scope, either complicating or simplifying the introduction. A simple introduction consists of two sets of implied questions and answers in four lines (TLED 1980:13):

<i>sa vdi yi sa ngo ma shes na</i>	If you don’t know this place,
<i>sbra chen po thang shom gong</i>	This is the great tent of <i>thang shom</i>
<i>dgu red</i>	<i>gong dgu</i> ,
<i>pho nga dang nga ngo ma shes na</i>	If you don’t know me personally,

gling sku rje seng chen nor bu red I am the Pearl King of Bear-and-Lion.

Grags pa likes to add a phrase, “If you don’t know me personally,” after the third introductory sentence:

nga vdra nga ngo los kyang shes A man like me you are bound to know.

Detailed descriptions can be as long as 56 lines. For example, consider Vbrug mo’s self-introduction (Grags pa 1997:28):

Concubine, if you don’t know,
 Before I was born,
 At the side of that jade-green lake,
 Where the eastern white cock circles,
 I come from my father Skya lo’s hometown.
 I am the daughter of King Skya lovi ston pa.
 I was not born in summer but in winter,
 On the first of the New Year in deep winter.
 The jade-dragon was roaring up in the clouds,
 The snow-mountain lion was showing off his power in the middle world,
 Sunflowers were blossoming down on the earth,
 Hence the name of Seng lcam vbrug mo.¹³

No matter whether the singer wishes to introduce a place or a song, the first sentence is the same. For example, consider the following (TLED 1980):

<i>sa vdi yi sa ngo ma shes na</i>	If you don’t know this place,
<i>pho¹⁴ nga vdra nga ngo ma shes na</i>	If you don’t know me in person,
<i>glu vdi yi glu ngo ma shes na</i>	If you don’t know the song.

Conclusion

The concluding parts of a stanza also have a set formula and are relatively simple. In the *Gansu* manuscript they appear in three sentences.

¹³ *S eng* (“lion”) and *lcam* (“sunflower”) are terms used mostly for naming women; *vbrug* (“dragon”) also means “thunder.” Because the jade-dragon was roaring, the lion was showing off his power, and sunflowers were blossoming, she received the name *seng lcam vbrug mo*. The Tibetan word *mo* refers to woman.

¹⁴ When a woman sings, she substitutes *aman*, a self-appellation for a woman, for *pho*.

Among the 65 stanzas of the whole copy, there are 43 endings that consist of three sentences. Here is an example (TLED 1980:72):

<i>glu vkhrul bar song na mthol</i>	I will repent if I sing the song wrongly.
<i>lo gshogs</i>	
<i>ngag vkhrul bar song na bzod</i>	Pardon me if I speak the wrong words.
<i>par gyis</i>	
<i><u>gling seng chen thugs la de</u></i>	Please, my king, keep that in mind.
<i><u>skad zhu</u></i>	

Usually, people of lower status who talk to those of higher status use this set formula, which requires a three-stanza unit. Simply replacing “king” (*gling seng chen*) with another name does the job.

There is another kind of three-sentence formula that people of higher status use in talking to those of lower status. To accommodate different characters, the singer can just replace “my king” with “small boy” (*bu chung*) in the third sentence. For example (TLED 1980:109):

<i>go na rna bavi bdud rtsi gyis</i>	It will be as sweet as honey to your ear if you understand what I say.
<i>ma go glu yi vgrei bu zhu</i>	If you don't, just ask for an explanation.
<i>khyod <u>bu chung</u> yid la de ltar</i>	You, small boy, just keep this in mind.
<i>zhog</i>	

The Grags pa version has the most two-sentence stanzas. Of the 120 stanzas, 68 end with two sentences; the remaining 30 end with one sentence. Consider the following example (Grags pa 1997:217):

<i>go na de tsho <u>man bzavi</u> yid la</i>	Having understood, <i>man bza</i> should
<i>zhog</i>	keep that in mind,
<i>ma go glu la skyor rgyu med</i>	No repetition though you don't understand.

Such endings are also formulaic; a different singer would need only to replace *man bzavi*. An example of a whole-line formula is (Grags pa 1997:159):

<i>khyed <u>klu btsan</u> yid la de ltar zhog</i>	you just keep that in mind
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For this formula, *klu btsan* is the substitutable element.

The Main Body

The main body, being both the core of the libretti and their central content, expresses the ideas and wishes of characters and unfolds in dialogues. This part takes up the largest proportion of the epic, as many as 255 lines (Grags pa 1997:17-23). Different stanzas relate different contents; the narrative style, however, follows the traditional Tibetan mode, and is therefore formulaic.¹⁵

The 65 stanzas of the *Gansu* manuscript embody 3,436 total lines. Table 1 shows the proportion of lines in each part of the epic. Grags pa's manuscript has 120 stanzas all together, totaling 11,582 lines. The proportion of lines for each of its parts is shown in Table 2.

Table 1. Statistics for Libretti in the *Gansu* manuscript

	NUMBER OF LINES	PERCENTAGE
Prelude	97	2.8
Prayers	248	7.2
Introduction	604	17.6
Main Body	2346	68.3
Endings	141	4.1
Total Lines	3436	100

Table 2. Statistics for Libretti in the Grags pa manuscript

	NUMBER OF LINES	PERCENTAGE
Prelude	343	2.9
Prayers	984	8.5
Introduction	1894	16.4
Main Body	8162	70.5
Endings	201	1.7
Total Lines	11582	100

We see from the statistics that no major difference exists between the two versions with regard to the proportions of parts. Setting aside the main body, we see that the lump-sum percentage for the preludes, prayers, introduction, and endings is 31.7 percent for the *Gansu* manuscript and 29.5

¹⁵ Details in the next section.

percent for the Grags pa manuscript. In other words, the parts with set formulas represent nearly one third of *Gesar*, which may be one of the reasons for its successful commission to memory.

The Influence of Tibetan Narrative Tradition on Epics

First of all, the multiple-stanza circular style, or ring-form, is widespread in Tibetan narrative tradition. It possesses great vitality, and is widely used in Tibetan folk poetry such as local dramas, long narrative poems, folk songs, and especially the *Gesar* epic. The history of such rhyming poetry can be traced back to the Tubo period. The use of multiple-stanza style with six-syllable lines is already found in the literatures from the Dunhuang Grotto. In the eleventh century, the White sect lama Mi la ras pa made use of this style and invented the influential ballad “Mi la ras pa.” For this reason, “from the eleventh to the fourteenth century, the rhyming pattern of the multiple stanza style took up a large proportion, and that explains why it influenced so deeply the literati in their creative work” (Tong Jinhua 1992:377). Therefore, people conjecture that from the eleventh century on, *Gesar* has been popular among the folk and, having overcome the limitations of the six-syllable pattern, used freer patterns of seven, eight, or even nine syllables. Today we can see such a pattern in epic performances everywhere. In the multiple-stanza circular style each stanza may have two, three, or four verses, as the following examples illustrate (TLED 1980:44):

<i>gangs mthon po <u>mi bzhugs phebs</u></i> <i><u>zer na</u></i>	The high snowy mountain will not let the white lion stay.
<i>seng dkar po <u>sdod yul gang la</u></i> <i><u>byed</u></i>	White lion, where will you live?
<i>mtsho chen po <u>mi bzhugs phebs</u></i> <i><u>zer na</u></i>	The sea will not let the golden-eyed fish stay.
<i>nya gser mig <u>sdod yul gang la</u></i> <i><u>byed</u></i>	Golden-eyed fish, where will you live?
<i>spang ri bo <u>mi bzhugs phebs zer</u></i> <i><u>na</u></i>	The grass mountain side will not let the dappled doe stay.
<i>sha yu movi <u>sdod yul gang la byed</u></i>	Dappled doe, where will you live?
<i>zer ba mnav mivi gtam la grags</i>	Just as the old proverb says,
<i>gling rgyal po <u>mi bzhugs phebs</u></i> <i><u>zer na</u></i>	The King of Gling will not let her stay.

sman a vbrug blo gtad su la byed Maiden Vbrug mo, where will you
live?

The above verses all consist of eight syllables with a pause between syllables one and two, and two and three. The first three syllables vary, while the remaining five syllables are stable and constitute a question-and-answer formula. The third and fourth stanzas, however, do not correspond to the other stanzas, and reflect impromptu elements in the artist's performance. Moreover, the ring composition has a certain logic.

A key technique in traditional Tibetan narrative order is the movement of the visual field from far to near. In the above example, the field starts with the snowy mountain on the horizon and the far-off sea, then moves to the nearby grassland, and finishes with close-at-hand objects before one's eyes. Another traditional narrative technique moves downward from what is above, that is, from heavenly gods to gods in the middle world and then to the dragon god in the lower world. The prayers cited above are good examples of this technique. A third technique juxtaposes imaginary and literalizing tropes. The first few stanzas are metaphorical while the last is literal, and it is the literal trope that serves as the focus and subject of the whole poem. This combination of imaginary and real abounds in ring-composition style and is illustrated in the following example (Chinese translation by Wang 1980:73-74):¹⁶

There are two ferocious lions at the foot of the snowy mountain. / A
green-maned lion is patrolling round the mountain. / The other is guarding
by the crystal cave.

There are two blue dragons up in the blue heaven. / One is sending
thunder round the horizon. / The other is guarding in the midst of the
dense forest.

There are two wild bulls on the mountainside. / One red-horned bull is
patrolling round the remote mountain. / The other is guarding the *yan*
mountain and the *yin* mountain.

There are two falcons on the red rock. / One white-breast falcon is flying
up into the blue heaven. / The other red-breast is guarding the nest.

There are two red tigers. / One is still-hunting game by the forest. / The
tigress guards the den.

¹⁶ I made some changes after cross-checking the original text of the Tibetan version; cf. TLED 1980:76-7).

The golden-eyed fish are down in the sea. / One is patrolling along the sea-rim, striking its fins. / The other is guarding in the deep water.

The King Ga is with his concubine up in Gling. / The great King has gone out to the horizon to let the four enemies from the four directions surrender to him. / The concubine stayed behind to guard their home.

Analogies, such as these involving the lion, blue dragon, wild bull, falcon, ferocious tiger, and golden-eyed fish, are frequent in Tibetan folk literatures.

In addition, the generous use of traditional Tibetan rhyming patterns not only adds color to the epic, but also aids memorization. The use of anadiplosis, or repetition of elements from within contiguous lines, is one example (Grags pa 1997:15):

<i>phu gsum dkar yag <u>gang</u> kyi ri</i>	The white snowy mountain up the valley,
<i><u>gang</u> la dung <u>seng</u> vkhor bavi ri</i>	The lion loves to live on the snowy mountain.
<i><u>seng</u> la gyul ral rgyal bavi ri</i>	The lion shakes its green mane on the snowy mountain.
<i>sked gsum tsan dan <u>nags</u> kyi ri</i>	The mountain is embraced by alnum trees.
<i><u>nags</u> la rgya <u>stag</u> ckhor bavi ri</i>	The ferocious tiger loves to live in the woods.
<i><u>stag</u> la vdzum drug rgyas pavi ri</i>	The ferocious tiger shows off its stripes on the blue mountain, and is contented.
<i>mdav gsum chu ma <u>zhing</u> gi ri</i>	The mountain is surrounded by valley entrances and paddy fields
<i><u>zhing</u> la <u>vbras</u> drug smin pavi ri</i>	And rich fields give bumper harvests.
<i><u>vbras</u> la dbu nag vkhor bavi ri</i>	The black-headed man loves all the harvests on the green mountain.
<i>mthal gsum <u>chu</u> bo chab kyi ri</i>	The mountain is surrounded by a slow river.
<i><u>chu</u> la gser <u>nya</u> vkhor bavi ri</i>	Goldfish in the water love to live here.
<i><u>nya</u> la gser gshog rgyas bavi ri</i>	Goldfish are jumping round the mountain.
<i>gling la <u>sde</u> gsum chags pavi ri</i>	The three tribes of the Gling formed

dpav la rtsal dtug vdzoms pavi ri The heroes are showing off their martial arts on the high mountains.

These reiterative endings, repetitive words, and cross-reiterations constitute another feature of the poetic rhyming pattern of the *Gesar* epic. Gesar's General Vdan ma uses reiterative locutions to describe himself in the following way (Grags pa 1997:94):

<i>zangs khog kun dgva rawa</i>	All flesh in the tent is happy,
<i>ba ta</i>	
<i>gtam yon tan lho sprin</i>	Words of wisdom make people
<i>vtshub vtshub yin</i>	smile.

The second sentence of each stanza contains onomatopoeic reiterative locutions—*rgyug rgyug* (“gu-gu”), *gshag gshag* (“sha-sha”), *vtshub vtshub* (“tsu-tsu”)—that are full of life.

The libretto about Gesar's *chitu* horse also uses onomatopoeic reiterative locutions. Consider the following example (Grags pa 1997:122):

ha ha ha la ho ho ho / ha ha ho ho rta yi skad

ha ha ha la ho ho ho / ha ha ho ho, which is horse language.

In the epic, the endings of the libretti for the red-crowned crane always use onomatopoeic reiterative locutions such as *khrung khrung* ("chong-chong") (Grags pa 1997:268-70); for the *shang shang rgyal po* (a kind of poison-eating bird), *shang shang* ("shang shang") (TLED 1980:146-53).

Examples of cross-reiterative locutions include these below (TLED 1980:127-28):

ha cang shes rab che
mkhan po

A fully wise man

bya ba mang na rang
nyid vphung

Will ruin himself if he carries too
many loads of work.

ha cang longs spyod
sgrub mkhan po
dran rgyu mang na rgya
srid nyams

A very eminent king

Will let his state decline if he craves
greatness and success.

ha cang longs spyod
sgrub mkhan po
gsog ma shes na rang gi
gshed

A pleasure-seeking Buddhist

Will harm himself if knows nothing
of saving money and energy.

ha cang zas la dad che
bas
za ma shes na dug du
vgyur

A man who eats and drinks too
much

Will be poisoned by too much food.

This song consists of four stanzas. Each stanza begins with *ha cang* ("very much" or "too much"); the fourth syllable of the second line of each verse is always *na* ("if"), which creates cross-reiterative locutions at the beginning and middle of every other sentence.

There are also quite a few instances of whole-verse reiterations. For example, when King Gesar is about to set off on his expedition against the Monster's Kingdom, he entrusts the state's affairs and its coffers to his mother, Vbrug mo, and his twelve concubines. The songs that recount the entrusting contain nine stanzas concerning the treasury of silk and damask,

jewelry, fortresses, the precious Buddha icon, Buddhist scriptures, and cattle and sheep. The last two verses of each stanza are basically similar:

ngas bcol dus kha tshang
cha tshang yi
tshur len dus sprod rgyu
yod ni gyis

When I entrust them to you, I
 entrust them all.
 When I take them back, I will take
 them all.

Concluding Remarks

From what has been explained above, we can see that generations of artists have performed *Gesar* on countless occasions, and their performances have inherited and preserved traditional Tibetan poetic elements such as rhyme patterns. Fixed ballad formulas consist of two-, three-, and four-verse stanzas that are based on the verses or the stanza as a unit. Stanzas of similar formulas are joined into a formulaic system. Another feature of the epic is repetitive singing, and these fixed formulas migrate among different cantos for different characters. When an artist tries to learn the lines by rote, he must become familiar with the subject and content of *Gesar* and master these formulaic sentences and stanzas: they are the basis on which he uses his talent to create new formulas with individual characteristics.

In a word, the *Gesar* epic has a distinguished, centralized, and binding subject and an open structure. Its combined narrative form of prose and verse is a style that the Tibetan people have preferred, enjoyed, and passed down for generations. Four of the five parts of the libretti—the prelude, the prayers, the introduction, and the ending—have relatively fixed narrative domains and formulas. These four sections represent 31.7 percent of the total poetic lines in the *Gansu* manuscript and 29.5 percent in the Grags pa manuscript. The epic has also inherited elements of the ancient Tibetan narrative tradition, such as the visual movement from distant to near, from upper to lower, and from fictive to literal. It uses a wide variety of rhetorical devices such as multiple-stanza circularity, anadiplosis, reiterative locutions, cross-reiterative locutions, and even reiterative sentences. Although these features appear to be structurally intricate and extremely frequent, they have given the epic a unique narrative logic, namely, a defined narrative order that allows an artist enough room to move around.¹⁷ A good command of

¹⁷ The artist can decide whether he is going to complicate or simplify the performance, according to the particular situation, the audience, and the singer's own physical condition.

these laws and set formulaic expressions makes it possible for folk artists to learn this voluminous epic, and is also the key to remembering how to perform it.

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History and the Tibetan Epic *Gesar*

Li Lianrong

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 *Xuajuan 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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The Mythology of Tibetan Mountain Gods: An Overview

Xie Jisheng

The Tibetan Mountain Gods

There are countless high mountains in Tibet, and ancient Tibetans believed that gods resided on every one of them. The worship of mountain gods was one of the most important forms of nature worship among ancient Tibetans; it was fundamental to their entire belief system. Each mountain god possessed his own territory and was in charge of particular affairs. Around each god sprang up myths, legends, sacrificial rites and procedures. Analysis of Tibetan mountain god worship should lead to a fuller understanding of Tibetan mythology, and to a vision of the larger structures of that mythology.

As ancient Tibetan society grew ever more complex, individual, autonomous Tibetan mountain gods became associated in a complex hierarchy. Classification and stratification heralded the emergence of a single, supreme deity. Different geographical circumstances, and complex social developments and contradictions in the religion, however, brought about similarities, differences, and contradictions in characteristics and functions among the deities in the upper echelons of the system.

According to traditional, pre-Buddhist Tibetan belief, there are four great mountain gods in the Tibetan region; each one is identified with a specific sacred mountain¹: *yar-lha-sham-po* in central Tibet; *gnyan-chen-thang-lha*, in Byang-thang in the north; *sku-lha-ri-rgya* in the south; *vod-de-gung-rgyal* in the south. These four gods, together with five other famous mountain gods—*rma-chen-spon-ra* (or *Anyesrmachen*), *shyogs-chen-ldong-ra*, *sgan-po-lha-rje*, *zhogs-lha-rgyug-po*, and *shevu-kha-rag*—form the core

¹ The four great sacred mountains in Tibetan Buddhism—*lcogs-po-ri*, *mgon-po-ri*, *hos-po-ri*, and *dkar-po-ri*—differ from those named here.

of the Tibetan mountain-god system; together they were called “the nine creator-gods” (*srid-pa-chags-po-lha-dgu*). In addition, geographical differences between each Tibetan region gave rise to individual local gods, such as the great mountain god *gnyan-po-g'ywu-rtse-rdza-re*, worshipped by the Tibetan *go-log* tribe, and the sacred mountain of *gangs-dkar-ti-se* in western Tibet.

The study of Tibetan mountain gods presents two principal problems. First, previous research on Tibetan mythology has had little to say about them, and what data does exist is quite heterogeneous. In addition, the features of the myths have certainly been diluted over time. Buddhist myths and rituals muffled the original character of the Tibetan myths; for example, almost all mountain gods are now Buddhist guardians. These twin obstacles require that our investigation must start with the place of mountain gods in relevant folk beliefs, myth, ritual, and customs. Some Tibetan literature and ritual scriptures also help to reveal the outline of the involved mythology. In what follows, all these sources are employed in providing an introduction to and analysis of some well-known mountain god myths and rituals.

The Myth of yar-lha-sham-po

Located in the vphyongs-rgyal county, *yar-lha-sham-po* “the great god *sham-po*,” ranks second among the nine creator-gods mentioned above, behind only the mountain god *vod-de-gung-rgyal*. *Yar-lha-sham-po* is an old mountain god, often mentioned in the classic Tibetan scriptures of Dunhuang from the sixth to the ninth centuries CE. The scriptures state that “*yar-lha-sham-po* is the highest god” (*Yar-lha-sham-po-ni-gtsug-lha-vo*),² but, in fact, *yar-lha-sham-po* is not the highest mountain peak in Tibet; it is, rather, largely due to its location in central Tibet that it became one of the greatest Tibetan gods.

The Tibetan mountain gods belong to two principal classes. One arose from the deification of mountains believed to act as the benefactors of mankind. Such mountains are most often located in proximity to temperate valleys and fertile pastureland that benefit from the reservoirs of water held in the snowy mountaintops. The natural advantages conferred by the fertile land and mountain waters led the local inhabitants to deify the snowy mountains, creating mountain gods. These gods, obviously, were seen as benefactors of mankind. The other major class occupies mountains located in dense forests or in wild and desolate lands uninhabited by mankind.

² Wang and Chen 1980:98, 102.

These gods are usually considered to be evil. *Yar-lha-sham-po* is located in the *Yar-lung* River Valley, an agricultural region said to be the cradle of the Tibetan people. The material bounty that nature afforded the ancient inhabitants of this river valley induced them to deify the surrounding mountains, and *yar-lha-sham-po* was venerated as the greatest god. With the later interaction and amalgamation between the *Yar-lung* tribe and other tribes, the *Yar-lung* developed and prevailed, eventually becoming the rulers of the entire Tibetan people. Their principal mountain god, consequently, became the principal god for all Tibetan tribes.

In Tibetan historiography, the mountain god *yar-lha-sham-po* is often called the royal god, and represents the power of the royal family. At the beginning of the spread of Buddhism into Tibet, many members of the royal house, adherents of the native Tibetan religion, *Bon-po*, remained averse to Buddhism. This situation gave rise to the story of how the Buddhist deity *pad-ma-vdyung-gnas* encountered resistance from *yar-lha-sham-po*, who caused a flood to destroy a Buddhist palace. The emergence and triumph of *yar-lha-sham-po* as the supreme mountain god is also the history of the development and strength of the *yar-lung* tribe. Absent a unified Tibetan power and a wise king skilled in military strategy, the Tibetan mountain god *yar-lha-sham-po* would not have become such a preeminent fixture.

A distinctive feature of Tibetan mythology is that the images of mountain gods are based on religious elements other than the physical mountains themselves. They are often embodied as animals or totems. In this respect the mythology is not one-dimensional but exemplifies complex forms. A good example is the image of *yar-lha-sham-po*. According to a popular regional myth, *yar-lha-sham-po* is portrayed as a white yak, from whose mouth and nose snowstorms continuously blow. He is endowed with extraordinary magical powers: he can destroy rocks, cause floods, and even transform himself into a white man in order to have sexual intercourse with women and father babies. As the paramount god, *yar-lha-sham-po* ruled all local gods (*yul-lha*) and village gods (*sa-bdag*) in the *Yar-lung* region. Here is a description of *yar-lha-sham-po* in the throes of resisting *pad-ma-vbyung-gnas* as the new god tries to enter Tibet:

*de nas. o rgyan padma vbyung gnas kyis
lha vdre gdug pavi zhe bstags mkhyen nas su
bal yul lam vphrang lam na gshengs tsa
Yar lha sham povi skungs thog brgyab
g. yag dkar ri tsam zhig tu sprul
vus vdebs brag rnam thams cad rlog
lam vphrang bcad nas vgro sa med par byas
kha rlang sna rlang ma bun bzhin du vthids*

*kha char babs pas lam mi mthong bar byas*³

After that, master *pad-ma-vbyung-gna*
 Knew beforehand that it was time to defeat the monster,
 Came to the dangerous road of *lam-vphrang*.
Yar-lha-sham-po sent out ambushing thunders.
 He turned into a white yak as large as a mountain,
 Became wild and smashed rocks,
 Blocked the road and left no passage;
 Air pumped from his mouth and nostrils as dense as fog-fall;
 It was heavy with rain and snow that let you see nothing of the road.

The portrayal of *yar-lha-sham-po*—as a white yak who can change shape at will—reveals something of early Tibetan beliefs about mountain gods. As the myths about the mountain developed, images of *yar-lha-sham-po* also changed; a white yak was replaced by a man-god clothed in white with a body as white as a conch, holding a short spear with colorful silk flags and a crystal sword in his hands. This human image of *yar-lha-sham-po* is typically accompanied by a wife and children. His wife is *gnam-smanthog-gi-bu-yug*, the primary goddess. She is clothed in light red attire, holds lightning in her right hand and hailstones in her left, and flies on bolts of lightning.

The Myth of gnyan-chen-thang-lha

If *yar-lha-sham-po* is the supreme god, indeed the royal god, then the most famous mountain god is *gnyan-chen-thang-lha*; he is also known as *thang-lha-val-shur* or *thang-lha-yab-shur*. *Gnyan-chen-thang-lha* was first worshipped as a god of hail, one of eighteen deities in charge of hail. When people passed by the mountain *thang-lha*, they would burn incense and offer all kinds of sacrifices to him. In Tibetan mythology *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* is a guardian of treasure. A prayer text describes the image and lineage of this mountain god:

sku lhavi yab smos pa
vo de gung rgyal lags
sku lhavi yum smos pa
g.yu bya gshog gcig
sku lhavi nyid smos pa
yar zhur gnyan gyu lha

³ Tong 1985:18a-18b.

bzhugs yul mtshan gsol ba
vdam shod snar mo lags
khri rges g.yu ljang vkhril dbyar sngo dgub yang sngo
bzhugs yul nyams re dgav
dgyes so lha yi yul mi chos mtshan gsol ba
thang lha ya zhur lags
lha chos mtshan gsol ba
dri zavi rgyal po ni
gsang bavi mtshan mtshan gsol ba
zui phud lnga pa lags
sku lha ci gsol ba
rdo rje vbar ba rtsal
dar dkar ras dkar gsel
chibs su ci chibs na
lha rta rkang dkar chibs
knams gsum kun du rgyu
mdog dkar vod zer vbar
g.yas na spa cags vphyar
ma kun las la vgye
g.yon pa shel vpheng vdren

To your father
vod-de-gung-rgyal pray.
 Plead to your mother,
 The single-winged jade bird.
 To yourself,
God yar zhur gnyan gyu, pray.
 With respect I mention your residence,
vdam shod snar mo lags.
 An eagle as green as turquoise is soaring in between.
 It is full of light there,
 Though in winter it is as green as spring.
 O mountain god, the land you inhabit is delightful!
 I call upon your name, and your name is known to
 the gods,
 The heavenly musician king *mtshan gsol ba*.
 I call upon your secret name,
rdo rje vbar ba rtsal.
 O mountain god, what clothes do you wear?
 You wear white, a silk dress and a white cotton coat.
 If you want to ride, what are you going to ride, mountain god?
 You ride on a magic horse with four white hooves,
 Galloping across the three worlds.
 Your white dress sends out brightness.
 You hold a cane in the right hand
 And hold a crystal rosary in the left.



Mountain god *gnyan-chen-thang-lha*. Photograph by the author.

The text *Padma-bkav-thang* describes how the Buddhist god *pad-ma-vdyung-gnas*, who came to Tibet to spread Buddhism, defeated monsters and gods. Note the mention of *gnyan-chen*, here called *thang-lha*:

*de nas sku gnyan thang lha nyams sad phyir
mgo bo gru guvi yul du sleb pa la
gzhug ma khams kyi sog chu gyer thang brkyangs
sbrul dkar zhig gis lam vphrang bcad pa la
slob dpon sbrul gyi sked par phyag vkhar btshugs
klu yi rgyal po ne le thod dkar khyod
dri zavi rgyal po sur phud lnga pa zhes
khyod rang phar song tshags vkhor shoms dang gsungs
thang lhas gangs la bros pas gangs zhu nas
rtse mo nag zang g. yav sngon nyil gyis byung
ma bzod zhal zas sna tshogs vkhor drangs
byis pa gyu yi zur phud can du gyur
dar dkar ral gu zhig gyon phyag bskor byas
srog suyung phul nas dam btags gter rgya gtad*

*gsang mtshan rdo rje mchog rab rtsal du gsol*⁴

At this time, *sku-gnyan-thang-lha* is the testing master.
 He stretches his head to the region of *gru-gu*;
 His tail fills up the possession *sog-chu-gyer-thang*.
 A white snake blocks the road,
 The master puts the stick onto the waist of the snake, and says:
 “You are the Dragon King *ne-le-thod-dkar*,
dri zavi rgyal po sur phud lnga pa zhes.
 Be quick and return to prepare the *tshags* offerings and *dang* city.”
Thang-lha runs to the snowy mountains that are melting.
 The black peak appears,
 Green rocks crash down.
Thang-lha cannot bear such hardship,
 Offers all kinds of delicious food for the *dang* city,
 And is transformed into a boy-waiter wearing jade, his hair in a bun,
 Wearing a white dress as a sign of the lotus.
 He takes a vow to offer his life for the sake of Buddhist scriptures,
 Prays and gets the secret name of *rdo-rje-mchog-rab-rtsal*.

The prayers for the mountain god *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* contained in this folk ritual book reveal more detailed mythological data: *gnyan-chen* is the son of the mountain god *vod-de-gung-rgyal* and the single-winged jade bird, and is the chief of the *gnyan* gods. The place where the god lives is called *vdam-shon*;⁵ the jade-green bird brings vitality and the greenness of spring even to the snowy mountains in wintertime. In popular mythology *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* is imagined as a white man.⁶ The prayers quoted above describe him as the heavenly musician *zui phud lnga pa*, a detail that clearly alludes to the influence of Buddhism. In Tibetan drawings, *zui phud lnga pa* is often drawn as a handsome man attired in white, his hair tied up in five turquoise-colored buns. According to these images, the mountain god *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* is a white man astride either a magic horse with four snow-white hoofs or a flying white horse. In his right hand the god holds a cane or a crystal sword. In some folk traditions, however, *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* is still a ferocious hail god to whom people are obliged to make blood-offerings and sacrifices of mules, horses, and sheep.⁷ The god also

⁴ Padamsambhava 1988:363-64.

⁵ I suspect that *vdam-shon* should be *vdam-gzhung*, which is located east of the middle part of the *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* mountain.

⁶ See further Editorial Board 1983.

possesses great powers of transfiguration and can become a gigantic monster as large as a mountain; he can even change into a big monkey. On the south end of *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* there is a famous lake called *gnam-mtsho*, and the herdsmen in North Tibet believe that the goddess in the lake is the wife of this mountain god.

The Mythology of the Mountain God Anyesrmachen

The *Anyesrmachen* Mountain is a range at the southern end of Kukunor. In Tibetan, it is known variously as *rma-chen-spon-ra*, *rma-rgyal-spom-ra*, *ram-gnyan-spon-ra*, and *ram-ygyal*; locally, it is called *anyesrmachen*. In Tibetan mythology, *anyesrmachen* is a great god who lives in the east; his worship is particularly widespread in the pastoral region of *mdo-khams*, an area also known for the prevalence of the Gesar epic. In fact, the mountain god *anyesrmachen* plays a key genealogical role in the epic. In the passage telling how King Gesar's mother *klu-mo-vgog-mo* dreams of a yellow man (*mi-ser-po*) who has sex with her, with the result that she later gives birth to Gesar, the yellow man is in fact the mountain god *anyesrmachen*.⁸ The Gesar epic also explains that the mountain god can make the yak and the mare fertile and can strengthen other animals. The snowy waters of *anyesrmachen*, guardian of mankind, can cure diseases such as leprosy.

Although textual research into the early iconography of *anyesrmachen* is not possible, some traces of it may be seen in an old song popular in the Amdo region:

Stod rma rgyal ri la mgo yod ki
mgo yod na klad pa yod med shod
Stod rma rgyal ri la sked yod ki
Stod rma rgyal ri la Lto yod ki
Lto yod na rgyu ma yod med shod
Stod rma rgyal ri la mgo yod gi
mgo yod na klad pa los re yod
gangs gkar bo babs na klad pa red
Stod rma rgyal ri la sked yod ki
sked yod na ske rags los re yod
sked smug pas bzung na ske rags red

⁷ Qinghai 1958:48.

⁸ Qinghai 1959:49.

stod rma rgyal ri la lto yod ki
lto yod na rgyu ma los re yod
sbrul khung la vdzul na rgyu ma red

Is there a head for the upper *rma-rgyal* mountain?
 If there is, is there any brain?
 Is there a waist for the upper *rma-rgyal* mountain?
 Is there a belly for the upper *rma-rgyal* mountain?
 If there is, are there any bowels?
 The upper mountain *rma rgyal* has no head.
 If it had a head, it should have a brain.
 The falling snow is the brain.
 The upper mountain *rma rgyal* has a waist.
 If it has a waist, there must be a belt to tie it up.
 The clouds and fog in the mountains are the belt.
 The upper mountain *rma rgyal* has a belly.
 If it has a belly, it must have bowels.
 The poisonous snakes going into their holes are the bowels.

In the the ancient song, the images of the mountain god are extremely unstable, and his appearance as nature god is the most prevalent aspect of his presentation. However, in Buddhist ritual texts, the mountain god is described as wearing armor and a white fighting gown studded with decorative gems. He is often pictured waving a spear with a fixed flag in his left hand, while holding a magic bowl full of gems his right hand. Around one of his upper arms is wrapped a bag made of eagle-skin (*nevu-levi-rkyal-pa*). He rides a magic horse that gallops as fast as a cloud.

His wife is the goddess *rma-chen*, also known by the names *gung-sman-ma* and *rma-ri-rab-vgyams rdo-rje-dgra-mo-rgyal*, and she has her own extensive mythology. She originally lived on the *anyesrmachen* mountain and was considered the greatest of the twelve goddesses (*bstan-ma-bcu-gnhyis*). Tibetan ritual texts describe her in this way: she rides a stag as white as a conch, and her body is as white as the snowy mountains. She is extremely beautiful, and her hair is plaited with colorful ribbons. In her right hand she holds a magical mirror, in her left a lasso and an iron hook. Dressed in a silk coat, she is adorned with a golden crown decorated with diverse gems atop her head. She also wears a pearl necklace, bracelets, and anklets; a shining bell is fixed to the belt around her waist.

A Tibetan prayer gives another description of *rma-chen*:

You look with angry eyes,
 Riding on lightning,
 Spitting fire-like clouds from your mouth,

Spewing smoke from your nostrils,
 Fire clouds are enshrouded behind you.
 You instantly gather clouds in the sky,
 With thunder roaring across the world in all the ten directions.
 On the road to death it is full of meteors
 And big hailstones,
 The foundation of the earth is swollen by water and fire,
 Evil birds and crows are flying in the sky,
 Yellow birds with yellow beaks came down from the air.
 The goddess *sman-mo* tucks herself up into a ball,
 Many monsters appear;
 The praising god's horse dashes here and there.
 If you like,
 The seawater can connect itself to the blue sky;
 If you hate,
 Even the sun and the moon will fall to the dust;
 If you laugh,
 The mountains of the world will even crumble to dust.⁹

This text clearly shows that *rma-chen* was originally a hail goddess, who rides lightning and spews forth clouds of fire from her mouth and nostrils. However, the myth also describes her as a beautiful woman, richly decorated with jewelry, a contrast that points to the ambiguity of her nature. Together she and *anyesrmachen* have nine sons, who are often depicted riding tigers, and nine daughters, who ride cuckoos.

Among the nine creator-gods, the mountain god *anyesrmachen* customarily ranks fourth, though some traditions place him fifth. He is the brother of *yar-lha-sham-po* and *gnyan-chen-thang-lha*, among others, and the eighth son of *vod-de-gung-rgyal*. *Vod-de-gung-rgyal*, also called *srid-pavi-lha-rgan*, is the founding father of the Tibetan mountain gods. He is an ancient Tibetan god who inhabited a palace decorated with rare stones on a steep and snowy mountain. According to a myth popular in the Amdo region, *vod-de-gung-rgyal* was an old man who lived near Lhasa. He had eight nomadic sons who lived by hunting. One day while out hunting, the old man met large groups of refugees fleeing from monsters that had appeared in Duo Kang. They asked the old man to vanquish them, and he dispatched each of his eight sons to one of the locations haunted by the monsters. The fourth son went to Amdo. After defeating the monsters, a nine-story crystal palace was built for them. When the sons met up with

⁹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975:196-97.

their father, the crystal palace became the huge and snowy *Anyesrmachen* Mountain.¹⁰



La-rtse on A-nyi-rma-chen mountain for worshipping mountain gods.
Photograph by the author.

Gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra

An eastern extension of the *Bayakhara* Mountain, *gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra* is also known as *sngo-la-g'yu-rtse* or *gnyan-rje-sngo-la-g'yu-rtse*. It is particularly sheer, and is further distinguished by its many sharp rocks. The Tibetan *go-log* tribe lives around this mountain, thus providing its alternate name, “*go-log* Mountain.” According to Tibetan ritual texts,

¹⁰ Mgo-log 1985:221-26.

gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra lives in a large palace, inside which a red storm blows endlessly. The roof is made of gold and turquoise in the Han style, and the palace is surrounded by iron mountains where many ferocious beasts live. Seen from the outside, the palace appears as a gray horse, on whose back the great *gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra* himself rides.

In the standard iconography, this mountain god wears burgundy clothing under his armor, holds an iron hook in his right hand, and girds a quiver around his waist. His wife, *gnyan-ma-ma-le-gu*, is dressed in white; she holds an arrow tipped with brilliantly colored feathers and rides on a red doe. The son of *gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra* is named *tho-ri-rgyal-ba*; traditionally garbed in a pink gown, he holds a long spear and a lasso and rides on a blue dragon. *Gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra* also has two assistant gods, the fast and hot-tempered *ston-hor-bovi-sras* and the young and beautiful goddess *lha-sman-sras-mo*.¹¹

There is a famous myth in the *go-log* region about *gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra*. A young man named *che-ambum* once came from the *ngarlatu* region, where he had saved a young dragon caught by an eagle near the Wagn-tsho and Daitso lakes. After this deed, he met several people coming from the lake; one wore white, the others either blue or yellow. These men, who were in fact incarnations of lesser mountain gods, told him that the dragon he had saved from the eagle's beak was the youngest son of the mountain god *gnyan-po-g'yu-rtse-rdza-ra*. Afterwards the mountain god gave *che-ambum* a stick adorned with six-colored ribbons, which the young man used to woo the mountain god's third daughter and take her as his wife. Their offspring were the ancestors of the *go-log* tribe.¹²

The Myth of the Five Sisters of Longevity

The myth of the Five Sisters of Longevity (*tshe-ring-mched lnga*) is popular in the Mount Everest region. The five sisters are identified with particular mountains in the area. The greatest of them is *bkra-shis-tshe-ring-ma*, who oversees the welfare and longevity of mankind. Iconographically, she is young and beautiful, and rides a white lion. In her left hand she holds a sacred arrow used for taking auspices; dice made of white conch and a

¹¹ Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975:313-16.

¹² This myth was collected by R.A. Stein about 1950, and was cited in introducing the Guo Luo tribe (Rock 1952:125-26).

mirror are tied to the tail of the arrow. She wears white silk garments, a cloak made of peacock feathers, and a white scarf wrapped around her head.¹³ *Bkra-shis-tshe-ring-ma* belongs to a group of guardian goddesses who offer cleverness and wisdom to mankind. Among the sisters of longevity are *mting-gi-zhal-bzang-ma*, typically represented as a green goddess holding a magical mirror and riding a wild horse; the yellow goddess *mi-g'yu-blo-bzang-ma*, a giver of grain who rides a golden tiger; the red goddess *cod-pan-mgrin-bzang-ma*, a goddess of wealth who holds a plate full of treasures and rides a red doe; and another green goddess, *gtad-dkar-vgro-bzang-ma*, who holds a sacred arrow in her hand, rides a dragon, and possesses dominion over the animals. The Five Sisters of Longevity live on the peak of Mount Everest. Myth tells that at its foot lie five icy lakes, each a different color corresponding to the colors of the five goddesses.



Bkra-shis-tshe-ring-ma, one of the five mountain-goddess sisters of longevity.
Photograph by the author.

¹³ See further Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1975:177-80.

The Eminence of the Mountain Gods

In Tibetan mythology, the mountain gods have immense power and rule all other deities; this power stems from their control of weather phenomena—the wind, the clouds, thunder, hail, and so on. Accordingly, they have become the principal gods of Tibetan mythology, and their veneration is the most important form of nature worship in Tibet. In this regard Tibetan mythology is no different from myths of peoples all over the world, since the principal gods in most cultures are usually nature gods. Because of their massive “bodies” and because of the illusions created by the weather around the peaks, mountain gods have changeable images in ritual. In time an amalgamation of mountain god worship with animal worship occurred: animals such as sheep, yaks, and wild horses all but replaced the old images. This animal imagery in turn gave way to anthropomorphism, as the animal forms became accompanying gods or the beasts that the mountain god rides. Changes in ritual imagery notwithstanding, the preeminence of the mountain gods in Tibetan mythology is unquestioned. Sacrifices to them are a collective rather than an individual matter, for a mountain god is not usually considered to be an individual guardian; instead, he or she is the guardian of a particular tribe or even an entire people.

The Mountain Gods and the Heavenly Rope*The Origin, Development, and Etymology of the Heavenly Rope*

Owing to the lofty heights of the mountains and the sometimes illusory influences of weather conditions, ancient Tibetans connected the mountain gods to the more abstract conceptual class of heavenly gods, believing the peaks to be sites for passage from this world to the heavens above, sites where a rope (or step) was connected directly to heaven.¹⁴ Myths about this heavenly rope (*dmu-thag* in Tibetan) were, not surprisingly, especially prevalent among the various ethnic groups that lived near the mountains themselves.

¹⁴ Similarly, La Farque notes that “the Australian aborigines believe that the soul climbed up a rope to reach a hole in the heaven where it entered another world” (1978:132).

Early Tibetan mythology differentiated mountain gods from heavenly gods: heavenly gods were chiefly symbolic and less directly connected to the material life of early Tibet. Over time, however, the apparent physical proximity, together with similarities in ritual worship, led to increased identification between the mountain gods and the heavenly gods, the result being that the latter now possess a large measure of the features of the preeminent mountain gods; it is even held that mountain gods and heavenly gods can transform from one into the other. The mountain gods sometimes rise to the status of heavenly gods, and the heavenly gods sometimes descend to become mountain gods. *Vod-de-gung-rgyal*, for example, is a patriarchal god ranked among the so-called “nine creator-gods.” However, judging from the word *vod-de-gung-rgyal*, this mountain god is also a heavenly god, for in Tibetan, *gung* means “heaven,” and *gung-rgyal* signifies “heavenly king.”

Here it may be appreciated that the way the Tibetans understand the heavenly gods is somewhat different from that of peoples who live in other geographical conditions. The Tibetans’ understanding of the heavenly gods developed on the basis of their mountain god worship. After developing the conception of the heavenly gods through this kind of worship, ancient Tibetans postulated a tie between the two sets of gods. Hence the myth of the heavenly rope.

The phrase for “heavenly rope” in Tibetan is *dmu-thag-smu-thag*. The word *dmu* appears relatively late in Tibetan literature. *Dmu* is written as *mu* in Dunhuang literature, and etymological comparisons between various Tibeto-Burmese languages strongly suggests that *mu-* in Tibetan refers to “the heavenly god.”¹⁵ As for the word *dmu-thag*, I believe it to be closely connected to the Tibetan word for “rainbow” (*vjav*). A rainbow could well be understood by early societies as a rope connecting heaven to earth, a rope sent down by the heavenly gods. Literally, *dmu-thag* means “the heavenly gods’ rope.” According to Tibetan literature, when the Tibetan king *btsan-po* died he looked like a rope under the “rainbow,” and he went up to the heavens along the *dmu-thag*. It seems, then, that there is an intimate relationship between *dmu-thag* and *vjav*. In Pelliot’s Tibetan text no. 126.2 (“The Formation of *Dmu-thag*”), we read that “from the lights in the sky and

¹⁵ E.g., the Kachin word *mu* refers to “the heaven, thunder, and lightning,” and the Nu word *mu* refers to “the heaven.” Cf. Benedict 1980:156. Also, Professor Huang Bufan has provided me with an in-depth analysis of the word *dmu*, showing how *mu* changed into *dmu* or *rmu*, as well as given me S. W. Cobin’s paper *A Note on Tibetan (mu)* for reference. I here express my thanks.

fog over the sea came the white curdle of the Bon religion. It is stretched by the wind, woven into threads, and wound round a tree. It is known as *Dmu-thag* or *g.yang thag* (“fortune rope”).¹⁶ This text clearly identifies *dmu-thag* with the rainbow.

The Myth of the Heavenly Rope and the Royal Genealogy of Ancient Tibet

Like the Hans, the Tibetans also have their own tradition of historiography. Beginning in the seventh to ninth centuries CE and continuing for more than 1000 years, Tibetan culture produced a wide variety of historical texts. The Tibetan historiographical tradition is closely linked to the cultural exchanges between the Tibetan and Han peoples; as early as the sixth and seventh centuries, Tibetan scholars were translating Chinese historical texts into the Tibetan language.¹⁷ Chronological texts similar to those in Chinese also began to appear. In much the same way that Han historians historicized their ancient mythology, Tibetan historians, when recording their own ancestral deeds and the genealogy of the royal family, historicized Tibetan mythology, but the historiographical methods, approaches, and processes they adopted differed somewhat.¹⁸ It will be useful to turn now to an analysis of the historicizing of Tibetan mythology and its relation to the mythology of the heavenly rope.

At an early stage of the heavenly rope myth, gods that traveled between the heaven and the earth appeared largely in a natural shape, taking the form of such animals as yaks and wild horses; etiologically, then, these

¹⁶ Karmay 1975:210. In addition, some shamanistic groups also believe that their sorcerers can ride rainbows and ascend to the heavens. They use red and blue ribbons to symbolize rainbows. Some scholars hold that the red and yellow silk ribbons that hang on the frames of the *thang-ka* icons (called *vjav-ser* and *vjav-dmar* in turn) are reflections of this idea, the ribbons standing for the rainbow on which the sorcerers ride.

¹⁷ Translated into Tibetan were *Shangshu*, *Zhangguoce*, and other important texts. See further Huang 1987.

¹⁸ Scholars all agree that the lack of mythology among the Han people “is largely due to historicization of the mythology in the Shang and Western Zhou Dynasties. As to the reasons for such historicization, on one hand ‘devious gods’ were not acceptable in the Confucian thinking of the Zhou and Han periods, and deliberately justified the mysterious mythology. On the other, this was also an unavoidable trend of humanism and revival of arts between late Spring and Autumn period and that of Warring Kingdoms” (Zhang 1983:283). See also Yang 1992:120-40.

animals were considered to be descended from the heavens. According to the myth known as *The Horse and the Wild Horse*, for example, the horse lived in the heavens and the wild horse lived in the middle air, and they descended to the divine land of *gong-thang*. With the emergence of more complex societies, anthropomorphic gods with magical powers replaced animal-shaped gods. In Tibet, the currents of military and economic development fostered the emergence of a “high” culture, and people began to keep track of their ancestral history. In a system rooted in tribal confederacies, the concept of consanguinity meant that Tibetan historiography gave special attention to the recording of genealogies. New cultural contacts also played a part. Tibetan historians employed new chronological methods, recording folk tales and myths as history with extreme rigor and accuracy. They ranked mythological figures among their ancient kings and thus brought them into the historical record. As a result, many Tibetan history books hold that the first generation of Tibetan kings (*btsan-po*) descended from the heavens to the sacred mountains. For example, in *Tibetan Historical Texts in a Duhuang Version* we find that *nyag-khri-btsan-po* descended to the mountain of *lha-ri-byang-mtheo* (“the sacred mountain towering high in the north”).¹⁹ In sum, the inheritance of royal Tibetan genealogy in ancient times was founded on the basis of the mythology surrounding the mountain gods; indeed, the mountain gods were crucial to the development of the heavenly gods and the mythology of the heavenly rope.

Changes: *gnyan* and the Conception of the Mountain Gods

Many names of mountains and mountains gods in Tibet contain the word *gnyan* (“argali,” or wild sheep), the most famous being *gnyan-chen-thang-lha* and *lha-chen-gnyan-rje-gung-sngon*. The *gnyan* grazed in pasturelands where the ancient Tibetans often hunted it and other animals for food; it is here that the *gnyan* entered the Tibetan consciousness. The *gnyan* was traditionally renowned for its fierce temper and resistance to domestication; as a result, it was often killed by ancient Tibetans, and its horns, known as *gnyan-raw*, were used as vessels for wine and milk. Alongside this practice, they also worshipped the *gnyan* and other animals that they hunted; such worship was born out of fear, for the *gnyan* was a ferocious beast. Padma Tibetans, for example, tell the following tale: On the

¹⁹ See further Karmay 1992.

mountain where they lived there was a snow-white argali. People in Wen County were very much afraid of it, because whenever it heard a human voice it would come out and kill people.²⁰ This tale, and others like it, express the ancient Tibetan view of the *gnyan* as a demon. The ubiquity of the *gnyan* made it one of the most important such creatures; thus the semantic extension of *gnyan* to include “demon” or “monster.” Inasmuch as demons were considered divine—coupled with the frequent movement of the argalis on the wild mountains and valleys that contributed to their mystery and sanctity—the *gnyan* was regarded as a mountain spirit. In the Dunhuang written text PT 986, for example, the Chinese for “mountain god” was translated as *ri-gnyan-po*. Other literary and historical writings support the translation of *gnyan* as “mountain god.”

In accordance with the evolution of ancient Tibetan beliefs, the idea of *gnyan* as a divine demon and spirit diversified. The world of ghosts and gods was projected from the pattern of human social relations, further complicating the concept of the divine demon. The *gnyan* of mythology was eventually marked by opposing conceptions of the animal as both demon and god. The *gnyan* also became a totemic animal for Tibetans.

On the whole, then, it may be appreciated that the concept of the divine *gnyan* initially evolved from the worship of the biological *gnyan*, and was associated mainly with mountains gods or spirits. This divine association has also changed, and the idea of the *gnyan*-as-demon became more generic and widespread. The word *gnyan* now represents any number of different demons:

<i>sa-gnyan</i>	earthly demon
<i>chu-gnyan</i>	water monster
<i>shing-gnayn</i>	wood ghost
<i>rdo-gnyan</i>	stone spirit
<i>brag-gnyan</i>	rock spirit
<i>mtsho-gnyan</i>	lake spirit

Depending on the material form, these demons and spirits took on new physical appearances. For example, *sa-gnyan* is a frog with a jade breast; this is because the frog represents a dragon god under the ground.

Since the *gnyan* is such a widespread and diversified demon-god, it is believed to exist virtually everywhere. It is found not only in the substances of all inanimate objects but also in human bodies; in general, it permeates

²⁰ Padamsambhava 1988:29, 117-18. I have seen a specimen of an ancient argali, which is genuinely frightening. It was large in stature, standing as high as two meters having horns one meter in length.

every aspect of human life. When the demon *gnyan* enters the body, it causes diseases; in Tibetan, *gnyan* can also mean “disease.” Of the some eighteen kinds of *gnyan* illnesses the following group is but a representative sample:

<i>gnyan-kha</i>	tetanus
<i>gnyan-kha-med</i>	nephritis
<i>gnyan-vbur</i>	hot-treatment
<i>gnayn-vbars</i>	focus of infection
<i>gnyan-glang</i>	enterogastritis
<i>gnyan-dug</i>	blister treatment
<i>gnyan-dug</i>	poison treatment
<i>gnayn-rims</i>	seasonal febrile disease

In turn, substances in Tibetan medicine that can curb *gnyan* invasions incorporate the very word in their names: e.g., *Saussurea involucre* is *gnyan-thub-pa* (anti-*gnyan*) in Tibetan. Musk and *sman-chen* are *gnyan-gsod* (*gnyan*-killer). From these interconnections between the spiritual and the medicinal, the developing knowledge of diseases and medicine among the ancient Tibetans may be glimpsed.²¹

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²¹ The demonic and disease-causing *gnyan* represents the evil aspect of its nature. This evil aspect of *gnyan*, particularly its cruelty and ferocity, gradually motivated the formation of postnominal adjectives. For example, *sa-cha-gnayn-po* means “very dangerous,” *bkav-gnyan-po* means “a harsh order,” *dam-tshig-gnyan* means “heavy oath,” and *gnayn-sa* means “dangerous place.”

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The Rhinoceros Totem and Pangu Myth: An Exploration of the Archetype of Pangu

Wu Xiaodong

Region and Ethnicity of the Pangu Myth

There are theories that the Chinese Pangu myth originated either in Western India, the Central Plains, or the South. As for the ethnicity of the Pangu myth, since it is found in almost every group in China many different peoples believe that the Pangu myth belongs to them. However, only the Miao and Yao language families reflect a seamless connection between the regional and ethnic diversities. This is because the Miao and Yao language families migrated from the Central Plains to the South.

Many scholars—notably Lu Simian, Yang Kuan, and He Xin—believe that the Pangu myth has an Indian origin. In *The Origin of the Gods* the scholar He analyzes all works before the Qin Dynasty¹ that have no trace of the myth in which Pangu opens heaven and breaks the earth (1996:235). Nor is this myth documented in such compendia of surreal phenomena as *Shanhaijing*, *Tianwen*, and *Diwang Jishi*. It first appears in Xu Zheng's *Sanwu Liji* and *Wuyun Linian Ji*² at the time of the Three Kingdoms (222-280 CE), as well as Ren Fang's *Shuyi Ji* of the Liang Dynasty (440-589 CE).³ During this period, China experienced the

¹ During the Qin Dynasty (221-206 BCE) Chinese scholars first began documenting and annotating their culture in the unified Chinese Writing System established by Emperor Qin shi huang.

² The original copies of *Sanwu Liji* and *Wuyun Linian Ji* were lost. *Sanwu Liji* was first cited in *Yi Wen Lei Ju* from 557-641 CE (Ou et al., Tang Dynasty) and *Wuyun Linian Ji* in *Yi Shi* (Ma Xiao 1670).

³ Some scholars argue that Pangu myth was passed down orally among southern ethnic groups and barely recorded in early Chinese books. As a result, the Chinese (Han) literati were hardly aware of this storytelling tradition until it emerged in Xu Zheng's books. Xu Zheng lived in the Wu Kingdom in southeast China, where he collected the

encroachment of Indian Buddhism and culture. Due to this influence, He inferred that the Pangu myth had a Western Asian/Indian origin and that it later spread to the Central Plains via Southwest China sometime after the mid-Eastern Han Dynasty.

Though the “Western Indian Origin Theory” is very influential in the study of the Pangu myth, the inferences upon which it is based are not reliable. Further discoveries and new research are causing it to give way. First, at the site of an ancient temple on a Pangu mountain⁴ where the locals hold a grand worship ceremony on March 3 (Chinese lunar calendar) each year,⁵ scholars from Beijing and Henan discovered fragments of earthenware and broken bricks. According to an assessment given by the archeological team in Nanyang district, the earthenware fragments came from the rim of a well dating from the Han Dynasty; the broken bricks date back to the same period. There are also remnants from the Song, the Ming, and the Qing Dynasties.⁶ Here, then, is proof that people built a brick and tile Pangu temple even in the Han Dynasty. In theory, this fact indicates that people at that time devotedly worshipped Pangu, and supports the idea that the Pangu myth was popular even earlier, back at least to the pre-Qin and Han Dynasties. This discovery fully proves that the Pangu myth did not first enter China with the advent of Indian Buddhism and culture.

Second, that there is no record of the Pangu myth in the literature of the Han Dynasty before the Three Kingdoms period does not mean that there were no oral versions among the minority groups at that time. Though the Pangu myth appears only in the literature of the Three Kingdoms period, there remains the possibility of its dissemination among the folk. Whether the stories focus on Pangu’s opening up heaven and breaking up the earth or on his reincarnation, all are common to minority groups in the south. The description of those events in the *Ancient Miao Song* is quite similar to parallels in the Han Dynasty literature, but more detailed (Yan 1993:24):

Ghet paif Gux dail lul,
Nenx diub diot nangl lol,

Pangu stories from local ethnic groups and recorded them in Chinese. See further Geng 1993:67-68 and Liu 1997:177-86.

⁴ Fifty kilometers north of the Taibai peak of the Tongbai Mountains in Henan province.

⁵ May 29, 1987.

⁶ Ma H. 1993:14.

Dad lol diongb dot bil,
 Lol pab ob liul niangl,
 Wangt zeit mongl ob dangl,
 Fangx waix dot ib liul,
 Fangb dab dot ib liul,
 Paif Gux dail vut hxut,
 Denl laib waix al zeit,
 Dad laib hfud mongl diut,
 Dliangx jil bil mongl hniant.

Old grandpa Pangu,
 He walked down from the East,
 Brought a big axe with him,
 Cutting two pieces of thin plank.
 The two pieces broke up into two;
 Heaven got one,
 The earth also got one.
 Old man Pangu is kindhearted,
 Raising heaven upward with all his might,
 Using his head as support,
 Reaching out his hand to back up.

The splitting up of heaven and earth is described thus in the *Ancient Miao Song* (Ma Xueliang and Jin 1983:9):

Once two pieces were cast:
 The white one floated upward,
 The black one sank down.
 In this way we have a wide expanse of heaven,
 And now we have a broad span of earth.

Here, the description that “the white one floated upward, / the black one sank down” is probably derived from the opacity and purity of the white and yolk of the egg. This is similar to a claim found in the *Sanwu Liji*, that “the *yang*-opacity is the heaven and the *yin*-purity is the earth.” There are traces of egg-birth conception in the *Ancient Miao Song*. At the beginning of *Sanwu Liji*, we find that “the Heaven and the Earth were mixed like an egg, and Pangu was born into it.” The *Ancient Miao Song*, for its part, gives more detailed descriptions of the “egg,” or Shen Niu’s egg. But Xu’s “the Heaven rises by one *zhang*⁷ a day while the Earth thickens by one *zhang* daily, and Punban grows by one *zhang* each day, and Pangu is very tall” has come to be imaged in the *Ancient Miao Song* as simply a long-legged baby.

⁷ One *zhang* is equivalent to 10 Chinese feet (1 Chinese foot = 33 cm.).

The reincarnation of Pangu also exists in the mythology of southern minority groups. The *Ancient Miao Song* represents Pangu's transfiguration at the moment of death; this episode is similarly described in Xu's poem. The *Ancient Miao Song* also discloses the cause of Pangu's near-death—his fatigue in holding up heaven (Yan 1993:31):

Paif Gux daib lul,
 Vud hseid jangx hob nul,
 Hseik mais jangx hob dul,
 Xangt bongt jent nangl,
 Eb mais jangx eb seil,
 dliub hfud jangx ghaib dul,
 Tiangt lax lax tiant dol,
 Ghut jox diub bel dlel.

Grandpa Pangu is a hero,
 He speaks like thunder,
 He winks like lightning,
 His breath became the wind from the east,
 His tears converged into a stream,
 His hair turned to firewood and grass,
 He held up heaven for too long,
 His body fell into pieces,
 Pangu died and became the hillside.

Such a transfiguration may be totemic and indeed seems close to other myths about totemic reincarnation. The Yi people regard the tiger as their totem, and their epic *Meige*⁸ describes the reincarnation of the totemic tiger in this way (CIFY 1959:12-14):

The tiger's head became the heavenly head,
 The tiger's tail became the heavenly tail,
 Its left eye became the sun,
 Its right eye became the moon.
 . . .
 The tiger's belly became the sea.

The Miao people have the maple for their totem, and their *Song of the Maple* includes a similar description (Yan 1993:476-78):

⁸ “*Meige*, a well-known Yi creation epic in Yao'an, Yunan describes how the universe and all plants and things on the earth were gradually generated from the tiger's body” (CIFY 1959).

The tree roots became carp,
 The tree's base became a bronze drum,
 The tree's leaves became swallows,
 The tree trunk became a butterfly.

From such similarities we can assert that the pre-death transfiguration of Pangu also evolved from totemic reincarnation. Its origin should be early, at least before the Qin and Han Dynasties. The transformation of Pangu recorded in Chinese literature is closer to this kind of pre-death reincarnation than it is to the stories of Brahma's changes recorded in the Indian *Veda*. Brahma's reincarnation is one of the senses, e.g., "that man has mouth and then language, has language and then fire, has nose and then breath, has breath and then wind" (Lemowanna 1984:50). On the basis of this evidence we cannot simply assume that such myths among the national minorities were imported.

The "Southern Origin Theory" is represented by Mao Dun (1981). According to this perspective, the earliest appearance of the Pangu myth is in *Sanwu Liji*. Since its author, Xu, was from the southern Wu Kingdom of the Three Kingdoms period, the Pangu myth he recorded might well have originated from his research tour in the south. In addition, related artifacts are also concentrated in the south. For that reason Xia Zengyou remarks that "it is doubtful that [the Pangu myth] is not a traditional Han Chinese tale; or else Pangu is homophonic to Panhu. That is why the Pangu Tomb is found only in the South Sea [the Dongting Lake] and Guilin has a Pangu Temple. If not, our ancestor-kings should live in the North. Why did only Pangu live in the South?" (Ma H. and Zhu 1992:5).

Ma Huixin and Zhu Gelin represent the "Central Plains Origin Theory." Because Dong Sizhang of the Ming Dynasty was Xu Zheng's countryman, they believe that the Pangu myth was based on data gathered from around the Tongbai Mountains. In his *Guangbo Wuzhi*, Dong, quoting Xu, observes that "the master of Pungu has a dragon's head and a snake's body. His bones became mountains and forests after his death, his body became the sea and the river, his blood became the Huai and Du Rivers, and his hair became grass and wood" (Ma H. and Zhu 1992:8).⁹

Actually, if we combine the factor of ethnicity with that of territoriality, the difference between the Southern Origin Theory and the Central Plains Origin Theory can easily be resolved. I believe that the Pangu myth originated in the Central Plains. The reason why there are many Pangu remnants in the South is that the Pangu Tribe of the Sanmiao, who

⁹ The Huai and Du Rivers originate in the Tongbai Mountains.

first lived at the foot of the Tongbai Mountains of the Central Plains, later migrated to the South and brought Pangu culture with them.

As for the ethnicity of the Pangu myth, Ma Huixin is the recognized authority on the subject. He spent nine months in the field searching for the Pangu myth, covering a distance of 15,000 kilometers, and collecting myths and legends in different regions; the sheer weight of his collected material amounted to 90 kilos. He also made recordings on 27 cassettes and brought back more than 40 photographs. Ma H. learned much about the origin and spread of the Pangu myths in over twenty ethnic groups across more than twenty provinces and Autonomous Regions (1993:50). His data is rich and comprehensive. In his book *The Pangu God*, Ma H. compares the Pangu myths among such various ethnic groups as the Yi, the Bai, the Lisu, the Gelao, the Buyei, the Dong, the Maonan, the Zhuang, the Miao, the Yao, the Tujia, and the Tu, as well as among the Han Chinese in the regions of Hainan, the Chengdu Plains, and the Wu-Yue areas. He finally comes to this conclusion (1993:51):

By surveying the Yao areas in Hunan and remote areas of Guangxi and Lingnan, my general impression is that the areas where the Pan Yao live are closely connected to ancient Pangu tribes. Wherever the Pan Yao go they build Pangu shrines and temples, and they seek help from Pangu and are grateful to him for good fortune. They make offerings to Pangu at festivals. Because of changes in ethnic elements in the Yao-populated areas, the Dog-Head Yao who worship Panhu were influenced by the Pangu Yao and added on their Dog-Head tablet, above the dog head itself, characters for King Pangu who opened up heaven and broke up the earth.

Nowadays, the Miao, the Yao, and the She in Hunan and Guangxi still put the tablet for Pangu in the first place where they worship their ancestors, consigning the tablet for Panhu to the second place. We can see from this sequencing that the origins of Pangu are very old. At that time both the Yao and She belonged to the Sanmiao. They solved their territorial issues with the help of Pangu's ethnicity: speakers of the Miao language family clearly occupied the Central Plains very long ago. More precisely, their habitat included the Tongbai Mountains, because the Miao-Man have spread out south to Huanan, Hubei, Jiangxi, and north to Xionger, Waifang (the Songshan Mountains), and Funiu.

“Pangu”

A linguistic analysis of the term “Pangu” proves that the Pangu myth belongs to the Miao-Yao language family. In the early stages of Pangu studies, scholars believed that Pangu was the same figure as Panhu, since the pronunciation of the two names differs by only one phoneme. However, further research has shown that these two names were not the same. Wu Shunze holds that “Pangu” is derived from “Fuxi” (1991:26):

Based on their pronunciation, Pangu and Fuxi are related by phonetic law, and Pangu is the phonetic transformation of Fuxi. Both “pan” and “fu” belong to the ancient “bing” sound. “Gu” belongs to the “jian” sound under section “yu,” and “xi” belongs to the “xiao” sound under section “ge.” “Yu” and “ge” are closest in transformation. Since there was no difference between guttural and palatal sounds, “gu” and “xi” can be the same anterior sound. For example, the anterior sound “hu” belongs to the sound “gu,” which was pronounced with a guttural sound in ancient times, the same way as “hu” is pronounced as “he” (the interrogative pronoun); therefore “he” and “xi” were the same in ancient times.

However, this kind of far-fetched and confusing manner of textual interpretation can make almost any two sounds seem similar or related.

With regard to grammar, the word “Pangu” does not conform to Chinese grammar: *gu* (“old”) is an adjective, and *pan* (“dish”) is a noun, and it is clear that “gu” modifies “pan” from a posterior position. Of course in the remote past it was possible for the modifier to follow the modified core word. However, if we say that “Pangu” is a survival from ancient Chinese, then we cannot explain why there was no record of the Pangu myth before the Three Kingdoms period. Then again, if we say that the Pangu myth emerged in the Three Kingdoms period or in the Qin and Han Dynasties, then why does the word “Pangu” not conform to Chinese grammar? Since at least the time of the Qin and Han Dynasties, the core word has followed the modifier.

If we analyze the two characters “Pan/gu” according to the present Xiangxi dialect of the Miao language, the results are clearer. In this dialect, “old grandpa” is still called *pangu* (written in Miao as “poub ghuot”); *pan* means “grandpa,” and *gu* means “old.” According to Miao grammar, the modifier should follow the modified core, and it can be translated as “grandpa.” What attracts our attention is that since *gu* in Chinese also means “old,” is it the case that the Miao language borrowed this morpheme from the Chinese language? It is hard to say so, because the anterior sound for *gu* in Miao is a uvular sound, while there is no such sound in Chinese

anymore. We can say therefore that this sound is relatively old, and it is possible that the word might come from the same root language from which both Miao and Chinese derived.

To explain *pangu* as “old grandpa” according to Miao is in perfect agreement with the Pangu myth. Pangu is an ancestor of creation and it is therefore only proper to call him “old grandpa.” Generally, time and characters in the myth are represented ambiguously: with respect to time we often find such imprecise phrases as “one day” or “long, long ago.” Characters are often introduced with “there is one man” or “there is an old man,” and so on. In a word, it is never precise. Now in what we have been referring to as the Pangu myth, “pangu” is used as a personal name, a usage that does not agree with the account of the creation myth. When the myth came into being, people would absolutely not give a particular name to the hero of the myth. Therefore, if we explain “pangu” as “old grandpa” according to the Miao language, then it accords well with the ambiguity demanded by history.

In the *Ancient Miao Song* this ambiguity remains. The ancestor-creators of the heaven and the earth are called “grandpa” and “grandma,” terms close in meaning to *pangu* (Ma H. and Jin 1983:9):

Look how the heaven and the earth are created.
 Who will steel the heaven and the earth?
 The grandpa of the remote olden times who created the heaven,
 The grandma of the primitive past who made the earth.
 They made a big crucible,
 To be used for steeling the earth.

The word “Pangu” also appears in Yan Bao’s annotation of the *Ancient Miao Song*. There it coexists with such divine names as Popa, Kedi, Xiuchou, and others. The poem proceeds as follows (Yan 1993:11):

Kot dit bil hsat denx,
 nenx diub dai yut niox.
 Dail xid dail hvib fangx,
 Dail xid lol hsat denx?
 Paif Gux dail hvib fangx,
 Paif Gux lol hsat denx.

Not that Kot dit [a god] is the earliest comer,
 He is still too young.
 Who is cleverest,
 Who is the first born?
 That Pangu is the cleverest,

Pangu is the earliest comer.

When Yan translated and edited this passage, he added this note (*idem*): “Pangu, man of divinity; he appears directly in the *Ancient Miao Song* and is not from a transcription.” In Yan’s annotation of the the *Ancient Miao Song* Pangu is written as “paifgux” in the Miao script of East Guizhou, and its meaning is beyond comprehension. We can surmise that the word *pangu* has probably undergone a shift from a general name to a proper name. In other words, at first *pangu* was strictly a term of address, and later became a personal name.

Characterization of Pangu and the Rhinoceros

What is the archetype of Pangu? Is he a real man? An imagined man? A totem? We have demonstrated that the Pangu myth belongs to the Miao, and thus we may start with the mythology of the Miao language family in answering such questions. Pangu’s transformation before death is recorded in Xu’s *Sanwu Linian Ji*. The Pangu myth contains two parts. The first describes the opening of heaven and the breaking of earth, while the second tells of Pangu’s pre-death reincarnation. The latter part reveals traces of the belief in totemic reincarnation, which came into being and developed as a result of totemism. According to such convictions, totems are men and the two can transform into each other. It is this adherence to pre-death transformation that is responsible for the belief in totems’ reincarnation into various objects after death. The Yi people hold the tiger to be such a totem, believing that all beings descended from transformations of the tiger before its death. The Miao people consider the maple a totem, and in the *Ancient Song* the maple transfigures into all sorts of beings. Since Pangu also had the ability to transfigure before his death, his archetype might well be a totem, and therefore a totem for the Miao and Yao language families.

As for Pangu’s reincarnation before death, the earliest description comes from *Sanwu Liji* and *Wuyun Linian Ji*, both of which date from the Three Kingdoms period. Unfortunately, both texts are lost. We can, however, learn something about them from a later generation of ancient texts that contain excerpts, such as *Yiwen Leiju*, *Taiping Yulan*, *Guangbo Wuzhi*, and *Yi Shi*. Volume 9 of *Guangbo Wuzhi*, for example, quotes *Wuyun Linian Ji* (Yuan 1985:358):

King Pangu has a dragon's head and a snake's body; his sigh became the wind and rain, and his breath became the thunder and lightning; when he opened his eyes it became day, and when he closed them it became night. After he died, his bones turned into mountains and forests, his body became the river and sea, and his hair became the grass and wood.

At first glance Pangu's archetype seems to be something with "a dragon's head and a snake's body," and for this reason Yuan Ke inferred that "it is possible that the Candle Dragon was Pangu in the old legend and Pangu was the outcome of a changed Candle Dragon" (1993:71).

Actually we can see from the contradictions in this description that Pangu does not in fact possess "a dragon's head and a snake's body." A dragon, after all, cannot have hair. That Pangu is described as having "a dragon's head and a snake's body" is probably the result of a false analogy. The first volume of *Yi Shi* quotes *Wuyun Linian Ji* as reporting nothing of these features (Yuan 1985:358):

Pangu came into being first and then he transfigured before death: his breath became the wind and clouds, his voice became the thunder, his left eye became the sun, his right eye became the moon, his five bodies and limbs became the four directions and five mountains, his blood became the rivers, his tendon became the contours of the earth, his muscles became the fields, his hair and beard became the constellations, his skin and body hair became the grass and wood, his teeth and bones became gold and stones, his marrow became pearls and jade, his sweat became the rain and lakes, and the worms on his body turned into the earth's inhabitants after touching the wind.

In the Han people's epic *A Record of Darkness*, which was unearthed in the Shennongjia area of Hubei, there are also descriptions of Pangu's transfiguration before death (Ma H. 1993:104):

Pangu the great hero,
His speaking turned to thunder,
His winking turned to stars,
His breathing turned to wind,
His tears became the rain,
And he died because he held up heaven for too long.
His hair became grass and wood,
His skin and flesh became the soil,
His bones and flesh became hillsides,
The twelve mountains in the southeast.

Here again there is no mention of Pangu having “a dragon’s head and a snake’s body.”

Based on the quotations above we can suggest the following about Pangu:

- 1) He has four limbs, and seems to be a kind of animal.
- 2) He is an animal with fur.
- 3) He has parasites on his body.
- 4) He has horns on his head.

We can judge from the four points above that the archetype of Pangu seems to be something similar to an ox. Though the dragon also has four legs and horns, it has neither fur nor parasites.

As for the legend that the worms on Pangu’s body became the denizens of the earth after touching the wind, there are other derivations of this detail as well. A legendary myth about the worm as the ancestor of humanity was discovered in the Dinghai County of Zhejiang province (Chen 1986:4): “It is said that after Pangu divided heaven and earth, at first there were no human beings; it was from heaven that many worms fell and became human beings.” This mythologem is probably derived from the statement that “the worms on his body turned into the inhabitants of the earth after touching the wind”—“inhabitants” here referring to humankind. There are not many places where such legends persist nowadays. Cheng Junjian believed that “the story of ‘the worms’ becoming human beings was given up by people later on because they spurned as ‘irrational,’ according to aesthetics of their own time, the primitive conception that was contained in ancient mythology” (1997:15).

The image of a horned Pangu is still found among the folk in the Central Plains. As noted above, there is a Pangu Temple on a Pangu mountain in the Tongbai Range, in which people worship a clay figure: “Grandpa Pangu has a pair of horns on his head, with a square face and big ears, tree leaves and animal fur, and sits barefooted on the altar” (*ibid.*:21). Rock picture no. 378 in the exhibition hall of pictures from the Han Dynasty in Nanyang shows a naked horned man holding an axe in his right hand, with the left hand raised in front holding an unnamed bifurcated object. Ma H. has proposed (1993:75) that this was a picture of the Pangu who cut the mountain open and defeated the monster.

There is also a legend among the folk around the Tongbai Mountains that explains why Pangu has grown a pair of horns (Ma H. 1993:16, 75-76):

The picture of Pangu has been passed down from generation to generation; all the people around the mountain can tell how Grandpa

Pangu looks. Grandpa Pangu is tall, as tall as one *zhang*, with a square face, big round eyes, a pair of horns on his head, kudzu vines interwoven with tree leaves, and bare feet.

At the time of Pangu, human horns had two functions: as a weapon used by men against beasts and as a harbinger of death. Usually people were busy in search of food and game. However, as soon as their horns became soft, they would give up working and wait for death. Soon the number of people who had soft horns increased, and fewer people were working. The Heavenly Grandpa sent down heavenly generals with his arm and took back all the horns. At that time, there were fewer people on the earth. Overnight all the horns were taken back.

The widespread dispersal of this legend shows that the archetype of Pangu does not have a dragon's head and a snake's body, but is an animal with horns and a square human face accustomed to fighting animals and beasts. The dragon also has horns, but they are different from what is described above.

What, then, is this beast with four legs, a pair of horns, fur, and worms in its hair? It could be a deer, an ox, a buffalo, or a rhinoceros, but certainly not a dragon or its archetype, the snake. I believe that it is highly possible that the archetype of Pangu is the rhinoceros, since the Pangu myth came originally from the Miao and Yao language family, in which there is a buffalo-like animal totem called *hxeb niux*.

Hxeb niux Gave Birth to Pangu

In the *Ancient Miao Song*, Pangu was not the most archaic ancestor. A sacred animal called Hxeb niux (as pronounced in Miao) gave birth to Pangu (Yan 1993:15-16):

Dliel denx hxib khangd niul,
 Hxeb niux daib bad lul,
 Hliad niux hxangb tid nongl,
 Tid nenx laib zaid dlenl,
 Ax was ghab diux yel,
 Laib zaid dliangt bongl liongl,
 Dlenx gib wib qut nangl,
 Jangx ghob hmob ax fal,
 Niangb lax lax niangb dol,
 Hfaid jangx git Hsenb Niul,
 Git Hsenb Niux hnaib niul.

...

Git dangt daib hvib ngangl,
 Daib hlieb bongt hieb dliangl,
 Ghab ait Paif Gux dail,
 Paif Gux daib bad lul.

In the remotest ancient times,
 There was a hero called Hxub niux.
 He vomited threads to build a storehouse with,
 He built a house for himself,
 With no door nor window;
 The whole house is smooth,
 Round in shape in the east.
 He turned himself into a chrysalis and slept in it,
 He was soundly asleep and could not wake up,
 He sat and lay and slumbered there for a long time,
 He then changed into an egg of Shen niux [another name for Hxub niux],
 The egg of Shen niux from long, long ago.

...

The egg of Shen niux gave birth to a long-legged son,
 The long-legged son was strong,
 He was given the name Pangu,
 Pangu was a hero.

We may observe the relationship between Pangu and Hxub niux: Hxub niux became the egg of Shen niux, and the egg of Shen niux gave birth to Pangu. This implies that Hxub niux and Pangu are one. We might expect the archetype of Pangu to be the image of Hxub niux.

Then what kind of animal was Hxub niux? In the *Ancient Miao Song*, the giant god Hxub niux is an animal with two horns, very close in appearance to the buffalo. Most scholars believe that this archetype might be the rhinoceros because the two animals share several similarities in the Miao epic. First, Hxub niux has horns. The ancient song "Opening Heaven and Breaking up Earth," collected by Tang Chunfang, mentions this detail (Pan, Yang, and Zhang 1997:7):

Hxub niux is powerful,
 With a pair of horns on its head;
 First he pried and broke the mountain,
 Second he pried and let the earth sink.

Elsewhere Hxub niux is a kind of ox. In the story "Creating Heaven and Earth" in the *Miao Epic*, collected and translated by Ma Xueliang and Jin, we find the following (1983:20):

Oh, Hxub niux, who broke up the mountain and opened the river,

...

Had a body very much like a buffalo,

His head looked like that of a lion,

His tail was similar to a palm leaf,

His four legs looked like an iron-toothed rake.

If it was the bull we offered as sacrifice for our ancestors,

It would leave us with the horns even if it went away,

Leaving them with our parents' family,

Hanging them on the core-pillar,

Showing them to our ancestors.

But Hxub niux had gone,

Where had it left its horns?

They were hung in the temple,

In the court.

The Miao and the Han were watching.

These descriptions show that Hxub niux resembled the buffalo. Furthermore, the story "Plowing the Land" in the *Miao Epic* contains the following (*ibid.*:135):

You said that Xiangliang's ox looked like a frog.

This is wrong;

His ox looked like a barn,

His plowing ox was Hxub niux.

Xiangla drove it plowing the field,

Harrowing and making it flat to grow the maple in.

It should be carefully pointed out that Hxub niux is an ox and not a buffalo. But why do scholars use the analogy of the buffalo? In "Creating Heaven and Earth," Ma Xueliang and Jin explain this tendency thus (1983:5): "Hxub niux . . . according to the correspondence law between the Miao and Chinese languages, it seems to be cognate with 'rhinoceros' in Chinese." Yan Bao notes that Hxub niux was a kind of semi-god and semi-beast animal, with the appearance of a rhinoceros. I agree with him: Hxub niux is a rhinoceros. This identification explains why in *The Ancient Miao Song* Xiangliang employed Hxub niux to plow a field. If we affirm that Hxub niux gave birth to Pangu and had the appearance of a rhinoceros, then Pangu might well look like the rhinoceros. The rhinoceros is the archetype for Pangu.

Hxub Niux and the Pangu Myth

Not only is Hxub niux Pangu's ancestor, but it, like Pangu, also possessed the ability to break up mountains and rivers, and can be counted as a great creative god. "Creating Heaven and Earth" attests to this reality (Ma X. and Jin 1983:19):

In the remotest ancient times,
 Heaven stuck to the earth,
 The earth stuck to heaven,
 The riverbed was only as thick as the human leg,
 The river ran quietly eastward.
 Hxub niux opened up a water route,
 Buba opened up a mountain road,
 Broadening the riverbed by three arm lengths.
 It was old man Hxub niux
 Who cut open the gorge to the barn,
 So not only the river could run freely,
 But so could the boat.

These words potentially unfold before us a picture of the Pangu who opened up heaven and broke up the earth in primitive times.

The depiction of Pangu's reincarnation before death has also undergone a process of change. When totemic culture prospered, the totemic figure itself transformed into the aspects of the universe. When this culture became relatively depressed, the totemic image became half-man and half-beast, and even separated into a human accompanied by a beast. The transfiguration process became relatively esoteric, and when the totemic image was completely personified, the reincarnation often became the "ancestral creature." In the Xiangxi Miao epic *Opening up Heaven and Breaking up the Earth*, Pangu's transformation was in transition from the second stage to the third. The origin of all creatures resulted from Pangu's killing a beast called Penggou; its body was used to create them (Shi 1991:4-5):

[He] came to kill King Penggou,
 Brought death to this gigantic sacred beast,
 Tore open its skin to make the blue heaven,
 To make the earth,
 Using its eyes to make the stars,
 Using its hair to make the bamboo, wood, and all creatures,
 Using its flesh juice to make salt wells and oil wells,
 Using its blood to make springs and water sources.

Clearly, this story was derived from that about Pangu's pre-death transfiguration. In the text the name Penggou could be a modified pronunciation for Pangu; the two are quite close. Since Pangu's archetype is a kind of animal, and its pre-death incarnation has caused the origin of all creatures, then we may suppose that during the depression of the totemic culture the mythological plot changed into one in which Pangu killed some sort of beast and used it to make all creatures. The trace of this change remains crystal clear: the beast killed by Pangu is called Penggou, suggesting that what Pangu killed was himself. From this we can see clearly that the reincarnation of Pangu before death has totemic origins.

We can come, after all this discussion, to some conclusions. The Pangu myth originated from the Sanmiao in the Central Plains. Put more concretely, it came from the rhinoceros tribe or clan in the Sanmiao, and the archetype for Pangu is the rhinoceros. The story of Pangu's opening up heaven and breaking up the earth dovetails with the power of the rhinoceros over nature, and the story of Pangu's pre-death reincarnation comes from an early belief and legend about the incarnation of the totemic rhinoceros.

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Mongolian-Turkic Epics: Typological Formation and Development

Rinchindorji

The academic community has long noticed the resemblance between Mongolian and Turkic epics. Some believe that the Mongols and the Turkic people share a narrative tradition that accounts for their commonalities. Such a tradition arises from the period of time when ancestors of these two groups lived together in Central Asia and South Siberia (cf. Nekljudov 1981). One could also assert that Mongolian and Turkic heroic epics display common features in theme, plot, structure, motif, character, and formula.¹ This paper explores how the Mongol-Turkic epic typology formed and developed.

Mongol-Turkic Epic Typological Classification

Mongol-Turkic epics are both ancient and lengthy, eliciting the attention of epic specialists such as E. M. Meletinskij (1963), I. V. Pukhov (1975), and others, who locate the most ancient models for the study of Mongol-Turkic epics in Siberia. Scholars from different countries have recorded a total of well over 1,000 epics among the Mongolian and Turkic language families. In addition to the voluminous Mongolian epics *Jangar* and *Geser*, more than 550 Mongolian epics and variants of small and medium length have been recorded. These are mostly shorter performances that consist of several hundreds of lines, each telling a complete story. Medium-length epics number in the dozens, each with thousands of lines, and some with more than ten thousand.

Based on regional distributions, the Mongolian epics discovered in China amount to more than 60 with 110 variants. According to Narantuyaa (1988), medium- and small-volume epics collected in Mongolia number 80

¹ Cf. Rinchindorji 1987 and 1999.

with 241 variants. The Mongolian Buriat epics in Russia have at least 200 variants (Sharakhshinova 1987). Excluding the *Jangar* recorded by the Kalmyk in China, 200 volumes of relatively independent long poems, totaling as much as 200,000 lines, have been noted in Mongolia and Russia. There are more than ten handwritten and woodblock copies and librettos of Mongolian *Geser*, in both prosaic and rhyming style. The rhyming style has variants of more than 30,000 lines.

Similarly, the Siberian Turkic groups—the Altay, Tuva, Khakas, Shurtz, and Yakut—also possess a rich repertoire of epics. For example, the Siberian Institute of the Russian Academy of Science boasts an *Olonho* collection (*Olonho* is the Yakut term for epics) numbering over 200 handwritten copies (Surazhakov 1958-80). Currently there are 396 *Olonho* registered, among which *The Rapid Niurgonbaatar* contains as many as 36,600 lines (Pukhov 1962). The historian Surazhakov edited the ten-volume epic series of 73 Altaic heroic epics (1958-80); he cited 222 epics in his study of Altaic epic (1985). There remain hundreds of Siberian-Turkic and Central-Asian-Turkic epics awaiting further study.

Mongol-Turkic epics that originated in an earlier clan society still belong to a living tradition. Over 1,000 epics and epic variants are found even now among Mongolian and Turkic language groups in various countries. However, early epics have not been passed down to the present without change, and in the course of more than a millennium they have developed and varied. On the one hand their core sections gradually developed, and new elements and whole epics evolved out of the old; on the other hand, secondary or outmoded elements receded from the historical stage. Some ancient epics were forgotten. Within the living exemplars, differences in epoch, content, types, and patterns co-exist, constituting a varied landscape. This overall process leads to the preservation of features from various stages.

The typological formation and development of the plot structure of the Mongol-Turkic epics merits further description. Heroic epic is special in that there are many similar or shared elements in the plot structure of all Mongolian epic works. The renowned Mongologists W. Heissig,² Nikolaus Poppe,³ and others have classified the plot structure of the Mongolian epics on the basis of the motif-unit. Heissig has made detailed and comprehensive analyses of the hundred or so Mongolian epics that have been collected in

² Cf. Heissig 1979.

³ Cf. Poppe 1979.

China, Mongolia, and Russia and has identified 14 structural types and more than 300 motifs and events. In addition to the motif-unit, I have adopted a larger plot-unit—namely, the motif-series (the plot-frame of the early epics)—as an increment for classifying plot structures of the Mongolian epics.⁴

What is an epic motif-series? Lyric preludes and narrative stories usually form the constituent parts of the Mongolian epics. The preludes are not long and share common patterns and motifs. Basic narrative plots structure the main body of the epics; these are supplemented by secondary plots and episodes that were integrated into the epic as it developed⁵—as with folktales, it is difficult to discern the logical connections. The basic plots are the pillars of the epic, in which we can find the traditional narratives of Mongolian epics and their periodicity and logic. I have compared and analyzed more than 200 epics and their variants both at home and abroad, and concluded that, in addition to motifs, a larger periodic plot unit commonly exists. I call such units *epic motif-series*, and based on their content, have separated them into two types: the marriage-motif and the battle-motif. Each type has its own structural patterns with a set of basic motifs that are organically linked and ordered. In a word, these two motif-series originated from early epics. After comparing and analyzing various Mongolian epics, I suggest that there are two types of early Mongolian epics, one focusing on the hero's quest for a wife and the other on the hero's struggles against a demonic figure. The plot-frame of the hero's marriage expedition is the marriage-motif-series, which consists of the following basic motifs:

Time; place; the young hero and his relatives; his riding horse; home country; palace and tent; information about his future wife; the young hero's desire for marriage and the relatives' advice against it; catching the riding horse; preparing harnesses; arming with bows and arrows and swords and knives; events on the road (conquering a ferocious beast of the natural world and enemies in the human world); arrival at the future wife's home; rejection of his proposal by the future wife's family and the particular conditions they set; conquering or persuading her family through valorous struggles; and finally, holding wedding ceremonies and bringing his beautiful wife home.

⁴ Cf. Rinchindorji 1989.

⁵ The author conceives of three stages in an epics' development: a period of origination, a period of development during which the epic reaches greater levels of sophistication, and a period of decline.

The epic frame for the hero's struggles against a demon belongs to the battle-motif-series, which, although different from the marriage-motif-series, also shares quite a few common motifs. The battle-motif-series consists of the following basic constituents:

Time; place; hero and his relatives; his riding horse; home country; palace and tent; the evil omen for the arrival of the *mangus* (demon); the riding hero's power; discovery of enemies; encounter with the *mangus*; declaration of names and intentions; fighting (using swords and daggers, bows and arrows, and hand-to-hand combat); defeating the *mangus*; begging for mercy; killing the enemy and burning its flesh and bones; and returning with honor.

Of course, we cannot say that these two motif-series always contain all the listed motifs, and there are of course cases with larger and smaller numbers. However, there is an indispensable core; the units organically link to each other to create the plot frames and plot patterns of the epics. To put it another way, the marriage-motif-series and the battle-motif-series form the basic plots of all Mongolian epics. Due to differences in content, number, and combination, however, the Mongolian epics can be divided into three plot types: single-plot epics, tandem-compound plot epics, and juxtaposition-compound plot epics.

Single-Plot Epics

Epics whose basic plot consists of only one type of motif-series are single-plot epics. This kind of epic itself falls into two types: the marriage epic, consisting of the marriage-motif-series (represented by the letter A in the figure below), and the battle epic, consisting of the battle-motif-series (B). The single-plot epics are the earliest, simplest, and the most basic type. Since the particularities of marriage and war differ at various stages of development of each tribe and ethnic group, these subjects are differently reflected in the epics. According to the content of the series, the marriage epics can be divided into three types: marriage by abduction (A_1), trial of son-in-law (A_2), and the arranged marriage (A_3). The battle epics can be of two types: clan revenge (B_1) and struggle for property (B_2).

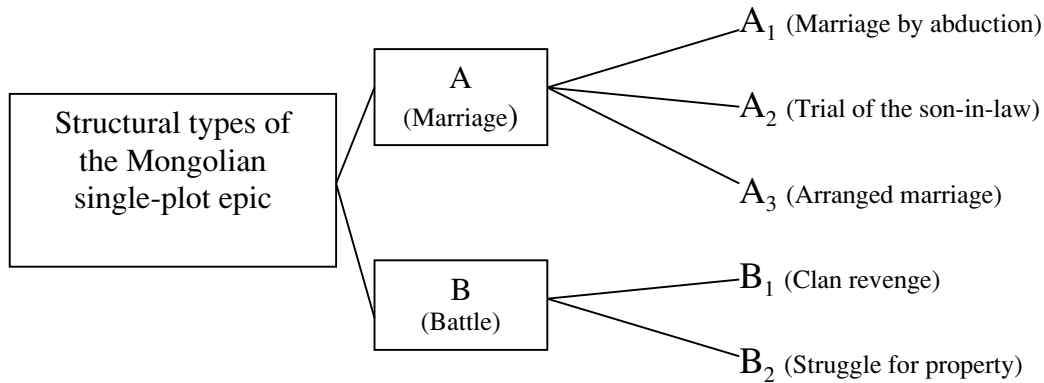


Figure 1: The Mongolian Single-Plot Epic

Tandem-Compound Plot Epics

Epics whose basic plots have in tension two or more motif-series are tandem-compound epics. They have two basic categories with combined motif-series serving as the core of the epic: one joins a marriage-motif-series and a battle-motif-series (typically A_2+B_2 , or the trial of the son-in-law and the struggle for property), while the other comprises the two types of battle-motif-series (B_1+B_2 , or clan revenge and the struggle for property).

Juxtaposition-Compound Plot Epic

The long epic *Jangar* is regarded as a juxtaposition-compound epic. The plot structure of such a work differs from that of the Hellenic and Hindu epics. There are two kinds of plot structure: the general structure and the structure for each part (or canto). The general plot structure is of the juxtaposition-compound type that consists of over 200 long poems with independent plots. The basic plots of each of its constituent parts can be classified into four large sections (A, B, A_2+B_2 , B_1+B_2). These sections are consistent with the types mentioned above, being the two types of the single-part epic (A, B) plus the two types of tandem-compound epic (A_2+B_2 , B_1+B_2). The following figure presents a scheme for the various plot types of Mongolian epic:

- 1) single-plot epic $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} (1) A \\ (2) B \end{array} \right.$
- 2) tandem-compound epic $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} (1) A_2 + B_2 \\ (2) B_1 + B_2 \end{array} \right.$
- 3) juxtaposition-compound epic
 (includes all of the above, ex. *Jangar*) $\left\{ \begin{array}{l} A \\ B \\ A_2 + B_2 \\ B_1 + B_2 \end{array} \right.$

Figure 2: Structural Types of the Basic Plots of Mongolian Epic

The earliest basic plots in the medium- and small-volume epics among the Turkic groups in Xinjiang are similar to those in the Mongolian single-plot and tandem-compound epics. In comparison with Mongolian epics, Turkic epics in Xinjiang and Central Asia are more historically and realistically oriented, reflecting the complex ethnic and religious strife in those areas—many depicting struggles against the Kalmyk rulers. However, as early as seven to eight hundred years ago, the basic plots in the *Ugus Naman* and the *Book of the Kurkot Grandpa* are similar to those in the early Mongolian single-plot and the tandem-compound epics. *The Book of the Kurkot Grandpa* is believed to be a work of the seventh or eighth century, with the present written version appearing around the twelfth century in twelve volumes. Many of its cantos depict the battles and marriage struggles of the Ugus heroes. For example, Canto 6 presents a marriage epic (A_2) in which Kangle's son, Kantulal, travels to the regions ruled by heathens. Kantulal passes through three dangerous trials—killing with his bare hands a ferocious wild bull, a lion, and a male camel—and obtains his beautiful future wife, defeating the enemy that followed him. Canto 3 is similar to the first type of tandem-compound epic ($A_2 + B_2$, or the trial of the son-in-law and the struggle for property). After facing three competitions—namely, horse racing, archery, and wrestling—the hero Bamus, son of Baibor, wins the love of his future wife. What occurs next is fairly intriguing: Bamus is attacked and taken prisoner on his wedding night. After 16 years of imprisonment, he returns home and finds his hometown plundered. Bamus retaliates, killing the head of his enemies, who had wanted to possess his wife, and defeating the host of offending enemies. This canto consists of

two parts, that of the hero's marriage and that of his battles. Other cantos, such as "On Beger's son Aimole" and "On the Attack of Salarkazan Aur," focus solely on the hero's one or two battles. In the first instance, Beger's enemy seizes the chance to launch an attack when he is badly wounded hunting. Beger's son Aimole goes to battle on his father's behalf and defeats the aggressors (B_1). In the latter case, Salarkazan routs the enemy with the help of a shepherd and rescues his mother, son, and the soldiers who were abducted, thus winning back his property (B_2).

In telling the life story of its named hero, the famous epic *Ugus* simultaneously recounts several hundred years of oral history. Its plot consists of four parts focusing on the life of Ugus: his childhood; his marriage and children; his many battles; and the transmission of his power as Khan to an heir. *Ugus* is a rare instance of Altaic epic that was passed down in written form. Unlike other Altaic epics that adopt extended descriptions, it uses a simplified language to summarize the hero's marriage and heroic exploits. Though its plot consists of the four parts described above, the depiction of Ugus' heroic deeds centers on his battles and marriage. From this emphasis it could be surmised that battle and marriage served as the traditional subjects and plot frames for Turkic epic as early as five to six hundred years ago.

Another famous epic, *Alpamis*, recounts the story of its hero's life and the events before his birth with rich description and intriguing stories. Its basic plot, however, can be classified into four parts. First, Alpamis' parents pray for a son, make a pilgrimage, and experience the miraculous pregnancy of Alpamis' mother. Alpamis is eventually born and grows up. Second, Alpamis marries the beauty Gulibairsen after a heroic battle. Third, after returning home with his wife, Alpamis fights his enemy Taishik Khan, who has ransacked his herds and property; Alpamis kills him and recovers everything that was lost. Fourth, after returning home again, Alpamis conquers Urtan—a very destructive demon and son of the charwoman of Alpamis' family—who attempted to possess his wife Gulibairsen. This plot is similar to those of the Mongolian epics, in that the second and third parts most fundamentally reflect and highlight the heroism of Alpamis.

Epics among the Siberian Altay, Tuva, and Khakas are closer to those of the Mongols. S. Surazhakov (1958-80 and 1985) has classified 222 Altaic epics according to their relationship to early feudalism and the age of feudal patriarchies. He again subdivided the epics of clan society into works of five subjects, but, generally speaking, these reflect the two great events of marriage and battle. "The Story of the Hero's Marriage" employs the marriage motif. The hero's struggles with monsters, the lower world, and plunderers, and the relationship between the hero's immediate family and

relatives all draw on the battle motif. The plot structure of the long epic *Manas* is similar to that of *Jangar*. The first volume of *Manas* contains many poetic cantos that detail the legendary origin of the hero Manas and his ethnic group, his miraculous birth, his childhood, and the sacrificial rite held in the name of Koktoy—all plots that are rare in the Mongolian epics. However, according to Lang Ying's study (1991), *Manas*'s primary plots involve battles, as well as some stories about weddings and abduction. In the first part of *Manas*, the Kirghiz wage many wars against surrounding ethnic groups; each expedition is treated with a relatively independent long poem. Some individual plots interrelate, but many of the expeditions are relatively independent from each other, no single episode being more important than the others. Rather, the various plots in *Manas* are juxtaposed, each acting as an equally important facet of the epic. Thus, we can say that *Manas* is also a tandem-compound epic. However, while "Saymaytaic," "Saytek," "Qigetay," and other tales belonging to the *Manas* epic series reveal parallel plot-structures, they do not function as horizontal tandem-compound types. Each epic part is connected with the Manas family tree, resulting in a series of epics depicting the first generation of Manas' genealogy down to the eighth generation. The plot of the first volume of *Manas*, titled "Manas," serves as a prototype for the seven subsequent volumes. In all likelihood, the eight volumes of *Manas* were formed by periodic repetition of the fundamental plot structure.



Mongolian *jangarchis*, L. Purbe, Kanara, Purbujab, and Arimpil with the author second from right (1982). Photograph by the author.

An epic that takes shape via periodic recurrences of the plot structure may be characterized as a chain-type epic. This kind of epic seems to be relatively rare worldwide and a special type in Central Asia. In addition to *Manas*, the *Abai Geser* among the Buriat is also a chain-type epic. It consists of nine long poems, all interrelated in a fashion similar to the way *Manas* vertically and genetically develops from volumes 1-8. The first volume of *Abai Geser*, called “Abai Geser Khubogun,” is largely similar in content to the Mongolian *Geser*, but the next eight volumes, created by the Buriat as the continuation of *Geser*, derive from their own ancient epics. The second volume, “Oshir Bokhdo Khubogun,” describes the life of Abai Geser’s eldest son; the third, “Khulin Alai Khubogun,” tells the story of Abai Geser’s second son; the fourth, “Wengshen Khar,” is about the son of Oshir Bokhdo Khubogun, and so on. This overall process resembles many streams converging into a vast river that widens and deepens as it flows; in the same way, an influential epic can incorporate many other epics.

The Tibetan *Gesar* is a grand and voluminous epic belonging to the juxtaposition-compound epic series. Like *Jangar* and the first volume of *Manas*, it recounts the adventures of heroes, piecing together cantos with independent plots in tandem. The plot structures of various ethnic epics in Mongolia are extremely complicated, with each having its own local features. In addition to the basic plots described above, there are also many derived plots and scenarios with marriage (the ritual abduction of beautiful women) and battle at their core.

The Origin of Early Epics

Mongol-Turkic epics could be described as living patterns that have enjoyed a long and complicated process of formation and development. They may have passed through a series of stages, developing from legends to stories, from shorter genres of verbal art to linked narratives, from prose to poetry. The epics then continuously consolidated and developed, reflecting and incorporating societal changes in a manner that affected their motifs, narratives, and characters. This process brought about a gradual widening of plots, structure, and motifs, and an ever greater increase in volume, number, and type. Over time, epics have grown more and more artistically mature.

Epics Formed in the Context of Tribal Wars

The ethnic groups in Mongolia have emerged from primitive clan societies where inter-clan blood feuds were common, sometimes resulting in one clan exterminating another. With the emergence of private property and class divisions, clan society has gradually dissolved; ransacking property, the theft of animals, and the abduction of women and slaves were once widespread. For example, among the Mongol-Turkic nomads in Northern China divisions among grassland nobles, commoners, and family slaves have appeared. During a period of over a thousand years, some tribes established small and large khanate states, leading to the appearance of famous khans and generals. However, as proved by *Historical Collection*⁶ and *The Secret History of the Mongols*,⁷ the “heroic epoch” of clans and tribal warfare lasted into the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Even at this late date, battles over horses, herds, slaves, and women still occurred and the acquisition of trophies was for men the highest honor. With regard to marriage customs, conjugal and exogamous marriage was the practice. There were both paid marriages and free marriages, but the primitive custom of marriage by abduction had not completely disappeared from the historical stage.

Respected scholars worldwide have noted that the most ancient epic subjects are of two types: the quest for a wife and children and battle against a demon. The epics that focus on an expedition for a wife and children appear to reflect the custom of exogamy in patriarchal clans. This kind of epic praises the heroic deeds of the main character, who on his expeditions overcomes the natural obstructions and the evil designs of those he meets en route to a remote clan where he defeats his competitor, removes his future parent-in-law’s obstacles to marriage, and wins his future wife. The German scholar W. Heissig (1979) has pointed out that the Mongolian epics tell typical courting stories in which the hero goes on a quest to win his future wife. Typical courting scenes often appear in the Mongolian epics: the hero, alone or with his brothers, sets forth, climbs over steep mountain peaks,

⁶ Rashidal-Din 1983. *Historical Collection* (or *Jami’ al-Tawarikh*) is a voluminous world history composed in Persian at the beginning of the fourteenth century. It consists of three parts: a Mongolian history, a world history, and a world topography.

⁷ *The Secret History of the Mongols* was compiled in Uihur Mongolia during the thirteenth century and describes how the Mongol kingdom formed, focusing primarily on Chinggis Khan (1162-1227) and his family. The original text vanished; the work being cited derives from an early Ming Dynasty translation (1368-1644).

crosses the wild sea, and defeats ferocious beasts and demons; the travelers reach a remote clan, where with courage and power they overcome the future father-in-law's objections to the marriage of his daughter; and they successfully return with the newlyweds. Such epics belong to the marriage-by-abduction type (denoted A_1 above).

Early marriage-by-abduction plots have long been popular among commoners and have influenced later epics. For example, in the Dai epic *Li Feng*, which came into being in late clan society, several wars are fought for women. The hero, Feng Gai, has abducted the wives of Hai Han and King Sang Luo. He also captures other women.⁸ The traditional marriage-by-abduction plots have also influenced the later longer epics *Jangar* and *Geser*. In the descriptions of the wedding of Jangar's father, Uzon Aldar Khan, and that of Manas with Kanikai, we can spot traces of this motif. In fact, the same pattern is prevalent internationally. Stories that describe obtaining beautiful women by means of abduction in the Greek and Indian epics may have originated from the actual social custom of marriage by abduction.

The second major theme, the hero's struggle against a demon, derives from heroic legends. There are many kinds of demons in various ethnic epics, such as the snake-monster, the cyclops, and the many-headed demon. Many-headed monsters, known as Mangus, Mangni, Delbegen, and Ker-Diutpa, often appear in Mongolian epics and are full of symbolic meaning. At first they seem to have represented the ferocious beasts found in nature; later they become a symbol of the hero's enemy clan, reflecting the practice of blood feud in primitive society. With the emergence of private ownership and class divisions, these demons become symbolic of bandits and oppressors. In Mongolian-Turkic epics they are characterized by their many heads, their acts of cannibalism, and a separate power source that may be hidden in one or several animal bodies.⁹ They despise human beings and often attack the hero's home country. In early epics, the demon's primary motivation is to abduct the hero's wife or sisters; in response, the hero kills his adversary, exterminates the latter's family (his wife, children, and parents), and rescues his wife or sisters. In this case, the contest represents the collective force of one clan against another, with the struggle resulting in

⁸ Cf. Qing Jiahua 1985.

⁹ In the epics both heroes and enemies can have a separate power source (sometimes translated as "anima") hidden in the body of an animal or object. For example, while the hero Geser and his enemy fight, their power sources battle as well in the forms of a white bull and a black bull. In order for Geser to conquer his enemy, he has to destroy its power source first.

the symbolic extermination of one whole clan. For this reason we call them clan-feud-type epics (denoted as B₁ above).

The Influence of Varieties of Verbal Art on Epic Content

Epics depend not only on a culture's social organization, but also on its various forms of verbal art. Before the emergence of epics, there existed prose-style versions of myth, legends, and other stories, along with the rhythmic style of verbal art employed in sacrificial rites, shamanistic poems, blessings, ballads, and folk sayings. Epics are an early style of narrative that took shape by combining narrative traditions with lyric and rhythmic features. Across the spectrum of folk oral creative works, epics are the largest comprehensive form. The Mongolian epics furnish an example: within their prelude and body, the elements of time, place, the hero and his wife (or future wife), home country, tent, horse, and weapons are introduced and praised. All varieties of lyric are employed, borrowing from the ancient poetic forms of Mongolian shamanistic sacrificial poems, blessings, and praise songs. Myths and shamanistic poems contributed demons, harmful falcons, ferocious beasts, personified natural phenomena, various mythological figures, fairies, and spirits. In comparison to these eastern epics, those of the West appear to have an even stronger relationship with myths and legends, being full of representations and metaphors and making use of ancient totemic myths, heroic legends, and short narrative poems. For example, the epic *Moyi Dawang* of the Zhuang people appears to draw on the myth of a totemic ox and legends about the Bamboo King and the Flying Head (Ya 1996). The *War between Black and White* among the Bai people symbolically represents the struggles between two different belief systems.

Heroic tales bear a close relationship with epics. The content of the former is similar to that of the latter, both representing the hero's struggles to obtain a wife and his campaigns against demons or other heroes. Of course, some epics also become heroic tales during their dispersal. In a word, however, the majority of heroic tales have roots in the ancient past. It is most likely that heroic tales and epics are different branches with the same origin, and they use the two artistic styles that evolved and took shape on the basis of the earliest short heroic tales.

The Inseparability of Oral Poets and the Emergence of Epic

At present, there are epic ballads under various names among the relevant ethnic groups in Mongolia and neighboring countries: *tuulchi*

(Mongols and Tuva), *ülgerchi* (Mongols and Buriat), *chorchi* (Eastern Mongols), *jangarchi* (Oirad and Kalmyk), *zhongken* (Tibetans), *zanha* (the Dai), *jirshi* (Kazak), *aken* (Kizghiz and Kazak), *manaschi* (Kirghiz), *kayichi* (Altay), and *olonkhosuti* (Yakut). These epic ballads grew out of early artistic traditions. In all likelihood, before the emergence of epics among various ethnic groups and before the existence of priests and shamans, there appeared many talented poets, who were not only eloquent enough to fluently recite poems in praise of their gods and ancestors, but also created many sacrificial poems, blessings, praises, and old ballads of various kinds. They accomplished the creative task of transforming tales into epics, weaving together bits and pieces to form a complete set and skillfully reworking prose into verse. They connected their received heroic tales to the social reality of their own times and revised them, giving divinity to the heroes by endowing them with shamanistic or spiritual features. Abduction and clan-feud epics were created in this way. Even the earliest epics were understood as having a sacred function, and the ancestors appreciated and revered them. As singers continued reciting them, the growing audiences among various clans encouraged the spread of epic performances.



Mongolian epic singer Rinchin performing an epic in 1991. Photograph by the author.

Development of Types of Small- and Medium-size Epics

Abduction and clan-feud are no doubt the earliest epic themes. The plot-frame or motif-series of abduction-type epics (A_1) became the basis and prototype for the development of the marriage-type epic (A). In the same way, the plot-frame or motif-series of clan-feud epics (B_1) is the basis for battle-type epics (B). As mentioned above, these two kinds of epic motif-series served as the frame, pattern, and unit for the further development of epics.

First, on the basis of the plot-frame of the marriage-by-abduction type (A_1), the trial of the son-in-law type (A_2) took shape. Due to changes in ancient society, the primitive custom of marriage by abduction became anachronistic, and a new social consciousness and revisionist views on marriage emerged, resulting in all kinds of marriages based on bride-price and other conditions. The “trial of the son-in-law” epics reflect this new social practice. For example, the hero would destroy various evils—including demons, monsters, and ferocious birds and beasts—for the father-in-law as the price for his daughter. In the Mongolian epic *Hairtu Hara*, the hero kills seven wild wolves and five *mangus* for his father-in-law. In *The Four-Year Old Hulugbatur*, the hero kills nine *mangus*. The warriors in the Daur people’s *Chokaimergen* capture the *mangus*, Yeldengker, and a vicious lion in order to win their future wives. When the hero saves a maiden from the monster who abducted her, he is rewarded with her hand in marriage. The Buriat epic *Altainai Hu on the Golden Horse* and the Mongolian epic *Erdeni Habuhsoya*, performed by the Ewenki, all follow this pattern of loss and recovery. In the epics *Ejin Tengeri* and *Tugalchinhuu*, the heroes rescue golden and silver foals; and in *Chokai Mergen*, the hero recovers 70 white foals. In the *Wedding of Hongor*, performed by Li Purbai and others, the hero captures and tames a murderous wild camel, a dark blue bull, and a white-breasted black dog before he wins the consent of his father-in-law to marry his daughter.

In many epics, dangerous trials are set three times in succession, according to the future father-in-law’s requirements, which stem from the father-in-law’s dual aim of a suitable price for marrying his daughter and strengthening his own clan by recruiting a good son-in-law. Because he imposes daunting conditions for the suitor without any concern for his life, many young men die fighting ferocious beasts and only the most outstanding hero can win the fight and secure a wife. The description of these adventures and trials probably reveals vestiges of the practice of trading marriage for service or of rites of passage into adulthood. In the history of many ethnic groups in China, the phenomenon of service marriage has been

popular. According to this arrangement, a man had to work in a potential bride's clan to compensate for the loss of her contribution of labor. Under such a system, the young woman's family tests the suitor, in the hope of securing a worthy son-in-law. This same desire could also explain the behavior of the father-in-law in some epics *after* the daughter's marriage, since after the wedding the father causes more difficulty for his son-in-law, using all kinds of strategies and excuses to prevent him from returning to his own home country with his new wife. In other epics, when the hero returns with his wife to his own clan, the father-in-law, together with his family, herds, and property, follows him and settles down close by. These actions can be explained by interpreting them as a test: in the interest of his own clan, the father-in-law prevents the son-in-law's return in order to use his strength for the protection of the clan; later, he follows his son-in-law to establish a confederacy of clans and strengthen the power of his own clan. Of course, by this time, marriage has become a way to achieve clan and tribal confederacy.

There is also another common way of testing the son-in-law in epics: the father-in-law raises three conditions for marrying his daughter—namely, mastery in horse racing, archery, and wrestling. The winner of these three competitions is qualified to marry his daughter; should a suitor fail in even one of the competitions, he is disqualified. In many cases, two suitors vie for the daughter's hand. The three competitions are the traditional folk recreational activities among northern nomadic peoples. This "triathlon" has traditionally served as a means to confirm and reward the most skillful men and the swiftest horses, and, historically at least, has not been employed as a procedure for selecting a son-in-law. Nonetheless, it is easy to see how the social custom could have been transferred to epic to serve a new purpose, with the result that a new type of pattern formed (A_2).

According to its plot structure, the trial type of epic (A_2) has taken shape on the basis of the marriage-by-abduction type of epic (A_1). With a few exceptions, the basic motifs are similar in content and sequence:

time; place; the growth of the hero; information about the future wife; the hero expresses his desire to marry; discouragement by his family; determination to set out on an expedition; preparation of the riding horse, armature, and weapons; setting out on the expedition and occurrences along the way; encountering the future father-in-law; the father's rejection of the suitor's proposal (marriage-by-abduction type); harsh conditions prescribed by the father (trial type); defeating the future father-in-law (marriage-by-abduction type); fulfillment of conditions (trial type); the father forced to agree to the marriage; the wedding ceremony; and returning home with a wife.

By comparing the two marriage types, one may see the line of development from the marriage-by-abduction—unconditional and with no bride-price—to the trial type that involved a bride-price and one or more conditions. Similarly, by comparing the direct and heated struggle between the suitor and the father-in-law to the indirect struggle among several gentle suitors, one may glimpse evolving social models.

The plot frame of the clan-feud type (B_1) is the basis for another battle epic—the bandit type (B_2). In late clan society, due to the greater prevalence of private property and class divisions, competition for herds, property, and domestic slaves intensified. This social reality was reflected in the epic and developed into the bandit type on the basis of the framework of clan-feud epics. In the bandit epic, the hero's enemies include demons and warriors, who not only abduct women but also ransack herds and other property and force the hero's parents and clan members into slavery. The difference between these two types is not the matter of whether the enemy is a demon or not. A demon who appears as an abductor in the clan-feud type will possess the features of a plunderer and oppressor in the bandit type. In the clan-feud type, herds and property are rarely ransacked and the hero's parents and clan members do not become slaves. Nonetheless, other elements of these plots are similar. The basic motif-series of the clan-feud and bandit types is as follows:

Time; place; hero; an attack by the enemy—either the feud is motivated or a chance act of banditry occurs; preparation of horses, armature, and weapons; expedition and occurrences along the way; encounter with the enemy; informing each other of names and the desire to battle; fighting (with swords and daggers, bows and arrows, and wrestling); the defeat of the enemy; asking for pardon; extermination of the enemies and their clan; rescuing the lost wife (and in the bandit type the lost herds, property, and the captured family members); and returning with success.

In summation, the motif-series of the marriage-by-abduction type and the trial of the son-in-law type share many of the same motifs, diverging where marriage customs differ. Likewise, the motif-series of the clan-feud type and the bandit type differ only in regard to the enemy's object. In addition, the motif-series of the two marriage types and those of the two battle types as a whole share common motifs, suggesting the fundamental unity of the epics and a traditional model behind their variety. The four types of epics are similar in that they all describe one valorous deed by the hero (the struggle for marriage or in battle), and their frames are all comprise a single motif-series. Thus, they are single-plot (or single-canto) epics. The

single-plot type seems to be the primary genus of epic and serves as a foundation for various other types. It is short and effective, usually consisting of several hundred lines, but however short it may be, each one describes a complete story. Some call this kind of epic an epic-fragment, but actually they are early forms of epics that preserve the most basic features.

Besides the single-plot type there are also several kinds of compound-structure epics. Due to differences in the way the motif-series compounded, there are two large types—the tandem-compound epics and juxtaposition-compound epics. Two or more epic motif-series form the compound-structure type, while the tandem-compound developed according to social and historical factors. With the emergence of a laboring class and an increased focus on private property, class divisions appeared. Heads of clans and tribes launched endless wars for property and slaves. In this severe and complicated social struggle, a hero typically faced more than one battle. For example, in the tandem-compound epic, other warriors, noticing that the hero is away seeking a wife or was leaving home to go hunting or fighting, will often devastate the hero's home country, drive away his herds, and force his parents and subjects into slavery. Even when the hero returns successfully from a distant war, he has to go to battle again. Though epics had a cultural responsibility to reflect these struggles, single-canto epics could not include all of them. Bards made use of existent single-plot structures and the original motif-series of marriage-type epics and of battle-type epics, editing and linking them to create tandem-compound epics that reflected the hero's second set of struggles.

The common tandem-compound type combines the motif-series of the trial of son-in-law epics and the bandit epics (A_2+B_2). For example, the Mongolian epic about Khan Tegus' son Shiretu Mergen Khan, *Jugaimijidehu*, and the Kazak epic *Alepamis* describe the hero's weddings (trial of son-in-law type) and his battles; *Alepamis* adds to these basic plots the narrative of the hero's growth and his struggles within the family. *Ugus* is similarly composed of battle and marriage motifs. However, this is not the sole combination of motif-series possible—for example, a tandem-compound epic may employ two different battle motif-series (B_1+B_2). Both of the Mongolian epics *Altan Galu* and *Gunagan Ulanbataar* describe a hero who conquers two different bandits. According to the plot-structure of the Mongolian epics, the latter parts of these two tandem-compound epics are basically similar, both relying on the single-plot bandit pattern (B_2). Thus, as has been shown, there are many small- to medium-size epics among the Mongolian ethnic groups with rich content and various forms, bearing marks of different stages of social development.

Evolution of Long Epics

The law of development of long epics throughout the world is similar. The process of formation of *Jangar* and *Manas* is similar to that of the world-famous Greek and Indian epics, which may have first taken shape as great and voluminous works on the basis of many smaller narratives and poems in the oral tradition.

Before *Jangar* and *Manas* became long epics, the Mongolian and Turkic peoples already shared hundreds of small- and medium-size epics, most limited to several hundred lines. Later, however, epics of between several thousand and three hundred thousand lines appeared. Current versions of *Jangar* and *Manas*, which each have over 200,000 lines, were formed on the basis of the subjects, styles, structures, characters, and artistic treatment of the original small- and medium-length epics, and especially on their plot frames.

The plot structures of the three great epics of Mongolia—*Geser*, *Jangar*, and *Manas*—differ from those of the *Iliad* and *Mahabharata*, which focus on the roles of many heroic characters in the unraveling of one major heroic event. The *Iliad* describes the war between two great military powers, with its plot centering on the struggle between the Greeks and the Trojans in their fight for the city of Troy. The *Mahabharata* is all-inclusive, focusing, however, on the struggle for kingship between two military camps, namely Bandu and Julu within the Harata; this war has become the core plot of the epic. The three great Mongolian epics do not follow a single war between two huge military camps; they concentrate instead on the heroes Geser, Jangar, and Manas, charting their lives and describing their campaigns against various enemies in different volumes and cantos. Take *Jangar*, for example, which contains more than 200 relatively independent cantos, most of them battles and marriage struggles. All these cantos are based on short- and medium-length epics and employ their motif-series. As mentioned above, there are four types of short- and medium-length epics, among which *Jangar* appears to be the fourth type. The first volume of *Manas* sounds similar to *Jangar* since it has many independent cantos, most of which describe battles. Although the heroic expeditions in *Manas* are more complicated than those in *Jangar*, its core has also formed on the basis of the motif-series of short- and medium-length epics about the historical warrior Manas.¹⁰

¹⁰ As Lang Ying has pointed out (1991:263-69), the long historical poem *Manas* has a relationship to the epic *Alap Manash* of the Altay, an ethnic group among the Siberian Turkic peoples, in terms of hero's name, representation of characters, and plot

In addition to drawing upon the form and content of short- and medium-length historical poems, the long historical poems absorbed features of myths, legends, folktales, sacrificial prayers, shamanistic poems, incantations, blessings, praises, narrative poems, and folk sayings from the larger oral tradition. For example, when performing the epic *Jangar*, singers will represent the orphaned heroes Jangar and Satar by drawing upon legends in which orphans kill monsters, such as the “Legendary Origin of Cholos Tribe,” “The Extermination of the Mangus by the Orphan,” “Lonely Nutai,” “Lonely Yirgai of the North,” and “Hangel Kuk Batur.” The representation of Jangar has also made use of such legends as “The Sharp Arrow Shooter,” “The Giant,” “The Fast Runner,” “The Mighty Mountain Lifter,” “The Three Heavenly Maidens,” “The Swan Girl,” “The Beauty Turned Spirit,” “The Copper-Mouthed and Gazette-Legged Witch,” “Descent to the Underworld in Search of Someone,” “The Underground Kuk-Darhan (Blue Blacksmith),” “The Cultural Hero who Raises Wild Life,” and others. The influence of the Altaic legend *Alap Manash* upon the epic *Manas* is also apparent: not only did the central figure inherit his name from Manash, but these two heroes also share similar characteristics of gigantic appearance, magic power, resistance to spears and swords, and the ability to sleep soundly.

What is more, *Manas* has absorbed myths and legends from the Kirgiz and ancient Turkic peoples. For example, “The Forty Maidens,” which is popular among the Kirgiz, Karakalpak, and others, was woven into the first part of *Manas*, providing Manas with noble origins by depicting him as the son of a princess. Kaypushan myth may be heard in the narration of the lives of several generations of the Manas family. In addition, *Manas* draws upon the legends of “The Giant” and “The Crippled Blacksmith,” (Lang 1991:163). In brief, small- and medium-size epics and folk oral traditions were the artistic basis and cultural precondition for the formation of longer epics. The transition from shorter historical poems to voluminous epics required a major shift in the process of development.

The process of epic evolution is extremely complicated. After a long epic has achieved its most basic shape, it builds upon this, developing and changing continually during its oral dissemination. In addition, other long sister epics may evolve from one long epic, just as seven long sister poems, “Saymaytay” and others, have evolved on the basis of the pattern and plot

structures. She has observed that “regarding Manash’s life history, *Alap Manash* consists of large sections depicting the miraculous birth of the hero, his marriage, his heroic quest, the threat to his life, and the hero’s death and resurrection. It is basically similar to the narrative frames of the epic *Manas* and ancient Turkic epics” (*ibid.*:266-67).

frame of the first volume of *Manas*, and as the eight long epics of *Oshir Bogod Hübegun* and others appeared as a continuation of *Abai Geser Hübegun*. These epics followed a new type of pattern with a chain plot structure, narrating the life of a hero and his descendants.

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The Oirat Epic Cycle of *Jangar*

Chao Gejin

Introduction

It is difficult or impossible to specify the exact moment of the emergence of Mongolian epic. As far as we know, no convincing clues have ever been found about epic singing in surviving documents composed by historians, missionaries, and travelers over the past few centuries. The Russian historian B. Vladimirtsov points out that a predisposition toward epic and perhaps even epic narrative patterns existed among the North Asian hunters and herdsman in earlier eras and developed during Chinggis Khan's time, which is also the period of the rise of Mongol nationality. Through the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century, large epic songs, known as *byliny*, and epic cycles were created. Martial concerns, military achievements, and, most importantly, the steppe aristocratic class provided a supportive framework for the evolution of epic singing.

One piece of evidence is *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which is filled with epic motifs and characteristics even though it is a history of Chinggis Khan and his "golden family."¹ The earliest printed epic text was *The Beijing Geser Wooden Block*, which appeared in 1716. As for the epic

Author's note: I am aware that international scholars use different methods to transcribe the Mongolian language. To avoid confusion over different dialects, I follow the written spelling. Thus I do not differentiate masculine from feminine, as some scholars have in the past. For instance, I spell hand as *gar* and yurt as *ger*. To take an example from the literary context, the phrase *hüreng haljan hölög* (a sorrel horse with a white spot on its forehead) alliterates perfectly and would not cause any confusion, whereas spelling the same phrase as *küreng qaljan külüg* would. Furthermore, in a very few cases, I follow the most common usage, spelling Jangar and Hongor as Jangar and Hongor and *tegri* (heaven) as *tenger*.

¹ See Vladimirtsov 1983-84:6-7. *The Secret History of the Mongols* is dated to 1240 (Heissig 1964:28).

Jangar, scholars agree that the prominent Oirat² epic cycle matured in the fifteenth to seventeenth centuries,³ the period during which the Oirat peoples moved to the Tian Shan Mountains, took shape as the “Four Allies of Oirat” (Torgud, Dörbed, and other tribes), and eventually appeared on the banks of the Volga in 1630.

We call *Jangar* an epic cycle because it is composed of many cantos with close mutual connections. The story as a whole concerns the khan Jangar and his twelve warriors’ heroic deeds: how they build up the khan’s palace, how they defeat threatening invaders, how they conquer others’ territories, and how they woo and marry beautiful maidens according to the dictates of destiny. Each canto is a somewhat independent story about one or more of those warriors’ adventures, yet it also shares the overall framework and the basic elements: an opening canto (*jangar un ehin böläg*) provides essential information about the kingdom, Khan Jangar’s palace, his incomparable deeds, his distinguished warriors, and his honorable lady. Besides the *Jangar* cycle, the Oirat people also possess other comparatively short epic songs that bear a close relation to *Jangar* in story-patterns and motifs. Some of them may have arisen earlier and thus had an influence on *Jangar*.

² Oirat, also spelled Oyrat, designates any of the peoples speaking western dialects of the Mongolian language group. Before entering the Mongol steppe, the Oirat were called “Forest Folks” and lived in Siberia. In the thirteenth century the Western Mongols were enemies of the Eastern Mongols of Chinggis Khan’s empire. During the following centuries the Western Mongols maintained a separate existence under a confederation known as the Dörben Oirat (Four Allies of Oirat); at times they were allies, at times enemies, of the descendants of Chinggis Khan. A part of the Western Mongol population remained in their homeland, northern Xinjiang, or Dzungaria, and western Mongolia. Another part of the Oirat confederation, including all or some of the Torgud, Khoshud, Dörbed, and other groups, moved across southern Siberia to the southern Urals at the beginning of the seventeenth century. From there they moved to the lower Volga, and for a century and a half, until 1771, they lived as nomads both to the east and to the west of the lower Volga; this part of the Oirat gained the name Kalmyk. During the course of the eighteenth century the Oirat were absorbed by the Russian Empire, which was then expanding to the south and east. In 1771 those on the left bank, to the east of the Volga, returned to China. The right-bank Kalmyk, comprising the contemporary Torgud, Dörbed, and Buzawa, remained in Russia.

³ See Rinchindorji 1999:195.

Texts

Among the Kalmyk in Russia, 25 cantos of *Jangar* have been collected, with exactly the same number discovered and printed in the Mongolian Republic; about half of the latter 25 cantos are only provisionally identified as belonging to the *Jangar* cycle. The Oirat Mongols in the Xinjiang area of northwest China have maintained the *Jangar* singing tradition up to the present time. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, the Xinjiang Jangar Office combed the Mongol area to collect and record epic. According to the office's reports, 106 *jangarchi* (singers) were recorded.⁴ As a major result, the twelve-volume publication entitled *Jangar Material*, with 124 cantos, was issued in successive installments.⁵

The author suggests classifying the various *Jangar* texts into five types: retold texts, dictated texts, manuscripts, transcriptions of audio recordings, and lithographed and modern printings.

Retold texts

The *Jangar* epic was first told to the outside world by the German traveler Benjamin Bergmann at the beginning of the nineteenth century (Bergmann 1804-05). He encountered the nomadic Kalmyks in the Astraxan government during the years 1802-03. In his publication of a few years later he retells two stories about the hero Jangar. In the 1940s a Chinese Han named Bian Yuan composed a story entitled *Hong Gu'er*. He described going to Xinjiang in 1935 to conduct revolutionary activities and being captured by Governor Sheng Shicai and put in jail. A Mongolian named Manjin, imprisoned along with him, sang the story of Hong Gu'er (or Hongor, one of Jangar's principal warriors) for the captives. Bian Yuan tried to keep the story in memory, and when he was released in 1942 he began to write it down in Chinese. As he commented later on, "I had a deep impression of this story . . . I did not make changes to its plot or structure" (1958:77). Through Bergmann's notes, the outside world first came to know that an epic called *Jangar* was prevalent among the Kalmyks in the Lower Reach of the Volga River, though Bergmann mentioned neither the singer's nor the interpreter's name (no evidence exists to show that he spoke

⁴ See *Jangar Manuscript* 1996:vol. 3.

⁵ *Jangar Material* 1985-96. These 124 stories are not independent; some of them are highly homologous. Thus the total number of independent cantos found in Xinjiang is considerably less than 124.

Kalmyk). Through Bian Yuan's retold story, people first realized that an epic story about a hero named Hong Gu'er circulated among the Oirat Mongols in Xinjiang. These retold texts reveal important information about the epic singing tradition.

Dictated texts

The Russian Mongologist A. Bobrovnikov published one of his two *Jangar* texts in Russian translation in 1857. The two texts had belonged to O. Kovalevskij and G. I. Mikhailov, respectively. Scholars believe that at least Mikhailov's text was a genuine dictated text, taken down with the help of a local Kalmyk amanuensis.⁶ Another Russian Mongologist, K. Golstunskij, conducted epic recording in 1862, once again with the aid of a Kalmyk assistant.⁷ Nomto Ochirov, a student of Golstunskij's epigonos W. L. Kotwicz, visited the great *jangarchi* Eela Ovlaa (1857-1920) in December 1908, and in two days managed to take down the singer's entire *Jangar* repertoire of nine cantos via dictation. The Finnish philologist Gustav John Ramstedt elicited a great many dictated texts—including some of the epic *Jangar*—during his several journeys to the Mongol regions. He described his field methods in this way: "I got girls, boys, and oldsters to relate epics. Like the Russian merchants who buy up different kinds of goods in the Mongolian countryside, I played the part of a merchant. I bought songs and epics, proverbs, riddles, and similar things. I let it be known about that I paid five copecks per page for transcriptions in a black-covered notebook, but if the text in my opinion was free of errors I would pay even up to ten copecks." (1978:78). Obviously, dictated texts require two participants: the person who takes down the dictation must have adequate knowledge of the language, and the person who narrates the story must have the patience to stay the course. Golstunskij apparently tried to elicit more dictated texts, but failed for an interesting reason—not because of a lack of singers, but because those he worked with were unaccustomed to being interrupted during performance to allow time for someone to copy the libretto into his notebook.⁸

⁶ *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:i, 235.

⁷ *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:ii, 146-47.

⁸ *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:ii, 150.

Manuscripts

Scholars have known that *Jangar* manuscripts were discovered in Russia and the Mongolian Republic, but we do not have further information about the discoveries. From the mid-1950s to the 1980s ten manuscripts were found in Xinjiang, China. As far as we know, a few of them are almost the same as the printed Kalmyk versions—which were transmitted in some areas in Xinjiang from the late 1940s onward—and the rest are in accord with some local singers' songs. Some scholars firmly believe that the tradition of making *Jangar* manuscripts began shortly after the Oirat “clear script” (*todo bichig*) was invented in 1648, and lasted until the 1950s.⁹ Rinchindorji contends that at least the manuscript *Hara Hinis*, stored in the library of the Inner Mongolia Academy of Social Sciences, is a copy of the Kalmyk version printed in Russian. According to Batunasan's report (1984), the princes and aristocrats in the Oirat area maintained the tradition of preserving *Jangar* manuscripts. It was the Cultural Revolution that destroyed the majority of those precious artifacts (Jamcha 1988:26).

In general, Oirat manuscripts were created when an aristocrat hired an amanuensis to record the singer's libretto; in rare cases, a literate singer would write down his own libretto. In a sense, such manuscripts are quite close to a dictated text. We suggest distinguishing between them by considering two factors: the *conductor* who arranges for the transcription, and the *purpose* of the text-creation. If a text is taken down by an outsider, and the purpose is scientific research or introduction to the outside world, then we call it a dictated text. If insiders write out the text for their own use, the product is, from this point of view, a manuscript.

Transcriptions of audio recordings

It is hard to slow down a singer's pace in order to make dictation feasible. The practical and convenient way to do so, of course, is to use an audio tape recorder, although we still lack a precise evaluation of how modern audio technology influences the singer's performance. Experienced fieldworkers readily recognize that an outsider with strange machines will always make a singer nervous, and that the singer will find that performing for a microphone is quite different from singing for his folk audience. In such artificial circumstances, interactions between singer and audience disappear. We are also aware that performance consists of more than the

⁹ *Jangar Manuscript* 1996:5.

libretto: gesture, voice, and musical instrumentation all converge in helping to convey epic meaning; audio recording cannot preserve all these elements. Still, transcription does encode a singer's libretto with reasonable precision, even if it does present a special challenge.

We should point out here that in China quite a few transcriptions are unreliable. This inaccuracy stems partly from transcribers and editors who consider their own knowledge of the traditional folk culture more authentic than the singers' (some of them do in fact come from the same culture). On that basis they believe they have the right and duty to emend a libretto.¹⁰ The twelve-volume *Jangar Material* in "clear script" is less heavily edited. One ideal transcription, made by the young native scholar D. Taya, was printed in Japan in 1999. Entitled *Jangar of Singer Arimpil: Heroic Epic of Oirat-Mongol in Xinjiang*, this is the first emendation-free corpus of one *jangarchi*'s libretto in China.

Lithographed and modern printings

Lithographed and modern printings started with Bergmann's notes, and *Jangar* has seen numerous printed versions over the past two hundred years. The Kalmyk script lithograph version appeared in 1864 in St. Petersburg, and the famous Eela Ovlaa's ten-canto *Jangar* was published in 1910 in Kalmyk as well. In China, the most important versions include "the fifteen-canto version," "the 70-canto version," "the 124-canto version," and the photocopy of the *Jangar* manuscript. But the avenue from oral libretto to publication is not a one-way street; we also found that the printed story influenced oral epic singing in some cases. In the 1940s, Bolod of the Mongol Hürüye went to Tashkent to take a training course. When he came back, he brought with him a twelve-canto printed version of *Jangar* from the former Soviet Union. Those stories then spread throughout the neighboring regions (Rinchindorji 1999:69). We also learned that the Beijing xylographic epic *Geser* (which appeared in Beijing in 1716) had a distinct influence on the oral singing of *Jangar* (Vladimirtsov 1983-84).

¹⁰ I cite one case to illustrate how emendation operates. In *Jangar Material* 1998:i, 739, we read the following note: "This canto (*dogsın hara hınıs un bölög*) is compiled and emended by A. Taibai, based on Arimpil's singing, with reference to the early manuscript and two variants from the singer Jawa of Mongol Hürüye and the singer Binba of Tekes."

Singers

According to various widespread legends, the earliest *jangarchi* can be traced back to the end of the sixteenth or the beginning of the seventeenth century. Here is the story. It was claimed that *Jangar* had a total of 72 cantos, and that no singer had been able to master all of them. There was, however, an old couple, Tur Bayar and his wife Tübsinjirgal, who lived in Hobagsair (now Hobagsair County). Tur Bayar was in the habit of putting a piece of stone under his Mongolian gown every time he had mastered one canto. The stones kept increasing in number until they reached 70. The prince was very glad to hear of his capability: he conferred upon him the title of “seventy-canto pouch” (*dalan tobchi*) and announced the title to the 49 banners within the Four Allies of Oirat. This all took place before the horde of the Oirat moved to the Volga (Batunasun 1984:42). It is worth mentioning that Hobagsair is a region with a strong *Jangar* tradition; for example, the prominent *jangarchi* Sisina Bolor (mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century) and Holbar Bayar (?-1943) came from this region. The two best contemporary singers, Juunai (1926-) and Arimpil (1923-94) are also from this area.

Eela Ovlaa (1857-1920) is the single most famous *jangarchi*. His family was well known for its association with the epic tradition of *Jangar* singing. According to the Kalmyk scholar A. Kichikov’s research, Ovlaa’s family’s singing genealogy proceeds in this way:

- 1st generation: Jintemür 1690-1720
- 2nd generation: Jinceg 1720-60
- 3rd generation: Chagan Emegen 1760-1800
- 4th generation: Khusmu 1800-80
- 6th generation: Ovlaa 1880-1920¹¹

The time spans following the names indicate the years they performed the epic *Jangar*, not the years of their birth and death. Ovlaa’s father Oela was not an epic singer (thus the lack of a fifth generation), so Ovlaa learned the epic from his two uncles, Delter and Margasi. Ovlaa’s stammer meant that he had to expend great effort to become a singer, but he succeeded at last. Ovlaa started his performing career in the 1880s, and won great fame in later years.

Juunai was born in Hobagsair in 1926. His father Jaba was the prince’s toaster, and was thus in a position to foster his education. As a literate epic singer, he learned eight cantos from manuscripts. These

¹¹ Rinchindorji 1999:29.

manuscripts contained *jangarchi* Sira Nasun's libretto, written down by the singer himself, and presented to the prince's amanuensis Uljitu as a gift. Juunai was a pupil of Uljitu from the age of seven, and therefore had ready access to the manuscripts and the opportunity to master them. Yet Juunai also learned quite a few cantos directly from his father and from other qualified local singers, like Holbar Bayar and Sira Nasun; in other words, some of his repertoire stemmed from an oral source. With 26 cantos to his credit, Juunai is identified as the one who can sing the most units from the *Jangar* cycle. As it turns out, his family background helped him greatly in becoming a *jangarchi*. We now know that both his grandfather Erhetü and his father Jaba were excellent singers in the community. Like one of his epic teachers, he wrote his libretto down himself.

Arimpil was born three years earlier than his countryman Juunai. With 21 cantos of *Jangar* in his repertoire by the early 1990s, Arimpil is the most prominent illiterate *jangarchi* ever known. He was born to a family belonging to the Torgud tribe, now resident in the Hobagsair Mongolian Autonomous County of the Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region. His father Purlai was Prince Erligjab's messenger. Their neighbors included Holbar Bayar, a very famous *jangarchi*. Since the singer and the messenger were close neighbors and friends, Arimpil enjoyed the privilege of listening to Bayar's *Jangar* singing from the time he was about seven or eight years of age. The majority of Arimpil's repertoire comes from this early experience.

Arimpil's father was a devout Buddhist; hence he sent his son to a lamasery, hoping to add one more lama to his family. But Arimpil was more fond of singing heroic stories than reciting the Buddhist lection, and the only thing he achieved during his lamasery experience was the acquisition of a modest amount of Tibetan. To force him to continue learning the Buddhist lection, his father then sent him to his uncle Dambi, the prince's augur, when the young man was seventeen years old. But once again the plan backfired: an elderly neighbor of his uncle Höhegünjen attracted Arimpil via his *Jangar* singing. In addition, he had the chance to learn from another *jangarchi*, Ijir Aliya, a poor singer who made a living through epic performance, and who used to drop in occasionally at Höhegünjen's. Within Arimpil's repertoire, the canto *Hündü Gartai Sabar in Bölög* was learned from Bayar, while *Hongor's Wedding* was learned from Aliya. His uncle chided him time and again for sinking into epic singing, and his father warned him that, since he was a Buddhist, he was not allowed to perform epics like *Jangar* and *Geser*, which were full of killing and other forms of violence. To perform those stories, he claimed, was to "commit a sin." But

his father's warning went unheeded; When Arimpil was eighteen he began singing *Jangar* for his neighborhood and at children's gatherings.¹²

With the advent of Communism in China, he became a People's Commune member, working as a coal miner and then as a farmer. He continued to sing *Jangar* for native audiences in his spare time through the 1950s and early 1960s. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), he was criticized for promoting old ideology through *Jangar* singing; he was even imprisoned for about two months. Other accusations centered around one of his uncles, who had been a chamberlain of a Living Buddha, and another uncle who used to perform *Cham* (the Buddhist exorcism ritual in which lama performers wear masks). By his own actions and those of his relatives, his accusers argued, Arimpil was surely the protector of the old national tradition and the "feudal trash." Specifically, he was charged as a "reactionary and silent resister" of "the revolutionary new ideology." His defense against these charges was that his singing was beneficial to the revolution, since he had entertained the revolutionary commune members in their spare time, helping them to recover after a day of demanding labor.

Good fortune came to him after 1980; the starting point was a visit by Choijinjab, a professor of linguistics at Inner Mongolia University. He made a recording of Arimpil's epic singing, and as a result the bard gained entry to more and more social activities. He was invited to *Jangar* singing pageants in various places.¹³ He also visited Urumchi, the capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, several times in order to perform *Jangar* for domestic and foreign scholars. In 1989 he was summoned to Beijing to participate in the *Jangar* Exhibition: he performed the epic for an enthusiastic audience, and a brief biography, together with photographs, was exhibited during the show. Arimpil was nominated to the Chinese Folk Arts Society, Xinjiang Branch, and was elected his county's Committeeman of the Political Consultant Congress in 1984. He won the First Grade Award of the State Ministry of Culture in 1989 and of the Xinjiang *Jangar* Society in 1991. He died in Hobagsair County on May 20, 1994 (Chao 2000:120-24).

The lives and experiences of Juunai and Arimpil epitomize the destiny of *jangarchis* during the past century. What of the status of other singers? I offer here a brief sketch.

¹² He did not, however, learn any musical instruments to accompany his epic singing.

¹³ The Xinjiang *Jangar* Office organized many such pageants during the 1980s. By gathering *jangarchis* from neighboring areas and asking them to perform, they were able to record a large number of texts.

Long-term investigations of *Jangar* and of *jangarchis* in Xinjiang began in 1979 and have continued to the present day. According to different sources, 106 singers have been identified and their performances recorded. Compared to the entire Mongolian population of 120,000 scattered across this large space, the performers represent only a tiny group. The basic qualification for being considered a *jangarchi* was that the singer perform at least one complete canto of *Jangar*.

The ages of the singers (distributed according to date of birth) are as follows:

- 11 born between 1900-10
- 38 born between 1911-20
- 33 born between 1921-30
- 10 born between 1931-40
- 10 born between 1941-50
- 4 born between 1951-58

During this long-term investigation, a significant percentage of the elderly singers passed away. Their demise and our analysis of the surviving singers' ages show that the singing tradition has approached its very last stage. Generally speaking, this folk oral tradition no longer exists in the Oirat territory. My fieldwork reveals that some aged herdsmen—not to mention young people—have never even heard a *Jangar* performance! When asked about *Jangar* and *jangarchi* in Melchig summer camp in Wen Quan County in 1999, three old herdsmen told me they had some knowledge of the story and of people talking about it, but were personally unacquainted with its performance.

Consider this anecdote as a measure of the state of the tradition. A singer named Jongarab was sitting in his summer yurt on the bank of the Jambinama River, rolling a cigarette with a small piece of local newspaper when we dropped in. According to various reports, the Bayanbulag area in which he lived was a hotbed of *Jangar* tradition. But what the singer said took us by surprise: he calmly told us that his last performance took place over 20 years ago when a university professor visited him in 1979 to record his *Jangar*. Jongarab had not had a single chance to tell the old story to anyone until we arrived that afternoon. Four grandchildren lived with him, but none had learned a single line of the epic.

The tribal backgrounds of the singers show the following pattern:

- 62 singers from the Torgud
- 21 singers from the Ogeled
- 15 singers from the Chahar

7 singers from the Hoshod
1 singer from the Chinese

More than half of the singers were from the Torgud tribe, indicating that the Torgud people served as the major tradition-bearers among the “Four Allies of Oirat.” This breakdown provides circumstantial evidence for the rumor cited by Vladimirtsov that the Torgud regard *Jangar* as their own tribal heroic poetry (1983-84). The same hypothesis is also suggested by the long-term investigator Jamcha.¹⁴



The *Jangarchi* (*Jangar* singer) Jongarab performing the epic *Jangar* in 1999.
Photograph by the author.

¹⁴ “It is quite possible that *Jangar* first emerged among the Torgud, one of the “Four Allies of Oirat,” and then spread through the other Oirat tribes and became their common heritage” (Jamcha 1988:88).

The singers' repertoire is another indicator of the health and recent history of the singing tradition:

26 cantos: Juunai
 21 cantos: Arimpil
 6 cantos: T. Badma, Jawa
 4 cantos: Badibazar, Harz'ha
 2-3 cantos: 33 different singers
 1 canto: 67 different singers

At least until the early decades of the twentieth century there were still professional singers. The top local singer would be awarded a title such as "the prince's *jangarchi*"; some of them were even retained in the prince's palace or yurt in order to please their master, earning their livelihood entirely by performing for him. Competitions were held among the princes to verify their singers' qualifications; these events offered the masters an opportunity to gain honor and respect through their singers' performance. Some Hobagsair singers recalled that their prince's *jangarchi*, Sisina Bolor, boasted a repertoire of about 30 cantos.

Of the 106 singers under consideration, 103 were male and only three were female. Sixty-two were illiterate and 44 were literate. Although no taboo prevents it, it is much harder and rarer for a woman to become a singer than for a man. Statistically, unlettered Torgud males are most likely to become singers.

According to field notes made by the staff of the Xinjiang Jangar Office, and my own experience, we now know that *jangarchis* who belong to a family tradition are called *yasun-u jangarchi*, meaning "singer with a family background." This designation also means their singing is normally more authentic. The training undergone by singers varies quite a lot; no single routine predominates; on the other hand, singers normally start learning the craft at an early age, and an excellent memory, passion, and inspiration are highly valued qualities for aspirants. As a special group in the community, singers enjoy respect from their audience, no matter their social class. The natural respect in which they are held differentiates them from epic bards in contiguous Chinese society, where folk artists (*yi ren*) have traditionally been looked down upon.



A Mongolian yurt in Southern Xinjiang. Photograph by the author.

Performance

Thanks to field notes only recently accessed,¹⁵ we now know that the epic *Jangar* was performed in military camps, on long journeys of merchant caravans, in herdsmen's yurts, and also, if not most often, in the steppe aristocrat's palace. It is hard to imagine that any large feast or important occasion for entertainment went without such a performance in the old days. The Oirat people were so fond of *Jangar* that they spent whole days and nights listening to a singer's story. Performance contexts varied from place to place: the epic could be sung in any season but was, generally speaking, more likely on a winter night. Sitting around a fire with tobacco and hot milk-tea, people were immersed in the narrative of the hero's glorious deeds. The nomadic campsite was normally rather small, consisting of only a few families, so it was natural that most of the performances took place in front of small audiences. On the other hand, during the *Jangar* competitions once organized by princes, and more recently by the Jangar Office, large groups

¹⁵ See Jiang Ge'er *Lunwen Ji* 1988 and *Jangar Manuscript* 1996:vol. 3.

of people tended to gather, some of them from afar. Such pageants are termed *jangar un danggar*, meaning a large performance or competition of *jangarchi*.

Some taboos connected with *Jangar* are reported, suggesting that people in different regions have different notions. What I have learned via my field trips are the following: in Wen Quan County people firmly believe that to sing *Jangar* during the daytime would offend the deities and thus cause disasters. In Bayanbolog in southern Xinjiang, the singer Jongarab claimed that performing at an hour other than nighttime would insure the singer's poverty. Most people are convinced that the only proper time is after dark. Some even stress that the door and window (a dormer on top of a yurt) should be shut tightly. Yet some singers dare to break the prohibition. One *Jangar* pageant was held at Salihintai Commune in Usu County in 1988. Since this was an extension of the international Jangar Symposium held in Urumchi, most of the famous *jangarchis* were gathered together there. After a large opening ceremony with a ritual conducted by a group of lamas, these singers performed *Jangar* to large audiences during the daytime; bursts of rifle fire ensured that their activities were protected.

A more common injunction prohibits learning all of the *Jangar* cantos; if a person ever were to accomplish this impossible feat, he would be in dire jeopardy. Daring to perform all the cantos of the cycle would shorten his life. Conversely, there is a strong prohibition against singing an incomplete canto, and such an action would also lead to one's doom. This is to say, during one performance a singer would sing neither all the cantos nor any incomplete canto; there is no record of anyone declaring mastery of all the cantos in the cycle. As for how many cantos the epic actually has, the answers are varied: in Hobagsair County legend prescribes 72, while in other regions 12 or 36 is the customary number (the belief in twelve cantos may stem from the tradition that Jangar has twelve warriors). *Jangar* is considered sacred and is thought to possess magical power. The bard Shokai, a 49-year-old Dörbed Mongolian herdsman, told us that in his experience singing it too frequently is harmful. He emphasized that his elder brother Badam lived only 42 years because he performed *Jangar* too frequently. Before we left, Shokai added that singing the epic too frequently would be harmful not only to the offending *jangarchi* but also to his offspring.

Some singers believe that the epic is genuine history, and that the central hero Jangar still has magical power, even though he lived long ago. This is the chief reason why one cannot shorten or modify the epic plots. The following dialogue reveals Arimpil's opinion of the epic and its hero (Chao 2000:286):

Interviewer: Some *jangarchis* make embellishments to the story, enlarge its plots; what do you think of this behavior?

Arimpil: I think this is not proper. First, *Jangar* is real history; second, *Jangar* himself has magical power. Thus, to add irrelevant things is blasphemous. What's more, it would really be ridiculous if [*Jangar*] survived a fifteen-headed monster but could not escape the *jangarchis*.

If nothing can be changed, are the songs that *jangarchis* have performed for generations always the same? The answer is surely negative. It is well known that the folk songs keep changing, and different historical layers—at both the lexical and plot levels—demonstrate the evolution of the cycle. Still, most of the singers insist that they follow the traditional way. One example of the discrepancy between singers' beliefs and actuality was Arimpil's frustration over the differences between his published libretto and his sense of how the song should go. When his niece read his libretto aloud, a version that had been subjected to editors' embellishments and then printed together with some other bards' songs from Xinjiang, he complained afterward that “it seems these are not my *Jangar* songs. They are mixed with other *jangarchis*' songs. These are not my *Jangar*” (Chao 2000:130). As we mentioned, there are at least two kinds of changes involved: lexical or phraseological emendation and story reorganization. Five cantos of his stories are printed under both his name and the names of one or two other singers.¹⁶

To perform something sacred and avoid unexpected harm, a singer needs “conducting rites,” often including animal sacrifice. Muta (a late *jangarchi*'s wife from Chagantongga village in Wen Quan County) told us that a live white sheep with a yellow head must be tied in front of the gate if all twelve cantos of *Jangar* are to be sung. As soon as the performance is over the sheep will die of a stomach malfunction. If the sheep does not die, then the singer's belly would become distended and he would die. From another family we heard that the animal bearing the punishment in front of the gate should be a white horse rather than a yellow-headed white sheep. But all agree that such a sacrifice is not necessary if one plans to sing only a few cantos. In Wen Quan County, we heard that burning incense and having a lama recite some lection is another rite. It illustrates how the people there understand *Jangar* singing as a serious event in their lives.

It is also said that performing *Jangar* exerts a strong influence on nature and human activity. For instance, to sing the epic before hunting

¹⁶ *Jangar of Singer Arimpil* 1999:453-58.

brings people good fortune; it elevates the Mongolian people's spirit (*himori*). We were also told that it nourishes mountains, meadows, and rivers. Possible negative effects of too frequent performance include shortening one's life, condemning one's offspring to misfortune, or lengthening a severe winter.

The main function of *Jangar* singing, however, is entertainment, as revealed most clearly through performances by the prince's *jangarchis*, which were intended to please the prince, his family, and his honored guests. A prince's *jangarchis* can be divided into two basic types: the wandering singer who is conferred a title by the prince and makes a living by singing publicly, and the bard with the same title who relies primarily on his master for his livelihood. Since this rank represented a great honor, it was highly treasured within the singers' circle. The usual arrangement was that a few families invited a *jangarchi* to assume such a position jointly; they would then share the related expenses, which included sheep, cows, and money. An animal sacrifice was also included if necessary. But a prince's reward was customarily much handsomer: after a first-rate show, a singer might be rewarded with a horse, a camel, silk, tea, or other valuable goods.

As for the singing melodies, the experienced investigator Jamcha reports that they can be grouped by regions; certain communities typically possess their own repertoires of melodies, marking discernible regional styles (Jamcha 1988:26). Arimpil observes that only renowned *jangarchis* had their own personal tunes, and that only they can create new melodies. In addition, certain cantos have specific musical patterns. As for his own melodies, Arimpil confirms that they are from his teacher Holbar Bayar.¹⁷

Investigators' reports¹⁸ reveal that musical instruments like the *hugur* (*huur*), horsehead fiddle (*morin huur*), *tobsigur* (*tobshur*), and lute (*pipa*) were used to accompany *Jangar* performance. Most common is the *tobshur*,¹⁹ played by the singers themselves when performing the epic.

¹⁷ The young researcher Taya found six types of melodies used in Arimpil's epic singing (*Jangar of Singer Arimpil* 1999).

¹⁸ See Vladimirtsov 1983-84, Jamcha 1996, and Batunasun 1988.

¹⁹ The *tobsigur* or *topshuur* (from the verb *tobsihu*, "to pluck") is a two-stringed plucked lute traditionally used to accompany heroic epics in some Mongol regions. It is also found among the Manchu people. Two-stringed lutes have been associated with the Mongols since Marco Polo's thirteenth-century description of instruments played before battle. *Tobsigur* bodies vary in shape according to ethnic and family traditions. The instruments of the Baits, Dörbeds, and Hotons may be small and round, and some Altai, Urianghais, and Torguds make necked-bowl *tobsigurs*. In any case, the skin covering the

Story-pattern

Like other Mongolian epics, and Turkic epic traditions as well,²⁰ *Jangar* is a nonhistorical cycle. Accordingly, its motifs and story-lines do not correlate with historical events or particular people's biographies; instead, they follow traditionally molded patterns. In his influential account of Mongolian epic structures Walther Heissig offered his insights on the "fourteen motif series"²¹; these have been widely applied in the past two decades by epic scholars in China, ever since the article was translated into Chinese in 1983.²² Because the *Jangar* cycle shares motif series with other Mongolian epics, I will not go into a lengthy explanation of how motifs are organized and stories are composed in the *Jangar* singing tradition. Instead, I will briefly discuss *Jangar*'s story-pattern. It quickly becomes apparent that the preponderant story-pattern is infighting; the secondary one is matrimony; lesser narrative sequences—e.g., the alignment between heroes or kingdoms, probably a reflex of the infighting type—also exist within the cycle. Matrimony is an independent type, relatively rare and very simple in plot and structure.

The epic story-patterns are in some sense the embodiment of the Mongolian epic ideology. The core of that ideology is conflict: infighting between good and evil represented by the hero versus his opponent. In the infighting story-type, a hero conducting a war or a duel naturally constitutes the central plot. Astonishingly, fighting is the fundamental plot in the matrimony type pattern. The hero either has to pass successfully through one or a series of duels against other suitors, or must take part in the "three manly games," which include archery, wrestling, and horseracing, so as to win the bride's hand. To make the matrimony epic more warlike, a

instrument should be as thin as possible and is therefore often taken from the groin of an animal such as a horse, sheep, or goat. Among Baits and Dörberds, strings are made from sheep intestines that, after being cleaned and washed several times, are stretched and twisted clockwise and counterclockwise, and then dried. Strings are tuned to an interval of one-fourth.

²⁰ See Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:142-59.

²¹ See Heissig 1979. The fourteen motif-series consists of (1) time, (2) the hero's birth, (3) the hero's locality, (4) the hero himself, (5) the hero's steed, (6) the expedition, (7) the sworn brother and aide, (8) threats, (9) the enemy, (10) fighting the enemy, (11) the hero's stratagem, (12) courtship, (13) wedding, and (14) return to the homeland.

²² *Minzu Wenxue Yicong* 1983-84:i, 352-75.

sequence of vital tests or challenges set by the bride's father is usually added; these involve conquering dangerous beasts or monsters, winning precious objects, and so on. Bravery is necessary for the hero-suitor, and the competitions reveal his fighting nature. Even in a minor story-pattern, such as facing down a warrior and converting him into a sworn brother, infighting is still the core plot. In a word, heroes are idealized while monsters are demonized, creating a great contrast between the two parties in most *Jangar* cantos.

The majority of the cantos share the same beginning and ending: Jangar and his twelve warriors and his eight thousand soldiers (in Ovlaa's cantos, there are six thousand and twelve warriors instead of eight thousand) are feasting in the palace. This is a special framework that structurally aligns the majority of the song-units; the exceptions are a couple of cantos that deal with the infant Jangar and the beginning stages of the Bumba kingdom. What happens between these regular "bookends" remains flexible. To create internal coherence within this large cycle, *Jangar* also depends on a lengthy protasis to lay the groundwork—telling about Jangar's heroic deeds from an early age, his lady, his palace, his kingdom, his warriors, his steed, and so on. We see these features clearly in Arimpil's seventeen-canto collection, three cantos of which retell stories of the early deeds of the hero Jangar and the establishment of his Bumba kingdom. These units, together with the closing canto, exhibit the same beginning motifs mentioned above. Of the remaining thirteen cantos, ten open with the same scene: in the fifteen-story palace, Jangar and his warriors are busy feasting. Furthermore, seven begin with exactly the same sentence—*Arban tabun dabhur / altan charlig bambalai dotora* ("inside the golden, shining fifteen-story palace"). The other three cantos start with large passages dozens of lines long depicting the Bumba kingdom solely from the protasis. After these similar lead-ins, which provide a general background for the story, the feast motif appears again—together with its fixed verses and identical function—to start the story.

Language

Until recently, *Jangar* was still a living tradition. But is the epic language the same as the singers' and their audience's everyday language? An answer to this question is given in an interview between the singer Jongarab and myself in 1999:

Chao Gejin: Is the epic language different from our daily language?

Jongarab: [They are] different.

C: What are the differences?

J: [laugh] In the old days Mongols used to *haila** *Jangar* in that way.

C: With melody?

J: Yes, sing it with melody. And now they narrate it.

(**hailahu*, a word created by the Oirat people and used in reference to epic singing, means to perform in verse and melody)

Obviously, this is more than a concern with performing the story with or without melody. Present-day bards “tell” *Jangar*, while in the past *jangarchis* used to *haila Jangar*. *Haila* means to perform in traditional epic language—that is, in verse, with certain melodies and specific styles characterized by fixed phrases and ornaments. Jongarab clearly knew that the traditional epic language differs from his usual, unmarked language. Most contemporary singers, however, do not possess that specialized language; they can tell the epic only in a register close to their everyday language. People talk a lot about how the singing tradition has declined, and that is undoubtedly true. The loss of the epic language is one of the symptoms of that decline.

The epic language, or epic register, can be identified by at least these features: archaic and foreign words and phrases, a rhythmic dynamic (words and phrases created for the purpose of matching the rhythm), and a high density of formulaic diction.

In *Jangar* and the entire Mongolian epic tradition, listeners and readers encounter “rare” words. For example, I heard the eastern Mongolian singer (*huurchi*) Jana use many Chinese idioms to adorn the story in his *Feng Shen Yan Yi*. One impressive idiom is *yi shou zhe yian*, “to cover the sky with one’s palm,” meaning to hide the truth from the masses. He follows this idiom with a parallel sentence in Mongolian that serves as a gloss or explanation. Correspondingly, one finds Turkic, Tibetan, or Sanskrit words and expressions in western Mongolian epic, just as the geographical proximity of these language groups would suggest. For instance, the derivation of Jangar’s kingdom Bumba remains unclear. In the Oirat dialect, Bumba means “spring water container”; others, however, believe it stems from Buddhism.²³ Jangar’s flag is “a *galbar* red flag” (*galbar ulagan tug*): the word *galbar* comes from the Sanskrit *Galbarwasun*

²³ *The Mongolian Dictionary* (1999:1038) defines *bumba* as “a rotund bottle with a high neck, used in the third part of the Buddhist eight-part sacrifice.”

or *Galbaragcha*, the name of a tree king who has ten functions and is in charge of satisfying desires.

Archaic words are also used in *Jangar*. The word *alta* is an archaism designating a unit of measurement equal to an adult's outstretched arms. Another archaism is *bere*, a distance of about two kilometers. In short, we do have some epic words that are no longer used in Oirat people's daily life, and which have become unusual words—their derivation and meaning blurred over time, and due to other factors as well. Compared to editions of other folk genres, the epic text always glosses difficult “rare” words.

Many of the epic expressions are very well organized, picturesque, meaningful, and rhythmically melodic. As the English scholar Charles Bawden points out, some Mongolian epic formulae have a long tradition. One example is a couplet—“with embers in the eyes, with fire on the cheeks”—that appears in different epics such as *Han Harangui*, *Egel Mergen Haan*, and *Gants Modon Honogtoi*, with almost exactly the same form (1980:268-99; Bawden's transcription follows colloquial pronunciation, and thus differs from our literal spelling):

Nüdündee tsogtoi,
Nüürendee galtai.
or
Nüürendee galtai,
Nüdündee tsogtoi.

In Arimpil's *Jangar*, sung in 1991, the phrase has exactly the same meaning and almost the same wording (the singer uses different prepositions, and we follow the colloquial pronunciation to agree with Bawden's example):²⁴

Nüür tal-an galtai,
Nüden tal-an tsogtoi.

This couplet formula is also found in *The Secret History of the Mongols*, which was composed in the mid-thirteenth century. We should emphasize that this is not the only longstanding formula in present-day *Jangar* singing. In Arimpil's *Jangar un Ehin Bölög* (*Protasis of Jangar*), another couplet formula captures our notice:

²⁴ *Jangar of Singer Arimpil* 1999.

Önöchin hübegün
 Ölögchin nohai üledegel ügei ²⁵

This phrase means to wipe out every single enemy, leaving not even an “orphan-boy, bitch-dog.” It can also be traced back to *The Secret History of the Mongols*.

Experienced listeners and readers are aware that in Mongolian epics some words should be understood as poetic language. In the epic context, they provide a rhyming partner rather than conveying literal meaning. Here is one example:

Emnig gool un modo bar	[with] Emnig River's wood
Elige higsen	making the Elige [side parts of a saddle]
Hanggal gool un modo bar	[with] Hanggal River's wood
Habcha higsen	making the Habcha [parts on a saddle]

The two rivers' names, Emnig and Hanggal, seem only to match the two words *elige* and *habcha* and create the head-rhyming pattern AABB,²⁶ thus making this four-line formula a very well organized instance of parallelism. The parallelism here is describing the unique construction of the wooden saddle. Similar words with the same function—to fill rhyming slots—exist everywhere in the epic tradition.

The central feature of the epic language is the use of ready-made formulae adopted and adjusted by singers from generation to generation. Without the formulae, the epic could no longer exist. A comparison to a closely related genre provides a clear illustration. While the Oirat hero-tale is similar in story-pattern, plot, and even motif to epic poetry, there are differences, some of which are shown via this brief tabulation:

Epic	Hero-tale
Sung often in melody and accompanied with a musical instrument	Narrated without melody and without a musical instrument
Singers either professionals or amateurs	Amateur narrators

²⁵ *Idem.*

²⁶ In the terminology we suggested for Mongolian poetry, alliteration takes the form A-A-A- in one and the same stich, while head-rhyme denotes the repetition of a sound at the beginning of successive stichs to form a group of lines with the same initial sound. For further explanation, see Chao 2000.

Mostly in rhyme, highly formulaic; epic register	Prosaic, everyday language
Molded framework; concerns the whole world	Snippet; concerns specific event

In practice, an experienced audience can quickly and easily distinguish a hero-tale from an epic on the basis of their respective register. Epic language employs specialized formulaic expression, while the hero-tale is more likely to use everyday language.

Formulae

Since *Jangar* consists of lengthy cantos, drawing examples from the entire cycle is impractical: apart from the sheer bulk of material, it would be difficult or impossible to gain an overall sense of how formulae work in a certain canto. Thus, we choose one canto, entitled *Hündü gartai Sabar-un Bölög* and sung by Arimpil in 1991. In this canto we find a large number of repeated phrases, stichs, and stanzas. Repeated units employed as ready-made blocks for composing the epic story in performance are readily identified, since they recur in other cantos sung by both Arimpil himself and by other Oirat singers. Some of the formulae even belong to the Mongolian oral tradition as a whole.

There are at least two types of formulae connected to characters in the poem, namely epithets and characters' ornaments. Epithets combine primarily or only with certain personages, while ornaments can be used as independent units, normally several lines long, to fit various compositional situations. Epithets are also comparatively more stable in form and wording. The following phrases are epithets used in our text:

(1) Aldar bogda noyan Jangar	Great-famed saint, governor Jangar
(2) Dogsin sira mangus hagan	Atrocious yellow monster king
(3) Asar ulagan Hongor	Giant red Hongor
(4) Hündü Gartai Sabar	Mighty-armed Sabar
(5) Dogsin Hara Sanal	Atrocious black Sanal
(6) Altan chegeji Babai Abaga	Gold-chested Babai Abaga
(7) Agai Shabdala Gerel hatun	Agai Shabdala Gerel Lady

Among singers in this tradition, rhetorical skills are highly regarded and single-stich epithets are not always satisfactory to either singer or audience. To meet the challenge of demonstrating a high degree of verbal skill, more melodic and refined couplet-epithets are pressed into service:

Aguu yehe hūchūtei
Asar ulagan Hongor

With great strength
Giant red Hongor

Hümüm nü nachin
Hündü gartai Sabar

Eagle among the mass
Mighty-armed Sabar

Bolinggar un hūbegün
Dogsin hara Sanal

The son of Bolinggar
Atrocious black Sanal

It is almost an iron-clad rule that Arimpil resorts to an epithet every time he introduces an epic character. There is also a formula associated with assembling Jangar's army: "araja in naiman minggan bagatur ud" ("araja eight thousand warriors"). This is a highly productive fixed phrase as well; it is used in all Arimpil's cantos as an epithet for the collective troops. In fact, in the canto under examination it occurs in most cases with another line to form a couplet:

Aldar noyan Jangar ni tologailagad
Araja in naiman minggan bagatur ud

Great-famed governor Jangar headed
Araja eight thousand warriors

Asar ulagan Hongor mini
Araja in naiman minggan bagatur ud mini

[My] giant red Hongor
[My] Araja eight thousand warriors

Unlike epithets, which combine only with certain characters, personal ornaments normally consist of several lines and are more likely to involve parallelism. Here are some examples:

Irehü yeren yisün jil i
Ailadchu mededeg
Önggeregsen yeren yisün jil i
Tagaju mededeg

The upcoming 99 years [things]
He knows by forecast
The past 99 years [things]
He knows by retrospect

Ama tai hümün
Amalaju bolosi ügei
Hele tei yaguma
Helejü bolosi ügei

People who have mouths
Dare not to gossip [about him]
Creatures that have tongues
Dare not to talk [about him]

Utalhula
Ulagan chilagun boldag
Chabchihula
Chagan chilagun boldag

When they cut him
He turns into red rock
When they cleave him
He turns into white rock

The first example above is used principally to depict the hero Altan Chegeji Babai Abaga, first among Khan Jangar's twelve-warrior team. He serves as their brain trust, a man of incomparable intelligence who knows events of the past 99 years as well as what will happen in the upcoming 99 years. This formulaic increment is so common that Eela Ovlaa used it in the Astraxan region of Russia in 1908 and Arimpil employed it in the Xinjiang region of China 83 years later, in 1991. In fact, almost all the *jangarchis* summon this formulaic unit when they introduce Altan Chegeji Babai Abaga to their audience, always resorting to nearly the same wording. Nevertheless, I would argue that it belongs to the category of ornament rather than epithet, since it is used as an independent, ready-made unit. For instance, we found that other singers press it into service to stress a lady's wisdom (Chao 2000:148).

The second ornament supports an exaggeration conveying Sabar's atrocity: people dare not even mention him, never mind offend him to his face. This unit is widely used in similar contexts. The third example plays exactly the same role. In our poem it applies to the hero Aliya Shonghor, but wherever it occurs this formula implies that the person described is extraordinarily tough, that one cannot hurt him at all. He becomes a red or white rock when cut or cleaved.

It is understandable that singers always try their best to show off their language skills while describing epic characters. What about other images in the epic? Since horses play such a special role in Mongolian epic tradition, let us consider the phraseology associated with them. Here the horse is not a domestic animal but a Mongolian herdsman's companion. Generally speaking, the horse has never been a nonessential narrative convenience: in many cases, it proves much more powerful than its master, playing the decisive role in fighting against a dangerous enemy or in competing against other suitors. It has the shape and physical characteristics of an animal, but can think and speak like a human, and possesses magical powers normally wielded only by deities. In a word, the horse is a triple combination of animal, human, and god.²⁷ This composite function is reminiscent of the horse's role in neighboring Turkic peoples' epic poetry.²⁸

Now let us see how our singer introduces his hero Sabar's steed:

²⁷ Cf. Büribeki 1997.

²⁸ "It is a noticeable feature of the Turkic poems, as of the Russian *byliny*, that while the hero may, and often does, forget his heroic quest in the pleasures of eating and drinking, the horse is never at fault, and invariably recalls him to his senses" (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:15).

Hüreng haljan hölög

Sorrel haljan horse*

(**haljan* means “with a white spot on its forehead”)

This phrase appears seven times in this poem, and is also used by Arimpil in other cantos. There is thus no doubt that it functions as a fixed formula. An experienced listener would also perceive the melodic phrase in the line, where all three words alliterate in “h.” I would emphasize that—in both the singer’s and the audience’s minds—the horse conventionally deserves a refined and detailed description. Just like the ornaments that depict a hero’s bravery or his worldwide fame, such phrases celebrate the hero’s powerful animal companion. Here are additional examples of the tradition’s regard for horses:

- | | |
|------------------------------------|--|
| (1) Tonjir ud un üre | Accipiter’s offspring |
| (2) Tonggag gegüü ni unagan | Mare’s first colt |
| (3) Naiman minggan aranjäl jegerde | Eight thousand <i>aranjal</i> reddish-brown horses |
| (4) Adugun dотора yabugsan | Had joined [the herd] |
| (5) Agula bügdüreme manggus | This <i>manggus</i> is able to carry a mountain |
| (6) Ugchi gi ergime hurdun | Swiftly round a hill, his eyes blinking |
| (7) Ochín höhe jaljan hölög | Mars grayer haljan horse |

The following ornament exhibits head-rhyme in the pattern AABB. It informs the audience of how unique the steed is as it eludes a pursuing horde, carefully protecting its master from any wound:

- | | |
|---------------------------------|---|
| Bum agta hügebe gejü | [When] one hundred thousand horses
[with riders] chase from behind |
| Burugu jöb ügei daldiradag | [It] dodges to the left and right |
| Ejen degen mese hürgejü | Has never let its master be touched |
| üjeced ügei | by [enemy’s] sharp edge |
| Eb tei bugurul haljan hölög tei | In fine appearance the gray <i>haljan</i> horse |

Similar ornaments are very common in the epic tradition. In my experience, not a single epic is ever performed without formulaic expressions describing horses. We cannot list all the typical formulae here, but I would like to stress that they cover a wide variety of aspects and situations: the horse’s mystical birth, its great size (usually like a mountain), rites for summoning it (burning incense, e.g.), the detailed process of saddling it, the exaggeration of its speed, its magical ability to fly in the sky and travel under the ground, and so forth.

While a generic horse is called *mori*, *agta*, *adugu*, or *hölög* in Mongolian, important ones, like Khan Jangar's horse, customarily possess their own distinct names. For example, the name of Jangar's steed is Aranjal. When referring to normal, generic horses within the epic diction, our singer employs the phrase *agta hülüg*, a specialized folk poetic designation typical of the epic register and different from everyday language use.

Our overall aim is to offer a close-range observation on the epic formula from different perspectives. However, it is not easy to limit the number of examples and still fashion a clear explanation of how the formula works in its phraseological routine. One practical method is to select representative samples that indicate the differing morphology of formulaic expression. We will look at the treatment of common utensils first. The following example is a fixed formula depicting an army banner; the phraseology is highly patterned, with typical head-rhyme:

Dugtui dотора baihula	When in the container
Dolbing sira-in önggetei	The banner has a yellowish color
Dugtui eche-ban garhula	When out of the container
Dologan naran nu gereltei	It shines like seven suns

Notice that the aural concord is doubled: ABAB in end-rhyme and AAAA in head-rhyme. This kind of strictly rhythmic and acoustically patterned formula is usually easily identified as a traditional and commonly used unit of diction. It would not be surprising to learn that the Kalmyk *jangarchi* Eela Ovlaa employed the same unit about a hundred years ago. It is a rule that widespread formulae are more likely to have such melodic sounds, strict rhythm, and perfect parallelism; these features help to preserve them over a broad variety of usage by different singers in different times and places. As for the implications of this expression, some may see it as simply a descriptive formula, emphasizing the nonpareil nature of Jangar Khan's army banner. But I would argue for something beyond a merely material connotation. From a traditional perspective the banner unit serves iconically as a symbol of the Khan's army, especially the troop's position on the battlefield. This kind of formula is thus both expressively thrifty and powerfully visual: when the scene turns to the battle array, the singer calls forth an army banner rather than rehearsing the details of the entire troop.

A similar formula stands symbolically for Khan Jangar's palace:

Arban tabun dabhur	Fifteen-storied
Altan charlig bambalai dотора	Golden, shining palace

This two-line phrase appears most often at the beginning and end of virtually every *Jangar* canto. It is associated with a typical scene: the Khan and his warriors feast here, threatening messages from dangerous enemies arrive here, vital decisions concerning the kingdom usually are made here, grand expeditions set off from here, and quarrels and clashes among various heroes occur here. In short, the khan's palace is not simply a grand building and shelter, but also the arena in which storylines are begun and solutions are reached.

The next formula is also a fixed phrase about location. It appears several times in our song, and recurs countless times in Arimpil's other poems. Not surprisingly, we find this descriptive unit in other singers' libretti as well.

Ermen chagan hödege
Ejegüi chagan büürüg
Elesün sira tohoi du

Far-reaching white wasteland
Masterless white desert
Yellowish sand-sinus

These three lines suit all the similar contexts that answer the general definition of open country. A hero customarily pauses in such a sand-sinus to take a rest from his expedition, but it turns out to be a battlefield as well (in both our sample and in other cantos such as *Aliya Monholai-in Bölög*, for instance). When this formula occurs, it idiomatically prefigures a change in the hero's fate. In our story, the enemy Sabar would have come to the monster's aid if Jangar and his army had not stopped him at this sand-sinus. It is also the place where Sabar fights against Hongor, Jangar Khan's primary warrior.

Numerals and directions are highly formulaic, and thus worth mentioning as a special type. In most cases, they do not imply any specific quantity, but rather a generic amount like "some," "many," and so on. The following numerals are used very often: 3, 7, 10, 13, 15, 21, 33, 81, and 99. When singer says *gurba dahin* (three times), for example, it always means "a few times." The numbers 15 and 21 connote "quite a lot," while 33, 81, and 99 have the sense of "uncountable." Within the epic register, when the singer portrays a hero as having crossed 33 rivers and 99 mountains, he is employing traditional language to indicate an extremely long way. This is typical poetic expression inasmuch as it avoids abstract terms like "many," "a large amount," and the like.

The same rule applies to directions. Statistically, the left or east side and right or west side are used unequally. In Mongolian shamanism (*böge mörgöl*), the 99 heavenly deities (*tenger*) are divided between east and west,

representing evil and good, respectively. It is thus quite understandable that the west is more frequently mentioned by our singer.

The epic formulae deal not only with static scenes but also with dynamic actions: for instance, *dagulaldun nairlahu* (“singing at a get-together”), or *hüngginen helen baiba* (“to say in a loud voice”). Or, when a hero gets angry, he will conventionally “gnash his thirteen canine teeth, his large black eyes blinking”; and when epic characters start out on a journey, “their horses’ mouths are released [from halters] to set out.” Some formulae simply describe a single action, while others help to narrate a group of actions, that is, to build up a scene like an escape or duel. In short, the frequent formulae in Oirat epic tradition cover every aspect of narration and exhibit a high density of recurrence.

Epilogue

The epic *Jangar* cycle is the unique heritage of the Oirat people. Clues about related traditions reveal that *Jangar* cantos have been found in other Mongolian regions. They are nevertheless fundamentally Oirat epic. Such non-Oirat *Jangar* cantos bear a close connection to the original singing tradition in one of two ways: the performers either belong to the Oirat population or learned the songs directly from Oirat singers. In our opinion, a few cantos or fragments scattered here and there, lacking both any comprehensive repertoire and a qualified audience, can hardly be called an independent tradition.

From a broader perspective, the *Jangar* cycle shares many characteristics with other Mongolian epic traditions. Stated telegraphically, they include:

1. Same story-patterns: fighting, matrimony, and so on
2. Same motif-series and sequences—starts with hero’s birth, ends with return home and feast
3. Same versification—includes head-rhyme and parallelism
4. Specialized epic language or register, dense with formulae
5. Nonhistorical nature
6. The hero’s major opponent is a monster called Manggus
7. The horse usually plays an important role in the story
8. Singers are both professional and amateur
9. Epic singing has multiple practical functions
10. Epic performance is accompanied by certain rites
11. Mainly oral transmission; may involve manuscripts and other forms
12. A strong singing tradition that may arouse folk legends about epic

heroes or epic singers

13. Alien cultures and religions, such as Tibetan Buddhism, are influential

Obviously, Turkic epics manifest some of the same features. As neighboring peoples through many centuries, Mongols and Turks share similar cultural elements. As Victor Zhirmunsky points out, “Kirghiz and Kazakh folklore give many examples of the heroic folklore (*Heldenmärchen*), with the plot limited by the family and tribal relations of a patriarchal society and the action laid against a fabulous background; but their origin, their ideological and artistic content, their motifs and imagery, can be more clearly traced in the more archaic folk-tales of the Turkic and Mongolian peoples of southern and eastern Siberia” (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:312).

Mongol and Turkic epic share similar story-patterns. Through the work of Turkic epic scholars,²⁹ we now know that this tradition has numerous instances of the matrimony type, the quest for a far-off bride who is destined for the hero. On his journey the hero must overcome various obstacles, including battles against monsters or hostile heroes who also have some claim to his bride. Sometimes the hero must enter three military contests (wrestling, archery, and horseracing, exactly the same triad as the Mongolian Three Manly Games). In addition, the future father-in-law may send the prospective bridegroom to conquer monsters or perform other deeds of bravery. Although certain details may differ, the reader or listener would be aware that this Turkic epic story replicates the Mongolian matrimony pattern. Fighting, which recounts a blood feud, is another epic type. If we investigate the analogy between Turkic and Mongolian fighting epics, we will find that they are organized in the same order and share common traditional elements.

Turning our attention from structural to cultural and story-based factors, we find other concordant phenomena in the two traditions that reveal their close connections. In the Turkic epics, for example, the main hero is often described as having a legendary birth and childhood, with predictions of future heroism or even kingship. According to this paradigm the boy grows up in poverty, as a shepherd, but eventually attracts the attention of a nobleman or the khan himself. In the Oirat *Jangar*, our hero Jangar has an unusual birth, then becomes an orphan when a monster attacks his homeland and kills his parents. Subsequently he is adopted by a nobleman and works for his family. Remarkably, his adoptive parent discovers that the young

²⁹ See Reichl 1992:espec. 143-70; also Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:271-339.

boy is destined to become a khan. In Central Asian versions of *Gorogli*, the hero has forty warriors at his command.

In the Kirghiz *Manas*, the warriors (*qyrq coro*) all have a consistent place in the epic cycle, and are often portrayed in full, each with his own biography. This organization is reminiscent of Jangar's twelve warriors, each boasting his own epithet and title, playing his hard-won role, and taking his assigned position under Khan Jangar's "left hand" or "right hand." Some *Jangar* cantos are allocated to them individually (not a common factor in other Mongol epics).

In the Uzbek *Gorogli*, the hero is portrayed as a wise and powerful sovereign: a protector of his people against alien invaders. He is also the embodiment of the popular ideal of patriarchal authority, as imaged in his looking after the good of the people and, in particular, his care of the oppressed and unfortunate. The legendary Age of Gorogli and his state Chambil come in the epic to resemble a popular utopia—a land where, under the authority of a wise ruler, the eternal dream of social justice comes true. Jangar's kingdom Bumba is that same utopia. Here the poor become wealthy, the sick regain their health. People remain twenty-five years old perpetually, and the four seasons all resemble a gentle spring.

In the Turkic tradition, the epic cycles sometimes tell not only the hero's story, but also the tales of a second or even a third generation. This narrative strategy can be seen in the *Jangar* cycle as well. Not only Jangar's second generation but also Hongor's and other heroes' offspring appear in the epic arena. Scholars have found this scheme in the eastern Mongolian *bensen üliger* (text-tale), but it occurs only rarely in Mongolian epic poetry from other regions.

On another topic, the following statement seems descriptive of Mongolian in general: "The horse is the hero's main, often his only, helper: it understands human speech and answers in human words, warns the hero of impending danger and saves him from death, travels over forest, water and mountains at fabulous speed" (Chadwick and Zhirmunsky 1969:313-14). In fact, the description aptly characterizes the role played by horses in Turkic epic tradition. Other folk narrative elements shared by Turk and Mongol attract special interest, for example when the young hero fights against dragons or many-headed giants (*devs*), old witches, and so on in Uzbek *dastans*. We cannot know whether the image of the many-headed monster entered the Turkish tradition from the Mongol or vice versa.



A Mongolian *Obo* in southern Xinjiang. An *Obo* serves as a site for various forms of worship. Photograph by the author.

Comparing different epic traditions among Altaic peoples is a challenging project. Mongols and the Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia—the Uzbeks, Kazakhs, Karakalpaks, Kirghiz, and others—have been linked ethnically and culturally for centuries. These diverse peoples also share a similar historical development. Scholars have made us familiar with the predatory raids conducted into Central Asia by the “pagan Kalmyks” during the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries that won them a negative reputation and portrayed them as the most threatening enemies of the Central Asian Muslims. Thus it is logical and understandable that in some Turkic epics the hero’s enemy is a Kalmyk khan or warrior. Correspondingly, in a few *Jangar* cantos a Turkic khan and his property become their enemies’ booty.

Jangar studies in China began in the 1950s with a few papers printed in journals and newspapers; academic scholarship stems from the 1980s. Today hundreds of papers appear each year in Mongolian, Oirat clear script, and Chinese all over the country. A handful of editions and translations

have appeared as well, revealing the comprehensive and systematic research now underway.³⁰

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³⁰ A quick review of relevant publications may help scholars without either Mongolian or Chinese to gain a sense of research developments in China: (1) Rinchindorji 1999 is a revised edition of his previous work (*The Heroic Epic Jangar*, Chinese, Zhejiang Education Press, Hangzhou, 1990 and *On Jangar*, Chinese, Inner Mongolia University Press, Hohhot, 1994). Rinchindorji has studied epic *Jangar* for many years; he has conducted extensive fieldwork in Mongolian regions and assembled a large archive of tape recordings. His writing concentrates on epic themes and structure as well as its distribution and artistic accomplishments. (2) Jangar's *Studies on Epic Jangar* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia Education Press, Hohhot, 1993) consists of five chapters. The first two cover publications and research concerning *Jangar*, while the following chapters deal with such topics as plot, theme, structure, rhetoric, character, and folk life. This is an introductory work. (3) *The Aesthetics of the 13-Canto Jangar* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia Education Press, Hohhot, 1995) proceeds from an aesthetic perspective. The author, Gerel, tries to probe into the Mongolian people's idea of beauty through an analysis of their epic creativity. Deficient knowledge about international aesthetics and academic rigor weaken the book's theoretical proposals. (4) As a native scholar's work, Jamcha's *Jangar*, based on personal observations, brings us a vivid and detailed account of the epic tradition. His *The Source of Epic Jangar* appeared both in his native language, clear script Mongolian, and in Chinese (Xinjiang People's Publishing House, Urumchi, 1996 and 1997). A hard-working investigator of *Jangar*, this amateur scholar raises some now outdated concerns; the attempt to combine the epic hero and Chinggis Khan is but one example. Moreover, his exclusive focus on own people's epic accomplishments constrains his judgment and renders some of his hypotheses simplistic. (5) Jin Feng's *Jangar: Yellow Four States* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia Culture and Arts Press, Hailar, 1996) is a questionable work. A professor of Mongolian history, especially the western Mongols, he tries to draw a direct connection between *Jangar* and real history. Some of his linguistic explanations are unconvincing. An oral traditional composition, *Jangar* contains different historical layers and boundless imagination. (6) *Epic Jangar and the Mongolian Culture* (Mongolian, Inner Mongolia People's Publishing House, Hohhot, 1998), by Sarangerel, sets out to demonstrate how well the epic cycle reflects Mongolian culture but is ultimately unpersuasive. (7) *Jangar and the Mongolian Religious Culture* (Chinese, Inner Mongolia University Press, Hohhot, 1999), composed by Sechinbatu, treats religious elements and meaning in *Jangar*. The conclusion that shamanistic incantation was the predecessor of Mongolian epic singing bears further examination. (8) Chao Gejin's *Oral Poetics: Formulaic Diction of Arimpil's Jangar Singing* (Chinese, Guangxi People's Publishing House, Nanning, 2000) is the first work to concentrate on a certain canto from one singer; its aim is to explain the core feature of Mongolian traditional oral poetics, namely, formulaic diction. The Oral-Formulaic Theory is applied in the book.

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Dong Oral Poetry: *Kuant Cix*

Deng Minwen

The Dong people are ethnic Chinese living primarily in the Guizhou and Hunan provinces of southwest and mid-south China and in the Zhuang Autonomous Region. According to the 1992 census, the Dong number some two and one-half million. Cultivation of paddy rice, forests, and other subsistence industries are their main means of support. Dong villages are typically situated on one or both sides of a river or a brook, with a small bridge over the rushing water in front of the village and virgin forest behind. The traditional Dong residence is a three-story wooden building: penned animals are kept on the ground floor, people live on the middle floor, and grain and other foodstuffs are stored on the uppermost floor. The most distinctive public buildings are the Drum Tower and the Wind-and-Rain Bridge; replicas of these important communal buildings are found in Beijing, Shanghai, and Shenzhen. The Dong have received international attention via their folk homophonic chorus *Gal Laoc* ("Big Song"), which has performed many times in Paris, Rome, and Vienna, receiving enthusiastic accolades from the musicians of those countries. Two additional points about the Dong are important for understanding their oral poetry: they are animists whose most revered deity is the female god Sax Sis, and they have not developed a written form of their language.

In April 1986, a team of Chinese and Finnish folklorists conducted a ten-day survey of the Dong in the Sanjiang Dong Autonomous County of Guangxi. These participants—Jia Zhi, Lauri Honko, and others—developed a strong interest in the *kuant cix*, an ancient oral poem whose form and content embody features of Dong social structure, folk music, folk beliefs, and codes of conduct. This paper addresses five aspects of the *kuant cix*: origin, form, content, literary characteristics, and channels of transmission.



The Wind-and-Rain Bridge of the Dong people.

The Origin of the *Kuant Cix*

The *kuant cix* originated in the sacrificial words of primitive religion. From primeval times, the mystery of natural phenomena such as wind, rain, thunder, and lightening have inspired dread. In order to protect themselves from calamities and natural disasters, people used words and gestures to pray for the help of the gods, to win their benevolence and kindness. Such gestures were the earliest forms of religious and sacrificial activity, and the associated utterances were the earliest sacrificial words. Take, for example, “Words Offered to Gods for Hunting” (Pu 1985:164):

Hoh xaop duc dih jenc xeenp,
Wags kap laiv yak;

Dos maoh lagl kap,
Meec wox laens biac;
Biagl dal laiv neml,

Dos maoh pap dal,

We invite with respect the village gods,
To slam the red boar with all your might
on its ears;

Let it become deaf,
And not run through the mountains;
To slam the black boar with all your
might on its eyes,

Let it go blind,

Meec xongp kuenp bac,
 Songk juil laengx beengv
 laengc daoh,
 Laengc songk laengc kaenp.

And stay where it is,
 So that we can take good aim at it on
 its first appearance,
 And knock it down with the first shot.

These words, known in Dong as *Leix Jiuc*, are offered to the gods at the sacrificial rites performed before departing on a hunting trip. In rhythm and melody they are quite similar to later versions of the *kuant cix*; it is therefore thought that they are its probable source.

Two major factors distinguish human beings from other animals: (a) they can consciously choose to engage in sexual relations for the purpose of reproducing; and (b) they can consciously undertake material production for the satisfaction of their own needs, such as creating goods. From this viewpoint, human society is a network created on the basis of these two modes of production. In one sense, human reproduction (the propagation of species) occurred much earlier than material production (the creation of material goods). The propagation of species was ongoing, consciously or unconsciously, while people still relied completely on nature for their sustenance: one could go up the mountain alone to gather fruits to live on, but neither male nor female could alone propagate the species. Sexual relations between man and woman constitute the earliest form of social interaction, from which all other marital relations derive. With the combination of marital relations and subsistence production, the primitive social organizations and structures of clan, tribe, and confederation of tribes took shape. These social organizations appear again in modern structures such as family, lineage, tribe, nation, guild, class, the party, the state, and the federation of states.

The *Kuant* organization in Dong society originally arose from an early form of marriage system. It probably developed during the historical period of group exogamy. During that time, sexual relations between siblings were already taboo and endogamy was prohibited. Group marriage, however, maintained its social position. Men from group A maintained group sexual relations with women from group B. Such an enduring relationship formed a kind of consolidated social confederation, which was the earliest form of the *Kuant* organization. Traces of that early social confederation are seen in certain customs of present-day Dong society. For example, it is customary for young men and women to practice *xingge zuoye*: males from village A, or clan A, go in groups of three to five to visit females from village B, or clan B, where they spend the night together singing. Males from village B or clan B can also visit groups of three to five females from village A or clan A, where they spend the night together singing. The so-called *xingge zuoye*

allows the young men and women to express their love with the aid of songs. From such heterosexual courting activities, frequent contacts develop between members of different villages or clans. In the Dong language, such contacts are called *weex Kuant*, meaning “*Kuant* behavior.” This is the origin of the Dong *Kuant* social organization. With the wider net of social contacts and further complication of social relations, *Kuant* organization developed into a series of political and military confederations between villages, becoming what are now called the Dong folk self-government and self-protecting organizations.

Since the Dong had no writing system in ancient times, it is difficult to locate the specific year in which the *Kuant* organization came into being. According to Chinese literature, the Dong were the offspring of the ancient Yue. In 218 BCE, the Qin Emperor Qingshihuang sent an army of 500,000 to conquer the *nanyue* (the South Yue). One of the army detachments was “stationed up at the highest mountain of the Tancheng” in the Dong area southwest of the Qianyang County, in what is now Hunnan province. At that time, the Yue “all entered into the thin forests and stayed up there together with the wild birds and beasts, rather than surrender to the Qin and be captured. They appointed their most talented and courageous men to be their generals and launched a night attack against the Qin, who dissolved before the Dong forces. The Dong killed an officer of the Qin army, Tu Sui, and left several hundred thousand corpses lying in their own blood” (*Huainanzi: Renjian Xun*). It is likely that this military organization was the *Kuant* organization of the day. Until the end of the Tang Dynasty (early tenth century), famous leaders of the *Kuant*, such as Pan Jisheng, Yang Chenglei, and Yang Zaisi, emerged from what are now the communities of the Dong compact. The term *Kuant* also appeared in some works of Chinese literature. From this evidence it can be seen that an organization like the *Kuant* has been in existence in the Dong areas since before the tenth century (see Deng and Wu 1995).

After the appearance of the *Kuant* organization, the formulaic language of the primitive sacrificial rites was often used to promulgate *Kuant* rules and regulations, as well as to relate the history of the *Kuant* organization. This was *kuant cix* in its earliest form. To enliven their performances, the eloquent leaders used vivid descriptions; as the rhythm and melody of *kuant cix* gradually grew more polished, it developed into a work of great artistic achievement.

The Form of *Kuant Cix*: Rhyme, Image, Syntax

Kuant cix is a special, stylized recitation replete with rhymes and sound harmonies. Its form, called *Leix Kuant* (“Kuant speech”), was developed by the ancient judicial organization—the Kuant. The rhyme of *Leix Kuant* is complicated, usually involving both end and internal rhyme, but less rigid than the prosodic requirements of folk ballad. For example (Zhang and Deng 1988:90):

Memx laox deil douv bic,	The tiger left its skin when it died,
Guix laox deil douv guaol;	The ox left its horns when it died;
Ongs lebx daol.	Grandpa passed it to papa,
Bux lebx daol.	Papa passed it to me.
Nyence angx nyenc qingk,	People tell and people listen,
Nyenc nguingv nyenc deic.	People listen and people follow. ¹

These lines illustrate how a *kuant cix*’s complicated rhyme patterns can stitch together the entire poem. The last syllables of the second and the fourth lines fall on the “ao” end rhyme, demonstrating the rule that end rhymes usually occur in even lines, with some exceptions. For example, the last syllable of the sixth line is not “ao,” and there is no internal rhyme between the first and second sentences.

The sentence pattern of *kuant cix* is flexible: most lines are anywhere from three to six syllables long, but some contain more than seven syllables. There is no theoretical limit on the number of sentences in the *kuant cix* form. A recitation may be as short as a dozen lines or surpass hundreds or even thousands of lines. *Kuant cix* makes use of parallelism and its rhythm is especially strict. The opening lines of *kuant cix* serve as an example (Deng and Wu 1995:63):

Baov jaix angx,	I tried to persuade the elder brother to talk,
Jaix eis angx;	And he does not speak;
Baov nongx angx,	The younger brother was asked to talk,
Nongx buh eis angx;	And he does not speak;
Baov jaix angx,	I tried to persuade the elder brother to talk,
Jaix baov ebl jeml nanc eip;	He said he could not open his golden mouth;
Bao nongx angx,	The younger brother was asked to talk,

¹ Tiger skins and buffalo horns are highly prized by the Dong, who hunt tigers in the mountains and enjoy traditional bullfight festivals. Whole villages invite one another to a bullfight held at a customary spot; there the villagers renew friendships and generally enjoy themselves. After the bulls are killed, their horns must be hung from the Drum Towers, then passed on to later generations as a symbol of the tradition.

Nongx baov ebl nyenc
nanc jangs.

And he said he could not open his
silver mouth.

These lines are a formulaic invitation to the audience and an expression of modesty on the part of the performer. “Elder brother” refers broadly to the senior members of the audience, “younger brother” to the younger people in the audience. “Golden mouth” is a metaphor for the most valuable speech of the older and wiser audience members, and “silver mouth” symbolizes the still valuable speech of the younger crowd; these images imply that the speech of the performer is the least valuable.

Kuant cix is largely composed and passed on orally, but in modern times some pieces have also been recorded in written form. These written records are Chinese-character transcriptions of the Dong language, termed *leec kuant*; they are limited in scope, however, and are not standardized. Consequently, only the fieldworkers responsible for making these written records, or those who are very familiar with *kuant cix*, can read and understand *leec kuant*. For this reason, *kuant cix* continues today to be a Dong verbal art dependent mainly on oral transmission.

The Content of *Kuant Cix*

Kuant cix subsumes a wide variety of subjects. *Yuefa kuant*, for example, describes Dong customary law. Types of *yuefa kuant* include *liumianh yingui*, *liumianh yanggui*, and *liumianh weigui*. The geographical distribution of *kuant cix* organizations is described by the *kuantping kuant*; examples include *shier kuantping* and *shishan kuantping*. *Zuyuan kuant*, meaning “tribal origins,” recounts ancient Dong mythology and historical legends. Examples of *zuyan kuant* include *Guipo Fudan* (“Grandma Turtle Nurtures the Egg”), *Jiangliang Jiangmei*, *The Origin of the Dong Ancestor*, and *The Grand Ancestor Up the Big River*. *Kuant* told in praise of heroes include *Sasui Kuant* and *Mianhwang Kuant*. Other *kuant cix* reflect a variety of folk beliefs and customs, such as *God-Inviting Kuant*, *Bumper-Harvest Kuant*, *Bullfighting Kuant*, *Birthday Celebration Kuant*, and *Funeral Kuant*. *Kuant cix*, then, acts like an encyclopedia of Dong beliefs and practices passed along orally among the people: it is a very important oral tradition.

Yuefa kuant is the oldest and most important of the *kuant cix*. At its core is a description of Dong customary law, known as *leix yed*. The origin of the *yuefa kuant* is told in *kuant cix* (1987:43):

Jus Fup daengv al,
 Liogx Lang jiv xeih,
 Dengv leis nyih liogc xibc
 nyih miinh,
 Nyih jus xibc beds banc.

Yanc meec siv wangp,
 Tangp meec siv Yangp;
 Yanc meec siv wangp dags,
 Xeih meec beds miinh xup.
 Meec naenl liogx miinh yeml,
 Meec naenl liogx miinh yangc;
 Meec naenl liogx miinh nal,
 Meec naenl liogx miinh mangl;
 Meec naenl liogx miinh xangh,
 Meec naenl liogx miinh hak.

Zhu Fu created songs,
 Liu Lang created the law,
 Creating two-times-six-equals
 twelve facets,
 Two-times-nine-equals eighteen
 clauses.
 The house has four directions,
 The barn has four sides;
 The house has four interior walls,
 The law has eight bundles.
 There is *liumianh yin*,
 There is *liumianh yang*;
 There is *liumianh* that is thick,
 There is *liumianh* that is thin;
 There is *liumianh* upwards,
 There is *liumianh* downwards.

The first two lines name the founders of Dong culture: Zhu Fu (or Jus Fup), a legendary composer of songs, and Liu Lang (or Liogx Langc), a legendary lawmaker who codified early folk law. *Yuefa kuant* presents twelve aspects and eighteen clauses that all people should observe. The basic rules stated are these: mete out severe punishment to offenders of *liumianh yin*, but show leniency to transgressors of *liumianh yang*; and mete out severe punishment to offenders of *liumianh* “that is thick,” but show leniency to transgressors of the *liumianh* “that is thin.” Those judged to be in the right are *liumianh* “upwards,” and those found to be in the wrong are *liumianh* “downwards.” The most influential of the eight aspects today are *liumianh yin* and *liumianh yang*; the others have greatly changed or have been lost.

Liumianh yin refers to six types of criminal actions meriting severe punishment; these are described by a series of clauses. Transgression of these clauses warrants capital punishment in one or another form: being buried alive, drowning, or suffering death by beating. The clauses of *Level One and Part One* are exemplified in the following passage from *liumianh yin* (*kuant cix* 1987:45):

Maoh lagx nyenc nouc,
 Bov mags lags guas,
 Longc banc sais jongv,
 Dedl oc nganh,
 Sonp duh liongc.
 Jic wenc sangv juh,

Whichever family's son,
 Should he be bold enough and
 hardened,
 With a stretched heart and winding
 bowels,
 Cutting the neck of the goose,
 Poking the belly of the Dragon.
 Straddling the tomb of the dead

<p>Weds wenc loul muh, Weds nyogc xeengp, Gueengv lags sos; Eip binv nuv nyenc, Yeds mzix jibl lags. Dos jih nyenc xeengp donc sais, Dos jih mungx deil nees ngail ngaic. Xeih mags yunv menl, Os yeml deml heis; Mangv xeih naih nal, Lags xeih naih qaenp, Mangv xeih naih mags deml xebx, Lags xeih naih qaenp deml begs. Eis gonh maoh yongh douh beeuv, Eis gonh maoh yax douh memx, Maenl naih yac daol, Ugs yak saip maoh dens, Ugs tent saip maoh aemv; Eis saip jeml nyaenc map qaot, Nyouc max map beenh. Deic maoh samp bux lagx jungh buv not, Deic maoh ngox bux lagx jungh buv saoc. Maengl mags saip maoh nyaoh, Aox magx saip maoh nunc. Sagl maoh samp peek magx mant, Jinc maoh jus peek magx yak!</p>	<p>and conducting a repeated burial, Digging up tombs, Throwing out the body of the newly dead, Casting out the old bones; Raising the board cover and looking at the body, Opening the coffin and picking up the bones. Making a living person sad, Making the dead cry out. The crime shocks heaven, The evil is as deep as the sea; This kind of crime is grave, This crime is heavy, This crime is as great as Degree Ten, This piece of crime is as heavy as Degree One Hundred. In spite of it he is as ferocious as a leopard, In spite of it he is as evil as a tiger, Today we, Let him put on a red coat, Let him wear a jacket; No ransom of gold and silver is allowed, Nor payment of oxen and horses. Let the father and sons, the three of them, share a mouse hole, Let the father and sons, the five of them, share a water hole. Let him live in the deep pool, Let him sleep in the deep hole. Bury him as deep as three <i>peek</i> in the yellow soil, Cover him as thick as nine <i>peek</i> in the reddish mud!²</p>
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² The “peek” is a unit of measurement equaling two outstretched armlengths, about one and one-half meters.

The Dong are ancestor worshippers who believe the soul never perishes. Their dead are placed in firwood coffins from where they can eternally protect their descendants. As animists the Dong believe the hills and the land are endowed with souls. Every lineage has its own carefully chosen public burial ground, and members of the lineage who die a normal death are interred in the public tomb; there they receive frequent offerings. The above-cited lines “Cutting the neck of the goose” and “Poking the belly of the Dragon” refer metaphorically to crimes involved in the the destruction of public tombs. “Straddling the tomb of the dead and conducting a repeated burial” refers to criminals who bury the dead in already occupied graves or disinter the body of an ancestor, not their own, and throw it into the wilderness. *Yuefa kuant* ranks such a crime among the most serious: “This crime shocks heaven,” and “the evil is as deep as the sea.” Offenders deserve the most severe punishment. The statement “let the father and sons, the three of them, share a mouse hole,” means that the offender and his family are to be buried alive; “let the father and sons, the five of them, share a water hole” describes how their bodies are to be weighted with stones and drowned in the river. Among the Dong, the “red coat” and “jacket” are emblematic of criminals, who in ancient Dong society were obliged to distinguish themselves from others by wearing such garments. The “three peek” and “nine peek” are ballpark figures, implying a deep grave.

The Dong developed *yuefa kuant* in the matrix of their work and life experiences. As was mentioned above, the Dong mainly grow paddy rice: without water the seedlings cannot grow, and without oxen the people cannot plow. To safeguard these key elements in the process of production, *yuefa kuant* deals severely with criminal actions that harm rice production, such as draining off water or stealing fish, cattle, rice, or grain, examples stipulated in *Level Five and Part Five* of *Liumianh Yingui* (*kuant cix* 1987:50):

Nuv baov lagx nuc,
Jiv semp eis jiangc,
Jiv sais eis lail,
Janl dangc ul,
Loul dangc dees,
Aox dangc liagc bal,
Aox yav liagc oux.
Luix oux semh jail,
Luix bal semh guenv.
Yac daol dos dinl mudx,
Yac daol yudx dinl laiv.
Dos dinl leis luh dah,

Whichever family's son,
Who is treacherous,
Who is evil-hearted,
Digging at the upper mound,
Digging at the lower mound,
Stealing fish from the pond,
Stealing grain from the fields.
Losing grain we trace the crumbs,
Losing fish we trace the scales.
We will find his footprints.
We will follow his footprints,
The footprints can betray the route,

Dos bav leis luh bens.	The footprints give a clue.
Yiv leis ul miac,	The real evidence was found,
Lah leis ul sap.	The real object was uncovered.
Deic qax xibx samp bingc duh,	Together with <i>Shisan pingtu</i> ,
Liut qak xibx jus bingc <i>Kuant</i> .	<i>Shijiu ping kuant</i> were captured.
Jibl eel douh jibl louv,	Take his snails,
Qoup jil douh qoup yibc.	Ransacking the home as <i>lian</i> .
Dos maoh bux ongp yanc nyaoh,	Let his father have nowhere to live
	in the village,
Dos maoh lagx ongp senl jiangc.	Let his son have nowhere to live in
	the village.
Jianx maoh bux bail samp	Drive him three days' journey away,
menl dih yais,	
Jais maoh lagx bail sik	Drive him four days' journey away,
menl luh jiangc,	
Bai eis saip juanv yanc,	Away and not allowed back home,
Ganx eis saip map senl.	Not allowed back to the village.

Theft of fish or grain, although not punishable by death, is cause for seizure of the thief's personal property. The lines "take his snails, / ransacking the home as *lian*" in fact mean the confiscation of all of his possessions, such as his snails and fishnets. Other images and words here also require explanation. Both *Shisan pingtu* and *Shijiu ping kuant* are permanent sites where village activities are organized, while "three days' journey away" and "four days' journey away" are general references to a great distance. Confiscation and expulsion are the usual punishments given out to thieves who steal cattle, horses, fish, grain, chickens, ducks, or other property. Punishment of serious chronic offenders may include live burial or drowning by water. For example, in 1923, two young men, Wu Xinyou (age seventeen) and Yang Xinnong (age sixteen) were caught stealing chickens. The local *kuant* organization investigated the crimes, substantiated that the two were repeat offenders, and the thieves were punished by being buried alive (Deng 1991:15).

In former times, trials were held following traditional Dong customary law: the *kuant* chief would call a meeting of village or lineage heads and the matter was resolved by collective decision. According to the degree of their crimes, offenders were sentenced by being buried alive, drowned in water, beaten to death with sticks, expelled from the village, or forced to eat pig and dog feces—this was smeared on the lips. A wide range of punishments was available. Lineage membership could be revoked. A criminal could be shunned or his property confiscated. Criminals were fined, or ordered to forfeit wine and meat to the village or make public restitution by building village roads and cutting firewood for the Drum Tower. Other penalties

included: “to wash face,” a public face-to-face apology to the offended person; “meat offerings,” taking meat to each household as a expression of repentance; or, finally, walking throughout the village beating a gong in self-condemnation. If the case was a complicated one, there was recourse to “divine judgment.” This could involve a variety of divinatory rituals: “calling heaven,” by which each suspect was asked to take an oath against heaven; or “cooking rice,” in which two suspects in a cooking contest were either exonerated or condemned on the basis of whether or not their rice was well-cooked. Another divine trial required slitting the neck of a chicken, throwing the bird at the suspects, and leaving it to die. The suspect towards whom the chicken’s head was pointing when it died was deemed the offender. Yet another test involved pulling an axe from a pot of boiling oil: the oil was brought to a boil, an axe was dropped into the pot, and the suspects were made to fish it out barehanded. The one whose hand was burned was condemned; otherwise he was found innocent (Deng 1991).



Drum Tower of the Dong People.

With the help of *yuefa kuant*, the people in the Dong region have long lived in peace and harmony. For example, until the 1940s many Dong were ignorant of the existence of locks. Their plowing-oxen were pastured in the mountains for long periods and never lost. People left their grain outdoors in the sun secure in the knowledge that no one would steal it. According to the *Record of the Sanjiang County* (1911-49), in the areas populated by the Dong,

rules made by the locals are rigid. When cases of theft occur, no matter how big or small, people are called to a meeting and the offender is put to death, without reporting it to the authorities. For that reason people dare not steal. Cattle and sheep can pasture freely and the owner need never go in search of them because they come back on their own and are never stolen.

Such rigid codes have exercised a great influence over the minds of the Dong people. In 1933, a young singer by the name of Wu Hongmiao, from the Gao Ding village of the Sanjiang County, Guangxi, succumbed to his greed and foolishly stole property from the people of the village. Since it was his first offense, the local *kuant* organization fined him 40 *liang* of silver and another person offered to pay the fine. Dissatisfied with his sentence, Wu Hongmiao insisted on death by live burial, and asked that he be allowed to sing a farewell song. The court relented and granted his request. His tomb may still be seen in the village, and his *Farewell* song has survived to the present time via oral transmission (Deng and Wu 1995:14-16).

The Artistic Style of *Kuant Cix*

The artistic style of *kuant cix* relies on two main features: the continuous expansion of its content and the continual perfection of its art. The first *kuant cix* was limited to issuing *kuant* rules and regulations or telling the history of the *kuant* organization. With the increased needs and complications of social life, the subject matter gradually incorporated new, richer content.

Kuant cix first invokes and honors celestial, terrestrial, and village gods, including Sax Sis, the female god most revered by the Dong, and Zaisi, also called the “Flying Mountain-god,” the greatest *kuant* leader in Dong history. The first expansion of the content of *kuant cix* would have included the myths and legends about Dong history, e.g. *Opening up Heaven*

and *Breaking up the Earth*, *The Tortoise Grandma Hatches Eggs*, *Jiangliang and Jiangmei*, *Zugong Shanghe*, *Breaking up the Lineage for Internal Marriage*, *King Wu Mianh*, and other such narratives. These works, polished and revised by *kuant* narrators over many generations, gradually developed into an epic oral history. These episodes now supply some of the most striking passages in *kuant cix*. Dong social customs are reflected in such lovely and vivid works as *Bull-fight Verse*, *Longevity Verse*, *Marriage-Congratulating Verse*, *Completion of New House Verse*, and *Funeral Verse*, which are widely known and enthusiastically received. The following example is from *King Wu Mianh*, which contains a lengthy passage from the story of Wu Mianh, leader of the Dong peasant uprising of the late fourteenth century CE, who fought bravely against the Ming army (*kuant cix* 1987:77):

Mianhx sangx dogl dih,
Biac xees deic leec,
Biac wap deic bianl.
Wul leec meec fux,
Fux xuh qinp xul.

Binkl samp qigs yais,
Qoup jienc jienc bengl,

Joul bial bial qamt.

...

Yinl yuih yuh yinl yuih,
Yinl yuih wang Mianhh luih
jienc,
Bingh nyaoh ul xangc,
Saip gax sebl leis,
Guanl miach dedl nyunh,
Nyenc daol nees samp maenl,
Nyenc daol nees samp janl;
Nees guh guh,
Nees huh huh.
Neix Mianhh aol gaos map sibs,
Sins qit idl leix,
Mianhh jonv soh;
Sins qit nyih leix,
Mianhh junc lingh;
Sint qit samp soh,
Mianh yuh daiv junl qac gaos
jienc.

Mianh was born on the floor,
Holding a book in his left hand,
Holding a whip in his right.
There are magic figures in the book,
The magic figures are from the
heavenly book.

The whip measures three *chi* long,
When it struck the mountain, the
mountain broke,
When it drove the stone, the stone went.

...

Because and because,
Because King Mianh came down the
mountain,
And was ill in bed,
Caught by the official army,
And his neck cut with an axe,
People cried for three days,
People cried for three nights;
“Guh Guh,” they cried and cried,
“Huh huh,” they cried and cried.
Mianh’s mother caught his head,
And let out a first shout,
Mianh began to breathe;
And she let out a second shout,
Mianh stood up;
She let out a third shout,
Mianh went up the mountain with his
army.

By means of this vivid description, a heroic leader of the Dong peasant uprising lives in the hearts of the people.

Although the artistic repertoire of *kuant cix* is broad, its outstanding feature is figurative language. Even works that recount *kuant* rules and regulations describe them in a figurative mode. The prologue of the *yuefa kuant* offers a useful example (Zhang and Deng 1988:90):

Xibx jiuc weex nyut, Jus jiuc weex bedc; Gaenx liemc dinl bedl,	Ten pieces as one bundle, Nine pieces as one handful; All connected as the duck's webbed foot,
Bix miidl dinl aiv.	They do not separate like the chicken claw.
Miidl dinl aiv, Duih janl daol; Liemc dinl bedl,	Separated like the chicken claw, He wins over me; Connected like the duck's webbed foot,
Daol janl duih.	I win over him.

Each sentence of this passage is an analogy exhorting solidarity in the fight against the common enemy. "Ten pieces" and "nine pieces" are analogies for collective force, and the importance of unity is expressed by "the chicken claw" that separates and "the duck's webbed foot" that is connected. The example illustrates how the language of *kuant cix* is figurative and artistic rather than reasoned and logical.

Artistic language often appears in other clauses of *kuant cix*, for example the first part of the *First Facet* in *Liumian Yingui* tells about how to deal with conflicts born of love affairs between young men and women (*Kuant Cix* 1987:54):

Lingx pangp deev wenp donc dangc, Lingx nyangt dos oux wangc ngac; Aox songp beeuv nangc, Aox bangc beeuv eus. Nyangt sup lingx jih, Ah meix qengp wap. Yuh baov henl maenl aol, Yuh baov henl maenl eev.	The high mountain was opened up and became the fields, On the grassy slope sorghum grew; Bamboo shoots were growing in the pot, Fiddlehead grew in the wooden bucket. Green grass grew dense on the mountain, Fresh blossoms were full on the trees. It was ordered that the bride be taken in time, It was ordered that the bride be married off in time.
Dah maenl dengv, Ugs maenl guangl.	Send away evil days, Receiving good times.

Nouc vox duil bianv
 wenp yeic,
 Jingv bianv wenp ah.
 Banl piat semp daov sais,
 Miegs nanc dogl yanc bas.

Who knew that peaches became
 pears,
 True became false.
 Man has changed heart,
 Woman did not stay with her aunt-in-law.

The first six lines metaphorically tell of sexual relations, conception, and pregnancy. Then a vow of mutual devotion is taken, “the bride [should] be taken in time,” and “the bride [should] be married in time.” As a result, “peaches became pears,” “true became false,” and “female did not stay with her aunt-in-law.” According to the Dong custom, the female should return to the home of her mother’s brother and the son of the maternal uncle has the right to marry the daughter of his father’s sister; for that reason the bride calls her mother-in-law by the term aunt-in-law. A romantic comedy becomes a tragedy. For unreliable, unfaithful, and deceiving men, *yuefa kuant* proposes a punishment: let them eat the feces of pigs and dogs. The reason for the widespread popularity and dissemination of *yuefa kuant* must be connected with its artistic style.

Channels of Transmission for *Kuant Cix*

As a cultural and artistic classic of Dong society, *kuant cix* was naturally as well received and publicized among the Dong as were China’s “Four Books” and “Five Classics” and the Western Bible among their respective audiences. How did *kuant cix* spread among the Dong? This question entails an examination of *kuant*-telling during the festivals of *yueqing* in March and *yuehuang* in September.

The so-called *yueqing* in March is the annual recitation and explanation of *kuant cix* before the spring plowing that month, as determined by the Chinese lunar calendar. When spring plowing is imminent, plowing-buffaloes roam the wilds and water for irrigation is abundant; all kinds of crops, wild animals, and plants grow and reproduce. This is the appropriate time for reminding people to protect the plowing-buffaloes and the spring waters, tend their crops, and protect the wild plants and animals. In order to exhort and educate the people, the regional *kuant* organizations hold meetings at which the head men of the *kuant*, and other talented people, recite *yuefa kuant* and other *kuant cix* for their audience. This is in fact a traditional way of popularizing folk customs. At present, the “Village Regulations and Folk Disciplines” written in Chinese have replaced the tradition.

The so-called *yuehuang* in September involves the recitation and explanation of *kuant cix* before the autumn harvest, again as determined by the Chinese Lunar calendar. On the eve of the harvest, the crops have matured and the public celebrates with many social activities. The autumn recitation is a reminder to protect the achievements of their labor, and to guard against any violation of the rules observed during the large-scale celebrations. In addition, the relative dryness of autumn and winter places the Dong's wooden houses in some peril from fires; the grass and wood on the mountains also dessicate and turn yellow, increasing the likelihood of wildfires. To ensure the safeguarding of lives and the protection of property, all regional *kuant* organizations call mass meetings at this time to perform important passages of *kuant*. Such good traditional customs have been absorbed by the township-level administrations in present-day Dong regions.

The so-called *kuant*-telling during the Spring Festival, or other important festivals, makes possible the recitation of *kuant* and its explanation for the public. In some regions where large-scale competitions are held the winners are often honored with the title of *Kuant* Master. For example, during the Qianlong reign (1736-95) of the Qing Dynasty, in what is now Liping County in Guizhou province, a major *kuant*-telling competition was held. An outstanding Dong girl, Wu Peiyao, fulfilled the people's hopes by defeating all her competitors and was selected to be the first local female *kuant* master and head *kuant*. She enjoys great renown and stature in Dong history, and many stories about her circulate today.³ Such festivals involve many aspects. In addition to *yuefa kuant* there are also *kuant* on ethnic origin, heroes, a bumper harvest, and impromptu creations. The style and artistic quality of these works are quite polished. These activities occur as part of a competition, where displays by talented performers are exchanged to the enjoyment and appreciation of their audiences. Each village and lineage is excited if its representatives win, and disappointed if their showing is poor. Even today such *kuant*-telling activities are an ongoing part of life in many Dong villages.

The attractions of modern cultural and recreational activities, and the disappearance of the social functions that *kuant cix* traditionally regulated, are displacing *kuant cix* from its historical role. As an art form, however, it continues to be favored by the Dong and by specialists in oral traditions because of its unique charm.

³ For details, cf. Deng and Wu 1995:165.

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Traditional Nuosu Origin Narratives: A Case Study of Ritualized Epos in *Bimo* Incantation Scriptures

Bamo Qubumo

Muvu paqugo
mujjy avu su;¹
mudde nramogo
bbopat avu su.

In the white father heaven
sparkling stars are incalculable;
in the black mother land
origin stories are innumerable.

A Nuosu *lubi* (“proverb”)

The starting point for this essay is the word *bbopa*,² whose common meaning is “origin” or “origin-narrative” in the Nuosu language. *Bbopa* refers to the creation of the world, to material and non-material creations of Nuosu society, and to “the way of speaking” about a remote past. *Lubi* are the salt of everyday Nuosu life, while *bbopa* is the prelude to ritual life. Throughout this essay, I underscore the consistency and diversity of Nuosu

¹ The romanized form of standard Nuosu orthography indicates tone by means of an iconic “musical scale” graph: “t” indicates a high tone, “x” a mid-rising tone, no graph a mid-level tone, and “p” a low falling tone. The standard romanization is here applied, except for the omission of tone marks so that, for instance, experienced English-language readers do not misinterpret the “p” icon as a bilabial stop.

² *Bbopa* has many more connotations than its synonym *ddurlabo*, or “the point at which something originates,” which is much closer to the word “origin” in English; for example, the phrase *ne ybbopa bi, wo yobbopa sha* (“you recite the origin of water; I chant the origin of sheep”). There is also the phrase *ashy pamu ddieddur laxity*, or “the point at which something comes into existence,” signifying creativity; for example, the usage *shanbie shaqi sulima, Ayo Axie bosumge* (“the tools for weaving woolen cape were invented by a man named Ayo Axie”). The term *bbopa* is a compound word. The first part, *bbo*, can function in a sentence as a noun, meaning “origin,” “source,” “beginning,” and “invention”; or as a verb, meaning “to originate,” “to rise,” “to grow,” “to bring into being,” and “to create.” *Pa* in ancient Nuosu means “father,” “root,” and “ancestry”; as a verb, *pa* means “to give birth” or “to grow.”

oral traditions. These few observations only begin to illustrate the many diverse generic categories of Nuosu oral traditions; included among them is *bbopa*, a rich and complex traditional narrative that encompasses a number of oral forms, styles, and genres.³ The *bbopa* constitute the case study for this essay.

Ethnographic Context

A subgroup of the Yi people, the Nuosu number more than two million residents in the Cold Mountains (Liangshan) in the Sichuan Province of China.⁴ Up until the last fifty years, the region lacked a central political structure. The Nuosu community consisted of numerous patrilineal *cyvi*, or clans, subdivided into four castes: the *Nuoho*, or black Nuosu of the nobility; the *Quho*, or white Nuosu of the commoners; the *Mgajie*, the serfs; and, finally, *Gaxy*, the slaves. The Nuosu were the last slaveholding society in China, as manumission took place only in the 1950s. The *suyy*, or clan chief, handled clan affairs, while the *ndeggu*, or arbitrator, adjudicated customary law cases. The subject of this paper, the *bimo*, or ritual specialist, together with the *sunyi*,⁵ or shaman, acted as the mediators between human and supernatural beings.

³ Sometimes the *bbopa* genre is also referred to as *bbobo bbopa* or *bbolu palu* to allow for meterical rhyming in performance. Nuosu words are often rhymed or alliterated in the following patterns: AABB, ABCB, ABAC, or ABCD.

⁴ The Nuosu are the largest of the Yi subgroups. There are nearly seven million Yi people, almost all of them in the Yunan, Sichuan, Guizhou, and Guangxi provinces, with some few in Vietnam and a small number who are emigrants to Southeast Asia.

⁵ In addition to the *bimo*, there is another religious specialist, the *sunyi*, or “shaman,” whose authority is derived from spirit-possessed inspiration rather than from book knowledge; unlike a *bimo*, a *sunyi* may come from any clan, even from the serf or slave stratum, and could be either a man or a woman.

If we look at the respective etymologies of *bimo* and *sunyi*, we see that the terms embody two different styles of ritual specialist. The *bi* element of *bimo* means “reading,” “chanting,” or “reciting.” The *mo* element, here as a suffix, denotes “the practitioner.” So, *bimo* refers to a man who engages in religious activities by reciting scriptures. Meanwhile, the *su* in *sunyi* means a person, and the *nyi* means shaking while dancing and beating a drum. A *sunyi* is akin to a shaman, or a religious practitioner who beats a drum, shakes, and dances exuberantly. The actions of a *bimo* are calm—he simply recites scripture; in contrast, a *sunyi* uses body language. If asked to describe the difference

Natural factors such as high mountains and deep valleys, as well as hostile relations with the surrounding Han Chinese, help account for the uniqueness of Nuosu culture and religion. Some foreign scholars have referred to the Nuosu region as an independent realm, and to the people themselves as the “independent *Lolo*,” using the Chinese name formerly used to designate the Nuosu. In 1956 democratic reform greatly changed the political system in this area. During the Cultural Revolution (1966-76), Nuosu traditional culture declined disastrously. Since the 1980s, however, the relaxation of outside political control and a policy of national equality have brought about a dramatic revival of traditional culture (cf. Harrell, Bamo Q., and Ma 2000:3-9).

Today there is little outside influence, and the Nuosu maintain their indigenous traditions intact. They believe that their ancestors, nature gods, spirits, and ghosts are able to influence the health of people, the success of the clan, the bounty of the harvest, the fertility of cattle, and the harmony of the community. Rituals serve as the main vehicle for the expression of beliefs and feelings: they are the primary means for balancing and adjusting the relationship between human and supernatural beings. An important part of Nuosu traditional religion springs from beliefs about health and illness—indeed, most rituals are healing rituals. As professional ritualists, the *bimo* are high-status religious specialists in Nuosu society.⁶ There is a native saying, “If a ruler knows a thousand things, and a minister a hundred, then the things a *bimo* knows are without number,” meaning that there is no better source for advice on living than the words of a *bimo*, because the *bimo* recite all kinds of texts and perform all sorts of ceremonies. For the living, the *bimo* divine auspicious days and times, exorcize ghosts and expel evils, replace misfortune with good fortune, and regulate ethical behavior. For the dead, they provide offerings, lead the way to the world of the ancestors, and ensure peace in the next world.

Nuosu is a unique language that preserves a rich and dynamic verbal life associated with the traditional rituals of Nuosu society. The experience of geographic isolation so typical of mountain-dwelling peoples has shaped their oral traditions. In their rugged mountain homeland, the Nuosu world is permeated and ordered by ritual, ceremony, poetry, vocal and instrumental

between *bimo* and *sunyi*, a Nuosu would tell you that a *bimo* is mild while a *sunyi* is wild; a *bimo* gracefully chants while a *sunyi* violently shakes.

⁶ According to the 136 *bimo* generations of *bimo* Qubi Shuomo’s genealogy as recorded in the *Bibu* (see Liangshan), and estimating one generation at about 25 years, the profession of *bimo* in its developed form has existed for well over 3,000 years.

music, and a variety of oral traditions concerning life and death, bravery and beauty, glory and grief, and fate and loss.

The Nuosu also possess a rich written culture, recorded in an independent writing system, that the *bimo* have passed down for millennia. These scriptural transcriptions are couched without exception in poetry. The sacred texts contain different genres of traditional poetry: myth, legend, tale, wedding song, lament, curse, epic, lyric, riddle, and proverb. These texts, fixed yet fluid, are revocalized and revitalized in oral performance.

Since 1991, my research has focused on long-term fieldwork in Meigu County, the heartland of the Nuosu. The Nuosu account for more than 95 percent of the 160,000 inhabitants of Meigu county; it is considered the area where traditions are best preserved⁷ and ritual life is very important (cf. Bamo Q. 1998). This study considers *bbopa* as a traditional mode of narrative poetry in Nuosu rituals and ceremonies. By examining the long narrative song *Nyicy Bbopa*, or “The Origin of Ghosts,” as performed by the *bimo* Qubi Dage,⁸ this essay raises three basic questions about *bbopa*: Why are there so many origin narratives? Why is origin storytelling needed? Why will origin narratives always be necessary? Though I have asked myself these questions time and again, it is not the purview of this essay to answer them in full. There is, nevertheless, good reason for pondering them: searching out recurrent polarities and relationships in the expressive dynamics of *bbopa* can reveal more about how specially sanctioned Nuosu narratives operate than could be achieved by merely isolating static universals. The remainder of this article examines the polarities and other dynamic patterns that have come to the fore of discussion of *bbopa*.

Ritual/Genre

The word *bbopa* has two levels of basic meaning, each dependent on syntactic relationships. The first refers to the creation of the world—for instance, “the making of heaven and earth,” “the twelve offspring-branches

⁷ The number of *bimo* in Meigu, one of eighteen counties of Nuosu Autonomous Prefecture, is a good index of tradition. In 1996 there were 6,850 *bimo* (males only), representing four percent of the total population and eight percent of the male population. The variety of religious rituals exceeded 200, and the number of religious scriptures reached a staggering 115,000 copies (Ggahxa, Shama, and Mosi 1996).

⁸ This performance took place in Village Jjolo, Township Hxoggurluo of Meigu County, on April 14, 1992.

of the snow clan,” “the origin of thunder,” “the origin of women’s fertility spirit,” and so on. The other envelops the civilization of Nuosu society, for example, “the origin of fire,” “the origin of scripture,” “the origin of *bimo*,” and “the origin of sacrificial offerings to ancestors.” The *bbopa* are best understood, however, through comparative analysis with other oral genres and by attending to questions of intertextuality and genre.

If, before embarking on the study of *bbopa*, one were thoroughly familiar with Nuosu oral genres, one would find that *bbopa* texts consist mainly of *bbudde*, or “ancient words of the remote past,” in which the mythic time of creation is set forth and the origins of the Nuosu people are revealed. The original roots can be traced back to the wellspring of storytelling about our first ancestral inventors and their inventions—tales about the first artisan, the first blacksmith, the first craftsman of lacquerwork, the first distiller of liquor, or the first maker of woolen capes. Having acquired a general model of narration, *bbopa* or *bbopa teyy*⁹ draw upon a repertoire of mythology, histories, and legends which are recited in poetic ways. In my collection of *bbopa*, the length of the texts varies from 86 to 1,455 lines. *Nyicy Bbopa* subsumes the mythological, historical, and legendary repertoire and in its range resists assignment to the typical genres defined by folkloristic or anthropological criteria.

With the advent of “the new folksong movement” in the 1950s, scholars began studying Nuosu verbal arts in terms of Chinese words, genres, and even concepts. This work produced a “translation” from Nuosu language into the dominant cultural format: some *bbopa* poetry was quoted out of its cultural context and categorized as “creation songs,” “ancient songs,” or “creation epics,”¹⁰ terms that were taken from Chinese folkloric concepts of creation epics (*chuang shi shi shi*), origination epics (*qian xi shi shi*), and heroic epics (*ying xiong shi shi*). These Chinese formulations of

⁹ All Nuosu texts are couched in poetic lines called *teyy*, meaning “scripture” or “book.” Thus, *bbopa teyy* means “the book of origins” or “the collection of origin poetry.”

¹⁰ In China the concept and definition of epic are quite different from the working assumptions of Western scholars. Within the circle of Chinese epic studies, and even in Chinese folkloristic theories, scholars have usually divided epic songs into three types, a so-called trichotomy: (1) creation epics, (2) origination epics, and (3) heroic epics. Until the 1980s, the consensus was that heroic epics existed only in the north and northwest of China, including Tibet. Further exploration and publication, however, have shown folklorists that epics exist among many southern ethnic minorities, such as the Nakhi, Dai, Dong, Miao, Pumi, Zhuang, and Yi. The seemingly sensible “trichotomy” of genres thus only confused generic notions of oral epics.

genre imperfectly describe the reality of the Nuoso “poetic narrative about the creation of the world.” In fact, *bbopa* poetically integrate a great number of *bbudde*, a traditional oral genre. These myths, legends, histories, and folktales are all types of prosaic storytelling that are conceived, transmitted, and perceived orally. As interpretive instruments, then, literary criticism and folklore genre theories are only partially applicable to the complexity of Nuosu tradition; such analytic categories provide us with but a part of the complete picture available in the multiform mirror of the tradition per se.

The relationship between genre and ritual can be highly complex, as *bbopa* poetry illustrates. In the Cold Mountains there is scarcely a ceremony, a ritual, or a rite of passage that is not accompanied by the recitation of traditional *bbopa* songs. *Bbopa*, then, are performed only in a public space. A performance of *Yy Bbopa* (“The Origin of Water”), for example, always includes *nimu vijjie* or “the ritual for dividing a clan into branches and migrating,” and *vyny tege*, or “the ritual for combining branches into a clan.” The *Nabbu Bbopa* (“The Origin of Disease and Ailment”) and *Ggobboxy Bbopa* (“The Origin of Death”) are part of cremation ceremonies. *Furiju Bbopa* (“The Origin of Marriage”) and *Xyxi Bbopa* (“The Origin of Wedding Ceremonies”) are performed at marriage events. After the *bbopasha*, or “origin-narrating,” the *bimo* begin chanting the two classic books of the Nuosu: the creation epic *Hnewo teyy* and the didactic gnomology *Hmamu teyy*. In practice, there is a strict correspondence between different kinds of ceremonial contexts and different *bbopa* songs. When funeral ceremonies are concluded, for instance, there is a great gathering in the village and the young men, wearing long white yak tails and carrying swords in one hand, perform ancient warrior dances to open the way for the soul of the deceased to the realm of his ancestors. At the same time, the *zomo zosse*, or storytellers, narrate *Yimo Bbopa*, “The Origin of the Sword.” Beauty contests, horse races, wrestling matches, and other traditional sports that lend gravity and warmth to the funeral ceremonies follow. All of these activities demonstrate the positive attitude toward death among the Nuosu. Cremation ceremonies embody optimism about the end of life and are a way of actively valuing the living instead of the dead.

The *bimo* typically performs *bbopa* songs at the very beginning of a ritual, and continues inserting them into the sub-rituals as the need to articulate the objects or artifacts being employed at that very moment arises. The *bimo* uses his voice, gestures, and body to enact and interpret the *bbopa*. Every Nuosu can explain the meaning of this narrative mode, and most are keenly aware of a general expectation that the *bimo* employ this traditional mode when reciting *bbopa* in rituals. To the ears of the Nuosu, the constant

repetition of the core word *bbopa* or *ddurlabo* is required so that the telling of the origin story “sounds convincing and sacred.”

Text/Performance

The cultural context of each *bbopa* song—oral or literary—is crucially important. This essay probes the relationship between textual performance and ritual process by examining a specific song, *Nyicy Bbopa*, or “The Origin of Ghosts.”¹¹ Analysis of *Nyicy Bbopa* offers a glimpse into the complexity and diversity of *bbopa* songs.

Of the various ritual songs performed by the *bimo*, one set is devoted to healing.¹² Addressed to supernatural representatives from the ghost world and spirit world, these incantation songs adjust the relationship between ancestors and descendants, the dead and the living. The *bimo* chants the scripture in order to bring the supernatural beings together and to help ensure the success of the ritual. The performance of *Nyicy Bbopa* described and quoted below was recorded during a ritual performed by the *bimo* Qubi Dage.¹³ This particular performance came about because lightning had struck the household of a villager named Jiji Zuogge a few days earlier. To the Nuosu, something unfortunate is sure to befall anyone who is affected by thunder or lightning because these meteorological phenomena can transmit leprosy and other contagious diseases through trees and other media. Thus it is necessary to have a *bimo* perform the *curjy*, or “exorcism,” to expel “the ghosts of contagious disease.” This is done by telling an ancient story about the origin of ghosts; in the Nuosu tradition, to exorcize ghosts one must first recount their origin. Rituals such as this are only one of the many functions that *bimo* perform in Nuosu society.

A *bimo* had divined that the auspicious time for the ritual would be April 15. The chief officiating *bimo* was Qubi Dage, who was assisted by

¹¹ *Nyicy Bbopa* is known in both five- and seven-syllable verse types. There are many variants throughout Liangshan.

¹² Incantation songs belong to the category of *bimo* text entitled *Ssyrre bburre*, which contain spells or counter-spells whose primary purpose is to relieve illnesses. Nuosu often classify these rituals as *namgusu*, which means “curing illness.” Nuosu believe that ghosts cause illness, and that these rituals expel the ghosts and evil spirits that are haunting peoples’ bodies, thus putting an end to their misfortune. In other words, using rituals to control ghosts is equivalent to curing an illness.

¹³ See the Appendix for the full text.

more than ten other *bimo*. The ritual clients were eleven households in Jjolo village who draw drinking water from a common spring; the chief client was Jiji Zuogge himself. On the evening of April 14, each of the households involved performed a small-scale *xi'o bbur* ritual¹⁴ to protect themselves against evil spells. The household of Jiji Zuogge performed a larger ritual, *nyicyssy bi*¹⁵, to exorcize ghosts.

The first step in *bimo* rituals is *muguci*, or “rising smoke.” A fire is lit and the rising smoke hastens the supernatural beings to assemble and aid the *bimo* in his ritual performance. At dawn on April 15, each household brought the “ghost boards”¹⁶ of Curbu, the ghost of leprosy, used in the spell-protection ritual of the previous night, to the place where the exorcism was to be performed. Larger than the other ghost boards, and piled on top of them, was the ghost board used by the household of Jiji Zuogge.

Scholars frequently assume that Nuosu scriptures of “sacred text” are neatly defined by clear boundaries. My fieldwork reveals that scriptures are treated in Nuosu society as both bounded and open. In particular, more and more evidence of this state of affairs emerged from the comparison of oral *bbudde* and written *bbopa* texts. It is important to recognize the extent to which the idea that “scripture” has a single fixed form and expresses a single concept as “sacred text” has dominated scholarly thought. *Bimo* scripture is most often a creation of the transmission from oral culture to written culture. It is, nevertheless, a form with which literati have continued to re-create the

¹⁴ *Xi'o bbur* is a family ritual usually held in early spring to ward off evil spells and prevent curses originating from other households.

¹⁵ The constituent parts of *nyicyssy bi* may be broken down as follows: *nyicy* means “ghosts,” *ssy* means “curse” or “drive away,” and *bi* literally means “chanting scripture,” but it can also mean “to perform or conduct a ritual”—thus *nyicyssy bi* is a chanting ritual for driving away ghosts.

¹⁶ Nuosu “ghost boards” are used in creating spells directed at ghosts. Before an exorcism ritual begins, it is necessary to make straw and clay ghosts, as well as these ghost boards. *Bimo* use bamboo pens that they make themselves, the blood of sacrificial animals, and black soot burnt on the bottom of pots to draw the ghosts to be exorcized on the front side of prepared slabs of wood. On the back side they write the incantations and spells to exorcize the ghosts. When the ritual is almost over, the straw and clay ghosts are discarded and the ghost boards thrown away to show that the entities they represent have been expelled from the household. After the ritual, an assistant takes the ghost boards to a crossroads facing in the direction of Ndabbu Luomo, the ghost mountain, and hangs them on a tree at the side of the road to show that the ghosts have been sent back to their proper realms.

oral-aural experience of words. Written texts are not so essential to the *bimo* for a ritual performance such as the *bbopa* recitation.

Nyicy Bbopa is an example of narrative epos in the form of *bimo* incantation songs.¹⁷ It is also well known under two other titles: *Nyicyssy Teyy*, or “Scripture of Ghost-spelling,” and *Zyzy Hninra*, or “The Beautiful Zyzy.”¹⁸ The following two excerpts are from this tale:

After Hninra [a beautiful ghost] had left, Awo Nyiku [her husband] quickly summoned 90 *bimo* from the upper end of the village and 70 *sunyi* from the lower end of the village to his house to read texts and perform rituals.

“Let me chant out loud with a full and strong voice. Zyzy Hninra, you use flattering words and a pretty appearance to baffle human beings, and you use your witchcraft to mislead common people. You’d better submit to magic arts immediately! Zyzy Hninra, you are the spirit of the trees on the wild mountains and the licentious bird in the sky. Now your witchcraft has lost its effect and you’d better submit to the magical arts immediately! I will dispatch the flood dragon to the sea so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the water! I will dispatch the divine snake to the earth so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the earth! Casting curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!

(Episode 10)

Many tribes and clans were all destroyed by the ghosts descended from Zyzy Hninra, so the *bimo* and *sunyi* of every tribe and every clan all curse her with a thousand curses, and all say that Zyzy Hninra was the origin of ghosts. *Yya kekemu!*¹⁹

(Episode 13)

¹⁷ There are two kinds of epos in the Nuosu tradition. One is *syji yiehxo*, “narrative epos,” in which the story is told in the third person. For example, *Gamo Anyo* (Liangshanzhou 1993:536-63; see also Shi, Gan, and Bai 1998) takes its name from its principal character, in this case a beautiful woman who probably lived during the Ming Dynasty. The tragic story of the heroine has been sung by bards for several hundred years throughout Liangshan. Scholars have recently collected and collated this material in a book. The other kind of epos in the Nuosu tradition is *mgojju yiehxo*, “lyric epos,” in which the story is sung in the first person.

¹⁸ Zyzy is the name of a kind of bird.

¹⁹ The ending formula, literally “Casting curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!”

The idea of a fixed text of *Zyzy Hninra* is unfounded and innaccurate, because it fails to account for the diversity inherent in the tradition. We must be aware that what we consider the most typical oral text in Nuosu society has, in form and concept, culturally indigenous origins and is thus the product of a long historical process. We also need to recognize that textual form and meaning were never static: the forms and concepts of sacred texts handed down in *bimo* circles over centuries have been continually changing and influencing oral culture. The mythical story of *Nyicy Bbopa* may be understood as floating down different streams that flow from the same headwaters, the wellspring of *bbopa* stories.

<i>Nyicyssy Teyy</i>	→	“Scripture of Ghost-Spells”	→	Incantation text
<i>Nyicy Bbopa</i>	→	“The Origin of Ghosts”	→	Origin Narrative
<i>Zyzy Hninra</i>	→	“The Beautiful Zyzy”	→	Epos

Figure 1. Book titles for different variations derived from the same text

Nyicy Bbopa is an oral-derived text that recounts historical legends and heroic songs about the warrior *Hxoyi Ddiggur*.²⁰ The story accurately mentions several historical places and describes a war between two famous ancient tribes believed by many Nuosu to have in fact taken place in Nimu, their ancestral homeland. Many generic elements overlap and interact in a performance of this typical Nuosu epos. *Nyicy Bbopa* exemplifies a particular *bbopa* song-type: its style is quite different from most of the *bbopa* songs that use similar narrative strategies (e.g., a movement from heaven to the earth) or mythic story-patterns. It is also much longer than other *bbopa* songs. It is clear that the beginning and ending formulas closely follow the general incantation song style. The *bimo* chants the story by heart without reference to a written text, and the story itself reveals much about traditional Nuosu customs and patterns of thought. As *bimo* Qubi Dage has said, storytelling is the best way to explain a profound meaning with a simple device.

An incantation may be defined as a kind of ritual song that exhibits a given set of stylistic characteristics (cf. Bamo Q. 1996). Among the classics

²⁰ Ggelu 1986. *Hxoyi Ddiggur* takes its name from its principal character, a warrior-retainer of the famous *nzymo* Miajy. In the course of recounting the exploits of its hero, the heroic song gives detailed descriptions of life in his era, which was probably sometime between the Dong-han and Tang periods. Several versions of his story were recorded at various times during the Ming and Qing periods at different places in Liangshan.

in the *bimo* repertoire, *Zyzy Hninra*, one of the *bbopa teyy* and an older epos, is found both in written form and in living oral recitation. The version of *Zyzy Hninra* discussed here is a long *bbopa* song composed of thirteen episodes totaling 1,455 lines. It is a traditional epos; the plot is wholly continuous, the protagonist is a female, and the other main characters are historical figures. As the need arises, a Nuosu individual invites the *bimo* to his home to perform the ritual exorcism of ghosts. While the *bimo* begins reciting the story, his *bisse*, or assistants, slaughter goats as a purifying sacrifice. They draw all kinds of ghosts and write all manner of spells on the wooden ghost boards that depict the ghosts being captured and then sent back to the ghostly realms in the direction of the ghost mountain Ndabu Luomo. *Zyzy Hninra* is most readily identified with a poetic narrative composed, performed, and transmitted orally. There are other instances, however, in which a textual performance is oral in only some of those senses. For example, a passage of an incantation song may be composed during the writing of curses on the ghost boards, then transmitted and performed orally. Conversely, it may be composed and performed orally but enter into writing during the ritual process. Ghost boards, spirit pictures, and other visual patterns create a connection between text and performance, between thought and word, and between sound and voice (cf. Harrell, Bamo Q., and Ma 2000:58-64).

Qubi Dage's performance employs a remarkable variety of ritual objects. This young, knowledgeable *bimo* illuminates the relationship of each item by chanting, a process known as *bbopabi*. His chanting is vivid, poetic, imaginative, and metaphorical. Before initiating a ghost story, six different *bbopa* songs are performed: (1) "The Origin of *Bimo*," a recitation of the patrilineal genealogy of the *bimo*; (2) "The Origin of the Cock," for divining with the skull of a cock; (3) "The Origin of Herbs," for sending smoke to inform gods and ancestors about the ritual; (4) "The Origin of Water"; (5) "The Origin of *Lurca* Stone," for purifying the ritual site with water and steam; and, finally, (6) "The Origin of Fire," for lighting the fire in the hearth. The recitations inform the spirits attached to these objects and elements of the purpose of the ritual, and counsel them to help the *bimo* fulfill his ritual duty. Once the ritualist/performer has convinced the spirits that he knows the origins of each and every one of them, and is able to control them, he begins reciting the epos and tells how the first ancestor of the ghost called *Zyzy Hninra* was crushed and overcome by the power of a *bimo* incantation. It is the performance of the narrative that rescues the client in this world from the calamities that have befallen him or averts impending disasters. After this recitation, the *bimo* summons his protective

spirits and many generations of his ancestors before proceeding with the important scripts of the particular ritual.

Orality/Literacy

The juxtaposition of orality and literacy is “a false dichotomy”; as John Foley has pointed out, “oral traditions are many and various, and they bridge the supposed gap between orality and literacy, between performance and texts” (Foley 1999:18, 21). In the case of *Nyicy Bbopa*, “scripture” seems at first to refer necessarily to written texts and their status as inscribed objects. But that is not the end of the matter. It is crucial to understand the rich multiplicity of scripture as a part of the living oral-aural communication experience. “Scriptures” among the Nuosu have never been considered mere *texts* to be read silently with the eyes but *words* to be recited loudly with *fubi* or “voice.” Their vitality lies in their being activated and reactivated in performance and interactive reception.

Poetic narratives in the old Nuosu language and written styles like *bbopa* continue to circulate within the clans. Frequent oral performances imply that there is normally little reliance on written texts. Fixed written texts are passed from one *bimo* generation to the next, normally as part of the training of the apprentice. Usually, a *bimo* recites *bbopa* only on the ritual ground, according to the episodes he learned from the written text or memorized. In my field observation, almost every *bimo* chants *bbopa* songs, even the long epos, without having the transcript at hand.

The written text of *Nyicy Bbopa* does not play an important role in its performance. In its absence, the chanting of the oral text is more intense and more demanding. Discovering the ways a *bimo* takes the main elements of plots, settings, episodes, and tropes from the written text and molds them according to his individual style and his insight on the ritual ground is a fascinating study. As narrators, *bimo* are not content to simply reiterate received word-for-word verbalizations from the past, but adopt new ideas and develop new forms that build upon the old ones. There is, then, a shift between text and no-text, between memorization and extemporization.

By comparing the scripture-text version with the recorded-text versions of two different performances by *bimo* Qubi Dage, we find many recurring riffs embodied in the performance process, especially in transitions between scenes. The diction is notable for its freshness and vividness; skillful prosody and neat tropes are highly polished by the *bimo* compilations. The comparison of texts and performers that follows illustrates the reality that,

far from being mutually exclusive, orality and literacy interact significantly in the textual performance.

Two types of sacred text: oral and written

For the *bimo* there are two types of “scripture”: *kemgo kehxa eyyma* (“oral text”) and *teyy eyyma* (“written text”). *Nyicyssy Teyy*, “Scripture of Ghost-spelling”—another name for *Nyiy Bbopa*—is an example of *teyy eyyma*. Ritual texts are the most valuable of a *bimo*’s tools. They are the principal authority and vehicle for the symbolic meaning of the incantation ritual. Oral texts, as the term *kemgo kehxa* implies (literally, “words pierced mouth, voice clutched tongue”), derive their power from the language itself, from the vibrancy of spoken words, and from other oral genres.

Some oral texts, *Qubu Ddoma Teyy* (“The Analects of *Bimo* Master Qubu”), for example, consist primarily of rules and instructions for training *bimo*, mainly in the form of oral proverbs. During ritual performances, especially rituals against ghosts, however, the *bimo* never recites according to the written text. Orality plays a fundamental role in Nuosu tradition, and this is so whether the mode of expression for a text is oral or is principally “carried” by some other mode—writing, painting, and so on. Thus, the category “scripture” may be subdivided by medium into two types. Although the division between oral text and written text can be said to mark the divergent frontier between orality and literacy, *kemgo kehxabi* (chanting an oral text) and *teyybi* (reciting a written text) converge in a single performance. The chanting of *Nyicy Bbopa* abundantly demonstrates that in practice no boundary separates *teyybi* from *kemgo kehxabi*; instead, they are merged. But even this merging does not necessarily exhaust the interaction between modes. The sound of the word emerges more clearly through the following *bimo* song known as *Bibu*²¹:

Bimo depend on their books,
The brown text pages,
Transmitted to sons and grandsons,
With their wise and perceptive words,

²¹ *Bibu* (“The Genealogy of *Bimo*”) is a popular scripture that the *bimo* usually chants at the beginning of a ritual. It traces the origin of the *bimo*, recounts their history, and invokes the guiding presence of the famous *bimo* masters along with the *bimo*’s own ancestors. *Bibu* is a text handed down from one generation of Nuosu *bimo* to the next. The verses quoted herein were preserved by the Liangshan Prefecture Museum of the Yizu Slave Society.

From the father to the son to hold dear,
 The *vytu* and the *kuhlevo*²²
 Passed from elder to younger generation.
 Perceptive people become mediators;
 Brave men wield the knife and spear;
 Rich people herd their cattle and sheep;
 Our generations are intelligent and continue the *bimo* tradition
 And chant the sound of texts.

Two kinds of performer: literati and non-literati

As a traditional mode of poetic narrative, *bbopa* has been shared in common between literati and non-literati. As lettered persons, the *bimo* are greatly respected in traditional Nuosu society; some scholars call them the “village intellectuals.” From the *Bibu Eyyma*, or “Scripture for Offering Sacrifice to Ancestors,” we know that *bimo* had no written scriptures during the early period; their chanting was handed down orally. Not until the time of Qubu, a legendary figure in the Nuosu tradition, did the *bimo* begin to document their scriptures in writing, thereby initiating the literate period.²³ From then on, scriptures served as the groundwork for the *bimo*’s performance of the recitations. For the literate *bimo*, mastering written scriptures and being highly skilled in all the oral traditions are prerequisites for carrying out ritual performances and communicating with gods, ghosts, and ancestors. In an oral/aural context, the professional education of the Nuosu *bimo* has depended on writing, and books circulate within *bimo* circles.

As a textual performer, the *bimo* has authority to chant or recite scripture, or to ritualize different kinds of texts. *Bimo* are: (1) ritualists of the indigenous religion of Nuosu society, (2) authentic singers of the epic manuscripts identified among the Nuosu people, and (3) qualified performers of the ritualized poetic texts defined by *bimo* institutions. Culturally their role in Nuosu society has multiple significances (cf. Bamo A. 2001). Becoming a *bisse*, or a student of a *bimo*, requires some recitation of written texts, but writing is secondary to oral training. Even for the *bimo* himself, writing is not a major part of his tradition. The most important and

²² A *bimo*’s ritual implements (Bamo A. 1994).

²³ Qubu, also known as Qubu Shyzu, a well-known *bimo* master in Nuosu ancient history, lived 99 generations earlier than the current *bimo* master Qubi Shuomo. The creation of five kinds of *bimo* ritual implements is attributed to Qubu, and Nuosu *bimo* regard him as the founder of Nuosu written culture.

fundamental aspect of *bimo* training is learning face-to-face performance. Traditionally, a new apprentice masters a ritual text or song by vocal mimicry—following his teacher’s chanting word by word on the spot. The results of this traditional method of learning ritual texts are embodied in Jjyke Kehxa, a six-year old *bisse*, who by imitating his father, Jjyke Ggufu, was able to recite more than sixty texts by oral dictation, including fluent versions of *Zyzy Hninra*.

In most social rituals, another group of *bbopa* performers act as “storytellers.” These are the *zomo zosse*.²⁴ As a verb, *zo* means “to encounter,” and *Zomo zosse* means literally “storytelling-mates,” or “storytelling-partners,” indicating that the performance is conducted by two storytellers paired for ceremonial occasions. These storytellers perform *bbopa*, as well as other oral genres, in song-and-dance duet form, usually at weddings or funeral ceremonies. Their *bbopasha*, or “origin-narrating,” always involves two voices in duet, echoing and supporting one another. The Nuosu regard *zomo zosse* as traditional singers, orators, and storytellers, according to the specific ritual context.

The *zomo zosse* style of *bbopasha* is markedly different from that of *bbopabi* conducted by a *bimo* or a *bisse*. Older, and often more experienced, storytelling partners recite their *bbopa* at an unhurried, almost methodical pace around the floor hearth. They much prefer subtle shifts in pitch or pacing to flashy gestures and wild intonation. The personal style of my informant Abi Quti is more animated and his pace much quicker than either his father or uncle. Abi Quti likes to start slowly, gradually increasing the narrative tempo. Like his elders, he tends to maintain a very serious expression while telling an origin narrative, never betraying so much as a smile.

Many *bbopa* songs are shared between *bimo*, *bisse*, and *zomo zosse*, between the literati and non-literati. But only the ritualist *bimo* can perform the *Nyicy Bbopa*, since it is regarded as a classic *bimo* text and a primary incantation. Even ordinary *bimo* who lack certain skills are normally unwilling to perform such rituals.

²⁴ *Zo* and *zomo* are equivalent terms. The suffix - *mo* occurs in many nominal forms, often indicating largeness or seniority, and is sometimes opposed to -*sse*, meaning “small” or “junior.” Thus, to recap, a *bimo* is a priest; *bisse*, a disciple; and *gemo*, a senior artisan. *Gemo* may also mean “a large wardrobe,” while a *gesse* is a small chest of drawers.

Variability/Stability

The polarity between variability and stability has long been recognized as being at the heart of the phenomenon of oral tradition and has captured the attention of many scholars (cf. Honko and Honko 1999). This kind of polarity inheres in *bbopa*, the richest form of Nuosu narrative poetry. The relationship between variability and stability in Nuosu traditions, like the debate over “a song” versus “the song” in many oral traditions, has exercised great influence over the study of these verbal arts. In Nuosu traditions, there are rules that govern what is variable and what is invariable. Depending, then, upon such elements as subject, function, and pertinence of the ritual, the Nuosu generally divide their rituals into two categories: *ggahxa*, “above the road,” are rituals performed for gods while *ggajjy*, “below the road,” are rituals for ghosts and enemies.

The *bimo* say that there are 120 scriptures for incantations and 48 scriptures for sacrificial offerings. These two different genres illustrate the rules of variability and stability in the recitation of scriptures. In a ritualized performance, sacrifice scriptures contain very special hymns and odes. The strict rules and formulas that govern this type of song symbolize a divine or special format that the *bimo* is not at liberty to alter.²⁵ As the saying goes: “If the sacrifices and spirit sticks are insufficient, the client may be harmed; if the textual recitations are simplified, the *bimo* may be harmed.”

Incantation songs,²⁶ on the other hand, aim at a changing, uncertain, and capricious ghost, and demand that the *bimo* rise to the occasion using curses, spells, or incantation songs. For instance, in *Nyicyssy Teyy* the Nuosu character for the ghost may have more than one hundred different handwritten forms. The variant forms call attention to the dangers of not taking these metaphors seriously and testify to an ongoing understanding of textual truth and language power among those who cherish these texts. In

²⁵ In the *bimo* institutions, reciting a dedicatory hymn or offering an ode to the gods and ancestors while chanting *mulu musy bi* (the invocation of natural gods, and especially the Mountain Gods, to ensure the success of the ritual) is comparable at the level of pragmatics to the performance of an incantation song against ghosts. Furthermore, the genre functions similarly in both cases to activate and reactivate a kind of ceremonial or ritual occasion.

²⁶ In *bimo* incantation ritual, the way of *ttyybi* (“to chant or recite the book”) often involves exclaiming formulas that signal incantation songs—*cymgo ggututu* (“to chant out in a loud and long voice”) at the beginning, and *yya kekemu* (“casting out curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away”) at the end of a canto.

my field work, *bimo* recite this story in different *fubi* or “voices,” imitating the sounds made by a bee, a tiger, an eagle, a deer, river water, rustling leaves, a storm, rain, and thunder. Vocal mimicry brings melodic variety to the chanting. The performance is lively, and the *bimo* amplifies and embellishes the events throughout the storytelling. For example, in *Nyicy Bbopa* the mother of ghosts undergoes seven transformations: from a white river deer (episode 2) into a grove of trees with red blossoms (episode 5), into the beautiful *Zyzy* (episode 5), into a red-winged kite (episode 9), into a banded jackal (episode 9), into an otter (episode 9), and, finally, into a light gray mountain goat with a red tail (episode 11). It is evident that as the girl changes so also do the main threads of the narration. Each transformation occurs at precisely the point where the *bimo* stops chanting curses and begins specific incantations of the ritualized text. Recognizing this correlation helps account for the many variations in *Zyzy Hninra* or *Nyicy Bbopa* storytelling, and points to contingent, historical manifestations that reflect different circumstantial expansions of the texts.

Function/Meaning

To recap, *bbopa* is a typical mode of Nuosu oral tradition. It constitutes a narrative dimension of Nuosu expression and reveals a traditional way of Nuosu thinking. The structure of the *bbopa* resembles most forms of oral narrative, or *bbudde*, that we distinguish as myths, folktales, or legends. Thematically, *bbopa* are typically stories associated with the creation of the world, cultural heroes, gods and ancestors, ghosts and demons, migration and history, the creation of life, the origins of customs and laws, and the structure of caste and clan. As an aspect of the dynamics of communication, *bbopa* in poetic meter constitute the curriculum and school through which the Nuosu learn their traditional culture. With regard to the circulation of transcriptions, performance, and reception, *bbopa* are regularly used in religious rituals and folk ceremonies, mainly rites of passage, either as textual commentary on the ritual or as ritual dramatizations.

Originally, I intended to examine the *bimo* scriptures related to Nuosu ghost beliefs and incantation songs because they seemed to address questions of religion and oral-textual topics from the standpoint of a ritualized interpretation of ghosts. The poetic rhythms and traditional referentiality of this narrative storytelling fascinated me. By studying a dozen of the texts employed by the *bimo* in rituals for expelling ghosts and for healing, I noticed that although they were ostensibly cursing the ghosts,

their narration became a so-called “fact” of a ghost’s origin, and informed people how and why to expel the ghost and how to obey social regulations, customs, and taboos.

What was the social structure of Nuosu society before 1956²⁷ and what survives of it? Liangshan society was, and remains, a clan society—clans being patrilineal, strictly exogamous, and geographically scattered—and this is of fundamental importance. Known in Nuosu as *cyvi*,²⁸ the clan is the dominant social institution, especially as regards marriage. After nine generations a black Nuosu²⁹ son can open a new clan branch, thus enlarging the possibilities for matrimonial alliances; the required period for a white Nuosu son is seven generations. Alliances are also determined by the caste system. The Nuosu believe that clan loyalty is the basis of social well-being—of peace and order as opposed to strife and warfare—so in village life clan elders, called *suyy* or *ddeggu*, play an important role in resolving disputes and ensuring social order.

Consider this example. In Episode 8 of *Zyzy Hninra*, Awo Nyiku takes ill. One day he asks Zyzy Hninra about her genealogy and origins, and she tells him a plausible story. His suspicions aroused, Awo Nyiku then invites the *bimo* and *sunyi* to curse her. Why does he seek to destroy Zyzy? In Nuosu society, *bbopa* (here meaning the “origin” of a particular person) means not only parentage or ancestry, but also bone and blood, root and caste. In this context, *bbopa* resonates with ritual performances such as the *Nyicyssy* “Ghost-exorcism,” in which *bimo* cast their curses at a beautiful woman who has dedicated her life to her beloved husband. Recalling Episode 2 of *Nyicy Bbopa*, we now see that “White-river deer” is a social metaphor. Zyzy had no origin, no ancestor, and no roots. Above all, she has no noble blood, nor a strong clan to defend her. In addition to all this, she has no experience of motherhood. Her childlessness means she has no stable

²⁷ “ Beginning in 1956, the Communists instituted what they called the ‘Democratic Reforms.’ This was a comprehensive effort to abolish what they saw as the exploitative and oppressive aspects of what they termed the ‘slave society’ in Liangshan, and to set the Nuosu, along with the rest of the citizens of China, on the road to socialist modernization” (Harrell, Bamo Q., and Ma 2000:8).

²⁸ The literal meaning of *cyvi* has two parts: *cy* means “generation” and *vi* means “bone.” The hierarchical order of castes, and even of clans, was demarcated by the degree of “hardness of bones” or “the purity of blood.”

²⁹ The colors black and white here refer to social status. A black Nuosu is a nobleman, or upper-class member of Nuosu society. A white Nuosu is a commoner.

position in her husband's clan;³⁰ she is like water that has no source or a tree that has no roots. She is the victim of a rigorous caste-system of social control. By falling in love with a woman of questionable ancestry and dubious background—one whose social status was undefined owing to her unknown origins—Awo Nyiku acted contrary to the morals and ethics of his noble clan. This is why he falls ill: it is a metaphorical punishment visited upon him by his ancestors.

As an origin narrative, the story implies much about the traditional Nuosu conceptions of individual and community, man and woman, blood and bone, and “the pollution of women.” These abstract ideas are all illustrated by a dramatic account of an animal metamorphosed into a female. It coincides with, and makes reference to, mythic narratives about why and how black goats are selected for ritual sacrifice as “scapegoats.” The use of color expresses the profound relationship between human and superhuman beings, expressed through the symbolic agency of language. The storytellers use language, whether it is lively and quaint or amplified and embellished, to express meanings that fit commonly recognized patterns of the social charter.

As ritual songs or chants, *bbopa* not only subsume genres, they represent a typical mode of traditional narrative as well as provide insight into a fundamental way of thinking in Nuosu society (cf. Bamo Q. 2000). *Bbopa* reflect the Nuosu worldview, value, social charter, and clan politics, not to mention ritual poetics.

Diversity/Identity

Among the Nuosu nothing seems more natural and universal than the *bbopa bi*, or “origin-narrating,” performed at public ceremonies. For a Nuosu villager, there is no river or stream in the Cold Mountains, however “slow,” without its source of water, and there is no clan or family in Nimu (the land of the Nuosu), however “small,” without its root of father-son genealogy. As a subgroup of the Yi people, the Nuosu have maintained their own indigenous cultures and zealously preserved their oral traditions.

The Yi are linguistically and culturally a diverse people. I cannot agree, however, that “this great linguistic and cultural diversity raises the

³⁰ Nuosu believe in many different spirits. For example, women have a fertility spirit (*gefe*), men have a protective spirit (*quose*), families have a hearth spirit (*shaku*), and even property has a spirit (*kepo*). In this case, if a woman lost her fertility spirit, she could not become pregnant, or her children would die young.

question of what makes the Yi people a *minzu* [a ‘minority’ or ‘nationality’]” (Harrell 2001:7-9). Though for a long time few of them were known to outsiders, “origin narratives” are recorded as classical poetry in other ancient Yi books (cf. Bijie 1990-93). Seen in the light of Yi terminological taxonomy corresponding to their ritual functions (cf. Bamo Q. 2000), “origin-narrating poetry” is a major genre among the ten types of Yi scriptural literature. The many origin-narrating songs and poems collected by the *bimo*—who wrote them into the ancient books at different times and places in the various dialects of the Yi subgroups throughout the Sichuan, Yunna, and Guizhou provinces, and passed them down—reveal that every Yi community possesses similar creative representations. The seven volumes of *Wushi Jilue* (“The Origins and Genesis,” Bijie 1990-93) compiled by local scholars in the Guizhou Yi area include 179 origin-narrating songs—some longer, some shorter in length—on the creation of the world and on the early myths and legends of the Vusa and Azi tribes of the Yi.³¹ Although for the most part disconnected, and in part obscure in sense and allusion, these poetical narratives are original, profound, and powerfully imagined events.

In the typical fashion of traditional verbal art, the origin-narratives have changed and developed over the years. However, every song from the river of time retains certain basic features and qualities, and even local color, that reflect the deep sense of “root-bone”—the maintenance of father-son genealogy, ancestor worship, and the promotion of knowledge. Although bearing specific cultural markers—the Yi writing system, the *bimo* institution, the worship of the first ancestor Apu Dumu after the Flood period (cf. Bamo A. 1994), and the cultural hero Zhyge Alu—the circulation of origin narratives surpasses the geographical scope of the Yi region in China, and can be taken as a cultural pattern that helps us understand the identity of the Yi. There is no doubt that “origin narratives” can be defined as a traditional genre of poetic expression, in both ancient Yi records and in the present-day living oral performance.

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³¹ A Chinese collection of Yunnan Yi origin narratives entitled *Chamu* is similarly extensive. Generally speaking, there are fewer texts translated and published from the Liangshan area than from the Yunnan and Guizhou Yi communities.

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Appendix

Nyicy Bbopa ("The Origin of Ghosts")

Episode 1

Cymgo ggututu.³² Once upon a time (the time has already passed), when heaven and earth were in chaos; once upon a time (the time has already fled), in the age of the six suns and seven moons. . . .

At that time the cock crowed at dawn, the swallows soared in the clouds, and the dawn was brightening. Towards the direction called *zyzy puvu*, in the land of the noble Nuosu Ajy clan, the old man arose and made the fire, the old woman arose and set the pot, the maiden arose and prepared the dog food, and the child arose and tied bands to the dogs. In the land of the Nuosu, the Ajis had been raising hunting dogs for three years, and they had been weaving dog cages for three months. Three young men arose and whistled to their hunting dogs to go to the mountains for the chase. The white hunting

³² The beginning formula used in every incantation song; literally, "to chant out in a loud and long voice."

dogs rose like sheep; the black hunting dogs rose like bears; the multi-colored hunting dogs rose like magpies; the red hunting dogs rose like badgers; the yellow hunting dogs rose like tigers; the gray hunting dogs rose like wolves. The three young men whistled to their hunting dogs and left, they left for the forest.³³

Episode 2

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, a **white river-deer**³⁴ was driven out of a bamboo grove. As the deer was fleeing, he came round three hilltops while running out of nine acres of woods; he jumped three gullies while wading through nine rivers; he reached the bank of Anning River from the mountain Sypy Ggehxo.

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, the deer butted into the chief hunter Nzy Miajy. He drew his silver bow, fixed a golden arrow, and shot at the white river-deer. But the arrow flew towards the clouds; no one knew where it fell.

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, the deer butted into Moke Ddizzi.³⁵ He drew his copper bow, fixed an iron arrow, and shot at the white river-deer. But the arrow flew towards the mist; no one knew where it fell.

At this time, responding to a dog's bark, the deer butted into a world-famous hero, the warrior Hxoyi Ddiggur.³⁶ He drew his huge wooden bow and fixed a bamboo arrow. While he was aiming at the white river-deer, it suddenly spoke out at the last second . . . :

Episode 3

"Hxoyi Ddiggur, don't shoot me. Ddiggur, don't shoot me. You were born a human being in Momupugu; I was born a beast in the same place. So we share the same birthplace. Ddiggur, don't shoot me." And she explained again and again: "I am the divine beast with a single horn. Even if I am a beast to be aimed at, I am not supposed to be hit. Even if I am hit, I am not supposed to fall down onto the ground; even if I fall down, I am not supposed to be butchered; even if I am butchered, I am not supposed to be cooked; even if I am cooked, I am not supposed to be eaten; even if I am eaten, I am not supposed to be digested. Such a white river-deer as I would either break nine strong bows or injure nine archers if they were to shoot me; either break nine long swords or hurt nine butchers if I were to be flayed; either damage nine iron pots or hurt nine eaters

³³ These are magic words: such descriptions of hunting dogs imply a successful chase.

³⁴ The transformations of Zyzy Hninra are in **boldface** type.

³⁵ The principal counselor of the ruler Ajy.

³⁶ Who was in the service of Ajy.

if I were to be cooked; either snap nine white teeth or hurt nine gluttonous tongues if I were to be eaten.³⁷

“Hxoyi Ddiggur, don’t shoot me. Ddiggur, don’t shoot me. You were born a human being in Momupugu; I was born a beast in the same place. So we share the same birthplace. Ddiggur, don’t shoot me.” And she explained again and again: “I have been looking for you for so long, since your parents asked me to send you their words. Your father was melancholy, for he missed you very much. Your mother was not herself, for she was always thinking of you. When your father missed you in the daytime he would wander at the entrance of the valley and take seven wrong roads, while at night he was so sad that he shed many tears that soaked his pillow and clothes. When your mother thought of you in the daytime her mind was uneasy and her eyes were dizzy. She would go to ten different places outside the village, while at night she cried so hard that tears poured from the hands with which she covered her eyes, and the tears would soak three layers of the soil.”

Hxoyi Ddiggur did not believe what the deer said. He drew his huge wooden bow and fixed a bamboo arrow. While he was aiming at the white river-deer, he cast spells at the last second:

“The sun rises in the east and my arrow flies like a dragon! The water in the rivers flows to the south and my arrow is ever-victorious! The sun goes down in the west and my arrow can sweep away all obstacles! The source of water is in the north and my arrow will miss no targets!”

No matter how the deer begged and cajoled, he could not stop the flight of Ddiggur’s lethal arrow. As the deer was hit, the arrow broke its neck and went directly through its tail.

Episode 4

Hxoyi Ddiggur, when he was five years old, went to play on the dam with the swineherd. He caught big snakes and played with them as if they were fish. He caught toads and played with them as if they were pieces of stone. When he was six years old, he hung around the hills with the shepherd. He caught gray leopards and rode them like horses. He caught red tigers and made them plough like oxen. He caught wild boars and rode them like horses. He caught old bears and made them plough like oxen, too. He led jackals and wolves like one leads dogs. He caught muntjac and river-deer and yelled to them as if they were domestic animals. When he was seven years old, he wove mats and put them on as armor. When he was learning martial arts, he would dextrously sit on the floor to prevent being hit by the stones flying towards him. On the battlefield, he would prepare to meet an approaching enemy head-on when the spear was thrust toward him. He walked like a jumping fish. He moved freely along a cliff among spears thick as bamboo and arrows falling like stars.

³⁷ These verses are joined like a string, and the rapidity of the voice is like a close-set chain of pearls.

Episode 5

When the hunters ran to the place where the deer had fallen, they could not see the deer's shadow. At this time they heard the sound of a hunting dog barking in front, so they went forward, following the sound to investigate. They found the whole pack of hunting dogs barking around **a clump of trees with red blossoms**. Ddiggur thought there was probably something hidden in these trees, and anxiously he fixed an arrow and shot toward the trees. He shot off a branch that fell to the ground and disappeared, and standing in front of him was a maiden, the incomparably beautiful **Zyzy Hninra**.³⁸

Episode 6

Look at Zyzy Hninra: her plait is black and glossy with smooth, soft hair; her forehead is wide and flat; her nose is in exactly the right place; her neck is slender and upright; her lips are thin and delicate; her cheeks are soft and tender; her eyes are bright and shining, with upturned eyelashes. Look at Zyzy Hninra: her fingers are delicate and slender, her arms are soft and dainty, her legs are plump and round, and her dress is long and graceful. Oh, Zyzy Hninra! Her appearance is as beautiful as the charming moon on a Fall night; her carriage is as elegant and sharp as the river in the sloping fields; her speaking voice is as melodious as a skylark in a vast field. She is indeed a pretty maiden!

Episode 7

One day, the head of another Nuosu tribe, Nzy Awo Nyiku, took his hunting hounds to the forest to look for game, and soon was face to face with Zyzy. He was stricken at first sight, and Zyzy Hninra followed Awo Nyiku to his own clan's village, where the two lived happily together.

Episode 8

In the first year, Hninra was a beautiful wife, with a face like flowers and a bearing like the moon, and in the second year she was a wise and capable spouse. But in the third year, Zyzy Hninra began to change, to become nasty, evil, and cold, and in the village people began dying, one after another, for no apparent reason.

She was born with two pairs of eyes, which were set separately in the front and at the back of her head, with the front ones to watch the roads and the back ones to see human beings. She was born with two mouths, which were also set in the front and at the back of her head, with the front one to eat food and the back one to devour human beings. She was born with two pairs of hands, set in the front and at the back of her body with the front ones to collect firewood and the back ones to dig out human hearts. She would eat the corpse whenever someone died in the village, and she would devour the remaining bones when a corpse was burned on the mountain.

³⁸ Zyzy is the name of a kind of bird, while *Hninra* means "the beauty." Her name implies that she has no clan, and thus no origin—an important point.

In the fourth year, Awo Nyiku took ill. One day he asked about Zyzy Hninra's genealogy and origin, and she told him a plausible story.

Episode 9

Awo Nyiku was very afraid, and began to plot to control Hninra. He pretended that his illness was worsening. Hninra tried to cure him, and one day she turned into a **red-winged kite**, and flew in an instant to an island in the middle of the sea to bring back a swan egg; another day, she turned into a **banded jackal**, and in the blink of an eye ascended a tall mountain, boring into a black bear's chest to steal the bear's gall bladder; another day, she changed into an **otter**, and instantly dove to the bottom of a river to bring back a fish's heart. But none of this had any effect.

One day Awo Nyiku said that nothing could cure him except snow from the peak of the great mountain Minyak Konkar. Zyzy Hninra was determined to save her husband, and decided that, no matter what, she would go to that distant mountain to fetch the snow. Before she left, Zyzy asked Awo Nyiku for a promise:

"After I go, don't burn the stone used to exorcize evil spirits at home, or one will get a headache. Don't burn wood, or one will get asthma. Don't burn the fire made to exorcize evil spirits in front of the house, or one will feel dizzy. Don't sweep the rubbish in the house, or one will feel nervous. Don't let a *bimo* speak in the village, or one will become deaf. Don't pick up the exorcizing branch, or one will get a backache."

Episode 10

After Zyzy had left, Awo Nyiku quickly summoned 90 *bimo* from the upper end of the village and 70 *sunyi* from the lower end of the village to his house to read texts and perform rituals.

"Let me chant out loud with a full and strong voice. Zyzy Hninra, you use flattering words and a pretty appearance to baffle human beings, and you use your witchcraft to mislead common people. You'd better submit to magical arts immediately! Zyzy Hninra, you are the spirit of the trees on the wild mountains and the licentious bird in the sky. Now your witchcraft has lost its effect and you'd better submit to the magical arts immediately! I will dispatch the flood dragon to the sea so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the water. I will dispatch the divine snake to the earth so that you will not be able to hide yourself in the earth! Casting curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!"

Episode 11

At that time, Zyzy Hninra had suffered a thousand travails and was on her way back from the snowy peak. Because of the spells and curses cast by the *bimo* and *sunyi* she slowly changed into a **light-gray mountain goat with a red tail**, and the snow that she had fetched for Awo Nyiku stuck to her hooves, caught in her wool, clung to her ears, and fastened to her horns. She knew that her life was almost over, and she wanted to ride the wind back home from the snowy mountain. She wanted to bring back the snow, to express her undying love for Awo Nyiku.

Episode 12

But Awo Nyiku summoned ninety young men, and shot with an arrow a tired old goat, which they bound and took into a cave in the mountainside. Before long, the goat that Zyzy Hninra had been turned into was washed out of the cliffside cave into a river, and fell into a cloth fishing basket being used by three herders from the household of Vusa Jjujjo. There it was skinned and eaten by people who knew nothing of it. As a result, the people who died from eating the goat that Zyzy Hninra had turned into became ghosts who injure people everywhere.

The goat was pulled out of the water. With a slate for a cutting board, nine herdsmen skinned the goat and then the skin was stretched on the ground. Seven young girls dealt with the goat intestines, putting the mutton on a bamboo sifter and cutting the goat intestines with a reaphook. But many people died of poisoning after eating the mutton.³⁹

Episode 13

Many tribes and clans were destroyed by the ghosts of Zyzy Hninra, and so the *bimo* and *sunyi* of every tribe and every clan all curse her with a thousand curses, and all say that Zyzy Hninra was the origin of ghosts. *Yya kekemu!*⁴⁰

³⁹ Eating mutton is taboo in everyday Nuosu life.

⁴⁰ The ending formula literally means “casting out curses toward ghosts like the waves fiercely rolling away!”

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