



THE LIFE OF KING GESAR —THE WORLD'S LONGEST EPIC SAGA

—An Introduction to China's Tibetan Culture

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— the World's Longest Epic Saga

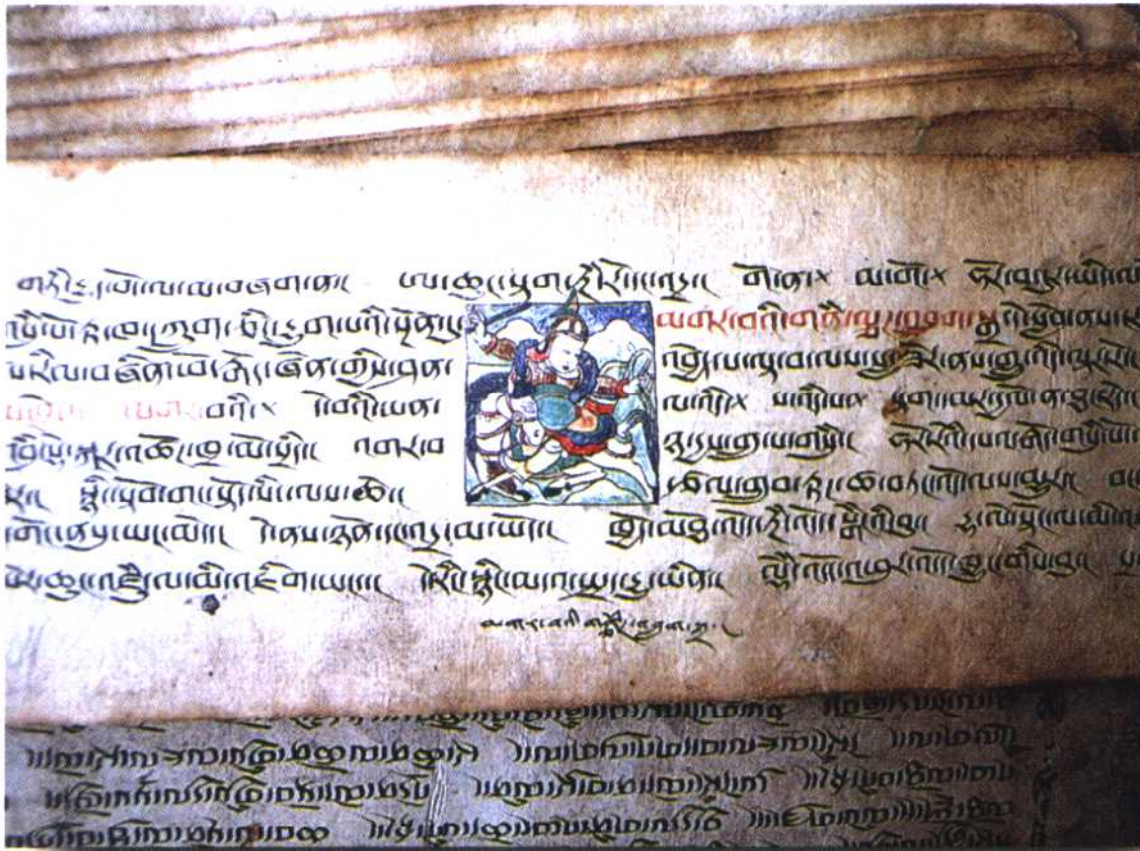
— An Introduction to China's
Tibetan Culture

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Manuscripts and plates of *The Life of King Gesar*.

The Life of King Gesar is a heroic epic collectively created by China's Tibetans. Originating in the folk oral traditions passed down among Tibetan generations for some 1,000 years, it has been collected as a work composed of 120-odd volumes, with more than 1 million verses, totalling over 20 million words. It is the longest epic known to the world, and has been called the Orient's Homeric Epic.

I. The Origins and Significance of the Epic

The immortal epic evolved during the transition period between the 3rd and 6th centuries as the Tibetan clan society gave way to the emerging slavery society. The diverse elements of the epic were consolidated after the establishment of the Tubo Kingdom (early 7th-9th centuries). It was further refined and gained wide fame during the shift from a



The First Gesar tangka (painting):
King Gesar.

slave society to a feudal society in Tibet from the 10th century to the early 12th century.

With resurgence of Buddhism in Tibet around the 11th century, Tibetan monks began participating in efforts to compile and popularize *The Life of King Gesar*. The basic structure of the epic took shape and the earliest transcripts emerged. The work of consolidating the epic was mainly undertaken by monks of the Nyingma (Red) Sect.

Based on such folk literature as fairy tales, legends, poems and proverbs passed on by

the Tibetan people, *The Life of King Gesar* came into being and further developed, representing the leading achievement of ancient Tibetan culture. The epic relates the heroic achievements of Gesar, who lived without fear of his rather formidable enemies, subdued monsters, helped the poor and controlled the strong, and brought benefits to the common people.

The epic warmly praises the truth that justice and brightness will be victorious over evil and darkness. It also reflects the important historic stages of national development and basic social structure in Tibet, conveying the good wishes and lofty ideals of the masses and depicting the complicated relationships between China's ethnic groups and the process of final unification. *The Life of King Gesar* is a great work featuring the study of ancient Tibetan social history, class relations, exchanges between ethnic groups, moral concepts, folk customs, traditions, and culture. Thought of the Oriental Homeric Epic, it is of high academic value.

China is home to many

nationalities. History has closely united the peoples of the Han and various ethnic groups. Therefore, *The Life of King Gesar* embodies the great spirit of the Chinese people and their lofty ideal of pursuing justice and a happy life.

The evolution and development of the epic are a cultural phenomenon not often seen in Tibetan history, or in histories of China or the rest of the world for that matter. The evolution of the epic spanned a long historical period, encompassing several stages of Tibetan history, including the late primitive society, the

dictatorship of the slave owners, the slave society, and the feudal society. The epic continues to meet with widespread fame in the society of today's Qinghai-Tibet Plateau.

These important periods in Tibetan social development have greatly influenced the popularization and development of the epic and are reflected directly or indirectly through its words. At the same time, *The Life of King Gesar* had tremendous effect on Tibetan culture during different periods, resulting in its important position in Tibetan cultural history. No other work comes close to the epic in its ability to reflect the history and cultural development of the ancient Tibetan society. Nor has any other work been able to so thoroughly influence the cultural development of the Tibetans. In this sense, the Life of King Gesar can be thought of as a work of social and literary power.

The Second Gesar tangka (painting):
King Gesar.



II. Plot Briefs

The story was set far in the distant past, when the common people of the Tibetan plateau were subjected to natural disasters and calamities across their

The Life of King Gesar



The Third Gesar tangka (painting):
King Gesar.

lands. Demons and spirits run wild. The Goddess of Mercy, in the hope of helping the people, asked the Amitabha Buddha to send the son of the God of Heaven to the world to defeat the evil demons.

Toiba Gawa, who later came to be known by the name Gesar, descended to the earth and became the king of the Tibetan people. Able to defeat the demons, aid the poor and benefit the common people, Gesar is portrayed as a combination of god, dragon and a fierce spirit

known as nyan in Tibetan primitive religion. He was endowed with special characteristics and marvelous powers and abilities. Gesar suffered several trials. However, his invincible power and the protection of the God of Heaven allowed him to survive and eventually defeat the evil demons.

Throughout his life as a human, he worked to rid the common people of the scourges of their existence. At the age of five, he moved with his mother to the banks of the Yellow River. When he was eight, they were joined by the members of the Ling tribe. Winning a horse race against the finest warriors of the tribe at the tender age of 12, he was recognized as the chief of the tribe. He married Sengjam Zholmo. Gesar then led expeditions against the enemies of his tribal kingdom. He defeated the northern demons who had invaded the lands of the Ling Kingdom. In successive campaigns, he defeated King Gurdkar of the Hor Kingdom, King Sadam of the Jang Kingdom, King Shingkhri of Monyul, King Nor of Tangzig, King Chidan of Khachevigyu, King Toigui of

the Zugu Kingdom and scores of small tribes and minor kingdoms known as zongs in ancient Tibet. After completing his sacred mission, he returned to heaven together with his mother and wife, bringing to a dramatic close the grand epic of his life.

The story's structure



The Fourth Gesar tangka (painting):
White-Conch Roc.

touches upon two important periods in Tibetan social development and includes depictions of almost 100 tribes, kingdoms and regions. The epic is generally divided into three parts: the birth of Gesar; the expeditions against

the enemies; and his return to heaven. Of the three parts, the depictions of his battles and exploits are the most detailed and contain the most enlightening materials in relation to Tibetan history and culture. The second part includes four parts — *Defeating Demons in the North, Battles Between Hor and Ling, Defend the Salt Sea, and Battles Between Mon and Ling*—as well as battles to conquer 54 zongs.

The Life of King Gesar is recognized as a literary treasure and a heritage of Tibetan art and beauty. Based on the society that gave it birth, the epic sums up important stages in the development of Tibetan history and expresses the lives of the ordinary Tibetan people as well as hundreds of figures. Whether heroes or tyrants, men or women, young or old, the figures make deep impressions with their clearly defined characters and striking images. The heroic figures, led by King Gesar, provide immortal examples of valiant sacrifices.

The portrayal of characters through dialogue, actions, and

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The Fifth Gesar tangka (painting): *God of the Earth Yashiumabu*.

plot twists is characteristic of the epic. No two figures are identical. For instance, among the heroic figures, King Gesar is portrayed as a leader with a broad and long-term view and a boldness of vision. Manager King is described as a resourceful and kind man. Gyaica is shown through his words and deeds to be a brave man of strong character, while Dainma is described as both intelligent and courageous. The female figures are portrayed more elegantly, with vivid and lively characteristics. For instance, according to *Battles Between Hor and Ling*, three kings of Hor

send armed forces to seize Zholmo, wife of King Gesar. He did so because, when the wife of Hor's King Gurdkar had died, the four birds from Hor who were ordered to find the most beautiful woman in the world, had a cow to bring back the following message:

The beautiful girl is in Ling Kingdom,

Queen Zholmo is resplendent and bright.

Her step forward is worth 100 strong horses,

Her step backward is worth 100 thriving sheep.

She is warmer than the sun in winter,

The Life of King Gesar

*And cooler than the moon in
summer.*

*She is more fragrant than
flowers in bloom,*

*Surrounded by bees in adu-
lation.*

*There are many beauties in
this world,*

*But only she is a true match
for the king.*

*King Gesar has gone to the
north,*

*His queen is alone and un-
protected.*

*The Life of King Gesar origi-
nated from the ordinary society of
Tibet and was solidly based on
ancient Tibetan literature, espe-
cially ancient folk stories. Before*



The Sixth Gesar tangka
(painting): *Dragon King
Zouna Rinqen.*

The Life of King Gesar

the epic was consolidated, Tibetan literature boasted a variety of works, especially folk stories, fairy tales, legends, traditional stories and poems. These were numerous and richly woven. *The Life of King Gesar* drew much from these previous literary works and carried forward the tradition of outstanding literatures through its plot development, evolution, materials, and forms of expression, as well as in ideology, religion, and customs. Rhetorically, it borrowed a number of Tibetan proverbs, cited in the original or adapted in the epic after polished. For instance:

*If seeds are not sown in
spring,*

*No corn will be harvested in
autumn.*

*If cows are not fed in winter,
There will be no milk in the
spring.*

*If fine horses are not well
bred,*

*They will not gallop into the
face of your enemies.*

*A white-lip wild horse won't
eat chaff,*

Even if he is hungry, that is



The Seventh Gesar tangka (painting):
Warrior God.

his character.

*A wild ox won't drink drain-
age water,*

*Even if he is thirsty, that is
his character.*

*A man won't shed tears,
Even if he leads a bitter life,
that is his character.*

The Life of King Gesar has also preserved various traditional words of praise, such as the *Ode to Wine*, *Ode to the Mountains*, *Ode to Tea*, *Ode to Horses*, *Ode to Swords and Knives*, *Ode to Dress*, and *Ode to Armor*. The famous *Ode to Wine* speaks of

one of the simpler pleasures of life:

The bowl of wine in my hand has a long history.

The sky is blue like jade.

The blue-jade dragon roars in the sky.

*The lightning flashes red,
And drizzle falls like sweet dew.*

By using the clean sweet dew,

Heavenly nectar can be brewed in the human world.

Crops should be grown first for making wine.

The earth is like a golden basin,

Opening its bounty to the grain.

Crops spring from the golden basin,

And are harvested by the sickle in autumn.

Pien Nieu stand side by side ready to thresh grain,

Farming tools whisper through the air.

Shovels of white poplar winnow the harvest.

Chaff blows on the wind.

The winnowed kernels wait

in the silo.

Barns and depots overflow with highland barley.

Everyone rejoices in the highland brew.

Colorful kitchen ranges

The Eighth Gesar tangka (painting):
Buddhist Guardian Camba.



appear,

Good bronze pots with auspicious knobs stand ready.

White towels clean the sweat from the pot.

Highland barley simmers in clear water

Over a roaring fire.

Spreading highland barley

The Life of King Gesar



Bards specialized in spoken and sung renditions of the epic are honored at the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 1991.

on the felt,

*Mixing with essential
distiller's yeast.*

*Four seasons are needed
to make the wine for the
New Year's Day.*

*Which is called Sweet
Dew.*

*Wine made in one month
is called Cold Sweet
Dew.*

*Wine made in one day is
called Whirling Sweet
Dew).*

.....

*Officials who drink it,
Will be more broad-minded*

than the sky.

*The timid will become brave
After but one cup.*

.....

*There are many advantages
to drinking this wine,*

*Which our homeland is
short of.*

*It is the imperial wine for
kings;*

*It calms worried souls;
It brings happiness and
dancing to common people.*

.....

*In addition, The Life of King
Gesar is considered a flower bas-*

ket of folk literature, having drawn many elements from folk songs, fairy tales and stories. On the other hand, it also provided a wealth of material for the later creation of literature and art. Some tunes of folk songs and dances are drawn from *The Life of King Gesar*, and some songs herald praise for the Gesar couple. In addition, some fairy tales and folk stories have drawn material from *The Life of King Gesar*, such as *The Story of Seven Brothers*, which combines the interesting source material about the seven brothers building houses for

people with elements from *The Life of King Gesar*. Numerous unique frescos and sculptures are also based on the plots found in *The Life of King Gesar* and there are statues enshrined in temples with an image of King Gesar serving as the guardian.

The Life of King Gesar combines the styles of prose and verse. Its poetry joins the ancient past with the modern age of Tibetan literary development. It reflects the importance of ideological and rhetorical methods, especially in its poetic rules and forms. For instance:

A fierce tiger with bright stripes

Wandering in the forest shows its power.

But what use are the stripes if no one sees them?

A wild yak relishes its youth, Climbing Black Rock Mountain, dancing with its horns.

But what use is youth if you fail to dance?

A wild stallion with white lips,

Intending to gallop across the grasslands.

But what use is the white lip

China's Inner Mongolian bard Canbolhanorbu sings the epic.



The Life of King Gesar



The world-renown Tibetan bard Tubdain performs **King Gesar**.

*if he fails to
gallop?*

*Tangze, a hero of the Hor
Kingdom displays his
might.*

*Facing Ling on the battle-
fields.*

*But what use is he if he fails
to defeat the dragon?*

Poems of this style are common in *The Life of King Gesar*. Not only do they follow a multiple paragraph pattern and a circular style evident in the Tubo period, but also create a new style that uses eight-word stanzas, instead of the former six-word stanzas (in the original Tibetan language). The rules and forms were basically shaped and fixed by the 11th century and have remained unchanged. This form is widely used in Tibetan folk songs, narrative poems, poems in lyrical stories, and Tibetan dramas, as well as in the works of scholars and poets. They have become the most influential and important rules and forms in Tibetan poetry.

By using verse, proses, lyrics and narration, the epic combines real stories, myths, poems, fables, proverbs and mottos, making it a collection of Tibetan folk culture.

III. Collection of and Research on the Epic

With collaboration and collection, *The Life of King Gesar* has become truly of epic proportion. The entire work is longer and has a greater number of verses than

the world's other five great epics combined. The other five epics are the ancient Babylonian *Gilgamesh*, the Greek *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and the Indian *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. The Babylonian epic *Gilgamesh* is regarded as the world's oldest epic, having been written some 3,000 years before the Christian Era. It has some 3,000 verses.



Famous bard Sangzhol.

The *Iliad* is made up of 24 volumes with over 15,000 verses. The *Odyssey* is also made up of 24 volumes and has some 12,000 verses. The Indian classic *Ramayana* is divided into seven volumes, totalling 18,000