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

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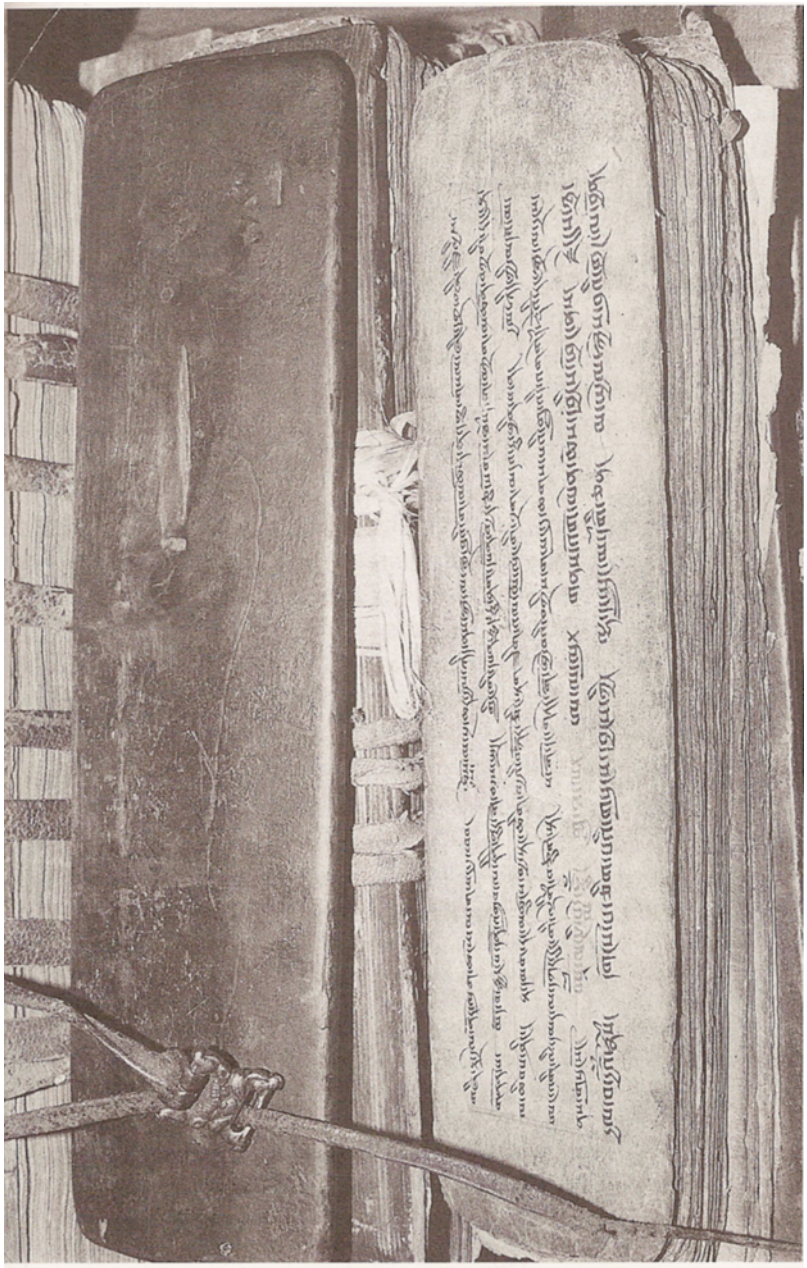
The Tibetan epic *A Record of King Gesar* (hereafter *Gesar*) has been passed from generation to generation, largely through two channels of transmission: singing and the printing of manuscripts and woodblock prints. Printed editions of the epic, especially woodblock editions, appeared only in the last 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*

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[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,

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[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* style[8] 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):

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

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

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

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

ao na ae. glu a la la mo a la len,	*ao na ae.*[10] *glu a la la mo a la len,*
tha lala mo tha la len,	*tha lala mo tha la len,*
tha la thengs gsum ma blangs na,	If you do not sing the *tha la* melody three times,
gling mkhas pa rnams kyis mi go gi.	The sage in the Kingdom of 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 Jiacuo.

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 po[12] ("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

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[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*):

steng dag pa lha yi zhing khams nas	In the peaceful heavenly world up there,
lha tshangs pa dkar po dam tsheg can	The white Buddha is a god who made an oath.
thugs dgongs pa ga ru yengs nas yod	Your prayers are everywhere.
de ring skyes buvi grogs la byon	Today you are invited to protect me.
spu gri rlung gi dbyings rim nas	In the world of wind as sharp as a knife,
gnyan chen drag rtsal vphrin las can	*Gnyan* is a god of martial cause.
dgongs pa gang du yengs nas yod	Your prayers are everywhere.
de ring skyes buvi grogs la byon	Today you are invited to protect me.
ma dros klu yi pho brang nas	In the Dragon King's cool palace,
klu dung skyong dkar po mthu rtsal can	The conch-protector White Dragon King is a powerful god.
dgongs pa gang du yengs nas yod	Your prayers are everywhere.
de ring skyes buvi grogs la byon	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):

bon sku ston pa gshen rab mkhyen	I pray to ask help from the *bon* master-founder of *ston pa gshen rab*,
a bon stag lha me vbar mkhyen	I pray to ask help from the flaming god A bon stag lha,
ma gcig srid pavi rgyal mo mkhyen	I pray to ask help from Ma gcig srid pavi rgyal mo.
dpon stag rong glu la len rogs mdzod	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):

sa vdi yi sa ngo ma shes na	If you don't know this place,
sbra chen po thang shom gong dgu red	This is the great tent of *thang shom gong dgu*,
pho nga dang nga ngo ma shes na	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):

sa vdi yi sa <u>ngo ma shes na</u>	If you don't know this place,
pho[14] *nga vdra nga <u>ngo ma shes na</u>*	If you don't know me in person,
glu vdi yi glu <u>ngo ma shes na</u>	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):

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

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):

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

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):

go na de tsho man bzavi yid la zhog	Having understood, *man bza* should keep that in mind,
ma go glu la skyor rgyu med	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):

khyed klu btsan yid la de ltar zhog	you just keep that in mind

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):

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

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

	a mountain.
sde la dpav brtul vkhor bavi ri	The tribal heroes love this mountain.
dpav la rtsal dtug vdzoms pavi ri	The heroes are showing off their martial arts on the high mountains.

The literal translation shows the unfolding of the anadiplosis and the logical connections it fosters in the poem.

The examples given above embody the following features. First, in each tercet, anadiplosis occurs between the second, third, fourth, or fifth syllable of the first verse and the first syllable of the second verse. Similarly, the second, third, fourth, or fifth syllable of the second verse is also the beginning of the third verse. Second, all fifteen verses in the example end with *ri* ("mountain"), making the same end-rhyme. Third, the endings of the second and third verses of each stanza often use either *vkhor bavi ri* ("mountain that is surrounded") or *rgyal* (*rgyas*) *bavi* (*pavi*) *ri* ("prosperous mountain"), forming three-syllable reiterations.

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):

kha chung pad mavi vdzum mdangs nas	From small lips, with all smiles,
gtam mkhan pa chu ba rgyug rgyug yin	Clever words are pouring out,
rig pa gyu lung sngon mo nas	Ability and wisdom like an emerald-green stone,
tshig rno po rgya gri gshag gshag	With words as sharp as a knife,
zangs khog kun dgva rawa ba ta	All flesh in the tent is happy,
gtam yon tan lho sprin vtshub vtshub yin	Words of wisdom make people 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	A very eminent king
dran rgyu mang na rgya srid nyams	Will let his state decline if he craves greatness and success.
ha cang longs spyod sgrub mkhan po	A pleasure-seeking Buddhist
gsog ma shes na rang gi gshed	Will harm himself if knows nothing of saving money and energy.
ha cang zas la dad che bas	A man who eats and drinks too much
za ma shes na dug du vgyur	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	When I entrust them to you, I entrust them all.
tshur len dus sprod rgyu yod ni gyis	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 tolearn this voluminous epic, and is also the key to remembering how to perform it.

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