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# Translation and appropriation of the world's longest epic: Tibet's *Gesar of Ling*

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## Abstract/Résumé

Ces dernières années, la Chine a investi des ressources considérables dans des travaux de collecte, de traduction et de publication de l'ancien conte oral tibétain L'épopée du roi Gesar. Si l'épopée en tant que telle a déjà fait l'objet d'études exhaustives de la part des chercheurs, personne ne s'est encore penché sur le gigantesque projet de traduction actuellement en cours en Chine. Le présent article a pour objet de combler cette lacune en adoptant différentes approches traductologiques critiques, ce afin d'étudier la nature et les modalités de la traduction de l'épopée de Gesar en Chine en tant qu'œuvre littéraire d'ethnie minoritaire. Les concepts d'appropriation et d'oralité seront d'abord discutés dans la mesure où ils se rapportent à la traduction. Ensuite, nous étudierons la théorie du polysystème, notamment au regard de la version enrichie de cette théorie de Chang (2001). Cette version est d'un intérêt particulier pour les chercheurs travaillant dans les régions politiquement sensibles car elle leur permet de placer une traduction dans son contexte politique, idéologique et social. Ensuite, nous passerons en revue les normes et les stratégies actuellement utilisées par les traducteurs de cette épopée en chinois, sur la base d'ouvrages réalisés par d'éminents traducteurs et spécialistes de Gesar. La discussion sur les différentes approches critiques aboutira à une hypothèse qui sera ensuite appliquée au projet de traduction.

## Keywords/Mots-Clés

Tibet, epic, appropriation, orality, polysystem theory

## I. Introduction

The Tibetan epic known as *Gesar of Ling*, *King Gesar*, or simply, in China, *Gesar* (格萨尔), is an ancient oral tale believed to date from the 10<sup>th</sup> or 11<sup>th</sup> century CE.<sup>1</sup> The tale recounts the birth, life and heroic deeds of the legendary King Gesar, who ruled the kingdom of Ling (Tib. *gLing*), located in the eastern part of the Tibetan plateau. Although the tale originated in Tibet, it has spread widely throughout

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the dating of this epic is still indeterminate according to Li (2001), who cites the most leading scholar of Gesar studies in China, Jiangbian Jiacao, who concluded that the epic probably originated in the 5<sup>th</sup> or 6<sup>th</sup> centuries CE, took shape in the 7<sup>th</sup> to 9<sup>th</sup> centuries then developed and spread beginning in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (2001: 332).

Central Asia, with singers of the epic still active in the People's Republic of China (PRC), Mongolia, Siberia, Nepal and other regions of Asia. Being an orally-transmitted tale, there has never been a single, canonical written edition, but the earliest extant text of the epic is a Mongolian woodblock print commissioned by China's Emperor Kangxi in 1716.

This text formed the basis for the first translation outside of Asia proper, a Russian version published in 1836. A German translation followed in 1839, and between 1905 and 1909 a Moravian missionary collected and translated a version from Ladakh. Other translations and detailed studies of the epic followed, with the French Tibetologist R.A. Stein completing a 600-page magnum opus on the epic entitled *Recherches sur l'Épopée et le Barde au Tibet* in 1959. Other translations and retellings of the epic have been made in a number of European and Western languages, including English, though all are only partial translations to date.

In China, attention to the epic began not long after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, but various political upheavals prevented any real progress from being made until the early 1980s. Since then, and particularly in the past decade, China has poured tremendous resources into preserving, collecting, studying and translating the Gesar epic. Numerous research centers and institutes have been set up, including the King Gesar Research Office of Tibet University, the Qinghai Provincial Gesar Epic Research Institute, the King Gesar Rescuing Work Office of the Tibet Autonomous Region, and other regional institutes. Under the auspices of the state-run Chinese Academy of Social Sciences (CASS), the Tibetan Epic King Gesar Research Institute and the Ethnic Minority Literature Research Institute are tasked with studying and translating this work.

Information on the work of the Gesar epic is available, in Chinese and English, on the main state-run portal for Tibetan news, set up by the China Tibet Information Center.<sup>2</sup> Here the government proudly announces its accomplishments to date: Some 300 Tibetan manuscripts and woodblock carvings of the epic have been collected, more than 70 Tibetan volumes have been published (out of a total of some 100) with over three million copies printed, and 20 volumes of translations into Chinese have thus far been published. The PRC government plans to publish 40 translated volumes of the epic in Chinese in the coming five years.<sup>3</sup> Hundreds of

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/english/culture/c\\_plaza/literature/liter\\_01\\_zl.htm](http://www.tibetinfo.com.cn/english/culture/c_plaza/literature/liter_01_zl.htm).

<sup>3</sup> The wording on the website makes it unclear whether this means it intends to publish 40 more volumes, or 40 volumes in total.

experts have been assigned to this project and over ten million Chinese *yuan* (nearly US\$1.5 million) have been invested in its study and translation.

Why has the Chinese government put such massive effort and resources into studying and preserving this particular piece of minority literature? The project is considered so important that it was listed as a “key national scientific research item” for four consecutive Five-Year Plans since the 1980s (Fitzherbert 2007: 219). Briefly stated, the reasons for such support are related to the national interests of the PRC and a wish to show the world that it is protecting and promoting Tibetan culture.<sup>4</sup> On the official website for the project, the fact that Gesar is “the world’s longest epic,” consisting of over one million lines and 20 million words, is repeatedly stressed: “The entire work is longer and has a greater number of verses than the world’s other five great epics combined,” which ranks the epic with the greatest works of world literature.<sup>5</sup>

A centuries-old statement made by the German philosopher Georg Hegel, that China had no national epic and that therefore China’s literature was not as well-developed as the West’s, also appears to have been a motivating factor for state support of this project.<sup>6</sup> According to the state portal, the study of Gesar is “of great significance to an understanding of Chinese cultural history” and “it demonstrates that epics existed not only in the West and in ancient India, but in China as well.” The language used on the website is highly indicative of the attitude of appropriation that will be discussed below; one official statement even implies that Gesar is a “Chinese epic” created by a “Chinese writer”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See Fitzherbert (2007: 220-221) for a detailed discussion of the reasons for the PRC’s study and preservation of the epic.

<sup>5</sup> These five are the Babylonian tale of Gilgamesh, ancient Greece’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and India’s *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*.

<sup>6</sup> The Institute of Ethnic Literature under CASS provides the following information: “Hegel asserted: ‘There is no national epic in China.’ In his great work on aesthetics, when talking about the evolution of the epic, he said, ‘Yet the Chinese did not have a national epic. Their narrative mode was basically prose-like.’... However, as the collection of and research into folk literature developed, people found to their surprise that China not only has an epic, but also has the longest national epic, which still remains alive among the people--it’s [sic] name is Gesar.” <http://iel.cass.cn/english/Detail.asp?newsid=3641>.

<sup>7</sup> The full quote is: “The study of The Life of King Gesar is of great significance to an understanding of Chinese cultural history and fills a gap in China’s multi-ethnic literary history. With vivid facts, it demonstrates that epics existed not only in the West and in ancient India, but in China as well, overturning the long-held academic belief that Chinese writers have never created a Chinese epic. In fact, China boasts the longest epic in the world. Along with the Babylonian, Greek and Indian epics, The Life of King Gesar is of significant value as part of the world’s cultural treasure-house, making important contributions to human civilization.” [http://www.tibetinform.com.cn/english/culture/c\\_plaza/literature/liter\\_01\\_03.htm](http://www.tibetinform.com.cn/english/culture/c_plaza/literature/liter_01_03.htm).

These issues, though not the focus of the present paper, provide a backdrop for the discussion that follows. The aim of this paper is to investigate the nature and manner of the translation of the Gesar epic within China as a piece of minority literature. Although the Gesar epic itself has been studied in great depth by scholars from various academic fields, including oral studies, folk studies and Tibetology, there are only a handful of articles regarding its translation praxis in TS journals, and there has, until now, been no examination of the massive translation project currently underway.<sup>8</sup>

The present paper aims to fill this gap and investigate the translation of the Gesar epic from various critical perspectives. Situating the translation of the epic within TS, two key theoretical frameworks will be used to analyze the Gesar translation project. The first is the concept of appropriation as discussed by TS scholars, as well as how the concept of orality relates to appropriation and translation. The second is that of polysystem theory, which explicates the place of translated literature in target cultures. Chang's (2001) augmented version of polysystem theory, which is particularly applicable to examining the role of this translation project in China, will be presented. The actual translation norms and strategies used by the translators of the epic into Chinese will then be discussed, based upon writings by Gesar scholars and translators, after which the theoretical frameworks will be reexamined in light of these practices.

## **II. Appropriation, Orality and Translation**

Tibetan is a minority language according to any number of critical definitions, including those used by TS scholars and international bodies (see, for example, the discussion in Raine 2010). Having been colonized by the PRC in the 1950s and 60s, Tibet is now part of China and the Tibetan people are one of China's 55 ethnic minorities. Like many minorities in the world, Tibetans struggle to maintain their own unique culture and language, in this case within the major dominant culture and language of China. Within this socio-political context, should China's translation of the Tibetan Gesar epic be considered an act of cultural appropriation, or one of preservation of a minority group's language and culture?

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<sup>8</sup> The only scholarly works on the Gesar epic published in Translation Studies journals are the following Chinese-language articles: Jiangbian (2012), Zhaxi (2004), Liang et. al. (2012).

The *Routledge Companion to Translation Studies* defines “appropriation” as follows:

This term has been employed to refer to the act of taking possession of an original text from one culture by another culture. In this respect the term ‘appropriation’ equals that of ‘domination’ or ‘cultural domination.’ One of the most obvious motivations for this act is undoubtedly to gain power over something or someone...Recent work in the field of translation studies has addressed the issue of cultural domination as a means by which political and economic power can be exerted by a developed culture over a less-developed culture through the act of translation. (Munday 2009: 169)

According to this definition, one culture must take possession of an “original text” belonging to another to constitute the act of appropriation. The requirement of an original text raises a number of key questions in relation to the Tibetan epic: As an oral tale that was passed on through the generations and only much later recorded in writing in different versions, does it lack the qualification of being an “original text”? And, if one considers China to be a more “developed culture” than Tibet, does the author-less and oral nature of this epic make it more susceptible to appropriation by China?

Further, China spent decades preserving, collecting and studying the epic; only later did the translation process take place. If an act of appropriation took place, when did it begin? Was research and study of the epic not sufficient for China to claim it as its own, or did it require the tangible result of a translated work to take possession of this piece of minority literature? What were the motivating factors for China to translate the epic into Chinese? National pride may again be a reason, since the translation of Gesar began outside of China as early as 1836, leaving China to lag behind other countries. Added to this is the ongoing political turmoil and repression in Tibet itself and in other Tibetan areas of China, which China may be eager to deflect with its efforts at preserving Tibetan culture.<sup>9</sup>

Saglia’s (2002) definition of appropriation allows us to further examine the oral nature of the epic and its relationship to translation. Saglia seeks to “illuminate the mechanism of appropriation as it operates in the overlapping spaces of translation and rewriting” by examining translation practice in British Romantic culture (2002:

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<sup>9</sup> In 2010, China’s official news agency, Xinhua, released a statement to proclaim that Tibet’s traditional culture is “well protected,” citing the example of the work done on the Gesar epic (Xinhua 2010).

96). Drawing on theories from literary and cultural studies, Saglia states that “the concept of appropriation belongs in a series of mechanisms including assimilation and incorporation,” with some scholars maintaining that cultural assimilation “corresponds to a domestication of diversity—a smoothing out or bracketing of cultural otherness” (2002: 96). This concept is closely related to the concept in TS of domestication as a translation practice, which will be discussed further below.

After reviewing a number of theories of cultural appropriation, Saglia concludes that the term may be defined as:

[T]he inclusion and adoption of foreign, *other* signs into one’s own cultural environment in order to aggrandize, enlarge and reinforce it. Appropriation corresponds to an assumption and assimilation of material whose diversity is perceived as naturalised, whilst still importantly retaining its *other* status. (2002: 98)

Applying Saglia’s definition to the translation of the Gesar epic, it appears that China has indeed appropriated “the world’s longest epic” by including and adopting it into its own literary culture in order to aggrandize it, due to the lack of any epic literature written in the Chinese language. If China had its own epic that equaled the Gesar epic in length, it likely would not feel compelled to invest millions of *yuan* in preserving this particular piece of minority literature.

Returning now to the question of orality and translation, the above discussion provides a useful background for examining whether or not the Gesar epic’s oral nature has made it more vulnerable to appropriation. When Chinese scholars began studying the epic, they soon found that “it was not written by a single hand nor was it written at one time,” but rather was “gradually shaped by the folk legends and the interests of individual artists and their audiences” (qtd. Li 2001: 325). Thus, when the translation work of the epic began, scholars researching the epic had to select among multiple versions which version to use for each section. This process of choosing different sections of a number of different versions creates ever more distance from anything resembling an “original text” that can be appropriated.

Studies by TS scholars on the interface of orality and translation are scarce and “fairly recent,” according to Bandia (2011: 109). In his entry on “Orality and Translation” in the *Handbook of Translation Studies*, Bandia links oral narratives to post-colonialism and writes that a “double transposition process” is involved, which includes first transcribing a text from the oral to the written form, and then translating that text into another language, putting the latter process at a “double

remove from the original” (2011: 110). In postcolonial contexts, oral works of art are “encapsulated” in writing in two ways: the first is “the deliberate and direct transcription of oral narratives and performances such as epics,” and the second “the selective use of oral artistry for creative purposes by writers of postcolonial fiction” (Bandia 2011: 110).

Only the first of these concerns us here, since the process of transcribing the many versions of Gesar was an essential step in preparing a manuscript for translation. As Bandia frames this issue, the very transcription of an oral narrative is already an act of appropriation, though Bandia refrains from using this particular term. Instead, he emphasizes the stigma often attached to oral works in colonial contexts, with the colonizer viewing oral narratives as being the products of a “primitive” culture (Bandia 2011: 109), which the colonizer lifts out of its oral beginnings and elevates to a “modern” written form. According to this line of thinking, appropriation of the Gesar epic may have begun in the early stage of transcription.

However, it should be noted that once the long process of collecting, selecting and transcribing the Gesar epic was complete, China’s next step was to publish it first in Tibetan in 70 volumes. Not only that, but it published a total of three million copies of the epic in Tibetan, which—as is pointed out on the website—roughly equals the number of adult Tibetans in China. Indeed, the process of publishing the epic in Tibetan required substantial resources and state sponsorship. This, then, cannot be seen as an act of appropriation but rather one of linguistic and cultural preservation.

The next step for the Chinese governmental bodies in charge of researching and preserving the Gesar epic was to begin translating the epic into Chinese, based on the final version published in Tibetan. In one of the few case studies in TS of oral narratives in translation, one which has clear parallels to the Gesar project, Tymoczko shows that a translation of Welsh oral stories into written Latin was an “adaptation” intended to be an acceptable translation oriented to the target culture, rather than an adequate one oriented to the source culture (1995: 52). Based on this and other translations of oral works, Tymoczko concludes that:

Translation in oral tradition involves the adaptation of narrative to the poetics and ideology of the target culture. In oral tradition translated narrative is naturalized to the natural and social context and to the ideology of the receptor culture. Translation in oral tradition also involves adaptation to the poetics and to the ‘grammar’ of the receptor literary system.... (1995: 53)



Tymoczko emphasizes that the oral nature of this type of literature means that the translator “*must* refract the source text” and cannot translate literally or word-for-word since the original narrative does not take the form of a fixed text. This statement echoes that of Munday (2009: 169) regarding appropriation requiring an “original text.” Buffetrille also writes that because there was no original text, and indeed no “textual trace” of the epic for centuries, it has been easier for the Chinese to claim the epic as their own, positing that “if the Chinese authorities had focused their sights on a particular version, it might have been more difficult for them to appropriate the epic” (2010: 531). In the concluding section of this paper, after examining how China’s translators have translated the Gesar epic, we will review these comments.

### **III. Polysystem Theory, Politics, and the Gesar Translation Project**

Another useful critical approach to examining this translation project is that of polysystem theory. According to Even-Zohar, translated literature may take either a peripheral or a central position within the home system of the country in which it is translated (2006: 430). When it is in a central position, it “participates actively in shaping the center of the polysystem” and brings into the system “innovatory forces” that serve to reinvigorate the system, introducing new concepts, models and forms that did not exist previously (Even-Zohar 2006: 430). In this case, the texts selected for translation are chosen based on what they can bring to the system and on the “innovatory role they may assume within the target literature” (*ibid.*).

On the other hand, when translated literature finds itself in a peripheral position within the home system, “it has no influence on major processes and is modeled according to norms already conventionally established” in the target literature (2006: 432). Even-Zohar considers this to be a force for conservatism, rather than innovation. The translated works lend nothing new to the home system and make no lasting change on the system, which he points out is an “interesting paradox” since translated literature has long been viewed as a means of introducing new ideas into a target culture. Instead, in this scenario, the translated literature becomes a means of “preserving traditional taste” (Even-Zohar 2006: 432).

Even-Zohar makes no reference to the position of ethnic groups within nations, or to the relationship between minority literature and that of a “home” system. The

only hint as to how translated minority literature may fit into the home system is in Even-Zohar's statement that "it is the portion of translated literature deriving from a major source literature which is likely to assume a central position" (2006: 433). This implies, for our purposes, that the translation of minority literature—which is by definition a "minor" source—is likely to assume a peripheral position.

In the case of China, with its 55 different ethnic minorities, many of whom have their own "home" literary polysystem, the position of minority literature in translation is an important (but under-researched) point. Indeed, for decades Chinese scholars have discussed polysystem theory insofar as it relates to the importation of translated *Western* literature into the Chinese polysystem, but there has been no similar discussion of the position of translated minority literature belonging to China's ethnic groups. Based on Even-Zohar's hypothesis as outlined above, we may posit that the translation of the Gesar epic will take a peripheral position in, and will have no lasting impact on, China's literary polysystem. Further, according to the theory put forward by Tymoczko, its translation should be adapted to the "poetics and grammar" of the receiving literary system, or in other words, modeled on conventional norms already established.

Even-Zohar explains how translation norms and strategies are connected to these two poles of center vs. periphery. In the former case of translated literature that takes up a central position in the home system, the translator is prepared to "violate the home conventions" and will produce a translation that is closer to the source text in terms of adequacy (Even-Zohar 2006: 434). However, such translational norms may be considered "too foreign and revolutionary" in the target culture (*ibid*), a practice known in TS as foreignization. In the latter case, when translated literature takes a peripheral position, the translated text turns out to be a "non-adequate" (Even-Zohar 2006: 434), or "acceptability-oriented" (Chang 2008: 144) translation oriented to the target culture. Such a translation implies a regime of domestication. Thus, according to polysystem theory, if the Chinese translated version of the Gesar epic takes up a peripheral position in China's literary polysystem, we may expect to see a strategy of domestication applied in its translation.

While such conclusions are certainly relevant to this piece of minority literature, Even-Zohar's work does not contribute to answering two key questions: What were the motivating factors for China to translate the epic into Chinese, and how does its translation serve China's national interests? Polysystem scholar Chang (2001)

offers an “augmented” version of polysystem theory that aids in answering these queries by taking into consideration a number of factors not discussed by Even-Zohar.

Chang begins by expanding upon the concept of “repertoire” which, in Even-Zohar’s writing, is defined as the materials and rules that govern the making and handling of a particular product, such as a translated text. Chang writes that according to Even-Zohar, “the materials are provided mainly by the linguistic and literary polysystems, such as lexical items and rhetorical devices” but in Chang’s view, “the rules that determine the usability of these materials may come from a large variety of sources” (2001: 319). Chang proposes that translators of literary texts are, in fact, governed by a set of norms originating from six different polysystems: political, ideological, economic, linguistic, literary, and translational (2001: 321). Chang then provides an example of a piece of translated English literature into Chinese as it manifests these different norms.

The beauty and usefulness of Chang’s augmented version of polysystem theory is that—perhaps especially for researchers working in highly politicized regions—it allows one to situate a translation more precisely within that social and political context. In Chang’s words, it has the potential to reveal “the power relations that are concealed and various kinds of values that are too often taken for granted” (2001: 327). Thus, it is not enough to say that the translation of the Gesar epic is at the periphery of China’s literary polysystem, or even that, because of this, its translation strategy will be one of domestication (which is yet to be seen). Other factors may also be analyzed, according to Chang.

Chang’s six proposed polysystems are laid out below with reference to the Gesar epic:

- 1) The political polysystem, which is “made up of institutions of power and marginalized groups” (Chang 2001: 321) is clearly, in the case of the Gesar epic, at the very center of the translational process. The PRC government and its various bodies have been in undisputable control of all decisions related to the epic, including its translation, as is evident from the information provided on the Gesar website cited above (note 2). Political factors are perhaps the most crucial and overriding of the six polysystems proposed by Chang, and are a recurring theme in the present paper. Why the epic is translated, how, and by whom, are all—in the context of the PRC—largely determined by political factors.

2) The ideological polysystem, “which consists of competing and conflicting ideologies of all sorts that exist in a given culture” (*ibid.*) is, in the case of China, deeply interrelated with the political polysystem, but here can be extended to include the ideology of the Gesar epic itself. Chang notes that “incompatibility with the value system behind the accepted repertoire” may be a cause of resistance to its importation into the home system (2008: 138). Indeed, in the case of the Gesar translation project, the contents of the epic not only do not challenge the value system of the PRC government, but are in fact compatible with it.

Buffetrille argues that China is willing to support the preservation and study of the Gesar epic because it is not overtly religious, it promotes values that lead to “social stability,” and in the story King Gesar’s half-brother was born from a Chinese mother and Tibetan father (2010: 534). This latter element in the tale helps to buttress China’s long-held claim that Tibet has been a part of China for centuries, a point greatly contested by Tibetan and international bodies for decades. Samuel also notes that the promotion of the Gesar epic in China is “related to its being seen as a safe ‘folkloristic’ topic, not directly involved with Buddhism, and politically neutral or even positive, since Gesar can be seen as fighting for the welfare of the Tibetan masses” (2002: 186). Thus, China has been able to bring this item into its literary polysystem as a foreign “other”, with no concern that it might pose a challenge to the government’s core ideological values.

Chang cites a number of instances from Chinese history in which “repertoires imported from other entities” were “regarded as a double threat” because they not only had the potential to cause instability by challenging core values, but also might have “hurt national pride” (2008: 138). In the case of the Gesar epic, no such threat is posed and in fact “possessing” this epic heightens national pride, rather than harms it. Further, the ideological dimension of the epic itself may be a factor in its promotion and introduction into China’s literary polysystem.

3) The economic polysystem refers to “norms that would bind translation activities to certain ‘economic principles’” (Chang 2001: 321). As seen above, tremendous resources have been poured into the study, preservation, and translation of the Gesar epic. The printing costs alone of the government’s official Tibetan version cannot have been a small amount, not to mention the manpower involved in translating the work (discussed below). Chang notes that among the six polysystems, “some may be overlapping or mutually reinforcing; others may be competing or hierarchical” (2001: 319). In the Gesar epic we see an example of the

political (and ideological) polysystems reinforcing or overlapping with the economic factors, since politics and ideology must always be considered in funding decisions of state-sponsored projects in China.

4) The linguistic polysystem is that which requires “conformity to the norms of a language variety” (Chang 2001: 321), and will be explored in relation to the Gesar translation project in the following section.

5) The literary polysystem, the concept of which is already well-developed in polysystem theory, offers certain literary models for the translator to emulate; this aspect was discussed above.

6) The translational polysystem, in Chang’s view, “partially” includes classroom activities for training translators (2001: 321), but Chang does not mention what the other parts of this polysystem may include. In the case of the Gesar epic, the translational polysystem could include the translational norms functioning in the home polysystem (norms, directives, approaches and strategies used by the translators), as well as who the translators are and what ideological stance (if any) they have.

According to Chang, translational norms in China in recent years have tended towards adequacy (subscribing to the norms of the source language), rather than acceptability (subscribing to the norms of the target language). In many cases, the former strategy often involves, or results in, the use of foreignization, while the latter often results in a regime of domestication. In Even-Zohar’s view, translation norms favoring adequacy are present in translated literature that occupies a central position in the target culture’s literary polysystem, but Chang points out that this is not the case in China. The reason for this exception is that in China, “dominant ideological norms” play an important role in translational norms that cannot be accounted for merely by the “polysystemic position of translated literature” (Chang 2001: 325). The dominant translational ideology in China is that an “illusion of faithfulness” is maintained while at the same time both the text and the reader are manipulated (Chang 2001: 326).

Wang (2008) comes to a similar conclusion in regard to how polysystem theory relates to translation in contemporary China. Wang finds that the “co-existence of the two strategic orientations, domestication and foreignization, has actually been the translation norm in China for a long time” but that since the 1990s, translations have been more source-oriented, and in general, Chinese readers “reject highly domesticated translations” (2008: 153). Yang, in his study of the use of these two

approaches in China since the 1980s, writes that “as a whole the voice for foreignization dominates,” especially for literature translated into Chinese (2010: 79). It should be noted here that all such discussions among Chinese scholars are on Chinese-English (or English-Chinese) translations; no mention is made of other language pairs or of minority language translations.

In a later work, Chang (2008) further advances Even-Zohar’s theoretical thinking by examining how cultural repertoires (e.g. translated texts) are selected, a point that is particularly pertinent to our discussion. Chang notes that such items should possess the two qualities of “beneficialness” and “uniqueness.” They must be believed to bring some benefit to the entity and they “must be seen to be different from the repertoires of other entities” (Chang 2008: 136). Thus, certain items will be selected for their particular “selling points” which may be “meaningless or even ridiculous to members of other entities” (*ibid.*). He concludes that of these two, uniqueness “is actually the decisive factor” (Chang 2008: 137).

As is evident from the foregoing discussion, to the Chinese authorities the translation of the Gesar epic offers both beneficialness and uniqueness: Not only does it bring a missing genre, the epic, into China’s literary polysystem, but it also possesses the highly unique feature of being “the world’s longest epic,” a point that China makes again and again in its publicity materials. As discussed above, if the Gesar epic were not purported to be the longest in the world, it is unlikely that the PRC would have expended such resources on its compilation and translation; thus, Chang’s conclusion that uniqueness is the primary factor is supported here.

#### **IV. Translation of the Gesar Epic in China**

Based on the above discussions, the following points may be posited in regard to the Gesar epic: 1) Saglia’s definition of appropriation indicates that the Gesar epic was indeed appropriated and that its Chinese translation may be expected to be a type of domestication, or smoothing out of foreign, *other* signs. 2) As Tymoczko sees the translation of oral traditions to be one of adaptation and naturalization to the ideology of the target culture and language, we may again expect to see a strategy of naturalization, or domestication, used in the translation of the Gesar epic. 3) According to polysystem theory, we may assert that minority literature such as the Gesar epic will assume a peripheral position within the home literary

polysystem, and that the translation of such peripheral literature will be modeled on established, conventional norms.

However, Chang and other Chinese scholars show that in China, modern-day translation norms favor the use of foreignization for literature translated into Chinese, not domestication (or naturalization). This runs counter to polysystem thinking, unless the translations come to assume a central position in the home polysystem. This is very unlikely in the case of the Gesar epic, given China's already highly developed literary culture, where literature from ethnic minorities rarely—if ever—takes up a central position.

With these points in mind, let us now examine what Gesar scholars and translators have written about this translation project, and how—if at all—the translational norms of China have influenced translators' decisions. The most informed and comprehensive publication on this is a 2012 volume by Zhaxi Dongzhu (Tib. Tashi Dondrup) and five other authors. This nearly 500-page Chinese-language volume examines and analyzes every aspect of the translation of the Gesar epic and provides a detailed history of the entire translation project.

The authors of this book, all eminent scholars and translators of the Gesar epic, first review a variety of commonly-held conceptions about translation in the Chinese context, most notably Yan Fu's famous triad of translation standards: faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance (*xin, da, ya*). The authors note that, this being the “mainstream of translation standards” in China, “naturally, Gesar's literary translation”<sup>10</sup> must also use these three (Zhaxi et. al. 2012: 25). Faithfulness, in this instance, is considered “especially important” because the epic consists of social, cultural, historical, ethnic and religious factors that must be retained (*ibid.*). In terms of language, expressiveness requires that “standardized usual language in Han Chinese” should be used, as well as “modern vernacular Han Chinese,” while elegance requires that the translation be “concise and readable” (Zhaxi et. al. 2012: 26).

According to these authors, the overall approach applied to the translation of the epic has been literal (or direct) translation, with this approach applied in an overly strict manner in the 1950s, when the dictum was to be “absolutely faithful to the source text.” However, the authors note that this resulted in “rigid” and even “dead” translations (Zhaxi et. al. 2012: 39), and that after the end of the Cultural

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<sup>10</sup> All translations of Chinese sources cited are the present author's.

Revolution in the 1960s, semantic translation began to be used, with a combination of the two methods applied. The main principle of translators of the epic since then has been to use literal or direct translation whenever possible, but if the full meaning cannot be brought out using this approach, other measures should be used, such as semantic translation (Zhaxi et. al. 2012: 44).

The authors also discuss the use of foreignization and domestication, writing that “for any translation of a language from another ethnic group” one should rigorously avoid foreignization or, in this case, “Tibetanization”. Domestication, a “basic principle of translation” is preferred, although it should not be extreme domestication that may result in loss of the spirit of the text (Zhaxi et. al. 2012: 55). In summary, both methods may be used simultaneously but the clear preference is for domestication.

In a later chapter of the book, nine translation strategies (e.g. addition, deletion, substitution, shifts of word order) used by the translators of the epic are discussed, with examples from the epic provided in Tibetan and Chinese. The authors conclude that all of these methods use the target language standard to realize the aims of faithfulness, expressiveness and elegance, by retaining the content while using the accepted linguistic features of the target language. From this angle, they write, “the translation process is one of domestication of the source language to the target language” (Zhaxi et. al. 2012: 203).

Other writings by translators or scholars of the Gesar epic echo these views. Baima Zhaxi (Tib. Pema Tashi), a translator of the Gesar epic at the state-run Tibetan Academy of Social Science, also emphasizes that one must stay faithful to the source text, follow Yan Fu’s three principles, and use modern standard Chinese with no neologisms (Baima 2010). The stricture not to use neologisms, together with his other translation strategies, shows that he uses a clear regime of domestication.

Jiangbian Jiacao, widely acknowledged as China’s greatest expert on Gesar studies, notes that the earliest Gesar translations were overly mechanical in their word-for-word approach and were therefore never officially published (2012: 17). Jiangbian also evokes Yan Fu’s three principles, but this author is more critical of the quality of Chinese translations of the epic than others. Apart from some translations being still too literal, the main problem is “inadequate polishing and refinement.” Without grasping the spirit of the original, he writes, the translations are “like cold water compared to the original, which resembles mellow wine”



(Jiangbian 2012: 18). He proposes a team approach to translating the epic, with native Tibetan speakers to translate the meaning into Chinese, and then native Chinese translators to “poeticize” the translation. Since little has been done on the poeticizing part, he writes, most of the Gesar translations “have not achieved a high standard” (Jiangbian 2012: 18).

According to Zhaxi et. al., the type of translation collaboration suggested by Jiangbian has been the exception rather than the rule. In a list of the 61 sections of the epic that were translated into Chinese from Tibetan between the years 1980-2009, more than 40 different translators were involved, but only 13 of these were Tibetan, with the remainder of Chinese ethnicity. Many of the translators worked on more than one section, and often they worked in teams or, occasionally, in committees, but only 11 (out of 61) sections were translated by teams consisting of both Chinese and Tibetans (Zhaxi 2012: 90-93). Interestingly, this practice became more common in the later years, which may indicate that the translators found, through experience, that this mode of collaboration was indeed the most effective.

## **V. Conclusion**

Having examined the actual translation practices of the Gesar epic in China, we can see that the three points posited at the beginning of the above section are affirmed. Saglia’s assertion that culturally appropriated translations will be carried out using a strategy of domestication is true: the translators of the Gesar epic do clearly prefer and promote a regime of domestication, aiming to use modern standard Chinese and target-language norms. Tymoczko’s assertion that the translation of oral traditions involves adaptation to the poetics and grammar of the target language is borne out, and the view of polysystem theory that peripheral literature will be modeled on established, conventional norms also seems to be the case for the translations of the Gesar epic.

Applying Chang’s augmented version of polysystem theory has aided us in our understanding of the complex issues related to the translation of minority literature in highly politicized contexts. Chang’s model brings to light the various factors affecting translation in a home system, and highlights the importance of “uniqueness” to major literary polysystems in selecting items for translation. We have also seen that the content of the epic itself was an important element in

whether or not it was selected for state-sponsored translation, and that in fact its translation does serve China's national interests. However, since the project is not yet complete, what impact the published translation will have on Chinese readers and on China's literary polysystem remains to be seen.

However, contrary to the theoretical conclusions above that the Gesar epic should be translated using a regime of domestication and naturalization, Chang and others note that in China, translational norms show a preference for foreignization of translated literature. Here we can see the distinction—and the importance—of the fact that this is a work of minority literature, not of Western (that is, English) literature. The reason given by Yang for readers to prefer foreignization in English-Chinese translations is that there is “an enormous group of Chinese readers eager to accept the foreign elements” and culture as presented in translated Western literature (2010: 79). Does this then imply that Chinese readers are *not* eager to accept what is “foreign” in Tibetan minority literature? I would argue that it does, and that most Chinese readers in the PRC value Western learning and literary products much more than they do their own country's ethnic or minority literature.

What of the future of the Gesar epic in other languages? In discussing China's eventual translation of the epic into English, Zhaxi et. al. reveal that it will be based on the translated Chinese (not the original Tibetan) version (2012: 465). This decision further solidifies China's claim of ownership over the epic, effectively rendering invisible the original source text and supplanting it with a Chinese version that becomes the new source. In TS, the process of translating a text that is itself a translation of the original is known as relay translation, and is usually carried out due to necessity rather than choice (for example, the well-known relay translations of Buddhist sutras in ancient China). In the case of the Gesar epic, this decision may have been made simply because there are not enough skilled Tibetan-English translators; or perhaps it is because the state is able to retain a higher degree of control over the process by using its own “source text.” The reasons for this decision have not yet been made public.

As seen above, the translators of the Gesar epic chose a strategy of domestication—a “smoothing out” of the foreign to create a naturalized text for Chinese readers to more easily digest. Had the source text been of Western origin, rather than Tibetan, it is quite possible that the translators would have adhered to Chinese readers' preference for foreignization. This strategy of domestication will, in turn, have a great influence on the eventual translated English version. Tibetan

cultural items not familiar to Chinese readers may be absent, and rhetorical language in the Tibetan source text may be altered to meet Chinese linguistic norms. Perhaps even more importantly, any changes, additions or deletions made by the translators into Chinese will be unmarked in the translated English version, depriving English readers of the full beauty and cultural richness of this ancient tale.

This paper has aimed to investigate the complex factors involved in translating the Gesar epic, as an example of minority literature, by examining the Gesar translation project from various critical lenses. It is hoped that further studies into the project will be carried out, particularly once the full translation is published in Chinese, when its reception, quality, and position in the literary polysystem may be examined in depth.

Recently, a partial English translation of the Gesar epic was published in the US, rendered directly from the Tibetan by a team of Tibetan and Western translators,<sup>11</sup> the very model of teamwork recommended by Jiangbian for the Chinese translation. A comparative analysis of this work to China's eventual English translation could bring to light important issues related to how relay translation affects the final product, how domestication or foreignization are used (and to what effect), how teamwork may improve the quality of such a long and difficult text, and how the translations of this epic are received in the different target cultures.

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#### **Bio-note**

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