

“May the new emerge from the ancient! May the ancient serve the present!”¹
the Gesar festival of Rma chen (A mdo 2002)

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Located in the Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, an area traditionally populated mainly by nomadic pastoralists, Rma chen is one of those new cities that has experienced significant development since the beginning of the 1990s. In 2002, the place hummed with activity: 2002 was a horse-year, the main auspicious year in the twelve-year cycle of the Tibetan calendar when one is assured of receiving much more merits than in any other year if one does the pilgrimage circuit around A myes rma chen mountain (6282m). Rma chen being one of the gateways to the pilgrimage route, many Tibetans were present in the city, taking advantage of this opportunity to buy in various Chinese shops all the items they need for the daily life in their camp. But it was also one of the places elected for the celebration of the millennial year of the creation of the Gesar epic, a very appropriate choice in view of the peculiar relations that link Gesar, the hero of the epic to his protective deity, the A myes rma chen mountain. The latter is known to be the keeper of Gesar’s treasures (Stein 1959: 124), among them the magic sword from which the Mgo log say they get their strength (Rock 1956: 127). Moreover, the importance of Kham and Amdo in the propagation of the epic is well known.

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Tibetan terms are in Wylie transliteration except for well-known toponyms like Kham, Amdo, and very common terms such as Rinpoche.

¹ Chinese proverbs quoted by Trebinjac (2000: 306).

But how did it happen that 2002 was declared the millennial year of the creation of the epic?

On October 17th 2001, the Chinese authorities through the permanent delegation of the PRC requested UNESCO to support the organization of the “1,000th Anniversary of the creation of the epic poem King Gesar (China)” which they planned to organize.²

The Executive Board regarded the request as admissible according to the six selection criteria of which the 1st, 3rd and 5th are:

1. Each proposed anniversary should be indisputably linked to the Organization's ideals and missions in the fields of education, science, culture, social and human sciences and communication and should promote closer relations among peoples, tolerance, and the ideals of peace, cultural dialogue and mutual understanding among peoples.

3. The anniversary should concern personalities of genuinely universal stature and works or events of either genuinely worldwide or at least regional significance in order to reflect the ideals, the values, the cultural diversity and the universality of the Organization.

5. The anniversary should be the occasion for nationwide events already planned and for the Organization of which certain resources have been allocated to the Member State or group of Member States directly concerned.³

The request received a positive answer during the 161st session (April 21st 2001) of the Executive Board since it fulfilled two criteria, namely that the anniversary marked a multiple centenary, and more precisely that “King Gesar (Latin spelling) great epic poem created in old times by the Tibetan ethnic group [sic] has been transmitted orally from generation to generation and spread in all regions inhabited by Tibetans. Parts of this epic

² <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001238/123885F.pdf>. (February 2010).

³ The other criteria are :

2. Commemorations of the birth, independence or institutional regime of a state, historical empires and dynasties will not be eligible for consideration; similarly the anniversaries of military events will be excluded.

4. The anniversary should be a fiftieth anniversary, a centenary, or a multiple thereof, some flexibility should nevertheless be used in applying this criterion.

6. Any anniversary proposal involving more than one state should be submitted by all.

<http://erc.unesco.org/anniversaries/en/Default.htm#Crit%C3%A8res%20et%20proc%C3%A9dures> (April 2010).

poem have been translated into English, Russian, French, German, Japanese, Hindi and Finnish. The Tibetan epic King Gesar is known worldwide as the ‘Homer of the East’⁴.

It is thus by using one of the laudatory epithets (which is wrongly translated) awarded during the Maoist period (1949-1976),⁵ that the “Orient's Homeric Epic” was included in the list of the anniversaries supported by the UNESCO.

Soon after, the China Tibet Information Center, an official site, drew a parallel between this commemoration and another anniversary. Writing that “In 2001, *the year of the 50th anniversary of the peaceful liberation of Tibet*, China succeeded in applying to the UNESCO for holding the International King Gesar Year in 2002 », it gave an explanation to what was may be the origin of the initial request in the year 2001.⁶

In conformity with the criteria decided by UNESCO, many events — artistic (the realization of documentaries, the erection of Gesar statues, the execution of paintings), academic (national and international conferences, the publication of books) and cultural (the creation of a stamp and festivals, among them one in Rma chu and one in Rma chen) — were staged in 2002 to celebrate the millennium of the “longest epic of the world”.⁷

But who was Gesar whose heroic deeds recounted by bards, from Gilgit in the West to Mongolia in the East, passing through the different Tibetan cultural regions, continue to appear in ever newer episodes?

The beginning of the epic follows the ideal of Tibetan kingship in which the ruler reluctantly agrees to come from heaven at the request of the community.⁸ While everything is going wrong on earth, men ask a god of heaven to send his son to earth. This intervention is undertaken in the form of a smoke offering of juniper (*bsang*) at a sacred mountain. The first chapters recount the miraculous conception and birth of Gesar whose father is both a god and also a sacred mountain; and whose mother is an aquatic spirit in the subterranean world. In his youth, ugly, mischievous, sometimes naughty but endowed with supernatural powers, he is called Jo ru. Together with his mother, he is exiled by his paternal uncle to a

⁴ unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0012/001224/122473f.pdf (March 2010). My translation. The reader will notice that the Mongol versions have been omitted.

⁵ Maconi (2004: 391).

⁶ http://www.tibetinform.com/tibetzt/gesaer_en/doc/7000.htm. Emphasis added.

⁷ See *China's Tibet*, vol. 13, n° 6, 2002, half of it being dedicated to the millenary of the Epic. <http://www.tibetinform.com.cn/english/zt/TibetologyMagazine/..%5CTibetologyMagazine/2003120031215155030.htm> for other manifestations (March 2010).

⁸ Ramble (2008: 313-318).

place near A myes rma chen mountain. One day, a horse race in which all members of the tribe have the right to participate is organized by the Great Assembly of Gling. The winner is to be elected king and receive 'Brug mo as his queen. Contrary to all expectations, Jo ru wins, is proclaimed king and takes the name King Gesar, Great Lion of the World.⁹

Advised by his celestial guardian, Ma ne ne and assisted by the thirty knights (*dpa 'thul*) of Gling, among them Rgya tsha zhal dkar, his elder half brother whose mother is said to be Chinese, Gesar subdues the demons of the four directions and launches a series of conquests that ensure the prosperity of the kingdom of Gling.

The first part of this article will attempt to interpret the poster designed to commemorate this event and is followed by a description of the festival. The next two sections question the role assigned to the epic and its hero by the Chinese authorities on the one hand, and the Tibetans on the other, through the Gesar dances performed by monks at the festival. The study tries to understand whether in the first case the use of the epic is a tool of propaganda, and in the second a “space for resistance”.¹⁰

This article is based on observations made during the festival and does not attempt to be an exhaustive study. Indeed, my main goal when carrying out fieldwork was to do a third pilgrimage circuit around A myes rma chen mountain. My 1st pilgrimage had been done in 1990 and the 2nd in 1992; the purpose of the 3rd one was to observe the changes to it over a period of twelve years.¹¹ Nonetheless, it seems of some interest to demonstrate how the two main actors involved in the celebration, with totally divergent interests — the Chinese authorities on one side, the Tibetans on the other — sought to reconstruct and to appropriate the epic and the image of its hero, Gesar, in a festival sponsored by an international organization, UNESCO, at the request of the central government, but organized at the level of the prefecture.

The poster

A poster had been executed by Bsod nams, a painter from the Reb gong Center for Artistic Research “in commemoration of the first artistic and cultural festival of Gesar [celebrated]

⁹ See Stein (1956) for a translation of the Gling manuscript that tells the prologue, the birth and youth of Gesar and the horse-race that leads to his enthronement as the king of Gling.

¹⁰ I borrow this expression from Graezer-Bideau (2008: 58).

¹¹ See Buffetrille (1997: 75-132 et 2004: 319-363).

for the first time in the Mgo log region, in Rma country.”¹² Since art is “an effective agent for ideological, political and social change”,¹³ an analysis of this poster filled with heterogeneous components, can help us to progress in understanding the issues at stake in this festival.

The structure of the poster follows the traditional schematic divisions into three horizontal sectors (Kvaerne 1994: 168):

Gesar, the central figure is on horseback, wearing helmet and armour. He greets with the right hand and holds a cup of beer (*chang*) in the left. He carries the flag of Gling and one spear and is followed by the knights of Gling (*dpa' thul*) brandishing swords and spears; all are evidently getting ready to leave for an expedition.

The lower left section shows 'Brug mo, Gesar's spouse, a conical white hat adorned with red fringes on her head accompanied by several other ladies and a man also wearing a white hat with red fringes but with a slightly different shape. Both pieces of headgear remind that of Phying dkar ba, the mountain-deity of Rwa sgrengs, identified by many Tibetans with A myes rma chen: a white hat with large brims, the cone covered with red fringes and with a ball at the top. It is also the hat of his medium. In fact, the god's name derives from his white felt hat (*phying zhwa*) worn also by Amdo tribes (mainly the Mgo log).¹⁴

Bya kyung, the territorial god of Reb gong, the native place of the painter, also wears this kind of hat.¹⁵ During the *glu rol* festival¹⁶ that takes place in some Reb gong villages, the villagers have a similar hat (without the ball and not so sharp). Nevertheless, its appellation *Ar zhwa* or *phying zhwa rtse ring*, “felt hat with a long top” lets one imagine a taller hat.¹⁷

¹² *Mgo log khul rma yul Gesar rigs gnas rgyu rtsal dus chen thengs dang po'i dran rten du.*

¹³ See Kvaerne (1994: 166-185) and Trebinjac (2000) on this subject.

¹⁴ On Phying dkar and his hat, see Stein (1959: 348) and Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1975: 160-163 et Pl. X, p. 413).

¹⁵ <http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=730> (April 2010) for the hat of Bya khyung.

¹⁶ <http://emscat.revues.org/index508.html> for pictures of this hat during the *glu rol*. See also Buffetrille (1998 et 2009) on this festival.

¹⁷ Karma smon lam and Skal bzang mkhas grub (2005: 9) confirm the existence of various forms of this hat in Amdo associated with different areas (*mdo smad kyi sa khul khag tu zhwa 'di'i bzo dbyibs mi 'dra ba re zung yod par gleng/*). I would like to thank Étienne Bock for this reference.

Apart from their headgear, these people are dressed in sumptuous gowns (*phyu ba*) of brocade bordered with otter, festive clothing common in the region.¹⁸ They carry various offerings for Gesar: ceremonial scarfs, beer (*chang*), fruits and flowers. The faces of all the protagonists are very white and highly sinicized. A Tibetan tent for reception and a Mongolian yurt decorated with a window (which shows the painter's unfamiliarity with the Mongol world) are located side by side in the right corner of the poster. The viewer may suppose that they symbolize the harmony between Mongolians and Tibetans who have the epic of Gesar in common, the epic having been transmitted from Tibet to Mongolia. The eight auspicious symbols and various offerings are placed at the bottom center.

Three deities occupy the upper part of the poster, following the tradition. But while usual representations place Padmasambhava over Gesar¹⁹ — who is said to be his incarnation in the epic (Stein 1959: 519) — here we have Rnam thos sras (Vaiśravaṇa) with Spyan ras gzigs on his right and Sgrol ma on his left. Rnam thos sras, seated on the snow-lion,²⁰ holds the mongoose which produces treasures in his left hand and a banner of victory in his right. His various aspects of wealth-god, protector of the faith, god of war and protector of the north make him close to Gesar, the warrior god who reigns in the north as king of the universe but also as a god of wealth (Stein 1959: 282-290). It is thus his “wealth god” aspect that is highlighted and not that of the reincarnation of Padmasambhava. Above, in the upper left corner of the poster stands Shou Lao, the Chinese god of longevity, represented in Chinese style, seated under the tree of life, surrounded by two cranes and by his mount, a stag. He does not hold his stick, but what seems to be a single flask in his right hand, not the usual double gourd of the alchemists (Beer 2004: 96; Stein 1987: 66-78).

Below, a tantric practitioner and various animals fill the pastures, while two Tibetans prostrate themselves before a furnace for smoke offering of juniper, the traditional offering to sacred mountains and in this case, a sign of the privileged relations Gesar maintains with sacred mountains, especially Ger-mdzo, one of his fathers on earth, and A myes rma chen, the most important mountain deity of Amdo. Yet, “one of the characteristic elements which has contributed towards enhancing cultural unification among Tibetans is King Gesar’s worship of Mount Ger mdzo” (Karmay 1998a: 426). The upper right corner is occupied by

¹⁸ Following the appeal by the Dalai-Lama to stop using the skins and furs of endangered species to adorn clothing, Tibetans in Amdo (mainly in Reb gong) publicly burnt them in 2006 and do not wear fur anymore (Tibetinfonet 10 February 2006).

¹⁹ See for example Macdonald (s.d.) *thangkas* 2, 4.

²⁰ The snow-lion is also the mount of Ma ne ne, the aunt and celestial adviser of Gesar (Stein 1958: 248; 1959: 445).

the representation of “the four friends” — the elephant, monkey, hare and partridge, mounted upon one another and catching the fruit of the tree of life — familiar to Tibetans. The two vignettes can also be interpreted as eulogizing the freedom the minorities are supposed to enjoy in their practice of religion.

Snowy Mountains — the A myes rma chen Range? — and green hills delimit the horizon. The twelve zodiac animals are displayed in the framework of the poster and the upper part is topped by the mantra *Oṃ a ba hūm dzra ma hā gu ru ma ṇi rā dza sarba siddhi pha la hūm*.²¹

The festival

The festival of the millennium of the epic took place from the 23rd to the 27th day of the 6th month (1st to 5th of August) in a grassland located eight kilometers west of Rma chen, from where the peak of the A myes rma chen mountain can be seen. The choice of the first of August to start the festival is not neutral since it is People's Liberation Army day²² but the dates of this celebration correspond also to the propitious days for festivals dedicated to sacred mountains (Stein 1959: 449) and to local deities such as the *glu rol* of the Reb gong area. The festival was organized by the Mgo log Autonomous Prefecture and the choreography, according to a Tibetan informant, was by Tibetans. The six counties of the Mgo log prefecture, Dga' bde, Padma, Gcig sgril, Dar lag, Rma chen and Rma stod participated in it.

A large crowd of Tibetans, monks and lay people, thronged to attend the various festivities and many tents had been erected. They accommodated members of various “work units” and were mainly for banquets. Many people came for the festival as well as for the pilgrimage.

The morning of the 23th day of the 6th month was devoted to the opening ceremony. It began, in the traditional way with a smoke offering of juniper (*bsang*) to A myes rma chen while the knights of Gling (*dpa' thul*) did the circumambulation of the foyer on horseback calling down “luck” and power upon themselves. The rituals that were later enacted were far more political and in the traditional Chinese style: after the raising of the Chinese flag as well as the flag of Gling, there was a parade of all the work units, schools and monks of the

²¹ Not identified. Possibly a mantra to Gesar.

²² The Chinese Red Army was founded on August 1st 1927 by the CCP and later became the People's Liberation Army. See Diemberger (2003: 109-134) for another festival (*naadam*) celebrated in Henan Mongolian Autonomous County on August 1st 1984.

various monasteries performing episodes from the epic. One monk from each of the monasteries involved played the role of Gesar. Wearing a helmet and sumptuously dressed, each of them paraded in a chariot — in fact, a decorated truck — sometimes surrounded by the main personages from the episode to be performed. He preceded the monks of his monastery who were wearing their religious clothing or the costume of the character of the epic they played. A monk from Khra gling monastery²³ (Dar lag rdzong) held a guitar — a sure sign of modernity — another an accordion, a “musical instrument of impeccable ideological respectability” (Kvaerne 1994: 178) since it had become from the twenties on the “proletarian” instrument *par excellence* in the Soviet Union. This shows the confluence between the idea of modernity and the notion of cultural progress and economic development, embodied thanks to the Chinese Communist Party in the musical instrument of the proletariat.

Each county had delegated its best singers, its best dancers and a group of men and women dressed in long gowns embellished with fur (tiger, leopard and otter) and covered with gold (or imitation) and silver jewelry, amber necklaces (mostly fake) and corals, carrying swords (for men) and reliquaries. This costume, which amounts to an “ethnic uniform” (Kvaerne 1994: 182), was proudly worn by the Tibetans, who proceeded with great and slow strides. Such a display of jewels and fur that no Tibetan would have worn in such abundance before the Chinese occupation, was to show the supposed wealth of the population but also demonstrated the love of hunting. What better way to control the formidable Tibetan than to represent him with an exotic but domesticated look (Said [1980] 2005: 77)?

A large number of nomads on motorcycles, the flag of Gling on the handlebars, paraded as modern knights, mounted on their iron steeds, symbols of progress and wealth.

The Chinese army was present in relatively large numbers. It participated in the festival by giving a demonstration of its talents on the last day, that could pass either as proof of its ability to protect citizens or as a threat against those who might oppose it.

Many activities took place simultaneously during the five days of the festival, and these can be divided into two main categories: performances by monks of some episodes of the Gesar epic (to which we shall return later), sometimes interrupted with folk dances and, as advertised in Chinese language and often in Amdo dialect (*a mdo skad*), competitions in

²³ Khra gling *dgon pa* (Thub bstan bshad sgrub nor bu'i dga' tsal bkra shis ldan gling) is a *rnying ma* monastery, a branch of Kaḥ thog *dgon pa*. It was founded in 1895. This tent monastery was built in adobe after 1913 (Gruschke 2001, I: 83; TBRC G1746).

which various counties competed in horse racing, yak racing, stone lifting, and also a modern version of a tug-of-war contest, in which women participated.

The singers followed one after the other. All were Tibetans but they sang mostly in Chinese, the language of “modernity” which gives them a wider audience. Their songs were based on traditional musical themes but they were modernized and sinicized, and some had the sound of pop music. The “folk” dances²⁴ were performed to pre-recorded music pouring from loudspeakers. They were actually dances from Skye dgu mdo area (Ch Yushu),²⁵ in northwest Kham, and not from the Mgo log region, a fact reflecting the gradual disappearance of regional specificity. Singers and dancers were dressed not in traditional clothes but in brightly colored “ethnic uniforms” that meet Han aesthetic standards for what is exotic. Prizes awarded on the last day rewarded the winners of each competition.

The festival ended on the 27th day of 6th month (August 5th): as if in a victory parade, Gesar and 'Brug mo, standing in a chariot dominated by the A myes rma chen mountain, went around the grassland preceded by snow lions – all symbols of Tibetan identity – to the sound of Chinese pop music.

Two main actors are involved in all of this. If the intrusion of Chinese values in the epic and its instrumentalization are obvious, the smoke offering of juniper, the various competitions and the performance of Gesar episodes are significant aspects of summer festivals associated with sacred mountains “whose environment is clearly the source of inspiration for numerous themes of [the] Gesar [epic].”²⁶ Moreover, as rightly noticed by Morcom (2003: 191), if “the state is vigorously appropriating “popular” culture, ‘the people’ could be seen to be actively appropriating the state style”.

Gesar, a tool of propaganda

Assigning an important political function to an epic is not an innovation of the Chinese authorities. Already in 1940, Stalin decided to celebrate the 500th anniversary of the

²⁴ For a study on the transformations the Tibetan dances have undergone since the 1990s, see Morcom (2007).

²⁵ This according to Tashi Tsering (AMI) to whom I showed the DVD of the festival that I bought shortly afterwards in Rma chen. See Morcom (2003: 205, n. 54) on the characteristics of the Skye dgu mdo dances.

²⁶ Stein (1959: 449), my translation.

Kalmyck epic in order to obtain the support of the Kalmycks.²⁷ Moreover, in 1991, UNESCO was approached by the Buryat authorities who sought its support to commemorate the millennium of a particular version of their epic. This was rejected, and the organizers were left very disappointed.²⁸ This request and the refusal that followed may have been an additional incentive for the Chinese application since it freed the way for them to submit their own request.

One would have thought that a particular version of the epic would have been selected in order to give more weight to the claim of a millennial anniversary. We know that the dating of the epic is problematic, although the antiquity of many of its themes (religious beliefs, folklore, ancient stories, etc.) is not in doubt. “Its core ‘orality’ as a vernacular tradition, carried on largely in highland (*'brog pa*) communities with low rates of literacy, should now be acknowledged” (Fitzherbert 2009: 173). Still Stein's work showed that there is no textual trace of the epic before 1500 (Stein 1962 99-100). But if the Chinese authorities had focused their sights on a particular version, it might have been more difficult for them to appropriate the epic for use on the international scene, which was apparently the purpose of this anniversary. Indeed, in the year 2002-2003, statements such as “The Chinese government has supported research on King Gesar for over 50 years. The results show that epics existed in China in ancient history and overturns the old Western belief that China had no epic poems”²⁹ or “Gesar is a great contribution the Chinese nation has made to human civilization,”³⁰ appeared. Here one sees that the appropriation of the Tibetan epic is also a way to claim that Tibet is part of China since ancient times, which shows clearly that the epic is being used as a propaganda tool.

One cannot deny the — up and down — interest in the epic on the part of the Chinese authorities. The credit for the early work on Gesar is assigned to Ren Naiqiang, a Chinese scholar who made the epic known in the late 1920s, but the first real studies on the subject date from the 1930s with a strong increase in interest in the period 1950-1960. Its study,

²⁷ See Hamayon (1994: 348 ; 2002: 18; 2004b, n. 16, p. 302) for other examples of commemoration of epics among populations of Central Asia.

²⁸ However, in July 1995, a great celebration for the millennium of the epic of Gesar (the version of the Ekhirit-Bulagat, the main Buryat tribe) was held in Ulan-Ude (Hamayon 2004a: 59 2004b: 295 and n. 6, p. 302).

²⁹ Tibet Daily Online 24/07/2002.

³⁰ Jambian Gyamco – Zhou Aiming 2003: 4.

forbidden during the Cultural Revolution, was officially resumed in 1978 and has since undergone very important developments.³¹

Like other rituals or popular practices in China,³² the Tibetan epic was quickly appropriated as a propaganda tool. In the 1980s, it was presented in Marxist terms in the introduction to Chinese publications as “the crystallization of the Tibetan People’s Wisdom”³³ and is said to be “told today by the broad masses of Tibetan people” (Jambian Gyamco–Zhou Aiming 2003: 16). Nowadays, it is still described in Marxist and evolutionary terms, in which there arises sequentially “a wide range of social stages, from the clan society and tribe union periods in late primitive society to slave society, the feudal serfdom era, and modern times” (Jambian Gyamco–Zhou Aiming 2003: 4).

Today we are witnessing the creation of a cultural policy around Gesar the purpose of which is to propagate the epic at a popular level: Gesar is intended to educate since “Gesar is a great work of encyclopedic volume, serving research on ancient Tibetan society, history, religious beliefs, communications, moral concepts, customs, habits and folk culture.”³⁴ “King Gesar is no longer a pure epic; it is a kind of culture, a kind of spirit and a kind of symbol. It adds luster to patriotism, national happiness and civilization.”³⁵ Traditionally, bards, itinerant semi-religious singers often “inspired”, recited the chapters of the epic they knew for hours, sometimes days in places to which they had been invited. This recitation had a ritual and protective function that is now completely absent. The context has changed from that of a bard reciting some episodes in particular circumstances (before the hunt, at funeral) to one in which we have a plethora of shows, plays,³⁶ songs, dance, films, paintings³⁷ and books, focusing on the epic hero. Emphasis is placed not only

³¹ For a detailed study of the vicissitudes experienced by the study of the epic in China, see Li Lianrong (2001); Maconi (2004: 391-402); and http://www.tibetinform.com/tibetzt/gesaer_en/doc/6701.htm (March 2010).

³² See Trebinjac (2000: 42-51 and 94ff) and Graezer-Bideau (2008: 52-60) concerning the *yangge*. The performances are given by amateur peasant artists at the New Year. This traditional collective dance very much valued by the Chinese has been taken over since the 1940s and integrated into the new revolutionary culture for use as a propaganda tool.

³³ Information E. Sperling (e.mail communication, May 2010).

³⁴ China Tibetology n° 1.

<http://www.tibetinform.com.cn/english/zt/TibetologyMagazine/..%5CTibetologyMagazine/..%5CTibetologyMagazine/2003120031216143852.htm>

³⁵ *China’s Tibet*, vol. 13, n°6, 2002: 1.

³⁶ See among others: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A9lbe1dkvg> et <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTs4xQR5PEI&feature=related> (March 2010).

³⁷ In 2002 there was launched in the district of Dar rtse mdo (Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture) a project to paint a thousand *thangkas* depicting the episodes of

on the spread to the Chinese public but also to the outside world: one of the lavishly publications produced on the occasion of the millennium of the Gesar epic (Jiangbian Gyamco–Zhou Aiming 2003), is published in both Chinese³⁸ and English, and therefore intended, in the latter case, for a largely foreign audience. It aims “to adapt classic works in light of popular forms.”³⁹ Various episodes of the epic are told through illustrations where Gesar and the various protagonists have strongly sinicized features. Clad in armour and wearing helmets, they fight with swords and bows and thus “refer to the past” (Hamayon 2004b: 299) without presenting any danger to the present. This version, quite similar to a comic book, is totally free of any religious content and the sinicization of the names in the captions is such that it is often difficult to trace the originals.⁴⁰

The interest of the Chinese authorities in the epic is further confirmed by its inclusion in 2009 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity under the title “The Gesar epic tradition” (China).⁴¹

The description given makes it clear from the outset that three minority nationalities (Tibetans, Mongols and Tu [or Monguor] share “this vast oral history narrative known as ‘beads on a string’” [sic], thus emphasizing the unity and harmony between them. It praises the role of Gesar, the protector of the weak, conqueror of the mighty and the unifier of various tribes. The importance of this work as a “major entertainment... in the religious and daily life of the community”, is emphasized, thus highlighting the vision the Chinese have of the epic and of the Tibetans, a people who “love to sing and dance” in a country called

the epic. Moreover, an exhibition of 270 *thangkas* from this program was mounted in Beijing during the Olympic Games. <http://iel.cass.cn/english/Detail.asp?newsid=4219> (April 2010). However, on another site, one learns that the exhibition presented in Beijing 13 000 *thangkas* from the TAR <http://www.cctv.com/program/journaldelaculture/20080731/103619.shtml> (April 2010).

³⁸ Jiangbian Jiacao 降边嘉措 and Zhou Aiming 周爱明 eds., 2003 « Zangzu yingxiong shishi ‘Gesar’ tangka » 藏族英雄史诗(格萨尔)唐卡 *Thangka Paintings: Tibetan Epic Gesar*, Zhongguo huabao chubanshe 中国画报出版社 Beijing, China Pictorial Publishing House (mail from L. Maconi 31/3/2010).

³⁹ www.book.cultural-china.com/books8.html (March 2010).

⁴⁰ The second part of the book is dedicated to modern *thangkas* of Gesar and representations of some chapters of the epic.

⁴¹ <http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?pg=00011&RL=00204> (April 2010).

“Ocean of songs and dances.”⁴² But its pedagogical role in “history, religion, customs, morality and science” is not forgotten. Emphasis is placed on the influence of the epic in *thangka* painting, Tibetan opera and other forms of art. The sense of “cultural identity and historic continuity” that the epic “imbues in audiences young and old” is stressed and may even seem surprising, a feeling that disappears when reading Article 2 of the conditions for registration in UNESCO’s list of “Intangible Heritage”⁴³ which requires that this cultural heritage provides communities with a “*sense of identity and continuity*, thus promoting respect for *cultural diversity*”⁴⁴ and human creativity.”

Several authors have examined the reasons for the support the Chinese authorities have given for the preservation and study of the epic.⁴⁵ They noted how the profane aspect of the epic literature; the presence of Rgya tsha zhal dkar, half-brother of King Gesar, whose mother is said to be Chinese, making him a “politically correct” individual and a symbol of the unity between Tibetans and Chinese; the values defended by Gesar that lead to “social stability, economic development and happiness in everyday life,” have been put forward.⁴⁶ Moreover, Gesar may appear to the Chinese more as a symbol of the regional rather than national identity. And his identification with Guan Yu, the Chinese god of war under the Qing dynasty, certainly plays an important role as well.

In the same way that the epic itself is capable of multiple interpretations (Dreyfus 1998: 44), Gesar too is a malleable figure: he is a non-Buddhist but also a Buddhist hero representing quite opposite values, possessed of patriotism, honor and courage while at the same time being a trickster and a magician. Ugly in the first half of his life, his victory in the race gives him a glorious aspect.

Nevertheless, the question of whether it is the importance of the epic and its hero in the Tibetan world that lead the Chinese authorities to use it as a medium to convey certain messages remains unanswered.

⁴² The site <http://french.china.org.cn/fa-xizang/tibet3/gk25.htm> puts it thus: “Tibetans like to sing and dance. Tibet is nicknamed “the Ocean of songs and dances.”

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http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/index.php?lg=FR&pg=00173#Critères_pour_inscription_sur_la_Liste_représentative (March 2010).

⁴⁴ Emphasis added.

⁴⁵ Among them, Dreyfus (1998), Karmay (1998), Samuel (2002) et Maconi (2004).

⁴⁶ Geng Yufang quoted by Maconi (2004: 403).

Sixty years of the Chinese “civilizing” mission has left some Tibetans with what S. Harrell calls a “stigmatized identity” (Eidheim 1969, Hsieh 1987, cited by Harrell 1995: 6). The way some Tibetans intellectuals speak of Tibetan attitudes to the epic indicates that they have internalized the Chinese perception of minorities as backward, uneducated and stupid.

In a recent article (12/23/2009),⁴⁷ a certain Wu Jia cites Nyima from the Tibetan Cultural Office, who ascribes the alleged Tibetan neglect for the epic before 1959 to the inferior status of bards in the days of traditional Tibet and contrasts that with their current status as “artists,” (the present day rank of those “bards”), the appointed heirs of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. It is then the turn of Jambian Gyamco — the author of the book cited above — to explain how the Han were able to protect their heritage thanks to their advance development, while Tibetans, according to him, were not able to preserve the epic since they had no scriptures at the time of its creation (with the Tibetan script dated 7th century according to tradition). Even if it is true that the epic was generally forbidden in the monasteries — where the learned persons lived — and looked down upon by the clergy, such talk only serves to legitimize the “civilizing” project of the Chinese for whom their particular vision of cultural and economic development is the only valid one. But the fact remains that the majority of Tibetans remain unmoved by this Sino-centric argument, and for them the epic remains a matter of national pride and a symbol of their “Tibetanness.”

The festival of Gesar, “a space for resistance”?

While a Tibetan intellectual encountered at the festival regarded it as a tool of Chinese propaganda, many people with whom I spoke felt that it was a significant event that demonstrated the importance of the epic and the recognition of Tibetan culture by the Chinese authorities. The commemoration of the — supposed — millennial anniversary of the epic shows indeed the antiquity of Tibetan literature and its celebration recalls the glorious days of conquests and the defense of the country against the invaders.

The Gesar dances

As stated previously, during this festival, some episodes of Gesar were performed by monks from monasteries of the various counties of the Mgo log Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. I observed four such performances:

⁴⁷ <http://english.cri.cn/4406/2009/12/23/1122s537565.htm> (March 2010).

The monks of Khra gling *dgon pa* (Dar lag rdzong) together with those of Rdo grub chen (Padma rdzong)⁴⁸ chose to perform the horse race (*rta rgyug*) episode of which they did a pantomime. In contrast, those from the monastery of A bzod *dgon pa* (Gcig sgril rdzong)⁴⁹ did the same episode, but with a real horse race that was received with enthusiasm by the spectators. The awarding of a prize turned the race in a simple competition just like the others – horse and yak races, tugs of war, etc. – thus denoting the secularization of these dances which are religious in origin. The choice to perform this episode can be easily explained by the fact that all the characters of the epic appear in it. Only the monks from Lung sngon *dgon pa* (Dga' bde rdzong) opted for another chapter: the war against the Hor (*Hor Gling g.yul gyed*).

Sku gling gsum pa (1934-2009), the 9th lineage holder of Lung sngon *dgon thub bstan chos 'khor gling* monastery⁵⁰ was present at the festival. In an interview during the festival, he explained to me that until 1986 Lung sngon *dgon pa* was a tent camp monastery,⁵¹ but his desire was to establish a permanent structure. He justified his request to the authorities by his interest in the epic and willingness to maintain a group of monks to perform episodes from it. The request was accepted which shows once again the interest of the authorities in propagating the epic. During the parade on the first day, the hierarch wearing a Heruka dress and a raven hat led the monks of his monastery.⁵²

The monks played both male and female roles, dressed in sumptuous costumes and wearing Chinese style make-up, just like the actors playing Gesar in various plays. It was a Chinese opera-style dramatization of the epic to the sounds of pre-recorded songs sung by bards. The knights of Gling (*dpa 'thul*) from each monastery went around the area of the

⁴⁸ Called also Gsang chen dngos grub dpal 'bar gling, it was founded as a branch of Rdzogs chen *dgon pa* in 1880 by the 2nd Rdo grub chen Bla ma 'Jigs med phun tshogs 'byung gnas. It is the seat of the lineage of reincarnations Rdo grub chen (Gruschke 2001 I: 90 and TBRC375).

⁴⁹ A bzod *dgon Dpal ri theg chen bshad sgrub 'phel rgyas gling* is a *rnying ma* monastery of Khaṅ thog tradition (TBRC G1748).

⁵⁰ This monastery was founded by Mdo mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje (1800-1859) (*Mgo log lo rgyus* 1991: 230).

⁵¹ Tent camp monasteries were quite common before the 1950s in Amdo and Kham. It seems that there were still some in the recent years: Lung sngon *dgon pa* is one example; another is a tent monastery in the Dkar mdzes Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture that Bstan 'dzin bde legs Rinpoche was accused to have converted into a permanent structure in 1997 by the Religious Affairs Bureau of the Prefecture (Wang Lixiong and Tsering Shakya 2009: 151).

⁵² He is also responsible for the construction of a replica of Bya rung kha shor near his monastery.

performance imitating the movements of men on horseback, accompanied by a very rhythmic music that all Tibetans, however, agreed to recognize as “Gesar music.”

The acting of the monks-actors, absolutely identical from one monastery to another, suggested a common origin. But then, what? Were we witnessing the invention of a tradition or the revival of traditional performances – albeit modernized – that had been halted following the Chinese occupation?

Written sources are not very abundant on the subject but the following, supplemented by various interviews, help to advance in the research:

Stein (1959: 325, 336) reports a lay play in Kham with Gesar as the subject and a Gesar *'cham* in the rdzogs chen monasteries of Kham in the 11th Tibetan month which 'Jam mgon Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846-1912),⁵³ one of the most respected figures of the “Non Sectarian” Movement (*ris med*)⁵⁴ would have authored. Mi pham, one of the heirs of this movement developed by 'Jams dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (1820-1892)⁵⁵ and Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas (1813-1899),⁵⁶ is the author of “over fifty invocatory and liturgical texts on Gesar” (Fitzherbert 2007: 208).⁵⁷ He also worked to develop the cult of Gesar as a “god -who subdues- enemies” (*dgra lha*). He is the author of the *Gling bro bde chen rol pa*, “A dance of Gling, the music of great bliss,” a collection of song texts and dances centered on Gesar that was then performed in Rwa sgreng⁵⁸ monastery under the patronage of the Regent. The *Gling bro* has undergone a renaissance among exiles in Orissa, in India (Lerner 1983) through the teaching of Tagtsang Norsang. Namkha (Nam mkha') Rinpoche⁵⁹ continues this work. These dances are usually performed by laypeople though Lerner's informant (1983: 55), Khenpo Sherab Paldan (*Mkhan po Shes rab dpal ldan*), told her he had seen these dances

⁵³ On Mi pham, see Dudjom rinpoche (1991, I: 869-880) and Smith (2001: 227-234).

⁵⁴ On the *ris med* movement, see Smith (2001: 227-272).

⁵⁵ See Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, I: 849-858)

⁵⁶ See Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, I: 859-868) and Smith (2001: 235-271).

⁵⁷ Fitzherbert (2007) shows that the version translated by Stein (1956) and worked on by Kornman (1997) has been erroneously attributed to Mi pham. The author of the text is in fact a monk called 'Gyur med thub bstan 'jam dbyangs grags pa, from rDzong 'go monastery, a monastery close to the royal palace of the Gling tshang kings. See Nālanda Translation Committee (1997: 401-405) for the translation of a smoke offering (*bsang*) to Gesar also composed by Mi pham.

⁵⁸ Let's recall that Phying dkar ba is the mountain deity of Rwa sgreng.

⁵⁹ Namkha Rinpoche's daughters are part of the *Gling bro* troupe (interview with Rinpoche in Kathmandu in October 2009). One of them has married Sa skyongs Mi pham, one of the sons of Trungpa Rinpoche, said to be the second reincarnation of Mi pham rgya mtsho.

performed by monks (Lerner 1983: 55). The text of *Glin bro*⁶⁰ does not give the narrative of the epic; it is a text of meditative practice and an offering of songs and dances.

Tashi Tsering⁶¹ knows about two other performances of *Gling bro* dances in Tibet before 1959: one sponsored by the present Sogyal rinpoche's family: A sdug la dkar tshang in Rong pa tsha, Tre hor, and another one at Rdzogs chen monastery.

The 5th Rdzogs chen Rinpoche, Thub bstan chos kyi rdo rje (1872-1935)⁶² was indeed the originator of Gesar dances which he created as a result of visions; dances that later spread in the various branches of Rdzogs chen monastery, and then to other monasteries in the region. But what exactly were these dances? To date, I haven't been able to get enough information to answer this question. The biography of the 5th Rdzogs chen pa⁶³ called them *gar 'cham*, a term repeated in a recent article by one Bdud' dul rdo rje (2008: 97-101)⁶⁴, and defined by a modern dictionary⁶⁵ as "1. a graceful dance filled with dignity 2. a dance and a 'cham,⁶⁶ thus leaving us in total ignorance as to what exactly a *gar 'cham* is.

The biography states that Gesar's knights as well as "the divine assembly of the *dgra bla lung rta* (*dgra bla lung rta'i lha tshogs*) participate in these dances."⁶⁷ Through Nebesky-Wojkowitz (1997: 32), we learn that "in the part of the dance devoted to the Kesar legend there are usually thirty dancers on the scene, but, if the dance is performed on a bigger scale, their number may be increased to eighty. This group of personages is said to be composed mainly of *dpa' brtul*, (heroes). Rather unusual figures included in this dance are the so-called 'wind-horse' (*rlung rta*) and various mythical animals playing an important part in Tibetan astrology. To represent the 'wind-horse', two dancers don a horse-shaped dummy. Also a mountain god plays a part in this 'chams: Gzhi bdag shva mdo, the stag-headed personification of a nearby mountain."

Unfortunately, the author does not give his sources.

⁶⁰ I would like to thank Tashi Tsering for kindly providing me with a copy of the text.

⁶¹ Information Tashi Tsering (Dharamsala, August 2009).

⁶² Bstan 'dzin lung rtogs nyi ma (2004: 362); Bdud' dul rdo rje (2008: 98); TBRC P701; http://www.dzogchenmonastery.cn/html/king_gesar.html
http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/Dzogchen_Rinpoche_Thupten_Chokyi_Dorje
<http://www.tibetanlineages.org/biographies/view/203/9646..>

⁶³ Bstan 'dzin lung rtogs nyi ma (2004: 359-363).

⁶⁴ I am grateful to Tashi Tsering who brought this article to my attention.

⁶⁵ *Tshig mdzod chen mo* (1993: 351).

⁶⁶ 1. *lus sgeg 'gying nyams ldan pa'i gar*/ 2. *gar dang 'cham gnyis*/

⁶⁷ "The title *dgra lha* is given to the four animals who occupy the four corners of the so-called *rlung rta* or 'wind-horse' flag" (Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1997: 32)

Bdud 'dul rdo rje (2008: 98) notes that many great masters who have visited the monastery of Rdzogs chen showed great interest in Gesar: The founder of the monastery, the first Grub dbang Padma rig' dzin (1625-1697) composed the episode *Stag zigs nor rdzong*, “Fortress of the wealth of Stag gzig;” Rdza dpal sprul Rinpoche (1808-1887),⁶⁸ *Shan 'dan nang 'khrug*, “The war of Shan [pa Me ru rtse] and 'Dan [ma];”⁶⁹ 'Ju Mi pham Rinpoche was, as already mentioned, a prolific author of texts dedicated to the hero of the epic, and *Mkhan chen Padma badzra* (1867-1934)⁷⁰, wrote *Gangs ri shel rdzong*, “The Crystal Fortress of the Snowy Mountain.” The author ascribes another text to Padma badzra, *Gling gi bro ra yid 'phrog pad dkar phreng mdzes*,⁷¹ The “Gling dance space, a beautiful string of white lotuses that delights the mind,” a text written “in the symbolic script of the *ḍākinī* that he translated in order to make it accessible” (2008: 98-99).

The 5th Rdzogs chen pa Thub bstan chos kyi rdo rje, the inventor of Gesar dances, was recognized as the reincarnation of the 4th Rdzogs chen rinpoche by 'Jams dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po who was, with Kong sprul blo gros mtha' yas, one of his teachers. Both were major figures in the Non-Sectarian Movement (*ris med*), of which, as already said, the most important personages manifested a strong interest in Gesar. This was the case with Mchog 'gyur gling pa (1829-1870),⁷² Las rab gling pa (1856-1926), and 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen rtse'i dbang po, who like Mi pham, edited a printed version of the epic (Stein 1959: 226).

Everything leads us back to the circle of the “treasures-revealers” (*gter ston*) that constitutes the environment of inspiration for the epic (Stein 1959: 141), the Non-Sectarian Movement (*ris med*) and the Rdzogs chen tradition, centered around Rdzogs chen monastery.

But can there be a link between these dances and the ones performed at the festival?

Sku gling gsum pa, also known as Padma gtum po, the 9th lineage holder of Lung sngon *dgon pa* was a tantric practitioner (*sngags pa*), a “treasures-revealer” (*gter ston*), and was regarded

⁶⁸ See http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/Patrul_Rinpoche (March 2010).

⁶⁹ Me ru rtse the ‘butcher’ was a minister of the Hor King that Gesar spared during the war and who became one of his faithful warriors (Stein 1959: 111, 521-522). 'Dan ma is one important General of Gesar.

⁷⁰ Also called Pad ma rdo rje, he was the master and the disciple of Mi pham. Mkhyen brtse dbang po and Las rab gling pa were among his other disciples. TBRC P6744 (April 2010).

⁷¹ I don't have access to this book.

⁷² Dee Dudjom Rinpoche (1991, I: 841-848).

as the emanation of both Mahāsiddha Dril bu pa (Ganṭāpa)⁷³ and Lha lung dpal gyi rdo rje, the murderer of King Glang dar ma⁷⁴ according to Tibetan sources. The 5th Rdzogs chen pa and the 4th Rdo grub Rinpoche had prophesied his coming to earth.⁷⁵ Moreover, in the late 19th century a lama from Rdzogs chen monastery (Dongcha lama?) came to Lung sngon *dgon pa* to spread the doctrine.⁷⁶

During the festival, Sku gsum gling pa was accompanied by his son and successor, Hung dkar Rinpoche (1969-), himself a reincarnation of Mdo mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje (1800-1859). The latter is the bodily reincarnation (*sku'i sprul sku*) of the great *rnying ma* scholar 'Jigs med gling pa (1730-1798)⁷⁷ one of whose main disciples was the 1st Rdo grub chen 'Jigs med 'phrin las 'od zer (1745-1821)⁷⁸, himself one of Mkhyen brtse Ye shes rdo rje's masters.⁷⁹ Note also that Dpal sprul Rinpoche was the reincarnations of the verbal aspect (*gsung gi sprul sku*) of 'Jigs med gling pa,

The *Mgo log rig gnas lo rgyus* (1991: 235 and 237), "The History of the Mgo log culture", tells us that there was a college of biographical plays (*rnam thar grwa tshang*) called *Rnam thar skal ldan mthong grol gling in Lung sngon dgon pa* where the monks were taught six different plays (*rnam thar zlos gar*), in particular that of Gesar.

The tradition of playing Gesar in this monastery didn't exist before the Chinese occupation and started only in the 1980s.

Sku gsum gling pa told me that the monks of his monastery had been trained in Gser rta in 1981 with a Tibetan dance group (composed of lay people and monks) which is in fact an actual organization called *Gser rta rdzong rnam thar tshogs pa* founded in 1980 by Theg lo Rinpoche. According to Hung dkar rinpoche⁸⁰, Theg lo rinpoche was helped by monks from Rdzogs chen monastery. They were performing what was called *rnam thar*, namely Gesar's story but also those of Srong btsan sgam po and Dri med kun ldan, and others.

⁷³ See Dowman (1988: 145-150).

⁷⁴ On Lha lung dpal kyī rdo rje and his identification, see Karmay (2003: 63-64).

⁷⁵ A short English biography of Sku gsum gling pa (without any references) was given to me in 1999 by an American disciple of the *sprul sku*.

⁷⁶ Gruschke (2001, I: 83).

⁷⁷ The incarnation of the mind aspect of 'Jigs med gling pa is 'Jam dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po (Smith 2001: 26). On 'Jigs med gling pa, see Dudjom Rinpoche 1991, I: 835-840).

⁷⁸ Smith (2001: 21ff, 276, n. 30 et 33).

⁷⁹ Bradburn (1995: 343).

⁸⁰ Mail from May 14th 2010.

Theg lo Rinpoche was recognized by 'Jams dbyangs chos kyi blo gros (the reincarnation of 'Jams dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po) as the rebirth of Padma rdo rje,⁸¹ the second son of Khrag thung bdud 'joms gling pa (1835-1904). The son of one of the emanation of Bdud 'joms gling pa, he studied at the monastery of Rdo grub chen, one of the branches of Rdzogs chen monastery.

Moreover, according to a *sprul sku* of Khra gling, the monks of his monastery have been trained by those of Rdo grub chen only since the “Peaceful Liberation of Tibet,” and that, according to another informant, on the advice of the great master 'Jigs med phun tshog, the founder of Bla rung sgar, a huge monastic camp in Gser rta.⁸²

Films⁸³ shot in Gser rta by Chinese and Western disciples of 'Jigs med phun tshogs show that dances similar to those seen during the festival were held, but to the sound of a flute played by a monk. The theme was the same as that used in the modernized musical playback during the festival. 'Jigs med phun tshogs (1933-2004) had likewise very strong connections with Mi pham and Gesar.⁸⁴ He was recognized as an emanation of 'Dan sras g.Yu 'od 'bum med, the son of 'Dan ma Byang khra, the mighty general of Gesar and also as the reincarnation of the great “treasure-revealer” Las rab gling pa (1856-1926)⁸⁵ who stayed at Rdzogs chen monastery. The latter gave and received lessons to, among others, the 13th Dalai Lama, 'Jams dbyangs chos kyi blo gros (1893-1959, the reincarnation of 'Jams dbyangs mkhyen brtse dbang po and a disciple of the 5th Rdzogs chen pa), the 5th Rdzogs chen pa himself and the 3rd Grub chen 'Jigs med bstan pa'i nyi ma (1865-1926).⁸⁶ 'Jigs med phun tshogs was himself a great “treasure-revealer” and a major scholar of the Rdzogs chen tradition. He had many visions of Gesar during the Cultural Revolution and it was out of devotion that he vowed to him that he would not break his vows.

According to my informants, the monks in Gser rta performed episodes of the epic in the 6th Tibetan month, mainly those related to the life of 'Jigs med phun tshogs as 'Dan sras g.Yu 'od 'bum med and the Gesar dances based on the *Gling bro bde chen rol pa* composed by

⁸¹ TBRC P705 and <http://www.orgyendorjeden.org/announcements/Dudjom%20Lingpa%20Wangs.pdf> (March 2010).

⁸² On 'Jigs med phun tshogs and Gser rta, see Germano (1998: 53-94).

⁸³ I could see the films thanks to N. Schneider.

⁸⁴ See Khenpo Sodarjey (s.d.) et Germano (1998: 53-94).

⁸⁵ See TBRC P5970; <http://www.lotsawahouse.org/tertönsogyalbio.html> and http://rywiki.tsadra.org/index.php/Lerab_Lingpa_Tertön_Sogyal

⁸⁶ TBRC P248 (April 2010).

Mi pham. *Mkan po* 'Jigs phun ascribed the performance of these dances to the need of eliminating karmic obstacles (in fact political obstacles) with the help of Gesar.

Even if I am not able at the present time to assert that the dances performed at the festival were a modern revival of those created by the 5th Rdzogs chen pa, all this shows that in modern times too the Amdo hierarchs involved in the Gesar dances:

are “treasure-revealers”;

have close links with the great masters of the Non-Sectarian Movement;

have ties with Rdzogs chen and Rdo grub chen monasteries and practice the Rdzogs chen tradition.

This hypothesis has been corroborated by information received very recently by mail from Hung dkar rinpoche.⁸⁷ Nevertheless, he pointed to the fact that if the *Rta rgyug* chapter was based on the vision of the 5th Rdogs chen pa, the *Hor gling* episode they performed at the festival was based on their own choreography. According to him, Sku gsum gling pa was the first to have established a formal dance troupe in the Mgo log area. The other monks were either trained in Lung sngon monastery or learned just by coming to watch. Hung dkar Rinpoche added that when his father started the first dance troupe, several lamas complained that it was inappropriate for monks to be dancing the Gesar story. Those against it have now formed their own Gesar dance troupe.⁸⁸

Besides this, we know that 'Jigs med phun tshog was an exemplary religious leader seeking to maintain Tibetan identity while avoiding conflict with the authorities (Germano 1998: 53-94). Could this revitalization of the Gesar dances in the eastern provinces of Tibet — the traditional environment in which they were born — along with the interest in them shown by some major charismatic religious figures and the vitality they exude at present mean that the epic is used by Tibetans as a “space for resistance”?

As a conclusion

Following the integration of Tibet into China, many traditions have been suppressed. But others have been rebuilt by Tibetans who have had to adapt to the constraints imposed by

⁸⁷ I would like to thank A. Terrone and Tulku Sherdor for the help they gave me in getting in touch with Hung dkar rinpoche.

⁸⁸ Mail of May 14th 2010.

the Chinese state and also to an oft-times brutal confrontation with modernity and modernization.

The millennial commemoration of the festival of the epic allows us to observe a relatively common phenomenon among oppressed people: on the one hand, the people under domination reappropriate some discourse of their overlords. On the other hand, the role of local cadres is not insignificant in the revival of some tradition, as shown by Feuchtwang (2000) and Diemberger (2003).

The Gesar epic, used as a propaganda tool by the Chinese in their “civilizing” project, is for the Tibetans a space of cultural expression if not a “space for resistance”, a niche where they rush to affirm their identity. It is said that contrary to the hopes of the Chinese authorities, the spread of the epic has strengthened the feeling of “Tibetaness” of the population (Dreyfus 1998: 46). It is significant that Sku gsum gling pa got the authorization to build his monastery by promising that the monks would perform chapters of the epic. Even covered with Chinese make-up and dressed in colorful clothes, the performances of Gesar dances by monks are, for the Tibetans, imbued with religious meaning. This can explain the apparition of this new tradition in so many monasteries. Moreover such a festival offers a place where Tibetans can be found in large numbers without causing suspicion

The Chinese authorities, for their part, supported by UNESCO, have appropriated the Tibetan epic. They try to empty it of any religious content and transform it into a tourist attraction. China’s new presentation of the epic has made use of some local traditions from Kham placing Gesar’s birth in A phyug, a village located in the former domains of the Kingdom of Lingsang.⁸⁹ The story even adds that Gesar was born on a Saturday, in a poor, “socially correct”, family of nomadic pastoralists.⁹⁰ This is now the pretext for travelling in the footsteps of the epic hero and for some years, tourist trips have been organized as a quest for Gesar.

⁸⁹ See Fitzherbert (2007) for a study of these traditions.

⁹⁰ http://www1.chinaculture.org/library/2008-01/10/content_47635.htm (March 2010).

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