Buddhicizing the Warrior-King Gesar in the *dMyal gling rDzogs pa Chen po*

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That hell has a certain allure is undeniable. From the gory maps of Dante's *Inferno* to contemporary television and film featuring devils and demons, hell occupies a unique conceptual space at the intersection of anxiety and amusement, of dread and diversion, of panic and pastime. Edward Ingebretsen has traced the development of the genre of horror as entertainment in American culture to the fascination—one might even say erotic obsession—with hell of America's first settlers, the Puritans.[1] However, the attraction of hell extends across cultures, and many of the most popular myths and legends of Buddhism prominently feature the torturous tribulations of the netherworld. My own experience living in Tibetan communities has shown that Buddhists are quite similar to the Western population: while a small portion of the audience viewing a hell image will become respectful and contemplative in response to the distressing vision before them, a much larger portion will find entertainment in the picture—pointing in barely-contained, gleeful horror to the mashed torsos, stretched limbs, and little dangling eyeballs.

My interest in hell lies not in exploring the strange feature of a human nature so enthralled by that which is meant to disgust, but rather to begin investigating how the apparent psychological power and allure of hell has been harnessed by Tibetan Buddhist thinkers to produce doctrinal change. Specifically, detailed descriptions of hell and the characters one meets there are an important component in transforming the eastern Tibetan epic hero King Gesar of Gling into an explicitly Buddhist teacher and deity. When King Gesar descends to hell to save his mother in the popular *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*, it decisively buddhicizes the warrior-king by means of situating him in a recognisably Buddhist narrative context. However, Gesar's netherworld encounter with King Yama also humbles the violent warrior-king while simultaneously ensuring he is subordinate to the

[1] See, further, Ingebretsen 1996.

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Buddhist institution and is dependent on them to fulfil his salvific role.

1. Buddhist, Pre-Buddhist, and the Problem of Second-Order Categories

Many scholars have argued that religions and religious thinking are inherently fluid and dynamic. Thomas Tweed has maintained that an academic picture of religion that more closely mirrors reality is one which discusses religions not as discrete categories or units, but instead as "cultural flows."[2] Indeed, one could argue that the boundaries between "Buddhist" and "non-Buddhist" in Tibet are so porous as to make the process of "buddhicizing" an untenable object of study. To consider the *dMyal gling* as a force in "buddhicizing" King Gesar there is an apparent assumption of certain divisions between religion and culture and a risk of essentialising the nature of "religion" and "Buddhism" in a way that distorts lived Tibetan realities instead of elucidating them.

This issue is compounded by a lack of knowledge about the exact nature and boundaries of "pre-Buddhist" religion in Tibet. While Bon practitioners claim to continue the tradition of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion, David Snellgrove and others have challenged some of these historical claims concerning Bon's authentically pre-Buddhist nature—though acknowledging that Bon is more than a mere mimicry of Buddhist thought and practice.[3] Considering the unique aspects of Tibetan Buddhism, Réne de Nebesky-Wojkowitz and John Bellezza both use their contemporary research on spirit mediums to argue for the practice's centrality in "pre-Buddhist" religious practices.[4] Despite the encyclopedic nature of their work, however, using contemporary Buddhist practice to hypothesise about the nature of religious thinking in Tibet before Buddhism's arrival is a dangerous game that produces more speculations than certainties. Indeed, the project does more to reveal the malleable and transforming nature of the category of "Buddhism" than to demonstrate those religious practices in which Tibetans engaged before Buddhism's arrival on the plateau.

The risk in using terms like "Buddhist," "non-Buddhist," and "buddhicizing" lies in misunderstanding the nature and purpose of these categories. These are not empirical realities, but rather heuristic, second-order categories created by scholars as the basis of a comparison. As J.Z. Smith explains, creating comparisons using

[2] Tweed 2008.
[3] Snellgrove 1967.
[4] Nebesky-Wojkowitz 1993; Bellezza 2005.

second-order categories like this has the potential to reveal something new which would have otherwise remained hidden.[5] Examining how the figure of King Gesar moved from being a "non-Buddhist" warrior-king to a "Buddhist" savior in hell seeks to use these categories as a framework to enhance our understanding of the nature of violence in Tibet, Tibetans' self-perception of non-tantric Buddhism in Tibet, and the multivariate roles popular literature plays in Tibetan society.

2. *An Introduction to the* dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po

The story of King Gesar's descent to hell to save his mother is almost certainly a relatively recent innovation. Matthew Kapstein argues the text's origins lie in nineteenth-century or twentieth-century Khams due to the extent of the region's already-documented Gesar-related activity during that century.[6] Beyond the well-known composition of tantric Gesar rituals by 'Ju Mi pham rgya mtsho (1846–1912)[7] and 'Gyur med thub bstan 'jams dbyangs grags pa's (1883–1945) edition of the epic's first three episodes,[8] the region also witnessed the commencement of Dzogs chen monastery's Gesar operas by the Fifth Dzogs chen rin po che Thub bstan chos kyi rdo rje (1872–1935)[9] and the era saw the construction of numerous temples devoted to the warrior-king. The *dMyal gling's* nineteenth-century or twentieth-century origin is also supported by its first blockprint edition, which was created at Wa ra monastery (Wa ra dgon pa) and sponsored by the early twentieth-century monastic retreatant Dam chos bstan pa. Although few copies of the Wa ra blockprint remain today,[10] handwritten reproductions frequently circulated among Tibetan

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5 Smith 1982.

6 Kapstein 2007a.

7 Forgues 2011.

8 Despite only containing the first three episodes and its authorship by a man other than 'Ju Mi pham, the text is frequently called the "Mi pham Gesar" after the designation of the late Robin Kornman. Robin Kornman's English translation of these has recently been completed by Sangye Khandro and Lama Chonam (Kornman, Sangye Khandro and Lama Chonam 2013). The composition and publication of this text has been discussed by Solomon George FitzHerbert in his dissertation, "The Birth of Gesar: Narrative Diversity and Social Resonance in the Tibetan Epic Tradition," 2007.

9 A plaque to commemorate this event was recently installed on the road between the monastery and the *bshad grwa.* The area, however, gets little foot traffic and the broader significance of this plaque is unknown.

10 A notable exception is the nearly complete copy held at the Nationalities University in Beijing, China.

communities in the 1960s and 1970s. [11] These hand-copied manuscripts of the Wa ra blockprint became the foundation for the majority of subsequent publications.

Beyond its relatively recent origin, the *dMyal gling* is unique among Gesar episodes on two accounts: first, while most episodes of the Gesar epic are initially oral narratives which are sometimes written down at a later point, the *dMyal gling* is entirely a literary text. It is possible that the *dMyal gling* gained a secondary orality and gave rise to differing versions of the narrative where King Gesar descends to hell not to save his mother, but rather to save his female confidante or his wife. However, a narrative of Gesar's journey to hell may also have circulated as an oral story performed by bards prior to the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po's* publication. Oral stories leave few traces, and it is likely, therefore, that we will never know which came first—the oral or the published. In terms of contemporary published versions, however, the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* is by far the most popular: of the ten recent publications of the *dMyal gling* produced since the 1970s, eight are the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*.

The second unique feature of the *dMyal gling* in relation to other episodes of the Gesar epic is the text's status as a self-proclaimed treasure (*gter ma*). The purported author is 'Dan bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug, whose title likely indicates that he is a *bla ma* serving King Gesar's most-trusted warrior—the archer 'Dan ma. 'Dan ma, however, is also a locale north of sDe dge associated with the Gling tshang kingdom and many epic traditions in the Gling tshang area claim that 'Dan ma's name reflects his home in that region.[12] It is likely, therefore, that the title "'Dan bla ma" denotes both the author's allegiance to the archer 'Dan ma, as well as his association with the physical region bearing the same name. Bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug actually makes an appearance in the later chapters of the text itself, leading several funerary rituals for King Gesar's warriors. After hiding the *dMyal gling* in the Red Water Lake (*dMar chu'i rdzing bu*) in Northern Golok, it was recovered by the Gling tshang gter ston Drag rtsal rdo rje. No explicit explanation is offered within the text for Chos kyi dbang phyug taking on the role of a treasure concealer usually reserved for Padmasambhava or his consort, but the text's colophon features traditionally Buddhist statements about the benefits of reading, copying, or reproducing the text. Interviews with contemporary practitioners of Gesar *tantra*s

[11] Thub bstan phun tshogs (Professor at the Southwest University for Nationalities), personal interview by the author, Chengdu, China, June 5, 2015.

[12] FitzHerbert 2007.

reveal that both men are believed to have been rNying ma *bla ma*s,[13] though no further information can be found on their specific identities at this time. No biographies or *rnam thar* exist for Drag rtsal rdo rje, and it seems that excepting his revelation of the *dMyal gling* he had relatively little impact as a treasure recoverer (*gter ston*) or as a religious practitioner.

The specifically Buddhist features of the *dMyal gling* extend beyond its status as a *gter ma* to the narrative itself, which has two distinct parts revealing the nature of King Gesar as both a Buddhist teacher and a Buddhist Savior. The first half of the *dMyal gling* tells of King Gesar traveling to the Copper-Coloured Mountain and receiving initiations not only from Padmasambhava, but also from every buddha of the five families. He then returns to Gling, where he calls together peoples from every land—including those which he has conquered—and gives specific teachings to each delegation, ending with a proclamatory song encouraging devoted practice and commitment to Buddhism. The titles of the teachings Gesar gives his guests read like a primer of important rDzogs chen practices and rituals—beginning with ordinary preliminaries on the nature of the transient world and the importance of a human life, through the *mKha' 'gro snying thig*, the *Bla ma yang thig*, and others.

Despite the intriguing nature of this section and its role in situating the *dMyal gling* within contemporaneous Ris med discourses more broadly, the rest of this paper will focus on the second half of the *dMyal gling.* In this section, King Gesar takes the form of a different Buddhist archetype—a savior for all suffering beings in hell (*dmyal ba*). After giving teachings to the assembled multitudes, Gesar journeys to India for an intensive meditation retreat, during which time his mother dies. Despite the many rituals sponsored by his wife 'Brug mo and all the Gling pas, the *bla ma*s of Gling divine that his mother has been reborn in hell. They dispatch a messenger to notify the king, who does his own divination to confirm that his mother has been reborn in the deepest, most tortuous hell—the Avīci hell or "No Waves" hell, named thus because torture continues without interruption. He then descends to hell to challenge the Lord of the Underworld—King Yama, though he is most frequently called the Dharma King (*chos rgyal*) in this text—and demand that he release his suffering mother. What follows is a significant encounter between Yama and Gesar that reveals important distinctions and debates about the role of violence in religious practice and life; it ultimately subjugates the warrior-king to

[13] Bkra shis 'od dkar (Caretaker and lead practitioner at Gesar Temple in Asu Village), personal Interview by the author, Asu, Sichuan, China, July 24, 2015.

the Buddhist institution, while still allowing him to leave hell triumphant with his mother freed and reborn in a Pure Land.

3. Buddhicizing a Warrior-King

As explained above, we see in the *dMyal gling* two distinct methods of buddhicizing the epic hero King Gesar of Gling—one by giving him initiations from Padmasambhava and portraying him as a Buddhist teacher par excellence, the other by means of inserting him into the narrative role of a Buddhist savior. As has been noted by Matthew Kapstein, the narrative of Buddhist savior in hell is not particularly novel.[14] The *dMyal gling* is likely building on popular mythology surrounding the Buddhist disciple Maudgalyāyana—known in China as Mu-Lian, where the tale is most popular—who is also said to have descended to hell to save his mother. When talking about heroes saving mothers in hell, it seems inconceivable that the authors of the *dMyal gling* were ignorant of the Chinese tale. Beginning from the ninth century onwards, several translations of the Mu-Lian story existed in Tibet in various forms of completeness.[15] The influence of the Mu-Lian narrative is apparent in the stories of other indigenous Tibetan narratives of saviors in hell—including the Bon hero lHa bu padma 'phrul and Gu ru chos dbang (1212–1270), whose own narrative of saving his mother in hell only arose centuries after his death.[16] The story of lHa bu padma 'phrul in particular demonstrates a clear mimicry of the Mu-Lian narrative, down to the mother's rebirth as a dog and the inclusion of specific ritual practices to ensure relatives are never reborn in hell.[17]

While the *dMyal gling* inserts King Gesar into this established narrative role of a Buddhist savior in hell, it is important to note that there are few clear signs of direct influence between Mu-Lian's descent to hell and the *dMyal gling*. In its fullest iteration, the story of Mu-Lian features not a simple salvation, but multiple trips to hell and rebirths, as Mu-Lian gains assistance from the Śā kyamuni Buddha and leads his mother through successive rebirths as a hungry ghost, a black dog, and a human.[18] Furthermore, the Mu-Lian story traditionally features calls to perform specific ritual practices—namely making offerings to the Buddhist monastic assembly during

[14] Kapstein 2007a.
[15] Berounsky 2012: 86–99.
[16] Cuevas 2008: 118.
[17] Berounsky 2012: 100–15.
[18] An excellent translation of the full tale can be found in Victor Mair 2007: 87–121.

the Ghost Festival—to ensure one's relatives are spared from hell.[19] The *dMyal gling* features no such call to ritual practice, nor is the threat that one's parents could end up like Gesar's mother 'Gogs mo relevant, for reasons that will be discussed below. Despite this lack of clear influence, the Mu-Lian story and the narratives to which it gave rise are important for demonstrating the prevalence and continued attraction of the Buddhist imagery of the hell saviour. When King Gesar was re-contextualised as a Buddhist saviour in hell, therefore, it represented a critical move to buddhicize him and augment his role as a Buddhist teacher.

However, while the *dMyal gling*'s hell episode buddhicizes King Gesar by means of outfitting him in this traditional narrative role, certain unavoidable problems begin to arise—namely that King Gesar does not fit the ideal model of a Buddhist savior quite so well. Unlike Maudgalyāyana and Gu ru chos dbang, King Gesar was not already a Buddhist figure turned into a popular hero by his adventures in hell; rather, he was a folk hero who became a Buddhist hero. This reversal means that King Gesar carries a significant amount of narrative "baggage" featuring traits generally celebrated in eastern Tibetan cultures of masculinity,[20] but rather distasteful to the religious identity and teachings of many prevalent forms of lay Buddhism in nineteenth-century Khams—a certain love of arms and armory, a penchant for incredible feats of violence, and a kingly habit of brutally conquering surrounding lands. While these certainly fit a tantric metaphor, the hell episode of the *dMyal gling* seems to be intended for an educated, but largely non-ordained, lay audience, making King Gesar's traditional penchant for violence and death rather problematic.

As a historical phenomenon, the implicit tension between the Gesar epic and Tibetan Buddhist ethical ideals has been remarked upon by Georges Dreyfus and Robin Kornman.[21] While conducting field research in Yul shul during the summer of 2015, this dispute was still conspicuously present. While some monasteries associated with the bKa' brgyud and rNying ma orders in eastern Tibet have incorporated King Gesar into the pantheon of divine Buddhist figures, many other religious leaders expressed suspicion of the epic hero. In an interview with mKhan po Thub bstan rong rgyu of Ba' thang bsam grub gling monastery, the *mkhan po* explained that it was inappropriate for devout Buddhists to read the Gesar epic because it would make them too easily provoked and too wild, leading to acts

19 Teiser 1988: 196–212.
20 Tsomu 2015; Barstow *forthcoming*.
21 Dreyfus 1994; Kornman 1995.

of violence in emulation of King Gesar.[22] An interview with Tibetan doctor Mon pa don sgrub echoed this sentiment, though he limited the prohibition on reading Gesar only to monks.[23] A ba 'jam zong, an elder of Rong bu village, told me that if the Gesar epic becomes too popular, it will lead to the end of Buddhism in Tibet.[24] What is evident in these interviews and in the historical evidence presented by Dreyfus and others is that many Tibetans perceive an opposition between the violent figure of King Gesar and the practice of Buddhism. In making King Gesar a Buddhist savior, therefore, the authors of the *dMyal gling* must in some way "tame" King Gesar—take the bite out of his bark, dull the sword in his scabbard, and soften the tip of his arrow.

4. Subordinating King Gesar to the Buddhist Institution

To accomplish the goal of taming King Gesar within his role as a Buddhist savior, the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* engineers an encounter between King Gesar and Yama in hell that clearly subjugates the epic hero to the Buddhist institution as represented by the King of the Underworld. While Gesar has come to hell as a recognisably Buddhist saviour, his encounter with King Yama ensures that he is also clearly made subject to the Buddhist laws of cause and effect and its resultant punishment for wanton bloodshed and murder. The foundation of his power as a Buddhist saviour is revealed to be entirely dependent on the Buddhist institution: King Yama must provide Gesar the tantric ritual necessary to free suffering beings in hell.

Upon finding out his mother has been condemned to hell, King Gesar flies upon his magical horse to King Yama's throne, draws a thousand golden arrows, places them in his bow which can bend the world, and demands King Yama tell him where his mother is located. What follows is a lengthy encounter in which King Gesar not only fails to even ruffle King Yama, but is also defeated in battle by King Yama and his servants. In his interrogation, Gesar demands to know why his mother has been placed in hell, despite the fact that she is virtuous; King Yama explains that his mother's painful rebirth is punishment for Gesar's own sins of violence.

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[22] Thub bstan rong rgyu (Religious teacher at 'Ba' thang bsam grub gling), personal interview by the author, Jyekundo, Yushu, July 27, 2015.

[23] Mon pa don sgrub (Tibetan medical doctor in Zhiduo), personal interview by the author, Zhiduo, Yul shu, July 26, 2015.

[24] A ba 'jam zong (Village Elder), personal interview by the author, Hua Shou Village, Yushu Prefecture, July 28, 2015.

Yama then enters into a vitriolic critique of Gesar based on the laws of karma, explaining that he is a "butcher who kills in the morning, but acts like a *bla ma* in the afternoon,"[25] and that Gesar's heroic companions "kill as meaninglessly as making water."[26] Following these attacks directed at the actions of King Gesar as a warrior, King Yama criticises his role as a ruler. Yama mockingly asks Gesar if it is suitable or good Buddhist rulership to crush neighbouring nations in order to receive tribute. Enraged by Yama's mockery, King Gesar runs to attack, but Yama's servants emanate a mandala of wrathful buddhas in defence. When Gesar tries to behead one of the emanated buddhas, his own head is lobed off instead and he is defeated.[27] Upon arising, Yama and Gesar sing several songs to each other—a common trope in the oral versions of the epic that is mimicked in this literary edition—each trying to convince the other of their viewpoint on the role of violence in religious practice. During this interlude, Gesar makes one last effort to convince Yama of the ethical correctness of his actions, claiming that his warfare has ultimately spiritual aims: "When I fight, I fight with the enemy of afflictive emotions; I uproot the blood line of the five toxic emotions."[28] Yama remains unconvinced, however, and Gesar prepares to leave in defeat.

This narrative interlude reveals a critique of King Gesar grounded in a non-tantric, traditional Buddhist perspective that links his bloodshed and martial prowess with the suffering of his mother in hell. Despite his role as a Buddhist teacher earlier in the text, King Gesar fundamentally misunderstands the equivalency of self and other—as demonstrated by his attack on the emanated buddhas that results only in injury to himself. The Buddhist critique of King Gesar is reinforced throughout the encounter by phrases asserting the primacy of karma which pepper Yama's speech: in one example, Yama proclaims, "It is not I, the Dharma King, who places one in hell…it is the result of calculations of cause and effect."[29] Not only is this critique of Gesar's violent nature on the basis of karmic consequence entirely unprecedented in Gesar literature, but it also condemns King Gesar for the very things for which he is celebrated in other Gesar narratives. It is not merely King Gesar's mother who is in hell; all the demon kings whom Gesar had killed in other episodes of the epic surround her. In order to save his mother 'Gogs mo, therefore, King Gesar must save the demon kings he had fought so

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[25] Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160.
[26] *Ibid*.
[27] *Ibid*.: 162.
[28] *Ibid*.: 173.
[29] *Ibid*.: 160.

hard to destroy.

Although Yama presents a Buddhist denunciation of King Gesar, it is important to note that the interlude between the two men does not seek to actively undermine the larger vision of Gesar as a Buddhist figure developed in the first part of the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*—where Gesar receives initiations from Padmasambhava and gives Buddhist teachings—or in his incarnation as a Buddhist saviour in hell. Before criticising King Gesar for his years of bloodshed, Yama also praises him for planting Buddhism and promoting Śākyamuni's words in the lands under his jurisdiction. Yama even acknowledges that King Gesar is an emanation of Mañjuśrī. This identification is an interesting break with the rest of other buddhicised Gesar literature where King Gesar is almost always painted as an emanation of Avalokiteśvara rather than Mañjuśrī.[30] Yama's identification of King Gesar as an emanation of Mañjuśrī emphasises that despite his misunderstanding of karma and inappropriate violent actions, King Gesar is still essentially a Buddhist figure. While King Gesar's descent to hell to save his mother establishes him as a Buddhist saviour, his encounter with King Yama provides a unique condemnation which demonstrates that Gesar is himself still subject to the Buddhist institution, cosmology, and the laws of karma.

As a defeated King Gesar prepares to leave his mother in hell and return to Gling, Yama calls on him to remain and reveals a second strategy for subordinating King Gesar to the Buddhist institution—King Yama himself acts as a Buddhist teacher to provide King Gesar with the ability to free suffering beings of hell. Before offering Gesar instruction in the transference ritual to remove beings from hell, Yama's role as an important and powerful person within Buddhist cosmology is first reaffirmed. Yama asserts his own spiritual attainment to Gesar, stating: "I encircle the transient world. [My] exalted mind meditates without distraction on the emptiness of the self-luminous mind."[31] He then exhorts King Gesar to fulfill his duty as a Buddhist saviour and lead his mother from hell.

To aid in his quest, Yama as Buddhist teacher explains the ritual of *'pho ba* transference which Gesar can perform to free the suffering beings in hell. As mentioned previously, these suffering beings include not only his own mother, but also the demon kings who terrorised the land prior to Gesar's conquest. Once receiving the ritual, King Gesar "loosens the armor from his body, removes the pennant from his helmet, and tosses the weapons from his waist."[32]

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[30] This shift is a major focus of my current research. Mikles *in progress*.
[31] Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 186.
[32] *Ibid.*: 194.

Free from these emblems of his martial prowess, Gesar descends deep into hell to search for his mother. Like many other forms of Tibetan hell literature, Gesar tours the hell realms accompanied by King Yama's Tiger-headed servant, stopping at each level to hear of the sins that land one there and using the transference ritual taught to him by King Yama to free the suffering beings. On account of King Gesar's actions, the hell realm is ultimately transformed from a place of torment into a "courtyard of flowers" and a "place of delights," though we can presume this change is not permanent.

5. Gesar's Mother in Hell

By means of his journey to hell to save his mother, the demon kings he previously destroyed, and all suffering hell-beings, King Gesar is made into a Buddhist saviour. However, to address the violent nature of King Gesar at odds with traditional Buddhist ethics, the text portrays him as a saviour clearly subject to the Buddhist institution and the laws of cause and effect as evidenced both by Yama's chastisement of the epic hero and Yama's role in providing Gesar with salvific power. This emphasis on King Gesar's confrontation with karma presents an unresolved question—why do King Gesar's sins have an effect on the spiritual status of his mother at all? Throughout traditional Indian Buddhist doctrine, karma generally belongs to an individual alone. While the Buddha is said to have ascended to the Heaven of the Thirty-Three to preach the dharma to his mother and ensure her salvation, *her* favourable rebirth was not directly caused by *his* merits—except perhaps for the merit of birthing a Buddha. Indeed, Yama's songs seem to support the individual nature of karma, as he tells Gesar, "If you have dharma, I am the one who will lead you to the heavenly realm. If you do not have dharma, I am the one who will posit you in hell. I am the one who honestly differentiates good and bad karma."[33]

It is possible that this non-traditional twist of doctrine is evidence of Chinese influence on the *dMyal gling*—mirroring many forms of Chinese Buddhism, Gesar's mother's salvation is tied up with his own. As noted earlier in the discussion of the popular Chinese tale of Mu-Lian, several influential Chinese Buddhist texts argue that children are uniquely responsible for parental salvation and provide the Buddhist rituals necessary to ensure their redemption.[34] We know that some versions of these texts were translated into Tibetan as early

[33] *Ibid.*: 163.
[34] Teiser 1988 and 2003.

as the ninth century, though their readership seems to have been extremely limited.[35] Indeed, Matthew Kapstein notes that Tibetans seems to have intentionally avoided Chinese apocryphal texts,[36] and the Ghost Festival—where individuals make offerings at both the Buddhist monastery and local grave sites in order to benefit their ancestors—was simply never as popular in Tibet as it was in China. Beyond that, with little to no explicit evidence, it is difficult, some might even say dangerous,[37] to rely solely on this amorphous force called "influence" as an explanation for the text's unique narrative.

A more appropriate explanation for Gesar's mother's suffering also did not arise from field research in Yul shul. When asked about why Gesar's mother was in hell, my informants consistently provided different reasons than the text itself did. The most popular reason was that—despite being a devout Buddhist—Gesar's mother fell to hell because she had taken pleasure in Gesar's conquests of foreign lands and rejoiced in the many deaths they caused. Such a sentiment or rationale is not mentioned a single time within the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po.* Despite my efforts to confirm with my informants that we were discussing the published *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* of Wa ra monastery, however, it is possible that this reasoning reflects interpretations found in alternate renditions of the *dMyal gling* as either sung by Gesar bards or published in contemporary paperback editions. Whatever the reason for this change, the explanation popularly offered, either intentionally or unintentionally, contradicts the text's own reasoning and does little to illuminate why Gesar's mother is in hell.

I suggest that two mutually reinforcing concerns are at work ensuring that the violent actions of King Gesar cause his mother's rebirth in hell. As discussed above, making King Gesar a Buddhist savior in hell effectively draws him more completely into a Buddhist narrative framework. It also forces a confrontation with Gesar's violent nature in other epic episodes that feature him destroying demonic kings. To bring Gesar into a Buddhist context defined by non-tantric forms of morality, he must be chastised and reformed from his violent nature. However, if he is to remain a Buddhist savior within a traditional narrative setting, he cannot be sent to hell himself. Thus, sending his mother to hell in atonement for his sins is the most logical choice within the narrative.

The second motive concerns preserving the *dMyal gling*'s inter-textuality with other episodes of the Gesar epic. Descending to hell to save one's mother is the act of a Buddhist savior par excellence,

[35] Berounsky 2012; Kapstein 2007b.
[36] Kapstein 2007b: 211–12.
[37] Lincoln 2012.

and King Gesar is closely imitating many Buddhist heroes such as Maudgalyāyana and Gu ru chos dbang, as discussed above. However, unlike the mothers of those heroes, King Gesar's mother is a virtuous Buddhist in all other episodes of the epic. If the creators of the *dMyal gling* wanted to create a story of Gesar saving his mother in hell which still had the authority of the larger canon of the Gesar epic, his mother could not be sinful—thus her punishment for Gesar's actions.

Further evidence supporting the author's concern for preserving the *dMyal gling's* intertextuality comes from the format of the text itself. Despite the *dMyal gling's* literary origins, it is carefully arranged to appear as if it were an oral episode—it is a prosimetric text and the song sections of the text rely particularly heavily on traditional features of eastern Tibetan oral poetics and metaphorical language. In this way, the buddhicization of King Gesar by means of the hell episode of the *dMyal gling*—as well as the earlier section where he takes on the mantle of Buddhist teacher—is made largely seamless with the rest of the canon and ensures that King Gesar's new identity as a Buddhist savior subjugated under the Buddhist laws of karma fully shares in the authority of the rest of the oral epic's canon.

6. Concluding Thoughts

Among the various episodes of the Gesar epic, the *dMyal gling* is entirely unique. Although containing little of the bloodshed and bravery that makes the other episodes of the Gesar epic so exciting, it simultaneously elevates King Gesar to a Buddhist teacher and saviour while also effectively subordinating his power to the Buddhist institution and cosmological universe. In this new role, Gesar is empowered as a Buddhist deity in a devotional rNying ma rDzogs chen context that prizes a non-tantric Buddhist moral framework, and we can see the effects of this promotion today at the numerous Gesar temples and religious sites across both Khams and A mdo. While few copies of the important first edition blockprint of the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* from Wa ra monastery remain, that blockprint became the wellspring for numerous handwritten copies produced for those desperate to acquire religious materials during the repressive and tumultuous time of the Cultural Revolution. The majority of contemporary publications of the *dMyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* originated from these individual, hand-written copies. In this way, the story of the *dMyal gling's* preservation and continued importance speak not only to the endurance of King Gesar as both an

epic hero and a religious figure, but also to the incredible tenacity of the Tibetan people to preserve their literature in the face of assault.

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