

Compte-rendu

Blondeau, Anne-Marie et Anne Chayet, *L'épopée tibétaine de Gesar. Manuscrit bon-po Fonds A. David-Néel du musée national des Arts Asiatiques-Guimet, Suilly-la-Tour (Éditions Findakly), 2014. 254 pp. ISBN 978-2-86805-148-6. ISSN 1271-9595.*

by Per Kværne
(IKOS, University of Oslo)

Two fundamental publications by Rolf A. Stein – *L'épopée tibétaine de Gesar dans sa version lamaïque de Ling* (Paris, 1956) and *Recherches sur l'épopée et le barde au Tibet* (Paris, 1959) – firmly established Paris as the centre of Gesar studies. Almost twenty years later, this was continued by Mireille Helffer, *Les chants dans l'épopée tibétaine de Gesar d'après le livre de la course de cheval. Version chantée de Blo-bzañ bstan-'jin*, Genève – Paris (Librairie Droz), 1977.

In the meantime, Stein had by no means abandoned Gesar studies. Starting in January 1969, this reviewer had the privilege of participating as a young student for half a year in Stein's weekly seminar on the "Leningrad Gesar manuscript", a text originating in Amdo. A version of this text had already been translated by Matthias Hermanns (*Das National-Epos der Tibeter Gling könig Ge sar*, Regensburg, 1965). A close study of Hermanns' German translation showed that while it was not without merit, it would be useful to translate the Tibetan text again in a more philologically sophisticated form. Although such a translation does not seem to have been completed by the time Stein's Gesar seminar ended in 1972,¹ the Gesar epic continued to intrigue French Tibetologist, and in the 1990s a group of scholars, headed by Anne-Marie Blondeau and Anne Chayet and with the collaboration of Yontan Gyatso and Samten G. Karmay, studied a Gesar text, conserved in the Musée Guimet, to which the latter had drawn attention. The present volume is the result of this project.

The volume contains a facsimile reproduction and annotated translation of three chapters of the Gesar epic: "The chapter of long

¹ For the somewhat complicated history of the study of the "Amdo version", cf. R.A. Stein, "L'épopée de Gesar dans sa version écrite de l'Amdo", Tadeusz Skorupski (ed.), *Indo-Tibetan Studies. Papers in honour and appreciation of Professor David L. Snellgrove's contribution to Indo-Tibetan Studies*, Buddhica Britannica Series continua II, Tring (The Institute of Buddhist Studies), 1990, pp. 293-304.

life", "The chapter of remedies", and "The chapter of the (conquest of) Hor". The three chapters form a single manuscript, known as the "Manuscrit Alexandra David-Néel", preserved in the Musée Guimet with the inventory number BG 54805. The author of the text is mentioned in the colophons under two names: dBang-chen Nyi-ma, of the gDong tribe and the rMa clan, or Lung-rig Nyi-ma Grags-pa (p. 6). Although the rMa clan was counted among the Hor tribes, its home area was located in the neighbouring district of Khyung-po. It is possible to determine the year of the final editing of the text (Earth-Pig, *sa phag*) as 1899. The author was what might be styled a 'devotee' of Gesar, having composed a ritual text invoking Gesar as the "expeller of the (enemy's) army" (*Ge-sar dmag-bzlog*) and established the corresponding annual ritual. Moreover, the clan castle contained a chapel consecrated to Gesar which contained a collection of masks of the hero of the epic and his thirty heroic warriors (*dpa' thul*), as well as an extensive collection of texts related to Gesar (p. 7).

The family of dBang-chen Nyi-ma were adherents of Bön, which at first sight is surprising, since *bon po* priests are generally depicted in the epic as evil sorcerers whom Gesar makes it his business to suppress. This is, however, not the case in the present version, where, on the contrary, Gesar is presented as "the restorer of Buddhism and Bön, without distinction" and as "the protector of *ban de* (Buddhist monks) as well as *bon po*" (p. 16). A revealing passage in the manuscript refers to "en Inde et au Zhang chung... le *bon* et le bouddhisme orthodoxes", in contrast to "des *ban de* hérétiques et des *bon po* hérétiques, qui sont hétérodoxes" (p. 93, *rGya gar dang Zhang chung la nang pa'i bon chos... phyi pa ban mu stegs dang bon mu stegs*). dBang-chen Nyi-ma can therefore be placed, as Blondeau and Chayet point out, in the context of *bon gsar*, "New Bön", an eclectic movement based on *gter ma* texts in which an attempt is made to render Bön compatible with Nyingma teachings, especially with regard to the figure of Padmasambhava – a figure which always takes centre stage in the Gesar epic (*ibid.*).

The book contains a detailed Index (pp. 217-234), as well as an extremely useful Glossary (pp. 187-215), covering verbal expressions and proper as well as common nouns. Many of the expressions listed and discussed – in many cases dialect terms from Kham and Amdo – cannot be found in available dictionaries.

It will come as no surprise, given the experience and competence of the authors, that their translation is reliable as well as readable. In the following I offer only a few remarks, all of which concern details.

— p. 31, l. 13 from top: The context is a song addressed to Gesar by the goddess Ma ne-ne gNam-sman dkar-mo. At a certain point in the

song, she exhorts Gesar to turn his body (*sku*), mind (*thugs*), and speech (*gsung*, in that order) to the body, mind and speech of the goddess, in the form of, respectively, her face (*zhal ras*), her thought (*sems nyid*), and the the 'religious song' she is singing to him (*zhi ba'i chos glu*). There is perfect parallelism between the three lines; hence it is – I suggest – an error to translate *sku zhal ras nyi mdangs bdag la gtod* by "En ce qui concerne votre corps, concentrez sur moi le soleil brillant de votre visage". It is only *sku* that refers to Gesar; *zhal ras nyi mdangs* refers to the goddess, just as *sems nyid rig pa'i dbang po* and *zhi ba'i chos glu dbyangs* in the following two lines. I therefore suggest the translation, "[As for your] body, fix it [i.e. your eyes] on me [who has] a face with the brilliance of the sun!"

— p. 39, n. 65: *pha le* is called a "Mot descriptif inconnu". In fact it is not entirely unknown, as it is listed by Rudolf Kaschewsky and Pema Tsering, *Die Eroberung der Burg von Sum-pa. Aus dem tibetischen Gesar-Epos*, Wiesbaden (Otto Harrassowitz), 1987, vol. II, p. 186: *kha rul dri pha le*, "mit stinkendem Maulgeruch (adverbial)". Actually, Kaschewsky does not really translate *pha le* at all, but in view of the text of the Guimet Gesar manuscript and its translation by Blondeau and Chayet (*sa skya pha le/ rdo skya tshubs se*, "la terre grisâtre pulvéru-lante, la pierre grisâtre poudreuse", p. 39), we may perhaps infer that *pha le* indicates that something is stirred up and diffused like a cloud, a mist, or an odour. The authors do not list Kaschewsky's excellent translation in their otherwise useful list of References (pp. 235-240).

— p. 207 *sgron (pa)*: the authors first refer to four meanings found in two standard Tibetan-Tibetan dictionaries: 1. "allumer un feu"; 2. "orner (hon.)"; 3. "offrir (hon.)"; 4. "parler (hon)". They then add information provided by Samten G. Karmay: "toutes les activités du départ à cheval", as well as the meanings "chevaucher (hon.)" and "tuer". As the fascicles of the *Wörterbuch de tibetischen Schriftsprache*, published by the Verlag der Bayerischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, Munich, now appear at a regular pace, it is always useful to consult it. In Fasc. 14, published in 2011 and hence - presumably - available to the authors, *sgron* is listed on p. 499 with the following meanings: 1. "aussprechen, mitteilen" (corresponding to 4. above); 2. "niederlegen" with the example *sga sgron*, "satteln" (thus corresponding to Samten G. Karmay's explanation); 3. "darbringen, schenken" (corresponding to 3. above); 4. "einladen" (which could also be related to 3. above, cf. the common words *mgron*, "feast, banquet", and *mgron po*, "guest", but also "Reisender", *Wörterbuch*, Fasc. 12, p. 361). I mention these references to show how complex a

term may be; in the present case, two phrases in the Guimet manuscript constitute the point of departure for the entry in the Glossary. The first, *chibs kha sgron nas*, would seem to have the meaning of "applying the bit", cf. the explanation of Samten G. Karmay; to involve the meaning of "decorate", as the authors do, would seem to be unnecessary; in the other, *dpa' thul gyi sgron skabs*, *sgron* is taken to mean "kill". This sense of the word, of which the semantic background remains to be clarified, is stated by the authors to be frequent in the Chapter on Hor.

— p. 214 *yul sa*: this word, which occurs quite frequently, is translated – correctly – as "dieu du terroir". The authors point out that the term is not found in dictionaries, but both Yontan Gyatso and Samten G. Karmay attest to its existence with the above meaning in Amdo, and textual passages are also quoted. The term is certainly an ancient one, as it occurs regularly in an 11th-12th century manuscript published and studied by John V. Bellezza, *Death and Beyond in Ancient Tibet*, Beiträge zur Kultur- und Geistesgeschichte Asiens Nr. 177, Vienna (Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften), 2013, cf. the Index, p. 293, for numerous references.

It is a pity, although of no material consequence, that there are a few misprints in Sanskrit terms, thus: p. 16, l. 5: "*Jīna*" for *Jina*; p. 25, n. 1: "*nāmo ratna trayaya*" for *namo ratnatrayāya*; p. 237, bottom right: "*Vīmalakīrti*" for *Vimalakīrti*. On p. 57, line 6 from the top: "*Vajravārahī*" should probably be *-varāhī*, *varāha* being the correct spelling of "boar". Lokesh Chandra's *Tibetan-Sanskrit Dictionary*, Kyoto, 1976 (2nd ed.), vol. 1, p. 1265, however, has *-vārāhī*.

There will always be minor points to discuss – or even correct – in a translation of a text of this type. This in no ways diminishes the great value of this book, which for the first time presents a study and translation of a Gesar text as the fruit of a collaborative effort by Western and Tibetan scholars, and once more makes Paris the centre of Gesar studies.

