The *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*, Social Kinds, and the Boundaries of Buddhism in Tibet

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Among the various genres of literature, narratives represent a particularly dynamic and boundary-crossing phenomena. A few poetic examples include the Ramayana, which despite originating in India, is found across Asia and a 2008 American iteration dubs it "the greatest breakup story ever told." In this version, it is Sita's eventual rejection of Ram that serves as the story's denouement.[1] Similarly, Hongmei Sun has discussed *Journey to the West* and the famous figure of Monkey King Sun Wukong as a dynamic and transforming figure, representing alternately a hero of Maoist China, a symbol of the mythic Orient in western media, and a representation of Asian-Americans' own perception of their otherness in wider American culture.[2] A final poetic example can be found in the story of Cinderella and her missing slipper, which has its earliest origins in a late 1st century Greek story,[3] but variously re-appears in 9th century China,[4] a Vietnamese legend that remains undated,[5] and eventually 12th century France.[6] Stories have the unique ability to swiftly move across cultural and historical boundaries.

But, conversely, narratives can also throw particular types of boundaries into relief. Because the value of a given story is largely personal and subjective, it has the potential to expose the assumptions a given reader or listener may bring to a topic. Literary critic Edmund Wilson famously condemned J.R.R. Tolkien's Lord of the Rings trilogy as "juvenile trash"[7] and described H.P. Lovecraft as an incorrigible hack,[8] demonstrating his distinctively rational orientation towards the fantastical or unreal. Over beers a few years ago, an unnamed

1 Paley 2008.
2 Sun 2018.
3 Hansen 2017: 86–87.
4 Beauchamp 2017.
5 Bach-Lan 1957: 43–56.
6 Anderson 2000: 24–42.
7 Wilson 1956.
8 Wilson 1946.

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colleague dismissed the Gesar epic tradition as "just the Ramayana in Tibetan clothes," revealing his own Indian-centric view of the world and preferential status given to an "original." Narrative—and I would argue especially popular or non-elite narratives like the ones highlighted in these examples—can shed light on the unspoken and implicit bias one might carry.

This article, therefore, examines what boundaries can be revealed by examining one particular popular narrative as an informative case study—the final episode of the Gesar epic, the *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po*. Through a comparison of how Euro-American scholars and contemporary Tibetan Buddhists approach and evaluate this text, this article hopes to do two things: (1) first, demonstrate the importance of the *Dmyal gling* as a tool eastern Tibetan Buddhists use to think about and enact Buddhist traditions with and (2) interrogate why, despite this central role in both historical and contemporary Tibetan Buddhist lifeworlds, the *Dmyal gling* remains overlooked in contemporary scholarship. Often relegated to a secondary position in academic framings of Buddhism, popular literature like the Gesar epic actually plays an important role in forming ethical dispositions and shaping Buddhist practice. It creates imaginative spaces to think inside and may take on a greater role in individuals' spiritual decision-making than a doctrinal or philosophical treatise. Through this case study, therefore, this paper argues for a reappraisal of our deployment of inherited academic boundaries concerning "Buddhism" and "buddhicized" literature in Tibet. Employing Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's concept of "social kinds" as a theoretical lens, this article hopes to consider how we can balance emic and etic understandings of a religious tradition to engender a much-needed appreciation for the diverse tools Tibetan Buddhists use to make their world meaningful.

1. Highlighting Buddhist Themes in the Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po

Prevalent across the Himalayas, but especially in the eastern Tibetan regions of Kham and Amdo, the popular Gesar epic details the heroic adventures of the divine King Gesar as he battles demon-kings threatening the practice of Buddhism. The epic is structured in the chantefable style of rapidly spoken prose punctuated by expansive song breaks relating the perspective of different characters. Until recently, the epic was told primarily in oral settings, most famously where bards known as *sgrung mkhan* experience a form of spirit possession and in this possessed state sing new episodes of the epic. These inspired bards generally undergo an initiatory illness before the

story is "awakened" in their mind—often with the help of a local Buddhist monk or lama who assists in healing the bard and pulling the story out of them. Other bards might memorize the epic, look into a bronze mirror, blank paper, or other device as if reading from a book—though these particular typologies are less well-known.[9] The epic has also recently become a publishing phenomenon assisted by the extensive backing of the Chinese government—who has invested in preserving the Gesar epic as a piece of Intangible Cultural Heritage.[10] Indeed, contemporary Gesar festivals, temples, and religious sites receive significant financial sponsorship from the Chinese government as tourist destinations that support local culture.

The text that purports to be the final episode of the Gesar epic—the *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po* or as I have translated it, *The Great Perfecting of Hell*—was first published in the early 20th century at Wara monastery in Chab mdo. It may have been circulating orally before that, and many oral texts call themselves the *Dmyal gling* or even the *Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po,* but do not share the exact features of the Wara publication. The remainder of this article will rely on the Wara-published *Dmyal gling,* but it is important to note the potential naming confusion. This particular telling details King Gesar's descent to hell to save his mother, his final Buddhist teachings, and the death of himself, his horse, and his divine kingdom of heroes. The earliest published telling of the *Dmyal gling* is a revealed treasure text from the region of Gling tshang by an otherwise unknown treasure revealer Drag rtsal rdo rje.[11] The text claims to be authored by 'Dan bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug, who is a character in the narrative itself, where he leads a funerary procession from Gling to Hor after the murder of the local regent.[12] While this telling's exact date of revelation is unknown, its publication at Wara Monastery occurred under the sponsorship of retreatant Dam chos bstan pa, possibly in preparation for producing the *Wara Bka' 'gyur*. Reflecting the boundary-crossing narratives that opened my paper, scholars like Matthew Kapstein and others have

[9] Thurston 2019; Yang 1995.

[10] Mikles 2019; 2024.

[11] While little is known about Drag rtsal rdo rje's life, two other texts have recently come to light via the efforts of the Buddhist Digital Resource Center that are popularly identified as being authored or revealed by Drag rtsal rdo rje: (1) a manual of rdzogs chen teachings that survives only in a *'bru 'grel* commentary by Lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (d. 2011) and (2) a little-known Gesar episode pertaining to the taming of a demon called A yan (2005). Despite these popular associations, however, the relationship between these texts to the Drag rtsal rdo rje of the *Dmyal gling* remains unclear.

[12] Chos kyi dbang phyug. The Wara Monastery edition is accessible only in photographic reproductions, but a 1984 edition was published in Thimphu under the editorial direction of Lopon Pemala. A further, heavily edited edition was published by the Sichuan Minorities Publishing House in 1986.

seen in this episode influence from the Chinese narrative of Buddhist hero Mulian saving his mother from hell.[13] However, many Buddhist heroes besides Mulian, save their mothers from hell and the significant differences between the two stories make it hard to argue for any connection with certainty.

Indeed, King Gesar embodies many important Buddhist roles in the *Dmyal gling* outside of savior in hell, often with the help of key Tibetan Buddhist divinities. Like many episodes of the Gesar epic, Padmasambhava frames the narrative of the *Dmyal gling*, inspiring his epic quest and remaining an important figure throughout. To this point, the text begins with Padmasambhava bringing Gesar to the Copper-Colored Mountain, affirming his divine status, and giving him high-level initiations for tantric practices.[14] During this section, Gesar worries about the future of Buddhism in Ling; listing the work he has done for suffering beings, he notes that although "I have acted as a mother for the whole six realms…the White Ling remains swamped in afflictive emotion."[15] Padmasambhava impresses upon him the need to teach advanced tantric practices to the peoples of his empire and, with this command, Gesar returns to Ling.

Once more in his kingdom, Gesar follows Padmasambhava's instructions and takes on the role of formal Buddhist teacher for the peoples of Ling. In the longest song of the text, he provides basic ethical guidelines modeled on *sngon 'gro* practices—preparatory exercises focused on developing ethical and doctrinal awareness undertaken before commencing more advanced meditative practice. In fact, the guidance offered in this song closely follows that found in *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* and metaphors appear throughout the song in a similar sequential order. These metaphors are common in many Buddhist teaching environments and their presence here is not a "smoking gun" indicating direct influence. However, they are significant for demonstrating that the *Dmyal gling* directly participated in the larger milieu surrounding its early 20th century eastern composition, where *"ris-med"* communities actively promoted, discussed, and employed Klong chen snying thig teachings, of which *Kun bzang bla ma'i zhal lung* is an important part.[16] This participation in

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13 Kapstein 2007.

14 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 54–78. This section also features a lengthy song prophesizing coming troubles for Buddhism in Tibet and the end of Gesar's kingdom. Due to its potential political ramifications, it was heavily edited in the 1986 Chengdu edition.

15 *ma rigs drug 'khor ba'i 'gro don lnga / tshe gcig bsod nams de tsam red / de nas slob dpon rin po che / nga gling dkar nyon mongs 'dam rdzab la / ma mkha' 'gro de nyid bsu ma mngags*/ Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 55.

16 Scholars still debate what best to call the community of thinkers and practitioners that thrived in late 19th and early 20th century eastern Tibet. While predominantly

Klong chen snying thig teachings is further apparent later in the chapter, where Gesar initiates each community of people that make up his empire—Hor, 'Jang, Mon, Pal po, Dbus, and so forth—into a different Klong chen snying thig teaching. This episode acts, therefore, as something of a "hype man" for popularizing religious scriptures prominent in eastern Tibet at the turn of the century. We see in this initial section of the *Dmyal gling* that the text is an active participant in larger elite Buddhist practices and movements surrounding its historical milieu.

Beyond this explicit involvement in the promotion of Klong chen snying thig teachings, discussions of Buddhist karma and the ethics of violence form a central theme throughout the text. After giving initiations, King Gesar goes on meditative retreat, during which time his mother dies and is reborn in hell. Shocked at his mother's fate, as she was a devout Buddhist, King Gesar descends to hell to demand answers from King Yama. What follows is a lengthy song exchange debating the relationship between karma and violence. Much of the throughline of the Gesar epic focuses on Gesar's incarnation as a tantric demon-slayer destroying the demonic evil forces who surround his land.[17] As he kills each one in bloody, dramatic fashion, the epic generally praises his ability to preserve the purity of Buddhist dharma and ensure a favorable rebirth for those he kills in battle. Even in the *Dmyal gling* itself, the opening section praises King Gesar as "the conqueror of all Mara's hosts, all enemies, and all hindrances—he who tames and purifies all that which seeks to harm the precepts of monastic discipline…the great conqueror who battles the adversaries with vast kindness."[18]

Once Gesar descends to hell, however, the *Dmyal gling* uses the confrontation between King Gesar and King Yama as an opportunity to undermine this narrative of the tantric demon-slayer. Yama declares

called the *ris-med* movement in early scholarship of the period (Smith 2001), later scholarship has pushed back against this designation, noting that *ris-med* materials were not quite so non-sectarian as previously presented and that it is unclear how much the intellectuals thought of themselves as a unified movement with shared goals and values (Gardner 2006). Indeed, in this issue itself, Andrew Taylor identifies Smith as primarily a popularizer of the term *ris-med* rather than a creator from whole-cloth (Taylor 2025). Others choose to highlight the heavy Nyingma presence in these communities (Karma Phuntsho 2010: 50), though it seems especially limiting to only look at Nyingma elements. In light of these valid critiques, but also with an understanding that something deeply generative and intertextual seemed to be happening in eastern Tibet at the time, I elect to call the association of late 19th and early 20th century thinkers the "*ris-med*" or "non-sectarian" community.

17 Dalton 2011.

18 *dgra bgegs bdud dpung ma lus kun 'joms pa* / *'dul ba'i lung skyongs nyer 'tshe tha dag 'dul* / … *drin chen pha rol g.yul las rab rgyal zhing* / Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 2.

that King Gesar is a "butcher who kills in the morning, but acts like a lama in the afternoon,"[19] and that Gesar's heroic companions "kill as meaninglessly as making water."[20] When Gesar retaliates, challenging Yama for his own acts of violence—directing individuals' rebirths towards hell and overseeing the torture there—King Yama explains that he does not commit acts of violence based on his own whims, but rather "as the result of my own calculations of the cause and effect of each 100 chunks of virtuous and non-virtuous action with each grain of a white mustard seed."[21] When Gesar, enraged by this news, attacks Yama, the King of Hell emanates a *maṇḍala* of buddhas in defense. Gesar soon discovers that every strike against Yama becomes a strike against himself.[22]

Most damning of all, in this confrontation Gesar discovers it is not his mother's sins that have led to her infernal rebirth, but rather his own violent activities. While chiding Gesar's violence, Yama also reveals that Gesar's claimed abilities to control his enemies' future rebirths—the foundation upon which themes of martial tantric practice depend—are false. As a result, Gesar's mother remains in the deepest pit of hell, surrounded by all the men he has ever killed in battle: to save her, he must save them. While certainly contributing to larger debates about the role of karma, this experience may also further reflect the *Dmyal gling's* participation in promoting Klong chen snying thig materials. As a systematic path placing Rdzogs chen as the highest form of practice, the Klong chen snying thig—especially as practiced in its *ris-med* incarnations—largely de-emphasized the violent imagery that had previously served as an important component of Tibetan tantra. In its place, it celebrated a discourse of naturalness and spontaneity.[23] While not quite an outright repudiation, this questioning of tantric violence also reflects other contemporaneous eastern Tibetan efforts to challenge or otherwise question violent imagery in religious practice.[24] Undermining the position of a paradigmatic tantric demon-slayer in the *Dmyal gling*, therefore, may serve to enhance the *ris-med* community's championing of Klong chen snying thig practice.

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19 *ma tshad thams cad bsad nas snga dro gsod pa'i shan pa phyi dro 'dren pa'i bla ma byas kyang.* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160.

20 *gling dpa' bdud kyis don med chu bzos kyi bsad* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160.

21 *nga chos rgyal gyis chos yod med thams cad dmyal bar bzhag pa min pas las dge sdig gi rgyu 'bras de skra'i jag ma re la brgya gshag nas rgyu 'bras rtsis pa dang yung dkar 'bru re la dge sdig gi rgyu 'bras dum bu brgya re rtsis pa'i 'bras bu yin no gsungs so.* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 160–161.

22 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 162.

23 Germano 1994.

24 Dalton 2011.

After Yama provides Gesar with the *'pho ba* ritual to free those suffering in hell and ensure them a new favorable rebirth, Gesar's journey to rescue his mother becomes an opportunity to learn about karma's effects. Despite teaching about the horrors of hell earlier in the text while presenting *sngon 'gro* practices, when visualizing these effects firsthand, Gesar balks and becomes filled with rage.[25] He calls the hell workers "demonic buddhas interested only in cutting, killing, and tormenting," and describes plans to march an army of buddhas to hell to destroy their torments.[26] The hell workers' responses defending their role in the karmic system mitigates only slightly Gesar's anger, and as I have written elsewhere, this may be the very point. As a popular narrative, the *Dmyal gling* creates an imaginative space in which one can express the fact that karma, though an unchanging law, can be difficult to accept sometimes. Chagrined and shamed, Gesar eventually finds his mother and saves her, leading her—and his former enemies—to a future rebirth in the heavens.

Upon Gesar's return to Ling, the text swiftly rattles towards its ending. After a prophetic dream from his cousin Néchung, the heroes of Ling die one by one. Each death is accompanied by miraculous revelations of divine status, the appearance of buddhas and dakinis emanating in the sky, and exhortations to remain devout in Buddhist practice. Finally, Gesar and his beloved horse Kyangbu die, with proclamations from Gesar that he will always be with the black-haired Tibetans, as he is himself inseparable from Padmasambhava.[27] Likely inspired by the Kālachakra tantra, the text hints at a coming apocalyptic battle where Gesar and Padmasambhava will together challenge demonic forces to re-establish a purified Buddhist practice. In this way, the kingdom of Ling as a model Buddhist kingdom ends. This prophetic return as a warrior on the battlefield may seem to throw into question the text's earlier challenge to the martial imagery of the tantric demon-slayer; however, it reflects widespread popular beliefs of King Gesar that exist outside the text and remain an important source of influence that cannot be fully dismissed. Indeed, in my 2015 field research, I continually encountered a disinterest in or repudiation of the *Dmyal gling's* reframing of King Gesar as a chastised demon-slayer. When I asked research informants why Gesar's mother was in hell in the *Dmyal gling,* answers ranged from "She took too much joy in Gesar's battlefield triumphs" to "She had relied on her son's good karma to ensure her future rebirth" to "In secret, she had not been a good Buddhist." Only one person, a scholar at the Southwest

[25] The author discusses the implications of this further in Mikles 2019a.

[26] *khyed las mkhan sangs rgyas yin pas zer / sangs rgyas bdud kyi lam lugs la / bsad bcad mnar gsum so nam red.* Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 213.

[27] Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 344.

University for Nationalities in Chengdu, repeated the reason given in the text itself. As will be discussed below, this interpretative drift demonstrates the centrality of the *Dmyal gling* as a living text being continuously re-framed and re-interpreted within the environment of a larger Buddhist community.

2. *Framing the* Dmyal gling rdzogs pa chen po *as "Buddhicized" Text*

Analyzing the Buddhist themes in the entire plot of a 300-page text in a single article is an impossible task. However, this article is using the *Dmyal gling* as an important case study comparing how Euro-American scholars and Tibetan Buddhist practitioners frame a text and what academic boundaries they see as important. For our point, therefore, the brief discussion above serves to demonstrate in a variety of ways how the *Dmyal gling* is doing important Buddhist work: (1) it promotes Klong chen snying thig practices through both Gesar's role as Buddhist teacher promoting *sngon 'gro* practices in the first third of the text and the later challenge to martial models of tantric practice; (2) it provides intellectual space to think through the uncomfortable implications of foundational doctrines like karma; (3) the deaths of Gesar and his court of heroes reveal a kingdom of divine emanations whose dedication to Buddhist practice hints at an eventual return in an apocalyptic battle mirroring that found in the Kālachakra tantra practice cycle. That this Buddhist work takes place in the context of a popular narrative with talking horses, fighting kings, and evil sorcerer-uncles makes it no less important and no less effective. In other publications, I have described the Gesar epic as a Buddhist midrash,[28] and the *Dmyal gling* speaks to the potential for popular or fantastical literature to contribute to and influence larger doctrinal debates happening within.

In spite of this important Buddhist work, however, the Gesar epic and the *Dmyal gling* in particular have generally been framed as a "buddhicized" narrative that reflects the culmination of Buddhist influence in Tibet. In his brief reference article describing the relationship of the Gesar epic to Buddhism, Solomon George FitzHerbert has noted that the amount of "Buddhism"[29] in the epic varies between different geographic versions; in his interpretation, "This observation suggests that the Buddhism of the [Gesar] epic represents a relatively late interpretative layer, while the archaic core

[28] Mikles 2019a.

[29] As will be elaborated on below, the idea that Buddhism is a single thing measurable in a text is a reflection of the World Religions paradigm arising from the Orientalist foundations of the field of History of Religions itself.

of the epic lies in a secular folkloric orientation only lightly touched by Buddhist influence."[30] Geoffrey Samuel describes Gesar as a liminal figure who has close links to local forms of shamanic religion that later became core components of the Tibetan Buddhist milieu.[31] In his German translation of the epic, Matthias Hermanns argues that the epic reflects pre-Buddhist ideas of sacred kingship in Tibet that became co-opted by Buddhist monasteries.[32]

While FitzHerbert, Samuel, and Hermanns are excellent scholars who have made incredible and invaluable studies of the Gesar epic, their assumptions about the epic's origins reflect a very particular line of reasoning: Tibetans used to have a variety of shamanistic religious practices, of which the Gesar epic tradition preserves many in its form of bardic storytelling. As Buddhism spread in Tibet and dominated non-Buddhist indigenous practices, these practices became enveloped within its sacred canopy. Therefore, the role of Gesar as Buddhist teacher and Buddhist savior in the *Dmyal gling* is the most complete iteration of that phenomenon, reflecting the ultimate triumph of Buddhism in Tibet.[33] This particular idea is so prevalent that it is often taken as a given in scholarship and not even explicitly stated, all while remaining an important foundational belief evident in the boundaries created by our larger academic communities. To this point, the International Association of Tibetan Studies has sponsored close to half a dozen large panels on King Gesar, while the International Association of Buddhist Studies has had only one single paper in the past two decades, despite hosting many panels on minute and specific topics in Tibetan Buddhism. Gesar is understood as a uniquely local, Tibet-specific concern that is not a component of larger Buddhological history.

This particular historical narrative of buddhicization, however, is based largely on conjecture and assumptions about the nature of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion. While it might be true, there is little to no concrete evidence for the argument itself. FitzHerbert himself acknowledges this concern in a 2022 article, noting an "absence of any hard documentary textual evidence regarding Ling Gesar before the 14th or 15th centuries" and acknowledging it very well may not have existed earlier than that.[34] Indeed, our earliest textual evidence of the Gesar epic is a 1716 publication in Mongolian sponsored by Qing dynasty rulers, in which Gesar is already framed as a Buddhist

30 FitzHerbert 2017.
31 Samuel 1993: 540.
32 Hermanns 1965.
33 So pervasive is this narrative the author herself unreflectively repeated it in earlier scholarship. See further, Mikles 2016.
34 FitzHerbert 2022: 122.

figure.[35] Such meager evidence allows for the very real possibility that scholars might project their own specific suppositions onto the Gesar epic. This possibility comes closer to reality with the fact that any knowledge of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion is sparse. In fact, the very category of "shamanism" as a single global phenomenon identifiable in communities as diverse as the Aboriginal Australians, Tibetan nomads, and African tribes is problematic at best and dangerous at worst.[36] While the author is not stating that historical arguments about Gesar or pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion more generally are always untenable or inappropriate, this particular historical argument concerning the origins of and beliefs about the epic itself is made with little hard evidence and may, instead, reflect our own assumptions about the nature of pre-Buddhist Tibetan religion.

But the most important critique of this particular academic narrative is that, as will be discussed below, for the vast majority of eastern Tibetans today and in the recent historical past, Gesar is understood as a fundamental component of their Buddhist lives, not a secondary "buddhicized" element. As seen in the discussion of the *Dmyal gling* in the previous section, the text *is* doing important Buddhist work through both ethical contemplation and supporting the *ris-med* promotion of rdzogs chen practices. This involvement in *ris-med* thought was further evident in the Gesar sādhanā rituals composed by 19th century Tibetan Buddhist thinkers like 'Jam mgon kong sprul, Mi pham rgya mtsho, and others in the *ris-med* community that situate Gesar as a tutelary deity—often in his form as Nor bu Dgra 'dul.[37] Many of these rituals are still practiced today and have been further developed by contemporary Tibetan Buddhist thinkers, though often generating little academic interest.[38] Indeed, in his forward to a recent book of Gesar sādhanā rituals, Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche commented on the widespread academic disinterest in Gesar despite its centrality to Tibetan Buddhist practice, writing, "Pompous modern scholars tend to turn their noses up at Gesar's stories and chuck the entire tradition into the basket of myth and legend... Mipham Rinpoche, who had himself invoked the spirit of profound brilliance, recognized that everything about Gesar of Ling had the potential to inspire authentic presence and an appreciation of nowness. And he didn't think twice about making use of any of it."[39]

Gesar's importance as a religious figure is further reflected in the contemporary religious landscape of eastern Tibet. Several monastic

[35] Damdinsuren 1957; Samuel 2017 [2005].
[36] Kehoe 2000; Taussig 1991.
[37] Forgues 2022.
[38] Kornman 2005. See further, Jamgön Mipham 2023.
[39] Dzongsar Jamyang Khyentse Rinpoche 2023: xvii.

complexes in eastern Tibet house temples where Gesar appears in both wrathful and peaceful forms, or where relics of King Gesar—his sword, his bones, his sash, or his bridle—are worshipped with offerings next to those of more traditional buddhas.[40] Prominent statues of Gesar or other characters from the epic loom large in a variety of towns across eastern Tibet. In Gser thar County, there exists a thriving tradition of Gesar stone carving meant to represent important Buddhist values. 'Dri stod county features two honored Gesar sites—a large white conch shell painted on the mountain representing the location of Gesar's palace and a series of sacred pools where Gesar's wife Drugmo supposedly washed her hair.

Gesar's role as a Buddhist figure in contemporary eastern Tibet is especially apparent in interviews performed during my most recent period of fieldwork in Yul shul. A local monk at the Gesar temple in A phyug—which claims to be Gesar's place of birth—explained to me that Gesar should be propitiated before any arduous undertaking. He showed me several sites around the temple that miraculously revealed evidence of Gesar's touch.[41] These sites are so important to local expressions of Buddhist practice that the Chinese tried to destroy many of them during the Cultural Revolution.[42] During that same trip in Yul shul, I spoke with several local intellectuals about the role of King Gesar in their own Buddhist practice. Local historian and employee at the Yushu Office of Cultural Preservation Karma lha mo explained, "Although it looks like King Gesar is fighting and killing, he is really freeing all these people who are suffering and helping them—he truly has the kind heart of a buddha, not the bloody sword of the king."[43] While the figure of King Gesar more generally is perceived as an important Buddhist hero, the *Dmyal gling* especially has an important place in everyday Buddhist life. The heads of both the Kaḥ thog and Lha gong monastic colleges explained that they assign junior monks the *Dmyal gling* as preparation for more advanced

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40 Prominent among these is Rta na Monastery and Kaḥ thok Monastery, though the author has personally visited several smaller, local temples in Yul shul and Mgo log that have their own set of relics claimed to be from Gesar.

41 A personal favorite is a stone about 200 meters from the temple that bears the imprint of Gesar's butt-cheeks and spine as he laid down upon the rock to gaze at the sky and hunt crows.

42 Bkra shis 'od kar (Caretaker and lead practitioner at Gesar Temple in Axu village), interview with author, July 24, 2015.

43 Dkar ma lho mo (Local historian with the Yushu Office of Cultural Preservation), interview with author, July 18, 2015. As noted previously, while this contradicts somewhat the actual text of the *Dmyal gling*, it also evidences the Gesar epic as a continued source of interpretative materials.

Buddhist practice.[44] Similarly, a monastic teacher at Ya chen sgar explained to me the *Dmyal gling* is an ideal study text for lay individuals interested in Buddhism, as it is both entertaining and enlightening.[45]

Indeed, the physical text of the *Dmyal gling* in particular is treated as a powerful book of Dharma that has agency to affect everyday reality. Like many powerful texts in Tibetan culture, the *Dmyal gling* must be kept covered and secured when not in use and never allowed to touch the floor. Indeed, several Tibetan friends explained that discussing the text too much invites inauspiciousness. When I asked for elaboration, my friend said, "Gesar dies in it. It is not good to discuss the death of a buddha too much."[46] Indeed, this particular association with inauspiciousness extends to the bardic tradition as well. When a bard receives the episode of Gesar's descent to hell to recite in a moment of possessed inspiration, Tibetans say the karmic thread of his life is growing thin and his death is swiftly approaching. Many people I spoke with in Qinghai had a story of one or another village where the bard received the *Dmyal gling*, then soon died, and one individual told me that a Tibetan should make sure to attend such a bard's performance because of the significant good karma gained.

In short, from the lived perspective of eastern Tibetans on the ground, King Gesar—and the *Dmyal gling* in particular—is central, not secondary to Buddhist practice. While certainly not all Tibetans celebrate Gesar as a central Buddhist figure and there is debate within the Tibetan tradition as a whole,[47] this evidence neither contradicts, nor cancels out the experience of eastern Tibetan Buddhists. Many Tibetan Buddhist practices and traditions are the subject of intense debate within communities of practitioners, and the Gesar epic tradition is no different. But to focus on claims about origins and label the epic as "buddhicized," especially with so little hard evidence for these proposed pre-Buddhist realities, ultimately disenfranchises the voices of contemporary, living Tibetans. By using the term "buddhicized" rather than "Buddhist" we're either privileging one group of Buddhists over another or presupposing an idea of what Buddhism is that exists apart from the lived realities of everyday, actual Buddhists.

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[44] Kaḥ thok Bsha grwa mkhan po, interview with author, August 17, 2015; Lha gong Bsha grwa mkhan po, interview with author, August 14, 2015.

[45] Mkhan po sprul sku dam chos rinpoche, interview with author, August 16, 2015.

[46] Tshe khrim rin chen, personal communication with author, July 17, 2015.

[47] Mkhan po Thub bstan rnam rgyal from 'Ba' thang bsam grub gling monastery explained to me that reading and thinking about King Gesar was ultimately detrimental to religious practice because he was too wild and too violent. Geoffrey Samuel describes a Geluk lama once telling him that Gesar epic was a Chinese plot to undermine Tibetan culture. Samuel 2001: 179.

3. The Problem of Defining Buddhism and a Social Kinds Solution

The *Dmyal gling*, therefore, introduces a weighty question of definition: is Buddhism considered (either explicitly or by assumption) first and foremost those things that arose in India or in Indian-mirroring monastic institutions or is it what local Buddhists identify as Buddhist, regardless of origin or lineage? How do we academically label the texts, practices, and beliefs arising and enacted outside formal Buddhist institutions like monasteries? How do our choices as to what to research continue to privilege a (potentially suspect) historical narrative over the viewpoints of living Tibetan Buddhists on what is valuable and what is not?

Tomoko Masuzawa traces the stratification of culture that surrounds the *Dmyal gling* to the 19th century divide between Orientalism, which formulated Buddhism as a "world religion," and anthropology, which framed all vernacular beliefs and folkways as examples of "primitive religion."[48] Literature like the Gesar epic found only in Tibet and a relatively specific swath of East Asia and the Himalayas—with its fantastical battles, bloodthirsty demons, and talking horses—has been largely dismissed by scholars of Buddhism, therefore, as a folk story that was "buddhicized," not a Buddhist text to be studied for how it informs individual practice and belief. This particular formulation of what has been called the World Religions paradigm creates a boundary that divides the world into universal, transnational traditions and local folk traditions that are perceived as ephemeral, interchangeable, and secondary to the global traditions. In this perspective, the traditional academic narratives of the *Dmyal gling* fall firmly into the second camp—a local folk story made Buddhist that is secondary to the "true" Buddhist materials found in the local monastery. As evidenced in Masuzawa's work, critiques such as these have already been made for decades in academia. And yet, we instinctively fall back on these assumptions that reveal a predilection towards origins as, in large part, the categorically-defining feature.

It is important to note that this argument does not seek to reproduce the very faults it claims to fix. To say our definition of Buddhism would be correct if only we included this particular thing, or that something is obviously Buddhist and something else is obviously not—such an approach would simply be reproducing the sins of the father, so to speak. Furthermore, this argument is not saying that Buddhism is an entirely constructed category in and of itself. While the urge to proclaim everything to be the construction of our historical

[48] Masuzawa 2005: 17–18.

forebears is tempting, scholars like Urs App have challenged this idea and stated that any claims that "Buddhism" is only a made-up category are "a problem of faulty optics."[49] As early as the 16th century, Catholic and Protestant missionaries recognized a unified religious practice in the "East" that centered on the single figure of the Buddha.[50] Buddhist thinkers throughout the centuries may have vehemently disagreed on how best to practice, but they recognized a shared kinship of practice that only became more pronounced in the colonial and post-colonial era.

So, we should not throw out the intellectual category of Buddhism entirely, nor can we constantly add ever more items underneath its conceptual canopy until the term is rendered without meaning. Rather, we must find ways to balance our etic and emic perspectives in ways that are honest, explicit, and situationally-specific. To begin accomplishing these goals, I tentatively offer Jason Ānanda Josephson Storm's concept of "social kinds" discussed in his recent book *Metamodernism*. He states, "conceptual categories are less about determining sharp edges around concepts than focusing attention on particularly relevant features of the environment."[51] While it is tempting to say, especially after the "linguistic term" of the 1960s, that nothing exists *but* conceptual categories, I am taking direction from Storm to instead say that the problem is how we as scholars focus our attention and refine our scholarly lens on what are very real existing phenomena. We are constantly re-creating our categories in every moment of use. In that vein, I am suggesting here that the focus of many Buddhologists' attention has been a rather disproportionate interest in historical origins. We know something is Buddhist if it originated in India or, at the very least, in a monastic or institutional environment that can be traced back to India. While this might be a "relevant feature of the environment" if we are interested only in charting out a textual history, it does little to help us apprehend how Tibetan Buddhists may understand their world today. Worse, it ignores and deems irrelevant or mistaken the lived perspectives of actual Tibetans.

In response to the constructed nature of academic and conceptual categories, Storm offers the idea of "social kinds" as replacement. In Storm's words, social kinds are, "temporary zones of stability in unfolding processes, which are instantiated in their materialization."[52] While Storm's work goes into exceptional detail about the creation of social kinds based on homeostatic property clusters, for our purposes,

[49] App 2010: 185.
[50] Pascal 2019.
[51] Storm 2021: 178.
[52] Storm 2021: 106.

the critical part is that social kinds are (1) dynamic clusters (2) demarcated and anchored by various historic and social causal processes. This perspective places our attention on the doing and the creating of stability in the midst of a constantly transforming marker, rather than the static nature of the thing being created.

By labeling the *Dmyal gling* as alternately "Buddhist" or "buddhicized," we are implying a necessary ontology that exists above and beyond its social construction; but a social kinds perspective focuses our attention on the dynamic position of the *Dmyal gling* and the Gesar epic more generally—throughout Tibetan history, within Tibetan Buddhist communities, and comparatively between the perspectives of eastern Tibetan practitioners and Euro-American scholars. Framing such conceptual categories as dynamic actions rather than ontologies requires us as scholars to be honest about the casual processes influencing our creation and deployment of boundaries. As seen in this case study, labeling the *Dmyal gling* as "buddhicized" gives disproportionate weight to a (potentially dubious) historical narrative of origins at the expense of the perspectives of at least some living Tibetan Buddhists. By calling the *Dmyal gling* Buddhist, I am highlighting my preferential commitment to a lived perspective that radically privileges what contemporary Buddhists say is Buddhism. Both can be valid perspectives if we are honest about what relevant features define the environment. This article suggests the danger arises when we mistake the dynamic cluster we as the scholar have focused on as the thing itself. Like one of those visual tricks where you may see a duck or a rabbit, an old woman or a young woman at her dressing table, the Gesar epic is only or buddhicized or Buddhist in direct correlation to what we deem as relevant. A social kinds perspective, therefore, throws these boundaries into focus so that we can be explicit about what "relevant features of the environment" are important to our work.

Conclusions

This paper has used the case study of the *Dmyal gling* in both its literary and lived forms to argue for a larger change in perspective concerning the creation and deployment of academic boundaries. When examining texts like the *Dmyal gling,* academics have historically relied on categorical designations like "Buddhist" or "buddhicized" that speak to the text's ontology. However, such an ontology-focused evaluation reifies potentially suspect historical narratives concerning the origins of the Gesar epic and the nature of pre-Buddhist Tibetan

religion, while also silencing the perspectives of living Tibetan Buddhists. In contrast, a social kinds perspective puts emphasis on the researcher as the center of a dynamic process of knowledge-building. Such a perspective encourages us to be honest about what assumptions we bring to our work, where our attentive focus lies, and where we draw our own boundaries. If we're going to say the perspectives of contemporary eastern Tibetans are mistaken, then we need to say that explicitly.

Beyond challenging our academic inheritance, being honest about the central role of the researcher when examining narratives like the *Dmyal gling* allows us to interrogate other boundaries as well. When I approach reading Gesar, am I the detached scholar who has just happened to turn my attention to this topic in my quest to create knowledge? Or am I the lover of epic narrative who dreams of riding across the grasslands with victory banners waving and sword in my hand? We're all embedded in academic systems that ask us to be the former, to be an objective voice outside the box of culture, to hide that we might actually *like* the thing we study or that we can be personally affected by it. As a crisis of the Humanities grows in higher education and university systems around the world question whether they *need* a program in Religious Studies, Buddhist Studies, or Tibetan Studies, being honest about why we take personal joy in our research might help convince students of its value, demonstrate what can be learned from the devoted study of other cultures, and ward off even greater cuts to research funding. As discussed in the vignettes that opened this article, narratives both cross boundaries and throw boundaries into perspective. They can also be an ally in defending the value of our academic positions.

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