Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

On the Epic of Gesar of Ling

Robert Wood · Wednesday, September 26th, 2018

I have a Tibetan friend who trained as a monk in his home country before escaping over the Himalayas as a political prisoner. He walked for days over the mountains eating snow, his frostbitten toes spiked with a pain similar to when the occupying authorities had lashed his back. When he got to Dharamsala on the Indian side of the border, he fell down and wept. Somehow he made it to Australia. I have seen him dance in his regalia in the suburbs, fine silks of blue edged with white fur and ribbons thrown into the sunlight as he twirls to the slow 'pom pom' of a single drum. He chants as he goes, recalling the sounds of an ancient and rhythmic beat for a contemporary age that will not forget where he comes from or what it is to be under the hammer of a repressive government.

This friend told me about *The Epic of Gesar of Ling* as I sat with him one evening. Gesar of Ling was a warrior king, but in the best tradition he was also something of a priest. There are varying myths about his origin. He may have been sent by Shenlha Okar or he may have come from Shakyamuni. He may have been the emissary of the Wisdom Kings of Shambhala or he may have emanated from Buddha himself. He may have been the eldest of fifteen sons of the Heavenly King Baifan or he may have been born into a poor herder's family on a day when a rainbow bridged the heaven and the earth. Some say his birthplace is to the left of a cypress tree somewhere resembling a horse's tail, others to the right of a spring beneath a rock resembling an arrow. Some say he is born where two rivers meet. Wherever he came from, he went on to perform great deeds – leading victorious armies, slaying beasts.

Emily Lorimer, writing in the *Times Literary Supplement* in 1934, said of the Gesar:

> He is invulnerable and at will invisible; he can assume any form, demon, animal or human, and can leave doubles to any of them to hold the fort while he adventures off to slay demons and heretics, or to annex kingdoms, cattle or queens; he can at any moment summon gods, riding on rainbows, to his side in war or council. With supercilious magnanimity he dispatches the spirits of all he slays to enjoy a future life in the 'Great Beatitude' but in lesser matters his ideas of honour and generosity fall far short of Western standards even of the earliest days.

King Gesar, precisely because he is saturated with magic, seems like just the sort of figure I would want to share a cup of tea with, maybe even a plate of momos. This is despite the fact that, at the end of our meeting, he would call a white horse to go home rather than an Uber. If one has an

imagination, Gesar is relatable, perhaps even more relatable than ‘real’ historical people, say Winston Churchill. He ranks with Achilles and Helen and Zeus and Athena in the very least, and is the foundation stone for so many, the source of such culture that we cannot rule him out, not only in this epic but as a myth inside our collective head that dreamt him up before he even reached our lips.

A people must have a story to tell, a story they can argue about in the world itself. The poet is there to make them argue, to ask the question that sets up the debate for the future so we know there is more to how we live than the shadow of death itself. If death is the only certainty, it is the thread that runs through epic. Epic is about war, about gods and heroes, ancestors and ghosts. However much we fight, the consciousness of death that comes from Epic is one we know we have. This is as individuals with cancer, old age and heart attack, and also as a people, be that from plague, famine, war, class conflict or climate change. *The Epic of Gesar of Ling* is a type of life precisely because it is unreal, surreal, magical. To refuse it is to miss out on the heartbeat in the ceiling of the world where the six major rivers have their headwaters and half the world replenishes itself. People always know that death is coming, know that the epic for our times is still being written in this century. This is a response to a conservative or parochial or regional idea of place. Now then, we might come to see the feats of magical heroes like Gesar as a way to know that the fights of all unfree people are our fights as well, that the classics of poetry speak to the whole world. I thought of all this, of death and Epic, of Tibet and the future, as I sat in a Wollongong motel listening to the sound of traffic on a nearby highway. I wondered who was the person to bring to mind this understanding – what was the story to tell of a fractured people in that occupied land in the ceiling of the world? How might ancestors who have returned speak of the ghosts they brought with them? Why was I returning to the Epic when I was stuck in a small place that held grandness was no longer possible?

When we think of reincarnation, of cycling through *bardo*, of stopping in *moksha*, we think of symptoms more than structures. We think of how our nephew looks like his great grandfather from the photos that are on the bookshelf. Perhaps, we would do well to think of the universe itself as undergoing a cycle, of being our world and cosmos that is changedly unchanging. What are its myths? What are its classics that we should always read and listen to? There might always be white horses ridden by kings but they too can allow us more freedom when we know what it is to see the light once more even as the darkness of war seems certain to reign down on us below. That is the lesson that Epic shares with us, not only that anonymity is coveted and allows a text to breathe beyond authorship; that magic is possible in our contemporary world; that we can travel by staying at home; that hell can be found and passed through. Epic, and the one of the Gessar of Ling, teaches us that we are part of something greater, that our coming death is a sacrifice of some sorts, that we belong to a collective that matters for the world as a whole.

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