

Zhiguo Wang:
记忆的千年传唱：《格萨尔王》翻译与传播研究
[Translation and Dissemination of Oral Epic Gesar],

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Review

Traditionally, “Chinese Classics” has been used to refer to the canonical cultural works written in the Han (Sinitic) script by the Han ethnic group, and therefore, synonymous with “the Han Chinese classics”, it does cover those cultural works written by the Chinese peoples of non-Han ethnicity in their own various scripts, which can be termed “the non-Han Chinese ethnic classics” or simply “Chinese ethnic classics”. That means that scholars in China have been focusing on the Han Chinese classics, ignoring the non-Han Chinese ethnic classics, which is also true in translation textbooks. But now the non-Han Chinese ethnic classics increasingly attract more people’s attention. And Zhiguo Wang is one of them.

As a typical epic from Chinese minority traditions, Gesar is a lengthy heroic epic created first by Tibetans and then by Mongolians. While in Tibetan it is known as Gesar, in Mongolian, as Geser. Gesar is gradually formed on the basis of ancient Tibetan myths, legends and historical events and influenced by local Tibetan customs, folk songs and proverbs. It is also shaped by the religious beliefs such as primitive Shamanism, Tibetan Buddhism, Lamaism and other ideological influences, thus, demonstrating a process of multi-

channel folk creation encompassing text translation and oral transmission, as well as that of multicultural co-molding at large. The original route of formation and dissemination of Gesar is from Tibetan to Mongolian regions, after long years' folk creation and circulation, forming a variety of complex multilingual versions. The epic has been in circulation by folk singers for thousands of years, and is still performed and appreciated nowadays. In this sense it can be justifiably credited with "A Model for Oral Literature" and "A Typical Live Epic". The discovery of Gesar, together with other epics from Chinese minorities, conveys to the world that China has not only epics but also the world's longest one. The very existence of such a grand epic itself is of great academic and research value. Since the 19th century, Gesar has increasingly spread in Europe, arousing growing interests and attention of western sinologists. Successive translations in Russian, French, German, English and other languages were available in the west. Owing to its own unique value and charm, as well as the key position in Chinese multi-ethnic literature, Gesar has been under study by scholars home and abroad from various perspectives of epic studies, ethnology, anthropology, literature, etc.

Thus a new subject "Gesar Studies" has come into being, constituting an important branch of international Tibetology. However, few investigations into transmission and dissemination of this live epic have ever been conducted from the perspective of translation studies. A preliminary study finds that the epic abounds in various forms of translations and transmissions, such as translation among ethnic minorities, translation into Chinese and foreign tongues, cross translation and back translation. What a variety of complex phenomena of translations! The channel of these translations is more than literary translation, intermediate translation or retranslation in traditional sense, which further manifests itself a more complex, multi-directional, overlapping cross translation, producing new and classical translation problems. A description and investigation into these problems is of great significance as far as translation of ethnic epics and oral literature is concerned. Also it will greatly benefit the on-going program of rewriting the history of Chinese multi-ethnic literature and restructuring the history of Chinese translation in particular.

The collection, collation and translation of Gesar constitute a comprehensive research project, a preliminary work for it to go abroad. Translations between minorities and into Chinese belong to "inter-translation", which takes place frequently in translating Chinese minority classics. By undertaking investigations from a partial introduction to an overall research, Translation and Dissemination of Oral Epic Gesar deals with epic translation both among

minorities and into foreign languages, aiming at proper approaches and strategies for Gesar to be well received and appreciated in the world literature. To this end, the book intends to draw a cognitive map of Gesar translation and transmission as well as a hierarchical graph reflecting the interrelationship between different versions, starting from the occurrence, development and dissemination of Gesar to the translations among ethnic minorities and into Chinese, translations into English and other languages.

A classification of the complex phenomena of translations and translation types is made for further studies. More emphasis is laid on multi-dimensional comparative studies on the three major English translations of Gesar in regarding of translations of Homer's epics and Indian epics, with a view to initiating some theoretical explanations and elaborations on translations of oral live epics. In view of the complicated mutual opposition and transformation of textuality and orality of the epic, the book also tries to analyze epic translation in two dimensions, oral transmission and text translation, and how they are connected in an attempt to put forward the ontology of oral literature with some theoretical issues of its translation.

Based on the objectives and research priorities above, the book firstly takes the epic itself as the stepping stone and proceeds to make an investigation into the following tasks: formation, origin, content and structure, artistic achievements, spreading, circulation mode, folk singers, text formation, variations and versions. By adopting the latest achievements in international epic studies and introducing oral poetics theory, it makes an exploration into the formulaic structures and memory features of the singers. From the perspectives of Transference of the Original Story and Intertextuality, it also analyzes the formation mechanism of multiple epic versions and variations and makes an effective classification of circulation of epic versions, thus paving a way for later studies on epic translation and transmission.

Secondly, after a survey on the history of epic circulation in more than 200 years, a research including overseas translation and domestic translation, the present study comes up with three routes of Gesar translation, i.e. from translations among minorities, translations into Chinese, translations into foreign languages, especially English. Then a further classification and elaboration of these translations is carried out, which underlies the core part of Gesar Translation Studies. In a cross-cultural context, it makes an all-round comparison on three typical English versions of Gesar, namely, European Sinologist David Neil's version, North American Douglas Penick's version and

Chinese translator Guozheng Wang's version, in order to expound different historical contexts of each version and theoretical thinking and interpretation triggered by the new types of translations.

The translation of Gesar should not go alone without reference to translations of other major epics in the world. Therefore, by relocating Gesar in the context of translations of three famous epics in the world and comparing text translations with oral transmissions, the book finally explores translating strategies and methods of epics and oral literature from the perspective of ethno-poetics. Through theoretical interpretation on epic translation, it proposes two concepts: ontology of oral literature and ontology of translation of oral literature. And approaches to translating ethnic epics and rewriting a Chinese history of multi-ethnic literary translation are also discussed along this line.

In conclusion, translation studies on ethnic literature and oral literature form an important part of the history of Chinese literature translation as well as an important chapter in rewriting Chinese translation history. The translation of Gesar, an oral ballad masterpiece, poses a new field of translation, which enjoys a dual nature of empirical research on translation and literary criticism of translation. Concepts such as "translations among minorities", "translation into Chinese" and "translations into foreign languages" will facilitate proper approaches to translate other ethnic classics as a whole.

However, the discussion of the book might be incomplete because of limited references. Such materials as Robin Kornman's English version *Epic of King Gesar* published by Shambhala Publications in 2010, could not be found in its bibliography. And it is a pity that the author has not done the anthropological fieldwork to investigate the acceptance of the translated versions in the target countries, especially the United Kingdom and the United States, which is necessary for Translation Studies.

In sum, the book under review is excellent because it probes into theoretical sublimation and discipline construction of epic translation by exploring its feasible principles, strategies and methods. It is not only helpful in developing a full concept of translation of the ethnic classics and in the rewriting of a history of China's multi-ethnic literary translation but also provides some referential perspectives for translations of other epics. What's more, it may serve as not only fodder for translation textbooks but also a reference book for students, educators, researchers and practitioners of translatology.