

## The Tuzu *Gesar* Epic: Performance and Singers

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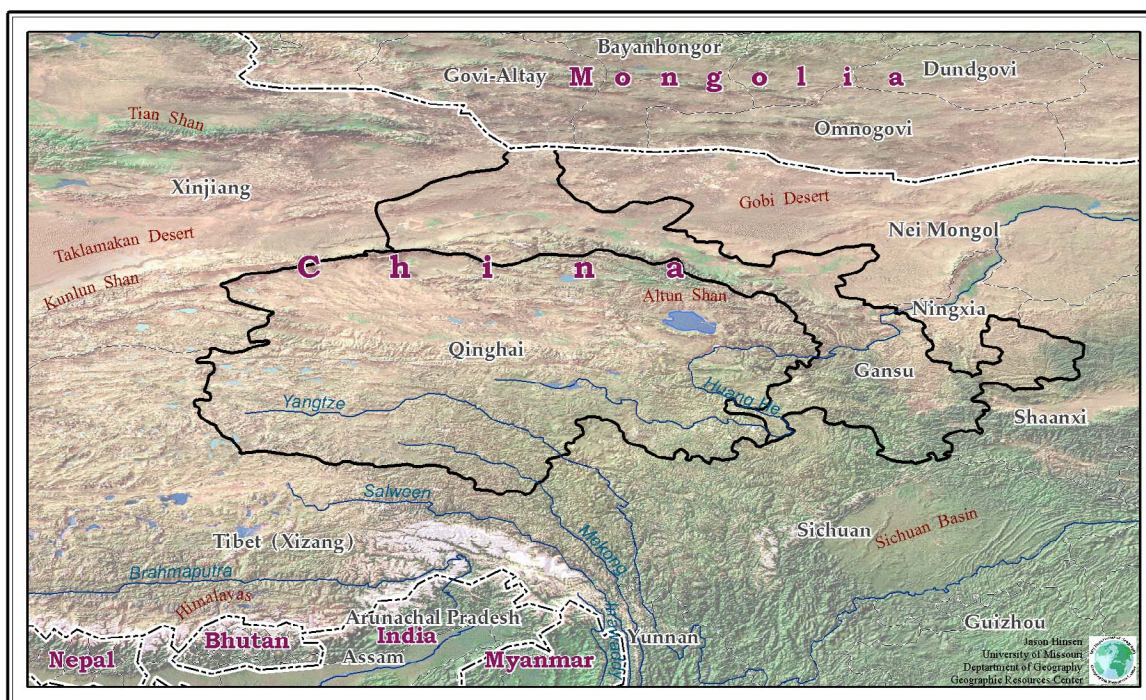
Wang Yongfu performing the Tuzu *Gesar*. Photo by Wang Guoming.

### The Uniqueness of the Tuzu *Gesar*

Different minority groups have different versions of the *Gesar* epic. Their respective forms differ from the Tibetan version in content, structure, characters, events, and actual performances. This kind of variety is common in Asian oral epic traditions.

The Tu people are a unique minority who reside in northwest China with a total population of 200,000. The *Gesar* epic of this group is found mainly in Tu communities in Gansu and Qinghai provinces. The Tuzu *Gesar* is performed as a combination of verse and prose. It also

shows some differences from the Anduo dialects of Tibetan. As a result of phonetic changes, the Tuzu *Gesar* has its own structure and follows strict procedures and performance rules. Many native scholars and experts have studied this tradition.



For a long time, the *Gesar* epic performances have mixed stories, myths, proverbs, and quotations through the medium of prose and verse, as well as combinations of chanting and recitative. The Tu people have no written language, and more and more performers are passing away. Currently Wang Yongfu, who is 79 years old and lives in the Zhucha village, Tiantang town, in Tianzhu, is the only performer in China who can sing the entire Tuzu *Gesar* epic.

### The Combination of Verse and Prose

Because Tuzu is a spoken language with no written system, the Tuzu *Gesar* is unique in its pattern and content. When performed, the verse sections are sung in Tibetan, and there is no limit on the order of rhymes and lines. After the Tibetan exposition, the performer then interprets the epic in the Tu language. Instead of explaining the action literally, he adds ancient Tuzu cultural stories, uniting the bilingual presentation. To represent the linguistic makeup of this material, I have adopted the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) to make a complete and scientific record of the Tuzu *Gesar*, and have translated the result to both the Tibetan and the Mandarin languages. As for the prose part, I have recorded the sounds in IPA and translated it word-for-word into Mandarin. This process preserved the materials in original and scientifically sound form. In this way, the Tuzu *Gesar* is presented as a multi-ethnic production with rich Tu

cultural characteristics. It reflects the great influence of the Tibetan *Gesar* on other ethnicities, and foregrounds and clarifies its unique content and pattern. The Tuzu *Gesar* fully illustrates the Tu people's creativity in dialogue with other ethnic cultures.

How did the Tuzu *Gesar* develop its current performative pattern? There are two explanations. First, the Tu are a unique minority in northwest China. For centuries, they frequently communicated with other groups, including the Han, Tibetan, Hui, and Mongolian peoples. The Tu have been significantly influenced by other ethnic groups, and not only by their languages but also, to varying extents, by their customs, religion, literatures, and arts—especially by Tibetans. Tuzu folk literature consists mainly of various special myths, legends, folktales, narratives, ballads, proverbs, and fables, all of which are depictions of Tu social history. These have been passed down through oral performance, and the Tuzu *Gesar* is the most representative of the overall cultural heritage.

Second, when initially introduced into the Tu area, the Tuzu *Gesar* was much the same as the Tibetan version, with verse and prose portions performed in Tibetan. In most cases, when an ethnic culture is introduced to other areas and peoples, it is changed and transformed by the folk performers who adapt it to their daily life, basic concepts, social environment, and aesthetic needs. In this way the transformed cultural product is appreciated for generations. Tu epic performers have imported *Gesar* into a mother-tongue tradition. Keeping the original Tibetan verses, the performers also added native heroic stories and other content with Tu cultural characteristics. Under such circumstances, the Tuzu *Gesar* circulated throughout the Tu area, and a *Gesar* version with unique characteristics developed and was passed down to the current era with its integrity and originality intact.

Even though the long tradition of *Gesar* has maintained its original prose elements since the beginning, after generations of performance the Tibetan vocabulary has been simplified and modernized. The remaining Tibetan words have sometimes been transformed by the Tu language, and sometimes have retained the ancient pronunciations or even original words. These Tibetan words are similar to the Tu language in their phonetic pronunciation.

### **The Practice of Sacred Performance**

The Tuzu *Gesar* is performed according to a strict procedure and within a unique pattern. My father, Gengdeng Shijia (Wang Yongfu), is the only living individual who can perform the complete version of the Tuzu *Gesar*. He has observed that “the procedure and performance pattern date back to ancient times, and if performers do not follow this procedure or pattern they will offend the deities and King Gesar, and they will also feel guilty and be punished due to Karma.” Several days before the event, the performer will usually go to a valley several miles away in order to get water from between six and nine springs, and also cut some twigs from the top of a cypress tree to worship Gesar and other gods. In addition, he cleans the performing place and burns the twigs to purify the site. Then the performer puts on special clothing, burns incense along with the cypress twigs, lights Buddha lamps, offers the pure water he has collected, and recites prayer scriptures. Then, sprinkling wine and water, he worships three levels of gods: the higher “King Heaven,” the middle “Treasure,” and the lower “Dragon,” as well as of all the

mountain and family gods. It is believed that if the performer follows these procedures the people will not suffer any illness or disaster, and that they will also enjoy good harvests for the entire year. After all of these steps are complete, he begins his performance.



The Discovery and Protection of the Tuzu Gesar. Video by the Northwestern University for Nationalities. [http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/guoming#myGallery-picture\(3\)](http://journal.oraltradition.org/issues/25ii/guoming#myGallery-picture(3))

### **Near Extinction**

Many Tuzu epic performers of great achievement have passed away in recent decades. The only one left is Wang Yongfu (Gengdeng Shijia), who is 79 years old and has been ill for some time. Thus the need to study and to protect the Tuzu *Gesar* epic as performed by him is extremely urgent. With the development of science and technology, as well as the evolution of the market economy, people's cultural life has become more varied and more complex. Many have lost interest in the Tuzu *Gesar*, and this change has had a negative impact on epic performance. Now it is difficult to transmit the Tuzu *Gesar*, which is on the verge of dying out. Maxim Gorky valued highly the role of folk performers in developing and promoting the arts (Suonan 2005). He highlighted the importance of protecting ethnic culture, and argued that losing a folk performer was like losing a library. Lu Xun, a famous Chinese writer, considered

folk artists to be “non-literate writers,” and praised their contributions to cultural history. Therefore, if the government does not take effective measures to protect *Gesar*, an important manifestation of human oral and intangible heritage will be forever lost in our lifetime and we will be responsible for that loss.

### The Epic Performer: Wang Yongfu

Before 1990 there were some four performers of the Tuzu *Gesar*. Today, Wang Yongfu, from the Tianzhu region, is the only one still living. Here is his story.

One August morning in 1930, a baby was born in a crude cave dwelling to a family who had performed the Tuzu *Gesar* for at least five generations. This baby grew up to become the famous performer Wang Yongfu, whose Tibetan name is Gengdeng Shijia. From childhood, he was clever and had an excellent memory. Under his father’s instruction, he acquired the skills for performing the epic when he was a teenager. The table below provides detailed information on the genealogy of his family. (I have recorded this material according to Wang Yongfu’s memory because the family record was lost. We are currently conducting research on the accuracy of the facts provided for the first generation.)

<u>Generation</u>	<u>Name</u>	<u>Gender</u>	<u>Birth date</u>	<u>Literacy</u>	<u>Transmission pattern</u>	<u>Performing era</u>	<u>Home region</u>
First	Huoer Jiamaya	Male	Unknown	Illiterate	Within family	Unknown	Huzu county, Qinghai
Second	Sangou Acairang	Male	Unknown	Illiterate	Within family	Unknown	Huzu county, Qinghai
Third	Lin Qiaheilo-ngjiang	Male	Unknown	Illiterate	Within family	Unknown	Huzu county, Qinghai
Fourth	Yang Zeng	Male	1912	Illiterate	Father-in-law to son-in-law	After 1927	Tiantang town, Tianzhu
Fifth	Wang Yongfu	Male	1930	Illiterate	Father to son	After 1942	Zhuca village, Tiantang town, Tianzhu

Wang Yongfu has earned high praise for his performances. He won an honorary certificate from the National Administrative Panel in November of 1991, and was chosen as a Paragon Individual for his contribution in protecting *Gesar*. In 1996 he was invited to attend the Fourth International Academic Conference. In June 1997 he was commended by the National Ministry of Culture, the National Ethnic Affairs Commission, the National Literary Union, and the National Academy of Social Science, who jointly conferred the title of Paragon Individual with Remarkable Contributions. In September 2006 he was listed as one of the First Group of Representative Inheritors of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage.

### Cultural Context, Structure, and Content



Wang Yongfu praying before his performance. Photo by Wang Guoming.

The Tuzu *Gesar* is similar to the Tibetan version only in its characters and general plot; it is different in content, structure, events, and the story as a whole. From its very beginning, the Tuzu *Gesar* is dependent on the folk custom of the Tu people, and reflects many aspects of the Tu people's daily life. It consists of an unusual mixture of creation epic, mythology stories, and heroic epic, an uncommon combination in other traditions. The two completed studies of *Gesar* demonstrate that the epic has a rich content, covering topics as diverse as the original universal chaos, human emergence, the origin of various species, raising domestic animals, and cultural development from primitive tribes to modern nationalities. It also recounts the biography of Gesar, who is transformed from a god into a human being, and then from an ordinary person into the tribal chief. He teaches his people to be self-reliant instead of trusting in the gods, and to develop agriculture and livestock to enrich their lives. The epic also includes information about food, living, clothes, and customs, as well as about agriculture, politics, military matters, and religion. The hero and gods from the Tuzu *Gesar* are half human and half divine, and we can observe that the epic illustrates a transition from the "mythological age" to the "heroic age." Its diverse content touches on language, religion, folk culture, mythology, history, geography, politics, and economics, as well as agricultural and handicraft-related topics.

The first part of the Tuzu *Gesar* is known as the Creation Epic, which has an independent conceptual system. It exists, for example, in the collection by Shi Luode, *Alangbu Creation History*, as discovered by Wang Xingxian, and in the Tuzu *Gesar* as performed by Wang Yongfu. The creation epic illustrates the living conditions and practices of the primeval people, such as collecting wild fruit, hunting, cave-dwelling, and dressing themselves in clothes made from animal skins and tree bark. Wang Yongfu tells a creation tale that is more detailed, more real, and more magnificent. His Creation Epic demonstrates to us a Tuzu *Gesar* that is unusual and more fully nuanced, showing us how the universe developed, how human beings were created, and how the different species arose. This part is a prelude to the following section, but is also in its own right of great significance in the Tuzu *Gesar*: it provides a comprehensive summary of the Tu people's original concepts of the universe, human beings, religion, language, and origins.

The second part of the Tuzu *Gesar* is called the Heroic Epic, and it tells the origin of Alang tribe, the power struggle among tribal members, and wars against other tribes. The elder chief (Khan) Alang Qiagan wants to abdicate and to choose a successor. But the evil Agu Jiadang usurps the throne by bribing the diviner. Agu Jiadang is weak, depletes his people's resources, and puts the Alang tribe at war for years. Under such circumstances, the elder Khan goes to heaven and beseeches the bottom-level Dragon God to let the god's third son be born into the Alang tribe. That son later becomes Gesar; he is the hero sent to the earth by the gods. From the time of his birth he is persecuted by his uncle, but the smart young Gesar outwits Agu Jiadang many times. Finally the young man overthrows his uncle, conquers some nearby tribes, and restores relationships with them; as a result the people of Alang have a peaceful and happy life. The second part of the Tuzu *Gesar* is similar to the Tibetan and Mongolian versions, with additional Tu cultural content.

### **The Study and Protection of the Tuzu *Gesar***

For a long time, people have valued the Tibetan and Mongolian versions of *Gesar*, and researchers initiated the preservation, collection, and edition of these versions quite early on. However, since people knew little about the transmission of the Tuzu *Gesar*, they have not done a great deal so far to protect, collect, and edit it. There are two principal explanations for this situation. The first is geographical and demographic. The Tu people live mainly in the areas with minority communities (Huzhu Tuzu Autonomous County, Minhe Huizu and Tuzu Autonomous County, and Datong Huizu and Tuzu Autonomous County of Qinghai Province; Tianzhu Tibetan Autonomous County and Yongdeng County of Gansu Province). The Tu people are a small population of fewer than two hundred thousand, and they have a poor economy. Second, the lack of a written language historically frustrated developments in their politics, economy, and culture, and made communications with other ethnic groups difficult. Therefore, Tu traditional culture was not preserved well, and researchers did not pay much attention to the preservation and edition of the Tuzu *Gesar*.



Wang Yongfu speaking with his son, Wang Guoming. Photo by Li Wei.

Since the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee, the Central Committee of the Communist Party and the State Council have issued several documents, stating that “the edition of ancient books, inheriting the precious cultural heritage of our homeland, is a significant task in regard to our posterity.” This statement placed the edition of ancient minority works on the government’s agenda.

Scholarly research on Tuzu *Gesar* has advanced in three stages: discovery, edition, and research. The first stage (1948-85) was the period when foreign scholars discovered the “Akelong *Gesar*” for the first time. Dominic Shlude from the former West Germany was the first scholar to discover, edit, and publish this tradition. The second stage (1985-2005) witnessed domestic scholars beginning to collect, edit, and publish the Tuzu *Gesar*. They made tremendous efforts to explore the oral epic performed by the inheritors of the tradition. As a result they were able to save this outstanding historical cultural heritage and publish their achievements. People began to pay attention to the epic’s historical and cultural value, and the Tuzu *Gesar* was gradually accepted by the *Gesar* study group and by scholars in other social science fields. This was significant for future edition, exploration, and research on the Tuzu *Gesar*. The main scholastic achievements of the second stage are as follows:

1. The survey conducted by the researcher Yang Enhong (June 25-July 3, 1986)
2. The experience of “seeking the treasure” by the researcher Wang Xingxian and his important contribution (September 6, 1986)



3. The collection and edition of the Tuzu *Gesar* by Wang Guoming, son of Wang Yongfu (from 1994 to the present)

The third stage began in 2006, when the Tuzu *Gesar* was placed among the first group of the national intangible cultural heritage. With the further development of reform and opening up in China, more efforts were made by the government to explore, collect, and save the cultural heritage of all minorities. The State Council promulgated “Instructions on Strengthening the Preservation of Works of the National Intangible Cultural Heritage” for effective protection in 2005, and in 2006 published a name-list of the first group of the national intangible cultural heritage, which included 518 items in total. The confirmation of the Tuzu *Gesar* in that name-list has far-reaching significance, even though the relevant work has just started. The tradition has gained national respect for its historical and cultural position. Its immense research value in the areas of history, culture, religion, and art is acknowledged, and it is also unique in the overall research area of *Gesar*. Including the Tuzu *Gesar* on the list means that it will be fully explored with national support and that research achievements will be published as a series.

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[All original citations in Chinese]

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