

# Secularization, Sanctification and Artistry: the Aesthetic Changes of “Gesar” Tangka\*

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**Abstract**—“Gesar” Tangka is an important theme of Zhongtang in Tibetan Buddhism, along with the creation and circulation of the epic of “Gesar”, “Gesar” Tangka was originally hung from the rap scene to temple and Buddhist hall for worship, in the pursuit of aesthetics, it has experienced the change from secularization to sanctification. Since the 1980s, the rescue of “Gesar” epic, the rise of market economy, and the initiation of intangible cultural heritage protection have made the creation of “Gesar” Tangka obtain great vitality. At the same time, the change of creators' identity, the diversity of artistic expression and the diversification of their functions make Tangka the aesthetic pursuit of secularization, sacredness and artistry.

**Keywords**—“Gesar” Tangka; secularization; sanctification; artistry

## I. INTRODUCTION

“Gesar” Tangka is the image presentation of Tibetan epic “Gesar”, and it is an important theme of Zhongtan in the traditional Tibetan painting art Tangka. Compared with other types of Tangka, Zhong Tang had more freedom in creation. As a result, Tangka, accompanied by the changes of social history and its living circumstances, has also undergone complicated historical changes in the pursuit of aesthetics. Especially since the 1980s, the figure of “Gesar” Tangka began to appear in the cultural institutions, temples, Buddhist halls, gallery market and other cultural backgrounds and the aesthetic pursuit shows the characteristics of secularization, sacredness and artistry.

## II. THE EMERGENCE OF “GESAR” TANGKA AND THE AESTHETIC PURSUIT OF SECULARIZATION

“Gesar” is a great heroic epic produced in Tibetan area of China. It is widely believed that it was born in the early 11th century AD. At that time, the Tubo dynasty was in a state of collapse, Tibetan society was falling apart, tribes were

standing up and fighting was going on, so people expected a hero who could put an end to these disasters, so they began the rap of the Gesar story. “Gesar” Tangka also accompanied by the Gesar epic rap, “for thousands of years, Gesar has been handed down mainly by the rap of folk artists. In order to enhance the effect of rap, and to attract and serve more listeners, some clever folk artists use ‘Gesar’ as the theme, drawing figure paintings and Gesar stories, hanging up while rap, explaining while singing. This is the Tangka painting about Gesar, and over time it became a special type of Tangka-Zhong Tang.” [1] It can be seen that the original prototype of Tangka is the portrait of Gesar and its related characters drawn by the rapper. The material of these works is not easy to preserve cloth and paper, so long lost. Then, with the formation of Tangka art in the 11th century, the popularity of “Gesar” epic rap and the improvement of audience appreciation, some professional painters who make a living by painting have started making “Gesar” Tangka for rap artists to hang during rap ceremonies or rap scenes. As a result, Tangka appeared in the “Gesar” theme of the Tangka type-Zhong Tang. Although the Tangka of this period did not pass down because of its material, according to some scholars, King Gesar is a real hero in history. For example, in his autobiography, Sombakambo Eshilazur said, “the Biography of King Gesar is not a Buddhist classic, but a biography of historical figures, and Gesar himself was the little king of Amdo.”[2] Therefore, it can be estimated that the period of the “Gesar” Tang card should also be created according to the historical heroes, so it belongs to the Zhong-Tang type of non-religious subject matter.

In general, “Gesar” Tangka was initially hoisted at the rap scene, and its main function was to serve rap, with obvious secularization characteristics. Mr. Xu Guoqiong wrote in “the investigation of Gesar”: “Gesar is a character who is generally worshipped as a god. Some say that he is a god of war, fighting war to worship him; Some say that he is the god of wealth, praying for prosperity of cattle and sheep, and accumulating wealth and treasure, that people would also worship him at ordinary times, others that he is a local god, that where he is worshipped, where people and animals would be safe, and that life would be happy. In short, he is regarded as a god and respected by the people.”[3] Therefore, the folk worship and belief of Gesar laid the groundwork for the later sanctification of Gesar.

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### III. THE PROSPERITY OF "GESAR" TANGKA AND THE AESTHETIC PURSUIT OF SANCTIFICATION

Gesar went through three periods of evolution, said Mr Ibarnagatsu, the first was the Ka Zhong, a story told entirely by the Lower Riba. With the expansion of the influence, "Jie Zhong" and "Qu Zhong" appeared gradually. "Jie Zhong" refers to the story of Gesar who was processed by literati. "Qu Zhong" is the story of "Gesar" with the content of Buddhism, so the appearance of "Qu Zhong" means that "Gesar" was accepted by religion, even though the exact period of this transformation was not known. However, scholars generally agreed that "Gesar" was accepted by religion in Ming and Qing dynasties. "Gesar" was accepted by Tibetan Buddhism and entered the sacred temple of religion, which also brought prosperity and sanctification of the aesthetic pursuit of Tangka's creation.

The sanctification of "Gesar" Tangka originated from the religious image of Gesar. The creation of "Gesar" epic was also the beginning of Buddhism in Tibetan areas, folk artists in rap "Gesar" story was inevitably influenced by religion. After entering the 15th century, Master Zongkaba sent two of his disciples to preach Buddhism and extinguish benzene in the Aba Tibetan area, and began to stand firm in the Tibetan area. In the process, Buddhist monks, in order to promote the Dharma and win the support of the general public, began to use the "Gesar" story to preach the Dharma, collect and arrange the stories of King Gesar and publish them. Thus many Buddhist elements were added to Gesar's story. Among them, the famous Tibetan scholar, the living Buddha of Jugu Temple, Cumeiban Ranggitatso, when he wrote the Gesar story, he transformed it into the "Gesar King Biography" with the content of Buddhism, and transformed Gesar into a Buddhist dharma god. He wrote many prayers in tribute to Gesar and classics about Gesar, arguing from different angles that Gesar was a man of God, who believed that the belief in Gesar was essentially the same as that of the Buddha. This kind of eulogy had a strong influence among some believers, who also worshipped Gesar as a dharma god. For example, the living Buddha of Ganzi Temple in Ganzi County wrote "Gesar Prayer", another eminent monk in Kang District, Daozi Yixi Dorje, wrote "Gesar Prayer", "Gesar Achievement Law", and so on. In this connection, King Gesar was gradually deified by Tibetan Buddhism from secular people to the gods of Tibetan Buddhism, and was also considered to be the embodiment of Manjushri Bodhisattva, the incarnation of Quan Shiyin Yu, the embodiment of the hand of Jingang Shouyi, the emissary of Master Lotus Life, and so on. The sanctification of the Gesar image has been further strengthened. At the same time, "Gesar" Tangka is also regarded as a "holy thing" to be consecrated in the scriptures of the common people or in the temple Buddhist hall. "Among the people, 'Gesar' Tangka, especially Gesar riding-horse Tangka, is worshipped and enshrined, not only as an artistic work, but more as a the picture of a god-god of war. In the past, when soldiers were ready to go out for battle, they hung up 'Gesar riding-horse Tangka' to burn incense and pray for the protection of the god of war to make them victorious." [4] The monastery worshipping "Gesar" Tangka is also popular in the Nima-style monasteries in the Tibetan area. Most of the "Gesar" Tangka left over from

the Ming and Qing dynasties that can be seen today are worshipped in temples. For example, the "Gesar horse-riding battle statue" (Ming) in Yiniu Temple, Shiqu County, Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Sichuan Province, the "Gesar riding-horse- battle statue" (Ming) in the Xiangkha Temple in Batang County, and the "Gesar King and his Lingguo generals" in the Donggu Temple of Ganzi County (Qing), "Gesar horse-riding battle statue" (Qing) in Zongsa Temple, Dege County, "Gesar and the gods of the mountains" (Qing) Gongqing Temple, Dege County, [5] For the providers, the holy images in the "Gesar" Tangka paintings are the objects of his meditation and worship, which are best hung on the walls or beams of the family Buddhist hall and temples.

The expression of the sacrament of "Gesar" Tangka is also reflected in the creation of the image itself. From the surviving Ming and Qing dynasties "Gesar Riding-Horse Statue in the Battle" Tangka, whether in the overall picture layout or all the details can be seen, obviously as a god of war to worship the "holy things". First of all, "Gesar Riding-Horse Statue in the Battle" Tang Ka and Buddhist Tang Ka have the same characteristics in composition, strictly follow the Tang Ka painting measure scale of the classic book, "the Buddha said the Statue Metrics" to create, the main image at the center of the picture is Gesar's horse-riding statue. In the specific details, in order to pursue the symbolization of the god of war, King Gesar sits sideways on the horse, and the whole shape is completely out of proportion. Instead, he made every effort to maximize the integration of King Gesar and the Horse. The same pursuit can be seen in color processing Gesar's lower body is harmoniously aligned with the colors of the Horse. For example, The "Gesar Riding-Horse Statue in the Battle" (see "Fig. 1") which is now hidden in of the Research Institute of Qinghai Federation of Literature and Art and collected by the Qinghai Folk Literature Collection team in the 1950s, the age of Tangka creation is considered to be the Ming Dynasty. In this Tangka work, Gesar sat on horseback, with the red of the lower body so close to the horse's color that it took great care to find the left leg on which King Gesar stepped on his foot. Secondly, the battle statue itself is a dynamic shape, but the painters, when dealing with it, held it down very well, as far as King Gesar's style is concerned, the slight tilt angle of the upper and lower halves and the lift of the whip's right hand have an upward momentum, but his gazing at the earth and the downward pressure of their left hand with spear stifle the upward movement. The hoofed position of the horse in the crotch seemed to emphasize the movement of running, but at the same time with a low head to suppress the movement, so that the image of the god of war has a solemn feeling, like the silence of the Buddha, with a permanent.



Fig. 1. "Gesar Riding-Horse Statue in the Battle" provided by Qingcuo.

Of course, "Gesar" Tangka has been sanctified and artistically improved. As we all know, traditional Tangka is a form of religious art born out of Tibetan Buddhist culture. The picture is presented in a flat painting manner. There is no difference in the image in the picture between far and near, and there is no difference between the inside and outside of the space. It means that what the painter conveys is the vision of Buddha overlooking the world, and all beings are equal. For believers, drawing and offering Tangka is an accumulation of merit. Painters concentrate on getting rid of worldly thoughts and reciting the mantra of the Lord Buddha, as if the incarnation had entered the Temple of Daoism and the Buddha's body to look at each other, the creative process of Tangka is considered to be a process of spiritual practice among Buddhist believers and the Benthic believers, so the monks in the temple often appear many famous painters in Tangka's creation. These monks and painters participated in the creation of "Gesar" Tangka, not only according to the religious Tangka rigorous picture layout, strict image measurement of the "Gesar" Tangka for the sacred rendering, at the same time, it also makes the Tangka more artistic.

#### IV. THE MODERN CHANGE OF "GESAR" TANGKA AND THE AESTHETIC PURSUIT OF ARTISTRY

After experiencing the prosperity of the Ming and Qing dynasties, "Gesar" Tangka suffered a downturn because of historical reasons. In the 1980s, the rescue work of the epic "Gesar" made the creation of "Gesar" Tangka regain the artistic life. The "Gesar" theme Tangka in the huge picture scroll of Qinghai Province, "Chinese Tibetan Culture and Art Painting", Ganzi prefecture "The Legend of King Gesar." Thousand Tangka, "Gesar's 30 Senior Generals" and so on appeared one after another. Since the 21st century, the "Gesar" epic has been recognized as a national and world-class intangible cultural heritage. While rescuing the "Gesar" rap artists and collecting and sorting out the texts of the "Gesar" epic, People also began the large-scale creation of "Gesar" Tangka. In August 2016, the author discovered in a field

survey in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Yushu Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Guoluo Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Qinghai Province, local government schools, cultural institutions at all levels, temples and folk painters were all actively organizing and participating in the creation of "Gesar" Tangka, under the background of multiculturalism, Tangka's works of Gesar show the aesthetic characteristics of secular, sacred and artistic amalgamation.

Since 1980's, "Gesar" Tangka has undergone important changes in its function. It is not only a rap tool and an object of worship, but also an important way of spreading and inheriting Gesar's culture. In the field investigation of Guoluo and Yushu in Qinghai Province, the author found that the creation of Tangka was mainly based on the following reasons: first, as a "holy thing", it was consecrated in Buddhist temple, such as Caiji Temple and Dana Temple in Yushu Nangqin County, Gesar's King Lion's Palace in Guoro, Senlong Palace in Zalang Temple and so on, that have been dedicated to the "Gesar" Tangka. The second is to sell as a "commodity" in the market. For example, the "Gesar" Tangka works created by the Zhum Girls'd School in Daren County, Guoluo prefecture, Qinghai Province, were sent to galleries in Beijing, Shanghai, Shenzhen and other places for auction; Tudeng Weise teacher in Banma County, Guoluo County, founded the "Gesar Tangka Handicraft Production and Sales Factory in Bama County", where some of the "Gesar" Tangka works are displayed for guests to choose from. The third is to organize the creation of "Gesar" Tangka as a cultural product of "intangible cultural heritage". Teacher Renqing Jiancuo's creation of "Gesar" Tangka in Jianza County, Huanan Prefecture, Qinghai Province, started mainly from the "Gesar Art Rescue Office", which was established in 1979. In 1980, he wrote "Ridge.Gesar King and the Thirtieth General " published in the Tibetan periodicals "Zhangchal" and "the Art of the masses of Qinghai". In the 1990s, Renqing Jiancuo's Tangka works on the theme of "Gesar" epic, "Hawling War", "Horse race king", "Sindan Tiger Lion confrontation", "Gesar Blessing Ode", "Demoniac Chapter", "Shadowline Chardonnay", "The Birthday of the Ridge" and "The World Mulberry" are collected by the Gesar Research Center of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences and become an important part of the epic heritage of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences. Since then, Renqing Jiancuo's Tangka creation, named "Ridge Gesar King and the Seven Major Generals", has been collected by the Rubin Museum in the United States, letting the story of "Gesar" be broadcast overseas. In 1999, in the Great View of Chinese Tibetan Culture and Art painting, organized by Mr. Zong Zela, a master of Tibetan arts and crafts, there are 11 Tangka pieces on the contents of "Gesar", from "Nativity Flower Garden" to "three boundaries of Stability". The longest scroll painting in the world was exhibited at the Museum of Revolutionary History in Beijing in 2000, causing a great sensation among the audience and academia, and a good publicity for the spread of the epic story of "Gesar". The work is currently in the Xining Tibetan Medical Museum, Qinghai Province, and continues to tell the legendary story of Gesar to visitors in the form of images. The government of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture of Sichuan Province presided over the drawing of "King of Gesar Biography" 1000 Tangka in the form of a comic strip to present the epic story of "Gesar",



which was displayed at the Cultural Palace for Nationalities in Beijing during the 2008 Olympic Games, which spread the heroic story of Gesar to the people of the world. The "Gesar" Tangka, organized by the cultural organization of Yushu, Guoluo, Qinghai Province, is now in full swing. For example, the town of Jiegu in Yushu has built a special Gesar cultural exhibition hall in the Gesar Cultural Square rebuilt after the earthquake. The exhibition hall in the upper and lower floors of the exhibition hall hanging about the "Gesar" epic character Tangka works a total of 28 pieces; Yushu second Nation High School organized Tangka artists to draw 60 meters long "Gesar" story Tangka, and with a special exhibition hall, used for visits and Tangka students to copy and study; The Gesar Cultural Exhibition Park in Guoluo County is now under construction and has commissioned Tangka painters Peng De and Ramon to design and create 36 Tangka works on the theme of "Gesar" by way of competitive bidding. Based on the diversity of the functions of Tangka, the aesthetic pursuit has the characteristics of secular, sacred and artistic blending.

First of all, in this period, "Gesar" Tangka's works pursue the characteristics of secular, sacred and artistic amalgamation overall artistic expression. In terms of composition, in this period, besides inheriting the traditional central composition of Tangka, some innovative works appeared in the composition of "Gesar" Tangka. The composition of "Gesar Tangka of Thousands of Pictures" is the form of comics. Each work is composed according to the content of the story, and the image of Gesar is not placed in the center of the picture as the main image of the central character. The "Gesar" Tangka story map found by the investigation team in Senyong Art Palace in Dali County, Guoluo Prefecture, is also different from that of the Qing Dynasty. There is still no main figure of the central character, but the scene is arranged from top to bottom according to the vertical axis of Tangka. In the "Volume of Seizing the Silk the Milwaud Kingdom" for the selected illustrations of "Gesar", Tangka even adopted a close-up composition, the whole central part of the picture is occupied by a huge fish head. In the 1980s, Nimazien, Iwasawa, Dawa, Ishisandan, Mei Dingkai, Chen Bingxi, Lu Shuming's "Ridge · King of Gesar" Tangka and Teacher Renqingjiancuo's "Gesar" Tangka are the central composition of traditional Tangka, but the overall shape of Gesar's horse-riding emphasizes the hero's momentum with a diagonal composition. Different from the traditional Gesar equestrian image, these changes show a breakthrough in the stylized composition of the traditional Tangka by the modern "Gesar" Tangka. From the perspective of character shaping, both the figure painting and the story painting of "Gesar" emphasize the authenticity and secularization of the characters. The proportion of the human body is closer to that of the normal people. Faces, hands, and other parts that express muscle reflect the relationship between light and dark with the transition of color, showing a sense of three dimensions. The figure facial expression molds exquisite vivid, each kind of character characteristic all manifests incisively and vividly. For example, teacher Tudeng Weise, in Banma County, placed in his studio a picture of the figure "Gesar Riding Horse statue in Battle", which was about to be finished, with delicate depictions. Although the facial expression is mainly flat smear, in the color rendering around the eyes of the characters and the corners of the mouth, which

is obvious that the colors are used to highlight the three-dimensional feeling of the face. Around the image of the Thirteen Wilma<sup>1</sup> is lifelike, and possess the form and spirit, in the treatment of hair, with the use of traditional Chinese painting "hair tearing" technique to strengthen the texture, so that these places are bright, the schemata are like the highlights in an oil painting. In terms of space performance, in this period, "Gesar" Tangka began to pay attention to the perspective relationship and to pursue the reproduction of space. The "Gesar Tangka of Thousands of Pictures" uses the scattered point perspective of Chinese painting to deal with the background and integrate the ethereal world of epic legends into real life. Each story shows as much as possible the scene that really happens in real life. The picture shows mountains, grasslands, rivers, cattle, sheep, tents and other familiar and friendly natural environment.



Fig. 2. Partial photo of "Gesar Riding-Horse Statue in the Battle", by the author, at Tudeng Wei Colour Studio in 2016.

Secondly, the secularization and artistic pursuit of "Gesar" Tangka in this period are also reflected in the image shaping of King Gesar. Take concrete works as an example, Nimazren mentioned above, in this Tangka "Ridge · King of Gesar" created by Ishikazawa and Iwasawa, etc, (see "Fig.2") the secularization of the characters and the artistic innovation of the works are obvious. The overall composition of the picture is still central, but the sun, moon, snowy mountains, holy lakes and other indicative images appear in the central circle. Various shades of blue make the shape of King Gesar's riding-horse look like a ride on the snowy mountains of Animachin, with a strong sense of space. In the shape of Gesar riding-horse, the image of King Gesar and the image of the horse are clearly distinguished by color. Among them, the posture of the battle horse in which the legs are vacated makes the horse very dynamic, although its head is still in a bow position, it was apparent here that it is for the balance of the horse's body or for the flight of the legs, and Gesar's whole body is in a straight line, and the right leg pedal on the saddle strengthen the upward movement, and raise his left hand, the diagonal composition formed by a spear in his right hand further reinforces this dynamic, with the red cape behind him flying in the wind, and the whole shape is trying to reproduce the heroic

<sup>1</sup> The Thirteen Wilma: Gesar's God of War and Protector, they are thirteen kinds of animals, Dapeng, Azure Dragon, male lion, fierce tiger, wild donkey, wild wolf, gray eagle, flower kite, white chest bear, white shoulder bear, golden snake, buffalo, long horned deer.

spirit of horse-riding, where Gesar is no longer the solemn god of war. What is more is the hero image in the worldly world.

Finally, an important feature of "Gesar" Tangka's creation in this period is that it is no longer the "nameless creator", but the artist's distinctive and individualized creation. Teacher Renqing Jiancuo's "Gesar" creation has a clear personal stylized characteristic from beginning to end. In his 2008 composition of the "Ridge · King of Gesar and the Seven Major Generals"(see "Fig. 3"), in color, which give up the traditional Tangka technique of using bright colors and light and thin flat painting, and with the red and black two colors to highlight the thick feeling of color, so as to achieve the majestic force and the air of justice that highlight the image of the characters. The whole work has a kind of elegance and dignity of classical oil painting. In the Gesar Cultural Exhibition Hall of Jiegu Town, Yushu prefecture, the influence of modern meticulous painting can be clearly seen in the creation of "Gesar" Tangka, especially in the portrayal of female images, with a total of about 30 female images depicted in the whole venue, which includes the Tibetan, Mongolian, Miao, Uygur and other ethnic women are involved in the female image, all women are slender and slim, posture or sitting or standing, beautiful and moving, the dress on the body depicts exquisite, all line sketches are fine smart. Of course, the artist's personal emphasis can also be seen from the signatures of artists in Tangka's works. In the Gesar Culture Exhibition Museum of Jiegu Town, Yushu prefecture, two large paintings of "Gesar" are painted on the lower right rock of the picture with the bright and orderly seal of Tangka painter Quxiong Zeren. When the author visited Banma County, the author found that Tudeng Weise teacher had signed his name with small strokes in his works.



Fig. 3. "Ridge · King of Sagar and Seven Major Generals", by the author , at Renqing Jiancuo Studio. in 2016.

In general, the works of "Gesar" Tangka since the 1980s have a stronger artistic pursuit on the basis of their secularization and sanctification. More emphasis is placed on the authenticity of the characters, the life of the scene and the individualization of the techniques of expression in artistic expression. As a result, these pictures of "Gesar" Tangka are particularly delicate, showing the artistic pursuit of Tangka painters and the inclusiveness of Gesar's culture.

## V. CONCLUSION

The aesthetic change of Tangka's creation not only shows the variation of "Gesar" epic in the course of historical change in Tibetan area, at the same time, we can see the cultural choices made by the Tibetan cultural elite with the change of the times. Especially since the 1980s, "Gesar" epic culture has become an important part of the traditional culture of the Chinese nation. In protecting and inheriting the traditional culture and art of this nation, the Tibetan cultural elites absorb and draw lessons from the foreign culture and art, so that we can see the tolerance of this nation, when the authors came into contact with the artists who drew "Gesar" Tangka in Qinghai field survey, they inherited this artistic form of traditional painting Tangka of their own nationality, they all began to explore their own innovation. As mentioned above, the teacher Peng De followed the online video self-taught oil painting, in his studio also hung a number of oil paintings and water powder works; Tudeng Weise teacher went to Shanghai to study painting twice, and also thought that he had the influence of oil painting in the creation of Tangka, while Mr. Renqing Jiancuo definitely used the color of western classical oil painting to create "Gesar" Tangka. The artistic innovation and aesthetic pursuit they have carried out in the creation of Tangka seem to show us that the Tibetan cultural elite is working hard to transform this "religious sacred object" of Tangka into "national art." As Nimazien says, "Since 1300 years, the Tibetan people have produced religious paintings as worshipers because of their belief in Tibetan Buddhism. If the art of a nation exists only as a sacrifice, it is easy to lose its vitality. The traditional Tangka takes the primitive religion as the content, unable to convey the fresh cultural information of the new era. Only when the life of the Tibetan people is expressed through the International 'language' and through the language of modern painting can more people understand the history of this nation and their present life and spiritual pursuits." [6]

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