Narrative Lifeworlds, the *myl li dosp po*, and *tm*'s Social Function

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ABSTRACT: Taking as its case study the *myl li dosp po*, this article investigates the social function of *tm* through their role in creating a "narrative lifeworld" — a theoretical term introduced and defended by the author here. As explored by Holly Gayley, David Germano, and others, *tm* are not isolated incidents, but rather complex social interactions that weave together the past and present into a dense network of significance. Generally, *sto* are recognized as cultural heroes who envelop the present age in the significance of the past and construct a meaningful semiotic universe out of their relationship with the past. Although not traditionally considered *tm* by Tibetan interpreters, the Gesar tradition shares much with the *tm* tradition — most notably, patterns of inspired revelation creating new texts that have social effects beyond their initial telling.

Despite these similarities, however, only one Gesar text explicitly identifies itself as a *tm*: the *myl li dosp po*, composed by 'Dan bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug and revealed by Gling tshang *sto* Drag rtsal rdo rje. Through reading in comparison the Gesar tradition and the *tm* tradition at the point where they intersect, the *myl li*, scholars have the opportunity to use the Gesar tradition to understand with greater clarity *tm*'s social functioning. Beyond introducing this important text to scholarship, this article argues that through creating a narrative lifeworld that built on a continually significant and effective past, *tm* allow individuals to relate to this narratively-built past and make a world in which to meaningfully dwell in the present. Narrative lifeworlds, therefore, become the engine by which *tm* gain social reality and relevance in contemporary Tibet.

Concealed objects or teachings framed as revelations from the past for the benefit of the present, *tm* are a mélange of history, revelation, and narrative and represent one of the most enduring features of Tibetan religious literature. In academic scholarship, *tm* are most discussed for their ability to introduce innovative practices and reformulate histories with the authority of Indian texts. *tm*, however, are not only individual moments of revelation, they are narratives that offer an imagined connection to the past. For people who regard these narratives as authoritative, *tm* provide a framework for understanding themselves, the world, and new social or cultural developments. In this way, *tm* function as centers for

complex social systems that orient communities toward both the past and the present, ultimately forming what anthropologist Cli f ord Geertz has called a "web of signi f cance."[1] At the center of this community is the *t sto* , who represents both the voice privileged with access to the past and the means to (re-)connect to that past in the contemporary world. Listeners, readers, and other individuals who interact with the *t m* actively participate in the *t m* tradition through making real its historically-oriented relationships in the contemporary world. By situating their practice and identity within the world made meaningful by the *t m* , both *t ston* and audience simultaneously produce and respond to the *t m* tradition itself.

Through utilizing narrative and inspired revelation to tie together local traditions, geography, and religious beliefs,[2] *t m* traditions function in ways remarkably similar to the Gesar epic. Like a *t sto* , a Gesar bard will experience a moment of revelation — one they often bring about through specific ritual action in ways similar to a *t sto* — and then produce a new, but socially-signi f cant, narrative. This narrative concerns a period that is historically set centuries before, but which functions in the contemporary world largely as a timeless, culturally-bound past that speaks to and comments on the now. Like with a *t ma*, the world is rendered meaningful for listeners, readers, and participants through their relationship to the epic. While from a Tibetan Buddhist institutional perspective *t m* and the Gesar epic traditions are di f erent — one representing unique knowledge hidden by buddhas to be recovered when needed and the other relating narratives of a king and his warriors f ghting demonic forces in defense of Buddhism — the social functions of these traditions share remarkable similarities.

Despite these similarities, only one core Gesar episode explicitly identi f es itself as a *t ma*: the *my l li d o s p po*.[3] While there are many versions of the story of King Gesar's descent into hell — popularly called the *my l li* — the most well-known and widely distributed was published at Wa ra monastery in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century, under the sponsorship of a local meditative practitioner Dam chos bstan pa (d.1946). In this text, the epic's hero, King Gesar, receives initiations from Padmasambhava to teach Rdzogs chen practice to the peoples of Gling. Most famously, he then descends to hell to f ght Yama over the fate of his mother's rebirth, learning in the process that she su f ers for his karmic

1 Geertz 1973: 5.

2 In contemporary American and European scholarship, the category of "religion" and its associated adjective "religious" has come under question as an analytical category that transcends speci f c cultural environments. While the author acknowledges the validity of such arguments, the term "religion" has attained cross-cultural adoption, allowing its analytical use here.

3 By "core" Gesar text, I mean considered as central to the Gesar narrative arc by the majority of participants in the Gesar tradition. As will be discussed below, the author is aware of at least one other text calling itself a gter ma — A yan 'dul ba'i rtogs brjod — but it has had only one known publication (2005) and seems to be considered minor, inauthentic, or unknown by most Gesar tradition participants.

sins of violence committed on the field of battle. After saving from hell his mother and all the men he has ever killed in battle, Gesar eventually returns to the human realm and the remainder of the text details the deaths and associated miracles surrounding each warrior of Gling, culminating in the death of Gesar and his horse Kyang bu. According to the Wa ra monastery *myl li*, the text was composed by 'Dan bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug and hidden as a *tm* in Mgo log, before being recovered by Gling tshang *tsto* Drag rtsal rdo rje at an undisclosed time.

Examining *tm* and the Gesar epic at the point where they intersect — the *myl li* — provides a useful pathway to interrogate how *tm* function. While *tm* certainly generate new practice traditions, ritual systems, and sacred histories, they also do important social work that has, to this point, yet to be fully explored in the academic literature. As seen in the *tm* prophecies of Rig 'dzin rgod ldem concerning the Sbas yul of Yol mo,[4] the environmental philosophy arising from reciprocal offering relationships between local deitires and *tsto*,[5] and the contemporary veneration of holy sites celebrated in O rgyan gling pa's *Padma bka' thang*,[6] *tm* form identities, designate values, and make sacred the landscape of Tibet. Due to its unique position as both a *tm* and a popular Gesar episode, the *myl li* provides an important opportunity to use the lens of the Gesar tradition to think about the means by which these social functions of *tm* are produced. Through creating, deploying, and building narrative lifeworlds — that is narrative patterns that situate the listener, reader, or other participant within a given web of significance and imbue them with a certain perspective towards the historical past — *tm* and other revelatory systems provide orientation and make meaningful an individual's identity and place in history. Beyond introducing this important text to larger academic scholarship, my analysis below also presents the theoretical tool of "narrative lifeworld" to begin a consideration of how *tm* make worlds in which to meaningfully live.

Introducing the

The *myl li dos po* is the culminating episode of Tibet's Gesar epic— sometimes claimed to be the world's longest living epic tradition.[7] Prevalent across the Himalayan plateau, but especially in the eastern reaches of the Tibetan cultural region and Mongolia, the Gesar epic is a living epic tradition performed by bards for centuries. Based on

4 Gelle 2020.

5 Terrone 2014.

6 Doney 2016.

7 Raine 2014.

available publishing evidence, the *dmyl li dos po* is a later episode of the epic, likely dating to the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Unlike most Gesar episodes, which are generally authorless or the product of revelatory storytelling, the *dmyl li* has an author — the 'Dan bla ma Chos kyi dbang phyug. Appearing as a character in the narrative itself, Chos kyi dbang phyug leads a funerary procession from Gling to Hor after the murder of the local regent. His title may indicate that he is from the 'Dan region of Gling tshang, located north of Sde dge, or that he personally serves the family of 'Dan ma, Gesar's most trusted warrior. After Gesar dies and the narrative enters its final chapter, 'Dan ma endeavors to finish the great work of Gling by charging everyone to remember Gling's final days:

> Tomorrow, before the sun [rises], I, 'Dan ma, will go to India. The time of the mandala of emanations of Gling is complete… May the rnam thar of King Gesar and my true words of aspirational prayer pervade all the lands of the southern world! May it become the Dharma of the kingdom! May it be heard in the deathly land of hell![8]

From an intratextual perspective, therefore, Chos kyi dbang phyug's composition of the *dmyl li* is a critical part of 'Dan ma's goal, ensuring future generations know of King Gesar and his important work.

As noted above, the *dmyl li dos po* is perhaps the only core Gesar text to explicitly identify itself as a *tam*. After being hidden in Red Water Lake of Northern Mgo log (Byang mgo log na dmar chu rdzing bu), it was recovered by Gling tshang gter ston Drag rtsal rdo rje at the Hermitage of the Upper Northern Pool (chan stod chab kyi rdzing bu'i dben gnas).[9] Little to nothing is known about Drag rtsal rdo rje, though two other texts are popularly identified as being authored or revealed by him: (1) a manual of Rdzogs chen teachings that survives only in a *'bul* commentary by Lung rtogs rgyal mtshan (d.2011)[10] and (2) a little-known Gesar episode pertaining to the taming of a demon called A yan.[11] Despite this popular

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8 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 354-356. *sa yi yi mu 'i sol l; 'dam y pyo sl' o; li sp ul p 'i d yil' o d duds d o s; ... s y l po'i m t d ; 'd m 'i bd ts i s smo l m 'di; l o 'd m li yul u p y b p s o ; y l ms os l' yu p s o ; s i dmy l b 'i yul l t os p s o* . To arrive at the most reliable text, I have compared three versions of the *dmyl li dos po*: (1) the 1984 Bhutanese edition, (2) a photographic recreation of the original Wa ra monastery block print, and (3) the 1986 Chengdu edition. Throughout the article, if any significant difference was found between the three texts, I will note it in the quote itself.

9 While all published editions of the *dmyl li dos po* identify the Hermitage of the Upper Northern Pool as the text's hiding location, only the 1984 Thimpu edition notes that Drag rtsal rdo rje recovered the text from the Red Water Lake of Golok. In the original Wa ra monastery blockprint, the name is obscured from where it was revealed is obscured, though "chu" can be clearly seen.

10 Lung rtogs rgyal mtshan, unknown.

11 Si khron zhing chen ge sar zhib 'jug and Gser rta rdzong ge sar zhib 'jug gzhung 2005.

associations, however, both texts have strange attributions that make their relationship to the Drag rtsal rdo rje of the *myl li* unclear. The Rdzogs chen commentary is a small practice manual published locally at Ya chen monastery at some point recently. However, the work upon which it is commenting remains unaccounted for and it provides no background information on the purported author of the teaching, leaving its attribution to Drag rtsal rdo rje a mystery. The second text is especially mysterious, having purportedly been revealed as a *tm* at Bsam yas Monastery at an unknown time by a *tsto* named Rdo rje dbang drag rtsal. The only publication is a 2005 text from the Serta Gesar Research Institute (Gser rta rdzong ge sar gzhung). The introduction from the editor provides no identification of pre-modern publications except to note that the original pecha was ruined and significant editorial work had to be done to make it publishable. Furthermore, the editor notes that the episode subjugating the demon A yan is almost entirely unknown by Tibetans today, a fact supported by my own conversations with Tibetan research partners. In light of such difficult and unclear information the details about Drag rtsal rdo rje's life, his motivations or practices before revealing the *myl li* are largely unknown at this point.

The *myl li dosp po* had only one blockprint publication in pre-modern Tibet, at Wa ra monastery in Chab mdo prefecture. A Sa skya monastery that was heavily involved in promoting ris med teachings, Wa ra monastery served as a center of Mahāmudrā and Rdzogs chen practices in the region.[12] The monastery seems to have had a lengthy association with the epic as Wa ra monastery's front courtyard featured a large-scale mural of King Gesar and his warriors in battle in its original construction; the mural has since been fully restored. The blockprint of the *myl li* does not give a specific date for the publication, except that it was produced under the sponsorship of Dam chos bstan pa — a retreatant at Wa ra monastery who was deeply involved in their publishing activities.[13] His sponsorship helps to date the text as arising at some point prior to his death in 1946. Additionally, Wa ra monastery produced a full canon of the Bka' 'gyur ca.1930,[14] meaning that the *myl li* also was likely produced prior to that date, potentially as a means to begin gathering the necessary artisans for the much larger Bka' 'gyur project.

A brief introduction to the plot of the *myl li dosp po* will be beneficial for those readers unfamiliar. The text can be roughly divided into thirds, with the first third (Chapters 1-2) detailing Gesar's Rdzogs chen initiations and subsequent teachings in Gling, the second third (Chapter 3-4) Gesar's journey to hell to confront King Yama after the death of his mother 'Gogs mo, and the final third (Chapters 5-18) relating the death of Gesar and all his warriors. The text opens with Gesar in meditation at the Bsam 'grub stag rtse palace, before being

12 Gruschke 2004: 59-62.

13 Smith 2001: 29.

14 Nourse 2014: 43.

admonished by his aunt Ma ne ne to travel to the Copper-Colored Mountain and receive Rdzogs chen initiations from Guru Rinpoche himself. Gesar subsequently returns to Gling and calls together all the peoples of his lands to provide instruction in the foundations of karmic practice, closely the Klong chen snying thig practice cycle particularly popular among ris med circles in the late nineteenth or early twentieth century. Eventually, Gesar goes on meditation retreat in India, during which his mother 'Gogs mo passes away and falls to hell, from which Gesar vows to save her.

Chapter 4 subsequently details Gesar's confrontation with King Yama and his journey through hell, during which he discovers it is his own karmic sins of violence that have sent his mother to hell. This revelation represents a signi f cant break with other episodes in the epic, which highlight Gesar's work as a tantric buddha defending Buddhist practice through violent means.[15] Chastened, Gesar witnesses the horrors of hell as he searches for his mother, who is surrounded by all the men he has ever killed in battle: to free her, he must free them. Using a ritual of 'pho ba transference, Gesar transports his mother and the men he previously killed to a divine Pure Land and ensures their future enlightenment. In the remaining third, Gesar returns to Gling, where he and all of his warriors pass away one by one. The f nal deaths are those of Gesar and his horse Kyang bu who respectively become subsumed into Padmasambhava and transformed into a divine vulture. After ensuring the relics of Gesar and all warriors of Gling are well-protected, 'Dan ma journeys to India, signifying the end of Gling.

It is important to note that since the publication of the *myl li do sp po*, bards tell numerous renditions of Gesar's descent to hell. Even more so than other episodes of the Gesar epic, these are remarkably diverse — many do not feature the early chapters on Rdzogs chen practice, some mitigate or eliminate entirely King Yama's critique of Gesar, and a few even portray him saving in hell a di erent female companion other than his mother.[16] It is impossible to tell if these narratives preceded the publication of the Wa ra monastery *myl li* or if they re ect a secondary orality to the text. Regardless, these are all simultaneously the *myl li* and not the *myl li*. Colloquially, Tibetans refer to all of these variants as the *myl li* and published recordings of narratives that do not follow the Wa ra monastery *myl li* are sometimes even published under the specific title *myl li do sp po*. However, unlike the Wa ra monastery-published *myl li do sp po*, these variants do not identify themselves as *t m* in colophons. As this article endeavors to highlight the unique social work of *t m*, these texts will not feature here.

15 See further, Mikles 2016.

16 An particularly popular example of the *myl li* variant is *myl li mu p s l*, 1992.

Narrative Lifeworlds as a Theoretical Tool

While relating this publication and textual history of the *mylidospo* helps us to situate the work in a larger literary framework, it provides little perspective on the lived experience of the text. This lived perspective is critical, however, to fully understanding any literary work — Gesar, *tm*, or otherwise. Texts are as much social phenomenon as literary phenomenon and not taking them seriously as such limits our abilities as scholars to make sense of Tibetan Buddhist history and experience. Indeed, *tm* serve an important social function through constructing narrative lifeworlds. The term "lifeworld" was originally coined by Edmund Husserl (d.1938)[17]and contemporary formulations in lived religion scholarship emphasize religious traditions as fundamentally and inalienably embedded within a larger framework of daily life, while acknowledging their use as interactive tools of meaning making beyond and above mere collections of doctrinal realities.[18]

In my formulation of a "narrative lifeworld," I focus attention on the interactive relationship between stories and individuals' understandings of themselves. Narrative literature is a powerful tool for both shaping society and constructing meaning because it relates in the immediate present something that came before. In that process, narrative imagines and fashions an alternative world — be that world fve minutes ago, fve months ago, or fve hundred years ago. It is the necessarily subjective nature of this alternative narrative world that ultimately gives narrative its power because events, symbols, and people can be reconstructed to suit the perspectives of the storyteller. By relating a given version of the past, narratives construct a specific vision of a social world and practitioners are able to construct identities that locate themselves within that narrative world as a variety of identities — participants, inheritors, rivals, and so forth. Crucially, once narratives enter a given community's semiotic lexicon, they can be re-told and re-imagined, allowing the process to begin again. In this way, narrative can develop layers of significance that are largely unmoored from a single or definitive interpretation. It is this simultaneous quality of (1) expansive repetitive potentiality and (2) infnite semiotic depth that allows narratives to be powerful engines in the construction of both individual meaning and social signifcance.

As a story set centuries in the past, the Gesar epic perhaps most recognizably represents this process of using narratives of the past to read the present; however, *tm* traditions *futio* similarly, despite presenting themselves as a diferent type of text. *tm* traditions frame themselves as accounts of an immediate present found at a later time — a present-tense version of a narrative — and for the person of the *tsto* who experiences the *tm* in the

17 Husserl 1970: 108-109.

18 See further Jackson 1996: 1-50; Orsi 2010: xxxii; Knibbe and Kupari 2020.

moment of revelation, they certainly are this. For the community that develops around the *t ston*, however, *t m* are stories of the past that produce a narrative lifeworld extended into the present — a past imperfect narrative. Caught between the past and the present, this narrative achieves timelessness via disassociation from a specific historical past. In this way, the narrative that underlies a given *t m* creates an alternative narrative world ostensibly in the past, but which spreads roots and blossoms into the contemporary world.[19] This particular feature of the narrative form foundational to *t m* allows them to participate in the construction of a narrative lifeworld that has the potential to affect society and construct identity.

However, the interaction between these past imperfect narratives and their social function to fashion a meaningful world has yet to be fully explored in academic scholarship. Generally, academic interest in *t m* has centered on their origins and efforts to secure authenticity. While this has largely taken the role of examining efforts to build internal authenticity — how the person of *t sto* and the surrounding community demonstrates authenticity within the textual tradition itself [20] — other scholarship has begun examining how *t m* incorporate older materials and narratives outside the tradition to establish their validity.[21] Despite these new and exciting directions, however, the focus generally remains on the authenticity of the textual tradition and the personal experience of the *t sto* as a conduit by which the historical is made real. A noted exception of this that has been influential on my own work and will be discussed in detail below is the work of Holly Gayley to develop the concept of an "ontology of the past," whereby the *t sto* constructs a timeless past referential to the contemporary world.[22]

To summarize, while serving different purposes from the perspective of Buddhist institutions, the Gesar epic tradition and *t m* traditions both function to construct narrative lifeworlds that orient and render significant individual experience. They embed a contemporary individual into a past imperfect narrative rich with semiotically-significant persons and places; in this way, the Gesar and *t m* traditions both create a world in which to meaningfully live. This particular aspect of the *t m* tradition has been somewhat overlooked by the larger academic interest in authenticity and *t m* 's relationship to the Indian Buddhist tradition. Examining the point where *t m* and Gesar traditions intersect provides a useful corrective to this through considering the world made meaningful via narrative. An examination of the *my l li* with particular emphasis on its role in constructing a narrative lifeworld, therefore,

19 It should be noted that the division between the experience of *t sto* and the experience of the community is similarly found in the Gesar tradition, where the bard has a first-hand experience of the text while the audience surrounding him generally experiences the narrative as an experience entering their lives today.

20 Gyatso, 1998.

21 Mayer, 2019.

22 Gayley, 2007.

will allow us to consider how *t m* function socially to imbue the world with significance.

Narrative Lifeworld and the

As the culminating episode of the epic, the *my l li d o s p po* has an important place in the larger Gesar tradition. Via a dense network of relationships built between the past imperfect narrative and contemporary lived experience, this *t m* constructs a narrative lifeworld that invites Tibetans to build an identity. Holly Gayley proposes that *t m* work by deploying an "ontology of the past" that makes the past simultaneously timeless and participatory in the contemporary world through the action of the *t sto* .[23] In this framework, the experience of *t sto* Drag rtsal rdo rje recovering the *my l li* produced a means to interact with the Gesar tradition via his unique access to a timeless past and his subsequent production of a past imperfect narrative.[24]

Due to the current paucity of information on the life of Drag rtsal rdo rje and the original social context surrounding the *my l li d o s p po*, it is largely impossible to evaluate how the timeless past of the *t m* /epic tradition influenced individuals' self-understanding at the original moment of revelation. However, the *my l li* episode of the Gesar epic continues to be published and performed and as such continually produces new, dynamic iterations of its narrative lifeworld. Constructing this narrative lifeworld takes place via two interrelated modes — reading a published version of the *my l li* and attending a contemporary bardic performance. While each bardic performance is, to some extent, wholly unique and often branches wildly from the Wa ra monastery *my l li d o s p po*, my conversation partners understood the published text and the performance as fundamentally united. As noted above, this reality is a tricky aspect of researching the Gesar epic tradition — wherein things indicated by a single term may be understood as the same, though be very different when compared side-by-side. Following the cue of my research informants, therefore, I will consider the published Wa ra monastery text and the performance tradition as related components of a single revelatory phenomenon.

Turning first to the experience that most similarly reflects, and to a certain extent, recreates the initial *t m* revelations of Drag rtsal rdo rje, bardic performances have an important role in creating the narrative lifeworld of the *my l li* . Within the *my l li* tradition, one of the most important ways to interact with the narrative lifeworld of the epic is through

23 Gayley 2007: 215.

24 Tsering Shakya (2004) has noted that this construction of a timeless past is actually foundational to the larger narrative functioning of the Gesar epic itself (125) In this interpretation, therefore, a *t sto* of the Gesar epic is able to combine the already operative timeless past of the epic tradition with *t m* 's "ontology of the past. "

the extensive performance traditions that have been a focal point of academic scholarship.[25] The center of these performances is the bard (*s u m*) who relates the story in a quick recitation of prose sections, followed by longer, expansive songs that provide insight to the characters' motivations and moods. While some bards may study the epic to recite it, the most famous bards experience a form of revelation that "opens" the epic in their minds (*'b b s u*) and which is repeated in miniature with each performance during which the story "descends upon them" (*s u 'b b*). Besides *'b b s u*, other forms of revelatory storytelling are common, including bards who bodily experience the epic in dreams and bards who "read" the epic from blank pages.

Reflecting this revelatory impulse, the performance space is a dynamic arena in which bards and audience have the potential to re-engage with past imperfect of the epic and use it to build significance in their contemporary lives. This fact is particularly evident in performances of the *my l li*, which are often far different than the performance of other Gesar episodes. As discovered on a recent research trip to Qinghai province, popular belief among contemporary Tibetans is that a revelatory bard who receives the *my l li* to recite has only one to two years left to live. Performances of the *my l li* are, therefore, understandably emotional affairs and Tibetans may travel significant distances to personally witness a bard perform that specific episode. Much like popular folktales or so-called "urban legends" in American society, my Tibetan conversation partners demonstrated the truth of this belief to me by reciting second- and third-hand stories about bards in nearby towns who had died soon after a public performance the *my l li*.

Many of my Tibetan conversation partners directly linked the bard's *my l li*-related death to their profound responsibility to recite the narrative. Several bards I spoke with explained that their work was a special calling instituted by King Gesar himself — thus their understanding of themselves is informed by their connection to a past and to characters that they understand through narrative. In the words of contemporary bard 'Gyur med rab rten, "during the time of the epic, all the animals could recite the stories of Gesar, even the earth worms, but then Gesar said that people must know of his deeds in the future, so he made humans the special bards to tell the tale."[26] This responsibility was reflected in the words of Dkar ma lha mo, local scholar at the Yul shul Office of Cultural Preservation; when asked about the relationship between the *my l li* and the death of the bard, she answered, "The epic is finished, so now is their life."[27] For these and other eastern Tibetans, the *my l li* is a living text threaded through with tangible social consequences to which lived reality itself is tied. In contemporary *my l li* performance, bards are the conduit by which the narrative lifeworld

25 Yang Enhong 1993; Gcod pa Don 'grub 1989.

26 'Gyur med rab rten, Personal Interview, July 18, 2015.

27 Dkar ma Lha mo, Personal Interview, July 18, 2015.

is made real.

The published text of the Wa ra monastery *mya ngal gling* is also a means to build individuals' social identities through relation to the *gtam* 's narrative lifeworld. Threaded throughout the text is a call to traditional Buddhist ethical practices founded on a contemplation of karmic realities. Throughout the text, we see King Gesar taking on the role of a Buddhist teacher instructing *gling pa* s in ethical action. This activity is most prominent in the first third of the text, where Gesar is explicitly charged by Padmasambhava to bring Rdzogs chen teachings to the peoples of his land. After receiving initiations from the buddhas of the five directions, Padmasambhava charges Gesar to "return to the pretty land of Gling [and] turn the Dharma wheel of the three vehicles for the common people of his kingdom."[28] He does indeed return, and gathers together all the peoples of Gling and the surrounding lands. His first song is directed towards all present and highlights traditional, karmically-oriented Buddhist values. Further detail is provided by the author in other publications,[29] but the song centers its attention on the brevity and preciousness of a human rebirth, for all "sentient beings are like mist on the tip of a blade of grass."[30] In light of this impermanence, Gesar preaches the centrality of karma, noting that "Virtue will come by the power of one's own good and bad cause and effect. In this way, various fruit will arise from the good and bad seeds."[31] This initial song is followed by individual initiations for each collected community, and each is accompanied by a brief song emphasizing once more the centrality of karma.

While these exhortations to pay attention to karma are found extensively in other Buddhist literature, the *mya ngal gling* 's narrative frame and identification as a *gtam* produces a narrative-historical space in which the reader is invited to situate themselves as a participant in King Gesar's Buddhist world. This is accomplished via two interconnected means: (1) the prosimetric literary style interspersing song and prose that situates the reader as a participant in the narrative and (2) the belief in Gesar as a dynamic and operative personage who continues to guide the future and wellbeing of Tibet into the present-day. Turning first to (1), by utilizing second-person grammatical structures, the prosimetric or chantefable literary structure of both the text and bardic performances invites individuals to develop an immediate and intimate relationship with King Gesar. Because the songs are sung within the narrative framework directly to a given individual — utilizing exclusively second-person exhortations and commands — the response of a listening or reading individual is to identify themselves in the

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28 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 61. *de'i mo li la byon ; mo li de yang ma spyi ; thun mong gi 'o lo bsgo .*

29 Mikles 2019.

30 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 96. *sems can ni mar me'i gil pa bzhin .*

31 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 98-99. *gil ser 'bab pa bzhin yis; phal by ed de bsod nams dang sdug bsngal gyi 'bras bu skye ; 'bad pa dang bcas pa'i las kyi 'bras bu skye .*

song and through that develop a relationship with Gesar. The use of first-person and second-person grammar contributes to the past imperfect form of the narrative lifeworld, reflecting the social understanding that this narrative continues to be operative in the contemporary world, despite its depiction of a historic past.

The emotive effects of this particular literary style are apparent when speaking with devotees of Gesar and others who read the *dmyal li* regularly. In a conversation with Pad ma Thub btsan, a local elder in Rong bu village in Qinghai, he explained that when he reads the *dmyal li*, "I just cry and cry and cry to hear about so many great men leaving the earth."[32] He later explained that reading about the death of King Gesar in the *dmyal li* inspired him to be a better Buddhist, for if buddhas themselves can die, so will he. The *dmyal li*'s unique ability to shape Buddhist identities was repeated by many leaders of Tibetan Buddhist institutions, including the head teacher at Lha sgang monastery, who said the *dmyal li* was essential for lay people and young monks to read as a means to understand and embody Buddhist ethics.[33] The head of the Ka thog Monastery's monastic college expressed similar views, explaining that all entering novices were required to read the *dmyal li* to provide an ethical foundation for their later academic studies.[34] Indeed, I heard from several monastic and community leaders that the *dmyal li* is the only episode from the Gesar epic that monks should read, because all others make them too aggressive and distracted. The *dmyal li*'s narrative lifeworld, therefore, encourages individuals to take on a specific identity as a karmically-sensitive Buddhist practitioner through building an emotional relationship with Gesar himself.

Turning next to (2) — the living reality of King Gesar — the vast majority of eastern Tibetans I spoke with understood King Gesar as an active presence in Tibet, collapsing the historic past of the Gesar epic narrative capped by the *dmyal li* and the contemporary present.[35] Reminders of King Gesar's mark on the land of Tibet are prevalent in the innumerable mountains, valleys, and other sites that Tibetan believe bear his mark. While the intersection of the epic tradition and sacred landscape remains to be fully studied, in creating and marking these spaces as sacred, living Tibetans simultaneously affix the historic past of the epic narrative to the contemporary world and embed themselves within it. A particularly illustrative example is Zhidu county Sichuan; Tibetans living there have used white rocks to mark a mountain with

32 Pad ma Thub bstan, Personal Interview, July 28, 2015.

33 Lha sgang bsha grwa, Khenpo, Personal Interview. August 14, 2015.

34 Ka tog bsha grwa, Khenpo, Personal Interview. August 19, 2015.

35 My conversation with local Zhidu county resident Bden grub was a notable exception to this generalization. While admitting that he had read the *dmyal li* as a child and stayed up all night in terror, he was adamant that King Gesar was a myth or legend based on a historical king that had been heavily embellished. This conversation was virtually the only time I heard this claim while traveling in rural areas outside of major cities, though several scholars at the Southwest University for Nationalities made similar claims.

Buddhism as they fght of the demonic forces and restore the sanctity of Tibet.

The latter third of the text sees Gesar afrming that he will return in the future to defend Gling and the practice of Buddhism. As Gesar's death approaches, he declares his intention to return with Padmasambhava:

> After I go to the Pure land, [you] must not worry for White Ling! I, the [divine] son Gesar, will be in the intermediate space between samsara and nirvana. Because I and the great Padmasambhava are inseparable, remember [me] residing on his crown ornament. I will not let those living in this life and the next be free from the blessed iron hook of compassion…. [My] cousins, all young princes of Ling, heroes of Ling, and fnally medicine women, [I will be] inseparable to you all in this life and beyond.[38]

Gesar's song ends with a declaration that he will return to bring "great comfort to the black-haired Tibetans."[39] He then dissolves into a display of light, appearing one final time in a meditative posture before leaving Gling entirely.

This belief of Gesar's prophetic return frst expressed in the *my l li* remains prevalent today among my Tibetan conversation partners. King Gesar was repeatedly identified as a buddha whose violence was an expression of his commitment to defend Buddhism in Tibet, and who continued to watch over the land of Tibet with compassion and love. Several repeated their faith that Gesar would eventually be reborn to continue his defense of Buddhist teachings and lead a global revival in Buddhist commitment.[40] Related to the anticipation for the return of King Gesar was a collective mourning over his death and the deaths of his warriors. As noted above, many individuals experienced sadness and dread when reading the final third of the *my l li* ; these emotions extend to the gravesite of King Gesar as well. At Rta na monastery in Khams one can see the alleged remains of King Gesar and his 30 warriors preserved in white stūpas high atop the mountain. Monks make the climb on horseback each day to leave oferings given by local villagers in the hopes of building a karmic connection with the warrior-king and ensuring rebirth at his return. As seen in these widespread popular beliefs and practices traced back to the *my l li t m* , King Gesar remains a vital presence in Tibetans' live realities.

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38 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 344. *i l ' o b 'i j s s ul l ; li d po s ms l d os p m d; bu s ' o 'd s mts ms l 'du ; l p +d 'byu d yis dby m d p s; m d spyi bo'i y l b u s; byi l bs t u s j 'i l s yu yis; 'di p yi u l bt ; ; ... li i s s u spu sum d ; li i dp ' ts ul mo sm ms; 'di p yi u l mi 'b l lo.*

39 Chos kyi dbang phyug 1984: 346.

40 A ba 'jam zong (Village Elder). Personal Interview. July 28, 2015.

Gesar's prophetic presence as a living force that continues to affect the world today is further re-enforced by his perceived role in recovering contemporary *t m* . While the *my l li* is the best known Gesar *t m* , the epic tradition as a whole is associated with further *t m* recovery in contemporary Tibetan regions. Most notably, the founder of the Larung Gar Buddhist community 'Jigs med phun tshogs (d.2004) has relied on Gesar as a tutelary deity in his contemporary *t m* recovery, had intricate visions of the warrior-king charging him to accomplish Buddhist work, and often credited the warrior-king as the source of his long life and protection from evil forces.[41] When having visions of Gesar, 'Jigs med phun tshogs would place himself in the narrative world of the epic, identify all the members of his court and describe in detail the semi-mythical setting. These experiences then become the engine by which 'Jigs med phun tshogs recovered numerous physical Gesar *t m* before his death, including a chest filled with treasures and some remains of the warrior-king's physical palace. While certainly in need of further study, the treasure revelations of 'Jigs med phun tshogs further demonstrate the living and active presence of King Gesar and the *my l li* 's narrative lifeworld in the lives of contemporary Tibetans.

Individuals' participation in the *my l li* 's narrative lifeworld was reinforced by the variety of cultural prohibitions that surround reading, discussing, and otherwise interacting with the *my l li* . These various social taboos are part of what Timothy Thurston has called the "ecosystem" of the Gesar epic. He notes that, separate from the published narrative and bardic performance, Tibetan participate in "Gesar culture" [Ge sar rig gnas 格萨尔文化], producing a presence of the Gesar tradition in everyday reality with "links between genres [that] are multidirectional, and point to the transmission of cultural knowledge through multiple, mutually reinforcing genres."[42] This "ecosystem" includes innumerable proverbs, verbal references, and social practices that make the 0.5 0 0 0.57a0f0.018 Tw [0 0270057004C0.5 0 0440.5 0 004

participation in the narrative lifeworld it creates, however, is through examining the disintegration between the actual words of the text and individuals' interpretation of it. As revealed in the song battle between Gesar and King Yama, the Wa ra monastery *my l li* is exceedingly clear that King Gesar's mother su fers in hell for the violent behavior and sins of her son. The majority of Tibetan informants I spoke with, however, provided di ferent reasons for Gesar's mother's internment that removed the blame from King Gesar entirely. Local Yul shul guide Tsheb khrims stated that Gesar's mother su fered because she took joy in his victory over local nations and desired great land and wealth for her own family.[43] Another individual stated that it was a clerical error that sent Gesar's mother to hell and that Gesar was duty-bound to correct it.[44] Similar arguments were o fered when I inquired about Gesar's violent activities. Gesar's essential need to defend Buddhism through violent conquest of the surrounding demon-kings threatening its practice was repeatedly invoked. When I speci fcally referenced the Wa ra monastery *my l li* and pushed back against these arguments, one woman speci fcally told me that Gesar "has the kind heart of a buddha, not the bloody sword of a king. You misunderstand the text."[45] These examples provide a final note on narrative lifeworlds: they are growing, transforming, and, above all, dynamic. By allowing participants to construct an identity within them, they also invite pushback and change. As in the case of the *my l li* , this often does not invalidate the *t m* , but rather the *t m* itself becomes the fertile ground out of which innovative interpretations and challenges grow.

Conclusion

This article has argued that examining the *my l li* — the most well-known Gesar episode that describes itself as a *t m* — allows us to consider how *t m* function socially through creating narrative lifeworlds in which adherents can meaningfully live. In many ways, *t ma* traditions are something of an epic themselves, detailing the heroic e forts of buddhas and bodhisattvas to bring the people of Tibet to enlightenment. When examining the signi fcance of *t m* or any other important aspect of Tibetan culture, western scholars' early studies generally relied on intellectual tools developed to study and understand Christianity and other aspects of Euro-American culture.[46] While theorists like Sigmund Freud, Max Weber, and others made claims to a singular human experience, post-modern developments have since brought assertions of such a universal human experience into question. However, through

43 Tsheb khrims. Personal Interview. July 24, 2015.

44 A ba 'jam zong (Village Elder). Personal Interview. July 28, 2015.

45 Dkar ma Lha mo, Personal Interview, July 18, 2015.

46 Pomplun 2009.

comparing different cultural traditions within Tibet at the point where they intersect — the Gesar tradition on one hand and *t m* on the other — Tibet-specific forms of theory can be developed that walk the line between universal models of human experience and radical phenomenological individualism.

While the appellation of *t m* to the *my l li d o s p po* has been unfairly dismissed as simply the product of a process of buddhicization,[47] it also provides the entry point to consider how *t m* function as socially lived documents. Through the utilization

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