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Assessing the Sustainability of the Gesar Epic in Northwest China, Thoughts from Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture.¹

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Abstract

As heritage—in both its tangible and intangible forms—has grown into an important component of cultural policy around the globe, new scholarship has emerged critically examining how the heritage framework has impacted designated sites and cultural practices. In recent years, “cultural sustainability” has allowed scholars to examine individual traditions as part of a larger cultural and sociopolitical ecology. Using Schippers and Grant’s (2016) five domain theory for the assessment of cultural sustainability, and ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, this article examines the present vitality and prospects of the Tibetan Gesar epic from the perspective of systems of teaching and learning, musicians and communities, contexts and constructs, regulations and infrastructures, and music and music industries. Although the UNESCO-listed Gesar epic appears stable at present, there are some potential concerns about its future vitality.

Key words: Cultural sustainability, Tibet, Yul shul, Yushu, Gesar, epic

As heritage—in both its tangible and intangible forms—has grown into a vital component of cultural policy around the globe, new scholarship has emerged critically examining how the heritage framework has impacted designated sites and cultural practices. Heritage has been seen to create an “Authorized Heritage Discourse” that “establishes and sanctions a top-down relationship between expert, heritage site and “visitor, in which the expert ‘translates this discourse into national policies and laws’” (Smith 2006, 34). The emphasis placed on the expert’s role in managing and replicating these discourses has created a separate class of metacultural professionals (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004) who manage the application for, discourses around, and presentations of heritage. At the same time heritage regimes (Bendix et al 2013) have also come under scrutiny for perceived negative outcomes. These include concentrating resources at metacultural institutions instead of going to traditions and the communities that support them (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 2004), excluding local communities or stakeholders (Maags 2018), and the ossification and abandonment of traditions (Goody 2004). In response to these concerns, applied anthropologists, ethnomusicologists, folklorists, and linguists alike have sought new theories and metaphors to understand the complexity of intangible traditions that can then structure new participatory approaches to ensure the future vitality of intangible traditions.

In recent years, ecological metaphors of culture, viewing expressive practices as parts of a complex and dynamic system have offered powerful correctives to approaches that treat cultures statically or in isolation. Scholars studying language maintenance and revitalization, for example, have adopted resilience as a metaphor emphasizing adaptation to emerging disturbances to a system (see, for example, Bradley 2010 and Roche 2017), though some folklorists remain skeptical (Noyes 2016). In applied ethnomusicology, meanwhile, “cultural sustainability” has emerged as a powerful theory for understanding individual traditions as part of a larger cultural and sociopolitical ecology. Cultural sustainability recognizes music cultures as existing within a broader ecosystem, requiring “adaptive management” in attempts to maintain the health of the traditional ecosystem more generally (Titon 2009 and Titon 2015). In order to better understand the factors influencing a tradition’s present vitality and future sustainability, Schippers and Grant (2016) forward a five-domain structure for assessing “systems of teaching and learning,” “musicians and communities,” “contexts and constructs,” “regulations and infrastructures,” and “music and music industries.” Cultural sustainability has thus far been applied primarily to musical traditions, but the application to storytelling traditions can offer valuable perspectives to these traditions as well.

On December 2, 2004, the People’s Republic of China became the sixth nation to ratify the UNESCO Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage. Although both grassroots and governmental interventions into intangible traditions predate the UNESCO convention, the Convention has given new moral and governmental authority to efforts to safeguard China’s heritage, and China has been one of the most active states in accruing recognitions from the international body.² Today China boasts the largest number of traditions on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. Noting the development of this sprawling heritage regime, an increasing amount of scholarship has examined the growing heritage industry in China from the disciplinary perspectives of anthropology, tourism, folkloristics, ethnomusicology, and more.³

The Tibetan epic of King Gesar, often championed as the longest epic in the world,⁴ was inscribed onto UNESCO’s representative list of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009 with an ambitious nine-year, 50 million RMB, plan for safeguarding the epic. Doing so brought a nation-wide network of Gesarologists, heritage professionals, and tradition bearers into a national “heritage regime” and an international framework of cultural governance. Yul shul (Yushu) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, located in the Southwestern part of Qinghai Province, is a major center of the Gesar epic tradition. The prefecture is home to a vibrant ecosystem of traditions that includes religious pilgrimage sites, material traditions (including specific metal-working traditions and carving holy stones), and folksong, speech, and storytelling traditions. The Gesar epic broadly construed to include both the long-form epic and broader Gesar-related knowledge transmitted in opera, proverbs, folksong, micro-narrative, and sites attributed to the epic and its characters is an integral part of this traditional ecosystem in Yul shul (for more, see Thurston 2019). The prefecture is home to several *‘bab sgrung* “dream-inspired bards” as well as a variety of sites linked to episodes or characters in

the epic, including Rta rna Monastery in Nangchen County a site boasting reliquaries of Gesar and his generals as well as many items reported to have belonged to Gesar (Grüschke 2004). A Gesar festival is held in the summers set to coincide with the Yulshul horse race festival, and many monuments and museums are dedicated to Gesar in the prefecture. For all of this effort, however, many performers seem to believe that the epic is under threat. A decade on from the epic's inscription on the UNESCO list, the time seems ripe to assess the effects this program has shaped the present and future of the epic tradition.

Based on fieldwork comprised of 24 semi-structured ethnographic interviews with cultural management professionals and bards completed in Yul shul ཡུལ་ཤུལ། (Ch. Yushu 玉树) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the summer of 2018, as well as numerous unrecorded conversations and participant observation of Gesar performances and cultural festivals, this article examines the current conditions and the prospects of the Tibetan epic of King Gesar within China's heritage program. Responses are analyzed along Schippers and Grant's (2016) five-domains of cultural sustainability, with each section devoted to one of these domains. The conclusion offers a discussion of the Gesar epic's present and future and how these might help us better understand intangible cultural heritage in Tibet, specifically, and the People's Republic of China more generally.

Systems of Teaching and Learning

This domain assesses balances between informal and formal training, notation-based and aural learning, holistic and analytical approaches, and emphasis on tangible and less tangible aspects of 'musicking'. It explores contemporary developments in learning and teaching... and how non-musical activities, philosophies and approaches intersect with learning and teaching. These issues play a key role from the level of community initiatives to elite institutionalised professional training. (Schippers 2016, 12)

Philosophies of Learning and Teaching

In Yul shul, efforts to safeguard the Gesar epic focus primarily on its prosimetric form performed by *sgrung mkhan* སྐྱུང་མཁན། "bards," who are emically distinguished by how they learn the epic. The most famous of these are '*bab sgrung* འབབ་སྐྱུང། who learn the epic through divine inspiration. *Phra sgrung* འཕམ་སྐྱུང། are inspired as well but perform the epic holding a blank or reflective device in front of them in which they see the epic. There are also non-inspired classes like *don sgrung* རོན་སྐྱུང།, who perform the epic by reading it and *thos sgrung* ཐོས་སྐྱུང།, who learn the epic through hearing it. Still others—sometimes illiterate—are suddenly inspired to write entire episodes of the epic. These so-called *gter sgrung* གཏོར་སྐྱུང། are not found in Yul shul.⁵

For inspired bards, like '*bab sgrung* and *phra sgrung*, there are no formal systems for teaching or learning the epic, as performance requires divine inspiration. One example of this comes in the narratives bards tell about their inspiration. The biography of one officially recognized '*bab sgrung* from Yul shul's Rdza stod County, reads:

When he was 13, on the 15th day of the first of the summer months, one early morning as the cattle were spread out foraging on the side of Dzakyab Champa Taktse mountain, in that holy place the birds and the bees were chirping and buzzing. Resting and listening lazily to a bubbling stream, he fell asleep. In his dream, he saw a white man with conch armor, a white horse with a turquoise mane. A loving smile appeared on his lips, and he said “Boy, I have an empowering jewel for you.” Then he seemed to open his chest with both hands placed light-filled volumes of books in his chest and closed it. He touched him three times with a *vajra* and with a sharp voice, he said, “You, boy connected by karma, I’ve placed this highly auspicious jewel in your hands. May it bring benefit to all beings.” Having said this, he disappeared... From then on, he was able to tell the epic of King Gesar of Ling without difficulty.

The narratives of other inspired *sgrung mkhan* are remarkably similar to this (see, for example, FitzHerbert 2010). Other bards learn the epic by listening to it and memorizing it (*thos sgrung*), or they recite it from a written version (*don sgrung*).

The heritage regime in Yul shul places overwhelming emphasis on inspired bards, and cultural heritage experts frequently told me that these could not be taught. Interestingly, however, it is common for multiple inspired *sgrung mkhan* to appear in a single family with ties to Tibetan oral traditions, and to the Gesar epic itself. In Yul shul, there are at least two families that have more than one recognized bard, multiple examples in which inspired bards **hail from the same families, and go on to receive official recognition from the state**. For example, one performer told me that his son had recently started feeling inspired to sing the epic. At the same time, one heritage expert mentioned they knew of an entire family of inspired bards. The performer whose biography is narrated has an older brother who is one of China’s most inspired famous bards.

A sympathetic reading on this phenomenon would be that lineages play a significant role, and families with several *sgrung mkhan* in their lineage are often considered more likely to have *sgrung mkhan* in their future. A more cynical perspective might be that families provided access to the key discourses and narratives necessary for state recognition (see Maags 2018) as well as environmental exposure the ecosystem of genres through which Gesar culture is transmitted (see Thurston 2019). Nevertheless, neither bards nor heritage workers question this taxonomy in their work, and this has significant consequences for state interventions.

Learning and Teaching Practices and Approaches.

In Yul shul, people say that if a Tibetan can talk, they can sing, and if they can walk, then they can dance. In place of formal training, singing and dancing are traditionally learned more environmentally. Since the establishment of the People’s Republic of China, and Tibet’s incorporation into that region, Tibetan song and dance traditions have Song and Dance troupes (Ch. *ge wu tuan* 歌舞团). Tibetan dancers can receive formal tuition at universities training institutions with minority dance traditions in-

corporated into a new form of “Chinese Dance” (Wilcox 2019), and students can specialize in certain performance traditions like Tibetan opera (Henrion-Dourcy 2017). These opportunities for formal study do not, however, extend to the epic. Instead, the emic classification of *sgrung mkhan* influences learning and teaching.

Inspired bards, by virtue of their inspiration, cannot be taught, but instead, as described above, find inspiration through supernatural encounters on the grassland and other liminal spaces. As such, many cultural professionals emphasize that there is no way to teach these *sgrung mkhan*. In Yul shul, the heavy emphasis placed on ‘*bab sgrung*’ for heritage recognition means that the teaching of performance is not considered necessary for officially recognized heritage transmitters. At the same time, the number of amateur *don sgrung* “reciting bards,” means that literacy and environment are essential to learning the epic.

Traditionally, one might have learned to read in a monastery, and learned music section from listening to other performers. One septuagenarian reciting bard, for example, spoke of first hearing the epic as a six-year-old novice when, during his first day in the monastery, he heard his teacher singing it during a break from class. He was hooked and was eventually able to parlay his literacy into jobs teaching, researching history, and as a respected *guojia ji yinsong yiren*, or “national level chanting artist.” More recently, “transmission bases” (Ch. *chuancheng jidi* 传承基地) have been created in local schools, including one in Yul shul’s Zaduo County. Interested students can go to these bases as extracurricular activities where they can learn about the epic, and learn to perform sections of the epic under the tutelage of local teachers. As this suggests, literacy, is one gateway to the epic. Some, however, learn to perform the epic based on hearing it. Though I did not meet any officially recognized *thos sgrung* during my fieldwork, I did meet some people who could perform sections of the epic on command simply by hearing their parents, grandparents, or itinerant bards during their childhoods. In this way, there are many pathways for learning the epic.

Other influences on learning and teaching

Culture workers in Yul shul focus heavily on identifying and recognizing inspired *sgrung mkhan* and documenting their repertoire. The overwhelming emphasis on inspiration leads culture workers to focus less on transmission itself and more on ‘mass transmission’ (Ch. *qunzhong chuancheng* 群众传承). Doing so places more emphasis on teaching “fluent audiences” (Foley 2002) than on training the next generation of competent performers. Tasks focused on mass transmission include curating painting exhibitions, displays, preparing public performances during festivals, and inviting bards to perform in local schools.

Implications for sustainability

The heritage management system in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture heavily emphasizes inspired bards. This emphasis on inspiration has important implications for State interventions and the futures of the tradition, as government work tends to focus more on training fluent audiences than on a new generation of performers (more

on this below). The diverse ways that people come to perform the epic, meanwhile, are good for the epic's overall prospects, and some trends suggest people are beginning to look beyond inspired bards, to encourage people to perform the epic as reciters. At the same time, the ambivalent place of Tibetan literacy in the education system will certainly have effects on the epic's future.

Musicians and Communities

This domain examines the role and position of musicians and the basis of the tradition within the community. It looks at the everyday realities in the existence of creative musicians, including the role of technology, media and travel, and issues of remuneration through performances, teaching, tenured employment, freelancing, portfolio careers, community support and non-musical activities. Cross-cultural influences and the role of diasporas are examined as well as the interaction between musicians within the community. (Schippers 2016, 12)

The Musician-Community Relationship

Some researchers have reported that Gesar performers feel that there is little interest in the epic within their local communities (see Guo 2005), but this did not appear to be the case in Yulshul in 2018. Many inspired bards reported the strong belief that audiences appreciated and understood their performances. Bards said that they regularly perform divinations, wedding speeches, and attempt to heal people's various bodily afflictions by breathing on them. In Yul shul, then, inspired bards contribute to the spiritual and physical health of their local communities.

Though not called on for divinations or healing, non-inspired bards, especially the literate *don sgrung*, "reciting bards," also often enjoy high status in the broader Yul shul community. These bards are respected both within their local communities and especially within the broader Gesar studies community, where they rub shoulders with prestigious Gesarologists and publish versions of the epic. This said, their social position in the community is also closely related to their literacy, which has opened other (often high status) avenues of employment as teachers or in the local government.

More recently, the ICH "brand" (see Maags 2018) has added a new valence to the musician-community relationship. UNESCO recognition of the Gesar epic as Intangible Cultural Heritage, and the creation of county-, prefectural-, provincial-, and national-level lists. This four-tier recognition system and their corresponding lists have added new governmental authority to the Gesar epic and its officially recognized artists and transmitters. Though bards remain close to their communities and play vital roles in the community's spiritual health, the heritage system focuses almost exclusively on secular visions of the epic, thereby overlooking some of the bard's most significant points of connection with the local community.

Being a Sgrung mkhan

The changing place of Sgrung mkhan in their local communities and the broader national Tibetan community is a salient feature of the bard's experience. In the "old society," itinerant bards had a lower social status, and earned money traveling around the region performing for paying audiences. Now, with the government emerging as a primary patron of the epic and its bards (FitzHerbert 2007), the material aspects of a musician's life are more stable. However, the specific terms of the government's support for bards changes by locality. In Yul shul City, for example, many non-inspired bards serve in the local government (Yang 2012, 3) while inspired bards in Yul shul City get paid each time they complete recording of a new "episode" of the epic. In 2018, the rate was around 5000 RMB (\$730.78 in 2018) for each "episode." The telling of one episode can last several sessions. After recording the epic, they work with a researcher who transcribes it with the *sgrung mkhan's* assistance. The government, in its role as patron, also sponsors many of the bard's opportunities for public performance.

In Rdza stod County, by contrast, which has over a dozen officially recognized *'bab sgrung*—whose inspiration has been tested and confirmed by experts from the Chinese Academy of Social Science's Gesar Research center in Beijing—find employment in the County's culture bureau. The bards almost universally expressed appreciation for this support, despite the fact that their paltry 1200RMB per month salaries do not cover their monthly expenditures. Because of this, bards must supplement their incomes by digging and selling the profitable medicinal herb "Caterpillar fungus" (T. *Dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu* དབྱར་རྩེ་རྩེ་གླིང་འབྱུང་བོ།), performing for visiting researchers. In this way, the state as patron has revolutionized the bard's life in contemporary China and added new, secular valences to their place within the communities, even if state support remains insufficient for most bards to support a family without taking on extra work.

With positions in the local government culture apparatus, officially recognized *Sgrung mkhan* perform in schools, for the public on holidays, and for guests. Additionally, they record versions of the epic and assist the culture bureau's specialists to publish textual versions of their repertoire. They also work with visiting researchers who examine the epic and travel the country attending professional conferences and representing Yul shul.

Implications for Sustainability

Sgrung mkhan in Yul shul continue to play **vital roles in their communities**. Their performances keep the epic alive and entertain audiences. Inspired bards, meanwhile, also perform divinations, wedding orations, healings, and ensure the health of the community and its individuals. The language of UNESCO documents, however, focuses more on the narrative work of bards than their role in a community's spiritual well-being. With official jobs in the local heritage apparatus, *sgrung mkhan* often live in county or prefectural seats and spend parts of the year travelling the country. Financial incentives also support efforts to safeguard ethnic minority traditional practices (Blumenfield 2018) and shape relationships between tradition bearers and communities. In Yul shul, funding overwhelmingly supports inspired bards but is often not

enough to ensure their financial stability. Nevertheless, the combination of financial support and prestige both within the local community and in the broader academic community speaks to an overall positive relationship between musicians and communities in the present and provides hope for the epic's future. New threats to sustainability may arise; however, if heritage recognition distances *sgrung mkhan* from their communities.

Contexts and Constructs

This domain assesses the cultural context of traditions. It examines the realities of and the attitudes to recontextualisation, cross-cultural influences, authenticity and context, and explicit and implicit approaches to cultural diversity resulting from travel, migration or media, as well as obstacles such as poverty, prejudice, racism, stigma, restrictive religious attitudes, and issues of appropriation. It also looks at the underlying values and attitudes (constructs) steering musical directions. These include musical tastes, aesthetics, cosmologies, socially and individually constructed identities, gender issues, as well as (perceived) prestige, which is often underestimated as a factor in musical survival. (Schippers 2016, 12)

Cultural and Social Contexts

Tibetan Society is undergoing rapid change, and Yul shul is no exception. Yul shul has seen an economic boom underpinned by state infrastructure spending as part of the "Great Open the West" (Ch. *Xibu da kaifa* 西部大开发) Campaign (Goodman 2004), the popularity of "caterpillar fungus" prized for its medicinal properties (Grüschke 2011), and mining. New technologies and an increasingly mobile population, meanwhile, have provided unprecedented access to new cultures and ideas. In response, many Tibetans have grown concerned about the state of the Tibetan language (Roche 2019) and culture (Thurston 2019). Part of the response to this has been an explosion of attention to education and literacy across the region (see, for example, Dak Lhagyal 2019). This section discusses the broader cultural context of contemporary Tibet, the contexts of epic performance, local attitudes about new media environments, and feelings about the epic's recontextualization in these new media.

The epic traditionally is told in a variety of contexts, depending on performance type. Informal narratives from the Gesar epic could take place almost anywhere. Kondro Tsering (2012, 19) speaks of listening to his grandmother tell Gesar stories as entertainment. Rdo rje tshe brtan (2013, 29), meanwhile, remembers an elementary school teacher regaling his classmates with tales of the epic. In still other cases, certain parts of the epic might be linked with features in the local landscape and recalled when passing those locations (Thurston 2019a). In addition to informal narratives, itinerant bards and local Gesar opera troupes, meanwhile, have traditionally performed at festivals and horse races. Bards, I was told, travelled from tent to tent, singing parts of the epic for donations. In twenty-first century Yul shul, however, some of these contexts still exist, but they are rapidly changing.

In Yul shul, the government has become the chief “patron” of the Gesar epic, and opportunities for performance are primarily limited to government-sanctioned stages. For example, every summer, the Yul shul Horse race festival runs concurrently with a Gesar Culture festival. Key events during these festivals include performances of Gesar opera, the opening of a Gesar exhibition hall in the middle of Yul shul city, and performances by inspired bards. The government also arranges for *sgrung mkhan* to visit and perform in schools and for visiting officials. The most renowned performers also travel to perform at conferences in major urban centers like Beijing, Xining, and Chengdu.

Unfortunately, the state as patron has also severely constricted opportunities for audiences to hear the epic in traditional contexts. For example, the Gesar Culture Center, managed by the Prefectural Gesar Research Office, is not regularly open, and the public can only attend performances or view the center’s Gesar-related “artifacts” (I was later told that these are copies and that the originals are held in a monastery in Nangchen) on selected days. Despite these levels of control, it appears that performance also does occasionally occur in less formal contexts. Performers in one county of Yul shul have opened a *sgrung khang* ལྷོ་ཁང་།, a teahouse where people can listen to the epic. Due to time constraints, I was unable to visit this site in 2018, but consultants suggested that it was locally operated. This sort of grassroots attempt at promoting culture may be an emerging trend.

The advent of new audiovisual and communications technologies on the Tibetan Plateau has further fueled concerns about the Gesar epic’s ability to survive when audiences have so many other, more modern choices distracting their attention. Tibetan autobiographical texts poignantly illustrate this concern when describing the initial arrival of new technologies on the Tibetan plateau. Though not from Yul shul, one autobiography describes the way television brought new forms of sociability to the Tibetan village:

After a local power plant was built, a number of families bought televisions and stopped telling King Gesar stories for recreation... They seldom talked to each other before television came because they chanted *mani* and did not want to be disturbed. But, after TV came to our village, they discussed the film they had watched the previous night, or the TV series about the Monkey King (Journey to the West). (Kondro Tsering 2012, 95)

The author further recalls one old man saying, “Our King Gesar is absolutely nothing at all in compared [sic] to those Chinese actors. He didn’t know martial arts and didn’t have a gun,” (Kondro Tsering 2012, 96). Beyond television, Tibetan folksong competes with Tibetan, Chinese, and Western popular music industry (Morcom 2008, 270). Smartphones and social media, meanwhile, have made this media available on demand, and concerns persist about the Gesar epic’s ability to compete in an increasingly crowded mediascape.

Nevertheless, recontextualization is more than just a threat to traditions. It is also an opportunity. In 2018, culture workers and *sgrung mkhan* in Yul shul were open to

remediating the Gesar epic as a way to support the epic's continued vitality. In work with local government offices, inspired *sgrung mkhan* assist workers to create new textual versions of the epic documenting their repertoires. In 2018, several governmental units were simultaneously creating competing "complete" editions of the epic. Many also wished to see cartoons and live-action films about the epic. Nevertheless, culture workers uniformly expressed disapproval when asked how they would feel if these new media replaced the prosimetric form entirely. In this way, people see new media as potential "cultural carriers" (Ch. *wenhua zaiti* 文化载体) to support the Gesar epic's sustainability.

More broadly still, while the government supports the epic, changing language competences in Yul shul are also **crucial to the epic's vitality, both in terms of the performers' ability to narrate the epic, and the audience's ability to understand the epic register.** Yul shul suffers from some of the worst education levels in Qinghai Province (Zenz 2014, 52-59), and is notorious for poor Tibetan language education in particular. In recent years, speaking "pure Tibetan" (Thurston 2019b) and Tibetan literacy have emerged as key concerns. The government, meanwhile, has also limited opportunities for Tibetan language both in schools and in holiday classes offered in local monasteries. In 2019, reports on social media suggested that one County in Yul shul even banned all winter literacy classes. Poor literacy leads one to question the utility of creating textual editions, while the time students spend in school—distanced from folk traditions—may future generations' ability to understand the oral versions.

Constructs

The Gesar epic is considered a vital part of Tibetan identity in Yul shul. Sites attributed to Gesar's exploits dot the Yul shul Tibetan landscape (Thurston 2019), and inspired bards are considered to have spiritual powers. Tibetans more generally view Gesar as a culture hero, and references to the epic appear in a variety of oral traditions, including proverbs, riddles, folksong, and informal narrative. The epic has also been the inspiration for and subject of modern cultural production, including literature (Alai 2009, Don grub rgyal 1997), film, and more. In conversation, handsome men are compared to Gesar, and beautiful ladies to Gesar's wife 'Brug mo, and cunning folk likened to Gesar's devious Uncle Khro thung. Folk songs make allusions to the epic and its main characters. There are also real audiences for prosimetric performance as well. UNESCO recognition also adds a more modern and governmental value to the epic and its bards.

Beyond the secular realm, the Gesar epic has developed **crucial valences with Tibetan Buddhism** as well. Texts incorporating Gesar into Buddhist tradition date back to the 17th century (FitzHerbert 2016), while a well-documented vein of religious and intellectual interest in the epic hero can be traced to the 18th century (Makley 2007; FitzHerbert 2015). In the twenty-first century, Yul shul different sects maintain different attitudes toward the epic. The Sa skya and Bka' rgyud sects—the two largest Buddhist sects in the area—support the epic, but the reform-minded Dge lugs pa sect is less supportive of the epic. In conversation, one inspired *sgrung mkhan*, for example, sug-

gested that his son had recently started to feel inspired to perform the story as well. This unwanted inspiration had caused some consternation because his son is a monk in a Dge lugs monastery, where the epic is not viewed positively. The relatively weak presence of the Dge lugs sect in Yul shul locally limits the influence of these negative attitudes toward Gesar culture, but the sect's popularity across Tibet may raise some concern for broader sustainability.

Shortly after UNESCO recognized Gesar epic as Chinese heritage, Gauthard (2011, 185) wrote that “[t]he Tibetans are unanimous, Gesar does not need to be saved by the Chinese authorities.” By 2019, this did not seem to be true in Yul shul. Yul shul's *sgrung mkhan* and cultural workers seem to feel that the Gesar epic and its performances would be in great danger without the State's support. The local government, meanwhile, is also seen to be largely supportive of this work, with several competing province- and county-level projects being completed simultaneously. At the same time, many Gesar professionals in Yul shul seem to believe that their contributions are undervalued. Several expressed concern that funding for Gesar research centers is distributed at the national and provincial level, where many of the scholars are from the ethnolinguistic region of Northeastern Tibet known as Amdo. Lacking a deeper understanding of Yul shul's Gesar traditions, local cultural professionals argue, Amdo's Gesarologists overlook and undervalue the prefecture's unique contributions, thus hampering efforts to safeguard and sustain the epic.

Implications for Sustainability

Schippers and Grant (2016) highlight prestige as one of the most significant factors for cultural sustainability. The prestige afforded to officially recognized *sgrung mkhan* is one of the main reasons for optimism regarding the epic. The combination of the State's recognition and the role in the community's spiritual health offer considerable prestige to inspired *sgrung mkhan*. Many reciting bards in Yul shul, meanwhile, are literate, have government work (which may be unrelated to the epic), and work to preserve Tibetan traditions. This all guarantees many of reciting bards levels of prestige, and, to some degree offsets the lack of official recognition and monetary assistance. The tendency of provincial and national-level metacultural professionals to undervalue Yul shul's contribution, meanwhile, is seen as a threat, but also seems to mobilize the Prefecture's culture workers to redouble their efforts to preserve Tibetan culture.

The changing contexts for and attitudes toward the epic remain a potential problem for the vitality of epic performance in its prosimetric form. As a traditional “verbal art,” language competence is essential to both performers and audiences, and ongoing tensions over education leave the epic in a strange state. There will be little point in performing if the students have not learned the oral traditional register well-enough to understand it. Without improved literacy in Tibetan, meanwhile, one wonders about the value of the textual versions as well. At the same time, there are generally positive attitudes toward the Gesar epic and openness toward any medium that can help to further “develop” the epic and its contents. Many performers expressed a wish to take

the epic itself to a broader audience around the world, and people felt this would be good regardless of the artistic form it would take.

Regulations and infrastructures

This domain primarily relates to the “hardware” of music—places to perform, compose,

practice, and learn, all of which are essential for a practice to survive as well as virtual spaces for creation collaboration, learning, and dissemination. Other aspects included in this domain, are the availability and-or manufacturing of instruments and other tangible resources. It also examines the extent to which regulations are conducive or obstructive to a blossoming heritage, including grants, artists’ rights, copyright laws, sound restrictions, laws limiting artistic expression and averse circumstances such as obstacles that can arise from totalitarian regimes, persecution, civil unrest, war or the displacement of music or people. (Schippers 2016, 13)

The Chinese government places a high value on the Gesar epic for decades, and the epic was mentioned as a key project for social science research in the sixth, seventh, and eighth five-year work plans (1980-1995). In 2009, as part of the application for UNESCO recognition, the Chinese government earmarked 50 million RMB (approximately 7.27 million US dollars) for safeguarding the epic over the next decade. The creation of laws to safeguard the epic and other intangible cultural heritage, the infrastructure to engage in this work, and the funding to support this work is undeniable.

In the decade since the epic’s initial inscription, culture workers have made good on many of the proposed measures, including the creation of cultural spaces for live epic performances (there are multiple such locations in Yul shul alone), and created a digital database of the Gesar epic tradition. The Chinese government funds a network of county-, prefectural, and provincial, and national-level Gesar research offices responsible for working with bards to collect, transcribe, and publish editions of the epic, arrange for public displays relating to the Gesar epic. Some of these offices, including the Prefectural level Gesar research office in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture have a dedicated recording studio just for bards to record their performances of the epic, and plans are in place for upgrading the studio as well. In some cases, the Gesar research offices collaborate with or work in parallel to each other and to culture bureaus responsible for identifying and safeguarding heritage more broadly.

The documentary work done by these offices, however, is rarely accessible to a broader public. In light of this, and the heavy emphasis placed on entextualization, it seems as if most recording work is done primarily to support the creation of written versions of each inspired bard’s repertoire, **and there are often a number of “authoritative”** versions being created at any given time. In July 2018, the Yul shul culture bureau was completing one version with the assistance of bards and retired schoolteachers working long hours to meet their deadline. The National Gesar Research Center had funded this project. At the same time, one “reciting bard’ (and Yul shul native) with

whom I spoke said that he was self-funding his own bilingual, 113 volume version of the epic.

Complementing this massive, ongoing entextualization effort, is a series of well-funded projects to provide for more dynamic approaches to safeguarding intangible cultural heritage more broadly. In 2018, Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous prefecture also announced the designation of the region as a Yul shul prefecture Tibetan Cultural ecological safeguarding experimental region (Ch. Zangzu [Yushu] *wenhua shengtai baohu shiyan qu* 藏族(玉树)文化生态保护区). The experimental region is the third such region in Qinghai Province and the 20 across China. Official news reports say that the project will see them engage in *salvage* (Ch. *qiangjiu xing* 抢救性) safeguarding for more intangible forms, and “productive” (Ch. *sheng chan xing* 生产性) safeguarding. Gesar. Meanwhile, the neighboring Mgo log (Ch. Guoluo 果洛) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture has a “Gesar Cultural Ecological Safeguarding” experimental region. Local culture workers in Yul shul were, as yet, unsure about what this would entail or how it would affect current efforts to safeguard the Gesar epic.

Across these efforts, workers reported inconsistent archival methods, and even the leaders of different work units were sometimes unsure about how to locate specific episodes from specific performers. The experts who work in these offices, meanwhile, often have little to no training in recording, cultural documentation, folkloristic, archival methods, or related disciplines. Instead, many are former schoolteachers. Such is the state of Tibetan language education in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous prefecture that those with the best Tibetan language skills become teachers, and move into culture later in life. When they make this move, however, they receive little to no training and are generally unaware of concerns of archives, accessibility, metadata collection, and the like.

Implications for Sustainability

National and local governments have placed considerable emphasis on safeguarding the Gesar epic, and the tradition of prosimetric performance. There are strong infrastructures and regulatory frameworks to support the tradition. The material requirements for performance, meanwhile, are few. Within the heritage regime, there is also considerable scope for individual officials to create and implement programs that they think may benefit a tradition. In Rdza stod (Ch. Zaduo) county, for example, one young leader, whose father recites the epic from a text, told that in his county, they have a “Gesar transmission base” in a local primary school, where students can learn. He is also planning to hold a competition for non-inspired performers of the epic with cash prizes for the best performers. These sorts of initiatives seem to seek not just the creation of fluent audiences, but also to encourage a broader range of participation in the Gesar epic. These sorts of programs are only just beginning, but a new stage of engagement with the Gesar epic—a stage based on a broader definition of the epic and its transmission—may be underway. Through encouraging broader participation of the epic meanwhile, and acknowledging the contributions of non-inspired performers, there would seem to be more scope for community members to actively engage with the epic, which may yet have positive outcomes for the epic.

Music and music industries

This domain addresses large-scale dissemination and commercial aspects of music.

Most musicians and musical styles depend in one way or another on the music industry for their survival. Over the past 100 years the distribution of music has increasingly involved recordings, radio, television, and internet... At the same time, many acoustic and live forms have changed under the influence of internal and external factors leading to a wealth of new performance formats. This domain examines the ever-changing modes of distributing, publicising and supporting music, including the role of audiences... Patrons, sponsors, funding bodies, and governments who 'buy' or 'buy into' artistic product. (Schippers 2016, 13).

With Tibetan language broadcast stations, a large popular music industry, and a budding film industry, Tibet has a thriving (though always precarious) Tibetophone media ecosystem. The Gesar epic, however, does not feature prominently in this ecosystem. China's state-run media—including all television and radio broadcast—maintains a fairly consistent, low-level engagement with the Gesar epic. *Sgrung mkhan* occasionally appear on local culture programs, and national news regularly publicizes major achievements in safeguarding the epic, from the publication of new textual traditions to new performance styles. Nonetheless, performances themselves are less frequently featured on traditional mass media. Recordings made by government offices tend not to get broader distribution to the public unless transcribed and published as books. There are even some barriers to publication, particularly for private individuals. In China, getting published requires funding, as most publishing houses require authors to pay for all the costs of publication from obtaining an ISBN number to the cost of printing the book itself. While government offices sometimes assume these publication costs, many others are self-funded. In both cases, printing runs tend to be limited, and it can be difficult to obtain a copy unless you already know the people involved. Anecdotal evidence suggests that these textual versions are rarely read.

Yul shul also has a number of shops that specialize in selling recordings of chanted religious scriptures, and Gesar epic recitation. Customers enter the shops and purchase either speakers or SD cards full of mp3s of their choice. Shopkeepers told me that they do make steady sales of epic recordings. From my observations, customers often knew to request specific bards and specific episodes of the epic. Interestingly, recordings seemed limited to *don sgrung* "reciting bards" rather than the *'bab sgrung* officially recognized by the state. The featured bards in these recordings were not making any financial benefit from the sale of their recordings. Nevertheless, the continued sales of these recordings suggest the ongoing appreciation for the epic and its performance in the present.

The Gesar epic, meanwhile, appears (often indirectly) in a variety of other media. For example, the popular 2016 hip-hop song *Alalamo* used a highly recognizable feature of epic performance to comment on the direction of Tibetan society more broadly.

Some documentaries circulate featuring epic performers, including “A Gesar Bard’s Tale” (Coleman & Lharigtso 2014), which was available on Netflix between 2015 and 2017. One can also find locally produced lower budget videos of Gesar opera (performed on location as opposed to on stage) on YouTube, and there are even rumors of a feature film about the Gesar epic under production, while several local groups have also produced films about the Gesar epic. These efforts are often received positively by Tibetan audiences and speak to how the epic reaches audiences through a variety of media.

Implications for Sustainability

The ability to experience the Gesar epic across a variety of media has perhaps helped to further support audience engagement with the epic. The Chinese media’s engagement with the epic and with government achievements in safeguarding efforts has conferred prestige on the epic and its performers. Thus, although performers may derive little financial benefit from the media, and although the epic’s presence in the media is largely oblique, the opportunities to garner prestige may help to further guarantee the sustainability of the epic. At the same time, the epic’s presence in media is mostly oblique, and the prestige garnered, then, may be ephemeral or unevenly distributed.

Issues and Initiatives for Sustainability

Overall Vitality

At present, the Gesar epic benefits from a strongly supported and well-funded cultural heritage regime, prestige within the local community, and considerable support from within the Tibetan community and a number of passionate workers both inside the government and outside it who seek to ensure continued knowledge and performance of the epic. The epic exists across a variety of new-media and performance contexts, and reaches audiences in many formats. These factors combine to ensure that, among Tibet’s oral traditions, the epic boasts impressive vitality in the present even if it—like much of Tibetan culture—often seems precarious in an increasingly crowded mediascape.

Key Issues for Sustainability

The key issues for sustainability in the present, in the eyes of performers and culture workers, are the remuneration of *sgrung mkhan*, and the concern about training fluent audiences able to enjoy the epic. Efforts to improve the training of fluent audiences are ongoing. From this researcher’s perspective, however, many other issues may impact on the sustainability of the epic in Yul shul Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. These include the tendency to focus on inspired bards at the expense of other bards, the complex politics of heritage recognition and its tendency to remove *sgrung mkhan* from their local communities, and how Yul shul’s implementation of bilingual education policies may mitigate against true sustainability.

Past Initiatives

For many years in the post-Mao period, the primary interventions in Gesar culture were focused on recording the repertoires of different inspired bards, and creating textual versions of these (for example, Bsam grub 2001 and Grags pa 1998). Dozens of volumes have since been published, documenting the unique capabilities and verbal artistic repertoire of these bards. A tremendous amount of scholarly effort, meanwhile, has gone into identifying the historical origins and analyzing the verbal art of the genre. More recently, UNESCO recognition has encouraged new efforts to safeguard the epic through the establishment of “transmission bases” where students can learn to perform the epic, through public performance at “Gesar festivals.” In 2018, meanwhile, Chinese government websites (see, for example, Xu 2018) trumpeted the creation of a Gesar Culture Transmitters Database” (Ch. *Gesaer wenhua chuancheng ren shu ju ku* 格萨尔文化传承人数据库), though as of writing, I could find no public-facing link to the database itself.

Current and Planned Initiatives

While all of the above-mentioned past initiatives continue into the present, several new initiatives are also planned at local levels. Textual efforts continue. In 2018, the Yul shul government also established a Tibetan Culture Ecological Preservation Experimental Region covering the entire prefecture. This area aims to engage in productive preservation for handcraft and tangible traditions, while also supporting “salvage preservation” for intangible traditions. Planned initiatives change based on the proclivities of leaders in different offices and work units. The young assistant bureau chief of the Zado County culture bureau was preparing competition to give prizes to non-inspired bards in hopes of encouraging fans to take up active performance of the epic. In 2018, I also heard reports of new *sgrung khang* “story houses” in other counties of Yul shul. Due to restrictions of time, I was unable to visit one of these locations and assess their funding and operations, but consultants suggested that these locations allowed for public performance of the epic independent of the state. In comparison with Zado, Gesar professionals working in prefectural level offices were more concerned with *qunzhong chuancheng* (“mass transmission”). They were creating new textual editions, preparing the Gesar festival, and also laying the groundwork for an upcoming plan being an exhibition of expensive *thangka* paintings that would help people learn about the epic’s main characters.

Conclusion

Using Schippers and Grant’s five-domain assessment of cultural sustainability, this article has made an ecological examination of the Tibetan Gesar epic’s sustainability. The overall picture is complicated, and there are many reasons for optimism and concern in equal measure. At present, the Gesar epic seems to be stable. There is no shortage of passionate Tibetans who seek to continue performing and documenting the epic, and the government continues to devote tremendous amounts of resources to the safeguarding activities. Safeguarding activities include documentation and performance,

and there seem to be audiences interested in the epic. Concerns about the epic's future, however, remain, although centered on fuzzier evidence. For example, official Gesar work seems to focus overwhelmingly on mass transmission—including the creation of textual versions and public displays. Much of the work being done to safeguard the epic seems focused on creating “fluent audiences” (Foley 2002, 104), and on the content of the epic rather than the performance tradition itself. At the same time, the famously poor state of Tibetan education in Yul shul, and the amount of time students spend learning away from homes, leaves one to wonder how the next generation will become fluent audiences without better grounding in the range of Tibetan oral traditions within the broader Tibetan folk ecology. In Yul shul, in particular, meanwhile, bards and heritage professionals alike still feel like more funding is needed and better understanding from provincial and national offices dominated by scholars from other Tibetan areas. In sum, some positive trends give hope for the future, while structural issues remain that lead to concerns about the epic's long-term sustainability.

Notes

- 1 Research for this paper was funded by the University of Leeds, School of Languages, Cultures and Societies Strategic Research Development Fund and a small grant from the Association of Asian Studies China and Inner Asia Council. Early drafts of this paper were shared at conferences in China and at a University of Leeds East Asian Studies Research Seminar in December 2018. I am grateful for comments and questions at these events, which have shaped the present essay. Remaining mistakes are entirely my own.
- 2 See UNESCO 2003 for the Convention itself. For how UNESCO's heritage frameworks have shaped communities around the globe, see Foster and Gilman 2015.
- 3 For a selection of relevant English language scholarship, see, Oakes (2012), You (2015), Silverman and Blumenfield (2012), and Maags and Svensson (2018), McLaren 2010, and Rees 2016. For contributions specifically examining Tibetan culture, see Gauthard 2011, Laukkanen 2016, Saxer 2013, and Shepherd 2006.
- 4 Some, including Fitzherbert (2010), question this claim.
- 5 See Zhambei Gyaltsho 2001 for more on this emic typology of bards.

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Responses

Not Assessing the Potential of the New Glocal Tools of the UNESCO Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage Paradigm in Yul Shul, in Applied Ethnomusicology or Gesarology

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Timothy Thurston has done a fine job of appropriating the structure promoted in an Oxford University Press volume on applied ethnomusicology as a sensitizing framework to present and analyze the recent developments in transmitting a repertoire of epic constructions in Tibetan, and now also Mandarin languages. His article would have fit in (a sequel, on storytelling, of) that volume, edited in 2016 by Huib Schippers and Catherine Grant, with the inspiring title “Sustainable futures for music culture: an ecological perspective.” The different case studies all follow the “Five-Domain Framework” developed by Schippers and Grant: 1) systems of learning music, 2) musicians and communities, 3) contexts and constructs, 4) infrastructure and regulations and 5) music industry and media. This is complemented by a systematic discussion of the “implications for sustainability” and a section on “issues and initiatives for sustainability.” The Schippers and Grant volume was applauded and welcomed but also subjected to sharp criticism by Aaron Allen (2017, 383): “Nevertheless, I do hope that the project’s framing theory will be

revised and surpassed soon (...) I am disappointed at the lack of adequate engagement with the meanings and vast areas of inquiry around the two keywords ‘sustainability’ and ‘ecology’.” The book was the result of a research project in Australia between 2009-2014, hence missing the whole movement that emerged thanks to the United Nations’ Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, launched in 2015, and the effects of injecting the SDGs in the implementation of UNESCO’s heritage conventions, recommendations and programmes.

It does not help that Thurston opted to work with gross caricatures of “the heritage framework” or of “metacultural professionals.” He does this in order to take distance and to promote (the abovementioned) alternatives for studying dealing with “intangible traditions” (a pleonasm). He explores stories about a few effects attributed to the inscription of an item on the so-called Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

Reflexive twenty-first century applied ethnomusicology and the 2003 UNESCO Convention Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage Paradigm could be a match made in Heaven. But just like in a relationship, unless it is a story of transcendent inspired transmission or purely the work of Cupid, it involves hard work to mutually understand each other and, but above all, to keep up these efforts as everyone changes.

If the words “world heritage” (list) pop up in relation to (ethno)music(ology), then you immediately know that you are confronted with a very superficial (non) understanding of the 2003 UNESCO Convention. Luckily this is not the case in Thurston’s contribution. In a recent dis-

cussion of studies of top scholars on Vietnamese musical items on the Representative and Urgent Safeguarding Lists, I voiced my surprise that these taboo words were used and I asked the question if this echoed (wishful) misunderstandings of government officials or stakeholders (Jacobs 2018). In any case, ethnomusicologists should be aware of the “appropriate language” battles and what is at stake (see “heritage frameworks,” in plural). It is also important to understand which special—marginal!—positions UNESCO programmes on endangered languages (see Catherine Grant) and the programme on “living human treasures,” or what Catherine Maag called “ICH transmitter system,” actually have in the global 2003 UNESCO Convention paradigm. Are there no other safeguarding trajectories possible? It will allow to make a richer exploration of which alternatives under that paradigmatic UNESCO umbrella could be proposed to CGIs and other stakeholders in this part of China.

It is not a reassuring sign if the only primary source reference to UNESCO instruments is the original Convention text itself, dated 2003, and not the whole, periodically updated set of *Basic Texts*, hence https://ich.unesco.org/doc/src/2003_Convention_Basic_Texts-2018_version-EN.pdf. In 2020, it is no longer sufficient to only mobilize, discuss and interpret the 2003 text. Not only should recent publications like the Commentary, edited by Janet Blake and Lucas Lixinski, be used to understand the evolving interpretations, or to be sensitized about the reasons why for instance the emphasis on “the community” in the Five Domain Framework should raise caution (Jacobs 2020). The focus should also be on the most recent

version of the Operational Directives for the Implementation of the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, the Ethical Principles for Safeguarding Intangible Cultural Heritage and the Overall Results Framework for the Convention for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage: recent tools for glocal ethics (Jacobs 2016 & 2017). Preferably in combination with resources like <https://ich.unesco.org/en/safeguard-00012> and, today, above all <https://ich.unesco.org/en/overall-results-framework-00984>. Not using, or even mentioning, the successive versions of the operational directives, leads to missing the operational directives 170 to 197 assembled since 2016 in the chapter VI on sustainable development at the national level. Exploring the potential of operational directives 170 and 171, 172-176, 179 (for instance when discussing the roles of the *'bab sgrung*, or “inspired bards”), 180, 185-186 (for all bards) or 187 is a way forward for research that claims to foster (cultural) sustainability and ecology and that actually can be “applied.” This can become very important in the 2020s: thanks to the theory of change/overall results framework, periodic reporting and the expected impact on future cultural policy developments at all levels. It is there that ambitious contributions to applied scholarship, like those of Grant, Schippers and, indeed, Thurston might really flourish.

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