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Knowing King Gésar Between Buddhist Monastery and Socialist Academy, Or the Practices of Secularism in Inner Asia

Matthew W. King

This article argues that selective memories of imperial-era Buddhist knowledge practices helped Soviet-era scholars localize secularist ideology, knowledge practices, and historical models in post-imperial Mongolia. At the root of one such memory was the eighteenth century eastern Tibetan Buddhist polymath Sumpa Khenpo, who differentiated between historical, legendary, and enlightened King Gésars in a letter correspondence with the Sixth Panchen Lama, Palden Yéshé (1738-1780). To the delight of his later Soviet and socialist Mongolian readers, Sumpa Khenpo drew his conclusions about the historical Gésar based on observable evidence instead of scriptural authority. Through a close examination of the contents of those Qing-era Tibetan letters and their later circulation amongst academics in socialist Mongolia, this article argues that securing secularist certainties in post-imperial Inner Asia at times required strategic emphasis on what were considered to be the ‘pre-modern’ religious genealogies. The historicity of Gésar and ways of discerning that historical identity became, in the memories of such Soviet-era scholars, a space of value defined by ‘scientific knowing’ shared between Buddhist monastery and scientific academy. Such productive exchanges continued even when those scholars were writing years after Buddhist institutionalism had been purged through widespread state violence. Ways of knowing Gésar from the imperial-era Buddhist monastery were thus generative of, and not simply effaced by, changing regimes of authority, styles of sovereignty, and privileged ways of knowing the world in the formation of the world’s second socialist nation and the anachronistic invention of secular modernity in Inner Asia.

Keywords: Gésar, secular, Tibet, Mongolia, Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Peljor, Panchen Lama Palden Yéshé.
Introduction: Secularism and Memories of ‘Traditional’ Science in Mongolia

Following the collapse of the Qing (1911) and Tsarist (1917) empires and then the tenuous rule of a Buddhist theocratic government (1911-1919), Outer Mongolia was gradually reorganized conceptually and administratively into a socialist polity beginning in 1921. During the course of the Qing formation (1644-1911), Buddhist monasteries had vastly populated Mongolian cultural regions. These were overwhelmingly of the Tibeto-Mongolian Geluk tradition (Tib. dge lugs pa; Mon. gelügwa) favored by a Manchu ruling elite who had historically offered strategic patronage in order to mediate imperial authority along its western and northern frontiers. In Mongol lands especially, the aim of Qing authorities had been to gradually dilute regional communities of identification in favor of a pan-Buddhist communitas rooted in the ‘Yellow Religion’ (Mon. shira shasìn) of the Geluk school and the authority of the Manchu ruling elite (Elverskog 2007; Elverskog 2005). 1 By the Qing imperial collapse in 1911-12 and the start of nationalist and socialist transitions in Inner Asia, Geluk monastic networks extended across the Tibetan plateau to north China, and into the Mongol and Siberian cultural sphere as far as St. Petersburg. Outer Mongolia in particular had arguably the highest per capita monastic population in Buddhist history. (Common estimates are that one out of three adult males had some kind of monastic affiliation). In addition to enormous economic reservoirs, monastics and monastic institutions at that time had almost exclusive domain over, among other things, education, literacy, printing, calendrics, visual and dramatic arts, and medicine. If, as early refrains from revolutionary party channels often promised, Mongolia was to emerge from its repressive, imperial past into a new era guided by scientific certainty and socialist values, party leaders would need to work through, or at least seriously account for, the enduring hegemony of Buddhist monastic institutions.

Indeed, early generations of revolutionary leaders faced the task of defining the place of monasteries and the value of monastic fields of knowledge in the post-imperium. After achieving a tenuous grasp on power in 1921, officials and intelligentsia of the Mongolian People’s Revolutionary Party (Mon. mongol ardin khuwisgalt nam) faced steep challenges in promoting industrialization, mass vernacular literacy, secular education, biomedicine, and more generally, routes of development founded in scientific inquiry and industrialization. 2 Early efforts to accommodate monastic institutions and ways of knowing into the framework of the ‘people’s revolution’ came from within the party itself. Many early revolutionary leaders were either ordained Buddhist monks or committed lay-Buddhists who centered Buddhism in embryonic discourses about modern Mongol identity and development (Rupen 1956b; Rupen 1956a). In time, more radical leftists aligned with Stalinist elements in the Soviet Union came to power. They insisted that Buddhist monasticism’s long tradition of imperial patronage, the bourgeois excesses and enduring power of the Buddhist monastic elite, and the economic clout of monastic estates meant that contemporary Buddhist institutionalism demanded strict, even violent, state suppression in the march towards modernism.

Ultimately, the hardline leftist elements succeeded. While a Soviet-style socialist command economy was not implemented in Mongolia until the 1950s, the violent erasure of Buddhist institutionalism came earlier, in the late 1930s (Humphrey 1994). Bolstered (but not determined) by Stalin’s Great Terror, Mongolian party leaders abandoned nearly two decades of legal, educational, and economic campaigns meant to supplant the authority of Buddhist monasteries and of the high lamas specifically (Kaplonski 2014; Kaplonski 2004). Beginning in earnest in 1937, the desperate socialist party purged at least 40,000 people (mostly aristocracy and Buddhist monastics), imprisoned tens of thousands more, and forcibly returned untold numbers of low-ranking monastics to lay life. Mongolia’s over seven hundred monasteries and temples, save three, were razed. All continuity of religious practice in public or private life was officially prohibited until the democracy movements of 1990.

In what sense may we speak about the course of this bloody transition in post-imperial Mongolia as ‘secularization’? What, if anything, was the form, content, generative conditions, and effects of ‘secularism’ during what has been called ‘Asia’s first modern revolution’ (Onon and Pritchatt 1989)? Given how attentively the Soviet state apparatus intervened in Mongolia, perhaps the story of secularism in Mongolia is simply one chapter of a dominant (and better documented) story of Soviet secularization, as has often been supposed in the secondary literature. Revolutionary developments in the Soviet Union were explicitly constructed by party officials as socialization processes aimed at the “creation of a new Soviet (atheist) man,” and “the administrative and legislative regulation of religious bodies with the ostensible intention of eventually seeing them disappear” (Anderson 1994: 3). As such, the sought after outcome of class struggle in the Soviet Union was something akin to ‘secularist secularity.’ In José Casanova’s analytical distinction, this is the “phenomenological experience not only of being passively free but also actually of having been liberated from ‘religion’ as a condition for
human autonomy and flourishing” (Casanova 2011: 60). But was such a ‘phenomenological experience’ ever so desired on the Mongol steppes?

Christopher Kaplonski has argued persuasively against this idea (Kaplonski 2014). He has shown quite clearly that state violence against Buddhist institutionalism in revolutionary Mongolia was not the outcome of secularist ideology per sé, even if such violence did cause religious bodies, institutions, and values to disappear from public life in the most terrible fashion for over five decades. Unlike in the Soviet Union, in revolutionary-era Mongolian religious belief and practice was never specifically identified as a force opposed to modernization. In fact, the revolutionary party legally guaranteed the right to religious affiliation during the entire socialist period (1921-1990). Turning too quickly to secularization as an explanatory framework for state violence and, more generally, to periodize the imperial-socialist transition in Mongolia obscures the nuances and specific histories of state policies. Those policies are more responsibly understood as stemming from an entrenched anti-clericalism in the party leadership. The socialists struggled against the competing political, economic and ideological authority of the head lamas and monasteries until, out of desperation, they turned to mass political violence (Kaplonski 2014: 38).

We can thus hardly claim that a radical secularist ideology motivated state violence against religious actors and institutions in post-imperial Mongolia as it had in the Soviet Union. Nor can we assume that secularization, as some kind of abstracted global historical process, simply wound itself onto the Mongol steppes in the ruins of the Qing formation. Instead, it seems that in Mongolia, as elsewhere in post-imperial Inner Asia, modernism (and secularism specifically) was constructed in zones of contact shared between folk tradition, Buddhist monasticism, and a privileged scienticism then circulating along newly opened routes of global exchange (Bernstein 2009; Rupen 1956b; Rupen 1956a; Dugarava-Montgomery 1999; King 2015).

For example, from academies in Irkutsk, Leningrad, and Ulaanbaatar, Soviet scholars spent decades combing the Mongolian and Tibetan religious, literary, archaeological, and ethnographic record for the historical conditions that had led to the ‘sudden’ awakening of a people’s movement and to the concomitant rationalization of the Mongolian socio-political landscape. In time, the scholars who undertook such research—many of whom, as I mentioned above, were early vanguards of the revolutionary movement and committed lay or ordained Buddhists—began to identify ‘traditional scientific’ cultural traditions in pre-revolutionary Mongolia and in the Tibetan cultural sphere more broadly. For example, they argued the historical Buddha Śākyamuni had been the world’s first materialist, a sagacious precursor to Marx, Engels, and Lenin. Likewise, such scholars argued that Buddhist monastic law and Mongol-Buryat customary laws were implicitly socialist (Rupen 1956b). It was widely proclaimed that examples such as these had equipped a newly imagined pan-Mongol people—which included Tibetans in many formulations—with the distant historical conditions for the blossoming of national autonomy, social emancipation, and a properly ‘Mongol’ modernism founded in techno-scientific knowledge and practice.

However, not all pre-revolutionary traces of ‘Mongolian national’ culture and tradition were so lauded. Lenin had mandated that only democratic and socialist elements were to be preserved from national culture. In Mongolia throughout the early revolutionary period and well after the purges, it became the task of intelligentsia and artists (such as writers, painters and dancers) to identify, produce, and disseminate ‘cultural enlightenment’ (Mon. soyol gegeerel) (Pegg 2001: 253–254). Party intellectuals identified and collected national folk traditions, classifying these as varieties of belief and practice alongside, but always distinct from, religion and science. Writers of modern socialist realism likewise drew deeply upon folk traditions for appropriately inspired characters and themes in their works (Chakars 2014). Across the USSR and affiliated states, national epics especially became favored resources to better define the collective identities of the Soviet world and to discern the contours of acceptable national literatures in the 1920s and 1930s.³

There were hardly any examples of Inner Asian folk tradition regarded more highly by Soviet-era redactors than the ‘Legend of King Gēsär of Ling’ (Tib. gling ge sar rgyal po’i sgrun; Mon. ling geser khaqhan-u tughuji). As the name suggests, this was a vast epic and ritual system that washed across Inner Asia from eastern Tibet that followed a multivalent protagonist named King Gēsär. The Gēsär epic, carefully disassociated from its religious elements, was celebrated in Soviet-era Mongolia as part of the social fabric of its newly defined national culture. For example, in comparisons between Tibetan and Mongolian Gēsär traditions, post revolutionary-era (c. 1940-1990) Mongolists such as Jamtsarano, Poppe and Damdinsuren labored to define and, thus, produce ‘a Mongolian people’s Geser’ (cf. Rinchen and Zhamcarano 1960). Damdinsuren and Poppe agreed that the Mongol Gēsär epic bared only a superficial relationship to Tibetan versions, and that “these versions were not compiled by lamas or feudal lords but seem rath-
er to have been created by the people” (Damdinsüren 1957: 167) and “bards of ordinary descent” (Poppe 1958: 195).

For such scholars it was more than the narrative content of Gésar epic poetry alone that helped provide the form and content of secularist modernity in Mongolia. More fundamentally, they strategically memorialized the knowledge practices that had produced that poetry and which had been used by imperial-era Mongols to document and historicize received epic traditions. In almost all cases, given their hegemony during the Qing, the locus of those knowledge practices so prized by Soviet-era historians had been in the now purged Buddhist monastery. Those practices had been developed and used by monastic elites deeply implicated in the imperial (i.e. ‘feudal’) administration of Mongol lands and peoples. This was especially true of one widely memorialized and analyzed imperial-era inquiry into the historicity of King Gésar that came to Soviet-era historians in preserved letter exchanges between two prominent Géluk Buddhist scholastics from the Tibetan-Mongolian interface during the height of Qing sovereignty. Soviet-era memories of this Qing-era inquiry into the historical Gésar provide a fine-grained, contextualized account of one way that the secular was realized in post-imperial Inner Asia. For many prominent historians working in Mongolian and Soviet scientific institutes, the pseudo-rational knowledge practices they detected in this imperial-era letter exchange counted as no less than a primary (or at least, characteristic) antecedent to the revolutionary rationalization of Mongolia beginning in the 1920s. It was, more precisely, a monastic precursor to the sites of their own scholarship in party academies and to their knowledge practices as historians, philologists, ethnologists, linguists, and the like. Imagined as ‘traditional science,’ such valued knowledge practices from the imperial-era Buddhist monastery became critical in articulating the form and content of a self-conscious secularized modernity in Mongolia.

The Epic of King Gésar and the Imperial-Socialist Transition

The epic of King Gésar of Ling is a widely dispersed, centuries-old tradition that has long been twinned with Inner Asian political ideologies and models of legitimate rule. For example, the epic is still very much alive as far west as Gilgit-Balistan in Pakistan, east across the Himalaya and north China, and north through Mongolia and Siberia. Apparently originating in the eastern Tibetan region of Kham (Tib. kham) about a millennium ago, King Gésar is variously evoked in these regional traditions as a legendary military hero, a semi-divine trickster, or, in the ritual cosmos of certain later Buddhist traditions, as a sworn protector of the Buddhist dispensation or a manifestation of an enlightened Buddha. Tibetan versions of the Gésar epic generally unfold in the following way: a conflict arises between Gésar’s Ling people and a usually non-Buddhist, antagonistic neighbor; Gésar and his Ling allies defeat their enemy using cunning, military prowess, and usually a dose of supernatural intervention; the defeated population is converted to Buddhism and made into an ally of Ling; some civilizing element, such as medicine, is recovered from conquered territory and dispersed amongst Gésar’s followers (Samuel 1996).

In the pantheon of Mongolian and Siberian popular religion, King Gésar was a relative latecomer from Tibetan regions. On the basis of a very early 1614 translation, Walther Heissig estimates that Mongols began worshipping Gésar on the Tibetan example only in the early seventeenth century (Heissig 1980: 98). In time, Mongolian variations of the epic took quite a different form than elsewhere in the Tibetan cultural sphere. For example, in Mongolian epics Gésar is not an enlightened being as much as an intermediary between supra-mundane, sky-dwelling beings and the human realm, who acts to suppress evil and establish virtue and security. As such, King Gésar as the object of monastic or folk ritual propitiation usually acted as a protective being entrusted with guarding wealth, livestock, and health (Dugarov 1999: 49).

Less than a half-century after its adoption into Mongolian cultural regions, the King Gésar epic and its associated ritual traditions began to be assimilated into the ideological and ritual structure of the multiethnic Qing Empire (1644-1912). Narratives and characters from the epic were synthesized with visions of Manchu history in projections of imperial authority across the Tibetan and Mongolian imperial frontier. Early on this took the form of patronage and translation: for example, Emperor Kangxi sponsored the first Mongolian language woodblock edition of the Gésar epic in 1716. Even so, the absorption of narratives and characters from the Gésar epic into Qing political discourse and state-sponsored ritual began in earnest only once the empire began to decline in the nineteenth century in the face of escalating internal dissent, such as the Taiping Rebellion (1850-1864), and humiliating defeats at the hands of foreign powers, such as to the British in the Opium Wars.

In order to maintain sovereignty, earlier Qing strategies to segregate, specialize, limit, and distill minority ethnic identities faded. The nineteenth-century tendency became instead to collapse, conflate, and fuse court representation
to counter disintegrating imperial sovereignty (Crossley 1999: 285; Heissig 1980). To that end, the Qing court began to amalgamate aspects of Mongol and Chinese popular religion with Tibetan Buddhism and imperial ritual (see Rawski 2009: 197–302). King Gésar (whether seen as a lineal ancestor, enlightened Buddha, local spirit, or war deity) and the Gésar epic (which evoked potent models of leadership) were particularly valued resources in late imperial adaptations. Another much venerated, divine leader culled from the Han ethnosphere by the Qing ruling elite was a general known as Guandi or Guan Yu.4 Deified during the Sui dynasty (581–618 C.E.), Guandi was still a popular deity in China by the advent of the Qing Dynasty, and like King Gésar, the Manchu court connected Guandi to the multicultural discourses of Qing sovereignty during the Qianlong era (1735–1796). Guandi was promoted in imperial-sanctioned narratives and ritual programs as a deified Nurhaci, the founder of the Qing imperial line, and as a protective deity for the imperial family, the military, and of Buddhism generally (Crossley 1999: 284–285). By the twilight of the Qing in the early twentieth century, imperial temples dedicated to Gésar and Guandi dotted the Sino-Mongol-Tibetan borderlands in an ultimately failed attempt to construct a compelling, sacred basis for an enduring Qing claim on the region in quickly changing times.

The figure of King Gésar, the Gésar epic, and ritual traditions linking King Gésar with imperial authority were thus deeply embedded in the Tibet-Mongol cultural landscape by the time the Qing and Tsarist empires collapsed in the second decade of the twentieth century. It is no wonder that King Gésar and associated millenarian traditions became useful cultural repertoires upon which progressive Buddhist intellectuals and revolutionary leaders drew to circumscribe utopian futures for newly autonomous Mongol peoples, as observed long ago by Emanuel Sarkisyantz (1958). For example, early in the post-imperium, Mongol and Buryat Buddhist millenarian movements took hold of prophecies foretelling the imminent arrival of military forces from the legendary Buddhist kingdom of Śambhala to rid Inner Asia of non-Buddhist barbarism (Elverskog 2006: 201, n. 45). The epic and ritual traditions of King Gésar were put to similar use. When the Bogd Khanate was taken over by the White Russian forces of Baron von Ungern-Sternberg in 1919, King Gésar was used to authorize his short-lived and rather brutal rule: a Gésar temple provided the setting for his declaration that he had come to defend the Buddha’s religion and the throne of the Manchu emperors against the “Reds and Atheists.”5

With this necessarily brief historical sketch of the enduring political utility and public face of the Gésar epic during the imperial-socialist transition in mind,6 I now come finally to the details of Soviet-era memories of the content and generative practices of an imperial-era monastic inquiry into the historicity of King Gésar. This example, I argue, suggests useful routes for future comparative inquiry into the practices of secularism and secularization in modernizing Inner Asia.

Sumpa Khenpo on the Historical Gésar

These historical reflections came to Soviet analysts in a preserved letter correspondence between Sumpa Khenpo Yéshé Peljor (Tib. Sum pa mkhan po ye shes dpal ’byor; Mon. Sümbe khambo ishibaljur, 1704-1788), a cosmopolitan Géluk monk from the Sino-Tibetan-Mongolian borderlands, and the Sixth Panchen Lama Lozang Yéshé (Tib. Pan chen bla ma blo bzang dpal Idan ye shes; Mon. Banchin lubangbaldanish; 1738–1780), a Géluk incarnate lama from Central Tibet who was one of the highest Buddhist patriarchs in all of Inner Asia.7 In 1778, the Panchen Lama wrote to Sumpa Khenpo with a series of questions about the latter’s historical and geographical writings. Sumpa Khenpo’s answers to the Panchen Lama’s questions were preserved in his Collected Works in a long compilation entitled The Glittering Venus: Some Entry Points into the True Meaning of the Conventional Fields of Knowledge Written in Simplified Form as Question and Answer (Tib. Nang don thag snyad rig gnas kyi gzhung gi ngogs gnas ’ga’ zhih dris pa’i las phyogs gcig tu bris pa rab dkar pa sangs).

While no specific text is referenced as the basis of the Panchen Lama’s inquiry, Sumpa Khenpo’s widely-read Tibetan language publications by that time included the influential 1747 Wish-fulfilling Tree (Chos. byung dpag bsam ljon bzang), the Historical Account of Kokonor (Tsho sngon gyi lo rgyus) and the 1777 General Description of the World (’Dzam gling spyi bshad). The Panchen Lama questioned Sumpa Khenpo on topics as diverse as the location of Turkey, Germany, and Mecca, the whereabouts of the kingdom of Śambhala, the circumstances surrounding the death of Chinggis Khan, the historical identity of the Uighurs, and about King Gésar of Ling. On this last point, the Panchen Lama had at first only inquired about when Gésar had lived (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 189). His curiosity piqued upon receiving Sumpa Khenpo’s response, he wrote to Sumpa Khenpo again asking for a more detailed explanation on the historicity of Gésar generally and the open question of his divine status specifically (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 196).

Before coming to this important exchange, I must sketch its intellectual and social context since this bears upon the after-life of Sumpa Khenpo’s views in revolutionary and Soviet-era Mongolia examined below. Sumpa Khenpo, a Tibetanized Oirad Mongol, was an incarnate lama from the
eastern Tibetan monastery of Gönlung (Tib. dgon lung). He was a prominent member of an elite group of borderland Geluk monks who, over the course of the Qing, produced highly synthetic works that extended the form and content of their scholastic tradition. The authors of these works were largely Mongolian and Tibetan incarnate lamas and polyglot scholastics who spent time in the cosmopolitan environs of the Qing court and who came from Tibetan and Mongolian groups living in Sumpa Khenpo’s eastern Tibetan homeland of Amdo (Tib. a mdo). These authors included, but were not limited to: the Mongol confidant of the Qianlong Emperor and prolific translator Changkya Khutugtu Rolpé Dorjé (Tib. Lcang skya Rol pa’i rdo rje, 1717–1786); the (relatively) ecumenical doxographer Tuken Lozang Chökyi Nyima (Tib. Thu’u bkwan Blo bzang chos kyi nyi ma, 1737–1802); the Mongol grammarian and historian of Buddhism in China known today most commonly as Gombojav/Gombojaw (Tib. Mgon po skyabs, 18th century); and the renowned geographer Tsenpo Nomin-han Jampé Chökyi Tendzin Trinlé (Tib. Btsan po no min han ’Jam dpal chos kyi bstan ’dzin ’phrin las, 1789–1839).

Each of these monks were deeply implicated in Qing administration of Inner Asia. In this distinct historical and political milieu, they acted as intermediaries between imperial centers and the Tibetan and Mongolian borderlands. They did so using Tibetan, Mongolian, Chinese and, in some cases, Manchu. At the Qing court they gleaned new historical, geographic, religious and cosmological data from Chinese, Russian and Jesuit sources. In their far reaching works, such foreign materials were synthesized with the Indian Buddhist canon and exegetical traditions from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. For example, new geographical information about France, the Arctic Circle, and St. Petersburg were mapped onto classical cosmological information about France, the Arctic Circle, from the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. For example, new works, such foreign materials were synthesized with the Indian Buddhist canon and exegetical traditions ranging from the Abhidharma corpus and the Kālacakra-tantra. Rudimentary descriptions of Christian doctrine were inscribed into classical Indo-Tibetan doxographies of Buddhist and non-Buddhist views (Tib. grub mtha’ (Sweet 2006), as were new explanations of Chinese Buddhist schools and East Asian religions more generally (Thuken Losang Chökyi Nyima 2009). Monastic fields of knowledge about physiology, immunology and veterinary medicine were similarly expanded or, as in the oeuvre of Sumpa Khenpo, overturned entirely (Erdenibayar 2007).

The weight placed in these cosmopolitan works on observation and source-criticism over scriptural authority represents a formative, if still ambiguous, shift in Tibetan and Mongolian scholastic life. Sumpa Khenpo’s works are at the center of this ‘early-modern’ Geluk scholasticism that has been so alluring for scholars of late, though not as yet a subject of sustained or comparative inquiry. In his own lifetime, Sumpa Khenpo was apparently known as far as Central Tibet for his sober discernment between superstitious fantasy and evidence-based assertion. This was the reason the Panchen Lama had sent his vexing historical queries off to Sumpa Khenpo, such as the one concerning the historicity of Gésar:

Nowadays, it is said that there are Gésar legends in all of the lands of China, Tibet, and Hor [i.e. Mongol lands]. Are these stories simply poetic imagination? If he was a regular person, it is very difficult to believe that he displayed so many different types of magical emanation and also engaged in so many competitions! From the point of view of an ordinary person (Tib. tshur mthong), it is very difficult to decide whether Gésar was a manifestation of a deity or just a regular person (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 196).

The Panchen Lama’s question suggests that the thick identity of King Gésar is beyond normal human comprehension; he may not have even existed, or he may have existed as both an ordinary being and as an emanation of a deity. In his answer, however, Sumpa Khenpo insists that there is a mundane history of Gésar “comprehensible to ordinary beings” (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 197). Furthermore, in his initial answer to the Panchen Lama’s inquiries, Sumpa Khenpo responds that there was indeed an ‘actual life story’ (Tib. rnam thar dngos) of Gésar out there in the world awaiting scholarly discovery (though he does not, at this point, claim to have discovered it himself) (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 190). He elaborates that like other legendary and popular stories in Inner Asia (including the famous pilgrimage tale of the Chinese monk Xuanzang and the Indic Mahābhārata epic) the facts had, over time, been lost to fantasy and poetic invention. Fiction and not fact, Sumpa Khenpo lamented, now circulated “in front of the Mañjuśrī deity” or just a regular person (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 190).

Apparently more sure of his ability to correct such misinformation in his later, more elaborate response to the Panchen Lama, Sumpa Khenpo there decides that King Gésar had been a military leader from the eastern Tibetan principality of Dégé (Tib. sde dge). He had been born in Upper Middle Kham at a lowland confluence of the Dza River in a small grassland which “looks as though it were a carpet spread out” (Ye shes dpal ’byor 1975: 197). At that time, Sumpa Khenpo continues, this region was part of the Dégé kingdom and possessed two clans: Gésar’s Ling group (Tib. gling pa) and the Den (Tib. ’dan pa). He is careful to note that neither of these belonged to the Dégé of his day.
(Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975: 197). Sumpa Khenpo explains further that the historical Gésar most likely became famous for effectively responding to military aggression on the Dégé borders. The Ling were robbed again and again, he supposes, and the historical Gésar originally entered local legend as a strong leader who was able to re-establish and defend Ling autonomy (Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975: 200). Also in Sumpa Khenpo’s version of events, Gésar suffered a very human, if curious, death: he passed away from a bad fall after being startled by a loud dog belonging to the rival Den clan (Ye shes dpal 'byor 1975: 199).

Of great importance for the later Soviet-era memorialization of this eighteenth-century exchange were the types of evidence Sumpa Khenpo used to draw his conclusions. Our author almost exclusively turned to visible physical evidence and contemporary cultural tradition as the surest kind of confirmation. With the exception of one citation from the Fifth Dalai Lama’s autobiography, Sumpa Khenpo did not, for example, look to the authority of received scriptural tradition or the logic of enlightened manifestation to discern his historical object. The evidence he cited is material and observable. For example, he supported his description of Gésar’s birthplace at Kyi Nyima Khün Khyil (Tib. kyi nyi ma kun khyil) by appealing to the still recognizable ruins of Gésar’s parents’ tent stones and the stone markers erected long ago to honor Gésar’s brothers (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 197). Elsewhere, Sumpa Khenpo described iron fragments still to be found in Hor regions of eastern Tibet, the homeland of the hereditary enemies of Gésar’s Ling people. These fragments, he argued, were remnants of chains Gésar’s forces had used to scale the walls of a Hor fortress in a famous victory widely remembered in the epic (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 199).

In addition to observable material evidence, Sumpa Khenpo answered the Panchen Lama by appealing to still observable cultural and economic traditions from the Dégé region. For example, out of a blood debt for the loud dog that had startled and killed Gésar centuries earlier, Sumpa Khenpo wrote, the Den people of his day regularly constructed cairns dedicated to Gésar and still paid tax to the descendants of Gésar’s Ling clan (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 199). Sumpa Khenpo likewise found traces of Gésar’s campaigns against the Hor people by referencing still-observable traditions amongst descendants of the royal Hor lineage to erect a thin pillar topped by a piece of wood above the center of their tents (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 200). Referencing another Hor military loss, Sumpa Khenpo described how the eight groups of Yellow Uighurs (otherwise known as Bata Hor) still hang pieces of black wood inside their tents to commemorate how Gésar’s forces destroyed their abodes in battle (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 200). Whenever Sumpa Khenpo had not seen the material evidence or heard the relevant stories himself, he pieced his theory together on the good authority of “a few people who had seen this situation for themselves” (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 199).

While apparently convinced that Gésar was an historical agent embedded in the flow of ordinary (and thus, knowable) historical time, Sumpa Khenpo expressed uncertainty about whether Gésar was an extraordinary man or the manifestation of a “very strict regional deity” (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 197). While his Soviet-era celebrants would later pass over the supernatural presumptions in his answer, it was notable that Sumpa Khenpo here again turned to local oral history as the soundest evidence for even a supra-mundane Gésar:

Some people say that both the Ling and Den clans had been robbed again and again. The local people always make a ‘smoke offering’ (Tib. bsang) to their strict ‘regional deities (Tib. gzhi bdag) and requested help. People say that either a regional god or his manifestation was born as Gésar. This is possible. For example, recently the sedentary daughter of a nomad delivered the son of a regional god in the ‘Donak’ (Tib. rdo nags) region (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 197).

Sumpa Khenpo similarly cites oral tradition as evidence that many of those defeated by Gésar’s forces long ago still haunt their old abodes as demons and ghosts. These, he cautions, are ready to harm anyone who evokes Gésar’s memory by reciting his epic or even just by riding a horse or carrying a bow through their territory (Ye shes dpal ‘byor 1975: 200). With much consequence for the later secular formations in Inner Asia, Sumpa Khenpo’s answers to the Panchen Lama were thus founded in a comparative analysis of observable tradition, living memories, and material evidence.

**Strategic Soviet-era Memories**

More than a century and a half later, Soviet-era scholars working in post-revolutionary scientific institutes looked to the works of cosmopolitan Buddhist monks such as Sumpa Khenpo for many of the same reasons as recent scholars tracking modernism in Inner Asia: the allure of early harbingers of a familiar rationalism and secular sensibility (cf. Kapstein 2011; Gyatso 2011). In Soviet-era Mongolia, the scholars responsible for this characterization considered themselves heirs to a long Mongolian tradition of ‘scientific’ historical inquiry. Critically, this extended
deep into Tibetan and Qing space and tradition. For Mongolian and Russian scholars such as Shagdaryn Bira, Ts. Damdinsüren, N. Poppe, B. Dandaron, and A. I. Vostrikov, Sumpa Khenpo represented one of several Inner Asian modernists who, they believed, had developed a radical scientific acumen that foretold the national, historical-materialist awakening of the Mongolian peoples after the Qing collapse. This was made all the more remarkable by the fact that he had been embedded in ‘feudalist Buddhist monasteries’ and acted elsewhere as an agent of ‘exploitative Qing imperialism.’

For such scholars, Sumpa Khenpo’s letters to the Panchen Lama about the historical Gésar was the surest evidence of his ‘traditional scientific’ acumen. Reproductions and analyses of those reflections were widely circulated across the USSR and Mongolia quite late into the socialist period, well after other pre-revolutionary Buddhist monastic ‘scientists’ had fallen out of favor and the mass mining of national epic traditions had cooled. For example, as late as the 1950s, Ts. Damdinsüren translated Sumpa Khenpo’s full letters into Russian and used it as the basis for his own controversial arguments about the historical Gésar (much maligned by Rinchen), which included the position that Gésar had been a historical person from eastern Tibet who had lived in the ninth century (Damdinsüren 1957; Rintch-en 1958).

Other Soviet-era thinkers such as the great Mongolist Shagdaryn Bira wrote that Sumpa Khenpo exhibited “a serious, critical, scientific approach to his sources,” having “overcame blind faith in the infallibility of the Buddhist canons” (Bira, Damdinsuren, and Frye 1970: 20, 30). Sumpa Khenpo’s description of the historical Gésar was lauded as “equal in importance to great research in the fields of history and literature” of the Soviet period; his “departure from the long obsolete tradition of Buddhist literature are [his] most positive characteristics” (Bira, Damdinsuren, and Frye 1970: 20, 30). The reason for all this favorable attention during and after the state purges of Mongolia’s monastic institutions was precisely the modernist knowledge practices those Soviet-era scientists detected in Sumpa Khenpo’s monastic works. Bira notes especially that Sumpa Khenpo “evidently overcame blind faith in the infallibility of the Buddhist canons and preferred the information and stories by live people who had traveled in various countries in the world” (Bira, Damdinsuren, and Frye 1970: 30). Sumpa Khenpo’s histories were widely acclaimed for “broadening of the historical theme, the acquisition of new materials, their critical treatment, and, finally, the increase in secular motifs and a gradual departure from the religious viewpoint of history” (Bira, Damdinsuren, and Frye 1970: 32). Memories such as these gave shape to the socialist transition in Inner Asia, which it was thought had already led to the ‘gradual departure from the religious viewpoint’ in many, if not most, spheres of Mongolian society.

**Conclusion: The Practices of Secularism and Strategic Memories of the Pre-Secular**

In Cold War-era scholarship on either side of the Iron Curtain, anachronistic master narratives of the Mongolian socialist party and its Soviet allies have flattened the nuances and generative work of such memories and of the intellectual exchanges between monastery and academy. In this clumsy narrative, Qing imperial domination gave way suddenly to national self-awakening, the pursuit of industrial development and scientific rationalism, and eventually to the popular embrace of the egalitarian and atheist ideals of state socialism (cf. Brown, Onon, and Shiréndèv 1976). Closer attention indicates that many overlapping frames of reference guided modernist movements, and that even the most resolutely rationalistic and scientific often drew heavily upon imperial-era Tibetan and Mongolian cultural repertoires to give shape and legitimacy to their revolutionary program. Buddhist, and Géluk specifically, monastic scholarship was key in this regard. Even as party cadres sought to marginalize or eliminate Buddhist monasteries as bastions of feudalism and as hotbeds of counter-revolutionary sentiment, the strategic memory of certain monastic ways of knowing, such as those of Sumpa Khenpo, helped localize secularist ideologies and abstracted models of historical-materialist development.

If post-imperial social imaginaries were tied inextricably to scientific ways of knowing in Inner Asia, these would remain foreign without claiming some continuity with imperial-era knowledge practices. Whether lauding modernist discontents or condemning exploitative feudalists, Soviet and Mongolian scholars of the socialist period used strategic memories of the imperium to provide historical context and authority to the secular reorganization of Mongolia. As progressive leaders adopted versions of that desire-saturated idea of ‘modernity’ then in global circulation through Asia’s heartland, they also adopted a version of what Webb Keane has called its moral narrative. That is, they adopted notions that progress is not only a matter of governance, technological mastery, economic organization or scientific knowledge. It is, more fundamentally, a story of human emancipation and self-mastery (Keane 2011). Keane argues that the modernist imagined community, in which versions of secularism are generally found, is usually positioned against a pre-modern past of illegitimate
rulers, rigid traditions and unreal fetishes. With these socialist-era memories of ways of knowing the historical Gésar staged from the otherwise illegitimate imperial period and the devalued (and purged) Buddhist monastery, we see a useful nuance to Keane’s model. In the Inner Asian case examined above, the pre-modern Buddhist tradition was not simply effaced in the story of post-imperial secular modernity, even if in practice the continuity of its institutions had been so violently severed. Rather, certain knowledge practices from the imperial-era monastery not only presaged, but gave form to, a local iteration of the modernist imagined community founded in ‘rational’ ways of knowing Inner Asian history.

Revolutionary and post-revolutionary intellectuals thus constructed a ‘traditional science’ as one of the only, if not the only, salvageable elements from the Tibetan and Mongolian Buddhist monastery (that institution tied so inextricably to regimes of truth during the Qing). State rhetoric throughout the seventy years of socialism in Mongolia is often explicit about this. For example, the periodization of the birth of Mongolian modernism itself was seen to be rooted in the attainment of “the knowledge of scientific materialism for the Mongolian ‘ard masses’” [i.e. the nomadic-pastoralists], where “science developed and spread on the firm basis of earlier tradition the new concepts of the People’s Revolution and Marxist-Leninist theory,” and “developed having conquered and surmounted feudalist and capitalist ideologies as well as reactionary religious doctrine” (Brown, Onon, and Shirendev 1976: 382). Through the lens of scholarly inquiries into pre-revolutionary ways of knowing Gésar, modernist values tied to scientific knowledge were promoted and a secularist periodization of the imperial-socialist transition were more deeply inscribed.

Strategic Soviet-era memories of Sumpa Khenpo’s Gésar analysis provide just one example of strategically privileging certain examples of pre-revolutionary Buddhist monastic ways of knowing in the post-revolutionary period. Even so, it suggests that securing secularist certainties in post-imperial Inner Asia required strategic emphasis on pre-modern religious genealogies of modernist, rational knowledge and knowledge practices. The historicity of Gésar and of monastic ways of discerning that historical identity became, in the memories of Soviet-era scholars, a shared space of value defined by ‘scientific knowing’ (whether ‘traditional’ or ‘modern’). Ways of knowing Gésar from the imperial-era Buddhist monastery were thus generative of changing regimes of authority, styles of sovereignty, and privileged ways of knowing the world in the formation of the world’s second socialist nation.

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Endnotes

1. This article uses the Tibetan and Himalayan Library (THL)’s Tibetan transcription system and the ‘simplified Mongolian transcription system’ developed by Christopher Atwood.

2. For the sake of simplicity, I refer to the Mongolian socialist party throughout this paper as the MPRP. However, I should note that between 1921 and 1924 it was known simply as the Mongolian People’s Party (Mon. Mongol ardîn nam).

3. On a tangential note related to the broader theme of this special issue of HIMALAYA, in Tibetan regions under very different sociopolitical circumstances during the last decades of the Republican era (1930s and 1940s), a newly inaugurated Chinese tradition of Frontier Studies adopted similar knowledge practices to construct Tibetan Gésar traditions as minority history, literature and folk tradition. Clarifying the historicity of Gésar and the Gésar epic in relation to Han ethnic history and culture was for those Republican-era Chinese scholars an attempt to resolve the ‘core problem’ of ‘opening up the frontier and consolidating the [Chinese] state’ (Lianrong 2001: 322). The popularity of Gésar Studies in the People’s Republic of China to the present reveals the extent to which this opening and consolidation remains an unfinished project in the PRC.

4. While it is true that both Guandi and King Gésar were synthesized into centralizing state rituals and historical-political narratives during the late Qing, it is also true that both figures were simultaneously the object of decentralizing local ritual and historical traditions across
Tibet and Mongolia. These latter traditions were aimed at bolstering local sovereignty against Qing and (later) Han dominance. For a fascinating study of one such Guandi tradition at Labrang monastery (and in Amdo more widely) along the Sino-Tibetan-Mongol-Muslim borderlands, see Nietupski 2015.

5. In response, it is said that the assembled monks declared Ungern-Sternburg a manifestation of Gésar, “whom no Red Russian bullet nor Black Chinese bullet could harm” (Veit 2002: 304; Rintchen 1958: 10).

6. Readers interested in the larger political and cultural context of this exchange, and of the fascinating careers of Sumpa Khenpo and the Sixth Panchen Lama, should consult FitzHerbert 2015.

7. There are two traditions of enumerating the Panchen Lamas, since the Fifth Dalai Lama conferred the title posthumously upon the first three incarnations. For that reason, Lozang Chökyi Gyeltsen (Tib. Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan 1570-1662), the first to bear the title in his life, is considered to be both the first and the fourth Panchen Lama. I refer to Sumpa Khenpo’s correspondent as the Sixth Panchen Lama, though in discussing these letters other scholars refer to him as the third (de Jong 1967: 214).


12. For example, to those scholars investigating the form and content of the pre-modern and modern in Inner Asia. See Kapstein 2011; Gyatso 2011; Yongdan 2011; Tuttle 2011; Erdenibayar 2007.

13. The Dégé Kingdom of centuries past registers today as Dégé County in Garzé Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province, PRC.

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