

Research Review on the Music of the Epic "Gesar"

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Abstract: The research on the epic "Gesar" has yielded remarkable results and has garnered attention both domestically and internationally. From ancient times to the present, this epic has been passed down orally and through manuscripts among the people. The art of reciting the epic "Gesar" intertwines music and language, carrying the expression of musical language through the tradition of storytelling. It utilizes various forms of recitation and multiple tunes, enriching the art of epic storytelling.

1. Review of Foreign Research on the Music of "Gesar"

The earliest foreign scholar to study the music of "Gesar" was Vinnie Amin Bergman, who published "The Saga of King Gesar" in 1864. Although the work is introductory, it marks the beginning of the study of "Gesar" music. A systematic professional interpretation of "Gesar" music was provided in 1977 by the French Tibetologist Mme. M. Elfie from the Institute of Historical Languages at the University of Paris[1]. Her book is the first foreign work dedicated to the study of "Gesar" music. Divided into two volumes, its third chapter studies "tunes", and the book has pioneering insights into the musical studies of "Gesar". As a translated work, some textual expressions are not precise, and the music analysis fails to convey the author's original arguments. However, the path of studying different characters' lyrics is worth learning from. The study on tunes is extensively described, but it fails to show the specific correspondence between different characters and tunes. Nevertheless, this book remains the only foreign monograph on "Gesar" music research.

2. Overview of Domestic Research on Gesar Epic Music

Researchers of Gesar in China have been deeply involved in the study of the epic and related content since 1950 (the research status summarized in this article goes up to December 2022, including all published journals and works on "Gesar" epic music). They have made significant contributions in searching, documenting, and publishing, established a specialized "Gesar" working group, and formed dedicated research societies and institutions. Various manuscripts and woodblock books have been collected and published. Various audio and video texts have been gathered, and modern scientific technology has been used to record and preserve the development of the "Gesar" epic.

During the 1950s and 1960s, domestic research on "Gesar" epic music, though existent, was more from a literary perspective, focusing on describing and critiquing lyrics. Comprehensive understanding and objective analysis of "Gesar" music began in the 1980s, with research flourishing thereafter. In recording music tunes, professional disciplinary backgrounds were utilized to analyze "Gesar" music, not only preserving the musical tunes of the oral text but also enhancing its artistic value and filling the gap in "Gesar" epic music research.

2.1. The 1980s (1980-1989)

Entering the 1980s, scholars Tashi Dajie, Huang Yinsan, and Guan Quejie conducted more specialized research on "Gesar" music. In 1987, Qinghai musician Tashi Dajie's paper filled a gap in domestic music research, noting that "Gesar" narrative tunes are numerous, stylistically diverse, and richly and vividly formed, with melodies that are varied and delicate, possessing high artistic and research value[2]. He categorized the narrative tunes into: character-specific tunes, general character

tunes, and character-specific suites. His classification of character singing tunes was pioneering. In another article in 1988[3], he discussed various connections between "Gesar" tunes and local folk songs, noting that narrative tunes would evolve into higher musical forms as cultural arts developed. Huang Yinsan's 1988 paper[4] discussed "Gesar" in terms of performance style, tune, pitch, mode, beat, and form, providing detailed musical analysis. In 1989, Guan Quejie[5] discussed the characteristics of narrative artists, marking the first domestic paper to study narrative artists, with valuable data on the many tune names sung by artists, providing reference material for future research on "Gesar" music tune names.

Research on "Gesar" music in the 1980s adopted a professional perspective, with only a few documents analyzing the basic techniques and artistic forms of "Gesar" music, but the study of the music itself was quite detailed, opening up the perspective of domestic "Gesar" music research.

2.2. The 1990s (1990-1999)

After the 1990s, the number of researchers increased during this decade, and the scope of their studies expanded. There was further development in the field of music research, and the research conducted during this period laid the foundation for later studies on "Gesar" music. The research outcomes were mainly divided into four aspects: 1. Studies on the history and development of "Gesar" music; 2. Research on the characteristics of the music; 3. Studies on "Gesar" drama (focusing on the music within the dramas); 4. Comparative studies of "Gesar" music.

In August 1991, the Second International Gesar Conference was held, which placed significant emphasis on artistic research and expanded the content of the studies. Tashi Dajie, at the conference, discussed the status, influence, and contributions of music within the epic, stating: "The earliest 'Gesar' was not written or spoken, but sung. There is no other literary work in the world that is as inseparably intertwined with music as 'Gesar'[6]." The centuries-old music of "Gesar," which had not received much attention domestically, saw a significant leap forward in its study at this conference[7].

2.2.1. Studies on the History and Formation of "Gesar" Music

In the 1990s, studies on the characteristics of epic music included scholars such as Ma Chengfu, Tashi Dajie, Lu Guowen, Wang Jianming, Tan Shijie, and He Lin. In 1991, Bian Duo[8] discussed in his article the connections and evolutions between "Gesar" music and the folk Gurulu of the Tibetan people, marking the first domestic article to study the historical evolution of "Gesar" music. Every art form evolves over time and through cultural accumulation; "Gesar" music, as a folk art, emerged from the broad soil of the populace, and studying its historical evolution marks a pioneering exploration into the development of "Gesar" music. In 1997, Ma Chengfu argued in his article that the concept of 'melodic modes' does not exist in "Gesar", stating: "It is actually an adjective describing the performer's facial expressions and vocal embellishments[9]," a view with which the author strongly agrees, providing a critical perspective on the use of melodic modes in epic music. By 1999, based on his earlier works[10], Ma Chengfu discussed how "Gesar" music underwent mutations during its transmission and evolution due to the inability to record tunes. These three scholars laid the groundwork for understanding the origins and evolution of "Gesar" music, offering important insights into the emergence and development of epic music.

2.2.2. Research on the Characteristics of Music

In the 1990s, research on the characteristics of epic music included scholars such as Ma Chengfu, Tashi Dajie, Lu Guowen, Wang Jianming, Tan Shijie, and He Lin. In 1990, Ma Chengfu analyzed "Gesar" singing styles in his article[11], arguing that the singing does not involve fixed melodic modes, and clarified some disputed views in the academic community. In 1993, Tashi Dajie provided a detailed analysis of the extensive system of tune names in "Gesar" music in his article[12], emphasizing its value and practicality. In 1994, Lu Guowen's article[13] highlighted the aesthetic and entertainment functions of "Gesar" music, marking the first domestic article to address the social functions of "Gesar" narrative music. In 1995, Wang Jianming and Li Yang reviewed Elfie's song studies, providing a comprehensive critique; the first volume was a translation and commentary on the 'King of Horse Racing' segment, and the second volume was a theoretical study; they conducted

an in-depth analysis of the song tunes from the 'King of Horse Racing' segment and suggested that the so-called character-specific tunes also have trends of interchangeability with general tunes[14]. This view challenged Tashi Dajie's notion of "specific tunes for specific characters," offering new directions for subsequent tune research. In 1996, Tashi Dajie proposed the multi-faceted composition of contemporary epic music in his article[15], reflecting the process of integration as epic music encountered and absorbed various cultural influences. In 1996, Tan Shijie compared Tibetan folk songs with the meters and themes of "Gesar" in his article[16], noting that "Gesar" absorbed characteristics of Tibetan folk songs. Folk songs, being the earliest musical genre, form the foundation of ethnic folk music; "Gesar" music, as traditional music, also bears clear traces of folk genres. During field investigations in places like Golog and Maqu, the author discovered that some tunes of "

Gesar" music were adapted from local folk songs, showing a close kinship between the epic and local folk songs. In 1998, He Lin discussed the structural features of "Gesar" narrative music in terms of melodic modes, narrative structures, musical characteristics, narrative fillers, and performance styles in his article[17], with detailed descriptions of the musical characteristics. However, the article misused the term 'concept,' as the eighteen major narratives each correspond not to a 'melodic mode' but to a 'tune name.' During this decade, several scholars further advanced the study of "Gesar" music characteristics based on the foundation laid in the 1980s, with Tashi Dajie continuously emphasizing the importance and value of music.

2.2.3. Comparative Studies of "Gesar" Music

In 1995, Tashi Dajie conducted a comparative analysis of the systems and musical forms of the Tibetan and Mongolian "Gesar" traditions in his article[18], noting that Tibetan and Mongolian "Gesar" music have each formed their own independent musical systems. This was a pioneering work in the comparative study of epic music in China, exploring epic music from different perspectives and enriching the viewpoint on "Gesar" music.

2.2.4. Studies on "Gesar" Drama (Musical Interpretation in Drama Studies)

The musical interpretation in "Gesar" dramas was explored by scholars Guo Jinyuan and Danqu. In 1991, Guo Jinyuan analyzed the characteristics of Tibetan opera music in "Gesar" in his article[19], providing important material for early understanding of the musical tunes in "Gesar" Tibetan opera. In 1999, Danqu, although only briefly discussing the music in "Gesar" dramas in his article[20], highlighted the uniqueness of its music, which bears characteristics of folk songs and dances.

Over this decade, research on "Gesar" music mainly focused on the composition, historical evolution, multi-faceted structures, musical techniques, musical characteristics, dramatic music, comparative music studies, and performance forms. These analyses are fundamental in music studies, addressing directly perceivable musical features and remaining on the basic level of musical research. However, they laid the foundation for the development of epic music and prepared the ground for subsequent advancements. This research has accumulated considerable data for future studies of "Gesar" music and provided valuable clues.

2.3. The First Decade of the 21st Century (2000-2009)

In the first decade of the 21st century, the "Gesar" epic was inscribed as a UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage. The research outcomes were particularly notable; the number of domestic and international scholars and experts attending conferences increased, with numerous papers published, and the research directions delved deeper into aspects such as the development, forms, and intrinsic meanings of the music. The Chinese Academy of Social Sciences established an "Oral Traditions Field Research Base" for the study and preservation of the "Gesar" epic, while scholars in music research built on previous foundations, adopting multidisciplinary theories and methods from various academic perspectives to analyze and interpret "Gesar" music using oral poetics theories and methodologies. This period was a developmental phase for epic music research, with further advancements in the field and more in-depth studies on various aspects of "Gesar" music. The decade's achievements can be summarized into four main areas: 1. Research on inter-ethnic cultural exchanges; 2. Studies on singing styles; 3. Research on musical characteristics; 4. Studies on "Gesar"

drama (interpretation of music in drama).

2.3.1. Research on Inter-Ethnic Cultural Exchanges

In 2002, at the Fifth International "Gesar" Conference, Tashi Dajie's article[21] first presented to the world the "Gesar" music of the Tu ethnic group, composed of multi-ethnic tunes, providing valuable data for inter-ethnic cultural exchanges and collective development.

2.3.2. Studies on Singing Styles

Research on singing styles was conducted by scholars Ma Chengfu and Tsangyang Gyatso. In 2002, Ma Chengfu presented numerous viewpoints based on the formation of singing styles in his article [22], most notably challenging the appropriateness of labeling "Gesar" music as fixed melodic modes, arguing that singing styles do not meet the conditions to be considered such, providing an important argument against previous perceptions of melodic modes. Tsangyang Gyatso's research focused on singing styles, and in 2002, he emphasized in his article[23] that researchers, faced with uncertain musical notations, need a correct and broad understanding of "Gesar" music from theory to field. In 2004, Tsangyang Gyatso discussed "Gesar" narrative singing in another article[24], stating: "The names hint at the content of the performance," suggesting that "Gesar" has borrowed from folk songs and incorporated many artistic techniques to enhance its musicality. In 2005, Tsangyang Gyatso explained in his article[25] that epic music is established through narrative singing and the musical imagery built on imaginative thinking; focusing on the artists' emotional control and the embellishments in singing. By 2005, in his master's thesis[26], he provided a detailed discussion on the classification and characteristics of singing styles. Tsangyang Gyatso continuously explored the realm of singing styles, contributing significantly to the study of "Gesar" music.

2.3.3. Research on Musical Characteristics

In terms of research on musical characteristics, scholars Zhang Chunmei, Wang Li, and Wang Shi were prominent. In 2000, Zhang Chunmei simply discussed the tunes, rhythms, and structural forms of music in her article[27]. In 2005, Zhang Chunmei analyzed the recitative characteristics of narrative music from five aspects—form, mode, melody, scale, and rhythm—in her article[28]. In 2007, Wang Shi discussed the standardized transmission of "Gesar" tunes, focusing on the structures of lyrics, formulas of tunes, and their variability in his article[29]. Also in 2007, Zhang Chunmei analyzed "Gesar" music forms through the features of musical phrases, sections, repetition, and non-repetitiveness in her article[30]. During this period, the musical characteristics of "Gesar" were mainly analyzed and summarized by scholar Zhang Chunmei, who further refined the analysis of tunes on the basis of basic musical analysis, sharing many similarities with the features analyzed by Wang Shi, though some analyses were repetitive and redundant, such as the classification of tunes, a concept already proposed by Tashi Dajie as early as 1987, and later adopted by Wang Shi and Zhang Chunmei.

2.3.4. Studies on "Gesar" Drama (Interpretation of Music in Drama)

The interpretation of music in "Gesar" dramas was solely undertaken by scholar Cao Yali. In her 2003 article, she introduced Tibetan "Gesar" opera, providing only a brief explanation of the music. The author believes that "the singing styles of 'Gesar' music are broadly divided into Gesar tunes, chanting tunes, Dao songs, and folk songs[31]." In 2007, Cao Yali discussed in her article how Tibetan "Gesar" opera transitioned from narrative singing to a representational form, offering a model for reference and emulation[32]. Building on the research of Tsangyang Gyatso, she further classified the musical singing styles into different tunes.

2.4. 2010 to Present (2010-2022)

With the progression of time, research on "Gesar" music after 2010 entered a period of diversified, interdisciplinary, and multi-dimensional development. "Gesar" music research expanded into fields such as anthropology, folklore, sociology, performance theory, oral poetics, and ethnopoetics, adopting a multidimensional approach. Scholars continued to build on previous academic

achievements and theories while integrating new theoretical frameworks. "Gesar" music, embodying local musical cultural knowledge, the musical wisdom of folk artists, and ideas contained within traditional Chinese narrative music forms, exhibits a rich and interdisciplinary research trend. An increasing number of journals and publishers have featured papers, monographs, and collections of tunes on "Gesar" music, marking a peak period for its study. The research achievements over these years can be broadly categorized into: 1. Studies on musical characteristics; 2. Comparative studies; 3. Interdisciplinary research (including studies on music in drama, performance studies, sociological studies, anthropological studies, etc.); 4. Studies on artists; 5. Studies on singing styles; 6. Compilation of musical scores and audio-visual materials.

2.4.1. Studies on Musical Characteristics

Post-2010, research on the characteristics of "Gesar" music has covered a wide range. Scholars such as Guo Xiaohong, Yao Hui, Tan Wenqi, Tashi Dajie, Zheng Longyin, and Juega have been involved. In 2014, Guo Xiaohong [33] analyzed the origins of primitive religions and epic singing. In 2016, Yao Hui, while reviewing the development of melodic modes, argued that one should not solely rely on the characteristics or a single aspect of melodic modes to determine whether the music of the epic belongs to the Han ethnic group[34]. I strongly agree with scholar Yao Hui's view, as the concept of melodic modes has been consistently misinterpreted and misused in "Gesar" music research. Tan Wenqi discussed how Danzeng Zhihua's "Gesar" singing originates from ancient folk music, stating that epic music is complex and variable, and provided a comprehensive interpretation and analysis of ten tunes[35]. His discussion on singing structure and style aligns with Huang Yinsan's views. In 2016, Su Yu and Chen Chen[36] discussed the variability of tune singing. In 2018, Tashi Dajie[37] elaborated on the structure, system, tunes, performance, style, and artists in ten aspects. In the same year, Zheng Longyin[38] focused on the Naqu singing section as a case study, analyzing the diversity of the music from the aspects of structure, techniques, and style. In 2020, Juega discussed the types, names, structures, and styles of songs, reviewing the perspectives of various scholars on each type, and proposed the concept of "Gesar" story songs[39], providing a detailed discussion on the style of story songs, especially highlighting terminological issues in the study of "Gesar" songs, which provided valuable insights for my research. In 2020, Yao Hui[40] further analyzed the names of "Gesar" tunes based on melodic modes. Different scholars have conducted in-depth studies on the origins, melodic modes, character music, singing, musical systems, character singing sections, and musical types, broadening the scope of research.

2.4.2. Comparative Studies

Comparative studies in music were solely conducted by Li Jin, who in 2011 compared the similarities and differences between Makame and "Gesar." Both share similarities in their performance methods, narrative structures, and literary significance [41]. However, differences are interpreted based on the distinct ethnic characteristics of the respective ethnic groups and the differing values brought about by their religious views. While comparative studies in the 1990s focused on the comparison of music from different ethnic groups with a common origin but diverse flows, the 21st-century comparative studies expanded to include comparisons with narrative art forms from different countries, broadening the perspective of epic music comparative research.

2.4.3. Interdisciplinary Research

Interdisciplinary research represents an expansion in the field of "Gesar" music studies, involving scholars such as Luo Cheng, Cao Yali, Guo Xiaohong, and Yao Hui. In 2010, Luo Cheng[42] utilized sociological methods to discuss the origins and development, structure, and functions of "Gesar" music, as well as its connections with relevant carriers, advocating for urgent preservation and organization of "Gesar" music. Cao Yali has discussed "Gesar" music from various perspectives within the field of "Gesar" drama. In 2012, Cao Yali[43] explored the relationship between drama and rituals from the perspective of drama genesis. In another article[44], she discussed the forms of "Gesar" voice and poetry from an anthropological perspective. In 2014, she argued from a performance perspective that "Gesar" epic music continues the trinity of poetry, music, and dance as

primal arts[45]. That same year, in another article[46], she used the poetics of oral narrative to discuss "Gesar" singing. In 2014, Guo Xiaohong[47] applied methods from music anthropology and ethnography to study "Gesar" music in the Yushu region, thus advocating for the preservation of the epic's heritage. In 2021, Yao Hui[48] combined folk arts and ethnomusicology under oral poetics theory to explore interdisciplinary music research in Chinese epics. Her book is one of the more specialized domestic works discussing "Gesar" music, comparing Tibetan and Mongolian "Gesar" music to study the paradigms of epic music. Interdisciplinary research on "Gesar" music in the 21st century transcends past categorical music research approaches, achieving integrative studies of epic music. Interdisciplinary methods also reflect the new paradigms of modern "Gesar" music exploration.

2.4.4. Studies on Artists

In 2012, Guo Xiaohong analyzed the psychological structure of narrative music of 16 artists from Yushu, suggesting that "music can evoke unconscious illusions in people, with musical memory of pitch, melody, and rhythm also proving that artists visualize the narrative content and scenes during performance [49]." In 2013, Li Tiancai and Wang Juntao discussed the current state of domestic research on epic narrative art[50], providing constructive suggestions on the challenges faced by "Gesar" singing. In 2015, Yao Hui revealed the process and methods of oral creation in epic music through interviews with a divinely inspired Tibetan artist[51], reflecting the unique musical thinking of divinely inspired artists. In 2016, Guo Jianxun summarized firsthand data on "Gesar" artists from nearly a decade of field research on artists (Ani). In 2017, Jia Yangqizhen primarily introduced the early learning experiences of artist Dijiong Baji[52]. In 2017, Yang Enhong's work, based on 30 years of systematic gathering, organizing, and categorizing of folk artists, provided detailed discussions on the narrative content and form, the social background of narrative artists, and the relationship between oral narratives and written texts[53]. The interviews with the older generation of artists, who have since passed away, make this field data particularly valuable.

2.4.5. Studies on Singing Styles

In 2014, Guo Xiaohong believed that the interjections and tunes in Bon music laid the foundation for the narrative art of "Gesar"[54]. That same year, she conducted a case study on the Yushu narrative artist Danmajiang Yongcicheng. In 2017, Guo Xiaohong discussed how "Gesar" chanting tunes in monasteries have borrowed from and absorbed folk "Gesar" singing styles[55]. This period of research on singing styles involves Guo Xiaohong building on the work of Tsangyang Gyatso (Li Xiaoling), providing specific interpretations of variations in singing styles and individual cases.

2.4.6. Compilation of Musical Scores and Audio-Visual Materials from Field Collections

Through long-term attention and observation of "Gesar" artists in extensive pastoral areas, starting in 2010, scholars such as Bian Duo and Juega initiated fieldwork to collect and record local "Gesar" music. In 2012, Bian Duo documented 108 unique "Gesar" tunes and lyrics, recorded them on CDs, and published a work[56]; in 2013, organized by the Tibet Autonomous Region Library with recording, and Tibet University's Juega and students handling the notation and review, 360 unique character singing sections performed by Naqu intangible heritage bearers were collected, recorded on CDs, and published in the work "The Song of the Divine - 360 Exquisite Gesar Music Singing Styles"[57]; these two publications not only recorded the musical scores but also laid the foundation for further protection and study of "Gesar" music. In 2014, Dr. Ban Jue, an anthropology expert from the Tibet Academy of Social Sciences, and experts and scholars from the Tibet University College of Arts, such as Juega, recorded "Gesar Epic Digital Resources—Northern Tibet Section"[58]. This audio-visual material started with national-level and intangible heritage artists from Naqu, using digital means to preserve the "Gesar" epic passed down in Northern Tibet Naqu. In 2016, Danma Jiang Yongcicheng recorded ten unique tunes [59]; in 2019, Sitaduoji recorded thirteen unique tunes[60]; these recordings were all part of the rescue and preservation of epic music.

To facilitate later research, a dynamic chart of the past fifty years of study was created, as shown in Figure 1.

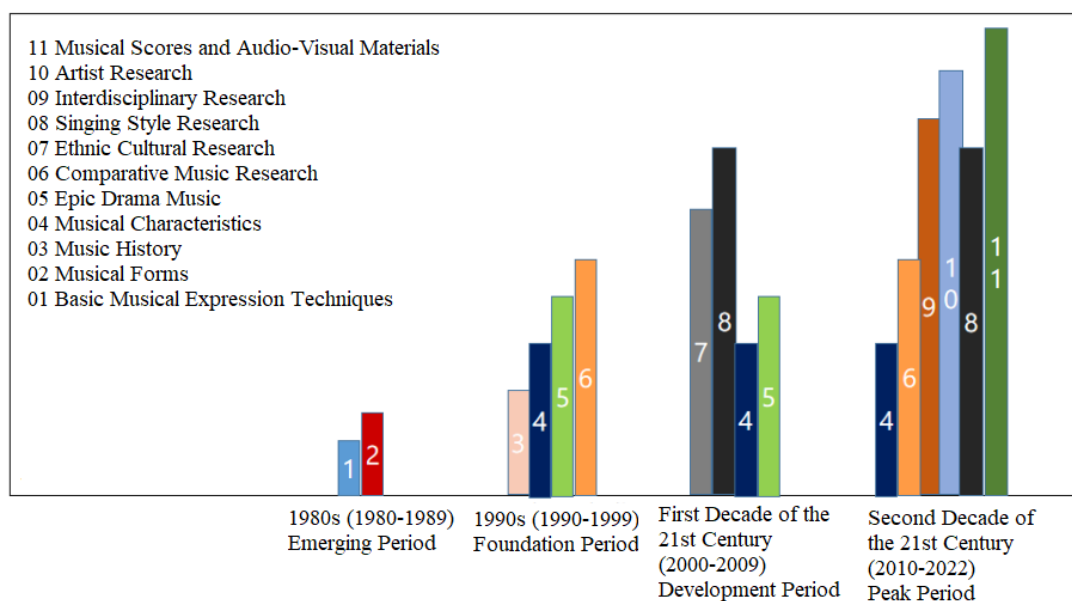


Figure 1: Dynamic Graph of Early Research (Nearly Fifty Years)

3. Conclusion

After 60 years of effort, research on "Gesar" music, initiated by the pioneering work of the first-generation scholar Tashi Dajie and deeply pursued, has been diligently advanced by subsequent generations of scholars. This research has expanded new domains in the study of Chinese "Gesar" epic music. Their findings have attracted the attention of both domestic and international scholars, fostering a shift in research perspectives within the field and increasing its specialization. Whether in terms of musical characteristics, singing styles, studies on artists, or interdisciplinary research, the scope has broadened, providing a comprehensive and detailed analysis of "Gesar" music from an ever-expanding viewpoint.

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