

The Russian Academic Research on Geser: Contributions of Representative Scholars in the Second half of the 20th Century

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Abstract. This study focuses on the research of Russian scholars in the second half of the 20th century on Geser epic. It mainly introduced the achievements of Geser research in terms of textual interpretation, version verification and the exploration of cultural connotations by Ts. Damdinsuren, S. Yu. Neklyudov, and A. I. Ulanov. Through a deep analysis of relevant literature, this study reveals the scholars' unique perspectives and approaches in Geser studies, which will deepen and expand the study on the Geser epic.

Keywords: the Second Half of the 20th Century; Russian Scholars; Geser Epic; Version; Origin and Development.

1. Introduction

The epic Geser was originated in the early 11th century in northeastern Tibet. With its grand narrative and masterful artistic techniques, it recounts the heroic exploits of Geser in his life. Geser is clearly distinguished by its cross-ethnic and transnational development. In China, it is widely popular in regions of Tibet, Inner Mongolia, Qinghai, Gansu, and Sichuan, where the ethnic people such as Tibetan, Mongol, and Tu people live. Internationally, it has mainly spread to over 30 countries, including Mongolia, Japan, and Russia. There are two primary transmission forms: oral performances, predominantly in verse and handwritten manuscripts, largely in prose. As an important part of traditional culture of Tibetan, Mongol, Buryat, Tuvan, Kalmyk, and many other oriental nations, the Geser epic is not only a common cultural wealth of all ethnic groups in China, but also a vital part of the world's human art treasure house. Studying the Geser epic offers a profound insight into the culture, philosophy, and religion of Eastern people.

In 1716, the Mongolian-language wood block version of Geser was published in Beijing. Since then, the Geser epic has world widely attracted great attention by oriental scholars. The Russian scholar P. S. Pallas is regarded as the first person of Geser study in abroad. In 1772, Pallas traveled through Eastern Siberia to the border city of Maimach (modern-day Kyakhta) in Mongolia, where he encountered a temple of Geser. During his journey, Pallas collected lots of evidence about temples consecrating Geser and oral legends about the folk hero. From the year 1772 to 1773, Pallas published his travel records [1] after his expedition, in which, he firstly mentioned the existence of textual versions of the Geser epic and described his visits to Geser temples in Mongolia. From the second half of the 18th century, Russian scholars began to study the epic based on the Beijing woodblock version of Geser in Mongolian.

2. Research Achievements of Russian Scholars on Geser in the Second Half of the 20th Century

The Russian scientific community has a long-standing history of research on the epic Geser. In the second half of the 20th century, after great effort by Soviet and Russian scholars, Russia has made significant progress in the study of the Geser epic. Particularly the achievements by Oriental scholars Ts. Damdinsuren, S. Yu. Neklyudov, and A. I. Ulanov are noticeable. Their studies advanced the understanding of the origins, formation, and dissemination of the Geser epic in Russian academic fields during this period. This article will focus on the three scholars and their related research achievements..

2.1 Ts. Damdinsuren and the Study of the Geser version

Ts. Damdinsuren is a famous Mongolian historian, writer, poet, and linguist. In 1930s, Damdinsuren studied and worked in the Soviet Union. In 1950, he defended his doctoral dissertation on Geser in Leningrad. He published his monograph "The Historical Roots of Geser" in Russian in 1957. In which, the author described the geographical distribution of this heroic epic as follows: "This grand poem extends from the tropical Ganges River to the cold Amur, from the sunny Huang He to the dusky Lena." [2].

In his work, Ts. Damdinsuren reviewed the research findings of worldwide scholars regarding the origin of the protagonist Geser's identity. This included the theory proposed by the German-Russian scholar Julius Klaproth that Geser was related to Guan Yu, the British scholar Robert Shaw's assertion that Geser was a king of Rome and Istanbul, and the "Genghis Khan" theory put forward by the renowned Soviet Orientalist S. A. Kozin. In his research, Damdinsuren refuted all the perspectives on the origin of the epic's protagonist and presented his own view: he argued that Geser was a ruler named Gusiluo, who lived in the 11th century and governed the Tibetan regime in northeastern Tibet. Although this viewpoint was original, it remained controversy among some Soviet and foreign researchers [3].

Regarding the relationship between the Mongolian and Tibetan versions of Geser, Ts. Damdinsuren argued that the Mongolian version of Geser has borrowed the plots from two chapters of the Tibetan version, and independently created and developed the epic's storyline based on that. The author noted: "...Geser was originally a written work, which later became widely popular through oral transmission and was enriched during its dissemination by the folklore of various ethnic groups" [2]. According to this developmental characteristic, the epic gradually formed many versions as it spread among the ethnic groups of Central and East Asia.

After reviewing a vast array of historical and literary materials related to the creation and origins of heroic epics, Ts. Damdinsuren conducted a detailed study of several versions of Geser (including Mongolian, Buryat, and Tibetan versions) and provided objective and reasonable comments for each version. His study transcended the superficial understanding of the Geser epic in earlier period, and has entered a phase of summative, pioneering, and forward-looking discipline construction. This work remains one of the most important scholarly contributions to the study of Geser to this day.

2.2 S. Yu. Neklyudov and the Study of the Origin and Development of Geser

Sergei Yuryevich Neklyudov is a Soviet and Russian scientist, Mongolist, linguist and folklorist. In 1984, he published the scientific research work "Mongolian People's Heroic Epic: Oral and Literary Traditions" [4]. This monograph is dedicated to the study of epic works in the literary and folk traditions of the Mongolian people.

In his scientific work, S. Yu. Neklyudov examined a vast array of oral and written versions of Buryat and Mongolian epics, summarized and analyzed the research experiences of Russian, Soviet, and Mongolian scholars on the Geser epic. His scientific achievements provided detailed information for the study of verbal art in Central Asian heroic epics, it also revealed the author's profound understanding of Eastern Mongolian epic traditions as well. In his work, Neklyudov analyzed the changes of the Geser epic, explored the origin and evolution of heroic epics, focused on the general characteristics of the Mongolian version of Geser narratives, and demonstrated the influence of written manuscripts and woodblock print formats on the formation of the Mongolian version of the epic. This is a valuable achievement in the study of literary epics.

S. Yu. Neklyudov studied the Mongolian epic Geser from the perspective of historical development patterns and poetics. In his monograph "Mongolian People's Heroic Epic", he analyzed the historical changes of the Geser epic, investigated the origin and evolution of heroic epics, identified the general characteristics of the Mongolian version of Geser, and discussed the influence of written manuscripts and woodblock-printed forms on the formation of the Mongolian epic. This is a valuable contribution to the study of literary epics. About the time of the Mongolian

version of Geser epic, he noted: "...its key points initially took shape in the Tibetan region of northwestern China... and its formation spanned over five hundred years" (4, p. 220). About the Tibetan language origin of the Mongolian Geser epic, Neklyudov asserted: "...the Geser epic spread from Tibet to Mongolia, and then from Mongolia to Buryatia... this viewpoint is now self-evident to be discussed" [4].

S. Yu. Neklyudov also conducted research on the oral and written traditions of Geser, which not only encompassed textual studies of the epic but also included a deep exploration of its cultural value and artistic achievements. His scholarly contributions have had a significant impact on the international academic community.

2.3 A. I. Ulanov and the Study of the Buryat Geser

A. I. Ulanov, a former famous Soviet folklorist, actively engaged in collecting and studying materials of the Geser heroic epic, published a series of articles and monographs dedicated to the study of the Buryat Geser. "Abai-Geser" occupied a significant position in Ulanov's research field. He conducted comparative studies of the epic's versions and variants and became the first to translate a variant of "Abai-Geser" into Russian. This version was completed based on the principle of proper scientific translation, which is highly praised by scholars since the 1940s–1950s. This bilingual version was very unusual in the Soviet Union during the 1960s. The bilingual version of the "Abai-Geser" epic (Ulan-Ude, 1960, recorded by I.N. Madason from P. Petrov) stands as a major contribution to his efforts in researching and publishing the Buryat heroic epic Geser.

A. I. Ulanov primarily focused on the formation and development of Buryat folklore oral works. During his research on the historical development and theoretical aspects of Buryat oral works, he proposed his original ideas and concepts upon the existing ideas by other scholars. He categorized Buryat oral works into three main series: the Ekhirit-Bulagat Geser, the Ungin Geser, and the Khorin Geser. He dedicated his work to the study of the origin, typology, ideology and artistic characteristics of Buryat folk epics, and published a series of significant research articles and monographs, including *The Buryat <Geser> and Its Central Ideological Themes* [5], *Features of the Buryat Heroic Epic* [6], *The Buryat Heroic Epic* [7], *Buryat Uligers* [8], *Ancient Buryat Folklores* [9], and *Selected Works: Articles and Poems* [10]. Among which, in "Features of the Buryat Heroic Epic", he elaborated and defended the characteristics of people of the Geser epic: "...the Buryat heroic epic is a genuine, folkloric, and original creation that celebrates the struggles of heroes against invaders, monsters, and natural forces" [6, p. 101]. It is a true folk masterpiece which reflects the spiritual culture, aspirations, and psychology of the Buryat people. In "The Buryat Heroic Epic", Ulanov researched and analyzed the foundation of Buryat epic formation from the perspectives of the ethnic history, culture, and economic traditions of the Buryat people, which used the epic Geser as one of the key sources for his research.

A. I. Ulanov has made significant contributions to the translation, research, and publication of oral folklore, particularly in his translation of the Buryat "Abai-Geser". His research achievements have earned recognition from Geser researchers across Russia and worldwide.

3. Summary

In the second half of 20th century, scholars such as Ts. Damdinsuren, Neklyudov, and A. I. Ulanov have achieved summative, ground breaking and forward-looking advancements in the study of the Geser epic, particularly in its origins, versions, variants, and dissemination. In addition, during the same period, lots of Soviet and Russian scholars have made notable achievements in the study of the Geser heroic epic, including M. P. Khomonov [11, 12], N. O. Sharakshinova [13], M. P. Khangalov [14], and B. M. Narmayev [15, 16]. These research achievements reflected a deeper understanding on Geser by Soviet and Russian scholars and broadened the academic perspective on the study of epic works.

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