“We” and “They”: On Gesar Culture and Ethnic Boundaries of Rebgong Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi

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The Gesar Epic is not only a literary work and cultural icon of the Tibetan people but a symbol of maintaining ethnic boundaries. In particular, in the community mixed with both Hor and Tibetan residents, the cultural memory of Gesar is considered as one of the greatest distinguishing factors to tell the Self Group from the Other-Group. Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi (referring to the four villages), a marginal group in Tibetan-inhabited area of Rebgong, is called Hor or DorDo by local Tibetans. When it comes to ethnic identification, the ethnic group is commonly recognized as Tu ethnicity. In fact, in the community of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, local residents are distinguished by whether they are Hor (a branch of Mongolian language family) or Bod (Tibetan); moreover, there remains a relatively obvious sense of ethnic identity. And yet, in addition to the dominant characteristics of local languages, it is the Gesar culture that has become one of the main features to differentiate between Bod and Hor. More importantly, people of Bod and Hor identify themselves by whether the others tell the complete version of the Gesar Epic or whether they have the authentic King Gesar enshrined, in order to determine their cultural identity.

Keywords: ethnic boundary, gesar culture, ethnic identity, four villages, Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi

Ethnic groups are the oldest mode of survival in the history of humanity. It is acknowledged by many anthropologists and sociologists that ethnic group refers to an ethnic group with its own cultural characteristics within a larger culture and social system, in which the most significant traits are comprised of the religious and linguistic features of the group, as well as the physical, ethnic, and geographical origins of their members or ancestors (Nathan, 1975). Fredrik Barth believes that ethnic groups are categories of ascription and identification by the actors themselves and the ethnic groups are mainly their “boundaries” rather than their “connotation”, such as language, culture and blood relationship. The boundaries of an ethnic group are not necessarily about geographical boundaries, but mainly about “social boundaries”. In ecological resource competition, an ethnic group defines its “boundaries” by emphasizing its specific cultural characteristics to exclude others (Barth, 2014).

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Despite years of dispute and disagreement, there has been a meaningful consensus that “ethnic groups” are not individual, but interactive with others. Simply put, without “the sense of otherness”, there is no “sense of self-group”; without “them” there is no concept like “we”; in a sense, without “ethnic boundaries”, there would be no “ethnic core”. Thus, ethnic boundaries have become a key to our analysis of ethnic groups (Zhou, 2001). Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, which this paper focuses on, is a marginal group in the Tibetan-inhabited area of Rebgong. In the 1950s, the ethnic group was officially identified as “Tu ethnicity” on the basis of the objective characteristics of its culture. However, in this community, “self-group” and “other-group” are defined by emphasizing their specific cultural characteristics. In addition to obvious linguistic features, Gesar culture has turned into a major symbol to distinguish between “Bod and Hor”. Furthermore, the local tends to distinguish the others by judging whether they tell the complete story of the Gesar Epic and if they enshrine and worship the authentic Gesar or not. This paper starts with the ethnic consciousness of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi and analyzes the Gesar culture and ethnic boundaries in the community inhabited by Hor and Tibetans.

**Cultural Background of Fieldwork Venue**

Rebgong refers to Tongren County, capital of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the southeast of Qinghai Province. RongBo Dgu Chu, also known as Rongbo River, flowing through the area from its south to north, is a natural barrier that divides into the upper, middle, and lower part of the whole area. Located in the most fertile river valley along the middle part of the Rongbo River, Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi has been widely recognized as the home of Rebgong Art with a high reputation at home and abroad. Traditionally speaking, Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi is comprised of tribal villages, such as GnyanThog and SgoDmar, and RkaSar on the west bank of the river, as well as ThoKya BodSkor and SengGe Gshong on the east bank, etc. The tribal community is commonly named Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, which is one of the 12 unions of tribes, also called Rebgong ShogKha BcuGnyis in Tibetan. The tribe has been divided into 7 administrative villages.

*Figure 1. Map 1 Distribution Map of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi in Rebgong (Drawn by Julang).*
Khre-Tse is actually transliterated from the Chinese pronunciation of ZhaiZi, from which it can be implied that Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi is associated with a Rebgong-based military stronghold built by the emperors of Ming Dynasties. Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi used to be the four villages under the jurisdiction of GnyanThog Tubazong, also known as a stationed magistrate, was appointed by the royal house for the purpose of local administration affairs in Rebgong. According to the Chinese-language history records, Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi was also called BaoAn Zhan, Si ZhaiZi, and BaoAn SiTun. In the long course of history, Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi has its sources of more complicated background with regard to its identity from indigenous peoples to military soldiers and subordinate union of RongBo Nang So1 stationed in Rongbo area. In terms of religious belief, their pluralistic beliefs have gradually been integrated into the political and religious system of Rongbo Monastery. In consideration of complicated elements in the course of history, tribal culture presents a tendency of diversity. People with a population of just over 10,000 speak two different language families in addition to Tibetan; a Mongolian dialect of Altaic language family is widely spoken in the villages of GnyanThog, SgoDmar, RkaSar on the west bank of the Rongbo River and in the village of ThoKya BodSkor on the east bank; instead, the residents in SengGe Gshong including its upper and lower parts, and Gya Tsang Ma situated on the east bank of the river speak a kind of dialect mixed with Chinese and Tibetan languages. At the beginning of this ethnic identification, as a result of unknown ethnic origins and similar language features, the tribe of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, consisting of 4 villages, was officially identified as Tu ethnicity, which is commonly called Hor2 in the Tibetan language.

2. “We” and “They”: Internal Identity and Distinction of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi

As a marginal group inhabited in Regong Tibetan area, Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi has been identified as “Tu ethnicity”, but local residents distinguish them from each other in their own community, in which there remains a clear boundary of ethnic group. In addition to their spoken dialects, Gesar culture is more like a prominent symbol to distinguish themselves from others.

2.1 Dialectal Differences: “Our Dialect” is Different from “Theirs”

More residents laid an emphasis on the differences between their respective dialects when I worked on the interviews about their internal identity and distinction. It is generally believed by residents in the villages of GnyanThog, SgoDmar, RkaSar that the residents inhabited in SengGe Gshong on the east bank of the Rongbo River are likely to differ from them as people in SengGe Gshong speak a kind of dialect that is totally different from theirs. In spite of their similar costumes, customs, and religious belief, the village of SengGe Gshong belongs to the ShokKha of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, a union of tribes. On the contrary, the residents living in ThoKya BodSkor on the east bank of the river may be ethnically related to them as people there speak the same dialect as theirs.

1 Nang So refers to the local Tibetan officials.
2 “Hor” initially referred to the northern nomadic people in ancient times, and was referred to as Mongolian in the Yuan Dynasty (1271-1368). Currently, Tu ethnicity is commonly known as Hor. The ethnic composition is relatively complex in Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, where local residents consist of Hor people commonly named during the periods of the Tibetan Empire, Mongolian from the Yuan Dynasty, and descendants of ancient Tibetan soldiers. And yet, all they have been officially identified as Tu ethnicity, commonly called Hor in Tibetan. When internally distinguishing between Hor and Tibetan, Hor is mostly referred to people with Mongolian blood lineage as most of them refuse to recognize their ethnic origins directly associated with local Tu residents.
Vjam X, an old man from Gnyan Thog said:

People living on the other side of the river are different from us as we are Hor, an ethnic group with Mongolian blood lineage. It is said that they were originally from Sichuan province in southwestern China, and their spoken language sounds like a Chinese dialect. And yet, no difference can be found in terms of our respective costumes. Their village is under the administration of Tubazong, belong to Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, and we share the same magistrate.3

Dpav X, an old man from RkaSar said:

Speaking of our respective costumes, customs, and religious beliefs, there is nothing different, but their dialect (SengGe Gshong’s) is different from ours. Unlike our tribe including GnyanThog, SgoDmar, RkaSar, and ThoKya BodSkor in which Man Ni Ga Qu, a kind of Mongolian language is spoken, and they do speak a dialect mixed with Tibetan and Chinese languages, which may not be the same as ours.4

Shawo X, an old man from ThoKya BodSkor said:

Residents in SengGe Gshong may be different from us, because they speak a kind of dialect mixed with Chinese and Tibetan languages which we do not understand. They say they are Tibetan, whom we call Gya Ma Bod (referring to an ethnic group neither Tibetan nor Chinese), and their women are commonly called Gya Mo (meaning that they are Han Chinese women). Due to the language barrier, there has been very little intermarriage between us. Instead, it is only in the 1960s that one woman from the opposite village was married to a household in our village. Thus, we insulted her by calling her GyaGor, but none of us knew what it meant. Whatever, SengGe Gshong is under the jurisdiction over Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi.5

Moreover, when speaking of the difference from those three villages on the west bank of the river, an old man from SengGe Gshong on the east bank emphasized the difference of ethnic origin, frequently stressing that residents from those three villages on the west bank are Hor, an ethnic group that shares no ethnic origin with his compatriots from SengGe Gshong. He said that they are Bod (Tibetan), but they speak a kind of mixed dialect due to the influence of their deceased mother or the Chinese dialect. The above-mentioned old man said:

The residents living on the west bank of the river are Hor, with whom we were just classified into the same group and identified as “Tu ethnicity” due to our mixed language differ from local Tibetan dialects when our identity information was initially registered. They speak Hor dialect (a dialect of Mongolian language family), which is the same as the dialect widely used by residents in the villages of GnyanThog, SgoDmar, and RkaSar, and even ThoKya BodSkor, where they have no difficulty communicating with each other in spite of some differences. We cannot at all understand what they speak, and we are ethnically different, but we are now under Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, in which we share the same magistrate.6

Because of the tribal dialect mixed with Chinese and Tibetan languages in SengGe Gshong, it is commonly believed in the three villages on the west bank that residents in SengGe Gshong are different from them, believing that residents there are neither Tibetan nor Chinese. However, residents in SengGe Gshong attempt to demonstrate their pure Tibetan identity through a series of rituals in relation to the Gesar culture.

3 Interviewer: Author; Date: Jan. 19, 2015; Interviewee: Dpav X, an old man, 63; Venue: his house in GnyanThog; Language: Hor dialect; Translated by author.
4 Interviewer: Author; Date: Jan. 15, 2015; Interviewee: Vjam X, an old man, 72; Venue: his house in RkaSar; Language: Hor dialect; Translated by author.
5 Interviewer: Author; Date: July 10, 2014; Interviewee: Shawo X, an old man, 78; Venue: his house in ThoKya BodSkor; Language: Hor dialect; Translated by author.
6 Interviewer: Author; Date: August 12, 2014; Interviewee: Mgon X, an old man, 66; Venue: SengGe Gshong; Language: Amdo Tibetan dialect; Translated by author.
2.2 Whether Telling the Complete Story of the Gesar Epic or Not

The residents in SengGe Gshong firmly believe that they are authentic Tibetan, whereas, people in the three villages on the west bank of the river are not Tibetan, but Hor. They refuse to tell or listen to the story about how Hor’s King was defeated in a chapter of the Gesar Epic.

**Rdo X, an old man from SengGe Gshong said:**

Due to our linguistic problems, very few people tell the story of the Gesar Epic, to which we are ready to listen. And yet, some of the villagers decline to do that, like the village of SgoDmar on the other side of the river, its villagers are Hor; for that reason, they just listen to or tell the story in the Gesar Epic about the great accomplishments achieved by Hor’s general, such as Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse, kings of Gur Dkar and Gur ser’ (white tent tribes and yellow tent tribes), instead of telling or listening to the chapter on how King Gesar fought against the tribe of Hor. Instead, we choose to listen to the heroic deeds of King Gesar rather than Hor’s story.8

When asked whether there is any true phenomenon like that in his village, an old man from SgoDmar admitted it.

**Lha X, an old man from SgoDmar said that:**

We also tell the story of the Gesar Epic. A man named Shawo Tsering in our village usually tells the story of the epic. Especially in the past, we often gathered to listen to the epic when television was unavailable here. And yet, storytelling is not allowed in some areas. For instance, a storyteller usually skips the chapter in which Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse, a Hor’s general, was defeated, as our guardian deity is BakTse. It is said that Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse, a Hor’s general, is the secular embodiment of BakTse, and our guardian deity will be wrathful if Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse is desecrated.9

In this case, the residents in SgoDmar village are more or less ethnically associated with Hor. As the story goes, Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse’s helmet was enshrined at the temple of BakTse prior to the year 1958. People in GnyanThog believe that they are descendants of Hor’s military, whose identity is unequivocal, so they decline to tell the story of the epic. However, the reason why the villagers in SengGe Gshong emphasized their difference with Hor living on the west bank of the Rongbo River is that there remain some culturally distinguished boundaries.

Although the residents in ThoKya BodSkor speak a kind of dialect pertaining to the Mongolian language family, they are well convinced that they are not Hor, but Tibetan. The reason is that no historical memory related to Hor can be found in their collective memories which consolidate themselves.

**Shawo X, an old man from ThoKya BodSkor said that:**

We are not Hor (referring to Mongolian) at all, and nothing can prove that we are ethnically similar to them. So to speak, one can find no similarity of Mongolian culture in our tribe, and even very few of us know about Genghis Khan. In addition, my son’s wife is a native of Inner Mongolia. I have been to her hometown, where local Mongolians pay homage to Genghis Khan by hanging up his portrait on the wall to tell the story of their hero, from which it can be concluded that we have no relation with the ethnic origin of Hor, also known as Mongolian descendants. In fact, we are Tibetan and our village is called Bod Skor, which means a Tibetan-inhabited community in the Tibetan language. People in our village tell the stories of Srongbtsan Sgampo, the 33rd king of the ancient Tibetan Empire, and King Gesar. Exceptionally, people of

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7 Gur Dkar and Gur Ser refer to tribe of Mongols who lived in white and yellow tents in the Gesar Epic.
8 Interviewer: Author; Date: August 14, 2014; Interviewee: Rdor X, an old man, 75; Venue: his house in SengGe Gshong; Language: Amdo Tibetan dialect; Translated by author.
9 Interviewer: Author; Date: August 21, 2014; Interviewee: Lha X, an old man, 75; Venue: Temple of Gesar in SgoDmar; Language:Hor dialect; Translated by author.
Bao’an ethnicity (a group that speaks Mongolian language family) who were migrated to Dahejia have lived in our community, which is precisely why our dialect has been influenced and became what it is now.10

2.3 Whether the Enshrined King Gesar is Authentic

The belief in Gesar is widespread in Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, where one can see the temple of Gesar with the statues, rituals, and scriptures of Gesar throughout the tribe of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi. However, people living in SengGe Gshong on the west bank of the river distinguish the authentic Tibetan identity of others by judging whether they enshrine an authentic King Gesar. The statue of Gesar enshrined and worshipped by residents in SengGe Gshong is a typical Tibetan statue of Gesar, with its red face, a spear in its right hand and treasures in its left hand, wearing a gold helmet, gold armor, silver shield on its chest and colored flags behind it. Moreover, an old man from SengGe Gshong said that:

There are several different kinds of images of Gesar, mainly including VzamGling Gesar (World Gesar) and Gesar of Gling, etc. We enshrine and worship the latter, which is the orthodox Gesar and is known as DgarLha GyalBo (referring to deity of war). Instead, the statue of Gesar enshrined by residents on the other side of the river is called Guanlaoye, which seems to be a deity featured with Chinese cultural elements11.

At the temple in SgorDmar are three enshrined statues of Gesar, among which the middle one is a newly enshrined statue wearing ahelmet, which is based on the Tibetan image-making arts, characterized by Tibetan styles. On the two sides are two small-scale statues of Gesar. An old man from SgoDmar said that:

Gesar is known as Guanlaoye in Chinese, but it is honored as Gesar in the Tibetan language. The statue on the left side was consecrated prior to the year 1958. It is the most original image of Gesar representing compassion; however, the statue on the right side is the wrathful image of Gesar. Both RgyaTsa zhalDkar and TsaZhang VdanMa, two generals of Gesar’s, were enshrined on the two sides on the same year. In addition, the middle one is Gesar’s statue, which is its latest image.12

They are all called Gesar, but they are a bit different. What is commonly known as Gesar initially looked like Guan Yu (Guanlaoye), a deity in Chinese culture. Besides, a set of scriptures containing relevant records of both Gesar of Ling and Guanlaoye were discovered in the community of SgoDmar. Some of the paragraphs are shown as follows.


(Translation: The King Gesar, known as the executioner of hostile forces, dominated the infinite universe and was heavenly appointed as a deity of war, secularly called Guanlaoye, allowing him to appear on the earth together with his wife and son.)

10 Interviewer: Author; Date: August 24, 2014; Interviewee: Shawo X, male, 81; Venue: his house in ThoKya BodSkor; Language: Hor dialect; Translated by author.
11 Interviewer: Author; Date: August 14, 2014; Interviewee: Rdor X, an old man, 75; Venue: his house in SengGe Gshong; Language: Amdo Tibetan dialect; Translated by author.
12 Interviewer: Author; Date: August 21, 2014; Interviewee: Lha X, an old man, 75; Venue: Temple of Gesar in SgoDmar; Language:Hor dialect; Translated by author.
13 Quoted from A myes Gesar rgyal po dang bkwan lo ye gyi bsang mchod bkra shis dbal ster bzhugs so, The sacrificial scriptures about Gesar and Guanlaoye were provided by Lha X, an old from from SgoDmar. Date: August 21, 2014; Venue: Temple of Gesar in SgoDmar.
Both Gesar and Guanlaoye are hailed as Deities of War. Instead, the other version of Gesar-related scriptures shows that:


(Translation: A heroic rider of fast horse, equipped with sharp weapons, is one who abides by the relevant duty and obeys the orders, looking doughty and mighty. He is praised as an army commander of Han Chinese.)

As a deity of war in traditional Tibetan belief, the character of Gesar came into being on the basis of inspiration from the image of Guan Yu (Guanlaoye), a general widely known to all in Chinese culture. It is a widespread phenomenon that Guan Yu is regarded as Gesar in Tibetan-inhabited areas. A research paper by Jamyang Phuntsok from Minzu University of China indicates that what is commonly enshrined and worshipped at the temples of Gesar in Lhasa, Yushu, Labrang, and Choneh, even Mongolian area is actually Guan Yu (Phuntsok, 2010). If anything, people in SengGe Gshong lay a special emphasis on the authenticity of what they enshrine, instead of recognizing the legitimacy of Gesar enshrined in other three villages on the west bank of the Rongbo River. It may be that the concept of “authentic King Gesar” is defined by local residents in SengGe Gshong, but they consider it a symbol to distinguish themselves from Hor people on the west bank of the river for a special purpose of highlighting their authentic identity of being Tibetan.

3. Gesar Culture and Ethnic Boundaries

Identity is an emotionally or psychologically convergent process for self and group (Sigmund Freud 1856-1939) (Che, 1988). It mainly focuses on two questions of “Who I Am and Which Category I Should Belong to.” Ethnic identity contains a strong mental or emotional component that divides the society into two categories like “We” and “They” (Zhuang, 2006, p. 312). It is commonly believed by a number of scholars that the crucial factors for ethnic identity consist of a common historical origin and similar characteristics of culture; however, identity is, in effect, not proportional and equivalent to those objective factors. What’s more, such a situation is unavoidable in the field research. For example, when realizing that the maintenance and establishment of ethnic boundaries is more beneficial to the opposite side, any difference of minuscule accent or subtle behavior will be likely to be seen as a sign of a certain group (Ma, 1995, pp. 102-104). In other words, it is ethnic identity that strengthened the difference of cultures, instead of cultural factors making difference. When ethnic groups recognize each other, the emphasis is laid on their cultural similarity. Instead, their cultural differences are deliberately underlined when refusing to identify each other. Among the villagers of SengGe Gshong and ThoKya BodSkor in Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi, it is firmly believed that they are descendants of ancient Tibetan military soldiers who settled down after their garrison services in Rebgong. People, in turn, in the three villages on the west bank of the Rongbo River are supposed to be Hor. For that reason, in spite of dominant universality of culture, they tend to prove their authentic identity of being Tibetan by highlighting their cultural differences from the one throughout the three villages on the west bank. When it comes to cultural differences, much emphasis is placed on Gesar culture in addition to dominant characteristics of language. Whether one tells the complete story of the

14 Quoted from dgra lha rgyal po A myes Gesar gyi bsang mchod las bzhi lhun grub ces bya pa bzhugs so, The sacrificial scriptures about Gesar were provided by Lha X, an old from from SgoDmar. Date: August 21, 2014; Venue: Temple of Gesar in SgoDmar.
Gesar Epic, or whether the enshrined Amyes Gesar is authentic or not has become one of the important signs to distinguish between the self-group and other-group. In the eyes of local Tibetans, the Gesar Epic is not only a heroic epic created by Tibetan ancestors in the course of their long history, but a history of ethnic and spiritual history of ancient Tibetan tribes, reflecting their values and traditional concepts. Particularly, the Battle between Hor and Gling (HorGling GyulVgyed) is a heroic history mainly about how Hor tribe was defeated by the King Gesar, which is an important chapter of the heroic epic. There is a legend in the village of SgoDmar on the west bank of the river that Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse is the secular embodiment of BagTse enshrined by local residents. Prior to the year 1958, the helmet (RmogKhyung) of Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse’s was still enshrined at the temple of BakTse (Dondrup, 1989). Shan Ba Rme Ru Rtse, a general of the Battle between Hor and Gling, fought with Vdan Ma, a general of Gling’s tribe, who eventually opened the skull of Hor’s general by arrow. Furthermore, given the historical memory of the Battle between Hor and Gling, those who claim themselves as Bod (Tibetan) in the villages of SengGe Gshong and ThoKya BodSkor declare that telling or listening to the story of the battle is undoubtedly a taboo among the Hor people on the other side of the river. It is precisely because they are Bod (Tibetans), not Hor that they feel free to tell or listen to the story of the Gesar Epic with an aim of eulogizing the heroic achievements their ancestors have made. Moreover, they are well convinced of the authenticity of their enshrined Gling Gesar, honored as Amyes Gesar. Regardless of historical fact or fiction, those who undoubtedly consider themselves as Bod (Tibetans) throughout the tribe of Khre-Tse Sde-Bzhi create such a locally featured culture to maintain their own ethnic boundaries.

It is widely believed by anthropologists that those who lay an emphasis on ethnic identity are the marginalized facing an identity crisis. There is no identity crisis at the core, and yet, they place emphasis on their tradition in the event of identity crisis in a marginal area, where tradition is mostly used as an approach to distinguish them from each other. When defining myself, it is necessary to choose something to reference. Thus, cultural differences are intentionally chosen for the establishment of boundary before there is a definition of the self-group and other-group (Xu, 2005, p. 6). Under the circumstances, Gesar culture is specially regarded as a boundary to distinguish the self-group from other-group. Without doubt, it is, in a sense, an eloquent illustration that Gesar culture has been far beyond its status as a folk literature in the eyes of most people along with its spread and development. It has become a brand of ethnic culture and a symbol of ethnic identity as well. In particular, Gesar culture is more like a core strength that unifies each other in the mixed community inhabited by Tibetan and Hor residents, and it is also a major force to differentiate between the self-group and other-group.

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