

The Song of King Gesar as Narrative Space: Translating Epic Narrative into Cultural Landscape

Xiaoyu Chen*

Sichuan Minzu College, Sichuan, 626001, China

*Corresponding author: Xiaoyu Chen, chenxiaoyu@student.usm.my

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Abstract: As a living epic sustained primarily through oral transmission The Song of King Gesar has increasingly entered contemporary public culture through spatial and material forms. Taking The Song of King Gesar as a case study, this article investigates how epic narrative is translated from a linguistic and performative mode into a spatial and experiential cultural landscape. Drawing on spatial narratology and cultural landscape theory, the study examines the narrative characteristics of The Song of King Gesar, the logic through which temporal narrative structures are transformed into spatial configurations, and the concrete spatial practices through which this translation is realized. The analysis demonstrates that The Song of King Gesar is not a simple visualization or display of epic content, but a form of narrative space constructed through spatial layout, symbolic nodes, and visitor pathways. In this process, core epic motifs are re-encoded as spatial symbols, while narrative progression is achieved through embodied movement and experiential engagement, reshaping both the mode of representation and the mode of reception. By shifting the epic from a tradition centered on telling and listening to a cultural practice structured around seeing, walking, and experiencing, this spatial translation enables the epic to sustain its core cultural meanings while acquiring new forms of visibility and continuity in contemporary society. This study contributes to research on living epics and intangible cultural heritage by demonstrating how traditional narratives can be rearticulated through cultural landscapes, thereby offering a spatial perspective on the contemporary transformation of narrative tradition.

Keywords: The Song of King Gesar; Narrative Space; Cultural Landscape; Spatial Narratology; Intangible Cultural Heritage

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1. Introduction

The Song of King Gesar is one of the most significant heroic epics of the Tibetan people and is also globally distinctive as a living epic tradition that continues to be transmitted primarily through oral performance. Scholars have long recognized that the epic is remarkable not only for its vast scale and rich content, but also for its distinctive narrative modes, cultural meanings, and forms of transmission. As such, it has been widely regarded as a crucial cultural text for understanding Tibetan historical memory, cultural identity, and narrative traditions (Norbu Wangdan, 2017; Tashi Dongzhu, 2009). Unlike many epics that have been stabilized through written canonization, The Song of King Gesar has historically relied on the oral performances of bards, whose storytelling practices have allowed the content, details, and expressive forms of the epic to vary across regions and historical periods. For this reason, the epic is commonly defined in scholarship as a paradigmatic example of a “living epic,” characterized by continual regeneration rather than textual fixity (Norbu Wangdan, 2017).

Existing research on The Song of King Gesar has primarily been conducted within the disciplines of epic studies, ethnic and minority literature, folklore, and cultural anthropology. These studies have focused on issues such as narrative structure, character construction, cultural symbolism, and the dynamics of oral tradition. For instance, some early scholarship, through systematic examination of textual versions and variants, has argued that while the epic developed a relatively stable overarching narrative framework, it nevertheless retained a high degree of openness and variability in actual performance contexts (Xu Guoqiong, 1959). From the perspective of oral tradition, Tibetan scholars have emphasized the improvisational nature and multi-version phenomenon of Gesar storytelling, arguing that the epic's reliance on formulaic oral composition is precisely what enabled it to endure across regions and historical eras (Tashi Dongzhu, 2009). Building on this foundation, later studies have proposed the concept of "living transmission," highlighting that The Song of King Gesar does not exist as a fixed textual entity but is continually embedded in social life through ongoing narration, performance, and re-creation, thereby functioning as a form of collective cultural memory (Norbu Wangdan, 2017).

In the contemporary context, especially with the advancement of intangible cultural heritage protection and local cultural development initiatives, The Song of King Gesar has begun to transcend its traditional modes of transmission centered on oral performance and textual documentation. It has increasingly entered public cultural spaces through diverse material and spatial forms. The emergence of cultural landscapes such as "Gesar King City" marks a significant shift, in which epic narrative is transformed into a spatially organized, visually accessible, and experientially navigable cultural form. This transformation expands the channels through which the epic is disseminated, enabling narratives once dependent on oral performance to be re-presented through architectural design, spatial sequencing, and visual symbolism within contemporary cultural consumption. As existing studies on cultural heritage suggest, the continuation of traditional culture in modern society rarely involves simple replication of earlier forms; instead, it often entails the reconfiguration and reinterpretation of cultural memory through the construction of cultural landscapes and public spaces (Li Nan, 2022).

However, despite extensive scholarship on The Song of King Gesar, academic attention has remained largely concentrated on textual analysis, oral tradition, and literary adaptation. Relatively little systematic discussion has been devoted to how the epic is translated into spatial form within contemporary cultural practices, or to how such spatial translation reshapes modes of narrative reception. Cultural landscapes such as Gesar King City are often examined primarily within the frameworks of tourism development or cultural display, while their significance as "narrative spaces" has yet to be adequately theorized.

In response to this gap, the present study approaches Gesar King City as a cultural spatial form structured around epic narrative and examines how The Song of King Gesar is translated from an orally transmitted narrative tradition into a cultural landscape mediated through spatial experience. The article focuses on how the epic's narrative structure is materialized within the spatial organization of the site, and how visitor pathways, spatial nodes, and symbolic design elements collectively generate a form of "narrative-in-motion," in which storytelling unfolds through embodied movement. Through this analysis, the study aims to illuminate an important mode through which epic narrative persists in contemporary contexts, and to offer new perspectives on the relationship between traditional literary forms and modern cultural space.

1.1 Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to examine how The Song of King Gesar, as a living epic traditionally transmitted through oral performance, is translated from a temporal and linguistic narrative form into a spatial and experiential cultural landscape in contemporary contexts. Specifically, the study aims to analyze the narrative characteristics of the Gesar epic that enable its transformation into spatial form, to elucidate the underlying logic through which epic narrative structures are reorganized into spatial configurations, and to investigate the concrete spatial practices—such as spatial layout, symbolic nodes, and visitor pathways—through which this translation is realized in Gesar King City. By conceptualizing Gesar King City as a form of narrative space rather than a mere site of cultural display, the research seeks to demonstrate how spatial organization functions as a medium of storytelling that reshapes both narrative representation and reception. Ultimately, the study aims to contribute to scholarship on living epics and intangible cultural heritage by offering a spatial narratological perspective on the contemporary transformation and continuity of traditional narrative forms.

2. Narrative Characteristics and the Living Tradition of The Song of King Gesar

As a Tibetan heroic epic, The Song of King Gesar has, through its long history of transmission, developed a narrative structure that is both relatively stable and inherently flexible. At the macro level, the epic typically begins with the divine descent of Gesar, followed by his victory in the horse race through which his legitimacy as king is established. This is succeeded by a series of military campaigns in which Gesar subdues hostile forces and restores social order, and the narrative ultimately concludes with his withdrawal from the human world and return to the divine realm. This foundational narrative framework recurs across different regions and versions, constituting the core narrative spine of the Gesar epic tradition. Scholarly research has pointed out that it is precisely this relatively stable overarching structure that enables The Song of King Gesar to maintain narrative coherence despite its immense scale and complex plotlines, thereby providing a structural basis for its long-term transmission (Xu Guoqiong, 1959).

Unlike literary works that have undergone textual fixation, however, the narrative of The Song of King Gesar does not exist in the form of a definitive written text. Instead, it is primarily sustained through the oral performances of bards. In actual storytelling practices, performers frequently adjust and elaborate upon the epic in response to specific occasions, audiences, and their own experiential repertoires. As a result, the same narrative episode may display notable variation in detail, length, and even plot arrangement across performances. Research on Gesar's oral tradition emphasizes its pronounced improvisational quality and multi-version phenomenon, arguing that such variability does not signify narrative instability but rather constitutes a fundamental mechanism through which oral literature sustains itself (Tashi Dongzhu, 2009). It is through this continual process of narration and variation that the epic adapts to diverse regional cultural contexts and remains embedded in everyday social life.

The multiplicity of versions generated through oral transmission gives The Song of King Gesar its distinctive "living" character. Scholars commonly employ the term "living epic" to describe this mode of transmission, underscoring that the epic is not a completed artifact fixed at a particular historical moment, but a narrative tradition continuously produced through ongoing storytelling, performance, and re-creation. Studies have further noted that the living quality of The Song of King Gesar is manifested not only in the differences among textual or performative versions, but also in its close integration with social life. Through activities such as bardic performances, ritual practices, and festival celebrations, the epic continually acquires renewed vitality and functions as a form of collective cultural memory embedded within broader social and cultural practices (Norbu Wangdan, 2017). This open-ended narrative mode allows the Gesar epic to maintain an active relationship with contemporary society.

It is precisely because The Song of King Gesar combines a relatively stable narrative framework with a highly open and living tradition that it possesses an inherent capacity for translation into other expressive forms. On the one hand, the clearly identifiable narrative structure provides a coherent reference point for the re-articulation of the epic's meanings; on the other hand, the flexibility and variability intrinsic to oral tradition create interpretive space for the epic's re-expression in contemporary contexts. Grounded in these narrative characteristics, The Song of King Gesar is able not only to persist through textual and performative modes, but also to lay the narrative foundation for its transformation into spatial forms within modern cultural practices.

3. From Epic Narrative to Spatial Expression: The Logic of Translation

Epic narratives are conventionally organized through temporal progression, constructing a complete story by arranging events in sequential order. Yet narrative meaning does not rely solely on linear temporality. Epic storytelling typically contains clear hierarchical structures, key narrative nodes, and recurring thematic motifs. These structural features allow narrative meaning to remain intelligible even when detached from a purely temporal dimension and reconstituted through other modes of perception. As studies in spatial narratology have demonstrated, narrative organization inherently possesses a spatial dimension at the level of meaning-making: temporal sequences can be transformed into positional relations, pathways, and overall spatial configurations, thereby enabling the spatialization of narrative expression (Long Diyong, 2008). This theoretical insight provides an essential foundation for understanding how epic narrative may be translated from linguistic

form into spatial form.

Within literary and cultural studies, space is no longer regarded as a passive backdrop for narrative action but is increasingly understood as an active medium through which narrative meaning is generated. Research has emphasized that the relationship between narrative and space is not one of simple correspondence. Rather, spatial arrangements themselves—through layout, symbolism, and visual organization—participate in the construction of meaning and shape interpretive direction and emotional orientation (Fang Ying, 2020). Once narrative enters spatial form, storytelling no longer unfolds primarily through language, but is reorganized through spatial order, visual symbols, and embodied experience, allowing space itself to function as a mode of narrative expression.

More specifically, the translation of narrative into space is not a straightforward replication of the original narrative, but a process that necessarily involves selection, compression, and reconfiguration. This is particularly evident in epic narratives characterized by multiplicity and openness. In such cases, spatial representation requires choices to be made within a vast and flexible narrative system, fixing certain core events, symbolic scenes, or thematic motifs to construct a coherent and recognizable spatial structure. Spatial narrative research suggests that when narrative is mapped onto concrete space, it inevitably undergoes processes of condensation, reordering, and thematic emphasis; such structural reorganization constitutes a prerequisite for narrative spatialization (Shi Fei; Gao Caichi; Meng Lu; Jiang Zhijie, 2014). Spatialization, therefore, does not aim at narrative reproduction, but rather at the creation of a new organizational mode.

At the same time, once narrative is translated into spatial form, its mode of reception is fundamentally transformed. Traditional epic narratives are primarily perceived through auditory and linguistic channels, whereas spatialized narratives emphasize movement, visual engagement, and bodily participation, enabling audiences to gradually construct narrative understanding through physical traversal. Research in literary geography indicates that spatial narratives guide audiences toward coherent meaning-making through pathways and spatial settings, allowing narrative communication to occur even in the absence of complete verbal narration (Long Diyong, 2003). This embodied mode of storytelling opens new possibilities for the transmission of epic narratives within contemporary cultural contexts.

Based on the above analysis, it becomes evident that epic narrative possesses inherent conditions for translation from temporal structure into spatial structure, and that space functions not as a passive container but as a key participant in the construction of narrative meaning. It is within this theoretical framework that *Gesar King City* can be understood as a concrete instance of translating *The Song of King Gesar* into narrative space. Through spatial layout, symbolic nodes, and the design of visitor pathways, epic narrative is transformed from oral storytelling and textual representation into a cultural landscape that can be traversed and experienced, thereby establishing the conceptual basis for the subsequent analysis of *Gesar King City*.

In the contemporary cultural context, *Gesar King City* does not merely exist as a physical site for the display of *Gesar* culture; rather, its spatial form itself constitutes a mode of cultural expression centered on epic narrative. From overall spatial planning to individual spatial nodes and the organization of visitor routes, *Gesar King City* systematically translates the narrative structure of *The Song of King Gesar* through spatial means, enabling the epic to shift from a predominantly linguistic mode of narration to an experiential cultural landscape structured by movement and perception.

At a macro level, the spatial configuration of *Gesar King City* should not be understood as an arbitrary aggregation of architectural elements, but as a culturally organized spatial structure shaped by symbolic meaning. Cultural geography research emphasizes that cultural landscapes are not merely accumulations of natural or built components, but holistic spatial manifestations of specific cultural values and meaning systems (Zhao Nina, 2022). In this sense, *Gesar King City* constructs a symbolic spatial order through the establishment of central spaces, hierarchical differentiation, and overall spatial coherence. This structure formally resonates with the epic's hero-centered narrative logic, allowing concepts of kingship, order, and sacred authority to be perceived intuitively through spatial relations. As Zhao Nina has argued, the spatial organization of cultural landscapes itself functions as a crucial medium of meaning expression, capable of conveying core values without reliance on verbal explanation (Zhao Nina, 2022).

Within this overall layout, *Gesar King City* further translates key epic motifs into tangible spatial forms through the

establishment of symbolically charged spatial nodes. Research in spatial narratology suggests that significant spatial nodes can assume narrative functions, serving as materialized representations of story events and meanings (Long Diyong, 2010). In Gesar King City, spaces associated with royal legitimacy, heroic conquest, and sacred authority are often assigned prominent visual positions and symbolic emphasis, thereby forming narrative focal points within the spatial system. These spatial nodes do not constitute literal reenactments of epic episodes; rather, they distill and reorganize epic motifs through symbolic design. As Fang Ying has noted, narrative motifs are frequently re-encoded through processes of symbolization and visualization during spatial translation, allowing them to be expressed within new media forms (Fang Ying, 2021).

In addition to spatial layout and nodal design, the organization of visitor pathways represents a crucial mechanism through which Gesar King City achieves narrative spatialization. Whereas epic narrative traditionally progresses through temporal sequence, spatialized narrative emphasizes guided movement through space, producing what may be described as a “narrative-in-motion.” Studies of cultural landscapes indicate that pathway design often embeds implicit narrative sequences, directing perception and movement so that audiences gradually construct meaning through spatial experience (An Qi, 2016). In Gesar King City, visitors do not receive narrative information simultaneously; instead, they encounter different narrative nodes progressively as they move through space, enabling epic meaning to be continuously constructed through embodied experience.

This embodied mode of spatial narration significantly alters the reception of epic narrative. Research in literary geography suggests that spatial narratives generate cultural identification through pathways, places, and movement, allowing narrative meaning to emerge through spatial perception rather than solely through linguistic comprehension (Fang Ying, 2020). Compared with traditional modes of auditory or textual reception, spatialized narrative places greater emphasis on participation and experiential engagement, thereby enabling epic narratives to acquire renewed modes of transmission within contemporary cultural fields.

In sum, through overall spatial organization, symbolic spatial nodes, and the structuring of visitor pathways, Gesar King City systematically translates the narrative structure of The Song of King Gesar into a spatialized and experiential cultural landscape. In this process, the epic is not simply reproduced in textual form, but undergoes a re-encoding of meaning through spatial reorganization. This mode of narrative space construction not only responds to the need for the continuation of the epic’s living tradition in contemporary contexts, but also provides a concrete case for understanding the relationship between traditional narrative forms and cultural landscapes.

4. The Significance of Translating Epic Narrative into Cultural Landscape

An examination of Gesar King City as a concrete case demonstrates that The Song of King Gesar has not remained confined to its traditional modes of oral narration or textual representation in the contemporary context. Instead, through spatial translation, the epic has entered the realm of cultural landscape, giving rise to a new mode of narrative expression. This process does not constitute a simple substitution of form; rather, it involves a reconfiguration of the epic’s modes of representation, reception, and cultural function while preserving its core symbolic meanings.

At the level of representation, epic narrative shifts from a predominantly language-based mode to one centered on spatial presentation and visual expression. Traditionally, The Song of King Gesar relied primarily on bardic performance, in which narrative worlds were constructed through voice, rhythm, and verbal imagery. Within the cultural landscape, however, the epic is transformed into a visible and legible spatial form. Architectural layout, symbolic spatial nodes, and overall spatial order collectively assume narrative functions, enabling key epic motifs to be “seen” through spatial configuration. This transformation does not entail the disappearance of narrative content, but rather a change of medium, through which the epic acquires renewed visibility in contemporary society.

At the level of reception, spatialized narrative fundamentally alters the pathways through which the epic is perceived and understood. Whereas traditional epic transmission is primarily based on listening or reading, the narrative space constructed by Gesar King City emphasizes embodied participation and experiential movement. Visitors gradually construct narrative meaning through bodily engagement with space, as understanding emerges in the process of walking, observing, and encountering symbolic sites. In this process, audiences are no longer passive listeners or readers; instead, they actively

participate in narrative construction through their movement along designated paths and interaction with spatial nodes. The epic thus shifts from a cultural form centered on linguistic comprehension to a cultural practice mediated by spatial experience.

In terms of cultural function, the translation of epic narrative into cultural landscape expands the modes through which The Song of King Gesar exists within contemporary society. As a living epic, its continuity has historically depended on folk performance, ritual practice, and communal storytelling. The emergence of cultural landscapes allows the epic to enter more open public cultural spaces, where it participates in contemporary cultural display and the construction of collective identity. As studies of intangible cultural heritage have emphasized, the continuity of traditional culture in modern society does not necessarily depend on the complete preservation of original forms; rather, it is often achieved through reproduction in new media and expressive modes (He Xuejun, 2005). In this sense, Gesar King City can be understood as a transformative pathway through which the epic is rearticulated in the contemporary cultural context.

It must also be acknowledged that the translation of epic narrative into cultural landscape inevitably involves processes of selection, compression, and stabilization. To some extent, this reduces the openness and multi-version characteristics intrinsic to the epic's oral tradition. At the same time, however, it allows the epic's core meanings to remain identifiable and intelligible within the contemporary cultural environment. Research on cultural landscapes suggests that spatial form itself constitutes a crucial mode of cultural meaning-making; its value lies not in the complete replication of original cultural forms, but in the reorganization and reinterpretation of cultural significance (Xiao Jing, 2013). From this perspective, the spatialization of epic narrative represents both a result of necessary selection and a practical condition for the epic's continued circulation.

In sum, the translation The Song of King Gesar into cultural landscape not only transforms its modes of representation and reception, but also creates new possibilities for its continuation in contemporary society. Through the construction of narrative space, the epic can enter new communicative contexts while retaining its core cultural meanings, thereby demonstrating the enduring vitality of traditional narrative forms within contemporary cultural practice.

5. Conclusion

Taking The Epic of King Gesar and Gesar King City as its objects of analysis, this study has examined the question of how epic narrative is translated into cultural landscape, with particular attention to the mechanisms and cultural implications of the transformation from linguistic narration to spatial expression. Through a systematic analysis of the epic's narrative characteristics, the logic of narrative-to-spatial translation, and the spatial practices embodied in Gesar King City, the study argues that Gesar King City should not be understood as a simple display of epic content. Rather, it constitutes a form of narrative space constructed through spatial layout, symbolic nodes, and visitor pathways.

The analysis demonstrates that, in the process of translation into cultural landscape, the narrative structure of The Song of King Gesar is reorganized into a spatial order. Core epic motifs are visualized through spatial symbols, while narrative progression is realized through movement and embodied experience. This process not only transforms the mode of representation of the epic, but also reshapes its mode of reception, shifting it from a cultural form centered on "telling" and "listening" toward one structured around "seeing" and "experiencing."

In terms of academic significance, this study introduces a spatial narratological perspective into research on The Song of King Gesar and demonstrates, through a concrete case, how traditional narrative forms can acquire new modes of expression in contemporary cultural contexts through spatial translation. By bridging epic studies and cultural landscape studies, the analysis contributes to ongoing discussions on the transformation of intangible cultural heritage in modern society and offers a new lens through which to examine the contemporary rearticulation of traditional narratives.

It should be noted that this study focuses primarily on Gesar King City as a single case. Comparative analysis of similar cultural spaces in different regions, as well as empirical research on audience experience and reception, has not been undertaken here. Future research may build upon this foundation by exploring the diverse forms and social impacts of epic spatialization, thereby further deepening our understanding of the mechanisms through which traditional narratives are reconfigured and sustained in contemporary cultural practice.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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