

## A Study on the Horse Racing Culture in Ancient Tibet

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### Abstract

Horse racing is a traditional folk sport culture formed in the special geographical environment, living area and religious belief. Horse Racing made nomadic sonorous and powerful, the formation of moral value orientation of advocating bravery and fair competition. This thesis based on Tibetan historical documents on the origin, development and evolution of the ancient Horse Racing in Tibet. Tibetan people are fond and proud of the “Horse Racing Winning the Crown” excerpt from noted Tibetan heroic epic “*Gesar*” sung by the Tibetan people for thousands of years. Ancient Horse Racing was derived from the prehistoric era of heroic history. In Tubo and Qing Dynasty, with development of politics and economy, Horse Racing integrated with the cultures of the surrounding countries. Horse Racing becomes a unique military, sport and cultural activity. It enriches the folklore content of Tibetan ancient society and people’s interest in life, showing the spiritual and cultural value of “Nationality on Horseback”.

**Key words:** Horse racing; *Gesar*; Tibetan nationality; Sports; Tibet

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### INTRODUCTION

As a Tibetan heroic Epic with a history of thousand years of folk inheritance, *Gesar* is an important carrier and a component of the Tibetan culture (Jia, 2016). *Gesar* likes an encyclopedia of Tibetan nationalities in period of nomadic tribes, contents referring to history, culture, military affairs, sports, religion and customs. Among them, excerpt “Horse Racing Winning the Crown” from *Gesar* depicts the original horse racing event, which makes Tibetan Horse Racing folk culture closely integrated with the material production and spiritual life. It has become an indispensable cultural form in Tibetan life, which can be extended and developed. The Tibetan people have lived in the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau since ancient times, and have been known for their talents for riding, shooting, and tough folk custom. Horse Racing is a Tibetan folk culture which was formed on a certain geographical environment, living area and religious belief. With features of entertainment, fitness and thrilling, Horse Racing festival is very popular among Tibetan people (Xia, 2000). The harsh natural environment has created the Tibetan people apt at “action” and “martial arts”.

### 1. THE ORIGIN OF TIBETAN HORSE RACING

The Tibetan called the Horse Racing as “Da Jiu”, which was a most important custom and entertainment for nomadic tribes. The special geographical environment on the plateau enabled the Tibetan ancestors to only choose

nomadic life. Because of the scattered plateau pasturing areas, vast territory, horses are very essential in nomadic hunting activities, wars among tribes, parties, marriages, entertainments, interaction activities and other major activities. At that time, Tibetans' life cannot be separated from horses, and were tightly bound to horses. Herdsmen liked horses, so they focused on the domestication of horses and advocated the skills of horse riders, thus creating Horse Racing activities.

Tibetan horse racing mainly originated from or was integrated into the following activities: One is the production and lifestyle, such as raising, training horses which gradually developed into today's horse racing, equestrian and other related items; the second is the ancient military activities. To meet needs of the wars among tribes, equestrianism and shooting on horseback were gradually developed in the combats among tribes. The last one is festivals, religions and sacrificial rituals. During the Tubo period, the initial horse racing aimed at sacrificing and competing among the brave warriors, which later became an important part of traditional festivals.

The colorful Tibetan Horse Racing culture is closely linked with ethnic reproduction, nomadic life, plateau regional characteristics, religious life, productive labor and military activities. Usually, horse racing, archery, equestrianism, polo and other sports played on horseback are events on religious ceremonies, festivals, weddings and funerals as well as other various Tibetan festivals (Ibid.), which is consistent with "Nationality on Horseback", the custom of horse companionship and fearless national characteristic.

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## 2. THE NARRATION OF THE FOLK RAP "HORSE RACING WINNING THE CROWN"

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"*Gesar*" is the epic of Tibetan folk heritage with history of thousands of years, which is an important carrier and constituent part of Tibetan culture transmission. It has the value of "encyclopedia". As precious intangible cultural heritage, via oral rap and written version, "*Gesar*" is continued and developed. "*Gesar*" has two forms of subdivision version and subchapter version; "Horse Racing Winning the Crown" is a subdivision version of "*Gesar*", which is an important subdivision with significance of serving as a link between past and future. Meanwhile, it is also the most widely spread and welcomed among the Tibetan people.

### 2.1 The Main Contents of "Horse Racing Winning the Crown"

The article "Selection King through Horse Racing" shows respect for bravery, praise of force; fair competition, the winner being the king, tribal council, military democracy

and other social and cultural phenomena that is also an ideal moral model of the tribal society. To disseminate and promote this moral phenomenon in the form of rap, it has underestimated roles for social stability, cultural dissemination and ideological education. "Horse Racing Winning the Crown" contains the following three parts:

The first part mainly narrates the reasons why Horse Racing Activities were held in Lingguo kingdom and the purpose of Horse Racing. The colored notes in the epic (the throne of Lingguo Kingdom, the property and daughter Zhu Mu of Jia Luo).

The second part describes the basis of determining the schedule of the horse race as well as the unification of the various ceremonies to be held and dress before the Horse Racing. In addition, the importance of scribes and adjudicators is emphasized.

The third part discusses from two aspects. First of all, it expounds the primitive tribal social moralities of upholding bravery, praise of force; fair competition, the winner being king, tribal council, and military democracy and so on. Secondly, at present, moral decline, the simple moralities play incalculable roles for social stability, dissemination of fine culture, and ideological education. Additionally, when it comes to the ways of inheritance, it is necessary to learn from the good traditional moralities of its predecessors selectively and establish new morality.

As embodiments of human skills and wisdom, Horse Racing is recognized by the people in the nomadic era. At "Gesar's Time", Horse Racing was the basic form of competition for the throne. Horse Racing Winning the Crown reflects the fair and value at the nomadic period. As a kind of entertainment competition commonly existed in Tibetan areas, Horse Racing continues as a cultural form so far.

### 2.2 Folk Rap Artists Were "Live Heritage"

The folk rap artist in the article "Horse Racing Winning the Crown" describes: "In the vast northern grass beach / I practice hunting martial arts / commonly eat delicious bison to allay my hunger / drink bison blood to quench their thirst ..." (Chen, 2012) showing the ancient Primitive hunting gave birth to the original form of sports, creating a Tibetan tough character of the long-term nomadic life on the plateau. During the war, the Nomadic tribes held various traditional sports activities; the winner was rewarded through the game to boost morale and physical fitness as well as show strength (Ding, 2004).

Folk rap artists described the article "Horse Racing Winning the Crown": "In the vast northern grass beach/ I practice martial arts via hunting/I take delicious meat of buffalo, while hungry/ drink blood of buffalo to quench their thirst..." (Chen, 2012), which presents that the ancient primitive hunting gave birth to the original form of sports, creating Tibetans' tough character through long-term nomadic life on the plateau. During the wars or in their ordinary life, the Nomadic tribes held various

traditional sports activities, such as horse racing, archery, wrestling and rock holding etc. The winners were rewarded to encourage morale, build up physique and demonstrate strength through competition (Ding, 2004).

Before slavery was officially formed, in the period of primitive tribes those highly-skilled leading commanders had been selected by means of Horse Racing. The folk rap artists of "Horse Racing Winning the Crown": said "before Lingguo country decided to attack the tribe A'zha grand athletic activities had been held. There were no limitations for ages of participants. The competition items mainly contained horse racing and archery. Before the game, all the participants must sing the song to ask the god of war to bless them. In the match, warriors from the Shangling are as fierce as tigers running down the mountains; those from Zhongling in white robes and saddles seem like white snow covered on the earth; participants from Xialing in blue robes and saddles like the sky covered with dark clouds. In the end, Gesar known as the incarnation of wisdom and bravery demonstrated extraordinary horse riding skills and became the king. From then on, he began to fight throughout the country showing his prestige as a king. His great contribution to surrender the demon, robbing the rich and relieving the poor and helping people out of trouble left his descendants surprising heroic feats. At the same time, Gesar was also deeply grateful to his people. After the establishment of Lingguo country, he resolutely smashed his gold belt into pieces and sprinkled gold in the Snow Mountains and lands, giving his blessing to the common people, and finally returned to heaven with great achievements and got admiration and worship from people. In order to remember Gesar's achievements, the people living on the grasslands hold horse racing every year. The horse racing match is held every year in Chamao Datang of Ganzi Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, which was crowded with people. All the participants wear yellow robes and saddles, who aims at pleasing the audience by difficult riding skills and the audience always amazed and cheered accompanied by the riders' completion of acts. In the end, spectators' cheering stimulates the riders performing more innovative skills on horsebacks, all of these highlight the tough national character and superb riding art.

### **3. THE DEVELOPMENT AND EVOLUTION OF ANCIENT FOLK HORSE RACING**

#### **3.1 Selecting the King Through Horse Racing in the Nomadic Period**

During the nomadic period, wars among tribes often broke out. Their leaders should take the leading roles in fighting, so martial arts became a prerequisite for leaders. People living in the special natural environment on the plateau almost can't live without horses and when they engaged in the fierce wars, they had to have superb riding skills. The selection of leaders by the way of horse racing seems

to be lacking reliability in the eyes of modern people. However, before slavery, the hereditary system of leaders was not established. At that time, on the basis of military democracy, it was reasonable and logical to choose leaders by horse racing. The composers of Tibetan epics used art to view history when they created epics. "Horse Racing Winning the Crown" is created by the possibility of real life, and have high artistic authenticity.

#### **3.2 Horse Racing Promoted the Prosperity of the Military Force in Tubo Period**

During the Tubo Period, economy, culture, the Tibetan army group creation, legislation and acrobatic sports, singing and dancing had reached a certain height, which made Tubo (Tibet) bun ton in West of China became a strong and famous "Fan" (Wang, n.d.). In Tubo era, horses and yaks were raised widely, so, horse racing became very popular among Tibetans. The Tibetan people lived a nomadic life and riding soldiers are the most powerful military force in Tubo era. Horses made great contribution to expand territory and unify Tibetan in Tubo Dynasty (Li, 2006). Songzan Ganbu is a famous sportsman; he likes killing wild horses in the galloping horse racing, and such thrill is higher than the Spanish bullfighting (O'Neill, 1999). After that, horse racing and shooting on horseback gradually athleticized, sports. At Tubo period, Tibetans' riding skills had communication with riding skills of Tang palace. A nomadic tribe will have horse racing on every happy festival. The winner is often regarded as a hero and respected by the whole tribe. Gesar continued this tradition (Chen et al., 2016).

During the Tubo Period, the nomadic tribes often held venue barrier race which is a kind of horse racing with Gesar style. On 7 to 10 kilometers of track, dotted with ponds, gullies, steep slopes and detours. With perseverance, on the scenes of the track, the warriors showed stunts by climbing up to the top of the mountain. With the national cultural imprint, the horse racing was passed down and loved by the Tibetan people which became an important part of the traditional festivals. Later, to display the bravery and roughness of nomad, horse racing activities are held on vast pastures for men from north part of Tibet. Regardless of the number of rings, ranks, riding on horsebacks, they run around the court again and again but refused to end, till a murky sky over a dark earth. While participants and the spectators mixed together, their emotions reached a climax, so, they yearned out loudly. Therefore, in Tibetan areas, horse racings are held everywhere and horse racing plays the leading role in their major festivals, which add a lot to these festivals.

#### **3.3 The Evolution of the Horse Racing From Military Training to Entertainment in Qing Dynasty**

With the development of a social economy, people pay increasingly attention to the pursuit of health and longevity. Besides focusing on health preservation, horse racing,

singing and dancing, acrobatics and art have become the main contents of people's entertainments. During the Qing Dynasty, horse racing was one of the most popular sports in Tibet and also the most important recreational activity for the Tibetan people. Compared with other places, horse races were famous in Dangxiong's, Lhasa's and Jiangzi's, because of their large size. In 1642, Gushi Han (Mongolian, the founder of Qingzang plateau He Suo Te Han Guo kingdom) led his army entering into Tibet. Most of his soldiers were cavalry. To check their results of military training on Dangxiong grassland, horse races were held every year on July 10<sup>th</sup>. Later, this kind of horse racing evolved into Tang "Qia Qing Horse Racing" in Naqu and "Dang Mu Ji Rang" (Horse Racing Festival in Dangxiong).

To prevent the expansion of Tibetan military force, the Qing government decided to limit the size of horse racing, only nobles and senior monks were allowed to select representatives to participate the activities. In the late of the Qing Dynasty, Liu Zanting recorded in his book *Record on Tour in Tibetan for Thirty Years*. A poem of his work wrote like this: "when cavalry on coursers pulled the bridle rein tightly, they run as swift as Pi Xiu." Every spring and autumn, in the rest of military drill, the soldiers from Qing Court riding coursers ran on the ten miles wide racetrack. Swinging with horsewhips, coursers ran swiftly and sound was as loud as thunder. The scene was grand. With various kinds of forms, horse racing in Dangxiong is the most famous one, such as trot, long distance horse racing (juveniles allowed, without saddles, winners are judged by riding speed), archery, shooting, picking up hadas on horseback (riding on horseback to pick up hadas, winner are decided by numbers of picked hahas in a limited time). In Jiangzi of Tibet, archery on horseback is the most famous game. On each April, to commemorate Paba Sangbu the Buddha of Jiangzi, activities of archery on horseback was held on the ritual ceremonies. Later, it developed as "Damar Festival" of Jiangzi and was kept in the folk, which became an important recreational activity among Tibetans.

After the 15<sup>th</sup> century, archery on horseback spread from Jiangzi to Lhasa, Shannan areas, which became the important recreational activity on Tibetan New Year Festival, "Wanguo Festival", and other Entertainment Festivals. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the poem "XiZhao Zhuzhi Ci" recorded the description of "Horse Racing" in Lhasa on the first month of new year of the Tibetan calendar. The winners were awarded hadas. In the poem depicted: "the plyers ran out of breath and won half hadas which were stained during the race." About Jiangzi horse racing, in his book *Tour in Tibet for 20 Years*, Macdonald described the custom that Tibetans in Jiangzi were fond of horse racing in the late Qing Dynasty. Horse racing was held in Jiangzi every early June and thousands of people came to watch. In the six-mile trackway, some children riding on horseback without saddles galloped with swinging

horsewhips and whistling. The fastest horse won the game and people decorated the first destination arrival horse with colored silken strips, whereby the second horse can only get a white hada.

### 3.4 The Outline of the Modern Horse Racing in Folk

Horse racing was one of the most popular leisure activities for Tibetan people in ancient time. Till now, Dang Ji Rang horse racing in Dangxiong area and Qi Qing horse racing in Naqu are embodiments of legacy Lingguo kingdom. Today, the horse racing festival kept the heritage of horse racing of Dangxiong both in forms and content passed down from Qing Dynasty. In addition to horse racing, there are wrestling, tug of war, Tibetan bouldering competition, fashion shows; Guozhuang performances and equestrian performances. Compared with horse racing in Lhasa, they are different in form and content. In the book *Tibetan Records* stated: On 23<sup>rd</sup> June, Jun Wang, Ge Long, Die Ba and leading Lamas selected eight or nine participants ages of fourteen or fifteen respectively. Riding on fine horses, they ran from the foot of Sera Monastery to the Potala Palace, ended at Gongbutang, about thirty miles. The first arriver was awarded with silk, hada, money and other items. Others were awarded differently according to their different performances. Then, tens of athletic people were singled out to ran from west of the Potala Palace to the east of Lhasa, about ten miles. They also were awarded in light of their performances. Finally, they ran around Zhao Monetary three turns before departure which was thought as a year of robbing the bid and grabbing the lottery.

Horse Racing is popular a traditional festival held by Tibetans once a year. On July of each summer, various kinds of horse racing activities were held and people gathered together on race course. Tibetans are keen on horse racing festivals, as it is a key symbol of spirit of the "Nationality on Horsebacks", which can enhance national identity. Various Horse Racing festivals were held in Tibet, Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, Yunnan and other Tibetan areas. Among them, these Horse Racing festivals are well known, such as Horse Racing in northern Tibet, Qia Qing Horse Racing in Qiangtang of Naqu, Horse Racing in Yushu, Horse Racing in Jieji, Dang Mu Ji Rang Horse Racing in Dangxiong, Pao Ma Hui Horse Racing in Kangding, Ba Yi Horse Racing in Litang, Horse Racing in Tianzhu, Dama Festival in Jiangzi, and the Seda Dharma. Before each Horse Racing festival, riders have to undergo hard intensive training. Only those with superb riding skills can show themselves on the festival. The beautiful Tibetan scenery and unique Tibetan customs attracts tourists from all over the world, which promotes tourist consumption in Tibetan areas. Through the interview feedbacks from Horse Racing Festivals: nearly 60% of the local people thought that Horse Racing became less and less lively; More than 30% of the local people believed

that Horse Racing festivals were still lively; Less than 10% of the people felt they were more and more lively; Nearly 70% of the local people provided accommodation and other services for tourists to gain economic benefits on Horse Racing Festivals.

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## SUMMARY

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Horse racing has become the lasting and universal mass activity for Tibetan people in ancient and modern times, and thus created the unique Tibetan Horse Racing culture. Through Horse Racing activities, these special “customs and traditions” are imperceptibly integrated into the blood of the Tibetan people and “constituting the charm of ordinary life in the certain social order.” (O’Neill, 1999) As a manifestation of sports culture, to meet the needs of spirit or physic, Tibetan folk Horse Racing was formed in the process of social development, in the face of the harsh natural environment. Nowadays, Horse Racing doesn’t play big roles in political life while it still has very close relationship with folk customs, traditional festivals, amusements, occasions and specific circumstances. The Horse Racing does not only show the Tibetan people’s spirit of being enterprising, but also greatly enrich the political, military and folk contents of the ancient Tibetan society. By understanding the value and traditions carried forward by the traditional Tibetans, to broaden the importance of the Tibetan national culture, which as a result improves the national cultural consciousness.

Therefore, enhancing the understanding of value and significance of Horse Racing doesn’t only good for carrying forward Tibetan traditional culture, but also good for broadening the research of Tibetan culture and raising cultural consciousness of Tibetans.

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