

# A novel of epic proportions

Tibetan author Alai's *King Gesar* provides easy access to the classic and lengthy adventures of the legendary ruler. **Liu Jun** reports.

Gigme wakes up to find himself in a pigsty, covered in manure, clueless as to his whereabouts.

"I don't deserve this! You shouldn't have treated me like this!" he yells, while children and suspicious villagers laugh.

He has every reason to be angry. For several years, he has been journeying on foot, telling stories about King Gesar, the legendary Tibetan hero whose tales are wildly popular throughout Central Asia.

Gigme, who used to be a poor illiterate herder and is blind in one eye, is one of the few gifted ballad singers who claim they were entrusted with the mission of spreading Gesar's glory in a dream.

Yet Gigme has annoyed the King by questioning the tales. In Gigme's dream, the King thrusts an arrow through the storyteller, and shoots him out of the dream.

The epic *King Gesar* is one of the classics. But since it is the world's longest epic, most people have not read it.

*King Gesar* (2009), a novel by Tibetan author Alai, offers easy access to this literary treasure. After much anticipation, foreign readers will finally get an English version in a year's time.

Canongate Books, the British publisher that initiated the *Myth Series*, for which Alai was commissioned to rewrite the Tibetan epic, will publish the English version around October 2012.

"The story itself has never — as far as I am aware — been told in English to Western readers before, and this in itself makes it fascinating and an ideal addition to the Canongate *Myths Series*," Norah Perkins, managing editor with Canongate, says in an e-mail interview.

"Alai's myth is also a window on Tibet, a land that has long inspired the



FENG YONGBIN / CHINA DAILY

Alai's *King Gesar* will be published in English in 2012, as part of the Canongate Books' *Myth Series*.

empathy and imagination of millions of people around the world."

Perkins is working with renowned American translator Howard Goldblatt to shorten the book slightly, to which Alai has agreed.

"My wife and I finished the translation of *Gesar* more than a year ago. We liked the novel — a bit long, perhaps, but a fine concept," Goldblatt says in an e-mail earlier this year.

Alai was the ideal candidate to rewrite *King Gesar*. The Tibetan author was born and grew up in the area bordering Tibet autonomous region, Sichuan and Qinghai provinces, where King Gesar is said to have lived some 1,000 years ago.

The author is not content with telling the life story of Gesar alone but carefully builds a parallel structure revolving around Gesar and the storyteller Gigme. It is particularly relevant to modern readers in offering glimpses into the hardships of the humble storytellers.

While traditional storytellers and their audiences have been intoxicated by Gesar's stories of war and love, Alai poses tough questions that force readers to think.

Like Alai himself, Gigme tries to locate places where Gesar fought or lived. But the longer he travels, the more doubtful Gigme becomes of the King's everlasting glory.

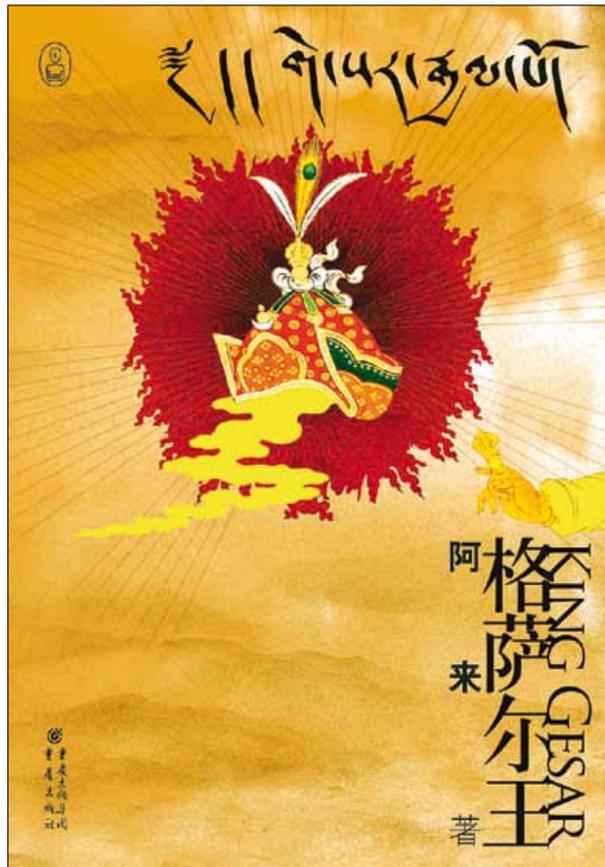
Gigme finds a salt lake where Gesar is said to have fought a prince and allowed the conquered people to make a living by gathering and selling salt from the lake.

However, salt and other daily commodities are now sent to remote places at reasonable prices. Villagers no longer need the bitter lake salt.

In an interesting twist, just as Gigme struggles to find the meaning of his mission, Gesar is also reluctant to fulfill his mission to help mankind.

Like King Arthur in Camelot, Gesar is not happy on his golden throne, surrounded by powerful generals, wise counselors and jealous beauties. Gesar realizes that he cannot get rid of greed, suspicion or inequality — demons hiding in the human heart.

In turn, the perturbed King dreams of Gigme. He is amazed to learn that the great kingdom he has created will no longer exist. Compared to the arrogant and all-knowing Gesar in heaven, this melancholy King is more



humane in Gigme's (and the author's) eyes.

After freeing the ghosts from hell on a quest to save his wife and mother, Gesar is ready to return to heaven. On the way, he revisits Gigme and pulls out the invisible arrow, freeing the ballad singer from his life-long mission.

*King Gesar* looks like a fossil: The meaty parts — glamorous descriptions of battles, attire and witty banter — had to be sacrificed. But Alai does a good job introducing the world's

longest (and still growing) epic to the reader.

"The enduring fascination of the *Myths Series* is that no two myths are the same — they reflect not simply their different origins but, most importantly, the individual voices of the authors who have chosen to retell them," Perkins says.

"So Alai's myth fits perfectly into the patchwork of our series — it is both like and unlike the other books, distinct and complementary."

## Unleashing his pen by untying his tongue

By LIU JUN  
CHINA DAILY

Alai's voyage to become the best-known Tibetan author was anything but smooth sailing — especially navigating the choppy waters of writing outside his mother tongue.

Literature became fashionable in China in the early 1980s. Alai then delved into classics penned by such star scribes as Hemingway and Tolstoy while studying tractor driving before he became a middle school teacher.

Alai had never studied written Tibetan. He was born in 1959 in rural Sichuan province, where the Tibetan dialect is unlike the standard Lhasa parlance.

He grappled with the question of which tongue in which to pen his works.

Alai recalls feeling befuddled when he participated in an amateur writers' workshop in the early 1980s.

The discussions exclusively focused on literature's political meanings. Alai raised eyebrows when he told the group, "That can't be right."

A local celebrity author retorted by challenging him to write something. Alai stayed late into the night, penning the prose of his first Chinese-language poem.

The soft-spoken Sichuan Writers' Association chairman says he can't recall the work's content but remembers it garnered praise.

After much pondering, he settled on authoring his works in Chinese.

He poured his energy into *Red Poppies*, a book based on legends from his hometown. Publishers rejected the novel for four years before it became a best-seller translated into 16 languages.

His other major works include *Hollow Mountains (Kong Shan)* and *King Gesar*.

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# Food enthusiasts find 'paradise on earth' in Hangzhou

By YE JUN

The sublime scenery of West Lake is not the only attraction in Hangzhou. Considered "paradise on earth" by the Chinese since ancient times, the tourist city also has a wealth of culinary traditions that make it a paradise for gourmets.

Locals can easily give you a list of more than 10 food centers — places such as Wulin Square, Gaoyinjie Street, Shengli River and Nanshanlu Road that are already established among foodies.

But two new epicurean destinations promise a shortcut to understanding new developments in cuisine, not just in Hangzhou, but also in China.

As night falls, Zhongshan South Road lights up with warm yellow lamps on more than 100 food carts lining the street that offer some 500 gustatory varieties.

Different from many such streets offering local food, the carts here provide some great samples of *xiao-chi* — or quick food — from around the world and throughout China.

Prepare yourself for a diverse culinary exploration. It could be a bit of a surprise to see lamb kebabs prepared by locals from Xinjiang and roast lamb *gigot* made freshly on the spot by people from Inner Mongolia.

You soon realize most food carts sell something different from the next — barbecued squid Korean style, Northeast China's boiled dumplings, fried dishes made spicy Sichuan style, and even Japanese sushi and sashimi.

But the majority of foods are still local — mud-wrapped roast chicken and Hangzhou quick-fried dishes that leave vegetables and fish looking very fresh.

An elderly woman cooks cakes stuffed with diced bamboo sprouts and preserved vegetables, a local delicacy. You can follow your nose to find crispy Hangzhou smelly bean curd, which actually tastes delicious.

Zhongshan South Road is adjacent



PHOTOS BY JIANG NAN / FOR CHINA DAILY

There are 21 dining establishments along Dadou Food Street, half of them home-style restaurants.

to an old Drum Tower with a pagoda at its southern end. In the old part of Hangzhou — an imperial city in ancient times — the other end of the pedestrian street leads to a square built around the ruins of an ancestral temple from the Song Dynasty (960-1279).

The old lanes in the area are being renovated while keeping the ancient architectural style. The food street is in fact part of the local government's effort to revive and restore the old city.

### Restaurants

In addition to food carts, Zhongshan South Road has a row of "proper" restaurants representing different regions of China.

The local management has obviously gone to great effort to attract restaurants that have already established themselves nationally.

Xi'an Fanzhuang Restaurant, for example, is a famous eatery from its namesake city in Shaanxi province.



River shrimp and clams are among the popular dishes at Yunhe A'Er restaurant.

It offers dishes popular throughout China, such as sour and spicy cold noodles, and boiled flour cake in lamb soup.

Or try some of their signature "gourd" chicken, which is marinated, boiled, steamed and then deep fried, providing a taste flavorful and soft on the inside with crispy skin.

visitors can't resist the temptation of Nansong Shiba Xian — 18 delicacies of Southern Song Dynasty (1127-1279) — Restaurant. Its West Lake vinegar fish is ever so tender. The restaurant has a secret recipe for making soft dough ball soup, leaving it soft and elastic, served in a tasty bowl of clam and shrimp soup.

The food street also has restaurants from Fujian, Nanjing, Xi'ning, Kunming and Chongqing representing their regional cuisines, in addition to a teahouse.

While Zhongshan South Road is in the middle of downtown Hangzhou, Dadou Lu food street is located in the north of the city next to the historic Grand Canal.

### Along the Grand Canal

The canal, which starts in Beijing and ends Hangzhou, is the oldest and longest in the world. Buildings in the Dadou Lu area have been restored to their traditional Chinese architectural style.

One can admire the canal along Dadou food street, either by day when water traffic is busy, or at night, when lights illuminate the watercourse — or even take a boat, the city's "water bus", to reach the food street from within the city.

The recently rebuilt Xiangji Temple also adds allure to the area. It is the only temple in China worshipping a Bodhisattva who was a cook — one that protected his temple from bandits during the Northern Song Dynasty (960-1127).

At night the temple is also picturesque, with rows of red lanterns lighting its wooden rooftops.

There are 21 eateries along Dadou Food Street, half of them home-style restaurants, with the other half clubs and more high-market restaurants. The majority serve local cuisine, with three restaurants — Yunhe A'Er, Green Tea and Jiang Nan Yi — representatives of a new school of Hangzhou food.

Yunhe A'Er is popular for three styles: nutritious slow-boiled soups, river shrimp and clams, and country-



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style local dishes. A clay pot of soup is prepared inside a huge urn with charcoal for more than 6 hours. Sautéed flowery clams, boiled red fish with crab and razor clam are simple, but exceedingly delectable, just because they are so fresh. No MSG or other chemicals are used in the food.

Shui Tian Fan Restaurant, on the other hand, is a good example of an up-market dining experience. The interior is designed in natural Hangzhou style with private rooms including courtyards, bamboo, fountains and open-air spaces. One feels calm and in harmony with the nature while dining.

The food at Shui Tian Fang offers cuisines from Hangzhou, Guangdong, Sichuan and Fujian. Dishes are beautifully laid out, tasting light, but delicious. It includes an array of seafood, and plenty of healthy, tasty dishes.

After a good meal one can sip a nice cup of Longjing — Dragon Well — tea at San Run Jun teahouse, or good latte at Palmax, a film-themed café. After that, you can relax with a foot massage or a full-body massage at Yi Shui, a courtyard style health club.

The city of Hangzhou will not be just remembered by the eye, but also by the tongue. It is a place to come back to for one more exploration of great tastes and fantastic foods.