

## Exchanges: Artistic Dialogues Between Tibet and China



Zelda Ziebell

HART 372: Chinese Art and Visual Culture

Dr. Shih-shan Susan Huang

2 January 2019

Abstract: In a dynamic exhibition, *Exchanges: Artistic Dialogues Between Tibet and China* explores hybridized Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese styles from the Tang to the Qing Dynasty. China and Tibet have engaged in an iconographic dialogue, facilitated through Buddhism, for a period of over a thousand years, and a survey of this convergence of styles will present museum visitors with a visual timeline of a complex, transcultural relationship. The exhibition is organized by three sections: Secular Portraiture and Encounters, Esoteric Buddhism and Chinese Emperors, and Vajrayāna Buddhist Figures.

For my exhibition, *Exchanges: Artistic Dialogues Between Tibet and China*, I intend to display artworks that depict key moments in the visual relationship between Tibet and China and exemplify hybridized Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese styles. From Tibetan envoys in the Tang Dynasty, to Emperor Qianlong, who was depicted in Lama's robes, China and Tibet have converged in a cultural and artistic dialogue, often mediated through the shared practice of Buddhism (Kapstein 3). In Chinese dynastic history, Tibetan Buddhism offered the "allure of esoteric tantric ritual" that fueled relations between Chinese priests and Tibetan patrons, legitimized expansive dynastic rule, and introduced esoteric Buddhist iconography that resulted in the creation of Sino-Tibetan, or Tibeto-Chinese objects (Kapstein 3; Debreczeny 277).

Though Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese are art-historical terms, there are few exhibitions that display the convergence of these iconographic traditions. In 2009, The Museum of Fine Arts Boston opened *Tibet/China Confluences*. Curated by Joseph Scheier-Dolberg, the intention of the exhibition was to display paintings of the same subject matter together in order to draw attention to the ways in which Tibetan and Chinese stylistic traditions influenced each other (Bergeron 2009). However, the pieces in this exhibition were limited to the Boston MFA, and only included paintings and printed work. Correspondingly, I have been unable to find an exhibition that places regional emphasis on China, or incorporates artworks that span from the beginnings of China and Tibet's visual relationship to the reign of Emperor Qianlong in the 18th century.

In the course of my research for *Exchanges*, I debated whether to label my exhibition as either Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese. According to scholar H. Karmay, Sino-Tibetan may be used to indicate either "Tibetan art strongly influenced by Chinese" or "Chinese art strongly influenced by Tibetan," however, by definition, Sino-Tibetan art is made in Tibet with a predominantly Chinese style, and Tibeto-Chinese art is made in China in a Tibetan Style (qtd in

Samosyuk; Berger 109). In *Lineages of Form: Buddhist Portraiture in the Manchu Court*, Patricia Berger contests that both terms are problematic, as they each create the misapprehension that “Tibetan-style Buddhism was unified and homogenous,” imply a “hierarchy of host and guest cultures,” and omit the artistic contributions of foreign powers in Chinese imperial history, such as the Mongols (109). For lack of a better term, I have decided to include both Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese in the proposal for *Exchanges* since I have incorporated artworks that correspond to either category (109). However, I intend to include a placard in the exhibition that defines each term and explains their problematic aspects. That being said, the lack of a precise term confirms the necessity for an exhibition such as *Exchanges*, so that scholarly attention is drawn to each distinctive, hybrid style; likewise, with acknowledgement of nationalistic disputes between China and Tibet, an exhibition such as *Exchanges* offers hope that an understanding of artistic exchange can provide a comprehensive, historical look into a complex transcultural relationship.

In order to avoid a textbook approach to the artistic exchange between China and Tibet, I will organize my exhibition by rooms that feature the following themes present in the exhibited works: Secular Portraiture and Encounters, Esoteric Buddhism and Chinese Emperors, and Vajrayāna Buddhist Figures. The wall adjacent to the exhibition’s entrance will display a placard that provides an overview of Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese styles and a timeline that reviews key historical moments between China and Tibet. Near the entrance, there will be a room that loops a short documentary video of the artistic exchange between China and Tibet. This will allow visitors to locate themselves in the spatial context of the artwork prior to entering the exhibition

### **Secular Portraiture and Encounters**

Upon entering the exhibition, the visitor will discover representations of secular encounters between China and Tibet through both portraiture and historical scenes. They will be greeted by *The Imperial Sedan Chair* by Yan Liben (Fig. 1) — an early representation of a

meeting between China and Tibet, in which Gar Tongtsen, the Tibetan Envoy was asked to participate in a series of trials in order to win the hand of Chinese Princess Wencheng. Adjacent to the scroll, a touch screen will prompt the viewer to learn more about the scene. This will enable the visitor to distinguish Emperor Taizong, fanned by his Chinese consorts, from Tongtsen, and will describe how physiognomy and size are utilized to distinguish the Tibetans from the Chinese and to convey social status (Hsu 154; Murray 53). Throughout the exhibition, each object will have a touch screen that allows the viewer to learn more about the pieces.

As the visitor turns the corner, they will come across the *Imperial Portraits of Khubilai Khan and Chabi* (Fig. 2) from the Yuan dynasty, painted by Anige. At first glance, the portraits are not overtly Sino-Tibetan or Tibeto-Chinese, however — like *The Imperial Sedan Chair* — they illustrate a key historical moment in Tibetan and Chinese imperial relations. Art Historian Anning Jing provides context for Khubilai Khan's acceptance of Tibetan Buddhism and patronage of Anige; Chabi, Khubilai's wife and "ardent Buddhist," persuaded him to appoint Tibetan monk Phags pa as the Imperial Preceptor, or highest religious authority in the Yuan dynasty (Jing 41 *Portraits*). With recommendation from Phag spa, in the early 1260s, Nepalese artist Anige was invited to the Yuan court after his participation in the Sa skya Pandita stupa commissioned by Khubilai (Jing 44). By 1273, Anige was selected as Supervisor-in-chief of All Classes of Artisans, which gave him responsibility for religious images and imperial portraits (46-47). Influenced by kesi (silk) portraits of monks from the Sa skya monastery in Tibet, Anige created two versions of the *Imperial Portraits*: the first painted, and the second — through use of this innovative technique — woven into silk (53). In this section of the gallery, I will also display a Jade sculpture of Phags pa Lama and a scripture (Fig. 3-4) written in gold Phag spa script as an example of the Mongol writing system, the importance of gold as an incentive for conquest, and as a

representation of the value of the priest-patron relationship to political goals (Jing 217-220 *Financial and Material*).

Following the Yuan Dynasty objects, I will display the *Portrait of Zhu Di*, the Ming Yongle emperor, and the *Portrait of the Ming Ze*, the Ming Zhengtong emperor, and the *Portrait of Zhu Youtang*, the Hongzhi Emperor (Fig 5-7). In accordance with the precedent set by Khubilai Khan and Phag spa, the Ming emperors continued to foster the Tibetan Buddhist priest-patron relationship through imperial missions and gifts (Ching 337-338). As in the Yuan dynasty, interaction between Ming emperors and Tibetan priests was not limited to political relations; in “Tibetan Buddhism and the Creation of the Imperial Image,” Ching asserts that the portraits “reveal cross-influences and the sharing of new visual materials primarily Tibetan Buddhist in nature” (336). For example, though the portrait of the Ming Yongle emperor is traditionally Chinese, the artist hid eight auspicious Tibetan Buddhist symbols within the fabric of the carpet (346). Likewise, in the *Portrait of the Ming Ze*, the portrait’s full-frontal view, its flatness, and the elaborate decoration of the Ming Zhengtong emperor’s robe indicate Sino-Tibetan style (350-351). Tibetan influence in Ming portraiture culminated with the abstracted *Portrait of Zhu Youtang*, in which the artist diminished the “individual’s identity” through perfect symmetry, increased flatness, lavish decoration, and an overtly imperial setting (353). Exhibited together, the emperor portraits will convey the transformation of the Ming imperial image through Tibetan modes of representation as a means to “capitalize on religious convictions to political advantage” (358).

### **Esoteric Buddhism and Chinese Emperors**

Following Secular Portraiture and Encounters, the next gallery, Esoteric Buddhism and Chinese Emperors, will display artwork in which Chinese emperors are explicitly rendered in Tibetan Buddhist iconographic models, such as mandalas, or “diagrams of complex buddhist

fields and all their inhabitants,” often used to facilitate meditation practices (Berger 7 *Empire of Emptiness*). In addition, this gallery will exhibit gifts given to Tibetan hierarchs in priest-patron relationships, and a bronze portrait of Rolpe Dorje, Emperor Qianlong’s Tibetan guru.

The visitor will be greeted by the *Vajrabhairava Mandala* (1330-32) (Fig. 8) from the Yuan Dynasty. Woven in kesi, this mandala not only displays traditional Tibetan diagrammatic form and the deity Vajrabhairava, a manifestation of the Buddha of Wisdom and protector of the Mongol Empire, but also depicts portraits of Emperor Tokh Temur and his brother Prince Koshila, the great grandsons of Mongol emperor Khubilai Khan, in the bottom left corner (Fong 53; “Vajrabhairava Mandala”). In the bottom right corner, their consorts, Empress Bhudhashri and Lady Bhabucha, are depicted wearing the traditional Mongolian gugu (53). As a representation of the Mongol imperial family — within the context of a mandala — this tapestry epitomizes the intersection of Tibetan art and Chinese emperors in the Yuan dynasty.

After the *Vajrabhairava Mandala*, the gallery will display Ming Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese artwork. First, a thangka of the *Ming Yongle Initiation by the Karmapa* (Fig. 9), painted by an unknown artist in the 18th century, will portray the 1407 initiation of the Yongle emperor, Zhu Di, into Tibetan Buddhist practice at the Linggu Monastery pagoda in Nanjing, China, during the Tibetan Karmapa’s conduction of funerary ritual masses for Zhu Di’s father, the Hongwu emperor, and his mother, the Empress Ma (Berger 145, 150 “Miracles”). In this initiation ritual, water, mixed with medicines, grains, and gems was poured onto a mirror in an act of purification (151). The Karmapa is depicted on the larger throne holding a bell, and the Yongle emperor’s face is reflected on the surface of the mirror. In the center of the gallery, I will exhibit a series of Ming blue and white ceramics donated as gifts to Tibetan hierarchs from the Ming court (Ching 345). In the pictured example from the Met (Fig. 10), the ceramic surface of the altar bowl is inscribed with a Tibetan prayer that offers blessings to the user (“Altar Bowl with Tibetan Inscription”).

The opposing side of the gallery will be occupied by the final Ming artwork: *The Yongle Karmapa Scroll*, or the Tsurphu handscroll (Fig. 11). Commissioned by the emperor in 1407, the 50 meters-long scroll illustrates the auspicious events, including “rays of light, rains of flowers, congregations of lohans, bodhisattvas, rainbows, and cranes,” that occurred at the Linggu Monastery during the Karmapa’s visit (Berger 145 “Miracles in Nanjing”). Painted by the Yongle emperor court painters, and inscribed in Chinese, Arabic, Uighur, Tibetan, and Mongolian (characteristic of the multicultural nature of the Ming dynasty), the events culminated in the consecration of the Ming Yongle emperor and his wife as Buddhist saints (Berger 150; Weidner 53). Together, the *Ming Yongle Initiation* and *Tsurphu scroll* will illustrate the relationship between the Karmapa and the emperor (demonstrated in the thangka’s use of scale — the emperor is rendered smaller than the Karmapa), the miracles at Nanjing, and the interchange of Chinese and Tibetan artistic styles (Berger 153). Ultimately, the works will be indicative of the Ming dynasty’s “quintessential” development of the priest-patron relationship (Kapstein 6).

On the opposing wall, the exhibition will showcase pieces from the Qing Dynasty, likely the highpoint of Sino-Tibetan and Tibeto-Chinese artwork (Berger 7 *Empire of Emptiness*). The first piece will be *The Great Fifth Dalai Lama and the Qing Shunzhi Emperor in the Baohedian Beijing* (1653) (Fig. 12) (21). In the double portrait, the architecture of the Forbidden City is used to form a Tibetan mandala, and the Emperor and Lama are rendered under the rising Baohedian (21). As in the *Ming Yongle Initiation*, the Tibetan Lama is depicted as larger than the Emperor, which is illustrative of how scale was utilized to convey the gravity of the priest-patron relationship, and Chinese support of Tibetan Buddhist practice (21).

In this section, there will also be two pieces from Emperor Qianlong, who was, of all Chinese emperors, the most ardent supporter of Tibetan Buddhism (9). Facilitated by his personal Tibetan guru and National Preceptor, Rolpe Dorje, Qianlong was initiated into Vajrayāna

Buddhism ten years after his appointment as emperor (8-9); through a balance of traditional Chinese cultural activities and daily Tibetan Buddhist practice, Qianlong strove to unify his multicultural, multilingual, empire that expanded into Central Asia (6). The first painting, an 18th century thangka titled *Qianlong as Mañjuśrī Emperor* (Fig. 13), displays the Emperor wearing lama robes and holding a chakra wheel in the position of Mañjuśrī, the universalist Bodhisattva of Insight (55). Qianlong is surrounded by Mandala circles that illustrate a “self-generated pantheon of 108 Buddhist figures” set against the background of auspicious clouds and sacred Mt. Wutaishan, Mañjuśrī’s “Chinese home” (55). The Emperor’s face, rendered by Guiseppe Castilogne, stares outside the picture plane directly into the eyes of the viewer (55). The next piece, *The Thousand Dharmas Return As One* (1771) (Fig. 14), is a wallpaper painting of the Qianlong Emperor during a celebration at Chengde, the Manchu summer retreat “designed to replicate one of the great monasteries of Tibet,” in which the Torget Mongols returned from Russia to the Qing Empire (18). The scene depicts a ritual performance by the Tibetan Lama (18), and incorporates, in precise detail, the attendance of Rolpe Dorje, Isha-dambanina (a descendant of the “greatest incarnate lineage” Mongol Khalka tribe), an audience of Tibetan lamas, and a group of rugged Mongol guests wearing five-buddha crowns as new “initiates into the tantras of Tibetan Buddhism” (16-17). Rendered in rich, Tibetan-style colors on Chinese silk, the painting exemplifies the Manchu’s multicultural style through the involvement of Chinese court artist Yao Wenhan, who executed the emperor’s portrait, and a Bohemian Jesuit artist Ignatz Sichelpart, who painted the Torghut Mongols and lamas, as well as by the incorporation of iconographic details such as a traditionally Tibetan sky over Chengde, a “Chinese-style pavilion enclosed within a Tibetan-style citadel” (15-19). Sichelpart’s attention to realistic detail will be supplemented by a portrait of Rolpe Dorje (Fig. 15), which I will display in the center of the gallery (17). Qianlong



invited the Torghuts to assert power over his empire, and together, the paintings will underscore the way in which Qianlong utilized Tibetan Buddhism as a personal practice and political strategy.

### **Vajrayāna Buddhist Figures**

The last gallery will consist of a room dedicated to Vajrayāna Buddhist figures that are depicted in scenes that exclude additional Emperor portraiture (as seen in the previous gallery). Here I will have the opportunity to display examples of early Buddhist Art from the Tangut state of Xia Xia, also known as the Western Xia Empire. Beginning in the 11th century, Xia Xia, located “between Tibet and China,” flourished with support from the bustling Silk Road and attention to both Vajrayāna and Mahayana Buddhist practice, until its eradication by the Mongols in 1227 (Kyachnov 65). The material culture that emerged from this Buddhist amalgamation included Chinese style, Tibetan style, and consequently hybridized artwork. Correspondingly, I will display two pieces from the Tangut town of Khara Khoto: the first, the *Green Tārā* thangka (Fig. 16), is an exquisite representation of the female buddha goddess upon a blue lotus (140). Woven in kesi — a technique that was undoubtedly Chinese — the Tibetan Tārā is framed by pearls, an assortment of lotus blossoms, and trees (140). The thangka is also decorated with additional Vajrayāna Buddhist iconography, including Aśokakāntā (the Goddess of the Dawn), Ekajaṭī (another Vajrayāna Buddhist goddess), nāgas (serpents), minor Buddhas used to facilitate meditation, and a row of dākinis (dancing girls), a feature indigenous to the artwork of Khara Koto (72, 140). Renowned for its “composition and line, subtlety of color, and fine craftsmanship,” the *Green Tārā* thangka will be one of the star objects of my exhibition (141). In addition to *Green Tārā*, I will also exhibit *Samantabhadra* (Fig.17), a scroll that depicts the *bodhisattva* of meditation seated upon an elephant, and various attributes, including paintbrushes, books, and a spouted jar (214). The iconographic details, including a series of Chinese protectors that surround the central composition, two Chinese-style bodhisattvas, Tibetan flatness and

symmetry, and a central figure with “Mongol features” epitomize the multicultural style of the Tanguts (214).

In this gallery, I will also include the *Green Tārā* thangka painted by Anige (Fig. 18), in the hope of conveying stylistic variety of Khubilai Khan’s court painter (“Green Tara”). Painted in the 1260s, the incorporation of an additional *Green Tārā* will allow a point of comparison from the Khara Koto thangka; influenced by the central Tibetan painting tradition, this *Green Tārā* is notable for its line-work, careful shading, and saturated, “jewel-like” color (“Green Tara”). The center of the room will feature a sculpture from the Yongle Ming Period of the same deity, *Green Tara, Seated in Pose of Royal Ease* (Fig. 19). Engraved with Da Ming Yongle (“Bestowed in the Yongle reign of the Great Ming”) this sculpture is representative of gifts given to lamas in the context of the priest-patron relationship (“Green Tara”). Similarly, I will display the *Original Vows of the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha Sutra* as an Xuande example of woodblock printing, a practice incited by Buddhism and “affected by cultural exchange with Tibet” (Weidner 54). In this piece, hybridized style is embodied by the buddha, which is stylistically Tibetan, and the secondary figures, which are Chinese (54).

The last painting in this gallery will be *The Demoness of Tibet* (Fig. 21). Painted with mineral pigments during the late 19th century, the composition portrays an abstracted map of Tibet, depicted upon the body of a mythical supine Tibetan Buddhist demoness (Mills 2016). The inclusion of the *The Demoness of Tibet* will refer back to the first work of my exhibition, *The Sedan Chair*: when Princess Wencheng wed Gar Tongtsen, she declared that Tibet was “filled with inauspicious signs” and characteristic of a “she-demon (sinmo) lying on her back” (Mills 2016). Thus, Princess Wencheng ordered Tongtsen to nail down twelve temples — that still exist today — onto the body of the demoness, in an effort to control her untamed qualities (Mills 2016).

## Architecture and Conclusion

In the final section of the exhibition, I will present a to-scale, life-size, miniature model of the sDe mgon po Mahākāla Temple (that allows visitors to walk through it), as a representation of Tibetan Buddhist temples from the Yuan Dynasty, with a sculpture of the deity Mahākāla (Fig. 22) within the temple (Debreczeny 299). In Tibetan Buddhism, Mahākāla is a frightening deity that serves as a protector. In the attempt to conquer the Southern Song, Mahākāla sculptures were utilized as a “means to real physical power” (Debreczeny 277; Jing 47 *Portraits*). The Mahākāla in my exhibition is the closest replica to a Mahākāla made by Anige, and exemplifies the Tibetan Buddhism of the Yuan Empire (“Mahākāla”). The temple, constructed in 1284 and located in Western Sichuan, was blessed by Phag spa and incorporated Mahākāla as its “central image” (Debreczeny 281, 293). Within the model (which will be constructed in an outside area of the exhibition space), visitors will be able to experience Tibetan architectural features: the front porch, outer circumambulatory, and rooftop chapel (Debreczeny 295), and replicas of the temple’s panel paintings. The Mahākāla will be featured prominently in the center of the temple’s inner chapel. Inspired by *The Astor Chinese Garden Court* in the Met, the model will offer visitors a dramatic, memorable experience of the hybridized architecture that conjures the unique spatial context of the artwork and important figures in Tibetan and Chinese exchange.

# Film Room

# Timeline

