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The Transformation of Tibetan Artists' Identities from 1959-Present Day

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF TIBETAN
ARTISTS' IDENTITIES FROM 1959-PRESENT DAY

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THE TRANSFORMATION OF CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ARTISTS'
IDENTITIES

FROM 1959-PRESENT DAY

MICHELLE MENO

ABSTRACT

The notion of Tibetan art as a preservation of the Shangri-La culture that existed before Chinese occupation is a pervasive ideology among western scholars. Buddhist *thangka* paintings were and still are an important aspect of Tibetan heritage and sense of identity. This paper, however, focuses on the shifting roles of Tibetan artists from the onset of the Chinese “liberation” of Tibet in 1959 to present day. The tremendous lack of scholarship on contemporary Tibetan artists, including both those who still live in the Tibetan Autonomous Region and those who have traveled abroad, has served as a catalyst for the research presented in this thesis. The major theme of this paper, which encompasses the shifts in Tibetan artistic identity over the past sixty years, is presented three different sections. The first section explains artistic identity as it was before the Chinese occupation. The second section presents Tibetan art identity as it existed under Communist rule and the Cultural Revolution, and the third section notes the changes in contemporary art identity in regards to the post-Mao era to present day. The change in social and political climates dictates how Tibetans classify and explain their identity and the roles of artists change with both internal and external influences. The Buddhist *thangka* artists, socialist-realist painters, and contemporary artists, all define Tibetan artistic identity over the last sixty years and create a visual, interconnected timeline of Tibetan people’s suffering and transformation.

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CHAPTER I

THE BARDO: TIBETAN ART IDENTITY BEFORE CHINESE OCCUPATION

The first chapter of this paper serves as the introduction. The first part explains the nature of Tibetan art identity before the 1959 takeover of Tibet. The second part details the scholarship previously written on this subject as well as important scholars working in the field. The last part discusses the Tibetan invasion by the Communist Chinese, an historically essential aspect to this paper since the majority of artwork presented here responds to this event. In writing this thesis, I present Tibetan artists' works as a dialogue of their feelings, emotions, and interpretations of the social events surrounding Tibet. I do not speak for the artists, and can only analyze their works within my own social and cultural constructs. I do so with empathy, compassion and the wish to gain insight into their artistic intentions. There are few scholars researching in this area, and with current Chinese restrictions in the Tibet region, I fear that the rich contemporary art created in Tibet will be suppressed and soon forgotten. It is important to keep this artistic inquiry in motion, and thus from this inquiry the following is written.

PART 1

THE ROLE OF THANGKA PAINTING IN TIBETAN ARTISTIC IDENTITY

In order to understand how modern Tibetan artistic identity has been shaped since the “Peaceful Liberation” of 1959, one must have a background in traditional Tibetan art; its influences and purpose over the previous thirteen hundred years. To accomplish this in a short chapter is difficult, but necessary for the foundation of my thesis. This section is dedicated specifically to Tibetan *thangka* painting; its creation, function, and religious and political meaning for the Tibetan artists. This art form is so important for a modern scholar to understand because it holds all of the cultural and religious beliefs of the Tibetan people within its cloth. From the production of the materials to the creation and dedication of the painting, this art form exemplifies the Buddhist philosophies that permeate the Tibetan mindset.

The word *thangka* literally translates to “written record” and this art form is closely linked to the *pata* paintings created in India during the eighth century A.D.¹ The Hindu *pata* paintings, like their Tibetan counterparts, depicted religious deities and scenes from sacred Sanskrit texts. The evolution from *pata* painting to Tibetan *thangka* painting proved to be an easy transition: there was extensive trade and migration from Northern India into the Himalayas from King Asoka’s time (272-236 B.C.) onward. After a thousand years of trade and travel between countries, it is understandable that Hindu and Buddhist art forms would influence one another. Sadly there are no surviving *pata*

¹ Ann Shaftel, “Notes on the Technique of Tibetan Thangkas,” in *Journal of the American Institute for Conservation*, vol. 25, No. 2 (Autumn 1986): 97.

paintings from the early years (600-1200 A.D), but many Sanskrit texts from these times describe their structure, iconography, and purpose.² Thangka paintings became more common as a Buddhist art form during the end of the tenth century in Nepal and Tibet, and the four hundred years of prior pata painting had apparent influence on this new form.³ The Buddhist religion added thousands of new deities to the older Sanskrit/Hindu pantheon and newly formed Buddhist schools set up rigid diagrams of artistic creation. Both cultures set up the painting ground on cotton, both trained and empowered their artisans to perform meditation/mantra recitation during the painting process, and both dedicated the merit of their actions to their enlightened deities. They also inscribed religious inscriptions on the back of the paintings, thus bringing the deity to “life”.⁴ It was through this process that the thangka painting became a sacred, religious tool for both personal meditation and for teaching purposes.

The primary function of a thangka painting was religious and followed a fairly rigid set of instructions set forth by the prominent families (lineages originating from

² These scholars point out that the cloth artworks would not survive more than 200 years within the harsh, hot climate of India, especially when constantly rolled up and carried throughout the countryside. Steven M. Kossak and Jane Casey Singer, *Sacred Visions: Early Paintings from Central Tibet* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1998), 11.

³ Heather Stoddard, “Early Tibetan Paintings: Sources and Styles (Eleventh-Fourteenth Centuries A.D.)” in *Archives of Asian Art*, vol 49 (1996): 26.

⁴ Matthew Kapstein, “Weaving the World: The Ritual Art of the “Pata” in Pala Buddhism and Its Legacy in Tibet.” in *History of Religions*, vol 34, No. 3 *Image and Ritual in Buddhism* (Feb 1995): 250.

enlightened Buddhas) and their Buddhist ministers.⁵ Prior to the eleventh century, Buddhism was a court religion set forth by King Songsten Gampo (649A.D), and the religious art was commissioned by heads of monasteries, important Buddhist officials, and wealthy practitioners who wanted to accumulate good merit for themselves and family members.⁶ Buddhist art was not for the layperson or nomadic wanderer. Thangka styles varied by teaching lineage and geographic location, but there was also much overlap in artistic style due to the nomadic life of the Himalayan cultures during the “Early Diffusion” of Buddhism. As groups of Tibetans would drift through the mountains, they would trade, share art, and discuss the teachings, which contributed to the blending of their art styles. All thangka paintings, however, followed a similar formula of creation: first, the construction of the support ground and cotton (prepared with yak hide glue); second, the measurement of the deity and figures (the proportions varied by master teacher and school), third, the charcoal sketch of the entire painting; fourth, the application of flat, local color in a specific sky to foreground order; fifth, the outlining of figures and objects; sixth, the shading of the entire painting; seventh, the gold ornamentation; eighth, the mounting of the painting onto silk or brocade; and ninth, the consecration ceremony or “*cenje*” in which the living embodiment of the painted deity

⁵⁵ I mention “fairly rigid” because the strict, auspicious standards applied to the Pata paintings could not be assimilated into the structure of Tibetan thangka paintings. For example The pata artist would make sure the cotton came from a “pure” source and would consecrate a village virgin before she would weave the cloth. These standards were impossible for Tibetans to follow since many of their materials and fabrics were imported from surrounding regions. Thus Tibetan thangka painting became more flexible to the landscape and nature of their people. Stoddard, “Early Tibetan Paintings,” 47.

⁶ Kossak and Singer, *Sacred Visions*, 3.

was “opened”, therefore the painting actually *became* the deity itself.⁷ Most Tibetan thangka paintings included a wide array of subject matter including mythological beings, important living and deceased lineage masters, scenes of various Tibetan legends, and biographies of previous teachers.⁸ After creation, these paintings were sold to the previously mentioned patrons, or rolled up and carried on yaks to be used as teaching devices by Buddhist Lamas and monks who traveled to villages and monasteries between Nepal, Tibet, Bhutan, Kathmandu, and China.

Some of the earliest known thangka style paintings were excavated at a pilgrimage site in Dunhuang, China, which Tibet controlled from 787 until 848.⁹ Among these was a banner painting on cloth of the Bodhisattva Vajrapani, which dates to the early ninth century (Fig. 1). The painting is clearly executed with an Indian influence since the deity is adorned with Indian jewelry and clothing, as well as Hindu motifs of flowers and lotus petals. The disproportionate hands and feet, along with the rough outlining and unsophisticated shading, show that this is an early example of thangka painting. It precedes the rigid iconometry of later styles and proves that the techniques of early painters were unorganized without the establishment of Buddhist art schools. This is an important image illustrating the beginnings of a Tibetan style; they chose Indian influence over Chinese style despite their close vicinity to China and their political occupation of its capitol. King Trisong Detsen held a disputation in 779 A.D. where both Chinese and Indian philosophies were argued. The king upheld that the Indian tradition of

⁷ Shaftel, “Notes on the Technique,” 99-101.

⁸ Pratapaditya Pal, *Tibetan Paintings: A Study of Tibetan Thangkas Eleventh to Nineteenth Centuries*. (London: Sotheby Publications, 1984), 17.

⁹ Kossak and Singer, *Sacred Visions*, 5.

the “gradual path” to enlightenment, coupled with compassionate deeds, would be the influential tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.¹⁰

The creation and function of Tibetan thangka paintings shows that the Buddhist lifestyle was meant to apply order to a chaotic world; each step of the painting process and every mantra recited during creation were considered enlightened actions for both the artist and the patron.¹¹ This sets up a paradox in the nature of Tibetan artistic identity during the early periods of thangka painting (7th through 11th centuries): artists were, on the one hand, creating paintings for a religious purpose, under a system dictated by the Buddhist aristocracy; and yet these artists were not considered instruments of a repetitive, stagnant art form, rather they were actively engaged individuals celebrating their own path to enlightenment. This dual status for the artist as anonymous craftsman and as a creative artist is key to understanding the complexity of the role and identity of the early Tibetan artist. The term anonymous is to be taken literally here since the Tibetan artists of the early periods did not sign their names on the backs of paintings; only the names of the deities, and those of patrons, and lineage masters were inscribed onto a thangka.¹² An act of inscribing one’s own name would imply a great ego, and since the nature of Buddhism is to cut through the ego to understand interdependence and emptiness, the artist denies such act and practices reverence to all other sentient beings. Since many thangka artists were high lamas of particular schools, there was no separation between the politics of the monasteries, the religious servitude of the artist, and the creation of the painting. This

¹⁰ Singer argues that King Trisong Detsen had political ties to Eastern India, and his philosophical beliefs aligned more with those of the Indian tradition. Kossak and Singer, *Sacred Visions*, 4.

¹¹ Kapstein, “Weaving the World,” 254-55.

¹² Stoddard, “Early Tibetan Paintings,” 28.

cycle of art making appears to have been externally prescribed by the Tibetan state, especially when the importance of the donor is taken into consideration. Because of the nature of the Tibetan Buddhist religion, however, these thangka artists were also creating for their own religious enjoyment and were engaged in ritual bliss as they tended to their craft. As Matthew Kapstein describes their art:

[It is][N]ot to be understood solely as utilitarian acts in the service of a ritual practice with which they enjoy no inherent relationship; there is no distance here between craft and ritual—we are engaged at all times in the weaving of a world”.¹³

For the early Tibetan artists, creation, religion, and life were all intertwined; art was a sacred study that brought everyone involved closer to enlightenment. A set iconographic style was followed, but the “creative impulse” of the artist was still allowed if his intent was spiritually guided.¹⁴ This philosophy is key to understanding later changes in Tibetan artistic identity (once Tibet is taken over by the Chinese); if the traditional Buddhist religion remains connected to its artistic creation for over one millennia, then artists’ identities would consciously (and subconsciously) shift once religion was expunged from its process.

A second shift in Tibetan artistic identity occurred over one-hundred and fifty years after the “Dark Period” (838-1000), which is described as a time of chaos in Tibet due to assassinations of Buddhist Kings by Bon followers, and vice versa.¹⁵ Buddhist

¹³ Kapstein, “Weaving the World,” 249.

¹⁴ Pratapaditya Pal. *Tibetan Paintings*, 19.

¹⁵ Bon religion is the pre-Buddhist, indigenous religion of Tibet characterized by its shamanistic foundation and its belief in world full of good and evil spirits. Kossak and Singer, *Sacred Visions*, 5.

monks who had been ordained in smaller villages during the turmoil returned to Central Tibet and began to build monasteries. They brought trained artists who wished to cleanse and sanctify their artistic practice that centuries of war had eroded.¹⁶ Buddhist art gained widespread popularity throughout Tibet, moving it beyond the realm of royal families and political aristocracy. The normal layperson who excelled in the arts found this a time of opportunity (especially the 14th through the 16th centuries when Tibet and the Mongol empire had close political and religious alliances) for patronage and career advancement. One of the most famous artists of the thirteenth century, Anige, was only an eighteen year old Nepalese boy when the imperial court of Kublai Khan summoned him from monastery work in Tibet.¹⁷ He later started his own art school and it is thought that his Tibetan art style greatly influenced Yuan and early Ming art in China.¹⁸

Although most Tibetan artists did not sign their names on works before the early fourteen hundreds, the famous “Green Tara” thangka painting from the Cleveland Museum of art has been attributed to the artist Aniko by many scholars.¹⁹ Figure 2 shows the progression of skill mastered by both Nepalese and Tibetan artists from the earlier period of thangka painting into the thirteenth century. This painting illustrates the more elaborate style of the “Later Diffusion” of Tibetan art and Aniko’s attention to intricate detail, which he included in his architectural, mural, and sculptural work as well.²⁰ This particular image is a prime example of the artistic “brilliance and originality...that is so

¹⁶ Kossak and Singer, *Sacred Visions*. 6.

¹⁷ Pratapaditya Pal, *Tibetan Paintings*, 61.

¹⁸ Pratapaditya Pal. *Ibid.*, 73.

¹⁹ Kossak and Singer, *Ibid.*, 144. See also Miranda Shaw, *Buddhist Goddesses of India*. (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), 501.

²⁰ Kossak and Singer. *Sacred Visions*. 146.

programmatically ambitious and artistically accomplished.”²¹ The thangka painting of Tara exists as an exemplary model of this time period because the shift in artistic style and identity moved towards spiritual and artistic originality and individuality. The inventiveness of the painting is related to Aniko’s blending of multiple styles (Bengali shrine ornamentation, Nepalese miniaturization, Indian motifs and adornments, and Tibetan iconography and proportion), the unusual degree to which he details Tara’s *torana* and throne base (see Fig. 3 detail), and the extensive shading that lends a highly three-dimensional aspect to the deity and surrounding creatures.²² The painter’s mastery of his art form and his independent creative identity place him as the most advanced and influential artist of this time.

These new Tibetan artists, as part of the Later Diffusion of Buddhism, placed more emphasis on distinguishing themselves from other area painters. Apprenticeships became common, art schools were built and headed by master painters, and artists began signing their names onto the backs of the thangka paintings.²³ Their individuality as artists became more important, which creates a quandary for scholars since the nature of Buddhism is to reject the ego and place other beings before oneself. This cultural phenomena could be seen as a small shift from their religious rigidity (some might say a weakening of the religion) to embrace the flourishing art movements under new leaders and alliances. The famous artists of these later years (mid fifteenth century) would create entire manuals on their style and iconography, which would also include their other areas

²¹ Kossak and Singer. *Sacred Visions*, 144.

²² Kossak and Singer, *Ibid.*, 144.

²³ David Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions*. (Vienna: Austrian Academy of Sciences, 1996), 82.

of expertise (poetry, knowledge of ancient texts, etc.).²⁴ This further perpetuated the teaching master's ego over their novice disciples, thereby placing another fissure in the "ego-less" culture they wished to represent. The greatest example of this "Master-Ego" complex comes from the words of the tenth Karma-pa of Tibet (1604-1674), a master painter. He stated that "there will not be anyone better than me in Tibet in the arts of poetry and painting. I am a person who gladdens Avalokitesvara. I have come into this world to paint paintings."²⁵

This mentality shows that while a religious framework for artistic creation in Tibet was established, an internal conflict remained between religious values and artistic practices. The artistic identities of these painters were varied and complex from the onset of Tibetan thangka painting to the Chinese occupation in the twentieth century. Some artists identified themselves as preserving their lineage for the sake of Tibetan history; some were devoted students of painting masters dedicating their life to religious art in the hopes of achieving enlightenment, and some were more radical, creating completely new styles because of their spiritual fervor and artistic genius.²⁶ Their religion offered a cultural and vocational opportunity to utilize their artistic skills, and their passion for art was satiated both monetarily and spiritually. This was the nature of their artistic identity until the Chinese takeover of 1959.

²⁴ David Jackson. *A History of Tibetan Painting*, 104.

²⁵ David Jackson. *A History of Tibetan Painting*, 247.

²⁶ David Jackson. *Ibid.*, 348.

PART TWO
NOTES ON SCHOLARSHIP

The reason I chose to research contemporary Tibetan art was in part due to the tremendous lack of scholarship on the subject. Although there have been some major exhibitions in recent years on contemporary Tibetan art (for example the Rubin Museum's "Traditions Transformed" exhibit in 2010 and Peaceful Wind Gallery's "Lhasa Train" exhibition from 2006), the scholarly discourse is still severely lacking. The factors behind this are numerous. Many modern Tibetologists instead discuss the greatness of traditional thangka painting and the preservation of Tibetan culture through its time honored art forms (ie. Robert Thurman's books on thangka painting exhibitions in San Francisco and Boston²⁷ and the mandala art exhibition sponsored by Tibet House²⁸). The scholars discussed in the previous section includes David Jackson, Steven Kossak, and Jane Casey Singer are further examples to the scholarly focus on traditional Tibetan art forms. Since the Dalai Lama and the large exiled Tibetan community in Dharamsala further wish to preserve their artistic lineages and the long-established culture of their people, it is inevitable that many books will be published on this topic.

There are, however, a few scholars who have written on contemporary Tibetan art and continue to advance this subject matter as it changes in the twenty first century. One notable scholar (and the only one thus far who has published an entire book on the

²⁷ See *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2000) and also *Worlds of Transformation: Tibetan Art of Wisdom and Compassion*, (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1999).

²⁸ See *Mandala: The Architecture of Enlightenment*, (New York: Shambala Publications, 1998).

subject) is Dr. Clare Harris of Oxford University. She is both lecturer of Visual Anthropology at Oxford and curator of Asian Collections at the Pitt Rivers Museum. Her book *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959* served as a primary source for this thesis. The book concisely describes the various images of Tibet as seen by the Chinese, the Tibetans themselves (both the Tibetan Autonomous Region in China and the communities in exile), and Western cultures. She uses numerous visual examples to explain how these cultural perceptions are formed, and also discusses the progress of Tibetan art into the modern era. She devotes an entire chapter to the art and biography of Gonkar Gyatso, a prominent contemporary Tibetan artist who she interviewed in the mid-1990's while traveling to both the T.A.R. and exiled communities. Although this book is a milestone in presenting modern Tibetan art to the Western world, it was published fourteen years ago and begs for following commentaries. There are dozens of modern Tibetan artists, both traveling abroad and living in the T.A.R. who deserve recognition for their artistic contributions while a majority of the art world continues to research traditional Tibetan art. It is unfortunate that Dr. Harris' second book on this topic entitled *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet* cannot be used for this thesis since its publication date is set for fall of this year.

Aside from Dr. Harris' book, there are other scholars who have written short publications and articles on modern Tibetan art. Laura Harrington's article "Crossing the Great Divide: Tradition and Modernity in Tibetan Buddhist Art" explains the dichotomy

between lasting traditions and new implementations of modern Tibetan art.²⁹ This article shows the scholarly trend to analyze and comment on the modern Tibetan art exhibitions that are growing in number across the globe. Her article also compliments the many journalists writing for both online and print publications, for example Max Eternity's "Buddha 2010: Contemporary Tibetan Art in New York."³⁰ Both Eternity and Harrington use the Rubin Museum's *Tradition Transformed* exhibition as the backdrop for their articles.

The reality of global economies and fast-paced social networks has given rise to shorter, more immediate writings on this theme. Curators of shows post their commentaries on gallery websites³¹, and professors of Tibetan anthropology write short articles for the widely known Asianart.com conglomerate gallery site.³² The Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art and the Gedun Choephel Artists' Gallery constantly update articles on current shows and artists' intentions. Even the artists are writing commentaries on their work and the meaning of modern Tibetan art in a global

²⁹ "Crossing the Great Divide: 'Tradition' and 'Modernity' in Tibetan Buddhist Art," in *Journal of Material Religion*, Vol 4, Issue 1, (March 2008).

³⁰ "Buddha 2010: Contemporary Tibetan Art in New York," *The Huffington Post.com*, Oct. 12, 2010, www.huffingtonpost.com/max-eternity/buddha-2010-contemporary-b-738707.html (accessed Jan 16, 2012).

³¹ See Leigh Miller Sangster, "Inside Out," Exhibition Essay in Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild, *Arts Cad.com*, May 20-22, 2007, <http://fr.artscad.com/A.nsf/Opra/SRVV-72UKSC> (accessed on Dec. 4, 2010).

³² See Kabir Mansingh Heimsath's, "Untitled Identities: Contemporary Art in Lhasa, Tibet," *asianart.com*, Dec. 16, 2005, (<http://www.asianart.com/articles/heimsath/index.html>) (accessed on Dec, 12, 2011).

And also Lisa Becker's "Waves on the Turquoise Lake: Contemporary Expressions of Tibetan Art," Asian Art Exhibitions, *asianart.com*, <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/waves/lake.html> (accessed on October 18, 2010)

atmosphere.³³ Artists' blogs, university seminar publications, and chapters of multi-authored books, all form a stream of consciousness that at first seems fragmented, but underneath shows a pattern of Tibetan pride and a longing to establish a sense of contemporary Tibetan artistic identity.

This is where my scholarship enters. I have attempted to piece together the multitude of small publications, museum exhibition catalogues, artist blog entries, curator commentaries, anthropological articles, and other sources for Modern Tibetan art studies. I present the notion of artistic identity as the underlying theme for my thesis and bridge the traditional art forms with their contemporary counterparts. I conversed with curators of art shows from Rome to Beijing and networked with professors in order to both expand the information available to me and synthesize it all into my argument. I use the research of Dr. Harris as my catalyst, but greatly expound on her findings by embracing twenty-first century technology; social networks, email, and websites. I use a plethora of magazine, newspaper, and journal articles from both art, religious, and anthropological publications in order to connect the visual art movement with the cultural phenomena of identity and the Tibetan devotion to their Buddhist religion. In the future I hope that more scholars will research and write about modern Tibetan art, for this will create a wider historical and cultural dialogue for the people who reside on the "roof of the world."

³³ See Jamyang Norbu's "The Tractor in the Lotus: The Origins and Evolution of Contemporary Tibetan Art". PDF sent by Dr. Robbie Barnett via email, Dec. 2010.

PART THREE

THE DARK HOUR:

A BRIEF DISCUSSION OF THE TIBET INVASION

The “Peaceful Liberation of Tibet” in 1959 and the Chinese Cultural Revolution of the late sixties and early seventies left Tibet in historical, architectural, and cultural ruins. Jamyang Norbu, once the director of the Tibetan Institute of Performing Arts, described the broken Tibetan society as a “cultural noodle-machine for cranking out endless political and racial propaganda.”³⁴ Where Tibetan *thangkas* were once created with religious pride, Maoist representations took their place. Where paintings of Tibetan landscapes and peoples had flourished, socialist-realist propaganda now enveloped the art world. The political agenda of China was publicized mostly through artworks, and Tibetan artists felt the suppression of their religious art in favor of the national program. In fifteen years a thirteen-hundred year old culture was seized and assimilated into a modern communist program that sought to erase all that was culturally Tibetan.

As early as 1933, following the death of the thirteenth Dalai Lama, the Chinese government attempted to control the mediation and reinstatement of the fourteenth Dalai Lama.³⁵ They tried to shape Tibetan politics and foreign affairs during World War II in

³⁴ Jamyang Norbu, “Broken Images: Cultural Questions facing Tibetans today- Part 1” in *Tibetan Review*, Dec 1993, 15.

³⁵ China obviously wanted the next Dalai Lama to be a Chinese nationalist, but the Dalai Lama lineage was historically predicted through the previous Dalai Lama’s advisors and Panchen Lama, on the basis of reincarnation (which the Chinese religiously refuted). China’s attempt did not come into fruition as Tibet held fast to their values and the Panchen Lama described who

order to move profitable war supplies from India to China, but Tibet remained neutral and did not allow the formation of these trade routes.³⁶ In 1950 the People's Republic of China (PRC) seized the Tibetan military forces of Chamdo as a warning to the Tibetan government that it was not an independent nation; they were geographically and historically a part of China.³⁷ The Dalai Lama was only fifteen years old at the time and was pressured by his advisors to take complete political and religious control over Tibet; beforehand he had been receiving training for his role as head of government, but had years left to complete. For nine years following the invasion of Chamdo, Lhasa and the PRC held negotiations while China pressed for the "Peaceful Liberation" of Tibet's people. Tibet appealed to the United Nations, but since China insisted it had not attacked Tibet proper (they believed Chamdo to be Chinese territory since 1904), the U.N. turned down their appeal.³⁸ By 1955 Chairman Mao expressed his thoughts on Chinese colonization (the acquiring of Tibetan land and the increase of population within those areas) to Tenzin Gyatso (the Dalai Lama), which further pushed the two countries into disaccord.³⁹ Tibetan scholar Warren W. Smith gives background to Mao's intentions of political domination:

would be the next Dalai Lama. David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet*. (Boston: Shambala, 1986), 259.

³⁶ Snellgrove and Richardson, *A Cultural History*, 260.

³⁷ Warren W. Smith Jr, *China's Tibet? Autonomy or Assimilation* (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman and Littlefield, 2008), 13.

³⁸ China's underlying message throughout these negotiations stated that they would be liberating the Tibetans from the unequal feudal/serf system of government. There was no prior historical research to prove that the Tibetan system did not work for its people, and in fact many scholars found the Tibetan people to be happy with their life. Smith. *China's Tibet?*, 20.

³⁹ Smith. *Ibid.*, 22.

The Chinese name for Tibet, *Xizang* (“Western Treasure House”), demonstrates a Chinese perception of Tibet as a territory exploitable for its resources rather than as a nation, a country, or a people.⁴⁰

Between 1955 and 1959, the Chinese government slowly integrated its officials to the Tibetan government in Lhasa (some were Tibetan aristocrats bought-off by the Chinese on the promise of keeping their wealth and possessions).⁴¹ This culminated with the 1959 Tibetan riots in Lhasa against the Chinese oppression, whereupon China denounced and eradicated the Tibetan government.⁴² The Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans subsequently escaped to Northern India, where they established the Tibetan exile community in Dharamsala.

Some might think that the culture and heritage of Tibet has been somewhat preserved by the surge of Western interest in Tibetan Buddhism since the early 1980’s. The “Free Tibet” movement has given global headlines as well as international aid to the Tibetans in exile, but those left behind in Lhasa still face great cultural and religious oppression from the People’s Republic of China.⁴³ Some scholars argue that even the Tibetan community in exile has difficulty preserving their arts and culture because they live within the confined structure of the foreign countries organizing their aid.⁴⁴ In

⁴⁰ Smith. *Ibid.*, 22.

⁴¹ John Powers., *History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People’s Republic of China* (Oxford: Oxford University, 2004), 26.

⁴² Powers, *History as Propaganda*, 26.

⁴³ Lhasa is the administrative capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region (T.A.R.) but functions within the politics of the People’s Republic of China. It is one of the tallest cities in the world (11,400 feet) and is the home of the Potala, Jokhang, and Norbulingka Buddhist palaces. The Dailai Lama lineages resided in the Potala Palace until His Holiness the Fourteenth was exiled into Northern India in 1959.

⁴⁴ Dorsh Marie de Voe, “The Refugee Problem and Tibetan Refugees” in *The Tibet Journal* , vol VI, issue3. (Autumn 1981): 24.

essence the very countries trying to “liberate” Tibetans are unknowingly oppressing them through Western desires for Tibetan philosophy and traditional art. The Western expectations of Tibet as the “Shangri-La” culture and their hope (as well as the Dalai Lama’s) to maintain traditional art forms within Tibetan communities has greatly affected the young, modern Tibetan artists who wish to develop their new art forms. Whereas many of Tibetans in exile hold true to their *thangka* traditions and continue to identify with the religious aspects of their culture, the identity of Tibetans within the Tibetan Autonomous Region is more complicated.⁴⁵

This thesis discusses the problem of the cultural identity for Tibetan artists, in terms of the fragile remaining elements of Tibetan social values as they have been subjected to an anti-religious ideology and to an invasive, commercialized, global economy. To do so I take two related approaches. First, I show how Tibetan artists’ sense of self, purpose, and connection to their art were transformed during the Cultural Revolution. Second, I discuss how current “Tibetan” artists create art in response to their own notions of identity as well as cultural labels placed on them. I present these two facets of Tibetan art history as interconnected art movements, inherently dependant on one another.

⁴⁵ Clare Harris, “Struggling with Shangri-La: A Tibetan Artist in Exile” in *Constructing Tibetan Culture*, Ed. Frank J. Korom (Quebec, CA: World Heritage Press, 1997), 160.

CHAPTER II

SAMSARA: COMMUNIST CHINA'S ROLE IN SHAPING TIBETAN ART IDENTITY

This chapter outlines the cultural, political, and religious purging of Tibet under the direction of the Chinese government. This was a dark time for Tibetans, one of great suffering and change as their country was assimilated and controlled by the communist officials of China. Under Chairman Mao, the Tibetan countryside was bulldozed, the Tibetan people's belongings were confiscated, and religious practice was outlawed. Propaganda replaced art and young artists were forced to join the cause or perish. The following two sections explain this tumultuous era from the perspective of the artists. The first part details Socialist Realist art, or propaganda art for the masses, while the second part shows how Tibetan Romanticism (a subtler form of propaganda) shaped Tibetan cultural and artistic identity.

PART ONE

SOCIALIST REALISM AND ITS EFFECTS ON TIBETAN ARTISTS

“If the Tibetans wish to force the issue of their independence after all we’ve done for them, then we will attempt to stop them with all the power at our disposal! We will rather extinguish them than let Tibet go.”⁴⁶

The 1960’s and 70’s proved to be a time of great suffering for the Tibetan people; their national identity was endangered, as well as their customs and religious values. China did not keep secret their wish to eradicate Tibetan ethnicity and fully assimilate Tibetans into the Han-Chinese way of life. Chinese propaganda became the tool through which the Chinese government changed Tibetan history and integrated Tibetans into the communist state. They re-wrote textbooks, formal documents, and letters to state that the Tibetans had, in fact, “acknowledged China’s sovereignty over them” since the early 1900’s.⁴⁷ Tibetan newspapers and printing presses were also to show the state of Tibet prior to 1959 as barbaric and backwards, an untruthful ploy to prove that the Chinese government had “saved” them from an undeveloped and uncivilized way of life.⁴⁸

Simultaneously, the Peoples Liberation Army (PLA) was using Tibetan prisoners (many of whom were former Tibetan government officials who protested during the anti-Chinese riots) in labor camps and prison farms to de-forest massive areas of land for

⁴⁶ Chinese man interviewed by Thomas Herberer. “Old Tibet a Hell on Earth? The Myth of Tibet and Tibetans in Chinese Art and Propaganda” in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*. ed. Thierry Dodin & Heinz Rather (Boston: Wosdom Pub. 2001), 145.

⁴⁷ Robert Barnett, *Lhasa: Streets With Memories* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 37.

⁴⁸ Robert Barnett, *Lhasa*, 37.

buildings, roads, and agriculture.⁴⁹ By the mid 1960's, the Democratic Reform campaign issued by the communist government led a massive confiscation raid in Tibetan monasteries, government buildings, and prominent Tibetan family homes.⁵⁰ Tibetan antique furniture, rugs, clothing, books, and artworks were taken and either stockpiled or destroyed by the Chinese. Buddhist images (both painting and sculpture) were removed from the palaces as part of the massive "Cultural Revolution" that Chairman Mao implemented. The former Tibetan government official and prisoner Tubten Khetsun eloquently described the chaos of this time:

[A]fter taking the best of what the Tibetans had for themselves, the Chinese government and its officials carried out Democratic Reform by distributing useless clothing, worn-out bedding, farm tools, and such among the people, while shaking both sky and earth with propaganda that they were justly redistributing to the masses the goods that the "three feudal lords" [state, church and nobility] had amassed through their exploitation and oppression of the masses in the past.⁵¹

This amount of degradation and cultural cleansing had a lasting effect on Tibetans, who either had to forfeit their former way of life for a new communist cause, or resist and be thrown in prison or executed. Some of the older, more "stubborn and conservative" Tibetans silently protested but did not challenge the Chinese, while many young Tibetans attended Han Chinese schools of massive propaganda, surrendering their minds and religion to the communist way.⁵² Hundreds of former Tibetan Buddhist artists,

⁴⁹ These prisoner sentences were entitled "Reform Through Labor" by the Chinese government. Tubten Khetsun, *Memories of Life in Lhasa Under Chinese Rule* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 125.

⁵⁰ Many of the items taken are supposedly still kept in the Nationalities Cultural Palace in Beijing. Tubten Khetsun, *Ibid.*, 139.

⁵¹ Khetsun, *Ibid.*, 140.

⁵² Dawa Norbu, *Red Star Over Tibet* (New York: Envoy Press, 1987), 116.

as a result of the Cultural Revolution, had to decide whether they would produce propagandistic art for the state, or find employment elsewhere.

From the onset of the “Peaceful” liberation of Tibet starting in 1950 and throughout the Cultural Revolution of the 1960’s and 70’s, the Peoples Liberation Army forced Tibetan artists to paint what they deemed politically appropriate.⁵³ Chairman Mao paintings replaced Buddhist thangkas and images of Chinese officials politically “guiding” welcoming Tibetans flooded the art market. One such propagandistic image is Shi Lu’s “Chairman Mao Sends His Emissaries” (Fig. 4). This bustling painting illustrates a fictitious scene of Tibetans welcoming the People’s Liberation Army into their city. The whirlwind of smiling, clapping Tibetans draw the viewer to the center of the composition, where a PLA soldier and a Tibetan embrace. The parade of festivities encircles the two men and one Tibetan reaches in to hand flowers to the Chinese soldier. This painting clearly shows how China used such images to reshape history and to “prove” that Tibet had something to gain from the Chinese takeover. This painting is powerful in its blatant attempt to depict that which did not happen in order to coerce the masses (both Tibetan and Chinese) into a false sense of security about the invasion. In fact, the people of Lhasa and its surrounding cities actually rioted violently against the PLA as it overtook their monasteries and government buildings.

Similar to Figure 4 in its attempt to rewrite historical facts of the Tibetan Liberation, Figure 5 also shows Tibetan people welcoming a Chinese official, possibly Chairman Mao. This composition is slightly less dynamic with a smaller crowd, but is

⁵³ Clare Harris, *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959* (London, UK: Reaktion Ltd, 1999), 120.

nonetheless colorful, boisterous, and ecstatic in style and theme. Colorful Tibetan flowers and fabrics flank the top and bottom of the painting, framing the Tibetan couple that welcomes Chairman Mao with butter tea. Other Tibetans laugh and dance around the central figures, and one woman on the left margin of the scene waits to present a white *khata* to the Chinese official.⁵⁴ Trumpeters blast their welcome sounds in the top left as Tibetan men march and dance in the top right of the painting. This is a scene of fabricated history, another attempt at shifting the mind-set of the Tibetan people. The question remains as to whether this propaganda was effective in persuading the majority of Tibetans of the Chinese salvation from their former feudal system. Nevertheless, government controlled art would have sent a clear message to Tibetan artists; paint the “positive” agenda of the Chinese State, find a new line of work, or risk incarceration for artistic freedom of expression. Figure 4 was Chinese made, while Figure 5 was painted by a Tibetan artist, and both images were available to the Han and Tibetan people. Therefore the Communist state expended tremendous effort and utilized artists from both regions to control and assimilate Tibetans. As stated previously, Tibetan *thangka* artists had created for *their* religious state in the manner appropriate to their lineage, but the new Chinese artistic identity denied any link between spiritual devotion/enjoyment and artistic creation. Since some of the artists creating new Chinese propaganda images were formerly *thangka* painters, this created a complex and fragmented identity for those individuals; the meaning of artistic creation dramatically changed in a short period of time, and that change would have its effects on artists’ works.

⁵⁴ A *khata* is a ceremonial scarf which symbolizes compassion and purity. It is used as an offering for important officials and is also used during weddings, funerals, etc.

This was a time of despair and destruction for Tibetans; a genocide of culture, history, and identity that has yet to be mended. Leigh Sangster discusses how communist China would “enlist” artists as revolutionary workers of ideology; they were forced to lead masses of people in the streets with posters of Mao and proletariat workers in tow.⁵⁵ Figure 6 shows one such poster, printed in Tibet, with Chinese inscriptions on the bottom exclaiming, “Chairman Mao is the red sun for revolutionary people all around the world.”⁵⁶ Below the glowing orb that is Chairman Mao’s head the viewer finds a crowd of Tibetans and other “minority” groups smiling and cheering as they hold up Mao’s books and red banners. Muslims, Chinese soldiers, Chinese farmers, and Africans, are all represented alongside Tibetans as those who can benefit from the Socialist cleansing. Most of the figures in the foreground wear Mao’s pin on their clothing, further signifying their allegiance to the cause. The various faces of pure bliss and happiness show that the true function of Socialist Realism was to change the dominant interpretation of reality to support “revolutionary development” and “party-mindedness.”⁵⁷ This false reality was repeatedly engrained through books and images until the masses actually believed in it; in essence it was a self-fulfilling prophecy.

The double contradiction here lies in the socialist theory backed by the CCP, which was adopted from Marxist socialism and developed further by Lenin. Original Marxist socialism “required” that the masses propel the state from end-stage capitalism to

⁵⁵ Leigh Miller Sangster, “Meeting Old Buddhas in New Clothes,” *Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art*, http://www.mechakgallery.com/meeting_old_buddhas_in_new_clothes.html (accessed October 24, 2010).

⁵⁶ Zhuny Yang, translation, October 16, 2010.

⁵⁷ Jamyang Norbu, “The Tractor in the Lotus”, 3.

socialism only when the proletariat class decided this as a “popular and voluntary” motion.⁵⁸ As the CCP assimilated the Tibetan area into their territory, they clearly met a forceful opposition from this minority nationality, thereby negating the “popular and voluntary” aspect of their social philosophy. On the other side of the sword, Chinese nationalists were anti-imperialist in that they sought to preserve the Han Chinese culture and protect it from foreign imperialists like Japan and Europe.⁵⁹ They did not allow their contiguous neighbors the same beliefs, for the Turks, Mongols, and Tibetans were all seen as undeveloped cultures that could benefit from the modern promises of Communism. This forced political, social, and cultural change had a negative effect on the Tibetan people and especially the artists painting for the Communist cause. The national identity of Tibet was fragmented, as was the identity of Tibetan artists, who formerly painted within environments that were free from spiritual and religious persecution. Since Chairman Mao believed that “political power grows out of the barrel of a gun,” the motivation of artistic creation was no longer a voluntary, spiritual endeavor.⁶⁰ These artists now had to bend to the Communist Party’s control over the arts, which denied religious freedom and emphasized the strength of public workers for the industrialization and globalization of modern China. The Chinese used these propaganda images to legitimize their takeover of Tibet, a takeover that freed the Tibetans from a “barbaric culture,” but their motivations were less about cultural change and more

⁵⁸ Warren W. Smith, “The Nationalities Policy of the Chinese Communist Party and the Socialist Transformation of Tibet,” in *Resistance and Reform in Tibet* Eds. Robbie Barnett and Shirin Akiner, (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 51.

⁵⁹ Warren W. Smith, “*The Nationalities Policies*”, 54-55

⁶⁰ Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution and Post Mao Reforms, a Historical Perspective* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), 93.

inclined to promote the Chinese power and control over Tibet's landscape and resources.⁶¹

An example of this CCP propaganda is depicted in a Cultural Revolution-era photograph from China [Fig. 7]. The photo shows a group of people standing in front of a gargantuan billboard. The billboard, which is being changed at the moment of capture, depicts two Chinese soldiers flanking a female worker, arm in arm. They all carry Mao Zedong's book in their hands and hold serious expressions of dedication and determination. The red sun and banners fly behind them as they stare at the viewer, daring them to join their cause. This poster was used as a proletariat tool, a morale booster for Chinese workers, and a symbol of unification for Maoist principles.⁶² If these images were mass-created throughout China and Tibet, any implication of cultural and religious identity that was individualistic and separate from the agenda of the communist state was suppressed, if not outlawed. Given that the visual arts are highly effective in shaping the thoughts and attitudes of the masses, Mao exploited this profession profusely in order to achieve adherence of the population and political control.⁶³ The cultural and religious demise of Tibetan art is apparent with these images of propaganda and the spiritually enriched livelihood of art-making was no longer a path to enlightenment. These artists were no longer creating images of their Buddhist history; they were re-writing history with factually incorrect and subversive images.

⁶¹ Quoted by Frank Bockelmann from Thomas Herberer. "Old Tibet a Hell on Earth? The Myth of Tibet and Tibetans in Chinese Art and Propaganda" in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*. eds. Thierry Dodin & Heinz Rather (Boston: Wosdom Pub. 2001), 145.

⁶² Clare Harris, *In the Image*, 125.

⁶³ Tang Tsou, *The Cultural Revolution*, 182.

Another bi-product of Chinese Socialist propaganda art was a more subtle version of Tibetan propaganda, aimed at calming the Tibetan society and reassuring them that life was better under Chinese rule. One image that supports this style is “Tibetan Families” (Fig. 8). The scene portrays a large group of nomadic Tibetans in traditional garments, bundled tightly as they cross the bitter landscape. One man at the head of the group plays a flute as the rest smile and enjoy the festivities. Off in the distant left of the composition, a man pushes an agricultural machine, which is a blatant element of Chinese “proletariat” propaganda aimed at the Tibetan nation; through industrialization and modernization their culture can progress and assimilate with China. Other propagandistic elements include the large stereo system held by the man riding a yak, proof that Tibetans had access to commercial, material items through the Chinese takeover (see Fig. 8 detail). One woman in the foreground holds three balloons, which seem to be a ridiculous contrast to her traditional dress, but sends the message that modern commercialism is imbedded in Tibetan culture. Per Kvaerne describes the phenomena as “the myth of the integration of minority culture into the mainstream culture of modern China, characterized by gaudy, mass-produced consumer goods”.⁶⁴ The juxtaposition of traditional Tibetan elements with the aspects of modernity brought forth by the more “advanced” Chinese culture is simultaneously a visual agent of political propaganda and potentially an artistic comment on the awkwardness of forced globalization/industrialization. In one way the artist fulfils the communist duty of showing Tibetans the advantages of embracing a modern culture, while on the other,

⁶⁴ Per Kvaerne, “The Ideological Impact on Tibetan Art” in *Resistance and Reform in Tibet*, Eds. Robbie Barnett and Shirin Akiner (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1994), 176.

more subversive side, he can illustrate the impact of two cultures colliding and the immediate effect it has on the current generation of Tibetans. The modern aspects painted in parallel to traditional Tibetan themes allow space for the artist to show his resistance.

Artists Chen Danqing and Nawang Choedrak also painted a Chinese-Tibetan socialist piece in 1976 (Fig. 9). “The Workers Weep though the Harvest is Good” is yet another example of Chinese nationalistic propaganda. The Tibetan workers in the painting weep because they have just heard of Chairman Mao’s death via the radio that the central figure holds.⁶⁵ Grim, solemn expressions set the tone for this painting and one crying woman in the foreground is bent over, sickle still in hand. Even the young children are upset by the news, further symbolizing the people’s deep admiration and devotion to the ideology of the Chinese State. The harvest machine in the background holds the same proletariat symbolism as the previous painting, yet no one rides it joyfully. Instead a small male figure, possibly the rider, approaches the crowd through the wheat field, signifying that harvesting has temporarily stopped. The quiet and strong attitude of the portrayed Tibetans represents their devotion to Mao, yet upon more scrupulous inspection, one of the female workers sports a small pin on her *chuba* (Fig. 9 detail). Although it is hard to decipher, and at first glance the red background makes one assume it is a Mao pin, Clare Harris believes that the Dalai Lama’s profile is depicted on it, with black glasses and a yellow garment.⁶⁶ Harris argues since Chen Danqing’s family was “purged” and escaped to the Tibetan exile community, he was sensitive to their plight and subtly added these punishable elements to his painting, suggesting his true allegiance to

⁶⁵ Clare Harris, “In the Image,” 140.

⁶⁶ Clare Harris, *In the Image*, 141.

the Tibetan cause.⁶⁷ Therefore, despite the hard efforts of the People's Republic to commandeer Tibetan artists' mind-set, they were still able to slip in elements of their suppressed beliefs unbeknownst to public officials.

This small example of anti-Chinese sentiment clearly shows that not all Tibetan believed in the false history that China hoped to create. Some artists were motivated to add cultural elements of silent protest in their paintings, despite the massive censorship and suppression of literature, art and religion during the Cultural Revolution. From the takeover of their country in 1959 to the death of Mao in 1976, Tibetan artistic identity shifted from that of the devoted religious painter to the artist of forced Socialist-Realism propaganda. Many artists worked within the state created framework, but some artists subversively painted images and symbols of resistance. Within the mid-late 1970's, however, another style of Tibetan painting emerged that was also a result of Chinese propaganda. Tibetan Romanticism visually idealized the landscape of Tibet and the strength of her people. It was a style particularly sought after by Westerners during this time and China was aware of this demand and the large tourist market it created. Tibetan artists could more easily depict their national pride within these images, but secularism dominated the former religious scenes and structures of the paintings.

⁶⁷ Harris, *Ibid.*, 141.

PART TWO

FROM SOCIALIST REALISM TO TIBETAN ROMANTICISM

The Tibetan glorification of a “new world” under China’s rule was illustrated in Chinese artist Zhan Jianjun’s painting, “The Song of the Plateau” (Fig. 10). Despite its late 1970’s date (post-Cultural Revolution), Zhan Jianjun was one of China’s most celebrated Socialist Realist painters.⁶⁸ This later painting was utilized as Tibetan propaganda and so, even though it was painted by a Chinese Nationalist, it fits into our scope of “re-creating” history through imagery. The change in subject matter from strong proletariat imagery to romanticized Tibetan life demonstrates the shift in artistic identity; artists began depicting Tibet as a wonderful place to live, despite the recent cultural demise and religious suppression by the Communist Chinese Government. “The Song of the Plateau” depicts a young, Tibetan woman riding a yak through a beautiful field of flowers as the sun sets low in the sky directly behind her. The Himalayan foothills lay in the distant background and two yaks graze in the field off to the right. The woman wears a content, peaceful expression on her face as she gazes over her land. This painting fits into Elke Hessel’s description of romantic realism that started just after the Cultural Revolution. He explains that a “Chinese Tibet nostalgia” style emerged from Chinese painters travelling to Tibet that depicted nomadic Tibetans within the vast expanse of the mountainous landscape.⁶⁹ This Chinese version of Tibetan propaganda, despite its lack of traditional Maoist imagery, portrayed Tibet as a mystical, wondrous place to live. It

⁶⁸ Zhan is currently painting and teaching at the Academic Council of China Central Academy of Fine Art. Jamyang Norbu, “The Tractor,” 4.

⁶⁹ Elke Hessel, “Modern Artists in Lhasa” in *The Tibet Journal*, vol.27 issue 1-2, (Spring/Summer 2002), 218.

labeled Tibet as a “Shangri-La” paradise that was sought after by outsiders. These types of paintings became common in the late seventies with the increase of Western interest in the Himalayan utopia as a place where one could find enlightenment and escape the chaos of daily life. This artwork exemplifies how a propagandistic piece, painted by a Han Chinese artist, could be a model for national persuasion that is further perpetuated and supported by outside Western ideals. This painting also shows how a well-known Chinese painter created an image of Tibet that was both politically appropriate and aesthetically pleasing to tourists, which in turn molded the basic structure of Tibetan artistic identity and dictated what they should and would paint. Many contemporary Tibetan artists at the time were then pigeon-holed into creating this type of “tourist” art for the marketplace.

Figure 11 also romanticizes the Tibetan landscape and depicts the benefits of an isolated, quiet life in the hills of the Himalayas. This painting portrays an old, praying Tibetan man within a composition of white snow. The painter has pushed only the man’s head and hands into the picture plane, which places more emphasis on the landscape as it overwhelms the painting. Large Tibetan prayer flags draw the viewer’s eye from the man back to the one mountain in the distance and footprints left in the snow cut through the lower third of the picture. Although the scene appears lonely and remote, the old man shows a half smile, as if content with his simple life. Westerners particularly valued this type of “folk” painting because it quickly summarized their superficial notion of “Tibet-

ness,” a heartfelt worshipper consumed and shaped by his brutal landscape.⁷⁰ The irony of the Western markets guiding the demand for what was “Tibetan” in essence shaped the identity of Tibetan painters for that specific market. The complex relationship between Chinese control, Tibetan artistic identity, and Western fantasies of Tibet was thus intertwined and symbiotic. Not only did these paintings convince Chinese nationalists that Tibet should be subjugated, but they also became an image for international propaganda and marketability. The CCP found its double-edged sword when it instigated Tibetan artistic propaganda; the Tibetan people could be suppressed while simultaneously creating an art market that would benefit the Chinese Communist empire.

Another aspect of Tibetan Romanticism/Realism was the merging of secular theme with traditional symbols of Tibetan Buddhism. This is evident in the “Prosperity” *mandala* of Figure 12. The folk version of a *mandala* design was common at the time, because, under Chinese occupation, portraying a central deity with surrounding religious icons and symbols was a punishable crime. In this painting, what traditionally would have been the focal deity is replaced by a woman milking a yak, and the surrounding figures are not those of *Bodhisattvas*, but rather laywomen churning butter. In the four outer border niches where worshipping monks or protective deities might traditionally have been painted, four scenes of craft-making take their place. In the top and right scenes women are creating pottery, in the lower scene a woman is painting, and in the left scene a woman weaves a rug. The four corners of the painting show horses and goats instead of auspicious symbols or animals (such as a lion or lotus motif).

⁷⁰ Kabir Mansingh Heimsath, “Untitled Identities: Contemporary Art in Lhasa, Tibet” Asianart.com, Dec. 16, 2005 <http://asianart.com/articles/heimsath/index.html> (accessed on Nov. 2nd, 2010): 2.

During the occupation, Tibetans produced goods mainly for Chinese consumption. Therefore the “liberation” of Tibet resulted in mass-production of goods for the Chinese economy, not for Tibet. In this artwork, however, productivity is depicted as morale-boosting for Tibetans. In Chinese-directed folk mandalic artwork, these questionably sacrilegious scenes became plentiful and, as Kvaerne notes, hinted at the repetitious display of “trivial scenes” from everyday life in Tibet.⁷¹ The astute blending of secular scenes within the format of traditional *thangka* painting was supposed to make such artful propaganda acceptable to Tibetans.⁷²

Thus began another shift in Tibetan artists’ artistic identity towards the end of the Cultural Revolution and after. Creating religious artwork, the fundamental core of Tibetan culture, was punishable by the Chinese state for it was deemed to have “hidden agendas” of undermining socialist China, as well as being antithesis to the modernity that China brought to Tibet.⁷³ Instead the artists were reduced to creating paintings of “great distance and lack of emotion” for galleries at the base of the Potala monastery.⁷⁴ To the Chinese, these images perpetuated the social indoctrinization of Han ethnocentric groups. Many Tibetan artists and people may have seen these images as offensive because the artwork sub-planted their religion, their institutions, and their national identity with

⁷¹ Per Kvaerne, “Ideological Impact,” 176.

⁷² Per Kvaerne, “Ideological Impact,” 177.

⁷³ Herberer, “Old Tibet,” 144.

⁷⁴ Although one could also argue that they never really had the freedom to paint for art’s sake, since previously they would have painted Thangka paintings for religious purposes. With the rise of European and Western art influences in their Chinese art schools, young modern Tibetan and Chinese artists began to question the roles of their art identities. Elke Hessel, “Modern Artists,” 224.

Communist ideals.⁷⁵ This marginalization of Tibet as the “other” and the Han-Chinese as the superior group de-valued the autonomy of the Tibetan people since they were seen as incompetent of governing themselves, even though China still calls this area the “Tibetan Autonomous Region.”⁷⁶

The rise of the “New Age” culture in the West labeled Tibet as the mystic Shangri-La, whose philosophies were used to fulfill the Westerner’s fantasy of the exotic and sublime. This came at a cost to the Tibetan artists, who were forced to create for an international market that placed superficial value on their ritualistic items and art rather than create for the wholly devoted Buddhist practitioners of the previous generations. In some Westerners’ quests to find an alternative to Christianity during the 1960’s and 70’s, they turned to Buddhism, but misunderstood and de-valued the serious worship and engagement of Buddhist practitioners. This forced a rift between the image of Shangri-La and true Shambhala practice, as Frank Korom suggests, which ultimately de-emphasized the true plight of the modern Tibetan within his suppressed landscape.⁷⁷

The dramatic changes in culture, politics, and landscape forced new functions of Tibetan art. Artists’ identities were constantly shaped by societal and political functions, as well as international demand for exotic Tibetan paraphernalia. Tibetan artists’ roles changed first from the religious mindset of Tibetan *thangka* painting, to the function of artist as part of the socialist machine. The second phase of artistic identity led many

⁷⁵ Herberer, “Old Tibet,” 147.

⁷⁶ Herberer, *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁷ Frank J. Korom, “The Role of Tibet in the New Age Movement” in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies*. eds. Thierry Dodin & Heinz Rather (Boston: Wosdom Pub. 2001), 180-81.

artists to create within the framework of Western idealism and its fabrication of Shangri-la images. Tibetan Romanticism was profitable for the Chinese, was demanded from many Western collectors, and reinforced communist values in Tibetan communities. As time passed, some Tibetan artists challenged societal norms while others observed and reported the changes in their works. Within the last 30 years, their modern art has served as society's "mirror", blending traditional religious motifs with the ever-shifting conceptions of their identity.⁷⁸ Because of Tibet's long history of *thangka* painting, many young artists wanted to remain sensitive to their culture while moving into an entirely new mode of art creation.⁷⁹

⁷⁸ Elke Hessel, "Modern Artists," 226.

⁷⁹ Leigh Sangster, "Meeting Old Buddhas," 1.

CHAPTER III

REBIRTH: YOUNG TIBETAN ARTISTS CLAIM THEIR CULTURE AND SEW THE SEEDS OF 21ST CENTURY ART FOR FUTURE GENERATIONS

As some artists conformed to the artistic guidelines set by the Communist Chinese, others rebelled for the sake of artistic freedom. The following chapter follows the artistic identities and artworks of five contemporary Tibetan artists, most of whom still reside in Tibet. The first section describes the artists' works, possible motives, and their underlying beliefs that influenced the art. The second section explains how the Qinghai-Tibet railway influenced many Tibetan artists and helped create new forms of contemporary artistic identity.

PART ONE

CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ARTISTS: CHALLENGING SOCIAL CHANGE, GLOBALIZATION, AND BUDDHIST TRADITION

“I am just like you; we are Tibetans hiding our sole identity deep inside our hearts. To say so does not mean I am nationalistic; I only want to be reassured of my own identity.”⁸⁰

Following Chairman Mao’s death in 1976, a number of policy reformers in the Chinese Communist Party travelled to Tibet to document the social and political effects of communist rule. In 1980, when General Secretary Hu Yaobang saw that two decades of collectivization had left Tibet in economic and cultural ruin, he formed a new policy of liberalization for Tibet.⁸¹ These liberal reforms continue to this day, but come with state constraints and hollow promises of government autonomy. During its initial implementation in the 1980’s, policy changes included Chinese government subsidies, tax and quota sales exemptions for farmers, more freedom to exercise their “autonomous” government, removal of Han officials from Tibetan government offices, and efforts to revitalize the Tibetan culture, education, and language.⁸² Tibetans were also allowed to wear their traditional clothing, set up altars in their homes, rebuild Buddhist monasteries, and give public religious offerings or go on spiritual pilgrimages without state

⁸⁰ Tsering Woesser, “On Recent Paintings of Tsering Nyandak,” Trans. Susan Chen. Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art , (Aug 16, 2006) www.mechak.org/recent_paintings_of_tsering_nyandak.html (accessed on Dec. 9, 2011).

⁸¹ Ronald D. Schwartz, *Circle of Protest: Political Ritual in the Tibetan Uprising* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 15.

⁸² Melvyn C. Goldstein, *The Snow Lion and the Dragon: China, Tibet, and the Dalai Lama* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 64-65.

persecution.⁸³ However, these new freedoms were met with mixed feelings from Tibetans because political and military control still remained in the hands of the Chinese and any “self-governing” was confined to Chinese Communist law, thereby undermining any sense of “rights” or “freedoms.” From the Chinese viewpoint the liberal reforms were meant to “placate Tibetan discontent and win acceptance of Chinese rule,” but the reforms had the opposite effect. Tibetans engaged in more anti-Chinese political demonstrations and protests throughout the next three decades.

Despite constant political turmoil and ineffective talks between the Dalai Lama and the Chinese government, the relaxation of cultural and religious activities gave rise to new Tibetan artwork and young artists who could freely create without fear of incarceration. Some of the older artists who were trained in traditional thangka painting blended their knowledge of Buddhist iconography with modern ideas of globalization and social change. The younger artists, who did not witness firsthand the effects of the Cultural Revolution, instead turned to pop culture images and Western art as sources of inspiration. These artists all had differing artistic backgrounds; some attended Chinese State art schools and returned to Tibet, some attended schools within Tibet, and a few were self taught. Regardless of their varying artistic training, these artists were sensitive to their Buddhist heritage and Tibetan culture and understood the inherent problems facing modern Tibetans, one main issue being the question of Tibetan identity in the face of Communist China.

⁸³ Ronald Schwartz, *Circle of Protest*, 16.

The five contemporary Tibetan artists discussed in the following pages were chosen using important criteria: the artists' backgrounds, the visual content, and the meanings of the paintings. The two essential dynamics that supported my thesis, however, were the locations of the artists (these artists were creating in the T.A.R, not the exile community in India, although some like Gyatso, traveled West) and their personal roles in creating a visual dialogue on Tibetan artistic identity. Each artist addresses themes which contribute to the overall Tibetan artistic identity in the twenty-first century: consumerism, globalization, Chinese assimilation and the hybridity of their culture, preservation and idealization of their heritage, and the Tibetan Buddhist religion. The significance of the artists' location in the Tibetan Autonomous Region lies in the fact that these artists were creating under Chinese Communist rule and in response to the framework of the political state, whereas artists in the exile communities would conform to the traditional Buddhist art iconography in order to preserve the old heritage. The former were creating contemporary Tibetan art under situations of social change and using those change agents as artistic content. With artistic identity shifting once again in response to the liberalization policies of the eighties and nineties, the artists discussed here embrace the role of the artist as a commenter on social change and globalization under a "New" Tibet.

GONKAR GYATSO:

The most popular current Tibetan artist, or at least the one who receives the most press, is Gonkar Gyatso. Born in Lhasa in 1963 to the son of a PLA⁸⁴ soldier and a government office clerk, Gonkar's childhood was shaped by communist ideology.⁸⁵ His primary schools supported a pro-Maoist education and warned of the poisonous teachings of the Dalai Lama and Tibetan Buddhism. Since his young adult years came at the tail end of the Cultural Revolution, his school attended the "The Wrath of the Serfs" exhibit in 1976 that served as a visual ethnic cleanser for both young Chinese and Tibetan students.⁸⁶ This powerful exhibit displayed over one hundred life-size clay statues, depicting various scenes of the "suffering" Tibetan serfs and peasants at the hands of noble families and Lamaist rule. If one attended a Chinese grade school at this time, it was mandated that you attend this exhibition.⁸⁷ Figure 13 shows an example of one of the life-sized scenes, in which a brutal monk forcefully pushes a young child into a box. Chinese guides would tell Tibetan and Chinese visitors that a sacrificed child would be buried in a box within the foundations of a Tibetan monastery as it was being built.⁸⁸ Other false scenes of monks performing human sacrifices and engaging in cannibalistic ceremonies were also created and shown to Chinese and Tibetan citizens in Beijing and Lhasa. The function of this exhibition was to validate the Chinese presence and takeover of Tibet twenty years earlier. The fact that it was being created and shown twenty years

⁸⁴ People's Liberation Army

⁸⁵ Clare Harris, *In the Image*, 181-182.

⁸⁶ Clare Harris, *In the Image*. 133.

⁸⁷ Clare Harris, *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁸ Gonkar Gyatso explained that at the time of seeing this exhibit and particular scene of the monk and boy, he believed religion to be a terrible entity. K. Yeshe, "Gonkar Gyatso: Creation of a Painter in Contemporary Tibet," in *Choyang* vol. vii (1996), 76.

after the takeover and right after Chairman Mao's death demonstrates the weakness of the Chinese communist agenda in Tibet; the communist party was still trying to convince both populations that their motivations had been in the right.

In his forties, and in response to the Tibetan situation and questions of identity, Gonkar Gyatso's created the four-photograph series entitled "My Identity." Figures 14 through 17 show an exploration of his personal identity as well as an "outsider's" perception of his culture. In the first image he is portrayed as a Tibetan, in traditional clothes and surrounded by furniture and fabrics commonly used in Tibetan homes. A collection of paints sit on a low wooden table while he works on a *thangka* painting of the Buddha. This photo speaks of the pre-1959 Tibetan world of traditional *thangka* paintings, the world that Westerners and Tibetans in exile want to preserve and suspend in time. As a Tibetan artist, Gyatso is making a commentary on how others might assume he was schooled in the methods of *thangka* painting. Gyatso did learn traditional *thangka* painting under Sangay Yeshe in 1995, but instead of using the knowledge to create traditional *thangkas*, he applied it to create modern, iconometric breakdowns of the Buddha's form, as will be discussed later.⁸⁹

The second photo (Fig. 15) depicts Gyatso as a Socialist-Realist artist under the watchful eye of Chairman Mao, now the subject of his painting. Gonkar wears a PLA soldier's uniform and sits in the same position as the previous image. The only elements left from the first photo are the small paint table and the wooden framework of the painting. The unchanging elements could represent the pieces of Tibetan tradition that are

⁸⁹ Clare Harris, "Struggling with Shangri-La," 174.

an underlying and pervasive thread of culture among many Tibetan people. The walls have been covered with Chinese newspaper pages and a modern façade replaces the Tibetan imagery on the front of the right cabinet. The newspaper clippings have a claustrophobic effect, haphazardly surrounding Gyatso and subliminally reminding the artist of his omnipresent oppressor. Chinese propaganda paintings cover his paintbrush mug and a plaster bust of Mao rests on top of the cabinet. The focal point of the photograph is clearly the painting of Mao, with the strong red background drawing in the viewer's eye. This clearly defines Gyatso's role as a Socialist-Realist painter and the constraints of his artistic environment under the Chinese Communist Party.

Gyatso once again changes the scene in the third photo (Fig. 16) to show the identity of a refugee artist. In 1992 Gonkar left Lhasa for Dharamsala in search of the Tibetan truths that he had questioned during his Chinese controlled schooling.⁹⁰ While he lived in Dharamsala he realized that the exile community also had an agenda: to preserve the artistic lineage of its elders. He therefore depicts himself in Figure 16 as an exile artist and Dalai Lama devotee. The low wooden paint table is replaced with a "Bangla" Indian box and his maroon suitcase supports a *khata* clad photograph of the Dalai Lama. The impermanent lifestyle of the exiled Tibetan is further symbolized in the makeshift metal roofing used for the room's walls. The painting Gyatso works on illustrates the Potala Palace (the former residence of the Dalai Lama) with an image of the Dalai Lama hovering in the sky. The overall photo is quite awkward; on the one hand there are traditional elements of Tibetan Buddhism and on the other there is a transitory, shifting nature of "Tibetan-ness" that translates through the suitcase and temporary walls.

⁹⁰ Clare Harris, "The Buddha Goes Global," 703.

Gyatso's authenticity as a Tibetan artist has been a challenge for him, especially as one schooled in the Chinese contemporary art schools. While the very conservative exilic art circles pulled him one way, his ideology of what was truly "Tibetan" pulled him in another direction. He could not identify with the stagnant, self-preserving mentality of exile artists, however, and forged onward to the West in his ongoing quest to find an identity that resounded with his true, transient nature.⁹¹ His fourth photo in this series (Fig. 17) shows him as a young, modern artist in a minimalist setting. He sits in front of a contemporary *mandala* painting surrounded by plain, white walls, a simple white cabinet, and a clean wooden floor. The *Bangla* box is replaced with a stainless steel shelving unit for brushes, further adding to the cold, austere environment. The only Tibetan elements in this photo are the *mandala* and the tattoo on his upper left arm, which are post-modern representations of traditional script and visual imagery; post-modern in the sense that it is ultimately his personal interpretation of Buddhist tradition that creates reality and his sense of identity. All religious and political aspects have been omitted from this scene, perhaps symbolizing the current biography of Gyatso; he claims his identity as a simple artist, but he is still proud of his national heritage.

This four-photo series reflects Gyatso's quest to show how others label him as a Tibetan artist. He modeled these photographs after C. Suydam Cutting's 1937 photo of the thirteenth Dalai Lama's *thangka* painter (Fig 18). Prior to this early photograph, the photography of Tibetans was taken from an outsider's perspective, in what Clare Harris describes as the "anti-individualism of the ethnographic lens".⁹² These early photos

⁹¹ Clare Harris, *Ibid.*, 703-704.

⁹² Clare Harris, *In the Image of Tibet*, 89.

would have shown Tibetans roaming the plateau or performing various daily activities in their landscape. In the early 1930's, however, Tibetans started manipulating their self-portraits in order to explain their identity and shift the power of labeling away from the "outsider". The 1937 example shows that the *thangka* painter staged his own environment and became an active part of the photographic process. Likewise, Gonkar Gyatso turned the camera on himself and played with the notion of the "identified" versus the "identifier"; he similarly manipulates his surroundings to challenge how and whom he is labeled.

Zaklina Petrovic writes that Gyatso's artwork plays with various definitions of personal identity as it relates to migration.⁹³ He is a *thangka* painter in Lhasa, a socialist-realist painter for communist China, a Tibetan exile painter in Dharamsala, and a contemporary painter in London. These various roles are interdependent and shape and influence Gyatso as an artist as he continues to create. Although the first three photos show the heavy influence of external social forces (tradition, communism, and exilism), the last photo shows his hope as an individual Tibetan artist; he takes ownership of his Tibetan background and transnational influences that shape him as an art creator.

In his other works, Gonkar Gyatso is notorious for dissections of Buddhist imagery, and "Made in China" (Fig. 19) is no exception. Black ink lines span across the paper to create the head of the Buddha as a barcode and the random numbers placed below his head makes the barcode look authentic. Gyatso placed stickers of meaningless commercial products in the background such as lipstick, shoes, and purses. The artist

⁹³ Alsop, "Visions From Tibet", 13.

explains that, with Westerners demanding certain “authentic” items from Tibet, they subtly influence how Buddhist images are used; creating more of an iconic idol of Buddha that can be easily bought and sold.⁹⁴ Large red letters stating ‘MADE IN CHINA’ hover over the Buddha barcode. This sends a powerful message that images of the Buddha have been not only commercialized for profit, but controlled and created within the Chinese territory. Just as Mary Wiseman explains that a “made in China” tag is the single piece of evidence labeling an article of clothing’s origin (despite the fact that there are no signifiers proving that clothing was made there), Gyatso as well blurs the lines of identity and origin with his artwork.⁹⁵ The Buddha’s identity shifts into a meaningless commodity while the viewer’s identity is a matter of consumption; we are what we purchase. This image shows the overlap between global, economic relationships and religious paraphernalia; Buddhist icons and modern consumers are both “made in China”. Since the Buddhist notion of emptiness explains that something cannot inherently exist without dependence on something else, the interdependent nature of global consumerism becomes a part of and shapes Buddhist images and items. The clash of pop culture with traditional religion paradoxically waters down the religious aspects of Buddhist imagery while making Buddhism easily accessible to Westerners. Gyatso’s artwork comments on the shifting roles of Buddhist art and traditional Buddhist practice; religious images as a purchased commodities brings global exposure, but at the cost of traditional values.

⁹⁴ Gonkar Gyatso, “Buddha in Modern Times,” in *Seminars Proceedings, Tibetan Arts in Transition: A Journey through Theatre, Cinema and Painting* (Rome: Asia Onlus, March 2009), 110.

⁹⁵ Mary Bittner Wiseman, “Subversive Strategies in Chinese Avant-Garde Art,” in *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* Vol. 65. (1) (2007), 110.

Gyatso's "Buddha with Puzzle's Clues" is another example of his transformation of the Buddha into a common, everyday object (Fig 20). Within the outline of the Buddha's head, Gonkar paints the pattern of a crossword puzzle. An orange arrow points downward into an opening at the top of the Buddha's head, revealing where the puzzle's clues lie. The image is simple and nonchalant in its secularization of a religious deity. This could also be interpreted as a self-portrait, showing Gonkar's quest to find his artistic identity in a globalized world full of distractions. This painting contains the elements of what Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa believes is a "political statement, or signifier of Tibetan identity".⁹⁶ The crossword spaces are all blank and represent the exterior of the Buddha, or more specifically they signify the outsider's perception and labeling of what characteristically describes something as "Tibetan." The small, orange arrow is Gyatso's focal point and rebuttal to labels; the Tibetan artist can create his own identity within his mind and shed the exterior, superficial notions placed upon him.

Both Figures 19 and 20 comment on the Western demand for "authentic" Tibetan art, since it is difficult to separate Buddhism from Tibetan themes. Gyatso ironically uses the image of the Buddha to show that Western, contemporary demands shape the identity of Tibetan artists.⁹⁷ In one interview Gyatso explained that both Buddhist and Maoist philosophy condemned the notion of identity or the individual; the former placing the individual as inseparable from all living beings, and the latter suppressing it in order to

⁹⁶ Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, "Re-imag(ni)ing the Buddha: The Multiplicity of Authenticities in Contemporary Tibetan Art," *Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art* www.mechakgallery.com/re-imagi-ni-ng-the-buddha.html. (Accessed October 23, 2010): 1.

⁹⁷ Amy Holmes-Tagchungdarpa, "Re-imag(ni)ing the Buddha," 2.

create a conformist state.⁹⁸ “*Buddha with Puzzle’s Clues*” is Gyatso’s subtle refutation of those philosophies. Contemporary Tibetan artists’ identities do exist, whether they are molded by outsiders’ expectations, influenced by an intrinsic desire to create, or created by other social and cultural factors. This artwork simultaneously suggests that Tibetan artists have many questions of national as well as artistic identity, but they also have the power to shape their identity by using, as artistic content, the same external global and social influences that intend to label them.

Figures 21 and 22 show a stylistic shift in Gyatso’s artwork. Where the previous examples showed staged photography and the simplified dissection of the Buddha, these last two images have a much more complicated format and serious tone. Figure 21 entitled “Angel” shows a sticker-clad figure that clearly resembles the famous, media-strewn Abu-Ghraib prisoner. The prisoner holds what could be interpreted as both Buddhist prayer beads and the electrical wire controversially used to torture inmates.⁹⁹ Hundreds of stickers and symbols that “have overloaded in the commercial mass media of our time” cover the figure.¹⁰⁰

Behind the prisoner lies a pencil drawing of the Buddhist deity *Avalokiteshvara*, with multiple hands and heads. The pencil diagram that artists follow when drawing a Buddhist deity still remains over the image, a reminder of all things traditional. The deity holds a lotus in his left hand and a *chakra* in his right while standing on a moon disk and lotus leaves. A fire *mandala* surrounds both figures and the background is full of smaller,

⁹⁸ Zaklina Petrovic, “Conversation with Gonkar Gyatso,” in *Visions from Tibet: A Brief Survey of Contemporary Painting* (London: Rossi Pub., 2005), 14.

⁹⁹ Gyatso, “Buddha in Modern Times,” 109.

¹⁰⁰ Gyatso, *Ibid.*, 110.

random sketches that represent the distractions of daily life. Gyatso includes a small circle with scissors that tells the viewer, “Cut and take with you,” lending a trivial, impermanent aspect to the artwork. A very sarcastic slogan at the bottom reads, “Always look on the bright side of life,” and is accompanied by doodles ranging from benign images of Pepsi bottles to soldiers and nuclear explosions. Consumer advertisements claim, “Buy now, pay 2088” and hopeful phrases like “Imagine there is war and nobody shows up” surround the central figures.

“*Angel*” is a politically and socially powerful work that concisely describes modern humanity; we question the morality of war and violence when it is portrayed in the media, yet we do not question the morality of our wasteful and environmentally detrimental consumerist behaviors. Beyond the socio-political implications of this artwork, Gonkar claims that a *Bodhisattva* exists within the Abu Ghraib prisoner and that the suffering of man is at the cause of our own hand. Gyatso turns to the Buddhist teachings in this artwork, showing his sensitivity to his traditional religion, while still including aspects of contemporary culture such as the hundreds of pop culture stickers that make up the central figure. This work’s more religiously-charged tone shows how Gyatso’s art has shifted over time; he has changed from a brain-washed producer of communist propaganda, to an externally guided exilic painter, to a social and political commentator on contemporary times. He questions the anti-religious agenda of Communist China despite being raised in its very environment, and he embraces his religious heritage even though his upbringing in modern Chinese schools dictated otherwise. This piece delicately balances the serious with the light; religion, tradition, human suffering and global pop culture images come together to show that even with

some human values lost, there is hope for humanity and liberation through one's own and heart and mind.

The final Gyatso work I will discuss is "The Buddha of Our Time" (Fig 22). A variation of this 2010 piece has recently been used for the cover art of Dzogchen Ponlop's book, *Rebel Buddha: On the Road to Freedom*.¹⁰¹ This painting shows the *Buddha Shakyamuni* sitting in meditative pose but his body, like those of Gyatso's previous works, is filled with stickers that blur his outline. Where his right hand would be touching the earth as witness to his enlightenment, it instead turns into dissected roads for large cars and a myriad of pop culture stickers. The "roads" are actually an authentic diagram for how the Buddha would be drawn within a Tibetan *thangka* painting, showing Gyatso's traditional skills and his artistic right to transform them for the sake of his modern message. Gonkar uses these stickers to represent the diverse culture he can experience in London which then influences the Buddhist aspects of his artworks.¹⁰²

A larger detail, although pixelated, shows Homer Simpson, Elmo, McDonalds, Playboy, and many other stickers mixed in with words like, "bingo," "soldiers," "price," and "fragile" (Fig. 23). The stickers overwhelm the viewer when observed closely; they overlap haphazardly and visually explain the inner workings of a troubled, contemporary mind. I use the words of Mr. Li Xianting, curator of contemporary Tibetan art, to describe this work of art more fully:

¹⁰¹Gonkar's variation on this painting is called "*The Buddha Sakyamuni*". Dzogchen Ponlop, *Rebel Buddha: On the Road to Freedom* (Boston, Mass.: Shambhala, 2010).

¹⁰² Gonkar Gyatso, "Interview Part 2," by *Asia Onlus*, Rome (Feb. 2009): <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVgYh9-x0B0> (accessed on Dec. 4, 2010).

[N]one of us non-natives can really experience but can only sense the cultural identity crisis, the contradictions of beliefs, the tainted religion, the damaged and broken culture, the polluted environment, the gravity of Han assimilation, the invasion of Western consumerism and so on that have caused this bitter anguish amongst Tibetans!¹⁰³

Gyatso's artwork visually explores the political and social constraints that have shaped Tibetans' identities since the Peaceful Liberation. "The Buddha of Our Time" portrays the Buddha as inseparable from his surroundings; he is consumerism, greed, novelty, love, compassion, and wisdom. He reflects the desires and creations of society and remains peacefully sitting, absorbing them into his being. This artwork is a biography of the Tibetan people, who have to absorb the penetrating cultures of China and the West while simultaneously preserving their traditions and religion.

Gonkar Gyatso's art peels back the thick layers of modern influences and presents a subtle, thought provoking look at Tibetan identity. Some works such as "Made in China" present his playful art nature, and some, like "Angel" take the viewer to deeper levels of how individuals and societies perceive themselves and others. He repeatedly blends traditional Buddhist iconography with images of mass media and pop culture to explore the Western fascination with the Buddha "icon".¹⁰⁴ His works describe the transient nature of modernity and how religion and politics shape the identity of the contemporary Tibetan people. The sticker-clad Buddhas represent the dilemma for Tibetan artists: must they assimilate or perish, or can they find a middle-way that allows

¹⁰³ This quote was taken from Woesser's blog (originally written for *Radio Free Asia* on Sept. 14 2010 in Beijing) on the "Scorching Sun of Tibet" art exhibit. Woesser, "Those Giving Voice to "Scorching Sun of Tibet," in *High Peaks, Pure Earth*, (Monday October 4, 2010): <http://www.highpeakspureearth.com/2010/10those-giving-voice-to-scorching-sun-of.html> (accessed October 12, 2010).

¹⁰⁴ Lisa Tamiris Becker, "Waves on the Turquoise Lake: Contemporary Expressions of Tibetan Art" in *Asian Art Exhibitions* <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/waves/lake.html> (accessed on October 18 2010).

them to embrace change and take ownership of their identity through their art? Gyatso is creating proof that the latter is possible, that modern Tibetan artists have a voice and something important to say.

NORBU TSERING (NORTSE):

The second contemporary Tibetan artist discussed in this section, Nortse, has similar artistic tendencies to Gonkar Gyatso in that he uses self-portrature as his subject matter when dealing with issues of Tibetan identity. However, whereas Gonkar Gyatso searches for meaning and identity through societal influences and geographic location, Nortse places heavier emphasis on inner emotion and past experiences. Both artists visually challenge the notion of Shangri-la through their modern representations and comments on global societies, but Nortse's work is much more personal and shows how his upbringing and family life are inseparable from his perception of Tibetan artistic identity.

In Nortse's first painting, "Father's Violin," he presents himself in Tibetan clothing holding a violin, which has been wrapped in red cloth to prevent the musician from creating any sound (Fig. 24). His right arm is held up slightly, signifying the violin bow that is absent, further silencing the music. Nortse's expression is seen only through his eyes, featuring a furrowed brow that expresses sadness and concern: the remainder of his face is hidden behind a medical mask, preventing him from speaking clearly. One can interpret the binding red cloth as the Chinese Communist government suppressing the creation of traditional Tibetan music and art. Nortse supports this idea and explains that

this piece reflects his memories of the Cultural Revolution and of his father, who was killed in a car accident when he was only 13 years old.¹⁰⁵ The small bandages on Nortse's finger are a reminder of the bandages that covered his father in the hospital, an image that is permanently stamped in Nortse's heart and mind.¹⁰⁶ The background is plain and gray, depressing and dark, providing a stark contrast with the bright red cloth that surrounds Nortse's instrument.

The imagery is strong, silent, and visually describes the Tibetans' inner turmoil between preserving their artistic culture and maintaining their sense of identity while being oppressed as a society. The white surgical mask is a reoccurring theme in Nortse's art, representing the "chaotic period of anarchy when everyone on the streets was wearing a mask". This mask-wearing allowed people to hide their identity and act as an autonomous mass during the SARS epidemic that swept Asia during 2003. Nortse describes this period of time as a "rehearsal for the end of the world" that plagued his dreams and deeply affected his work.¹⁰⁷ "Father's Violin" invites the viewer into Nortse's realm of identity forming; he uses self-portraits to describe his life events and the influence they have over his art. Differing in form, subject, and theme from Gyatso's art, he tackles his inner-emotions, wavering memories that plague his dreams, and how he

¹⁰⁵ Norbu Tsering, "Self-Portraits and My State of Imbalance, My Loss of Equilibrium," in *Writings on Visual Arts, Mechak Contemporary Tibetan Art*. www.mechak.org/nortse_on_his_self_portraits.html (Accessed on Mar. 16th 2011).

¹⁰⁵ Norbu Tsering, *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁰⁶ Norbu Tsering, "Self Portraits and my state of imbalance, my loss of equilibrium" in *Nortse: Self Portraits- The State of Imbalance* (London: Rossi & Rossi, 2008), 7.

perceives himself as a Tibetan in contemporary society. Though his work is deeply personal, he does not omit the common themes that shape the contemporary Tibetan artist, which include sentiments on the earlier Cultural Revolution and the current restrictions placed on his people.

Nortse further explores this self-portrait theme in his “White Tablecloth” painting, which shows the artist sitting at a table in a yellow ribbed tank (Fig. 25). He wears no dress shirt, but sports a gold and red tie nonetheless. A surgical mask again covers his features, allowing only his eyes to engage the viewer with a serious and stern gaze. A bright image of Mickey Mouse is painted on the mask, with similar implications as Gade’s popular icons represent in “Sleeping Buddha” (Fig. 28, to be discussed in further detail later in the section). His left arm rests on the table, adorned with a silver bracelet and bandages (again Norbu deals with his father’s death and the memories of his hospitalization). Various texts including “The Chinese Avant Garde” and Claire Harris’ “In the Image of Tibet” are bound and stacked on the table. Nortse paints these books as a possible commentary on the Chinese invasion of Tibet, and the very few scholars that research the cultural impacts the invasion had on the indigenous people. A baby bottle also sits on the table, a symbol of the “alcohol bottle” that Nortse uses as an escape from his overworked and imbalanced mind.¹⁰⁸ Tiny colorful paper squares lay on the table, which appear to be cut pieces of Tibetan prayer flags: a severed piece of tradition amid the modern, cryptic imagery.

¹⁰⁸ Norbu Tsering, “Self-Portraits,” 7.

This image has many more symbolic references that without Nortse's personal explanations would simply appear as strange disassociations. But like a dream, those aspects relate to various moments in Nortse's life and come together in this insightful still life painting. The first impression of these self-portraits does not indicate a Tibetan artist or predominant Tibetan theme. One has to look very closely at the smaller symbols in his works to notice his comments on contemporary Tibetan culture. Nortse therefore focuses less on the traditional sense of identity that the other artists in this section explore (that of the Buddhist religion defining Tibetan identity) and concentrates more on life events and creates enigmatic paintings that incorporate these events in order to develop his sense of self.¹⁰⁹

"Group Painting" is another example of Nortse's self-portraits that, without knowing his past, would appear to be a triad of disturbing figures (Fig.26). He repeatedly presents himself as a bandaged-wrapped man with varying shirt colors and more concentrated "bloodied" bandages as the viewer looks from left to right. The figure in front has the least amount of red bandages, which like the others, cover his entire head. The middle figure and figure on the left recede in relation to one another but progressively gain more red bandages. This is a more figurative analysis of the memories that Nortse tries to suppress (rather than the more puzzling symbols of his previous works). Each figure represents a further sense of grief and loss and a symbolic manifestation of slowly losing his father to inevitable death. Had Nortse lost his father

¹⁰⁹ Karmay explains that there are two aspects that shape identity for Tibetans, one being foreign occupation and the other being heavy Western influences both within and outside Tibet. Samten G. Karmay. "Mountain Cults and National Identity in Tibet," in *Resistance and Reform in Tibet* Ed. Robert Barnett. (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1994), 114.

later in life, his visual imagery might have dealt more with acceptance. The horrific hospital scenes left a lasting impression of grief and suffering that has yet to heal since he had to part with this father at such an early age.

Another interpretation of this painting, which fully supports the issues of contemporary Tibetan artistic identity, involves not only the grief of losing his father, but the quick deterioration of the Tibetan community and heritage in the T.A.R. Each figure represents a phase in Tibetan life since the Chinese takeover. The red bandages symbolize the invasive, Chinese Communist ideals, which become more pervasive with each figure. The first figure represents the occupation in 1959, the second symbolizes the horror and result of the Cultural Revolution and “cleansing”, and the third represents the loss of traditional Tibetan culture to a global, modern society. Both interpretations are interconnected because both play integral roles in shaping Nortse’s life: his art is personally meaningful but cannot exist without cultural and societal influences.

The last Nortse artwork, “Group Photo” is a staged life photograph taken in the same manner as “Group Painting,” only the figures in this artwork gradually come forward from left to right and the theme is more complicated than in the latter work (Fig. 27). This manipulated photo propels Nortse into the multimedia format, which his Chinese counterparts were undertaking more than 20 years prior.¹¹⁰ The symbolic bandages are represented on each of his person’s (he superimposed himself in various costumes for this image), but the remainder of their clothing hints at the modernity and

¹¹⁰ Mary Ann Toy, “Lhasa: New Art from Tibet,” In *Writings on Visual Art, Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art*. (June 2, 2007): http://www.mechak.org/new_art_from_tibet-beijing_exhibit.html (accessed on March 22, 2011).

technological advances of a changing culture. This photo supports the “modern Tibetan identity production,” illustrating the influx of global products at the expense of a traditional society.¹¹¹ On the left, Nortse is wearing a shirt made from traditional Tibetan fabrics, but has dress pants on underneath. He holds a prayer wheel to illustrate his identity in relation to Tibetan customs and wears colorful Tibetan necklaces. The bandages wrapped around his face are made from white brocade fabric and tightly constrict his facial features. This part of the image represents tradition in Tibet as it was before the Chinese occupation: the untouched, secluded and culturally rich country that was both politically and economically stable and religiously fulfilled.

The traditional fabrics of the first figure are replaced by a sports coat and dress pants in Nortse’s middle figure. The undershirt, however, is still a traditional white Tibetan shirt and his tie is red and gold, the colors worn by Tibetan monks. Instead of a prayer wheel, Nortse holds a large black cell phone to his right ear and looks out at the viewer through bandages made from folded Chinese newspapers. This image marks the Chinese “purification” and economic “prosperity” that came with the occupation after the 1950’s. While the figure still has a few articles of Tibetan origin, the contemporary aspects like the cell phone and Chinese newspapers show that China is successful in its ability to force present trends onto the Tibetan people.

The last figure symbolizes the future Tibetan, with Nortse wearing only silver metallic bandages on his upper body and a children’s robot mask on his face. He holds a

¹¹¹ Toni Huber, “Shangri-la in Exile: Representations of Tibetan Identity and Transnational Culture,” in *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies* eds. Thierry Dodin and Henz Raether. (Boston: Wisdom Pub. 2001) 357.

remote control in his right hand, held up in proclamation of the loss of Tibetan identity to the Chinese masses, if not the global, technological masses that await. This photograph is blatant and effective in its meaning; Nortse watched the Tibetan culture slowly die from the beginning of the Cultural Revolution to present day. He has seen first-hand the submission of the Tibetan people as their language, culture, and art forms were transformed to serve a state cause. He watched as transnational ideals brought with an onslaught of commercialism and consumerism that ironically embraced capitalistic principles. Nortse captures in this photo the ethnocentric nationalism that many Tibetans identify with, both in and away from Tibet.

Nortse's quest to visually create his identity is focused around his reality from childhood to present day. It is from his experiences in the TAR, where Tibetan culture has been erased, that Nortse has to create a Tibetan reality that becomes transfixed in art.¹¹² Although Clare Harris describes this mechanism of identity creation in regards to Gonkar Gyatso's art, this sociological phenomenon can be applied to Norbu Tsering as well. She describes that the power of these artists' imaginations creates an entirely new and real Tibet both in the fixed art and in reality itself.¹¹³

Some scholars believe that Tibetans such as Nortse actually have *more* liberties in the T.A.R to express their identity than in exiled communities such as Dharamsala, where strict modes of Tibetan identity production are censored in order to project their version of "Tibetan-ness" to their community and to outsiders.¹¹⁴ The Tibetan community in exile

¹¹² Clare Harris, *In the Image*, 197.

¹¹³ Clare Harris, *In the Image*, 197.

¹¹⁴ Toni Huber, "Shangri-la in Exile," 370.

does have political agendas which influence their images and censor their texts, and this is sadly ironic since the Chinese also re-wrote visual and linguistic history during the Cultural Revolution. Nortse does enjoy artistic liberties due to the Chinese liberalization and their underlying yet [demeaning] sympathy to sub-national groups, but the liberties come at a price. Artists in the T.A.R walk the streets that used to be under Tibetan control; they are connected to their past every day and constantly reminded of what they lost as they wander the streets of Lhasa. Nortse is re-inventing his image of Tibetan artistic identity within the confines of the political structure of the T.A.R, as a broken man who misses his father, and as an activist commenting on the future state of Tibet and the people who inhabit its walls.¹¹⁵

GADE:

An artist who matches Gonkar Gyatso's popularity is Gade, a Lhasa born artist who studied at the Central Fine Art Academy of Beijing.¹¹⁶ Gade is the founder of the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild, which is comprised of 14 native Tibetan artists and a few Lhasa-born Chinese artists.¹¹⁷ Gade is vehemently against ethnicity as a guiding factor for the guild's membership. He explains that Chinese artists in the guild have every right to participate because they are among friends and hold the same aesthetic ideas about

¹¹⁵ Clare Harris, *In the Image*, 199.

¹¹⁶ Gade, "Artist Biography," *Asian Art*.

<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/gendun/gade/bio.html> (accessed on November 30, 2010).

¹¹⁷ See Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild, <http://www.asianart.com/gendun/index.html> (Accessed on November 30, 2010).

art.¹¹⁸ This guild was created to honor the modern artwork and writings of Gedun Choephel (b.1903), who died prior to the Chinese takeover of Tibet but is revered by many as the first modern Tibetan painter.¹¹⁹

An elaborate discussion on Choephel would fill an entire paper on its own, so I will briefly touch on pertinent details. Despite being well versed in the iconographic techniques of *thangka* painting, Gedun (sometimes spelled Gendun) spent twelve years studying art and politics in India.¹²⁰ The few writings and illustrations preserved of his work, most were lost during the Cultural Revolution “cleansing,” are described by Harris as a deconstruction of the human figure and controversial to the Tibetan authorities.¹²¹ The controversy stems from Gedun’s writings on the *Kama Sutra* and his preoccupation with sexual imagery.¹²² Although better known for his writing than his art, the director of Latse Library, Pema Byams, acquired twenty-seven of his drawings and is currently organizing a Gedun Choephel archive on the Latse website.¹²³

Gade, inspired by the forward-thinking Gedun, created the artists’ guild in his name in 2003 in order to preserve and exhibit contemporary Tibetan art. His work has been described as a provocative and thoughtful presentation of Tibetan imagery which is

¹¹⁸ Kabir Heimsath, “Untitled Identities,” 4.

¹¹⁹ Laura Harrington, “Crossing the Great Divide: ‘Tradition’ and ‘Modernity’ in Tibetan Buddhist Art,” in *Journal of Material Religion* Vol 4, Issue 1, (March 2008), 88.

¹²⁰ Clare Harris, *In The Image*, 114.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 115.

¹²² See also Harris’ description of Gedun’s drunken debaucheries and his expansive sexual prowess with Tibetan women: *Ibid.*, 117.

¹²³ “Newly Discovered Artwork by Gedun Choephel,” in *Latse Library Newsletter* Vol. II (Fall 2004), 13.

threatened by profane and sacrilegious global phenomena.¹²⁴ While Gyatso presents similar themes with “pop-art” abstraction, Gade’s paintings are created to look like antiques; they are much darker and more sarcastic in nature.

Take, for example, “Sleeping Buddha” (Fig. 28). This purposefully aged, mixed-media painting has the elements of an ancient Tibetan manuscript: worn edges, deteriorating images, and darker, dulled colors. The ultimate difference lies in the subtle subject matter. Smaller dilapidated and tattered paintings of faces are placed together to create a reclining Buddha. Twentieth-century pop-culture icons and images are painted in the smaller squares, evidenced by the two enlarged details (Figs. 29 and 30). Alsop explains how these modern images permeate the “new and evolving Tibetan consciousness” and artists like Gade present them side by side with traditional elements of Tibetan Buddhism.¹²⁵ Howdy Doody, Ronald McDonald, and Charley Chaplin are delicately appliquéd on linen alongside the Buddha, monks, and Tibetan kings and families. Gade places a determined Tibetan farmer above a race car driver and a painting of Pope John Paul is situated underneath Tibetan guardian deities. PLA soldiers, a Mao image, and even an @ sign are torn and painted to look ancient. They exist as parts of the whole Buddha, yet they are fleeting and impermanent, deteriorating and dissolving over time. All of the icons have golden halos behind their heads, illustrating that even the most trivial personas of today’s society can be elevated to reverence and worship. Like Gyatso, Gade utilizes the image-within-image technique to foster deeper thinking in the viewer and to present the multi-faceted identities of modern Tibetans.

¹²⁴ Lisa Becker, “Waves,” 3.

¹²⁵ Alsop, “Visions from Tibet,” 12.

Gade's "New Tibet" is also painted to mimic the aesthetic of a traditional manuscript page (Fig. 31). This 2006 artwork was part of *The Waves on the Turquoise Lake* exhibition at the University of Colorado's art museum. The dark mineral colors seamlessly blend the vast Himalayan Mountains with elements of modernity and futurism. Dirty clouds and red smoke pollute the cities jutting from the hills. Planes and hot air balloons dot the horizon while satellite dishes and *stupas* grace the tips of skyscrapers and low valleys. In the enlarged detail of Figure 32, the New York World Trade Center is enveloped in red smoke, a September 11th reference symbolizing the pervading capitalist economy of America and the close international ties binding the west to China. This Western element, placed within the hills of Tibet, could represent the strong influence of the American consumer, who demands cheap Chinese goods. Gade could be commenting here that Tibet is being exploited for labor, land, and products which are driven by Chinese and Western greed.

Although Gade uses colors that would be common in traditional *thangka* paintings (red, beige, blue, and green), his style is cartoon-like; the objects are painted with flat blocks of color and broad outlines which satirizes the seriousness of the subject matter.¹²⁶ The second detail of "New Tibet" (Fig. 33) shows a modern, white train moving through the mountains and a small UFO in the lower right foreground. The juxtaposition of the UFO to the Tibetan landscape is an illustration of ridiculousness, yet it provides a social commentary on the "modernization" of Tibet through Chinese rule.

¹²⁶ Lisa Becker, "Waves," 3.

The railway built from Beijing to Lhasa, Tibet has been a controversial topic for natives since its inception in 2006. Carin Zissis, a journalist for the Council on Foreign Relations, explains the hostility and opposition of Tibetans in regards to the railway. They believe the railway, bringing with it 800,000 tourists and Han Chinese each year, will destroy their Tibetan culture and help China succeed in “assimilating” Tibet both economically and geographically to China.¹²⁷ Gade’s representation of “New Tibet,” with the high-tech passenger train in tow, is meant to evoke Tibetans’ suppressed emotions that surface with China’s geographical absorption of Tibet. The fragility of Tibetan identity is brought to surface with this painting detail; the Tibetan way of life and identification as a Tibetan is threatened with hybridism as thousands of Chinese travel to Tibet, set up homes, and create new job markets.

The exploitation and modernizing of traditional images is further explored in “Precious Items” (Fig. 34). Over three hundred “precious” commodities are presented on top of a lotus base within their own gold-outlined *torana*. Every item is equally sized and lined up to reflect the rows of deities in traditional *thangka* paintings. The objects include general necessities (socks, toilet paper and lights), household and work items (cleaning products, paper clips), leisure elements (planes, paint palettes and musical instruments), and food (wine glasses, ice cream, and fast food drinks). This artwork is meant to give insight into which items are more accessible in a contemporary Tibetan society (mainly food and leisure) and which traditional items are no longer necessary due to

¹²⁷ Carin Zissis, “Chinese Train Carries Controversy,” in *Analysis Brief of Publications, Council on Foreign Relations*, (Aug. 31, 2006): http://www.cfr.org/publication/11380/chinese_train_carries_controversy.html (accessed on Dec 4, 2010).

industrialization and commercialization (*tsampa* bags and teacups).¹²⁸ Leigh Sangster believes that there are two interpretations to this painting: first, that the Tibetan culture is shaping the external economic and social influences and not vice versa, or secondly, that the external traditional Tibetan forms remain unchanged, yet the subconscious identity and values are uprooted and shifting.¹²⁹ Although Tibetans would rather believe in the former, the latter interpretation is more realistic because of the overbearing duty of the Communist Chinese Government to change the “noble savages”.¹³⁰

The final Gade painting that comments on the shifting identity of Tibetan artists is his 2008 work, “Diamond Series: The Hulk” (Fig. 35). This artwork is his most overt commentary on popular culture and its effects on the contemporary Tibetan painter. “The Hulk” was exhibited in Gade’s 2008 *Making Gods* exhibition at the Rossi & Rossi gallery in London.¹³¹ This painting is reflective of traditional *thangka* paintings in its format, color, and modeling, but the subject matter is extremely modern and explicit (see Figs. 36 and 37 for comparison). The central deity is that of the Incredible Hulk, with arms flexed, legs in lunging warrior pose and body stomping on the blue Kali and female *dakinis*. The Hulk wears some of the traditional items of Buddhist deities; a tiger cloth is wrapped around his legs and a long skull garland (*munda-mala*) falls over his neck and torso. A red *torana* of fire is painted behind him, and an orange and blue lotus flower supports

¹²⁸ Leigh Sangster, “Inside Out,” in *Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild, Arts Cad.* (May 20-22, 2007) <http://fr.artscad.com/A.nsf/Opra/SRVV-72UKSC> (accessed on Dec. 4, 2010), 5.

¹²⁹ Leigh Sangster, “Inside Out,” p. 6.

¹³⁰ Dodin and Rather explain that Han Chinese believe Tibetans are primitive, childlike barbarians, *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, & Fantasies*, Eds. Theierry Dodin and Heinz Rather (Boston: Wisdom Pub., 2001), 123.

¹³¹ “Tibetan Artist Turns Hulk And Spider-Man Into Himalayan Heroes,” *Young Tibet Online* <http://youngtibet.com/2010/04/tibetan-artist-turns-hulk-and-spider-man-into-himalayan-heroes/> (accessed on Dec. 11 2010).

him from below. In the top left and right corners (near his elbows), two circular images have been painted. In a traditional *thangka* painting, it was customary to include a smaller image of the main deity's consort. In this contemporary example, Gade paints an image of Betty Banner, who is Bruce Banner's wife. In the "Incredible Hulk" comics, Bruce Banner is a scientist who takes experimental potions and ultimately turns into the large, green Hulk. The upper right image shows Bruce Banner as the scientist experimenting on himself, a screaming man with tubes attached to his head. Smaller scenes encompass the Hulk, showing bizarre images and random scenes. Directly above the hulk are panoramic images of legs standing in barrels of blood and the bent-over backsides of women. Weird creatures flank the corners of the painting and sexual scenes pan down the sides. Puppets, sunflowers, and spaceships abducting monks all surround the central deity while scavenging beasts feast on carcasses and headless, haloed creatures stand guard at the bottom of the painting.

"The Hulk" illustrates the aspects of Western culture which permeate Tibetan society and challenge the religious and artistic norms of Tibetan painters. Initially "The Hulk" appears to be a harmless representation of a Buddhist deity and a humorous challenge to the classification of said deity. Further interpretation of the painting leads the viewer to issues of contemporary Tibetan identity and its multi-faceted existence. The Hulk represents the Tibetan people and more importantly, Tibetan artists who are both internally and externally influenced to change for the sake of globalization. While Bruce Banner was bullied throughout his youth by his father and peers, he did not let it change his kind heart, for later in his life he "selflessly" threw himself into atomic radiation to

save the life of a young teenager.¹³² It was exposure to the radiation that first started his Hulk changes. The Tibetan people, too, experienced bullying and exploitation by the Communist Chinese government. The cultural changes which manifested as a result were both externally forced, like Banner's exposure to radiation, and internally adapted, like Banner's ongoing quest to define whether he is a monster or a man. Likewise, Tibetan artists continue to define and label their identity according to both society's desires and their own cultural values. Whether Gade intended this deeper interpretation, or he simply wanted to illustrate the powerful influence of Western Culture within the Tibetan landscape, the similarities between the Hulk's multiple personas and Tibetan identity cannot be ignored.

Gade's paintings are sometimes subtle observations of the shifting artistic identities, like "Sleeping Buddha" and "Precious Items," and others are blatant depictions of how consumerism and pop culture distort traditional values ("New Tibet" and "The Hulk"). He uses disturbing and explicit images to represent the modern world and blends them within traditional Tibetan frameworks. Gade expresses his wishes of continuing Tibetan art within a "Tibetanised context" (as opposed to Chinese or Western styles) whilst addressing the consumerism of global markets.¹³³ When asked about how modern art developed in Tibet, Gade explained:

¹³² See the "Childhood Trauma" and "Man or Monster" sections of the Hulk character page of *Marvel Comics*. http://marvel.com/universe/Hulk_%28Bruce_Banner%29 (accessed on Feb. 26th, 2012).

¹³³ Gade. "Making Gods: Gade," *Rossi & Rossi Gallery online*. <http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/making.gods/information> (Accessed on Dec 11, 2010).

[I]t has just happened like the mingling of the red and blue neon lights of the nightclubs with the butter lamps and the Potala palace with the plastic evergreen coconut trees at its foot...It's like an underage person without preparation and experience facing simultaneously a life-and-death crisis, the bars and fetters of his own ancient culture, and the stereotypes of the outsider[.]¹³⁴

This poetic mindset sets the tone for all of Gade's artwork and shows his briskly satirical adaptability to the changing culture of Tibet. He and Gonkar Gyatso recognize that they cannot shed the tradition that shapes them as Tibetans, nor can they shake the labels placed on them by others. They must create what they know in the conditions that arise from their situations, and use their intrinsic artistic expression to create the dialogue of the Contemporary Tibetan artist.

DEDRON:

Dedron is one of a handful of female artists creating and exhibiting artwork within Lhasa and she is one of two female artists in the Gendun Choephel Artists' Guild. In 2003 she and four other Tibetan artists exhibited artworks through the Guild's first female show.¹³⁵ Dedron lives, produces, and shows her artwork in her Tibetan homeland.¹³⁶ The four works I have chosen to discuss greatly differ from those of Gyatso and Gade. Curator Becky Bloom compares Dedron's style to that of Mark Chagall and when their work is placed side by side that comparison can be understood

¹³⁴ Alsop, "Visions From Tibet," 16.

¹³⁵ Tamar Scoggin, "Report From Lhasa," in *Writings on Visual Art, Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art* (2003): http://www.mechak.org/report_from_lhasa.html (accessed on Mar. 16, 2011).

¹³⁶ Max Eternity, "Buddha 2010: Contemporary Tibetan Art in New York," in *The Huffington Post* (Oct. 12th 2010): www.huffingtonpost.com/max-eternity/buddha-2010-contemporary-b_738707.html (accessed on Oct. 13, 2010).

(Figs. 38 and 39).¹³⁷ Both artists use bold, bright colors, although Chagall paints with primary hues while Dedron's art utilizes warmer earth tones. Both artists paint with strong, angular lines and have distorted use of perspective; there is much overlapping and layering of space within both paintings. A simplified but enchanting quality is apparent in both artists' styles, and both artists tend towards scenes of everyday life. This comparison is important because it shows that while Dedron lived and attended school in Tibet, she had a "globalized" education that included the artworks of Western artists. Dedron attended Tibet University in Lhasa as an art student and was exposed to and influenced by the art of Western art masters.¹³⁸ The Communist government would say her education was part of the "modernization" and industrialization agenda in Tibet. The integration of Western style with her deeply rooted Tibetan culture is apparent in some of her paintings, while other works deny the global hybridity and illustrate a simpler Tibetan life.

"Life" encapsulates the exotic beauty and vibrancy of the Tibetan landscape without the modern amenities and consumerist elements of previously discussed works (Fig. 40). Dedron's painting illuminates another aspect of Tibetan artists' identities; that of the preservation of "Tibetan-ness" and nostalgic attachment to pre-industrial times.¹³⁹ The tall Tibetan mountains protrude through swirling clouds in the background, yet there are no indications of modern buildings or smog dotting the landscape as in Gade's "New

¹³⁷ Becky Bloom., "Tradition Transformed," Training Transcript. (June 3 2010): http://docs.rma2.org.../Tradition_Transformed_Training_Transcript%206.3.10.doc (accessed on Dec 12, 2010).

¹³⁸ Unknown author, "Unearthly Beauty," in *China Hourly* (Monday, Nov. 22, 2010): <http://www.chinahourly.com/life/5322/> (accessed on Dec 14, 2010).

¹³⁹ Ken Johnson, "Heady Intersections of Ancient and Modern," in *The New York Times*. (Aug. 19 2010).

Tibet.” In their place we see native birds and yaks, Tibetan prayer flags, small village homes and colorful trees. In the foreground, the focal point of the painting shows a Tibetan couple dressed in traditional garments. Their over-simplified faces have only one large, stylized eye and an absence of facial features. Characters and objects melt into one another, like the almost transparent yak in the lower left corner and the houses which are painted on the man’s upper right arm. The sense of space is distorted, with yaks as large as mountaintops in the background and yet abnormally small in the foreground. One art critic comments that Dedron’s style is reminiscent of a “modern children’s book version of folk art.”¹⁴⁰ The outlining of shapes and objects and flat modeling of color values supports this opinion. Her whimsical painting depicts the life of common Tibetans within an uplifting, colorful setting. This is a positive, nationalistic work that demonstrates that contemporary Tibetan artists are concerned with preserving their heritage. This piece is reminiscent of the earlier, Tibetan Romanticist artworks in that it stylizes the emotions of Tibetans in regards to their tradition. Dedron creates a modern version that idealizes her culture as it was before Chinese interference.

Dedron’s 2009 painting, “Mona Lisa with Pet” (Fig. 41) is an unusual pairing of the famous Western painting with Tibetan elements, a “Tibetanized” version of the Mona Lisa that allows deeper insight into Dedron’s artistic motivation. She did not have the traditional Tibetan artistic training like some of her peer and her knowledge of European artists is once again evident in this work.¹⁴¹ The Mona Lisa stares at the viewer with bright green, stylized eyes that are signature to Dedron’s figures. She wears a formal

¹⁴⁰ Ken Johnson, “Heady Intersections,” 1.

¹⁴¹ Max Eternity, “Buddha 2010,” 5.

black dress as in the original, but the similarities end there. A Tibetan necklace and headband adorn her skin as she holds a small yak on her hands and an exotic bird on her right breast. Her porcelain white skin is slightly shaded and her fingertips slightly turn up in the style of traditional Buddha hands (need image here). In the place of the Italian countryside, the Himalayan Mountains are painted in jewel-tones of turquoise, oranges, and reds. Crystal blue lakes and swirling, cartoon-like clouds weave in and out of the landscape, and the only element of civilization is the stone bridge and road winding behind Mona Lisa.

This artwork shows more depth than the simple “folk charm” style that scholars and curators believe she exudes.¹⁴² The Mona Lisa’s bright green eyes are quite disturbing and alien, showing Dedron’s similar perception of Western art and her commentary on the Italian master. This interpretation seems more introspective than degrading, when compared to other modern satires of the sixteenth century painting, for example Marcel Duchamp’s *L.H.O.O.Q.* of 1919 (Fig. 42). The “Tibetanization” of the Mona Lisa could be interpreted similarly to Leigh Sangster’s explanation of Gade’s “Precious Items,” that the Tibetan art culture is heavily shaped by Western external influences. This painting represents more than simple fantasy and whimsy; Dedron attaches her Tibetan heritage to the new Mona Lisa. This painting comments on the all-pervasive Western ideals as Tibet becomes inundated with tourists and modernization. It represents the notion that Tibetan art can no longer be a “pure” and sheltered endeavor; it must surrender to the global, social and political forces existing within the landscape.

¹⁴² Lisa Becker, “Waves,” 3.

Similar in style and theme to “Mona Lisa with Pet,” “Marilyn Monroe” further illustrates the presence of Western popular culture within the modernized Forbidden City (Fig. 43). The use of American icons, both real and fictitious, seems to be a reoccurring subject for contemporary Tibetan painters, as seen previously in Gade’s “The Hulk” and “Sleeping Beauty”. “Marilyn Monroe” provides the viewer with a stylized, fanciful display of the 1950’s actress. Her head tilts to the side, with lush lips open in song. Blond hair, long lashes, and large, un-proportionate eyes set off her features while a soft, white fur envelopes her and a butterfly hovers at her shoulder. A twisting tree rises behind her to hold the sun and moon within a lotus blossom, and Dedron’s signature white cloud rises at the top of the painting. Unlike the “Tibetanization” of Dedron’s “Mona Lisa”, this image of Marilyn omits Tibetan jewelry and landscape. Only the small sun, moon, and lotus represent what is left of Tibet within the wake of Western cultural dominance. This is a visual interpretation of the fading Tibetan culture as more tourists flock to the T.A.R., and a comment on the education of Tibetans within the confines of the newly structured Chinese-Tibetan universities. Dedron is not simply illustrating a public icon that is known throughout the world, she is showing her audience the disappearing society and culture of common Tibetans. Perhaps Dedron chose to paint Marilyn Monroe and Mona Lisa, two, western women, as a comparison of her Tibetan femininity and the western female image. She certainly alters the original imagery to combine Tibetan aspects, which hints at the cultural hybridity of the new, Tibetan society.

“We Are Nearest to the Sun,” also painted in 2009, is a macroscopic visual interpretation of Tibetan life, which expounds on the meaning and style portrayed in “Life” (Fig 44). Instead of her usual treatment of the figure as a focal point in the

foreground, Dedron paints a dramatic aerial perspective of the Tibetan landscape. The sharp angles and bright colors that signify her style shape the buildings and alleyways of the village. This painting's structure and meaning is far from the "simple pictorial language" described by some art critics.¹⁴³ While from a distance the composition may seem simplified, with the village occupying a triangular shape against a plain, white sky, the smaller details within the village beg for inspection. The outskirts of the town, undoubtedly Lhasa, show earth-colored homes and buildings wielding Tibetan prayer flags. Within the center of the painting, a crowd of Tibetans circumambulate around the center Jokhang Palace while they spin tiny blue prayer wheels. Exotic trees and plants dot the perimeter of the palace, which extends upward four stories. In the balcony of the fourth story, a smiling figure dressed in red, perhaps the Dalai Lama, holds up a gold cup as an offering. A separate rooftop shows two men playing a dice game whose faces are turned up to glance at smoke rising out of a vase, possibly from a woman cooking. The smoke billows out and surrounds the moon, creating a focal point in the sky.

While some scholars continue to view Dedron's work as folk-like and primitive, Rachel Weingeist explains that this painting holds a much deeper meaning.¹⁴⁴ A red flag waves at the top of the mountain, symbolizing communist Chinese rule over Tibet. A group of Tibetans in the alley below stare at the flag, mouths open in raging protest and arms flailing to the sky (see detail in Fig. 45). This small but effective social commentary subtly lingers, surrounded by mundane images of everyday chores like cooking barley

¹⁴³ Absolute Arts, "Dedron: Nearest the Sun," (Thursday, May 7th, 2009): <http://www.absolutearts.com/artsnews/2009/05/07/35552.html> (accessed on March 16, 2012).

¹⁴⁴ Max Eternity, "Buddha 2010," 5.

and cleaning homes. Because Dedron still works and exhibits from Tibet, this artwork serves as her silent protest of the wrongdoings against her Tibetan people.

This painting is a testament of Dedron's observations of her environment; the rich Tibetan landscape plays an integral role in defining what is authentic to her heritage and simultaneously influences her subject matter.¹⁴⁵ The Buddhist prayer flags and worshippers of the Dalai Lama, who is no longer allowed in the Jokhang Palace, are symbols of that authenticity. She declares her Tibetan identity within this piece and defies the assimilation of the Chinese culture, despite not having a traditional Tibetan upbringing and being the youngest painter of those discussed. Dedron illustrates in this work the multiple faces of Tibetan art identity in that contemporary artists continue to idealize, romanticize, and defend their culture in the face of Communist China, and they do so surprisingly freely, within the structure of the Communist landscape.

JHAMSANG:

The last Tibetan artist of this discussion, Jhamsang, is similar to Dedron in that he is one of the younger members of the Gendun Choephel Artists' Guild. He was born in 1971 and was trained under the traditional *thangka* painter Tenpa Rabten.¹⁴⁶ This traditional background is apparent in many of his works, where he dissects traditional imagery and combines it with contemporary, graphic elements. The central theme of his paintings is the Tibetan Buddhist religion and how its following is on the decline. He

¹⁴⁵ Lopez, *Prisoners of Shangri La*, 140.

¹⁴⁶ *Peaceful Wind Gallery*. <http://peacefulwind.com/gallery6/10.html> (accessed on April 12 2011).

works in a layered style with a collage effect and aside from his painting of “Tara” (Fig. 53), his works are visually complicated when compared to the prior artists’ works.

In his 2003 painting, “Peacock River” (Fig. 46), a young Tibetan woman stands in front of a lotus and jewel encrusted *mandala*. The overall composition is a masterful exploration of color and texture, with subtle floral motifs parading in the background (the same designs you would find on the side of a Buddhist temple). An exotic peacock leans in to the woman from the left part of the painting and its long, billowing tail rises to the top of the image. Peacocks represent vanity in many cultures, but in Tibetan folklore these birds are used to represent a strong force that cuts through the rising ego. The style of the tail is similar to flames of fire that appear in *thangka* paintings of wrathful deities, demonstrating Jhamsang’s traditional skills as he applies them to this contemporary piece.

The young woman stares at the viewer with the facial structure of a Buddha, eyes half open and lips pursed in a tiny smile. She wears an elaborate turquoise and fabric headdress and is covered from the head down in semi-precious turquoise, coral, and brocade fabrics. Modern applications of floral designs run in strips across and behind her, adding intricate details and a graphic quality to the painting. This image speaks of the idealization of traditional Tibetan customs in the same way as Dedron’s “Life” painting. Although there are rural Tibetans who continue to wear traditional clothing and follow old ways, they are rare in comparison to the hybrid Tibetan citizens who wear *mala* beads and hold iPhones while hanging out at a karaoke bar below the Potala Palace. Because contemporary elements are left out of this painting, Jhamsang expresses the voice of the

rare Tibetan traditionalists that long for their country as it existed before the Chinese invaded. He, like Gade, is heavily influenced by traditional Buddhist iconography and images and uses these as the springboard for larger issues such as societal deterioration, loss of religion, and the effects of modernity in daily life.

In “Wrong Positions” (Fig 47), Jhamsang dissects Buddhist imagery and compounds it with Picasso’s famous painting, “Guernica” (see Fig. 48). The Medicine Buddha, Bhaiṣajyaguru, stands in the center of the painting (standing is unusual for Buddhist deities, as they are usually depicted seated). Traditionally Bhaiṣajyaguru’s body would be blue, but Jhamsang makes sweeping changes to this image in order to make his point, and the blue bowl of nectar Buddha holds is adequate iconography to prove his medicinal status.¹⁴⁷ He is swathed in orange and yellow fabrics of an ordained, enlightened monk and holds his right hand in *akasha mudra*, the hand symbol for creating infinite space in the mind. Maroon and gold outlined scenes from Picasso’s 1937 masterpiece are superimposed in three sections over the medicine Buddha. The tortured animals and figures intertwine with the lines of the Buddha’s fabric, subtly hinting at the interconnected nature of all beings. Jhamsang pays artistic homage to Picasso’s cubist style by fragmenting Buddha into seventeen slightly shifted pieces, allowing the Guernica figures to peek through his body and continue over the composition.

Jhamsang’s powerful imagery blends the tragedies of war and the suffering of man with the protective qualities of the healing Buddha. The “Wrong Positions” that

¹⁴⁷ Minh Thanh and P.D. Leigh, “Sutra of the Medicine Buddha” *International Buddhist Monastic Institute*, (2001): http://www.buddhanet.net/pdf_file/medbudsutra.pdf (accessed on April 18 2011), xi

Jhamsang refers to includes the standing version of the deity, a symbol of action for the current and future generations of Tibetan Buddhists, and the pieces of Buddha that hover over the scenes of death and destruction. Jhamsang also expresses the wrong positions of modern man since the Medicine Buddha is *behind* the images of suffering and death. The Medicine Buddha can heal the sore wounds of Tibetans, but his teachings are mere fragments in the minds of current Tibetans as commercialization and pop icons takes their place. This image comments on the faithless, war-driven societies as depicted by Picasso during the Spanish Civil War, which currently exist in our times. For Jhamsang to use a Western image of war is evidence of China's "global" education: the privilege of homogenization.

Jhamsang's "Culture of Change" brings the *thangka* tradition into the twenty-first century, where a Tron-like white grid runs outward through the appendages of the Buddha: his life-essence essentially flows with the lines through space and time (Fig. 49). Jhamsang notes that he was influenced by the thirteenth century "Buddha Amoghasiddhi" *thangka* of Central Tibet (see comparison Fig. 50 and 51).¹⁴⁸ While his respect for *thangka* painting is reflected in the stylized treatment of the Buddhist figures, he maintains his artistic right to express contemporary ideas within this cultural framework. The painting shows predominantly red and gold monks, consorts, and mythological animals surrounding the central Buddha. Traditional *thangka* colors of blues and yellows contrast with the white, futuristic computer grids. This artwork visually defines contemporary (especially Western) notions of the "loss of premodern and sacred" Tibet through Jhamsang's exaggerated, computerized overlay of a more conventional art

¹⁴⁸ Leigh Sangster, "Meeting Old Buddhas," 4.

form.¹⁴⁹ His deconstruction of the Buddha is a societal as well as religious comment about modern Lhasa. If the “real” Tibet that Adams speaks of (the Tibet that exists in Western discourse) lies in religious embodiment and preservation, then Jhamsang’s “Culture of Change” visually represents this notion.¹⁵⁰ His contemporary creation of the Buddha is no more real than the Tibet that exists in the nostalgic minds of Westerners and Tibetans. The theme appears as an interpretation of Buddhist modernization and the loss of religious identity that many previous artists enjoyed before the “Sinicization” of Tibet by the Han Chinese.¹⁵¹

Jhamsang further twists traditional Tibetan iconography in his “Culture” painting, where Buddhist deities, Chinese newspaper clippings, and naked women compete for compositional space (Fig. 52). Bleached-sprayed paint washes out sections of dark color and creates an unfinished effect that is intentional and shows the ephemeral aspects of art. Jhamsang carefully paints the Chinese newspapers in *Trompe L’oeil* fashion, making them appear ripped and pulled forward as though they make up the reverse side of the existing painting. Red and gold Buddhist figures take up the lower two-thirds of the painting and despite the large seated Buddha’s central location, the buxom nude at the top of the composition is clearly the focal point. This is a blatant comment on the pervasiveness of Western art history in modern Chinese schools; the nude has brightly painted foliage around her and is surrounded by a gold frame, referencing the early

¹⁴⁹ Vincanne Adams discusses how karaoke bars and Western pop culture destroy downtown Lhasa, and I take the liberty of applying his anthropological findings to the art world as well. “Karaoke as Modern Lhasa, Tibet: Western Encounters with Cultural Politics,” in *Cultural Anthropology* vol. 11, no. 4, (Nov. 1996), 514.

¹⁵⁰ Adams, “Karaoke,” 522.

¹⁵¹ Sinicization is defined as the erasing of Tibetan culture, language, and religion in order to assimilate to the modern Chinese nation-state. *Ibid.*, 521.

Western art masters. Jhamsang also makes a social statement here of the Western importance of vanity and sex over spirituality and tradition. Placing sacred Buddhist images alongside the woman, whose breasts are represented as nothing short of Japanese Anime pornography, is a bold artistic move by Jhamsang. While these images would be “safe” to create in China’s Tibet because of their radical treatment of Buddhist imagery and the outward appearance they give in corrupting the faith, Jhamsang’s undertones are not unnoticed. The distressed and tormented style of this painting is an extension of the breakdown of religion and faith in the Tibetan community. The artist is highly aware of the shifts in Tibetan artistic identity in the twenty-first century and he creatively uses the “freedoms” given by the PRC to refute their messages of mass-secularization.

Some would question the sacrilegious nature in which he presents these images, but I believe he brings to light the problems of many Buddhist practitioners, the most important being societal obsessions with youth, beauty and sex while the inner spiritual being wrestles with non-ego, interdependence and impermanence. Jhamsang expresses the in-flux identity of contemporary Tibetan artists, on one side enjoying the artistic liberties in which an artwork such as “Culture” can be displayed in communist China, and on the other side satirizing his faith and culture while still preserving himself as Tibetan painter. This is where the blur of artistic identity occurs: contemporary Tibetan artists like Jhamsang believe that the notion of Tibetans having “lost” their identities is a Western idea stemming from a social and diasporic standpoint, and that the “identity crisis” has simply become a “requisite for recognition in art circles”.¹⁵² Some Tibetan artists create art based on Western idealized concepts of the fragmented Tibetan culture

¹⁵² Kabir Heimsath, “Untitled Identities,” 6.

simply because it's a popular theme. This version of artistic creation seems false or contradictory to the notion of self expression, but a Tibetan Buddhist would understand that because of interdependence, both outsider and personal perception are dependent on one another and therefore self expression cannot exist without external influence.

The final Jhamsang painting I wish to discuss is “Tara” (Fig. 53). This image is possibly the most disturbing for Buddhist practitioners since it depicts the female *Bodhisattva* smiling and holding a gun to her left temple. Her silver body is reflective and shiny, while her overlapping metal joints give her a futuristic, robotic aesthetic. Her large breasts have the same style and form of the woman's from the previous painting, continuing the cartoon/anime theme of Asian pop-culture. When Leigh Sangster interviewed Jhamsang for the 2008 exhibition *Tibetan Encounters*, he explained that Tibetan artists should not be “photocopy machines” for traditional images, but instead should visually describe their emotions and ideas in the present moment.¹⁵³ This is far from a traditional image, and some might believe it teeters on the edge of obscene, much like Chris Ofili's late 1990's painting “The Holy Virgin Mary,” which showed a black version of the virgin covered in elephant dung (Fig. 54).¹⁵⁴ And while both of these spiritually charged artworks may be described as satirically playful, “Tara” holds dark issues within her paint.

¹⁵³ Leigh Sangster, “Meeting Old Buddhas,” 4.

¹⁵⁴ Ofili also used collage-cut pornographic magazine images that were strategically glued to resemble butterflies. Jerry Saltz, “Man in the Middle: Chris Ofili Africanizes an Icon,” in *The Village Voice* (Oct 5 1999): <http://www.villagevoice.com/1999-10-05/news/man-in-the-middle/> (accessed on April 20, 2011).

As stated earlier, Jhamsang was trained in the fine art of *thangka* painting and thus understands that the main purpose for painting Buddhist deities is to accumulate merit (both for the painter and the patron).¹⁵⁵ With the artist preparing his mind and body, he meditates on the chosen deity while painting on the carefully prepared canvas: religion being the catalyst for the “cleanliness” of the art object and the artist.¹⁵⁶ Despite his traditional artistic identity and knowledge, Jhamsang still chose to create this shocking image of the Buddhist deity which is far from the “pure” and systematic form of a traditional *thangka* painting. The one aspect of *thangka* painting that Jhamsang might have invoked for this artwork is that of establishing motivation; this is the act of painting (or meditating) for the benefit of all suffering beings. We find Tara with a large smile on her face despite the revolver to her head, posing as the entire Tibetan population as they suffer under the stifling economic and social disparities brought on by “homogenization.” The dramatic visual imagery brings with it a like response; the whole of Tibetan suffering is at the heart of this painting. Jhamsang reflects on the religious and cultural distress of his people and shows, with dark irony, that the deities one would visualize for aid have become trivial visions for present and future generations in Tibet.

Jhamsang’s artworks are provocative and daring, much more so than the previous artists’ works. This shows that each contemporary Tibetan artist has his/her own agenda and creates within a uniquely perceived concept of Tibetan artistic identity. For Jhamsang, the Tibetan Buddhist religion is central to his paintings, whether he is

¹⁵⁵ Mathew Kapsner and Tania Wynniatte-Husey, “Thangka Painting,” in *Cho Yang: The Year of Tibet Issue* Eds. Jeremy Russel and Pedron Yeshe (New Delhi, India: Council for Religious and Cultural Affairs, 1991) www.tsemulku.com/dharma/.../35%20-%20thangka%20painting.doc 4. (accessed on April 20, 2011).

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 6.

satirizing the philosophical concepts (as the Chinese would believe), or drawing attention to the rapid degeneration of traditional Buddhist values.

PART TWO

THE QINGHAI-TIBET RAILWAY AS AN IDENTITY SHAPER IN TIBETAN ART

“All of these changes are not brought only by the train, but the train plays the role of instigator and is a focus point. So now we cannot place our identity in a fixed area, as there are too many things that have happened.”¹⁵⁷

In 2006 both Sweet Tea and Peaceful Wind galleries commissioned paintings from contemporary Tibetan artists in response to the Qinghai-Tibet railway.¹⁵⁸ This highly controversial modern Chinese development opened in July of the same year as part of a “Go West” economic policy promising a modern infrastructure and easier export/import of natural resources.¹⁵⁹ The political and social responses remain varied, with contemporary artists opening the dialogue to both the positive aspects and degrading effects of the new railway. China touts the railway as the engineering achievement of the century because the railway winds through the Himalayas at heights of over 15,000 ft.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁷ Gade, *Peaceful Wind Gallery website* <http://www.peacefulwind.com/gallery7/3.html> (accessed on March 6, 2012).

¹⁵⁸ “Lhasa Express: A Diverse Artistic Dialogue” in *Art Knowledge News* http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Rossi_Rossi-Tibetan_Art.html (accessed on May 10, 2011).

¹⁵⁹ Thierry Mathou, “Tibet and Its Neighbors: Moving Toward a New Chinese Strategy in the Himalayan Region,” in *Asian Survey* vol. 45, no. 4 (July/August 2005), 504-505.

¹⁶⁰ Thierry Mathou, “Tibet and Its Neighbors,” 506.

Westerners see this railway as a means of exploration through the difficult landscape as they fulfill their tourist desires. Many Tibetans, however, have a dark outlook on the socioeconomic and cultural repercussions caused by the new mode of transportation.

This section presents one artwork from each of the previously discussed Tibetan artists and explores how the Qinghai-Tibet railway influences Tibetan artistic identity. These works are meant to give insight on the varied artistic feelings surrounding this subject. Artistic identity in relation to the railway can be dissected into many forms, but the most prominent modes of identity-shaping revolve around the artist as an observer and commenter of social and cultural change, as a contemporary positive voice, and as an expresser of his/her faith in the face of modernity. Hybrid variations and combinations of these examples exist because identity is “mobile and malleable” and depends on personal background, time, place and surrounding conditions.¹⁶¹ Using the railway as a central theme, these artists challenge transfixed notions of Tibetan identity and show that multiple identities have arisen and are now common in the Tibetan art world.

Gonkar Gyatso’s visual analysis of the railway is depicted with his usual swirling pop-culture stickers, which wind their way upwards to a sitting Buddha’s body (Fig. 55). A crescent moon and sun *mandala* is set in the background, represented as tiny squares in crossword-like style. The layout of the stickers invokes the viewer to think about cause and effect; is the railway bringing modern items and commodities into Tibet (represented by the Buddha), or is the Buddha breaking down into these images, showing that we are

¹⁶¹ Clare Harris, “Generation Exile: Exploring New Tibetan Identities,” *Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art* (July 7th, 2011): <http://www.mechakgallery.com/kesang-lamdark-and-palden-weinreb-generation-exile.html> (accessed on March 12th 2012).

inherently part of such commodities? Both interpretations are correct, since according to Buddhist philosophy, the trivial items and modernizations are not separate from us. The stickers become more concentrated to create the form of the Buddha's head, further signifying the symbiotic relationship between our mind and the perceived objects of reality. The color images of cosmetics, cars, wineglasses, and slot machines starkly contrast with the black and white penciled background. Beneath the assembly of stickers, the Buddha sits in meditative pose, with his right hand touching the earth (calling the earth to witness as he obtains enlightenment).

This painting is Gyatso's subtle message of hope; despite the chaotic nature of modernization and global economies, one can still take refuge in the *Dharma* and practice Buddhism. Aside from religious optimism, Gyatso addresses the issue of assimilation and modern identity. The hundreds of stickers, representing the railway's daily capability of bringing over 4,000 tourists and Han Chinese into Lhasa, also represent the blending of nationalities and the bombardment of modernity within a traditional landscape.¹⁶² His work proposes the idea that Tibetan artistic identity has shifted into a multiple states; on the one hand Tibetan artists create out of a negative response to the railway and believe it is yet another cause of their broken culture, but on the other hand their artworks (and artistic livelihood) would not exist without the railway, which provides their patronage and allows easy access to their works. Because Buddhist philosophy is rooted in the act of "present-ness," the idea that one should be aware of and live in the present moment,

¹⁶² Willy Lam, "The Qinghai-Tibet Railway: China's New Instrument for Assimilation," in *China Brief* vol.6, issue 14. http://www.jamestown.org/single/?no_cache=1&tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=3960 (accessed on March 6th 2012).

and contemporary Tibetan art should not be an exception. Gyatso's mindfulness of the present moment allows his artistic identity to hover in the void between external political and social circumstances and the internal mind that ultimately creates its own reality.

The Chinese are highly cognizant that Tibetan art is a large resource in regards to tourism and international trade.¹⁶³ The Qinghai-Tibet Railway allows for faster export and larger quantities of cultural goods to be sold to foreign markets. Nortse's collaged painting, "006/07 NO.1" is a visual representation of this cultural and economic parallel; the railway becomes the vehicle of expedient means, quickly allowing access to information, culture, people and ideas (Fig. 56). He uses layered newspaper clippings related to the railway as the background and adds images including Tibetan families, landscapes with yaks, both modern and classical artworks, and modern aircrafts. These various pictures link to the central image in a diagram-like format, which consists of a smaller diagram of pictures that surround the railway and a yak.

The overall composition is an explanation of the flow of information and ideas that are brought to and from the railway. Nortse describes it as a "record of time" since the images all represent aspects of Tibetan life which have been affected by the train.¹⁶⁴ The ripped photograph of the Tibetans in the lower left corner symbolizes the traditional family life that has been disrupted by the train, and the images of the Tibetans represent the terrain that has been lost to the train's infrastructure and new construction. The picture of the airplane shows the inevitable elements of modernity that arise from the

¹⁶³ Ashild Kolas, *Tourism and Tibetan Culture in Transition: A Place Called Shangrila* (London: Routledge, 2008), preface page 1.

¹⁶⁴ Nortse, *Peaceful Wind Gallery's website*. <http://www.peacefulwind.com/gallery7/8.html> (accessed on March 6th 2012).

train's presence, thus shaping the local culture, and the image of the Buddha in the lower center illustrates the shifts in religious beliefs as commercialization and modernization reshape the Tibetan countryside. All four of these aspects: family life, landscape, culture, and religion are identity shapers for contemporary Tibetans, and since they are deeply affected by the train's existence, the train thus becomes the symbol of their moving, shifting identity.

Norste's artwork is an analytical response to the railway that oscillates between the positive and negative effects of China's prized train. This image proves that Tibetan artistic identity is and always was changing, even during the traditional *thangka* making generations and the Socialist-Realist days of Chairman Mao authority. Massive tourism into Tibet, thanks to the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, has given Tibetan artists new 'opportunities' to define their identities and revive their culture.¹⁶⁵ They can create *thangka* paintings or abstract art, and they can generate art for Western tourists or for elite galleries in the newly formed art districts of China.¹⁶⁶ They can travel abroad, like Gade and Gyatso, and be artistically affected by international cultural and social elements, or they can remain in Tibet and express their ideas and culture using their interpretation of what it means to be an "authentic Tibetan."

Gade's artistic response to the Qinghai-Tibet Railway, entitled "Railway Train," is reminiscent of his earlier discussed artwork, "New Tibet," which also shows the hyper-

¹⁶⁵ Kolas, *Tourism*, 123.

¹⁶⁶ Such as Beijing's 798 Art District. Murray Whyte, "How China is Using Art (and artists) to Sell Itself to the World," in *The Toronto Star* (Sat. Dec. 12, 2009): <http://www.thestar.com/news/insight/article/737359--how-china-is-using-art-and-artists-to-sell-itself-to-the-world> (accessed March 12th 2011).

modern white train weaving through the mountains (Fig. 57). “Railway Train” is less panoramic and focuses on more up-close details, including Coca-Cola endorsed buildings, praying monks, and wandering yaks. When compared compositionally to his earlier work “Sleeping Buddha,” (a title play on the Disney movie “Sleeping Beauty”) one can see that this newer painting conforms to the same outline of the reclining Buddha (see Figs. 58 and 59). In contrast to the religious undertone and framework, this painting illustrates bizarre combinations of subject matter, which is the trademark of Gade’s other artworks. For example, the bullet train allows glimpses of passengers, which include Sherlock Holmes, the Buddha, and an alien life form. Rolling clouds and hills cover the landscape, but are dotted with non Tibetan-native sunflowers and palm trees. Even the Disney castle, a Western icon and image of global entertainment, is tucked between the hills in the middle of the canvas.

Gade’s cleverly created commentary on the opening of Hong Kong’s Disneyland in 2005 holds relevancy three years after he completed this painting. In 2009, China approved the construction of their second Disneyland theme-park (Shanghai), deemed one of the largest in the world both in size and cost.¹⁶⁷ Gade jokes that the once sacred city of the Dalai Lama has become a “Lhasa-Vegas” society that worships pop culture at the economic exploitation of the Chinese government.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁷ Brooke Barnes, “China Approves Disney Theme Park in Shanghai,” *New York Times* (November 3, 2009): <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/business/global/04disney.html> (accessed on May 9, 2011).

¹⁶⁸ Anindita Ghose and Supriya Nair, “Leaving Lhasa-Vegas,” *LiveMint.com and the Wall Street Journal* (Friday March 11, 2011): <http://www.livemint.com/2011/03/11202946/Leaving-Lhasa-Vegas.html?h=B> (accessed on May 10, 2011).

Because Gade's concepts of artistic identity are rooted in the effects of globalization, pop culture (and thus the loss of his culture), and Buddhism, his painting shows the absurdity of these clashing ideals. Monks who worship the Disney castle instead of a Buddhist *stupa*, Tibetans who row a boat on top of the railway infrastructure, and a PLA soldier who rides an elephant are all elements of this ridiculousness and a part of the blended, shifting identity of contemporary Tibetans. Each of these examples represents two influential aspects of contemporary Tibetan art: tradition versus modernity. Gade's painting is a reminder of what Tibetans have lost with the Qinghai Railway, but it is also an artistic response to the interconnectedness of all beings and a window of truth to the present moment.

For Dedron, the Qinghai-Tibet railway is less of a negative factor in regards to shaping Tibetan identity. Her painting, "Train," shows the positive sides of travel, tourism, and communication that are enjoyed by both Tibetans and outsiders (Fig. 60). Because Dedron is the youngest of the mentioned artists (having been born at the end of the Cultural Revolution in 1976) her youthful spirit and lack of exposure to the "cultural cleansing" may explain her more optimistic interpretation.¹⁶⁹ Her painting depicts train cars carrying passengers in her usual, colorful, geometric style. From the left she paints a business man traveling to work, a Tibetan family, and a car full of Tibetan exports (yaks, rugs, Buddhist relics, etc.). The last two cars show an old Tibetan woman traveling with a young Chinese girl, and a group of monks going on a pilgrimage. All of the passengers are traveling *to* China, which is important because it shows the empowerment of Tibetans

¹⁶⁹ "Rossi & Rossi to Exhibit the Tibetan Female Artist: Dedron," in *Art Knowledge News* http://www.artknowledgenews.com/Tibetan_female_artist_Dedron.html (accessed on March 7, 2012).

to travel away from their homeland.¹⁷⁰ Dedron does not illustrate the train bringing in swarms of Chinese citizens or tourists, insinuating assimilation. Instead she shows that business, tourism, pilgrimages, and exportation of Tibetan goods *from* Tibet to outside destinations can create positive exposure for Tibet and promote better public relations.

From an artistic standpoint, this coincides with the earlier idea that Tibetan artists will have more opportunities to show their work, and in a much more easily accessible manner. If the artistic economy of Tibet flourishes because of the train, then Dedron's perspective is contrary to the previous artists' more negative ideas about the railway. Gyatso and Gade might argue that the art being produced and sold is not "authentic" Tibetan art and that creating for tourists just reinforces the non-authentic identity for contemporary Tibetans. However, some scholars and anthropologists believe that authenticity is dependent and subjective to whoever is questioning the authenticity.¹⁷¹ For example, while I traveled to Australia with students, we visited "authentic Aboriginals" while they danced, sang, and played instruments. The students did not question the Aboriginals' authenticity because they were dressed as Aboriginals and behaved (historically) as Aboriginals. The teachers questioned the authenticity because we were in a Rainforest theme-park, but they could have been from local villages. Placing the Aboriginals in a theme park does not define or refute their authenticity, even if they washed off their skin-paint and drove home in a Volkswagon. Likewise, Dedron's painting argues that modernity can positively affect the local Tibetan culture, and the

¹⁷⁰ Dedron, *Peaceful Wind Gallery*, <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/lhasatrain/11.html> (accessed on March 7, 2012).

¹⁷¹ Kolas, *Tourism*, 124.

new, shifting roles of Tibetan artists are no less authentic than the traditional identities of artists from generations before.

Jhamsang's painting for the Lhasa Train exhibition displays the artist's neutral sentiments in regards to the railway. "First Railway" has a simple composition (in contrast to his earlier, more detailed artworks) which depicts both traditional and contemporary elements of Tibetan culture (Fig. 61). In the center of the painting, a man in modern clothes holds a woman in a traditional Tibetan dress and guides her across the train tracks. Behind them, the Qinghai-Tibet train is either stopped, or narrowly misses hitting them as it travels to its destination. This scene is colorfully painted within the outline of a Buddha's open palm. Black and white traditional *mandalas* flank either side of the central image, representing the Buddhist faith and culture. Jhamsang explains the purpose behind the black and white *mandalas* versus the colorful train and people:

"The two mandalas represent Tibetan traditional culture, which in the face of modernity is 'de-colored'. The modernity has the stronger colours, but I feel that eventually everything has a time, as in the Buddhist teachings of impermanence. Eventually everything will be lost or disappear."¹⁷²

By not expressing a positive or negative emotion towards the railway, Jhamsang embraces his Buddhist religion and carves out yet another spectrum of contemporary Tibetan art identity. He acknowledges the modern aspects of the railway and its life-changing implications, but this painting suggests that Tibetan identity is not wholly altered by external forces. Everything arises, exists for a while, changes, and ceases to exist, including how one identifies his/herself as a Tibetan.

¹⁷² Jhamsang, *Peaceful Wind Gallery*, <http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/lhasatrain/4.html> (accessed on March 7, 2012).

For Jhamsang, who was born after the horrors of the Cultural Revolution and raised in a time described as “a minor renaissance of Tibetan cultural identity,” contemporary Tibetan artistic identity would focus on empowerment, observation of one’s surroundings, and living in the present moment.¹⁷³ Whereas Gyatso and Gade’s artworks stress the railway’s effects of social and cultural disintegration, Jhamsang’s piece subtly illustrates the nature of Buddhist reality; in time the railway will be just a memory. Its successor, another symbol of modernity, will then be a central theme from which Tibetan identity will be shaped. Thus Tibetan artistic identity does not exist independently from social, cultural, and political factors: it is simply a classification dependant on time, place, and circumstance.

Chinese propaganda portrays the Qinghai-Tibet railway as economically beneficial to the Tibetan culture and exclaims that Tibetans have “celebrated” the train’s one year anniversary.¹⁷⁴ These five Tibetan artists show both the flaws and elements of truth in that portrayal. For contemporary Tibetans living within Lhasa, the railway can be a positive symbol of modernity and economic expansion, a destroyer of traditional culture, or a marker of Sino-Tibetan assimilation. Through these railway-inspired artworks, Tibetan artistic identity is sensitively explored, confirming that the nature of their identities is not a permanent definition.

¹⁷³ Tashi Rabgey, “Citizenship as Agency in a Virtual Tibetan Public,” in *Tibetan Modernities : Notes from the Field on Cultural and Social Change* Eds. Robert Barnett and Ronald Schwartz. (Leiden, Netherlands: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2008), 341.

¹⁷⁴ “Qinghai-Tibet Railway Marks Anniversary,” in *China View* ed. Jiang Yuxia. (July 1, 2007): http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/2007-07/01/content_6317397.htm (accessed on March 12, 2012).

Gyatso illustrates that even in the chaos of the twenty-first century, artistic identity can involve one's Buddhist heritage and hope in Tibetan's cultural future. Nortse acknowledges the positive and negative effects of the railway and records time and society from a more neutral, artistic standpoint. Jhamsang follows suit with Nortse's thoughts on neutrality, but adds his experience and knowledge of the *Dharma* to his painting; his artistic identity thus fluxuates between commenter and Buddhist practitioner. Gade's artistic identity is shaped by his feelings of cultural exploitation and assimilation in respect to the railway; he views the clash of tradition and modernity as absurd, contradictory, and yet inevitable in our global age. Because Dedron's perception of the train is optimistic, cultural empowerment and economic/geographical accessibility become influential factors of her artistic identity. Through these artists, one can perceive the intricacy of contemporary Tibetan artistic identity as it is shaped by both external geographical/social landscapes and the nature of the mind.

CONCLUSION

On January 23rd and 24th of 2012, over one hundred Tibetans were shot at while they peacefully protested the “Year of the Dragon” Chinese New Year celebration.¹⁷⁵ Tibetan Prime Minister Dr. Lobsang Sangay asked practitioners and international supporters *not* to celebrate the Tibetan New Year (Losar, Feb. 22nd) because of the atrocities committed against the Tibetan people.¹⁷⁶ The Chinese government immediately shut down internet access to the entire areas affected by the shootings, banned all foreigners from entering Tibet until March 31st, and declared martial law throughout the Tibetan territories.¹⁷⁷ This act against the basic human rights of the Tibetan people is testament that after fifty-three years, the psychological, social, and geographical assimilation of Tibet has not been successful. This causes one to question why more Western governments and the United Nations have not come to the aid of the Tibetan people.

As America and Europe expand their global trade with China, economic ties bind political ideals, forcing these Western nations to turn a blind eye on Tibet for the sake of national profits.¹⁷⁸ The larger elements of American capitalism, represented by Coco

¹⁷⁵ Six Tibetans were killed and over sixty were injured. Dr. Lobsang Sangay, “Statement on Recent Killings in Tibet,” in *Tibet’s Truth* <http://tibetstruth.com/2012/01/26/kalon-tripa-statement-on-recent-killings-in-tibet/> (accessed on March 15, 2012).

¹⁷⁶ In response, international protests of Chinese Ministries commenced on Feb. 22nd. “Tibetan Year of the Water Dragon Arrives: For Many, a “Solemn Occasion,” in *Buddhadharma* <http://www.shambhalasun.com/news/?p=29675> (accessed on March 15, 2012).

¹⁷⁷ Keith Bradsher, “Tibetans Fired Upon in Protest in China,” in *New York Times* (Jan. 23, 2012): <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/24/world/asia/deadly-new-violence-reported-in-restive-tibetan-area-of-western-china.html> (accessed on March 15, 2012).

¹⁷⁸ Tsering Shakya, “Tibet and the Occident: The Myth of Shangri-La” in *Tibetan Review* (1992) Issue 27, No.1, 13.

Cola flags, now hang over sacred buildings in Lhasa, perpetuating the Communist Chinese economic agenda at the expense of their citizens. In contrast to the “harmless” symbols of capitalism, a young Tibetan can be gunned down for waving the National Flag of Tibet during demonstrations.¹⁷⁹

As evidenced by their works, Gyatso, Nortse, Gade, Dedron, and Jhamsang all acknowledge that change is the only constant element in our lives. For Tibetan artistic identity, social, political, and geographical change has shifted the roles of artists for the last twelve-hundred years. While Tibetan artists did enjoy a long period of cultural, artistic stability with *thangka* painting, their religiously guided artistic society was impermanent, as evidenced by the political and cultural changes of the last sixty years.

Within the period of *thangka* painting, Tibetan artists benefited from flourishing patronage; local monasteries, Mongolian rulers, and Tibetan families all commissioned artworks and created a rich, cultural environment for talented and learned artists. Artistic identity was heavily influenced, if not entirely dictated, by the traditional Tibetan Buddhist religion, but the Buddhist iconography and diagrams of style were not meant to be artistically stifling. Artists instead used them as a guide and as part of an overall path to fulfill their personal and spiritual goals of enlightenment. This is an important aspect of traditional Tibetan artistic identity: religion, politics, social life, and art were all intertwined and affected how a Tibetan identified him/herself as an artist. There was no separation between their inherent beliefs in Buddhism and the manner in which they created art. While the desire to stress their individuality as artists became more prominent

¹⁷⁹ Tsering Shakya, *Ibid.*, 14.

in the Later Diffusion (1150-1959), their devotion to the Buddhist practice and the preservation of their lineages never wavered.

During the Communist Chinese takeover in the 1950's, Tibetan artists were pressured, if not forced, to paint in the Socialist-Realist manner that was socially and economically productive for the new state. *Thangka* painters had to give up their former identities as religious vehicles on a path to enlightenment. They instead had to paint Chairman Mao's propaganda that supported the takeover and visually re-wrote the history of that era. This culturally degrading shift for artists was built out of an ideological mindset of assimilation and political/geographical control of the Tibetan territories. Tibetan artists became a powerful part of a larger, anonymous machine which focused on mass-industrialization and modernization; their visual imagery would influence the masses to the positive aspects of secular, Communist rule. Even the paintings of the short-lived Tibetan-Romanticist era were meant to cultivate ethnic pride while conforming to the Chinese State. The major problem overriding these ideals was that most Tibetans did not believe in the Communist cause. Their land had been invaded, their possessions had been confiscated, and many Tibetans were incarcerated and worked on prison farms. During the Cultural Revolution, they watched as their countryside was deforested for Chinese infrastructure and they protested as Buddhist monasteries and temples were burned. A Communist state that wished for cultural and geographical integration could not successfully persuade Tibetans of its righteousness with violence and destruction. Some artists, like Chen Danqing and Nawang Choedrak, hid Tibetan nationalistic elements into their Socialist paintings, a silent resistance to the Chinese agenda. Some young Tibetan artists did, however, begin to question their "authentic"

identities as they were integrated into Chinese schools, thus propagating the breakdown of their traditional, isolated notions of “Tibetan-ness.” It is out of this tumultuous, transitional artistic state that contemporary art was introduced to Tibetans, with multiple identities serving as a central theme for Tibetan artists.

Contemporary Tibetan art is currently a new concept, only having been shown in smaller exhibitions in China, the United States, and Europe. While Tibetan artists have been creating art since the post-Mao era of the early 1980’s, it has taken thirty years for this non-Western art form to be prominently displayed and examined. Much of this is to the fault of global, economic and political ties between China and the West, and also to the Western preconceptions of Tibetan art and their post-colonial desires for “Shangri-La.” Tibetan artists have been faced with the questioning and confrontation of their own identities as conceived and created by outsider beliefs of what indigenous, Tibetan art should be. Likewise, these artists have produced internal, multiple identities based on their bi-cultural state with China and their engagement with modernity and globalization. Contemporary Tibetan artists, represented by the five discussed in this paper, have pushed their art beyond the traditional conservatism of formal *thangka* painting. They have also detached their work from Chinese content and form, which allows them to more fully observe their own heritage and create new artistic identities based on personal exploration.

With the cultural and political upheaval and change in Tibet over the past sixty years, artistic identity has been fractured and re-structured into sub-categories of both external and internal realizations. Artists create as social observers and protesters of the

current, Communist oppression within their cities. Gonkar Gyatso mocks and satirizes issues of globalization under Chinese rule with his painting “Made in China (Fig. 19),” while Gade nostalgically places similar pop-images within more traditional, Buddhist and *thangka* formats (“Diamond Series: The Hulk” Fig. 35). Jhamsang, with a more cynical and crude tone, also addresses themes of ethnic and religious loss with “Culture” (Fig. 52) and “Tara” (Fig. 53) and his artistic identity is clearly shaped by the ideals of his national heritage (as shown in “Peacock River” Fig. 46). All three artists claim their identities have been affected by the deterioration of Buddhist culture, commercialism, and the effects of assimilation and all tailor the art to their interpretations of these elements.

Tibetan artists reflect on personal connections to the Cultural Revolution, demonstrating that the younger generation of Tibetans has not lost its cultural ties in spite of the counter-efforts of CCP. Norbu Tsering is an example of how Tibetan artistic identity can combine socio-political elements with deeply private aspects of one’s life. He does not portray the larger effects of globalization like the former artists; rather he bases his themes on individuality and the psychological/emotional effects of the Chinese program in Tibet. In contrast, Dedron’s artistic identity springs from her youthful spirit and optimism in both her surviving heritage and the opportunities of modernity. She represents a strong sense of Tibetan identity with her paintings “Life” (Fig. 40) and “We Are Nearest to the Sun” (Fig. 44) and explores the positive effects of the Qinghai-Tibet railway for Tibetan people with “Train” (Fig. 60). Dedron’s is an ethnocentric and nationalistic identity that includes Western influences, inherent in her schooling, but also embraces the inevitable, positive changes that can shape her society.

Michael Sheehy explains that contemporary Tibetan artists are currently “working to reconcile inherent tensions at this intersection of their cultural tradition and their art.”¹⁸⁰ As some of these artists struggle to form a cohesive artistic identity, and others embrace the fluidity of the changing global, situations, one question remains. Will the contemporary Tibetan art movement become more prominent on the global art scene, or will it quickly fade as a short-lived trend? Art scholars should address this sensitive topic and research more fully the socio/political implications surrounding this newer art form. Comparisons to the more traditional art identities of the Tibetan communities in exile would also be beneficial to understanding contemporary art within Tibet proper. Specific areas of research should include the recently opened *Peak Art Gallery* of Dharamasala (April 2010) and how contemporary exile art differs from art created in the T.A.R. Comparisons could also be conducted to other indigenous cultures’ contemporary art in regards to colonialism and oppression, for example the similarities to Native American art in its response to expatriation and diaspora. For the moment, contemporary Tibetan art appears to be gaining more attention from larger art establishments like the Rubin Museum in New York and Rossi & Rossi Gallery in London. Like all aspects of life, however, the unavoidable agents of change and impermanence will cause the constant transformations of both Tibetan artistic identity and the art itself.

¹⁸⁰ Michael Sheehy, “Transforming a Tradition: Tibetan Artists on the Dialectic of Sanctity and Modernity,” *Mechak Center for Contemporary Tibetan Art* <http://www.mechakgallery.com/transforming-a-tradition-tibetan-artists-on-the-di.html> (accessed on March 17, 2012).

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APPENDIX

EARLY TIBETAN THANGKA PAINTING



FIGURE 1

BODHISATTVA VAJRAPANI

DUNHUANG, CHINA 9th CENTURY

DISTEMPER ON CLOTH

BRITISH MUSEUM OF LONDON



FIGURE 2

THANGKA OF GREEN TARA (ATTRIBUTED TO THE ARTIST ANIKO)

TIBET (1260'S)

INK AND COLOR ON CANVAS

CLEVELAND MUSEUM OF ART

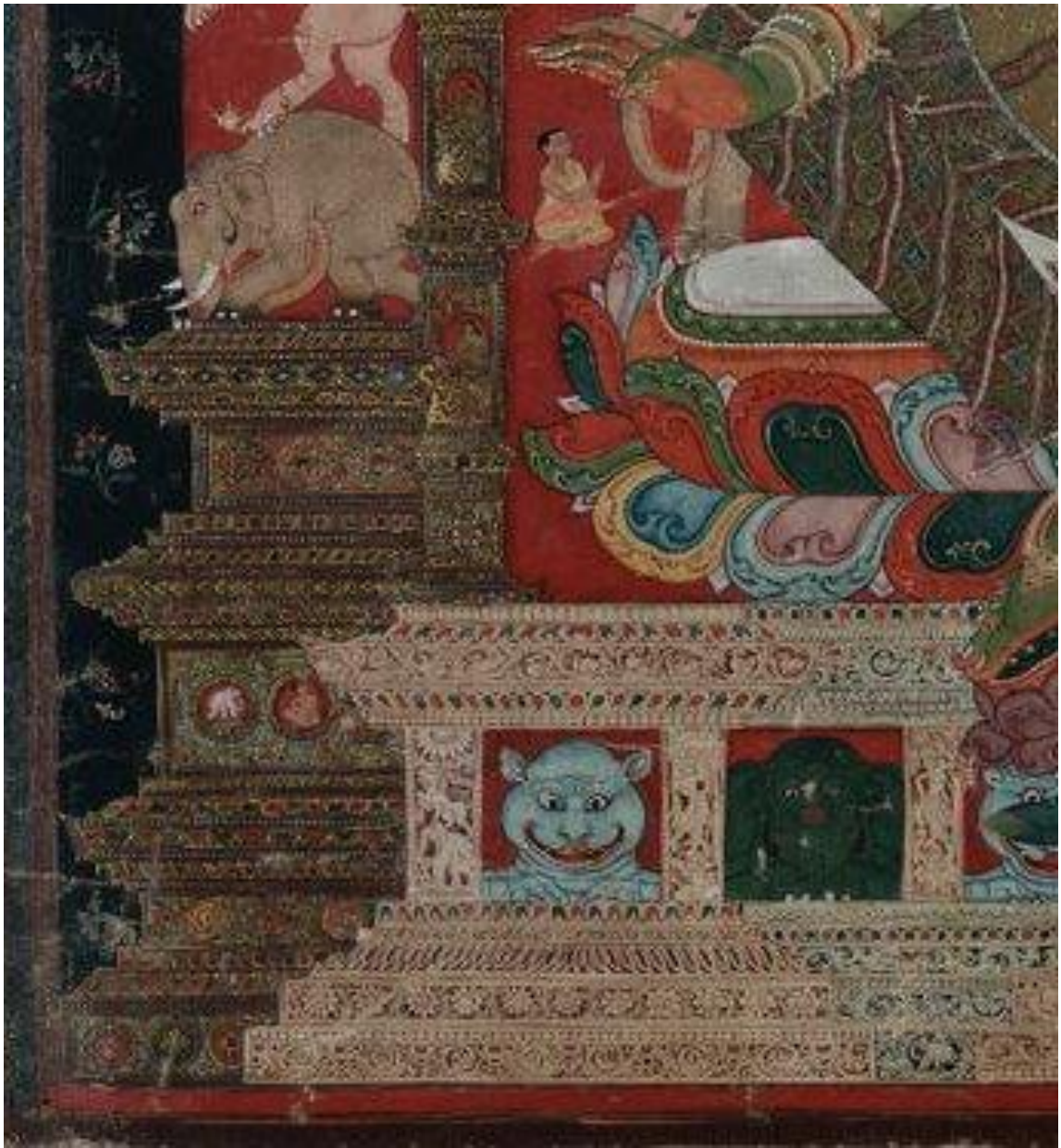


FIGURE 3

GREEN TARA THANGKA DETAIL

LOWER LEFT THRONE AND SHRINE ORNAMENTATION

CHINESE/TIBETAN SOCIALIST REALISM

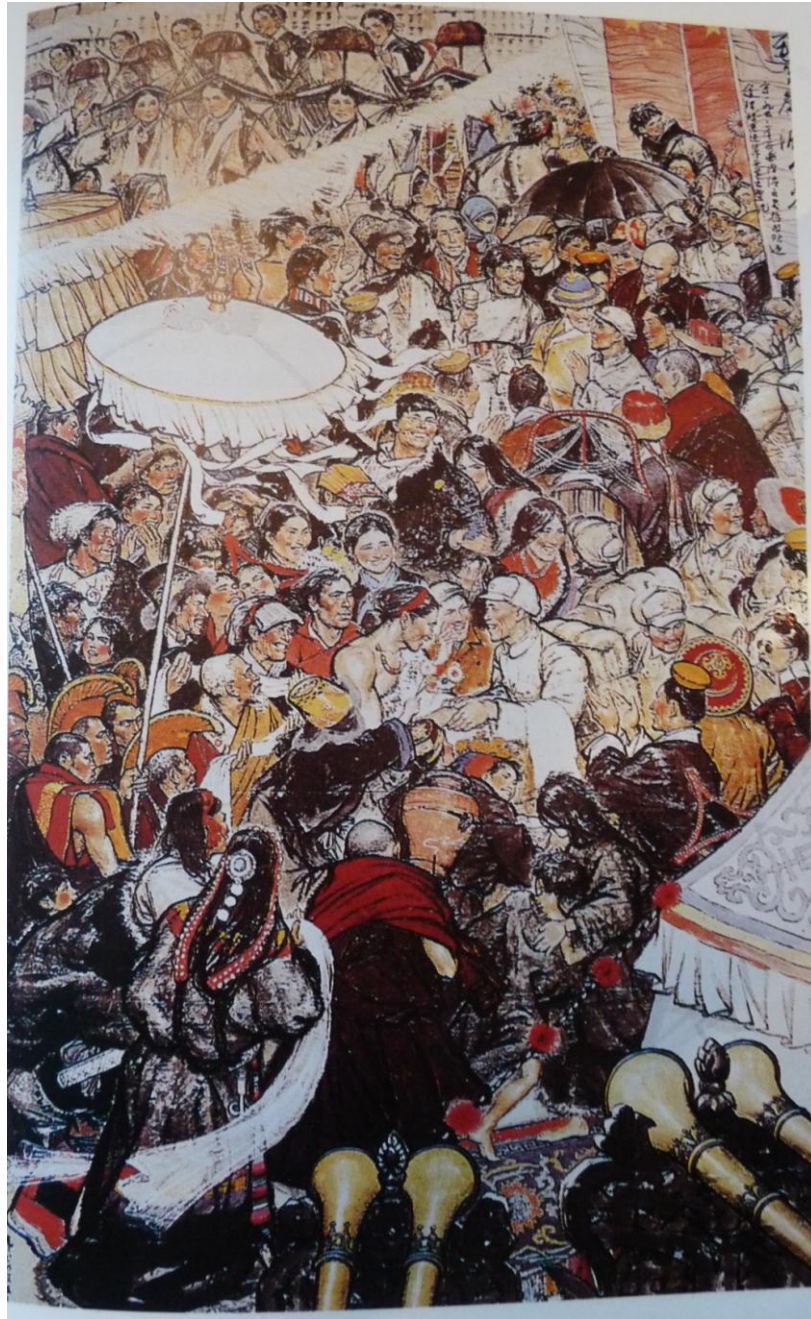


FIGURE 4

CHAIRMAN MAO SENDS HIS EMISSARIES (1970)

SHI LU

COURTESY OF *TIBETAN CONTEMPORARY ART*, LHASA 1991



FIGURE 5
TIBETANS RECEIVING CHAIRMAN MAO
1970 CHINA/TIBET
COURTESY OF LEIGH SANGSTER



FIGURE 6

CHINESE TIBETAN MAO PROPAGANDA POSTER

TIBET 1969

COURTESY OF HINKYLMPORT.COM



FIGURE 7

CHINESE PROPAGANDA POSTER

CULTURAL REVOLUTION ERA (1967-76)



FIGURE 8

TIBETAN FAMILIES

COURTESY OF TIBETAN CONTEMPORARY ART, LHASA 1991



FIGURE 8 DETAIL



FIGURE 9

CHEN DANQING AND NAWANG CHOEDRAK

THE WORKERS WEEP THOUGH THE HARVEST IS GOOD (1976)

COURTESY OF TIBETAN CONTEMPORARY ART LHASA 1991



FIGURE 9

DETAIL OF *THE WORKERS WEEP* 1976

TIBETAN ROMANTICISM



FIGURE 10

ZHAN JIANJUN

THE SONG OF THE PLATEAU 1979

COURTESY OF THE HUBEI MUSEUM OF ART

<http://en.hbmoa.com/html/zhanxun/guowangzhanlan/20090322/139.html>



FIGURE 11

NOMADIC TIBETAN

COURTESY OF *TIBETAN CONTEMPORARY ART*



FIGURE 12

JAMPA SANG

PROSPERITY (1970'S) TIBET

COURTESY OF *TIBETAN CONTEMPORARY ART*



FIGURE 13

WRATH OF THE SERFS EXHIBITION

BEIJING, LHASA, 1976

LIFE-SIZED CLAY SCENES

COURTESY OF MAKLEY IMAGE ARCHIVE

<http://academic.reed.edu/anthro/faculty/mia/wrath/gallery-01.html>

CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART

GONKAR GYATSO



FIGURE 14

GONKAR GYATSO

MY IDENTITY-1 (2003)

COURTESY OF *CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART*



FIGURE 15

GONKAR GYATSO

MY IDENTITY-2 (2003)

COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART



FIGURE 16

GONKAR GYATSO

MY IDENTITY-3 (2003)

COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART



FIGURE 17

GONKAR GYATSO

MY IDENTITY-4 (2003)

COURTESY OF CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART



FIGURE 18

C. SUYDAM CUTTING

THE 13th DALAI LAMA'S SENIOR THANGKA PAINTER (1937)

COURTESY OF CLARE HARRIS, *IN THE IMAGE OF TIBET*



FIGURE 19

GONKAR GYATSO

MADE IN CHINA (2006)

INDIAN INK, STICKERS ON TREATED PAPER

SIEBNGEBIRGSMUSEUM, GERMANY

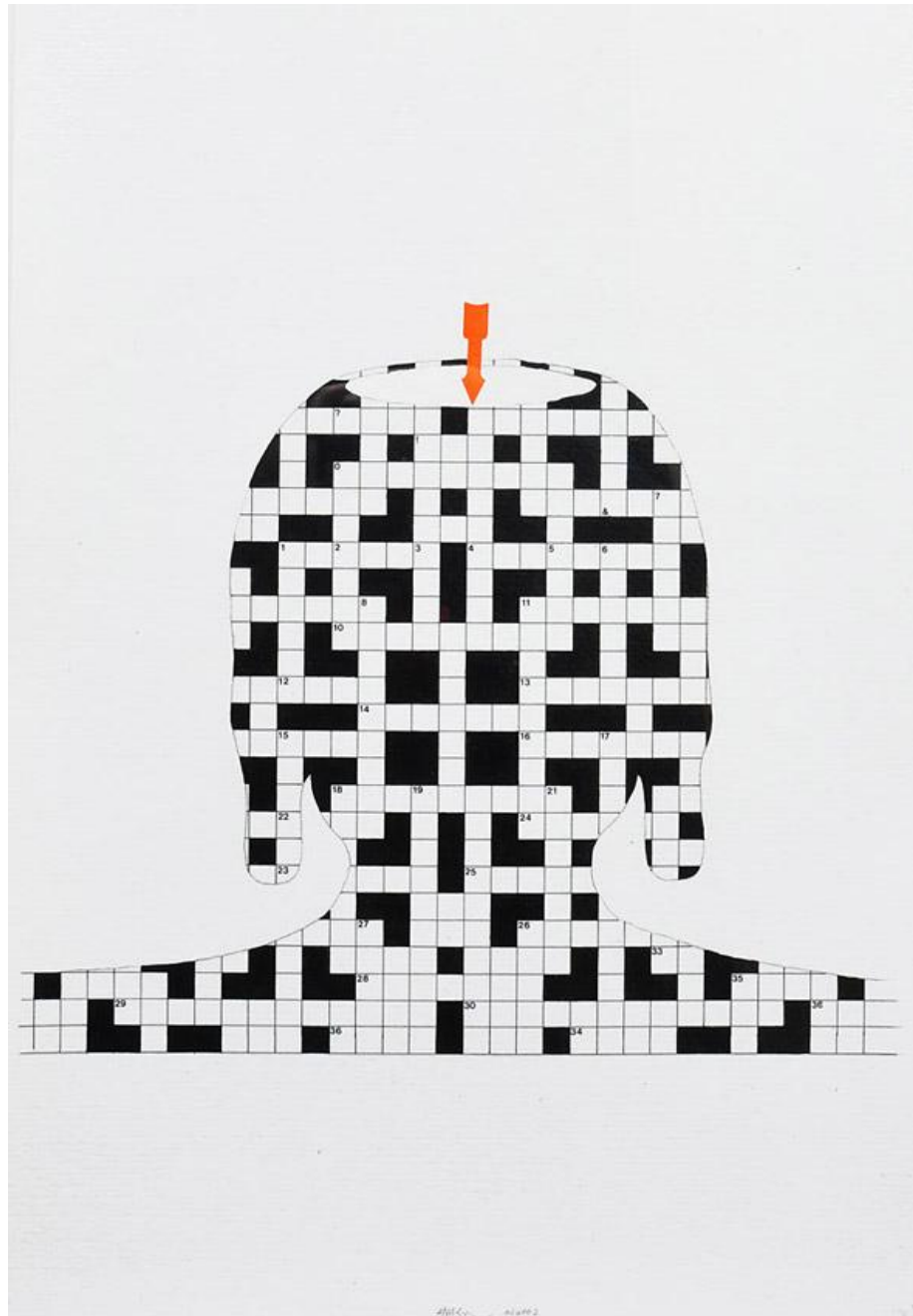


FIGURE 20

GONKAR GYATSO

BUDDHA WITH PUZZLE'S CLUES (2008)

INDIAN INK AND STICKERS ON PAPER

<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/visions/29.html>

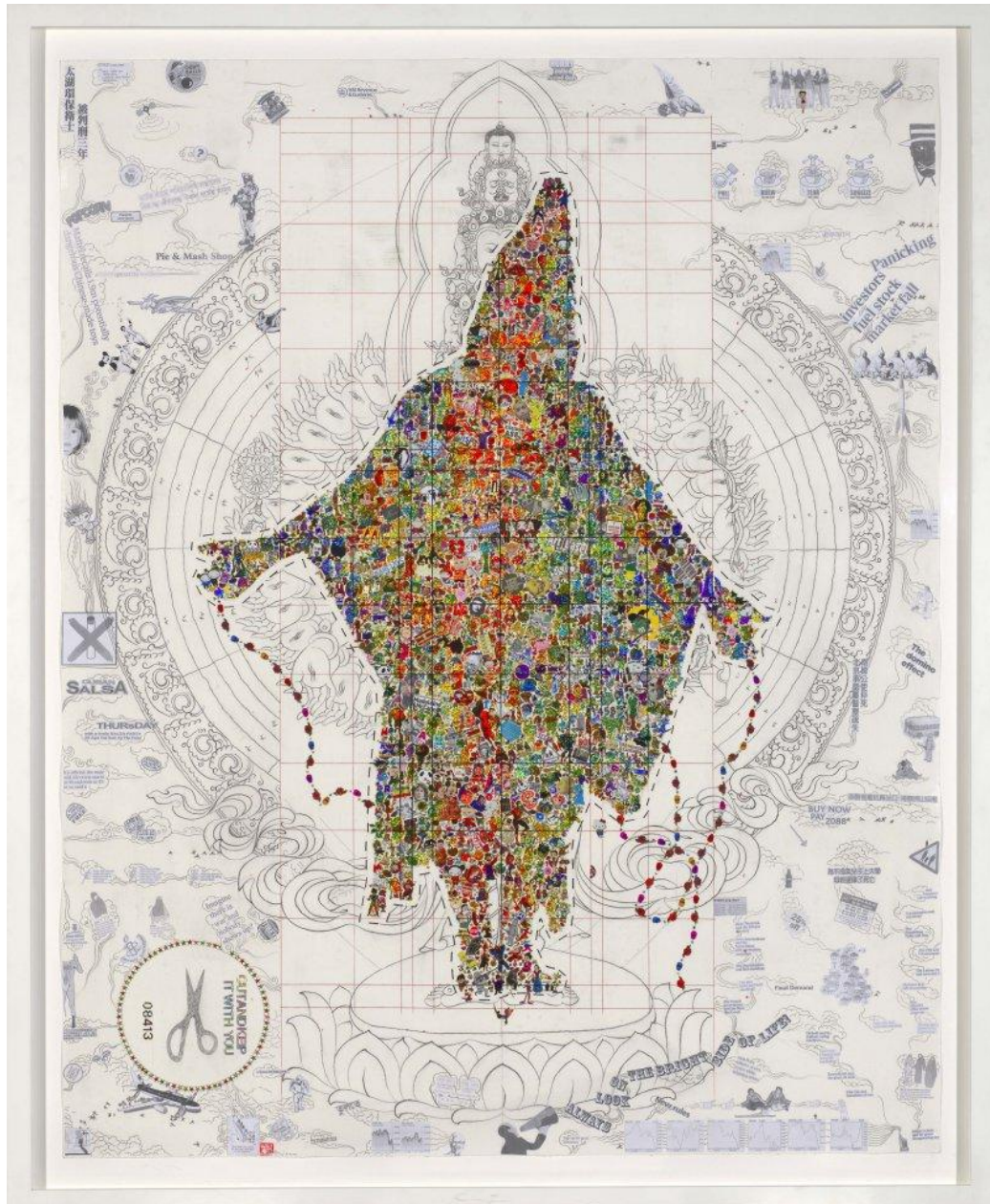


FIGURE 21

GONKAR GYATSO

ANGEL (2007)

STICKERS AND PENCIL ON TREATED PAPER

QUEENSLAND ART GALLERY COLLECTION

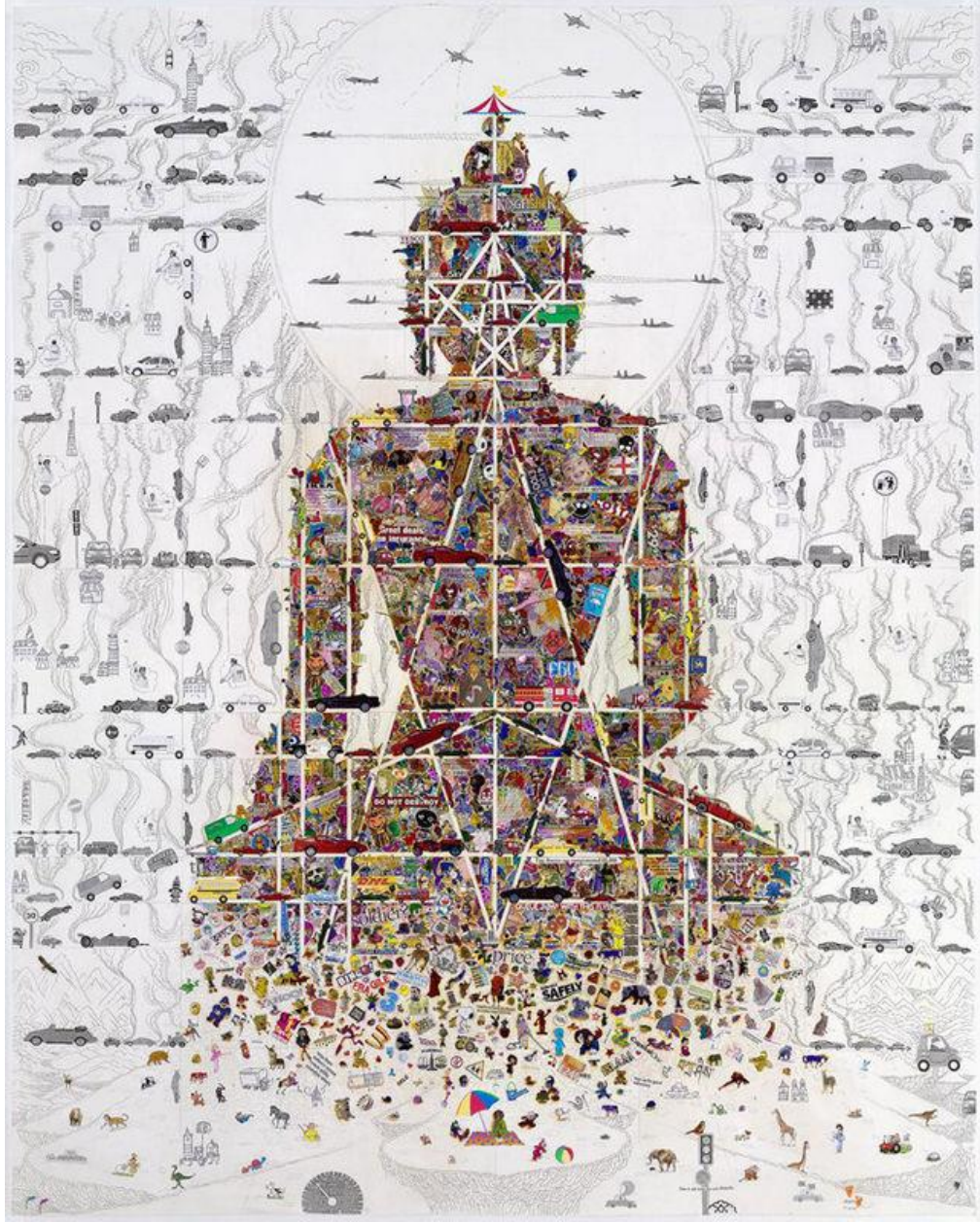


FIGURE 22

GONKAR GYATSO

THE BUDDHA OF OUR TIME (2010)

STICKERS AND PENCIL ON PAPER

COURTESY OF TAG FINE ARTS



FIGURE 23

THE BUDDHA OF OUR TIME DETAIL (2010)

NORBU TSERING



FIGURE 24

NORTSE (2007, TIBET)

FATHER'S VIOLIN

COURTESY OF ROSSI AND ROSSI GALLERY, LONDON



FIGURE 25

NORTSE (2007, TIBET)

WHITE TABLECLOTH

COURTESY OF ROSSI AND ROSSI GALLERY, LONDON



FIGURE 26

NORTSE (2007, TIBET)

GROUP PAINTING

COURTESY OF ROSSI AND ROSSI GALLERY, LONDON



FIGURE 27

NORTSE (2007, TIBET)

GROUP PHOTO

COURTESY OF THE MECHAK CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART

Gade



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FIGURE 28

GADE

SLEEPING BUDDHA (2004)

MIXED MEDIA ON LINEN

COURTESY OF VISIONS OF TIBET, EDITOR IAN ALSOP

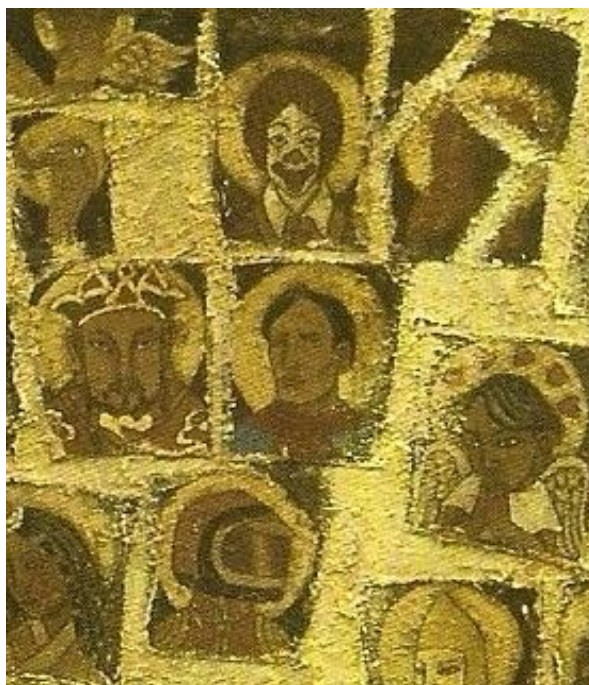


FIGURE 29

SLEEPING BUDDHA



FIGURE 30

SLEEPING BUDDHA



FIGURE 31

GADE

NEW TIBET (2006)

MINERAL COLOR ON HANDMADE TIBETAN PAPER

COURTESY OF THE UC ART MUSEUM, UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO



FIGURE 32

GADE

NEW TIBET DETAIL (2006)



FIGURE 33

GADE

NEW TIBET DETAIL 2 (2006)



FIGURE 34

GADE

PRECIOUS ITEMS (2007)

STONE PIGMENT, GOLD ON FABRIC

COURTESY OF LEIGH SANGSTER (picasaweb)



FIGURE 35

GADE

DIAMOND SERIES: THE HULK (2008)

MIXED MEDIA

COURTESY OF ROSSI & ROSSI GALLERY, LONDON



FIGURE 36



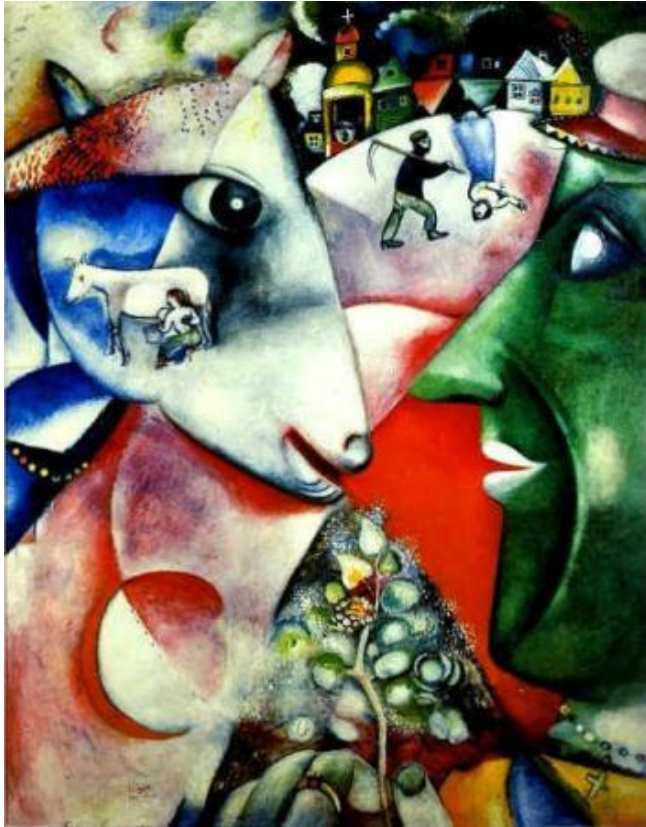
FIGURE 37

SHAKYAMUNI BUDDHA

CENTRAL TIBET, SAKYA LINEAGE (1300's)

GROUND MINERAL PIGMENT,

FINE GOLD LINE ON COTTON



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FIGURE 38

MARK CHAGALL

I AND THE VILLAGE (1911)

COURTESY OF MoMA, NEW YORK



FIGURE 39

DEDRON

LIFE (2009)

COURTESY OF ROSSI & ROSSI



FIGURE 40

DEDRON

LIFE (2009)

MINERAL PIGMENTS ON CANVAS



FIGURE 41

DEDRON

MONA LISA WITH PET (2009)

MINERAL PIGMENTS ON CANVAS

COURTESY OF ROSSI & ROSSI



FIGURE 42

MARCEL DUCHAMP

L.H.O.O.Q. (1919)

PENCIL ON POSTCARD

COURTESY OF MUSEUM BOIJMANS VAN BEUNINGEN



FIGURE 43

DEDRON

MARILYN MONROE (2009)

MINERAL PIGMENTS ON TIBETAN PAPER

COURTESY OF ROSSI AND ROSSI GALLERY, LONDON



FIGURE 44

DEDRON

WE ARE NEAREST TO THE SUN (2009)

MINERAL PIGMENTS ON CANVAS

COURTESY OF SHELLEY AND DONALD RUBIN



FIGURE 45

WE ARE NEAREST TO THE SUN DETAIL

JHAMSANG



FIGURE 46

JHAMSANG

PEACOCK RIVER (2003)

OIL ON CANVAS

PEACEFUL WIND GALLERY



FIGURE 47

JHAMSANG

WRONG POSITIONS (2004)

MECHAK CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART



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FIGURE 48

PABLO PICASSO

GUERNICA (1937)

OIL ON CANVAS

COURTESY OF THE MUSEO NACIONAL CENTRO E ARTE REINA SOFIA



FIGURE 49

JHAMSANG

CULTURE OF CHANGE (2008)

COURTESY OF LEIGH SANGSTER, PICASAWEB



FIGURE 50

CULTURE OF CHANGE

2008

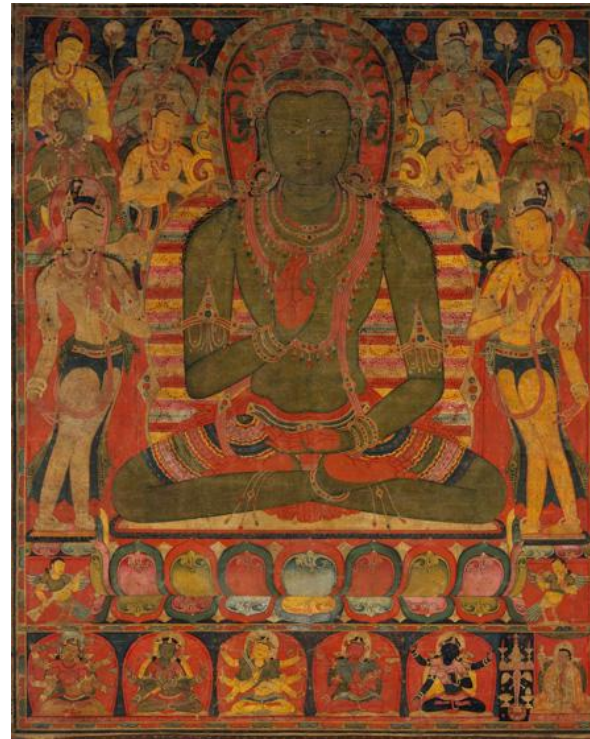


FIGURE 51

BUDDHA AMOGHASIDDHI (1200-1250) TIBET

DISTEMPER ON CLOTH

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NY



FIGURE 52

JHAMSANG

CULTURE (2008)

MECHAK CENTER FOR CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ART

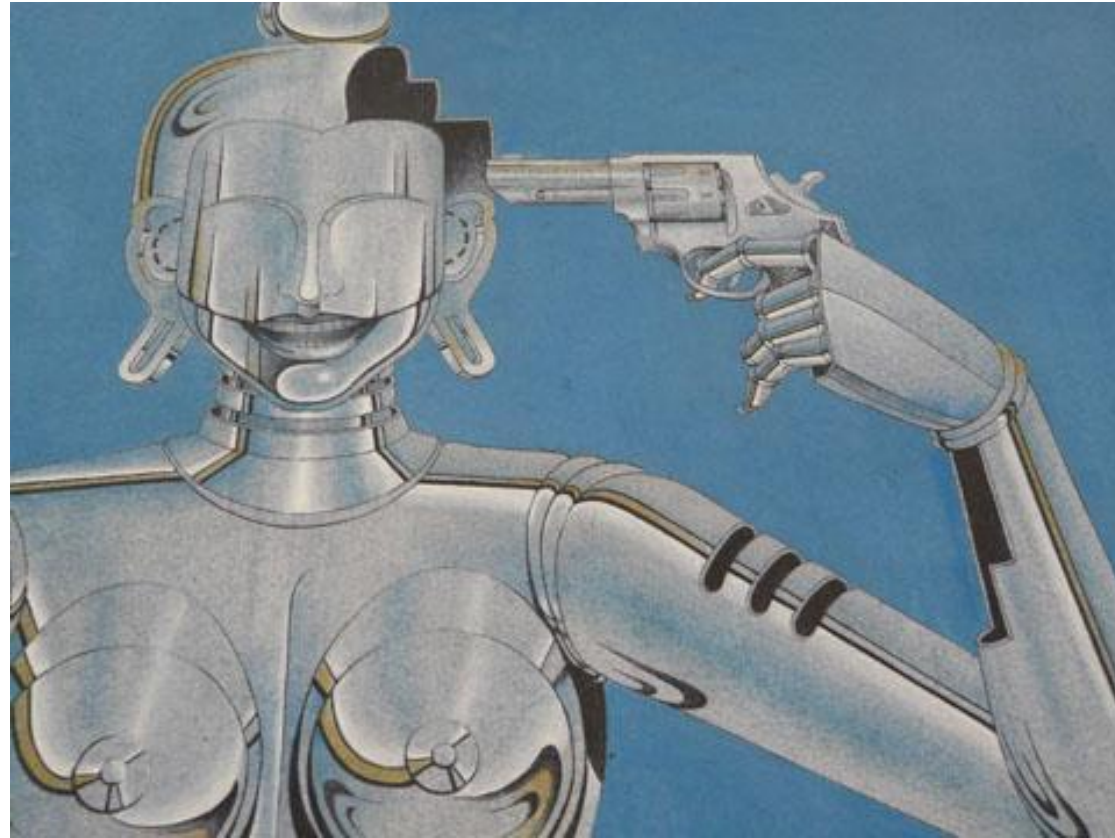


FIGURE 53
JHAMSANG
TARA (2009)
ASIANART.COM



FIGURE 54

CHRIS OFILI

THE HOLY VIRGIN MARY (1996)

COURTESY OF THE MUSEUM OF OLD AND NEW ART, TASMANIA

CONTEMPORARY TIBETAN ARTWORK IN RESPONSE TO THE QINGHAI-TIBET RAILWAY



FIGURE 55

GONKAR GYATSO

(2006)

COURTESY OF SWEET TEA GALLERY, LONDON



FIGURE 56

NORTSE

006/07 NO.1 (2006) TIBET

MIXED MEDIA

PEACEFUL WIND GALLERY



FIGURE 57

GADE

RAILWAY TRAIN (2006) TIBET

MIXED MEDIA ON TIBETAN PAPER

COURTESY OF PEACEFUL WIND GALLERY



FIGURE 58

SLEEPING BUDDHA FROM FIG. 28 (2004)



FIGURE 59

RAILWAY TRAIN (2006)



FIGURE 60

DEDRON

TRAIN (2006) TIBET

MIXED MEDIA

COURTESY OF PEACEFUL WIND GALLERY

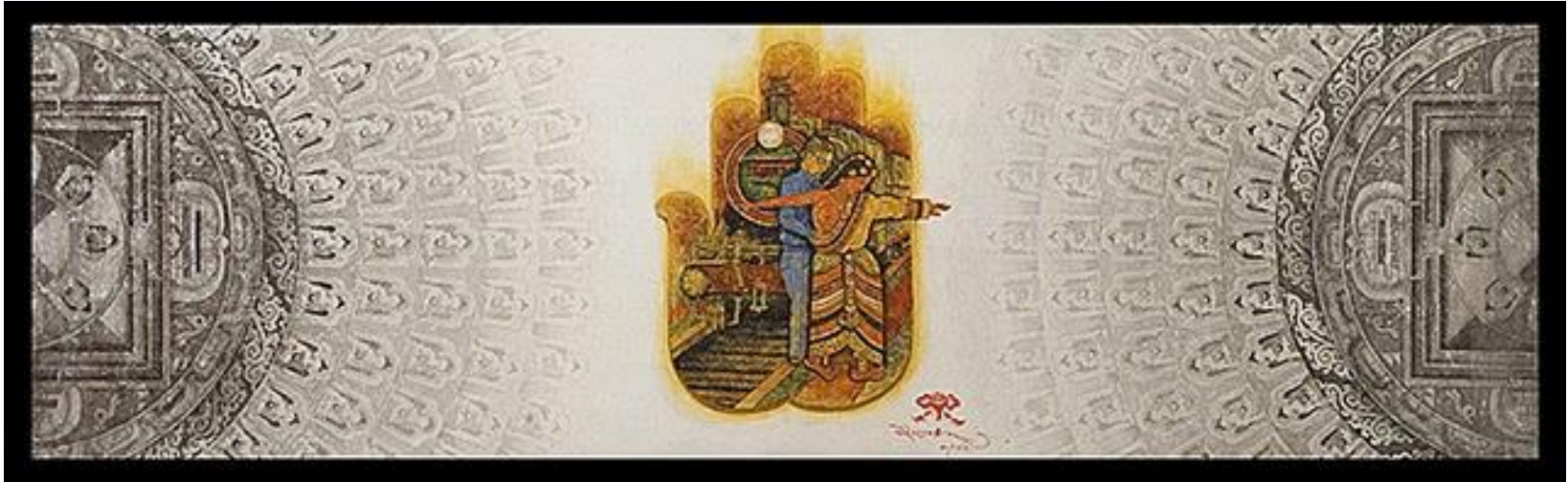


FIGURE 61

JHAMSANG

FIRST RAILWAY (2006)

MIXED MEDIA

COUTESY OF PEACEFUL WIND GALLERY

Glossary of Terms/Abbreviations

Abbreviations:

CCP: Chinese Communist Party

CCR: Chinese Cultural Revolution

PLA: People's Liberation Army

PRC: People's Republic of China

T.A.R.: Tibetan Autonomous Region

Terms:

Akasha mudra: The “space” hand symbol for broad-mindedness and cutting through all obstacles.

Avalokiteshvara: The bodhisattva of compassion; Tibetans believe the Dalai Lama is Avalokiteshvara incarnate.

Bodhisattva: One who has achieved enlightenment but who chooses to be reborn (out of selfless compassion) in order to help other sentient beings obtain enlightenment.

Chuba: Long sheepskin coat made from Tibetan wool to protect the wearer from the cold, harsh, high-altitude climate of Tibet. The robe is ankle length and is usually accompanied by a colorful sash tied around the waist.

Dakini: An enlightened female yogini, portrayed as a tantric deity in Tibetan art.

Dharma: The established doctrine of Buddhism (sanctified in texts and books) and the entire practice of Buddhist principles.

Dharamsala: A city in Northern India and the headquarters for the Tibetan Community in Exile, home of the Dalai Lama.

Emptiness: The Buddhist concept that nothing exists independently from anything else, that everything is interdependent. Empty of inherent existence.

Han-Chinese: The largest ethnic group of China (as well as the largest in the world), comprising about 92% of the People's Republic.

Khata: Tibetan ceremonial silk scarf symbolizing purity and compassion. This scarf fosters generosity for the owner when offered to a Tibetan Lama.

Mala beads: Buddhist prayer beads used during meditation, with each bead representing one repetition of mantra recitation.

Mandala: Sanskrit for circle, this is the basic religious form in Buddhist painting. This sacred concentric circle is a symbol for the layers of consciousness in one's own mind, ultimately resulting in our "created reality" and the universe itself.

Pata-chitras: An Indian/Hindu painting, created on fabric and originating in Orissa, specifically for the Jagannath Temple (seventh-eighth century A.D.).

Potala Palace: Original residence of the Dalai Lama in Lhasa, Tibet before the Chinese "liberation" of Tibet. Potala Palace was built in 1645 by the fifth Dalai Lama. The original palace (which no longer exists), was built on the same site in 637 by Songsten Gampo, the first King of Tibet.

Samsara: Sanskrit for "continuous flow" and a Buddhist term for describing the birth and re-birth of our consciousness. The constant suffering of life if one does not obtain enlightenment.

Shangri-La: Term used to describe Tibet, derived from James Hilton's 1933 *Lost Horizon*. A mythical Himalayan utopia full of mystery and beauty.

Sinicization: The change in Tibetan society since the PLA takeover of Tibet in the 1950's: assimilation into Han culture.

Stupa: A mound structure and place of Buddhist worship that houses Buddhist relics and remains of the Buddha Shakyamuni.

Torana: An arched gateway, sometimes depicted as fire in Tibetan thangkas.

Thangka: Traditional Tibetan painting on silk and brocade, usually depicting a Buddhist deity, protector, or mandala. Thangkas were created to obtain good karma for both the artist and the patron, and these paintings were used as religious objects for meditation and education.

Trompe L'oeil: “To fool the eye,” a concept and style in art where the artist realistically paints a background or scene, “fooling” the viewer to believe it is real.

Tsampa: Tibetan flour used to make soups, teas, butter and some cheeses.