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Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet

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Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet

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Master of Arts, Emory University, 2006

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Abstract

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By Leigh Miller

The novel cultural phenomenon of contemporary Tibetan art emerged in Lhasa in the 1980s and gained international visibility in the first decade of the twenty-first century, and yet is not well understood as an expression of modern Tibetan culture. Contemporary Tibetan artists in Lhasa work to express Tibetanness, relationships to Buddhism, and their pasts in modern Tibet. Their contexts, practices and discourses surrounding art in contemporary Lhasa suggest art impacts cultural identity, representation and transmission, and may be a pioneering practice of cultural sustainability in post-Mao Lhasa.

This study investigates the shifting historical, political, social and visual contexts in which modern and contemporary artistic practices and discourses have arisen and to which artworks respond. These include the construction of Tibetanness as an ethnic minority identity in the PRC by the State and non-Tibetans in primitive and exotic or romantic modes, in contrast to which self-representations by Tibetan artists such as Tsewang Tashi and Tsering Nyandak assert their modernity and cultural heritage. Tibet's long history of religious art, in which art and artists had specific material and ritual functions and relationships to society, traditions uprooted by Communist occupation, yield complicated relationships to Buddhism. Artists find in Buddhist imagery a visual language that speaks far beyond traditional religious interpretations, as explored in Gade's artistic career. Artists in Tibet overcome and transcend spiritual, political, artistic, and professional obstacles. Acknowledging often silenced but pervasive concerns with the past in some cases constitutes a form of creative memory work, as in Nortse's art. In the post-Mao and post-Deng eras, innovative artistic production works to some extent as a bulwark against the annihilating forces of trauma, colonialism, globalization and racism that threaten to undermine indigenous cultural continuity and survival. At a time when Tibet's future is far from guaranteed, I conclude Tibetan contemporary artists ultimately pioneer practices of cultural sustainability.

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Chapter One

Introduction to Contemporary Tibetan Art and Cultural Sustainability in Lhasa, Tibet

Contemporary Tibetan art emerged in the 1980s as a new form of cultural expression and has burgeoned as a global phenomenon since the start of the twenty-first century. Contemporary Tibetan art differs from the millennium of traditional Buddhist arts with which Tibet is so closely associated, and the communist propaganda that supplanted the dominance of religious imagery after 1959. Although modern Tibetan cultural production in the post-Mao era has received little scholarly attention, art appears to be an important dimension of contemporary Tibetan cultural formation, representation, and identity. In the aftermath of collective trauma, the practices of contemporary artists in relation to ethnicity, religion, and memory may be pioneering strategies of cultural sustainability.

Anxiety about Tibet's future arises when considering not only national twentieth century devastation, but also the dramatic effects of change upon the cultures and places inhabited by indigenous peoples worldwide. In the past century, the benefits of modernization have extended into once remote societies around the globe to enrich and fortify lives. On the other hand, there are serious disadvantages raised by modernization: extinction of languages; redefined cuisines, crafts, and communication by mass markets; people displaced from deep-rooted communities; and decimation of their most sacred sites.

This is particularly salient in the case of Tibet. The repressive, and at times brutal, colonial occupation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China, as well as aspects of globalization occurring there, have radically re-organized Tibet's religious, political, economic, and social structures. Chinese media representations celebrate change in Tibet as beneficent State development beyond the hamper of tradition. Tibetan and Western observers, on the other hand, generally present change as inevitably detrimental, and potentially threatening to the survival of

Tibet. No less than the Dalai Lama, the Nobel Peace Laureate and exiled leader of Tibetans, has accused Communist policies in Tibet of committing “cultural genocide (Eimer 2008).”¹

The Dalai Lama’s concern is absolutely valid given the absence of Tibetan autonomy over the development of their homeland, religious practice, education and linguistics, and institutionalized discrimination against Tibetans within China that results in widespread poverty, disease, drug and alcohol abuse, exploitation, and despair (Norbu 1998).

Thus readers may be surprised to find in Tibet, as I was, not only loss but also survival. Despite the many challenges, there is also vibrant renovation, renaissance, and innovation occurring in the cultural realm. I’ve followed the manifestations of culture and change in my nearly annual travels in the Himalayas between 1996 and 2007. During one of my first visits to Lhasa I noticed something that I had not observed in Tibetan exile communities in Kathmandu, rural Nepal, or Dharamsala, India: on the walls of an ordinary, hole-in-the-wall teashop frequented by locals in the Barkhor neighborhood, hung modernist oil paintings of secular subjects. Previously, the only Tibetan paintings I had observed were Buddhist thangka paintings. These small landscapes and portraits of Tibetan subjects were unassuming, yet unprecedented in the diaspora, and made a strong impression on me because it suggested that Tibetan culture inside Tibet was not in its death throes, but undergoing adaptation. This realization had caught me by surprise in 1997, after a year immersed in Tibetan culture in exile in Nepal and India, where the predominant culture narrative claimed that authentic Tibetan heritage was preserved only in exile and undergoing irrevocable annihilation in its homeland by Communist Chinese occupiers, a narrative seemingly underscored through my interviewing of refugees who had risked their lives to flee Tibet. Visitors to Tibet, it was commonly said, could only sadly bear witness and then politically protest once they returned home, and I was ready for both. And yet, as I made the rounds of Lhasa’s temples, tearfully aware they were reduced from their former grandeur and that beyond the sites available to my tourist eyes were languishing political prisoners who were perhaps being tortured at that very moment. I also observed that I was surrounded by throngs of

devout Tibetan pilgrims, Tibetan businessmen, Tibetan beggars, and Tibetan children all praying, bartering, speaking, and playing with many dressed in Tibetan clothes, enjoying Tibetan cuisine, or going about their daily business in the most ordinary ways. They were not living in a stark dichotomy in which they could only either weep and protest, or assimilate to Chinese Communism. This contradicted my cultural assumptions that in the wake of collective trauma and amidst modernization (and sinocization and colonialism), indigenous and traditional cultures inevitably died or were radically altered.² I began to question the received narrative of diasporic cultural survival and to consider that not only could culture survive inside Tibet, but also that innovation and adaptation were more probable than sudden mass forgetting.³

Cultural innovations were occurring in the diaspora, too, by my next trip to India. Sonam Dhondrup was the first Tibetan artist that I conversed with who worked in contemporary styles and materials. We had a series of conversations in his studio in Dharamsala, India, in 2001, and I was struck by his urgent need to record his childhood memories of Tibet: it was a place continuing to change in his absence, the memories of which he feared would fade as he dwelt as a refugee in exile, and which Tibetans born in or long resident in exile needed to sustain connection to, a need partially met through the viewing of his art.⁴ Sonam Dhondrup's motivation mirrored the mainstream exile narrative of the homeland, and yet he materialized the need for cultural continuity in an untraditional form. Through his urgent need to document his memory for himself and others, I began to see art as a method for and practice of novel but authentic cultural production.

While in Lhasa again in 2001, I sought that tiny teashop, and while it had disappeared, in 2004 I found contemporary art had sprung onto the walls of a few cafes catering to the local middle class and foreign travelers. A painting which particularly intrigued me was by Tsering Wangdu. *Samsara I* appeared to be a presentation of the traditional Buddhist view of the six realms of samsara into which beings cyclically reincarnate: as animals, hell beings on fire, hungry ghosts, demi-gods and gods, and humans. In the traditional didactic diagram explaining

reincarnation, the Wheel of Life, common at the entrance porticos of monasteries, these beings are embedded in six realms within fixed compositional locations, sizes, styles and vivid colors. In Tsering Wangdu's painting, the texture and muted colors of maroon, gold, ochre, and charcoal, were evocative of traditional earthen walls and faded murals, while the style, in which elements appeared superimposed, collaged, and floating dreamlike into diffuse backgrounds, was utterly unconventional.

Samsara I raised questions for me about contemporary religious and artistic education of the laity, the religiosity of the artist, the reception of the work locally, and the re-interpretation of religious and visual tradition. Two elements—tradition and novelty—had been combined in one beautiful and powerful painting, a manifestation of Tibetan modernity about which I wanted to learn more.



Figure 1 Wheel of Life (sid pai khor lo). 1960. Himalayan Art Resources. Item No. 59637. Ground Mineral Pigment on Cotton.

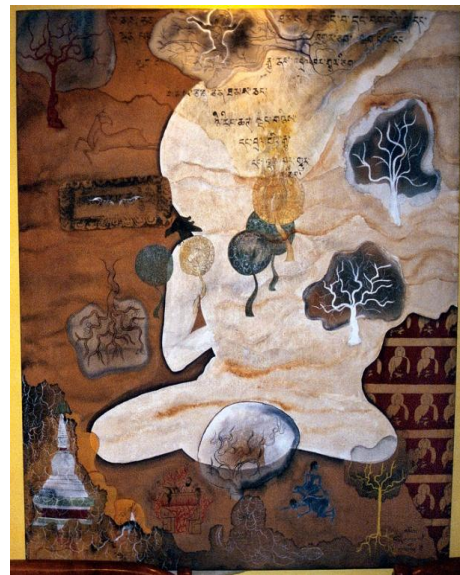


Figure 2 Tsering Wangdu. Samsara. c.2003. Oil on canvas.

Emergent Cultural Formations and Cultural Sustainability

Tibetans began using non-traditional media for expression of their contemporary experience beginning in the 1980s, ushering in artistic innovations in literature, music, and

painting. The emergent cultural phenomenon suggest that for Tibetans living inside Tibet, navigating the challenges of undeniable radical change—change which is neither wholly condemnable nor embraceable for residents, if not for outsiders⁵—does not necessarily compromise their identities as Tibetans. Personally observing Tibetan creativity and cultural vitality in the face of oppressive Communist rule and aftermath of the devastating Cultural Revolution in Lhasa led me to the questions at the heart of this dissertation: How is the emergence of contemporary Tibetan art as a new cultural formation to be understood? Could the making of contemporary art in Lhasa be a pioneering practice of cultural sustainability?

Questioning Tibet's survival prompts assessment of the status of culture and its viability into the future. Understanding new art as contemporary cultural formations gives a window into such assessment. As Yangdon Dhondup writes, “for those who care to see a Tibet which might not necessarily portray their own imagination of the land, but those of the Tibetans themselves, the works of these [contemporary] artists are worth careful consideration, for they represent the present state of Tibet and its people (Dhondup 2007).”

For Tibetans and their supporters worldwide there is cause for alarm regarding the status of Tibet as a whole. Tibetan language and religion have unified a population of millions across the vast geography of the plateau (Kapstein 2006), and so signify tradition, that yardstick by which contemporary cultural vitality and authenticity is measured. Kolas and Thowsen's (2005) important study charts the status of Tibetan language instruction and use, and monastic rebuilding, in comparison to pre-PRC data of language education and religious institutions in eastern Tibet. As a purported gauge of the hotly debated status of Tibetan culture nearly three decades after the Cultural Revolution, it risks reifying religion and language as indicators of cultural survival.⁶ The status of Tibet then concerns “tradition,” and point to troubled pasts and futures.

This discourse reinforces a preservationist approach to cultural survival amongst Tibetans in exile and observers of change in the PRC's Tibet. Under such conditions and anxieties,

sympathy for the preservationist ethos—that holds rebuilding of pre-1950 Tibet as the benchmark for current cultural and religious institutions and practice—is understandable, but it is not realistic. A wider anthropological look at the reach of globalization into formerly remote peoples and geography makes clear that Tibet is not alone in becoming urbanized, struggling with hybridity, losing indigenous forms of knowledge and its transmission and language, subject to industrialization and consumer-based economies. For those on the fringes of trans-global flows, goals of cultural sustainability may be more practical than preservation.

Moreover, records, memories and imaginations of 1950 Buddhist Tibet as a benchmark for cultural authenticity today can omit or inhibit acknowledgement of other social changes, and therefore situate statistics—such as the number of novice monks in newly rebuilt monastery buildings—in a vacuum devoid of new social contexts (in which, for example, the restoration of monastic populations to their pre-communist numbers is not the assumed goal of a younger generation). Religion and language or literature are important approaches to studying contemporary Tibetan populations and reflect majority indigenous and scholarly valuation of some dimensions of culture over others. Nonetheless, space for ways of seeing emerging cultural productions, such as contemporary art, as valid and authentic are needed.

The concerns of Tibet's culture producers reflect these anxieties underlying linguistic and religious preservation movements and debates. In Tibet between the early 1980s and 2008,⁷ in the art, narratives, music, poetry and intellectual commentary about current society, language, education and so forth, anxiety about the future is a central concern. In the 1980s, after the birth of contemporary Tibetan literature, ethnically Tibetan authors began to publish modern novels and poetry in both Tibetan and Mandarin. Hartley (2000) documents fervent debates over who could claim to be writing modern "Tibetan" literature, and the threat to cultural survival that Mandarin language writing by Tibetans represented to conservative critics.

Nonetheless, the post-Mao generations depict their complex and rich experiences and present times and respond to the visual representations that have been crafted of Tibet and

Tibetanness in unprecedented ways. But why, in the midst of globalization, secularization, sinocization, and colonialism—all processes that undermine indigenous cultural continuity and survival globally—is cultural innovation actually occurring in Tibet? What makes art something people in such a context want or need to do? Can artists harness and manipulate dimensions of progress and modernization as bulwarks against the annihilating forces of trauma, colonialism, and racism?

Tibet's long and rich visual and religious history (and the ways it has been perceived and represented by outsiders) in which art and artists had specific material and ritual functions and relationships to society creates a context in which acknowledging change and adaptation is not easy. And yet generations born since 1959 are at the forefront of emerging modern cultural phenomena. Exploring what forms these new cultural productions are taking, why they are needed, and what they accomplish or how they function for their producers and social context illuminates issues of cultural change and continuity which are at the heart of cultural survival anxiety and authenticity debates.

For example, Tibetans' unique, strong connection to the land, and the near synonymous link between Buddhism and Tibetan identity and pride in their civilization, are referenced in artists' mix of traditional and non-traditional materials, compositions, and methods. Against critics who would say that modern literature, music, and especially contemporary visual arts are derivative of the west, inauthentic, or a sign of the degradation of Tibetan civilization, there are Tibetans who now lay claim to legitimate, non-traditional expressions as both modern and Tibetan.

People around the world want and need alternative ways to understand our complex world. Tibetan artists have developed mechanisms to both engage in and transcend frameworks and socio-political contexts. As the artist Susan Hiller, in dialogue with anthropologists, notes “synergies between artistic processes often enable artists to transcend particular cultural contexts and insert their works into different cultural frames without leaving their own culture behind

(Hiller 1996).” Artists in Tibet who wish to speak about and to their communities may find their contemporary art enables their compatriots to recognize familiar images and aesthetics, while also opening up to and becoming legible for international audiences through the use of media and styles that transcend single cultural locations. Dialogue with the world outside their own culture is also reflected in the contemporary art influences they embrace, and the art world practices in which they partake.

In doing so, Hiller states, artists also highlight a reality around them that has generally been ignored, skillfully emphasizing and revealing aspects of culture they, as experts in it, must change (Hiller 1996).⁸ Contemporary artists are engaged in countering problematic expectations for traumatized and colonized peoples, foreign imaginations of Tibet, indigenous notions of art as solely religious, and Chinese communist ideology of cultural evolution which figures minorities as pre-modern primitives. Contemporary artists demonstrate commitment to artistic practices and discourses that emphasize depictions of individual and collective memories, “real life” in the present, debates about artistic and cultural identities and responsibilities, and engagement with international art worlds and issues. Contemporary Tibetan artists are inserting a vision of their contemporary Tibet into the cultural frames through which they have been sympathetically or problematically represented, and through which their indigenous histories are remembered. As such, while Tibetan contemporary artists offer counters to others’ representations, they ultimately speak with and image their community. In this way, art plays an important role in the production of meaning, showing how artistic contexts, discourses and practices affect identity, representation and transmission of culture.

I consider that only ethnic Tibetans share their collective memories and heritage, and have considered the shared past an important part of their present identity since, Dreyfus argues, the thirteenth or fourteenth century (Dreyfus, *Are We Prisoners of Shangrila?* 2005) (Dreyfus 1994). Creating a past is an assertion of agency against events, people or powers that threaten to overwhelm memory, as Benjamin (Benjamin 1968) and Berger (Berger 1972) (Berger 2001) find

crucial to visual culture praxis. What is remembered, and pictured, becomes reality; this helps explain the tremendous expenditure of the State on creating a miserable feudal past for “Old Tibet” and its imagery of primitive and backwards masses. The colonial framing of a great tradition poised to get even better through contact and change denies Tibetans the agency to determine their own adaptations. The modern Tibet contemporary artists image is differently oriented to the past, present and future than the “Tibet” others imagine or represent. Imaging the past also suggests the potential power of Tibetan self-representation.

I see artists, to varying degrees, engaging contemplatively with their past as they document their present, pioneering a form of memory work, a process that may be made visible when performed through art making. Such memory work, by which cultural futures become possible despite rapid and radical change, may importantly contribute to cultural sustainability. Connections forged with the past in the service of the present can afford opportunity for meaning making and identifying meaningful sources of identity and cultural sustainability into the future.

I investigate the shifting historical, political, social and artistic contexts in which these practices and discourses have transpired and analyze artistic influence upon these contexts, particularly the implications of the phenomenon of contemporary art for Tibet’s future. Does artistic countering of problematic expectations, and assertion of self-representations, imagine and constitute practices of modern Tibetan cultural sustainability?

Is it the case that pasts made visible and relevant to modern experience enables art to contribute towards Tibetan cultural sustainability? This curiosity animates the project for me as I approached contemporary Tibetan art through several lenses – ethnographic, artistic, visual representational histories, cultural theory – organized below by the treatment of artists and their oeuvre in relation to ethnic minority status within China, Tibetan Buddhism, and autobiographical memory and postmemory for post-1950 generations of urban Lhasans.

Informed by anthropological studies of art, media and modernity that celebrate indigenous agency and alternatives in the face of disempowering hegemonies, and the insistence

in memory studies on the persistence of the past in both troublesome and enlivening ways, I ask whether Tibetan contemporary artists may be engaged in practices of cultural sustainability, at a time when Tibet's future is far from guaranteed.

I am particularly engaged here then with understanding contemporary art as a manifestation of difficulties in the present with the role of the past, as a creative artistic process that can be a form of memory work carried out by artists, and the possibility that the therapeutic and future-oriented dimensions of memory work contribute on personal and collective levels to the development and sustainability of rich cultural identities and experiences.

Interdisciplinary Scholarship

To deepen my understanding of modern Tibetan culture and explore the emergent phenomenon of contemporary Tibetan art and its possible implications for cultural sustainability, I embarked upon interdisciplinary scholarship. This study spans the fields of Tibetan studies, memory studies, anthropology of art, and the cultural anthropology sub-disciplines of modernity, oral narratives, and ethnographies of Chinese minorities. My approaches to contemporary art in Lhasa are informed by these fields' cultural theories of identity, representation, transmission of knowledge, and methodological approaches to social contexts, and discourses and practices. Furthermore, they are grounded in the study of Tibetan history, art, politics, religion, and culture, which critically contextualizes my temporally specific ethnographic data.

“Tibet”

Modern and contemporary art confronts outsiders' stereotypes of Tibet, which have been intensely visual. Today, as it has for hundreds of years, “Tibet” conjures, in imaginations worldwide, visions of maroon-clad monks meditating in chapels filled with images of esoteric divinities and nestled amid a spectacular Himalayan landscape. Early explorers and missionaries, the first Europeans to reach Tibet in the fourteenth to seventeenth centuries, wrote evocatively of the dramatic landscape, filthy towns, and ornate temples. They were followed by Orientalists and agents of the colonial British government in India who added their own paintings, sketches, maps

and photography to the eager publics' vividly imagined realm north of the Himalayas. Above all, the indigenous Buddhist art of Tibet—religious paintings, statues, and murals—sparked European projections. The complex symbolism, dramatic colors, and fantastic subjects—meditative, macabre, mysterious, sexual and beatific—are essential to foreign (and indigenous) notions of Tibet defined by its religious material culture.

As Lopez (1998) demonstrated, foreign interpretations of this visual material have oscillated wildly from Victorian evidence of the barbaric and immoral Tibetan psyche, to Orientalists' perceived degeneration of classical Indian Buddhism upon its import to Tibet, to Communist ideology of the impoverishment of the Tibetan character fallen under the enslavement of monastic elite and the harsh natural environment, to the modern popular and New Age mysterious and cloistered Shangri-la spurred by Theosophists, and the Tibetophiles' embrace of Tibetan Buddhist imagery as transcendent symbols of universal, timeless truths and compassion. Lopez writes, "the play of opposites has been both extreme and volatile in the case of Tibet, and it remains at work in contemporary attitudes toward Tibet and Tibetan Buddhism (1998)."

Because of this history, the meaning of "Tibet" ranges widely over time and texts and places—in Tibetan studies, as a nation, within China, and for Tibetans' collective identities. In academia, "Tibet" as a field of study is a relative newcomer, originating as a secondary linguistic source of religious texts for Orientalists interested in Sanskrit and ancient Indian Buddhism.⁹ This is somewhat surprising, considering Tibetan civilization was and is one of the world's greatest and major historical civilizations.¹⁰ Yet, for centuries, Tibet has been virtually inaccessible; unlike other Asian kingdoms, Tibet was never colonized by Europeans, and challenges to physically traverse the vast distances over harsh terrain from outside the plateau, ringed by the world's highest mountains, to the capital of Lhasa, have been compounded by the waxing and waning missionary, explorer, colonial, diplomatic, and economic motivations of foreigners and Tibetans.¹¹ Thus despite public fascination with Tibet in the west since the European Middle

Ages, the field of Tibetan studies did not find academic roots in the United States until 1959, and then in departments of religious studies.¹²

Reflecting on the field, His Holiness the Dalai Lama remarked, “In the past, for largely geographical reasons, Tibet was isolated from the rest of the world, which meant that our country, people and culture were not only shrouded in mystery, but often gravely misunderstood. More recently, as interest has grown, scholarship concerning Tibet has improved beyond expectation, although it has often singled out narrow topics for consideration (Kapstein 2006).”

Only in 1990 was the development of Tibetan society since 1950 taken up as a topic of study, and there remained a dearth of scholarship of modern Tibetan culture through the decade (Barnett 1994). Shakya writes that in academia there was a “residual sense that there was nothing worthy of study in post-1950 Tibet; as if the apparent demise of traditional society rendered further studies valueless and uninteresting (1994).” Tibetan Studies’ text-based and historical approach to religion continues to characterize the ‘narrow topics’ in the field, but with the start of the twentieth century, social sciences and ethnographic methods are gaining ground as the field grows and diversifies becoming more interdisciplinary, and Tibetan communities within the PRC become more accessible.

One of the first waves of investigation that broadened the field was refracting the layers of meanings attributed to “Tibet” itself: Western and Chinese engagements with the Himalayan plateau and indigenous views have resulted in multiple and often conflicting definitions of “Tibet.” Western perceptions, from missionaries to Victorian travelers (Dodin 1996) (Miller 1976) (Bishop 1989) (Hopkirk 1995) and diplomats (Waddell [1894] 2003) (C. Bell 2000) to Hollywood and pop culture (Schell 2000) (Brauen 2004), have been shaped by the contemporaneous cultural mores of their authors and audiences, which swung like a pendulum, Lopez (1998) claims, between disgust and infatuation.¹³ This insight led to the recognition of the absence of Tibetan voices in previous narratives, and coincided with increasing access to and interest in contemporary, post-Cultural revolution society inside Tibet. Goldstein and Kapstein’s

Buddhist Revival and Contemporary Tibet (1998) and Kolas and Thowsen's *On the Margins of Tibet* (2005) exemplify a shift towards ethnographic studies of contemporary Tibetan religious communities, which others have followed. Recent works by Barnett (2006) and McGranahan (2010) are similarly committed to understanding Tibetans in Lhasa and the diaspora respectively, interestingly both focused on lesser known histories and memories in their respective contemporary societies. Hence in the first decade of the twenty-first century, the field has begun to adapt a new approach to understanding "Tibet" that seeks to include change, modernity, and Tibetan voices as subjects of study in themselves.

Memory and narrative reveal modern constructions of Tibetanness. Scholarship by westerners, sometimes in conjunction with Tibetans, has sensitively addressed the tensions between communal self-representation and acknowledgement of 'atypical' subjects. Goldstein, in his books about the Cultural Revolution (2009) and early Tibetan communist, Bapa Phuntsok Wangye (2006), written after years of research with interviewees and historical documents, and Carole McGranahan's *Arrested Histories* (2010) about the Tibetan resistance army, uncover controversial pasts of violence that are often omitted from collective narratives, and the pain of those carrying memories erased from collective narratives. They make clear that assertions of common "tradition" today can contribute to the flattening of regional or other variation for the presentation of a unified if not homogenous body, and pan-nationalism can obscure controversial pasts of violence that are often omitted from collective narratives. Contemporary Tibetan artists also embody, and at times call attention to, Tibetan lives that other Tibetans might prefer to obscure: that of the Tibetan whose responses to the demands of the times do not appear to fit a collective narrative of traditional Buddhists, but who too share a deep, proud and historic sense of Tibetan identity.

Although clear that many "Tibets" have been constructed by others, making space for indigenous articulations has proven a more difficult task. There is a critical need to understand Tibetans' contemporary experiences and views of their own society, and yet Tibetan Studies,

despite unparalleled accessibility to Tibet since the 1980s, has shown a “remarkable dearth of scholarship on Tibet and Tibetans under Chinese rule (Lehman 1998).” Exceptions offer pioneering ways of knowing Tibetan civilization,¹⁴ largely through an openness to and curiosity about the details of the everyday, as Grimshaw (1992) conveys,¹⁵ collecting data through which Tibetan meaning making could be mined. Recent studies of the emergence of contemporary Tibetan literature (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008) (T. Shakya 2000) (L. Hartley 2008) (L. Hartley 2000) and music (Diehl 2002) (Stirr 2008) and performing arts, and film and media have made important contributions to increasing attention to Tibetan cultural expressions.

My study is part of this evolution in Tibetan studies, but has always felt a bit on the fringe of the field, both for its contemporary ethnographic focus, and its focus on (non-textual, non-Buddhist) contemporary art. The study of traditional Tibetan art, as in literary productions, has also focused on religion in the Buddhist paintings and statues dominating artistic production in Tibet. Despite the pervasiveness of Buddhism in Tibetan civilization for more than one thousand years, understanding of these traditional art objects would still benefit from increased contextualization within a broader cultural and historic context, both in order to appreciate indigenous interpretations of religious imagery, as well as to assess the roles of religion and art in society. In this intellectual climate then, understanding modern and contemporary art as a social process has required an interdisciplinary rather than strictly Tibetological approach. The current project hopes to contribute to these gaps in attention to contemporary and non-religious cultural formations and in indigenous perspectives by amplifying contemporary Tibetan artistic expressions, in which contemporary artists challenge outsiders’ constructions, create counter-images, and articulate a unique and legitimate Tibetan modernity within the PRC.

Twentieth Century Tibetan Political Context

In political science, the status of “Tibet” as a nation is challenging to define. Standard political histories of modern Tibet portray the first half of the twentieth century as a prelude to imminent demise. The religious hierarchies are represented as overly fearful of change to the

status quo threatened by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's modernization initiatives,¹⁶ and too immersed in internecine rivalries during the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's childhood to have adequately responded to the changing world around them. Insufficient engagement in reforms at home and with global politics seems to have cost Tibet her independence. This image of insularity and conservatism has been more recently tempered by attention to those elites in Lhasa and Tibet who were passionately in support of modernization and closely followed international affairs and trends (M. Goldstein 1989) (M. C. Goldstein 1997) (D. S. Lopez 2006).¹⁷ Nonetheless, indigenous twentieth century modernization and international political efforts were aborted when Tibet was swept by invasion by a foreign army. A brief period of international engagement through diplomatic negotiations with Peking and appeals to Western nations and India for aid in repelling Communist Chinese forces did not yield political or militaristic success. The Fourteenth Dalai Lama sought exile in India in 1959. Thousands of Tibetans followed. The Central Tibetan Administration (or Government in Exile, as it is popularly known) formed in Dharamsala, India, and adopted a democratic constitution and parliamentary government. In exile, "Tibet" existed, and continues to exist, as a mandate for the preservation of a culture temporarily in exile.

From at least the early twentieth century, Chinese political theorists and intellectuals considered Tibetans like one finger of a hand, as Dr. Sun Yet Sen described the Han-led larger civilization of multi-ethnic China (J. D. Spence 1999). Inside Tibet, internal autonomy and international engagements evaporated after the "Seventeen Point Agreement for the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet" of 1951, annexing Tibet into the People's Republic of China (founded in 1949).¹⁸ The departure of the Dalai Lama in 1959, when the "Seventeen Point Agreement" was repudiated, marks the start of CCP Democratic Reform in Tibet. Participation in official commemoration of the anniversaries of 1951 and 1959 are compulsorily observed in Tibet, including with art events and publications, and serve to reinforce political narratives defining China's Tibet. The resulting polarization of stark differences in perceptions of political histories

is discussed in John Powers' *History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People's Republic of China* (2004).

In 1965, China created administrative "Tibet" as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (Xizang, Ch. Bod ljong, Tib.), China's second-largest but least densely populated province. Its borders roughly correlate with the Lhasa-based Dalai Lama's central government administrative control when annexed by China in 1951. While the TAR is over 90% ethnic Tibetan according to the 2000 China census, this administrative demarcation splits the Tibetan ethno-cultural population of the PRC between the TAR and the former traditional provinces of eastern Kham and Amdo, which have been annexed into the contiguous Chinese administrative provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunan, making the Tibetans into minorities in those provinces also inhabited by millions of Tibetans.¹⁹

"Tibetan" then also refers to the ethnic definition of Tibetanness constructed by China's recognition of Tibetans as one of the nation's fifty-six minzu, or minority groups, and the fifth largest minzu group. As scholars of China's minzu have pointed out, minzu designation brings benefits, such as political representation in legislative government bodies, educational opportunities, and national development funds for their regions, but also negative pressures to assimilate to mainstream Han society and restrictions on religion, language, and customary livelihoods.

The invasion and occupation by the People's Republic of China in the 1950s galvanized a common political consciousness amongst Tibetans as a distinct nation in modern terms, but was not its point of origin. Dreyfus finds a strong and proud proto-nationalism, the precursor to modern nationalism, much earlier, writing: "At least since the thirteenth or fourteenth century, it is possible to find a trace of a sense that Tibetans have had a sense of belonging to a political community (Dreyfus 2005)." Dreyfus finds historical memory critical to group cohesion and the strong identity amongst Tibetans. Tibetan origin myths of their race²⁰ and the territory they occupy were coded to explain their Buddhist destiny and subsequently map the geographic polity

to the reach of religious expansion. The plateau was made safe for the thriving of Buddhism by the subduing of a demoness who was stretched out across it and pinned down by the construction of temples, the Jokhang in Lhasa at her heart (Gyatso 1987). This traditional imagery maps alleged temple construction all the way to the geo-political borders, illustrating the conceptual and physical extent of the Tibetan world; it is a motif that recurs in contemporary paintings, too.

Tibet's political power and cultural influences did spread broadly: at the height of the Tibetan Empire around the seventh century, Tibet controlled the central Asian Silk Route, and after the rise of Buddhism, the regions as far west as Xian and Chengdu, south as Bhutan and Nepal, east to western Pakistan and northwestern India, and north into Buryatia were Tibetanized to varying degrees. At least since the widespread adaptation of Buddhism, religion and a common written language unified the plateau people and identified them to others (Kapstein 2006) (Tuttle 2005). These territories were traversed by traders, pilgrims, nomads, and artists—the diversity of known races and luxury goods, geographies and cultures reflected in early murals such as at Tsaparang, Dratang, and Zhalu monasteries—and thus Tibet should not be perceived as isolated from the world and its neighbors. Despite natural diversity, the ways in which plateau peoples were distinctive and different from their neighbors, was also long commented on by foreign observers since medieval times, note scholars of Tibetan nationalism (Kleiger 1992) (W. Smith 1996). Yet spoken language, cuisine, commodities, agricultural and pastoralist economies, dress, and natural environments did vary across the contiguous vast geography of the 1.2 million square kilometers of Tibetan plateau and its borders. In Tibetan communities before the twentieth century, local and regional identities based on one's *phayul*, fatherland, outweighed a national “Tibetan” consciousness.

In the modern era, “Tibet” has been understood by Tibetans to refer to “political Tibet”, the reach of the Dalai Lama's governments to the Himalayan plateau regions known as Ü (south central) and Tsang (western), and a “greater” or “ethnographic Tibet” which included the regions of Kham (southeast) and Amdo (northeast) which since the eighteenth century had differing

political relationships to Lhasa, local authorities and their Chinese neighbors. In the modern era, efforts to obtain international recognition of political Tibet's de facto independence since at least the early twentieth century have not impacted China's standing internationally. Many Tibetans since the late twentieth century have urged pan-Tibetan nationalism across "ethnographic Tibet," to bridge the past regional divides of central and eastern Tibetan regions of Ü-tsang, Khams and Amdo in the concept of a "Greater Tibet" signified by the Tibetan name *pöd*.²¹ This view has also been popular in contemporary music and literature.

Tibetans also have self-referential names for themselves: "tsampa eaters" (referring to the roasted barley staple) (T. Shakya 1993), and the inhabitants of "the land of snows." In fact the psycho-geography of the land of snows pervades literature and personal and collective memories, too. The aristocrat Shelkar Lingpa's poem "Songs of Lhasa," penned in Darjeeling in 1910 while stationed with the temporarily exiled Thirteenth Dalai Lama, expresses longing for homeland through vivid imagery of the Kyichu river and birds, recreating the landscape of the Lhasa valley, recalled as delightful under the rule of the Dalai Lama (L. Hartley 2008). Contemporary autobiographies of lay persons in exile, written at the encouragement of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, universally recall the Tibet of their pre-Chinese childhood fondly, if not as a sort of heaven.²² The contrast with the indignity, torture, and hellish inversion of society they suffered at the hands of the Communists, and the beauty of their homeland compared to the perilous journey over the border and mal-adaptation to India, could not be more sharply drawn. The "Tibet" of memoirs is a paradise unjustly lost after millennia of rightful habitation. In contemporary Tibetan fiction, "Tibet" is at times nearly as inaccessible, marked by mystery and magical realism as a residue of this historical memory. Thus, while outside constructions of Tibet have proven to say more about the foreigner, Tibetans themselves have also conflicted relationships to their remembered and imagined pasts; the construction of "Tibet" is complicated for Tibetans, too.

In the end, "Tibetan," despite its referents and interpretations past and present, remains a functional label for a particular place and time and histories, and a people with a remarkably

strong identity. More importantly, however, for this study, it is the way a group of contemporary artists living in Lhasa identified themselves; they are Tibetan people, speaking to Tibetans, and others, about their lives in the Tibet they know.

Tibetan as Minorities in the People's Republic of China

Anthropologists of China's ethnic minorities also influenced my understanding of *minzu*, various translated as "nationality" and "minority", and their representations in China and minority groups' relationships to the power of central authorities (Gladney 2004) (Harrell 1994) (Baranovitch 2001). Contemporary Tibetan artists work within the context of the People's Republic of China, state media, and tourism, which all aggressively promote particular images of Tibetan minorities within the Socialist nation, based upon an evolutionary view of peoples from primitive (*minzu*) to advanced (Han majority). Problematic representations of *minzu*, and especially Tibetanness, make alternatives imaged by contemporary Tibetan artists important for understanding Tibetans in relation to China, and contribute to the ethnographies of China's minorities.

China is poised to make the uniquely troubled region of Tibet a central point of foreign relations (Warren W. Smith 2009) and yet Tibet remains an understudied area in inquiries into the nature of ethnic minority relations to the hegemony of the state. From the origin of modern Chinese nationalism, political forces have established tropes about ethnic minority peoples (*minzu*) and their difference from the Han, the impacts of which throughout the twentieth century have been studied in China studies in Yi, Yao, Hui, Mongolian and other populations (R. A. Litzinger 2000) (R. A. Litzinger 2001) (Mueggler 2001) (Bulag 2003). Tibetan Studies has infrequently situated Tibetans within the contemporary, especially urban, context of the PRC, although they are especially impacted by the State's voracious appetite for development and control.

The incomplete Socialist project of developing the *minzu* enables the authenticating function of tradition to be invoked by the State. The State claims to be the champions of Tibetan

cultural protection, visible in circumscribed realms approved to include “ethnic characteristics”. However, there is an ideological limit to the State’s cultural preservation: “Old Tibet” was a feudal serfdom the Party is transforming for “a brighter future under socialism”.²³ This transformation pervades not only the political and economic spheres, but also cultural production. Some contemporary Tibetan art is acclaimed by the state for its ethnic features, but the culture is seen as nonetheless in need of “develop[ing] a new Tibetan art,” which can only be birthed through interaction with outside influences, particularly modern China (Xiaoke 2004).

The Party perspective of “Tibet” is the opposite of postcolonial notions of the degenerative affect of colonization and globalization found elsewhere. In art and society at large, by projecting a future superior to tradition, the value of pre-modern society’s art and culture is no longer derived from age or indigenous authenticity, but accrues with modernization and nationalism. Tibetan artists are therefore caught between Western consumers in search of at least the semblance of pre-modern, pre-Chinese “traditional Tibet,” if not artifacts pre-dating colonial contact, and local political imperatives to couch their “tradition” within a celebration of the modern nation within which “Tibet” is a province.

The *minzu* label is advantageous, too, for some in the PRC. Modern and contemporary “Tibetan” art has somewhat uncritically been taken in western literature to refer to artworks created by ethnic Tibetans. In the course of my fieldwork, however, I found that Han artists also included themselves in the rubric (and growing commercial appeal) of “Contemporary Tibetan Art”. This designation was based on a number of possible factors: by virtue of their membership in the government branches of the regional Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association or municipal level Lhasa Artists Association, having lived and worked as an artist in Tibet, painting in a style advocated by some artists as a regional school of painting (*pu hua*, Ch.), or even simply creating works with Tibetan subject matter. In Lhasa’s art worlds, there is no current consensus regarding the “Tibetanness” of contemporary Tibetan art.

Nonetheless, I concluded that for the purposes of this study, when I use the term contemporary Tibetan art, I am referring to art made by artists who live and work in Tibet, and who identify primarily as ethnic Tibetans.²⁴ This is somewhat in contradiction to a post-ethnicity stance of my Gedun Choephel Guild informants, who dismissed western interest in the mixed ethnic composition of the association as a distraction from the experiences and artistic ideas that brought their multi-ethnic members together. It is definitely in contrast to the stance of governmental artists' associations. However, I found understanding artworks, their contexts of production, and discourses about them, as well as the subtleties of artists' interactions and linguistics, were impossible to separate from the ethnic identity of the artist, in the Gedun Choephel Guild, government associations, at Tibet University, and among independent artists. For example, while all Tibetan artists in Lhasa were effectively fluent in spoken Mandarin, most Chinese artists knew very little Tibetan, and thus the language of dialogue could be used to achieve inclusive or exclusive participation along ethnic lines, the Tibetans speaking in Mandarin to include Chinese artists or contacts, or switching into Tibetan to exclude them. I believe this awareness of and distinguishing between ethnicities permeated perception of their peers artistic identities, activities, and productions as well. This was not a politically comfortable assertion for Tibetans to articulate often, but I did hear it, and has also been smartly and empathetically articulated by the Chinese art critic, Li Xianting (Li 2010).

Contemporary Tibetan Art

Approaching the study of modern Tibet as a place and topic has been done through cultural phenomena usually pertaining to the revival of religion and textual traditions. Also available to analysis of modern Tibet, however, are secular, popular culture productions that are formative of and integrated into the reproductions of or challenges to social hegemonies.

Modern and contemporary Tibetan art have been the subject of few scholarly articles or books in Western, Tibetan or Chinese languages. Scholarly writing about individual artists in Tibetan art history is also rare. Despite Shakya's claim that "modern Tibetan literature is

unknown in the west, and has been ignored by the field of traditional Tibetan studies, which considers it of little interest (T. Shakya 2000),” the birth of modern Tibetan literature has received more scholarly attention than innovation in other cultural realms, including art. New social identities are not easy to create, or write, after strong traditional notions of “art” and “artists.”

Per Kvaerne opened the new path of western study of post-Cultural Revolution Tibetan art with the article, “The Ideological Impact upon Tibetan Art” (Kvaerne 1994). In the article, Kvaerne described the Kandze School contemporary art movement of the 1980s in southeastern Tibet (Tib., Kham, Ch. Sichuan), and looked at the first sanctioned post-Cultural Revolution return to Tibetan aesthetics and culture in the paintings of Tibetan artists and Tibetan-Han collaborations. Kvaerne insightfully describes a specific post-Cultural Revolution way in which the adaptation of indigenous visual forms facilitates the glorification of Party values by usurping the hierarchy formerly reserved for Buddhist deities,²⁵ a move consistent with other incidences of Party-orchestrated cultural revival.²⁶ Kvaerne’s multi-layered analysis of paintings was instructive for me, as he revealed the relationship between visual production and politics of minority representation within China by demonstrating how to see Tibetan and Chinese elements within a painting. His conclusions, too, remain strikingly pertinent two decades later, as the art movement he described continues to inform new paintings with CCP patronage.²⁷

Clare Harris’ *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan painting since 1959* (1999) is a groundbreaking book dedicated to twentieth century painting about Tibet, largely by Tibetans. It explores various ‘images of Tibet,’ or how Chinese, Tibetan exile, and TAR Tibetans materialize the Tibet they imagine and know, demonstrating by her multi-sited ethnographic research that there is no one “Tibet”. Harris’ work includes one chapter on contemporary art production inside of Tibet, which brought western audiences a first and insightful analysis of Lhasan art worlds and establishes what may now be seen as the roots of the contemporary art movement. In the chapter about Lhasa, Harris discusses works selected from the first catalogue of contemporary Tibetan art published in Lhasa in 1991 called *Art of Contemporary Tibet* (Tibet Autonomous Association of

Literary and Artistic Circles and Chinese Artists Association Tibetan Branch, ed. 1991). Harris' work also models, for me, analysis formed through the integration of interviews with artists and their productions, and inspired my imagination of the research I might similarly do in a place I love (crucially encouraged by Dr. Bruce Knauff during a year-long Vernacular Modernities seminar).²⁸

Art historian Erberto Lo Bue and others, including some Tibetan artists, have critiqued *In the Image of Tibet* for its errors,²⁹ but overall, as the first scholarly work of its kind in Tibetology, artists and those interested in anthropological understanding of modern Tibet have found it a very important contribution. Harris' interviews with Gonkar Gyatso, first introduced in this book, have since been sustained over more than ten years. They provide rich source material Harris has discussed in a series of articles, focused on the "transnational" in international contemporary art worlds which Gonkar Gyatso's migrations from Lhasa to Dharamsala to London to Beijing and New York illustrate (C. Harris 2008) (C. Harris 2006) (C. E. Harris 2012).³⁰

Claire Harris updated her mid-1990s Lhasa fieldwork in her 2012 publication, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet*. As the only recent scholarly publication with a significant section dedicated to contemporary Tibetan art in the twenty-first century, it deserves considered review here. Largely focused on museum representation of Tibet, she includes two chapters on contemporary Tibetan art which, as Harris sees it, is primarily viewed and marketed within the spaces of galleries in the West. While I have been indebted to Claire's mentorship and support in the field of contemporary Tibetan art, and we enjoyed a rare opportunity to spend time together with artists in Lhasa and Beijing (she for several weeks in the early summer of 2007, near the end of my year and a half of fieldwork), there are some differences in our professional methods and interpretations.

In her chapter "The Invention of Tibetan Contemporary Art," conclusions about the place of religion in artists' and modern Tibetans' lives rests in a few cases on analysis of paintings that

incorrectly identify or misattribute traditional Buddhist iconography and other graphic elements³¹ and painters.³²

More significant however is the claim that the figure of the Buddha appears as a calculated marketing ploy designed for foreign consumption. Harris writes, “Despite the fact that many of them [artists] have never had an intimate relationship with Tibetan Buddhism, they have identified it [the Buddha] as their unique asset and selling point.” She continues, “the Buddha silhouette could function as the logo for a brand that sought global name recognition: Tibetan contemporary art.”³³ Rather than read their work as a personal and collective struggle with the legacy of a limited cultural inheritance and the search for shared visual language, Harris presents artists as having formulated a strategy for exploiting the interest of foreigners to advance their careers: “Tibetan artists have remodeled the Buddha to enhance his universal appeal while also asserting themselves.” Of course artists are not naïve; they know foreigners are interested in Buddhas and will look for them in “Tibetan” art. However, I found this was, for many Lhasa artists, more of a challenge they tried to work through than an asset they exploited.

Harris’ familiarity with modern Tibet however does contribute to a nuanced depiction of the contexts of the “ideologically charged spaces” in which artists create and display their works, both in the mainland and abroad. However, the above view of artists’ motivations in part leads Harris to write that because of censorship and “restrictions of their local environs, Tibetan artists have therefore treated the international art world as a new Shangri-La, a place of peaceful coexistence with other artists, where ethnicity, politics and nationality are irrelevant and talent is rewarded. By inventing the term Tibetan contemporary art, they could at least ensure that their artworks would escape to this distant utopia even if they could not.”³⁴ While I sympathize with the metaphor and did note Tibetan artists’ hopes for greater creative autonomy in international art worlds than was possible in the PRC, this seems an oversimplification if not misrepresentation of their realities if taken literally. Nonetheless, Harris’ commitment to artists’ works as a means to

displace both utopian Western fantasies and negative Communist representations make it a valuable and timely contribution.

Two short general pieces introduced emerging developments in Lhasa to Asian art observers in 2007, with subtle explorations of contemporary cultural identity issues. “Untitled Identities” is a thoughtful essay grounded in artist interviews with the founding artists of the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild by Kabir Heimsath (Heimsath 2005). A short history of modern Tibetan art, the second half of which is devoted to members of the same group, was written by Ian Alsop (Alsop 2007). Alsop’s 2007 introduction appeared in “The Modern and Contemporary Art Issue” from *Orientations* and marked the first time an international art journal brought scholarly attention to the emerging contemporary art movement from Lhasa (alongside the advertisements in the same issue of four galleries newly showing contemporary Tibetan art). In discussions of artists’ work, Alsop is sensitive to the tensions artists face to preserve their heritage while partaking in a rapidly changing and modernizing context. He writes, “The struggle for—and in some ways against—a cultural identity informs all contemporary Tibetan art.”

Heimsath’s focus on artists’ personal expression of the present, in modes he helpfully labels ‘not artifact,’ ‘not past,’ ‘not ethnic,’ and ‘not fashionable,’ is unprecedented. And yet, in his emphasis of the uniqueness of the aesthetic and conceptual work Tibetan artists are doing at the start of the twenty-first century, Heimsath perhaps overly distances them from the cultural and artistic past, with which most of them remain concerned. In some ways, while their work reflects the development of a “modernist shift” Heimsath identifies “from iconography to portraiture,” this could also be seen as the development that actually began in the early twentieth century. However Heimsath’s insistence upon contemporary artists’ sophistication, confidence, and agency, and the degree to which outsiders have failed to see and acknowledge this, is precisely correct.

Despite artists’ calls for it, Tibetan critical writing on modern and contemporary Tibetan art is rare. Several Tibetans have recently begun to comment in Tibetan, Chinese and English

forums in print and online. In these, I discerned that reception of contemporary Tibetan art mirrors artists' own orientations to their evolving movement, which originate from three predominant perspectives: Chinese Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC) influenced writers, enthusiastic supporters, and sympathetic critics.

Writing about Tibetan art influenced by the CFLAC's perspective presents Tibetan minorities as fascinating subjects for colorful art affirming their happiness within the socialist state, in an aesthetically pleasing art form accessible to the people.

Enthusiastic supporters tend to be Tibetans who are not artists but find in the work of Tibetan artists a poignant expression of their own complex lives and identities, either inside the PRC or in the Diaspora. For example, the award winning and beloved writer and poet, Tsering Woeser, has written evocatively about contemporary Tibetan art and artists in Lhasa on her blog and elsewhere.³⁵ Writing about the Lhasa artist Tsering Nyandak, Woeser reflects, "there is still something in this new batch of the artist's work that speaks to my heart; they remind me of the way I used to feel about my own soul broken into pieces, drifting, and flying (Woeser 2006)." Woeser thus identifies an emotional truth in the artists' work, articulating for many Tibetan viewers how contemporary art resonates or is recognizable for them, and lauding artists for serving in this capacity in their current society and helped me to see and appreciate the emotional and personal aspects of artists' process.

A diasporic young Tibetan writer using the online pen name dlo08 finds contemporary artists represent a collective zeitgeist in which "Tibetan agony is, in part, that of a medieval culture passing violently into the modern world," but appreciates that despite this condition, "their work provoked and encouraged independent thinking." From the elders in her community who "vehemently frowned upon...delving into the arts," to Tibetans condemning contemporary art's so-called sacrilegious use of Buddhist symbolism, dlo08 counters that contemporary artists deserve "respect" for the ways in which they continue to image Tibetan culture, for her one that is pervaded equally by Buddhism, whether superficially or profoundly, and politics (dlo08 2011).

Tibetans writing as sympathetic critics both appreciate the work of contemporary artists and their contributions to date, largely agreeing with supporters, but find the potential and promise of the form still exceeds the bulk of the current production. They urge artists to entirely forego outsiders' stereotypical ethnic and religious imagery in favor of more challenging conceptual and aesthetic grappling with the specificities of their experience; this perspective includes the voices of some artists themselves.

A fascinating short history of modern art was among the first written in English by a modern Tibetan historian and political activist, Jamyang Norbu, in an online essay "The Tractor in the Lotus" includes information based on rare interviews with surviving artists who recalled artistic work in Lhasa during the Cultural Revolution era (Norbu c.2005).³⁶ Norbu writes that while the fledgling modern art scene in the 1980s and 1990s saw increasing assertions of Tibetanness, "quite often this deteriorates...into the depiction of a romanticized stereotype of Tibet as a land of noble savages with bizarre tantric/sexual beliefs and practices," risking reification of the very clichés "consistently foisted on Tibetans."³⁷ His critique is meant to encourage, however, as he merges sympathetic, indigenous points of view with critical inquiry into the lingering impact of Socialist Realism and outsider constructions of Tibetan cultural authenticity.

Contemporary "Tibetan" art is also understood by some to refer to the ethnic identity of the artist, the place where was produced, or the subject of a work of art. For some, this designation is based upon their decades living in Tibet and painting subjects of relevance to life in the TAR, despite their non-Tibetan ethnicity; the "Tibetan" adheres to "art" as a classification for their productions and hopeful entre to markets. I am using an ethnic criterion for designating "Contemporary Tibetan Art" because only ethnic Tibetans share their collective memories and realization of their common heritage, not to mention the current experiences of colonial dominance over their marginalized political, cultural, linguistic, and religious lives.

Alternative Modernities and Ethnography

Concerns about globalization, power, nationalism, and curtailed possibilities for cultural and religious autonomy in Tibet make studies of other world areas and indigenous peoples of interest. Yet, Tibet was colonized for the first time in its history in the mid-twentieth century, four years after India gained independence from the British Empire; given that its population considers itself to still be under Chinese colonialism, the applicability of subaltern and postcolonial studies becomes limited. The anthropological sub-discipline of Alternative Modernities productively takes as its subject the ways in which globalization can be mediated locally by minority populations and others at a remove from geographic, economic, or political centers of power (B. M. Knaft 2002).

Ethnographies such as Anna Tsing's (1993) *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen*, Lisa Rofel's (1999) *Other Modernities*, and Bruce Knaft's (2002) *Exchanging the Past* brought the impacts of colonialism and globalization into focus with real individual's lives in communities adapting to worldwide change. Ethnographies of people on the margins of economic power and in geographically remote areas find that globalizations' impact is not necessarily homogenizing, and challenge assumptions to the contrary that figure modernization as inherently corrosive to culture, while acknowledging significant change. Local adaptations, adoption, and rejection of aspects of globalization transpired uniquely in each place over time.

I quickly found that the issues of how modernity arrives and takes forms and intersects with local cultures, which I wished to take up in relation to Tibet, could be productively explored with artists and their productions. Anthropological theories of alternative modernities help us understand local agents' mediation of global flows—for instance, how and why a Tibetan artist would subtly reference Picasso to articulate Tibetan experience, without necessarily being derivative of western art.

Memory and Images

People, things, and ideas flow not only transnationally, but through time as well. This came to life for me during my fieldwork one day. I was sitting with Gade, an active contemporary artist in Lhasa, looking at book on temple architecture and murals, but the photographs of most interest to him were not the color reproductions of Buddhist art, but the black and white photographs of Lhasa from the 1960s (Alexander 2005). One photograph from the height of the Cultural Revolution showed a large crowd gathered before a long table of officials who were assembled in front of a banner on a stage. Gade suddenly exclaimed, “Oh! I remember going to this as a child! It’s the *tromsikhang!*,” naming a large outdoor market east of the Barkhor neighborhood at the center of the Tibetan old town. Having read the English caption that Gade could not read, I replied in Tibetan, “It isn’t the central temple (*tsuglhakhang*)?” Gade paused, took a closer look, and then said, “Oh, yes. I was mistaken. It is the *sung chor wa*,” the name for one side of the central temple with a platform and square formerly used for outdoor religious events. “There was one like it – a stage with a huge crowd and a banner with officials speaking – at the *tromsikhang* and I attended such events there,” Gade concluded.³⁸

For a child survivor of the Cultural Revolution, political transformation of public spaces in Lhasa enabled the most famous and important religious temple at the heart of the city, the Jokhang, to be mistaken for a large marketplace. While Gade’s memory was historically incorrect, such mistakes revealed other truths about a past that is captivating but cannot be fully known, and these influence his artistic choices as an adult. In Gade’s recent artwork, details of contemporary urban landscapes are alluring but enigmatic—a hot pot restaurant inside a temple building, a coracle atop a bridge, a meditating Mickey Mouse in monastic robes. At a time when it is possible, while flipping through a book, for Maoist era Tibet to fully return in memory still confused by the transformation of Lhasa when images of Chairman Mao replaced Buddhas, we could read Gade’s paintings as a manifestation of how the past still impacts the present in

powerful ways, shaping people's present relationship to their city past and present as much as depicting the fluidity of temporal, spatial, fictional, and political boundaries.

Experience of displacement and disorientation in a city in which memories are challenged by frequent change is not limited to those born during the Cultural Revolution; even those born afterwards have anxiety about rapid change and disappearance of personal and collective pasts. For example, in commentary on the pace of change in Lhasa, one young anonymous artist showed me a painting he was working on in his home. The painting's foreground shows the back of a Tibetan man's head, beyond which viewers also take in the scene he observes. Amid traditional style *barkhor* houses, a crane is lifting a Buddha shape into the air. The artist explained to me, "These works are about cultural background. The man from Amdo³⁹ is looking at a crane hoisting the Buddha. In the *barkhor* now there is this big crane. But to build new things here means to destroy the old ones. I don't like this. The old homes should be protected. The cranes you see everywhere, even when I drive just from my house to someplace nearby. In my childhood, I saw lots of old homes, but when I see them being destroyed it is like memories are being gotten rid of. So when I see new buildings I feel uncomfortable. If they build on empty land, then it is no problem. But to destroy the old to build new, I show in my painting, this is memories disappearing. Traditional homes have lots of memories inside (Anonymous, 2007)." In this personal expression, the artist utilizes the figure of the Buddha, here being removed from a traditional and historic home, to symbolize the extraction of traditional life and memories, displacing and rendering homeless the heart of his former Lhasa. Personal and collective anxieties about the pace of change and the loss of the past, such as this one, are a frequent refrain in this study.

Such episodes wove throughout my time in Lhasa with artists and point to the pervasiveness of questions about what to do with pasts that are both troublesome and rich sources of identity and meaning. I still needed methods by which to understand the mechanics that propel

the past into the globalizing present and the impact of memory upon indigenous artistic cultural production.

To understand this conundrum of continuity after massive collective trauma through non-traditional means, I began forging connections between Tibetan studies and cultural theory through the lenses of trauma studies and alternative modernities. Both contributed enormously to my appreciation for the specificity of traumatic pasts and the agency too often assumed indigenous people's cede in the face first of colonialism and then globalization. Contemporary Tibetan artists, I soon found, are oriented primarily towards the present moment, with a sense of urgency to document it now, but that also implies an intentional will towards a future which receives artists' conscious efforts. It is this openness to the present and the future, rather than obsession with or domination of the past, which soon made memory studies, rather than trauma studies, a productive theoretical approach to interpretation of Tibetan contemporary contexts and cultural productions today.

In my curiosity about relationship of individuals and collectives to their pasts, I read widely in the field of memory studies to understand the basis for concepts such as collective memory (Halbwachs 1992), social memory and its transmission and commemoration (Connerton 1989) (J. E. Young 2000) (Krog 2000), religious aspects of memory (Hervieu-Leger 2000), trauma (Caruth 1995) (Caruth 1996) (Erikson 1976) (Hoffman 2005) (Das 2001), and modernity and anxiety (Lowenthal 1999) (Terdiman 1993) (Baudelaire 1995). Some scholars have also very recently looked at memory in Tibet (Barnett 2006) (C. McGranahan 2010) (Dreyfus 2005) (Pistono 2010).

Richard Terdiman takes a diagnostic approach to mining cultural productions for evidence of collective relationships to pasts perceived to be lost or vanishing. In his analysis of nineteenth century European literature in *Present Past: Modernity and the Memory Crisis* (1993), Terdiman explores the ways in which modernity is constituted by radical social, political and technological changes that fundamentally alter societies and individuals felt relationships to (and

anxious distances from) imagined pasts. He terms this phenomenon a “memory crisis,” claiming it is a symptom of traumatic pasts or dramatic change that manifests in cultural productions. “In a world of change,” Terdiman writes, “memory becomes complicated. Any revolution, any rapid alteration of the givens of the present places a society’s connection with its history under pressure.” Terdiman’s examination of cultural productions and theories yielded the observation, “Of course every culture remembers its past. But how a culture performs and sustains this recollection is distinctive and diagnostic.” Given Tibetan collective traumas and ruptures to transmission of memory and culture in the past fifty years combined with the rapid pace of change in Lhasa, I expected to find manifestations of anxiety and loss in artistic cultural productions. This dissertation explores, in part, art in Tibet as expression, manifestation, and diagnostic performance of troubled pasts.

Also of particular interest in my study are the intersections of memory and image, first theorized by Yates (1966), and the artistic process. Memory theorists have suggested links between memory, image, and imagination, and thus lend themselves to reflection on artistic practice. While not specifically referencing art, Halbwachs stated, “at the moment of reproducing the past our imagination remains under the influence of the present social milieu (1992).” Artists’ recourse to imagination creatively positions their relationships to the past within present social experience, through appeal to styles, materials, compositions and symbols from their Buddhist artistic heritage and modern visual culture in equal measure. Hampl argues, in reference to memoir writing, that all reconstructions of the past are inherently imaginative acts, and embraces creativity as a route towards uncovering the personal meanings embedded in persistent memories (Hampl 1996). Nora (1989) describes memory’s transmission and also change over time in ways that are remarkably suited to the artists’ personal recollections and relationship to society. He writes, “...representation proceeds by strategic highlighting, selecting samples, and multiplying examples,” a plausibly intensely visual process of deciphering what we are, in light of what we are no longer. Contemporary Tibetan artists’ representations select samples from everyday life,

multiply them throughout works and across their oeuvre, strategically highlighting the multiple factors that influence life in Lhasa. As Tibetan artists do this, they show relationships to the past and present in ways their own communities recognize.

In the Tibetan context at least, when taken together, alternative modernities and memory studies suggest that in the context of globalization I might find ways to understand the mechanics and motivations that propel the past into the present (as memory studies says happens), but not only as problematically nostalgic, haunting or burdensome, but also as sustaining and anchoring and uniquely adapted by cultural agents (as alternative modernities affirms). I take up visual arts as a set of productions available for analysis, after Terdiman, and as a mechanism for performing collective or cultural memory in Lhasa influenced by new studies of art and memory. Art may communicate uniquely due to a special connection between visibility or image and memory (Yates 1966) (Gibbons 2007). The theoretical and methodological approaches to individual and social dimensions of visual objects, deconstructed by Berger (1982) and Barthes (1981), are also more recently described by way of their creation as memory work in writing by Gibbons (2007), Hirsch (2002), Kuhn (2002) and Saltzman (2006).

Methodologies exploring form, materials, content, production and circulation are emerging in intersections of art, memory and anthropology, including a notable shift towards interest in therapeutic and not merely diagnostic uses of memory, particularly where artists are speaking to conditions of persistent inequality or grief. Hirsch takes seriously the artistic and visual, material and creative processes as an author or artist's actual enactment of what she terms "postmemory" at the level of intentional expression. Hirsch writes of Spiegelman's *Maus* that "Drawing [the book]... represents his attempt both to get deeper into his postmemory and to find a way out (Hirsch 2002)." It is drawing which is the practice and expression of postmemory. As Kuhn reflected after working with photographic images in reconstructing her own past, "the language of memory does seem to be above all a language of images (Kuhn 2002)." Emerging explorations of artists' works in relation to memory and memorialization, in Saltzman (2006) and

Gibbons (2007), also point to social dimensions of a creative, visual process of engaging with the specter of the past. Contemporary art scholars are also turning to memory and the past as important to their work. Saltzman and Gibbons interpret art works in light of their artists' personal and collective pasts, particularly exploring the techniques and imagery employed to communicate communal dimensions of artistic work in relation to memory and pasts. Gibbons (2007) offers productive re-evaluation of the power of art to communicate what history cannot. Saltzman claims that a particular set of artistic techniques are particularly suited to capturing indexical relationships, and thus convey materially an impression of something that had previously transpired or a presence that was now absent. Some artists in Lhasa may be employing such techniques in their work as well. Hirsch and Kuhn explicitly consider artists' productive process as a physical, emotional, and contemplative enacting of a unique form of memory work.

This emphasis on process is a valuable contribution to the field of memory studies, in contrast to analysis of finished products, such as Terdiman's (1993) analysis of literature. Such processes, as I have observed them in Tibet, have to do with intentional and less deliberate ways in which the past is referenced what I consider artistic memory work.

Exactly what pasts and memories Lhasa artists express in contemporary art is perhaps not easily classified as traumatic for those theorists of memory concerned with generational distance from collective traumas. Yet Young's "after images" and Hirsch's "postmemory," for example, affirm space for and importance of childhood survivors' and second generation experiences with trauma and its legacies. Lhasa artists' present-focused, 'documentary' impulse can be understood as a response to trauma when opposed to 'aesthetic' representations of trauma to which Adorno objected. Though he later reaffirmed individuals' rights to expression of suffering, Adorno's provocative statement of the impossibility of poetry after Auschwitz has undergirded decades of suspicion of representing a traumatic past. In contrast to the proof, the "having been there" (as Hirsch borrows the phrase from Barthes), of documentary photography "the aesthetic is said to introduce agency, control, structure and, therefore, doubt (Hirsch 1997)." Young is particularly

concerned with the impact of twentieth-century traumas upon these theoretical paradigms of memory as interpretative strategies for understanding history; by looking at the fragmented nature of memory, particularly in exhibiting, memorializing, and constructing monuments to traumas, he concludes that ‘collected memory’ can include “after-images” of “vicarious memory” for those born in decades subsequent to trauma, but their artistic or memorial productions can never be “redemptive.” Rather, they crucially update historical experience into the present by including how it has come to be known, an important historical methodology and an insight into why art matters for history (J. E. Young 2000, J. Young 1993), and Lhasa artists’ concern with legacies of the Cultural Revolution era in Tibet.

Moreover, while contemporary artists everywhere may work within and on the edges of their own culture, in Tibet this work is strongly marked by time. This appears as anxiety in response to change, and also an interest in memory and the past. Yearning is oriented not towards proximal traumatic events and moments of loss themselves, but to a distant and irreplaceable cultural world not quite accessible or knowable, despite its vibrant existence “before” (Tib. *snga ma*⁴⁰), just years prior to their births. The traumas experienced by adults in the late 1980s and early 1990s during extreme periods of martial law in a police state and repressive colonialism are related to the more minor discriminations and suppressions normalized as everyday circumstances for Tibetans in China, and also to the worst years of persecution and deprivation of the Cultural Revolution. This becomes apparent in artists’ visual and metaphoric references to that era in their artwork. Disorientation is traced to the interruption of cultural transmission. But because it is also impossible to formulate direct critiques of the government through exposition of past sufferings at the hands of that government, options for expressing the recent pasts are far more limited than imaginations of the pre-Communist past, which can merge with a generalized sense of a timeless “before,” unchanged since ancient times, or at least unpolluted by foreign occupation and modernization.

And yet the forms in which culture producers are expressing these concerns are not timeless but feel utterly new. The introduction of new forms, used in part to address loss of tradition, created shock waves, perhaps escalating Tibetan “memory crisis” anxieties. The artistic process connects culture producers not only to the present, but also the past, in crucial ways. As conservative and innovative responses to cultural anxieties about cultural transmission multiply, culture producers and commentators are establishing an area of cultural and intellectual activity encompassing diverse efforts, debates, perspectives and strategies. Contemporary artists pioneer an important shift in this cultural sphere: that from orientation focused on the lost past to a documentation of the present. For these artists, the present holds within it the unfolding legacies of the past but can also project itself into a future. If there is a practice of cultural sustainability in Tibet, it may emerge from such strategies.

Materials

Artists are important to exploration of the theoretical concerns of this dissertation, namely modern Tibetan culture and cultural sustainability, because they are explicitly engaged with the same concerns, and moreover, because artists are acknowledged by some Tibetans (especially bloggers) to be the ones really showing what is happening in Tibet today, inside the minds and souls of ordinary Tibetans. Thus, the primary materials for this study are artists’ narratives and artworks, with secondary materials contributed by a limited number of catalogues and scholarly or critical writing about Tibetan contemporary art.

The primary source materials for this study—art works and artists’ oral narratives—were gathered during ethnographic fieldwork primarily in Lhasa in 2004 and 2006-7, but also in other locations with Tibetan populations and artists between 2001 and 2010. While the primary materials for this specific study broadly concern the previous century of artistic production, the focus is on members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and their artistic activities and productions in the period 2003-2007. I also utilize art publications, interviews, and participant observation experiences, interviews, artworks, Chinese Communist Party propaganda, museum

exhibitions' catalogues, and draw upon my familiarity with Tibetan Buddhism and Himalayan Buddhist art history as well.

By the time I was concluding ethnographic fieldwork in Lhasa for this study, the sites in which one could see secular art had multiplied beyond the one little tea shop I'd stumbled upon in 1997. The novelty of contemporary Tibetan art has become sensational and capitalized. Craig Simmons (2004) in the *New York Times*' Travel section describes the Gedun Choephel gallery, Lhasa, a Beijing-published guidebook, included a full color, multi-page feature on contemporary art (L. M. Sangster 2006), and editions of Lonely Planet and other guidebooks (always on the lookout for new ways to tell the story of a place with a declining number of historical sites), popular amongst western and Han tourists now include sites of contemporary art sales amongst their top recommendations in the city. Tour guides in 2006 brought groups of foreigners to the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild's Gallery while enjoying the Barkhor circuit surrounding the holy Jokhang temple.⁴¹ A young, bar-visiting Tibetan once said, in reference to tourists' views of his generation, "I know we are not the Tibetans they want to see (Adams)." Although many foreigners are not interested in present-day Tibetan lives, the new visibility of non-traditional culture and contemporary art can serve as a counterpoint to Shangri-la tourism.

Still, in 2004 there were four, and in 2007 only two serious contemporary galleries dedicated to Lhasa's more conceptually and aesthetically challenging work. Most of the visibility satisfying the newfound tourist curiosity then is met by the dozen or so souvenir shops and cafes meeting increased tourist demand for souvenirs and art by selling so-called contemporary Tibetan art (much of it made by Han painters, some pieces even imported from eastern China) primarily to Han tourists, while reproductions of Buddhist thangka paintings (of greatly varying quality) also continued brisk sales in the Barkhor neighborhood.

Local and regional publications of art and literature associations, research institutes, and local newspapers under government sponsorship are limited sites for critical aesthetic or conceptual engagements with contemporary art. Editorial content in the PRC about modern and

contemporary art infrequently appears in Tibetan and Chinese language journals about Tibetan arts and culture. A pair of short articles, for example, was unusual in their celebration of the non-governmental, independent efforts of artists, and was printed within four-page color inserts of at least half a dozen paintings from two artists' collectives (L. (. Sangster 2006) (L. (. Sangster 2006). In general, the only print visibility of contemporary art was found on the back cover, full color reproductions with simple captions that appeared monthly in journals such as *Art and Literature*. There have been attempts to increase editorial content in Lhasa. In one instance of which I am aware, a young Tibetan artist and journalist employed by a cultural publication encountered significant resistance to his proposed review of an exhibition opening at the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in 2007. When he questioned his editor's "censorship" of certain portions of the report, the editor pulled the article altogether.⁴² Yet this means academic, art theory or critical writing about the themes and practice of contemporary artists are not yet being written in local or national journals.⁴³

More so than current scholarship and secondary literature suggests by its paucity, it is in the studios and the galleries of London, Beijing, and Lhasa that contemporary art by Tibetan artists is visible and dynamically engaged with contemporary society. Exhibition catalogues published by the international galleries are important as documents of the emerging field, containing excellent color reproductions of art works, artists' statements, and insightful essays by scholars and art professionals.⁴⁴

Catalogues and books of contemporary art have also been published in the TAR and are an important survey of works which have passed official sanction between the late 1990s and mid-2000s (or, as Harris suggests (1999), evaded censors insensitive to the subtlety of culturally encoded images of dissent). These publications also demonstrate how art works are selected from artists' oeuvre for official exhibitions; I noted they tend to have subject matter centered on ruins, animals, women, appropriated religious motifs, and primitive nomads, which confirm State and popular representations of Tibet and Tibetans as vestiges of a romantic, pre-modern world.

Critical attention in American media is also slim, but made for irresistible material that evidenced reception of the phenomenon in the international contemporary art world, and Tibetan responses. Two reviews of contemporary Tibetan art in the *New York Times*: one positive introduction of Rossi+Rossi's show for Asia Week 2007 (Cotter 2007), and one negative review of the exhibition "Tradition Transformed" at the Rubin Museum of Art (Johnson 2010). Both reviewers struggle to reconcile an interest in this new source of fodder for contemporary art markets with their expectations of traditionalism and implicit assumptions and critiques of imitating western modernity. Tibetan responses to the latter review (largely in blogs online) have suggested these critics were ignorant of Tibetan contemporary politics and contexts, while reviewers note that the RMA's New York and Atlanta exhibitions would have overcome this gap with greater attention to artists' contemporary contexts and curatorial selections less narrowly focused on the continuity of religion (Ciliberto 2009).⁴⁵ Notwithstanding the faults of the curators and museums, however, the critics identified multiple artists "to watch" and noted this was a movement with fascinating potential, constituting a form of validation outside of gallery agents, artists, and academics.

Methodology

I approached my materials with the goal of first answering critical questions about the nature of art and artists in Lhasa. I then reflected upon artists' commentaries about their art and lives as artists helped me understand art and its functions personally and socially.

My approach to fieldwork, as well as the interpretive lenses I have brought to bear upon all it yielded in over a decade of interest in the subject, has been critically informed by an interdisciplinary training in modern Tibetan studies, anthropological sub-disciplines of art, oral narrative, and vernacular or alternative modernities, and memory studies.

Ethnographic fieldwork for this specific project occurred in two focused stays in Lhasa during the summer of 2004,⁴⁶ and from January 2006 to August 2007.⁴⁷ I periodically surveyed the sites in which contemporary art could be seen in Lhasa, but primarily divided my time

between participant observation at the Gedun Choephel Artist Guild gallery, viewing, photographing and discussing works in artists' home studios, and meeting artists in public places such as cafes for gatherings or interviews.

I compiled some materials into a structure for writing a modern art history of change in the past one hundred years in Lhasa. I utilized research and previous studies of Tibetan Buddhism to identify references and influences from traditional religious philosophy, world views, imagery and materials, and to understand the meanings and practices associated with art and artists over time. I also distilled coherent commentaries – verbal and visual – artists offered over a range of art works and interviews on particular topics such as ethnicity, religion, memory, trauma, and the politics of identity and globalization in a colonial context. In working with the materials in this way, I was able to unveil predominant concerns, artists who shared ideological commitments and working methods, social processes of contestation between artists, and unique voices.

My approach to this work was informed, of course, by anthropologists of art, narrative, and ethnography. Anthropologists in various subfields inform my intention to be attentive to local and social processes, sensitive to the importance of unique individuals, and include multiple voices in exploring the manifestations of hybridity and adaptations to global flows in specific contexts. As artworks constituted a set of original primary source data, in addition to artists' narratives, the anthropology of art guided my focus on a type of material culture and its production that has been under-represented in anthropology to explore cultural specificities and focus on individuals and the social processes in which they are engaged. Mahon particularly attends to making visible the work of culture producers and the “social affects” their practices, contexts and discourses can engender (Mahon 2000).

Anthropologists of art whose methods and commitments are important for me include Howard Morphy, Faye Ginsburg, Nicholas Thomas, and also Jeremy Coote, Anthony Shelton, and Marcus Meyers. They model methodologies of research and writing that move back and forth between objects' forms and the social contexts of production and use, unraveling how materials

and content are a window into larger and deeper cultural worlds. Morphy (2008) wrote at length about an individual artist's life as well, illustrating intimate relationships between art and life. In particular, however, I appreciated how Ginsburg (F. Ginsburg 1991) (F. D.-L. Ginsburg 2002) and Thomas (2001) (1997) situate persons for whom an indigenous identity is very important as contemporaneous with the hegemonic, national, or majority populations among or near whom they live. As minorities who have been marginalized (typically through colonial histories), such artists and media producers have particular communication goals in relation to both their broader social and political contexts, and within their own communities.

I benefited from Howard Morphy's didactic prescription for analysis of indigenous arts, described in "From Dull to Brilliant: The Aesthetics of Spiritual Power among the Yolngu" (Morphy 1994). Morphy outlines an ethnographic method that moves from the tangible details of an art object's materials and forms, to symbolic content, and finally to uncovering the role it plays in creating and transmitting larger cultural meaning making structures registered in the production, use, and viewing of artistic media. Morphy documented this process in the case of aboriginal Australian use of "shimmering," an affect achieved through a technique of crosshatching patterns in coffin lids, costume, and body paint, in life cycle rituals that connect the community to its origin myths and the physical landscape. Steiner's (1994) work in Africa and Meyer (2002) (1995) and Morphy in Australia, reveal how such local meanings, uses, and worldviews are ignored or difficult to retain when traditional (and new "old") objects are moved from local production and use into markets beyond the borders of those communities.

The movement of productions outside of their native communities is not always configured as a loss or diminishment, however. Ginsburg focuses on the enactment of cultural knowledge performed by social processes of artistic production, and the adoption of modern technologies to assist in the transmission of such knowledge between generations and across geographic distances via indigenous television and radio programming in Australia and among the Inuit in the Canadian arctic (1991, 1994, 1993). Ginsburg's multiple studies illuminated the

creation of media as a process that was deeply embedded in and productive of social relationships; these “social processes of production” also functioned in these cases to strengthen indigenous community, and relationships with outside the community through the production and broadcasts, thus promoting understanding of their heritage within the mainstream population.

While these goals and insights are positive, I often felt there were also limits to indigenous art and media studies in the treatment of indigenous media producers to the extent that they are portrayed somewhat one-dimensionally as replicators of tradition, primarily motivated to authentically enact, preserve and transmit tradition.

While I also noted that Tibetan artists, like those in Africa and Australia, could encode meanings in their work that were not readily legible to outsiders, and, like the Inuit, adopted new technologies and media, I found as much significance in an inversion of what might be expected elsewhere. Rather than assume traditional symbols carried unchanging meanings for their makers (meanings that might be protected through the adjustment of images to enhance or disguise them before export to foreign viewers), Tibetan artists did not assume their own full knowledge, nor their communities’, of their traditions. Thus, I attempted to recognize traditional elements in contemporary artists’ works and to be knowledgeable of historical meanings and uses of those elements, without however also assuming artists had intended to wholly import these historical meanings into the present works. That is, at times, artists were even pointing to this very gap between historical meanings of content and changes to how the same symbols or concepts could be understood, transmitted, or relevant today.

Additionally, Tibetans artists were as likely to intentionally adapt imported foreign or modern imagery to their own contexts, so that such references did not enter into circulation in their own places and time with their original, foreign designers’ full meanings, either. In regard to indigenous adaptations of traditional and modern imagery, I found Thomas’ choice of artists and his analysis very helpful for understanding contemporary Tibetan arts because of his contribution of two valuable concepts: what he terms coequality and imaging collectivity.

Thomas pursues histories of engagement between aboriginals and white settlers by returning art objects to their sites of production in contemporary times, where the works can “assert presence” and speak about indigenous rights and agency to both audiences (2001). By this demonstration of the “coevality” of colonial or settler and indigenous peoples, acknowledgement of the mutuality and contemporaneousness of their histories is increased and biases which would continue to project primitiveness onto the indigenous are delegitimized. In addition, this move no longer constrains artists to work with traditional art objects or the modification of recognizably traditional forms with modern technologies and materials, as in the above studies, in order to claim their unique cultural identities. Thomas writes that the contemporary Maori artist, Robert Jahnke, “imaged collectivity” by combining references to modernity and traditional imagery, which both familiar to local community members. This functioned to strengthen identification with indigeneity and with indigenous community members and with the work of art, even as the final product did not take a traditional form or style (Thomas 1997). Similarly, in the Tibetan context, as Thomas models, “traditional” elements can be read as familiar, for their continued meaningfulness and as traces of the past still in circulation, alongside the equally familiar signs of modernity in the local visual economy and culture. To acknowledge this reality serves critical functions for community, for and relevancy and presence, and claims to legitimacy of cultural identities and rights to self-representation.

In Lhasa in 2004, I first met many of the artists in this study, who had the year before convened and organized as the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild and Gallery. They were clearly thinking about cultural pasts and futures, but oriented primarily to the present moment, where these intersected in real and important, if not challenging and unsettling, ways. While I looked at the commentaries and productions of an urban, educated group in Lhasa, they are deeply concerned about issues such as the exploitation of women, the environment, and nomadic communities, and acutely aware of the suffering created everyday by discriminatory policies and social marginalization for the past sixty years. They are also students, teachers, parents, lovers,

and friends, with lives they seek to make joyful, meaningful, and fulfilling. Their work, far from created from a removed perspective of elite privilege or dictated by politics, seemed to bring together modernity (for better and worse) and strong cultural identity that reflected their personal and social everyday realities. My aspiration to help amplify their articulations was spurred by an awareness that Tibetans' contemporary urban contexts, and artists' expressions of their experiences of them, were almost entirely absent from academic and public perceptions of Tibet, and sometimes even discounted.

I began with documentation of their commentaries and photographing their artworks in the gallery and a few members' home studios in 2004. During my 2006-2007 fieldwork, participant observation began with association with artists in the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild's (GCAG) Barkhor neighborhood gallery.⁴⁸ I observed visitors to their gallery, meetings of gallery members, and discussed works brought by members for display there. Before long, the GCAG members introduced me to other artists, art professionals and professors, leaders of other art organizations, and their students, which often led to formal interviews and private studio visits. I visited art classes and the mounting of and attendance at exhibitions at Tibet University. These structured exchanges and settings were a regular feature of my life in Lhasa, but were accompanied too by the fascinating conversations that transpired during casual travels across town and meals together, and the informal social gatherings of the artists. In time, I also became involved in GCAG's emerging relationships with foreign contemporary art dealers and curators. Despite the awareness that my very presence could not but have an impact of some sort, I had become comfortable with the notion of myself as an 'observer' of the realms of activity artists had established. Involvement with their burgeoning international careers signaled a shift to another form of participation in the creation of new and emerging spheres for which I felt unprepared as a researcher or, as my new friends may have hoped, as an advisor. It was, however, a thrilling opportunity to learn from the inside along with artists, for whose evident trust and collaboration I remain indebted and grateful. At the time, contemporary artists in Lhasa and

foreign supporters and audiences needed someone who had a working grasp of urban Tibetan realities and history and could draw on this to contextualize the artists' smart, passionate, stunning, and savvy articulations. I did my best to fill this gap when opportunities arose to write catalogue essays and to co-curate exhibitions, but not without some handwringing over how this implicated me in the creation of value and could elevate some artists and works over others. In curatorial roles towards the end of my year and half of fieldwork in Lhasa, I was however more motivated to advance the educational opportunities that artists sought about western/international exhibiting and market conventions, as the degree to which they wanted to be involved in these worlds was a discernment processes in which they were engaged regardless of my presence, as buyers and agents sought or discovered them in Lhasa. These opportunities also widened the scope of my sites of research to include people living in Beijing, London, and the United States, enhancing my understanding of the unique features of Lhasa's art scenes.

I also participated in and have continued to observe artists' encounters with exhibiting internationally, an emergent area of activity I had not anticipated. The years 2003-2010 were marked with many important "firsts" in the dramatic increase in the international visibility and marketability of a previously unknown phenomenon. It is amazing to recall, for example, that the first independent artists-run gallery in Lhasa opened in 2003 with sales to tourists averaging under \$200, turned into a movement with its first international exhibition of artwork from Lhasa in 2005 (and still sales in Lhasa rarely topped \$1,000), and yet by 2009, its superstar, the Lhasa-born artist Gonkar Gyatso was invited to the 53rd Venice Biennial (Italy) and in 2012 his work "Endless Knott" sold at Sotheby's London Contemporary Art auction for \$271,409, more than doubling his previous record (Sotheby's London 2012).⁴⁹



Figure 3 Gonkar Gyatso. Endless Knot 2011. polyurethane, paint, graphite, and stickers.

This was hardly imaginable in the early 2000s, and would have been “unbelievable” artist Gonkar Gyatso has said,⁵⁰ at the birth of contemporary art in Tibet. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, artwork created beyond the employ of the state was relatively radical and those artists’ efforts were dismissed, derided and lacked an audience.

I was fortunate to participate in many of the landmark events of the movement: the first exhibition of diaspora Tibetan artists in the United States in 2003 in Washington, D.C., New York, and at a University (which I organized at Emory); the first Lhasa artists shown in art galleries in Santa Fe, London and Hong Kong starting in 2005; a first joint exhibition of exile and Lhasa artists; the first exhibition of Lhasa artists at a prestigious contemporary gallery in Beijing in 2006 (for which I was the co-curator at Red Gate Gallery/798); Lhasa artists’ first solo shows in London starting in 2008; and the first independent Tibetan and Han jointly-curated major contemporary exhibition in Beijing in 2010. Within a decade, contemporary Tibetan art was established as a global phenomenon, with artists, collectors, and regular small exhibitions in America, Europe, South Asia, and East Asia. These “firsts” were made possible in large part as multiples players in art worlds converged, including artists (including those who traveled, studied, or moved abroad), gallerists, scholars, collectors, tourism, and a period of relative

political stability in Lhasa prior to 2008. And yet, while the fascinating global dimensions of this phenomenon were analyzed by Harris (C. Harris 2012) (C. E. Harris 2012) as I finalized this manuscript, but as I conducted this research and began to write about contemporary art in Tibet, it was too preliminary to investigate the impact of international galleries and collectors, and to have attempted as much would have detracted from the specificity of my work in Lhasa. However, it is hardly deniable that artists are engaged in the contemporary, global art world, and gaining recognition as producers. In the early 1980s, Tibetan artists recently graduated from art institutions or self-taught in Lhasa struggled to be included in juried exhibitions and advance their careers in Chinese Communist Party-governed art worlds. The dramatic and sudden growth of the movement two decades later attests to widespread interest in their work, the introduction of market factors, and the emergence of contemporary Tibetan art as a global phenomenon. These signs have encouraged my belief in the value of this project. I have befriended artists and dealers in the US, Europe, and Asia, and anticipate following their work for years to come. But through my focus on Tibetan artists working in Lhasa, I hope to advance understanding of their contexts and choices.

While engaged in ethnography, I also attended to the social processes and contexts for artists themselves and my own viewing of art. On occasion, an artist would suggest I go see another artist in their studio, or remark that a colleague was working on something new. These occasions were rare enough that I knew they were not only for my benefit as a researcher interested in anything and everything, but indicated to me that someone had especially caught the attention of their hard-to-impress peers. Artists shared with me art works which were in process and perhaps sought feedback, and those works which remained in their studio from prior phases of their studies or careers as either significant accomplishments, mile markers in their trajectories, or less successful pieces that had simply piled up. This gave me insight into their artistic choices, aesthetic formation and the role of peers and critics, as well as sensitivity to the considerations which preceded the public circulation of a work in exhibition or publication. Upon public display,

the artist relinquishes a work not only to the scrutiny, but also potentially erroneous or unsafe interpretations, of others. On the whole, artists were far more intrigued by others' responses at this point in the life cycle of a work than they were interested in dictating their intent or shaping viewer's perceptions, but at times artists voiced their displeasure with interpretations that were politicized or evidenced lack of understanding of Tibetan society. I have respected their privacy by publishing here only works and commentaries which they have previously made public or given me permission to use. Of course my understanding of the works discussed is unavoidably also informed by the totality of our communications and the works I viewed.

This attention to local specificity also manifests in my discussion of art works, for example, as a decision to invoke western art historical moments, artists, or works only when my interlocutors do; a stance which differentiates my work from some others writing about contemporary Tibetan art today.⁵¹ The Rubin Museum of Art curators of the 2009 exhibition "Tradition Transformed" is a recent incidence of comparing Gongkar Gyatso's *My Identity* photography series to Cindy Sherman; Ian Alsop has described Tsering Dorje's thick oil paintings in reference to Picasso and invoked Wyeth's individualism and Warhol's iconicization of pop culture; and Harris (C. E. Harris 2012) writes without citing ethnographic evidence that Nortse's *Masked Man* and *Endless Bottle of Beer* from 2007 are "clearly indebted to Edgar Degas'" depictions of absinthe drinkers.

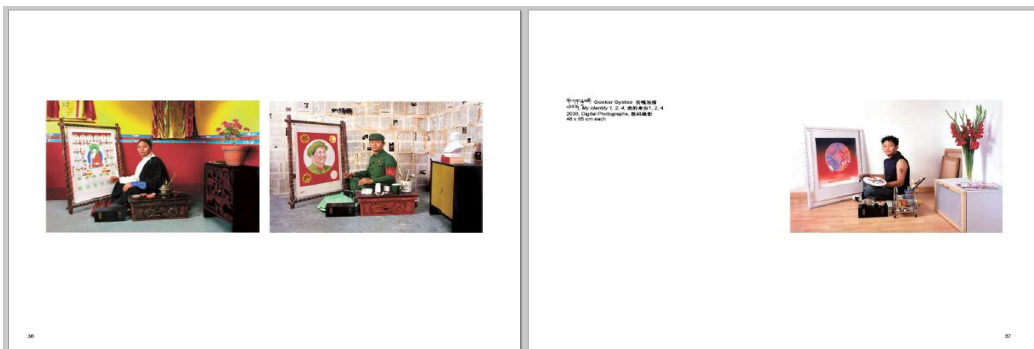


Figure 4 Gongkar Gyatso. *My Identity*. 2003. Three of Four photographs, from the "Lhasa - New Art from Tibet" exhibiton catalog (2007), Red Gate Gallery, Beijing.

Yet, Gonkar Gyatso, who was by far the most travelled and studied among Tibetan contemporary artists, having lived and studied art in Beijing, India and London, confirmed in conversation with me that despite numerous comparisons by western scholars of his photographic work *My Identity* to Cindy Sherman's oeuvre, he had in fact never heard of or seen her work when he donned costumes and posed before his camera in 2003.⁵² Moreover, her concerns with the history of female representation and the visual culture she references are far from his reference points and communication goals. Thus I refrain from this rhetoric and the imposition of my own cultural context, as much as is possible, in my own analyses, unless artists have explicitly told me of the influence of specific western modern art or artists or particular experience, in which case the connection to an entirely distinct cultural, historic and artistic moment is asserted by the artist. For example, Gonkar Gyatso's friend, Nortse, recounts the powerful impression, and confusion, he experienced upon seeing a book of Picasso paintings for the first time while an art student in Beijing in the mid 1980s, and how his teacher's attempt to discount it caused Nortse to break from Chinese art academies. These encounters took place in a very specific context and time period in China and Tibet, and to suggest artists' access to or familiarity with western artists' work in the absence of such confirmation and social context fails to take into consideration the very real limits on access to information and materials, and the educational processes and influences they have variably experienced in the past several decades. On the other hand, Tibetan artists in Lhasa have actively sought opportunities—through books, then online, and through visits to museums and galleries in eastern China and the West—to experience international contemporary art, and resent the assumption that, in the 2000s, they would be shocked or amazed by it in the same ways they were in the post-Cultural Revolution 1980s.⁵³ Finally, comparative associations to Western art can imply Tibetans' work is merely derivative or culturally inauthentic, a view that has been expressed in no less than reviews in *The New York Times*. Often, however, their insistence upon their status as “twenty-first

century global citizens,” as Nortse liked to say, took the form of questions, at times addressed to me and to which I had to admit my ignorance.

Artists knew, for example, that professional art practices in Lhasa (and in the PRC) often do not mirror other global sites of contemporary art production for a variety of reasons. Excessive State control of artists’ practices on the one hand – manifest in the strong influence of the Party in training and organizing artists and orchestrating career trajectories – is coupled with the absence of protections for artists’ output on the other. One artist, Gade, discovered after one of his paintings was published, without his permission or knowledge, that further copyright infringement ran rampant: his painting was reproduced as room-sized carpets, on tourist souvenirs, and on boxes of throat lozenges.⁵⁴ On another occasion, a group of artists discovered that a government publishing house was distributing a hardcover book of contemporary art from Tibet, but had not sought the permission or participation of the artists who, when they complained to the publisher, were each compensated with five free copies of the book, a gesture the artists found absurd. These experiences of exploitation at home perhaps intensified desire to understand international art business standards, and as such questions arose far beyond my expertise, for example, about international copyright laws and intellectual property rights or the fair percentage of sales galleries paid to artists, I attempted to identify reliable sources of information to refer them.

For Tibet, the past is a powerful presence, and questions of by whom, how and for whom “modernity” is variously defined are critical in light of projections and fantasies surrounding Tibet in both the West and in Asia which so often center on notions of “tradition” and change.

“Tradition” in Tibet is often synonymous with Buddhism. Just as I did not assume my informants’ familiarity with Western art history, I tried to resist assumptions about their Buddhist art historical proclivities and personal faith experiences, although most observers take for granted artists’ (as all Tibetans’) Buddhist identity. Assertion of relationship between contemporary art works and traditional Tibetan Buddhist arts in this study was based upon artists’ indications of

such connections either in direct commentary on specific symbols or (Tsering Wooser 2013) (C. Harris 2013) (Schwartz 2008) (Tashi 2008) more generally in regard to their approach to methods, materials, and techniques. Artists felt comfortable to express to me the ambivalence towards religion they feared many outsiders would not be sympathetic to hearing, while others were more apt to frame the historical conditions which had contributed to their sense that the conditions which existed for society as they grew up were not conducive to religious knowledge or practice. Nyandak once questioned the spiritual efficacy of “just walking in circles around a building,” referencing the ubiquitous practice amongst Tibetan Buddhists of kora, the merit-making circumambulation of holy sites, while Gade has felt the Buddhist-looking imagery in his art reflected his own “shallow knowledge of Buddhism,” and Jhamsang confided he “had no idea how to meditate or communicate with Buddhas.”⁵⁵ Artists’ reflections, such as Tsering Nyandak’s revelation that the “generalizing tactic” of referencing Tibetan Buddhism doesn’t acknowledge his lack of personal or emotional connection to Buddhist art, reinforced the importance, and paucity, of this perspective.⁵⁶ These voices are rarely heard in Tibetan studies or in popular discourse about Tibet abroad or in China.

Studies of unique individuals’ narrations of their life stories analyzed by anthropologists as reflections of larger cultural and social frames of reference (Behar 1993) (Crapanzano 1985) (Ochs 1996), and discussed with Dr. Joyce Flueckiger, facilitated my understanding of these individual’s constructions of themselves as “artists.” Artists’ commentary on works and life experiences unveil the intersections of powerful historical, social, political, economic and cultural forces. The limitations and opportunities artists’ perceive also inform us about the construction of artistic selves. For example, on more than one occasion, when artists were nervous about potential political implications of their artwork, they chose to describe a production perhaps in terms of the indigenous materials they used. Various fieldwork constraints common to researchers in the PRC, however, curtailed explicit life history interviews to a greater degree than I had expected, and I was not able to elicit life stories, or even thorough narratives of many

individuals' artistic identities and histories. Artists were reticent about even ordinary details of their lives when recalling politically troubled time periods, particularly in the presence of a research assistant. During the politically sensitive times in Lhasa that occurred during my fieldwork, artists also withdrew, even literally taking their art off the walls of the gallery on one occasion.⁵⁷ Yet over the course of my fieldwork, I assembled a picture of some artistic careers, and as our relationships deepened, the other problem arose of accounts so personal that I was asked to keep them confidential. I have done so, and because the movement is still so small and unique, I decided against using any of this material under pseudonyms. Through both reticence and being taken into confidence, I understood more generally the zeitgeist amongst creative intellectuals in the post-Mao era. The artists' visual productions and their narratives about them illuminate the ways in which these lives find expression and create meaning in their specific but shared social contexts. Specific interpretations and conclusions about their work and lives, however, remain my own.

Finally, while none of us could have known it at the time, the primary period of focus for my fieldwork for this project, 2003-2007, was a remarkable and unique moment in the history of contemporary Tibetan art and of Lhasa. There was a high degree of commitment to artistic activities in a variety of art scene circles, artists were enthused and encouraged by successes, and the milieu was relatively open and optimistic. This all began to change towards the end of my fieldwork with the arrival of the controversial Qinghai-Tibet Railroad and anticipation of the 2008 Beijing Olympics which brought Tibet uncomfortably into the national spotlight and individuals in the city under closer scrutiny of the authorities. Religious and civil restrictions steadily increased. For example, even lighting incense on a Wednesday (the day of the week on which the Dalai Lama was born), or *kora*, walking the circumambulation route on a holiday—personal devotional acts that are legally permitted under the PRC constitution—were periodically tightly controlled in Lhasa. For example, in the winter of 2007, friends of mine deliberated whether to join the popular traditional candlelight *kora* around the Jokhang temple on a major

holiday. Gathering at a home for dinner, preparations to depart for the temple were suspended, as everyone had a story of government officials convening meetings earlier that afternoon in workplaces and neighborhoods to ban participation by Lhasans (pilgrims from outside the city were permitted) and threaten being fired from their jobs if caught on video surveillance or by local authorities. Most of my friends decided to go out anyway, but to be disguised by bundling up so that only their eyes were visible. So as to not wear the daily attire which might have given them away to undercover police, informers, or acquaintances who would have been made uncomfortable by recognizing them but not wanting to greet them, they mixed up coats, scarves, hats, and mittens and laughed and joked as friend's garments were too big and too small. The mood was lightened, and there was a feeling of triumph, but all shared deep frustration and sadness at the situation. The artists with whom I was closest responded differently to the holiday and the tendency for authorities to impose last-minute restrictions, televised that day in the name of limiting the number of pilgrims because of public safety concerns. Most artists stayed home and one commented, "It is kind of the concerned authorities to protect us," which could be heard as a tongue-in-cheek response that declined to directly criticize the government's suggestion that a Tibetan custom enacted for hundreds of years needed paramilitary monitoring.

In the spring before I left Lhasa, one of my friends in Lhasa remarked of the local CCP authorities, "They are playing a stupid cat and mouse game with us Tibetans. They will push and push and push until finally a backlash will happen, and then they will say they were justified in repressing it." Another friend compared the situation to a tinderbox being filled with dry fuel that would only need a tiny spark to ignite. Sadly, they proved incredibly prescient.

Just months after my departure, massive protests, the largest since 1959 and 1987 erupted in Lhasa that spread across the plateau like wildfire in early 2008. The arrest of a few monks, who had refused increasing pressure to oppose the Dalai Lama in re-education campaigns at their monastery, was the spark that pushed Lhasa's citizens to take to the streets, escalating in a violent clash with ethnic Chinese immigrants, subsequently brutally repressed by the State security

apparatus (and detailed in *Tibet's Last Stand? The Tibetan Uprising of 2008 and China's Response* (W. W. Smith 2009)). For the next two years, authorities combed the footage from the city's many surveillance cameras, interrogated suspects, and even executed "terrorists." I saw reports that suggested intellectuals and people with contact with foreigners were particularly suspect to investigation by authorities. Reported in Tibetan press in the west was the case of one gallery suddenly closed by authorities shortly after an exhibition opening. In light of the dismal situation and out of concern for artists' safety, I suspended all communication with artists, but occasionally would continue to hear from them when they managed to travel abroad, and saw works they had slipped out to foreign galleries for exhibition. None of us foreigners who had been able to converse with artists about their work were in Lhasa and we could not get back in, as visas and travel permits for Tibet were not being issued, so galleries published these works, occasionally with prepared statements artists had enclosed, and these were a great resource to me at that time.

This study then unintentionally became a snapshot of pre-2008 Lhasa art worlds, after which, as Tibetans continue to say, "everything changed." One artist told me he couldn't work in the aftermath of the protests, and spent time in numb bewilderment. In some respects though, the tragedy of mass protests and deaths of 2008 have been displaced by the horror since 2009 of Tibetan self-immolations occurring in increasing numbers, having reached at the time of this writing more than 130 individual incidents, most of which have been fatal (L. M. Sangster 2012). Despite the escalation of tragedy, however, there appears to have only been a temporary cessation of artistic activities after 2008. Artistic responses have emerged from diasporic communities, but within Tibet and exile communities there has been a tremendous outpouring of sentiment in favor of pan-Tibetan unity and strengthening of cultural pride (L. M. Sangster 2012). In 2010, the exhibition *The Scorching Sun of Tibet*, was co-curated by Lhasa artist Gade and highly esteemed curator and critic of the Chinese avant-garde, Li Xianting, and mounted in the art gallery at Songzhung, Beijing. A monumental and landmark exhibition, including some of the best artwork

yet produced by many of my informants, the project also gathered an unprecedented number of practicing artists from across the Tibetan provinces in solidarity and communion for art and modern Tibet of resilience, pride, and cultural innovation. It perhaps proves contemporary Tibetan art is here to stay, and to respond.

Reflecting holistically upon the contemporary artworks I studied also followed upon visits to many of the sites of art historical import across the Tibetan plateau, including with some of the world's top scholars of Tibetan history, Buddhism and art on the 2007 Princeton Tibet Site Seminar.⁵⁸ I felt compelled to articulate linkages between the apparently disparate artistic productions of the past and the present, and, admittedly inspired by the use of the word "sustainable" in the environmental and organic farming movements in Portland, OR, where I had moved in the meantime, I was wondering what about Tibetan culture and its art makes it "Tibetan" and must be healthily transmitted to the future. At a conference of seminar participants at Princeton in 2008, I first coined the term "cultural sustainability" to describe on the one hand the common threads I perceived in art created in Tibet over many centuries, but moreover, I wanted to apply the term as a specific way of taking into consideration contemporary artists' approaches and answers to that question. The concept of cultural sustainability became central to this project.

A last word on methodology concerns the languages used in this research project. Tibetan is an especially difficult language to master. The gulf between modern colloquial and literary languages is reflected in the foreign expertise, instruction, and scholarship almost exclusively in the latter, resulting from western academic interest in textual traditions in religious and art historical studies. My ethnographic interests led to my practical development of colloquial communication skills in various Tibetan communities in Nepal, India, America and in visits to the three distinct regions of Tibet itself, which brought exposure to many dialects, accents and vocabularies, and also the influences of foreign (Indian, Chinese, English) languages on these Tibetan communities. Lhasan dialect has been accepted as the lingua franca of the international

Tibetan cultural world, and largely prepared me for Lhasa-based research. Nonetheless, the intrusion of Mandarin into Tibetan lives in the Tibetan Autonomous Region in the past 40 years, a highly political issue, in effect meant, to a degree I had not anticipated, that I met with an exceptionally small number of Tibetans who could converse with me entirely in Tibetan without use of phrases or terms borrowed from Mandarin, which I had not studied. This was particularly true when discussing modern art, as most artists' art education—either institutional or through books, journals and what they have had access to on the Internet—have been in Chinese language. Terms for painting materials, styles, movements and psychological subjectivities simply have not been coined, or are not in circulation, in Tibetan, as is the case with many modern subjects including science, medicine and technology, despite international efforts to support Tibetan neologisms. Additionally, modern Lhasan speech is peppered with its own Tibetan vocabulary and historical, commercial, and popular references. Therefore, I often leaned on English-speaking Tibetan artists for specialized terms, and employed a tri-lingual translator/research assistant to join me for formal interviews, and to review recordings of interviews and conversations with me afterwards. I primarily worked with a woman who wishes to remain anonymous, who was born in Tibet and raised speaking Tibetan and Mandarin before studying English in Tibetan communities in exile as a youth. She later returned to Tibet, where we met. Her language skills were an asset for people like me and NGOs hiring local assistants, but did not help her blend in to Lhasa, where they made evident her politically transgressive time in the Dalai Lama's headquarters. She assisted with literal translation on efforts—and I was grateful for our mutual desire to be faithful to each individual's literal choice of words, and not merely settle for the basic meaning—but she also thought with me about cultural idioms and subjects' affects, from reticence to enthusiasm, in order to understand the particular flavors of and contexts for an individual's expressions. These benefits outweighed the occasional reticence of my informers in the presence of a stranger, whose presence was less necessary as my own language skills improved over time. Interestingly, there were some topics artists could more

readily share with an outsider, a foreign visitor, than with a native local embedded in the same politics as themselves.

Phonetic rendering of Tibetan words in English has not yet been standardized in international usage, but I endeavored to use the most common spellings reflecting Lhasa dialect and to note when alternatives have appeared in prior publications or an individual's personal preference for spelling their names in English. Scholarly transliteration in the west employs the system originally devised by Wylie (1959), and I here include the Wylie transliteration for technical terms parenthetically.

Artists are important subjects for exploration of cultural and social processes of continuity and change because these issues are a focal point of their artistic practices and discourses. As artist Tsering Nyandak once said to me, "artists are different, more sensitive" to their environment, but on another occasion, he also wished to reiterate, "but mostly, we are just ordinary people, like everyone else." Artists, akin to why activists are excellent spokespersons on political issues, are synthesizing their sensitive but everyday observations and reflections, but as artists, are practiced in articulating them.

These methodologies combine in this study as I took up the challenge to both discuss works in the context of each artists' influences and experiences and goals, while also being mindful of the researcher's job to look at broader cultural and historical contexts and propose connections and implications that transcend any one individual's self-representations. In this regard, I looked for patterns of cultural production and expression in Lhasa that mirrored the "symptoms," to use Terdiman's term (Terdiman 1993), of collective anxiety, trauma, memory, "postmemory" (Hirsch 2002), transformation, "collectivity" (Thomas 1997), and indigenous mediation (F. Ginsburg 1993) which western cultural theorists have located in communities undergoing modern stresses worldwide.

By doing so, I mean not to lessen the specificity of the Tibetan context, but rather to attempt to bring that particular site and history, long cloistered in exceptionalism behind the

Himalayas, into dialogue with wider concerns and interdisciplinary issues (Gyatso 2005), including tradition, change, and cultural sustainability.⁵⁹

In contributing to Tibetan contemplation of cultural survival, this particular group of artists may be developing novel strategies and an orientation towards the present and future which has the potential to shift discourse away from preservation and towards sustainability.

Discussion

I structured my investigations in the following chapters to explore the history of art and artists in Lhasa in the past century, and whether and how contemporary Tibetan artists offer unique articulations of ethnic minority identity (Tibetanness) inside the PRC, reflect on the role of Tibetan Buddhism in modern culture, and consider role of memory in the present.

Chapters two and three take up the meanings various groups and individuals assume when labeling themselves “artists,” their work “art” within a variety of institutional frameworks and ideological commitments, these meanings shift over time but can be understood through artistic practices, discourses, and contexts. I utilize art publications, interviews, and participant observation experiences, and anthropological studies of visual culture to present a history of art production in Lhasa over the past one hundred years. For each of five distinct artistic eras I identified,⁶⁰ I introduce the general sociopolitical context and institutional frameworks within which art producers work, describe artistic practices and examples of artistic products, interpret artistic discourses, and consider the social impacts of art. Chapter two covers roughly 1900-1980, from the hegemony of traditional Tibetan Buddhist arts, to the introduction of indigenous modernization, and then total eclipse of Tibetan visual culture by Socialist Realism in the Maoist era. In chapter three, 1980-2008, the social dynamics of the Lhasa art world are revealed through the relationships between members of art associations, the roles of leaders, and the tensions between associations’ goals and commitments and how these manifest in public events and private conversation. Examples are drawn from interviews with and artworks by members of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association, the Lhasa Artists Association, the Gedun

Choephel Artists Guild, and Tibet University School of Fine Arts. Key figures articulate the at times contested notions of whether there is a “contemporary Tibetan art movement” in Lhasa, and what its features should be now or in the future.

In chapter four, I examine articulations of Tibetanness through the representations of Tibetans found in Chinese Communist Party propaganda and museum exhibitions’ catalogues, in contrast to the verbal and artistic articulations of twenty-first century Tibetan identities artists represent, focused on the portrait paintings of Tsewang Tashi and Tsering Nyandak between 2002 and 2008. These perceptions and representations are problematic because throughout these fluctuations in foreign projections, and their contemporary reverberations, as many artists reminded me, Tibetans’ indigenous perceptions have remained wholly absent from the representations of Tibetanness. Contemporary artists can and do answer back to these images of them created by others, articulating their own notions of Tibetanness.

Additionally, issues of power and representation are intimately related also to the relationship of art and nation, and the construction of history. Anthropologists including Errington (1998) and Karp (. L. Ivan Karp 1991) (C. M. Ivan Karp 1992), explore the unequal power dynamics exercised in the representation of others in museums. Berger (1972) (1982) and Benjamin (1968) also theorize the role of visibility in the construction of self, other, and power.

Locally too, Tibet’s traditional culture authorities have had a relatively singular view of the profound religious function of art and the artists’ place within Buddhist society. In chapter five, I review traditional Tibetan Buddhist artistic materials, composition genres, and symbols to illuminate the common visual language Tibetan artists often employ in their secular artwork to very different ends. In chapter five, interrogation of the role of Tibetan Buddhism and Buddhist art history for contemporary painters who came of age in Maoist and post-Mao Tibet is explored through examination of Gade’s oeuvre from the later 1990s to 2008 in comparison to traditional Tibetan Buddhist materials, techniques, compositions and artistic conventions. Moreover, while the (Buddhist) past in Tibet appears in some ways as compromised, for Hervieu-Leger, modernity

creates new needs for religious modes of belief, not less. This leads to religious groups whose individual members constitute a “chain of memory” through their investment of authority in “tradition” (Hervieu-Leger 2000). The image of the Buddha appears in many contemporary artists’ work, I postulate, as a placeholder for tradition, in ways not merely nostalgic but as a form of reflection upon cultural transmission and sustaining community in complicated times.

The debate points to the ways in which religion is at the heart of tensions and anxieties about cultural survival, identity and political freedoms in Tibet. Artists must navigate political, religious, commercial, and symbolic expectations for Buddhist imagery. For contemporary Tibetan artists, and their Tibetan and foreign observers, Buddhist imagery is as important as its frequent though unexpected absence.

Chapter five explores reasons for Tibetan and outsiders’ anxieties about the state of religion in Tibet under communism and its cultural role in the age of globalization through analysis of the ways in which contemporary artists have refused to un-tether themselves entirely from the cultural moorings that imbue Tibetan visuality, while at the same time offering alternatives to expectations.

In chapter six, the constraints faced by artists in Lhasa are addressed in one artist’s attempt to work against them, particularly through recourse to autobiographical and collective memory of trauma, explored in a self-portrait series (2007-2009) by Nortse. Young (2000) importantly asserts the role of art for transmission of history when eyewitnesses and living memory are no longer readily accessible. Cultural theorists concerned with memory and the past are also concerned with the role of images and their use (Barthes 1981) (Berger 2001) (Yates 1966). Today’s artists take up the role of cultural producers and cultural authorities to speak about changing Tibet today, and to re-present Tibet’s place in a globalizing world, while some are also experimenting with inclusion of personal memory. For Nortse, role of the past in modern society cannot be understood by Tibetans or observers without consideration of collective memory and personal pasts.

Chapter Two

Art and Artists in Lhasa: Modern Arts (1900-1980)

In the first decade of the twenty-first century, artists from Tibet mounted pioneering exhibitions across the United States, Europe, Asia and Australia, and yet the emergent phenomenon of contemporary Tibet art continues to struggle to define itself against foreign and indigenous expectations for “Tibetan art” and “Tibetan artists”. The origins of the contemporary movement, and the dialectic between tradition and innovation it provokes, are located in the changing socio-political contexts and corresponding artistic practices of the twentieth century. The contexts, practices and discourses surrounding art in the previous one hundred years are explored, beginning in the below discussion through the first three cultural shifts in modern art forms, followed in the next chapter with the subsequent two eras in contemporary art.

Individual artists’ secular expressions constitute a new phenomenon in Tibetan visual culture which first emerged in the twentieth century. Visual productions in Tibet have changed from the exclusively religious materialization of enlightened deities one hundred years ago, to contemporary painters’ expressions of self, challenging notions of Tibetan of “art,” and their producers as “artists”. To understand both how change occurs and is resisted, it is important to consider how traditional definitions of these terms were understood in Tibet, and then to ask, after a tumultuous twentieth century, what cultural adaptations are occurring in twenty-first century Lhasa? In outlining an historical account of Tibetan visual productions of the past one hundred years in this and the following chapter, various stakeholders and arbiters’ definitions of “Tibetan art” are introduced to frame contemporary debates.

Tibet has long been visually associated with both the dramatic landscape of snow capped peaks, and the Buddhist arts of statues, paintings, and murals surrounding maroon-clad monks in ornate temples. While Tibetan Buddhist arts contribute to indigenous and foreign imaginations of Tibet, Western understanding of this visual tradition has gaps, fallacies, and biases that influence our understandings of what “art” and “artist” mean in Tibet over time. The arts of Vajrayana

Buddhism produced in Tibet have been an important part of how missionaries and explorers and then Orientalists came to know and imagine traditional Buddhist Tibet, and continues to define “Tibetan art” in museums, exhibitions, and art historical surveys in the West. Moreover, Kvaerne (1994) and Harris (1999), quote Snellgrove and Richardson (1980), who note that Tibetan art was regarded in the West as having become “characterized by stagnation and reproduction of traditional forms” by the first half of the twentieth century. Rhie and Thurman (1991) sustain the view that neither worthwhile innovations nor artistic accomplishments in Tibetan civilization have transpired since 1950.

This perspective has dramatically intensified in the wake of colonial occupation by the People’s Republic of China, following the destruction in the Cultural Revolution of much of Tibet’s surviving masterworks *in situ* and disrupting the transmission of artistic training. Thus, Western art history of Tibetan Buddhism tends to present two options for a demise of Tibetan art: the gradual internal cultural loss of the tradition’s vitality long before the Communist Chinese annexation of Tibet, or the dramatic annihilation of occupation and the feeble revival of a diminished and repressed culture. Both views lead to revering only traditional and antique works as authentic art. Furthermore, “Tibetan” art has almost always been synonymous with “Buddhist” art, reflected in the way art has been described, collected, exhibited, and published.⁶¹

Tibet’s Buddhist art, and its producers, have largely been conscribed to a distant past, which overlooks the many contributions to a rich and varied Tibetan art history which Tibetan artists have made in the past and present. These constructions of Tibetan (Buddhist) art history tend to be dismissive of artistic productions associated with modernity and continues to influence the perception of “Tibetan art” into the twenty-first century.

The meanings of the terms “art” and “artist” change over time, reflecting cultural, historic, religious and political specificities. This is clearly evident in Lhasa. In roughly the past one hundred years, five distinct periods may be correlated with characteristic visual productions. This chapter examines the periods from the Buddhist-dominated fine arts, to early modern

innovations under the Dalai Lamas, and to Maoist Socialist Realism following Tibet's annexation by the People's Republic of China. The next chapter continues this historical account into the contemporary era, revealing Western and Chinese modern art influences appearing alongside the revival of Buddhist arts from the mid-1980s, and the emergence of an international contemporary movement at the turn of the twenty-first century. Each period redefined conceptions of "art" and the practices of "artists." Yet, little is known about whether or how the stereotypes of the *thangka* painter, the revolutionary Communist "fine art soldier," and the common modern notion of the artist as autonomous individual of creative genius have shaped contemporary Tibetan artistic identities and artistic activities in modern and contemporary times.

In many ways, contemporary artists in Lhasa disregard the traditional, Buddhist *thangka* painters' strictures, and yet they also participate in the recuperation of their artistic lineage. Along with all forms of tradition, Buddhist art was targeted for annihilation in the occupation of Tibet by the People's Republic of China and subsequent Cultural Revolution era, after which the relationships between contemporary and traditional art has been complicated. Art producers today inherited a Tibetan art history and sets of cultural identities that took shape in radically different worlds—from that of the Dalai Lama's Buddhist hegemony to the equally hegemonic Socialist Realist dictates of secular communism. The Lhasa-born artist Gonkar Gyatso reflected that while these two periods' productions are radically different in subject, purpose, and technique, from the perspective of the artist, both fulfill the requirements of a particular historic and cultural moment. He demonstrates this condition in his photographic series *My Identity* (2003), by posing in the attire and studio settings of four working artists. The composition of each image recreates a photograph of a *thangka* painter for the Dalai Lama from the 1930s, inviting comparisons of subtle differences (C. Harris 2006). The work at once shows distinct visual production phases of the past one hundred years, as well as speaks autobiographically about Gonkar Gyatso's artistic training and career, which, after the third image of the artist in exile (reflecting the ethos of the Tibetan diaspora in a portrait of the present Dalai Lama over the remembered Potala Palace),

culminates in the last photograph in a white box studio of the artist relocated to the West and creating individual works that attempt to transcend cultural bounds (L. M. Sangster 2007).

Looking at relationships to society, the personal or professional goals artists hold in the five time periods I identify, and what functions their productions perform, we can better understand how, in contexts of accommodation and adaptation, various indigenous and foreign meanings of “art” and “artist” are sometimes contrasted, sometimes fused, by the multiple arbiters and practitioners of visual production in Lhasa.

Brief Overview of the Time Periods

To ask what artistic identities are being sought, finding expression, and implied in a range of associated activities in the previous hundred years and particularly in the post-Deng era, I examine the contexts, practices, discourses, and potential social impact of key figures and sites of artistic production. For each era discussed in this chapter and the next, I describe the social, political, religious, and global contexts which inform—and may also be impacted by—art and artists. The practices of artists in Lhasa include membership in associations or operating within influential institutional frameworks in which the social processes of production, training, careers, and use, exhibition or viewing of art is as important to understand as the form and content the work of cultural producers takes. The narratives of artists and others constitute artistic discourses, or articulations of conceptualizations of art/artist, ideological commitments to production processes and goals, and interpretations or evaluations of art works. Finally, I consider the significance of each time period as a legacy and its “social affects,” including what the art is doing in society, potentially as a site for contestation, affirmation, visibility, appropriation, representation, transformation, cultural reproduction, commodification, and so forth (Mahon 2000).

Discussion of the past hundred years moves chronologically through five distinct eras in relation to understanding “art” and “artists” in Lhasa, focusing on some of the major artists, art associations, institutions, and exhibitions. These eras are distinct politically and in the dominant

styles of and purposes for creation of visual art. These five eras in Lhasa begin with traditional Buddhist art (1900-1934), and concerns the state of art production at the start of the twentieth century and the final decades of more than a millennium of Tibetan Buddhist art. The artistic output in this time period was exclusively dedicated to painting and statues of Buddhist subjects and figures which served religious functions. The end of this time period is marked here by the observation recorded in 1934 of a Tibetan painter who had “mastered” an unprecedented foreign, secular painting style, a deviation in style and subject from the traditional practices of Buddhist artists. The second period, Indigenous Modern Art: 1934-1959, describes the transition from tradition to modernity in the approach to and production of several important paintings that evince indigenous artistic innovation and modernization. Next, Maoist Socialist Realism: 1960-1980, describes the output of an era in which one foreign and politically determined visual style and production method was imposed to the exclusion of all other forms of art. The fourth and fifth era—namely, Reform and the Birth of Contemporary Tibetan Art: 1980-2003 and Contemporary Art and Artists: 2003-2010—mark the emergence of contemporary art and diversification of art practices, and are discussed in detail in the next chapter.

This discussion of the transition from traditional Tibetan Buddhist art practices to forms of modernity in art production relies upon Western and Tibetan scholarship about art and artists in Tibet, conversations with artists working in Lhasa, and the artworks I studied through catalogues of Tibetan art published in the PRC and abroad. I also relied upon scholarship by art historians in the field of Tibetan studies to bolster my understanding of traditional Tibetan Buddhist arts and serve as a basis of comparison to subsequent developments.

Defining Art and Artist Anthropologically

Anthropological studies of art note the difficulty of defining “art,” and thus the difficulty of defining the subject (or object) of study in other cultures and times (Coote 1994) (Marcus and Myers 1995) (Morphy 2008) The challenge of identifying art objects also invites debate about “aesthetics” (Weiner 1994), and distinctions between craftsmanship, or technical training and

skill, and artistry (Gell 1994). Whether or not art and aesthetics are universal categories, or modalities of categorization and perception that exist in the West that have been at times mistakenly imposed upon non-western others, in the case of Tibet, there is a well-established and centuries-old history of indigenous art historical and aesthetic writing, and active contemporary art worlds.

The anthropology of art influences my understanding of the social processes that construct notions of the “artist” and illuminate what “art” is or does. In Tibetan social contexts, the political, religious, material, and educational frameworks and limitations that dominated consecutive eras contribute to shifting notions of art and artist, particularly in regard to the relationships between the individual artist and his or her society and the implications for the purposes of art.

Although an uncommon area of anthropological investigation, cultural producers provide visual evidence of concerns central to anthropology: power, agency, identity, and globalization (Mahon 2000). Ethnographic studies explore media and visual cultural forms “as both cultural product and social process (F. Ginsburg 1993),” but emphasis is greater on the social actors, meanings, processes and relations than offering “comment on aesthetic qualities of work” (Mahon 2000). Aesthetics has been an area of anthropological debate, as Weiner *et al.* unpacked; in this discussion, the introduction to traditional Tibetan Buddhist artistic practice and history takes pains to assert the highly developed indigenous aesthetics of Tibetan visual producers and consumers, relying upon the foundational work of David Jackson (1996) (1988) and more recent scholarship by Debreczeny (Debreczeny 2012), as a basis for subsequent reference to a culturally specific category of productions understood as “art” and its producers as “artists”.

The discussion then in this chapter and the next seeks to understand meanings various groups and individuals imagine in different time periods when labeling themselves “artists” and their work “art” in modern and contemporary artistic eras, with a focus on contexts and concerns

around representation, the past, and agency revealed by examination of the frameworks, contexts, practices and discourses of Tibetan artists.

A Survey of Art and Artists in Lhasa

Traditional Buddhist Art: 1900-1934

Art is a complicated category anthropologically, but for centuries in Tibet, genres of fine art (*mdzes rtsal*) have pertained to Buddhist imagery, and this was the tradition still in full bloom at the start of the twentieth century. The history of artistic production of the past one hundred years in Lhasa may be characterized as a series of responses to dramatic and radical alterations to sociopolitical conditions, the most dramatic of which constitutes the mid-century end of exclusively religious art production with the definitive end of pre-modern Tibet. However, the deeply ingrained social framework of traditional, Tibetan Buddhist arts that dominated visual production in Tibet for over one thousand years with a highly developed system of iconography, production methods, ritual use, and aesthetics continues to be the baseline against which change is measured. Necessarily, it is into this context that some Tibetans introduced modern innovations early in the twentieth century, and also this rich tradition which continues to inform contemporary artistic practice and discourse at the start of the twenty-first century. Interestingly, in 1934, just between the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933 and birth of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in 1935, an Indian scholar visiting Lhasa recorded in his research diary that a Tibetan painter and intellectual was employing subjects, forms and styles unknown to previous Tibetan artists. The introduction of modern and foreign artistic practices marks the end of the period of exclusively religious Tibetan art and the start of indigenous modern art.

Many excellent art history texts deal with issues of iconography, important sites or monuments, various concepts of and problems with defining “style,” Western (mis)interpretations and appropriations, and so forth, but here I am concerned to merely introduce indigenous categories of visual forms and their production and producers.⁶²

Art in the Traditional Tibetan Buddhist World

The primacy of Buddhism in Tibet, indigenously articulated as central to the founding of the nation and central to its people's civilization, identity and pride, is also reflected in its elite status in the artistic traditions. Beginning in the eighth century Tibet imported artisans and beautiful religious objects along with Buddhist scriptures, translators, and teachers from India and Nepal. As oral and textual traditions were translated into the Tibetan written language, a visual language was also developed to translate Buddhist ideologies into didactic charts, portraits of lamas, and tangible embodiments of enlightened energy. Artists trained in Indian and Newari traditions had the strongest impact on Buddhist artists in the Tibetan cultural realm, combining with indigenous sensibilities and the influences of Central Asia and China, until a distinctly Tibetan Buddhist aesthetic emerged in painting, sculpture, and temple architecture. Many scholars locate as the emergence of national style, if not "international style," in the 15th to 17th centuries, after the ascendancy of the Fifth Dalai Lama, and the emergence of several painting schools active in south central and eastern Tibet and in the courts of the Dalai Lamas and Panchen Lamas (M. M. Rhie 1991) (D. Jackson 1996) (J. C. Singer 1997). Over the following centuries, Himalayan and Tibetan Buddhist art would continue to be influenced by the artistic traditions of neighbors and the innovations and creativity of its practitioners inside Tibet, whose skill was also renowned beyond Tibet's borders. Himalayan style art is indigenous to Tibet, Nepal, Kashmir, northern India and Pakistan, and Bhutan, and spread into China, Mongolia, southern Siberia, Tuva, Buryatia, and northern Burma. Its influence extended across China, particularly from the thirteenth century, when Yuan dynasty patronage, beginning with the Mongol Emperor Kublai Khan's appointment of the Sakya hierarch, Sakya Panchen, as ruler of Tibet and the Yuan court's spiritual guide, and the Khan's patronage of religious artistic projects in Tibet and China, principally led by the famous Newari master, Arniko (1245-1306).

The subject of Himalayan art is characterized by the region's religious cultures, primarily Buddhism, Hinduism, and Bon. Tibetan and Buddhist Himalayan paintings are primarily utilized

within a worldview in which they function as material support for religious efficacy. Himalayan art is recognized by its subject and compositions (which fall into three broad types as figurative, narrative, or diagrammatic), accompanied by distinctive regional symbols and motifs. Watt also identifies the creation of painted and sculptural sets, one large artwork comprised of multiple individual works, as a unique feature of Himalayan art (J. Watt n.d.).

“Himalayan style” has been put into recent use to refer to the art produced by Newars, Kashmiris, Tibetans and central Asians over the course of one thousand years and spanning thousands of miles; admittedly a category at times too large to have meaningful utility. Although Tibetan art was reported in Europe in the 12th century, the earliest Western account of Tibetan painting styles, by George Roerich in 1925 (Roerich 1925), makes evident the paucity of resources available for the study of Tibetan art history into the twentieth century, until Guiseppe Tucci’s visit to Tibet to study and document art and sites.⁶³ In 1970, Gene Smith contributed a valuable introduction to indigenous Tibetan texts about art history in his summary of Kongtrul Lodro Taye’s (Kong sprul Blo gros mtha’ yas, 1813-1899) encyclopedic *Treasure of Knowledge [Shes bya kun kyab]*, which “divides individual traditions of Tibetan painting along biographical and regional lines, but also according to style (Schaeffer, Kapstein and Tuttle 2013)” and describes five major schools and their artist founders.⁶⁴ Heather Karmay notes, “Kongtrul’s account, more than any other, demonstrates that in Tibet at least from the 15th century onwards, there were artists of great renown whose works were cherished and whose inspiration could come from a wide variety of sources, not simply from rigid and slavish imitation of what was laid down by tradition. Some of the schools described have living continuous traditions right up to the present day (*in* Jackson, 1996).” Thus, important indigenous accounts of Tibetan Buddhist art history demark geographic and stylistic characteristics, but primarily assert classifications based upon schools of painting originating with famous individual artists. This art has also been stylistically classified by Westerners according to religious sectarian affiliation, geographic influence or area of production, and, as these methods have proven problematic,⁶⁵ by returning to

the indigenous Tibetan terms for painting schools, the latter of which has more recently become the preferred scholarly method, although there is no single standardized Western nor Tibetan approach to defining style in Tibetan art.

In the areas of Tibetan Buddhist cultural domination, artistic energy and resources were dedicated almost exclusively to religious fine arts, as Buddhism so thoroughly permeated society that other images—such as medical illustrations, historical narratives and landscapes, cosmological and astrological charts—were seen as an extension of the Buddhist worldview in specific applied fields.⁶⁶ These topics were also studied by religious scholars, and illustrations displayed in religious sites.

The religious integration of philosophy, ritual, and meditation created the need for standardized visual representations within local, temporal, or lineage contexts,⁶⁷ and also stimulated versatility and diversity across place and time. Religious images were commissioned for and only viewed in temples or home shrines following their consecration by lamas. The most common objects of artistic production are *thangka* (paintings on thin cotton with brocade borders and a bottom dowel for rolling for storage and transportation), *deb bris* (temple wall paintings), and *sku rten* ('body support,' usually statues), the subjects of which are almost exclusively devoted to depicting Buddhist divinities and teachers, and are by definition also embodiments or abodes of enlightened energy. A fundamental tenet concerns the exacting replication of iconographic and iconometric forms by highly trained painters and sculptors. This requirement is predicated on the view that images are constructed not merely to illustrate something else, but to function as actual manifestations of the multiple forms of Buddhahood. The art of Buddhist imagery has an embodied nature via the conversion of a proper material statue or painting into an enlightened being's abode: the consecration ritual (*rab gnas*) that invokes the divinity to be present and project energetically and dwell within the physical support (*rten*) of the material image. The work is then no longer mere representation (Strong 2007). As such they are physical forms (*rten*, support) of spiritual presence that are suitable receptors of devotion and offerings;

they function religiously as a basis for accruing merit by such offerings, and as a source of blessing and inspiration for the practitioner. When a devout Buddhist “meets” a consecrated painting or statue, they come into contact with the Enlightened energy inhabiting it (*gnas mjal*), by which they receive blessing (Huber, Putting the Gnas back into Gnas-skhor: Rethinking Tibetan Pilgrimage Practice 1999) (Dowman 1998).

From the perspective of Vajrayana practice, images can be differently conceived in that tantric deities may also be considered as not literal, existent, external beings, but an emanation of particular qualities or the personification of a text. As such, they are a tool for stages of spiritual growth, functioning as pneumatic devices that aide a meditator in reviewing and rehearsing an entire religious system, and thus still require precision and authentication in production.

Art has long been a place to look back at established conventions and for revival of styles and subjects, and yet also reflects their contemporaneous society. The iconographic program of a new temple design (Luczanits 2004),⁶⁸ renovations of religious sites (Alexander 2005),⁶⁹ and even the subjects of art, were clearly linked to patronage, religious lineages, and concurrent social concerns.⁷⁰ Artists’ cognizance of historical change and their own local, present contexts may be evident in their cultural productions. For example, artists seem to have demonstrated a historical consciousness of their heritage through attention to and revival of older styles,⁷¹ for political, artistic, religious, commemorative, memorial, and other purposes.⁷² The most popular art changed over time and to suit the needs of the times.

Tibetan religious authorities and scholars wrote about art and artists in a variety of literary genres.⁷³ Jackson identifies eight texts authored in the seventeenth to nineteenth centuries about “Great Painters” (D. Jackson 1996).⁷⁴ Their commentaries and treatises include treatments of terms and techniques, encyclopedic accounts of crafts technologies (*bzo rig*),⁷⁵ the placement of holy objects, benefits of commissioning, creating and viewing sacred images, the functions of art as supports (*rten*) for practice, identification of great works in various schools,⁷⁶ and aesthetics. A type of treatise (*dphyad don*) describes “how to evaluate various valuable things”,

including the sacred images of Tibet and foreign countries as well as “musical instruments, tea, porcelain, silk,” and so forth (D. Jackson 1996).⁷⁷

While Morphy (1994) and others suggest that, like “art”, there is no universal definition of “aesthetics”, in the anthropology of art the term commonly refers to both evaluation and perception, particular to any given culture (Coote 1994). Tibetan historical documents before the twentieth century evince Tibetan aesthetics was both a set of indigenous evaluative criteria or standards that reflected such proper techniques as iconographic and iconometric accuracy, as well as the perceptual experience of the senses in which the emotional or spiritual impact that some rare works could impart was openly celebrated as the hallmarks of ‘divinely inspired’ artists. Critical evaluation of an image’s quality could clearly be disconnected or evaluated separately from its ritual function: “proper” images are ritually functional and compliant with established strictures (Thaye 1987),⁷⁸ but excellent artists’ images do far more than that.

Art is important to Tibetans, ritually, as a viewing experience, and as part of the path to enlightenment or the goal of Buddhism. The arts and sciences, from a Buddhist perspective, may appear to be a distraction from spiritual goals to transcend the mundane, but in fact, the great religious leader and intellectual Sakya Pandita wrote of the importance of mastering all the objects of knowledge, including the arts (Schaeffer, Kapstein and Tuttle 2013).⁷⁹ A common Tibetan rubric, derived from fourth century India, divided knowledge into five major and five minor subjects of exoteric learning.⁸⁰ A later definitive Tibetan description of the ten subjects is contained in the *Collected Works* of Kongtrul Lama Ngawang Loten (*Klong rdol blama ngag dbang blo bstan*) (1719 – 1794), where the first major topic is *bzo rig pa* (*Skt. śilpavidyā*), which Smith translates as “technology (E. G. Smith 2001).” The broad range of the subject includes iconography, as well as “architecture, political and social science, and even the art of love (E. G. Smith 2001).” In conveying the importance of these fields, Schaeffer writes, “Tibetan scholars not only describe individual arts but also theorize the nature of cultural practice, artistic tradition, and religion (Schaeffer, Kapstein and Tuttle 2013).”⁸¹ Thus, art and religion and culture generally

were intertwined: accomplished artists should be knowledgeable Buddhist practitioners, and religious adepts were further celebrated when they possessed or cultivated artistic skills.

Indigenous art historical and aesthetic writing relies upon a religious framework within which visual arts were produced and carried meaning. These texts not only trace developments that transpired on the plateau, but also attempt to trace a history linking their artistic heritage to the first images of the Buddha and to the Buddha's own time. Unlike Gell's resistance to aesthetics as a moral discourse, which he sees as outside the realm of an objective anthropological analysis, Tibetan aesthetics are rooted in spirituality both structurally and functionally and must be appreciated, as Coote urges, as a fundamental aspect of the ways in which Tibetans literally see and describe and manipulate their world (Gell 1994) (Coote 1994).

Modern Tibetan art historical writing has revived since the 1980s both in exile and inside the PRC, demonstrating that concern with the adaptation and preservation of Tibetan civilization continues to be visible in artistic and aesthetic discourse, as it has been for centuries.⁸² Western scholarship of Tibetan art, compared to the study of other Asian arts, is a young field and has been focused on dating and iconographic identifications.⁸³ Research has been difficult and a complete history of Tibetan art and artists remains incomplete,⁸⁴ largely due to Tibet's relative geographic and then political inaccessibility. In the second half of the twentieth century, the limited number of art objects, texts, scholars and practitioners in the Tibetan diaspora, and the political pressures inside the PRC for all researchers, have skewed art historical writing by both Tibetan and western scholars.⁸⁵ Despite the focus on religion, western observers' interpretations have often landed far from the spiritual and epistemological truths seen in Buddhist art by Tibet's religious elite, having largely failed to incorporate indigenous voices.⁸⁶ In recent years however, more Tibetan sources have come to light and western scholars have adopted indigenous classification schemes⁸⁷ and initiated exciting focus on individual artists (Debreczeny 2012) (Jackson and Debreczeny 2009) (D. Jackson 199?).

Traditional Tibetan Buddhist Artists

Visual art production methods in Tibet created strong indigenous conceptions of proper art and the role of Tibetan sculptors, *lha bzo pa*, literally “crafters of the deities,” and painters, *lha ‘bri pa*, “illustrators of the deities.”⁸⁸ Training in the production of these religious objects requires specialized training, offered in both lay and monastic settings. The artist is one who ascribes to particular religious lifestyle⁸⁹ and, foremost, is compliant with the requirements of his productions—*thangka*, mural, and sculpture—for religious ritual efficacy, via an elaborate pantheon and highly detailed iconographic and symbolic system.⁹⁰ Jackson describes the training artists undertook, generally as apprentices for seven years or more, and the stages of *thangka* production they learned (D. P. Jackson 1988).⁹¹ The social process of producing a painting begins with devout Buddhists who commission the artist to create a work tailored to their needs, perhaps on the advice of a previously consulted lama. The artist draws upon his knowledge of compositional templates to properly arrange the patron’s *lha ‘dud*, “desired gods,” and renders them first in pencil on a grid according to proportions, sizes, and hierarchical positioning prescribed in texts and manuals. Artists studied an elaborate iconometric system based upon units of measurement on a grid, the increments and diagonals and compass-drawn arcs between points determined proportions, angles, and dimensions of sacred figures and their relative size and placement with other figures in a composition. The artist then fills in the background and surrounding space with architectural and landscape details, generally following precedents but without the same degree of strictures as apply to deities. Symbolically coded colors are applied first as a plain ground upon which layers of shading, fine line details, and gold accents are painted. Different predominant styles dictated palettes and preferences for dominant versus balanced colors, towards a school’s sense of an overall impression of balance and complimentary effects.

Although the forms have remained relatively constant over nearly one thousand years, leading to a static and skill-based perception of Tibetan arts by foreigners, individual artists have

not only been indigenously recognized for their skill, but also innovative styles and approaches to cultural and historical influences, as evidenced in the multiple schools of painting described in Tibetan histories and in limited extant historical works and sites.⁹² This distinction between skill and creative talent is also reflected in terminology; for example, someone with *lag rtsal* has dexterous hands, skilled at art or craft techniques, while the *sprul pa'i bzo po* may be a divinely inspired artisan whose works transcend ordinary production. Nonetheless, rare is the artist who has been sanctioned to depict his own religious experience; artists' individual identities were almost always inferior to their subject matter, unless the painter or commissioner was a religious hierarch.

Although these 'illustrators of divinities,' have been represented as adherents to strict iconographic and technical training, a rich aesthetic tradition existed and exceptional individual artists could exercise some creative vision and technical innovation. In Tibetan-authored works on indigenous art history Jackson describes in his authoritative study⁹³ (D. Jackson 1996), the great painters enjoyed renown in their lifetimes and their reputations survived for centuries, even if not many of their works did. Tibetan texts describe artistic schools or traditions that followed from individual "genius" artists who spawned new schools of painting named for them (e.g. Bye'u, sMan blas Dhondrupo, mKhentse Chenmo, Kar shod pa, Chos bying Dor rje, etc.) (D. Jackson 1996).⁹⁴ The great artists of indigenous accounts were recognized for their innovative adaptations of earlier styles—through the availability of new technologies and materials as well as exposure to historical and foreign influences. Because these artists were dedicated to, rather than challenging, Buddhist worldviews, they were well patronized by the Buddhist religious and political authorities, and recorded in national and religious histories. Their accomplishments were, however, largely attributed to the intercession of blessings of the enlightened deities or to their being human manifestations of bodhisattvas, as opposed to human individuals of extraordinary creativity who produced works marked by originality.

Originality was not required of artists in the replication of set compositions and deities arranged with within them. The master *thangka* painter would have very probably replicated the same or similar paintings many times before. Thus, “the main chance for an artist to express his own sensibilities was in the decorative parts of the painting, such as the landscape and the details of ornamentation,” Jackson explains. Jackson notes that some painters never deviated from what they were taught as novices even in these decorative elements, while in the extreme case, “painting was reduced to faithful copying” through mechanical reproduction by tracing or pouncing. Jackson shrugs aside Western distaste for such methods with the acknowledgement that such practices “guaranteed the continuity and religious authenticity of Tibetan art.” Continuity and authenticity was especially important given the need for artists to produce proper Buddhist icons that could function with religious efficacy.

The interconnected relationship between text, religious practice, and art production is critical to the practices of the religious artist in Tibet.⁹⁵ For example, Kongtrul Lodro Taye’s account of the painter Tsuklak Chokyi Nangwa describes his production of scenes of the Buddha’s life as based on the Indian *Avadana* texts. Spiritual biographies describe famed teachers’ use of favorite statues and paintings, handed down to disciples, and meditators’ visionary experiences that were sometimes then painted. But the most common literary practice of artists was in the consultation of art treatises and manuals for guidelines of composition, posture, color, and proportion, and written meditation manuals (*sadhana*) describing what the practitioner is to visualize mentally, and thus what the painter can render as an aide and object of devotion, and painting manuals, which convey techniques, proportions, and histories. Artists, lamas, and art historian scholars engaged in dynamic exchanges of treatises and manuals over the centuries, for example in debates to establish correct proportions and measurements for various classes of human, semi-enlightened, and enlightened figures (D. Jackson 1996).⁹⁶

Although a strong relationship between Buddhist art and texts exists, and religious efficacy required iconographic standardization, this could be in tension with social contexts.

Karmay points to artists' lives and work—artists needed to be educated and practiced in a diversity of styles and were subject to multiple influences—as evidence to counter the myth of Tibet as isolated, closed, and static (D. Jackson 1996).⁹⁷ Art historical studies of Tibet are beginning to recuperate painters as socially situated individuals. Knowing about artists' socio-historic contexts and practices stimulates us to imagine their lives more dynamically than the academic focus on dating, inscriptions, discrete schools or styles, and bound iconographic forms has tended to encourage.

Tibetan scholars of art noted that with a skilled teacher, the excellent artist can go beyond the text. Karma Rinchen Dargay (*karma rin chen dar gyas*) writes in “A Wish-fulfilling Jewel for Artists: The Proportions of All Sacred Figures, both Painted and Plastic,” an iconometric treatise and manual, that even a Buddha drawn according to proportions if not beautiful is not a good thing to look at, and that artists must make choices about styles and techniques that are suited to the needs and purpose of the work (D. P. Jackson 1988).⁹⁸ Conversely, lamas have noted that even works of poor quality can have tremendous blessing power (Debreczeny 2012), but artists in training are warned that constructing improper images cannot be beneficial for the mind of the viewer⁹⁹ and is a sin for which the artist will suffer in a future birth in a hell realm (Thaye 1987).

Artists and their patrons also went ‘beyond the text’ by inserting representations of indigenous practices of monastic and lay dress, architecture, community events, patrons, animals and foreigners, alongside depictions of celestial realms and foreign lands and cultures, as is particularly evident in mural paintings if less so in the *thangka* paintings with which foreigners have been more familiar. The *khorlam* circular ambulatory of Zhalu monastery, for example, depicts the life story of the historical Buddha Shakyamuni with a mix of Indian, Nepali, Central Asian, and Tibetan cultural details. This may have aided in Buddhist nation building, and perhaps also demonstrates a certain cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, seen by modern viewers of the tenth century murals of the Buddha’s multi-national disciples at Dratang monastery¹⁰⁰ as much as

in the twentieth century murals at the Norbulingka summer palace of Tibetan, Mongolian, and European personages in attendance at the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's enthronement ceremony.

What might be of most interest to the scholar of Buddhist arts is the staggering number of functions that the Tenth Karmapa, Chöying Dorjé, who was an accomplished and innovative artist, and his associates ascribed to or engaged in through the production and viewing of religious art; I counted at least two dozen in Debreczeny's authoritative study of his life and art (Debreczeny 2012). Chöying Dorjé held a "self-conception as first and foremost an artist," stating, "Regarding poetry (*snyan ngag*) and painting (*ri mo 'bris ba*) there is none greater than me in Tibet. I am one who pleases Avalokiteshvara. I am one who has come in to this world to paint (*ri mo bri ba*) (Debreczeny 2012, 65)." As perhaps Tibet's first "modern" artist, he thoroughly eschewed contemporaneous conventions in art production, preferring to examine existent art constantly, commenting on and differentiating between its religious power and aesthetic value; he copied paintings and drew statues as a means to training, and to put back into contemporary circulation favored images from the past through his copies of them. He created original and unprecedented works, and used them for life cycle events such as ordinations, enthronements, deaths, and as gifts for the faithful to encourage their spiritual practice. He made paintings to outfit new temples, and to serve as objects for receiving the confession, prostrations, and offerings of devotees. Chöying Dorjé also calls upon the efficacy of paintings of the divinities as witnesses to rituals, and to directly affect the environment in terminating illnesses, removing obstacles to long life, and even in subduing an army. The processes of viewing, producing, gifting, and using art is evidenced through his practices and discourses as having powerful effects on individuals, including at the most subtle levels of their spiritual development towards enlightenment, and entire communities' worldly wellbeing. Thus, the exceptional artist who is also a religious teacher both produces and directs the uses for paintings and statues.

Tibetan scholar-practitioners distinguished between "superior" artists "who were graced by enlightened deities" or "divinely emanated artisans" (*sprul pa 'i bzo po*),¹⁰¹ in contrast to "the

many ordinary skilled artisans” producing works too numerous and various “to be encompassed by critical investigation (D. Jackson 1996).”¹⁰² The fifteenth century conceptualization of the mastery of the great artist is encapsulated by the sMan-ris style founder, sMan-bla Don-drup who writes, in his colophon to a brief manual for his novice students, that it was composed by a painter who has mastered all the worthy painting styles of Nepal, India, China and Tibet, and poetics, grammar, and Indian and Tibetan scripts (Jackson 104). Biographies of the Dalai Lamas include fascinating accounts of artists fulfilling prophecies, directly perceiving deities, possessing extraordinary skill,¹⁰³ overcoming formidable obstacles, and some whose births’ were accompanied by auspicious signs.¹⁰⁴

Choying Dorje studied in the Menri style, was influenced by Kashmiri sculpture and dynastic era (7th - 9th centuries) and produced “marvelous” and truly innovative painting and sculpture (D. Jackson 199?).¹⁰⁵ Chöying Dorjé, to an extent unprecedented in Buddhist art perhaps even today, “did not feel bound by iconographic strictures and displayed a freedom of spirit in his innovations that were probably only afforded to an incarnation of his stature.” Yet, his place in Tibetan tradition is tentative; “while he is venerated as one of the great artists, his eccentric and even heterodox works had a limited impact on the largely conservative Tibetan orthodox traditions (Debrezény 2012).” Clearly, the artist may be an individual with talent, purpose, erudition, and even unconventional practices, and this is not at all incompatible with the religious identity of the artist or the religious frameworks within which their productions circulate, but their power to dramatically impact deeply ingrained artistic traditions varied. That is, while some artists were indigenously identified as remarkable, original and creative, they and all Buddhist artists in Tibet were also employed in the reproduction of the dominant social frameworks and hegemonies of their times.

Such outstanding practitioner-painters, however, were not typical of the Tibetan painters in skill, certainly, and also atypical for the place of profound religious experience in the lives of Tibetan painters.¹⁰⁶ Jackson urged the incorporation of the study of individual artists and, as

corrective to past readings and fallacies, emphasized the continued importance of pre-modern indigenous Tibetan texts in his seminal works, *A History of Tibetan Painting* (1996). Prominent among these fallacies in need of correction as Jackson notes, and because these myths color the perceptions of contemporary artists today, is the myth that all Tibetan artists were anonymous¹⁰⁷ Buddhists creating meditatively-inspired imagery, presumably working to channel the divine in a pious vacuum devoid of concerns for reputation or finance.

Roger Jackson, Jeff Watt,¹⁰⁸ and Carl Debreczny are pioneering a new artists-centered approach to Tibetan art history, attentive to the hand of the master and social contexts. For example, Carl Debreczny, in *The Black Hat Eccentric: The Artistic Vision of the Tenth Karmapa*, writes, “The life story of the Tenth Karmapa provides insight into the lives of Tibetan artists, who are typically absent from discussions of Tibetan art (Debreczny 2012).”¹⁰⁹ Debreczny explores the complicated cultural and religious questions of authorship in scholarly approaches to art history, the artist’s revolutionary productions in relation to his lineage and contemporaries, and most importantly and uniquely, considers indigenous art use and production from within the temporal and religious worldview of a remarkable seventeenth century artist (L. M. Sangster 2013). This anthropological approach to the history of Tibetan Buddhist arts prior to the twentieth century inspires the present study, which puts ethnographic methods towards similar aims: to reveal unconventional and unprecedented art forms and subjects by Tibetan artists from, as much as possible, the perspective of the producers in exploring how the work of individual artists and their products reflect broader social concerns and trends.¹¹⁰

Traditional religious art practices have been strongly revived at the turn of the twenty-first century after several decades of persecution and suspension, comprising a history unfolding more or less parallel to the emergence of modern and contemporary art to which this study now turns. Art has been, and continues to be, a socially embedded practice and construct.

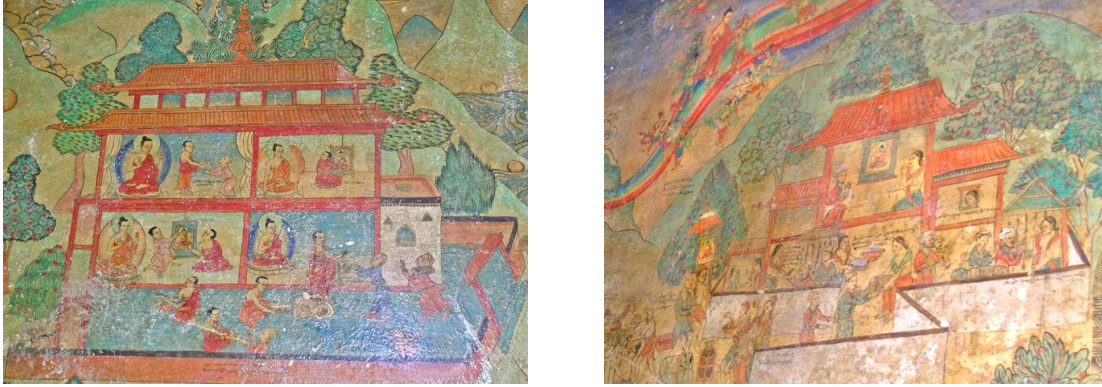


Figure 5 Tibet. Jonang Phuntsok Ling monastery. photographs by Leigh Miller Sangster, 2007. Mural depicts the stages of commissioning, painting, consecrating, and installing a thangka painting.

This brief discussion of the producers and productions of traditional Tibetan Buddhist art history therefore concludes with the affirmation of the existence of a Tibetan indigenous aesthetic tradition, and the usefulness of the terms “artist” and “art” to describe visual culture producers and their works in this context. The above descriptions serve then as a foundation for the subsequent historical developments that amended local uses and understandings of the categories, as a reference for the frameworks and practices understood locally and by outsiders as “traditional”, and finally as analysis of art during this period as in the service of the social reproduction of religious authority and worldviews.

Indigenous Modern Art: 1934-1959

Into a relatively stable, although certainly dynamic art history, some elites and ex-patriots introduced radical artistic innovations and modernizations of visual culture, and also faced religious and political limitations to their modernist impulses. The Thirteenth Dalai Lama, (*Nga dwang blo bzang thub bstan rgya mtsho*, 1876 – 1933) and the current Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso (*btan 'dzin rgya mtsho*, 1935-present) maintained ateliers of traditional Buddhist court painters, and yet also introduced new uses of art and artists for religious and political purposes. It was into the context of the traditional Buddhist artistic world of Tibet that two monks in eastern Tibet were born at the start of the twentieth century, and which they would

revolutionize in two very different ways, one with the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's encouragement, and the other nearly killed in the Potala palace prison.

The two artists, Gedun Choephel and Amdo Jampa Tsetan, had limited audiences as mainstream religious hegemonies and art production continued into the middle of the century. Then, suddenly, all indigenous art production—traditional and newly emerging modern painting—halted as Tibet was fully colonized by the People's Republic of China. Gedun Choephel and Amdo Jampa's works and ideological commitments regarding artists in this early modern era have been recovered and celebrated as the indigenous source of the modern art era in Tibet. Thus, this period—which I am marking from the notation by a foreign artist of Gedun Choephel's art work in a "new" (non-Buddhist) style in 1934 to the flight into exile of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Chinese-named Liberation of Tibet in 1959—is the final phase of a millennium of Tibetan Buddhist art history as the dominant sphere of fine arts production and the origin of indigenous modern art in Lhasa. The below discussion of the time period is based upon the recollections and interpretations of artists working in the twenty-first century, interviews with students of Amdo Jampa, an extended interview and tour of Gedun Choephel's hometown with his nephew, a recent wave of scholarship about Gedun Choephel, and viewing reproductions and original surviving works by Amdo Jampa and Gedun Choephel.

The Thirteenth Dalai Lama was an advocate of the modernization of Tibet, and invited British colonial officers to train a military, open English language schools, and sent youth for education abroad. He also initiated a major departure from traditional religious visual practices by sanctioning the photographic reproduction of his likeness, overturning taboo regarding the reproduction of a living lama's likeness. Consequently, in the early years of the twentieth century, lamas distributed their own photographs as a mementos, which quickly became popular icons for the faithful (Chen, 2006, Bell, 1987), and interpreted by L. Augustine Waddell, a British colonial officer, as idolatry (D. S. Lopez 1998).¹¹¹ But the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama in 1933 disintegrated the influence of his modernist views in Lhasa and set the stage for political rivalry,

compromising Tibet's ability to engage with international affairs, including preparation for and response to the dramatic developments of Indian independence in 1947 and China's civil war between the Kuomintang and Communists and the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949. Before his passing, the Thirteenth Dalai Lama had warned of the imminent threats to traditional Tibet in his final testament, but the most progressive of Tibet's intellectuals and politicians were nonetheless persecuted by conservatives in the 1930s and 1940s (M. Goldstein, *A History of Modern Tibet, 1913-1951: The Demise of the Lamaist State* 1989). The Fourteenth Dalai Lama was born in 1935, and faced with national crisis, assumed leadership of the country at age fifteen in 1950. He was fascinated since childhood with the world outside the Potala Palace, and initiated modernizations within Tibet and dialogue with foreign nations, but it was too late to preserve Tibetan independence past the middle of the century. In this context of political tension between the conservative, progressive, and international political demands upon a traditional society, artistic conceptions and productions also exhibited external influence and change.

The seeds of innovation of the Buddhist art worlds of traditional Tibet by two of its own were planted with the arrival of photography in Tibet, first in the hands of British colonial officers of India and then as Tibetan elites acquired their own cameras (C. Harris 1999).¹¹² By the 1930s, elites in Lhasa posed for British and Tibetan photographers in cosmopolitan homes and with modern possessions (C. Harris 1999) (C. a. Harris 2003), crossing over from religious medium to representation of everyday life, an unprecedented subject matter for Tibetan visual media. Exposure to photographs of lamas, which constituted a representational revelation of realism, light, perspective, and two-dimensional rendering of the world around them, impressed Gedun Choephel and Amdo Jampa as young monks in Amdo, where they studied and began producing thangka, before journeying 1200 miles to Lhasa, where they also would have inevitably encountered further photography.

Gedun Choephel

Gedun Choephel (*dGe 'dun Chos 'phel*, c.1903 – 1951)¹¹³ radically departed from Tibetan artistic practices following exposure to modernism largely encountered outside Tibet; his non-conformist practices in politics and religion brought him under the suspicion of power holders upon his return to Lhasa, as well as the posthumous idolization of subsequent generations. Regarded by many as “the most important Tibetan intellectual of the twentieth century (D. S. Lopez 2006),” his artistic achievements often are a marginal aspect of scholarship about his life, travels in India and Sri Lanka, translations (working in Tibetan languages, Sanskrit, Pali, Hindi, and English), and prodigal authorship of at times controversial and always original treatises on philosophy,¹¹⁴ history, pilgrimage, culture, politics, and sex (Chosphel 1993) (Huber 2000) (Karmay 1980) (D. S. Lopez 2006) (Mengle 1999) (H. K. Stoddard 1985) . Gedun Choephel was also an avid artist and the first to work in a variety of traditional and modern media, including *thangka* painting, sculpture, watercolor, and pencil and ink, yielding a creative output, of which little survives, that spanned forty years and thousands of miles.¹¹⁵ Gedun Choephel has been the subject of intensive western academic interest and re-discovery by post-Cultural Revolution intellectuals (a number of Tibetan biographies have been published inside the PRC and in the diaspora) and a generation of Tibetans eager for modern Tibetan heroes.¹¹⁶

Gedun Choephel was born in 1903 in Shoepang, Amdo (Qinghai province), a small village on a steep mountainside in northeastern edge of the Tibetan plateau. He was recognized as an incarnate lama and began religious training with his family and in the local monasteries from a young age. Gedun Choephel began to paint and create art objects as a child, his cousin, Yudrung Gyal (*yong khungs dra rgya las*) reported when he showed me surviving works and reproductions at the family home.¹¹⁷ They demonstrate training in the traditional *thangka* methods, but also intellectual curiosity and confidence. For example, Gedun Choephel sketched the motif of the eight auspicious symbols such that the two golden fish are not depicted vertically along the sides as traditionally rendered, but horizontally at the bottom and in water. Yudrung Gyal demonstrated

a metal sculpture in the shape of a lotus bud Gedun Choephel made. When a bolt is turned in the base, the petals opened to reveal a statue of the ‘Lotus Born’ Padmasambhava, founder of the Nyingma school of Tibetan Buddhism which his family practiced.



Figure 6 Tibet. Jonang Phuntsok Ling monastery. photographs by Leigh Miller Sangster, 2007. Mural depicts the stages of commissioning, painting, consecrating, and installing a thangka painting.

After the death of his father, a lay tantric yogi believed to have been killed through the black magic of a rival, and having become a controversial figure at the regional monastery, he departed in 1927 with a trade caravan on pilgrimage to Lhasa, where he enrolled to continue his monastic education at Drepung Monastery. The young monk, virtually without funds or friends in Lhasa, continued to paint *thangka* to support himself (C. Harris 1999).

In Lhasa, Rahul Sankrityayana, an Indian Sanskrit scholar on a research expedition, recorded in his diary in 1934 that Gedun Choephel, “having studied and mastered traditional painting, quickly learnt the new style (H. Stoddard 1985).”¹¹⁸ He does not specify the ‘new style,’ but it was probably a reference to realism, which Gedun Choephel likely adapted from photography, and may have also learned in part from the Indian watercolor artist Kanwal Krishna, who was travelling with Sankrityayana. This constitutes important documentation of indigenous innovation in modern visual styles in the early 1930s.

Meanwhile, Gedun Choephel experienced repeated conflicts with the religious authorities at Drepung monastery over his heterodox views and behavior, and so from 1934-1938 he

accompanied Rahul Sankrityayana across central Tibet in search of Sanskrit texts at monasteries. Gedun Choephel became increasingly interested in India, and in 1938 embarked on a journey through Nepal to India that was unimaginable to most Tibetans. Gedun Choephel was to spend the next twelve years in Buddhist Holy Lands of India and Sri Lanka as an itinerant and prodigious scholar. He was also researching ancient Indian Buddhist arts and sites, and acquiring exposure to contemporary visual styles and production of non-traditional compositions, subjects, and media. In northwestern India, Gedun Choephel spent time in the home of Russian Theosophist and modern artist, Nicholas Roerich.¹¹⁹ Gedun Choephel observed Roerich's oil paintings of majestic mountain landscapes, and even painted Tara, the female Buddha, image in the style of a Russian icon painting.¹²⁰ Choephel also encountered the Japanese aesthetics and emerging modernism in India's contemporary art, and made the acquaintance the poet Rabindrinath Tagore and others at the forefront of the Independence movement in India. Gedun Choephel retained his unique sensibilities, describing himself as a "discerning beggar" in a strange land, while appearing an irreverent former monk, but whose deep love of his homeland and compatriots, and respect for Buddhadharma, drove his insatiable curiosity, scholarship, and wandering, and his practice of sending sketches and writings to acquaintances at home in Amdo and Lhasa.

One of Gedun Choephel's pet projects was something of a travelogue through modern India, which he seems to have intended to compile and publish in Tibet with copious illustrations as *The Golden Mean (Gtams rgyud gser gyi thang ma)*. Some of his surviving sketches for this project show a keen observance of human form and movement in fluid lines, while others demonstrate a draftsman's concentrated attention to detail, such as illustrations of the architecture of Hindu temples and British colonial buildings. Many were watercolors depicting local customs, dress, religious practices and landscapes, sent to his hometown, perhaps to expose them to places far beyond the village.¹²¹ Gedun Choephel's drawings were also published in *The Mirror*, the first and only Tibetan language newspaper, published in Kalimpong, India. Among these were a

famous essay and illustration of the world as a round globe, in contrast to Tibetan cosmological views of the earth as flat, and portraits in black and white photorealism.



Figure 7 Gedun Choephel. A watercolor illustration. Pema Byams Collection, Latse Library. After Latse Library Newsletter No 2003.

Gedun Choephel returned to Lhasa in 1946 something of a celebrity, and drew students of poetry, Sanskrit, English, philosophy and history to his residence. Yet, in conservative Lhasa, this activity was short-lived. Gedun Choephel was arrested for unfounded British and Lhasan suspicion of Communist sympathies and revolutionary political activities. When government officials came to arrest him without warning, Gedun Choephel requested his papers and notes be left undisturbed. His residence was sealed, but upon his release approximately three years later, he returned to find his home emptied of his papers. Gedun Choephel’s alcohol drinking and cigarette smoking debilitated his body. Shortly after his release from prison and the occupation of Lhasa by the Chinese People’s Liberation Army, Gedun Choephel died, impoverished and, by some accounts, with a broken spirit, at the age of 48.

After the Cultural Revolution, writings and artworks surviving in others’ possession in Lhasa and Amdo have been published and are in collections internationally.¹²² In artistic discourses about Gedun Choephel, Kvaerne writes, “A small number of his sketches have been preserved, which reveal a fluid, sensuous hand unfettered by traditional religious art (Kvaerne 1994).” Norbu is not unique in seeing lively and charming sketches by Gedun Choephel as

evidence that he “seems to have believed in a kind of focused spontaneity as the essential requirement of great art. Kanwal Krishna writes that to demonstrate his theory Gedun Choephel once drank a whole bottle of spirits, took off his clothes and then in one continuous and rapid movement of his brush drew a marvelous and complete human figure (Norbu c.2005).” In outlining a dynamic Tibetan monastic Black Hat dancer in one fluid line, without lifting the tip of his pen from his paper, Gedun Choephel enacted a practice unheard of in Tibetan painting, impressing others not only with the feat, but his very embodiment as a modern artist.

In 2006, Tsewang Tashi asserted that, from what limited material he has seen, a black and white drawing of a Sikkimese nobleman is the best surviving example of Gedun Choephel’s photorealistic portraiture, commenting that his style was economical and his hand confident.¹²³



Figure 8 Gedun Choephel. Illustration of a Sikkimese nobleman for *The Mirror*.

Nonetheless, Tsewang Tashi also opined,

Gedun Choephel was too poor then to own a camera! Probably if he would have had one, he wouldn’t have made so many drawings and paintings [while traveling]! But yes, he also did enjoy painting. He had a very economical style. It is somewhat strange then that if he intended them as illustrations, for publication with his texts, that he would have separated them and sent art to Amdo and left writing in Lhasa. But he wanted to do something for his homeland and his hometown. And he knew that Amdo people were very conservative—for them even Lhasa is far away, let alone India or other countries—and so he wanted to open their minds, show them there is more out there than the place

they come from and know. Also he knew they would respect and pay attention to those things about India, because it is the religious holy land.¹²⁴

Interestingly, contemporary artists infer Gedun Choephel's artistic choices were motivated by a desire to communicate with his countrymen about the world as it appeared to Tibetan eyes in the 1940s, and not only to expose them to something new, but also to "open their minds." In this commentary from a practicing contemporary artist and professor, Gedun Choephel is attributed an artistic identity consistent with one who uses art production to influence viewers, particularly to bring about a change in perception of the world as they know it.

Nonetheless, his legacy in Tibet has been limited. During his lifetime, his creative output circulated outside of Tibet and the number of viewers inside Tibet, either in pre-1934 Lhasa or Amdo villages, was quite small, thus curtailing his artistic impact on his contemporaneous Tibetan society. The posthumous social effects of his artistic work have also been constrained because of the difficulty in studying original or reproductions of artworks by Gedun Choephel, but his phenomenal intellectualism and writing have buffered this obstacle and bolstered his visibility.

For Gedun Choephel, an "artist" was not constrained to *thangka* or convention, from the time of his youth in Amdo until his death in 1951. His painting and drawing then seem a functional result of his intellectual curiosity, to facilitate communication and exploration of foreign concepts and culture. His writings and close associates maintain he was a devout Buddhist and loyal Tibetan nationalist, and he is revered in post-Cultural Revolution Tibet as misunderstood progressive, a Tibetan hero whose way of thinking may have saved Tibet from its tragic fate. Thus it is not for his art alone, but for his bravery, independence, insatiable mind, and attempts to skillfully affect Tibetan society that artists invoked Gedun Choephel on the centennial of his birth in the name of a newly formed artists' cooperative in 2003, the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild.¹²⁵

Amdo Jampa Tsetan

Amdo Jampa Tsetan (*a mdo byams pa tshe stan*) (1911¹²⁶ -2002) was a classically trained *thangka* painter before being commissioned by the Dalai Lama to paint important non-traditional works. He continuously reinvented Tibetan art practices as an artist active throughout most of the twentieth century's shifting political and artistic contexts. Amdo Jampa was close contemporary of Gedun Choephel, but has had an arguably greater and more lingering impact upon contemporary art practices in Lhasa (Tibet Information Network 2002), although little has been little written about him to date (Pulin 2002) (C. Harris 1999) (Norbu c.2005).¹²⁷

Amdo Jampa, was born in Chentsa, Amdo (Qinghai province) and died in Lhasa as one of the most influential modern Tibetan painters of the twentieth century, having produced remarkable works in each distinctive visual era of his lifetime. Amdo Jampa's painting activity and creative output spanned seven decades, but his most important artistic achievements were twofold: the innovations and interventions into traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting that predated Chinese Communist annexation, and the successful integration of modern art influences into Buddhist imagery at the heart of his new school of Tibetan Buddhist painting in the post-Cultural Revolution era. As an artist, he practiced a variety of styles and techniques in radically shifting cultural, religious, social and political contexts.

Like Gedun Choephel, Amdo Jampa was born into the traditional Tibetan Buddhist world and its art forms and training. At age seven, Amdo Jampa began religious and artistic training at a local monastery, and at age 22 entered one of the largest monasteries in Amdo, Labrang, in the Rebgong region. Labrang is noted for its monastic arts, and Amdo Jampa began to develop a reputation as a painter with a distinctive style (Pulin 2002). In 1942, he and some other monks embarked on a pilgrimage to Lhasa, where he joined the largest monastery in Tibet, Drepung Monastery. Amdo Jampa apprenticed at Drepung with a master *thangka* painter for the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Sonam Rinchen, and became one of his top three students (Pulin 2002).¹²⁸

Jampa was a well regarded painter by the 1950s, when political troubles came to Lhasa. Throughout the 1950s, Mao Zedong's supporters in the Chinese Communist Party attempted rapprochement with the Lhasa government and Tibetan Buddhist leadership across the plateau. The highpoint of relations occurred when the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and the Tenth Panchen Lama traveled to Beijing in 1954 to meet Mao and attend the National People's Congress. Amdo Jampa was included in the entourage, and commissioned by the Dalai Lama to paint a thangka-style portrait of Chairman Mao as a suitable gift to the leader of the People's Republic of China, the first instance of modern art as political capital. He also remained in Beijing for one year and was the first Tibetan to study traditional Chinese painting, under Li Zhongjin, and modern Western art in a Chinese art academy.



Figure 9 Amdo Jampa Tsetan. Portrait of Mao Zedong. 1954.

Amdo Jampa's portrait of Mao commissioned by the Dalai Lama as a state gift, positions Chairman Mao in the center of the painting, dressed in olive green uniform and cap with the red flag of the People's Republic behind him, standing behind a low stone wall. His right arm is

raised in a wave, as if he is addressing a large crowd from a stage. Amdo Jampa depicts him from a viewpoint below, as if from the crowd, conveying the leader in the larger-than-life iconic style associated with Maoist Socialist Realism. Mao is framed by vignettes depicting People's Liberation Army soldiers, the vanguards of socialism in Tibet, meeting Tibetan farmers, children and monks, along with scenes from Tibet on the cusp of modernization. Tibetans and Chinese are pictured as partners, defending borders, engaging in education, politics, healthcare, animal husbandry and harvesting barley, building bridges, and purchasing commodities.

The painting is rare evidence of a *thangka* painter's work in a Socialist Realist style, but bears relationship to traditional *thangka* painting in its composition and orientation to vertical space as indicators of hierarchy. In *thangka* painting, the figure of central importance is literally placed in the middle of a composition, and the largest in size. Spatially, this figure is connected to the space in the top center of the work (reserved in *thangka* for primordial Buddhas), as in this painting in which there is no border vignette above Mao's head. It is common in biographical *thangka* to surround the figure with vignettes from the figure's life story, and in historical paintings, to depict episodic moments; the PLA soldiers could be read as emissaries of Mao himself, or a historical-style painting of contemporaneous, unfolding events. Additionally, in the surrounding scenes, the Han may introduce new technologies, such as the doctor who gives a monk an injection alongside a Tibetan doctor using a stethoscope, but in subtle cues, such as the Tibetan in each vignette being taller or positioned higher than the Han, it is the Tibetans who are at home and in control in the pristine environment.

The painting also raises interesting questions about Amdo Jampa's exposure to Socialist Realism and his artistic intentions. In 2006, Tibetan contemporary artists' discourse included the possibility of the work's mild subversion of Communist authority: the rotund depiction of Chairman Mao could have been a transgression of socialist realist visual conventions.¹²⁹ Though unlikely, the politicized reading seeks to valorize and infuse nationalism into an artwork that is a landmark in modern Tibetan art history for its unconventional realist style, the commission from

no less than the Dalai Lama for a ‘modern *thangka*,’ and for its express utilization in political relations. That is, in Amdo Jampa’s practices—engagement with the Dalai Lama, exposure to non-indigenous art styles, producing work for purposes beyond the purely religious, and travel—a new conception of the “artist” emerged in evolving historical, political, and visual culture contexts. This did and continues to have real social effects, as reflected in discourses then and since.

Upon returning to Lhasa from Beijing, Amdo Jampa was commissioned by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama for another revolutionary project, this time in the Takten Migyur Potrang, a new temple and audience hall constructed under the Dalai Lama’s direction at the Norbulingka summer palace.¹³⁰ There, Amdo Jampa painted two previously unimaginable murals: One was an unprecedented naturalistic depiction of the historical Shakyamuni teaching his first disciples in ancient India, and the other was a semi-photorealistic depiction of the enthronement ceremony in Lhasa of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama.¹³¹

The Dalai Lama commissioned Amdo Jampa to paint a depiction of the historical Buddha, the human Prince Gautama Siddhartha who became known as the Awakened One from the shakya clan, Shakyamuni, as he would have appeared to his contemporaries at the time of his first teaching to a handful of disciples. The painting of the Buddha contextualized in the Indian environment coincided with the occasion in 1956 of the Buddha Jayanti, the 2500 anniversary of the Buddha’s enlightenment, celebrated at the site of the bodhi tree and temple in Bodh Gaya, India, which occasioned the Fourteenth Dalai Lama’s first travel to India (Bstan-'dzin-rgya-mtsho 2010).

Amdo Jampa was reportedly initially bewildered by the commission, and told His Holiness that, having never been to India, he did not know how to proceed.¹³² The Dalai Lama advised a combination of research and *imagination*; and thus artistic practice that otherwise would have constituted a flagrant disavowal of centuries of iconometric precision and art theory, gained the sanction of the highest authority.¹³³

In the painting, the Buddha is dressed in a simple, plain cloth, seated on a flat grass mat, and smiles at the mendicants seated in an arc before him.¹³⁴



Figure 10 Amdo Jampa Tsetan. Shakyamuni Buddha and the first disciples. Mural, Takten Migyur Potrang, Norbulingka, Lhasa, Tibet. 1956.

After Pulin, Wen. Amdo Jampa: Painter of the Dalai Lama and Tibet.

Traditional Tibetan conventions are preserved in the centrality of the Buddha and glowing halo around the Buddha's head, below which, according to vertical hierarchy, all other humans are positioned, including those in the far background of the painting which lent an exceptional degree of depth and perspective to the mural composition; the merger of novel rendering of perspective and traditional hierarchical space must have been a challenge. Alongside the innovations in realism, perspective, and conceptualization of historical context, the visual conventions preserved would have clearly signaled to local audiences the Buddha as an extraordinary figure.

The wall painting depicting the enthronement of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in an audience chamber should be placed in the indigenous category of historical paintings depicting major events, found in the Jokhang, Potala, and other monasteries.



Figure 11 Amdo Jampa Tsetan. Enthronement of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama. Mural, Takten Migyur Potrang, Norbulingka, Lhasa, Tibet. 1956. After Pulin, Wen. Amdo Jampa: Painter of the Dalai Lama and Tibet.

Amdo Jampa's wall painting, however, employs unprecedented photorealism for the faces of the attending dignitaries, foreign guests, and aristocrats.¹³⁵ Also present, although clearly a break with photorealism, are celestial goddesses making offering to the young Dalai Lama and rejoicing. In a similar mix of approaches, the young Dalai Lama is immediately recognizable by his facial expression, and he wears the costume of his rank and occasion, and yet his hand is in a very traditional symbolic gesture (*mudra*), and holds the traditional symbolism of a stem of a flower between his thumb and forefinger, which curves sharply to his right, and supports upon its blossom symbols of enlightened qualities. This extraordinary mural again demonstrates Amdo Jampa's introduction of the merger of traditional aesthetics, artistic practices, and religious worldviews, with modern techniques and ways of seeing.

In 1959, when the Dalai Lama and thousands of Tibetans left Tibet for exile in India, Amdo Jampa remained in Lhasa as the Maoist era commenced. As a former master painter for the Dalai Lama, Amdo Jampa was imprisoned as a suspected spy of the "Dalai clique" from 1960-1962. After his release, he was dispatched to the Norbulingka to join communized labor as an "art worker" for the newly re-named People's Park. When the Cultural Revolution commenced, Amdo Jampa was again persecuted and endured struggle sessions, the Red Guards' staged public

humiliation, persecution or even executions in which rivals or class enemies were verbally and physically victimized to exact confessions and to shape public opinion. Amdo Jampa later recollected that because of the portrait he had painted of Mao in 1954, he was not as badly “struggled against” as others who had been connected to the former religious and political leadership. He recounted too that many famous people helpfully gave him little bits of work to do to survive those difficult years (Pulin 2002).

Amdo Jampa conveyed the dark and threatening nature of the times in an unprecedented and remarkable painting attributed to the 1960s of a standing White Tara (Tib, *drolkar*) (Pulin 2002). In the painting, a white standing Tara fills the height of the painting, resplendent with a golden halo and unusual flowers on the traditional gold adornments decorating her celestial body, her legs draped in an unusual multi-layered diaphanous skirt. The viewer’s eye is drawn to Tara’s face, with its expressive depth and dimensionality. Her gaze is penetrating and her lips set tightly, yet her expression is serene and powerful. Her right hand extends a protective gesture towards the left side of the painting, where dark black and red flames and smoke swirl around chained animals. At the edge of this threatening space stand the diminutive and devout family of the artist, his wife, and five boys and girls dressed in Tibetan *chupa*. Their smaller size and placement at the bottom of the frame reflects the traditional compositional space for devotees, but the way they are encircled with the gold and rainbow hued stem of Tara’s blue lotus flower make the work extraordinarily personal. This stem extends lasso-like from her left hand, as if to hook them towards her and forms a border around them, on the other side of which terror roils. Tara emanates on a wisp of cloud and trailed by gold foliage that curl on the right side of the painting, a small scene of a parade of monks at a temple hover at the top right corner, as if in a celestial realm from which she has descended to intervene in the family’s plight. There are no architectural or landscape elements other than clouds common in central Tibetan *thangka* painting, leaving the space around Tara only a clear sky blue.

All art workers were required to strictly adhere to Maoist Socialist Realism and tradition was banned as the “Four Olds” to be uprooted and discarded during the Cultural Revolution, including religion and religious imagery. Although Amdo Jampa did produce Communist propaganda works,¹³⁶ he also somehow completed a highly personal painting featuring himself and his family at the feet of Tara, praying to the swift savoir from harm and fear.



Figure 12 Amdo Jampa Tsetan. White Tara. c. 1960s. After Pulin, Wen. Amdo Jampa: Painter of the Dalai Lama and Tibet.

The painting is influenced by western modernism as a purely personal expression lacking conventional composition or representational strictures, thus adhering to neither Buddhist nor Maoist expectations. Tara’s face is the only aspect of the painting in a somewhat photorealist mode or at least not drawn to conventional iconometric proportions, while the composition seems to have come from the artist’s imagination and not the established conventional compositions employed by classical *thangka* painters. The influences which may have contributed to Amdo Jampa’s radical composition and style could date from his exposure to western and Chinese art history in Beijing about a decade prior to the Tara painting.¹³⁷

Before the Communist takeover and after the return of religion and traditional culture to Tibetan life after 1980, Amdo Jampa painted the portraits of Lhasa’s leading religious figures,

including the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's Senior and Junior tutors and the Tenth Panchen Lama, utilizing his signature photorealism for faces, hands, and bodily forms, and more traditional aesthetics for their environments and attire or other details. Original paintings by Amdo Jampa can be seen in Lhasa today, including in several chapels at Drepung monastery,¹³⁸ including a large Tara *thangka* in an assembly hall and an interesting landscape painting that consolidates the major religious sites of central Tibet that is framed in the private quarters of the Dalai Lama at the monastery.



Figure 13 Amdo Jampa Tsetan painting of the Tenth Panchen Lama in shrine at Drepung Loseling Monastery, Lhasa..
Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster, 2006.

Amdo Jampa did visit the exile seat of the Dalai Lama in India.¹³⁹ He returned to Lhasa and was appointed in the late 1980s to the official positions of Chairman of the Tibet Fine Arts Association and Chief Research Officer of the Central Executive Committee of the Tibet Autonomous Museum of Cultural Artifacts, but does not appear to have desired a political career. In the 1990s, he opened a school in the Shol village beneath the Potala to transmit to youth the traditional art training he had received in pre-1959 Tibet and train them in his signature style, as well as to empower his students, largely rural and poor young men and women, with skills by which they could earn a livelihood, at times without charging them tuition. Graduates continue to

operate and teach in his school, have opened private small studios where they are making a living by their painting, and even have led important international restoration and repainting work in Lhasa's temples.¹⁴⁰

Whether emphasis on expression and gesture were perhaps influences from Socialist Realism which lingered into the next historical period, or Amdo Jampa's style was a return to the natural and historical approach the Dalai Lama had encouraged, or the deep impressions of copying images from photographs, Amdo Jampa became best known for his vivid photorealism style and the introduction of perspective, depth, and lighting. This constituted a major shift for Tibetans accustomed to highly stylized representations of spiritual over physiological features, in uniformly lit space, on a singular plane. In effect, he established a new school of *thangka* painting, combining photorealism for lamas' and divinities' faces, hands, and bodies, with traditional aesthetics, compositions and subjects. His portraits of the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama, the two highest religious figures in Tibetan Buddhism, as well as other lamas, aristocrats and foreigners, were immediately recognizable individuals, with detailed facial features and shading that achieved three-dimensional representation. He then extended this treatment from humans to other enlightened divinities in the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. Amdo Jampa's realism achieves a feeling of closeness, of personal relationship with the lamas and deities in his paintings, visually heightening an indigenous concept by adopting a mode of visuality prevalent in his time.

Although this style of painting had the support of the Dalai Lama, the location of most of his productions—in residences of the Dalai Lama, gifts to lamas and political leaders, or made in secret—had made them inaccessible and invisible to the vast majority of the population before 1980. Amdo Jampa's approach could be revived and popularized in China's Tibet after the end of national Socialist Realism, and the majority of Tibetans had become accustomed to forms of realism. Nonetheless, in the 1980s, "It was a revelation for many people to see life-like images

of such figures for the first time," said Tashi Tsering, a Tibetan writer who knew Amdo Jampa (Tibet Information Network 2002).

Contemporary artists in Lhasa post-Deng view the history of indigenous modern art in Tibet as beginning with Amdo Jampa.¹⁴¹ As Gonkar Gyatso, an artist who knew Amdo Jampa, explained, "He trained... at the same time as several other very talented *thangka* painters and he was the one who tried to do something different. He was quite brave to do so—as well as fortunate in having the support of the Dalai Lama for the work he began to create."¹⁴² The Tibetan literary journal *Drangchar* opined, "As [Amdo Jampa] mastered the techniques of all three traditions of Tibetan, Chinese and Western art, his paintings were characterized by outstanding individuality, and a three-dimensional effect with the use of shading (Drangchar 1993)."

But this realism, and the Dalai Lama's support, was not unproblematic, politically and in his community. The influential Tibetan diaspora writer Jamyang Norbu writes Amdo Jampa was "lucky not to have his fingers cut off" during the Cultural Revolution as a result of having been the Dalai Lama's painter, and characterizes his painting in the Socialist Realism era as political imperative (Norbu c.2005), but this may be an overly politicized reading of his life. Amdo Jampa is recognized as a master artist for his accomplishments, but had the ideas for altering traditional images of lamas and deities not enjoyed the endorsement of the Dalai Lama, he artist would have been seen by Tibetans as sinful. "People were astonished and admired the techniques involved, but there was also some controversy, particularly because His Holiness the Dalai Lama looked so human in his work," Gonkar Gyatso said (Tibet Information Network 2002). This evidenced cultural change from within the bastion of the very authority upon which tradition is based, and created a category of artist whose social function is to not only reproduce hegemonic forms, but also to change them.¹⁴³

This change rippled through Tibetan society belatedly, but eventually became widely influential in thought and practice. The contemporary artist Gonkar Gyatso recounted, "Before the Chinese ban on Dalai Lama pictures [in 1996], many monasteries I visited all over Tibet had a

large-scale picture of the Dalai Lama on the main shrine – all in the style of Amdo Jampa’s famous painting of the Dalai Lama.” Amdo Jampa engaged with ideas and technologies of the time, so-called modern notions of imagination, historicism, and scientific research, which translated into pioneering a painting method for Tibetan communities increasingly saturated with photographic media.¹⁴⁴

Amdo Jampa evinces fluidity in the role of an “artist.” The dramatically different stylistic and ideological modes within which he produced paintings—from traditional *thangka* to Socialist Realism propaganda to western modernism’s personal expression to photorealistic religious iconography—illustrate the powerful dominance of political and social contexts over artistic production, as well as possibilities for individual creativity and expression as cornerstones of cultural change from within.¹⁴⁵

Although in different ways, Amdo Jampa and Gedun Choephel were pioneers who brought Tibetan artistic production into the modern era, as much as they were artists actively working during Tibet’s entry in to the modern era.¹⁴⁶ The shift from iconography to portraiture, from enlightened qualities to personalities, Heimsath (2005) states, make Amdo Jampa and Gedun Choephel uniquely modern. Amdo Jampa and Gedun Choephel’s innovations and contributions are important to place before the defining and cataclysmic events of invasion and colonial occupation.¹⁴⁷ In contemporary Tibetan artists’ discourse, they point to these two men as evidence that change is not necessarily imposed from or credited to outsiders, but is a local capacity from which to draw inspiration for authentic cultural change.

Maoist Socialist Realism: 1950s-1980

The 1956-1980: Maoist Socialist Realism and the Cultural Revolution Era

A two decade political era—spanning from the flight into exile of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama and assumption of complete political control over Tibet by the Communist Party of the PRC in 1959 to the post-Cultural Revolution reforms initiated in Tibet in 1980—maps roughly onto the Socialist Realist era of visual productions in Tibet. Radically new visual environments

and processes of production redefined “art” as produced by “art workers” for political, not religious, purpose. For two decades, Mao’s theory of Socialist Realism exclusively dictated that all forms of national production across visual, performing and literary arts serve the advancement of political causes, and a set of practices and conventions arose to do so. Maoist Socialist Realism took unique forms and practices in Tibet, whilst intricately linked to the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). For artists in Tibet, the era began gradually with the portrait of Mao Zedong by Amdo Jampa, but soon after, socialist realism eclipsed all other production until the first “anti-political” art produced in Tibet, likely by Han artists from about 1979.¹⁴⁸

Below, the contexts, practices and discourses of the mid-century Socialist Realism in Tibet are briefly described, and its impact on Tibetans’ artistic formation and history is recounted through the perspectives of Tibetan professors of art and art history, and informed by publications of communist propaganda and documentary photography. The social processes of production of Maoist Socialist Realism, its formal characteristics, and the ways in which Socialist Realism was adapted to Tibet and its modes of representation of Tibetans are treated in depth in Chapter Three, in dialogue with the ways in which contemporary artists may now be responding to its social and visual impact and legacy.

A faction within the Communist leadership in Beijing had by the late-1950s lost faith in a gradualist approach to working with Tibetan leaders, and after 1959 held sway in bringing radical revolutionary methods to governing Tibet (Kapstein, *The Tibetans* 2006). The CCP first began Democratic Reforms (confiscation of aristocratic and monastic estates for reallocation and collectivization) in ethnographic Tibetan, the eastern plateau, sparking resistance and the flight of Tibetans towards Lhasa. By early 1959 thousands of eastern Tibetans and accounts of destruction of monasteries had reached Lhasa, and motivated the city to rise in protest against the Chinese military and political leaders. The uprising March 10-12th was brutally repressed and the Dalai Lama escaped from the Potala in disguise on March 14 to seek asylum in India. The CCP took power and immediately instituted Democratic Reforms and launched not only a class struggle, but

also the destruction of religion, the Tibetan people's ultimate source of authority and identity. While the Cultural Revolution was a national campaign explicitly designed to "Smash the Olds," by the time it was launched in 1966, much of Tibetan religious and cultural life and institutions had already been devastated. Nonetheless, during the Cultural Revolution of 1966-1976, rival Red Guard factions in Tibet completed the final destruction of thousands of temples and monasteries, an overwhelming majority of the Tibetan religious sites and objects embodying the heart of Tibetan civilization were razed or ransacked by the end of the Cultural Revolution. These were the sites of religious practice and training in philosophy, meditation, medicine, astrology, and other arts and sciences, a unique social system for the residential cloistering of monks and nuns that yet institutionally dominated local lay society, and the repositories of centuries of texts, arts, and wealth. As the faithful were persecuted, hundreds of tons of statuary and religious objects made of precious metals and gems were shipped to China to be smelted or sold (Rinbhur Rinpoche n.d.). *Thangka* were ripped from their silk brocade frames, the silk more highly valued by the Chinese than the paintings, and centuries' old murals and clay statues demolished or desecrated. The Lhasa Jokhang, the holiest cathedral in Tibet, was converted to military housing and its chapels used as pig sties. The shock and horror remains almost inexpressible.

Simultaneously, propaganda works in the mode of Maoist Socialist Realism illustrated the so-called backwardness of religion, justifying its eradication, and celebrated socialist heroes. The portrayal of the 'three heroes'—the worker, soldier, and peasant—of Socialist Realism were elevated to iconic status in depictions of patriotic and zealous action for the nation (Wang 2008). Art elevated Mao to the position of a Buddha by literally co-opting Tibetan visual culture through substituting portraits of Chairman Mao for the vacated Buddhas in temples and villages across the plateau, as can be seen in rare photographs like those from *Forbidden Tibet* (Woeser 2006).



Figure 14 Cultural Revolution parade with anti-religion and anti-monks poster. After Woesser, Tsering. Shājié. Sishi nian de jiyi jinqu 《杀劫》(Forbidden memory. Tibet during the Cultural Revolution).

Communist Chinese Socialist Realism was a national art created alongside the birth of the modern Chinese nation, under Chairman Mao’s directive in all forms of economic, political, and cultural life. Chinese Socialist Realism developed from Mao’s pre-victory speeches to the early Communist Party at their Yan’an base about the role of the visual and literary arts according to Marxist theory (McDougall 1980) (Marcuse 1978), and adaptations of Soviet Socialist Realism style (Galikowski 1998). It promulgated the ideology that art “serve the masses,” (McDougall 1980) through a visual style that was symbolically coded and teleologically driven to unify and mobilize, if not coerce, the masses.

Chinese politics radically inverted past and contemporaneous Chinese and international notions of artists by enlisting them in communist revolutionary ideological battles as “art workers”. Charged with drawing source material from “the people,” they led “mass art” movements according to Socialist Realist methodologies celebrating Mao foremost, the Communist heroes of workers, soldiers and farmers, and visually emphasizing the central character (Galikowski 1998) (Jiang 2004) (Xu 2005), or the conventions for portraits of a radiant Mao referred to as “Red, Bright, Light” (Tashi, Art in Process unpublished manuscript). Under Maoism, artists were intended to document current conditions, which would presumably portray both the problems of the past and the promise of society being realized through the committed

labor of Communist zealots. In fact, art was so politically determined that the proletariat's strength, heroism and optimism became blatant exaggerations directed by Party allegiance, which the prominent cultural critic LuXun pointed out (J. D. Spence 1999).¹⁴⁹

The working methodologies of this political dictum included popular art production, trained artists being sent to rural areas to draw from the field, training local "art workers", and recruiting rural art workers to the interior for further training in Communist theory and future evangelism. Tibet was no exception. Han artists were sent to minority and border areas to become familiar with local idioms and to train local art workers. "In the 50's," says Gade, a contemporary artist in Lhasa, "Tibetan artists only painted religious art, and the Chinese artists that the army sent created political propaganda showing Tibet as a feudal society and arguing that we should believe in socialism (Simmons 2004)." Tibetan artists then learned to produce socialist realism, including through participation in the quintessential Socialist Realism artistic project in Tibet, the large scale *Wrath of the Serfs* propaganda exhibition condemning the Dalai Lama's former theocracy and celebrating indigenous proto-socialists.¹⁵⁰

In this exhibition production in Lhasa and in the PRC at large, the work of artists was directed, supervised, and approved for distribution by a network of government officials (Xu 2005). As Xu explains, art associations are central to official art worlds as they mediated the "extremely close" relationship between artists, the State and the Party, and managed exhibition spaces (Xu 2005). In the first decades of the new nation, Xu writes,

The aim of every art exhibit was perfectly explicit: the artists' work should satisfy the requirements of current government policy. This task was not simply left to the artists' own initiative but was highly organized. The various levels of artists' professional associations would select artists and organize them to work according to a "three-in-one" philosophy: the leaders propose the subject, the workers discuss the method and the artists create the product. Within this collective structure there would be repeated discussion and revision before a final version was agreed on. After the work was finished it still had to be approved by several levels of leadership before it could finally be entered in an exhibition. This was especially true for exhibitions that were prepared as part of major political movements.

Regional and municipal branches of the Chinese Artist Associations were formed during the Maoist era, and their original mission and artistic production methods are still important, especially in Tibet, where the Tibet Artists Association (Tibet referring to the Tibetan Autonomous Region, and hence my use of the acronym TARAA) extended its methods through its members, branches and influence on cultural institutions. Norbu writes, “art in Tibet in the sixties and seventies became entirely ‘socialist’ and ‘revolutionary’ in inspiration and Chinese in character and execution (Norbu c.2005).” Former *thangka* painters spent the Cultural Revolution either adapting their meticulous technique to the broad brush strokes of Socialist Realism’s utopian vision, or, recognizing that to paint anything else meant severe punishment, did not paint at all.

One Han Chinese artist deployed by the State to illustrate the work of revolutionizing Tibet is Han Shuli. His painting *Chairman Mao Sends His Emissaries* helped establish a stylistic and thematic genre of images characterizing the artists in the TARAA (of which he soon became and remains a leader). In the painting, Tibetans offer a celebratory welcome of People’s Liberation Army soldiers, a theme replicated for Han representatives of the State in print media and other propaganda for decades afterwards.



Figure 15 Han Shuli. Chairman Mao sends his emissaries.

A new generation of Tibetan artists was indoctrinated with a visual style and artistic identity tied to political ideology through training, by Han artists in Tibet and by sending Tibetan youth to educational institutions to the east, to work as Fine Art Soldiers (*rimo dmagmi* (Tib.)) during the Cultural Revolution. The Tibetan artists Cham Sang, Wangdor, Abu, and Tsering Dorjee worked as illustrators, art designers, and poster artists when they returned to Tibet after their training.¹⁵¹ Secondary schools at the time also taught fine art classes in simple calligraphy and sketching for students to utilize in making political posters and billboards.

For Tibetans then, Socialist Realism was an imposed and alien aesthetic when it was introduced, and was forced upon the breach created by the destruction of traditional religious imagery and its production and use; the traumatic exclusion of religion from the visual environment was compounded as artists were recruited to participate in the replication of Communist propaganda, superficially adapting it to Tibet.

Although Socialist Realism dominated Tibetan visual environments and artistic production and training opportunities for two decades, there is a lacuna of documentation of the

period, and although it is commonly referenced in visual and narrative artistic discourses today, the impact upon Tibetan artists at the time and since has not been analyzed. Surviving images and artists' accounts of the period are scarce; this seems in keeping with general avoidance, forgetting and denial of the role of Tibetans in campaigns of the Cultural Revolution, from painting to iconoclasm¹⁵² to acts of violence (C. McGranahan 2010).

Professor of painting, international modern art history, and contemporary artist Tsewang Tashi countered the misperception that Tibetan artists were not active producers during the Cultural Revolution. Tsewang Tashi found it quite a matter of historical fact and context that Tibetan artists trained in *thangka* painting prior to “Liberation”, such as the *thangka* masters Amdo Jampa, Tenpa Rabten,¹⁵³ and Yeshe Sherab,¹⁵⁴ would have worked in the Socialist Realism mode of art production during the Cultural Revolution era. In the 1960s and 1970s, Socialist Realism dominated the PRC, dictating the Han artists' style and in turn “dominating the style of Tibetan artists at that time,” he said.¹⁵⁵

Tsewang Tashi described watching painters in the late 1960s and early 1970s in his childhood neighborhood. When viewing the posters and murals they produced, it was easy to spot the propaganda posters locally produced by former *thangka* painters. He recalled,

Because I lived in the Muslim area, behind where the Flora Hotel is today, and lived there until 1980, I played all around the mosque. I remember in front of the mosque there was one work unit that had a large section of wall dedicated for political posters. These were made by *thangka* painters. I felt the way they did their paintings was very different from the other common propaganda images of the time, and also the feeling they gave was very different. Everything was so detailed—like the strands of hair and also the posture and facial expressions—just like the wrathful deities! These (traditional) postures and hand gestures (*mudra*) for deities were used for leaders but even more so for farmers, workers and soldiers. I have a very clear memory of them.¹⁵⁶

As he spoke, Tsewang raised his hands and extended his legs, demonstrating postures and gestures of the ‘heroes,’ borrowed from the traditional iconography for wrathful deities which only Tibetan artists and Tibetan Buddhist audiences would have known.

Those Socialist Realism wall paintings also utilized techniques and materials that belied either the Tibetan or Chinese training of the artist. For example, the lines and detailing by Tibetan

painters were done with the much finer lines and brushes of the thangka painter's toolkit. In contrast, Tsewang Tashi explained,

Ordinary (Chinese-) made propaganda posters and canvases were very rough, using big brushes, scarce details. On the mosque walls often [Chinese artists] painted and hung canvases in oil, because oil can withstand rain better than painting on the wall itself. Usually in color, sometimes black and white. But when [Tibetan artists] made images on the walls, they first applied some special mud and then smoothed it to a shine, then painted on that, then coated it—just like the Tibetan temple wall painting (*debris*) technique, just like our murals!

Tsewang laughed, “So, as a child I played in my own gallery!” with rotating images and working artists to observe.¹⁵⁷ As an adult artist interested in his early artistic influences and the history of art and visual culture in Lhasa, he has attempted to locate extant documentation of such paintings so vivid in his memories, but so far as not discovered any archival images.¹⁵⁸

Reflecting on modern art history, Tsewang Tashi asserts the Socialist Realism era was an important art historical period both for China and Tibet. “Tibet, since 1959, has followed nationalist movements”, he said, and “art and politics are inseparable in China in the twentieth century.” For China, the beginning of modern art, Tsewang Tashi claims, was in the early twentieth century, when “the western influence was very strong in China in all areas—arts, politics, ideas of freedom, etc.—but those artists soon began to incorporate Chinese traditional elements as well, so they were not just copying the western images. This flourished amongst the political May 4 Movement's denial of tradition and adoption of ideas from the West, such as individual freedom.”¹⁵⁹ This movement, however, was overshadowed by the subsequent civil war between the Kuomintang and Communists.

Socialist Realism was the next form of Chinese “modern” art, marked as such by virtue of being entirely novel and utterly different from both the earlier modernizations and from traditional arts, adopted from Soviet influence, and because it quickly acquired a very strong character native to China through its palette and appeal to rural decorative styles (Norbu c.2005).¹⁶⁰ By comparison, when socialist realism came to Tibet, Tibetan artists were under local authorities' dictates to replicate Sino Socialist Realism, periodically dressing the subjects in

Tibetan clothing or substituting landscape or architectural details to reflect the local physical environment.

Tsewang Tashi is interested in establishing a history of “modern art” in Tibet that does not follow Chinese modern art’s historical markers, chronologies, and influences, yet he does utilize similarities between Tibetan and Chinese contexts to identify and claim Tibet’s own modern periods. For Tibetans like Tsewang Tashi and Jamyang Norbu, defining “modern” art for both Tibet and China hinges on the two features of novelty and mixing of local characteristics with a foreign style. Thus, China may be said to have had two different but strong national modern periods: in the early twentieth century (mixing Western and Chinese sensibilities) and with Socialist Realism (a national incorporation of Soviet movements into Sino-Maoist socialism).¹⁶¹ In contrast, Tibetans also initiated their own modern art movement in the early twentieth century (stimulated by the introduction of British photography, yet constituting significantly less exposure to foreign influences compared to contemporaneous China), but experienced Socialist Realism not as a *Tibetan* modern art form, but as an era of novel production only, as it was imposed, and, even if practiced by Tibetans, not incorporated into Tibetan indigenous expression.

Communist Socialist Realism lost its visual and ideological primacy after the death of Mao, but Tibetans sent to study in China’s art departments found that into the early 1980s, training in styles other than Socialist Realism was nearly impossible, limited by the professors’ decades of constraints. Socialist Realism also persists in official imagery, in popular culture, commercial art and advertising, and in the subtle influence in contemporary artists’ work. Tsewang Tashi said, “Socialist realism dominated in the 1960s and 1970s in the TAR and Tibetan ethnic areas, and some artists now [2004] continue to produce socialist realism paintings and street billboards for specific occasions.” So, while it was not an indigenous modern movement, its ubiquity had a profound impact on the development of modern and contemporary art and artistic identities in Tibet.

All Tibetan art after 1959 has to be understood in the context of the new modern Chinese state in which artists have lived and been trained (Alsop 2007). Dramatic political changes and concomitant radical changes to the visual culture changed notions of the Tibetan “artist,” that “art worker” in the Maoist era was far removed from a Buddhist engaged in the “proper” production of religiously efficacious images by prescribed techniques. Traditional notions of art and artist were radically challenged by a model of visual production in service of political ideologies rather than religious efficacy and transcendence. After the Maoist era, former Buddhist notions and practices were not aspects of culture and religion which could simply be reinstated in subsequent decades, but had to make accommodations and adaptations (Kapstein, *The Tibetans* 2006). The legacy of Socialist Realism is that it has become a part of subsequent visual culture and art making and interpretation in Tibet, as a result of Tibetans trained to be artists under the Maoist system, exposed to an art history of Russian and Chinese revolutionary realism and its painting materials and techniques, and introducing styles and practices that were not native to Tibet or the Buddhist arts of Tibet’s neighbors.

Conclusion

Major art historical time periods in the past century are characterized by distinct contexts, practices and discourses about visual cultural productions and producers in Tibet, from serving Buddhist to Socialist hegemonies, between which there was a brief period of indigenous secular modernism. The sociopolitical context of each era and its institutional structures are inseparable from the conceptions, functions and production of art and artists. Artistic social practices reflected the dominant visual cultural products, beginning with *thangka*, mural and sculpture created by divinely-inspired artists and skilled artisans, but these practices were outlawed under Chinese Socialism and replaced with painterly techniques and secular uses of visual productions for political ends. Artistic discourses during and about these time periods reveal ideological commitments, debates, goals and concerns that motivate and are stimulated by artistic production. As described, in the traditional Tibetan Buddhist society, evidenced in indigenous literature into

the nineteenth century, concerns for making a karmically and spiritually beneficial impact on the mind of the viewer motivated Tibetan commentaries and manuals framing artistic practices, which served larger social reproduction of power structures and worldviews. By the time religious artists like Tenpa Rabten and Amdo Jampa were employed by the PRC's authorities in Tibet as "art workers", the State's need to image rhetoric of communist propaganda made the techniques of Socialist Realism requisite, and the exclusive, visual culture. The impact upon Tibetans like Tsewang Tashi and his generation at the most benign was to broaden their visual vocabulary, and thus ideological exposure, beyond religion. In terms of cultural identities and transmission, art productions reflects radical social changes in just a few decades, and also signal traumatic rupture. Thus, analysis of social processes and contexts explores the affect of art and artists upon cultural identities and the cultural politics of representation, aesthetics, authenticity, and appropriation, which may impact the social reproduction, challenge or transformation of dominant ideologies.

Chapter Three

Art and Artists in Lhasa: Contemporary Arts (1980-2008)

Contemporary artists in Lhasa shape the debate regarding what criteria makes cultural productions “Tibetan” and the roles “art” may or may not play in contributing to contemporary Tibetan culture and collective cultural identities. After 1980, artistic contexts, practices, discourses and effects broadly diversified, fomenting multiple and intersecting strands of contemporary movements.

This discussion of “art” and “artists” in Lhasa builds upon the previous chapter (concerning 1900-1980) and continues the discussion into the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, concluding with glimpses into some contemporary exhibition practices and discourses that highlight tensions and multiplicity of views and activities in the emergent phase of international contemporary Tibetan art. In the previous chapter, I focused on the emergence of modern art eras, and below on contemporary art eras, to describe the social, political, religious, and global contexts which inform—and may also be impacted by—art and artists.

I examine the contexts, practices, discourses, and potential social impact of key figures and sites of artistic production in the post-Deng era to ask what artistic identities are being sought, finding expression, and implied in a range of associated activities. The period 1980-2003 is the era I call Reform and the Birth of Contemporary Tibetan Art, explored in a multi-faceted look at the post-Cultural Revolution era of cultural revival, identity crisis, innovation and experimentation, and the formation of new artists’ associations, spaces, and professional practices. I date a twenty-first century shift to the founding of the Gedun Choephel Guild in 2003. The period of Contemporary Art and Artists: 2003-2008 considers the legacy of the past within the context of a blossoming and dynamic, if yet small and tentative, movement and a time in which their work was significantly gaining visibility internationally. This emerging visibility, in western-run galleries and even in 2009 participation in the Venice Biennale by Lhasa-born artist Gonkar Gyatso, is, however, like the front door or public façade. The remainder of this study

focuses on the artists and works by entering, as it were, from the back door, to understand artists' productions as motivated by impulses at once documentary, cultural, commercial, universal, and personal. As this project focuses on this latter time period, and select members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in particular, I have in this history tried to trace the artists, movements, and influences most directly related with the eventual emergence of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and the global phenomenon of contemporary Tibetan art, from a Lhasa-centric point of view.

This study also takes cultural productions as a window into contemporary Tibetan cultural formation and identity in contexts of post-traumatic memories, ongoing colonization, and globalization. Artists aid exploration of cultural and social processes of continuity and change because they are actively engaged in synthesizing information, perspectives, and their own experience, and are prepared to demonstrate and give commentary upon their views. Individual artists' contexts, choices, productions, and their challenges and accomplishments enact and/or reflect upon issues endemic to the frameworks within which they live and work. In the artists' own times, their practices frequently transcend ordinary communication channels to redefine and interpret what is happening locally and globally. While some artists live at a remove from mainstream society—by virtue of their cultured, elite status, or marginalized as an outsider, for example—a society's great artists frequently come to define or be closely associated with national identities and historical moments. Thus artists, living or posthumously, and their works are often at the heart of national aesthetics, formed by and shaping social possibilities for others. Yet, particularly in contexts of colonialism, artists' work can be appropriated and/or become sites for contestation of representation and minority or indigenous identity formation. The study of art and artists may begin to remedy a critical lack of understanding of Tibetan artists, particularly the contemporary inheritors of a rich legacy of indigenous art history and who are forming modern Tibetan culture.

In the modern era, Lhasa's professional, visual cultural producers—including artists in the mainstream “culture industry” of state media and consumerism and those outside of it among independent intellectuals—enable consideration of the impact of social frameworks, including different institutional structures and ideological commitments, on artistic practices and discourses.

The context of rapid and dramatic artistic changes in the past one hundred years has led to the perception of polarization of tradition (located in memory as most authentically received and practiced in pre-1950s Tibet) and the contemporary, new art of the post-1980 eras. The inseparable linkage of “art” and Buddhism which has defined Tibetan visual artistic production for centuries in Tibet complicates defining contemporary art in Lhasa. By comparison, contemporary art, the personal expression of an artist often intended for public secular display, reflection and sale, follows no iconographic strictures, is not in the service of spiritual efficacy, and is not housed in religious locations. When the conventional ritual and edifying aspects of religious imagery are removed from art, the question often arises today whether such work can even still be considered Tibetan.

Another debate concerns whether it is even possible, consciously or unconsciously, to remove Buddhism from art created by Tibetans, imbued as its influence is in all aspects of life originating from the Land of Snows.¹⁶² And yet another set of observers would call the mere appearance of any Buddhist visual language, despite the presence or absence of intended religiosity of its function or communicative goals, a continuity of and deliberate hallmark of the Tibetanness of contemporary art. In short, any painting by Tibetans today that are *not-thangka* raises questions, and at times seems difficult to even conceive.

This may be illustrated by a 2006 dialogue between artists and scholars about defining contemporary Tibetan art, in which an inquiry was posed by Tsering Shakya: “What makes this art Tibetan?”¹⁶³ Shakya noted the critique among Tibetans, “One is disloyal if you don't hold up

tradition,” prompting a lively interrogation in the role of the artist as transmitter of tradition or cultural innovator (C. a. McGranahan 2007).

The more obvious references to Buddhist imagery, perceived by many as persistent and pervasive, prompted art historian Dina Bangdel to ask, in response to Shakya, if it was “the recognizable Buddhist symbols that made this Tibetan art?” (C. a. McGranahan, *Seeing Into Being: The Waves on the Turquoise Lake Artists' and Scholars' Symposium 2007*), a view with which Harris (2013) may concur. Yet, from my extended conversations with artists in these same years, I understand that none of the artists could have answered Bangdel’s question with a simple “No,” for they cannot exclude Buddhism from Tibetan culture, nor deny its visual influence upon them or its marketability. But perhaps more importantly and subtly, they could not comfortably say “Yes” in answer to Bangdel either, as this would be to deny that much of their extent oeuvre *without* “recognizable Buddhist symbols” was *also* “Tibetan art,” and foreclose future possibilities for art production if it would necessarily require religious symbols to be deemed both “art” and “Tibetan”. Regarding the role of heritage in contemporary life, Losang Gyatso, an artist now in the US, had replied in the symposium that questions of cultural sustainability demand the difficult discernment of “what to discard and what to keep.” This in turn involves honestly addressing what happens when “things become symbolic rather than meaningful,” Losang Gyatso said (C. a. McGranahan, *Seeing Into Being: The Waves on the Turquoise Lake Artists' and Scholars' Symposium 2007*). In other words, artists can and do feel burdened by expectations to represent their culture and religion in ways which can exist in conflict with their personal experience, knowledge, and beliefs. In many of the artists’ work we see just this bittersweet tension between artistic, cultural and religious heritage informing identity on the one hand, and the recognition of the superficiality of cultural and religious clichés on the other. Reflection of their personal experiences is a goal, but they have to fight for space for such expression to be received as culturally authentic.

Cultural producers, including artists, affect social reproduction, often “working within structures of power . . . and organizations that are tied to and doing the work of national or commercial interests (Abu-Lughod 1997).” Artists in Tibet have had fluctuating degrees of control over whether to participate in such structures or not; during the Cultural Revolution era, it was obligatory, but some Tibetan artists did and do continue to replicate Party-state interests since then. At the same time, cultural producers may affect social transformation or challenges to dominant ideologies, typically through analysis of the cultural politics of aesthetics, authority, and appropriation (J. O. Young 2006), particularly in representations of tradition and of otherness (including the anthropologically-implicated construction of “primitives”) (Errington 1994) (Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* 1998) (Price 2002). Social practices of visual productions of interest to anthropologists such as Gell (1994), Ginsburg (1991) (1993) (1994) (2002), Marcus and Myers (1995), and Myers (Myers 2002), are the “ways in which people use these forms and technologies to construct, articulate, and disseminate ideologies about identity, community, difference, nation and politics, and with their impact on social relations, social formation, and social meanings (Mahon 2000).”¹⁶⁴ For Thomas (1997) (2001), for example, these uses by artists productively center on exposing oppositional relationships as a mode of representation that accomplishes both “imaging collectivity” to strengthen indigenous community and “assertion of coevalness” with settler history. Visual forms of representation repeatedly arise as a central concern for Tibetan modern artists, such that representation is viewed as a historically situated arena for constructing and contesting nationalism, Tibetanness and modern identities as minorities within the PRC.

I explore notions of art and artist at work in these periods through reliance upon the ethnographic methods by which I obtained recollections and opinions of independent and affiliated artists I interviewed, participant observation in galleries and amongst groups of artists, and the art works these artists produced primarily during my fieldwork trips in Lhasa between 2004 and 2007. Select artists have had opportunities to speak for themselves in exhibition and

catalogue artist's statements, at the opening of exhibitions in London, America, and Beijing, and in non-commercial roundtables, scholarly panels, and online,¹⁶⁵ many of which I attended or from which I accessed proceedings.

Exploration of the modern and contemporary periods, 1980-2003 and 2003-2010, will be informed by the art associations and institutions active in those times. These groups include the Tibet Autonomous Region Artists Association (founded 1981), the Sweet Tea House Artists Association (active 1985-1987), the Art Department of Tibet University (founded in 1985), and the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild (founded in 2003). The artistic dimensions of the cultural renaissance of the 1980s in Lhasa were related to me by artists Gonkar Gyatso and Tsewang Tashi in particular, and Stevenson (2002) and Kverne (1994) document non-traditional art in the period in other Tibetan areas within China. I conducted interviews with the founders of the important artists' organizations formed in Lhasa in the 1980s, which were the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artist Association (TARAA), Tibet University Art Department (TU), and the Sweet Tea House group. The mid-1980s were an exciting time, but activities ground to a near halt for many as political protests were squelched by martial law in the late 1980s; Norbu (c2006) considers the political milieu's impact on artists. Catalogues and artist interviews support discussion of the 1990s.

For the period of 2003-2010, I rely primarily upon ethnographic materials, including formal interviews and informal experience with artists, particularly in galleries and studios. A brief comparative look at several exhibitions in the 2000s mounted in Beijing and Lhasa will be drawn upon to illustrate differing goals and conceptualizations of art and artists espoused by individuals and art associations that sponsor them.

Narratives about and by artists provide entry into conceptions of artistic identities and practices, institutional and ideological structures, limitations and instances of transcending given parameters. Together, narrative and visual productions evidence ways in which art is influenced by and at times also affects social contexts and social processes. I trace the training, careers, and

evolving conceptions of artistic identities expressed by several principal figures active from the 1980s into the present, including: Han Shuli, Yu Youxin, Gonkar Gyatso, Tsewang Tashi, Norbu Tsering (Nortse), Gade, Tsering Nyandak and others. After introducing these men here, in-depth exploration of some of their artistic output will follow in subsequent chapters.

A Survey of Art and Artists in Lhasa

Revival, Reform and Revelation: 1980-2003

The Economic Reform and Open Door Policy of the 1980s was a radical cultural shift from the Maoist era. The opening of China signified national political will to redress the excesses of the Cultural Revolution, and marked the start of a new era in which the revival of traditional Tibetan culture could be embraced along with innovation and modernization. Cultural revival in Lhasa had a powerful impact upon artists and their society, spawning both artistic innovation and personal and collective anxiety about the past. Modern and contemporary Tibetan culture has been emerging in various forms (art, literature, and music¹⁶⁶) across the plateau's several Tibetan regions since the 1980s, primarily as the result of post-Maoist political and economic change in the PRC and local negotiations and adaptations to change (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008) (T. Shakya, *The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers* 2000) (Stirr 2008).

In this context, contemporary art and artistic identities in Lhasa burgeoned. Three highly influential art institutions were founded in Lhasa in the 1980s: the Tibet University Art Department, the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA) and the Sweet Tea House group. In the same decade, the stimulating movements of Han and Tibetan artists back and forth between Beijing and Lhasa brought competing ideas of artistry and diversity of imagery to Tibet. The practices and discourses of artists which emerged in the 1980s in affiliation with these distinct groups continue to strongly inform Lhasa's art world thirty years on. The late 1980s and 1990s saw a dramatic decline in artistic activity, largely influenced by political and economic conditions, and yet, though fleeting, some important milestones were achieved. By the turn of the century, a renewal of artistic energy was afoot, reviving and adapting some of the practices and

discourses of the mid-1980s, and setting the context for the next and current phase of modern and contemporary art in Lhasa in the first decade of the twenty-first century.

In 1978, the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) convened and dramatically changed the course of the PRC's political philosophy from "class struggle" to the "Economic Reform and Open Door Policy" of transition into market economies. The Great Helmsman, Chairman Mao Zedong, was dead, the Gang of Four ousted for the disasters of the Cultural Revolution they had helped to orchestrate, and Deng Xiaoping had risen to power with a reformist agenda. The effects of these changes in Beijing transformed political conditions, and then economic and cultural conditions. Among the far reaching effects of this shift, for Tibetan areas, were an eventual cultural renaissance in the resurgence of their previously oppressed religious and cultural life, and the arrival of foreign goods including, even in remote Lhasa, books about foreign artists and art. Han and Tibetan artists found it a heady time to create art in Lhasa.

The transition began in Tibet when Party Secretary, Hu Yaobang, visited Lhasa in 1980. Alarmed by conditions in Tibet, which he boldly proclaimed had worsened under communist rule, Hu made an unprecedented public admonishment of policy failures in Tibet and exhorted TAR authorities to support local culture, including religion and language, stimulate economic growth, and retract excess Han cadres in the region (HuVisitInBarnett). The Open Door reforms thus reached Lhasa belatedly, but swept in a period of cultural revival, even "renaissance," artist Tsewang Tashi once said, across the Tibetan plateau, as monasteries and temples were rebuilt to some extent, forced communes disbanded, and some forms of social, cultural, and religious life that had been suspended for nearly two decades resumed. Among the far-reaching effects of this shift, for Tibetan areas, were a vibrant cultural renaissance and the arrival of foreign goods, including, even in remote Lhasa, books about foreign artists and art. Artists were freed of the imperatives of Socialist Realism and exposed to modern Western arts (outside of Soviet Socialist Realism) for the first time, stimulating a burst of artistic activity. For a generation of artists raised

in Maoist Tibet, “revival” also constituted novel experience of Tibetan “tradition”. Artists thus enjoyed stimulating and relatively relaxed contexts for expression and experimentation in the early and mid 1980s, along with often confusing and anxious quests for ethnic identity.

Unfortunately, political protests in Lhasa, the largest since 1959, rocked the city in 1987 and 1989, to which authorities responded with massive militaristic repression and institution of martial law. The open atmosphere at the start of the decade vanished, and State support was thrown behind economic development of Western China, as fledgling religious, cultural and personal freedoms were rescinded. Again, political contexts impacted artistic practices, and triggered a retraction of practices and discourses. In the context of economic growth of the 1990s entrepreneurial pursuits that benefitted artists were, more often than not, outside the artistic realm. The post-political protest environment was a pale comparison to the expansion and freedom of the previous decade. Political contexts made the period a turbulent mix of relative freedom and repression, with implications for the meanings of “art” and “artist”.

Artistic Diversification

Out of the stimulation and activity of the early and mid- 1980s, multiple distinct artistic realms of activity surfaced with particular artistic practices, as independent and anti-political Han artists visited Tibet, government affiliated Han artists established careers in Tibet, and Tibetan artists took up leading roles in pioneering new artistic possibilities both official and unofficial. Distinct artistic realms of activity surfaced: Tibetan Socialist Realism, independent and anti-political Han artists visiting Tibet, government affiliated Han artists establishing careers in Tibet through the founding of the Lhasa Artists Association, and Tibetan artists (mainly trained in China) who took up leading roles in pioneering new artistic possibilities for Tibetans both official through Tibet University and unofficial in the founding of the Sweet Tea House Artists’ Association.

Independent Han Artists Discover Tibet

The national “opening up” after 1978 that released of art from politics’ grip meant Han artists were freed from Maoist Socialist Realism to discover new artistic forms and practices. Han artists were embarking on a stimulating a period characterized by openness and diversity in terms of materials, methods, and ways of thinking, first stimulated by newfound exposure to artists such as Picasso, Kandinsky, the Bauhaus, and post-impressionists before crystallizing in their own identities and initiating China’s “contemporary” art period, according to Tsewang Tashi.

Independent Han artists began to travel freely in Tibet in the 1980s. Some Han artists sent to work there under the Maoist regime stayed, while other young Han artists came to Tibet jaded by eastern China and in search of alternatives. They became fascinated with the visual culture of Tibet and artistic heritage of Buddhism, and enthused by the anti-ideological Chinese art movement, initially appropriating objects and motifs for their visual impact alone. This stood in contrast to past Han representations of Tibet, which sought to make State messages culturally legible through the dress and environment of the characters while denigrating minority culture and religion.

Han painters often represented the land and people as mysterious, holy and pure, but also developed new methods of imaging the relationship between Tibet, the nation, and its peoples by practicing a new, anti-ideological ‘cool realism’ (Ye 2000). The mode of painting is epitomized in Chen Danqing’s *Tibet Series* (1980) four oil paintings of Tibetan farmers, devout pilgrims, and nomads. As Chen’s paintings won acclaim, it was, and remains clearly an image of Tibet the post-trauma nation craves of the pre-modern Other within its borders. Such images, however, freeze Tibetans in a fantasy outside of time and change, creating a romantic realism which fails to represent Tibetans’ lives.



Figure 16 Chen Danqing. Tibet Series: The Shepherd (Muyang ren). 1980. Oil on wood. 80 x 52 cm



Figure 17 Chen Danqing. Tibet Series: Entering the City (Jinsheng). 1981, oil on canvas, 78x63 cm



Figure 18 Chen Danqing. Tibet Series: Pilgrims (Chaosheng). 1980.

Alsop finds a famous group portrait representative of the independent Han artists' ethos. In the painting *Drink to Tibet* by Yu Xiaodong, twenty-three Chinese (and two Tibetan) artists, writers, and filmmakers gathered around a long table, wine glasses in raised hand. Alsop writes, "By and large...[they] came to Tibet to escape the drudgery and regimentation of life in China and to bask in the glow of the mystical vitality of Tibet's culture and people (Alsop 2005)." Han artists in Tibet in the 1980s were thus also engaged in critique of their own society through the appropriation of Tibetan imagery, emblematic of a purity and simplicity outside of politics (Ye 2000), and embracing artistic identities that were defined by bohemian pursuits, autonomy and creative freedom rather than politics.

Han artists going to Tibet was a springboard to national or international fame in some cases, but these young or established artists had limited yet specific direct impacts upon local artistic practices. Firstly, the opening up and interaction with Han artists, Tsewang Tashi observed, led to changes in style. Orthodox socialist realism of the 1960s and 70s, he observed, gave way to another kind of "realism...as another alternative artistic language, which artists employ to express their feelings and thoughts." The first generation of Tibetan artists trained after the socialist realism era did, according to Tsewang Tashi, adopt some "self-exoticizing" in the vein of Chen Danqing, but many Tibetan artists trained in oil painting propaganda turned to romantic realism focused on people, rural scenes, still life, and architecture to recover connections to local identities. Abu, a Tibetan Muslim, painted in a realist style between 1978-1990, focusing on Lhasa's streets, rural landscapes, and portraits of female elders and farmers. *A Corner of the Potala* (1979) shows Tibetans in traditional dress, with spring-like blossoms on a shrub, and above, dangling from a tree limb, could be cloth strips tied on by pilgrims. It constitutes a very early image of cultural and possibly religious revival; tentative in that Potala could almost be any other large Tibetans religious building from the angle of view, but for the very wide shallow steps and ascending walls of maroon and white barely seen at the edge through

trees, and the pilgrims' practice signalled only through the material trace of their devotion, legible only to those familiar with practice (Selected Art by Abu 2005).

Secondly, Han artists have been critiqued by contemporary artists for creating a romantic image of Tibet and Tibetans. Gade explained in 2007, "Up to the present, many Tibetan themes have been painted by Chinese. Many big Chinese artists came to Tibet, but they somehow eventually ended up representing Tibet, through a style of painting [they] associated with Tibet and what they think of Tibet." Thus, while Chen's imagery remains iconic, it is not by any means singular, and is a mode of representation of minorities and Tibetanness familiar through private sector advertising as well as State media. Finally, independent Han artists working in Tibet, it is felt, profited off of exoticizing Tibet, while excluding local Tibetan artists from being seen as Hans' peers, or accorded the same artistic rights and recognition.¹⁶⁷

Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association and Its Founders

The Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA)¹⁶⁸ was founded in 1981, later than but with a parallel structure to other regional or provincial level agencies under the national administration of the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC). The Tibetan painter Amdo Jampa Tsetan was its first Chairman, although the highest levels of leadership since him seem to have been held by Han Chinese artists, the longest serving of whom is Han Shuli, whom I interviewed in 2007.

On the newer west side of town, largely populated by Chinese settlers, between the small shops and restaurants lining a main avenue, is an unmarked turn off for an unpaved lane. It ends at the metal gates of the regional government art association complex. In 2007, a new cement office building was under construction. It was distinctly lacking in aesthetic appeal, mirroring the older Communist drab, block rows of units more than the glitz of new urban development in other parts of the city. Slender, leafless trees were planted equidistant in the bare dirt in rows along the members' identical cement houses and studios.

The Chinese painter Han Shuli lived in one of these houses, where I met him for an interview about the history of the TARAA and his artistic life. Han Shuli became TARAA Chairman and has held numerous leadership positions in the art worlds and politics of Tibet.¹⁶⁹ Joined by Panor, a Tibetan artist and former student of Han Shuli, and my Chinese/Tibetan/English translator, Han Shuli and I sat in his living room, where the coffee tables were cluttered with papers, books, and magazines, and the walls hung with several of his long vertical black and white ink paintings of swans akin to his “Inspired by Tibet” collection (Shuli 2004).

Han Shuli (b.1948, Beijing) came to Tibet over thirty years ago, he said, “for the water, mountains and innocent people, who were gentler and more attractive than my own people.”¹⁷⁰ Particularly in the early years, “despite hardships in making art and basic livelihood and lack of oxygen,” he stayed because he “loved the people.”¹⁷¹ The people and culture have so inspired his artwork that he cannot leave, and so despite his imminent retirement and opportunities to relocate, he is remaining in Lhasa.

But Han Shuli did not come to Tibet solely for personal artistic inspiration. He was a young art student when the Cultural Revolution commenced, and he agreed to being sent to Tibet, as he told me, “on the occasion of [preparation for] the 10 year Anniversary [of the founding of the TAR].”¹⁷² Han Shuli explained, “the exhibition hall in Lhasa was in need of some artists. The Central Academy of Fine Arts (CAFA) in Beijing was to send some artists to the TAR, where the art level was quite poor and following [in the manner of] sending teachers into the countryside [that was occurring] during the Cultural Revolution. They asked if I would go. I had no idea of Tibet, except for a popular song I’d heard and a few historical movies, but others said it was a hard place to live and that the people were very secretive and would never let me ‘in’.

Nonetheless I felt attracted to the idea of going and arrived for the first time in 1973 as a student to help prepare the museum exhibit.”¹⁷³

Han Shuli returned to Beijing to earn his Masters at CAFA (1980-1982). His graduation work, “Flowers of the Grasslands” (*Bangjin Meiduo*), a graphic novella of a devout nomad girl’s hardships and mystical experiences on the Tibetan grasslands, was inspired by his time in Tibet. The work won the Gold Prize at the 1984 Sixth National Art Exhibition in Beijing, reflecting national officials were enthralled by an outsider’s aesthetic renderings of a primitive, ethnic borderland, and securing Han’s rise as a professional artist. Han returned to Lhasa in 1982 to be appointed Secretary General of the new TARAA. Han Shuli’s teacher from Beijing, Yu Youxin, followed his student to Tibet in 1982 and also decided to make Lhasa his adopted home and has long-acted as Vice Chairman of the TARAA.¹⁷⁴

It is through his role with the TARAA that Han Shuli has exerted the greatest influence upon Lhasa’s contemporary artists’ training and career development, and became known for *PuHua*, a style he advocates as an approach to “new Tibetan art”. Han Shuli’s (and the TARAA’s) vision for new Tibetan art has enjoyed the national and international spotlight as he was the curator for two traveling exhibitions, the first large exhibitions of contemporary art from Tibet shown in national museums.¹⁷⁵ The “first group exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art since the founding of the Tibetan Autonomous Region³ⁿ” was a “huge success” in 1999.¹⁷⁶ A similar group of artists, whose ethnicities (Han, Yao and Tibetan) are highlighted in the biographical sketches in the catalogues, are identified as the progenitors of the “New Tibetan Art movement (Han 2005)” as in the *Exhibition of New Tibetan Art in Singapore* (Croft 2005)¹⁷⁷ and *Colorful Chain from the Snowland* (Xiaoke 2004).¹⁷⁸

Han and Yu began practices in the 1980s that have enabled them to lay claim to multiple identities as instrumental agents of the art worlds of Tibet: leaders, curators, producers of contemporary art, philanthropists, and publishers. They engage in private collecting of antiques,¹⁷⁹ supporting restoration and conservation work, publication of books and catalogues,¹⁸⁰ and research travels across the Tibetan plateau, which played an important role of introducing

Tibet's traditional art history to China (China Pictorial 2005).¹⁸¹ Han exhibited domestically and internationally,¹⁸² and published several catalogues of his own artwork in the 1990s.

The Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA) is part of a large complex of government cultural agencies. The Propaganda Bureau of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) oversees the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles (CFLAC),¹⁸³ the umbrella under which the Chinese Artists' Association (CAA) and its subsidiary branches, including the TARAA, now operate.¹⁸⁴ The CFLAC is principally dedicated to the support and promotion of its members,¹⁸⁵ although the mission statements have also expressed its duty to "follow the CCP line" by "serving the people and serving socialism" by devoting efforts to the development of Chinese socialist literature and art, and to "promote unity among ethnic groups" and call upon ethnic Chinese worldwide to "contribute to the reunification of the motherland (Ministry of Culture, P.R.China n.d.)."¹⁸⁶ In turn, the TARAA has oversight of its municipal level branch, the Lhasa Artists Association (LAA), founded in 1997, and subsidiary branches for artists working in specific genres and media, such as literature, dance, painting or calligraphy. Thus the history of the TARAA is as a political unit subservient to Party goals and supervision, and endowed with certain privileges and constraints, which impacts members' artistic practices and discourses in varying degrees.

Today there are over 6000 individual members within this national artists association system. In 2007 the membership of the TARAA was approximately thirty *thangka* painters and two hundred other artists, including the leaders of the TARAA, Tibet University professors, and other contemporary and traditional artists in Lhasa. Every four years, the TARAA convenes a large meeting to choose new regional leaders and conduct a census of its members. Hierarchy is reportedly based upon skill rather than seniority of age, political position or ethnicity, according to TARAA Vice Chairman Bama Zhaxi.

The TARAA's official responsibilities, as Chairman of the TARAA, Han Shuli, and Vice Chairman Bama Zhaxi¹⁸⁷ explained, center on the collecting and exhibiting of art work. Bama

Zhaxi said, “for example, if an exhibit in China needs works from Tibet, we collect and send them.” These days, he noted, exhibitions in Lhasa and Tibet are very rare; more often art works created in Tibet are shown in China or foreign countries.

The associations also established formal career trajectories, in which membership at increasingly higher levels of associations proceeds in large part on the basis of selection into and awards at juried exhibitions. Membership entails privileges including commissions and access to exhibitions, as well as in some cases employment benefits such as stipends, housing and/or studio space, retirement, and insurance. Members of the TARAA were among first TAR artists to go abroad for study and exhibition in the early 1990s, including several Tibet University professors.

In contrast to the rest of the PRC, the “revolutionary” working methodology described by Xu is still employed and referenced in Tibet through the Tibet Artists Association, although less visibly than in the past. Not without irony, a group of artists told me of the time two of them were employed by a cultural bureau’s theater company to create stage backdrops for a New Year’s performance, the biggest of the year. They were instructed to paint a mountainous landscape, and to make it more beautiful, the artists created a sunset scene, the snow reflecting pale pink and orange. A high-ranking official, TAR Party leader, Radi, was brought to survey the entire completed production just before the opening night, and said, “I’ve never seen an orange snow mountain!” the artists reported mockingly, and so they had to paint over it, making the mountains entirely white.¹⁸⁸ From the artists’ perspective, there was nothing artistic about this image whatsoever, but they had little choice but to “correct” it. Such stories underscored the artists’ perception that the time of the Socialist Realist “art worker” had been eclipsed in most art production circles by the reforms of the 1980s, but that its legacy remained strong in Tibet, well into the twenty-first century.¹⁸⁹

The curatorial and artistic practices of Han Shuli and Yu Youxin as TARAA leaders and as artists reflect a specific view of Tibet and its art history. Han Shuli wrote of three Chinese artists “some years older [who] came to Tibetan many years ago” and six Tibetans in their thirties

who were "therefore trained under the new Tibetan order" after 1951 that together as a group of "nine artists is representative of the whole New Tibetan Art movement that has done so much to develop Tibetan art (Han 2005)."¹⁹⁰ Han Shuli sees Tibetan contemporary art as a result of mixing Tibetan "cultural background" and "spectacular scenery" with Han Chinese modernity, and this is reflected in the exhibitions of "contemporary Tibetan art" in the capital, Beijing ((Guangdong) 2003) (Xiaoke 2004) (Jiming 2000) (Shining Pearl of the Snowland - China Tibetan Culture Exhibition 1999).

The so-called New Tibetan Art movement and its signature style, 'rich color painting on canvas' (*puhua*), are inextricably linked to Han Shuli. In his living room, Han Shuli explained the origin of *puhua* to me, linking it to his early years in Tibet, saying,

In the beginning, I saw that *thangka* was painted on material. We lived here and so thought it would be good to paint according to the local practice, so we began to paint on material too, as this approach is very close with Tibetan culture and the artists here, so it came very naturally and spontaneously to our minds... We based it on something that was already here.

Painting on cloth was in contrast, he explained, to the long history in China of painting on paper and to his own art school training, so when he initially began to paint on cloth instead it required many challenging adjustments.¹⁹¹



Figure 19 Han Shuli. Himalayas. 1999.
Rich Color on Canvas. 91.5 x 64 cm
After Xiaoke, Li [Ed.]. Tibet-the
Colorful Chain from the Snowland.

Han Shuli continued, the Chinese and the Tibetans each have their traditional ways of painting, but after thirty years of residence in Tibet, he believes he has found a way to combine them. “Putting the two traditions into one piece, people find it easier to look at and to understand,” Han Shuli said. However, for Han Shuli, this is not merely a combination of materials and techniques and Tibet-inspired subject matter. Han Shuli added, “*Puhua* is a way of thinking about religion and culture. It is not a set distinguishable style. Rather, from the artists’ way—from their thinking, emotion, and the energy they put into the work when they make art about the culture and by using their own imagination—so that the viewer can gain some feeling from it. I do not think much about identifying styles or the different ‘Chinese’ and ‘Tibetan’ elements in the work.” Thus Han Shuli states that artists should follow their own imagination to communicate a feeling about Tibet to viewers, based upon ‘a way of thinking’. As discussed below, this representation of the origin of *puhua* and its place in the development of contemporary Tibetan art is problematic and contested.¹⁹²

Tibetan Socialist Realism

In the 1980s, some Chinese artists formed state-supported collaborations with Tibetan artists. The Kandze School of New Tibetan Art (*mkar mdzes bod kyi ri mo gsar pa*) emerged as a merger of traditional Tibetan *thangs* technique, composition, motifs, and style with ideological celebration of socialist citizenship in the new China of the Open Door and Reform. The Kandze school, named for the eastern Tibetan city in which it emerged with the patronage of the Sichuan Artists Association, established a set of practices that made a stylistic impact that remains visible and celebrated nationally.

Per Kvaerne was the first to describe Kandze New Tibetan Art, “started by two artists: a Tibetan, Rinzin Namgyal, and a Chinese, Mei Ding-kai, who... encouraged [by state support], and having ‘understood the art of the masses,’ decided to find a new path for Tibetan painting’ (Kvaerne 1994).”¹⁹³

‘The Land of Song and Dance’ (1986) is an example of the Kandze school, in which the central figure appears as a multi-armed tantric deity encircled by an aureole of flames and surrounded by an entourage, but is a Tibetan woman in a chupa dress. Her right knee is raised and foot extended in a classic move from Tibetan folk dances, her left hip (unconventionally and seductively) protrudes, and her primary hands are raised, waving a drum and drumstick. The additional arms, without clothing, mimic the bodies of deities, but the hand gestures and implements held in them match no traditional symbolism for deities and here serve to merely accentuate the dance movement. Kvaerne writes, “The message of the painting is totally secular and in complete conformity with the officially promoted myth of ‘minorities’ as exotic, colorful, and above all, given to song and dance (Kvaerne 1994).” The subjects—nomads, farmers and townsfolk—depict a politically motivated and approved message of Tibetan minority people enjoying the work, consumerism, and leisure of life under Deng’s liberalization.

Norbu notes, “however propagandistic and ideological this art form, the fact that some level of Tibetan cultural and religious imagery was incorporated... was considered by many in Tibet to be a significant improvement on the previous dismal state of affair during the Cultural Revolution (Norbu c2006).”¹⁹⁴ But Kvaerne raises the question of the efficacy of such imagery in convincing everyday Tibetans, living with poverty and institutional and popular discrimination in stark contrast to the prosperity and cultural freedoms on canvas, and finds no evidence of Tibetan adoption of the imagery’s institutional meaning.

The return to Tibetan culture in the wake of Hu Yaobang’s 1980 visit to Lhasa and policy reforms was thus also quickly co-opted by the State. Nearly a decade after the publication of Kvaerne’s essay, it stands as an important exploration of the ways in which Tibetan culture was enshrined as primitive other within the State under the guise of cultural autonomy provided by the use of “regional characteristics”. Tibetan culture continues to be deployed and represented in the TAR in the 2000s as Kvaerne encountered in Amdo in the late 1980s: “Official minority folk culture in China is entertainment, circus, show – nothing more.” Kvaerne insightfully notes that

national investment in this myth must be considered in light of Chinese civilization's long standing view of actors and dancers as occupants of the "bottom rung of the social hierarchy." In live spectacles as well as in the visual arts (and other official and private visual culture productions), Tibetans are all, and only, demoted to performing culture (Kvaerne 1994). This trend must be seen as setting the stage for the coming decades of representational strategies of the state.

Tibet University

Tibet University was founded in 1985 with an important Department of Fine Art, with divisions for teaching and research, and courses in painting history, music, and dance.¹⁹⁵ The art department has thrived, and was renamed in 2008 The School of Art at Tibet University.

Tibet University was also an important, if unlikely, site for the revival of traditional, Buddhist artistic practices after 1980. Tenpa Rabten, one of the senior-most *thangka* painters remaining in Tibet, having been highly trained prior to 1959, was invited to become a founding faculty member, despite his lack of conventional academic credentials (GZ Beauty 2007).¹⁹⁶ While the traditional training methods of private mentoring of students by masters in ateliers was also revived, the creation of the *thangka* program at the Party administered university was endorsement to embrace Tibet's religious art history and transmit techniques and pedagogies from a generation trained before 1959 to those born after. Tenpa Rabten re-established *thangka* lineages in Lhasa by skillfully creating a curriculum of art history, restoration, and iconographic and painting training, which has grown to include a Masters degree (Tashi 2008) (Dorji 2008) (GZ Beauty 2007).

Tenpa Rabten reflected on the modern sensibilities of the traditional Tibetan artist in the PRC, saying "The traditional Tibetan painting is different from realism. What's the difference? Every nation has its own painting characteristics. As to the Tibetan tradition painting, every work is created by the artists' imagination instead of by the imitation of other works. The Tibetan artists have never had the tradition of imitating. Most of the Buddhas on the paintings are nearly

the same. However, artistically speaking, they are different. Besides the expression, the skills are very special. For example, we draw a cloud which is very lifelike but it's different from the real one. Despite this, every child would say it is a cloud when asked what it is (GZ Beauty 2007).” By this, Tenpa Rabten establishes the traditional artist as also original and creative, but working within a unique form distinct from realism and abstraction, in which specific techniques and practices are mastered to communicate to viewers in a special way.

The university was also home in the 1980s to the first Tibetan radical innovators in post-Cultural Revolution art. The art department hired as their primary faculty members Tibetans who had been trained in China, including Gonkar Gyatso, Tsering Dorje, Gade, Kelsang Dorje, and Tsewang Tashi. The first Tibetan self-portraits in oil painting were produced by faculty members Tashi Tsering and Tsewang Tashi. Both appear influenced by exposure to the European masters Durer, Rembrandt, Courbet, the faces expressive, and the light and shadows dramatic. Tashi Tsering's self-portrait appears to have been the first published, in 1991, but Tsewang Tashi's also dates to the 1980s.

Tsewang Tashi (b.1963, Lhasa) graduated from the Central Nationalities University in Beijing in 1984 and immediately joined the art department faculty there for several years, before returning to Lhasa and joining the faculty at Tibet University, where he would later serve as Dean of the Art Academy and, in 2003, a co-founder of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. He returned to Tibet, he said, just as

...the CCP's policies toward the minorities also began to change, after the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP, and traditional Tibetan culture had revived to a certain extent. Books on Tibetan culture, histories, literature and religion were published, which was impossible before. My colleagues and I were fascinated by this phenomenon. We were discussing a sort of cultural renaissance (Tashi, Art in Process unpublished manuscript).

The Tibetan artists in Lhasa at the time were strongly impressed with the revival of Tibetan culture and the promise it offered younger Tibetans to establish a connection with their heritage and witness religious practices, in some cases for the first time in their lives. At the time

of his self-portraits, Tsewang Tashi was invested in an intense process of “root searching,” an exploration of ethnic identity. He employed both a soft realism depicting village scenes and monastic ritual, and surrealist portrayals bridging the often discordant experiences of his travels across the plateau in search of ethnic authenticity with his inner journey of personal discovery.

Tsering Dorje was the first to use thick, swirling, vibrantly colored oil paints, which many observers point out is reminiscent of van Gogh. Tsering Dorje’s subjects are architectural landmarks of religious and historical significance, such as the Potala and the Jokhang in Lhasa, and monasteries and temples in other Tibetan towns. The structures, while immediately recognizable, are also somewhat abstracted, in the refusal of straight lines, actual angles and proportions and the imagined color schemes. In *Potala* shows bright red and yellow colors, irregular angles, and interesting perspective. These elements position the work as avant-garde for its time and as slightly unsettling and shocking, an alternative to the romantic and ‘cool realism’ of contemporaneous Han Chinese artists. He became a leader of the TARAA, where he has remained a vocal supporter of Tibetan artistic development, despite his artistic style, in his own words in 2007, failing to evolve beyond this style and technique.¹⁹⁷

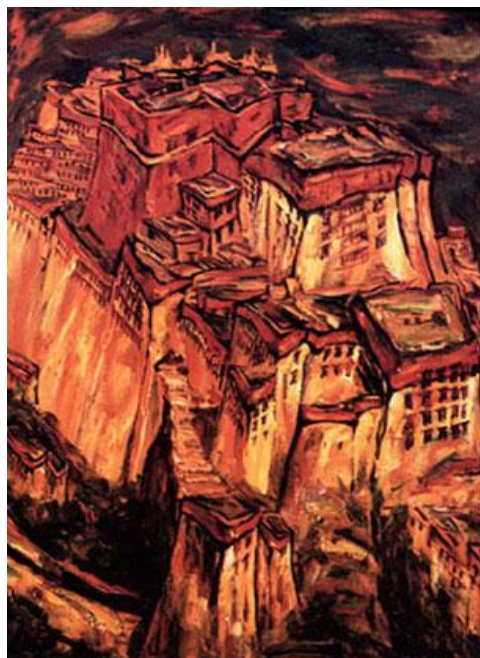


Figure 20 Tsering Dorje.
Potala. 2011. oil on canvas.

The professors and instructors represent a diversity of conceptualizations of art and artists and their methods evidence the dynamism, experimentation, and newfound artistic identities of the time, as well as concerns about developing themselves, a movement, and the transmission of tradition after ruptures to their own cultural and artistic inheritance.¹⁹⁸ The exhilarating revelation of the history of western modern art and local revival that together inspired a commitment to the formation of an indigenous artistic modernity, also inspired some of these individuals to pioneer the first independent artists association, the Sweet Tea House (active 1985-1987).

The Sweet Tea House Art Group

The first generation of artists in Tibet to regularly produce modern, non-religious, post-ideological art began their careers after the Cultural Revolution, in the era of Deng's Open Door Policy. These Tibetan artists were more likely to be involved in both official and unofficial art circles, and deeply inspired by the reforms of the 1980s. They were both self-taught and trained; with training by Han artists in Tibet or sent to study in mainland China, primarily in either the Fine Art department of the Central Nationalities University (CNU) and the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA), both in Beijing. They were somewhat exposed to international avant garde, and were intrigued by the cultural renaissance underway, and their own hybrid identities. This manifest in their artistic practices, Tsewang Tashi explained, as "Some artists base their works on traditional Tibetan thangka techniques, but incorporate elements of realism, surrealism in drawing, chiaroscuro and perspective. The themes are contemporary or non-religious. Some other artists were inspired by modern western paintings, and they used Tibetan traditional motifs and a free arrangement of composition and color. These artists are interested in making new, synthesized paintings."¹⁹⁹ Among the first six young Tibetan men sent to Beijing, the CAFA graduate, Gonkar Gyatso, also briefly joined the Tibetan University faculty, but is remembered in Lhasa as the main founder of the radical 1980s Sweet Tea House Artists Group.

Gonkar Gyatso's generation were born and raised just after 1959, and went to Communist Party administered schools during the Cultural Revolution. As children, they lacked adult

comprehension of the annihilation of tradition from daily social and family life around them. Gonkar Gyatso relates entirely believing the Communist, atheist versions of history and social and political theory with which he was indoctrinated, in Chinese language, through high school. Then, two experiences for which officials selected him, called this training profoundly into question. Sent to the countryside to assist art professionals with education and documentation, he was shocked to see that peasants were not thriving, as in the propaganda, but were incredibly destitute. Secondly, he was selected to attend the Central Nationalities University art school in Beijing with five other Tibetans, an experience of being a minority that forced awareness of their ethnic difference from the Han majority and faced experiences of discrimination. Wondering what made them different and “Tibetan,” Gonkar describes an epiphany while flying over the Tibetan plateau returning to Lhasa from Beijing. As the plane left eastern China further behind and soared over the Tibetan plateau, Gonkar Gyatso was struck by the high contrasts of strong sun and deep shadow, the sharpness of the features and vastness of the barren plains and rolling ranges of mountains and river valleys. Seeing the dramatic and unique landscape, he realized the painting techniques he had been taught in Beijing—the paper, brush, and ink techniques of classical Chinese painting, with their landscapes of misty pines and soft lines—had arisen to suit a different landscape and a different cultural perception of it. They could not be exported to his homeland, or of use in expressing his feelings for it, and he resolved to create a new Tibetan art.²⁰⁰ This moment was, for Gonkar Gyatso, the dawning of a commitment to inventing not merely his own personal style, but also a modern, Tibetan way of painting.²⁰¹

Around this time, Gonkar Gyatso painted an abstract landscape. More so than his painting classes, Gonkar appreciated opportunities to peruse art books from the West in the Beijing bookstores. Exposure to cubism and abstract expressionism had given him confidence and encouraged experimentation, which show in this early approach to rendering his homeland in a non-traditional, and non-Chinese, artwork. Gonkar was already an accomplished artist, having been selected to work on a Tibetan themed mural in the People’s Hall in Beijing, but insatiably

curious about western art, he had been bored by the end of his course of study in Chinese painting (*gombi* and *zhong hua*) and sought creative stimulation first in the bookstores of Beijing and then in rapidly changing 1980s Lhasa. However, feeling “physically Tibetan, but mentally Chinese” due to his upbringing during the Cultural Revolution, his exposure to western philosophy and art accentuated discomfort with his lack of knowledge of Tibetan art, history and religion, and Gonkar felt a new art needed to have more Tibetan influences (G. Gyatso 2005).

One incident propelled Gonkar Gyatso along with Gonkar Gyatso, Nortse, Ang Chen/Ang Qing, Abu, and Wei Gond, all Tibetan artists who met to discuss their work in Tibetan tea houses to take the development of modern Tibetan art into their own hands. Several of these young Tibetan painters had submitted works to a national minorities youth exhibition, but their works were all rejected, presumably because they failed to represent expectations for colorful and traditional ethnic minorities. The rejection galvanized a sense not only of incredulity, but of responsibility to show their work to a Tibetan public in whom they hoped to stimulate conversations about Tibetan identity and culture. Gonkar Gyatso’s closest friend and fellow artist, Nortse (Norbu Tsering), recalled to me in 2007 that,

At that time we thought we needed to make a group, and all the members were quite innocent then. We believed we had to work very hard to improve, and prove ourselves to society; all the members were very enthusiastic. At that time, we never thought of making money by selling our work, we just loved our work (painting). There was no one at that time to organize a gallery or exhibits or anything. We just talked to a tea house owner and he said ok, once a year we can show our work there, so we did. The local government paid a lot of attention to the work. Reporters from the television station interviewed the members. There weren’t many tourists in those days but somehow some of them found out about it, and they came too. We sold one or two works to them. They were not expensive, but Tibetans and Chinese at that time couldn’t afford to buy paintings. Then, life was very poor, and by comparison now is much improved, but still they don’t buy paintings! So, we still need a change in ways of thinking, too.

In Nortse’s view, the members considered it the social role of artists to make an impression upon society and to manage their own promotion, market, and exhibitions. The group²⁰² took the name the Sweet Tea House Artist Group (*ja mngarmo rimo tshogs pa*), for the improvised exhibition spaces. A photograph shows five members in front of a sign announcing an

exhibition on April 5, 1987, which reads in Tibetan “Sweet Tea Group Art Exhibition” and in English “The Third Painting Exhibition of the Tea Houses’ School Some for Sale held by young Tibetans” with a humorous logo of a mustachioed yak.



Figure 21 Artists (including Angching, left, Notse, second from left, and Gonkar Gyatso, second from right) pose in front of a sign that reads "The Third Painting Exhibition of the Tea Houses' School."

The third or fourth exhibition, as Gonkar Gyatso recounts, attracted more attention, and soon afterwards they began to receive pressure to admit Han artists to their group. The association felt Han membership was antithetical to their explicit goals for Tibetans creating new Tibetan art, and this pressure is cited as one reason for their disbanding.²⁰³ Additionally, by then the political protests of 1987 had sharply altered the milieu of Lhasa from one of opening and relaxing to martial law and fear. Gonkar Gyatso went into exile in India before immigrating to London, and Ang Ching and Abu took up business opportunities, and these broader political contexts and personal choices also were factors in the group’s dissolution.²⁰⁴ Other artists had similar formative experiences of the interconnections between art and identity in the 1980s, but for various reasons did not join the Sweet Tea House group, instead pursuing similar quests in other ways.²⁰⁵ Tibet’s first democratic, artist-run association however made a deep impression upon original members and subsequent ‘generations’ of artists, and was an inspiration to artists at the turn of the twenty-first century.²⁰⁶

Some of these burgeoning movements of the 1980s were captured in PRC publications in the early 1990s, signaling the first published recognition of the phenomenon, as in the 1991

survey titled *Contemporary Tibet Art*, and subsequent exhibition catalogues. Published artists included those in juried exhibitions and official award winners, producing a limited representation of art of the time but also marking a turning point increased official support for enhanced visibility and professional promotion of contemporary artists.

Rauschenberg Visits Lhasa

In 1985, in an event that remains utterly unparalleled, the American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg visited and exhibited in Beijing and Lhasa on his Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange (ROCI) tour.²⁰⁷ His works from that endeavor received mixed critical reviews at home and abroad (R. Smith 1991).²⁰⁸ Rauschenberg said of his exhibit at the Tibet Revolutionary Hall in Lhasa that he struggled to create works for Tibet "because they have a respect for all things (...), there is no hierarchy between the materials ... I thought they were so close to my own sensibility that I think that this was the most difficult exhibition I had to do (Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Art, Nice 2006)."²⁰⁹ Undoubtedly Rauschenberg's visit to China also had a "major impact on the evolution of contemporary" art concepts and practices in Lhasa and Beijing (Ye 2000).²¹⁰ For artists in Lhasa in 1985, Rauschenberg's visit seems to have not been so much galvanizing as bewildering. Rauschenberg's views on art, his use of media other than paint, including found objects in the construction of "Combines," were extremely radical for Lhasa where for decades artists had been constrained to painting Socialist Realism, and before this, the strictures of *thangka*. Even when the latter reflected the artist's faith, the completely free expression of the individual's thoughts, feelings, and aesthetic sensibilities, which western art represented and Rauschenberg embodied before them, was still novel to artists in Tibet. Where Rauschenberg perceived Tibetan proclivities to forego material hierarchies, Tibetans did not readily accept any and all objects as "art".

At the time of his visit, as several other artists narrated to me in 2006, none of them comprehended Rauschenberg's ideas, and they all found his creative output perplexing. Nortse considers himself to have reached a belated understanding of Rauschenberg's dictum in Lhasa:

“It is art if you call it art.” Nortse was the first Lhasan artist to create installations of found materials, which he installed in the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild Gallery in 2006, stating: “This is art.” He laughed that he wanted to be the “the first Tibetan Rauschenberg,” but in resurrecting Rauschenberg’s impact, he also lamented that Lhasa had not had a real contemporary art exhibition, nor advancement conceptually, since his visit twenty years prior.²¹¹ However, in the 1980s artists began to embrace the power to proclaim personal expression in a range of materials and topics, diversified their associations and practices, and, like Rauschenberg, created works and concepts that made a strong impact on discourse and practices, with effects that unfolded over long period of time.

In the 1980s, for artists in eastern China, “post-revolutionary China was a time of testing boundaries of official tolerance and experimentation with the newly accessible Western art ideas (Ye 2000).” It seems artists in Tibet did not indulge in a period of political backlash against Beijing, but were moved by the promise of (re)discoveries of their Tibetan culture and creative freedoms. Compared to the few dozen Chinese artists who came to Tibet in the late 1970s and early 1980s, and the ongoing expeditions out of Lhasa by Han Shuli and his friends, only two Tibetan artists, Nortse and Tsewang Tashi, undertook major travel on the plateau in the 1980s as a deliberate technique to advance their artistic life or as an artistic endeavor,²¹² although the artistic and ethnic identities of Gonkar Gyatso, Gade, Pewang, and others have been influenced by their movements back and forth between Lhasa and Beijing. Issues of ethnicity and tradition were the greatest sources of inspiration and conflicted feelings.

In the 1980s multiple communities of artists emerged and *converged* for the first time in Tibet: Tibetan, Han artists employed by the Party, and independent Han artists, and collaborations between them. In various combinations, they formed the art movements (independent Han and Tibetan Socialist Realism) and art associations (the Tibet Autonomous Region (TARAA) and the Lhasa Artists Associations, the art department at Tibet University, and the Sweet Tea House art group) that have defined Lhasa’s contemporary art worlds for more than three decades.

Drifting: 1990s

For Gonkar Gyatso, Nortse, Tsewang Tashi and other artists, the enduring impact in the 1980s of western contemporary artists seems to have been their example of originality, their role in society, their experimentation with materials and techniques, and finally their conception of “art” itself. But the exuberance of the early and mid 1980s was tamped down by political protests and 1987, 1988 and 1989, and the periods of martial law and repressive atmosphere that the ended almost a decade of reform, revival, and relative relaxation in which creative cultural activities had thrived. This situation was mirrored somewhat nationally, as the Tiananmen Square protest was brutally crushed and democracy movements repressed in 1989. However, the artistic aftermath in Beijing saw both the flight to the west of artists and a rebound of counter-culture and underground avant-garde art, neither of which transpired in Lhasa.

Artistic activity in the late 1980s and 1990s was limited. At least six artists mounted solo exhibitions in Tibet, Beijing, Sydney, Berlin and New York, but these seem isolated instances that did not garner sustained international or domestic attention, although the experiences afforded a glimpse of international art world practices for those artists who were traveling outside of China for the first time.²¹³ Some were organized by the TARAA, but others appear to have been organized independent Tibet Autonomous Region Artists Association influence, and demonstrated that foreign recognition of artistic merit could by-pass the official career trajectory previously established.

The First Artists’ Gallery

The Sweet Tea House group seeded the possibilities for independent Tibetan artists to collectively organize. Another milestone for the Lhasa art scene was the opening of the first gallery for contemporary art. It was independently artist-run (but officially permitted “in partnership with the government museum department”²¹⁴) for a year, from approximately 1990-1991. A prior commercial gallery had been briefly opened by a Chinese artist and his wife, and may have helped to germinate the idea amongst Tibetan artists. However, the founders, Nortse

and Ang Ching, were less driven by the commercial prospects than they were by the inspiration from their participation in the democratic, artists-focused Sweet Tea House Artists Association, and an impression of museums as places for people to view art objects. In the absence of any such institutions for art,

Nortse says, “we thought then that a gallery should be run by artists, that it was our responsibility to do it. I like to be different, it’s my personality, so really, with no other reason, I just opened it.” Nortse said in 2007,

The location was below the Potala, but since then it has been destroyed...I was also an artist then, and thought it would be interesting to do because we’d never seen a gallery before, even in China, at that time...We thought ‘if we put some paintings on the wall, this is enough.’ That was the thinking at the time! Just put paintings on a wall and then you can name it a “gallery” and people will come to see it, because it would be the only one!

Tibetan artists brought their works to the gallery, which had “no set prices. Artists would just say, ‘sell this for whatever you can get for it!’” Nortse recalled with amusement.

However, a combination of factors—a lack of infrastructure to support further growth, lack of access to markets other than a small tourist industry, the dissolution of the Sweet Tea House, and the soured political environment (in which the authorities had begun a ban on images of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama, instituting visual censorship)—significantly slowed momentum among the Tibetan avant-garde. Artists who were active at the start of the decade but who were not employed by Tibet University, including Nortse, Ang Ching, and Keltse, left art to pursue entrepreneurial endeavors and state employment, but returned to Lhasa’s art circles in the 2000s.²¹⁵ Gonkar Gyatso summarized the period from the late 1980s to the turn of the century, saying there was very little awareness or interest in contemporary art, and it was “quite a hard time for Tibetan artists, but, for whatever reason, we continued to work hard and believe in what we were doing.”²¹⁶ After closing the gallery, Nortse said of the decade in which he does not appear to have produced art that he was nonetheless “always paying attention.”²¹⁷

Beyond the Past

A new generation of Tibetans, born since 1959, was galvanized in the 1980s to examine and formulate expressions of their cultural and ethnic identities within the nation (Upton 1995). Shakya and Hartley trace the history of contemporary Tibetan literature as a manifestation of collective anxieties and insecurities, particularly in the 1980s (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008) (T. Shakya 2000) (L. Hartley, *Heterodox Views and the New Orthodox Poems: Tibetan Writers in the Early and Mid-Twentieth Century* 2008). Shakya boldly asserts that modern literature in Tibet was only born in a post-Cultural Revolution Tibet in China, which brought Tibet's first broad-based encounters with a modern technologically advanced society imbued with materialist ideology (T. Shakya, *The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers* 2000).²¹⁸ Shakya writes, "the missionary zeal of the new Communist regime was focused on incorporating Tibet into the great "motherland," and in doing so to "civilize" this underdeveloped, backward region. In this regard, there are many similarities between western colonial rule and Chinese colonization of Tibet. In both cases, colonialism caused a dislocation of identity and traditional epistemology in the indigenous social system and culture (T. Shakya, *The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers* 2000)."

Shakya writes that after massive trauma and with newfound opportunity for cultural expression after 1980, Tibetans plunged into fervent cultural debates. Regarding literature, the main questions were, "What is Tibetan literature? What should be the defining factor: the ethnic origin of the author, the subject matter, or the language?" Waves of opinion and published work under the banner of modern literature oscillated between written language and author's ethnicity as most definitive of "Tibetan". Tibetan intellectuals, considering broadly the state of Tibetan culture at the outset of revival, split in their views: "Traditionalists in the community argued that the weight of intellectual labor should be directed towards restoring what had been lost and destroyed; ... At the same time, a group of young intellectuals believed that the main task facing Tibet was what they called "innovation (T. Shakya, *The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers* 2000)."²¹⁹

Modernity is often characterized by breaks in the social fabric that may be gradual or sudden and radical, as in the case of Tibet's colonial encounter with Chinese modernity, but even when the 'new' is championed by 'innovators,' modernization also entails particular anxieties. In *The Past is a Foreign Country*, Lowenthal (1999) invokes a range of cultural forms to explore the past as a source of enrichment and a burden. The past "as a focus of personal and national identity and as a bulwark against massive and distressing change," is a powerful force shaping the present. That past often appears as "tradition" (Schaeffer, Kapstein and Tuttle 2013) (Shils 2006) (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983).

Contemporary Tibetan artists were among the cultural "innovators" of the 1980s. They sought a visual language that would be both recognizably Tibetan (and therefore rooted in "tradition") and modern in its approach to art and art making. This can be placed within a larger cultural context where it may be read as symptomatic of pervasive cultural anxieties. For Tibetan writers and artists in the 1980s and 1990s, coping with change was managed through a search for the past, expressed in new forms.

Modern Tibetan literature, which springs from authors' imaginations, as Shakya defines it, was only birthed in the early 1980s, developed by the 'innovators' (T. Shakya, *The Waterfall and Fragrant Flowers* 2000). However, another view of Tibetan modernity traces its emergence in art and intellectual history to significantly pre-date—by decades if not centuries—the founding of the People's Republic of China and its subsequent annexation of Tibet. Facets of modernity in intellectual Tibetan histories emerged between the seventeenth to twentieth centuries (J. Gyatso, *Experience, Empericism, and the Fortunes of Authority: Tibetan Medicine and Buddhism on the Eve of Modernity* 2011). For visual arts if not literary arts, "modern art" is seen as an indigenous development, perhaps going back to the seventeenth century Tenth Karmapa, Choying Dorje, but certainly birthed by Gendun Choephel and Amdo Jampa's recourse to imagination and new technologies. "Contemporary art," however, is not merely a resurrection of indigenous modernity post-Mao, but, like new forms of Tibetan literature, crucially shaped by the historical experiences

of radical political change and cultural influences of Communist China, and thus emerges only after 1980 as well.

Artists in the early 1980s were enthused by the revival of culture, which was embodied as a sense of cultural responsibility in the mid 1980s, and then shifted again by the end of the decade to disillusionment. Initially, they perceived their practices to be informed by a mission to consciously identify and distinguish those sensibilities inherent to their Tibetanness, and those formed by exposure to international and modern artistic trends. Their goal was to merge them, and mature this approach into a nationalist style, with each individual artist also developing a personal artistic identity and unique output. Finding little support or outlets for this quest, some attempted to create entire art worlds from scratch, acting as artists, organizers, curators, agents, and gallery owners.

According to Tsewang Tashi, the Tibetan contemporary art pulse of the time was characterized by diversification. Non-traditional art emerged which may have been based on techniques or themes from religious art, but to which artists were not bound or could freely incorporate the influences of realism, surrealism, impressionism and abstract expressionism.²²⁰ Nortse was the first Tibetan artist to work in non-painting media and to do outdoor performance and installation in the late 1980s, inspired by the Han avant-garde and a desire for true experimentalism. No single style or approach became predominant, and, Gade reflected, many artists became lost in the explosion of symbols to depict Tibetanness and the sudden plethora of art schools from the west and China to which they were exposed. He wrote,

For a long time Tibetan Buddhism had a strong and undeniable influence on many Tibetan artists. I myself was under such influence in my early days and you can see the magic and secret spell of Buddhism, with its symbols and icons reflected in my paintings. In my studies I explored techniques that would allow me to express the themes I was then inspired by, but slowly I started questioning myself, my art, and my life and realized I was getting lost down the wrong path. Firstly, I only had a superficial understanding of Tibetan Buddhism so by trying to represent it in my work, my ability fell short of my wishes. I was running the risk of depicting the myth of ancient Tibet that you can find in textbooks, or the legendary land of magic that people talk so much about, while what I really wanted was to paint my Tibet, the one I grew up in and belong to (Gade 2005).

Gade's description of the influences and efforts to be cultural, particularly in the environment of religious revival, dominated ethnic anxieties in the 1980s. They were also aware of images of Tibetanness being created by others. "Up to the present," Gade stated, "many Tibetan themes have been painted by Chinese. Many big Chinese artists came to Tibet, but they somehow eventually represented Tibet, a style of painting associated with Tibetan artists and what they think of Tibet." Gade is referring to Han Shuli and the artists of the TARAA, and also to independent Chinese artists like Chen Danqing, who reflected outsiders' fascination with Tibet for a foreign audience. The internal conflict generated by burdens to be cultural agents amidst their own confusion gave way in the 1990s to acknowledgement of individual goals and values. For working artists, the quest for personal style and cultural identity became more subtle or sophisticated in the 1990s. Tsewang Tashi abandoned the "root searching" journeys across the plateau and painting of rustic and religious scenes, surrealist compositions, and ambiguous self portraits. He turned to landscapes as a personal subject, rooting his work in his own sense of place and experiences of Lhasa. Art practices had begun to turn to more personal and more contemporary concerns and interests. In doing so, they also began to meaningfully fill the void of indigenous voices in representations of Tibet.

"Art" and "Artist" in the 1980s – 1990s

Artists' perspectives and experiences may be read as specific manifestations of collective anxieties in the 1980s and 1990s, which had two foci: loss and ethnicity. In the aftermath of destruction and persecution, return to tradition and religion was not only a renaissance for artistic inspiration; rebuilding was one facet of assessing and coping with all that had been violently lost. Artists and art students could see the monasteries and temples which had very recently become ruins; surveying the artwork and copying the faded murals became studies in art historical styles and sources of visual appropriation, particularly for their Han teachers. Those who came of age after 1959 struggled to relate to their artistic heritage, and its influence only begins to appear after the late 1980s. While artists in Tibet were enthused to create a modern art, they could not, for

reasons both within the larger PRC and within their own Tibetan communities, imagine doing so apart from a collective, cultural and ethnic position. In the face of near annihilation and continued pressure to assimilate, they had to be cultural spokespersons for a Tibet that had survived, but was still under threat. This was a tremendous pressure, in addition to the daily needs for livelihoods and adaptation to post-Mao colonial occupation, was too great a burden for many.

Secondly, the heightened awareness of ethnicity was pervasive. For artists this dawning of difference was both artistic and political: between the 1960s and 1980s Tibetans realized ethnicity was directly related to sets of unique painting techniques, materials, and styles and which preceded politics. Tibetans who studied in Beijing also experienced the discrimination of urban Han, which heightened awareness of ethnic difference. Tibetans' status as minorities within a multiethnic nation was far from clear when restoration of 'ethnic characteristics' was encouraged after 1980, and trepidation increased as religious and political expression was later suppressed.

Art organizations and institutions became the arenas within which the majority of Lhasa's Tibetan and Han artists operate as members and leaders of one or more associations. Artist associations, both official affiliates and independent of the Party, control opportunities and parameters for artists' livelihoods, exhibitions, and, in some cases, style and content; and this has important implications for the future of modern Tibetan culture and its representation at home and abroad.

Despite encountering obstacles, Lhasa artists' novel experience of attempting to represent Tibet as they perceived and experienced it, rather than as receptors of outsiders' projections and expectations, was incredibly empowering and set the stage for the prolific and simulating era ahead. At the close of the 1990s, the balance tipped from cultural representation to personal expression as the stronger point of departure. Eventually, alternatives emerged for art creation to function as deeply connected to the past on the one hand, without sacrificing individual experience on the other.

Artists embraced identities based in individual, original expression and pursuit of experimental forms and methods. Art became secular, personal, and imaged collectivity—by and for Tibetans—for the first time in this period of dramatic change.

At the Start of the Twenty-First Century: 2003-Present

Lhasa art worlds were changed by the practices and discourses of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, founded in 2003. Much to the members' and observers' surprise, within ten years, they are credited with accomplishing, or inspiring, the rise of independent, non-governmental alternatives to artistic expression, exhibiting and organizing, engaging markets, and having significantly encouraged the emergence of a pan-Tibetan contemporary art movement worldwide. Thus, the fifth and current phase of Tibetan artistic practice to emerge in the past century is defined by the rise of Tibetan contemporary artists within either existing or newly created infrastructure sufficient to sustain their ideological and artistic values and practices.

Unprecedented diversity and the spawning of unofficial art has attracted foreign art world participants who have invested, collected, mounted exhibitions and published catalogues of their works, all outside of the domestic, official art infrastructure. This activity has made contemporary Tibetan art from Lhasa a global, not domestic, phenomenon, the visibility of which has spurred a feeling amongst Tibetan artists worldwide that they belong to a coherent movement. Herein, however, I focus on artistic activity pertaining to Lhasa artists' own discourses concerning their aesthetic formation, conceptualizations of art, and communication goals. These practices and discourses, and the political and social contexts in which they take place, can be productively compared across the art production sites introduced in the previous era, namely the TARAA, TU and independent or unaffiliated Han Chinese and Tibetan artists in Lhasa, with the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. By doing so, contemporary art in Lhasa may be seen as a site for the contestation of representations, a social process, and local mediation of rich and troubled pasts, and the colonial and global present.

The Tibetan “contemporary” period in art, literature, and other cultural and intellectual currents clearly commences as a post-1980 phenomenon and in art, especially develops post-2001. Contemporary artists locate themselves as inheritors of an early modern lineage, but differentiated from them by having come of age in the post-Mao era’s dramatically different social context than their modern forbearers. Recognizing this, artists began after 2000 to organize into independent associations which invoke this lineage with the culturally resonant names the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, for the early twentieth century artist and intellectual, and the Zhunnu Dahmeh (*gZhu nu Da med*), who take their name from the title of the first Tibetan novella, *The Incomparable Youth*. This gesture signals something critical to understand: in the moment of birthing a contemporary art movement, they look to their early modern past for precedents of indigenous modernization and courageous innovation.

Certain artistic themes become trends in Lhasa’s tight art circles. In mid-2000s, many artists worked with the silhouette of a classical Buddhist form, such as the Buddha and the reclining demoness of Tibetan mythology, and filled in the shape with novel content. In the works “Sleeping Buddha” by Gade (a member of TARAA and TU professor but artistically aligned with the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild he helped found) and “Shangri-la” by Han Shuli (Chairman of the TARAA) both artists employ the silhouette of the reclining Buddha on a spacious background, filled in with intricate details. In Han Shuli’s work, a religious, traditional Tibetan landscape in muted tones is interrupted by grey splotches, creating the appearance of a mural that has been damaged and exposes the cement beneath. The image creates a romantic attachment to a fading time and a precariously enshrined relic. Gade’s work, in contrast, situates the Buddha amid textured, luminous gold, and fills in the shape with a tile-like arrangement of thumbnail portraits of historic, religious, mythic, cartoon, and commercial figures. They speak to his Tibet, in which Elvis, Charlie Chaplin, Ronald McDonald, cupid, Lama Tsongkhapa, doctors, policemen, soldiers, Mao, King Tsongtsen Gampo, Superman, monks, a Karmapa lama, and his own nuclear family portrait all abide in equanimity within the Buddha’s shape. Gade’s paintings from this

time used popular “iconic elements,” he said, in “an effort to give reality a more authentic appearance (Gade 2005).” Despite the similarity in their approach to composition, the paintings communicate very differently about contemporary Tibet as a place of romantic nostalgia, or vibrant contemporary life. In another work by Gade, which more closely resembles the palette and effects in Han Shuli’s work, the landscape is not a religious and timeless one, but marked with skyscrapers, factories, and blotched with pollution; again, Gade opts for presentation of reality in *The Reclining Buddha of New Tibet*.

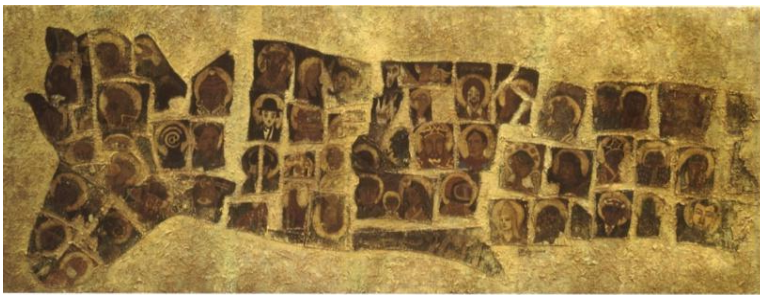


Figure 22 Sleeping Buddha. mixed media on linen: mineral colour, acrylic, Chinese ink with appliquéd details, 2004, 26.5 x 74 inches.



Figure 23 Han Shuli. Shangri-la. Rich color on canvas, 2002, 96.5 cm x 130 cm. After Tibet-The Colourful Chain from the Snowland



Figure 24 Gade. The Reclining Buddha of new Tibet, Mixed media on canvas, 2008, 78-3/4 x 26-3/8".

While there were topics or styles or techniques that spanned artists in various affiliations, there were also ideological, social, and personal elements of artistic identities and practices that set some artists apart, specifically from the methods and goals of the official artists associations. For these artists, there was an urgency about their work that revealed a deep and profound commitment to Tibetanness and sustaining this cultural identity into the twenty-first century. As we will see below, contemporary artists grapple with the present, and all its humor, confusion, and passions, in personal and dynamic ways.

Gedun Choephel Artists Guild

In 2003, a group of twelve Tibetan and Chinese artists founded the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild (GCAG) based on their shared goals for the development of contemporary Tibetan art and artists in Lhasa. These included the desire to represent the Tibet they know, enjoy the support of a community of artists to freely work in any style, media, or subject, and provide spaces for exhibition and discussion of members' works and ideas. Their most fervent wish was to contribute to the formation of a contemporary Tibetan art, one that expressed their modern Tibet and communicated beyond it. In this orientation, they felt akin to and inspired by Gedun Choephel, the visionary reformist, patriot, and cosmopolitan, and organized in his namesake despite having little access to his surviving attributable artwork. The communion of artists had most in common conceptually anyway, so the inspiration of Gedun Choephel's views were more important than his actual visual productions. After some discussion, Gade penned their mission statement, quoted here in full:

Usually groups are formed through someone's initiative. However, this particular Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild came together naturally through shared experiences and common interests. We were all born in the turbulent 1960s and 70s. We lived through the rationing period of Chairman Mao, and remember his passing away. We also have experienced the radical modernizing changes brought about by Deng Xiao Ping throughout China.

Like other young people, we like to keep up with the time and trends, but we also respect and value the traditional aspects of our unique cultural aspects of our unique cultural heritage.

Some of us were born here in Tibet, and some have come from other places. However, we always stick to drawing out originality and inspiration from the new multifaceted Tibet, which is far beyond the image of many outsiders, thus, with our shared ideas and vision, we have formed this Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild in 2003, the very year of the centenary birth anniversary of 20th century Tibet's great leading intellectual and artist, Gedun Choephel, an inspiration whose spirit is living in us to this day.

We do not wish to simply make a living from our art, but wish to contribute to the development of contemporary art. We want to faithfully show our innermost thoughts and feelings through art by whatever medium we choose to use.

While the group emphasizes what they share, no style of painting unites them. Alsop writes, "There is no 'school' in this group, no movement other than an attempt to express in their painting what they see, feel and experience; and if we notice similarities, they are those of shared experience in an ancient but rapidly changing world (Alsop, Contemporary Painting from Tibet 2005)." Gade writes, "My generation has grown up with *thangka* painting, martial arts, Hollywood movies, Mickey Mouse, Charlie Chaplin, Rock 'n' Roll and McDonalds.... We wear jeans and T-shirts and when we drink a Budweiser it is only occasionally that we talk about 'Buddhahood'." Therefore, he continues, in his own work he now looks "for signs of a culture that speaks of age as well as modernity, as if my brush is a thread that connects the past and the present. I depict Tibet as a society in transition, which has received outside cultural influences

and underwent major changes. A Tibet shaped by present realities and connected to the rest of the world (Gade 2005).”

The concept for the GCAG began with conversation amongst four artists, Gade, Tsering Dhondrup, Penba Chungdak, and Tsering Nyandak, in 2002. All but Tsering Nyandak had recently spent four months in New York City as artists-in-residence with a cultural exchange program organized by the Trace Foundation. They toured galleries and museums, but the strongest lingering impression upon their return to Lhasa was of the studio complexes in which artists worked and collaborated together. At that time, most modern artists in Lhasa painted in their homes, even one room apartments, and found it challenging to show and receive critique of their art work. The four artists “sought to bring both the production and exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art into the hands of the artists themselves, and to create new opportunities for self-expression (Vanzo n.d).” The idea for a shared space, to show and also see each others’ work, spread to a group of ten. All wanted to participate, but while some artists worked for Tibet University or had other full time employment, others had little or no regular income and felt they could not share the costs of such a venture. They devised a charter to fairly and democratically guide operations, and then rented and renovated a space in the northeast corner of the Barkor circuit around the Jokhang temple.



Figure 25 Gedun Choephel Artists Guild Gallery, Barkhor, Lhasa. Front entrance with Tsewang Tashi, Untitled, April 21, 2007. Photographs: Leigh Miller Sangster

The renovation of a former Sichuanese restaurant into a gallery was labor intensive. The gallery was in an historic, whitewashed stone building which retained its colorful, ornamented wooden doorway entrance. Inside, on the ground floor was one small windowless room and a tiny bathroom, on the other side of which a wooden staircase led up to a larger space, subdivided by a passageway into two galleries, one as small as the downstairs and another about twice that size, with a window overlooking the busy pedestrian Barkor street below. The floors were set with river rocks, with a long rectangle wood inset in the center of the largest room, a striking contrast to Lhasa's ubiquitous cement floors. The walls were white. The lights chosen for the ceiling were small spotlights on the end of bendable fixtures to easily be directed onto works of varying dimensions. Along the top of the walls, the artists installed a strip of wood with long nails hammered half way in about an inch apart. They devised a long handle with hooks on the end of it to lift and move works fitted with hanging wires or strings onto the nails; a clever and inexpensive installation system. Another flight of steps led onto the flat roof which was converted into a gathering space, with several picnic tables and benches, and white strings of prayer flags hung like a parasol overhead from poles entwined with black yak hair ropes.

The operating policies, which were explained to me and I observed evolving between 2004-2007, emphasized the non-discriminatory and non-hierarchical ideals of the members. The Guild (which grew to nineteen members in 2007), included one Tibetan woman (Dedron) and one Chinese woman (Zhang Ping).²²¹ Ethnically, fifteen members identified as Tibetan.²²² In order to ensure members had equal access to the best wall spaces, they planned to rotate assigned sections each month. The Guild members measured the wall spaces available for hanging work and divided evenly by the number of full dues-paying members.²²³ Members were also assigned gallery shifts, to ensure that an artist was present to talk to visitors, handle any potential sales, and assist with gallery business as needed. Most importantly, they decided that member artists would bring their newest works, which they felt represented their best attempts as genuine artists (and not simply what they guessed would sell to visiting tourists!) for the other members to be vetted. Those works which members approved could then be hung in the artists' section.

Despite enthusiasm, in practice, by 2006, the management of schedules, prices, dues collection and bills payments, reviewing work, rotating installation space, business meetings, and public relations was too onerous. The eclectic membership required some management to even out the disparities between artists who were extremely busy (and often skipped their assigned shifts) and those with little outside responsibilities (who enjoyed hanging out at the gallery), those who produced a lot of work and those who rarely brought new pieces, and so forth. Guild members elected an executive board and Tsering Nyandak as their manager, and, because he is fluent in English, as their public relations representative with foreigners. They also hired a series of young women to work at the gallery in the summer months, to greet visitors, handle sales, clean, and call the artist whenever a visitor was interest in a member's work or wanted to meet an artist. The artists thus worked through pragmatic obstacles and kept the gallery open and improved its business operations.

While artists hoped these changes support focus on the work of developing as artists, producing and discussing serious work, as some professed was a Guild expectation of its

members, releasing members from some of the institutional obligations possibly contributed to loosening of ideological commitments. Members began dropping off works to be hung, and the collective review process fell by the wayside. Other members did not bring work for months at a time, and, rather than hold blank spots in the gallery. Space was filled with available works, leading to the disintegration of the equitable rotation plan, although the underlying intention was upheld and works frequently rotated. If daily operations became stiflingly mundane, other exciting opportunities for members and the group were arising and these kept morale high and serious artists productive, encouraged, motivated, and with a feeling of communion.

In the Gallery, the assumption by foreign visitors that traditional Tibetan artists were and are practicing Buddhists—either as inspired visionaries or faithfully engaged in meditative copying—informs foreign perceptions of Tibetan artists today. I watched a Western tourist enter the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild Gallery, look for a few moments at several paintings and then, standing in front of one with a recognizable Buddhist image, she inquired, “Oh! Was this one drawn from the artists' visions while in meditation?” This was of course not the case, as artists had complicated relationships to Tibetan religion and religious art history. Nortse and Panor expressed the possibility that Tibetan contemporary art with Buddhist imagery could build connections with others interested in their history and culture, including other Asian Buddhist cultures. Gade turned his love of traditional styles and materials derived from the art historical traditions into rich tools for expressing contemporary experience. For Tanor, a student of Gade's and founder of the Zhunnu Dame group, Buddhist imagery locates him in a world of options and choices, the Buddha just one of his heroes.²²⁴ Tsering Nyandak is more conflicted; for him Buddhism and tradition are too tightly woven. He questions the utility of religious devotional acts and does not feel moved by Tibetan traditional Buddhist arts, so his work cannot draw upon the readily available markers of ‘Tibetanness’ that actually originate in religion. In response to the Shangri-la tendencies of outsiders to misrepresent Tibet, Tsewang Tashi created a work, “Shangri-la Series,”²²⁵ in 2009 that directly speaks back to Chen Dan Qing's *Tibet Series* (Figs.

17, 18, 19) and the Shangri-la image created by others who romanticize Tibet (and capitalize on Tibetanness) while turning a blind eye to the real social problems Tibetans face in contemporary society. Understanding the diversity of artists' responses to ethnicity and religion is an important context for artists' choices, and for the detailed examination of these subjects below.

The Gallery has organized several special exhibitions, talks, and student tours for locals in Lhasa that, while rare, were met with enthusiasm and engaged a collective goal to progress all modern and contemporary art in Lhasa. Tsewang Tashi was the main curator of their first exhibition in December 2003, the first ever Lhasa exhibition of all female artists, featuring six female artists' paintings. The event garnered some visibility, but occurred in mid-winter, ensuring that Guild members did not miss opportunities market their works during the tourist season. Other exhibitions included Lhasa's first solo artist exhibition, for Norbu Tsering (Nortse), in 2005, after which he became a member of the Guild. In 2006, a two-man show of multimedia works by Keltse and photography by the Englishman Kabir Heimsath, was very well attended. A partial exhibition about the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad, in 2007, brought them uncomfortably close to political danger.²²⁶ Their largest special exhibition, "Fasheng, Fasheng,"²²⁷ is discussed below.



Figure 26 Tsering Nyandak building an untitled installation in the Gedun Choephel Gallery for the exhibition Fasheng/Fasheng. Photo: Leigh Miller Sangster, April 25, 2007.

The initial interest from outsiders in their work was strong, bewildering, and "amazing," like the realities they were depicting. At the time, one of the best known artists, Gade, was uncertain whether to call their art "modern" or "contemporary,"²²⁸ but said it "is like a strange

creature, itself grown and developing without preparation, but it 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 (Gade 2005).”

In 2005, Gedun Choephel Artists Guild members were featured in the first exhibition of Lhasa contemporary art outside of Tibet organized outside the official artist association structure. The exhibition “Visions from Tibet: A brief survey of contemporary painting” was jointly organized by curators/gallery owners Ian Alsop (Asian Art.com/ Peaceful Wind Gallery, New Mexico) and Fabio Rossi (Rossi + Rossi, London). Both men operated successful antiques businesses specializing in Himalayan art, and had been deeply impressed and intrigued by the work of contemporary artists they met in Lhasa starting in 2003. As “abundant evidence of the vitality of Tibetan culture,” they felt these young artists, “despite all the change and upheaval,” hold a part of Tibet’s future in their hands.

This was the start of a flurry of international exhibitions for the Guild’s members between 2005 and 2008. Generally, a gallery owner proposed a concept, discussed it with the artists, and then came to Lhasa to select the best works from those artists submitted for consideration. There were concerns about how this might influence artists. But artists seemed to agree that living and working in Lhasa was preferable to the major contemporary art centers like New York or Beijing because they were much less subject to the influence of trends and critics, and enjoyed more autonomy to develop organically. The downside to their location, which was both geographically remote and behind the “Great Firewall,” was their reduced visibility to outsiders and increased difficulty in access to materials and knowledge from the outside. Tsering Nyandak concluded it was important for artists to be aware of markets, so as not to be taken advantage of, but not too aware, as to be unfavorably influenced.²²⁹

Increasing access to foreign curators and collectors brought newfound success, confidence, excitement and visibility for the Lhasa art world that was unprecedented for most members, who had struggled for decades to find audiences and support. As recognition, support,

and cash began flowing towards the Guild, they were emboldened to articulate larger goals. They started a fund to help struggling artists, including students, very early on.²³⁰ The Guild members were thinking of long-term strategies to amplify the success of new contemporary art by translating it into support of artists in the region.²³¹ The flow of some funds to artists allowed them to try new materials or work out concepts or engaged in artistic activities without attachment to a resultant product. In 2006, there was a palpable feeling amongst artists of a kind of liberation and freedom to be experimental.

Challenges also arose, however, as the best artists began to bypass local activities, and while this contributed to some stimulating debates about what constituted “real contemporary art”, tension came from the realization that their own autonomy was to some extent trumped by international arbiters of that debate, whose external judgments led to the unprecedented infusion of attention and cash to some members and not others.

Attention did not come without conflict. Nortse had said “we should not even cling to the name Gedun Choephel!” Offended members clamored, “How dare he suggest they not be guided by the most radical and progressive intellectual known to twentieth century Tibet?” And yet, Nortse had in previous months experienced a “rebirth” as an artist; he felt invigorated, determined, enthused and courageous after visiting contemporary galleries and studios in Shanghai and Beijing, but also critical of Lhasa’s fledgling scene. Tsering Nyandak suggested, in defense of Nortse, that Gedun Choephel had gone outside his home to engage with the contemporary world in a very fresh and direct way for his time, but they now were dated rather than inspirational. Then, one night at a dinner with most of the artist members of the Guild seated around a large round table in the back room of a Chinese restaurant, the artists opposed a surprisingly critical voice from outside. Someone reported that a Tibetan scholar in the west had publically suggested that the artists in Lhasa were riding on Gedun Choephel’s fame in the West for commercial reasons, reasoning that since such little artwork by Gedun Choephel survives, little other motives were plausible for taking Gedun Choephel as their namesake. Instantly, artists

shouted their defenses: they knew about Gedun Choephel and his progressive ideas before any western scholars, they chose to organize in his namesake long before their awareness of English publications about him; how could they have known their art would become visible abroad? In the midst of this indignation, the artist Tsarong Dhondrup turned introspective, and in recalling a brand new important exhibition opportunity about which they had been excited earlier that day, he remonstrated, “We have to stop having this whore’s attitude! Chasing after every paying customer’s glimmer of interest...doing whatever they want us to!” Calmly and quietly, Tsewang Tashi pulled a tiny strip of paper from his wallet and passed it around the table for all to read. It was a verse in Tibetan by Gedun Choephel. Tsewang explained the meaning of the poetic statement: not seeking other’s praise or approval, not seeking to avoid blame, but being true to himself, and being honest, would be his guiding principle in life. Visibly moved, the artists could affirm their own grasp of their individual and collective aspirations, even if they remained poorly understood by others, and they passed the rest of the night in good cheer (and with much beer).

Artists repeatedly debated and questioned the status of their art relative to global standards for “contemporary art”. Nortse often made statements such as, “In the Gedun Choephel Guild, we all say we are modern artists, but whether this is really true or not we must question.”²³² Nortse, who joked with me that he wants to be “the first Tibetan Rauschenberg,”²³³ does take up a position of authority as an artist, in important contrast to the Party-affiliated schools or art associations or even ‘the people,’ in urging artists to look honestly and critically at their productions, in light of international trends and their own local aspirations.

Yet, radical avant-garde for its own sake, or provocation, is not appealing to even the most progressive in Lhasa’s contemporary art world, who are critical of, or unmoved by, such artistic strategies employed elsewhere. Shelkar, in 2007. *No. 01- 08*, satirically criticized the embrace of new technologies, materials, or colors simply because they seemed the most “contemporary” trends of the moment. In this large (103 x 155 cm) digital print on synthetic fabric, rows of eight square photographic portraits of the artist, bald and shaven, have been

manipulated into distorted faces and tinted with unsettling hues of plum and chartreuse. For Shelkar, a talented portrait painter but whose works had been passed over for international exhibition more than once, this was his first use of photographic and digital techniques and vinyl material in this work, asking if this move, which he considered quite superficial, catapulted him into “contemporary” status, but requires the distortion of the artist. Voicing another critical observation of international trends and the individual artists’ place, Nyandak said Tibetan artists share the common ground of not doing “confessional art,” popular amongst Western contemporary artists. He understands such work as art which is so deeply personal and psychological, that it becomes entirely individualistic. Gade agreed, noting that “confessional art may be an extravagance when cultural identity is in question.”

When cultural identity is in question, Nortse, Tsering Nyandak, Gade, Tsewang Tashi, Tsarang Dhondrup, Dedron and others in the GCAG are explicit about their efforts to show real society, in the present moment. Nortse’s notion of a contemporary artist is someone who is inevitably engaged with his or her social context, and responsible to it, practiced in the form of translating what that society values from its past into forms which will contribute to their sustainability.²³⁴ For him, contemporary art is a vehicle for communicating important thoughts and feelings with his compatriots, and has the ability to actually connect more powerfully with their pasts and futures.

Tsewang Tashi’s belief, “Contemporary art cannot be created if contemporary life is ignored,” has become a maxim. He explained this position by saying,

Traditional culture and art have become an important source of inspiration for many artists, writers and musicians in the TAR and other ethnic Tibetan areas. Many artists use elements from Tibetan traditional art or subject matter related to their surroundings in order to express their cultural consciousness. ... [While] traditional art is considered an important symbol of cultural identity...and is an effective tool for artists because of its unique cultural characteristics, ... [there also exists] a risk that it might become another commercial product. I realized that superficial elements (form and color) alone cannot represent the reality and the true identity of a culture because these elements can easily be employed by anyone, anywhere and at anytime. What are of greater importance are the inner feelings and thoughts of the living individual, something that comes from the reality (Tashi, Art in Process unpublished manuscript).

Thus for Tsewang Tashi, “contemporary” art is intimately connected to the artist’s current time; the artist communicates reality when he or she accesses and bridges the feelings and thoughts of individuals with a deep cultural consciousness.

Although sharing Nortse and Tsewang Tashi’s commitment to the realities of present society, Gade and Tsering Nyandak debate the role of artists in their society, and what is possible for artists to do, on individual and collective levels, in their unique historical and political contexts. Tsering Nyandak used to feel that artists were exceptional in their societies because of being “more sensitive,” but a few years later, he expressed that artists were “not special or different,” and doubts the extent to which one artist can impact society. He preferred a more pragmatic approach to the role of art and artists in society.

For Gade, the responsibility of the artist goes beyond making beautiful or funny images or merely copying from the past. More so than Nyandak is willing to do, Gade ascribes to this practice a degree of cultural responsibility served by the artist in doing so—not as a spokesperson or preservationist, but in honestly reflecting contemporary realities. Gade wrote, “Perhaps what is most conventionally perceived as Modern Art does not exist as such in Tibet; or maybe its existence is simply a figment of contemporary Tibetan artists’ imagination. But what is important is that these artists are recording the transmigration of a civilization and a disappearing myth (Gade 2005).” That is, regardless of the labels others would use to describe their productions, for the artist, the task is reflecting collective experience and countering misrepresentations.

These artists are also grappling with how to express individuality. In recent collective experience, the values of both Buddhism and Socialism (for different reasons) minimize attention to the individual. This could contribute to artists’ discomfort with “confessional” art as excessive individuality, on the one hand, but the complete subsuming of the self in order to represent a theology or an ideology (as in *thangka* or Socialist Realism) or a collective (as when cultural anxieties have led artists to feeling burdened with the responsibility of acting as a spokesperson) is another end of the spectrum with which they did not wish to engage.

Artists are experimenting and pioneering new relationships of the individual to contemporary society in Tibet. In Tsering Nyandak's quest for individual expression, he suspected that reliance upon Tibetan Buddhism or other cultural clichés allowed the individual artist to “hide inner emotions behind facades.” A conviction to cease this in his own work led him to literally stripping his subjects and content of recognizably, or stereotypically, Tibetan elements. This happened quite literally, until he arrived at painting nudes in stark landscapes.

Speaking from London, Gonkar Gyatso looks back on his career and sees a persistent challenge to express individuality, beginning in Lhasa:

In the early 80s when I said I was going to create a new form of Tibetan art, one of the intentions was to express my own views or feelings about Tibet. But after 20 years I suddenly realized I had become a modern version of a *thangka* painter. You know, the *thangka* artist is totally devoted to faith and religion, not wishing to put any of his personal feelings in the work, he serves the religion. Somehow I had also become one of them. Hiding my emotion and feeling behind the Buddha figure in the work. When I realized that, I tried to find the reason this happened to me. The reason has to do with culture and also history. First of all, Tibetan modern art has only 50 years of history; it's quite a new concept for all of us. Also we don't really have in our tradition a culture of the individual; the individual is always being dismissed. In my case it's not only dismissed by Tibetan religion and culture, but also by the influence of communist ideology... The communists say the individual is a part of the machine; this was the doctrine we were brought-up on. Tibetans have only recently started expressing their own feelings; it's a novel concept for us (G. Gyatso 2005).

When Gonkar Gyatso looks back on his work, he can see the “lack of the personal view” but also sees a change occurring, most notably signaled by the work *My Identity* (L. M. Sangster, Lhasa: New Art from Tibet 2007). Showing his identity is a “sensitive topic”—“identity” being the composite of influences that drive him, past experiences, struggles to erase or accentuate aspects of his identity—but is the primary motivation for creating art.

Similarly, Gade is also committed to personal truths and an expression rooted in personal experience, but does not feel this is in tension with cultural or traditional modes. Gade feels there is a natural connection between art and Tibetan culture that emerges dependent upon physical residence in the city of Lhasa or the Tibetan plateau. Gade explained in conversation with Tsering Nyandak and I,

As a result of living here, growing up here, a Tibetan character is an automatic product of our environment, but as an artist, we don't need to be deliberate about it – explicitly trying to make art about Tibetan culture, or depicting some notions of Tibetan culture broadly or generally. Rather, to express our own experience is simultaneously also about the larger situation. Of course, I do not paint about individual experiences of love or particular emotional states and experiences, because the culture is so much larger than myself. This doesn't mean that the culture or society is more important than the individual, or that some responsibility to the collective is more worthy of expression than individuals' experience, but rather that the individual experience must take place within, or under, such social/cultural circumstances and conditions, and also are forming our very experiences as we have them.

Thus for artists, the very practice of art is a one of discovery of the self; being an artist in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries now means claiming and expressing a personal identity. In the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, for the first time in the history of Tibetan arts, artists experienced the emergence of a non-governmental, secular support structure in which their full artistic identities could be cultivated.

Tibet University

The School of Fine Art at Tibet University (TU) by the mid-2000s was an expanding program led by active faculty. In 2007, department leaders hoped to add photography,²³⁵ film and other media to the studio program, and additional advanced degrees in the coming years.

Being an “artist” at Tibet University entails specific qualifications, restrictions, and benefits. The approximately sixty-seven faculty in the Art Academy's four departments—Music and Dance, Painting, Graphic Design, and Thangka – included Tibetan instructors and professors who had completed university studies in mainland China, Tibetan graduates of Tibet University, traditionally trained Tibetan *thangka* painter Tenpa Rabten, as well as Chinese art professionals. Many of the faculty graduated from TU and did Masters level studies there or elsewhere and regularly publish articles about art education and pedagogy, painting and mural history and preservation, and Tibetan art genres such as *thangka*, mural and decorative arts, in regional and national journals.

All faculty and head administrators at TU are required to be members of the Communist Party, and receive employment benefits of working for the State, including living quarters for

their families and studios on campus.²³⁶ Promotions in the ranks of professorships were clearly defined and predicated on years of experience, publications, teaching, and exhibition participation. In some professors' opinions, these criteria skewed faculty evaluations in Tibet because they rewarded Chinese national, over regional or international, activities. For example, publication in national journals counted more than regional publications, but this necessarily favored Chinese language over Tibetan language use, and limited the local relevance and accessibility and usefulness of such scholasticism. Similarly, exhibits and awards juried by official CFLAC affiliates, were rewarded over participation in the international art world, and yet national official exhibitions were perceived by some Tibetans as embroiled in China's ethnic politics, minority discrimination, stunted artistic rigor. This situation however forced artists to choose between local job requirements and rewards, and career development according to global standards. Tibetan contemporary artists working within Tibet University thus had opportunities as well as some parameters: they had the unusual opportunity to earn a living through their passion for painting, coveted employment security with benefits, and were required to participate in politics and official art organizations, teach and publish in Mandarin, and exhibit for Chinese audiences.

Tibet University art faculty also had to balance their departmental service and teaching with making time for their studio work. Department service, particularly for the leaders, included admissions reviews and tests of dramatically increasing number of applicants, faculty evaluations, and curriculum development. Since several faculty members completed advanced studies abroad, the curriculum and pedagogy have been modernized and diversified.

In 2007, Tsewang Tashi had advanced to positions of Assistant Professor and Dean at the School of Art. By then, his experience of study in Beijing and Norway, as well as with the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and exhibiting internationally, clearly informed his pedagogical and curricular approach to students and the department. Tsewang Tashi enjoys students' challenges at different stages and introduced peer review, encouraging the identification of individual strengths

and voices. He also introduced new methods of teaching, for example, with the third year students in his oil painting class. They met nine hours per week for a semester on nude figures. They began with copying a reproduction of their choice from a western art history text, standard Chinese art school pedagogy, before actually painting from a live nude model as well. This came as a surprise in socially conservative Lhasa and the University, but to my look of astonishment, Tsewang Tashi simply joked, “Yes, I know! It will still be so cold in April!”²³⁷ Of course he knew that live nude models were far from radical in many other parts of the international art world.

Application to The School of Art saw a sharp rise in the 2000s. Admission is competitively based on academic and artistic standards.²³⁸ Whereas many Tibetan artists trained in the 1970s and 1980s described mastery of realism as a requisite skill for receiving art training, this generation now examines their prospective students by inviting them to create a work of their own imagination in response to a prompt. According to Tsewang Tashi, the admissions committee is looking for talent as well as willingness to attempt individual creative thinking, a recent reform in art pedagogy.

On occasion and usually on short notice, Tibet University officials informed Tsewang Tashi that important visitors were coming to the campus and instructed him to mount an exhibition of student and faculty works. After the visitors’ tour, the show would be taken down.²³⁹ While stressful, such requests also demonstrated that the art department was one of the university jewels.

In 2007, at least fourteen of the current or past Tibetan fine art faculty created contemporary art.²⁴⁰ The views amongst these professors vary. Ngawang Jigme asserted that only Tibetans can make new Tibetan art (*bod pa'i rimo gsarpa*) owing to their private or personal sense of Tibet formed by memories and distinctive ways of thinking. Mixing non-traditional techniques, materials and techniques from Tibetan, Chinese, and Western traditions is no problem for the artist when “the inner meaning of Tibetan art expresses relationships to traditions,” he

said. These traditions in his paintings, Ngawang Jigme says, are about the Tibetan customs (*gom shi*), not religion, of farmers, nomads, monks, and the activities which mark their life cycles and calendars.²⁴¹ For Sherab Gyaltzen, contemporary art enables novel expressions of Buddhist concepts and values, both for personal expression and for communication to the next generation.



Figure 27 Ngawang Jigme. Auspiciousness with tsampa. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Tibetan graduates from the University went on to be, along with some professors, instrumental in founding two independent artists associations in Lhasa in the mid-2000s: the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, and the students of those leaders, who graduated in the 1990s, are forming the Zhunnu Dammeh (The Incomparable Youth) group, Melong Art Space, and joined other cohorts of self-taught artists in cooperatives.

Zhunnu Dammeh

The next generation of artists is newly emerging with noticeable characteristics. In 2006, the Qinghai-based *Folk Art and Literature* published rare introductions to two independent Lhasa artists associations, the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and the Zhunnu Dammeh.²⁴² A one paragraph introduction to the Tibetan young artists group based in Lhasa, Zhunnu Dammeh (*gZhonnu zlamed*; Incomparable Youth) describes the members as from a “different generation, living in a different environment, and with a different cultural zeitgeist,” having “all experienced youth since the 1990s,” compared to senior artists in Tibet. They adopted their name from the title of the first secular Tibetan novel, an eighteenth century tale of the romantic adventures of a heroic prince (Hartley and Schiaffini-Vedani 2008) (T. Shakya 2000).²⁴³ Thus looking at their art

works, viewers can see that the influences and attitudes that shape it have been developed in current conditions in Tibet, the Qinghai journal writer concludes (A selection of fine art 2006). The Zhunnu Dammeh group was directly inspired by the Gedun Choephel Guild, but rather than attempt to join with their teachers, opted to establish their own association which, in 2007, was working towards their first group exhibition.²⁴⁴

A founding member of Zhunnu Dammeh group, Tanor (Tashi Norbu), uses concepts from Tibetan Buddhist historical narratives to comment on contemporary society. In his painting *Plastic Flowers* (2007), the Tibet Museum, a bronze statue of Padmasambhava (Guru Rinpoche), a boy performing stunts on his dirt bike, and some bright colored plastic flowers float upon a mustard yellow ground. The Tibet Museum is an ornate, pseudo-Tibetan architectural monument with exhibits offering a (colonial) natural history of Tibet, including precious Buddhist artworks in glass cases under spot lighting, visited primarily by Chinese tourists. Padmasambhava, “the Lotus-Born,” (who was born as an eight year old child inside a lotus flower upon a lake, with all the signs of perfection, and proclaimed his destiny to establish Vajrayana Buddhism in Tibet), is contrasted to the young male surrounded by artificial flowers of the sort used in government commemorations and grand openings at department stores. Tanor said the painting images a question in his mind: “In a time when our precious cultural relics are locked up where no one can see them, who could be born in a plastic flower?” Tanor finds the world of religious merit and the world that surrounds him to be at odds, with global politics and rising personal economic and material desires making it “increasingly difficult to be a religious person, or even a good person.” The environment is not conducive to the emergence of spiritual leaders or realizing the potential of contemporary citizens, of concern to this next generation, particularly when the ethnic and religious identity of Tibetans is marginalized.

Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA)

The TARAA continues to be active into the 2000s but had undergone changes in the administration and focus since the 1980s. Artist and TARAA Vice Chairman Bama Zhaxi (Pema

Tashi) Bama Zhaxi explained that in the past the prerequisite for TARAA membership was having one's work selected for three exhibitions. After becoming a member, maintaining active status included participating in at least two exhibitions per year, in Lhasa or elsewhere. Today, requirements are all but waived; aspiring members merely need to bring some works to the Lhasa office and apply, and if they are *thangka* painters, Bama Zhaxi said, it is especially easy to become a member. In regards to maintaining active status, Bama Zhaxi stated, "Tibet is special within China," and so this standard too is no longer in effect in the TARAA. There are not enough exhibiting opportunities to make such criteria feasible.

TARAA members' main responsibility, Bama Zhaxi said, is to create new works of art. However, locally, there is no proper exhibition space and, anyway, Bama Zhaxi said, "no one pays any attention."²⁴⁵ In other words, while TARAA is supposed to find and promote active artists through exhibitions, it did not in 2007 view its responsibilities to include facilitating the construction of a gallery or museum for art, nor planning of exhibitions locally to promote artist members and to educate the public. Bama Zhaxi stated, "It is not our responsibility to try to reach the public. This is the job of the Culture Bureau. Our responsibility is to develop art." Their means of 'developing art' include showing selected works to officials and to foreigners, and "promoting and representing artists." Yet, comparing their work to the way in which "western galleries represent artists," Bama Zhaxi claimed it is "more complicated for us" because western galleries are at liberty to "make choices merely to meet their own needs" of taste, clientele, etc.²⁴⁶

Bama Zhaxi's view of the responsibilities of various government agencies implied some critical gaps in the functioning of this art world: A lack of exhibition space hampered maintenance of local membership standards designed to be measured through exhibition participation, as well as general public interest and awareness of contemporary art. National level exhibitions were important for some artists, but does not compensate for these local needs. Finally, the kind of art TARAA can promote is not solely left to the aesthetic judgment of the

artist-leaders themselves, but must operate within the mission and working methodology of the artists associations.

Speaking personally as a practicing contemporary artist, for Bama Zhaxi, these challenges with Lhasa and the TARAA were not a critical impediment. Bama Zhaxi reflected on the changes in the Lhasa art world in the past two decades, and remarked that the youth of today have much greater access to study art and view books of international art. Considering their “good future” and “good opportunities,” he did not see any “particular challenges or difficulties” currently facing the development of contemporary art in Tibet. Today’s youth, that is, seem privileged in light of the struggles his generation surmounted. In fact, art is taught in grades schools in Tibet, and gifted pupils have opportunities to study at art academies and with the leading artists of the city. Han Shuli, Yu Youxin, Bama Zhaxi and others have been dedicated teachers for Tibetan and Han youth in Lhasa, formed close personal bonds with their students that endure long after their tutorial activities are completed.

The experiences he has had in the Lhasa art world of the TARAA have enabled his personal expression, his cultural identity, and overall improvement in access to art study and practice for himself and younger generations in Tibet. On the one hand, politically, he could hardly say otherwise, but it is also the case that his life history is remarkable: from childhood origins in a humble and troubled family, and personal struggle during the Cultural Revolution, he has become the Vice Chairman of a regional level institution, with the primary responsibility to follow his passion for creating new art.

Despite his training with Chinese teachers and role as a leader in the TARAA, Bama Zhaxi did not think it necessary to intentionally articulate any special relationship between Tibetan culture and modern art, but felt they were related. Having grown up in Tibet, he explained, means he does not need to focus deliberately on communicating some connection, rather, it emerges naturally in his art.

Thus, I heard this view: Tibetanness naturally emerges in art production, from TARAA, TU, GCAG and affiliated artists. But there are subtle shades of difference, with some more likely to say this relies on the ethnicity of the artist, and others willing to attribute it to merely having grown up in Tibet. Diversity in notions of artists and art that blossomed in the 1980s, continue to reverberate.

The TARAA in the mid-2000s was still under the leadership of Han Shuli, who, in his artistic output, curatorial work, commentaries, and in national media about his work in Tibet, offers positive reflections on the development of art in Tibet since Chinese modern artists arrived on the plateau. Han Shuli and Yu Youxin contributed to the acknowledgement within the PRC of Tibet's tremendous traditional art history through publications of traditional religious and folk arts [CIT], which had been a surprising discovery for Han Shuli upon his tours of the plateau. In national media, Han is most celebrated for his contribution to a new Tibet within modern China, and the "research" Han has conducted is credited as the wellspring of a new, and "correct," approach to Tibetan art (China Pictorial 2005).²⁴⁷

Han Shuli organized several important exhibitions, which were shown in multiple cities in China and Singapore as representative of the Tibetan Autonomous Region's contemporary artists. The publications' editorial prefaces are in accord with official state ideologies, and frame the works featured as evidence of the development of art in Tibet under Socialism and the merits of continuing to invest in the training of minority artists.²⁴⁸

In the 1990s and early 2000s, State level exhibitions and publications have been linked to the celebration of political anniversaries related to the incorporation of Tibet into the PRC, and share curatorial and editorial lenses (Jiming 2000) (Tibet Autonomous Association of Literary and Artistic Circles and Chinese Artists Association Tibetan Branch, ed. 1991) (Qizheng 2000) (Shining Pearl of the Snowland - China Tibetan Culture Exhibition 1999). One of the first publications, *Contemporary Tibetan Art (Bod ljong deng grabz kyi mdze' tsal)* in 1991, was a collection of works allegedly representing the art created in Tibet since 1951, in celebration of the

fortieth anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet.²⁴⁹ The book includes early examples of experimentation with non-traditional modernism, with a strong emphasis on secular culture, and while it omits many blatant forms of propaganda, may be read as a politically motivated selection of works for inclusion.²⁵⁰

Exhibition catalogs give voice to approved State views of modern Tibetan culture as in need of “develop[ing] a new Tibetan art,” in conjunction with outside influences, particularly from modern China (Xiaoke 2004).²⁵¹ The “new form of Tibetan art” is dated to the arrival in Tibet of Chinese artists in the mid-twentieth century (Croft 2005).²⁵² The new ways of seeing and expression are explicitly attributed here to distinctly Chinese interventions in Tibetan history,²⁵³ rather than or in addition to increasing exposure to the globalizing world.

Artists are described as a product of their ancient cultural heritage or religion, the rugged natural environment, ethnic “psychology”, and socio-political influence. The CFLAC influenced perspective of contemporary Tibetan art most commonly found expressed in the introductions to state-sponsored exhibition catalogues, a journal article about a senior Tibetan artist member of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association, Jigme Thinley, characterized the artists work as celebrating the “good life” of the people marked by sustained folk traditions, emphasizing the nature of Tibetan women, and utilizing sacred symbolism (Huang Zhaje 2006).²⁵⁴

An example of new art development²⁵⁵ is Han-Tibetan collaborative painting by Wanggya, Li Zhibao, and Lhaba Cering, “Red Sun Over the Snow Mountain—Compassionate, Motivation, Expectation,” was included as a poster size fold out in the catalogue from *The Colorful Chain* exhibition. The work may be seen as a stylistic extension of the Kandze school of Tibetan Socialist Realism, for its adaptation of traditional *thangka* compositional templates for framing central figures and surrounding them with secularized traditional motifs. The subjects however are neither Buddhas nor deities, but social leaders of a previous generation paired with ethnically Tibetan children, presumably future socialist leaders in culture and politics.



Figure 28 Wanggya, Li Zhibao, Lhaba Cering. Red Sun over the Snow Mountain - Compassionate, Motivation, Expectation. 2004. Rich color on canvas. 120 x 320 cm

In State rhetoric, the most lauded merger of ethnic characteristics with modernizing influence from China, and the most promising for future development of Tibetan contemporary art, is the exemplary *puhua* genre of painting.²⁵⁶ Exhibitions organized by the TARAA in the 2000s prominently feature *puhua*, and traffics in representation of contemporary art from Tibet, and contemporary Tibetan culture today, being as unknown and breathtaking as the country from which it comes, a place described as remote, inaccessible, and mysterious, an extreme terrain populated by hearty, superstitious, and self-sufficient nomads, attracted to marvelous and grotesque religious imagery. The catalogue claims Tibetan artists are “instinctively informed” by these conditions, and yet modern by virtue of being unconstrained by the “classical, narrow theology” (Croft 2005).

While claiming the Han artists through their love of the land and long experience "consider themselves to be practically Tibetan," the vision that is celebrated is of "developing Tibetan art" which is "different from the traditional, classical forms," or differentiated from the past, and which "reflected the new ideas that were flooding into Tibet," i.e. from China. The concept of undeveloped minorities implies not only technologically lagging, but also that minorities are culturally backwards (T. Shakya 2000).²⁵⁷

For Han Shuli and Yu Youxin, *puhua* as a new art is an opportunity to intentionally create a school of art, with a regional character that gains recognition nationally and internationally and would thereby serve the nation and the artists. To this end, Han Shuli and Yu Youxin utilize their influence to promote *puhua* in informal as well as official ways.

Thus, state definitions of “contemporary Tibetan art” are remarkably different from those artists who are members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, or other independent artists outside of the TARAA.

Han Shuli and Yu Youxin are, in the mainstream Chinese view, portrayed as cultural liaisons and catalysts. They appear as key intermediaries between Tibetan tradition and modern China, and as entrusted arbiters of the Tibetan artistic future, selecting the valuable elements of the Tibetan past and steering young artists towards improved and modified forms. With few exceptions,²⁵⁸ many Tibetan artists I worked with, on the other hand, were far more likely to perceive them as unselfconscious of their roles as advanced colonial administrators and as modern artists appropriating ethnicity and artifacts of ‘primitive’ others.

Tibetan artists I spoke with in 2006-2007 had mixed feelings about Han Shuli and Yu Youxin, and their influence in Lhasa and the TARAA. In the context of exhibitions, many contemporary Tibetan artists are concerned that the TARAA asserts it represents all contemporary art developments and artists in Tibet, when in fact they feel excluded from its membership, benefits, and most importantly, its stylistic bias for Han Shuli’s *puhua*. Several of the leading Tibetan artists today have collegial relations with Han, or he was an influential art instructor when they were students. The history of those relationships, as well as Tibetan social etiquette around elders and teachers, complicate Tibetan artists’ public articulation of disagreements with Han.

When museums or galleries nationally or abroad wish to mount an exhibition with works from and about Tibet, and go through the official art channels, the exhibition planning and implementation comes through the TARAA to Han Shuli and his administration. The TARAA

leaders then select or commission works for travel to represent the region. This structure enabled several contemporary artists in the 1980s and 1990s to travel abroad for the first time. However, by the 2000s, GCAG members were growing resentful of the consolidation of power—the power both to represent “Tibet” and over individual’s careers which were built upon access to exhibiting—in so few hands, and by whom their practices, products, and views were often excluded.

Most contemporary artists in Lhasa with whom I spoke in 2006-20067 agreed that the TARAA fails to adequately represent the true diversity of Lhasa artists in its exhibitions or membership, and are nearly unanimous in their critique of their attempts to define “Contemporary Tibetan Art” as equivalent to “*puhua*,” a genre of Lhasa art world productions strongly identified with Han Shuli and practiced by Yu Youxin.²⁵⁹

Tibetan contemporary artists in the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild were vocal in 2007 in their opposition to *puhua* and the power of the TARAA, including those artists who included *puhua* in their style toolbox and were members of TARAA. Contesting *puhua* begins with its origin. While Han’s statements would seem to attribute *puhua* to Chinese artists, other accounts of the origin of *puhua* from Tibetan artists inevitably mention that the Tibetan artist Ang Qing was actually the first to paint in the style that Han Shuli would later name and market “*puhua*,” usually translated as “rich color on cloth” in English language publications from the PRC. Gedun Choephel members however note the Chinese painters’ switch to cloth was also due to a shortage of paper in Tibet, not only the influence of local traditional thangka practice which in any case was hardly fully revived after decades of state denigration and destruction when Han Shuli arrived. The use of cloth, emphasized in the name *puhua*, is thus opposed to paper, the Chinese traditional (*Zhong hua*, national painting) painting surface. Thus the very term is in reference to Chinese art traditions, defined by what it is not, i.e. the national norm. Crucially, *puhua* does not then locate contemporary Tibetan art (which it claims to encompass) in the context of indigenous art history, and discounts the diversity of styles and mediums artists in Lhasa use today.

Many artists and observers described *puhua* as a mere combination of Tibetan materials, Tibetan subject matter, and Chinese painting techniques.²⁶⁰ Despite Han Shuli's claim to a particular way of thinking in *puhua*, the impression of his stylistic components is pervasive. In the catalogue of an exhibition in Singapore curated by Han Shuli, the biographical statement describes the artist as, "specializing first in colourful paintings on cotton cloth inspired by Tibetan folk culture and then, in works created in ink and colour wash that are imbued with Buddhist imagery and references. His Chinese media and brushwork and the Tibetan themes he has adopted form a powerful combination."

Furthermore, Tsering Nyandak, Anu, Nortse, and others have suggested that there is a particular aesthetic of *puhua*, beyond its materials, which minimizes conceptual elements and favors appropriation of ethnic imagery and tends to have a superficial romantic, exotic, nostalgic, effects. Independent contemporary artist, Tsering Wangdu²⁶¹ goes further, stating, "the name, *puhua*, is wrong and the art has no meaning. Mostly it is on cotton, whether with oils or watercolors, and so the name refers to the materials, nothing more."²⁶²

SoTse (Sonam Tsering) is a leader in the Zhunnu Dammeh (The Incomparable Youth) artists group, mainly comprised of graduates of Tibet University's art department and former student of Gade and Tsewang. He articulated a difference between Tibetan and Chinese artists that reflects Tibetan interest in their own contemporary society, in contrast to Chinese artists in Tibet who are more interested in aesthetic versions of motifs from the art historical past.

"Honestly, they [*puhua* advocates Han Shuli and Yu Youxin] are Chinese and we are Tibetan... I can see that Han Shuli and Yu Youxin are not painting close to the real life. They go far away to monasteries, research old wall paintings, and then they get an idea and paint from that. Western people also think it's nice. But actually, it is totally removed from modern society. Sometimes we go to tea shops. Han Shuli told me this is a waste of time, but actually you can meet lots of different people there, like monks and teachers, and learn about all different topics from them. Once I did a painting about this called "tea house", and when Han Shuli saw it he didn't like it

and said I was wasting my time.”²⁶³ For SoTse, methods and a cultural informed cultural orientation in contemporary society are related to style and technique, making *puhua* unavailable to him. Overall, dissenting artists were critical of a style that, for them, represents merely decorative art.

In The Galleries

Intersections and tensions in Lhasa’s art worlds become visible through local exhibition practices and discourses. However, it is important to mention international trends first before turning to a few specific exhibition occasions in Lhasa because discussion about art and artists in Lhasa is influenced by international exhibitions, in terms of artists’ experiences with foreign galleries, curators, and dealers, their travels in conjunction with exhibitions, and in light of the recent assertion that contemporary Tibetan art is primarily viewed within the spaces of, if not created for, western galleries (C. E. Harris, *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet* 2012).

Only a handful of international exhibitions of contemporary Tibetan art occurred before 2000, but between 2004-2007 international interests took off and there were suddenly at least one dozen major exhibitions of contemporary art by Tibetan artists.²⁶⁴

“Tibetan Encounters: Contemporary Meets Tradition,”

Rossi + Rossi, New York City

One of these shows was “Tibetan Encounters: Contemporary Meets Tradition.” The New York Times reported in March, 2007, in a review of Asian arts that “the news...is that the Rossis—Anna Maria and Fabio, mother and son—also have an ambitious show of contemporary Tibetan art” on view during Asia Week in New York City (Cotter 2007).²⁶⁵ For this exhibition, Fabio Rossi had sent images from his antique collection to Tibetan artists in Lhasa and abroad and invited them to respond in some way to the historical Buddhist images.

Social commentary in this exhibition directs critique outward and inwards. Critique of the commercialization of Buddhist antiquities, was specifically tackled by Dedron and Panor’s *The*

*Buddhas Conversation*²⁶⁶ and Penpa Wangdu's *Turning thoughts from spiritual to monetary value* (2007).²⁶⁷ The increasingly worldly attitude of Lhasa residents was perceived as degradation in religious practice and cultural knowledge by Tannor. Works from this time period mark a clear turning point in contemporary artists output in which they adapted traditional materials, methods, concepts, and spiritual views to express contemporary and controversial social anxiety about the endurance of their traditions, in very real material sense as well as the transmission of cultural knowledge (L. M. Sangster 2007).

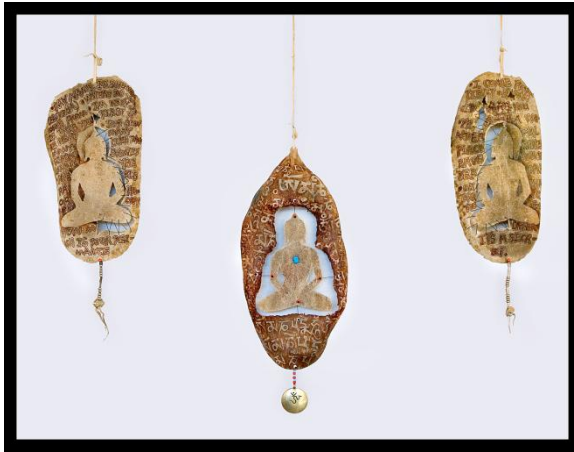


Figure 29 Dedron and Panor. *The Buddha Conversaion*. Leather, stone, metal, thread, stone pigment, ink. 2007. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Contemporary artists have redefined traditional roles of Tibetan artists from egolessly in the service of religion, to bravely include social critique, even at the risk of offending their largest foreign sponsor.²⁶⁸ The adaptation of the role of individual artists to include criticism is also noteworthy in the context of the visual politics of the past decades. Mid-twentieth century Chinese politics enlisted artists in Communist revolutionary ideological battles as “art workers”. Charged with drawing source material from the people, they led “mass art” movements by the people with large character posters of political slogans and depictions of Mao, heroic peasants and workers (Ye 2000) (Jiang 2004) (Xu 2005). It was forbidden for artists to express views critical of the government, and has remained so in Tibet and parts of China. In light of such 20th century history, when oppositional views in art swung from culturally idiosyncratic in traditional

Tibet to criminal activity in the Maoist era, and approved art practices only slowly re-admitted indigenous culture and religion as suitable subjects, the confident social and global criticisms offered by Tibetan artists today is radically new.

Thus foreign exhibition opportunities encouraged experimentation with mixed media, with commentary on social concerns, and the confidence that resulted from positive media attention and sales. It also raised crucial questions about the role of the gallery representative in generating exhibition themes, equitable pricing of works, promotional materials, introductions to collectors, and the influence market trends could have—knowingly or unwittingly—upon artists’ creative work. Artists also raised doubts about the careers of the primary foreign agents up to that point in antiques trade, and interest in them because of their ethnic identities.²⁶⁹

“Oil painting exhibition and Open Discussion,” Ke Rong Sun City Gallery, Lhasa

Sun City Gallery owner, KeRong, followed formal etiquette by inviting an official guest of honor, Yu Youxin, retired Vice Chairman of the Artists Association of Tibet, to keynote an artists’ conversation in conjunction with her gallery opening of a pan-Lhasan exhibition of oil paintings. Regrettably, Yu gave a rambling, hour long speech many found irrelevant and stifling at the “Open Discussion.”²⁷⁰ Yu encouraged the solidarity of artists, and that they take advantage of the opportunity to have a professional do the branding, marketing, and exhibition organizing for them. Yu encouraged the artists to let KeRong promote them under a common, marketable brand such as *pu hua*. Several other artists spoke briefly after him, but Tsering Nyandak opined that the “open discussion” “was a flop.”

The GCAG artists gathered at a nearby teahouse afterwards to, finally after waiting all evening, enjoy some conversation. They commented that the proposed Open Discussion was a rare opportunity to gather so many people from different organizations and could have been an engaging exchange. Tsewang remarked that the Oil Exhibition and Open Discussion was a historic occasion—he could remember nothing like it in the past twenty years in Lhasa, so in this sense it was a very good accomplishment.²⁷¹ Nyandak acknowledged that Yu is passionate about

Tibetan culture, and encouraging artists. The other artists agreed with Yu's assessment that there should be more exhibitions in Lhasa, and the artists needed to produce more new, original works to show at exhibitions, both for furthering their own skills and art circle conversations, as well as to attract more local audiences. But unfortunately, in Nyandak's words, Yu's "monologue killed the conversation," and Gade shrugged that the speech "had no real point." Nyandak, who is soft spoken and shy, but an original and critical thinker, had wanted to say that they needed new, and most of all *personal*, works, and that almost every piece in that exhibition (excepting his, and a few others in the GCAG) had all been shown many times before, which meant there was no life or excitement for artists in going to recycled exhibitions. Tsewang Tashi lamented that shows were still organized by media, saying "From the art side, this is totally unnecessary."²⁷² Underlying such criticism was not merely a critique of being behind the times, but also lacking conceptual sophistication and an experimental attitude, and a fundamental disconnect or lack of understanding between the highest leaders of the official Chinese art world and international contemporary art movements. Much of the 20th century in Chinese art had been beholden to politics, but it seemed time to move beyond self-imposed limitations.

At the gallery, I had observed artists expressionlessly but intently reading all the labels on the walls. At the tea house, GCAG artists began comparing observations, jokingly asking each other "What 'style' are you?" Some terms appeared to have been invented, like 'expressive abstraction,' and others who found their works quite different from each other learned they shared a 'style', and still other artists who felt they worked in similar ways 'discovered' their differences, and all were hooting with laughter.

Privately, Tsewang Tashi conveyed the sentiments of GCAG members that they had nothing to gain from KeRong, and possibly a lot to lose, as she is not as well experienced or connected as the advocates and partners they already have, and she would take a commission, not to mention they don't want to homogenize CTA with a 'brand' concept. They had the sense that the official art world in Lhasa had observed the independent GCAG for a few years. It appears

that local official leaders were interested in courting GCAG members only after the GCAG build substantial market and critical success, independent of the government's associations and through their own foreign contacts. As some GCAG leaders told me anonymously, the TARAA now wants to ride on their coattails, and yet still expects them to conform to the TARAA aesthetics and strategies, seemingly oblivious to the fact that they had very little leverage with GCAG and similar artists who were already enjoying more freedom, creativity, and success without the TARAA.²⁷³

“Fasheng, Fasheng,” Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, Lhasa

In contrast to the Sun City Oil Painting exhibition and Open Discussion event, GCAG soon after hosted the show “Fasheng, Fasheng / Inside Out”. Gade contributed the Chinese title, FaSheng FaSheng, two words which sound identical but are written with different characters. The first means “Happening,” in the sense of a singular event and also an active state of things in Lhasa's art world. The second means “to make a sound,” and suggests artists in Lhasa are finding and using their own indigenous voices, sounds which will be heard.

Artists in the GCAG were preparing for a historic and important exhibition at Red Gate Gallery/798 in Beijing, which I co-curated with Tony Scott, and the artists and I decided to show some of these works in Lhasa before shipping them to Beijing.²⁷⁴ After working closely with several members, a three day exhibition was proposed to the GCAG Board,²⁷⁵ which would include an opening reception and an artists' talk, various publicity in the city, and professional gallery practices including a Works' List and bi-lingual wall labels, which are not always easily incorporated into the Gallery's ever-shifting works on view. The result was a diverse exhibition of works by Guild members (including those whose works had not made the final cut for the Beijing show) of oil and acrylic paintings, photography, multi-media, and computer generated digital prints, which together touched on a range of themes, from the representation of Tibetan culture to questions of defining “contemporary” in Lhasa art today.

The opening reception welcomed about seventy people from all over the city: Tibet University Art School students, artists from the Shunnu Dameh (Incomparable Youth) group, foreign residents, NGO employees, media reporters, office workers, and friends and family of artists. The Artists' Talk gave each participating artist the opportunity to introduce himself and his works on display for about ten minutes and to take a question or two from the audience. After each artist had finished, the floor was opened to general questions and answers, which continued for almost another hour with the rapt audience. For example, when introducing two portraits, *Untitled, No.1, 2007* and *Untitled, No.2, 2007* (both 135 x 135 cm, oil), Tsewang Tashi noted that there are so many competing perceptions of Tibet and Tibetans, in the midst of which he depicts the feeling of the environment in which individuals are presently living.²⁷⁶ A young Tibetan asked him how a portrait of one person could represent all the Tibetan culture and the diversity of its people. Tsewang Tashi replied that "contemporary art is not an introduction to a culture," but is an "expression of the artists' thoughts and feelings. Contemporary art cannot be created if contemporary life is ignored," he told the young man.

After the formal dialogue was brought to a close, some members of the audience clustered around works and artists, continuing the conversation yet further. Many attendees were shocked because they hadn't seen work of this kind before, in terms of quality nor themes.²⁷⁷ When the guests had departed, the artists gathered in a tight circle on the gallery floor with a couple bottles of wine. They noted that even amongst the 'inner circle' of artists themselves, such in-depth conversation about art was rare, and such an event with the community unprecedented. Artists felt the important thing about the evening was the accomplishment of holding an event that is causing others to think, and also that many younger people came and gained exposure to contemporary art. Although one artist commented that it was clear from audience questions that they did not know much about contemporary art itself, artists agreed this was an important first step towards building knowledge, appreciation, and communication, and they were enthused to continue this sort of community building dialogue.



Figure 30 Opening Reception and Artist Talk for "Fasheng/ Fasheng, Inside Out" at Gedun Choephel Artists Guild Gallery. April 21, 2007. Photographs: Leigh Miller Sangster

Although the opening reception and talk were surprisingly well-attended, only one member of the TARAA (the brother of a participating artist) attended, and only one professor from the TU art department (other than the two professors participating as members of the Guild); it was a truly surprising absence of the art “community” following Yu Youxin’s very recent exhortation at the Sun City Open Discussion that artists unite and support each other. A couple of months later, I was told that despite their absence in person, “FaSheng, FaSheng” had “made a big impression” in those official art circles nonetheless. The appeals from TARAA to GCAG members to join them, compounded by the highly successful GCAG event, affirmed the new power position of the GCAG in Lhasa at least as an equal, if not in fact more successful, player in the TAR art world and beyond.

Thus the TARAA leadership may have been trying, in their backing of Ke Rong, to initiate art world norms of private gallery exhibitions with professional commercial representation and marketing, and a communion of artists whose primary occupation would be the production of art. This is in keeping with their context within a State-run culture industry with a mission to promote art production in the region, and while maintaining strong influence over the practices and discourses such that they would reflect approved ethnic and regional characteristics. However, in 2007 at least, GCAG members seem to prefer continuing to function as producers, curators, gallery managers, publicists and agents for themselves, over ceding these

responsibilities. Their artistic identities and ideological commitments, predicated on conceptually and visually progressive practices and discourses, are foundational to the contexts in which they organize themselves and drive their activities, and translates into impact locally, and beyond Lhasa, in forging contemporary Tibetan culture.

Conclusion

Five major art historical time periods in the past century are characterized by distinct contexts, practices and discourses about visual cultural productions and producers in Tibet. The above discussion introduced the sociopolitical context of each era and its institutional structures, and described artistic social practices and the dominant visual cultural products. Artistic discourses during and about these time periods reveal ideological commitments, debates, goals and concerns that motivate and are stimulated by artistic production. Lastly, social processes and contexts suggest the affects of art and artists upon cultural identities and the cultural politics of representation, aesthetics, authenticity, and appropriation, which may impact the social reproduction, challenge or transformation of dominant ideologies.

In the 2000s, artists matured artistically beyond the experimentation of the 1980s, found greater access to markets than in the 1990s. Lhasa's political and economic conditions were more stable as well. Thus artists of several 'generations' enjoyed a fluorescence of creative productivity across multiple sites and styles in the 2000s. In their artworks and discourses, many artists intentionally, and confidently, now grapple with relationships between social contexts and artistic identities, both in regard to social constructions of conceptualizations of art and artists and the social impacts of art making practices and discourses.

This dramatic change, having overcome many obstacles and constraints to the mere production of contemporary art to be using it in such innovative and socially and culturally dynamic ways, has even re-inspired some of the first Tibetans contemporary artists. Gonkar Gyatso told me in 2007 that he had recently met with Abu and Ang Ching, and reported that these two former Sweet Tea House members had returned to painting after years of business work, and

were even thinking of reviving the Sweet Tea House. Gonkar Gyatso advised them this time to be safe, and that they should include some Chinese members. These artists wanted to re-convene, as Gonkar Gyatso said, “probably because there are the Gedun Choephel and Zhunnu Dammeh groups now, and they also want to have a feeling of belonging to something. The Lhasa Artists Association doesn’t give that sense of belonging to their members.” Additionally, Gonkar Gyatso suspected, there may have been some commercial motivation as well. Thus artistic activity in isolation was less satisfying, in artistic, communal, and financial terms, than membership in an unofficial artists association. The rise of these associations in this latter period not only returns contemporary art practices to its initial impulses in the 1980s, but matures them in extremely successful ways.

This success carries risks, too. In the context of early twenty-first century popular imagery and promotion of tourism in Tibet, “Buddhist” and “authentic ethnic” art has become an industry in which mainstream State representation of ethnic minorities, production of fake antiques for beguiling tourists, and the art of some official art associations are strands that are braided together to create a common thread of contemporary visual culture about Tibet. Although their works are not visible in the tourist markets, the members of the Tibet Artists Association and the Lhasa Artists Association frequently emphasize religious subject matter, and rewards stereotypical ethnic representations as the subject matter of aesthetically pleasing techniques. This market is dependent upon ideas of the past, Shangri-la fantasies, promotion of the modernization of the state, and the invisible and diminished agency of actual Tibetans. The close connection between representations of Tibet to and by outsiders with ethnic politics and commodification is examined further in Chapter Four.

These contexts shape the experience and reception of Tibetan contemporary artists. At times, denial of their artistic originality occurs to the extent that their work reinforces “tradition,” or the denial of their cultural authenticity to the extent that it does not. A writer for *The New York Times*, in an unprecedented and positive review of contemporary Tibetan artists nonetheless

wrote, “However much Asian artists may borrow from the West—which is a lot—their art collectively evokes geographically specific tensions and anxieties (Cotter 2007).” Implicit is the possibility that creativity and originality, like modernity, flows only in one direction to be borrowed and adopted, but they are praised for retaining local characteristics along with their appropriations. Similarly, Han Chinese observers have, in assuming that modernity flows from the Han to China’s minorities, seen Tibetan contemporary art as merely “traditional Buddhist elements dressed up in modern-looking compositions and colors.”²⁷⁸ “Artists” in these assessments seem to be held to unclear, if not unfair, standards to be both entirely original and recognizably Tibetan to others; which may or may not mirror artists’ own goals and agendas.

The inability to appreciate Tibetans as both modern and authentic is pervasive, and prevents clear seeing and interpretation of artwork from Tibet. This is not unrelated to the problems of conceptualizing what ‘contemporary’ art from Tibet would be. The above discussion perhaps points most to what “contemporary” in relation to art in Tibet is *not*: it is not the same as western or Chinese contemporary art, not a phenomenon that emerges in post-Chinese occupation Tibet without indigenous modern roots, and not independent from complicated ideas and feelings about tradition, nor relationship to hegemonic Han culture and the Party State of China. Stylistically, however, active Tibetan artists also struggle to define what makes art—in general, and specifically in Tibet—“real contemporary art.” Despite their differing views, many of Lhasa’s contemporary artists resist outsiders’ “Shangri-la” expectations of their work, and refuse Tibetan orthodoxy. In light of histories of Western and Chinese appropriations of Tibetan cultural memory in the name of tradition and when serving as arbiters of Tibetan authenticity, this art work can function as an important corrective to outsiders’ gazes.

While differentiating themselves from stereotypical expectations of “artists”—the figures of the traditional Tibetan religious painter, the communist “fine art soldier,” and the western individualistic creative genius, for example—contemporary artists in Lhasa are influenced by these models and the art histories out of which they emerged. Today, they are cognizant and

confident of being rooted in place, time, and culture, and of their role in the creation of a Lhasa's "art worlds".

Lhasa's art scene is not a complete, functional contemporary "art world." In *Art Worlds*, Becker (1982) constructs an intricate and interdependent web of relations—of artists, critics, galleries, collectors, educational or training facilities, suppliers, promoters, and so forth—that constitute an art world. Against this articulation, in the PRC, powerful official artist associations both serve a number of essential functions and contribute to significant gaps in this web. As they occupy a disproportionately important facet of Lhasa's art world, alternative yet embryonic unofficial art worlds and agents have emerged to address dysfunction and implicate artists in expanded social relations beyond production, such that they at times become their own curators, critics, promoters, gallery managers and representatives and suppliers. As described above, being inspired to define their arenas and activities themselves contributes to frustrations as well as a richness of debate among artists about "art," including the at times contested notions of whether there is a "contemporary Tibetan art movement" in Lhasa, and what its features should be now or in the future.

These contexts and choices for Lhasa artists included frequently pondering, in the mid-2000s, whether their developing relationships with international agents and galleries would be defined by mutual benefit or exploitation, and so did impact artistic identities.²⁷⁹ Artists were concerned about how opportunity to sell certain kinds of work might impact their production, but also recognized that the infusion of foreign funds could advance plans for local artistic and charitable projects and afford artistic freedoms and experimentation previously unknown. Yet, they were clear that while they were disadvantaged from convenient visibility and participation in international art worlds by their location and China's control of media and communications, they were also privileged to be relatively free of the influences of the constantly shifting trends in New York, London, or Paris. Finally, Tsering Nyandak observed, "artists cannot think about the market, but we do have to be knowledgeable of how it works."²⁸⁰

Tibetan contemporary artists in this period, particularly members of the Guild and those younger artists they were inspiring, envisioned a new set of artistic practices and discourses. These included using art to experiment with new media outside established conventions, to critique society, to interrogate the role of Buddhism in individual and cultural realities, to form and stimulate alternative representations of Tibetanness, to embrace and grapple with self-expression; and these approaches to art are a foundation upon which they have organized into groups for community building and working toward goals related to visibility and viability.

Contemporary artists in Tibet have not only created a new form of cultural expression, but their activities and productions, despite (or perhaps in part in response to) contexts that can be extremely difficult, and the discourses in which they engage among themselves and with outsiders, have coalesced into a nascent cultural shift. Ultimately, artists are pioneering contemporary Tibetan art as expression and formation of modern Tibetan cultural identities, processes which straddle past and future, grounded in their present moment.

Chapter Four

Representing Tibetanness

The ways in which Tibetan ethnic identity, or Tibetanness, has been defined and visually represented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a problem for contemporary Tibetan artists. Despite dramatic social and historic changes in the twentieth century and fluctuations in CCP officials and policies, mainstream representations of the Tibetan minority in China tend to be ideologically and visually stable over time (Bass). The CCP constructs Tibetanness in a visual history of propaganda from the Maoist Socialist Realism era through neo-Socialist Realism. The subjects, iconographic conventions and materials of artistic propaganda in mid- twentieth through early twenty-first century State sponsored imagery, found in and beyond State museum exhibitions, offer a useful condensation of official policies and historical narratives, and reveal the establishment of visual conventions for representation of Tibetanness.

The State's visual legacy and continuing practices will be elucidated by introducing official propaganda productions, primarily the exhibitions of three museums: the *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition at the People's Revolutionary Hall opened in 1968, the Tibet Museum opened in 1999, and the Potala Zhol Museum opened in 2007. The modes of Maoist Socialist Realism and neo-Socialist Realism in State image production in Tibet are characterized by exaggerated physical gesture and facial expression, teleological political orientation, and superficial treatments of bodies, principally through dress, to convey ethnicity and status relative to the Han nation. Constructed for and about Tibetans, these official public works inform not only private sector imagery, but also define the political, educational, and media contexts in which artists have lived and work.

Another set of visual materials, the artwork of contemporary artists in Lhasa, offers another set of materials depicting Tibetanness. Contemporary Tibetan artists have been raised with, trained in, and have reflected upon the influences of party-state constructions of Tibetanness upon their personal ethnic and artistic identities and their society. The subjects, iconography and

materials of their artwork may be seen to offer a response to the state's visual tropes of Tibetanness, and to propose alternative images of Tibetanness for local and global audiences. Since the turn of the twenty-first century, the creative output of the prominent artist Tsewang Tashi has focused on portraiture that demonstrates familiarity with Western and Chinese representational tropes of Tibetans, his own engagement with contemporary Lhasa, and desire to communicate realistic images of Tibetanness.

Tsewang Tashi's early paintings, landscapes, portrait series and recent photography are characterized by psychological complexity and realism. Contemporary artists in Lhasa utilize different methods and techniques and have different communication goals, but inescapably operate in the context of the legacies of Socialist Realism and its revival. After exploring the Chinese Party-State's establishment of visual forms of representations of Tibetanness in Tibet, I consider the subjects, iconography and materials chosen by Tsewang Tashi to express his experiences as an individual artist, and as a Tibetan. In light of the dominant State representations of Tibetanness as a traditional, pre-modern, undifferentiated collective, contemporary artworks evince the evolution and emergence of alternative images of twenty-first century Tibetanness. Tsewang Tashi's images become alternatives through their modern materials and methods including photography and oil painting, attention to specific individuals, and attention to contemporary realities often in juxtaposition to expectations.

The Tibetan Minority in the People's Republic of China

The representation of Tibetanness is fundamentally tied to politics, and most importantly and specifically, the status of Tibetans as an ethnic minority within China. The People's Republic of China's early nation building projects included assessment of its population and the eventual designation of fifty-six official minority nationalities, or *minzu*, peoples. Ethnographers of China's minorities suggest variable outcomes of this project: official *minzu* policies and propaganda materials strengthen, and have even invented, some minorities' imagined communities, while in other cases classification standards for recognition of minority

designations were inconsistently applied and reflected little meaningful unity amongst groups (Gladney 1994, 1998; Litzinger 2000; Harrell 2001; Mueggler 2001; Gladney 2004). Yet, Tobin claims, the everyday, face-to-face experiences of China's minorities with the Han majority are marked by discrimination and mistrust, leading minority citizens to assess party rhetoric about the multiethnic, harmonious State as empty slogans and, moreover, a source of tension resulting in violence (Tobin 2011). In some rarer contexts, *minzu* elites have collaborated with official policies and representations and managed to even effect a reversal of the usual direction of influence, impacting national trends in their favor (Baranovitch 2001).

Most *minzu* studies are not easily comparable to the Tibetan contemporary context, where forms of Tibetan nationalism predate the founding of the PRC (Dreyfus, Proto-nationalism in Tibet 1994) (W. W. Smith 1996) and the Communist Party has rarely forged meaningful collaborative rule with Tibetan elites (M. C. Goldstein 1998) (Tuttle 2005) (A.-M. a. Blondeau 2008). Tibet, the Party authored Tibet's history as one of a feudal, backwards, and impoverished society crippled by the exploitation of the Dalai Lama's theocracy, and the Han vanguards of socialism as Tibet's liberators; a perspective that clashes with Tibetan understandings of their history (Powers, History as Propaganda: Tibetan Exiles versus the People's Republic of China 2004). Thus the interesting and hopeful prediction by Baranovitch in 2001 that growing minority influence, in allegiance with Han alternative or counterculture representations sympathetic to minorities, would soon change official policies towards and general public opinion of *minzu*, including in and towards Tibet, have not yet been borne out. In Lhasa instead there has been, since 2006, a revival of orthodox official representations of Tibetans. Counter to the authorities' stated goals of harmony and assimilation, official representations of Tibetans have tended to instead fuel ethnic tensions.²⁸¹

While in some ways Tibetans are a unique minority within China, in other ways they are not exceptional, namely the representation of minorities as traditional, exotic and other to the majority, developed Han. This reflects an evolutionary model of ethnicity embedded in the very

conception of the modern Chinese nation from its founding, a multi-ethnic State, the eventual goal of which is the assimilation and bringing up of the minorities to the cultural and developmental equals of Han. After the communist victory in 1949, "the party went to work to control the print and electronic media; it built monuments, museums, and other public memorials to honor its image, its revolutionary history, its leaders and martyrs. The making of a modern socialist nation also demanded a new relationship with the non-Han other," who were brethren occupying a land mass to be politically unified as a multi-ethnic family, writes Litzinger (R. A. Litzinger 2000). In mass produced, ephemeral print media and museum exhibits, communist ideology and historical narratives of this relationship were adapted to the Tibetan context. State museum exhibitions, as we shall see below, established Tibetans as peripheral primitives with colorful traditions that, freed of the yoke of the oppression of their feudal, theocratic past, would thrive under State protection, alongside state development and influence towards Tibetans' full assimilation into the modern State. However, as we shall see below, despite the rapid modernization of Lhasa, views of Tibetanness have not evolved apace with changing contexts.

State Museum Representations of Tibetanness in Lhasa

Socialist Realism in Tibet adapts a unique visual style and its teleological political functions to Tibet through iconographic conventions established in the Maoist Socialist Realism era. These include reliance on ethnic markers such as sartorial elements in the constructions of ethnic and traditional identities, outward depiction of internal states of being, and a pre-modern collectivity in harmony with State policies.

Socialist Realism rose to dominate the visual environment in the Cultural Revolution era and established and propagated visual codes through State propaganda in museums and posters. The visual culture in Tibet since the 1960s has been dramatically impacted by Maoist Socialist Realism, which emerged in the early 1950s as a series of injunctions for art to serve the nation in fomenting and actualizing revolutionary political change. The paragon of orthodox Socialist Realism in Tibet was the museum exhibition *The Wrath of the Serfs (Nong Nu Fen, Ch.*,

Shingdren Ki Khongdro, Tib.). Opened in the People's Hall in 1968, it constructed Tibetans as socialist revolutionaries in a series of life-sized sculptural tableaux. The Tibet Museum, opened in 1999, uses modern ethnographic museum exhibition formats including photography, encased artifacts, mannequins and dioramas to figure the Tibetan subject as colorful primitive existing in an ahistorical timelessness outside of Han modernity. Finally, the Potala Zhol museum, opened in 2007, presents the Tibetan subject through neo-socialist realism to emphasize the ethnic status of Tibetans within the modern state.

Contemporary artists in Lhasa cite Socialist Realism in Tibet and China as an important period in the national art history for its difference from all prior forms of Tibetan and Chinese visual and artistic culture, and for its sheer dominance to the eventual exclusion of all other art forms in the 1960s and 1970s. The enduring legacy of Socialist Realism continues to shape the neo-Socialist Realism of museums in the 1990s and first decade of the twenty-first century, influencing imagery beyond museum walls in official and private sector visual culture. While Socialist Realism is not a genre Tibetan artists explicitly work against or reference (as various visual and literary movements in Chinese art post-1980 have positioned themselves, such as 1980s Native Soil, post-Cultural Revolution Scar literature or post-Tiananmen Ironic Pop), its ubiquity in the visual environment and in many artists' formal training into the 1980s, as well as its periodic revival in the TAR, begs exploration of its legacy and influence today. First, I offer examples from State-sponsored visual productions to explore the establishment of conventional representations of Tibetanness.

The Wrath of the Serfs (1968)

The Wrath of the Serfs was a paragon of Cultural Revolution era Chinese Socialist Realism (Sullivan 1996), and was the first and only major revolutionary propaganda exhibition specifically for and about Tibet. The subjects of *The Wrath of the Serfs* are fictive revolutionary Tibetans, rendered in life-sized clay sculpture. The dramatic installation was a specifically Tibetan version of the visual conventions developed nationally for dramatizing Communist class

theory and inspiring revolutionary zeal. It opened in 1968 after over a year and a half in production.

At the time of production, the ten year anniversary of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama's 1959 escape into exile was approaching, and coupled with the Cultural Revolution's rejection of traditional culture and religion in full swing, the times occasioned a reminder to Tibetans of the yoke of feudalism that had been thrown off by socialist vanguards, and the optimism for a bright future under the PRC which is implied. The events and associated rhetoric of the Peaceful Liberation of Tibet in 1951, the commencement of Democratic Reforms in 1959 and the creation of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in 1965, were fresh in the lives of the exhibition's audiences but Communist leaders sought to win over Tibetan loyalists and educate youth by throwing the present into dramatic contrast with the alleged miseries of the pre-communist past through the narrative of the exhibition.

The exhibition featured tableaux in which Tibetan characters were depicted within Tibetan architectural settings, some accompanied by sound recordings. The exhibition features 106 life sized clay sculptures. These, the catalog states, were "created by sculptors from the College of Fine Arts of the Central May Seventh Academy of Arts in Beijing and a teacher from the Lu Xun art college of Shenyang in co-operation with art workers of Tibet... These [Chinese] sculptors were experienced in this work since they had already built another exhibit... which depicted the misery and suffering of the Chinese peasantry under the Kuomintang warlord of Sichuan province," in the monumental exhibition *Rent Collection Courtyard*. The main Tibetan "art worker" was known as Pa (father) Dorje, a traditionally-trained clay image (*jim sku*) maker, who had two Tibetan assistants (Norbu, *The Tractor in the Lotus: The Origins and Evolution of Contemporary Tibetan Art* c2006). These Tibetan artists adapted Tibetan Buddhist statuary medium of paper machê and clay, previously employed in religiously prescribed images of deities. The adaptation required two new practices: sculpting human figures, and constructing images modeled on live subjects, who were sourced from Lhasa and the Zhol village. The use of

real Tibetan models was believed to lend to the realistic effect (Norbu, *The Tractor in the Lotus: The Origins and Evolution of Contemporary Tibetan Art* c2006). This production process and product was unprecedented in Tibetan art history and introduced by the Chinese sculptors under the direction of government officials.

Exhibition Images and Themes

The narrative structure of the exhibition is divided into four parts: the feudal manor, the lamasery, the *kashag* or former local government, and the serf's struggle for liberation. The first section, the feudal manor, introduces the trope of past suffering in Old Tibet. In one scene, three life-sized clay figures – a woman working at a grindstone, an elderly woman, and a baby – are arranged on a mud floor in front of stacks of hay and some livestock tethered to a column. The women wear the long wrap style *chupa* dress, with a striped apron and long sleeved blouse, and their hair in long braids wrapped around their heads. According to the exhibition captions reproduced in the museum catalog, a scene of “great pathos” depicts an indentured house servant, bent low toiling over her masters’ barley grinding stone as the “wretched” elderly mother sees her daughter’s “vitality wasting away,” and her weeping “baby cries pitifully, ‘mama, I’m hungry! I’m hungry!’.” They work and live an impoverished life in the basement stables.



Figure 31 Female Serf toils for master, Wrath of the Serfs, Lhasa. 1968.

The subjects of the scene are Tibetan women conducting traditional manual labor, but from which they will receive little to no benefit, the exhibition's captions explain, owing to the consolidation of wealth in the hands of the aristocrats, one of the three oppressors of the Tibetan masses. The *chupa* mark the women as Tibetan. Moreover, their dress is visibly worn, tattered and patched, linking the past's traditionalism with poverty and material lack. This exhibition marks a major attempt to Tibetanize Socialist Realism and create subjects with whom Tibetan viewers might identify; although tradition was under attack and many Tibetans wore the national 'Mao suit' at the time, dress was an important visual cue in concurrent visual and performing artistic productions of the time, establishing a sartorial iconographic convention for Tibetan *minzu* representation.²⁸²

Another iconographic convention defining Socialist Realism's importation to Tibetan contexts is the stylistic imperative to render subjects' interior states of being transparently on the surface of their bodies, through facial expression, gesture, and posture. The woman's exhaustion and despair is conveyed in her slumped head and back, her body barely held up by one arm. The grandmother's resignation is drawn in the lines on her face and the tilt of her body, and the baby's tears and outstretched hand showing an empty bowl express the urgency of its misery. The

manifestation of emotional and ideological experience through such physically emotive expression is not a Tibetan cultural characteristic, but the dictate of Socialist Realism.

Another example from *Wrath of the Serfs* introduces the iconographic theme of meetings between Tibetan protagonists and emissaries of power and authority, and demonstrates that the adoption of Socialist Realism to Tibetan contexts was not only a superficial translation of dress and setting, but also carried ideological differences between representations of Tibetan and Han. In the exhibition tableau depicting the abuses that transpired sanctioned by the former Tibetan government, a scene depicting tax collection is borrowed directly from the earlier Sichuan province *Rent Collection Courtyard* exhibition, the CCP's first large scale sculptural exhibition project and from which art workers had been brought to Tibet to make *Wrath of the Serfs*.²⁸³ In the Sichuan exhibition, a blind elder Chinese man in rags and a straw hat, unable to pay the tax, is led to the rent collection courtyard by the granddaughter he depends upon; the landlord forces him to sell her and gives him a receipt for tax payment. The scene was popularized nationwide by mass produced poster art, in which a Tibetan girl touring the exhibition, ethnically made recognizable for non-Tibetan audiences by her *chupa* dress, is shown aghast. She is in the center of the frame, backed by classmates in blue uniforms, red neckties, and carrying red flags; their ethnicity is un-marked in light of their full adoption of Communist ideology. That a common *chupa* as Tibetan dress has become a nationally legible convention even for non-Tibetans, is underscored by the girl's wearing of the striped apron (*pangden*) which, in most Tibetan areas, is reserved for married women. This poster image prepares the ground for Tibetans to be represented as repulsed by abuse of power, and centers the nation's gaze upon Tibetan ethnicity as traditional and yet receptive to the Socialist/Han influence that literally surrounds the girl. Bass writes about the educational curriculums of Tibetans in China since 1950 and finds a major Party-State goal "for all China's 'minority nationalities', has been to encourage patriotism towards China and to foster a sense of nationhood (C. Bass 2005)."²⁸⁴ In the relationship between Tibetan and non-Tibetan emissaries of State ideologies, Tibetanness is

marked on the body sartorially, and by affinity or loyalty to the State communicated with gesture, expression, and setting.



Figure 32 Tax collection scene from Rent Collection Courtyard (Sichuan), 1966.

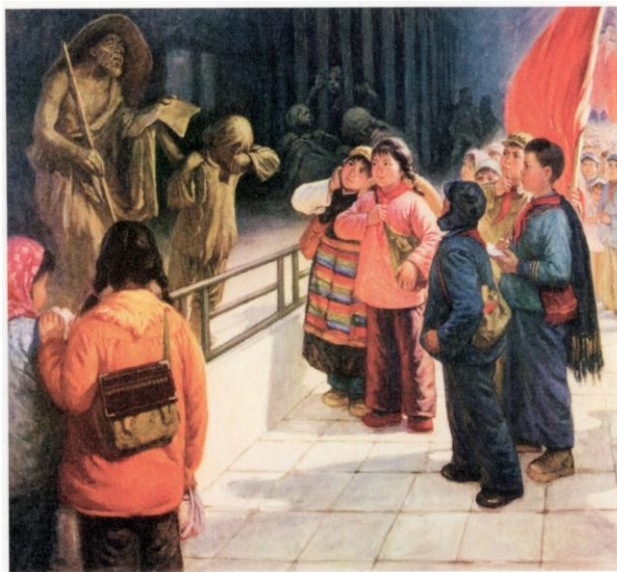


Figure 33 Artwork by Jia Xingtong, published by People's Fine Art Publishing House, 52x38cm

Reproduced in the Tibetan context in the *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition, the tax collection scene is greatly elaborated. The figures are dressed in Tibetan clothes, and the action transpires in the courtyard of a traditional stone and wood Tibetan mansion. Unable to pay their taxes, a straining, despairing boy is wrenched away from his relative, whose arms stretch and grasp at thin air, by a bulky monk in robes under the directive of a man who points accusingly wearing the hat of a government official. A Tibetan female onlooker clinches her fist, infuriated by the egregious brutality. While the *Rent Collection Courtyard* scene is woeful, the Tibetan *Wrath of the Serfs*

scene is meant to incite righteous anger and horror in the face of heartless brutality, on par with the intensity of emotion evinced in the exaggerated physicality of the gestures and expressions at the center of the drama.

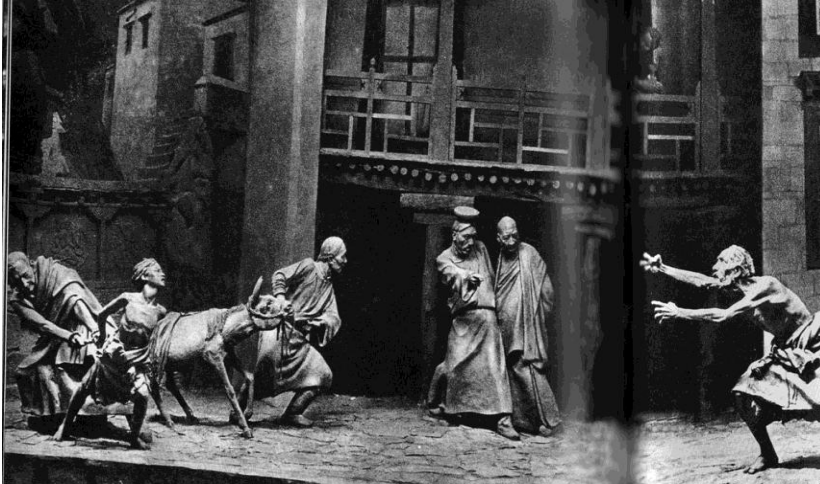


Figure 34 Tax collection scene. *Wrath of the Serfs* (Lhasa). 1976

The *Wrath of the Serfs* continues to lead the viewer through scenes of increasing brutality, including a dramatic depiction of a toddler stolen from his parents' arms by bullying monks, who force the screaming boy into a wooden box to be buried alive in the foundations of a monastery under construction. The fictionalized representation of monastic practices enables a socialist story of class consciousness to be adapted to Tibet by being populated with uniquely Tibetan actors, the monks, at a Tibetan monastery, a familiar setting. The extended family of the stolen child is enraged by their powerlessness, and it is the penultimate scene of crimes against the innocent that propels the protagonists into revolt. Such overwhelming exploitation, official rhetoric proclaims, was jubilantly cast off with the Communist Liberation of Tibet. Furthermore, the sacrosanct place of Buddhism in Tibetan culture prior to Liberation is transmuted into a hellish nightmare.



Figure 35 Final Scene from *Wrath of the Serfs* (Lhasa).

In the final scene of *The Wrath of the Serfs*, Tibetan masses are unified in their dawning class consciousness that shows in their righteous indignation, revolt and the joining with Chinese Communists that portends a happier future, symbolized by a girl painting a star on a rocky peak, over which a Tibetan fighter beckons the others, possibly to meet with like-minded others [(Harris 1999)Topping, 1980] [Sangster unpub2010]. Tibetans' only optimism in the exhibition is vividly expressed in their body language in warrior-like gestures of battle and triumph, wide-legged stances and arms upswept, muscles rippling in action of revolutionary struggle against their oppressors. Their facial expressions transition in the exhibition scenes from exertion, pain and horror, to anger, and finally determined resistance.

Visual Conventions Established by *The Wrath of Serfs*

The conventions of Maoist Socialist Realism that most pervaded the installation included the celebration of the common people and vilification of traditional leaders, the ideological imperative to serve the masses by inspiring their revolutionary zeal, and the dramatization of human emotions and uses of the body to mark ethnicity and convey political sympathies. These were employed to create a narrative of the Tibetan past and the Tibetan ethnic subject as revolutionary at heart, which required the Tibetanization of Socialist Realism.

The sartorial iconography adopted to portray Tibetans became iconographic conventions of ethnicity, and due to their unchanging appearance rooted in a pre-Liberation past, also stand for traditionalism. The coordinated activities and evidently shared sensibilities of the subjects also represent all Tibetans as a unified, undifferentiated mass. Their experiences of extreme suffering transpire in Tibetan settings to frame them as embedded in corrupt social and political context of Old Tibet; the exception being the moment of hope following the successful rebellion, in which the figures are placed outdoors, literally outside of the Tibetan social and material context.

In the style of emphatic realism in the above examples and others, the subjects' facial expressions, postures and gestures transparently convey the Party's emotional message of suffering endemic to Old Tibet and hope brought by Communist liberators, intended to elicit shock and outrage about the past and gratitude and perseverance in the present. The viewer instantly understands not only the subjects' ethnic status and location, but also their ideological and emotional orientations.

The exhibition introduced uses of materials and methods unprecedented in Tibetan sculptural tradition. Among these was the use of live models, selected from the residents of Zhol, to pose for sculptors. Also the subjects of humans, at real life size, was new and while Tibetans had sculptural traditions of clay over armature, the Sichuanese project leaders and the political processes introduced new production methods. The Socialist Realism mode intends a documentary aesthetic, which required new artistic processes of artists, and which visitors to the exhibition newly experienced through the perspective of an eyewitness. This enhanced the audience perception that the actions depicted bore historical veracity, its emotional intensity intended to convince of and overcome resistance to the narrative. This historical "truth" must be opposed to the exhibition's fictitious rhetoric; the specific incidents either never occurred (such as the burying of children under monastery foundations and serf rebellion scenes), or are grossly exaggerated (such as the harsh conditions under which some peasants and prisoners lived). The material process of production then was directed by foreign artistic practices in materials,

working method, and ideological input into the design. Although purporting to unveil the Tibetan past, its non-traditional materials and construction also implies knowledge of this past and material sophistication to present it are actually possessed by outsiders superior to the subjects depicted, with whom the Tibetan audience was meant to identify.

The adaptation of Socialist Realist conventions from mainland China to Tibetan contexts thus introduces the major hallmarks of art in the Maoist period to Tibet. Socialist Realism served teleological purposes of arousing and intensifying viewers' ideological convictions in accord with the state. Exaggerated physical gestures and facial expressions made transparent, on the surface of the body, the emotion and thought of representatives of the patriotic masses, who thereby served as models of outrage at feudal injustice and selfless dedication to socialism. Individuals rarely appeared alone, but in illustrations of revolutionary patriots and post-revolutionary socialists, as anonymous members of a united and harmonious group in which people of all classes, ages and ethnicities lived in enthusiastic constant consensus and loyalty to the Party.

The *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition's teleological function was, for a limited time at least, successful. It contributed to obscuring and silencing local history and memory for Tibetan and non-Tibetan audiences. The tour is described as a "harrowing" experience by the journalist Audrey Topping [1980],²⁸⁵ and history is told solely from the ideological present in which Han Communist victory is both justified and inevitable. The exhibition remained a requisite tour for schoolchildren and work units, as well as the few tourists, through the 1980s.²⁸⁶ Tsewang Tashi and others in his generation²⁸⁷ remember mandatory visits to tour the exhibition with museum trained guides which were both persuasive and confusing (Heimsath 2005). These tours became a basis for either accepted or interrogated notions of the Tibetan past, and are recollected decades later (L. M. Sangster, *Official Exhibition and Unofficial Art: Visual Constructions of the Ethnic Tibetan in the PRC 2010*).²⁸⁸ The iconographic conventions of dress, place, expression and meetings with power combined during the Cultural Revolution to create a synonymous code

between the categories of ‘ethnic minority’ and ‘impassioned socialist citizen’ in defining Tibetanness; a powerful and persistent representation.

The Tibet Museum (1999)

The Tibet Museum opened in October 1999 in celebration of the 50th Anniversary of the founding of the People’s Republic of China and the 40th Anniversary of Tibet’s Democratic Reform and “four glorious decades of regional ethnic autonomy in Tibet” [Information Office of the State Council]. State media proclaimed the aims of the Tibet Museum, one of sixty-two “Tibet Improvement Projects”²⁸⁹ of the 1990s, included the preservation and display of “cultural relics of the best quality,” and functioning as a “national education center” (China Tibet Information Center n.d.).²⁹⁰



Figure 36 Tibet Museum, Lhasa.
Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster, 2006.

The TAR’s first modern museum is a combination of natural history and ethnographic museum, by which it adopts the international look and function of modern, national museums (Errington). The impressive edifice recalls the architectural grandeur of the Potala palace. Much of the museum’s displays consist of artifacts installed in glass cases under spot lighting. The subjects of these displays purport to represent the history and diversity of Tibetan civilization: from ancient pottery and fossil shards from archaeological research sites, Buddhist statuary and ritual implements, and material folk culture, to government documents from Old Tibet and the PRC’s Tibetan Autonomous Region with photographs of modern legislative assemblies. The

materials for the exhibitions also still include some dioramas fashioned by museum-employed artists, the earlier working mode of the People’s Hall in production of *The Wrath of the Serfs* when visual materials were painted or sculpted entirely by art workers, but this process of production was of poor quality and has largely given way to indigenous objects and photographs arranged by curators.

The lower level, where the tour begins, is dedicated to pre-history, while a hall on the upper floor housed the exhibition “Elaborate Ceramics of Ming and Qing”. Not only is the vertical and semi-chronological ordering of exhibitions suggestive of cultural hierarchy, but masterworks of Tibetan Buddhist artistic heritage in the Arts and Culture halls and the pre-historical pottery are both displayed inside cases upon square platforms covered in brown or maroon burlap, while the Chinese ceramics are mounted upon clear acrylic stands, better lit, and well captioned. Despite relatively contemporaneous Buddhist and ceramic works, their installations communicate different narratives of cultural evolution.



Figure 37 Prehistoric Pottery (left) and Ming Dynasty Ceramics (right). Tibet Museum.
Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

A large exhibition hall dedicated to folk life contains a long glass case that encloses Tibetan costumes, including opera performance costume, ceremonial monastic robes, and regional fashions paired with aristocratic adornments. The headdresses, jewelry, and shoes are

prominently included on and around the few mannequins in the display wearing costumes. The hall also includes daily objects of material culture, some of which are contextualized within a replica setting, such as the cooking pots and utensils hung near a life-sized earthen hearth within the kitchen of a pre-modern village home.

The same hall contains a yak skin coracle, small boat, and loom, each mounted on a stand in the center of the room, and a miniaturized nomad tent (the real butter churn in front of it accentuating the lack of scale) in front of a wall painted with a green hill and blue lake for a backdrop. The village home, nomad tent, and transportation displays do not contain any images of people, leaving only their material culture to be examined by visitors.



Figure 38 Ethnic costume display with mannequins, Tibet Museum. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster



Figure 39 Interior village home, replica. Tibet Museum. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster



Figure 40 Tibetan loom (foreground) and small wooden boat (background; Nomad Camp replica. Tibet Museum. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

This type of institution seemingly moved away from the virulent propaganda of the Cultural Revolution era that defined previous decades of State visual productions. Problematically, however, curatorial decisions, such as omitting captions with places of origin and dating for objects, serve to subtly collapse the differences between ancient and modern artifacts, minimizing cultural and historical evolution and diversity. In an exhibition about the *changtang* grasslands, for example, stuffed wild animals prance and unnaturally crowd a plot of artificial grass, across from which a wall of photographs document the region. Photography of ancient rock petroglyphs is adjacent to close ups of calligraphy in Buddhist philosophical texts, as

if all forms of writing discovered on the Tibetan plateau were equivalent. Photographs of herds of endangered species are placed next to nomads dancing and a mother breastfeeding, and several profiles of animals are adjacent to a profile of nomad man wearing a fur-trimmed coat; the collection of images echoes State views of Tibetans as indelibly shaped by their harsh environment to impart the sense that indigenous Tibetans are and have always been intimately linked with nature, including wild animals.



Figure 41 Wild Animals of the Grasslands. taxidermy animals. Tibet Museum. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster



Figure 42 Wild Animals and Nomads of the Grasslands (photographic display). Tibet Museum. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

In the *mélange* of timeless ethnic fragments, the overall impression of Tibetans the Tibet Museum imparts is of an exotic, timeless people whose greatest cultural achievements were channeled into the limited sphere of religious arts, and whose daily life is quaint but incompatible with modernity. In fact, it could be a museum not about a living culture outside the museum's walls in the heart of Lhasa, but to an extinct people. The only signs of modernity are politicians

pictured in meetings and scientists in Jeeps and Gortex exploring the nomad's native *changtang*; they are understood to be Han not by some ethnic garb or traditional practice, but by their embodiment of modernity in contrast to the minority.²⁹¹ The sartorial iconographic conventions of dress and hairstyle are privileged in mannequins and selected photography, but authentic Tibetanness is primarily conveyed not through the people, but through use of traditional dress and objects and materials presented largely devoid of actual people or context. The state positions itself as the protector, preserver and promoter of Tibet's traditional objects, but museum signage proclaims "more brilliant achievements [are yet to come] under the Socialist system." In so far as Tibetans are absent or frozen in a pre-modern past, there cannot be any authentic contemporary subject; even the post-Liberation subject of Chinese Communist Party development is forestalled, because the pre-modern primitive representation serves the State well.

For example, the Tibet Museum's ethnographic mannequins, the females' braids and ornate jewelry studded with turquoise and coral, are reproduced in miniature in the gift shop downstairs. Commodification of the Other and celebrating the "aspiring modernity of the nation" are, in China, linked through "the globalization of the ethnic, a process that relies on visual displays and consumption (Litzinger 1998)." After the Open Door and Reform policy brought entrepreneurial enterprise to post-Mao China, the ethnic character effortlessly passed from political art into the marketplace for private and state profits. The official and private sector initiatives to profit from the ethnic chic became nearly indistinguishable in 2006 when a Chinese partnership with Mattel launched Tibetan Barbie dolls, wearing elaborate traditional dress, in a limited edition that debuted at the international and domestic tourist gateway, Lhasa's Gonkar airport.²⁹² Tibetanness, once represented as pre-modern ethnographic specimen essentialized in costume, quickly becomes spectacle and entertainment. The nationalist agendas, of the Tibet Museum and all official media, reify the marginalization of Tibetanness through flattening their cultural achievements, eliminating their coequality with the colonizer, and packaging the most

predominant visual marker of ethnicity, traditional dress, for commercial consumption. Tibetan ethnicity is thus represented as timeless, exotic, and available for consumption.



Figure 43 Ethnic costume of south central Tibet on mannequins, Tibet Museum. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster



Figure 44 Tibetan dressed dolls for sale in Gongkar Airport, near Lhasa. Photograph: Jason Sangster



Figure 45 Advertisement for the Tibetan Barbie (Fuxi) by Mattel.

The Potala Zhol Museum (2007)

The Potala Zhol Museum opened May 31, 2007, one year after the arrival of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad and in anticipation of millions of domestic and foreign tourists to Lhasa. The railroad represents a massive financial, ideological and rhetorical investment by the state in infrastructure, with a price tag of over US \$4 billion, designed to integrate the western regions into a great nation while generating tourism and freight revenues as a central pillar of regional gross domestic product (Makin 2007).²⁹³ In 2007, tourism rose by over 60% over the previous year, bringing more than 4 million visitors (about 1.5 million arrived by train) to a region with a population of 2.8 million (Stanway 2008). Lhasa boasts spectacular sites, but they are few in number and none rival the Potala Palace, a massive seventeenth century stone, wood and earthen structure, which reportedly limited visitors to 2300 per day (Chang 2007).

In the heart of Lhasa, the Potala Zhol museum absorbs some of the flood of tourism. It is built out of the architectural restoration and re-purposing of surviving buildings in the Zhol (“shöl”) village at the base of the Potala palace, purportedly re-creating their past uses and highlighting progress achieved in the intervening decades in neo-Socialist Realism fashion.²⁹⁴ It was claimed that damage to the fragile fifteenth century monumental Potala resulting from the increased demands of tourism could be mitigated and visitors enabled to see more “cultural relics” if they were moved into renovated sites.²⁹⁵ The Potala Zhol Museum opened on the eve of China’s hosting of the Beijing Olympics, widely viewed as China’s demonstrable entrance into an elite club of modern nations, and was at pains to both minimize disturbances in the restive Tibetan province and trumpet its achievements. The Potala Zhol Museum’s many exhibits and spaces combine to represent Tibetanness past, present and future, in ways that are familiar, new, and shocking for local residents.

The Potala Zhol Museum’s exhibitions can be divided into two subjects: pre-Liberation ‘Old Tibet’, and the post-Liberation Tibetan Autonomous Region. In its use of historic buildings as the stage for recreations of Old Tibet, the authorities chose not only to exhibit the precious

artifacts of an accomplished Tibetan past, as my friends expected and as trumpeted in advance press, but, in the tradition of earlier socialist realism exhibitions, highlight the brutalities which allegedly transpired on that site.

In 2007, the State's newly-created exhibitions revived *The Wrath of the Serfs* in both life-sized, realistic clay sculpture, and themes reviling Tibet's feudal past. The intentional reference to Cultural Revolution era propaganda is manifest in the replication of working modes, materials, themes, and even identical reproductions.

In the basement of the Official's House, the visitor encounters a Tibetan woman toiling over her masters' barley grinding stone, the sculpture and accompanying textual captions intentionally copied from the *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition catalog. The commissioned sculptor, Lobsang Tashi, a professor at Tibet University, told me museum officials pointed to the page in the recently re-issued catalog and, to his great surprise, instructed him to reproduce the scene. Official commissions at the Zhol and another site, the Nangtseshag prison museum in the Barkhor, required the disconcerted artist to almost entirely forego contemporary artistic practice in the production of propaganda; he was unable to account for the revival of Cultural Revolution era practices, subjects and styles.

The alleged horror of Old Tibet is most egregious in the reproduction of the historic Potala prison within the Zhol village grounds. Tibetans jailed in the dark, bare, stone walled cells crawling with scorpions (their numbers increased upon the order of an official during a pre-opening tour) are dressed in ragged chupas, their diminished physicality and despairing faces communicating the misery of their imprisonment. Various torture devices are arrayed on the walls, and in the centerpiece of the exhibit, mechanically engineered statues reenact the removal of a prisoner's eyeballs, accompanied by the loud, looping soundtrack of sizzling hot oil and piercing screams.²⁹⁶ Thus, in the Potala Zhol Museum's Old Tibet, the pre-liberation Tibetan is still subject to egregious abuse by the feudal theocracy; Tibetanness is superficially marked in

dress and embedded in a social context that is primitive, barbaric, and corrupt, while the protagonists' feelings transparently communicate.

The Potala Zhol Museum, however, unlike other museums, revives passionate portrayal of the impoverishment and cruelty of pre-Liberation Tibet, *and* illumines the purportedly thriving cultural and economic life of the minority people since the decades of Socialist State rule. In light of prison exhibitions, the juxtaposition is unsettling, as under the PRC, prisons in Tibet are exceptional in their inhumanity, and the rate of political imprisonment and sentencing for security reasons is up to 100 times greater than in China proper (Seymour 2005). In the Potala Zhol Museum, as at Nangtseshag prison museum, punishments are represented as evidence of a barbaric Tibetan past, without critical account of their frequency, Tibetan penal codes (which abolished capital punishment and other tortures in 1913), or, as Norbu points out, the political sway of Imperial China coincident with extreme corporal punishment in Tibet (Norbu 2009).



Figure 46 "Moving into new house, farmers thank to Communist Party," Potala Zhol Museum (photo courtesy of Andrew Quintman)



Figure 47 "Long distance call to family member," Potala Zhol Museum (photo courtesy of Andrew Quintman)

In another section of the Potala Zhol Museum, a chronicling of the implementation of the Develop the West²⁹⁷ campaign's national and regional development ambitions [Lai 2002] are presented in (comparatively bland) installations of photographs, documents, and charts under glass cases.²⁹⁸ The development campaign is encapsulated, for example, in the photograph captioned "Moving into new house, farmers thank to Communist Party." A village Tibetan woman, dressed in a simple *chupa*, blouse and hair braided with colored threads, hangs a poster of Tiananmen Square over which the busts of Mao, Deng and Hu form the Communist lineage of new China's leadership who are her benefactors. The viewer is meant to accept her gesture of gratitude for her government subsidized housing, communicating passive receptivity through the implied realism and naturalism of the photographic medium.

A photograph captioned "Long distance phone call to family member" features a woman talking on a mobile phone in an elaborate Tibetan headdress and earrings of semi-precious stones.²⁹⁹

The composition was familiar; photographs of nomads and eastern Tibetan men on mobile phones in regional attire peppered state media. The image and its exhibition presupposes that the juxtaposition of traditionalism in the form of dress, hairstyle and ornaments with the modern cellular phone is evidence that Tibetans maintain their culture within a modern China, but as parallel phenomenon; Tibetanness itself is not modern.

A third depiction of Tibetanness within contemporary Lhasa in a poster ubiquitous in Lhasa in 2006 was framed for display at the Potala Zhol Museum, where it is captioned "Tibet's Tomorrow will be Happier." The Qinghai-Tibet Railroad arrives at the center of the frame, welcomed by the costumed Tibetans at the bottom, the women's sleeves traditionally elongated for graceful accentuation of dance gestures. The setting is identifiable as Lhasa by the Potala Palace and Marpo Ri mountain at the top register and the new railroad bridge over the river, but is also disorienting in its futuristic celebration of intersecting rail and highway transit.

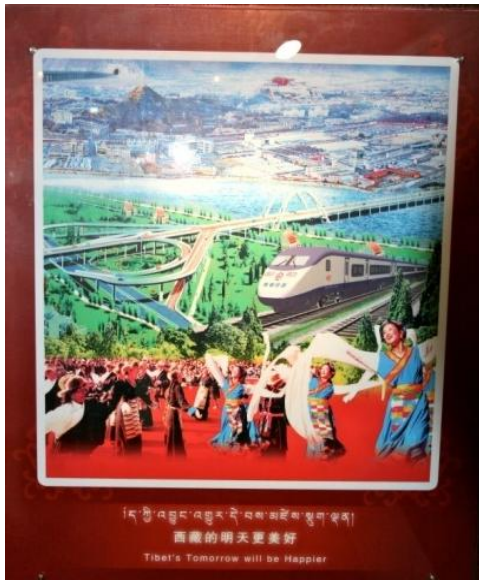


Figure 48 "Tibet's Tomorrow will be happier," Potala Zhol Museum (photo courtesy of Andrew Quintman)

The theme of receptive Tibetan welcome of Han Communist people and development is a recurrent trope especially prevalent in visual media co-incident with or commemorating major infrastructure projects and political anniversaries.³⁰⁰ In this recurrent imagery, traditionally dressed and gentle Tibetans of all demographics gather in festive atmosphere to welcome modern Han officials - often with tea, long white *khatag* scarves, dances, and smiles - as proof of long standing “warm relations between Tibetans and Chinese peoples,” as captions in the Potala Zhol Museum reiterate.

In the poster and similar media, it is the Qinghai-Tibet railroad’s sleek train that evidences an engineering marvel symbolic of the State’s technological superiority, and stands in for the State’s human emissaries. In the face of State modernity, Tibetans in festive and ceremonial *chuba* dance exuberantly, their bodies and expressions manifesting joyful enthusiasm for modernization. However, so long as they are traditionally dressed and performing dances, they remain mere pre-modern bystanders or passive recipients. The profusion of railroad media and other installations in the Potala Zhol museum, cast Tibetans as living pre-modern ornaments to a developed future within China.³⁰¹

Tibetan culture continues to be deployed and represented in the TAR in the 2007 as Kvaerne (Kvaerne 1994) encountered in Amdo in the late 1980s. “Official minority folk culture

in China is entertainment, circus, show – nothing more,” as art, festivals and other productions conform to the “official promoted myth of ‘minorities’ as exotic, colorful and, above all, given to song and dance.” Kvaerne insightfully notes that national investment in this myth must be considered in light of Chinese civilization’s long standing view of actors and dancers as occupants of the “bottom rung of the social hierarchy.” Nonetheless, this is a lucrative image. One keen observer notes, “tourism already accounts for 9% of Tibet’s gross domestic product [in 2008], and exploiting the region’s cultural allure is the cornerstone of government efforts to integrate Tibet with China and stimulate the region’s primarily rural economy (Stanway 2008).” Tibetanness had been made a specimen by the Tibet Museum, and transformed to spectacle at the Potala Zhol Museum, in which Tibetans are all, and only, performing culture.

The contrast in the Potala Zhol Museum between the pre-liberation past and the post-liberation present is heightened by the revival of ghastly tableaux,³⁰² presumably intended to stimulate Tibetan gratitude for and international reappraisal of the success of Chinese rule in Tibet [Harris, Sangster], but was confusing to local residents. The commissioned sculptor of the female *tsampa* grinder recounted to me his surprise when local officials showed him the catalogue from *The Wrath of the Serfs* and instructed him to replicate it exactly. The poet and blogger Woese, a survivor and historian of the Cultural Revolution era known for her political dissidence, saw leaked Museum planning documents including signage captions, and exclaimed “It’s the Cultural Revolution again!”³⁰³

The Socialist Realism convention of exaggerated gestures and expressions outlasted Maoism to inform the Potala Zhol’s neo-socialist realism, largely in photographic media, in the service of demonstrating Tibetanness in harmony with official Party-State ideologies. Visually, the museum’s exhibitions span decades in its representations of history, but leave intact superficial ethnic characteristics despite radical social change. As moments worthwhile of documentary, they appear only occasionally on the cusp of the kind of technological present the Han (and western world) take for granted as daily life—with mobile phones, trains, houses for

former nomads with plumbing and electricity, and urban interstate cloverleaf. “Modern” in museum narratives is meant to define only the normative Han and the State, or what they bring to Tibetans, thus clarifying pre-modern traditional Tibetanness in relation to the scientific, political, and industrial superiority of the State is a persistent official view.

If national museums are a public presentation of central government views, the Zhol Museum is a disconcerting and regressive indicator of CCCPC Tibet policy for Tibetans who hoped that the vitriolic portrayals of pre-Liberation Tibet might be finally circumscribed to the Maoist era’s fading legacies (L. M. Sangster, *Official Exhibition and Unofficial Art: Visual Constructions of the Ethnic Tibetan in the PRC 2010*).³⁰⁴ After all, the *Wrath of the Serfs* installation was still standing inside the People’s Revolutionary Hall when it was bulldozed in the mid-1980s, suggesting the propaganda had been relegated to a unique historical moment and no longer served state purposes. Official visual propaganda projects in the 1990s focused on the benefits of development and encapsulating the image of a thriving folk population; representation of the political past did not challenge earlier scripts, but, in the midst of rapid economic development and the creation of consumer society, was minimized and lacked the intensity of the early Communist and Maoist eras,³⁰⁵ or was virtually absent, as in the Tibet Museum.³⁰⁶ The Party, and the Zhol Museum, seem unwilling to establish a rhetorical space in which Tibetans are simultaneously ethnic as well as modernized, continually relegating Tibetans in the twenty-first century to pre-modern visual spectacle through neo-Socialist Realism photography and the look of a colonial, ethnographic museum.

Official Tibetanness in Conclusion

Thus, in decades of representation by the State, Tibetans in *chupa* dress remain anonymous, traditional, rural peoples transparently and superficially communicating their emotion through facial expressions and exaggerated gestures. Both orthodox and neo-Socialist Realism in Tibet aims to convince Tibetans and others of a degenerate pre-Liberation Tibet, and reinforce the validity and benefits of Communist rule. The purported visual “realism,” conferred

initially by art worker's deployment to rural, ethnic and labor sites in Mao's methodology known as "drawing from the masses" and later through the perceived evidentiary status of photography, links State imagery in the TAR from the Cultural Revolution to the present in a strategy to portray State historical narratives as natural and genuine.³⁰⁷ Moreover, despite the purported benefits and changes pioneered by Communists in Tibet, Tibetans remain curiously unchanged, trapped by an essential ethnicity that renders them timeless. The story of Tibetan's twentieth century conversions from representations as ethnic minzu to culture-less compatriots in class struggle to happy folk objects of tourism and development is an understudied but essential script at the core of major state museums and propaganda in Tibet.

After the Cultural Revolution, efforts by the state to placate grievances and stimulate economic development included encouraging the revival of ethnic "traditions". The relaxation of ethnicity policies in Tibet from the 1980s led to retrieval of traditional culture, as manifest for example in the rebuilding and re-populating of monasteries, as well as the birth of modern Tibetan literature, music and art. However, the state's view of Tibetan "tradition" in the post-revolutionary period proved to reduce permissible ethnicity to the visible, colorful features such as costumes, dances, songs, and handicrafts, thereby flattening and abstracting local diversity and fields of knowledge, and in very real ways, limiting Tibetan access to their own linguistic and religious heritage. After the Cultural Revolution, the chupa is converted from the backward peasants' tattered garb in pre-Liberation depictions of Old Tibet in the *Wrath of the Serfs* to be remembered in post-Liberation society as the most elaborate of traditional couture in photographs at the Tibet Museum. This imagery is then amplified in official and private sector promotions and advertisements, especially tourist industries, rendering contemporary Tibetan people at once specimen and spectacle.

Despite changing political contexts and campaigns, state representation of Tibetanness has hinged upon a pre-modern subject – whether located in the past (*Wrath of the Serfs*), a timeless ahistorical continuity (*Tibet Museum*), or a within a modernizing present around them

(Potala Zhol Museum) - which is conveyed through: their dress (be it in tatters or bejeweled), and their pro-socialist sentiment transparently imaged on the surface of the body's gestures and expressions. That is, while depictions of Tibetanness have remained constant since the visual conventions were established in Socialist Realism, the purposes to which they can be put vary somewhat by context into which these images are inserted, communicating degrees of exoticism or depravity, but never equality or coequality with the majority Han or the State.

Thus, the visual markers of ethnicity established a visual code for representing Tibet, importantly enabling both the romantic fantasy that nothing was lost or destroyed in Tibet between the 1950s-1970s and consequently validating the political necessity of unending development of a people and place not yet caught up to the industrialized Han east. As so-called primitives have stood in relation to other colonial encounters and institutions (Errington, *The Death of Authentic Primitive Art and Other Tales of Progress* 1998), the Tibetan ethnic Other is primarily a pre-modern, naïve, exotic and commoditized figment for affirming Han majority nationalism, justifying colonialism and paternalism. Sanctioned Tibetanness thus remains identifiably ethnic and visible only as pre-modern traditionalists; the Tibetan who does not conform is either assimilated (and invisible), or a separatist or otherwise an impediment to Socialist progress. To be ethnic in the PRC then is, problematically, to continue to possess characteristics that pre-date the communist revolution, and therefore, as the State configures it, modernity itself.

This is crucial for understanding the history of state representations of Tibetans, and how Tsewang Tashi and other contemporary artists' works are radical alternatives, and, in an unprecedented way, not directed at the state, but their own communities and the international audience interested in Tibet.³⁰⁸

Contemporary Artists in Lhasa

Today's contemporary artists are still familiar with these codified sartorial tropes, as evidenced by Keltse's explanation of a Cultural Revolution era poster he salvaged and discussed

with Tsering Nyandak and me.³⁰⁹ In an original painting made for mass reproduction during the Cultural Revolution, a woman is wearing traditional Tibetan felted boots, striped apron (*pangden*) and dress with blouse (*chupa*), politicized by the accompanying blue ‘Mao jacket’. Her hair is braided with colored threads and wrapped around her head, further marking her ethnicity. She wears a military-ready canteen across her chest, and is walking from east (the right side), symbolic of China and marked with Chinese landscape elements, to west (Tibet is the furthest western province). She cheerfully carries a full basket on her back and leads a horse (which is also smiling, as my interlocutors pointed out) loaded with materials across a wooden bridge over a river, and in her pocket is a white book with the red Tibetan letters *rgyal khab dang gsar rjes*, “Country and Revolution”, a Maoist political tract.

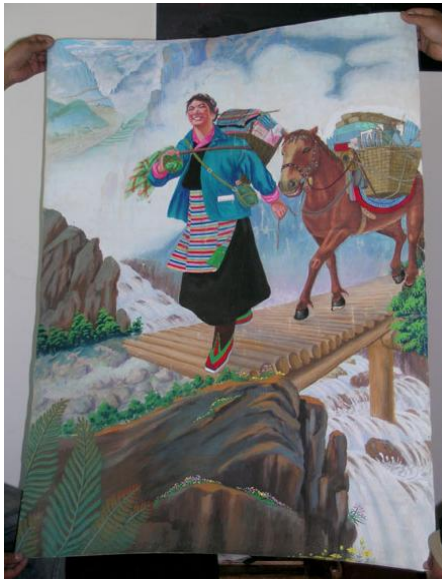


Figure 49 Country and Revolution painting for Cultural Revolution propaganda posters. Found in Lhasa. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

Keltse explained that the woman “looked like everyone else in posters from that time, except for her *chupa*.”³¹⁰ At “that time” during the Cultural Revolution, youth were educated in Chinese cities and sent to rural areas to spread communist zeal, and the Socialist Realism mandates for art both combine to communicate a model Tibetan socialist. Thus she looks outwardly Tibetan in dress, but her actions show she is inwardly devoted to the Communist Party

and cheerfully doing her part to bring about a socialist future for Tibet and the nation, conveyed through the same visual conventions employed and recognizable throughout the PRC.

The establishment by Socialist Realism of dress as a visual convention marks an important and enduring shift in which traditional dress became an ethnic costume, in life and propaganda, and then consumerism forty years later.³¹¹

For example, a popular advertisement for traditional Tibetan medicine marketed to Chinese consumers nationwide shows a Tibetan girl posed to represent Tibetan ethnicity and confer ethnic authenticity for Han consumption by her *chuba* dress, hair, jewelry, and smile, and, in one advertisement, her arms spread wide in a flowering meadow before a snow peak.

Stylized thus, she enters the visual landscape of commodification of Tibetanness. Thus not only are artists familiar with historical imagery, but they are surrounded by its legacy as well.



Figure 50 Advertisement for Tibetan herbal medicine by a Chinese company.

Tsewang Tashi's Art of Tibetanness

Contemporary Tibetan artists present a very different way of thinking about and representing "Tibetanness". Tsewang Tashi (b.1963) intentionally works with notions of ethnicity to counter problematic representations and to assert alternatives. He is recognized locally as irreplaceable in his official and unofficial roles in the nascent contemporary art world of Lhasa, roles in which ethnicity is an issue navigated daily. Artists face both imperatives to be circumspect on the one hand, and embrace contemporary Tibetan realities on the other, as they mediate ethnicity in China's Tibet. Read through the above visual history of the representation of

Tibetanness by the State, Tsewang Tashi's portraits of Tibetan subjects include omissions and alterations of established iconographic conventions, directly inspired by their daily lives in Lhasa.

I first met Tsewang Tashi in the summer of 2004. Fluent in English, he is one of the first artists of the Gedun Choephel Guild to meet and engage with foreigners interested in the artwork and artists in Lhasa. As we came to know each other, we met regularly for meals, at his home studio, and at the Guild gallery.

Tsewang Tashi generously informed me of the occasional art events in the city and at Tibet University, where he also invited me to observe his classes. Tsewang Tashi's many work demands limited the time we spent together, but he periodically made time for leisurely meals with me and invited me to his studio when he completed works so we could discuss them, almost always before he mailed them to a gallery abroad. Below, I describe phases of Tsewang Tashi's career, particularly attending to his representations of Tibetanness and how it has been both unique and evolved over time.

Tsewang Tashi is a leader in the art world of Lhasa as an Associate Professor and, at the time of my fieldwork, Dean of the School of Art at Tibet University. He is also one of the dedicated founding members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, a member of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA), represented by several contemporary galleries internationally, and a vocal advocate for other artists and students. Despite obligations to teaching, research, administrative work, family, and occasional curatorial work, Tsewang Tashi finds energy for his first passion, painting.

Tsewang Tashi's artistic orientation is the most international and contemporary of the Lhasa artists today, in part a consequence of his years of study in Beijing and Norway, which has translated into critical and commercial success.³¹² In 2007, Tsewang was offered representation by galleries in Beijing, Hong Kong, and London, and subsequently mounted a solo show in London (*Untitled Identities*, 2009, Rossi + Rossi). As a leader locally, and because of the local

and international visibility of his work, his choices for the representation of Tibetanness are important to examine.

As a youth, Tsewang was selected as one of six Tibetans to attend college at the art school of the Central Nationalities University (CNU) in Beijing, where he studied oil painting and art history from 1980-1984. Upon graduation, he taught at CNU for several years. Tsewang returned to Lhasa in 1988, joining the faculty at Tibet University's (TU) art department as a professor of Western art history and methods. In 2000, Tsewang began studies at the Institute for Colour at the National College of Art and Design in Oslo, Norway. There he not only earned an MA in Fine Arts (2002), but was exposed to entirely new pedagogies, and acquired perspective regarding the Chinese art history curriculum by discovering international art movements and figures that had been omitted from his training in Beijing. For example, he discovered the relative obscurity internationally of the so-called famous painters of Soviet Socialist Realism that features so prominently in his training. As an artist, however, he reflects that he most benefitted from the novel experience of serious critique from peers and faculty with diverse cultural and political backgrounds.³¹³

Ethnicity may present one of the greatest opportunities and challenges to his professional life in Lhasa. As a professor and as Dean of the School of the Arts³¹⁴ at Tibet University, Tsewang was integral to every departmental process from admissions testing, to teaching, to developing program curricula, to difficult faculty-university politics. The ethnic politics of his job was also demanding: he had to teach in both Chinese and Tibetan, admit to the program a mix of Tibetan and Chinese students, and rank Tibetan and Chinese professors' academic and artistic achievements for tenure and promotions, a process in which scholarly articles published in Mandarin counted for more institutionally than those published in Tibetan language because of the wider circulation of Chinese journals.³¹⁵ Paradoxically, foreign exhibitions (in which contemporary Tibetan artists garnered increasing success) were less esteemed in university evaluations than domestic (government-sponsored) exhibitions (which disproportionately

awarded Han aesthetic politics), despite the perception of domestic institutional art education and exhibiting practices as frustratingly outdated by international standards.³¹⁶ Administering these processes required a sensitive and cool-headed balancing of personal, professional, and cultural interests. All of these responsibilities took time and energy away from his studio work, yet he remains dedicated to making contributions locally and his positions in the University and in the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild as the most efficacious means to develop and promote young talent. It is this commitment to Lhasa and her people that also infuses his work and artistic goals.

Tsewang Tashi describes his artistic output in three phases: “root searching”, landscapes, and portraits. Childhood experiences growing up during the Cultural Revolution, then art school in Beijing, gave rise to the first of three distinct artistic phases in his career to date, the “root searching” of the 1980s in which he tried to establish contact with and then uniquely represent an “authentic” Tibetan tradition and culture he felt must exist somewhere on the plateau. Works from this time, such as an untitled self-portrait, a monastic scene, and a landscape described below, were motivated by his experiencing of his own ethnic difference from the Han majority, but uncertain roots.

After returning to Lhasa and commencing his career at Tibet University, he embarked upon his second phase – landscapes – from the mid- 1990s through the turn of the century, with determination to avoid illusions and to re-connect with own experience and places, as in *River with Reflection*.

While pursuing his MFA in Norway and then throughout his tenure as Dean, he was committed to a unique form of portraiture in his third phases, during the first decade of the twenty-first century. He produced between two and five portraits each year between 2004-2007. In his most prolific period, 2008-2009, he painted to nine facial and three full body portraits, in addition to completing a four-part photographic series of portraits.³¹⁷

“Root Searching”

During a “root searching” period, as he calls it, Tsewang Tashi visited, photographed, and sketched villages and historic and religious sites in central and eastern Tibet. One work from the time period is *Barn* (c. mid-1980s), a small oil painting of a tethered equine farm animal seated on hay facing a stone wall from which a hand-woven basket hangs. The work has a peaceful and timeless feeling of village life, rendered in the soft focus of romantic realism, but with strong lighting coming from the left and casting shadows increasing a photographic feeling of presence. There is more of a documentary, having-been-there feeling than a nostalgic one.



Figure 51 Tsewang Tashi. Barnyard. 1980s.
Photograph: Jason Sangster



Figure 52 Tsewang Tashi. Prayer Festival. 1980s.
Photograph: Jason Sangster

During this phase, Tsewang Tashi not only sought village life, transitioning with decollectivization, but also the revival of religious life. Tsewang Tashi may have been one of the first Lhasa artists³¹⁸ to use Buddhist imagery for modern secular comment on contemporary society, and specifically his own confused identity as a Tibetan born after 1959. *Prayer Festival*, a portrait of a disciplinarian monk supervising seated monks in prayer in a typical monastic courtyard, still hung in his studio in 2007 as an example of this period's fascination with religious revival around him. A much more personal expression can be found in a self portrait from 1986 and is unprecedented as both a self-portrait³¹⁹ and as an expression of distance between himself and the Buddhism of the imagined Tibetan past and present. We see the backs of rows of maroon-robed monks in a band embedded into the blue sky while in the foreground, inserted over the snow peaks of a mountain range, a rectangle frames a self-portrait of Tsewang in modern clothes with long hair. He and the monks have their backs to each other, the artist facing ahead and the monks looking back. The young artist stands alone, almost as if apart from the collective represented as monks; and therefore Tibet itself were it not for the inimitable landscape that envelops them all. While Tsewang Tashi utilized the visual language of Tibetan Buddhism embodied by the monks, he does so to image contemporary difficulty with identity and presumptions of religiosity, and is an early example of the struggle many artists have felt.

The interpersonal Han-Tibetan experiences and the visual propaganda common during childhood in Cultural Revolution Lhasa and at college in Beijing sharpened Tsewang's awareness of his ethnic difference from the Han majority of China, but could not answer what made him "Tibetan".³²⁰ As newly permitted Tibetan cultural revival was underway in the 1980s,³²¹ Tsewang's generation witnessed the return of a religious and cultural life they had never known, but was "fascinating", "a cultural renaissance" he could learn from, and which had been part of everyday reality for previous generations. During this phase of his life and work, he recalls, "I wanted to find some indigenous Tibetan things, take photographs and make sketches of them and

try to create a kind of new Tibetan art.” The notion of a pure Tibetan-ness, existing beyond political devastation or prior to his birth, seemed increasingly accessible.

Creating these images, and the “root searching” tours of the plateau and Lhasa, resulted from a sense that his own Tibetanness was inadequate and that a more authentic form of Tibetan life existed outside of his own urban, post-1959 upbringing. He hoped coming into contact with it— at the monastery, in the village, with nomads - would bring him closer to Tibetan heritage and thereby personal identity.

The pursuit of this goal seemed to necessitate a quest for authentic Tibetan culture, and he embarked for rural areas of eastern Tibet with “great expectations”. A pivotal moment occurred after days on horseback and the promising arrival at the tent home of a welcoming nomad family. He imagined a carpet-floored tent without electricity, its residents dwelling as they had for generations. Entering the tent, he found, to his great shock, a grandmother seated on a couch and watching television.³²² Recounting the story two decades later, he laughs about his own naivety, but then it was a startling disappointment given his experiences and expectations.

Tsewang was born in 1963 into an intellectual, cultured, and cosmopolitan Lhasa family. At home, he heard about the Tibetan intellectuals of the early 20th century from relatives, particularly his father, who valued wide-ranging intellectual curiosity about religion, history and culture, and the kinds of association with teachers that had occurred in people’s homes prior to Communist rule. These values, discussions and associations were displaced as his family endured the Cultural Revolution. Tsewang remembers being particularly troubled one morning during the Cultural Revolution at his elementary school when a teacher instructed the art class to draw a picture titled, “When I grow up, I want to be a nomad.” Having never actually seen a black wool tent or a yak grazing, the child was confronted with expectations determined by perception of his ethnicity for his knowledge and aspirations, neither of which were in accordance with his urban experience in an educated, cosmopolitan family. Additionally, in official historical memory that the State tries to establish, in part through the *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition Tsewang toured with

his schoolmates, the only memories the Tibetan masses could carry from Old Tibet were of peasant misery, struggle, and the yearning for freedom that ultimately yoked them to the Communist cause; not his family's memory.

Thus Tsewang's sense of cultural displacement and interrupted inheritance was doubled: he was divorced from the urban and intellectual culture that was "Tibetan" for his family's elders, and from the state image of "Tibetan" as a newly liberated, class conscious, nomad or farmer. These factors combined to create an image of Tibetan cultural authenticity that existed outside his own life experiences, but which he sought to discover and render through art.

After his journey to meet actual nomads, however, the notion of ethnic authenticity as a counterpoint to his own insecure identity vanished, and a new artistic phase emerged out of the disjuncture of imagined and actual realities. Tsewang Tashi writes,

I travelled to many places in the TAR and ethnic nomadic areas like Amdo Golok. But at the end I found that reality was not same as I had imagined. Jeans, pop music and table tennis were everywhere even in the remote areas. What I was looking for had undergone historical changes. I then realized that my efforts in finding something called indigenous culture perhaps existed only in the artists' mind. What I was looking for was just a romantic idea rather than reality. Society itself underwent dramatic change, and no place is an isolated island. Then my works changed I and started another period, [characterized by] freely applying ...different motifs [that] broke the nature of space and time.³²³

Tsewang Tashi made a painting of a stone lion famously marking the Chonggye valley tombs of the kings of Tibet's Dynastic period (7th – 9th centuries). The stone carving dominates a barren landscape and is bisected by horizontal bands of air, the pieces hovering against a blue sky full of swirling clouds and moonglow. The influence of Surrealism is detectable in the floating stone sculpture's pieces and the unidentifiable elements, creating some mystery at the suggestion of geological formations or the vestiges of a settlement in the distance and curious boulders in the foreground. He painting was done from a photograph Tsewang took there while on his root searching travels, but the surreal elements of the work suggest the instability of his Tibetan identity and the groundless illusions informing his quest.



Figure 53 Tsewang Tashi. Chongye Valley. c.1984. Photographs courtesy of artist.



Figure 54 Tsewang Tashi. a painting inspired by travels in Chongye Valley. c.1985
Courtesy of the artist.

Tsewang Tashi's compositions transformed to “serve the concepts of the painting,” rather than “according to the natural eye’s view at specific times and specific places. To some extent,” he said, “my works were influenced by surrealism and by Robert Rauschenberg³²⁴ in terms of approach, but my interest was not concerning the unconscious and its relation to dreams, but was expression of what I felt and thought at that time (Tashi 2007).”

Tsewang Tashi's quest for the ‘pure’ Tibetan culture of his socially-constructed imagination, untouched by Communism and modernity, was now over, and he took stock of his motivating intentions. He has said, “I had hoped that one day I could use oil color to present Tibet from my own point of view, and to create a kind of Tibetan oil painting (Tashi, Art in Process 2007).” His ‘own point of view’ was, he intended, to be a “Tibetan” point of view, and a “kind of

new Tibetan art,” and thus one which was clearly distinguished from Han painters’ representations. These goals became attainable, we will see, by turning to his modern experiences.

Landscape

Although Tsewang Tashi did not find the timeless cultural word he sought, he did find Tibetan people whose lives and environments were both undergoing radical change. Tsewang began landscape oil paintings in 1990, as a reflection on the interaction of memory, modernization and place after his return to Lhasa from Beijing,.

In *Lhasa River Reflection* the Kyichu River is painted deeply blue, wide, clear and clean, with ripples in the main channel and a still pool mirroring the Bonpo Ri hill on the opposite bank. The surface of the water bisects the painting, forming a horizontal axis for the reflections of the yellow-browns of the bare hills and the cobalt blue sky. The large panoramic oil painting is spread over three canvases, and painted in vibrant, saturated, highly contrasting colors. Signs of human life such as figures, roads, houses, agriculture, religious markers, and bridges - all unavoidably visible from any vantage point along the river in the city today – are entirely absent.



Figure 55 Tsewang Tashi. Lhasa River Reflection. 1999. oil on canvas. triptych. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Tsewang commented that the quality of the light captured in the painting is like this only in the winter, when the hills and the trees in the far right of the painting are dry and bare. Intimately familiar with the Kyichu, the river running through the Lhasa valley and forming the southern edge of the city, and the hills on the opposite bank, it was a common scene in Tsewang's landscapes. In this painting, as in others, the hill is the immediately recognizable sacred site, Bonpo Ri.

Gazing at the painting in his studio one afternoon, Tsewang recalled boyhood swimming in the river. Even in summer's lower water levels, the river was deep with dangerously strong currents, and children were not allowed to wade without the help of careful adults. But this was back when it was still too cold to go outside in a short-sleeved shirt without a coat, unlike the hot summers these days, he said.

I was visiting Tsewang's new studio, (the only room which had been completed on the upper floor of a house still under construction) on a spring day in 2006 when we viewed this last of his remaining landscape paintings, soon to be sent to foreign collectors. The well-lit studio had a high ceiling, and a wall of windows faced south. They provided an unobstructed view of the prayer-flag adorned Bonpo Ri and the Kyichu River. He continued to comment that weather and the river "now feel quite strange." They are disconnected from his memory, especially since in the construction of the new railroad bridge a couple of miles away, State engineers had removed stones from the riverbed for construction and dug a deep narrow channel with long high walls to contain the river upstream, leaving little to flow toward the city. Tsewang could not remember Lhasa having ever been so dry, hot and dusty. We stared at the painting, pulsing with vitality even in its winter season, while a narrow stream of murky water trickled through a wide dry riverbed outside the window of his home and studio.

Tsewang Tashi once described the land itself as a "witness to all that has happened". For some time, it seemed unchanging as development and modernization transformed the city alone; now his painting appears to document the landscape as it once was, as it is recollected, and as it

changes and impacts Tibetan relationships to their environment, in which mountains and rivers stand as “monuments”.³²⁵ Tibetans have long been defined by outsider’s perceptions of their physical territory – an impregnable Himalayan keep, a harsh and scarce vastness, a majestic grandeur. Tsewang Tashi’s landscapes place Tibetan life in the context of Tibetan memories of their land.

Portraits

With the turn of the century, Tsewang Tashi commenced the portrait phase of his career. *Untitled No.1, 2003*, one of the earliest portrait works Tsewang Tashi kept,³²⁶ is of a serious little girl with coral red skin, shiny waves of chin-length black hair, dressed in a white shirt with a green collar and navy flower-like ruffle on her shoulder. The contours of her face, hair, and clothing are highlighted by soft, bright white lines that reach into the hazy yellow, purple and orange background. Soon after this initial approach to portraits, he removed color from the backgrounds, placing his figures in a white field, while the skin tones remained rainbow-hued, and the clothes retained their perhaps original colors, as in this painting of a purple-faced boy in an ordinary crew-neck red shirt and green zippered jacket. (2003 or 2004).³²⁷ The white lighting in this work includes highlighting spots and lines, and the face of the subject is painted in purple and lavender colors. The photorealism of the work is pronounced in the critical expression on the boy’s face, although the nature of his raised eyebrows, direct gaze at the viewer, slightly tilted head and frowning mouth remain an enigma.



Figure 56 Tsewang Tashi Untitled No.1, 2003. 2003. Courtesy of author.



Figure 57 Tsewang Tashi. Untitled, No.?, hanging in the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild Gallery. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster Summer 2004.

Tsewang Tashi's approach to painting and framing the subjects shifted as he continued the series, but other elements remained consistent. *Untitled No. 3, 2006* is of a golden yellow hued young man with one gold earring, black jacket, and black and yellow hair. The painting is an example of Tsewang's circa 2005 -2007 paintings and his move towards monochromatic color schemes and close framing of the subjects' face. The boy's skin, hair and clothing range from tarnished to highly polished gold, with a hint of rose or copper in the lips and hair. While the colors and gender of his subjects varied during this stage, most utilized a similar closer crop of

the face, from chin to just above the forehead, against a white background, and with white light reflection lines softened in focus.

The white lines rippling through the subject convey a plastic quality, as if the subject were a mannequin, and yet the highly individualistic, photorealistic features and expression yield intimate, psychological portraiture. The subject of the startling *Untitled No.3, 2006* nearly pounces off the canvas to confront the viewer. The boy's expression, at the center of the composition, radiates a confidence that demands our acknowledgement of his presence, but is utterly inscrutable.

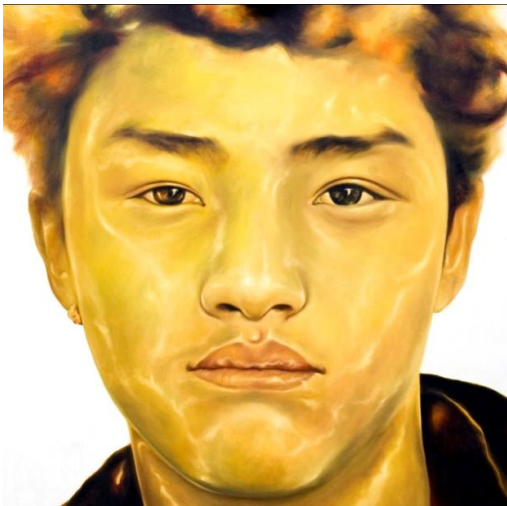


Figure 58 Tsewang Tashi. *Untitled No. 3, 2006*. 2006. oil on canvas. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Untitled No. 6 (2009), *Untitled No. 9 (2009)*, and *Untitled No. 8 (2009)* illustrate an even closer framing of the face to the point of eliminating a background and very minimal evidence of clothing, the use of monochromatic coloring, and a softening of the sharp focus, feature lines and lighting effects. In this prolific year, the palette shifted away from jewel tones to velvety violet, aqua and cornflower for the girls' and boys' exceptionally smooth skin. Their gazes are direct.



Figure 59 Tsewang Tashi,
Untitled No. 6, 2009. oil on
canvas. 53 x 41 cm – 21 x 16 in.

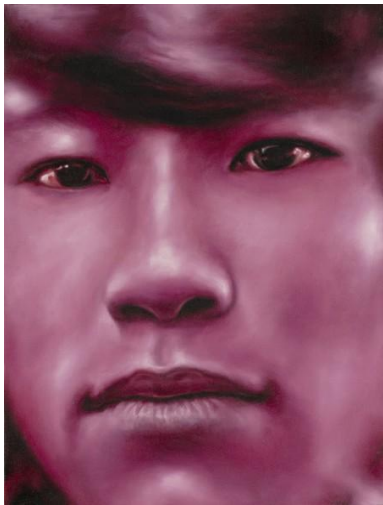


Figure 60 Tsewang Tashi.
Untitled No.9, 2009. Oil on
canvas. 53 x 41 cm – 21 x 16 in



Figure 61 Tsewang Tashi.
Untitled No. 8, 2009. oil on
canvas. 53 x 41 cm - 21 x 16 in

Viewing several images from the series together makes evident the individuality of each subject despite the similarity in Tsewang's approach and methods. The significance of this is underscored by the artists' insistence that portraits from the series, while individually conceived and completed works, be exhibited in galleries at least in pairs, if not more.

Tsewang Tashi's artistic process reveals his commitments. He began painting portraits while pursuing an MFA in Oslo, utilizing photographs he had taken of youth in Lhasa. He had packed the photos, often students at his campus of Tibet University in their everyday casual clothes and hairstyles, in his luggage without a specific goal in mind. Once in the foreign environment of northern Europe, the photos became invaluable connections to home, and insight into individuals and artistic process.

He noted how the act of photographing someone elicited their individuality and captured something of their personality. Reflecting on the photographic process, he notices that as the photographer, he takes pictures differently over time, sometimes angling the lens

...little bit up, and one is from down. But also the children, when they are looking at you, they are different! Really different, I think. Their character comes out, I think, when they are looking at me with the camera. Some of them are looking like this (tucking his head shyly), some like this (straightening up boldly). You can see very strong personalities.³²⁸

Tsewang developed a creative process that combines photographic and digital technology with painting techniques. Selecting a photograph from his collection, he digitally changes subject's skin color which is chosen based upon several factors. These include which shade suits a subject's personality, and the needs of the artist's painting context, including consideration of portraits that will be exhibited together need to "harmonize," and a change in color from the previously completed painting is required because of the effects upon him of immersion in particular colors in the course of producing the work.³²⁹ He then he uses software filter functions to create patterns of reflected light on the surface of the facial features, creating a plastic texture. After choosing a color and sharpening the light, Tsewang converts the image to black and white

on his computer and prints it on paper. He uses the black and white image, taped to his easel or nearby, to gauge the “depth of color,” while the color image could be open on his laptop screen for reference as well.³³⁰ Tsewang’s method for applying the oil paint to the canvas is also unique: he first “pencils in a rough outline” of the composition, and then paints “all the color at once” moving over the surface of the canvas only once from the top left to the bottom right corners; he does not know of any other traditional or contemporary artist who works this way. This is in contrast to the Tibetan traditional *thangka* technique in which grounds of color are built up in layers until the finest details are applied on top, or the way modern oil painters touch up details at the end.

For Tsewang Tashi, the digitally altered photograph is not the end product, which can only be achieved through the painting medium. In painting, Tsewang intentionally omits the photograph’s fine details (stray hairs, freckles, tiny wrinkles) in the smoothing of the surfaces. The entire process seems to distill the intensity of the subjects’ unique expression, which perhaps can only be achieved through the synthetic element of his process.



Figure 62 Tsewang Tashi's studio, with painting in progress. 2006. Courtesy of the artist.

Resisting Conventional Tibetanness

The summer of 2004, the medicinal advertisements campaign featuring the young Tibetan woman described above appeared on many of Lhasa's bus stands and billboards. Tsewang Tashi had recently completed *Untitled, No. 3, 2003* from a photo taken on campus of a student in the dance department of Tibet University in her everyday dress. Tsewang Tashi was surprised to recognize the model in the ads as the same young woman. In Tsewang's portrait, *Untitled No.4, 2003*, she looks directly at the viewer with an ambiguous expression, her skin is amethyst colored and rippled with light rays, and the background is white. The painted portrait is a very different kind of representation of Tibetanness, absent traditional dress, hair and jewelry, scenic landscape and broad smile.³³¹

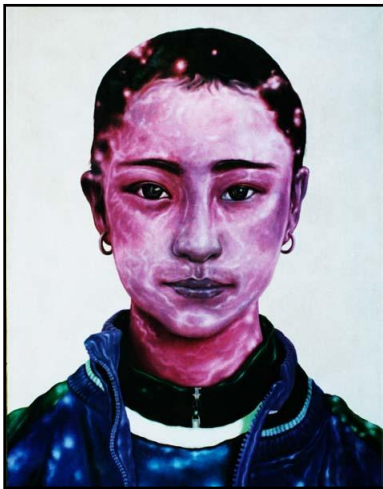


Figure 63 Tsewang Tashi. *Untitled No.4, 2003* Oil on Canvas.



Figure 64 Chinese company advertisement. Lhasa. Photograph: Tsewang Tashi, 2006.

Considering Tsewang Tashi's portraits from 2003-2009, it is evident that he resists notions of traditional Tibet and conventional representations of Tibetanness. In the materials and techniques he uses, Tsewang's primary source and commitment is to contemporaneous everyday young people, photographed as they dress and express themselves, not as they are imagined. They are located in the urban present, not a traditional past or as lingering relics of pre-modern life. Tsewang's loyalty to their individual personalities also refuses to turn one Tibetan into a generic representation of Tibetanness. The colors Tsewang Tashi chooses, he notes, are not "natural" for skin tones, but in the rapidly changing environment of urban Lhasa, the "artificial" colors of neon and plastic, which used to be novel, are now ubiquitous. Within his lifetime, they have "become naturalized" in his environment, and are thus reflected or embodied literally in these portraits.³³² Tsewang Tashi's colors and lighting effects are thus visual strategies for showing unique individuals embedded in collective social contexts of rapid modernization.

Additionally, the techniques and processes Tsewang Tashi developed are not traditional artistic materials or methods: oil paint on canvas, photography and computer photo editing software, and painting each area of the surface only one time do not have roots in the thangka painting tradition of mineral pigments on thin cotton, in which shading and detail are applied over the entire surface in multiple layers, replicating compositions marked by iconometric and iconographic precision.

These portraits are also devoid of the expected iconographic markers of ethnicity, defined by the State as pre-modern primitivism in reference to political campaigns, and by 'Shangri-la' romanticism of tradition and religion that characterizes some post-1978 Han and Western views of Tibet. As described above, the State's visual construction of Tibetanness in the modes of Socialist Realism and its revival employs sartorial elements and superficial transparency of emotion communicated through exaggerated physical gestures and facial expressions. Whereas Tibetans in State museums become homogenous and undifferentiated in their traditional dress and

settings, their ideologies in harmony with the State and their closed-circuit gazes directed within the action of the frame or beyond the viewer, Tsewang Tashi's subjects in this body of work are unique individuals, their interior lives an enigma to the viewer at whom they gaze directly. The larger than life size of the faces on the canvas, with the cropping centering our focus upon their eyes, insists upon the subject's interiority and presence in these psychological (not political) portraits.

The sartorial element of Tsewang Tashi's portraits has visibly changed in the course of making portraits. The dress of the subjects in the earlier works is ordinary, modern urban youth attire, but virtually disappears in the close cropping of the paintings from 2008-2009, both of which omit the trope of the *chupa* or traditional ornaments by omitting any dress from the compositional focus on faces.

However, Tsewang Tashi draws explicit attention to a new dress code for young Tibetans in three full length portraits in 2009, and plays with the contrast between this reality and pervasive stereotypes in a series of four photographs discussed below. In three nearly full-body portraits of young women, Tsewang shows each one against a white background with aqua, pink, and purple skin tones, wearing dance club employees' uniforms, emblazoned with Budweiser (with Olympic rings) (*Beer seller No 1*), Carlsberg "Chill" (*Beer seller No 2*), and Great Wall wine logos (*Wine seller No 1*).



Figure 65 Tsewang Tashi.
Wine Seller No.1. 2009. oil on
canvas. 146x97 cm - 57 1/2 x 38
in



Figure 66 Tsewang Tashi.
Beer Seller No. 2. 2009. oil on
canvas. 146x97 cm - 57 1/2 x
38 in



Figure 67 Tsewang Tashi.
Beer Seller No. 1. 2009. oil on
canvas. 146x97 cm - 57 1/2 x
38 in

The women, in corporate-designed short skirts and synthetic shiny material, will be dressed identically to all her co-workers on a given night but in Tsewang Tashi's paintings, can be seen to retain their individuality in their expressions, postures, unassuming hair styles and simple jewelry; in Tsewang Tashi's portraits, their modest demeanor and costumes seem somewhat at odds. In these subjects, Tsewang Tashi sees a nexus of global commerce, pan-Tibetanness,³³³ and local mediations, as the girls sell alcohol at clubs and are "involved in things far beyond Lhasa...It is not Tibet, but it is real life in Tibet (Tashi 2009)." Tsewang's depiction of contemporary realities reflects a Lhasa hybridity that is often ignored in reflecting Tibetanness today: that these youthful Tibetan girls (living in Lhasa perhaps from different Tibetan provinces) can wear an American beer company's sponsorship logo, work in a Chinese owned club, and serve drinks to Chinese, Tibetan and Western customers dancing to Hindi, Mandarin, Hip Hop and House music is a multicultural, globalizing modernity that is denied by State propaganda's representation of a multi-ethnic state comprised of modern Han and pre-modern ethnic groups on its borders. In his choice to depict ordinary young Tibetans in the everyday clothes they actually

wear in Lhasa's schools, clubs, and homes, Tsewang's portraits refuse dress as a marker of ethnicity, and thus the history of sartorial representation of Tibetans.

Tsewang Tashi further challenged the conventional representation of Tibetanness through sartorial markers in his four-part photographic work, *Shangri-la, 2008*.³³⁴ Tsewang Tashi's *Shangri-la No.2, 2008* photograph poses two young Tibetans: the male is bare-armed in a fur lined *chupa*, an unsophisticated country boy in the eyes of the giggling urban young woman in a short-skirted, silver Coors Light club uniform and knee-high white boots. Behind them, cement sheep stand in a tiny urban park near a gazebo, a parked car in the edge of the picture.



Figure 68 Tsewang Tashi:
Shangri-La No.2, 2008, digital photo, 100 x 150 cm

The photograph re-stages an iconic image of Tibetanness by the painter Chen Danqing, one of the most well known Chinese artists to come to Tibet in first wave of independent artists after the liberalizations of 1978. The *Tibet Series* catapulted Chen Danqing's reputation as a Native Soil artist in opposition to the past politicization of art, and yet the works led to the popularization of romantic realism for Tibetan subjects. His work *Shepherd (1980)* (Fig. 16) portrays a flirtatious moment on a cold, early spring day as the bare-armed man in a *chupa* tries to kiss a woman, also in a *chupa*, who smiles as she gently pushes him away. They are dressed in the clothes and boots of nomads, and a flock of sheep graze dry stubble beneath patches of snow in the vast landscape behind them.

In Tsewang Tashi's *Shangri-la, No.1 2008*, the woman wears a headscarf and a felted wool and fur-trimmed *chupa*, but her child, in jeans and sneakers, sits in a modern backpack-style carrier. The young man shows not a thread of tradition, dressed in baggy pants, orange sneakers, unzipped hooded sweatshirt, and black knit hat. She holds his arm as they stroll down a paved street in front of advertisements. Comparatively, Chen Danqing's hearty nomads in *Entering the City* (Fig. 17) are traditionally dressed, the woman in a head scarf breastfeeding an infant inside her thick leather and wool *chupa*, holding the arm of a man with traditional, rural braided hair and knife hanging from the belt of his *chupa*.

Tsewang facilitates a counter-reading of stereotyped images of Tibetan ethnicity in the four part photography series *Shangri-la* (2008) by recreating images of traditionalism made iconic by Chen, and juxtaposing them against highly modernized elements within the composition.



Figure 69 Tsewang Tashi Shangri-La No.1 2008 Digital Photograph 39.8 x 59.1 in.

Chen's *Tibet Series* became extremely popular in the 1980s as symbols of a new, post-ideological art in China. This development by independent Han artists contributes an important part of the visual history of representations of Tibetanness, in which Tibetan tradition is not denigrated and yet the romantic realism they practiced created different bias: Tibetans as timeless, exotic and simple Other to the industrializing, jaded eastern Han. Conventions for representing ethnicity established in the Socialist Realism era spilled over into the non-official 'cool realism' and romantic realism of independent Han artists to create works in which the ethnic status of the subjects are still communicated by dress, environment and pre-modern living. Tsewang Tashi objects to the persistence of this mode of representation of minorities and Tibetanness, familiar through private sector advertising, such as the medicinal advertisements, as well as State media including museums.

Tsewang Tashi wrote of his *Shangri-la*, 2008 series, "Tibet has been a popular exploring field for many [non-Tibetan] artists, such as painters, filmmaker, writers, and musicians. But [the] depiction [of the subjects] and the attitudes toward the subject are not [the] same" as a Tibetan would present them. "Some artists are thinking it is 'primitive', some other thinking it is 'Shangri

la' and exotic...and there is a certain market, because the works match the ...imagination and [criteria] of the consumers. However reality is much [more] complex and there are more important and interesting things one can focus on than the 'regional characteristics'. In these photo works my interest is to use former art works [Chen Danqing's *Tibet Series*] as vehicle to present the subjects from another way."³³⁵

Tsewang Tashi highlights this difference through the use of photography not only as a part of the artistic process of production, but as the medium of the completed work. By contrast, Chen Danqing's *Tibet Series* paintings show the subjectivity of the painter, while Tsewang Tashi's photographs communicate the indexical relationship of the medium to the Tibetans before his lens, who appeared, in 2008, as we see them, alive in a specific time and place. And yet, the subjects of *Shangri-la* are posed by the artist, and many are in costumes; it is not mere documentary Tsewang Tashi is trying to achieve. His subjects' setting and relations to each other, however, serve to document a reality in the present upon which a fantasy is projected and staged. The viewer becomes incriminated too, particularly to the extent that, like the tourists in *Shangri-la No.4, 2008*, (a re-staging of Chen Danqing's *Pilgrims*, Fig.18), we have focused our lens upon the most exotic specimens and cropped out the less-than-'Shangri-la' elements that inevitably surround these Tibetans. Tsewang Tashi speaks back the Shangri-la image created by others who romanticize Tibet (and capitalize on Tibetanness) while turning a blind eye to the real social problems Tibetans face in contemporary society.



Figure 70 Tsewang Tashi Shangri-La No.4
2008 Digital Photograph 39.8 x 59.1 in.

Whether Chen Danqing's paintings are seen as romantic idealism of Shangri-la, primitive exoticism, or, as they were in early 1980s China, as counter-propagandistic naturalism, Tsewang Tashi asserts that in highlighting the surfaces of his Tibetan subjects, Chen misses the more interesting realities of their diverse lives. Although the work is thirty years old, Tsewang Tashi's referencing suggests that the problematic ways of seeing Tibetans only through their ethnic markers have not changed, and he offers an updated vision. He juxtaposes the timeless and traditional look that is still expected for all Tibetans everywhere with the reality of urban youth on Lhasa's streets; and yet importantly, *both* the traditional nomad youth visiting Lhasa and the urban youth who live in the city are Tibetan.

Tsewang Tashi makes his subjects contemporaneous with his own globalized present, and maintains their interiority. One young artist in Lhasa, SoTse, affirmed Tsewang is achieving his goals, saying "Chen Danqing was painting at a time when life was very simple, people were happy just to have a radio. He was not painting a developed society. Tsewang is showing the inner mind of young people in a developed society." Again, this is in marked contrast to the denial of individual private life in the superficial, exterior-focused treatment of Tibetans in Socialist Realism and its contemporary revival.

Influences Past and Present: Socialist Realism, Photography, Chinese Contemporary

Tsewang Tashi's art bears traces of the influences of Socialist Realist propaganda, photography, and contemporary Chinese art, and shows how he shapes these influences particular to his generation's history and present into powerful communications of Tibetan cultural life today. These three influences began with his visual environment since childhood. His sense of his life history as an artist begins as a child keenly interested in art and observing closely various details and artistic processes, receiving strong feelings from the images, and watching the painters work. The art to which he was exposed – and which he laughingly describes occurring in his

“first gallery” of the neighborhood walls – was Cultural Revolution era Socialist Realist propaganda. The painted images that Tsewang Tashi watched as a child provided his first lessons in line and brushwork, and cultural aesthetics; the hand of the artist revealed either Tibetan *thangka* training or the Chinese broad soft brush.³³⁶ The iconic images of larger than life size heroes of the Communist pantheon – Marx, Mao, and “model citizens” – introduced two-dimensional representation of contemporaneous individuals. The impression of their scale and impact returns in his oversized and demanding portraits of individual Tibetans.

Tsewang Tashi affirms the unique individuality of Tibetans through a personal form of realism that is faithful to actual photographed persons’ physiological features, onto which he layers, through artificial colors and plastic textures, an impression of the transforming but actual environment in which they are embedded; this is a fundamentally new treatment of surfaces, even if emerging from the influence of superficial state imagery. To the extent Socialist Realism remains a traceable influence, it is as a visual, stylistic form only, stripped of the Party’s messages of loyalty and common political interests.

Tsewang Tashi is the first artist of his generation to use photography regularly in his art practices,³³⁷ a fact that may be related to his exposure to cameras when they were still extremely rare in Tibet. Tsewang grew up in a household led by his cultured and intellectual father, who was friends with Lhasa’s mid-century modernists, including Sonam Penbar Horkhang, Gedun Choephel’s friend and caretaker of his writings, and Demo Rinpoche, one of the first elites to own a camera (C. a. Harris, *Seeing Lhasa: British Depictions of the Tibetan Capital 1936-1947* 2003) (Woesser 2006). A grandfather figure in Tsewang’s life obtained a “big box camera” from Demo Rinpoche, which Tsewang remembers seeing him use during his childhood. He knows now that this relative must have carried this camera widely throughout the plateau on his tours as a general with the Tibetan army in the 1940s – 1950s. Sadly, all his photos have “disappeared,” Tsewang laments, and with them rare and precious documentation of the Tibetan past through

Tibetan eyes. In this lacuna, Tsewang Tashi's art turns documentary interest on the present moment.

Photography became integral to his artistic methods and process. Attending to his own impact upon photographing others and his subject's individuality is integral to the portrait process, and subverts propagandistic and romantic claims to capture an ethnic essence or inherent nature. It also allows that which does appear before the lens to be transcribed in a personalized way which is yet still capable of functioning as a historical document of a moment in time, both for the individuals present, and of the society in which they are ingrained. In his painted portraits, indexical connection to physical presence of the body is diluted through his process of production and the change of media from photography to paint (Saltzman 2006) (Gibbons, Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance 2007), but the technique works to enhance the gaze of the subject out of the frame, and the viewers' returned the stare into the canvas, replicating in the viewing a reciprocity that existed between subject and artist in the creation of the photograph. The absence of such reciprocity in state propaganda and commercial imagery is a means of vacating the subject of personhood.

Another artistic influence upon Tsewang Tashi is contemporary Chinese art. Western and Tibetan observers have seen a visual connection between internationally acclaimed Beijing artists and Tsewang Tashi's portraits.³³⁸ Inspired by political memories jarring with present consumer society, Chinese contemporary artists such as Zhang Xiaogang, Fang Lijun, Yue Minjun, and Wang Guangyi have painted large faces with unreal skin colors, some with grotesque distortions. Yue Minjun's laughing faces are satirical and disturbing. The *Bloodlines* series by Zhang Xiaogang, which evoke aged black and white photographs, depict faces altered to alien-like proportions with enormous eyes and pointy chins. These works critique the disorientation of a post-Cultural Revolution society overwhelmed by consumerism and loss. In common with Tsewang Tashi, these are large works in unnatural colors or effects that focus the viewers' attention on facial expressions.

Despite resonances between Tsewang Tashi's portraits with mainstream Chinese art – either in the past Socialist Realism or the early 2000s contemporary art in Beijing - there are far more differences. None of the characteristics of Socialist Realism discussed above – reliance upon dress and surface features, teleological orientation, erasure of difference and individuality, transparency of passionate emotions, absence of individual artistic creativity, and historical revisionism – can be found in Tsewang's work. At the same time, to the ways in which Han artists may be rejecting the visual legacy of prior decades, Tsewang adds a different set of possibilities. In fact, he reverses past visual conventions for defining Tibetans (and citizens of the PRC), but without embracing satirical, nostalgic, or critical relationships to the past as Chinese artists do.

Tsewang Tashi's portraits invert the Socialist Realist mode of representation. Tsewang Tashi's life history, memories, and artistic productions contradict such representations, even without any deliberate attempt on his part to undermine the state's narratives. His portraits convey a different reality of ephemeral colors and fashions, enigmatic expressions, and documenting a passing moment in an individual's search for a place in a rapidly changing social context. In the absence of familiar traditional garments, adornments, animals, religious objects or products emblematic of Tibetans, these Tibetan people live their daily lives in Lhasa, in the current fashions and hair styles which, along with their plastic and neon skin, literally reflect immersion in a society undergoing change. Artist Tsering Dhondrup considers Tsewang Tashi one of the most contemporary artists in Lhasa and observes, "Tsewang paints people his way because he chooses not to paint nomads or farmers or monks – people by whom one's eyes can understand them, that they're Tibetan, and maybe even which region they are from. His people are youth who wear fashionable clothes, go to dance halls, use computers, etc. so they have the new look of young modern people." Likewise, Tibetan artists SoTse and Tsarong affirm Tsewang Tashi's portraits capture the "inner feelings" of real Tibetan youth. SoTse elaborated, "These days many famous Chinese artists, they paint only the outside of things. Tibetans are showing

experiences and expressions of inner way of thinking. Tsewang just paints the faces because he is a university professor and now he deals closely with students and knows their pressures in society. He paints the students' inner way of thinking and feeling. From Chinese artists, when they paint, Western people look and see a subject in Tibetan dress. From that viewers' side, they think it is good. Tsewang Tashi is not showing the outer dress, but the inner way of feeling.”³³⁹ At the same time, his figures cannot be instantly read, ethnically, politically or emotionally. In fact, their expressions block interpretation more than they offer singular meanings. Tsewang shows them not as blank canvases for the culturally-denigrated open display of emotion found in propaganda, but as possessing rich interior lives, the complexities of which we may never grasp. Rather than the propaganda character swept up in dramatic action, his individuals possess a gravity, stillness and silence that are haunting. They are actual, specific individuals with unique facial features and expressions who cannot be taken as an anonymous representative of an entire class or collective.

Recounting artistic histories of country, region and neighborhood, as Tsewang Tashi's anecdotes illustrate, is also embedded in memories. At times, these memories were of Maoism and the factional battles impacting the lives of actual people and families.³⁴⁰ Often they were not traumatic or political. Driving across town or reflecting on a new work, Tsewang Tashi traces moments in his current life to roots in his childhood or to his father's life, or Tibetan history. For instance, driving to the university from his house one day, he pointed out the home of a “great, very old teacher” who had died in recent years; although the monk hadn't held a high position in a monastery or a school, people of all ages and backgrounds had flocked to his home to learn from him on a range of topics, much as they had to Gedun Choephel's home decades prior. To the extent that Tsewang Tashi saw himself as my tour guide, he simply wanted to include a former resident of the city who epitomized a once normal and traditional Tibetan mode of intellectualism, a love of which Tsewang Tashi's father seems to have instilled in him. I was often struck by the way his casual recollections inflected daily life—memories that calmly

surfaced passing a house or view of the river—demonstrating the profound place of a highly-esteemed past in his sense of self and motivations for his work. This makes his deliberate choices in his artwork, to connect his art and viewers to the very new times in Lhasa, particularly interesting. Capturing the ways in which the ephemera of consumer society force constant renegotiations of one's place within a changing environment, Tsewang Tashi's art enacts a distinctly modern predicament. For him, this includes the intimate relationship between individuals and their physical environment, and the constant renegotiation of identity that occurs in that shifting relationship in modern times (Heimsath 2005). Tsewang, like Baudelaire's "painter of modern life", captures the "moral and aesthetic feel of [his] time" (Baudelaire 1995). Tsewang elaborates,

What I pay attention to is to the real people and environment as my source of inspiration. I believe that if contemporary life around us is ignored, real contemporary art cannot be created. I avoid seeking novelty in my works, because a lot of these things are imaginary or expectations by outsiders who are looking for "Shangri-la" or "Savage Culture". I am living in a real society and have feelings and thoughts as other people in the world. I want to speak as [as a member of] humankind in general.³⁴¹

This can be unsettling. Tsewang Tashi's loyalty to contemporary lives and realities leads to such a de-centering of conventional markers of ethnicity that the subjects' Tibetan identities even become invisible, achieving the general human dimension. Some find this to also be a reflection of contemporary Lhasa: Tsering Dhondrup continued, "Maybe even some Chinese who come to Lhasa and see them [the young Tibetans Tsewang paints] don't know if their face is Tibetan or Chinese. But in the past Tibetans' faces were very expressive, one easily could understand them."³⁴² Viewers of Tsewang Tashi's paintings then, without the crutch of the expected surface clichés to identify the ethnic Tibetan subject, experience the unsettling uncertainty of the identity of the Other facing us, an increasingly common experience in Lhasa where Tibetan and Han youth share fashions. These portraits of Tibetans then are challenging – they refuse to include elements that perpetuate Shangri-la fantasies of Tibet, but their lack of ethnic specificity within a globalizing present is not always welcome.

Tsewang Tashi's portraits implicitly challenge the historical memory and visions of the present and future that the State attempts to construct. They reflect his commitment to substituting fantasies of Tibet—demonic, romantic or pre-modern—with the realities of Lhasa today. He has a pragmatic and philosophical commitment to the present, and yet while it may not be apparent on first look at his work, Tsewang's perceptions of his local and global locations historically and physically deeply inform his work. He rejects histories and myths that are not verified by the experience of Tibetans he has known, to create a Tibetan view of modernity.

Tsering Nyandak

Tsewang Tashi is not alone in intentionally de-emphasizing conventional markers of Tibetan ethnicity. The subjects of Tsering Nyandak's paintings were recognizably Tibetan, but in a unique manner that captured their daily realities and, for those who can read them, included clever social commentary. Tsering Nyandak (b. 1977) left Tibet at age eleven, (crossing the Himalayas with a leg crippled by polio into a foreign country without his parents) to become educated in Tibetan schools in Dharamsala, India, where he also became fluent in English. Some adults in his early life noticed and encouraged his interest in drawing, but he is almost entirely self-taught as an artist. Upon his return to Lhasa at age nineteen, Tsering Nyandak received some private painting lessons from Tsewang Tashi, a relative, but did not attend formal classes. He has, since the 1990s, endeavored to support himself solely as by his painting and artwork, but has also used his English language skills to translate for foreign non-governmental organizations and researchers in Tibet. As a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and elected its general manager, he plays pivotal roles in the world of independent contemporary art in Lhasa, and promotes the movement and individual artist friends through the web and as a liaison between foreigners and local artists, a job that is not always easy for him given his reserved disposition around strangers and in formal settings.

At the start of the 2000s, Tsering Nyandak mainly used a palette knife to apply paint to canvas, resulting in works characterized by thick, layered applications of oil paints in dark colors

with bright highlights. The images made frequent use of visual markers of Tibetan ethnicity, though often with some humor and irony, such as the Tibetan women who's sweatpants and sneakers peak out from under their *chupa*, marking their so-called traditionality within the context of prevalent consumerism for cheap Chinese goods.

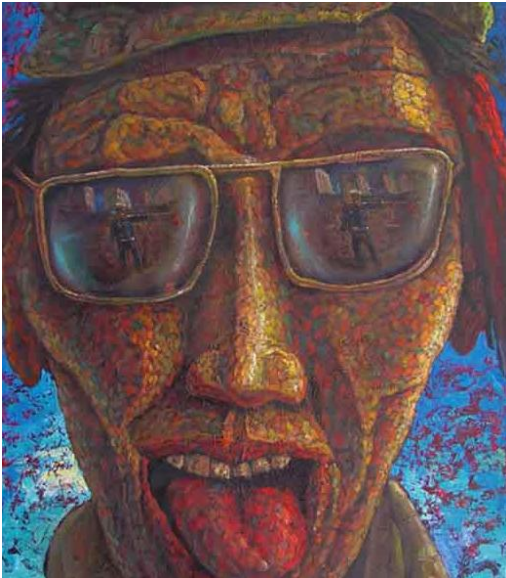


Figure 71 Tsering Nyandak. *Police Phobia*. c. 2003. Oil and acrylic on canvas. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

One of the first times I visited the Gedun Choephel Guild Gallery, this painting in thick acrylic paint was hanging in the far corner of the main room. The subject is a man whose facial expression shows a traditional gesture of sticking out one's tongue, once a common greeting in pre-modern Tibet, particularly in showing deference to someone of a higher social stature.³⁴³ The gesture suggests the man belongs to an older generation. His sunglasses reflect the person he encounters and gestures towards: a policeman in white cap and blue uniform, who though still at some distance away from the Tibetan, points for him to move aside. The Tibetan's intimidation and obsequiousness is revealed as a habitual response to state authority by the re-appropriation of a routine gesture, as the title *Police Phobia* (c.2003) reiterates. Nyandak thus co-opts the representation of Tibetans through their traditionalism in order to comment upon contemporary and historical conditions of paranoia, fear and discrimination.³⁴⁴



Figure 72 Tsering Nyandak. *Woman at River*. 2006. oil on canvas. Photograph: Jason Sangster

In 2006, Nyandak returned to brush work for thinner, smoother paint surfaces in paler shades, with diffuse sources of light through water or clouds. In stripping away the visual markers of Tibetan ethnicity, he literally arrived at painting nudes in natural landscapes. *Woman at River* (2006) depicts a nude woman kneeling on the stones at the edge of blue water, her eyes closed and face calm as she inflates a white balloon. Her right shoulder is enlarged, and her hair lifts skyward towards yellow clouds. A tiny reliquary *chorten* is visible on the distant horizon at the left side of the painting.

The placid expression on the woman's face is troubled for the viewer by the composition. In Nyandak's words, the stooped and bent woman, whose oversized shoulder bears an invisible "burden," evokes "discomfort;" this is compounded by the electrified braids, unsettling horizon line and ominous sky. The physiological proportions serve an expressive purpose more important than anatomical verity. The balloon, which appears in *River* and in many of his paintings in the mid-2000s, represents "something like a party," which everyone has had the repetitive experience of eagerly anticipating and perhaps enjoying, only to become aware of its ephemeral nature that leaves one deflated in its wake. Tsering Nyandak is not concerned with physical veracity but with emotional truths, manipulating colors, compositions and the exaggeration and attenuation of his characters' features to evoke complex feelings in the viewer. The painting seems to ask, 'How

can one not feel mixed emotions?’ Modernity in Lhasa is like this: the episodic arising of a fragile hope. The *chorten*, a Buddhist reliquary structure, on the distant horizon is the only visible hint of her geographical location, but on an emotional level, the imagery of bearing of an invisible burden while one’s behavior appears calm and mundane struck a deep chord with Tibetan viewers with whom I spoke.

Conclusion

When the Potala Zhol Museum opened in 2007, the state may have felt a need to remind Tibetans of their transformation out of misery with the recreation of Cultural Revolution era *Wrath of the Serfs* tableau, the replica even bearing the original captions.³⁴⁵ Contrasting these contemporaneously (re-)produced images – Nyandak’s composed nude bent under an invisible burden and the tearful slaving serf bent by indigenous feudalism – startlingly pictures a shared location through the compositional similarity, but from the opposing perspectives of the occupied and the occupier.



Figure 73 Two images of bent women, made by artists in Lhasa c.2007, in Socialist Realism mode (left) [from the Potala Zhol Museum, *Wrath of the Serfs* recreated] and in contemporary painting [Tsering Nyandak. *The River*].

Whether or not Tsering Nyandak and Tsewang Tashi’s paintings can be said to represent Tibetan experience it is clear that their emotional and psychological portraits are achieving new

assertions of contemporary Tibetan ethnic identities, and are of an immense qualitative difference from Socialist Realism representations of Tibetanness.

Tsewang Tashi and Tsering Nyandak affirm the unique individuality of Tibetans they encounter in daily life. Both grant their figures a psychological depth and interior complexity that has been denied Tibetans in previous decades. Often this works through opacity and ambivalence, but also through humor and the confirmation of their own creative agency. Freed from reliance upon external signs of ethnicity in their work, artists find unprecedented creative freedom, and ultimately “mirror the present state in Tibet, a place full of beauty and contradiction. (Dhondup 2007)”³⁴⁶

The PRC’s communist party ideology regarding minority populations manifests in teleological visual representations of Tibetans that do not reflect indigenous experience or aspirations. CCP images of Tibetans are derived from an ethnic hierarchy in which Han superiority is enshrined, and that consigns minorities to superficial traditionalism in the past and present, and a future of total assimilation brought about by current economic development. This is a problem for Tibetans because images of individuals who are both ethnically Tibetan *and* modern do not exist in official propaganda or the mainstream visual culture it strongly influences. In the representation of everyday life in Lhasa, contemporary Tibetan artists Tsewang Tashi and Tsering Nyandak provide a counter image of twenty-first century Tibetanness.

The difficulty Tibetans face worldwide in transcending the assumption that cultural authenticity lie in the traditions and productions of the past is further compounded in the PRC where the state and private sector are motivated to sustain images of the pre-modern Tibetan as ethnic spectacle. The examples of State museums and exhibitions in the TAR in this chapter reveal that representational tropes for Tibetan people and history have changed very little despite the dramatic political, economic and social changes of the past five decades. The influence of state representations of *minzu* is evident primarily in inversion of or movements away from conventions for representing ethnicity through externally visible markers upon which

propaganda, and subsequent commercial and media imagery, rely. Emerging self-representation work of contemporary artists is an unprecedented corrective to visual histories, implicitly questioning the possible pasts and futures foreclosed by state representations of the Tibetan ethnic minority within the PRC. Moreover, they insist that ethnicity need not be synonymous with notions of tradition, enabling Tibetan cultural identities to exist authentically in a globalizing, modernizing, secular present.

Contemporary Tibet artists picture subjects with a future as modern people with ethnic identities. Smith argues that Tibetans may not have political strength or allies to combat Chinese continental colonization, but that they can resist to the extent that their history is not forgotten or lost to China's fervent re-writing of it (W. Smith, *Tibet's Last Stand?* n.d.). Regrettably, he sees Tibetans in exile (and their international supporters) as the only ones capable of keeping Tibet alive via maintenance of accurate histories of the nation's former independence and unique civilization. His prognostication may be complicated by the evidence this discussion offers that as Lhasa contemporary artists have struggled to create modern Tibetan art, they do so not in capitulation to assimilation or resignation to or internalization of official representations of their ethnicity that, in most cases, predates their own births, as Smith would seem to expect. I do not want to suggest that indigenous or minority cultural productions are inherently contestatory or that their work warrants scholarly attention to the extent that it can be framed as a form of resistance to hegemony, both because a merely oppositional stance seems overly simplistic and because in Tibetan contexts such implications are ethically problematic. Nonetheless, the ways in which Tibetan artists situate their own awareness of the construction of their ethnicity by outsiders and the negotiations this entails would seem to counter the implied conclusion of Smith and others that state attempts to control memory have worked and that there is no hope for sustaining Tibetan cultural identities, histories and knowledge inside Tibet. Contemporary Tibetan artists, in fact, invert the state's visual conventions, and thus minority politics in China, by their assertions of culturally distinct and modern identities in creating their unprecedented self-

representations and refusal to ignore, as Tsewang Tashi says, “contemporary realities.” Insisting upon Tibetan modernity and ethnic and cultural identities in their works, they also insist upon Tibetan cultural sustainability.

Chapter Five

The Visual Language of Tibetan Buddhism in Contemporary Art

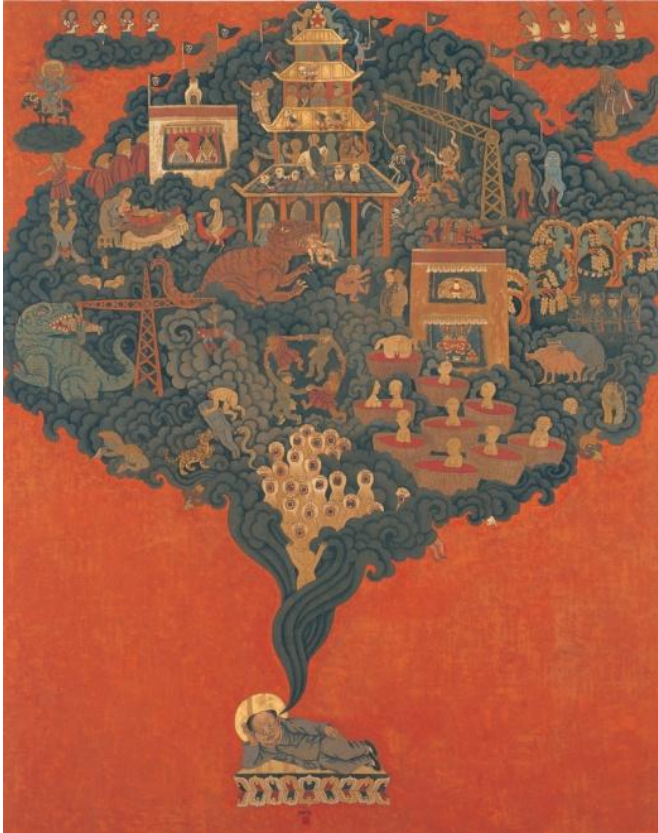


Figure 74 Gade. *Father's Nightmare*. 2007. Mixed media on canvas.

In the painting *Father's Nightmare* (2008), a figure in a Mao-suit lounges beneath a billowing grey cloud. Upon it, cranes and dinosaurs tower over mannequins and masseuses in skimpy underwear, school children and gymnasts, corpses and fornicating animals. A howling choir serenades bathers, and inside the temple-like architectures are the Grim Reaper, the doomed iconic couple on the bow of *The Titanic*, and a hot pot restaurant. Considering the history of representations of Tibet and its religion, and subsequent local and foreign expectations of Tibetan art, viewers may well wonder what this painting by Lhasa contemporary artist Gade (*dga' bde*, pronounced *gah-day*) could possibly have to do with Tibetan culture let alone Tibetan Buddhism.

For many, Tibet is associated first and foremost with the religion and imagery of Vajrayana Buddhism. Beginning in the seventh century, Tibet imported the scholarly and

contemplative lineages of India's greatest monastic universities. These flourished in Tibet for over 1500 years and the nation's history and spirituality became thoroughly enmeshed, and expressed through an intricate system of Buddhist arts. The art of Tibet has also constituted material access to Tibetan culture for outsiders since the seventeenth century, though often misinterpreted. The centrality of Buddhism to Tibetan culture is thus integral to Tibetan, Chinese, and Western constructions of Tibetanness, and yet Gade's painting does not 'look like' what viewers have come to expect of (Buddhist) art from Tibet. What might *Father's Nightmare* and other works by contemporary Tibetan artists show us about socioreligious identities in urban Lhasan lives today? In the most general terms, is there any continuity between Tibetan Buddhist art historical and religious traditions and secular contemporary art productions? More specifically, I am interested in whether or not contemporary artists can utilize Tibetan Buddhist imagery, methods, materials and compositions to create or sustain relationships to notions of their past that are relevant for the present.

The diversity of uses for references to the art historical past that has emerged since the 1980s warrants special attention given the religious constructions of Tibet by outsiders and ongoing expectations at home and abroad for the role of religion in post-Mao and post-Deng Tibet. This chapter argues for re-evaluation of specifically religious constructions of Tibet and Tibetans within China and consideration of religion as a representational strategy for other cultural expressions, cultural expressions that are equally validated and authenticated as specifically modern Tibetan phenomenon.³⁴⁷

Buddhisms in Tension

Buddhism has played a central role in Tibetan life as a definitional ideological framework for mundane matters and ultimate questions of meaning and existence. Buddhism in Tibet for centuries up until the 1950s punctuated everyone's daily life rhythms: with ten to fifteen percent of the male population monastics, almost everyone had an ordained relative or friend; and pilgrimage, consulting lamas, and holidays were part of the annual lifecycle, and daily shopping

and socializing were integrated with temple visits. In Lhasa this integration of secular and spiritual was especially centered on the Jokhang temple, where throngs of pilgrims from afar and local residents generated karmic merit, bought meat, tea and vegetables, and paused at tea shops in clockwise rotation of the temple along the circumambulation (*khora*) path known as the Barkhor. Buddhism equally pervaded Tibetan politics, particularly since the Fifth Dalai Lama's establishment of theocratic rule known as *chos srid gnyis 'brel / ldan*, "religion and politics conjoined," or, ideologically a synthesis of nirvana and samsara, and institutionally, a diarchy of lay and religious elements and officials, which describes the central Tibetan administration from 1642-1951 (Sinha 1968). "Tibetan Buddhism, therefore, exemplified for Tibetans the value and worth of their culture and way of life and the essence of their national identity. It is what they felt made their society unique and without equal," writes Goldstein, noting Tibetan lamas were invited as teachers of Chinese emperors (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998).

After the establishment of the PRC and CCP stated objectives including the liberation of Tibet, the relationship of the Chinese state to Tibetan Buddhism has taken form in four phases. First, from 1949-1959, a period of "gradualism" and rapprochement with Tibetan leaders reflected a CCP top-down strategy, in which it was hoped that local leaders would opt for "socialist transformation" and the people who trusted them would follow suit without force. This disintegrated with the rebellions that began in 1956 in eastern Tibet and moved towards Lhasa culminating the 1959 uprising, after which the period of "democratic reform" commenced. Goldstein writes, the "political, economic, and ideological dominance of the religious and aristocratic elites was totally destroyed," monastic life disintegrated and the influence of the centers of study and prayer crushed, and leaders were incarcerated and monks disrobed. Individuals were still allowed to practice religion in the privacy of their homes, until the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, which lasted until 1977, in which all expression of religion was banned. With the onset of the Cultural Revolution, "within two years, all vestiges of religion in China was eliminated" and people were told their religion was false and primitive. The

devastation of sacred sites, desecration of holy objects and art, and maltreatment of religious people “created a broad-based community memory of hatred and distrust that continues to the present (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998).” The “revival” period began in 1978, and the CCP sought to redress past wrongs in Tibet, within the framework of Tibet as an inalienable part of China,” with a focus on raising living standards, improving infrastructure, and a degree of cultural autonomy. Once Tibetans realized this was not a trick but actual policy change, there was an “outpouring of religious activity (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998).” Revival of Buddhism in Tibet has met with successes and challenges and adaptations.

Tibet’s recovery from the Communist dismantling of the former theocratic society and destruction of religious sites has included ever increasing demand for and training in the traditional Buddhist arts such as *thangka* (religious paintings on cloth). However, those artists who received little or no such training, nor aspire to create religious arts, also incorporate religious imagery into their contemporary secular art works. They do so to such an extent and variety that inquiry into the function of “Buddhist” imagery in contemporary Tibetan art is warranted. Rather than re-inscribing the stereotypes of a uniformly faithful populace, more often religious imagery provides and enables startlingly multi-vocal indigenous commentaries on a range of contemporary social issues.

Various deployments of Buddhist art historical tradition stem from religious, political, commercial, and cultural goals. These uses highlight both the continuities with and divergences from traditional and contemporary indigenous conceptions of art. Prevalent uses of imagery derived from Tibetan Buddhist art history in Lhasa include: continued production of traditional religious artwork, in tourist souvenirs, and in innovative expressions affirming the cultural and religious identities of younger Tibetan Buddhists.

Contrary to Buddhist identities commonly ascribed to all Tibetans and devotional Buddhist themes often sought by non-Tibetans in contemporary art, for independent contemporary artists like Gade, born during or since the Cultural Revolution, the limited exposure

to religious edification paired with ingrained precautions against openly sharing one's faith powerfully contribute to uneasy relationships to portraying religious beliefs.

Gade's paintings help to illuminate uneasy relationships to religion; Gade can neither paint devotional images nor omit Buddhism from his artwork. As Gade explores different genres, materials, motifs, and content, his work reflects upon the relationship between the status of religion in contemporary society and Tibetan cultural sustainability.

The connection between Tibetan civilization and religion has undergone radical and unsettling changes in the twentieth century, first from the traditional Buddhist society that was relatively stable for a millennium, to religious persecution under Chinese Communism, and again changed with the modest revival of religion but in the context of increasingly secular and urban Lhasa. Thus a dilemma arises in which Buddhism, as it is experienced and represented, is many things at once, some of which are at times incompatible or at least in tension with one another.

Buddhism is at once a symbol of Tibetanness, of authenticity, and yet its practice is no longer under indigenous control. Traditionally, religious artistic productions are considered by the faithful not as merely material objects, but actual physical embodiments of enlightened beings, with which the devout have made contact for blessings for generations (Huber 1999) (Strong 2007). Yet, this material and religious world was suddenly and irrevocably dismantled in the first two decades of Chinese Communist rule. Countless Buddhist images fell to iconoclastic violence, a dehumanizing desecration that still defines some public spaces in Tibet where bullet holes in murals evidence shooting at the bodies of Buddhas. (Material evidence of the shooting at Buddhist human bodies is scarce.) Buddhists also encountered a crisis in the transmission of religious knowledge: those recognized reincarnated lamas who were unable to complete their training prior to Democratic Reform and Cultural Revolution became a class of uneducated adults in the post-Mao era, while those who had been fully trained had died or become very elderly (Panchen Lama 1998).

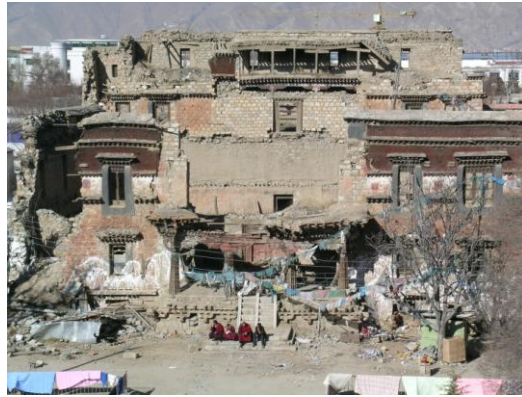


Figure 75 Damaged mural, Jokhang Temple, Lhasa. Late 1990s or early 2000s. Photograph by Leigh Miller.

Figure 76 Shide monastery, Lhasa. 2007. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

In Communist China, the past and present targeting of Buddhism as “backwards,”³⁴⁸ “superstitious” and politically suspect or dangerous, impacts the pasts created about Tibet which differ from those religious memories Tibetans may have.³⁴⁹ Thus even in the stilted recovery of Buddhism permitted under the striking 1978 reversal of CCP policy on freedom of religious belief, local political oversight of religious institutions and individual practice continues to carry threat. And yet the State gains from at least the superficial visibility of religious revival as a boon for Western and Han tourism and as a mechanism for controlling minority affairs (Blondeau and Buffetrille 2008).

Buddhism thus becomes a site of nostalgic memory or longing. Buddhism is foundational to collective memory in Tibet that pre-dates modern times and is critical to Tibetan nationalism (or proto-nationalism) (Dreyfus, Proto-nationalism in Tibet 1994).³⁵⁰ In Tibetan and western imaginations today, it is particularly the institutional monastic form of Buddhism which serves as a yardstick of cultural preservation and authenticity in Tibet. The destruction of upwards of ninety-seven percent of Tibet’s monasteries between 1957-1976 (Blondeau and Buffetrille 2008) (Panchen Lama 1998) induces extreme anxiety, and suggests restoration of religion as a critical key to cultural survival (Kolas and Thowsen, *On the Margins of Tibet: Cultural Survival on the Sino-Tibetan Frontier* 2005) (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998). Concern about the past and the

yearning for what has been lost indicates memory may be an important element to understand in how artists work with religious imagery. Maurice Halbwachs' (1992) theory of collective memory in contexts of rapid and dramatic change, and specific religious dimensions of collective memory to which Danielle Hervieu-Leger calls attention as a chain of memory (Hervieu-Leger 2000), help us to understand why religion might be a particularly suitable source of imagery for artists.

Religious revival is occurring, sometimes from out of the ruins and in preservation of ancient sites of art and faith. Dratang Monastery, founded in 1081, particularly struck me as an unofficial kind of memorial. Tenth century murals are an exquisite example of of early Tibetan art emerging from the clear influences of Central Asian, Indian, and Nepali neighbors, In the Cultural Revolution era, the ceiling-high stucco sculptures were completely destroyed, leaving on the wooden braces and halos embedded in the walls, and the temple was used a grain storehouse.



Figure 77 Dratang Monastery, Central Tibet. Photograph 2007 by Leigh Miller Sangster

Today, the murals show marks of time and enforced neglect next to traves of violent upheaval, in the face of which a lone new Buddha statue is placed with *khatag* scarves and light offerings, welomcing into quiet sanctity periodic bursts of tourists, art students, and pilgrims. It is in the adjacent renovated, fully functional assembly hall that the resident monks gather, forming the current religious center around which the small town's faithful and pilgrims orbit.

Buddhism is also invoked as a source of resistance. Some Tibetans meanwhile, sometimes in the face of grave threats to safety and even lives, continue to practice their religion and express devotion for the Dalai Lama and the wish for his return to Tibet, sentiments that are deeply embedded in Tibetan nationalism, and perceived by China's political authorities as its greatest threat to national security (Pistono 2010) (W. W. Smith 2009). Tibet's religious leaders and devotees have in fact played important roles: The highest lama in Tibet after the exile of the Dalai Lama, the Tenth Panchen Lama (1938 - 1989), shocked the CCP by becoming an outspoken critic, for which he was imprisoned, and monks and nuns have been at the forefront of political demonstrations (Barnett 2006) (Barnett and Akiner 1994).

As a nexus of potent political, spiritual and cultural unrest, religion becomes a metaphor, and one which artists can use to symbolize far more than faith. Gade's paintings image and claim relationships to Buddhism, to Tibet's Buddhist past, and to Tibet's artistic and cultural heritage, relationships importantly forged in the context of a network of tensions surrounding religion in China's Tibet.

Although religious hegemony is no longer tenable in hybrid 21st century Lhasa, it has not been easy for modern artists to invent and inhabit a new cultural space, particularly, I was told, in light of local religious ideas of "artists".³⁵¹ In Tibetan Buddhist icon technologies, proper iconographic artistic production is essential to the efficacy of religious practices, as described in chapter two. Gade rejects the role of the "artist" throughout most of Tibetan artistic history, in which artists, patrons and the general populace held common religious beliefs and practices that transcended other social divisions, and the role of an artist included powerful religious functions. Gade provokes acknowledgement that many people are uncomfortable accepting new definitions for what it means to be a Tibetan artist. These potential meanings and contradictions present a dilemma for artists, including Gade, who both claim and reject Buddhism at the same time.

This discussion is an exploration of how imagery derived from religious visual language can speak to cultural issues of identity, change, memory and, ultimately perhaps, cultural

sustainability. Gade develops creative strategies that make possible a visual invocation of Tibetan Buddhist tradition to establish and re-circulate shared visual language, image collectivity and present realities, and create important alternatives to the dominant society's constructions of the Tibetan minority.

Gade and Visions of Buddha

Gade's life and work are of interest for this discussion for many reasons. Gade holds a critical role among contemporary artists in Lhasa, where he is seen as groundbreaking and instrumental, because of his artistic output and lifelong career. In addition to being one of the most important artists working in Lhasa at the start of the twenty-first century, his personal interests and life history render rich materials for exploring the above issues and questions. His artistic output over two distinct professional phases is emblematic of the new thinking and practices that mark the emergent contemporary art movement in Lhasa, particularly in relation to Tibetan Buddhist art historical heritage.

A Biographical Sketch of the Artist

Gade was born in Lhasa in 1971 to a Chinese father, a soldier in the first People's Liberation Army regiment to enter Tibet, and a Tibetan mother. In those days, this was not an uncommon occurrence, he says, although the details of this arrangement were unclear to him, as it was not the custom when he was growing up for parents to tell their children how they met and married.³⁵² Gade was unhealthy as a child and endured long and lonely hospital stays that left him behind in school work and unskilled in sports and the activities that seemed to foster bonds amongst the other children. The early deficit in academics and athletics may have predisposed him to finding other activities in which he could succeed, but he also relates episodes in his life as fulfillment of his destiny to become an artist.

Gade began drawing, he said, "when I was about two years old. Of course I don't remember that! But my parents noticed I enjoyed drawing...especially circles!" As a child he regularly made drawings and spent hours copying from picture books. Eventually, he earned the

respect of his classmates as one of the best illustrators in the school and was often selected to draw the requisite Communist propaganda images decorating the classrooms. By age eight, he was “firmly convinced” he would become a “professional artist.” With his parents’ support, by age fourteen he was taking private lessons with a Tibetan artist and family friend, Pema Tashi (Bama Zhaxi),³⁵³ who would later hold leadership positions in the TARAA.³⁵⁴ Pema Tashi³⁵⁵ also introduced him to Han Shuli, a Han artist who came to Lhasa in the 1970s and later became the TARAA Chairman. Han gave Gade lessons in realism, necessary to pass entrance exams to art school well into the 1980s. Gade enrolled at Tibet University’s Art Department soon after its founding in 1985, where he continued study with Han Shuli. He and other Han artists had come to Tibet inspired by the people and the landscape and were then surprised to discover the exquisite history of Buddhist arts in Tibet, to which they exposed their young Tibetan students (C. Harris n.d.).³⁵⁶ Gade and his classmates had limited to no exposure to traditional Buddhist arts before the early 1980s, and while the political climate regarding religion was shifting significantly by 1985, Han Shuli’s position of authority perhaps made such exploration and appreciation of the past and traditional religious arts safer for Tibetans.

Gade made artistic pilgrimages to surviving sites that preserve Buddhist mural masterpieces, but trained in the Chinese and Western painting techniques being taught in Lhasa and then in Beijing. By the early 1990s, Gade had completed graduate studies at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts (Beijing) in traditional Chinese brushwork (*gongbi*) and western art theory, had won awards at national competitions, and been recruited to join the Tibet University art department faculty in Lhasa. On the basis of these successes, he was inducted into the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association, and has received commissions and participated in officially-sponsored exhibitions nationally and internationally with this governmental organization under his former teacher’s administration.

However, since the early 2000s, Gade has preferred to concentrate on international contemporary art worlds and advancing the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild. In 2001, he and three

other artists were the first from Lhasa to have an artists' residency abroad,³⁵⁷ and he soon thereafter began exhibiting and traveling internationally in Europe, Asia and the United States.³⁵⁸ Gade is among a group of artists who now prefer to exhibit outside official channels and have found the success and support to do so, largely as a result of the Guild.

In 2003, Gade and several other artists founded the independent Gedun Choephel Artists Guild. Gade co-wrote their mission statement, which gives voice to the mutually felt need amongst those of his generation and training to foster opportunities to gather, critique, develop, and exhibit their artwork. Particularly amongst the members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, Gade's quick intelligence is most often exercised in the joke-filled amusement of his friends, and others turn to him for a poignant or eloquent expression, or a good debate on the role of artists in society and cultural continuity. Gade also brings younger artists and students to the gallery to engage and encourage them.

Gade's students in the School of Art at Tibet University have tremendous respect for him because of his ability to inspire in them both a love of their artistic heritage³⁵⁹ as well as the curiosity and confidence to experiment as individuals.³⁶⁰ For example, in 2008 Gade introduced his university students to the concept of installation and site-specific art by taking them to a rocky hill, Bonpo Ri, on the southern edge of town not far from the university. The site is frequented for religious activities such as offering incense and hanging prayer flags. It is also marked with white painted ladders conveying aspirations for higher rebirths, a traditional "installation" art practice Gade informed his students, who had only painted on canvas. Gade invited them to similarly paint the rocks, connecting them in bodily practice both to their heritage and also alternative materials and settings for contemporary art practice.

In 2008, his studio, provided by Tibet University, was a one bedroom apartment on campus. Despite the bright Tibetan sun, the main room was not well lit, as the only windows adjoined a covered balcony rather than opening directly to the outside, prompting plans to move to a new home with a studio in 2010.³⁶¹ The walls were hung with works finished or in process.

He worked, usually standing, at a large long table next to a shelf holding pigments, powdered minerals, gold and silver leaf, brushes, scissors, compass, and other tools.



Figure 78 Gade at work on Pecha Nagpo (Black Scripture) in his studio, Lhasa. 2007. Photograph: Leigh Miller Sangster

Gade is among the first generation of Tibetan artists trained in Chinese art academies in Beijing, a small cohort of artists who found upon returning to Lhasa that their training in foreign aesthetics and techniques was incompatible with representing their homeland. Like Gonkar Gyatso and Tsewang Tashi, discussed above, these artists believed new modes of representation were legitimate. The heightened awareness some artists possessed in the 1980s of their difference from the Han majority (often as a result of discrimination) and Han artistic traditions, materials and techniques, stimulated Tibetan artists to experiment with representing their own cultural identities with indigenous imagery and methods.³⁶² Visually, they worked to intervene in a field dominated by Han constructions that imaged the religion of ethnic minorities as backwards superstition or exotic pastiche. The Lhasa to which Tibetan artists returned from studies in the mainland was also changing in the late 1980s cultural revitalization. Yet Gade, like other young Tibetans, witnessed the performance of Buddhist practices and the opening of temples not as a return to something familiar, but as a belated introduction. The local revival of culture and religion in the mid-1980s, suppressed throughout their childhood and early adult lives, stimulated intense desires to discover their roots and cultivate and represent a positive Tibetan identity.

Despite his Han Chinese father, Han teachers and training in Beijing, Gade identifies himself as a “Tibetan” artist. Gade is now a leader of a generation of artists who began to feel stifled by expectations of outsiders, including their own teachers, to reflect a Tibet other than one they experience. They adopted their own expectations to show their Tibet, and to do so in a new style with Tibetan characteristics as much as the painting styles they learned in Beijing embodied Chinese or Han aesthetics. Gade initially approached this through developing a visual language that incorporates the Tibetan Buddhist visual culture, but eventually included the rapidly changing environment in Tibet, which had been excluded before. In this way, Gade’s own life history and artistic career parallel Tibet’s revival of tradition, tempered with adaptations to new social realities and influences, primarily the intractable presence of Chinese people and state in daily life which creates an environment of social hybridities in ethnicity, politics, and so forth. Gade only began acknowledge his ethnic hybridity in print in catalog with achievement of a solo show of his work in Hong Kong, saying, “One of the issues confusing me is my identity, as I have both a Tibetan and a Chinese background.” Gade says while there is a ‘half-half’ term, he sometimes feels “I do not belong to any ethnic group, or sometimes, that I belong to the ethnic group of Number 57,” referring to the 56 officially recognized ethnic minority classifications within the PRC. Thus, while his status as “mixed” complicates the “Tibetanness” of the painter of contemporary Tibetan art, Gade is accepted both in Lhasa and by foreign galleries as one of the preeminent leaders of the movement, perhaps because he embodies quite literally the struggle of Tibet around him to navigate hybridities and adaptations. Gade says he hopes his art may change others’ preconceptions about Tibet, but ultimately his aim is to “document my life,” representing the place he was born and lives from a personal point of view (Gade 2008).

Gade’s artistic career to date does not exhibit classical orientations to Tibetan Buddhist art. He does not work seated with an easel as a thangka painter does. Moreover, religious influence is noticeably absent from his accounts of youth or influence on his life as an adult. Gade, like others of his generation, carries personal and collective memories of religious

persecution and ongoing institutional discrimination against religious tradition and faith. The limited exposure to religious edification afforded to thirty to fifty year old artists, and ingrained precautions against openly sharing one's Buddhist belief and practice, powerfully contribute to uneasiness about portraying religious beliefs.

When shying away from comment on official or self-censorship, in response to inquiries about the general absence of traditional religious iconography in contemporary artists' work, Gade emphasizes that just as with artists and people anyplace else in the world, their lives are rich with the subjects of love, death, desire, humor, consumerism, families, and other human experiences; this provides ample subjects for artists. While this assertion of their 'normalcy' is useful, it does not account for why Buddhist-derived imagery persists, and in what ways it has been a particularly suitable creative strategy throughout two distinct phases of Gade's artistic career. Closer inspection of Gade's works and commentaries however reveals deep connection to Buddhist art historical traditions in the context of his contemporary Tibet.

His foundational status as an avant-garde thinker and artist in the Lhasa art world is based upon multiple sites of engagement: having trained in Lhasa and Beijing with important teachers, working as one of students' favorite professors at Tibet University, participating as a member of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artist Association, flourishing as an exhibiting artist garnering international critical and commercial success, and serving as a foundational member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild.

From Gade's artistic output, a large number of painted works on paper and cloth show changing relationships to Buddhist imagery in contemporary art over the past two decades of his career and illustrate varied uses of the visual language and concepts of Tibetan Buddhism. Gade's work is marked by a shifting sense of his personal and cultural relationship to Buddhism in the first decade (roughly the 1990s), and, in the second decade, by his use of Tibetan Buddhist materials, methods, traditional compositions, historical styles, as well as his experiential knowledge of surviving traditional wall paintings.

Many artists employ this visual language, but I chose to focus this discussion on Gade and his works because he successfully uses extensive references to Tibetan's Buddhist art history as a technique for merging cultural memory and contemporary reality. Gade's subjects are contemplative, imaginative and, eventually, playful vignettes and objects sourced from his own rapidly changing society. I also consider the ways in which his work deviates from tradition. Although the secular nature of the content and function of Gade's art is the most obvious example of this deviation, I also explore conceptualizations of an "artist" through the local notion of sin (*dikpa*) in relation to art production in contemporary times.

Most importantly for the concerns of this chapter, Gade is particularly reflective about crafting "a modern Tibetan art separate from religion," as he has said, but one which is also tied to both Tibetan cultural and artistic inheritance and honest depictions of contemporary realities. He arrived at this intention and his sophisticated use of whimsical and cartoonish figures and vignettes after reflection on his own and his generation's connection to Tibetan religion.

Diversity in Contemporary Tibetan Artists' Imaging of Religion

Gade works in an art world of religiously motivated artistic productions, commercial art, and visual propaganda produced by the State, all of which sustain or reference traditional Tibetan Buddhist art.

Artists in the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild (GCAG), Tiber University faculty, and young independent artists in 2006-2007 were motivated to communicate through Buddhist imagery a range of concerns I heard voiced during my fieldwork: critique of local and global consumer society, protest of war and antiques trade, affirmations of faith, the nostalgic desire for a unified populace that the religious past signifies, commercial exploitation, as cultural clichés proving a facade behind which individuals hide, or to show common objects of material culture. In contrast the government agency TARAA members' works could be characterized generally as aesthetically and commercially motivated appropriation of Tibetan Buddhist looks. The state's propaganda departments and religious affairs departments' uses serve nationalistic agendas.

Of note are novel Tibetan artistic expressions of religious faith created to assert the continued value, relevance and insights of Tibetan Buddhism and the artists' own faith. Artists including Tibet University professors Sherab Gyaltzen, and Penpa Wangdu, Gedun Choephel Artist Guild member Ang Sang, and independent artist Tsering Wangdu, for example, see the expression and transmission to future generations of faith and basic Buddhist principles as central to their artwork, and, in relation to their careers as artists, as either their cultural and religious responsibility or as useful to their own development.³⁶³ These laymen artists do not employ traditional painting methods, but develop personal imagery for expression of conventional Buddhist notions in a kind of personal "Buddhist" art.³⁶⁴ As a seemingly unprecedented movement, the surge in this kind of art since the 1980s is remarkable, and may be discussed elsewhere in relation to other artists in Tibetan history exhibiting so-called modern characteristics of originality and creativity (such as the seventeenth century Tenth Karmapa, Choeying Dorje, or twentieth century Drugu Chogyal Rinpoche, whose Buddhist paintings are exquisite and utterly unconventional).

But while clearly a part of the Lhasa art world, and perhaps what most people expect of it, such contemporary artists' expression of faith through didactic Buddhist works actually represents a minority of artists' approach to Buddhist imagery in Lhasa today. It is true that the majority of contemporary artists seem to have at least a phase of their career, or specific works, in which they celebrate the contributions of religion to Tibetan civilization, and perhaps to their own personal lives, Gade included. Nonetheless, while most acknowledge profound respect for the role of religion in Tibetan culture and even the value they personally find in basic Buddhist beliefs, they do not cite religious motivation as foundational to their careers or artistic practices. Gade's career trajectory illustrates this delicate and at times uneasy point.

Buddhist imagery is also used, as I have written elsewhere, by Han artists in romanticizing and exoticizing Tibetans (L. M. Sangster 2006) (L. M. Sangster 2008), and by Tibetans for critique of the trade in antiques and for conducting social criticisms of consumer

society and war (L. M. Sangster 2007). Gonkar Gyatso and Tsering Nyandak may even represent an extreme in evacuating Buddhist imagery of religious meaning, seeing it merely as symbol, shape or mechanism for arresting viewer assumptions about both art and contemporary society.³⁶⁵ Again, Gade's art picks up this conceptual thread on occasion, challenging the assumption of wholesale importation into the present of meanings that were formerly attached to Buddhist symbols, but does not employ this strategy for the purely aesthetic reasons expressed by Gyatso, for example. Thus, the artists, works or interpretive schemas included here cannot be comprehensive or exhaustive in light of the tremendous diversity in Lhasa,³⁶⁶ but nonetheless Gade's work and career provides an instructive sample that contributes new ways of understanding emerging cultural formations in relationship to Buddhism in early twenty-first century Lhasa.

Gade's Artistic Output

Gade's artistic production will be examined as two distinct phases of his career. The first phase, roughly the 1990s, is characterized by an attempt to merge traditional Buddhist conceptual content with a modern painting aesthetic. The second phase is characterized by a shift from content to forms, in which traditional Buddhist elements are no longer on the level of conceptual content, but rather embodied in the materials, compositional genres, and stylistic influences of Tibetan Buddhist art history. This shift from traditional conceptual content to traditional forms was occasioned by personal needs for expression that were constrained by local expectations for artists or the responsibility to represent Tibetan Buddhist culture, and the discovery of strategies that enabled art making to be fun as well as meet his communication goals about modern Tibet.

The first decade of Gade's career, roughly the 1990s, will be represented by discussion of *Spirit Beings on a Yak Hide Raft* (1997) and *Saka Dawa* (1998). Gade selected these two works as his best works from the period, and which he had saved for a decade before agreeing to sell them in 2007. Gade showed me his small scrapbook with photographs of a number of other works

from the 1990s, and those images and our discussion also inform my analysis of these two exemplary works and the time period's focus on Buddhism as a conceptual source.

The second decade, the 2000s, began with a dramatic shift and the emergence of a new style, characterized by adoption of traditional Tibetan Buddhist imagery in the genres, materials, and motifs Gade employs. The works *Happy Home* (2006), *Father's Nightmare* (2007), and selections from his *Pecha Sarpa* and *New Thangka: Diamond Series* series of works are exemplary and will be discussed in detail. Then it will be possible to interpret them in terms of their relationships to traditional Tibetan Buddhist art methods, materials and compositions. I then offer some analysis of the examples discussed in terms of their effectiveness at imaging relationships between contemporary realities and imagined pasts, often marked by ambiguity.

The First Decade of Gade's Career: The Search for Traditional Language

Spirit Beings on a Yak Hide Raft (1997) is a large work on canvas in a gray and beige palette with hints of red and ochre. The subject is a traditional yak skin coracle, a river and lake ferry boat of leather stretched and lashed onto a wooden frame. The boat in the painting bears a diverse crowd of beings. A woman wearing an old-fashioned felt and cowry shell decorative piece in her long hair braids stands in the bow, lifting high the glowing flame of a small butter lamp of the kind offered before images of the Buddhas, an illuminating glow dispelling some of the surrounding darkness. A small, radiant halo frames her head and those of other "spirit beings," including humans, two owls and a horse. The image appears in uneven vertical segments divided by a dark background, and overlaid with black dots arranged into triangular formations.



Figure 79 Gade. *Spirit Beings on a Yak Hide Raft*. 1997. Mixed media on canvas. 62 x 47 inches.

The dots suggest an inversion of the traditional custom of decorative white spots applied with a *tsampa*³⁶⁷ flour-covered fingertip onto the smoke-blackened walls around a hearth at New Year, an element of the painting that is culturally legible and yet also used for texture and aesthetic effect. The halos, faded palette, and antiquated hair piece image a Buddhist worldview of time and impermanence. Even the impermanence of lives is suggested by the religious offering coupled with the notion of a journey by boat, and the title words “spirit beings.” The notions of impermanence and a journey combine to image the common Buddhist belief in reincarnation, and specifically the *bardo*, or “in between”, journey of souls passing from one body to incarnate in another sentient form.

While Gade worked on this painting, his mother brought him “endless pots of freshly-brewed tea,” until, near the completion of the painting, she died. His daughter was born just before the painting was finished, and thus “it was as if reincarnation was taking place,” he said. “My mother, my daughter and the painting were all linked together in a karmic embrace,” he wrote (Consciousness and Form 2009). In this case, working through Buddhist imagery (butter lamps and halos) and concepts (reincarnation), with images of distinctly Tibetan secular culture (jewelry, boat, dots) created a successful work for the artist, one he regards as the pinnacle of the first decade of his artistic career.³⁶⁸



Figure 80 Gade. *Saka Dawa Festival*. 1998. Mixed media on canvas. 58 x 39 inches

Saka Dawa Festival (1998) is painted in shadowy, muted tones depicting Tibetan architecture, religion and people. A barefoot figure on the right side with a bald and haloed head, in monk's robes folded with pleats wrapped around the torso and over one shoulder leaving one arm bare, lifts his hands, above which branches a tree trunk and limbs. At the lower center of the painting a horse is by his side, and the animal faces a carcass of a seated, headless goat, a halo nonetheless at the top of the neck. On the left side, a male figure, his muscular shoulder and arm bare and torso covered by a garment, also has a halo around his bald head. Behind the figures are typical angled Tibetan stone walls. The light in the painting in diagonal stripes suggest shafts of sunlight and the clouds of incense smoke.

The image is broken by vertical dark lines and abstracted in swirls of nebulous blotches, compounding some of the ambiguity of the work. The man on the left is likely also a monk – a possibility suggested by his possibly shaved head, but may alternatively be a nomad, who often wear their *chuba* with one arm exposed. The headless goat is not an uncommon sight in the butcher shops and even hanging in the windows of family homes at times of the Tibetan year; the meat is used in cooking for large gatherings and also dried to be eaten as jerky. At the time of *saka dawa*, an annual religious festival celebrating the birth, death and enlightenment of the Buddha, and *losar*, Tibetan new year, the population of Lhasa swells with monks and pilgrims;

the goat is perhaps brought to the city by the nomad/monk from his rural hometown as provisions during the prayer festival. Tibetans refrain from eating meat on the full moon date of *saka dawa*, but not on other days. Gade, who was himself a vegetarian for many years, may suggest the irony of killing an animal for food in order to go pray for the wellbeing of all sentient beings, or perhaps the monks' prayers for the animal's next reincarnation. The feeling suggested by the painting is of a time past, with monks, laypeople, and animals walking the pre-modern stone alleys between Lhasa's houses and temples. The Buddhist conceptual content in the work concerns the intersections of life, death, and prayer, visually symbolized by monk(s) and halos. Gade adapts the use of halos: the traditional motif was reserved for enlightened beings, as opposed to animals and ordinary humans, as in Gade's paintings.

The tones and textures are also influenced by traditional Buddhist arts.³⁶⁹ Gade wrote that he "copied ancient Tibetan frescoes and thangka in an attempt to discover in those traditional art forms a language with which to express the suffering and the essence of the Tibetan people, and to draw a map of the Tibetan soul." Copying from the appearance of surviving religious arts seemed to enable a method of both personal discovery and artistic service as a cultural spokesperson. It connected him with childhood memories now understood as a pivotal moment in a collective return to religious and cultural tradition. This method of copying the past, however, became an unsustainable route to finding a visual language to express Tibetan life.

Almost ten years after completing the painting, Gade reflected,

I used the subject of the *Saka Dawa* festival to depict the Tibetan spiritual world. Tibetans believe that human life is merely a passing phase in the greater scheme of things... Of course very few Tibetans today still believe in these things. But the painting evoked recollections of my childhood, when I lived with my family near the Barkhor in Lhasa. The difference in the colors between then and now is something spiritual for me and hard to describe... [The] dull colors belong [to] a period in my life [that] is gone forever (Rossi & Rossi 2007).

The attempts Gade made to "copy" religious imagery to infuse his work with a recovered Tibetan Buddhist identity came to have another memorial function for the artist, that of recording a personal time and environment that has passed and endures only in his memory. In contrast to

the exoticism or political ideology common to outsiders' colorful representations of Tibet, Gade felt "something spiritual" in the muted colors of his early career work. The colors belong in his memory to the specific time period of his childhood neighborhood and the dark, smoky temples re-opened after the Cultural Revolution for use by the devout, before the bright colors these buildings were painted after economic revitalization and tourism began. He is also, perhaps surprisingly, dismissive of beliefs and makes clear that the "spiritual" nature of his memory and work concerns colors and the passage of time, not Buddhism.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Gade's works began to appear in lighter colors, some with sharper focus and smoother textures; they were less atmospheric and yielded enhanced narrative quality. Subtle Buddhist imagery appeared in them, but as elements selected from the margins of tradition, their placement in the center of a work lent ambiguity more than straightforward interpretation.

For example, as in the painting below, the deer and conch shell appear in several paintings from the time and allude respectively to the deer and eight-spoke wheel atop monastery roofs, symbolizing the deer present at the Buddha's first teaching in ancient India, and the heroic, resonant conch shell, one of the common eight auspicious symbols (Beer 2003) (Rinpoche 1995). But certainly the viewers attention is directed here to the woman's bare chest, her traditional felted *chupa* and the jewelry adorning her head, and the sense that a story of some kind of relationship between the deer and the woman is unfolding.



Figure 81 Gade. White Conch. c.2000. mixed media on canvas. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Also prevalent subjects in Gade's paintings are monks, animals being freed by the traditional Tibetan Buddhist practice of animal liberation, and the butter lamps used as offerings to Buddhist divinities. The other common elements in his works at this time imaged secular, folk tradition such as the Bathing Festival (a popularized, if not eroticized and commercialized, theme in many artists' works³⁷⁰), traditional dress, textiles and jewelry.

Gade was aesthetically influenced by the surfaces of flaking earthen temple wall paintings, and the Chinese techniques and style of a prominent teacher, Han Shu Li, such as ink washes and a nebulous, undefined use of color and light to frame figures and spaces to mimic those remains. Increasingly however, he took stylistic, material and technical inspiration from the Tibetan artistic tradition itself, rather than its reinterpretation and appropriation by outsiders.

Early in his career, influenced by the dominance of Tibetan art history by religion, Gade worked to saturate his subjects and compositions with "an essence of Tibetan Buddhism". Gade and other artists' goal at this time was to discern a unique, personal style that was simultaneously accountable to representing Tibetan culture as a whole. This meant being a crucial spokesperson for a people anxious about their cultural survival in the face of colonialism and globalism, and creating self-representation to answer back to centuries of representations by outsiders. This

novel self-representation demanded that individuals, Gade included, forge personal connections to notions of their collective past, in which religion played a tremendous role.

Artists therefore assumed religion was among the ingredients essential to creating a Tibetan modern art that championed their cultural heritage in the wake of traumatic ruptures. However, Gade's childhood memories of the Cultural Revolution and the subsequent tentative place of religion in society and family life during his youth meant he had been endowed with what he called a "shallow" sense of Buddhist ritual or philosophy.

Representing Tibet through Buddhist identities and concepts ultimately failed to capture the breadth of his own experience. He reflected, "Initially I was very focused in my works on the aesthetic properties of color schemes, nice lines, compositions, etc. and into these I tried to fit some ideas from Tibetan Buddhism, or apply that approach to art about Buddhist ideas. But I came to feel it was too superficial, because my knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism was not very deep."³⁷¹ Though aesthetically acclaimed by others, his works began to feel unsatisfactory and his own expectations to represent Tibet, and implicitly Tibetan Buddhism, became a predicament he shared with other Tibetan artists in the 1990s.³⁷² Ultimately this approach to cultural responsibility became stifling and burdensome. He turned to what he knew best: his own memories and experiences in rapidly modernizing Lhasa.

In the transition from his first decade into the new style, which would characterize his second major career phase, his subject matter and techniques gradually changed in several important ways. He dropped the nudity of the bathing festival, traditional culture and religious themes, and the use of signifiers of tradition, as dominant subjects of works to the exclusion of anything else. That Tibetan world was not visible around him, and had in his paintings the feel—though the visual effects of flaking, shimmering, and haziness—of a fantasy of the past. Gade began to introduce modernity in images of political ideology, humor, and objects of everyday material culture. While the content or subjects of his paintings veered further from traditional religious culture, stylistically, Gade's painting methods and materials came closer to the Buddhist

art of his heritage, in contemporary contexts. The strong dark lines which emerged, derived from both Tibetan Buddhist painting tradition and from cartoons, are an example of the change in his communication goals, techniques and content.

The Second Decade (2000s): The Look of a Tibetan Painting

In the early 2000s, Gade found a playfulness in art making by turning to rapidly modernizing Lhasa and discovering strategies for art creation to function as deeply connected to the past on the one hand, such as through use of traditional materials and iconographic conventions, without sacrificing individual experience of the “actual situation of this sad culture” on the other.

The very complicated place of religion in contemporary Tibetan lives leads some contemporary artists to resist any imagery that either supports outsiders’ expectations, or which could be politically sensitive if seen as too religious, both of which become understandable given the history and current contexts of religious persecution and suppression in Tibet at the same time it is romanticized as a vestige of an alluring but fading past. Yet, among generations of Tibetans born during or after the Cultural Revolution, there is a religious identity struggle born of acute awareness that they did not grow up witnessing and participating in the traditional religious life of society and family.

Gade employs abundant references to Buddhist art historical practices, materials and compositions as techniques he has chosen for cultural and personal reasons. Gade recently wrote,

To locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context is something that I have always been thinking of doing. I try to imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when it is detached from religion (Gade 2008).

How Gade’s paintings in this second period of his career have the look of a Tibetan painting in modern times depends upon a different way of seeing and referencing the common Tibetan visual language of Tibetan Buddhist imagery. Using Buddhist visual language and forms to explore contemporary culture became in inversion of the approach he had used in his first

phase, in which he had attempted to use modern materials and forms to express traditional religious concepts.

Mickey Mural (2007)

The *pecha sarpa* series had enabled Gade to work on a small scale with imagery, particularly objects of material culture from contemporary life and pop culture, and with traditional Tibetan Buddhist materials such as pigments, brushes, gold leaf and pigment, and on paper. He returned to working on cloth with these materials and modern secular symbols and produced larger scale works exploring contemporary culture through the visual language of religion.

Gade was working in his small sunlit painting studio, the living room of a modern apartment on the campus of Tibet University, one spring afternoon in 2007 when he invited me to see a new work. From across the room, the long vertical painting in gold and uneven muted hues on thin cloth created the effect of a fading mural, damaged from age and exposure to water seeps and streaks. The painting recalled the familiar Himalayan Buddhist composition of a central enlightened being surrounded by rows of identical figures, each on their own lotus petal throne. The color palette was darker towards the bottom, while the top rows tapered to a triangle and faded into the reflective illumination of pale gold.

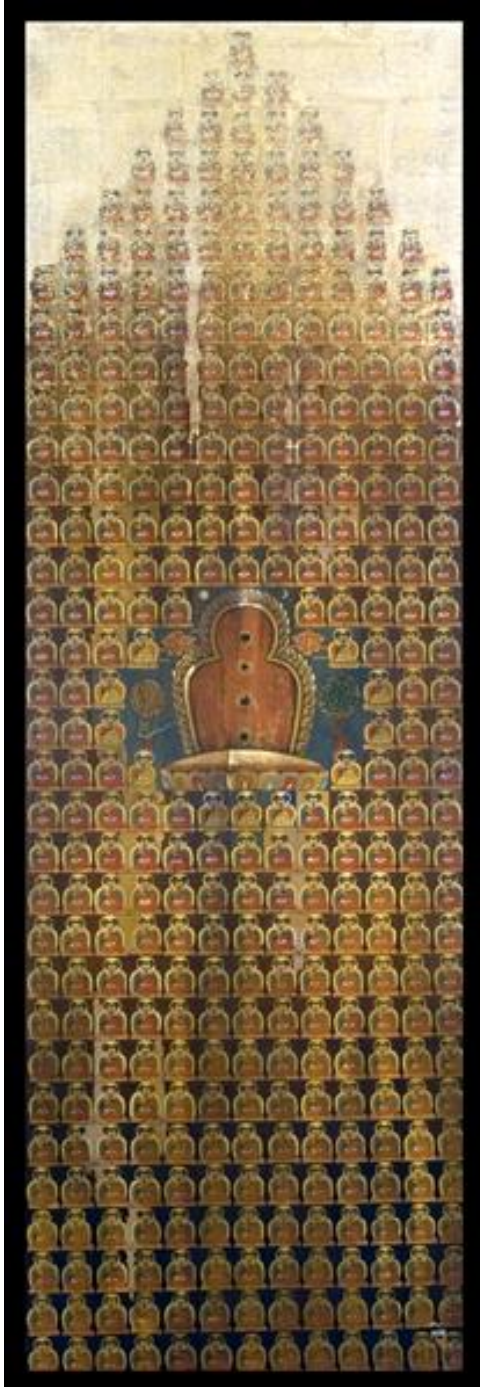


Figure 82 Gade. Mickey Mural. ground pigment, gold leaf on cotton. 2007. Photograph: Jason Sangster

At the center of the painting, as in the central shrine of a ruined temple, is an empty lotus cushion and halo, to the right and left are two small trees.³⁷³ In the back of the throne, large holes where wooden beams formerly attached to the wall a giant clay Buddha statue, are still visible in

this condition decades later, as in these photographs I shared with Gade.³⁷⁴



Figure 83 Tholing Monastery, Guge. Western Tibet. Photographs 2006 by Leigh Miller Sangster.

I was focused on the center of the painting, where the throne and halo were vacated of its Buddha, seeming to bear witness to former grandeur and to the legacies of violent loss and haunting absences. In Tibet, where so many temples still stand in their post-Cultural Revolution condition of damage compounded by lack of maintenance, the mural and missing statue suggests former times of grandeur and recent iconoclasm. As I neared the painting, I was startled to discover the rows of niches surrounding the central throne were filled with Mickey Mouses seated in meditation posture, wearing the monastic robes of the Buddha! I laughed aloud, and Gade beamed; his more than 500 Mickey Mouse figures had elicited just the response he'd intended.³⁷⁵



Figure 84 Gade. Mickey Mural, detail. 2007. ground mineral pigment, gold leaf on cotton. Photograph: Jason Sangster

When we sat to drink tea, Gade commented *Mickey Mural* borrows from Buddhist art historical tradition in the compositional genre, materials, and style to “show the growing distance between myself and previous generations’ religious traditions.”³⁷⁶ The aged and damaged mural simultaneously refer to Tibet’s more than a millennium of Buddhist scholarship, practice and art, and the mid-twentieth century end of traditional Buddhist Tibet. The unfiltered glimpses of current everyday life in Gade’s works both contribute to recognizably “Tibetan characteristics,” he said, and yet are also signs that in a “transient time [when] memories are disappearing, all we can do is pick up fragments.”³⁷⁷ This articulation and production process recalls Richard Terdiman’s conception of “memory crisis,” a quintessentially modern phenomenon in which the disquiet elicited by a collectively perceived distance from an imagined past manifests in cultural productions. *Mickey Mural* highlights the complicated tensions about the place of religion in this changing society by performing the blasphemous substitution of a cartoon for a Buddha alongside depiction of actual iconoclasm in the vacated halo. In Gade’s artistic productions, the fragments cohere not to re-assemble or preserve the past, which is felt to be impossible, but to urgently document the present, in which memory is troubled.

New Scriptures Series

The *Pecha Sarpa*, or New Scriptures series, of more than 108 pieces³⁷⁸ was completed over several years (c.2005-2009). The series was the first major work in the style Gade began developing around 2000, using almost exclusively traditional Tibetan materials. *New Scripture: Recipe* [*dpe cha gsar pa: kha lag bzo stangs kyi tho*] is a horizontal work on handmade paper. Most of the surface area is a bright red background with yellow Chinese letters in eight lines of text. Three irregular shapes interrupt the text with landscape images of soft green hills and white clouds, temple and home architecture and two Buddhist white reliquary structures (Skt. *Stupa*, Tibet. *Cho rten*). The “text” begins at the top left corner with a set of three swirls and a vertical line, a graphic sourced from Tibetan literary traditions that indicates the start of a document. The words are extracted from a recipe for a famous dish in Chinese cuisine. The landscapes are

quintessentially Tibetan, mimicking the style of hills and clouds used in *thangka* painting. The traditional stone and timber construction buildings are white and yellow with black rimmed windows and walled courtyards, the secular homes have flat roofs while the religious building has a golden pagoda shaped roof.³⁷⁹



Figure 85 New Scripture: Recipe [dpe cha gsar pa: kha lag bzo stangs kyi tho]. Ground mineral pigment on paper. 2006. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Gade adopted the form and materials of traditional loose-leaf Buddhist scriptures called *pecha*, scriptures printed by hand from inked carved woodblocks onto long, narrow handmade paper pages, held together between boards wrapped in cloth. Gade uses the form as a template by painting his own original scenes on the loose folio paper pages. The physical form of his *Pecha Sarpa* pieces incorporate the handmade paper pages, with their uneven edges, while the lines and colors of the drawings are stylistically related to wall paintings in their bold, black outlines and minimal or absent shading or perspective. The uneven surface of the textured paper and the treatments on some of the works to give the content an aged appearance also reference the appearance of surviving wall painting.

Pecha Sarpa: Sunflowers (2006) is painted on a rectangular piece of roughly textured, thick paper. On the vertical work, a rectangle is divided into thirds. The top third contains six bold black Chinese characters. The bottom third is comprised of eight squares each filled with three horizontal red dashes and lines. In the center section are four sunflowers with green leaves and stems above and behind which are gold and red rays emanating from a gold sun in the right corner. The metallic gold is particularly reflective in contrast with the soft green of the mineral pigments in the plants, and the matte paper.



Figure 86 Gade. *Pecha Sarpa (New Scriptures): Sunflowers*. 2006. Mixed media on paper. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Gade offered analysis of the images in his painting. “The title of this *pecha* is the name of a song, written in Chinese at the top (*kaihua yang xiang taiyang*). If you ask people, even today, everyone can remember this song comparing Mao to the sun and the people are like the sunflowers following him wherever he goes.³⁸⁰ Before, Chinese culture was rooted in Taoist religion,” he said pointing to the Taoist line diagrams. “Then Chinese people’s way of thinking changed and they tried to destroy religion, and a new way of thinking became predominant,” that of Maoism.³⁸¹ The parts of this work are all pieces of Chinese culture, but Gade’s work, he said, shows the relationships between them, essentially a passage from one ‘religion’ to another, as Maoism became like a fanatical religion during the Cultural Revolution. The high-contrast, wide stripes of the suns’ rays and symbolism of the sunflower also pay visual tribute to Socialist Realism artistic conventions and symbols of the Maoist era (Wang 2008).

Gade asserted this relationship between traditional Chinese religion and a new social order in a *pecha* format, implying its impact upon Tibet as well. The visual impact of the sunflowers, a Chinese symbol of loyalty and metaphor for the masses but drawn by Gade in a novel cartoon-like style with large faces and swaying dancing stems, and the bright gold sun, with the simple lines of the text and Taoist symbols, does not feel heavy and dark, as a story of trauma would suggest. Instead they suggest that the period was not necessarily experienced as traumatic at the time; as a child in the Cultural Revolution Gade may have simply delighted in seeing flowers as decorative elements in the visual culture. Gade's images therefore can be read lightly (and safely), or mined for deeper implications for those familiar with local histories and memories.

Pecha Nagkpo [Black Scripture] (2006) is a work on paper with bold symbols outlined in gold and silver on a solid black background. The images are bisected into two vertical scrolls, each with wooden dowels at the bottom. The geometric shapes are surrounded by pale gold Tibetan script. At the top is a triangle with a circle inside it, and inside that are a grid of colored blocks with Chinese characters in each square. The middle of the long scroll is a mandala-like shape of nested circles and squares with four directional gates. The Communist Party hammer and sickle is in the center. It is surrounded by an American dollar symbol, the Muslim star and crescent, the *yung drong* Bön and Buddhist symbol of auspiciousness, and the Christian cross. At the bottom, a star within a circle within a triangle includes graffiti-like writing in English, including British rock bands, and Tibetan. Within these three dominant shapes, the paper is cut out to form black circles with square holes.



Figure 87 Gade. *Pecha Nagkpo [Black Scripture]*.
2006. Mixed media on paper.
Photograph: Jason Sangster

The use of paper rather than cloth, and the lettering and the arrangement of bold symbols, are inspired by antique Tibetan scriptures. The Tibetan lettering across the work was influenced by the gold³⁸² lettering on black ground of an antique scripture about the primordial Buddha, Amogapasha.³⁸³ The cut outs in the shape of antique Chinese coins add Chinese artistic elements to the ideological dominance of Communism, reflected in the central positioning of the hammer and sickle. The blocks with Chinese characters visually resemble an erudite form of Tibetan religious poetry, but here are Mandarin transliterations of humorous introductory phrases for learning colloquial Tibetan.³⁸⁴ Gade also includes material objects, such as a thermos and Coke can, which are products that originated in foreign lands but have become ubiquitous in Tibet. This

is similar, Gade explained to me, to the travel of ideas such as Buddhism which came from India, where it died out, but grew strong in Tibet.

The esoteric appearance of the symbols was inspired by the discovery of a seventeenth century secret illustrated biography and visionary experiences of the Great Fifth Dalai Lama (S. G. Karmay 1988). Gade said, “In tantra, shapes and symbols carried meanings correlating to the elements and so forth, but that is not my intention here. More importantly, one can see connection to Tibetan culture immediately, but looking closer or with deeper thought, [one finds they] cannot say what the symbols mean. This is the state of [many people’s] relationship to Tibetan culture today, they don’t know it deeply.”³⁸⁵ Gade’s aim isn’t to resurrect traditional meanings, but to show the superficial level of knowledge most people - Tibetans or outsiders - have about Tibetan culture today by substituting a modern iconography. It is not merely a mix of Chinese and Tibetan artistic traditions, but a mix of cultures, religions, languages and politics that ultimately, while beautiful and interesting, lacks the profound spiritual meanings Buddhist symbolism could formerly be read to contain. The words of the text are incoherent; the ancient Buddhist symbols are detached from their former meaning. The forms are recognizable as traditionally Tibetan, but beneath the surface, they have been vacated of religious memory and filled with hybrid forms.

Gade explained the historical context by stating that works of this nature had never been published or even seen by ordinary Tibetans, as they were “reserved for *chospa thopo* (religious adepts).” It is a startling example of the role of visual productions in spiritual life and biography, evidences a close relationship between an artist confidant and the “Great Fifth,” and for Gade, has an especially fascinating and highly unusual graphic quality of large, gold-detailed symbols on a dark ground. That is, for Gade, the published document is most striking as an historical artifact and visually arresting use of materials and symbolism; that it is a work of sacred literature penned by one of the nation’s greatest spiritual and political authorities did not stimulate spiritual devotion in Gade. I emphasize this point because along with expectations of art produced by Tibetans to have Buddhist content, so too are the religious identities of artists themselves

assumed to be Buddhist and the process of art production somehow Buddhist. However, if attending to the processes of production is a window into the artists' and his societies' broader views and values, we can infer that there is no longer any necessary correlation between religious imagery, its production, and religious faith for contemporary Tibetan artists.

In the artist's community, however, the work was criticized by Tibetans as "*dikpa chenpo*," a big sin.³⁸⁶ Firstly, as an artist Gade's works disregard the iconometric system to such an extent that it is inconceivable as a support (*rten*) for an enlightened being's presence or consecration. Pema Namdol Thaye warned in his *thangka* manual, "The image must be accurate. An erroneous image cannot be blessed and consecrated. Such images should be in remote and deserted places as they are more harm than benefit to human society," and warned artists that such productions would lead to rebirth in a hell realm (Thaye 1987). Creation of an unauthorized or poorly executed image does violence to the self and society; art can be dangerous. In regard specifically to *Black Scripture*, the work was viewed as *dikpa chenpo* by local religious conservatives for three reasons, Gade explained. First, he transgressed traditional bans on the authorized viewing of secret tantric manuals. Secondly, he reproduced the iconography without the permission of religious authorities, and thirdly, in the process of reproduction, he also altered them extensively, presenting his own ideas in the form of a scripture of the highest religious authority. Thus, despite Gade having never intended to produce a religious work, the resemblance is strong enough to unsettle viewers, eliciting the condemnation accorded a disobedient religious artist. While Gade understands the religious worldview in which this critique is formed, he is acting from a worldview that is at times in tension with the Buddhist one, that of the contemporary artist, who is entitled to creative self-expression. This tension is uncomfortable however, because Gade genuinely feels a strong sense of cultural responsibility.

Gade recognizes this effect of a painting 'detached from religion,' and it is purposeful. He wrote,

To locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context is something that I have always been thinking of doing. I try to imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when it is detached from religion. Although it is indeed very personal, my work does offend many Buddhist believers. I know this something that they do not want to see, but I am bored with the ‘Shangri-la’ that Tibetan art has been depicting so far. I want to truly reveal my life, no matter how silly and trivial it is ...to this extent, I regard my work as realistic (Gade 2008).

The *Pecha Sarpa* series illustrates that as Gade re-purposes these traditional materials and forms of texts, they become clearly ‘like’ tradition, but not its replication. Born of such a patchwork milieu, these ‘texts,’ he said of the *Pecha Sarpa (New Scripture) Series*, can only be ‘read’ as randomly arranged “puzzle pieces;”³⁸⁷ they fail to yield any single narrative of Buddhist Shangri-la. Tibetans and foreigners have been affronted by his art because it reveals the displacement of religion from the center of society, and also for contravening traditional roles for “artists”. We might read that as uneasiness with Gade’s religious inheritance that characterized the end of his first phases, but they also signal affirmation and confidence to “reveal” his “silly and trivial” life. They are evocative of the “realistic” current urban zeitgeist: Maoist slogans and monasteries, mobile phone messages and *mani* wheels, *tsampa* bowls and hamburgers, hybrid characters of Mandarin and Tibetan letters and more. Gade’s work reflects new ideologies, spaces, desires and memories dominating the cultural landscape in twenty-first century Lhasa.

New Thangka Series: Spiderman Buddha

One of the unique features of Himalayan arts, according to Watt, is the creation of sets, a whole artistic project comprised of smaller individual works that are all related stylistically, thematically, and within a Buddhist worldview of a path system or cosmological mandala (J. Watt).³⁸⁸ Gade’s first series, the New Scripture series, was followed by others, including The New Thangka Series (*thangka sarpa*), which propose a new pantheon of deities.

In *The New Thangka Series* of four works, the central figures are seated upon high-backed thrones and lotus cushions, with a halo around their heads, and one female stands on either side. In one of them, *Spiderman Buddha*, a predominantly dark red and navy blue painting the cartoon character Spiderman is seated with his left heel drawn in to his body and his right foot

extended, his left hand at his chest and his right hand on his knee. He sits on a high-backed throne with halos surrounding his head and torso, and his throne rests upon a multi-colored blossoming lotus petals. Two females stand on either side of him, wearing knee-high leather boots and elbow-length gloves, a revolver placed in belts on their thighs, and their torsos clad in Superwoman-like skin-tight leotards. Nine rows of miniature Spiderman Buddhas fill the remaining space. The painting is framed at top and bottom by trapezoid shapes of dark blue fabric.

Gade's *New Thangka Series* adopts the 'portrait' compositional type and specifically the stylistic influence in southern central Tibet in the 11th – 14th centuries of the Newari Buddhists of the Kathmandu valley. Characteristic of this type and style, the central figure is flanked by two bodhisattva attendants, numerous small deities in rows and architectural niches fill the spaces on either side and along the top and bottom registers, scrolling foliate patterns give texture and details, and red is the predominant color (J. C. Singer 1994, J. C. Singer 1997). Portrait compositions feature one teacher, Buddha or deity given prominence by the larger size and central placement relative to other figures or details of the painting. The formal iconographic elements of postures and hand gestures, implements and color then identify the figure to viewers.



Figure 88 Gade. Modern Thangka:
Spiderman Buddha. 2008.
Mixed media on canvas. 116 x 70 cm.

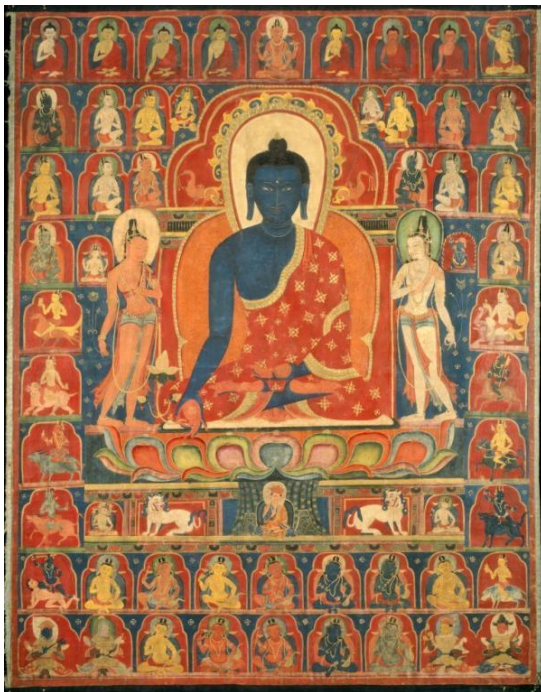


Figure 90 Central Tibet. Painted Banner
(Thangka) with the Medicine Buddha
(Bhaishajyaguru), 14th century.
Pigment on cloth, 104x82.7 cm (41 x 32
½ in.) Kate S. Buckingham Fund,
The Art Institute of Chicago

Spiderman Buddha is seated on a throne in one of the postures and gestures (*mudra*) formerly reserved for Buddhas, his right hand turned out, like this 14th century Medicine Buddha thangka, in the traditional gesture of giving. Spiderman Buddha's left hand at his heart in the gesture of teaching Dharma. His attendants are not bodhisattvas as in the traditional composition, but sexy superhero vixens.

Gade retains iconography elements adopted from Buddhist art historical tradition; in this and most of Gade's paintings since the early 1990s, the halo is a prime example. Halos in his imagery may function, as in Buddhist works, to communicate a spiritual dimension of the subject, but also are a traditional visual technique to emphasize certain figures by introducing a contrasting color in the space between a subject and his environment, as in the pale colored halos behind both the traditional Medicine Buddha painting and Gade's Spiderman Buddha.

Gade's *New Thangka Series* adopts this composition and style to pay homage to four modern 'deities': Spiderman Buddha, Communist Buddha with waifish, androgynous female soldiers swallowed by their Red Guard garb, Ronald McDonald Buddha flanked by fat, bikini-clad women, and Mickey Mouse Buddha attended by bored-looking costumed women. Rows of miniature 'new Buddhas' fill the surrounding niches, mimicking a thangka composition genre of filling spaces with miniature replicas of the central figure, as was seen above in *Mickey Mural*.

The Hulk (from the Diamond Series)

While the deities of the *New Thangka Series* are, except for the Maoist Buddha, borrowed from comic books and fictional, commercial characters to explore the fascination with sex and food and politics in urbanizing Lhasa, Gade also turns this technique on the darker sides of human nature. The subject of *The Hulk* is painted dark green in color, the largest figure in the center of the composition, standing wide with one knee bent and one leg straight, and bound figures lie beneath his feet. His bulging muscles dwarf his grimacing face, his red fists raised above his head. A red fiery halo surrounds him, a garland of skulls drapes his chest, and a tiger skin is tied around his waist. The border spaces framing the Hulk are scenes of figures against a

deep red and black background. In the vertical registers, figures are placed on a lotus cushion with a red throne back and include aliens and a monk boarding a space ship, two people in a knife fight, and in the top and bottom registers, we see a row of women's underwear-clad behinds and corpses of animals.



Figure 91 The Hulk. Gade. 2008.
Mixed media on canvas. 147 x 117 cm
Photography: Rossi & Rossi

The Hulk, an American fictional character whose skin turns green and muscles swell to unbelievable proportions when overcome with righteous rage, is transformed by Gade's brush to resemble a Tibetan wrathful deity in his *Diamond series* painting *The Hulk*. Vajrayana, Sanskrit for Diamond Vehicle, is the tantric form of Buddhism that originated in India and spread to Tibet. Gade uses again the thangka compositional template of the portrait, but this time for a wrathful rather than peaceful divinity, as *Spiderman Buddha* adopted (a traditional classificatory distinction). Gade's *Hulk* borrows from Buddhist iconography the wrathful form and posture of Vajrapani, the Bodhisattva of power,³⁸⁹ in Tibetan Vajrayana Buddhism. Vajrapani is depicted according to traditional iconography as blue, draped in a tiger skin, and in the same wide-legged posture upon a lotus petal cushion trampling enemies underfoot in a raging fire blaze, as in this eighteenth century painting in the Rubin Museum collection of Vajrapani-Bhutadamara. The dark

color of the wrathful deities' body is highly contrasted with the orange-red fire ring and yellow-gold details, and is balanced by a surrounding retinue and environment in dark reds and blues.



Figure 92 Tibet. Vajrapani – Bhutadamara (detail). Eighteenth century. 69 x 46 cm. Ground mineral pigment, Fine gold line on cotton. Collection of Rubin Museum of Art. Himalayan Art Resources no. 64.

Instead of a retinue of holy beings in the niches around the borders however, as in this fourteenth century example of a Vajrapani thangka, we find in Gade's *Hulk* instead macabre scenes of sexuality, violence, and death along with a few references to Tibetan and Chinese traditions.



Figure 93 Central Tibet. Vajrapani. Fourteenth century. Sakya lineage. Ground mineral pigment on cotton. Private Collection, Himalayan Art Resources no. 90135.

And the present is full of anxiety. Gade's art since the early 2000s, such as *Hulk* (2008) and *The World of Monsters (Mandala Series)* (2008), increasingly includes frightening characters and violent actions that cinematically relate a human propensity for fear, sex and violence. This disposition was traditionally channeled, in Tibet's Vajrayana arts, into wrathful deities who used

their fearsome powers to subdue and overcome evil and ignorance. But Gade's figures, while aesthetically reminiscent of wrathful deities and their retinues, aren't triumphant. They pointlessly impale each other with swords, monsters with gaping mouths of pointy teeth howl, and animals, people and monsters fight, fornicate, decapitate, and bite each other. Gade told me fear and violence are the consequences of uncertainty about the future,³⁹⁰ produced in contexts of postmodern globalization worldwide as many cultures grapple with the loss of traditions.³⁹¹ Gade's images of fading traditional murals and of modern media violence both become, read through Terdiman,³⁹² diagnostic of pervasive memory disturbances in the shared experience of the late twentieth century's radical social changes in Tibet.

The Hulk's world in Gade's painting is not a Buddhist deity's pure realm nor the metaphoric illustration of conquering of inner 'enemies', but is that of popular entertainment's horror, aliens, and pornography. The characters in his retinue are Tibetan-ized by borrowed halos and lotus petal cushions and the historic style and compositions. The main character, the cinematic vignettes and the inclusion of at least one reference to Maoism – the bunch of sunflowers – insist upon, explicitly bringing the modern imagery into the Tibetan context.

Tibetan esteem for their teachers combined with political expediency in the 14th – 16th centuries such that lama portraits, in the symbolic language of Buddha images, reached one quarter of all *thangka* production (J. C. Singer 1995). Similar status, and perhaps calculating socio-economic power, is accorded the new pantheon featured in the *New Thangka Series* and the *Diamond Series*. In adapting an extremely popular genre of traditional art, Gade fills the spaces with imported or imposed new "heroes", products, and ideologies, icons now as ubiquitous as lamas in the past. Together they signal the world of memory, fantasy, social concerns and history that Gade's art inhabits with signature humor.

Happy Home

Gade turned to traditional genres outside of the *thangka* painting's deity compositions to commemorate the arrival in Lhasa of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad, employing the use of landscape

and narrative genres in a new way, as historic events unfolded. The opening of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad in 2007 was a nationally anticipated and highly televised event. The Qinghai-Tibet Railroad represents an enormous State infrastructure investment, and scored invaluable global recognition as an engineering miracle of laying and operating railroad track over tundra that freezes and thaws to carry passengers in sealed cars oxygenated to compensate for increases in elevation (Makin 2007) (Stanway 2008). The expected benefits included increased mobility of tourists and workers in and out of the region and the reduction in the price of more efficiently transported goods in the TAR. Internationally, critics were concerned about the already massive influx of Chinese migrants marginalizing Tibetans in their own homeland, and facilitating exports from the region by unregulated mining and other industries which create serious environmental degradations at specific sites throughout the plateau and potentially along emerging transport routes. However, in Lhasa, where tensions mounted as the State's security apparatus increased its presence to protect the train throughout the summer, anxieties about the railroad's environmental, economic, and cultural impact were seldom voiced. Even the most outspoken artists were anxious, and Gedun Choephel Artists Guild members reversed plans to show works related to the train in their Lhasa gallery.

The painting on paper titled *Happy Home* (2007) (*bde ba gzhing*) is in the physical shape of the silhouette of the reclining Buddha, the position in which the historical Buddha is said to have lain at age eighty when he passed into *parinirvana*. The shape itself provides a compositional structure to the long horizontal work, containing numerous vignettes, characters, and decorative details all rich with historical and symbolic meaning. Gade used traditional paints on Tibetan handmade paper, rather than cloth.



Figure 94 Gade. *Happy Home*. 2007. Mixed media on paper. Photograph: Jason Sangster

Happy Home shows vignettes of contemporary Tibetan life, through which the new railroad track and train tunnels. The train, paragon of state-driven development and modernization in Tibet, worms through the land and snow peaked mountains, tunneling through the mountains to the heart, stopping and welcomed in front of a monastery with a Coca-Cola billboard. Several of the vignettes are humorous: the palm trees in the center are a reference to the unbecoming plastic trees lining the commercial boulevard between the Jokhang temple and Potala palace; from beneath the costume worn for the yak dance, a traditional entertainment act, high heeled shoes poke out; the motif of the flying monk, lifted from monastic murals, is accompanied by a witch on a broomstick, and cupid points his arrow at a couple embracing beneath a Chinese money tree. The great feat of the railroad's construction, an obsession of the state-run media for months, is parodied by the man who stands on one hand on the tracks balancing stacks of dishware on his head and feet.



Figure 95 Gade. Happy Home, detail. ground mineral pigment on paper. 2007.

Many of the characters are engaged in some sort of performance or are being made spectacle. The costumed dancers on stage before a Tibetan, Chinese and foreign audience could signal the commodification of traditional culture in which the performance of ethnicity serves political and commercial aims. The dancers also allude to the Cultural Revolution model operas, the pageantry of which Gade remembers from his childhood, and to the ethnically-costumed and choreographed Tibetans welcoming the actual train to the Lhasa station in July, 2006. A wrathful figure, with a blue head holding aloft a *phurpa* (ritual dagger) and bell, “rides” a legless horse costume, reducing the figure from a fierce deity to a masked actor.

Modernity is apparent in the pollution billowing factory on the outskirts of town, and in the advertisements atop a monastery for Coca-Cola and a China Mobile sign posted by a yogi’s meditation cave. Popular culture icons Sherlock Holmes and E.T. are aboard the train, and a Disneyland castle, tour guides, and a foreign sunbather await the passengers. A tour guide waves a red triangular flag up a ladder to the roof of a traditional Tibetan building with an incense burner where a man in a shirt and tie has wings strapped to his outstretched arms and seems ready to jump, a modern Icarus. References to the recent Communist past are also present in the

traditional didactic Buddhist motif of the Four Harmonious Friends adapted to include a Red Guard atop an elephant, and in the sunflowers which reference Cultural Revolution symbolism for the masses who follow the sun, Mao Zedong.

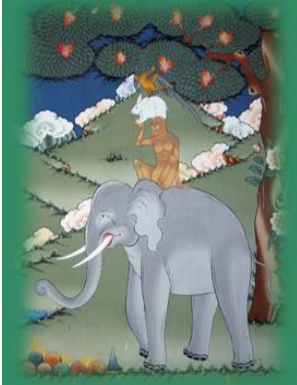


Figure 96 Traditional motif. The Four Harmonious Friends.

The Qinghai-Tibet Railroad³⁹³ arrives in Lhasa of at a time when Communism, Buddhism, and modernity are pervasive and entwined (L. M. Sangster 2006). The seamless integration of these elements makes us aware of the ongoing presence of the past even in a bustling present, and questions what happens to pasts that are no longer relevant or are appropriated and commercialized or completely lost.³⁹⁴ For example, the nomads' yak-skin boat, a major form of transportation in a land without roads or bridges until the middle of the twentieth century, is immobilized atop a railroad bridge.

The silhouette of the reclining Buddha is filled in with mountains and unmistakable markers of Tibet, thus mapping the very land of the Tibetan plateau itself as synonymous with the Buddha shape. This could be read as an assertion of Buddhism remaining fundamental in Tibet, and in light of the indigenous sense of place communicated through the didactic image of the *shrinmo*, a female demonic spirit stretched across the plateau to protect Buddhism.³⁹⁵

Gade's mapping the plateau through the Buddha shape, and the details of monks and temples, signal the continued presence of Buddhism in Tibet, yet, the misguided monk prostrating to a hypothetical Disneyland castle (seemingly displacing the absent Potala Palace from its present domination of the Lhasa skyline and minds) and the posture of the Buddha at the end of

his life, could cast upon the light-hearted scenes a sobering point: the nation is no longer secured against threats to individual and collective integrity.

Buddhism is just one of many facets of life undergoing change and at times apparently displaced by modernization. In the intersections of modern and traditional referents, people are living their lives; in the penetration of the mountains by tunnels, land takes on new meanings as well as preserves older orientations.

The form of *Happy Home* is not a traditional painting composition or genre, but visually and functionally resembles the landscape painting type. In traditional historical and narrative paintings, or within those elements of a work, the artist has more freedom for creatively expressing narratives of historical events and places, with “temporal settings [that] located figures in the historical or legendary past (Jackson and Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* 1988).”³⁹⁶ Gade’s painting documents the present in the form of an indigenous historical document.

Father’s Nightmare (2008)

I began the chapter with *Father’s Nightmare* (2008) and the apparent absence of Tibetan Buddhist influence, but let us now consider the composition, materials and content more closely. *Father’s Nightmare* (2008) is a bustling cityscape: cranes and dinosaurs hover threateningly, monks and Maoists carry the pennant shaped flags used in peak tourist season by group leaders, mannequins and masseuses in skimpy underwear remind the viewer familiar with urban Lhasa of the department store windows and girls inside the brothels and spas that line the streets, creatures from scary movies and the tragic-romantic Hollywood couple on the bow of the doomed *Titanic* live here, and temple architecture houses auspicious offerings downstairs and the popular cuisine of hot pot restaurants upstairs.³⁹⁷ The population includes festival-clad Tibetans dancing from the ends of a puppeteer’s strings, men uniformed in suits, monastic robes, as well as police and army gear, migrant workers, and an impaled couple (borrowed from classical hell realm depictions), while high above them black flags of poison and death wave where once bright prayer flags may

have flown. The pleasures of spas, dancing and singing, the Olympic spirit of school children and gymnasts, and the general bustling activity on this cloud however belie any noxious nightmarish realities. Gade's mushroom clouds are smoky swirls to which, strangely, beings appear to be blind and immune.



Figure 97 Gade. *Father's Nightmare*.

A popular composition in Tibetan Buddhist art is the established arrangement of multitudes of sacred beings, as opposed to the dominance of one main figure as in the portrait style discussed above. These assembly compositions are of many types, but there are two main compositions that depict lineages: “refuge trees” (*dpag bsam gyi shing* “wish-fulfilling tree”), which illustrates generations of teachers and disciples in direct descent from a Buddha to one’s own teacher, and the merit or assembly field (*tshogs zhing*), an assembly of beings in a which a Buddhist places faith.³⁹⁸ In lineage paintings,³⁹⁹ teachers and disciples are chronologically linked and hierarchically positioned between enlightened beings (above) and lesser deities who were not refuges, such as guardians and other worldly gods and goddesses (Jackson and Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* 1988).⁴⁰⁰ The common features of both types include the clustering of similar beings according to their ontological or philosophical classification, the placement of these clusters upon clouds or the branches of a “wish-fulfilling tree” or in concentric rows, and a vertical orientation to hierarchical status of figures. These compositions encompass

entire schools and their associated historical figures, deities, and protectors, visually presenting a complete historical, philosophical, cosmological and practice narrative of a group in relation to the principally depicted teacher or Buddha. The contemporary artist Penpa Wangdu's lama lineage painting (photographed recently completed and unframed) includes several twentieth century lamas, and shows the clouds and gatherings Gade borrows.



Figure 98 APenpa Wangdu. Gaden Lha Gyama. ground mineral pigment and gold on canvas. 2006. Photograph: Jason Sangster

The traditional Buddhist pantheon is so immense that few people could recognize or name all the iconographic forms, or even be permitted to see them prior to spiritual qualifications.⁴⁰¹ Thus, Gade's imaginative expansion of ontological classes and casts of characters (monsters, fictional characters of myth, comic books and cinema, historical, familial, monastic and aristocratic figures, and thousands of objects from a century of material culture) emerges from an art tradition rich with diversity, and the potential for secret and new forms to be discovered.

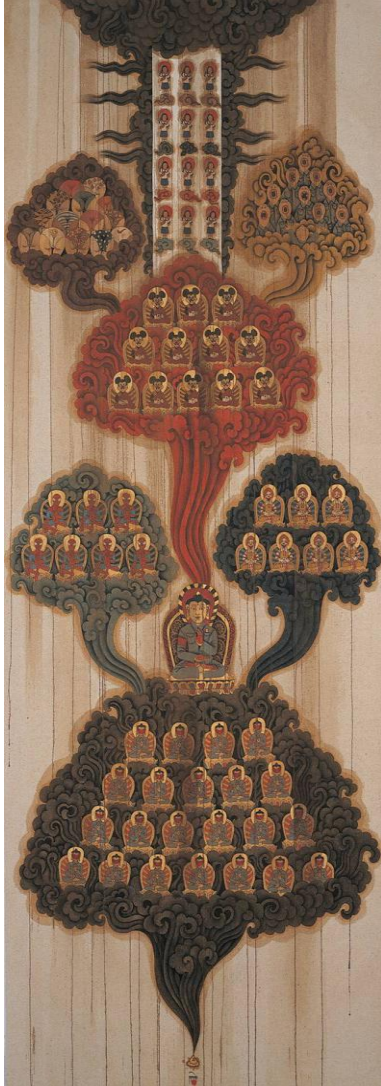


Figure 99 Gade. Mushroom Cloud No. 2, 2008. Photography: Plum Blossoms.

These assembly compositions, the lineage tree and the assembly field, are the structural basis of *Father's Nightmare*, *Mushroom Cloud No.1*, and *Mushroom Cloud No. 2* (pictured), painted at approximately the same time with stone ground pigments on thin cotton cloth. The composition of *Father's Nightmare* resembles a refuge field. The clouds supporting the denizens originates from the mind of a haloed man in a Mao suit, who could be either Gade's Han father, dressed as and resembling Mao Zedong (they were from the same region), or Mao himself, reclining on a lotus throne in the posture of Shakyamuni Buddha the time of his parinirvana (death of the physical body). Clusters of similar or identical beings – schoolchildren and gymnasts on clouds in the top corners, bathers, howling aliens, monks and marching soldiers –

recall the groups of beings assembled and ordered in rows in the classical compositions. In *Mushroom Cloud No.2*, the clusters of uniformed school children, women's bottoms in colorful panties, a choir of Maoists, Ronald McDonald Buddhas, Spiderman Buddhas and Mickey Mouse Buddhas and Mao Buddhas in rows on their separate clouds recall groups of teachers on the branches of a lineage tree. In the typical assembly field composition, beings are also organized hierarchically by spatial divisions, with classes of beings grouped together, as the clusters in the *Mushroom Cloud* paintings suggest with their repetition of nearly identical figures on separate clouds. Rather than a classical Buddhist visualization cultivated in meditation practice of the assembly as emanating from the lama's heart, Gade laughed when he pointed out to me that the billowing clouds originate from a small pile of "golden shit."

Gade is creating a bridge between past and future cultural landscapes in his choices. The lama lineage composition of *Mushroom Cloud* and *Father's Nightmare* carries particular resonance in this sense. Lama lineage compositions are remarkable because Tibetan respect for gurus conveys "a deep and concrete sense of history (Jackson and Jackson 1988)." The deep and concrete history that Gade narrates with his paintbrush, which he has called "a thread that connects past and present," is both personal and collective. The lama lineage, literally referred to as a "thread" (*rgyud*), is fundamentally about continuity, connecting the present to the legitimating past, embodied through the teacher-disciple relationship in religious contexts. Thangka lineage assembly and refuge field compositions, the basis of *Father's Nightmare*, function in Tibetan Buddhist contexts to convey and honor a living sense of history. As a technology the composition may be comparable to the indexical quality of art and photography celebrated by theorists concerned with living memory (Gibbons, *Contemporary Art and Memory: Images of Recollection and Remembrance* 2007) (Barthes, *Camera Lucida* 1977) (Saltzman 2006). In Gade's art, indigenous elements create a material trace from the past into the globalizing present.

Ice Buddha No.1- Kyi Chu River

Ice Buddha No.1- Kyi Chu River (December, 2006) was Gade's first time-based installation work and was the culmination of experiments in new media, mold-sculpted ice and collaborative photography. It was also, he shared in private discussion with me, an expression of explicitly Buddhist concepts in which he believed. Additionally, in this work, Gade switched again, from traditional materials for imaging new content characterizing the second phase of his career, to new materials for imaging the traditional Buddha form, which he had never used before. I close my discussion of Gade's works with an emphasis on the process of production, in which I was able to participate.

Gade gathered water from the Kyi Chu, the River of Happiness, which runs along the south side of Lhasa, and froze it in a traditional style mold of a Shakyamuni Buddha. The material the mold was made from was a modern synthetic material that would be flexible to expand as the water froze into ice, and was designed with and carved to traditional proportions by his friend and Tibet University sculpture professor, Lobsang Tashi. After many weeks of experimentation with a large freezer chest (of the kind street peddlers used to sell popsicles), Gade was able to produce ice that did not cloud or crack, but yielded lovely clear ice sculptures of Shakyamuni Buddha.

Gade planned to utilize these sculptures in an installation work, 'returning' them to the KyiChu River where they would melt in the bright Tibetan sunshine. Gade, Nortse, Nyandak, the American photographer,⁴⁰² and I spent a day scouting locations along the river. It was more challenging than we expected to find a vantage point that would not include modern developments of apartments, clubs, and shopping centers along the opposite bank. Equally important, Gade eventually insisted, was preserving the view of the Potala Palace in the background. As the most iconic symbol of Lhasa, if not Tibet, Gade felt without it, the location of the installation, once photographed, could have been anywhere in the world, but the location of Lhasa was central to the process he envisioned and thus the work's meaning.

Once the appointed day at the river arrived, Gade brought two perfect clear ice buddhas, “just in case.” The actual art installation/performance involved about a dozen artists and supporters (and, as Tibetans are not in the habit of spending a day outdoors without a picnic, a tent for enjoying endless dumplings and tea). Several other members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild were eager to participate in the long awaited event; a few artists had already photographed small temporary installations in the countryside, experimenting with the process of turning an idea into material reality, but because the opportunities were rare and the creative challenges stimulating, each time generated enthusiasm.

Gade said, “What is most important is the process, like a performance. And yet, we need to document it in order to share it with others, beyond ourselves today, so the photography becomes important too.⁴⁰³” With help of the other artists present, he positioned an ice Buddha in the water with the Potala in the background. He then checked the framing in the photographer’s lens, agreeing on one stationary tripod location for the duration of the event.

Then, as the Buddha glistened in the bright sun, we waited for the ice sculpture to melt and Gade explained that *Ice Buddha No.1- Kyi Chu River*, was for him about the cycle of life and reincarnation. The water from the river was frozen into form and then melted back into its source. It flowed downstream in the river that becomes the Brahmaputra, eventually returning this Buddha to India from whence the Buddha’s teachings had long ago come to Tibet. Thus the concept of reincarnation is taken on multiple levels – the material transmutation of water changing forms, the parallel with our own individual succession of consciousness that passes from one bodily form into another, and the collective karma that experiences waxing and waning religiosity in society. Reincarnation is also about impermanence, which the ice sculpture, which could not be preserved in a studio or gallery, reinforces.

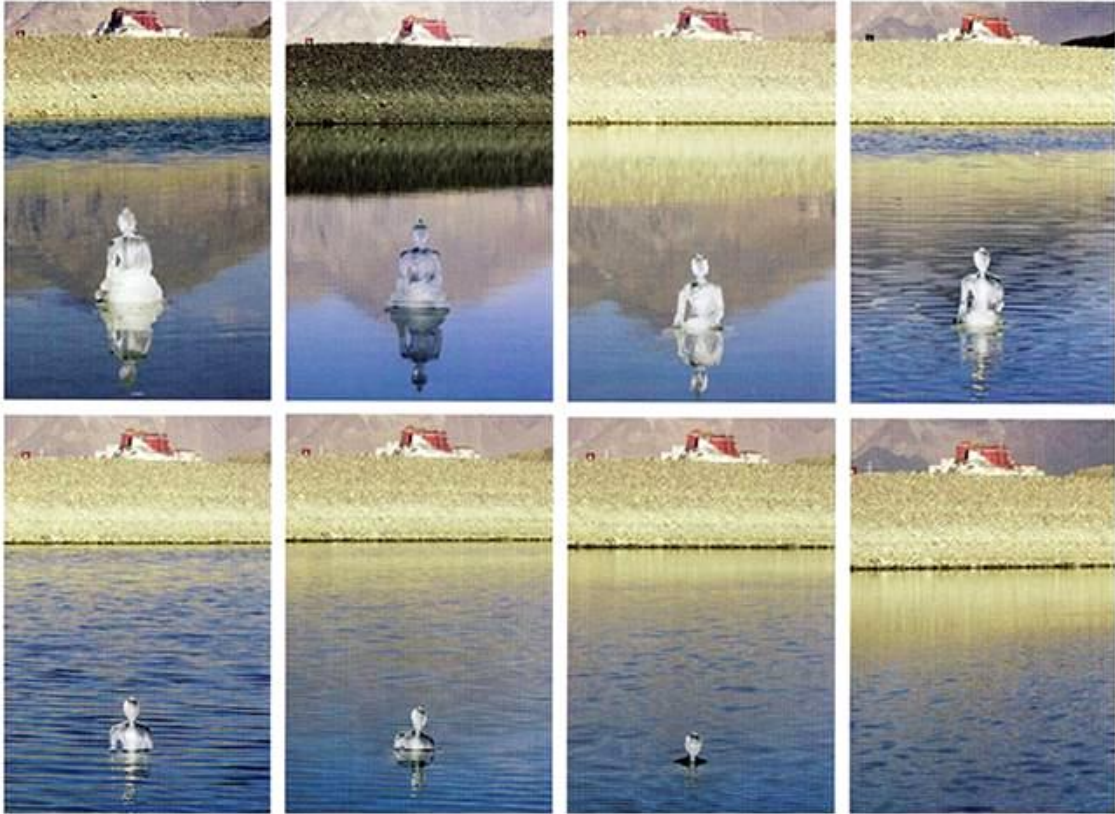


Figure 100 Gade with Jason Sangster Ice Buddha No.1- Kyi Chu River. 2006.

The sun was bright, but it was after all late December and cold, so the melting did not proceed exactly as envisioned, but it was agreed some artists' production secrets are not to be revealed! Later, Gade was eager to see the photographs, and helped to edit them into a sequence for exhibition. The photographs were to be installed in a single row. The Buddha can be read, as he told his Tibet University students on a class trip to see the work at the Gedun Choephel gallery, as "sinking into or emerging from the water," thus remaining open to alternative interpretations.⁴⁰⁴

Gade's emphasis on artistic process, the historical dimension of Buddhism's arrival in Tibet from India, and the artist's openness to interpretation all are secular and modern dimensions of artistic practice, but the subject of the work is a startlingly beautiful, radiant Buddha, offered, almost, before the Potala, and deeply reflective of Buddhist concepts of reincarnation. *Ice Buddha No.1 – KyiChu River* utilized imagery of the Buddha, the Potala, and the river that signals

collective memory and experience, and yet also maintains a flexible connection to cultural inheritance in modern times.



Figure 101 Gade with Jason Sangster. Ice Buddha

Finally, in my own experience of sharing this image from that day with others including Tibetans, Europeans and Americans around the world, it has never failed to induce a response from viewers. Whether aesthetic or something more personal (and I have seen people spontaneously put their palms together in the presence of the image), it strikes me that Gade's project perhaps performs some traditional functions of Buddhist images as they were originally intended; to be so moved by their splendor that the viewer is inspired to appreciate and emulate the positive qualities symbolized in the deity's form. In this work, Gade switched from traditional materials for imaging new content to new materials for imaging the traditional Buddha form. The unexpected Buddha arrests attention, as the introduction of gold statues and paintings to the plateau may have done centuries earlier.

The Tibetan Look

Gade said, "Cultural icons such as Mickey Mouse, McDonald's, Mao Suit and The Cross, are actually a reflection of the current cultural state of Tibet affected by the Cultural Revolution and globalization. From my experience there is no longer a single, homogenous culture in Tibet. Rather, it is hybrid and diverse. I am interested in the state of people who are living in this ever-

changing society. With the change in Tibet, all these issues can only become more prominent.” It is in the midst of such hybridity that Gade wants his paintings to both reflect change and, as Gade said above, ‘look Tibetan’ even as they are detached from religion.

Anchoring his choices of materials, style and compositions in tradition can render work that ‘looks like’ a Tibetan painting, and is a “realistic” depiction of his contemporary Tibet. This works to image collectivity (Thomas 1997) even as it sometimes offends that very collective in which he is embedded. Borrowing from Buddhist art history does not affirm an untroubled inheritance of a Buddhist identity. But it does affirm a Tibetan identity. Gade believes that artists do have a cultural responsibility, especially in Tibet. Remarkably, he concludes that the best way he can serve Tibetan modernity is to draw upon his own experience. The notion of Tibetan identity and cultural responsibility as linked to preservation of “the past”, generally embodied by Buddhism, is re-imagined by Gade. For him, documentation of the present moment *is* an act of cultural responsibility, but one which is freed from the constraints of “Buddhist” art.⁴⁰⁵ That is, Gade subverts not only notions of what Buddhism ought to look like, he also subverts ideas of what it means to be an artist in his culture, in order to represent it accurately in the “current cultural state.” This concluding section details what it means to “look Tibetan” and why that is important. To create a painting that “looks Tibetan” Gade uses materials, forms, and compositions which are almost exclusively drawn from traditional Tibetan Buddhist arts. The traditional materials he regularly uses include the ground stone pigments, gold leaf, paper and thin cloth that have been used for texts, murals and *thangka* for centuries. The art forms he adopts include scriptures, *thangka*, murals, and molded sculpture. Gade also employs the traditional genres for compositions adapting the template for portraits of peaceful and wrathful divinities, lama lineage (*rgyu zhing*)⁴⁰⁶ and assembly or refuge fields (*tshogs zhing*), didactic charts and diagrams,⁴⁰⁷ mandala (*kyil khor*),⁴⁰⁸ and history or narrative⁴⁰⁹ painting. In short, he has appropriated every major form of Tibetan painting⁴¹⁰ and put many traditional materials to new purposes.

The painting style Gade developed in these works and which has become a defining characteristic of this phase of his career derives from the techniques of thangka and mural painting, in which shading and perspective are largely absent and the brushwork emphasizes lines and the effect of color combinations. Clear dark lining is used for outlining forms, detailing and patterns, just as is visible in traditional art in the clothing folds, clouds, foliage, nimbuses, and so forth. Although the concept of style is vexing in Tibetan art history, Gade's references to compositions and palettes and styles that range over centuries and geographies demonstrates his familiarity with the breadth of Tibetan Buddhist art history. Like those traditional murals, but also like the cartoon characters and comic books he loved as a youth, Gade's images are primarily defined by line drawings with minimal depth or dimensionality. Though some have described this characteristic of Tibetan art as 'flat', in combination with the narrative effect of Gade's vignettes, he infuses the method with vitality and movement, capturing the tradition's capacity for expressiveness. Gade's paintings embrace the narrative quality of temple wall paintings: viewing one of his paintings feels like stepping close to examine one section of the story, which could continue to wrap around the corner and through a labyrinth of chapels and corridors. The moments of activity in which the characters in his compositions are engaged, as in *Happy Home* or *New Century*, *Mushroom Cloud*, or works in the *Mandala* series, feel excerpted from a longer story or narrative painting, one the author is still writing, describing the unfolding present.

Gade also captures the present-day, aged appearance of the physical remains of centuries-old Buddhist arts, particularly crumbling or faded murals and aged paper scriptures. Gade's productions trace physical connections to Tibetan materiality through time, particularly in the appearance of age in replicated water stains, and flaking and cracked images. This appearance of history is juxtaposed to the modern subjects of the works, pointing to contemporary feelings about a very different but very proximate past. This distance is one factor that underlies discomfort with depicting religious belief, counterbalanced by the need to nevertheless accept, and even delight in, the present as it is.

Gade also adapts traditional Buddhist art but subverts the forms and compositional genres by making transparent their very form and templates, elements of sacred art that should be subsumed by the content and its function ritually. Gade instead brings these templates to the fore, emptying them of their former content and filling them with the mundane details of his own times, rather than a sacred realm outside of place and time. Some of Gade's uneasiness with religious belief is reflected in this strategy: it mirrors the shallow religious knowledge of many in his generation and younger. Gade, to borrow from Thomas, "draws upon and affirms traditional art forms through continuities of media, style or motifs, yet" like his colleagues, "adopt[s] a critical attitude to the restrictive curatorial practices that privilege such works and deny or marginalize the continuing dynamism" of Tibetan contemporary arts (Thomas 2001).

Imaging Collectivity in Tibet Today

Why is 'looking like a Tibetan painting' so important, after all? I began the chapter with the question why, if the use of Buddhist imagery is so problematic for today's artists given their relative alienation from religion under Communism, Buddhist imagery continues to occupy a prominent space in many artists' oeuvre. Taking Buddhist imagery as a symbol of more than religious faith, a range of representational strategies and interpretive possibilities open up.

Buddhism's prior national, unifying cohesiveness as the source of meaning and identity, once signaled in art, has been displaced from the central subject of contemporary Tibetan art, reflecting the crumbling of institutional religion as dominant social structure. This collapse is traceable to the specific historical events of Chinese Communist occupation but also, Hervieu-Leger (2000) writes, is a pattern in modernizing societies. This kind of change often links notions of modernity and a break with the past, either chosen or imposed, that constitutes a disorienting paradigm shift, witnessed in histories of industrialization, colonialism, and globalization, and particularly in locations peripheral to global power. Anxiety emerges (Terdiman 1993), and can be linked to "invented tradition" (Hobsbawm and Ranger, *The Invention of Tradition* 1983) that attempts to mitigate as it localizes these tensions. For instance, Chatterjee critiques postcolonial

India's construction of women as embodiments of nationalist ideas, and therefore as both critical actors meant to uphold tradition and a locus for anxiety about modernity; problematically, this nationalist discourse asserts difference from the west, and yet still "remain[s] trapped within [a] framework of false essentialism (Chatterjee 1989)". Chatterjee is concerned with dichotomies of masculine/feminine, spiritual/material, and home/world, but in the Tibetan case (absent postcolonial discourse) I am concerned with the dichotomy between past and present, and the constructions of Buddhism that result from the anxieties such dichotomy provokes.

In Tibet, Buddhism and Buddhists are the embodiments of the essence of Tibetan values, and therefore perceived as the most crucial to preserve as well as the most susceptible to being targeted by corrupting influences of modernity and political repression. Yet, in fact, practices of family, education, economy, language use, and agrarian and nomadic ways of life are undergoing extreme upheaval. In contrast, many Buddhist institutions have been rebuilt, lamas are writing about science and advice for life in modern times, monks are gaining computer literacy, and lay people maintain some measure of connections to their religious leaders and temples; there is a visible semblance of continuity. Buddhism may be more resistant to, or insulated from, change imposed from outside and a strong example of indigenous mediation of modernity through the traditional structures of religious hierarchy and institutionalization, even as these now operate under the supervision and debilitating strictures of the Communist Party.

However, even if religion is one dimension of Tibetan culture exercising adaptability and fortifying Tibetan identities, a relatively strong link in the "chain of memory (Hervieu-Leger 2000)," Buddhism is not necessarily the only link to the past, and it is not necessarily functioning in the same ways as before. The past is not broken off, but is inevitably still present, in a variety of ways. The past also appears as a "tradition," but tradition has a way of becoming merely nostalgic or burdensome, and it is to this propensity that contemporary artists object.

In Tibet, art historical traditions are recollected through the still familiar forms and compositions to image tensions between continued cultural transmission and the unclear

relevance of tradition in current times. If Gade used traditional religious compositions merely as templates, they become emptied of their former ‘inner meaning’ (*nang ‘don*), or the most profound levels of Buddhist interpretation, and purpose. Terdiman writes, the “evacuation of recollection leaves the narrative empty. It signifies the failure of organic integration of the past into the lived experience of characters, which is one sign of ... memory crisis (Terdiman 1993).” Yes perhaps in contrast, by re-purposing compositions, Gade sustains the visibility of historically rooted aesthetics and possibly preserves them against total forgetting. Gade also infuses them with new meanings, to not only express local and personal experience, but also to document the interruption of transmission and inheritance that leaves gaps to be filled; recollection is not completely evacuated, but filled with a new narrative, and one that includes loss.

Gade told me he is not fabricating the state of affairs he depicts, no matter how imaginatively he depicts them, but is reflecting that, in fact, many cultural traditions have already been hollowed out of meaning. They “look Tibetan” to everyone, yet it is rare to find a Tibetan who is deeply knowledgeable about religion, art, or history. Regarding the role of Buddhist heritage in contemporary life, Losang Gyatso, an artist now in the US, has said that questions of cultural sustainability demand the difficult discernment of “what to discard and what to keep.” This in turn involves, Gyatso said, honestly addressing what happens when “things become symbolic rather than meaningful (C. a. McGranahan 2007).” In many of the artists’ work, and as Gade tries to point out in his artwork, we see just this tension between artistic, cultural and religious heritage informing identity on the one hand, and the recognition of the superficiality of cultural and religious clichés on the other.⁴¹¹ The shared visual language of Buddhism can also then image the inability of memory to perpetuate itself, particularly in the absence of certain minimal environments and lineages. Reflecting on the future of contemporary Tibetan art, Gade told me in his studio that “Without traditions, there is no soil or ground upon which to build a new path.”⁴¹²

Gade stated, “In this transient time, when memories are disappearing, all we can do is pick up the fragments.” Thus, by way of traditional Buddhist elements, his paintings “pick up fragments” by “looking Tibetan” (a look defined by the past) despite the visibility of modernity in his paintings. Even for secularizing moderates, the radical change of Tibet is felt as a memory crisis; connection to the past has to be constructed when previously, it is widely felt, cultural transmission was transparent and autonomous.

Gade’s formal continuities with materials and compositions are crucial aesthetic choices for a generation with a strong cultural identity despite feelings of distance and loss. These choices develop a new visual language for Tibetan contemporary expression that moves back and forth between past and present, imaging a world that feels familiar and yet also uncharted. Buddhas and Buddhism enable contemporary artists to continue to bring land and people and practices together in one place, to locate everything they are experiencing in their own communities as unequivocally in Tibet, as in *Ice Buddha No.1- KyiChu River*. They form a common visual language that necessarily references the past through its stimulation of collective memory, which can then be put into dialogue with contemporaneous experience and concerns.

Imaging collectivity is a concept developed by Nicholas Thomas that I take as a social process manifesting collective or cultural memory. Thomas (2001) writes about Maori artists’ incorporation of indigenous elements and symbolism in artwork about their collective historical experience with white settlers and in the face of oppositional histories, from contact to colonization to mainstream New Zealand society. They creatively use shared and personal imagery such that those who share indigenous collective memories also recognize their own heritage, and contemporary experience. It is a tactic, Thomas concludes, which makes visible local histories and assertions of presence and coequality, for indigenous and mainstream audiences, and thereby undermines troubling dynamics of colonial relationships.

Similarly, Gade imports global icons to image local mediation of modernization; these are after all images just as familiar to Tibetans in Lhasa today as the Tibetan Buddhist art

historical tradition, which Gade similarly appropriates not for religious edification but to affirm his Tibetanness.

Gade introduces modernity into his art in three specific ways that Thomas (2001) identifies as strategies for imaging collectivity in oppositional histories and contexts. First, Gade's modernity is not divorced from ancient or recent pasts. Often in global markets the re-articulation of images or materials and techniques associated with the past or exoticism undermines the present creativity of the individual artist (Morphy 2008) (Myers 2002). Indigenous artists are expected to appropriately reference a past that is the source of generalized cultural principles and myths, and materials, styles or forms, but *not* specific or recent events (Thomas 2001). Gade insists upon making visible the changes that have occurred in Tibet, from the first airport (in *New Century*) to the first railroad (in *Happy Home*), and Cultural Revolution era dancers and Hollywood characters (repeated in the details of many works).

Secondly, the playfulness of his cartoon-like characters yokes humor as an empowering tool for transformation of the present. It immediately conveys the very aliveness of a people in contrast to the "frozen sanctity of ...artifact" (Thomas 2001) and expectations for solemn spirituality. When wit is combined with legible tradition, tradition becomes fresh, relevant, and a source of pride. Gade's humor skillfully draws people to the space between the Mickey of today and the ruins of the past, to show Tibetan despair, hopefulness, and determined presence.

Thirdly, Gade, out of pragmatic necessity, uses those symbols and objects with which he and his audience are familiar, and these are, especially in the post-Deng era of Chinese consumer society, in no way limited to the spheres of tradition.

These strategies in Gade's art can be read as an inversion of colonialism and globalism dynamics where the presumed unidirectional flow of influence moves from dominant to indigenous societies. In this context, consequences for indigenous art include the assumption that 'Western' or settler culture corrodes local authenticity and devalues their post-contact productions in global markets (Steiner 1994), at the same time as the representation of the

colonizer as civilizing sustains primitivism and the ongoing marginalization of indigenous communities (Errington 1998) (Thomas 2001). Cultural objects removed from their local uses then acquire different values in the process of being made into “art” or “artifacts” in a foreign museum or other context (Errington 1998) (Morphy 2008) (Myers 2002) (Steiner 1994).

In contrast, Gade’s strategies show Tibetan mediation of dominant Chinese culture and challenges to stereotypes. For example, he uses the images and symbols which are most familiar to him and his audiences through their experience and environment. But this does not necessitate that he import foreign objects into his context with their original meanings, and in fact many of the Western or Chinese or global elements he adapts acquire layers of meanings and alterations of values in the new contexts which he creates for them. Mickey Mouse and the castle of his Magic Kingdom (*Happy Home*, 2006) do not represent the fantasy of a vacation to Disneyland. Gade undermines the superiority and dominance of the mainstream by asserting agency to incorporate and adapt according to local values and aesthetics. By conjoining imported and local elements within a work of art, he insists upon their coequality (Thomas 2001) historically and within modernity (and by which intricate and sublime Tibetan aesthetics arguably appear especially sophisticated compared to foreign cartoon and fictional characters). The viewer is forced to relinquish visions of a Tibet that only existed in the past and to acknowledge that Buddhas no longer solely dominate the visual culture; in fact, modern global culture is ubiquitous.

An ingrained sense of the prominence of Buddhism in Tibetan collective memory (Dreyfus 1994) (M. T. Kapstein 2002) has informed artists’ identity formation and artistic endeavors since the 1980s. Gade frequently comments that he wants his work to have the feeling of Tibetan art of the past, and for it to be “part of the continuity of Tibetan traditional art,” reflecting a “Tibetan context” and “visual language”.⁴¹³

Gade’s imaging of modernity could be seen to displace or threaten religion and tradition, but through his insistence upon so many traditional elements, repeated in the content and

materials of his work, Gade seems to be also insisting upon the continued existence – co-existence or even co-dependence – of tradition and modernity.

That said, the compositional forms he employs may also carry some notion of their traditional didactic messages into his modern context, matching form, content and meaning as in traditional paintings. For example, lineage trees and assembly fields function in part to trace connections from the past into the present as important and sustaining. Gade's *Father's Nightmare* brings the Buddhist past and the revolutionary past into the present, demanding they be acknowledged amidst the howling and glittering distractions of urbanization. The categories of paintings of wrathful beings continue to function in Gade's *The Hulk* and in the monsters lurking in many other of his works to show how the energy of a violent world may be transmuted. In these ways, Gade does not reject Buddhism at all, but honors its role and possibilities for continued contribution to Tibetan civilization.

That is, out of his own uneasiness with religion, he has perhaps found strategies that work for him, but may spark uneasiness and hopefully subsequent contemplation, in others. Yet the vignettes of characters interacting and the surprise in suddenly recognizing pop cultural icons like E.T. and Batman in 'Tibetan' compositions play out in miniature the larger level of cultural encounters in the fast developing Asian world. Gade's role is to draw the ordinary objects of daily life in Lhasa into the spotlight where they can then be funny, condemned or dispassionately noted. As an artist, he is perhaps inserting and championing local culture amidst the adaptation – or onslaught - of foreign influences.⁴¹⁴ Gade and his generation have grown up with hybridity and are comfortable with both tradition and modernity, as the seamless cohabitation in his scenes depict. Yet, his work nonetheless questions what is "Tibetan" today, who can say, and what has been displaced by Sinicization and globalization.

Tibetan contemporary artists continue to employ Buddhist imagery but dynamically and with contemporary reality, to assert Tibetan cultural and temporal location, identity, and agency. They assert presence, their artworks document the present social and cultural landscape.

Gade does not deny ruptures or seek redemption, but acknowledges challenges to cultural sustainability that must be faced in order for Tibetan cultural identities to survive into the future. The use of religious imagery in novel forms is a crucial strategy for these aims.

Art, formerly a premier site for illuminating religious worldviews and ideals, now employs Buddhist imagery for picturing the norms of a mundane world. Strikingly absent from most contemporary and independent Tibetan artists' work are the reasons Buddhist imagery is employed by the State, Han artists, and by some Tibetan artists in the TAA, namely: commercial appeal, ideological propaganda, political control of religious affairs, secularization of culture, tourism promotion and souvenir industries, and ultimately an attempt by the State to re-make Tibetan civilization in the image of the ethnic primitive, proto-Socialist utopia. Religious imagery instead functions, in Gade's works, to signify what is at stake for cultural sustainability. Gade's paints, lines, compositions, style, motifs, and so forth function to invoke Buddhism as not only a common set of beliefs, but also as a shared visual language. This shared visual language can affirm deep connection to tradition on the one hand, and distance or alienation from it on the other in contexts of reclaiming collective and personal agency in the midst of colonialisms.⁴¹⁵ as much as Gade is not painting religious art, he is also not opposed to Buddhism in any way. In light of the dictatorial control of religion and politics in Tibet by the Chinese Communist authorities, and the visual culture results of state-run media and artists associations, Gade is defining an important sphere of cultural life, one which is neither controlled by religious conservatives nor political repression.

Paradoxically, in the first decade of Gade's professional artistic career, he felt bound to represent Buddhism in his conceptual content, and yet his compositions were entirely free-form, such as in *Spirit Beijing on a Yak Hide Raft* and *Saka Dawa*. When he began to adopt some of the structures of traditional Tibetan Buddhist art, in compositions, materials, and aesthetics, the feeling and content of his works became much more relaxed and capable of expressing his own life experience and contemporary realities. Gade's artistic goals in the second major phase of his

career concern the merging of modern society with art historical materials and styles. The materials and forms of the art historical tradition, perceived by some as limiting constraints, became a liberating strategy for Gade because they accomplish important goals: imaging contemporary collectivity.

Gade's ability to make art that looks Tibetan but refuses replication of tradition at the expense of realistic reflection of contemporary life makes important interventions into the representations of Tibetans and religion by others, and contributes to the pioneering and stimulating work of local artists offering critical alternative uses of this visual inheritance.

Gade's deliberate invocations and substitutions pose an important question to viewers: Does tradition, or, for that matter, modernity, reside in the forms, content or uses of material objects? His work incontrovertibly establishes his Tibetan identity and location through connection to art history and its legacy of a shared visual language that helps to define a group's collective and cultural memory, but refuses to be confined to the past.

Chapter Six

Portraits of Constraint, Memory, and Liberation

Nortse, Gade, Nyandak and I were passing the time on the three-day train ride from Beijing back to Lhasa in May of 2007 when the convivial conversation turned to recounting their earliest childhood memories. Gade spoke of being carried on his mother's back, walking down a Barkhor neighborhood alley in the direction of the mosque, as a winter wind was blowing toward them. As friends and acquaintances stopped to greet his mother, they lifted the blanket covering his head to have an adoring look at him, which let the cool air rush onto his cheeks. Nyandak admitted his first memory was being left by a nun babysitter for hours to play alone, trapped in a cardboard box with his own excrement. The guys laughed at the renunciant's evident lack of maternal instinct. Then Nortse said his first memory was also of nuns: he was three years old when he witnessed police gun down nuns... many of them...one at a time... on the street just outside his home, in the old east neighborhood. In a few moments, from mothers to monastics, the conversation had turned from ordinary to traumatic pasts.

Nortse's memory is shocking, and it is rare and troubling to hear a Tibetan reveal personal traumatic pasts so candidly. In fact, I was so shaken by this moment on the train (and detailed in my field notes), that years later I constructed a 'memory' of my own: that I was walking with Nortse down that very alley when he paused and muttered the recollection of trauma, pointing to a wall which we both, for a moment, saw splattered with blood. That never happened, but the way in which the past could be so palpably present and unavoidably painful, even someone else's personal past, does help me see what Nortse was struggling with that spring. In his art practices at the time, Nortse was deeply invested in the past.

Nortse had always wanted to lay claim to specific and broader artistic identities than those offered by his cultural and political contexts. When I met him, he had already confronted many constraints, and had begun working on living with difficult personal and collective pasts which had been censored and silenced. This chapter explores the constraints Nortse and other

contemporary Tibetan artists have faced since the 1980s, and how he has worked against them to create works in unprecedented media and subject matter, and with new ideological commitments about the roles of art and artists within modern Tibet and China.

In Western conventional notions of contemporary artists, that they do something “new” is taken for granted. But what would that mean in Lhasa? It is not merely a matter of crafting a personal style. To expand possibilities for artists in China’s Tibet to lay claim to such an artistic identities requires adapting, circumventing, or overcoming numerous obstacles. Multiple constraints on Tibetan artists expressing themselves in Lhasa curtail the ways they practice art, and advance their careers. For instance, constraints placed on their professional, aesthetic, and political contexts are dictated by the Chinese Communist Party. In terms of professional development, China’s national art academies and associations control opportunities for officially sanctioned professional art careers, which narrowly defines educational training and art production, ultimately in the service of the Party-state. Thus, the kinds of works that may be selected for exhibitions, competitions, and publication, the very benchmarks that are often the criteria for membership in professional associations and career promotions, must often conform to aesthetic as well as ideological criteria. There are multiple stylistic and aesthetic constraints, including the influence of styles favored by the formal, professional art world, and those which result from political contexts and the multiple local religious and foreign ‘Shangri-la’ expectations. Artists are informed by and attempt to navigate others’ associations with Tibet’s rich indigenous Buddhist art history on the one hand, and the visual legacies of State socialist propaganda in the mainstream Han visual culture on the other. Stylistic constraints have curtailed artwork to a narrow visual range and often required use of Maoist Socialist Realism and the cool romantic realism that emerged when Maoist Socialist Realism was rejected. This has led to a preponderance of decorative art, evocative of nostalgia and featuring primitive folk depictions of Tibetanness.⁴¹⁶ These constraints curtail artistic and aesthetic formation and expression in multiple ways, from limited exposure to and training in alternative art forms, to lack of

infrastructure support, to prejudice and misrepresentations, to self-censorship and risk (as in mainland China) of official surveillance or punitive response to more daring work.⁴¹⁷ Political constraints include the pervasive conceptual and thematic constraints felt under the current repressive Communist regime which severely curtail any expression that could be interpreted as political dissent to Communist rule of Tibet since 1959. An area of particular political sensitivity inherent to the colonial politics of Tibet's relationship with China concerns representations of the Communist and pre-Communist pasts in Tibet. Expression of unofficial, indigenous history and memory can become suspect and dangerous; with such threats, artistic reference to recent events and memories, particularly of difficult or traumatic pasts, is very difficult to create. Accepted artistic representations of the Tibetan past have been relegated to timeless folk and nostalgic evocations largely intended for non-Tibetan audiences. The Buddhist or cultural Tibetan past as a source of inspiration, pride, and cultural continuity into the modern era is something the artists discussed above have all worked quite hard to insert into the public sphere, even creating their own spaces and networks to do so; infusing their artwork with an ideological commitment to modern Tibetan culture has put them up against professional, aesthetic, political and personal constraints that are the greatest challenges to artistic practices facing artists in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries in Tibet. The context of multi-layered constraints is important to understand because, if they cannot be overcome, changed, or adapted, they threaten to undermine the emergence of a modern Tibetan culture and its future.

Norbu Tsering is a contemporary Tibetan artist in Lhasa who has experienced these constraints and worked to overcome them. This discussion of his biography and artworks explores whether, and how, he has succeeded in doing so. Nortse's art is informed by social and visual conventions that give context and meaning to his artistic choices. Just as Nortse resists the constraint to represent Tibetans as traditional, he also honors tradition and draws upon it as a source of some of his artistic techniques. Nortse's artistic life history and creative output also enable exploration of another pervasive but little acknowledged restraint: personal and collective

memory haunted by traumatic pasts. The force of this constraint is made visible in Nortse's recent series of portraits in unparalleled ways.

During a prolific period from 2006 to 2008, aspects of Nortse's art career and reflections on his own life history illustrate both the parameters within which artists in China's Tibet have been expected to operate and the strategies one artist developed to confront them. Nortse created multi-media works with wide-ranging topics of personal and social concern. This discussion mainly focuses on the subset of oil on canvas portraits of anonymous subjects and self-portraits.

As he created these works, Nortse was especially focused on three concerns: the lingering effects of the past, producing art works that were personally and culturally relevant in the present, and gaining visibility for Tibetans as twenty-first century citizens. How does Nortse approach subject, content, style, materials, and communication goals to explore these concerns and transcend constraints on his artistic expression? Nortse developed strategies to work against aesthetic, professional, and political constraints throughout his artistic career, from the time he was a student in Chinese art academies, as we will see below. In addition to those practices, however, in the period in which he painted the portraits, Nortse also developed additional creative methods through actively recalling the past, depicting the memory in the present, and weighing implications of the past for the future. Nortse's art becomes a locus of reflections on personal, cultural, national, and temporal dimensions of cultural identity, making him an important figure for those wishing to understand modern Tibetan cultural and artistic expression.

In this period, Nortse produced the oil on canvas portraits and self-portrait paintings *Father's Violin-1* (2007), *Childhood Memory* (2008), *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* (2007), *Self-Portrait* (2007), and *The State I am In, 1-3* (2008), the multi-media piece *Red Sun, Black Sun* (2006), and photographs *Bound Scenery* (1986/2008) series and others.⁴¹⁸ The paintings in subset of the portrait work, *Dream, Release Life, Rebirth, Saved* and *Release from Suffering*, retain the composition and style of the above portraits, but are distinguished by alterations in the symbolic content and production techniques.

Lastly, Nortse's success in the art world makes him an important subject for study. Many of the portrait and self-portraits Nortse commenced in 2006 have entered into the international contemporary fine art market.⁴¹⁹ Many of the works from this period, including the ones discussed herein, were shown in one of three exhibitions in Beijing, Hong Kong, or London.⁴²⁰ Nortse has become one of the most successful members of the Guild, participating in curated group exhibitions shown regionally, nationally, and internationally, and has enjoyed multiple trips abroad to America and England for art-related purposes.⁴²¹ Nortse's choices, productions, and his recent international success point to strategies for overcoming professional, aesthetic, and political constraints: for example, production for and inclusion in international exhibitions and galleries bypasses narrow domestic professional trajectories and works to expand global visibility of Tibetans as twenty-first century citizens, now and into the future. Nortse's artistic career in these terms then also demonstrates ways artists in Tibet might face challenges to their artistic expression of personal and collective experiences.

A Biographical Sketch of Nortse

I first met Nortse in Lhasa in 2004. He had returned to art-making only a few short years prior, after a long period of other pursuits. I had been cautioned that he was not very interested in talking with foreigners, so was relieved to visit his home studio in the company of two other Tibetologists, one of whom was already familiar with the artist.⁴²² We found him to be soft spoken, but generous in his commentaries on the disparate works cluttering his studio, a space seemingly re-claimed from the home's courtyard by the addition of a metal roof, a space heater, and a few light bulbs, and furnished with a recliner, coffee table, several easels, and piles of books, papers, and found objects filling the shadowy perimeters of the space. Nortse expressed his current satisfaction with not joining in the founding of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild the previous year, but rather with maintaining his autonomy as an artist unaffiliated with any group in Lhasa.

When we met again in the winter of 2006, his engagement with the local art world had changed, and he was eager to be outspoken in his critiques and aspirations for it and for himself. He had mounted a solo show with Gedun Choephel Artists Guild support and become a member in 2005. In the spring of 2006, Nortse took a long trip to London, Beijing and Shanghai, and returned, in his own words, “reborn” as an artist infused with newfound confidence and enthusiasm for the work ahead. After this, Nortse often invited me to see works in process or recently completed in his studio and met me for tea at the gallery, the most common settings for our more formal interviews. In the movements between these sites, in his car or walking the streets of Lhasa, he would often muse aloud, about his memories, world affairs, his enjoyment of cooking (and how I relished his sweet and sour chicken) or whatever was on his mind, and these informal dialogues certainly contributed to a more holistic sense of him as a person, and a trusting relationship between us. After a year in Lhasa in which we saw each other with increasing frequency, Nortse cautiously broached propositions to work together on a project for the advancement of contemporary Tibetan art. Unanticipated by us at the time, this took the form the following spring of my serving as co-curator of an exhibition in Beijing (and an associated debut in Lhasa), in which his art was featured alongside four others’. Nortse was incredibly earnest about the entire process, and reflected at length on its significance for him personally as he created work for the show, for the Lhasa art world, and for the visibility of modern Tibetan culture in relation to the Han majority in the PRC and on the international stage. In this way, I grew to know Nortse as an individual who struggled - with his past, with alcoholism, with creative expression, and aspirations often frustrated by the conditions of his socio-political context that could manifest as reticence – but who also found wellsprings of diligence, perseverance and creative inspiration, and created not only remarkable and striking art, but also times of joy, humor, fulfillment, and deep kindness and affection shared effusively with his art world compatriots.

Norbu Tsering is known professionally and to his friends as Nortse,⁴²³ following the Tibetan custom for contracted personal names. One way to understand Nortse's life history is through his facing of a series of professional, aesthetic, and political constraints to his artistic development and expression; he emerges as an individual with unusual ways of doing so, in unusual times.

Nortse was born in 1963 to parents who were professional performers of the traditional music and dance genres favored by the aristocracy in Lhasa.⁴²⁴ The orthodox cultural knowledge in which they were invested may have proven a rigorous artistic constraint on young Nortse but for the Cultural Revolution that commenced in 1966 and eradicated traditional culture from public life; the strictures of traditional art forms were to have a much belated influence on Nortse's aesthetic formation.

The first artistic constraints Nortse experienced were the stylistic and ideological parameters of China's art academies. As a youth, he was selected as one of six Tibetans sent from Lhasa to study art in Beijing. In Beijing and far removed from their natal land and society, these young Tibetans' awareness of their ethnic identity was heightened by experiences of difference from and discrimination by the Han majority.

Nortse was enrolled at the renowned art department of the Central Nationalities University (CNU) in Beijing to study Chinese and Soviet forms of realism in oil painting. In the 1970s and early 1980s, advanced educational opportunities were only available in the Chinese mainland. CNU is the main campus of a national university system, with satellite schools or departments in each provincial capital, established specifically for training minority populations as cadre of the PRC, who would become leaders and ambassadors of the central government within their ethnic communities.⁴²⁵ As such, the university curricula were politically determined in accordance with the ruling Chinese Communist Party. In the art departments, this manifested as decades of adherence to Soviet and Sino Socialist Realism, the principle mode endorsed by the government's propaganda bureau. Maoist Socialist Realism can be defined by its teleological

orientation and an aesthetic of superficial treatment of unified, patriotic masses, as I discussed in chapter three. Although Mao decreed artists' working methods should include drawing from actual encounters amongst a populace mobilized by communist revolutionary zeal (MaoYanan), "realism" in political art referred not to documentary so much as projection of an inevitable, glorious future under socialism. In addition to this mode, students like Nortse were also extensively trained in the formal realism of still life painting and to accurately copy from photographs and painting reproductions. CNU graduates were prepared to succeed in national professional artists' career trajectories for exhibitions, association membership and leadership, and official commissions.

Nortse, however, did not complete the program of study in Beijing, nor at Tibet University in Lhasa or the regional universities for minorities in Guangzhou and Tianjin, all of which he attempted to study at for periods of three months to one year. Nortse left or changed schools, he said, because "in school, I would get bored, and then I would think if I could change to another school, it would be more interesting." As he moved through art departments across the country, he had the opportunity to compare their curricula and approaches to art. In 2007 he recalled, with some disdain, that these schools were "exactly the same. And all the students were the same too."⁴²⁶ Nortse felt constrained by the legacy of decades of politically-motivated art practices in the national academies, and the educational system and career it foretold failed to win Nortse's allegiance.

For visual as well as ideological reasons, Nortse countered this artistic constraint by leaving the state schools and categorically rejecting formal Socialist Realism and the copying of others' images. He arrived at this position after encountering both contemporary art from abroad and university opposition to his explorations. Post-Mao Beijing was just opening up to the outside world under Deng Xiaoping's reform policies, and Nortse and his Tibetan compatriots were discovering Western contemporary artists in books imported into China for the first time. Nortse found the European *avant-garde* fascinating but deeply confusing. He said,

When I was in Beijing studying at the Central Nationalities School for Minorities...I found one art book [in a bookstore] that I did not understand. I brought it to a teacher to ask him about it, and he said ‘Oh, that stuff is not interesting, just throw it out. You don’t need it. Instead, we have to study the Russian style.’ He recommended one of those [Russian] artists’ books, but since that time I was more interested in what was in my book.⁴²⁷

Nortse elaborated, “Picasso and others were becoming known in China, but they weren’t necessarily popular, but I liked them very much. From the time I saw Picasso, I threw out my formal studies and the schools’ methods.”⁴²⁸ This experience with the conservative ethos of the national art academies (even as rejection of Socialist Realism and political art was soon to fuel alternative art movements amongst urban Han Chinese too), convinced Nortse that even if he did not understand the work of Western artists, he would not be bound by China’s politically dictated and outdated aesthetics.

The limited visual and conceptual scope of academic art was not only numbingly repetitive and predictable for Nortse, who found the intellectual stimulation of foreign artists irresistible, but Socialist Realism and Russian and Sino romantic realism included mores that constrained a Tibetan artist and were incompatible with his homeland. Nortse explained,

We studied Soviet Socialist Realism style painting, but after returning to Tibet, we couldn’t use it. It just couldn’t be melded with Tibetan culture or Tibetan subjects. They didn’t go together. But we could see that Tibet had strong characteristics, and that was interesting and we set our minds on working on Tibetan culture.⁴²⁹

Upon his return from Beijing in the mid-1980s, in the context of heightened awareness of his difference from the Han majority and the fledgling revival of Tibetan culture underway in Lhasa as a result of the Opening Up and Reform, Nortse perceived Tibet’s unique civilization, its precarious status, and opportunities for modernization. His Chinese art training did not meet his needs visually, methodologically, or rhetorically in Tibet at this important moment. The limitations of Socialist Realism on creativity had led to a rejection of realism, compounded by the close association of any type of Realism with Communist political ideology for Nortse and for Tibetans and Chinese generally in the 1980s. Additionally, they were motivated to make visible uniquely Tibetan cultural characteristics through a native aesthetics.

Nortse responded to ideological, visual, and academic constraints by leaving academies and refusing to utilize Socialist Realism, putting him outside of the only functional art institutions, and their career paths, in the country. Nortse's rejection of socialist realism was mirrored in exile Tibetan populations in the 1980s (C. Harris, *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959* 1999),⁴³⁰ but he seems to have been unaware at the time of diaspora visual politics, regarding himself as a lone pioneer. In Beijing and then Lhasa, Nortse's bold independence led to an inspiring period of discovery and self-taught artistic experimentation, but also presented new frustrations and constraints once back in Lhasa's inadequate contemporary art world infrastructure.

Nortse and a few friends who saw Tibet's "strong characteristics" attempted to reflect them and contribute to their own culture through the creation of a new and Tibetan form of contemporary art.⁴³¹ They attempted to overcome the imposition of the national and colonial norm, and to change the lacuna of contemporary art in Lhasa, by focusing on the local and what made them different from the majority population's culture. Nortse worked to change this limiting context by initiating independent, artist-led projects, and supporting emerging artists' collectives.

In the mid-1980s, as Nortse recalled, he "was one of five or six" like-minded artists to form Lhasa's "first democratic group" of Tibetan artists, the now famous Sweet Tea House Artists Association.⁴³² He explained that,

At that time we thought we needed to make a group, and all the members were quite innocent then. We believed we had to work very hard to improve, and prove ourselves to society; all the members were very enthusiastic. At that time, we never thought of making money by selling our work, we just loved our work (painting). There was no one at that time to organize a gallery or exhibits or anything. We just talked to a tea house owner and he said ok, once a year we can show our work on the walls there, so we did.⁴³³

Tea houses are often populated with people of all ages who may converse for hours; by utilizing this space to show their art, they hoped to engage the public as well as experience staging exhibitions. Moreover, the first exhibition included works they felt pioneered their new

approach to Tibetan contemporary art but which had been rejected from an official juried exhibition of youth art by minorities in China.⁴³⁴ The attempt they had made to enter into the official art world – applying for inclusion in an exhibition juried by Party officials – failed because their work did not fit government notions of “minority art”. This experience confirmed the Sweet Tea House members’ disillusionment with the State’s politically determined notions of art and further compelled them to overcome the constraint of this national art system and to create their own art worlds. One of the works which Nortse created during this time period, the first known Tibetan artists’ outdoor performance art piece, *Bound-Up Scenery*, is discussed below. The Sweet Tea House artists’ group and their annual exhibitions garnered increasing attention from local Tibetans and the official media, but after several years, the notice shifted from local curiosity to authorities’ directive to admit Han members. The association disbanded in 1987 when the mounting pressures of State scrutiny combined with the departures from Lhasa of Nortse and the primary organizer, Gonkar Gyatso.⁴³⁵ By then, they had accomplished the formation of the first unofficial artist association and the first exhibitions and sales of contemporary art in Tibet. They bypassed State organized outlets for artistic production and exhibition and thus freed themselves from the narrow officially sanctioned notions of art within the nation or produced by minorities. Nonetheless, Nortse was not satisfied.

Lhasa still lacked a permanent exhibition space a few years later, and so Nortse became the first Tibetan and artist to run a gallery for modern painting in the TAR. Nortse recalled in 2007, “The location was below the Potala, in Zhol, since then that area has been destroyed, but it was open from about 1989 to 1990. I was an artist, and I thought it would be interesting to do because we’d never seen a gallery before, even in China.” Nortse expressed it was a simple concept then, saying, “If we put some paintings on the wall, this is enough - that was the thinking at the time. Then you can name it a ‘gallery’ and people will come to see it because it is the only one.” Nortse was intrigued by doing something novel, and also, he said, “We believed that it was our responsibility, the artists’, to create and run a gallery.”⁴³⁶ There had been one gallery

previously opened briefly by a Chinese man, and Nortse credits that pioneering effort, in addition to his experience with the Sweet Tea House group and the opening of the State’s museum in Lhasa, with giving him the idea to create a place for people to come and see art and for artists to show and possibly sell their works. Artists brought works to him for sale “without any set price, just whatever price I could get for them.” During this time, Nortse occasionally taught painting to “poor people, without taking any payment from them, to try to give them some vocational skills; I did not teach thangka, just oil painting.” Thus, more than a physical site, the motivation was also to create a viable space for and by artists, and by which artists would be the leaders in positive personal, collective, and cultural artistic developments and contributions. Nortse refused professional constraints of the government-supervised system, by laying claim to a much broader concept of artistic identity: that of the artist involved in all aspects of a functional art world, from training, to critical engagement with other artists and audiences, to exhibition, marketing, and attention to stimulating creative expression.



Figure 102 Location of the first Tibetan contemporary art gallery in the Zhol area below the Potala, Lhasa. C.1990. Photograph courtesy of Nortse



Figure 103 Angsang (L) and Nortse (R) inside the gallery. c.1990. photo courtesy of Norbu Tsering Nortse).

In addition to Nortse's participation in building a local artists' network in Lhasa to assuage professional constraints, his own artistic development during the 1980s was unfolding outside the official Communist art academies which had artistically constrained him but within a society that lacked any alternative infrastructure to support his training or development. Nortse had left Beijing and returned to Lhasa having gained initial exposure to the European and American avant garde, but before Chinese modern artists gained traction in Beijing. Nortse thus worked in Tibet without much influence from Han artists or access to materials about Western art.

Nortse carried an impression from Picasso and other western artists encountered in Beijing's bookstores, but the extraordinary occasion of Robert Rauschenberg's visit to Lhasa in 1985 was a dramatic embodiment of those ideals. "When people saw Rauschenberg," Nortse explained, "it changed their thinking."⁴³⁷ At the time, Nortse recalled, Lhasa's artists found the assemblages of found objects Rauschenberg called "combines" as utterly bewildering as the corresponding conceptual view that if an artist labels something "art," it becomes "art." Rauschenberg introduced such media and ideas in Lhasa in 1986, but, Nortse felt, in 2006 Lhasa's enduring lacuna of progressive multi-media and conceptual approaches to art was a manifestation of the local art world's failure to embrace by then twenty-year old ideas and practices. Thus, it was apparent to Nortse in the 1980s that Western contemporary artists strove for and valued originality and expression of ideas far more than political statements, realism, or skilled reproduction. Nortse very clearly sought to model his aesthetic formation and artistic development after the former.

Nortse began experimenting with non-paint media, becoming the first to create work in several art forms unprecedented amongst Tibetans. Nortse said in 2007, "Although I don't know

for certain, probably I am the first Tibetan to do installation or performance art,” referring to the work *Bound Scenery* (1986) described below. “Definitely I was the first Tibetan, back in the 1980s, to paint in the ‘*ziling ziling*’ [mixed-up] manner,” Nortse asserted with satisfaction in regard to his use of abstraction and affixing non-paint materials to his canvases. But, between the mid 1980s and 2005, there were several periods of his artistic career in which he produced personal works privately that he rarely showed others, or decorative pieces for the tourist market sold under pseudonyms, or nothing at all. He used pseudonyms for work that, he said, was “easy and fast” to produce and that could easily sell but which he felt lacked artistic integrity. While he bypassed the academies’ artistic and professional constraints to pursue more radical art practices and ideas, as a lone pioneer he also found himself struggling to find appreciation for his work and to make a livelihood.

Despite these attempts in his own artistic practices and on behalf of artists to overcome educational, professional, and aesthetic constraints, frustration at the difficulty of finding his own original style, the lack of art world in Lhasa to support and encourage him, and political pressures were draining. Nortse appears to have ceased making art for most of the 1990s. With the deterioration of the political situation in Lhasa following the periodic protests of 1987-1989, and the rise of entrepreneurial opportunities and economic growth in the 1990s, Nortse was among the many artists who, for personal and social reasons, sidelined their careers as artists. Nortse tried his hand at several business ventures from pool hall manager to carpet designer.⁴³⁸ He also worked for the State as a stage designer and at the government’s Tibetan language television station.⁴³⁹ Nortse said art, for him, was “all or nothing,” but that even when he wasn’t painting, he “never stopped paying attention.”⁴⁴⁰ Around 2001, Nortse took early retirement from the Tibetan television station and returned full-time to art.

Although invited to join the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild (GCAG) at its founding in 2003, Nortse’s non-conformist attitudes meant he was content to remain an independent artist. Nortse delayed accepting membership until 2005, and when he joined, the association sponsored

a solo exhibition of Nortse's work. It was a ground-breaking contemporary art exhibition: it was the first solo show and the first exhibition of multi-media works in Lhasa, feats not achieved by the members of the local or regional official artists' associations.⁴⁴¹ Nortse had created a series of painted dried tobacco leaves – the type available in the Tibetan market and ground to a powder for snuff – and mounted them on unprepared canvas on stretchers in a new gallery space during the summer height of tourism. Resistance to the local and national conventions – for two-dimensional painting on canvas – was not commercially successful, but fortuitously caught the attention of an art collector, Fabio Rossi, who would soon sponsor the exhibition of Nortse's and other artists' work in the West. This was a turning point in his confrontation of professional and artistic constraints, as he gained access to infrastructure, visibility, and trends in international contemporary art.

Twenty years after Rauschenberg's historic visit to Lhasa, Nortse enjoyed another period of stimulating observation of international avant-garde artists in early 2006. He traveled to London for the first time and toured galleries there and in Beijing and Shanghai. He returned to Lhasa, as he told his colleagues and me, feeling he had had an artistic "rebirth," and full of ideas for contemporary art, action art, and found object installations. He also provoked Gedun Choephel Guild members by declaring that there was "no true contemporary art" yet in Lhasa, even at the Guild's own gallery, and that Tibetans today should not even cling to the name 'Gedun Choephel'. It sparked fierce debate. One member, Anu, found this an insult to their namesake's greatness of mind and vision, while another, Nyandak, said in Nortse's defense that Gedun Choephel's art itself, many decades later, was no longer stimulatingly novel.

Nortse predicted to his close friends that he might even give up two-dimensional painting altogether, a radical proposal for Lhasa and even institutional art in China. While other members brought to the guild's gallery their best paintings for their peers' critique and to sell to foreigners, Nortse brought funky collages, multi-media constructions on stretchers, and assembled found object installations in the gallery's corners, unconcerned with others' opinions. Towards the end

of that year, Nortse joked that he wanted to be “the first Tibetan Rauschenberg,” referring to the vivid contribution of Rauschenberg’s ideas to his artistic formation, by “creating conceptual works and stimulating viewers.”⁴⁴² The period of uninhibited experimentation enabled critique of the local and domestic art worlds’ constraints. In 2006 however Nortse’s needs for expression and his communication goals changed again.

From 2006, having firmly established his unconventional approach to artistic practices and found an unofficial professional outlet through the Guild, Nortse intentionally turned these skills to addressing another most serious constraint within which contemporary artists in Lhasa must work: the sensitive political and visual parameters for representing the past or critique of the present. His needs to express these concerns demanded he confront new constraints, and to do so he returned to painting and introduced photography into his artistic process. The past, and its lingering effects in the present, are a conceptual element that permeates his portrait paintings from 2006 -2008 which I explore in detail below. The portraits evidence the most significant constraint to overcome, and the demands for personal invention of technological as well as psychological creative strategies to work against.

Options for artistic expression of the past differ for Tibetans from those available to Han artists within China. Artists in China since the post-Mao era, particularly those who, like Nortse, left the national art academies, have also rejected Socialist Realism and struggled against powerful constraints to launch politically independent contemporary arts. However, a large community of artists since the late 1980s persisted, and did so in a liberalizing Beijing. In China’s contemporary art movements since the 1980s, artists have used the arts to address and redress the past, and drawn on Cultural Revolution era imagery to depict both deeply personal and ironic Political Pop references to the past, a move which also proved extremely lucrative internationally (Colman 2004) (Erickson and Hou 2007) (Erickson 2006) (J. Jiang 2007). In contrast, the implicit criticism of the state that characterizes much of contemporary Chinese art in Beijing and Shanghai is unthinkable for Tibetan artists who have never enjoyed comparable freedom of

expression (or international art markets) in the far away, heavily policed Tibetan Autonomous Region.⁴⁴³

Nortse's study and production of art is inseparable from the context of dramatic changes in Tibet over the second half of the twentieth century. He was born after the invasion of the People's Liberation Army into Tibetan, flight of the Dalai Lama and the assumption of Communist control, and just before the Cultural Revolution; in other words, he was born into and grew up in a period that arguably constitutes one thirty year long trauma for Tibetans.⁴⁴⁴ This past, for Nortse, demands expression, but has been politically silenced. Those Tibetans who survived find, at the start of the twenty-first century, that their individual and collective relationships to the traumatic past continue to be politically dangerous to voice and moreover secondary to the daily demands of navigating the ongoing structural violence of colonialism, racism, and poverty.

In both popular visual culture in Lhasa and in contemporary artists' work, visual representational strategies for relating to or signifying the past have been limited to a narrow expressive range. Visual signs of the past typically rely on ethnic markers of traditionalism, Buddhist imagery, evocations of the distant cultural past through romantic stylized images of ruins, and the imagined simple life of the pre-modern past, as explored in the preceding chapters. In addition to the temporal distance such images evoke, notions of the past persisting into the present also become located at a geographic and social distance from the urban centers, such as in depictions of rural and nomadic life and landscape. This is particularly problematic in imagery created about Tibet by non-Tibetans. Such forms of representation of the past – pervasive in Lhasa's visual environment of state propaganda and commercialization of the ethnic primitive – have tendencies towards manufacturing nostalgia and distance from everyday Tibetan lives in the present. Nortse finds imagery of the past needs to be broadened far beyond this narrow range.

From the 1980s through 2006, Nortse made important interventions into the professional and stylistic constraints faced by Tibetan artists in the TAR and the limited opportunities within

China's art infrastructure for training, professional development, exhibitions, intellectual rigor, and livelihoods. Below, I consider how Nortse continues these interventions and others since 2006, and whether his artwork may offer new strategies for visually expressing connection to the Tibetan past and its impact in the present, strategies that may undermine constraints that have been in place during his artistic career. His visual strategies work at the intersections of private and public memory to address disruptions to the transmission of personal and cultural inheritance, in the context of rapid, dramatic changes in Tibetan society.

Nortse's Portraits (2006-2008)

The contexts of Nortse's art production, his creative methods, and symbolism are important for understanding the body of work commenced in 2006. *Red Sun, Black Sun* and *Father's Violin* establish Nortse's personal and collective pasts as well as the artist's interests, contemporary context, and the constraints he works against, and how he begins to do so. A crucial part of his creative process was determining to face the past. I begin the discussion of Nortse's portrait series with a multi-media work that is not a portrait, *Red Sun, Black Sun*, because it immediately preceded, and set the groundwork for, the portraits which followed.

Red Sun, Black Sun

Red Sun, Black Sun is one multi-media work in two panels. Nortse attached three-dimensional materials onto Tibetan paper mounted on wood panels to form a central disc. At the center of each disc is a 'buddha' image, encircled by silky cloth and plastic tubes. The traditional handmade paper is marked in the upper left corner with one red stamp that reads *bod*, Tibet, in Tibetan *uchen* script and another red stamp of a crescent moon and sun, a popular Buddhist symbol (Beer 2003).⁴⁴⁵ In the bottom right corners, Nortse has placed two small footprints and his signature (in Tibetan *umed* script) and on *Black Sun* he adds the date, November 30, 2006, in the Tibetan numerals rarely used nowadays. Contrasting with the pulpy matte surface of the paper, long white silky scarves (*katag*) are delicately gathered around red and black plastic tubing arcing out of the red and black center discs. At the center of *Red Sun* is the torso and arm of a broken

metal statue of the Buddha, around which are waxy clear drops. The silhouette form of a seated Buddha is created at the center of *Black Sun* by the arrangement of glass shards and barley seeds.



Figure 104 Red Sun, Black Sun, 2007.75 x 75 cm. wood, handmade paper, metal, rayon, plastic, glass, barley, acrylic paint.

In discussion of the materials, Nortse pointed out that the handmade paper is not glued on to the wooden backing completely, but, he said, is detached at the edges, analogous to the state of traditional ways and customs becoming unanchored from their foundation. Nortse purchased the headless bronze statue at the middle of *Red Sun* from a scrap metal seller in Lhasa, a relic of the Cultural Revolution plundering that missed the shipments of bronze statues and other religious ritual items to be smelted in eastern China's industrial cities (Rinbhur Rinpoche) (W. W. Smith 2008).⁴⁴⁶ The decapitated bronze Shakyamuni Buddha statue sits amid translucent tear-like drops on a deep red disc. The tubes are arranged like rays of the sun, or splayed outwards, vein-like, as if spurting red blood. The color and title, “Red Sun,” suggest the cult of personality around Mao Zedong, who, in the Cultural Revolution era slogans and songs, was equated with the rising red sun of the east.⁴⁴⁷

The Buddha of *Black Sun* is formed of barley and glass, which I read as culturally and religiously symbolic. Barley has for centuries been a staple crop in Tibet, often eaten in the form of *tsampa*, made from the roasted and ground grains. Tibetans have even referred to themselves by the epithet “tsampa eaters” (T. Shakya, *Whither the Tsampa Eaters?* 1993), and in assessments of the degree of Tibetanness in new cultural productions such as paintings, a good work was metaphorically said to ‘have the smell of tsampa’. The fragments of a shattered light bulb is a reminder that light is a powerful symbol of the brilliance of the Buddha’s enlightenment, the empowering energies of the teachers and deities are visualized as light, and the cultivation of wisdom is often metaphorically expressed as light dispelling the darkness of ignorance. The light bulb shards image fears of broken, authentically Tibetan, religious and artistic lineages and being swallowed by darkness, in both a novel and culturally legible symbolism.

The process of producing *Red Sun, Black Sun* originated with a commission for the exhibition *Contemporary Meets Tradition* mounted for New York City’s prestigious Asia Week by Rossi & Rossi (London) in 2006. Fabio Rossi invited a group of contemporary Tibetan artists to “create a work in response” to his selection from Rossi & Rossi’s collection of 14th - 18th antiques.⁴⁴⁸ Nortse explained, “Fabio asked us ‘Please look at these pictures [of antiques] and then make a work about what you think and feel about them.’ All of us artists see a big connection then between the works we made and our culture. But mine is not in response to one particular piece, but to the whole collection.”⁴⁴⁹ Looking at digital images of antiques, Nortse was powerfully struck not only by the sublime beauty and mastery apparent in his artistic heritage that these works evinced, but the absence from their native lands of innumerable so-called “masterpieces,”⁴⁵⁰ now commodities abroad. For him in this context, the *thangka* paintings⁴⁵¹ Fabio showed him define centuries of Tibetan art history, and became synonymous with Tibetan culture. These *thangka* suggested to Nortse all the paintings (and equally astonishing murals and statues) that cluttered the walls and shrines of the monasteries of pre-Communist Tibet. Ravaged during the Cultural Revolution, or stolen and sold, Tibetans are not only bereft of their cultural

and material inheritance, but also crippled in the transmission of skilled knowledge of the production and meaning of such religious works. The very survival of religious, cultural and artistic, as well as linguistic identity and even population of Tibet – crystallized so acutely by this viewing of relics now sitting in London – could no longer be displaced from Nortse’s artistic production. The question of the living future of Tibet had to be posed, despite the implicit ban on representing the past.

For many artists, the past is invoked through reference to artistic tradition of *thangka* paintings of Buddhist divinities, such as the ones Fabio showed Nortse and other Lhasa artists. *Thangka* tradition has also often become a constraint both in aesthetics and in the fixed religious function of art, as I discussed in chapter four. Nortse was never trained in *thangka*’s strict iconometry and iconography, and respectfully works outside this tradition without feeling any need to mimic it. While the format and imagery of *thangka* painting is not a pivotal influence for Nortse’s work, the materials and artistic practices of his heritage provide a framework of cultural tradition which provides meaning to his work, most visibly in this work in the form of the Buddha. In *Red Sun, Black Sun*, the multi-media materials operate in several ways to counter the Tibetan traditional and Chinese institutional art conventions of two-dimensional painting on canvas: it was the first multi-media artwork by a Lhasa Tibetan to be exhibited abroad, and a way to find meaningful, creative connections to cultural and artistic traditions without reliance upon *thangka* painting.

Nortse uses materials and Buddha figures to create connection to cultural and religious heritage and trauma. The fragmented relic of the Buddha statue that survived the Cultural Revolution bears witness to the destruction of lives and material culture; it endured in a state which testifies to its near annihilation and the irreparable de-consecrating of a holy object (for Tibetan Buddhists, vandalism is more than material; it is the antithesis of the rituals and blessings which make the image an abode of enlightened divinity). The relic appears as one of the “stubborn survivors of cultural genocide...[one of] the few remaining records of a culture almost

completely annihilated (Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* 1997).⁴⁵² The relic though is not obliterated but here now and thereby also serves a documentary function, telling a story to the future.

Haunted by what should have been their cultural obliteration, Nortse creates the work out of symbolic indigenous materials and language – *khatag*, handmade paper, barley, Buddha imagery, Tibetan script – that somehow still exist and circulate in the practices of daily life. Nortse’s use of indigenous materials is perhaps akin to other artists’ choices to use traditional pigments or compositions; these materials refer to and ground him in a specific cultural and artistic heritage, giving meaning to his work that is commonly held in a collective.

Yet, Nortse relates to them as more than mere materials for his artistic toolbox: these materials also carry the power of transgression of Tibetan artistic and religious orthodoxy. Nortse requested a relative, a nun, to recite prayers to “remove the sins” for the two Buddha images in this work, implying both the disrespect that befell the bronze decades ago, and implicating himself for contravening religious rules of Buddha representations through the re-circulation of a broken image in *Red Sun* and a Buddha created from unsanctioned materials and proportions in *Black Sun*.⁴⁵³ By this, Nortse also acknowledges his “sin” of creating improper Buddhist images, thereby also defying expectations for traditional Tibetan artists. His identity as a different kind of artist however is privileged, and he elects religious mitigation of the tensions between these two identities.

Red Sun, *Black Sun* focused the artist’s emerging interest in the past and brought memory to the fore in startling ways through highly personal and collective visual language and materials. The common rhetoric of suffering in all of China during the Cultural Revolution tends, when focused on Tibet, to lament the destruction of monasteries and statues. At the center of *Red Sun* a headless bronze Buddha statue attests to this destruction. But *Red Sun*, with its blood-colored veins and clear teardrops, also commands memory and history to the destruction of human lives and cultural life.

Black Sun images the unspoken fear that Tibetan life has been desiccated and something in the collective heart shattered beyond repair. The shards of glass and barley seeds forming the silhouette of a Buddha feel on the one hand magnetically attracted, as if there is some essence of Tibetan culture, perhaps informed by its Buddhist heritage, that will cohere and endure, and yet, on the other hand it is as if the moment of devastating explosion were just frozen in time, a split second before the impact of being blown apart is felt to the core, and all the pieces fly apart and fall down to scatter across the earth.

The work's two pieces force the viewer to see the human suffering of the Cultural Revolution, and its human and material ramifications into the present. The art questions the possibilities, or impossibilities, of Tibetan culture re-assembling itself in the wake of trauma. Viewing the work, a Tibetan mumbled, "To rebuild after a culture has been destroyed, scattered and lost...."⁴⁵⁴ The sentence, which cannot be finished, is like the artwork: an expression of the "sorrow and dread" and incomprehensibility that becomes momentarily palpable across Lhasa and Tibet when memories accompany reflection on the status and future of Tibetan culture. In a reverberation of Benjamin's angel of history, who is blown backwards into the future staring at the "single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet (Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction* 1968),"⁴⁵⁵ Nortse explains the two tiny red feet in the corners of the handmade paper. They represent "the way we have already gone. So far, we've just walked...but when I look down, I see what our feet have trampled. We are destroying with our own feet, and these will be the footprints in history, recording we tread this way."⁴⁵⁶ Nortse's commentary adds to historic trauma an ongoing tragedy, and refuses to blame only Chinese Communists. Although traumatized, the ongoing silence of Tibetans in their routine daily lives compounds damages in which they were compelled to participate decades ago. The work must be understood as a critical reflection on the tragedy of the Cultural Revolution, decades ago, and the lingering of its impact and of memory into the present;

an assessment of the state of culture and life at the moment of trauma, and collective living with trauma since then.

When Nortse invited me to his home studio to see the recently completed work in late 2006, he was reticent to give a definitive interpretation of the meaning both because of the work's emotional intensity for him, and because he was nervous about the ways it would be interpreted by local Tibetans and authorities. He did however wish to describe his choice of materials and the commission process, discussed above, and through this exposition of his creative process, I heard testimony to powerful forms of memory. Expressions of memory would continue to unfold, for soon after completing this work, Nortse quietly confided to me his newfound resolve to further address the past, despite the personal and political difficulties entailed in doing so.⁴⁵⁷ After focusing in *Red Sun, Black Sun* on collective trauma, Nortse's contemplation of the past took a personal turn that was mediated through a set of anonymous portraits merging personal and social concerns (in *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer, Masked Man, and Temperature* from 2006, discussed below), before emerging more autobiographically in the self-portrait series.

In today's political and artistic ethos, colored by decades of official and self-censorship, Nortse's *Red Sun, Black Sun* is exceptional as the first artwork in Lhasa to directly address the collective trauma of the past.⁴⁵⁸ Nortse was inspired by and relied upon access to a foreign gallery owner to make a work that broke constraints and allowed his expression, but protected him from public local visibility, at least temporarily. The relative freedom from political and local religious constraints afforded this opportunity for a profound personal shift that seems to have occurred for the artist through the process of creating *Red Sun, Black Sun*. Facing the enduring past in the present was a radical move even for avant-garde artists in Lhasa in 2007. The process of engaging with memories and materials linking traumatic pasts with the present unleashed the flood of visual, creative memory work Nortse would produce in the coming years.

Father's Violin



Figure 105 Father's Violin - 1. 2007.
130 cm x 130 cm. Mixed media on
canvas

Father's Violin -1 (2007) is a large self-portrait painted on canvas. The artist stands wearing a white face mask over his nose and mouth, and a loose-fitting traditional Tibetan fringed and brocade-collared white shirt onto which is pinned a small button. He holds a violin, partially wrapped in red strips of fabric, in playing position with his left hand on the instrument's neck and the other end tucked between his shoulder and chin. The subject's short black hair is swept back from his forehead. His right hand is lifted and the pinkie finger is wrapped in a narrow white cloth. A fabric belt holding up grey pants is visible at the bottom of the painting. The background is dark grey at the bottom and pales gradually towards the top.

The material process Nortse used reportedly fused some photographic elements printed on the canvas with extensive overlaying of paint, revealing a remarkable talent for photorealism. As a mode of painting Nortse had rejected in the 1980s, many were astonished, particularly after his outbursts of rejecting painting altogether in the name of “contemporary” art, by this skill and his return to it. Nortse added photographic techniques and unprecedented subject

matter, developing new methodologies to meet his needs for particular communication, in, he said, “an attempt I’ve been making over the past year to express myself in a new way by combining photography and drawing (Nortse 2008).” In a sense, Nortse overcame the constraints of his own established artistic practices to find new a methodology.

The content of the work concerns painful memories. The violin is a direct reference to Nortse’s father. During the Cultural Revolution, Nortse's father was assigned to a typical work unit for physical labor, but at the frequent political parades and meetings, he was conscripted to play nationalistic music on his violin.⁴⁵⁹ One day when Nortse was thirteen years old, his father's unit was kept late, working until after dark. Upon their return home to the city, the workers’ truck was involved in a serious traffic accident. Nortse's father was taken to the hospital. When Nortse arrived, he saw his father wrapped in blood-soaked bandages, the air “thick with the smell of formalin (Nortse 2008).” Nortse’s father had already died from his head injury.⁴⁶⁰

The self-portrait confronts the painful recollection and the haunting of his life by the death of his father. In this self-portrait, Nortse stands at his current age in the center of the image, wearing a stiff and pressed Tibetan shirt, signaling through this cultural marker a disaster that is more than personal. The artists’ eyes are sad under a knit brow, gazing beyond the viewer. The father’s blood-soaked bandages are transferred onto his violin, which has also died a death without a player. The violin is missing its strings and some tuning pegs, essential anatomy for the instrument's vocalization. Nortse holds his father's violin in a posture as if he might play it, but to make music is impossible – the violin is broken, bandaged, and the son has no bow. Nortse’s covered mouth suggests the son cannot speak of the pain in his eyes and his gesture. The absent bow the artist cannot wield evokes incomparable loss and silence.

Constraints placed on exploring the past, especially difficult and traumatic pasts, have curtailed expressions of such memories within Tibetan communities. Yet Nortse’s work is unprecedented, unparalleled and the most profound communication of personal loss and grief to have emerged in contemporary art from Lhasa. His sophisticated entwining of the past and

present, such that painful memories appear ‘merely’ personal rather than political, avoids visible direct critique of the state, although in fact his father’s death must be conflated with the collective trauma of the Cultural Revolution. In 1976 both Nortse’s father and the PRC’s “father,” Mao Zedong, died, officially bringing the Cultural Revolution to an end. Compounding his personal loss, his father’s death maps onto the larger chaos and meaningless destruction that transpired in Nortse’s childhood environment and across Tibet through the 1970s. Nortse’s father’s tragic early death becomes but one in the pervasive tragedy of the Cultural Revolution.

The poignant absent bow in *Father's Violin* invites multiple readings. On first look, we expect to read as a smooth narrative a musician poised to play his instrument, the *studium* in Barthes’ terms, but then we see he is haunted, frozen, in his inability to play. In *Camera Lucida*, Barthes (1981) describes the piercing he feels looking at his aged Winter Garden Photograph, which connects him with shocking intensity to his mother, who has recently died. The photograph for Barthes is a medium that, like an "umbilical cord," carries the past through time to meet him. Nortse’s *Father's Violin* is based upon a photograph of himself holding his father’s surviving violin, a precious heirloom. Nortse’s creative process literally puts himself inside the image to touch the past and present, the violin serving as “incontrovertible referent” of a time that did exist. In doing so, the artist, I claim, makes crucial steps to overcome constraints: he engages in memory work. The very personal “investment” of himself into the frame is, in Hirsh’s terms, an effect of “postmemory”, and in its creative, productive nature, fits Kuhn’s (2002) model of explicitly material processes of memory work.⁴⁶¹ The absence of the violin bow - Nortse’s father - has the power to ‘prick’ the viewer, as Barthes’ *punctum* does. The artwork makes visible this dramatic acknowledgement, and allows the artists, and ourselves, to feel this prick. We now see the adult son today painfully living with the loss of a generational link and an entire world that has been rendered inaudible and inaccessible.

The process and the work also perform an indexical connection to the past through the father’s most cherished material possession that his son has inherited, prematurely; Nortse keeps

the violin these many years later in its original case, stored among family possessions in a small sitting room. This material trace in his life and work, Saltzman indicates, enables art to embed memory.

Barthes, Kuhn, Hirsch and Saltzman suggest models of memory as problem, therapeutic work, and as psychological and artistic processes that may help understand Nortse's moves, this body of work, and attempts to counter constraints that curtail memory and its expression.

Childhood Memory (2008)

Several portrait paintings from this period of work cannot be labeled explicitly self-portraits, because the faces are entirely obscured. *Childhood Memory* (2008) is a painting of a man dressed in an army green uniform with the red armband of the Red Guards, the young radicalized civilian activists who carried out massive destruction of Tibetan monasteries according to the 'Smash the Four Olds' ideology of the Cultural Revolution.⁴⁶² A flower is pinned to his uniform, and he wears a water canteen over his shoulder and an army-style cap with a Mao pin.⁴⁶³ His body is stiffly posed: at his navel his right hand holds up the famous collection of Mao's speeches known as *The Little Red Book*, studied in requisite gatherings, his left arm and palm are pressed against his side. His face is entirely covered by the bright red fabric wrapped around it. Suspended in a grey background behind the Red Guard is a Buddhist *mandala*, the circular diagram rendered here in the faded tones associated with temple frescos. It forms a halo effect behind the head of the subject, as the grey background is lighter, seemingly illuminated, around the edges of the mandala.



Figure 106 Childhood Memory, 2008. 135 x 150 cm. Mixed media on canvas

The costume is synonymous with the political ideologies and actions of the Cultural Revolution era, and contrasts with the pale Tibetan Buddhist art. In the context of the self-portrait series, we can infer that the figure may be Nortse himself. The composition, technique and style of the work match many others in which his face can be seen. Our knowledge of Nortse's father's death, and the work *Father's Violin*, allow us to immediately read the red fabric as wound dressing and contributes to seeing *Childhood Memory* through an autobiographical lens. Perhaps the figure is the father, remembered as he may have performed his compulsory allegiance to the Party-State. While the identity of the subject is ambiguous, it is clear the subject wears the uniform of the brutal Red Guard and the color red of his head wrapping also links the personal loss of Nortse's bloodied father with the new nation's father figure, Chairman Mao, whose "red" Communists carried out the violent and nationalist campaigns. More than forty years after the Red Guards' rampages, many temples still exist as irredeemably damaged shells of their former grandeur. The *mandala* in this painting copies the common present appearance of temple walls' once brilliant murals subjected to intentional damage and subsequent enforced neglect, weathered by sun and water exposure.

Nortse's investigation of the past lingering into the present, for his personal life and in collective life around him, suggests that he could imaginatively transfer himself into that body – importantly a body which is both father/victim and perpetrator. Collective and private memories

are intertwined and contain unresolved conflicts and secrets. Whether by coercion, ideological concordance, or for other reasons, Tibetans did participate in Communist campaigns and side with various embattled factions, although Tibetan communities worldwide would rather this, and other painful remembrances, be forgotten (M. C. Goldstein 2009) (C. McGranahan 2010).⁴⁶⁴ Thus the mandala in Nortse's painting places the subject in Tibet, but also enables the possibility that the figure in the Red Guard uniform also is Tibetan, the silencing of trauma is compounded by the pervasive present silencing of Tibetan culpability. That is, the figure could be read as a Tibetan Red Guard from the 1960s, or as a Tibetan whose very identity has been effaced by political ruptures.

In classical Tibetan Buddhist cosmology, an enlightened being resides at the center of a *mandala*. At the center of the mandala in *Childhood Memory* is a portrait of a masked figure who is at once anonymous (public and timeless), a Red Guard (past murderer), wearing the father's gauze (past victim), and the artist (private and present). While the original traumatic events to which this painting refers – the violence of the Cultural Revolution and the death of the artist's father, symbolized by the uniform and bandages - transpired when Nortse was a youth decades prior, the faded mural and the matured adult are in the present. In *Childhood Memory*, the figure was (is) present at the Cultural Revolution's destruction, and knows what will (has) happen(ed). In Barthes' terms, Nortse in self-portrait makes himself the "this has been," the evidentiary proof of his existence (Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on photography* 1981), an important quality often associated with photographic methods that also informs Nortse's aesthetics and painting techniques.

Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer (2007)

In the first portraits in 2006, the individual figures anthropomorphize contemporary social and global issues, such as alcoholism, climate change, and consumerism. Nortse brings to these issues an implicit understanding of the local experience of these problems as inextricable from historical conditions of modern and postmodern colonialism.⁴⁶⁵ They are simultaneously

self-portraits and generic portraits of anonymous individuals in urban Tibetan society. Nortse said of the subjects in the pair of paintings *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* and *Masked Man*, “they are like me.”⁴⁶⁶

Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer and *Masked Man*⁴⁶⁷ are a pair of paintings that were Nortse’s first portraits since joining the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild.⁴⁶⁸ In both paintings, a man in a red short-sleeved shirt sits, shoulders slumped, at a table set with a large empty beer or wine bottle and a half empty wine glass in front him. The head of the figure in *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* (pictured) is wrapped in red and white cloth strips, and the subject wears three beads hung on a white string and a plain yellow string around his neck. Like other works in the subsequent series of portraits, the setting is sparse with only a few emblematic objects included with a centered figure against a monochrome background, of a uniform hue in these two works.



Figure 107 *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer*, 2007. Oil on canvas, 100.5x100.5 cm.

Though a subtle detail, it is the necklaces in both paintings that unmistakably mark the subjects’ ethnicity as Tibetan. The beads in *Endlessly* are the stones amber, coral, and turquoise, precious stones commonly worn by men and women in Tibet, while the yellow thread refers to the cords given as a form of blessing and protection from a lama.⁴⁶⁹ The mask in *Masked Man* is of the kind commonly seen on the streets of dusty and germ-phobic Lhasa since the 2003 SARS epidemic threatened to reach the plateau from mainland China. The medical connotation of the

masks and the panicked populace were “alarming” to Nortse (Nortse 2008), for whom the sight triggered recollections of personal and collective fear and chaos.

The central issue of the paintings however is the personal and social problem of alcoholism. In a published artist’s statement, Nortse spoke to the deleterious effect of escapist bouts of drinking in his own life: “I have long been tormented by excessive drinking and over and over again when I am wandering in a state of imbalance separated from reality, I choose alcohol as a means of escaping, but in doing so I have lost so much (Nortse 2008).” Nortse knows he is not alone in struggling with alcoholism and a social environment that abets it. Lhasa’s proliferation of bars, and the government’s lack of public health campaigns to help people, Nortse reported, led people to whisper speculations that the government is even complicit in the problem.⁴⁷⁰ Thus, there is also an element of ironic humor in these paintings, for how can one drink (and we can see the bottle is empty) with one’s mouth covered? The bindings – with their personal connotations as bandages, and political suggestion of censorship - and alcohol represent the constraints of the current political and social contexts that conspire to render the paintings’ subjects deaf and mute.

Nortse here deliberately works against such numbing and silencing through his paintings. As he told me, “many people get destroyed in the small bars...I did a painting about this, and from now on I am going to paint broadly about things like this. We have to see the real situation...we must tell the truth.”⁴⁷¹ This conviction and approach to painting, in which Nortse developed a new type of realism to reflect personal and collective problems, initiated the portrait series that followed in subsequent years.

Nortse referred to his commencement of the portrait series as a “return” to realism, which he had rejected decades ago. Nortse had painted people in the academic mode of Socialist Realism in the early 1980s and depicted Tibetan scenes in romantic realism in the mid-1980s, but around 2000, green, horned and distorted heads and faces filled his canvases. From 2003 until he accepted an invitation to join the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in 2005, he painted abstract and

impressionistic works in dark hues and incorporated found materials such as *khatag* and tobacco leaves in to collage. As he faced contemporary society through a personal lens, however, he needed to depict people who, through their postures, dress, and actions could convey certain ideas. This was uncomfortably close to realism modes which were, for Nortse, contaminated by politics when under the rubric of Socialist Realism, and insufficient for cultural Tibetan realities in romantic and Chinese techniques, but which he now found he was able to adapt and utilize. He explained this shift from post-Socialist Realism work in “realistic” painting to his understanding of “realism” when creating *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* in 2007,

Earlier, we just worked on [developing our technique with the] materials, and we didn't think about other things. All our paintings were similar to snapshots, thinking they should be realistic. But they weren't very interesting. I feel the artist should mainly paint according to what is in his mind. Like my painting of the man with the beer [*Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer*] - his hand and clothing are realistic, but my way of thinking and communicating is very different. I did not paint from a model or from something physical in real life that you can see, yet it is something which is happening all the time. I just put this issue, this situation, on the body and painted it. So this is my method of making contemporary art.⁴⁷²

Putting the real, social “situation on the body” became Nortse’s mode of conceptual realism and is the signature of this series of portraits and self-portraits. The works all depict or imagine various ways of working with constraints, and, as in this case of breaking the silences around alcoholism, of working against them.

The State I Am In

Three related paintings, *The State I Am In -1*, *The State I Am In -2*, and *The State I Am In -3*, each depict a standing subject with wide shoulders and a body that tapers to an impossibly thin waist and thighs, clothed in a mix of indigenous Tibetan and non-traditional items. The works share features of the portrait series, such as the now familiar bandaged head of the dying father transferred to the adult son, the single color backgrounds, and the use of a few symbolic objects. *The State I Am In -1* depicts an anonymous man with white cloth encircling his head from the top of the forehead to the lower lip, the visible top of his head is shaved, and he wears a yellow tank

top and simple brown bead rosary around his neck. His left arm is bent at the elbow, his forearm across his abdomen and his hand in a fist. *The State I Am In -2* is almost identical in composition, except the rosary is removed and pinned to the tank top is a button with a miniature reproduction of a detail from the 2006 painting *Masked Man* (a painting in which a man we can infer to be Nortse wears a face mask seated at a table with a beer bottle). In *The State I Am In -3*, the face is partially bound in white gauze, and he wears jeans and two neckties atop a collarless, brocade bordered and fringed Tibetan shirt.



Figure 108 Nortse. *The State I am In - 1*, 2007. 130 x 130 cm. mixed media on canvas. Photograph: courtesy of the artist



Figure 109 *The State I am In - 3*, 2007. 130 x 130 cm, mixed media on canvas. Photograph: courtesy of the artist

The self-portraits highlight tensions between notions of tradition and modernity in the formation of identity and confront conflicting expectations of self and others in a context that does not offer positive examples of hybridity. The body is marked in each work, respectively, by incongruous signs of religion, artistic profession, and ethnic identity, revealing intersecting cultural worlds that are difficult to synthesize. In the first painting, the yellow shirt, rosary and shaved head mimic the monastic's appearance; in the second the subject is the alcoholic and the artist who paints him; in the third, a sad eye visible between the wrappings suggests the unsatisfactory nature of trying to embody expectations for both traditional and modern identities at the same time, imaged through the three 'modern' 'Western' neck ties awkwardly looped over a 'traditional' Tibetan shirt.

The wrapping moves beyond the medical association of gauze covering a literal wound, as the cloth strips render the present subject deaf, mute and blind. A stance of determined commitment to carrying on is suggested by the appropriation of a socialist comrade's heroic raised fist in the gesture of *The State I am In -1* and *-2*, harkening to the national Socialist Realist era of political propaganda art. However, far from triumphant, his painted body is attenuated and we sense some inner atrophy caused by restriction or immobilization. Nortse appropriates a gesture but subverts the meaning of Socialist Realism, thereby altering its constraints for imaging of Tibetans as subjects of the State.

Together with other works in the collection, these pieces signal concern with identities as torn between modern and traditional impulses. They examine relationships between the artist's religious, artistic and aesthetic formation, and cultural identities, as Nortse 'tries on' various aspects as costume. They challenge the notion that authenticity in Tibetan cultural identity is only sourced from the past and ideas of tradition. And yet, within the current colonial pressures to

assimilate into the modern State or remain ethnic primitives, modern and traditional identities are not easily reconciled. Nortse's paintings expose the gaps between experienced realities and how they fall short of the mythical images of religious, artistic and political Tibetan subjects created by official and Tibetan collective narratives. Nonetheless, confronting these limitations and how they have curtailed acknowledgement of his modern Tibetanness did not bring answers or resolution, but left the artist, he says, in a state of "Imbalance".

Nortse's memory work process in the series *The State I am In 1, 2 and 3* shows Nortse literally facing himself, in relation to specific representations of his and Tibetans' past, each painting bringing to the fore details of his experience and dimensions of his present artistic, religious and ethnic identities. Yet, the dimensions of memory that have been stifled also surface as he assumes various identities in his self-portraits that his audiences might not expect; they do not easily fit the possible identities constructed by others for Tibetans in 21st century Tibet. Instead, they highlight the tensions such narrow constructs create, tensions which often have to do with a subtle but "pervasive dissonance between the past and the present (Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* 1997)." Nortse is neither "Buddhist" nor "victim", nor contemporary artist unencumbered by tradition. He cannot wholly embody the pre-modern Tibetan of the previous generation, nor the minority figure of State myths. But he *is*, meeting the viewer with a direct gaze, a snapshot of the present with all its complications.

We can read this as an adoption of Kuhn's (visual and photographic) approach to Freud's process of "working through". Akin to Kuhn's projection of the self into the position of other people in historic photographs, Nortse also takes stock of aspects of Tibetan identity through time by trying on "persons" from the Tibetan past – the Socialist Realist stance, the pious, the relic, the modern citizen, the artist – for they all contribute in varying degrees to who he is today, an important healing insight.

Self-Portrait, 2007



Figure 110 Self-Portrait, 2007.
134x 134 cm, mixed media on canvas.
Photograph: Rossi & Rossi Gallery

In the one explicitly titled *Self-Portrait, 2007*, Nortse stands with arms crossed, wearing a turquoise and “nine eye” pattern *dzi* bead necklace and sunglasses that conceal his eyes. His mouth is tightly closed, and his brow creased. He grasps paint brushes and a palette knife in his hands, and a narrow white cloth wraps around the extended index finger of his right hand. His robe is of red, green and blue brocade, and the colors of the silk and his skin run in rivulets from his chest down to the bottom of the painting, streaking his lower body and the purple background below his elbows. The buttons pinned to his robe include details of paintings by his peers at his shoulders (the yak head and horns that populate works by Yak Tsetan, and the blue-faced girl of one of Tsewang Tashi’s series of *Untitled* portraits), a Chinese brand logo at the bottom center, and the antlers of a grassland antelope, endangered by poaching, are on a button by his right hand.

Feelings of cultural displacement and the gap between present generations and their predecessors can be seen in *Self-Portrait*, in which the authenticating brocade robe of precious religious statues that Nortse dons is fading and streaked, like the weather-worn murals of once

thriving monasteries now falling into ruin, metaphorically signaling perhaps the slippage of religion from primacy in cultural life and artistic production.⁴⁷³ More than the tradition and techniques have shaped his artistic practices, or constrained him, it is the destruction of the world formerly distinguished by its Buddhist art that marks his and his peers' aesthetic formation. That which validates Tibetanness is increasingly slipping away on the one hand, while the impracticality and impossibility of a living person carrying the past, like a relic, on one's shoulders is illustrated too. There is a world of consumerism and environmental degradation, indicated by the pins, to which the artist bears witness. The child of the destructive period cannot make whole again his parents' world, nor live without loss in his own. Putting the real, social situation "on the body" became Nortse's mode of conceptual realism and is the signature of this series of portraits and self-portraits, which all depict or imagine various ways of working with constraints. Nortse tries to break free of a past that would fix him, but doesn't want to drift into the future without a cultural anchor.

Bound Scenery (1987/2008)

During a 2007 conversation with Nortse, I inquired whether the recurring use of cloth wrapping covering all or parts of figures in the emerging portrait series had any precedent in earlier art work. After a moment of thoughtful silence, Nortse recalled an early artistic adventure. In 1987, at twenty-four years old, he and a small group of other artists journeyed to the *changtang*, a remote grassland inhabited sparsely by nomads and their herds, with some simple camping supplies and art materials and the determination to "alter our minds."⁴⁷⁴ He and his colleagues spent two months camped in a tent making art. Nortse recollected his most exciting creative endeavor: he enlisted a friend to help wrap his body in stages in long strips of white and maroon wool fabric. He posed to be photographed in various postures against the backdrop of the broad green expanses and ribbons of blue streams and skies. A series of photographs were taken as Nortse sat on fabric stretched out across the ground, hands on his knees, and wearing a black turtleneck sweater and khaki pants before beginning to cover his body in the wool. He then stood,

the fabric wrapping his shoulders, then most of his body, then entirely covering him from his head down and around each leg to the feet in maroon and white wool.



Figure 111 Nortse. Bound-up Scenery, 1987. 2 of 4 photographs. Printed in 2009 in a limited edition of 10 each. 17 x 25 inches each. Photographs: courtesy of the artist.

Nortse said, “All the long material was wrapped on the body ... At that time, I had no idea what we are doing... We had no deep thoughts about it, but when we looked, the outcome appeared interesting... But at that time, we just did it to alter, or develop, our minds.”⁴⁷⁵ Nortse and his colleagues were actively pushing against aesthetic constraints of their formal training, hoping to discover alternatives.

I asked Nortse what he had done with photographs they took, and Nortse explained the professional constraints of the time, saying it was not the custom to do these things, let alone seriously document these creative expressions. “Even with paintings,” he said, “after we’d finished a painting, we’d show each other, but at that time there was no place to sell paintings, so sometimes after finishing one, we’d just throw it away and start a new one.”⁴⁷⁶ An infrastructure for exhibiting, circulating, or selling art simply did not exist in Tibet in the 1980s. At our next meeting, Nortse showed me four surviving photographs from the *changtang* site-specific performance, which he subsequently decided to exhibit with the title *Bound Scenery* in 2008.⁴⁷⁷

Nortse believes that the activity was probably the first performance piece by a Tibetan in Tibet.⁴⁷⁸ The creative enterprise seemed to have represented, in his autobiographical sense of his artistic life history, his pioneering methods and approaches. After all, Nortse pointed out, Tibetan words for art forms he has worked with did not even exist, and still do not.⁴⁷⁹ Nortse said, “I can’t say for certain [if I am the first], but my way of doing it was what I would call *mdzes bzo* in Tibetan...In Mandarin, we say *zhuang zhi* (installation art), but at the current moment, we do not have a Tibetan word for this because it is still early, people don’t regard this as “art” yet. I think we could call it *mdzes bzo* (fine art, or ‘to make beautiful’).” Thus in the context of art in Lhasa today, his activities of twenty years ago still feel to him ahead of the times; there is still not a word for it.

However, in light of the emerging portrait series, he reconsidered the place of the *changtang* creative expression in his life as an artist. He came to see the work as the origin of a personal symbolism expressing his life’s experiences and memories.

Autobiography and collective memory are entwined in the imagery of wrapped cloth, which takes on literal meaning as the father’s bandages and in a metaphoric sense as constraints, as Nortse wrote in 2008,

People of my age in Tibet have experienced the Cultural Revolution and then period of the Reforms and the country’s reopening to the outside world and now are experiencing the present period of economic globalization...perhaps, you might say, our experience of life has been rich, but if I could have made a choice, I would rather have done without such ‘richness’. Even more, I personally feel that in the midst of all these various changing social or societal forms I’ve been a human guinea pig, part of an ongoing experiment, a constantly experimented-on substance, continually being forced in and out of different test-tubes to be tested for different chemical reactions.

The *Self-Portraits* are of that guinea pig, that much experimented-on substance and the bound-up or hemmed-in imagery is not at all accidental. The origin of the imagery can be traced back to the 1980s, when I was in an uninhabited area of the Tibetan grasslands in Jiangtang, Nachu⁴⁸⁰, and did a performance work called *Bound-Up Scenery*. Although the method used in *Self-Portraits* is different, I have been continually using ‘Wrapped or Bound-up’ as the principle

identifying symbol or insignia of my expression, as it is the mental concept most closely interwoven with my childhood memories (Nortse 2008).

Nortse thus makes evident in his commentary the double (familial and political) symbolism of the wrapping and their origin in early experience, returning to him in his memories of childhood. In the context of his newest work in 2007, looking back to that youthful project two decades earlier was now also evidence of the return of a gesture made, unconsciously, with deep connections to his personal history. Nortse discovered that as he probed meaningful expression of self and generational experience, even the very process of dressing up, posing for photographs and portraiture, and the motifs of wrapping, binding, and cloths had returned.

Furthermore, these methods had first been conceptualized and enacted in the space of the open plateau in which the urban realities of Chinese aggressions was palpably absent, and which was fully identified, even amongst urban dwellers, with the *phayul*, the fatherland. Thus, Nortse's urge to push received artistic boundaries, to develop his own mind, and to contribute to Tibetan culture were realized through making art in a particular kind of Tibet, made visible in the landscape. The vast openness of the landscape contrasts sharply with the constrictive bindings that wrap Nortse. We can read *Bound Scenery* as a quest for freedom from personal and collective traumas of the past, located in a Tibet that is not the one he ordinarily inhabited, the urban Lhasa of post-Chinese Communist occupation. Being "bound-up" and "experimented upon" are metaphors for the multiple constraints that Nortse works to overcome through creative processes merging memory, culture, location, and indigenous materials and unconventional art methods.

Nortse's *Bound Scenery* (1987/2008) was importantly staged in the quintessential embodiment of a Tibetan imagined community that is linked by the geological Tibetan plateau,⁴⁸¹ the nomads' vast grasslands, which Chinese have had little interest in settling or policing.⁴⁸² Nortse and his Tibetan and Han artist companions in the *changtang* in 1987 were pioneering something new in Tibet and responding to broad-based sentiments in the art worlds of China.

Post-Mao, anti-political Han art movements of the time were inspired by landscapes and an imagined purity of rural folk life existing beyond and having survived failed politics.

Tibetans in Lhasa are, importantly, not at a physical or territorial remove from sites of past violence and ongoing systemic state violence. Tibetans in the PRC have not navigated expulsion from the territorial site of their genocidal past, but live in a state of ongoing internal cultural displacement, overwhelmed by Han in-migration, extremely rapid state engineered social and material development, and the global phenomenon of urbanization. Nortse's revival of this photographic and performance work decades later seems to ask whether internal cultural and demographic displacement compound historical ruptures, or if sustained presence in the homeland might mitigate loss?

Nortse's communication goals in the above works required he attempt transgression of local conventions and constraints through several pioneering developments. In these works, Nortse maintains the visibility of his Tibetan location and heritage with the use of materials and iconic objects, often personalized through the use of his own body and depictions of his memories. Some additional portraits emerged towards the latter portion of this time period that I will consider below as a specific subset. These works invite consideration of personal and collective therapeutic transformations of difficult pasts through creative, visual work.

Liberation

A subset of Nortse's paintings from 2007 – *Release from Suffering* [Tib. *thar pa*], *Saved* [*tshe thar gtong ba*], *Dream*, *Release Life*, and *Rebirth*⁴⁸³ – may be read as sharing a liberation theme both because of their imagery and the works' titles, and the introduction of new symbolic and technical elements to the series. If *Bound Scenery* and the portraits containing wrappings signify a “bound up” or constrained and “experimented upon” life, these works suggest the possibility of being unbound.



Figure 112 Release from Suffering, 2007.
mixed media on canvas. 62 x 51 inches.
Photograph: Rossi & Rossi Gallery

Nortse added new symbols - flowers and butterflies –to the familiar compositions of the portraits and some works also incorporate a new hand gesture. The compositions center on Nortse’s face or a wrapped head with light hazily outlining the figure, halo-like, against a plain background.⁴⁸⁴ *Dream* and *Rebirth* are nearly identical paintings of a figure in a red t-shirt, head wrapped in white and red cloth, wearing a yellow thread around his neck (as in the works *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* and *Masked Man* discussed above), but this time in *Rebirth* eleven purple, yellow and white butterflies flit about the figure, one resting on his shoulder. In *Dream*, eight white and pink daisies seem to float in front of the subject.

Saved and *Release from Suffering* are another similar pair of paintings that belong to the portrait series but most dramatically depart from the rest of the portrait series in composition, theme and also, as I will discuss below, in technique. In these, the entire face of the artist is visible, with photographic clarity, and he is unclothed. The artist’s hands are raised together, his wrists touching in front of his throat, and fingers spread wide open. Cloth is loosely wound around his forearms in front of his bare chest. From out of Nortse’s hands arise flocks of butterflies. In *Release from Suffering*, they appear as origami creatures cut and folded from paper with Tibetan writing printed on it. The background of *Release from Suffering* is a uniform pale

purple-grey. Compared to the other portraits in the series, these portraits have softer light and brighter palettes.

In *Release from Suffering*, the legible Tibetan words (*bod*, Tibet; *shing pas so nam du*, agricultural work of farmers) on some butterfly wings suggest the writing was not excerpted from the more iconic paper texts of religious scriptures, but rather a modern secular source.⁴⁸⁵

Butterflies appear both as colorful creatures and as cutouts from Tibetan texts; as colorful, text-printed papers in the air, they are reminiscent of the colored paper squares printed with prayers Tibetans ritually throw into the air for auspiciousness.

Nortse's wrapping motif appears in these paintings as well, but it is transformed. The fabric strips, formerly an insignia of constrictive, "bound-up" wrapping wound around the subject's heads, here merely loosely drape the artist's arms and we see in *Saved* the dangling ends of the now translucent gauze for the first time.⁴⁸⁶ He is literally becoming unbound.

The imagery and titles in the liberation set of paintings imply two Buddhist concepts: liberation from the suffering of samsara, or *thardol*, the Tibetan word and its root which are in several of his original titles, and the practice of releasing or freeing animals, or *tshe thar stong ba*, the title of the painting translated into English as *Release from Suffering* in the exhibition catalogue. Mainstream Tibetan Buddhist views of the nature of life and rebirth include familiarity with the concepts of karma and reincarnation, and the ethical and religious value placed upon compassion. One form of this belief in popular practice is "liberating a life," or saving animals that would otherwise be slaughtered by purchasing and returning them to the rivers, the wild, or protected pastures to live out their natural lifespan. Ultimate liberation from all forms of suffering, the potential of all beings and goal of Buddhist practice, is release from the suffering of *samsara*, the cycle of life, death, and rebirth transcended by attaining Buddhahood. The butterflies Nortse releases from his cupped hands evokes both a spiritual liberation and the compassionate practice liberating animals, placing him conceptually and linguistically in Tibetan Buddhist contexts and a collective framework that gives his work meaning and a shared cultural

language for expression. More specifically, the close relationship of the paintings *Dream* and *Rebirth* with the works *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* and *Masked Man* from the year earlier could be about recovery (liberation) from the specific suffering of alcoholism. *Saved* and *Release from Suffering*, with their gestures that recall hands joined in prayer, unwinding bindings, and butterflies that emerge and ascend from near his heart, ultimately create a measured optimism.

This image is neither a denial of difficult pasts, nor a rosy picture of the present and future. The artist holds space for the cohabitation within him of happiness and sorrow, or in Tibetan, the term *skyid sdug* (“kyi dook”). The term means happiness and grief, pleasure and pain, and suggests mixed emotions or the simultaneous existence of opposites, and also refers to the general conditions of life in samsara. Nortse’s sad eyes combined with the lifting of the butterflies and loosened bindings falling away may picture *skyid sdug*, and the inclusion of hope into images formerly dominated by struggle and painful pasts. In other words, as Nortse’s innovative techniques surpass professional and aesthetic constraints and his symbolism works around political constraints, the liberation subset of paintings communicate the artist’s confrontation of the more intimate constraint of troubled memories. While Nortse’s memory work does connect him to the past in meaningful ways, how to then be Tibetan in the present is far from clear. These paintings are a tentative step, and thus in some respects the most personal and ambiguous art in the series, as he works out his own liberation. The parameters he explores here may be of his own visions of meaningful contemporary Tibetan personhood.

Overcoming Constraints

Nortse’s life and works evince successful strategies for overcoming aesthetic, professional, political and personal constraints to artistic identities and expressions which expand notions and practices of the artist in Tibetan and Chinese art worlds. This happened in a career marked by experimental fluctuations with materials and techniques, never settling on any signature style or method. Despite frequent changes, which “may simply be my personality,” he has acknowledged a psychological and emotional undercurrent motivating him which remains

constant. Nortse wrote, “The versatile, unfixing way of creating validly expresses my personal condition – a type of imbalance, a lack of equilibrium. Yet those who really understand me will discover that in the midst of this fluid ever-changing creative mode, I am throughout continuing or extending, as it were, my personal experience and recollections, clumsily piecing together the fragments of my spiritual, inner life (Nortse 2008).” His persistence at the task of ‘clumsily piecing together...fragments’, first motivated by far-reaching political, professional, and aesthetic goals, became, in the portrait series, the practice of creative, visual memory work. All of his many changes in production modes, materials, and content were artistic turning points occasioned by attempts to transcend or overcome constraints.

Nortse’s artistic career in many ways begins with his aesthetic rejection of the art academies of China and Socialist Realism, even when it left him without peers, mentors or institutional support to pursue interest in Picasso or inventing techniques and materials for depicting distinctly Tibetan art. Instead, Nortse - quite literally in his voyage to the *changtang* - set off with the intent to artistically experiment with “expanding his mind”.

Artistically, he not only works to be unconventional, but thrives on inventing methods that combine materials and media to meet his visual and conceptual needs. Aesthetically, Nortse’s choices since 2001 of collage, mixed media, found object assemblages, the self-portrait genre, and photorealism refuse to be constrained by expectations to look “Tibetan”.

Nortse is the first contemporary artist in Lhasa to use the self-portrait genre to explore the lingering effects of the past in the present. While the genre is not necessarily transgressive of Tibetan tradition or professional constraint, only a couple of artists in Lhasa since the 1980s had painted self-portraits,⁴⁸⁷ and Nortse is unique for his extensive use of self-portraits among Tibetan contemporary artists. His self-portraits are also unprecedented in Tibetan art history, where the painting of humans was once reserved for great religious figures as opposed to ordinary lay persons or the personal expression of the artist. The genre raises questions about modern Tibetan identities through the shift in the role of the Tibetan artist from nearly anonymous religious

craftsman to the actual subject of the art itself, from artists' work on commission basis to self-expression, and some might argue from Buddhist to secular values.⁴⁸⁸ In genre and subject then, Nortse comfortably works outside of Tibet's Buddhist artistic history; he does not evoke the strict iconography or practices sufficiently to be read as transgressive or rebellious, but rather by his contemporary, secular art that centers on Tibetan people, places, and materials he asserts an expanded Tibetan identity. This Tibetan artistic identity, in ways which will be explored below, is subtly influenced by or explicitly references tradition to reinforce his Tibetan location and identity. Nortse's shifts towards individualism in self-expression and secularism may be hallmarks of modernity itself, but they are also means of maintaining relevance in the twenty-first century by challenging both the preservationist paradigm of cultural survival as measured by the past in the repetition of tradition, and paternalistic projections by the state about ethnic minority culture producers. That is, by his choice of genre, Nortse attempts to expand "Tibetan" art beyond expectations defined by traditional Tibetan Buddhist aesthetics, and beyond political and professional limitations on expression of the modernity of minorities within China.

The consistency of his aesthetic attempts to transcend constraints, despite his "versatile, unfixed way of creating," becomes clear.⁴⁸⁹ The themes and processes of production of artwork discussed here emerge from his pioneering introspective look at personal history, cultural survival, and artistically experimental impulses.

Nortse overcame professional constraints that should have followed from his abandonment of the official art institutional structure by participating in the creation of alternative associations, the Sweet Tea House and Gedun Choephel Artists guild, opening his own gallery, and initiating the first artists' solo show in Lhasa. That exhibition garnered the attention of the first foreigners to mount exhibitions of the GCAG members abroad, which led to exhibiting, publishing and selling his work internationally with contemporary art galleries and collectors.

Nortse skillfully adapted to political constraints as well, expanding the understanding of artists and what they can, should and must do. For contemporary artists, the colonial politics of

Tibet's relationship with China means Tibetans self-censor expression of unofficial, indigenous history and memory that could invite State retaliation. And yet the past – as personal memory, historic event, and sensed through collective, cultural change – is a persistent theme in Nortse's portrait work. Nortse says the artist faces political constraints by being “smart” in two ways, politically and artistically: “The artists’ brain is very smart ... If someone isn’t smart, they cannot do art. They have to be able to get the expected result, to know how to make something so the people can understand it. But here, one always has to think of politics first, to think about it and be careful.”⁴⁹⁰ Nortse's artistic investigations of difficult pasts draw at once on highly personal memories and collective memories of the Cultural Revolution, and ongoing political repression, through his ‘smart’ use of materials and symbols.

Eventually, to move beyond politics, Nortse added costume, the artists’ body, and new techniques to these ‘smart’ methods, a shift which signals creative, visual memory work. Memory work, as a process of investigating the past’s enduring impact upon the present in order to not be constrained or debilitated by it, can be accomplished through artistic techniques and expressions. Nortse’s use of photography and his own body are strategies similar to those described by Kuhn (2002), Saltzman (2006), and Gibbons (2007) in their studies of Western artists’ work in relation to collective memory and memorialization.

Nortse’s *Childhood Memory* and *Father’s Violin* importantly mark the difficulty Nortse has in letting go of losses sustained in the past and which continue to plague and inhibit him like a wound or contagion (referenced in bandages and masks) or obscuration of his own identity (imaged by the covered face). Freud explicated memory work as a psychoanalytic technique in his essay “Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through” (Freud, Remembering, Repeating and Working-Through 1914), in which he describes the therapeutic method of “working through,” putting recollection to proper use in the aftermath of loss.⁴⁹¹ Freud cautions that problems of the past and memory can become pathological when ordinary mourning slips into melancholia, a state of despair in which the usual orientations to life are not only eclipsed, but

replaced with a deep disregard for one's self-worth and painful inhibition (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia* 1917).⁴⁹² In these works, Nortse seems to teeter between mourning and melancholia: *Red Sun Black Sun* depicts the mourning for a world that is being emptied of its former sources of meaning and sustenance, while in *Childhood Memory*, *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer*, and *The State I am In* series, the alcoholic, blind, deaf, mute subject may express the inner vacuity of the melancholic.

Working through is a creative management of tensions, and the "will to remember" is a path to recovery (Sedler 1983).⁴⁹³ We may read such inner work as a process that is active for Nortse, who has said that through his work, he is "continuing or extending, as it were, my personal experience and recollections, clumsily piecing together the fragments of my spiritual, inner life (Nortse 2008)." This begins with countering taboos and looking honestly and directly at his alcoholism and memories of trauma that find expression in his portraits in the bottles and bloodied bandages. As such, the will to remember is no longer suppressed in Nortse's paintings and, accordingly, opens up the possibility for transcendence of personal psychological and political forms of repression.

Nortse also adapts the memorializing function of visual techniques that highlight temporal gaps between then and now. For Hirsch, it is only through the current context and our imputation of the intervening years that we read "Holocaust photographs" as emblematic of loss (Hirsch, *Family Frames: Photography, Narrative and Postmemory* 1997). That is, they can only be read as proof of former worlds because we bring to it the knowledge of the disaster which occurred after the photograph was taken and through which the material photograph survived (when photographer and subject and implied others may not have).

Nortse intentionally creates for his viewers the temporal context Hirsch describes, through faded mandalas (*Childhood Memory*, *Release Life*), Tibetan script (*Red Sun, Black Sun, Release from Suffering*), traditional materials (khatag, tobacco leaves, barley, Buddha images, handmade paper, etc.), and traditional Tibetan clothing or textiles and historical uniform (*The*

State I am In, Father's Violin, Self-Portrait, Childhood Memory), that signal a Tibet of 'before' against which trauma and distance is registered. The temporal gap is also dramatically rendered by use of his adult body in the present standing in place of a figure from the past, such as the Red Guard soldier in *Childhood Memory*, and is the central problem posed through *Red Sun, Black Sun*.

Forcing himself and viewers to consider this temporal gap and its emotional effects is unprecedented in Lhasa's visual arts. In Saltzman's study of twentieth century American contemporary artists' engagement with memory, she asserts that "imminent loss drives the impulse to record and remember," dictating strategies for materializing reflections of loss.⁴⁹⁴ In her study, certain media and techniques are central to artists' memory work because they retain or simulate indexical relationships to what, or who, have been lost or belongs to the past (Saltzman 2006).⁴⁹⁵ The use of his father's violin, a Buddha relic, and his own body as a frame on which these layers – of literal clothing and metaphoric layers of memory – can be read as an indexical use of Nortse's body to examine social myths and assert his reality. By doing so, he reaches across time, touching and connecting the past, his present and the viewers' present.

The action of doing so, in Hirsch's postmemory aesthetics, also makes visible the condition of postmemory and the ways second generation remembrances are marked by "imaginative investment." Imaginative investment refers to the ways in which the one with postmemory projects him or herself into the past, trying to re-enact the past from his or her own imagined eye-witness perspective or to reconnect with important people or places. The creative work of postmemory is characterized by ambivalence generated by deep desires and passionate fascination on the one hand and inevitable distance and fundamental incomplete understanding on the other. Nortse faces the constraint of his parents' trauma as his postmemory in projecting himself into the past, rendered with ambiguity in the portraits in which his face is covered. With knowledge of Nortse's biography and artistic symbolism, we might read all red-colored bandages in his portraits, including *Childhood Memory, Father's Violin*, and others, as reference to the

death of his father, and also marking the amputation of multiple links to the past. This is not a constraint that is possible to overcome, but Nortse's gestures acknowledge this loss, an unprecedented public expression of private familial pain.

Nortse's insistence on this work, on facing the past, is validated by Hirsch's postmemory analysis which confers on second-generation survivors – and in Nortse's case, an argument can be made for childhood survivors, too⁴⁹⁶ – an ability to express their present relationship to the past, and their feelings of responsibility to do so, a degree of authenticity which has previously been granted to eye-witness testimony. As the task of remembering in Tibet is passing from adult eye-witnesses to the traumas of the 1950s-1970s to those who experienced events through young children's eyes or who were born since the collective ruptures, this dynamic is of pressing concern to many especially in light of ongoing colonial relations between China and Tibet.

In Nortse's autobiographic portraits, we witness a journey of personal states from the artist as despairing alcoholic (*Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer* and *Masked Man*, 2006), to one who faces his bereavement (*Father's Violin* and *Childhood Memory*, 2007), to grappling with the many influences upon his current identity (*The State I Am In*, 2007), to the potential for liberation (*Release from Suffering, Saved*, 2008). It is possible then to say Nortse's constraint by pathological despair and the confounding elements of postmemory moves into therapeutic transcendence through his creative, visual memory work. Tibetans' unofficial past, Nortse ultimately argues, is both painful to recollect and to suppress. The Tibetan past should and can be a source of rich cultural traditions for himself and his community at large, and Nortse models a way to do so without compromising modern experiences and desires.

Nortse's work then also brings to the fore the role of the collective in such processes. The use of personal symbolism that relies upon ingrained religious imagery is a form of artistic memory work (Gibbons 2007) that permeates Nortse's oeuvre.⁴⁹⁷ Nortse's ability to image his community through visual memory work is an important methodology for collectives and indigenous or otherwise marginalized minorities. He writes,

I gradually came to understand that the power of art to influence people was a matter of culture, not formal language. ... I realized that the future of Tibetan art depended entirely upon whether Tibet could maintain its own unique culture. From that point on, in my work I began to focus on the influence of the Cultural Revolution (1966-76) on Tibetan culture, and the striking economic changes taking place in Tibet.⁴⁹⁸

The influence on people Nortse wants art to have is that it affirms and promotes Tibet's "unique culture," as alive in the present but acknowledges it has been radically shaped by recent history.⁴⁹⁹

Visual memory work seems to serve not so much memorial functions as documentation of the present for Nortse and other contemporary artists in Lhasa. (And in Tibet, the contemporary artists' job is not (and cannot be) to create memorials or 'factual' historical record.) Documenting the present by creative processes that perform and visualize memory enables the artist to assert and create realities beyond overdetermined historical narratives, formulating expression of crucial relationships to the past which have been so curtailed, and yet are so critical.

Ensuring continuity of culture into the future requires looking at difficult pasts. After looking at his personal and collective history and the construction of memory and history, Nortse affirms his cultural identity and inheritance without naivety or romanticism. Creative, visual memory work like Nortse's bridges the individual and collective, the personal and cultural, individual healing and, I argue, cultural sustainability. Nortse's memory work offers at least moments of liberatory potential for the individual artist. Collectively, the traumas that led his generation to feel imbalanced by incomplete cultural inheritance may be mitigated by art. Lhasa's contemporary artists rely on transmission of shared cultural knowledge, and use it in documenting the present for present and future generations.

This is but one particular way in which Nortse has claimed and enacted more expanded artistic identities than those afforded him by the artistic and political contexts into which he was born. He expands "artist" by entertaining the possibility of contributing to the future, not merely personal expression (as Picasso may have modeled for him), or in service of the State (as he was taught in school), or religion (as was the role for Tibet's past artists).

Accounts of moments in his life and his commentaries on his art work and methods cohere into a narrative of local exceptionalism, even in Lhasa's small art world, but model unceasing struggle against constraints, which he transforms into catalysts for meaningful expression, creative stimulation, and culturally-rich communication. This work could be heartening in the context of political marginalization and dramatic, rapid social change, mitigating some sources of collective anxiety about cultural survival through the performance of cultural sustainability.

Conclusion

This study explores how and why contemporary Tibetan artists offer unique articulations of artistic identities, ethnic minority identity (Tibetanness) inside the PRC, reflect on the role of Tibetan Buddhism in modern culture, and consider role of memory in the present. These issues are critical in light of traumatic pasts, rapid change, outsiders' expectations, and political conditions of repressive colonialism, which all create constraints for artists and modern cultural identity formation. And yet the particular group of artists I described in Lhasa attempt to navigate, work against, or transcend these constraints. They claim to offer alternatives and counter-images to the representations that have long been created by others about Tibet, from the primitivism of minorities, to demonization of its theocratic past, to romantic Shangri-la fantasy of pre-modern Buddhists, to silencing of their traumatic pasts. They arrive at visions of Tibetanness that speaks to outsiders as much as to other Tibetans, who feel resonance with the depictions of their shared memories, locations, experiences, and recognize within it their unique Tibetan heritage and futures. In crafting these visions of modern culture in times of change, I claim they are pioneering practices of cultural sustainability inside Tibet.

In summary, I have explored the meanings various groups and individuals assume when labeling themselves "artists" and their work "art" within a variety of institutional frameworks and ideological commitments in the past century in Tibet; these meanings shift over time but can be understood through artistic practices, discourses, and contexts that characterize five discrete time periods of artistic production. These proceed from the dominance of traditional Tibetan Buddhism over artistic production, to early modern indigenous innovators, to Socialist Realism and Chinese colonial occupation, to post-Deng reform era development of official and unofficial art worlds, and finally the twenty-first century's confident, international contemporary movement. The social dynamics of the Lhasa art world are revealed through the relationships between members of art associations, the roles of leaders, and the tensions between associations' goals and commitments and how these manifest.

The ways in which Tibetan ethnic identity, or Tibetanness, has been defined and visually represented by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) is a problem for contemporary Tibetan artists. Described through three State museum exhibitions in Lhasa, the subjects, iconographic conventions and materials of Socialist Realism adapted to and for Tibet may be characterized by exaggerated physical gesture and facial expression, teleological political orientation, and superficial treatments of bodies, principally through dress, to convey ethnicity as pre-modern and traditional and Tibetan minority status as ornamental relative to the modern Han nation. Another set of visual materials, the artwork of contemporary artists in Lhasa and especially the portraiture of Tsewang Tashi, offers a response to the state's visual tropes of Tibetanness, and proposes alternative images of Tibetanness that insists upon both the Tibetanness and modernity of Lhasans amid globalization. Such work begins to fill a long-standing gap, recognized by both Tibetan artists and in Tibetan Studies, in Tibetan self-representation.

Tibetans born during and since the consolidation of power over Tibet by the People's Republic of China, and in particular the subsequent Cultural Revolution era, experience unease regarding religion; it is a confusing matrix of cultural authenticity and incomplete inheritance for many. A profusion of ways in which contemporary artists utilize Tibetan Buddhist imagery, methods, materials and compositions has arisen which reflect and comment upon these current conditions. By tracing the artistic career of one painter, Gade, from his attempt to infuse his paintings with Tibetan Buddhist concepts which he felt ultimately unqualified to represent, to personal, secular works of art in which social reflections are grounded in traditional compositional motifs and materials, Buddhist imagery emerges as a common visual language for Tibetans. Gade finds this visual language allows a work to "look like" a Tibetan (Buddhist) painting, and this may enable important connections to the past and imaging of collectivity in the present. The image of the Buddha appears in many contemporary artists' work, I postulate, as a placeholder for tradition, in ways not merely nostalgic but as a form of reflection upon cultural transmission and sustaining community in complicated times. Tibetan and outsiders' anxieties

about the state of religion in Tibet under communism and its cultural role in the age of globalization is warranted, but so too is the ways in which contemporary artists have refused to un-tether themselves entirely from the cultural moorings that imbue Tibetan visuality, while at the same time offering alternatives to expectations.

Finally, I explored the professional, aesthetic, and political constraints contemporary Tibetan artists have faced since the 1980s, specifically by examining how one artist has worked against them to create works in unprecedented media and subject matter. Nortse had always wanted to lay claim to specific and broader artistic identities than those offered by his cultural and political contexts, and discovered that his ideological commitments about the roles of art and artists within modern Tibet and China necessitates exploring how to live with difficult personal and collective pasts. Thus the most subtle, pervasive, and difficult constraint, that of the past, necessitated Nortse's recourse to autobiographical and collective memory of trauma, explored by the artist in a self-portrait series, in a process I refer to as creative visual memory work. Creating a past is an assertion of agency against events, people or powers that threaten to overwhelm and control memory. Thus for Tibetans to establish records of the past is paramount, but in a time of second generation postmemory and colonial power, the record can never be completely known or fixed. For Nortse, modern society cannot be understood by Tibetans or observers without consideration of collective memory and personal pasts. Today's artists take up the role of cultural producers and cultural authorities to speak about changing Tibet today, and to re-present Tibet's place in a globalizing world; this requires contemplating the past, against which such changes are measured.

My analysis of contemporary Tibetan painting leads up to reflections on the past because the presence of the past in the present is important to attend to in contexts, such as modern Tibet, which tend towards polarization of "modern" and "traditional" practices. Notions of "tradition" are complicated in Tibet, particularly in the aftermath of recent collective traumas and in contexts of Chinese colonialism, modernization, and globalization. In such contexts, authenticity is too

often conferred upon tradition alone. Contemporary art in Tibet documents how religion and culture are at the heart of tensions between “traditional” and “modern” that ensnare novel cultural formations and politics in battles over cultural authenticity. But contemporary artists, like other cultural producers and intellectuals in Tibet, are concerned with Tibetan cultural survival in a radically different era than the ones in which their heritage formed and thrived in the past one thousand years. Contemporary art points to a ‘middle way’ in which the present is not rendered “inauthentic” due to a perceived cutting off from the past. The persistence of memory, and the pasts made visible in the aesthetics, motifs, materials, imagery, and referents in art, attest that the past anyway cannot be cut off, but remains. It is the meanings attributed to these enduring pasts which are always being constructed: are they mere traces of a fading, irretrievable past, or sources of tradition that may yet infuse contemporary cultural pride?

My own conclusion is that artists’ contexts, practices and discourses in contemporary Lhasa suggest art impacts cultural identity, representation and transmission as a pioneering practice of cultural sustainability in post-Mao Lhasa. As such, contemporary art furthers our limited understanding of Tibetan lives and conceptions of authenticity in modern Tibetan culture at the start of the twenty-first century.

Postscript

As an alternative way to honor and take leave of this particular project, I offer my final reflections in the form of a personal postscript. One exhibition in particular is powerfully emblematic to me of both the long distance that has been covered in the decade of I have been involved with contemporary Tibetan art, and is a harbinger of things to come. The artist Gade and the Chinese contemporary art critic Li Xianting joined to co-curate the landmark exhibition “Scorching Sun of Tibet” in the fall of 2010 in Beijing. The exhibition also elicited personal comparisons to a previous Beijing exhibition, which I had been invited to co-curate.

In 2007, after a Scholar-in-Residence month at Red Gate Gallery in Beijing, founder Brian Wallace and curator Tony Scott invited me to co-curate an exhibition of contemporary

Tibetan art. It would be the first exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art in a world-class gallery, known for its critical role in the contemporary Chinese art world. The exhibition would be held in Red Gate's gallery at 798, a complex of former Bauhaus warehouses, converted in the 1980s by bohemian Chinese artists into studios and eventually became the epicenter for the Chinese avant-garde. For the artists I worked with, the exhibition represented an opportunity to be received on par with other contemporary artists; Red Gate was not hosting them because of their exotic ethnicity, romantic primitive nostalgia, nor mystical religious traditions, but because they were emerging contemporary artists deserving of the same nurturing that Red Gate had extended new promising artists throughout China since their opening in the early 1980s, and from their main gallery in the Ming Dynasty Dongbianmen Watchtower. Moreover, the Tibetan artists from Lhasa were eager to represent themselves in dialogue with their Chinese artist compatriots, a proposition that filled them with a mix of hopefulness and curiosity. As we prepared in Lhasa, the enthusiasm generated by their recognition by Red Gate and their desire for genuine critical response to their work was momentarily sidelined after we arrived in Beijing and entered entirely new international contemporary art worlds. I became a mediator between the artists and journalists (even sitting in on interviews with Western journalists and reminding them in Tibetan that they didn't have to answer questions that felt too political) and the gallery owners over pricing their work at "fair" market prices (about which none of us had so much as a clue) and the challenges of mounting a highly professional show with a tri-lingual publication, while gathering short term and long ranging advice about cultivating international artistic careers.

Although there were multiple intriguing, eye-opening, and powerful moments in that week, in hindsight, vignettes of two moments in those heady days especially shaped the following years. One day, as Red Gate curator Tony Scott and the guys and I took a break from our installation work in the gallery to enjoy lunch at the hip Japanese restaurant within 798, Tony's eyes darted toward the café door. He casually mentioned, in his Australian accent, "Oh, there are the boys from Goldman Sachs. They're having a look around for abstracts this trip."

Later, Tony rose from the table mid-conversation and when he returned, he commented, with a wink, “Guess who I just bumped in to on the way to the gent’s room? I mentioned I was just hanging a new show of contemporary Tibetan work with a few semi-abstract pieces.” Tony reported he hadn’t seen any flicker of interest on the gentleman’s face, but thought he would probably take the information back to the others at their private table upstairs, and they might give him a call in the coming days. The artists and I, it’s fair to say, were awestruck by our first eye-witness experience of the timing and style with which a professional art agent worked with extraordinarily wealthy clients. We returned to the gallery, facing challenges of Gonkar Gyatso’s artwork stuck in customs, stretchers made in Beijing that didn’t fit paintings brought from Lhasa, and reconciling differences over the price list. Then a charismatic Chinese artist working as a buyer for a wealthy Australian collector pranced in with the postcard he’d received announcing the exhibition. Proclaiming his delight in discovering “there *even was* such as thing as Contemporary Tibetan!”, he circled the room in which the exhibition art was propped up on walls and spread on the floor near their stretchers singing out, “I’ll take that one, and that one...and that one!” Tony suavely encouraged his enthusiasm, while also cautioning that not everything was available for sale and the final prices had not yet been confirmed with the artists. The next day, when the prices were reported to him, a hissy fit of drama unfolded anyway, demanding sensitive negotiations, in response to which all I could offer was bewildered sympathy for Tony’s fretting over client relations. The promotion and attention the show was generating before we’d even hung the works on the walls was simply staggering.



Figure 113 Opening night of the exhibition "Lhasa: New Art from Tibet" at Red Gate Gallery/798,

Back row, from left: Tsewang Tashi, Leigh Miller Sangster, Brian Wallace, Tony Scott, Tsering Nyandak, Nortse. Front row, from left: Gonkar Gyatso, Gade, Keltse. Photograph: Jason Sangster.



Figure 114 Installation views. Lhasa: New Art from Tibet. Red Gate Gallery / 798. May 2007. Photographs: Tony Scott

I'd loved entering into this world alongside the artists, in a role as fellow learner, advocate, and most importantly, cultural translator who could provide context for the artists' productions in the catalog essay, wall panels, interviews, and a couple of well-attended presentations in Beijing. Well-meaning ex-pat art world actors advised me to 'hitch myself to these guys' because I understood them, passionately and articulately represented them, they trusted me, and, it was not so subtly implied, because they were going to make it big and would

need an agent, and if I didn't step in, someone else would, and quick. The fantasy was alluring: I'd set up a rewarding and exhilarating life between Lhasa, accepting the Gedun Choephel Guild members' invitation to help them start up their dream of an artists' complex, and Beijing organizing exhibitions (and hobnobbing with art world socialites at Campari-filled happy hours). But, back in reality, I could not see myself as a start-up fundraiser, a legitimately informed advisor to artists, as able to casually greet millionaires by name, and pitching to clients and collectors and scouts. Furthermore, while I understood the critical role agents played for artists, ultimately the suggestion that I make a living off of commission from the sale of Tibetan artists' work was utterly unthinkable for me. I would go back to America, write a dissertation, and remain a friend and supporter as an academic.

The artists meanwhile had a very different pivotal experience in Beijing in 2007. Over the past few years, the poet, blogger, and essayist Tsering Woeser had become one of the few Tibetans to write in Chinese about contemporary Tibetan artists, expressing a poetic sensitivity to and passionate interest in their work. Woeser, as she is known internationally, has a following of thousands of Tibetans and westerners who find her an unprecedented and fearless voice of contemporary Tibetan life. Much of her writing and journalism have been censored or banned by the government, her blogs repeatedly shut down, and she has been confined to house arrest in Beijing on multiple occasions. Forbidden to travel abroad, even to accept international humanitarian and literary awards, she still manages frequent trips to Lhasa, where she has conducted oral histories and interviews with Lhasans about everyday life and development of the city, her birthplace, but also about the Cultural Revolution past, the political riots of 2008, and the self-immolations that have continued unabated since 2009. While artists may have been initially reticent about association with her for their own safety, the soft-spoken manner, sharp intellect, artistic sensibility, and quick sense of humor of this petite woman make her utterly irresistible as an ally in the struggle for Tibetan self-representation internationally, and among artist-intellectual circles in Beijing. And, we learned on the way to Beijing, her husband, the Han political dissident

Wang Lixiong, was friends with the preeminent art critic of the Chinese underground and avant-garde, Li Xianting; the sympathetic couple was happy to arrange a meeting between Li Xianting and the artists.

After contemporary Chinese art began commanding skyrocketing prices at the auction houses in New York and London, the 798 compound was transformed by the international art market; artists had become unable to compete with galleries and shops for affordable rent, and the parade of tourists became a distraction to the work of a studio. A new artists' colony was coalescing on the city outskirts, and in its center was the massive Songzhuang Art Center, founded by Li Xianting. Woese, Gade, Nortse, Gonkar Gyatso, Keltse, Tsering Nyandak, Clare Harris, and I were welcomed by Li Xianting and his wife in their home for tea and spirited conversation about the history of contemporary Chinese art and the differences with the emergence of contemporary Tibetan art two decades later. Then Li Xianting invited us to tour Songzhuang with him. The artists were impressed by the development and the beautiful space, but when Li Xianting proposed they consider mounting their next major Beijing exhibition in his Art Center, they were struck speechless. His endorsement had been unthinkable. Filling the cavernous museum-scale gallery was unthinkable, as they stood in the middle gazing around the open space. Gade and Nortse asked me quietly on the side if I would help coordinate, and I was speechless. As Gade recalled later, "We were quite excited, but also feeling a lot pressure - Mr. Li Xianting's academic authority and large space of Songzhuang Art Museum are a bit overwhelming." But a seed was planted in 2007, and in 2009 planning began, completely under the direction of Li Xianting and Gade.

In 2010, pictures started coming to my Inbox, showing up in Woese's Facebook page, and then, in October, I opened my mailbox to find a package from China. Inside were two copies of a gorgeous, tri-lingual 202 page catalog for "Scorching Sun of Tibet – Contemporary Tibetan Art Show".



Figure 115 Scorching Sun of Tibet, exhibition catalog cover, 2010.

It happens to me again now, as it did four years ago. Turning the pages of the catalog, looking at the images of the work by both artists I knew well and those I'd never met, and revisiting Woesser's snapshots taken in the gallery during the installation (of the guys, occasionally shirtless, working with thoughtfulness and also playfulness, humility and pride, to mount the show) and at the opening reception.... I see how they so perfectly fill the space, so naturally fit and belong there. I am struck, again, with the thought "This is completely amazing! In just a few fast years..." and goosebumps spread over my skin and tears have sprung to my eyes. The work by many of the artists is far and above the best work I've seen them produce, the range of media employed and the scale of the productions surpasses all prior collections, and the organizers included young and less developed Tibetan artists, Tibetan artists working internationally and Chinese artists whose careers have been strongly marked by periods of artistic production in Tibet. This remarkable accomplishment, of an exhibition tremendous in scope, inclusivity, and accomplished artistry, was also achieved entirely by their own making, their own vision, and was not beholden to an outcome of gallery sales. It was simply unprecedented in so

many important ways; abundantly clear to me after our first major gallery show in Beijing together just three years prior.



Figure 116 Nortse. 30 Letters. 2010.
insallation of iron and earth.
Photograph: Tsering Woser

In the exhibition catalog essay, Gade notes the difficulty he faced in collecting works sufficient in quality and quantity: “In Tibet, there are actually not many contemporary artists apart from the over 20 artists in Gedun Choephel Gallery, let alone finding good art works here.” Gade connected with artists in Qinghai, Sichuan and Beijing, and abroad, then assembled works at the Gedun Choephel Gallery for a first-round review by a jury. The collection, including works from younger artists, was surprisingly impressive and bolstered confidence to proceed with facing the formidable obstacle of funding. Financial challenges are common for exhibition planners, but in Tibet, it is not uncommon to “have to go through endless censorship and supervision which are unbelievable to artists in other provinces, then your exhibition eventually end[s] up with nothing,” Gade wrote. Li Xianting, came to Lhasa with curatorial assistants from Beijing to make the carefully considered selections. The exhibition came to represent finally access to a “mainstream platform” from which to protest a cultural condition in which “There is only one 'imaginary Tibet' in people’s mind, while the one in reality has always being erased.” Gade asserts the gap of Tibetan self-representation, and even acknowledges the difficulty Tibetans have encountered in attempts to escape the gravitational pull of hegemonic representations. Gade asks, “Out of thousands of works related to Tibet, how many were made with our mother language?” He answers the point of the exhibition is not to prove to anyone or settle the question of whether

there exists such a thing as “contemporary art” in Tibet. Rather, Gade concludes, the effort of contemporary Tibetan artists to create self-representation is hugely significant: “the important thing is to show another way to depict Tibet. In the context of economic changes, secularization and globalization, every Tibetan is in the middle of an ever-experienced spiritual transition and religious transformation, while all of these can only be tasted and expressed by ourselves.”

A detailed exploration of the artworks and expressions in “Scorching Sun of Tibet” is a separate project, but the artworks by Tibetans in this exhibition do continue to manifest the themes I outlined above. Works by TseKal, Tsewang Tashi, Gade, Somani, Keltse, and Phurpu Gyalpo especially comment upon representation of Tibetan ethnic identity. Penpa Wangdu, Tsering Dolma, Tenzin Dhargya, Gade, Kalzang Norbu, Jhamang, Angsang, and Kaka 21 continue the original and beautiful appropriation and deployment of Tibetan Buddhist imagery and aesthetics for variable purposes from the highly personal and religious to critical social commentary. The collective traumatic past (both decades past and of the preceding months) and personal memory continues to haunt the present in works by Penpa, Kalsang, Tashi Phuntsok, Tsering Nyandak, and Nortse.



Figure 117 Tsering Nyandak. Boy No.1. 2010. Mixed media on canvas. 100 x 80 cm.

Approaches that had sprouted during the time of my fieldwork, such as multi-media and installation artworks, had come into fuller expression, including the use of new technologies in Tibetan life and in the production of art, highlighted in works by Anu Shelkar and Tashi Norbu, as well as by the inclusion of several Tibetan filmmakers. Many artists who were primarily painters ventured into new media, especially photographic documentation of site-specific performances, on-site performance pieces during the exhibition, and large scale installations. These installations included the re-location of a large, ornate, traditional wooden door and doorway, installed by Penpa with transparent glass blocking passage through. Gade manufactured wood frames encasing traditional-looking prayer wheels, but has the brass embossed not with mantras, but Chinese watchwords of Communist ideology. Nortse's *30 Letters* covered a large area with metal frames that each enclosed a single, large metal Tibetan letter crafted from fused iron plates, the letters rusty but heavily and firmly nestled in piles of earth. Yak Tsetan and TseKal collaborated in the construction of a massive stupa, constructed out of rows and rows of empty bottles of Lhasa beer on a metal frame. The stupa had been first build and photographed on the Tibetan grasslands, and then re-constructed within the Songzhuang Art Center.



Figure 118 Opening ceremony for Scorching Sun of Tibet, 2010.9.10 at 11 am (September 10, 2010). In background: "Arak Stupa" by Yak Tsetan and Kaltse 2010; "Dialogue" by Zhuoquan Liu and Nortse. Photograph. 2009.

Future viewers may, in retrospect, also find in this exhibition the emergence or initiation of other new directions. One of these may be collaboration between Tibetan and Han artists, which demonstrates “equality and mutual respect,” as in the work “Dialogue” by Nortse and Liu Zhuoquan, Li Xianting writes. Li Xianting finds in this work, and in the individual works by Tashi Norbu and Tsewang Tashi and Liu Zhuoquan, a reminder that Han artists in Tibet have been “in the position of spectator or observer watching Tibet from outside. Mostly being depicted and being sought for novelty.” This is poised to change.

These accomplishments are, however, not to be taken as a simple affirmation that all is well in modern Tibet. I agree with Li Xianting’s assessment that many of these works exhibit profound states of cultural depression, psychological conflict, anxiety and restlessness. Multiple influences – modernization, globalization, secularization, sinocization, Russian, Socialist, Western arts, etc. – are also evident in the contemporary movement. These elements have been present, and will remain still for some time to come, sadly. The point I want to make is that artists express these states and manipulate influences in ways that are deeply informed by their cultural identity, artistic lineages, and contemporary conditions in Tibet, where they live and work in creative ways that, if nothing else, are empowering because they are of their own making.

Conclusion Reprised

I asked in the beginning of this study, as I did before field work, if contemporary Tibetan art may be a vehicle for Tibetan cultural sustainability in post-Cultural Revolution, post-Deng, globalizing Lhasa. I took this question seriously, although it broke my heart to acknowledge I might end up, after my research, concluding that this was a study in forgetting and loss. There will be those who continue read contemporary artists works as appealing to commercial tastes, as desecrating and vacating Tibetan religion’s profound meanings, as derivative modernism, and as mere superficial updating of traditional persuasions. I hope this work however attests to another

possibility: that of the far more profound workings at the intersections of cultural memory and individual creativity.

And with every passing exhibition – and there have now been several dozen in the past ten years since I first met artists in Lhasa – they just keep getting better. To me (and I believe the artists would agree), “better,” refers to developments with their technique, innovating with their materials, grappling with increasingly complex conceptual issues, confronting ever-deeper layers of self-censorship and inhibitions to claiming their own identities. They are overcoming or transcending former professional limitations, and “Scorching Sun” demonstrated capacity to do so even without recourse to the foreign organizations and audiences that first afforded alternatives to the national art system. The stakes are also higher. Since 2008, artists in Lhasa have suffered bouts of creative paralysis in the face of political horror and pressure. Artists have been interrogated, had their passports revoked, witnessed incommunicable traumas, and escaped temporarily to foreign countries to work. But they show no sign of quitting; the compulsion to create always returns.

Nowadays, I’m struck speechless not by these artists’ personal and professional successes, but by those who fail to grasp the magnitude of their selfless dedication to artistic and cultural identities, to their homeland, to examining their and their fellow Tibetans’ experience of racing headlong into worlds that bear little resemblance to those of their predecessors. I recall the words of the artist Jhamsang, who painted *Century of Change* (2006). In commentary upon the work synthesizing 14th century iconography and the inner wirings and nodes of a computer motherboard, he said he “doesn’t know how to meditate or talk to Buddhas” but perhaps with advances in modern technology, he might one day “send them an email!” His laugh belied both amusement, and acknowledgement that his religious knowledge was not aligned with outsiders’ expectations or potentially former indigenous ways of relating to Buddhas. Nonetheless, he told me, “artists cannot be Xerox machines,” responding to critique of artists who deviate from

traditional *thangka* painting. I use the term cultural sustainability for the work of these artists to resist tendencies to judge authenticity by standards applied to photocopiers.



Figure 119 Jhamsang. Century of Change. 2006. mixed media on canvas. Photograph: Jason Sangster.

By assembling, describing and analyzing a specific set of contemporary artists' work this study makes visible a phenomenon that otherwise remains all but unnoticed. This study also demonstrates new ways in which fields of anthropological studies of modernity, art, and narrative and memory studies may intersect. Most concretely, this study contributes to ethnographic research of modern Tibet within the PRC as an overdue field within Tibetan studies. Tibetans are the ones who are and will articulate what it means to be a Tibetan in the modern world, but I am honored to attempt to amplify, appreciate, and contemplate their work.

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¹ The Dalai Lamas have exercised political and religious leadership of Tibet in successive reincarnations since the Fifth Dalai Lama consolidated power in 1642. In 2011, the present Fourteenth Dalai Lama voluntarily abdicated political leadership, against the wishes of most Tibetans, and insisted upon the exercise of democracy upon which the Central Tibetan Administration, the Tibetan government in exile, is build to elect a new highest political leader. The Dalai Lama remains the spiritual leader of Tibetan Buddhists.

² My interest in this phenomenon had been shaped by my early interest in my own family history. A trace of my relatives' forever-lost world, the Jewish shtetls of Eastern Europe, felt only faintly transmitted to my childhood in my grandparents' Yiddish phrases and a few family recipes. I grew up within a Judaic world which had re-conceived itself in terms of a past too horrific, too painful and too impossible to transmit, and a future defined by cohesion through beliefs and practices that were transferrable to new lands. I wondered what especially made me the great-granddaughter of an Orthodox Ukrainian artist or Polish seamstress. At what costs did the American assimilation of their children come? It did not occur to me to wonder whether, after pogroms and the Holocaust, the Jewish experience could have been otherwise.

³ In fact, innovation seemed more likely to thrive inside PRC controlled Tibet than in exile, where young people felt increasingly hampered and frustrated by the conservative social views and cultural expectations of their elders. Divisiveness in Dharamsala was also fomented by the condescension some successful exiles felt towards newly arrived refugees from Tibet with so-called Chinese haircuts, dress, and music, constituting a nationalistic reactivity against occupiers, but also hypocritically denying the Hindi cultural influence upon Tibetans born in India as then equally degenerate to their 'Tibetanness'.

⁴ Interviews, Sonam Dhondup, February – March, 2001.

⁵ Amnesty International and others are of course right to object to the imprisonment and torture of political dissidents. But what about the successful American protest against the opening of a Kentucky Fried Chicken in Lhasa on the grounds that it would be detrimental to local culture? As one Tibetan in Lhasa told me, "No one asked us if we wanted a KFC here. And we did (Gade, interview, 2003)." Also implied was the lost possibility that American corporate influence upon Chinese business in Lhasa may have had a positive impact on economic development of the region. I had also heard a similar critique leveled against the pre-1959 Tibetan government: a Tibetan joked that had they cooperated with the British, rather than resisting the Younghusband invasion of 1904, today Tibet could have been another Hong Kong! What is of interest to me here is that Tibetans recognize and wish to control the short and long term consequences of political, economic, and cultural change in their region, rather than the totalizing opposition to both China's occupation and modernization that marks outsiders' protests.

⁶ These are epitomized in the exchange of White Papers extensively cited in *In the Margins of Tibet* (Kolas and Thowsen 2005), and taken up in *History as Propaganda* (Powers 2004). Kolas and Thowsen's study examined the clash between exile Tibetans and the PRC government on the status of cultural preservation inside Tibet. They researched quantifiable measures of cultural life in the two domains of Tibetan language, and the reconstruction and inhabitation of Tibetan monasteries. In these examples, religion, here defined in its most conservative and institutionalized form, becomes an essential yardstick by which contemporary cultural vitality is measured. The number of monks and monasteries rebuilt were compiled by

county (in Tibetan areas outside the TAR) and this measurement of institutional religion was compared to 1950s statistics to allegedly assess, with empirical, non-rhetorical methods, the degree to which Tibetan pre-Cultural Revolution society had been revived. Religion, in institutional monastic form, becomes critical to western scholastic assessment of the status of Tibetan freedoms and repressions and cultural health and revival in the Post-Mao era.

⁷ Recovery is exacerbated by ongoing colonialism inhibiting revival and rebuilding for this generation, as well as by the re-traumatizing and pan-Tibetan unification-building surges of protests since 2008. The post-2008 cultural productions (particularly of those born since about 1980), however, may prove to differ; music recordings and videos, poetry, art and likely other forms of artistic expression by younger Tibetans are directly referencing protests and self-immolations since 2008. These often occur within a framework of opposition to oppressors and calls for unity among Tibetans and pride in their language and heritage that should manifest as active engagement in present study, practice, speaking, and everyday integration of Tibetan-ness into modern lives. This would seem to mark a shift in the temporal historic and metaphoric references, relation to history, and view of contemporary society compared with pre-2008 contemporary art. Regrettably, the current project is unable to fully explore this comparison or an emerging shift in cultural productions and the modes of referencing past and present, but it may become a fascinating area for research. In any case, it is clear that Tibetan culture producers remain committed to the sustainability and promotion of Tibetan-ness, and generational experiences as well as current events suggest strategies for pursuing artistic modes of expression and reflection.

⁸ “Artists must *change* their culture by emphasizing certain aspects of it, aspects perhaps previously ignored. The artist’s version may... reveal the extent to which shared conceptual models are inadequate because they exclude or deny some part of reality. Artists everywhere operate skillfully within the very socio-cultural contexts that formed them. Their work is received and recognized to varying degrees within these contexts. They are experts in their own cultures,” Hiller stated in 1976 (Hiller 1996).

⁹ In an interview included in the documentary *Digital Dharma* (Yachin 2012), E. Gene Smith (1936 - 2010) narrates his experience as a student of Dshung Rinpoche, the first Tibetan lama brought to the United States in 1959 to teach at the University of Seattle. Smith explained how fortunate it was that great lamas had the texts and histories of their lineages in their heads, but western-style historical scholarship was impossible to conduct in the absence of “books to cite in the footnotes!” Smith reports Dshung Rinpoche advised him to go to India to find the texts. He joined the Library of Congress’ field office in India and applied PL480, a public law which allowed the sale of American agricultural commodities in developing countries in the local currency which was then reinvested in local humanitarian projects, to enable the purchase, copying and reprinting of rare Tibetan texts. These were then distributed to major universities and libraries worldwide, and to the Tibetan lamas and monasteries re-establishing themselves in exile. Gene Smith never completed his doctoral degree, but was a convivial and humble gentleman, regarded as a hero for his textual preservation and cultural sustainability efforts and a peerless intellectual with an encyclopedic knowledge and comprehension of Tibetan literary genres, and was sought after and relied upon by western scholars and Tibetan lamas alike.

Also surprising is the building of an academic field largely upon the access to Tibetan refugees – who initially had no material resources for their survival let alone the libraries they left behind – when thousands followed the Dalai Lama into exile in 1959. E. Gene Smith was almost single-handedly responsible for the recovering, collecting, reprinting and redistributing of the

surviving Tibetan literary cannon. This became a lifelong project, continued in the work of the Tibetan Buddhist Resource Center, which Smith founded in New York in 1999. Popular interest in Tibet, post-World War II growth of religious studies departments, and a few translations of Tibetan texts published in Europe in the early twentieth century, once galvanized by the presence of highly educated Tibetan lama refugees outside of the PRC and fortified by gradual access to Tibetan scriptures thanks to Gene Smith, finally created the conditions for the birth of the field in the United States.

¹⁰ Tibetan language is one of the four canonical languages (with Sanskrit, Pali, and Chinese) of Buddhism, one of the world's largest religions, and the Tibetan civilization has existed in unbroken continuity for over two thousand years, with periods of military, religious, and political power or influence over most of central Asia, and accomplishments in art, literature, medicine, philosophy, and spiritual practices on par with the world's greatest civilizations. The Tibetan cultural realm, and at times political influence, extended far beyond the geological Tibet. After the sunset of Tibetan military strength in Asia, they captured neighbors' faith with Vajrayana Buddhism. Monasteries and temples in the Tibetan tradition were established as far as current-day Russia and Pakistan, and the Tibetan temple in Beijing held sway at times over the dynastic courts, particularly the Yuan in the fifteenth century, when the Sakya hierarch was named Imperial Preceptor to the Mongol Khan Emperor. Several ethnic groups along the southern slopes of the Himalayas, the most well known of which are the Sherpas of Nepal, are descendants of Tibetans. The formerly independent kingdoms of Sikkim and Lhadakh (now part of India) and Mustang (now within Nepal), and the small Buddhist kingdom of Bhutan practice Tibetan Buddhism. The reach of military and then religious power and influence, canonical (if not also colloquial) use of Tibetan language and script, and other shared social and cultural features of these far-flung societies and over many centuries, and as scholarship and cultural innovation and expertise developed in the homeland to be spread by traders, artists, pilgrims and politicians made the Tibetan civilization one of the world's greatest.

¹¹ On the one hand, that a field of Tibetan studies even exists is amazing. After all, Tibet has been virtually inaccessible for centuries; challenges to physically traverse the vast distances over harsh terrain from outside the plateau, ringed by the world's highest mountains, to the capital of Lhasa, have been compounded by waxing and waning missionary, colonial, political, economic, and xenophobic agendas of foreigners and Tibetans. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the mystique, and in turn desire, generated by Tibet's perceived isolation from the rest of the world left ample opportunity for romantic projection, only occasionally challenged by eyewitness reports of Tibetans as "ignorant, superstitious and intellectually atrophied", in the words of Susie Carson Rijnhart, a medical missionary in Tibet from 1895-1899, (J. D. Lopez 1998), their religion a debased, corruption of "original Buddhism". For the Victorian British officer L.A. Waddell, it was the highly symbolic tantric arts which revealed the Tibetan psyche to be of debased morals and preoccupied with garish glorification of the carnal and violent. Orientalists' prized study of surviving Sanskrit scriptures from ancient India. For Victorians, expanding fields of study in comparative religions and world philosophies on the basis of increasing knowledge produced from the colonies, Tibet was a footnote – having never been colonized, it existed for European scholars as a derivative unworthy of further serious investigation, or, at best, a secondary linguistic interest in support of other studies. Western knowledge of Tibet was tied to colonial projects, imperialist desires and knowledge production in the centers of colonial power, where Tibet's Vajrayana Buddhist art was of fascination, particularly when Tibetan people themselves were little known. And then, just as colonialism was waning and only two years after India won independence from the British, Mao Zedong declared

the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, and by 1951 had annexed Tibet, sealing it off from foreigners in 1959 until after his death in 1976.

¹² Following the 1959 exile of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama into exile with some 80,000 followers, a grant funded by the Rockefellers enabled the commencement of the academic study of Tibetan with Tibetan lamas at universities.

¹³ Though often polemical, the frequency with which the question of how to define "Tibet" has arisen in the past decade indicates there is no simple answer. Frameworks for defining "Tibet" necessarily emerge whenever the future of its politics, people, or culture arise, contributing to assertions of "tradition" and often the flattening of regional or other variation for the presentation of a unified if not homogenous body.

In the 1990s and early 2000s, the constructions of western images of Tibet was illuminated in several studies: Schell's treatment of Hollywood's Tibet in *Virtual Tibet: Searching for Shangri-La from the Himalayas to Hollywood* (2000), Brauen's *Dream World Tibet: Western Illusions* (2004) looks at American and European popular culture from comic books to advertisements, Hopkirk analyzes the narratives of European missionaries and explorers (Hopkirk 1995), and *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, and Fantasies* (Dodin and Rather 1996) is an important historical survey of literature. "Tibet" appears as a set of outsider's projections. Lopez points out that these projects swing like a pendulum between romanticized and demonized representations of Tibet, with the current romance creating a "prison of Shangri-la" in which Tibetans, Tibetologists and Western Buddhists alike become the guards and inmates. Lopez's 'prisoners' thesis has been criticized as an over reification of western influence (Dreyfus 2005) (Germano 2001) (T. Shakya 2001) (Thurman 2001).

¹⁴ The British colonial officers in Tibet in the 1930s and 1940s, deployed by London and the Commonwealth's colonial government of India to central Tibet, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, included photographers and political officers had a voracious appetite for documentation of the secular and material environment (Pitt Rivers Museum; The British Museum) and also formed close relationships with the lay elite, in whom they found jovial camaraderie.

¹⁵ Grimshaw's (1992) personal memoir of dissertation research, *Servants of the Buddha: Winter in a Himalayan Convent*, offers a portrait of a small group of nuns, but her exquisite rendering of the cold weather and their seemingly inadequate clothing, the meager food, the hours of physical labor required to sustain themselves, the nunnery and in part, the affiliated monastery, at high elevation and without electricity or plumbing, as well as the nuns' sisterly bonds and their (at times critical) commentary on their status relative to the proximate monastery and village, all combine to refuse to reinforce local or foreign notions of Buddhist institutions as places defined only in terms of their religious efficacy and spiritual or moral superiority. This intense ethnographic focus on a single site and time is an approach which has been rare in Tibetan studies, and one wonders whether the author's refusal to celebrate Buddhist lives or philosophy makes the study a challenge for the field to embrace.

¹⁶ The Thirteenth Dalai Lama is noted as a reformist who struggled against the often stronger opposition of conservatives in his administration and religious hierarchy for modernization of the country. In the first half of the twentieth century, representatives of the Lhasa government engaged in practices future scholars point to as evidence of de facto independent nationhood: participation in international treaty conventions with India, China, and

Britain; issued passports, postage stamps, and currency; ejected foreigners from their borders; and so forth.

¹⁷ For example, Lungshar attempted political reform from within the Gaden Potrang government cabinet, and was brutally persecuted as a result (M. Goldstein 1989); Bapa Phuntsok Wangye, Tibet's first Communist attempted reform in alliance with Han who advocated Marx's vision of federation of autonomous minorities (M. C. Goldstein 2006); Sherab Gyaltzen was a liberal teacher at Drepung Monastery; and, most famously, Gedun Choephel is celebrated as Tibet's first modernist and lay and monastic scholars flocked to study with him in Lhasa during the six months between his return from India and his imprisonment by the Lhasa government (D. S. Lopez 2006). Lopez cites examples of advocates of modernity as evidence of the false view of Tibet's isolationism.

¹⁸ Many contend the Seventeen Point Agreement was signed by Tibetan officials under duress, and was subsequently also refuted by the Dalai Lama.

¹⁹ China has defined "Tibet" as the Tibetan Autonomous Region (Xizang, Ch.), created in 1965, China's second-largest but least densely populated province, spanning over 1.2 million kilometers. Its borders roughly correlate with the Lhasa-based Dalai Lama's central government administrative control when annexed by China in 1951. The TAR is over 90% ethnically Tibetan according to the 2000 China census, and includes the traditional provinces of U-Tsang and half of Kham. This administrative demarcation splits the same ethno-cultural population between the TAR and the former traditional provinces of eastern Kham and Amdo, which have been annexed into the contiguous Chinese administrative provinces of Gansu, Qinghai, Sichuan, and Yunnan, where Tibetans are minorities. Tibet has also been defined, notably by Tibetans living in exile since 1959, as "Greater Tibet," the traditional provinces of U-Tsang, Kham and Amdo comprising a whole larger than the "central Tibet" administrated from Lhasa. Not only a historical point of interest, debates about the territorial and national boundaries of Tibet are critical to exile Tibetans' claims to autonomy or independence and ongoing international tensions. For example, the 1914 Shimla Convention was a belabored attempt to resolve borders shared by Tibet, India, and China, but the McMahon Line which resulted was never accepted by China, leading to the 1962 border war between China and India.

²⁰ The creation myth includes that the progenitors of the Tibetan people were a wild ogress and the compassionate Avalokiteshvara manifesting as a monkey.

²¹ The protests of 2008, and more than 130 self-immolations between February, 2009 and March 2014, galvanized and mobilized pan-Tibetan solidarity and strengthened Tibetan identity.

²² For example, see the testimonial autobiographies:

Jamyang Norbu, *Warriors of Tibet: Story of Aten and the Khampas' Fight for the Freedom of Their Country*, Wisdom Publications, 1986.

Palden Gyatso with Tsering Shakya, *Autobiography of a Tibetan Monk* (also published as *Fire under the Snow: The Testimony of a Tibetan Prisoner*), Harvill Press, London 1998.

Ani Pachen with Adelaide Donnelley, *Sorrow Mountain: The Journey of a Tibetan Warrior Nun*, Kodansha International, 2000.

Adhe Tapontsang and Joy Blakeslee, *Ama Adhe: The Voice that Remembers*, Wisdom, Boston, 1997.

²³ Signage in the Tibet Museum, Lhasa.

²⁴ Three artists with whom I worked exemplify ethnic hybridity that calls for further research in contemporary Tibet, but which I do not examine here. Zungde is a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild and was born to in Lhasa to Chinese parents, but, as Tibetan artists explained to me, their friend is very unusual because he speaks Tibetan. Gonkar Gyatso, perhaps the most internationally famous contemporary Tibetan artist today, was born in Lhasa to a Tibetan mother and Han father and was raised speaking Tibetan and Chinese in housing units and schools for children of Communist Party cadres and went to India in the mid-1980s in search of Tibetan religious and cultural roots. Gonkar has openly discussed his biography with me in interviews between 2003 – 2009, and aspects of which have been published by Harris. Gade, a founding member of the Gedun Choephel Guild with whom I worked closely, who is also published as a contemporary Tibetan artist, and is the focus of chapter four of this dissertation, was born in Lhasa to a Tibetan mother and Han father, but was raised within a Tibetan household as a Tibetan and is fluent in Tibetan and Mandarin. Both Gonkar and Gade were perceived by majority Han populations in eastern China as belonging to the Tibetan ethnic minority when they were art students in the 1980s. After identification at the beginning of their careers as “Tibetan” artists, the two have recently become more open about their, as Tibetans say, “half-half” status.

²⁵ During the Cultural Revolution era, the same tactic was employed when Buddha images were removed and replaced with images of Mao (Woeser 2006).

²⁶ Kvaerne also discusses in the same article a traditional secular festival, enacted under Party supervision in such a way as to confirm State constructions of Tibetans as colorful, primitive minorities within the nation.

²⁷ Yet the essay’s lack of commentary from artists or audiences of these works makes it impossible to know if the phenomenon was celebrated as at least a partial return to Tibetan culture and aesthetics, if not yet Buddhist *thangkas*, or regarded as further forms of State propaganda for the post-Maoist era. In the history of contemporary Tibetan art, the legacy of the Kandze movement may be that it marks an important step of introducing secular Tibetan subjects into Tibetanized visual forms, but on the other hand, the works created there may not have been much known outside the region. The Han-Tibetan synthetic approach Kvaerne first identified, however, continues to be a hallmark of Party supported art production about Tibet.

²⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Bruce Knauff, who created and taught the Ford Foundation funded Vernacular Modernities program at Emory University. The year I was in the seminar, one assignment was a book review of a book of our choice from our own field, and I wrote about Harris’ *In the Image of Tibet*. I concluded it by stating that I’d love to do a similar project one day, and Bruce replied, ‘Why not? Sounds great, Go for it!’ I then believed it would be possible, and began planning to use my Vernacular Modernities funding that summer of 2004 not only for Tibetan language study, but to begin interviewing artists in Lhasa. I quickly found that the issues of the seminar – how modernity arrives and takes forms and intersects with local cultures – which I wished to take up in relation to Tibet could be productively explored with artists and their productions.

²⁹ Harris (1999) does mistakenly attribute a mural of the *Three Kings* in Dharamsala, India, to Amdo Jampa and conflates more than one painter working there by the name of Jampa. I was curious about artists' perceptions of a few of her more political inferences. In Lhasa, I inquired with some artists whether Harris' suggestion that Han Shuli, a powerful Han Chinese artist in Tibet, had introduced young Tibetans to the value of their art historical heritage, and this was vehemently denied. Similarly, Harris describes the sequencing of the artworks in the publication *Contemporary Tibetan Art* (1991) as politically motivated, but artists I talked to and viewed the book with saw it as basically chronological.

³⁰ Harris' chapter on Gonkar Gyatso in (C. E. Harris 2012) is a more sophisticated argument for a "transnational" view of contemporary art reflective of postmodern, globalized experiences and influences. Gonkar Gyatso's movements between Chinese Communist Tibet and Socialist Realism art training, Tibetan exile community and *thangka* painting training, and as an immigrant in London all serve to complicate typical culture and place-bound notions of art. Gonkar Gyatso is unique amongst the Tibetan contemporary artists worldwide today for his life experiences and exceptional talent, but other Tibetans may come to similarly illustrate "transnational art" in the future.

³¹ Harris identifies, "the mudra adopted by Spiderman" as the "earth-touching posture (a sign of the Buddha's compassion for human suffering)." A more traditional understanding of the earth-touching mudra is the indication of the moment of enlightenment. Harris continues, "Ronald McDonald holding a hamburger in his lap, just as the "treasure vase" (*bumpa*) associated with the satisfaction of material desires is held by Buddhist figures with superhuman abilities (233)." Robert Beer (2003) defines *bumpa* in *The Handbook of Tibetan Buddhist Symbols* as a ritual vase with a spout used by lamas in rituals, that is, not something for the satisfaction of material desire; one wonders if Harris didn't mean to refer instead to the monastic begging bowl, shown in the lap of Shakyamuni Buddha, and used when receiving offerings of meals. Harris also describes Gade's script in the *pecha sarpa* series of paintings saying, "the 'Tibetan' text is created in the style of a rare script (Lantsa) that is not longer legible to Tibetans." However, Gade told me he used a "made up" script that emphasizes illegibility in the hybridization of Tibetan and Chinese characters, which suggests his intention was not to imitate an existent Tibetan script employed by the elite learned and for mantras. Harris also claims a painting, *Made in China*, "represents an inventory of his [the artists'] possessions and suggest that what have become most precious to contemporary Tibetans are the goods they can acquire from the outside world." This statement is likely to be both false and an embarrassment to the Tibetan artist, who is not offering a personal inventory of his home, but documenting the commodities that flood the markets of Lhasa certainly not all of which are "precious"; the painting is crowded with items including lipstick, condoms, sex toys, and hypodermic needles.

³² Harris (C. E. Harris 2012, 227) attributes the painting "Drolma Lisa" to the Naxi artist Jangyung (Jiang Yung), but it was painted by the Han artist Zhongde, who was born and raised in Lhasa.

³³ Ibid, p.229

³⁴ Ibid, p.237

³⁵ Tsering Woesser's short articles about Tsering Nyandak and the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild appeared in Chinese in a southwestern China daily newspaper, where Lhasa artists first read them, but it is unclear to me whether she wrote them for the newspaper, or the

newspaper reprinted them from another source, such as her blog. Woesser's writing about Tsering Nyandak was translated into English by Susan Chen (Woesser, On recent paintings of Tsering Nyandak 2006).

³⁶ Norbu reports the list of a couple dozen contemporary artists in the PRC known to him and the Dharamsala-based Amnye Machen Institute at the time of his writing.

³⁷ Norbu does not include images in the article nor explicit reference to many paintings, but I imagine he might here be referring to works that could have been produced specifically for the tourist market by artists with little other financial recourse, or by artists who had not yet matured in ways which have become more supported since his writing.

³⁸ Gade, Interview. January 9, 2007.

³⁹ Amdo is a region formerly of eastern Tibet, now Western Qinghai province, and men traditionally coifed are recognizable by the characteristic regional red threaded braid wrapped around the head.

⁴⁰ This word literally means 'former, earlier, prior, before, preceding, first' (Tibet and Himalayan Library), but also colloquially indicates historical periodization meaning "before (the Chinese)".

⁴¹ The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild opened their gallery in 2003 in the Barkhor, which remained their primary location until 2009. Brief explorations of alternative sites in 2004 and 2006 closer to Beijing Lu, and of land for purchase through 2006-2008, did not culminate in a move until 2009, when the group changed their name to G.C. Art Yard and relocated to Ti Yan Dao, a newly developed, primarily Tibetan residential island, along the banks of the Kyichu River forming the southern border of Lhasa. By the end of 2013, they had returned to their original Barkhor location.

⁴² Interview. Tannor (Tenzin Norbu), May 2007.

⁴³ More often Tibetan artists and professors in Lhasa have published articles in Tibetan and Chinese language in professional journals, but their subjects have been Tibetan art history, preservation and restoration of thangka and temple murals, and arts curriculum. These artists do find other opportunities, such as Professor and artist Tsewang Tashi, who has written two autobiographical papers presented at the International Association of Tibetan Studies (Tashi 2008) (Tashi 2007).

⁴⁴ See Rossi+Rossi (London), Sweet Tea House (London), Peaceful Wind (Santa Fe), Plum Blossom (Hong Kong), Red Gate (Beijing), University of Colorado (Boulder), and SongZhuang (Beijing), and online galleries such as www.asianart.com and www.mechak.com,

⁴⁵ I was hired in 2008 by the Rubin Museum of Art as a consultant for the development of their first contemporary Tibetan art exhibition at Oglethorpe University Museum in Atlanta, Georgia. I made the original selection of works from the Rubin's still quite undeveloped personal collection of contemporary art from Tibetan artists based worldwide, made recommendations for works and artists to add to their acquisitions plan, works to show on loan to broaden the scope of the exhibition, and wrote exhibition texts that placed the artists and their works within a contemporary Tibetan context based upon my ethnographic research and personal relationships with most of the artists. However, the RMA chose not to use or acknowledge my work, and

instead edited the texts to remove most of the artists' contemporary context and replace it with commentary on the works' resonances with either the Tibetan Buddhist past or contemporary Western art, which they felt would make the exhibition more appealing to western audiences. This exhibition was the basis for their launch of a contemporary Tibetan art exhibition in their own museum, "Tradition Transformed" in 2010, which was negatively reviewed, precisely for the lack of context and breadth of subject matter.

⁴⁶ I remain grateful for support from two Emory University grants for Internationalization and Vernacular Modernities research.

⁴⁷ This was supported by a Fulbright Fellowship for which I am grateful.

⁴⁸ This neighborhood surrounding the Jokhang temple, the center of Tibet's Buddhist world, is also known as the old town as a modern city has enveloped it and tourists and pilgrims flock to the historic district.

⁴⁹ There were many of claims to "first" milestones of various kinds worldwide, which is indicative of a perception of rising and future growth of the phenomenon. Some of these included:

1990s: Han Shuli, first group exhibition of contemporary Tibetan art in Beijing/Shanghai

2005: USA - exile artists' first show, "Old Soul, New Art: The Works of Three Contemporary Tibetan Artists" at Tibet House (New York) and International Campaign for Tibet (Washington, D.C.), and at Emory University, was the first exhibition at a University gallery

2003: founding of first gallery for contemporary Tibetan art in the west, Sweet Tea House, London, by Gonkar Gyatso

2005: "Visions of Tibet" was the first exhibition mounted in a commercial galleries in the west (Peaceful Wind, Santa Fe and Rossi + Rossi, London) and the first exhibition catalogue of artists from Tibet

2006: "Waves on a Turquoise Lake" was the first American show of exile and Lhasa artists in one exhibition, at the University of Colorado, Boulder gallery, which published a catalogue

2007: "New Art from Tibet" was the first contemporary Tibetan art show in Beijing mounted in an international contemporary commercial gallery, Red Gate / 798, and the first tri-lingual catalog (Tibetan, Chinese, and English).

2007: After the Red Gate/798 show, the Tibetan contemporary artists gained formal gallery representation by international contemporary art dealers for the first time (Red Gate Gallery - Beijing, Plum Blossoms – Hong Kong, Rossi+Rossi - London).

2008: The first solo exhibitions of contemporary artists in the post-2003 era began with solo shows by Tsewang Tashi and Gade, soon followed in 2009 and 2010 by others.

⁵⁰ Gonkar Gyatso, Personal communication, 2006; and at the International Association of Tibetan Studies, 2006.

⁵¹ Most notably, the Rubin Museum of Art in exhibitions at their New York City museum and sponsored at Oglethorpe University in Atlanta, GA, chose to write wall labels with references to Western art works with which they felt Western audiences would be familiar, rather than from the perspective of what artists creating the works would have been familiar.

⁵² The similarities in fact probably stop with this basic method of dressing and posing for a photograph in a staged setting: while Sherman was concerned with feminist themes in response to Western media, Gyatso was working out his autobiographical and artistic journey from Lhasa, to Dharamsala, and finally to London.

⁵³ Interview, Tsering Nyandak, April 2007.

⁵⁴ Interview, Gade, 2006.

⁵⁵ Artist interviews. Tsering Nyandak, July 2003; Gade 2006; Jhamsang, April 2006.

⁵⁶ Referencing Tibetan Buddhism when discussing contemporary Tibetan art is “valid,” says Tsering Nyandak, “but it’s kind of a generalising tactic – whenever you make a critique or you write about something, you need to grab some sort of link or lineage. So people always try to label... it’s kind of a labeling tactic. But on a personal level, it doesn’t really help. For me, for myself, I can say that I’m not influenced by Tibetan *tanka* or traditional art at all. I never studied that... unlike some of my artist friends who think that [temple] murals are very beautiful, and they feel some sense of beauty and feel some connection. But I don’t feel that at all. I feel kind of... blank in front of a mural or something. I never have this kind of strong emotional feeling... In my case it’s Western paintings that have moved me more (Heimsath 2005).”

⁵⁷ The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild members had been commissioned by Ian Alsop of Peaceful Wind Gallery to produce works in response to the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad, a major nation-wide event in July 2006 widely regarded by Tibetans and foreigners as highly controversial, but a State technological and engineering marvel. The artists each brought their completed works to the gallery and installed them in advance of Ian’s arrival to select the best works for exhibition in the USA and UK, in collaboration with Fabio Rossi of Rossi & Rossi and Gonkar Gyatso of Sweet Tea House Gallery. As it was only a couple of days before the train was due to arrive, Lhasa was packed with military personnel including snipers on rooftops and armored tanks in the streets, Chinese journalists, and undercover police. The increased foot traffic into the gallery, including an uncomfortable number of unknown visitors with cameras, caused the artists to panic and they took down the special exhibition less than 24 hours after they had mounted it. Had any observer suggested these artists were opposed to the railroad, they would have risked the gallery being shut down and the artists involved certain interrogation and possible imprisonment, regardless of their artistic intentions.

⁵⁸ Faculty of the Princeton Tibet Site Seminar included: Dr. David Germano, Dr. Christian Luczanits, Dr. Puay-peng Ho, Dr. Rob Linrothe and Jeff Watt and was directed by Dr. Stephen F. Teiser.

⁵⁹ My interdisciplinary methodology and theoretical frameworks for a project rooted in Tibetan studies thus also respond to the repeated call of Harvard Tibetologist and past President of the International Association of Tibetan Studies, Janet Gyatso, for greater engagement with broader academic discourses (Gyatso, Presidential Address, Tenth Seminar of Tenth Seminar of the International Association of Tibetan Studies 2005).

⁶⁰ The five artistic eras I describe in the past century may be briefly characterized as follows: Firstly, at the start of the twentieth century, Tibetan artists were operating within a seamlessly inherited tradition of exclusively Buddhist art production for religious purposes, more or less as it had existed for over one thousand years. It was into this traditional Buddhist art historical context that innovations born of modern ideas and techniques were introduced. The second phase marks the origin of modern Tibetan art, often credited to Gedun Choephel and Amdo Jampa in the first half of the twentieth century. The two former monks introduced photorealism and chiaroscuro into religious art, and secular subject matter into Tibetan fine arts, but their contributions were not widely realized until decades later. Next, during the occupation, Maoist, and Cultural Revolution eras in Tibet, from 1951 – 1980, traditional Tibetan Buddhist arts were destroyed and artists were re-trained as “fine art soldiers,” for the Chinese Communist Party’s (CCP) revolutionary politics.

Fourthly, from the CCP’s Open Door and Reform policies to 2002, a period of general Tibetan cultural renaissance and coincided with modern China’s unprecedented exposure to the west, both of which were critical conditions that gave rise to the birth of contemporary art in Tibet. The government has generously funded art programs in Tibet, teaching art to all students in middle school, bringing talented youth for training in the mainland, opening Tibet University in 1985 with a Fine Arts department, and founding in 1981 the influential Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association. The Sweet Tea House Artists Association was the first collective organizing of artists independent of government affiliation. The small Tibetan group of male culture producers was, in the mid-1980s, actively seeking a modern Tibetan identity and expression, although their association was short-lived. By the 1990s, contemporary artists in Lhasa could be found in the government artists associations and faculty of the School of Art at Tibet University, but the constrictions of institutionalized art spurred some artists to again seek independent artistic outlets that were both experimental and yet also more resonant with the particulars of present-day Tibet. The fifth and current phase could date from the Gedun Choephel Artists’ Guild formation in 2003, becoming the first independent group with its own artists-run gallery, whose members quickly attracted the interest of foreign art dealers to Lhasa and democratized access to international art practices and exhibiting for the first time. Unlike in the 1980s, in the early and mid-2000s, contemporary Tibetan artists also gained critical attention at home and abroad, and the patronage of domestic and foreign galleries and collectors. These artists articulate, in almost every way, alternatives to all previous artistic representations (or absences) of Tibetanness and artistic practices, but are adamant about their cultural authenticity.

⁶¹ For example, the popular title *The Art of Tibet* (Pal, 1990) is actually a catalogue of exclusively Buddhist works, and many western museum exhibitions and catalogues have been likewise.

⁶² Within Tibetan Studies, the study of art as situated within social networks of production, political, economic, and religious ideological contexts, and as a production of individual people(s), has, for the most part, yet to have been undertaken.

⁶³ Giuseppe Tucci traveled to Tibet to observe and document *in situ* Buddhist painting, sculpture, mural, inscriptions and temple architecture, producing invaluable records of sites subsequently destroyed. He wrote *Indo-Tibetica* (1932-1941) and *Tibetan Painted Scrolls* (1949) among other works. Tucci’s “scholarly method, especially in how he treated the paintings in combination with the relevant written sources,...[was] for many decades unsurpassed (Jackson D. , 1996).” While he did not have a grasp of indigenous stylistic terminology, Tucci made an important contribution to the genesis of the field of study in his attentiveness to individual artists

through listing names of dozens of artists recorded on murals and citing references to artists. This stood in contrast to the anonymous *thangka* in private collections abroad.

⁶⁴ Smith's promulgation of Kongtrul's *Encyclopedia*, with its artistic history grounded in specific individual innovative artists, stands in contrast to contemporaneous efforts by John C. Huntington to develop a classification system based upon regional production styles, and Pal's 1980s classification schemas based upon religious sects, neither of which satisfactorily account for artists' multiple styles and extensive travels, and overlook traditional indigenous categories, as Lo Bue points out (1983, 1986). Thurman and Rhie (1984) also invoked regional styles, and this approach persists because while Tibetan art styles cannot only be described in terms of geography or sect, notable locales preserved exceptional and unique iconographic programs and stylistic features, produced under the patronage of powerful lamas within temple monuments.

⁶⁵ The problems associated with classification by Buddhist sect is foremost that styles favored by particular schools changed over time, and that while particular sites, such as the main monastery for a school or residence of their head lama, may have been famed for a particular stylistic production, such as the Sakya school's Ngor monastery associated with remarkable paintings, it was not necessarily the case that other contemporaneous schools had strong identifiable stylistic differences. The problem with classification by geographic origin of influence or production region is that styles were more often than not mixed, and that artists travelled widely and had to be conversant in a number of styles to meet the needs of their patrons. Early scholars of Tibetan Buddhist art however were likely hampered by the dearth of indigenous literature on the subject, and the difficulty of viewing works *in situ*, problems gradually assuaged in recent decades but not without remaining limitations.

⁶⁶ For instance, Tibetan medicine is a combination of Indian, Chinese, Central Asian and Tibetan diagnostic techniques, herbal preparations, and holistic treatments, but has as a foundation in Tibet the Buddhist understanding of the elements and subtle energies requiring balance within our bodies. Tibetan medicine was often studied by monks, in a special college within the larger monasteries or the two national medical colleges in Lhasa, and lay people often consulted both lamas and doctors when ill.

⁶⁷ This codification project received considerable consolidation in Geluk-dominated central Tibet under the Great Fifth Dalai Lama in the form of extensive Menri style painting commissions in the construction of the Potala Palace and in the writing of painting manuals; its stylistic dominance in Lhasa was never subsequently challenged.

⁶⁸ For instance, it was determined by the philosophical positions of lineages and the wealth of benefactors sponsoring artisans and materials, but also by the political agenda of the patrons (Lecture, Christian Luczanits, 2004). The iconographic program of a temple refers to the conceptualization of the entire built structure as a mandala of a particular enlightened deity, such that the deity and his retinue could inhabit the space just as it was described in the texts that were prominent in the study and practice of the lineage to which the temple and its founders belonged. For instance, in the ninth and tenth century in the western regions of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural sphere, Vairocana was the most prominent Buddha depicted, and the temples' ordinal walls housed side chapels and murals depicting the retinue of beings in Vairocana's mandala. Vairocana, the primordial Buddha occupying something akin to the position of a King in relation to the Buddha families, enjoyed prominence when political leaders were establishing and consolidating kingdoms throughout the western Himalaya (Luczanits, 2004).

⁶⁹ Renovations of religious sites were also a way to signal religious and/or political prestige, and demonstrate indigenous preservation methods and commitments, see Alexander's discussion of the history of the Jokhang temple, for a fascinating example (Alexander, 2005).

⁷⁰ The subjects of art – from the popularity of the universal, transcendent Buddha Vairocana found in temples through the Tibetan realm as political powers were being centralized in Himalayan kingdoms, to the complexly symbolic and highly elaborated Kalachakra deity from the final development of the tantric schools of India imported to Tibet, to the simplified visual form of tantric enlightenment energy, Kuntu Zangpo, favored by the anti-establishment Nyingmapa sects, or the proliferation of human teachers depicted similarly to the form of Buddha Shakyamuni coincident with monastic institutions' need to consolidate and maintain wealth after a teacher's death (Singer, 1995) – were also clearly linked to concurrent social concerns. (Princeton Tibet Site Seminar lecture series in Tsaparang by faculty, including Dr. Christian Luczanits, Jeff Watt, David Germano, July 2007).

⁷¹ Citing some examples give a sense of the pervasiveness of this in text, monument, and painting practice: the seventeenth century historian, Taranatha, wrote a famed study of ancient Indian Buddhist images; collective artistic revival occurred in Guge where the sixteenth century visual mimicry of an eleventh century golden age was part of a political attempt to re-establish the religious and economic prestige of the western Himalayan kingdom, and the fifteenth century Tenth Karmapa, Choying Dorje, copied and created artwork in the style of several earlier periods as far back as the Yarlung era (seventh – ninth century). Artists preserved the memories of past masters including into the twentieth century, as Jackson describes Yeshe Tenzin's (ye-shes bstan 'dzin, 1915/6 – 1971) self-taught masterful copying of the extant mKhentse murals in his home monastery at Gong dkar to revive the sixteenth century style along with infusions of contemporary times.

⁷² Yeshe Tenzin (ye-shes bstan 'dzin, 1915/6 – 1971) left some small murals at Gong-dkar monastery in Tibet, including the depiction of the former monastic complex (attribution from Jackson, plate 24). I photographed it in 2007, curious whether this was one of the first of the now popular re-presenting in 'bird's eye' view of the pre-Cultural Revolution complex, and what such a composition suggests for modern technological and visual influences and local memory work. Architectural drawings, such as the famous scenes of the construction of the Potala and Jokhang murals and illustrated maps of Lhasa (Alexander, 2005) (Larsen & Sinding-Larsen, 2001), long pre-date the British colonial and Communist Chinese visual impacts, but aerial views of a site(s) (including computer generated composite views) is especially prevalent in today's poster market, and those newer murals and surviving early twentieth century photographs at the entrance of monasteries today are especially notable as only showing pre-devastation images of the monastic complex, both virtually re-establishing the site as it was, if only in pictorial representation, and creating access to a version absent the ruins that enter the view in contemporary times.

⁷³ These patron-scholars were connoisseurs in their descriptions of exemplary works: the historian Jonang Taranatha relished and revived styles that had become outdated, Buton Rinchen Drup (Bu-ston Rin-chen Grub, 1290-1364), fourteenth century abbot and author of a definitive History of Buddhism of India and Tibet and leader in redaction of the Tibetan canon, was also a patron of the magnificent murals at Zhalu monastery where he was abbot, and the eighteenth century Tai Situ Panchen Rinpoche was a lama, statesman, patron and revolutionary artist whose paintings and compositions and their conceptualization in multiple sets of works, were copied in

his workshop and throughout the Himalayas in the Encampment style he did much to revitalize and promote (Jackson & Debreczeny, 2009).

⁷⁴ Jackson (Jackson D. , 1996) identifies additional significant traditional sources concerned with “traditional styles and their identifying characteristics,” and which had not been previously translated. The earliest, from the 17th century, by De’u dmar dge bshe describes eleven styles. Another is a mid-19th century painting manual written by a Bhutanese scholar or painter focused on painting techniques and the proper placement of sacred art and the auspiciousness of sacred art production, but including an overview of styles and their origination. References to additional traditional Tibetan sources and ancient Indian iconographic works once known in Tibet are known, but extant copies have yet to be discovered.

⁷⁵ For example, texts authored by Bodong Panchen (*Bo dong pan chen phyogs las rnam rgyal*, 1376-1451), an important early fifteenth century intellectual, cover a “vast range of secular arts and sciences,” including “technical knowledge needed in the creation of icons (Smith, 2001).” He also authored works on symbolism and proportions for representing Buddhas, bodhisattvas and tutelary deities as well as the three types of forms or “supports” (*rten*) - those that “operate on the visual level” through representations of the body of deities in statues and paintings (*sku’i rten*), those that operate narratively in the form of texts (*gsung gi rten*), and those that represent Buddhas’ mind or pure conceptualization (*thugs kyi rten*), i.e. stupa and ritual bells – and where they should properly be housed in temples and chapels and their worship. From Bodong’s detailed writing on metallurgy and casting (including the making of swords and associated legends of warriors), and more briefly, the techniques of painting, Smith deduces the possibility that “Bo dong Pan chen was himself a skilled practicing craftsman.” Bo dong also describes the relationship of patron and artisan, and the auspicious connections that result from the production of sacred objects, thus referencing a social and religious process of production, from the perspectives of a scholar and artisan.

⁷⁶ For example, the Thirteenth Karmapa, bDud ‘dul rDor rje, who was himself a painter including of a self-portrait, wrote a treatise in the second half of the eighteenth century on aesthetics in cryptic verse, which includes instruction on identification and evaluation of valuable things including works of art belonging to each major school of painting.

⁷⁷ In light of debate within the anthropology of art regarding the establishment of whether non-western cultures can be said to have aesthetic practices (Weiner, 1994), Tibet would meet even the strictest of the classifications proposed.

⁷⁸ Interestingly, images of deities which are not “proper” nonetheless function socially and religiously: Thaye writes the artist risks rebirth in a hell realm (Thaye, 1987), presumably because of the negative impact upon viewers’ mind stream of viewing improper images and offense caused.

⁷⁹ Sakya Pandita, in a treatise on music, wrote, “Until, in your own mind, you have cultivated all objects of cognition/ Omniscience will be as far from you as the limits of the sky!/ Following such reasoning, the buddhas and their sons/ Have rightly said: ‘Cultivate all the sciences!’.” (Schaeffer, Kapstein, & Tuttle, 2013)

⁸⁰ The five greater forms of knowledge were standardized by the fourth century in India, and inherited in Tibet from the ninth century, as the non-Buddhist subjects to be studied by bodhisattvas: 1) inner (sacred) knowledge, 2) logic, 3) language, 4) medicine, and 5) arts and

crafts (Schaeffer, Kapstein, & Tuttle, 2013). Codified in the verses of *Ornament for the Sutras of the Great Way*, the minor five are listed as 6) poetics, 7) prosody, 8) synonymics, 9) dramaturgy, and 10) astrology and divination (Schaeffer, Kapstein, & Tuttle, 2013). Of the lesser sciences, the fourth in Kongtrul Lama's text is performing arts, as closely tied to the studies of linguistics, Sanskrit and poetics (Smith, 2001). Alternative formulations include the eighteen arts and sciences given in the *kalacakratantra* and *abhidharmakosa* of Vasubandhu, major texts in the monastic curriculum.

⁸¹ “Linking these was the Buddhist ideal of the bodhisattva – the ethically perfect and, one might say, fully civilized individual – for each form of knowledge as considered an essential component of his or her training (Schaeffer, Kapstein, & Tuttle, 2013).”

⁸² Thubten Phuntsog (*Thub bstan phun tshogs*) (1985) laments in India the loss of so many artifacts and the difficulty of finding qualified painters let alone those who can explain the history and principles of sacred art, while Yeshe Sherab (*Ye shes shes rab*) (1990) in one of the first illustrated manual to be published inside the PRC after the Cultural Revolution, notes the difficulties faced by those wishing to study the history and distinctions between Tibetan artistic styles. Yet, Rigzin Paljor (*Rig dzin dpal 'byor*) (1987) includes a simple visualization to be practiced by Buddhist artists before painting, indicating the survival and revival of painting within the context of a renewal of traditional Buddhist practices. In the late 1980s, Tenpa Rabten (*bsTan pa rab brtan*), the traditionally trained and exceptional thangka painter and founding professor of thangka at Tibet University, published scholarly articles including one about Tibetan painting styles, which includes the rejection of excessive influence from western realism. Also reflecting on contemporary era continuation of traditional sacred art, Shengshong Dorje Choepa (*Seng gshong rDo rje gcod pa*) indicates the political complications of art practice and writing in his rebuttal of assertions that Senge Shong's centuries of tradition could be classified as Chinese, or any less specific than the small locality in which it has been practiced and secretly transmitted for generations. Other writing through more official, sanctioned channels not surprisingly emphasizes the influence of Chinese art and downplays Newar, Indian, and central Asian influences throughout Tibetan art history, ignoring even Buddhist art's origin in India.

⁸³ The western history of Buddhist studies through texts meant Tibetan studies was slower to approach art (the study of Tibetan art emerged long after Indian, Japanese and Chinese art), and then did and remains focused on inscriptions upon and textual sources about imagery. The focus in western scholarship has been on dating and iconographic identifications, often based on extant works in collections outside of Tibet, to the exclusion of attention to individual artists.

⁸⁴ Jackson concludes that western scholarship in Tibetan art history has yet to sufficiently secure chronological data and reliance upon traditional sources to produce a complete history of Tibetan art and artists.

⁸⁵ The theosophist and painter George Roerich published the first account of Tibetan art styles in 1925. The most valuable early contributions were the volumes and photography collections of Guisippe Tucci published between 1932 – 1949 [Tucci], which include documentation of sites that were subsequently destroyed making singular documentation of pre-Cultural Revolution artistic monuments and religious sites. Western and exile Tibetan scholarship bloomed as Tibetans sought exile from the 1960s, but Jackson [199?] points out the myths and errors that have persisted in Tibetan studies as a result of recycling of conclusions based on the slim primary sources available amongst a community in the early years of Tibetan diaspora. Furthermore, Jackson notes, pre-modern Tibetan texts or those composed in exile are more

reliable guides to Tibetan understanding of their art history than contemporary publications from the PRC, where Tibetan scholars are pressured to over-emphasize the influence of Chinese culture on Tibetan art history and undermine or omit entirely the much greater role of Indian and Newari artists and stylistic influences (Jackson D. , 1996).

⁸⁶ Early explorers and missionaries in Tibet and British colonial officers on the borders saw a degenerate society and “Lamaism” of debased morals and garish glorification of sex and violence, particularly in the tantric symbolism of Vajrayana arts. Foreigners “turned a blind eye” on living Tibetans in their critique of so-called idolators (Lopez D. S., 1998). While a wave of critique of the construction of Tibet by Westerners looked back a century to the ways in which Christian and Victorian mores and colonial ambitions first shaped vision, a reading of how Tibetans see images is only vaguely possible from between the lines of Western interpreters; there has been a persistent dearth of understanding of indigenous perspectives.

⁸⁷ Western art historians proposed various classification schemes for the historic and stylistic development of Tibetan arts, based largely upon sectarian and/or geographic divisions, but the current trend, as more Tibetan literature has emerged, has renewed interest in indigenous schema based more on artistic lineages often deriving from a famous artist, although there are exceptions for schools which did emerge from association with sectarian and geographic origin, such as the Encampment school associated with the Karma Kagyud in Kham.

⁸⁸ From Tibetans, *lha* is often translated “gods”, ;*bri*’ is the verb “to write”, and the suffix *pa* means is the nominalizer “-er”, or “one who does”. The *lha ‘dri pa* were and are the ones who painted *thangka* and wall paintings. *Lha bzo pa*, utilizes the verb “to make” rather than “to write” and is used to refer to sculptors of deities.

⁸⁹ Painting manuals also describe the ideal artists’ religious and ethical commitments during his training and whilst engaged in painting.

⁹⁰ Makers of Buddhist art were expected to depict enlightened deities and their entourage, requiring training and tools for rendering a staggeringly large pantheon. Moreover, artists were trained in producing and preparing the painting materials (gesso, stretching canvas, mineral pigments), and the iconography, iconometry, and symbolism requisite for the finished product to perform in ritually efficacious ways, the primary purpose of Buddhist art.

⁹¹ The painters who achieved repute were often erudite monks, however, training in religious arts was not restricted to the monastery. The earliest notable Tibetan lay man is the fifteenth century master Bye’u, On the fifteenth century master painter Bye’u, see chapter three, Jackson (1996). The lay man discovered painting only after a horrid marriage that drove him to leave his homeland, and became one of the most celebrated artists of his day. Teacher-apprentice relationships have transmitted knowledge through lineages of familial descent. In the family-based Seng-shong artist community in the Rebgong area of Amdo (present day Qinghai province), instructions on techniques and specialized local styles passed down from generations within the community are held as secrets that cannot be taught to outsiders, on penalty of expulsion. Familial painting lineages can include monastics.

⁹² There exist a set of behavioral and spiritual guidelines for artists that, in addition to the uses of their productions, seems to set them apart from the more strictly skills-based or craft genres of cabinetry, carpet weaving, and so forth.

⁹³ Jackson describes eight Tibetan masters' historical accounts authored between the seventeenth and mid-nineteenth centuries that are organized at least in part by the great painters lives, in addition to three sources primarily organized by treatment of styles, and one by iconography (Jackson D. , 1996).

⁹⁴ Chief among these, in Kongtrul Lodro Taye's presentation, are the following: the Menthang style originated with Menla Dondrup, regarded as an emanation of the perfection of wisdom bodhisattva, Manjushri. Menla Dondrup inherited a tradition dominated by Nepalese painting and dramatically shifted color palettes from dominance by red and orange, to blue and green. Kyentse Chenmo later created especially vivid tantric and wrathful figures through a dynamic balance of colors. Trulku Jiu, known as "Little Bird emanation" for his relentless travels in artistic pursuits, is considered by Tibetan scholars to have surpassed others in color and shading. Choying Gyatso founded the New Menri school, which dominated central Tibet into the twentieth century. The artist Trulku Namkha Trashī studied the Menthang tradition and the bodily proportions of earlier Indian bronzes, and lent these figures background treatments and pale colors inspired by the Chinese Ming period scroll paintings, out of which the Gadri (Encampment) style arose and came to define the style of eastern Tibet.

⁹⁵ See, for example, Himalayan Art Resources' outline of iconographic source texts are linked to collections of art from the eleventh through nineteenth centuries.

⁹⁶ For example, Desi Sangye Gyatso (*sDe srid Sang rgyas rgya mtsho*), the learned regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, compiled a treatise on the history of art and techniques (*bZo rig pa'i skabs*) completed in 1688. This codified technical matters such as proportional measurement systems (debated by proponents of other systems) in use during the most ambitious artistic project ever undertaken with state patronage, the design, construction, and painting of the Potala Palace. The mural paintings of the palace chapels and government and private chambers employed hundreds of painters, whose names were recorded along with the details of their materials (Alexander, 2005).

⁹⁷ Historically, artists needed to be educated and practiced in a variety of painting styles in order to win commissions, while the most well-reputed of whom were courted by political and religious leaders over vast geographic regions. Artists commissioned as a personal painter to a single lama or for productions in a single temple site could be required to paint in more than one style (as in the sixteenth and seventeenth century when mixing *sMan ris* and *mKhen ris* styles within a site was popular), artists traveled and adapted to the popular styles and practices of different locations, and were influenced by viewing art objects from different centuries and geographic or sectarian origins than their own backgrounds. Lineages of painting traditions sustained local artistic practices, while influences from the outside stimulated versatility or could trigger offshoots of new schools.

⁹⁸ Karma rin chen dar gyas writes in *A Wish-fulfilling Jewel for Artists: The Proportions of All Sacred Figures, both Painted and Plastic*, "The author asserts in principle the priority of artistic practice. He states for instance that if a figure of the Buddha is not beautiful to the eyes, is a ridiculous thing even if the painter has correctly learned the proportions." He reinforces the need for artists to go beyond textual accounts and receive practical instruction and oral explanations from their teachers, noting that in practice this can differ from the scriptural basis. Karma Rinchen Dargyay also recommends particular styles as better suited than others for specific types of deities and even for elements of paintings dependent upon their sizes and moods.

⁹⁹ In general, it is said that viewing an image of a Buddha is beneficial for the mind in immediately arresting negative emotions and making positive imprints for one's future karma.

¹⁰⁰ Tibet University professor of art history, thangka painting and contemporary art, Penpa Wangdu, on a visit to the temple explained the Dratang murals figures' diversity of skin color, hair styles, dress, facial features and so forth as perhaps both evidence of local social awareness of foreigners as well as a religious viewpoint in which the universal appeal of the Buddha's teachings attracts disciples from throughout time and space.

¹⁰¹ Though they may have been few in number, Jackson writes that in the work of masters "one gets glimpses of the creativity and imagination possible within the tradition... Any artist who had the basic skills and knowledge and in addition possessed a flair for fine depictions of facial features and other details could easily attract a surplus of commissions. The most skilled of such artists, those who could transform an ordinary composition into something vibrant and extraordinary, were always in demand. As their fame spread far and wide such gifted painters sometimes even acquired the reputation of being 'divinely emanated artisans' (*sprul pa'i lha bzo*) (Jackson D. , 1996)."

¹⁰² Writing in the early 19th century, Guru bKrahis states, "It is said here in the country of Tibet previously in the time of the early great religious kings [i.e. in the 7th – 9th centuries] there was much [religious art] produced by emanated artisans (*sprul pa'i bzo pa*)."¹⁰⁴ In enumerating artists and styles after the 10th century, the author traces the influence of the Newar style in painting and sculpture is noted, followed by Chinese influence upon pictorial art before concluding, "The above [great artists] are superior since they were painters who were graced by enlightened deities. But as for the many other different paintings one sees that have been produced by the skill of individual [ordinary] artisans, these are simply too numerous and various] to be encompassed by critical investigation." (Jackson D. , 1996)

¹⁰³ Klongtrul Lodro Taye mentions "the paintings and sculpture produced by the discernment of the omniscient Tsuklak Chokyi Nanwa surpass the ordinary mind. These magical creations can even today become the nectar for the eyes of ordinary folk (Schaeffer, Kapstein, & Tuttle, 2013)."

¹⁰⁴ The mid-sixteenth century painter Tulku Ngala Zig (*sprul sku nga la gzigs*), praised as "lord of painters" by the Second and Third Dalai Lamas, was gifted in multiple arts, oversaw important commissions, and received instructions directly from perception of the gNas chung oracle and the Saraswati goddess. His name, translated 'look at me!',¹⁰⁴ derives from an account that once while preparing a painting he was about to consult meditation text for the technical description of the goddess Sarasvati (the deity patron of artists, music and literature), when she appeared to him and called out for him to copy her likeness directly (Jackson 182). Another artist, also of the sMan-ris lineage in the same century but in far eastern Tibet, sangs.rgyas.lha.dbang of ldan ma, was born with auspicious signs, and fulfilled prophesy of the 8th Karmapa, Mi bskhyod rdo rje through the use of "religious painting as his main meditative practice" (183).

¹⁰⁵ Kongtrul Lodro Taye names as "superior to all of these was the Lord of the World practicing art, the Glorious [Tenth] Karmapa Choying Dorje" (Jackson D. , 1996).

¹⁰⁶ Despite the celebration of these men as extraordinary, the perception in the west in this century has tended towards the assumption that *all*, or no, Tibetan artists are prone to deeply

religious or mystical experience. Artists have been represented in extremes, as advanced practitioners of esoteric Buddhism, or as automatons merely adhering to canonical strictures.

¹⁰⁷ *Thangka* paintings were usually not signed, contributing perhaps to the common erroneous assertion that Tibetan Buddhist art is anonymously created. As counter evidence, Tucci recorded the names of some forty artists inscribed in murals in the temples of a small region of sTsang) and artists have been recognized through inscriptions, textual descriptions of monastery construction and inventories, catalogues of lama's possessions and commissions, and perhaps for the skilled art historian, even by discernment of a particular artists' hand at work. In my own fieldwork, I have seen attributions to mural painters.

¹⁰⁸ Jeff Watt has published some scholarly work in Himalayan Art Resources, which he directs, but the opportunity to enjoy extensive lectures and conversations at sites of art historical import across the Tibetan plateau in 2007 constitute invaluable learning for which I am grateful.

¹⁰⁹ Debreczeny's is the first publication about a single Tibetan artist, in which he adopts a strong focus on "the hand of the master" to shed light upon an artist who developed "a unique personal idiom" that eschewed all formalism (Debreczeny, 2012).

¹¹⁰ Social and historical contexts – such as individual artistic creativity, historical consciousness that underlay periods of artistic and stylistic revivals, active historians and patrons, strong aesthetic traditions, social and political and economic roles of art production and patronage, and the reflection of religious, philosophic and sectarian debates in art - all existed and were indigenously recorded, but have not been significantly included in the ways in which Tibetan Buddhists nor academics primarily relate to Tibet's Buddhist art, which is primarily through the lens of the religious function of objects. Nonetheless, the precedents of the above social dynamics should be a part of how we think about Tibetan artists today, in order to cease representation of Tibetan art and artists that is not contextualized in contemporaneous worldviews and political, cultural, and religious experience.

¹¹¹ Modern indigenous visual innovations began with the Thirteenth Dalai Lama's startling embrace of photography when he allowed British officer Sir Charles Bell to photograph him in 1937, and the image to be reproduced and distributed. An apparent violation of the Tibetan taboo against representing the likeness of lamas, particularly while they are still living, once endorsed by the Dalai Lama, photography was easily incorporated into Tibetan modes of interaction with holy images; they were placed upon shrines. Other lamas followed suit, and distributed their photographic portraits to disciples, some of which likely provided Amdo Jampa and Gedun Choephel their first views of the photographic medium. Photography and photorealism was revolutionary in the first half of the twentieth century, but did not fundamentally alter quintessentially Tibetan ways of seeing; a portrait of a lama was still placed upon shrines with utmost respect.

¹¹² Photography began to circulate amongst Tibetans as a result of contact with Western travelers, especially the British colonial officers stationed in India and then southern Tibet. Sir Charles Bell was the first person, in 1910, to photograph the Thirteenth Dalai, unwittingly, although with the Dalai Lama's sanction, overturning taboos against realistic representation of living high reincarnate lamas. The reproduced photograph, and another taken in 1933, swiftly became "photo-icons," placed by Tibetans upon shrines and accorded the reverence of other holy objects.

¹¹³ There are multiple variations on the English spelling, including: Gedun Chosphele, Gendun Chöphel, Gendun Chompel, etc.

¹¹⁴ Donald Lopez's biography, *The Mad Man's Middle Way*, includes a biographical introduction with reference to his artistic pursuits, but focuses on Gedun Choephel's controversial interpretations of Buddhist philosophical points on the nature of reality which ran counter to the hegemonic commentaries in his lineage, later seen as evidence of his original and non-sectarian intelligence but which advanced his ostracizing from powerful monastic stakeholders of Lhasa politics.

¹¹⁵ Gedun Choephel's apparent intended audiences included the elite in the Gelukpa school's monastic colleges, whose orthodoxy of views he challenged and suffered rebuke [Lopez], and for his ordinary countrymen, for whom he wrote extensively. His popular writings ranged from an article [1940?] in *The Mirror*, the first and only Tibetan language newspaper based in Kalimpong, India, denying that the world was flat as Tibetan cosmology asserted, to a treatise based upon a translation of the *Kama sutra* and his unabashed personal investigations, and a guidebook to pilgrimage in the Holy Land of the Buddha practically instructing Tibetans regarding travel in modern India (including a railroad map). His largest undertakings were a scholarly investigation of Tibetan history based upon historical documents and archaeology which has been lost, and an illustrated popular tome which partially survives of his observations and reflections of his travels, from Hindu ascetics, women's fashion, colonial architecture and oppressive rule.

¹¹⁶ The first Tibetan artist to capture widespread scholarly attention in the modern era was introduced to western audiences by the art historian Heather Stoddard's thorough biography, *Le mendiant de l'Amdo* (Stoddard H. K., 1985) and Irmgard Mengele's English translation of his Tibetan biographies (Mengele, 1999). A number of Tibetan language sources about Gedun Choephel now in print have inspired Tibetans' interest in history and potential compatibility between Buddhism and modernity and science. For instance, one Tibetan woman in her twenties told me she had just finished reading his biography for the third time in a row, crying each time. Another young man passionately asked me if Gedun Choephel's assertion that Buddhism and modern science could be compatible was true. This is to say Gedun Choephel, and the contemporary writer Tsering Woenser, are easily the most popular Tibetan figures for the current generation.

¹¹⁷ Interview, ____, February 2007. __ showed me a copy of a thangka that Gedun Chophel reportedly painted at the age of eight (?). My gratitude also to ____, Gedun Choephel's nephew who graciously spent a day with me in their hometown, touring Gedun Choephel's birth home and the large school founded in his honor by __.

¹¹⁸ In Harris, Clare (1999), translated by Harris from the French in Karmay (1985).

¹¹⁹ After designing the set and costumes for the controversial first performance of Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring*, Nicholas Roerich, led an expedition across Central Asia in search of Shambhala. He and his family lived in northwestern India, which inspired his paintings of mountains and Himalayan village settlements.

¹²⁰ However, Gedun Choephel was not living in the Roerich home to study art; he was employed by Nicholas Roerich who was attempting to translate the *White Annals* from archaic Tibetan into English, an engagement Lopez writes was fraught with frustration as Choephel's

enormous intellectual contributions were not properly acknowledged, but provided personal experiences of colonial power imbalances and injustices against which he later wrote.

¹²¹ Gedun Choephel sent portions of the excerpts of his writings and translations to a friend, Horkhang, in Lhasa, and his captioned watercolor and pencil and ink sketches, the illustrations for the travelogue to a friend near his hometown, perhaps to expose them to places far beyond the village. It seems he meant to reunite them, compiled as *Gtams rgyud gser gyi thang ma* (translated in various publications as *Grains of Gold*, *The Golden Surface*, and *The Golden Chronicle*). During his travels in the subcontinent, Gedun Choephel sent over one hundred sketches and watercolors back to Tibet to illustrate his accounts of the people, religions, arts and culture. Gedun Choephel numbered and signed each work in the collection and amongst the twenty-seven known today, the highest numbered one is 178, indicating at least 151 pages have disappeared since he created them. The pencil, ink and watercolor illustrations primarily introduce the culture, religious traditions, architecture and sites, as well as natural environment, of India and Sri Lanka and were presumably sent from abroad during his journeys to a friend in his homeland. Some of the topics and scenes are described, with nearly identical captions, in his work *Gtams rgyud gser gyi thang ma*, indicating that the collection of illustrations were intended to accompany the written text. The Latse Library of Contemporary Tibetan Culture in New York City presently holds a portion of these works in the Pema Byams Collection. I thank Pema Bhum and Christina Dy-Liacco for allowing me to enjoy working with these rare surviving works by Gedun Choephel. A few reproductions of the same works are in the collection of the Rebgong Library and Cultural Center and I am grateful to Sherab for accessing them for me.

¹²² Surviving writings, journals, watercolors, and sketches by Gedun Choephel are in private and institutional collections internationally, and contribute to the contemporary assessment of Gedun Choephel's artistry and intellectual achievements. After the Cultural Revolution, Horkhang published the surviving manuscripts which had been in his possession. Of the illustrations for that had been sent to a friend in Amdo, twenty-seven survived in the care of the wife of a childhood friend (and were recently put on loan to the Latse Library in New York), out of a minimum of 178 individually numbered drawings. Pema Byams' (pad ma byams) collection of twenty-seven illustrations and watercolors were unknown outside Tibet until she donated to Latse in 2003. Pema Byams had assumed care for them after the death of her husband, Samten Gyamtso (bsam gtan rgy mthso), who had been a fellow monk at Labrang Thoesamling (thos bsam gling) monastery with Gedun Choephel in the 1930s (Gedun Choephel in New York, 2004). Pema Byams relates that twenty-three watercolors and sketches were lost in the Cultural Revolution, and the surviving works constitute a large portion of Gedun Choephel's known artwork, in the Pema Byams collection at the Latse Library. A sketchbook in the possession of Gustav Roth in Germany contains a significant portion of the known artworks by Gedun Choephel (Gedun Choephel in New York, 2004), perhaps the only other known artworks in the West.

¹²³ Professor Tsewang Tashi also compared his portraiture to Amdo Jampa Tsetan, whom Tsewang concluded was the better photorealism portrait artist.

¹²⁴ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, March 2007.

¹²⁵ A small group of artists in Rebgong, Amdo, near Choephel's birthplace, have also organized under his namesake. Interview, Serdrak Dhondrup Tsetan, February 2007.

¹²⁶ Birth year given as 1914 in (Pulin, 2002), but TIN reports Amdo Jampa died in 2002 at the age of 91 (b.1911) (Tibet Information Network, 2002).

¹²⁷ A biographical book rich with photography of the artist and his works by Wen Pulin was published in Taiwan in Chinese (Pulin 2002). The Tibetan language journal *Art and Literature* published an article about Amdo Jampa's life in Tibet, including his portrait of Mao Zedong and his Chairmanship of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association, and the painting school he founded.

¹²⁸ I am grateful to Dr. Roberta Raine for her oral Mandarin translations of portions of Pulin's text, July, 2013.

¹²⁹ A Tibetan artist in Lhasa viewing a reproduction of this painting with me in 2006 commented that at the time of the painting, there was some controversy in the Chinese reception of the painting because Amdo Jampa had painted Mao with a large belly, despite communist theory deriding leadership that benefitted at the expense of the oft impoverished masses, and the implied suggestion that Mao may have been hedonistically feasting while millions of Chinese were dying of starvation. This is an interesting interpretation of the painting that posits Tibetan artistic subversive behavior prior to 1959 through sophisticated critique of communist theory on the one hand, but also aligns the 1954 painting with the failures of the Great Leap Forward, which came several years later (1958-1961). It seems more likely that, as an artist in the employ of the Dalai Lama during the rapprochement period, Amdo Jampa's portly representation of the politician did not reflect awareness of and resistance to early socialist realism dictates for portrayal of the Chairman.

¹³⁰¹³⁰ The contemporary artist Shelkar (Anu) told me that once when in one of their conversations in the years before his death, Amdo Jampa had told him His Holiness the Dalai Lama had appointed him the head of the more than one hundred artists working at the Taken Migyur Tsochokang during its construction. 2006.

¹³¹ These two murals are reproduced in Harris (1999) and (Pulin, 2002). On multiple visits to the Norbulingka in 2004, 2006, and 2007, the rooms containing these murals were not included on the tour or accessible to the public, but I was permitted into the audience chamber to see the enthronement mural once prior to 2004, but the room with the Buddha mural was never unlocked at any time I visited.

¹³² Interview, Penpa Tsering, November 2006. Penpa Tsering was a student of Amdo Jampa's at his Lhasa school, and became the principle and main teacher after the passing of Amdo Jampa.

¹³³ Amdo Jampa conducted his visual research by consulting two sources. From Indian popular magazines and newspapers available in Lhasa, he drafted the Buddha's Indian facial features after the photograph of a famous actor. The Jowo Buddha statue in the Jokhang Cathedral offered a measurement for the proportions of the body, head, and crown protuberance (*ushnisha*); conducting such research required the unusual viewing the statue without its crown, adornments, and robes.

¹³⁴ Other details in the Shakyamuni mural include more than one dozen white or saffron-robed renunciants and ascetics in a tropical forest landscape are engaged in spiritual exercises and study, as Shakyamuni had also done before attaining enlightenment at the base of a bodhi tree, or

listening to the words of Shakyamuni. Two women and a child approach with reverence and offerings at the bottom center. The humans' physiologies and gestures are natural, the folds of their garments realistic, but the source of illumination seems to emanate from the Buddha himself, the landscape captured in a noon-like absence of shadows.

¹³⁵ It is a catalogue of the most important religious and political figures and guests Lhasa, and includes the photorealistic likeness of foreigners as well.

¹³⁶ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, 2006.

¹³⁷ The use of a standing figure, sheer white skirt, blossoms and foliage is suggestive of the influence of European renaissance painting, which Amdo Jampa may have encountered, but clearly enjoyed in the post-1980s era of Party sanctioned Opening and Reform. Gonkar Gyatso says: "Once I went to his studio in Lhasa and he was studying a book of 15th century Italian religious art. Some of his paintings were clearly influenced by painters such as Carpaccio, who used vivid, opulent colors, little shading, and had a narrative style (Tibet Information Network, 2002)." It is also possible he was exposed to Chinese Buddhist arts and their influence upon Tibetan painting; in which the Buddha and Arhats are commonly depicted standing, and with spacious backgrounds.

¹³⁸ Drepung Loseling Monastery contains some works by Amdo Jampa, particularly the Ganden Potrang assembly hall (a large white Tara thangka) and the upstairs lhakhang (small framed portraits of lamas, including Khabje Trijang Rinpoche and Khyabje Ling Rinpoche, the senior and junior tutors of the Dalai Lama in the 19050s. Amdo Jampa founded a school in Lhasa in the 1980s; a collection of reproductions of some works are held in the school office.

¹³⁹ Harris seems made some errors in describing Amdo Jampa's activities in Dharamsala, India (Harris C. , 1999).

¹⁴⁰ Amdo Jampa's student, Tsewang Dorje, worked with the Tibet Heritage Fund's restoration of Meru Nyingba temple. [Formerly detailed here, site apparently deactivated: http://www.tibetheritagefund.org/3_works/3_01_02/3_01_02_01merunyingba/3_01_02_01_01_en.html]

¹⁴¹ Interviews, Tsewang Tashi, Anu (Shelkar), and others.

¹⁴² Gonkar Gyatso also said, "People were astonished and admired the techniques involved, but there was also some controversy, particularly because His Holiness the Dalai Lama looked so human in his work....Before the Chinese ban on Dalai Lama pictures [in 1996], many monasteries I visited all over Tibet had a large-scale picture of the Dalai Lama on the main shrine - all in the style of Amdo Jampa's famous painting of the Dalai Lama (Tibet Information Network, 2002)."

¹⁴³ Artists including members of the Gedun Choephel guild as well as the principal and teacher in Amdo Jampa's school in 2006 told me this.

¹⁴⁴ For example, I sighted photorealistic elements in monastery murals at several sites in Lhasa and central Tibet in 2007.

¹⁴⁵ The end of the Cultural Revolution era brought a backlash against political art throughout China, but the subjects and styles permitted to Tibetan artists was not readily

apparent. Amdo Jampa may have also participated in a reclaiming of traditional culture, first through secular everyday objects and people, to signal Tibetan material and popular culture had been resuscitated from categorization as an “Old” to be abolished.

¹⁴⁶ Amdo Jampa and Gedun Choephel came from nearby hometowns to become friends (some say Amdo Jampa was a student of Gedun Choephel) in Lhasa. Amdo Jampa did not have the broad-ranging intellectual curiosity nor erudition of Gedun Choephel or his years of travel and experiences with the outside world. Nonetheless, after the opening up of China, Amdo Jampa enjoyed an access to books on western art history, including the European Renaissance painters, whereas Gedun Choephel’s contact with Western and contemporary art seems to have come through personal contact with those in a modernizing zeitgeist in nearly independent India. Comparatively, Amdo Jampa innovated from within, bringing modern and foreign artistic techniques to bear on traditional, historical, and religious subjects, while Gedun Choephel was a radical explorer and was passionate about finding compatibilities and compromises to bring Tibetan civilization into the modern world. Their work was known only among the elites of Lhasa prior to 1959, and recovery of their ideas, techniques and artwork after the Cultural Revolution differed: Amdo Jampa was able to start a school and amass new art works, while the deceased Gedun Choephel and his many lost works have only come to the broader Tibetan and Western public in the past ten to twenty years.

¹⁴⁷ This is interesting to compare to the birth of modern Tibetan literature, analysis of the history of which leads Shakya to conclude only happened after incorporation to the modern Chinese state (Shakya, 2000).

¹⁴⁸ While destruction of Buddhist sites and arts, particularly in eastern Tibet as the People’s Liberation Army encroached, predates 1959, and some thangka painting may have occurred after 1959 up to the start of the Cultural Revolution in 1966, the introduction of Maoist Socialist Realism was swiftly followed by its domination of the visual environment and all artistic production.

¹⁴⁹ Lu Xun, an early reformist and modernist, objected saying, “there is no need to make their fists larger than their heads,” but such critique was squelched (Spence, 1999).

¹⁵⁰ The artistic processes of Tibetan and Han artists in the construction of the influential life-sized tableau, its impact upon Tibetans who were required to tour the exhibition, and its ongoing legacy are described in detail in chapter three.

¹⁵¹ Several of these Chinese trained Tibetan artists continued to work as artists after the Maoist era and into the twenty-first century. Abu is a Muslim Tibetan who became a watercolor painter of scenes of traditional secular Tibetan life. Tsering Dorjee became the first Tibetan to paint in vivid color and thick layers of brushstrokes in oil painting. Cham Sang and Wangdor were involved with the Sweet Tea House group in Lhasa in the 1980s.

¹⁵² In personal communications with Tsering Woesser and Susan Chen about Woesser’s discovery of her father’s photographs, researching them, and publishing them as *Forbidden Tibet* (Woesser, 2006), they described poignant moments in which Woesser showed individuals photographs from decades prior which brought back a flood of memories. Many Tibetans had had to find a way to live as neighbors with people who had committed wrongs against them, their families or their sacred sites, or remember their own regrettable acts, in an entirely chaotic time.

¹⁵³ Both were traditionally trained thangka painters prior to Chinese invasion and have been invaluable to the restoration of traditional art education in Tibet post 1980. Tenpa Rabten is the most celebrated thangka painter in Lhasa today, and the senior professor behind the thangka painting program at Tibet University, bringing the traditional training into the modern higher education model. Amdo Jampa (1916-2003) is famed in the history of contemporary Tibetan art for early experimentation, along with his friend Gedun Choephel, with photorealism. Amdo Jampa adapted realism to religious paintings and led a large school in Lhasa until his death, now sustained by his students. Tsewang Tashi may have invoked their names in order to include Tibetans in the history of time which often excludes their contributions, and to remove stigma from acknowledging that Tibetans participated in communist campaigns.

¹⁵⁴ See [Jackson] for an account of Yeshe Sherab's artistic life, he was a thangka painter who taught himself to paint in the style of the fifteenth century master, Khentse Chenmo, by copying extant murals, and who did not train students.

¹⁵⁵ Interview, Tsewang Tashi. November 3, 2004.

¹⁵⁶ Interview, Tsewang Tashi.

¹⁵⁷ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, October 2006.

¹⁵⁸ Tsewang has attempted but not been able to find surviving examples of this way of painting propaganda images. He would like to conduct an experiment to 'commission' a traditionally trained thangka painter to produce an image of a Socialist hero and see if the result would approximate his memory.

¹⁵⁹ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, October 3, 2006.

¹⁶⁰ Tsewang Tashi said Chinese Socialist Realism also was the earliest form of Political Pop Art; Warhol was inspired by the large Mao portraits! Interview, October 2006.

¹⁶¹ Tsewang Tashi's presentation of modern Chinese art history, which reaches back to the early twentieth century for its origins, is in contrast to those histories which state that "modern" Chinese art can be dated from 1976 or 1980 – 1989, and "Contemporary" Chinese art post-1989, as distinctively post-Maoist phenomenon (Erickson & Hou, 2007).

¹⁶² Viewers of art work created by (presumably) Buddhist artists leads to a search for religion's influence, found by some, as one Tibetan writer describes, as a formative aspect of identity: "Though ... without any hint of religious symbols, Buddhism exuded from every angle, shape and colour (dlo08 2011)." That is, to some observers, what makes art work "Tibetan," and what makes Tibetan production "art," was either explicit or subtle Buddhist influence that shapes the very core of the artist such that the literal content of any image is touched by it.

¹⁶³ Professor Tsering Shakya posed this question at the roundtable discussion accompanying the exhibition "Waves on the Turquoise Lake" at the University of Colorado, Boulder Art Museum.

¹⁶⁴ This approach reflects an attempt by anthropologists to assert and affirm the agency of groups marginalized by colonialism and globalization. However, this has the potential to reify alternative representations as dichotomies of resistance to the hegemonic and frame productions

as forms of oppositional cultural activism, an ethically fraught lens for exploring minorities in China and possibly other sites of extreme power differentials.

¹⁶⁵ Artists have participated in non-commercial discussions such as those supported by the Trace Foundation and at the International Association of Tibetan Studies meetings in Oxford (2003) and Bonn (2006).

¹⁶⁶ New modern literature in Tibetan language was birthed in the northeastern edge of the plateau, traditionally known as Amdo and largely incorporated into the PRC province of Qinghai. It continues to thrive in Amdo. Modern Tibetan music, sung in Tibetan and Chinese, is especially identified with southeastern Tibet's Kham region (mapping on to Sichuan and Yunnan provinces) and popular throughout Tibetan areas of the PRC. Though less studied within Tibetan Studies to date than literature and music, modern and contemporary visual art, with its nexus in Lhasa and central Tibet, exhibited similar cultural characteristics and developments.

¹⁶⁷ For example, in 2007, Tibetan artists were still talking about a group performance environmental art work called "Living Water," staged in Lhasa in 1996 with the intention to promote environmentalism. The curators selected Chinese artists from other provinces and local Tibetan artists to participate, some of whom worked collaboratively and others independently. The Tibetan artists quickly found that on the appointed day, media followed and documented only the Chinese artists, even when they worked alongside Tibetans. At the time, they "did not have any awareness of how to document these things ourselves,...but Song Dong was one of the participants and is now quite famous," one participating artist reported. Photographs of Song Dong's performance art, *Stamping Water*, are highlighted in his artistic resume. Tibetan artists discovered that the "Living Water" project was written about in Chinese and Western press, but the participation of local artists went unmentioned; they were eclipsed by Chinese artists and the Tibetan natural environment.

¹⁶⁸ Often referred to as the Tibet Artists Association in translation, I use Tibet Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA) to convey that "Tibet" refers to the administrative region of the PRC, analogous to the other major regional or provincial branches under the China Artist Association, e.g. Sichuan Artist Association, etc.

¹⁶⁹ Han Shuli's titles and positions include: Committee member of the Chinese People's Political Consultative Conference (CPPCC); Committee member of the China Art and Literature Union; Chairman of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Art and Literature Union; Chairman of the Tibetan Artists Association; President of the Tibetan Painting and Calligraphy College; Honorary professor of Tibet University.

¹⁷⁰ Interview, Han Shuli, 2007.

¹⁷¹ During his travels in rural and nomadic areas in the 1970s and 1980s, Han Shuli said, it was "difficult even to procure salt – I even asked kids to steal it for me!" he joked.

¹⁷² The Tibetan Autonomous Region was founded September 9, 1965. It is one of four important political anniversaries observed in Tibet, along with the 1949 founding of the People's Republic of China, the 1951 Peaceful Liberation of Tibet, and the 1959 start of Democratic Reforms in Tibet.

¹⁷³ The epitome of Socialist propaganda in Tibet, the *Wrath of the Serfs*, described in detail in chapter three, was under construction at the People's Hall at this time.

¹⁷⁴ Yu graduated from the Fine Art Department of Beijing Art College in 1964 and became a teacher at the middle school where Han was a student. Yu trained Han, who attended the high school affiliated with the Central Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing. According to one report, Yu first suggested a career opportunity in Tibet to Han. Yu Youxin followed his student, Han Shuli, and moved to Tibet in 1982. Yu, then in his forties, joined Han in 1980, and the two have, despite opportunities to live and work elsewhere, made Lhasa their home, claiming immersion in the Tibetan world is essential to their artistic productivity.

¹⁷⁵ Organized by the Li Keran Art Foundation with the China National Museum of Fine Arts, Beijing, The Municipal Cultural Union of Tibet, The Artists Association of Tibet, Tibet Institute of Calligraphy and Painting (Han Shuli has a role in the leadership of all of the institutions in Tibet). In 1999 and 2004, the shows *Exhibit of Tibetan Art* and *The Colorful Chain from the Snowland – Tibet Contemporary Art Exhibit* travelled to several large Chinese cities.

¹⁷⁶ Tibetan Contemporary Art Exhibition, Beijing, China. 1999.

¹⁷⁷ 2005: A Selection of New Tibetan Art. Yisulang Art Gallery. Singapore. Held in celebration of the 40th Anniversary of the Peaceful Liberation of TAR, 5-24 July 2005, in cooperation with Tibet Art Association and Tibetan Institute of Calligraphy and Painting, the show included works by the following artists: Bama Zhaxi (Pema Tashi), Benpa, Careing Namgyai (Tsering Namgyal, known as and referred to in this study as Panor), Dezhoin (Dedron), Han Shu Li, Jimei Chilei (Jime Trinley), Lhaba Cering, Li Zhibao, Yu Youxin.

¹⁷⁸ The Tibetan names in the catalogue are spelled from Chinese pinyin, and in the western method of phonetics would be spelled as: Wangyal, Lhaba Tsering, Pema Tashi, Jigme Trinley, Tsering Namgyal, Dedron, and Penpa. three Han (Han Shuli, Yu Youxin, Zhai Yuefei), one Yao (Li Zhibao), and seven Tibetans (Wanggya, Lhaba Tsering, Bama Zhaxi, Jimei Chilei, Cering Namgyai, Dezhoin, Benbar)

¹⁷⁹ I was told that Han Shuli claims his collecting was intended to salvage masterpieces from ruin, particularly in the immediate post-Cultural Revolution era, and make them again available to the Tibetan people through museum exhibitions. Some Tibetan artists do believe genuine knowledge and respect for Tibetan culture and a kind heart motivates Han Shuli. Others however, in refutation of his alleged aims, told me Han Shuli amassed an extensive and valuable personal collection, proudly displayed in his home, and by means of plundering and stealing enabled by his official designations. That is, informants suspected that the insinuation that local Tibetans were incapable of caring for their own religious treasures misrepresents the scenarios that likely unfolded as Han Shuli and other political figures like him traveled across the plateau: when a Han official arrives in a rural location and shows proof of government positions, who amongst the village Tibetans could have stopped them from taking whatever they wanted? (Anonymous group interview with three informants, March 2007.)

¹⁸⁰ In 1985, Han organized the *Exhibition of Tibetan Sculpture Art* in Beijing sponsored by the TARAA. In 1991, Han edited the Sculpture volume, and Yu Youxin edited the volumes Painting and Folk Art for the three volume publication “A Collection of Tibetan Art”. Han followed with “A Treasury of Tibetan Arts” in 1995, and has continued to be involved in numerous exhibitions of non-traditional art since then.

¹⁸¹ *China Pictorial* describes their motivations and projects, writing, “Deeply impressed by the plateau's imposing landscapes and hardy local people, the artists also relished in the

passionate folk songs, exotic dances, primitive and unique engraved masks, magnificent monasteries, majestic and imposing statues of Buddha, splendid murals and elegant and delicate thangka paintings. Further intrigued by the mysterious and traditional lifestyles of today's Tibetans, Han and Yu dedicated much time to the careful collection of artistic relics and folk art scattered around the vast plateau. Based on the written and pictorial materials they collected ...they displayed the essence of Tibetan classical and folk art masterpieces, preserving these treasures of local history (China Pictorial, 2005).”

¹⁸² Han Shuli has had solo and group exhibitions since 1987 in Paris, Tokyo, Toronto, Macau, Taiwan, Fuzhou, Malaysia, Germany, Belgium, Netherlands, Luxembourg, Chile, Argentina, and Brazil (Shuli, Han Shuli: Inspired by Tibet, 2004).

¹⁸³ CFLAC sponsors various juried exhibitions, according to curatorial themes such as works by national minorities or by genre such as oil paintings, and mounted generally in larger eastern Chinese cities, for which submissions from across the nation are invited. Other countries wishing to officially exhibit contemporary artworks from China are routed through the CFLAC, ensuring members are promoted and controlling content that will be seen as representative of the country.

¹⁸⁴ Under CFLAC, the Chinese Artists' Association (CAA) was founded in 1949 as the China Art Workers' Association with an explicit mission to support the Communist Party. The art cadres' founding vision was a union of professional artists of voluntary members meeting admission standards who would endeavor to: raise art standards in the country; train and set an example for young artists; organize exhibitions; bring art to the people; and publish art criticism in the monthly journal *Meishu* (Fine Arts). The CAA members have included the most accomplished artists in the nation, and its leadership forms an administrative hierarchy over many subsidiary branches, including the Tibet Autonomous Region Artist Association. Under the CAA is a hierarchical, pyramid structured national level, arts specific organizations (i.e. Chinese Painting Association, subdivided into committees for Chinese Oil Painting, Fresco, Animation, Children's Arts, etc.), and geographic subdivisions (i.e. Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists' Association, Lhasa Artists' Association, etc. subdivided into media, e.g. the Tibetan Painting and Calligraphy Institute). These include subdivisions both for arts specific associations (over a dozen in various visual and performance arts, including the CAA) and geographic associations (several dozen Regional and Municipal art associations) totaling 52 member organizations of CFLAC. There are also special art units in eight federal industries, such as the Chinese Railroad FLAC and the Army FLAC.

¹⁸⁵ China Federation of Literary and Art Circles takes as its task to unite artists and writers all over the country, train literary and art talents, promote the development and prosperity of the cause of literature and art. CFLAC gives professional guidance to its group members by sponsoring performances, exhibitions, artistic creations, theoretical researches, academic symposia and forums, personnel training and external exchanges. It funds and supports artists and writers through publishing books and video-audio works, establishing awards, organizing art exchanges, etc. It reflects the viewpoints and requirements of the group members, artists and writers, safeguards their legitimate rights and interests. Until recently, in addition to the aims mentioned above, the mission of CFLAC was expressed first and foremost as to "follow the CPC line" by "serving the people and serving socialism" by devoting efforts to the development of Chinese socialist literature and art, and to "promote unity among ethnic groups" and calling upon ethnic Chinese worldwide to "contribute to the reunification of the motherland." They encouraged members to make "grassroots investigations in factories, mines, rural areas, among the army and

in border areas, while providing necessary aid." chinaculture.org, accessed May 7, 2006. Text not available at this site in 2009. See www.cflac.org.cn/english.

¹⁸⁶ chinaculture.org, accessed May 7, 2006. Text not available at this site in 2009. See www.cflac.org.cn/english.

¹⁸⁷ Bama Zhaxi is the spelling which appears in publications in English language as derived from the Chinese pinyin spelling of Tibetan, but in the west the Tibetan phonetics would be given as Pema Tashi. Bama Zhaxi was a youth in Lhasa when his family suffered a 'black' political label during the Cultural Revolution. His father was beaten and killed, the family possessions taken or destroyed, and his mother was left in poverty with four children. The intercession of a family friend led to Bama's employment as a truck driver for a government office, and a chance to escape his father's political branding. Bama Zhaxi worked as a truck driver for ten years, but was always very interested in art.¹⁸⁷ Bama Zhaxi could be considered largely self-taught, as there was not an art training program in Lhasa at the time, but he was tutored by Han artists dispatched in Tibet.¹⁸⁷ Bama Zhaxi says his first art teacher was with a division of the Chinese Artists Association attached to the People's Liberation Army in Lhasa, and of the three Han Chinese artists who informally offered instruction in traditional Chinese painting (*zhong hua*) and woodblock carving, Han Shuli became his closet teacher, followed by Yu Youxin. Han, Yu and Bama Zhaxi were to become three of the top leaders of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA). (Interview, Bama Zhaxi, 2007. Also based upon Interview, Gade, December 2006.) Gade's Chinese father helped Bama Zhaxi, and later Bama Zhaxi returned the kindness when Gade showed childhood interest in drawing, offering him instruction and materials. In a twist of fate, Bama Zhaxi was able to return a kindness to the family friend who'd won Bama his first job as a truck driver when his son, Gade, showed an interest in art. Bama Zhaxi was one of Gade's first teachers, and then arranged for Gade's study with his own teachers, Han Shuli and Yu Youxin, all of whom Gade would surpass in success in the international art market.

¹⁸⁸ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, December 2006. Ang Sang, Keltse and Tsarong are all working on Losar productions for State theatre, for which we cannot buy tickets, 'but we can watch on tv!' This work is difficult because there are several leaders, and any of them can change their minds and be in disagreement with each other and the artists have to keep changing things. They pay is not great and there is no individual artistic freedom, from Tsewang Tashi and Nortse's perspectives. The pay used to be better when there were fewer who could do it, but now pay is threatened by computer generated and printed backdrops taking over what was always hand painted in the past and will yield the best quality craftsmanship, Tsewang Tashi opined.

¹⁸⁹ According to an anonymous informant, in 2007, a high ranking government official had a preview tour of the Zhol Museum. Reportedly, upon seeing the Old Tibet prison exhibit, he required that there be more and bigger scorpions added to the cell blocks. My informants implied the officials' approved version looked ridiculous and was yet another historic inaccuracy done for purely propagandistic reasons.

¹⁹⁰ If three Chinese artists are included as representatives of New Tibetan Art, "Tibetan" clearly does not refer to the ethnicity or birthplace of the artists, but foremost to their subject matter and/or the geographic location of the creation of a work. Much of the work by members of the TARAA features recognizably Tibetan subject matter, but some does not and is nonetheless included in "new Tibetan art," a nebulous intersection of particular aspects of style, technique, emotive expression, inspiration, and marketing.

¹⁹¹ Han Shuli denied having invented the *puhua* style himself, saying “Actually, it was not only me, but four or five of us in our twenties and thirties, but since I have been here the longest, people imagine that I created it.” Han Shuli does not appear to make great efforts to correct what ‘people imagine,’ but the Tibetan artist who introduced us considered Han’s explanation so widely known and accepted that he later accused me of wasting Han Shuli’s time asking stupid questions.

¹⁹² Interview, Han Shuli. December, 2006. This representation was contested by Tsewang Tashi and Tsering Nyandak, who concurred that the Tibetan painter Ang Ching, who had been one of the first six Tibetans to study in Beijing along with Tsewang Tashi and Gonkar Gyatso, had been the first to paint PuHua, before Han Shuli. Furthermore, as a Tibetan raised and still living and working in Lhasa, Ang Ching should be considered to have ‘been here the longest,’ not Han Shuli who claims that status for himself. If by the “four or five of us” he speaks of as originators of PuHua refers to Chinese painters to have worked in Tibet, he disregards Tibetan painters’ contributions to ‘new Tibetan art’ entirely.

¹⁹³ Kvaerne’s sophisticated analysis probes the implications of the style and subjects and identifies three ‘myths’ that can be deciphered in the paintings of this school. Firstly, they create a Tibetan world of past and present that is a “gaudy, one-dimensional, fairy-tale distortion of history, from which the great saints and ecclesiastical figures who have dominated Tibetan civilization and played a decisive role in Tibet’s history are conspicuously absent (Kvaerne, 1994)(173).” Additionally, the art promotes the harmonious relationship between the Chinese, particularly the army, and the Tibetan people who welcome the benevolent guidance of the Party. Thirdly, glorification of consumerism is propagated through the art, in particular the glut of mass-produced industrial goods from mainland China infiltrating dress, domestic space and the newly motorcycle-filled streets. These themes pervade state representation of Tibet and Tibetans in art in subsequent decades, and perpetuate “art” as in service to the State. In this paradigm, “artists” do not have total conceptual creative freedom, but work to synthesize traditional styles with concepts derived from state narratives.

¹⁹⁴ The visual hallmark of this era in contemporary Tibetan art’s development was combination of thangka elements and modern Chinese painting, yet the subjects of the paintings were secular heroes of the distant past, communist political figures and sympathizers, and everyday citizens of New Tibet. That local Tibetans plastered cheap reproductions of the paintings on their walls “for lack of anything better,” as Kvaerne claims, could suggest that Tibetan artists and viewers may have opted for the incorporation of recognizably Tibetan elements into their visual environments that had long been absent and demeaned.

¹⁹⁵ In 1958, each province of the PRC was directed by the Ministry of Culture, under the auspices of the Party’s State Council, to establish fine art academies overseen by the regional Community Party. In the Tibetan Autonomous Region, in lieu of an art academy, Tibet University’s art department was founded.

¹⁹⁶ A state produced documentary about Tibet Museum and Tibet University explains his appointment thus: “In order to make the students learn the traditional painting well, the university breaks the rules and employs many professionals according to the staff’s quality and teaching ability. In 1985 the university invited Danbaraodan [Tenpa Rabten] for teaching the art students the traditional painting. In 1998 Danbaraodan became a professor who had never studied in formal university. With the best wish for the school leaders and the diligent teaching of professor

Danbaraodan [Tenpa Rabten], the university has made prominent achievements in the field of traditional painting (GZ Beauty, 2007).”

¹⁹⁷ Comments made at the Artists’ Open Discussion, Sun City Gallery.

¹⁹⁸ After the 1990s, graduates of the department were also subsequently hired as faculty, including Penpa Wangdu, who was trained by Tenpa Rabten in *thangka* and art history and preservation. He worked with Gonkar Gyatso on the Tibetan mural in the Great People’s Hall in Beijing, and in the 1990s began experimenting with modernism. He has become the most successful artist in Lhasa to produce both traditional *thangka* paintings and contemporary art, finding they suit different expressive needs and vocabularies relative to his skills. Other faculty at Tibet University included Kelsang Tsering, the first Tibetan artist who, as a member of the TARAA, exhibited contemporary Tibetan art in the west, showing impressionist and semi-abstract, pale-hued, textured oil paintings of Tibetan village life Paris in 1991. Ngawang Jigme’s contemporary compositions are rooted in Tibetan “custom,” the largely secular aspects of Tibetan civilization common to farmers and nomads, while the sculptor Lobsang Tashi and painter Sherab Gyaltzen both utilize modern compositions and abstraction to communicate traditional Buddhist concepts. The ethos of creativity and moderization at Tibet University seems to have inspired instructors of more traditional crafts and arts to experiment with arranging traditional imagery in modern compositions. Finally, in the 1990s Tibet University began to support faculty advanced studies abroad through partnership with the Institute of Colour at University of Oslo, where both Tsewang Tashi and Benpa Chundak, the first Tibetan to use video as an art medium, have completed Masters of Fine Arts degrees. Thus, in the 1980s and 1990s, Tibetan artists found institutional support at the university, however, as it was still under the rubric of State controls, many of these artists sought alternative avenues for expression and development concurrent to or subsequent to their appointments in the art department.

¹⁹⁹ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, November 3, 2004.

²⁰⁰ Interview, Gonkar Gyatso, September 2003.

²⁰¹ Interview, Gonkar Gyatso, October, 2003.

²⁰² A sixth member reportedly passed away or disappeared.

²⁰³ Harris and others have represented State pressure upon the all ethnically Tibetan group to include Han artists as the primary or sole cause of the group’s cessation, but as former members reported to me, it was not sufficient in itself make them stop their activities. Instead, Nortse claimed, a combination of Gonkar Gyatso’s departure for India that left the group without a strong leader, Nortse’s departure from Lhasa to art academies in other provinces, and members’ assumption of work outside of producing art in the aftermath of the 1987-1988 protests all derailed the group’s activities and focus.

²⁰⁴ Interview, Gonkar Gyatso, May, 2007.

²⁰⁵ For example, Tsewang Tashi is also particularly articulate about the parallel between his artistic development and his quest for ethnic identity, but was in Beijing during the few years in which the Sweet Tea House was active.

²⁰⁶ Interview, Gonkar Gyatso, June 2007.

²⁰⁷ ROCI (Rauschenberg Overseas Cultural Interchange) was a six year exhibition tour, comprised of paintings, sculpture, prints and art objects, and included new works inspired by Rauschenberg's experiences at each locality. Rauschenberg's mission included the promotion of world peace and cultural awareness, but Tibet and Rauschenberg made strong mutual artistic impressions.

²⁰⁸ While the assemblages Rauschenberg produced in Lhasa were not critically acclaimed in the west, Rauschenberg later transferred the photographs he took in Lhasa to walls and freestanding sculptures for the Tibetan Keys and Locks series (41.171—41.181). A critic commented, "when one ignores the glare and glare of the on-location videotapes and examines the artworks up close and selectively, they are often rather good. It is true that some countries agreed with Mr. Rauschenberg more than others. Several giant glazed ceramic paintings he made in Japan constitute a terrible case of visual indigestion, and the assemblage sculptures made in Tibet -- one consisting of nothing more than a bent car fender and a metal beer keg -- often read as ludicrous quotations of his own early work (R. Smith 1991)." See Robert Rauschenberg. Tibetan Keys and Locks, *Tibetan Keys (Centers)*, 1987. 25.4 x 76.2 x 76.2 cm (10 x 30 x 30 in.). 41.176 © Robert Rauschenberg and Gemini G.E.L./ VAGA, New York, NY

²⁰⁹ Museum of Modern Art and Contemporary Art, Nice http://www.mamac-nice.org/francais/exposition_tempo/musee/raushenberg-2005/d_presse/chrono.html 2-23 December : "ROCI Tibet", Tibet Revolutionary Hall, Lhasa. Rauschenberg a eu du mal à créer des œuvres pour le Tibet « parce qu'ils ont un respect total de toutes choses (...), il n'existe pas de hiérarchie entre les matériaux... Je pensais qu'ils étaient si proches de ma propre sensibilité qu'il me semble que cela a été l'exposition la plus difficile que j'aie eu à faire ». 2-23 December: "ROCI Tibet" Tibet Revolutionary Hall, Lhasa. Rauschenberg has struggled to create works for Tibet "because they have a respect for all things (...), there is no hierarchy between the materials ... I thought they were so close to my own sensibility that I think that this was the most difficult exhibition I had to do. "

²¹⁰ Sang Ye translates and quotes an unattributed Chinese source which said, "In 1985 an exhibition of works by the American pop artist Robert Rauschenberg in Beijing and Lhasa had a major impact on the evolution of a contemporary Chinese art. Around that time and into the next year, over one thousand exhibitions of new art were staged throughout China which in turn fostered a variety of new concepts and styles, not to mention encouraging the proliferation of artists." This clearly represents a Beijing-centric perspective of "a contemporary Chinese art," as in Lhasa the reaction was not galvanizing so much as bewildering (Ye 2000).

²¹¹ This account of Rauschenberg's visit is compiled from Interviews with Nortse, Keltse, Tsering Nyandak, 2006. In addition, I heard the anecdote that Rauschenberg had gifted a painting to a high ranking official in the TAR, who had traded it for an antique thangka. The bemused artists' implication was that the official was hedging a bet on their relative financial values and had no idea that the gift was produced by an artist who would become the third highest selling American contemporary artist. Artists showed me a picture of a Rauschenberg work famed for its record breaking price fetched at auction, and told me the gifted work had been very similar to that one.

²¹² Nortse spent months on the *changtang*, northern grasslands sparsely inhabited by nomads, producing art such as the *Bound Scenery* (1987) series, and Tsewang Tashi took "root searching" journeys in central and eastern Tibet including on foot and horseback. The artists' reflections on these journeys are detailed in chapters five and three, respectively.

²¹³ Artists traveling outside of China for the first time in the late 1980s and early 1990s for activities included Kelsang Tsering, Keltse, Nyandak, and Gade, Benchung and Tserang. Kelsang Tsering's career is exemplary of the TARAA trajectory from local to national to international, from a 1988 solo show in Shigatse, Tibet followed by a 1989 Tibetan Contemporary painting exhibition in Beijing, then having a work collected by the National Art Museum of China in 1990, and then a trip and exhibition 1991-92 in Paris. Keltse visited Australia, and a private gallery hosted a show of Tsering Nyandak's work in Berlin in the mid-1990s. Then in 2001, the non-profit Trace Foundation in conjunction with Snug Harbor Cultural Center and The Henry Street Settlement in New York City, hosted Gade, Benchung, and Tserang for an extended artists' residency program. These appear to have operated independent of Tibet Autonomous Region Artists Association influence, and demonstrated that foreign recognition of artistic merit could by-pass the official career trajectory.

²¹⁴ Interview, Nortse, 2007.

²¹⁵ Nortse said, "They are all still here in Lhasa mostly. Gade, Pewang, Anu, Ang Ching, etc. ..The older members of the GCAG."

²¹⁶ Gonkar Gyatso, Interview, August 2006.

²¹⁷ Nortse, Interview.

²¹⁸ "A new Tibetan literature emerged only after the establishment of Communist Chinese rule in Tibetan—speaking areas. The Chinese government established not only Communist political and administrative control of Tibet, but also brought about Tibet's first encounter with the modern world—specifically, an engagement with a technologically advanced society imbued with a modern and materialistic ideology (Shakya 2000)."

²¹⁹ In the period after 1980, the Tibetan intellectual community—traditional scholars educated in the monasteries, and a young generation of intellectuals trained in universities in China – "emerged from the Cultural Revolution severely traumatized. They had witnessed attacks on every aspect of Tibetan culture and identity. Now, when the Party allowed even a small opportunity for expression, the intellectual community plunged into a debate on how best to make use of the degree of openness that the new policies allowed. Traditionalists in the community argued that the weight of intellectual labor should be directed towards restoring what had been lost and destroyed; ...At the same time, a group of young intellectuals believed that the main task facing Tibet was what they called "innovation." They believed that Tibet had suffered under the hands of the Communists not only because of the military and political might of the Chinese, but also because there was an inherent weakness in Tibetan culture: its inability to confront and integrate the forces of change (Shakya 2000)."

²²⁰ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, March, 2006.

²²¹ The members of the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in 2007 were: Ang Sang, Anu, Dedron, Gade, Jhamsang, Jiang Yong, Keltse, Norbu Tsering (Nortse), Penpa, Penpa Chundak, Tenzin Jigme, Tsering Dhondrup, Tsering Namgyal (Panor), Tsering Nyandak, Tsewang Tashi, Wang Shiming, Yak Tsetan, Zhungde, and Zhang Ping.

²²² Fourteen of the members are Tibetan; one, Gade, is half Tibetan and half Han but primarily identifies as Tibetan; of the four Chinese members, two are Han born in eastern China, one was born in Lhasa and is fluent in Tibetan language, and one is of a different minority

²²³ Two couples elected to share the space and voting rights of one member; Tsering Namgyal (Panor) and his wife Dredon shared a membership, and Jiang Yong/Yung and his girlfriend Zhang Ping shared. Although all four were productive artists, Dredon was a full time teacher with limited time for art when she joined (she later quit teaching to be an artist full time). The other couple seems to have been financially motivated.

²²⁴ One young artist, Tannor, a member of the Shunnu Dame group, told me, “I love rock music. I slowly became aware of it and noticed that it is great, like U2. Bono’s thinking is for the whole world. I like not only their way of singing, but that behind the music there is great mind. This is like our religion because the main goal is peace for all sentient beings.) I also like SuJin’s way of thinking: It is not necessary to believe always that $1 + 1 = 2$. We can feel some doubt. And the Buddha says this exactly – it is right to have doubt. So artists too (question the assumptions that others take for granted). This is a positive way of thinking.” For this Tibetan, born in the late 1970s, the rock music stars Bono and SuJin, artists and the Buddha share modern scientific and altruistic ways of thinking. The Buddha is one among his heroes. Many of his 2007 paintings include one Tibetan Buddhist, one Western and one Chinese historical reference or figure each, demonstrating hybridism and relativity that may characterize his generation, and the displacement of Buddhism from the sole and central focus. For this young artist, religious imagery inspires his life ideals (he uses the figure of a monk to stand in for himself) but situated relative to the world’s religions and social histories.

²²⁵ The term Shangri-la was popularized in the west by James Hilton’s 1933 novel, *Lost Horizons*, in which the best of western civilization is preserved against impending doom in the Himalayan keep of Shangri-la, overseen by Caucasians, while Tibetans toiled in ignorance below. Eventually Tibet itself became conceived of as a storehouse, or embodiment, of pristine and secret wisdom.

²²⁶ The Gedun Choephel Artists Guild members were commissioned to produce works in response to the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad, a major nation-wide event in July 2006 widely regarded by Tibetans and foreigners as highly controversial, but a State technological and engineering marvel (see chapter four). Tsering Nyandak pointed out, “some groups often receive commissions for special occasions and anniversaries,” but this was the first collective commission for the Guild. The artists, overcome with curiosity about each other’s works, each brought their completed works to the gallery and installed them in advance of the arrival of Ian Alsop of Peaceful Wind Gallery to select the best works for exhibition in the USA and UK, in collaboration with Fabio Rossi of Rossi & Rossi and Gonkar Gyatso of Sweet Tea House Gallery. As it was only a couple of days before the train was due to arrive at the new Lhasa station, Lhasa was packed with military personnel, including snipers on rooftops and armored tanks in the streets, Chinese journalists, and undercover police. The increased foot traffic into the gallery, including an uncomfortable number of unknown visitors with cameras, caused the artists to panic and they took down the special exhibition less than 24 hours after they had mounted it. Had any observer suggested these artists were opposed to the railroad, the artists would be at risk for the gallery being shut down, interrogation, and possible imprisonment, regardless of their artistic intentions. All the works were promptly packaged and mailed to the US.

²²⁷ I asked Gade for a Chinese language title for the Lhasa exhibition and he felt the phonetic play and meanings embedded in *fasheng fasheng* captured the spirit of this exhibition and the current state of contemporary art in Lhasa. The first *fasheng* means “Happening.”: Much is now happening in Lhasa, with three artists associations, Tibet University’s School of the Arts turning away hundreds of applicants, and numerous independent artists all engaged in

contemporary art practices. The second *fasheng* means “to make a sound”, or we might say to make some noise, using their own indigenous voices to fill the gap for audiences Tibet and foreign.

²²⁸ “My art might not be seen as contemporary in a western manner since the cultural pulse in Tibet is very different (Gade, 2005).”

²²⁹ Interview, Tsering Nyandak, December, 2006.

²³⁰ They were in fact so modest about this fund that I never ascertained its scope.

²³¹ The vision emerged of the construction of a 2000 square meter art complex to house a gallery, studios, and residences. Studios would be subsidized for artists who could not afford materials or work space, and common spaces for collaboration and for pooling and democratizing access to expensive new media and technologies such as computers with video and photography editing software, digital and film cameras, and a darkroom (there was not one in all of the TAR). Residences would be offered through an artist-in-residence program, one of which would offer scholarship for rural artists (for whom time in such an urban facility and with other artists could be truly transformative), and for foreign artists who would pay. Several members had worked together on a budget, securing foreign partner investors, and searching for real estate, but significant obstacles would need to be overcome. Nonetheless, bearing in mind the artist-in-residence programs a small handful of them had experienced abroad and programs and artists complexes in Beijing and Shanghai as models, they assumed this responsibility to help strengthen the formation of a contemporary Tibetan art through tangible and intangible support of individual working artists and those who would become the leaders of the next generation of artists. They did so in a very matter of fact way, without any sense of themselves as charitable and noble, and with an unquestioned commitment to benefiting others that would be sustainable and impactful.

²³² Nortse. Interview, December 2006.

²³³ Nortse said, “We need a modern exhibition again. Rauschenberg did it once. Slowly, slowly art is gaining some attention these days. But after the Rauschenberg show there has been none like it again in Tibet. When people saw Rauschenberg it changed their thinking.” Interview, December, 2006.

²³⁴ Nortse says, “We can see very strong Tibetan characteristics in the culture, and they are very interesting, and so we’ve had a mind to work on Tibetan culture....to let so-called ancient Tibetan culture change into something we can have more connection with and know more. CTA can help with this.”

²³⁵ Demo Wangchuk has been invited as a guest teacher of digital photography, and they have applied to the central government for funding to build and equip facilities for new technologies, potentially at the new campus that was under construction in 2006. Despite the enlarging program, expanding curriculum for Bachelor and Master’s degrees and increasing numbers of applicants, the new campus will only have four rooms for the Art Academy, potentially leaving the department split between two campuses 30 minutes apart.

²³⁶ Until the gradual introduction of a private sector, the State organized citizens into work units that included housing, and government employees are still within this system, but are not required to live in the government housing.

²³⁷ Tsewang Tashi, Interview, March 2006.

²³⁸ Applicants submit samples of artwork, must pass a color blindness test, and interviewed in an art studio where they are asked to make a work in response to a given prompt. Tsewang Tashi, Interview, 2006.

²³⁹ On several occasions I witnessed these impromptu exhibitions, which were avidly attended by current art department students, but few others. Seasoned artists explained that the same works were repeatedly brought in by the faculty, so there was very little new serious work to see or discuss. They were not advertised to the general public, and no signs appeared on campus.

²⁴⁰ These fourteen are: Tsewang Tashi, Gade, Benchung, (these three are also members of the Gedun Choephel Artist Guild since 2003; Tsewang and Benchung both completed MA degrees in Norway), Penpa Wangdu (also known as Pewang, the only accomplished artist in Lhasa regularly working in both contemporary and thangka painting), Kelsang Tsering, Pasang Choephel, Kelsang Tsetan, Ngawang Jigme, Jigme Trinley, Sherab Gyaltsen, Tsering Dorje, Tashi Tsering, Kelsang Dorje (Graphic Design), Lobsang Tashi (sculpture).

²⁴¹ Ngawang Jigme, Interview. July, 2006.

²⁴² “A selection of art from the Gedun Choephel Fine Art Group” announced the founding of the association in Lhasa in 2003, lists the names of the then seventeen members, and, significantly, names foreign exhibition sites in the UK, US, Singapore and Hong Kong, stating, “when in their own country and abroad, they have had the experience of discussing the relationships between art and culture; and many of their works have been collected in China and abroad by institutions and private individuals.” “*A selection of art from the Gedun Choephel Fine Art Group*,” Folk Art and Literature, Qinghai: 2006.

²⁴³ *The Tale of the Incomparable Youth* (gzhon nu zla med kyi gnam rgyud) was written by the cabinet minister Dokhar Tsering Wangyal (1689-1763). It borrows heavily from Tibetan (Indic) classical literary style, and this is a pre-modern secular novel in subject only.

²⁴⁴ Interview, Tannor, spring, 2007.

²⁴⁵ TARA has utilized spaces for art exhibitions at Tibet University, the municipal Library and, before it was torn down, a museum under the Potala, but none are permanent or designated for art display.

²⁴⁶ Interview, Pema Tashi/ Bama Zhaxi, April 2007.

²⁴⁷ The State news agency writes, “Their research results provide sufficient cultural elements composing their own artistic styles, as well as a possibility of further expansion of Tibetan arts. An unprecedented art genre that represents contemporary Tibetan arts was created, and paintings rich in color were put to canvas (*puhua*). Bridging traditional and modern, local flavors and exotic styles, the genre has helped to stimulate a painting renaissance in Tibet. Their work has also served as text material and as a model for cultivating young Tibetan artists. Inspired by these works, young artists inheriting and carrying on the gene of folk art receive a full introduction to the world of art theory. Students are thus directed to correct paths of aesthetical orientation and a stronger artistic psychology (China Pictorial 2005).”

²⁴⁸ Representation of contemporary art and artists from Tibet within the PRC occurs primarily through large exhibitions and the publication by the government of general survey catalogues and journals, and to a much lesser extent, through the publication of individual artists' retrospectives and small groups' local exhibitions in regional centers.

²⁴⁹ In this first publication of contemporary Tibetan art in the TAR, *Contemporary Tibetan Art (Bod ljong deng grabs kyi mdze' tsal)* (1991), the majority of works appear to be from the immediately preceding decade (unfortunately, the works are not dated), and artwork typical of the Cultural Revolution era's propagandistic productions is omitted. Socialist Realism is still present, as is its legacy, in these works from the 1980s but most of the paintings reclaim traditional culture in romantic realist styles, celebrate folk culture with appropriations from thangka motifs, and draw subject matter from "common people" and the landscape. There are some notable exceptions of modernist experimentations and individual creativity, and these works generally represent very early works by those who would become accomplished artists of the 2000s.

²⁵⁰ Tibet Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA) published *Contemporary Tibetan Art (Bod ljong deng grabs kyi mdze' tsal)* in 1991. Harris reads the underlying organization of this book as a political discourse on minorities, including the hierarchical view of cultures, with Tibetan traditionalist work, at the beginning of the book, as less advanced than the Han-influenced work that follows. The political motives imputed to the editors is not how I found the book to be read by Tibetan artists in 2006-7 who read it as a more or less chronological presentation, beginning with thangka and then Amdo Jampa, followed by those he influenced, and so on to more abstract experimentalism of the 1980s and development of artists through the decade. It is also likely that Communist Party-member editors of the collection may have been motivated to select works that presented a harmonious and secularized representation of Tibetan society.

²⁵¹ The *Colorful Chain from the Snowland – Tibet Contemporary Art Exhibit* was described in the publication: "Eleven Tibet artists bring their love of art and their love of the land where their arts were born to the city of Beijing. Their works contain the unique character of culture and their artistic response to the contemporary world. Therefore, their distinctive artistic language, symbol, and style are constructed as soul of Tibetan art.

There are several elements contribute to the characteristic of Tibetan art the magnificent landscape of Tibet, the endurance of a Tibetan people to the harsh living condition, and the mysterious aesthetic fashion of Tibetan art. Such elements form a relatively closed and straightforward cultural entity, which shines with breathtaking, mysterious and sacred attraction to the world. For the burden of such exclusive attraction since 1980s', there have been a great number of Tibetan artists continued onto the journey of rediscovering their artistic and cultural heritage.

Since the modernization of Chinese society, the globalization of the economic market and the breaking of the cultural boundaries among peoples, Tibet artist have to reexamine the art of yesterday and of today to develop a new Tibetan art for tomorrow. Often artists have to ask themselves carrying on the tradition of their own culture, while learning from others. But the ultimate objective is to explore for a new artistic form that honestly represents their people, their land, their history, and their culture.

China is a country with various ethnic groups. If all ethnic groups learn to respect their own tradition and to engage contemporary conception from others, as well as to create art with their own ethnic characters, soon oriental art will be playing an influential role in the world.

During the 45th Anniversary of Tibet Democratic Reformation, this is a gift from the artists of Tibet and Li Keran Art Foundation to present to you the dazzling art from the holy land of Tibet.[sic]"

Tibet—the Colorful Chain From the Snowland: Tibet Contemporary Art Exhibition, 2004
China National Art Museum of Fine Arts, Beijing
Editor- Li Xiaoke; Organizer—Li Keran Art Foundation
Sponsors—The Municipal Cultural Union of Tibet, The Artists Association of Tibet, Tibet Institute of Calligraphy and Painting
Artists: Wanggya, Lhaba Cering, Han Shuli, Bama Zhaxi, Li Zhibao, Jimei Chilei, Zhai Yuefei, Cering Namygal, Dezhoin, Benbar, Yu Youxin. Nine of these eleven artists are living in and working in Tibet, five are Tibetan, three are Han and one is Yao from Yunnan.

The exhibition is a "gift" from the artists of Tibet on the occasion of the 45th Anniversary of the Tibet Democratic Reform. The catalogue emphasizes ethnicity by inclusion of Tibetan script for artists' names on their biographical pages, and the selection of art works is misrepresentative of artists' oeuvre, favoring monks, and other "ethnic" imagery.

²⁵² "The source of this new form of Tibetan art dates from the middle of the last century, when Chinese artists started coming to Tibet to do research and to sketch what was, to them, a previously unknown land." Tibetan art "at that time" was "as it had always been, religious in nature" and comparable to the medieval art of Europe, a devotional craft. The Chinese artists were "stimulated" and "influenced" and "began to create wonderfully colourful paintings of their own... From the 1970s onwards, many young Tibetan artists graduated from local and Chinese art schools where they had been exposed to new ideas, new technologies, new materials and new ways of looking at the world. As a result, and in marked contrast with previous generations, they adopted new ways of expressing the world around them and their relationship with it." Their success is measured by the fact of its "warm welcome" by critics and the public for the "Their paintings are excitingly original, but they can also be seen as hybrids that create a kind of cultural bridge between the old and the new. They make reference to traditional Tibetan art, but the paintings have a freshness that reflects a new view on the world (Croft, 2005)."

²⁵³ This framing, of a great tradition poised to get even better through contact and change, is the opposite of Western notions of pre-modern societies contaminated by colonization and/or globalization (which, in the art world, informs various scales of "value").

²⁵⁴ "Comment on the Painting Works by Jigme Chilya" was written in Chinese in the journal *Tibetan Art Studies* by Huang Zhaje, which could be a Chinese version of the Tibetan name Wang Tashi Dekyi (Huang Zhaje 2006).

²⁵⁵ In government-influenced discourse, artists are praised for re-examining traditional arts and "developing a new Tibetan art for tomorrow," carrying on some traditions while learning from others in the age of "modernization of Chinese society [and] globalization of the economic market." The path to the further development of culture as well as to success as an artist (defined as global recognition in the name of the nation) is a combination of ethnic tradition and modernization: The most promising potential they could realize would be to garner world influence for oriental art by learning about their own ethnic tradition and maintaining "their own ethnic characters" while engaging with outside contemporary "conception."

²⁵⁶ Problematically, in some catalogs, these artists are represented not by the diversity of their oeuvre, but by their PuHua works, possibly created in this style by request for a specific show, complicating the notion that they are representative of all contemporary art in Tibet, and the perceived progressive nature of that style to develop the art of the region.

²⁵⁷ “The notion of underdevelopment (*rjes lus*) is crucial to understanding the nature of Chinese rule in Tibet. The term implies that Tibet lagged behind in technology and, more important, that it was culturally stagnant and backward (Shakya 2000).”

²⁵⁸ Some contemporary Tibetan artists are also appreciative of Han Shuli’s contributions, particularly those who benefitted from his tutelage in their youth. They see him as genuinely knowledgeable of and concerned with Tibetan Buddhist culture, people, and young artists’ development; students Dedron and Panor (Tsering Namgyal) referred to him as “*sems zangpo*,” good-hearted. On the other hand, it has been suggested that when Tibetans saw Han Shuli’s artwork, stimulated by his ‘discovery’ of Tibetan traditional art, they regained interest and a sense of pride in their traditional and artistic heritage (C. Harris, *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959* 1999). Panor, one of Han Shuli’s closest Tibetan students, vehemently denied that Han was instrumental in overcoming the rupture of teachers and practices of traditional arts and transcending any possible internalization by Tibetans of the official message that their culture was backwards. Tibetans “did not forget their culture, which has a long history, and although it was a very low period, Tibetan masters themselves slowly began to teach again,” Panor said (Interview, 2007). Han’s appropriation of Tibetan aesthetics however contributed to the introduction of Tibet’s rich heritage to China, and thereby perhaps helped to make Tibetanness safe again for Tibetans, although via Han artists in the Tibet in the 1980s, art was oriented towards aesthetics (and away from revolutionary politics) rather than devotional use as in the Tibetan past.

²⁵⁹ In 2007, a group of Lhasa artists (Bama Zaxi [Pema Tashi], Han Shuli, Yu Youxin, Norbu Tsering [Nortse], Lhaba Tsering, Benha, Gade, Li Zhibao, Zhai Yuefei, Jimei Chilei, Tsering Namgyai [Panor]) were commissioned to participate in a project they could not refuse, as it was spearheaded locally by Han Shu Li, the Chairman of the official Tibet Artists Association and former teacher of several invited artists. Culturally, teachers are highly esteemed; barring ethical violations, to refuse the request of a teacher is nearly unthinkable. Each artist was asked to produce large works in a particular, and for some of them uncomfortable, style of *PuHua* for Realm of Purity—Realms of Experience: From Divinity to Humanity—An Exhibition of Contemporary Tibetan Art, at The Luxe Gallery, Singapore. The exhibition showcased *puhua*, a “special feature” of contemporary Tibetan art, and noted its “distinctive character” is the “energy it conveys,” derived from a unique geography, and culture “steeped in esoteric Buddhist traditions and ancient beliefs (The Luxe Art Museum, 2008).” A description of the exhibition from the gallery website (<http://thelam.sg/about-the-exhibition?e=exhibition-3-tibetan-exhibition?e=>) reads:

From Divinity to Humanity – An Exhibition of Contemporary Tibetan Art

Tibet, with its unique geography and environment, has nurtured a distinctive culture which combines a reverence for the powers of nature with a belief in the oneness of Nature and Man. From the Land of Snows, a land dotted with sacred lakes and holy mountains and endowed with a culture steeped in esoteric Buddhist traditions and ancient beliefs, renowned for its colourful and beautifully intricate religious arts and motifs, has sprung forth modern artistic interpretations of life in this vast and sublimely majestic landscape. The exhibition “From Divinity to Humanity” attempts to showcase some of these contemporary Tibetan art pieces.

A special feature of Contemporary Tibetan art is its use of the “colour on canvass” painting method inherited from traditional Thangka painting. What gives contemporary Tibetan art its distinctive character is not that its contents differ from other types of paintings. Its uniqueness lies in the roots of its contents and the energy that it conveys. The energy that it puts forth allows viewers to experience the visual arts from a whole new intuitive perspective. Depictions of highland barley fields, yaks, symbols, and the Himalayas tells stories of the human condition and highlights the unpretentious nature of Spirit. Therein lies its attractiveness. Contemporary Tibetan Art allows us to more easily understand what it means by “the persuasive power of art”.

²⁶⁰ Notable exceptions are Dedron and Panor, graduates of the art department of TU where Dedron was especially inspired and encouraged by Gade, and are members of GCAG and also consider themselves students of Han Shuli. They consider themselves as painters of *puhua*, but do not see it, or Han Shuli, as rigidly defined, but as a liberating combination of materials and methods, unified by the use of cotton cloth. They mix locally and traditionally made stone ground mineral pigments, small amounts of oil paints, and Chinese inks. They consider their work as informed by various traditions and techniques, but with the freedom to mix them at will. The materials, genres, traditions and rules of the past and of other locations do not bind them.

²⁶¹ A thirty-something year old artist struggling with substance abuse and fighting whose art work is deeply reflective and inspired by Buddhist philosophy, Tsering Wangsdu has had limited classroom and private instruction from a few Lhasa artists and occasionally brings paintings on a consignment basis to the GCAG.

²⁶² Interview, Tsering Wangdu, January, 2007.

²⁶³ Interview, SoTse, July 2007.

²⁶⁴ Some major group exhibitions between 2003-2013 include: *Colorful Chain form the Snowlands* (National Museum of Art, Beijing, 2004); *Rethinking Tradition* (Mechak sponsored exhibitions at Tibet House, New York, International Campaign for Tibet, Washington, D.C., and Emory University, Atlanta, 2005); *Visions from Tibet* (Rossi & Rossi, London/ Peaceful Wind, Santa Fe, 2005); *Lhasa Train* (Peaceful Wind, 2006); *Lhasa Express* (Rossi & Rossi, 2006); *Faces of Contemporary Tibet* (Konigswinter, Germany, 2006); *Waves on the Turquoise Lake* (University of Colorado Boulder Art Museum, 2006); *The Missing Peace: Artists and the Dalai Lama* (traveling exhibition, Committee of 100 for Tibet and the Dalai Lama Foundation, 2006); *Kathmandu meets Lhasa* (Netherlands, 2007); *Tibetan Encounters: Contemporary meets Tradition* (Rossi & Rossi, New York, 2007); *Vajra Visions* (New Delhi, 2007); *Lhasa: New Works from Tibet* (Red Gate Gallery/798, Beijing, 2007), *Scorching Sun of Tibet* (Beijing, 2010) as well as ongoing rotating exhibitions since 2003 at Sweet Tea House Gallery of Contemporary Tibetan Art, London, and community exhibitions in Lhasa and Dharamsala in recent years.

²⁶⁵ “The news, though, is that the Rossis — Anna Maria and Fabio, mother and son — also have an ambitious show of contemporary Tibetan art, interspersed with antique ritual objects and thangka paintings. Some of the artists draw heavily on these traditional sources; others avoid cultural references. It’s always hard to draw conclusions about anyone in group shows, but some of this stuff looks interesting. Perhaps someone in New York will pick up the lead and give us more. (Four of the artists will speak at the gallery at 4 p.m. tomorrow.) (Cotter 2007)”

²⁶⁶ One of the pieces was a collaboration between the married artist couple, Panor (Tsering Namgyal) and Dedron [also Dezhoin], who were initially reticent to explain the piece as a critical commentary on antiques trade, electing to comment on the materials they employed in their first multi-media work. Buddha images appear on leather, taken from the nearly worn out soles of a pair of discarded traditional Tibetan felted wool boots. The soles represent the footprints of many successive generations that have gradually accumulated to form their Tibetan culture, step by step, they said. However, from a Buddhist point of view, placing the image of a Buddha on the bottom of the feet is considered very sinful, yet in this modern world changes in attitude locally and different customs abroad have enabled people to see Buddha statues and images as just another material thing which can be bought and sold. One Buddha asks “Is this your first time to be here?” “Yes,” the other replies, “it is a wonderful place. Where have you been before?” The first replies, “I’ve been many many places like Tokyo, London, Sydney.” They also ask each other their age (“very old”), and the cost of each other’s ‘performance’ (“it’s a secret”). The third Buddha displayed between and higher than the other two is different. The turquoise at this Buddha’s heart is a *bLa gYug*, a stone that holds and protects the spirit, commonly worn by Tibetan people. This Buddha has not lost its essence and blessing power, and the mantra around it, resembling a carved *mani*²⁶⁶ stone, indicates its physical location as within Tibet, while the use of English connotes the outside world in which the others circulate. Dedron and Panor also explained that for them, the dangling mirror is one of the most important materials of the piece. It is the nature of mirrors to show, without bias or distortion, reality before it; mirrors cannot lie. The mirror hangs from the central Buddha in Tibet, as a marker of truth and honesty, while from the other two dangle counters used on rosaries. Taken off a rosary and attached to discussions of value, we have to wonder what they are counting now. Finally, the left and right pieces have stitches holding together the Buddha and the sole (generations of tradition).

²⁶⁷ Penpa Wangdu expressed similar sentiment in *Thoughts turn from spiritual to monetary value* a painting rendered entirely in traditional Tibetan materials and methods of *thangka* painting, but for an original composition showing a frame-by-frame sequence in which a full altar of sacred and beautiful objects is emptied for money. Each time an item disappears it is replaced by silver and gold coins, until only the Buddha remains, and then it too is replaced.

²⁶⁸ Fabio Rossi did not take offense, and was heartened by artists feeling emboldened to express themselves. Interview, Fabio Rossi, May 2007.

²⁶⁹ Ian Alsop of Peaceful Wind, Stephen McGuinness of Plum Blossoms, and Fabio Rossi of Rossi + Rossi each conducted regular business in the Buddhist antique trade, a business which many in Tibet and observers of Tibetan culture claim is inevitably morally suspect. To what extent or combination factors such as the increasing difficulty in obtaining new antiques for markets, new business opportunities, ethics, or passion for contemporary art emerging from cultures they long studied, motivate their investment in Tibetan contemporary art is hard to say. Contemporary artists were also aware that these businessmen became interested in them firstly because of their interest in Tibetan and Himalayan art, and would present them in relationship to their cultural traditions, as opposed to international contemporary galleries who may appreciate them first on the basis of their artwork, and only secondly for interest in their ethnic or geographic origins and contexts. These were, and remain, complicated topics and difficult conversations, but will be of interest to explore as the movement matures.

²⁷⁰ Yu meandered in his speech, often citing examples of nineteenth and twentieth century French and Russian painters as examples of artists who through their hard work and dedication over a lifetime achieved international fame for their countries and for works that conveyed

powerful emotional states to viewers. Yu himself saw some of these portraits and landscape works in person, others in books, and was impressed by their emotion and realism. He would have been exposed to these artists through his own training and early career in the domination of art schools and 'art workers' productions by Soviet and Socialist Realism. Citing such works and artists was meant as an exhortation to the younger artists to work hard, and a promise of what they might achieve. However, the audience was far from inspired by references to such dated 'masterpieces' that did not embody their own goals, and they did not mask their obvious boredom, even dissatisfaction with the undemocratic monopolization of the "open discussion."

²⁷¹ In 2000, Tibet University and the LAA had collaborated to put on a program at the Tibet Museum, with an exhibit and talks, but the speakers had all been leaders invited from outside and followed a scripted program. This Open Discussion in 2007 was the next closest thing to have happened in Lhasa since; Bama Zhaxi, Kelsang Tsering, Tsedor, and others echoed this sentiment in their remarks at the event.

²⁷² Tsewang Tashi and others were well aware that the norm for private galleries in Beijing and Shanghai, and worldwide, to have show with works of paintings, sculptures, multimedia works, video, installations, digital technologies or performance, and artists working in more than one medium.

²⁷³ Han Shuli and Yu Youxin have responded the Gedun Choephel Artist Guild's success however by privately attempting to persuade artists to leave GCAG for TARAA, while publically advocating for a unified international front.

²⁷⁴ Some original works were not available for exhibition in Lhasa; Gonkar Gyatso's works were being shipped from London directly to Beijing, and two of the subjects in Nortse's oil paintings (a troubled friend) made him uncomfortable showing them locally where he could be recognized.

²⁷⁵ There was initially some debate on where to have show. Gade and Nyandak initially thought people not selected would oppose having it at GCAG because they paid their rent. I think there was even talk of selected people refunding them. Nortse said it should be at GCAG and would be good idea to show what works get chosen to shown outside. Three days seemed like a fair duration without compensation.

²⁷⁶ Tsewang Tashi, "Artists' Talk" accompanying the opening of "Inside Out" at the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild, May, 2007.

²⁷⁷ Field notes, June 3, 2007 as told by Nyandak, Nortse and Gonkar (by phone).

²⁷⁸ Tsering Wooser. Interview, May 2007. Wooser recounted to me that this view was among the commentaries of Han Chinese artists and art viewers in attendance at the exhibition, "Lhasa: New Art from Tibet" at Red Gate Gallery/798, Beijing, which was the first time many of them became aware of the existence of contemporary artists in Lhasa/Tibet.

²⁷⁹ Interviews, Anonymous artists. Dec 2006 through May 2007.

²⁸⁰ Interview, Tsering Nyandak, March 2007.

²⁸¹ Representations are but one of the many ways Tibetans experience systemic discrimination.

²⁸² This may be evidenced for example in the photographic documentation of the Cultural Revolution era in *Forbidden Tibet* (Woeser 2006), in which Tibetans are seen in Mao suits, and also *chupa*, in particular those marching in political parades and performing in official theatrical productions and dances.

²⁸³ The legacy of this tax payment trope endures in the post-revolutionary period, for example, in recreations in a mild scene in the Gyantse Fort Museum from the early 1990s, in which peasants bow deeply before tax officials who record their payment in a ledger, and in the Potala Zhol Museum in 2007.

²⁸⁴ The ways in which this is enacted “varies in degree and content as political leaders or policies change ...[but is a] process whereby Tibetan ethnicity is recreated through selective rendering of elements of Tibetan culture, history and religion to reposition it in the Chinese national context.” Bass concludes this “particular blend of patriotic and moral education is likely to continue as long as the Chinese state feels threatened by outside cultural and political influences (C. Bass 2005).”

²⁸⁵ Some of the first foreigners in Tibet after Communist rule, Topping describes the dramatic and emotional impact of the *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition, but fails to critically investigate any of its claims, despite her and her accompanying husband’s journalism careers.

²⁸⁶ Powers (Powers 2004) states the tour was requisite until officials noticed the “disbelieving snickers” of foreign tourists, in less than a decade after the Topping’s visit.

²⁸⁷ Interview, Peyang (pseudonym), March 2007. Interviews, Gonkar Gyatso, October 2003. Interview, Woeser, March 2007.

²⁸⁸ Gonkar Gyatso described his first job upon graduation from high school as a tour guide at the exhibition and recalled it as a powerful reinforcement of the Communist Party rhetoric which he did not question until he travelled outside Lhasa some years later (Interview, Gonkar Gyatso, October, 2003). In contrast, an anonymous woman recalled how, family discussion of the exhibition was a catalyst for learning to question the veracity of official propaganda. Following a visit to the museum as a schoolgirl, she went home and said “how awful! The sun never shined in Tibet before!” Her grandmother replied, “What are you talking about? Of course it did!” The girl explained that, in the exhibition, all the scenes were dark and stormy, and everyone looked miserable. Her grandmother said, over her daughter’s cautions objections, that Tibet before the Communists had been lovely and peaceful, and the claim that all Tibetans had been impoverished slaves or wealthy exploiting aristocrats was false, as she had been an ordinary person but had owned her own home, before the Communists confiscated it.

²⁸⁹ The central government hailed the new museum as a “national patriotism education demonstration base,” and notes the multi-billion dollar “Tibet improvement project [was] funded by the central Government [and] was built under the kindly care of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the direct leadership of the Party Committee and People’s Government of the Tibet Autonomous Region (China Tibet Information Center).”

²⁹⁰ “Before the Tibet Museum was built, numerous cultural relics in the Autonomous Region were kept in shabby storehouses of the departments in charge of historical relics, others were scattered among and kept by the common people. Because of the limitations of exhibition, those relics were seldom put on display for the public, and there were fewer opportunities to

introduce them through publication (China Tibet Information Center n.d.).” Himalayan Art Resources (Watt Est.1997) states the collection contains approximately 1000 objects, those of Buddhist artistic merit were formerly in the *tsuglhakhang* (Jokhang temple) and Potala.

²⁹¹ Majority and minority peoples are not shown in meeting; in contrast to earlier popular iconographic conventions, Tibetanness in the Tibet Museum is largely devoid of meetings with either representatives of a feudal past or emissaries of Socialism. One exhibition room is dedicated to government artifacts, legal documents and photographic and textual documentation of the implementation and function of the CCP’s regional government. In the photographs, Tibetan and Han government officials are nearly indistinguishable in their identical suits and ties, seated in long rows in political assemblies.

²⁹² The Tibetan Barbie dolls, in a limited edition of 300, is one of eight dolls “featuring the ‘ethnic’ look of minorities across the PRC” called “Fuxi Girl” (“lucky and happy girl”) to debut in the Lhasa Gongkar Airport, but is regarded as “the most fetching and most vividly-molded,” of the eight, according to a Xinhua report. Xinhua continued, “Each doll has long braided hair with coral and manual silver accessories, wears necklaces made of coral or turquoise and is adorned with an amulet ‘Gawu’, showing a rich ethnic feature (China Digital Times 2006) (Xinhua 2009).”

²⁹³ John Makin of the American Enterprise Institute called the \$4 billion cost “ludicrously low” both in terms of the likelihood that labor and land acquisition costs are not reflected, and in terms of the extremely high return on investment China will see from the railroad infrastructure, which he likened to the completion of the American railroad linking the east and west coasts in 1869 (Makin 2007).

²⁹⁴ Building a museum on the site of the former Zhol village and government facilities is reminiscent of the Cultural Revolution era *Rent Collection Courtyard*, the Socialist Realism exhibition installed in a former warlord’s estate in Sichuan, heightening the purported veracity of the “re-creation” of daily life in life-sized clay sculpture propaganda.

²⁹⁵ At the same time, authorities permitted the sale of more, not fewer, tickets to the Potala, timed for one hour, thus increasing the number of people who could pass through the palace each day.

²⁹⁶ The excruciating eyeball removal enactment in the Zhol Museum as an ordinary feature of Tibetan prisons is based loosely upon the commuted sentence of a former minister, Lungshar (Dorji Tsegial, 1880 - 1934) in 1934. Lungshar had been appointed by the Thirteenth Dalai Lama to escort four boys to England, where they presented official gifts to Their Majesties King George V and Queen Mary in 1913, and then served in ranks as a finance minister and Commander in Chief of the Tibetan army (1925-1931), and while very intelligent and politically a reformist, he had made many enemies. Shortly after the death of the Thirteenth Dalai Lama he was charged with plotting to overthrow the government and imprisoned and blinded (Drauschke). The procedure was horribly bungled as it was the only instance of the punishment to have occurred within memory and the technique was essentially unknown (M. Goldstein 1989).

²⁹⁷ Announced in 1999, the new “Develop the West” economic plan shifted the State priorities from development of the industrial coastal areas to the central and western provinces to overcome regional inequality, political instability in western regions, environmental degradation, and to exploit untapped natural resources.

²⁹⁸ The presentation though is skewed towards local TAR authorities' public emphasis on healthcare, education and so-called "cultural preservation and protection," while downplaying national plans such as resource extraction and increased military and security measures that economically and socially disenfranchise Tibetans and impact the plateau's fragile ecosystems. For example, "Infrastructure projects," a key area of development according to State plans, are pictured thirty-six times in the Zhol museum's photograph display, while cultural practices (traditional dance, song, sport, costumes, language usage) are not part of the Develop the West planning documents but are featured in the Zhol thirty-four times, the second highest number of captioned photographs after Infrastructure.

²⁹⁹ Tibetans and ethnographers, on the other hand, could actually read the photograph as the performance of ethnicity – her adornment as mere costume rather than daily traditional dress, an interpretation the bright red lipstick and heavy eyeliner would support – at an organized festival or theatre production, for example. But this is reading against the intended message of the neo-Socialist Realism of the Zhol Museum's framed photorealism.

³⁰⁰ Meetings between the Tibetan minority and Han majority is a visual trope that can be traced from the Long March of Mao's ragtag Communist comrades through minority areas in the 1940s, to construction of the first highway linking Tibet to the newly established People's Republic of China in 1956, to the welcome of the People's Liberation Army through Tibetan regions in the 1950s and 1960s, new bridges in the 1970s, and revived in more recent times in depictions of the arrival of the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad in Lhasa in 2006 (Sangster 2006)

³⁰¹ Decades of static images were brought to live action television broadcast nationwide in the opening ceremonies as dancing and smiling Tibetans in garish costume versions of ethnic dress performed at stations along the route and in Lhasa. I was told by several anonymous individuals in Lhasa that in addition to official song and dance troupes, most work-units in Lhasa, from schools to hospitals and banks, were required to provide employees with some talent in singing, dancing or who were attractive, and other entire units had to choreograph group performances for opening ceremonies in Lhasa (Sangster 2006).

³⁰² One sculptor hired by the Zhol Museum officials recounted to me that he was shown the original catalogue for *Wrath of the Serfs* exhibition and asked to re-create the scene (Interview, anonymous, July 2007). Documents provided to me by anonymous sources in 2007 of draft captions for the Zhol Museum exhibition were identical to the original *Wrath* catalogue for this scene and some others. Other displays in the Zhol Museum in life-size sculpture were original to the Zhol Museum, but were done in the Cultural Revolution era style, and incorporated technological advances, most notably the animated sculptures with coordinated soundtrack that re-enact, every few minutes, a torture scene in the prison exhibition.

³⁰³ Interview, Anonymous sculptor, July 2007. Interview, Wooser, April 20007.

³⁰⁴ In the months before the museum opened, in interviews with five Tibetans peripherally involved in some aspect of the museum's planning, and who contrasted their expectations for the museum with the actual exhibitions and official documents they encountered were characterized by shock, trepidation and confusion, and in two cases, refusal to offer personal reflections. I am grateful for their sharing of official documents and personal memories and reflections with me. I was able to tour the museum once in the opening week, when photography of exhibitions was prohibited, before departing Lhasa at the conclusion of fieldwork.

³⁰⁵ The Gyantse Fort Museum, for example, follows the precedent of the *Rent Collection Courtyard* and the *Wrath of the Serfs* in terms of many visual and narrative conventions, but the force of the visual and ideological impact is greatly reduced in comparison (Sangster 2010).

³⁰⁶ The Tibet Museum presents the political history of Tibet largely through the installation of documents and administrative artifacts. The interpretation of history and Sino-Tibetan relations is unaltered, but is not told through dramatic re-presentations of torment under theocratic feudal serfdom, as seen earlier.

³⁰⁷ Jamyang Norbu points out that photography can also be used as a “counterpoint to the prevailing visual representations of Tibet,” in this case, the Manuel Bauer exhibition “Shadow Tibet” in Dharamsala in an exhibition at the Amnye Machen Institute (Norbu 1998).

³⁰⁸ The artists I know have been more explicitly concerned to rescue Tibetan representations from Western and Han romanticism and oversimplification than from Maoism. We might expect that, as artists, they would be interested in and at times familiar with the history and current work of other artists; I am trying to place this within the broader, national and local, ideological and visual contexts that have been and continue to impact Tibetan lives, including but not limited to the relatively specialized subgenre of private sector Han painting of Tibet and Tibetans in the past twenty to thirty years.

³⁰⁹ Keltse, a contemporary artist in Lhasa, salvaged this “piece of visual history” while it still hung on a wall in an office building slated for demolition. Interview, April, 2007.

³¹⁰ Interview, Keltse, April 2007.

³¹¹ The photographs in *Forbidden Memory: the Cultural Revolution in Tibet* (Woeser 2006) may document shifting uses of dress to signal ethnicity and conformity to Maoist mandates during the Cultural Revolution. Curiously, in the images in this book, *chupa* seem to be worn by everyone only in rural environments (where assimilation and reform were attempts were underway), and by actors in performance events and marchers in parades where they are distinguished from the Mao-suit wearing audience members.

³¹² Tsewang Tashi had exhibited in Germany, Japan, Taiwan, Macao and Beijing prior to 2000, but after 2003 exhibitions of his work expanded to the United States, England, and various European and Asian cities. In early 2007, Fabio Rossi said that Tsewang Tashi was perhaps the only Lhasa artist truly ready for representation at a serious contemporary international gallery, because his work is polished, detail oriented, and the professionalism of the artist. Interview, Fabio Rossi, June 2007.

³¹³ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, December 2006.

³¹⁴ Tsewang Tashi was the Dean of the Art Department at Tibet University from 2003-2006. The name of the department officially changed from Art Department to School of Art in 2007.

³¹⁵ A particularly challenging ethnic tension arose in 2006 when university leadership demanded a reduction in art faculty size for budgetary reasons, triggering months of agonizing evaluations, meetings and widespread rumors (which Tsewang Tashi was careful not to articulate himself, but which I heard from others) that the university administration merely wanted to fire Tibetan instructors in order to recruit young PhDs from China. It was said that too many schools

in China were financially motivated to accept more PhD students than actually had talent or promise, and then faced pressure to find jobs for them. These PhD graduates were seen as motivated not by a passion for their subject matter, as Tibetan art faculty reportedly possessed, but merely for the sake of earning an advanced degree. For these Han graduates, being ‘sent’ to teach in Tibet would likely not have been seen as a good job, but a job with State benefits nonetheless. Tibetan professors resented the possibility of outsiders coming in to replace them, especially when they were perceived as receiving an undeserved favor at Tibetan expense. Therefore, it is somewhat in response to the trend in the higher education system nationally to hire PhDs, that Tibet University art department leaders began working to develop their own PhD program.

Tsewang Tashi told me they “won the battle in the end,” and he was able to preserve everyone’s jobs. In fact, after one Chinese professor voluntarily left the department to pursue further studies in China, a place was decisively secured for a Tibetan professor upon his return from completing an MA in Norway. Tibetans involved with the art department celebrated that not only had the university been unable to increase Han employees in the department, they even gained another Tibetan! (Interviews, Tsewang Tashi, December 2006, and Anonymous A and Anonymous B, December 2006.)

³¹⁶ For example, Tsewang once explained to me that official exhibitions were “still” organized according to medium – “painting,” or “sculpture” for instance – whereas a look at any international modern art gallery clearly showed installations of exhibitions included multiple mediums, and were organized by curators’ selection and conceptual theme.

³¹⁷ Many of the paintings and the photograph series discussed below were exhibited in the solo exhibition *Untitled Identities* at Rossi & Rossi, London.

³¹⁸ Gonkar Gyatso was also pioneering in a similar manner.

³¹⁹ Tsewang also painted a self-portrait in a dark, European Old Masters style, which hangs in his studio but has not been published. The only self-portrait from the late 1980s published to date was painted by Tashi Tsering (Tibet Autonomous Association of Literary and Artistic Circles and Chinese Artists Association Tibetan Branch, ed. 1991) and which Harris describes in (C. Harris 1999).

³²⁰ One of Tsewang Tashi’s contemporaries, Gonkar Gyatso, has discussed his similar experience. In 1980, several Tibetans were recruited by the Arts Department of the Central Nationalities University (CNU) and the China Academy of Fine Art (CAFA) in Beijing: Ngawang Choedrak, Tashi Tsering, Gongkar Gyatso, Ngakyen, Tsering Dorje and Tsewang Tashi. Ngawang Choedak and Tashi Tsering painted after graduation, but have since stopped. The three who still make art – Tsewang Tashi, Gonkar Gyatso and Tsering Dorje – have all met with great successes, but taken very different paths. Tsewang Tashi has worked as a professor of art at CNU and Tibet University, becoming Dean of the School of the Arts there, while earning an MFA in Norway and continuing to move between Lhasa and Oslo, exhibiting in Europe, the US and China. Gonkar Gyatso rejected art institutions in China and sought deeper exploration of his Tibetan identity in exile, but soon moved to London to interrogate his Tibetan-Chinese-Communist-Buddhist life influences in total creative freedom and becoming the most internationally famous of the contemporary artists. Gonkar Gyatso and I discussed these experiences on multiple occasions and locations, and he also explored them with Clare Harris, who has written about him in several publications (C. Harris 1997, 2008, 2012). Tsering Dorje was the first Tibetan to use thick oils in Lhasa in an impressionistic style, and thereby gained

repute and foreign interest and exhibition. He is one of the senior members of the Tibetan Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA), but has become frustrated with his own development and the art circles of Lhasa. His work has been exhibited and collected abroad, but his initially bold style and subject matter – mostly religious buildings in Tibetan cultural history such as the Potala and the Gyantse Kumbum, avoided by younger artists today – has not changed in twenty years. Tashi Tsering was involved with arts and painting for some time in Tibet, but became involved in the administration of other areas of the University and no longer had time to produce new paintings, he told me in a 2006 interview.

³²¹ Tsewang Tashi wrote, “In 1984, I graduated from Central Nationalities Institute in Beijing and became an assistant lecturer in the Art Department. After the Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee of the CCP was held, the CCP’s policies toward the minorities also began to change, and traditional Tibetan culture has revived to a certain extent. Books on Tibetan culture, histories, literature and religion were published, which was impossible before. My colleagues and I were fascinated by this phenomenon. We were discussing a sort of cultural renaissance. I read some of these books and started to take root-searching trips to many of the historical sites in the TAR (Tibetan Autonomous Region) and other ethnic Tibetan areas (Tashi, *Art in Process* 2007).”

³²² Interview, Tsewang Tashi, March? 2006.

³²³ (Tashi, *Art in Process* 2007)

³²⁴ Robert Rauschenberg engaged in a world tour (ROCI) in 1986 and made stops in Beijing and Lhasa. Even in Beijing, Rauschenberg was incredibly revolutionary, and in Lhasa his statements and productions were utterly incomprehensible at the time, something artists who remember his visit now laugh about.

³²⁵ “In 1989, I returned back to Lhasa from Beijing and from early 1990 I started to paint landscape painting. My intention was not only to make general landscape paintings, but also treat mountains and rivers as monuments rather than simple landscapes. Through painting landscapes it was possible for me to express my feelings of my homeland. I have noted from some black and white photographs that the even there are big difference compare to nowadays same scenery, but the surrounding mountains and rivers are still there. They seem to be a witness of history and have stories to tell. I felt that landscapes were a reliable subject, and as readable as a human face. And sharp contrast of light and vivid line of mountain and cloud also fascinated me (Tashi, *Art in Process* 2007).”

³²⁶ Photographed by the author in Tsewang Tashi’s studio in Lhasa, July 2004 and reportedly painted in 2003.

³²⁷ Photographed by the author in 2004.

³²⁸ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, April 2007.

³²⁹ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, March 2007. He cited the examples of an occasion in which he saw two of his portraits installed adjacently, although he felt the colors clashed. Another time, after working intensively on a blue Buddha face, his next portrait was a warm color, in order to alter his experience of immersion in a color and its effects upon him.

³³⁰ Interview, Tsewang Tashi, April 2007.

³³¹ My thanks to Susan Chen for sharing this anecdote with me in July, 2004.

³³² Interview, Tsewang Tashi, July, 2003.

³³³ Although Tsewang Tashi is representing a phenomenon occurring in Lhasa, it is, as he well knows, not unique to Lhasa on the Tibetan plateau, and Tibetans from all regions reside in Lhasa, as these young women could reflect.

³³⁴ The term Shangri-la was popularized in the west by James Hilton's 1933 novel, *Lost Horizons*, in which the best artifacts and wisdom of western civilization is preserved against impending doom high in the Himalayan keep of Shangri-la, overseen by Caucasians, while Tibetan natives toiled in ignorance in the valleys below. Notions of Tibet as a storehouse, or embodiment, of pristine and secret wisdom has persisted, dovetailing with colonial knowledge building that influenced the origins of Buddhist studies as highly textual but divorced from contemporaneous living Buddhists (Donald S. Lopez n.d.). "Shangri-la" has been perpetuated in projections upon lamas, monks, and Tibetans generally but successive waves of popularity of the Theosophical movement, counter-culture and New Age, and Hollywood, etc. The histories of Western literary, cinematic, popular, and mystical representations of Tibet have been traced in important contributions to Tibetan and Buddhist studies.

³³⁵ Statement written by Tsewang Tashi, February, 2008, edited for clarity.

³³⁶ See chapter two for detailed account of Tsewang Tashi's remembrance of Han versus Tibetan *thangka* painters' propaganda painting methods and styles.

³³⁷ Tsewang often expressed interest in learning more about cameras, digital technology, and darkroom processing and computer software. He also championed the addition of photography equipment in a shared access work space in conversations about the development of the TU department and campus, and when the GCAG investigated building an artists' facility. In 2007, Norbu Tsering (Nortse) began incorporating photographs of himself into his artwork, as explored in Chapter 5.

³³⁸ Personal communications with three western contemporary art collectors, who commented that Tsewang Tashi's portraits would likely appeal to the same audiences that appreciated the Chinese contemporary artists creating large faces, sometimes in bold colors. A few Lhasa artists grumbled privately to me about this same comparison, very subtly suggesting in a slightly critical or envious way that Tsewang Tashi was savvy about markets or international trends.

³³⁹ Interview, Sonam Tsering (SoTse). July, 2007.

³⁴⁰ Tsewang Tashi remembered that people would parade with large portraits of Mao, often four men carried long poles on their shoulders supporting a framed portrait, on political anniversaries or occasions, defined as "anytime something important happened, such as if Mao gave a speech in Beijing, people immediately celebrated it with such a parade." Tsewang Tashi recounted to me that almost every night there were meetings inside the mosque he and his family attended. There were two factions that started to fight in Lhasa. One faction was for unification of the people under the central government, other faction was for complete overthrow of current authorities. He said, "At first they debated their ideas, then they set up loudspeakers and shouted at each other. Then it evolved into "*wu tog*," Chinese for "armed struggle", and they began to fight with guns, even canons fired in Lhasa. When one side killed people the other side would

carry around their bodies. Like in Palestine today!” Tsewang said the central government and military were not involved, in fact because near the Indian border, they wanted to stabilize the area. Educated people and workers were involved, and sometimes even families were divided, even wanting divorce. He remembers one night an aunt came from out of town to stay with them. Late that night, some people from a faction came in with red arm bands on and interrogated his father and aunt about what she was doing there. She got dressed and went to her father’s house, which was presumably under the surveillance of a different faction. Tsewang Tashi summed up the ethos saying, “People took all this very seriously, actually, they were not just pretending to go along with it.” People thought there were spies everywhere, American spies, all sorts of spies. Tsewang Tashi then laughed, recalling an anecdote Tibetans found a humorous revelation of the ludicrousness of the times: “Even in the nomad areas people thought like this – one older woman told me about it. In the nomad tents, they would discuss Marx and Lenin’s philosophy. They didn’t have guns or swords, but did have long wooden poles with metal spears on the end, with which to fight. Near the metal end, they tied on yak wool dyed red as some ornamentation. They would try to sneak around listening in on people to see if they were spies or doing other bad things, but,” this woman recalled to Tsewang, who laughed relaying the story, “these men would forget that hiding behind the tent those inside could see the long ends reaching up, with the red tassel clearly visible!”

³⁴¹ Tsewang Tashi, artist statement that has appeared in several foreign-published exhibition catalogues and self-published website galleries.

³⁴² Interview, Tsering Dhondrup, July, 2007

³⁴³ The origin of the tongue gesture has been explained as reassuring proof that one was not engaged in working with poisons, black magic or homicidal plots, which would turn one’s tongue black.

³⁴⁴ This interpretation is solely the author’s.

³⁴⁵ The shock felt by the sculptor and Woese and friends in response to this deliberate recreation was shared with me and recounted in an unpublished manuscript, “Official Exhibitions and Unofficial Art: Visual constructions of the ethnic Tibetan in the PRC” (Sangster 2010).

³⁴⁶ “Some even do not feel obliged to express something ‘Tibetan’ in their works and although psychically based in Lhasa, their works include cultural references from different parts of the world. The result is innovative and shows a creativity and vitality not seen before in traditional Tibetan art forms. Undoubtedly, their works mirror the present state of Tibet, a place full of beauty and contradiction (Dhondup 2007).”

³⁴⁷ Contemporary Tibetan artists might also be considered in reference to international contemporary art influenced by Buddha images or concepts, in artwork created by Buddhists and non-Buddhists worldwide. This area of study is growing, as contemporary arts emerge influenced by pan-Buddhist ideals popularized in western cultures, and as artists in China, Korea, Thailand, Japan and Mongolia integrate aspects of their nations’ Buddhist heritage and imagery into their work. Established artists like Nam June Paik and Zhang Huan brought such imagery to the global art market’s attention. However, as the publication *Buddha Mind in Contemporary Art* (Bass and Jacob 2004) also exemplifies, such works and their audiences are more interested in approaching the making of artworks *like* a Buddhist rather than *as* a Buddhist. Yet such a role for Tibetan artists would be unsatisfactory for viewers demanding Tibetans create Buddhist works *as*

Buddhists, given the role of western attraction to Buddhism in constructions of Tibetanness (Moran 2004). Tibetan artists themselves, on the other hand, generally occupy a kind of middle ground between seeing the use of Buddha imagery as visually interesting, and resisting outsider's imputations of their religious identity or its dominance in their work. Thus this study retains a focus on illuminating the specificities of Lhasa's artistic worlds to emphasize 'contemporary' and 'Tibetan', and refrains from comparing their work to 'Buddhist' art by international artists.

³⁴⁸ Artistic religious projects and objects often demanded significant financial resources in pre-Communist Tibet, fueling Communist attacks against Buddhism not only as "superstition" to be dispelled by socialist proselytizing, but also bourgeois exploitation of the masses' resources.

³⁴⁹ Religious figures and institutions have, since 1959, been suspected of harboring "separatists" in league with "the Dalai clique," constituting a threat to national security. This pertains to ordinary civilians as well as religious leaders, given the widespread belief that the Tenth Panchen Lama's "mysterious death" is connected to a speech three days previous in which he was critical of CCP policies and failures in the religious realm (Panchen Lama 1998). His reincarnation, upon confirmed recognition by the Dalai Lama, was abducted at age five in 1995 and he and his family have not been seen since, despite intervention from Amnesty International and foreign governments on their behalf.

³⁵⁰ "Long term cultural trends," Dreyfus writes, play an "important role in determining identity," because "memories...inform sense of community (1994)."

³⁵¹ Tsering Nyandak, Interviews, 2004 and 2006.

³⁵² Gade, Interview, December 12, 2006.

³⁵³ Pema Tashi's father was persecuted in the Cultural Revolution and Gade's father advocated for the son, Pema Tashi, to be given an opportunity and not negatively branded so young. Pema Tashi was given a job as a truck driver but became a self-taught artist, and thus able to reciprocate a kindness to Gade's family when the young Gade showed promise in art by giving art lessons.

³⁵⁴ Pema Tashi / Bama Tashi is a member of the China Association of Fine Artists; Deputy Secretary General of the Tibet Association of Fine Artists; Full-time painter with the Tibet Autonomous Regional Association of Literary and Art Circles. "Bama Tashi, was born in 1961 in Xigaze, Tibet, and began to work for the Tibet Association of Fine Artists in 1984. His major works include Cuckoos which won the Outstanding Work Award at the 9th China National Engravings Show; Colorful Clouds which won the Silver Award at the 6th China National Fine Art Works Show; and Peak Goddess which won the Gold Award at the Canada International Contest of Wash Paintings. He has held individual fine art works show in France and Malaysia, and attended large paintings shows in Japan, the Republic of Korea, the United States and countries in Europe." Formerly accessible: <http://www.tibetinfo.com/tibetzten/zgddzhx/ez10.htm>

³⁵⁵ Pema Tashi's art is usually published as Bama Zhaxi, according to Chinese pinyin transliteration of Tibetan.

³⁵⁶ Some artists refute the idea that Chinese artists introduced them to their own heritage (Anu, Interview, 2006). In the post-Cultural Revolution political climate, however, I suspect that

endorsement from Chinese professors and leaders in the university and party organs, made Tibetan interest in what had survived safe to explore.

³⁵⁷ Snug Harbor, New York. In the 1990s, a small number of artists had been abroad for art activities, including: Kesang Tsering, a Tibetan University professor and TAA senior member, had been to Paris and exhibited there; Keltse had been to Australia; and Tsering Nyandak had traveled to Berlin for an exhibition of his work.

³⁵⁸ Gade's work has won various prizes in Chinese exhibitions. Abroad, he was an 'Artist in Residence' in 2001-2 at Snug Harbor in New York, and in 2003 at the Taigh Chearsabhagh Museum and Art Centre in Scotland. He has exhibited in the United States, Canada, England, Germany, Scotland, China, Hong Kong, Nepal, Malaysia, Singapore, and Australia.

³⁵⁹ Dedron, now an accomplished artist in her own right with a recent solo exhibition in London, *Nearest to the Sun* (Rossi & Rossi, 2009), recounted her ambivalence towards art even as an art student (her father, she says, advised her to go into the art department because she lacked talent in other disciplines) until she took a class with Gade, who inspired her interest in Tibetan art history and modeled a way of fusing artistic and cultural heritage with contemporary life and painting (Dedron, Interview, February 2007).

³⁶⁰ Gade also brought students on field trips to the Gedun Choephel Artists Gallery and encouraged them to talk to older independent artists, and spoke often about the need for students and artists to discover their own styles and not merely imitate their teachers, an uncommon view in China's schools.

³⁶¹ In 2010, Gade and his family are moving into a larger new home on the banks of the Lhasa Kyi Chu river which will have a large, sunny studio. Tsewang Tashi was the first university professor to build a new home with a top floor studio facing the hills, and other artists in the city are following suit.

³⁶²³⁶² Interviews with Gonkar Gyatso, Gade, Tsewang Tashi, and Nortse between 2003 – 2008. See chapter one.

³⁶³ Other artists to consider in this vein would include Tibet University professors Kelsang Tsetan and Pasang Choephel, independent artist Phurbu Tsering, Shunu Dame member Sonam Tsering, and Tibet University professor Penpa Wangdu who is the only artist to successfully professionally paint both thangka and contemporary works.

³⁶⁴ Importantly, they are *not* the first or only Tibetans to do so. Two interesting other examples include the seventeenth century Tenth Karmapa Choying Dorje, whose portraits of Milarepa and the Buddha are lively and utterly unconventional, and the twentieth century Drugu Chogyal, an incarnate lama in exile who is an avid painter of Buddhist tales and personages inspired by direct meditative experience rather than iconographic convention.

³⁶⁵ Rossi & Rossi published an interview with artist Tsering Nyandak regarding the use of Buddha images as an impersonal but useful visual 'container for information' or even as a commercial strategy (Heimsath 2005). Gonkar Gyatso has said he has used the silhouette of the seated Buddha as an interesting and beautiful shape (Gonkar Gyatso, Interviews, 2001, London, and 2002, by phone).

³⁶⁶ Invocation of religious imagery within various Tibetan and Han artists' groups, or by the State, which, while diverse, still loosely maps onto Lhasa's art worlds and individuals' or groups' social and political prerogatives, and will continue to emerge. Tibet University professors, as members of a Communist atheist government institution and therefore Party members, tended to carefully sidestep personal belief in the politically tense years around the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad and the Olympics.

³⁶⁷ *Tsampa* is ground roasted barley, a staple food in Tibet.

³⁶⁸ Gade, Interview.

³⁶⁹ On the point of color palettes, some artists have pointed out that Tibetan traditional pigments were bright, and that the "soy sauce colors" (Nyandak, Interview, 2006) in vogue in the early 2000s to evoke a Tibetan look or timelessness are actually only the way un-restored murals and buildings look presently, but not their original colors. Gade is here contrasting the pre- and post- restoration of Old Quarter buildings.

³⁷⁰ In the late 1980s, Han Shu Li was commissioned to create an enormous mural on the wall of the Lhasa airport's waiting area. A river runs through the scenes and along its banks were Tibetans in various activities, including semi-nude female bathers, to which some officials protested. The theme of beautiful young topless Tibetan women with long flowing hair as representative of a traditional Tibetan practice (that of bathing in the river on an auspicious summer date) became popular amongst Tibetan and Han artists, and can be related to eroticizing of ethnic minority women in Chinese visual culture. I suspect that in the case of some earnest young Tibetan artists including Gade who were searching for cultural relevance and tradition, they may have attempted to bring their own indigenous and modern sensibilities to bear upon the theme, although the influence of their teacher, Han Shu Li, cannot be ignored.

³⁷¹ Gade, Interview, 2007.

³⁷² Tsering Nyandak, Interview, June, 2007. Gonkar Gyatso, Interview, 2003. These are but two of the artists who described a sense of obligation to be a cultural spokesperson in the 1980s and 1990s.

³⁷³ There are two trees on either side of this empty seat which I asked Gade to interpret: one is "the Buddhist tree," which has the meaning of liberation from all suffering and problems as realized by Buddha in meditation under the bodhi tree. The other tree has a snake coiled around its trunk, and "comes from Christianity". Gade explained, "Although both religions have important trees, the meaning is very different." He laughed then, saying, "the tree that the boy and girl [Adam and Eve] are connected with turned out to be a source of their problems!"

³⁷⁴ I took this photograph (Oct. 2006) in far western Tibet, known as Guge, in a temple at the monastic complex at Tholing, which housed thousands of monks when Atisha taught there on his journey from India to Lhasa in the eleventh century and today has approximately half a dozen/ or at Tsaparang. Although Gade had himself seen similar sites if not the same one, he appreciated a print of this photo and others I gave him, and the work does combine some of the features visible in the photographs, such as the rows of Buddha figures, wooden halo, and holes for beams. Clearly, the two trees and the Mickey Mouse are from Gade's imagination.

³⁷⁵ Gade first exhibited this work in Beijing at an exhibition I co-curated at Red Gate Gallery/798 in 2007, *Lhasa: New Art from Tibet*. On several occasions, we clandestinely observed this reaction from gallery visitors, and Gade told me this was a reaction he had hoped for when making the *Mickey Mural*.

³⁷⁶ Gade, Interview, Spring 2007.

³⁷⁷ Gade, Interview, March 2007.

³⁷⁸ The number 108 is considered auspicious in Tibetan Buddhism. Gade said he would complete at least this many works in the series, but probably continued beyond this number. He photographically documented most of them, but lost count exactly, as pieces dispersed from his studio as gifts and for global exhibitions.

³⁷⁹ Two areas on the right even bear resemblance to famous Buddhist complexes: Lhasa's two-storey Jokhang temple with gold roof and tree in the center, and the circular-walled Kumbum stupa and Pelkhor Choede monastery at Gyantse at the far right.

³⁸⁰ Sunflowers all turn to the sun, Chairman Mao is the reddest sun in our hearts. [*kaihua yang xiang taiyang, Mao zhuxi shi women xin zhong de hong taiyang*] Sunflowers were a Chinese symbol of loyalty and were common in visual propaganda as well as in this song (Wang 2008).

³⁸¹ Interview, Gade, May 2006.

³⁸² Today the ink appears gold hued, although it is actually oxidized silver (Personal Communication, Fabio Rossi, 2007). Gold, silver, and other precious materials were used for special editions of scriptures, as can still be seen in the Potala and other sites.

³⁸³ Images provided to the artist by Rossi & Rossi from their collection.

³⁸⁴ Gade imitates a unique visual and linguistic form of religious verse in which syllables may be read horizontally and diagonally to offer profound meanings; such puzzle-like verses are difficult to compose. Gade adopts only the diamond shape of the lines of verse, and fills them with his own humorous imaginary Chinese textbook for learning colloquial Tibetan. The top line says, in phonetic renderings of Tibetan in Chinese characters, *pu (boy)*, then *gu coom tsang (greetings)*, then *kyerang gi ming ka re red? (What is your name)*, *chimpa ngarmo red (the urine is sweet, a humorous reference to traditional Tibetan medical analysis)*, then *kyerang gi ka nas yin pa? (Where are you from?)*, and at the bottom, *mo (girl)*.

³⁸⁵ Interview, Gade, January, 2007.

³⁸⁶ It is not only viewers local to Lhasa who have been offended, but also Tibetans abroad who strongly disapprove of some works by Gade and Gonkar Gyatso.

³⁸⁷ Interview, Gade, July, 2004.

³⁸⁸ For more in painting sets as specially conceived and executed painting iconography and commissions, see Watt, "Painting Sets," on the website Himalayan Art Resources (Watt).

³⁸⁹ The three most common bodhisattvas in Tibetan Buddhism, often represented as a triad, are Chenresig (Avalokiteshvara), emblematic of compassion, Jampelyang (Manjushri) of wisdom, and Dorjechang (Vajrapani) of power.

³⁹⁰ Interview, Gade. July 2004.

³⁹¹ In addition to anxiety about the future, we might also be tempted to consider the violence of the Tibetan recent past, and present rage at systemic oppression and discrimination, as having found permissible outlets, although Gade denies using his artwork to advance any particular political agenda or view.

³⁹² Terdiman predicts the visibility in cultural productions of collective anxieties about future ramifications of the loss of tradition as an important dimension of “memory crisis” (Terdiman 1993).

³⁹³ The completion of the controversial Qinghai-Tibet Railroad was marked in China by day-long broadcasts on all the television channels of speeches and performances at the Golmud and Lhasa train stations, as well as commemorations and exhibitions throughout China, and extremely heightened security measures in Lhasa. Gedun Choephel Artist Guild members created new works about the railroad for a group commission for a multi-sited exhibition coordinated by the galleries Rossi & Rossi (London), Sweet Tea House (London) and Peaceful Wind (Santa Fe).

³⁹⁴ Gade wrote about the impact of such change, encapsulated by the train, upon Tibetan identity and the conditions of life in Tibet, saying,

The whole shape is of the reclining Buddha. Nowadays Tibet has lots of changes brought by the West, and the East too. Our generation is a time when we experience this the most and see the effects from all of these changes. In my painting you can see lots of things, like Disneyland, a China Mobile signboard, Coca Cola signboards, which are seen by us every day in our lives. Of course, Disneyland is not here yet, but just like the train, maybe in the future it will also come to Tibet.

Tibet has gone through a cultural revolution, and now commercialism, so now Tibetan culture has become some sort of circus center, or resort center, where you can see everything. Some things are very foreign, almost extraterrestrial. 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. And we feel this loss of identity, and maybe we are the only generation to experience such a thing. I am just displaying such circumstances (Peaceful Wind 2006).

³⁹⁵ In the seventh century, according to popular Tibetan historical narrative, the Indian tantric master Padmasambhava ensured the adoption of Buddhism in Tibet through the subduing and conversion of a threatening demoness, and then constructed temples to forcefully pin her body stretched across the earth to bind her to her oath to protect the new religion there. The temples at the furthest reaches of her body are conceived as the periphery of the Tibetan cultural, religious, and political world, and thus the narrative and image are at the heart of the origin story of the Buddhist nation itself.

³⁹⁶ Traditionally, composition generally required the thangka painter to replicate a template, perhaps created many times before. Even if a commission required a set of ‘desired

deities' (*'dod lha*) new to the artist, he relied upon a set of rules governing size, placement and spatial stratification of classes of beings to lay out the figures to be included. While these most common types of *thangka* left little room for individual artistic freedom at the composition stage, creativity could still be expressed subtly in the landscape or background details, and other minor flourishes that, combined, could make an ordinary composition extraordinary (D. Jackson 1996). The artist enjoyed more freedom to arrange scenes from a life, or the many lives, of a religious figure in biographical narrative paintings, and landscape paintings depicting historical events, pilgrimage places, or monastic complexes could be populated and contextualized with little governing strictures. These later types of paintings can occur as murals, particularly through corridors used for circumambulation and in vestibules and porches. "Temporal settings in paintings located figures in the historical or legendary past, and most commonly depicted episodes in the life of the subject. These "narrative paintings" often biographical and may focus on one or on successive lives of a great being, with scenes divided compositionally by walls or empty spaces, and genre generally enabled greater artistic freedom (D. Jackson 1996)."

³⁹⁷ Gedun Choephel Guild artists enjoyed special group dinners at so-called Chinese hot pot restaurants but once told me laughingly that in fact the Chinese actually adopted the cuisine from the Mongols, so actually we should say we are going out for Mongolian food!

³⁹⁸ In refuge trees, one's own principle teacher is in center, with four branches in cardinal directions, upon which were assembled yidam deities (tantric or Vajrayana meditational deities), Buddhas, Dharma (in the form of texts), and Sangha (bodhisattvas), in the sky above the teacher are arranged chronologically the direct transmission line of teachers of one's own teacher. Below the branches dwelled protectors and guardians. In the composition of assembly fields, a mainly Geluk school form of imagery, a great number of beings associated with an entire school or lineage are arranged in a vertical spatial orientation. The main figure is placed at the top center, with "descending concentric rows of exalted beings" of the eight classes of beings: gurus, yidams, buddhas, bodhisattvas, pratyekabuddhas, sravakas, dakas, dharmapalas. In the sky above the main figure were grouped teachers in the three spheres of tantra, wisdom, and method. Beneath this assembly were non-enlightened beings, such as guardians, offering goddesses, patrons or students, and Hindu gods (Jackson and Jackson 1988) (Watt, Himalayan Art Resources Est.1997).

³⁹⁹ The lama lineage composition was painted from liturgical texts beginning amongst the ruling Geluk sect in the late eighteenth century where they became very popular, and spread to a limited extent to other schools in the nineteenth century.

⁴⁰⁰ Chronological reading of a lineage of lamas, or the hierarchy of spiritual beings follow relatively established compositional patterns (Jackson 2005).

⁴⁰¹ A hierarchical listing of mere categories or types of figures that can appear in Tibetan Buddhist art is dizzying: lineage masters, yidams, Buddhas in nirmanakaya and samboghakaya forms, bodhisattvas, goddesses, pratyekabuddhas, shravakas, arhats, dakinis, wrathful protectors, wealth bestowing deities, and other figures such as yogis, patrons, historical figures, guardians, devas, pretas, and mythological and earthly animals...all of whom may be situated in settings as diverse as from Pure Lands to hell realms. Though certain divinities are common to all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, they may appear with different colors and numbers of hands and legs, for example, based upon the version initiated by a lineage master and sustained by his disciples. Tibetan Buddhism also limited who was permitted to see certain divinities at all. Simplified forms

of divinities may exist in spaces of general public access, while more esoteric forms are limited to specific days, chapels, teaching occasions, or the private meditations of initiated practitioners.

⁴⁰² The photographer was Jason Sangster, a professional, published photographer for humanitarian organizations, who was also my husband at the time.

⁴⁰³ Interview, Gade. December 2006.

⁴⁰⁴ This commentary, that the Buddha's in the photographs could be viewed as emerging from the water, was especially interesting in light of possible temptations to read this work as related to the loss of Buddhist holy objects thrown into the river during the Cultural Revolution, according to some accounts, or any kind of loss, death or disappearance of Buddhism in Tibet. In fact in my interviews with the participating artists throughout that day, only one artist, Penpa, commented on any feeling of sadness. For him, the sunshine which made the ice shine so brilliantly and beautifully was also slowly melting the sculpture and this irony was bittersweet.

⁴⁰⁵ Interview, Gade, June 2007.

⁴⁰⁶ Lama lineage depictions take a number of forms, such as chronologies bordering the sides of a *thangka*, with the register across the top tracing the lineage back to Indian teachers, disciples themselves of historical Buddha Shakyamuni and/or various transcendental Buddhas.

⁴⁰⁷ Didactic charts and diagrams traditionally included educational illustrations such as the Wheel of Existence (*srid pai 'khor lo*), Vinaya topics such as permitted possessions of a monk, and materials for the fields of astrology and medicine.

⁴⁰⁸ Mandala (Sanskrit) in Tibetan (*'kyil khor*) literally means "center and periphery", referring to deity dwelling in the central chamber of a palatial environment, inhabited by central deity and his or her retinue. This is commonly represented in Tibetan Buddhism by a circular diagram, essentially an aerial view of a topographical landscape, wherein the deity resides at the top, center of a palace, with four gateways in the cardinal directions, set within a circle of protected space, in the nature of the basic elements of the universe (macrocosm) and our own bodies (microcosm).

⁴⁰⁹ Examples of landscape paintings in Tibetan art history, and therefore as religious paintings, would include panoramic views of pilgrimage sites or monastic complexes. Popular history paintings include narrative scenes of historic events, such as the travel of the Jowo Buddha statue to Lhasa, the construction of the Jokhang temple or Potala Palace, or other events important to the particular location in which a painting is found.

⁴¹⁰ There is no standardized Tibetan or Western classification schema of compositional genres or "styles". Jackson describes many divisions and subdivisions (Jackson and Jackson 1988), while Jeff Watt describes five main types (Himalayan Art Resources), the only one of which Gade does not employ often being Charts (astrological, medical and Wheel of Life didactic images, traditionally). Other western art historians have developed various methods of classifying 'style', though no consensus has been reached.

⁴¹¹ Losang Gyatso made these remarks at a symposium in 2006 with scholars and Tibetan artists. The artists were challenged to explain just what about their work was "Tibetan" or what unifying features might underlie contemporary Tibetan art as a movement. One scholar asked

whether it was “the recognizable Buddhist symbols that made this *Tibetan* art?” Such questions illustrate the unselfconscious projection of Buddhism onto art and artists of Tibet that is occurring today in both America and East Asia. In response, none of the artists could disavow the importance of religion to their culture and to some of their colleagues, but neither could they consent that yes, Buddhism was the “Tibetan” hallmark of their work.

⁴¹² Interview, Gade, March 2007.

⁴¹³ Interview, Gade. 2006-2007.

⁴¹⁴ Murals are especially rich site of production in which artists had some relative latitude to mirror indigenous settings and cultural interactions, such as the murals of the Zhwa lu monastery *nangkhor*, filled with examples of Tibetan, Indian, Newari, Chinese and central Asian architecture, dress, hairstyles, trade goods, rituals, dance and music, etc. There, in the illustrations of the Buddha’s life, which was well known to have transpired in ancient India, artists inserted Tibetan architectural settings, and in other ways bringing local and neighboring cultures into a common, ahistorical but religiously potent realm.

⁴¹⁵ Western and Chinese colonialism in Asia have decisively played roles in the construction of “Tibet”.

⁴¹⁶ I offer a detailed discussion of representations of Tibetans as ethnic minorities within the PRC in chapter three.

⁴¹⁷ Officials have routinely closed contemporary art exhibitions and removed works from gallery exhibitions in China since the 1980s. The infamous targeting of Chinese contemporary artists’ shows by Beijing authorities, such as The Stars group in the late 1980s, proved further impetus to artists’ work and reputations, birthing a new movement that has, two decades later, matured into a multi-billion dollar industry. Nonetheless, artists are not enjoying full freedom of expression, as the monitoring of galleries, and even arrest and harassment of internationally famed artist Ai Weiwei confirms. The problem plagues Tibetan artists in Beijing and in the TAR as well. Plain-clothes authorities visit Lhasa exhibitions, prompting artists to close an exhibition preemptively in 2007. Kalnor’s solo exhibition, “Jangshing,” at the Melong Art Space in Lhasa was closed by authorities within hours of opening in October 16, 2011 (Radio Free Asia 2011).

⁴¹⁸ Nortse’s portraits ultimately demonstrate an overall contour of progression of his personal relationship to the content of his work, as I will argue below. And yet, as with most artists, this progression, nor the specific concerns the works reference, did not unfold in a strictly linear way. Biographic and symbolic elements of Nortse’s works take up various constraints, memories, and creative experimentation; the artist references his own history and contexts in an order that is determined by his own shifting memories and interests. Thus, in the discussion below, rather than the chronological order in which they were painted the works are unpacked in an order that usefully presents biographic and thematic elements that emerge and re-surface in order to illumine subsequent interpretations, to show the artists’ process of production, and to suggest the overall movement of the artist over a period of years in addressing the many constraints he faced.

⁴¹⁹ The works I include in this chapter were featured in the London solo exhibition *Norse: Self-Portraits – The State of Imbalance* (Rossi & Rossi 2008), the two-person exhibition *Fragile Mandala: Nortse and Tsering Nyandak* in Hong Kong (Plum Blossoms Gallery 2008), and a

group show I co-curated with Tony Scott in Beijing's 798 arts district, *Lhasa: New Work from Tibet* (Red Gate Gallery / 798 2007). Catalogues were published by the galleries to accompany each exhibition. My interpretations of Nortse's art which follow, while informed by extensive interviews with the artist in his Lhasa home, studio, and the Gedun Choephel Gallery in 2006 and 2007 and long-distance communications since, remain entirely my own. For a published statement written by Nortse about this body of work, the reader is referred to *The State of Imbalance* catalogue (Nortse 2008).

⁴²⁰ Nortse's first solo exhibition in the West was in 2008 in London at the Rossi + Rossi Gallery of art dealer Fabio Rossi. Nortse exhibited 14 works, which the gallery priced from £ 5,000 – £10,000.

⁴²¹ Nortse has been an invited speaker at symposia on contemporary Tibetan art coinciding with exhibitions, and been an artist in residence in Los Angeles. His work has been exhibited in Lhasa, Beijing, Boulder, New York, Santa Fe, Los Angeles, Koningswinter, London, Shanghai, Hong Kong, Tel Aviv, and Wellington (NZ).

⁴²² I first visited Nortse's studio in the summer of 2003 with Susan Chen and Dr. Robbie Barnett, who introduced us. I am grateful to them both.

⁴²³ Many Tibetans abbreviate their names through a contraction comprised of the first syllables of their two names; Nor(bu) Tse(ring) signs art works with a singular name, Nortse. His friends and business associates also use this name.

⁴²⁴ Nortse's father was a musician and his mother a dancer in a dance and drama troupe.

⁴²⁵ Minorities universities were established to train minority cadres in the political centers for leadership in their home areas, and now often house departments of minority studies but enroll students from both minority and majority Han ethnic groups.

⁴²⁶ Nortse, Interview, February 2007.

⁴²⁷ Nortse, Interview, April 2007.

⁴²⁸ Nortse, Interview, February 2007.

⁴²⁹ Nortse, Interview.

⁴³⁰ Harris describes the rejection of Amdo Jampa's photorealism by the exile Tibetan community of Dharamsala on the basis of such ideological association (Harris 1999) and it is reasonable to extrapolate similar visual culture conditions existed inside Tibet for Tibetans. For Han Chinese, art movements erupted in the 1980s in the search for alternatives to political art.

⁴³¹ Gonkar Gyatso, a lifelong friend of Nortse's and successful artist residing outside Tibet since 1988, was also selected for study in Beijing and expressed similar artistic realizations and challenges in and upon leaving Beijing. Interviews, October, 2003.

⁴³² The Sweet Tea House association is discussed in the history of contemporary art in Lhasa presented in chapter two.

⁴³³ Nortse, Interview, February, 2007.

⁴³⁴ Gonkar Gyatso, Interview, Fall 2003.

⁴³⁵ It has been alleged that the Sweet Tea House was essentially forced by the State to cease and desist because their membership was entirely ethnically Tibetan. This may have contributed to the organizers' reasons to seek other artistic opportunities outside of Lhasa. Nortse left for a regional minorities art academy and Gonkar Gyatso was preparing to escape to India in 1987. However, both Gonkar Gyatso and Nortse affirmed in the mid-2000s that State pressure was not the sole reason for the groups' dissolution.

⁴³⁶ Nortse, Interview, February, 2007.

⁴³⁷ Nortse, Interview, February, 2007.

⁴³⁸ Nortse, Interviews, 2007.

⁴³⁹ All media in China is state owned. There was one Tibetan language channel based in Lhasa that broadcast throughout the country.

⁴⁴⁰ Nortse, Interview.

⁴⁴¹ Nortse's solo show, sponsored by the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild, was part of an experiment by the Guild to attract more foreign visitors by taking over a retail space adjoining the lobby of a popular tourist hotel during the summer of 2005. It was not commercially viable and the space was not leased more than a couple of months. Nortse's exhibition was a success in art world terms however, as the first solo show and first installation of multi-media artwork ever mounted in the city. His paintings of fish on the dried tobacco leaves, which Tibetans traditionally make into snuff, caught the eye of Fabio Rossi, an antique dealer from London who would soon be introduced to the artists and become several Guild members' European agent and a curator of many group exhibitions abroad.

⁴⁴² Nortse, Interview, December 2006.

⁴⁴³ Only since 2007 have a few Tibetan contemporary artists painted Mao and other references to the Cultural Revolution with some Pop culture sensibility; some may be subject to the critique of appeal to foreign markets. An important early exception is Karma Phuntsok's inflammatory painting of Mao shown in Dharamsala, India in 1999 in an exhibition put on by the Amnye Machen Institute. None of these works bear strong resemblance to the Warhol-esque Pop Art iconization of Maoist era art that has marked some Contemporary Chinese art.

⁴⁴⁴ The Cultural Revolution officially is dated 1966-1976, concluding with the death of Mao and imprisonment of the Gang of Four, but in Tibet, admission of political and policy failures and a significant political and administrative change did not occur until 1980 with the visit of Hu Yaobang to Lhasa. Thus, the period 1951-1980 is often glossed under the rubrics of "1959" and "the Cultural Revolution era" by Tibetans, constituting nearly three decades, not one.

⁴⁴⁵ The sun and moon are common symbols representing dichotomies in Vajrayana Buddhism (Beer 2003).

⁴⁴⁶ Rinbhur Rinpoche (A Search for Tibet's Holiest Statue of Buddha) was able to recover and return to Tibet thirty-two tons, over 13,000 statues and ritual items, discovered in warehouses in Beijing in 1973. Twenty-six tons were salvaged from fifty tons of recognizably Tibetan crafted

metal at a precious metals foundry warehouse, and was all that remained from 630 tons of gold, silver, bronze and brass statues and vessels delivered for smelting to just one Beijing foundry, reportedly one of several which each received comparable amounts. While such massive export of wealth is clear evidence of the “systematic and organized” confiscation of Tibetan art for Chinese gain, it is only a portion of the measureable loss (Smith 2008).

⁴⁴⁷ These interpretations are based on the artist’s and others’ comments about the time period more generally.

⁴⁴⁸ Fabio Rossi, Interview, 2006.

⁴⁴⁹ Nortse, Interview, December 5, 2006.

⁴⁵⁰ I mean to suggest by the label “masterpiece” the structure of Western art criticism, collecting, and exhibiting that drives both legal and illicit international art and antique markets, further escalating fiscal values and the migration of objects out of original, indigenous circulation.

⁴⁵¹ Thangka are traditional Buddhist, highly iconographic paintings on canvas that can be rolled around a dowel and are very common in temples and homes, and are, along with statues and mural paintings in monasteries, are the main religious visual materials. That they are easily stored and transported for a population that had a high percentage of traveling nomads and pilgrims and traders has also made them the most common Tibetan objects circulated in antique art markets and museums.

⁴⁵² While Hirsch (1997) describes “Holocaust photographs,” photography in early and mid- twentieth century Tibet was still largely limited to a few elites in the capital, and was thus far from the feature of family and social life it was in Europe. The parallel with Hirsch is nonetheless clear.

⁴⁵³ Religious practices for the visual representations of Buddhas and other Buddhist divinities followed strict iconographic traditions, including commentary on the negative karma accrued by persons who make or display improper images. See chapter four for a discussion of artistic religious conventions and the notion of sin in the context of contemporary art by Lhasa artists.

⁴⁵⁴ Anonymous.

⁴⁵⁵ "A Klee painting named *Angelus Novus* shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (Benjamin 1968)."

⁴⁵⁶ Nortse, Interview, December 5, 2006. It is interesting to note that Nortse does not assign all blame to the Chinese, as we will see again below.

⁴⁵⁷ Nortse, Interview, December 2006.

⁴⁵⁸ To the best of my knowledge, and certainly among art from Lhasa published in China or abroad, *Red Sun, Black Sun* is the first of its kind. While other artists were reticent to speak about Nortse's work, it was clearly regarded as powerful and unprecedented. In print, the only other plausible earlier contemporary art work by a Tibetan inside the PRC that appears to offer commentary on traumatic pasts under Communism that I have found is by Ngawang Respa from the 1980s, *Untitled*, first published in *Tibetan Contemporary Art* (1991) and discussed by Harris (1999), who also includes Ngawang Respa's *White Moon Red Banner* as political allegory.

⁴⁵⁹ Interview. Nortse. 2006. "Everyone had to go out in the streets for parades and to sing songs in the evenings."

⁴⁶⁰ Interviews, Nortse, 2007.

⁴⁶¹ Kuhn (2002) provides a methodology for memory work which is visual and creative. To explore past events and their meanings then and now for herself, family members, and the nation, Kuhn utilizes photographs to plumb personal and social contexts of memory and history in order to emotively connect them. The photographs can transport the viewer back in time to explore the present of the subjects of the photograph and photographer, even imagining oneself in their shoes, enabling a tacking back and forth between the viewer's present, and the past that was once others' present. The result is, ideally, an insightful, enriched, "revisionist autobiography" (Hampl 1996) that heals relationships with pasts.

⁴⁶² Eradicating the Old Customs, Old Habits, Old Culture and Old Ideas was a Cultural Revolution goal, carried out through the 'Smash the Four Olds' campaigns announced by Mao in 1966. Chinese cultural treasures, traditions and the artists and intellectuals who housed or practiced them were viciously targeted by Red Guards, generating intense Party factionalism, until the Red Guards were forcibly repressed by the People's Liberation Army in 1968.

⁴⁶³ The uniform was adopted after a youth rally at Tiananmen Square in 1966 (Powerhouse Museum).

⁴⁶⁴ Carole McGranahan (2010) investigates why and how some pasts become history while others are not socially endorsed as part of the collective narrative, specifically in the case of the guerilla war fought by the Chushi Gandruk Tibetan resistance against the Chinese Communists, which was fought with secret CIA support from the 1950s-1970s. Tibetan participation in Cultural Revolution era campaigns is an even more repressed part of Tibetan history, but one which Goldstein (2010) has managed to document as a historian in the case of one large skirmish outside Lhasa. This secret history is one which continues to surface visibly upon very rare occasion, according to my fieldwork experience. For example, on a visit to a monastery a few hours' drive from Lhasa, I saw repair and reconstruction work underway and was told that many Tibetans who have contributed to the rebuilding of monasteries and sacred sites such as destroyed *chortens* (reliquary monuments) since the 1980s are doing so to karmically atone for destruction they caused in the past [Anonymous sources, 2007]. I also heard a recollection from artist Tsewang Tashi who repeated a nomad's humorous account of the obvious visibility through the gaps in the woven yak hair tents of would-be spies "eavesdropping" upon nomads suspected of allegiance to opposing factions.

⁴⁶⁵ While the development of personal and collective histories in conjunction with these very real present anxieties is equally deserving of attention, limitations of space in this chapter requires I largely bracket them for discussion elsewhere.

⁴⁶⁶ Interview, Nortse, Spring 2007.

⁴⁶⁷ *Endlessly Painted Bottle of Beer, Masked Man, and Temperature* were completed for an exhibition in Beijing at the Red Gate Gallery/798 which I co-curated with Tony Scott in 2007, *Lhasa: New Art from Tibet*.

⁴⁶⁸ Norste had painted people in the academic mode of socialist realism in the 1980s, and in the late 1990s and early 2000s painted green, horned and distorted heads and faces which were still in his studio in 2003. From 2003 until he accepted an invitation to join the Gedun Choephel Artists Guild in 2005, he painted in abstract and impressionistic works in dark hues and incorporated found materials such as *katag* and tobacco leaves.

⁴⁶⁹ The masked man wears a *dzi* bead, found only in Tibet and regarded as precious, ancient and able to offer protection from harm to its wearer. *Dzi* are not well understood but are highly treasured, particularly large “nine eye” (*dzi migs dgu*) patterned beads. They are agate in composition but it is not scientifically known how or when they were created; some Tibetan mythologies explain them as formerly animate creatures that turned to stone when captured. They are widely believed to have protective qualities, and are treated as family heirlooms.

⁴⁷⁰ This kind of criticism accuses the PRC of replicating the United State’s treatment of Native Americans.

⁴⁷¹ Nortse, Interview, March, 2007.

⁴⁷² Nortse, Interview, April 2007.

⁴⁷³ Such representations of the past, while plausibly read as an indictment by Tibetan artists, may have been made politically safe by Han artists’ romanticization of Tibetan difference, and ruins.

⁴⁷⁴ Nortse, Interview, 2007.

⁴⁷⁵ Norste. Interview.

⁴⁷⁶ Norse, Interview.

⁴⁷⁷ Four photographs were exhibited together as the work *Bound Scenery* by Nortse, in the solo exhibition, “The State of Imbalance”, Rossi + Rossi, London.

⁴⁷⁸ Han artists have done performance pieces in Tibet, but whether there have been Tibetans involved with them has not been documented. Song Dong, like other Chinese artists who visited Tibet for experimentation and inspiration in the 1980s, launched international art careers. Song Dong created the photograph of a pile of nude people, *To Raise Mountain by One Metre* in Tibet, and returned to enact *Printing on Water* (1996). The later may have been part of a project of environmentally themed performance art that was conducted in Lhasa and Chengdu with groups or individual Chinese and Tibetan artists invited to participate by the curator. However, the media and even organizers of the event documented only the participation of Han artists,

despite the active participation of a number of Tibetan artists, particularly in Lhasa, as two involved artists told me (Interview conducted with Tsering Woenser of Keltse and Tsering Nyandak, March 2007).

⁴⁷⁹ Nortse. Interview, April 2007.

⁴⁸⁰ The spelling here is that used in the published catalogue, but reflects a Mandarin pinyin phoneticization of the Tibetan. The location is also transliterated as Changtang (a vast grassland sparsely inhabited by nomads), Nagchu (a small town that is the gateway to the Changtang when coming from Lhasa).

⁴⁸¹ In contrast to emerging anthropological understandings of globalization phenomenon, where urbanization is seen to reduce attachment to land, Tibetans may be noteworthy for the continued importance of land and geographical markers such as mountain ranges and lakes to their national and local identities.

⁴⁸² This is not to say that nomads and tiny settlements have been free from Communist government incursion. In recent years, there has been a strong impact upon nomads from state interference with their livelihoods, land, and residential customs through the extraction of natural resources and construction of infrastructure to support heavy industry (highways, railroads), and the campaign to settle nomads into permanent housing clusters along these roadways, critically endangering their lifeways as well as increasing state opportunity for surveillance and assimilation agendas, such as gifts of televisions.

⁴⁸³ *Release from Suffering* [Tib. *thar pa*], *Saved* [*tshe thar gtong ba*], and *Dream* were exhibited at Rossi + Rossi, London, in “Nortse: Self-Portraits - The State of Imbalance,” February, 2008. *Release Life* and *Rebirth* were exhibited at Plum Blossoms, Hong Kong, in “Fragile Mandala,” April, 2008.

⁴⁸⁴ One exception to this portrait composition in this subset of liberation themed works, *Release Life*, is of a mandala and butterflies, absent a human figure.

⁴⁸⁵ The source of the words could be Nortse’s own imagination, a common daily newspaper, or propagandistic political texts about agricultural boons under socialism.

⁴⁸⁶ Though they fall outside the range of this particular study, in two similar works painted in 2009, the strips of fabric have been further transmuted, replaced by religious blessing cords and scarves encircle the artists’ arms.

⁴⁸⁷ Prior to 1959, the modern Tibetan artists Gedun Choephel and Amdo Jampa were known to have painted and drawn photorealistic portraits of lay persons (see chapter one). The first contemporary self-portraits in Lhasa appear to have been painted by Tashi Tsering and Tsewang Tashi in the early or mid 1980s, in the style of European Renaissance oil painting on canvas, in muted tones and bearing thoughtful expressions. Both artists retain these works from their post-graduate days in their current studios. There are no artists’ self-portraits in any of the few art books published in Lhasa in the 1990s, and Clare Harris, who conducted some fieldwork with artists in Lhasa in the mid 1990s did not discover artists creating self-portraits at the time. Since then, Anu Shelkar (in Lhasa, 2007, and Beijing, 2010) and Penpa (in Beijing, 2010) have shown self-portraits, a rarity in their oeuvre. Shelkar did one experimental self-portrait piece for the Lhasa exhibition *Inside Out* at the Gedun Choephel Gallery in Lhasa in 2007 which I curated. He digitally distorted several photographs of himself and printed them in chartreuse and plum

hues on vinyl-coated cloth. His interest was principally in provoking thought and discussion regarding the nature of “contemporary” art, by suggesting the danger of following trends as opposed to allegiance to one’s own reflections and mediums of expression. The 2010 Beijing exhibition “The Scorching Sun of Tibet,” curated by the famous art critic Li Xianting and Tibetan artist Gade, included pencil and ink self-portraits by Anu and Penpa.

⁴⁸⁸ It is widely presumed that artists of Buddhist *thangka* paintings were motivated purely by spiritual merits and therefore did not sign their works or charge a fee, which would have presumably indicated worldly concerns for fame or profit. While a romanticization of craftsmen and their livelihood, and contrary to the well-documented historical examples of famous artists and their patrons, I suspect attachment to this notion of spirituality as foremost in art production underlies critiques from observers of new Tibetan art that contemporary artists are financially motivated. That is, the professional realities of artists’ lives are obscured in the case of traditional religious artists and exaggerated in the contemporary case.

⁴⁸⁹ Nortse and others generally perceive his art productions as experimental fluctuations with materials and techniques, never settling on any signature style or method. Despite frequent changes, which “may simply be my personality,” he has acknowledged a psychological and emotional undercurrent motivating him which remains constant. “The versatile, unfixed way of creating,” he wrote, “validly expresses my personal condition – a type of imbalance, a lack of equilibrium. Yet those who really understand me will discover that in the midst of this fluid ever-changing creative mode, I am throughout continuing or extending, as it were, my personal experience and recollections, clumsily piecing together the fragments of my spiritual, inner life (Nortse 2008).”

⁴⁹⁰ Nortse said, “Whatever we talk about is essentially connected with politics. But the artists’ brain is very smart because they have to have a good knowledge and they have seen a lot. If someone isn’t smart, they cannot do art. They have to be able to get the expected result, to know how to make something so the people can understand it. But here [in Tibet], one always has to think of politics first, to think about it and be careful.” Interview, July 2007.

⁴⁹¹ Applied productively, memory offers the promise of liberating the ego from debilitating haunting in the present by events or people from the past. The therapeutic method of “working through” entails bringing the lost object – person, object, nation – into the present through recollections and through actions (repeating, including compulsive repetition and transference). The work of the analysand in psychoanalytic therapy is to gain insight into resistance to painful memories and overcome resistance (that is, to change); one faces the difficult past and takes measure of its meaning and significance to one’s life in the present. Then, separating from it, one is able to release it to its proper place, i.e. in memory, which locates and assigns it to remain in the past.

⁴⁹² Freud writes, “In mourning it is the world that has become poor and empty; in melancholia it is the ego itself (Freud, *Mourning and Melancholia*, 1917).”

⁴⁹³ Engagement in working through “gives evidence for the idea of a will to recover which, in the psychoanalytic situation, becomes a will to remember (Sedler, 1983).”

⁴⁹⁴ Saltzman (2006) retells the ancient Greek origins of art from Pliny’s account: on the eve of her beloved’s departure for battle, a young maiden picked up a charcoal and traced his silhouette cast upon the wall by the firelight, creating the first work of art. The woman “forges

with her tracing of the shadow that foundational conjunction between the work of remembrance and the visual field.” Her father later ‘fills in’ the form with clay sculpture (in an attempt to placate her loss). Saltzman reads these mediums as satisfying different memorial functions and representational goals; hers refuses full representation to emphasize absence whereas the father attempts to recreate the presence of the lost object. The artists’ choice of materials and methods – projection, silhouette, and sculpture - is critical to the meaning and functions their work carries. Both bear indexical relation to, or physical trace of, someone actual and formerly present.

⁴⁹⁵ The connection between vision and memory is ancient (Yates 1966). Pliny’s account, however, might suggest a special connection not just between visibility and memory, but memory and portraiture in particular.

⁴⁹⁶ Nortse’s art also challenges, and potentially expands, dimensions of Hirsch’s concept of postmemory. His status is also that of a child survivor, who continues to live in the occupied homeland, conditions which inform his memory work. Nortse’s groundbreaking portrait series as a whole, and the works *Red Sun, Black Sun* (2006) and *Bound Scenery* (1987), especially complicate two criteria Hirsch establishes: notions of “generational distance” as pertaining only to those born after a collective trauma which is transmitted to them primarily by parents, and an assumed geographic distance from the homeland. The sense which grew as children aged that they were divorced from their natural cultural inheritance on the one hand, was in tension with the danger of knowing too much about the past on the other hand. Children’s experience was also not necessarily traumatic at the time their parent’s experiences were, as they only belated comprehended events as traumatizing in their impact upon their families and communities and lingering influence.

⁴⁹⁷ The use of personal symbolism that can be collectively read is also clearly a form of “imaging collectivity” in the anthropological context (Thomas 1997).

⁴⁹⁸ http://www.mechak.org/nortse-self_portraits_at_rossi__rossi_london.html

⁴⁹⁹ Interview, Nortse. *Month* 2007. “We tried, but still not much result. This is why I think contemporary Tibetan art can get more results, can do more for the old Tibetan culture (*na’a rabs bod*) by changing some things and making more connections [with more knowledge of modern world]. Contemporary Tibetan art can help with this.”