

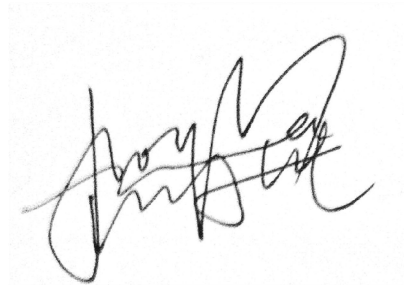
**An Exploration of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its Art:
A Potential Resource for Contemporary Spiritual and Art
Practice**

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Submitted for the degree of PhD

I, Jia Peng, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Jia Peng', written in a cursive style.

Jia Peng

Abstract

Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is today considered one of the most important and controversial forms of Asian culture, using a rich and somewhat complicated range of methods and materials. The perception of the ‘mystical’ nature of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art in the world beyond Tibet has changed and evolved significantly and profoundly over the last three decades. However, contemporary Tibetan artists feel confused about how to develop a Tibetan art tradition within the context of a globalised world.

Against this background I am interested in exploring the mysterious nature of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art through grasping its religious values, historical context, and artistic qualities. In so doing I try to investigate questions concerning the cross-cultural analysis and utility of images in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, as opposed to political conflicts that often arise in the media now.

As an exploration of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art and its contemporary significance, this research seeks to fulfill three important goals: first, to introduce Tibet’s mystical and magnificent art within its historical and religious contexts to those unfamiliar with either Tibet Buddhism or Tibetan Buddhist art and its cultural background; second, to examine the influences of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art tradition on some contemporary Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists’ art practice; and third, to embark on combining theoretical research, methods of meditation and my own art practice as a way of exploring the trans-cultural translation of Tibetan Buddhist art in Chinese and Western contexts. The aim is to explore the potential of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art as elucidating common ground between the meditative mind and the creative mind for engaging in an open conversation of faith, spirituality, religion, and aesthetic experiences in the contemporary period.

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This thesis is dedicated with love to the memory of my grandmother Shiyu Wu (24th August 1937 to 29th September 2011).

Preface

In order to arrive at what you do not know
You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance (Eliot, 1971:
127).

1. Outline of the Research

Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is foremost a religio-philosophical art, and Tibetan Buddhist artworks are perceived by Tibetan monks and practitioners as forming a part of the spiritual awakening, which is the goal of Tantric practices dedicated to the worship of various male or female deities. Moreover, compared to other schools of Buddhism, the traditional art of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism offers a profusion of magnificent, compelling, and somewhat complicated styles, forms, practices, methods, and materials. In focusing on beliefs, meditative practices, and artistic qualities that surround the mysterious nature of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art I have uncovered a complex, contentious, and ongoing discourse concerned with exploring its past and present, and which questions whether it is still alive and inspirational for contemporary spiritual and art practice within the context of a globalised world.

This research aims to make connections between the artistic tradition of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism as formulated in the past and art forms remodelled, developed, and capitalised upon very recently. Thus, I draw upon several bodies of knowledge from art history, anthropology, philosophy, and psychoanalysis, alongside my knowledge of Tibetan and Chinese culture. It is the result of nine years of research investigating hundreds of Tibetan paintings and their associated documentation; observing and documenting the working process of Tibetan artists and their apprentices; meeting with Tibetan lamas, scholars, and artists in Lhasa, Beijing, Dunhuang (in Gansu province), Chengdu (in Sichuan province), Xining (in Qinghai provinces), and in London and Oxford, whereby I kept up relationships with them. It also has involved visiting major Tibetan Buddhist monasteries, such as the Jokhang¹, the Ramoche, the Tholing,² and the Shalu,³ and

¹ I introduce Jokhang and Ramoche at length in Chapter 1.

² Tholing monastery was built in 996 CE, and was once regarded as one of the most important Buddhist centres for the translation of Indian scriptures during the eleventh century in Western Tibet.

travelling extensively in the Tibetan autonomous areas in China where a much wider realm of Tibetan culture now operates. Chronologically, my research begins in Tibet in the period from the seventh century to the nineteenth century. It moves through the West (especially Great Britain) and the Tibetan autonomous areas in China from the end of nineteenth century to recent decades. Finally, it proceeds towards personal journeys of contemporary Tibetan and Chinese artists and ends with my own art practice, from 2000 to 2012, which was inspired by the Tibetan art tradition. This research aims to provide a bridge between the historical and theoretical dimensions of Tibetan art and its current reinventions and the practical strategies of global communication for contemporary art.

Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is impossible to understand and appreciate without grasping its religious value, historical context, and artistic qualities. These three aspects are like the legs of a tripod supporting the experience and comprehension of the complex content of Tibet's sacred art. Thus, in Part 1 (including the Introduction, and chapters 1 and 2), my questions are:

1. What is the significance of the visualisation and visual traditions in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art?
2. What is the development of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art in a religious and historical context?
3. What is the artistic heritage of Tibetan traditional art (mainly paintings) that has been left behind and has become recognised gradually in Chinese and Western scholarship?
4. What are the technical elements of the Tibetan artistic tradition?

The focus in this part is not on any specific iconography or symbols, or indeed about the lives of specific Buddhist masters or artists. Rather, I examine the historical background and religious context of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, the development of its art tradition, and its great aesthetic value as a means of understanding its attitudes towards a 'seamless expression of Tibet's complex culture' (Rhie and Thurman, 1991: 12).

The second part of my research (including chapters 3 and 4) is devoted to an analysis of the evolution of the perception of Tibetan art traditions outside Tibet from the eighteenth century to the present. In Western scholarship, the image of Tibet was constructed by Christian missionaries before the nineteenth century,

³ Shalu monastery was founded in 1040 CE by Chetsun Sherab Jungnay and was a scholarly centre of learning of and (psychic) training in the Sakya tradition.

and by the British officials who served in Tibet between 1904 and 1947 (McKay, 2001: 67-89). In the early twentieth century, the British sent military and diplomatic missions to Tibet and then brought back a considerable number of art objects and photographs, which laid the foundation of ‘a pivotal role’ that Great Britain occupied in the emergence of the concepts of ‘Tibetan art’ (Harris, 2012: 12-13, 26-27). Associated with its religious themes or practices, Tibetan traditional art was once presented and treated as an anthropological project, as a representation of ‘a potentially colonizable part of the British Empire’, rather than as a piece of art on its own terms having parity with Western forms (Harris, 2012: 12). Yet, non-Western art of this type has been questioned since the 1930s as to whether or not it should be judged in terms of Western evaluations of what is and what is not art.⁴ Although Tibetan Buddhist art may still be viewed as ‘a category of consumption, ownership, and display’, it is now regarded as art, as well as ‘personalized narratives of spirituality and psychological improvement’ (*ibid.*). Research on the Tibetan art tradition also allows us to chart the course of its evolution in external viewpoints, which reveals the politics of its representation, orientalism, and neo-colonial appropriations of non-Western cultural artefacts.

Another consideration is the modern and contemporary encounter of Tibetan art with the outside world (mainly China and the West) after the Chinese Communist reforms of the 1960s, and the implications of that encounter in the context of cross-cultural analysis between Tibetan, Chinese and Western scholars and artists. Since the 1960s, Tibetan self-government has been established in autonomous areas; there, Tibetans live in compact communities under the unified leadership of the Chinese central government (Information Office of the State Council of the People’s Republic of China, 2009). The Chinese government has put great emphasis on encouraging economic development in autonomous areas of Tibet. A number of Han Chinese, including Chinese artists and scholars, have come to work and live in Tibetan cities, in Lhasa in particular. As a consequence, the great value of the Tibetan art tradition and its cultural elements has been promoted in a much wider dialogue with Mainland China and the rest of the world. For example in the Chinese musical epic *Dongfang Hong* (1964)—which means

⁴ The pioneering studies of Tibetan art by Giuseppe Tucci began in the 1930s, which was the start of modern Western scholarship in treating Tibetan art objects in their cultural context (Fisher, 1997: 7).

The East is Red—Tibetan folksongs play a most important role, becoming popular not only in China but all over the world.⁵ On the other hand, the 14th Dalai Lama and the heads of Tibetan Buddhism have claimed that their religious traditions have been severely repressed by ‘Chinese values and the principles of communism on the non-secular society’ (Campbell, 1996: 2-3) and they sought refuge in India in 1959, followed by about 80,000 to 100,000 Tibetans who eventually settled in Nepal, India, Bhutan, and many Western countries (Heller, 1999: 221). The first *Dharma* centre in the West, *Kagyü Samye Ling*, was established in the United Kingdom in 1967 by two Tibetan lamas; hundreds of Tibetan Buddhist centres have been founded all over the world (Campbell, 1996: 2). These centres have attracted much attention from Westerners for the practice of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. Subsequently, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is not only alive in China and many developing countries in Asia, but it has been successfully transplanted into many Western societies. It is my aim in this thesis to unfold answers to the following questions:

1. What would be the value of the ancient Tibetan tradition for contemporary Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists?
2. Is it possible for Tibetan culture, with its specific vocabulary and visual codes, to be understood by non-Tibetan audiences?
3. How can we appreciate ways in which Tibetan art has influenced and inspired contemporary art?

Here, the cross-cultural analysis of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism—in the context of Tibet, China, and the West—requires a clear awareness of the global or local tensions latent in the process of its transforming impact on the local (Tibetan) culture.⁶

2. Overview of the Thesis

In Chapter 1, I provide an overview of the history and development of Tantric Buddhism and its art in Tibet under the influence of its neighbouring countries—China, Nepal, and Kashmir. From a personal perspective, the greatest illusion of Tibet in the West is that the country had been hidden by giant snow mountains, so that it was an unchanging and isolated spiritual centre. However, according to a large number of historical records from Tibet, and its neighbouring (and even

⁵ The song of *Dongfang Hong* was broadcast by China’s first space satellite on 24 April 1970 and became very famous all over the world.

⁶ I discuss this at length in Chapter 3.

Western) countries, Tibet was connected to the outside world and was deeply involved with the dynamic religious and political changes of world cultures. To most extents, Tibetan culture was formed as a melting pot, swirling with different cultural influences from the seventh century onwards. I discuss the varied styles and iconographic development of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art over the centuries, and I propose two ways of perceiving the developmental stages of the Tibetan art tradition in relation to Tibetan religious history.

Chapter 2 is the contextualising chapter, which has as its focus, theory and practice in Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhist art (mainly the wall paintings in monasteries) and technical aspects of the visual tradition. This enables us to see clearly how the traditional artistic wealth in Tibet influences contemporary Tibetan, Chinese, and Western artists working in relation to this culture.

Chapter 3 has two parts: the first provides an overview of Tibet's most significant contributions to developing Tantric art forms—*mandalas*,⁷ sexual imagery and the independent images of wrathful deities; then it analyses the contemporary evolution of the old Tibetan art forms. The second part concerns many dangling strands of modern and contemporary Tibetan art that Tibetan artists (such as Gonkar Gyatso) and some Chinese artists (such as Han Shuli) try to tie together between the global players of China and the West (Hofer, 2010: 1).

The terrain of the last chapter becomes more personal and subjective. Working through exploring and understanding Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art on a spiritual and artistic level, I attempt to bring these two aspects into contact with my specific art practice. Furthermore, I explore my art practice in painting, installation, and a short film in relation to Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art. My artwork can be divided into three developmental stages. It has been inspired by the changing cultural environments I have experienced from growing up in China, travelling in Tibet, and living as a researcher and artist in England. This experience and the changing personal landscape challenged my previous Chinese ideas and assumptions about Tibetan art and culture. Now, I see Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art from a much broader perspective from both inside and outside Tibet. In my artwork I have endeavoured to explore the possibilities of combining the

⁷ *Mandala* is a spiritual and ritual icon in Hinduism and Buddhism and I elaborate on it in Chapter 3.

iconographic and stylistic influences of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art and spiritual practice within my artistic expression. In doing so, I have gained a new way of looking at the world that I assumed I had known, and I have positioned my practices within that world in a contemporary sense. In this respect, I argue that personal art practice as an experiment may offer an openness that can deal with the encounters between the art tradition of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and contemporary art from open, creative, and dynamic perspectives.

3. Theoretical Approaches

My project is different from most research on Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art tradition. Most has been textually orientated, focusing on studying and analysing the original Indian or Tibetan scriptures and records with their translations in other parts of Asia (Linrothe, 1999: 4). From my viewpoint, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist artworks are vivid, reliable, ongoing research sources for the reconstruction of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. First, there is a long history of visual traditions in Tibet; visualisation also plays a prominent role in the meditation practices of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As Linrothe (1999: 3) claims, Tantric Buddhist art played an active role for Tantric practitioners as ‘visual triggers of integrated states of realization and as expressions of those states, which beggared verbal description’. Second, the abundant evidence of art may be complementary to the historic records and textual studies in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As Conze (1999: 5) claims, the visual tradition ‘is precious [and] that may help him (the historian) to trace the often obscure development of Indian religious thought between 600 and 1200 AD’. Third, in the cross-cultural dialogue between Tibetan, Chinese, and Western scholars, I argue that artworks are striking, efficient, and pragmatic agents. I also consider questions about the potential for how traditional Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, ‘a distinctive body of fine art’, can be presented and appreciated in different cultures and countries. In response to these questions, I investigate some contemporary Tibetan artists’ responses to the changing cultural environments within Tibet, China, and the West and I introspect my experience of exploring Tibetan Tantric Buddhist meditation and its art as potential resources for contemporary spiritual and art practice.

With regard to a theoretical framework, the following works greatly informed and inspired my research: Marilyn M Rhie and Robert A F Thurman’s exhibition

Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet (1991), and Pratapaditya Pal's exhibition *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure* (2013); Rob Linrothe's study of Indo-Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (1999); Claire Harris's books on contemporary Tibetan art *In the Image of Tibet: Tibetan Painting after 1959* (1999) and *The Museum on the Roof of the World: Art, Politics, and the Representation of Tibet* (2012). At the end of the twentieth century, scholars and curators—such as Rhie, Thurman, Pal, and Linrothe—start the unprecedented journey of exploring and presenting the mysterious Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism and its art to the outside world (especially the West), which interweaves the religious and artistic content of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhist art. Rhie and Thurman (1991: 12) suggest that:

[The way of approaching Tibetan sacred art] is a kind of experiential hand-in-hand walk through one of the most difficult images for a Westerner to comprehend ... on the first view, [Tibetan artwork] is both fearsome and erotic. By confronting this image on several levels—symbolic, aesthetic, psychological, and spiritual—we hope to make the beholder aware of the possibilities inherent in all the works of art that follow.

This is a new construct, which is intended to realistically bridge both the inside and the outside of the myth of 'Tibetan-ness'. As Stoddard comments, this approach is 'based on a practical desire to communicate the sublime reality and exquisite aesthetics of a new (to the Western public) and little-known religion' (Stoddard, 2001: 225). The theoretical research done by Rhie, Thurman, Pal, and Linrothe provides me with potential models for interweaving religious, historical, and aesthetic aspects of Tibetan Buddhist art together—a good starting point for my exploration.

On the other hand, Harris's research—being a pioneering study of Tibetan contemporary art since 1959—provides me with insights on the disparity between indigenous, Chinese, and Western assessments of the transformation of Tibetan art from traditional forms to innovative forms. Harris (2012: 208) examines post-1959 Tibetan artworks produced in two parallel but somehow connected worlds: the world of Tibetan painters who remain in a Tibetan autonomous region and the other Tibetan-speaking regions of China, and the world of Tibetan refugee artists living in exile. As Harris (*ibid.*) writes:

Significantly, although artists in each location were forced to reimagine what Tibetan art might be, and did so with very different results, their aim was to generate something that could still be seen as ‘authentically’ Tibetan.

However, from my perspective, the aim of being authentically Tibetan reveals ‘utopian and archival representation of their homeland’, which can be ambiguous and politicised as facets of cultural diplomacy:

[In the 1980s and 1990s] new paintings from Tibet were construed as ugly deviations from the earlier glories of Tibetan heritage and as evidence of the decline of Tibetan culture under Chinese rule. Art made in Tibet after 1950 was thought to be tainted by association with the People’s Republic (in terms of style, content, and mode of production), and to have lost the distinctive qualities that made it recognizably Tibetan (*ibid.*).

However, the modern and contemporary movement in Tibet during the 1980s was actually an underground activity, a radical protest against the Chinese central government in the political climate of the period. In response, China has, since the early 2000s, endorsed the production of Tibetan contemporary art as a way of preserving and promoting Tibetan culture. More interestingly, some Western curators and art dealers dramatically switched their interest from Tibetan antiques to the new profile of Tibetan art after the turn of the millennium (Harris, 2012: 208-209). Influenced by Harris’s work, my research on contemporary Tibetan art confronts controversial issues on a cross-cultural level and, in a broad context, is discussed at length in Chapter 3.

I also embarked on combining theoretical research and my art practice as a way of exploring the trans-cultural translation of Tibetan Buddhist art in Chinese and Western contexts. First, as a Chinese woman artist, my standpoint when analysing Tibetan Buddhist art is inevitably different from the position of a Tibetan (man) artist, such as Gade, in the conventional sense.⁸ Second, my project confronts a controversial issue in respect of the conflicting viewpoints from Tibetan, Chinese, and Western perspectives and it tries to explore questions that are perhaps more important to ask than to answer. At the beginning of my research, I was confused as to how I could manage to weave together so many different strands of ideas, theoretical considerations, historical records, and cross-cultural perspectives. But I believe that the multifaceted and multilayered nature of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art can be incorporated into contemporary

⁸ I discuss it at length in Chapter 4.

academic studies along with personal experiences in the translation of cultures within art practice.

Yet, I find myself ambivalent in tackling some problems. First, the study of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism itself is controversial, with its focus on beliefs and practices that surround the centrality of apparently violent and sexual imagery in Tibetan religious icons and texts. Also, there are some obstructions: the aura of secrecy, the oral teaching of prayers in cryptic language, the complicated complex symbols, and the esoteric nature of Tibetan ritual ceremonies. As Campbell (1996: 1) suggests, ‘the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism are little known generally, and are often the subject of much imaginative speculation and misunderstanding, because of what has been written about Tibet, its landscape, religion and people, in the past’.

Furthermore, the present Western image of Tibet implies some emancipation from the Oriental legacy and colonial era, and it echoes a general anxiety and hostility towards modern China,⁹ which makes my research standpoint even more confusing and difficult to negotiate through the ‘highly politicised debate’ between the Chinese and the Westerners (Harris, 2012: 7). My knowledge of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art was first gained from a Chinese understanding of Tibetan Buddhist thoughts under the influence of Chinese culture (including Confucianism and Taoism). I am aware that my Chinese identity and cultural background place me in a different position from both Tibetan and Western artists and scholars. As a Chinese painter, I have a particular understanding of image itself and on the Chinese position of subjects. These all entail my arriving at a different point from Tibetan Buddhists and Western scholars. To some extent, my research in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art was born largely out of my deep and inexplicably ambivalent relationship with Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art from a contemporary perspective.

I am from a Chinese intellectual family background: all of my family members are atheists, and my mother and grandfather are Communist Party

⁹ On a positive note, some recent research by Western scholars shows their self-critical awareness; they have made serious efforts to criticise some of the major myths and misconceptions in the West about Tibet. For instance, see Korom's *Constructing Tibetan Culture* (1997), Dodin and Rather's *Mythos Tibet* (1997) and *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections and Fantasies* (2001), and Brauen's *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* (2004), Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-la* (1998).

members. Without any clear reason, I was drawn to Tantric Buddhism, which seemed so different from what my family members believe. Many years ago, as a freshman in art school, I was captivated by dazzling and diverse Tibetan Tantric Buddhist paintings in many picture books. Since then, I have studied Tibetan Tantric meditation and rituals and employed its skills and the techniques of traditional painting within my art practice. However, my family could not help asking a difficult question: why was I, a Chinese, well-educated artist so fascinated by such primitive, erotic, and uncivilised Tibetan traditions? As Heberer (2001: 145) points out, most Chinese ‘cling to their own imagined superiority, consider the Tibetans inferior’. Worse still, any research related to Tibet seems to be oversensitive and coloured by a certain political significance that receives considerable attention in Western media and popular culture.

However, in the course of my probing into the mysteries of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, I now have a different interest in offering an ‘encounter’. The encounter is one between the art tradition of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and contemporary (Western) art. I commence with what I value about ancient Tibetan Tantric art: the insights and aesthetic tastes it has given me. The heritage here goes back a generation to Ajit Mookerjee (1915 to 1990), who recognised a complex pattern in (Tibetan) Tantric art inasmuch as it has adopted and adapted imagery from different cultural sources, remodelling its significance and weaving the strands of tradition and the daily meditation practice by the power of imagination (Mookerjee, 1994 [1963]: 9). Indeed, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is a shifting amalgam of fantasies, fears, and wish fulfillment (Urban, 2003: 3). That is to say, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, seemingly, could be considered positively as an ongoing, dynamic, and mobile flow of art without limits (Rawson, 1988 [1973]: 38). According to Mookerjee’s *Tantra Art: Its Philosophy and Physics* (1963), the spirit of a human being transcends all natural restrictions to attain eternal enlightenment for both man and woman in (Tibetan) Tantric art and practice. Eternal enlightenment is the ultimate form of worship for us to rely on, and on which to establish the grounds for justice and equality. Within (Tibetan) Tantric meditation as a pursuit of enlightenment, each individual holds a conversation questioning, examining, and then believing from the perspective of trans-disciplinary studies and cross-cultural analysis.

Indeed, we might note an apparent contradiction inherent in this encounter. On the one hand, it implies an attempt at setting out a journey on challenging, rupturing, and reconstructing Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art by what might be called a contemporary strategy. On the other hand, Tibetan Tantric art also foregrounds certain knowledge, belief and value; pre-established research methods and systems on symbolism and representation would always and everywhere disrupt putting new conditions and methods into play. Moreover, I would argue that Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is a living force and a movement of art that can have the potential to ‘be truly transformative through the cross-cultural interplay between Eastern and Western imaginations’ (Urban, 2003: 280). Here, an individual approach has a unique position in opening new possibilities for the encounter with non-Western ideas and art, liberating the mental power and maximising the potential for a genuine transformation of both the East and the West through the impact of this encounter. Therefore, we may follow a path between ancient Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art and its expanded field of modern and contemporary art. I argue that exploring this encounter could only be written about from one’s personal experience, because of the variety and diversity of contemporary art. To this extent, my research is like a personal archive, a changing history of my encounters between the Asian tradition and contemporary art from the West.

To summarise, my research aims to contribute to a variety of communities—both artistic and academic. I have sought to offer a personal approach to Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art in order to highlight its potential as a spiritual resource, as demonstrated in my art practice. My art practice, in drawing on Tibetan Tantric Buddhist meditational and compositional techniques seeks to contribute to, and invest in the on-going development of art rooted in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism as well as to draw attention to its ongoing dynamism and vitality as it crosses geographical, religious, and cultural boundaries. Second, my work is image-oriented, as opposed to textual or philological which are the dominant approaches to the study of Tibetan Buddhism. The benefit of approaching the study of this form of Buddhism via an art-historical and contemporary art practice perspective is that it enables an integrated analysis of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism as a set of dynamic practices rather than a relatively static doctrinal system. Third, my work

is intended to speak to an international intellectual community, but especially that of China, I hope to show the unique relationship between Tibet's visual heritage, methods of Tantric meditation, and contemporary art practice, in order to encourage a new and sympathetic understanding of art that is rooted in the Tibetan Tantric tradition. This tradition is conventionally viewed as rather primitive and undeveloped by scholars of art in China. I intend to challenge this view, drawing attention to the sophistication, nuances, and complex history of development of the tradition. Last but not the least, my research is aimed at promoting Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art in the world outside of its original cultural environment. I hope that it will influence and encourage young artists, and provoke an on-going engagement between contemporary art and traditional aesthetic production.

Introduction

Tantric Buddhism: An Alternative Path¹ to Enlightenment

Frankly I find that historical awareness of Buddhism is a wonderful way of illustrating the core teachings of Buddhism itself, namely that Buddhism is not somehow excluded from being contingently arisen, nor is it excluded from being impermanent, nor is it excluded from being *dukkha*, from being dissatisfactory and imperfect (Batchelor, 1994: 3).

1. The 'Elusive Image' of Tantric Buddhism

When oriental scholars and missionaries first discovered Tantric Buddhism and its art in the eighteenth century, the abundant presence of sexual imagery and practices—together with its pantheon of demonic figures—was found to be shocking. This art was quickly assessed as providing evidence of a degenerate and corrupting influence on Buddhism, which was thought to be one of the central reasons for the demise of Buddhism on its native soil. As Padoux noted:

Tantra was something too abominable to enter the ears of man and impossible to reveal to a Christian public, or simply an array of magic rites drawn from the most ignorant and stupid classes (Urban, 2003: 2).

Tantric Buddhism is today considered the most radical, controversial, and essential form of Buddhism. In the past three or four decades, Tantric Buddhism has suddenly gained popularity in Western pop culture, and it has attracted serious attention on an academic level. Consequently, it has gradually generated a new body of scholarship and thus has been rediscovered and reinterpreted in a positive way. More surprisingly, Tantric Buddhism might, as a consequence, be considered by some people as the ideal religion for contemporary Western society. As Urban (2003: 3) points out, Tantra is a religion that combines spirituality with sensuality, which is perhaps the ideal path for spiritual consumers in the strange world of 'late capitalism'.²

Despite a great deal of scholarship on Tantric Buddhism over the past four decades, perhaps more than any other Buddhist tradition it has retained a limited understanding of its complex and multifaceted systems of Buddhist thoughts, meditation, and art practices. As the Dutch Buddhologist Jong (1974: 74) stated,

¹ Modern scholars commonly consider Tantric Buddhism as an alternative path to enlightenment within Mahayana. See also Keown (2003: 293).

² On the concept of late capitalism, see also Jameson (1991) and Mandel (1970).

Tantric Buddhism ‘is still the most neglected branch of Buddhist studies’. Indeed, Tantric Buddhism and its art is ‘complex and multiform, containing what may appear to the beginner as a baroque and dizzying array of deities, practices, and symbols’ (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 192).

Apart from its doctrinal and ritualistic labyrinth, a maze of historical and cultural complexities surround Tantric Buddhism and its art. This can seem overwhelming for anyone, particularly for those who are unfamiliar with either Buddhism or Asian culture.³ For this reason, this introductory chapter provides a brief overview of Tantric Buddhism in order to convey a general overview of its main doctrinal currents and practices. And, in doing so, it endeavours to focus on the following three elements: 1) to set Tantric Buddhism in a wider historical and scholarly context; 2) to provide a survey of (Tantric) Buddhist doctrine in its many and varied facets, ideas, rituals, and practices; and 3) to consider the significance of visualisation in Buddhist Tantric meditational practices, which is as important as the methodology in my research.

Here, I am aware that this approach of trying to understand Tantric Buddhism may resemble the parable of the blind men and the elephant told by the Buddha (*Udāna 69f.*). There is a potential danger that different readers might take some basic information of Tantric Buddhism and its art for the whole, or take one point of Tantric Buddhism and spread it to the entire Tantric Buddhist (art) tradition, or any cultural stereotyping in the encounter with the exotic, and so on. Keown discusses these kinds of tendencies of generalising, ‘essentialising’ or deconstructing Buddhism and suggests that there is ‘the middle way’ to ‘think of Buddhism as resembling the elephant in the story: it has a curious assembly of somewhat unlikely parts but also a central bulk to which they are attached’ (Keown, 1996: 1-3). Following Keown’s suggestion, I strive to introduce Tantric Buddhism in this chapter through the middle way—some focus on Tibetan cultural conditions and the visualisation of meditative and art practices as parts of the elephant, which are all linked to essential core teachings of the religious system as its central bulk.

2. The Terminology of Tantric Buddhism

³ Here, I particularly mean the Indian, Tibetan, and Chinese cultural backgrounds.

In contemporary scholarship, the term Tantric Buddhism is widely adopted to refer to the ‘Buddhist Tantric movement’ and the ‘Tantric paradigm of Buddhism’ as a whole. The Sanskrit word *Tantra* means to wrap on a loom, which is probably derived from the root ‘*tan*’, ‘to weave or stretch’ (Urban, 2003: 4), where it originally referred to the weaving process in the creation of fabric. Also, *Tantra* is used in an enormous collection of texts in different traditions and historical contexts. For this reason, many scholars have offered diverse interpretations of the implications and ramifications of Tantra. This endeavour aims to define or delimit the concept of Tantra, which can be found from the earliest Orientalists and missionary accounts up to the most recent debates among contemporary scholars of religion (Keuls, 2012: 2). For example as the historian of India Wheeler (1874: 364) commented, in ‘so-called Tantric religion ... nudity is worshipped in Bacchanalian orgies which cannot be described’. In Woodroffe’s redefinition of Tantra, it ‘is nothing but the Vedic religion struggling ... to reassert itself’ (Woodroffe, 1978 [1918]: 179). Yet, some other scholars, such as White et al. (2000: 9), have attempted to pin it down more precisely:

[Tantra is an] Asian body of beliefs and practices which, working from the principle that in the universe we experience nothing other than the concrete manifestation of the divine energy of the godhead that creates and maintains that universe, which seeks to ritually appropriate and channel that energy, within the human microcosm, in creative and emancipatory ways.

In another example—with perhaps a more romantic definition of Tantra—proposed by Eliade (1971: 203-205) there is ‘a great underground current of autochthonous and popular spirituality’. Moreover, as Rawson (1988 [1973]: 7) points out in his book *The Art of Tantra* (1973), there is one thread that both Tantric Buddhism or Hinduism can be strung on, which ‘is the idea that Tantra is a cult of ecstasy, focused on a vision of cosmic sexuality’.

In confronting the multifaceted viewpoints regarding the definition of Tantra, many scholars endeavour to describe the characteristics of the Tantric phenomena to make the Tantric religion more accessible. As Brooks (1997: 53) suggests, 10 essential characteristics of the Tantric phenomena have been identified, such as that the Tantric places greater emphasis on the guru, the spiritual master, and

requires his or her initiation, with a kind of Tantric ceremony of empowerment from the guru.⁴ Metaphorically, the term Tantra (or the Tantric) also signals the secret initiation of the spiritual master (such as the Buddha) as a means of cultivating and passing on power from a teacher to a student. Concerning its application to Buddhism, it is discussed and regarded as a continuum in some texts of *Yoga Tantra*, for example the *Sri Paramadya Tantra* and the *Vajrasekhara Tantra*.

In the Buddhist discourse, the usage of Tantra has a meaning similar to the term *Sutra*, which literally means a thread or line that draws things together (MacGregor, 1989). The term Sutra refers to ‘the collections of the discourses’ (Bowker, 1997: 931), most of which are regarded as canonical scriptures of the oral teachings of Buddha. Similar to the Sutras, the Tantras are a collection of scriptures of the particular teachings of Buddha, often dedicated to particular deities as the focus of ritual and meditative practices. The Tantras, the root texts of Tantric Buddhism, represent the last stage of the Buddhist canon, with distinctively esoteric features. In other words, the sense of weaving is preserved insofar as it implies a process whereby all the threads of Buddhist philosophical ideas, doctrines, and practices interwoven and enfolded with all actions, thoughts, and emotions in the path towards enlightenment.

From the Tibetan point of view, even though divergent Tantras reveal various epistemologies, there is a common ground underneath all these bewildering threads: a threefold approach to the enlightenment from ‘the perspective of basis, path and result’ (Mullin and Watt, 2003: 32). First, the primordial thread of (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism is to establish the basis of presenting ‘the nature of the Buddha’⁵ in both mind and matter at every flowing moment of existence. That is, (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism and its practice is primarily orientated towards the present mental transformation from negative to positive states, like loving, compassion with wisdom, and non-attachment. Furthermore, the path of (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism is the individualistic method for attuning its basis—the primordial thread of the reality. Last, the term result within the threefold approach

⁴ Initiation (*abhisheka* in Sanskrit) is a kind of empowerment by a guru. The Sanskrit term guru was translated to lama in Tibetan (Namgyal and Trizin, 2005: 2, 7).

⁵ The nature of the Buddha is also called the Principle of Buddha, and the realm of Buddha. It refers to ‘the basic goodness of all beings, the inherent potential within each person to attain complete Buddhahood regardless of race, gender, or nationality’ (Trungpa with Gimian, 2004: 2).

is identified as the Sanskrit term *punya*.⁶ It refers to the uninterrupted rise of the clear light of the nature of the mind, *selwa* or luminosity, and the utter awareness of the great bliss.

In popular imagination, the term Tantric Buddhism is from its root scriptures called Tantras. However, many scholars, such as Onians (2001: 8), point out that Tantric Buddhism is a term borrowed from Hinduism and is of modern coinage, rather than being a native term used by Buddhist practitioners. It is more often called *Vajrayana* and referred to as the *Vajra* Vehicle by its followers, which denotes two important aspects of Tantric Buddhism. On the one hand, the Sanskrit term *yana*, which literally means vehicle, is employed to refer to a foundation, mode, or method, and the goal of spiritual practice in Buddhism (Dorje, 2001: 5). With the rise of Tantric Buddhism, Buddhism is often classified as three vehicles: the Lesser Vehicle *Hinayana*;⁷ the Great Vehicle *Mahayana*;⁸ and the Esoteric Vehicle *Vajrayana*.

On the other hand, the Sanskrit term *vajra*, literally meaning the hard or mighty one, is also known as *dorje* (the lord of stones) in Tibetan. Both of them denote the diamond, the hardest and crystal-like substance, like the omniscient wisdom of Buddha, or the thunderbolt, which can penetrate any obstacle obstructing the path of enlightenment. According to Beer (2003: 87):

The *vajra* or *dorje* is the quintessential symbol of the indestructible path of the 'diamond vehicle' of Vajrayana Buddhism, appearing in both its name and as the appellation or prefix of a host of *vajra*-named divinities, attributes, and qualities ... Essentially the Buddhist *vajra* symbolizes the impenetrable, imperishable, immoveable, immutable, indivisible, and indestructible state of absolute reality, which is the enlightenment of Buddhahood.

The *vajra* was initially a wrathful weapon associated with Indra,⁹ the God of War, Storms, and Rainfall in Hindu mythology. It was also called his thunderbolt, because through its power Indra can control thunder and lightning, and slay

⁶ Mullin uses the Sanskrit term *yugganada* to refer to the result of the threefold approach (Mullin, 2003: 32). However, it may be more accurate to identify with the term *punya*, which loosely means merit in Sanskrit and refers to 'the accumulation of beneficial consequence' (Bowker, 1997: 775).

⁷ Mahayana Buddhists use the term Hinayana for forms of early Buddhism. There are also some other alternative names. As *Theravada* is the only surviving school of early Buddhist traditions, the term *Theravada* (literally the Teaching of the Elders, or the Ancient Teaching) can refer to various forms of early Buddhism (Bowker, 1999: 430).

⁸ Mahayana Buddhism is a prominent form of Buddhism in China and Japan.

⁹ He is the Chief Dharmapala or Defender and Protector of the Buddha, *Dharma* and *Sangha* in Buddhism.

*vritras*¹⁰—his enemies. The *vajra* was usually presented in early Indian and Central Asian art as a short and sturdy club with two sharp tridents at each end (Dorje, 2001: 5). Tantric Buddhism borrowed the iconography of the wrathful weapon and its symbolic significance, but developed it into two forms of the most essential ritual implements: the peaceful and the wrathful *vajras*. Most often peaceful deities hold a *vajra*, which is a form of peaceful sceptre with one, three, five, or nine prongs bent together in his or her right hand. Its closed prongs represent the great perfection of the deity's skilful means (*upaya-kausalya* in Sanskrit), in contrast to his or her perfection of insight or wisdom (*prajna-paramita* in Sanskrit). The concepts of *upaya* and *prajna* are very important in both Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism. I elaborate on their philosophical ideas and historical context later. In the right hand of wrathful deities, the *vajra* is usually depicted with its prongs open as sharp tridents, and it is most commonly made of dark-coloured meteorite (Dorje, 2001: 5). Although it shares the symbolic meaning of the peaceful one as representing skilful means, it also symbolises 'the indestructible power of the deity's *vajra*-wrath, which is capable of destroying all negativities and illusions' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, the *vajra* embodies the Diamond, or Thunderbolt, or Adamantine wisdom mind of Tantric deities. Therefore, Tantric Buddhism—widely known as *Vajrayana* Buddhism—is also translated as the Diamond or Thunderbolt or Adamantine Vehicle in English. From two aspects of *vajra* (diamond-like) and *yana* (vehicle or a base, a path, and result of Buddhist practices), *Vajrayana* or Tantric Buddhism is about exceptional insights of enlightened individuals¹¹ in order to explore the physical elements and potential within the human body and mind to their fullest extent in spiritual progress.

3. The Indian Prelude¹² of Tantric Buddhism

Due to the overwhelming cultural and historical complexities in ancient India, it is very difficult to introduce the special knowledge of Tantric Buddhism and its art without an historical overview of Buddhist development. From an historical

¹⁰ *Vritras* are serpents or dragons or *Asuras* who are power-seeking and, sometimes, sinful deities in Hinduism.

¹¹ Here, enlightened individual refers to those who can see the ultimate reality as it is. In Buddhism, it is believed that the mind and matter can be cooperative, yet remain as separate until accomplishing the enlightenment to bring them together as one (Mullin and Watt, 2003: 27).

¹² The term Indian Prelude is used by Reginald A Ray (2002a: 9; 2002b: 67) for discussing the Indian background of Tibetan Buddhism.

perspective, Indian Buddhism can be divided into four stages:¹³ Primitive, *Nikaya*,¹⁴ Mahayana, and Tantric. Although it is not possible to discuss the entire development of Buddhism within this chapter, I discuss here some elements of early Indian Buddhism that are relevant to Tantric Buddhism as it developed later in Tibet. There are reasons why it is necessary to build up a vivid picture of the distinction between Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism. First, some scholars regard Tantric Buddhism merely as one part of Mahayana Buddhism, which I discuss later. Second, Tibetan Buddhism combines the essential teaching of Mahayana and Tantric Buddhist traditions and indigenous culture. On the other hand, to gain a better understanding of Tantric Buddhism, it is important to discuss the relationship between (Tantric) Buddhism and Brahmanism¹⁵ or Hinduism. This is because Buddhism has coexisted and syncretistically mixed with Brahmanism or Hinduism, which had particularly pervasive and profound effects on the evolution of Tantric Buddhism (Cousins and Hinnells, 1998: 372). There is one example showing how much Brahmanism or Hinduism influenced Tantric Buddhism: La Vallée Poussin (1922: 193), a well-known Buddhist scholar in the twentieth century commented that Tantric Buddhism was ‘practically Buddhist Hinduism, Hinduism ... in Buddhist garb’.

3.1 Primitive Buddhism

Primitive Buddhism dates from approximately 2,500 years ago when Siddhartha Gautama Buddha (Shakyamuni)¹⁶ founded Buddhism in north India, to approximately 100 years after his *parinirvana*.¹⁷ It recounts the legendary life of Shakyamuni, a privileged upper-caste man who renounced the world as a wandering ascetic and then became enlightened by meditating under a *Bodhi* tree.

¹³ The history of Buddhism can be generally divided into two main traditions: *Theravada* and Mahayana Buddhism. More commonly, it is classified into three phases: the Early, Mahayana, and Tantric (or Vajrayana) Buddhism (Gross, 1993: 7-12; Ray, 2002a: viii-ix).

¹⁴ *Nikaya* Buddhism is a modern coinage to avoid the term Hinayana Buddhism, which was suggested by Nagatomi, because some members of the *Theravada* tradition found the term Hinayana Buddhism, which literally means Lesser or Inferior Vehicle offensive (Thurman 1980: ft. 10).

¹⁵ Brahmanism is a ‘religion of early India which came to prominence in the Vedic period, and is effectively to be identified with Vedic religion and its continuity’ (Bowker, 1999: 164). According to Jamison, Brahmanism is a ‘historical predecessor of Hinduism’ (Jamison and Witzel, 2003: 65).

¹⁶ Most historians, such as Cousins, dated his lifetime as 563 BCE to 483 BCE. But some scholars, such as Narain, argued his death to be between 486 and 483 BCE, or between 411 and 400 BCE (Narain, 2003: 11).

¹⁷ *Parinirvana* is the ultimate attainment of the profound peace of mind when an enlightened individual achieves freedom from physical existence and its suffering, and also the vicious cycle of rebirth and *karma* (Williams, 2005: 190).

By this time, the Brahmanic religious tradition had reached a stage of great philosophical productivity and intellectual development, most evident in religious scriptures the *Upanishads* that focus on the Vedic philosophy and spirituality (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 9). There are debates among scholars¹⁸ on whether the Buddha was influenced by the Brahmanic religious treaties. It is more likely that the Brahmanic religious tradition, which includes the earliest *Upanishads*, had an impact on the Buddha positively and negatively. According to Gombrich (1996: 31), the art historian and well-known British scholar of early Buddhism:

The central teaching of the Buddha came as a response to the central teaching of the old Upanisads, notably the *Brhadaranyaka*. On some points, which he perhaps took for granted, he was in agreement with the Upanishadic doctrine; on others he criticised it.

Even though the metaphysical superstructure between the Buddha's teaching and the Vedic tradition differed considerably, 'the Buddhist process of insight mediation is a direct continuation of the meditations on the great sayings of the *Upanishads*, wherein the practitioner internalizes a concise doctrinal formula as a direct and personal realization of the truth' (Prebish and Keown, 2010: 7). As Prebish and Keown suggest, the Buddha's teaching inherited many elements from the Vedic tradition, for example the quest for liberation within the phenomenal world, and the contemplative techniques used in meditation for enlightenment (*ibid.*). On the other hand, the Buddha denied the existence of a Supreme Being or a permanent substance, rejected the sacrificial cult of the Brahmanic religion, and also condemned its social order of castes, known in Sanskrit as *varnas*.¹⁹ He set up the doctrine that members of every caste were welcome to become his disciples and should be treated equally in the Buddhist community (the *Sangha*). As Dewaraja (1994: 6) comments, 'he [the Buddha] did succeed in creating a minor stir against Brahman dogma and superstition'.

¹⁸ Some scholars, such as la Vallee Poussin, argue that the earliest *Upanishads* may have been composed hundreds years later, after the death of the Buddha. However, recent research on the *Upanishads* by Patrick Olivelle places the *Brhadaranyaka* and the *Chandogya Upanishads* in the seventh to sixth centuries BCE, before the Buddha's time. Subsequently, some other scholars, such as Gombrich, have endeavoured to demonstrate that the references from the old *Upanishads* were in the earliest Buddhist scriptures that may be traced back to the Buddha directly. See Gombrich (1996: 14, 31).

¹⁹ According to the Brahmanas, the adherence to one's ritual status and social duties should be divided by birth into four *varnas*: the *Brahmans* (the priests), the *Ksatriyas*, (the warriors), the *Vaisyas* (the makers of social wealth), and the *Sudras* (the servants). Strictly hierarchical relationships formed between the four castes, which ranked the *Brahmans* at the top, then the *Ksatriyas*, who ruled over the *Vaisyas*, followed by the *Sudras* at the lowest populace of ancient Indian society (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 14).

One should note that primitive Buddhism concerns the influence of the *shramana* to renunciate ascetic tradition. The *shramana* refers to those renunciates²⁰ who perform religious austerities (severe self-discipline), and who developed a non-theistic and individualistically experiential tradition with a variety of philosophical concepts and meditative techniques and terminology (Lochtefeld, 2002: 639). From the *shramana* tradition, the teaching of the Buddha absorbed its philosophical concepts as well as ‘technique terms and epithets’ (Norman, 1997: 33), for example the concept of *karma*²¹ and the cycle of birth and death, the concept of *samsara*.²² Yet, upon awaking, Buddha Shakyamuni rejected the polarised strategies of the *shramanas*’ activities and asserted that extreme asceticism is as counterproductive and misleading as hedonism.²³ Subsequently, regarding the liberation from suffering, the Buddha advocated a middle way between sensory deprivation and sensory indulgence, which is the cornerstone and most universal characteristic of Buddhism.

In brief, the teaching of Buddha Shakyamuni in primitive Buddhism can be summarised by the principle of the Four Noble Truths: 1) *Dukkha* (suffering and discontent) is the fundamental nature of all conditioned existence, the impermanence and interdependence of all phenomena; 2) *Samudaya* (the cause of suffering) is the desires rooted in ignorance and coupled with *karma* accumulated in the past and the present lifetimes; 3) *Nirvana* (the cessation of sufferings) is a way out of the vicious cycle of ignorance, desire, disappointment, suffering, pain, and death where beings experience the tranquillity of enlightenment. To achieve it, one has to develop a profound revulsion towards false notions of a self and to cultivate dissatisfaction with cyclical existence; 4) *Marga* (the path to overcoming suffering) is an outline of the means of developing the positive cognitive reorientation and moral qualities that the Buddha set up, summarised in the Eightfold Noble Path. It consists of 1) Correct view; 2) Correct intention; 3)

²⁰ In Hinduism, renunciate (also known as *sannyasi*) refers to ‘a Brahman who having attained the fourth and last stage of life as a beggar will not be reborn, but will instead be absorbed into the Universal Soul’. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sannyasi> (accessed on 15 October 2013).

²¹ In the Buddhist discourse, the term *karma* is retained as the law of consequences, with its fundamental perceptions of ‘non-soul’ or ‘non- (subsistent) self’, and being reborn (Neufeldt, 1986: 6).

²² *Samsara*, which means continuous flow, or wandering in Sanskrit, is the cycle of birth and death, and is related to the reincarnation as a consequence of *karma* in Asian religious traditions.

²³ Here, I use the term hedonism to refer to people striving to maximise sensual pleasure. The Vedic householder’s sacrificial cult had a period of sensual indulgence to fulfil ‘one’s sacrificial, productive, and reproductive duties’ (Hamilton, 2000: 41).

Correct speech; 4) Correct action; 5) Correct livelihood; 6) Correct effort; 7) Correct mindfulness; and 8) Correct concentration.

3.2 *Nikaya* Buddhism

After the Buddha Shakyamuni's passing, the earliest two sub-sects, the *Sarvastivadins* and the *Mahasamghika*, emerged in the third century BCE. From approximately 370 BCE to 150 BC, these two groups developed and eventually numbered about 18 schools.²⁴ Therefore, the term the Eighteen School is conventionally referred to as *Nikaya* Buddhism, Sectarian Buddhism in India, and sometimes loosely identified as *Hinayana* in the modern era. Generally speaking, the sutras of *Nikaya* Buddhism are mainly about training that involves a set of physical self-disciplines to enable practitioners to refrain from negative and destructive thoughts and behaviours on the path of *arhat*²⁵, or individual liberation. According to Powers (2008: 36-37), arhats 'overcome the afflictive emotions and eliminate hatred, ignorance and desire for the things of cyclic existence'; they also transcend the mundane view of life and history. When they die, they attain the *nirvana* and avoid further rebirth and cyclic suffering for themselves.

3.3 Mahayana Buddhism

Mahayana Buddhism is regarded as a radical reinterpretation of the early teachings of the Buddha, highlighting the prominence of the *Bodhisattvas*²⁶ and his or her path to enlightenment. It can be traced back to approximately 200 BCE and became distinctive from the early Buddhist traditions during the first or second centuries CE. Both *Nikaya* and Mahayana Buddhism are based on Buddha's first teaching about the doctrines of the Four Noble Truths, which are 'open to everyone to practise without the need for empowerment' in Tibetan Buddhist discourse (Gyatso, 2010: 424). On the other hand, different to the path of *arhat* in the previous stage, Mahayana teaching is about training the right mind to face negative mentalities and emotions and then conquer them through great compassion for all sentient beings to the path of the *Bodhisattva*. Therefore,

²⁴ Some Buddhists argue that Sectarian Buddhism should be 20 schools. See Hirakawa with Groner (1998: 2).

²⁵ The term *arhat* refers to one who is worthy of reverence because he or she has attained their personal liberation (Bowker, 1999 [1997]: 87).

²⁶ *Bodhisattva* literally means awaking (*Bodhi*), being (*sattva*) in Sanskrit and is translated as *byang chub sems dpa* in Tibetan, which means awakening hero (Powers, 2008: 36).

Mahayana Buddhists claim that it is a more liberating and superior vehicle for its practitioners than *Nikaya* Buddhism.

The core concept of Mahayana Buddhist doctrine and practice, the concept of emptiness, was composed in approximately the first century CE. The theory of emptiness was developed by Nagarjuna,²⁷ a charioteer who opened the way of the Mahayana teaching through logic demonstration: first, all phenomena have no fixed, unchanging, self-nature or identity; and then emptiness, which is ‘devoid of inherent or concrete existence’ (Densal, 2009: 5), provides the potential for new changes to take place. However, these changes also lack any inherent identity; they come into being as an illusion from emptiness and ultimately merge into emptiness. According to the verses in *Heart Sutra*, ‘form is emptiness, emptiness is form’. In order to assert the non-duality of form and emptiness in the nature of reality, Nagarjuna claimed that the teachings of the Buddha have two levels: the doctrines of the absolute, ultimate, and definitive reality; and a relative, superficial, and provisional reality. And Mahayana Buddhists claim that the concept of emptiness should be understood as the essence of reality.

Mahayana Buddhism inherits the basic principles of the Buddha’s teaching and articulates the concept of emptiness. Further, it places great emphasis on wisdom and compassion as a means of reaching the enlightenment, being conceived of as emptiness. Instead of seeking the ideal of personal liberation, the teaching of Mahayana Buddhism is the path of accomplishing the *Bodhisattva* ideal²⁸ to achieve enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

4. Tantric Buddhism

In academic discourse, Tantric Buddhism usually refers to a special esoteric school of Buddhist philosophy, practice, and art ‘based on treatises known as tantras’ (Keown, 2003: 292). It emerged in northeast India during the fifth or sixth centuries CE, and then formed its distinctive features around the seventh century CE. Afterwards, it expanded geographically outward to the Himalayas, East Asia, and Southeast Asia.

²⁷ Nagarjuna (*circa* 150 to 250 CE) was originally from a Brahmin family in India and converted to Buddhism later (Kalupahana, 1992: 160).

²⁸ The *Bodhisattva* ideal is to save all beings from difficulties; to eliminate all negative states and experiences; to cultivate compassion and wisdom in the nature of the Buddha; and to seek the enlightenment for all the beings.

4.1 The Origins of Tantric Buddhism

The origins of Tantric Buddhism are highly obscure. Only a few references to Buddhist Tantric texts exist in India's oldest literature. On the other hand, even if there is some evidence of the early Buddhist Tantras, their dates remain an unresolved issue debated in modern scholarship. There are three most obvious reasons: first, most of the Buddhist Tantras had been composed, revised, and developed by many gurus and their followers within particular groups over the centuries. Second, these innovative Tantric ideas were incorporated into existing Buddhist doctrine and canons in order to gain their validity and access the centralised authority. Last, a great quantity of the first-hand resources—the early Sanskrit manuscripts of Tantras²⁹—were lost in their place of origin. However, as Matsunaga (1977: 173) suggests, the Chinese and Tibetan translations can be helpful to provide some evidence for dating. Not surprisingly, in modern scholarship, there are a great number of different rescensions³⁰ concerning when, where, how, and by whom its secret power and knowledge was passed on from master to disciple.

4.2 Cultural Background of the Indian Tantric Movement

Just as primitive Buddhism grew out of the Brahmanic religious tradition, the evolution of Tantric Buddhism was also affected by the revival of Indian Brahmanism and stimulated by the development of a magical ritual complex in Hinduism.³¹ Two major groups in Tantrism³²—Tantric Buddhism and Tantric Hinduism—share considerable similarities in doctrines and practices, as mentioned earlier. Further, Tantric Hinduism had a profound and pervasive influence on Tantric Buddhism. The most evident elements can be from their (same) emphasis upon female deities and creativity, and a perspective of

²⁹ The early and original manuscripts of Tantras were written in palm leaf, which are very rare and are preserved until today. Most of the surviving Tantra manuscripts are copies and translations done in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and twentieth century (Patel, 2004: 34).

³⁰ Rescension is 'a revising of a text on the basis of a critical examination of sources'.
<http://www.yourdictionary.com/recension> (accessed on 15 October 2013).

³¹ Hinduism is a unified system, which is regarded as the mainstream Vedic religious tradition of India. Recently, scholars tend to use the term Hinduism to refer to the post-classical phase of the Vedic religious tradition that commenced around 400 BCE; this is to differentiate it from the early phase known as Brahmanism.

³² Tantrism refers to a movement mainly within Hinduism or Buddhism combining magical and mystical elements and with sacred writings of its own distinctive features. There is also a Tantric tradition in Jainism in western India.

regarding women as embodiments of female divinity. As Shaw (1995 [1994]: 32) claims:

These passages [in a genre of praising female deities and women] have no direct precedent in earlier Buddhist literature but echo passages in Hindu Tantric and Sakta texts, revealing their proximity to the Sakta cultural realm. Tantric Buddhist and Sakta texts have parallel passages urging respect of women and extending threats and punishments to those who would transgress this inviolable command.

As I understand and use the term ‘Tantric Buddhism’ in this thesis, one of the main differences between the two is how they each perceive the divine feminine creative power. For example Tantric Hinduism puts greater emphasis on *Shakti* (the concept, or personification) of the divine feminine creative power. It also asserts that the male divinity Shiva is passive, whereas *Shakti* is active in the male-female polarity. By contrast, Tantric Buddhism suggests that it is necessary to transform the feminine divine power, *prajna*, and unite it with compassion for all sentient beings, *upaya*. Also, it ‘reverses the male-female polarity with passive female *prajna* and active male *upaya*’ (Bowker, 1997: 949). Nonetheless, Tantric Buddhism shares a lot of important deities, concepts, symbols, and ritual practices with its Tantric counterparts in Hinduism and other Indian traditions. For example as Keown states, Buddhism and Hinduism share many basic beliefs and philosophical concepts about ‘cosmology, karma, rebirth, the cycle of *samsara*’ and so on (Keown, 2003: 107). But Buddhism rejects the belief in a Supreme Being or cosmic power, *atman* (individual soul), and a caste system, which play a fundamental role in Hinduism.

From the historical perspective, Tantric Hinduism had already appeared with significance in India by the middle of the first millennium CE (Padoux, 1981: 347). In the Gupta period (from approximately the fourth century to the sixth century), a blossoming of Hindu philosophy and classical Sanskrit literature became the initial catalyst to push forward the revival of Hinduism. Despite a minor decline during the early eighth century, Hinduism had been revived and enriched by the ninth century, due to its popularity among ordinary people. In contrast to the revival of Hinduism, Mahayana Buddhism started to experience a gradual yet serious decline in India. For example the Buddha was worshipped as a supreme, imperial, Hindu deity in eighth-century royal circles and rituals, and was identified as an incarnation of Vishnu, the supreme God, one of the three most

important deities in Hindu scriptures (Harris, 2011: 113). By the sixth or the seventh century CE, lay practitioners had initiated a radical movement to protest against the ecclesiastical privilege of Mahayana Buddhism; they then introduced many obvious elements from Tantric Hinduism, representing the last stage of the Buddhist canon with distinctively esoteric features.

4.3 Three Stages of the Evolution of Tantric Buddhism

It may be helpful to consider the historical complexity of Tantric Buddhism in three stages, which are based on the development of the evolving Buddhist Tantras. Most of the Tantras are practice-orientated texts that can be divided into four categories: 1) *Kriya* or *Action Tantra*; 2) *Carya* or *Performance Tantra*; 3) *Yoga* or *Union Tantra*; and 4) *Anuttarayoga, Mahayoga* or *Supreme Union Tantra* (Gray, 2007: 696).

4.3.1 Eclectic esotericism

From the Tantric point of view, Tantras have always coexisted with and developed alongside the other Buddhist traditions. Some scholars—such as Snellgrove, Holm, and Bower—agree that centuries prior to the date of the surviving historical evidence, the earliest Buddhist Tantras may have appeared as short formulas attached to sutras (Snellgrove, 2010 [1959]: 5).³³ Some encouraging sparks of Tantric elements can be found in *Agamas*, the collections of early Buddhist manuscripts, which were presumably composed by monks around the time of late primitive Buddhism and the Eighteen Schools.

4.3.2 The middle phase of Tantric Buddhism

From approximately the fourth or the fifth century, a certain number of Tantras evolved in the late stage of Mahayana Buddhism and tapped into the same wellspring as Hindu Tantric traditions. For example *Kriya Tantra*, the largest class of Tantras, was written probably from the second century to the fifth or the sixth century (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 205). In Chinese scholarship, the compositions of *Mahavairocana Sutra* and *Vajrasekhara Tantra* are regarded as the hallmark of pure esotericism, as the middle stage of Tantric Buddhism in India.

³³ From the point of view of Mahayana Buddhists, the earliest Tantras are regarded as late Mahayana Sutras that contain some Tantric elements.

Mahavairocana Sutra is possibly the first authoritative Buddhist Tantra, which was probably compiled in southwest India during the early seventh century CE (Nakamura, 1999: 322). There is the early classification of Buddhas and *Bodhisattvas* with their associated qualities. It is known as a system of three Buddha-families: the highest *Tathagata* or Buddha Family, the middle *Padma* or Lotus Family, and the lowest *Vajra* or Thunderbolt Family. They are epitomised by Shakyamuni, Avalokitesvara³⁴, and Vajrapani³⁵ respectively (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 210). Awakened deities surround Shakyamuni in the Buddha-family, whereas unawakened deities in peaceful or wrathful forms surround Avalokitesvara and Vajrapani in the Lotus or *Vajra* Families.

While the basic theory of Tantric Buddhism in the *Mahavairocana Sutra* has been discussed, the methodology of attaining enlightenment in this most rapid Tantric path is elaborated as the main theme in the *Vajrasekhara Tantra*. The *Vajrasekhara Tantra* was composed at the end of the seventh century and is considered to be the main representative of the *Yoga Tantra* class of texts in Tibetan Buddhism. In the *Vajrasekhara Tantra*, the system of three to five Buddha-families is developed with the addition of a Gem or *ratna* or *Jewel* Family³⁶ and an Action or *Karman* Family (Williams and Tribe, 2000: 210). Along with the expansion of Buddha-families, there is a shift in how the deities around the central Buddhas are conceived. In contrast to the unawakened deities in three Buddha-families, the surrounding deities in five Buddha-families in the *Vajrasekhara Tantra* are regarded as awakened or near-awakened figures (*ibid.*).

Based on the system of five Buddha-families, *mandalas* of the five Buddha-families are used to support the meditation practices in the Buddhist conceptual framework for understanding, interconnecting, and orienting the five different energies attributed to our psychological types into an integrated whole. In Buddhist meditation, each of the five Buddhas in the *mandala* can be considered as a manifestation of a particular aspect of enlightenment in its purest and most natural form. Also, the Five Elements (space, fire, water, earth, and wind/air) and five dominant colours (white, red, blue, yellow, and green) are associated with the five presiding Buddhas or *Bodhisattvas*, respectively. This is closely related to the

³⁴ Avalokitesvara is a *Bodhisattva*, representing the compassion of all Buddhas.

³⁵ Vajrapani is a *Bodhisattva* who embodies the Buddha's power.

³⁶ The *ratna* family first appeared in the texts of *Tattvasamgraha* (Williams with Tribe, 2000: 210). Ratnasambhava is the presiding Buddha of the *ratna* family.

transformation of the five types of neurotic energies of our own awareness into their enlightened aspects during spiritual practice. I elaborate on this in Chapter 2.

4.3.3 The late phase of Tantric Buddhism

No later than the end of the eighth century or the beginning of the ninth century, a new body of Tantric scriptures with its own distinctive features had radically grown out of the models of the earlier Buddhist Sutra traditions (Gray, 2007: 1). Two of the most representative influential Tantras of this stage are the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra*, which were probably produced around the late eighth or early ninth century (Snellgrove, 1959: 12-16; Gray, 2007: 11-14). Both are classified as *Anuttarayoga*, which is also known as *Highest Yoga Tantra*. Since the early tenth century, the later Tantric form of scriptures has been stabilised and made official.

The *Guhyasamaja Tantra* maintains the five-family system of the *Yoga Tantras*, yet regards Aksobhya as its central Buddha who is one of the Five Wisdom Buddhas³⁷ that represent consciousness as a mere reflection of actual reality. The significance of Aksobhya in the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* reflects a radical shift in emphasis from the Vairocana Buddha (or Mahavairocana) in *Carya* and *Yoga Tantra* to paving the way for more wrathful and semi-wrathful Tantric deities. Aksobhya, along with his *Vajra* Family, plays a dominating role in the later developmental phase of Tantric Buddhism in India.

4.4 The Differences and the Interface between Tantric Buddhism and Other Buddhist Traditions

Many Tantric followers consider Tantric Buddhism to be separate from Mahayana Buddhism and, also, they claim that it is the supreme and final Buddhist system. Tantric Buddhism follows the doctrines and practices of Mahayana Buddhism, for example the basic principles of Shakyamuni Buddha's teaching; that is, Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Noble Path, and Three Jewels.³⁸ To put it another way, Tantric Buddhism incorporated elements of earlier Buddhist doctrines and practices. For example Tantric texts were encapsulated in the Four Noble Truths:

³⁷ The Five Wisdom Buddhas are Vairocana, Aksobhya, Amitabha, Ratnasambhava, and Amoghasiddhi.

³⁸ To become a Buddhist, one has to take refuge in the *Triratna*, Three Jewels: the Buddha, the *Dharma*, and the *Sangha*.

Each of these three represents a distinctive approach to the practice of the dharma: the Eighteen Schools stresses the four noble truths and individual nirvana; the Mahayana places its emphasis on the compassionate ideal of the bodhisattva along with the altruistic practices of the six *paramitas*, or perfections; and the Vajrayana is a colourful and intensely practice oriented yogic tradition calling for the attainment of enlightenment in this life (Ray, 2002a: 3).

These basics are amplified by specific ways of philosophical discussion in Mahayana Buddhism that put great emphasis on wisdom and compassion as a means of reaching enlightenment, being conceived of as a radical emptiness. Furthermore, Tantric Buddhism denounced the ideal of personal liberation, and valorised the bodhisattva ideal to achieve complete perfect enlightenment for the sake of all sentient beings.

In contrast to Mahayana Buddhism's abstract form of philosophical presences, Tantric Buddhism makes extensive use of imagery and visualisations of meditation deities. These deities are vivid representations aimed at supporting meditation. For Tantric followers, the use of meditational rituals is central to the Tantric system. In meditation practice, prayers are combined with visualisations and bodily movements that together represent particular deities, with the goal of attaining a high level of manipulation of subtle energies and advanced states of consciousness. As Powers (2008: 77) states, '*Sadhanas*³⁹ describe the qualities of the deity and its retinue, contain recitations of *mantras*⁴⁰ and prayers, and they are connected with visualization of the deity's *mandala*'.

4.5 The Significance of Visualisation in Tantric Buddhist Meditation

The power of visualisation plays a critical role in the Tantric meditation process, which is very important in my art practice and research.⁴¹ For example in *Kriya Tantra*, practitioners repeatedly appreciate an image of a particular deity until the image can appear clearly in their mind, and then they can visualise the deity in front of them. Success depends on the level of a practitioner's imagination, and how they can visualise themselves in the divine aspect of a deity, which is called the path of actualising the enlightened body. In other words, the practitioner aims

³⁹ *Sadhanas* refers to means of achievement.

⁴⁰ The Sanskrit term *mantra*, which means instrument of sacred chants, refers to 'a verse, syllable, or series of syllables believed to be of divine origin, used in a ritual or meditative context in Indian religions' (Bowker, 1999: 615). In Buddhist Tantra, the use of *mantras* is essential to awaken the cognitive potential of practitioners in meditation.

⁴¹ I discuss the relationship between Tibetan Tantric meditation and my art practice in Chapter 4.

to develop a clear appearance of the deity and then a clear visualisation of themselves as that deity, which eventually leads to a strong sense of divine consciousness of being the deity.

In this form of visual tradition, Tantric visual representations of wisdom and compassion as the *yab-yum* images are quite common. Among them, the *yab-yum* couple is one of the most startling images created mainly as a means to support meditation and worship, presenting the sexual union of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother. In the contemplation of icons in Tibetan art objects, such as *thangkas* (Tibetan scroll paintings), sculptures, and *mandalas*, the male deity—often seen standing or sitting in a lotus position—and his consort are seen as an impassioned couple, looking adoringly at the face of their beloved, embracing each other. The aim of the meditative practice on *yab-yum* images is a state of ecstasy in balance with the peaceful consummation of physical union. Tantric Buddhism regards sexual intercourse as an important form of enjoyment or pleasure, with the goal of reaching spiritual ends with divine ecstasy (Rawson, 1988 [1973]: 83). When it links to the *mandala*, it can be seen as part of the process of purification in Tantric meditative practice, in order to cleanse the inner energetic palate so that one can enter and be lifted into a higher state of mind in meditation practice. According to Thurman, the Buddha-mother symbolises the abstract and quiescent concept of wisdom, which is necessary for the Tantric practitioner to come to an awareness of a higher level of reality that is evident in the Buddha's experiences and thoughts, and the Buddha-father represents compassion for all sentient beings (Thurman, 1991: 21). In Tantric Buddhism, wisdom and compassion can be attained by meditating on the sexual union of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother, and is a striking approach to the concept of emptiness and liberating freedom of Buddhist teachings.

‘Meditation’, as Rawson (1988 [1973]: 27) claimed in *The Art of Tantra*, ‘has the job of filling the abstraction with a valid content of reality’. Mental concepts that unify man and woman on the plane of ultimate reality are expressed in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art by drawing a large number of *yab-yum* images, and imagining sexual yoga by developing meditative skills and, in so doing, a presence of mind to reach the state of in-between when practising Tantric meditation. In other words, these images strive to express the in-between state of

consciousness between man and woman and are created to help mankind achieve enlightenment, with the wisdom of union and compassion as a guide in some Tantric meditative practices. Followers of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism believe that it is from one's apprehension of the essential emptiness of all that exists in beings and objects that one can experience the negation of all dualities and the supreme bliss that arises from going beyond the concept of man and woman, self and other, good and evil, forbidden and allowed. The visualisation of sexual images is meant to help those who wish to make and use outward images, as well as those who need only to be reminded of the attributes of images, which they will inwardly realise in their own meditation. Here, one can also see a distinction between Tantric Hinduism and (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism. Unlike Hinduism, which has the belief that in every image or reality there is something, (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism asserts that where we think we are seeing something, in actuality and in truth we see nothing. As Rawson (1988 [1973]: 53) concludes, the *yab-yum* images and their associated practice aid a state of mind devoid of any normal existential content whatsoever. That is to say, sexual images of (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism could be considered as a device for emptying the pre-given mind on its way to 'the void fullness of Nirvana' (*ibid.*), empty of any existential thought.

Tantric Buddhism teaches that a visual representation is a reflection of the true transcendent image whose sphere of existence is the MIND-mind. 'What one worships', Rawson says, 'that one becomes' (*ibid.*: 52). As Khenchen Thrangu Rinpoche has taught, one can find that all images are on a plane of emptiness, in which past, present, and future coexist and can be ordered in various ways.⁴² When confronting the *yab-yum* image, practitioners are 'surrounded by a mist of virtual sexual images, distributed themselves in mobile circuits' towards enlightenment (Rawson, 1973: 3). The belief here is that through the union of opposites in meditation, wisdom and compassion might be attained. Meditational practices are thus an attempt to return to a state of union—with all living beings—that is thought to have coexisted originally.

Indeed, Tantric Buddhism provides a dynamic, visualised, and sometimes physically acted-out method of experiencing enlightenment as emptiness. More strikingly, Tantric Buddhism provides a profound revision and extraordinary

⁴² <http://www.rinpoche.com/teachings/chod.htm>, (accessed on 10th April 2009).

transformation in Buddhist values as well. For example Mahayana Buddhism teaches the gradual cultivation of the perfections over many lifetimes as the path to Buddhahood. By contrast, Tantric Buddhism claims to be a powerful and effective method of practice and is considered a quick path for passionate people towards enlightenment in a single lifetime. As the 14th Dalai Lama asserts, ‘one must finally engage in Mantra (another name for Tantric practice) in order to become a Buddha (in this lifetime)’ (Tsong-ka-pa, 1977: 69). This claim corresponds well to another interesting and, more magical, explanation of the popular biographies of Shakyamuni in Tantric Buddhism. The scripture *Compendium of the Truth of All Tathagatas* explains why Shakyamuni could attain Buddhahood in his single lifetime by sitting alone under the *Bodhi* tree at the bank of the Nairanjana River: The Buddhas of the 10 directions appeared in his meditation and informed him that he must engage in the sexual yogas of *Highest Yoga Tantra* to become awakened. Then Shakyamuni left his physical body under the tree. Following the instruction of the Buddhas, his mental body travelled for a transcendent Tantric realm into the *Akanistha* Heaven.⁴³ There, he received the Tantric initiation and engaged in sexual yoga with the daughter of the Gods, Tilottama. In the union with his consort, he eliminated the subtlest obstructions to wisdom, and liberated himself from cyclic existence and became a complete Buddha (Powers, 2008: 68). Then his mental body returned to the physical one, and from there he began to teach people the *Dharma* for the benefit of others. On the basis of this account, some Tantric Buddhist followers even claim that enlightenment is only attainable through Tantric practices in a single lifetime. In this Tantric version of the biography of Shakyamuni, we are informed that Tantric practices consist of transforming an unenlightened body of speech and mind into an enlightened body of speech and mind. For Buddhists, mind has several important meanings and always has the determinative quality of what humans do with their lives. Mind can also be referred to as a sixth sense in Buddhism; it denotes a non-physical sense, whose sense subjects are ‘sense impressions, feelings, perceptions and volition’ (Bodhi, 2000: 288).⁴⁴ Here, the more important meaning of mind in this Tantric story is that which refers to the non-conceptual awareness or the emptiness. Compared to the Western

⁴³ The *Akanistha* Heaven is considered as the most refined of the pure form heavens in Buddhism.

⁴⁴ Mind in Buddhism is also translated as intellect, or consciousness.

identification of mind with head, in Tantric Buddhism mind resides in the heart, while body is identified with the head (Gyatso, 2011: 165).⁴⁵

As discussed above, differing from the other schools of Buddhism, (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism also expresses the physical body-form in an innovative way by having the potential of becoming the enlightened body in Tantric rituals with the aid of communication through exceedingly visual representations. For example in the contemplation of icons about Vajradhara⁴⁶ (the personification of Shakyamuni) and his consort Tilottama, Vajradhara is often depicted as two-armed, sitting in a lotus position while embracing his consort with a peaceful consummation of physical union. For Tibetan practitioners confronting these sacred sexual images, to meditate with a sexual consort in both mind and physical levels can be a swift method in the intermediate stage of Tantric practice to make the mind-body deeds magical. According to Thurman:

Sexual union between coarse bodies is the only situation, other than death, in which all the neural wind-energies dissolve into the central channel. Thus the consort is essential to reach such depth in this life. (Thurman, 1994: 142).

Also, Tantric followers believe that during this Tantric ritual towards the image of Vajradhara and consort, they lay aside their rational knowledge and enter a world where love can transform into sex and vice versa, whereby sex can be sublimated into sacredness and, in so doing, the body becomes the shrine to this sacredness. In both their imagination and physical practices, as Buddha-father, they gently hold their beloved in the most intimate embrace. The impassioned lover gazes upward in rapture, meeting the downward glance of the other in such a peaceful consummation of physical union. Here, Tantric Buddhism expresses the fluidity of bodies beyond biological sex through both the very common Tantric meditation practice of self-visualisation, with rituals engaged with the physical body. Unlike many other spiritual traditions that reject the physical body, Tantric Buddhism does not. Instead, Tantric followers use the physical body in such a way that it becomes the fundamental tool in the spiritual journey. The employment of the physical body within the Tantric rituals of Tibetan Buddhism is fundamentally

⁴⁵ Being aware of the differences is integral part of my thesis because it will help Western viewers understand that Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art has an intimate relationship at the heart of Tibetan artists and practitioners. I discuss it further in Chapter 4.

⁴⁶ Vajradhara is also called Diamond-holder. In the Gelug and Kagyu schools of Tibetan Buddhism, he is regarded as the ultimate primordial Buddha, or Adi Buddha.

different from the ordinary experiences of having sexual intercourse in daily life.

As Thurman notes:

For the process to work, both partners must be at the same stage, neither using the other as a mere instrument. Both must have the same visualization, the same understanding, the same motivation, and the same concentration (*ibid.*).

From a Western perspective, these esoteric images and Tantric practices may appear romantic and idealistic with regard to gender relations and sexuality. However, in the context of the (Tibetan) tradition, a beautiful and correctly conceived image of the *yab-yum* couple, such as Vajradhara and consort, is a magical visual pattern for meditation that can possibly awaken its inner image in the mind by fully concentrating on it and practising the Tantric disciplines with great patience. As Young explains, ‘Through meditative skill the sensation of sexual pleasure is experienced as emptiness, the profound realization that all beings and all things are essentially empty, without individuality and non-enduring’ (Young, 2004: 140). The cognitive notion of emptiness is known as the ‘unknowing mind’, which is regarded as the leading role of the ‘correct mind’, rather than the physical sensation of bodies themselves in the Tantric visualisation. To some extent, the practice of Tantric meditation is about a state of mind or a state of consciousness with the full acceptance of one’s physical body as the natural and neutral path.

As discussed above, in contrast to Mahayana Buddhism, Tantric Buddhism proposes a more effective and visualised method within sexual images for its realisation. Moreover, it also offers a profound, liberal, and transformative potential in Buddhist values. In a very immediate and direct way, Tantric practices challenge practitioners to evoke the power of creative visualisation in order to experience the empty nature of mind, and to seek a paradigm shift of breaking down conventional and dualistic thought patterns. In Tantric literature, stories of Tantric adepts practising meditation in remote caves, desolate forests, and terrifying cremation grounds proliferate. Some abandoned their royal or aristocratic privilege. Some others pursue lowly forms of livelihood for Tantric practice to seek the freedom and enlightenment. For example the fallen monk Saraha—who broke his monastic vows and abandoned solitary wandering—found a young woman from the low arrow-smith caste to be his spiritual companion, and

he adopted her trade and lifestyle as an arrow-maker. When he was denounced at the royal court, Saraha recited a series of spontaneous realisation songs in his defence. One of his unconventional verses is like this: ‘Perfect knowledge can only be attained, while one is enjoying the pleasure of the senses’.⁴⁷ As Bernbaum (1980: 201) explains further:

[A] great surge of joy and bliss will carry you soaring beyond all bodily sensation. The heat of an inner fire, like the fire that blazes on the southern edge of the universe, will rise through your body, burning away the thickets of mental obstructions [and] it will purify your body and transform it into the indestructible diamond body of bliss.

While accepting that Buddhas have suppressed desires, emotions, and sensations of worldly life, (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism nonetheless claims that an ascetic path is not necessary in order to attain Buddhahood. It requires a great deal of energy, diligent practice, and determination to suppress desire over lifetimes, and by rejecting ordinary hopes, fears, and desires that lead to the renunciators’ lifestyle is very difficult for most Buddhists to achieve. Thus, (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism recognises that desires, emotions, and ecstasies are very powerful forces in human beings, and if their energy is redirected to the spiritual path correctly by the aid of Tantric teachings, they can bring not only freedom from sufferings, but also an expanded capacity for creativity, purification, and great bliss. Put another way, (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism asserts that all aspects of the psyche, including anger, fear, desire, joy, and ecstasy should be embraced positively on the religious path to enlightenment. As Powers (2008: 71) states:

Tantra proposes to incorporate all actions, all thoughts, all emotions into the path. Nothing in itself is pure or impure, good or bad, mundane or transcendent; things only appear to us in these ways because of preconceived ideas. In the Vajrayana (Tantric) systems, any action—even walking, eating, defecating, or sleeping—can be an element of the spiritual path. Tantric practitioners seek to overcome the pervasive sense of ordinariness that colours our perceptions of daily life.

As sexual encounters provide excitement, pleasure, and intimacy for ordinary people, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism considers the orgasmic state as the best occasion for medication. The reasons are explained well by the Indian *Mahasiddha* Naropa in his *A Treatise on Empowerment* in the eleventh century:

[T]hree qualities of consciousness ... arise during orgasm (in the sexual encounter). The first of these is a sense of great pleasure or bliss. The second is an utter radiance or lucidity. Thirdly, an all-pervasive sense of non-duality

⁴⁷ Cited in Conze et al., 2006: 226.

or non-separateness arises. Tantric meditators utilize these three factors for their quick liberation and enlightenment.⁴⁸

Building upon early Indian Buddhism—the Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism in India—Tibetan Tantric Buddhism inherits, extends, and develops many rituals and practices with various meditative techniques known as skilful means for the swift attainment of enlightenment. It offers a new way to transform ordinary awareness in the midst of daily experiences and to attain ecstatic inner freedom by visual meditation. In the process of developing meditations in any activities, including sex, Tantric followers are able to affirm that their emotions, desires, passions, and all sense experiences are the fuel and energy for cultivating detachment and compassion and wisdom for meditation upon emptiness. The employment of sexual images as an art form in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism intends to transform the psyche and physical continuum of practitioners through extensive use of ritual, imagery, visualisation, and meditation practice.

4.5.1 Sexuality and representation of women in Tantric Buddhism

I admit that the Tantric emphasis on sexuality and the other pleasures of the senses in (Tibetan) Buddhist art were not entirely new and some texts seemed to condemn women, while the iconography looks expressively to be exalting them. However, I argue that the form of these sexual images implies that a distinctive understanding of sexuality and the value of femaleness are presented by both Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its artistic tradition. First, some texts in the *Guhyasamaja Tantra* and *Hevajra Tantra* claim that not only are the biological sexes unstable and emphatically illusionary, enabling women and men to change into each other, but also, that women have the same or even greater potential to achieve enlightenment than men. According to Mookerjee (1981: 13), the spirit of a human being transcends all natural restrictions to attain eternal enlightenment for both man and woman in Tibetan Tantric art and practice. When one achieves enlightenment, the enlightened person is neither man nor women, but transcends gender (*ibid.*). Second, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism gives great significance to sex and honour, and shows respect towards women consorts, in theory. ‘Tantric notion is the only spiritual path that says that sex is sacred and not a sin’ (Urban, 2003: 32). As Krsnananda Agamavagisa (the sixteenth-century scholar) comments,

⁴⁸http://archive.org/stream/TantricBodyTheSecretTraditionOfHinduReligion/Flood_2006_tantrichody_djvu.txt, (accessed on 14 June 2013).

‘the pleasure derived from sexual union is of the nature of the Supreme Bliss’.⁴⁹ The Tibetan Tantric Buddhist practitioner believes that in sexual union, women inherently possess wisdom or insights that procreate the energy for enlightenment, while men do not. For example the *yab-yum* image in Tibetan Buddhist art is the visualisation of transforming and liberating desire positively as cosmic power provoked by the female deity. Therefore, women are embodiments of female deity and men should respect and even worship women in Tibetan Tantric practice or meditation (Shaw, 1995 [1994]: 39). This respect has been shown explicitly in some major Tantric scriptures in Tibetan Buddhism:

One must not denigrate women,
In whatever social class they are born,
For they are Lady Perfection of Wisdom,
Embodied in the phenomenal realm (verse 21: 19).⁵⁰

One who knows this yoga should always worship,
By the method of wisdom and skilful means,
Mother, sister, daughter, and niece,
He should always worship women
With his powerful sceptre of wisdom,
Even crippled women, artisans, and women of the lowest class.
(verse 45: 15)

Built upon the same fundamental Buddhist philosophy, over the centuries there are somewhat contradictory views about the wide range of biographies, iconographies, and rituals related to sexuality and women in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. In recent studies of gender and religion, some scholars—such as David Kinsley, Reginald Ray and Kalu Rinpoche—have paid serious academic attention to the sexuality of women in Indian and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. For example Kinsley points out in his paper ‘Women’s Studies in the History of Religion’ (2002) that women’s studies of religion are very different from men’s. First, historians of religions found that there were quite distinct male and female religious subcultures within the larger patriarchal societies. Also, the religious experience for males and females in the same religious community can evidently be different. Thus, these scholars consider the issue that the study of women’s religion is still a new field, full of challenges and difficulties (Kinsley, 2002: 3). These scholars’ endeavours have led to some progress in exploring the positive aspects of imagery and symbols of women in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. They point

⁴⁹ Cited in Urban, 2003: 39.

⁵⁰ Critical edition by Malati Shendge.

out the historical evidence that models of female divinity in Indo-Tibetan Buddhism have had a powerful influence on women's spiritual liberation; therefore, Tibetan women seem to have enjoyed more freedom and fulfilled more religious achievement than their counterparts in other Asian countries. From my perspective, the re-analysis of sexual images engaged with figures of women deities in both the texts and visual presentations of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is worth further deep discussion. However, here space is too limited for more detailed discussion.⁵¹

5. Conclusion

To conclude, Tantric Buddhism initially proved very popular among the general populace in India and subsequently received royal support for its promulgation in monastic universities in India from the eighth century to the late tenth century and the early eleventh century. However, subject to stringent critique from classical Mahayana universalism, Tantric Buddhism was regarded as a particularly radical, dangerous, and horrifying practice in monastic universities and was eventually prohibited in the mainstream society of India by the thirteenth century. But it spread out to many countries of the East. From my observation, there are two basic sub-traditions in Tantric Buddhism: Eastern (Chinese and Japanese) Esoteric Buddhism, and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Tantric Buddhism reached China during the eighth century and was then transported from there to Japan. Since Confucianism dominated in both China and Japan, Tantric Buddhism has been expunged of the explicit expression in the literature of sexual Tantras, 'leaving only a schematic psychological version' (Rawson, 1988 [1973]: 17). In contrast to Tantric Buddhism in China and Japan, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism has been established and has flourished since the seventh century. Tibetans not only managed to incorporate the later esoteric Indian Buddhist rituals, texts, and yogi literatures into their new dimension of Buddhism, but they also created a living Buddhist institution with authority and a stable religious model for the Tibetan people. Since then, Tibet has become the matrix of Tantric Buddhism as an alternative path to attain the enlightenment, instead of its country of origin—India.

⁵¹ I discuss the figures of women deities and their significance in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art and ritual/meditative practices further in chapters 2 and 3.

From Tibet, Tantric Buddhism made its way into Mongolia, Nepal, and other western and southwest parts of China.

In this chapter I have briefly introduced important Tantric Buddhist philosophic thought and practice (such as the emptiness, the system of five Buddha families, the *yab-yum* couples, and the visualization in Tantric meditation)⁵² within a broader context of the four developmental stages of Buddhism in its birthplace India. My intention has been to provide a broad context in order to set the scene for my discussion of Tibetan Tantric art practices, symbology, and techniques in the following chapters.

In the next chapter, I outline the introduction of Tantric Buddhism into Tibet and discuss how it developed into the four major schools in the Tibetan cultural environment. I examine Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art as one of the religio-philosophical traditions from the seventh century through to the nineteenth century.

⁵² These religious and symbolic concepts are also very important in my art practice, which are discussed further in Chapter 4.

Chapter 1

A Brief History of the Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Art Tradition Interwoven with the Buddhist Establishment and Development in Tibet

In Tibet art and religion are one, and it is scarcely possible to understand and appreciate the visual representations out of their religious context (Stoddard, 2001: 224).

[T]he art of Tibet is at once a blend of influences from ... various civilizations and also itself a tradition so distinctive and vibrant that it came to influence the arts of other cultures, and not only those immediately adjacent to Tibet, but as far as Mongolia and the imperial court of China. Tibetan art is almost entirely Buddhist art, reflecting the tremendous influence of religion throughout the culture. From government, education and land distribution to ordinary lives, all were deeply interwoven with the Buddhist establishment (Fisher, 1997: 12).

As mentioned in the Introduction, there are three complex religious dimensions in Buddhism: an ethico-psychological path that puts a greater emphasis on ethical and psychological aspects of early Buddhism; the metaphysical-devotional path of Mahayana Buddhism; and a ritualistic-yogic path, often referred to as Tantric Buddhism, that focuses on the performance of rituals and highlights esoteric meditation with certain archetypal values, meanings, and worship (Sangharakshita, 1996: 30). These three paths of Buddhism made their way to Tibet before they were almost wiped out in India due to the Turkic invasions around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries CE. Tantric Buddhism flourished and achieved its greatest success in Tibet and has been preserved and continues to develop and flourish (Ray, 2002b: 2). To a large extent, Tantric Buddhism is at the centre of the Tibetan Buddhist cultural sphere (Blocker et al., 2003: 121).

On the other hand to understand the religious meanings, the sensations provoked by its images, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art should be conceived of as an integral aspect of Tantric beliefs and meditational practices. Similarly to Buddhist Tantric meditation, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is a pursuit of enlightenment, which aids and supports practitioners to experience the mental and spiritual transformation and to comprehend the nature of reality. Rhie (1991: 39) states that:

Tibetan art, expressed primarily in terms of deities and their settings, possesses an intensity, a power, and a reality that appear more penetrating, more beautiful, and greater than ordinary.

To understand and appreciate Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, I have tried in the Introduction to decipher its doctrinal complexity from the Buddhist Tantras,

which considers the important role that visualisation plays in Buddhist Tantric practices. In this chapter, however, traditional Tibetan Buddhist art—especially from the seventh century through to the nineteenth century—is discussed with respect to its historical context, within Tibetan Buddhism and its fruition, the varied styles, and iconographic development of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art over the centuries. Here, I am particularly interested in illustrating the development of the ‘mystical’ elements of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art that was strongly influenced by religio-philosophical traditions of Tibet’s neighbours, such as India, China, and Nepal.

The three main purposes of this chapter are as follows: to outline the introduction of Tantric Buddhism to Tibet and how it developed into the four major schools in the Tibetan cultural environment; to outline the four evolving developmental stages of iconography in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art; and to discuss the evolving stages of early Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art within its historical context. This chapter is intended to provide an historical context in order to lay the ground for my later analysis of the highly artistic quality (including techniques, compositional forms, and colours), values, and function of Tibetan Tantric art in more depth in Chapter 2.

1. Historical Divisions of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism

Some scholars argue that the geographic closeness between India and Tibet guaranteed the organic and successful migration of Tantric Buddhism (Thurman, 1991: 25). However, other scholars, such as Sangharakshita, disagree, emphasising instead the significant differences between the two regions in respect of their geography, climate, culture, and the temperament of the people (Sangharakshita, 1996: 15-17). As Sangharakshita comments:

Before it actually happened, the chances that Buddhism might ever be transplanted from India to the Land of Snow must have appeared pretty remote ... one might have thought that Indian Buddhism was the last religion the Tibetans would choose to adopt. (Sangharakshita, 1996: 17).

As strange and miraculous as it may seem, the diverse range of types and forms of Indian Buddhism were not only transplanted successfully and adopted by the Tibetans, but also developed, flourished, and even advanced to an uncommonly creative and vigorous level of spiritual life, practice, and transformation in Tibet. Sangharakshita attributes the successful transplantation to similarities in the rural

and tribal sociality of India and Tibet (*ibid.*: 30-31). Regardless of the reasons for the success of Buddhism in Tibet, its establishment did not happen overnight nor for that matter over a few years. In fact, initially it encountered a lot of resistance from Tibetan nobles and indigenous religious priests, and it was nearly five centuries before Buddhism was widely accepted among the general public. The two commonest ways of dividing the history of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism are the two-fold and the four-fold periodisation systems, although there is little scholarly consensus about the periodisation of Tibetan history among Tibetan, Chinese, and Western scholars.¹

First, two-fold periodisation is widely accepted in the contemporary Chinese scholarly context of the study of Tibetan Buddhism. Generally speaking, it divides the history of ancient Tibetan Buddhism into two major phases; the first is thought to have been the establishment of Buddhism in Tibet from the seventh century to the twelfth century. The second phase marks the development of Tibetan Buddhism from the thirteenth century to the twentieth century.

After its establishment in Tibet, there were four major religious movements that resulted in four schools of Tibetan Buddhism: the Nyingma School, the Kagyu School, the Sakya School, and the Gelug School.² The first three are sometimes referred to as the old schools, or the unreformed schools, and the Gelug School as the new school, or the reformed school. This distinction was first suggested by the Tibetans and then became popular not only among Chinese scholars, but among Western scholars too.

In my view, the major difference between the first three schools and the Gelug School is with regard to their respective origins. The first three originate from Indian Buddhism directly, and were founded either by Indian masters and their Tibetan students together, or by Tibetan students who had studied in India. The Gelug School, however, can be regarded as a purely Tibetan interpretation of Buddhism because its founder, Tsongkhapa (1357 to 1419), neither went outside Tibet, nor was he in direct contact with any Indian Buddhists. I discuss these four schools in more detail later.

¹ There is also a three-fold periodisation proposed by early Tibetan historians, such as the thirteenth-century Tibetan scholar Bcom-Idan Rig-pa'i-ral-gri. See Cuevas (2001: 47).

² The sequence of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism is in chronological order.

In contrast to the two-fold division employed by Chinese scholars, most contemporary Western scholars suggest that the history of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism can be divided into four phases between 600 and 1500 CE.³ Broadly speaking, the contemporary four-fold periodisation system is as follows:⁴

Phase 1

The first phase marked the introduction of both Sutric and Tantric Buddhism to Tibet during the Pugyel Dynasty in the period circa 630 to 842 CE, and is referred to as the first diffusion.

Phase 2

The second phase is the age of fragmentation⁵ after the imperial court collapsed. During this period, circa 842 to 986 CE, Buddhist monasteries were almost wiped out in central Tibet by the 41st king, Lang Darma, but Tantric Buddhist practices gained greater popularity among the Tibetan population, albeit without garnering authority or legitimacy.

Phase 3

The third phase is the reintroduction of Buddhism to the eastern and western regions of Tibet from India, Kashmir, and Nepal from 986 to 1315 CE. Some contemporary Western scholars, such as Schaik and Davidson, also refer to it as the second dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism, or the New Translation period, or even as the Tibetan Renaissance. As Davidson states, during its Renaissance, Tibetans brought back and translated enormous amounts of textual and ritual material and then employed the ‘new ritual and ideological forms’ (especially those from the late esoteric, yoga-based systems of Indian

³ Interestingly, there is historical evidence for the employment of a similar division in the old Tibetan chronicles from Dunhuang, which are now preserved in the British Library in London. See Stein (1972: 54); Cuevas (2001: 47).

⁴ There is an aspect of the four-fold periodisation with which I disagree with regard to the adopted terms of identifying the periods of Tibetan history as the ancient, medieval, Renaissance, and the modern. I believe these are very vague, inappropriate, and even ill-defined, particularly the word medieval. This is because these terms indicate that the Tibetan historical periodisation (which is the one most supported by Western scholars) has been encompassed in the European historical and ideological structures. Instead, I use the terms: the first diffusion; the age of fragmentation; the second dissemination; and the Golden Age. I hope that there will be indigenous Tibetan terms for the periodic divisions of Tibetan religious history that denote how Tibetans understand their history, cultural background, and religious values.

⁵ Some Western scholars such as Mckay (2003: 17) also call this period medieval.

Tantric Buddhism) to ‘knit together their fragmented culture’ (Davidson, 2005: 2-3).

Phase 4

The last phase is known as the Golden Age from 1315 to 1543 CE. It was a period that saw the revival of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and the innovative configuration of Tibetan culture. Tibetans incorporated the later esoteric Indian Buddhist rituals, texts, and yogi literatures into their new Buddhism, and they also created living Buddhist institutions with authority and a stable religious model for the Tibetan people.

There are a number of advantages to employing this four-fold periodisation. First, it enables a conception of Tibetan history as one of continuity and change between the earlier imperial and the later regional institutional authority. Second, it enables a nuanced assessment of the subtle and complex changes in the politics, cultural influences, and religious forces that shaped the development of Buddhism in Tibet. Last, and most importantly, it provides a solid theoretical framework for mapping the four stages of the development of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art (especially iconographies) which I detail below. While there are many forms of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, as I noted in the Preface, I mainly focus on the figurative paintings and iconography of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism because of their influence on my art practice.

2. Two Ways of Perceiving the Developmental Stages of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Art in Relation to Tibetan History

As I have already mentioned, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is closely interwoven with Buddhist history in Tibet. The method selected for dividing the historical and cultural context of Tibetan Buddhism necessarily influences an appreciation of the varied styles and iconographic development of its art. In relation to the two different periodisation systems of Tibetan history, there are two ways of perceiving the developmental stages of iconography and artistic styles in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art.

First, in the compass of the two-fold model of Tibetan history, Tibetan Buddhist art is divided into two phases: an initial period and then a later period of development. According to Yu, a well-known Chinese researcher of Tibetan art,

the first stage developed from the seventh century to around the fifteenth century. There are two striking characteristics of the early phase: its lack of originality, which means Tibetan Buddhist art at that time was originally imported from India, Nepal, Kashmir, and China; and the presence of the mixed techniques, styles, and aesthetics of Buddhist art form's multiple influences in one artwork. The later stage developed from the fifteenth century to the mid-twentieth century. During these centuries, Tibetan monks and artists endeavoured to create a distinctive and vibrant Tibetan artistic style under the influence of the different schools of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. During the middle of the seventeenth century, Tibetan Buddhist art gradually developed and fixed an ideal form and standard model which became distinctively Tibetan (Yu, 2005: 4-9).

In my view, this way of perceiving Tibetan Buddhist art in two stages has some advantages—namely its emphasis on the significance of the multiple influences of non-Tibetan artistic traditions; and it highlights the open, distinctive, and vibrant nature of the Tibetan tradition. Further, this division makes the subtle change of styles in these two stages more noticeable. The early stage of Tibetan art has two main characteristics: the close composition of figures in groups, and the lack of the natural environment in the background. However, in the later period, especially after the sixteenth century, the intense tension between grouped figures became more relaxed and was presented in a more open and looser composition with the introduction of background landscapes. There is a significant disadvantage to this binary division. This minimalist division omits the subtle and complex changes that occurred between the political, religious, and artistic developments that were often intertwined. The criticism of scholars such as Cuevas (2001: 48)—with regard to the disintegration and formation of Tibetan art—is that the identification of two developmental stages of Tibetan Buddhist art is oversimplified.

From my research, I would suggest an alternative outline of iconographies of Tibetan Tantric deities that presents the development of Tibetan Tantric art in four trends that correspond closely to the four-fold system of Tibetan religious history. I want to argue that these four main trends of Tibetan Buddhist art correspond closely to an ongoing historical dialogue between Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, indigenous Tibetan tradition, multiple influences from India, Nepal, Kashmir, and

China, as well as between the shifting paradigm patterns among four major schools of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Although the origins of the four trends were initially diachronic, after the tenth century Trends 1 and 2 exist at the same time; after the thirteenth century, Trends 1, 2, and 3 are contemporaneous; after the fifteenth century all four trends are contiguous, overlapping and influencing each other.

In my view, the emergence of each trend of aesthetic development can still be roughly placed in chronological order, based on the surviving textual and artistic resources in Tibet, China, and some other Asian countries. Trend 1 is from the seventh century to the tenth century; Trend 2 dominates from the tenth century to the thirteenth century; Trend 3 lasts from the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century; and Trend 4 is from the fifteenth century to the nineteenth or early twentieth century.

Trend 1

From the early period of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art (the seventh century to the ninth century) to the Age of Fragmentation (the ninth century to the tenth century), the surviving artworks are very sparse, found only in the northeast corner on the second floor of the main temple at the Jokhang in central Tibet. Fortunately, there are some precious manuscripts and artworks from Dunhuang that provide a small window into the period.⁶ The figural representations are mainly drawn from Indian Buddhist art and mythology, but occasionally also from the indigenous Tibetan tradition as local guardians or nature spirits. From the surviving artistic and literary source materials from Tibet and Dunhuang in China, it would seem that the iconographies of deities and the motifs of artworks are mainly based on the Indian and Nepalese aesthetic traditions from the seventh century to the tenth century. Although the iconographies of protective deities show some Tantric elements, they are still derived from the Mahayana model⁷ of Indian Buddhism. However, these images can certainly be linked to *Kriya* (action) and *Carya* (performance) *Tantras* in the traditional Tibetan classification system.

Trend 2

⁶ Scholars such as Dalton (2011: 9) argue that the Buddhist traditions represented in the Tibetan Dunhuang manuscripts have much in common with the Buddhist traditions of central Tibet.

⁷ The Mahayana model of artwork is mainly focused on the Buddhas and the *Bodhisattvas*.

During the Second Dissemination period, new Tantric models were introduced to the western regions of Tibet from India, Kashmir, and Nepal. In Trend 2, the iconographies of Tantric deities become much more independent than in Trend 1, are often larger and are located with higher status in the hierarchical composition. From the tenth century to the eleventh century, these Tantric deities often appeared as a *Bodhisattva*'s attendants who were worshipped by practitioners for 'specific areas of human need' (Shaw, 2006: 6), such as in healing illness or protecting against harm. Later, from the end of the twelfth century, some members of Trend 2 Tantric deities were placed in the central part of compositions, usually paired with a *Bodhisattva* in a slightly subordinate relationship. This pattern of images continued to appear, and they were depicted in a more equal relationship with the *Bodhisattva* later. Trend 2 still exhibited a very close relationship with Mahayana Buddhist belief, practices, and models. But it started to display distinct Tantric features in which some Tantric deities had particular powers on the basis of the form and purpose of embodiment. Throughout the eleventh century, the art of western Tibet was strongly influenced by the Kashmiri aesthetic tradition, while the art traditions from the central and northeastern areas of India and Nepal were still apparent in artworks of central Tibet during the eleventh century to the thirteenth century. The iconographies of deities in trends 1 and 2 are the most enduring and widespread models that can be found in the following centuries in Mongolia and Manchuria, as well as in other western and south-western parts of China.

Trend 3

From the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century, the iconographies of Tantric deities become mature and independent figures, often with their own attendants, and they appear centrally in artworks. The wrathful Tantric deities are no longer necessarily paired with any other deities or *Bodhisattvas*. Also, practitioners worship them not only for specific ends, but regard them as personifying enlightenment or as inspiration for inner meditation. They grow radically out of the Mahayana models, philosophical ideas, and practices, displaying their own innovative and distinctive Tantric features drawn from the later Indian Tantric Buddhist rituals, texts, and yoga literature.

In my view, these images can be linked to *Yoga Tantra* in the traditional Tibetan classification. Because the iconographies of Tantric deities in Trend 3 mainly dominate the Golden Age of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism in Tibet (1315 to 1543 CE), they can also be seen as the product of an innovative configuration of Tibetan culture with the reintroduction of the later Indian Tantric Buddhist paradigmatic changes. With regard to the art style of this period, the influence of the Indo-Nepalese aesthetic tradition was increasingly assimilated into what became a distinctive Tibetan style. However, the Chinese naturalistic elements played a much more important role in the diverse stylistic groups in Tibet, and the Chinese artistic elements became much more obvious, particularly in the portraiture paintings from the late Trend 3 period.

Trend 4

Following the Golden Age of reforming the more exotic Indian Tantric styles and the aesthetic traditions from India, Nepal, and China towards the formulation of a specifically Tibetan aesthetic, the iconography of Tantric deities in Trend 4 are the most powerful and distinctively Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art. They can be linked to the classical Tibetan classification of *Anuttarayoga Tantra* (supreme union). Trend 4 also saw the establishment of a more stable and authoritative religious system, and this played a prominent role in shaping Tantric Buddhist art and rituals; Tantric deities began to rank among the most important and fully enlightened deities. The art of this period illustrates the close relationship between Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Bon, the indigenous Tibetan tradition. Also, stylistic changes in the iconographies of Trend 4 indicate the emergence of distinct schools of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, rather than a reliance on influences and models from India, Nepal, Kashmir, and China.

3. A Brief History of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Art

3.1 The Initial Establishment of Buddhism in Tibet

With the four-fold model of the periodisation of the Tibetan history in mind, I want to outline a 1300-year-long journey to see how Tibet changed from a ‘warrior empire’ to a ‘monastic Buddhist nation’ (Thurman, 1991: 26). The earliest Tibetan historic records about Buddhism are from the reign of the 33rd Tubo King Songtsen Gampo (609 to 650) in the Puyel Dynasty (630 to 850). According to the records, Buddhism was first introduced to Tibet between 638

and 641 CE by King Songtsen Gampo's two foreign wives, the Nepalese princess Bhrikuti Devi and the Chinese Princess Wencheng. The records also suggest that Tibet's two oldest and most important Buddhist temples in Lhasa—the Jokhang and the Ramoche—were built for his wives (Schaik, 2011: 6-7). The records suggest that Bhrikuti Devi brought a statue of Akshobhya Buddha when he was eight years old and that Wencheng brought a Shakyamuni Buddha to Tibet as part of her dowry. During that time, the statue of Akshobhya Buddha was housed in the Jokhang Temple and the other one in the Ramoche. They were switched around in the 710s by another Chinese Princess, Jincheng, who also came to Tibet for a political marriage with another Tubo king, Chidaizhudan, and in so doing became an envoy of amity in succession to Wencheng. Throughout the centuries both Buddhist statues endured many difficult times and were partially destroyed. Around the 1980s, both of them were carefully restored and since then have been worshipped by Tibetans and are the most sacred images to be found in Tibet.

There are two important points about these temples worth mentioning. First, as Zaya (1989: 95) points out in *Religious Art in Tibet*, King Songtsen Gampo worshipped some Tantric deities, including the auspicious Goddesses such as the eight disaster-saving Taras, *Laksmi* and *Sri*. According to Huo and Wangdui:

[In the time of Songtsen Gampo] It was said that in the Dazhao [Jokhang] Monastery were painted many Buddhist frescoes such as the portraits of the eight Buddhas, Buddha of Infinite Light (*Amitayus*), the eight disaster-saving *Taras*, *Avalokitesvara*, the Buddhas of the Seven Worlds, The Buddhas of the *Pancavarnya* (Five Names) and the auspicious goddesses (*Laksmi* and *Sri*) (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 22).

This evidence indicates that certain models of Tantric art were introduced to Tibet as early as the seventh century and were accepted by the Tibetan king and his court. Second, the structures of the Jokhang appear to have their roots in Indian Buddhist art and also reveal a clear artistic style of the Nepalese in the details. There are four outstanding architectural elements of the Jokhang that link directly to the structure of the fifth-century Ajanta caves, a masterpiece of Buddhist sculpture in western India. First and foremost, the front porch is a typical Indian model, consisting of an entrance, a pillared portico, and a vestibule surrounded by columned corridors. Second, the architectural model of the doorway and some parts of the wooden carved patterns on the pillars closely recall those of the Ajanta caves (Rhie, 1991: 40). Third, there are four colonnades in the main hall

that share the weight of the ceiling and form an aisle for the Buddhist statues in between. Last, the Jokhang and many ancient Indian Buddhist temples are similar, inasmuch as they are constructed with a main hall which is surrounded by many small shrine rooms. The Nepalese influence is clearly visible in the wooden figured carvings on ancient door lintels.⁸ Yet, it is still unclear whether they were done by the Nepalese artisans who accompanied Bhrikuti to Tibet in the seventh century⁹ or by Tibetan artisans who were influenced by the Nepalese style. As Heller (1999: 33) suggests, it is quite likely that the Tibetans were either influenced by Newar artisans working in Tibet in the seventh and eighth centuries, or they learnt the Nepalese aesthetic style during their pilgrimages to India via Nepal. Heller also suggests a possibility that the Indian Gupta style of clinging fabrics that we see in eighth-century Tibetan temples may have been brought by the Nepalese artisans as well. As a cosmopolitan centre of that time, Lhasa was probably home to (or at least a hub for) Nepalese, Chinese, and other foreign missionaries so that there is a possibility that Tibetans learnt the foreign aesthetic styles from them.

Compared to the Indian and Nepalese styles of Jokhang Temple, the Ramoche, that was built around the same period, reveals a strong aesthetic influence of the Chinese Han and Tang models. For example the golden upturned eave at the peak of the temple is of the most representative Han style, reminiscent of the temple in the Han Imperial Palace in Xi'an. We can see this unique Chinese modelling and casting style of dragon or phoenix patterns at the end of the uplifting roof as decoration (most often during the Han and the Tang dynasties) at the Ramoche, which is apparently different from the Indian, Nepalese, and Tibetan style. Other evidence of the Chinese influence is found in the carved pattern of the cirrus clouds on the edges of columns or roof beams, which was most popular during the Han Dynasty.

With multiple influences from India, Nepal, and China evident in these early examples of Buddhist art in Tibet, it is to a degree possible that the two wives of

⁸ Some scholars, such as Heller and Rhie, point out the similarity of the remaining ancient wooden carvings between the Jokhang and the Nepalese temple (Heller, 1999: 33); (Rhie, 1991: 40).

⁹ According to some Tibetan legends, Bhrikuti brought a large number of Newar craftsmen as well as sacred images to Tibet around the 620s. However, there is no reliable historical record about the Nepalese artisans working in Tibet until the eighth century.

King Songtsen Gampo may have influenced him by their faith and that they might be credited for the spread of Buddhism throughout Tibet, as they supported missionary activities over the Tibetan Empire. However, these claims lack plausibility, as it is doubtful that King Songtsen Gampo would have been personally touched enough by his two foreign wives to accept Buddhism for the whole nation, or that his wives and their followers could have been so powerful as to extend their influence over the Tibetan king and his court to that degree. Nonetheless, the view that his wives were influential in this respect took on the nature of a foundational myth in the centuries after the rule of Songtsen Gampo. As Schaik (2011: 6-7) concludes:

For later Tibetans, it was these princesses, their introduction of Buddhism statues to Tibet, and their encouragement of the Tsenpo in building Buddhist temples that became the defining images of Songtsen's rule. At the time, though, neither Songtsen nor his courtiers are likely to have perceived things in this way ... for the time being, [it] was only one of many new cultural imports circulating in Tibet.

Until the seventh century, there is a dearth of reliable historical records about Tibet. In fact Tibet's earliest historical sources were written by a number of Chinese historians. One such source in *Han Annals* can be traced back to 608 CE, in which the Tibetans were commissioned by the Chinese to improve conditions of the horse trade (Heller, 1999: 10). More strikingly, there are accounts from Chinese sources that describe the Tibetans as barbaric, uncivilised, and ruthless. According to *Sui Shu (Annals of the Sui Dynasty)*, the Tibetans 'are all warriors...They are given to lechery and obscenity to an extent unknown even among any other savage race' (Rockhill, 1891: 335). Similarly, in *Tang Shu (Annals of the Tang Dynasty)*, the Tibetans are described as having

hundreds of thousands of men all ready to bear arms ... They prize physical strength and despise old age. A mother salutes her son, and a son has precedence over his father ... They prize death in battle and hate to end their lives by sickness ... When someone is defeated in battle or runs away, they fix a foxtail to his head to show that he is cowardly like the fox. A great crowd will assemble and he is certain to be put to death (Snellgrove and Richardson, 1968: 20-30).

Building upon its formidable military force, King Songtsen Gampo accomplished the unification of the Tibetan state in the early seventh century. Later, he expanded his empire beyond central Tibet to encompass the Silk Road 'from the Hexi corridor to the Pamirs on the west and to Sichuan on the east' (Heller, 1999: 10) and also conquered some cities or towns on the Chinese border. The Silk

Road was used by traders and Buddhist pilgrims across China, India, and central Asia to the Mediterranean and Europe from the early third century to the fifteenth century. As Heller (1999: 10-11) states:

Through trade, proselytism and military campaigns, Tibet became linked with many cultures and kingdoms, principally those of Bengal, Nepal, Kashmir, Gilgit, Pakistan (Uddiyana), Persia (Iran), Sogdiana, Khotan, Uigur, Turk, Chinese (both Tang empire and Shu Kingdom in modern Sichuan), Korea, Tuyahun, Tangut, Nanzhao in modern Yunnan, and Burma. This international mêlée influenced the development of both esthetics and religious ideals in Tibet.

It seems likely, therefore, that the Tibetans initially made contact with Buddhism through trade with their close Nepalese and Chinese neighbours during the early seventh century, rather than through India. This likely direction of dissemination leads to the question of the extent to which Nepal and China influenced Tibetan Tantric Buddhism at this early stage. The Nepalese kings and aristocrats supported the coexistence of Buddhism and Hinduism, and Tantric Buddhism and Tantric Hinduism influenced each other and wove together an intricate combination from the earliest historical times (about the fourth century) in Nepal. Nonetheless, most of the Nepalese kings and Royal Nepalese families practised Hinduism. For example while King Narendradeva (641 to 679 CE) generously patronised the various sects of Buddhism in the Kathmandu valley, he was a highly religious man devoted to Lord Shiva (Jha, 1995: 53). Subsequently, Buddhism in Nepal was neither entrenched inside the Nepalese Royal court, nor was it of much influence within the Tibetan court. A similar situation pertained in the case of the Chinese, but rather than Hinduism, the main difficulty for Buddhist promotion in China was the powerful cult of ancestors, and the cult of the Emperor as ‘the son of Heaven’ (Prebish, 1975: 192). Essentially, the influence on Buddhism from both Nepalese and Chinese traditions was largely syncretic such that dislodging the Tibetan indigenous religion proved difficult.

According to the Tibetan historical records *Qing Shi*,¹⁰ there was often fierce resistance to Buddhism from *Bon*, the native pre-Buddhist religious practices of Tibetans. In the early Tibetan documents *Bon* was not an organised religion, but rather an offset of animist-shamanistic rituals based on the belief that the world is ruled by three types of spirits: ‘the *lha* in the heavens, the *nyen* in the air and on the peaks of mountains, and the *lu* in the underworld and rivers’ (Schaik, 2011:

¹⁰ Translated Chinese version by Guo Heqin in 1985.

24). The kings and clan leaders considered themselves the descendants of the mountains' divine embodiment. Just as the Chinese emperor believed himself to be the son of Heaven, the King of Tibet—the Tsenpo—was regarded essentially as a God who came down from Heaven via the mightiest mountain. Therefore, he had the divine right to rule. There are a few ancient Tibetan manuscripts that describe social customs, mythology, and rituals before Buddhism reached Tibet. According to archaeologists,¹¹ a tomb was identified as a mountain, along with offerings and animal (or even human) sacrifices for the guardian deities in Tibet. The funeral rituals and mummification of the Tsenpos were the most impressive examples of Tibetan burial practices. The Tibetans believed that the Tsenpo was buried in the tumulus that represented mountain in which he would reunite with his guardian deity after death and was reborn into an afterlife of prosperity and good health. Even now, the practices have been preserved, to a degree, in Tibetan understandings of death and the afterlife and have remained fundamental to Tibetan art—and even to the lives of most Tibetans—which incorporated combined Buddhist-like elements.

From the Chinese historical records mentioned earlier, it is clear that Tibet's neighbours regarded the Tibetans with trepidation for their savage, uncivilised, and aggressive nature. However, the Tibetans were nonetheless, as Schaik notes, 'eager to learn from the most established cultures that they encountered in the course of their military expansion' (Schaik, 2011: 12). King Songtsen Gampo sent a number of envoys to Nepal, India, China, and Persia to learn their cultural and social structures. For example one of King Songtsen Gampo's great achievements was to send Thonmi Sambhota (569 to 649) to India to learn Indian writing systems; the king subsequently appointed him to invent a Tibetan alphabet based upon the Indian alphabet in the mid-seventh century. One of the most important after-effects of the transliteration of Tibetan was that it facilitated the translation of Buddhist scriptures.

After King Songtsen Campo died (circa 650 CE), Buddhism made little progress under the rule of successive Tsenpos in the following century until Dharma King Trisong Detsen took up the throne in 755 CE as the 38th King. In

¹¹ More than 3000 tombs (from Neolithic times to the Pugyel Dynasty) were investigated by archaeologists in the past two decades, in all regions of Tibet.

that same year, the Tang Empire descended into chaos due to the rebellion of General An Lushi. Even though the rebellion was over by 763 CE, the Tang Empire never recovered from the blow. Trisong Detsen then sent his fearsome Tibetan soldiers back to the Silk Road and took the Tang's capital Chang'an in the winter of 763 CE. He also conquered other Chinese western cities such as Yunnan, Sichuan, and Dunhuang. During the Tibetan occupation of Dunhuang (786 to 848 CE), Tibetan culture thrived there and was preserved by later generations. The Tibetan manuscripts and paintings in the famous *Cang Jing* Cave—the Library Cave of Dunhuang—provide strong evidence of the preservation of ancient Tibetan culture from the late eighth century. A large portion of this collection consists of the most precious Tibetan Tantric Buddhist documents and artworks that exist anywhere in the world.

King Trisong Detsen extended his Pugyel Empire to the height of its full power as Schaik credits him with 'reshaping Tibetan society with his revolutionary decision to adopt Buddhism as the state religion' (Schaik, 2011: 30). Trisong Detsen invited the great Pandit Shantarakshita to Tibet to teach the Tantric Buddhist practices that he learnt from the great monastic universities of northern India. Shantarakshita convinced King Trisong Detsen to establish Buddhism as the official national religion in Tibet in 763 CE. As Schaik suggests, the adoption of Buddhism as Tibet's state religion was initially a political move in a wider historical context. After King Trisong Detsen's military campaigns, the Tibetan Empire encountered several Buddhist countries, such as India, China, Khotan, Uddiyana on every side and even swallowed some areas from its neighbours. Compared to the unsystematic Tibetan native religious practices *Bon* (which would not provide a basis for intercultural exchange), Buddhism enjoyed prestige among Tibet's neighbours and thus won patronage from the Tibetan court.

To overcome obstacles in building Samye, the first Buddhist monastery in Tibet, Shantarakshita brought back another Indian Tantric adept Padmasambhava as his reinforcement to Tibet in about 747. Padmasambhava (literally the lotus-born) is known as the Precious Teacher, Guru Rinpoche, or Lupon Rinpoche by Tibetans (Jigme and Colin, 1969: 163). The few historical records available regarding Padmasambhava indicate that effort was made to persuade the *Bonpos* (local shamanic priests) and their followers to convert to Buddhism.

Padmasambhava appears to have absorbed some religious rituals, deities, and theories from *Bon* into his Tantric teaching and to have attempted to reconcile the two world-views that gave Tibetan Buddhism many of its distinctive features. Thus, Padmasambhava established Tantric Buddhism in Tibet and transformed the anti-Buddhist and non-Buddhist traditions in ways that analogically related to the myth of his subjugation of the demon Rudra. Following the teachings of Padmasambhava, the school of the Nyingma (the oldest of the four major schools of Tibetan Buddhism) was founded at Samye in the eighth century.

It is worth mentioning the construction of Samye, which has an overall shape and configuration of the ideal Tantric Buddhist cosmos as a giant *mandala*. The main temple of Samye represents the legendary Mount Meru, the axis mundi at the centre of the Buddhist universe. There are four principal temples surrounding the main temple, representing four continents: ‘Purvavideha in the east, Aparagodaniya in the west, Uttarakuru in the north, and Jambudvipa in the south’.¹² Other buildings stand at the intermediate points of the cardinal directions, representing the sun, the moon, and the stars in the Tantric Buddhist cosmology. As Heller (1999: 35) suggests, the architectural structure of Samye mainly follows the Indian model of the Odantapuri¹³ and Vikramasila¹⁴ temples. However, there are strong elements within the central temple of Samye which suggest that its construction is a mixed model of Indian, Chinese, and Tibetan architectural styles. It consists of three floors, as with many other Tibetan temples, to represent the ‘three levels of existence’ (Sangharakshita, 1996: 79). The ground floor is in a traditional Tibetan style, representing the mundane level. The first floor is in a Chinese style, while the top floor is in an ancient Indian style. Together they represent the archetypal and absolute levels of existence, respectively. There are also three images of Buddha associated with each storey as well, representing the three *kayas* (vehicles) of the Buddha. As Sangharakshita (1996: 79) states:

When one perceive[s] the Buddha-nature, the Buddha-being if you like, on the level of mundane historical reality, then one sees the historical Buddha. Going higher (in the temple), one reaches the archetypal level, where one sees the same reality more closely, more truly, as the *Sambhogakāya* Buddha, a sort of archetypal form. And if one goes higher (in the temple) still, then

¹² http://www.sgilibrary.org/search_dict.php?id=734 (accessed on October 28 2012).

¹³ It was established by King Dharmapala (783 to 820) in the eighth century.

¹⁴ The Vikramasila temple was also built under the reign of King Dharmapala and is regarded as an important Indian Buddhist centre as Nālandā temple during the Pala Dynasty.

one sees the inner essence of those Buddha-bodies, the *Dharmakāya*, or Reality itself, without any form.

There is another important aspect of the artistic achievement of Samye: its mural paintings. According to the Tibetan historical records *Baxie* by Ba-Sainang, all the walls on the three floors of the main hall were covered by large-scale mural paintings. There were many other religious paintings in the corridors of the main hall, such as *the Birth of the Thousand Buddhas*, *the Sixty Kalpas of the Evil Gatis*, *the Births of the Ten Thousand Buddhas*, and the portraits of *the Eight Bright Sages and the Dragon Kings* (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 23). Last, all the ‘four big continents’ and the ‘twelve small ones’ were said to have been painted with elaborate religious mural paintings (*ibid.*). Unfortunately, almost all of these precious paintings were damaged during the end of the Pugyel Dynasty.

Before the collapse of the Pugyel Empire, one other ruler, King Ralpachen (806 to 841 CE), played a very important role in the history of Tibetan Buddhism. King Ralpachen was apparently a fervent advocate of Tantric Buddhism. He generously sponsored the restoration of the older temples and the development of new monasteries in Tibet. During his reign he invited many craftsmen, Buddhist artists, scholars, and translators to Tibet from China, Nepal, Kashmir, and Khotan (Das, 1970: 40).

3.2 The Age of Fragmentation of Tibetan Buddhism

The period immediately after the reign of Ralpachen (842 to 986 CE) is referred to as the Age of Fragmentation, which describes a period of ‘religious corruption, when violence, ignorance, and demons reigned’ (Dalton, 2011: 5). During the 840s in Tibet, rivalries between the centralised royal power and various clans, and tensions between the powerful monastic bases and the people fuelled conflict. A severe suppression and persecution of monastic Buddhism followed in the mid-ninth century leading to revolts that tore the Tibetan Empire to pieces. Many Tibetan Buddhists claim that both the Mahayana and Tantric traditions of Buddhism were almost wiped out by King Langdarma (838 to 841 CE) and his followers between 836 and 842 in Tibet. After the monasteries lost their wealth and political influence, most were abandoned as centres of power (Schaik, 2011: 49). Tibetans believe that the revival of Buddhism in Tibet is due to a handful of

heroic Tibetans who managed to keep the flame of the Buddha's teaching alive in northeastern Tibet at Amdo. According to some Tibetan legends, during the severe persecution of Buddhism, there were only three Tibetan monks—Mar Shakya, Yo Gejung, and Tsang Rabsel—who escaped from central Tibet by passing through Mongolia and taking asylum in East Turkistan (now Xinjiang) (Schaik, 2011: 49-50).

Rather than viewing the survival of Buddhism during this period pessimistically, some contemporary scholars suggest that a reassessment of the Dark Age in Tibet is necessary.

[T]he era (842-986 AD) was in fact marked by an eruption of religious creativity. The innovation[s] that emerged during these crucial years were subsequently denied their historical importance by later historians, dismissed as the heretical distortions of ignorant Tibetans under the influence of demons. Nonetheless, many elements of the later Tibetan tradition—and many relating to tantric violence in particular—took root in this chaotic and obscure environment (Dalton, 2011: 5-6).

Similarly, Davidson (2005: 83) suggests that the roots of many Tantric innovations in the latter second dissemination period may be traced back to the Age of Fragmentation. It seems likely, therefore, that Tantric Buddhist practices flourished secretly among the Tibetan people in the vacuum left by the absence of monastic hegemony (Schaik, 2011: 55). In this scenario, many Tantric followers became famous for their Tantric skills—apparently able to tame evil spirits—so that most of the clan leaders and the aristocrats continued their patronage for such purposes. Some Tantric followers gathered in small groups and travelled from place to place for meditation retreats and practices. Without royal restrictions on both the practice and the translation of Tantra, Tantric rituals were practised widely among the Tibetan people. Nonetheless, because very little documentation survives it is difficult to ascertain exactly what happened in Tibet during that period.

3.3 The Second Dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism

In approximately 842 CE, the reigning king, Langdarma, was assassinated and left no clear heir which led to political instability. Subsequently, rivalry erupted between Namde Osung, the son of Langdarma's junior queen, Tsepongza, and Trihde Yumten, the son of the senior queen, Belpen Zama (Davidson, 2005: 66). Many Tibetan historians, such as Tsuglak Trengwa, believe that Yumten was not

the legitimate heir of King Langdarma, because he had already had teeth when he was first shown as a newborn baby at court. It is very likely that the clan family of the senior queen provided her with a boy. Eventually, Yumten was put on the throne by the 'firm insistence of the mother' (Davidson, 2005: 67). As a result, the imperial court in central Tibet became weakened and separatist movements began. Strife continued until the early tenth century between the two contenders for the throne and then, after their deaths,¹⁵ between their royal lineages; the remnants of Yumten and the descendants of Osung survived around the 910s (Vitali, 1996: 548). Osung's grandson Trih Kyide Nyimagon fled to Purang, which was developed into the Guge and Purang kingdoms by his successors, Yeshe O, Rigpa-gon, Trashig-gon, and Detsug-gon. They were all in favour of Buddhism and laid the foundation for the reintroduction of Buddhism in western Tibet (Davison, 2005: 69).

During the second dissemination, Tibetan religious and cultural life was knitted together by the Tantric texts and rituals provided by Buddhist religious systems. As Davidson (2005: 2) suggests:

From the tenth to the twelfth century, Tibetans used the evolving literature and practices of later esoteric Buddhism as iconic forms and points of reference to reconstruct institutions, found monasteries, and recognize the political realities of the four horns of central Tibet.

The enormous number of Tantric texts and yogic literature were translated from Sanskrit into Tibetan, which provided the Tibetans with more access to the ideology of Indian Buddhism and late Pan-Indian culture. This was an ambitious project, which brought the Tibetans new knowledge and created multiple textual communities. During the second dissemination period, Tibetans changed the configuration of their culture with Tantric Buddhist texts and rituals that supported forms of Buddhist yoga from India. In the course of embedding the Indian Tantric Buddhist system in Tibet, Buddhist scholars, translators, saints, and Tantric adepts managed to formulate an innovative form of Buddhism, unique to Tibet. Indeed, the promotion of this reformist Buddhist culture was so successful that it eventually displaced India as the dominant site of Buddhism (Davison 2005: 3).

¹⁵ Osung died in 893, and Yumten in 877.

During this period, two major power bases of Buddhism survived: to the east, the monasteries of the Kokonor zone, and to the west the Ngari kingdom located in the west of Mount Kailash, which was founded by Osung's successors (Heller, 1999: 53). According to the Tibetan *Great Chronicle*, by the mid-tenth century the two regions seemed to achieve some political stability, which facilitated Tibet's economic coalescence and precipitated a cultural resurgence among the Tibetans. The second dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism is undoubtedly one of the most complex and difficult periods for which to trace the rise and fall, the development, and the artistic styles and achievement of the different Tibetan Buddhist traditions that flourished. The lines of transmission are not easy to unravel because they continually overlap. As Sangharakshita (1996: 27) comments, the diverse traditions of Tibetan Buddhism keep 'shading off into another school or even into several'.

From surviving documents found in the regions of Dunhuang, Sichuan, and Lhasa, the principal monastery in the Kokonor zone, Khri ga, had enjoyed a great reputation for its prosperity in both Mahayana and Tantric Buddhism for centuries (Heller, 1999: 51-53). Some Tantric ritual manuals from Khri ga had been spread widely and were also handed down from generation to generation as the fundamental texts. According to Heller:

This monastery and its hermitage at Dan tig were providential for the survival of Tibetan Buddhism ... Khri ga probably served as a link among isolated schools of Buddhist activity throughout eastern Tibet (*ibid.*: 53).

The monastery Khri ga, associated with the town, was not only the spiritual resource, but also a political centre in eastern Tibet until the Mongols invaded in 1250. Unfortunately, due to the lack of sufficient archaeological evidence, the art of eastern Tibet during the period of the second transmission is now little-known. But the art of western Tibet and that of central Tibet during that period had a magnificent flowering.

The western kingdom in Tibet, Ngari, was bordered by Kashmir in the west, India in the south, and Nepal in the southeast. From the eighth century some areas in the northwest of India were taken over by the Arabs and, as a consequence, many Buddhist inhabitants of the region converted to Islam. Under increasing pressure from Muslim military force and cultural influences, Kashmir became an important Tantric Buddhist centre for a large number of itinerant Tantric adepts,

and hosted highly regarded Buddhist scholars, and patronised important artworks until the fourteenth century. However, the constant military campaigns in Kashmir destroyed some of the famous Buddhist monasteries.

Surviving images (in Kashmir), mostly metal sculptures of middle and late period Esoteric Buddhist wrathful deities, are particularly numerous ... Kashmiri Esoteric Buddhist masters and artists were critical for the transmission of Esoteric Buddhism to Tibet (Linrothe, 1999: 11).

By the end of the tenth century, the king of western Tibet, Yeshe O, sent delegations to retrieve Tantric Buddhist scriptures and art from Kashmir. Suspicious about the authenticity of many Buddhist practices, Yeshe O sent Rinchen Zangpo (958 to 1055) to Kashmir and India in an endeavour to bring back the rituals of Tantric practice to Tibet. Rinchen Zangpo translated numerous Tantric Buddhist scriptures, including the *Cakrasamvara Tantra*,¹⁶ one of the most influential Tantras of the late phase of Indian Tantric Buddhism. Also, he promoted some Tantric traditions, particularly the *Yoga Tantra*, which is one of the four classes of Tantras that emphasise the internal visualisation of oneself as an archetypal deity.¹⁷ According to Jamgon Kongtrul (1813 to 1899):

Yoga tantra is so named because it emphasizes the inner yoga meditation of method and wisdom; or alternatively, because based on knowledge and understanding of all aspects of the profound ultimate truth and the vast relative truth, it emphasizes contemplation that inseparably unites these two truths (Kongtrul, translator, Eliot, 2005: 128).

Yeshe O first introduced to Tibet some rituals for wrathful deities, for example the *Mahakalatantra*, the ritual of Mahakala,¹⁸ which is a medicinal ritual that puts emphasis ‘on gaining the powers of health, wealth, and wisdom, through the utilization of medicinal substances’ (Stablein, 1993: 18). Due to Rinchen Zangpo’s great contribution and the support of the aristocratic class, new Tantric Buddhist lineages from Kashmir and India and new monasteries subsequently gained popularity in western Tibet.

In the mid-eleventh century, a respected and prestigious Buddhist master Atisha (980 to 1054 CE) came to *Tholing* monasteries in western Tibet from the great Indian monastic university of Vikramashila. As mentioned earlier, King

¹⁶ It belongs to the class of *Anuttara Yoga Tantra* in Tantric Buddhist tradition. See Gray (2012).

¹⁷ This is an important method of Tantric meditation, which influence my art practice and method of meditation. I discuss how I visualise myself as dog (an archetypal deity) in meditation for my art practice in Chapter 4.

¹⁸ Mahakala is a protector of *dharma*, who is also called the Great Black One in Tantric Buddhism.

Yeshe O believed that popular Tibetan Tantric practices during the tenth century lacked ethical content and regarded such Tantric practices to be a sign of the degeneration of Buddhism (Schaik, 2011: 54-55). To respond to the need to assert religious authority in Tibet, Atisha wrote a brief poem known as the *Bodhipathapradipa, Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment*, in which he presented the whole Buddhist path within the framework of three graduated stages or paths: the path to the individual liberation, which is suitable for people who have average capacity and motivation; the Sutra path to the Universal liberation, which is suitable for those of higher capacity; and the Tantric path to Universal liberation with great compassion for those individuals with superior capacity (Blondeau, 1998: 95). Further, in a comprehensive form for lay practitioners, he explained the ritual of taking refuge in Buddhism, the motivation to attain enlightenment for all beings, and Tantric meditative practices, making it clear that the Tantric Vehicle is for those individuals with the capacity to undertake self-confrontation and self-transformation fearlessly on the spiritual path. The theory that Atisha proposed during the eleventh century plays a prominent role in the foundation of all schools of Tibetan Buddhism, even now. As Sangharakshita (1996: 31) comments:

All schools (of Tibetan Buddhism) accept this threefold structure both in terms of the historical development of Buddhism and within the spiritual life of the individual. All accept all three yanas, and all regard the Tantra as the highest flowering, the culmination, of Buddhism ... for Tibetan Buddhists the Tantra represents the highest and most sacred stage in the development of Buddhism.

With regard to the Tantric teaching that he brought to Tibet, Atisha put greater emphasis on Tantric meditative rituals through the figure of the legendary *Mahasiddha*. *Mahasiddha* is a Sanskrit term for the Tantric practitioner who has attained sufficient psychic and spiritual abilities and powers in the context of Tantric Buddhism. The meditative rituals with the *Mahasiddha* were the cornerstones of the Tantric Buddhist tradition of eastern India. The icon of Atisha doing meditative practices, found in both Tibetan Buddhist texts and art, can shed light on the importance of Tantric rituals attached to his teaching in Tibet.

Atisha also introduced and translated many Tantric texts and much yogic literature from Sanskrit into Tibetan. These include many Indian masters' personal texts on various (wrathful or semi-wrathful) protective deities (Heller,

1999: 60), which may explain the increasing significance of wrathful deities in the late developmental phase of Indian Tantric Buddhism. According to surviving Buddhist manuscripts and artworks at Tholing Monastery, it was only during the eleventh century that Tibetan Buddhist texts put greater emphasis on female *Bodhisattva* and Tantric rituals that were associated with female deities. Atisha himself was a great devotee of Arya Tara, ‘a female *Bodhisattva* of the Lotus family of Buddha Amitabha’ (*ibid.*: 60). As he was an accomplished Buddhist scholar and a skilled artist, Atisha’s personal meditational devotions to Tara are very likely to have contributed to the creation of the striking icons of Tara at Tholing (Eimer, 1979: 92).

3.3.1 Tabo, Tholing Monasteries and their mural paintings in western Tibet

Yeshe O and Rinchen Zangpo built some 15 monasteries, which include Tabo and Tholing in western Tibet. Tabo Monastery was founded in 996 CE by Rinchen Zangpo in the Spiti Valley of what is now Himachel Pradesh, India. Tholing was built in the capital of the Ngari region of western Tibet around 996. Some historians, such as Luciano Petech, argue that the Tholing Monastery was founded around 980 CE (Petech, 1997: 252). Tholing has a particular significance in both the history of Tibet and Tibetan art. As Heller (2006: 43) comments:

The monastery of Tholing ... is of paramount importance for the history of political authority, religion and art in the region of Mnga’ris (former kingdom of Guge, western Tibet).

Regardless of when it was built, most scholars agree that the main temple of Tabo Monastery was finished during the tenth and eleventh centuries. The construction of the main temple at Tabo is based on an Indian architectural model, which consists of three parts: an entry hall, a central hall, and an apse at its western end. With regard to the construction of Tholing Monastery, it follows the Indian-Nepalese archetypal model of Samyé Monastery: the central hall symbolises Mount Meru; the four smaller buildings surrounding it represent the four continents; and the 108 *stupas* in the four corners stand for the four Heavenly Kings guarding the teaching of the Buddha. Also, the structure of the main temple of Tholing Monastery has three storeys with three images of the Buddha as the main temple of Samye, representing the three developmental phases of Buddhism. Some archaic shapes of clay *stupas*—surrounding the ancient main temples of both Tabo and Tholing—were probably constructed on the ancient Indian model

of the Gandhara *stupa*, also reminiscent of the four-metre long Amluk-Dara *stupa* in Swat, which probably dates back to the third century, and is possibly one of the best-preserved pieces of Buddhist architecture in Gandhara. The architectural mode of the *stupas* at Tabo consists of two square bases, a regular trapezoid or rectangular-shaped layer, and a higher round or dome-like shape as the middle part, and a vertical-shaped finial at the top (which is now lost). Sharing many characteristics of the *stupas* at Tabo, the well-preserved red *stupa* of the Tholing Monastery resembles this type of architectural model from India as well. This type of the red *stupa* is called *Lhabab*, which literally means descent from a celestial realm or Heaven. The characteristic of the *Lhabab stupa* at Tholing is that each of its four sides has a triple ladder or stairs ascending to a central projection (Beer, 2004: 133). According to Heller (1999: 61), the *Lhabab stupa* is a symbolic representation of a legend that Maya Devi, the Buddha's mother, was reborn in the Tushita Heaven, a celestial realm where the Buddha visited her to teach her the path to enlightenment. As Beer (2004: 132-135) elaborates in his book *The Encyclopedia of Tibetan Symbols and Motifs*, there are eight great types of *stupas* in Tibetan Buddhism; each commemorates one of the major events of the Shakyamuni Buddha's life.

Rinchen Zangpo took journeys to India via Kashmir to bring back a group of Kashmir artists and 32 Indian artisans to undertake the mural paintings in the ambitious temple-building project during the 980s (Rhie, 1991: 42). The mural paintings in the Dukhang hall at Tabo Monastery and in the two northeast buildings at Tholing Monastery are probably the most representative artworks in western Tibet that reveal the strong influence of the Kashmiri and Indian styles, respectively, during the tenth and the eleventh century. Generally speaking, western Tibetan art of the tenth and eleventh centuries inherited the architectural organisation of the Indian-Nepalese model from the empire period, and displayed more iconographies of deities portrayed in Indian Buddhist texts, particularly (female) wrathful deities. Yet the art of the period also displays apparently characteristic and aesthetic influences from Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh in northern India. As Rhie (1991: 42) concludes:

The art of Kashmir and Himachal Pradesh were the dominant sources for Western Tibetan art through the 11th century, although the roles of Pala art from India and Nepalese art are also apparent.

The design of the mural paintings in the main hall is systematic and consistent, illustrating the three major stages of the Buddha's teaching. On the lower north wall there are scenes of the Life of the Buddha. On the south adjacent walls, the 53 phases to attain the enlightenment are depicted in the Pilgrimage of Sudhana, one of the acolytes of the *Bodhisattva* Avalokitesvara. The imagery refers to the *Gandavyuha Sutra* and the last chapter is of *Avatamsaka Sutra*. More strikingly, midway there are 32 life-sized stucco high-relief sculptures of deities associated with the *Vairochana mandala* (*ibid.*: 43). At the corner of north and west Vajradhatu-Vairocana, the main deity of the *mandala* is located. Many scholars, such as Rhie, suggest that the scenes of the life of the Buddha represent the early stages of Buddhism and the individual vehicle tradition; the paintings about the Pilgrimage of Sudhana have symbolic meaning focused on the sutra tradition of the Universal vehicle, which is the second developmental stage of Buddhism; and the Tantric deities on the midway and the upper walls represent the last stage of Buddhism, the Tantric Tradition of the universal vehicle (*ibid.*).

With respect to the stylistic aspect, compared to the elongated and slightly disproportionate bodies in the Tibetan artworks of the previous period, the figures of the wall paintings of the Dukhang have more lifelike naturalistic configurations, which are generally more roundly proportioned, simpler, and with less ornamentation. Apparently, there are many elements of these figurative paintings at Tabo Monastery which reveal the direct aesthetic influences from Kashmiri tradition during the eleventh century. First, the facial features of the iconography in the paintings are characteristic of the Kashmiri style. For example the model of the face of Vajradhatu-Vairocana, the main deity of the Dukhang, has a gentle, peaceful, and elegant configuration with a careful application of a range of subtle tones of colours to give a sense of depth and breadth (Heller, 1999: 61). The eyelids on the faces of deities have a particularly Kashmiri style, usually outlined in red or black. The shape of eyes is elongated and narrow, with a curved upper eyelid, a horizontal lower eye-line, and small round pupils in between. This unique Kashmiri artistic style of expressing the calm gaze from deities is intended to 'show complete mental equipoise' (*ibid.*). Second, there is a slightly smaller and narrower proportion of the hands, the feet, and the waists of figures, particularly in the female figures. For example the main deity of Vajradhatu-

Vairocana has smaller hands, a waist pinched, with broader shoulders, and an athletically shaped chest. Third, another characteristic of Kashmiri style is visible in the upturned fingertips of the female figures. The delicate application of the hands with upturned fingertips of the green Tara on the south wall of the Dukhang is a particularly good example. Fourth, the application of joyously vivid colours, particularly red and blue, is very prominent in the eleventh-century mural paintings of Tabo Monastery.

Similarly, the iconographies in the mural paintings at Tholing Monastery share the same roots as the Kashmiri models and stylistic heritage. However in 1933, Giuseppe Tucci initially classified these paintings as Indian artists' works (Tucci and Ghersi, 1996 [1935]: 161). But soon after, Tucci examined Mang nang temple, which was built around the same time as Tholing. The mural paintings inside Mang nang temple are probably a bit later than the Tholing, but also show exquisite examples of the work of the various schools of Kashmiri paintings. Tucci (1949: 273-74) describes it thus:

Nevertheless, some idea of Kashmiri miniatures may be gained from some copies of the Prajñāpāramitā which I have discovered in ruins of upper T[h]oling ... While some paintings ... appear to be coarse imitations made by inexperienced craftsmen, others express a highly artistic atmosphere; the figures are drawn with extreme delicacy, golden backgrounds are frequent, the haloes are iridescent like rainbows. The miniatures are covered with a resinous varnish or lacquer, which imparts great luster and freshness to the colouring; the figures are slender, tall, with no trace of the plumpness and fullness apparent in Bengali and Nepalese art ... The colour is not applied in a flat manner but ably graded [sic: graduated], so as to produce chiaroscuro shadows and cause the figures to bulge out with a plastic relief.

The recently excavated mural paintings and sculptures inside a *stupa* in the northwest corner of Tholing shed a new light on the significance of artistic values. On the west wall, there is a red semi-wrathful Goddess with a lavish golden crown and hair ornaments, presented in three-quarter profile. As Heller suggests, all the Goddesses in the mural paintings of the northwest *stupa* of Tholing have the similar veil behind their hair and in front of their halo, which is typical hair ornamentation of 'Kashmiri goddesses and female donor figures in sculpture' (Heller, 2006: 66). The Goddess has an extended (right) eye, outlined black eyelids with small pupils, a slightly round jaw with a pointed chin, two round naked breasts with the nipples pointing in different directions, a shaped torso with an extremely slim waist, the varied arm and hand positions with upturned (left)

index finger and (right) little finger, and an ovoid halo at the back—all of which are characteristics of Kashmiri aesthetics. Compared to the female figures in the mural paintings in Tholing and Tabo monasteries, the Kashmiri artistic style and atmosphere in Tholing seem stronger and more direct. Also, the colour juxtapositions in the mural paintings of Tholing seem brighter with a thicker application of paint, which may be due to a slightly different primer technique on the foundation before painting. Last, jewellery worn by the female figures in Tholing and Tabo indicate, to Heller, that the mural paintings inside the northwest *stupa* of Tholing were done directly by Kashmiri artists who were brought back by Rinchen Zangpo, and the ones in Tabo were probably done by Tibetan artists that followed the Kashmiri and Indian models (*ibid.*: 67), which reveal the combination and transformation from the mode of Indian and Nepalese aesthetic traditions to a fresh, inspiring, and more naturalistic Kashmiri style of representation in western Tibetan art.

The style of the magnificent wall paintings of western Tibet during the eleventh century continued steadily during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. However, the flowering artistic achievement in the eleventh century was not surpassed until the middle and late fifteenth century (Rhie, 1991: 45).

3.3.1 The emergence of diverse traditions of Tibetan Buddhism: the eleventh century to the early thirteenth century

Before moving to discuss the diverse traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and associated art, there is another important aspect to note regarding the most important characteristics of the art in Tibet during the time of the second dissemination—that is ‘the greatest esteem for Tantrism’ (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 23). As Huo and Wangdui state:

[In] the early phase of the Latter Hong Period of Tibetan Buddhism ... especially during the time when the Anuttarayoga (Highest Yoga) Tantras were prevailing, the various Buddhist sects in Tibet paid special attention to the doctrines and practices of Tantrism and many Tantric images appeared in their monastery frescoes (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 23).

In my view, the most startling images of Tibetan Tantric art—the *yab-yum* images that represent the sexual union of Buddha-father and Buddha-mother—were

prevalent due to the popularity of Tantric rituals and practices. According to Huo and Wangdui:

Particularly, as the *Saivife* Cult prevailed in Tantric Buddhism, it was generally thought that the vitality of the deities was embodied in the female body, that is, in the *Saivifes* of the deities and the force of the deity was wholly or partially embodied in the sexual union of the deity and his *Saivife* (*ibid.*).

To interpret the sexual images, Huo and Wangdui suggested a link between them and the images of various female deities, such as the Taras or Vajrayoginis, and regarded both of them as the result of transplanting the Shaivite Cult from Indian Tantrism to Tibet.

3.3.2 The Kadampa Order, ushering in later traditions

After Atisha died in 1054 CE, his chief disciple Dromtonpa (1005 to 1064 CE) travelled to Reting, north of Lhasa in central Tibet, with some of Atisha's relics (Dowman, 1988: 91-95). In 1056 CE, Dromtonpa founded the Reting Monastery as the centre of the reformist tradition that he had inherited from his Indian master, and established what became known as the Kadampa Order. His disciples, also known as Kadampa, which means those who follow oral teachings, put great emphasis on Buddhist philosophy, stressing that its disciplines were based on the authority and legitimacy of the teaching of Tantric Buddhism that Atisha brought back to Tibet in about 1045 CE.

Ringu Tulku, the author of *A study of the Buddhist lineages of Tibet* (2006) suggests that the Kadampa tradition made a significant contribution to the formulation of a complex philosophical basis for Tantric Buddhist thought, but it nonetheless developed practices that were accessible to the broader populace through its use of stories and analogies (Ringu, 2006: 164). Although the Kadampa Order was eventually absorbed into the Gelug Order during the fourteenth century, its influence on the Tibetan monastic tradition established what became the classical model of ritual, yoga, and meditation in the Tantric Buddhism schools evident in the common veneration of the four deities—Shakyamuni, Avalokiteshvara, Tara, and Achala (a guardian deity)—by practitioners of all four major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism, but which was first emphasised by the Kadampa Order. Also, the highlighted practices of the ethical

discipline, meditation, and wisdom of the Kadampa Order are still evident in all the major traditions of Tibetan Buddhism.

3.3.3 The Sakya tradition and its artistic style

In 1073 CE, Sakya, another important school of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism was founded at Sakya Monastery by Khon Konchok Gyalpo (1034 to 1102), a disciple of another Indian master, Brogmi, in the Tibetan region of Tsang, north of the border with Nepal. It followed the teachings of the Indian master Brogmi who translated one of the most important and fundamental Tantric texts, *Hevajra Tantra*, from Sanskrit to Tibetan and transmitted the teachings of the *lam'bras* (path and result) into Tibet. According to the Sakya tradition, the *Hevajra Tantra* teaches the union of skillful means and wisdom, which is the core of the *Yoga Tantras* and *Highest Yoga Tantras*. It has famous quotations, for example 'One must rise by that by which one falls' (Mookerjee, 1966: 32). These quotations from Tibetan Buddhism are all intended to teach that everything is marked with emptiness, which comes and goes, increases or decreases, and appears or disappears. Everything has no self-being. They explain a basic tenet of Tantra—emptiness—in a very simple way. To understand the complete realisation of the *Hevajra Tantra*, the Sakya lineage developed the most comprehensive and well-structured meditation paths of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, the Lamdre (*lam 'bras* is literally the Path and its Fruit), which is said to have been passed down in an unbroken lineage until the twenty-first century (Tseten, 2008: xi).

With regard to the Sakya Order's art legacy, the mural paintings in the main halls of the Shalu Monastery were completed at the beginning of the fourteenth century, and have a distinctive artistic style. The Shalu Monastery was built in 1087 by the Tibetan monk and Tantric master Jiezun *Pralnapalita* and then reconstructed on the design of master Buton in 1333 (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 187). Compared to the white and red wall of most Tibetan monasteries, the huge grey walls and the green glazed tiles with the golden roof ridge of Shalu Monastery express a unique aesthetic character. There are only a very limited number of mural paintings that can be traced back to the eleventh century, and they are mainly preserved in the corridor of the main hall of Shalu Monastery. Many scholars, such as Yu (2005: 99), point out that these early mural paintings were

largely based on the Indian models. The composition of the early mural paintings is often a group arranged in four rows, showing a wide and spectacular scene. Each *Bodhisattva* or *arhat* in the group has a halo at the back of his or her head, which helps separate them into different rows. In close-up observation of figures in the early mural paintings, one is struck by their vivid facial expressions, and the various hand gestures and postures.

Most later mural paintings preserved at Shalu Monastery were painted in the first half of the fourteenth century. The characteristics of these paintings, such as the popular application of the red and green, are closely connected to the earlier ones. However, compared to the eleventh-century mural paintings in the corridor, the composition of the latter paintings appears to adopt a more independent presentation of Buddha or *Bodhisattvas*. The composition placed them in the centre of the painting with several much larger attendants. In the latter paintings, there are more Tantric (female and male) deities located in a much higher position and some of them are presented independently with their own attendants. A good example is from the first half of the fourteenth century in the work of the Vajrapani on the central part of the west wall of the gate tower at Shalu Monastery. Its style shows some Nepalese influences on the Indian Tantric models. As Huo and Wangdui suggest, the Nepalese influences on the later Shalu paintings may relate to Anyikor, the Nepalese artisan who was commissioned to build Buddhist art projects in Tibet by the head of the Sakyapa tradition, *Pak-pa*, who was also the National Tutor of Kublai Khan (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 24).

3.3.4 The Kagyu tradition and the visualisation of Tantric protective deities

The third of the great four schools in early Tibet Buddhism is the Kagyupa (*Kagyu*, *Kagyupa*, or *Kagyud*) School, also known as the oral-transmission school, because it put great emphasis on the continuity of oral instructions passed on from master to student privately. It was founded by Marpa Lotsawa (1012 to 1099) who was a great translator and Buddhist teacher, and his pupil Milarepa (1052 to 1135), one of the greatest monks and poets of Tibet. It primarily follows the Tantric

teachings based on the New Tantras¹⁹ which were translated during the second diffusion of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet. The most important reference of the Kagyu tradition is traced back to the great Indian yogi Tilopa (988 to 1069), one of the 84 *Mahasiddhas* of India, who was famous for combining two lineages, ‘the hidden teaching of the Vajrayogini’, and ‘the direct wisdom of Mahavajradhara’. Vajrayoginī is the Vajra yogini, which is literally the diamond female yogi in the *Highest Yoga Tantra*. The meditative practices associated with her include ways of preventing ordinary death, the intermediate state (*bardo* in Tibetan), rebirth, and for transforming all mundane daily experiences into higher spiritual paths to enlightenment (Tsongkhapa, 2002: xii). Mahavajradhara is also known as vajradhara, which is literally the Diamond-holder. He is regarded as the Primordial Buddha in most schools of Tibetan Buddhism. There are three main Tantric deities' practices associated with *Vajrayogini* (*rdo rje phag mo*), *Cakrasambhava* (*khor lo sde mchog*, literally means the binding of the wheel of Union and the wheel of supreme bliss), and *Gyalwa Gyamtso* (*rgyal ba rgya mtsho*, also known as *Red Chenrezik*) is a peaceful meditation deity for the highest Yoga practices in Tibetan Buddhism that are unique to the Kagyu School (*ibid.*).

The Kagyu lineage practises the quintessential points of both *sutra* and *Tantra* teachings, with a special focus on the Tantric teachings. For example the two most common manuals of Tantric practices, *The Six Yogas of Naropa* and *The Great Seal*, were partly from the advanced teachings of Kagyupa School. On the one hand, the *Six Yogas of Nāropa* (also known as *Ming Xing Dao Liu Cheng Jiu Fa* in Chinese, which is literally Wisdom Activities Path Six Methods of Accomplishment) is a set of advanced Tantric practices that developed in the late stage of Indian Tantric Buddhism and then were introduced into Tibet by Marpa during the second half of the eleventh century. According to the Tibetan religious biographies, Marpa met many Tantric masters, such as Kukkuripa,²⁰ on his travels to India and received teachings from Naropa,²¹ who was one of the most famous Tantric masters in eastern India. One night in Nepal, he dreamt that two beautiful Indian dakinis approached him with smiles and led him to the meditation retreat

¹⁹ New Tantras refers to the Indian Tantras translated into Tibetan during the eleventh century and the thirteenth century. See Skorupski (1996: 95-110).

²⁰ Kukkuripa was one of the 84 Indian *Mahasiddhas*. See Beer (1986).

²¹ Naropa was another Indian *Mahasiddha* who followed a great Indian master Tilopa.

of a great Indian adept, Saraha. There, he received Saraha's teaching known as *the Great Seal*. After he woke, Marpa wrote down some Indian songs that presented the true nature of mind that he learnt in the dream from Saraha. These songs are preserved in the Kagyu tradition and play an important role in reminding Tantric practitioners about the simplicity of the Buddha-mind among the complicated, diverse, and sophisticated meditation practices of Tantric Buddhism. Importantly, the Kagyu tradition developed some Tantric practices involving the visualisation of Tantric protective deities. In the Kagyu tradition, there are two types of visualisation of the deities in the higher level of Tantric meditation: 'development and perfection' (Schaik, 2011: 68). The Tantric practitioner visualises himself or herself as a deity in a stage of development, while he or she becomes the deity with the manipulation of the subtle internal energies of the body in the stage of the perfection. In Tibetan Buddhism, there is a subtle flow of energies associated with the Five Elements, which travel in the internal channels of the body and are manipulated in various Tantric practices (*ibid.*).

3.4 The Golden Age of Tibetan Buddhism

In circa 1253, Mongke Khan (1209 to 1259) diverted the patronage of the Sakya tradition to the Kagyu tradition of Tibetan Buddhism and appointed Karma Pakshi (1203 to 1283), the second Karmapa's spiritual heir, as the chief representative of religious authority in Tibet. From that time onward, the leaders of the spiritual lineages, such as the Dalai Lama and Panchen Lama,²² have been recognised as the worldly embodiment of the Buddhas. Subsequently, the paintings of the individual Tibetan lamas at that time suddenly gained as much popularity as the portraits of Indian *Mahasiddhas*. More importantly, from these portraiture of Tibetan lamas, we can sense more realistic elements hidden behind the more mystical aspects of the works, which not only reflect the down-to-earth approach of the Tibetans, but also help us to have a better understanding of Tibet's social and cultural life at that time.

With regard to the guru-patron relationship between the Tibetan Buddhist tradition and its Mongol or later Manchu patrons, the authority of Tibetan Buddhism among the various traditions largely depended on the recognition of

²² They are the highest lamas in Gelug School, who played important roles in exercising spiritual and political power from the seventeenth century onwards.

their patrons. In return, Tibetan Buddhism, with its Tantric character, provided its patrons with a philosophical and systematic world-view, ideological values, and sophisticated art. Thus, the fragmented nature of power in Tibet was ended and the central religious authority that was established as a consequence offered a degree of political stability. Evidently, this resulted in a stronger and broader foundation for the development of the multiplicity of Tibetan art and its style.

From the thirteenth to the fifteenth centuries, various distinct stylistic groups such as the Khotanese and the Shalu emerged. Their artistic values continued to be fully realised and developed to their highest point from the sixteenth century to the early seventeenth century. Generally speaking, the Khotanese style—mainly associated with the Iwang and Nesar monasteries in the central region of Tibet—was distinguished by its soft pleats and massive drapery in figural representations. As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Shalu style of paintings in Shalu Monastery was created under the influence of an Indo-Nepalese aesthetic tradition around the beginning of the fourteenth century. During the fifteenth century, under the influence of both the Shalu and Chinese styles, another distinctive style of painting, called the Gyantse style, at Kumbum Monastery, was gradually formed. According to Rhie (1991: 55), its forms, ornamentation, and textile designs are similar to the Shalu style, which was also influenced by an Indo-Nepalese-related aesthetic model, but it assimilated a strong Chinese naturalistic model in the drapery, garments, and scarves.

Another important aspect of the art of the Golden Age in Tibet was the emergence and development of three folk artistic styles—called *Ton-trup-gyam-tso*, *Karma Gadri*, and *Qiwu-re*—in different regions of Tibet. To a degree, all of them seem to have shared a common influence from the Chinese Ming model of paintings and sculptures. However, each of them had a distinctive artistic character. As Wei and Wangdui state, *Ton-trup-gyam-tso* style is renowned for its compact composition, broad and wave strokes, and the rich application of golden colouring; the *Karma Gadri* style introduced the natural environment and landscapes into the composition, and it also put emphasis on bold and strong strokes with subtle and elegant colours; the strong contrast of colours and loose composition were the outstanding characteristics of the *Qiwu-re* style (The

Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 24).

3.4.1 The Gelug tradition and its Menri and New Menri styles

The last great school Gelug (also known as Gelugpa or the Yellow Hat sect) which means the Virtuous, was founded in the fourteenth century by the reformist monk Tsongkhapa (1357 to 1419 CE), who was inspired by the Kadampa tradition that was based on the teaching of Atisha. Tsongkhapa was famous for his Tantric practices and teaching with regard to the means to bring the *sutra* and Tantra teachings together, inasmuch as he taught that compassion and wisdom had to be rooted in a strong wish for the liberation of all beings. The core teachings of the Gelug tradition were *Lamrim: The Great Treatise on the Stages of the Path of Enlightenment* that was composed by Tsongkhapa, and was based on the teachings of the Indian master Atisa and his root text *A Lamp for the Path to Enlightenment* (Sopa, 2004: xvii-22). These teachings promoted the systematic cultivation of the emptiness on the basis of monastic discipline, philosophy, and debate, while Tantric Buddhist practice was reserved for advanced practitioners of higher ability.

Along with the Gelug tradition, the *Menri* style became the most influential Tibetan aesthetic tradition during the late fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The three characteristics of this style were as follows: it preferred to depict both historical and Tantric themes; its compositions were often very compact; and its artistic techniques were standardised with strict and conscientious attitudes. These characteristics were particularly evident on some of the mural paintings in the three major monasteries of the Gelug tradition: the Sera Monastery, the Dre-pung Monastery, and the Tashilhunpo Monastery in Lhasa. Later in the seventeenth century, a new style developed called New *Menri*, which was based on the older *Menri* style, and was mainly associated with the scroll paintings (*thangka*). The New *Menri* style was initiated by Choying Gyatso, a follower of the *Menri* School, who painted the wall paintings of the Chokhang Shar temple and a *stupa* in Tashi Lhunpo Monastery. I discuss this at length in Chapter 2.

4. Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter the multiplicity of diverse art traditions of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism interwoven with the Buddhist establishment and development in Tibet from the seventh century to the nineteenth century. Corresponding to the historical context of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, I proposed a way of perceiving the development of iconographies in its figurative art forms in four trends, which inspired my art practice.²³ Also, reviewing the past history may shed light on current misunderstandings on Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art.

In what follows I discuss the importance of painting in Tibetan arts generally and the traditional theory and practice in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist painting, unpacking the complicated manufacturing steps and the methods of making (wall) paintings in Tibet.

²³ I discuss this in Chapter 4 (p. 190-191).

Chapter 2

Technical Notes on Tibetan Tantric Art

Artistic Heritage and Traditional Techniques

Tibetan ... painting is one of the great arts of Asia. It is rich not only in its iconography, religious content and stylistic development, but also in terms of the materials and skills that the painters and their patrons lavished upon it. Anyone examining even a small number of these fine old scroll paintings (*thangka*) cannot help being impressed by the exquisite materials and consummate skill that went into their creation (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 1).

1. The Traditional Artistic Wealth in Tibet

As I explained in Chapter 1, in Tibet there are numerous Buddhist monasteries, such as Jokhang, which were not only scholarly centres with political influence, but also ‘the primary inspiration sources presenting a magnificent flowering of the Buddhist art’ (Rhie, 1991: 45). Any visitor who encounters Tibetan Buddhist art at these Tibetan monasteries will be impressed by the infinitely varied, complex, and distinctive artistic traditions of amazing paintings, sculptures, and craft objects. The Tibetan pantheon of the vivid, diverse, and abundant imageries of Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas*, and mythic Tibetan *yidams*¹ (‘archetype or meditation deities’) is so dazzling that one might feel transported to an imaginative paradise or divine universe with passion and ecstasy. As Shaw (1995 [1994]: 3) describes it, ‘One can almost hear the soft clacking of their intricate bone jewelery and feel the wind stirred by their rainbow-colored scarves as they soar through the Tantric Buddhist landscape’. It is no exaggeration to say that Tibetan art ranks among the highest, unparalleled, religious art in the world. As David and Janice Jackson (1988[1984]: 5) state:

Nowhere in traditional Tibet were superior artisans and their beautiful craftsmanship held in such high regard as in the centres of religious culture, the monasteries. There the various arts reached their highest expression in the service of Buddhism.

Similarly, Rand Castile, the director of Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, praised the aesthetic value of Tibetan art highly as follows:

¹ The Tibetan term *yidam* (Sanskrit *ishtadevata*) is often translated as tutelary deity, meditation deity, or meditational deity. In Tibetan Buddhism, *yidam* is a fully enlightened being who is the focus of individual meditation. Rhie and Thurman translated the Tibetan *yidam* as ‘archetype deity’ (Rhie and Thurman, 1991: 15).

In sculpture and in painting we find an equally strong and colourful Tibetan art. The rank of imagination and artistic skill here is among the highest one can encounter in religious art, Western work of the Byzantine Church or in the early stained glass art of French cathedrals. In these, as in the Tibetan tangkas [*thangkas*] of the exhibition, colour, form, and iconography meet in unparalleled enthusiasm (Castile, 1990: 9).

Besides the comprehensive artistic practice of the major arts, the basic techniques of the lesser arts and crafts are bewildering, complex, and challenging enough for the average layperson to study them persistently in the long term. According to Jam-mgon Mi-pham-rgy-mtsho (1846 to 1912), a great Nyingma master, the technical notes on the lesser arts and crafts he had specifically introduced in *Bzo gnas nyer mkho za ma tog* (*Collected Writings*, 1906), which cover 55 topics, are just ‘a drop from the ocean of crafts’ in Tibet (Gangtok, 1975, vol. 9: 71-138). An extensive list of Mi-pham-rgy-mtsho’s topics is as follows:

1. incense manufacture
2. ink preparation from nine different materials
3. penmanship
4. paper-making
5. stones for polishing paper, and the polishing support
6. drawing lines for guiding calligraphy
7. the penknife
8. the pen and its characteristics
9. preparation of powdered gold for lettering
10. preparation of powdered copper, brass, and silver
11. imitation [of] gold and silver inks
12. preparation of paints: grinding, mixing, and so on
13. preparation of a cloth painting support
14. imitation gold varnishes made with mica
15. varnishes used with paints
16. linseed oil and its uses
17. Chinese lacquer
18. shellac
19. dyeing silk, cotton, and woollen cloth
20. felt dyeing
21. leather dyeing
22. paints for applying to iron and metals
23. various finishes
24. crystalline substances
25. fashioning objects from unmeltable precious substances
26. casting of metals
27. powering of gold for “cold” gilding
28. “hot” gilding by the mercury-evaporation process
29. refining gold for various uses, including gold leaf
30. borax soldering
31. alchemical formulas for transmuting substances into gold
32. other solders and related techniques
33. tattooing
34. ways of drawing on iron with gold and silver
35. modelling paste and its application in relief drawings

36. applying gold, silver, or tin leaf
37. writing on stone
38. writing on bone
39. working ivory
40. working with stone
41. clay and earth technologies
42. mending broken crockery
43. woodworking, including carving and ornamentation
44. leather-working
45. cardboard, paper mache, and leather-like products derived from wood, cloth, or paper
46. medicinal compounding
47. preparing different saline substances
48. mercury manufacture
49. flammable mixtures
50. cleaning agents for gilded and cast-metal images
51. storing meat without spoilage
52. drum making
53. units of measure for cloth
54. magical techniques and contrivances; foreign machines
55. preserving flowers and fruits (Gangtok, 1975, vol. 9: 7-8)²

This list does not include the various other arts and crafts from Tibet that in a very broad sense are significant in stature; here, I simply refer to very impressive Tibetan traditional paintings, and their immensely diverse artistic styles that have changed and evolved radically from the seventh century to the nineteenth century. According to Jeff Watt's speech *Introduction to Tibetan Paintings Styles* (24th November 2011) in Sichuan University, there are at least 13 different styles in a later period, after the sixteenth century; these are listed below:

<i>Sman thang pa</i>	勉塘派
<i>Sman ris</i>	勉日
<i>Mkhyen bris</i>	钦孜
<i>Sgar bris</i>	噶玛嘎孜
<i>Sgar bris /dpal spungs lugs</i>	嘎孜/八蚌式
<i>Kar shod pa</i>	噶雪派
<i>Sman gsar (new men ri)</i>	新勉（新勉日）
<i>Khams-bris</i>	康孜或康·新勉日
<i>Newar style or bal ris</i>	尼泊尔风格或贝日
<i>Ngor lugs</i>	俄尔式

² It is also cited in (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 7-8).

<i>Stag lung lugs</i>	达隆式
<i>Reb kong lugs</i>	热贡式
<i>Jonang lugs</i>	觉囊式

Indeed, if one opens a picture book of Tibetan art, one feels dazzled by so many different expressions of exquisite Buddhist artworks and ‘one may even go so far as to say that no two paintings of the Tibetan tradition are the same’ (Stoddard, 2001: 244). This kind of reaction is probably shared by many of the visitors who have seen an exhibition of Tibetan art both at home and abroad.

2. The Superior Importance of Painting in Tibetan Arts

Among various arts and crafts in Tibet, painting appears to enjoy a uniquely crucial position in both the religious centres and the lives of ordinary Tibetan people who think that painting is not only a foundation of the design, decoration, and making of crafts, but is also essential for their religious expression, medicine, astrology, drama, literature, dance performances and so on. According to the scripture of *Fan-ji Painting Iconometry*, Brahma, the creator, taught the Jie-tu king the techniques of the paintings and stated:

The centre of all the mountains is Mount Meru;

The master of all the birds is the roc;

The head of all the people is the King;

Apart from them, painting is the most sacred (Jie-la, 2002: 64).³

The importance of paintings is also evident in the breathtaking and beautiful mural paintings in the monasteries, and the ceremonies of giant sacred scroll painting on the hillsides, that are patronised generously by the Tibetan nobility and by lay people. It can also be seen from the small sacred scroll paintings hanging in the centre of the Buddhist shrine, which is the most important place in the tent or house of ordinary Tibetans.

3. The Originality of Tibetan Traditional Paintings

Some Western scholars, such as Said, criticised Tibetan fine art (mainly painting). According to Said (1978: 214), the work should not be considered as art because

³ My translation of *Shan zhi zhu shi xu-mi-shan, luan-sheng zhi zhu shi da-peng, zhong-sheng zhi zhu shi jun-wang, ci-wai hui-hua zui shen-sheng*. (山之主是须弥山，卵生之主是大鹏，众生之主是君王，此外绘画最神圣).

it lacks originality. As Stoddard (2001: 232) claims, ‘Tibetan art was considered a hybrid byproduct of two major civilizations, Indian and Chinese, with little or no contribution made by the Tibetans themselves’. First, from the Tibetan point of view, Tibetan Buddhist painting is a direct continuation of Indian Buddhist art. As Sangharakshita comments, as late as 1996 almost all the iconography of figures in Tibetan Buddhist paintings is ‘strictly determined by the Indian iconographical tradition’ (Sangharakshita, 1996: 73). Also, Western scholars have commented on some details, such as the background of Tibetan Buddhist paintings, reflect the Chinese artistic tradition to some extent. Subsequently, they conclude that Tibetan Buddhist art has ‘the specifically religious component of Indian art, whereas the secular component tends to be Chinese’ (*ibid.*, 74). When Pascalis analysed the Tibetan-related objects from Yonghe Palace in China in 1935, he stated:

pre-Buddhist Tibetans ... were rarely sedentary, without intellectual culture ... The character of the Tibetan style, which appears with energy in the artistic production of those who followed on, all formed through foreign influences, reveal nevertheless the original qualities of the people: ingenuity, skill, love of embellishment, taste ... ⁴

In addition, Stoddard observes:

... they [Tibetan artists] simply juxtaposed, in an admittedly artistic way, various elements borrowed from elsewhere (*ibid.*: 232).

As far as the originality of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art is concerned, I agree that in the early developmental stage of Tibetan Buddhist painting there was a blending of three aesthetic traditions. These include the Indian tradition of Pala Dynasty, the Chinese Han and Tang styles, as well as a third traditional style that has Nepalese elements. As I noted in Chapter 1, in the style of the very early Tibetan Buddhist art,⁵ the iconographic presentations of these deities—their colours, their facial expressions and gestures, the ritual implements, costumes, and ornaments—are mainly based on the Indian Buddhist artistic tradition, particularly that of the Pala Dynasty of eastern India (Sangharakshita, 1996: 73), with some influence from Nepalese Buddhist art. From the eleventh century to the thirteenth century, the iconography of these Tibetan deities, particularly the fearsome and wrathful ones, and some female deities (such as Tara) evolved significantly out of Tantric literature and developed into various styles. Based on the Indian-Nepalese aesthetic model, Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art draws fresh

⁴ Cited in Stoddard, 2001: 251, ft. 16).

⁵ Here I mean the Tibetan artwork done between the seventh and tenth centuries.

inspiration from China and Kashmir in the central and western regions of Tibet. A prolific array of wall paintings of both peaceful and wrathful deities in the Kashmiri stylistic lineage appeared in western Tibet. Later, Chinese symbols and motifs with their naturalistic style come to have more and more influence on Tibetan Buddhist art, and the Tibetan Khotanese style became a major style in Chinese Buddhist art from about the late twelfth century (Rhie, 1991: 46).

During the fourteenth and the sixteenth centuries, Tibetan Buddhist art fuses various aesthetic elements from Indian, Chinese, and Nepalese traditions and indigenous sources into ‘something distinctive and incomparable’ (Sangharakshita, 1996: 74). It is evident from the idealised iconography of Tantric deities and their symbolised harmonious realm in the late Tibetan Buddhist art. Rhie (1991: 39) comments:

In the style of early Tibetan art, the deities are presented with a complete immediacy that impacts the viewer without hindrance; in later Tibetan art, the deity and its world dwell in an idealized harmony that draws us into their realm. In both cases, the reality of the enlightened sphere seems to become one with our plane of ordinary reality ... The art [of Tibet] seems to break the “veil of illusion” and offer a complete, instantaneous vision of the radiant beauty and power of pure reality ... The uniquely Tibetan result is an art that shows a genius for clear, pristine vision and that possesses a quality of energy and vitality wedded to gentleness and beauty.

In a recent rediscovery, the prehistoric cave paintings⁶ near the town of Rutog in Rabgyailing in northern Tibet show characteristics which are somehow very similar to Tibetan Tantric Buddhist paintings that were painted three or four thousand years later. In addition to these cave paintings, a sense of Tibetan original aesthetics can be seen from the modelling of two breast-shaped ceramic vases with nipples not in the centre but on each edge. According to Yu (2005: 2-3), it is very likely that shamanic and animistic *Bon-po Shen* priests used this particular type of ceramic vase before Buddhism arrived in Tibet. These *Bon-po Shen* priests put seeds into the vase, and performed certain divination rituals to summon a good spirit to put out more food for them. Generally speaking, pre-Buddhist Tibetan art appears in cave painting in Ngari Prefecture, Rabgyailing, and Namtso, and was prolific in its depictions of positive images of women and female divinities that emphasise their auspicious power of fertility. Also, this probably reflects the Tibetan ideology of symbolic manifestations of good and

⁶ There is a debate about the dating of these Tibetan cave paintings. Generally, it is agreed that they were probably painted during the period from 4500 BCE to 2000 BCE.

bad spirits of the mountains, rivers, lakes, and the underworld. It was assimilated into Tibetan Buddhism later when Padmasambhava subdued Tibet's pre-Buddhist Gods and wild spirits with the magic power of his Tantric rituals. With regard to the field of Tibetan art, the modelling of breasts with nipples in the eleventh-century wall painting at Tholing Monastery in western Tibet appears to be similar to the pre-Buddhist Tibetan art that was produced from 3000 BCE to 2000 BCE.

What is more, the rock painting in Ngari Prefecture that was probably created around 2000 to 4000 years ago provides further evidence that the pre-Buddhist Tibetan art style probably influenced the later Tibetan Buddhist painting. These ancient rock paintings mainly depict animals such as deer, yak, sheep, horse, and hunting activities in their initial stages (from around 2000 BCE to 1 BCE), and then some historical events, such as the ritual ceremony, and legends in the later stage (from around 1 CE to 500 CE). The rock paintings of a deer and a yak were done in unified, powerful, and sophisticated linear dimensions with elegant simplicity. There is a common symbolic sign of 'S' lying inside the bodies of the deer and the yak as decoration, reminiscent of the 'S' decorative patterns on the mane of the two stone lions standing at the entrance of the tomb of Tridu Songtsen (676 to 704)—who was the 38th King of the Tibet Empire—in the Chongye Valley. Although the model of the lions is obviously based on the Indian Pala style of aesthetic tradition, the decorative pattern and the way of carving the lines on the head, the mane, and the body are probably inherited from the characteristics of pre-Buddhist Tibetan art. Admittedly, further studies on pre-Buddhist Tibetan art are needed to explore and investigate further to provide more indication of its possible influence on later Tibetan Buddhist art.

Last, there is a legend about the origin of Tibetan painting.⁷ In the prehistoric period, there was a slave called A-ga who lived in the Shannan region of Tibet. While his sheep were grazing, he used some charcoal to draw them on huge rocks. One day when the rain was drizzling, out of a ray of sunlight A-ga suddenly saw a very beautiful woman dancing in a rainbow over a hill nearby. Enchanted by her beauty A-ga could not help himself and ran towards her, but the further he chased her, the further away she became. Soon after, she disappeared into the mist along with the rainbow. In the evening, when he went back to his tent, A-ga could not

⁷ Based on the Yu's version. See (Yu, 2005: 3-4).

stop thinking about the woman in the rainbow and did not sleep a wink all night. He went back there every day hoping to see the woman again, but saw no sign of her. In the end, he decided to make an image of her in charcoal on a rock and brought it back home. Worried that the image would fade over time, he carved the lines into the stone with a hammer under the faint flame of a paraffin lamp in the evening. Whenever he rested, he always watched the image on the rock for a long time and imagined that the bewitching woman would appear again. One of his friends saw this image and asked him who this woman was. A-ga answered ‘that is *Ri-rgyud-ri mo*’, which literally meant the daughter of the mountain. However, his friend only remembered the *ri mo* and told everyone in the village that A-ga had a very mystical treasure called *ri mo*. The news of *ri mo* spread quickly and people all came to pay homage to A-ga’s rock painting. This legend reflects the Tibetan aesthetic tradition before Buddhism came to Tibet, and the Tibetan ideology of regarding the icons as the manifestations of spirits or deities, which still influences Tibetan Buddhist art and the Tibetan people.⁸

To summarise, in my view the exploration and investigation of pre-Buddhist Tibetan art work and the associated Tibetan legend of the origin of the painting are helpful to recognise and appreciate the character of Tibetan style and the originality that developed later in Buddhist art. Especially between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art revealed a delicate feeling of harmony and a purity of imagination associated with the expressive and manifest way to which pre-Buddhist Tibetan art contributed. As Jacques Bacot, a pioneering Tibetologist, observes, the connection between Tibetan Buddhist art and prehistoric art may be summarised as follows:

All Tibetan art is impressionist; even the miniatures are made in relation to the whole, and need to be observed from a distance. It would be a learned and even psychological process if the criteria were not entirely unconscious. The Tibetan artist feels, he does not know. Art that is learned can never produce this maximum effect and harmony, which seems always to be the result of hazard ... Tibetan artist[s] have no sensuality, they are mystics. They are close to our [French] ‘primitifs’.⁹

⁸ Even now, when seeing the images or the photographs of Dalai Lama or other tulkus, Tibetans regard themselves as seeing these spiritual leaders in person and, as a result, worship them. Traditionally, when a Tibetan dies, the family would burn all their photos after the funeral to avoid their spirit becoming attached to these images (Yu, 2005: 3-4).

⁹ It is taken from (Jan, 1992: 1360, 1364) and also cited in (Stoddard, 2001: 242-243).

4. Theory and Practice in Tibetan Tantric Painting

4.1 Tibetan Traditional Theories on Buddhist Image-making

Iconography is an essential key to understanding and appreciating Tibetan art and considering the work as a manifestation of enlightened beings giving instructions to the practitioners in the good practice of the Tantric Buddhist path. As I mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, there is a complex body of extraordinarily varied and extensive iconographical presentations, representations, and symbols¹⁰ in Tibetan sacred images. Despite the different appearances of these Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas*, and other deities, all of them are, without exception, representations and manifestations of an enlightened body, speech, or mind. To enlighten the minds of others for the benefit of all, they are mainly created as important aids for Buddhist observances, practices, worship, and offerings. This aim has been expressed clearly in many Tibetan Buddhist scriptures. For example in *The Law of the Esoteric Tantra* (399 CE), ‘The Buddha tells Ananda: if any *Bhiksu* or *Bhikkhuni* ... lusts much, let him or her go to watch the [image of] Buddha first’ (Kumarajiva, 2012 [399]: 5).¹¹ Also, there is similar text in *Dhyana dharmasutra*, which states:

If there is anyone who first learns *Samskara*, lead him to the place where the Buddhist image is or tell him to go there himself to look at the image of Buddha (*ibid.*, 2011 [407]: 8).¹²

As Huo and Wangdui pointed out:

[Tibetan] Buddhist image-making is for the worshippers to look at and to cultivate themselves with, that is to say, by using the method of looking at the Buddhist images to eliminate the root of life, death and other worldly worries and finally to attain the spiritual realm of *Nirvana* detached from the *samsara* of life and death and devoid of lust and love (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 26).

To fulfill its religious purpose, since the seventh century in Tibet there have been many very strict and fixed rules, principles, and developments on how to

¹⁰ There is a subtle difference between a representation and a symbol in Tibetan art. As Dr Berzin explained in the lecture *The Art of the Mandala* on May 22nd 2012 in USA, the meaning of a symbol is obvious to anybody who encounters it, whereas the meaning of a representation is not and is in need of further explanation.

¹¹ In the Chinese translation of *The Law of the Esoteric Tantra*, it states as *Fo gao A-nan: ruo-you bi-qiu bi-qiu-ni ... tan-yin duo-zhe, xian-jiao guan-fo* (佛告阿难: 若有比丘比丘尼 ... 贪淫多者, 先教观佛).

¹² The Chinese translation of the text is *Ruo chu-xi xing-ren, jiang-zhi fo-xiang suo, huo jiao ling zi-wang, di-guan fo-xiang xiang-hao* (若处习行人, 将至佛像所, 或教令自往, 谛观佛像相好).

create the right sacred images. These large parts of texts that discuss artistic theory and practices in relation to making sacred images are generally called ‘technical treatises’ (Jackson and Jackson, 1988[1984]: 7). The first book discussing the making of sacred images there is probably *The Painting-Measurement Sutra* (also known as *The Brahmadeva-Samadhi-Sutra*), which was written by the Indian Buddhist scholar Azhaibu and introduced into Tibet during the seventh and the eighth centuries (*ibid.*). In the phases of the second dissemination and the Golden Age of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism (especially from the late twelfth or thirteenth centuries), a number of very influential theoretical works dealing with the Buddhist image-making systematically appeared in Tibet, such as: *The Testament of Ba* written by Ba-sai-nang during the eleventh and the twelfth centuries; *The Ideal Measurement for Image-Making* by the great master Man-la-ton-trup (1420s to 1510s); *Happy Feast of the Great Scholars* written by Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa (1504 to 1566); *Rust Coloured Glaze* and *The Virtuous in Meditation* written by Sangye Gyatso (1653 to 1705); *Confluence of Knowledge and Source of Techniques* by Gongzhu Yon-dan-gyam-tso (1813 to 1899); and so on. Among the immense number of Tibetan artistic theories, *The Painting-Measurement Sutra*, *Image-making Measurement Sutra*, *Portrait-Making Measurement*, and *Measurement for the Making of the Buddhist Images* were regarded as the fundamental rules for creating sacred images in Tibet by the New *Menri* school of Tibetan Buddhist painting¹³ during the seventeenth century.

Based on these theories, the New *Menri* School gradually set up very strict standards on six categories of Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas*, and deities. These categories are called 10 *mtho*, nine *mtho*, eight *mtho*, seven *mtho*, six *mtho* iconographies and the rituals of repairing the damaged iconographies. (*Mtho* is a Tibetan fundamental unit of length, which is approximately the distance or length from the tip of an outstretched thumb and the index finger.) For example there are two proportional drawings of the Buddha Shakyamuni that show the exact established lines in the iconometric measures. According to David and Janice

¹³ As noted in Chapter 1, Choying Gyatso developed the *Menri* style and created a new style known as the New *Menri* style in the seventeenth century.

Jackson (1988 [1984]: 50),¹⁴ the most influential treatise written on proportions by a Tibetan is probably the *Sku gzugs kyi cha tshad kyi rab tu byed pa yid bzhin nor bu* of Sman-thang-pa's treatise, which lists six main proportional classes as below:

- 1) Buddhas, 125 *sor* (= 10 *thal mo* of 12½ *sor* each)
- 2) Peaceful bodhisattvas, 120 *sor* (= 10 *thal mo* of 12 *sor* each)
- 3) Goddesses, 108 *sor* (= 9 *thal mo*)
- 4) Tall wrathful figures, such as the *Bodhisattva Vajrapani*, 96 *sor* (= 8 *thal mo*)
- 5) Short wrathful figures, 72 *sor* (= 6 *thal mo*, although some texts specify 5 *thal mo*)
- 6) Humans, including some Sravakas (disciples of the Buddha) and Pratyekabuddhas, 96 *sor* tall (= 4 cubits, although the canonical texts specify a height of 3½ cubits) (*ibid.*: 50).

During the nineteenth century, with the support from the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism, these standards were written down as manuals, which are known as *the Buddhist Canon of Iconography and Iconometry*. From that moment, almost all the Tibetan Buddhist artists in the late-nineteenth century and the twentieth century followed it rigorously.

4.2 The Criticism of Tibetan Traditional Art Theory and Practice in Western Scholarship

In Western scholarship, the particular interest in the study of artistic theory and practice in Tibet (mainly painting) can be traced back to Alexander Csoma de Koros (1784 to 1842) and H. H. Godwin-Austen (1834 to 1923) in the early to mid-nineteenth century. According to Csoma de Koros, an evident sample of a technical treatise of Tibetan Buddhist art 'enumerates what must be the proportion in feet, inches, lines of a statue representing Buddha or Shakya' in 1825.¹⁵ There were a number of Western scholars who shared a similar interest in the middle and end of the nineteenth century. For example Godwin-Austen (1864: 151-154) was keen to explore 'the system employed in outlining the figures of deities and other religious drawings as practised' in some regions that bordered Tibet and eastern India. Further, Roerich's *Tibetan Paintings* (1925) and Sankrityayana's

¹⁴ They are perhaps the most accomplished contemporary Western artists in traditional Tibetan painting. During 1970s, they learnt their painting skills mainly from Legdrup Gyatsho, a monk and artist from Phenyul Nalendra near Lhasa, and Wangdrak from Shekar Dzong in western Tibet (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 1).

¹⁵ Cited in Duka, 1972: 50.

‘Technique in Tibetan Painting’ in the journal *Asia* (1937: 711-715) started to attract serious attention in modern Tibetan studies. During the two waves of the 1940s and the 1970s—with regard to the development of Tibetan studies in Western scholarship—there were many important works about Tibetan culture published. These include the topic of the theory and practice of Tibetan painting as follows: Pallis’s *Peaks and Lamas* (2004 [1940]: 332-338); Tucci’s *Tibetan Painted Scroll* (1949: vol.1, 268); Huntington’s ‘The Technique of Tibetan Paintings’ and Mehra’s ‘Notes on the Technique and Conservation of Some Thangka Paintings’ in *Studies in Conservation* (1970: vol.15, 122-133; 190-214); and Gerasimova’s ‘Compositional Structure in Tibetan Iconography’ in *The Tibet Journal* (1978: vol.3, 39-51).

In some studies on Tibetan Buddhist art in the West, the criticism is focused on the fixed traditional patterns, about the proportion and colour, posture, and insignia of the iconography that Tibetan artists followed and handed down from generation to generation. Some scholars, such as Sangharakshita, state that there was very little space for Tibetan Buddhist artists to express their own attitude, mentality, or imagination in an individual creative way. According to Sangharakshita’s observation:

He [a Tibetan Buddhist artist] would be highly unlikely to decide spontaneously to paint his own idea of, say, the Buddha Amitabha. Instead, he will just sit in his studio or workshop until someone comes and orders a Thangka of that particular Buddha.

The first question to be settled [when you order a picture at a Tibetan Buddhist artist’s] will be the rather prosaic one of the size of the thangka you want. The next question, usually, is whether you want gold to be used and, if so, how much—gold being charged for separately. When all this has been settled, you can get down to discussing the deity you would like to have depicted. If it is a well-known figure like Amitabha, the artist will know the iconography off by heart. Otherwise, if it is a more obscure figure, he will rummage in a drawer containing wood-block prints of a variety of figures—Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, dakinis, dharmapalas, and so on. Eventually he will pull one out and ask, ‘Is this the one you want?’. If it is, then after your departure he will transfer the outline on to the rectangle of silk on which he will paint it (Sangharakshita, 1996: 75).

Therefore, Sangharakshita and some other Western scholars have concluded that those Tibetan Buddhist artists, even the good ones, all work within the tradition and will never try to paint the Buddhas and other deities from their imagination. In fact, all of them regard the aspiration of being original and creative in individual work as an aberration. Similar statements about the unchanging nature

and similarity of Tibetan Buddhist art can be found in *Peaks and Lamas* by Pallis, the first Westerner to study under a Tibetan Buddhist Master Konchok Gyaltsen in Phiyang Monastery in Ladakh (Stoddard, 2001: 243). According to Pallis (2004[1940]: 345):

A singular consistency of style is observable throughout the vast territories where the Tibetan Buddhist tradition holds sway, in spite of wide climatic and racial diversity. It calls for a trained eye to distinguish whether a certain painting was executed in Lhasa or Mongolia, and whether the photograph of a building refers to Ladakh or to Kham, many miles away to the East.

From their point of view, the theory and practice of Tibetan Buddhist art was (or perhaps, to some extent, is) regarded as uncreative, unchanging, and ossified. As Said (1978: 98) comments, Tibetan culture, including its art, had ‘always been the same, unchanging, uniform, and radically peculiar object’.

I have mixed feelings about such criticism with regard to the strictly controlled tradition in Tibetan art. I would agree, to some extent, with Pallis’s comments on the unchanging tradition of Tibetan art that he observed earlier. This is because it might have been true for the late-nineteenth-century and twentieth-century style of Tibetan painting that he studied. Admittedly, these strict rules and standards formed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries within Tibetan artistic traditions have their own obvious disadvantages, which has left little space for talented artists to stretch the potential of their creativity to the maximum. However, I would argue that the systematic theories and standards in Tibetan art have also had the advantage of keeping the precious core of Tibetan art’s heritage, and subsequently facilitated their succession. I disagree with the comments on Tibetan art as the ‘ossified’, ‘unchanging sameness of tradition’. As I argued in the Preface, Tibetan culture has never been isolated. As Schaik (2011: xvii-xviii) claims:

The tensions, divergences and connections to the outside world that defined it have led to centuries of dynamic movement ... Tibet constantly subject to change. These changes have sometimes been gradual and almost imperceptible; at other times they have been cataclysmic. Though it came late to modernity, Tibet’s ... artistic and literary developments match those of other countries before the Industrial Revolution.

It should be noted too that the strict rules and powerful standards of the artistic and creative imagination of the Tibetan artisans brought about a rigid religious atmosphere that is still evident from both the existing figurative paintings and

decorative designs. For example there is a vivid scene of the Buddha's *Tapas*¹⁶ in a mural painting in the *Buddhist Tradition* that does not exist within the Buddhist texts, but was designed by the talented artisans in western Tibet in the mid-fifteenth century. It is painted on the lower part of the south wall in the remains of the Red Palace of the Guge Kingdom in Zanda County of Tibet. It shows Shakyamuni portrayed as a determined figure in a gesture of meditation, seated in a stable position on a throne under the *Bodhi* tree, with a pair of naughty village boys flanked either side and who poke Shakyamuni's ears with grass-sticks. But Shakyamuni did not take any notice of them and continued practising meditation with full concentration. The painting gave lively expression to the strong contrast between the stillness and determination of the Buddha, as well as the motion and childish expression of the village boys. Nonetheless, from my perspective, the figure of Shakyamuni in this painting appears to be more solemn than vivid, which could be a minor defect.

Another good example is the mural painting entitled *The Scene of Heaven* on the east upper part of the south wall of the corridor on the second floor in Shalu Monastery, which was done during the first half of the fourteenth century. On the left side of this painting, a man is at the middle part of a staircase, climbing towards the top with all his strength. Another man with darker skin who stands at a higher part of the staircase has one of his feet stretched out to the highest level where the Heavenly Paradise and the celestial Buddha and various deities are located. From this version of the Heavenly Paradise, the artisan who made this painting was probably inspired by the Buddhist theory *samsara*. As I mentioned in the Introduction, *samsara* refers to an endless repeating cycle of birth, death, and rebirth. When a person becomes fully enlightened, they will be free from the *samsara* and allowed to enter 'the paradise of Heaven where the sun and the moon and the star shine, with the auspicious clouds that float amidst the jade buildings, and the various deities and Gods that live happily' (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 277).

What particularly interests me here is the medium that the men can enter the Heavenly Paradise through the stairway in this painting. This refers to a Tibetan

¹⁶ The Sanskrit word *Tapas* means heat or ardour. It refers to voluntary ascetic practice in order to achieve the enlightenment.

legend that I mentioned in Chapter 1 in which the Tsenpo was a God who came down from the Heaven via the celestial staircase to a mighty mountain in Tibet. Clearly, the artisan used his talents and imagination to combine the Buddhist theory *samsara* with the Tibetan indigenous culture successfully in this artwork, which we can only see in this version in Tibet.

Compared to the rather fixed patterns of the Buddha-subject in Tibetan painting, some other imaginative subject matter may have given the artisans more space to display their individual skills, designs, and expressions creatively. The mid-fifteenth-century mural painting *Various Deities* found in the remains of the White Palace of the ancient Guge Kingdom in western Tibet is one of many good examples. There are various horse-headed deities on the upper part of the painting, who are probably incarnates of the *Kala-vajra*¹⁷ and his consorts, while some winged *Garuda*¹⁸ birds with different postures are on the lower part. The image of the deity's consorts, located on the left-hand top of the painting, is of them wearing tassels, pearled chains, and bracelets with a naked upper body in white, and an elegant silk gown on the lower body. The left profile of her horse-face is painted with her left eye wide open and her big mouth grinning in anger. Her right hand stretches out gracefully and the right leg bows upward, while the left hand is placed on the kneeling left leg. From my perspective, this kind of artistic expression is a new creation, fully based on the artists' imaginations and their understanding of the representative spiritual enlightenment.

The richness of Tibetan artistic creations can also be seen if one compares the seven images of dancing Goddesses. All of them are fifteenth-century mural paintings in Toling Monastery and Palcho¹⁹ Monastery in Tibet. These curvaceous semi-nude dancing Goddesses are depicted with their breasts bulging out and with slender waists, which are exaggerated by the artisans. They are all two-armed and crowned, wearing big earrings, gold tassels, bracelets on the arms and ankles, floating ribbons over the shoulders, and silk-like gowns on the lower body. However, each image shows different lively dancing postures with various art styles. For example in the mural painting *Vajranrti* on the east wall of the porch of the Du-kang Palace of the Toling Monastery, eight Goddesses are dancing

¹⁷ *Kala-vajra* is a *vidam* deity in Tantric Buddhism, who represents omniscience.

¹⁸ The Garuda is a mythical bird or bird-like creature in both Hinduism and Buddhism mythology.

¹⁹ The Palcho Monastery is in Gyantse County, Shigatse Prefecture in Tibet.

gracefully with various gestures, which are drawn fluently in black and white lines on a brown background. In the close-up of one of the Goddesses on the left lower row, her face is depicted beautifully with lined eyes, long eyebrows, and a small mouth. The artistic expression of the dancing Goddesses in this exquisite mono-coloured painting is soft, gentle, and clear. In strong contrast, the Offering Goddess in the mural painting on the west wall of the Red Palace in the same monastery is depicted in bright and rich colour that is applied with dark-blue skin, golden jewels and ribbons, red and orange haloes, and dark-blue pillars as well as background. I think that the artists in Tibet had to conform to the rules and standards of religious painting. Nonetheless, they were able to employ their artistic imagination and talent to make full use of every line, stroke, design, and pattern to maximise their individual aesthetic interest and creative potential. Before moving forward, there is another thing to note on these vivid and compelling iconographies of female deities, which highlight women's beauty and their auspicious power of fertility. Evidently, they are one of the most popular subjects of Tibetan Tantric art. As I mentioned in the Introduction, compared to the other schools of Buddhism, Tibetan Tantric art seems to be expressively exalting women, and elevating the position of women (deities), which is one of the characteristics of the work. Though the implications of positive imagery and symbols of women (in my opinion) go beyond the scope of this chapter, I come across the subject of women's imagery (mainly in *yab-yum* images) and the impact of their significance in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, ritual and meditative practices in Chapter 3.

Finally, the negative comments on Tibetan art along with its other aspects of Tibetan culture among Western scholars (mainly before and during the 1960s) may have been clouded by political issues between the East and the West during that time. As Stoddard (2001: 232-233) points out:

The attitude [of some Western scholars that Tibetan culture was ossified] ... was "a kind of intellectual authority over the Orient within Western culture". ... There was an underlying idea (again in Said's words) "that people, places and experiences can [always] be described by a book, so much so that the book acquires a greater authority and use, even than the actuality it describes".

[The negative image of Tibetan culture, including its art, as the dead civilization] still represented a considerable development from the Shangri-la vision that dominated in the West ... Perhaps it could be said that we were

(or at least I was) at that time [during the late 1960s or the early 1970s] beginning to move toward present attitudes and becoming ... “modern Orientalists, heroes rescuing the Orient from the obscurity, alienation, and strangeness which we ourselves had properly distinguished”!

This may be worthy of further investigation. Yet, as I said in the Preface, I tend to focus more on the analysis of Tibetan art rather than the political issues.

5. Material and Method of Tibetan Traditional Painting

By observing the working process in many mural paintings and *thangkas* at first hand, and having attended a number of their exhibitions, art workshops, and other resources both at home and overseas, I have learnt much about the traditional techniques, methods, and materials used in Tibetan mural and *thangkas*. It is important to note that the mural painting in Tibet shares almost the same materials as *thangka*, which includes the same pigments, dyes, glue, brushes, the techniques of paint application and outlining, order, and method of painting. As the renowned Tibetan art master Luo-bu Si-da, the successor of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, stated in an interview in Beijing (2012):

In the aspects of the content and the technique, and the materials for painting, there is not much difference between painting a *thangka* and a piece of mural painting [in Tibet].²⁰

If one had to find differences between them, I think perhaps the biggest difference would be the surface on which the images are painted. For example a *thangka* usually requires a plain-woven Indian muslin, or a light-weight Indian cotton, or sometimes, a finely woven Chinese cotton (in eastern Tibet).²¹ A mural painting in Tibet requires none of these materials and, by contrast, is painted directly on the surface of a wall. To this end, the preparation of the painting surfaces is different. Specifically, *thangka* painters usually need to stretch the cloth fabric over a wooden frame (*rkyang shing*) by sewing a looping string, and then size the fabric by use of gelatin, hide glue, or deity-glue (*lha spyin*)²² for the best quality,

²⁰ My translation of *Cong hui-hua nei-rong he ji-qiao*、*hui-hua yuan-liao shang lai kan*, *hua tang-ka yu hua bi-hua mei-you duo da qu-bie*. (从绘画内容和技巧、绘画原料上来看，画唐卡与画壁画没有多大区别。) Ma Jing, http://www.tibetculture.net/xwsy/whtd/201211/t20121114_1796624.htm (accessed on 16 November, 2012).

²¹ In ancient times, *thangka* had also been painted on other materials such as ‘silk, linen and leather or skin’ (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 16).

²² Deity-glue is made from ‘skins that were free from fat, hairs and other impurities’ (*ibid.*: 18), which should be boiled clean in water and then cooled down for storing. It is also used for mixing paints.

or apply gesso,²³ and then polish the ground for the painting over either a dampened surface or a dried one. The wall surface for mural painting needs four steps of technical preparation before it can be painted on: first, a sticky mixture of coarse mortar with chopped grass onto the stone wall needs to be applied smoothly in order to build up the first and thickest layer, which should be from around 0.6 inches to 1.2 inches thick. Second, based on the first layer once it is dried, another layer is spread evenly (around 0.4 inches thick) made of fine mud and wool or yak hair. After the second layer is dry, it is coated with another layer of fine mortar, which is a mixture of fine sand, sticky clay, and *A-ga* powder, a special kind of ground stone powder. When this layer is half dry, the surface is polished with a smooth stone until it achieves the desired surface quality (usually, it should be rendered as smoothly as possible). Once the size is completely dry a final layer is prepared with a mixture of hide glue, safflower juice (traditionally), or yellow clay and then applied with hide glue and gesso. I think that the preparation of the wall surface in Tibetan mural painting is a technique reminiscent of a series of Sanskrit texts that originated from the wall-painting tradition in India from the fourth century to the sixteenth century. As Ward (2008: 737) says in his book *The Grove Encyclopedia of Materials and Techniques in Art*:

The wall was prepared [in the ancient Indian wall-painting] with a thick rendering composed of clay, straw or other fibrous materials and sometimes also granular matter. Then the finishing coats, made from white clay and gypsum or lime, were applied in one or more thin, smooth layers.

Because there are numerous books on the subject of the different ways of making *thangkas*, my survey of the technical aspect of Tibetan painting is primarily based upon the general usage of materials, as well as the method and the usual order of their application that relates to most kinds of mural paintings in Tibet, and which are less well-known in the West.

To my knowledge, although there are divergences in the techniques among varied art traditions, there are generally five main steps in the process of a mural painting in Tibet: 1) the preparation; 2) the sketch; 3) application of colours and outlining; 4) the finishing touches; 5) the varnish. It may sound very similar to the basic process of making a traditional classical oil painting in the West. Yet, the detailed techniques within the process of making a Tibetan mural painting,

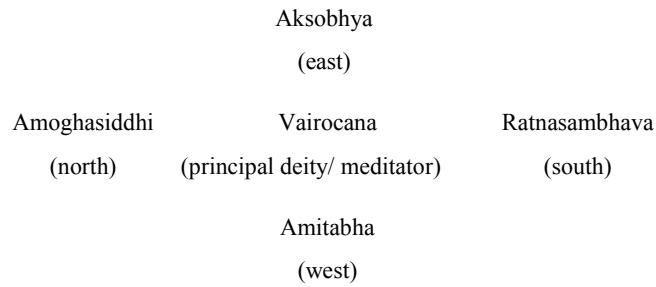
²³ Gesso is made of the powder of the white earth pigment, such as white clay, kaolin, chalk, or gypsum, with the size solution in Tibetan painting.

particularly the usage of the pigments, organic dyes, and the gold or silver, and the various methods of applying them are very different. I discuss this in more detail later.

5.1 The Preparation and the Meditative Visualisation

The first step in making a piece of mural painting in Tibet is to prepare the painting surface by applying glue (*spyin*), and polishing the ground for the painting (outlined in the previous section), which is coupled with a religious ceremony to purify the site by means of prayer and offerings, as well as worship for the deities that are to be drafted. If the content of the mural painting is wrathful deities, *yab-yum* images, or Tantric *mandala*, a ceremony should be performed by a Tantric master for the painters to: 1) understand the important doctrines of the Tantric path; 2) prepare a peaceful state of meditative mind; and 3), learn to visualise the Tantric deities gradually in their meditation practices until they can remember the attributes of images inwardly. Traditional Tibetan painters believe that the internal teachings or meditative visualisation enable them to reorient the wind of the right (female) and the left (male) energy-channels of the body into an awakened state of the central channel (Bryant, 1992: 14). In response, the Tantric master agrees and symbolically anoints their *chakras*, the sex energy centres (the crown of the head, the forehead, the throat, the heart, the abdomen, and the reproductive organs) in the human body (*ibid.*: 136-137). It is said that through this, the essence of deities associated with six Buddha-families (discussed in the Introduction)—Vairocana, Ratnasambhava, Amitabha, Amoghasiddhi, Aksobhya, and Vajrasattva—will arise inside painters and protect them so that they can accomplish their tasks in painting.

There is another thing to note about the significance of the five directions of the site for the painting. In Tibetan Buddhism, the centre represents emptiness; the north represents wrathfulness; the south represents longevity and virtue; the west represents compassion; and the east represents peace. Particularly where the site of the murals is limited, or lacks enough light, the painters should practise the association of five directions in the site with five wisdom Buddha-families in the meditative visualisation before the painting begins.



0.1 The usual arrangement of the five archetypal Buddhas

Specifically, the painters visualise the white Buddha Vairocana as the embodiment of the Buddhist’s concept of emptiness in the centre; then to the north, the green Amoghasiddhi represents the pacification of evils and the non-conceptual or sensational mind; to the south, the yellow Ratnasambhava is associated with the attempt to destroy greed and pride; to the west, the red Amitabha is known for the aggregate of recognition that is within the deep awareness of individuals; and to the east, the blue Aksobhya illuminates the darkness of ignorance and confusion.²⁴ During the process of Tantric meditation, the painters enhance their powers of visualisation and envision all these deities with the entire *mandala* that appears in their minds clearly. Then, the painters appraise these deities with their distinctive qualities and ask for blessings to enable them to be inseparable from these deities. They visualise themselves as the manifestation of the awakened mind, as well as these ideal archetypal Buddhas or deities. In the next phase of Tantric meditation, they visualise these deities—along with their realms—being dissolved into emptiness. In doing so, they contemplate the non-conceptual, and they recognise that ‘nothing is inherently what it appears to be’ as well as the joy and bliss they experience (Powers, 2008: 78). Since there is no fixed (self) nature in all the phenomena, no one can really comprehend an object in its true nature, and all our perceptions about objects arise from nothingness and leave nothing behind. However, within the process of transformation to an awakened mind in meditation, the painters believe that they reconstitute a true ‘reality... involving blissful conscious realising emptiness’ (*ibid.*). As Powers states:

Tantric texts stress that such bodhisattvas are not creating a delusional system in order to hide from the harsher aspects of reality. Rather, they are transforming reality, making it conform to an ideal archetype ... The sense

²⁴ The usual arrangement of the Five Wisdom Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism is based on the Sangharakshita (1999 [1996]: 98-99) version.

of bliss pervades all their cognitions [in the Tantric meditation], and their understanding of emptiness allows them to generate minds that are manifestations of bliss and emptiness (*ibid.*: 79).

Therefore, during the later process of painting the murals the painters should maintain this peaceful, purified, and awakened state of mind and, in so doing, keep friendly and respectful relationships with people; also, the painters should not kill animals, eat meat, drink wine, or have sexual relations. Otherwise, it would incur bad luck or rigid punishment—for all the people involved with the murals—by the deities in the Tibetans' religious belief.

5.2 The Sketch and the Most Commonly Used Compositions

In short, the next step is to lay down the main chalk lines for orientating and dividing the position of the central and other figures and to sketch the draft of the figures in pencil or charcoal on the wall. This needs the mastery of the measurements and proportions of various Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas*, and deities in Buddhist iconometry; and then they finalise the sketch by applying the ink on the outline of the charcoal-lined draft. In reality, this involves much smaller steps when we see how the Tibetan artist makes the draft and finalises the sketch of the murals. These steps are set out below.

5.2.1 The eight main lines of orientation

To locate the precise centre of the painting accurately is very important, since a minor mistake would not conform to the significance of the painting's religious value. Once the centre, the vertical, and horizontal axes are established and are perfectly correct, the artist maps out the rest of the composition. Hence, before beginning the sketch the artist needs to establish the very important eight lines for orientating. These are: 'two diagonals, the vertical, the horizontal and the four outer borders' (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 45).

5.2.2 The arrangement of the composition

Once the eight main lines are fixed, it is time to arrange the actual composition in the mural. There are various ways of arranging the composition flexibly and, sometimes, based on the different content, purpose, and art school, it may be loosely designed.

According to the digital library of *Himalayan Art Resources*, a Tibetan painting can be classified into five main categories according to its subjects:²⁵ (1) portraits of Buddhas, *Bodhisattvas*, deities, and images of religious lineages and historical personages ; (2) narrative paintings and, sometimes, historical stories or events, such as the mural paintings entitled *The Trip of the Princess* (the eleventh century, in Dong-ga Cave) and *The 13th Dalai Lama and the Guangxu Emperor* (the nineteenth century, in Potala Palace); (3) chart paintings that impart practical information directly, such as the astrology paintings , the medical paintings , *the Magic Diagram* , and *the Wheel of Life* in *thangkas* or the murals; (4) the landscape paintings including the religious Buddhist cosmology and the historical monasteries ; (5) *mandalas*, circular diagrams that represent the divine universe of deities, including the forms of the single and the multiple *mandalas* .

Almost all the categories of subjects, particularly the portraits and the narratives, can be seen in Tibetan mural paintings in Tibet. In each category, there are a number of different ways of arranging the composition. Due to the limited length of this chapter, I restrict the discussion to iconic and narrative paintings here; later I discuss the *mandala* separately in Chapter 3. Generally, the circle or square-shaped composition is the most popular and commonly used in Tibetan painting; it is usually symmetrical with the eminent figures in the centre and other less important figures grouped around. Gerasimova (1978: 47) stresses this compositional formula as follows:

The construction of individual figures and decorative-ornamental combinations on a flat surface actually exhausted the entire problem of the organization of space in the representational icon. Its compositional formula consisted in the quantitative establishment of the centre and a symmetrical grouping of the secondary components according to a principle of simple transfer.

The formula is often used in portraits, in which the position of each figure is not designed at random but according to the strict hierarchical arrangements of iconographic classes within the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. As Jackson states (2005: 55), the classes of the main sacred figures can be generally ranked in a descending (spiritually) hierarchical order as below:

- (i) Masters of the lineage
- (ii) Tantric deities (*yidam*)

²⁵ The Shelly and Donald Rubin Foundation, <http://www.himalayanart.org/pages/figurativeart/index.html> (accessed on 11 January 2012).

- (iii) Buddhas in Sambhogakaya and Nirmanakaya forms
- (iv) *Bodhisattvas*
- (v) Goddesses (that is, female *Bodhisattvas*)
- (vi) Pratyekabuddhas; Sravakas/Sthaviras
- (vii) Daka and Dakini (*mkha, gro* and *mkha, gro ma*), that is, beings of high realisation associated with Tantric practice
- (viii) Wrathful protectors of the *Dharma* (*dharmapala*), for example Vajrapani
- (ix) Yaksa deities (*gnod sbyin*), for example the four great kings, guardians of the directions
- (x) Wealth-bestowing deities (*nor lha*), for example Jambhala
- (xi) Other lesser deities (*mahanaga, gter-bdag*, and so on).

The spiritual hierarchy of the Tibetan pantheon is obviously manifested in its painting through its vertical position and its figural proportions. Generally, the higher placement and the larger size of the figures represent figures that enjoy a relatively higher status of class compared to other classes of the same importance. If the minor grouped figures within a single iconographic class enjoy the same status, Tibetan painters usually place the more important figures either to the right hand of the main figures, or closer to the centre, corresponding to their spiritual seniority. To conclude, the arrangements of a large number of figures within a Tibetan painting can seem to be inexhaustible; however, once the painter masters the systematic, orderly, and hierarchic principles of composition, they can yield the varied sizes and chaotic positions of the primary deities and hundreds of minor figures correctly. Even if they are not familiar with some iconographic figures, they can always check their characteristic traits through the relevant Buddhist texts, or they can consult with the abbot of the monastery, the host, or the achieved lamas.

With regard to the detailed methods in the composition of the most popular iconic and narrative murals, there are three main ways (from my observations) of presenting different content and subject matter. These are first the arrangement of highlighting a single centre . This method, as I noted earlier, is the most commonly used arrangement, in which the principal figure (or grouped figures) is usually depicted as the largest one and placed in the centre of the painting, surrounded by smaller and less important figures, and situated in either an imaginative landscape or an architectural environment. Second, the arrangement

of check-division is mainly used to depict the stories of the Buddha that are often placed under the large principal image of the Buddha in mural paintings in western Tibet. Each incident from the story is painted in separate squares in a grid. For example the lower part of the Buddhist Tradition, a mid-fifteenth-century mural painting in Red Palace of Guge Kingdom in Zanda County shows a series of stories about the Shakyamuni Buddha. On the top of the left blue part, the Buddha sits on the throne with two attendants who kneel down by the right side. Under it, there is a scene with six attendants with bowls and one of them is offering the Buddha his bowl. The middle red part depicts the Shakyamuni encircled by a snake or a dragon under a mass of dark cloud, while three deities around there are kneeling down to pay homage to the Buddha. Third, the arrangement of a comic-strip-orientated image is often used to depict a plot or a story in narrative painting. In this kind of composition, there is no clear aesthetic focus and spiritual centre; instead, all the incidents of the plot or story are arranged in an orderly cycling sequence to make it coherent between each of them. A good example is the mid-sixteenth century mural painting *Samghata* located in the fourth layer on the interior wall of the Jinka-Lakang Palace in the Guge Kingdom. As an unfolded scroll, this painting displays all kinds of sinful figures, which are punished by dismembering their body and scattering their bones to beasts, serpents, eagles, demons, and sharp sticks in hell.

5.2.3 Drafting the sketch using charcoal

Now let us return to the artist at work to see how they actually draft the sketch using a thin charcoal stick (*sol ba*). If the artist has already completed a drawing or a ready-made block print of the figures, they can make a stencil (*gtsag par*) by first copying them and then converting them by perforating each of the lines with a pin or needle. Once the stencil is done, it can easily be defined by the composition of the painting's surface and can also be reproduced if need be—simply by placing the stencil on the wall and dusting it with the powder bag, and connecting the dots of powder left behind to get a clear outline of the image.

If the artist needs to do a new composition, without a possible stencil, they should bear in mind the iconometry stipulated in the Buddhist texts, such as the *Image-making Measurement Sutra*, and the rules of order and hierarchy of painting. They first need to divide the space for the major and minor figures by

drawing larger and smaller egg-shaped ovals, and then sketch out the outlines of the main and minor figures successively and, finally, draw a few brief lines to indicate the layout of the background.

5.2.4 Reinforcement and finalisation of the sketch in ink

Once the artist is satisfied with the charcoal sketch, they move on to the next step to reinforce and finalise the sketch with a pointed-constructed type of brush (*pir*) and ink (*snag tsha*). The artists usually hold the brush with the drawing hand very near the tip and rest either their wrist or elbow on the edge of the painting to hold the drawing instrument steady. In general, the final effect of the lines should be accurate, solid, smooth, and curved gracefully with a continuous flow of ink. From my observation, it is very similar to the effect of the iron-line (*Tie-xian miao* 铁线描) in Chinese traditional painting.

Apart from some minor details, such as the facial features, it is the permanent design that will be a guide throughout the rest of the painting; this design also reveals the outline in the completed version, thus the artists usually take great effort and care with the ink-line sketch.

5.3 The Usage of Pigments and the Application of Colours and Outlining

The third main step is the most crucial part in the procedure of Tibetan painting and which will decide its artistic quality. This involves making the mineral pigments (*rdo-tshon* and *sa-tshon*) and organic dyes (*tshos*), and mixing the paints with the deity-glue, and applying the colours to various areas of the painting surface.

5.3.1 The traditional way of making paints

Before we see the process of applying the colours to the mural painting, it is necessary to know the materials of the colours, the basic colours, and the theory about the mixing of colours in the old Tibetan art tradition. As mentioned above, the traditional Tibetan colours are usually made from mineral pigments and organic dyes from plants. For instance the blue usually used for the sky and water was derived from azurite (*mthing*); the green was from the mineral malachite (*spang ma*); the bright red was made using the mineral cinnabar (*cog-la-ma*); the orange was mainly munium; the chief pigment of the yellow was the mineral

orpiment (*ba bla*), which is a natural trisulphide of arsenic; the yellow ochre (*ngang pa*) was mineral limonite; the white was calcium compounds; and the carbon black (*snag tsha*) was made from soot and black ash (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 75-84).

How could the artists convert these raw materials to various paints? Generally, they first need to clean the crude minerals by scrubbing and rinsing them with warm water repeatedly and then grind these minerals into powder by using simple stone implements, such as mortars (*gtun khung*) and pestles (*gtun*) (*ibid.*: 78). The artist can put the ground pigments into clean small pots (*tshon kong*), respectively, with a little warm size solution, or the deity-glue for better quality, and stir using a wooden stick until it is completely mixed to the right thickness and consistency of paint (*ibid.*: 95). Note that some exceptional pigments require special methods. The mineral cinnabar—as well as azurite and malachite—should not be ground too much to keep the original deep colours and glaze. The raw material of the carbon black is also made by means of burning the wood of a larch tree, a birch bark, or wheat grains in a vessel and then mixing this together with the size solution, stirring the mixture constantly until it turns into a paste. Another thing to note is the amount of the size solution or deity-glue.

From my experiments, if too much glue is added in binding the colours, it forms wrinkles on the wall surface over a period of time. If the glue is inadequate, the colours will easily fade or even fall off the mural after a while. Thus, mastering the correct way of binding the colours needs many years of experience.

5.3.2 Basic colour theories

According to the colour system proposed by the Tibetan scholar Bo-dong Panchen during the fifteenth century, there are five basic colours: white (*dkar*), red (*dmar*), blue (*sngo*), yellow (*ser*), and black (*nag*)²⁶ (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 91). Another more recent system, which is based on the Tibetan traditional art theoretical book entitled *The Confluence of Knowledge*, develops them into five categories. These are ‘the main colours, the intermediate branch colours, the complementary colours, the bright colours, and the dark and white colours’ (The

²⁶ In some other versions, black is replaced by green (Zhang, 2006: 5).

Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 368). A further explanation is that:

The yellow, the red, the blue and the green are the main colours; and the orange, the flesh colour, the light rouge, the dark black, the smoke colour, the ochre-y yellow, the dark maroon, the deep blue-green and the bone colour are the intermediate branch colours. And each of the above can be subdivided into many kinds. Generally, there are 32 subdivided colours [which] are as follows: white, yellow-white, red-white, the crystal white, yellow, light yellow, orange-yellow, orange-red, red, pink, dark red, carmine-red, blue, light blue, dark blue, emerald green, light green, dark green, the flesh colour, the tea colour, the dark, grey, dark maroon, the smoke colour, the bone colour and the black, which are all widely used mixed colours and by re-mixing they can make up infinite colours (*ibid.*).

With regard to the colour mixing, one can find the most detailed accounts of the combinations of colours from the writings of Rong-tha Blo-bzang-dam-chos-rgya-mtsho (1863 to 1917). David and Janice Jackson (1988 [1984]: 92) quote Rong-tha's list of the colour combinations as follows:

white + a little watery paint of azurite blue (*mthing chu*) = white milk colour (*'o dkar*)

white + more of the above blue = bluish milk colour (*'o sngon*)

white + a little thin light green paint from malachite (*spang chu*) = milk colour (*'o kha*)

white + more of the same green = greenish milk colour (*'o ljang*)

white + thin minium paint (*li chu*) = pale yellow (*ser skya*)

white + diluted vermilion (*mtshal chu*) = vermilion pink (*mtshal skya*)

white + vermilion pink = light flesh colour (*sha dkar*)

white + a larger proportion of vermilion pink = reddish flesh colour (*sha dmar*)

reddish flesh colour + indigo = the colour of an old person's flesh (*rgan sha'i mdog*), i.e. a purplish flesh colour.

reddish skin colour + orpiment = yellowish flesh colour (*sha ser*)

lac-dye (maroonish) pink (*na ros*) + indigo = pale mauve (*mon kha*)

lac-dye pink + a larger proportion of indigo = bluish mauve (*mon sngon*)

pale mauve (*mon kha*) + pale yellow (*ser skya*: white and dilute minium) = liver colour (*mchin kha*)

if white predominates in the above mixture = whitish liver colour (*mchin skya*)

liver colour + lac-dye = maroonish liver colour (*mchin smug*)

white + ink black (*snag*) = ash grey (literally "ash colour": *thal kha*)

white + grey = whitish grey (*thal dkar*)

whitish grey + light blue (*mthing skya*) = bluish grey (*thal sngon*)

white + orpiment = bone colour (*rus kha*)

white = vermilion pink + yellow (*ser po*), the latter two colours in equal proportions = ochre-y yellow (*ngang pa*)

ochre-y yellow + munium = golden colour (*gser 'dra*)

vermilion pink + orpiment + ink black added to white = tea colour (*ja kha*)

when vermilion predominates in the above mixture = reddish tea colour (*ja dmar*).

Likewise, the appropriate shade results when the other colours in the mixture predominate:

indigo + orpiment = compounded green (*sbyar ljang*)

tea colour + compounded green = greenish tea colour (*ja ljang*)

reddish tea colour + ink black = smoke colour (*dud kha*)

smoke colour + light blue (*sngo skya*) = bluish smoke colour (*dud sngon*)

vermilion + ink black + lac[-]dye = a dark red (*dmar nag*) resembling sandalwood

white + lac[-]dye = maroonish pink (*na ros*), an excellent pink (*dmar skya*)

green (*ljang* = compounded green?) + white (*dkar*) = yellowish green (*ser ljang*)

Apparently, this account is very practical and valuable to guide the inexperienced artist to learn the colour combinations in detail. However, the master painters—those who have abundant decades of experience in mixing colours—develop a certain instinct in order to combine the colours in their right proportions to obtain the desired colours. Also, according to several experienced Tibetan painters, there is a tip on the deposits of the bottom of a brush-washing pot that could agglomerate an excellent grey colour, which is often too subtle to make on purpose, but is also very useful for mixing with other strong colours to lessen their saturation, if needed.

5.3.3 The painting orders

There are two main steps in the colour application—the laying down of the colours so as to fill the area evenly, and the finishing through the shading to tint and affect the gradual colour transitions; and the outlining to highlight the contour (*rlon mdangs* or *skam madangs*) (Jackson, 1976: 273).

From the initial step of applying the colours, there are some general rules of painting. To avoid smearing the colours, the Tibetan artist usually lays down only one colour each time and applies it from the lightest to the darkest shade. It often begins from the left side to the right, and from the top to the bottom of the

painting. Also, the sequence of depicting the objects is from the furthest area to the closest in perspective as follows: the sky and the cloud first, then the landscape, including the mountains, the rivers, lakes or streams, the flowers, trees and other plants, the animals in the distant background, and the thrones, the nimbus, and the clothing of both the major and minor figures follow each other; and last, the figures themselves are depicted without minor details, such as facial features and ornaments. Sometimes, to make the colour mixing more economical, the artist not only tries to fill in all the areas of a similar colour in one painting, but also makes several copies of the painting at the same time. Note that the brushes that are often used for laying down the first coats of paint with the Tibetan painting brush are usually made with cat or goat hair and a wooden handle; the Chinese ink-painting brush with various hairs and a bamboo handle; and another type of large horse-hair brush, with a leather handle, for painting a big area of wall or for white-washing.

5.3.4 Techniques of colour application

Having briefly introduced the general order of basic colour theory, as well as painting brushes and the painting itself, let us move to the next step of colour application for its shading, gradual transition, and enrichment. Now it is necessary to briefly outline some techniques of colour application in detail as the progression continues.

Briefly, there are two types of colour application: the wet shading (*rlon mdangs*) and the dry shading (*skam mdangs*). The wet shading, as its name suggests, means the blending of two adjoining painting areas when the paint is still wet; this can produce a smooth gradation of colour. It is also called two-brush wet shading by some researchers, such as David and Janice Jackson (1988 [1984]: 98), because it often involves two brushes—one darker and one lighter. Sometimes, to achieve a variety of shading effects, the artist may use more than two brushes for the intermediate colour between the lighter and the darker ones. From my observation, the artist often puts down the lighter colour, and then applies the darker one to the bottom of the lighter area. Two brushes can help the Tibetan artist to work more quickly when they brush back and forth to merge the area of the darker wet colour and the lighter colour with their succeeding strokes.

This technique of colour application is widely used in laying down the initial coats of colour, since it has the advantage of efficiency and gives an effect of a smooth, unbroken field of colour.

Compared to the wet shading, the dry shading is mainly used in the colour enrichment with only one brush. It requires the undercoat of colour to be completely dry, and then it is tinted with a successive accumulation of many thin washes of colour until the colour shading is right. There are some practical issues to raise on this technique. First, when the artist tints, they should not load the brush with too much dye—less is better than too much. Moreover, the artist should use only the tip of the brush to avoid too much pressure on the undercoat layer. As Wu (1994: 383) comments, ‘The method of colouring-enrichment is to dip in the ink lightly with the brush-tip and the strength of the brushwork is determined by the destiny of the colouring’. The colour that should be chosen for shading is based on the main undercoat colour and the experience of painting accumulated from generation to generation. The Tibetan painter Dan-ba-rao-dan summarises the experiences of adjusting and enriching the light and shade of the colours as follows:

The light blue is enriched by the dark blue; the light green by the dark green; the pink by the light rouge; the light rouge or the white by the carmine; the tea and the grey by the light black; the yellow by the orange and so on (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 383).

Finally, whether the dye is right or not cannot be judged until it is completely dry.

Having introduced the simplest form of dry shading, it is worth mentioning more advanced techniques used to achieve a variety of shading effects ‘by altering the size, shape, direction and frequency of the brush strokes’ (Jackson and Jackson, 1988[1984]: 111). As David and Janice Jackson quote (below) the classification of various ways of dry shading by the Bhutanese painter Kunsang Tobgye, there are four types of commonly used shadings in this example of painting the sky.

- 1) *byug mdangs* (spread-on shading): the usual evenly graduated dry-shading method. According to the artist this method was most appropriate for shading the skies in paintings that depicted peaceful (*Zhi ba*) deities.
- 2) *'bru mdangs* (granular shading): shading with small dabs or dots of indigo, applied thickly and close together at the zenith, but less

frequently as the horizon was approached. A less time-consuming method, this was used for the skies of paintings of either peaceful or aggressive (*khro bo*) deities.

- 3) *sprin mdangs* (cloud shading): shading laid down in horizontal bands in imitation of cloud layers.
- 4) *char mdangs* (rain shading): indigo shading applied in vertical strokes, giving the appearance of a falling shower. This was to be used especially in painting of aggressive, terrifying deities (*ibid.*).

From my observation, in order to obtain a smooth and even effect of shading, the techniques of spread-on and granular shadings²⁷ have been used not only in applying the sky, but also to various objects, such as hills and meadows, in both the wall paintings and *thangka* from the ancient times to nowadays. Compared to spread-on and granular shadings, the cloud and rain shadings can rarely be seen in modern Tibetan wall and *thangkas*. Even in the ancient Tibetan painting, we can mainly see these two types of shading employed by the artists from western Tibet.

Aside from these four types of shadings, there are considerably more varieties of shading techniques done by combining the dry shading, the wet shading, and diluting the dye with water. My research has revealed that there are at least four further types: burning-light shading, fluid shading, rainbow shading, and body-model shading. These methods are described as follows:

- (1) Burning-light shading: using a pointed small brush with a thin colour at the tip, quickly shade some details in a gradual transition upon a uniform coloured base. This method is often employed to create a gleaming effect in depicting the burning flame, the shining ornaments on the back curtains, the floating hair of the semi-wrathful or wrathful deities, and so on
- (2) Fluid shading is a method very similar to the granular shading with a much less visible and smoother effect. It is often used as a secondary shading technique to add an intermediate layer in between two tones of the shaded area, which can be most evident from some depictions of clouds and a river or stream .
- (3) Rainbow shading is also a secondary dry-shading technique, which is applied on an area that has been tinted by wet shading. The special point of this method is that it is often applied when the first wet shading is half-

²⁷ Granular shading is also called poked shading or dotted shading (Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 112).

dried, instead of completely dry. It is often used in depicting the rainbow, which has the obvious advantages of quick progression and a gentle, smooth, and dreamlike visual effect. However, it requires careful handling to avoid blurring the preliminary coat of shading.

- (4) Body-model shading is somehow similar to the spread-on shading, but it is mainly executed in tinting the bodily form of both peaceful and wrathful divine beings in Tibetan painting to create a three-dimensional appearance. According to the Buddhist scriptures and image-making rules, various deities and figures have different skin colour and body features, which represent their different characteristics. For example the skin of the Shakyamuni Buddha is usually depicted as the light pink, and Five Wisdom Buddhas with five different colours. The bodies of the eight Great *Bodhisattvas* are painted with various colours: Manjusri with apricot-yellow embodies wisdom; Avalokiteshvara with white embodies compassion; Vajrapani with dark blue represents power; Kshitigarbha with yellow increases the richness and fertility of the land; Sarvanivaranavishkambhin with the milky white, purifies wrong-doing and obstructions to achieve the enlightenment; Maitreya with darker apricot-yellow embodies love; Samantabhadra with red displays special expertise in making offerings and prayers of aspiration; Akashagarbha with blue has the perfect ability to purify transgressions.²⁸ The application of shading to the bodies of these figures follows this basic method: when it is applied to those figures whose skin colours are relatively dark, such as dark red, green, blue, or black deities, the artist usually shades a darker colour to the major joints, and recesses the anatomical regions of the body to get a contrast between the shaded and the unshaded parts of the body (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 122). To shade those figures whose skin colours are fairly light, such as the white or pink peaceful deities, the artist not only adopts the same shading techniques as above, but also employs steady dilutions of mineral paints when a subtle contrast is desired.

5.3.5 *Applying the outline of the contour*

²⁸ Khenpo Kunpal, www.kunpal.com (accessed on 20 January, 2012).

After the colours are shaded properly we come to the most sophisticated and crucial step of Tibetan painting: applying the outline of the contours of most objects. Wu quotes the Tibetan artists' comments, 'what is the use of good colouring if the contour of the figure is badly drawn? It is just like beautifying an 80-years old woman with rouge and powder' (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 370).²⁹ Thus, it is not an exaggeration to say that the outline of the contour is like the bone, the colour is like the flesh, and they are inseparably connected. Specifically, the line drawings have multi-functions: first, to separate objects from their surroundings; second, to indicate and determine the shape, the form, or the texture inside a given colouring area; third, to develop more small details, such as ornaments, on the figure.

Informed by the Tibetan painter *Dan-ba-ran-dan*, Wu summarises the five different methods of outlining found in the Tibetan wall painting as follows:

- 1) Plain or Even Drawing (*Ping-gou-fa* 平勾法): Use a similar colour to draw the outline with thin, smooth and fluent lines. It is somewhat like the iron-line sketch in the Chinese traditional painting, and usually used to depict the muscles.
- 2) Coarse-line Drawing (*Zhuo-gou-fa* 浊勾法): The thickness or size of the lines is variegated, similar to the leaky sketch in the Chinese traditional painting. This method is often used to depict the outlines of the mountains and rocks, and coarse wooden planks as well as their wrinkle-lines.
- 3) Clothes-line Drawing (*Yi-gou-fa* 衣勾法): Use thick lines for the sunken part and thin lines for the raised part with heavy start-touch and light finish-touch. That is to say, to draw the line with a thick head and a thin tail as if it were dying away gradually. This method is usually used to draw the folds of the clothes.
- 4) Leaf-line Drawing (*Ye-gou-fa* 叶勾法): This line is drawn with the middle thick and the two ends thin, something like the date-stone line in the traditional Chinese painting. This method is used to depict the periphery of the leaves as well as their complex veins.
- 5) Cloud-line Drawing (*Yun-gou-fa* 云勾法): This kind of line is relatively thick and bears a stereoscopic sense, showing the contrast of light and shade. It is mainly used to depict the auspicious clouds and other thick lines showing the contrast of light and shade (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 383-384).

The first type of outlining, from my observation, is the most common and fundamental method and the other types are also evident in both the ancient and

²⁹ My translation of *Xing-ci se-jia you he yong, ru tong ba xun tu zhi-fen* (形次色佳有何用, 如同八旬涂脂粉).

modern Tibetan *thangkas* and wall paintings. We may find the five different ways of line drawing complicated enough, however, as far as I know, they are usually employed by combining another two characteristics of outlining: the multi-colour linear, and the gold-coated (or sometimes, the silver-coated) lines. The multi-coloured line drawing, especially the indigo outlining and lac-dye or lake outlining, is commonly used in Tibetan painting. Usually, it requires a darker or a similar colour and a relatively thicker solution than those used in shading to form a concentrated line to contrast appropriately the colour underneath, as well as the background. According to the ancient rule of outlining quoted by a well-known Tibetan artist and scholar Zong-zhe Jie-la:

To outline the red, yellow, purple, and flesh colour, the lac-dye or lake is the most appropriate outlining colour. To outline the turquoise, green, the jade colour, the carbon black is the most appropriate outlining colour. To outline the white and blue, apart from the two art schools in *Xi-Gang*, the indigo is the most appropriate outlining colour. To outline the pinky white and dark flesh colour, the dark purple is often used in the Chinese art tradition. There is still the gold outlining and the double-colour outlining, which should be depicted very subtly (Jie-la, 2002: 247).³⁰

The two main dyes, from my perspective, are used as an outline colour in almost all Tibetan paintings. The indigo outlining is mainly employed for outlining the blue and green areas that probably have already been colour-shaded with indigo and are sometimes outlined with dark vermilion, and maroon areas (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 129-130). Lac-dye or lake outlining is mainly used around the similar warm base colours such as the golden, apricot-yellow, yellow, pink, red, and the flesh colour, so that it is often applied to the bodies and faces of the figures with lighter colours. Some typical examples of the indigo outlining and lac-dye or lake outlining have a very high artistic quality with sophistication, for instance there are the mural paintings entitled as *The Four-Faced and Eight-Armed Yi-Gu Deity* and *Vairocana* in the first floor of the north side of the Shalu Monastery that were done in the first half of the fourteenth century.

³⁰ My translation of *Gou-miao hong huan zi-rou-se, yi-ji xiang-guan zhu yan-se, yan-zhi hong-xian zui xiang pei. Gou-miao qing-lv he yu-se, yi-ji xiang-guan zhu yan-se, hua mo-hei-xian zui xiang-pe. Gou-miao bai-se he qing-se, chu-le xi-gang liang hua-pai, lan-dian-se zui xiang-pe. Gou-miao bai-se shen-rou-se, han-hua chang zui shen-zi-se. Shang-you jin-xian zuo gou-miao, yi-ji shuang-xian zuo gou-miao, gou-miao se-xian hen yin-yue* (勾描红黄紫肉色, 以及相关诸颜色, 胭脂红线最相配。勾描青绿和玉色, 以及相关诸颜色, 画墨黑线最相配。勾描白色和青色, 除了西冈两画派, 蓝靛色线最相配。勾描白色深肉色, 汉画常用深紫色。尚有金线做勾描, 以及双线做勾描, 勾描色线很隐约)。

In addition to the two main dyes for outlining, some other colours such as the white, black, and golden or silvery dyes are widely used as a secondary colour that can be applied thinly to create more contrast over the colour area, and over the line drawing created beforehand. Also, the application of the gold or silver is often used to depict various ornaments and decorative objects, such as the crowns, the earrings, the silky scarf, or the designed pattern on the throne that can make the sacred images more gorgeous, attractive, and vivid. Apart from golden and silvery, the method of applying the white, black, and other ordinary colours is the same as with the indigo outlining, and lac-dye or lake outlining. Yet, the application of the gold or silver appears in a variety of methods. When I interviewed some Tibetan artists, such as La-ba, they suggested that the simplest way of the gold or silver outlining is probably best done as follows: first, put the gesso into a small leather bag with a pointed metal tip or outlet, and from there press the dye lines, and when the gesso lines are completely dry apply dry shading on them with a fine grind of gold or silver powder until the painting is completed.

5.4 The Finishing Touches

The fourth step of painting the facial features of the main figures, particularly their eyes and eyebrows, should be given the greatest attention. As traditional Tibetan artists believe, once the completion of the facial features of the deities is done, these figures come alive and in so doing create an impression of the divine (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 384). It is similar to the old Chinese saying of putting life into a painted dragon by dotting the pupils of its eyes (*Hua long dian jing* 画龙点睛). When the artist begins this step, they know that the painting is near completion. According to Wu:

It [painting the facial features of the main figures] is placed at the last stage of the painting process, for whether or not the painted deities or other figures can be vivid or lifelike largely depends on how their eyes are painted. If their eyes and eyebrows are badly depicted or portrayed, these figures would look dull and lifeless (*ibid.*: 371).³¹

³¹ My translation of *Zhe-shi hui-zhi bi-hua zui zhong-yao de yi-ge bu-zhou, bing jiang zhe-dao gong-xu-dan lie zai hui-zhi bi-hua de zui-hou, yin-wei shen-zhi he ren-wu de chuan-shen zhu-yao kao mian-bu te-bie kao mei-yan, hua hao le jiu neng sheng-dong-gan-ren, da-dao yu-qi de xiao-guo, fou-ze jiu hui ping-ban-fa-wei, qian-gong-jin-qi.*

With respect to most of the common techniques used for painting the eyes and eyebrows of the figures, the traditional Tibetan artists redraw the central axis of the face and sketch the outline of the face with either a pencil or a charcoal stick. This is followed by the use of ink drawing to finalise them. From this point on, there are two main methods of processing the details of the facial features, the eyes and eyebrows in particular. According to David and Janice Jackson (1988 [1984]: 140), the first method is to apply the lac-dye outlining to the bottom of the eyelid, and then to shade gently the two corners of the eyeballs with diluted orange, and to colour the area of the eyebrow, the upper eyelid, and the iris with light blue. Next, is to underline the base colour with a darker blue indigo, and then finally to create an outline and contour of the iris with a dot in the centre of the pupil. Another method is to first lay down the base colour to the area of the eyebrow and upper eyelid and the iris, and then to outline the eyebrow, the upper eyelid, the iris, and the centre of the pupil one by one with the above method, but not with the dark lac-dye, because the black ink is not ideal. Last, the artist comes to shade the corners of the eyeballs with light orange and to outline the bottom eyelid with faint blue (*ibid.*). Note a feature of the adoption of the colours to the eyelids and the irises of the eyes: the lighter and darker brown, yellow, and red are also evident in some of the figures in Tibetan painting.

Although the technique and method of painting the facial features is rather simple and clear, their shapes and dimensions are much more complicated and varied with different deities and figures. Some Chinese scholars, such as Liu Yuan, Wang Zhimin, and Zhang Jun classify the various facial features of Tibetan figures into four categories. These are: (1) Buddhas and peaceful *Bodhisattvas*; (2) the *arhats*; (3) the Taras; (4) the Tantric deities, particularly the *yidam* deities and the Law-Protectors (Liu et al., 1983: 4). From my observation, the facial features of the Buddhas and peaceful *Bodhisattvas* are usually painted with placid crescent-shape eyebrows and downward-looking eyes, which are called bow eyes (*gzhu spyan*) by Tibetan artists (Jackson and Jackson, 1988[1984]: 139). Their upper eyelids are most commonly outlined with either dark blue, or black or deep brown, sometimes with both; and their irises are often drawn as blue, black, or

(这是绘制壁画的最重要的一个步骤，并将这道工序单列再绘制壁画的最后，因为神祇和人物的传神主要靠面部特别靠眉眼，画好了就能生动感人，达到预期的效果，否则就会平板乏味，前功尽弃).

brown with black dotted pupils. Their noses are depicted looking very straight with hidden nostrils. The corners of their mouths often appear to be uplifted in a subtle smile. The facial features of the Buddhas and peaceful *Bodhisattvas* are meant to strengthen their benevolent and compassionate appearances.

In contrast to the uniformly common facial features of the Buddhas and peaceful *Bodhisattvas*, for the *arhats*' facial features it is impossible to find a general rule, since the *arhats* are all different in age, background, experiences, and personality. As Wu comments on the set of the 16 main *arhats*:

their facial features are depicted differently with some dignified, some placid, some deep in thought, some wise-looking, some smart, some kind-hearted, some eloquent, some aloof and some worrying, all in different expressions (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 384).

In my view, these *arhats* are painted to look like ordinary human beings and each has his own facial features and characteristics. For instance the Arhat Vanavasin has the long, drooping eyebrows, blue eye pupils with black and brown double-lined eyelids, and dark-brown beard and moustaches on his thin face. The Arhat Kanakavatsa has a big nose with a round and wide end, showing his nostrils. His eyes are depicted with black upper eyelids, reddish brown outlines of the lower eyelids and eye-bags, and black or deep brown irises with a red dotted centre of pupils, which 'engage us in pointed and unwavering sharpness, animating the believable presence of an extraordinary person' (Rhie and Thurman, 2001: 105). Both of these *arhats* show a cheerful and smiling mood. In contrast, the facial features of the Arhat Angaja and Arhat Rahula seem to be aged, worried, and fragile.

With regard to the facial features of the Taras, some of them, such as the white Tara (*Dorlma Gapu*), have similar facial features (particularly the eyes and eyebrows) to the Buddhas and peaceful *Bodhisattvas*; some others, such as the green Tara (*Dorljaing*), have the grain eyes³² (*nas spyan*) as well as some saints and ordinary humans (Jackson and Jackson, 1988 [1984]: 139). To my knowledge, there are 21 Taras in Tibetan Buddhism, who have different body colours and various facial features. Among them, the most important Taras in Tibetan

³² Bow eyes and grain eyes are two most common ways of painting peaceful deities in traditional Tibetan painting. In contrast to bow eyes (that are curved, downward looking), grain eyes are depicted as round that glaze straight at the viewers.

Buddhism are the white Tara and the green Tara. The white Tara has an eye vertically placed in the middle of her forehead and each of her hands and feet has an eye in the centre. Her curved thin eyebrows and eyelids are usually outlined in black or dark brown, while her irises are painted dark brown with black dotted pupils. Compared to the white Tara, the green Tara has a pair of fairly wide and strong eyebrows and two blue grain eyes with the dark-blue outlining of the eyelids and the faint red shading at the two corners of the eyes.

Finally, like the *arhats*, the Tantric deities are expressed in various forms too, except that the Tantric deities are much more exaggerated, with some monstrous elements, rather than being like ordinary people. As Wu observes, ‘some [Tantric deities in Tibetan Buddhist art] are ferocious, some wild with rage, some indignant, some crafty, some monstrous ... all giving a sense of awe and fright’ (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 384). Further, Wu points out the difficulties and challenges of depicting the Tantric deities as follows:

There is a Chinese saying “It is easy to paint the deities and the ghosts but not the human beings”. [However,] this is not true for the Buddhist frescoes in the Tibetan monasteries because there are not only many kinds of *Yi-dam* deities and *Dharma*-Protectors in Tibetan Buddhism but also many detailed rules for painting them who have different body-colours and complicated religious embodiments, as described in the Buddhist scriptures. These rules are much more than those for painting the deities with kind looks such as *Buddhas*, *Bodhisattvas* and *Taras*. And these rules are not freely handled by the painters (*ibid.*: 385).

From my observation, the facial features of the Tantric deities are often exaggerated and appear in two moods: semi-wrathful and wrathful. In the first type, the eyebrows of these deities are strong, curved, and upward at the end and are often painted like the burning flame in orange or red, or like the frown form of the human in brown or black. Their eyes are usually outlined by black or crimson red to highlight their oval shape. The wrathful deities have even more expressive and exaggerated facial features: their eyebrows are usually thick and linked with the frown wrinkles in the form of a blazing fire. They are most commonly painted in the yellow, orange, or red colours and outlined with darker red lines. Their eyes are often bulging out in shape like big eggs, showing wrathful and frightening expressions. The double-coloured outlines, often the red and the black, are applied to the upper eyelids, while the red is applied to the lower eyelids. The two corners

of their eyes are shaded in orange, pink, or red and the irises are often painted in bright yellow, red, or blue with the black dotted centre. Their noses are very different from the other figures; they are often very short and wide with the nostrils fully exposed and are also depicted in bright yellow, red, or purple-red with the lines in the darker colour.

5.5 The Varnish and the Unveiling Ceremony

Finishing the last step of depicting the facial features of the main figure means that the painting process is complete. However, the whole process of making the Tibetan painting is not yet complete. To protect the painting and make the colours more vivid, the final process involves a glue coating on the finished surface. The method of glue coating is very similar to the varnish used on a Western oil painting, and is used to seal the painted surface, but with different materials. In the early ancient Tibetan wall paintings, it is said that a mixture of the egg white, antiseptic, and insecticidal herbal juice was once used as a varnish (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 385). In the later and modern Tibetan paintings, the artist usually applies an even thin layer of ox-hide glue or the deity-glue and, after it becomes completely dry, coats it with another layer of varnish with brushes. Then the monks are invited to an unveiling ceremony (*abhiseka*) to invite the spiritual divinity of the deities into their portraits—or the painted images—as the completion of the sacred painting.

Now, let us review the whole process of the method of making the Tibetan painting. Briefly, as Wu summarises, the process of making a piece of mural painting in Tibet consists of these steps:

the treatment of the wall surface, the holding of religious ceremony, drafting of the sketch, the finalization of the sketch, the application of colours, tracing in golden or silvery lines, dripping with gold-power, drawing the outline of the contour, delineation of the facial part, suppressing and polishing the golden lines, glue-coating and holding the opening ceremony (The Administration Commission of Cultural Relics of the Tibetan Autonomous Region, 1994: 380).

With regard to the instruction and the techniques to be followed by the artists in Tibet, they are far more like the old techniques of ancient Buddhist mural painting of India and ‘nothing is left to chance in this art which is completely aware of its means and purpose’ (Bagchi, 1980: viii).

The most important forms in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art are *mandalas*, *yab-yum* images and independent images of wrathful deities. The significance of these three art forms and their contemporary developments are the subject of Chapter 3.

Chapter 3

Tradition Transformed

Art Forms in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Strategies of Global Communication for Contemporary Tibetan Art

A great veil is lifted and life is forced to take stock of a strange and unique sensation ... The forms in the thangkas remind one of an invocation repeated and lost and repeated again, as prayers must sound to the human ear in the highlands of Tibet (Anon, 1965: ii-x).

I set out in chapters 1 and 2 aspects of my study and analysis of a brief history of traditional Tibetan Tantric art and its technical features. Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art fuses various aesthetic elements from Indian, Chinese and Nepalese traditions, and indigenous sources into ‘something distinctive and incomparable’ (Sangharakshita, 1996: 74). As I discussed earlier, this is evident from the idealised iconography of Tantric deities and their symbolisation of a harmonious realm in late Tibetan Buddhist art.

Tibetan Buddhist art has made significant contributions to many art forms from varied sources and aesthetic traditions within Tibet and from the other cultures surrounding it. In order to interweave this complex of iconographic presentations within a harmonious panel, the Tibetans have developed a spiritual hierarchy of the Tibetan pantheon that is manifested in their compositions of systematic art forms. I introduced this idea in Chapter 2: the higher placement in the vertical arrangement and the larger size of figural proportions imply that figures enjoy greater seniority in Tibetan two-dimensional paintings and three-dimensional sculptures. As Pal (1997: xiii) comments, ‘The Tibetans also appear to have developed a special skill [to create the art forms] in transforming these extremely complex images into art with extraordinary fineness and expressiveness’.

In my view, Tibet’s most significant contributions to developing Tantric art forms are threefold: *mandalas*; images of sexuality that include the femaleness (mainly within *yab-yum* images); and independent images of wrathful deities. Generally, all of these forms have at least three layers of symbolic meaning: the outer meaning of sense perceptions and the relationships with the outer world; the inner meaning related to our body; and the secret meaning that has a sacred and profound relationship with our emotions and consciousnesses (Bryant, 1992: 197).

Although there are multilayered symbolic meanings of various art forms, all of them overlap with each other and are associated with different aspects of Tantric (meditative) practices. I elaborate on this later.

In this chapter, I first provide a brief introduction to the most significant art forms, *mandalas*, *yab-yum* imagery, and wrathful deities' images, in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. I analyse some typical examples of these art forms and then move from an overview of the traditional processes of these art forms to an analysis of the contemporary evolution of the old Tibetan traditions. Several key questions inform the focus of this aspect of the chapter:

Which artworks by contemporary artists are proposed as exemplars of the use of (Tibetan) Buddhist Tantric themes in a contemporary framework?

What is the relationship between Tibetan and Western art forms? And what is the significance of the use of Tibetan Tantric themes in contemporary Western and Tibetan art?

What have been the responses of contemporary non-Tibetan audiences to the vocabulary and visual codes of Tibetan culture?

Here, my research on contemporary Tibetan art confronts controversial issues on a cross-cultural level and in a broad context, as addressed in the Preface. As postmodern theories of transnational translation go beyond issues of uniqueness and authenticity on a traditional cultural level, my research focus in this chapter shifts from studying Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art as specifically Tibetan, to studying it as a set of potential strategies latent within personal journeys in cross-culture communication. I mainly select the transnational experiences of various contemporary Tibetan, Chinese, and other non-Tibetan artists in seeking to explore the interaction between visual translations and cultures in globalisation.

1. Art Forms in the Tibetan Tantric Tradition and Their Influence on Contemporary Art

1.1 *Mandalas*: The Sacred Architectural Form of the Tibetan World

Mandalas are the sacred cosmograms of both Buddhism and Hinduism, and are probably now among the best-known spiritual and ritual icons all over the world. As Leidy (1997: 17) observes, the great popularity of *mandalas* is 'underscored by the use of the word *mandala* as a synonym for sacred space in Western scholarship and by its presence in English-language dictionaries and encyclopedias'; and Thurman (1997: 9) suggests their popularity may be due to

the fact that ‘the principles, methodology, and artistry of the mandala [can be referred to as] a sacred space created in the process of transforming the universe from a realm of suffering to a realm of happiness’.

In Sanskrit, *mandala* means ‘any circle or discoid object such as the sun or [the full] moon’ (Thurman, 1997: 9). In ancient India, *mandalas* were referred to as either a terrain of a country or the altar on which priests offered sacrifices to propitiate Gods and Goddesses. When *mandalas* were introduced in Tibet from the Pala Kingdom of eastern India between the eighth and twelfth centuries, Tibetans translated the Sanskrit word to *kyikhor* or *dkyil-khor*, which means that which encircles a centre.¹ According to Berzin, *mandalas* are basically round symbols or representations of profound religious meanings that represent a meaning or a world system.² However, not all *mandalas* are circular in Tibetan Tantric art. For example *Chamunda Fierce Fire Offering Symbolmandala* painted in the Gelug tradition of Tibetan Buddhism during the seventeenth century and the eighteenth century is not mainly based on a circle, but instead is a triangle or square-shaped model. This particular *mandala* is mainly used for performing a fierce fire offering to the Goddess Chamunda, the consort of Yama (the ruler of the departed). In the innermost centre of the triangle of the *mandala*, there is a skull bowl on the right and an erected trident on the left, representing the Goddess, which features her standing on a lotus. Also, the innermost central core is placed at the centre of the background of an ocean of blood in the form of another triangle and a circle, which are within the *mandala* mansion made of human skeletons and intestinal garlands. The flames on the black background surround the mansion of Chamunda, which is the representation of the heart of the fire God, Agni. Through Agni’s fierce fire, the offerings are given to the Goddess Chamunda.

As the example shows, the *mandalas* of a male or female Tantric deity (sometimes, a pair of male and female deities) include the deity, or representations of the deity, as well as their inhabiting palace, which is often called the immeasurably magnificent palace of the deity. Here, the *mandalas* have various

¹ The Buddhist Archives of Alexander Berzin, <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/index.html> (accessed on 11 February 2012).

² The Buddhist Archives of Dr Alexander Berzin, <http://www.berzinarchives.com/web/en/index.html> (accessed on 11 February 2012).

concentric diagrams that are used mainly in Tantric traditions of Tibetan Buddhism and each of them can be regarded as ‘a pictorial manifestation of a Tantra. It may be “read” and studied as a text, memorized for visualization during meditation, and interpreted’ (Bryant, 1992: 21).

Thus, the *mandalas* have both spiritual and ritual significance and represent the visual or sometimes the psycho or physical aspect of the teachings of the Buddha to eliminate duality in the diffusion of reality. According to some Buddhist texts, such as the *Sadhanamala* or *Nispannayogavali*, by visualising them while praying, or meditating on them, or by ritually entering into these various types of *mandalas* and their symbolism, one’s mind will be purified and exemplified; wisdom and compassion that are connected to the energies of the universe will prevail. In other words, the *mandalas* go along with enlightenment or awakening, a subjective point of awareness that every being has the potential of becoming by liberating themselves from the duality and suffering. To achieve that point of awareness, Tibetans believe that ‘every being is a *mandala* [and] we are our environment as much as we are the entity in the environment’ (Leidy and Thurman, 1997: 128). When one is described as a *mandala* psycho-physically, it means that one regards oneself as a system of matter, of sensations, ideas, emotions, and consciousness, which is in a process of detaching within the Buddhist cosmology. This viewpoint is also expressed in the *Diamond Pavilion Tantra*:

The Victors teach voidness to stop self-habits
Of both self-advocates and theory-less cynics.
But it is the *mandala* and environment
That incorporate the art of universal bliss.
It is the yoga of the Buddha-pride
That makes Buddhahood accessible.
A Teacher has thirty-two excellent signs,
And is Lord of eighty auspicious marks.
Thus, the art is to assume the goal,
Which is the Teacher’s actual Body of Form.³

For this reason, Tibetans regard the physical form of *mandalas* as being as important as their spiritual meanings, and the practitioners believe that physically entering the *mandala* in their ritual practice has a particular significance for them. As Bryant (1992: 21) comments:

³ This is a verse in *Vajrapanjarā Tantra* that is often quoted by Tibetan scholars. Here, I use Leidy and Thurman’s translation (1997: 129).

The purpose of a *mandala* is to acquaint the student with the tantra and the deity and to allow the student to “enter into the mandala”; that is, to enter into the state of being in which the deity dwells.

For instance in the Tantric ritual of the *mandala* of *Chamunda Fierce Fire Offering*, the Tantric adept, who has a passionate personality type or certain mental habit, visualises themselves actually being the furious deity Chamunda surrounded by the ocean of the blood in the heart of the fire God, Agni, and the flame that spread out from his fiery mouth, or vice versa. In their trained holographic imagination, the adept claims that they are in a complete three-dimensional environment, a real alternative world that is formed ‘against all negative influences by rings of fire and diamond-thunderbolt energies, which, when desired, can be made permeable to absorb beings from ordinary worlds to bless and transform them’ to the positive and divine energies (Leidy and Thurman, 1997: 131). Thus, the purpose of the ritual offerings to the Goddess Chamunda is to transform negative energies into positive ones, and then to generate great bliss in her, which ‘results in the accumulation of merit for the practitioners and the increase of prosperity for all sentient beings’ (*ibid.*). In the process, the *mandala* of *Chamunda Fierce Fire Offering* is created, looked at, and prayed to or worshipped in order to support a visualisation, which is meant to ‘be extremely macabre, eerie, and frightful, its ultimate goal being to eliminate the most deadly innermost enemy, insatiable egotism’ (*ibid.*: 109).

1.2 The *Kalachakra* Sand *Mandala* in Traditional Tibetan Tantric Practice

Another example of the *mandalas* that is constructed in Tantric meditative practice is the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala*, which is a visual vehicle for the *Kalachakra Tantra*. In Tibetan Buddhism, the *Kalachakra Tantra* is one of the most advanced and complex teachings of the Tantric meditation practices (Bryant, 1992: 10). *Kalachakra* means wheel of time, and refers to ‘the flow of all events, past, present, and future’ (*ibid.*: 24). The *Kalachakra Tantra* consists of three levels of teaching: first, the external teaching on Tantric Buddhist cosmology, which reveals itself in the complex geometric structure of the *mandala*, and contains 722 deities within five different hierarchical realms. Second, the internal teaching which enables practitioners to rediscover the energy-channels of the body, as well as the awakened state of the central channel (*ibid.*: 14). Third, the secret teaching in the self-transformation of the visualisation of Tantric meditative

practice is on the basis of the mystic vortices of the subtle body (*lus phra-mo*), which is the subtle energy system within one's gross body. According to *A Dictionary of Buddhism* (2003), at the completion stage of the Tantric meditation, the subtle energy system within the practitioner's body is a well-built network, so that energy-nodes (*chakra*), the creative energy-drops (*bindu*), and the energy-winds (*rlung*) can flow through invisible female and male energy-channels (*nadi*) smoothly in order to generate the sensation of great bliss (*maha-sukha*), which is associated with enlightenment (Keown and Hodge, 2003: 63). That is, the alternate meditative practice in the completion stage also guides the practitioner towards the attainment of enlightenment. According to Bryant (1992: 24):

The Kalachakra deity represents omniscience, for he is one with all time and therefore knows all. *Chakra*, meaning "wheel", refers not only to the cycle of time but also to the way in which the enlightened experience of great bliss radiates like the sun from the self to all sentient beings. The wheel, with no beginning and no end, is also the universal symbol of Buddhism, representing the teachings of the Buddha.

Therefore, the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* is regarded as a manifestation of a particular aspect of compassion and wisdom. It is mainly used to enable Tantric practitioners to visualise the Tantric deity Kalachakra's three-dimensional five-storey palace with its 722 deities that reside within the Tantric initiation ceremonies, and as a guide for their individual meditative practice. For the Tibetan monks, painting the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* is a means of 'invoking the deity [Kalachakra] in one's mind, awaking the Buddha nature which we already possess' (Bryant, 1992: 24). As Bryant further states:

Those who participate in making the sand *mandala* place themselves within the realm of the deity ... By doing so, they are perfecting or attaining the awakened state of mind. Rather than the emphasis being placed on creating something of material value, the monks are engaging in a process that benefits them and will also serve to benefit others (*ibid.*: 25).

Generally, the traditional process of painting the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* consists of a preparatory stage, a main ritual stage, and a dismantling stage, which usually takes six to 12 days and employs four to 16 monks. At the very beginning of the preparation, a Tantric master, as an embodiment of deity Kalachakra, gives offerings to the spirits of the place for the empowerment of rites and, in so doing, explains the importance of the principles of the Tantric path. After the Tantric master has completed his task, the new Tantric practitioners or their representatives recite verses and make vows as a reassuring commitment to their

Tantric practice. This is followed by the new practitioners' requests for the master to bestow the initiation upon them. In response, the Tantric master normally agrees and anoints, symbolically, their *chakras* within the human body (Bryant, 1992: 136-137). On the second day, the Tantric master and his assistant monks purify the site by clearing the area of objects and purifying them ritually, and by preparing the five substances, which include the vases, strings, the sand, and the ritual implements. This is followed by the Tantric master and his assistant monks visualising the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* in their meditation practices. After that, they prepare the *mandala* base, bless the chalk strings⁴, and draw the major axes and four base lines of the *mandala* onto the base. On the third day, the main ritual consists of snapping the wisdom string, applying sand, and 'placing the vases around the *mandala*' (*ibid.*: 142).

From the fourth day to the seventh day, 16 monks start their work, which consists of reciting some Tantric prayers for the purification of body, speech, and mind followed by meditative practices to gain the visualisation of the *mandala*. The construction of the *mandala* with coloured sands follows. During the process of painting, they also discuss the philosophical significance and symbolic meanings of the details of the sand *mandala* with each other in order to get the correct understanding for the collective. The monks work together and paint as a team, giving support and advice to each other for the best spiritual and artistic fruition.

On the eighth day, the Tantric master sets up 10 *purbas*⁵ and 10 ritual vases filled with water around the completed *mandala*, which represents the powerful Tantric protection against any obstacles to enlightenment, and the wisdom of enlightenment. Following this, the monks wear traditional Tibetan costumes of Tantric deities and perform a ritual dance to celebrate the completion of the *mandala*. On the ninth day, the new Tantric practitioners are allowed to enter the *mandala* site for the first time, after the purification of their bodies, speech, and minds. The Tantric master is regarded as a manifestation of the deity Kalachakra, and introduces the history, philosophic ideas, and the purpose of the *Kalachakra* practice to the new Tantric practitioners; he instructs them in the procedure of the

⁴ These are strings dipped in liquid chalk, which are used for drawing straight lines.

⁵ *Purba* is a Tantric ritual implement.

initiation and meditative practices. On the 10th and 11th days, these new Tantric practitioners receive the teachings about the ‘generation of the all-encompassing yogic mind’ (Bryant, 1992: 125) from the Tantric master, and then practise the visualisation of the deity Kalachakra, or even higher, and in doing so visualise themselves as the deity in meditation. The Tantric master hands out red blindfolds for the new Tantric practitioners to wear on their foreheads before being initiated, which symbolically represents their protection before their spirituality becomes ready. Each new practitioner then enters the *mandala* and receives instructions from the Tantric master, which take the form of a complex visualisation full of symbols, whereby each new practitioner holds out a single flower in their hands and, in so doing, visualises this particular image as an offering to the deity Kalachakra. Flowers (especially the lotus) have an important symbolic meaning in Tibetan Buddhism. For example the lotus flower usually represents fortune, rising and blooming to achieve enlightenment and the purification of the spirit. Later in the process, with the Tantric master’s instruction, the new practitioners remove their blindfolds and place the flower onto their foreheads, which represents ignorance being removed by the wisdom of bliss and emptiness.

On the 12th day, all the new Tantric practitioners are invited to view the sand *mandala* and then the Tantric master visualises and requests the 722 deities to return to their mythical abodes and practise meditation on emptiness before the *mandala* is dismantled. In the dismantling process, the Tantric master cuts the eight-direction energy-channels of the *mandala* from the centre by a *vajra*, which is a ritual implement in the shape of a thunderbolt at two ends. This is followed by the monks sweeping the sand into the centre of the *mandala* from four or eight directions, and then the sand is collected into a specially prepared vase (*urn*). The dismantling process of the sand *mandala* for the Tibetan monks is just as important as making it, because to them it represents the ‘energy and mental processes withdrawn or dissolved,’⁶ as well as the fundamental concept of ‘no-self’ and ‘non-attachment’.

1.3 A Cultural Offering: The Contemporary Evolution of the *Kalachakra* Sand *Mandala*

⁶ This is a quote from a lecture by the 14th Dalai Lama at the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, in 2010.

As an art form reflecting the strong living spirit of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism, the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* has recently become a form of cultural offering to the world outside Tibet. It is based on traditional features of the *Kalachakra Tantra* that have been given to communities as a Buddhist initiation to large groups. In contemporary East-West dialogue, the term ‘cultural offering’ is invented by the Tibetans to describe the transplanting of the Tibetan ritual and cultural context within its sacred art into a different cultural environment (Bryant, 1992: 28).

The first presentation of the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* in the West in the American Museum of Natural History in New York in 1988 could be seen as a cultural offering. For the first time in a museum, a group of Tibetan monks made a sand *mandala* and gave a daily recitation of the *mantra* .

Responses to the first presentation of the *mandala* in the museum were overwhelmingly positive. To some extent, the exhibition was a creation in itself; that is, the first collaboration between Tibetan monks and Western curators, as well as Westerner viewers within a contemporary setting. In the museum, the *thekpu* (the special Tibetan house where the *mandala* was constructed) was an invention that, together, a Western engineer and designer and a Tibetan artist contributed to making. Specifically, the Western architect adapted Tibetan methods of constructing the *thekpu* with an engineered design, which consisted of installing a video camera and ceiling lights. As Bryant (1992: 30) states, ‘there was no precedent or plan for what we were doing, we had to experiment and improvise. The Samaya *thekpu* became a beautiful merging of ancient and modern technologies’. Second, more than 50,000 visitors went to the exhibition and many of them seemed very curious about the exotic and mythic artwork, but also were deeply impressed by the intensity of the monks’ concentration (or meditative focus) that they maintained for so long while painting the sand *mandala*, especially when they were observed by hundreds of people moving around them. Based on my experience, I imagine that most of the museum visitors from different cultural backgrounds might have found that it was very challenging—for the first time—to understand the religious and spiritual significance, and the ritual and cultural context of the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala*. Yet, in a positive sense, as the report of the museum states, most of the visitors contemplated the sand

mandala with great respect and paid homage to the intense concentration of the Tibetan monks and artists, as if they were attending a ceremony in a church or a temple (Bryant, 1992: 32). Malcolm Arth, the director of the Department of Education of the American Museum of the Natural History recalls the exhibition as follows:

I don't think I've ever experienced this combination of quiet and intensity among the public [in the 17 years that I've worked here]. The average museum visitor spends about ten seconds before a work of art, but for this exhibit, time is measured in minutes, sometimes hours. Even the youngsters, who come into the museum and run around as if it were a playground—these same youngsters walk into this space, and something happens to them. They're transformed.⁷

Arth's comment that 'they're transformed' can be possibly understood as a two-fold process: first, the mental activity of these Tibetan monks is fully focused on every detail of the ritual practices, meditation of the visualisation, and the iconographies and symbols in the sand *mandala*. In so doing, the meditative practice transforms the Tibetan monks' state of mind to a higher level of consciousness that made them detached from their personal preoccupations. Even the people unfamiliar with the religious and cultural context could witness the mental transformation of these Tibetan monks from their undisturbed contemplative focus. Second, as Arth observes, the mental transformation was happening within the viewers as well (even if they were not consciously aware of either the symbolic meaning of the sand *mandala* or the monks' arduous meditation, and their altruistic intention to benefit all the others). The viewers were very likely to appreciate the unusual concentration of these monks and the way they used their bodies in the process of meditation and in painting the *mandala*, and sensed the peaceful and tranquil atmosphere that the presence of these monks brought into the museum.

However, when the exquisite and intense *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* came out of Tibet to be viewed in the West, some reactions to it were somehow ambivalent. Some Western viewers were resoundingly astonished to see the Tibetan monks sweep the sand *mandala* away, without any hesitation, and thus, they apparently unfavourably considered the sand *mandala* as a piece of art after it was dismantled. It was probably for this reason that these viewers appreciated the

⁷ Cited in Bryant, 1992: 245-246.

aesthetic value of the sand *mandala* from a conventional Western perspective, and thus expected it to be kept and exhibited in the galleries and museums for more people to see. That is to say, Western attitudes towards art tend to regard it as the creation of an individual artist's expression; they attach a lot of material value to the artwork, viewing it as a material commodity displayed with a price tag. Subsequently, they viewed with dismay the dismantling of the sand *mandala* as an unexpected destruction of an extraordinary and beautiful piece of artwork. As some Western art writers, such as Kay Larson, said: 'A sand *mandala* is an extraordinary thing, collaborative, ephemeral, unsigned, ahistorical—contrary in every way to "art" as we mean it in the [Western] world'.⁸

More importantly for the discussion pursued in my research, the context of the American Museum of Natural History (which holds the sand *mandala* created at the end of the twentieth century) seemed to suggest that the *mandala* was presented and viewed—in this particular museum—as an anthropological project rather than as a piece of art, on its own terms, and with parity with Western forms. Not surprisingly, this case is not alone. During the 1990s, the *mandala* as the traditional artistic wealth of Tibet has been presented in a number of collections in museums, public institutions, and private collections in the West.⁹ Among the major exhibitions outside Tibet, the finest and most comprehensive exhibition, in my view, is probably *Wisdom and Compassion: The Sacred Art of Tibet*, which was shown in the Asian Art Museum of San Francisco, and the IBM Gallery of Science and Art (New York) in 1991, and in the Royal Academy of Arts (London) in 1992. This exhibition of it initially tried to present a giant 3-D *mandala* in reference to the teachings of the Buddha outside its Tibetan religious and cultural context. It was then reconstructed as a symbolic idea of the *mandala* by showing the artworks and historical introductions of the lineages of the four main schools of Tibetan Buddhism at the four quarters (Stoddard, 2001: 224-225). The exhibition's way of curating the *mandala* was based on the traditional Western understanding of Tibetan art—it was perceived as a unique individual work of art

⁸ This is taken from Larson's column of art criticism in the *New Yorker* magazine (1988) and cited in (Bryant, 1992: 34-35).

⁹ Many comprehensive exhibitions and collections with catalogues dedicated to ancient Tibetan art were published in the 1990s: Essen, 1990; Beguin, 1990; Pal, 1990, 1991; Rhie, 1991, 1999; Leidy, 1997; Kossak, 1998; Bazzato Deotto, 1999; Weldon, 1999; see also Stoddard (2001: 250); Luczanits (2002: 125).

with religious insights and historical context, rather than its aesthetic value, which classified it as art in the Western sense. As Harris (2012: 20) argues:

The *Wisdom and Compassion* catalog appeared to suggest that the religion [of Tibet] ... could help solve many contemporary quandaries. Encountering Tibetan art in the ostensibly secular spaces of Western museums was therefore an act of veneration for the religion that had produced it, and the Tibetan *rten* [supporting element or representation of a *mandala* for the practice of Tibetan Buddhism] had been converted into supports for the Western mind.

Here, important questions should be asked about: What is meant in the West by the term Tibetan art? Why is non-Western art of this type to be judged as either an anthropological project, or as a kind of therapy for the Western viewers, rather than being appreciated in terms of the Western valuations of art? And how could we create modern or contemporary notions about Tibetan art among Westerners and non-Westerners alike, as well as Tibetans? Recent research, *The Museum on the Roof of the World*, begins by suggesting that:

Tibetan art is a product of the Western imagination. It was invented over the course of nearly two centuries by people who were not Tibetan but who developed a passion for Tibet primarily through an encounter with the portable, material signifiers of Tibetan culture ... When investigating the collection and display of things Tibetan in Britain from the mid-nineteenth century onward, it becomes clear that the idea of Tibetan art was forged in the classificatory systems of museums and the shifting academic fashions that informed them (Harris, 2012: 19).

This was self-evident, for example from the prevailing perceptions of Tibetan art in the West (mainly England) in the 1960s. As Stoddard observes: ‘The art of Tibet was not considered art [because it was] in absolute contrast to “art for art’s sake” in the West in the mid-twentieth century [and] the image of Tibetan art in the West was at that time marked by a stereotyped attitude [of Orientalism in England] concerning Tibet itself’ (Stoddard, 2001: 231). Here, the significance of Tibetan art in the West was not emphasised for its aesthetic value, but on the Orientalists’ descriptive mode in the Western political and cultural imagination (Shakya, 2001: 183). Even now, despite the fact that the perception of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism and its art in the West has changed and evolved significantly over the last four decades, the descriptions and representation of Tibetan art continue to be framed in the Western ideological and imaginative structure of the ‘other’. In other words, Tibetan art is still the ‘native being’, ‘a passive object in the objectifier’s gaze’, which should necessarily be subject to postcolonial critique

with respect to a colonialist appropriation and construction of ‘native’ identity (*ibid.*: 184). However, as Shakya (2001: 183) observes, Tibetan studies [including the study of Tibetan art] ‘has remained outside the scrutiny of postcolonialist discourse’.

However, another major exhibition, *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure* (which was held by the Art Institute of Chicago in 2003), attempted, for the first time, to define and present an aesthetic view of Tibetan art without an overemphasis on its religious and historical references. As the curator Pal (2003: 21) says in the catalogue:

It has become much too fashionable these days to read about art rather than look at it, especially when the artwork belongs to another culture. This is particularly true of the religious arts that were created primarily to appeal to the heart rather than the intellect. The purpose of this catalogue and the exhibition it accompanies is to encourage the viewer first to look [at] and enjoy the beauty of the objects and then to explore their spiritual import.

This was a significant movement from concentrating on the religious and historical message of Tibetan artworks as anthropological objects to acknowledging their artistic magnificence. That is to say, the brilliant artistic expression of Tibetan art was raised to top priority, above its religious themes or practices, and finally considered to be fine art in a Western Museum. Here, I cannot help wondering whether the process of making and dismantling the *Kalachakra* sand *mandala* in the American Museum was presented as a time-based experimental artwork in the Western sense. Without burdening the viewers with the excessive knowledge of the other culture, would the Western viewers be able to appreciate the aesthetic principle of the sand *mandala* more? It is the conjecture of this thesis that a simple answer does not follow.

2. Sexual Imagery: The Most Controversial Form in Tibetan Art

Among the three most significant contributions that the Tibetans have made to their artistic tradition, sexual imagery—such as the *yab-yum* images—is often regarded as the most radical and controversial form of Tibetan Buddhism art today. As I explained in the Introduction, these images represent the sexual expectation or union of male and female deities, which are created mainly as supporting elements to the *Anuttarayoga* Tantric practices. Although there are some sexual elements and rituals presented marginally in earlier *Yoga Tantras*, the iconography of Buddha and his consorts in sexual union supports the Tantric

practitioner in visualisation, and has gained great prominence and popularity in *Anuttarayoga* or *Mahayoga Tantra*. As Ray (2002b: 124) states:

In Mahayoga, one visualizes oneself as the divinity with consort. “All manifestation, thoughts and appearances are considered to be the sacred aspects of the divinities within relative truth”, in the words of Tulku Thondup. By visualizing all phenomena as the deities of the *mandala* of buddhahood, in the development stage, all appearances are purified.

For example one of the most beautiful paintings of sexual images is *Paramasukha and Chakrasamvara* in the Robert Hatfield Ellsworth Private Collection; it was made between the late fifteenth and early sixteenth century in the central regions of Tibet. In this painting, Paramasukha¹⁰ is depicted as having a deep blue body with four cheerful faces—painted in white (left), blue-black (front), red (right), and yellow (seen in two dimensions as the back)—representing four of the Buddha wisdoms. As the most eye-catching element in this painting, his deep blue body was modelled with six pairs of shapely arms and a pair of standing strong legs. Rhie and Thurman (1991: 220) observe that:

The modeling [of Paramasukha] does not follow the dictates of external light; instead, light seems to radiate from the body itself, heightening the muscular shaping and imparting a mildly rounded dimension and substantial reality to the figure.

There is a third eye in the centre of his forehead in his front blue face looking out peacefully at the viewers. His half-open mouth shows two rows of his shining bright teeth. His main arms hold a *vajra* sceptre (right) and a *vajra* bell (left), while embracing his consort, representing ‘the union of relative and absolute, love and wisdom, life and death, creativity and security’ (Thurman, 1991: 18). His top arms lift up the flayed skin of the elephant of ignorance across his back, symbolising the conquest of ‘the heavy mind that insists on the habitual perceptions and conceptions of ordinary reality’ (*ibid.*). His next pairs of arms hold a drum (right) and a *khatvanga*¹¹ staff (left), a *vajra* chopper (right) and a four-faced head of Brahma (left),¹² a trident (right), and a skull bowl (left),¹³ and

¹⁰ Paramasukha is a Tantric archetype deity of Buddha Shamvara.

¹¹ *Khatvanga* is one of the most complex implements of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, which consists of a long eight-faceted sandalwood shaft with symbolic objects, such as a *vajra* cross, at its top; see Beer (2003: 102).

¹² It was originally an attribute of Shiva in Hinduism and then adopted into the iconography of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. It usually symbolises ‘both the severing of all conceptualizations, and the development of altruism’ (*ibid.*: 161).

¹³ The skull bowl is a popular offering implement in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism; see Beer (2003: 110-112).

an axe (right),¹⁴ and a lasso (left).¹⁵ Also, he wears a five-skull crown on each of his heads and the long garland of severed heads and skulls encircle his neck, essentially representing ‘the masculine principle of form [and] the feminine principle of emptiness’ (Beer, 2003: 162). His consort, Chakrasamvara, has a beautiful and energetic red (coral) colour on her face and body, signifying blood and women at the basic level, and transcendent wisdom at a higher level. Embraced by Paramasukha, she puts her right leg around his left thigh, while stretching out the other leg vigorously. She raises her right arm above her partner’s shoulder, holding up the *vajra*-sealed curved knife.¹⁶ Her beautiful face is upturned towards Paramasukha with an adoring gaze. Both Paramasukha and Chakrasamvara wear the most delicate gossamer strands of white jewellery in their bracelets, anklets, and belts. As Rhie and Thurman (2003: 220) suggest, the style of the jewellery can be seen from thirteenth-century eastern Indian and Nepalese art, which may be evidence of the Indian and Nepalese aesthetic influence in central Tibet during the late fifteenth century.

This image, along with many other sexual images, expresses the highest goal of attaining the enlightenment alongside daily life. In other words, it has been integrated as a core ideal of the Tibetan way of life. As Thurman (1991: 19) comments:

Tibetan lovers and domestic couples are aware of the virtues of celibacy and the desirability of monastic life, but, perhaps unconsciously, they must feel exonerated in their mortal passions. After all, even the Buddha emanate in father-mother union form.

For Tibetan Tantric practitioners, this sexual imagery supports and aids them in the visualisation of the meditative practices of Tantric deity yoga until every practitioner identifies with the deity on which they meditated. In the case of practising the meditation of Paramasukha and Chakrasamvara, a male practitioner can generate himself as the Buddha-father Paramasukha first, and then he mentally transfers himself into the imagined body of Buddha-mother Chakrasamvara. Conversely, a female practitioner identifies herself as Chakrasamvara, and then imagines herself changing into Paramasukha. In doing

¹⁴ The axe is a docile weapon of some wrathful Tantric deities, representing ‘the severing of all negative notions and concepts from the mind’ (*ibid.*: 144-145).

¹⁵ The lasso is the rope noose or snare held in the left hand of certain deities in (Tibetan) Tantric Buddhism; see Beer (2003: 147-148).

¹⁶ This is one of the main Tantric implements for Tantric female deities; see Beer (2003: 112-114).

so, the practitioner realises ‘a mystic experience within his or her own body’ (Herrmann-Pfandt, 1997: 12).

Alternatively, there are two other ways of practising the sexual *Yoga Tantra* for couples or people living in celibacy, informed by a meditation handbook from the *Kalacakra* cycle:

1. Either the male meditator takes a female consort with whom he practises the meditation in the form of sexual yoga. In this case either of them identifies himself or herself with the deity who suits his or her gender. In our example, this would mean that the female practitioner identifies herself with Vajrayogini [the Buddha-mother], the male with Samvara [the Buddha-father]. Tantric Buddhist story collections and hagiographies include several examples of Mahasiddhas and yoginis who are reported to have attained to perfection this way and—as a kind of proof of their having reached the goal—to have been seen by other people as Tantric deities in *yab-yum* form, for example as Chakrasamvara and Vajravarani [Paramasukha].
2. For people living in celibacy, however, this type of practice is not possible, because even in order to practise Tantric meditation, they are not normally allowed to break their vows. Celibate practitioners of both sexes therefore identify themselves in the course of their meditation with the main deity, in our case Cakrasamvara, and visualise Vajravarani [Paramasukha] face to face in front of them as their partner. This principle is not altered by the fact that in the meditation of *yab-yum* deities, it is actually both deities with whom one has to identify.¹⁷

In such Tantric meditation, both man and woman are confirmed in their sexual identity and gender transformation seems to possess ‘all the ideological fundamentals of religious gender equality’ (Herrmann-Pfandt, 1997: 28).

I have already discussed the Tibetan view of the elevated position of woman in Tantric practice in the Introduction. It would be obvious for the viewers to obtain the impression that woman plays a very important role in both Tibetan Tantric meditation and its art. In Tibetan *thangka*, Buddhist iconography is prolific in its depictions of positive images of women and female divinities that emphasise their beauty, or their auspicious powers of fertility. One such case, in my opinion, is the figure of the Goddess in the mural painting of Tholing Monastery. In contrast, some feminists such as Lilian Zirpolo argue that in a patriarchal society beautiful images of the female form serve as nothing more than to fulfill the purpose of physical sexual attraction to man; the emphasis on fertility and procreation is defined as a woman’s function from a man’s viewpoint.

¹⁷ This account of sexual meditation in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is taken from the citation found in Herrmann-Pfandt (1997: 20-21).

Admittedly, there are some images of the female form in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism that are presented from the viewpoint of a man's expectation and imagination, such as the image of the precious queen who is believed to be the most beautiful woman with eight perfect qualities:

- (1) She is faithfully devoted to her lord, the *Chakravartin*, and desires no other man.
- (2) She is not jealous if the *Chakravartin* displays amorous feelings towards other women.
- (3) Her womb is fertile and will bear many healthy sons.
- (4) She works for the welfare of all beings in her lord's kingdom.
- (5) She possesses innate feminine wisdom, and always supports her lord's plans.
- (6) She always speaks the truth and uses no frivolous words.
- (7) She is not attracted to sensual objects, stimuli, or material possessions.
- (8) She holds no false views (Beer, 2003: 40).

However, I would argue that some other *yab-yum* images and some images of female deities in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism seem not to fall into this category. For example, a Goddess such as Maya is represented as a co-creator of the universe. In Tantric Buddhism, the energy of Maya is believed to be the active force of action for the creation of the universe on an atomic level. Although the essence of the universe is no-self, unenlightened people usually mistake the activity of Maya for the ultimate reality of existence. For this reason, Maya is often called the veil of illusion or deception that keeps us unenlightened in the endless cycle of birth and rebirth. In Tantric ceremonies dedicated to Maya, both male and female practitioners can meditate on the body and the activity of the Goddess in an endeavour to connect themselves with the cosmic power. Expressions of honour, worship, and devotional attention¹⁸ to the Goddess are the root activity in such ceremonies. Bowing to the image of the Goddess, giving symbolic offerings to her, as well as Three Jewels, and chanting canonical formulas are often made prior to an intense meditation. In the meditation, the man or woman practitioner imagines that the Goddess invites them into the inner awareness to identify themselves with her. Through the sexual self-realisation with the divine power, 'a discursive reflection of his [or her] own splendour [is presented as] an infinite bliss' of the creative energy of the Goddess within the cosmic sexual joy (Rawson, 1988 [1973]: 42). Thus, ritual ceremonies for the Goddess can be seen as liberation from distorted relationships between human and nature, which is the

¹⁸ Pali-English Dictionary, <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.2:1:2985.pali> (accessed on 28 August, 2012).

product of a patriarchal society. It could possibly enable a reading of the *yab-yum* image as promoting the elimination of gender difference towards transcendent ecstasy, in which woman is an important vehicle as much as man is to higher consciousness. The stone panel *Maya Giving Birth Without Infant Being Imaged* made by Indian artisans around the second century is a good example of the complexities that arise in portrayals of Queen Maya. She is often seen seated on the Buddha-mother's right side, and such portrayals are significant indicators of attitudes towards women and motherhood. The most frequent images of her focus on the Buddha's conception and birth and present her as a beautiful, voluptuous, and semi-nude woman asserting the auspicious powers of fecundity and prosperity thought to be possessed by women as an active force.

In Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, positive images of women's bodies are taken further. Representing 'the whole womb-complex' (Rawson, 1988 [1973]: 51), the outer appearance of the human vulva (Maya's vulva) is depicted explicitly in Tibetan paintings. The small icon of the vulva (called *yonis*) in a *mandala thangka* made by a Tibetan monk during the nineteenth century in a central region of Tibet is fully developed in both Tibetan Tantric theoretical practice and artistic skills. In the centre of this *mandala thangka*, Maya sits on the lotus base and spreads apart her legs to display her vulva fully. In the process of meditation, Tantric practitioners claim that one can embrace its creative energy for which the *yonis* is the symbol of the active cosmic energy. The shape of the vulva can also be seen on ritual objects and decoration in other Tibetan Tantric ritual objects. For Tibetan Tantric practitioners, the shape of the vulva in Tibetan Buddhism represents one of the peaks of artistic pleasures through the liberating sexuality of Tantra, which is, in contrast, an exploitation of mundane sexuality. Here, Tibetan Tantric vulva images function towards liberation in possibilities.

In summary, I think that there are two outstanding features of sexual imagery—such as the images of the *yab-yum* couple or the vulva—in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. The first is the use of the sexuality as a skilful means of attaining enlightenment. That is, it serves as a metaphorical approach in the Tantric meditative practices. These sexual images strive to express the in-between state of consciousness between man and woman and are created to help mankind achieve enlightenment with the union of wisdom and compassion, as a

guide in the advanced Tantric meditative practices. As Fisher (1997: 56) notes: ‘The development and marriage of wisdom and compassion are necessary for transcending the self-concerns that hinder progress towards understanding the ultimate nature of reality’. And the second is a Tantric initiation, which enables disciples to engage in rituals with sexual elements. Yet, genuine performance at such a high level for the practitioner and their consort is probably very rare, and the impure mind and motivation run the risk of sexual abuse. Subsequently, modern Tibetan Tantric practices put much more emphasis on visualisation in meditation, in which the practitioner does not need a real consort or even a coarse form of sexual images. It also insists that Tantric practitioners are purely motivated, and have great understanding of the Sutra and Tantra Buddhist traditions, as well as the correct employment of stabilised wind-energies of the subtle body, and the powerful imagination—something that takes decades of diligent meditative practice to cultivate.

2.1 Potentially Aesthetic Figures of Traditional Imagery in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism in Contemporary Art

In what potential ways can the form of sexual images in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art and its profound philosophical meanings be understood and related to contemporary life and art practice? Obviously, this is difficult to answer and there may be many different ways to approach the relationship between Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and contemporary art practice. From my observations, the sexual imagery (including its distinctive understanding of sexuality and the value of femaleness) in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism can be regarded as an aesthetic figure and may have the potential to bridge the two.

2.1.1 The precursor: Gendun Choephel

The patterns of traditional images—such as the *yab-yum* images or the erotic images of women—in Tantric Buddhism provide important symbols and sources that Tibetan artists can employ as part of Tibetan culture implicitly or explicitly in a contemporary frame. The Tibetan artist Gendun Choephel (also known as Gendun Chopel, 1903 to 1951) who was also an ‘iconoclast monk, scholar and itinerant intellectual’ is the precursor of Tibetan modern and contemporary painting as exemplars of the employment of Buddhist Tantric themes (Heimsath, 2005: 3). During his lifetime, Choephel published some interesting but

provocative and enigmatic articles and poems, some of which questioned how to develop traditional Tibetan views on history, Buddhist cosmology, the origin of Tibetan writing, and art (Dhondup, 1978: 10-18). Although he still held a Buddhist belief and an orthodox point of view, such as the wisdom and compassion conveyed by the *yab-yum* images in Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism, Choephel criticised the high-level ecclesiastical system in Tibet and advocated modern rationalism and individual orientation in the development of ancient Tibetan culture. In doing so, his explorations in (Tantric) art and literature were presented in his own way, which comprised something of a combination of tradition and wisdom, certainty and free thinking, and faith and scepticism on the question of modernising (Tantric) Buddhism and its art in Tibet. Unfortunately, few of his paintings survived due to the unstable political movements in Lhasa in the late 1940s and the Cultural Revolution in China from the 1960s to the late 1970s. From the very limited number of sketches, watercolours, and oral accounts, researchers and historians know that he was very interested in figures being presented in a realistic style. One such example is a vivid watercolour portraiture of an Indian young woman that he drew during his travels through South Asia . To earn his living, Choephel had to paint commissioned *thangkas* of the Buddha and other Tantric deities, which followed the traditional process and methods at the beginning. Gradually, he developed an unprecedented realistic style in depicting the light and shade of the figures (especially women), and erotic objects for his religious paintings, which influenced some of his friends and art students. Due to the lack of first-hand evidence of Choephel's realistic signature style in his Tantric-themed painting, the influence of his work can only be derived from the artworks of his students, such as the Indian artist Kanwal Krishna ((1910 to 1993), with an example of his paintings) who accompanied Choephel on a trip to southern Tibet in 1938; and the Tibetan artist Amdo Jampa (also known as Amdo Chamba, 1916 to 2002) who was significantly influenced by Choephel in 1949 and who later developed a more photo-realistic style of male and female Tantric deities in his religious paintings. I return to the analysis of Jampa's paintings in more detail shortly.

However, as 'a stubborn seeker of truth [and a] wanderer between worlds' of knowledge (Lopez, 2006: 11), Choephel eventually became a stranger in his

hometown and was disliked by the Tibetan administration and the ultraorthodox traditionalists, which led him to 12 years of exile in South Asia, and even imprisonment in 1947 after he returned to Lhasa. In a positive sense, during his travels to Nepal and India, he was well-informed about the modernist symbolism within the artworks of one of the greatest Russian painters, Nicolas Roerich (1874 to 1947), which absorbed some of the elements from Buddhism, Tantrism, and other mystical strains of thought (Stoddard, 2006: 1). And Roerich's personal viewpoint—'the triumph of Russian culture came about through a new appreciation of ancient myth and legend' (Bowl, 2008: 69)—was inspired by Choephel's experimental form and style of artwork. For example the line drawing of a naked (female) figure that he made during his travels in 1938 has a modernist artistic style that reveals his personal inner longing to re-explore old traditions from a humanitarian perspective for a future Tibet that could 'integrate into the modern world that yet retained its own cultural identity and history' (Stoddard, 2006: 1).

2.1.2 Amdo Jampa's photo-realistic painting as experimental development of the Tibetan art tradition

As I mentioned earlier, following Choephel's experimental guidance of (Tantric) art and philosophy that reviewed the (Tantric) traditions from a critical point of view, Jampa created a unique photo-realistic style in his paintings. This was inspired by his interest in photography and different elements from both the Tibetan aesthetic tradition and Western realism (Yu, 2005: 302). In 1954 he went to study in Li Zongjin's oil-painting class at the Central Academy of Fine Art and became the first Tibetan artist to learn contemporary art in China. To achieve a more realistic effect of light and shade, he often insisted on drawing with live models he invited to his studio. In the Tibetan photographic archives there exists a photograph of Jampa's studio in the 1990s in which a young Tibetan woman wearing a crown and jewels was posed half-naked at his request. Meanwhile, with full concentration, the artist drew the portrait of her as the image of Tara—one of the most popular Goddesses in Tibet—on a large canvas. The facial features of Jampa's sketching of Tara seem to be influenced, in my view, by the widely prevailing monthly posters of beauties in Shanghai during the 1930s and 1940s. The Chinese researcher Yu's found evidence that the Shanghai poster of the

Fashion had already arrived in Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, by the end of the 1940s in trade exchanges with Han Chinese (Yu, 2005: 302). According to Heberer's investigation of Tibetan and Chinese art after 1959, the depiction of facial structure, figure, and movement of Tibetan women seems to correspond to Han ideals of beauty (Heberer, 2001: 123). In the case of Jampa's sketching of Tara, although the facial feature has clear reference to Chinese fashion during the 1930s, the stereotype in which the model was drawn is the Tibetan woman in religious posture with traditional costume. To create the mysterious and sacred atmosphere, he depicted the ritual instruments (crowns, ornaments, throne) and the pattern in the background of Tara in the traditional decorative style of Tibetan religious art. It is obvious that some elements of Chinese, Western, and Tibetan aesthetic traditions are simply juxtaposed in this painting, which has not produced a completely mature style. However, in a positive sense, Jampa's experimental development of the Tibetan Tantric art tradition that borrowed Western photo-realistic painting methods is largely successful, because it has made more young Tibetan artists aware of the modern and contemporary artistic styles in the outside world and is a realisation of the significance of innovation and personal creativity from the traditional art resources.

2.1.3 Jigmei Chilai and his Tantric-themed painting

After Jampa studied in Beijing in 1954, several other Tibetan artists went to art schools in Mainland China to study Western and Chinese aesthetic traditions, and later in the 1960s the socialist realistic model and style became the predominate style there. Only from the end of the 1970s was art education in China open again to Chinese traditional paintings as well as various Western modernist artworks. This attracted more young Tibetan artists to go to Mainland China. Tibetan artist Jigmei Chilai (b. 1961)—who is also the Secretary General of the Tibet Association of Fine Artists—was one of them. During the late 1970s and early 1980s, he studied Tibetan painting in Tibet University in Lhasa, and then Chinese traditional painting and Western oil painting in the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing. Since the 1990s, Chilai has made his art from the symbolic Tantric vision of personal energy and altruistic dedication in the Tibetan way of life. For example he employs the sun and the moon, and traditional Tantric Buddhist symbols of sexual images in his cloth painting entitled *The Sun and the Moon*. My

research has revealed that the sun and the moon above the deity in *thangkas* or wall paintings in Tibet are very typical symbols related to gender relationships in Tibetan art. In Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism, the sun stands for the wisdom of females and the moon stands for the compassion of males. More specifically, in the Tantric system, the sun is a symbol of an ovum, all the things passed down from female ancestors, and the natural being of spiritual power; the moon is a symbol of a sperm, all the things passed down from male ancestors, which are powerful potential energies towards the path of enlightenment. In Chilai's painting, a man and a woman stand next to each other wearing the traditional Tibetan costumes and holding a red cloth by its ends. The man, on the right side, gazes passionately at the woman. There are two round circles around these two figures, reminiscent of the nimbuses of the Buddha-mother and the Buddha-father. The man's circle on the right side is painted red, which represents the sun, the symbol of the female; and the woman's is painted half red and half white, which represents the moon, which is the symbol of the man in Tibetan Buddhism. Although viewers outside Tibet may not be familiar with the symbolic meanings of these figures and objects in Chilai's painting, the loving and compassionate atmosphere within the male and female figures can easily be perceived by anyone who looks at his work.

2.1.4 The employment of Tantric symbols in Kardyi's painting

Another example is the cloth painting *Pastoral Song* (1999-2000), which was done by a young contemporary Tibetan artist Kardyi (b. 1971) who studied at the Department of Arts in Tibet University in the 1980s, and then at the Chinese Academy of Fine Arts in the early 1990s. In his artwork is a naked woman with a dark-brown skin colour and long straight black hair with a white lotus flower in her right hand, which she holds gracefully, surrounded by a tranquil atmosphere with a few sheep in the wild. She is reminiscent of the White Tara, also known as the Mother of all Buddhas, who is an important female *Bodhisattvas* of the Tibetan Tantric tradition. She represents purity, harmony, wisdom, and compassion. In iconography, White Tara often holds an elaborate white lotus flower, as with the figure in Kardyi's painting. Further, the lotus can usually be seen with the Buddha father-mother in Tibetan art.

As far as I know there are three aspects of the symbolic meaning of the lotus in Tibetan Buddhism. First, it stands for transcendent wisdom. Moreover, the lotus is considered the first pure flower—inasmuch as it is not stained with the dust of the six-fold world—a symbol of the mercy or compassion necessary for transcendent wisdom. These two insights are common in Mahayana Buddhism. However in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, the lotus is given a deeper meaning, representing female genitalia, the place where universal happiness is embedded, and where all images and visions originate, which then grow into the magnificent pantheon of the blessed worlds.

According to Tibetan Tantric practitioners, in the union of male and female practitioners they should imagine themselves as a full-blown lotus in order to reach the level of super bliss, brightness, and non-duality. In Kardyi's painting, the lotus is held between the woman's plump breasts, which could be a representation of her auspicious power of fertility. Not far behind her, there are two ambiguous figures and a monk-like man, staring straight ahead. Different to her peaceful gaze, the other figures seem anxious, enquiring, and somewhat confused. In this image, the artist abandoned the rules of measurement of *Bodhisattvas* and Tara, and painted the half-naked figure of White Tara as an ordinary Tibetan woman, but with darker skin colour in a natural and realistic way. The facial feature of White Tara in this painting is of a calm composure and a subtle smiling demeanour, which seems to express her love and compassion for people and for all beings with a strong spirit of humanism. It is different from the model of White Tara that is usual in traditional *thangkas*: a dazzling white body covered by magnificent gold embellishments and jewels. The background of this painting is a peaceful and natural landscape that seeks to highlight the main figure, White Tara, and to create a harmonious and peaceful atmosphere. I note too that the traditional icon of the heaven ladder and a naked man climbing up (as I discussed in Chapter 2) appear in the background of this painting. They make direct reference to the indigenous myths of Tibet about the divine origin of their earliest kings as sons of the Gods, descended from a mighty mountain. For Tibetans, a ladder (or a rope) is regarded as the connection between the human world and the realm of Gods and Goddesses. The figure of White Tara and the symbolic icons, such as the lotus and the ladder in Kardyi's painting may simply imply the artist's longing for inheriting the ancient wisdom of Tibetan culture.

To understand the implicit message from the Tibetan artist, it is helpful to put it into a wider historical context of the development of modern and contemporary Tibetan painting. From the 1950s to the 1990s, there were two waves of Chinese artists producing artworks about the Tibetan people and landscapes.¹⁹ However, for both Chinese and Tibetan artists, before the early 1990s it was not easy to find images and resources that related to Tibetan Tantric Buddhist symbolism and its art in Mainland China. This is because Chinese socialist realism during the 1950s and the 1980s was a sign of the ‘brutal and traumatic advances’ of Chinese modernisation hostile to old traditions of Tibet in order to remould it into the Marxist cultural system (Hofer, 2010: 1). Although traditional Tibetan painting, as a recursive/traditional aristocratic symbol was once repressed by Maoist propaganda as art at large, the Tibetans kept their cultural identity by going underground, culturally, between 1959 and 1978. The co-curator of the first museum exhibition of Tibetan Contemporary Art at the Rubin Museum of Art in the United States, Rebecca Bloom, stated in an interview that Tibetan symbolism, iconography, motif, and other visual elements in traditional Tibetan paintings are well-preserved and are still very important to most contemporary Tibetan artists.²⁰ In a positive sense, this statement demonstrates that the Tibetan religious value system, aesthetic tradition, and cultural identity have been maintained quite successfully within the process of Tibet’s modernisation that began in the 1980s. This may also have been assisted by the Chinese government’s liberalisation policies from 1978 onwards.

In the late 1990s there was heated discussion about the trans-cultural translation of visual codes between Han Chinese and Tibetan art. In the more open social atmosphere of the past two decades, Tibetan artists in the Tibetan autonomous areas in China have been encouraged to engage more thoroughly with their own culture. Thus, I think Kardyi probably intended to express his intention to develop the traditional pattern of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism in the Tibetan culture in an implicit way at that time. Since then, many Tibetan artists,

¹⁹ During the 1950s and 1970s, there was the first wave of Tibetan themes in prints and paintings by Chinese artists. Artworks during this period usually adopted metaphorical titles to imply the Chinese socialist orientation in Tibet. During the 1980s and 1990s came the second wave. Artworks at this stage expressed great interest towards the splendid natural landscapes in Tibet and the rural, simple, nomadic life of the Tibetan people.

²⁰<http://www.artinfo.com/news/story/35223/tradition-transformed-a-conversation-about-tibetan-contemporary-art> (accessed on 22 March, 2013).

such as Gonkar Gyatso, Losang Gyatso, Kesang Lamdark, Sonam Tsering, and Palden Weinreb question how they might engage with the very specific visual traditions (including the sexual imagery) of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism as their cultural identity in aesthetic ways. I elaborate on this at the end of the chapter.

3. The Independent Form of Wrathful Iconographies in Tibetan Tantric Art

In Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, there is a great array of images of fiercely animal-like Buddhas and other deities known as *Herukas* or *Krodhakaya*. Generally, they are described as monstrous hybrids of humans and animals depicted with three bloodshot eyes and a furious and terrifying glare, gnashing teeth, dark-blue or black skin, severed arms, heads, and legs, with eyes and entrails floating around, a leather garment of a skinned tiger belted with a poisonous snake, and a skull bowl filled with human blood or a skeleton holding their hands, jewellery made of human bones, and skulls entwined all around their body, with a sea of violent blood as the background. According to the Tantra scriptures, in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism deities such as *Herukas* or *Krodhakaya* are the enlightened ones, adopting a fierce or fearsome countenance to benefit all sentient beings in the experience of the ultimate reality, and to achieve enlightenment as non-duality, devoid of negativity. In both Chinese and Tibetan, the Sanskrit term *Herukas* is translated as blood-drinker, referring to ‘drinking the blood of self-cherishing, doubts, and dualistic confusion’ (Simmer-Brown, 2001: 156). According to Simmer-Brown:

Blood was considered horribly unclean as the *rasa* [essence] of another human being that could pollute one’s family line for generations. The ‘blood-drinker’ would ordinarily be unimaginably defiled (*ibid.*: 330).

Herukas include male Buddhas, such as Yamantaka who has the head of a water buffalo, or the female Buddha Simhamukha who has the face of a lioness and the body of a woman. As Simmer-Brown points out, ‘*Herukas* represents the embodiment of indivisible bliss and emptiness’ (*ibid.*: 156). These powerful and evocative images, appearing as *yidams* in Tantric meditation, are usually placed in *mandalas*, which is a spiritual practice for developing a practitioner’s own meditation without participating in organised groups.

Worshipped by the practitioners as protectors and guardians of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, the textual and iconographic presentations of exceedingly numerous wrathful monstrous deities are still one of the most mysterious aspects and,

perhaps, the least-understood field of Tibetan Buddhism and its art. Thus far, what we know is that the iconographies of wrathful monstrous deities first appeared in eastern India in the late sixth century and became very important and popular in Indian Tantric Buddhism. These were then transmitted with texts, doctrines, and rituals to Tibet with the arrival of Padmasambhava in the eighth century. Although they first appeared in Indian Tantras, they developed significantly in both an iconographic and an artistic manner in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, particularly from the eleventh century (Lopez, 1998: 141). As Pal (1997: xiii) states, some images of wrathful deities in Tibet were creations of Indian mystics, but many others are of local origin. A large number of the monstrous figures worshipped in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism are male or female protectors, who were originally mountain deities, local deities, and tribal and clan deities in pre-Buddhist times. One of these types of furious deities is the Naga or Nagini, who is a water, mountain, or nature spirit. She often lives in lakes or caves, sometimes guarding a treasure, and sometimes being responsible for bad weather, floods, and thunderstorms. She often appears in the shape of a serpent, or with the upper half as a human and the lower half in the shape of a serpent's body. Another type of furious God or Goddess is the lineage of male or female protectors who guard places, monasteries, and people.

One of the most popular and widespread assessments of Tibetan wrathful deities in China and some other Asian countries is the so-called traditional Chinese interpretation, which is a twisted and somewhat distorted expression of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its fierce Tantric deities. Thus, some (Chinese) Buddhist scholars suggest that these Gods and Goddesses were wild, terrifying, and free male or female demons, and were later convinced by a *vajra* master known as Padmasambhava or Milarepa to take refuge in Buddhism (Ji, 2006b: 43). Such Chinese Buddhist scholars claim that most wrathful deities are regarded as subordinated to a Buddha or *Bodhisattva*, and they conclude that the wrathful deities, even though they assume they have a fierce and powerful appearance, are actually oath-bound guardians who are only occasionally addressed as a fully enlightened Buddha and, most of the time, are lower on the hierarchical scale (*ibid.*).

Notably, the monstrous deities were usually depicted as protectors or guardians at a marginal level, surrounding and serving the main Buddha, *Bodhisattva* or deity placed in the centre of *thangkas*. As Narayanan (2002: 1) argues, '[These wrathful deities] are at once inside and outside, sacred and mundane, demonic and divine, wrathful in a compassionate and peaceful religion'. It is my conclusion, however, that the traditional Chinese assessment of wrathful deities seems to omit many of the cases in which some of the Tibetan Tantric male and female protectors are also known as high 'patrons of the Tantras [the Tantric meditative deities] who preside over the great Tantras of the Highest Yoga' (Beyer, 1978: 41). Evidently, these wrathful deities became the central form that occupied the paramount position of the later forms of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Further, the position of wrathful deities in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism seems much higher on the hierarchical scale than those in early Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhism. I think that in the late developmental stage of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism,²¹ their greater status and importance are also evident in their larger size of iconographic presentations and their popularity in Tibetan paintings and sculptures. In the late phase of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art (from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century), almost all wrathful deities played a prominent role that seems to have been higher than the historical Buddha, such that they occupy the central position of the *mandalas* and are independent images, often with their own attendants. As Beyer (1978: 9) notes, 'These wrathful deities are perhaps the most potent and symbolic and evocative of all the Tibetan deities'.

The female wrathful deities share the same functions and status as those of the male wrathful deities, and a number of monstrous female figures in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism are of particular significance to Tantric practitioners and ordinary Tibetans. I approach female wrathful deities' iconographies with their textual presentations in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. The fierce female Buddhas and enlighteners play a central role for the practitioners as a female embodiment of enlightened energy in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. For example Vajravetali, Vajrabhairava's consort, is the principal female Buddha in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. In the mature Tibetan Tantric Buddhist paintings Vajravetali was even presented as the central figure, as the embodiment of destroying all the obstacles

²¹ That is, Phase 3 (the thirteenth century to the fifteenth century) and Phase 4 (the fifteenth century to the nineteenth century).

to the enlightenment for supporting meditation and worship. As a wrathful female deity, she is described as a red body, with the third eye on her forehead to symbolise sexual passion and ultimate wisdom. Her dark golden hair flows upwards with the adornments of five white skulls as crown jewels, indicating that her practice guides practitioners to the transcendent wisdom; the inner heat of yoga is a prominent element of her instruction. In her left hand, she holds a white skull cup that represents the supreme bliss of non-duality, and in the other hand, a crescent-shaped knife that symbolises the wisdom to destroy obstacles, both the inner and outer, mundane and transcendental. More surprisingly, female wrathful deities, who can transform themselves in all the varied forms, seem to be even more powerful and widespread than male Buddhas are in Tibetan Tantric art. The fearsome and monstrous presentation of female deities in both Tibetan Tantric Buddhist iconography and texts are full of ‘passion, ecstasy, and ferocious intensity’ (Shaw, 1995 [1994]: 1).

Another example is Palden Lhamo, one of the most important Goddesses in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. She was a wild, free matriarch in pre-Buddhist times, but then, brought under control by a *vajra* master, she began to serve the true doctrine actively. She is the protective deity of the Dalai Lama, the whole country, and its capital Lhasa. This grants her an exceptionally high position in the Tibetan pantheon. She is (sometimes) called by the title ‘Great Warrior Deity, the Powerful Mother of the World of the Joys of the Senses’ (Richardson, 1993: 87), which evokes both her martial and her Tantric character. She is the only female among the eight principal *dharmapalas* who appears in terrifying form to protect Buddhists and Buddhism. According to the legend, Lhamo had been married to an evil-doing king of Lanka, who habitually murdered his subjects. She had vowed either to reform him to be kind and favourable towards the religion of Buddha, or else to see to it that an end be put to the whole dynasty. After many years of endeavours she failed to change his evil ways. Worse still, their son was being raised to be the ultimate destroyer of Buddhism in that kingdom. One day while the king was away she killed her son, flayed him, then drank his blood from a human skull and ate his flesh.

In examining a portrait of her, one becomes convinced that Lhamo would be among the most repulsive figures in a worldwide gallery of demons. With

gnashing teeth, bulging eyes, and a filthy blue body, she rides upon a wild mule. Beneath its hooves spreads a sea of blood, which has flowed from the veins of her slaughtered enemies. The mule's saddle is made from the leather of a skinned human—the skin of her son, who was killed by the Goddess when he refused to follow her example and adopt the Buddhist faith. In her right hand, Lhamo swings a club in the form of a child's skeleton. Some interpreters of this scene claim that this club is the remains of her son. With her left hand, this fiend holds a skull bowl filled with human blood to her lips. Poisonous snakes are entwined all around her.

As most Chinese scholars point out, the *yogi* brought the terrifying Goddesses under control. In other words, they believe that these monstrous women figures serve the patriarchal monastic state as the destroyers of enemies. Hence, to repeat, the *vajra* master is—when he encounters the dark mother—not interested in transforming her aggression but, rather, much more in setting her to work as a deadly weapon against attackers and non-Buddhists. In the final instance, however, Mahayana Buddhism teaches us that the feminine has no independent existence, even when appearing in its wrathful form. In this respect, these Chinese authors claim Lhamo is nothing more than one of the many masks of Avalokiteshvara. They point out that there would be a parallel between Lhamo and Sachmet in ancient Egypt, the flaming Goddess of justice with the face of a lioness. The ancient Egyptians personified the wrath of the male king as a female figure (Assmann, 1991: 89).

In contrast to this viewpoint, Western feminists have a totally different interpretation of these forms of apparently horrific female figures. Since woman was conceptualised as the victim of horror in a Western patriarchal view, Creed (1993: 22) puts much positive emphasis on the monstrous feminine. She challenges the mythical patriarchal view of considering a terrifying woman as being a castrated man. She argues that the prototype of all definitions of the monstrous is the female reproductive body; she also points out that the reason woman would terrify is because of a fear that she might castrate. Woman as castrator constitutes the most significant face of the monstrous feminine in Western culture.

Incidentally, the slaughter of Lhamo's son may be an indicator of an originally matriarchal sacrificial cult which the (Tantric) Buddhists integrated into their system. For example the researcher Francke (1914: 21) discovered rock inscriptions in Tibet, which refer to human sacrifices to the great Goddess. But as most Chinese scholars argued, it could also—in the light of the Tantric methods—be that Lhamo, converted to Buddhism, not from conviction, but because she was magically forced to the ground and was compelled by her new lords to murder her son. Even an apparently paradoxical interpretation is possible: as a female, the demon stands in radical confrontation to the Buddhist doctrine, and she may have sold her loyalty and subjugation for the highest possible price—that of the sacrifice of her son.

For Tibetan Tantric practitioners, the wrathful iconography of female deities such as Simhamukha and Lhamo is intimately linked with self-experience; that is, with our desires, inner states, or unconsciousness. As Linrothe (1999: 8) points out, 'What is rather unique to these wrathful deities is that Esoteric Buddhism has infused forms which are expressly violent and threatening ... with divine rather than demonic significance'. He adds:

Himalayan cultures have developed the potential of the demonic divine in subtle and nuanced ways, calibrating them to different inner needs and locating them in appropriate settings. Himalayan artists have been at the forefront of this development. Their achievements in visually fusing the awe-inspiring with the terrifying are worth enjoying, celebrating, and respecting, in all their forms (*ibid.*).

Furthermore, meditating on wrathful deities offers a range of techniques to transform the powerful psychological and physical energy through the body to the mind (in meditation or Tibetan ritual practice) 'for the internal yogic processes employed to gain enlightenment' (*ibid.*). As Shaw (1995 [1994]: 28) elaborates:

Tantric yogis and yoginis, patterning themselves after deities, also wear tiger skins and bone ornaments and drink out of skull-cups. Wrathful deities dance upon the negative forces they have overcome and laugh as they feast on the raw, painful negativity that unenlightened people regard as frightening demons. Such Buddhas may appear menacing, but Buddhas by definition act only to benefit all sentient beings. Wrathful deities demonstrate that there is pure energy even at the heart of aggression. The meditator must cease seeing fearsome and hostile appearances as threats to the ego and realize that they are patterns of pure energy, devoid of negativity.

Shaw interprets wrathful deities as a pure energy of wrath and anger from the suppressed, like women longing to liberate themselves from the restrictions of their sex, or for that matter to be a male or female protector and, in so doing, to protect their beloved from danger. As she says explicitly:

Wrath and anger are not totally eliminated on the spiritual path because at times it may be necessary to wield the appearance of wrath in order to rescue, liberate, or protect someone (*ibid.*: 31).

This says that wrathful deities, such as Lhamo, embody a torrent of protective energy and strength to protect or destroy, which is meant to be realised in the context of the path towards the realisation of spiritual growth and ultimate enlightenment. I must point out, nonetheless, that the wrath and anger of Tibetan fierce deities is not a selfish drive to violence or revenge but, in contrast, it is a deep-felt compassion and passionate love for all sentient beings. Shaw gives an example of the male Buddha Candamaharosana,²² who explains to his consort Dvesavajri²³ the reason that he carries his weapons is ‘to protect women from men who fail to honor and serve them’ (*ibid.*).

In summary, I would agree with Pal and Tseng (1969: 9) when they suggest that it is no exaggeration to say that images of wrathful deities have become a new creation of ‘an amalgam of early, native shamanist beliefs, Bon ideology, that are imported from Buddhist concepts’ with Tibetans’ physical, psychological, and cultural environment as a backdrop. At one level they are worshipped by the practitioners, not only as guardians of their faith, but as protectors who can create a wholesome force to heal the sick or to improve a troublesome situation in their ordinary lives. According to David and Janice Jackson (1988 [1984]: 9), ‘Thus ordinary Tibetans were often advised by their religious preceptors [gurus] to commission a painting [of wrathful deities] for the “removal” of physical or mental “obstacles”’. At another level, they are the embodiments of purely powerful psychological and physical energy within the collective unconsciousness that reflects the Tibetans’ instinctive respect and veneration for their formidable terrain. Neven (1975: 10) argues:

An introspective awareness develops [in Tibet] because of these unusual surroundings one which eminently favoured the identification of the

²² Candamaharosana is the main male deity in the *Candamaharosana Tantra*. See George, eds. and trans., (1974).

²³ Dvesavajri is also called Vajrayogini or ‘Diamond of Hatred’ in the *Candamaharosana Tantra*. (Shaw, 1995 [1994]: 41).

individual with the schemas imposed upon him (/her) by artistic canons which were entirely conditioned by mystical experience.

In a way, images and textual descriptions of terrifying wrathful deities, such as Lhamo, relate to the Tibetan mentality and show a distinctly Tibetan character in the ritualistic and contemplative setting of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. On yet another level, the wrathful deities are the enlightened ones, adopting a fierce countenance and demonic shape with dramatic exaggeration in order to destroy both external and internal demons that lurk inside and around the practitioners (Pal, 1997: xiv). In other words, each wrathful deity has a dual nature—being both the merciful and wrathful—and the goal of the images of wrathful deities in Tibetan Tantric art is to help the practitioner attain enlightenment as non-duality. As Shaw (2006: 431) comments:

Ignited by the incandescent blaze of transcendent fury, grounded in emotional self-mastery, she [the lion-faced female Buddha] revels in the ultimate form of power: the ability to liberate oneself and others.

3.1 Becoming the Monstrous: Experimental Experiences Inspired by the Form of Wrathful Deities

Compared to the impact of *mandalas* and sexual images in Tibetan Buddhist art, the form of the wrathful deities seems rather less well-known in the contemporary art world. This is probably for three reasons: first, the visual presentation of these wrathful deities usually appears to be violent, terrifying, and ‘grotesque ... involving ritual dances, divination, black magic, and weather-making’ and is thus open to misinterpretation by those unfamiliar with the symbolic function of the images (Nebesky-Wojkowitz, 1993 [1956]: vii). Therefore, it is easy for many contemporary artists to misinterpret them simply as demon-worship or superstition. Second, there are many more obstacles for people who are unfamiliar with this particular culture to appreciate the monstrous figures in Tibetan Buddhism and their associated ritual, meditative and art practices. Third, the exploration and the evolution of the Western viewpoint on these wrathful deities and their significance did not come into being until just two decades ago.

In a contemporary context, along with a better understanding of these wrathful images in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism in Western scholarship, there are sporadic artists’ works linked to the most mysterious aspects of art forms, explicitly or implicitly. For example the video and sound installation entitled *Five Angels for the Millennium* (2001) by Bill Viola (b. 1951), a leading artist and engaged (Zen

and Tibetan Tantric) Buddhist in media and time-based art, is one such outstanding example. This work is presented in a big dark room with many large-scale projections on the walls, which provides an overwhelming visual experience that occupies a viewer's whole field of vision. The five projections show an ambiguous figure that looks like a hybrid form of a clothed man and a flying monster, which are named *Depart Angel*, *Birth Angel*, *Fire Angel*, *Ascending Angel*, and *Creation Angel*. As one can see from the illustrations, the figure is visually presented as a moving body without a face and, sometimes, even with a head which seems to be dissolving into the darkness. According to Lucina Ward, a cooperative curator of *Bill Viola: The Passions*, which was presented at the National Gallery of Australia in 2005, the figure within these five projections seems 'weightless and without absolute form, into an underwater domain which is, in turn, translated into the cosmos surrounded by an infinity of stars'.²⁴ The figure can be regarded as the five channels surrounding the visitors at the museum, 'not all of which can be experienced at once, and the sensory overload threatens to overwhelm'.²⁵ This piece reminds me of the effect of wrathful deities in Tibetan Buddhism that I discussed earlier. The figure plunges into water in extreme slow motion under an explosion of the dark-blue, green, red-blue, and turquoise light, respectively, in order to create a dreamlike quality. It also evokes 'a sense of both the sinister and the purifying aspects of water'.²⁶ Along with the video installation there are also sound effects to envelop the viewer under water.

Here, I relate my experience as an example of how the viewer may feel when confronting this work: the first moment I entered the exhibiting room, the vague image, the slow motion, and the loud underwater sound are exercised together and transmitted into me with violent imagination. This figure is no longer a person, or a monster, but is the visible image of instinctual senses. It is creative. One could describe it as 'becoming the others', or 'becoming a state of in-between' mankind and the monstrous as the wrathful deities in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. The importance of the viewer's fascination with the vague hybrid form of the man and the monster is neither standing in for the original scene of trauma nor the desire for what one lacks. The figure is just another mode of perception of becoming the

²⁴ <http://nga.gov.au/viola> (accessed on 1 March, 2013)

²⁵ <http://nga.gov.au/viola> (accessed on 1 March, 2013)

²⁶ <http://www.artdaily.com> (accessed on 1 March, 2013)

monstrous. Through becoming the monstrous, one can perceive the world differently and describe the positivity and multiplicity of the unconsciousness in the form of inner transformation from aggression into a positive state of being that the power of the sensation generates in that direction. Here, sensation is the power of the artist who is able to ‘make visible a kind of original unity of the sense’ (Deleuze, 1990: 46) and make a visual figure evoke a multi-sensual experience. More specifically in my view, light and sound in this work seem to be both unreal and real: on the one hand, compared to hard and solid material things, light and sound are not real; on the other hand, they can be regarded as an important vehicle that can really bring us in touch with our emotional and conscious experiences. As Viola describes it, the effect of the light and the sound feels like carrying a mystery or ‘some intangible essence there—a spark, a flicker of living energy, both physical and metaphysical’ (Viola, 2004: 252), which is real in one’s spiritual experience. He particularly emphasises the effect of sound, which he describes as follows:

The effect of sound is very physical and real (you can destroy a glass with sound waves), and yet sound is also unconscious and metaphysical (a friend whispers something in your ear that will change your life, or another person hears voices speaking to them). A four-month-old baby in the womb is already hearing the sound of the mother’s voice, and in death the last sense to go is hearing. The correct translation of the title of the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* is “The Great Liberation through Hearing,” and that’s why the monks chant in the ear of the deceased for hours or days after they die (*ibid.*).

Generally, Viola uses the installation of images, sound, and light to create and project a narrative place or inner transforming experiences in the form of a symbolic and idiosyncratic code for the viewer. The symbolic codes in his work are rooted in his inner experiences as well as in spiritual traditions, including Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As James Lomax, a professional photographer, comments:

Viola is employing powerful thematic imagery, which resonates with religious systems ... Viola’s work can resonate with the unconscious, through intermediary symbolism, which we inevitably absorb from our cultural conditioning ... I suspect neither of them (the viewers) could have articulated or conceptualised it in spiritual terms, but it is in the nature of this work that it has impact, regardless of prior experience or knowledge. In that respect, Viola is an intermediary between ordinary urban experience—what galleries more usually consist of, however culturally sophisticated it may be—and more sacred concerns.²⁷

²⁷ <http://www.jameslomax.com/words/507/bill-viola> (accessed on 3 March, 2013)

From Viola's perspective, each individual's experience and their inner self-transformation is of special importance in spiritual art. According to Viola:

It is the individual that is the core of the religious experience: what happens within you, as opposed to the general congregation or the general population ... I think that any time you are making something that touches the inner self of the human being, anything that emerges out of ourselves from a genuine, unguarded place is ultimately a sacred act, no matter whether you follow a religion or not. All of the things that surround us came out of the inspiration of transforming the material world into our inner vision.²⁸

This is also revealed well in his work *The Five Angels for the Millennium*. While he was developing the idea for these works, his father was slowly dying and subsequently passed away, which brought him intense sorrow and grief at a deep personal level. As he describes this period, it felt like 'a long disturbing slow-motion film leading to an inevitable and unacceptable climax' and a constant presence of 'the sorrow that lived like an invisible underground stream in my life ... just beneath the surface, like the dull ache from some internal wound, and it colored everything around me' (Viola, 2004: 251). The imagery in this work was initially conceived as one kind of suicidal experience by Viola, but he changed his mind when experimenting with the footage by projecting it backwards (two years later), because he realised that a negative and devastating experience can be converted into a positive one by creating metaphorical images of birth or rebirth. This is reflected in Viola's belief that art can be a transformative experience that is intimately linked with our desires, inner states, or unconsciousness, including those physical or mental obstacles that we may think are preventing or hindering our progress to achieve awakening and liberation—this is probably the core message that these images of wrathful deities in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art intend to convey.

4. Conclusion: Contemporary Tibetan Art and the Outside World

To sum up, in the past three decades the aesthetic analysis of complex sources of styles, motifs, iconographies, symbols, and the meaning and function of Tibetan Buddhist art in Tibetan society—which includes the chronological movements and general distinctions of religious traditions—has been uncovered by

²⁸ Quoted from an interview with Viola by Ashley Rawlings on 6 November 2006 http://www.tokyoartbeat.com/tablog/entries.en/2006/11/interview_with_bill_viola.html (accessed on 7 March 2012).

researchers. Nonetheless, the study of Tibetan (Tantric) art is still new in the West, and the subject needs further extensive study in order to understand the mythical art of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism at a deeper level. From my perspective, the impact of Tibetan Buddhism and its art on contemporary artists remains relatively unexplored. However, on a positive note, Tibet's ancient traditional art has already been seen not only as an essential part, but also as a pioneer in the contemporary exploration and development of the mythic aesthetic tradition. Tibetan Buddhist notions such as impermanence, egolessness, emptiness, non-duality, and the transformation of consciousness, along with the Tantric meditative practices, have been breaking into Western culture since the 1960s. Maricia Tucker, a curator, points out that there are parallels between (Tibetan Tantric) Buddhism and contemporary art. In an interview with Baas in 2000, she suggested:

That's why this seems a good time to explore the parallel between [Tibetan Tantric] Buddhism and contemporary art ... [because Tibetan Tantric] Buddhism teaches us to relate to the world with openness, acceptance, generosity, and joy (Baas, 2004: 22-23).

In addition Baas also notes that Carol Becker, a contemporary writer and educator of Buddhist art in the United States, extends the Tucker's viewpoint:

[The Buddha's teaching helps her to] visualize the invisible process we were [or are] engaged in every day ... [and make her] understand the uniqueness of this environment that value[s] the 'intimate, immediate, spontaneous, obvious' and original above all else (*ibid.*).

Subsequently many artists of various races, nationalities, and religious faiths, including a number of famous ones, such as Viola, have been striving to achieve a successful transformative experience in this endeavour, and like the majority of artists exploring this field they are creating their work in a silent and yet creative way with the intention of expressing their individual vision within spiritual practice.

In this chapter, I have discussed the three most important art forms in the old Tibetan aesthetic tradition and touched upon their impact on both Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists in the contemporary world. Because of the recent question of how to find a balance between a Tibetan religious system, an aesthetic heritage, and its modernisation in the era of globalisation, I have endeavoured to point out the urgency of developing more modern scholarship on contemporary Tibetan art. I think that this involves an extensive examination of two aspects:

first, the traditional Tibetan art, which was kept almost intact until the middle of the twentieth century due to the conservatism of the Tibetan civilisation; and second, its contemporary developments, which seem to be a combination of loose ends of both Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists' personal journeys in Tibet, China, India, and the West tied together in a globalised world. This is because on the one hand, the majority of Tibetan artists nowadays are traditionally trained and often employ religious images and visual elements to create their cultural identity. That is to say, Tibet's rich and formalised artistic legacy still occupies a very special position with regard to its artistic characteristics of modernisation, which is a particularly important precondition of contemporary Tibetan art. On the other hand, as Tibetan culture differs from both Western and Chinese culture in values and practice, the process of developing contemporary Tibetan art is very different from what happened in the West and China.

Despite the good preservation of the distinctive Tibetan cultural traditions, contemporary Tibetan art has undergone profound transformations in the course of its short, intense, convoluted journey through modernisation in the past two or three decades. Specifically, first, the contemporary development of traditional Tibetan art has taken place in Tibetan autonomous areas, as well as in the outside world. Admittedly, there are real and potential conflicts that complicate the exploration of multiculturalism in an age of globalisation, as Tibetan, Chinese, and Western cultures are fundamentally different from each other, especially in the dimension of value-systems. One of the main issues is that some Tibetan artists and scholars are opposed to translating and outputting their religious theories and aesthetic traditions to the outside world, including China, for political, economic, or personal reasons. I think that they may overemphasise the so-called uniqueness or authenticity of the ancient Tibetan tradition, using this as a strong excuse for rejecting the idea of integrating cultural studies with China and the rest of the world. Although it is understandable that some Tibetans take intense pride in their cultural identity, this may lead to cultural protectionism and a return to the previous state of self-isolation, which would inevitably cause barriers towards other cultures in the present era of globalisation. Another major issue is that based on an over-romantic view of authentic nativeness, the Western perspective has developed its own fascination of the myth of the Tibet, which makes modern and

contemporary Tibetan art unimaginable in the eyes of some Western audiences (Hofer, 2010: 1). As Kabir Mansingh Heimsath, a curator of contemporary Tibetan art observes, there is a conservative stance about Tibetan art that ‘Tibetan “tradition” has been lost within Tibet itself—so anything genuinely “Tibetan” must necessarily be old, and anything new that comes from Tibet itself is not “really” Tibetan’ (Heimsath, 2005: 1). In response to these issues, some Tibetan artists, such as Gyatso, state that they need to produce a specifically contemporary Tibetan art, which would be explicitly different from Western and Chinese contemporary art and, to some extent, that also engages actively in a dialogue with China and the rest of the world. They point out the most challenging part of their creation is how to offer a startlingly different view of the role of the ancient aesthetic tradition in the radically altered present, while at the same time trying to be consistent, implicitly, with their tradition and cultural identity. The meaning and function of traditional art in ancient Tibet is to serve religious, spiritual, and cultural values, which is in strong contrast to ‘the intentional expression of an individual’ or ‘art for art’s sake’ in contemporary Western art (Stoddard, 2001: 231).

Here, my research on contemporary Tibetan art confronts controversial issues at a cross-cultural level as addressed in the Preface. Discussing globalisation in relation to Tibetan art, Harris offers a potentially new type of analysis for charting transnational dimensions in contemporary art. This is part of her case study of the career of the Tibetan artist Gyatso, who was educated in China (in both the linguistic and aesthetic sense), made bilingual art in his homeland Tibet, and then travelled to his current location in London. In each of these places, Gyatso and his artworks have been increasingly mobile and dispersed within global networks and cultural flows (Harris, 2006: 698). Harris provides very insightful views on cultural translation of images in a contemporary context. She acknowledges the prominence given to Tibetan artists by their spiritual homeland in imagination, and the influence from the places they physically inhabit. More importantly, Harris notes that a determining factor in the diverse interpretation and reception of artworks is the different locations of cultures.

What interests me, particularly in Gyatso’s work of *My Identity* (2003), is his questioning of what contemporary Tibetan art can be from the experience of

moving locations between China, Tibet, India, and London. In response to the changing cultural environments, his life and artworks have been reconfigured in four stages. First, he has adopted an altered perspective on the world that he had known as home from China. Second, he went back to Tibet and began experimenting on employing iconographies from traditional Tibetan Buddhist art with modernity. Then he moved to London and encountered Western culture, which articulates its differences from what he had learnt at home as art. During years of confusion and struggles, he questioned how artworks could bridge the gap between the (Tibetan) artist and the viewers and, in so doing, sought out the potential global recognition of the iconographies that he employed from Tibetan Buddhism to go across a wide range of national, political, and cultural boundaries. As Harris observes:

The Buddha icon has been Gonkar Gyatso's constant travelling companion through a transnational artscape [From Gyatso's perspective] The physical properties of the landscape of Tibet were thought to provide the ideal subject matter for this exercise [seeking the future of Tibetan culture], but it was not to be depicted in emulation of ancient *thangka* styles (Harris 2006: 700-702).

In the late 1980s Gyatso painted the absent or ambiguous figure of the Buddha in his paintings, such as the painting entitled *Red Buddha* (1989). Gyatso's painting was influenced by Western modernist art such as cubist forms. He employs the techniques of Chinese traditional ink and water painting that he learnt in the Minority Art School in Beijing during the 1980s. These were used in order to express a pared-down icon of the spiritual leader of Buddhism, the Buddha, 'into an anonymous apparition' (Harris, 2006: 702). Harris comments:

For Gyatso, the 'Red Buddha' painting he completed in the late 1980s was a statement about the absence of the Buddha in Tibet and a demonstration of the need to reactivate his presence in that place (*ibid.*).

Indeed, this painting was probably an expression of his sense of ambivalence about Tibetan cultural identity, and in making the painting he wanted to make a statement in order to reinvigorate the Buddha's presence in the place. Here, I found some cloth paintings entitled *The Buddha* (2002), *The Emptiness Number 1*, and *The Emptiness Number Two* (2004) which were done by a famous Chinese artist Han Shuli (b. 1948) in Lhasa, that also resonate with Gyatso's painting. The common feature of these three of Han's paintings during the end of the 1990s and 2000s is the encrypted visual vocabulary of the absent Buddha in a kind of style

that combined ‘dreamy semi-abstract forms’ with ancient Tibetan religious images (Heimsath, 2005: 5). In strong contrast to the socialist realist propaganda that once dominated China and Tibet during the period between the 1950s and the 1970s, Han felt at liberty to create images that re-engaged with Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism and its art in the second half of the 1980s. For Han, the statement of the absent Buddha in his paintings may reflect some kind of fusion with Tibetan’s cultural identity that was wiped out during the Cultural Revolution. In his artworks Han also reveals his inner personal longing to inherit the Tibetan traditional culture, as with other Tibetan artists. As Harris (2012: 217) states:

It should be acknowledged that this development [of a modernist sensibility among Tibetan artists in Lhasa] was initiated in part by Han Shuli ... he took the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism and reshaped it in ways previously unattempted by Tibetans...Han Shuli’s mode of regarding the vestiges of Tibet’s heritage proved to be hugely influential on other artists in Lhasa (Both Tibetan and Han). He had paved the way for the imagery of Tibetan Buddhism to be viewed from a secularist perspective, and for its objects to become props for making art.

I therefore suggest that the presence of Han and other Chinese artist in Lhasa positively contributed to reproducing and reviving Tibetan aesthetic traditions through innovation.

Admittedly, many ideas and models of Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhist art seemed to be repressed, abandoned or overlooked as visual codes, which have both theoretical sophistication and critical aesthetic vocabulary in the Tibetan-themed artworks created from the 1950s to the start of the 1980s. It is no wonder that in Harris’s interpretation she regards the painting as a medium that deflects politicised reading in the historical context of Tibet in the 1980s. Nonetheless, I would add one point to supplement Harris’s analysis of Gyatso’s paintings: there is clear evidence of the influence of the Chinese aesthetic tradition, which epitomises Tibetan artists’ concerns about their cultural identity and their engagement in the trans-cultural translation of visual codes between Han Chinese and Tibetan art at that time. That is to say, there is the question of how to develop an aesthetic heritage in contemporary Tibetan art, where both Chinese artists, such as Han, and Tibetan artists, such as Gyatso, all end up in the same place even though they may take different routes getting there. I come back to it later.

In 1992, Gyatso went to Dharamsala in the Kangra district of India to follow the 14th Dalai Lama, who in Gyatso’s eyes was regarded as the missing Buddha of

worldly life. During his four years in India, he noted that many of the Tibetan artists created murals, which were replicas of monasteries and traditional *thangkas* as a means to commemorate the dead. Thus, figures of the Buddha were placed in every orphanage and office within the refugee community. When Gyatso was in Dharamsala, he was neither here nor there as he was in a state of being in India because he suffered from conflicts about the authenticity of who and what was truly Tibetan in the era of globalisation (Harris, 2006: 703). As Harris concludes, ‘the Dharamsala vision of Tibet could not solve Gyatso’s dilemma about how to be a Tibetan artist engaging with the complexities of modernity’ (*ibid.*: 705). To solve his dilemma between old aesthetic traditions and being a contemporary artist, Gyatso decided to move to the West to be more engaged with the complexity of modernity. In 1996, like many other immigrants who come to London for the first time, Gyatso had something of a cultural-identity crisis, and during the first couple of years of his stay there he felt confused and troubled, due to the culture shock of being in such a modern and highly developed Western city, which was completely unfamiliar to him. Worse still, much of the installation and conceptual artwork so fashionable in the West caused him more personal conflicts. His creative work at that time adopted the icons of the Buddha, again to express the tensions he felt between all the conflicting feelings and influences of other issues, such as Tibetan-ness, exoticism, and political issues, that crept into his work then. Harris suggests:

In some contexts of interpretation, he was constructed as ‘hiding behind the Buddha’ in an anti-modern reification of tradition, whilst in others Buddhist imagery was thought to be his most powerful asset (*ibid.*: 706).

Harris points out the significance of the Buddha image for many of the Tibetan artists who have worked since 1959. The Buddha image carries for them a symbolic status—much the same for the Tibetans as Chairman Mao was for the Chinese, or Mickey Mouse was for the Americans. Bearing this in mind, Gyatso put the issue of translatability at the core of his recent work, such as the question of Tibet, whereby Chinese characters are framed within the icon metrics of the Buddha body (*ibid.*: 714). With the migration of an artist from one place to the next as in the Gyatso case, memory has played its part in his work which reflects the in-between state of two worlds: from where one comes, where one has been, and the transition of going to a new place which is completely unknown and is a

space that compresses memory and time into a new dimension of a cross-cultural global interface of existence.

Harris's analysis of cross-cultural dialogue through Tibetan art inspires me to explore art practice as a way of researching Tibetan art and questioning what it can become in a cultural environment that is not Tibetan. According to Harris:

Not only does the mobility of contemporary artists demand an expansion of scholarship beyond regional expertise into potentially global dimensions, but it requires an acknowledgement of the cumulative impact of contact with multiple locations. By this I mean that the cultural logic of one place is not erased on departure from it; it remains as a memory and an eminently transportable toolbox of art praxis, which can be re-used over space and time (*ibid.*: 698).

Here, I adopt Harris's viewpoint: 'the transnational suggests the interpenetration of different cultural modes and a repositioning of the core/periphery model' in order to rotate all cultural activity. Although I must admit that the physical location of an artist has a great influence on 'contextualizing the creative process as embodied experience' (*ibid.*), I put much more emphasis on the cultural logic of one place as a crucial aspect of the transnational in art, in which the transmission of visual images and cultural information could possibly begin and end in diverse sites, and in movements in many directions. With the growing exchange between artists and scholars from East and West, Chinese translation studies in visual images are influenced by different trends that are presented in Western theories and research methodologies. Due to the Chinese government's liberalisation policy, China bears a more tolerant attitude towards ideas and perspectives imported from Tibet and the West. This has enabled Chinese artists and scholars to gain easier access to recent research as well as to results and resources. According to Wang and Sun (2008: 6), Western theories and approaches are useful for innovation in Chinese visual translation studies as an emerging and dynamic discipline, incorporating and developing ideas and models from its adjacent areas that have made the Chinese visual tradition and translation an integral part of the global system of cultural studies.

Chinese artists have appreciated the great value of Tibetan traditions and endeavoured to absorb some elements from Tibetan culture into their own art practice. This can be seen in the influential wave of artworks produced about the Tibetan people and their landscape by Chinese artists during the 1980s and the

1990s, such as Chen Danqing's *A Series of Paintings for Tibetans* (1980); Ai Xuan's *Frozen Ground in the Zoige Plateau* (1985); Chen Yifei's *The Wind between the Mountain and the Land* (1994); and Yu Xiaodong's *Cheers, Tibet!* (1996-1997). Since the late 1980s, in their exploration of Tibetan culture, Chinese artists have contributed to creating new and diverse Tibetan cultural identities, such as Han Shuli's cloth paintings that I mentioned earlier; Yu Youxin's *The Floating Clouds and the Wild Cranes* (late 1980s); and Ye Xingsheng's *The Legend of the Tsang* (1992), *The Heaven* (2005) and *The Inventor of the Tibetan Script—Thonmi Sambhota* (2011). In these outstanding Tibetan-themed artworks, Chinese artists put their affection and subjective understanding of Tibet and its culture into the visual landscape and the figures that they depict. As Han says in an interview, 'anybody involved in art cannot resist the mysterious strength and temptation of Tibet and its culture'²⁹ and he describes his own inner feelings as follows:

[Once I] leave Tibet, I feel like a plant pulled out from its soil and that lives without water ... Let myself be immersed in the beauty hidden in my own culture [here, I refer to Tibetan culture because I regard Tibet as my art birthplace] where I find an appropriate way to express it out—that kind of pleasure and complex feelings of achievement is beyond words can express.³⁰

The Buddhist ideas, symbols and aesthetic tastes coming from Tibetan culture influenced many Chinese artists, and were later assimilated into contemporary art. In 2001, Han organized a tour exhibition of Tibetan contemporary painting in Europe, which attracted a lot of public attention. This was probably due to the works' presentation of various signature styles of contemporary Tibetan art that were in parallel to the scholastic need to correct the outdated over-romantic view of Tibet in the West. As a Western audience comments on Han's painting, he says:

From your artwork, I feel that the Tibetan aesthetic tradition and religious freedom are not to be stifled by the Chinese in Tibet as I often heard from

²⁹ 'Xi-zang shen-mi de you-huo shi mei-ge gao yi-shu de ren wu-fa ju-jue de.' (西藏神秘的诱惑是每个搞艺术的人无法拒绝的。) <http://hanshuli.artron.net> (accessed on 11 Sep 2012).

³⁰ 'Li-kai xi-zang jiu-xiang yi-ke miao bei ba le tu, you-xiang bei huan le shui yi-yang mei-you zhao-luo. Cai fa-xian que san-fen-zhi-yi de yang-qi dui wo fan dao shi xiang yi de, na dian yang-qi gang hao gou wo you-xian de ti-li qu zuo zui-xiang zuo de shi... Ba zi-ji wen-hua ji-dian zhong shen-cang de mei-hao shi-wu yong yi-shu de shou-fa biao-xian chu-lai, na-zhong kuai-gan ye-shi bu-yan-er-yu de.' ([我]离开西藏就像一棵苗被拔了土, 又换了水一样无着无落。才发现缺三分之一氧气的西藏对我反倒是相宜的, 那点氧气刚好够我有限的体力去做最想做的事.....把自己(西藏)文化积淀中深藏的美好事物用艺术的手法表现出来, 那种快感也是不言而喻的。) <http://hanshuli.artron.net> (accessed on 11 Sep 2012).

the media. In fact, I see the progress of developing the Tibetan culture. I can see your fascination for Tibet and its culture not only is love in its general sense, but also the most profound sincerity, modesty, love and compassion in the bottom of your heart, which manifest in the figures and objects in your Tibetan-themed painting.³¹

On the one hand, these artworks done by Chinese artists in Tibet (mainly Lhasa) display the spirit of the Tibetans; this is beyond the territorial boundaries of ethnicity. On the other hand, they also reveal their aesthetic tastes and an individual's deep inner longings. In other words, it is a central proposition of this thesis that contemporary Tibetan artwork (including Tibetan-related artworks by non-Tibetan artists in China or the West) can be regarded as a specific cultural product translating techniques and ideas and depicting images of Tibet in global communication. As Harris (2012: 222) suggests, most of Tibetan contemporary artworks by Tibetan and Chinese artists are 'designed for export from Tibet' and viewed by international audiences.

In the following chapter, I embark on a discussion of my art practice as a way of exploring the trans-cultural translation of Tibetan Buddhist art in Chinese and Western contexts.

³¹ <http://hanshuli.artron.net> (accessed on 11 Sep 2012).

Chapter 4

Personal Journey Inspired by Tibetan Tantric Buddhist Paintings

Some of our most influential artists explored and expressed the sophisticated perceptions and joyful energy emanating from the realm of Buddhist Asia ... [It] is a part of a courageous and encouraging new trend of a postcolonial scholarship that faces the finding that creativity and sensitivity flourish better in a climate of gentleness and peacefulness than in one of imperialistic expansiveness, militancy, and violence ... Only with such development will our frustrated superpower savagery transform into the peace of mind, gentleness, altruism, and satisfaction that are the signs of true human civilization (Thurman, 2005: xiv).

In Chapter 3, I discussed the contemporary development of three significant art forms in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and several experimental artworks created by a number of Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists during the late twentieth century. In this chapter I share my experience of moving between the cultures of Chongqing, Lhasa, and London and how this influenced my sense of what art could become. From my perspective, my encounters with life and art in Lhasa during 2005 and 2008 and in London from 2008 to 2012 helped me to articulate the cultural differences between China, Tibet, and Europe. In particular, the experience has made me more aware of the cultural impact of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism on my life and my art practice.

I begin by addressing the challenge of how to approach Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, and how to find a balance between these and modern people's activism¹ and conservatism.² In so doing, it is my endeavour to inform the reader about the present situation and the issues at stake, and to create a broader understanding of the subject matter and where my personal interest lies. I then share views about the potential significance of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art; looking at my experience of it in the context of the contemporary art world, and explore whether it is possible to break any boundaries between the experience of art and life. In doing so, I offer the reader an initial explanation of the core values of my work, before going into more detail about my journey and art practice. I then discuss the three evolving stages of my artwork (from 2000 to

¹ Here, I mean the action of advocating vigorous reform of Tibetan traditions.

² In contrast to activism, conservatism refers to the action of over-protecting Tibetan traditions and opposing any change in them.

2012) and exactly how Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art influenced my art practice. To this end, I hope to demonstrate that through crossing a wide range of national, cultural, and stylistic boundaries, ‘the relationship of [Tibetan Tantric] Buddhism to contemporary artistic practice can be explicit, implicit, or the work may resonate with insights characteristic of [Tibetan Tantric] Buddhism’ (Baas, 2004: 25).

1. The Issues between Activism and Conservatism

I am aware that the common world-view of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism is fundamentally different from the widely accepted view of modern people in terms of how one comes to know the world.³ For this reason, it is not so easy for modern people to understand the religious mythic language within Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, and to appreciate what the work intends to inspire. As some Chinese scholars, such as Liu (2001: 50-54) point out, the religious mythic language (of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism) is a metaphorical and pictorial language used to express a profound understanding and recognition.

Consequently, anti-traditional activist advocates are reforming the dominant thinking in Tibetan traditional society as a contemporary cultural ideology through a gradual de-structuring and restructuring of religious mythic tales and visual codes within Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. For example, the renowned Tibetan artist Gyatso, mentioned in Chapter 3, pioneered a radically modernist form of art to replace the traditional Tibetan art models during 1988 and 1989. Tibetan and Chinese activists, such as Gyatso, Ang Sang, and Min jiyin, argue that the scary monstrous figures within Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art are good examples that demonstrate how Tibetan Tantric Buddhism was meant to dominate people’s thinking, bodies, and souls, thus forcing them to go along with a system that is punishing, fearful, and painful. Interestingly, it is noted that anti-traditional activism does not seem to be the only voice heard in the modern ideological revolution; conservatism appears to be alive as well. Undoubtedly, there are conflicts between the traditional Tibetan Buddhist and modern world-views in terms of social formation and ideological systems. And the politics of

³ In the Introduction (p. 38), I mentioned about the Tibetan Buddhists identify the world with their heart, while the modern/western people identify it with rational thinking.

representation and colonialist appropriations of Tibetan cultural artefacts⁴ make these conflicts more complicated and challenging. While activism promotes new forms of art from Tibet as aesthetically appealing and exciting innovation, conservatism claims that it has lost the distinctive qualities of Tibetan heritage and thought to be ‘evidence of the decline of Tibetan culture under Chinese rule [after 1959]’ (Harris, 2012: 208-209). The greater the conflicts, the more it shows the confusion contemporary Tibetan people have in their value-orientation. As Harris suggests:

[Activist] Tibetan artists sought to use the idea [of new form of art] ... to counteract the prevailing utopian and archival representation of their homeland and replace it with an account of their own experiences in the bicultural, bilingual environment that is contemporary Tibet. That is, they sought to dislodge one colonially produced notion of Tibetan distinctiveness—particularly that created ... under the influence of the British—with another kind of uniqueness [now] derived from ... China (*ibid.*: 209).

Compared to more politically motivated young (Tibetan) artists, I care about whether or not spiritual transformation and meditative practices from thousands of years ago are still true or relevant now, and I am asking, through my work, what the relationship between modern people and the inspirations of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art is now, and what it may contain. I am conscious of different, ancient heritages from Tibet, China and the West, yet I remain determined to engage with Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art as a source or inspiration for my art and practise its meditation (mainly visualisation) as the methodology for combining my theoretical research and art practice. Inspiration, in the mythic language of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, is meaningful only when it meets the minds of those wishing to explain the question of their very existence; otherwise, it would be meaningless in respect of one’s spiritual growth. I believe that it is important that we reinterpret the world-view underlying Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art and, meanwhile, be critical of superstitious thinking within them, so that the true meaning of spiritual progress, or even transformation contained in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, can be made visible to the modern world. To reinterpret myths is not to rewrite traditions radically, but to enable people to understand Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art in modern terms, thereby making

⁴ I discussed that the perception of Tibetan culture (including Buddhism and its art) in the West was framed on the Orientalist mode of projecting it as the ‘other’ in Chapter 3 (p. 137-138).

possible the encounter of their existence and the spiritually transformative inspiration within Tibetan myths.

I suggest that it is not one's ethnicity that confers an essence of Tibetan-ness or an intimate relationship with Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism.⁵ Some Chinese artists, such as Han Shuli and Ye Xingsheng, who have lived in Tibet for over four decades, made outstanding contributions to the conservation of the old Tibetan tradition and the serious endeavor to develop a distinctively Tibetan style that could be understood by Tibetan audiences.⁶ In a complex contemporary environment, the emphasis on individualistic persona rather than one's ethnicity and nationality is a creative strategy: 'a tactic designed to deflate essentializing constructions of Tibetanness imposed on them from outside as well as a method for resisting politicized readings of their work' (*ibid.*: 234).

This endeavour to seek a true encounter between ancient Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and one's individualistic persona in the contemporary world is, in a way, an unprecedented journey; for me, the arts play an important role in this exploration. In my understanding, this is a journey in both directions, inwardly and outwardly, eventually leading one into the inner space of one's consciousness and to a path of life that is broader and more beautiful.

2. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Its Art: Catalysts for the Art-life Thinking

Fundamentally, the reason why I think there is potential for contemporary people to encounter the spiritual message of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art is because I believe that they are 'catalysts for the art-life thinking' (Baas, 2004: 19). Here, I refer to art-life thinking as a paradigm of making art that dates back to the French artist Marcel Duchamp (1887 to 1968). His admirer John Cage (1912 to 1992), an American composer and a leading figure of the post-war avant-garde movement, has developed this paradigm significantly. As Baas (2004: 19) suggests, the best example of the art-life paradigm is probably Cage's most controversial composition *4'23"* (1952). In this piece, any instrument or combination of instruments can be used and, under the guidance of the score, the

⁵ Some radical Tibetan artists (such as Gyatso) believe 'ethnicity fundamentally determined style' and therefore insist that Tibetan artist are the only ones can create an authentic Tibetan type of art (Harris, 2012: 227-228).

⁶ I discussed that the development of a modernist sensibility of Tibetan art was initiated and participated in part by Chinese artists in Chapter 3 (p. 167-168, 170-172).

performer does not play the instrument for four minutes and 33 seconds. Instead, the ambient sounds of the environment that the audience hears during the performance become the music, which can be perceived as the structure of silence that permits the sounds of the world—such as coughing and shuffling papers—to flow into the performance (Kostelanetz, 2003: 69–70). Interestingly, as another American art critic Arthur Danto concluded in an interview in 2010:

Cage's idea was basically just *that*, overcoming the gap between Art and Life. Why shouldn't any sound be a musical sound? Why restrict it to just the sounds that classically have been regarded as musical sounds?⁷

He continues to write in his essay *Upper West Side Buddhism* that Cage's conviction is that 'the distinction between art and life must somehow be overcome [as] a corollary of the Zen idea that the distinction between religion and life is to be overcome' (Danto, 2004: 56).

I think the paradigm of art-life thinking has two layers of meaning. First, these are the recognition of the importance of an artist's experience of transforming the mundane life into an artwork, and the shift from the display of the artwork to the creative process of how it is made by the artist. During the 1940s Duchamp initiated a shift from a previous Western artistic tradition to the process that artists 'go from intention to realization' (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1989 [1973]: 139-140). According to Duchamp, an artist creates artworks with the intention of expressing their individual vision, in order to gain the creative realisation of art and life in the world. In addition, Duchamp quoted Eliot in a talk entitled *The Creative Art* at the American Federation of Arts in 1957:⁸

The more perfect the artist, the more completely separate in him will be the man who suffers and the mind which creates; the more perfectly will the mind digest and transmute the passions which are its material (Sanouillet and Peterson, 1989 [1973]: 138).

Second, Duchamp adds that the artist is unable to express their intention fully with their artwork alone, because the artwork is also experienced and completed by a viewer's personal response (*ibid.*). Between making and experiencing art, there is a 'gap [that] represents the inability of the artist to express fully his intention' (*ibid.*), and which summons emotive aesthetics within viewers who digest and transmute the artist's intention and passion. In other words, the

⁷ Arthur Danto, *Between Art and Life: NP Interview with Arthur Danto*, <http://www.nakedpunch.com/articles/46> (accessed on 18 June, 2012)

⁸ This talk is published in Sanouillet and Peterson, eds., (1989 [1973]: 139-140).

viewer's realization is a 'phenomenon of transmutation': 'an act of "transubstantiation" in which inert matter is experienced as a work of art' (Baas, 2004: 20). Duchamp concludes about this by saying:

Art cannot be understood through the intellect, but is felt through an emotion presenting some analogy with a religious faith or a sexual attraction—an aesthetic echo. The 'victim' of an aesthetic echo is in a position comparable to that of a man in love, or of a believer, who dismisses automatically his demanding ego and, helpless, submits to a pleasurable and mysterious constraint. While exercising his taste, he adopts a commanding attitude. When touched by the aesthetic revelation, the same man in an almost ecstatic mood, becomes receptive and humble.⁹

For me, the fact that my life moved between Chongqing, Lhasa, and London posits some new ways of thinking about the image of Tibet and influences how my art practice could be related to Tibetan culture. As a result, my artworks map out my movement along a global trajectory and reflect my experience of daily life in each place that I have found myself. Both the experiencing of life and making of art share a state of open mindness, such as Duchamp described as ecstatic. I wish, through my artworks, that my audience would experience what I was perceiving or projecting as self; or, I could experience what my audience was perceiving. Thus both artist and viewer would share a feeling of something open, limitless, unbounded, 'reciprocally enhancing and mutually informative' (Bollas, 1987: 31).

This also has the potential of being achieved through meditation and art practice in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As I discussed in the Introduction and in Chapter 2,¹⁰ Tibetan Tantric Buddhist meditation and art practice can (together) be regarded as an effective vehicle to enable practitioners to break away from fixed states of mind, and this can awaken the cognitive potential within them. As Rawson (1988 [1973]: 51) claims, Tibetan Tantric practices integrate the unconscious energies of life and cosmic power through the complex patterns of symbolism, the visualisation of meditative practices, and the process of making its sacred images. Within them, the practitioner is 'set adrift in a realm of infinite possibilities', with 'no rules, no boundaries, and no certainties' (Powers, 2007 [1995]: 296).

⁹ This is cited in (Clearwater, 1991: 107).

¹⁰ P. 35-37, 101-103.

The art-life paradigm is not only about the artist's and the viewer's experience, but it is about what the other is perceiving as self, putting emphasis on the open, unbounded, and reciprocal state of mind that artist and viewer must find in order for them to discover the artwork for themselves (Baas, 2004: 21). I think that these two points are exactly what Tibetan Tantric Buddhist meditation and art practice intend to achieve.

According to Mark Epstein, an American psychiatrist who has written extensively about meditation and art practice within [Tibetan Tantric] Buddhism and psychotherapy, both the making and the experiencing of art share a state of mind in which self and object feel and that thought can also be described as the “dropping away” of the sense of self, which is what [Tibetan Tantric] ‘Buddhism knows, and can teach, the way; and has some important things to say about what to do when you get there’ (Epstein, 2004: 33). Since the Buddha teaches that there is no fixed essence or substance to the self in all the phenomena, no one can really comprehend an object in its true nature and uncover all our perceptions about all objects (including artworks) that arise from nothingness, and in the end of the process leave nothing behind. As I argued in Chapter 2, Tibetan Tantric practitioners believe that within the process of transforming the mind-state in either meditation or art-making, there must be an awareness of letting go of the sense of self in order, possibly, to experience a blissful consciousness and realisation of emptiness, which is the ultimate reality that the Buddha teaches.

The art critic Kay Larson (2004: 62) believes that in following the non-self approach from the Buddha's teaching, the gap between the artist and the viewer can be completely free and connected with everyone and everything. In other words, there is no barrier between art and life, which is a liberation from dualistic thinking (‘art’ versus ‘life’) (*ibid.*). She makes a bold argument that the Buddha ‘turned himself into the world's first performance artist’ (*ibid.*: 64) because he ‘has penetrated the veils of self’ and ‘tapped the enormous creative resources of his Buddha nature and thus is free of mental encumbrances’ (*ibid.*: 65). She explains this in more detail:

The Buddha at his awaking saw that all beings have Buddha nature. Thus we are all artists expressing our true nature fully through the ongoing, minute-by-minute activity of composing our lives out of the flux, out of the floating world. Some of us may realize it and some may not—and some may create

art consciously while others do not—but realization (or the lack of it) doesn't change the reality. This mobile view of human potential, which comprehends the artist in each of us, is Buddhism's great contribution to a conversation about human creativity (*ibid.*).

The art-life paradigm has had a great influence on my art practice; it offers me an open and creative mind¹¹ to connect art and life without barriers. This is because it helps me to see that everything in the world is worthy of our attention, which is how I believe that each of us should, ideally, experience life as much as possible. To understand our experience consciously in every moment of our lives is the basis for generating creativity and imagination in our awareness. Here, Danto references Buddha's statement that there is no difference between illusion and reality, which he explains further:

Nothing need distinguish artworks from mere real things. It is not that they are not distinct. It is that the difference between them need not be visible ... Once one recognized that there was no particular way a work of art should look, one would see that one could not define art in perceptual terms at all. It [art] is a way of seeing the world (Danto, 2004: 58).

I think it is time now to re-explore Tibetan Buddhist ideas, meditative practices and aesthetic traditions within the contemporary art world. This is because it has been more than six decades since the art-life paradigm was first presented to the West in the 1950s, and it took another decade before Tibetan Buddhism and its art broke into Western culture during the 1960s. Since then, many Western scholars, such as Baas, have undertaken a large body of serious research on Tibetan Buddhism and the potential that its art has to be linked to contemporary culture. The thriving research on Tibetan religion and culture provides a more stereotyped attitude,¹² from both inside and outside perspectives, concerning aestheticians and artists practising Tibetan Buddhist art. Many great scholars, such as Tucci,¹³ have contributed fine, sensitive, and serious research that has laid a solid foundation for the contemporary development of Tibetan

¹¹ The creative mind refers to a clear, open, and spontaneous mind that 'responds in a conscious and deliberate way to its experience' (Jones, 2011: 41). As Sangharakshita states, 'The creative mind is above all the aware mind. Being aware ... the creative mind is also intensely and radiantly alive' (Sangharakshita, 2001: 45).

¹² As I mentioned in the Preface (p. 13) and Chapter 3 (p. 136), many scholars and curators, such as Rhie and Thurman, believe that presenting Tibetan art with its historical and religious contexts to the outside world can provide the viewer more multifaceted aspects of it.

¹³ I discussed about Tucci's contribution on classifying Tibetan mural paintings at Tholing in Chapter 1 (p. 72) and also listed serious researches that have done in the Western scholarship in Chapter 2 (p. 93).

studies, especially in relation to the understanding of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its mystical art. Further, the globalisation of Tibetan Buddhist culture that includes Buddhist doctrines, practices, and art brought the opportunity for scholars and artists outside Tibet to have face-to-face contact with Tibetan Tantric Buddhist practitioners, artists, and the magnificent displays of Tibetan artwork since the 1960s. Some scholars, such as Epstein, suggest practising art in relation to understanding emptiness, and exploring (Tibetan Tantric) Buddhism as a potential capacity for creativity.

1.1 Jia Peng on a visit to Tibet, 2004

3. My Art Practice Influenced by Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and Its Art

Even after 13 years I still remember the exact scene and its influence on my emotions when I first encountered Tibetan Buddhist art at Jokhang Monastery in Tibet. Immediately upon entering, I was astounded by the uniqueness of the vivid and abundant imagery of mythic Tibetan deities, and intrigued by the complicity and controversy surrounding the peaceful and the wrathful deities. That initial interest has been further aroused and it has inspired my research into understanding and exploring Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. Here, my questions are: What does Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhist art inspire in contemporary art? How could I, a post-1980s Chinese woman artist, read, interpret, and understand the (religious) mythic language of this art form?

Influenced by Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism, I decided to abandon caution and the constraints within myself and instead chose to elaborate my vision of things with an open mind. The core of the value system within my art practice is indicative of the devotional function of the image that is made through bringing together methods of both Tibetan Tantric meditation and painting in a contemporary sense. It is also provided by the philosophy that I have learnt from Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese culture. In the process of creating my artwork, it is equally important to understand the various representations of me, other people, and historic events, and things in the world, and to what extent they can be related to art, life, and truth. Below I elaborate on how I have tried to explore and understand art in relation to the world around me, bearing in mind the Tibetan and Chinese aesthetic tradition in relation to contemporary life and art-making:

- 1 the early stage of 2000 to 2005 (when I was in Chongqing, southwest of China) was a phase of realism focused on the depiction of dogs faces. This was intended to unravel the confusion, loneliness, and indifference experienced by each individual in postmodern society. The paintings also worked with questions of human-centred thinking in relation to animals;
- 2 the transformative stage from 2005 to 2008 (when I travelled between Chongqing and Lhasa, the capital of Tibet, and the west of Tibet) was the phase of *thod rgal* (the direct approach). By creating the deformed and exaggerated figures of monstrous dogs, I intended to express through visual images the inner feelings of each individual's struggle for universal love and compassion in relation to Tibetan Buddhism and its conceptual reconstruction;
- 3 2008 to 2012 was the transnational stage (when I studied and lived in London, and travelled around Europe), in which over a period of time I abandoned the figures of dogs. Instead, through exploring video installations and short films, I sought the transformative sensation of abstract subjective feeling, aroused from Tibetan Tantric meditative practice. This was the phase of time-based conceptual experiments.

Looking back over this time-frame, it is very special for me to be able to review what I have done and consider how I developed my art practice over the past 12 years. In traditional Chinese culture, the symbolic meaning of 12 years is a sign of the lucky circle of a journey, or a cyclical concept of time. Chinese people have 12 different animal zodiacs that date individual years, and every 12-year period finishes a complete circle. For that reason, I think it is necessary to review, analyse, and reach a conclusion about whatever has happened and surfaced on my journey over the past 12 years of art practice, with my shifting experience within Asia (China and Tibet) and the West (in Europe, especially England). Undoubtedly, retuning to my hometown will transform my work again. I am at the crossroads of both the end and the start of a new journey in my artwork, as well as in my personal life with my return in 2013 to Chongqing.

3.1 The Early Stage of My Journey (2000-2006): The Implicit Relationship between Tibetan Buddhist Art and My Art Practice

3.1.1 Choosing dogs as the subject of my painting, and the influence of Tibetan Tantric meditation

Since 2000 I have been fascinated by Tibetan Buddhist art, and I have found myself gradually absorbed by its symbolic and visual forms that, in turn, inspired me to make dogs the subject of my paintings. When I showed my series of oil paintings entitled *Face Number X* at exhibitions in China and abroad, I was asked many questions about the dogs in my paintings. I try to answer some of them here, including: ‘Why do you use dogs as the theme of your oil paintings? What are the advantages of using dogs? How do the icons of dogs in your paintings relate to Tibetan Buddhism and its art?’

1.2 Jia Peng fed dogs in her garden, China, 2007

1.3 Jia Peng had a nap with her dogs in the studio, China, 2007

Not only is the dog my birth-sign in the Chinese animal zodiac, but I also have a strong identification with dogs and a deep affection and compassion for them, due, in part, to their honesty and loyalty. For these reasons I lived with 38 dogs in my house in Chongqing from the beginning of the 1990s until 2008 when I left to embark on my study in London (fig. 1.2 and fig. 1.3). For me, dogs are not animals but members of my family and I regard myself as one of them: we play and sleep together and, sometimes, I bark to them in order to communicate, and try to imagine things seen through their eyes. That is to say, in my paintings my identification with dogs is a form of self-expression, not only in art but in my life too.

The dog has a symbolic meaning that is multifold and varies from culture to culture. For example in many countries, such as the Congo (formerly Zaire), Egypt, Greece, India, and northern Europe, myths and folk tales involving dogs are usually associated with the dead. This is probably because dogs are used to hunt with people in the forests, because of their sensitive olfactory system, and the fact that they are by nature scavengers that sometimes eat dead animals or decaying organic matter. Therefore, they are considered mediators between the worlds of the living and the dead—something that is evident from many artworks. These include works such as *Kozo*, the Kongo carving of the double-headed dog from the Democratic Republic of Congo;¹⁴ the Egyptian jackal or dog-headed

¹⁴http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/highlights/highlight_objects/aoa/k/kozo_the_double-headed_dog.aspx, (accessed on 1 November 2012).

God Anubis , who protects the dead as a means of helping them in their journey into the afterlife; Cerberus, the three-headed dog in Greek and Roman mythology who guards the gates of the Underworld; and in Indian Buddhist myth, Syama and Sabala, a pair of four-eyed dogs of Yama who is the God of the departed. In the Indian paintings, a hunting dog is sometimes depicted with deities, such as Shiva, one of the three most important deities in Hinduism. In mythic tales of the southern Tibet, there is a dog-headed deity, who is the protector of the hunters (Si-bu-wang-dian, 2007: 44-45). Also, Tibetans believe that:

... if a person is bitten by a Tibetan mastiff [large, powerful and short-haired dog] in a year that matches his or her birth animal, then that is something lucky rather than bad, because when that occurs, the person's ill fortune will end. If that person takes some *tsampa*, lets it absorb the blood from his or her wound, and feeds it to the mastiff that bit him or her, the mastiff will be deeply moved and consider that action as a solemn pledge. The person will have this mastiff's friendship for life (Nie, 2012: 90).

I have shown my artworks to many people (mostly non-artists) in China and Europe. On asking what they felt about my dog paintings, I gathered that, even viewers who did not know anything about art, found it possible to get the sense that images of dogs could be regarded as an universal sign of life while also asserting each individualistic expression.¹⁵ It is very important to me that people connect with what they see in my painting as a way of seeing signs in life. I hope that my paintings evoke a more empathic, particular, and individual response from the viewer.

Finally, with regard to the question of how my dog paintings have been influenced by Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, I would now like to briefly discuss the state of open, introspective, and transformative consciousness that I gained from my inner feelings of amazement when confronted with Tibetan wall paintings, and from Tantric meditation practice. In 2002, after visiting Tibet, I tried to teach myself meditation by reading books. Then I decided to make a serious effort to learn more about the practice with a summer meditation class under the guidance of experienced Tibetan lamas in A-ba Prefecture in the northwestern province of Sichuan. It took me several days to stabilise my mind and concentrate on the representation that I intended to develop in my visualisation. In the Tibetan Buddhist tradition, one usually focuses on an image of the Buddha, but

¹⁵ Between 2007 and 2009 I had informal conversations with international audiences at exhibitions in which I showed my dog paintings, in China and UK.

(contemporary) practitioners can also choose a wide variety of images of people, animals, and other objects on which to meditate.

In my meditation, I choose to focus on the images of dogs, and gaze at them until I am very familiar with each detail of their appearance. I sit in a meditative posture (usually in a Lotus Pose): bending my legs and placing my feet on the top of my thighs while I keep my spine straight. Then I close my eyes and create a simulation of the dogs with the strength of my imagination. By taking time out each day for the practice of meditative quiescence, I become increasingly aware of how my mind functions. Within the practice, I begin to develop awareness of my mind gradually, which itself appears to become more lucid and still over time, and can be divided into two aspects. These are the subjective and the objective, and the old self and the new one. Following pithy advice from practitioners, such as Ani Tenzin Palmo, one should believe that ‘we need to dissolve the boundary between the subject and the object. In other words, we need to become the meditation’ (Palmo, 2002: 93). Palmo (2002: 124) describes her experiences in meditation further:

A new aspect of the mind arises. This is referred to variously as the witness, the seer, the knower, or the observer. It witnesses without judgment and without comment. Along with the arrival of the witness, a space appears within the mind. This enables us to see thoughts and emotions as mere thoughts and emotions, rather than as ‘me’ and ‘mine’. When the thoughts and emotions are no longer seen as ‘me’ or ‘mine’, we begin to have choices. Certain thoughts and emotions are helpful, so we encourage them. Others are not so helpful, so we just let them go. All the thoughts and emotions are recognized and accepted. Nothing is suppressed. But now we have a choice about how to react. We can give energy to the ones which are useful and skillful and withdraw energy from those which are not.

In a similar way, when I visualise dog, the mental images create a new aspect of mind that has a devotional nature. My heart is stirred by this devotion, and in so doing, I focus on the sensation of imagining the world as a dog. In the meditative state, mindfulness enables me to fasten my attention, and vigilance guards against becoming agitated or drowsy. Consequently, my enthusiasm for meditation has grown and before I start to paint dogs every morning, I practise meditative visualisation, sometimes for five minutes, at other times for as long as half an hour. Practising helps me to achieve the right state of mind and to promote the power of my imagination before I start making my work.

3.1.2 Face Number 1, Number 2, and Number 3 (2003-2004)

Looking back to the very beginning of my art practice from 2000 to 2005, I often observed the dogs in my house for hours everyday and I could not help drawing or painting their various faces with vivid characteristics. I was obsessed with the facial features of dogs because they had all kinds of cute and engaging expressions on their faces. One day I realised that I should reinvent my passion for these creatures in my art practice, because my obsession for them was such a big part of my life. Subsequently, from 2003 to 2005, my obsession with the faces of my dogs became the subject of my paintings. This is seen in my paintings entitled *Face Number 1* (2003-2004), *Face Number 2* (2004), and *Face Number 3* (2004).

1.4 *Face Number 1*, oil painting on canvas, 160 (L) x 140 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2003-2004

1.5 *Face Number 2*, oil painting on canvas, 180 (L) x 160 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004

In these paintings I tried to depict each dog with a different facial expression and features as vividly as possible. It was not my intention to present a dog's charm and lovely nature as a caricature; instead, I tried to express emotions and inner states of the singular character of each dog face both individually, and as a group of 100 dogs juxtaposed together on one canvas, rather than to depict the dog as representation. In *Face Number 1*, the painting is divided into two parts: the upper part has a grey sky—which I wanted to look like the sky of a hot and humid summer in Chongqing—that aims to create a repressed and anxious atmosphere in this painting. In the lower part, there are hundreds of different kinds of dogs, such as pugs, poodles, Chihuahua, and Chow Chow, depicted vividly together. Their faces take various forms; their eyes sometimes seem to stare at the viewers, and they gaze silently in different directions. Some dog faces are depicted barking or smiling, while others have wrinkled eyebrows to express their concentration. The sizes of the dogs are arranged according to perspective. In the front, the dogs are much bigger and more clearly depicted than those in the back of the group, which are smaller and less clearly defined.

1.6 Close-up of *Face Number 1*, oil painting, 160 (L) x 140 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2003-2004

1.7 Close-up of *Face Number 2*, oil painting on canvas, 180 (L) x 160 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004

1.8 Close-up of *Face Number 2*, oil painting on canvas, 180 (L) x 160 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004

Compared to *Face Number 1*, *Face Number 2* is filled with all types of dogs, leaving no space for the sky; this creates a bold and tight composition, which aims to express tension on its surface. The figures of dogs and their facial expressions here are very similar to those of *Face Number 1*, but the techniques and skill in

the approach to the painting are different. In painting *Face Number 1*, I adopted the impressionist style of painting techniques and skills to depict the dogs with short and thick brush strokes and colours applied side by side without too much mixing; and I didn't lay any colour foundation on the canvas. In *Face Number 2*, I used classical painting techniques and skills, and I had a deep-maroon colour foundation on the canvas before painting, and multi-layers of thin colour applied with fluent brush strokes, and subtler colours, to express an orchestra of colours playing a harmonious tune. The sizes of the dogs in *Face Number 2* do not follow the rules of natural perspective: the dogs at the front are the largest, and the dogs in the middle are smaller than the dogs at the front and back. Painting in this way, I intended to create a more intense space within the canvas.

In the composition of the paintings *Face Number 1 and Face Number 2* I faced the challenge of placing dogs on the canvas. The design of these two paintings was elaborate and took a long time, during which I arranged and adjusted the dogs so that they would be in harmony together on the canvas. In both of these paintings the white dogs seen together form a shape similar to a Chinese character known as ‘之’ (*Zhi*), which is a word used as an adverb for modifying a function, or a syncategorematic term without any real meaning.¹⁶ The reason I adopted such a character in these paintings is simple. First, the shape of the character ‘之’ is well-balanced among the dots, the horizontal lines, and the lines that move up from the left and down to the right, which fits in the grid of dogs within the painting in a harmonious way. Second, the Chinese word ‘之’ is meaningless, an expression that matches the content of these paintings—a vacuum of emptiness and confusion of each individual's existence in the contemporary world.

In these paintings, my aim was to express the intense visual impact that the dogs faces had on me. I wanted the viewers to neglect the individual identity of each dog as a pet and endeavoured to make a statement about the living condition of all sentient of beings in the world now. The dogs can be seen sitting closely together, barking out their desire for love and communication. Nevertheless, their facial expressions appear somehow lonely. In other words, each figure in my painting is an isolated and a confused individual and, despite appearing

¹⁶ From the online *Xihuan* dictionary: <http://xh.5156edu.com> (accessed on 22 January, 2013).

emotionally lonely, they are all physically and intimately together without any gaps—like commuters on an overloaded tube train in the rush hour. However much they are crammed together, they are strangers to each other deep in their hearts. Moreover interestingly, the loneliness they share seems to glue and connect them together, and to accommodate each of them in a superficial and trivial expression of modern society. As the well-known Chinese artist Pang Maokun comments on *Face Number 2*, the more dogs there are in this painting, the lonelier they appear. I intended to express the loneliness and confusion of all sentient beings in the contemporary world; of animals and humans alike.¹⁷ My interest was in expressing the experience of isolation, puzzlement, and loneliness that I felt in contemporary society.

This experience continues as a theme in another of my oil paintings entitled *Face Number 3* (2004, fig. 1.9). This painting, like the other two in this series, shares a similar colour, tone, and atmosphere as the paintings *Face Number 1* and *Face Number 2*. Yet the composition of *Face Number 3* is a development, because it is influenced by the figurative paintings of Tantric Buddhism that portray Buddhas or deities within a sacred space.

1.9 *Face Number 3*, oil painting, 110 (L) x 130 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004

From my observations, the most fundamental and common composition used in figurative Tantric Buddhist painting is that of a main (singular) figure in the middle of a background. This can be seen in the painting entitled *The First Sermon* in the eleventh-century Tibet. In Tibetan mural painting, this form of composition is intended to highlight the figure of Shakyamuni and it conveys his peaceful state of mind after he becomes enlightened, which is in strong contrast to the figures of *Bhiksus* (monks) that surround him. Similarly, in my painting *Face Number 3* I adopted a simple composition inspired by Tibetan figurative painting. For example the big head of a bulldog is depicted in the centre of the painting. It occupies almost 80 per cent of the entire canvas, and is surrounded by many other smaller dogs. In the composition of this painting, I did not wish to use a natural or realistic perspective. Instead, I followed the rule of composition and hierarchy within Tibetan painting, in which, most importantly, figures are manifested in different sizes. In *Face Number 3*, it was my intention to put more emphasis on

¹⁷ For Tibetan Buddhists, they believe that all sentient beings have their own soul to feel loneliness.

the image of the green-headed bulldog with its watery eyes and its tongue which appears stretched out as if it is a call for attention, while the other dogs that surround him appear rather sad, lonely, or puzzled.

3.2 The Transformative Stage of My Journey (2005-2008): The Explicit Relationship between Tibetan Buddhist Art and My Art Practice

3.2.1 Pastel drawings of dogs, Face series (2005)

Following the creation of my oil paintings entitled *Face Number 1*, *Face Number 2* and *Face Number 3*, my subsequent artwork was a series of pastel and watercolour drawings (2005, fig. 1.10) that gave expression to the individual characters of the dogs that were embedded in my home and family in 2005. These particular drawings showed the first signs of how Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art began to influence my work.

1.10 *Face Series*, pastel and watercolour drawings, 30 (L) x 40 (H) cm, Jia Peng, 2005

First, on a technical level, I began to adopt the traditional Tibetan way of making colour pigments and applying them to my work. As I noted in Chapter 2, the paints in traditional Tibetan paintings are mainly mineral pigments, which offer a variety of colours and tints that are different from those that are modern and factory-made. During the process of creating these pastel works, I usually laid down a thin layer of colour made of natural mineral pigments with hide glue as a foundation, which was done before I began to draw with pastel sticks. For example the work on the right side of the second row in fig. 1.10 was painted in multiple layers with deep blue as the foundation, which was made from ground azurite blue. To create the effect I wanted I applied another, thicker, layer of yellow, which was made of orpiment yellow and seldom gold powder. This was painted on top of the deep blue in the area where I planned to paint the poodle. During this period, and as used in Tibetan painting, I often tried to use mineral pigments for the foundation, to gain very rich and bright colours with a special semi-matte quality. This helped me to create layers and transitions of colours in my work—to make it subtler, yet abundant.

Second, the influence of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art on my work can be seen from the application of strong complementary and contrasting colours, such as blue and yellow or orange, red and green, and white and black, which are often found in Tibetan paintings (for example). The taste of Tibetan colour has been

handed down from generation to generation and is evident in almost all traditional Tibetan paintings, costumes, architectural buildings, and decorative artefacts. Many scholars argue that the natural environment of ‘the Roof of the World’ (Keay, 1983: 153) is probably the most influential factor in forming a preference for bright colours in Tibetan art and culture. As Gen-qiu Deng-zi, a well-known Chinese scholar explains, the Tibetan plateau has a wide range of snow and ice covering a large area and, apart from three months during the summer, the people in Tibet hardly see the blooming flowers and green trees.¹⁸ The extent of this means that the Tibetans long for bright and colourful artworks in their lives to compensate for the lack of bright colours that surround them in their natural world. Probably for the same reason I have been naturally attracted to bright and strong contrasting colours since I was a child. This is because Chongqing is a major industrialised city with a thick layer of fog that fills the skies above for approximately 100 days each year.¹⁹ This is especially apparent during spring and autumn. In such foggy weather, it is always much safer to wear bright clothes to be seen easily, so as to avoid accidents and, over time, most Chongqing people have become fond of strong contrasting colours. When I started to practise Tibetan meditation in 2002, I began to develop a similar colour taste to the Tibetans. I see now that this was in direct relation to my spiritual growth and my experience of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. In religious contemplation, the introspective awareness within me arises and makes me favour rainbow-like colours as the intrinsic nature of me is transformed through a path of creative and dynamic imagination. Thus, in the later series of pastel and watercolour drawings entitled *Faces*, my interest turned away from collections of dogs faces to individual dogs. I did this to search inwardly for answers to the basic question about the meaning of my present life, encountering each (actual) dog individually in my visualisation by means of Tibetan meditation.

On seeing the oil paintings and pastel drawings entitled *Face Number X*, some viewers have asked me if I intend to anthropomorphise the dogs, like artists such as the American Cassius Marcellus Coolidge (1844 to 1934) have done.

¹⁸ Gen-qiu Deng-zi (2005), *Qin-tan zang-min-zu de se-cai-guan*, <http://zt.tibet.cn/web/ganzi/jxgz/..%5Cjxgz/..%5Cjxgz/200502005729154430.htm> (accessed on 29 July, 2012).

¹⁹ ‘Chongqing Municipality’, <http://www.travelchinaguide.com/climate/chongqing.htm> (accessed 17 July, 2011).

Coolidge's renowned paintings of dogs playing poker (1870s to 1900s) were commissioned by a Minnesota advertising firm in 1903.²⁰ These anthropomorphised dogs (sometimes even dressed as gentlemen of the nineteenth century) often sit around a gambling table playing poker, drinking whisky, and smoking pipes or cigars. As the art critic Annette Ferrara comments, these paintings are 'indelibly burned into ... the American collective-schlock subconscious ... through incessant reproduction on all manner of pop ephemera'.²¹ In contrast to Coolidge's dog paintings, I do not project an anthropomorphic quality onto my dogs intentionally. Instead, I make efforts to encounter these dogs really, both spiritually and emotionally. This idea may sound simple but in fact it needs my serious determination and a rejection of human-centred ideas of identity. The process aims to challenge fixed identities of human and non-human animal beings in Western thought from a different perspective.

During the early 2000s, I read many books by contemporary philosophers and thinkers, such as Levinas,²² Derrida,²³ Foucault,²⁴ and Deleuze and Guattari that examined the human–animal binary.²⁵ Their ways of perceiving the world have had a great impact on me as well as on my research on Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art. I was not aware of their writings, between 2003 and 2005, when I made my *Face* series. However, between 2008 and 2012, I became more aware of their influences when I studied and lived in London. Since then I have intentionally explored the practicality of using terminology and methodology from various

²⁰ Anonymous (2005), 'Dogs in Art', *Doyle New York*, <http://www.doylenewyork.com/DogsInArt/2005/> (accessed on 11 September 2008).

²¹ Annette Ferrara (2008), 'Lucky Dog!' *Ten by Ten Magazine*, Chicago: Tenfold Media <http://web.archive.org/web/20080327040522/http://www.tenbyten.net/luckydog.html> (accessed on 1 September 2012).

²² Levinas comes close to deconstruct the fixed identities and beings of human and animal, and articulates a possible new relationship with animal. But he turns away from overcoming the hierarchy based on a duality between human and animal.

²³ In *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2002), Derrida addresses a positive thought of being with animals that 'crossing borders or the ends of man I come or surrender to the animal—to the animal in itself, to the animal in me and the animal at unease with itself' (Derrida, 2008[2002]: 3).

²⁴ For Foucault, 'the animal in man' has become his madness in itself: he associates animality with the history of human madness. Foucault undresses the distinction of human and animal and liberates one's certain existence as 'a living being in question' (Foucault, 1990[1978]: 143).

²⁵ During 2009, I tried to engage with Deleuze and Guattari's theories of 'becoming' with my research more, yet that experiment was unproductive. This is because the Tantric Buddhist traditions cannot be mapped directly on to those of Deleuzian becoming. The metaphors of space, for example, appear to be very different in Buddhist painting, which retains a hierarchical structure of elements that is not readily assimilated into rhizomatics. Therefore, I only adopted senses of critical thinking from this reading and linked some useful Deleuzian concepts with Tantric meditation and my art practice.

modern philosophical approaches to gain insights into the concerns of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art.

In contrast to Western thought, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism provides me with a non-dualistic perspective and an approach to the boundary between animal (dog) and human (me). Specifically, within the Tibetan Buddhist discourses, the traditional terminology of non-duality is radically reinterpreted as all sentient beings without exception are the Buddha Nature, which is being and non-being, permanent and change (Kim, 2003: 205-209). This has three layers of meaning. First, all sentient beings are equal. Humans do not have a superior position to other animal and non-human beings. Second, all sentient beings and the Buddha Nature are no longer subject and object, which means the boundary between the two is obliterated. Third, compared to traditional Mahayana Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhists believe that ‘the Buddha Nature is not a seed of a potential awakening at some point in the future’ (*ibid.*), but is all sentient beings in the present. In my meditative and art practices, through borrowing Tibetan Buddhist terminology such as non-duality, I claim that both me (a human being) and the dogs (non-human animals) are Buddha Nature itself, and are “‘the Un-namable, and Un-objectifiable” that is neither immanent nor transcendent’ (Stambaugh, 1990: 12). I intend to feel the sensation of becoming-others, such as a dog, and to understand that experience through the process of being a dog in my artworks.

To some extent, the sensation of images in Tibetan Tantric art is a result of contemplation in Tantric meditational practices and a pursuit of enlightenment through its dazzling and extremely rich symbols. Here, the reader may wonder what the sensation of images that I refer to is, because differing and conflicting viewpoints can be seen in a variety of definitions given by writers, artists, philosophers, and critics and so on. For example Deleuze (1990: 39) defines sensation as a subjective experience aroused from the sensory receptors directly working on the nervous system. Deleuze’s *The Logic of Sense* (1990) influences my understanding of Tantric meditation and art practice as ‘that which shifts from one order to another, from one level to another’ (*ibid.*: 33). When a practitioner enters Tibetan Tantric meditation, there is one level of his or her original self; during the visualisation, he or she tries to create another level of a new self by identifying him/her-self as the others; In doing so, the practitioner achieves to a

state of consciousness in between these two levels. As I explained earlier, my meditative visualisations on dogs generate a subject self (of dogs) and an object self (of me). As Tibetan Buddhism teaches that there are many faceted self in one's meditation, the object self refers to the original self when one begins meditating and the subject self refers to the new self that one tries to identify with. In doing so, it helps me to break down the boundary between dogs and me, which has become more dissolved over years of intensive practice. I think this experience is a creative way of encountering or engaging with dogs (the animal), without privileging the image of me (the human being) in my painting. In other words, Tantric meditation helps me to be aware of how to see the difference between dogs (the animal) and me—a non-human animal and human being at the same time—without the presupposition of knowing who or what human or animal is or should be. On the grounds of consciousness and visualisation within Tibetan Tantric meditative practice, I may have the potential to become more than me (the human being). In the process I may overcome myself or expand my will power by 'becoming-hybrid' with these dogs (Colebrook, 2001:135).

Here, some viewers ask me: 'If you do not intentionally make dogs anthropomorphic in your work, does it mean the artist (or human being) regards herself as a dog (the animal)?' In other words, the human being is degraded to the non-human animal. 'Should this be interpreted as a negative symbol of the inhuman, or the displaced and alienating condition of modern life?' I need to claim that in both my meditative and art practices I approach the encounter between dogs (animal) and me (human) as a positive creation and transformation. The transformation of oneself from human being to dog does not, for me, imply any loss or decline in humanity. It produces new perception. In its positivity, this transformative experience in Tibetan meditation and art practice can be perceived as an intensity, enjoyment, or excitement of becoming-others, without a metaphorical goal or presupposition, and can be achieved through openness to possibilities and diversities. Tibetan Buddhist meditation as well as my art practice are possible practical ways to experience the invisible self, the intensity, enjoyment, and excitement of becoming-others in a state of ecstatic pleasure.

In addition, discourse around the openness of encountering others (animals) is not only discussed in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, but also in Western

contemporary scholarship. Western philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari have been striving to think differently from the hierarchal thinking based on a duality between human and animal. In doing this, Deleuze and Guattari created philosophical concepts, such as becoming-animal. They claim that ‘Becoming-animal is not resemblance, identification nor imitation’ (Colebrook, 2001:135). As Colebrook (*ibid.*: 137) observes:

Becoming-animal is not, then, attaining the state of what the animal means (the supposed strength or innocence of animals); nor is it becoming what the animal is. It is not behaving like an animal. Becoming-animal is a feel for the animal’s movements, perceptions and becoming. Imagine seeing the world as if one were a dog, a beetle or a mole.

That is, becoming-animal is neither about reinforcing humanity, nor going back to the animal state, but doing away with the opposition altogether. Both human and animal come to their own limits, cross the borderline, and merge into each other becoming a new unfixed variation and creation in between. For Deleuze and Guattari, the immanence of becoming-animal not only repudiates the assumption of a normative humanist ground or foundation, but it also intends to examine life as having all kinds of possible tendencies in itself without suppressing any presupposition or restriction. This is an open, diversifying, and unstable system, which is based on the creativity of becoming other rather than the relative stability of being. I think it can provide the tool to maximise our strength by experiencing the others’ life power. Like the vampire and werewolf in the American film *Van Helsing* (2004), humans consider mutations such as most teratology in popular and artistic imagination to be dangerous, terrifying, and threatening to one’s human identity. However, Deleuze and Guattari make it possible to approach their interpretation differently—not as a sign of cultural decadence in our postmodern times, but allowing the construction of the flow of experience into much more open, flexible, and dynamic forms of identity and subjectivity, allowing other connections to proliferate from them.

As I noted above, the human and animal can be woven into each other through becoming-animal, but I could not help wondering if this becoming-animal was real, or whether it was an act of dreaming or a fantasy? Deleuze and Guattari (1987: 237) address these questions as follows:

Becoming-animal are neither dreams nor fantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in

playing animal or imitating an animal, it is clear that the human being does not 'really' become an animal any more than the animal 'really' becoming something else ... What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposed fixed terms through which that becoming passes ... The becoming-animal of the human being is real, even if the animal the human being becomes is not; and the becoming-other of the animal is real, even if that something other it becomes is not ... Becoming is always of a different order than filiation. It concerns alliance ... in the domain of symbioses that brings into play being of totally different scales and kingdoms, with no possible filiation.

The reality of becoming-animal is definite. It seems like a figment of the imagination, but it is claimed to be a form of reality and the key is becoming the other. This forms the alliance between the human and animal. It is not only the means of an encounter between human and animal, and is much more than juxtaposing the images of human and animal together. It encompasses the zone of proximity that we make great efforts to keep at bay in our lives, and it maximises the potential and the possibilities of life with others, by using the human power of imagination to see the world from an inhuman or animal perspective.

3.2.2 *The potential parallel between Tibetan Buddhism and Deleuze's concept within my oil paintings (2005-2006)*

1.11 *Face Number 4*, oil painting on canvas, 110 (L) x 130 cm (H), by Jia Peng, 2005

1.12 *Face Number 5*, oil painting on canvas, 110 (L) x 130 cm (H), by Jia Peng, 2005-2006

1.13 *Face Number 6*, oil painting on canvas, 110 (L) x 130 cm (H), by Jia Peng, 2006

I began to think about ways in which Deleuze and Guattari's potential ways of becoming-animal could be parallel, or even related to Tibetan Tantric meditation, as well as to my art practice. Intrigued by these ideas, I tried to imagine how Deleuze and Guattari's notion of becoming-animal might be formed visually in my Tibetan meditative practice. In doing so, I started painting and conceiving the monstrous figures of dogs faces. What I found particularly interesting here were not the dogs faces I was drawn to in my previous dog paintings, but the way of visualising the dogs faces in the transformation of becoming within my meditative practice. For example, my painting entitled *Face Number 6* (2006, fig. 1.13) presents a monstrous green head with two moving dog faces with three enlarged eyes, two noses, and two wide-open mouths with long outstretched tongues that appear to bark out at the viewer.

During my meditative practice before I paint, the moment the visual image appears in my mind I experience a strong smell that fully absorbs my senses and the sound of loud barking fills my ears. These sensations are all transmitted into

my being, and in the process create much joy and splendour within me. Thus, when I pick up my brushes and start painting, I think of the monstrous figure, which is no longer a dog but is a visible image transformed through the sensations I experienced in my meditation and that stay within me while I am painting. Within this process, I aim to express my critical sense²⁶ as well as the invisible, instinctual senses transmitted through my direct experience of reality and imagination. I wish to ‘make visible a kind of original unity of the senses’ (Deleuze, 1990: 46) and share with the viewer an image, that evokes a multi-sensual experience, which I originally gained from the visualisation within my Tibetan meditative practice, and that was transformed through the power of my imagination. I believe that the visualisation of Tibetan Tantric meditation has the potential to show what the sensation of the subjective becoming-others is through the maximised power of one’s imagination.

3.2.3 The myth reconstruction series (2005-2007)

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, in 2002 I visited the Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in A-Ba (Ngawa), where I learnt the most fundamental Tibetan meditation skills. In the summer of 2005, I reached a turning point in my art practice when I visited the western regions of Tibet, as well as the adjacent regions in Qinghai province and the Dunhuang in Gansu province. During these trips, I was deeply touched by the aesthetics of ancient (western) Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, particularly art from the eleventh century to the fifteenth century. I think that these works, due to their successful use of symbolism, seem to transform the viewer into a higher and more open state of consciousness.

From 2005 onwards this experience continued as a transitional phase, which led me to develop a closer relationship between Tibetan Buddhist art and my artwork through the Myth Reconstruction Series (2005 to 2007). In this new series of works, I absorbed the concepts of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism, the iconographies of deities, and the visual symbols of Tibetan paintings. As a contemporary Chinese woman artist, I explore Tibetan and Chinese myths and classical religious images and texts in an endeavour to realise, understand, and transcend the limitation of my being. By doing so, my aim is to translate the ancient mythic

²⁶ Here, critical sense refers to the habits or traits of mind leading to logical thinking and an intellectual approach to perceive and understand reality.

language into the language of things living in the world, to reconstruct love and life and, to that end, to understand more about the world and about life's overall significance.

1.14 *The Third Eye*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2006

During this period I obtained inspiration from a Chinese God Erlang Shen, who has a third truth-seeing eye (also known as the inner eye) in the middle of his forehead that leads to inner realms and represents a state of enlightenment (Leadbeater, 1927: 79). More interestingly, in Tibetan Buddhist mythology there is a semi-wrathful or wrathful protective deity Acalanatha who shares the same physical characteristics as the Chinese God Erlang Shen in having the third eye on his forehead. Regarding the origins of Erlang Shen and Acalanatha, there is no definite textual evidence to prove that they share an historical connection. Many Chinese scholars think that the archetype of Erlang Shen is probably Li Erlang, the engineer in the construction of the Du jiangyan Irrigation System in Chengdu Plain during the Warring States period (probably 475 BCE to 221 BCE). In memory of his contribution to the complex irrigation system, local people elevated him to the status of the greatest warrior. In Chinese mythic tales he is the greatest protective God of heaven. In contrast, Acalanatha's physical appearance is probably derived from some textual source such as the *Mahavairocana Tantra* and its annotation in Indian and Tibetan Tantric Buddhism (Shincho, 1985: 7).

The feature of the third inner eye in the middle of the forehead of both Chinese and Tibetan guardian deities inspired my painting, specifically the work entitled *The Third Eye* (2006, fig. 1.14). In this painting there is a close-up of a dog's head (a pug) in bright blue with a curving orange tongue that stretches out to occupy almost four-fifths of the canvas. Surrounding the enormous head, there are three other smaller heads of the same kind of dog. On the forehead of each dog, there is the third truth-seeing eye. A pair of huge eyes is placed behind the main dog's head to make the space and the atmosphere of the painting more mysterious. In total, there are 12 eyes in this painting. As discussed earlier, the number 12 is endowed with various abstract connotations in Chinese culture. Twelve usually represents good luck, or a (positive or productive) cycle, or a superior power.

In (Tibetan) Buddhism, 12 is also an important number—the Twelve Links of Dependent Arising related to *karma*, and the 12 fields of composing a sentient being. Within each pupil of these 12 eyes, I depicted a very small dog; a self-reflection of the dogs themselves. Here, the visual image of self-reflection in pupils as well as the forehead's third eye was inspired by my Tibetan Tantric meditation. Based on the general method of meditation that I discussed earlier, I applied the internal visualisation within energy channels and centres, and subtle minds before making this painting. Specifically speaking, with my eyes closed I tried to focus my full attention on the point between my eyebrows, while my body was in the Lotus Pose. When my mental state was stabilised, I paid attention to the conscious breathing and the flow of sensations, feelings and thoughts through the left, right and central energy channels within my body. According to Bryant (1992: 241-242), the left and right energy channels 'correspond to the polarities of male and female'; the central channel is the neutral pathway of balance and stability, which links the six main energy centres; and the method of inner meditation is to bind together 'the left and right channels into the central energy channels, thereby stilling the ever-changing mind'. As Watson (1998: 152) says, this method of meditation is 'in contrast to representational and calculative thinking, the [meditative] thinking that is logical, conceptual, grasping and reifying'. Tibetan Tantric Buddhism teaches me that the third eye is one of the six main energy centres within the body, and through meditative practice at an advanced level, it would expand and open invisibly, and also link the left and right energy lines of the body with the energy of the Universe. Here, I intend to express my longing for a speculative and invisible eye that provides the spiritual growth beyond ordinary sight in worldly life.

1.15 *Ashura and the Dragon*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2006

From late 2005 I was absorbed in the more explicit elements of Tibetan Buddhist art, which filtered into my paintings as exaggerated and deformed dog features (not only the face of the dogs) that made them monstrous. An example is *Ashura and the Dragon* (2006, fig. 1.15). In this painting, the dogs resemble beasts or the wrathful deities that appear in Tibetan paintings. I abandoned the doctrine of making them look realistic and transcended the original characteristics of the dog. Using the technique of repetition, I wanted to imply the Tibetan

Buddhist's notion of the six realms in the Tibetan wheel of life. These six realms are: the *Deva* (god), the *Ashura* (the semi-god, who is a terrifying and fierce war semi-god in Tibetan Buddhist mythology), the *Manusya* (human), the *Triyagyon* (animal), the *Preta* (hungry ghost), and the *Naraka* (hell) domains.

Tibetan Buddhists claim that before they are fully enlightened, all sentient beings are caught up in an endless process of a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, one after the other within the six realms of existence. The driving force behind the continual repetitive cycle among the six realms is *karma*,²⁷ 'the infallible law of cause and effect that governs the universe' (Sogyal, 2009: 97). The Tibetan Buddhist believes that the realm of existence one has in this life is determined by their actions in their previous lives; and the realm of one's next rebirth is determined by actions in this life. The Buddha preaches: 'what you are is what you have been, what you will be is what you do now'. Padmasambhava makes a further claim: 'If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition; if you want to know your future life, look at your present actions'.²⁸ In the endless cycle within these six realms, those who have good *karma* through diligent practice would be reincarnated into the upper realms (the *Deva*, the *Manusya*, or the *Ashura*); otherwise, they would be degraded into less good or even bad spheres, such as the *Triyagyon* (animal), the *Preta* (hungry ghost), and the *Naraka* (hell) domains. A person would probably have to go through all six realms before becoming fully enlightened and free from the condition of existence. This viewpoint may lead Buddhists on the path to a greater compassion for all sentient beings, and encourage them to seek the ultimate enlightenment.

As far as the application of specific symbols is concerned, my inspiration for *Ashura and the Dragon* was an ancient Tibetan *thangka* entitled *The Wrathful Form of Acalanatha* (painted between the seventh century and the ninth century). To my knowledge, descriptions of Acalanatha's physical appearance derive from Tantric scriptural sources, such as the *Mahavairocana Tantra* (Shincho, 1985: 7). The iconography of Acalanatha appears to be expressively semi-wrathful: wrinkle-browed, with glaring red eyes, and the third eye in the middle of his forehead, and lower teeth that bite down from the upper lip. His body is depicted

²⁷ I discussed it in the Introduction (p. 26, ft. 21).

²⁸ <http://www.qigonghealer.com/guru.html> (accessed on 2 March, 2013).

in dark blue, his round chest and belly poised in a threatening gesture. He holds a sword in his right hand, which he thrusts upwards, and a lariat²⁹ on his left hand in front of his chest. He wears elaborate earrings, necklaces, armbands, bracelets, and anklets, as do most of Tantric deities. His crown has a symbol of a Buddha in the centre, which is probably a reference to his special attribute. His elaborate red and gold loincloth with the Indian Pala patterns is in strong contrast to his dark-blue body. A golden dragon twists around his waist and left shoulder. He is engulfed in flame and seated on a huge rock base. As I mentioned in Chapter 3,³⁰ the wrathful iconographies of Tantric deities in Tibetan art as well as the wrathful and semi-wrathful Tantric deities in Tibet were probably created for the purpose of transforming one's desires, inner states, or unconsciousness from the negative to the positive, and to transform duality to non-duality. As one of these wrathful deities, Acalanatha is a fully enlightened one who adopts a fierce or fearsome countenance to benefit all sentient beings to experience ultimate reality and to achieve enlightenment as non-duality. I think Acalanatha and other semi-wrathful or wrathful deities can be regarded as a positive energy of wrath and anger, which passionately protects the Buddhist Tantric practitioners from all kinds of dangers on the spiritual path towards the ultimate reality of liberation.

1.16 The loincloth of *Ashura and the Dragon*, by Jia Peng, 2006

1.17 Close-up of *Ashura and the Dragon*, by Jia Peng, 2006

Iconographically, my artwork *Ashura and the Dragon* borrows ornaments, such as necklaces and loincloths, from the ancient *thangka*. Based on my observations of the basic form of wrathful deity, such as this *thangka*, it seems that all other complicated and various figurative depictions in Tibetan Tantric iconography of wrathful deities, such as Vajrabhairava,³¹ can be created simply by adding extra heads, arms and legs, ritual ornaments, and attributes.

Similarly, I depicted six arms and six legs on the main dog in the middle of the painting. Six is a special number in Chinese culture. As Yang Xiong (53 BCE to 18 CE) writes in *The Book of Supreme Profundity*, number six belongs to water,

²⁹ Here, the lariat is a loop of rope or chain with a round circle at one end, which is designed to be thrown around a target.

³⁰ P. 156-158.

³¹ Vajrabhairava is a wrathful, buffalo-headed meditational deity in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

which represents both female and the earth.³² In contrast to symbolic meanings in Chinese culture, the number six represents the completion of the six perfections (*shad-paramita*) in Tibetan Buddhism. In Buddha's teaching, the six perfections are about 'six dimensions of human character' that require perfecting (Wright, 2009: 267): 1) Generosity (*dana-paramita*); 2) Morality (*shila-paramita*); 3) Peace (*shanti-paramita*); 4) Vigor (*virya-paramita*); 5) Meditation (*dhyana-paramita*); and 6) Insightful Wisdom (*prajna-paramita*) (Ray, 2004: 140).

Also, I borrowed the form of nine heads of *Vajrabhairava* to create the main dog head in my painting. In Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art, nine-headed deities usually symbolise the flow of the past, the present, and the future. This is because nine is a multiple of three, which is a particularly significant number with symbolic meanings. According to the pre-Buddhist *Bon* religion, the universe is made up of three parts—the heaven, the earth, and the underground. In Tibetan Buddhism, the doctrine *three kayas* hypostasised three facts of the Buddha's nature in the past, the present, and the future. There are also Buddhas of the three times: Dipankara Buddha,³³ Buddha of the Past; Shakyamuni Buddha, Buddha of the Present; and Maitreya Buddha,³⁴ Buddha of the Future. In the *Tibetan Book of the Dead* there are three circles. These consist of the desire circle, the material circle, and the non-material circle into which the dead would incarnate.

Here, I have three reasons for adopting the nine heads as the most significant part of my painting: first, as I argued above, it refers to the symbolic meanings of nine in the discourse of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. Second, the number nine represents the great fortune (or the fortune one has reached in the zenith of all respects) in Chinese culture. Last, when nine is associated with both five and 'the dragon', it symbolises 'the ever-lasting existence'.³⁵ For example in the essay 'Qian', *the Book of Change* (around the 1040s BCE), 'Fifth nine, the dragon is

³² Yang Xiong, <http://guji.artx.cn/article/19593.html> (accessed on 19 September 2012).

³³ Dipankara Buddha is the most celebrated and the first of the 24 Buddhas. <http://www.dharmasculpture.com/buddha-three-times-dipankara-shakyamuni-maitreya-buddha.html> (accessed on 22 September, 2012).

³⁴ Maitreya is said to be waiting for the time when he will descend to earth. He is the hope of civilisation, expressing the invisible future by means of the visible. He confers happiness. <http://www.dharmasculpture.com/buddha-three-times-dipankara-shakyamuni-maitreya-buddha.html> (accessed on 22 September, 2012).

³⁵ The number five is sacred in Chinese culture. The dragon is the most powerful symbol of good fortune in Chinese culture, representing the ultimate symbol of the cosmic energy *qi*. www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/chinese_symbols_1109.pdf (accessed on 20 October, 2012).

flying in the sky; it is time for the great man to come to the fore'.³⁶ In my painting *Ashura and the Dragon*, there are five monster-like dogs; the middle one is depicted with nine heads.

Aesthetically, I have not only derived the symbolic meaning of numbers from Chinese and Tibetan cultures, but I have drawn on the symbolic way that contrasting colour is applied in the two-dimensional space of early Tibetan art. In my early phase of dog paintings (*Face Number 1*, *Face Number 2*, and *Face Number 3*) the application of colours, such as some grey and dark colours, was largely dependent on their resemblance to the naturalistic and realistic dogs situated in a three-dimensional space on a flat surface of the canvas. However in my artwork *Ashura and the Dragon*, I abandoned the kind of grey, dark, and somehow repressed colours that I adopted in my early paintings; I chose instead the strongest colour combinations: dark-blue figures on bright and light orange as the background that was one of the most popular ways of applying colours in early Tibetan Buddhist art. Although they were depicted in a three-dimensional way, all five blue dogs in *Ashura and the Dragon* seem to be floating against a flat background, which was meant to create a mysterious realm where time and space seem to have frozen into eternal nihility.

By placing the dogs in two-dimensional space I tried to give the viewer the opportunity to introspect, and to feel the energy of Tantric meditation in Tibetan Buddhism. In my understanding, the wrathful iconography is intimately linked with self-experience; that is, our inner states. The visual art of Tantra intensively seeks a means of releasing vital energies (known as *kundalini* in Sanskrit). I think that these energies could be described as spiritual powers that lie latent within our higher consciousness. While visualising my painting *Ashura and the Dragon*, I chose to pay homage to the Tantric deity Acalanatha and I observed the *thangka* of him until I remembered every detail, before visualising myself as the deity. Having the myself-image in this form as Acalanatha, I imagined a blue dog as another phenomenal body of me and then generated a self-awareness of combining Acalanatha, the dog, and me into one.

³⁶ *Jiu-wu, fei-long zai tian, li jian da-ren.* (九五，飞龙在天，利见大人。)

I hope the painting has the potential to inspire the viewer to explore their imagination and bridge the gap between the ego and others.³⁷ In the process of practising meditation at an advanced level, one may experience the sensation of visual images as a place of becoming, where events happen through the figures of deities (or any others), the strong contrasting colours, and the transformation of space. To put it another way, Tantric visualisation in the process of meditation is fundamentally a question of transforming our fixed self-image; it is a way to begin the creation of all possible life experiences through the maximised power of imagination.

1.18 *Simultaneous Engagement in Happiness and Nothingness*, 220 (L) x 250 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2007

In another of my artworks entitled *Simultaneous Engagement in Happiness and Nothingness* (2007, fig. 1.18), I was influenced again by the colours, numbers, and graphic layouts that were popular in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist painting. In the title the idea of happiness is a reference to the merging of wisdom and compassion in the discourse of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. While contemplating such things, I ask myself: What do the terms wisdom and compassion mean? And how should I try to demonstrate them in my artwork? First, as we know, Buddhism regards compassion or love for all sentient beings as the highest and most significant spiritual quality. However, many people put emphasis on the term wisdom and see it in isolation. They subsequently realise that it is important to develop both wisdom and compassion side by side. The *Heart Sutra* teaches that the highest wisdom is seeing that all phenomena are incomplete, impermanent, and non-self in reality, and that the ultimate reality is emptiness. As I argued in the Introduction,³⁸ Tibetan Buddhists believe that the Buddha-father represents compassion for all sentient beings, while the Buddha-mother represents wisdom; combined, they empty the preoccupied mind on its way to an awareness of a higher level of reality.

The real message I intend to convey in this painting is what I call Simultaneous Engagement, which is the indistinguishable nature of happiness and

³⁷ In traditional Tantric meditation, ‘the other’ is usually a certain deity who the practitioner wants to identify with. However, some contemporary versions of Tantric meditation encourage the practitioner to visualise anybody or anything as the other. For example, I visualise dogs in my meditation (I discussed it earlier, p. 183-186, 193-195).

³⁸ P. 30, 34

nothingness or that of wisdom and convenience. As I mentioned earlier, Tibetan Tantric Buddhism teaches us non-duality, which refers to insubstantiality or impermanence. This is not meant to refer to loneliness or a life deprived of sensual pleasures and worldly material possessions—as is often mistakenly thought. In this painting the seven brightly coloured dogs resemble Buddha's warrior attendants dancing to music. I hope to produce the effect of elevating the spectator to a visual world of total bliss. It also points out that the state of nothingness is one full of happiness, and vice versa.

1.19 *The Birth of Venus*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2006

1.20 The ornament of the major figure *The Birth of Venus*, by Jia Peng, 2006

1.21 Close-up of the necklace in *The Birth of Venus*, by Jia Peng, 2006

1.22 Close-up of the lotus base in *The Birth of Venus*, by Jia Peng, 2006

In my subsequent oil painting entitled *The Birth of Venus* (2006), I reshaped the iconography of Venus, the Roman Goddess of love and beauty seen in the classic work (1486) of the fifteenth-century Italian painter Sandro Botticelli. During his time, the subject of most paintings was about man as Hero; yet, Botticelli initially presented a Goddess's beauty and elegance as a woman, which reminds me about the significance of women in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.³⁹ In this painting, I intended to counteract the classic representation of Western culture and critique the colonialised perception of Tibetan (and other non-Western) culture as the other in Orientalist heritage.

In his *The Birth of Venus*, Botticelli presented Venus as a lively woman with slight melancholic expression, emerging from the shell in the sea. In the top left-hand corner of the painting are the West Wind Gods, seen blowing the shell to the shore. The West Wind Gods were not in existence in the original myth of the Birth of Venus, but Botticelli used his imagination to create the duo of man and woman in this work. Compared to the religious paintings that prevailed in the fourteenth century, the painting of classical and mythological subjects, such as *The Birth of Venus*, was a new trend. Michael Baxandall, one of the most influential art historians on Renaissance art, points out that the invention of expressive figure patterns made it possible for Botticelli to tell new stories on the canvases. According to Baxandall (1988 [1972]: 80-81):

The sensibility the dance [entitled *Venus*, which was composed by Lorenzo di Piero de' Medici in 1460s] represents involved a public skill at

³⁹ I discussed the significance of women in the Introduction (p. 42-43).

interpreting figure patterns, a general experience of semi-dramatic arrangements that allowed Botticelli and other painters to assume a similar public readiness to interpret their own groups. When he had a new classical subject, with no established tradition for the arrangement and no assurance that the story was very widely or intimately known, he could let the figures dance their relationship out, as Botticelli lets them in his [paintings] ... It does not matter much if we are not familiar with the story: the picture can be taken in the spirit of a *ballo in due*, a dance for two.

Similarly, in my artwork *The Birth of Venus* I borrowed the figure patterns of the Venus and other deities in Botticelli's work, but I replaced them with dogs: on the right side is a beautiful female Chinese pug with golden hair and three pairs of bright red breasts who stands with her two lower legs on a lotus throne. It is important to mention that the (pink) lotus is one of eight auspicious symbols⁴⁰ in Tibetan Buddhism are the best-known group of Buddhist symbols. The pink lotus for the Tibetans represents 'renunciation, purity, and freedom from the faults of cyclic existence [because it] grows out from the dark watery mire but remains completely unstained' (Beer, 2003: 169). As I discussed about the employment of the (white) lotus in Kardyi's painting in Chapter 3,⁴¹ I used the icon of the (pink) lotus to symbolise (and refer to) the feeling of the love and prosperity of the female human and animal as well.

Another important note is the mass of fire that is usually associated with wrathful deities in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art. It symbolises the ruthless destruction of 'ignorance, desire, aversion, pride, and jealousy' on the path to the enlightenment (*ibid.*: 153). Here, in my artwork, the fire in the background represents my wish to protect all the good, beautiful, and joyful sentient beings, while ruthlessly destroying any evil spirit inside or outside ourselves. On the left side of the painting there are four smaller dog-angels with wings at their backs: the one at the front is paying homage to Venus; the ones behind are respectfully holding two red flowers and the crown for her; and the one at the back is flying upward with its head turning to look at her. Behind these dog-angels, I depicted the river and the mountain in a traditional Tibetan way of painting. This is in reference to water and the earth, two of the Five Elements of Tibetan culture.

⁴⁰ According to Beer, the eight auspicious symbols are: (1) a white parasol; (2) a pair of golden fishes; (3) a treasure vase; (4) a lotus; (5) a right-spiralling white conch shell; (6) an endless knot or lucky diagram; (7) a victorious banner; (8) a golden wheel (Beer, 2003: 1).

⁴¹ P. 149.

Later I discuss the symbolic meaning of colour in relation to the Five Elements in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism.

This painting illustrates the alterations made to Western traditional image with non-Western (Tibetan) symbols and visual language (including composition, colour, and space/dimensional construction), which has a jocular allusion, as I convert the Western Goddess and angels into dogs. Western aesthetic tradition had influenced or even dominated the visual culture in China (including the Tibet Autonomous Region) since 1980s and some Chinese or Tibetan artists abandoned their art traditions and adopted the Western valuations of non-Western cultural artefacts.⁴²

Another of my artworks *The Victory of Venus* (2007, fig. 4.31) was an experimental way of replacing the Western Goddess Venus with poodles, as a reference to my painting *The Birth of Venus*.

1.23 *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2007

1.24 Landscape in *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng, 2007

1.25 Details of the silk scarf in *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng, 2007

1.26 Details of the lotus flower in *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng, 2007

One or two years after I invoked the explicit imagery of Tibetan Tantric deities in my dog paintings, a leading figure among the younger generation of Tibetan artists, Gade (b. 1971), created his New Buddha Series and Diamond Series in which he transformed popular American comic figures, such as Mickey Mouse, Spiderman, and the Hulk, into Tibetan *mandalas* and other religious icons. With globalisation and economic development in Tibet in recent years, these Western popular-culture figures can be seen in almost every corner of the Roof of the World. In an interview in 2008, Gade says:

In most people's minds, Tibet is an ancient, mysterious and exotic place. The notion of 'Tibet' is a conundrum. When outsiders actually visit Tibet, especially Lhasa, they get culture shock when they see all the pop culture, fast food, rock music, Coke and beer, brand name clothing, Hollywood movies, the nightlife scene, etc. I think Lhasa ought to be renamed Lhasa Vegas ... When I visited a tiny village called Pazi at the base of Mount Xishabangma (8,102 metres) in the Himalayas, the kids there had backpacks with Mickey Mouse on them, and were drinking Coca Cola. That made me realize the incredible power of those ubiquitous emblems of Western culture and Western values.⁴³

⁴² I discussed it in Chapter 3 (p. 135-138).

⁴³ <http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/making.gods/information> (accessed on 20 February, 2013).

In his artworks he intentionally deals with global consumerism in Tibetan culture. For example in his painting *The Hulk* (2008), Buddha and Tantric deities in traditional Tibetan paintings are replaced by the Hulk, a superhero of American comic books and film, showing off his muscles. Interestingly enough, there is a parallel between my own painting *The Birth of Venus* and Gade's work. For example I use Chinese dogs and Tibetan cultural symbols to reinterpret *The Birth of Venus* in Western mythology, while Gade works this approach the other way around and adopts popular figures in Western culture as a way of developing traditional Tibetan Buddhist painting. Gade's and my artworks have benefited from the diverse and rich source of Tibetan, Chinese, and Western culture. The similarities I share with Gade made me curious to know more about his life experience and his artistic sensibility.

Gade was born in 1971 to a biethnic family⁴⁴ and had a Chinese father who was a soldier from the People's Liberation Army in Tibet and a Tibetan mother who embraced Communism (Harris: 2012: 234). He graduated with a degree in traditional Chinese realistic painting from the School of Fine Arts at Tibet University in Lhasa. He then studied in a Master of Arts programme at the Central Academy of Arts in Beijing and in 1992 was a student assistant. He says his reason for choosing Chinese painting and wanting to study at the university was because 'it was less restrictive than Tibetan painting'.⁴⁵ In late 1990s, he returned to Lhasa to make 'traditional Tibetan painting but in a new way'.⁴⁶ Now he is a lecturer at the Tibetan University, and is an internationally contracted artist with Rossi and Rossi Gallery in London, Plum Blossoms Gallery in Hong Kong, and the Red Gate Gallery in Beijing.⁴⁷ In him, I have found some interesting parallels with my biography: 1) I studied Western oil painting and Chinese painting in my undergraduate and postgraduate programme; 2) the reason I chose oil painting and Chinese painting was because I wanted to be more liberated at the very beginning; 3) I made trips to many places in Tibet and was somehow drawn to traditional Tibetan paintings; 4) on my return to Chongqing, I became more and more

⁴⁴ Here the biethnic family refers to a model of family that consists of half of the family members are Han, or Hui within the group, whilst the other ethnicity within the same group are half Tibetan.

⁴⁵ <http://www.asianart.com/gendun/artist/2.html> (accessed on 21 February, 2013).

⁴⁶ <http://www.asianart.com/gendun/artist/2.html> (accessed on 21 February, 2013).

⁴⁷ <http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/artists/gade/biography> (accessed on 20 February 2013).

absorbed in the symbols of Tibetan culture and I have endeavoured to go on developing the mysterious and amazing traditional Tibetan paintings in my own creative way. Harris comments that ‘with references to the canon of Tibetan’s visual history ... Gade’s work has the feel of an almanac of his imagination’ (Harris, 2006: 714). Similarly, in my work the imagery in my paintings is steeped in references to traditional Tibetan art, which I see in the visualisation and realisation of my Tantric meditative practice, developed through the power of my imagination; 5) I am now a researcher at Chongqing University and also an internationally active artist; 6) we are both influenced deeply by Tibetan Buddhism and its traditional art. As Gade states:

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.⁴⁸

Like me, Gade is very aware that our paintings ‘might not be seen as contemporary in a Western sense,⁴⁹ because the cultural pulse in Tibet is very different’.⁵⁰

The main difference between Gade’s and my art practice is that he seems to be more interested in depicting Tibet as a society and a culture in transition within the context of globalisation and consumerism. I am interested in a new myth system in my paintings, through which I aim to convey Buddhist concepts (such as wisdom and compassion) from Tibetan and Chinese visual traditions, but seen from a contemporary perspective. Gade looks for major changes in Tibetan culture and society, while I seek to explore the unchanged spiritual meanings in the Tibetan (Buddhist) tradition in order to answer the question of my existence. Despite our differences of interests, I feel that we share the same responsibility of inheriting and developing the visual codes of traditional Tibetan art in the contemporary world. Gade explains:

I sincerely want my work to be part of the continuity of Tibetan art, to belong to a ‘Tibetanised’ context, rather than to a Western or Chinese

⁴⁸ <http://www.asianart.com/gendun/artist/2.html> (accessed on 21 February 2013).

⁴⁹ According to Harris (2012: 220), ‘contemporary art is often characterised as a mode of art-making that is supposedly unconcerned with technical dexterity or beauty and directed at challenging social and political conventions’. In this sense, I think my paintings (particularly from 2000 to 2008) may not be seen as contemporary because they are not concerned with social or political engagements.

⁵⁰ <http://www.asianart.com/gendun/artist/2.html> (accessed on 21 February 2013).

language system ... The Buddhist gods are wise: they know precisely why I do, what I do ... [I believe that] The responsibility of the artist goes beyond creating beautiful things. I just say what I believe.⁵¹

This summarises what Gade and I have (most) in common in our art practice.

3.3 The Transnational Stage of My Journey (2008-2012): The Ambivalent Relationship between Tibetan Buddhist Art, My Art Practice and Contemporary Art in the West

In the spring of 2008 I moved to London to study art. In the first few months I found most of the students around me painting abstract works. I found their work interesting. However, I felt that I wanted to produce figurative paintings. It sounds conventional, but I considered figurative or realistic image-making to be the key behind most of my work, and important to my art practice. The notion behind my paintings tallies with my experience (including spiritual progress) of the world outside or inside. In other words, I am interested in reflecting the existing world, and by observing the world, making my version of what I see or want to see. I try to make my artwork function as a kind of diary or meditation, which bridges the gap between the self as ego and the external world. To some extent the painting and the experiences of painting have become part of my meditative practice and can be regarded as a form of spiritual practice.

During 2008 and 2009 I did a series of small pastel and oil painting works, such as *Face Unknown* (2008, fig. 1.27) and *Face Number 11* (2008, fig. 1.30). In *Face Number 11* I combined figures of dogs with other symbolic Tibetan Buddhist Tantric art elements and visual forms. These include the blazing jewels and death-heads on the crown of the Buddha-mother, which contain the form of the circle and square, Tibetan Tantric colours, and five overlapping monstrous heads. Only two of them have enlarged eyes, positioned below other heads; all share the Buddha-mother's crown adorned with jewels and skulls. A teratologic head can be seen through dripping and dissolving brushstrokes: the nose, two enlarged eyes at the bottom, a wide-open mouth with bright tongues stretching out as if grappling towards us. In contrast to my previous dog paintings, the strong dripping brushstrokes make these figures vague and mobile. The area of contrasting colours in the flowery crown on top divides the painting into two parts

⁵¹ Gade (2008-2009), 'Making God', Rossi&Rossi Gallery, <http://www.rossirossi.com/contemporary/exhibitions/making.gods/information> (accessed on 20 February 2013)

and conveys unknown, anxious or even sad feelings that drag the three-dimensional scene back to a flat surface. Here, I wish to show the viewers how I endeavour to bring an invisible inner movement or emotional force to the surface.

1.27 *Face Unknown*, by Jia Peng, 2008

1.28 Close-up of *Face Unknown*, by Jia Peng, 2008

1.29 Close-up of *Face Unknown*, by Jia Peng, 2008

1.30 *Face Number 11*, pastel drawing, by Jia Peng, 2008 to 2009

1.31 *Yab-Yum Couple*, pastel drawing, by Jia Peng, 2008 to 2009

Due to culture differences, Western viewers are more likely to have problems reading the ideas, models, and visual codes coming from Tibetan and Chinese culture in my artworks. As a consequence, I found the gap between conceptual and installation art practices at London art colleges and what I had learnt about realistic or figurative painting in China beforehand, challenging. Westerners have generally been curious to know about my personal position on the political Tibetan issue, and some people doubt my sincerity in creating these paintings that are inspired by traditional Tibetan visual elements and meditative practice. Since many of Tibetan contemporary artists are ‘identified it [Tibetan Buddhism] as their unique asset and selling point’ (Harris, 2012: 228), I have been asked whether my work offers Westerners a new flavour of exoticism, which global consumers would want to buy. Such criticism became worse in 2008, because of the large numbers of supporters of the 14th Dalai Lama, and the continued dislike of the Chinese interference in Tibet coupled by the ‘Free Tibet’ movement during the Olympic torch journey in Britain. Although I was fully cognizant of the fact that Tibetan Buddhism or Tibetan-ness would sell in the Western art market, I clearly hoped to construct a creative strategy that would reject colonialised or politicised interpretation of my work and assert an Tibetan aesthetic style to communicate with Tibetan and non-Tibetan viewers. I drew lessons from my reconfiguration of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist imagery to make statements that could be comprehensible for Tibetan audiences and then tried to produce a new model of art that could potentially be understood by Western audiences.

Subsequently, I embarked consciously on a journey exploring the trans-cultural and global translation of Tibetan Buddhist art and Han Chinese art through my art practice in this Western context. As I explained earlier, I am a Han Chinese artist (influenced by Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and the traditions of its art) studying contemporary art in a Western context. But what roles do Tibetan

culture and my Chinese cultural identity play in my art practice? Tibetan Buddhist meditation has inspired me to experiment with my work in three ways: by the deformations of figures, the strong contrasting colours, and the transformation of space. I think that the exaggerated deformation of beastly figures, such as the warrior attendants that appear in *thangkas*, is an attempt to convey the process of finding a way to reach spiritual powers, and a release into the realms of a higher consciousness. These are inseparable parts of the paintings' expressive purpose. Using the different symbolic and visual aesthetics of Tibetan Tantric art, I intend my work to convey a spiritual purpose that evokes within me and my audience an ability to communicate life experiences that integrate, unconsciously, energies of life power to transcend the limitations of being.

My approach to Tibetan Buddhist art is based on cross-cultural experience. As postmodern translation theories suggest, I studied uniqueness and authenticity on a traditional cultural level, and then my research focus shifted from studying Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhist art and Tibetan-ness to studying Tibetan art as a means of cross-cultural communication. This shift inspired me to explore the interaction between visual translations and cultures and brought me a new orientation and a new attitude towards my exploration of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its artistic tradition from an insider's and an outsider's perspective. I wish to be more radical and active in seeking changes and developments in the ancient mythic system of spirituality and its visual codes of Tibetan Buddhism into a new era of love, compassion, and happiness.

1.32 *Untitled*, conceptual photography, by Jia Peng, 2009

1.33 Close-up of *Untitled*, by Jia Peng, 2009

1.34 *Covenant*, video installation, by Jia Peng, 2009

1.35 *Seeking*, conceptual photography, by Jia Peng, 2010

1.36 *Journey*, from the series of *Red*, video installation, by Jia Peng, 2010

1.37 *Red*, video, sculpture, and painting installation, by Jia Peng, 2010

1.38 *Red*, conceptual photography, by Jia Peng, 2010

I moved away from figurative representation, and tried to absorb Tibetan elements in a more implicit way, attempting to provoke the spectators' multisensory experience through the language of art. In my works from 2009 to 2012, I experimented with a series of negative conceptual photographs⁵² and short films of human beings and non-human animals—*Untitled* (2009, fig. 1.32) is a set

⁵² I was drawn to media/digital technology under my studio-mates' influences. For me, photographs have one foot in still images and another foot in moving images, which is a good medium in the process of my transition from creating still images to moving images.

of six negative photographs of migrant birds in bright colours. In the series I recorded the transformative process of birds' migration to different locations over time. From a distance, the viewers may think these photographs are abstract dots; the closer the viewer comes to them, the clearer and larger the shapes of the birds become. I intend to make the viewers realise the images from the dots to the birds as a process of constructing and deconstructing themselves through reading them in different ways. My aim in this art practice is to examine the relationship between abstract form and the figurative image based on people's active and embodied experience of time and space.

Also, the negative photographs of birds may be linked to the cognitive notion of emptiness in Tibetan Buddhist art.⁵³ Through dissecting my worldly experience of observing birds' migration, I tried to present my realisation from the dots to the birds as a process of dismantling 'the elements of subjective [the dots] and objective realities [the birds] into so many aggregates' as Buddhists (Epstein, 2004: 34). I hope my artwork would make the viewers come to a clearer understanding of 'how imprisoning our notions of inner and outer, of self and object, can be' (*ibid.*). The understanding of our version of the interpenetrating relativity may help us realise the Buddha's teaching that 'nothing can be seen to have inherent existence or a persisting individual nature' (*ibid.*). Yet, emptiness does not mean nothingness or nihilism. According to Young (2004: 140), emptiness can be experienced as the sensation of pleasure in Tibetan Tantric art through meditative skill; it is a profound realisation that all beings and all things are essentially empty, without individuality, and non-enduring.

1.39 *Face*, short film, 1'28", by Jia Peng, 2010

1.40 *Becoming*, Conceptual photography, 50 x 60 cm, 2010, by Jia Peng, 2010

1.41 Self-Portrait, the model for the later artwork, 2009

1.42 Close-up of *Becoming*, by Jia Peng, 2010

1.43 *Feather Dream*, video and sound installation, 3'01", by Jia Peng and Nathaniel Lane, 2012

Within the context of Tibetan Buddhist art, there is a link between strong contrasting colours and the transformation of space. I argued in Chapter 2 that the potentialities, the tendencies, and the qualities of Tibetan painting are closely related to colours. Since starting my pastel work in 2005 I have been deeply influenced by the Tibetan traditional conception of colours and their symbolic meaning. My recent artworks, such as *Face* (2010, fig. 1.39), *Red* (2010, fig.

⁵³ The notion of emptiness is discussed in the Introduction (p. 28, 34).

1.37), *Becoming* (2010, fig. 1.40) and *Feather Dream* (2012, fig. 1.43)⁵⁴ adopted representative colours in reference to their symbolic meanings in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism. As I discussed in Chapter 2,⁵⁵ there are five important and fundamental colours in traditional Tibetan paintings: blue, white, red, green, and yellow. The prayer flags in Tibet are painted in the five colours that represent the Five Elements. Zhang, in his paper *A Discussion on the Relation Between the Colours and Orientations of the Tibetan Iconography* (2006), suggests that the five fundamental colours in Tibetan Tantric Buddhism arise from an awareness of the tight bond between colours and the natural environment. Usually blue represents the sky/space or the east orientation; white stands for cloud/air/wind or the centre part of the earth; red refers to fire or the west orientation; green is a symbol of rivers/water or the north orientation; yellow is associated with the land/earth or the south orientation (Zhang, 2006: 5).⁵⁶ A good example of this (as I argued in Chapter 2) is found in the Five Wisdom Buddhas that are painted in these five basic colours, and are also associated with the symbolic meanings of the colour. According to Gen-qiu Deng-zi, Tibetan Buddhism has a huge impact on the Tibetan conception of colours and the symbolic meanings of colours in a religious context:

White, yellow, red, green four-color also represent the *catvari-karmani*⁵⁷: white symbolizes eradicating of the disease, the evil spirit, and the distress; the yellow stands for gaining longevity and wealth; the red represents great compassion of letting the [pre-Buddhist] gods and goddesses, the demons

⁵⁴ From 2010 I have tried to make some experimental video and sound installation, such as *Journey* (2010, fig. 4.42) and *Feather Dream*, which is a step from creating still images by (traditional) brushes to moving images with instruments of media technology. Influenced by Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium* (that I discussed in Chapter 3, p. 159-162), I realised that visual moving images perhaps have a more striking resemblance, force and vividness, as well as the power to transform the viewer's consciousness.

Both Viola's and my installations have received inspiration from Tibetan (Tantric) Buddhism. I share Viola's intention of invoking the viewers' inner self-experience with the religious experience through his artwork. As Viola's *Five Angels for the Millennium* refers to the notion of wrathful deities, my artwork *Feather Dream* can be linked with the notion of an endless process of a cycle of birth, death, and rebirth in Tibetan Buddhism (that I discussed earlier, p. 202). This was done by simply through repeating the same scenes with different colours of a feather falling off the tree, that goes on a journey, and then got burnt on the fire.

However, I would rather not discuss further about this experiment within my thesis. Because I would like to keep my focus on still images, even though I may try video installation or even short film again at some point in the future.

⁵⁵ P. 109.

⁵⁶ This is another way of interpreting the relationship between colour and orientation in Tibetan Buddhist art, in which the red, green, and yellow are the same, but the white stands for the east, and the blue is irrelevant to the orientations (Zhang, 2006: 511).

⁵⁷ *Catvari-karmani* refers to four different consequences of karmas.
<http://fodian.goodweb.cn/fodict.asp> (accessed on 19 March 2013)

and demonesses, and women and man taking refuge in Buddhism; the green symbolizes punishments and subjugation of the enemies and the evil demons/demoness.⁵⁸

Tibetan Tantric practitioners believe that people can see a great variety of colours, especially complementary colours, for the Buddha father-mother. Meulenbeld (2001: 192) comments:

The colours are the familiar identification marks recognizable by those initiated into the mysteries of Father-Mother Buddha. Only when all these aspects are taken together can the entire cognitive content of the picture be understood.

The strong contrasting colour in Tibetan Buddhist paintings is intended to involve all the senses, which might be a way to guide people to a different experience of openness and to create the potential for becoming.

Associated with their symbolic meanings, traditional Tibetan colours employed in my artworks could be understood by Tibetan audiences,⁵⁹ but would be obscure for Western audiences. I wish my work would be a way of introducing Western audiences to know the discourse of these complementary colours (for the Buddha father-mother) in Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art that I mentioned above. As a cross-cultural practice, I would also like my work to challenge the viewpoints of Tibetan, Chinese, and Western audiences, enabling them to find their own meanings and interpretations, and to reinvent the various versions of Tibetan myths and artistic traditions and foster a greater connection between my spiritual homeland, multicultural understanding, and global influences.

4. Conclusion

As I stated at the beginning of this chapter, my efforts and attempts to seek spiritual transformation and to encounter Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and modern encounters of ideological reforms is an unusual journey of exploration—both inwardly and outwardly. In the spirit of openness and exchange, I have attempted

⁵⁸ My translation of *Bai, huang, hong, lv si-se yi xiang-zheng si-ye, ji bai-se xiang-zheng xi-ye (xi-mie ji-bing xie-mo, wei-nan zhi ye); huang-se xiang-zheng zeng-ye(zeng-yi fu-shou cai-fu zhi ye); hong-se xiang-zheng huai-ye (huai-rou diao-fu shen-tian ren-gui zhi ye); lv-se xiang-zheng zhu-ye (fu-ye,zhu-mie zhi-fu yuan-di xie-mo zhi ye)*. 白、黄、红、绿四色亦象征四业，即白色象征息业（息灭疾病邪魔、危难之业）；黄色象征增业（增益福寿财富之业）；红色象征怀业（怀柔调伏神天人鬼之业）；绿色象征诛业（伏业，诛灭制伏怨敌邪魔之业）
<http://zt.tibet.cn/web/ganzi/jxgz/..%5Cjxgz/..%5Cjxgz/200502005729154430.htm> (accessed on 10 April 2012).

⁵⁹ During my recent visit to Tibet in May 2013, I showed my conceptual photographs to some Tibetan monks and they told me that the bright colours I used in my artworks reminded them of Tibetan prayer flags.

to express some ideas concerning religion, culture, and cross-cultural understanding, as well as the experience of my art practice. As a female Chinese artist, this work—*An Exploration of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its Art: A Potential Resource for Contemporary Spiritual and Art Practice*—has changed my understanding of the Tibet-China relationship. On entering this debate on Tibetan Buddhism and its art, my role for many years was that of a Chinese art student, fascinated by the magnificent Tibetan ancient paintings. Tibetan Buddhism and its art was an exotic, primitive, and erotic other, which ‘characterized the official public image of “minorities” in China’ (Heberer, 2001: 123). I travelled to Tibet and Europe (mainly England). After having studied the historical and technical aspects of Tibetan (Tantric Buddhist) painting, and having practised some preliminary Tibetan Tantric meditations and rituals, I began absorbing the symbols, colours, and compositions of Tibetan art in my personal life and creativity. Since 2008 I have gained access to more Indian and Tibetan texts of Tantric Buddhism and, more importantly, I have communicated with Tibetan lamas, including the senior lamas Tsem Tulku Rinpoche and Tulku Rigzin Tenkyung. Thus, I entered the inner realm of mythic Tibetan Tantric Buddhism quickly. It was at this point that my involvement ceased to be from a purely Chinese perspective that considered Tibetan culture as something foreign; instead, I began to cross the boundary into an unknown world of Tantric religious practices, to a culturally different mode of thinking, and to an aesthetically mystical tradition. I stopped clinging to my cultural identity and the imagined superiority of Chinese and Western art over the mythical and erotic Tibetan artworks. Now, I regard Tibetan art as equal to Chinese and Western art, but I recognise the differences and their respective identities. I am aware of the interesting and ambivalent relationship between my life’s experiences and the re-exploration of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, which I have endeavoured to pursue.

In a broader sense, the contemporary evolution of the old Tibetan traditions that took place in Tibetan autonomous areas, China, and the West confronts a controversial dilemma: despite their innovations and their courage in altering or even transforming the old traditions of Tibet, contemporary Tibetans simply cannot transmit the teaching of Tantric Buddhism outside the Tibetan cultural

environment without potential misunderstandings and misgivings. Campbell (1996: 4-5) states explicitly:

As for the question of the western 'literate genres' with which it has come into contact, it remains to be seen whether 'replacement' or evolution of the Tibetan Buddhist culture will take place ... there is a possibility that the global forces of secularism and materialism may overpower the spiritual dimension of the oral tradition which rested comfortably in the high plateaux of Tibet, and that the Tibetans themselves may be willing participants in a process which ultimately swallows up their culture. If Tibetan lamas themselves succumb to the pressure of western materialism, or if the highest positions of power are gradually taken over by western 'incarnations', there seems little doubt that the traditions of the Vajrayana [Tantric Buddhism] will alter radically.

As part of my research, I took into account the contemporary encounter of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art with China and the West and the implications of this cross-cultural encounter. I tried to analyse Tibetan art as one aspect of the old Tibetan traditions and the different approaches to developing it by contemporary Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists as being strategies of global communication. I discussed how Tibetan art has developed and transformed itself through its modernisation and its encounters with Chinese and Western cultures since the 1960s. In today's Tibet, visual culture is a precious reality that cannot be overlooked. This is because, first, it plays an important role in attracting the attention of countless people all over the world; and second, it is essential for constructing an imaginary representation of Tibet in order to correct the century-long, ill-informed interpretations and political ideologies encoded in over-romantic Western illusions about Tibet. I found Appadurai's view of cultural activity or social imaginary very helpful for Tibetans, Chinese, and Westerners to comprehend what the updated imaginary image of Tibet means, and its significance in the process of globalising Tibetan culture. Appadurai explains exactly what the social imaginary means for him:

The image, the imagined, the imaginary—these are all terms that direct us to something critical and new in global cultural processes: the imagination as a social practice. No longer mere fantasy, no longer simple escape, no longer elite pastime, and no longer mere contemplation, the imagination has become an organized field of social practices, a form of work (in the sense of both labor and culturally organized practice), and a form of negotiation between sites of agency (individuals) and globally defined fields of possibility. This unleashing of the imagination links the play of pastiche (in some settings) to the terror and coercion of states and their competitors. The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order (Appadurai, 1996:31).

From my understanding, the social imaginary in Tibetan visual culture is no longer simple fantasy, contemplation, or reflection; it is a form of new creation constructed by an imagination of the Tibetan collective consciousness from both inside and outside Tibetan culture. It is latent in each individual's personal journey related to Tibet.

In considering the potential value of my research, I believe that my own exploration of the relatively fragmented knowledge of Tibetan Tantric Buddhist art in the past may provide us with an understanding of how certain aspects of the past might provide some insights into the present and to contemporary art practice. To the extent that each individual's self-experience is orientated and limited, my research neither claims truth nor certainty, but is an attempt to link my personal experience as a practicing artist to the complex spiritual and aesthetic systems of Tibetan Tantric Buddhism in Tibetan, Chinese, and Western contexts. This kind of exploration has been demonstrated in via an image-oriented research process as well as my own art practice in respect of the techniques I have employed, the symbolic content of my work, and the use of colour and composition. Furthermore, I hope it might open up the possibility of a better understanding of spiritual insight and aesthetic heritage from Tibetan Tantric Buddhism and its art, and perhaps lead to a different and more balanced future concerning the conflicting Tibet-China-Western relationships in the process of globalisation.

As I mentioned earlier in the Chapter, I returned to Chongqing at the beginning of 2013 and soon after was recruited as one of the researchers in the 'One Hundred (Young) Talents' programme⁶⁰ at Chongqing University.⁶¹ My new role provides me some advantages for developing my research and art practice, such as an academic connection between Chongqing University, Sichuan University⁶² and Tibet University,⁶³ geographic closeness with Tibet, research funding, and supports from leaders, colleagues and students. As a continuation of

⁶⁰ It is a nationwide plan of attracting elite young researchers who are working overseas and willing to return to China. In the field of visual art, I was the first and only one who passed the examination and interview and then subsequently was awarded the honorary research position.

⁶¹ Chongqing University is a key national university (in the '211 Project and 985 Project') in China.

⁶² Sichuan University has a leading research centre for Tibetan Studies, where I have built up networks with.

⁶³ Many Tibetan, Chinese or biethnic artists born in 1960s and afterwards studied art at The Fine Art Department of Tibet University.

my thesis and research, I plan to develop a new project *From Classic to Contemporary: Paintings from Tibet after 1982*. This project is about contemporary paintings engaged with the vestiges of Tibet's heritage and made by (different generations of) Tibetan, Chinese and other non-Tibetan artists in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China (mainly Lhasa). In this project, I would take the initial experiment of reshaping the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism by Han Shuli in 1982 as its starting point. This project will explore the tension between Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists in Lhasa, and Tibetan artists in exile and the unsettling problem of their cultural identity in between 'the two external forces that dominate culture in the Tibet Autonomous Region: the globalised West and China' (Harris, 2012: 229). I hope it will offer a new interpretation of contemporary Tibetan art based on modes of art-making characterised as Tibetan style, as opposed to a more readily suggestion by some politically motivated Tibetans that 'Tibetan contemporary art can only be created *by* Tibetans' (*ibid.*: 228). Personally, pursuing this study of more recent developments of art world in Tibet will also engage me with artists in Tibet more closely, and (hopefully) help me relocate myself among Tibetan and Chinese artists within and beyond Tibet in a more fluid and network-oriented manner with freedom of the individual.

Appendix: Illustrations

- Fig. 0.1 The usual arrangement of the five archetypal Buddhas
- Fig. 1.1 Jia Peng on a visit to Tibet in 2004
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- Fig. 1.3 Jia Peng had a nap with her dogs in the studio, Chongqing
- Fig. 1.4 *Face Number 1*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.5 *Face Number 2*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.6 Close-up of *Face Number 1*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.7 Close-up of *Face Number 2*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.8 Close-up of *Face Number 2*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.9 *Face Number 3*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.10 *Face Series*, pastel and watercolour drawings, Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.11 *Face Number 4*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.12 *Face Number 5*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.13 *Face Number 6*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.14 The Myth Series, *The Third Eye*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
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- Fig. 1.16 The loincloth of *Ashura and the Dragon*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.17 Close-up of *Ashura and the Dragon*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.18 *Simultaneous Engagement in Happiness and Nothingness*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.19 *The Birth of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.20 The ornament of the major figure *The Birth of Venus*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.21 Close-up of the necklace in *The Birth of Venus*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.22 Close-up of the lotus base in *The Birth of Venus*, by Jia Peng
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- Fig. 1.25 Details of the silk scarf in *The Victory of Venus*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.26 Details of the lotus flower in *The Victory of Venus*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.27 *Face Unknown*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.28 Close-up of *Face Unknown*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.29 Close-up of *Face Unknown*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.30 *Face Number 11*, pastel drawing, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.31 *Yab-Yum Couple*, pastel drawing, by Jia Peng
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- Fig. 1.33 Close-up of *Untitled*, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.34 *Covenant*, video installation, by Jia Peng

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- Fig. 1.36 *Journey*, from the series of *Red*, video installation, by Jia Peng
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- Fig. 1.40 *Becoming*, Conceptual photography, by Jia Peng
- Fig. 1.41 Self-Portrait, the model for the later artwork
- Fig. 1.42 Close-up of *Becoming*, by Jia Peng
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1.1 Jia Peng on a visit to Tibet in 2004



1.2 Jia Peng Fed dogs in her garden, Chongqing, China, in 2007, photographed by Zhong Xuebin



1.3 Jia Peng had nap with her dogs in the studio, Chongqing, China, in 2007, photographed by Zhong Xuebin



1.4 *Face Number 1*, oil painting on canvas, 160 (L) x 140 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2003-2004



1.5 *Face Number 2*, oil painting on canvas, 180 (L) x 160 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004



1.6 The close-up of *Face Number 1*, oil painting, 160 (L) x 140 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2003-2004



1.7 The close-up of *Face Number 2*, oil painting on canvas, 180 (L) x 160 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004



1.8 The close-up of *Face Number 2*, oil painting on canvas, 180 (L) x 160 (H) cm, by Jia Peng 2004



1.9 *Face Number 3*, oil painting, 110 (L) x 130 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2004



1.10 *Face Series*, pastel and watercolour drawings, 30(L) x 40 (H) cm, Jia Peng, 2005



1.11 *Face Number 4*, oil painting on canvas, 110 (L) x 130 cm (H), 2005, by Jia Peng



1.12 *Face Number 5*, oil painting on canvas, 110 (L) x 130 cm (H), 2005-2006, by Jia Peng



1.13 *Face Number 6*, oil painting on canvas, 110 (L) x 130 cm (H), 2006, by Jia Peng



1.14 The Myth Series, *The Third Eye*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.15 The Myth Series, *Ashura and the Dragon*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng



1.16 The loincloth of *Ashura and the Dragon*, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.17 The close-up of *Ashura and the Dragon*, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.18 *Simultaneous Engagement in Happiness and Nothingness*, 220 (L) x 250 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2007



1.19 *The Birth of Venus*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.20 The ornament of the major figure, *The Birth of Venus*, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.21 The close-up of in the necklace in *The Birth of Venus*, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.22 The close-up of the lotus base in *The Birth of Venus*, 2006, by Jia Peng



1.23 *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng, 2007



1.24 the landscape in *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng



1.25 The details of the silk scarf in *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng, 2007



1.26 The details of the lotus flower in *The Victory of Venus*, oil painting, by Jia Peng, 2007



1.27 *Face Unknown*, 2008, 130 (L) x 150 (H) cm, by Jia Peng



1.28 The close-up of *Face Unknown*, 2008, by Jia Peng



1.29 The close-up of *Face Unknown*, 2008, by Jia Peng



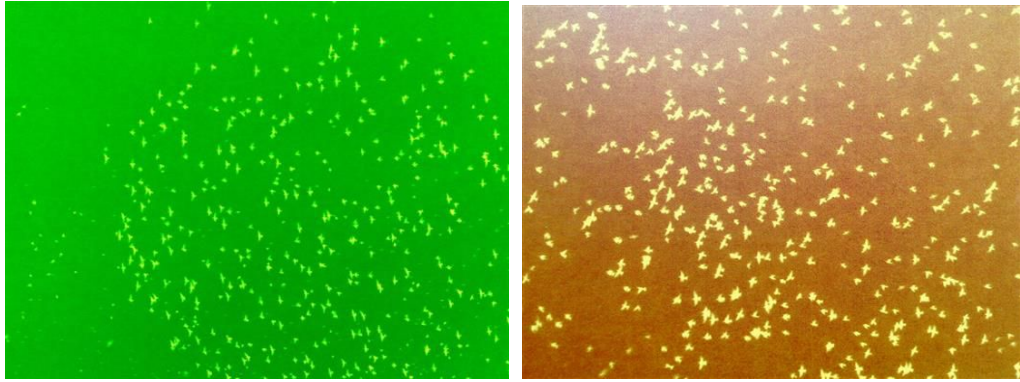
1.30 *Face Number 11*, pastel drawing, by Jia Peng, 2008 to 2009



1.31 *Yab-Yum Couple*, pastel drawing, by Jia Peng, 2008 to 2009



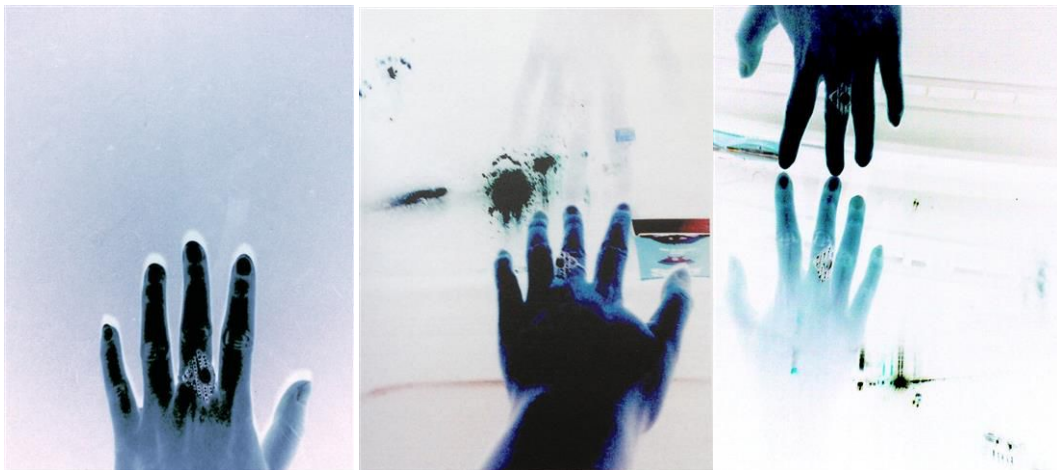
1.32 *Untitled*, conceptual photography, 2009, by Jia Peng



1.33 the close-up of *Untitled*, 2009, by Jia Peng



1.34 *Covenant*, video installation, 2009, by Jia Peng



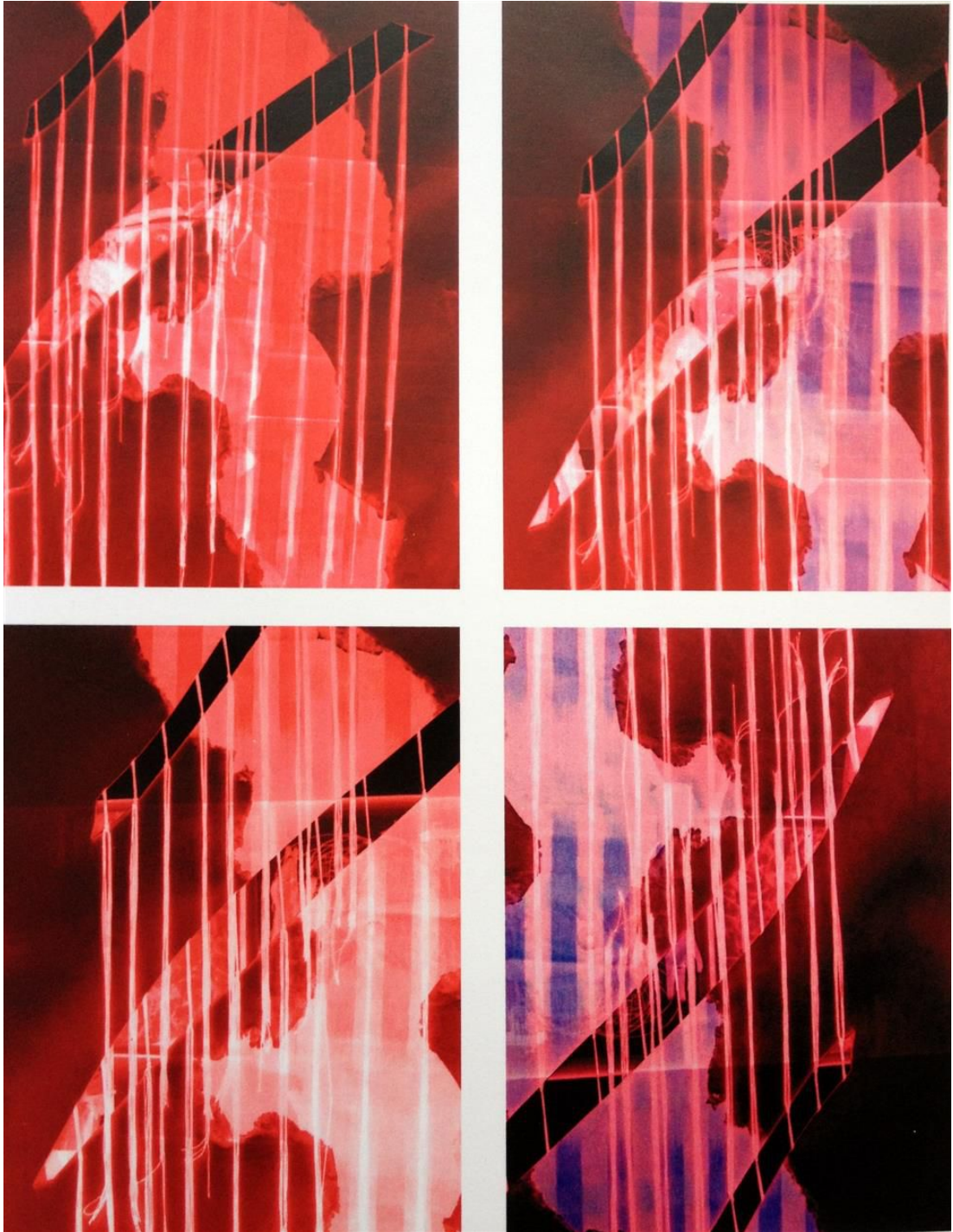
1.35 *Seeking*, conceptual photography, 2010, by Jia Peng



1.36 *Journey, the series of Red*, video installation, 2010, by Jia Peng



1.37 *Red*, a complex installation of video, sculpture, and painting, 2010, by Jia Peng



1.38 *Red*, conceptual photography, 2010, by Jia Peng



1.39 *Face*, short film, 1'28", 2010, by Jia Peng



1.40 *Becoming*, Conceptual photography, 50 x 60 cm, 2010, by Jia Peng



1.41 Self-Portrait, the model for the later artwork 1.42 The close-up of *Becoming*, by Jia Peng



1.43 *Feather Dream*, short film, 3'01", 2012, by Jia Peng and Nathaniel Lane

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