



## HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies

Volume 36 | Number 1

Article 11

May 2016

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### Recommended Citation

Miller, Leigh (2016) "The 'Look of Tibet' Without Religion: A Case Study in Contemporary Tibetan Art in Lhasa," *HIMALAYA, the Journal of the Association for Nepal and Himalayan Studies*: Vol. 36 : No. 1 , Article 11.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.macalester.edu/himalaya/vol36/iss1/11>



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## **Acknowledgements**

I cannot fully express my gratitude to Gadé for sharing so generously his artwork and friendship over the years. I am also grateful for Fulbright and Emory University funding that enabled the research that informs this study. The editors and reviewers of this article substantially improved it, although flaws of my own inevitably remain.

# The 'Look of Tibet' Without Religion: A Case Study in Contemporary Tibetan Art in Lhasa

Leigh Miller

The artworks and career phases of the Lhasa contemporary artist Gadé illustrate the complex entanglement of religion and the secular in modern Lhasa, while illuminating broader trends in contemporary Tibetan art as a cultural formation of local mediation of modernity's strong influences. While the past is vital to Gadé, he is driven to "locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context" where it can also be "detached from religion," raising questions about representations of Tibet and the cultural future. He takes a secular approach to the role of artists in society that, along with his cohorts in the emergent contemporary Tibetan art movement since the 1980s, overturns Tibetan (Buddhist) artistic conventions in favor of personal expression.

In Gadé's paintings and multimedia works from the 1990s to 2012, a collectively-recognized visual language derived from the symbols,

styles, compositions, and materials of traditional Buddhist art is juxtaposed with the equally familiar icons of globalization to depict hybridity, in which the fragmented nature of his generations' Buddhist inheritance shares space with the humorous and curious in urban Tibet. This new shared visual language can affirm deep connection to addition, on the one hand, and distance or alienate from it on the other in its secular reconfiguration. Yet, Gadé's strategies can also be viewed as reclaiming collective and personal agency in the midst of colonialism, globalization, and the secular in Tibet.

**Keywords:** art, anthropology, Buddhism, identity, social transformation, Tibet.



And yet, for Gadé it does very deliberately have the look of Tibetan painting. *Father's Nightmare* is a work that belongs to the second phase of Gadé's artistic career, about which the artist himself has said:

To locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context is something that I have always been thinking of doing. I try to imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when it is detached from religion (Gadé 2008).

His statement raises significant questions: Why would a contemporary Tibetan artist want his work to be detached from religion, and what might such cultural discourse and secular art productions show us about socio-religious identities in urban Lhasa lives today? What might the absence or presence of Tibetan Buddhist imagery and materials in contemporary art suggest for understanding the secular in Lhasa?

The connection between Tibetan civilization and religion has undergone radical and unsettling changes in the twentieth century, first from the traditional Buddhist society that was relatively stable under the rule of Dalai Lamas in central Tibet to religious persecution under Chinese communism, and subsequent shifts with the restrained post-Mao revival of religion in increasingly urban Lhasa.<sup>2</sup> Thus arises a dilemma in which Buddhism, as it is experienced and represented, is many things at once; some visions of Buddhism are at times incompatible or in tension with others. These tensions impact local understandings of 'art' and 'artists,' particularly those who make secular contemporary art. Given the religious constructions of Tibet by outsiders, and ongoing expectations within Tibet and abroad about the role of religion in post-Mao and post-Deng Tibet, the diversity of artistic references to Buddhism that has emerged since the 1980s warrants special attention. After Tibetans' traumatic twentieth century, establishing continuity from Tibetan Buddhist historical art to the secular art productions of today has been felt by certain artists as a cultural imperative. Yet it involves complex negotiations of artistic, social, religious, and personal identities.

This article offers a study of the Lhasa artist Gadé, who is a pioneering figure in Tibetan contemporary art and founding member of the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild (GCAG) in Lhasa.<sup>3</sup> Gadé plays a critical role among contemporary artists in Lhasa, where he is seen as groundbreaking and instrumental in local and international art worlds. Gadé has taken a distinctive approach over two decades to synthesize the religious and secular in his contemporary art. In addition, he has photographed site-specific installation artwork when it was an art practice nearly unprecedented

in Lhasa. He has also developed new artistic technologies for working with molds and sculptural materials. In 2010, Gadé was a co-curator with Chinese art critic Li Xianting of *Scorching Sun of Tibet* at Songzhuang Art Center in Beijing, for which he collected artwork and films from over forty Tibetan artists, mostly living in the People's Republic of China (PRC), and several Chinese artists. The sweeping and unparalleled exhibition included multimedia works, several large-scale installations, such as Yak Tsétan's (g.yag tshe brtan) towering *Arak Stupa* of empty green beer bottles, and other instances of the secularization of Buddhist iconography and depictions of modernity in Tibet (Xianting Li and Gadé 2010). By focusing on Gadé, this article illuminates significant trends in the development of contemporary Tibetan art.

Contemporary art by Tibetans may be diagnostic of broader processes of secularization in Tibet, and emblematic of a generation conflicted about their personal, cultural, and social relationships to Buddhism in contexts of colonialism and globalization. It suggests re-evaluation of specifically religious constructions of Tibet and Tibetans within China and consideration of religion as a representational strategy in cultural expressions. In this regard, contemporary secular art is part of a broader trend of emergent cultural expressions in literature, film, and music that seek to validate and authenticate specifically Tibetan modernity. Art quite literally makes visible the state of Tibetan modernity, as artists engage in a process of observing, reflecting, and then commenting on the social world in which they are embedded but also often impact. This world, as I explore through Gadé's paintings, is one in which religion is entangled in complex ways with memory and identity politics, local and foreign expectations for artists and their productions, and ongoing colonial circumstances. Within this ever-shifting constellation of issues, 'Buddhism' becomes, in Gadé's paintings, fragments in a larger mosaic depicting the hybridity and secularization of Lhasa today.

### 'Art' and Religion in Tibet

First, I introduce the emergent field of contemporary Tibetan art to situate Gadé and his citations of the Tibetan Buddhist artist tradition within artistic movements in modern times. The ways in which 'art'—including its producers, uses, and relationship to religion—has been understood in Tibet shifted several times in the twentieth century (Miller 2014). Religion's pervasive influence in pre-modern Tibet was accompanied by the materialization of faith. Buddhism dominated the visual environment, from monumental architecture (in the form of monasteries, temples, and *stupa*), to markings in the landscape (such



as mantra carved in stone, painted rocks, and prayer flags) and the saturation of altar spaces with scroll paintings, murals, and statues. Traditionally, religious images are considered by the faithful not only as merely material objects, but also as actual physical embodiments of enlightened beings, with whom the devout have made contact for blessings for generations (Huber 1999; Strong 2007). So-called Tibetan (Buddhist) 'art' was, in this historical context, a functional, religious instrument, intended to be spiritually efficacious, and distinguished from the graphic arts applied to objects of material culture for decorative purposes.

New conceptions and uses for what could be termed 'art' emerged after the annexation of Tibet into the PRC, forcing Tibetans' enacted relationships to religion and images to change. The devolution of Tibetan-Chinese relations that led to the 1959 uprising and departure of the Dalai Lama was followed by the Cultural Revolution, constituting a period of several decades in which the devastation of sacred sites, desecration of holy objects, and maltreatment of religious people eradicated religion from everyday life, including its visibility in physical spaces. In the wake of this iconoclasm, propaganda in Maoist Socialist Realism style dominated visual culture, introducing new conceptions of 'art' as an ideological tool towards political ends, and featuring human, not divine, subjects. The epitome of state-sponsored Socialist Realism in Tibet was the *Wrath of the Serfs*, a monumental installation of life-sized sculptures staging Old Tibet's alleged horrific feudalism in which babies were stolen by monks, the poor piteously exploited, and political dissidents tortured (Bstan 'dzin Rnam rgyal, Skal bzang Tshe ring 2005). Although imposed, the de-centering of religion from Tibetan life had begun, and visual culture and artistic practices were hugely impacted (Norbu c.2005).

During the post-Mao 'revival' period, begun in 1978 under Deng Xiaoping, the resurgence of religious activity included the reconstruction of religious sites and the return of traditional Buddhist art (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998). Tibetan Buddhists soon encountered a crisis in the transmission of religious and artistic knowledge: those recognized reincarnated lamas, teachers, and artists who were unable to complete their training prior to the so-called Democratic Reform of the late 1950s and Cultural Revolution (1966-76) found their capacity to transmit Tibetan culture compromised in the post-Mao era, while a great number of those who had been fully trained prior to the 1950s had, by the 1980s, died, gone into exile, or were elderly (Panchen Lama 1998).

Nonetheless, Tibetan fervor for rebuilding religious sites, and the later mushrooming of tourism, led to increasing demand for production and training in the traditional Buddhist arts such as *thangka* (*thang ka*), religious paintings on cloth. Training in the rigors of *thangka* painting involves years of study of iconography, prescribed iconometric proportions and measurement systems, production of pigments and color symbolism, and various genres and compositional templates for the arrangements of deities or subject within a frame. Tenpa Rabten (bstan pa rab brtan), a classically trained *thangka* painter, was appointed as a professor in the School of Art at Tibet University in 1985 to train a new generation of *thangka* painters (Namgyal 2001), while his contemporary, Amdo painter Jampa Tsetan (byams pa tshe brtan), celebrated for his incorporation of photorealism into portraits of deities and lamas, opened a private *thangka* painting school for poor youth, both to promote Buddhist art and to equip students with marketable skills (Dangchar 1993; Pulin 2002). Both training centers exemplify the successful return in Lhasa of the traditional workshop apprenticeship with a master painter.

Alongside the return of familiar religious arts, the reappearance of recognizable Tibetan aesthetics also took a new form: the emergence of secular modern Tibetan arts. The Kandze School of New Tibetan Painting, initiated in the early 1980s in eastern Tibet, produced art that reflected official political teleology regarding the benefits of a market economy within Chinese socialism flowing to Tibetan people (Kvaerne 1994). The style was a hybrid of Socialist Realism and some recognizably Tibetan subjects, customs, and decorative motifs unprecedented under Chinese communism, including the rehabilitation of secular heroes of the Tibetan past. Made commercially available as cheap poster prints, these depictions of China's secular Tibet were collaboratively produced by Han Chinese and Tibetan artists, initiating a neo-Socialist Realism (Miller 2014).<sup>4</sup> Thus, in addition to 'art' as it was locally understood pre-1950 (as Buddhist paintings, sculpture, etc.) and in the Cultural Revolution era (as Socialist Realist propaganda), in the Reform Era, yet more definitions of 'art' emerged, including neo-Socialist Realism and *thangka* painting. The social meanings of 'art' include the fact that as traditional *thangka* production resumed for religious purposes, it also stood in contrast to Socialist Realism and affirmed cultural identities in the monastery as well as in the market.

The 1980s revival period and resumption of Buddhist art-making did not, however, create clear roles for religion in public or private lives, nor did it enable an unhindered transmission of religiosity to those born after 1959. In

Communist China, the targeting of Buddhism as ‘backwards,’ ‘superstitious,’ and politically suspect pervades public narratives about the Tibetan past. Such representations contrast with the religious memories many Tibetans carry, and impede the transmission of religious memory and identity. Thus even in the stilted recovery of Buddhism in central Tibet, in comparison with other ethnically Tibetan areas, local political oversight of religious institutions and individual practice continued to feel threatening, particularly in Lhasa. Meanwhile, the State gained from the superficial visibility of religious revival as a boon for western and Han Chinese tourism and as a mechanism for controlling minority affairs (Blondeau and Buffettrille 2008). As a result, there were and continue to be real, even if unspoken, limits to the degree to which artists can convey religious meanings through art, even if they desire to do so.

Instead, the Reform Era sparked what artist Tsewang Tashi (tshe dbang bkra shis) felt was a ‘cultural renaissance’ in Tibet (Tashi 2014). Young artists, including Gadé, who received little or no training in *thangka* painting, encountered this modulated return to Tibetan imagery and a cultural awakening at the same time as they were exposed to non-religious and modern Western conceptions of ‘art.’ Exposure to the notion of ‘art for art’s sake’ was particularly revolutionary and even disorienting and confounding.<sup>5</sup> A small number of artists from Tibet were motivated by a quest for their identity and its expression, and the novel conception of art as a personal process, as a creation to be observed by others who could critically engage with it or dispassionately observe it, suited their creative needs. They did not aspire to create religious art. Nonetheless, they often did and continue to incorporate religious imagery into their contemporary secular artwork. They do so to such an extent and variety that inquiry into the function of ‘Buddhist’ imagery in contemporary Tibetan art is warranted. Rather than re-inscribing the stereotypes of a uniformly faithful populace, more often religious imagery provides and enables startlingly multi-vocal commentaries on a range of contemporary social issues. These uses highlight both the continuities with and divergences from traditional and contemporary indigenous conceptions of art (Ginsburg 1994; Errington 1998; Morphy 2008).<sup>6</sup>

The phenomenon of non-Tibetans ascribing to all Tibetans Buddhist identities as well as seeking devotional Buddhist themes in Tibetan contemporary art remains. Yet for those born during or since the Cultural Revolution, their limited exposure to religious training is paired with ingrained precautions against openly sharing one’s faith. For contemporary artists like Gadé, this dynamic contributes to a power-

ful yet uneasy relationship to portraying religious beliefs through their art. Gadé and other artists neither paint devotional images nor omit Buddhist iconographic elements from their artwork. At the nexus of social, spiritual, and political forces, Buddhism becomes, among other things, a site of nostalgic memory or longing.<sup>7</sup> In Tibetan and western imaginations today, it is particularly the institutional monastic form of Buddhism that serves as a yardstick of cultural preservation and authenticity in Tibet.<sup>8</sup>

Concern about the past and the yearning for what has been lost indicates memory may be an important element to understand in how artists work with religious imagery. Religion also becomes a metaphor, and one that artists can use to symbolize far more than faith. As Gadé explores different traditional genres, materials, motifs, and content, his work reflects upon the status of religion in contemporary society as well as the critical need for modern Tibetan cultural sustainability born of the freedom to innovate. Gadé’s paintings depict and stake a claim to relationships to Buddhism, to Tibet’s Buddhist past, and its artistic and cultural heritage, but these relationships are importantly forged in the context of globalizing Tibet and a network of tensions surrounding religion and the secular in China’s Tibet.

Although religious hegemony is no longer tenable in hybrid twenty-first century Lhasa, it has not been easy for modern artists to invent and inhabit a new cultural space, particularly, I was told, in light of local religious ideas of ‘artists.’<sup>9</sup> Throughout most of Tibetan artistic history, artists, patrons, and the general populace held common religious beliefs and practices that transcended other social divisions. The role of an artist included powerful religious functions and patronage, but this is something Gadé and other contemporary Tibetan artists reject. Gadé’s practices assert new secular definitions for what it means to be Tibetan artist. These potential meanings and contradictions present a dilemma for artists who both claim and reject Buddhism simultaneously. As one of the pioneers of the contemporary Tibetan art movement, Gadé has developed creative strategies that make it possible to claim Buddhism through the appropriation of visual elements, establishing and re-circulating a shared visual language. Yet he also rejects Buddhism’s social dominance and the accompanying traditional artistic strictures in order to depict collective cultural issues and present the social realities of Lhasa and Tibet more broadly. These strategies operate to create important alternatives to the dominant Han Chinese society’s constructions of the Tibetan minority and to illustrate Tibetan negotiations of modernity. Gadé is expanding a realm of secular cultural activity and creating alternatives

to constructions of Tibet as pre-modern and religious that still have currency at home and abroad—strategies reflective of the broader process of secularization in Tibet.

### Diversity in Contemporary Tibetan Artists' Imaging of Religion

Gadé produces his work at the intersection of Lhasa art worlds, including: the Tibet University School of the Arts, the Tibet Autonomous Region Artists Association (TARAA), a branch of the Ministry of Culture under the State Council of the PRC, and associations of independent artists, the most well-known of which is the Gedun Choephel Artists' Guild (GCAG). Although artists may be members of more than one of these groups—and Gadé is a member of all three—the ways in which art is produced in these art circles all reference traditional Tibetan Buddhist art in radically different ways. Moreover, individual Tibetan artists take a range of stances toward religion, including faith-based expressions of the centrality of religious worldviews in their lives; religion as immaterial to their artistic identities, practices, and careers; and the appropriation of religious imagery as a tool for responding to social change.

Tibet University faculty artists commonly employ Buddhist visual elements to express nostalgic desires for what the religious past signifies, to affirm their appreciation of Buddhist views, or to highlight objects of Buddhist material culture and their contributions to Tibetan civilization. Artistic works by members of the government agency TARAA have been used to promote the aesthetic and commercially-motivated appropriation of Tibetan Buddhist subjects, scenery, and symbols.<sup>10</sup> The uses (and omissions) of Buddhist imagery in government-sponsored commercial art, visual propaganda, and exhibitions serve nationalistic agendas for promotion of ethnic minority policy and western region economic development through reference to Tibet's storied past or as an emblem of exotic allure.

Select artists from Tibet University, such as professors Sherab Gyaltzen (shes rab rgyal mtshan) and Penpa Wangdu (spen pa dbang 'dus), GCAG member Ang Sang (Ngag dbang Bzang po), and independent artist Tsering Wangdu (tshe ring dbang 'dus) see Buddhism as central to their artwork. They intend to use art to express and transmit basic Buddhist principles to contemporary viewers and future generations. They do so because it fits within their understanding of their cultural and religious responsibility as professional artists, and/or because it is useful to their own spiritual and creative development. These laymen artists do not employ strictly traditional painting methods, but rather use personal styles and expression of conventional Buddhist concepts. As a seemingly unprecedented move-

ment, the surge in this kind of art since the 1980s is remarkable. It could be regarded as parallel to other religious artists in Tibetan history exhibiting so-called modern characteristics of originality and creativity (Debrecczeny 2012; Lopez 2013) or those working in the international Tibetan diaspora.<sup>11</sup> While clearly part of the Lhasa art world—and perhaps what most people expect of it—such expression of faith actually represents a minority of artists' approach to Buddhism. More common are traditional *thangka* painters, such as the students of Amdo Jampa and Tenpa Rabten, at the religious end of the spectrum, and a growing number of contemporary artists using religious imagery in secular art at the other end.

Independent artists working within associations such as the GCAG invoke visual elements of Tibetan Buddhism to depict and comment upon their contemporary society from a more secular perspective. Artists borrow *maṇḍala*, the Wheel of Life diagram, and buddha forms to communicate observations on local consumerism, globalization, and the Qinghai-Tibet Railroad, for instance. They also appropriate Buddhist imagery to protest Shangri-la myths about Tibetan culture, commercial exploitation of Tibetan tradition and the antiques trade, and global conflicts (Sangster 2007). Furthermore, the most avant garde Tibetan artists have been suspicious of invoking religion and tradition as cultural clichés, viewing these as at worst mere commercial appeal, and at best a façade behind which to hide more honest and personal depths or to avoid confronting contemporary realities.<sup>12</sup>

Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso (gong dkar rgya mtsho), who has studied and produced art in Lhasa, Beijing, Dharamsala, London and New York, and Lhasa-based Tsering Nyandak (tshe ring snyan grags) represent an extreme in stripping Buddhist imagery of religious meaning, seeing it merely as symbol, shape, universally recognized icon, or mechanism for arresting viewer assumptions about both art and contemporary society.<sup>13</sup> This evacuation of religious meaning through reduction to the pure shape or form can work to productively counter expectations. Gadé's art picks up this conceptual thread, challenging assumptions about (or even the very possibility of) static importation into the present of meanings that were formerly attached to Buddhist symbols in the past. However, unlike Gonkar Gyatso and Tsering Nyandak, he intentionally retains the cultural specificity of these symbols as a source of meaning making and identity formation. Buddhist imagery then defies straightforward interpretations and can only most broadly be understood as representing Tibetanness.

A majority of contemporary artists seem to have at least a phase of their career, or specific works, in which they



celebrate the contributions of Buddhism to Tibetan civilization, and perhaps to their own personal lives. Gadé is no exception. Nonetheless, many contemporary artists are secular artists in that they do not cite religious motivation or purpose as foundational to their careers or artistic practices. Gadé's career trajectory illustrates this delicate and at times uneasy point in the negotiation of religion and the secular.

### A Biographical Sketch of the Artist

Gadé (Fig. 2) was born in Lhasa in 1971. He informed me that his father was a Han Chinese soldier among the first to 'liberate' Tibet. As was the custom in Tibet, neither his father nor his Tibetan mother told him stories about how they met or were wed, although Gadé has depicted the imagined scene in his paintings as a Mao-suited soldier and a Tibetan bejeweled woman draped in the white *khatak* (*kha btags*) scarf of Tibetan rituals. He was raised bilingual and though his father returned to his Chinese homeland, Gadé has always considered Lhasa home.



Figure 2. Gadé posed for a portrait in his studio at Tibet University. (Rossi + Rossi/Jason Sangster, 2007).

Throughout childhood, Gadé enjoyed pictures, comic books, and drawing, and became one of the best illustrators of the Communist propaganda images decorating the classrooms in his school. By age eight, he was "firmly convinced," as he described in an interview with me, that he would become a professional artist, and by fourteen he was taking private lessons, especially in Realism, to prepare to pass exams for admission to the art school at Tibet University.<sup>14</sup> Two of his first teachers, Pema Tashi (Ch. Bama Zhaxi; Tib. padma bkra shis) and Han Shuli, would both rise to powerful positions within the government's TARAA, and retain a special relationship with him as one of their favorite pupils. Gadé graduated from Tibet University in 1991 with a BFA in Chinese Realism, and was one of a handful of young artists from Lhasa selected to train at the prestigious Central Academy of Fine Arts of Beijing in modern art theory and Chinese painting techniques. By the early 1990s, Gadé had won awards at national competitions and been recruited to join the Tibet University Art Department faculty in Lhasa, where he still teaches. On the basis of these successes, he was inducted into the TARAA, and has received commissions and participated in officially sponsored exhibitions nationally and internationally with this governmental organization.

Gadé is among the first generation of Tibetan artists trained in Chinese art academies in Beijing. They comprised a small cohort who felt, upon returning to Lhasa, that their training in foreign aesthetics and techniques was incompatible with representing their homeland (Gyatso 2005; Harris 2008). The Lhasa to which Tibetan artists returned from studies in the mainland was also changing rapidly. Cultural and religious revitalization of practices suppressed throughout their childhood and early adult lives was, for Gadé and other young Tibetans, a witnessing not of a return to something familiar, but a belated introduction to Buddhist spaces and practices. These artists paired belief in the legitimacy of new modes of representation with a heightened awareness of their difference from older generations of Tibetans and from the Han majority. They parted from Han artistic training to experiment with Tibetan imagery, materials, and methods to seek and express greater understanding of their cultural identities.<sup>15</sup> This ethos, which was dominant amongst artists in the 1980s and 1990s, defines the output of Gadé's first major phase of his artistic career. Since the early 2000s, however, Gadé has preferred to concentrate on interaction with international contemporary art worlds (Becker 1982). In 2001, he and three other artists were the first from Lhasa to have an artists' residency abroad,<sup>16</sup> and soon thereafter he co-founded the independent GCAG with a small group of progressive artists. They now prefer to exhibit outside

official government channels and have found success and support to exhibit and travel in Europe, Asia, and the United States.

Gadé's students and colleagues respect his ability to inspire in them both a love of their artistic heritage as well as the curiosity and confidence to experiment as individuals. This is a relatively new concept in higher education in Lhasa and in Tibetan conceptualizations of the role of so-called artists (Tashi 2008). In time, Gadé and his cohort made visual interventions into a representational field dominated by Han constructions of the religion and culture of ethnic minorities as backward superstition or exotic pastiche. They did so via a turn to their own experiences and realities, a hallmark of Gadé's second major career phase.

As a professional artist, Gadé only began publicly acknowledging his ethnic hybridity during a solo show of his work in Hong Kong in 2010, followed by an exhibition devoted to the theme of his 'half-half' status later that year in New Mexico.<sup>17</sup> Navigating perceptions of his ethnically mixed parentage has complicated his own identity and has made him acutely sensitive to the manifestations of hybridity around him. Thus, while his status as 'mixed' complicates his Tibetanness, as a painter of contemporary Tibetan art, Gadé is accepted both in Lhasa and by foreign galleries as one of the preeminent leaders of the contemporary Tibetan art movement. This is perhaps because he embodies struggles to navigate the change, alienation, and adaptations deeply affecting his generation and their sense of cultural responsibility. Gadé hopes his art may challenge overly romantic or constrained perceptions of Tibet, but ultimately his aim is, in his own words, to "document my life," that is to represent the place he was born and lives from a personal point of view (Gadé 2008).

Gadé's artistic career to date does not exhibit classical orientations to Tibetan Buddhist art. Although he made artistic pilgrimages to surviving sites that preserve Buddhist mural masterpieces, spending hours copying from fading murals, Gadé never studied Tibetan painting techniques or iconography formally. Nonetheless, his artistic output in the past decade evinces deep familiarity with the imagery, compositional templates, and the various stylistic modes of centuries of Buddhist art in Tibet.

Generally speaking, Gadé references the artistic history of Tibetan Buddhism for aesthetic purposes, not for spiritual or doctrinal meaning. His artistic works include a large number of painted works on paper and cloth that show changing relationships to Buddhism and illustrate varied uses of its visual language and concepts. In the first decade of his professional career, he appropriated Buddhist symbols into a personal aesthetic, imbuing his compositions

and contemporary non-traditional materials with imagery derived from of the religious past. In the second decade, Gadé used traditional Buddhist *thangka* painting materials and compositional templates as a medium and container to depict dimensions of contemporary urban life and to represent the hybridity of twenty-first century Lhasa.

Gadé's artwork therefore shows both continuity with and deviation from traditional Buddhist artistic production. Gadé's work is marked by a shifting sense of his personal and cultural relationship to Buddhism in the first decade of his career (roughly the 1990s), and, in the second decade, by his appropriation of Tibetan Buddhist materials, methods, compositions, and historical styles as well as his experiential knowledge of surviving traditional wall paintings. While thereby locating himself within a lineage of artistic tradition, the secular nature of the content and function of Gadé's art represents a deviation from traditional Tibetan conceptualizations of the 'artist' and decenters Buddhism from its previously central role in Tibetan culture. Unlike traditional religious artists, Gadé appropriates religion and its imagery for his own purposes; he is not an artist in the service of religion.

### The First Decade of Gadé's Career: the Search for Traditional Language

Gadé borrowed directly from religious art sources in the first decade of his artistic career, motivated by the main goal of artists at the time to discern a unique personal style that was simultaneously accountable for representing Tibetan culture as a whole. Gadé's artistic production in the 1990s is characterized by an attempt to merge traditional Buddhist conceptual content with a modern, personal painting aesthetic. *Spirit Beings on a Yak Hide Raft* (Fig. 3) is a large work on canvas in a gray and beige palette with touches of red and ochre. The subject is a yak skin coracle, a traditional ferryboat made of leather stretched and lashed onto a wooden frame, bearing a diverse crowd of beings. A woman wearing an old-fashioned felt and cowry shell decorative piece in her long braids of hair stands in the bow, lifting high the glowing flame of a small butter lamp of the kind offered before buddha images, an illuminating glow dispelling some of the surrounding darkness. A small, radiant halo frames her head and those of other 'spirit beings' including humans, two owls, and a horse. The image appears in vertical segments divided by uneven dark lines and overlaid with black dots arranged into triangular formations.

Elements of the painting are culturally legible and yet also used for texture and aesthetic effect. The halos, faded palette, and antiquated hairpiece depict a Buddhist worldview





Figure 3. *Spirit Beings on a Yak Hide Raft* (detail) painted by Gadé in 1997; mixed media on canvas, 158 x 119cm.

(Rossi+Rossi, 2007).

of time and impermanence. Impermanence is expressed in the *bardo* (*bar do*) or ‘intermediate period,’ the journey of consciousness passing from one body to another in the Buddhist conception of reincarnation. In the painting, beings—human and animal—embark on a journey together with religious offerings of candle light and hands raised in the gesture of homage to the buddhas. Gadé told me that while he worked on this painting, his mother brought him “endless pots of freshly-brewed tea” until, near the completion of the painting, she died. Gadé’s daughter was born just before the painting was finished, and thus “it was as if reincarnation was taking place,” he said.<sup>18</sup> In an artist’s statement Gadé wrote, “my mother, my daughter, and the painting were all linked together in a karmic embrace (Gadé 2007).” In this case, working through Buddhist imagery (butter lamps and halos) and concepts (reincarnation), with images drawn from a distinctly Tibetan secular culture (jewelry, boat, animals) in a modern aesthetic, resulted in an artwork Gadé regards as the pinnacle of the first decade of his artistic career.

During this phase, the historical dominance of Tibetan art by religion influenced Gadé to attempt a saturation of his subjects and compositions with “an essence of Tibetan Buddhism.” Gadé wrote that he “copied ancient Tibetan frescoes and *thangka* in an attempt to discover in those traditional art forms a language with which to express the suffering and the essence of the Tibetan people, and to draw a map of the Tibetan soul” (Gadé 2007). This

meant positioning the artist as a crucial spokesperson for a people anxious about their cultural survival in the face of colonialism and globalism, and creating self-representation to answer back to centuries of representations by outsiders. This novel self-representation demanded that individuals, Gadé included, forge personal connections to notions of their collective past, in which religion played a central role, despite its absence from their own Cultural Revolution-era upbringing and colonial present.

The tones and textures of Gadé’s work from this period were also a method to explore both collective memory and highly personal reflections, including childhood memories. Almost a decade later, Gadé reflected on the similar works *Spirit Beings on a Yak Hide Raft* (1997) and *Sagya Dawa Festival* (1998):

I used the subject[s]...to depict the Tibetan spiritual world. Tibetans believe that human life is merely a passing phase in the greater scheme of things... Of course very few Tibetans today still believe in these things. But the painting evoked recollections of my childhood, when I lived with my family near the Barkhor in Lhasa. The difference in the colors between then and now is something spiritual for me and hard to describe... [The] dull colors belong [to] a period in my life [that] is gone forever (Gadé 2007).

The attempts Gadé made to copy religious imagery to infuse his work with a recovered Tibetan Buddhist identity came to have a personal memorial function for the artist, that of recording an environment in urban Lhasa that has passed and endures only in memory. In contrast to the exoticism common to outsiders' colorful representations of Tibet, Gadé felt "something spiritual" in the reflection upon change that is depicted in his muted colors. The colors belong in his memory to the specific time and place of his childhood neighborhood. Returning there as a young adult, he connected again to the dark, smoky temples that had re-opened for use by the devout after the Cultural Revolution, but before the bright colors were added as a result of economic revitalization and tourism. He is also, perhaps surprisingly, dismissive of traditional beliefs and makes clear that the 'spiritual' nature of his work concerns colors and the passage of time, not faith in Buddhism.

In the 1990s, artists like Gadé were driven to create an authentically Tibetan modern art that championed their heritage in the wake of traumatic ruptures of the Maoist period. This involved a perceived personal and cultural responsibility to Buddhism. However, Gadé's childhood memories of the Cultural Revolution and the tentative place of religion in society and family life thereafter meant that he had been endowed with what he recently called a "shallow" sense of Buddhist ritual or philosophy. He reflected, "Initially I was very focused in my works on the aesthetic properties of color schemes, nice lines, compositions, etc. and into these I tried to fit some ideas from Tibetan Buddhism, or apply that approach to art about Buddhist ideas. But I came to feel it was too superficial, because my knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism was not very deep."<sup>19</sup> Though aesthetically acclaimed by others, trying to represent Tibet through contrived Buddhist identities and concepts became stifling and burdensome for him and other Tibetan artists in the 1990s.<sup>20</sup> Ultimately, this approach to cultural responsibility failed to capture the breadth and depth of his experience in Lhasa during the post-Mao era.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Gadé's works began to appear in lighter colors, some with sharper focus and smoother textures; they were less atmospheric and yielded enhanced narrative quality. Subtle Buddhist imagery appeared in his works of this period, but as elements selected from the margins of visual tradition. These minor symbolic elements, such as a white conch shell or deer, when placed in the center of his work, evoke ambiguity rather than straightforward religious interpretation. Also prevalent in Gadé's paintings were Tibetan monks, butter lamps, and multiplicities of figures—religious, historical and myth -

cal—given unconventional halos. These began to appear alongside secular symbols of folk tradition, festivals, traditional dress, textiles and jewelry. Gadé was aesthetically influenced by the surfaces of flaking earthen temple wall paintings and the techniques and style of his prominent teacher, Chinese painter Han Shuli: ink washes and a nebulous, undefined use of color and light to frame figure and spaces to mimic remains. Increasingly however, he took stylistic, material, and technical inspiration from the Tibetan artistic tradition itself, rather than its reinterpretation and appropriation by outsiders.

In the transition from Gadé's first decade into the new style developed since 2001, which would characterize his second major career phase, the subject matter and techniques of his work gradually changed in several important ways. He and several other artists dropped the use of religious and cultural signifiers of tradition as dominant subjects of works. That Tibetan Buddhist world was no longer prominently visible around him in Lhasa and was invoked in his paintings as a fantasy of the past though the visual effects of flaking, shimmering, and haziness. Gadé introduced modern iconography related to political ideology and objects of everyday material culture to bring the present moment into his work. His images are primarily defined by line drawings with minimal depth or dimensionality, in which shading and perspective are largely absent and the brushwork emphasizes lines and the effect of color combinations of traditional stone ground pigments. Like temple wall paintings, but also like the cartoon characters and comic books he loved as a youth, these adopted techniques, styles, and materials infuse Gadé's vignettes with vitality, humor, movement, expressiveness, and narrative qualities.

### **The Second Decade: The Look of a Tibetan Painting**

The second phase of Gadé's artistic career marks a shift away from referencing traditional culture (epitomized by Buddhist concepts like reincarnation) through modern form. Instead he appropriates materials, compositional genres, and stylistic influences from traditional Tibetan Buddhist art and employs them as visual elements to express other meanings. In the early 2000s, the discovery of these strategies met his need for artistic expression in a variety of ways: he transcended local and perceived constraints, rediscovered fun in art making, and explored relationships between contemporary realities and imagined pasts, often marked by ambiguity, in modern Tibet. None of these concerns had to do, explicitly, with Buddhism. And yet, how Gadé's paintings in this second period of his career have the look of a Tibetan painting in modern times



depends upon a different way of seeing and referencing the common visual language of Tibetan Buddhism. Recall his aim to “locate traditional Tibetan art in a contemporary context” and “to imagine what a Tibetan painting looks like when it is detached from religion” (Gadé 2008). We can now see that the first decade of his career for - shadowed this approach, because religion in his paintings is consistently in the service of aesthetics and conceptual goals, rather than spiritual edification or devotion. The secular is made manifest through the use of Buddhist imagery outside of a religious context. Gadé does not attempt a religious commentary on his context or subjects, but rather offers a depiction of contemporary life that mirrors a broader secularization process in which religious symbols are divested of meaning. Below, several works and series are treated in detail to illustrate these themes.

### **Mickey Mural**

Seen from a distance, the long vertical painting in gold and uneven muted hues on thin cloth creates the effect of a fading mural, damaged from age and exposure to water seeps and streaks. The painting recalls the familiar Tibetan Buddhist composition of a central enlightened being surrounded by rows of identical figures, each on their own lotus petal throne (Fig. 4). However, here at the center of the painting, the throne and halo are vacated of its buddha, seeming to bear witness to former grandeur and to the legacies of violent loss and haunting absences. Upon focusing on the surrounding rows of niches, viewers unfamiliar with Gadé’s work may be startled to discover that they are filled with more than 500 Mickey Mouse figures seated in meditation posture, wearing monastic robes! Gadé explained that *Mickey Mural* borrows its compositional genre, materials, and style from the historical traditions of Buddhist art to “show the growing distance between myself and previous generations’ religious traditions.”<sup>21</sup> Imitation of aged and damaged murals refers both to Tibet’s Buddhist material heritage and the passing of traditional Tibetan Buddhist society.

The unfiltered glimpses of everyday life in Gadé’s works, where ruins mix with cartoons, both contribute to recognizably “Tibetan characteristics” and yet are also signs that in a “transient time [when] memories are disappearing, all we can do is pick up fragments.”<sup>22</sup> In Gadé’s artistic productions, the fragments cohere not to re-assemble or preserve the past, which is felt to be impossible, but to urgently document the present, in which memory and its transmission are troubled. And yet his willingness to pick up the fragments and reassemble them with humor reveal a commitment to realistic depiction of the fractured



Figure 4. *Mickey Mural* by Gadé, stone pigment, gold on fabric, 200 x 66cm.

(Red Gate Gallery, 2007).





Figure 5. *Pecha Sarpa: Sunflowers* by Gadé; stone pigments, ink, gold on handmade paper.

(Courtesy of the author, 2006).

nature of the inheritance and identities of Tibetans today, while not denying the fullness of their contemporary lives.

Humor immediately conveys the very aliveness of a people in contrast to the “frozen sanctity of ... artifact” (Thomas 2001) and expectations for solemn spirituality. When wit is combined with legible elements from the past, tradition becomes fresh, relevant, and a source of pride for present and future generations. Since this work, Gadé has continued to employ the figure of Mickey Mouse, as well as Ronald McDonald, The Incredible Hulk, Spiderman, and Chairman Mao, in works that play with Tibetan Buddhist genres, materials, and aesthetics. Gadé’s humor skillfully draws people into the space between the Mickey Mouse of today and the ruins of the past, to show Tibetan despair and joy coexist, and to juxtapose tradition and modernity.

Gadé knows he causes offense to some Buddhists. After all, *Mickey Mural* highlights the complicated tensions about the place of religion in the changing society of Lhasa by performing the blasphemous substitution of a cartoon character for a buddha alongside depiction of actual iconoclasm in the vacated halo. But by importing global icons to broach local mediations of modernization, Gadé demands we acknowledge that these are, after all, images just as familiar to Tibetans in Lhasa today as are those that emerge from Tibetan Buddhist artistic tradition. *Mickey Mural* shows religion has been decentered and overtaken by global icons. In other words, it harkens to a vision of secularism in Tibet.

### ***New Scriptures Series***

The *Pecha Sarpa* (New Scripture) series (c. 2005-2009) enabled Gadé to work on a smaller scale with contemporary imagery and traditional Tibetan Buddhist materials, depicting objects of material culture from contemporary life and pop culture with the stone-ground pigments, Tibetan brushes, gold leaf, and handmade paper that have long been used by Tibetan producers of Buddhist art and texts. For the New Scripture works, Gadé adopted the form and materials of traditional loose-leaf Buddhist paper, formally the purview of religious manuscripts, for his imaginative scenes.

In *Pecha Sarpa: Sunflowers* (Fig. 5), Gadé illustrates a view of China’s politicized secularization process under Mao as a sort of radicalized religious conversion. The wide stripes of the sun’s rays and symbolism of the sunflower pay visual tribute to Socialist Realism artistic conventions and symbols of the Maoist era (Wang 2008). Gadé includes the title of “that popular Cultural Revolution era song everyone still remembers” comparing Mao to the sun and the

people to sunflowers following him wherever he goes<sup>23</sup> “Before, Chinese culture was rooted in Taoist religion,” he said pointing to the Taoist line diagrams from the *I Ching*. “Then Chinese people’s way of thinking changed; they tried to destroy religion, and a new way of thinking became predominant,” that of Maoism.<sup>24</sup> Gadé aimed to show the relationship over time between elements of Chinese culture, changing from one predominant way of thinking—Taoism—to another, Maoism. For this contemporary artist, the category of ‘religion’ is a socially dominant ideology (spiritual or political), which may appear fixed and totalizing but is actually fluid.

The theme of religious change in Lhasa appears again in *Pecha Nagpo [Black Scripture]* (Fig. 6). The artwork is on paper like the other *pecha* works, but enlarged and mounted vertically on dowels, as are cloth scroll paintings. It contains bold symbols outlined in gold and silver on a solid black background, inspired by esoteric diagrams and visionary experiences depicted in the Fifth Dalai Lama’s secret autobiography (Karmay 1988). In Gadé’s painting, the visual approach turns on ideological symbols of the Communist Party such as hammer and sickle, an American dollar symbol, the Muslim star and crescent, the *yungdrung* (*yung drung*), a Bön and Buddhist symbol of auspiciousness, and the Christian cross. Three types of ‘text’ appear: quotes from Buddhist scripture in Tibetan written in gold, graffiti-style names of rock bands in English, and a humorous imitation of an erudite form of Tibetan religious poetry (Sangster 2007). Gadé includes imported consumer products now ubiquitous in Lhasa (Chinese thermoses and American Coca-Cola bottles), which, he said, are analogous to “the travel of ideas.” In this and more than a dozen *Black Scripture* works Gadé has created since 2012 (see <[www.rossirosi.com](http://www.rossirosi.com)>), global icons overtake the esoteric form, as social change and globalization has overtaken the former ubiquity of religion.

Compared to the religious genre of esoteric imagery that inspired *Pecha Nagpo*, the mix of cultures, religions, languages and politics in Gadé’s painting ultimately eschews the Buddhist associations of tantric symbolism. Gadé said, “In *tantra*, shapes and symbols carried meanings correlating to the elements and so forth, but that is not my intention here. More importantly, one can see connection to Tibetan culture immediately, but looking closer or with deeper thought, [one finds they] cannot say what the symbols mean. This is the state of [many people’s] relationship to Tibetan culture today, they don’t know it deeply.”<sup>25</sup> Because Gadé’s painting has the ‘look’ of Tibetan art, upon first glance Tibetan or Western viewers might expect Buddhist content; looking closer, that expectation



Figure 6. *Pecha Nagpo [Black Scripture]* by Gadé; mixed media on handmade paper, 191 x 30 cm.

(Rossi + Rossi, 2006).



is foiled. There is no singular Buddhist meaning encoded in the baubles of globalization. Gadé challenges us further by querying how comprehensible an actual esoteric illuminated manuscript would be for viewers. Superficial knowledge of religion is, he says, a part of the “sad state” of Tibetan culture now.

His work stands in strong contrast to conventional presentations of sacred Buddhist images as well as the traditional role of art and artists. Gadé explained that works such as the secret illustrated spiritual autobiography of the Fifth Dalai Lama that graphically inspired him had never been published or even seen by ordinary Tibetans in the past, as they were, in Gadé’s words “reserved for religious adepts.” For Gadé, the scripture is most striking as a historical artifact with a visually arresting use of highly unusual but indigenous graphic art. The fact that this work of sacred literature was penned by one of Tibet’s greatest spiritual and political authorities did not stimulate spiritual devotion in Gadé. I emphasize this point because in addition to local and foreign expectations of art produced by Tibetans to have Buddhist content, the religious identities of artists themselves is often assumed to be Buddhist, and the process of art production is also expected to be somehow Buddhist.<sup>26</sup> However, if attending to the processes of production serves as a window into the broader views and values of artists and their society (Steiner 1994; Morphy 2009), we can infer that there is no longer any necessary correlation between religious imagery, its (re)production, and religious faith for contemporary Tibetan artists. This can be taken as a sign of the secularization of contemporary Tibetan culture.

In Lhasa, *Pecha Nagpo* was criticized by religious Tibetans as *dikpa chenpo* (*sdig pa chen po*) or ‘a big sin’.<sup>27</sup> Gadé not only transgressed traditional bans on the authorized viewing of secret tantric manuals but he also reproduced the iconography without the permission of religious authorities. Furthermore, in the process of reproduction, he altered the tantric iconography extensively, presenting his own ideas in the form of an esoteric scripture. Thus, despite Gadé having never intended to produce a religious work, the resemblance is strong enough to unsettle viewers and elicit condemnation. While Gadé understands the religious worldview in which this critique is formed, he sees himself as acting from a secular perspective on art that is at times in tension with the Buddhist one.

This tension is uncomfortable, because Gadé feels a strong sense of responsibility to contribute to cultural sustainability, such that the intent of such a painting is purposeful representation of his ‘real’ Tibet. He wrote:

Although it is indeed very personal, my work does offend many Buddhist believers. I know this [is] something that they do not want to see, but I am bored with the ‘Shangri-la’ that Tibetan art has been depicting so far. I want to truly reveal my life, no matter how silly and trivial it is ...to this extent, I regard my work as realistic (Gadé 2008).

The *Pecha Sarpa* series illustrates that as Gadé re-purposes traditional materials and forms of texts, they are transformed through new content and thus become clearly ‘like’ traditional images, but never a replica. Born of such a patchwork milieu, these “texts,” as he called the *Pecha Sarpa (New Scripture) Series*, can only be “read” as “randomly arranged puzzle pieces,” according to Gadé. They fail to yield any single narrative of a Tibetan Shangri-la, or any other local or foreign expectation. This patchwork approach by Gadé, in the wake of the fragmentation of traditional religious society, reveals public spheres and personal identities emerging as a hybridization of powerful influences. As a central feature of secularization, the displacement of religion that Gadé chronicles to provocative effect reflects new ideologies, spaces, desires and memories dominating the cultural landscape in twenty-first century Lhasa.

### ***New Thangka Series: Spiderman Buddha***

In his *New Thangka Series* and subsequent works, Gadé even more closely cites traditional Buddhist iconography, composition, and materials, demonstrating his fluency with a range of Tibetan art historical styles, palettes, and time periods. In the *New Thangka Series: Spiderman Buddha* (Fig. 7), a predominantly dark red and navy blue painting, the cartoon character Spiderman is seated on a throne in postures and gestures (*mudrā*) formerly reserved for buddhas, his right hand turned out in the traditional gesture of giving. Spiderman Buddha’s left hand is at his heart in the gesture of teaching dharma. Two female attendants stand on either side of him, wearing knee-high leather boots and elbow-length gloves, a revolver placed in belts on their thighs, posing in skin-tight leotards. They are not *bodhisattva* attendants as in the traditional composition, but sexy superhero vixens. The ‘deities’ of the *New Thangka Series* and other works are fictional characters playfully borrowed from comic books and international popular culture that Gadé ‘Tibetanizes.’

The Incredible Hulk, an American fictional character whose skin turns green and muscles swell to unbelievable proportions when overcome with righteous rage, is transformed by Gadé’s brush to resemble a Tibetan wrathful





Figure 7. *New Thangka Series: Spiderman Buddha* by Gadé; mixed media on canvas, 116 x 70cm.

(Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008).

deity in the painting *The Hulk*. This painting is part of a body of work called the Diamond Series (Fig. 8). Gadé's *Hulk* borrows from Buddhist iconography the wrathful form and posture of Vajrapāṇi, the *bodhisattva* of power in Tibetan Buddhism. According to traditional iconography, Vajrapāṇi is depicted as blue, draped in a tiger skin, and stands in wide-legged posture upon a lotus petal cushion, trampling enemies underfoot in a raging fire blaze. Gadé preserves this appearance. Moreover, instead of a retinue of holy beings in the niches around the borders, we find instead in Gadé's *Hulk* macabre scenes of sexuality, violence, and death along with references to Tibetan and Chinese artistic traditions.

In this work, Gadé turns his aesthetic technique toward the darker sides of human nature. Many of the characters pointlessly impale each other with swords; monsters with

gaping mouths and pointy teeth howl; and animals, people, and monsters fight, fornicate, decapitate, and bite each other; they wear gas masks and face terrifying fires and enemy hordes. Since the early 2000s, his art increasingly includes frightening characters and violent actions partially borrowed from wrathful Tibetan Buddhist iconography that, he explained during our conversations, relate our common human propensity for fear, sex, and violence. He told me that fear and violence are the consequences of uncertainty about the future, and that today such anxiety is produced worldwide by postmodern globalization, as many cultures grapple with the loss of traditions. Gadé's work insists that in Tibet's emergent modernity as elsewhere, globally familiar emotions and icons are the stuff of urban consumer and media cultures. Thus Gadé's figures, while aesthetically reminiscent of wrathful deities and their



Figure 8. *The Hulk* by Gadé; mixed media on canvas, 147 x 117cm. (Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008).

retinues, or the tortures of the hell realms, also resemble horror and action movies and violent video games. Gadé’s synthesizing of fading traditional murals and modern media violence become diagnostic of shared experience of the late twentieth century’s radical social changes in Tibet, which cannot be reduced to a religious issue or an issue with a solely religious answer.<sup>28</sup>

As much as it borrows from traditional *thangka* compositions and materials, the Hulk’s world in this painting is neither the charnel ground of a wrathful Buddhist deity nor the metaphoric illustration of spiritually conquering inner enemies. Instead we find images of popular entertainment’s horror, aliens, and pornography, with its

overtones of urban Tibet’s prostitution, drugs and alcoholism, and repression. These charnel ground scenes, like the ones in *Father’s Nightmare* and the paintings *Mushroom Cloud No.1* and *No.2* (discussed below) are licentious and macabre. They are provocative and yet, the style—comic, dreamlike, fantastical—buffers us from terror or fright. The synthesizing of Tibetan pasts and the preoccupations, values, challenges, and potential of the globalizing present creates worlds that vacillate between the humorous, contemplative, and dystopian.

Gadé’s artistic choice to use the visual language of Tibet’s religious past, rather than disregard or banish it, has been a testament to the continued importance of religion, while



highlighting cultural hybridity in the making of contemporary Tibetan art. The puzzle pieces of modern Tibetan-ness include not only a mélange of contemporary material objects and passions, but also fragments of the past in material forms as well as memory traces. This combination invites reflection about those eruptions of the past into the present and becomes visible in various ways in the compositional templates of Gadé's work. Images of daily life are haunted by the past which pervades, frames, and provides the background against which all else takes place. In this way, memory demands to be immediate and central, taking a focal point like a vacated throne, or poignantly and surprisingly puncturing the present in shocking juxtaposition. Together the forms, materials, and content signal the confluence of memory, fantasy, social concerns, and history that Gadé's art inhabits with signature humor and insight.

Contemporary Tibetan art becomes a prism of diversifying religious and secular influences, constraints, and environments. The secular, like radically new artworks or movements, does not appear fully formed overnight and out of nowhere. As a bridge between generations, contemporary artists like Gadé seek a distinctively Tibetan visual language through which to communicate to their local audiences, synthesizing collective memory with a much-broadened iconography related to the globalized context of their current lives. Buddhist imagery has served as that bridge, as much as it has a set of symbols to juxtapose against global icons that generate, for non-Tibetan viewers in particular, the culture shock many urban Tibetans experience on a regular basis in their rapidly and radically changing society. Contemporary Tibetan artists like Gadé depict the contact between diverse cultures, and their impact upon one another, in processes that are frequently referred to as globalization, modernization, westernization, and sinicization in scholarly analysis of contemporary Tibetan art. Secularization has less often been analytically applied, but Gadé is unapologetic about its inescapability.

### The Look of Tibet

I began this article with *Father's Nightmare* (Fig. 1) and its apparent absence of Tibetan Buddhist influence. Let us now consider the composition, materials, and content more closely. *Father's Nightmare* is a bustling cityscape: monks and Maoists carry the pennant shaped flags used by guides in peak tourist season, temple architecture houses auspicious offerings downstairs and the popular cuisine of hot pot restaurants upstairs. The population includes festival-clad Tibetans dancing from the ends of a puppeteer's strings, men uniformed in suits and monastic

robes, as well as police and army gear, migrant workers, and an impaled couple, while high above them black flags of poison and death wave where once bright prayer flags may have flown. There are other religious markers: the sun and moon decorate a rooftop, the haloed Mao figure reclines on lotus cushion reminiscent of the Buddha's pose at his enlightenment (*parinirvāṇa*), a multi-armed figure on an animal recalls deities on their mounts, an incense burner on rooftop billows, and monks assemble in procession. But the pleasures of spas, dancing, and singing, the Olympic spirit of school children, and the general bustling activity on this cloud belie its noxious, nightmarish realities. Gadé's mushroom clouds are smoky swirls to which, strangely, beings appear to be blind and immune.

In this work, the relationships between many figures draws on established compositions in Tibetan Buddhist art for the arrangement of multitudes of sacred beings, including refuge trees or *paksam gyi shing* (*dpag bsam gyi shing*, literally 'wish-fulfilling tree') and the *tsok zhing* (*tshogs zhing*), the merit or assembly field (Jackson and Jackson 1988). These compositions feature the clustering of similar beings, placed upon clouds, branches, or in concentric rows, and use a vertical orientation to hierarchy. Brought to mind in verses and tantric visualization practices, they visually represent the lineage of a Tibetan Buddhist school in relation to the principally depicted teacher or buddha. We can now see Gadé borrows from this genre for his imaginative casts of characters in *Father's Nightmare* and in *Mushroom Cloud No.2* (Fig. 9). Rather than a classical tantric visualization of the assembly as emanating from the lama's heart, Gadé laughed when he pointed out to me that the billowing clouds originate from a small pile of "golden shit" at the bottom of *Mushroom Cloud No.2*.

Gadé's use of the *thangka* painters' stone ground pigments on thin cotton and established composition for the *Mushroom Cloud* paintings and *Father's Nightmare* carry particular resonance with lama lineage genres, which ordinarily convey Tibetan respect for gurus with "a deep and concrete sense of history" (Jackson and Jackson 1988). The deep and concrete history that Gadé narrates is both personal and collective; he has said it is "as if my brush is a thread that connects the past and the present."<sup>29</sup> As a technology, the use of materials and compositions may be comparable to the indexical quality of art and photography celebrated by theorists concerned with living memory (Barthes 1977; Saltzman 2006; Gibbons 2007). In Gadé's art, Buddhist elements create a material trace from the past into the globalizing present. That this thread is troubled may be read as the central problem imaged by the multiple inversions: Mao at the bottom rather than primordial Buddha at



Figure 9. *Mushroom Cloud No.2* by Gadé; mixed media on canvas, 248 x 100cm.

(Plum Blossoms Gallery, 2008).

the top and the emergence of disorienting hybridity and humor rather than an enlightened pure land. Global icons and figures clad as Communist Party members replace as they displace Buddhist symbols and the sense of tradition they represent. This painting raises the question: what does it mean to be Tibetan today?

A descent into mayhem appears possible if the thread of cultural continuity is cut. Buddhism's prior national, unifying cohesiveness as the source of meaning and identity in Tibet, once signaled in art, has been displaced from the central subject of contemporary Tibetan art, reflecting the dismantling of institutional religion as a dominant social structure. The displacement of shared visual language of Buddhism is one way to show an inability of memory to perpetuate itself, particularly in the anxiety-producing absence of certain minimal environments and lineages (Terdiman 1993). This is a problem because, as Gadé told me while reflecting on the future of contemporary Tibetan art, "Without traditions, there is no soil or ground upon which to build a new path. In this transient time, when memories are disappearing, all we can do is pick up the fragments."<sup>30</sup> Gadé has anchored his choices of materials, color palette, style, and compositions in Buddhist art history.<sup>31</sup> However, by selectively borrowing these elements he turns them into dislocated fragments of tradition. Replacing central figures and symbols with icons of globalization depicts and queries the hybridity of modern Lhasa, and also a corresponding sense of displacement.

And yet when Tibetans' coeval histories are denied by Chinese and Western colonial knowledge production and nationalism, merely insisting on Tibetan-looking modernity remains important (Sangster 2012). As a response to unsettling change—in which secularization fills in the vacuums left by the fragmentation of the religious past—borrowing from Buddhist iconography does not affirm an untroubled inheritance of a Buddhist identity, but it has served for Gadé as a vehicle for fulfilling a responsibility to cultural continuity in the midst of transformation. This cultural continuity includes a place for Buddhist views and identities, in the visible signs of religious life, but at other times may be a more private place. For instance, in December 2006, Gadé created a site-specific, time-based installation of photographs which were exhibited titled *Ice Buddha, No.1—Kyichu River*. Discussing the conceptual elements of the work and his process of production, Gadé confided that Buddhist ideas of reincarnation were personally influential, but withheld this from public commentary on the work so as to leave interpretations more open to the viewers.



While appropriating and adapting Buddhist iconography, Gadé also subverts its formal elements and rules by secularizing them, foregrounding those elements of sacred art, like its materiality and shapes, which should be subsumed by the content and its ritual function. Like Thomas's writing on aboriginal New Zealand contemporary artists, we can say Gadé "draws upon and affirms traditional art forms through continuities of media, style or motifs, yet adopt[s] a critical attitude to the restrictive... practices that privilege such works and deny or marginalize the continuing dynamism" of contemporary arts (Thomas 2001: 30).

Gadé's art can be read as an inversion of colonial and global dynamics where the presumed unidirectional flow of influence moves from dominant to peripheral societies. In this paradigm regarding the impacts upon indigenous art, the settler, colonial, or mass media culture is presumed to corrode local authenticity and devalue their post-contact productions in global markets (Steiner 1994), thereby rewarding representation that retains primitive or pre-modern otherness (Errington 1998; Thomas 2001). In the context of contemporary Tibetan art, artists like Gadé refuse to depict the role of religion in Tibetan society as unchanging, which would require artificially freezing Tibetan identity and self-representations in the pre-1950 past.

In contrast, Gadé's strategies show that Tibetans are not passive reproducers of traditional artifacts; they are mediators of dominant Chinese culture and the symbols of global capitalism. Gadé's use of the images and symbols which are most familiar to him and his audiences does not necessitate that he import foreign objects into his context with their original meanings. In fact, many of the Western, Chinese, or global elements he adapts acquire layers of meanings and alterations of values in the new contexts which he creates for them. Mickey Mouse and the castle of his Magic Kingdom (see *Happy Home*, 2006) do not represent the fantasy of a vacation to Disneyland (Sangster 2006). Rather, Gadé undermines the superiority and dominance of global icons by asserting agency to incorporate and adapt them according to local values and aesthetics. Depicting Disneyland in Tibet may critique the transformation of Lhasa into a fiction for others' entertaining fantasies, as it meanwhile eclipses the Potala as the emotional and visual focal point of the city. By conjoining imported and local elements within a work of art, he insists on a Tibetan visual landscape that nonetheless positions Buddhist and Tibetan elements as coeval historically and situated within modernity.

This shared visual language can affirm deep connection to tradition on the one hand, and distance or alienation from it on the other, in its secular reconfiguration. Yet it can also be viewed as reclaiming collective and personal agency in the midst of colonialism and globalization. In Lhasa, the look of the secular is that of contemporary urban life in a rapidly changing society, even as it includes a special place—decentered, venerated, fragmentary, nostalgic, and symbolic—for religion. As Gadé commences the third decade of his artistic career, a stronger secular orientation and darker vision of society may be emerging.<sup>32</sup> In 2014, Gadé spoke of a series of works made from prayer beads sown on felted yak wool as raising questions about how to cope in the "present faithless era."<sup>33</sup> He has succeeded in the 2000s in finding ways to "detach Tibetan painting from religion," while retaining its echo. It remains to be seen whether we will witness the emergence of an image of modern Tibet entirely devoid of religion in his artwork.

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The author expresses her gratitude to Gadé for permission to use images of his artwork and for the conversations and friendship they have shared over the years. She is also grateful for Fulbright and Emory University funding that enabled her research, and the many artists in Lhasa whose work and generous conversations inform this study. The author appreciatively recognizes the editors and the anonymous reviewer of this article, by whose efforts it has been much improved.

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## Endnotes

1. The Western production of knowledge about Tibet by colonial British officers, missionaries, and explorer since the seventeenth century, has, as Lopez, Harris, and others have argued, created a set of narratives about Tibet that continue to reverberate. These narratives, whether condemning or romanticizing, center upon Tibetan religion, while its material objects were often misinterpreted as evidence of degenerate Buddhism or Shangri-la (Waddell [1894] 2003; Lopez 1998; Harris 2012).
2. Post-Mao religious revival and religious freedoms have not been uniformly experienced across the regions of Greater Tibet, traditionally known as Gugé, U-tsang, Amdo, and Kham, and now under the jurisdiction of the People's Republic of China (PRC) provinces of the Tibetan Autonomous Region (TAR), Qinghai, Gansu, Sichuan, and Yunnan. Constraints on religion have increased in all areas since 2008, but the TAR and its capital, Lhasa, have had relatively more restriction of religious freedoms.
3. The artists, artworks, and art circles I describe herein were largely the subject of extensive ethnographic fieldwork and interviews with artists between 2004-2007 supported by Fulbright and Emory University grants.
4. Collaborative Han Chinese and Tibetan artistic productions and methods continued in the "opening and reform" era with greater permission to borrow locally familiar themes and compositions from Buddhist art to depict China's secularizing Tibet. This synthetic method led, in the late 1990s, to a neo-Socialist Realism style approach to ideology that continues to be a hallmark of State-sponsored art produced in and about Tibet. As the State modernized its medium—in photographic technologies, mass media, advertising, and museum exhibitions—it created a neo-Socialist Realism that continues to convey Tibetanness through the subjects' sartorial markers, surroundings, and uniformly cheerful demeanors in a teleologically motivated narrative of secular, multicultural harmony (Miller 2014).
5. The visit to Lhasa of the American artist Robert Rauschenberg in 1985 stimulated radical re-conceptualizations of art for several artists (Miller 2014).
6. My use of the term 'indigenous' refers to efforts by peoples worldwide, particularly in art and media, to emphasize their co-historical evolution with colonial settlers or other mainstream cultural influences, which they claim agency to adopt or adapt, particularly insofar as it may strengthen local communities through processes of media production. This movement of indigenous media furthermore rejects notions of authenticity restricted to artifacts that pre-date colonial contact.
7. Buddhism is foundational to collective memory in Tibet and is critical to Tibetan nationalism (or proto-nationalism) and sense of community (Dreyfus 1994).
8. The destruction of upwards of ninety-seven percent of Tibet's monasteries between 1957-1976 (Blondeau and Buffetrille 2008) induces extreme anxiety, and suggests restoration of religion as a critical key to cultural survival (Goldstein and Kapstein 1998; Kolas and Thowsen 2005).
9. Tsering Nyandak, Interviews, 2004 and 2006.
10. On more than one occasion in gatherings of artists in Lhasa I attended in 2006-2007, TARAA President Han Shuli and Vice President Yu Youxin vocally advocated for the unification of artists (of any ethnicity) living in Lhasa under the banner of a named movement, e.g. School of Tibetan Art, to gain visibility for marketable, recognizable productions from the region.
11. Importantly, they are not the first or only Tibetan to do so. For instance, other fascinating figures include the seventeenth-century Tenth Karmapa Chöying Dorje, whose portraits of Milarepa and the Buddha are lively and utterly unconventional, the first modern artist in the 20th century, Gedun Choephel, and Amdo Jampa Tsetan, who incorporated photorealism into portraits of deities and lamas, and the present-day Drugu Chögyal, an incarnate lama living in the Tibetan diaspora who is an avid painter of Buddhist tales and personages inspired by direct meditative experience rather than iconographic convention. Many contemporary Tibetan artists now living outside Tibet create works deeply informed by their Buddhist identities, among them Jamyang Tulku (Nepal), Tsherin Sherpa (USA),

Tenzing Rigdol (USA), Nyima Dhondup (Rome) and Sonam Drolma Bruen (Switzerland).

12. Interview, Tsering Nyandak, 2007.

13. For instance, Gonkar Gyatso has used the silhouette of the seated Buddha as an interesting and beautiful shape (Gonkar Gyatso, Interviews, 2001, 2002, London).

14. All biographical information and quotations from Gadé, unless otherwise attributed, are derived from interviews I conducted with Gadé, usually in his studio, at a café, or at the Gedun Choephel Gallery in Lhasa, between 2006–2007. Interviews and participant observation were also conducted in Beijing, when Mickey Mural was exhibited in New Art from Lhasa at Red Gate Gallery/798, which I co-curated with Tony Scott in May 2007.

15. Interviews with Gonkar Gyatso, Gadé, Tsewang Tashi, and Nortse between 2003 and 2008.

16. Artist in Residence at Snug Harbor, New York, 2001–2002, organized by Trace Foundation.

17. “Tibetans think you are Chinese and Chinese think you are Tibetan. This fragment of time in Tibet is perhaps Tibet’s most fierce age of cultural change and secularization. Divinity, nature and life itself have been alienated, faith transformed; a people once led by the spirit are now increasingly permeated with material desires... During the present sensitive period, my ‘intermediate perspective’ is perhaps relatively objective, but certainly isn’t absolute. This is an extremely contradictory and complicated psychological state, at least when it comes to me.” See Gadé’s introduction to the exhibition, *Half Tibetan-Half Chinese* at PW Contemporary, Santa Fe, New Mexico, 2010. <<http://www.asianart.com/pwcontemporary/gallery1/index.html>>

18. Interview, Gadé, 2007.

19. Interview, Gadé, 2007.

20. Interview, Tsering Nyandak, June 2007. Interview, Gonkar Gyatso, 2003. These are but two of the artists who described a sense of obligation to be a cultural spokesperson in the 1980s and 1990s.

21. Interview, Gadé, 2007.

22. Interview, Gadé, 2007.

23. The song goes, “Sunflowers all turn to the sun Chairman Mao is the reddest sun in our hearts” (*kaihua yang xiang taiyang, Mao zhuxi shi women xin zhong de hong taiyang*). Sunflowers were a Chinese symbol of loyalty and were common in visual propaganda as well as in this song (Wang 2008).

24. Interview, Gadé, 2006.

25. Interview, Gadé, 2006.

26. Conducting participant observation in Lhasa’s art galleries, I often observed foreigners’ assumptions and expectations in queries to artists and gallery assistants and was also told of this bias amongst gallery owners, collectors, and Tibetans.

27. In the Tibetan Buddhist codification of religious art a strict iconometric and iconographic system ensured the material image could serve as a support (*rten*) for an enlightened being’s presence, invoked in a consecration of the artists’ accurate production. Pema Namdol Thaye warned in his *thangka* manual that an “erroneous image cannot be blessed and consecrated. Such images should be in remote and deserted places as they are more harm than benefit to human society,” and warned artists that such productions would lead to rebirth in a hell realm (Thaye 1987). Creation of an unauthorized or poorly executed image does violence to the self and society according to a Buddhist perspective.

28. In addition to anxiety about the future, we might also be tempted to consider the violence of the recent Tibetan past and present rage at systemic oppression and discrimination, although Gadé denies using his artwork to advance any particular political agenda or view.

29. <<https://www.asianart.com/gedun/artist/2.html>>

30. Interview, Gadé 2007.

31. To create a painting that “looks Tibetan” Gadé has continued to use materials, forms, and compositions drawn from traditional Tibetan Buddhist arts. The traditional materials he regularly uses include the ground stone pigments, gold leaf, paper and thin cloth that have been used for texts, murals and *thangka* for centuries. The art forms he has adopted include scriptures, *thangka*, murals, and molded sculpture. Finally, Gadé’s work draws on traditional genres for established compositions for portraits of peaceful and wrathful divinities, assemblies, didactic charts and diagrams, *maṅḍala* (*dkyil ‘khor*), and history or narrative painting. In short, he has appropriated every major form of Tibetan painting and put traditional materials to new purposes.

32. Major works from 2012 have included novel materials—beadwork on wool, sculptural assemblages, cloisonné, outdoor installations, and investigation of 3-D printing—while continuing painting on handmade paper. Some of these projects, such as the 2013 sculptures resembling hard cover books called *A Million Questions* and the 2014 the paintings on paper series *My White Papers* entirely drop the genres and compositional templates Gadé sourced from traditional Buddhist art history. See <[www.rossirossi.com](http://www.rossirossi.com)>.

33. The beads that connect people to their religious beliefs, enabling “communication with the buddha” and bearing the wishes, sadness, and joy in their hearts, are deliberately alienated from their religious contexts to be cast as “entirely secular objects” that offer “insight into the mundane world that we face” (Gadé, *Parallel Realities: Contemporary Tibetan art* 2014).

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