

# ABOUNDING VISIONS OF EMINENT LIVES

NANCY G. LIN



Fig. 1 (left) Fourth Panchen Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662), after Choying Gyatso’s (act. 17th century) set of preincarnations of the Panchen Lamas; Eleventh portrait in xylographic series of the Panchen rebirth lineage; Nartang printing house, Tsang region, central Tibet; second quarter of 18th century; woodblock print, ink on paper; printed area: 26 3/16 × 16 1/8 in. (66.5 × 40.9 cm); Tucci Collection of the “Biblioteca IsIAO” – Sala delle collezioni africane e orientali, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale “Vittorio Emanuele II” di Roma; inv. no. 8155/92; photograph by Nancy G. Lin

(right) Fourth Panchen Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662), after Choying Gyatso’s (act. 17th century) set of preincarnations of the Panchen Lamas; eleventh portrait in series of the Panchen rebirth lineage, copied from Nartang xylographic design; Tsang region, central Tibet; 18th century; pigments on cloth; 27 × 15½ in. (68.6 × 39.4 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1996.21.2 (HAR 477)

## NARTANG WOODBLOCK PRINTS AND THEIR PAINTED COPIES: PREVIOUS LIVES OF THE PANCHEN LAMAS

Nartang printing house, Tsang region, central Tibet  
second quarter of 18th century (and a painted copy)

## SUMMARY

Two kinds of “replicating” practices date to the twelfth century in Tibet—the establishment of lineages of lamas via the succession mechanism of reincarnation and woodblock printing. Religious historian Nancy G. Lin studies how images of the past lives of the Panchen Lamas were produced and reproduced by this powerful media technology. Printing allowed copies and adaptations of the original compositions made by a master painter to spread across the Tibetan Buddhist world.

During the second quarter of the eighteenth century, the Nartang printing house began issuing a series of block print portraits of the Panchen Lama rebirth lineage (fig. 1). Painstakingly carved in relief on large wooden blocks, then inked and applied to paper or cloth, the xylographic thangka designs enabled the creation of portrait copies and adaptations in painting or other media. The use of woodblock printing technology to make Buddhist texts and images had begun much earlier, with Tibetan-language texts printed by the mid-twelfth century in Khara-Khoto.<sup>1</sup> Among Tibetans, the practice of recognizing the rebirth lineage (*trungrab*) or chain of incarnations (*kutreng*) of an eminent lama was nothing new either. Dating to the twelfth century, it was roughly as old as the practice of identifying reincarnating lamas, or *tulkus*, itself.<sup>2</sup> Yet it was not until the golden age of woodblock printing in Tibet in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that rebirth lineage portraits appear to have been adapted into serial xylographic designs, thereby tapping the potential for proliferation, iteration, and authoritative ordering that the technology affords. The Nartang series of Panchen Lama portraits thus abounded in current and older senses of “abounding,” by prevailing widely through circulated copies, bearing a plenitude of magnificent lives and qualities, and setting limits on how those lives were represented.

## ITERATING THROUGH REBIRTH AND PORTRAITURE

As one of the most eminent and powerful *tulkus* of the Geluk monastic order, the Panchen Lama was a prime subject for a rebirth lineage portrait series. The Panchens are considered emanations of Buddha Amitabha; their lineage has been widely regarded as second in importance only to the Dalai Lamas, and their sphere of authority has extended from Tsang region to the Qing imperial court and beyond. The Fourth Panchen Lama, Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662), was recognized at an early age as the rebirth of the accomplished scholar Wensapa Lobzang Dondrub.<sup>3</sup> After achieving scholarly fame, he served as abbot of Tashilhunpo Monastery, tutored the Fourth and Fifth Dalai Lamas, and was the first in his rebirth lineage to receive the title of Panchen (“greatly learned one”). The Nartang portrait of the Fourth Panchen emphasizes his scholarly accomplishments (fig. 2): he wears a *pandita’s* hat, his right hand performing the gesture (mudra) of explication and his left cradling a book. It also attests to key figures in his life, such as his root teacher (lama) Khedrub Chenpo Sanggye Yeshe at his upper left, along with three deities—white Chakrasamvara, Begtse Chen, and Vaishravana—who are praised in the verse inscription below, together with the Panchen himself. The bodhisattva Maitreya, whom the Panchen reportedly encountered in a vision, floats in a sphere just above his line of sight.

A painted copy in the Rubin Museum collection retains the block print’s figures and design details while skillfully executing line, pattern, color, and shading for a vivid and legible effect (fig. 3). Other copies demonstrate that the Nartang designs were accepted as authoritative visual representations of the Panchen’s lives and their social networks. In some cases, painters applied color directly to the xylographic design printed onto the prepared cotton ground of a thangka; in others a combination of tracing, stenciling, and

pouncing techniques may have been employed in order to preserve the xylograph print.<sup>4</sup>



Fig. 2 Fourth Panchen Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662), after Choying Gyatso's (act. 17th century) set of preincarnations of the Panchen Lamas; eleventh portrait in series of the Panchen rebirth lineage, copied from Nartang xylographic design; Tsang region, central Tibet; 18th century; pigments on cloth; 27 × 15½ in. (68.6 × 39.4 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1996.21.2 (HAR 477)



Fig. 3 Fourth Panchen Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662), after Choying Gyatso's (act. 17th century) set of preincarnations of the Panchen Lamas; eleventh portrait in xylographic series of the Panchen rebirth lineage; Nartang printing house, Tsang region, central Tibet; second quarter of 18th century; woodblock print, ink on paper; printed area: 26 3/16 × 16 1/8 in. (66.5 × 40.9 cm); Tucci Collection of the "Biblioteca IsIAO" – Sala delle collezioni africane e orientali, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale "Vittorio Emanuele II" di Roma; inv. no. 8155/92; photograph by Nancy G. Lin

While spiritually advanced *tulkus* were considered capable of emanating in myriad forms, rebirth lineages highlighted and fixed their most noteworthy past lives. A lineage could emphasize aspects of the *tulku's* personality, physical appearance, abilities, and fields of activity, as well as networks and relations with human and nonhuman beings.<sup>5</sup> The first eleven members of the Panchen rebirth lineage portrayed in the Nartang series appear to have been set during the Fourth Panchen's lifetime.<sup>6</sup> Like other rebirth lineages, his is traced back to the time and place of Buddha

Shakyamuni, with the arhat Subhuti as the Panchen's earliest named preincarnation (fig. 4). Other preincarnations include Manjushriyashas, a mythical Kalki king of Shambhala (fig. 5); Bhaviveka, a distinguished Indic Madhyamika philosopher (fig. 6); Go Lotsawa Khukpa Lhetse (ca. eleventh century), a Tibetan translator and disciple of Atisha (fig. 7); and Sakya Pandita, the eminent monastic scholar whose relations with the Mongol prince Köten (Godan, fl. 1235–1247) set the precedent for preceptor-almsgiver (*choyon*) relations (fig. 8). By appearing in the Panchen's rebirth lineage, such figures resonate with elements for which the Fourth and other Panchens are renowned, including intellectual brilliance, relations with Mongols and other Buddhist patrons outside Tibet, and a predicted future rebirth as a millenarian king of Shambhala who will restore the buddhas' teachings.



Fig. 4 Subhuti (Rabjor), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History



Fig. 5 Manjushriyashas (Jampel Drak), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History



Fig. 6 Bhaviveka (Lekden Je, ca. 500–ca. 578), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History



Fig. 7 Go Lotsawa Khukpa Lhetse (11th century), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History



Fig. 8 Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyeltsen (1182–1251), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History

## SERIAL MODELING AND PROLIFERATION

A golden thangka (*sertang*) portraying the Fourth Panchen as its main subject surrounded by smaller portraits of his ten preincarnations is attributed by handwritten inscription to Choying Gyatso (act. seventeenth century) (fig. 9), a master painter who carried out many artistic commissions on behalf of the Fourth Panchen. According to a later source, Choying Gyatso also designed a series of portraits of the Fourth Panchen's chain of incarnations; these likely served as models for the Nartang xylographic designs

(see all portraits at bottom of this page).<sup>7</sup> His virtuosic work is marked by energetic and variegated displays that feature emotionally expressive and dynamically postured figures. The Nartang designs of the first eleven Panchen lineage members evince these interests, rendering most of the main portrait subjects in a three-quarters pose facing the thangka placed in the center (fig. 10). Even Sakya Pandita (fig. 11) and Yungton Dorje Pel (fig. 12), who face the viewer directly, strike dramatically animated poses.<sup>8</sup>



Fig. 9 Attributed by inscription to Choying Gyatso (act. 17th century); Fourth Panchen Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen (1570–1662), with previous incarnations; Tsang region, central Tibet; mid-17th century; gold thangka; ground mineral pigment on cotton; 27½ × 16 1/8 in (70 × 41 cm); Tashilhunpo Monastery, Shigatse, Tibet; image after Xizang zizhiq wenwu guanli weiyuan hui 2007 [1985], pl. 75



Fig. 10 Sixth Panchen Lobzang Pelden Yeshe (1738–1780), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History



Fig. 11 Sakya Pandita Kunga Gyeltsen (1182–1251), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History



Fig. 12 Yungton Dorje Pel (1284–1365), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History

The initial set of Nartang designs most likely concluded with a stiffer *en face* portrait of the Fifth Panchen placed in the central position for mounted display, with the others radiating outward in an alternating right and left pattern. The set was sponsored by his students, as the inscription notes, and may have been carved either before or after his death in 1737.<sup>9</sup> The next iteration of the Nartang series was produced after the Sixth Panchen's death in Beijing in 1780, borrowing elements of Qing imperial court portraits made during his visit to design his *en face* portrait, and adding a portrait of the Fifth Panchen in three-quarter pose that could be shifted to the outer edge of the



arrangement (fig. 13).<sup>10</sup> The process was repeated once more with the Seventh Panchen Tenpai Nyima in about 1853.



Fig. 13 Fifth Panchen Lobzang Yeshe (1663–1737), one of thirteen thangkas copied from Nartang xylographic designs; Tibet; 19th century; ground mineral pigment on cotton; dimensions vary, painted area of central thangka (Sixth Panchen) 26-7/8 × 16¼ in. (68.3 × 41.2 cm); American Museum of Natural History, New York; cat. nos. 70.2/1216–1228; Courtesy of the Division of Anthropology, American Museum of Natural History

Infinitely reproducible and extendable, the Nartang Panchen series proliferated through copies and adaptations, perpetuating traditions and creating opportunities for media adaptation, display, and diplomatic and karmic relations. Many copies are painted in the Tsangri style, one of the regionally based successors of the new Menri painting tradition that Choying Gyatso founded. The Rubin thangka is a fine example (fig. 2), featuring sinuous pink clouds and distinctively shaded white clouds against a mostly dark blue sky.<sup>11</sup> The Sixth Panchen sent a painted set to the Qing court in 1770, which was adapted into different media, including multiple sets of engravings (*moke*) that outfitted the walls of various sites in Beijing and Rehe (present-day Chengde).<sup>12</sup> Another unusual adaptation of the Nartang Panchen lineage portraits in about 1780 utilized the painting and poetry format of classical Chinese album leaves. In concert with two other albums portraying rebirth lineages of the Third Changkya Rolpai Dorje (1717–1786) and the Qianlong emperor (1711–1799), the Panchen album worked to recall, articulate, and strengthen karmic affinities among these three prominent figures of Inner Asia and China and their wider networks.<sup>13</sup> In 1934 a Chinese Republican government representative gave a set of scrolls based on the Nartang designs, woven at a silk factory in Hangzhou, to the Ninth Panchen during one of his visits to China. This set was displayed at the controversial 1995 enthronement of Gyeltsen Norbu as the Eleventh Panchen at Tashilhunpo, alongside a photographic head shot of the Tenth Panchen.<sup>14</sup>

The Panchen series was but one of numerous important projects issued by the Nartang printing house in the eighteenth century. In 1742 an edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon was completed there, followed in 1747 by xylographic sets of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine of Bodhisattva Legends* (*Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata*) of Kshemendra in thirty-one thangkas, the life of Tsongkhapa in fifteen thangkas, and the sixteen arhats in seven thangkas. These large-scale projects were sponsored by the family of Miwang Polhane

Sonam Tobgye, who ruled central and western Tibet from 1728 to 1750.<sup>15</sup> As their visual authority has only been enhanced through prodigious reproduction, circulation, and adaptation, the appeal of such woodblock prints has endured for patrons, makers, and users who wish to claim or partake in the authority, charisma, and technical and aesthetic mastery these works embody.

## FOOTNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Agnieszka Helman-Ważny, *The Archaeology of Tibetan Books*, Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 36 (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 121–23, 68, fig. 28.

<sup>2</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "On Tulku Lineages," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 38, no. February (2017): 4–6, 14–16.

<sup>3</sup> Because the "Panchen" title was first applied to his *tulku* lineage during his lifetime, Lobzang Chokyi Gyeltsen is numbered as the first Panchen in an alternate system. This essay follows the numeration of Tashilhunpo, which retroactively added the Panchen title to three prior incarnations.

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Fabienne Jagou, "The Panchen Lamas and the Dalai Lamas: A Questionable Master-Disciple Relationship," in *The Dalai Lamas: A Visual History*, ed. Martin Brauen (Chicago: Serindia, 2005), 202–11, fig. 199; Wang Jiapeng 王家鵬, *Gugong Tangka Tudian 故宮唐卡圖典* [Thangka Paintings in the Collection of the Palace Museum] (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2010), pl. 30; David P. Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions*, *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften* 42 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 375, 378–79n853; David Jackson and Janice A. Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials*, 2nd ed. (London: Serindia, 1988), 71–73.

<sup>5</sup> José Ignacio Cabezón, "On Tulku Lineages," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines* 38, no. February (2017): 9–11; Nancy G. Lin, "Recounting the Fifth Dalai Lama's Rebirth Lineage," *Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines*, no. 38 (February) (2017): 144–45; Wen-shing Chou and Nancy G. Lin, "Karmic Affinities: Rethinking Relations among Tibetan Lamas and the Qing Emperor,"

in *Water Moon Reflections: Essays in Honor of Patricia Berger*, ed. Ellen Huang et al. (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2021).

<sup>6</sup> Blo bzang chos kyi rgyal mtshan and Panchen IV, *Paṅ Chen Blo Bzang Chos Kyi Rgyal Mtshan Gyi Gsung Rtsom*, 5 vols. (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2009), 1:337–39; cf. 1:428–59. <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW1PD177557>. The lineage members from Khedrubje Ge to Wensapa Lobzang Dondrub may have been recognized as a chain of incarnations before the Fourth Panchen's lifetime; see Peter Schwieger, *The Dalai Lama and the Emperor of Tibet: A Political History of the Tibetan Institution of Reincarnation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 24.

<sup>7</sup> David P. Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions*, *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften* 42 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 233–34 pl. 45.

<sup>8</sup> Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 172–76.

<sup>9</sup> David P. Jackson, *A History of Tibetan Painting: The Great Tibetan Painters and Their Traditions*, *Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften Philosophisch-Historische Klasse Denkschriften* 42 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 1996), 234–43; cf. Giuseppe Tucci, *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, 3 vols. (Reprint, Bangkok: SDI Publications, 1949) 1999, 2:416.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), pl. 16; figs. 57, 60; 176–77.

<sup>11</sup> David P. Jackson, *The Place of Provenance: Regional Styles in Tibetan Painting*, Exhibition catalog, Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 4 (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2012), 62-64, [https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/place\\_of\\_provenance\\_96](https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/place_of_provenance_96).

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Berger, "Reincarnation in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The Career of the Narthang Panchen Lama Portraits," in *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Monica Esposito, vol. 2, *Études thématiques* 22, 2008, 736; Wen-shing Chou, *Mount Wutai: Visions of a Sacred Buddhist Mountain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 82, 95–96; Wang Jiapeng 王家鵬, *Gugong Tangka Tudian 故宮唐卡圖典* [Thangka Paintings in the Collection of the Palace Museum] (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2010), pls. 21–30.

<sup>13</sup> Wen-shing Chou, *Mount Wutai: Visions of a Sacred Buddhist Mountain* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2018), 94–119; Wen-shing Chou and Nancy G. Lin, "Karmic Affinities: Rethinking Relations among Tibetan Lamas and the Qing Emperor," in *Water Moon Reflections: Essays in Honor of Patricia Berger*, ed. Ellen Huang et al. (Berkeley: Institute of East Asian Studies, 2021).

<sup>14</sup> Patricia Berger, "Reincarnation in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction: The Career of the Narthang Panchen Lama Portraits," in *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, ed. Monica Esposito, vol. 2, *Études thématiques* 22, 2008, 738–45.

<sup>15</sup> Nancy G. Lin, "Adapting the Buddha's Biographies: A Cultural History of the Wish-Fulfilling Vine in Tibet, Seventeenth to Eighteenth Centuries" (PhD diss., Berkeley, University of California, 2011), 68–7

## FURTHER READING

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