TIBETAN BUDDHISM AT THE QING COURT

WEN-SHING CHOU

Fig. 1 The Qianlong Emperor as Manjushri-Chakravartin; Beijing; Qianlong period (1736–1795), mid-18th century; thangka, color on silk; 44-3/4 × 25-5/16 in. (113.7 × 64.3 cm); Freer Gallery of Art, National Museum of Asian Art, Smithsonian Institutions; F2000.4; photograph courtesy Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC

THE QIANLONG EMPEROR AS MANJUSHRI-CHAKRAVARTIN

Imperial workshop in Beijing, China, with face by Giuseppe Castiglione
mid-18th century

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SUMMARY

Why did an Italian Jesuit paint the portrait of an emperor on the body of the bodhisattva Manjushri? The emperors of the Qing dynasty ruled a vast multiethnic empire that encompassed Manchus, Chinese, Mongols, and Tibetans, and even employed European specialists at court. Art historian Wen-shing Chou examines how the Qianlong emperor created the unprecedented visual articulations of religious kingship to project himself and the Manchu imperial line as divine bodhisattva rulers at the center of the Buddhist cosmos.

This painting at the Freer Gallery of Art depicts the Qianlong emperor (1711–1799) of the Manchu Qing dynasty (1644–1912) as a kingly embodiment of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom Manjushri at the center of an Indo-Tibetan Buddhist cosmos. Presented in the format of a thangka, a traditional Tibetan-style religious hanging scroll, the painting is an unprecedented visual articulation of religious kingship. The Manchus were a people from northeast Asia who conquered China from the north side of the Great Wall. When they established the Qing dynasty, they also adopted Tibetan Buddhism as means of uniting diverse Mongol and Tibetan groups and incorporating them into their expanding empire. Qianlong was an avid supporter and practitioner of Tibetan Buddhism. He oversaw the creation of a vast array of Tibetan Buddhist art and architecture. These works were made as gifts to high lamas and for imperial monasteries (fig. 2), the emperor's private domains (fig. 3), and the interiors of his own mausoleum (fig. 4).[1] Among them, the portrait thangka stands as the most direct and inventive expression of Qianlong's extraordinary engagement with Tibetan Buddhism and his court's creative adaptation of Tibetan Buddhist visual and material culture.

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Fig. 2 View of Putuo Zongcheng Temple; Chengde, China; 1767–1771; photograph by Gisling, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

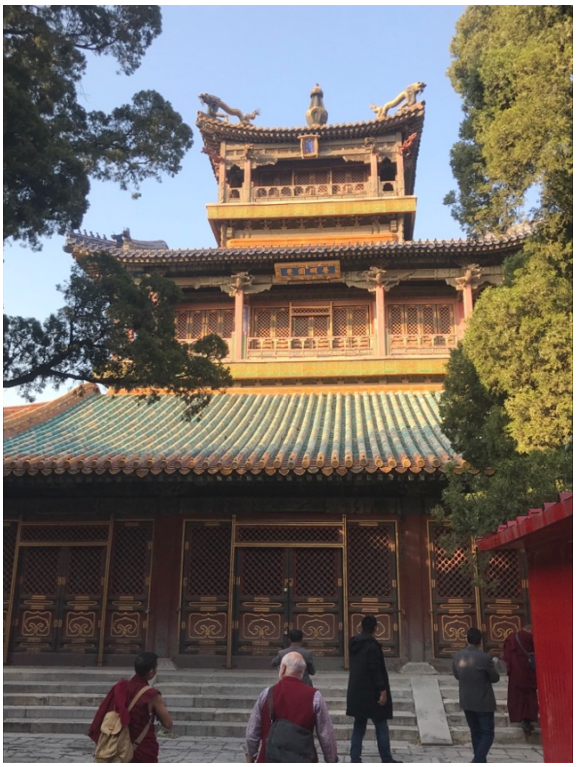

Fig. 3 Pavilion of Raining Flowers (Yuhua Ge 雨花閣); Beijing, Qing dynasty; photograph by Karl Debreczeny, 2018

Fig. 4 Stone relief on a wall of Qianlong's underground tomb, Yuling 裕陵 Mausoleum, Eastern Tombs; photograph by R. Linrothe, 2017

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MAJOR FIGURES AND THEMES

Qianlong appears in the center wearing monk's robes and the folded hat of a Tibetan Buddhist patriarch. Seated on the diamond throne of a high lama atop a lotus blossom rising from a pond, he raises his right hand in the teaching gesture (*vitarka* mudra), while holding in his left palm a jeweled wheel of law, the Indic emblem of a universal ruler chakravartin. He also carries in his hands the stems of two flanking lotus blossoms, above which rest a sword and a book—attributes of Manjushri. The figure presides over a pantheon of 108 figures, each labeled with gold-lettered Tibetan inscription, in a paradisiacal landscape allusive of Mount Wutai, the earthly abode of Manjushri in northern China. A verse inscription above the stem of the lotus below the throne invokes Qianlong's layered associations with monastic authority, Manjushri, and universal rulership. It reads:

> Sharp-witted Manjushri, king of men,
> Playful, unexcelled, great dharma king,
> On the diamond seat, feet firm.
> May your wishes spontaneously meet good fortune![2]

In contrast to the Tibetan Buddhist religious language and iconography that dictate most of the composition, Qianlong's face is rendered in an empirically descriptive manner. This subdued form of Baroque realism is attributed to the emperor's favorite court painter, the Milanese Jesuit lay brother Giuseppe Castiglione (1688–1766). Likely a collaboration between lama painters of the palace workshops and the Jesuit painter, the thangka exemplifies the hybridized nature of Qing imperial production and the cultural pluralism of the Pan-Asian empire.[3]

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The pantheon of figures surrounding Qianlong represents the major teachings and practices under the framework of Gelukpa Buddhism—the dominant religious institution in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Tibet and Mongolia. Immediately surrounding Qianlong is a garland of nineteen eminent Indian and Tibetan masters of important transmission lineages. Directly above Qianlong, in a separate roundel, is the emperor's root teacher (Tibetan: *tsawai lama*; Sanskrit: *guru*; or main spiritual teacher), the Imperial Preceptor Changkya Rolpai Dorje (1717–1786), shown with a bell and vajra, iconographic attributes of his personal meditation deity Chakrasamvara. Rolpai Dorje was a Tibetan Buddhist polymath of ethnic Monguor origin who spent his career in the service of Qianlong.[4] As the most important reincarnate lama at the Manchu court, he played a decisive role in Qing policies toward Tibet and Mongolia, as well as in the design, translation, and production of Buddhist scriptures, art, and architecture at the Qing court. Rolpai Dorje is known to have given Qianlong initiation into many tantric teachings, which are also represented in the thangka. Tutelary deities of major Gelukpa practices, along with buddhas, bodhisattvas, mahasiddhas, disciples, and protector deities associated with major Gelukpa lineages, populate the rainbow and cloud roundels above, while the assemblies below the throne include various bodhisattvas and wrathful deities for offering protection.

RELATED OBJECTS AND SOURCE IMAGERIES

The thangka is one of seven extant paintings on silk of the same subject matter in a variety of symmetrical compositions.[5] Most of them were originally hung in major imperial monasteries in and around the Qing court. But similar thangkas were known to have been sent as gifts to Tibetan Buddhist hierarchs. These thangkas therefore played a crucial role in communicating Qianlong's religio-political identity to his Tibetan and Mongol constituents. One of the earliest thangkas was likely sent to Lhasa

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in 1757 during a Qing imperial mission to oversee the selection of the reincarnation of the recently deceased Seventh Dalai Lama (1708–1757) (fig. 5). According to records, thousands of monks and laymen came to the gathering during which the image of Qianlong was unveiled.[6] A decree from Qianlong explicitly instructed that the image serve as his surrogate for visiting the sacred icons of Tibet *and* for receiving veneration from the lay and monastic communities. Qianlong's decree from 1757 reads:

> Tibet has been the pure and clear sacred land of my utmost aspiration. However, the journey is long, preventing me from visiting in person. Today I send my portrait with Changkya, which is just like my paying homage to the Jowo Buddha in person. Therefore, do not prevent any lay or official ministers who wish to admire the portrait. [I use this] to display my pious devotion to the Jowo Sakyamuni Buddha and my sincere intention to spread the teachings of the dharma.[7]

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Fig. 5. Qianlong as Manjushri-Chakravartin (brought to Lhasa in 1757–1758 at the death of the Seventh Dalai Lama) in front a Qing imperial tablet (brought in 1722 during the enthronement of the Seventh Dalai Lama); Hall of Victory over Three Realms, Red Palace of the Potala, Lhasa, Tibet; image after Henss 2014, vol. 1, fig. 184

Sure enough, the thangka later became an important object of ritual veneration in the Hall of Victory over Three Realms in the Potala Palace, home of the Dalai Lamas and seat of the Tibetan government, where it remains today.[8] It also came to serve as a substitute for the Qing emperors' presence during the ritual of the Golden Urn, a ceremony Qianlong had implemented for the selection of reincarnate lamas.[9]

An eighth thangka (fig. 6), now in the collection of the Palace Museum, Beijing, is virtually identical in composition to two of the extant thangkas of Qianlong, but instead

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features Rolpai Dorje at the center, with his iconographic attributes of bell and vajra, and holding a long-life vase. It remains unclear if this was a singular experiment or a more established convention. What is palpable is a fluid and playful interchangeability between the lama and the disciple, alternately placed in the center of a deity pantheon. In addition, at least nine three-dimensional shrine panels of varying sizes and composition also feature a sculptural image of Qianlong as an ordained monk and Manjushri-Chakravartin at the center of a niched pantheon (fig. 7). The panels are still preserved from the inner palaces of the Forbidden City for which they were specifically designed. Given the prominence of his role in all aspects of Tibetan art and ritual, Rolpai Dorje was most likely also behind the design of these thangkas and shrine panels.

Fig. 6 Changkya Rolpai Dorje; China; 18th century; ink and colors on silk; 49 5/8 × 27 in. (126 × 70 cm); Palace Museum, Beijing; gu 6655; image courtesy Palace Museum

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Fig. 7 Manjughosha Emperor, niched hanging shrine panel, Eastern Side Hall, Pavilion of Raining Flowers, Palace Museum, Beijing; image courtesy Palace Museum

Extant thangkas and shrine panels reflect borrowings from an array of Buddhist imageries that would have been recognizable and meaningful to their viewers. An apparent inspiration for the composition and iconography is the Refuge Field (*tsok zhing*) paintings of the Gelukpa tradition (fig. 8), the only type of contemporaneous Tibetan Buddhist imagery that approaches the comprehensive and pluralistic display of the Qianlong images.[10] A Refuge Field painting pictorializes what the practitioner is asked to generate and invite to their world through a practice of meditative visualization (*sadhana*) in a liturgy that pays homage to their teachers (Sanskrit: *guru puja*; Tibetan: *lama chopa*), the most universally practiced liturgy for every Gelukpa practitioner. The painting thus depicts a main teacher surrounded by other teachers, deities, and protectors.[11] Not only does the painting function as a support for the practice of meditative visualization and for the longer liturgy, but it also serves as the

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most defining representation for the universal authority of Gelukpa Buddhism at the time.[12] The portrayal of Qianlong as an ordained Gelukpa patriarch invokes the Gelukpa Refuge Field painting's central figure Tsongkhapa (1357–1419), the fourteenth-century founder of the Gelukpa school of Tibetan Buddhism, while many of the subsidiary figures also overlap. By replacing Tsongkhapa, who was also known as an emanation of Manjushri, Qianlong is thus positioned as the source and center of Gelukpa teachings and genealogies. Borrowing the form and compositional logic of Refuge Field paintings, the Qianlong thangkas harnessed the power and authority of a Tibetan liturgical object to advance a new Qing-centered religious orthodoxy. Other pictorial sources include liturgically prescribed icons and relics, deity mandalas, and paintings of teaching transmission and incarnation lineages, as well as Buddhist paradises and cosmos. The many layers of references point to the creativity and resourcefulness with which the Qing court artists created images of the Manjushri-Chakravartin emperor.

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Fig. 8 Geluk Refuge Field with Tsongkhapa; central Tibet; ca. late 18th–early 19th century; pigments on cloth; 40 × 26½ in. (101.6 × 67.3 cm); Rubin Museum of Art; Gift of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation; F1997.41.7 (HAR 571)

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FOOTNOTES

[1] For a comprehensive study of Qianlong's mausoleum, which is entirely covered in relief carvings of Sanskrit dharanis, or protective incantations, see Françoise Wang-Toutain, *Le décor de la tombe de Qianlong (r. 1735–1796): Un empereur mandchou et le bouddhisme tibétain* (Paris: Françoise Wang-Toutain, 2017).

[2] *'jam dpal rnon po mi'i rje bor/ rol pa'i bdag chen chos kyi rgyal/ rdo rje khri la zhabs brtan cing/ bzhed don lhun grub skal ba bzang//*

[3] On Qing imperial production, see Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 55. On Qing multilingualism and multiculturalism, see James Hevia, *Cherishing Men from Afar: Qing Guest Ritual and the Macartney Embassy of 1793* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995); Evelyn Rawski, *The Last Emperors: A Social History of the Qing Imperial Institutions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Crossley 1999; Mark Elliott, *The Manchu Way: The Eight Banners and Ethnic Identity in Late Imperial China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001).

[4] See Xiangyun Wang, "Tibetan Buddhism at the Court of Qing" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995); Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003).

[5] Ishihama has classified the extant seven thangkas into three major compositional types as a way to account for their similarity and variation; Yumiko Ishihama, *Shinchō to Chibetto Bukkyō: Bosatsuō to Natta Kenryūtei* 清朝とチベット仏教: 菩薩王となった乾隆帝 [The Qing dynasty and the Tibetan Buddhist world] (Tokyo: Waseda daigaku shuppanbu, 2011), 209. For published images of extant thangkas, see Christopher

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Bruckner, ed., Chinese Imperial Patronage: Treasures from Temples and Palaces, Exhibition catalog (London: Christopher Bruckner Asian Art Gallery, 1998).

[6] Xiangyun Wang, "Tibetan Buddhism at the Court of Qing" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 1995), 228.

[7] Zhongguo Zangxue yanjiu zhongxin 中国藏学研究中心, ed., *Yuan yilai Xizang difang yu zhongyang zhengfu guanxi dang'an shiliao huibian* ***元以来西藏地方与中央政府关系档案史料汇编,*** vol. 5 (Beijing: Zhongguo zangxue chubanshe, 1994), 264.

[8] See De mo 08 Ngag dbang thub bstan 'jigs med rgya mtsho, *'Jam dpal rgya mtsho'i rnam thar* [Life of the Eighth Dalai Lama, Jampel Gyatso] (Bras spungs, Lhasa: Dga' ldan pho brang, 1811), http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/W2CZ7847, 269a:2–269b:3; partially cited in Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 140. The Eighth Demo khutugtu served as a regent in Tibet between 1810 and 1819. For specific occasions in the nineteenth century when the portrait thangka was the object of ritual devotion, see Michael Henss, "The Bodhisattva-Emperor: Tibeto-Chinese Portraits of Sacred and Secular Rule in the Qing Dynasty. Pt. 1," *Oriental Art* 47, no. 3 (2001): 6.

[9] For a recent study of the Golden Urn, see Max Oidtmann, *Forging the Golden Urn: The Qing Empire and the Politics of Reincarnation in Tibet* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018).

[10] Michael Henss, "The Bodhisattva-Emperor: Tibeto-Chinese Portraits of Sacred and Secular Rule in the Qing Dynasty. Pt. 1," *Oriental Art* 47, no. 3 (2001): 2–4; Patricia Berger, *Empire of Emptiness: Buddhist Art and Political Authority in Qing China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2003), 60; Luo Wenhua 罗文华, *Longpao Yu Jiasha: Qinggong*

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Zangchuan Fojiao Wenhua Kaocha 龙袍与袈裟: 清宫藏传佛教文化考察 [Dragon Robes and Kasaya: An Investigation of Tibetan Buddhist Culture at the Qing Court (Beijing: Zijincheng chubanshe, 2005), 539–44; Yumiko Ishihama, *Shinchō to Chibetto Bukkyō: Bosatsuō to Natta Kenryūtei* 清朝とチベット仏教: 菩薩王となった乾隆帝 [The Qing dynasty and the Tibetan Buddhist world] (Tokyo: Waseda daigaku shuppanbu, 2011), 215–18.

[11] Roger R. Jackson, "The Tibetan Tshogs Zhing (Field of Assembly): General Notes on Its Function, Structure, and Contents," *Asian Philosophy* 2, no. 2 (1992): 159.

[12] Roger R. Jackson, *Mind Seeing Mind: Mahāmudrā and the Geluk Tradition of Tibetan Buddhism* (Somerville, MA: Wisdom, 2019), 219–26.

FURTHER READING

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ABOUT PROJECT HIMALAYAN ART AND THE RUBIN MUSEUM

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