

REEXAMINING KHYENTSE CHENMO AND HIS PAINTING TRADITION

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Fig. 1 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Detail of Morality Tale of Vidura from chapter 76 in the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine* (*Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata*); southern mural painting of the original Main Assembly Hall, ground floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gangto Village, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Andrew Quintman, 2011

MURALS OF GONGKAR CHODE

Gongkar Chode Monastery, Lhoka, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China)
1464–1476

SUMMARY

Early Tibetan Buddhist art was largely derived from outside sources: India, Nepal, China, and Central Asia. According to traditional Tibetan histories, in the fifteenth century two artists named Khyentse Chenmo and Menla Dondrup created the first indigenous Tibetan styles, named after Tibetan artists and artistic centers. However, few works by these masters survive, and even the dates of their lives are debated. Artist and scholar Tsechang Penba Wangdu examines the murals of Gongkar Chode monastery, a rare example of works painted by the great founding artist Khyentse Chenmo himself.

At the beginning of the fifteenth century, two new distinctive artistic traditions of Tibetan painting and sculpture arose in central Tibet: the Khyentse and Menla traditions.¹ The artist Khyentse Chenmo Genyen Nampar Gyelwa established the Khyentse tradition, which is named after him, including the Khyentse painting style (or Khyenri), exemplified by his surviving murals at Gongkar Chode Monastery (fig. 2).



Fig. 2 Exterior of Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gangto Village, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu

Founded in 1464 by a master of the Sakya tradition, Kunga Namgyel (1432–1496), Gongkar Chode, or Gongkar Dorjeden, is located about thirty-seven miles (sixty kilometers) south of Lhasa. Khyentse Chenmo was responsible for creating paintings and sculptures throughout the monastery, including the ground, middle, and upper floors of the main temple, which took him twelve years, from 1464 to 1476.

OVERVIEW OF THE MURALS

Ground floor: The main building has a total area of about 9,040 square feet (840 square meters), with each higher floor smaller than the one below it.² In the Main Assembly Hall, the walls are painted with the one hundred deeds of the Buddha, illustrating the popular narratives as told in the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine (Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata)* (figs. 1, 3 and 4). In the Great Protector Chapel, paintings depict charnel grounds, a common setting for the wrathful deities who are venerated there (fig. 5).



Fig. 3 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Main image of Buddha Shakyamuni from chapters 71–72 in the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine (Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata)*; southern mural painting of the original Main Assembly Hall, ground floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gangto Village, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu, 2018



Fig. 4 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Right narrative detail of Main image of Buddha Shakyamuni from chapters 71–72 in the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine (Bodhisattvavadanakalpalata)*; southern mural painting of the original Main Assembly Hall, ground floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gangto Village, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu, 2018



Fig. 5 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Charnel ground scene, Great Protector Chapel (Vajrabhairava/Yamantaka Chapel), ground floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gangto Village, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu, 2018

The wall paintings of the Inner Sanctum feature the Buddhas of the Three Times, including Kashyapa and seven successive buddhas. Flanking the entrance to the Inner Sanctum on the right are the Three White Ones (lay masters) of the Sakya school surrounded by lineage masters of the Lamdre teachings (fig. 6), and on the left side are the Three Red Ones (ordained

masters)—Sakya Pandita (1182–1251), Pakpa Rinpoche (1235–1280), and Pelden Lama Dampa (1312–1375).

The inner Circumambulation Corridor depicts the twelve great deeds of the Buddha (fig. 7), and the Great Tantric Chapel, or Vajrabhairava Chapel, includes scary scenes of charnel grounds.



Fig. 6 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Detail showing Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158), one of the White-Clad Masters of Sakya; left wall, entrance to Inner Sanctum, ground floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu



Fig. 7 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Detail of Twelve Deeds of the Buddha, showing Queen Mayadevi's Carriage; Circumambulation Corridor, ground floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Karl Debreczeny

Middle floor: The Protector Chapel features images of the great Sakya master Sachen Kunga Nyingpo (1092–1158) and the Indian mahasiddha Virupa, as well as charnel-ground scenes (fig. 8), with the *yaksha* Vaishravana and his Eight Horsemen (figs. 9 and 10).



Fig. 8 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Charnel Ground Scenes; east wall of the Upper Protector Chapel, middle floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu



Fig. 9 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Detail of Vaishravana and His Eight Horsemen; Upper Protector Chapel, middle floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photographs by Tsechang Penba Wangdu



Fig. 10 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Detail of Vaishravana and His Eight Horsemen; Upper Protector Chapel, middle floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photographs by Tsechang Penba Wangdu

The highest tantric deities, including the nine deities of Hevajra, are painted in the Hevajra Chapel (fig. 11 and 12). The Lamdre Chapel has wall paintings of Vajradhatu, while the Vajradhatu Chapel features Maitreya and 996 other bodhisattvas.



Fig. 11 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Hevajra; northern mural painting in Hevajra Chapel, middle floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu, 2018



Fig. 12 Khyentse Chenmo (act. 15th century); Vajrabhairava Solitary of Ra Lotsawa Tradition; western mural painting in Hevajra Chapel, middle floor, Gongkar Chode Monastery, Gongkar County, Lhokha, U region, central Tibet (present-day TAR, China); ca. 1464–1476; photograph by Tsechang Penba Wangdu, 2018

Upper floor: On the roof, in the Guru Chapel, are paintings depicting the lineage masters of the Lamdre teachings, which are central to the Sakya tradition of Tibetan Buddhism.

NEW EVIDENCE ON THE LIFE OF THE ARTIST KHYENTSE CHENMO

Details about Khyentse Chenmo's life are sparse. Most scholars believe he was born around the third decade of the fifteenth century.³ Yet an important source recently came to light, *A Note of the Uncommon Biography of Lhatsun Rinchen Gyatso* by Rinchen Tsultrim (ca. fifteenth century),⁴ which is one of the earliest records mentioning Khyentse. According to this text, in 1428 Drongtse Chode Lhatsun Rinchen Gyatso constructed Genden Riwo Tarpa Ling,⁵ a monastery consecrated by his famous teacher of the Geluk tradition Khedrubje Rinpoche (1385–1438) and Baso Chokyi Gyeltsen (1402–1473) in 1432. During this time, over thirty artists trained in the Khyentse tradition and Tibetan painters trained in Nepalese-style painting (Beri) painted the murals of the Assembly Hall and the temples. The murals of the Reconciliatory Stupa, designed by Lhatsun himself, were also painted according to the Khyentse artistic tradition. The text also states that Menla Dondrub was learning Nepalese-style painting in Nenyang Monastery while the painting of the main temple mural was underway. Lhatsun suggested to Menla that it would be of great benefit to the Buddhist doctrine and all sentient beings to create a new tradition of Mentangpa painting (also known as Menri) by analyzing the Nepalese style and Chinese tradition, adopting the best practices from the two traditions, and relying mainly on the proportion system used for Chakrasamvara and Kalachakra tantras.

It is clear from this narrative that the Khyentse tradition existed before the Menla tradition was founded, a view also expressed by the Thirteenth Karmapa (1733–1797). It further suggests that Khyentse Chenmo was born at the beginning of the fifteenth century. In light of this new evidence, we must also reevaluate other commonly held beliefs about the artist, such as that Khyentse Chenmo, together with Menla and his students, carried out the painting of Yangpachen Monastery in 1505.⁶ That was likely accomplished by followers of the Khyentse tradition, not Khyentse Chenmo himself.⁷

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE KHYENTSE PAINTING TRADITION

Most of what we know about Khyentse Chenmo's work comes from his surviving wall paintings at Gongkar Chode. The main characteristic of the Khyentse tradition, as pointed out by the Fifth Dalai Lama (1617–1682), is that it excels in the depiction of wrathful deities, whereas the Menla tradition excels in peaceful deities. After many trips to Gongkar Chode, I have perceived another characteristic of the Khyentse tradition: a strong sense of realism. For example, in the Assembly Hall, a mural section depicting the story of Vidura, as told in the seventy-sixth chapter of the *Wish-Fulfilling Vine*, is expressed through realistic impressions that mimic everyday life (fig. 1). As one can see from the main image here, the mural depicts humans, tigers, crocodiles, crows, insects, and other animals inflicting harm on a buffalo. The onlookers are crying; some point their fingers, while others are conversing.

In the Nepalese style, the bodies of Buddhist masters usually include a halo and body nimbus, but in the Khyentse tradition, there is a halo but no body nimbus. The face shapes, body types, and individual appearances are distinct and exquisitely represented. For instance, the physical characteristics of the root masters of the Lamdre teachings, flanking the entrance to the Inner Sanctum, are painted with such liveliness that they give the impression they are about to speak.

The paintings of charnel ground scenes in both the Protector Chapel (fig. 8) and in the Vajrabhairava Chapel (fig. 5) evoke the impression of being immersed in the charnel grounds. The appearance of scenes of figures eating human flesh is akin to depictions of otherworldly beings in Western films about alien planets. The paintings are realistic beyond expectation.

FIGURAL PROPORTIONS OF THE KHYENTSE TRADITION

The proportions of figures are determined by rules of measurement, or iconometry, as outlined in religious texts. These proportions are commonly expressed visually in artist manuals as iconometric grids. It is commonly assumed that the proportional measurements of the Khyentse and Menla traditions are the same. Yet when I examined the wall paintings at Gongkar Chode, I noticed the figures appear shorter than in the Menla tradition. My research into ancient iconometric texts revealed clear differences.

Khyentse's measurements closely match the iconometric guide written by Tsamo Rongpa Sonam Woser, a disciple of Drogon Chogyel Pakpa (1235–1280), *Source of Excellent Qualities: A Treatise on Proportions for Making Three Representations and Their Abodes*, and Bodong Tamche Khyenpa's (1376–1451) manual, *Entrance for the Experts*.⁸ These two iconometry manuals were the popular standards during Khyentse and Menla's time. The basic unit of measure in this system of iconometry is one *zbel*.⁹ This system of proportions has three main proportional classes or figural types; it gives a measurement of nine *zbel* for the body of a peaceful deity (fig. 3), six *zbel* for a fierce deity (fig. 12), and eight *zbel* for a semi-wrathful deity (fig. 11).

Menla's measurements are different in both the categorization of figures and their sizes. Generally speaking, Menla figures follow ten classifications of measurement, as described in his text, *The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel*.¹⁰ Space does not allow a detailed explanation here, but, for example, the first four classes of figures in Menla's system include peaceful deities such as buddhas and bodhisattvas (ten *zbel*) and wrathful figures (eight *zbel*). Both are taller than the system Khyentse followed. The Fifth Dalai Lama's regent, Desi Sanggye Gyatso (1653–1705), later standardized all the traditions of painting proportions as part of a larger effort to systematize different fields of knowledge.¹¹

Khyentse Chenmo's founding of the Khyentse tradition ended the spread of Nepalese and Indian painting traditions in Tibet and started a new direction of art traditions with Tibetan characteristics. Today it is rare to see his work; Gongkar Chode is the only monastery that preserves wall paintings by his hand. His paintings represent a unique style among the Tibetan traditions. The qualities that distinguish him from other artists include his ability to capture the nature and character of his subject matter, his realism, his great attention to detail, particularly in paintings of wild animals and birds, and the striking expression of wrathfulness in fierce deities. Upon seeing Khyentse Chenmo's painting of Vajrabhairava at Gongkar (fig. 12), the famous Western Tibetologist Giuseppe Tucci (1894–1984) was overwhelmed with fear, which demonstrates the artistic quality and evocative power of Khyentse's work.

FOOTNOTES

¹ Editor's note: this essay was edited and shortened from its original length and more specialized scope. For more images of Gongkar Chode, see Luo Wenhua 罗文华 and Gesang Qupei 格桑曲培, *Gongga Qudesi bihua: Zangchuan fojiao meishu shi de licheng bei 贡嘎曲德寺壁画: 藏传佛教美术史的里程碑* (Beijing: Gugong chubanshe, 2015).

² This calculation of area is based on the monastery's 130 large pillars. In this monastery the two-pillar size is about 9 feet, 6 inches, to 11 feet, 2 inches, in width (2.92–3.4 meters), and 8 feet, 9 inches, to 11 feet, 3 inches, in length (2.68–3.43 meters).

³ See, for instance, 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), 103; Tsechang Penba Wangdu (brtse byang spen pa dbang 'dus), "Gong dkar rdo rje gdan gyi ldebs bris kyi don snying dang da lta'i gnas babs skor la rags tsam gleng ba," *Bod ljongs zhib 'jug* 94, no. 2 (2005): 105–9; Yu Xiaodong 于小冬, *Zang Chuan Fojiao Huihua Shi 藏传佛教绘画史* [History of Tibetan Buddhist Paintings] (Nanjing: Jiangsu meishu chubanshe, 2006), 232; Yu Xiaodong 于小冬, *Xizang Huihua Fengge Shi 西藏绘画风格史* [History of Tibetan Painting Styles], Part 2 (Tianjin: Tianjin meishu chubanshe, 2021), 700.

⁴ Rin chen tshul khriims, "Lha Btsun Rin Chen Rgya Mtsho'i Rnam Thar Thun Mong Ma Yin Pa Zin Bris Su Btab Pa Bzhugs so [A Note of the Uncommon Biography of Lhatsun Rinchen Gyatso]" (Manuscript, ca. 15th century).

⁵ Geden Riwo Tarpa Ling, or Drongtse Chode Tarpa Ling, is in Drongtse Township, Gyantse county, Shigatse.

⁶ *Dpa' bo gtsug lag phreng ba, Dam Pa'i Chos Kyi 'khor Lo Bsgyur Ba Rnams Kyi Byung Pa Gsar Bar Byed Pa Mkhas Pa'i Dga Ston* [Scholar's Feast of Religious History] (Beijing: Mi rigs dpe skrun khang, 1986), <http://purl.bdrc.io/resource/MW7499>, 1148.

⁷ Khyentsewa. The ending *pa/wa* added to a place or person's name can mean a person from a region, or the follower of a tradition.

⁸ Tsa mo rong pa bsod nams 'od zer, "Rten Gsum Bzhugs Gnas Dang Bcas Pa'i Bsgrub Tshul Yon Ten 'byung Gnas [Source of Excellent Qualities: A Treatise on Proportions for Making Three Representations and Their Abodes]" (Manuscript, 14th century), 14th century, 30–35; Bo dong paN chen phyogs las rnam rgyal (bo dong thams cad mkhyen pa), "Mkhas Pa 'jug Pa'i Bzo Rig Sku Gsung Thugs Kyi Bzhengs Tshul Bzhugs so [Entrance for the Experts in Crafting Art: The Way of Constructing Three Representations of Body, Speech, and Mind (of Tatagathas)]," in *The Collected Works of Bo-Doñ Pañ-Chen Phyogs-Las-Rnam-Rgyal*, vol. 9 (New Delhi: Tibet House, 1981), 9:256–60.

⁹ *Zhel* (Tibetan: zhal tshad), literally means "face measure," which in the system Khyentse followed can be further divided into twelve sor ("finger measure"), a smaller unit of measure.

¹⁰ Sman bla don grub, "Dde Bar Gshegs Pa'i Sku Gzugs Kyi Tshad Kyi Rab Tu Byed Pa Yid Bzhin nor Bu Zhes Bya Ba Bzhugs so [The Wish-Fulfilling Jewel: A Treatise on Canonical Proportions of Tathāgatas] 6 (Folio), Woodblock Print" (Lhasa: Zhol par khang, 1944).

¹¹ Sde srid sangs rgyas rgya mtsho, *Bai DUrya g.Ya' Sel (Baidūrya Dkar Po Las Dris Lan 'khrul Snang g.Ya' Sel)* [Removal of the Tarnish of Deluded Appearances: Questions and Answers Arising from the White Beryl], vol. 2, 2 vols. (Beijing: Krung go'i bod rig pa dpe skrun khang, 2002). See also Christoph Cüppers, Leonard Kuijp, and Ulrich Pagel, "Handbook of Tibetan Iconometry: A Guide to the Arts of the 17th Century," in *Introduction in Chinese by Dobis Tsering Gyal. Brill's Tibetan Studies Library 16/4* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

FURTHER READING

Jackson, David P. 2016. *A Revolutionary Artist of Tibet: Khyentse Chenmo of Gongkar*, 3–22; 67–80; 83–119. Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 6. New York: Rubin Museum of Art. https://issuu.com/rmanyc/docs/a_revolutionary_artist_96.

Tsechang Penba Wangdu. 2010. “Gong dkar sgang stod mkhyen brtse chen mo dge bsnyen rnam par rgyal ba dang mkhyenlugs kyi khyad chos skor rags tsam gleng ba.” *Journal of Tibet University* 4, 112–17. Translated by David P. Jackson as “A Recent Introduction of Khyentse Chenmo and His Art,” in *A Revolutionary Artist of Tibet: Khyentse Chenmo of Gongkar*, edited by David P. Jackson, 67–80. Masterworks of Tibetan Painting Series 6. New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 201

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