A Case of Old Menri (*sman ris rnying pa*) in Mustang?

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Among the book covers documented at Namgyal Monastery (rNam rgyal), Mustang, one pair stands out for its complex paintings on the inside. Of these the top cover depicts Śākyamuni flanked by a diverse audience and surrounded by the Buddhas of the Ten Directions (Fig. 1), while the bottom cover has a bodhisattva of the tenth stage at the centre emitting light to all surrounding figures (Fig. 2). As indicated on the short sides, these covers where once made for an *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā*, it is however unclear if the manuscript with it today is original to it, as its illuminations differ somewhat in style.[1]

Of course, using the interior of a book cover for painting means that the paint layer suffers from abrasion when the book is used, I thus assume that the thick varnish giving the entire surface a brownish sheen was applied to protect the paint surface. Unfortunately, it did not protect the top cover adequately, and it has suffered considerably over time. I will, thus, focus predominantly on the bottom cover, as it is better preserved and more informative about the painting's style I want to discuss.

This pair of book covers belongs to a larger group of related covers a student of mine studies in terms of their relationship to each other, their iconographic content, and their cultural and artistic context.

1 The book under concern has been documented in 2015 as 'Book 27' with the support of Jaroslav Poncar, Nawang Tsering Gurung, and Bhirat Thapa. I am deeply grateful to Namgyal Monastery and its abbot, Khenpo Tsewang Rigzin, for supporting the documentation and the subsequent work on it. Unless noted otherwise, all photography is by Jaroslav Poncar and myself. This study is an outcome of an AHRC-funded research project on Tibetan Buddhist Monastery Collections Today (AH/N00681X/1).

But pinning down the latter on the basis of the published material has proven extremely difficult for a number of reasons. Among all the covers, this is the only one with polychrome painting, while all others are painted in gold relief on gold against a red ground. Most features of the covers hint towards a late fifteenth or early sixteenth century date, but there is no direct comparison for the main features of the paintings, such as the prominent and distinctive vegetal frames. In addition, some details in the depictions on the pair of covers focused on here, in particular the multi-coloured rim around some of the clouds, are only known from much later paintings.

Unfortunately, the two-line inscription along the bottom edge of the bottom cover (Fig. 2) is not of much help either, as it is only partially legible due to its cover with varnish and grime. It does, however, identify the likely painter of the covers, a certain Shérap Penjor (Shes rab dpal 'byor),[2] who unfortunately does not appear to be known from elsewhere.

While I did not succeed in finding a direct comparison for the paintings, there is a small group of works that may not only enable to resolve the contradictions observed in the style of the covers, but potentially also fill a larger gap in our knowledge of the evolvement of Tibetan painting traditions, which we largely owe to the pioneering work of David Jackson. Thereby, I have to rely purely on comparisons of motives and minor stylistic features, and have to read them within the broader historical context that can be established on the basis of these comparisons. While this methodology is almost diametrically opposed to that employed by David, I hope it is nevertheless a fitting tribute to his groundbreaking work.[3]

Distinctive Features

In the bottom cover, a heavily bejewelled and garmented bodhisattva sits in meditation on a lotus, the fleshy lobed petals of which derive from the peony (Fig. 3). He is framed by plants with large lobed leaves

2 The relevant text passage reads: *pir 'dzin ri mo mkhas pa'i mchog/ sngon med she+s rab dpal 'byoro//.*

3 I am particularly pleased that the topic of this tribute not only contributes to David's work on Tibetan painting, but also links back to his first book-length study dedicated to the Mollas of Mustang (Jackson 1984).

the edges of which are highlighted in gold. Peony-like flowers with a large and heavy interior interrupt the foliage in regular intervals. The entire composition is set against a cloud the outer edges of which are lined in three colours, from inside out bright green, dark green and dark blue. In the centre above the composition hovers a large, fragile umbrella the sides of which appear to be blown up by the gold rays emitting from the bodhisattva's crown. The relative size of the vegetal foliage in relation to the figures and the thickness of the outlines of the clouds emphasise these elements.

Moving into the upper left corner (Fig. 4), five buddhas sit on a cloud bank the upper edge of which transforms into the shape of lotus petals with multi-coloured edge. Another type of white cloud without those edges frames the gods playing musical instruments underneath. The variation in the cloud formations, their colours, shapes and shading is remarkably sophisticated.

The lower left corner, in contrast, shows some of the secondary figures set against a rocky landscape interspersed with trees bearing orange fruits (Fig. 5). Here a fourth type of cloud frames the bodhisattva teaching disciples in the lower centre. The rocks are outlined in gold and their darkest areas may well have been dark blue originally. To this one may add that the rock in the bottom right corner is much more pointed and a cloud wraps around it (Fig. 2).

Overall, tones of pink and green dominate the painting, and blue may have been used throughout as well but has darkened considerably. Even though the rocks are exaggerated, there is a certain realism and depth to the landscape. The figures themselves are well drawn but rather schematic and idealised.

The other comparative book covers at Namgyal are not polychrome, but have gold relief paintings in gold against a red background.[4] Their relief work is closely comparable to the decoration on the outer side of the bottom cover, which has the five esoteric buddhas in a row, only the central one performing the teaching gesture (*dharmacakramudrā*) well preserved (Fig. 6). This Buddha and his surrounding are rendered with greater sophistication than those on the other Namgyal covers. The

4 See Luczanits 2016: figs. 14 and 15, the former replicating the composition of the top cover in Fig. 1.

fragmentary inscription on the inside may also preserve the name of its artist.[5] Equally, the illuminations in the accompanying manuscript are painted in gold relief on gold.[6] The workshop that produced these covers (and the associated texts) thus more commonly specialised in such monochrome relief depictions, and the polychrome paintings are the exception. A shared feature between them is the peculiar representation of the vegetal scroll surrounding the images with its large and distinct foliage.

Intriguing Relationships

It is this foliage and the predilection for the monochrome that links the covers to a well-known painting in The Metropolitan Museum of Art depicting Ṣaḍakṣara Lokeśvara (Fig. 7).[7] I have always been puzzled by the early date of this painting, the museum providing the late fifteenth century, so this has been a welcome occasion to review this attribution. Examining the lineage figures and their captions, it is clear that the attribution by the museum is based on Kuzhang Chöjé Khyenrap Rinchen Chokdrup (sKu zhang Chos rje mKhyen rab Rin chen mchog grub; 1436–1497)[8] represented immediately above the goddess Ṣaḍakṣarī to the right of the main image. However, there are two more figures represented in the painting, which bring its date into the early sixteenth century.[9] The lineage associates the painting with Zhalu Monastery (Zha lu) in Tsang (gTsang).

5 Immediately following the previous painter, the text reads (the number sign standing for a lost syllable): *gzi ri+s mchogi # #e- mkha+n// blo gsal b*[*y*]*ang chub she+s rab yi// # # # dri med* [...]. In this transliteration the + indicates that the following letter is a subscript, the # stands for a lost syllable and the - for a part of the syllable.

6 See Luczanits 2016: fig. 13 for an example from another manuscript.

7 The painting has been published in Watt and Leidy 2005: pl. 36.

8 Referred to as *mkhyen rab chos rje* in the caption; BDRC P3102.

9 It is the relationship of the teachers that makes clear that the first of the two additional teachers is Rin chen rgyal po (no dates; BDRC P3426), while the second person is unclear, as he is simply referred to as *sku zhang chos rje*. The pupil of Rin chen rgyal po that come closest to this caption are sKu zhang bSod nams mchog grub (1468–1538; BDRC: P3267) and sKu zhang Rin chen bkra shis (BDRC: PoRK585), but the lineages surveyed do not link up to the former. I am sure the receiver of this tribute knows of more possibilities in this regard than I do.

In this high-quality painting, the foliage is even more outsized and varied, the drawing of the clouds is more detailed, and there is no landscape as such. Further the facial features of the teachers are individual and they sit on mats that curiously are curved at the sides as if they would lie on the back of a horse, and some of the deities have flaming pearls as their central hair ornament. Further, the offerings on the central table underneath the main deity are emphasised by a transparent sphere painted around them, an element that can also be found on the Namgyal book cover with the Buddha in the centre (Fig. 1).

Another painting bearing similar elements is the portrait of the twenty-second Sakya Trichen Sa skya Lotsawa Jampe Dorjé Künga Sönam (Sa skya Lo tsā ba 'Jam pa'i rdo rje Kun dga' bsod nams; 1485–1533) flanked by his teachers Panchen Drakpa Dorjé (Paṇ chen Grags pa rdo rje; d. c. 1491) and Lowo Khenchen Sönam Lhündrub (Glo bo mKhan chen bSod nams lhun grub; 1456–1532) today in the Rubin Museum of Art.[10] Here, too, the foliage is large and prominent, the faces of the teachers are portrait-like, the mats stand up, and Jambhala has a flaming pear as a head ornament. But while the historical context of this painting brings us closer to Namgyal, stylistically it is more remote. The painting is rather crowded with details of the individual figures overlapping, the foliage differs considerably from that found at Namgyal, and the sphere around the offerings on the table in front of the teacher is much less successfully rendered.

The third painting I want to bring in here is a representation of the Hevajra assembly from a Sakya (Sa skya) context also in the Rubin Museum of Art.[11] Its background appears to be much more reflecting than that of the other paintings, and it is similarly crowded as the previous example. With the teachers in the top row we again find the curved mat, and they are set against a hilly landscape or pillowing clouds of

10 Sakya Lotsawa (Sa skya Lo tsā ba) with His Teachers and Buddha Vajradhara; sixteenth century; Distemper (gold and pigments) on cloth; 35 ⅜ × 27 ½ in. (90 × 70 cm); Rubin Museum of Art C2006.42.5. On this painting, see Kreijger 2001: 78, no. 24; Jackson 2011: 98–100, fig. 3.22; HAR, no. 89148 (accessed May 17, 2020).

11 Hevajra; sixteenth century; distemper on gold base (*gser thang*); 37 ¾ × 30 ¼ in. (126 × 105 cm); Rubin Museum of Art, C2003.23.3; Jackson 2016: fig. 3.29; HAR, no. 90919 (accessed May 17, 2020).

considerable variation. However, here the main deities, Hevajra and the eight yoginīs, clearly derive from Khyentse Chenmo (mKhyen brtse chen mo), active in the second half of the fifteenth century.[12]

While the three paintings differ considerably, each of them has distinct elements and is clearly the product of a different artist, all three likely date to the early sixteenth century and derive from a Sakya context somewhere in Tsang province. This likely is also the case for the last example due to the elements it shares with the others, even if its main images and the charnel grounds are clearly deriving from Khyentse Chenmo. Including this painting in the discussion of the Namgyal covers makes sense, as the covers also contain elements, such as the shape of the rocks, that remind of the murals of Gongkar Chöde (Gong dkar chos sde) but are also distinct from them in detail and colouring. We also know that any good artist prided himself of being able to paint in any style,[13] and that the Hevajra depiction of Khyentse Chenmo has been highly influential.[14]

Established School

Obviously, the relationships identified above are tenuous, but they are the best I have come along in providing at least some temporal background for the Namgyal book covers. Stylistically, there are the similarities described above, but the covers show much more variety and sophistication in details than the comparisons. This is surprising, given that book covers are commonly workshop products, as is clear with the gold on red examples probably from the same workshop. In comparison the polychrome pair of covers has been painted by the master artist Shérap Penjor, possibly the one leading that workshop. Given the emphasis on landscape, the blue-green rocks, the variety and shading in trees and clouds, and the thick layer of pigments used, no effort has been spared in making them. But where does his style come from?

12 See in particular the painting discussed in Luczanits 2019, also in Jackson 2016: figs. 4.61 and 4.62, in comparison to the depiction of the same deity in the Yidam Lhakhang (Yi dam lha khang) of Gongkar Chöde. On Khyentse Chenmo, see Jackson 1996: 139–168 and Jackson 2016.

13 See in particular Jackson 1996: 104, for Menla Döndrup's assertion in this regard.

14 For examples, see HAR, nos. 8088, 19844, 61137, 61312, 61401, 85900.

One of the confusing elements with the style of these covers is the occurrence of the multi-coloured edges of the clouds. These are well known for central Tibetan paintings from the second half of the seventeenth century onwards, in particular those related to the court of the Dalai Lamas in Lhasa, such as the paintings of the Lukhang (Klu khang).[15] But they are also quoted in a wide context that goes beyond that area in later paintings.[16] Given that much of the art from that period onwards is extremely rich in citations, it is impossible to actually apply a particular stylistic term to its usage, but it is clear that David Jackson predominately associates them with diverse branches of the Menri (*sman ris*) painting tradition.

In the meantime we have a considerable body of works that may be directly associated with Khyentse Chenmo, David's most recent book dedicated to this painter and his successors.[17] In comparison, we have almost no direct visual examples for the work of Mentangpa Menla Döndrup (sMan thang pa sMan bla don grub), who became equally famous for including Chinese elements in his paintings. In his case we are dependent on the mentions in the literature that David so generously summarised for us in his pioneering work on the *History of Tibetan Painting*. From it we know that Menla Döndrup, or rather one of his successors may have even worked together with Khyentse Chenmo at Yangpachen (Yangs pa can) in northwestern Ü (dBus), and that several of his descendants were engaged in works at Sakya monasteries in Tsang, in particular at Serdokchen (gSer mdog can).[18] The comparative thangkas described above equally point to a Sakya context and the same wider region, even if a monastery can only be suggested in one case.

From David's work we are also familiar with the descriptions of Menthangpa's work by the most art-historical connoisseur among the Tibetan writers on art, Deumar Géshé Tendzin Püntsok (De'u dmar dGe bshes bsTan 'dzin phun tshogs; b. 1665?):

15 See Baker and Laird 2000; Luczanits 2011: figs. 1, 3, 6, 9 and 9a.

16 See the many examples with such clouds especially in Ü and Tsang, but also beyond in Jackson 2012.

17 Jackson 2016.

18 See also Caumanns 2015.

> The coats of pigment and shading are thick. In most respects the layout is just like a Chinese scroll painting, with the exception that it is [here] slightly less orderly than [in] that one. [Also, the figures] are not placed in [close] groups, but are a bit more spread out. (X 39).
>
> The bodily posture, skeletal structure and musculature/flesh contour are excellent. Necks are long, shoulders are withdrawn, and clearness predominates. There is much shading. The colors are detailed, soft and richly splendid. Malachite and azurite [pigments] predominate. Because of the blue and green [colors], (X 40) from a distance the painting is very splendid, and if one approaches [nearer], it is detailed. The forms of robes and scarves are not symmetrical. Even though the basic pigments are many, they are fewer than in China. There is greater richness in tone than in one hundred [other painted] images. The shading is evident through [the use of shading washes of] a somewhat greater strength. This is the tradition of the sprul-sku sMan-thang-pa. (X 41–42).[19]

While obviously not a perfect match, a lot in this description resonates with the details that can be observed on the Namgyal book covers, even more so if one imagines the painting to be fresh. Obviously, the covers are not the work of Menthangpa himself, but the comparisons above and the context for some of his successors make it plausible that Shérap Penjor, too, needs to be considered one of his successors.

Stemming from somewhere around the early to middle of the sixteenth century, the Namgyal covers stand out for their emphasis on elements deriving from Chinese painting. To my knowledge, they are the earliest artworks known to date to feature the multi-coloured rims around some of the represented clouds, a feature that continues to be characteristic for paintings associated with the Menri tradition. Thus, the paintings on the Namgyal covers may well represent a variant of the Old Menri tradition as represented by one of the successors of Menthangpa.

With Ngor, Zhalu and Serdokchen in the vicinity of Tashilhunpo (bKra shis lhun po), the close connections of the latter monastery with Menthangpa and his successors, and the close connections of Ngor and Serdokchen with Mustang, it is quite possible that these covers where

19 Jackson 1996: 119.

produced in this wider area of Tsang and reached Mustang from there. Equally possible is that this branch of painting spread further west to Sakya Monastery itself, and the covers stem from there. One can only hope that this can be clarified in the future.

For now, the Namgyal covers offer a glance on a painting tradition and book production workshop the unique features of which can be loosely associated with the Old Menri tradition. They likely also document the work of a painter previously unknown, a certain Shérap Penjor who, as the inscription on the cover asserts, is the best among the painters available at that time.

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Fig. 1 Inner face of the top cover with teaching Śākyamuni flanked by a diverse audience and surrounded by the Buddhas of the Ten Directions; cover of an *Aṣṭasāhasrikāprajñāpāramitā* manuscript, Namgyal Monastery, Mustang (Book 27); photo D8107.

Fig. 2 Inner face of the bottom cover with bodhisattva of the tenth stage flanked by the Buddhas of the Ten Directions; photo D8022.

Fig. 3 The central meditating bodhisattva of the tenth stage (called buddha in the caption); photo D8147.

Fig. 4 Five Buddhas of the Ten Directions seated on a cloud bank; photo D8152.

Fig. 5 Landscape with teaching bodhisattvas and disciples; photo D8151.

Fig. 6 The central Buddha Vairocana on the outside of the bottom cover; photo D8159.

Fig. 7 Ṣaḍakṣara Lokeśvara triad; South-Central Tibet (gTsang), early sixteenth century; gold, ink, and colour on cloth; dimensions: 40 ⅜ × 31 ¼ in. (102.6 × 79.4 cm); The Metropolitan Museum of Art, gift of Margery and Harry Kahn, 1985, accession number: 1985.390.3.

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His Holiness
The Gongma Trichen
SUPREME HEAD OF THE SAKYAPA ORDER
OF TIBETAN BUDDHISM

FOREWORD

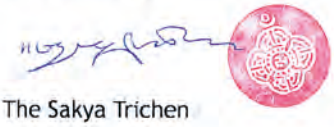
I am very pleased that this commemorative volume is being compiled in celebration of David Jackson's 70th birthday.

I have known Ngawang Kalden, as we know him in Tibetan, for a very long time and in one instance, we received teachings from Chogye Trichen Rinpoche together. We have always maintained contact throughout the years.

David's grasp of the Tibetan language is truly remarkable, certainly placing him among the most accomplished Tibetan-speaking westerners. Likewise, his knowledge of Tibetan literature and of the Tibetan Buddhadharma is pre-eminent, while his translations of the same are of exceptional precision.

He is a scholar in the true sense of the word, and it is befitting that this former students at Hamburg University show their gratitude to his accomplishments by dedicating this Festschrift to him.

With blessings,



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White Tārā, Artist: Tsechang Penba Wangdu (brTse byang sPen pa dbang ’dus).

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