

## FROM THE MICHELANGELO OF LHASA TO THE PROBLEM OF TIBETAN IDENTITY

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The author, through the analysis of a case study, examines the issue of building and evolving identity under the influence of migration and cultural variation. Throughout the biographic method employed, he presents the Tibetan artist, Gonkar Gyatso and his works, showcasing how his approach to his own identity has changed over the years.

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Autor, analizując studium przypadku, prezentuje zagadnienie budowania i ewoluowania tożsamości pod wpływem migracji i zmienności kulturowej. Posługując się metodą biograficzną, przedstawia tybetańskiego artystę, Gonkar Gyatso, i jego prace ukazujące zmianę w podejściu do własnej tożsamości na przestrzeni lat.

**Key words:** identity, Tibetan, art, Gonkar Gyatso, thangka.

In 2003, an art show under the title *Radiant Transmission: Contemporary Masterpieces of Tibetan Buddhist Art* was opened in the October Gallery, London. Presenting works by contemporary Nepalese, Tibetan, Mongolian and English artists, the pieces were curated by the Tibetan art expert Robert Beer and organized by art historian Zara Fleming, a specialist in Tibetan art.

The exhibition was the first to introduce modern Tantric art to England. In addition to the exhibition of thangkas (Tibetan Buddhist painting using traditional methods but in a characteristic style) on display, particular significance was given to the work of Gonkar Gyatso<sup>1</sup> (Tib. *Gong dkar rgya mtsho*), a Tibetan artist, who migrated to England in 1996 and who presented a four-part photo ensemble entitled *My identity*. In these pictures he portrayed himself in four different roles: as a traditional thangka-painter, a Red Guard working on a Mao icon, a refugee living in India painting the Dalai Lama's portrait, and finally a modern artist forming a mysterious, nonfigurative mandala-like depiction.

Gonkar Gyatso is an artist of British citizenship, originating from Tibet, who was educated in Beijing, Lhasa, Dharamsala and London and who now normally resides in

<sup>1</sup> Gongkar Gyatso's bio – see: <http://gonkargyatso.com/about-the-artist/artist's-bio>. Access: 10.10.2017.

New York. He was born in 1961 in Lhasa as the son of a PLA<sup>2</sup> soldier, resulting in his childhood being affected by communist ideology. He studied traditional Chinese ink painting at the Faculty of Fine Arts of the Central Institute of Nationalities, Beijing. He was the first Tibetan to paint a mural for the Great Hall of the People in Beijing in 1985 but he also became acquainted with Western painting styles. Returning to Lhasa, he studied traditional Tibetan art and became a founder of “The Sweet Tea House” movement, involving contemporary Tibetan artists<sup>3</sup>.

He initiated his career with nonfigurative paintings in the early eighties. Later in 1989, shocked by the demonstrations in Lhasa and the events of Tiananmen Square, he created his famous Red Buddha painting. Going into exile to Dharamsala in 1992, he finally settled in London in 1996 when he was 35. His recent works focus on the current situation of Tibetan Buddhism and are characterized by irony, regarding a western understanding of the word. As he said in an interview, although he is only a lay Buddhist, this does not stop him from showing not only what he knows about being Buddhist, but also comparing the Buddhist approach to that of Western culture:

“Due to the upbringing I never understood fully behind the Buddha [as a Buddhist I should follow the Buddha’s understanding of] a serious religious significance [in drawing]. I have participated to some extent in traditional thangka-training when I went into exile and lived in Dharamsala, but these were only introductory skills. So, I took stock of what I knew about Buddhism and compared it with what I knew of western culture – the many interpretations Buddhism has gone through varying with the fashion and trends [at the time]” (Scoggin 2007).

However, among Gonkar Gyatso’s works is not primarily his interpretations of Buddha, but the *My identity* series seems to have provoked the most vivid reactions among audience. A number of art historians have studied it, including Clare Harris, who gave an excellent analysis of it in her new book. She raised important questions such as the meaning of identity for Tibetans who live in a global world, what they identify with in the Western world and Western attitudes to Tibet (Harris 2012, 249–253). I am of the opinion that some other issues need to be addressed in relation to background-image-personages and objects included in the compositions. These aspects may deepen understanding of this series and place it in a new and more complex context.

It is well known that Gyatso was inspired by a photograph depicting the thangka painter of the 13th Dalai Lama, Tsering Döndrup (Tib. *Tshe ring don grub*, 1902–1947),

<sup>2</sup> PLA – People’s Liberation Army in China.

<sup>3</sup> „Emerging from the aftershocks, debris and trauma of the Cultural Revolution, a loose-knit group of young Lhasa artists in the early and mid-eighties decided to come together to better utilize their individual creativity and to promote their own works. They jokingly called themselves the Sweet Tea House Movement.” Cited from Jamyang Norbu’s blog: <http://www.jamyangnorbu.com/blog/2014/10/27/a-cup-of-tea-and-a-slice-of-art-please/>. Access: 10.10.2017.

while working in Norbulingka, the summer residence of the Dalai Lama. The photograph was taken by the American ethnologist and botanist, Charles Suydam Cutting (1889–1972) in 1937. He is as good a person as any to start with.

A national tennis champion, Cutting is recognized as the first American allowed to enter the forbidden city of Lhasa. After graduating from Harvard University he worked as an engineer for the M. W. Kellogg Company and in 1925 he accompanied the sons of Theodore Roosevelt (the 26<sup>th</sup> President of the USA) to Ladakh and Turkestan. On this expedition in the company of Theodore Jr. Roosevelt (1887–1944), and Kermit Roosevelt (1889–1943) he collected materials for the Chicago Field Museum of Natural History and then travelled to Ethiopia, Burma and China. He regarded his 3 visits to Tibet and two to Lhasa as particular highlights (Cutting 1947, ix). Thanks to a friendship struck up with the British political officer in charge of Sikkim and Tibet, Frederick Marshman Bailey (1882–1967), he was allowed to visit the South Tibetan Gyantse and Kampa Dzong in 1930 which were then open to British trade. From 1931, he also corresponded with the 13th Dalai Lama. Finally, in 1935, through his Tibetan connections, he was able to travel to Shigatse and Lhasa together with an English art dealer, Arthur Vernay (1877–1960), collecting for the American Museum of Natural History, New York. In 1937, Cutting returned to Lhasa with his wife, Helen (Reynolds and Heller 1983, 61; see also Reynolds 1999, 17). On this trip, recorded in his book *The Fire Ox and Other Years* (“Fire-Ox” signified the year 1937 in the Tibetan calendar) published in 1947, he took his famous photo of Tsering Döndrup.

Although Cutting did not publish the photograph in his book, he described in detail his impressions of the young painter, whom he first met in the Potala, and whom he characterized rather superficially:

“Work was still in progress on the tomb of the last Dalai Lama at the top of the Potala. In a room forty by twenty, fifteen to twenty feet high, Tsering, that sensitive young Michelangelo of Lhasa, and several others were busy on a series of incredibly fine miniatures. Tsering, having served the ruler during his life, was now contributing to his posthumous glory. Every inch of wall and ceiling eventually would be filled with the lovely miniatures depicting the whole Buddhist pantheon, with mythology and motor-cars mixed in with great ingenuity. There were gods, goddesses, angels and demons. It would take years, perhaps, for the artists to complete this microscopic type of frescoing, which they did with loving care. Tsering’s plight reminded one of Michelangelo, wearing steel-rimmed glasses to save his eyes as he fretted and fumed on the Sistine ceiling” (Cutting 1947, 218).

Shortly thereafter, Cutting visited the Norbulingka, where the murals of some rooms were painted by the young Tsering too. The famous photograph was most probably taken at that time. But his most interesting story in relation to Tsering suggests that Tibetan painters were already being attracted to a western style of painting that was as yet barely known to them. Cutting asked Tsering to paint a portrait of him and of his wife:

“He had always to paint from life, he explained, but up to now he had been occupied with divinities. To this my wife replied amiably that he might, if he wished, paint us as gods and goddesses. After a week’s time the picture appeared, with cross eyes for me and two double chins for my wife. We had seen likenesses of ourselves before but never had we emerged so completely and perfectly figures [of] fun. The occidental face and figure were for this man who, year in, year out, turned out exquisite, magical divinities by square yard” (Cutting 1947, 230).

Tsering Döndrup was the senior thangka painter of the 13th Dalai Lama, and also reached a lower edge official rank, the *letsen* (Tib. *las tshan*) (Jackson 2012, 38). His Tibetan biography was written by a famous contemporary thangka painter of the Menri school and university professor, Tenpa Rabten (Tsering Döndrup was his paternal uncle) (Jackson 2012, 38):

“Letsen Tsering Döndrup (Tib. *las tshan Tshe ring don grub*) was born in [the] Chusumdzong district of the Tibetan Lhoka prefecture, in a place called ‘The lowest among the new houses lying on an upper nomadic area’, as son of the thangka painter Pema Künsang and Sönam Dolma, in the fifteenth cycle of the Tiger-Water year (1902). Since he was eight years old, it took him two years to learn reading and writing without any difficulty [from] his maternal uncle, in Dokhar Chöde<sup>4</sup>. From the age of ten he grazed the cows of their house and with the help of his karmic abilities (Tib. *chags bag*) discovered earlier, he was able to learn to draw a variety of small animals and flowers without the aid of an art teacher. Around the age of twelve his father took him to Lhasa and introduced him to the reputable, famous and educated master, Tsering Gyau (Tib. *Tshe ring rgya’u*)<sup>5</sup>, the chief painter, to learn the craft. His resulting joy from the acquired ‘drizzle’ and later ‘peacock-body’ [technique]<sup>6</sup> could not be put into words. He practiced day and night with tireless diligence, and by the respect the three doors<sup>7</sup> with the greatest reverence, and prostrating at his feet serviced him with three kinds of pleasing actions<sup>8</sup>, resulting in not long being able to expand his knowledge on the theory of Tibetan painting and on the drawing method of proportions, including specific oral instructions. He was about eighteen years old when he joined the highest-level thangka painter workshop, from whence he entered into government service in the Norbulingka and other places. When he was twenty-one, he reached the rank of lesser craft foreman (Tib. *dbu chung*). When Victorious Lord (Tib. *rGyal dbang*), that is the 13th Dalai Lama (1876–1933), learned of his unparalleled talent, leaving out the rank of chief craftsman (Tib. *dbu chen*), he elevated him directly to the rank of belonging to his retinue. In the presence of older painters he commented on their instructions being good but behind their back [he said] ironically that: ‘the young and experienced can cast away instructions.’ Although his life was short, his unique talent and honest nature meant that he gradually became one of the most respected leaders amongst all painters. He himself created many significant works in the field of view and vision, based on joint plans and with the help of detailed advice emanating from the government official Letsen Yeshe Gyatso,

<sup>4</sup> Dokhar Chöde (*mDo mkhar chos sde*), a monastery belonging to the Kadampa sect in Lhoka prefecture.

<sup>5</sup> Epa Uchen Tsering Gyau (1872–1935) was Tenpa Rabten’s grandfather who was born in a small village of the *E* district. On his life see: bsTan pa rab brtan 2007, 177–179.

<sup>6</sup> These are likely to be the two types of shading used in thangka painting. The “drizzle” (*char zhim bu*) perhaps refers to the technique of “rain-like shading” (*char mdangs*): an impression achieved by vertical brush strokes, while the “peacock’s body” (*rma bya’i lus*) refers to the “spread-on shading” (*byug mdangs*) technique, similar to a peacock’s tail, see: Jackson 1984, III.

<sup>7</sup> The three doors (*sgo gsum*) of the body: speech and mind, physical and verbal and mental activities.

<sup>8</sup> Three ways of pleasing the guru (*mnyes pa gsum*) by means of material things, service and practice.

he completed frescoes in the bedroom of Norbulingka, murals and coloured the upper, middle and lower parts of the stupa-temple for Victorious Lord's thirteenth incarnation in the Potala Palace. In addition, he himself created murals illustrating the life of the thirteenth incarnation of the Victorious Lord. Furthermore, in the lower College of Sera Monastery, inside the assembly hall, he made murals both of the south-west wall and entrance hall, which are stunning works of art. During the lifetime of the Taktra regent<sup>9</sup> he restored the appliqué thangka (*gos sku*) of the Potala Palace and carried out preservation works of its general design and detailed representation together with Yeshe Gyatso. His ability to direct [operations] is still regarded with amazement, reaching beyond words and thoughts. For their perfectly realised work of the appliqué thangka, both artists received the salary of the rank of *letsenpa* [renown followed suit]. Tsering passed away at the age of forty-six in the sixteenth year of the cycle of the Fire-Pig (1947)" (bsTan pa rab brtan 2007, 193–195)<sup>10</sup>.

It can be regarded as symbolic that Gonkar Gyatso saw Cutting's photograph for the first time on the cover of David Jackson's famous book on Tibetan painting, published in 1984 (Harris 2012, 296, fn. 17). This book still retains its reputation as the most complete western book on Tibetan painting techniques and this photo has become a symbol of Tibetan art. It is also not mere coincidence that Cutting was the first American to enter Lhasa and came to embody the barely known outside world for Tsering Döndrup. Tsering painted scenes from the life of the last independent Dalai Lama around his stupa. Thus, his figure also symbolizes the continuity of Tibetan independence. It is also of special importance that Döndrup was probably one of the first Tibetan painters who tried to paint portraits in accordance with Western ideas.

For a complete comprehension of Gonkar Gyatso's gesture, I would first like to ask how we see the photo taken by Cutting in fact, that is the painter himself, his environment and the picture painted by him. It appears already at first glance that the photo is a "double" representation as we not only see what the photographer wished to capture about Tsering but also what the subject of the photo wanted to show to the photographer himself. A man dressed in traditional Tibetan clothes is sitting in front of a painted canvas hanging from a frame. Tsering is wearing a common garment of Tibet, called a *chuba* (Tib.: *phyu pa*), which is a traditional robe that leaves the right arm unsheathed. His long hair is pigtailed – like most Tibetan painters' hair nowadays unlike government officials or secular aristocrats who wear theirs in a chignon – and he has an elegant, thin moustache. He is clearly proud of his long earring (Tib.: *sog byil*) decorated with a turquoise hanging from his left ear onto his shoulder, which indicates his official rank. On his left hand, resting on his knee, he is wearing an ornate ring which together with his long nails, expresses nobility. All of this is reinforced by Cutting's description of Tsering:

"Handsome and charming to begin with, the young man cuts a dashing figure with his pale-green blouse one sleeve of wine-red covering his arm with the other hanging down; an enormous jade ring on his left thumb and a smaller mandarin jade on his right ring finger" (Cutting 1947, 230).

<sup>9</sup> *Srid skyong Stag brag, Ngag dbang gsung rab grub thob bstan pa'i rgyal mshan* (1874–1952), became Regent in 1941.

<sup>10</sup> With interpretation of the text I am grateful for the help of Zsóka Gelle.



Charles Cutting's photograph of Tsering Döndrup taken in 1937 in Lhasa<sup>11</sup>.

The photograph's surroundings contain a typical painted Tibetan table (Tib. *lcog rtse*) decorated with lotus flowers in front of him with the inevitable tea accessories on it: including a small teapot (Tib. *tib bu*). The porcelain cups (Tib. *dkar yol*) are probably used for mixing colours, because other painting implements are also present: a brush holder filled with brushes and a closed box in front of the table, presumably containing the colours; this has a special role in Gyatso's photos. On the table, a foraminous Chinese rock, the so-called "scholars' rock" (Ch. *gōngshí*) also appears to express the depicted man's affection for an ideal life in nature. This clearly reflects the Chinese fashion prevailing at that time amongst educated people (Linrothe 2004, 22). In front of Tsering, a folded carpet (Tib. *kha gdan*) is visible, while on a small table next to him can be seen accessories of Tibetan homes such as small trees and flowers in pots.

The picture before Tsering shows the traditional working method of Tibetan painters. A canvas is also stretched over a frame but a different technique is being employed.

<sup>11</sup> <http://tibetanmaterialhistory.wikischolars.columbia.edu/file/view/bob1-3.jpg/100489381/bob1-3.jpg>. Access: 10.12.2017.

Firstly, an appropriate-size canvas for the painting (Tib. *ras gzhi*) is sewn onto a narrow, flexible inner frame made of bamboo (Tib. *rgyong shing*). Then an outer frame (Tib. *rkyang shing*) is constructed and the framed canvas with zig-zag stitches with a thicker cord is affixed. Thus, the cord can also be applied to stretch the canvas (Jackson 2012, 38). In the photo, the painting is almost completed; Tsering Döndrup probably is just adding the final touches to his picture.

The figure in the almost completed painting is that of Vādisimha Mañjuḥoṣa (Tib. *'Jam dbyangs smra ba'i seng ge*), a manifestation of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī, representing the knowledge of the Buddhas, that is Mañjuśrī as “Lion of Debaters”. According to David Jackson, this work was painted in the mid-Tibetan Eri (Tib. *e bris*) style, which was typical in the twenties and thirties of the 20<sup>th</sup> c. when the photograph was taken. In his description of the decorative details:

“The clouds in particular are more elaborately convoluted and shaded than in many Eri paintings of the period. Note also the Chinese tree that grows upward to the left at a slant, behind the body nimbus of the main figure, making the overall composition asymmetrical” (Jackson 2012, 38).

Practitioners of this style were usually born in Lhasa or – as Tsering Gyau – came from the region of E (Tib. *E*), the south-eastern part of the central Ü (Tib. *dBus*) province, after which the style was named. The *Eri* was the most approved style of the Lhasa government; so much so that it was sometimes referred to as the “government style” (Tib. *gzhung ris*) and used by artists who belonged to the artisans office (Tib. *Zhol 'dod dpal las khung*) (Jackson 2012, 38). Many examples of this style can be found among the wall paintings of the Potala and the Norbulingka, which were painted during the reign of the 13<sup>th</sup> Dalai Lama.

After listing the main elements of the photograph taken of Tsering Döndrup, let us now proceed to focus on how Gonkar Gyatso transformed this photo into a four-part series given the fact that this typical picture-in-picture series not only closely relates to Gyatso’s life (a man born in 1961 who began his career in Tibet and then moved to Beijing; later to return to Tibet before leaving for Dharamsala and later for London) but is also connected to the historical situation emerging from the Tibetan uprising of 1959 which has influenced the lives of many Tibetan generations even up to this present day.

Comparing the Gyatso picture with the one from 1937, we can see that Gyatso completely fits into the role of the Tibetan thangka painter, which was Tsering Döndrup.

The picture in fact recalls in a subtle way European self-portraits *an face*. The artist is gazing from the picture, as if looking at himself in a mirror in front of him and seeking eye contact with the viewer of the image.

Gyatso is sitting in traditional Tibetan dress in front of the canvas, his hair in a bun with a long earring denoting his official position. In front of him tea and painting implements are placed on a table (interestingly, the Chinese rock is missing). He is



Gonkar Gyatso *My Identity* No. 1, C-Print, 2003.

surrounded by the type of furniture used in Tibetan homes and the vajra-motif of the wall painting refers to Tibetan Buddhism. All these are obviously included to evoke traditional Tibet before the Chinese occupation whilst also referring to certain periods of his own life.

Nevertheless, as is well known, Gyatso has never become a thangka painter. Returning from Beijing to Lhasa, he studied traditional Tibetan artworks and after emigrating for three years (1993–1996) he learned traditional thangka painting from master Sangay Yeshe in Dharamsala. However, he took up painting Buddha representations under his own approach (Harris 1997, 174). This is also evident from the photograph where he swaps the Mañjuśrī image originally present in Cutting's photo for an *unfinished* Śākyamuni Buddha one including his two disciples, the most common subjects for Tibetan painters. However, 28 other unfinished Buddha images also appear around them, presumably following the description present in the 27th chapter of Buddhavaṃsa describing past Buddhas and the future Buddha, Maitreya. If this supposition is correct, it is especially interesting, because the system described in this important work of the Theravāda Buddhism is a completely unusual representation in Tibet (See: Allinger 2007, 73–80).





Gonkar Gyatso *My Identity* No. 2, C-Print, 2003.

In the second photo Gyatso personifies a Red Guard wearing the green uniform of the People's Liberation Army, completed with the Mao badge and the Red Guard armband (Ch. *hongweibing*), painting a picture of Mao.

Everything is different from the previous picture apart from the black box in front of Gyatso. In the concrete floored room the wall is covered with Chinese newspapers (like in most Chinese homes during this period) and in the background on a laminate Formica cupboard, a Mao bust is positioned on top of some red books.

Next to Gyatso, on a red lacquered Chinese table, a mug full of brushes is placed. This is another accessory of the Mao cult because of the Mao picture on the mug. Moreover, in the thangka in front of Gyatso, Buddha Shakyamuni is transformed into the smiling Great Helmsman, as if a mirror image of the artist. In Tibet, this was the period of the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) when priceless monuments were destroyed and traditional religious art was replaced by Socialist Realism. For Gyatso, it brought back his childhood experiences of the nature of the Cultural Revolution which also impacted on his family life: “Everything in our home was Chinese and the entire family strictly adhered to party guidelines” (Reilly 2012, 10).

The third picture of the series shows Gyatso as a long haired Tibetan artist, similar to a hippy, living in India.



Gonkar Gyatso *My Identity* No. 3, C-Print, 2003.

The stone-flagged room covered with corrugated iron evokes the Indian accommodation of Tibetan refugees. The only furnishing present is a dark red suitcase (the colour of Tibetan monks' robes), referring to their permanent homelessness with a "Free Tibet" vignette. A framed photograph of the patron saint of emigration, the 14th Dalai Lama is placed on top of the suitcase, covered with a *khatak* (Tib. *kha btags*). The table next to Gyatso in the previous pictures is replaced by a crate of the popular Indian Bangla beer, with factory colours in a tube on top, two brass bowls for their mixing and brushes in a tin.

Most interestingly in the painting is that in front of Gyatso, Mao has become a portrait of the 14th Dalai Lama. This may be understood as a summary of the desires of a life in emigration. In the top third of the painting, above the mountain ranges and clouds, a portrait of the Dalai Lama, framed with rainbow, is floating like a radiant Sun. In the middle lies the Potala Palace which is the seat of the Dalai Lamas and was built by the 5<sup>th</sup> one, symbolizing the religious and secular power of Tibet. Beneath the place and ironically included can be found the famous column with the inscription in two languages (Tib. *rdo ring*), which was originally erected in front of the Jokhang and bears a written record of the Tibetan-Chinese treaty of 821. Thus in the picture, the



Gonkar Gyatso *My Identity* No. 4, C-Print, 2003.

properties of Tibetan Buddhism are juxtaposed with the homelessness of immigrants. Although Tibetan emigration to India was taking place at the time when Gyatso was being born, in Gyatso's life this image refers to the period beginning in 1992, when he emigrated to Dharamsala.

Finally we see the posing, contemporary and cosmopolitan Western artist in an empty, minimalist environment.

Among the white walls on a laminate floor, in place of the Tibetan or Chinese table and beer crate there was now to be found a stainless steel table of the IKEA variety used to hold painting implements. Behind the painter's back, on a practical storage box a bouquet of gladioli takes the place of the Dalai Lama picture and next to the vase of flowers are some strewn fashion magazines. The artist is clad in jeans and trainers and sports a punky hairdo with only the provocatively tattooed "Tibet" (Tib. *Bod*) inscription on his arm giving any identification as to his identity.

However, the painting in front of him is not that of a saint of 'the new era'. It is not Buddha, Mao or the Dalai Lama but instead it is a mystical nonfigurative image reminiscent of a mysterious globe floating in a fire ocean and of a mandala, painted with colours reminiscent of computer graphics. There are no historical, political or

religious references present but only a vision of the artist living entirely in a western world. In terms of Gyatso's life this obviously represents the period starting in 1992 when he arrived in London. Later, he graduated with an MA degree from the Chelsea Art & Design College (1999–2000), received British citizenship and became a frequently exhibiting Western artist.

The creation of series may well have been inspired by Gyatso's new artistic experiences at this time. A likely precursor to *My identity* was *The Swing (After Fragonard)*, an installation made in 2001 by Yinka Shonibare, an artist of West-African origin. Jean-Honoré Fragonard's original picture depicts a frivolous scene where a lady is being swung by her husband, while her lover hiding in a bush gets a vision of what lies under her clothes. Shonibare's work reverses the scene in that a headless lady is swinging free of the presence of men, and her flying slipper refers to the disintegration of aristocracy (or the Western world), which was soon to be seen in the French Revolution. Gyatso wrote about Shonibare's influence:

“His work attempts to show that all forms of culture and identity are constructed, shaped and reshaped by varying forms of historical conjunctions, appropriations, contestations and rejections” (Gonkar Gyatso 2003, 151).

It seems that in the four images of this series Gyatso was providing a complete answer to the question of his identity. In 2009 he explained this:

“I was and I am really interested in the ‘identity’ issue and that probably was one of the reasons why I went to India. Although I say that I found my identity in 1993 and became reconciled to it, I still find that my Tibetanness different from that of other Tibetans. When I was very young, I was strongly influenced by Chinese culture and communist ideologies; I am Tibetan by birth and I am emotionally a Tibetan; I've lived in the West for more than a decade and I am now trying to get involved with mainstream artists in London. I am a sort of combination of different cultures. I think I am different from the Tibetan artists coming from Tibet. I should not talk about ‘culture’; I should talk about how I am myself trying to adapt to these situations, changes and to this new environment” (Gonkar Gyatso 2009, 109).

However, in 2015 at a New York exhibition entitled *Transcending Tibet: Mapping Contemporary Tibetan Art in the Global Context*, organized by the Trace Foundation in Chelsea, Gyatso exhibited the fifth picture of the series.

At first sight, the re-arranged composition seems to represent a crowded and kitschy summary of the pure concept of the four previous pictures. The environment presented combines both the traditional and modern world in a frustratingly confusing manner. The background aims to represent the 21st century including as it does objects of a globalised world manufactured in China: fake Tibetan furniture, plastic religious objects and magazine advertisements on the wall. The picture is undoubtedly crowded on purpose and the separated worlds of the previous pictures are intertwined here: Tibetan, Chinese, Indian and Western elements form an almost inextricable accumula-



5: Gonkar Gyatso *My Identity* No. 5, C-Print, 2015.

tion. The composition no longer focuses on an artist exposed to historical, political or even traditional elements, but instead on a craftsman who has become both famous and fat during the elapsed time period, wearing the earphones of his smartphone. His clothing: the branded western shirt and elegant bow-tie, the wide gold ring on his thumb, the gold rosary beads wrapped around his wrist and the leopard skin wrapped around his waist all refer to his wealth and well-being.

A portrait immediately serves two surprises: On the stretched canvas, in place of the Buddha – Mao – Dalai Lama – Space – Mandala, with the auxiliary lines of the Tibetan iconometry but in western style, we see a female face. As regards how a contemporary Tibetan artist could have learnt this representation, a finger might be pointed at the proportion system in the book of painting by Tsöndu Rabgye and Dorje Rinchen, where a completely different kind of measurement is applied for western-style representations than in Tibetan (brTson 'grus rab rgyas and rDo rje rin chen 2001, 287). The other significant surprise is that the portrait under construction and through which the transfiguration of Gonkar Gyatso's identity can be traced, has now changed into a portrait of the Burmese politician, Aung San Suu Kyi, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1991 "for her non-violent struggle for democracy and human rights".

As this change is major in comparison to the other representations, I wish to summarize this politician's life. After the violent death of her father, who fought for

Burmese independence, she grew up in India. Later, she studied philosophy, political science and economics at Oxford University. In 1972, she married Michael Aris, a prominent Tibetologist – so a Tibetan line is also involved in the story. In 1988, she returned to Burma to head the National League for Democracy, a party participating in political efforts against the military dictatorship. Although her party won the elections in 1990, the military government did not recognize the result and put Aung San Suu Kyi under house-arrest; thus in 1991 it was her sons who received the Nobel Peace Prize on behalf of her. Then she alternated under house arrest, terms of freedom and in jail alternately, until her detention was lifted only in 2010. In 2015, as leader of her party she again won the elections in Myanmar.

This necessarily compacted story impacted on Gonkar Gyatso's life and most importantly in this context, in this picture. Firstly, in Aung San Suu Kyi's personage, Gyatso obviously considers her to be an example of an Asian Democratic politician who adhered to her beliefs throughout seemingly hopeless decades. In addition, each painted thangka image of *My identity* has an ironic aspect, but if Gyatso is interpreted in this light, the image of a politician is not the detail being viewed at ironically but rather the artist himself and his environment. However, in Gyatso's *Reclining Buddha* exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 2009, in a humorous cartoon caption Aung San Suu Kyi wonders whether: "Non-violence is too old-fashioned?"<sup>12</sup>, thereby questioning traditional Buddhist values to boot. In fact, currently in Myanmar it is the nationalist Buddhist majority that threatens the existence of the Muslim minority.

The picture-in-picture composition is added to with a Tibetan image in the background. This undoubtedly represents a traditional Tibetan Buddhist subject, because in the background to the left is to be found a thangka with twenty-one Taras. Three different traditions of representation exist. Here, according to the Nyingma (the old school), the figures around the main character are shown in identical pose but with different colours and symbols. Besides evoking traditional art, the thangka is most likely included in the photograph because it visualizes the highly important Tibetan prayer to the twenty-one Taras.

In addition to the thangka, a poster can also be seen in the background, depicting Chinese Communist leaders as a veritable guru-lineage. This reflects the historical situation holding sway in 2015: the past is represented by the cut off face of Mao Zedong at the top and Deng Xiaoping a bit further down (with his forehead cut off). In a row of leaders in black suits and ties, Jiang Zemin (1993–2003) is on top while slightly below him is Hu Jintao (2003–2013) and bringing up the rear is Xi Jinping (2013), current chairman of the People's Republic of China. Underneath a mass of people adorned with red flags are celebrating on Tiananmen Square. The khatak, familiar from Dalai Lama's image can also be seen here.

<sup>12</sup> See the leaflet on Gyatso's work, released on the occasion of the Venice Biennale, Gonkar Gyatso 2009. See also: Harris 2012, 261.

Next to the poster is an art group's award certificate (Ch. *rongyu zhengshu*). Lying by the artist's leg is an edition of the Shanghai-based weekly magazine, the Oriental Outlook (Ch. *Dongfang zhou kan*). The photo on the wall, torn from Slam Magazine, represents Derrick Rose who is a Chicago Bulls basketball player. Behind the artist, on a flower-decorated wall, is a Chinese advertisement and photo of a Range Rover.

On the cabinet behind Gyatso, a Nike advertisement is pinned and a wide variety of cultural tropes are lined up in stirring confusion: a gilded, presumably plastic incense, a western porcelain statue probably depicting Cupid with angels, a blue monster called Sulley from the film *Monsters Inc*, and a small Tibetan Buddha statue next to it. In front of them is a gilded table prayer wheel which was more than likely made of plastic, accompanied by photos of the Tibetan state oracle Nechung, named after the monastery, and of Dorje Drakden, the protective deity embodied in him.

Above and next to the Buddha statue, is a framed photograph of one of the most famous of Tibetan reincarnations, the 17<sup>th</sup> Black Hat Gyalwa Karmapa, Orgyen Trinle Dorje (Tib. *O rgyan 'phrin las rdo rje*). His inclusion symbolizes the inner division of Tibet where he was recognized as a reincarnation by Tai Situ Rinpoche, who is representative of one rebirth line of the Karma Kagyu order. This was also approved by the Dalai Lama but opposed by the four regents of the Kagyu order, including the Shamarpa, who accepted instead Trinle Thaye Dorje (Tib. *'Phri las mtha' yas rdo rje*) as the Karmapa, all because of a hidden message by the previous Karmapa. In the foreground of Orgyen Trinle Dorje's photography, water cups are placed, symbolizing daily sacrifice. All of this is completed by a liquor-box in the right corner, which is none other than the favoured drink box of Chinese leaders: famous Maotai wheat spirit, a favourite brew of Chairman Mao who liked it to be offered to foreign dignitaries. This is confirmed also by the little Mao bust next to it.

On the cabinet glass a number of other small references are placed. On one cabinet glass be found a sticker representing a Tibetan monk, a ten-pound banknote with the portrait of the British Queen and a postcard of Şađakşarı Lokeşvara. On other there is a card with a marijuana leaf, the picture of the 10th Panchen Lama who was first supported then slandered by the Chinese, a photo of a jeep and a drawn illustration of *Gangnam Style*: a performance by the South Korean singer, Psy.

On a table near the artist, surrounded by the painter's implements and next to a prayer wheel, teacup and a small copper kettle, there is a coco-cola can symbolizing modern times. It can therefore be offered that this last piece of the *My identity* series is suggesting a globalized world where traditional Tibetan culture is not only mixing with that of the conquering Chinese, but also with the commercial western world. In other words, the accessories of Tibetan Buddhism and a Western welfare society manufactured in China not only refer to the full neuroses of the Tibetans living in the West, but point to the confusion of the West as well. It is clear that Gonkar Gyatso has abandoned the *univoque* roles of his life and is therefore no longer a traditional

Tibetan thangka painter, a committed propagandist of Communist China, a vegetating kitsch painter in Indian exile or a self-conscious contemporary artist in London. He is now a craftsman living in the West, who is enthusing about a Southeast Asian politician fighting against dictatorship, even though non-Buddhist minorities are persecuted in her country. He apparently still manages to preserve his identity even as in his environment traditional objects are made available for everyone involved in global consumer culture. How far this is from Cutting who wished to explore an unknown, isolated world or from the inexperienced Tsering Döndrup who was interested in an unknown outside world.

There is only one object whose position is unchanged in each of the five pictures. This is the paintbox, lying by Tsering's feet in Cutting's photo. This changes into a black box in Gyatso's pictures and always remains in the same place in each of the five compositions. Clare Harris informs her readers that the significance of this box for Gyatso leads us to a Chinese proverb: "Never leave home without your scissors" (See: Harris 2012, 252). The scissors indicate the most important tool of any profession which allow any trader or migrant to settle anywhere. The only constant for Gyatso in this transformation series is his toolkit located within the box but as a result unseen by the viewer. This is in a sense his artistic work. However, a black box also brings to mind the sealed recording equipment used on airplanes, which helps to determine the circumstances and causes of every plane accident. The disaster here lies not only in the division of the Tibetan people but also from the artist's view in the identity of the western and eastern worlds that came into contact with the Tibetans. There is no doubt that Gyatso tries to fix these ever-changing circumstances and reasons through his own life identity, which must be difficult for him. Presumably, this is why he found it important after so many years to create a fifth version of his work. In 2009 Gyatso explained his search for identity:

"I grew up in Chinese-occupied Tibet, a land where history had almost been erased but I am deeply involved in Chinese culture through my years as student and teacher at university. My hybrid experience has taught me much. In China, I was trained as a calligrapher and landscape painter for four years, from morning to afternoon, I imitated the masters, learning the arts of self-discipline, self-control, meditation and patience in the process. In Dharamsala, through copying the master thangka painters, I was also taught the Tibetan way as regards self-control and self-discipline. But as a Tibetan, my Tibetanness also comes very naturally: it is in my blood and my essence. So it was in accordance with my own cultural tradition that I pursued my artistic work and I have no other choice but to draw on it.

I felt that to use Tibetan cultural elements to address global issues and to participate in global cultural debates would assist my development. I used Tibetan elements but untraditionally which was difficult for my Tibetan audience to understand. At the same time conservative Tibetans and western intellectuals accused me of revisionism. The isolation and levels of incomprehension among different cultures which ensued was the dilemma I faced. I still feel culturally displaced and one solution which has presented itself has been to keep moving in search of an artistic home" (Gyatso 2003, 149–150).



The question then arises as to whether the black box suggesting constancy actually leads to an artistic no-man's-land, appearing in Gyatso's series. The irony is that while a destroyed Tibet is being reconstructed with the assistance of the Chinese government and the vision of traditional Tibet is being sold to both Western and Chinese tourists, Tibetan artists have become contemporary artists in a Western sense and use the symbols referring to traditional Tibet and Buddhism only incidentally. This, however, is clearly sacrilege for many Westerners who desire a traditional Tibet and who ignore the fact that global changes do not leave Tibet untouched. What then is Tibetan identity? Is it the maintenance of the traditional Tibetan way of life under all circumstances with a national consciousness going back to the 7th century? Is it coexistence with the Chinese occupation and transformation into a western treasure (Ch. *Xizang*) for the Chinese People's Democratic Republic? Is it the government in exile in Dharamsala, India? Is it the slow transformation of the Tibetan way of life in India and/or the rapid transformation in Western emigration? Is there anything else left for Tibetans other than the spectacular "western career of Buddhism in eastern costume", or rather, a surprisingly durable Western fantasy-product, the world of Shangrila, which has been realised recently in the Tibetan borderland in Yunnan province, China?

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