

*Art from Tibetan Buddhist perspective*  
*The First Anthropological Study of Jonang Sect*

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The European Conference on Arts & Humanities 2017  
Official Conference Proceedings

**Abstract**

Art, divided into art works of fine art; and art objects of religion. Religion includes world religions like Christianity and Buddhism, it also includes folk religions, or local religions. Amongst religion, some objects are treated as persons, they certainly have agency, but the agency is given within a particular context. This paper is going to talk about how to understand Tibetan Buddhist art within its cultural context, setting the Jonang sect as an example. The Jonang sect is not well-known, this is the first anthropological research about it. I am going to argue with Gell to clarify how he misleadingly understands non-western art in a western context. He ignores the diversity of forms of art, and simply treats all kinds of arts as secondary agent. Although some of Tibetan Buddhist images, icons, and the like have spiritual power, they are not merely treated as person, some of them are further treated as guidance, such as, a map, a communication or an outline to participants, not to the outsiders of this system, which are used as reminder to guide Tibetan Buddhists in their practice. In Tibetan Buddhism, teaching, practicing, philosophy, and doctrines are a coherent system, and art is a semiotic expression of this system.

Keywords: Tibetan Buddhist art, anthropology of art, Gell, agency, criticism, Jonang

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## Introduction

Among the lesser-known sects, Jonangpa occupies a very special place because, for hundreds of years; the Jonang tradition was thought to be extinct in Tibetan Buddhism history. Due to opposing political views and interests, and religious considerations, the Fifth Dalai Lama Ngawang Lozang Gyatso, who was from the Gelug tradition, did not approve the Jonangpa. The Jonang monasteries were, therefore, converted to the Gelug sect in the late 17th century. After the Fifth Dalai Lama annexed the Jonang sect, some of the Jonang monks travelled to remote villages in Amdo region, mainly in the Ngawa Tibetan and Qiang Autonomous Prefecture in Sichuan Province and Golog Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province; and east Tibet (Samuel 1993: 529), in these backwaters they guarded their practice and traditional culture. The Jonang sect continues on in an unbroken lineage and has been newly rediscovered and opened up to the world during the late 20th and early 21st centuries, the sect distinguishes itself with other Tibetan Buddhist sects with the emphasis of the practice of the Kalachakra Tantra, I will give more details about the Kalachakra Tantra in the following chapter.

In this paper, I am going to talk about Tibetan religious art as semiotic guidance to Tibetan Buddhist practitioners. Art as agency does not completely apply in Tibetan Buddhist art. For example, Tibetan Buddhists of Jonang tradition use the mandala to enhance their memory and visualization of the cosmology of tantric Buddhahood; it is a guidance to visualization.

“The basic thesis of this book, to recapitulate, is that works of art, images, icons, and the like have to be treated, in the context of an anthropological theory, as person-like; that is, sources of, and targets for, social agency”(Gell 1998: 96). However, without cultural conventions, the art’s agency cannot be understood properly, as Layton (2004) justifies “ what Gell has identified as the distinctive features of art cannot be understood except by recognizing the status of art as a culturally constructed medium of visual expression”. Gell dismisses the context of various cultural conventions. Art works have power to influence their viewers, but the viewers’ cultural contexts mediate the interaction between works of art and its makers or viewers. We live in a world full of diversities nowadays so that a Thangka painting hanging in a British museum does not necessarily share the same interpretation as it does in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery. In a British museum, it may be a colourful exotic painting, which even has no artist is identified; while, in a Tibetan Buddhist monastery, it has multiple explications, such as guidance, a map of Buddhist universe, a communication or an outline, which, based on various occasions and different stage of practice, has different meanings. The interactions differ but the painting is the same, it is the agency of viewers’ cultural contexts’ rather than of the painting itself that differ. On the other hand, “the distributed person”(Gell 1998:96-154) from his formula of [[Prototype-A →[Artist-A]]→Index-P, does work, mostly in exoteric Buddhism, but not always in the tantric system<sup>1</sup>.

It is interaction with/within cultural conventions, which is behind the art works rather than the art works per se. It is like when we look at a white paper wearing glasses in different colours, the paper would show in red if the glasses were red; the paper shows blue if we wear blue glasses. It is not the paper changes colour; it is because of the coloured glasses one wears. The object is the paper, and the cultural context is

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1 Tibetan Buddhism contains both exoteric and tantric systems.

coloured glass. We are not mediated by the paper but by the glasses. Gell rightly notices that aesthetic is a Western idea, “consequently, it is only from a very parochial (blinker) Western post-Enlightenment point of view that the separation between the beautiful and the holy, between religious experience and aesthetic experience, arises. Since this is so, the anthropologist writing about art inevitably contributes to the anthropology of religion, because the religious is – in some contexts, though not all-prior to the artistic.” (Gell 1998: 97). However, Gell sidesteps this crucial background to his agency orientated theory. In fact, the term ‘art’ did not exist in some non-Western cultures such as Japan and China before the end of 19th century.

Basic on my fieldwork and literature review I realized that the complexity of art and religion in Chinese/Tibetan context, especially the terms of “art” “religion” could not match the ideas in practice, as these terms “philosophy”, “culture”, “democracy”, and so forth, are neologisms that entered China through Japan in the early 20th century (Chen 2002; Thoraval 1996) that there are no equivalent concepts in context of the culture I do research with. Thus, any analyse without identify different contexts of “art” falls into the danger of Western misconception.

### **The Kalachakra mandala and the cosmology of the Jonang tradition**

I joined a ritual of Kalachakra initiation with about three hundred Buddhists at the Chinese New Year’s Day in 2015. The Kalachakra is a tantric system brought to Tibet from India. The guru gave us instructions at each steps of initiation.

Kalachakra is a term used in Vajrayana Buddhism; it literally means the wheel of time or the cycle of time. Kala means time, and chakra means cycle. The system contains three layers of Kalachakra, namely the external/outer Kalachakra, internal Kalachakra, and other Kalachakra. The external Kalachakra, takes in the physical world, time and the universe, it revolves around the concept of the cycle of time. This can be considered as a part of the basic sciences: astrology, astronomy, and mathematics. The inner Kalachakra has to do with the human body; it is believed that the human body is a small cosmos, which is related to the external cosmos. It concerns processes of human gestation and birth, the classification of the functions within the human body and experience; the expression of human physical existence in terms of channels and Qi (wind or energy). The internal Kalachakra refers to regularities of human body, which is corresponding to the external Kalachakra. The ‘other Kalachakra’, describes the spiritual method leading to enlightenment in the form of Kalachakra. It is the study and practice of the Kalachakra, which leads from ordinary state to the state of Buddhahood or enlightenment. The Kalachakra mandala also consists of three mandalas corresponding to human body, which are the Body, Speech, and Mind Mandala, and great bliss mandala that is the ultimate state of the Buddha.



Figure 1 The Kalachakra initiation

In Tibetan Buddhism, initiation or empowerment means giving permission, in other words to grant the disciples the right to practice the Tantra, it also means planting seeds and nurturing to cultivate to attain certain capacity and to grow the Buddha fruits. Kalachakra mandalas are regarded as the actual divine abode of a particular Kalachakra Buddha state. There are six hundred and thirty-six Buddhas in this mandala. At the second day of the initiation, after a series of complex rituals for preparing to enter the mandala in meditation, all the disciples were guided enter into the Kalachakra mandala by the guru. The disciples imagine they enter the mandala under the guru's instruction and see all the Buddhas inside. According to the guru,

Imagine yourselves walking through the east, south, west, and north gates, and back to the east gate, bow to Buddhas in four directions, and the Buddhas in the centre respectively in sequence. Pray to all Buddhas in the mandala, dedicate to them all your resources to get blessing from all Buddhas, meanwhile, plant the seeds to attain the Buddhahood.

The ritual of the initiation is part of tantric teaching; here I am only talking about data related to the mandala. The Kalachakra mandala is one of the most complicated systems in Tibetan Buddhism. It is a huge palace, which represents physical body of the universe, the cosmology, and the philosophy of the tantric practice. Each of little dots in the painting represents a deity in the Buddha state according to the external Kalachakra; and each deity actually represents one constellation. It also represents the channel, wind, and drop<sup>2</sup> of human body according to the internal Kalachakra.

In the Kalachakra tantra, there are many Buddhas in the mandala; for example, there are 620 Buddhas in 3 mandalas (the empowerment is conducted in 3 mandalas). They all correspond to constellations, seasons of the external wheel of time (Kalachakra) and the internal wheel of time (Kalachakra) in the human body. In the human body there are Yin and Yang

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<sup>2</sup> In Tantric Buddhism, drop (Tib: tigte) is subtle substance that permeates the body, caused by the coalescing of the mind and its accompanying wind at certain parts of the body. It is originated from the original white drop from the father and the red drop from the mother.

aspects corresponding to each other, the Buddha taking the appearance of Yab and Yum, the manifestation of the male and female Bodhisattvas, all of which represent corresponding law of Yin and Yang.

The doctrine of Kalachakra believes that the cosmos, human body and life should be studied from the perspective of time. For example, the four seasons of spring, summer, autumn and winter in a year is called external Kalachakra. The human body is a small cosmos, which is related to the external cosmos. For, example, emotions change in spring and summer or are even different from morning to evening. In a word, life cannot be separated from the living environment; any minor changes will affect the body and life. Things in the cosmos reflect on the human body. The human body is made up of six aggregates, such as form, feeling, perceptions, mental formation, consciousness, and space, and in Kalachakra mandala there are six Buddhas representing the six aggregates. Six is a symbolic number in Kalachakra; for example, earth, water, fire, wind, space, and consciousness are six important constituents to make up human body. Only with the constituent of consciousness, can it form human body. In Kalachakra mandala, the six constituents are represented by six consorts of the tantric deities (yums).

In a word, all the different appearances of Buddha are the symbols of tantra, representing different theory and practice, in other words, they represent different philosophical views; they are not simply secondary agents standing in for the Buddha himself.

There are many guided visualizations at the ritual, to give you an idea of these, here are some data I recorded at the second day of the initiation.

First of all, we visualize the emptiness of all forms; visualize ourselves as Vajra Body of the Boundless Light Buddha. Led by guru, we walk to the north gate of the mandala, facing to Vajra Body of Kalachakra. In order to remove the obstacles of body, supplications are made to Vajra Body who are non-differentiable from guru to confer empowerments on us.

During the empowerment, disciples were guided by the guru went through all the four gates of the mandala in their visualization by visualizing themselves as different Buddhas to remove different type of obstacles (body obstacles, speech obstacles, mind obstacles, and so forth)<sup>3</sup>.

As aforementioned, the Kalachakra mandala contains three layers, which includes the external cosmology and astrology; internal system of human body; and the third level of the mental realm. They are all correspondence to each other; the essence of the Kalachakra doctrine is reflected in the mandala. Practitioners use the Mandala to visualize in meditation the steps along the Path to Enlightenment.

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<sup>3</sup> As the Kalachakra empowerment is a tantric ritual, there are many details I could not represent here.



Figure 2 Four faced Kalachakra and consort

Figure 2 is an image of four faced Kalachakra (image is taken from internal teaching material among the group of Tibetan Buddhists). The four faces are black/blackish blue face in the centre, red face to his right, white face to his left, and yellow face at the back. The four coloured faces represent four constituents. In the centre, black/blackish blue represents wind, in other words, vital energy; red represents fire; yellow represents earth; white represents water. The four constituents in external wheel of time represent the four seasons in a year. Spring, summer, autumn and winter correspond to earth, water, wind, and fire respectively. Kalachakra has 24 hands, which represent the 24 divisions of solar year, two legs represent two tropics, red leg represents the tropic of Cancer, and white leg represent the tropic of Capricorn. This is the corresponding law of Kalachakra between body and universe, in other words, the corresponding law between inner Kalachakra and external Kalachakra.



Figure 3 The guru explains the Kalachakra mandala to disciples

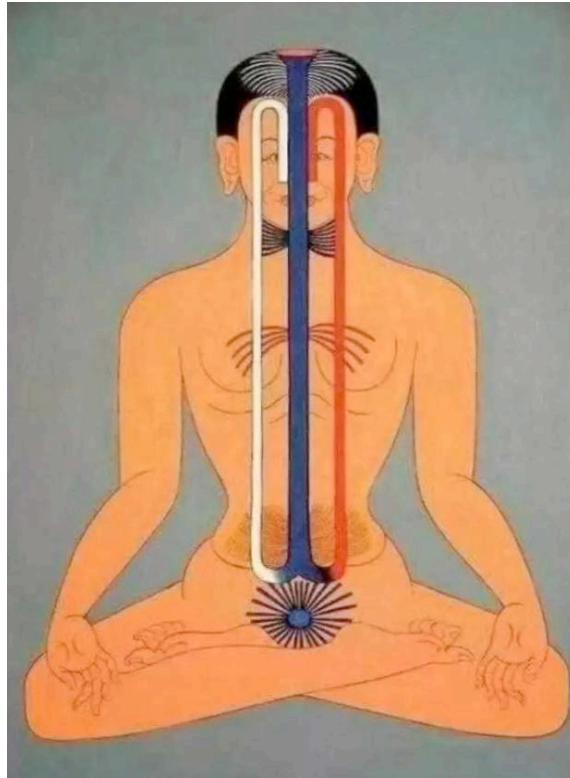


Figure 4 Main channels, wind, and drops of the human body

Figure 4 is a graphic guidance to practice Qi in the Jonang tradition (digital image, it is circulating for instruction among the group of Tibetan Buddhists on Wechat group) (n.d. Wechat, 15 Dec 2016), it shows there are three main channels and four main connections (the top of head, throat, heart, and intimate area). Once Qi could circulate through those channels and connections freely, the practitioner is most likely gain his/her enlightenment of Buddhahood. This image illustrates the location and colours of those channels and connections, also the posture of meditation.

### **Conclusion**

In tantric Buddhism, art objects are made to represent theories, doctrines, philosophy, and so forth. They are visual code, rather than merely an index of a certain prototype, to assist the practitioners to visualize the concepts of doctrines in their practice. But if we were to follow Gell and merely regard the Kalachakra as a secondary agent of the Buddha, all of the rich and diverse meanings and cultural uses of the Kalachakra would be ignored.

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Main Channels, wind, and drop of the human body. n.d. digital image. 15 Dec 2016. Wechat chating group.

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