

*The Creation of Trans-Cultural Belonging
Chinese Artists' Paintings from Tibet after 1982*

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Abstract

Since the 1960s, Tibetan self-government has been established in autonomous areas; there, Tibetans live in compact communities under the unified leadership of the Chinese central government. A number of Chinese artists and scholars have come to work and live in Tibetan cities, in Lhasa in particular.

Against this background, this paper is about contemporary paintings that engaged with the vestiges of Tibet's heritage and made by Chinese artists in Tibet. In this paper, I would take the initial experiment of reshaping the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism by Han Shuli in 1982 as its starting point. This paper examines what Chinese artists have done in the bilingual and bicultural environment of Tibet in the past three decades. It aims to explore the tension between Tibetan and non-Tibetan (mainly Chinese) artists in Lhasa, and the unsettling problem of their cultural identity in between Tibet, the globalised West and China. To its end I hope it also offers a new interpretation of contemporary Tibetan art that created by Tibetan and non-Tibetan artists, which is based on modes of art-making characterised as Tibetan style.

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Since the 1960s, Tibetan self-government has been established in autonomous areas; there, Tibetans live in compact communities under the unified leadership of the Chinese central government. As one of the results of the reform policies by the Chinese central government in 1978, a number of Han Chinese, including Chinese artists and scholars, have come to work and live in Tibetan cities, in Lhasa in particular. Generally speaking, these Chinese artists and scholars have appreciated the great value of Tibetan traditions and endeavored to promote them into a much wider dialogue with Mainland China and the rest of the world. This can be proved by the influential wave of art works produced about the Tibetan people and landscapes by Chinese artists during 1980s and 1990s, such as Chen Danqing's *A Series of Paintings for Tibetans* (1980, fig. 1); Ai Xuan's *Frozen Ground in the Zoige Plateau* (1985, fig. 2); Chen Yifei's *The Wind between the Mountain and the Land* (1994, fig. 3); and Yu Xiaodong's *Cheers, Tibet!* (1996-1997, fig. 4). Since the early 1980s, in their exploration of Tibetan culture, Chinese artists, such as Han Shuli, Ye Youxin and Ye Xingsheng, not only have been inspired by the surface of Tibetan culture, but also have contributed to creating new and diverse Tibetan cultural identities.

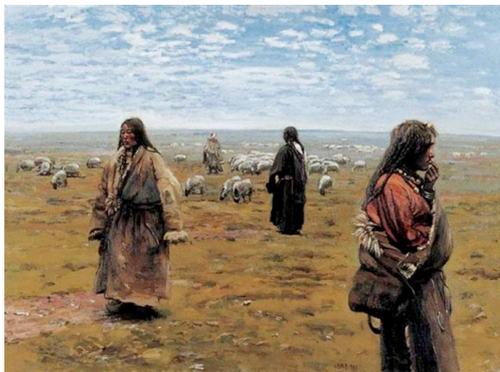


Fig. 1 *A series of paintings for Tibetans*, oil painting by Cheng Danqing, 1980.



Fig. 2 *Frozen Ground in the Zoige Plateau*, oil painting, by Ai Xuan, 1985.



Fig. 3 *The Wind between the Mountain and the Land*, oil painting, by Chen Yifei, 1994.



Fig. 4 *Cheers, Tibet!* Oil painting, Yu Xiaodong, 160X190cm, 1996-1997

This paper is about contemporary paintings engaged with the vestiges of Tibet's heritage and made by Chinese artists in the Tibet Autonomous Region of China. Here, I would take the initial experiment of reshaping the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism by Han Shuli in 1982 as its starting point. In this paper, I mainly select the transnational experiences of some contemporary Chinese artists in seeking to explore the interaction between visual translations and cultures in globalisation. I try to explore the tension between Tibetan and Chinese artists in Lhasa, and the unsettling problem of the trans-cultural identity in between 'the two external forces that

dominate culture in the Tibet Autonomous Region: the globalised West and China' (Harris, 2012: 229). Several key questions inform the focus of this paper:

1. Which artworks by Chinese artists are proposed as exemplars of the use of Tibetan traditional cultures, particularly Tibetan Buddhist themes, in a contemporary framework?
2. What would be the value of the ancient Tibetan tradition for contemporary Chinese artists?
3. Is it possible for Tibetan culture, with its specific vocabulary and visual codes, to be understood by Chinese artists and audiences?
4. How can we appreciate ways in which Chinese artists working on Tibetan themes have influenced and inspired Tibetan contemporary art?

I first provide a brief introduction to the complex contemporary environment of Tibetan art development and the controversial issues on its ethnicity and authenticity at a cross-cultural level. I then analyse some typical examples of the contemporary development of the old Tibetan traditions that done by Chinese artists who have lived and worked in Tibet for decades. In so doing, it is my endeavour to create a broader understanding of one's ethnicity, cultural identity and an essence of Tibetan-ness in contemporary Tibetan art. In this respect, I argue that personal art practice as an experiment may offer an openness that can deal with the encounters between Tibetan art tradition and contemporary art from open, creative, and dynamic perspectives.

Contemporary Tibetan art is constituted by many loose ends and dangling strands that Tibetan artists and some Chinese artists try to tie together between the global players of China, Tibet and the West (Hofer, 2011:1). Influenced by Harris's work, my research on contemporary Tibetan art confronts controversial issues on a cross-cultural level and, in a broad context. Harris's research—being a pioneering study of Tibetan contemporary art since 1959—provides me with insights on the disparity between indigenous, Chinese, and Western assessments of the transformation of Tibetan art from traditional forms to innovative forms. Harris (2012: 208) examines post-1959 Tibetan artworks produced in two parallel but somehow connected worlds: the world of Tibetan painters who remain in a Tibetan autonomous region and the other Tibetan-speaking regions of China, and the world of Tibetan refugee artists living in exile. As Harris (*ibid.*) writes:

Significantly, although artists in each location were forced to reimagine what Tibetan art might be, and did so with very different results, their aim was to generate something that could still be seen as 'authentically' Tibetan.

Yet, from my perspective, the aim of being authentically Tibetan reveals 'utopian and archival representation of their homeland', which can be ambiguous and politicised as facets of cultural diplomacy:

[In the 1980s and 1990s] new paintings from Tibet were construed as ugly deviations from the earlier glories of Tibetan heritage and as evidence of the decline of Tibetan culture under Chinese rule. Art made in Tibet after 1950 was thought to be tainted by association with the People's Republic

(in terms of style, content, and mode of production), and to have lost the distinctive qualities that made it recognizably Tibetan (*ibid.*).

However, the modern and contemporary movement in Tibet during the 1980s was actually an underground activity, a radical protest against the Chinese central government in the political climate of the period. Anti-traditional activist¹ advocates were reforming the dominant (traditional Tibetan and Chinese) thinking in Tibetan society as a contemporary cultural ideology through a gradual de-structuring and restructuring of visual codes and forms within Tibetan art tradition. For example, the renowned Tibetan artist Gonkar Gyatso, who was educated in China (in both the linguistic and aesthetic sense), pioneered a radically modernist form of art to replace the traditional Tibetan art models during 1988 and 1989. He stated that Tibetan artists needed to produce a specifically contemporary Tibetan art, which would be explicitly different from the Chinese (and Western) contemporary art and, to some extent, also engaged actively in a dialogue with mainland China and the rest of the world.

While activism promotes new forms of art from Tibet as aesthetically appealing and exciting innovation, conservatism² claims that it has lost the distinctive qualities of Tibetan heritage under Chinese rule [after 1959] (Harris, 2012: 208-209). Some Tibetan artists and scholars not only insist on following the traditional forms of Tibetan culture, but also are opposed to translating and outputting their religious theories and aesthetic traditions to China and the outside world for political, economic or personal reasons.

From my perspective, I think they may overemphasize the so-called uniqueness or authenticity of ancient Tibetan tradition, using this as a strong excuse for rejecting the idea of integrating cultural studies with China and the rest of the world. Although it is understandable that some Tibetans take intense pride in their cultural identity, this may lead to cultural protectionism and a return back to the previous state of self-isolation, which will inevitably cause barriers towards other cultures in the present era of globalization.

Furthermore, the politics of representation and colonialist appropriations of Tibetan cultural artefacts³ make these conflicts between Contemporary Tibetan people's activism and conservatism more complicated and challenging. Based on an over-romantic view of 'authentic nativeness', the western perspective has developed its own fascination of the myth of the 'Tibet', which makes modern and contemporary Tibetan art unimaginable in the eyes of some Western audiences (Hofer, 2011:1). As Kabir Mansingh Heimsath, a curator of contemporary Tibetan art, observes, there is a

¹ Here, it refers to the action of advocating vigorous reform of Tibetan traditions.

² In contrast to activism, conservatism refers to the action of over-protecting Tibetan traditions and opposing any change in them.

³ The perception of Tibetan culture (including Buddhism and its art) in the West was framed on the Orientalist mode of projecting it as the 'other', see Korom's *Constructing Tibetan Culture* (1997), Dodin and Rather's *Mythos Tibet* (1997) and *Imagining Tibet: Perceptions, Projections, Tibetan Traditions and Fantasies* (2001), and Brauen's *Dreamworld Tibet: Western Illusions* (2004), Lopez's *Prisoners of Shangri-la* (1998).

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conservative stance about the Tibetan art that is ‘Tibetan “tradition” has been lost within Tibet itself—so anything genuinely “Tibetan” must necessarily be old, and anything new that comes from Tibet itself is not “really” Tibetan’ (Heimsath, 2005: 1).

The greater the conflicts, the more it shows the confusion contemporary artists in Tibet have in their value-orientation. As Harris suggests:

[Activist] Tibetan artists sought to use the idea [of new form of art] ... That is, they sought to dislodge one colonially produced notion of Tibetan distinctiveness—particularly that created ... under the influence of the British—with another kind of uniqueness [now] derived from ... China (*ibid.*: 209).

In response, China has, since the early 2000s, endorsed the production of Tibetan contemporary art as a way of preserving and promoting Tibetan culture. With the financial support from the Chinese government, Han Shuli, who have lived in Tibet for over four decades and become the Chairman of the artists’ Association in Tibet, has organized many tour exhibitions of modern and contemporary paintings from Tibet in Europe since 2001.

Compared to more politically motivated Tibetan artists, these Chinese artists, such as Han Shuli and Ye Xingsheng, care about whether or not spiritual transformation from Tibetan belief and art tradition thousands of years ago are still true or relevant now, and they are asking, through their work, what the relationship between contemporary people (in Tibet) and the inspirations of Tibetan (art) tradition is now, and what it may contain. As Han says in an interview, ‘anybody involves in art cannot resist the mysterious strength and temptation of Tibet and its culture’⁴ and he describes his own inner feelings as follows⁵:

[Once I] leave Tibet, I feel like a plant pulled out from its soil and that lives without water ... Let myself be immersed in the beauty hidden in my own culture [here, I refer to Tibetan culture because I regard Tibet as my art birthplace] where I find an appropriate way to express it out—that kind of pleasure and complex feelings of achievement is beyond words can express.

⁴ http://hanshuli.artron.net/main.php?pFlag=news_2&newid=279845&aid=A0001384&columnid=0 (accessed on 11 September 2012).

⁵ <http://hanshuli.artron.net> (accessed on 11 September 2012).

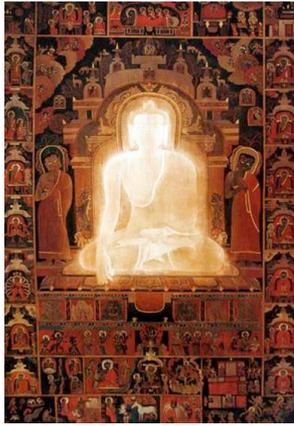


Fig. 5 *The Buddha*, cloth painting, by Han Shuli.

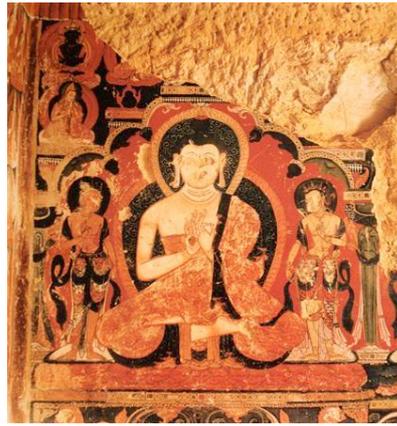


Fig. 6 *A Buddha and Two Bodhisattvas*, Mural painting on the north wall of the Red Palace ruins in Zanda county, the mid-15th century.



Fig. 7 Sakyamuni, mural painting, A-ji Monastery, 12th century, Tibet.



Fig. 8 *The Emptiness No. 1*, cloth painting, 151X101cm, 2004, by Han Shuli.



Fig. 9 *The Emptiness No. 2*, cloth painting, 151X101cm, 2004, by Han Shuli.



Fig. 10 The remains of the large backlight in the Buddha's Hall of the Zatang Monastery in Tibet.

In order to explore and express the hidden beauty in Tibetan culture, Han Shuli has found inspiration from the ancient Tibetan paintings and sculptures, particularly those of the desolate remains of Guge kingdom, such as Zatang Monastery in western Tibet. For instance, one can see clearly the influence in the composition of his cloth paintings entitled *The Buddha* (fig. 5) that was completed at the end of the 1990s, which is very similar in structure to the mural paintings of the Sakyamuni Buddha in the Red Palace ruins in Zanda County (fig. 6) and in A-ji Monastery of Western Tibet (fig. 7); and the reference of the large backlight of the clay-sculptured figure in the Buddha's Hall of the Zatang Monastery (fig. 8) from his series of cloth paintings entitled *The Emptiness* (*Kong Men* in Chinese, 2004, fig. 9 and 10). The common feature of these three of Han Shuli's paintings during the end of 1990s and 2000s is the encrypted visual vocabulary of the absent Buddha in a kind of style that combined 'dreamy semi-abstract forms' with ancient Tibetan religious images (Heimsath, 2005: 5). From my personal perspective, the fantastical palaces and monasteries that are full of sophisticated mural paintings in the Guge civilization were greatly damaged during the 11th century and the 15th century for reasons that are unknown and eventually were abandoned in the 17th century due to its neighbour the Ladakhi's military campaigns (Yu, 2006: 170-171). Until the archeological investigation in 1980s and 1990s, the precious and magnificent artworks in the remains of Guge Kingdom finally came

back into the public gaze after centuries' of silence. The history of the Guge kingdom is somehow paralleled to the modern history of the Tibet from 1960s to 2000s—the Chinese Cultural Revolution during 1966 and 1976 endeavoured to demolish any religious beliefs and many of the objects and art in Tibet and the aesthetic tradition were destroyed and abandoned there until the start of the 1980s. It makes me suspect that it was not coincidental that the visual culture of the Guge in Western Tibet became the inspiration for Han Shuli's paintings in 1990s. In strong contrast to the socialist realist propaganda imagery that were once dominating both China and Tibet during the period between the 1950s and the early 1970s,⁶ Han Shuli and his Tibetan and Chinese artist friends, felt at liberty to create images that re-engaged with Tibetan Buddhism and its art. For Han, the statement of the absent Buddha in his paintings may reflect some kind of fusion with Tibetan's cultural identity that was wiped out during the Cultural Revolution. In his artworks Han also reveals his inner personal longing to inherit the Tibetan traditional culture, as with other Tibetan artists. As Harris (2012: 217) states:

It should be acknowledged that this development [of a modernist sensibility among Tibetan artists in Lhasa] was initiated in part by Han Shuli ... he took the iconography of Tibetan Buddhism and reshaped it in ways previously unattempted by Tibetans...Han Shuli's mode of regarding the vestiges of Tibet's heritage proved to be hugely influential on other artists in Lhasa (Both Tibetan and Han). He had paved the way for the imagery of Tibetan Buddhism to be viewed from a secularist perspective, and for its objects to become props for making art.

I therefore suggest that the presence of Han and other Chinese artist in Lhasa positively contributed to reproducing and reviving Tibetan aesthetic traditions through innovation.



Fig. 11 *Red Buddha*, mixed media on cloth, 120X85cm, by Gonkar Gyatso. Photographed by Clare Harris.



Fig. 12 *The Emptiness No. 1*, cloth painting, 151X101cm, 2004, by Han Shuli.

⁶ During the 1950s and 1970s, there was the first wave of Tibetan themes in prints and paintings by Chinese artists. These representative works during this period are as follows: *When the Good New of Liberating Tibet peacefully Arrived the Kangxi Plateau* by Liu Wen and Li Shaoyan (1952), *Outside the Ancient Great Wall* (1954) by Shi Nu, *The Spring Comes to Tibet* (1955) by Dong Xiwen, *In the Heavy Snow* (1955) by Huang Wei, *The First Time Stepped on the Golden Road* (1963) by Li Huanmin, *The Golden Season* by Zhu Naizheng (1963), *The Summer River* (1964) by Ye Qianshu, and *Serf's Daughter goes to University* (1973) by Pan Shixun. Artworks during this period usually adopted metaphorical titles to imply the Chinese socialist orientation in Tibet.

Here, I found another painting entitled *Red Buddha* (1989, fig. 11) which was done by the famous Tibetan contemporary artist Gyatso in Lhasa, that also resonates with Han Shuli's cloth paintings. In this Gyatso's painting, that were influenced by Western modernist art such as cubist forms, he employs the techniques of Chinese traditional ink and water painting that he learned in the Minority Art School in Beijing during 1980's, that were done in order to express a pared down icon of the spiritual leader of the Buddhism, the Buddha, 'into an anonymous apparition'(Harris, 2006: 702). As Harris comments,

For Gyatso, the 'Red Buddha' painting he completed in the late 1980s was a statement about the absence of the Buddha in Tibet and a demonstration of the need to reactive his presence in that place (*ibid.*).

Admittedly, many ideas and models of Tibetan traditional (Buddhist) art seemed to be repressed, abandoned or overlooked as visual codes, which have both theoretical sophistication and critical aesthetic vocabulary in the Tibetan-themed artworks created from the 1950s to the start of the 1980s. It is no wonder that in Harris's interpretation she regards the painting as a medium that deflects politicised reading in the historical context of Tibet in the 1980s. Nonetheless, I would add one point to supplement Harris's analysis of Gyatso's paintings: there is clear evidence of the influence of the Chinese aesthetic tradition, which epitomises Tibetan artists' concerns about their cultural identity and their engagement in the trans-cultural translation of visual codes between Han Chinese and Tibetan art at that time. That is to say, there is the question of how to develop an aesthetic heritage in contemporary Tibetan art, where both Chinese artists, such as Han Shuli, and Tibetan artists, such as Gyatso, all end up in the same place even though they may take different routes getting there.

Take another outstanding Chinese artist Ye Xingsheng as an example, who was from Sichuan Province and is also the Chairman of the Tibetan Folk art association. In 2003, for his outstanding contribution to the conservation of the old Tibetan tradition and excellent art achievement, Ye was blessed by 480 Tibetan lamas (fig. 13) and conferred to the honorary title of 'Sera Thekchen Monastery Chuntse' tagmeme with a gold seal (fig. 14), which was the first time a Chinese artist received such a prestigious honour in Tibeta history.⁷ 'I cannot live without Tibet, and Tibet would remember me as well', he says in an interview,

Thanks to the Tibetan people for their great creativity in developing such a broad and profound culture, which makes me being so intoxicated for over 40 years.⁸



Fig. 15 *Tashi Delek*, mural painting in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing, 450X1800cm.

⁷ <http://ent.cctv.com/interview/special/yexinsheng/>(accessed on 11 September 2012).

⁸ <http://ent.cctv.com/interview/special/yexinsheng/>(accessed on 11 September 2012).

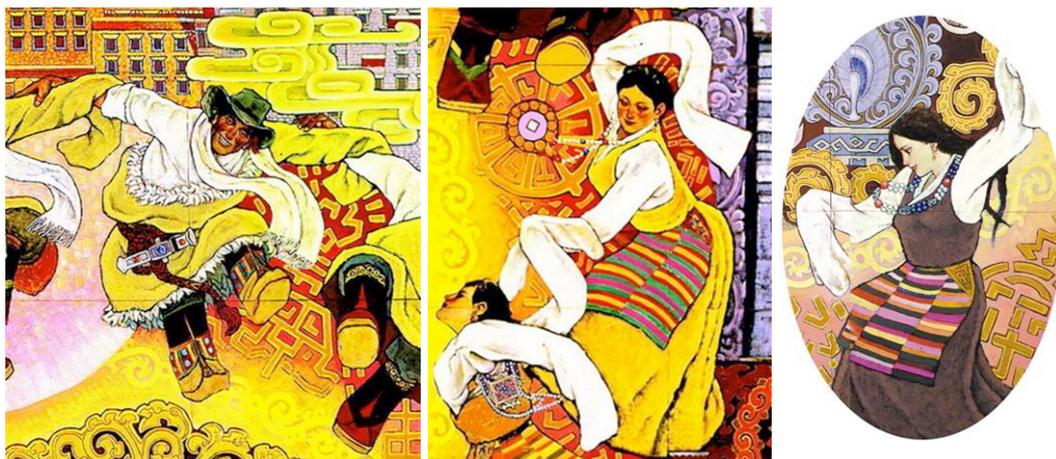


Fig. 16, 17 and 18 the figures in the centre of the painting are performing the *Guozhuang* dance.

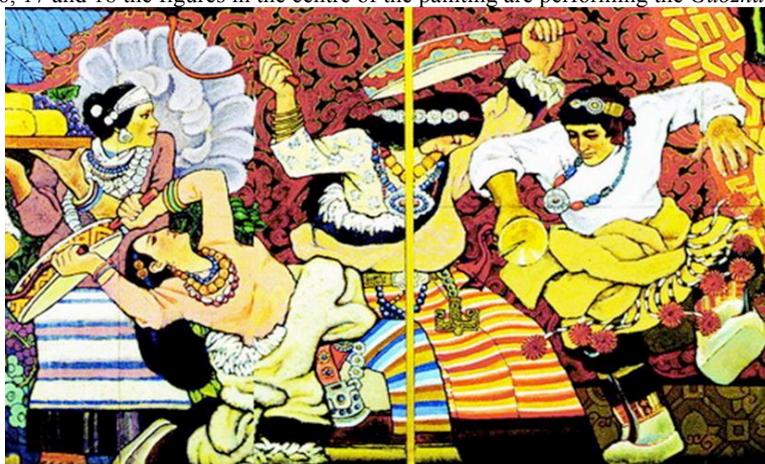


Fig. 19 the figures performing the *Reba* dance.

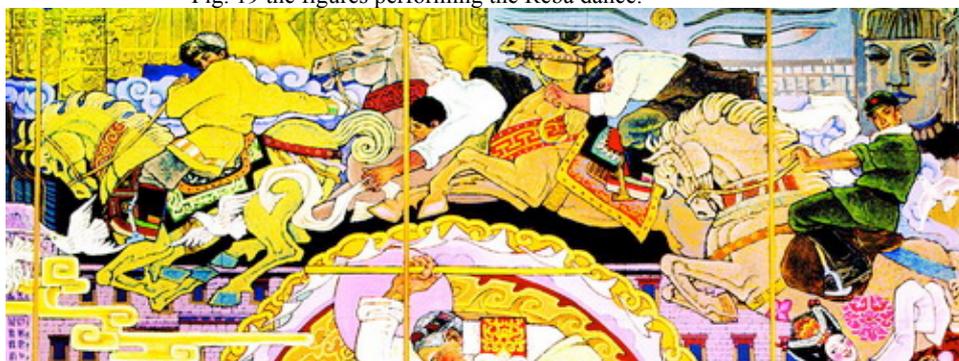


Fig. 20 the figures on the top of the right side of the mural painting are racing the horse.

Indeed, his love, passion and close relationships to the Tibetan culture is evident from his design of the masterpiece mural painting *Tashi Delek* (1980-1985, fig. 15) seen above and in the Great Hall of the People in Beijing. The composition of this gaint piece is based on the painter inheriting the traditional forms of the circle and the square used in the *mandala* of Tibetan art. Followed by the rules of the old traditional Tibetan painting, Ye Xingsheng maps out the main lines of orientation, the vertical and the horizontal axes and adopts the symmetric arrangements of 71 figures, 49 animals, and over 100 symbolic objects.⁹ From my personal perspective, the artist delicately designed the circle as a variety of patterns of flaming fire and auspicious clouds so that they are intertwined in a round and a square naturally. The contrasts

⁹ <http://ent.cctv.com/interview/special/yexinsheng/>(accessed on 11 September 2012).

between the circle and the square, between the curves and the straight lines, make the whole composition well-balanced and harmonious. Also, Ye adopts the methodology and artistry of the *mandala*—‘a sacred space created in the process of transforming the universe from a realm of suffering to a realm of happiness’ (Leidy and Thurman, 1997: 9). Thus, in my own viewpoint, the systematic figural and architectural creation of individuals and communities can be regarded as a new approach for developing the art of the *mandals*, which exalt spaces and reflects ‘a longstanding commitment in ... [Tibetan] Buddhism to world transformation as well as individual liberation’.¹⁰

Moreover, Ye employs decorative techniques and styles to depict the magnificent scenes of the whole process of traditional Tibetan *Losar*.¹¹ In the centre of the gaint mural painting, many young Tibetan men and women are performing the Khampa Circle (or known as *Guozhuang*) dance (fig. 16-18), one of the three major Tibetan folk dances, which is based around auspicious symbols, such as the head of sheep, the green crops, and a pair of lucky buckets. On the left hand side of the painting, there is a Tibetan woman holding torches in pastoral areas to say farewell to the past year. Surrounding her are various scenes of Tibetan traditional activities that are depicted before the beginning of the new year, such as eating dough drops known as ‘Gutu’, having a bath, carrying water, throwing grains, playing a Tibetan fiddle made of six strings, performing *Reba* (‘the drum and the bell) dance (fig. 19). On the right side of the painting, there is an old Tibetan man is singing *zhega*, one of the oldest door-to-door folk performing arts in Tibet, in the centre and surrounding him, the people are giving each other *hada*, performing a traditional Tibetan opera, horse-racing (fig. 20), drinking the hullessbarley wine and singing songs, and preparing for ploughing in order to welcome the coming new year. The background of the whole piece is the splendid Potala Palace, the snowy mountain and the folating clouds. Confronting this magnificent mural painting, one can see a great number of figures from the children to the old that are portrayed vividly with different characters, gestures and Tibetan costumes in a wide range of traditional activities. Unless the painter was very familiar with customs and the general way of the Tibetan’s thinking and feelings, it would be impossible for him to accurately grasp and design the content of this mural painting. Also unless the artist understood Tibetan culture comprehensively and was able to master the technical aspects of Tibetan painting, it would be too difficult for him to find a way to inherit and develop the traditional form as Ye managed to do in his painting.

¹⁰ <http://ent.cctv.com/interview/special/yexinsheng/>(accessed on 11 September 2012).

¹¹ *Losar* means ‘New Year’ in Tibetan.



Fig. 21 *Auspicious Clouds around Potala Palace*, cloth painting by Ye Xingsheng, 1988.

After completing the monumental mural painting, Ye created another influential painting entitled *Auspicious Clouds around Potala Palace* in 1988 (fig. 21). The main body of this painting displays an accurate representation of Tibetan traditional architecture: the Potala Palace in the centre, the beautiful Norbulingka palace on the lower part on the left hand side, the famous Jokhang Monastery and the Alliance Tablet of Tang China and Tibet on the lower right hand side, and the Buddhist white stupas with a gold top in the middle of the bottom. Surrounding them are colourful auspicious clouds depicted in the decorative traditional patterns in Tibetan art. On the upper corners, there is the sun on the right hand side and the moon on the left hand side among the clouds. As it well-known in Tibet, the sun and the moon are usually depicted above the main deity on the upper part of traditional *thangka* or wall painting in Tibet, representing the wisdom of the female and compassion of the males respectively. Here, Ye inherits these traditional Tibetan symbols and their symbolic meanings in order to refer to the unity, harmony and balance of Tibetan society that he sees today. In the distant background of the painting, there is the Dragon King Lake, the grassland and the rivers, and the snowy mountains. The whole composition comprises three parts: the background area, the middle-body area, and the front area, which may sound similar to the linear perspective that was used by the Renaissance artists in the West. However, in fact Ye Xingsheng breaks out of the illusion of three-dimensional space and the rules of the linear perspective in this painting and layouts the content of various Tibetan architecture and landscape in accordance with the rules of traditional Tibetan paintings that arrange the content orderly and symmetrically together on a rather flat surface.

Before I move on, there are two notes that I notice in this painting. The first note is that Ye employs the traditional mineral pigments and dyes in Tibet, such as the azurite blue, lapis lazuli, minium, cinnabar, *ka rag* (earth white), and carbon black, that have better stability and more resistance to both the light and the damp. He also follows the common method and process of applying colours and outlines of traditional Tibetan painting. Another interesting note is that there is a flock of 21 black-neck white cranes with various gestures that forms incomplete round shapes in front of the Potala Palace. As far as I know, black-necked cranes are an endangered species as precious as pandas, usually found on the Tibetan Plateau and parts of India and Bhutan. Every year, thousands of cranes fly to the Yarlung valleys on the Tibetan

Plateau to spend the winter. Because of their incorruptible temperament, beautiful appearance, elegant movements and long life span, the Tibetans love black-necked cranes very much, deeming them as symbols of wisdom, auspiciousness, nobility and longevity.¹² Similarly, in Chinese legends and Chinese traditional art, the crane is also one of the most popular auspicious symbols and is often called the ‘blessed’ or ‘heavenly’ crane, which is probably because Taoists believed that their highly-ranked priests would ‘turn into a feathered crane’ or ‘fly on a crane and become immortal’ when they pass away in ancient China. With regards to their common adoration in the cranes, it is unclear whether there is any connection or influence in their symbolic manifestations between the Tibetan and Chinese culture. Yet, what one can see clearly is that both Tibetan and Chinese artists have introduced the cranes as an auspicious symbol into their traditional paintings since the ancient times. Ye is probably the first contemporary Chinese artist to paint the symbol of the cranes in his Tibetan-themed paintings at the end of 1970s, which in turn influenced some other Chinese painters in Tibet. For example, the symbol of the cranes also appears in Yu Youxin’s paintings entitled *The Floating Clouds and the Wild Cranes* (1980s, fig. 22) and *Flying over the Empty Valley* (1996, fig. 23), and Han’s Chinese painting *Longivity* (2003, fig. 24) and illustrations *Flowers of the Grassland* (1982, fig. 25 and 26). Also, in Ye’s recent artworks, he repeatedly paints the cranes as a symbol of Tibetan cultural identity, such as his cloth painting entitled *The Heaven* (2005, fig. 27) and mural painting known as *The Inventor of the Tibetan Script—Thonmi Sambhota* (2011, fig. 28) in the centre hall of the research centre of Tibetan studies.



Fig. 22 *The Floating Clouds and the Wild Cranes*, cloth painting by Yu Youxin, 1980s.



Fig. 23 *Flying over the Empty Valley*, cloth painting by Yu Youxin, 1996.



Fig. 24 *Longivity*, Chinese Painting by Han Shuli, 2003.



Fig. 25 and 26 *Flowers of the Grassland (BangJin Meiduo)*, illustrations, by Han Shuli, 1982



¹² <http://2007.tibetmagazine.net/en/cranep.htm> (accessed on 11 September 2012).



Fig. 27 *Tian Jie (The Heaven)*, cloth painting, by Ye, 2005.



Fig. 28 *The Inventor of the Tibetan Script—Thonmi Sambhota*, painting, by Ye Shengxing, 199X360cm, 2011.

In Ye's painting entitled *The Inventor of the Tibetan Script—Thonmi Sambhota*, Ye combines the old Tibetan aesthetic tradition and a more modern realistic method of painting, which integrates successfully the mysterious visual languages and forms from ancient times into the artistic tastes of our contemporary life. In the centre of the painting, there is *Thonmi Sambhota*, one of the seven great ministers at the King Songtsen Gampo's court during the first half of the seventh century, who also invented the writing system of the Tibetan language on the basis of the Indian alphabets and scripts (Schaik, 2011: 12). The figure wears a red top hat, a patterned red Tibetan robe with a white long vest, and holds Buddhist scriptures with two hands and walks forward from the rays of bright sunlight. When the artist depicts the parts of the figure's face and hands, he adopts realistic Western drawing techniques of highlighting the light and shade of the objects in order to create a three-dimensional and real effect of the flesh. The other arrangements of the painting are as follows: Karmapa palace, which is used for translating the Indian Buddhist texts into Tibetan, is drawn on the left part of the painting. Underneath it, there are thirty different Tibetan characters written on a colourful tablet that fill the middle on the left side, which makes the whole painting appear somehow post-modern in style. The Nyemo County in the west of Lhasa, the birthplace of *Thonmi Sambhota* is drawn at the bottom of the left hand side. Some stationery materials, such as the Tibetan writing tablet, ink stand, and brushes, that are depicted in the middle part of the right side; and Johang monastery and the alliance monument are located on the lower part of the right side.

In summary, my research is on the input that Chinese artists have given to contemporary Tibetan art and the sense of trans-cultural belongings that these Chinese artists have developed in their artworks and personal lives in the past decades. In a positive sense, it is no exaggeration to state that the ideas, models and visual codes coming from Tibetan culture influenced many Chinese artists, which were later assimilated into Chinese culture and contemporary art. During the period from the late 1980s to the 1990s, new and diverse Tibetan cultural identities were created with contributions made by Chinese artists, in their exploration of Tibetan culture. This was probably due to these works' presentation of various signature styles of contemporary Tibetan art that were in parallel to the scholastic need to correct the outdated over-romantic view of Tibet in the West. As a Western audience comments on Han's painting, he says:

From your artwork, I feel that the Tibetan aesthetic tradition and religious freedom are not to be stifled by the Chinese in Tibet as I often heard from the media. In fact, I see the progress of developing the Tibetan culture. I can see your fascination for Tibet and its culture not only is love in its general sense, but also the most profound sincerity, modesty, love and compassion in the bottom of your heart, which manifest in the figures and objects in your Tibetan-themed painting.¹³

In these outstanding Tibetan-themed artworks as I discussed above, Chinese artists put their affection and subjective understanding of Tibet and its culture into the visual landscape and the figures that they depicted, which not only display the spirit of the Tibetans, but also reveal their own aesthetic tastes and individual's deep inner longings. Here, I suggest that it is not one's ethnicity that confers an essence of Tibetan-ness or an intimate relationship with Tibetan art traditions.¹⁴ In a complex contemporary environment, the emphasis on individualistic persona rather than one's ethnicity and nationality is a creative strategy: 'a tactic designed to deflate essentializing constructions of Tibetan-ness imposed on them from outside as well as a method for resisting politicized readings of their work' (Harris, 2012: 234). As postmodern theories of transnational translation go beyond issues of uniqueness and authenticity on a traditional cultural level,¹⁵ my research focus in this paper shifts from studying Tibetan art as specifically Tibetan, to studying it as a set of potential strategies latent within personal journeys in creating the sense of trans-cultural belonging.

To its end I hope it will offer a new interpretation of contemporary Tibetan art based on modes of art-making characterised as Tibetan style, as opposed to a more readily suggestion by some politically motivated Tibetans that 'Tibetan contemporary art can only be created *by* Tibetans' (*ibid.*: 228). On the one hand, these artworks done by Chinese artists in Tibet display the spirit of the Tibetans; this is beyond the territorial boundaries of ethnicity. On the other hand, these artworks also reveal their aesthetic tastes and an individual's deep inner longings. can be regarded as a specific cultural product translating techniques and ideas and depicting images of Tibet in global communication.

¹³ <http://hanshuli.artron.net> (accessed on 11 September 2012).

¹⁴ Some radical Tibetan artists (such as Gyatso) believe 'ethnicity fundamentally determined style' and therefore insist that Tibetan artist are the only ones can create an authentic Tibetan type of art (Harris, 2012: 227-228).

¹⁵ Based on Wang Ning and Sun Yifeng's analyses of contemporary translators' approaches to 'cultural translation' that 'localized' western theories in the Chinese context in a post-colonial era or vice versa, they conclude that cross-cultural dialogue can be carried more pragmatically and ideologically, especially in the field of art through various individual artist's experimental exploration. (Wang and Sun, 2008: 26)

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