



Karmapa Statues in Drepung Monastery

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Abstract. This paper offers a brief history of Karmapa, one of the livings Buddhas in Tibetan Buddhism, including an introduction to Drepung Monastery, a Tibetan Buddhism Temple, and a detailed analysis of the history and iconography of the eleven lacquered wood Karmapa statues at the Monastery, together with a focus on their distinguishing features when compared to traditional Chinese Arhat representations. This research demonstrates that these Arhats exhibit exclusive features that are corresponding with Tibetan Buddhist tradition. The findings show that these monuments had a significant impact on the preservation of Tibetan Buddhism history.

Keywords: Karmapa Statues, Drepung Monastery, Tibetan Buddhist

1 Introduction

Tibet had remarkable progress in economic, political, religious, and social spheres throughout the 276-year reign of the Ming Dynasty (1368-1644). Deshin Shekpa, the fifth Karmapa (1384-1415) was the formal leader of the Karma Kagyu tradition and continued to be headed from generation to many generations in transmission via hereditary lineage. Among Tibetan Buddhist groups, the Karma Kagyu tradition was the first Tibetan religion group who take the reincarnation system for the Living Buddha.

Under the reincarnation system for the Living Buddha, the fifth Karmapa, Deshin Shekpa, was verified in the year 21 of Yongle era (1423), i.e., Tibetan year of the Water Rabbit. According to *Mdo-smad-chos-byung: The Theocratic History of Amdo* ^[1], “Emperor Taizong of the Ming Dynasty, personal name Zhu Di, sent a Tibetan monk, Bandanzhashi, to travel westward to Zari Mountain in Tibet, Gong Bu, to verify the existence of the reincarnated child of the Karmapa.”

Drepung Monastery, an important heritage site under state protection, owns eleven lacquered wood Karmapa statues of the Ming Dynasty. As indicated by the formal historical record, these wooden statues were a diplomatic gift enshrined by Zhu Di, the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, and were sent to the fifth Karmapa. During the reign of Emperor Yongle and Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming Dynasty (1403–1435), the Ming government supervised the production of numerous Buddhist statues combining both Tibetan and Chinese styles, known as “Yongxuan Buddha Statues” ^[2]. The interaction between the Fifth Karmapa and Emperor Yongle has left a significant historical record,

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and Chen Xinhai's book, Emperor Yongle and Deshin Shekpa ^[3], compiles scattered information, documenting their exchanges and the historical evidence of their mutual promotion of Sino-Tibetan cultural exchange.

Most of the surviving Yongxuan Buddha statues today are gold and bronze statues. These lacquered wood Karmapa statues, which use the ancient Chinese wood-carved technique and strictly follow the rituals of Karmapa offerings in Tibet. This study of Karmapa statues in Drepung monastery has scientific and social value in Tibetan Buddhism.

2 Background

Drepung Monastery is located in southern Lhasa and is about 10 km away from the downtown area. It appears like a heap of rice, which is why it is referred to as a collection of rice. However, it is known as Drepung (prosperity made manifest) in Tibetan. The Drepung Monastery is built on a grand scale and covers a total area of approximately 250000 square meters. The main buildings include the Tsochin Hall and the Ganden Phodrang Palace. A large number of Buddhist classics, Buddha statues, and thangkas were collected in there. The monastery has had a great influence on Tibetan Buddhist society.

Drepung Monastery together with Ganden Monastery and Sera Monastery, became the three major monasteries in Lhasa and one of the six major monasteries of the Gelug—the schools of Tibetan Buddhism. Drepung Monastery is listed as an important heritage site under state protection because of its typical Tibetan architectural style. It is also a precious collection gallery of many important Buddhist cultural relics and heritage.

The fifth Karmapa's statues were given less attention recently within Tibetan Buddhism research than traditional Buddha statues. This article takes the statue of the great treasure, Dharma King Karmapa, as a research case and reveals its important historical value, and then illustrates the research results from the perspective of artistic value and the difference between Chinese and Sino and Tibetan Karmapa's statues styles.

3 Features of Ancient Sino-Tibetan Karmapa statue

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, due to the prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism in the palace and street, a style of Buddhist statue art that had matured in the 12th century in Nepal gradually influenced the Han people's region. Anigo, a Nepali architect and sculptor, introduced new techniques to the Kahan Balig and promoted the popularity of the "Western Brahmanical Appearance" style ^[4]. From the Yongle Emperor of the Ming Dynasty to the Xuande Emperor, Tibetan-style statue art continued to thrive in the local art, giving rise to a group of palace Buddhist statues known as the "Yongxuan Statues." These eleven Karmapa's' statues are part of the most classical Tibetan-style Buddhist sculpture of this period, blending the artistic influences of the Sino and Tibetan styles.

According to the major historical record, Buddhism was introduced to China mainland after the Eastern Han Dynasty. Statue art followed the spread of Buddhism from the western regions, such as Xinjiang and Dunhuang, and, following the river route, came to the central plain cities like Xi'an, Luoyang, and Qingzhou. Incorporating the foreign styles such as Gandhara, Mathura, and Gupta, the Chinese people were able to boldly construct Buddhist sculptures that mixed Eastern and Western culture and artwork styles while presenting distinguishing traditional mid-China features throughout the Sui and Tang dynasties.

During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynastic periods, Tibetan Buddhism was disseminated throughout various regions of China via imperial patronage, leaving behind profound traces of cultural fusion. One prominent illustration of this is the Buddhist sculptures at the Feilai Peak of Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou.

Regarding the art of sculpting arhats in Han Dynasty, it lagged behind traditional Buddhist sculpture by several centuries. It wasn't until the 7th century AD, during the Tang Dynasty, that Master Xuan Zang's translation of the *Nandimitrvadna: Record on the Duration of the Law*, spoken by the Great Arhat Nadi Mitra, provided a comprehensive list of the sixteen Arhats, along with their names, ranks, retinues, and abodes. It was only after this development that Arhat's faith and the production of Arhat paintings and sculptures began to flourish. However, due to the absence of specific visual descriptions of the Arhats in the *Nandimitrvadna*, the sculptures took on a wide range of forms and appearances. Due to absence of written inscriptions, it would be an arduous task for onlookers to discern the identity of each Arha.

With the earliest surviving sets of eighteen Karmapa statues, the Song Dynasty polychrome statues from Changzhi County, Shanxi Province, and the Yuan and Ming Karmapa portrait paintings from Dule Temple in Jixian County as examples, we can observe common traits of Han-style Karmapa statues from different periods. Approximately one-third of the Karmapa statues have the appearance of Indian monks, with red faces, prominent noses, thick eyebrows, or curled beards, while the rest have Han-style monk features with plump cheeks, fair skin, and a refined demeanor. The physical positions of the Karmapa are presented randomly and without fixed conventions.

4 Analysis of the shapes of the Arhat Statues at Drepung Monastery

The lacquered wood Arhat statues were originally made of sandalwood and numbered sixteen in all. They were initially kept in Rtes. La, Nyingchi Chongkyê^[5], a revered repository under the supervision of the fifth Karmapa. References to these sixteen wooden Arhats can be found in the Tibetan autobiographies of both the fifth Karmapa and the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche^[6]. In 1722, the 8th Tai Situ Rinpoche embarked on a pilgrimage to Lhasa along with his mother, during which they "viewed and paid homage to various Buddhist artifacts, including the sixteen Arhat statues bestowed by the Ming Emperor on the fifth Karmapa, which were kept in Drepung Monastery." This indicates that during that time, among the many precious offerings in the RTSE La Repository, these sculptures held a particularly significant status.

The repository burned down around the year 1644, during the late Ming period when it was set ablaze by Mongol forces. At that time, Gusri Khan, the Khoshut prince and founder of the Khoshut Khanate, led a large army into the Tibetan region, defeating the Tibetan rulers who supported the Karma Kagyu tradition. This event led to the plunder and destruction of the RTSE La repository, and the Buddhist relics and treasures housed therein were looted and transported across the Yarlung Tsang Po River to be taken to the Lhasa region. During the chaotic period of transportation, five of the sixteen Arhat sculptures fell into the river by accident. The remaining eleven Arhats eventually found their way to the Buddha Hall of Drepung Monastery, where they have been preserved to this day. More than a century later, in 1775, the Tibetan autobiography of the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche recalled this painful history for Karma Kagyu tradition. The eleven incomplete lacquered wood Arhat statues became significant witnesses to this historical episode.

Drepung Monastery boasts an impressive collection of eleven wooden Arhat statues that differ significantly from typical Chinese Arhat sculpture styles. These Arhat statues are uniformly depicted in a sitting position with distinctively Tibetan features, including elongated ear lobes, a high nose, a mustache, a beard, and a bald pate with hair on the sides and back of the statue's head. Each Arhat statue has distinct features and mudras that set it apart from the Han Arhat lineage. The iconography of these Arhats at Drepung Monastery is influenced by the widely practiced Tibetan Buddhist book, *The Ritual for Paying Homage to Elders and Offerings*.

"The Ritual" is the most prevalent Arhat worship ritual in the Tibetan region, dating back to the 13th century and translated by the Tibetan Buddhist text translator Shakyashribhadra (1127–1225). The Ritual describes the seating arrangements, names, abodes, relations, and, most crucially, the distinctive features and mudras of Tibetan Arhat statues, which identify them from Han-people-made Arhat statues.

By comparing the wooden arhats at Drepung Monastery with the descriptions in "The Ritual," researchers can identify specific arhats with confidence. The first image [Fig.1], depicting an elderly Arhat holding a treasure lasso, corresponds to the seventh Arhat, residing in the sacred land of Kashmira, Jigano Gawa Tsawa. In the second image [Fig.2], the young Arhat adorned with golden earrings represents the fourth Arhat, residing in the Copper-Colored Mountain of Southern Jambudvipa, Gyaligya Tsawa. The third image [Fig.3], featuring an Arhat wearing a celestial crown, is the tenth Arhat, residing in the Blue-Green Land of Tanggute, Lopu Lopu Tsawa. The fourth image [Fig.4], depicting an Arhat with sutras and an alms bowl, is likely the twelfth Arhat, residing on the Eastern Shambhala Continent, Bindu Lopaka Ro Doshisha.

According to "The Ritual," only the fourteenth Arhat In his right hand is a monk's staff (Khakkhara), and in his left hand is a vase that removes poverty and spiritual deficiencies. Therefore, the fifth image [Fig.5], despite the left hand holding nothing, can be identified as the fourteenth elder, Arhat Nagas Ena. The monk's staff may have been lost over the years, resulting in the current open-hand pose. In the sixth image [Fig.6], the Arhat's left-hand holds a teaching mudra, and his right hand holds a book. He aids those who earnestly wish to study, practice, and meditate on the Buddha's teachings. These features indicate this is the thirteenth Buddhist elder who is dwelling in the Heaven of the Thirty-Three, Arhat Pant haka. The seventh image [Fig.7], portraying a

slightly smiling Arhat holding a book showing his dedication to the teachings and his resolve to help others, represents the fifteenth elder, Arhat Gopaka. The benevolent Arhat of the eighth image [Fig.8] holds an enlightenment stupa given to him by the Buddha, and it can also be identified that he is the last sixteenth Buddhist elder, the king of the snowy mountains, Arhat Abhaya.

The remaining three Arhat statues present a challenge in terms of identification. The ninth image [Fig.9] shows an Arhat in a meditation mudra. "The Ritual" lists three Arhats with these gestures: the second Arhat, Ajita; the eighth Arhat, Kanaka; and the eleventh Arhat, Chulapanthaka. The tenth image [Fig.10], with the Arhat's hands clasped together, lacks a corresponding gesture in "The Ritual," and the Arhat may have lost its original attributes. The eleventh image [Fig.11] portrays an Arhat with the left hand in a Tarjani-mudra and possibly holding a fly whisk in the right hand. Two Arhats in "The Ritual" share similar features: the third Arhat, Vanavasin, residing in the caves of the Seven-Leaf Mountain, and Arhat Kanaka, residing in the Sanghara Continent. This Arhat statue could be either of the two of them.



Fig. 1.(Arhat holding a treasure lasso)



Fig. 2.(Arhat adorned with golden earrings)



Fig. 3. (an Arhat wearing a celestial crown)



Fig. 4. (Arhat with sutras and an alms bowl)



Fig. 5.(Arhat Nagas Ena)



Fig. 6.(Arhat Pant haka)



Fig. 7.(Arhat Gopaka)



Fig. 8.(Arhat Abhaya)



Fig. 9.(Arhat, Chulapanthaka)



Fig. 10. (Arhat may have lost its original attributes)



Fig. 11.(Arhat with the left hand in a Tarjani-mudra)

These characteristics align with the scholar Wang Ruilei's Summary of Tibetan Arhat sculptures ^[7]: "In Han Chinese tradition, the influence mainly pertains to the techniques of sculpture, while in the Indian tradition, it primarily concerns the worship and levels of practice of the Arhats."

Since these sculptures were created by craftsmen in Han Chinese territory, they inevitably incorporate other features of Han Chinese Arhats, aside from employing the ancient Han Chinese technique of wood core lacquer. The wooden Arhats all uniformly wear Han Chinese robes, with nine of them adorned in the distinctive Han Chinese style robes, and one Arhat dressed in an earlier Han Chinese "half-draped" robe. Only one

Arhat is clad in the traditional Indian style robe, which passes over the right shoulder, but even within this robe, the monastic toga inside follows Han Chinese fashion and is adorned with auspicious cloud patterns. During the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty, it was stipulated that "the robes of the monks and the borders should be decorated with gold ^[8]." This gold-trimmed robe, known as the "gold-pleated garment, had already appeared in the early Ming period, and without exception, all eleven Arhats are depicted wearing this gold-pleated garment.

In contrast, the surviving 11th- to 12th-century wall paintings of Arhats at Drepung Monastery, which exhibit a purer Nepalese-Tibetan style, depict the Arhats uniformly wearing the distinctive red robes of Tibetan Buddhism^[9]. When compared to these Tibetan-style Arhats in the wall paintings, the richly colorful robes of the Arhats at Drepung Temple display a bold use of color tones, reflecting the unique aesthetic preferences of the craftsmen from Han Chinese territory.

5 Conclusion

As the leader of the Karma Kagyu tradition, the Karmapa has always represented an important political and cultural status in Tibetan Buddhism. This essay describes Sino-Tibetan cultural diffusion during the Yongle period of the Ming Dynasty and, through case studies, examines the statues of the Fifth Karmapa preserved in Drepung Monastery in Tibet.

The Karmapa statues of lacquer on wood at Drepung Monastery exhibit a unique blend of Tibetan and Han Chinese influences, with a strong adherence to the iconographic descriptions. These Arhats serve as a monument to the extensive cultural exchange and artistic synthesis that occurred in the context of Tibetan Buddhism in Tibet, with the expected inclusion of some Han Chinese features.

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