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Report on Religious Activity in Central Tibet, October 1985

by Donald S. Lopez, Jr. and Cyrus R. Stearns

We led a Smithsonian Institution tour to Tibet in early October 1985, visiting Lhasa, Gyantse, and Shigatse. On the road from the airport at Gong-dkar to Lhasa, we passed prominent hilltop ruins of the fortress of Gong-dkar rDzong, behind which is the Sa-skya monastery of Gong-dkar Chos-grwa (f. 1464). We were told that the monastery had not been completely destroyed, and that there were about thirty monks there presently.¹ Our bus fortuitously broke down at dPal Chu-bo-ri on the gTsang-po river, near the site of lCags-zam monastery, built by the engineer and saint Thang-stong-rgyal-po (1361–1485). It was the fifteenth day of the Tibetan month, a time for religious observances, and a small group of Tibetans could be seen on the summit of the mountain burning juniper boughs as offerings to the local spirits. The monastery of lCags-zam has been totally destroyed, without a single brick remaining in place. A group of pilgrims circumambulating the mountain told us that permission has been granted for new construction to begin on Chu-bo-ri. The iron suspension bridge erected by Thang-stong-rgyal-po in 1444 has also been destroyed. All that remains is a pile of stones in the middle of the river that once served as the support for the northern end of the bridge.²

Outside of Lhasa, we stopped briefly at sNye-thang monastery, where Atīśa died in 1054. The monastery, which appeared to have been recently restored, was in good condition and contained three temples. In the first was a large stūpa said to contain certain possessions of Atīśa. The second was a temple to the twenty-one Tārās, containing almost lifesize identical statues of Tārā on three tiers along three walls. They appeared to be the

same images photographed by Tucci.³ The third hall contained a small (18") statue of Atiśa that the monk in residence said had been sculpted by Atiśa himself. It appeared to be identical to the image that appears in plate 50 of Ferrari's *mK'yen brtse's Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet*.⁴ There were also three Buddha images, approximately fifteen feet in height, the central figure identified by Tucci as that of Maitreya⁵ and reported to us by a monk in residence to also have been made by Atiśa. That statue was flanked by images of the Buddhas Kāśyapa and Śākyamuni. There were also standing images of the eight Bodhisattvas. During our short time there, it was impossible to determine how many of the statues were original and how many have been replaced since the Cultural Revolution.

In Lhasa, a large plaza has been constructed in front of the Jo-khang. We were able to spend considerable time on the ground floor of the Jo-khang, and found the layout to be essentially unchanged from that described by Richardson in his article, "The Jo-khang 'Cathedral' of Lhasa."⁶ In the central hall a new statue of Padmasambhava, some twenty feet in height, has been erected to the left of the main statue of Maitreya. Each of the twenty-four chapels on the ground floor was in excellent condition. The entrances to two were closed by doors of chain: the chapel of the famous statue of the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara in the center of the north wall of the Jo-khang and the chapel containing the statue of Jo-bo Rin-po-che. The latter was opened for us. We were told by the monks in residence that every single statue on the ground floor of the Jo-khang, including that of Jo-bo Rin-po-che⁷, had been destroyed during the Cultural Revolution, with the exception of the nine statues in what is called the Thon-mi chapel, preserved presumably because they recall the ancient link between Tibet and China. The chapel contained statues of the three religious kings Srong-btsan-sgam-po, Khri-srong-lde-bstan, and Ral-pa-can, the Chinese consort Wen-ch'eng Kung-shu, the Nepalese consort Bhṛkūtī Devī, the ministers of Srong-bstan-sgam-po, mGar-stong-bstan and Thon-mi Sam-bhota. All the other statues in the Jo-khang have been newly made since 1979.

The market area surrounding the Jo-khang was very active, with pilgrims from all over Tibet. Texts were offered for sale at several stalls, mostly prayers and tantric sādhanas. However,

a few philosophical texts were available, for the most part elementary dGe-lugs-pa textbooks on *blo rig* and *rtags rigs* but also more advanced works, such as the first Dalai Lama's *Tshad ma'i rig rgyan*.

'Bras-spung monastery presently shows few signs of overt damage, but is in poor repair, unpainted and overgrown with grass and weeds. There were very few monks to be seen, most of them at work building roads. We were told that, except for the elder monks, the monks work all but five days per month, leaving little time for study. There are currently some 400 monks at the monastery; they all use the bLo-gsal-gling assembly hall rather than the main assembly hall of the monastery. The famous image of Maitreya in the main assembly hall is still to be seen, as is the conch shell purportedly unearthed by Tsong-kha-pa. The debating courtyard of bLo-gsal-gling college appeared to have gone unused for many years.

Se-ra monastery seemed considerably more active and in better repair. There are approximately 300 monks there, but only 50 or so were monks before 1959. The protector's temple at Byes College contained a remarkable array of old weapons around the ceiling: spears, armor, helmets, and quivers of arrows covered with what appeared to be several centuries of accumulated dust. The famous statue of Mañjuśrī leaning toward the window to the debating courtyard of Se-ra Byes was intact, as were other famous images in the monastery. There were thirty or forty young monks debating at the Byes College on the topic of cause and effect (*rgyu 'bras chung ba*). We were informed by one of the instructors that the most advanced class has now moved on to the study of Maitreya's *Abhisamayālamkāra* and is working on the structure of the path (*sa lam*) and the seventy topics (*don bdun cu*). This would suggest that the study of dialectics (*mtshan nyid*) has been reinstated in the last five years. A monk at the Jo-khang reported with sadness that there is not a single monk in Tibet who began the *dge bshes* curriculum after 1959 and has subsequently completed it.

The Potala appears to have been kept in good condition, with many of the murals recently repainted. Among the thousands of treasures of painting and sculpture were four very large three-dimensional maṇḍalas of Kālacakra, Guhyasamāja, Cakrasaṃvara, and Bhairava. Chicken wire has been nailed to

a height of about ten feet along those walls that contain bookshelves, to prevent tourists from handling the texts. A catalogue of the art contained in the Potala is much needed, but would require several lifetimes for a single art historian to do properly.⁸

The tantric college of rGyud-stod is active at the Ra-mo-che, with 43 monks. It is in the process of being restored. The original statue of Jo-bo-mi-skyod-rdo-rje at age eight, according to tradition brought to Tibet by the Nepalese consort of Srong-btsan-sgam-po, was apparently broken in half during the Cultural Revolution and the pieces taken to Beijing. A replica was made and put in its place. Subsequently, through the good offices of the Panchen Lama, the original statue was located, repaired, and reinstated. It can be seen at the Ra-mo-che, with the replica mounted behind it. The Tantric College of Lower Lhasa (*rGyud smad*) is not active; the building is being used for the printing of the Lhasa edition of the bKa'-gyur.

The medical college that was located at the summit of lCags-po-ri in Lhasa is gone, with only the foundation stones remaining. A large radio transmitting tower has been erected on the summit by the Chinese. Another well-known, although less important, site in old Lhasa was the iron suspension bridge over the sKyid-chu river, connecting Lhasa to the area of Grib on the eastern bank. Built in 1430 by Thang-stong-rgyal-po, it was the oldest iron bridge in Tibet. We were told that it had been washed away five years ago. A new iron cable foot bridge, covered with prayer flags, has been erected in its place and receives constant use.⁹

The journey by bus from Lhasa to Shigatse takes about eleven hours, including a stopover in Gyantse. Several hours south of Lhasa, we reached the summit of Gampa Pass (elevation 16,000 feet), from which there is a magnificent view of the Turquoise Lake of Yar-'brog. Along the road there were many ruins visible on the hillsides, but it was impossible to take time to investigate and identify any of them.

The fortress residence of the rulers of Gyantse is still intact, at least as viewed from outside. The monastery of dPal-'khor Chos-sde (f. 1418) at the foot of a nearby ridge as well as the great stūpa beside it suffered considerably during the Cultural Revolution, but are being beautifully restored by Tibetans. Many original statues and frescoes from the 15th century have survived intact.¹⁰

We were told by monks that the monastery had seventeen colleges (*grwa-tshang*) at the time of the Chinese occupation. Most of these were dGe-lugs-pa, although there were several Sa-skya and Zhwa-lu colleges. Fifteen of the colleges were destroyed in the recent past, but two remain, one of which was identified as Sa-skya-pa. At its height, the monastery housed 1500 monks. Today there are forty. No organized program of study is being pursued and the two remaining colleges appeared to be closed.

The main assembly hall in the temple is vacant and not in use. One of the side chapels contains a large gilded statue of Vairocana, with the four remaining Buddhas of the five families, crafted in terracotta, along the walls. Monks pointed to large muslin bags in one corner, stating that they contained the fragments of hands, feet, and faces from large statues that have been destroyed. The statues which remained intact in the chapels had been skillfully repaired.

The chapel to the rear of the main hall had a large gilded *mahābodhi* stūpa in the center, with statues of Mañjuśrī, Avalokiteśvara, and the Buddhas of the past and future along the walls. The inner circumambulation path was in use by lay people, mostly women, children, and the elderly. The walls were graced with large, well-executed frescoes, with paintings of the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara and Sitāpatrā framing the main entryway.

Another side chapel has an image of the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara in the center, with fine old statues along the rear wall of the three religious kings, along with Atīśa, Kha-che Panchen, Padmasambhava, and Kamalaśīla, among others. In an adjoining chapel there was an exquisite gilded stūpa containing the remains of the mother of Si-tu Rab-brtan-'phags (1389–1442), or "Great Dharma King," as the monks referred to him, the patron founder of the monastery and the great stūpa of Gyantse. On the surrounding walls in this room, as in several other chapels, there were rows of scriptures. We were told by the monks that there were three full sets of the bKa-'gyur and bsTan-'gyur in the temple, all calligraphed with gold ink on black paper.

The second floor of the main hall contains chapels, most notably the Lam-bras lha-khang, which holds beautiful ancient life-sized figures of the great Indian master Virūpa and teachers

in the lineage of the *Lam 'bras* explication of the *Hevajra Tantra*. In the center of the room is a magnificent three-dimensional Cakrasaṃvara maṇḍala of copper, gilded with gold and studded with jewels.

The great stūpa or sKu-'bum (f. 1427) of Gyantse stands beside the main temple. It is still being restored and was not fully open to us. The external portions are in good condition, as are the chapels around the lower level that we were allowed to enter. The frescoes appeared to be both ancient and well-preserved, but the lack of opportunity to examine them closely prevented any certain conclusion as to whether they had been restored from a damaged state. We were not able to examine the upper stories of the stūpa. Here, as in the main temple, pilgrims came to receive blessings.

Upon leaving Gyantse, the road crosses to the south side of the Nyang River and continues northwest to Shigatse. Outside Gyantse, massive hill ruins can be seen, including the remains of the fortress of Pa-rnam.

In Shigatse, the great monastery of bKra-shis-lhun-po is in excellent condition, but the stark ruins of the great fort of Shigatse loom on the adjoining ridge. The monastery now has 400 monks and seemed quite active, perhaps even more than usual because of the presence of the Panchen Lama, who had just finished giving the initiation of Vajrabhairava. He was residing in his new palace, the bDe-chen pho-brang, separate from the monastery. Local people informed us that he had given a public speech in Shigatse on October 1, in which he lamented that young people have only been taught Chinese language in school and urged Tibetan women to wear traditional dress rather than pants, as the Chinese women do.

Within bKra-shis-lhun-po itself we saw a small group of monks, all quite elderly, performing a tantric ritual in a chapel and some younger monks printing prayer flags in a courtyard. On the hill above, a large new monastery building in traditional Tibetan architectural style was almost ready for paint. The most spectacular temple is still that containing the immense golden image of Maitreya, the largest statue in Tibet.

Our visit to central Tibet provided reason for both hope and despair. The Tibetan people seem to have survived the horrors of the Cultural Revolution with their faith intact; we found a very real hunger for dharma among both monks and

lay people. It is also clear from the numerous new statues and murals that Tibetan artistry and craftsmanship remain at a remarkably high level. Two dangers seem particularly threatening at this time. One is the dramatic increase in tourism that will take place in central Tibet in the next five years. It is uncertain what effect foreign tourists and the consumerism that they bring with them will have on what remains of traditional Tibetan culture. The second danger lies in the severe shortage of qualified teachers of the *Buddhadharma*. A relaxation of Chinese policy regarding the practice of Buddhism has occurred at a time when those few lamas who have survived the last three decades are in their seventies and eighties. Several monks urged us to ask the lamas in exile to return to teach. It is difficult to predict the future of Buddhism in a Tibet without the lama.

NOTES

1. See Alfonsa Ferrari, *mK'yen brtse's Guide to the Holy Places of Central Tibet*, Serie Orientale Roma XVI (Rome: Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente, 1958), plate 32. Ferrari refers to the *rdzong* as a monastery. All that now remains are the foundations and lower walls of the structure.

2. See L.A. Waddell, *Lhasa and Its Mysteries* (London: Dutton, 1906), p. 315 for a picture of the lCags-zam monastery, the iron bridge, and support in the river.

3. See Giuseppe Tucci, *To Lhasa and Beyond* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1956), photograph facing page 130.

4. Ferrari, plate 50.

5. See Giuseppe Tucci, *To Lhasa and Beyond* (Rome: Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, 1956), p. 70.

6. See Ariane Macdonald and Yoshiro Imaeda, ed., *Essais sur l'art du Tibet* (Paris: J. Maisonneuve, 1977), pp. 157-188.

7. We were told, however, that portions of the original statue had been enclosed within the new image, thereby preserving the sanctity of the image.

8. An excellent, although by no means comprehensive catalogue of the architecture and art of the Potala has been recently published in a bilingual Tibetan-Chinese edition entitled *Pho-brang-Po-ta-la*, (Rigs gnas dngos rdzas dpe skyan khang, 1985).

9. A photograph of the old iron bridge appears in David Snellgrove and Hugh Richardson, *A Cultural History of Tibet* (New York: Frederick Praeger, 1968), p. 42.

10. For a study of Gyantse and the artwork found there, see Giuseppe Tucci, *Indo Tibetica IV: Gyantse ed i suoi monasteri*, 3 vol., (Rome: Reale Accademia d'Italia, 1941).