

Robert Linrothe. 2015. A Group of Mural Paintings from the 1930s in Amdo Reb gong in Gerald Roche, Keith Dede, Fernanda Pirie, and Benedict Capps (eds) *Asian Highlands Perspectives 37 Centering the Local, A Festschrift for Dr. Charles Kevin Stuart on the Occasion of his Sixtieth Birthday*, 279-295.

A GROUP OF MURAL PAINTINGS FROM THE 1930S IN A MDO REB GONG

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Over the course of several summer and winter visits to Amdo Reb gong in the late 1990s and early 2000s, I had the privilege of meeting 'Teacher Kevin' and several of his students (of Tibetan and various ethnicities) and teaching colleagues in Xining. I sat in on more than one of the evenings at his apartment with his amazingly proficient language students. Often these rather jolly gatherings ended with a performance fest: going round the room, each person was obliged to sing a song. Without either musicality or a good memory for lyrics, and in the face of some truly extraordinary musical talents among the Tibetan-speaking young men, I usually begged off. I vividly recall one evening, however, when I was somehow convinced or inspired to uncharacteristically sing a bawdy song taught to me in the winter of 1971 by my friends Chief and Skeeze, two Chippewa Native Americans who were resident, as I was that year, on Madeline Island in the Wisconsin side of Lake Superior. The ditty started, "There once was an Indian maid, a shy little prairie maid..." and went downhill from there. In Xining that night, we all recovered, and I even had the good fortune soon after to be able to steer Skidmore College into admitting, in consecutive years, two of Teacher Kevin's students, Spencer (Don grub dbang chen) and Joe (Sgrol ma don grub), who both graduated with BA degrees. The point of this anecdote is to suggest that Kevin's methods may have been unorthodox, but, to put it mildly, they did work, not only with Tibetan students and the English language, but also to the mutual benefit with the world of Tibet-related scholars, so many of whom came to know and appreciate Kevin, his colleagues, and his students.

I burnished the fieldwork I conducted in Reb gong those years into two articles (Linrothe 2001, 2002a), but both were published before I had made a minor discovery of some slender documentary value for the study of pre-Cultural Revolution Reb gong painting. Having since those years focused mainly on art in the Western Himalayas and Tibet, I never had the chance to share it in print,

except for two paragraphs in a non-scholarly venue (Linrothe 2002b). The means by which I arrived at the pertinent evidence is, I believe, analogous in some loose ways to the methods used by Kevin Stuart himself, and resulting in his many publications in *Anthropos*, *Asian Folklore Studies*, and so on. That is, they involved orally-transmitted information, collaboration with local people whose knowledge and memory was drawn on, as well as personal observations. Therefore, I hope it is appropriate to submit it in the context of this *festschrift* for Kevin Stuart.

Because of the high reputation in Reb gong of the Seng ge shong monasteries (upper and lower), I naturally visited both of them several times while investigating contemporary Reb gong painting in the late 1990s and early 2000s. My primary base of operations was Tongren (Rong bo) where I had forged a friendship which endures to this day with a learned and devout friend and *kalyāṇamitra*, Dge 'dun A khu dpal bzang.¹ We started interviewing various people related to the arts, including the monk Skal bzang blo gsal of the Dga' ldan phun tshogs gling Monastery at the Seng ge shong ma mgo (lower) temple. We visited Skal bzang blo gsal in mid-January of 2001, and then again on the third of February 2002. Being a knowledgeable impresario and manager of younger painters, Skal bzang blo gsal was thus a fount of information about the reach of Seng ge shong artists into the surrounding areas of A mdo. In addition, he took us into those buildings of his monastery with artwork, and allowed us to take photographs. In 2001, I had already noticed that on the porch of the Byams pa lha khang 'Maitreya Hall' there were paintings which looked to me to be older than recent paintings. At that time, based on the high quality and subtle shades of the pigments, I thought that they might be nineteenth century. It was common knowledge that the sculptures in the Byams pa lha khang, believed to have been built in the early eighteenth century, had been destroyed between 1958 and the Cultural Revolution. The re-creation of the present main statue of Maitreya was overseen in 1982 by one of the premier artists in the region, the late Rgya mtsho, along with a

¹ A khu dpal bzang later produced a study of the monasteries of Reb gong, their histories and holdings (Dpal bzang 2007).

team of collaborators.² Because the interior of the shrine became a granary for the village during 'the troubles', the architecture itself survived, though its interior murals were ruined in the process, and have since been repainted. The porch murals, however, may have been covered, and so were protected.

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Skal bzang blo gsal asked one of the older monks about the porch murals, and with his help, we tracked down the elderly monk Snying 'bum, now retired from painting but not from religious practice (Figure 1). In 2002, he said he was eighty-three (thus born around 1919). Born in Seng ge shong village, his father was also a painter. He began learning the arts from his father and became a monk at age seven. Later, he painted alongside the slightly older Rgya mtsho, also from Seng ge shong. Snying 'bum recalled not only the fact that he was forced to stop painting in 1958, but that unlike many other monks and monk-painters at that time (including Rgya mtsho and another famous painter Sha bo tshe ring),³ he was allowed to remain a monk. It was not until the year 1980 or so that he could return to painting publically. Snying 'bum showed me a painting of Tsong kha pa he had done when he was sixty-four, in around 1983.

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Snying 'bum clearly recalled helping two painters work on the porch of the Byams pa lha khang. He was sixteen then, while his teachers were in their thirties. One was named Kun dga' sha bo, and the other Skal bzang. Skal bzang was also a monk. Snying 'bum related that Kun dga' sha bo painted the four Lokapāla and the Shambhala (bde 'byung) Kings (Rigs ldan) on the porch, which would leave Skal bzang as primarily responsible for the Dpal lha mo (Lakshmi) (Figure 2). She is one of the protectresses of Lha sa, and I was told she is locally referred to as De ma chi ni. She is surrounded by a large number of local mountain gods and their retinue. Directly below Dpal lha mo is Tshe ring ma of the Long-Life Five-Sisters, with her sister Ting gyi

² A khu dpal bzang and I had interviewed the recognized master-painter, the late Rgya mtsho, in January of 2002, when he was 86 and already in poor health.

³ A khu dpal bzang and I also interviewed Sha bo tshe ring; on him see Fraser 2010, 2011.

shal zang ma' to her right. The mountain deities Rma chen spom ra (the deity presiding over A mye rma chen, the highest peak of A mdo) and A myes bya khyung (presiding over the highest peak in Reb gong) are the first deities in the lower left corner of the panel (Figure 3).

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The twenty-five Shambhala Kings are arranged around a large central deity (Figure 4). I was told that the largest Shambhala King was the Pan chen bla ma in his pre-incarnation, Mañjuśrīkīrti ('Jam dpal grags pa), which can be confirmed by comparing the iconography (holding a sword and a book) with the images included in the Pan chen bla ma pre-incarnation sets.⁴ The rest of the Rigs ldan identities are difficult to confirm, however, as more than one carry the same attributes, such as the vajra and bell. There are gold inscriptions beneath each one, but unfortunately my images don't allow decipherment.

Despite its limitations, the value of this documentation lies in the establishment of a relatively rare fixed point in the evolution of Reb gong painting within the first half of the twentieth century. It helps to position the style of painting that was bottled up in the late 1950s and then revived and further developed from the 1990s to the present. Many of the particular characteristics represented in the 1930s painting are visible in the revival style, thus demonstrating the fidelity of many recent painters to former painting practices. Yet, at the same time, comparison of painting in the 1990s and the new millennium with earlier painting demonstrates a significant gap between the two periods of mural painting at the same site. Without color illustrations, this is nearly impossible to demonstrate, only describe.⁵ One fitting comparison is between the 1930s painting on

⁴ See for example the complete sets of pre-incarnations included on the Himalayan Art Resources website; <http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=72>, accessed October 2014.

⁵ Many of my images from Amdo Rebgong are already available on Artstor (www.artstor.org/index.shtml) but an institutional subscription is required. Through the Northwestern Library Digital Collections Department, others not already in Artstor will be made available to anyone with internet access, including Amdo Rebgong material. They will be available at: <https://images.library.northwestern.edu/>.

the porch of Seng ge shong ma mgo's Byams pa lha khang, and those on the porch of the Byams pa lha khang of Seng ge shong ya mgo on the other side of the same village. They were done by a young local artist, Sha bo thar, in the late 1990s and feature not only most of the same larger themes but echo many of the same tendencies, though without literal copying.

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To summarize the similarities, one notices a broad tendency toward lighter colors in the skies, a generous use of gold, and a tendency to indulge in the elaboration of tiny details of both an ornamental and a figurative nature, as in the Fabergé-like wish-fulfilling jewels held by Dpal lha mo and the gold patterns of her garments. Building on a base of features absorbed from late Ming painting, as well as painting known in Lha sa from the eighteenth century, the exaggerated, hard-edged blue-and-green rock formations, outlined in gold, are quite prevalent in both earlier and later painting. The imaginative placement of vignettes almost playfully irrelevant to the main theme – such as yogi or siddha meditating in a cave below the sword tip of Virūhaka ('Phags skyes po) (Figure 5) – are one of the hallmarks of the earlier painting that seems to have been consciously picked up by the later painters to a distinctive degree. The most significant difference between the 1930s paintings and those of more recent times can be attributed to a factor simultaneously material and economic: the type of pigments employed. As Rgya mtsho explicitly told me in the interview of 2002, before 1958 he used stone-ground pigments, while the paints he used once he was allowed to paint again are of a prefabricated, industrial nature. This is generally the case in my encounters with practicing artists. The contemporary pigments have lost most of the subtlety and softness of hue that are perceptible even in reproductions of the 1930s murals, as long as those reproductions are in color. They allow for a considerably warmer, less harsh tonality that is immediately visible in person. Interestingly, the bright pigments of artificial colors have been, it seems, embraced by artists and the local viewing public alike, all of whom appear to value the bright freshness they feel is suitable to the religious themes. Contemporary artists also tend to have been exposed to 'modern' realist painting from multiple sources. They are much more likely to

interpolate into relatively traditional themes naturalistic poses, one-point perspective, shadows and shading, resulting in a fascinating hybridized combination of the traditional and the 'modern'.

These murals on the porch of the Byams pa lha khang of Seng ge shong ma mgo, then, can form a benchmark for the study of both contemporary Reb gong art as well as pre-1958 painting. Although a great deal, particularly sculpture, was destroyed in the years intervening between 1958 and the late 1980s, when painting in the service of Buddhism seems to have resumed in Reb gong, there are significant pockets of surviving works of art. In particular, murals and *thang ka* paintings from before 1958 have been identified⁶ and will no doubt continue to be rediscovered and documented. This short essay, dedicated to Kevin Stuart, is a small piece of the puzzle in the recovery of the distinguished culture of A mdo Reb gong.

⁶ See for example the set of Klong chen snying thig paintings from the 1940s and 1950 available on Artstor and the Himalayan Art Resources site: <http://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=68>, accessed October 2014. The Byams pa lha khang of Gnyen thog monastery has late 18th century murals and its Sa 'dzin Lha khang has pre-twentieth century, Khyen ri-like murals, to name just two examples.

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NON-ENGLISH TERMS

'Jam dpal grags pa འཇམ་དཔལ་གྲགས་པ
A mdo ཨ་མདོ
A myes rma chen ཨ་མྱེས་རྩ་ཚེན
A myes bya khyung ཨ་མྱེས་བྱ་ཁྱུང
Byams pa lha khang བྱམས་པ་ལྷ་ཁང
Bde 'byung བདེ་འབྱུང
De ma Chi ni ???
Don grub dbang chen དོན་གྲུབ་དབང་ཚེན
Dga' ldan phun tshogs gling དགའ་ལྷན་ཕུན་ཚོགས་གླིང
Dge 'dun A khu dpal bzang དགེ་འདུན་ཨ་ཁུ་དཔལ་བཟང
Rgya mtsho ལྷ་མཚོ
Sgrol ma don grub ལྷོལ་མ་དོན་གྲུབ
Skal bzang ལྷལ་བཟང
Skal bzang blo gsal ལྷལ་བཟང་བློ་གསལ
Kun dga' sha bo ལུན་དགའ་ཤོ་བོ
Rma chen spom ra མ་ཚེན་སྤོམ་ར
Snying 'bum སྤྱིང་འབུམ
Dpal lha mo དཔལ་ལྷ་མོ
Pan chen bla ma པན་ཚེན་བླ་མ
'Phags skyes po འཕགས་སྤྱེས་པོ
Reb gong རེབ་གོང
Rigs ldan རིགས་ལྷན
Rong bo རོང་བོ
Seng ge shong སེང་གེ་ཤོང
Seng ge shong ma mgo སེང་གེ་ཤོང་མ་མགོ
Seng ge shong ya mgo སེང་གེ་ཤོང་ཡ་མགོ
Sha bo thar ཤོ་བོ་ཐར
Sha bo tshe ring ཤོ་བོ་ཚེ་རིང
Ting gyi shal zang ma' ཅིང་གྱི་ཤལ་ཟང་མའ་ (?)
Tongren 同仁
Tshe ring ma ཚེ་རིང་མ
Tsong kha pa ཚོང་ཁ་པ

FIGURES

Figure 1. Snying 'bum, born ca. 1919, photographed in Seng ge gshong ma mgo Monastery. Photograph by Rob Linrothe, 2002.



Figure 2. Dpal lha mo (Lakshmi, or De ma Chi ni); detail of a mural painted around 1935 on the porch of the Byams pa lha khang in Seng ge gshong ma mgo Monastery. Photograph by Rob Linrothe, 2002.



Figure 3. Detail from the Dpal lha mo mural depicting (left to right) Rma chen spom ra, A myes bya khyung, and Ting gyi shal zang ma', painted around 1935 on the porch of the Byams pa lha khang in Seng ge gshong ma mgo Monastery. Photograph by Rob Linrothe, 2002.



Figure 4. Mural of the twenty-five Shambhala kings arranged around Mañjuśrīkīrti ('Jam dpal grags pa), one of the Shambhala kings and a pre-incarnation of the Panchen Lamas; painted around 1935 on the porch of the of the Byams pa lha khang in Seng ge gshong ma mgo Monastery. Photograph by Rob Linrothe, 2002.



Figure 5. Detail of a mural of the Guardian General of the South, Virūhaka ('Phags skyes po) depicting a yogi or siddha meditating in a cave below Virūhaka's sword tip; painted around 1935 on the porch of the of the Byams pa lha khang in Seng ge gshong ma mgo Monastery. Photograph by Rob Linrothe, 2002.

