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The Changkya Huthugthu Rölpai Dorje – Grand Lama of China, Buddhist Teacher of the Empire, Imperial Art Consultant, 1717–1786

An exquisite image in the Zhiguan Museum, Beijing

by Michael Henss

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A biographical survey



Fig. 1

Rölpai Dorje (Rol pa'i rDo rje, “The Playful Vajra”) was for half a century during the reign of the Qianlong Emperor the principal authority of Tibetan Buddhism at the Chinese court (fig. 1). This was a period when not less than 959 Tibetan and Mongolian monks stayed in the Qing capital (1736). He was also known under the Mongolian hereditary title of Changkya Huthugthu, “His Holiness” or “The Great Blessed One”, a most meaningful epithet for an eminent religious authority in the Qing-dynasty milieu. Dragpa Sonam (Grags pa bSod nams) – his personal name – was born in 1717 in a prominent Tibetanised Mongol family near Tsongkha in the modern Gansu-Qinghai border area. Having been recognised as the reincarnation of the First Changkya Huthugthu [1], Ngawang Losang Chöden (Ngag dbang bLo bzang Chos Idan, 1642–1714), the spiritual mentor of the Kangxi and Yongzheng Emperor, Rölpai Dorje entered the nearby Gönlung monastery (dGon lung, Chin. Youning si “Temple of the Protecting Peace”) at the age of three; he was the abbot until 1769 (fig. 2). [2]

By imperial command of the Yongzheng Emperor, the young “spiritual master” (hu thug thu) was brought in 1724 to Songzhusi in Beijing. Famous for its production and sale of Tibetan and Mongolian texts, this was the monastic residence of the Changkya Huthugthu during the

Qing dynasty. Here he was educated in Chinese surroundings and in the Mongol-Tibetan Buddhist court milieu, an essential cultural and political background for his later religious and diplomatic career between Beijing and Lhasa. Rölpai Dorje soon learned to speak and write Chinese, Mongolian and Manchu fluently. Under the guidance of great Gelugpa teachers like the Thukwan (Thu'u bKva) Huthugthu (whose later incarnation became Rölpai's disciple and biographer), he studied the Kanjur canon together with Prince Hongli, the later Qianlong Emperor (1711–1799).



Fig. 2



Fig. 3

In 1734 Rölpai Dorje was appointed National Preceptor (guoshi) when, according to a later inscription by the Qianlong Emperor, his father and predecessor, Yongzheng, “bestowed the rank of a Teacher of the Empire” upon him. Later in the same year, the new state tutor was sent together with Prince Yunli, the seventeenth son of the Yongzheng Emperor, to eastern Tibet, to accompany, as the emperor's representative, the exiled Seventh Dalai Lama (1708–1757) back to Lhasa for his reinstatement on August 5, 1735. During this first visit to the land of his faith, Rölpai Dorje received his monastic vows and the final ordination as a geshe (Tib. dge bshed) from the Second Panchen Lama Losang Yeshe (bLo bzang Ye shes, 1663–1737) at Tashi Lhünpo monastery in November 1735. In early

1736 he returned from Lhasa to Beijing with over thirty Buddha statues and an image of the Fifth Dalai Lama. When in that year his former classmate was enthroned as the Qianlong Emperor, Rölpai Dorje was appointed “Lama of the Seal” (Tib. tham ka bla ma), the highest rank of a Tibetan Buddhist monk in China. This was equivalent to the position of the Thukwan Huthugthu, his former teacher at the court. With the exception of the Third Panchen Lama (1738–1780), no other Buddhist monk in Qing dynasty Beijing was as much honoured as Lalita Vajra, “the Playful Vajra”, the Sanskrit epithet name for this Grand Lama of the Empire (fig. 3).

With the transformation of the princely palace Yonghegong into a Buddhist temple in 1744, the Beijing centre of Tibetan Buddhism to this day, Rölpai Dorje started various undertakings in art and architecture in the Qing capital. He became the supervisor of all Buddhist temples. A Buddhist academy with four colleges and 500 monks was established, and a catalogue of Buddhist statues and paintings in the Palace collection compiled. [3] In 1745 the Changkya Huthugthu initiated the emperor into the Tantra of Chakrasamvara. After the ritual, the Chinese Universal Ruler said to his Tibetan guru: “Now you are not only my lama, you are my vajra-master!” In a philosophical treatise (1746), Rölpai Dorje reestablished the concept of a bodhisattva king's sacred and secular rule whereby the emperor is believed to be an emanation of Manjushri, the



Fig. 4

the bodhisattva of infinite and perfect wisdom. (fig. 4; see also figs 20a and 20b) [4] For the legitimation of the worldly sovereign, he compares his tantric rites with those of the Sakya lama Phagpa ('Phags pa, 1235–1280). Phagpa, who was regarded as one of Rölpai Dorje's previous incarnations, initiated Khubilai Khan (1215–1294), the Yuan-dynasty emperor and

also a manifestation of Manjushri, into the Hevajra Tantra. This directly links the Phagpa-Khubilai Khan lama-patron relationship with that of Rölpai Dorje and the Qianlong emperor.

Rölpai Dorje visited his homeland in Amdo in 1749. From 1750 to 1757 he stayed in Beijing to give first priority to the planning, construction and to the iconographic programme of the principal temple of esoteric Buddhism in the imperial palace, the Yuhuage (“Temple of Raining Flowers”) and to the Zhongzhengdian (“Hall of Central Uprightness”, founded in 1690) building complex for “Buddhist Affairs” (figs. 5, 6). Concurrently, he compiled the first illustrated pantheon of esoteric Buddhism, the famous Three Hundred and Sixty Icons, an illustrated iconographic model book for artists (1750–1756), in Manchu, the language of the emperor, in Chinese, the language of the empire, in Mongolian, the language of the Imperial Preceptor Rölpai Dorje, and in Tibetan, the language of the Buddhist Dharma and after 1757 completed another Three Hundred Icons reference work in a Tibetan Poti (spo ti) style printed edition, which was re-edited by Lokesh Chandra in 1964 (*Encyclopaedia of Indo-Tibetan Culture*), and also copied sets as three painted scrolls (fig.7). [5] Little known in the West are Huthugthu’s “Regulations and Rules on Making Statues and Images of the Buddha” (Zaoxiang liangdu jing). [6]



Fig. 5



Fig. 6

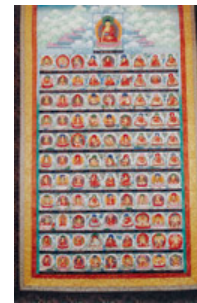


Fig. 7

When in 1751, after much political unrest in Lhasa, the Chinese emperor was considering a more direct rule over Tibet, so that in his own words “all Tibetan affairs, big and small, should be in the hands of officials from China”, Rölpai Dorje was able to persuade the emperor not to impose a tighter rule on his spiritual home. The emperor followed Rölpai Dorje’s advice, demonstrating the high esteem in which he held his guru. It was these same diplomatic skills that appeared to have been instrumental in the reinauguration of the Seventh Dalai Lama’s (1708–1757) temporal power in 1735, since which time both dignitaries had maintained close religious and personal ties.

The Changkya Huthugthu’s second visit to Tibet in 1757–1759 was motivated predominantly by religio-political considerations, namely, overseeing the funeral arrangements for the Seventh Dalai Lama, who had died on March 23, 1757. He was also charged with the important task of finding and establishing the reincarnation. This is confirmed by an imperial edict in which the Qianlong Emperor says: “I dispatched ICang skya to Tibet especially for the purpose of recognising the new-born reincarnation of the Dalai Lama” (October 1758) [7] Qianlong no doubt ordered this mission because he was interested in a quick decision, wanting to avoid civil turmoil after the Seventh Dalai Lama’s death. For this difficult task, the diplomat and mediator between the imperial court and the Tibetan clergy was well prepared.

The Changkya’s presence in Lhasa, where he arrived after a five-month journey from Beijing on February 6, 1758, was helpful not only for his good relations with the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, but also to resolve disputes between the Tibetan Buddhist schools, and to consolidate the status of the Demo Huthugthu Ngawang Jampel Deleg Gyatso as the regent of Tibet (1757–1777). This also served, by strengthening the connection between Tibetan

religious dignitaries and the Qing court, to prevent the Chinese ambans from overreacting and initiating military expeditions to western Tibet. The definitive agreement of the emperor and the Tibetan hierarchs concerning the new Dalai Lama Losang Jampel Gyatso (bLo bzang 'Jam dpal rGya mtsho, born July 29, 1758) was a direct result of the personal efforts of "China's Tibetan ambassador". Due to his beneficial diplomatic presence and great religious teachings, both the local Chinese representatives and the Tibetan clergy – by whom he was warmly welcomed and honoured – wanted to keep Rölpai Dorje in Tibet. However, he left for Beijing on August 26, 1759, "his place" (nged tshang), a term which, according to his biographer, the Changkya always used for the imperial court. In his luggage he carried a magnificent set of thirteen painted scrolls depicting the Seventh Dalai Lama and his twelve previous incarnations, a set still preserved in the Forbidden City. [8]

During the 1760s, Rölpai Dorje built a hermitage retreat for his regular sojourns at his beloved Wutaishan, the mountain sacred to Manjushri which he had first visited in 1750. Between 1766 and 1779, he concentrated largely on the planning and construction of the Tibetan-Buddhist style temples at the imperial summer residence at Chengde ("Jehol" in European accounts, in Chinese Re-he), which have survived, though without most of their original furnishings, to the present day.

Rölpai Dorje's earlier close relations with the Third Panchen Lama Losang Pelden Yeshe (bLo bzang dPal Idan Ye shes, 1738–1780) proved to be instrumental in arranging the hierarch's visit to the imperial court in 1780, which coincided with Qianlong's 70th birthday. Rölpai was sent to his summer residence, a monastery built from 1701 to 1705 at Dolonor in Inner Mongolia, where he first welcomed the Panchen Lama and subsequently accompanied him to the imperial residence Bishushanzhuang, the "Mount Resort for Escaping the Summer Heat", at Chengde. The Xumifushou temple, modelled on the Panchen's home monastery, the Tashilhunpo, had been built specifically for this visit to ensure the guest's comfort and ease. They arrived there in late August 1780, and during the visit Rölpai acted as an interpreter for the Buddhist debates between the Emperor and his highly venerated Tibetan guest. Following the visit to Chengde, the imperial party left for Beijing. After a two-month stay at the Xihuang monastery (built for the fifth Dalai Lama's visit in 1652), the Panchen contracted smallpox and died on November 26, 1780, much to the dismay of the emperor.

Some years later, in 1786, Lalita Vajra made his last pilgrimage to sacred Mount Wutai, where he went to the Honourable Field on April 29. The Qianlong Emperor personally supervised his funeral arrangements, erecting a gold stupa for the corporeal remains of this Manjushri incarnate, the principal ritual master at the Court, and Teacher of the Empire.

Icons and Iconography of Rölpai Dorje

As with representations of the Dalai and Panchen Lamas, there is not a single fixed iconographic programme for the various painted and sculpted images of Rölpai Dorje. With the exception of the vajra and ghanta, only the gesture of argumentation (vitarka mudra) is a common feature for all, apparently not to confuse the Teacher of the Nation with an earlier emanation of Manjushri's wisdom, Tsongkhapa, always depicted in dharmacakra mudra.

Including some identified paintings of Rölpai Dorje, his most characteristic hand gesture and attributes are the vitarka mudra of argumentation characterising him as a teacher, while on his proper left hand, when not just given in the meditational dhyana-mudra, is either holding a longevity vase filled with the amrita nectar of immortality (fig. 8) as an emanation of Manjushri, or a Tibetan poti book (fig. 9).



Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10



Fig. 11

Other images, like the statue in the Zhiguan Museum of Fine Art, Beijing, depict Rölpai Dorje like Tsongkhapa, as an emanation of the bodhisattva Manjushri, with the sword and book of wisdom, or with the book of knowledge and a fire-flaming wisdom jewel on two lotus stalks. As a monk-teacher, Rölpai Dorje is either represented bare-headed (figs. 1, 11), or he wears, as in most images, the prominent folded “Huthugthu hat” (figs. 3, 9, 15, 16, 17), which may have been inspired by similar caps worn by the First Panchen Lama Lobsang Chökyi Gyaltsen (1570–1662) [9], whose successive reincarnations were held in high esteem by the Changkya Huthugthu. The folding hat exists in various forms and was also cast separately for larger statues, like one in a Swiss private collection (fig. 9) which is nearly of the same height and heavy weight as the Zhiguan Rölpai Dorje, the principal image under review. Eyes and mouth of both statues, as well as the Zhiguan lotus attributes, are polychromed. A unique feature of the Zhiguan statue are the five cushions of the throne-base symbolising the very specific veneration and esteem for this First Tibetan Buddhist lama of the Qing empire. The different facial features of the Zhiguan and Swiss Changkya Huthugthu (figs. 1, 8 and 9, 10) appear to represent individual personalities, and both have impressive portrait-like physiognomies beyond the conventional sculptural image types of this lama hierarch. On some sculptures and paintings, Rölpai Dorje is characterised by a small lump, a tumour-like cystic growth, on this lower right cheek, apparently a naturalistic life-like feature of this lama (figs. 8, 11) [10]

A few other statues and paintings depict the lama with the pandita hat of the Indian scholar tradition. A prominent 75-cm-tall gilt-silver statue commissioned by the emperor shortly after Rölpai Dorje’s death in 1786, and completed in the same year, was once installed in the memorial shrine for the Huthugthu at the Yuhuage temple in the Forbidden City and is now preserved in the Palace Museum (fig. 12). [11]

Several painted Rölpai Dorje “portraits”, some in the pandit hat, depict the physiognomic features of the Qianlong emperor, and were sometimes identified with the “bodhisattva king” (figs. 13, 14, 17), even those without a Dharma Wheel and related Tibetan inscriptions of the universal world ruler and the “Manjushri Emperor”. [12] The identification of the emperor with his tutor, Rölpai Dorje as Qianlong, has been conceived also the other way round, Qianlong as Rölpai Dorje, when the latter he is represented with the characteristic folded Huthugthu Grand Lama hat (figs. 4, 17, 20a, 20b) Only twice before in Chinese history had an emperor awarded a similar respect to a Tibetan-Buddhist leader: Khubilai Khan (1215–1294) appointing the Phagpa Lama as state religious preceptor, and the Yongle Emperor’s special veneration of the Fifth Karmapa Dezhin Shegpa in the early 15th century.



Fig. 12



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The Qianlong emperor bodhisattva painting in the Freer Gallery of Art is dedicated to “Sagacious Manjushri” (inscription), and thus to his incarnation, the emperor (figs 20a, 20b). This portrait of the Chinese ruler, and several related Tibetan-style Chinese scroll paintings preserved in Beijing and in Tibet (fig. 4), as well as an extensive study of Rölpai Dorje’s role as an imperial art consultant, have been published by this author in detail [13]. The concept of divine kingship and of a “God Incarnate” (Tib. phrul gyi lha) goes back to the late 8th- and 9th-century Tibetan text traditions from Dunhuang describing the first historical Tibetan king Songtsen Gampo (7th century) as “son of the gods (lha sras), the divinity manifested king” and “God Incarnate” (phrul gyi lha), or the first “official Buddhist king”. Trisong Detsen (reign 756–797), was believed to be an incarnation of Manjushri at the time of the eminent Butön Rinpoche in the 14th century. Thus the antecedents of the Qianlong Emperor (1711–1799) as an emanation of this foremost wisdom bodhisattva can be traced back to much earlier Tibetan text traditions of the early Dharma Kings as “Avalokiteshvara in the form of a king”. [14]



Fig. 15



Fig. 16



Fig. 17

A very specific and little-known painted multi-figure panel once in the Cuihanglou “hall for enjoying lush sceneries” (1777) is now kept in the reconstructed Qianlong garden complex in the north-eastern section of the Forbidden City. [15] It presents, set in a three-dimensional niche, and surrounded by numerous wooden statuettes depicting an entire Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, the gilt statue of the emperor as an emanation of Manjushri, with sword and book, holding the Wheel of Law (dharmacakra) of a universal sovereign (fig. 18). A likewise more thorough study should be made of a screen painting, very similar in iconography, composition, and technique, of this “bodhisattva king” in his divine palace preserved in the Pavilion of Raining Flowers (Yuhuage) in the Imperial Palace complex, which was built as the principal Buddhist temple at the imperial court between 1750 and 1755 (fig. 19). [16]

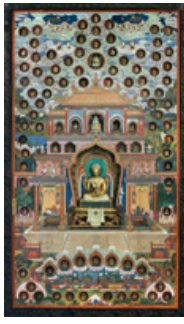


Fig. 18



Fig. 19



Fig. 20a



Fig. 20b



Fig. 21

Coming back to a presumable individual portraiture, and to the conventional image typology of eminent lama hierarchs, mention must be made of several late-18th-century paintings from the imperial ateliers depicting Rölpai Dorje in a completely Tibetan-Buddhist context, except his face, which is shown in a naturalistic “Western chiaroscuro” style with subtle shading. These European characteristics had already been introduced by Jesuit artists like Baldassare Castiglione (Chin. Lang Shining, in China 1715–1766) (figs. 20a, 20b). When compared with sculptural images, the painted portraits indicate a remarkable variety of the Huthugthu’s supposed lifelikeness between the “true likeness” (Tib. nga 'dra ma) (figs. 13, 14), as a Tibetan would say, the real person, or a Qianlong emperor identity in disguise, and a general monk-scholar type of that period as represented by most of the statues.

For “portrait” or pseudo-portrait statuary, however, there were no Western-style models, but a long Chinese tradition of naturalistic Buddhist Lohan (Chin. for the early disciples of the Buddha) images, which may have inspired great masterpieces like the Zhiguan Rölpai Dorje up to the 18th century (fig. 21).

Endnotes

1. For the name and title, different spellings, and biographical details see more in Henss 2010, p. 230f. (notes)
2. On dGon lung, ca. 65 km from Xining, Qinghai province, see Henss 2010, p. 231 (n.2)
3. Cf. Tuguan 1988, p. 144
4. See for a detailed documentation on the Qianlong emperor as an emanation of the bodhisattva Manjushri Henss 2001
5. On the Three Hundred Icons and other iconographic collections see Henss 2010, p. 148ff.
6. See on this text by Gömpojab (mGon po skyabs) from 1742 Cai Jingfeng / Michael Henss (translation from the Chinese and editing), *The Buddhist Canon of Iconometry*. Ulm 2000
7. Wang Xiangyun 1995, p. 232, and 2000, p. 148

8. Cf. The Tibetan Buddhist Thangkas in the Qing Palace Museum. Hongkong 2003, pls. 7-19. This set was commissioned by Rölpai Dorje "in accordance with the emperor's wish" in 1758 (Wang Xiangyun 2000, p. 144) and catalogued as new entries to the imperial collection with added silk labels in 1761.
9. Lokesh Chandra, Buddhist Iconography of Tibet. Kyoto 1986, figs. 1705 and 1928
10. See for example Portraits of the Masters 2003, ill. p. 328; Rhie, M. / R. Thurman, Wisdom and Compassion. The sacred Art of Tibet. New York 1996, no. 100
11. Made after a similar statue of the Third Panchen Lama Lobsang Palden Yeshe (1738-1780), cf. Wang Xiangyun 1995, p. 307f.
12. For a Rölpai Dorje painting with the physiognomical features of the Qianlong emperor see an album illustrated with the 14th preincarnations of the Huthugthu in the Berlin Museum of Asian Art, painted on silk between 1786 and 1794, size 65x51 cm, cf. Henss 2010, p. 264, fig. 26, p., and p. 265, n. 3
13. M.Henss 2010. Apparently Karl Debreczeny and Wenshing Chou (Faith and Empire). Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism. New York 2019, p. 19-51, 191-211 did not read this extensive article, and my two publications on The Bodhisattva Emperor. Tibeto-Chinese Portraits of Sacred and Secular Rule in Qing Dynasty, Oriental Art, 2001, no.3, p. 2-16, no. 5, p. 71-83
14. On the early concepts of the Tibetan sacred kingship see M. Henss, King Srong btsan sGampo Revisited: the royal statues in the Potala Palace and in the Jokhang at Lhasa. Essays on the International Conference on Tibetan Archaeology and Art (Beijing 2002), Beijing 2004 (p. 128-171), p. 129f.
15. N. Berliner, The Emperor's private Paradise. Treasures from the Forbidden City. New York 2010, pl. 39
16. See Cultural Relics of Tibetan Buddhism Collected in the Qing Palace. Beijing 1992, pl. 112. The two separate panels at both sides with calligraphies refer to the Qianlong emperor: zhi zhu san jie zheng zhen ru / fo ri jin ceng xuan zui shang, "The pearl of wisdom manifests the suchness of the Three Worlds. Above is the sun of the Buddha, the highest of the nine stages of existence".

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