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Cover: Daoist robe (daujpa)
Qing dynasty, 19th century
Embroidered satin
Length 128 cm, width 166.5 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, 1620-1901

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The Silk Road: From China to Tibet – and Back

Valrae Reynolds

The fabled silk of China – the quintessential luxury export – gave name to the earliest global trade route, which crossed the deserts of Central Asia from China to the Mediterranean as early as the fourth century BC. Several offshoots of this route, from Central Asia south into Tibet, were active from the seventh to the mid-twentieth century as kings, princes and lamas invested in vast quantities of silk from China to use as clothing and decoration. With the destruction of Tibetan monasteries and palaces, and the displacement of the Tibetan people during the last forty-five years, beautifully preserved silk textiles of the Song (960-1279) to the Ming (1368-1644) period have left Tibet to enter European, American, Japanese and Hong Kong collections. These silks, once held in princely and monastic treasuries, are greatly expanding the understanding of the economic, technological and stylistic development of China’s silk industry (see articles in Orientations, April 1990 and August 1989).

The first major international exhibition of Chinese silk textiles and costumes will be held from 22 June to 17 September 1995 at the Hong Kong Museum of Art. Many of the finest-known examples of Chinese silk from Tibet will be included in the exhibition, thus bringing these world travellers full circle, back to China. Two New York collections will be represented in loans to this show, featuring a very specialized type of silk from Tibet, commissioned Buddhist ritual hangings, dating from the late Yuan period (1279-1368) through the earliest reigns of the Ming dynasty, when Buddhism was in favour at the imperial courts and Tibetan religious leaders enjoyed great influence.

Chinese silk had been coming into Tibet since at least the Tang dynasty (618-906), in the form of imperial tribute and commercial goods. A Sino-Tibetan peace treaty of circa 760 records an annual tribute of fifty thousand ‘pieces’ of silk from the Chinese emperor to the Tibetan court at Lhasa. In China at this time, the most desirable type of horse for military use was valued at forty bolts (‘pieces’) of silk. Although the menace of Tibetan incursions into Central Asia and across China’s western borders lessened with the collapse of the Tibetan empire in the mid-ninth century, the Chinese governments continued to purchase Tibetan horses and to placate Tibetan princes and religious leaders with silk goods into the Song period. Much of this exchange may have been indirect, through the Tangut state (982-1227), which had close relations with both Tibet and China. Mongol advances across Central Asia destroyed the Tanguts between 1205 and 1227, but many aspects of the special religious connection between the Tangut court and Tibetan lamas were adopted by the new rulers of Central Asia. When the Mongols consolidated control over all of China after 1279, they placed Tibetan clerics in positions of great power over religious and cultural affairs, and promoted artistic ventures incorporating Tibetan Buddhist themes and styles.

For textile historians, the most

(Fig. 1) Chakrasamvara
Ming period, late 14th/early 15th century
Kei
Height 126 cm, width 72.5 cm
Collection of Dr Wesley and Mrs Carolyn Halpert
interesting result of these
Tangut-Mongol-Tibetan
influences, was a completely
new use of silk to create
‘fabric images’, called gos-
shka in Tibet, for Buddhist
funeral use. These icons are
Chinese copies, in silk embroi-
dery, tapestry (kesi)
and, later, brocade, of Ti-
betan Buddhist paintings.
Identical in style, colour,
format and liturgical func-
tion to the painted originals,
these ‘fabric images’ had
greater cachet. The extraor-
dinary value and visual
beauty of richly coloured,
lustreous textiles made the
copies in silk thread
infi-
dently more prestigious than
the painted ‘originals’. Chi-
nese silk factories, both
im-
perial and commercial, had
been making embroidered
and kesi versions of Chi-
nese scroll paintings since
at least the Song period, but
the innovative ‘fabric im-
ge’ for Tangut, Mongol
and Tibetan patrons were
copies (either from paint-
ings or cartoons) of Bud-
hist icons in a pronounced
Tibetan style. The earliest
of these known to us today
date from the twelfth and
thirteenth centuries and are
exclusively in the kesi tech-
nique. Examples in the Her-
mitage in St Petersburg and
the Cleveland Museum of
Art in Ohio, as well as those
in the Potala Palace in
Lhasa, are similar in all sty-
listic and iconographic
details to the great number of
known twelfth-to-thir-
teenth century painted
thangkas (scrolls or hang-
ings) and extant wall pain-
tings in Tibet, and at such sites in Central
Asia as Dunhuang in Gansu province and
Khara Khot in Inner Mongolia.

One of the most beautiful kesi ‘fabric
images’ to have come out of Tibet is the
Chakrasamvara tapestry in the Halpert
collection, included in the Hong Kong
exhibition (Fig. 1). The dark blue twelve-
headed, four-headed mediational deity
Chakrasamvara clasps his consort, the
red-bodied Vajravarahi in the yab-yum
(‘father-mother’) pose symbolic of the
highest spiritual union of Wisdom and
Compassion. The Chinese silk weavers

have faithfully woven in all of the bril-
liant colour and rich adornments seen
typically in Nepalese-Tibetan paintings of
the fourteenth to fifteenth century. The
energetic branched-flame aureole, gold-
en-leaf crown, and complex
lotus-petal base and throne
support are also found in
wall paintings of the Gy-
antse Stupa, executed be-
tween 1427 and 1439, in
southern Tibet, as well as in
Nepalese painted scrolls of the late fourteenth to mid-
fifteenth century. The exten-
sive use of shading on the
bodies of Chakrasamvara
and Vajravarahi in the
Halpert kesi can be seen, in
particular, in these Nepalese
paintings. This iconic type
was extremely popular
across the entire Tibetan
cultural sphere, appearing
in paintings as early as the
twelfth and thirteenth cen-
turies, in sites ranging from
the temple complex of Alchi
in Ladakh to the ruins of
Khara Khot in the Gobi
Desert.

The Halpert kesi has
been previously published as
around 1333 or 1360-64
based on the portrait image
of a Karmapa lama at upper
right. The seated figure
wears the distinctive ‘black
hat’, or vajra (thunderbolt)
crown, of this hierarch in his
earlier incarnations, and
holds the stems of lotus
flowers which support the
vajra and bell emblems at
his shoulders. The Third
Karmapa visited the Yuan
court at Dadu (Beijing) in
1333 and the Fourth Kar-
mapa was in China from
1360 to 1364; both were in-
fluential in the complex rela-
tionship between the late
Yuan rulers and the Tibetan
Buddhist establishment.
The Karmapa lineage con-
tinued to play an important
role in the early Ming period, and in
Sino-Tibetan painted and textile images,
the Third and Fourth Karmapas are de-
picted posthumously, indicating a possi-
ably later dating for the Halpert kesi. A
kesi of Kalachakra featuring a flaming
aureole and complex throne base quite
similar to the Halpert example, is in the
collection of the Potala Palace. A portrait of the Third Karmapa is in the upper right
corner, but stylistically the work is fif-
teenth century. Two embroidered hang-
ings of Yamanka, one in the Metropo-
litan Museum of Art in New York, and

Fig. 2) Votive panel depicting
Shakyamuni Buddha.
Liao Yuan or early Ming period,
mid-14th/early 15th century.
Polychrome silk floss embroidery
with gold-wrapped thread.
Height 51 cm, width 24.5 cm.
Private collection.
the other in the Potala, also feature a seated lama with identical hat, and vajra and bell emblems at the shoulders. Both of these have been given early fifteenth century dates and both share stylistic affinities with a group of embroidered panels of a rather different format.

This most interesting series of embroidered Buddhist panels have come out of Tibet in several individual groups over the last decade. Seven examples now in an anonymous New York collection are included in the Hong Kong exhibition (Figs 2 to 8). The exact iconographic programme and ritual use of these panels is still uncertain. Although they are clearly related to the kesi and embroidered 'copies' of Tibetan paintings, they have a distinctive format and small size which makes them appear more as decorative textiles than as icons. These panels may have been very special commissions for a particular patron or a ceremony.

The panels all display an extraordinarily fine embroidery technique suggesting an imperial or major commercial workshop, perhaps in Beijing or Hangzhou. The panels are, with one exception, in pristine condition, with brilliant rainbow hues in silk floss, and fine wrapped gold thread, all on a dark blue silk background.

All of the panels share a triple-level scheme with borders and register separations framed in couched gold scrollwork. The narrow upper register of each encloses an umbrella/canopy, which signifies a Buddhist sacred space, and two clouds with characteristic pointed extensions. The larger middle and lower register are equal in size. The middle register encloses a seated figure on a multi-coloured lotus-petal base backed with a rounded, jewel-and-scarf adorned throne.
features Shakyamuni Buddha (Fig. 2). The size of the panel is slightly larger than the other known pieces. In the top register, the clouds do not loop across the umbrella, as on the other six panels, and a red sun and white moon are embroidered on the flanking clouds. The arch over the seated Buddha is formed not of clouds but of branching golden scrolls which are the tails of makaras and joined at the apex by a garuda clutching nāgas.

The makaras crouch on fully shown lotus columns and vases, and the throne base is more architecturally developed than on the other six panels, with a central drape like that on the Halpert kesi. In the lower register, six of the Eight Glorious Buddhist Emblems (conch flanked by double fish, endless knot, umbrella, wheel and standard) rise in a central column out of a lotus flower while the two remaining emblems, lotus and vase, are in central vine scrolls at left and right. Four more vine and lotus scrolls at the corners enclose four of the offerings of the five senses: mirror, conch, lute and food.

The panels in Hong Kong do not seem to form a complete group. The Shakyamuni Buddha panel would appear...
to be from a different set than the smaller six panels. Two panels depict guardian figures in flowing robes, boots and armour: yellow-bodied Vaishravana, Guardian King of the North holding a banner and mongoose, and red-bodied Virupaksa, Guardian King of the West holding a snake and jewel (Figs 3 and 4). A third panel has a similar figure, but lacking armour, blue-bodied and holding a staff, seated on a bull (Fig. 5). The panel in Figure 6 depicts a protector in bodhisattva garments, seated on a prone figure and holding a sword. Jambhala, a wealth god associated with Ratnasambhava (‘Lord of the Jewel’), is shown in Figure 7 facing forward holding his primary symbol – a mongoose vomiting jewels – as well as a small axe. The final panel (Fig. 8) bears another form of Jambhala – seated on a horse and holding a mongoose and a vajra sceptre. In both Figures 7 and 8, Jambhala is yellow-bodied and wears bodhisattva garments.

A panel now in the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, sharing all but a few minor decorative details with this group of six in the Hong Kong exhibition, also depicts a forward-facing Jambhala. Two other, slightly larger, panels are known in Western collections, one in the Cleveland Museum of Art and one in the Indianapolis Museum of Art. These two depict the ‘Seventh’ and ‘Tenth’ bodhisattvas, respectively, and have arches of lotus scrolls over the figures. The vase and lotus columns flanking the thrones are fully shown and the lowest register of lotus scrolls hold offerings of the senses.

Despite the fact that three of the panels on loan to the Hong Kong exhibition have been Carbon-14 tested to a date in the late Song period (twelfth to thirteenth century), all of the stylistic elements of
A fragmentary panel of needleloop silk with a central image of Garuda, also in the Hong Kong exhibition, seems to be related stylistically to the embroidered groups (Fig. 9). The exacting needleloop technique (see articles in Orientations, August 1989) gives this piece an awkward look, but the cloud forms, colour range, and Nepalese-Tibetan iconography are the same as the in other panels.

The figure of Garuda, an energetic configuration of human body, bird head and wings, is frequently encountered in Tibetan Buddhist iconography as a protective deity (as in the prabhamandalas of the embroidered Shakayamuni panel). This needleloop example, however, shows Garuda in a form closer to his Hindu manifestation as the vehicle and avatar of Vishnu. Adorned with elaborate scarves and jewellery, Garuda holds aloft a ring (Vishnu’s discus?) and a sword, not the snakes usually seen in Garuda’s grasp. The form and emblems here seem especially close to Nepalese syncretic traditions.

Surely the most spectacular embroidery to have come out of Tibet is included in the Hong Kong exhibition (Fig. 10). Unlike the other pieces discussed here, this large and perfectly preserved example left Tibet some time ago and had been in the collection of the Chogyal of Sikkim until presented to an English gentleman in the 1940s. The embroidery depicts the wrathful deity Raktayamari in yab-yum with his consort Vajravetali, both with heavy-set reddish bodies and bulging-eyes, menacing grimaces, trampling on the blue figure of Yama, Lord of Death, on a recumbent buffalo.

Many aspects of this enormous hanging recall the Chakrasamvara kesi in Figure 1. The flaming aureole, shaded bodies and fearsome ornaments of skulls, severed heads and bone chains are similar in both textiles. Like the Chakrasamvara and Vajravarahi yab-yum, wrathful forms such as Raktayamari and consort were frequently depicted as protective or meditational deities in fifteenth century Tibetan art, the primary monument being the Gyantse Stupa. In fact, one must go to the wall paintings inside this stupa to find a scale and complexity comparable to the embroidery. The six-character presentation mark of the Yongle emperor, at upper right, proves that the embroidery was done in the first quarter of the fifteenth century as an imperial commission. Some minor decorative details such as the three-jewel and vajra border design also link the Raktayamari and Chak...
pared to the lotus scrolls in the lowest register of the sets of panels. The jewel-and-scarf decorated throne cushions and lotus petal bases of the figures across the top of the large hanging also relate to those on the seven panels. Since the large hanging was clearly produced in an imperial embroidery factory in Beijing or Hangzhou, this may prove the case for a similar origin for the panel sets.

Although no historical figure is depicted in the Raktayamari hanging, a convincing argument can be made linking it to the Fifth Karmapa, who had a close relationship to the Yongle emperor. The Fifth Karmapa visited the Ming Court from 1405 to 1409 and performed numerous rituals for the emperor, including a Raktayamari initiation. There was a connection as well between the Karmapa lineage and the Sikkimese royal family, dating from the late sixteenth century, through which such a spectacular embroidery could have passed from Tibet to Sikkim.

It is certain that the Karmapa lamas and other Tibetan dignitaries who visited Beijing returned with silk treasures. Two hangings which are undoubtedly from the same original set as the Raktayamari embroidery are still in Tibet, housed in the Jokhang temple in Lhasa. Comparable in size, format and decorative scheme, these depict, respectively, Vajrabhairava and Chakrasamvara (the latter with consort). All three share flaming aureoles, scroll-pattern backgrounds, rainbow-hued lotus bases, dancing figures across the bottom, and deities across the top, as well as the Yongle mark. The Jokhang temple has no particular connection to the Karmapa lineage, but as the ‘Central Cathedral’ of Tibet, important donations would have come there to decorate chapels. The hangings could also have been deposited in the Jokhang in more recent times.

Also in this illustrious group of Yongle imperial commissions is a woven hanging included in the Hong Kong exhibition (Fig. 11). This brocade is somewhat different in proportions from the embroideries, but it shares their basic format and all decorative details.
Mahakala as ‘Lord of the Tent’ is the exuberant central figure, adorned with skulls, severed heads, snakes and bone chains, and holding a chopper and skull cup and balancing his special club across his arms. The flaming aureole is inhabited by Mahakala’s fierce entourage of beasts and protectors. Although this brocade has suffered extensive damage, it is easy to see that it is closely linked to the embroidered group, with the same jewel-and-vajra borders, dancing figures at the bottom, and Yongle mark at the upper right edge. Like many other ‘Lord of the Tent’ images of this period, this textile is linked to the Sakya lineage. Several of the small historical figures at the upper left and right appear to be Sakya hierarchs. The abbots of Sakya monastery and their secular delegate, the Prince of Gyantse, had ruled much of Central Tibet on behalf of the Mongol emperors and had continued to receive patents from the first Ming emperors. It is perhaps these very hangings which, arriving from the Chinese court, inspired the artists of the Gyantse Stupa. The distinctive Nepalo-Tibetan iconography and style had thus travelled across Asia to the Mongol court and returned, with Chinese flourishes, to Tibet by the first half of the fifteenth century.

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