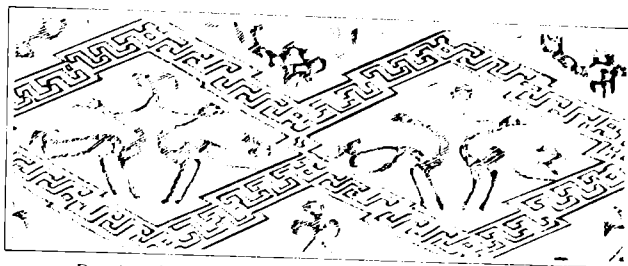


Orientalisms

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Drawing of woven textile pattern of birds inside rhombuses. p. 63

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Cover: Daoist robe (*daopao*)
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 in-

cluded 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 export to 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
Kesi
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-sku* in Tibet, for Buddhist ritual use. These icons are Chinese copies, in silk embroidery, tapestry (*kesi*) and, later, brocade, of Tibetan Buddhist paintings. Identical in style, colour, format and liturgical function to the painted originals, these 'fabric images' had greater cachet. The extraordinary value and visual beauty of richly coloured, lustrous textiles made the 'copies' in silk thread infinitely more prestigious than the painted 'originals'. Chinese silk factories, both imperial and commercial, had been making embroidered and *kesi* versions of Chinese scroll paintings since at least the Song period, but the innovative 'fabric images' for Tangut, Mongol and Tibetan patrons were copies (either from paintings or cartoons) of Buddhist 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* technique. Examples in the Hermitage 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 stylistic and iconographic details to the great number of known twelfth-to-thirteenth century painted *thangkas* (scrolls or hangings) and extant wall paintings in Tibet, and at such sites in Central Asia as Dunhuang in Gansu province and Khara Khoto 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-armed, four-headed meditational deity Chakrasamvara clasps his consort, the red-bodied Vajravahini in the *yab-yum* ('father-mother') pose symbolic of the highest spiritual union of Wisdom and Compassion. The Chinese silk weavers



(Fig. 2) Votive panel depicting Shakyamuni Buddha
Late 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

have faithfully woven in all of the brilliant colour and rich adornments seen typically in Nepalo-Tibetan paintings of the fourteenth to fifteenth century. The energetic branched-flame aureole, gold-

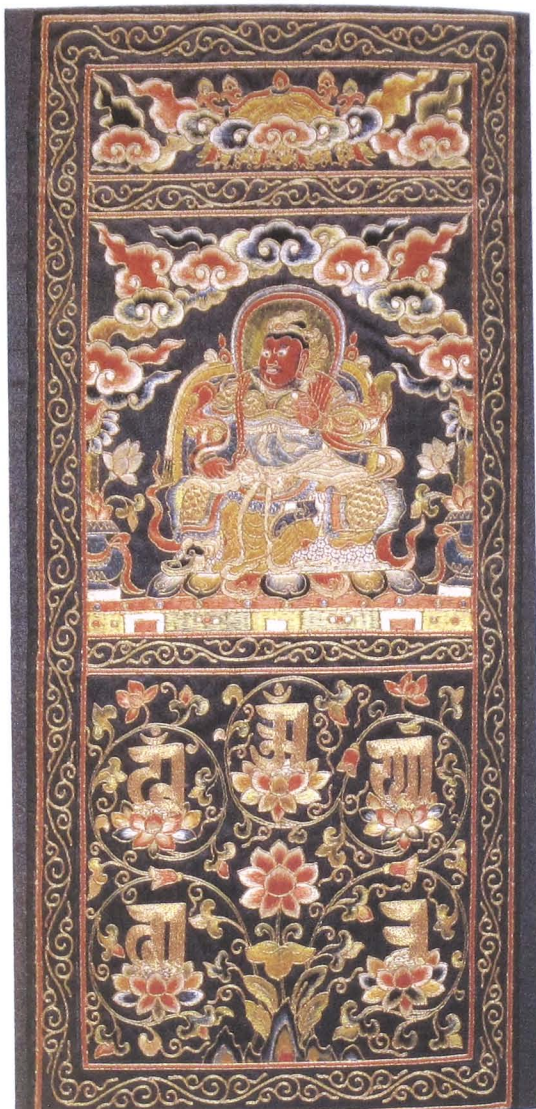
en-leaf crown, and complex lotus-petal base and throne support are also found in wall paintings of the Gyantse Stupa, executed between 1427 and 1439, in southern Tibet, as well as in Nepalese painted scrolls of the late fourteenth to mid-fifteenth century. The extensive use of shading on the bodies of Chakrasamvara and Vajravahini 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 centuries, in sites ranging from the temple complex of Alchi in Ladakh to the ruins of Khara Khoto in the Gobi Desert.

The Halpert *kesi* has been previously published as *circa* 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 Karmapa was in China from 1360 to 1364; both were influential in the complex relationship between the late Yuan rulers and the Tibetan Buddhist establishment. The Karmapa lineage continued to play an important

role in the early Ming period, and in Sino-Tibetan painted and textile images, the Third and Fourth Karmapas are depicted posthumously, indicating a possibly 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 fifteenth century. Two embroidered hangings of Yamankaka, one in The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, and



(Fig. 3) Votive panel depicting Vaishnavana
Late Yuan or early Ming period, mid-14th/early 15th century
Polychrome silk floss embroidery with gold-wrapped thread
Height 40 cm, width 18 cm
Private collection



(Fig. 4) Votive panel depicting Virupaksa
Late Yuan or early Ming period, mid-14th/early 15th century
Polychrome silk floss embroidery with gold-wrapped thread
Height 40 cm, width 18 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.

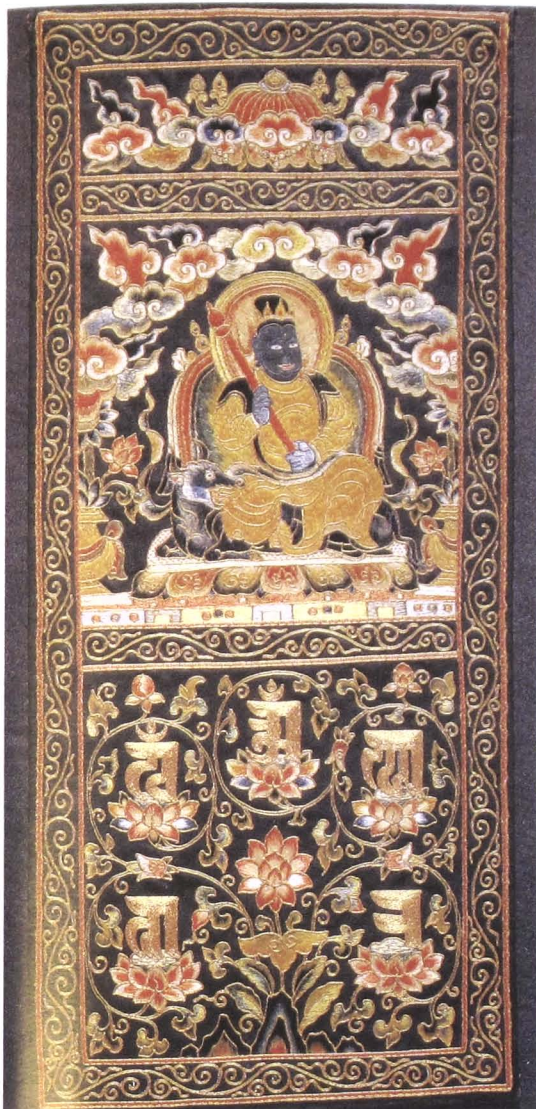
This most interesting series of embroidered Buddhist panels have come out of Tibet in several individual groups over the last decade. Seven examples now in an anonymous New York collection are included in the Hong Kong exhibition (Figs 2 to 8). The exact iconographic

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.

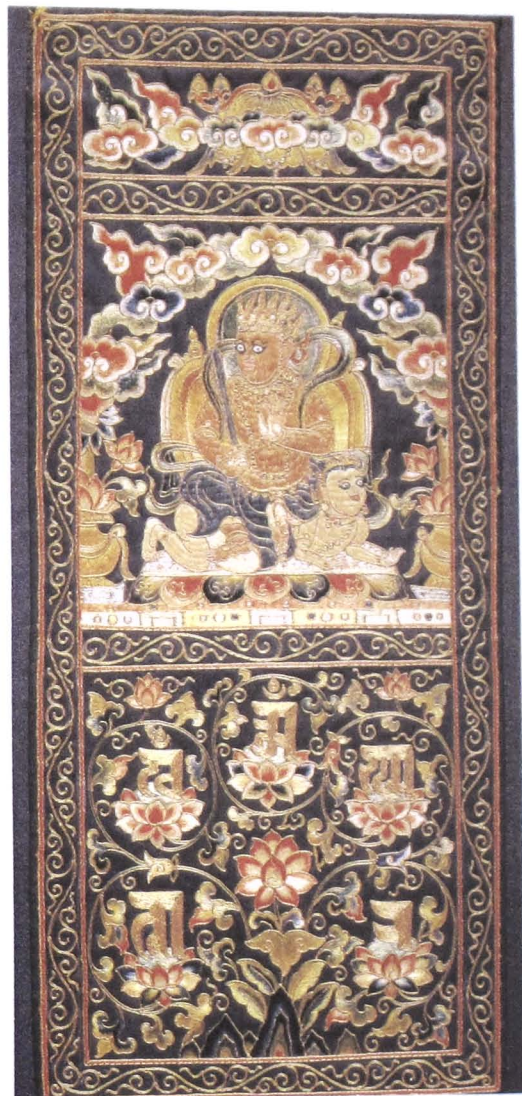
The panels all display an extraordinarily fine embroidery technique suggesting an imperial or major commercial workshop, perhaps in Beijing or Hangzhou. The panels are, with one exception, in pristine condition, with brilliant rain-

bow 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 *rayi* clouds with characteristic pointed extensions. The larger middle and lower registers 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



(Fig. 5) Votive panel depicting a blue-bodied guardian deity
Late Yuan or early Ming period, mid-14th/early 15th century
Polychrome silk floss embroidery with gold-wrapped thread
Height 40 cm, width 18 cm
Private collection



(Fig. 6) Votive panel depicting a guardian deity
Late Yuan or early Ming period, mid-14th/early 15th century
Polychrome silk floss embroidery with gold-wrapped thread
Height 40 cm, width 18 cm
Private collection

cushion. On six of the panels shown in Hong Kong (Figs 3 to 8), an arch of clouds (similar in form to the clouds in the upper register) over the figure springs from a thick lotus column which rises out of a bulbous vase set to left and right on the throne base.

In the lower register of these same six panels, lotus flowers and curling vines grow out from a central rocky base to form five circles each enclosing a *lantsha* (an ornate Sanskrit-based script) syllable in couched gold thread.

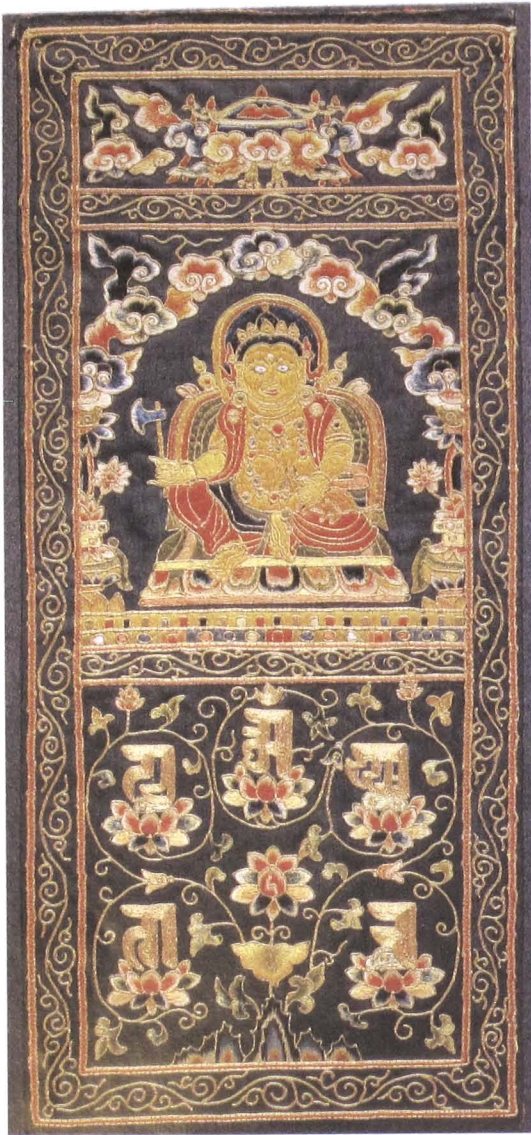
The seventh panel, which is the only one of this group in damaged condition,

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 *nagas*.

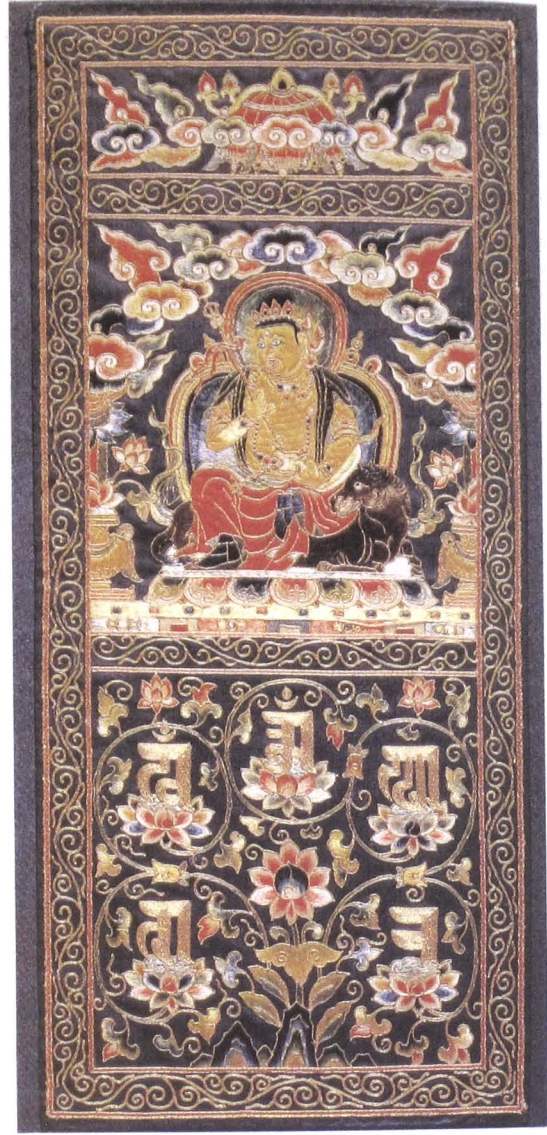
The *makaras* crouch on fully shown lotus columns and vases, and the throne base is more architecturally developed than on the other six panels, with a cen-

tral 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



(Fig. 7) Votive panel depicting Jambhala
Late Yuan or early Ming period, mid-14th/early 15th century
Polychrome silk floss embroidery with gold-wrapped thread
Height 40 cm, width 18 cm
Private collection



(Fig. 8) Votive panel depicting Jambhala on a horse
Late Yuan or early Ming period, mid-14th/early 15th century
Polychrome silk floss embroidery with gold-wrapped thread
Height 40 cm, width 18 cm
Private collection

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 Rat-

nasambhava ('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



(Fig. 9) Votive panel depicting Garuda
Yuan dynasty (1279-1368)
Polychrome silk floss needle-loop embroidery
with gold-wrapped thread
Height 32 cm, width 23 cm
Private collection

the known panels instead suggest a late Yuan to early Ming dating (mid fourteenth to early fifteenth centuries). The spiky lotus vine loops in the lower registers and gold scrollwork borders are common elements on late Yuan and early Ming period ceramic decoration. More importantly, the seated figures show the pronounced Nepalo-Tibetan style introduced to the Yuan imperial court by the Nepalese artist Aniko (1243-1306) under the sponsorship of Kublai Khan's religious preceptor Phagpa, a Tibetan cleric of the Sakya School. The vase-column-scrolling arch *prabhamandala* seen in its fullest form in the Shakyamuni Buddha panel in Figure 2 and in somewhat abbreviated form in the other six panels, is a

popular Nepalese convention of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries for scroll and manuscript painting, and is ubiquitous in Tibetan art of the fifteenth century.

In China, the key monument of the late Yuan period, the stone gateway built for Toghan Temur north of Beijing in 1345, shows many of the decorative devices of the embroidered panels: lotus floral circles, *ruyi* clouds and scrolling *prabhamandalas*. The closest comparisons, however, are the illustrations to the 1410 *Kanjur*, printed in Beijing by the order of the Yongle emperor (r. 1403-24), and based on the Tibetan Narthang edition of 1312-20. The jewelled thrones, vase-column-lotus supports (cut off by the frame) the *ruyi* arch (a solid bar, not clouds), lotus-petal base, body ornaments, and wide-faced round-bodied form of the deities in the *Kanjur* prints are all identical to those in the embroideries.

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 *Orientalis*, August 1989) gives this piece an awkward look, but the cloud forms, colour range, and Nepalo-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 Shakyamuni 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-eyed, 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-



(Fig. 10) Raktayamari
Yongle period (1403-24)
Embroidered silk
Height 335.3 cm, width 213.4 cm
Private collection
Photograph courtesy Christie's, New York

rasamvara textiles, and may confirm the later dating of the *kesi*.

The quality of the embroidery work on the large Raktayamari hanging is as high as in the set of six small votive panels. The similarity in design, colour and workmanship can be seen, for example, in the lotus scrolls adorning the red blanket on Raktayamari's buffalo, com-

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 aureole, 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. Ma-

(Fig. 11) Mahakala as
 'Lord of the Tent'
 Yongle period (1403-24)
 Silk brocade
 Height 345 cm, width 226 cm
 Private collection
 Photography by Longevity Textile
 Conservation, London

hakala 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 with 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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