

THE SIXTEEN ARHAT STATUES OF THE KARMAPA “LOOTED AND EXHIBITED” BY THE GELUGPA: Origin, history, style and current location of sacred “Yongxuan” Arhat statues gifted to the 5th Karmapa by the Chinese Yongle Emperor, looted by the Mongolian-Gelugpa military alliance, and stored for centuries until now in Drepung Monastery, and the inaccurate sourcing of such artworks by contemporary scholars and art historians¹

“The [Karmapa’s] repository burned down around the year 1644, during the late Ming period when it was set ablaze by Mongol forces. At that time, Gusri Khan, the Khoshut prince and founder of the Khoshut Khanate, led a large army into the Tibetan region, defeating the Tibetan rulers who supported the Karma Kagyu tradition. This event led to the plunder and destruction of the RTSE La repository, and the Buddhist relics and treasures housed therein were looted and transported across the Yarlung Tsang Po River to be taken to the Lhasa region.

During the chaotic period of transportation, five of the sixteen Arhat sculptures fell into the river by accident. The remaining eleven Arhats eventually found their way to the Buddha Hall of Drepung Monastery, where they have been preserved to this day. More than a century later, in 1775, the Tibetan autobiography of the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche recalled this painful history for Karma Kagyu tradition. The eleven incomplete lacquered wood Arhat statues became significant witnesses to this historical episode.” – L. Wei(2023)

Introduction

Recently, I wrote about the discovery of thousands of Tibetan Buddhist texts of the non-Gelugpa other main lineages in Tibet housed and hidden for centuries in Drepung Monastery, Tibet. In that article, based on a research paper by Dr. Cecile Ducher (2020)², I wrote about the Temple of the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas bcu lha khang) at Drepung Monastery named after the sixteen arhat statues the Gelugpas stole and kept [during the Mongolian invasion of Tibet] from the Karmapa and Karma Kagyu from the important Tse Lhagang³ repository that housed many precious objects of the Karmapas. Although the reasons for hiding and stashing them away for years from public view and publication/study has never been clarified by the Gelugpas, These items were never returned even to this day, and are still housed at the Drepung monastery.

I was unable to find any images of the Sixteen Arhats when I wrote that article, but today as I was searching for something else online, a recent, interesting paper by with photos of eleven of these sandalwood Arhat statues, written by a Chinese scholar, Luxu Wei⁴ called *Karmapa Statues in Drepung Monastery* (2023), who writes about their important historical value, and then illustrates the research results from the perspective of artistic value and the difference between Chinese and Sino and Tibetan Karmapa's statues styles.

The 5th Karmapa, as I have written about before (2021)⁵ (based on teachings by the 17th Karmapa, Ogyen Trinley Dorje) was remarkable in not only his influence and respect by the Chinese Ming Emperors but his refusal to become a political pawn for them. The 7th and 8th Karmapas followed his lead and refused to get embroiled in the Chinese quest for political and military power in Tibet. Unlike the Gelugpas with the Mongolians who actively supported and participated in the military takeover of Tibet and declared (for the first time in Tibetan Buddhist history) a political and spiritual leader in the political tulku lineage of the 5th Dalai Lama (a Mongolian title). For more on that history, and the continuing failed political policy of the Gelug-US alliance to win back entry and power in Tibet, can be read in my article [here](#)⁶.

As a personal observation, what often strikes me most about my research on this topic, is the high-level (and pervasive) bias, complicity and lack of academic objectivity when it comes to writing about the Dalai Lama institution and Gelug sectarian power during the 17th Century and beyond. People talk about ex-colonial countries returning their stolen loot to the rightful owners, but what about the Gelugpa/Dalai Lama institution? Why do so many Tibetans and their European and North American political and academic allies refuse to speak about (and call out) this not so romantic/uncompassionate (but important) aspect of how the Dalai Lama came to power in Tibet, and the loot and destruction they took from the other main lineages?

One can only surmise, it is because many of these academics are completely signed up to and invested in the Dalai Lama institution (and the support they get from their institutions in exile) since the 1960s onwards, and thus feel unable to write honestly about the Gelugpa history of that era. In fact, art galleries and museums, even online ones like Himalayan Art Resources (HAR), should also cite and correct the original sources of these artworks and their historical lineage, and how they came into the hands of the Gelugpas or western art collectors (like the Rubin), and if stolen should be returned to their original Karma Kagyu source and owners⁷.

In fact, ironically, many of these “western-based, politically correct and liberal scholars who often rail against racist “orientalism/romanticisation” on Tibetans and Tibet, do exactly that when they refuse to objectively and accurately speak about the history of Tibetan Buddhism and in exile, in relation to Gelugpa sectarianism and its violence against the Tibetan themselves, pre-1959 and after. Instead, when challenged on it, they also gaslight and glibly pass over it as being the work of a Chinese spy or communist, or anti-Tibet, which is exactly what the Gelugpa sectarians have been labelling such critics for centuries too. I share more of my observations on that below too. So, for the sake of historical accuracy, instead of referring to these statues as simply “owned” by Drepung, I refer to them as “stolen and housed” by them. For an article about the Chinese Emperors patronage and respect for the successive Karmapas, see [here⁸](#). First, let us turn to these remarkable statues of the Karmapa.

The Sixteen Arhats and their representation in Chinese and Tibetan art

Ducher also describes the origin of the sixteen clay statues, which were used as a practice support by the Gyalwang Karmapas after being gifted by Chinese Ming Emperor

Luxu Wei (2023) first briefly explains the origin and current location of the statues, stating that Drepung monastery “own” the statues:

“Drepung Monastery, an important heritage site under state protection, owns eleven lacquered wood Karmapa statues of the Ming Dynasty. As indicated by the formal historical record, these wooden statues were a diplomatic gift enshrined by Zhu Di, the Emperor of the Ming Dynasty, and were sent to the fifth Karmapa. During the reign of Emperor Yongle and Emperor Xuanzong of the Ming Dynasty (1403–1435), the Ming government supervised the production of numerous Buddhist statues combining both Tibetan and Chinese styles, known as “Yongxuan Buddha Statues”. The interaction between the Fifth Karmapa and Emperor Yongle has left a significant historical record, and Chen Xinhai's book, Emperor Yongle and Deshin Shekpa [Chen X. (2008) Emperor Yongle and Deshin Shekpa. Qinghai People's Publishing House,] compiles scattered information, documenting their exchanges and the historical evidence of their mutual promotion of Sino-Tibetan cultural exchange.

After giving a brief introduction to Drepung Monastery itself as a container of many Tibetan Buddhist artifacts. Wei continues:

"The fifth Karmapa's statues were given less attention recently within Tibetan Buddhism research than traditional Buddha statues. This article takes the statue of the great treasure, Dharma King Karmapa, as a research case and reveals its important historical value, and then illustrates the research results from the perspective of artistic value and the difference between Chinese and Sino and Tibetan Karmapa's statues styles." [2023: 863]

Indeed, and anyone who knows Tibetan Buddhist history knows why they received less attention. They were "stolen loot" hidden away by Drepung for centuries. Wei then goes on to describe the mixed "style" of the statues, exemplifying the fusion of Tibetan-Sino styles due to the spread of Tibetan Buddhism during those eras that had also matured in Nepalese Vajrayana Buddhist styles:

"During the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties, due to the prevalence of Tibetan Buddhism in the palace and street, a style of Buddhist statue art that had matured in the 12th century in Nepal gradually influenced the Han people's region. Anigo, a Nepali architect and sculptor, introduced new techniques to the Kahan Balig and promoted the popularity of the "Western Brahmanical Appearance" style .

From the Yongle Emperor of the Ming Dynasty to the Xuande Emperor, Tibetan-style statue art continued to thrive in the local art, giving rise to a group of palace Buddhist statues known as the "Yongxuan Statues." These eleven Karmapa's' statues are part of the most classical Tibetan-style Buddhist sculpture of this period, blending the artistic influences of the Sino and Tibetan styles." [2023: 863]

History and Style of the Sixteen Arhat statues in China

Wei then speaks about the history of sculpting the renowned Arhats/Ancestors of Buddhism in China, and how compared to other Buddhist countries, they "lagged behind" on that during the Han Dynasty":

"It wasn't until the 7th century AD, during the Tang Dynasty, that Master Xuan Zang's translation of the *Nandimitrvadna: Record on the Duration of the Law*, spoken by the Great Arhat Nadi Mitra, provided a comprehensive list of the sixteen Arhats, along with their names, ranks, retinues, and abodes. It was only after this development that Arhat's faith and the production of Arhat paintings and sculptures began to flourish. However, due to the absence of specific visual descriptions of the Arhats in the Nandimitrvadna, the sculptures took on a wide range of forms and appearances. Due to absence of written inscriptions, it would be an arduous task for onlookers to discern the identity of each Arhat."⁹

The "burning down" of the Karma Kagyu/Karmapa sacred objects repository at Tse Lhagang and their theft and housing in Drepung Monastery

For sake of accuracy, instead of referring to these statues as "owned by Drepung, I refer tot them as "stolen and housed" by Drepung. Wei then explains the origin, style and manufacture of the statues and how five of them were lost or destroyed when the Gelugpa-Mongolian forces looted them:

Wei states that:

"The lacquered wood Arhat statues were originally made of sandalwood and numbered sixteen in all. They were initially kept in Rtes. La, Nyingchi Chongkyêr, a revered repository under the supervision of the fifth Karmapa. References to these sixteen wooden Arhats can be found in the Tibetan autobiographies of both the fifth Karmapa and the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche."

This seems to be referring to the Tse Lhagang. Wei explains that the repository “was burned down around the year 1644, during the late Ming period when it was set ablaze by Mongol forces” after their:

“plunder and destruction of the Tse Lha repository, and the Buddhist relics and treasures housed therein were looted and transported across the Yarlung Tsang Po River to be taken to the Lhasa region. During the chaotic period of transportation, five of the sixteen Arhat sculptures fell into the river by accident. The remaining eleven Arhats eventually found their way to the Buddha Hall of Drepung Monastery, where they have been preserved to this day. More than a century later, in 1775, the Tibetan autobiography of the eighth Tai Situ Rinpoche recalled this painful history for Karma Kagyu tradition. The eleven incomplete lacquered wood Arhat statues became significant witnesses to this historical episode.”

Wei explains that after the statues had been stolen by the Gelugpa-Mongolian forces:

“In 1722, the 8th Tai Situ Rinpoche embarked on a pilgrimage to Lhasa along with his mother, during which they “viewed and paid homage to various Buddhist artifacts, including the sixteen Arhat statues bestowed by the Ming Emperor on the fifth Karmapa, which were kept in Drepung Monastery.” This indicates that during that time, among the many precious offerings in the Tse Lha Repository, these sculptures held a particularly significant status.”

Can you imagine the humiliation and shame of the great 8th Tai Situpa, Chokyi Jungne [1700-1774] being forced to make pilgrimage to this Gelugpa monastery to see these stolen sacred statues housed in a Gelugpa monastery? Like a thief showing off their loot to the owner's relatives? For anyone with an iota of compassion it is heartbreaking to read about, and a gross injustice too.

The style and identification of the “Tibetan Arhat” statues housed at Drepung Monastery

Wei then goes into more description of the Arhat statues and how they have more Tibetan features than the Han Chinese style and can be identified by a text called “The Ritual Identifying Elders and Making Offerings”. The Tibetan name of this text was not given by Wei, but when I researched it, I discovered there is a recent (2022) English language translation of it here by Khenpo Sodargye¹⁰.

“The Ritual” is the most prevalent Arhat worship ritual in the Tibetan region, dating back to the 13th century and translated by the Tibetan Buddhist text translator Shakyashribhadra (1127–1225). The Ritual describes the seating arrangements, names, abodes, relations, and, most crucially, the distinctive features and mudras of Tibetan Arhat statues, which identify them from Han-people-made Arhat statues.”

Wei then provides photos and descriptions of these statues, which I have re-produced in the public interest here. He gives the Tibetan names of the Arhats, which I have translated to the original Sanskrit names.

These characteristics align with the scholar Wang Ruilei's Summary of Tibetan Ar-hat sculptures:

“The wooden Arhats all uniformly wear Han Chinese robes, with nine of them adorned in the distinctive Han Chinese style robes, and one Arhat dressed in an earlier Han Chinese “half-draped” robe. Only one Arhat is clad in the traditional Indian style robe, which passes over the right shoulder, but even within this robe, the monastic toga inside follows Han Chinese fashion and is adorned with auspicious cloud patterns. During the Hongwu period of the Ming Dynasty, it was stipulated that “the robes of the monks and the borders should be decorated with gold.” This gold-trimmed robe, known as the “gold-pleated garment, had already

appeared in the early Ming period, and without exception, all eleven Arhats are depicted wearing this gold-pleated garment.”

In contrast, the surviving 11th- to 12th-century wall paintings of Arhats at Drepung Monastery, which exhibit a purer Nepalese-Tibetan style, depict the Arhats uniformly wearing the distinctive red robes of Tibetan Buddhism.”

Wrong or questionable attributions of historical Tibetan Buddhist artworks of the sixteen Arhats

These important “stolen” sacred and significant objects are not even listed on the Himalayan Art Resources website either. Although I have noticed various objects on Jeff Watt’s website HAR incorrectly or not accurately stated in terms of their *original* source. For example, [this 16th Century collection of Sixteen Arhat paintings from the Yongle dynasty](#)¹¹, painted in the Karma Kagyu Karma Gar-dri style does not even mention the 5th Karmapa or Tai Situpa lineage, and simply states they are housed at the Rubin Museum of Art. Some other artworks of that era are simply labelled as “Gelug” and yet no other detail is given or their origin or lineage history either.

Another example of an 18th Century artwork, attributed by HAR/Watts to Gelugpa, simplay based on the presence of an old Kadampa master, Dromton Jungwa Gyalne, which ignores the pertinent fact that the Kagyu lineage forefather Je Gampopa received and followed old Kadampa teachings, and so that is not a sufficient reason at all to label the painting as Gelugpa.

Watts also translates a [Praises to the Sixteen Arhats](#) without any reference or source to the original Tibetan or Sanskrit text.

“Western” European and North American art historian and academia’s silence, bias and complicity in Gelugpa sectarianism?

Why do so few Euro-North American scholars state clearly that the artifacts, thangkas and statues they write about, if from other lineages in Gelugpa monasteries are stolen?

As a final observation, why do so few Euro-North American scholars state clearly that the artifacts, thangkas and statues in these Gelugpa monasteries are stolen? Why is “western” academy generally silence on these gross injustices of the Gelugpa era, and/or glosses them over with neutral language?

Even the so-called Tibetan poets, rebels, and radicals revered by Tibetan exiles in Dharamsala, North America and Europe, never speak about Gelug hegemony and power in Tibet. The only Tibetans I ever met in Dharamsala who dared to do that, supported Tibetan independence and were generally isolated and hounded out of the exile society in India for their critique of the history of Dalai Lama/Gelugpa in Tibet.

The Tibetan-origin Tibetology scholar, Tsering Shakya (born 1959, based in North America)¹² “dared” to speak of these matters in some of his writing and research (such as his history book “Dragon in the Land of Snows). Yet, Shakya was also ‘isolated because of it’. Shakya also seems to have “watered down” his stance on the pre-1959 Tibet as being a brutal feudal slavery system controlled by Tibetan aristocrats and the Ganden/Gelugpa dictatorship, judging by his recent comments on social media, seemingly defending and supporting the Dalai Lama institution (in relation to the incident with the Indian boy in 2023).

Another more outspoken critic of the Dalai Lama/Gelugpa sectarian hegemony is Jamyang Norbu (1949--), a Tibetan origin, US-based political activist and writer of [Shadow Tibet website](#). Norbu tends

to steer more towards being anti-religious indoctrination in general though, and wanting a more secular Tibetan society, than being both devotedly Buddhist but critical of the suppression of Tibetan Buddhism itself by the Gelugpas.

However, socially and personally difficult, as it no doubt is, for Tibetans themselves to speak out about Gelugpa hegemony, one would think it should be easier for non-Tibetans living in Europe and North America to speak more openly and radically about the history and its effects on Tibet. Yet even some of the most "politically correct" and "woke" ones are not willing to look clearly at the history, glibly stating that "well you know all the lineages did bad things to each other" without giving any specifics or sources for that. In any case, even if that were true, there is no historical period in Tibetan history more important in terms of what has since happened to Tibet with China, than the seventeenth century onwards. After all there were many Tibetans during that time, despite the Gelug hegemony, such as Gedun Chophel and others who also wanted the Ganden religious Dob Dob dictatorship removed from their arbitrary, elitist brute power.

One can only surmise, it is because many of these "westernised" academics are actually not as objective or secular in their approach, as they want to have us all accept. And that many of the older, but even younger Tibetologists, have also completely been conditioned, signed up to and invested in the Dalai Lama institution since the 1960s onwards, and thus feel unable to write honestly to call out (or even see) how they got their dominant sectarian power in Tibet and in exile. This is evidenced by the unprecedented letter signed by 35 such academics (note how many did not sign it too though) to defend and protest the "media slandering" of the 14th Dalai Lama's persistent attempts to make an Indian boy make oral contact with him, despite the Indian boy clearly and visibly saying "no" three times. [Indians, and non Tibetans who reasonably exercised their freedom of speech and objected to its blatant "inappropriateness" of an adult stranger with a child were hounded and bullied and called Chinese spies and worse.](#)

Some people have remarked to me, that they do not want to criticise the Gelugpas/Dalai Lama because the Tibetans need unity and are fighting for the survival of their language and cultural heritage. Agreed, but what a bizarre and ironic reason to give though. As anyone who really knows the history of the last three hundred years in Tibet pre-1959, the biggest and most destructive threat to Tibetan culture, freedoms, heritage and Buddhism was (and to some extent still is) the Gelugpa sectarianism, headed by the Dalai Lama institution.

The Gelugpas have always falsely maintained and promoted a narrative that they unified Tibetans in a civil war. Yet, what they "conveniently" omit to mention is that it was not a civil war but a foreign Mongolian invasion, which Tibetans desperately tried to resist, and in terms of the 10th Karmapa refused to get involved in the violence. So any "unity" that came after that invasion and since, has been based on fear, violence, suppression, censorship, massive theft and forced conversions. Hardly a unity still worth preserving in exile or in Tibet, is it?

¹ This article by myself, Adele Tomlin was published on the Dakini Translation website here (24th July 2025): <https://dakinitranslations.com/2025/07/24/the-sixteen-arhat-statues-of-the-karmapa-looted-and-exhibited-by-gelugpa/>

² Ducher, C. (2020). *Goldmine of Knowledge: The Collections of the Gnas bcu lha khang in 'Bras spungs Monastery.* Revue d'Etudes Tibétaines, see: https://www.academia.edu/43730572/Goldmine_of_Knowledge_The_Collections_of_the_Gnas_bcu_lha_khang_in_Bras_spungs_Monastery. As Ducher (2020) remarked:

“One of the temples built at that time was the chapel at the rooftop of the Great Assembly Hall [in Drepung monastery] called the Temple of the Sixteen Arhats (Gnas bcu lha khang). It was named after the sandalwood statues of the Sixteen Arhat disciples of Buddha Śākyamuni that were initially housed in the Karma Kagyu monastery Tse Lhagang (Rtse lha sgang) in Kongpo and brought to Drepung when their initial home was taken over by Gelug -led forces after 1642.”

³ For more on the importance of the Tse Lhagang and its housing of the Black Treasury (Ngag Dzo) by the 3rd Karmapa (containing the liberation story and songs of Milarepa), see the extensive footnote to this article below and my prior article about it [here](https://dakinitranslations.com/2022/04/12/the-black-treasury-dzo-nag-by-3rd-karmapa-extensive-edition-of-milarepas-life-and-songs-origin-editions-and-contents/) (<https://dakinitranslations.com/2022/04/12/the-black-treasury-dzo-nag-by-3rd-karmapa-extensive-edition-of-milarepas-life-and-songs-origin-editions-and-contents/>). I was unable to find any photo of the Tselhagang monastery though.

⁴L. Wei (2023), *The Karmapa Statues at Drepung Monastery*. E. Marino et al. (eds.), Proceedings of the 2023 5th International Conference on Literature, Art, and Human Development (ICLAHD 2023), Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research 806: <https://www.atlantis-press.com/proceedings/iclahd-23/125996412>

⁵ See: <https://dakinitranslations.com/2021/03/01/exquisite-official-seal-of-approval-white-jade-seal-and-precious-objects-given-by-chinese-emperor-to-the-5th-karmapa-and-other-tibetan-seals-their-language-and-origin/>

⁶ See Tomlin, A. (2024) *Mongolian-Gelug Shadow Over Tibet: Six Decades of Failed US-Gelug policy*: <https://teahouse.buddhistdoor.net/the-mongolian-gelug-shadow-over-tibet-six-decades-of-failed-us-gelug-policy/>

⁷ I have sent copies of this new article to HAR and Rubin Art Museum who house such 16th and 17th artworks of the sixteen arhats in Yongle dynasty style and requesting they a) update their entries to include the origin and b) return the artworks to the official Karmapa/Karma Kagyu Tsurphu labrang in exile.

⁸ See Tomlin, A. (2022): *The Chinese and the Karmapas* (Dakini Translations):

<https://dakinitranslations.com/2020/11/16/the-chinese-and-the-karmapas-historical-survey-from-the-2nd-to-19th-karmapas/>

⁹ Wei [2023] further writes: "With the earliest surviving sets of eighteen Karmapa statues, the Song Dynasty polychrome statues from Changzhi County, Shanxi Province, and the Yuan and Ming Karmapa portrait paintings from Dule Temple in Jixian County as examples, we can observe common traits of Han-style Karmapa statues from different periods. Approximately one-third of the Karmapa statues have the appearance of Indian monks, with red faces, prominent noses, thick eyebrows, or curled beards, while the rest have Han-style monk features with plump cheeks, fair skin, and a refined demeanor. The physical positions of the Karmapa are presented randomly and without fixed conventions."

¹¹ See collection of 16th Century arhat paintings at HAR here: <https://www.himalayanart.org/search/set.cfm?setID=4215>

¹² Tsering Wangdu Shakya (born 1959) is a historian and scholar on Tibetan literature and modern Tibet and its relationship with China. He is currently Canadian Research Chair in Religion and Contemporary Society in Asia at the University of British Columbia. Shakya has written about the feudal serfdom present in Tibet, prior to 1959, but unlike Jamyang Norbu, has never overtly (as far as I am aware) critiqued the Gelugpa hegemony and Dalai Lama political tulku institution itself.