LIBERATION FROM THE PAIN OF EVIL DESTINIES: 
THE GIANT APPLIQUÉ THANG KAS (GOS SKU) AT GYANTSE 
(RGYAL RTSE DPAL ’KHOR CHOS SDE)

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Once a year at sa-ga zla ba, “the full-moon day of the saga constellation”, which is the festival commemorating Buddha’s birth, enlightenment, and nirvāṇa at the full moon of the fourth Tibetan month, one of a set of three huge silk brocade thang kas is displayed for a few hours at Dpal ’khor chos sde monastery in Gyantse (Rgyal rtse), Southwestern Tibet (Gtsang Province). This is a ritual that I was able to document on the 19th June 2000 and 9th June 2001.

The giant 15th-century cloth images (gos sku chen mo) in Gyantse have had little mention by modern authors1 and similarly brief reference in historical records (’Jigs med grags pa 1987 and Myang chos ’byung 1983). This paper therefore represents a first attempt at documenting these banners which—except for some late 17th century gos sku in the Potala Palace—are the only original early fabric thang kas of this type in Tibet to have survived to the present day. The analysis in this paper is supported by some nearly contemporary textual sources, and it describes the history, iconography, style, technique and ritual presentation of these important brocade thang kas.

The three giant fabric thang kas preserved in the Dpal ’khor chos sde gtsug lag khang—each approximately 22.5 by 22.5 metres in size—probably once formed a set representing the Buddhas of the Three Ages. It is likely that these were displayed one after the other on three successive days, as is still the case for the three “silken paintings”

1 Tucci 1989, vol. IV.1: 62; Chan 1994: 420f. (with misleading and undocumented data on two Śākyamuni gos sku 1419 and 1432); Lo Bue 1992: 564f.; Reynolds 1996: 250f. It is evident that extravagant and luxurious ritual banners, made of precious and often lavishly designed Chinese silks, originally were held in higher esteem than painted scrolls. Perhaps because of modern Western aesthetic standards, they have been overshadowed by their painted counterparts and only rarely been the subject of scholarly publications. Cf. Tanaka 1994, with a short selective overview on textual records and techniques; Reynolds 1996 and 1999; Henss 1997.
(made in the 1980s) at Bkra shis lhun po monastery. One of the Gyantse monumental silk images, depicting Dipankara—the Buddha of the Past—has not been shown since at least the late 1930s, probably because of its poor condition. It was then that the first photographs were published of the other two central gos sku and of the right hand side panel. The left side banner reportedly was removed by the British and brought to England during the Younghusband expedition in 1904. It was returned to Tibet during the political mission under Charles Bell sometime between 1906 and 1921. It has not been displayed since then due to serious damage. The two remaining principal scrolls, manufactured approximately 570 years ago, are in surprisingly good, and, in the case of the Atiśa Śākyamuni banner, near pristine condition. Only some cracked appliqué sections at the feet and palms of the hands and at the lotus throne can be found on the Maitreya gos sku. However, the side-banner presently displayed is more worn, as it is evident by the fading of the red-coloured clothes of the two uppermost bodhisattvas and in the sections of the fourth bodhisattva from the top of the banner.

THE ICONOGRAPHY OF THE ŚĀKYAMUNI GOS SKU (COLOUR PLATE 42)

The central Buddha, in bhūmisparśamudrā with the alms bowl in his left hand, is dressed in a red patchwork robe and is surrounded by an elaborate “Six Ornaments” (rgyan drug) prabhā. Śākyamuni is flanked by two standing bodhisattvas: to his left, a yellow-brown Maitreya, in vitarkamudrā with an amṛta kalaśa and an antelope skin; and, to his

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2 Rnam rgyal 1998: 144–46 (plates). The Amitāyus-like Buddha of the Past is identified here as Kāśyapa.

3 See Bowers Museum of Cultural Art, Santa Ana/USA 2003: ill. p.127 (photograph by Theos Bernard, 1939). A colour photograph by F.Bailey (1938, Maitreya gos sku and side-banner to the right) was published in LIFE magazine, vol.6, no.24, New York 1939; another one by M.R.Roberts (Śākyamuni gos sku and side-banner to the right) in ATLANTIS magazine, vol.XXIII, Zürich 1951: 140. An elderly caretaker at the Dpal ’khor chos sde told me in 2001 that he had not seen during his life-time the damaged Dīpankara gos sku about which no other information is known to exist. Apparently nobody has seen the Dīpankara and the left side-banner, now stored in the gtsug lag khang from at least the 1920s.

I wonder if the Dīpankara banner may be identical with the “Buddha” from 1432 as mentioned in texts (cf. n.20).

4 Local information gathered at Gyantse in 2001; cf.n. 5.