

The Manchu Influence on Buddhist Art and Iconography during the Qing Dynasty (1644-1912)

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Abstract: This study explores the cultural and academic implications of Manchu influence on Buddhist art during the Qing Dynasty, 1644-1912. A period marked by intercultural exchange with a major influence on the art and iconography of the dynasty. This work has highlighted the role of art in mediating the relationship between the Manchu rulers and their subjects through the clear lens of cultural diplomacy and identity construction in Qing China. It is in the socio-political dimension of each ethnic group where Buddhist art should be sought and used to claim power. The study relies on cultural hybridity and postcolonialism theories to discuss how the Manchu elements yielded peculiar forms of Buddhist art. Postcolonial theory interrogates how these cultural practices were used to validate the Manchu political order and promote cohesion among cultural systems. Together, these frameworks look at the impacts of Manchu in Qing Dynasty Buddhist art and iconography. A qualitative method from a wide range of primary and secondary sources, such as Buddhist paintings, and research studies indicates that Buddhist art was used by the Manchu rulers as an authorization for syncretizing the manifold cultural traditions and the new ruling elite. The findings of the study show aesthetics combined with artful elements of the Manchu and Han Chinese, which supported religious and political aims and showed Manchu's influence on art. Future research should search for the effect that technological progress leaves on both the production and distribution of art.

Keywords: Cultural Hybridity, Postcolonialism, Intercultural Exchange, Manchu, Qing Dynasty

1. INTRODUCTION

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), controlled by the Manchu, represented a period of vast and great cultural and political change within China. Art and religion in China received a strong Manchu influence during the period. Of more interest is that during this period, Manchu rule affected their Buddhist art and iconography to an issue which previously had elicited a great deal of scholarly concern. In return, this resulted in a unique aesthetic of a mixture of Manchu and Buddhist artistic elements, the outcome being a reflection of the eclecticism that existed in the culture of the dynasty. This study intends to take a close look at the influence of Manchu on Buddhist art and iconography during the reign of the Qing Dynasty in China, considering how the interchange of such cultures changed the visual images

of Buddhism and provided a cultural legacy to posterity. The Manchu rule in China in the 17th century brought a new chapter in Chinese history, an infusion of Manchu culture with the existing Han Chinese traditions. This cultural synthesis in Buddhist art was also reflected in this new development through Manchu patronage. Berger has noted that the religious and political sides of this patronage spoke to the utilization of Buddhist art for the consolidation of the authority of the Manchu and the appearance of a show of unity within the empire (P. Berger, 2003). Manchu emperors were known for the deep interest they took in Buddhism and their patronage of Buddhist art. Their patronage served well to further solidify their image as universal rulers and protectors of the Buddhist faith (P. A. Berger, 2003). The Buddhist artworks under the Manchu court include all forms of art and derive inspiration from the court more specifically like the Buddhist portraiture under Manchu patronage innovated. Rawson discusses the complex combination of Chinese and Tibetan artistic styles in creating Buddhist sculptures during the Qing (Rawson, 2010). The paintings served both the religious function and testified that the court belonged to a religious character and interacted with a multiplicity of cultural currents. The Manchu rulers' attempt to diversify foreign elements in Buddhist art might have reflected their cosmopolitan approach to diplomacy. Further, according to Fu, Buddhist painting reflects and shapes the religion and politics of the Qing Dynasty (Fu, 2017), which embodied the relationship between art, power, and spirituality. These mixed styles and themes in the Buddhist portraiture helped to serve the Manchus as a visual reflection of their broader ambitions both within and beyond the border of the Qing Empire (Bhabha, 2012). The Manchu influence on Buddhist art extended beyond portraiture to the broader visual culture of the Qing Dynasty. The Manchu rulers embraced and promoted a diverse range of artistic styles, incorporating elements from different regions and traditions within the empire (Murray, 2018). This eclecticism is seen in the fusion of Chinese, Tibetan, and Mongolian styles in Buddhist art, reflecting the multicultural nature of the Qing Empire and the Manchu rulers' efforts to present themselves as cosmopolitan leaders. The relationship between Manchu patronage and Buddhist art also had significant implications for the representation of female piety and spirituality. The late Qing period witnessed a surge in the production of Daoist paintings depicting Our Lady, a figure associated with elite female piety (Liu, 2004). These paintings, often commissioned by the court, not only reflected the religious beliefs of Manchu women but also served to reinforce the social hierarchy and the role of women within it. The impact

of Manchu influence on Buddhist art is also evident in the architectural world. Debreczeny highlights the role of the Manchu court in promoting a Sino-Tibetan artistic synthesis in Ming Dynasty temples (Debreczeny, 2003), which can be seen in the blending of architectural styles and the incorporation of Buddhist motifs. This synthesis was part of a broader strategy to integrate different cultural and religious elements within the empire, thereby strengthening the legitimacy of Manchu rule. Moreover, the Manchu influence on Buddhist art was not confined to the borders of China but extended to the global stage. The global perspective on eighteenth-century Chinese art and visual culture, notes that the Qing Dynasty's artistic achievements were part of a larger dialogue with the rest of the world (Wang, 2014). The Manchu rulers' patronage of Buddhist art contributed to the dissemination of Chinese cultural values and artistic styles, thereby enriching global art and culture. Another matter worthy of attention is the place of painting in the expression of Ming loyalism under the Qing Dynasty. By that time, paintings with images of peonies had turned into a symbol of Ming loyalism, showing how at times art can be a mirror, reflecting the hard interrelation of politics and identity in China under the Qing Dynasty (Chiem, 2017). In many ways, such painting works appear to be promoted by the Manchu rulers in an attempt to indicate and reinterpret traditional symbols for their political ends. Besides painting and architecture, the influence of the Manchu rulers on Buddhist art is also exemplified in the field of sculpture. Leidy provides an introduction to the art of Buddhism (Leidy, 2009), including its history and meaning, which is essential for understanding the context in which Manchu patronage operated. The Manchu rulers themselves were high patrons of Buddhist sculpture, whose style was made of all kinds of material and reflected the larger tendency of rich and diverse artistic life. The iconography of Chinese Buddhist art in the traditional period from Han to Liao would, therefore, be very relevant to understanding the Manchu influence on it. Van Oort assumes the development of Chinese Buddhist iconography to form the basis for characterizing the change and continuity of Buddhist art during the Qing Dynasty (van Oort, 1986). So, the Buddhist art patronage by the Manchu rulers would seem but another example of the age-old tradition of imperial support to Buddhism, coated with their peculiarly Manchu paint. The Manchu influence on Buddhist art during the Qing Dynasty presented a diverse facet of artistic expression and the relationship between politics, religion, and culture. Therefore, Buddhist art became a means not only for political patronage by the Manchu rulers to firm up their authority but also brought a sense of unity and identity among the people of the vast, multi-

national Qing Empire. Their support was the reason Buddhist art has gone the course, leaving a heritage that has presently come under study and with an interest of hundreds of various art admirers and academicians. This highlights a deeper regard for the role that art has in cultural and political settings and the effect that this era of the Qing Dynasty would bring to history concerning Chinese art. Therefore, the objective of the study is to reflect on the influence of Manchu on Buddhist art and iconography in the Qing Dynasty.

1.1 Significance Of The Study

This study is significant because it explores the cultural and political impact of Manchu influence on Buddhist art in the Qing dynasty. This research highlights the enduring effect of Manchu influence and offers a greater knowledge of the cultural and historical environment of the Qing Dynasty by concentrating on the interaction between politics, religion, and art. It considers how the Manchus influenced the art as a political tool toward being assertive in uniting multifarious cultural traditions, with which to forge a cosmopolitan empire. The research focuses on the art and iconography of this period and shows how Buddhist art is influenced by Manchu in their cultural diplomacy and formation of identity against the backdrop of a very complex social fabric of the Qing Dynasty.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review follows the manifold dimensions of the Manchu influence on Buddhist art and iconography during the Qing Dynasty, considered by many historians to be the stage of Renaissance in Chinese history undergoing inordinate cultural and political transformation. This literature drawing on several sources, dissects the complex nexus that linked Manchu political power with Buddhist artistic expression. It reflects on how Manchu rulers used art to claim political authority, relays the integration of diverse cultures, and their use for the creation of a cosmopolitan empire. Therefore, the present review of literature elaborates an understanding of the role of Manchu patronage in both the aesthetic and religious fronts of the Qing empire by synthesizing key studies and perspectives that set the foundation for further exploration of this subject. Li highlights the topics covering the artistic development and achievements made in the Qing Dynasty (Li, 2022). The book covers all forms of Qing art with a large spectrum from painting and sculpture to ceramics and

paintings in what aims to be a comprehensive study of Qing art. Through a collaborative effort, the scholars and experts touch on the development of the stylistic, the cultural influences, and the context in the socio-political arena that led to the formation of this art during the Qing period. The results, according to her, indicate an indispensable dynamic relationship of traditional Chinese aesthetics to foreign influences and a reflection of the widening cultural horizons in that empire. The work further recommends the diversity and depth characterizing Qing art and exploration into some of its subtleties of expression and impact on intercultural. Berger explores the complicated relationship Buddhist art had with political authority in Qing China (P. Berger, 2003), seeking to fill the unexplained gap in how art became not only a medium for imperial propaganda but also a mode of religious expression. The book impresses the fact further that the intersection of Buddhism with politics was elemental to mold the visual culture and ideological environment of the Qing dynasty. The interdisciplinary approach used by Berger studies the thangkas, sculptures, and temple architecture through political history, trying to discover how the type of art legitimized power and furthered Buddhist values within the Manchu empire. The findings reveal the fact that Buddhist art was not just a medium reflected by religious devotion but an exact strategy for the Qing emperors to assert their sovereignties: one that could be used in establishing a connection with the subjects. The study contributes to the complex dynamics between the two and suggests areas worthy of further inquiry regarding the changing roles of Buddhist art in the context of political change. The work of Teri et al. is very broad; it covers architectural painting materials of the Qing Dynasty in the Tibetan Buddhist Monastery in China (Teri et al., 2023). It fills the current gap in this area of research, which is the preservation and restoration of cultural heritage. The study reveals the meaning of understanding the composition and the techniques to be used for further conservation of the artworks. A multidisciplinary scientific analysis method, together with art-history research allows authors to check the pigments, binders, and other materials used in monastery paintings with a laudable level of detail. These materials are diverse and can be broadly reflected in such essential substance groups as mineral pigments and organic binders, which reflect the complexity of relations between local and imported traditions of artistic cultures. The study shed light not only on the material culture of Qing Tibetan Buddhist art but also provided critical data for proper conservation strategy development. Research and practical studies on the exact environmental and contextual factors, particularly on a few of the paintings kept for preservation, have to be

conducted. Zhu explores the depths of the standard iconography of the Four Heavenly Kings in their changes in Chinese Buddhist art (Zhu, 2023), especially the need for understanding the origins and developments that they undergo in their symbolic representations. The study emphasizes the Four Heavenly Kings in their position as Buddhist protectors in cosmology, their visual representation, and their position in Chinese art. Zhu traces the historical development of the lute (Zhu, 2023), sword, snake, and parasol of the kings before they became standardized attributes of Chinese Buddhist sculpture and painting back to their Indian sources through detailed iconographic analysis. They together show a cultural accommodation and synthesis that are relatively high for the development of the iconography of those gods and reflect a rather trended interchange between China and the Buddhist world. The study contributes to a deeper understanding of the visual language of Chinese Buddhist art and cultural interactions bearing on its development, thus recommending further study of the regional variations and their implications in the Four Heavenly Kings' iconography. Debreczeny et al. affirm that their research is set within Tibetan Buddhist principles (Debreczeny et al., 2019), where art represents a delicate bond of faith and empire. This book points out how important it is to be aware of how Tibetan Buddhist art was used, consciously engaged, to underpin this regime with powerful imagery for political legitimation and religious authority. The authors illustrate this as they explore thangkas, sculptures, and ritual objects, showing how these art forms were busy with the execution or manifesting for rulers in the propagation of political ideals and fortifying religious ideals within the Buddhist doctrine. One of the most interesting findings of this study is that it has a dual character of Tibetan Buddhist art. That is, consolidating political power and spreading religious doctrine are important parts. As such, the study fits within the setting of balance between art, religion, and politics in Tibetan history and further projections made in contemporary Tibetan culture. Lin and Xie carried out an approach-oriented study to focus on artistic characteristics in Dehua porcelain sculpture (Lin & Xie, 2022), which independently evolved at that time. The paper focused on the place of Dehua porcelain in the Chinese history of ceramic production and its relevance in the world. Using the available qualitative analysis approach, the authors identified the stylistic elements, production techniques, and thematic motifs that characterize the Dehua porcelain sculptures from the identified three periods. It showed how traditional skill and the use of modern artistic expressions are blended with highlights of aesthetic elegance, purity, and cultural symbolism in the sculpture. The study was

able to describe a greater level of historical accuracy about the artistic and cultural importance of Dehua porcelain in a way that has not yet been exhibited and described within the literature. Xie researched the custom Tibetan Buddhist ceramics of the Qing dynasty and how they are used by royalties through the lens of the Han-Tibetan Cultural Evolutionary Algorithm about some intersection of art (Xie, 2021), technology, and cultural exchange. This study evaluated how crucial the ceramics were in reflecting the synthesis between the Han and the Tibetan cultures during the Qing period. Using both data analytics and art-historical research, the study exposed the design patterns, symbolic motifs, and material composition of the ceramics that uncover cultural dynamics and changes related to technology innovation. Therefore, the study showed the delicate balance that was maintained between faith and belief, imperial patronage, and artistic creation in the production of Tibetan Buddhist ceramics for the Qing royalty. The study further illuminated the role that ceramics played in the cultural and technological environments of the Qing Dynasty and suggested further research on the use of big data analytics in the study of historical art forms. Existing literature on the subject is informative and provides insight into diverse facets of the influence to some extent. However, a comprehensive understanding of the extent and subtle influences of this relationship has not been touched upon. Further research is needed in this specific area of how the Manchu patronage of Buddhist art influenced the development of religious and cultural identity among so many identities within the Qing empire. The role of Buddhist art in mediating relations between Manchu rulers and their subjects, as well as acting in diplomatic exchanges among empires is a part of further investigation. Addressing these gaps would bring out much more of the whole interrelationship of art with politics and religion in Qing Dynasty China, and Manchu domination's impact on Buddhist art and iconography that tends to prevail unchallenged.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY To conduct a comprehensive examination of the Manchu influence on Buddhist art and iconography during the Qing Dynasty, this research employs a qualitative approach, prioritizing the qualitative analysis of both primary and secondary sources. First, three Buddhist paintings from the Qing Dynasty with clear influences of the Manchu are central in the analysis. They form direct evidence of aesthetic and cultural exchanges between the Manchu rulers and Buddhist artistic traditions. This presents a detailed visual analysis of these works of art, with an emphasis on their iconography, stylistic

elements, and thematic motifs to better understand Manchu influence. The paintings are accompanied by contemporaneous textual descriptions, imperial edicts relating to art and religion, and records from Buddhist monasteries and temples at the time. These documents, then, go on to contextualize the study to elucidate the circumstances under which Buddhist art is patronized and appreciated within the empire, so the socio-political and cultural setting better be understood from which artistic activity was developed. The research also includes several secondary sources in the form of scholarly articles, books, and research papers covering artistic, cultural, and historical details, with special light thrown on Buddhist art produced during the period of the Qing Dynasty. Major works of other authors in the literature review, such as Berger and Rawson, provide framing analysis within the broad scholarly dialogue and offer important theoretical and historical perspectives. The data considered for collecting regard to the Buddhist paintings selected for the current research are: medium, dimensions, contained iconographic details, and details of style. Digital tools enable one to use high-quality images of works of art that will be considered in the course of the research to check fine details in the image. Such information comes from the imperial and monastic discourses that are available to the contemporary world through digital databases and libraries dealing with East Asian studies. To this extent, the researchers examine data through thematic analysis to establish patterns, themes, and symbols that reveal the influence of Manchu. Interpretative methods view cultural and religious meanings of the works of art and put them in the socio-political context of the Qing dynasty. This study shows how Manchu and Han Chinese mix in some unique forms of Buddhist art, according to the theoretical perspectives of cultural hybridity and postcolonial theory. Further, the post-colonial theory examines how these forms of art were used to legitimize Manchu rule and, at the same time to show diverse cultural traditions. These together help in getting the point of view concerning the influence of cultural adaptation and imperial authority in Qing Dynasty Buddhist iconography. Important methodological considerations are taken into account concerning ethical guidelines, about the cultural and religious significance of the artwork analyzed. Reproduction of the analyzed images has been obtained with the necessary permissions, and this study does not escape the inherent biases and limitations of both primary and secondary sources. In doing so, the research will bring forth, through this structured and detailed methodological approach, the sophisticated dynamics between the Manchu rulers and the Buddhist art in the Qing

Dynasty, underlining how intertwining cultural, religious, and political factors contributed toward the influence of art. This study seeks to further the knowledge of Qing Dynasty art through an investigation of art as a form of communication in religion and politics during one of the most important times in China.

4. DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION



Figure 1: Avalokitesvara Thousand Arms

4.1 Thangka Painting Depicting Avalokitesvara

The Qing Dynasty (1644-1912), with Manchu rulers, is said to be an era marked by great cultural and artistic exchange. In that epoch, Manchu rulers from the northeast of China established rule with policies that spread an enrichment of cultural interactions. Thus, this period is remarkable due to the peak of Buddhist art that followed deep influences of intertwining religious and political agendas by the Manchu rulers. Promoting Tibetan Buddhism became, in particular, a strategic tool the Manchus used to consolidate their power and legitimize their rule over such a diverse empire. Viewed in light of this background, a very good and detailed work to examine the complex and delicate relationship of Manchu patronage with Buddhist iconography and art at this juncture would be a thangka painting of Avalokitesvara—the Bodhisattva of Compassion. Avalokiteshvara receives the most diverse forms of adoration throughout the Buddhist world. Still, she occupies a special place in Mahayana Buddhism for being one of the fundamental symbols of compassion and mercy. Both the thangka paintings and the sculpture are the work of the hands of traditional, well-practiced artists of Tibetan Buddhism, who have always

been devoted to their respective religious deities. This particular work of art focuses on allowing us to reflect upon how religious art worked for the Manchu rulers in solidifying their sovereignty, while also contributing a lot to the further development and cross-cultural fertilization of Buddhist iconography.

4.2 Avalokitesvara: A Reflection of Manchu Influence on Buddhist Compassion

The manifestation of Avalokitesvara as Chenrezig in Tibetan Buddhism and Guanyin in Chinese Buddhism is a symbol of Buddhist art and iconography under the grasp of Manchu rulers. The image of Avalokitesvara, a central figure in Mahayana Buddhism embodies the compassion of all Buddhas, during this era. It reflects how religious art is used by the Manchu rulers to project themselves on one hand as authorities and, on the other hand as benevolent leaders. Here is an iconic forceful image in iconography, precisely in Manchu propaganda, Avalokitesvara with a thousand arms and eleven heads a befitting image of limitless compassion for the Manchu agenda. This form is said to have arisen from the fact that such a being is overwhelmed by his suffering and, therefore is a bright argument for the great suffering of beings underlining the Bodhisattva's commitment to others, a theme that sounded to the Manchu rulers' efforts of presenting themselves as a compassionate sovereign. This symbol of the 1,000 arms and heads for Avalokitesvara besides other details and symbols, speaks to attest to the artistic value of that period about the complex interrelations of Manchu rule in their articulation with art, religion, and politics. The rule of the Manchu over the Qing dynasty was accompanied by a new era of Buddhist iconography, through the strategic embrace of Tibetan Buddhism. This adoption served a purpose not only to consolidate power but also to legitimize their reign across the diverse Chinese empire. The political underpinnings of this much affected Buddhist art in that the Manchu rulers were patronizing and promoting the creation of religious artworks that were in tune with the objectives of these non-Buddhist conquerors. The painting revealed some elements that show an influence of the Manchu on the iconography and style of the Thangka painting of the eleven-headed Avalokitesvara one-thousand-armed composition. That imagery, in its inherent Buddhist tradition, speaks to the emphasis in its turn of the Manchu rulers on the theme of compassion. The image of Avalokitesvara, a much-celebrated Bodhisattva for his mercy and charity spoke to the choices undertaken by the Manchu rulers. In a way through the endorsement of such imagery, they could also project their

image as compassionate leaders probably in line with the revered qualities of Avalokitesvara. The highlighted value of compassion in the iconography of Avalokitesvara reflects not only the religious values of Buddhism but also a sign of the way through which the Manchu rulers sought legitimization of their authority and presentation of a benevolent face toward the subjects.

4.3 Stylistic Elements and Thematic Motifs

The artistic style of the thangka painting which combines Tibetan and Chinese elements, is a striking example of the cultural fusion that defined the Qing Dynasty. Chinese creative traditions can be seen in the painting's softer, more flowing lines and the integration of backdrop nature aspects, while traditional Tibetan thangka craftsmanship is typified by the painting's exquisite details and bright colours. The wide-ranging cultural contacts that took place during Manchu control are demonstrated by this blending of styles. The thematic motifs underline still further how Manchu influenced Buddhist art, particularly their portrayal of the painting Avalokitesvara. This powerful, compassionate representation of the Bodhisattva would overlap with the Manchu rulers' desire for their subjects to perceive them as rulers who were both benevolent and had authority. More than two arms and heads of Avalokitesvara are no actual symbolic representation of his divine attributes. However, they also metaphorically show the long arms of the Manchu rulers and their capability to govern and protect the many empires. Such representation does not sit very well with the Manchu rulers, who projected, at all times, an image of omnipotence and benevolence, speaking to their dual role of protecting the state and being patrons of Buddhism. Whereas the artistic as well as thematic features of the thangka painting enable one to get a balanced insight into how the Manchu rulers strategically used Buddhist iconography for the legitimization of their rule and representation of commitment to the compassionate precepts of Buddhism, the thangka painting of Avalokitesvara with one thousand arms is a precious artefact encasing complex interplays between art, religion, and politics during the Qing Dynasty. Iconography and stylistic elements alike testify to the strategic patronage by the Manchu rulers of Buddhist art in this painting, which is a visual testament to part of their efforts at the legitimization of their rule and the bringing of the empire together under one roof. Through the analysis of this painting, we gain insights into the ways in which the Manchu influence shaped Buddhist art and iconography during the Qing Dynasty. This painting helps us understand the artistic accomplishments of that epoch much better

providing insight into wider cultural and historical forces and giving a more precise view of the complex interlacing between art, religion, and politics in one of China's most important historical epochs.



Figure 2: The Qianlong Emperor as Manjusri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom Thangka

4.4 The Qianlong Emperor as Manjushri, the Bodhisattva of Wisdom Thangka

During the Manchu-era Qing Dynasty, Buddhist art flourished and there were notable cross-cultural exchanges. The Manchu rulers' political and religious goals greatly affected this time. An example is the thangka painting of the Qianlong Emperor depicted as Manjushri the bodhisattva of Wisdom. A great example of this is the unique thangka artwork that shows the Qianlong Emperor as the wisdom bodhisattva Manjushri. Around 1750, the Imperial Workshop painted this picture with Giuseppe Castiglione's (Lang Shining) visage. It is a useful case study to examine the Manchu influence on Buddhist iconography and art at this period. The portrait of the Qianlong Emperor as Manjushri affirms the syncretism of Tibetan Buddhism with the power of the Chinese Empire reflecting how the emperor was attempting to legitimize his rule religiously. This thangka is a work of art at the same time an emblem of the political strategy and personal devotion to Buddhism of the Qianlong Emperor. They also collaborated with the participation of Giuseppe Castiglione, an Italian Jesuit painter who borrowed the Western techniques used in his home country and applied them to Chinese themes. This painting depicts the great lengths to which the Manchu rulers went in the use of Buddhist iconography to cement their authority and project an image of wisdom and kindness that would mesh their rule with the spiritual life of their subjects.

4.5 The Qianlong Emperor's Portrayal as Manjushri

The Manchu Qianlong Emperor (reigned 1735-1796) of the Qing Dynasty in his imaginative capacity beheld his multi-ethnic empire with universal monarchic spectacles that spectacle where all empires belonged to him. The image depicted in the thangka as Manjushri the bodhisattva of wisdom speaks to the living influence of Manchus on Buddhist art and iconography at this time. Placed in the middle of a symbolic universe and surrounded by 108 deities, teachers, and other Buddhist personalities, it is the strongest possible portrayal that indeed the Qianlong Emperor ruled in both the spiritual and temporal worlds. This is a visual representation of the artistic embodiment of the Qianlong Emperor's aspirations to be one of the considered wisest and most enlightened rulers. In the form of Manjushri, he takes on himself the revered qualities of wisdom and insight necessary for a sovereign to rule over a vast and diversified empire. The 108 deities and figures further demonstrate the claim to universal rulership on the part of the emperor, as they represent the extensive scope of his ruling and patronage or protection of Buddhist teachings. Therefore, the thangka is not just a work of religious art but rather carefully made imperial propaganda supporting the Qianlong Emperor's legitimacy and subtle reinforcement of his devotion to the Buddhist wisdom principle. He showed how the Manchu rulers used the iconography of Buddhism to further their legitimacy show an image of enlightened rule and thus mix their political ambition with the spiritual tapestry of their empire.

4.6 Manchu Influence on Iconography and Style

A prime example of the rich fusion of Tibetan and Chinese artistic elements that characterized the Qing Dynasty's cultural contacts is the thangka that portrays the Qianlong Emperor as Manjushri. This religious picture in the Tibetan style is decorated with jewel-like sceneries, lucky clouds, and Wutaishan, the five-peaked mountain that is thought to be Manjushri's earthly residence. These components demonstrate the Manchu emperors' support for Buddhist art as well as their attempts to incorporate Tibetan Buddhist symbolism into their imperial iconography. This is a portrayal of the Qianlong Emperor aligning with the same strategic view of the Manchu rulers where wisdom and enlightened forms of leadership were projected. By assuming the identity of the bodhisattva of wisdom, the Qianlong Emperor had placed himself squarely within the Buddhist tradition of enormous importance to the Tibetans and Mongols of his empire. This clever fusion of Buddhist iconography with the imperial person only served to reinforce who the emperor was and how legitimate his reign was, adding to that the respect and even inclusiveness he evoked before the many religious traditions his empire held. This synthesis of

Tibetan and Chinese artistic traditions in this thangka reflects the effort of cultural unification of their vast and varied empire by the Manchu rulers. It presented them with an opportunity to represent their political power, spiritual devotion, and the breadth of culture, which allowed them to set their rule into a place and leave a monumental impact on the religious art of that period.

4.7 Political and Religious Significance

The strategic use of Buddhist Art in the Qing Dynasty the thangka has a deep scope concerning its political and religious importance in the Qing Dynasty. Among other evidence including the inscriptions and symbols from the two-faced Tibetan Buddhists found in the tomb of the Qianlong Emperor, this thangka indicates the real devotion the emperor had for Tibetan Buddhism. However, their role was more than just religiously motivated canvases. The thangka had turned into a very strong political device that helped the Qianlong Emperor empower his control over the Mongol and Tibetan believers of the Qing Empire, faithful to the teachings of Tibetan Buddhism. By participating in the ritual inaugurals and assuming the persona of Manjushri, the Qianlong Emperor was effectively placing himself on the stage as one of the leading luminaries within the Tibetan Buddhist tradition. This strategic move constructed not only his authority and legitimacy as a ruler but also made it easy for the incorporation of the several religious and ethnic groups under his reign. The painting belongs to an exclusive group of eight similar works, having as its theme the Qianlong Emperor as the central deity. The distribution of these paintings was carefully arranged, presented to Tibetan religious dignitaries, or displayed in the chapels of the religious establishments of the Tibetan Buddhist establishment resident in the town now called Beijing. This is the exhibited painting to demonstrate the great use of Buddhist art by the Qianlong Emperor as an instrument of his political and religious diplomacy. The Qianlong Emperor used the power of Buddhist art to unite his multiethnic kingdom and solidify his control by fusing political strategy with religious devotion. The Qing Dynasty's complex relationship between politics, religion, and art is demonstrated by the thangka, which also highlights the Manchu emperors' adept approach to government and cultural fusion. The thangka painting is a rich artifact reflecting the complex interplay that art, religion, and politics had during the Qing Dynasty. It is apparent from the iconography and stylistic features of this painting how the Manchu rulers decided in favour of strategic patronage of Buddhist art to legitimize their rule and weld their empire under the mantle of wisdom and enlightenment. Analyzed in light of those changes the costume, script,

and furniture used in the paintings the picture then illustrates how Buddhist art and iconography were influenced by Manchu during the Qing Dynasty. This serves to amplify the significance of artistic accomplishments during the period, indeed speaking further to the broad cultural and historical forces at work and offering a very sophisticated view of the fine line in which art, religion, and politics all take part during one of the most important historical epochs in China.



Figure 3: Thangkas of Vajrabhairava

Among the various deities depicted in Buddhist art, Vajrabhairava, also known as Yamantaka, holds a special place as a wrathful emanation of Manjushri and a guardian of the highest form of tantra, Anuttarayoga. The strong patronage and interest of the Manchu rulers in Tibetan Buddhism and the arts ensured that these had a powerful influence on the representation of Vajrabhairava in the thangka paintings of those times. Thangka paintings of Vajrabhairava from this period tend to be very sensitive, rich in symbolic elements, colors, and meticulous detail reflecting the artistic amalgamation of Tibet and China. Vajrabhairava portrayed with his grim face and so many arms and faces depict his place in overpowering difficulties to enlightenment. The Manchu emperors encouraged these religious art objects as a testimony not only to the Manchu emperors' devotion to Tibetan Buddhism but also to the lifeline of Buddhist art in China. The Thangka Vajrabhairava paintings of the Qing dynasty witness not only the artistic level of that time but also the eternal great legacy of iconography in Buddhism.

4.8 Vajrabhairava in Tibetan Buddhism

In Tibetan Buddhism it is known as Vajrabhairava, "the destroyer of death," representing the elemental conquest of wisdom over ignorance and the transformation of anger into enlightened energy. This deity emanates

wrathful form from Manjushri the bodhisattva of wisdom with nine faces, thirty-four hands, and sixteen legs, to appear very fierce, having the power to conquer delusions. The face of the buffalo was between points of fire and the flames mounted the points of his horns and the brown hair on them flew upward as though on posts of fire with an insolent blaze. The other surrounding faces articulate the different features of his enlightened mind amongst which would be the serene countenance of Manjushri at the top. Under the Qing period, and particularly in the patronage that Manchu rulers extended to the cultural environment there was a great impetus given to the representation of Vajrabhairava in thangka painting. It reflected strong engagement from the Manchus towards Tibetan Buddhism and a wider cultural-religious improvement. The influence of Manchu is evident in the colours flashy with the detailing running from the top to the bottom of the tangka used to show the imperial and divine atmosphere of Vajrabhairava. During this time there was a style development in the art form where traditional Tibetan iconography was mixed with some Chinese artistic components. For example, in some details of the landscape backgrounds, and there are subtleties and a gradation of colour that would enhance the visual. Thus, the thangka paintings had dual purposes acting as devotional images and serving as the means of the Manchu emperors to show their religious and cultural authority that brought together the spiritual with the temporal all over China. The detailed depictions during this period testified to the skilled artisans whose works were pinned by the patronage of the Manchu enabling them to flourish in Buddhist art to preserve and transform their heritage. This helped in the way the Qing Dynasty played a role in the perpetuation and growth of Buddhist teachings and iconography, ensuring the iconography of Vajrabhairava was a central symbol of enlightened power and spiritual resolve.

4.9 Manchu Patronage and Artistic Innovation

Religious patronage of Tibetan Buddhism at the hands of Manchu rulers included the commissioning of thangka paintings which were used in religious devotion and at the same time served the purpose of assertion of the rulers. The most notorious was the Qianlong Emperor, who was said to take an interest in Tibetan Buddhist art. He had more than forty tangkas painted amongst them Vajrabhairava. This patronage provided the artists with resources and incentives to refine their techniques and experiment with new styles of depiction Vajrabhairava and others. Much of the influence from the Qing Dynasty of the Manchu on Buddhist art and iconography was profound. Manchu emperors, particularly Qianlong,

harboured great passion as patrons of Tibetan Buddhism and would proactively take part in the commission of thangka paintings as a way of religious devotion and in other ways to show cultural and political dominance. Their patronage of the arts further blossomed Buddhist art seen during their reign in the integrated art forms of both the Tibetans and the Chinese. During this period, the representation of gods like Vajrabhairava became complex notably having a character marked by rich colors, and profuse details with gold and silk as materials of choice in creating such works. The thangkas of this time besides being religious artefacts, also embodied the signs of the Manchu rulers' devotion to Buddhism and that they were their protectors. Tibetan Buddhism's visual language was enhanced and its everlasting legacy was reinforced by the artistic achievements of this era, which were driven by the Manchu emperors' support and had a lasting effect on Buddhist iconography.

4.10 Stylistic Elements and Manchu Influence

Thangka paintings on Vajrabhairava from the Qing Dynasty usually show style components illustrating that they are much influenced by Manchu for example, bright colors, which are attractive to the eye; there are also luxurious materials such as gold and silk that have added details to signify that era. All the jewellery, weapons, and flames, including everything else in the surroundings of the form of Vajrabhairava, would have been represented with the greatest detail to evidence the artist's craftsmanship and the luxury at the court of the Manchu. Besides Qing Dynasty Vajrabhairava thangkas have been the result of combined arts from the Chinese and Tibetan traditions. The composition of the figures and the treatment of perspective along with the introduction of landscape elements may well signify that Chinese painting techniques have left their mark on the Tibetan thangka.

4.11 Iconographic Details and Religious Significance

The iconographical details of Vajrabhairava in thangka paintings embrace deep religious meaning. The many arms bear abundant weapons and objects in their hands to symbolize many methods of subduing diverse obstacles in spiritual perfection. It also emphasizes his role as a deity protector to the Buddhist teachings. He presented Vajrabhairava trample figures that represent the delusions and the negative forces. Every aspect of the painting from the fiery halo of his head to the position of his limbs every single feature is symbolically meaningful and reflects the deep

iconography that is Tibetan Buddhist art. The thangka paintings show a lot about Manchu influence on Buddhist art and iconography during the Qing dynasty. The patronage extended to them by the Manchu rulers not only encouraged the evolution of Buddhist art but also greatly facilitated the fusion of the two Tibetan and Chinese art traditions. The details in those Thangka paintings are so fine, and sharp details, that illustrate the ongoing legacy of Vajrabhairava in the Buddhist deities, and provide an insight into the religious and cultural scene of the period through their precise details, amazing hues, and symbolic themes.

5. CONCLUSION

The analysis of the Thangka painting depicting Avalokitesvara offers deep insight not only into the context of the Qing Dynasty and the Manchu rule but also into the rather unique landscape of ideas on culture and religion. This period when it was defined by the overwhelming Manchu influences on Buddhist art and iconography turned out to be a very rich time for the students of the arts, religion, and politics. On the other hand, the Manchu rulers from the northeast regions of China at the same time implemented policies that would pave the way for cultural interactions perhaps best exemplified by the flourishing of Buddhist art. This further helped in the promotion of Tibetan Buddhism and solidification of the power coupled with an added rationalization of their rule over a diverse empire. Additionally, the painting of Avalokitesvara is dedicated to the deity of Bodhisattva and his compassion, giving a window to how the Manchu rulers used religious art in consolidating their sovereignty, also giving their contribution to the development of Buddhist iconography. This brings a strategic use of religious imagery projecting the Manchus as benevolent leaders whose political image is in line with the revered qualities of Avalokitesvara. The study argues that the details and symbolism presented in the Avalokitesvara Thangka of the Qing dynasty highlight not only the artistic excellence but have come to be a symbolic reflection of art, religion, and politics in the nth degree. Furthermore, the stylistic features of the thangka with a combination of lines and colours, epitomize a period of cultural interactions that had far-reaching effects. This mixture was typical of the kind of effort that the Manchu dynasty was making at the time to bring together a vast empire under one religion and culture. The thematic motifs of a thousand arms and many heads found in the Avalokitesvara painting have been metaphors for the reach of the Manchu

rulers and their capacity to rule with compassion and probably authority in an ethnically multi-composite state. For example, such choices of iconography further develop the Manchu image of the protectors or patrons of Buddhism, ensuring that Buddhism will be protected and developed in Manchu through the teaching and learning of Buddhism. Conclusively, the painting of Avalokitesvara thangka is a devotional religious artefact but can be seen as a testimony to the politics and cultural thorniness of the Qing Dynasty. This gives an example of how the Manchu rulers used Buddhist iconography to make real their power and benevolence, hence setting a legacy of the religious and artistic richness representative of that time. This analysis enriches our understanding of how art functioned as a medium of political expression and religious reverence, highlighting the enduring influence of the Manchu on Buddhist art and iconography during one of China's most pivotal epochs.

5.1 Future Recommendations

This firm position of the Manchu against the revolutionary influence of Buddhists might encourage future studies on Manchu influence over Buddhist art during the Qing Dynasty. Such research is then encouraged, which might take several focused questions. Comparative study of Buddhist iconography before and after the conquest by Manchus may throw light on certain changes, especially because of their rule particularly in the style of thangka paintings, sculptures, and temple architectures. In particular, this research may also focus on the regional differences that took place in Buddhist art across the empire, so as to add explanation to how and why local traditions slowly became fused with the imperial styles. Further looking at the socio-political roles that Buddhist art took in consolidating power across diverse ethnic and religious groups, and, again, its diplomatic engagements with other neighboring Buddhist countries, would provide an insight. Thus, Manchu emperors and court officials may similarly benefit from it, taking the approach of the in-depth study to plumb the motivations for specific commissions and their cultural import. Further studies into these areas would provide an enormous inspiration to understanding in depth how Manchu rule affected the given settings of the Qing dynasty with regard to its cultural, artistic, and religious parameters.

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