The Temple of Tamzhing Lhundrup Choling and the Legacy of Pema Lingpa (1450-1521): An Iconological Study

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Abstract

One of the most influential Buddhist masters in the Himalayan nation of Bhutan is the illustrious treasure-revealer Pema Lingpa (pad+ma gling pa, 1450-1521), a very charismatic and controversial figure. His corpus of religious teachings became a key locus of Bhutanese Buddhism, and his extensive lineages gave rise to a succession of important masters as well as the modern royal family. Pema Lingpa’s revealed teachings were expressed and transmitted in part through the complex iconography of Tantric Buddhist art. This dissertation analyzes the art, particularly the mural iconography, that Pema Lingpa personally conceived, commissioned, and supervised in his home temple in eastern Bhutan, the Tamzhing Lhundrup Choling (gtam zhing lhun grub chos gling). This iconological study of the art and architecture of Tamzhing thus examines how Pema Lingpa artistically expressed his revealed religious visions, gained widespread religious legitimacy, and transmitted them both throughout the lands that became Bhutan roughly two centuries later.

Specifically, we will demonstrate how Pema Lingpa used the iconographic imagery in Tamzhing to express his own unique religious experiences as well as his close affiliation with prestigious Vajrayāna Buddhist traditions in nearby Tibet. Much of Tantric Buddhist ritual and meditative practice involves sequences of visualizations of Buddhist ‘deities’ who represent enlightened qualities or states of mind; but these can differ considerably from tradition to tradition. By infusing Tamzhing with both commonly-known iconographic programs and otherwise unattested forms originating in his treasure revelations, Pema Lingpa could both preserve the long-standing practices and imagery of the Nyingma Buddhist tradition to which he belongs, as well as assert his own place within it. Following Pema Lingpa’s own, as of yet untranslated, autobiography as our guide, the dissertation analyzes in detail how the specific layout of the dozens of tantric deities within the temple not only serve as a step-by-step guide to awakening, but also strategically incorporate Pema Lingpa’s own revealed teachings at a very high level within the pre-existing Nyingma system—effectively claiming, and eventually receiving, his place within the tradition. Due to their perceived effectiveness, Pema Lingpa’s distinctive practices would eventually be incorporated into official state rituals performed throughout the country, transmitting his tradition far beyond the borders the master himself established in the late 15th and early 16th centuries.

In sum, this dissertation is an iconological study of Pema Lingpa’s mural program, analyzing the political and socio-cultural milieu behind the site’s conception, construction, and ritual use, and examining how Pema Lingpa’s followers would understand and transmit his teachings and their imagery behind his own time and place. It further explores Tamzhing as a mark of Pema Lingpa’s progressive development as a Buddhist master, and as a repository for the sources of his authority. This analysis of the iconography of Tamzhing incorporates history, text and architecture to provide a fuller picture of a man and his temple, and of the interactions between the dynamics of Pema Lingpa’s terma treasure tradition, its innovative iconography, and its significance in pre-unification era Bhutan.