THE ADAMANTINE TERRIFIER ON THE DRESSER

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In 1957, a team from Filmske novosti was invited to produce a documentary of a well-known resident of Ljubljana, Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase / Marija Skušek (1893–1963).[1] The film was a portrait of the woman who called herself »the first Japanese Slovenian« as well as a documentary of her flat at Strossmayerjeva 3 in the centre of Ljubljana (Fig. 1). At the beginning of the film, Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase, dressed in a kimono, opens a double-wing glass door and invites the audience into her living room. As the camera follows her, the viewer's attention is directed towards a collection of small metalwork pieces displayed on a dresser in front of a mirror (Fig. 2). The arrangement is reminiscent of an altar, as the religious nature of the sculptures is immediately perceivable. Buddhas depicted in monk's robes and seated on lotus bases constitute the majority of the sculptures, while Bodhisattvas and Cosmic Buddhas adorned with crowns, jewelled ornaments and silken garments are also present.

One sculpture is particularly highlighted and singled out in a separate frame (Fig. 3). The commentator calls the figure a »Buddha«. The sculpture actually consists of two deities in an embrace – Vajrabhairava, the Adamantine Terrifier (lit. Lord of Wrath), and his consort Vajravetālī, the Adamantine Corpse, standing on two rows of smaller crouching figures.

[1] Zanimiva zbirka, avtor Vladimir Perišić ©Filmske novosti Beograd, 1957, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tFDnA8UzBr0.

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Fig. 1: Still from the 1957 film, Filmske novosti.

Fig. 2: Still from the 1957 film, Filmske novosti.

Vajrabhairava, or Vajramahābhairava (Tib. rdo rje 'jigs byed chen po, Great Lord of Wrath), is also commonly addressed as Yamāntaka, 'the ender of death' (death = Yama). Vajrabhairava is the highest and most potent form of the Yamāntaka group of deities of tantric Buddhism, all of whom share the central buffalo head as a key feature, which is derived from buffalo-headed Yama, the Lord of Death. It is a common practice in esoteric Buddhism, or more traditionally Vajrayāna and Secret Mantrayāna, that an obstacle encountered along the path towards enlightenment is brought down by using the obstacle as a weapon against itself.

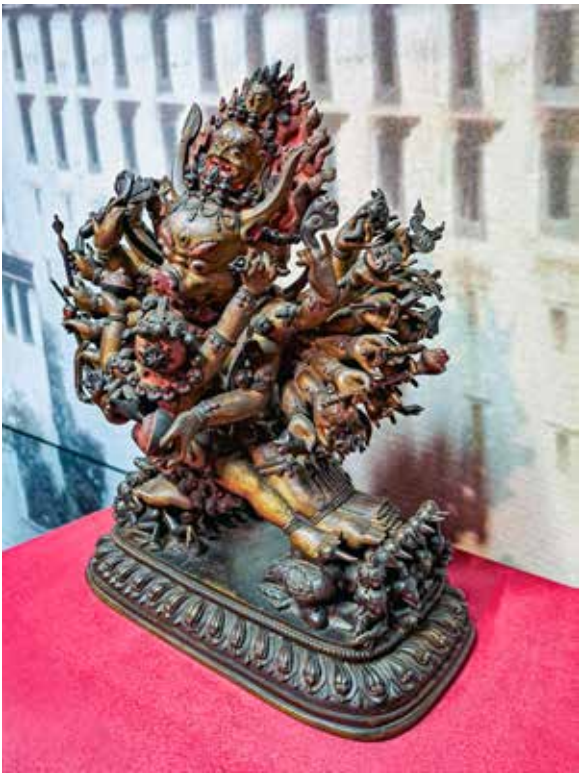

Fig. 3: The wrathful couple. Skušek collection, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana (inv. no. 216 MG). © H. Motoh.

The iconographical representation of wrathful deities is the standardised method of visualising this concept. In this specific case, the Buddhist response to death is to adopt the same form, absorb and transform, and eventually subdue the obstacle.[2] The addition of the female consort reflects the aspect of wisdom (Skr. *prajñā*), which completes and directs the aspect of compassion (Skr. *karuṇā*) and skilful means (Skr. *upayā*) associated with the male figure. Thereby, this sculpture–just as tantric Buddhist art in general–is a direct reflection of a psychic process.

Fig. 4: The wrathful facial expression of Vajravetālī, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana (inv. no. 216 MG). © G. Kozicz

[2] One Tibetan myth tells the story of a murdered (decapitated) monk who transforms into a demon and replaces his head with a buffalo head. He devastates the country until the Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī adopts the same form and overcomes the demon.

Vajrabhairava stands in an active pose with 16 legs on various small figures, while his 17 pairs of arms, holding weapons and attributes (except for the central pair which embraces his female partner), create a radiating aureole. Vajravetālī clings to him with her left leg around his back. Both of her hands are raised while she leans back, looking upwards (Fig. 4). Vajrabhairava is nine-headed. In addition to the three frontally-oriented heads, he has three additional heads on the left and three on the right (Fig. 5). With the exception of the head at the top centre, all heads express extreme wrath, with protruding eyes and exposed fangs. The same applies for the single head of Vajravetālī.

Fig. 5: Rear and lateral heads of Vajrabhairava, Slovene Ethnographic Museum, Ljubljana (inv. no. 216 MG). © G. Kozicz

To the visitors of Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase's home in the 1950s, the representation of the terrifying couple must have made quite an impression. The sculpture's immediate visual impact is certainly a good reason for placing it in the centre of the altar-like arrangement. At first sight, the configuration of the figures on the dresser seems to follow a visual logic, as the figures are simply placed according to size and

design rather than a specific iconographic or ideological structure that would be expected for an actual altar set. The order applied by Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase appears to be derived from the visual principles and qualities of the individual objects in the first place, if not exclusively based on representational considerations. Even placing the sculpture close to the mirror makes sense, because otherwise it would have been impossible for the visitors to see the horizontally arranged faces at the back of the piece. (Fig. 6a and 6b). This placement is reminiscent of museum exhibitions where multi-headed Indian statues–both Buddhist and Brahmānic ones such as the Maheśvara form of Śiva or Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha–are often displayed in front of mirrors allowing visitors to see the wrathful faces at the rear (Fig. 6a/b).

From a museological perspective, the documentary by Filmske novosti presents the collection as a part of a small but well-curated exhibition. Every exhibition, however, reflects a concept and the intention of the curator. In other words, it also tells us something about the curator. But who was the curator of this lived-in museum? So far, little is known about the pieces that actually came into the possession of the Skušeks. Ivan Skušek has been entitled the »collector,« but there is no evidence at all that he had acted as a collector in the sense of a specialist or an amateur scholar in Asian art. He had been a commissioner to the sea of the Austro-Hungarian navy with special training in economics, who, under unfavourable circumstances, spent several years in China. His activities rather resembled those of an art dealer.

The situation is completely different for Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase. By the time the film was produced, she had been a widow for ten years, and it had been 30 years since she was baptised. Born in Japan as Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase, she spent her youth in Northeast China, years that must have had a long-lasting impact on her intellect and cultural identity.[3] After relocating to a completely different cultural environment in Europe, she not only maintained but even cultivated her identity as the first Japanese woman in Ljubljana. It is quite obvious that she adopted

[3] See Klara Hrvatin, »The 'First Mrs Japanese' of Slovenia between the two World Wars: Marija Skušek and Her Series of Lectures on Japanese Women,« *Asian studies* 9 (25), no. 3 (2021): 169-197, https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2021.9.3.169-197.

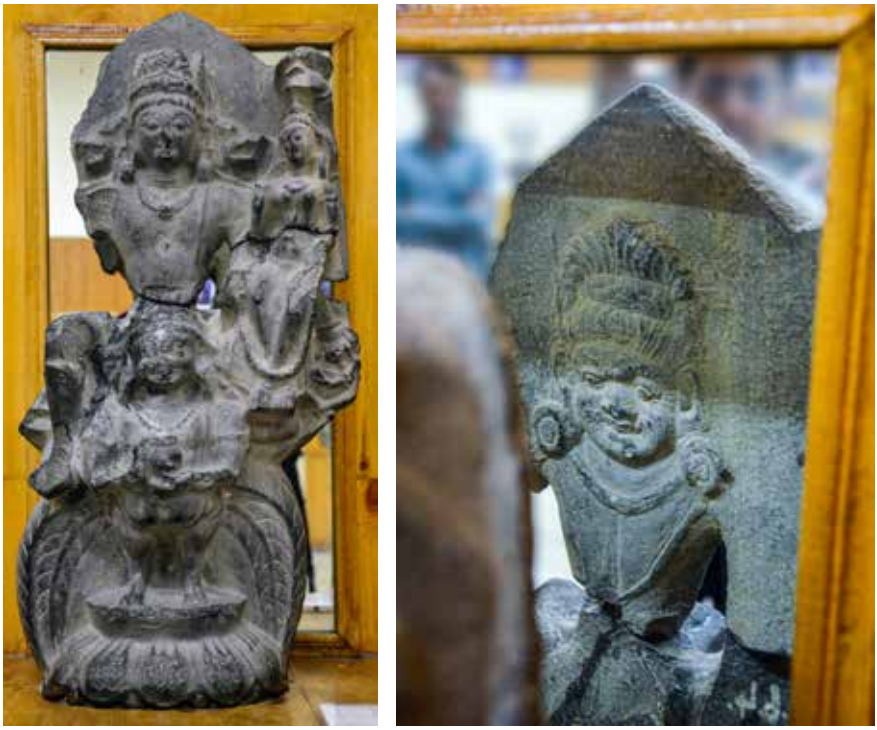

Fig. 6a and b: Four-headed Viṣṇu Vaikuṇṭha in front of a mirror, Bhuri Singh Museum, Chamba, India. © G. Kozicz

the role of the curator of the collection and shaped the stage wherein she began to play a central role, though this was of course never made official. It can be fairly assumed that both the traditional education received by Japanese women as well as the patriarchal system of Slovenia at that time determined that her position remained in the background.[4] In this context, the question arises whether or not the arrangement of the figures resulted from a deliberate creation of a Buddhist house altar. Even if not created as such on purpose, to what extent might the

[4] In 1930, Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase gave a number of public lectures about the role of women in Japanese society focusing on the strict subordination in marriage (ibid. 180). One such lecture was held at Graz Urania on 8 October (*Tagespost* 8. Oktober, 1930, Graz).

arrangement reflect a Buddhist perspective or even ideology? And how would a Buddhist practitioner at the time experience the presentation? Any inspection through the buddhological lens must naturally focus on the centrepiece: Vajrabhairava and Vajravetālī in an embrace.

A Matter of Wisdom

The presence of Vajrabhairava with Vajravetālī on the dresser requires as much explanation as their position in the centre. The terrifying couple expresses a motif that has never really gained a strong foothold in classical (Han) Chinese Buddhism which largely rejected the theology and explicit art of the Yoga- and Higher Yoga-tantras, two later traditions of Tibetan tantric Buddhism. However, the practice of these tantras has been documented in the case of several Chinese emperors, most prominently the powerful Qing ruler Qianlong (r. 1735–1796). It is not a surprise that a stylistic comparison with other pieces of metalwork suggests that this sculpture was likely produced by an imperial workshop in Beijing at the end of the 18th century.[5]

What we see on the dresser in the 1957 documentary might be read as a short history or visual summary of an impactful facet of Buddhism in China. The reconstruction of the possible meaning of the Vajrabhairava sculpture under discussion in its socio-cultural and religious context requires a retrospection into the long history and ambivalent interaction of the figure with Chinese culture. The origin of this history can be traced to the Vedic tradition of South Asia and back to Yama, the first of humankind. As the first to live on Earth, Yama is also the first to die and who then becomes the Lord of the Dead and the Ruler of the Underworld, the sovereign to all who follow him.[6] There, Yama serves as the judge for those who enter the intermediate state between death and rebirth. He represents the Final Judgement in the Vedic and Brahmānic concepts of reincarnation and rebirth. He knows

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[5] We are thankful to Ulrich von Schroeder, Gerd Mevissen and Norbert Deuchert for their assessments regarding the approximate date and place of the production.

[6] See Stella Kramrisch, *The Hindu Temple, Vol. 1* (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1946 [repr. 1976]), 12.

the dharma, the cosmic order or law in Indian religion and philosophy, and decides which scenario of rebirth will become effective. Eventually, he is identified with the dharma and is referred to as Dharmarāja (»dharma king«), being elevated to the status of the ruler of the world. This promotion was based on the belief that he had the ability to move freely and swiftly between the various hells and heavens of the cosmos.[7]

In the Buddhist context, dharma was expressed to a large extent in a textual corpus entitled the *Perfection of Wisdom*, or *Prajñāpāramitā* in Sanskrit, which found its visual expression in the anthropomorphic form of a goddess with the same name. The compilation of Prajñāpāramitā sutras in the 2nd century CE marked the so-called Second Turning of the Wheel or Second Revelation of the Buddhist Teaching in the history of the religion. About the same time, the male Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Mañjuśrī, appears on the stage and soon gains significance as a major figure in the growing Buddhist pantheon. When Buddhism spread to China in the first half of the first millennium, Mañjuśrī seems to have become the more prominent representation of wisdom. David Quinter notes that the Bodhisattva was soon identified as a Buddha[8]; he was even addressed as the »Mother of Buddhas«, an epitaph which according to Conze was originally given to the goddess Prajñāpāramitā.[9] This transfer of the salutation hints at a shift from female to male, which might have also been a response to the cultural preferences of the Chinese patriarchal society. During the Tang dynasty in the late 7th–8th century, Mañjuśrī was elevated to the centre of Chinese Buddhism and politics. He was promoted to the position of a state protector and became associated with Wutai Shan, the Five-Terrace Mountains which rose in significance as his earthly residence and the paramount Buddhist pilgrimage site of East Asia (Quinter ibid. 594).

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7 Ibid. quoting from the *Śatapatha Brāhmana*, XI. 2.3.5.

8 David Quinter, »Mañjuśrī in East Asia,« in *Brill's Encyclopaedia of Buddhism, Vol. II*, ed. Jonathan A. Silk et al. (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2019), 591–599.

9 Edward Conze, *The Prajñāpāramitā Literature* (London: Mouton&Co, 1958 [repr. 2008]), 15.

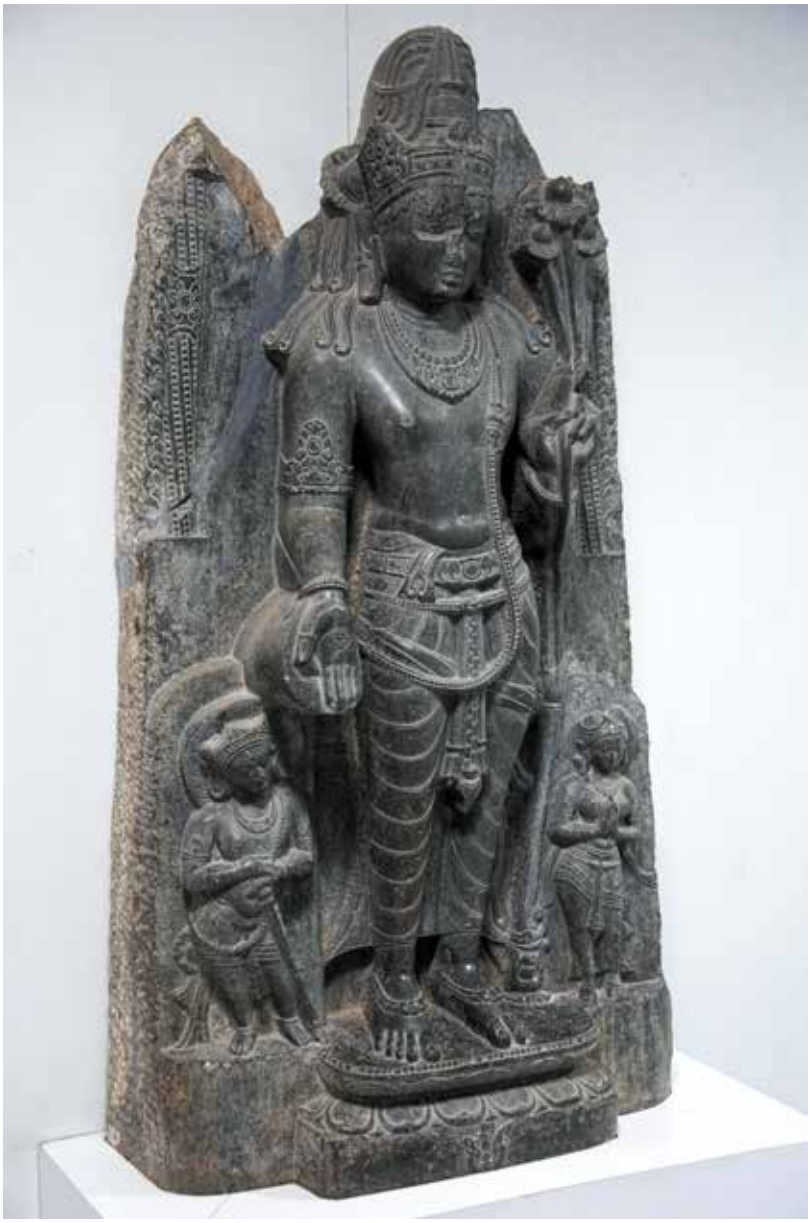

Fig. 7: Stele of Bodhisattva Mañjuśrī with dwarfish Yamāntaka (viewer's left), ASI Site Museum, Bodhgaya, India. © G. Kozicz.

The Yamāntaka Category

In eastern India, Yamāntaka, the Buddhicised form of Yama, started to appear at the beginning of the 9th century as a companion to Mañjuśrī in the form of a dwarf-like *yakṣa* leaning on a club (Fig. 7). While Yamāntaka was depicted in anthropomorphic form, a bull was sometimes included as his vehicle (Skr. *vāhana*). A 6th-century text, the *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa*, paved the way for this configuration as it »unequivocally identifies Yamāntaka as Mañjuśrī's wrathful emanation«.[10] He was transformed into an independent, full-scale Buddhist deity in its own right by the 9th–10th century.[11]

At the same time, tantric texts such as the *Vajramahābhairava Tantra* took shape. Various historical sources locate the origin of this text in Oḍḍiyāna, in the Swat district of modern Pakistan.[12] The tantras were composed after (or rather in response to) the theological concept of Bhairava, the terrifying form of Śiva and Brahmānic manifestation of destructive wrath (Fig. 8). While the first Buddhist mention of Bhairava in the *Mañjuśrīnāmasamgīti*, a text roughly dated to the 8th century, already links Mañjuśrī, Yamāntaka and Vajrabhairava together, the 10th-century monk Lalitavajra from Nālandā Monastery in East India is credited as the receiver of the tantras during his study in Oḍḍiyāna.[13]

Lalitavajra then transmitted the text to his disciple Līlavajra of Vikramaśila Monastery, the major tantric centre in northern India at the time, who then established the Vikramaśila lineage of transmission.[14] When invasions by the Turks, more precisely armies of the Islamic Ghaznavid kingdom, threatened Vikramaśila soon after the turn

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[10] Rob Linrothe, *Ruthless Compassion: Wrathful Deities in Early Indo-Tibetan Esoteric Buddhist Art* (London: Serindia), 64. The *Mañjuśrīmūlakalpa* was translated into Chinese by Amoghavajra in the 8th century (ibid. 65).

[11] Ibid. 27; 167–168, Fig. 148–150.

[12] Bulcsu Siklós, *The Vajrabhairava Tantras: Tibetan and Mongolian Versions. English Translation and Annotations. General Presentations of the Classes of Tantra, Captivating the Minds of the Fortunate Ones*, trans. M. J. Boord and Losang Norbu Tronawa (Dharamsala: Library of Tibetan Works and Archives,1996), 5.

[13] Ibid., 8, refers to Alex Wayman, *Chanting the Names of Mañjuśrī: The Mañjuśrī-nāmasaṃgīti* (Boston & London: Shambhala, 1985), 83, who critically notes that this might be a later interpolation to the original text.

[14] Ibid., 10.

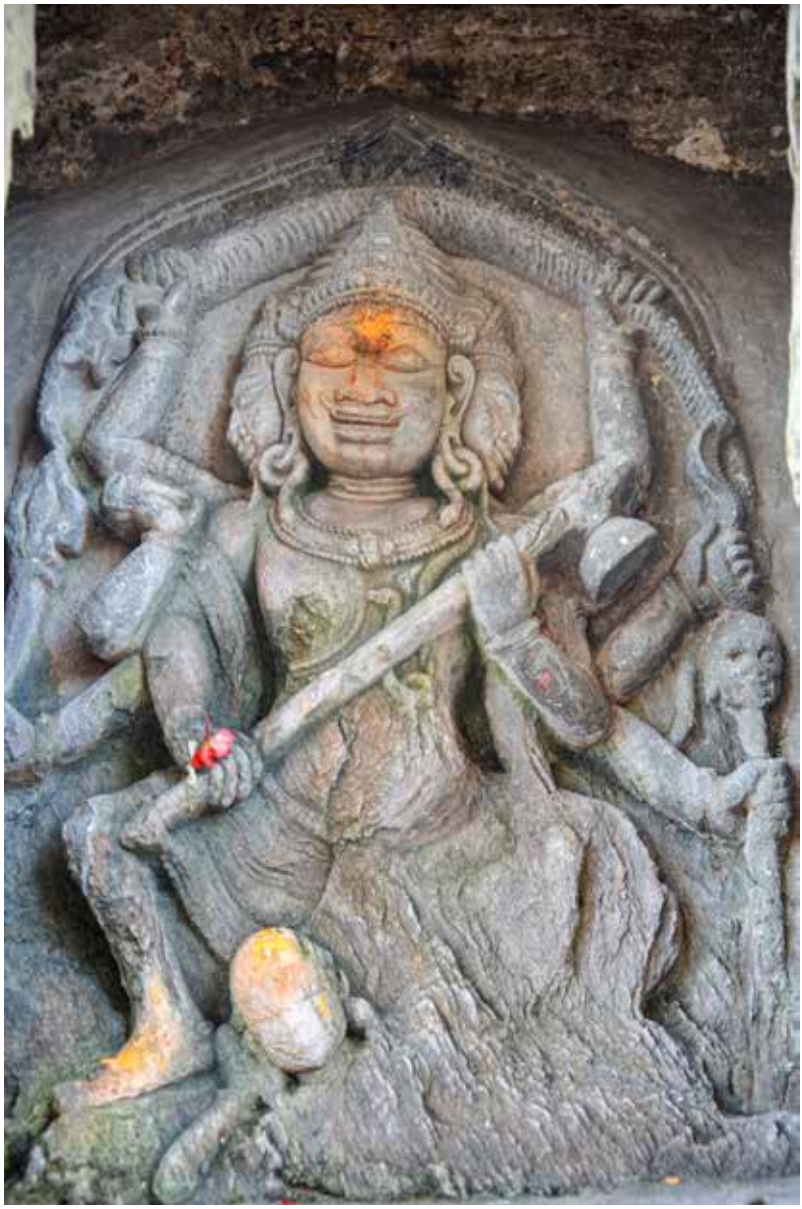

Fig. 8: Bhairava as the terrifying aspect of Śiva, Gaurīśankara Temple, Chamba, India. © G. Kozicz.

of the first millennium, rites of Vajrabhairava were performed to repel the invaders. As the 17th-century Tibetan historian Tārānātha notes, »a storm rose up and a mysterious band of black men emerged from the clouds, stabbing the Türk soldiers with daggers«.[15] Similarly, the Tibetan tantric practitioner Nup Sangye Yeshe successfully »applied Yamāntaka rites to defend against and subjugate his anti-Buddhist rivals« in the tenth century.[16] Apparently, tantric ritual which had been a matter of personal practice in meditation was applied against external threats in India and beyond. Rites and magic were then regularly used in religious and also political conflicts, and this would continue in the centuries to follow.

In 1264, at a time when the Mongol Yuan dynasty was firmly established in China, Kublai Khan designated Chögyal Phagpa (1235–1280) of the Sakya school of Tibetan Buddhism as his spiritual advisor. This is how the Yamāntaka category of deities entered the religious stage in the Chinese heartlands. The 'Ender of Death' and wrathful form of the Bodhisattva of Wisdom was a major tutelary deity or yidam (Tib. yi dam) of the Sakya Order of Tibetan Buddhism. By the 13th century, Chinese Buddhism had very well accepted the concept of the various hells and King Yama as their lord and judge, but it almost completely rejected tantric concepts that were reflected in visually explicit art. By contrast, however, the wrathful depiction of fierce deities, Vajrabhairava in particular, matched the self-perception of the Khan and his army as warriors of the steppes conquering the world. A woven tapestry (*kesi*) of a Vajrabhairava mandala probably produced by an imperial workshop in Hangzhou provides a stunning testimony to the significance of the practice of the Vajrabhairava tantra at the Yuan court (Fig. 9).[17] In contrast, tantric Buddhism continuously faced great scepticism among the broader society in China.

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[15] Siklós, *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, 10.

[16] Bryan J. Cuevas, »The Politics of Magical Warfare,« in *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism, ed. Karl Debreczeny* (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2019), 172–174.

[17] The MET tapestry is the largest of its kind from the Yuan Dynasty and has been recently dated to 1329 by Tsangwa Gendun Tenpa (2019: 118–122). See also James C.Y. Watt and Anne E. Wardwell, *When Silk Was Gold: Central Asian and Chinese Textiles* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1997), 95–100.

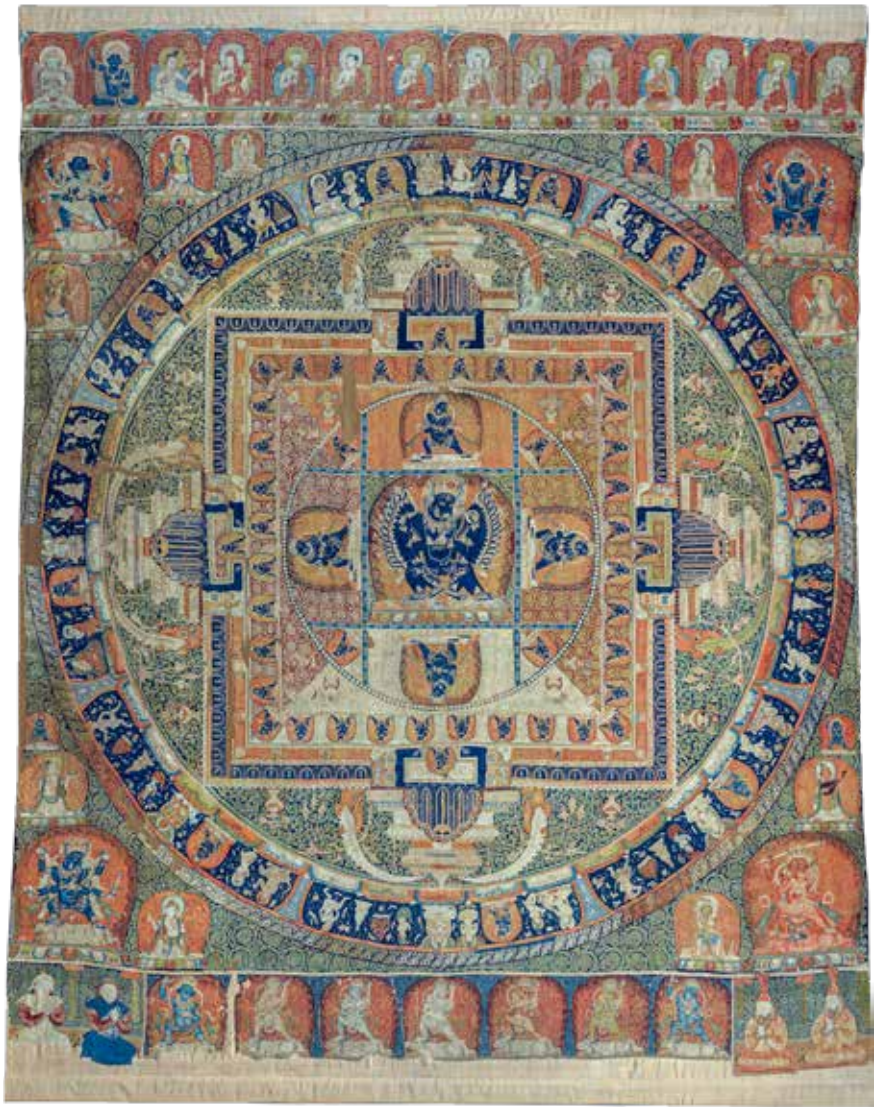

Fig. 9: Vajrabhairava mandala, woven silk tapestry, c. 1330–1332 (Yuan dynasty), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, accession no. 1992.54. (public domain) https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/37614.

When the Yuan Dynasty was overthrown in the middle of the 14th century, the religious and political power of the Sakya collapsed immediately. Although the succeeding Ming Dynasty showed continuous interests in Tibetan Buddhism and maintained contacts with various Tibetan schools and religious authorities, Buddhism lost its status as a state religion and faced harsh criticism and even iconoclasm, particularly by Confucian scholars and Daoist priests, into the middle of the 16th century.[18]

Vajrabhairava and the Manchu Emperors

The situation changed with the invasion of the Manchus and the establishment of the Qing Dynasty with Beijing as its capital in the middle of the 17th century. The Manchu leaders particularly popularised Mañjuśrī and Vajrabhairava for two reasons. The first reason appears simply phonetic. The two first syllables of Mañjuśrī are phonetically identical to Manchu.[19] It could easily be used by the Manchus to legitimise their rule over China by relating themselves to the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, the long-established Buddhist state protector. Since the Yuan dynasty, emperors of China identified themselves as reincarnations of Mañjuśrī. Considered an embodiment of the Mañjuśrī, the Qing emperors would incorporate also the wrathful manifestations of that Bodhisattva, including the Conqueror of Death with his ability to carry out ultimate judgement. It is hardly possible to imagine a better choice of religious authorisation for kingship. Religious legitimisation, however, had to be confirmed by an established religious authority–which directly takes us to the second reason that favoured the rise of the cult of Vajrabhairava: The Fifth Dalai Lama and highest authority of the Gelug order of Tibetan Buddhism addressed Hong Taiji (r. 1626–1643), the first emperor of the Qing dynasty, as »Mañjughoṣa-emperor«.[20] The

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18 Karl Debreczeny, »In the Shadow of the Khan: Tibetan Buddhist and Political Legitimation in the Ming Dynasty,« in *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Karl Debreczeny (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2019), 148.

19 Siklós, *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, 14–15.

20 Wen-Shing Chou, »Bodhisattva Emperors of the Manchu Qing Dynasty,« in *Faith and Empire: Art and Politics in Tibetan Buddhism*, ed. Karl Debreczeny (New York: Rubin Museum of Art, 2019),191.

founder of the order, Tsongkhapa Lozang Drakpa (1357–1419), had already been recognised as a reincarnation of Mañjuśrī, and the Vajrabhairava tantra became one of that order's three fundamental teachings (Fig. 10).

The veneration of Mañjuśrī and Wutai Shan as a pilgrimage site reached a highpoint under the most powerful Qing emperor, Qianlong. Although he was also supporting Confucianism, he strongly propagated Buddhism, had new Buddhist temples constructed, and stimulated the production of Tibetan Buddhist art.

The multi-ethnic and multi-cultural Manchu empire covered a vast portion of East Asia. Although Qianlong succeeded in stabilising the state using military force, he also followed the tradition of securing the empire through metaphysical measures. To the west of the Forbidden City in Beijing, within the Palace precinct, he built the Shanyin Dian (Hall of Good Causes) and dedicated it to Yamāntaka Vajrabhairava in 1751.[21] Enshrining a large statue of Vajrabhairava, the temple stands on an islet overlooking the imperial park and the palace. Moreover, the grid-based plan of Beijing can be equated with the layout of a Vajrabhairava mandala.[22]

Perhaps even more important than the statue is the mandala painted in the dome and covering its entire space (Fig. 11). The significance of the ceiling is the cosmic notion that comes with the round, domical shape and the vertical axis of the temple (axis mundi) that coincides with its apex. The ceiling is exclusively dedicated to Vajrabhairava as the main deity of the temple, which is itself at the very centre of a protective »hidden (or secret)« urban-scale mandala that was superimposed with the urban fabrics of the imperial city.

In the end, however, these efforts did not save the empire from coming to an end in 1911 following years of internal turmoil and the continuous external pressure from the colonial powers. Three years later, Word War I broke out, and the events around the German trading

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21 Siklós, *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, 15. See also Esther Bianchi »Protecting Beijing: The Tibetan Image of Yamāntaka-Vajrabhairava in Late Imperial and Republican China,« in *Images of Tibet in the 19th and 20th Centuries, Vol. 1*, ed. Monica Esposito (Paris: EFEO, coll. Études thématiques, 2008), 340.

22 Siklós, *Vajrabhairava Tantras*, 15; Bianchi, »Protecting Beijing,« 329.

Fig. 10: Vajrabhairava and Vajravetālī to the proper right of the Buddha's head, mural inside the main niche of the Gelugpa White Temple of Hunder in Nubra, India. © G. Kozicz.

port of Qingdao became the preface of the history of the Skušek collection. Involved in the battle of Qingdao was the Austrian-Hungarian navy vessel Kaiserin Elisabeth by which Ivan Skušek had travelled to the China. He was not on board when the battle began but among a group of officers and soldiers who had been ordered to stay at the Austro-Hungarian trading post at Tianjin where he was then practically stranded.[23]

[23] For a summary of the events around the battle of Qingdao and the vessel Kaiserin Elisabeth see Gerd Kaminski, »Arthur von Rosthorn, Österreich, China und der 1. Weltkrieg,« in *China Report 166* (Vienna: ÖGCF, 2014), 17-20.

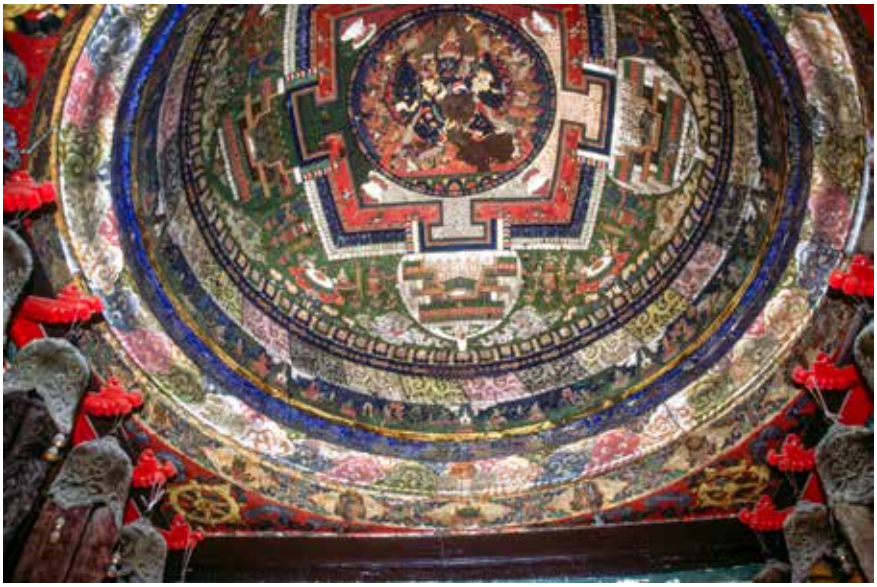

Fig. 11: *Maṇḍala* ceiling with Vajrabhairava in the centre of the dome, Shanyin Dian, Beijing. © R. Linrothe.[24]

The Boxers and the God of War

The circumstances of Ivan Skušek's acquisition of the Vajrabhairava sculpture are unknown. While Qing-dynasty sculptures of Vajrabhairava are not rare, it is still remarkable that this piece found its way to the home of the Skušek couple in Ljubljana. This sculpture displays more than just refined craftsmanship. It represents the zenith of Tibetan tantric Buddhism in China. It resonates with the long history of Buddhist theology, its interplay with politics and its application in conflicts during epochs that saw some of the largest empires in human history. That history however, has so far been mostly linked to the imperial court and the aristocratic upper class.

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[24] See also Rob Linrothe Image Collection, North Western University Libraries, https://dc.library.northwestern.edu/items/f8a9e6b2-c3ff-4ad1-b4aa-9c0cbd693d78.

This takes us back to the initial question: How should we interpret the configuration on the dresser? What might have been Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase's intention? To answer this question we might have a look at her life story. She came to Northeast China–the region where the Manchus had their ancestral roots–in around 1905. Although she officially declared her family to be followers of Shinto, Japan's indigenous religion, in her certificate of marriage,[25] one has to keep in mind that regular visits to Buddhist temples and even participation in Buddhist ceremonies were customary for all Japanese people.[26] Since she had left Japan at an early age, these temples in Manchuria must have provided the major visual source that shaped her idea of a Buddhist sacred space.

To maintain their cultural roots, the family probably visited and sought service for auspicious festivities at Buddhist temples that were either built or renovated by order of the Qing emperors. One temple of interest near Mukden (modern-day Shenyang), the former capital of the Manchus, was dedicated to Guan Yu, the Han Chinese legendary general and God of War whom the Manchus incorporated into their ideology and established as a state protector of the Qing. Guan Yu was related, if not conflated, with the yidams of the Gelug order–in particular with Yamāntaka.[27] It is exactly this conflation that finally created a link between the religious history of the God of War and the circumstances whereby the majority of the objects now in the Skušek collection first became available on the art market.

The Boxer Rebellion that broke out in China in 1899 eventually led to the extensive looting and demolitions of aristocratic buildings in Beijing by the foreign armies in the aftermath of the Boxers' defeat. A report by Paula von Rosthorn (1873–1967) sheds light on a so-far overlooked aspect of this traumatic moment in Chinese history–a note that is most relevant to the current discussion. Paula was the wife of Arthur

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[25] Poročni list, Archdiocesan Ordinariate in Ljubljana, St. Nicholas Cathedral, vol. 1927, p. 137, no. 9.

[26] Document from the personal archive of Janez Lombergar, the great-nephew of Ivan Skušek jr.

[27] Bianchi »Protecting Beijing,« 344, fn. 67 referring to Xiangyun Wang, »Tibetan Buddhism at the Court of Qing. The Life and Work of lCang-skya Rol-pa'i rdo-rje (1717–1786)« (PhD diss., Boston: Harvard University 1995), 137–139, 315–316.

von Rosthorn (1862–1945), then Diplomat at the Austro-Hungarian embassy in Beijing. Paula von Rosthorn had accompanied her husband, who had studied Chinese literature at Cambridge University before entering the imperial diplomatic service in Vienna from where he was assigned to the position in China. The beginning of her journal states:

»Sie [Die geheime Gesellschaft der Boxer] gewann rasch eine große Verbreitung, weil die Führer versicherten im Besitze von überirdischen Kräften zu sein und jedem, der sich der Bewegung anschließen würde, den Schutz des Kriegsgottes versprachen, der ihn für Schuß- und Stichwunden unverwundbar machen würde. Es waren Exerzitien vorgeschrieben, welche durch heftige rhytmische Bewegungen bei den betreffenden Individuen eine Art hypnotischen Zustandes erregten, der den Zuschauern stets als Einwirken höherer Mächte erklärt wurde.«[28]

Paula von Rosthorn explains that the successful spread of the Boxer Movement was due to the claim by their leaders that they had supernatural powers and the promise that all followers would be protected by the God of War and become invulnerable to bullets and swords. She further mentions compulsory rites that included wild, rhythmic body movements–like wild dances–that generated a hypnotic state of mind.[29] We cannot say which God of War she refers to. The mention of the rites including frantic dances and a kind of state of ecstasy, however, reflected a borrowing from Tibetan Buddhist Cham dances rather than Confucian or Daoist practices. We may assume that the Boxers created a fusion of ritual practices from several cultural strata to stand up against the colonial powers and the increasing influence of Christian missionaries. It would be only natural if they employed a conflation of Yamāntaka-Vajrabhairava and Guan Yu to enhance the impact of their propaganda and stabilise the alliance between the various parties that joined the movement. But first of all, such rites should motivate

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[28] Paula von Rosthorn, *Peking 1900*, ed. Alexander Pechmann (Vienna: Böhlau, 2001), 21.

[29] We assume that the observations are widely accurate as the whole book, which is practically a journal, provides a precise documentation of the events and is free of colonial and anti-Chinese prejudice. Although the von Rosthorns both joined the defence forces of the diplomatic quarter during the besiege by the Boxers, they were full of admiration of Chinese culture and the people. After her return to Vienna, Paula von Rosthorn was the first woman to receive the medal of honour for bravery in combat by the Emperor (Kaiser) Franz Joseph.

and prepare their followers for battle. It is possible that the beginning of the Boxer Rebellion was the moment when the concept of tantric Buddhist ritual–perhaps in a heavily modified form–reached also the non-Buddhist members of the Chinese society. Paula von Rosthorn's comments establishes a link between the rituals of the Boxers and the long tradition of wrathful deities. Her comment is a sketch that superimposes the aforementioned magical performances in Buddhist rituals with the actual fighting on the battleground. Religious goals like purification, enlightenment and nirvana, and scenarios of afterlife and rebirth were pushed into the background while survival and victory in times of conflicts despite their purely mundane nature became the most urgent. And even though the momentum was short-lived and the Boxer Movement failed, the memory of the rites must have lingered at least for a while. Even a young girl like Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase could have hardly been unaware of the growing popularity and significance of these deities as reflections of the precarious socio-political situations in both China and East Asia in the beginning of the 20th century.

At this point, mention must be made of two minor sculptures among the set on the dresser–Vajrapani and Begtse[30] (Fig. 12). Though significantly smaller than the Vajrabhairava couple, these two deities stand out from the set because of their wrathful appearance. Vajrapani's relevance to the present discussion derives from his function as a state protector of the Mongol-Yuan dynasty. Begtse, who widely shares his physical features with Vajrapani, is the Mongolian Buddhist warrior deity. Placed centrally in front of Vajrabhairava, they establish a triadic configuration with a clear message: protection, victory in warfare and the destruction of obstacles. Thus, the configuration on the dresser presents a long religious tradition and at the same time pictures the sociocultural climate of the period from the late 19th century to the end of the Qing dynasty.

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[30] Begtse is not listed on any inventory list. This is not surprising because in the past this deity was often mislabelled as Vajrapani or some other protector or *yidam*. However, except for that one photograph, no evidence of this figure is found in the archives and neither is it among the pieces of the present collection in the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

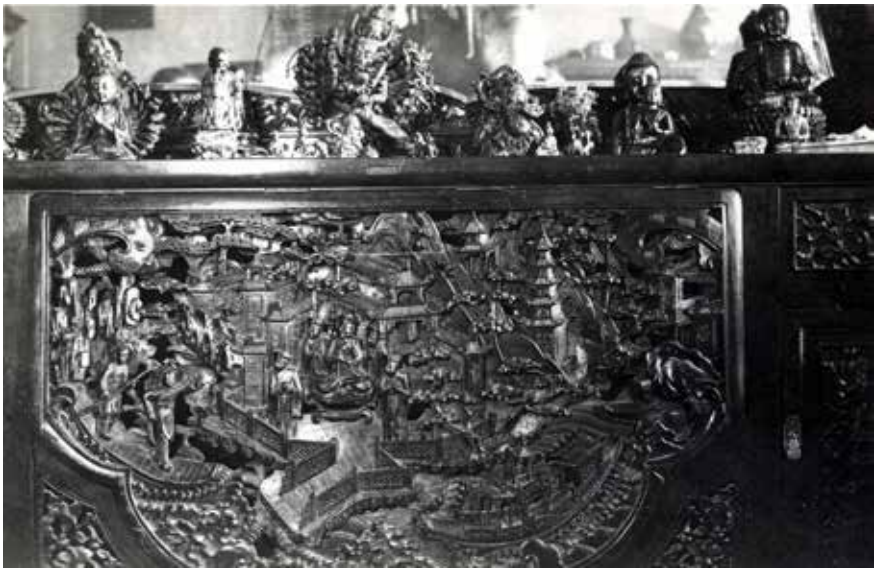

Fig. 12: Begtse holding his scorpion handle sword in front of Vajrabhairava. © Photographic archive of the Slovene Ethnographic Museum.

The Mirror

Three archival photographs show the collection presented in different flats and different spatial settings.[31] Although in one case the view is partly blocked, the configuration seems always the same: Vajrabhairava and Vajravetālī claim the centre. Whether or not such a consistency hints at an ideological concept remains a matter of speculation at present. However, the arrangement of the other figures changes. The photographs are not clear enough to provide all details, but some of the larger Buddhas and one multi-armed Bodhisattva can still be identified with certainty. They can be found in different positions in the different places where they were presented. Only the wrathful couple appears in

[31] See e.g. Tina Berdajs, »Retracing the Footsteps: Analysis of the Skušek Collection,« in *Asian Studies* 9, no. 3 (2021): 157, Fig. 2, https://doi.org/10.4312/as.2021.9.3.141-166.

the same position throughout the history of this part of the Skušek collection–even when Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase became a widow.

A comparison of the archival documents testifies that the Vajrabhairava sculpture was not the only constant element in this setting. The second unchanged component was the dresser itself, which was always used to display the collection of the metalwork pieces in all the photographs. Obviously the Skušeks considered it ideal for practical and aesthetic reasons, but we might ask again: Was there a specific intention behind this choice? The frontal face of the main body of the dresser displays fine woodcarvings of Daoist motifs. Although the carvings attract the viewer's attention, the focus is also directed to the mirror. Besides the documentary, the dresser can be seen in at least four archival photographs. In two of them the mirror is visible, while in the other two the frame is covered by a textile. The reason for the cover was that the dresser had been shipped to Europe without the mirror. Following the installation of the mirror, the textile was removed.[32]

In general, the idea of placing the metalwork pieces in front of a mirror–or placing a mirror behind them–might have purely representational reasons. However, if viewed from a Buddhist perspective, the broader Yama-Yamāntaka context stimulates an alternative interpretation related to Yama's function as a judge and king of the underworld and hell. In most cases, the attributes of Buddhist deities reflect a mental process, for example the sword of Mañjuśrī cutting the roots of ignorance and duality. In addition, a weapon may also directly refer to a certain action, such as Yama Dharmarāja' club representing the physical action of crushing an opponent. While this destructive quality is well presented in Tibetan Buddhist art, the iconography of Yama Dharmarāja seems to lack attributes that express his function as a judge. To compensate that, his entourage of demonic creatures and wardens of the underworld were employed. While these terrifying creatures again display punishment in a vivid manner, they may also signify the moment of final judgement through specific hand-held objects and weapons–in this case a pair of dice and a mirror (Fig. 13a/b).

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[32] The textile was recently identified by Tina Berdajs in the storage room of the SEM. It has never been inventoried.

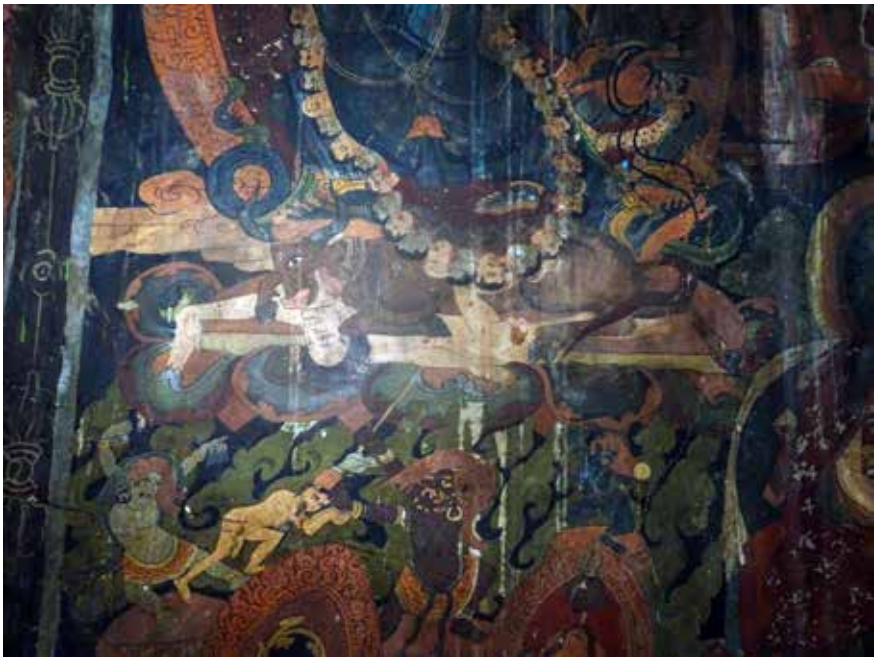

Fig. 13a: Three companions of the Buddhist Yama Dharmarāja–the left one holding two dices, the central one piercing the head of a man, and the right one holding a mirror, Sakya Temple of Skidmang, Upper Ladakh, 16th–17th century.
© Q. Devers.

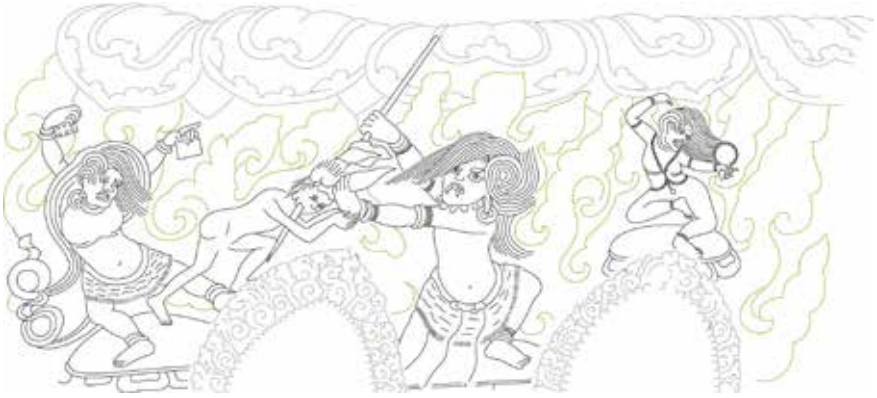

Fig. 13b: The three companions. Line drawing © G. Kozicz.

A thangka (scroll painting) of the Bhavacakra (Wheel of Life) now at the Virginia Museum of Fine Arts depicts a pot-bellied Yama holding a mirror and presiding over hell.[33] A series of hanging scrolls showing the Ten Kings of Hell painted by Lu Xinzhong sheds light on the role of the mirror in the Chinese vision of hell in the 12th century[34] (Fig. 14). There, Yama appears as a Confucian official who oversees the judgement of those entering the sphere of the underworld. Three wardens of hell assist him as they force two men begging for mercy in front of a large round mirror. The mirror symbolises the truth as it will show the true nature of the indicted.

The conception is certainly based on the Buddhist model but bespeaks a purely Chinese context. It is clearly pedagogical rather than ideological in nature. The narrative and visual representations of this scene became well-known outside the Buddhist context and much accepted by non-Buddhist communities in China at the time, having even found their way to Japan. Either in China or already in Japan, Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase most likely came across this tradition and the meaning of the mirror associated with truth and judgement. The decisive moment when one faces his or her deeds must have been one of the crucial points of the narrative.

At its core is the connection between the mirror and Yama Dharmarāja. The placement of Yamāntaka-Vajrabhairava on the dresser might be understood as a reference to this narrative. This is admittedly hypothetical. Mirrors are devices of multifaceted symbolism in the East Asian religious context.[35] What appears to be a rather insignificant background element to us nowadays might have conveyed a clear message to a contemporaneous Buddhist practitioner from East Asia.

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[33] See Jeffrey Durham and John Henry Rice, *Awaken: A Tibetan Buddhist Journey Toward Enlightenment* (Richmond: Virginia Museum of Fine Art, 2019), 13 and 92, Cat. No. 4 and Fig. 13. The thangka is also accessible on the Himalayan Art Resources Website: https://www.himalayanart.org/items/85113/images/primary#-2363,-4178,5343,-145.

[34] For a full set of the Ten Kings of Hell, see the Nara National Museum website: https://www.narahaku.go.jp/english/collection/1013-0.html.

[35] See e.g. Gina Barnes, »Chokkomon and the 'Art of Death',« *East Asia Journal* 1, no. 2 (2003): 45–67; Schuyler Cammann, »The 'TLV' pattern on cosmic mirrors of the Han dynasty,« Journal of the American Oriental Society 68, no. 4 (1948): 159–167.

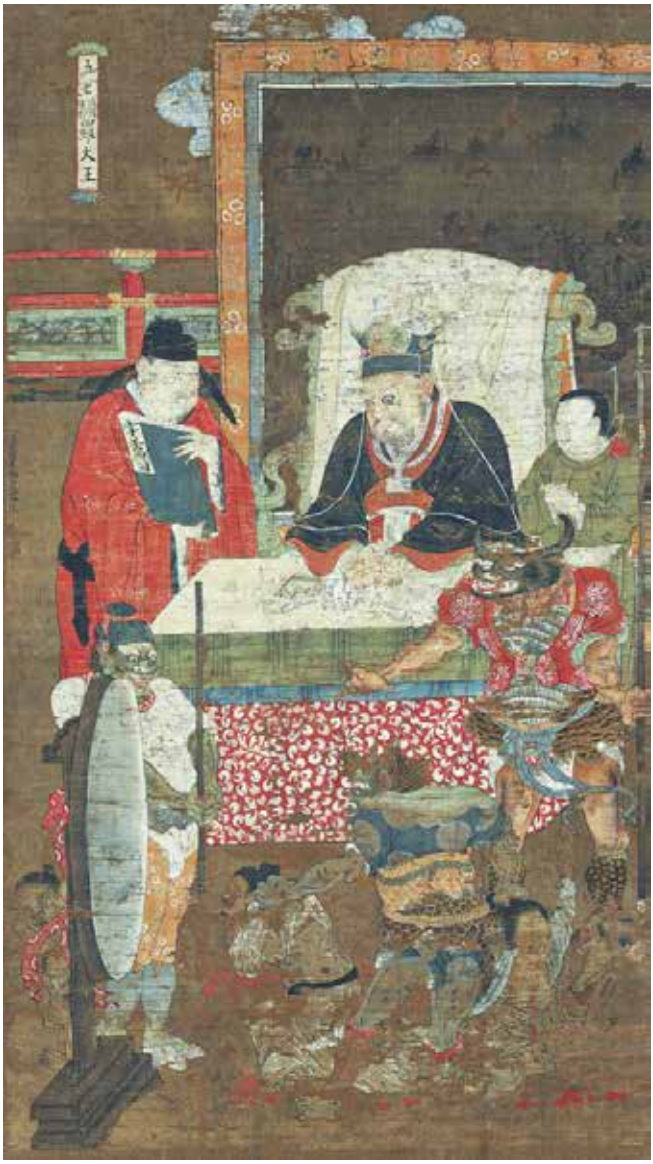

Fig. 14. Yama and mirror, from Lu Xinzhong, Ten Kings of Hell series, 13th century (Southern Song dynasty), China. Nara National Museum, https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ten_Kings_of_Hell,_Yanluo_Wang_(Enra_%C5%8C)_by_Lu_Xinzhong.jpg (CC BY 4.0).

For the time being we have no evidence that the mirror was part of Tsuneko Kondō-Kawase's original concept of the presentation. We do not know the specific intentions behind her choice of order, but we can recreate a historical context within which it is possible to interpret the arrangement on the dresser from different perspectives. One day, if we learn more about her life, we might get a better idea which of the perspective had been hers. Ultimately, the connection between the mirror and the arrangement of the sculptures was lost when the collection was moved first to the Goričane Museum outside Ljubljana in 1963 and later to the Slovene Ethnographic Museum where the objects were separated.

The Vajrabhairava-Vajravetālī became part of the Tibetan display in the permanent exhibition, while the dresser was disassembled and taken into storage. The significance of the sculpture for the Skušeks and their visitors can only be reconstructed through an understanding of the context in which it was displayed, a context which has only survived in archival photographs and a documentary film.

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