

The Trapchi Lhamo Cult in Lhasa

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Ones' understandings should be like the gods',
but ones' behaviour should be in accord with human beings'.
(*rtogs pa lha dang mnyam yang spyod pa mi dang bstun dgos*)

A Tibetan Proverb

1. Introduction

It seems to be since some point in the early 2000s that the worship of Trapchi¹ Lhamo (*Grwa bzhi lha mo*), a wrathful female deity, has gradually become popular amongst Tibetans. For those living in Lhasa, it is difficult not to notice the displays of the deity's photos which prevail in the public spaces such as teahouses, shops and on public transportation, where those of revered lamas and the Jokhang Temple's Shakyamuni had formerly been predominant. Indeed, the Trapchi cult has evidently become a significant element of the Tibetan religious landscape. An increasing number of people in Lhasa, across different social statuses, have started to pray to her for overtly mundane purposes, particularly for ones' individual economic prosperity, of which she is believed to be a guarantor. It can be said that the emerging popularity of Trapchi Lhamo as a deity of treasure, of wealth (*nor lha*) is one of the most peculiar religious phenomena in contemporary Lhasa, and Tibetans themselves appear, to varying degrees, to be aware of this distinct character.

It is peculiar and distinct in two senses. First of all, the nature in which the deity is worshipped is radically different from that of the typical, traditional mode, wherein people pray for protection, well-being, or transcendental motivations informed by Buddhist worldviews. The Trapchi cult, in contrast, squarely makes the promise of rapid economic gain. The people who practise the cult are expected to swiftly achieve material and monetary benefits, the nature

¹ The spelling "Drapchi" is used in most literature referring to the deity and her monastery, excepting a few examples (e.g. Richardson 1994) utilising "Trapchi". I employ the latter throughout this article since it is closer to the local pronunciation of the word.

of which is characterised by the devotees' naked desire and individualism. It is true to say that lay people's worship for secular purposes was and still is observable extensively in the Tibetan cultural environment. However, such worship is normally restricted either to prayers that are generally considered perilous² and are therefore made in secret or, most commonly, to essentially passive prayers such as those intended to prevent or nullify obstacles and misfortunes. The Trapchi cult is a radical departure from this conventional way of praying, in its *active and open* commitment to gain more.

The other feature peculiar to the cult is its origin. To my knowledge, no religious authorities such as high lamas and Buddhist texts specifically acknowledge the divine status of Trapchi Lhamo as a deity assisting people to increase their wealth. Also, this deity has no history of being renowned as that type of deity. Moreover, strictly speaking, Trapchi Lhamo is *not* a Buddhist deity, as some informed locals are aware. Trapchi Lhamo, though now enshrined in a monastery of identical name, is neither a supernatural being introduced from the world of Indian Buddhism nor an indigenous Tibetan deity subdued and subsequently incorporated into the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon. According to local belief, Trapchi Lhamo was originally a princess of the Qing court. She lived a few centuries ago, came to Lhasa, and became transformed into the deity.

Certainly, what is known about the cult is rather strange. Moreover, it does not explicate the sudden fervour for and the popular selection of Trapchi Lhamo as a modern mundane deity. Indeed, the cult is somewhat of a mystery. This riddle can be rephrased roughly in the following two interrelated questions: firstly, what kind of forces and conditions led to Trapchi Lhamo serving as a deity of wealth?; secondly, and this is more fundamental, why was it Trapchi who came to play that role rather than one of the other more powerful worldly gods?

The main objective of this article is to approach the kernel of these questions through ethnographic and historical analysis. It will be tackled by focusing on the recent economic climate in Lhasa, but more particularly, through exploring the historical space of Trapchi Lhamo, wherein power, economy and national sentiments are mutually intertwined. This religious as well as worldly space is, as will be shown, characterised as an ideological arena for contemporary Tibetans who, confronted with economic development and Chinese

² In recent Tibet, the most controversial one of all is, of course, the practice of Shugden. For more detail, see Dreyfus's article, *The Shugden Affair: Origins of a Controversy Part I* (<http://www.dalailama.com/messages/dolgyal-shugden/ganden-tripa/the-shugden-affair-i>) / *Part II* (<http://www.dalailama.com/messages/dolgyal-shugden/ganden-tripa/the-shugden-affair-ii>).

modernity, (de)value their Buddhist morality and identity. Indeed, the 'genesis' of the Trapchi Lhamo cult, as an amalgamation of past memory and present circumstance, is constituted by a discordant unison of Tibetan religious tradition and China's market economy, forming part of a dilemma with which Tibetans have increasingly been haunted. It may certainly be said that the noble phantom who landed from China a few centuries ago, has been revived as a (pseudo-)Buddhist deity in no small part due to enduring ambivalent Tibetan sentiments towards Chinese affluence and power.

2. Economic Development and Its Influences on Tibetan Lives

In order to give backdrop to the emergence of Trapchi cult, it will firstly be helpful to give a general overview of the rapid economic development that has taken place in Tibet (TAR – Tibet Autonomous Region), and its influences over people in contemporary Lhasa.

Since the early 1980s, following the turmoil of the Cultural Revolution, the Tibetan economy started to regenerate due to political initiatives. Under the slogan of the 'Reform and Opening up' policy [*gaige kaifang Ch.*], the central government implemented various liberal cultural and religious policies, and simultaneously introduced a 'socialist market economy' for the improvement of the general well-being of Tibetans. As is well known, the nature of the policy, despite the heavy dependence on Chinese subsidiaries, was presented as a gradualist attempt to initiate and encourage indigenous economic development in the interests of local Tibetans. However, in the late 1980s, this state endorsement of economic liberalisation was overshadowed by a number of political demonstrations demanding the independence of Tibet, which led to the subsequent declaration of martial law in Lhasa in 1989 (Schwartz 1994; Barnett and Akiner 1994).

After this political disturbance, fast-growing economic development was targeted under the hard-line leadership of Chen Kuiyuan, the then TAR Party Secretary, who advocated economic development as indispensable for the security of Tibet (Barnett 2003) – the dialectic relationship between social stability [*wending*] and economic progress [*fazhan*] was proclaimed and institutionalised throughout the 1990s. According to the internal logic of this political economy, it was expected that economic affluence, more precisely the removal of economic disparity between Tibet and China, would automatically render Tibetan nationalism obsolete. In other words, once the important element of ethnic distinctiveness – Tibetan religious culture – would be nullified by rapid economic development, this would strengthen

national unity and security in Tibet. Thus, along with a variety of suppressive measures being placed upon religious and cultural activities, including the infamous anti-Dalai campaign (ibid.), numerous infrastructure projects were devised and implemented to 'aid Tibet' [*lyuanzang*], funded with heavy subsidies from central and affluent provincial governments. Consequently, a number of Han Chinese entrepreneurs and skilled workers immigrated to the urban areas of Tibet, particularly its capital of Lhasa, where local Tibetans were largely excluded from an increasingly competitive job market due to their lack of linguistic and technical skills (cf. Fischer 2005). True, the average rate of annual increase of Tibet's GDP maintained nearly 14%³ during Chen Kuyuan's reigning period, between 1993 and 2000, but this was largely accomplished without local Tibetans either participating or benefiting much (ibid.).

From around the year 2000 onwards, the TAR government attempted to accelerate its economic growth through promoting Tibet's tourism industry, which had already been becoming a central source of the TAR's income due to the acquisition of foreign currencies. What was propagated by the media at that time was that Tibetan Buddhist culture would be cultivated as a significant, economically viable commodity for the development of the industry (Murakami 2008; 2011). Confidence in this trajectory originated from a growing Chinese interest in Tibetan culture and religion (e.g. Murakami 2008), stimulated to some extent by existent Western fantasy discourses regarding Tibet and its people. Thus, whilst the boom of 'Tibet Tour' [*Xizang lüyou*] which continued until the 1990s was mainly led by the increase of international tourists, domestic tourists were now also making a significant contribution to the development of the TAR's tourism economy. For years, from 2000 to 2009, the annual increase of Chinese tourists entering Tibet was nearly 40%⁴, the number reaching about 5.4 million in 2009; almost double the whole population of the TAR⁵. It is without doubt that various constructions of infrastructure, such as the Qinghai-Tibet Railway (completed in 2006), along with the fast improvements made to tourist facilities and services, supported this development. Income from the tourism industry now constitutes nearly 13%⁶ of the whole of the TAR's GDP (2009); the

³ My calculation is based upon data from section 2-8 (Indices of Gross Domestic Product) in *Tibet Statistical Yearbook 2010*.

⁴ My calculation is based upon data from section 13-5 (Number of Tourists and Foreign Earnings) of the statistical book above. Note that the statistical data given for tourist numbers might be dubious, since it may include *all* the domestic people, such as immigrant workers, who used the transportation to enter Tibet.

⁵ About 2.9 million (2009) according to section 3-1 (Population and its Composition) of the book above.

⁶ My calculation is based upon data from sections 2-6 (Gross Domestic Product)

Tibet Tourism Bureau recently claims that tourism has become the TAR's leading industry, allegedly employing about twenty thousand people.⁷

With tourism as the main booster of the economy, the TAR's GDP growth rate during the 2000s was more than 12% (except in 2008, when it was 10.1%), which represents a larger growth rate than that of the whole China. This rapid economic growth, however, has not been achieved without an increasing disparity between urban and rural income (Fischer 2005)⁸, nearly 80% of the whole population being rural people. Moreover, a growing intra-ethnic stratification among Tibetans in terms of cultural and economic welfare is evidenced (e.g. Murakami 2009). As often pointed out, this widening gap in the quality of life of individuals in contemporary Lhasa played a significant part in creating the backdrop for the uncontrollable spread of 'anti-Chinese' demonstrations in March 2008. Accordingly, in the Fifth Tibet Work Forum, held in Beijing in 2010, existing social contradictions were explicitly indicated as Tibet's primary obstacle to overcome in constructing a 'harmonious' [*hexie*] society, leading to an official proclamation of intent to tackle the economic problems in rural Tibet.⁹ It is too early to judge the degrees of success or failure implementing this directive has produced, but many people in Lhasa seem dubious it would be at all effective.

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Following rapid economic development spanning almost two decades, it is indisputable that visible modernisation and increasing wealth have become more in evidence in the Lhasa's cityscape. Many traditional houses in Old Lhasa, centred around the Barkhor area, have recently been demolished and supplanted by modern, pseudo-Tibetan style constructions, some of which have been transformed into massive tourist souvenir shops. Chinese business and administrative buildings, which used to be concentrated in the western area of the city, have extended in all directions, alongside the construction of wide, refurbished roads. Apparently, no restriction to protect traditional spaces is being implemented. For example, the 13-story Lhasa Public Security Bureau, completed in 2002, is an extremely prominent building which drastically affects the city's historical appear-

and 13-5 (Number of Tourists and Foreign Earnings) of the book above.

⁷ *Xizang zizhiqū "Shiyiwu" lüyou chanye fazhan guihua* (Tibet Tourism Bureau 2008: 2-3).

⁸ For some details of the urban-rural economic disparity, see section 2-5 (Per Capita Main Indicators on Economic Benefit) in *Tibet Statistical Yearbook 2010*.

⁹ TibetInfoNet 29 Jan 2010. (<http://www.tibetinfonet.net>).

ance,¹⁰ in conjunction with the proliferation of new modern hotels and shopping centres that have sprung up in the vicinity of the Barkhor. The most characteristic cityscape in modern Lhasa, however, may be the development of large-scale suburban residential constructions in response to an increasing number of Chinese residents and affluent real estate investors. The local media, on the whole, describes the rapid transformation of the cityscape as 'welcoming' and 'good' for the welfare of the Tibetans, extolling the present change with rhetoric referring to it in descriptive terms such as 'a splendid combination of tradition and modernity' [*chuantong yu xiandai wanmei jiehe*]¹¹.

Whilst the city's outlook has rapidly been transformed, the features of the propaganda displayed in public space have also been fundamentally changing. Until around 2000, overwhelmingly predominant were explicitly political messages, such as those of the anti-Dalai and the national fraternity between Tibetans and Chinese – devised and disseminated by the local government. However, as years passed, many of these began to be replaced with those bearing economic and commercial content¹². True, red-banners demonstrating the civilisation [*wenming*] campaign, or some other communist-inspired directive, are still prevalently observable – for example, just after the March 2008 Incident, when the local government needed to disseminate the significance of Chinese nationalism and communist morality. However, very recently, the government propaganda embellishing the cityscape seems to be selected largely to promote its economic imperative, the most typical being those encouraging further investment or supporting the development of the TAR's tourism industry. Not surprisingly, public spaces once dominated by political messages are now mostly occupied with commercial advertisements promoting telecommunications, real estate, and the latest Chinese and foreign products.

Another observable change, that has taken place in Lhasa since the late 1990s, is the wide circulation of a variety of commodities imported from different regions of China. Those goods include various foreign brands, ranging from necessities such as foods and clothes to lavish goods such as computers and cars. Until the late 1990s, cars were normally purchased only for companies or government units, but recently, an increasing number of wealthy people in Lhasa have started to acquire private cars. Concurrently, due to the boom of

¹⁰ See for some details Tibet Information Network (2003: 83-98).

¹¹ *Lasa wanbao* (Lasa Evening News) 24th Nov 2001.

¹² This view is based upon my observation as a resident of Lhasa since 2000. I lived there for two years since 2000, summer times in 2005 and 2006, and have been working there for most part of the year since 2007.

tourism industry, the trade of domestic products – Tibetan antiques, medicinal fungus (*dbyar rtswa dgun 'bu*) and precious stones, such as turquoise, coral and the *gzi* stone – are also becoming intensely popular, and so are the problems deriving from loaning money at high interest rates in order to repay debts and/or for further investment.

On the other hand, since about the year 2000, the increasing price of commodities has largely begun to oppress the lives of many people in Lhasa, particularly, those who are less affluent¹³. The prices that have increased most dramatically to Tibetan perceptions may be, as often addressed, those of traditional daily staples, such as butter and yak meat. For example, the latter cost about eight yuan per a half kilo in 2000, but it has now (in 2012) more than tripled. Indeed, the price of many daily foods has increased over the last decade. Due to the dramatic hike in the price of general necessities, the salaries of government officials have risen. However, those of many unskilled employees working in small or medium sized companies and shops saw only a limited increase, which has naturally led to the further socio-economic exclusion of many of these Tibetan workers.

For the deprived, their wish may be to achieve a stable life with a secure job, whilst for the affluent, their priority is wealth typified by further consumption and investments. It seems that stark economic stratification has firmly been established and strengthened in contemporary Lhasa, at least according to the experiences of Tibetan residents, who have suffered and/or gained from the rapid modernisation there.

This radical transformation of the socio-economic environment has caused major concern regarding the corruption of 'Tibetan morality', particularly amongst the senior and elderly. Above all, the deterioration of *Buddhist value* coupled with the dissipation of 'Tibetan-ness,' is a predominant issue. It may be worth introducing here some representative utterances and phraseologies in local currency. The first is that due to their sudden acquisition of wealth, many Tibetans are becoming 'self-centred' (*rang shed tsha po*) and 'greedy' (*ham pa tsha po*), ignoring the significance of Buddhist causality (*las rgyu 'bras*) informing their words and deeds and therefore becoming evermore trapped in the ephemeral blissfulness of this present life. Following on from this is the opinion that the more wealth Tibetans gain, the more they discard traditional values of modesty (*sems chung*) and respect (*gus zhabs*); that their affluence made them become miserly (*lag pa dam po*), arrogant (*nga rgyal*) and exceedingly proud of

¹³ Before 2008, even the local newspapers, such as *Lasa Wanbao*, often criticised the relevant authorities of their failures to control the increases of the prices of commodities.

themselves like the 'non-Buddhist' Chinese. Finally, the modern penchant in Lhasa for sending small children to China for the quality education which may secure their economic success will deprive them of their 'Tibetan-ness,' particularly, their faith in Buddhism. Instead, they will come to associate themselves with the economic motivations that the Chinese espouse. Indeed, the negative moralities and secular values, perceived as rapidly prevailing, tend to be attributed to the increasing presence of the Chinese and their influence.

In contemporary Lhasa, the desire for economic wealth has irreversibly expanded, which Tibetans, regrettably or not, admit. However, interestingly enough, the simultaneous decay of Tibetan Buddhist morality is normally articulated against the background of the 'Chinese Other'. Ethnic boundary is implicitly or explicitly demarcated in their contingent manifestations of the oppositional characters of their (non-)greediness. One subtle but symbolic example in daily contexts is the predictably recurring phrase often used by elder Tibetans to reprove younger ones for their greed: "You are a Tibetan, aren't you? Don't you feel ashamed?" The implication of this phrase is that the Tibetan concerned has forfeited his or her identity as Buddhist (*nang-pa*, literally meaning 'insiders'), due to dishonourable acts committed and the lack of shame towards them; being akin to secular, greedy Chinese. Across different social statuses, identical or similar phrases are often employed on a variety of occasions with different degrees of intent or seriousness. This distinctive way of phrasing, which connects Tibetan identity and morality, seems to bear such an evocative power, that Tibetans receive a forceful daily imperative to self reflection in relation to the perceived backdrop of an 'immoral', 'corrupt' and 'non-Buddhist' Chinese.

It is now widely believed that traditional Buddhist values, characterised as 'faith', 'modesty' and 'respect', are now being progressively supplanted with Chinese values prioritising immediate affluence over the importance of mind and next life. At the same time, however, it should be noted, Tibetan self-perception as inherently benevolent and religious seems to be durably sustained, however paradoxical it sounds given these pessimistic notions of Tibetan identity – yet this positive self-perception, it should be remarked, is commonly held in tandem with an opposite imagining of the Chinese as vessels of immoral qualities.

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Off the Barkhor Street, along some narrow lanes in the traditional area of Lhasa, one finds it difficult to ignore the distinctive popular prayers performed by a small group of lay practitioners. Reading a text aloud, they clap hands to repulse (*zlog*) an evil spirit called *mi kha*

– a gossip who is believed to malevolently influence the people by her mere existence. If one feels threatened by the negative energy *mi kha* emits, one must make some offerings and prayers for protection. The opening section of these prayers is interesting¹⁴:

...
khyod ni mi na dgu na gtong
khyod ni mi lab dgu lab byed
mi kha'i bu mo tshur la nyon
nag mo tig ta mgo zing ma
khyod dang po yong yong ga nas yong
dang po rgya bod mtshams nas yong
mi kha mang po rgya la gzugs
rgya nag rgyal pos bod la bsgyur
rgya 'dre mang po sde la logs
yul sa yar lung zer ba na
 ...

...
 You are spreading various illnesses.
 You are speaking various [unspeakable] things.
Mi-kha girl, listen!
 Black, small girl with tangled hair,
 When you first arrived, where did you come from?
 You first came from the boundary between China and Tibet.
 Much malicious gossiping was 'planted' in China.
 A Chinese king changed [your dwelling place] into Tibet¹⁵.
 Many quarrels (Chinese demons) are now found in the
 communities of the region.
 It is called Yarlung.
 ...

The act of gossiping is deeply connected to one's jealousy, desire and greed, and is indeed counted as one of the non-virtuous deeds in

¹⁴ An extraction from folio 2ab of *Slob dpon pad mas mdzad pa'i mi kha'i bzlog 'gyur bzhugs so. gtong* in the first line is originally *stong*, and *yul sa yar lung* in the last line is *yul la lung pa*. In order to make sense, I changed as above, following another analogous text, *mi kha'i bzlog bsgyur* (Published by Tibetan Cultural Printing Press: Dharamsala – 176215 (HP.)). *tig-ta* in the fourth line is a type of medicinal plant, but it is used as a slang word indicating 'small'. The meaning of *sde la logs* in the ninth line is ambiguous. Here, looking at the meaning of the following sentence, I translate 'communities (*sde*) of the region (*logs*)'.

¹⁵ If we interpret the transitive verb *bsgyur* in the eighth line as a misspelling of 'gyur [intransitive verb], this sentence can be translated as 'A Chinese king became a king of Tibet'.

Buddhist teaching¹⁶. It is noteworthy that the text above obviously implies the spirit of this immorality originates from China, and accidentally or not, came down to Yarlung, the land of Tibet.

Mi kha is pure negativity which causes the intensification of any existing animosities and conflicts between people. Therefore, in a sense, it is very easy to deal with her – to expel her from Tibet as the above prayers countering *mi kha* aim to do. In contrast, in the case of our Trapchi Lhamo, the situation is much more complicated and ambivalent, as will be shown. The latter is the case even though these two spirits are identical in terms of their worldliness, gender and origin – and, moreover, in terms of their fundamental relation to desire.

3. Trapchi Lhamo Cult

Thus far the rapid economic development of modern Lhasa and its influences on people's lives, particularly on their traditional moralities, have been discussed. As shown, the recent economic situation has naturally stimulated people's desire to gain more, regardless of their economic statuses, the context of which has undeniably been contributory to the emerging popularity of Trapchi Lhamo as a deity of wealth. Now, we can proceed in tackling more fundamental questions, such as how can the secular, mundane desire for economic gain be *openly* protected and expressed within the sacred realm of an explicitly Buddhist space such as a monastery? In what historical and social condition is it possible to accommodate this apparent contradiction in terms? And, to reiterate, the primary issue at stake here is the riddle of why and how Trapchi Lhamo came to be destined to play that role in preference to other (non-)worldly deities. These questions are certainly intriguing, and treatment of them inevitably requires one to employ a subtle, broad approach, constituted by the use of different sources, both ethnographic and historical. First of all, a general description of the Trapchi cult will be presented.

Trapchi Monastery, where our Trapchi Lhamo is enshrined, is located a few kilometres north of the Jokhang Temple, on the way to Sera Monastery. Its formal name is *Grwa bzhi brtan bzhuḡs chos 'khor gling* (Monastery of Trapchi Eternal Dharma Wheel). The Tibetan word, Trapchi, is spelled either *Grwa bzhi* or *Gra bzhi*. In both cases, it reflects, it is widely believed, the origins of the monastery, wherein

¹⁶ In the *Mi dge ba bcu* (ten non-virtues), one of the most cited moral codes among Tibetan Buddhists, *mi kha* naturally belongs to divisive, slanderous speech (*phra ma*) or senseless talk (*ngag kyal*).

initially 'four monks' (*grwa pa bzhi*) resided. According to a renowned local scholar, Chos 'phel, the monastery used to belong to the Kagyu School of Tibetan Buddhism, but it was transformed to that of Gelug during the rein of the Fifth Dalai Lama in the seventeenth century (Chos 'phel 2004: 71). From the early nineteenth century up until the middle of the twentieth, the monastery was institutionally affiliated with Ke'u tshang hermitage (*ri khrod*), whose main lama, Ke'u tshang Rimpoche, successively kept his room atop the Trapchi monastery (Cabezón 2006: 51). Now the Trapchi, composed of nearly thirty monks, is a branch of Sera Monastery, one of the Lhasa's three greatest Gelug monasteries.

Everyday, more particularly on precious days (*tshes bzang*), and on Wednesdays which is the 'soul date' (*bla gza'*) of the week for the present Dalai Lama¹⁷, Trapchi monastery is crowded. A number of fervent devotees queue with libations in hand from early morning. They are predominantly Tibetans, who may be young or elder, residents of Lhasa, or nomads and farmers from rural areas. The primary aim of most people is identical – to give monetary and spiritual tributes to the wrathful female deity Trapchi Lhamo whose divine power assures her worshippers' mundane wishes. On the other hand, there are some pilgrims who may also request the monks to conduct worldly rituals, such as *mo* (dice divination) or *bla 'gug tshe 'gug* (ritual for restoring one's life force), for which the Trapchi Monastery enjoys some renown.

Due to her worldly nature (*'jig rten pa*), Trapchi Lhamo is enshrined not at the innermost shrine within the main building, but near the entrance of it. However, the numerous other statues of transcendent Buddhist beings inside the monastery are evidently paid less attention by the visitors. It is locally rumoured that pilgrims' monetary offering for Trapchi Lhamo are estimated to accrue more than seven million Chinese Yuan annually, which is, possibly, much larger than those received in Trapchi's head monastery, Sera Monastery or, that of Drepung. The disproportionate amount of money offered clearly manifests the magnitude and anomaly of the cult of Trapchi Lhamo in contemporary Lhasa.

In the Tibetan Buddhist pantheon, there certainly exist traditional deities of treasure (*nor lha*), the most representative of whom are *Dzam bha la*, *Nor rgyun ma* and *rNam thos sras* (one of the Four Guard-

¹⁷ Local people in Lhasa usually say that Wednesday is a precious day since this is the day of the week upon which the present Dalai Lama was born. However, this is clearly a misunderstanding, as some informed Tibetans are aware. The zodiac sign of the Dalai Lama is that of the pig and, according to the traditional Tibetan calendar, the 'soul date' (*bla gza'*) of the week for the people born in the year of pig is Wednesday (*gza' lhag pa*).

ians, the Protector in the North), all of whom are in fact seen all over Tibetan regions. Paintings of the latter deity in particular are often hung in commercial enterprises, such as restaurants and business offices, due to his supposed power in assisting the accumulation of wealth. However, as far as contemporary Lhasa is concerned, this traditional deity has not enjoyed as many spiritual tributes as our triumphant Lhamo.

If one asks the locals – whether lay or clergy, devotees or not – the *reason* for her sudden popularity, some typical answers would be that it is because of a ‘contemporary trend’ (*dar srol*), or due to the ‘development of transportation’ which attracts devotees from all over Tibetan regions beyond the TAR. It seems to me that people just worship Trapchi Lhamo without much if any familiarity with her historical background and real identity.

Who on earth is Trapchi Lhamo? A local legend¹⁸ claims that she was originally a princess from the court of the Qing Dynasty a few centuries ago. When the Second Ke’u tshang Rimpoche, ‘Jam dbyang smon lam (born in 1791) – the then official owner of Trapchi Monastery, as noted earlier – was invited to her court in Beijing, she, a young princess who was constantly tormented by her sisters on account of her beauty, asked the Rimpoche to take her back to the land of Tibet with him. The Rimpoche might have appeared to her, in her predicament, as potential rescuer and protector, possibly due to her faith in Buddhism. Her attempt to escape was initially thwarted by the Rimpoche’s rejection, so she transformed herself into a kind of bird in order to fly after him on his return to Lhasa. Another version of the story says that, after being poisoned by her sisters, it was only the princess’s consciousness (*rnam shes*) who followed him. In whatever the case, her strong attachment to the Rimpoche successfully brought her to the land of Trapchi in Lhasa. It is also said that her sisters had mutilated her legs, but chicken legs grew to replace them. Whether the statue validates this cannot be confirmed due to it being clothed. Yet her tongue, emphatically poking out of her mouth, is evidently visible; it is believed that she attempted to vomit the food poisoned by her evil sisters, causing her tongue to remain fixed outside. A Chinese scholar gives us a different version of the story in which the mutilation of her legs and the poisoning were not carried out by her sisters, but by the local Tibetan *shannü* (literally, ‘female hermit’, possibly indicating dakini; *mkha’ gro ma*), who was jealous of her beauty (Su 2000). In both Tibetan and Chinese versions, the beautiful Chinese princess, despite undergoing tremendous physical tor-

¹⁸ The following account of the legend is constructed according to local oral testimonies I collected and on Chos ‘phel’s description (2004: 70-72).

ments, miraculously 'survived' in the land of Trapchi, presumably due to her strong adherence to life. In the end, the Qing princess endowed with incredible beauty and patience, flying far away from China down to Trapchi, became Trapchi Lhamo, 'Goddess of Trapchi'. Also believed is that Trapchi Lhamo is one of the embodiments of Palden Lhamo, the protector goddess of successive Dalai Lamas, and the supreme guardian deity of the land of Tibet.



Trapchi Lhamo (photographed by the author)

For some local Tibetans who are aware of the above background given for Trapchi Lhamo, she appears more like a local spirit, like a *gtsan*; a roaming consciousness of a deceased person, rather than a proper deity worthy of devotion. Moreover, even if she is treated as a deity, her identity is more than sufficient to actively refuse to worship her¹⁹. Her Chinese origin and 'non-Buddhist' character naturally incline them to keep distant from her monastery. Her worldliness, they claim, signifies no soteriological power with which to benefit human beings, who should instead turn to transcendent (*'jig rten las 'das pa*) Buddhist deities for salvation. Some such Tibetan critics of the Trap-

¹⁹ For the same reason, informed Chinese people and tourist books tend to emphasize that the cult of Trapchi Lhamo evidences a positive historical relationship between the Chinese and Tibetans.

chi Lhamo cult even go as far as claiming that “worshippers are mostly Chinese.” Even if there may be some Tibetans, they say, these are predominantly merchants or traders (*tshong pa*), who invest their capital in the hope of succeeding in their business enterprises. Tibetans who devalue the cult seem to believe that the devotees of Trapchi Lhamo are basically mammonists; therefore the majority are necessarily Chinese and the Tibetans involved are limited in number, since only a minority would blindly follow the Chinese in this fashion. This is very peculiar, since as mentioned earlier, the overwhelming number of visitors to the monastery are undeniably Tibetans, young and old, city dwellers and agriculturalists, who seem to be not all *tshong pa*, but originating from different social and regional backgrounds²⁰. Perhaps those levelling such critiques have not visited the monastery and, therefore, have never seen the fervour demonstrated by no small number of their fellow Tibetans. Nevertheless, this discord is noteworthy – the discrepancy of the reality and fantasy is confirmed and manifested in local discourses on the cult.

In a literary dimension, the association between Trapchi and Tibetan religious culture is also neglected or denied in an oblique but explicit manner. In *An Encyclopaedic Tibetan–Chinese Dictionary* (*bod rgya tshig mdzod chen mo*), the most authorised dictionary for decades for Tibetans and others, an item about Trapchi Lhamo or her monastery is conspicuous by its absence. This is a little bizarre, since this dictionary, due to its encyclopaedic nature, extensively encompasses a variety of minor and major gods, and small and large monasteries existing in both past and present Tibetan areas inside China. This act of omission is observable likewise in another authoritative dictionary, the *Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary* (*dung dkar tshig mdzod chen mo*), authored by the extremely erudite, late Dungkar Rimpoche. This tendency cannot only be seen in these great dictionaries but also, surprisingly, in the recent pilgrim’s guidebook (*gnas yig*) for monasteries and sacred geography in Lhasa. Thus, *Catalogue of Lhasa’s Monasteries – Mound of Gemstones and Ornaments – (lha sa’i dgon tho rin chen spungs rgyan zhes bya ba bzhuugs so)*, authored by a Tibetan scholar (bShes gnyen Tshul khirms 2001) from the Tibet Academy of Social Science, contains Lhasa’s forty-five monasteries and temples, including even ones such as *bZhi-sde*, which now lie in ruins, yet omitting to include the popular Trapchi Monastery. *Lhasa’s Historical Remains – Pleasant Grove of Lotus – (lha sa’i gna’ shul lo rgyus padma’i dga’ tshal zhes bya ba bzhuugs so)*, written by another Tibetan author (bSam shod

²⁰ This is confirmed not just by my observations during my frequent visits to the Trapchi monastery, but also by the general comments of the monks there whom I have spoken with over a number of years.

2010), again omits to mention Trapchi monastery from its interesting explanations regarding Lhasa's monasteries and historical sites. The only exception to this omission from publications is that of the renowned local researcher Chos 'phel (2004) in his *Guidebook for Sacred Places in Lhasa Area (lha sa khul gyi gnas yig)*, which devotes a few pages to Trapchi Monastery²¹.

The overall non-existence of the descriptions of Trapchi Monastery and its Lhamo in literature is certainly remarkable. It seems that most Tibetan authors do *not* actively acknowledge the Trapchi as a proper monastery, or its Lhamo an authentic deity. It could be plausibly pointed out that this literary repression is not unrelated to the general Tibetan disavowal of devotion to Trapchi Lhamo as discussed earlier. What is this practice of repression and why are Tibetans seemingly so often 'impelled' to do so? In what way is this repression normally sustained? The answer to the last question is, in a way, implied in the cited literatures above. Indeed, most of these literary works specifically refer to the land of Trapchi not as a sacred site, but instead as a field of the ultimate worldly power – *armed force*²².

4. Trapchi in History

There is a mystery about the toponym, Trapchi. If one naturally pronounces its Tibetan spelling *Grwa bzhi*, it would be 'Trashī' or, possibly 'Trapshi'. However in reality, people normally say 'Trapchi'. This peculiar phonetic use is also confirmed in Hugh Richardson's work – *Ceremonies of the Lhasa Year* (1994: 34), whose description²³ partly evidences that 'Trapchi' was the main pronunciation among Tibetans even more than half century before the Chinese takeover. This finding appears insignificant, however it is quite intriguing to note in relation to the fact that the common Chinese term for *Grwa bzhi* is zhaji

²¹ This may be due to Chos 'phel's conviction that Tibetans in general, though very religious (*chos sems chen po*), are miserably ignorant of the historical backgrounds of monasteries and temples to which they make pilgrimages (my personal communication with Chos 'phel in 2007). His inclusion of Trapchi and many other minor sacred sites in his book may be a reflection of this conviction.

²² For example, the *Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary* includes *Gra bzhi glog 'phrul las khung* (Trapchi Electrical Machine Office), *Gra bzhi dmag sgar* (Trapchi Army Barrack), *Gra bzhi rtsis bsher* (Trapchi Army Inspection) and *Gra bzhi ya mon dang dmag sgar* (Trapchi Amban Office and Qing Army Barrack), but gives no items for the monastery or the Lhamo. Likewise, *Encyclopaedic Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary* lists only *Gra bzhi las khung* and *Gra bzhi rtsis bsher*.

²³ In his description of 'The Review at Trapchi', he employs the spelling, *Gra phyi*, that can be pronounced 'Trapchi'.

(扎基)²⁴, which could literally be translated as 'The Foundation of a Garrison.' What should be noted here is that the colloquial Tibetan pronunciation of *Grwa bzhi* is very close to that of *zhaji* in Chinese. The character *zha* (扎) is often used in Chinese phonetic transliteration of many Tibetan words²⁵, irrespective of whether they are related to military terms. However, in the case of *Trapchi*, it is more than apt, as will be shown. It is probable that the local Tibetan pronunciation of *Grwa bzhi* reflects an historical feature of the *Trapchi* land, and importantly, that the *Trapshi* signifying 'four-monks', which is locally believed to be the origin of the toponym, could be a kind of distorted narrative concerning the land.

* * *

As far as the political history of modern Tibet is concerned, the early eighteenth century witnessed a crucial turning point. Qosot Mongols, Dzungars and Manchus, the then great powers, were intensely competing with each other to gain authority over the land of Tibet. In 1717, Lha-bzang, the 'King of Tibet', a descendant of Gu-shri Khan of the Qosot Mongols, was assassinated by Dzungars (with whom Sangye Gyatso, the Regent of the Fifth Dalai Lama, had previously been affiliated). However, in 1720 the Dzungars were driven away by the Qing army, who tactfully brought with them the newly reincarnated Dalai Lama to Lhasa, aiming to establish the Manchu authority as the supreme protector of the Gelug School and its Government. The Qing army was militarily and symbolically successful, and the garrison, composed of two thousand troops, was left to guard against possible re-attacks from Dzungars.

The huge presence of this external army in Lhasa naturally caused constant friction between Tibetans and Manchu, similar to that previously existing between the Tibetans and Qosot Mongols or Dzungars, whose troops had also been stationed in or nearby Lhasa. However, after the Dzungars' threat was removed in 1733 by the Qing's successful military campaign, the then Emperor, Yongzheng, declared the intention to effect a massive reduction of the Chinese troops stationed in Tibet²⁶. Furthermore, partly in response to a re-

²⁴ Another transliteration of *Grwa bzhi* is *zhashi* (扎什), which is often seen in classical texts. In modern context, however, *zhaji* (扎基) is most commonly employed.

²⁵ For example, look at the *Dictionary of Common Tibetan Personal and Place Names* (Chen and An 2004: 356-363) for a variety of Chinese terms that employ the character *zha* (扎) for Tibetan words.

²⁶ The official proclamation by the Emperor Yongzheng is recorded in *Qingshilu [The Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty] – Daqing Shizong Xian Huangdi Shilu (Vol.129 pp.1-2)*. For convenient access to the record see, for example, *Qingshilu*

quest from Pho lha nas, the then Chief Minister of Tibet (*mi dbang*), the military encampment of the remaining 500 troops was transferred from the area north of the Jokhang Temple far away to the northern plains. Qingbao, one of the two Ambans, representatives of the Qing government, reports as follows to the Emperor on the new military site:

... Setting out to investigate an area between Jokhang and Sera, *Zhashitang*, where all *Diba* previously built their buildings, [I found it] extensive and level, near to a source of water, far away from agricultural fields, distancing five-*li* [2.5 kilometres] from the Jokhang Temple, extremely good topography...²⁷

Two points should be noted. Of the toponym, *Zhashitang*, *tang* most possibly means a 'plain land' (*thang*) in Tibetan, and *Zhashi* (扎什) could signify either 'four-monks' (if one believes the local narrative) or 'auspiciousness' (*bkra shis*) – therefore, the meaning of *Zhashitang* would be either 'field of four-monks' or 'auspicious land', the then possible toponym used by the Tibetans. Another transliterated word, *Diba*, is slightly confusing, since it sounds as if it is referring to the thrown-holder of Ganden Monastery (*dGa' ldan khri pa*). But in this case, *Diba* is actually *sde srid* in Tibetan²⁸, meaning a regent (or high bureaucrat) of the Tibetan administration. In describing the topos of *Zhashitang*, the building of regents – the symbolic figures of mundane power – is mentioned. However, any single words or hints as to the existence of a monastery, or any kind of religious connotation, does not appear either in this or in the many other related Qing court documents. Here, it is worth noting that *Vaidurya Serpo*, an extensive catalogue of Gelug monasteries in Lhasa and beyond, written by Sangye Gyatso (1653-1705), also follows this trend: even the Tibetan side in the similar period does not mention anything about Trapchi Monastery or a religious compound of some kind in a land called Trapchi.

Zangzu Shiliao [1] (1982: 358-9) and *Daqing Shizong Xian (Yongzheng) Huangdi Shilu* (1978).

²⁷ This report is recorded in *Manwen Junjichu Lufu* (Document No. 0941-005; Microfilm No. 020-0825), which is presently preserved in The First Historical Archives of China (*Zhongguo Diyi Lishi Dang'an Guan*) in Beijing. The report is also included in the recent publication, *Yuanyilai Xizang Difang Yu Zhongyang Zhengfu Guanxi Dang'an Shiliao Huibian* [2] (1994: 463-6) where the report is entitled "Qingbao and others humbly report on the situation regarding the project of constructing *Zhashitang* military encampment".

²⁸ According to *An Encyclopaedic Tibetan-Chinese Dictionary*, the Tibetan term, *sde srid*, could be transliterated as *Dici* (第司), *Diba* (第巴), and so on.

If one examines the topography of Trapchi land, it is a smooth, extensive plain, where monasteries and temples are most unlikely to be constructed. True, in the earlier diffusion of Buddhism to Tibet (*snga dar*) more than one millennium ago, plain land near a water source where people tend to dwell was selected as ideal construction site for religious centres, perhaps partly due to the Tibetan Empire's grand mission to propagate the new religion to the common people. Most notable examples are the Jokhang and Ramoche temples in Lhasa, and Samye Monastery in Lhoka. However, from the eleventh century onwards, when Buddhism was reformulated and re-disseminated with a new ethos and fervour (*phyi dar*), monasteries – *dgon pa*, literally meaning 'wilderness' or 'remote' – tended to be built away from residential areas, namely, at the top or foot of an auspicious or sanctified mountain²⁹. If a religious compound was built in the middle of a vacant plain, as Trapchi was, this particular geographical location would normally have been chosen due to its being imbued with a sacred narrative – for example, the birthplace of a famous saint or the existence of a particularly shaped stone considered indicative of the presence of a divinity. In the case of Trapchi land, there seems no such legend or peculiar topological shape. It is, therefore, a total enigma as to how this place was chosen as location for a monastery where 'four monks', allegedly, intended to live.

It is at this juncture that the possibility of the involvement of the Qing military, as described above, should be considered. As mentioned, in 1733, their garrison, composed of 500 troops, was transferred from Lhasa to the Trapchi land. Interestingly, at some point during their station, a shrine to *Guandi*, a warrior god of the Qing army, was constructed for their protection. Every summer, it is said, there was a festival in which the statue of *Guandi* was carried outside to circumambulate the Barkhor in central Lhasa, together with civilian and military attendants³⁰. It is unknown exactly when the shrine was built, but it could presumably be speculated that it was in or after 1761 (Richardson 1974: 25)³¹. Indeed, this is the year when the then

²⁹ The apparent difference between the locations of monasteries constructed in *snga dar* and those in *phyi dar* is indeed noteworthy, an insight based upon my extensive pilgrimage trips in U-Tsang over a number of years.

³⁰ See the *Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary* (p. 556)

³¹ To cite Richardson (1974: 25), "[i]t is possible that when the Grwa-bzhi barracks were built in 1733 for the Chinese garrison a Kuan-ti [Guandi] temple was also made; but it might have been expected that if the Ambans had included a pre-existing cult in their new foundation, the fact would have been mentioned." In the stone tablet dedicated to Trapchi's *Guandi* by an Amban, Helin in 1793, no hint is given as to the exact year of the establishment of the temple. The text of this stone tablet is introduced in Zhang (1988: 485-7), though the author seems to misinterpret this, asserting that the tablet is located near Tashihunpo Monastery,

two Ambans officially constructed a monastery in the Trapchi encampment, for the further development of the Gelug School. An inscription on a wooden panel found at the foundation site of the monastery and left in Trapchi monastery, was recorded by Hugh Richardson (ibid.: 25-7) as reading:

On the thirteenth day of the eighth month of the iron-snake year [1761], the 26th of the reign of Lha-skyong [Chien-lung Emperor], as an act of special diligence appropriate to the birthday of our holy Hong-ti to [huangdi?] whom be ten thousand years, his humble servants the colleagues Ji Pu and Phu Nas [the names of the two Ambans] who, having been commissioned to dwell on this distant frontier, are unable to attend in person at the Golden Palace and offer together with the nobles who reside at Court the homage that fulfils the desires of his subjects, have therefore, in accordance with our great Emperor's practice of extending widely the Yellow Hat doctrine, respectfully raised a subscription. And his humble servants have founded brTan-bzhugs [firmly established] monastery on the Grwa-bzhi plain and have set up there images of the mighty Sage, the Lord of Doctrine; the Two Elder Brothers among the Spiritual Sons...³²

The exact location of the shrine of *Guandi*, the above *brTan-bzhugs* monastery and Trapchi Lhamo's chapel is unknown to us. They may not have been identical to each other in a strict sense, but it can be presumed that all of them belonged to the same site on the Trapchi plain (Su 2005: 12-3). Above all, the most significant point is that the maiden land of Trapchi was forcefully cultivated by the presence of external military, and in consequence the monastery was subsequently established there by these foreigners. Indeed, the Trapchi space was initiated and used primarily for the ultimately mundane purposes of the aliens; it was, in a sense, an unwelcomed but inevitable consequence of the incessant interventions of external powers, towards which Tibetans, as is well known, were ambivalent – both exploiting and resisting them since the seventeenth century (e.g. Ishihama 2001).

Nearly half a century after the construction of the Trapchi barracks (*dmaq sgar*), in 1789, it was transformed into a military drilling space³³,

Shigatse (ibid.: 487).

³² Richardson (1974: 26).

³³ The then Amban suggested to the Qing court that a drilling space be built at Trapchi, as seen in *Qingshilu [The Veritable Records of the Qing Dynasty] – Daqing Gaozong Chun Huangdi Shilu (Vol.1339 p.9)*. This report by Amban is also included

possibly in response to the first invasion of Gurkha in the previous year. It is said that this marked the inception of official inspections of Manchu and Tibetan military forces in the land of Trapchi (Ou 1988: 50), which is commonly known as the 'Trapchi Inspection' (*Grwa bzhi rtsis bsher*). Later, this event came to be held annually on the 23rd of the First Month, and many foreign residents in Lhasa in the early twentieth century reported the magnificent standard of Tibet's ancient militia, as demonstrated by Tibetan generals with their armour, weapons and extravagant costumes in Mongol styles (e.g. Richardson 1994: 34-8; Bell 1928: 273-6). Although the Manchu garrison was transferred from Trapchi to Lugu (*Klu sgug*), a site west of the Jokhang, in the late nineteenth century (Ou 1988: 50-1), it could be presumed that the Trapchi site continued to be a place permeated with the aura of ultimate worldly power, due to the alien inception of the land, annually symbolised and re-enacted by a demonstration of armed force.

As shown so far, the modern belief in the 'four-monks' seems to have been crafted in a later period – whether it referred only to a frequently observed Tibetan wordplay³⁴, or something more serious. Whatever the case, this modest myth would seem to me to involve a sort of (un)conscious act of *concealment* – a reflection of the psychological suppression of the Chinese, military connections to the foundation of the Buddhist site visited and reversed by so many contemporary Tibetans.

However much the successive Qing Emperors, the supreme masters of the Qing military, declared themselves as supporting the Gelug School and its Government as 'Buddhists' (cf. Ishihama 2001), it is not too difficult to imagine that the very existence of an external force in the vicinity of local residences may have been a source of grave concern or even a fearful menace to all sections of Lhasa society. The religious compounds constructed by aliens, particularly the shrine of *Guandi*, a pagan god of warfare, may have appeared ominous in the view of traditionalist Tibetans³⁵. It is possible to speculate that Tibetan national sentiment has, at least in part, operated to 'cover up' the origin of Trapchi as part of an impulse to dilute what is seen as Chinese contamination.

in *Qingshilu Zangzu Shiliao* [7] (1982: 3222) and *Daqing Gaozong Chun* (*Qianlong Huangdi Shilu* (1978).

³⁴ Some familiar examples of wordplay given by local Tibetans are the transformation of the word *ra sa* (land of goat) into the present *lha sa* (land of gods), and that of *yum bu bla mkhar* (Yumbu High Fortress) to *yum bu lha khang* (Yumbu Temple). Note that the contingent transformation of Tibetan words seems to normally operate to re-sanctify the things or places that the words denote.

³⁵ Apparently, the statue of *Guandi* at Trapchi was either taken away or destroyed before the Chinese takeover in the mid twentieth century.

* * *

The genesis of Trapchi monastery has long been buried in complete oblivion, but on the other hand, the past identity of Trapchi as a military area is widely known (as noted earlier when referring to contemporary literature mentioning Trapchi). Moreover, the military presence on that soil may be a vivid memory for many elderly Tibetans and others who have direct connections or relatives involved with the Trapchi land at some point during the twentieth century. It is indeed at this critical time in Tibet's modern history that the land has resurfaced in the consciousness of Lhasa's population.

During the two decades after the thirteenth Dalai Lama's return from his exile in 1913, Tibet experienced its *de facto* independence (Goldstein 1991). The Dalai Lama's first and foremost priority for this vulnerable nation was to rapidly modernise it, the most significant act towards which was that of strengthening Tibet's indigenous army against foreign powers, particularly the Chinese. In 1914, the military force called 'Trongdra Regiment' (*Grong drag dmag mi*) was established, and its location was selected to be that of the former Qing garrison – the Trapchi land. Most likely, this was a natural choice due to technical and/or geographical reasons.

The regiment was composed of 1,000 troops or more³⁶, influencing Lhasa society and its people, who, however, did not necessarily welcome the new move towards rapid modernisation. Particularly, the traditional segment of Tibetan polity, the Gelug hierarchs, opposed the sudden emergence of the political power of Tibetan commanders and soldiers, who had appeared to them a tremendous menace due to their overtly secularist attitudes and material strength, derived in large part from foreign (British) influences (*ibid.*). It can be said that even after the removal of the Qing's martial influence, the land of Trapchi, a centre of the newly developed Tibetan military, continued to be a place of intractable power – the space imbued with modern, external and worldly force.

The existence of the 'Trapchi Electrical Machine Office' (*Grwa bzhi glog 'phrul las khungs*)³⁷, established in 1931, appeared to symbolise Trapchi's affiliation with worldly power. Headed by Kumbela, an able, young Tibetan who was most favoured by the Dalai Lama, this office produced important modern items, such as currencies and munitions, and even provided electricity for some affluent homesteads.

³⁶ See *Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary* (p. 555).

³⁷ Its formal name is 'Trapchi Electrical Machine Office, Treasure of Extraordinary, Limitless Power of Mind' (*Gra bzhi glog 'phrul las khung ngo mtshar mtha' klas rig 'phrul gter mdzod*) *Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary* (p. 554).

The Tibet's first hydroelectric plant³⁸ constructed in *Dog sde* Valley, was the source of energy for the office's factories. Afterwards, it merged the agricultural office (*So nam las khungs*), and exercised an influence over the finance and economy (*nor srid dpal 'byor*) of the government³⁹. Fully backed by foreign technology and the Dalai Lama's tutelage, Kumbela, in the land of Trapchi, was even able to organise his own regiment equipped with modern arms and Western-style training (Goldstein 1991: 146-156). A British colonial officer reported on the Trapchi land in 1933: "[t]he whole place had an air of energy and efficiency which is rare in Tibet"⁴⁰, and on the regiment, "outside the regular units of the British and Indian armies, I have never seen such smartness and precision."⁴¹

* * *

After the middle of twentieth century, when the Tibetan hope of establishing their own nation-state had dissolved, the Trapchi space was transformed into 'Lhasa Prison No.1' to accommodate 'hundreds of thousands of'⁴² Tibetan dissidents. Now commonly called 'Drapchi Prison,' it has become internationally notorious for the maltreatment of prisoners. The majority of the prisoners are Tibetan political (ex-)protestors – lays and monks/nuns – who were directly or indirectly involved in largely peaceful demonstrations against the Chinese government and the suppression of their religious activities. The number of inmates dramatically increased towards the end of the 1980s, when the Tibetan demand for national independence culminated in riots. The locals normally keep silent about this fearful prison, which is located just behind Trapchi monastery, so close that the inside of the prison can be viewed from the monastery roof.

5. The Emergence of Trapchi Lhamo as a Modern Worldly Deity

Although the brief history of the Trapchi land given in the previous section may be rather fragmented, we are now in a better position to

³⁸ See bSam shod (2010: 78-9) for some details of the plant.

³⁹ *Dungkar Tibetological Great Dictionary* (p.555).

⁴⁰ Re-cited from Goldstein (1991: 152). IOR [India Office Records], L/PS/12/4175 (letter from the political officer in Sikkim [F. W. Williamson] to the Government of India, reporting on a visit to Lhasa in 1933, dated 6 January 1934).

⁴¹ Re-cited from Goldstein (1991: 155). IOR [India Office Records], L/PS/12/4175 (letter from the political officer in Sikkim to the Government of India, reporting on a visit to Lhasa in 1933, dated 6 January 1934).

⁴² Tibetan Centre for Human Rights and Democracy (TCHRD) website: <http://www.tchrd.org/>.

tackle the riddle presented in the introduction: why has Trapchi Lhamo, in preference to other powerful worldly gods, emerged as the supreme deity of wealth, despite no religious authorities such as high lamas and Buddhist texts acknowledging her status as such?

First, let us consider *Guandi*, the warrior god of the Qing garrison, whose shrine, as noted earlier, was constructed on the land of Trapchi in or after 1761. *Guandi* is a divine form of famous *Guanyu*, an ancient, legendary Chinese warrior of the Shu Dynasty (221-263 AD). He is now almost universally worshipped in culturally Chinese areas as a deity of commerce. It is not known to us whether *Guandi* in Trapchi was expected to play this mundane role at that time, when his shrine was demolished, and moreover, exactly when the phantom of the Chinese princess landed in Trapchi and became acknowledged as a Lhamo (goddess). However, the physical and temporal proximity between these two gods is noteworthy. It is possible that at some point the goddess began to be associated with commerce or other worldly matters with which the warrior god of identical origin, situated in her vicinity, is believed to assist.

In relation to this, one is reminded of the existence of another *Guandi* in Lhasa, whose shrine is located on the top of a small hill, *Bar ma ri* (or *Bong ba ri*) near the Potala Palace. Constructed by a general of the Qing army at the end of the eighteenth century⁴³, this shrine continues to exist to the present date; however, it attracts few pilgrims, and then only Chinese. If *Guandi* had been of any real significance in Trapchi, such that he could have affected the main features and capabilities attributed to Trapchi Lhamo, it would seem likely that *Guandi's* shrine on the small hill would have attracted more attention from contemporary Tibetans both historically and in the present. It is possible to suggest that the reason for the lack of popularity accorded *Guandi* by local Tibetans may well be due to his appearing too explicitly Chinese, and therefore representative of alien interests, in their eyes⁴⁴.

On a most fundamental level, the secret of the emergence of Trapchi Lhamo seems to lie less in *Guandi's* possible influence on her, than in a more 'lived' dimension, that is, the (re)production of historical space (cf. Lefebvre 1991[1974]) that occurred in Trapchi. To put it differently, Trapchi Lhamo emerged from a mutual correlation between space, power and morality, which she came to embody during her

⁴³ See for example Richardson (1974: 53-4) and Zhang (1988: 481-2) for some details of the stone tablet and the statue of *Guandi* on *Bar ma ri*.

⁴⁴ In fact, the statue of *Guandi* on *Bar ma ri* was and is widely believed by Tibetans to be that of the Tibetan legendary hero of Ling Gesar (see also Richardson 1974: 53-4). The existence of a worldly Chinese god at a Tibetan Buddhist site may seem to the locals to be unnatural or unacceptable.

reign in the land of Trapchi. The Trapchi area has long been very distinctive as a locus of a formidable profane power, entailing that the radiation of its worldly quality influenced or intimidated the local people in a variety of ways; the significant result of this is that the main deity governing the land, Trapchi Lhamo, was naturally imbued with this absolute worldliness.

At the beginning of the eighteenth century, the Qing garrison was constructed on the land of the regent's building, and subsequently, the space was transformed into a place for military drilling. Following the two-century presence of this alien army, the Trapchi land was utilised as a garrison for the modern Tibetan army, and also as a centre of technology and energy, where electricity, munitions and currencies were produced and distributed. In the aftermath of the 1959 Chinese takeover, the space was turned into the most notorious prison in Tibet, the existence of which has functioned to both suppress and stimulate national sentiments. The Trapchi land has thus been continuously imbued with a variety of tremendous mundane powers, characterised by externality and violence. A local perspective on the Trapchi land as *a source of profane power* has been formulated under the above historical conditions, giving rise to the successive transmission of local projections of fears, wishes and disgust towards that northern space, in the centre of which, the worldly deity has witnessed and fully assimilated the enormity of ruthless, ultimate forces.

As shown earlier, economic development has been rapidly enforced in modern Lhasa over the last few decades by the Chinese leadership and under their tutelage, resulting in Chinese economic dominance in Lhasa and beyond. It is significant to note that the market economy initiated in contemporary Lhasa is, at a fundamental level, remarkably analogous to the armed forces of Trapchi's history in that it is of an alien, sudden and invading nature. Thus the emerging popularity of Trapchi Lhamo is, in a way, a Tibetan expression of their perceived association between these two different powers – economy and army – in a form of worship. The locals seem to instinctively recognise the parallel between the two. To put it more precisely, the intrinsic similarity of these powers, it seems, sustains the ideological backdrop against which Trapchi Lhamo, powered by her land of violence, has increasingly resonated with the colonial nature of the Chinese economical governance, under which many Tibetans are (dis)affiliated with this goddess of Chinese origin.

Let us now approach the question of why Trapchi Lhamo became such a prominent worldly deity of wealth in Lhasa from a different angle, by asking why other powerful worldly deities in Lhasa have *failed* to come to fulfil this divine role. The answer seems to be inherently related to the general nature of Tibet's worldly deities (*'jig rten*

gyi lha). In contemporary Lhasa, the worldly deities are predominantly Buddhist protectors (*srung ma*) who serve the interests of respective schools and monasteries. The most prominent ones are Palden Lhamo and Nechung (*Srung ma dmar nag gnyis*), the two main traditional protectors for the Gelug School and the Dalai Lama's government. Some other minor but conspicuous examples are *Nyangra* (*Nyang bran rgyal chen*) of the same school, who particularly serves Sera monastery; Sakyabamo (*Sa skya 'bag mo*), the protector of the Sakya School, enshrined in *Pho brang gsar pa* (a branch of Sakya monastery) to the west of the Jokhang Temple; and Apchi (*A phyi chos kyi sgröl ma*) in *Nub rigs gsum lha khang*, a temple run by the Drikung Kagyu school. The infamous Shugden can also be enlisted as one of Lhasa's many mundane deities, being a supreme protector for Gelug fundamentalists⁴⁵. Such worldly deities are believed to be effective and powerful particularly in the physical world, in this present life, since they are essentially mundane beings of a different class to humans but sharing their worldly nature.

If one needs to pray for worldly matters, one tends to select a familiar deity, according to one's origin (*lung pa*) and religious affiliation. In Tibetan folk traditions, the most ideal choice for worship is a territorial god from one's natal place (*yul lha* or *skyes lha*), who, if properly propitiated, will increase one's life force and fortune in this present life. The original identities of these deities are often deceased local kings, warriors or even high lamas, whose souls have gone on to become worldly gods who watch over the place they were affiliated with in life. In general, worldly deities are especially associated with war and violence, easily affected by their own anger and jealousy, and so likely to harm their devotees if displeased, particularly if they are not worshipped regularly. In some cases, like the ones mentioned above, these territorial gods are promoted to the role of protector (*srung ma*) for local monasteries and temples.

In modern Lhasa, the custom of propitiating one's territorial gods has increasingly been dying out, even among senior generations, and many Tibetans now do not even know the names of their local gods. The generations of immigrant Tibetans from rural areas – who comprise the majority of Tibetan residents in present Lhasa – have mostly ceased to worship their local deities, since it is believed that occasional pilgrimage visits to the shrines of these territorial gods will anger the gods more bitterly than the complete terminations of worship. This belief naturally causes migrants to refrain from propitiating the gods even at the rare times they return home. However, un-

⁴⁵ For some details see Dreyfus's article, *The Shugden Affair: Origins of a Controversy Part I and II* (footnote 2).

derstandably or not, this does not mean that the inclination to pray for divine help in mundane matters has become extinct – an eloquent demonstration of which, of course, is the devotion accorded our Trapchi Lhamo. Most significantly here, the many other powerful deities listed above are tragically ineffective in competing with Trapchi Lhamo in gaining the people's faith for help in worldly matters⁴⁶. However powerful and 'Buddhist' they purport to be, all of them attach to their individual localities and/or sectarianism too heavily to attract a wide range of followers. Our Trapchi Lhamo, in contrast, can easily transcend these rigid boundaries of sectarianism and territoriality to which the Tibetan deities above are historically bound. Even if she abides in an officially Gelug monastery, her origin beyond Tibet makes her distinct and immune to traditional demarcations. The result is that these indigenous gods, who attract followers within their localities, are less popular contemporary worldly deities than Trapchi Lhamo, a female Chinese god who is generically an alien. In addition to this, our Lhamo, unlike other envious mundane deities, is believed not to punish occasional worshippers and those who also worship different deities. This is an exceptionally generous aspect, given the generally jealous characteristic of worldly deities. Accordingly, Trapchi Lhamo has emerged as the supreme worldly deity encompassing the whole Tibetan ethnicity across different localities and religious affiliations. It can be said that within the vacuum of appropriate mundane divinities dwelling nearby, Trapchi, who had flown from far China to Lhasa, has been selected as a kind of modern substitute for Tibetan territorial gods. As those traditional territorial gods used to promise their agriculturalist followers protection of and good harvests for their cultivated fields, this new god of Chinese origin, presiding over Lhasa's secular world, guarantees her devotees fertile economic ground. In a sense, Trapchi Lhamo has been transformed into a *modern territorial god*⁴⁷ for a rapidly urbanising Lhasa. She listens to the wishes of the old and new residents from a variety of dif-

⁴⁶ Among the deities listed above, Palden Lhamo and Nechung are those who are most worshipped, whilst there do seem to be quite a few Shugden followers in contemporary Lhasa. However, as far as I observed, even the latter divinity appears much less popular than Trapchi Lhamo, although it should be noted that the worship for this controversial deity is normally hidden from public view.

⁴⁷ Despite some obvious differences, such as origins and (non-)jealousness, Trapchi Lhamo is endowed with what would be some peculiar characteristics for a traditional territorial god. The most noteworthy of these is her death by physical violence (i.e. poisoning) at the end of her human lifetime, which reminds us of the births/deaths of Shugden and Nyangra (although the types of violence that took their lives are different). The limited spatiality of her divine power – no temples and monasteries outside Lhasa seem to enshrine images of her – is, perhaps, another intriguing characteristic.

ferent origins. Simultaneously though, the more she has become worshipped and her reputation has grown, the more palpable is, as we saw earlier, a certain rupture in perceptions of her divinity; a rupture that people tend to avoid facing.

6. Concluding Remarks: Trapchi – Ideology and Social ‘Symptom’

I hope here to have shed some light on the enigma surrounding Trapchi Lhamo’s sudden emergence as such a powerful deity of wealth in contemporary Lhasa. Yet, another question remains: that of how it is possible that secular prayers be openly made in the consecrated realm of a Buddhist monastery. In the process of exploring the primary enigma, interestingly, this second one has developed into a new question, that is, what precisely is the variety of Tibetan *repressions* regarding certain ‘fissures’ that the Trapchi Lhamo cult represents? The second one initially appeared less significant than the first, however, now it seems more fundamental particularly in its ideological connection with Tibetan perceptions of themselves within Chinese modernity.

To recapitulate the types of repression observed above: firstly, the general Tibetan tendency to *disavow* their countrymen’s pilgrimage to Trapchi monastery, claiming that visitors there are predominantly Chinese and those Tibetans who visit are primarily traders (*tshong pa*) following corrupt Chinese morality; secondly, the literary repression which has almost completely disregarded Trapchi monastery and its Lhamo, thoroughly replacing their listings with those denoting the past existence of the Trapchi military; and lastly, the Tibetan belief regarding the origin of the monastery as being Buddhist (‘four-monks’). The evident contradiction of these with observable realities is certainly remarkable. What creates and sustains this inconsistency? The answer is, of course, ‘the Chinese’, or more precisely, Tibetan ambivalence towards Chinese power and influence. Such apparent contradictions found within behaviour, thoughts and minds are *not* problematic at all, as is celebrated in the traditional Tibetan proverb which begins this article. Rather, the fundamental problem lies in the fact that such contradictions regarding Trapchi Lhamo inevitably involve the ‘Chinese’ (*rgya mi*) – and the undeniable Tibetan revulsion *and* reverence towards the worldly and menacing Chinese forces under which they live. Once such contradictions surface and are revealed to consciousness, they tend to then be repressed through a somewhat psychological operation to conceal or deny a particular part of the total reality, so that Tibetan identity in terms of an ideo-

logical self-integrity as Buddhists vis-à-vis the Chinese as corrupt mammonists is manifested and maintained. What is repressed in this operation is the thought of Tibetan desire for Chinese power and affluence; the possibility of Tibetan monetary aspiration is denied here, i.e. the amoral quality that the cult for Trapchi Lhamo appears to demonstrate.

In his most celebrated work, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek (2008[1989]) submits an interesting psychoanalytical account of the ideological mechanism of anti-Semitism. Though historical and political contexts are radically different, his analysis of this enduring European ambivalence seems to provide us with a constructive framework from within which to consider our Trapchi cult. Firstly, he says, there is 'displacement'. The hidden secret of anti-Semitism is to displace social antagonism into a particular entity: 'the Jew'. Although society itself cannot fundamentally sustain itself without intrinsic splits among its constituents (cf. Laclau and Mouffe 1985; Laclau 1990), an adamantly held belief in society as a harmonious whole pushes people to look for the cause of internal defects *externally*. The figure of 'the Jew' is born at this moment. The process of this displacement is sustained by 'condensation', in which opposing characteristics are imagined and projected onto the social entity of 'the Jew' – dirty *and* intellectual, voluptuous *and* impotent, and so on. The riddle of how the figure of 'the Jew' captures our desire, according to Žižek, lies in 'the way 'Jew' enters the framework of fantasy structuring our enjoyment (ibid.: 141)'. This is crucial. Here, by fantasy he means an 'ideological fantasy' in which society is imagined as a corporate body, constituted in the relations between organic, complementary parts. To rephrase the articulation above, the fundamental impossibility of such a society is masked by this fantasy, and its apparent contradiction with the reality is attributed to 'the Jew', whose very existence appears to manifest the positive cause of social negativity. However, Žižek argues further, in the moment when 'the Jew' is imagined as a source of corruption for social totality, 'the Jews' simultaneously and necessarily embodies a certain block; a naked disclosure of the impossibility of our fantasy, the revealing of invalidity of the fantasy, whose only function, i.e. the function of our ideological fantasy, is to fill out the empty space of the fundamental impossibility. Therefore, once this fantasy is 'traversed', 'the Jew' is revealed as a *'point at which social negativity as such assumes positive existence'* (ibid.: 143; *italic original*). It is due to this logic that the figure of Jew, as the embodiment of *fundamental impossibility* of our imagining-living world, threatens us and stimulates a desire to assimilate *and* annihilate them in order to restore what is in fact unattainable social order and harmony. As long as such a fantasy never ceases to

uphold its imaginative frame of corporatist social order, the paranoid images of 'the Jew' return again and again, as history evidences. It is in this sense that the (images projected onto) 'Jews' can be identified with a sort of social 'symptom' (ibid. 143-4) where immanent social antagonisms and fissures – however traumatic they may appear – become visible and palpable. In a psychoanalytic endeavour, most crucially, it is in this sphere, in the properties attributed to 'Jew', that one may discover some truth about oneself, the ideological kernel constituting one's identity and the fictitious totality upon which one rests.

Evidently, our Trapchi Lhamo, as an embodiment of 'Tibetan impossibility', is 'the Jew' in the above analysis. As we saw, the goddess, explicitly or implicitly, represents a Chinese power that can be considered constitutive for contemporary Tibetan identity. Firstly, opposing features are projected onto the figure of Trapchi Lhamo – effective *and* unenlightened, worshipped *and* denigrated. Her figure captures Tibetan desires within the psychological operation in which she enters the framework of Tibetan fantasy – the fantasy of national identity as 'pure Buddhist' in opposition to avaricious concerns exemplified by the 'Chinese'. Here, the fundamental impossibility of Tibetan identity is characterised as the complete negation of modern Chinese involvement in its own construction (i.e. on the social, economical and political levels). This impossibility is concealed by the Tibetan fantasy, but its apparent contradiction with the empirical world is immediately identified, and then projected onto external, dominant figures such as Trapchi Lhamo and her 'deviant' worshippers. Far from being the positive causes of social negativity, however, the Lhamo and her mammonist worshippers inevitably embody a certain impossibility of the Tibetan fantasy; they comprise a sort of traumatic modern kernel, which radically discords with existing Tibetan self-perception. In a sense, the Trapchi cult is a point at which impossible moral negativity – *avarice in Buddhism* – assumes positive existence. Thus, the figure of Trapchi (and her followers), as the embodiment of fundamental impossibility of Tibetan imaginative world, threatens them, stimulates their desire to worship (assimilate) *and* denigrate (exclude) the goddess in order to restore an unachievable 'pure' Tibetan identity as Buddhist. Since the Tibetan fantasy operates to conceal the immanent fissures within the Trapchi cult, the peculiar discourses on Trapchi Lhamo and her devotees appear in a form of conspicuous *repressions* – it is in this subtle sense that the contemporary Trapchi cult can be paralleled with a sort of social 'symptom'.

In a similar way to Žižek's 'the Jew', as indicative of an oblique reflex in which one could discover hidden elements of oneself, the

Trapchi cult brings us closer to understanding a vital aspect of contemporary Tibetan identity. The Trapchi cult is the point at which the Tibetan desire for economic gain assumes a positive form, erupts from hidden depths and rises up to the surface. It is a manifestation of the reality that Tibetan self-perception as 'unpolluted' Buddhist is unsustainable; the point at which Tibetan identity is dismantled. If Tibetans (and we) are fully captured by their fantasy, Trapchi appears as a form of anomaly, an intruder who disturbs the Tibetan tradition by her ambivalent externality. However, at the moment when the ideological fantasy underlying her divine aura is revealed, the true nature of Tibetan ambivalence is exposed, confronting contemporary Tibetans – Trapchi Lhamo is a Tibetan disguise, she wears the mask of a kind of Buddhist *persona*, but her real identity is embedded in an enduring Tibetan simultaneous desire for *and* rejection of Chinese power and affluence. The Trapchi cult, therefore, is *ideological* at a most fundamental level, whatever its claims to religiosity might be. It is due to this quality of the cult that local discourses on Trapchi Lhamo assume 'symptomatic' features such as fervent devotion and/or active ignorance regarding the cult. 'Symptom,' as recognised in psychoanalysis, is not a purely pathological and degrading entity, *never* a negative attribute, but is rather a pivotal point at which one could be confronted with one's hidden enjoyment, as structured by past traumatic events, and challenged to undertake a psychic act of redemption; a struggle to transform this hidden kernel into a manageable entity that is consistent to one's being-in-the-world. Hence analysis of the Trapchi cult could be productive for comprehending some ideological dimensions of contemporary Lhasa. However, it is of course entirely up to contemporary Tibetans how or if they face the symptomatic phenomena widely observed in their rapidly transforming society. However, the most essential thing for them, it seems to me, is to engage in an historical mission to dissociate the Chinese power from what is regarded as prosperity, thereby dismantling their heavy reliance on the Chinese as convenient, seductive brokers, through re-linking and exposing themselves *directly* to modernity itself in the interests of their own ideological liberalisation.

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This article aimed to illuminate the peculiar nature of the Trapchi Lhamo cult in both temporal and spatial dimensions. Through examining contemporary Lhasa and its rapid modernisation, it has explored the temporal distinctiveness that has generated the Trapchi cult. Through exploring the history of the Trapchi land, the spatial peculiarity where the goddess has reigned was revealed. In the process of this quest in both temporal and spatial dimensions, what I

wished to do overall was to get closer to appreciating the nucleus of Tibetan culture and identity in contemporary Lhasa. Hopefully, I have offered a glimpse of this during my struggle to unravel the intricate webs of ideological discourses within which the secretive Lhamo wraps herself up.

Note on Transliteration

In this article I employ the Wylie system in transliterating Tibetan words. Round brackets with italics are used throughout to indicate these words, whereas square brackets with italics are for Chinese pinyin. Tibetan words in current circulation amongst English speakers are given phonetic representations (e.g. Barkhor).

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