


# Searching for Tibetanness: Tenzing Rigdol's Attempt to Visualize Tibetan Identity

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enzing Rigdol (bsTan 'dzin rig grol), a contemporary Tibetan artist currently living in the US, not only wants to find the Tibetan in himself. He also tries to find the 'Tibetanness' in traditional Tibetan art and the aspects of a Tibetan's life which all or most Tibetans from his definition have in common, like the script, culture and religion.<sup>1</sup> But as Adrian Zenz states, Tibetanness is not so easy to define.<sup>2</sup> The Tibetan community within and outside Tibet speaks many dialects (and even languages), and though Buddhism is the most common religion, Bon, Islam and Christianity are also practiced. The search for essential characteristics of Tibetan culture therefore is difficult. Before I analyse the outcome of his, as I call it, "attempt to visualize Tibetan identity," I will look into Tenzing Rigdol's background and which topics and 'Tibetan' elements he depicts in his art.

## 1. The Artist

Tenzing Rigdol was born in 1982 in Kathmandu, Nepal. His parents, once producers of ink for wood block prints in Tibet, fled to Nepal in the late 1950s, where they began designing and weaving Tibetan carpets. Rigdol lived also in Dharamsala, where he learned Tibetan carpet design and studied Tibetan traditional collage and thanka art. He also studied Tibetan traditional sand painting and butter sculpture in Kathmandu. In 2002, he moved to the United States, where he began to study Western art before realizing he wanted first to study the art of his own culture more. He left for India and Nepal, where he received his diploma in Tibetan Traditional Thangka Painting at the Tibet Thangka Art School in Kathmandu in 2003.

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<sup>1</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol via Skype, in English, February 15, 2013, in context of my Master's thesis.

<sup>2</sup> Zenz 2013: 19-24.

Returning to the US, he earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts as well as a Bachelor of Arts in Art History degree from Colorado University in 2005.<sup>3</sup>

Rigdol currently lives and works in New York.<sup>4</sup> He makes sculptures, paintings, collages and installations, and he also has published three books of poetry.<sup>5</sup> In 2013, he released a documentary called *Bringing Tibet Home*. The 82 minute film documents the installation *Our land our people* (2011) and which obstacles Rigdol needed to overcome to get 20 tons of Tibetan soil out of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) to Dharamsala. The installation consisted of a stage covered with Tibetan soil. Tenzing Rigdol's idea was that the Tibetans who live in Dharamsala could set their feet on Tibetan soil again or touch it and say a few words into a microphone afterwards.<sup>6</sup>

Rigdol states that he wants to go back to Tibet, a place he only knows through his parents and friends and the media.<sup>7</sup> He shares this experience with a number of other Tibetan artists living outside of the TAR or other areas of China, such as Tenzing Lodoe (bsTan 'dzin blo gros) and Tshering Sherpa (Tshe ring shar pa). Tenzin Lodoe, born in Dharamsala and now working as a management consultant in Switzerland, has said that, for example, "having been born and raised in exile, with a strong emphasis to preserve all things Tibetan, there are many internal forces that tend to make an exile feel as if one is a 'potted plant.' Never really feeling at ease to grow roots unless it is at the designed and intended place. [...] Whether the search is external or internal, there is always a yearning to trot on this path of discovering the Tibetan in oneself [...]."<sup>8</sup> Similar to Lodoe, Rigdol tries to find the Tibetan in himself. He holds that his research is on what it means to be a Tibetan or what Tibetanness is.<sup>9</sup> But as stated, his focus is also outwards, towards finding the Tibetanness in traditional Tibetan art and in his life inside and outside of the Tibetan community. He is not alone in this aim; many artists like Losang Gyatso (Virginia, USA), Gonkar Gyatso (Chengdu, PRC) and Gade (Lhasa, TAR) are depicting their own struggles with Tibetan identity, the different cultures they have lived in or their own opinions about Tibet and its changing culture. They all use elements

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<sup>3</sup> Ng 2010: 127.

<sup>4</sup> Rossi & Rossi 2016a.

<sup>5</sup> "R" – *The Frozen Ink* (2008), *Anatomie of Nights* (2011) and 'Butterfly's Wings' (2011). Published by Tibet Writes in Dharamsala, H.P.

<sup>6</sup> *Bringing Tibet Home* 2013.

<sup>7</sup> Rigdol cited in Zhefan 2015.

<sup>8</sup> Tenzin Lodoe in an unpublished description of himself and his art.

<sup>9</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

of traditional Tibetan art in their artworks.<sup>10</sup> But those three were born in Tibet and experienced it first hand. Tenzing Rigdol is part of the second generation living in exile, which might be a reason behind his even stronger longing to find his identity and, similar to Tenzin Lodoe, finding the Tibetan inside himself.

## 2. His Art

In his artwork, Rigdol draws elements from traditional Tibetan art in dealing with contemporary issues. In his five-part *A Ripple in Time* series (Fig. 1–2),<sup>11</sup> he depicts a maṇḍala with a Buddha, bandages in the silhouette of a meditating monk, the empty robe of the Dalai Lama and an embryo. He does not use the maṇḍala to depict constellations of Buddhas and gods. It functions more as a stage on



Fig. 1. Tenzing Rigdol. 2013. *A Ripple in Time #1 Lost*. Acrylic on paper. Diameter 50 cm. Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi and the artist.

<sup>10</sup> Sheehy 2010: 18–33; Bremm 2010: 37–55.

<sup>11</sup> All five paintings of the *A Ripple in Time* series are published in Bonn-Muller 2013.

which he presents scenarios for Tibet's past, present and future. The maṇḍala in this series is free from decorations or religious symbols, apart from the maṇḍala itself. The first painting shows Buddha Shakyamuni in the centre of a stylized maṇḍala.

He sits on a lotus base under an arch of begging bowls, one of which is positioned on his head like a hat. Atop each of four gates surrounding Buddha Shakyamuni is a letter, together reading the English word "lost." Tenzing Rigdol said in an interview that his intention was to symbolize how the arrival of Buddhism in Tibet led to a weakening of Tibet's power.<sup>12</sup> The second piece, *A Ripple in Time #2 Cost*, shows Buddha Shakyamuni, his head covered in red bandages, seated in the centre of a maṇḍala in front of a lotus base instead of being on top of it. On the base is the red star of the People's Liberation Army. This piece seems to address the cost of Tibet's weakening: the loss of sovereignty. In *A Ripple in Time #3 Rise*, he depicts the rise of Tibetan protests, especially self-immolations, represented by a flame nimbus ringing the figure—whose head is also replaced by a flame—in the centre. In traditional Tibetan art, the flame nimbus is used in the depiction of wrathful deities regarded as protectors in Tibetan Buddhism. The figure in the centre, possibly a Tibetan monk, is thus ascribed the role of a protector of Tibet, Buddhism and Tibetan identity. A body is not visible, only red and orange bandages in the form of a person in lotus position, arms folded in a gesture of protest. The fourth piece of this series depicts, as Tenzing Rigdol explained, an empty robe of the Dalai Lama. Together with the word "exit" written atop the gates of the maṇḍala, Tenzing Rigdol addresses his fear of the Dalai Lama's death. The fifth and final painting shows a scenario of what possibly might happen in the future.

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<sup>12</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.



Fig. 2. Tenzing Rigdol. 2013. *A Ripple in Time #5 Fear*. Acrylic on paper. Diameter 50 cm. Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi and the artist.

A small embryo is in the centre of the maṇḍala clutching a gun. The clouds surrounding the embryo might express that this is just one possibility, a vision of an unknown future. Although the Dalai Lama keeps the Tibetans calm and peaceful at the moment, Rigdol has said that this image indicates his fears that, when the Dalai Lama passes, later generations might turn to violent tactics of resistance.<sup>13</sup>

In the triptych collage *Alone, Exhausted and Waiting* he shows the Parinirvāṇa Buddha in a brocade robe, his skin made of photographed flames.

<sup>13</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.



Fig 3. Tenzing Rigdol. 2012. *Alone, Exhausted and Waiting*. Collage, silk brocade and scripture. 122 x 396 cm. Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi and the artist.

The silhouette of the Buddha reminds Rigdol, as he claims in an interview, of the homeless people he saw in India and on a mountain range, possibly symbolic of the mountains in Tibet. In this work he again broaches self-immolation and the impact it has had on the Tibetan community. He depicts the unifying character of the self-immolations by using three canvases, representing the three provinces of Tibet (*chol ka gsum*), as well as scripture from Tibetan woodblock prints for the background. In traditional Tibetan art the background would not be filled with scripture. It would be filled for example with the depiction of landscapes. The Tibetan script is of general importance for him. He sees it as the main component of Tibetan identity.

I remove all the Chinese influence, especially the background, and then I replace that with Tibetan scripture, which for me represents the Tibetan identity. I mean, there are so many things in Tibetan culture, but somehow Tibetan [language], particularly the script, combines all the Tibetan provinces. They might have different dialects, but they write the same script and it was so popular that it spread to Bhutan, spread to even all these other Himalayan regions.<sup>14</sup>

He tries to emphasize Tibetan identity, for example, by highlighting the Tibetan script and actively omitting elements from other cultural backgrounds. One example is the Chinese landscape in traditional Tibetan art. He sees it as outside influence and replaces it with Tibetan script, in line with his aim to find and highlight the Tibetanness in traditional Tibetan art. He not only removes Chinese elements—as one might expect, given his political situation as an exile—but he also leaves out decorations and jewellery influenced by Nepalese and Indian art. However one might argue that traditional Tibetan art is heavily influenced by Buddhism and Buddhist art,

<sup>14</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

which came to Tibet by way of India in the 7<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> century. Nevertheless Rigdol nonetheless integrates this as an important part of his 'Tibetan identity' too.

When he does depict Buddhas or deities, it is not for religious reasons. For him such representations operate more like a platform to show that being Tibetan does not simply mean keeping old traditions alive.

The idea is, they [the buyers] might like the image, but I want to put more to it. It is not just the image for me—it is the contemporary. It is the stage for me to express the contemporary issue. Then it becomes something more.<sup>15</sup>

The silhouettes of deities in his artwork have the same function. He plays with the word *ston pa*, which functions in classical texts as a name for the Buddha.

Basically *ston pa* means 'to show.' What I show is a contemporary issue in their body. In that way it was a very conscious attempt to use the traditional images and to use them as a platform to express my individual concern.<sup>16</sup>

Rigdol combines the symbolism of Tibetan Buddhism with his own thoughts and worries.

He also depicts iconometric grids, used in traditional thangka painting, for keeping to the right measurements for Buddhas and deities. Usually these lines would vanish beneath the painting, but Rigdol chooses to give these "poor lines" more attention.<sup>17</sup> But he was not the first to popularize the iconographic grid as an element of contemporary Tibetan art. Gonkar Gyatso made probably the biggest impact on the popularity of these lines through his collages of comic stickers, in the silhouettes of Buddhas still surrounded by the iconometric grid.

When producing Tibetan carpets, Tenzing Rigdol's parents would first draw the design for a pattern. Rigdol used parts of these drawings in some of his artwork, including *One in Love* (Fig. 4) and *Fusion: Bud-dha-tara*,<sup>18</sup> in which "both the lines and forms are left together in the final composition. The figures of Buddha and Tara, the male and female deities of compassion and enlightenment in Tibetan Buddhism, are fused with staccato placements of geometrical

<sup>15</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

<sup>16</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

<sup>17</sup> Gavin 2009: 9.

<sup>18</sup> The image can be found at:  
<http://www.asianart.com/exhibitions/waves/35.html>.

lines, colours and texts, so that the representation of these traditional deities is contemporized through their aesthetic deconstruction.”<sup>19</sup> In the collage *Identity* (Fig. 5), integrating the patterns of the sketches for Tibetan carpet design, he addresses “the degradation of the Tibetan language within Tibet.”<sup>20</sup>

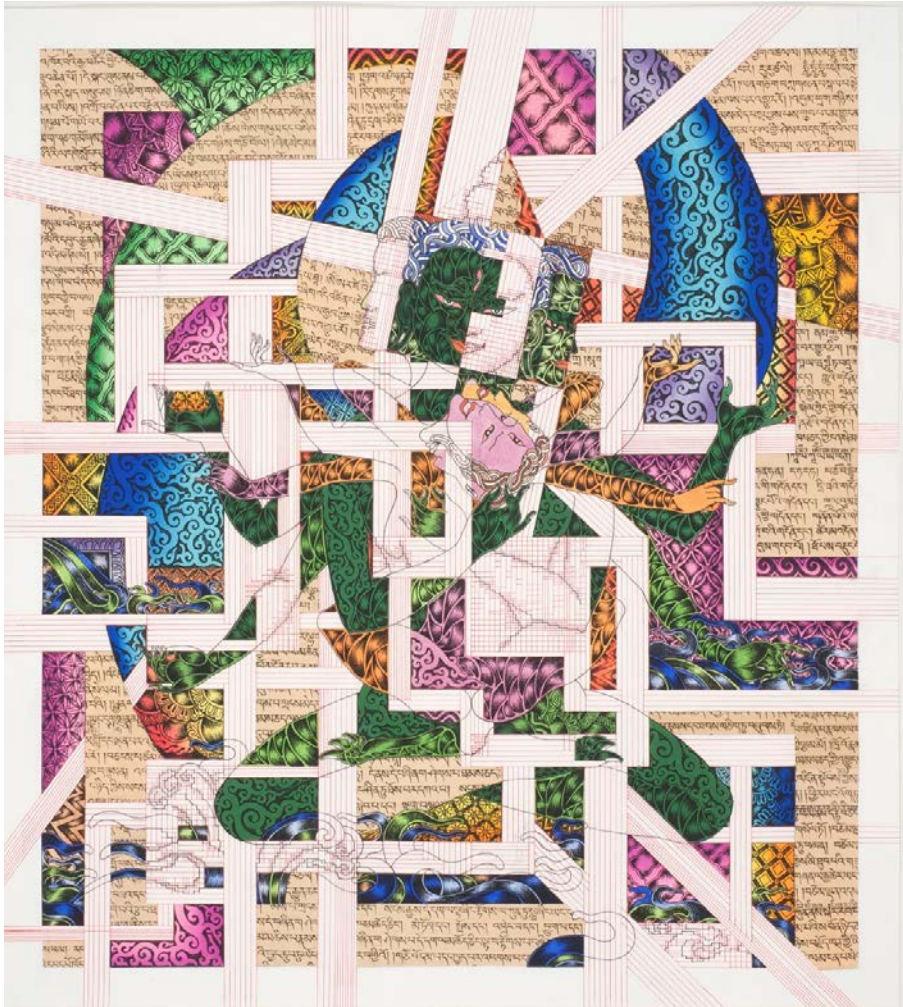


Fig 4. Tenzing Rigdol. 2010. *One in Love*. Pastel and collage on paper. 66 x 59 cm. Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi and the artist.

<sup>19</sup> Scoggin 2007.

<sup>20</sup> Rossi & Rossi 2016b.



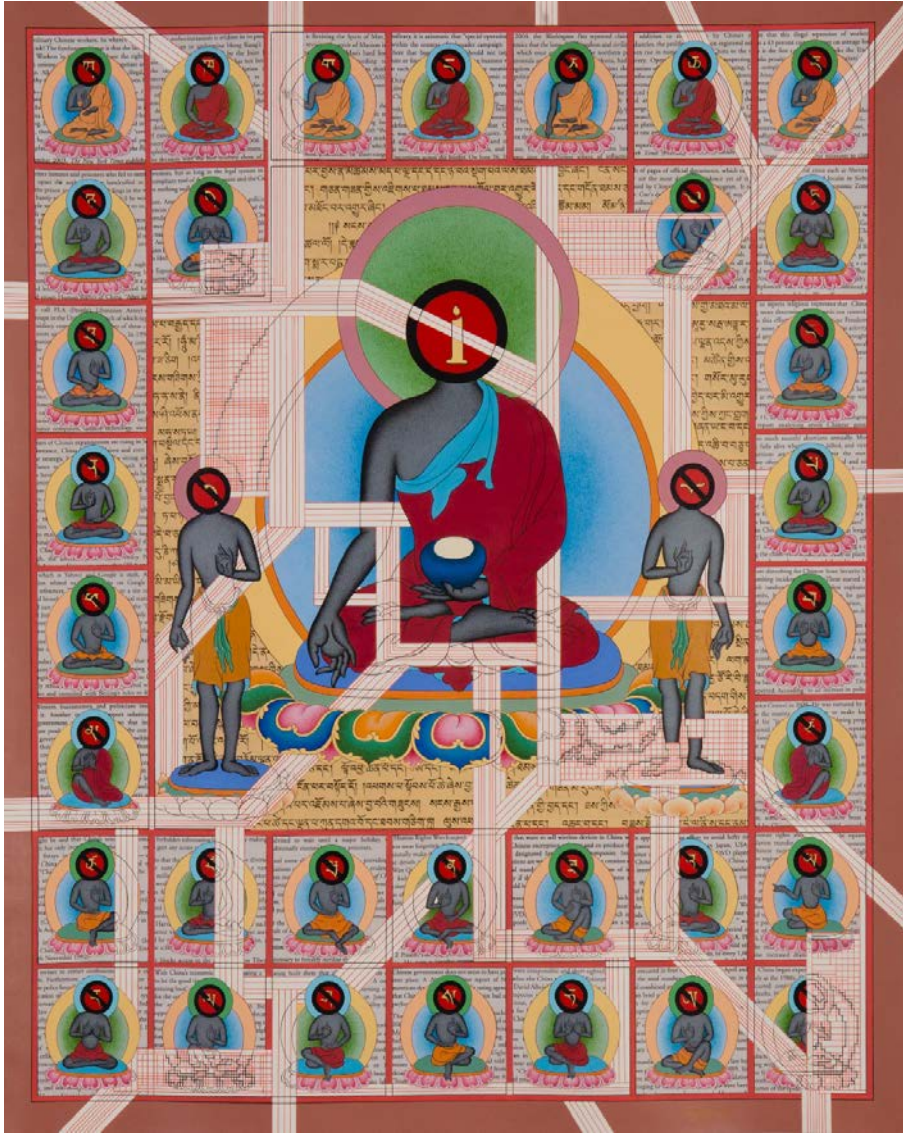


Fig. 5. Tenzing Rigdol. 2015. *Identity*. Acrylic and collage on paper. 71.4 x 77.5 cm. Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi and the artist.

But he does not always depict issues directly linked to self-immolation or the political situation between Tibet and China. With *The Whispering Storm* (Fig. 6) he expresses his worries concerning climate change and its consequences for the Himalayas and beyond:

The central figure is filled with images of polar animals, ice and water, in addition to global landmarks. This impending environmental crisis

will also have a devastating impact on the Tibetan plateau, which has been warming faster than the rest of the world. I worry that if we don't act, then we will face the threat of being washed clean of our human history.<sup>21</sup>

The concern about environment is nothing new, especially for the intellectual Tibetan elite in exile, but it is, as Toni Huber states, not as old as the elite claims it to be. More so, it is part of a new self-perception that has been built by using parts of the stereotypes that have evolved in the West and contributed to the image of Tibet as Shangri-La.<sup>22</sup> Although Tenzing Rigdol claims that his artwork is not intended to be political, this collage seems to transmit the message that something needs to change and functions as a reminder of what global warming could cause and which parts of nature and the world will be affected.



Fig. 6. Tenzing Rigdol. 2014. *The Whispering Storm*. Collage, photographs and silk brocade. 122 x 122 cm. Courtesy of Rossi & Rossi and the artist.

<sup>21</sup> Tenzing Rigdol 2014: 36.

<sup>22</sup> Huber 1997: 300–311.

## 2. 'Tibetanness' and 'Tibetan Identity'

Before I further analyse Tenzing Rigdol's search for Tibetanness, I would like to examine "the widely taken-for-granted notion of 'Tibetanness'"<sup>23</sup> and 'Tibetan identity,' which I equate in this paper. Both terms are problematic because, as Huber has demonstrated, they "evoke the existence of stable or unitary social and geopolitical entities that readily gloss over an enormous actual complexity and fluidity both past and present."<sup>24</sup> Sara Shneiderman acknowledges these difficulties and calls for an open discussion on ethnicity with other disciplines such as anthropology, postcolonial studies, history and so forth.<sup>25</sup>

Zenz contributes the critical notion that "'being Tibetan' ... is asserted as a distinct ethnic identity that is seen as being threatened through dilution by 'otherness,' and whose purity and authenticity must be maintained."<sup>26</sup> The voice of the Tibetan community, Zenz continues, can be characterized "as an imagined construct based on the social memory of a glorified and essentialised past, and of an imagined spiritual-cultural-linguistic community centered around essentialised understandings of 'authentic Tibetans' as morally-upright and religiously devout tsampa-eaters."<sup>27</sup> But at the same time Zenz extends the definition and possible usage of Tibetanness to "an identity that can be felt and claimed by those who no longer share common linguistic, cultural or social patterns (or never did so in the first place), and who may hold a significantly different interpretation of 'Tibetan history.'"<sup>28</sup>

Since the definitions of Tibetanness and Tibetan identity are too elusive, is it even possible for Tenzing Rigdol (or anyone else) to depict it? Before I try to answer this question, it is necessary to see how he defines Tibetanness for himself.

## 3. Tenzing Rigdol's Definition of 'Tibetanness'

Rigdol claims that honesty is one of the most important pursuits of his artwork. He said that he does not see his artwork as purposefully political, even when he depicts issues in the TAR, China or the rest of

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<sup>23</sup> Zenz 2013: 2.

<sup>24</sup> Huber 1999: viii.

<sup>25</sup> Shneiderman 2006: 1.

<sup>26</sup> Zenz 2013: 20.

<sup>27</sup> Zenz 2013: 21.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

the world. These are the topics that matter to him, and this means, according to his view, that he is just being honest, not political, although it appears to the viewer that at least some of his artwork contains subliminal political messages. The same approach applies to his interest in the idea of Tibetanness. He said “it boils down to the idea of being honest, being what I think and I proclaim it in a very innocent way.” He continues:

But for me, what challenges me is not that people like the idea of ‘Tibetanness.’ What challenges me is that people are stereotyping the idea of ‘Tibetanness.’”<sup>29</sup>

With his dislike for stereotyping ‘Tibetanness,’ he is part of a development that started with Gedun Choepel (1903–1951),<sup>30</sup> whose famous citation says a lot about the “Old Tibet” and signaled a start for a new development that took place within the Tibetan art scene:

All that is old is proclaimed as the work of gods  
All that is new conjured by the devil  
Wonders are thought to be bad omens  
This is the tradition of the land of the Dharma.<sup>31</sup>

His impact on the art scene is revealed by the name of the Gedun Choepel Artist’s Guild, formed in 2003 by a group of Lhasa-based, contemporary Tibetan artists.

Rigdol accepts the fact that other Tibetan artists do not work with Tibet-related motifs, but he sees it as not “being connected to what is happening.” This is in a way still a critique of those artists, especially as he found during his “research on what it means to be a Tibetan or what is the ‘Tibetanness’” that he could not distance himself from the situation in Tibet. It started in his process of thinking about what art is. He defines art as follows:

Art is made of being honest and being honest in a sense of being selfish. You just try to analyse, what that self is that wants to be selfish. And you realize immediately that that self is not independent of what has happened in Tibet. Now if you look at that self, you analyse that, the history, my parents, my grandparents and then thousands of years of tradition are all linked together and I cannot avoid that. To be honest would be to express those ideas and my own interpretation of those ideas.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

<sup>30</sup> For information on Gedun Choepel, see e.g. Stoddard 1985.

<sup>31</sup> Cited in Topden 2006.

<sup>32</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

Moreover, speaking about Tibetans, both inside and outside of Tibet, he further remarks:

They are, we are a product of what has happened in Tibet and not to be influenced by what has happened in Tibet is something I don't understand."<sup>33</sup>

Although he said that he accepts the fact that other Tibetan artists express different ideas, these former expressions imply that artists, who are not depicting traumatic events, are not influenced emotionally by these events, he also said:

If one wants to make flowers and landscape, it's ok, if that is what you really feel like making but I doubt it. Any Tibetan at the moment, if he wants to paint flowers or likes landscape or takes pictures of subways and tubes, either the person is not really connected to what is happening or even just completely gone rid of the idea of Tibetanness or has maybe reinvented the idea of Tibetanness, which is still fine."<sup>34</sup>

Tibet's past is visible in much of Tenzing Rigdol's artwork. The aforementioned topics, such as the self-immolations, the loss of Tibet's independence and the future of the Dalai Lama, are only a small overview of his concerns. Ernest Renan sees the collective negative memory as more effective in evoking a national thinking than positive ones.

Where national memories are concerned, griefs are of more value than triumphs, for they impose duties, and require a common effort. A nation is therefore a large-scale solidarity, constituted by the feeling of the sacrifices that one has made in the past and of those that one is prepared to make in the future.<sup>35</sup>

If we adapt Renan's theory for reconstructing the building of a national Tibetan identity, the past 60—70 years of Tibet's history would be emphasized. This is also reflected in Rigdol's focus on the past's negative events and how he uses them for developing his definition of Tibetanness.

Although those memories and contemporary issues are part of the life of many Tibetans, the way in which Rigdol depicts those topics does not solely solicit positive responses. He used and uses several elements of traditional Tibetan art, changing their role and meaning

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<sup>33</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

<sup>34</sup> Interview with Tenzing Rigdol, February 15, 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Renan [1882] 1993: 19.

by putting them in different contexts. He uses these elements for his own purpose, for example, to show Tibetanness and contemporary worldly issues, which leads to the question: if the meaning of these elements is changed, is it still a part of Tibetan identity? Some viewers criticize his usage of the Buddha silhouette for non-Buddhist issues and see this as a lack of respect for their religion. But as I mentioned earlier, Tenzing Rigdol does not like it when people stereotype the idea of Tibetanness. With his artwork, Rigdol challenges the conservative ideas of Tibetanness and replaces them with his own modernized and symbiotic idea of Tibetanness, a combination of tradition, history and modernity.

This conflict was on full display when many Tibetans criticized his 2008 performance *Scripture Noodle*. During this piece, he entered a Chinese restaurant, cut pages of a Tibetan book (*dpe cha*), fried and then ate the pieces. Buddhist scriptures are normally treated with a high degree of respect, and are never stamped upon or thrown away, but re-used, for example, to consecrate statues. There are some practices during which scripture would be eaten,<sup>36</sup> but never in a situation like a performance in a Chinese restaurant. Rigdol explained he wanted to explore the transformation of a book into a sacred scripture, which then becomes object of reverence:

Sometimes their undefiled reverence to scripture blinds them from being an individual, a meaning maker. When I look at scripture, it fascinates me. How so-called scripture evolves from an unknown book to something sacred. How it must have recruited the obedience from the people. These days, people are just busy: they take them to be very sacred and, when questioned, they are blank.<sup>37</sup>

In an interview in 2014 he also said he wanted to refer to an old Buddhist saying, “don’t be the bowl that carries the soup, be the mountain, that gulps it.”<sup>38</sup> Claire Harris best explains the pressure weighing on Tibetan artists to keep traditional Tibetan art alive:

The debate over an important public commission demonstrates that in their adaption or rejection of certain styles refugee painters are seen to inscribe a political narrative; for just as there is no such thing as an ‘innocent’ eye, there is no innocent brush. Those who wield the brush are required to demonstrate, both in their works and in their lives, that their Tibetanness is legitimate and authentic.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> Tenzing Rigdol in an interview published on Youtube. Thupten Norsang 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Tenzing Rigdol said that in an Interview with Francesca Gavin. Gavin 2009: 6.

<sup>38</sup> Tenzing Rigdol in an interview published on Youtube. Thupten Norsang 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Harris 1999: 46.

The struggle to paint in contemporary styles while expressing traditional Tibetanness is something shared by many contemporary Tibetan artists. Though the search for a universally valid definition for Tibetanness may be impossible, the search could form a strong bond that in itself becomes an aspect of Tibetanness, at least among artists.

Contemporary Tibetan artist Tsering Sherpa sums up the differences, struggles and the search in a few sentences:

Tibet itself exists in different realities—seen as both part of China and as something completely separate from it—and continues to be perceived as both a mythological and spiritual Shangri-la, as well as an occupied and rapidly industrialized country. Emerging from Tibet's history, these divergent pathways have led to so many unique perspectives, and continue to inspire the search for its people's sense of spirit and home.<sup>40</sup>

As mentioned before Rigdol's result differs from the scholarly discourse on Tibetan identity. In my opinion, Tenzing Rigdol's definition, or maybe rather his artistic attempt to pinpoint the essence of Tibetan identity, is based on personal emotions and experiences he had with his family and other Tibetans and therefore cannot be equalled with the definitions made by the scholarly discourse. Also, since those personal experiences always differ at least a bit for every Tibetan in exile, it will not be possible to express a Tibetanness to which every Tibetan can subscribe. The opinions on contemporary Tibetan art for example vary so much that for some commentators this art form does not even seem to be the right media for sorting out the divergent pathways. But since Tenzing Rigdol sees himself as an artist rather than a scholar, one who thinks of his works as expressions of his personality and personal thoughts, it seems legitimate then to view his artwork as an expression of his own journey towards finding the Tibetan in himself as well as his own personal definition of Tibetanness, using the shared term Tibetanness for his own understanding.

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<sup>40</sup> Sherpa 2014: 10.

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