



**Liberation from the pain of evil destinies”:
the silken images (*gos-sku*) of Gyantse monastery
(rGyal rtse dPal ’khor chos sde)**

Michael Henss

rGyal rtse dPal ’khor chos sde (gTsang) is the only site in present-day Tibet where the original giant appliqued silk thangkas (*gos sku*) are still preserved and ritually used until these days. They are by far the earliest examples of these most exceptional cultural relics in the whole Tibetan Buddhist realm to exist, dating back to the first half of the 15th century.

In 2000 and 2001 I was able to document the ritual of their annual display. In this paper an attempt is being made to reconstruct their original setting, to identify the iconographic program, and with the help of textual sources the historical evidence of their commission, manufacture, technique and dating, to characterise the style and to describe the present ceremonial use.

Of the original three principal silken banners (each ca.22,5 x 22,5m in size) two with the central images of Shakyamuni und Maitreya are surprisingly well preserved, while the third one, depicting Buddha Dipankara, is – like one of the two separate side banners(ca.22,5 x 5,5m in size) – seriously damaged and has not been shown on display since decades. The two prominent historical figures of the Shakyamuni *gos sku* could be identified with the help of local informants and ’Jigs med grags pa’s “History of the Princes of Gyantse”(rGyal rtse chos rgyal gyi rnam par thar...,1479/81, Lhasa edition 1987) as ’Jam dbyangs Rin chen rGyal mtshan, “the great abbot of gNas rnying” monastery near Gyantse (r.1422–1452),who performed the consecration ceremony for the rGyal rtse gTug lag khang in 1425, and Sems dpa’ chen po chos kyi Rin chen, another gNas rnying abbot. Since ’Jigs med grags pa’s quite precise description must refer to the present silken image in situ, it can be dated to the years 1436–1439. According to this source the other existing thangka of Maitreya was manufactured in exactly the same period, depicting the same gNas rnying abbot Sems dpa’ chen po chos kyi rin chen, and opposite – both figures were also confirmed as such by local informants – Shariputra, an Indian pandita and abbot of

Bodhgaya, who was invited by the Gyantse king Rab brtan Kun bzang 'Phags (1389 – 442), the actual commissioner and sponsor of these silken banners, to Tibet in 1418(or 1414?) to become his principal teacher.

The consecration ceremony for the Maitreya thangka was dedicated to Rab brtan kun bzang's mother Byang sems bzang mo (d.1435) and performed by Lama Chen po Tsen dra pa and Chos rje Phyogs las rnam rgyal (1376 – 1451), one of the three famous Bo dong pa masters who came to Gyantse in 1438. Further details presented in this paper are related to the manufacture technique and to iconometric data for these applied thangkas, to the Chinese silks, stylistic comparisons with the wall paintings in Gyantse, and to the ceremonial procedure as it is performed today.