

## A multivalent religious icon: the Jo bo Shakyamuni statue in Lhasa, Tibet

*Cameron David Warner*

This paper is on the history and present worship of the Jo bo Shakyamuni statue in the Ra sa 'Phrul snang gtsug lag khang (Jo khang) in Lhasa. The present statue in Lhasa is the most important Buddhist icon of Tibet. It is intimately connected with Tibetan self-identity and nationalism, as well as being an important object of pilgrimage for all Tibetans. Despite its importance, it has been hardly mentioned in secondary literature on Tibet. Since the beginning of Tibetan historiography, until the present, the history and worship of the statue has been complicated and controversial. Early sources tell us the statue was the focus of anti-Buddhist fervor during the dynastic period, and its symbolism has been appropriated by Communists seeking to deepen their authority over religion ever since the end of the Cultural Revolution. Complicating things further, the present statue is likely the latest in a series of replicas.

In my opinion, the future of Tibetan Studies lies in a multidisciplinary approach to understanding our object of study which implicitly accepts the notion that the production of knowledge is a subjective endeavor. Therefore, I employ multiple analytical tools in order to present my reader different ways of seeing the importance of the Jo bo Shakyamuni for the development of Tibetan self-identity. The paper begins with a close reading of passages that I have translated from the *Sba bzhed*, as well as from Per Sorensen's translation of the *Rgyal rabs gsal ba'i me long* by Bla ma dam pa Bsod nams rgyal mtshan. Unlike Sorensen, Hugh Richardson and others, I am not interested in proving or disproving the historical accuracy of early Tibetan historiography. Rather, I use Jo bo passages in order to understand how and why the statue became so important to Buddhists in Tibet. It is my opinion that either during the Dynastic Period, during the 1717 Jungar Invasion of Lhasa, and possibly the havoc during the Cultural Revolution, the statue was repeatedly damaged and or completely destroyed and rebuilt. I use the destruction and reconstruction of the statue as a bridge to discussing the Jo bo from an art historical point of view especially concerning material reproduction and simulation. I also add some of my own observations and information from interviews with Lhasa Tibetans during the summers of 2001 and 2003. Lastly, through demonstrating the Ra sa 'Phrul snang gtsug lag khang can be seen as a living museum controlled by the Communists authorities as means of controlling religion, I segue into the final part of the paper which is concerned with the fight between Tibetan nationalists and Communists who are both attempting to appropriate the statue and its house for their own political agendas.

Throughout the secondary literature, the notion that the Jo bo Shakyamuni is the palladium, the *sancta sanctorum* of Tibet is universally accepted, and yet no one has taken the time to write either a descriptive history of the statue, nor an interpretive analysis of

its significance for Tibetans. Obviously, just writing a history of the Jo bo Shakyamuni would be a large project in and of itself, let alone moving into an interpretive analysis. On the other hand, both projects are inherently dependent on each other due to the normative style of Tibetan Buddhist historiography. Therefore, it is my intention that presenting Jo bo Shakyamuni in a multidisciplinary fashion will elicit comments and helpful suggestions from my peers for a larger project in the future.