

What Forms the Basis for Translation? Thinking with Tibetan Material Culture

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Abstract: *Ten*: basis, foundation. *Ku*: an honorific body. *Ku + ten*= statue??? Before 1951, Tibet had an estimated 6,000 religious institutions plus thousands of private homes, housing millions of objects that are termed in English statues, sometimes under the rubric “Buddhist images.” They have played an essential role in Tibetan life for centuries. Unsurprisingly, the Tibetan language contains a plethora of terms, at least twenty-six that could be translated as “statue,” for these objects. And the breadth of the terminology only hints at the complexity of Tibetan theories of materiality at play, some inherited from Indian Buddhism, others entirely indigenous. Scholars of Buddhist studies have attempted to adopt a variety of theoretical frames, from Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity, Piercean semiotics, and Marxism to name a few, to translate the terms and ideas of Tibetan materiality. However, each of these frames explains away as much as they reveal to their intended audiences. I use the example of the Jowo Śākyamuni of the Rasa Trulnang Tsuklakhang to think with Tibetan materiality about the relationship between not just Tibetan and English, but the cultural contexts and purposes of the act of comparison and translation.

Keywords: *kuten*, Jowo, materiality, *zowo*, statue



The Jowo Śākyamuni without clothes or ornaments (except for the crown) following the regilding ceremony during Losar in 2004. Photo by Sarah Schorr.

In hindsight, this is perhaps unsurprising as Tibetans have been writing about the Jowo for nearly a thousand years and in almost every single genre from historical writing, biographies, ritual texts, pilgrimage guides, popular songs, novels, etc. This led me to pay attention more to the source context—who was the author, what was the genre, what was the time period—before deciding on when and how to translate a particular passage of text. But it also got me thinking about what I wanted the target context to be. Who was my audience?

At the time, in the early to mid 2000s, religious studies and anthropology had both rediscovered material culture, and art history had developed a keen interest in ritual studies. Some of my colleagues who studied Buddhist statues, the history and practices surrounding them, translated their findings into the language of Roman Catholicism and Eastern Orthodox Christianity due to their rich corpus of religious paraphernalia and hermeneutics, others chose to return to Sanskrit terminology, and some colleagues performed translation and analysis simultaneously through the use of European and North American

social scientific theory, especially Piercean semiotics or Marxist thought. In the present however, none of these choices is terribly satisfying. Each obscures as much or more than it reveals. None of them help us to understand fundamental questions Tibetans asked themselves about their material culture such as:

Who or what is the Jowo Śākyamuni?

Is he *the* Buddha Śākyamuni? Some texts answer yes.

Is he *a* Buddha, but not *the* Buddha Śākyamuni? Some texts answer yes.

Is he his own thing, possessing a history and qualities unique to him? Some texts answer yes.

Is he a statue or a person? In other words, what is his ontological status? Some texts use humor to state that the answer to this question is beyond our knowledge as humans.

Therefore, an example like the Jowo can tell us something about Tibetan material culture generally. He can be used to illustrate a whole range of theories about material culture for an advanced undergraduate student or research colleague. But if we do not first attend to the questions Buddhist Tibetans asked themselves prior to imposing non-Tibetan frames of comparison, interpretation, or analysis, then the quality of any translation will suffer. We will assume too quickly that we already know what a given text says. We will ignore or hyper-correct passages that do not conform to our preconceived notions.

For example, let's start some place simpler: What does the Jowo Śākyamuni even look like? And what did he look like in earlier time periods? One textual passage described his appearance in a way that did not make any sense to me. In one redaction of the *Vase Pillar Testament* (བཀའ་ཆེན་པོ་ཀློང་ལྷ་མོ་མཚན་མཛོད་), the Jowo is limned as having a wrathful deity named Dutsi Kyilwa (བདུད་རྩི་ཀྱིལ་བ) on the nape of his neck (Jo bo ati sha and Smon lam rgya mtsho 1989: 17-44). An excellent scholar of Tibetan history, Per Sørensen, communicated to me privately his opinion that the text was corrupted, as the prologue says that Monlam Gyatso combined two manuscripts to create this redaction of the text, neither of which is independently available. But when I conducted fieldwork in 2005, I interviewed one of the last two great Tibetan *zowo* (བོ་མོ་ལོ་མོ་), Chenmola Shilok (ཆེན་མོ་ལགས་ཀྱི་ལོ་མོ་). Descended from a long line of famous *zowo*, Shilok worked for the

Ganden Phodrang Government in Lhasa before 1959 and constructed the Jowo Śākyamuni at Tsechen Shedup Ling Sakya Tharig Monastery (ཁྲ་རིག་བརྗེ་ཆེན་བཤད་གྲུབ་སྤིང་) in Boudha, Nepal (Warner 2023). Few Tibetans of his generation could boast they were more knowledgeable about the Jowo Śākyamuni than Chenmola Shilok. I asked him about this strange passage, and we read it together. According to Shilok, this edition of the *Vase Pillar Testament* is uncorrupted. The text describes the Jowo in his true form, the way he appears to the enlightened beings whose minds are cleared of obscurations. Though Shilok had never made a statue with another deity popping out of the neck, he emphatically stated that some would see this feature, even though I could not.

My point in this example is to say that translation is obviously not just about moving from source to target language. Whether we are translating or analyzing someone else's work, we need to account for not only what we see in the text, but also for what the community that existed around the text saw in it. And when we read texts that have already been translated, we must also account for the identity of the translator and consider the intended audience of the translation. An academic translation of a tantric visualization might differ in important ways from a translation intended for a community who would engage in that practice. Tibetan language is not a fixed entity to be learned or preserved, but is multifaceted, dynamic, and evolving; it is a means of communication that is inseparable from the people who embody it.

For example, in the earliest Tibetan historical texts, such as the *Testament of Ba* (དབང་བཞེད) the Jowo isn't even called "Jowo" (Wangdu et al. 2000). He was the Lha, Sergyilha or even Gyanakilha (རྩ་ནག་གི་ལྷ)— the god, golden god, or Chinese god. Only later he was a *kutsab* (proxy) but never a *kuten* (Warner 2008). These terms reveal the Jowo's function, his role in relation to particular people— but not a fixed ontology; rather an interpersonal one. Lama Jabb refers to translation as a movement through the bardo where something is left behind and something is gained (Lama Jabb 2018). But translation is also related to *tendrel* (རྟེན་འབྲེལ)— a kind of connection where two different things meet, come in contact in a moment and leave changed by each other, and yet from then on are always, subtly connected.

Kuten

If we look into Tibetan Buddhist material culture more generally, we encounter a series of problems. Reliquary shrines are *chörten* (*mchod rten*) (མཚོན་རྟེན) and statues are *kuten*. And yet so much is lost in these translations. A dictionary would tell us *ten* is a basis or foundation. *Chö* is an act of worship or veneration. *Ku* is the honorific word for body, suitable for any person one shows respect. To translate *chörten* as the basis for veneration is not incorrect, but it is far from sufficient either. To even translate it as a reliquary shrine or sepulchral monument would not convey any sense of the variation or significance of *chörten*. Is it handheld, human-size or monumental? Is it generic or does it house the relics of a specific *tulku*? *Chörten* are not even useful for making offerings. And it is too far afield to begin addressing the question of *chörten* being a representation of the Buddha's mind.

Our options for translating *kuten* are likewise unsatisfactory. In English, statue conveys something supremely still, solid, dead, like a rock, the very opposite of *kuten*. Think of a person frozen in place, like after looking into the eyes of the Greek goddess Medusa, whose gaze could turn humans into stone. Whereas *kuten* are occasionally carved from wood, rarely from stone, *Kuten* are more often cast hollow from metallic alloys, whose interior cavities are filled with sacred substances, rolled prayers, and a life-giving spine (སློབ་ཤིང). Their eyes are covered during consecration ceremonies because of the dangerous power of that first gaze that comes from eyes that can truly see... and yet not see. Against the abundance of miraculous stories meant to convince audiences that *kuten* are truly alive, animate, speaking embodiments of the Buddha or other deities, Tibetan Buddhist exegetes, such as Desi Sangyé Gyatso (1635-1705) also wrote treatises tempering this stance with a view towards the doctrines of emptiness (སྟོང་པ་ཉིད) (*stong pa nyid*) and skillful means (ཐབས). These voices asked, “Why construct a *kuten* as the embodiment of the Buddha's miraculous [physical] manifestation (སྤྲུལ་སྐྱེ) when the Buddha's enlightenment body (ཚོས་སྐྱེ) already pervades all space?” From this point of view *kuten* and consecration rituals are only performed to encourage the faith of the unenlightened (Bentor 1996) but are ultimately unnecessary. We must conclude that *kuten* does not have an English equivalent. Perhaps like

the novelist Tsering Yangzom Lama, we're better leaving the term untranslated (Lama 2022).

Conclusion

And yet when we must translate, how? Do we invent new words, like Tibetan translators of Sanskrit once did? Do we choose among available words, and if so, ones that are relatively common or uncommon? Is the act of translation about accuracy and precision, or inspiration and affect? The answer lies again in our perceived audience, the function of the translation. For me personally, I use theory or comparisons to other religions to lower the cognitive burden of my audience. Tibetan names, words, and ideas, when presented too fast or thick can alienate a reader. On the other hand, my interest in the source material is because of the uniqueness of Tibetan thought on materiality. Therefore, I keep returning to the *Jowo* as an opportunity to entice readers to understand there are other ways of seeing and communicating beyond the canon they think they know.

The most important part of translation then is to make our choices clear to our readers so they can understand that the act of translation is a series of choices. It is not automatic, like Google translate; and it doesn't always exist on a scale of better or worse.

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