

The Hidden Power Scene: The Dual-Seated Portrait of Emperor and Imperial Preceptor and Its Historical Role in Addressing Tibet's Political-Religious Crises

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Abstract: This paper proposes an analytical framework that views Tibetan Buddhist civilization as a "pre-modern operating system" with inherent self-adjusting capabilities. From this perspective, monastic murals are defined as "iconographic programs" deployed by the system to respond to crises of legitimacy. This framework demonstrates how the system achieves the re-legitimation of power relations in response to external shocks by manipulating "site-specificity" (the embodied field of space and ritual) and utilizing "constructiveness" (the strategic reshaping of visual narratives). Centered on the narrative of the "Liangzhou Accord" (1247), this study employs an interdisciplinary approach combining visual close reading, historical context analysis, and conceptual decoding to examine its visual reconstruction during three major transitional periods: the Yuan, Qing, and modern eras. By analyzing three sets of "seated together" murals in the Pelkor Chode Monastery, the Potala Palace, and the Norbulingka, the paper reveals how elites translated political realities into sacred narratives using core cultural modules such as the "Two Truths" and the "Patron-Priest" relationship. The function of these iconographic programs exhibits a diachronic evolution: from the proactive foundation by the Sakya School, to the adaptive alignment of the Gelug School, and finally to dislocation and semiotic suspension in the context of modernity. This study provides an illuminating case for understanding the deep logic of how pre-modern civilizations conducted political negotiation and maintained order through visual art.

Keywords: Iconographic Programming; Visual Encoding of Power; Site-specificity; Constructiveness; Civilizational Operating System; Liangzhou Accord; Visual Politics; Legitimation Narratives; Tibetan Buddhist Murals

Introduction: From Faith to Operating System—Research Rationale and Theoretical Shift

Tibetan Buddhist art, particularly monastic murals, has long been a focal point of academic inquiry. Previous research has primarily followed two trajectories: first, an art-historical approach focusing on stylistic evolution and iconological interpretation; second, a religious studies approach elucidating religious allegory and the construction of sacredness. Neither, however, fully captures the complexity of images as **active political media and technologies of power** during historical crises. While recent scholarship has begun exploring the intersection of art and politics, these analytical paradigms often continue to treat Buddhism as a static "background" or a symbolic resource to be merely "utilized."

This paper, therefore, attempts a fundamental theoretical reconstruction: viewing Tibetan Buddhist civilization as a **"pre-modern operating system"** endowed with autonomous logic

and self-debugging capabilities. This system is centered on Vajrayana philosophy and **praxis**. Its deeply coupled internal modules—including the **dual political-religious structure**, the monastery-centered **patron-priest economy**, the ethical norms of karmic discipline, the **Pancavidya (Five Sciences)** knowledge system, and the **mandala-based spatial order**—collectively sustain the civilization's continuity and adaptability. Within this horizon, monastic murals acquire a new **ontological status**: they are "**iconographic programs**" proactively deployed by the elite to recalibrate the system when it encounters a crisis of legitimacy.

I.

Theoretical Framework: Core Concepts, Analytical Tools, and the System Metaphor

1. Definition of Core Concepts

- **"Iconographic Program"**: Refers to a visual narrative and symbolic system comprising a series of murals deliberately planned and executed within sacred monastic spaces. Spearheaded by ruling or religious elites during periods of historical crisis, it functions as a **strategic visual application** running on the civilizational "operating system," designed to **debug, repair, or reconfigure** legitimization narratives.
- **"Site-specificity"**: Refers to the material and ritual-spatial attributes essential to the efficacy of the iconographic program. It emphasizes the **seamless integration** of images with immovable architecture, periodic liturgy, and collective viewing practices. Together, these elements constitute a **comprehensive field** characterized by **phenomenological immersion** and an authoritative presence.
- **"Constructiveness"**: Refers to the proactive capacity of the iconographic program to shape the perception of reality. Through the strategic selection, spatial syntax, and narrative sequencing of visual elements, it actively **constructs** historical interpretations, power hierarchies, and social identities aligned with its objectives.

2. Civilization as an Operating System

Metaphorically characterizing the development of Tibetan civilization (7th–20th century) as an "operating system" highlights the **systemic coherence**, regularity, and adaptability of Tibetan Buddhism as its foundational architecture. This system comprises several **constitutive functional modules**:

- **(1) Ontological and Philosophical Core**: e.g., the doctrine of the "**Two Truths**" (*satyadvaya*).
- **(2) Political-Administrative Module**: The "**union of religion and politics**" (*chos srid zung 'brel*) paradigm.
- **(3) Socio-Economic Exchange Module**: The "**Patron-Priest**" (*mchod yon*) relationship.
- **(4) Jurisprudential and Epistemic Module**: Monastic discipline (*vinaya*) and

the "Five Sciences" (*pañcavidyā*).

- (5) **Spatial-Ritual Interface: Mandala cosmology** and ritual praxis.

When this self-consistent civilizational system encountered external "systems"—such as the Mongol Empire, the Qing Empire, or the modern nation-state—"systemic incompatibility" precipitated crises of legitimacy. At these junctures, the "iconographic program" was deployed as a **debugging mechanism**. "Site-specificity" and "constructiveness" constitute the dual mechanisms of its efficacy. The following analysis of the visual genealogy of the "**Liangzhou Accord**" examines this debugging process across three historical crises.

II.

Case Study 1: Proactive Encoding—The *Lam 'bras Lha khang* of Pelkor Chode Monastery and the Programmatic Installation of Sakya Legitimacy

The **Liangzhou Accord (1247)** represented Tibetan society's crisis response to Mongol military pressure. However, the systematic reconstruction of its textual mythology occurred significantly later than the event itself (e.g., the *Sakya Lineage History* was completed only in 1629). This "**textual lag**" highlights the **constructive priority** of visual images.

The mural *Phagpa and Kublai Khan Seated Together* in the *Lam 'bras Lha khang* (Hall of the Path and Result) of the Pelkor Chode Monastery was painted circa 1425, predating authoritative texts by nearly two centuries. This suggests that the core historical imagination and authoritative visual paradigm of the Sakya-Yuan relationship had already been solidified through a comprehensive "**iconographic program**."

1. *Lam 'bras Lha khang*: The Program Execution Environment of the "Encrypted Sanctuary"

The *Lam 'bras Lha khang* is a sanctuary dedicated to the *Lam 'bras* ("Path and Result"), the supreme tantric teaching of the Sakya school. Its "**site-specificity**" is deliberately intensified: at the center of the hall stands a three-dimensional mandala of Cakrasamvara.

The mural *Phagpa and Kublai Khan Seated Together* is situated at the narrative climax of the *Life Story of Phagpa*, nested within a sacred **programmatic loop** composed of tantric transmission lineages, the cosmic mandala, and protector deity iconography. Tibetan inscriptions within the hall corroborate this spatial intent; for instance, episodes detailing Phagpa's approach to the sanctuary of Nagarjuna and his reception of prophecies reinforce the **hagiographic attributes** of the visual space.

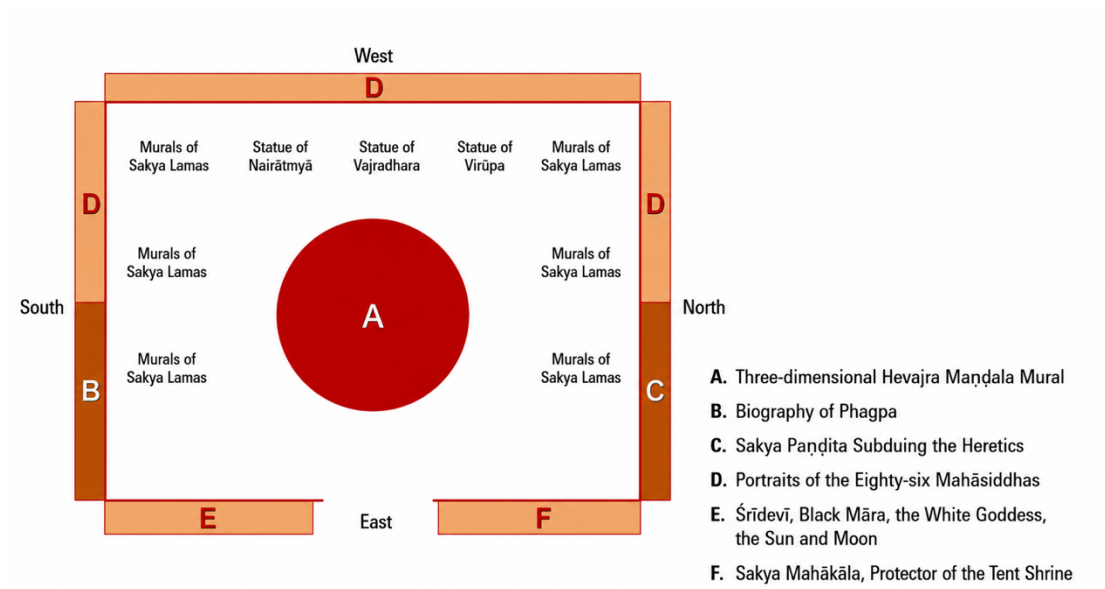


Figure 1: Schematic diagram of paintings and sculptures in the *Lam 'bras Lha khang*.

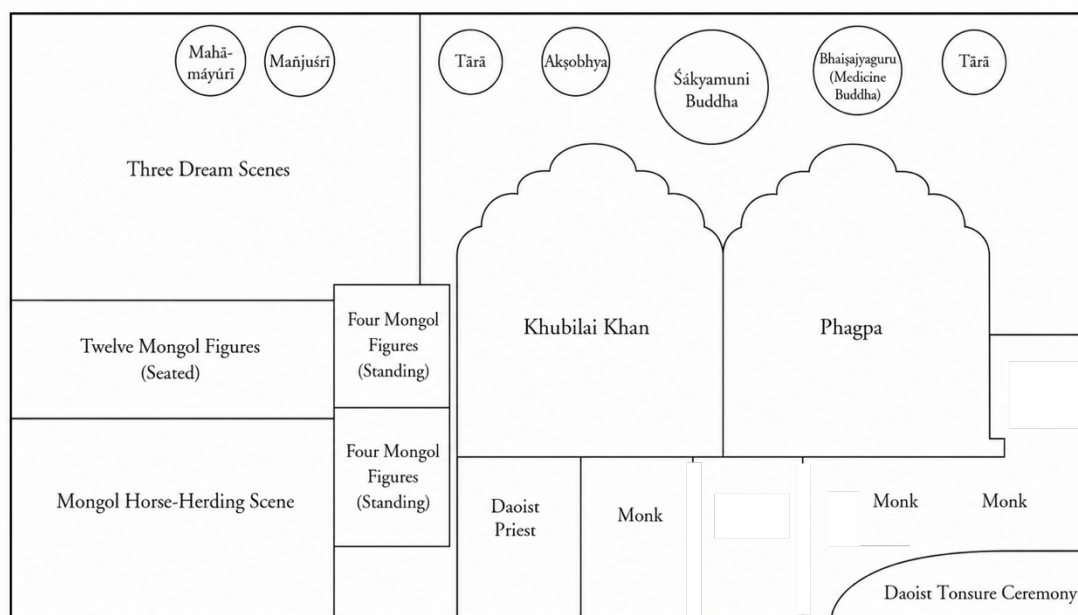


Figure 2: Schematic layout of the *Life Story of Phagpa* mural.



Figure 3: *Life Story of Phagpa* mural.

There are five Tibetan inscriptions on the murals detailing significant moments in Phagpa's life, such as: "At that time, the venerable Sakya Pandita clearly manifested and expounded various Dharma teachings..."; "The Supreme *Mahāmāyā*..."; "Presenting vast offerings to the protector Kurudabari and others..."; "On the night of the third day of the eleventh month of the Dragon year, the sixteen-year-old holy *Acarya* (Phagpa) approached the great *Bodhi* sanctuary of the noble Nagarjuna at Mount Beli (Auspicious Mountain), where he received numerous *Mahayana* teachings, and the celestial beings made vast offerings..."; and "Upon arriving in Kyirong, the holy Wati (Sakya Pandita) clearly appeared in a dream, whereupon arrangements for various praises were made..." (Wang and Zhao 2023, 46–52).



Figure 4: *Phagpa and Kublai Khan Seated Together.*

2. Programmatic Encoding Analysis of "Phagpa and Kublai Khan Seated Together"

Within this environment, the program executed a critical **transcoding**:

- **The Visual Declaration of Political Parity:** Both figures are rendered at an equal scale and seated side-by-side, defining the **Patron-Priest relationship** as one of **equal reciprocity**. This schema draws upon the Buddhist iconographic tradition of "**Two Buddhas Seated Together**," repurposed here as a visual mode for parallel political and religious authority.
- **The Hagiographic Absorption of Narrative:** The "sitting together" is absorbed into the biographical trope of "**the Sage converting the Monarch**," wherein Kublai Khan is transcoded into the **Cakravartin** (Universal Monarch) subdued by the Dharma.
- **Invocation of Core Cultural Modules:** The program invokes the "**Two Truths**" (*satyadvaya*) doctrine and the *mchod yon* relationship, reconstructing political dependence into a sacred reciprocity grounded in religious ethics.

3. Conclusion: The Image as the Primary Historical Solidifier

This iconographic program represents a **proactive, forward-looking encoding** by the Sakya School. It utilizes the absolute site-specificity of the tantric sanctuary to **"install"** a political compromise as a sacred foundational event within the system. Similar schemas found in the Southern Temple of Sakya Monastery indicate that this had become a stable visual paradigm. This demonstrates that in the construction of legitimacy, the visual program holds **narrative priority**, occupying the "interpretive high ground" before textual stabilization.

The proactive encoding of the Sakya School established a paradigm that integrated external powers into the Buddhist narrative. However, as the power structure shifted and a new ruling group sought to coexist with a strictly hierarchical empire, this paradigm required profound **"adaptation."**

III.

Case Study 2: Adaptive Rewriting—The West Great Hall of the Potala Palace and the Programmatic Debugging of Gelugpa Power

In the mid-17th century, the Gelug school (Gelugpa), despite establishing the **Ganden Phodrang** regime, faced significant internal and external pressures. The Fifth Dalai Lama's journey to Beijing for an audience with Emperor Shunzhi initiated a new alliance with the Qing dynasty; however, the asymmetric nature of this relationship had already begun to emerge. During the expansion of the **Red Palace** of the Potala, visualizing this new relationship became the central debugging task of the "iconographic program" within the **'Phags pa'i gtsug lag khang** (the West Great Hall).

1. 'Phags pa'i gtsug lag khang: The Meta-Program of the Power Nexus

The construction of the West Great Hall was the ultimate declaration of Gelugpa **orthodoxy**. Its **"site-specificity"** is elevated to the level of state ceremony: the hall is centered around the stupa-tomb of the Fifth Dalai Lama, surrounded by murals that constitute a visual "general history."

The mural *The Fifth Dalai Lama in Audience with Emperor Shunzhi* on the east wall had to perform a contradictory task: acknowledging the Qing Emperor's political authority without diminishing the Dalai Lama's spiritual sanctity.



Figure 5: *The Fifth Dalai Lama in Audience with Emperor Shunzhi.*



Figure 6: *The Fifth Dalai Lama and Emperor Shunzhi Seated Together.*

2. The Programmatic Rewriting Strategy of "Seated Together"

The program, through precise encoding, executes a rewriting of the "seated together" motif, transitioning from **equal reciprocity** to **hierarchical juxtaposition**:

- **Hierarchicalization of Spatial Syntax:** Emperor Shunzhi dominates through scale, orientation (following the Qing ritual logic of "left-superior, right-inferior"), posture, and the architectural backdrop of the Beijing city gates. These elements construct a clear **power hierarchy**.
- **Subordinate Integration of the Narrative Framework:** The "sitting together" is embedded in a narrative arc of "**journeying to the center—obtaining recognition—returning in glory to rule.**" This shifts the nature of the encounter toward "**authoritative certification.**"
- **Strategic Recalibration of Core Modules:** The *mchod yon* (Patron-Priest) module is "debugged" to emphasize the bestowal of political legitimacy (such as official canonization and the granting of gold seals). This forms a **bilateral legitimizing transaction**: the Gelugpa acknowledged Qing political suzerainty in exchange for the Qing court's formal endorsement of their governance in Tibet.

3. Conclusion: Adaptive Complicity and the Solidification of Hierarchy

This represented a successful **"adaptive rewriting."** While retaining the traditional "seated together" format, the program injected nuanced hierarchical symbols, resulting in a state of **"hierarchical alignment."** This reflects the political pragmatism of the Gelugpa: proactively absorbing external authority into their own narrative structure and transforming it into a resource for consolidating internal rule.

The Gelugpa's adaptive rewriting demonstrated the system's flexibility when interacting with another pre-modern empire. However, when the shock came from a fundamentally different **modern nation-state system**, the traditional debugging logic encountered fundamental challenges.

IV.

Case Study 3: Dislocation and Suspension—The Norbulingka New Palace and the Programmatic Dilemma under Modernity

In the 1950s, Tibet was integrated into the modern nation-state system. The New Palace in Norbulingka (*sTag rtse mi 'gyur pho brang*), a gift from the central government, embodied a duality of **"modern core and traditional skin"** (a steel-frame structure clad in traditional masonry). This architectural hybridity foreshadowed the **debugging dilemma** of its internal visual program.

1. The Fission of Site-Specificity: Dual-Track Space and the Dilution of Sanctity

The **"site-specificity"** of the hall underwent a fundamental **fission**: modernized materials and a bifurcated entrance design (traditional vs. modern) fractured the spatial power field. Consequently, the capacity of traditional liturgy to "activate" the sacredness of the images was significantly diminished.

2. Programmatic Dislocation and Semiotic Suspension

Within this fractured site, the iconographic program depicting Gelugpa leaders alongside the Chairman of the Republic underwent profound shifts:

- **Marginalization of Spatial Syntax:** The mural was relegated to a corner of the east wall in the *Srid zhi rdo gu kyil* Hall, reflecting a physical and symbolic **"dislocation"** of the program.
- **Secularization of Visual Representation:** Figures are depicted on modern sofas in secular attire (Mao suits), entirely stripped of traditional religious signifiers.
- **The Failure of Sacred Encoding:** The core "conceptual modules" could no longer be invoked. The **"Two Truths"** framework struggled to encompass modern political leadership, and the *mchod yon* paradigm collapsed as relations shifted to legal-rational frameworks (e.g., the *Seventeen-Point Agreement*). The image failed to achieve deep legitimation; its **"constructiveness"** ebbed, leaving its meaning in a **"suspended"** state, awaiting definition by a new political discourse.



Figure 7: *The Fourteenth Dalai Lama, Tenth Panchen Lama, and Mao Zedong Seated Together.*

The general meaning of the Tibetan inscription on the mural is as follows: "While passing through the Bomi Valley, heavy rain fell, posing a danger of landslides. However, since this journey was entirely dedicated to the cause of the *Dharma* and all sentient beings, the entire retinue encountered no accidents and traveled safely... On July 14th, the great leader Chairman Mao Zedong cordially received the Dalai Lama, and they unanimously agreed to protect sentient beings with compassion..." (Nyima Tenzin and Lhagpa Tsering 2013, 158).



Figure 8: Detail of the mural.



Figure 9: Comparison between the Norbulingka mural and a news photograph.

News photo: In 1955, Mao Zedong, Zhou Enlai, Liu Shaoqi, and the Tenth Panchen Lama attended the Tibetan New Year banquet hosted by the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Beijing.

3. Summary: The Debugging Limits of Traditional Programs

This case demonstrates that when confronted with a fundamentally different modern "system," traditional iconographic programs enter a state of **malfunction**. The program is dislocated, and meaning production is suspended. This reveals the **discontinuous challenges** faced by

traditional visual-political mechanisms during civilizational paradigm shifts.

V.

Discussion and Conclusion: Visual Politics as Civilizational Craft

1. Three Logics of Iconographic Evolution

- **Proactive Encoding and Foundation (Sakya/Yuan):** Seizing "interpretive priority" by performing "**source-code writing**"—internalizing political reality into religious logic.
- **Adaptive Rewriting and Alignment (Gelug/Qing):** Executing "**adaptive debugging**" to achieve "**hierarchical alignment**" through meticulous symbolic encoding.
- **Dislocation and Suspension (Modern Transition):** Encountering "**systemic incompatibility**," leading to programmatic failure and the suspension of semiotic meaning before a paradigm-level transformation.

2. Theoretical Reflection: Explanatory Power and Boundaries

The "**Civilizational Operating System—Iconographic Program**" framework transcends reductionism by revealing that: (1) images are **endogenous functional modules**; (2) debugging is an active cultural-political operation; and (3) "**site-specificity**" and "**constructiveness**" are rigorous analytical tools. This framework is most potent when analyzing highly systematized religious civilizations responding to external shocks. Its boundary lies in its application to gradual internal changes or individualized, non-ritual art forms.

3. Conclusion: Towards a Visual Politics of Civilization

This study posits that Tibetan Buddhist murals function as a "**visual-political craft**." Their essence lies in manipulating space and narrative to translate external shocks into a sacred discourse conducive to civilizational survival. This reflects the **civilizational subjectivity's** core capacity for self-defense and negotiation.

By positioning the "operating system" and "iconographic program" as **middle-range concepts**, this study offers a reference for cross-civilizational analysis. Testing these concepts against Christian Europe, the Islamic world, or Hindu kingship may open new trajectories for the study of political culture and art within a **global historical perspective**.

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