

Letters from Tibet
My first fieldwork in Tibet (July-August 1987)

by Erberto Lo Bue

The following text is dedicated to David Jackson, with whom I developed an important relationship as shown by our over 20,000-word correspondence of more than 140 letters and messages, containing information and mutual advice (1994-2019), and by our meetings in Fagernes (at the Sixth IATS Conference, 1992), London (first in 1994 at the conference "Towards a Definition of Style: The Arts of Tibet"), Leibnitz (1995), Istanbul (1997), Oxford and Lhasa (2003), and London and Lhasa again (2004).

David Jackson has shown himself to be an unsurpassed analyst of Tibetan painting in all its aspects, and has penetrated its soul through his historically contextualized study of iconography and iconometry, through researches carried out with living artists, and eventually on important paintings and painting schools confronted with historical sources. Gene Smith (1970: 52) had already warned that "The pontifications of eminent museologists and art historians regarding the characteristics and dates of the various styles and schools represent nothing but uninformed guesses." More recently Jackson (2010: 1 and 19) has argued that Tibetan art history "still finds itself in an elementary stage" and concluded that hopes for improving its discipline "will be nothing but a dream" unless "younger scholars were to begin applying a sounder historical method, rejecting inexact and unreliable methods of the past." A good example of the present unsatisfactory situation may be provided by the fact that in recent books on the Potala palace many murals from the 1920s were wrongly dated in the captions to the 1640s (Jackson 2010: 33-34). Incidentally chapters 3-5 in the same source (Jackson 2010: 33, 34, 39, 49, 70-72, 80-81, 91-92, 105, 108, 111-112), far from the antiquarian aesthetics prevailing in the Western world, include the 20th-century production in Tibet proper, Ladak as well as Nepal, examples of traditional 20th-century paintings and painters being dealt with also in chapter 6 (Jackson 2010: 146-147 and 149-150). David Jackson has studied and published also 20th-century paintings since "for some rare local styles the present may be the only point of departure for studying them" (Jackson 2010: XII), while collectors such as Gerd-Wolfgang Essen have collected also fine 20th-century items (Essen and Tsering Tashi Thingo 1989). In conclusion David Jackson's message to current and future researchers in Tibetan studies is to avoid idealizing their subject matter and to use reliable written as well as oral sources for their work, contextualizing the objects of their researches historically, socially and anthropologically starting from texts based on fieldwork (cf. Jackson 1984).

The following text represents my only autobiographical publication in a life dedicated to the study, fieldwork and teaching of Tibetan and Himalayan history and art. It is based on my notes and on the letters and postcards sent to my present wife, Stella Rigo Righi, reported in inverted commas, during my first fieldwork in Tibet as part of a scientific expedition sponsored by CeSMEO (Centro Piemontese Studi Medio ed Estremo Oriente, Turin) and led in 1987 with its cofounder, Professor Franco Ricca, and Ernani Orcorte, photographer.

Zangmu (Kasa), 9th July 1987

“[...] I do not know if and when you will receive these lines of mine, written on the only sort of paper I managed to find in an emporium in the first Tibetan border town, over a hundred kilometres from Katmandu. The envelope is the only kind on sale at the local post office, where a very rude Chinese clerk sold me a stamping that I hope to correspond to air mail. Otherwise you will forgive me for the fine you may have to pay. It took us two days, partly by bus, partly by taxi, partly by lorry, but above all on foot, to cover the one hundred and eighth kilometres separating Katmandu from the Tibetan border town of Zangmu. We had to cross or bypass landslides because rivers have swallowed at least four sections of the road. I am tired but fine. Zangmu is at 2,300 m above sea level, but tomorrow we shall have to cross passes of over 5,000. There is only one landslide left to cross and then a coach of the Chinese Tourist Agency CITS will take us eastwards, towards Shigatse and Lhasa.”

In order to reach Zangmu we walked, even under the rain, on tracks made in those days where the road no longer existed. The signs in the village were then exclusively in Chinese and the two post office employees did not understand Tibetan. On the 10th we reached the minicoach waiting for us upwards, after the landslides, and I noticed that along the way the Tibetan driver stopped twice to allow the soldier escorting us to shoot at two hares with a gun, whereas on the following day he tried to knock down one. I was struck by the absence of stupas, characterizing Tibetan landscapes, though I noticed, especially on passes and hills, traditional pre-Buddhist *lha tho* and a few *la(b) rdzas*, heaps of stones reminiscent of the shape of the stupa, where local deities are invoked by travellers launching slips of papers in the colours of the five Cosmic Buddhas, depicting “horse winds” and bearing invocations.

We spent the night in a sort of hostel at Shel dkar and on the 11th we left for Shigatse. West of lHa rtse, on the right side of the road, I noticed a stone obelisk presumably dating to the monarchic period (7th-9th century) and after that several caves where hermits dwelled, on the same side of the road.

Shigatse, 11th July 1987.

“[...] After a first halt at Xegar (Shel dkar), 4,350 m above sea level, I have recovered from the sensation of nausea and fatigue, and from the headache caused by the insufficiency of oxygen, and I find myself in a hotel worthy of that name at Tashilunpo-Shigatse, two centres that by now have become one city.” On our arrival at Shigatse we found a large crowd waiting for the Pan chen Lama (see under 10th and 11th July in my diary of 1987).

Shigatse, 12th July 1987

“This morning we went to visit the monastery of Tashilhunpo (bKra shis lhun po), founded in 1447 by one of Tsongkhapa’s disciples and subsequently seat of the Panchen Lamas starting from the 17th century. By a fortunate coincidence the present Panchen Lama, representative of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in Beijing, was on a visit to his monastery. It was the second time this occurred in the last twenty-two years. For that reason its monks (who from 4000 in 1959 have gone down to 700) had opened all the assembly halls, temples and chapels, which, mixed to a crowd of pilgrims, we have been able to visit, discovering hundreds of statues of all dimensions, some of them very old. It has been a very moving but also tiring experience, because the monastery is really large and it took us over two hours to complete its visit. We also had the luck to admire one of the huge thangkas hanging on a special construction at least 30-m high at the north-eastern corner of the monastery (Fig. 1), and the special procession during which monks, with vestments and accompanied by the sound of their traditional instruments, have carried the very heavy thangkas suitably folded on special litters. At the end of this extenuating morning I wonder what I have to share with this world so deeply different from mine [...]” During that first visit to the main monastic temple we dwelt on two bookshelves containing the Buddhist canon in volumes of traditional size with carved covers, Franco Ricca’s main interest, on the first and second floor of the same temple, on some wall paintings on the second floor, and on the chapel on the last floor, containing very ancient statues, some perhaps Indian.

Lhasa 13th July 1987. Telegram: “[...] Well arrived at Lhasa [...].

Lhasa, 14th July 1987

“[...] Here we are at last in Lhasa! Yesterday we left Shigatse alle 9:30 and two hours later stopped at Gyantse. We were able to visit the main temple and the first floor of the famous sKu ‘bum, where the paintings studied by Tucci are almost intact. The problem will be to take pictures of them when we

come back. The last jump to Lhasa with the two important passes, one 5010 m and the other 4794 m high. A total of 251 km only, but on a mostly dirt road, which we covered in 12 hours, arriving rather tired towards 21:30. Today we visited the great dGe lugs pa monastery of Drepung ('Bras spung), 6 km west of Lhasa, watching also a service in the main temple at 15:00. Tibet continues to be a far and mysterious country and it is a paradox that I feel it so extraneous right now that I find myself fully immersed in it [...]]».

Lhasa appeared then in the list of the twenty-four historical towns protected in the Chinese Popular Republic. In its historical centre, at the end of a large square obtained from the demolition of previous constructions, rose what, in the official language of beurocracy, is regarded as the "Cultural Relic Number One": thel Jokhang, the most venerated Buddhist temple in Tibet, founded in 639-640 AD. During the Cultural Revolution the Jokhang was damaged by the Red Guards' various raids, was used as a pigsty, and was the scene of a siege and a clash ending with the killing of young Tibetan rebels barricaded inside, and lost great part of its treasures: religious writings, documents, relics and statues. Restauration work started at the end of the Seventies and in 1982 the statues inside many chapels had been remade. During my stay in Lhasa I did not fail to linger over the *Zhol rdo ring*, the pillar bearing the most ancient example of Tibetan writing: an inscription, datable to about 764, commemorating the Great Minister sTag sgra Klu lhon's exploits, including victories against China, with which Tibet contended for territories crossed by the Silk Road.

Lhasa, 15th July 1987

"[...] At the Poste Restante one has to leaf through a register corresponding to the last days, weeks or months, hoping to find one's name and surname among hundreds of addressees. Next to one's name and surname there is a number corresponding to an envelope which is then handed over by a clerk. An ordeal. [Sending] a telegram has not been easier, for I had to convince the clerk that Torre Pellice is in the province of Turin and not of Tortona, as he had written on the address [...] Today was fruitless, but for an afternoon visit to the monastery that was the seat of the state oracle, Nechung (gNas chung), near Drepung [...] The oracular monastery of Nechung, on whose lower floor were kept the State Oracle's vestments, outfit, silverware and gold items, housed then sixteen monks, about half of which had obtained the title of *dge slong* ("master of virtue", namely fully ordained monk) according to my twenty-four-year-old monk informant, who asked me not to mention him in case of publication of our notes (on this monastery see Ricca 1999). We revisited Nechung two days later, I returned there in 1996, then precisely ten years later, on the 17th July 1997, and

eventually on the 15th October 2003 together with the Tibetan colleague Mi nyag Rin po che.

Lhasa, 16th July 1987

“[...] Today we visited the other large dGe lugs pa monastery near near Lhasa, Sera, which though consisting in a large number of temples and chapels, is artistically less interesting than Drepung. We were able to take pictures of the first two partly gilded wood covers and hope to have other opportunities of this kind thanks to the first relations we are establishing with the monks of the various monasteries. Sera was founded in 1419 by one of Tsongkhapa’s disciples [...]

The hotel where we are is the most luxurious one where I had the occasion to reside in my life, though the prices correspond to those of a good pension on the Garda [Lake]. This opulence is in contrast with the poverty in which many Tibetans live still today. However, the atmosphere on the whole is pleasant, because Tibetans have the gift to put you at ease. Today I made friends with rGya mtsho, a monk from the Potala, who acted as a guide in the monastic complex of Se ra [...]

In the chapel of Maitreya, the Buddha come, at the centre in the back of the upper floor of the meeting hall of the monastery, the expedition photographer, Ernani [...] Orcorte, documented a wooden book cover with a gilded central image. In the tantric college of Sera he photographed, besides a wood cover, the detail of a wooden head of a Turk or Mongol that accompanies the image of the Great King Guardian of the eastern direction in the chapel of the *sthaviras* (“Elder Ones”, the first disciples of the historical Buddha on the basis of an ancient Indian iconographic tradition), at the back of the meeting hall to the left from the visitor’s point of view, and three wooden masks in the chapel of the wrathful deities protecting the doctrine (*mgon khang*) on the opposite side.

Lhasa, 17th July 1987

“[...] Today we returned to Nechung to photograph the paintings in the porch surrounding the courtyard. They are valuable works, possibly of the beginnings of the century, representing cycles of mostly infernal and wrathful deities, with very bright colours and shapes (Fig. 2). I have copied all the inscriptions, filling eight of the pages of the memorandum book you presented me with. Many paintings have been disfigured during the presence of Chinese troops that camped there in 1959 and later during the Cultural Revolution. Paintings were blackened or burned by the fires lit under them, some were covered with Chinese papers with articles of political subject, the eyes of some deities were taken away, and ultimately deposits where various kinds of things, such as wood or juniper to be used as incense, have been piled up. In this break-up some paintings have been miraculously saved and

might be the object of a monographic study [see Ricca 1999]. It is with relief that I remember having always dissociated from pro-Maoist friends in the 1960s, when the Little Red Book was fashionable, and all that was Chinese was beautiful and good. I cannot forget the naivety and idiocy of many Italian intellectuals during that period[...]"

Lhasa, 19th July 1987

"[...] Between yesterday and today we took pictures of magnificent book covers and of illuminated pages of the Tibetan canon in one of the most important libraries in the monastery of Drepung, in the morning. In the afternoon we completed the photographic work on the paintings in the monastery of Nechung [...] I had regarded them as of the beginning of the century, but in the light of the inscriptions I copied in the last three days it looks obvious that they are part of a great cycle commissioned by the most famous of all Dalai Lamas, the Great Fifth (1617-83), towards the middle of the seventeenth century. We have therefore come across, a bit by chance, on a very interesting subject [...] which might be the object of a separate publication. I believe that we shall enjoy very much seeing the slides [...]"

Lhasa, 20th July 1987, 21:30

"[...] Today alarm clock at 7:30 (we never get up after 8:00) and visit to the Potala (Fig. 3). Extenuating: like visiting the Vatican Museums. Painting in its descriptive minutias, for example where it illustrates the very construction of the Potala depicting teams of carpenters and masons at work, stuns even more than sculpture." Similar depictions in the Potala illustrate the foundation of the Jokhang (Fig. 4). "We visited probably only a small part of it, but that has been more than enough: I got photographed also the chapel of the 6th Dalai Lama," (on whom see Lo Bue 1983 and 1993) "found in the section opened to the public [...]" In 1948 the chapels in the Potala were opened to devotees only one day in the year (Tucci 1952: 80). "In the afternoon visit to the Jokhang, the main temple in Lhasa and all Tibet, where we took pictures of Nepalese sculptures dating back to the 9th century and paintings contemporary to those in the Potala [...]" During the past few days the Chancellor of the German Federal Republic, Kohl, was guest in this hotel with his court. It is a really great hotel with a string quartet playing always the same things, many facilities and a relatively efficient staff, but I feel that in spite of that it will be difficult to get used to the uncleannes seemingly characterizing most of the rest of Tibet!" (cf. Maraini 1984: 77 with the experience of the overland expedition I organized from Gong dkar to Chengdu in 1997: 15th July – 3rd August). "We shall not remain in

Lhasa more than two days. Tomorrow I shall return to the Post Office [...]"

Lhasa, 21st July 1997. Postcard with the picture of a painted statue portraying Wen Cheng (fig. 5), the Chinese consort of Khri Srong brtsan sgam po (ruled ca 581-641 and 646-649), the first Tibetan ruler to be interested in Buddhism, under whom the first Tibetan alphabet was worked out: "([...] tomorrow we are leaving for Samye (fig. 6), the first Buddhist monastery built in Tibet, in the 8th century, and for the Valley of the Kings' Tombs, which will be the furthest eastern point we reach during this journey. Then our return will start with stops in Lhasa, and stays at Gyantse and Sakya. I will go to the Poste Restante in Lhasa towards the 30th July and hope to find still a letter of yours [...]"

Tsetang, 22nd July 1987

"[...] We are at Tsetang, the most eastern and lowest point (3400 m) in our journey in Tibet. We arrived here this morning by jeep from Lhasa, going along the Kyichu, and then crossing the Brahmaputra (Tsangpo) on the bridge at its confluence with the Kyichu, going along the former through different landscapes, from the barley fields yellowing under the July sun to the sand dunes reaching the mountains rising above, arriving first at the ferry for Samye and then at Tsetang itself. At the ferry for Samye we only made agreements to cross the Tsangpo tomorrow morning. We then proceeded and had lunch at Tsetang. During the afternoon we went southeast to Yumbulhakhang; it is the most ancient castle established by the Tibetan rulers, going back, in its original construction, to the 7th century. Then we visited Phyang rgyas, the valley where are placed the thirteen tombs of the Tibetan historical kings (Fig. 7), really imposing, in spite of being actually made up by truncated pyramids of earth and stones, partly covered with grass. The afternoon is magnificent, and its beauty is partly due to the sharp contrast of colours between the large cultivated oases and the mountain desert surrounding them on all sides, following neat border lines. The roads, though almost completely dirt, are good enough and often flanked for long kilometres by willows and small poplars, very closely-planted in subsequent rows. The jeep, a Cherokee, is really comfortable and well-sprung. You may follow my journey in Tucci's books, which pleases me very much, but I assure you that we move in altogether different ways and times! So far I have not denied myself anything, I feel very well, I have got used to altitude and I no longer happen to wake up because I cannot breathe [...]"

Lhasa, 24th July 1987

"[...] Yesterday morning we left Tsetang to return back and catch our ferry for Samye. It took an hour to our flatboard, provided with an outboard motor, to cross the Tsangpo, going upstream with a route

suitable to avoid the many sandbanks. The river is very large at this point, perhaps two kilometres, but hardly deep. On the opposite side we took a small van that took us as far as the village and monastery bearing the same name. We took immediately lodging in the local dormitory. Samye has been damaged, like all religious buildings in the monastic sites that I have been able to visit so far, more by the Cultural Revolution than by the Chinese invasion. However, the wall paintings in the main monastery are rather well preserved, actually some being presently being restored. Unique case so far come across, restoration work in the monastery is being sponsored, as far as the purchase of the material is concerned, by the Chinese Government (Fig. 8), a sign that Chinese regard it as a monument of national value. Monks, as it presently happens in almost all monasteries we visit, see to the reconstruction, acting as masons, carpenters, sculptors and painters [...] At Samye lived then about 95 monks, mostly of the Sakya (Sa skya) order. At Samye we have photographed a series of mandalas painted on cloth and applied to the ceiling of the main meeting hall, and some covers of texts in my opinion dating back perhaps to the early 9th century. After sleeping in the village, this morning we went by lorry to the landing stage, crossing a fine partly desertic landscape, with sand dunes, partly formed by small oases where willows predominate. Indeed the very village of Samye rises in a large oasis. Crossing the Tsangpo on our return has been characterized by a small incident: our flatboard stranded in a sandbank, but about half an hour later another flatboard came to help us, we transferred, reached at last the bank, where our faithful driver was waiting for us, and a few hours later we were back to Lhasa [...]"

Lhasa, 25th July 1987, 23:15

(Postcard showing a Buddhist manuscript in golden characters in Tibetan, Mongolian, Manchu and Chinese translations)

"[...] Tomorrow morning we are leaving for a two-day trip north of Lhasa to the monasteries of Reting and Ganden. We shall return to Lhasa on the 27th evening. On the 28th and 29th we shall prepare our return trip, which will start on the 30th [...]"

Lhasa, 25th July 1986

"[...] Last night we took stock of the situation of our little expedition and, on the basis of the result of the work carried out so far, it is clear that we shall be back in Katmandu towards the 15th August. I do not even exclude the possibility of a return to Katmandu towards the 10th, allowing a departure even on the 13th, but I regard the first hypothesis as more likely. I will keep you informed. Yesterday morning,

returning from Samye we made a diversion to Mindrölin (sMin grol gling), the main monastery of the rNying ma pa school in Tibet, established in 1671. Only a couple of bare temples are left and, at the time of our arrival, monks were trying to lift a big clay statue portraying the founder of the monastery from the courtyard to the mezzanine on which the monastery is built to be able to instal it in the assembly hall of the temple. I was saddened by the ruins of the palaces and dwellings of the monks (cf. Fig. 9), but was infused with some optimism by the religious fervour that seemed to animate those unfortunate representatives of the poorest and most persecuted of the Tibetan Buddhist religious orders. Today a visit to the monastery seat of the Karmapa bKa' brgyud pa order, to which our friend dKar phrug" (a member of the Tibetan diaspora and my assistant during the courses of Tibetan language that I organized on behalf of CeSMEO between 1982 and 1989) "belongs, caused a lump in my throat and a feeling of impotent rage. In order to reach the site one has to leave the main road connecting Lhasa to Beijing [...]. Can you believe that the idiots that set up and led the Cultural Revolution laboured also here, as in Drepung, Samye (bSam yas) [...] and many others sites, to dynamite the dwellings of the abbots and monks, and to destroy temples and libraries, tearing to pieces and burning Buddhist texts? No? And yet that was it. And do you know with which label Italian philo-Maoists approving of the Chinese Cultural Revolution of 1967 introduced themselves? No? I tell you: 'Servire il Popolo', the Marxian barbarians of the time. Forgive me for the outburst, which perhaps will not be the last one [...]"

Lhasa, 27th July 1987

"[...] We have returned from a two-day trip north of Lhasa in the Byang (Chang) region, with green pastures populated by nomads and studded with their white tents, and some forests of Himalayan cedars. We have tackled this 400-kilometre journey there and back represented mostly by a secondary dirt road and sometimes track, with small streams to ford, hoping that the monastery of Reting (Rwa sgreng), founded in 1056, had escaped the disasters of the Cultural Revolution. However even here the Red Guards have preceded us and 99% of the monastery with its books has been destroyed. On the way back we made a detour for Ganden (dGa' ldan, Fig. 10), founded in the early 15th century by Tsongkhapa on a mountain ridge amphitheatre at an altitude of 4200 metres. Now its roofless walls are hands rising to the sky asking why, and the windows are deep blue eyes too tired to cry. The wonderful position of this site, dominating a vast valley cultivated with barley, contrasts with the vastity of ruins. Ugly visions come to my mind: Montecassino, Warsaw, the ferocious intolerance of the human beast. Going to Reting we went over a 5,000 metre pass, and our photographer felt unwell. But on the whole it has been a most beautiful trip, in a Tibet where tourists do not go, with landscapes and a luxuriant

nature: wild rabbits, hares, and even a very beautiful marmot crossing our road, besides the usual yaks, *mdzo* (crossbreeds of yaks and cows), very woolly (presumably pashmina) kids and horses, often mounted by nomads. The photographer then recovered: luckily I carried with me the first-aid box with Micoren and Diamox (a medicine specific against mountain-sickness) and we were not far from the pass. Fifteen or so drops of Micoren and our return to a lower altitude, though higher than 4,000 metres, have fortified him [...]"

Lhasa, 28th July 1987

"[...] This morning we returned to Drepung monastery to take pictures of covers in two chapels we had temporarily left aside. In the afternoon we had to do some shopping and above all to get the sack [...] repaired, for in spite a thousand precautions it had been strained badly. Shoes [...] are destroyed: I had to buy a pair, unfortunately not that good. However the rucksack [...] is wonderful, since it has resisted the hardest trials and above all is very comfortable to carry, though usually I try to get it carried [...] We are by now ready for the first halt in our return journey at Gyantse (rGyal rtse), where we hope to be able to take pictures of some of the 70 chapels of the sKu 'bum, the great four-floor stupa that a ruler of gTsang (southern Tibet) got built in 1427, as well as of the mandalas of the main temple already studied and partly illustrated by Tucci [...]"

Lhasa, 29th July 1987

"[...] Today is the first holiday we allow ourselves since we left [...] Tomorrow, on the way to Gyantse, we will pass by Ralung, which is on our very itinerary, about 200 km west of Lhasa, immediately above the Karo pass, which is 5,010 m above sea level. I do not think we shall stop, because certainly the kind of religious life described Tucci has not survived and probably not even the monastery exists any longer, and I am a bit fed up with my role of police doctor, of ascertaining the demise of Tibetan institutions [...] Probably I am tired and wish to return to Italy. I have not run short of funny moments, especially during the trip from Katmandu towards Lhasa, which we made with a mixed group, sometimes with odd people, like an English teacher who lives in Katmandu working for the University of Pokhara (Nepal), and who had come to Tibet to hunt butterflies. I will never forget him jumping from rock to rock huntint non-existing butterflies on the very Karo La while I gasped in the grass not far from the van, though I was at least twenty-five years younger [...]"

[Postcard showing the interior of the Potala palatine fortress]

Lhasa, 29th July 1987

“Forget the columns of the Temple! (not that I like these especially). I thank you very much for the happy birthday greetings. I received a small present from Nanni and Franco [...]”

Lhasa, 30th July 1987

“This morning we should have left for Gyantse, but, because of a mechanical failure, the departure has been put off until tomorrow. The stretch of road to cover is about 150 km, which we covered in about six hours on the outward journey. This year the monsoon has caused exceptional rains, making the road slide down at four points on the Nepalese side, and causing landslips and floods also on this side of the Himalayan barrier, in Tibet itself. Weather has worsened these last days, whereby our return appears to be difficult and tiring [...]”

That day, the eve of the beginning of our return journey, we visited the rocky hill of the Drak Lhaluphug (Brag lHa klu phug), a cave in the neighbourhood of Lhasa, which according to tradition was used as place for meditation by the ruler Srong brtsan sgam po.

On the 31st July we started our return trip directed to Gyantsé, the specific initial objective of my research, halting at Ralung (Rwa lung), whose monastery had been destroyed and where there were no traces of religious life. At 16:30 we reached Gyantsé, which in the 15th century was the capital of a kingdom including a large part of South-Western and Southern Tibet, where we stayed until the early afternoon of the 8th August, to leave then for Shigatse. The following day we started our work on the main temple, devoting particular attention to the mandala temple, on the upper floor of the building, and to that dedicated to the Indian and Tibetan tantric masters of the tradition of the ‘Path’ and of the ‘Fruit’, fundamental in the school of the monastery of Sakya, on which see my *Lam ’bras lha khang* (E. Lo Bue and F. Ricca 1990: 411-460).

On the 2nd August we visited the castle built in 1365 by order of a local prince who became Prime Minister of the abbot princes of the monastery of Sakya, from which Gyantsé (rGyal rtse, contraction of the compound name rGyal mkhar rtse ‘Castle of the Victory Peak’) takes its name. In the left side porch and in the front porch surrounding the ancient courtyard of the palatine chapel, as well as on the two floors of the latter, survive the remains of the palatine chapel dating to 1390-1398. The ruin of the castle started with the end of the Gyantsé dynasty and its fortunes (cf. Tucci

1938: 741-758; and 2005: 262). Bombed and damaged on the 6th July 1904 during the attack launched by colonel Younghusband, who led a British expedition corps as far as Lhasa, it received the coup de grace sixty years later, during the Cultural Revolution, when it was devastated by the Red Guards. At the time of our visit, however, its restoration had been undertaken.

The following day we started the systematic visit to the monastic complex and to the Great Stupa of Gyantsé (Fig. 11), which we left on the 6th August, and where Franco Ricca returned in 1990, and I in 1995 and 1996 (cf. bibliography below). The same afternoon we reached Shigatse, main centre of South-Western Tibet, where we spent the night.

On the 7th August we went to the monastery of Shalu (Zhwa lu), of which Giuseppe Tucci (1980: 177) had already noticed the decay, underlining how the cares of the monastic complex were “entrusted to an ignorant and more and more impoverished monastic community, and whose library we found partly vandalized by Tibetans of the local village and nearby villages in 1966, according to what the abbot bsKal bzang nam rgyal confided to me, for reasons of hostility towards the clergy owning the lands worked by them (Fig. 12). The books had been deliberately pulled down from the shelves and many of them burned. Fifty-two years before Tucci had found, even though only out of carelessness, a similar situation in the Mang nang caves which he explored from the 15th to the 17th August 1935: “We walk on heaps of manuscripts thrown at random one upon the other, by hundreds, thousands, often even for a few metres of thickness.” (Tucci 1937: 160; and 1985: 127).

In his writings Tucci frequently laments the state of conservation of important cultural monuments in Tibet during his fieldwork before the Chinese invasion, criticizing monks and institutions responsible for their upkeep, including the Tibetan government (cf. Tucci 1941, IV/1: 39, 96, 98, 100-102, 135; and 1952: 125-126 and plate opp. p. 136; cf. Lo Bue 2016: 66-75). In 1935, in relation to his stay in Western Tibet, he had written amongst other things:

“Tsaparang was perhaps the most inhabited place in all the empire of Guge.

“On the steep cliffs the usual trogloditic dwellings and hermits’ cells, on the tops the usual ruins of castles and of temples; but even here we face remains of great importance: paintings, stucco-work, manuscripts, statues of all sorts and every age jumbled in the shadow of chapels: art treasures thrown halphazardly as useless junk by the few surviving monks. They have never seen a European: they open the doors of the their shrines unwillingly, but bow their heads shamefully when the horrible confusion in which they keep these places makes me lose my patience. I cannot see a beautiful thing, a work of art thrown there like scrap: I cannot see those paintings old of centuries, illuminated with so much devoted care by a school of artists for whom painting was a synonym for praying, creased, torn, riddled, those

statues brought perhaps from India by the first apostles of Buddhism, piled up one upon the other in a tangle, their heads and hands cropped: those books thrown in the darkest corners of the cells in a tangle in which by now it is almost impossible to disentangle and to reassemble the volumes. And when these monks who no longer understand anything, who do not know the value of the things committed to their custody pretend to be zealous, they become truly hateful to me.” (Tucci 1937: 171-172; and 1985: 136). Having returned to Shigatse, we left at 8:30 of the following day towards the monastic city of Sākya after stopping at the monastery of Narthang (sNar thang), famous for having produced the first edition of the Tibetan Buddhist canon. It was almost completely destroyed by Chinese and Tibetan Red Guards in 1966, but a religious had obtained there a small chapel where he performed his functions. At 14:30 of the 8th August we reached the monastic fortress of Sākya (Fig. 13), which the Chinese army was ordered to protect, together with the Gyantsé stupa and other Tibetan buildings regarded as of national importance, from the incursions of Chinese and Tibetan Red Guards.

At Sākya, of which we could admire the main temple with its images and its library, and in whose courtyard we watched the rehearsals of a sacred dance performed by monks, we met both the abbot Klu sgrub rgya mtsho, then sixty-years-old, who informed us that the monastery counted at the time sixty-seven monks to whom others would add soon, and the secretary dGe ’dun rgya mtsho, a forty-year-old layman.

On the morning of the 9th August we started our return trip by car, on foot and by coach, which in a couple of days would have taken us back to Katmandu.

I thank the authors of the photographs, Barbara Bartolini, Ernani Orcorte, Giada Rossi and Guido Vogliotti for having allowed me to publish them, and my wife for having typed the original texts of my letters.

Bibliography

Monographs:

Essen, Gerd-Wolfgang and Tsering Tashi Thingo. 1989. *Die Götter des Himalaya – Systematischer Bestandskatalog*. München: Prestel.

Jackson, David. 2010. *The Nepalese Legacy in Tibetan Painting*. New York: Rubin Museum of Art.

Jackson, David and Janice. 1984. *Tibetan Thangka Painting. Methods & Materials*. London: Serindia Publications.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 1983. *Vita e canti del VI Dalai Lama*. Torino: L'Angolo Manzoni.

Lo Bue, Erberto (ed.) 1993. *Tsàn-yan-ghia-tsò, VI Dalai Lama: Canti d'amore*. Palermo: Sellerio.

Lo Bue, Erberto and Franco Ricca. 1990. *Gyantse Revisited*. Firenze: Le Lettere.

Maraini, Fosco. 1984. *Segreto Tibet*. Milano: Dall'Oglio.

Ricca, Franco. 1999. *Il tempio oracolare di gNas-chung*. Alessandria: Edizioni dell'Orso.

Ricca, Franco and Erberto Lo Bue. 1993. *The Great Stupa of Gyantse*. London: Serindia.

Smith, Gene, 1970. Introduction to *Kongtrul's Encyclopaedia of Tibetan Culture*. New Delhi: Lokesh Chandra.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1952. *A Lhasa e oltre. Diario della spedizione nel Tibet MCMXLVIII*. Roma: La Libreria dello Stato.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1941. *Indo-Tibetica. Gyantse ed i suoi monasteri*. IV, 1. Roma: Reale Accademia d'Italia.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1937. *Santi e briganti nel Tibet ignoto. Diario della spedizione nel Tibet occidentale 1935*. Milano:

Hoeppli. Reprinted in 1985 with the title *Tibet ignoto. Una spedizione fra santi e briganti nella millenaria terra del Dalai Lama*. Roma: Newton Compton.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1980. *Tibetan Painted Scrolls*, I. Kyoto: Rinsen Book Co.

Articles in journals:

Lo Bue, Erberto. 2000. "On Some Inscriptions in the Temples of the *bum-pa* of the Great Stupa at Gyantse." *East and West* (IsIAO, Roma) 50/1-4: 387-437.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 2016. "The Condition of Tibetan Monasteries in the 1930s and '40s as Recorded by Giuseppe Tucci." *Marg. A Magazine of the Arts* (Mumbai: Marg Publications) 67/3: 66-75.

Tucci, Giuseppe. 1938. "La capitale del Tibet centrale: Ghianzé e il suo tempio terrificante." *Le Vie del Mondo*. VI (Milano: Touring Club Italiano): 741-758. Reprinted with the title "Un tempio terrificante" in Tucci, Giuseppe. 2005. *Il paese delle donne dai molti mariti*. Venezia: Neri Pozza: 257-266.

Contributions in collective volumes:

Lo Bue, Erberto. 2016. "A Tibetan Mahabodhi. The main image in the dPal 'khor chos sde of rGyal rtse." In Elena De Rossi Filibeck, Michela Clemente, Giorgio Milanetti, Oscar Nalesini, Federica Venturi (eds.). *Studies in Honour of Professor Luciano Petech: A Commemoration Volume 1914-2014. Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, Supplement 1 to vol. LXXXIX. Pisa – Roma: Fabrizio Serra Editore: 133-146.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 2015. "Considerations on the Gtsug lag khang in the Dpal 'khor chos sde of Rgyal rtse." In Olaf Czaja and Guntram Hazod (eds.). *The Illuminating Mirror. Tibetan Studies in Honour of Per K. Sørensen on the Occasion of his 65th Birthday*. Wiesbaden: Dr. Ludwig Reichert Verlag: 283-302 and 596-600.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 2002. "Il simbolismo dello stupa, con particolare riferimento al 'Kumbum' di Gyantsé." In Marisa Davy and Antonia Guarini (eds.). *Il Segno. Memoria e testimonianza, con espressioni d'arte in Oriente, Occidente e Africa*. Bari: Il Punto: 121-137.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 1992. "The Princes of Gyantse and Their Role as Builders and Patrons of Art." In Shoren Ihara and Zuiho Yamaguchi (eds.). *Tibetan Studies. Proceedings of the 5th Seminar of the International Association for Tibetan Studies*. Narita: Naritasan Shinshoji. Vol. 2: 559-573.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 1996. "The Sacred Enclave of Gyantse." In Pratapaditya Pal (ed.). *On the Path to Void. Buddhist Art of the Tibetan Realm*. Mumbai: Marg Publications: 122-41; and *Marg* (Mumbai: Marg Publications) XLVII, 4: 38-57.

Lo Bue, Erberto. 2017. "The Dharmarājas of Gyantsé. Their Indian and Tibetan Masters, and the Iconography of the Main Assembly Hall in Their Vihāra." In Alice Crisanti, Cinzia Pieruccini, Chiara Policardi, Paola M. Rossi (eds.) *Anantaratanprabhava. Studi in onore di Giuliano Boccali*. II. Milano: Ledizioni: 341-360.

Captions

1. bKra shis lhun po. Monastery with ostension of a *thang-ka*. 12.7.1987 © Ernani Orcorte.

2. gNas chung. Oracle temple. Detail of wall painting. 17.7.1995 © Guido Vogliotti.

3. Pötala Palace. 20.7.1987 © Ernani Orcorte.

4. Foundation of the Jokhang. Potala Palace. 12.8.1996 © Guido Vogliotti.

5. Queen Wen Cheng. Potala Palace

6. bSam yas. Restoration work in the main porch. 8.8.1996 © Guido Vogliotti.
 7. Tomb of king Ral pa can. 9.8.1995 © Guido Vogliotti.
 8. bSam yas. Restoration work for the main porch. 24.7.1987 © Ernani Orcorte.
 9. sMin grol gling. Buddhist painting covered with Maoist slogans. Summer 1987 © Barbara Bartolini.
 10. dGa' ldan monastery. Detail. 26.7.1987 © Ernani Orcorte.
 11. rGyal rtse. The Great Stupa. 05.2018 © Giada Rossi.
 12. Zhwa lu. bKa' 'gyur lha khang. 7.8.1987 © Ernani Orcorte.
 13. Sa skya. Summer 1987 © Barbara Bartolini.
-

Biographical sketch of the author

Before retirement Erberto Lo Bue was Associate Professore at Bologna University (1999-2012), where he taught history of Indian, Himalayan and Tibetan art, as well as classical Tibetan. From 1972 he carried out field work in Nepal, India and Tibet, and most of his over 200 publications are related to Tibetan, Newar and Indian religious art. Member of the editorial board of the *Tibet Journal*, of the International Association for Tibetan Studies, and of the Société Européenne pour l'Étude des Civilisations de l'Himalaya et de l'Asie Centrale, he has been member of the technical commission for the acquisition of works for the constitution of the Museo di Arte Orientale in Torino (2003-2004), and Guest Researcher at the Department of Court History at the Palace Museum in Beijing.