

Iconographic Representation of the Murals at Jibengang Lhakang in Lhasa

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Abstract Jibengang Lhakang stands as the sole ancient edifice in Lhasa constructed according to the mandala structure and represents the first ancient building in the city to undergo protective renovation into an art center. It serves as a landmark of Lhasa's Old City and is recognized as one of the city-level cultural heritage conservation units. Inside Jibengang Lhakang, a plethora of Qing Dynasty murals adorn the walls, exhibiting high artistic value. Despite the art center's exhibitions being well-known, the internal murals have been largely overlooked, with academic research on them remaining underdeveloped. These murals, rich in themes, possess unique aesthetic and research value, serving as treasures of Tibetan art and important carriers for studying Tibetan history and culture. This paper systematically organizes and summarizes the artistic imagery of the murals within Jibengang Lhakang and briefly analyzes their artistic styles.

Keywords Jibengang Lhakang; Qing Dynasty murals; Iconographic analysis

1. Historical Evolution of Jibengang Lhakang and the Current State of Mural Preservation

Jibengang Lhakang, located at the intersection of Xiaozhao Temple Road and Beijing East Road in Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region, is opposite the Saixin Comprehensive Wholesale Market. Originally, it served as a nunnery of the Gelugpa School of Tibetan Buddhism. The name "Jibengang" originates from a five-story pagoda that once stood on the same site in the 18th century, named for the 100,000 tsatsas (clay molded images) of Tsongkhapa stored within it. In Tibetan, "Ji" means "master or venerable one," specifically referring to Master Tsongkhapa; "Beng" means "one hundred thousand"; and "Gang" means "highland or above(Ji, 2006)." Thus, Jibengang Lhakang translates to "Temple of One Hundred Thousand Tsongkhas."

Following the Zhulmerte Namzhal incident

during the Qing Dynasty's Qianlong period, the 7th Dalai Lama constructed a five-story pagoda west of the Lower Secret College in Lhasa, housing 100,000 five-finger-long tsatsas of Tsongkhapa made by the Dalai Lama himself. Four iron chains extended from the pagoda's top, with Buddhist bells attached that chimed in the breeze. The pagoda's base was a shrine, accessible via ladders leading up through the pagoda's body to the neck and finally allowing a view of the old city from beneath the cap.

In the 19th century, the pagoda collapsed, and the tsatsas were enshrined in a long mani wall constructed in the street. With the support of the Demu Lama (also known as the Dimu Lama), Ngawang Lobsang Trinley Rinpoche built a three-story temple strictly according to the mandala structure, housing a two-story-tall clay statue of the Future Buddha and approximately 50,000 to 100,000

tsatsas of Tsongkhapa. This marked the establishment of Jibengang Lhakang and the yellow mani wall.

The architecture of Jibengang Lhakang centers around a "square" layout, with equal lengths on all sides and strict symmetry. The interior walls preserve a large number of Qing Dynasty murals, holding both artistic and historical research value. Jibengang Lhakang once served as a landmark of Lhasa's Old City, functioning as a city substation and a grain warehouse, and at one point disappeared from historical records (Wang, 2013). Later, it was rediscovered and initially renovated by the Chengguan District Government of Lhasa, with professional cleaning of the wall murals. Due to historical human factors and wall cracks, the murals were severely damaged, but parts were preserved (Meng, 2010). Finally, in 2021, through protective renovation, it became Tibet's first ancient building art space. During the renovation of the Jiben Art Center, mural preservation adopted a "traditional craftsmanship + technological intervention" approach, including using traditional mineral pigment repasting techniques to repair hollow and saltpeter damage, employing low-oxygen environmental control to delay pigment oxidation, and utilizing 3D scanning technology to establish high-definition digital archives of the murals. Today, although the murals of Jibengang Lhakang have endured the passage of time, parts remain well-preserved. For example, the west gate murals include Vaisravana, the Goddess of Summer, Dakinis, Thangtong Gyalpo, Twenty-one Tara, Black Jambhala, and Ushnishavijaya, among others; the north gate murals depict Dhrtarastra, the Goddess of Autumn, the King of Shambhala Leading Troops, Padmasambhava, and Milarepa (Zhang, 2021).

2. Iconography and Symbolism of the Murals Inside Jibengang Lhakang

Jibengang Lhakang adheres to the symmetrical

layout of the mandala, with murals on each of the five walls forming a systematic structure from outer to inner, from explicit to esoteric, creating a "central radiating" narrative of sacred space. The murals encircle the inner walls of the first-floor rooms. Given the building's equal lengths on all sides and perfect symmetry, its planar form is "square," consisting of four rooms: the porch, inner corridor, main hall, and central shrine hall (Sangji, 2009).

The walls of the porch are adorned with the Four Seasons Goddesses and Four Heavenly Kings, who are the attendants of Palden Lhamo. In Tibetan Buddhism, the Four Seasons Goddesses surround Palden Lhamo, obeying her commands, and are important components of the invincible Dharma Protector Corps. The east gate's left and right walls depict the Eastern Guardian King Dhrtarastra and the Winter Goddess; the west gate's left and right walls show the Western Guardian King Virupaksa and the Summer Goddess; the south gate's left and right walls portray the Southern Guardian King Virudhaka and the Spring Goddess; and the north gate's walls feature the Northern Guardian King Vaisravana and the Autumn Goddess, all echoing each other (Li, 2009). The Winter Goddess on the east gate holds a soul-calling banner in her right hand and a skull cup in her left, riding a camel amidst the winter winds. The Summer Goddess on the right side of the west gate holds a golden hook in her right hand and a skull cup in her left, dressed in an azure cloak, riding a water buffalo amidst the summer heat. The Spring Goddess on the south gate, with a curved sword in her right hand and a skull cup in her left, has one face, three eyes, and two arms, her hair standing upright, wearing pearl earrings, riding a mule, and advancing in the gentle spring breeze (Dang, 2017). The Autumn Goddess on the north gate, with a Sor'dag sword in her right hand and a skull cup in her left, is draped in a peacock feather cloak,

riding a spotted deer amidst the autumn colors. It is evident that the Four Seasons Goddesses all have one face, three eyes, and two arms, displaying an angry countenance, their hair standing upright, wearing jeweled earrings, with only their handheld items and mounts differing. In Tibetan Buddhism, angry deities often exhibit a formidable and wrathful demeanor to emphasize their Dharma Protector and demon-subduing, outwardly fierce yet inwardly compassionate spiritual realm. The Four Seasons Goddesses are a marvel in Tibetan primitive religion, possessing the ability to control wind, frost, snow, and rain, and were subdued by Padmasambhava to become Buddhist Dharma Protectors (Zhang, 2017).

The Eastern Guardian King Dhrtarastra, guarding the east gate, is depicted as a general in armor, with a stern countenance, holding a lute, embodying his duty and conveying a sense of harmony and tranquility, symbolizing the concept of harmonizing worldly disputes through wisdom and compassion, soothing all beings and protecting the nation. The Western Guardian King Virupaksa, guarding the west, symbolizes the ability to observe the world with celestial eyes and protect all beings (Xiong, 2010). He is depicted in deep red, wearing armor, holding a dragon or snake (though parts of the mural are damaged and stained due to the passage of time, the lines remain fluid, and the color contrasts are vivid, showcasing the high skill of the painter). The Southern Guardian King Virudhaka, guarding the south, is depicted in armor, holding a sword. In Buddhist tradition, he is named for his ability to enable all beings to increase their good roots and uphold the Dharma. The Northern Guardian King Vaisravana, guarding the north, holds a wisdom umbrella in his right hand and a treasure mouse (known as the Earth Treasure Mouse) in his left, symbolizing the ability to bestow endless wealth and being a deity who listens to the Dharma with

a pure mind and brings wealth to the virtuous. The Four Heavenly Kings are common Dharma Protector deities in both Han and Tibetan Buddhism, guarding the four continents in the Buddhist worldview, and they often appear together with the Eighteen Arhats in the outer corridor murals (Bianba, 2012).

Proceeding clockwise along the four outer corridors, the murals on the inner sides of the outer walls feature themes such as the Manjushri Abode, Avalokiteshvara Abode, Shambhala Kingdom, and the Thirty-five Buddha Pure Lands, supplemented by deities such as the Three Protectors, Six Longevities, Seven Royal Treasures, Eight Tathagatas, and Twenty-one Taras, creating an orderly layout that evokes a sense of the Buddhist Pure Lands. The murals of the Four-Armed Avalokiteshvara on the four walls and the depiction of the Potala Palace to the left form a whole. Potala is a Sanskrit transliteration, often translated into Chinese as Putuo, meaning the abode of Avalokiteshvara. The Four-Armed Avalokiteshvara is a manifestation of Avalokiteshvara and is particularly revered by Tibetan compatriots. The Shambhala Pure Land mandala, Shambhala being a Tibetan transliteration meaning the Paradise of Extreme Bliss, is an ideal world that people aspire to and pursue. In Tibetan legends, the Shambhala Kingdom is located in the north. Once entering this pure land, one can see beautiful gardens and majestic architecture, surrounded by two layers of snowy mountains, divided into eight regions, resembling the petals of an eight-petaled lotus. Through the preserved murals, we can still imagine the various wonders of this sacred land.

The Snowland Three Protectors, also known as the Wisdom, Benevolence, and Courage Triad, depict the upper part as the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokiteshvara, and the lower two as the Bodhisattva of Wisdom, Manjushri, and the Bodhisattva of

Courageous Perseverance, Vajrapani. These three bodhisattvas often appear together, representing the three qualities necessary for achieving accomplishment. The Seven Royal Treasures are a common image in Tibet, namely the Golden Wheel Treasure, Wish-Fulfilling Jewel Treasure, Queen Treasure, Minister Treasure, White Elephant Treasure, Divine Horse Treasure, and General Treasure. It is said that when a virtuous and blessed Chakravartin (Wheel-Turning King) appears, these seven treasures will manifest, satisfying all his needs and generating boundless wealth to aid him in teaching and civilizing the people. The appearance of the Wheel King's Seven Treasures symbolizes the unity of the four directions, the happiness and well-being of the people, and the prosperity and peace of the nation. In Tibetan legends, the Twenty-one Taras are manifestations of Avalokiteshvara born from compassion for all beings, with the Green Tara and White Tara being particularly revered. The central Green Tara has one face and two arms, wears a five-Buddha crown, sits on a lotus moon disc, displays a compassionate countenance, holds an Utpala flower to her chest with her left hand, and rests her right hand naturally on her right thigh, forming the boon-granting mudra, implying that all wishes can be fulfilled.

On the walls of the four corridor segments, there are three awe-inspiring manifestations of Padmasambhava each. The twelve depictions of Padmasambhava are consistent: wearing a ritual master's cap, displaying a stern and wrathful countenance, holding a skull cup containing a longevity vase in his left hand and a vajra in his right, seated on a lotus throne. Padmasambhava was an ancient Indian and the main founder of Tibetan Buddhism. At the invitation of King Trisong Detsen in the mid-8th century (763 AD), he entered Tibet to propagate the Dharma. During his time in Tibet, he established the Nyingma School,

the oldest Buddhist sect in Tibet, and presided over the construction of Samye Monastery, the first monastery in Tibet with the Three Jewels of Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha. He translated and taught the Dharma, guiding beings from the shore of afflictions to the shore of enlightenment, truly establishing Buddhism in Tibet and making great contributions to Tibetan Buddhism. Legend has it that Padmasambhava subdued many deities and demons in Tibet, making them swear to uphold the Dharma. In Kham, there is even a special Padmasambhava ritual used to resist military invasions. The murals in Jibengang Lhakang depict this ritual, with three Padmasambhava manifestations on each of the four outer corridors, their eyes wide with wrath, exuding an absolute sense of awe and inviolability.

Next to each of the three Padmasambhava manifestations on each corridor segment, there are four Arhats guarding, and with the symmetrically distributed Dharmatala and Harshang on the east gate's two sides, the outer corridor precisely follows the traditional configuration of the Eighteen Arhats in a clockwise direction. The Tibetan Buddhist Eighteen Arhats consist of the Sixteen Arhats and two honored ones. Dharmatala has a round face, holds a meditation staff in his right hand and a treasure pot in his left, carries a golden scissors on his back, and sits on a platform as if resting during a journey, with a fierce tiger accompanying him. Harshang, also known as Maitreya, has the right upper part depicting the Honored Holy Buddha Mother. In the mural, Harshang still retains the appearance of a great Indian accomplisher, with thick hair, high cheekbones, and angular cheeks, but his form draws inspiration from the popular Maitreya form in Han China, with a wealthy demeanor, holding jewels and prayer beads, and sitting in a relaxed and lazy posture. Meanwhile,

young children surround Harshang, also visible is the influence of Han culture. In Jibengang Lhakang, the murals of Dharmatala and Harshang are symmetrically distributed on the east gate's two sides, with the Sixteen Arhats respectively guarding the eight Padmasambhava manifestations. Thus, the perfect symmetry in Jibengang Lhakang is not only reflected in the architectural structure but also runs through the mural layout.

On the inner sides of the inner walls, over a thousand Vajrapani Demon-Subduing Stupas are evenly and symmetrically distributed, with 1080 Vajrapani Bodhisattvas and Harmony Stupas as the main subjects, creating a breathtaking spiritual totem on the mottled walls. Vajrapani is the wrathful manifestation of the Snowland Three Protectors in Tibetan Buddhism, symbolizing the unparalleled virtue of being able to crush the four demons and intimidate all celestial beings. Interwoven with the bodhisattva images in the murals are the one of the Buddhist spiritual stupa types, the Harmony Stupa. Legend has it that when the Buddha was alive, there was discord in the Sangha in Rajagriha, with some disciples establishing their own sects, causing a split. The Buddha's stepfather, King Shuddhodana, established the Bamboo Grove Monastery with supreme compassion and wisdom to resolve the conflict. When the British troops' iron hooves shattered the tranquility of the plateau in the 19th century, Jibengang Lhakang rose amidst the war. The 1080 Vajrapani Bodhisattvas and Harmony Stupas symbolize the Tibetan people's wish to successfully resist foreign invasions with the bravery of Vajrapani Bodhisattvas.

The central shrine hall faces east, arranged in the manner of the old "Auspicious Buddha Hall," with four columns and eight beams, and a ceiling height much higher than that of the inner hall and outer corridor. This is the residence of the

Buddha and Bodhisattvas, the most secret part of the mandala. The murals on the inner sides of the shrine hall walls also convey profound meanings—according to literature, the Gelugpa Three Principal Deities (Guhyasamaja, Chakrasamvara, and Yamantaka) in the center, with Hevajra, Kalachakra, Red Yamari, and Kurukulle on the two sides, are mostly still distinguishable today, also indicating the relationship between this building and the Gelugpa administrators. Guhyasamaja is one of the Five Principal Deities of Tibetan Buddhism, symbolizing the ultimate profound meaning of all Buddhas and representing the essence of all esoteric teachings. Guhyasamaja is depicted as a double-sexed deity in the cross-legged meditation posture, with the main deity and consort closely embracing, forming the core symbol of the Vajrayana teachings. Guhyasamaja has three heads, representing the three secrets of esotericism: body secret, speech secret, and mind secret. The three faces are of different colors, with the central one blue, the right one white, and the left one red, each with three eyes, symbolizing compassion and the two virtues of pacifying disasters and subduing demons. The two hands hold a vajra and embrace the consort; the other four hands respectively hold a Dharma wheel, a flame palm, a lotus, and a sword, symbolizing the unfading Dharma, cutting off all ignorance, and pure wisdom. Both the deity and consort wear five-Buddha crowns, earrings, and armlets. Chakrasamvara is the principal deity of the Mother Tantra in the Anuttarayoga Tantra of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, the vajra body, speech, and mind of the Buddhas of the three times, the total representation of the merits of all Buddhas, and one of the Five Principal Deities revered in Tibetan Esoteric Yoga practice, honored as the King of the Mother Tantras and the chief of billions of *ḍākinīs*. Its image is blue, with four faces and twelve

arms, embracing the consort Vajravārāhī, and standing on demons, symbolizing the subjugation of all afflictions and ignorance. Yamantaka is the wrathful manifestation of Manjushri Bodhisattva and one of the most important Dharma Protectors in Tibetan Buddhism. Its image is a bovine-headed wrathful countenance, with nine faces and thirty-four arms and sixteen legs, holding various dharma instruments, symbolizing the subjugation of all demonic obstacles and ignorance. Hevajra is one of the Five Principal Deities of Tibetan Buddhism, usually depicted embracing the consort, with an eight-faced, sixteen-armed, and four-legged wrathful countenance, six arms holding a skull cup containing longevity essence, and the left hand pointing to the deity. It symbolizes auspiciousness, joy, and freedom, helping practitioners eliminate inner afflictions and obstacles. Despite its fearsome appearance, the profound compassion to purify the three realms wells up within. Kalachakra is one of the Five Principal Deities of Tibetan Esoteric Buddhism, usually depicted with a blue body, four faces and twenty-four arms, red and white feet, embracing the consort Vajravahni, who has four heads and eight arms. Kalachakra is the emanation Buddha image manifested by Shakyamuni Buddha when expounding the Kalachakra Tantra. The colors and decorations on Kalachakra's body all have profound meanings, representing the one-to-one correspondence between the inner and outer Kalachakras. Red Yamari is an important Dharma Protector in Tibetan Buddhism, governing death and the underworld, belonging to the wrathful-countenance principal deity, often regarded as a manifestation of Manjushri Bodhisattva. Its image is usually deep red, with multiple heads and arms, holding various dharma instruments, and standing on demons, symbolizing the subjugation of all obstacles and evil forces. Red Yamari's wrathful

countenance is not born of hatred but arises from great compassion, aiming to intimidate heretical beings and protect all sentient beings. Kurukulle, known as Guru Gulei Buddha Mother in Tibetan, is considered the red Tara manifestation of the Twenty-one Taras and a goddess of power. She has four hands and three eyes, deep red in color, with fiery golden hair, holding a lotus hook, axe, flower, bow, and arrow, sitting in an archery pose, wearing a tiger-skin skirt, a necklace of human heads, a skull crown, and jeweled ornaments, with a demon under her feet, as if residing in a fire, possessing great authority and might.

3. Artistic Style of the Murals in Jibengang Lhakang

The murals in Jibengang Lhakang are renowned for their grand scenes and complex compositions, with rich content and distinct layers, exuding extraordinary grandeur. They are painted with traditional mineral pigments, mainly vermilion, malachite, and lapis lazuli, boasting high color saturation and strong weather resistance, maintaining their vividness even after centuries. The artists used "iron wire outline" to outline the figures' contours and "floating silk outline" to depict the folds of clothing, with fine line outlining, featuring both bold and powerful strokes as well as round and flowing brushwork. The painting adheres to the traditional Tibetan painting standards of the "Painting Measurement Scripture," with strict standards in measurement proportions and reference techniques to ensure the harmony and accuracy of the composition, showcasing superb painting skills and blending the delicacy of Han Chinese gongbi painting with the solemnity of Tibetan religious painting.

In color usage, the murals emphasize color combination and contrast, highlighting the theme and layers of the composition through strong color

contrasts. In painting techniques, they mostly employ single-line flat coating with slight shading to enhance the three-dimensionality and layers of the composition. The content mainly revolves around Buddhist themes while incorporating rich historical elements, such as depicting scenes of 19th-century Lhasa's Old City and the Battle of Shambhala, becoming important materials for studying Qing Dynasty Tibetan social life and religious art. Many images carry profound symbolic meanings, such as the Four Heavenly Kings symbolizing protection and harmony, and Padmasambhava symbolizing the propagation and protection of Buddhism.

Through the perfect symmetry of the architecture and the combination of high-standard Qing Dynasty murals, a sense of space is created, forming a visual impact. The architectural layout and color contrasts produce a visual rhythm and aesthetic sense as a whole, possessing certain aesthetic functions.

4. Conclusion

The murals in Jibengang Lhakang form a self-contained system with a strictly symmetrical layout, harmoniously cooperating with the architecture, showcasing the Tibetan traditional understanding of sacred space like a textbook. Their forms are dynamic, and their brushwork is delicate, making them outstanding representatives of Tibetan Qing Dynasty painting. Behind the rare and unique rituals lies the characteristics of the times, shedding light on a lost period of history and making the murals in Jibengang Lhakang a rare case that perfectly integrates structural, functional, and artistic aspects, serving as important materials for studying Tibetan history and art.

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