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Religious Studies

**Mellon Project Abstract**

The Gaze That Consumes: The Aesthetics of Image Display and the Géluk Buddhist Dispensation

Following Stuart Hall’s work on reassessing our analytical categories in the study of globally mobile communities, older ideas of the immutability, naturalness, ascription and fixedness of race, sex, religion, class simply do not stand up to closer scrutiny. In this seminar I began to explore some very new ideas and research about one such community: Tibetan populations that have, since 1959, been on the move as refugees, immigrants or else as new members of the People’s Republic of China. Specifically, I set out to explore a schism that was wracked the global Tibetan Buddhist world since 1996, when the Dalai Lama banned worship of a particularly popular protector deity known as Dorjé Shukden. My research this quarter examined the aesthetics of religious identity, history of transmission and and diaspora experience in the Tibetan Buddhist community. Specifically, I explored the production, circulation and reception of images that are used to enforce and resist what are called the external and internal enemies of the Tibetan people. The first concerned illegal images of the self-immolation of some 160 Tibetans in China since 2011. These are, in combination, displayed as a martyr cult of Tibetan protesting the “cultural genocide” of the Chinese state. The other set of portraiture I examined are the faces of Tibetans who protest the Dalai Lama’s public teachings in the West. These internal enemies, who oppose the ban on worshipping Dorjé Shukden, are outed on the Tibetan government in exile’s webpages: a particularly damning portraiture for refugees. Finally, my project examined the circulation of images of Shukden himself, in the form of videos of the oracle taking trance, the public display of Shukden images in Times Square and in graffiti in Venice Beach, or else in the form of recordings of now deceased Tibetan masters who supported Shukden worship contra the Dalai Lama’s ban. . I’m interested in continuing to think about how the Tibetan diaspora and its convert communities require such aesthetics to frame and define their contested and parallel visions of location, transmission and authority. I plan on developing a comparative analysis that juxtaposes this more recent schism with a similarly controversial event in 19th century Urga (Mongolia) concerning religious orthodoxy and the display of a Shukden image.