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Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi Iconography: Comparing the Representation of Asian Buddhist Deities

Emi Oba

Kanazawa University

1. Introduction

1.1 Origin and development of Four lokapāla in Asia

The cult of four *Lokapāla* or *Caturmahārāja*, namely the four directional great kings or gods (tib: Rgyal po chen po bzhi/Rgyal chen bzhi), is widespread throughout Asia. The representation of four lokapāla as a doorkeeper is still found in many Buddhist temples regardless of the area or age of their establishment. They are associated with the four cardinal points and placed as follows: Dhṛtarāṣṭra at the east, Virūḍhaka at the south, Virūpākṣa at the west, and Vaiśravaṇa at the north.

Similar to the other Buddhist deities, four lokapāla originated in India. The names of four lokapāla are mentioned in the ancient texts, where they are not always members of the directional gods' group but instead are described individually. This indicates that each god was originally independent and formed the group of four according to cardinal directions sometime in the early stages of Buddhist history. In Buddhist texts, they are described as guardians dwelling in the middle of Mt. Sumeru, protecting the world of Sumeru. Narrative stories of Śākyamuni also mention the four lokapāla, who often appear to help young Siddhārtha or devote themselves to Buddha Śākyamuni by offering bowls. In addition to the texts' description, extant artifacts show images of four lokapālas at the gate of *stūpa* as well as narrative stories of Buddha as seen in several reliefs from Gandhāra, Mathurā, and Nāgārjunikoṇḍa in India.

Representations of the four lokapāla are also found in Central Asia, where the cult of Vaiśravaṇa flourished and he became a popular deity. It further spread to Tibet, China, Korea, and Japan, mostly in areas where Mahāyāna Buddhism was accepted. In the course of transmission, iconography and the four lokapāla's function have changed. The reason for this change may stem from the fact that few *sūtras* describe their images. The process of four lokapāla's depiction has depended not only on the description of *sūtras* but also on factors such as the influence of local gods or military

clothing that was in fashion where the four lokapāla was worshipped.

The main role of four lokapāla as a protector of the king and his kingdom is mentioned in the *Suvarṇa-prabhāsottama-īndra-rāja*, and this role was favored by the authorities at the time. Because of this, kings and emperors dedicated temples to four lokapāla. The cult of four lokapāla as protectors of king and kingdom was strongly esteemed, especially in Japan, where temples were established and the following spread across the country.

1.2 Introduction of Tibetan Four lokapāla (Rgyal chen bzhi)

Many Tibetan temples and shrines have four lokapāla (Tib: Rgyal chen bzhi) at their entrance. Sculptures or paintings are arranged on both sides of the entrance—usually two figures to the right and two figures to the left. In this paper, Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi refers to the four lokapāla in the Tibetan style. Likewise, when the Tibetan deities are mentioned, their Tibetan names are used. Other than those in Tibetan, all proper nouns are written in Sanskrit (Table 1).

The Rgyal chen bzhi are also found in scroll paintings produced in Tibet. In many cases, they are not the central figures, but attendants, so they are represented in the corner or in the borders of paintings. The central figures are apparently associated with Rgyal chen bzhi, such as Bhaiṣajyaguru or any figures of Pañcarakṣās. The reason behind this connection is the *sūtras* of the central figures, which mention the presence of Rgyal chen bzhi as their attendants. In addition, the 16 *arhats* are also related to the Rgyal chen bzhi, as seen in many scroll painting sets that show them as protectors of the dharma in Tibet.

Figure 1 shows the standard Tibetan representations of Rgyal chen bzhi. This figure originated from a set of wooden prints called five hundred gods of Narthang. This is a beneficial resource of Buddhist iconography.¹ On the far left of Figure 1 is Yul 'khor srung, who wears a round-necked upper garment, lower garment, boots, helmet, and holds a lute. The second figure from the left is 'Phags skyes po, holding a sword in both hands. He wears armor, boots, and a helmet adorned with an animal head. The next figure is Mig mi bzan, holding a *stūpa* (Tib: chos rten) in his right hand and a snake in his left hand. He also wears armor, boots, and a helmet. The figure on the far right is Rnam sras, holding a victory banner in his right hand and a

¹ The hand written version was also produced in the nineteenth century in Mongolia. For hand written figures, see Chandra, Lokesh, *Buddhist Iconography*, (New Delhi: Indian Academy of Indian Culture and Aditya Prakashan, 1991): 216-217.

mongoose in his left hand. These are standard depictions of Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi, showing the already established portrayal of Buddhist deities at the time when the woodblock was produced around the first half of the eighteenth century.

As Figure 1 shows, the attire of the four kings is generally similar, with some minor differences such as inclusion of a helmet or crown; however, attributes of the kings' hands distinctly show their identities and characteristics. These images and hand attributes were almost established by the sixteenth century, but before then, these representations reveal variation. The iconography of Rgyal chen bzhi also differs between Tibet and other areas. For example, Indian Rgyal chen bzhi never wear Chinese garments. In addition, they never hold specific attributes, but instead they show veneration with their hands in most cases. Compared to some Chinese and Japanese figures, the most distinctive difference is the attribute of Mig mi bzan and Rnam sras. The standard Japanese Rnam sras has a *stūpa* instead of a mongoose.

The depiction and iconography of Buddhist deities were transformed and developed throughout their history. Their iconography is fundamentally based on *sūtras* or other types of Buddhist scriptures, although images of an actual artifact are often different from those described in texts. To clarify the history of Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi renderings, it is helpful to compare those from Tibet and from other areas. Characteristics of Tibetan images are revealed by these comparisons. From the broader perspective of Buddhist art, Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi depictions are interesting examples that show the iconographical transformation through their history. In addition, Tibetan standard Rgyal chen bzhi can be found across a vast geographical area, suggesting their significance and popularity as Buddhist deities. The sources of iconography based on written descriptions are shown in this paper.

2. Ancient images of Rgyal chen bzhi

The first image of Rgyal chen bzhi brought to Tibet probably originates from the scrolls of paintings stored in the Yerpa monastery. The paintings were thought to have been brought from China to Tibet around the tenth and eleventh centuries, representing Buddha Śākyamuni, 16 *arhats*, and almost certainly Rgyal chen bzhi.² At the same time, Neten Lha-khang was constructed to keep Śākyamuni, 16 elders, and possibly Rgyal chen bzhi. The lha-khang was destroyed, but a new one was

² For information on this set of paintings, see Schroeder (2001), Vol. 2: 798.

constructed at the same location. Unfortunately, we have no information on the first portrayals of Rgyal chen bzhi in Tibet, except that they were from China.

The most ancient standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi are found in some places outside of Tibet, in the Chinese and Tibetan border regions. These are dated at around the eighth and ninth centuries, when the Tibetans held power over this area. For example, Figure 2 shows the Rgyal chen bzhi drawn on four gates of a mandala found at Dunhuang that dated to the Tubo period around the eighth and ninth centuries. On the far left of Figure 2 is Yul 'khor srung, who is seated on a pedestal, with his right leg bent and his left leg hanging down. He holds a lute in his hand. The second figure on the left is 'Phags skyes po, holding a sword in his hand. The third image from the left is Mig mi bzan, holding a snake. The figure on the right holding a club and can be identified as Rnam sras. Although these figures of Rgyal chen bzhi differ somewhat from standard Tibetan images (e.g., Mig mi bzan without a *stūpa* and Rnam sras without a mongoose or victory banner) they are identified as Mig mi bzan and Rnam sras because of the direction shown in the mandala. The items held in their hands are still some of their various attributes.

One of the oldest Rgyal chen bzhi images in Tibet can be seen in Sgrol ma lha khang in Nyetan. These clay renderings (Figure 3), dated at around the thirteenth century, were placed in a row at the entrance and exit of the three lha khang. To be precise, Yul 'khor srung and 'Phags skyes po are standing to the viewer's left of the entrance, while Mig mi bzan and Rnam sras are standing to the viewer's right of the exit. In the left portion of Figure 3 is Yul khor srung, holding a lute in his hand. 'Phags skyes po is second from the left, holding his hands with the palms facing downward in front of his body. The third image from the left is Mig mi bzan, holding a snake. The figure on the right, with his left palm raised, can be identified as Rnam sras. The notable features of these figures are that all of them are stepping on small demon-like figures and have slender bodies in contrast to the plump figures in later Tibetan images. Apart from these features, the figures are wearing Chinese armor with helmet and boots, which is typical of Rgyal chen bzhi depictions in Tibet.

Typical Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi seen today are the same as the figures in the Gyantse *stūpa*. Those figures are considered to be standard fifteenth-century Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi images. Molded and colored during restorations, the figures are almost human-sized, placed in the hallway between the first and second floors of the *stūpa*. These figures can be dated to the fifteenth century, when the great *stūpa* of Gyantse was constructed. Figure 4 shows Yul 'khor srung on the right, placed at the

viewer's right side. His body is blue-green, and he is wearing a Chinese soldier's garments, helmet, and boots. He holds a lute in both hands. Figure 5 shows 'Phags skyes po on the left. His body is blue, wearing a Chinese soldier's garments, crown with flower motifs, and boots. His unique attribute is a sword held in his hand. On the right in Figure 5 is Mig mi bzan, whose body is red, and he wears the same costume as 'Phags skyes po. He holds a small *stūpa* in his right hand, while his left hand is placed on his waist. Figure 4 (left) shows Rnam sras. His body is yellow and he wears the same outfit as Mig mi bzan and 'Phags skyes po do. In his left hand, he holds a mongoose spitting gems from its mouth, and his right hand is raised and folded in the front. It previously held a victory banner, an attribute of Rnam sras, but this is now lost.

3. Written descriptions of Rgyal chen bzhi as an attendant

The cult of four lokapāla flourished on the description of *Suvarṇaprabhāsa-uttama-indra-rāja*, which described the protection of king and kingdom.³ For this reason, the text was supposed to be one source on the image's production, but the iconography is rarely depicted in this *sūtra*. It is notable that the same merit of protection is also described in the *Mahāsāhasrapramardanī nāma sūtra*.⁴ The central deity, Mahāsāhasrapramardanī, is one of the Pañcarakṣās, a group of five goddesses of *dhāranī* origin. As mentioned earlier, the scroll painting of Pañcarakṣā often depicts the four lokapāla, as shown in Figure 2. The diagram represents a mandala on *Mahāpratisarā-sūtra* and the four lokapāla are situated at the four corners as gatekeepers. Previous studies on Dunhuang have already indicated that the *dhāranī* of Mahāpratisarā were very popular in Dunhuang around the eighth century and the four lokapāla were often presented if the Mahāpratisarā was drawn.⁵ Because of these reasons, part of the development of the four lokapāla's iconography was closely connected and grew out of the deities of Pañcarakṣā.

Another text relating to the Rgyal chen bzhi is the *sūtra* of Bhaiṣajyaguru. There are many examples of Rgyal chen bzhi from the Bhaiṣajyaguru mandala. Indeed, the two Chinese *sūtra* on Bhaiṣajyaguru describe the iconography of Rgyal chen bzhi. One is the *sūtra* on the ritual manual of Bhaiṣajyaguru, translated from

³ TTP. No. 174 (translated from Chinese to Tibetan) (Toh. No. 555), TTP. No. 175 (Toh. No. 556), TTP. No. 176 (Toh. No. 557).

⁴ TTP. No. 177 (Toh. No. 558); Taisho No. 999.

⁵ See Matsumoto (1937).

Tibetan to Chinese by Saraha (1259–1314) during the Yuan period.⁶ In the Bhaiṣajyaguru ritual, Rgyal chen bzhi are visualized as dwelling at the four gates of the mandala. As shown in Table 2, the attributes of the Rgyal chen bzhi are almost the same as the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi. The second *sūtra* is also a part of the ritual of Bhaiṣajyaguru.⁷ It was translated from Tibetan to Chinese during the Qin dynasty, showing almost the same characteristics as Rgyal chen bzhi of the Yuan dynasty (Table 3). The years of the first *sūtra*'s translator's birth and the death confirm that the attributes of standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi had been established in Tibet around the end of the thirteenth century to the beginning of the fourteenth century.

Combining Rgyal chen bzhi and the 16 *arhats* is common practice in Tibet, as seen from scroll paintings, wall paintings, and sculptures, showing that these two groups were integrated into a set of protectors of Buddhism. Nonetheless, the *sūtras* explaining the combination explicitly have not been located. The Rgyal chen bzhi and 16 *arhats* are considered the protectors of dharma, but the reason for this role is also unknown. Other than *sūtras*, the *sādhana* texts, which describe the way to visualize deities, testify to the combination of the two groups. Rin lhan, the collection of *sādhana* that was compiled in the eighteenth century, and Rin 'byung, compiled by Thāranātha (1575–1634), explain the iconography of Rgyal chen bzhi under the category of attendants of the 16 *arhats*.⁸ Not only do these *sādhana* texts record the deities one by one, but the relationship between them is also indicated. Representing Rgyal chen bzhi with the 16 *arhats* is unique to Tibetan art. This suggests that its origins is not in the description of traditional Buddhist *sūtra*, but in either a custom only for Tibetans or from a historical incident concerning Rgyal chen bzhi and the 16 *arhats*.

4. Iconography

4.1. The garments of Rgyal chen bzhi

Figures in the standard Tibetan images of Rgyal chen bzhi wear Chinese soldiers' garments, with helmet and boots. Sometimes, they wear an elaborated crown that reveals the remnants of their roles as kings.

Apart from a set of Rgyal chen bzhi, Rnam sras is represented exclusively because of his popularity as a benefactor god. In this case, he is sometimes depicted

⁶ Taisho. Vol. 19, 47a.

⁷ Taisho. Vol. 19., 66a.

⁸ R. Vol. 1, fol.156., Tar fol. 99.

naked, wearing only underwear or lower garments, accessories, or a crown (see Figure 6). This type of Rnam sras is different from Rnam sras in a set of Rgyal chen bzhi. The images of Rgyal chen bzhi wearing only underwear are also found outside of Tibet.⁹

As mentioned earlier, the ancient Indian four lokapālas are not wearing Chinese soldiers' garments, but garments rather similar to those worn by Indian aristocrats. The Indian four lokapāla are wearing turbans with lower garments and accessories, seldom holding weapons. This four lokapāla type is not considered a warrior god, but probably a celestial being.

There is also a Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi aristocrat type found. For example, Figure 7 shows Rnam sras riding on a white lion, wearing layers of clothes with different colored vegetal motifs. The edges of their clothes are fluttering and the sleeves are made of different textiles. This type of Rgyal chen bzhi is not a warrior, but more of a Tibetan nobleman. The written description of Rgyal chen bzhi also attests to this type of image. The ritual manual of Rgyal chen bzhi written by Atīśa (982–1054) states that Yul 'khor srung and 'Phags skyes po wear robes made of silk and a helmet made of rhinoceros hide, while Mig mi bzan wears silk.¹⁰ There are some examples of Rgyal chen bzhi wearing tunic-like upper garments and a small piece of armor.¹¹ Previous research already stated that images of figures with a small piece of armor protecting the chest and belly are older than those wearing Chinese armor.¹²

Variations in the attire of Rgyal chen bzhi possibly reveals the complex origin of the image. It is reasonable to assume that the figure with Chinese armor is of Chinese origin. Although the armed four lokapāla are also found in central Asia, the style of armor of Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi is based on that of a warrior from the Tang dynasty. Another figure, similar to a nobleman with beautiful accessories and silk robes, could have originated in India because of the equivalent concept of Rgyal chen bzhi being a nobleman, or a king. Tibetans modified the Rgyal chen bzhi's outfits to project the image of Tibetan noblemen upon those of Indian origin.

⁹ See, for example, the figures of Rgyal chen bzhi, with Avalokiteśvara in the center, in Rhie and Thurman 1991: 324.

¹⁰ Mar me mdzad. *rGyal po chen po bzhi'i dkyil khor du dbang bskur ba*, TTP. No. 3776, (Toh.No. 2625).

¹¹ For example, see Rhie and Thurman 1991: 465.

¹² See Tanaka 2009: 192–197.

4.2. Items held in the hands: Attributes in ancient texts from before the eleventh century

As already mentioned and shown in Table 1, the standard Tibetan portrayal of each Rgyal chen bzhi is with a fixed item or attribute. Those attributes are not identical to the portrayals of Rgyal chen bzhi's from other areas, but the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi's iconography is written in texts from other places, such as ancient Chinese translated *sūtra* and Indian texts from around the eighth century.

In Chinese *sūtra*, the ritual of *Vikiraṇoṣṇīṣa*, translated by Śubhakraśiṃha (637–735), Yul 'khor srung is described as holding a lute (see Table 5).¹³ Although few ancient figures of Yul 'khor srung from China have a lute in their hand, this attribute of Yul 'khor srung was introduced to China in the eighth century.

The other text written in Sanskrit, *Sarvadurgatipariśodanatantra*, also describes the image of Rgyal chen bzhi.¹⁴ This text was first written in Sanskrit and then translated into Tibetan.¹⁵ In addition, a commentary of the text was written by Vajravarman, but only the Tibetan texts can be found today.¹⁶ All three texts mention the image of Rgyal chen bzhi. The original Sanskrit text explains 11–12 types of mandalas, one of which is the mandala with four four lokapāla.¹⁷ The mandala of the four lokapāla has Vajrapāṇi in the center and the Rgyal chen bzhi are surrounding him. As Table 6 shows, Yul 'khor srung in the east has a lute, 'Phags skyes po has a sword, Mig mi bzan has a noose, and Rnam sras has a club and mongoose. The hand attributes of Yul 'khor srung and 'Phags skyes po are the same as the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi. The Tibetan translation is the same as the original Sanskrit text. The translation of the Tibetan texts was completed at the end of the eighth century, during the reign of King Khri srong lde brtsan (ca. 740–798). It indicates that the original Sanskrit texts were compiled before the eighth century. The commentary text by Vajravarman was originally written in Sanskrit, then translated and included in the Tibetan *triptaka*, which also describes the mandala of the Vajrapāṇi attended to by four lokapālas. Around Vajrapāṇi are the four lokapāla, whose depiction is almost the same as the Tibetan standard Rgyal chen bzhi (Table 7). In other words, Yul 'khor srung in the east has a lute, 'Phags skyes po has a

¹³ This text describes Yul 'khor srung as one of the ten directional gods at the east gate. The other Rgyal chen bzhi do not appear. Taisho. Vol. 19, 379b.

¹⁴ Skorupski, Tadeusz, *The Sarvadurgatipariśodanatantra*, (Delhi, Varanasi, Patna; Motilal Banarsidass, 1983).

¹⁵ TTP. No. 116, (Toh. No. 483).

¹⁶ TTP. No. 3453, (Toh. No. 2526).

¹⁷ Older translations mention twelve mandala, whereas new translations mention eleven mandalas.

sword in his right hand and a lotus in his left hand, Mig mi bzan has a noose, and Rnam sras has a treasure club filled with jewels and a mongoose purse.¹⁸ The year of the author's birth and death reveals that the commentary was written in the eighth century.

In addition, another text from Tibet, written by Atīśa, *rGyal po chen po bzhi'i dkyil khor du dbang bskur ba*, also describes the image of Rgyal chen bzhi.¹⁹ The depiction was almost certainly based on Indian figures during the esoteric stage of Buddhism, since Atīśa was from Vikramaśīla in India and arrived in Tibet around the eleventh century. He states that Yul 'khor srung in the east has a lute, 'Phags skyes po has a sword, Mig mis bzan has a noose, and Rnam sras has a mongoose (Table 4). The portrayal is almost the same as the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi, although Mig mi bzan has no *stūpa*.

These texts show that the attributes involving Yul 'khor srung's lute and 'Phags skyes po's sword originated in India and persisted until the eighth century. The ancient four lokapāla in India did not have specific attributes, but they were later represented with attributes unique to their characteristics. Indian artifacts of four lokapāla around the eighth century are not known at present, but we can imagine the images based on the written descriptions. In addition to these written descriptions, an example of Dunhuang dated eighth or ninth century (shown above) also confirms the fixed attributes of Yul 'khor srung (lute) and 'Phags skyes po (sword). As seen in Figure 2, they have the same attributes, although their attire is Chinese. Therefore, it is safe to say that the basic attributes originated in India and spread to Tibet. They persisted until the eighth century in India and spread to Dunhuang around the eighth or ninth century.

The two lokapālas' attributes—Mig mi bzan's snake and Rnam sras's victory banner and mongoose—show discrepancies. For example, the Tibetan Mig mi bzan's snake is a variation of the Indian version's noose. A club is another attribute of Rnam sras, often seen in Rnam sras of China and Japan. A significant change in the Tibetan standard image is the *stūpa* that was assigned to Mig mi bzan.

¹⁸ TTP. No. 3453, (Toh. No. 2526). *bCom ldan 'das de bzhin gshegs pa dgra bcom pa yang dag par rdzogs pa'i sang rgyas ngan song thams cad yongs su sbyong ba gzi brid kyi rgyal po rgyud kyi rgyal po chen po'i rnam par bshad pa mdzes pa'i rgyan zhes bya ba.*

¹⁹ See note 10.

5. Iconography of Vaiśravaṇa (Rnam sras)

5.1 A *stūpa*, an attribute of four lokapāla

There are many examples of Rnam sras from Japan holding a *stūpa*. In fact, none of the four lokapālas from Japan holds a mongoose. The concept of a four lokapāla holding a *stūpa* is noteworthy. The connection between *stūpa* and four lokapāla goes back to the Indian model, as seen in the ancient examples of Sanchi *stūpa* and Bārhut, where each of the four lokapālas are placed at the four directional gates. Four lokapāla are significantly conceived as protectors of the *stūpa* or *dharmā*. As far as the beginnings of Vaiśravaṇa are concerned, earlier studies have already pointed out the origins of the Vaiśravaṇa holding a *stūpa* was from Khotan. In ancient Khotan, Vaiśravaṇa once dried up a lake, from where the first *stūpa* emerged, and the area became known as Khotan.²⁰ From this account, one may say that the rendering of Vaiśravaṇa with a *stūpa* was formed in Khotan. It is likely that the Japanese and older Chinese Vaiśravaṇa follow this model. On the other hand, no four lokapāla with a *stūpa* in their hand have yet been found in India. This probably reinforces the Khotanese origin of Vaiśravaṇa holding a *stūpa*. Simply speaking, there are two variations in the depiction of Vaiśravaṇa—one is Vaiśravaṇa with a *stūpa*, and the other is with a mongoose. The origin of the first type is not India but is probably Khotan, while the second type's origin is definitely India.

The standard Tibetan Rnam sras (Vaiśravaṇa) holds a mongoose and victory banner, showing that the image was introduced from India. However, we know that some older Tibetan Rnam sras had a *stūpa* because some texts on Rnam sras show them with a *stūpa* in their hands.²¹ For example, one *sādhana* from Rin 'byun, an angry Rnam sras, states that the Rnam sras has a *stūpa* in his right hand and a banner with a *vajra* shaft in his left hand (Table 8).²² This is one *sādhana* from several Rnam sras texts from Rin 'byun—a compilation of *sādhana* of the Buddhist deities—that suggest depictions of Rnam sras varied once the Rnam sras with *stūpa* was introduced to Tibet.

One text from the Tibetan *tripiṭaka* also indicates toward the existing image of Rnam sras with *stūpa*. The Tibetan *tripiṭaka* also includes *sādhana* of deities, some of which are on Rnam sras. One ritual manual on Rnam sras states that he has a

²⁰ See Williams 1973: 133.

²¹ For examples of artifacts, see Amy Heller (2006), 37. The stone figure shown in this article is now missing. The reason for identifying this figure as Vaiśravaṇa has not been stated in the article.

²² R. Vol. 2 fol. 217–224.

spear and *stūpa* in his hands (Table 9).²³ Actually, this image is almost the same as the Japanese Vaiśravaṇa. The text was written by Sugatigarbha at the beginning of the eleventh century and confirms that the tradition of Rnam sras holding *stūpa* was introduced to Tibet, but the tradition disappeared after the image of Rnam sras with a mongoose became popular.

5.2. A mongoose and potbelly: Attributes of Indian benefactor deities

The standard Tibetan Rnam sras has a mongoose spitting gems from its mouth. A mongoose is a symbol of wealth or abundance related to the benefactor deity. Other Buddhist deities holding a mongoose are Kubera and Jambhala.

For example, Figure 8 shows Jambhala from Ratnagiri, India. The stout male figure is seated on a pedestal, with his right leg hanging down and left leg folded. He is naked, except for elaborate accessories, crown, and lower garments. He holds fruit in his right hand and a mongoose spitting beads in his left hand. He is identified as Jambhala, deity of wealth, whose image and origin is closely related to Kubera. The motif of a mongoose, showing prosperity, was introduced to China as we see in the example from Fei lai feng in Hangjow, China (Figure 9). On the mountainside are caves with Buddhist statues. Based on iconography, some of them are strongly influenced by the figures of Tibetan sages and deities. Figure 9 shows a male figure seated on a pedestal, with his right leg hanging down, stomping on a vase, and his left leg folded. He is naked, except for a sacred thread and crown. He has fruit in his right hand and a mongoose spitting beads in his left hand. He has also been identified as Jambhala.

A stout body, with beautiful accessories and a crown, is typical of Indian benefactor deities. A mongoose is also significant, since it spits out unlimited amounts of jewels when hit in the belly. As shown above, some of the Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi's bodies are also plump, symbolizing abundance. In addition, although there are clothed Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi, there are also some examples of almost bare Rnam sras (Vaiśravaṇa). These Rnam sras are uncovered but are often adorned with beautiful jewelry and a crown. They are seated on lions, with right legs hanging down and left legs folded, holding a mongoose in their left hands (for example, see Figure 6). This particular depiction is almost identical to that of Indian benefactor deities, although benefactor deities never hold a victory banner.

²³ TTP. No. 4970.

5.3 Overlap in the portrayals of Vaiśravaṇa and Kubera

The other Buddhist deity that holds a mongoose is Kubera. He is also a benefactor deity and a *dikpāra*, a guardian of the eight directions, protecting the north, like Vaiśravaṇa does.

It is well known that Kubera is the epithet of Vaiśravaṇa, as we see in the inscription of Bhārhut in India, dating back to 100 B.C.²⁴ Kubera's father was Viśravas, and his son was Vaiśravaṇa. Similarly, Tibten Rnam tho sras means the son of Viśravas. Indeed, Kubera and Vaiśravaṇa point to the same deity. In terms of Kubera's image, he is considered plump, wearing a crown and accessories. He often has a mongoose or purse and a club. A *sādhana* from the Tibetan *tripiṭaka* describes the image of Kubera from the tenth century, stating that he has one face and two hands, with a *stūpa* in the right and a mongoose in the left.²⁵ His attributes show the combined depictions of both Vaiśravaṇa and Kubera.

A previous study has already pointed out that the Indian depiction of Kubera influenced Vaiśravaṇa portrayals.²⁶ Indeed, Kubera and Vaiśravaṇa cannot be separated because some texts also confuse these two images.²⁷

As for the overlap in depictions of Kubera and Vaiśravaṇa, an interesting example still remains on the wall of Yulin Cave in China. This site is not far from Dunhuang, and some caves were excavated during the Tubo period. The Vaiśravaṇa or Kubera figure was drawn on the north wall of the antechamber in cave number 15. As Figure 10 shows, the plump yellow figure is seated on a pedestal. He is almost naked, except for a lower garment, accessories, and crown. He has a club in his right hand and a mongoose spitting colorful beads in his left hand.

This figure can be identified as Kubera or Vaiśravaṇa. However, considering the whole area of cave 15, the south wall of the antechamber shows Virūḍhaka (south) and the north wall presents this male figure, this image can be identified as Vaiśravaṇa from the four lokapālas. Furthermore, as *Sarvadurugatipariśodhanatantra* stated (see

²⁴ The north pillar on the west side of the Bhārhut *stūpa* represents a Yaksha figure with the inscription "The Yaksha Kubera," suggesting Kubera is identified with Vaiśravaṇa. For the plate and the inscriptions, see Cunningham, Alexander, *Stūpa of Bharhut: a Buddhist Monument Ornamented with Numerous Sculptures Illustrative of Buddhist Legend and History in the third century B.C.*, (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1879; reprint, New Delhi: Munshiral Manoharlal, 1998): 138.

²⁵ TTP. No. 4555. (Toh. No. 3733).

²⁶ Getty, Alice, *The Gods of Northern Buddhism, Their History and Iconography*, (Oxford: the Clarendon Press, 1928): 156–160.

²⁷ Some *sādhana* on Vaiśravaṇa explain his image, stating that his image is the same as Kubera. For example, see the chapter of Rnam sras in sLe lung bshad pa'i rdo rje. *Dam can bstan srung gi mam thar*. (Beijing: The Ethnic Publishing House, 2003).

Tables 6 and 7), Vaiśravaṇa or Rnam sras holds a treasure club in his right hand and a mongoose in his left hand. This written description is identical to the figure at Yulin Cave. As follows from what has been stated, the figure is identified as Vaiśravaṇa, based on the Indian model.

5.4 Iconographic variations of Vaiśravaṇa

First, as the preceding discussion shows, there are generally two types of depictions of Vaiśravaṇa—one is Vaiśravaṇa with a *stūpa*, and the other is Vaiśravaṇa with a mongoose. These two images are transitional and probably changed later and spread across broader geographical areas.

Second, the attire of Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi is divided into three types—Chinese armor, Tibetan clothes, and the one with only a crown and lower garments and adorned with accessories. The last type is often represented as a potbellied man, the image of which is the same as Indian benefactor deities. One of these deities, named Kubera, was particularly related to the Vaiśravaṇa in terms of iconography. These two deities are identical, and Vaiśravaṇa's image is strongly influenced by Kubera. On the other hand, the image of Vaiśravaṇa never influenced that of Kubera. As extant artifacts show, the early portrayals of Indian four lokapāla had no individual characteristics. In most cases, they were represented as noblemen without any particular attributes. The development of Vaiśravaṇa's depiction was less substantial than that of Kubera. Furthermore, Kubera developed his image, as seen from texts written as early as the fourth and fifth centuries, *Viṣṇudharmottara-prāṇa* stated that Kubera or otherwise Vaiśravaṇa has one face and four arms and a potbelly, and holds a club and spear.²⁸ Although the two deities are identical, the development of the image was different. Vaiśravaṇa borrowed the concept of the Indian model of Kubera for this depiction. Consequently, Vaiśravaṇa was conceived as a benefactor deity with the key attribute of a mongoose. Indeed, the figure in the Yulin Cave was the exact image of Vaiśravaṇa illustrating the combination of Kubera and Vaiśravaṇa, showing significant Indian influence.

As mentioned above, the other type of Vaiśravaṇa —holding a *stūpa*—originated in Khotan and was introduced to Tibet later. A written description and example of this type was found, but its representation did not continue in Tibet. The Vaiśravaṇa with *stūpa* was only a temporary figure. The standard Tibetan Rnam sras

²⁸ Dr. Priyabala, trans., *Viṣṇudharmottara-prāṇa* (Delhi: Parimal Publications, 2002): Vol. 3 161–162.

(Vaiśravaṇa) is always depicted with a mongoose, and Mig mi bzhan holds a *stūpa* in some cases. It is notable that the description from *Sarvadurugatipariśodhanatantra* almost matches the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi, except for the fact that Mig mi bzhan holds a *stūpa*. Viewed in this light, Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi can be considered to be following an Indian model in terms of attributes.

This exception suggests the iconographic transformation from an Indian to a Tibetan image. Twofold depictions of Vaiśravaṇa represent the double aspects of his roles. He is a warrior god, clad in armor with a victory banner. He is also a potbellied benefactor deity, holding a mongoose to signify wealth. These conflicting images and roles were probably accepted once and were then reformulated by combining attributes from these two portrayals. Consequently, the Tibetan Rnam sras holds a victory banner and a mongoose, attributes of both a warrior and benefactor god. The variation in attire also shows these two aspects—Vaiśravaṇa with a Chinese armor represents a warrior, while the other one with lower garment, accessories, and a crown represents a benefactor deity. By combining these, the Tibetan Rnam sras was formed and the depiction was fixed.

The reformulated Vaiśravaṇa was often worshipped in Tibet, probably individually, and not because he is a member of Rgyal chen bzhi's group. Because it was altered, the iconography of Rgyal chen bzhi lacks consistency as a whole. To be precise, when Vaiśravaṇa picked up a victory banner and a mongoose, a *stūpa*, the significant attributes of Rgyal chen bzhi disappeared. The attributes not only indicate their role as protectors of *stūpa* or dharma, but also displays the origin of Vaiśravaṇa and four lokapāla. It is thus reasonable to state that Vaiśravaṇa gave the attribute of *stūpa* to Mig mi bzhan instead of assuming that none of the Rgyal chen bzhi hold the significant attribute, a *stūpa*.

6. Later developments and the expansion of the Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi's iconography

Examples of standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi were found in a broad area adjacent to Tibet. One reason for the expansion is that some authorities in mainland China favored Tibetan Buddhism and its art style. For example, it is well known that some emperors of the Yuan and Qing dynasties were devoted to Tibetan Buddhist monks and Buddhism in general. They were powerful patrons of projects concerning Buddhism, such as constructing temples and creating Buddhist sculptures. As a

result, temples and Buddhist monuments in inner mainland China still hold good collections of Tibetan Buddhist artifacts.

The relief of Juyonggan near central Beijing is a typical example. The platform was built from 1342 to 1345, during the reign of Huizong from the Yuan dynasty. Still standing in Beijing, the inside of the passage shows four lokapāla in the Tibetan style.²⁹ Figure 11 shows Mig mi bzan in relief at the end of the west wall. Although the surface of the relief has partly cracked, the largest central figure is clear enough to be identified as Mig mi bzan, wearing Chinese armor and holding a snake in his right hand. He folds his left arm and shows his palm with a few fingers folded, but does not hold a *stūpa*. An old sage and small demon-like figures are attending to him, but none of them holds a *stūpa*. This Mig mi bzan only has the traditional attribute of a snake, without a *stūpa*. Other than this difference, other rGyal chen bzi depictions are exactly the same as the standard Tibetan ones.

Another example from mainland China is found at the *stūpa* at the Biyun Temple in Beijing, dated to 1749, during the reign of Qiang long, an emperor from the Qing dynasty. The four lokapāla are carved in stone at the *stūpa*, called the “Vajrāsana pagoda.” Figure 12 shows two of the four lokapāla, of which the one to the left is Mig mi bzan. He is clad in Chinese armor, holding a snake in his right hand. He folds his left arm in front, but holds nothing in this hand. As seen from the figure, this Mig mi bzan does not hold a *stūpa* either.

As stated above, some *sūtras* of Bhaiṣajyaguru describe the image of the four lokapāla. As shown in Tables 2 and 3, the attribute of Mig mi bzan is a snake or snake-noose, but none of them has a *stūpa*. These two *sūtras* were translated from Tibetan to Chinese during the Yuan and Qing dynasties, the same period when the previously mentioned artifacts were created. As space is limited, only two examples are presented here, but there are other examples of the four lokapāla dating to the Yuan and Qing periods. Mig mi bzan from examples not mentioned here seldom have a *stūpa* in their hands, but always hold a snake. For that reason, the Tibetan style of Rgyal chen bzhi from China is basically the same as standard Tibetan depictions, except for Mig mi bzan, who is supposed to hold a *stūpa*, as per Tibetan depictions.

²⁹ The ceiling of the passage shows five mandalas. Each mandala was already identified in the *rGyud sde kun btus* No. 11, 14, 27, 28, and 29 by Musashi Tachikawa. The mandala of *rGyud sde kun btus* No. 27 is based on the *Sarvādurugatipariśodhanatantra*, probably suggesting the connection of the tantra and the four lokapāla. For the identification of mandalas, see Tachikawa, Musashi, *Mandala*. (Tokyo: Gakushu kenkyusha, 1996): 54.

Other standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi examples are found in Nepal. Nepalese art had a great impact on Tibetan art history. Geographically, Nepal is adjacent to Tibet and is situated en route India to Tibet, the same route that was used to introduce Buddhism to Tibet. It is known that artists from Nepal had been active in Tibet since the Jo-khang in Lhasa was constructed in the seventh century. Examples of art depicting the four great kings of Nepal are often found at the base of votive *stūpa*. Figure 13 is one example of this at the Kathesimbu *stūpa*. The square base of the votive *stūpa* faces the four cardinal points and each side represents one of the four lokapāla. The figure at the left end is Dhṛtarāṣṭra, seated and wearing armor and a crown, holding a lute in both hands. The second figure to the left is Virūdhaka, seated, wearing armor, and probably a helmet, holding a sword vertically in both hands. The second figure to the right is Virūpākṣa, seated and wearing armor with a crown, holding a small *stūpa* in his right hand, and a snake in his left hand. The figure on the right end is Vaiśravaṇa, wearing tight clothing; he holds a victory banner in his right hand and a mongoose in his left hand. These examples are not ancient; they are dated post-eighteenth century. It is interesting to note that the figures wear armor and the attributes are exactly the same as standard Tibetan depictions.

This is a typical image of four lokapāla from Nepal, where numerous similar examples are found. Other examples not presented in this paper show the same attributes of standard Tibetan depictions, but some of them show different outfits reflecting the local garments of Nepal.³⁰

Because these examples are dated to the eighteenth century, it cannot be proven that the standard Tibetan iconography of Rgyal chen bzhi was reimported to Nepal. There is also a possibility that iconography similar to the standard Tibetan kind was formed elsewhere and spread into Tibet and Nepal.

7. Conclusion

To conclude, from what has been stated above, the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi synthesizes images from various examples of four lokapāla, all with different origins. Before the styles of depiction were fixed around the sixteenth century, images of Rgyal chen bzhi showed diversity. As shown in this paper, there were three types of

³⁰ The votive *stūpa* offered around a central *stūpa* often show four lokapāla at the base; the examples of these are countless. Except for these votive *stūpas*, the plate of the four lokapāla are suspend at the Vijesvari temple near Thamel.

garments worn by the Rgyal chen bzhi. This variation suggests different origins of all the images. The figure with Chinese armor originated in China, while the figures wearing only simple clothes with accessories originated in India and are images of aristocrats. When the potbelly was added to the aristocrat rendering, the figures became equivalent to the Indian benefactor gods. Some earlier depictions show a thin body, rather than a plump body of a wealthy person, suggesting that the body type had changed based on the Indian benefactor depictions.

The portrayal of Vaiśravaṇa in particular changed significantly. These depictions of Vaiśravaṇa were diverse, depending on the area or time of production. For example, the image of Vaiśravaṇa holding a *stūpa* was introduced to Tibet, but the tradition of this image disappeared. Instead, Vaiśravaṇa holds a mongoose, one of the major attributes of Indian benefactor deities. He also holds a victory banner in his other hand, thus showing Vaiśravaṇa's dual roles of both benefactor deity and warrior god.

Other unique characteristics of the standard Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi's attribute is a *stūpa* held by Mig mi bzan. Since a *stūpa* as Rgyal chen bzhi's attribute is important, it was likely attributed to Mig mi bzan. This is a considerable iconographic change compared to other depictions from different geographical areas.

After depictions of Rgyal chen bzhi were standardized, they wore Chinese armor in most cases. Because of this attire, Tibetans themselves explain that Rgyal chen bzhi is represented in a Chinese style. This viewpoint is partly correct—because the garment is so obvious, their attributes basically match the Indian model. Texts such as *Sarvadurgatipariśodanatantra* and the ritual manual written by Atīśa reveal that Rgyal chen bzhi's iconography is almost the same as the standard Tibetan one. The discrepancy only involves a *stūpa* held by Mig mi bzan, suggesting that the standard Tibetan images follow the Indian representation, but with a few alterations. The image of the Tibetan Rgyal chen bzhi then spread as far as mainland China in the Yuan and Qing periods. The same depictions are also found in Nepal. This fact shows the broad scale and influence of Tibetan Buddhist art throughout the history of Buddhist art.

Abbreviations

Taisho: Taisho Tripitaka 大正新脩大藏經

TTP: Tibetan Tripitaka, the Peking Edition, Suzuki Foundation.

Toh.: Tibetan Tripitaka, the sDe dge Edition, Delhi Karmapae Chodhey, Gyalwae

Sungrab Partun khang.

R: *Yi dam rgya mtsho'i sgrub thabs rin chen 'byung gnas kyi lhan thabs rin 'byung don gsal*. Lokesh Chandra, *Sādhana-mālā of the Panchen Lama* (New Delhi: International Academy of Indian Culture, 1974).

Tar: “Yi dam rgya mtsho'i sgrub thabs rin chen 'byung gnas”. *Tāranāta.gSung 'bum* (Leh: Namgyal and Tsewang Taru, 1982–1987).

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Tables

Table 1. Names in Sanskrit and Tibetan, and attributes of standard Tibetan Four lokapāla

Sanskrit name	Dhṛtarāṣṭra		Virūḍhaka		Virūpākṣa		Vaiśravaṇa	
Tibetan name	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skyes po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras/ Rnam sras	
Tibetan standard attributes in hand	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left
	Lute		Sword		Stūpa	Snake/ noose	Victory banner	Mongoose

Table 2. Bhaiṣajyaguru ritual translated from Tibetan to Chinese. (Taisho. No. 926)

(藥師瑠璃光王七仏本願功德經念誦儀軌供養法)

	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skyes po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras	
Attributes	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left
	Lute		Sword		Noose		Mouse	

Table 3. Bhaiṣajyaguru ritual translated from Tibetan to Chinese (Taisho. No. 928) (修藥師儀軌布檀法)

Attributes	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skye po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras	
	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left
	Lute		Sword		Snake noose		Treasure mouse	

Table 4. Atīśa's four lokapala mandara ritual, (TTP. No. 3776, Toh. No. 2625)

Attributes	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skyes po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras	
	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left
	Lute		Sword		Noose		Mongoose	

Table 5 Vikiraṇoṣṇiṣa Yoga ritual(尊勝佛頂修瑜伽法儀軌 善無畏訳) (Taisho. No. 973)

Attributes	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skyes po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras	
	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left
	Lute							

Table 6 Sarvadurgatipariśodanatantra

Attributes	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skyes po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras		
	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	
	Lute		Sword		Vajra Noose		Club		Purse made from mongoose

Table 7 Sarvadurgatipariśodanatantra Vajravārman's commentary (TTP. No. 3453 Toh. No. 2526)

Attributes	Yul 'khor bsrung		'Phags skyes po		Mig mi bzang		Rnam thos sras						
	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left	Right	Left					
	Lute		Sword		Lotus		Vajra Noose		Placed on the knee		Club		Purse made from mongoose

Table 8. Angry Rnam thos sras from Rin 'byun

Attributes	Rnam thos sras		
	Right	Left	
	Stūpa		Victory banner with a vajra shaft

Table 9. Rnam thos sras sādhanā from Tibetan Tripitaka TTP. No. 4970

Attributes	Rnam thos sras		
	Right	Left	
	Stūpa		Spear

Figures

Fig. 1



Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Virūḍhaka

Virūpākṣa

Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 2



Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Virūḍhaka

Virūpākṣa

Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 3



(L) Dhṛtarāṣṭra

(R) Virūḍhaka



(L) Virūpākṣa

(R) Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 4



(L) Vaiśravaṇa

(R) Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Fig. 5



(L) Virūḍhaka

(R) Virūpākṣa

Fig. 6



Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 7



Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 8



Jambhara

Fig. 9



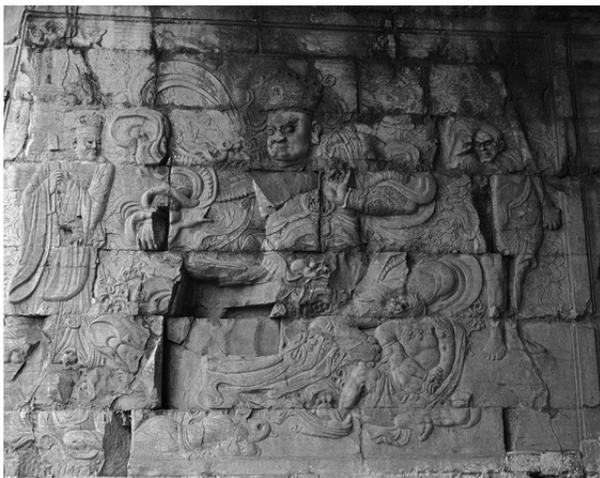
Jambhara

Fig. 10



Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 11



Virūpākṣa

Fig. 12



Virūpākṣa

Vaiśravaṇa

Fig. 13



Dhṛtarāṣṭra

Virūḍhaka

Virūpākṣa

Vaiśravaṇa