

The inappropriate embellishment of ancient Tibetan buildings

Minyak Choekyi Gyaltzen

Nowhere in China, or perhaps even the entire world, is it possible to see such major changes as in the case of traditional building methods in the Tibetan region. All the modifications or alterations to Tibet's historical monuments have been carried out by the Tibetan themselves. Apart from the temples, castles and palaces that have disappeared without trace, building, embellishing or extending in such a way as to alter the original design substantially entails a deviation from the local tradition. This is a very grave mistake, an error that should not be accepted or tolerated. The main point is that Tibet has produced some world-famous examples of buildings, as its many palaces and monasteries testify. Our architectural designs and features are exceptional in many respects. However, we should be aware of the following fact: that until now we have failed utterly to cherish and preserve our own architectural heritage. Thanks to benevolent natural conditions, such as the dry climate, many ancient buildings that are mentioned in the histories have managed to survive to the present day, and we ourselves should also do something to protect and preserve them. Nevertheless, apart from the damage and destruction suffered by ancient buildings as a consequence of war and natural disasters, all other modifications and alterations have been wrought by the inhabitants of the country themselves. This is a serious blight on our history, and should be a source of deep regret to all Tibetans. Insofar as I have devoted my time to the study of ancient Tibetan buildings, I would like to present this state of affairs to as wide as possible an audience, since I regard it as my duty to speak out against this trend. I shall attempt to do so by presenting the following cases.

1. The Lhasa Jokhang

The Lhasa Jokhang is a very important temple that is over 1350 years old. The earliest temple has only two stories, and the original dimensions were confined to that same square shrine. In the eleventh century, following the restoration by Zanskar Lotsawa, extensions were added to the eastern and southern sides. The most significant development occurred around 1650, when the Great Fifth Dalai Lama built the three-storey temple with materials from Kagyupa monasteries that had been destroyed, and erected the four-storied towers at each of the four corners. This was when the building acquired its present form.

2. Samye monastery

Samye is the first Tibetan monastery. Attributed to Padmasambhava, the monastery has been shown to have featured tiled balconies and to have had a number of outer faces [i.e.

it was polygonal]. It was damaged by fire on two or three occasions. The first occasion was in the thirteenth century, after which it was restored by Ra Lotsawa. It suffered another outbreak of fire in the eighteenth century. The subsequent restoration by Demo Delek Gyatso may have been the occasion when the monastery received its distinctive gold and copper pagoda style roof. Alternatively, this roof may have been added in the nineteenth century, during the time of the Eleventh Dalai Lama, when major alterations were carried out in the course of the restoration by the Kalön Shedrawa.

The pagoda-style roof was completely destroyed in 1967. In 1987, thanks to a substantial Government subvention, Samye was again restored to its pre-Cultural Revolution form.

Figure 1: Samye's original appearance, as shown in an early mural painting

Figure 2: Detail of a mural showing Samye following Demo's restoration

Figure 3: Samye at the time of Shedra

3. Sekhar Guthog in Lhobrak

The construction of Sekhar Guthog is attributed to [the famous twelfth-century poet and saint] Milarepa. This palace is very similar in design to other palaces that are still to be seen in the Lhobrag area. During the fifteenth century Pawo Tsuglag Trengwa built the assembly hall of Sang-ngag-ling and added many images to the topmost storey, thereby changing somewhat its original appearance. In the seventeenth century, during the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama, the appearance underwent a substantial change following the addition of a gilded roof.

4. The Great Assembly-hall of Drepung monastery

The hall is said to be the largest of its kind anywhere in the Eastern Hemisphere, with 192 pillars. It was built by Ne'u Dzung in the time of Sonam Gyatso [the Third Dalai Lama]. Later, in the time of Kessang Gyatso [Seventh Dalai Lama, eighteenth century], Pholane [the effective ruler of Tibet] extended the assembly hall and altered its original form.

5. The Songtsen Temple in Chongye, Lhokha

The temple that stands atop the tomb of Songtsen Gampo [d. AD 649] seems originally to have been the living-quarters of the tomb's guardian, but over the course of time it became a commemorative temple for the deceased emperor. It faces west, and there are only four pillars. A twelve-pillared assembly hall was built adjacent to it in the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama. The construction of houses to the south and west of the original temple has rendered it invisible from these angles.

6. *The Great Temple of Sakya*

The Great temple of Sakya was first built around 1268 by Drogön Chögyal as a single-storey square construction. Later on, in the time of the Sakya ruler Wön Wangchen, a new temple was built to the north, giving the edifice its present form. In 1947, a wealthy trader named Bomdawa sponsored the construction of a number of stone-walled temples within the great hall, and by installing a mezzanine, the creation of the new two-storey constructions resulted in very major changes to the interior design. This is the greatest of all the modifications to be wrought in the case of any ancient Tibetan monument, and the result is a disaster. Nowadays the building that most closely resembles the original form of the Great Temple of Sakya is the Tragyema temple of Riwoche Dzong in Chamdo [Eastern Tibet].

In short [under certain circumstances] it is possible to know how ancient buildings looked a thousand years ago. However, of all the early Tibetan buildings that have not succumbed to natural disasters there is not one that has not undergone subsequent artificial modification and alteration. There are a great many other cases that could have been described beyond the examples cited above. Even though buildings such as the Jokhang and the Potala may have gained in splendour and beauty thanks to their embellishment, the alterations that were made to the interior of the Great Sakya Temple are nothing less than a crime against architecture, a real act of violence.

Careful decisions have to be made as to whether alterations represent an improvement or a defacement. Nowadays, when any restoration is carried out on temples, monks are delighted to see an old temple demolished and newly rebuilt, and laypeople too are perfectly happy to knock down their own houses – houses that may be several centuries old – and reconstruct them.

Our excellent ancestral craftsmanship and building skills should be praised and valued and should receive the fame they deserves. Alterations have been made to many buildings of great historical value by a number of well-intentioned people. However, the complete modification of the original form of these buildings is something I would regard as a cause of regret.