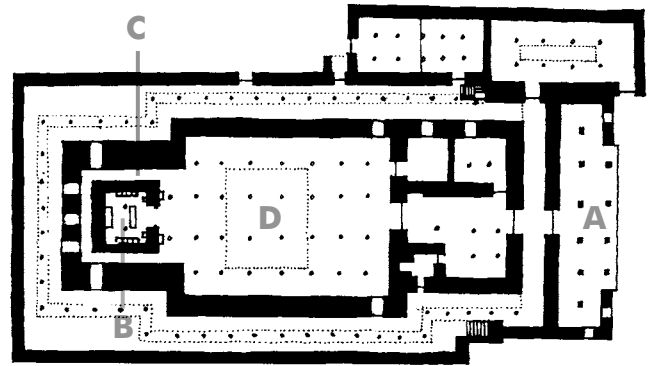


The Ramoche Restoration Project, Lhasa

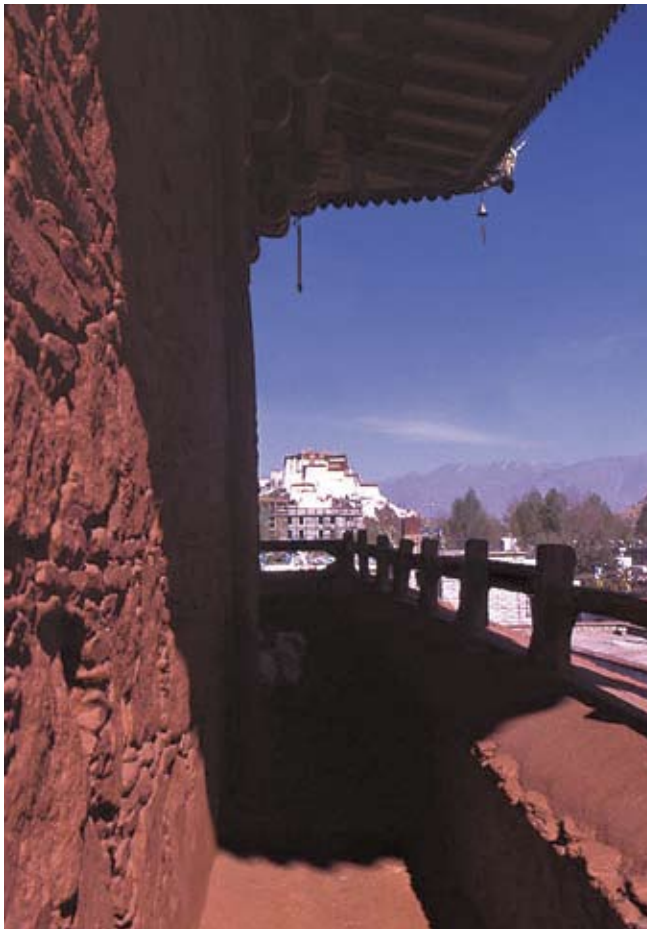
Amy Heller

Ramoche temple is one of the most ancient sanctuaries in Lhasa, Tibet. More than a millennium old, the construction of its core shrine is traditionally attributed to the reign of Tibet's first historical ruler, Songtsen Gampo (r. c. 629-50). According to later legendary tradition, Buddhism was first introduced to Tibet by Songtsen Gampo's two foreign wives, the princesses Wencheng (d. 680) from China and Bhrikuti Devi (T. Belsa Tritsun) from Nepal, said to be responsible respectively for the construction of the Ramoche and the Jokhang, the two largest and historically most important temples in Lhasa. Ramoche has been listed as a key cultural relic under the protection of the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) government since 1962, and is recognized as a national historical monument of the People's Republic of China (PRC). Situated about 500 metres northeast of the Jokhang, Ramoche houses a community of about 120 monks and is a popular des-



(Plan 1) Ground plan of Ramoche temple
Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region
Circa mid-7th-early 8th century
(Based on Larsen and Sinding-Larsen, p. 113)

A Entrance
B: Principal shrine
C: Circumambulatory passage
D: Main hall



(Fig. 1) Circumambulatory passage on the rooftop with view of the Potala Ramoche temple, Lhasa, Tibet Autonomous Region
(Photography by the author)

tionation for pilgrims. It is oriented on an east-west axis, with the entrance in the east (Plan 1).

Gradually expanded over time, the temple underwent four major stages of construction. The earliest temple consisted only of the principal shrine and its circumambulatory passage (T. *nang khor*). The holiest relic, the Ramoche 'Jowo' Buddha (a statue representing the historical Buddha Shakyamuni), is enshrined here. The main hall was constructed sometime between the 11th and the 13th century. As the monastic population increased – particularly after Tsongkhapa (1357-1419) founded the Gelugpa monastic school in the late 14th century and Ramoche became affiliated with the Gelugpa teachings – the main hall was enlarged to its present dimensions and the protector shrines were added in front.

The 'Great Fifth' Dalai Lama, Ngawang Lobsang Gyatso (1617-82), made Lhasa the capital as of 1642. According to his autobiography, after renovating and enlarging the Potala Palace in the mid-17th century, he embarked on a renovation programme at Ramoche in about 1673 (Tucci, p. 208 and Jackson, pp. 201-3). At this time, he commissioned mural paintings for the walls of the principal shrine, and the construction of a new shrine dedicated to the Sixteen Arhats, replete with clay statues: this was to be built on the roof directly above the Jowo Buddha, with a gilt-copper roof and another circumambulatory passage. The Fifth Dalai Lama's list of commissioned works details the names of Nepalese copper-smiths and Tibetan artisans who were engaged for this work (Cüppers, 2004). Apartments were also constructed as a secondary residence for the Dalai Lama and his immediate entou-



(Fig. 2) View of the roof of Ramoche showing completed restoration work (Photography by Mi Nyag Rinpoche Chökyi Gyaltzen)

rage during the major Buddhist holidays. Since Ramoche is situated on the longitudinal axis of the Potala, the Dalai Lama would have been able to see the Potala from the centre of town while performing the ritual circumambulation of the Ramoche *arhat* shrine (Fig. 1).

Although Ramoche suffered much damage during the Chinese Cultural Revolution (1966-76), it was partially restored and opened for worship in 1985. The upper roof and the roof shrine, however, remained closed. In 2004, the Swiss government initiated a conservation project for the roof and roof shrine; since Ramoche is in the vicinity of the Jokhang, a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage protection zone, it was stipulated that the work was to be carried out using traditional Tibetan architectural techniques and materials, conforming to UNESCO guidelines. In addition, this writer was appointed to oversee progress, working with Tibetan and Chinese architects specializing in conservation. The project, a collaboration between the Swiss Foreign Affairs Ministry and Federal Office of Culture, was approved by both the Chinese authorities and the Tibetan religious authorities, and coordinated by the Lhasa Municipality Foreign Affairs and Cultural Relics offices. In 2004 the Swiss Federal Councillor, Pascal Couchepin, made an official week-long trip to the PRC in his capacity as Minister of Culture, and visited Lhasa to attend the signing of the agreement pledging Swiss funds (CHF200,000 or US\$160,000) to support the restoration work.

It was the first time that Beijing had authorized a foreign government to undertake work to preserve Tibetan heritage. The project was completed in September 2005, and a concluding ceremony took place in April 2006, notably attended by Swiss Ambassador to the PRC Dante Martinelli, who said: 'The renovation project ... is an "ideal start" of China-Switzerland cooperation in cultural heritage preservation in Tibet'

(<http://en.tibet.cn/news/tin>). The conservation work was carried out by a Tibetan and Chinese team using traditional Tibetan techniques and materials, under the supervision of this writer, with Mi Nyag Rinpoche Chökyi Gyaltzen and Qu Yan, both architects specializing in conservation of Tibetan buildings (Fig. 2). However, while the roof and upper circumambulatory passage are now open to the public, the roof shrine remains closed, because it is empty of the traditional clay statues it once housed, and there has been a lack of funds to commission replacement statues and consecrate their contents.

The murals that line the walls at the entrance, back and sides of the principal shrine on the ground floor consist of very fine gold line paintings on a red background representing the Buddhas Amitabha and Maitreya (Fig. 3). The paintings on the entrance walls are coated with a thick layer of clear varnish, which is affecting the pigments. This coating needs to be removed with appropriate solvents to preserve the original 17th century paintings. The back and side walls of the shrine are covered in an obtrusive layer of black paint, present since the shrine reopened in the 1980s. When painting conservators examined the walls in 2004, in the context of the International Conference on Conservation of Traditional Architecture and Mural Paintings (20-24 September, organized by Tibet University, Lhasa, and Norwegian Technical University, Trondheim), they observed cracks in the black paint, revealing the original, undamaged paintings underneath (Fig. 4); removing all the paint to uncover them would, however, require the skill of an experienced painting conservator. At the conference, three professors from the Fine Arts Department at Tibet University proposed that they assist in the conservation of these important paintings, which would give them an opportunity to learn the techniques involved. They would then be able



(Fig. 3) Detail of the Buddha Maitreya in the principal shrine
 Circa 1670
 Mural painting
 Height 60 cm (approximately)
 (Photography by the author)

to pass on this knowledge to their students, and contribute to the preservation of Tibetan cultural heritage.

In view of these factors, this writer and Swiss Nobel Prize winner Professor Richard R. Ernst, a long-time supporter of Tibetan cultural heritage projects, conceived a follow-up conservation project for Ramoche. The purpose would be to conserve the paintings in the principal shrine on the ground floor and replace the clay statues in the upper roof shrine – 21 in all, representing the Buddha Shakyamuni, the Four Guardian Kings and the Sixteen Arhats. This would complement the original project, which was concerned exclusively with the structural conservation of the temple. It would also open possi-

bilities for its functional use by local residents and monks, and attract visitors.

This second phase of the Ramoche restoration project, to be sponsored jointly by the Swiss government and by private donors from several countries, includes funding for the construction of the statues, their consecration ceremony and the conservation of the mural paintings surrounding the Ramoche Jowo Buddha statue. It also takes into consideration the wish of the fine arts professors of Tibet University to participate as trainees. They would learn the techniques for conservation of mural paintings under the tutelage of Luigi Fieni, an Italian painting conservator experienced in conservation of mural paintings in Himalayan countries and in Kham (eastern Tibet). Fieni has worked for more than 10 years in the royal sanctuaries of Mustang, Nepal (Sanday, 1999), performing conservation of the mural paintings and training local people in these techniques. It is hoped that the project will commence in late autumn 2008 and be completed in spring 2009.

Amy Heller served as technical expert for restoration in Tibet for the Swiss Government, under the auspices of the Federal Office of Culture and the Department for Foreign Affairs, from 2004 to 2006. She is currently visiting professor at the Centre for Tibetan Studies, Sichuan University, Chengdu, and is affiliated with the Tibetan studies team of the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique, Paris.

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(Fig. 4) Back wall of the principal shrine showing area to be restored
 (Photography by Luigi Fieni)