

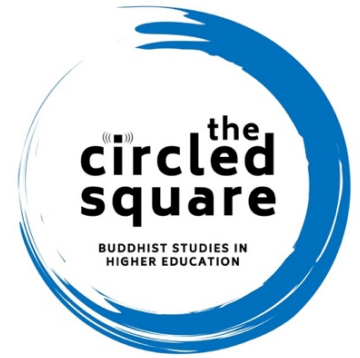
Episode 05: Wen-Shing Chou on Teaching Buddhist Art

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SPEAKERS

WC - Wen-Shing Chou

SR - Sarah Richardson



FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

[00:00:00.00] Wen-Shing Chou: And that's when I first became very interested in Buddhist art as a topic for future study. It was so inscrutable to me at the time.

[00:00:18:10] Sarah Richardson: Hello teachers and learners, welcome to this episode of The Circled Square! The podcast where we talk about teaching Buddhism in higher education. My name is Sarah Richardson from the Ho Center for Buddhist Studies at the University of Toronto. In this episode we sat down with Wen-Shing Chou Associate Professor of Art History at Hunter College CUNY in New York City. This was a really fun one for me because Wen-Shing and I are old friends. In this episode though I'm not talking to Wen-Shing about her research, which is normally what we talk about because we both do Tibetan art history but instead, I was talking about her teaching practice. **[00:00:53:07]** Now Wen-Shing has the great good fortune to teach in a school right in the heart of New York City. So her students and Wen-Shing together with them can walk to some of the greatest collections of Asian art anywhere outside of Asia. What a dream. This is a really interesting lens, I think, for Wen-Shing and her students. And it was a really interesting episode to hear about how to use the landscape of a city in teaching. So please enjoy this episode.

[00:01:27:00] Sarah Richardson: So Wen-Shing can you tell us a little bit about Hunter College and who your students are?

[00:01:30:28] Wen-Shing Chou: Yes. So Hunter College is one of the many colleges of the city University of New York a public school in the center of New York City. We serve mostly the New York City population. My students come from all the different five boroughs of New York City. And I teach both, we have both an undergraduate program and a graduate program. And I am in the art and art history department and we have both an MA program and MFA program.

[00:02:03:12] Sarah Richardson: Great. And what kinds of courses do you teach? You do both kind of survey lecture courses in Asian art and then more specialized courses, right?

[00:02:11:23] Wen-Shing Chou: So my sort of specialty ranges from pretty much different topics. The range of courses I cover include a wide array of courses in East Asia and the Himalayas. So Buddhism is my own specialty, Buddhist art is my own specialty. So I teach different topics within that. But I also teach, I just also finished teaching a class on Chinese

painting and calligraphy and I also teach other museum studies-based courses as well as other topics. I'm teaching a seminar right now on the forbidden city Beijing. Yeah so, it's a range.

[00:02:53:27] Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And before we go into your specifics of teaching and how you open these topics up for students, can you tell us a little bit about your own background. Where did you study and how did you get interested in Buddhist art as a topic?

[00:03:05:25] Wen-Shing Chou: Sure. So I majored in art history as an undergraduate at the University of Chicago. Then became very interested in the topic. I grew up being very interested in art in general and I just found that way of looking to be really interesting. And after I graduated from the University of Chicago, I graduated without a job at the time. And went to a lecture that was given by Sarah Fraser at Northwestern University. At the time, on a project she was doing in the Silk Road city of Dunhuang, the Chinese Silk Road city of Dunhuang, where she was digitizing, it was part of a Mellon funded initiative to digitize and turn into a kind of virtual realities, the caves of Dunhuang. **[00:04:01:21]** I was just really excited by being able to see the sights and see the paintings in such detail that I went to see her after the talk and basically asked her for a job. And luckily, I was able to join the team and started helping her and her team digitize, catalogue, the images that they acquired. And that's when I first became very interested in a Buddhist art as a topic for future study. **[00:04:33:23]** It was so inscrutable to me at the time that really excited me just how to make sense of something. As an art historian I've been trained to look at things in all sorts of different ways, and this is the first time I've felt so sort of useless and not knowing where, what to do with something a sight so enormous and so full history and so full of different kinds of art.

[00:05:06:23] Sarah Richardson: Diverse imagery.

[00:05:07:29] Wen-Shing Chou: Right. And so that's what's prompted me to go back to graduate school and focus on Buddhist art. Then I subsequently received my PhD from University of California Berkeley. I studied with my advisor at Berkeley was Professor Patricia Berger. And through studying with her I became very interested in the sort of Sino-Tibetan exchange and sort of the more broadly the issue of how the Tibetan Buddhist tradition became very instrumental to courts in China. And I subsequently wrote a dissertation which I, after much revision, was turned into a book. My first book Buddhist Sacred Site of Mount Wutai.

[00:06:01:00] Sarah Richardson: Yes, your wonderful book *Wutai Shan* has just come out last year. And congratulations on that. Thank you. It's a wonderful book. And so in your courses with students, do you find you do much with Dunhuang? Is that a site that you like introducing students to?

[00:06:19:18] Wen-Shing Chou: I do, very much yes. Yeah.

[00:06:22:20] Sarah Richardson: How, what how do you do it? What's the way in that you start with?

[00:06:27:06] Wen-Shing Chou: I think just presenting the fact of what the place is, is seductive enough. For to show it, and you know just explaining to students, here we have a site that was such a confluence of different traditions and cultures and religions that thrived for such a long time. And that the remains of which we have so much to look at. We have something like, what is the exact number 300? I don't know the number, 392 caves that are fully painted, the number is wrong, I have to come back to that. In this kind of stretch of Cliff facade has probably something like over a thousand caves that ranges for at least a thousand years of history.

[00:07:07:07] There's actually much more, the site was really active until the early 20th, it was pretty active until you went up to the early 20th century starting from starting in the fourth, around the fourth century. So I think just sort of letting students understand the magnitude of what we have to think with and learn from. **[00:07:30:28]** And of course the library cave, the famous so-called library cave, where all the manuscripts were discovered in the early part of century also contributed to the sort of different ways one can have access to the site.

[00:07:44:28] Sarah Richardson: Sure. Yes so for Dunhuang we have both. All of this visual imagery this rich visual imagery and then a huge cache of texts that are also diverse in multi languages. And yeah, can shed a lot of light on this moment. And the text cave was closed by the 11th century, so all of those texts are very early really exciting. So tell us something about your course, you have courses that are organized specifically around Buddhist art. So what do you find is most effective to teach about with Buddhist art? What do you think student's kind of, where do you start with them?

[00:08:24:09] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah, so because most of my students have no background whatsoever in either Buddhist art or so-called Buddhism, or Buddhist practice. I really stress the importance of close looking, or objective analysis, as a gateway into this study. I stress to them that it's good that they don't know anything about Buddhism because oftentimes it's very easy that we start to use what we know to project onto histories and objects that we see and encounter. **[00:09:03:12]** And so for my class on Buddhist art we look at, we, I have them in the very beginnings of class I would have them look at and examine things and objects from...we're right next to the... we're a few blocks away from the MET. So I take them there and I introduced objects from there and visit later looking at the art objects from...For one example I can give as we would look at an example of a Gupta Buddha in the Indian or South Asian art galleries which is adjacent to the East Asian art galleries and I would have them look at and compare an example, of an example of a form of a Buddhist image in India versus the room adjacent to it of a Buddhist image from the Northern Wei period.

[00:09:51:29] Sarah Richardson: In China?

[00:09:53:03] Wen-Shing Chou: In China. Where we can talk about where students can immediately use sort of formal comparisons to look at what's similar and what's different. Yeah and so that's very, very tangible way to access. And then of course we want to talk about after that. After observing the similarities and differences what can we know about that.

[00:10:15:21] Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And when you're doing that comparison specifically, can you help us visualize what are the objects they're looking at? They're looking at a large stone Gupta Buddha from maybe site similar to Sarnath or something like that? Yeah. So it'll be a quite beautifully embodied smooth sculpture. And they'll be comparing that to a metal sculpture and the Northern Wei?

[00:10:40:12] Wen-Shing Chou: Right. So they'll immediately see, I think, in these two examples that... they at the MET they changed the display a little bit from time to time but the a few times they've had them facing each other over the passageway that connects the two wings. And so I think there is that, as you pointed out, the material, the make is very different this is not smooth stone sculpture vs. a metal casting sculpture. So I think in both cases we have this kind of form of a Buddha that looks that has similar iconography.

[00:11:16:16] Sarah Richardson: Sure.

[00:11:17:03] Wen-Shing Chou: I put it right. I think the right hand is in an earth touching gesture or something like that in the left hand or the left hand is in an Earth touching gesture in the right hands in some sort of Abhaya or do not fear gesture so they can. And then there's also this kind of attention to the repose on the drapery. So there's immediately, I think students can see that these two images belong to... they have a strong connection in the larger visual world that they come from. And in terms of materials we can discuss what it means for something to be made of stone. Where did that come from? What does it mean for something to be made of metal? Is it more portable if it's smaller? And what about the size and the make. And then also sort of formal features are students often like to make the remark "Oh this Buddha looks more Indian" or "that one looks more Chinese."

[00:12:08:03] Sarah Richardson: They're getting there mostly from an assumption of like facial features or something.

[00:12:12:06] Wen-Shing Chou: Right. I think so yeah facial features and also kind of stylistic features.

[00:12:16:18] Sarah Richardson: Stylistic dress and...

[00:12:18:03] Wen-Shing Chou: Right. And so I would have them sort of, sort of unravel that a little bit more. And introduce also other factors such as technology. So we have this kind of piece-mold technology for casting bronze images that came from a long tradition of bronze piece casting. And in China that also conditioned sort of the angularities of the way certain images early bronze image just look in China. So I think we try to introduce these various different factors to try to elucidate the sort of changes that happen. **[00:12:58:10]** One very interesting thing to discuss I think not just in classroom but in sort of scholarship in general is, do we use the word transmission? Do we use the word appropriation? Do we use the word adaptation? Or do we use the localization? **[00:13:14:11]** I mean all of these words I think have

some virtue and some biases. And so just the sort of uncertainty as to how to describe that narrative is something that I would like to open up to the students as well.

[00:13:28:21] Sarah Richardson: Yeah. Wonderful. And are there other sorts of ways when you're teaching your students because you're in the incredible city of New York that you engage with the city? What are some ways that you use the city in the landscape of your teaching?

[00:13:45:18] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah, I mean, I'm always, I'm constantly thinking of different creative ways for my students to engage because we do have so much resources. Recently I've always... I remember as a graduate students or beginning graduate students, I remember the shock of going to Asia Week which is annual event in New York City that draws dealers and sort of art buyers from all over the world to for sort of the kind of what I would you call a trade show for all things objects of all those so-called Asian art objects. **[00:14:22:08]** So where there are galleries, viewing galleries, auction houses, dealers would set up shows displays where basically the objective is to bring people to see what they have and also to put things on the market for sale. And museums are a big part of creating this kind of participation because museums also are out in the market looking to acquire things as well. **[00:14:49:22]** And so I remember as a you know as a young graduate student the shock that they gave me in terms of just seeing how this was all commodity, and for toward a very sort of, this is rich people buying fine things to decorate their homes or to add to their wealth or investment. But now as a teacher, I see it as an incredible opportunity for students to think about why we are interacting with and how we're interacting with Buddhist art both inside and outside of the classroom. Because we, we can't, we, we can, we never can separate ourselves from this larger context. And so I take my students now to Asia Week in March and I have them I ask them to do an assignment or just casual discussions. **[00:15:37:23]** It could be different depending on the class and the level and the topic engaged. To ask them to think about how the Buddhist image, images, Buddhist images that we learn about you know from Dunhuang early history to a little bit later how they are kind of displayed and presented to this New York audience or to this international audience today how the information is delivered how the lighting conditions, how things are to review and what is the value? Not just commercial but what is the value of Buddhist art today? And I think that often is very can be very revealing really revealing for students as well.

[00:16:19.11] Sarah Richardson: Are they troubled by or curious about sort of the shifting field of what's assigned value and how? Do they comment to you on the ethics of how things are?

[00:16:32.19] Wen Shing Chou: My students are shockingly open minded. So I think there will be a few that are feeling very indignant. But mostly I see that they use this as an occasion to reflect on their own value systems. And so I think in this way reflect on how much what they know and what they're interested in is filtered through or conditioned by this contemporary context rather than something older.

[00:17:00.15] Sarah Richardson: Yes. And when they're analyzing these displays are you asking them to do this just verbally like in writing. Where do you get them to do diagrams or photographs or they're kind of...?

[00:17:11.21] Wen-Shing Chou: I should do that thank you for giving [that to] me. I am going to ask them now that you mentioned I hadn't fleshed it out completely, but I think it's great. Thinking about strategies of display, asking them which objects are located where and how they're located in relation to one another. So thank you Sarah! And also so diagrams and also, I guess photographic kind of like photo journals would be really very easy for them to just take pictures on their phones and add that into their overall analysis.

[00:17:43.09] Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And do you have favorite galleries that you always go to or do you have so many near Hunter College.

[00:17:50.15] Wen Shing Chou: Well so. So I really yeah. There are so many, but I like to take them to either to Sotheby's or Christie's shows because they're just... there's so many floors of them and students can then think about how objects are categorized into different sales and displays. And how Buddhist art objects fit into that and how our own category this so-called category of Buddhist Art to some degree stands from those categories as well. **[00:18:18.00]** And so those give you a good comprehensive overview but I will then also go to less well known or less open galleries to see specific pieces. A few years ago there was a very I taught a class I'm picturing Buddhist biographies and there was this very interesting piece of image of a Milarepa that was on display at a gallery that wasn't opened to the public and that was already sold and so I took the students to basically somebody's living room. And it was just wonderful to again, the context was this display was very interesting but also just being able to look at it closely and kind of very unusual. An interesting example.

[00:18:56.15] Sarah Richardson: What was that. What was unusual about this image of Milarepa. Milarepa's a great Tibetan Yogi saint and is often I mean the images that I can conjure up easily are small bronzes usually of a figure wearing just a small loin cloth and often with a hand cupping...

[00:19:16.20] Wen Shing Chou: Yeah, this was a Thangka, painting. So it had very interesting, I think, in some sort of I think it would have been probably an 18th century, 17th or 18th century. I can't recall now exactly; it was a Thangka that had a lot of different episodes not some not from his biography by Tsangnyön Heruka, but from the songs. From the gurs. So that was interesting because students were reading them and to kind of think about what gets pictorialized what gets mapped on to what is looked to be a sort of biographical / devotional image of Milarepa.

[00:19:58.00] Sarah Richardson: Wonderful. And then you've also done a little bit with using digital technology to introduce students to sites. Can you tell us a bit more about how you do that and how you teach with digital tech?

[00:20:11.10] Wen Shing-Chou: So I come back to Dunhuang again because of sites like Dunhuang, that is basically continuing what the Mellon Foundation's project, Mellon International Dunhuang Archive, was doing. And now doing it [on] a much larger scale there at their catalog... they're digitizing the caves of Dunhuang and it's kind of amazing speed. Every time I log on there more caves that seems to have been available for viewing both in terms of being able to see every inch of the wall in high resolution and also being able to take a kind of virtual tour of it through it, of the cave. And so that I think both that sort of that the opportunity that affords us both close looking, being able to see these in a way that you couldn't possibly even do when you're at the site and also getting some sense of the sort of spatial relations of objects and of images to one another. **[00:21:12:07]** And so one of the possibilities... so I thought I'd make full use of that now. There used to be, I still use books I think books are still helpful in fact publications of books, but these e-sites give you a very in a very quick way gives you a sense of one sense of the space. And also with Dunhuang images because a lot of them are in this very interesting way of dynamic way related to texts that we know and to specific versions of texts that we know. So that also allows us to do a lot of interesting comparison.

[00:21:49.28] Sarah Richardson: Analysis right. So can Yeah. What's an example you can work on?

[00:21:55.01] Wen-Shing Chou: Yes so two different examples that I often do. One is I think one example is the Vimalakirti Sutra, The Vimalakirti Nirdeśha sutra, and we know possibly the version that was in use in Dunhuang at the time and we have an English translation of it. So I asked students, one exercise I have students do for example is to have one group of students read excerpts from the text and another group of students look at images of the types and sorts of these kind of... presenting these texts referencing this texts in Dunhuang. And then have them come back as a group to discuss the sort of, what is it that they see. What are the major features that they see? What is the logic of the composition, both the textual and the and the visual? This particular composition is very interesting because for a while they were often being depicted on either side of the Ming altar or either side of the doorway. **[00:22:54.05]** And of course this kind of idea of nonduality is so central to the text. And so this idea that we're you know, that this text can be construed as kind of a dual gateway to do nonduality is very captivating. And you have you know that this text is about this great debate between the layman Buddhist named Vimalakirti who was supposedly a sort of embodiment of a Bodhisattva, really a bodhisattva, and there is a deity of wisdom in Buddhism, named Manjushri. And so having them on both sides of either to altar or the door really, and pairing them with all the other sort of dualistic components of the text, that actually is supposed to illustrate non-duality then just is a very ingenious way to fit, to compose these aspects of this text. And so that's one example. The other example I would I really enjoy teaching is looking at these Pure Land visualizations, the Guanxing or the visualization of Amitabha, I mean Amitabha's paradise alongside these so-called pure-land tableaux, these large architectonic spaces of Pure Land. And so that's a very different way of thinking about the connection between a text that is about or prescribes to some extent, these visualization techniques, and the sort of pictorialization of that.

[00:24:32.29] Sarah Richardson: Of what matters then. And so what strikes your students as most surprising do you think when they come to the visual images in terms of what is there and what is not, what do you think?

[00:24:45:01] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah I think they come from such a different visual tradition that they don't even, I mean, I think the other thing I could have them do is also before seeing the images come up with their own ways of visualizing this. I think a lot of times things are a lot more, are rendered in a lot more concrete ways than they imagine. And that's because they think of these philosophical ideas as being kind of abstract and intangible and yet I think what's surprising is how these very vivid figurative representations from the local tradition is so alive and well and capable of interpreting ideas...

[00:25:39.04] Sarah Richardson: And interpreted in yeah very kind of probably relatable ways right palaces look like palaces they have gardens that are recognizable, architecture. So they're rendered in very kind of human material terms. So what kind of assignments do you like to use with students to test them. So you've talked about analyzing displays and then doing this comparison of text and image. What do you help them build through the course towards. Like what do you do in final assignments with them?

[00:26:19:01] Wen-Shing Chou: Right. So in terms of going back to the use of digital technology for example it's a lot of information to absorb. You have on the one hand just basic iconography what you're looking at and, I know that full well from the first time that I was encountering these images, and then you have these kind of very sort of sometimes dense, sometimes esoteric, sometimes a little bit hard to grasp concepts that are being introduced in texts and images as well. And so one assignment I would like to ask them to do and I just I credit this to a colleague of mine, Nikki McCoy's, is assigning students to take, to describe kind of giving a tour of one of the caves, so I think [in] that assignment they would have to be able to kind of get the basics of looking at what they're looking at right there, the basics of what is it, what that sort of thing [is], where's subject matter. And then also think about how as a space it works how these different tableaux's, or things, or representations relate to one another.

[00:27:33:12] Sarah Richardson: Yeah that could be really fun having them be kind of tour guides for a specific cave for each other, that'd be great. Can you tell us a little bit about your...so your own research work has been focused especially on kind of 18th century Qing adaptation transmission at the Sino-Tibetan border and exchange. So can you tell us about that research a little bit? What has it been focused on and then how do you open that up to them to your classes?

[00:28:03:22] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah that's a good question. That's something I've been thinking very hard about because if you teach the classes chronologically, I rarely ever get to anywhere remotely close to the 18th century. Especially in a kind of survey class where there's just so much stuff to cover. But I think if I don't try very hard to sketch out a kind of historical trajectory, which is really hard to do considering what we're covering in the sort of density of

the different times and materials, one thing that's really that I can that students can be very accessible for in the 18th century for students is how much the tradition itself both visual, material and the textual tradition itself is invested in that narrative of that trajectory of where India, of where Buddhism comes from. [00:28:55:20] So in particular in the 18th century Qing court, what I'm working out right now is, this exclusively sort of Tibetan Buddhist circle of materials, exclusive group of materials that are related to Tibetan Buddhist practice and the Qing court. Closely affiliated with the Emperor, the Qianlong Emperor, and his guru Changkya Rölpe Dorjé. Now of course there's a wider group as well but basically objects made for use in the different temples in the Forbidden City in Beijing and also actually to be sent to further away places in Tibet. [00:29:36:29] In all of these materials there is this very strong desire to craft a narrative in which there was a continuous link of either transmission or reincarnation and... a timeless link as well between Buddhist India and coming, descending, starting with Buddhist India into dynastic Tibet to the Mongol Empire to the ring of the fifth Dalai Lama for example, the sort of Gelugpa Buddhism, directly then to the Qing court. So that the Qing itself is really a kind of descendent of that legacy that they're in fact also recreating, reinventing. And I think that is very compelling because when we think about, I think that adds a very different layer of dimension to this question of "how do we teach the transmission or appropriation of Buddhist traditions." Well interestingly, Buddhist themselves are very interested in that question. And so I think it gives us a very good opportunity to listen to these narratives by the people who constructed them.

[00:31:01:00] **Sarah Richardson:** Absolutely. And those kinds of objects that you're looking at that are working to express the importance of these many transmission stages what kind of objects are they?

[00:31:11:18] **Wen-Shing Chou:** So for example, one set of objects are these paintings or in fact they could be embroideries and prints as well of the rebirth lineages. So rebirth lineage as a concept of course was started in Tibet sometime probably in the 13th century and was a very important source of kind of political legitimacy as well as spiritual legitimacy as a way of kind of claiming transmission. Right. Not so much through teaching as it is through rebirth. And that idea really flourished again. I think in the way we see that in the fifth Dalai Lama's court, but is really was very strongly co-opted sometime in the 18th century in the Qing court. [00:32:05:03] So the Qianlong Emperor himself in fact we know had been recognized as a reincarnation of this kind of long lineage of luminous figures that trace back not surprisingly to Manjushri who he was commonly known as an emanation of. And so we have albums, we have thangkhas, we have prints that tries to reinforce the notion of rebirth lineage. Not just of the Qianlong Emperor himself but the figures in the Indo-Tibetan Buddhist world that he was relating to. So stressing this kind of connection of kinship, of spiritual kinship, between him and the Dalai Lama, the Panchen Lama and other important Gelugpa Lamas. And so it's basically, it's a rebirth lineage of images is one group of the images. Another set of images are for example we have these images of Qianlong as, at the center of this kind of Tibetan spiritual pantheon.

[00:33:21:18] The paintings of him, in the center is generally attributed to the Milanese Jesuit lay brother painter Giuseppe Castiglione, whereas the rest of it are attributed to court Tibetan painters that depict him in this kind of...inserts him into this kind of Gelugpa spiritual genealogy.

And so these are all different kinds of experimentations that tries to make that connection that I just described.

[00:33:55.09] Sarah Richardson: Yeah. And are there many copies of these paintings that survive?

[00:34:02:09] Wen-Shing Chou: So there are many copies of, for example, the Panchen Lamas rebirth lineage that the Qianlong had first received from the Panchen Lama as a gift. But the copies that we have are many, many versions that Qianlong had reproduced, and by reproducing, of course, it's not we don't mean exact replicas, but reinterpretations of them. And so we do have and yeah, we do have many, many versions of them circulating.

[00:34:34.05] Sarah Richardson: And what did he...and some of your research is also looking at ways he gifted these, right and sent them around. So how did how did Qianlong use these portraits and images that are tracing transmission as gifts and what were they meant to effect, do you think, in those exchanges?

[00:34:50.29] Wen-Shing Chou: So we don't know much about the rebirth lineage. There's only one album that I have with their textural records but the ones of him at the center of this kind of Tibetan Buddhist pantheon can sort of roughly categorize it as that way, were sent to Tibet as gifts and we know from accounts that they were venerated as kind of objects of devotion which is really just a very interesting thing. What that means. So we know that he had sent an image to the Tibet after the death of the 7th Dalai Lama, with Rölpe Dorjé who had been sent as an emissary. And we know that when the Dalai Lama came of age, he had initiated this kind of routine ritual offering around it. And so it's sort of, on the one hand kind of appalling to think about, how an image of an emperor could then you know how he could have just so successfully inserted himself into this spiritual pantheon that scene that has such an air of sort of tradition and authority. **[00:35:58.22]** On the other hand I think it was a very sort of skillful manipulation and that's why in some ways I think it might have worked. There are also very interesting silences sort of references in the Tibetan texts that talk about the fact that not everyone approved of it. And I think those are really interesting. A few mentions of these like critical voices and I think they are also very important for the study.

[00:36:30.09] Sarah Richardson: Can you tell us also a bit about, you have some graduate students, master's students especially working with you. So how do you guide them in their research? What do you find is important in training graduate students?

[00:36:44:19] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah. So most of my graduate students are MA students rather than, we don't have a PhD program. And so I think for them I think to have a kind of basic solid foundation for sort of critical scholarship in whatever area that they cover. So I guess it depends on the project that they're looking at.

[00:37:18.26] Sarah Richardson: And do you find in helping them with their projects, do they need help writing about their research? Do they need guidance with writing especially and how do you, how do you help support them?

[00:37:31.00] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah, I mean every student is so different with their project. In fact I supervise a lot of contemporary Chinese art. And there I do focus on I focus on their argumentation because that's my expertise and I learn from them. So they have, with contemporary art, they have a lot of archival material, they have a lot of material. So I really work with them on how to synthesize this kind of existing scholarship and there's a wealth of stuff that they're using to make their argument. And so I think there I play less of a role in shaping the project as things are, providing a critical feedback to the project. Now my students who are working on more premodern materials. I think there I really work with them from the beginning on how to make a feasible project. What is a doable project? What is not? And I think so that's so. So that's why I was kind of caught off guard, I try to think every student is so different in terms of what intervention is needed. **[00:38:41.06]** I have also students who are really interested in Buddhist art but that they don't have really the language facilities so really their project tends to focus on Buddhist art in the modern context and the sort of geopolitical problems of that. And so I think it's really helping them develop something that is, that is interesting and relevant to them there.

[00:39:07.29] Sarah Richardson: And when you talk about helping students recognize feasible projects what do you think makes a feasible project for a student? What do they need to happen when pieces are key?

[00:39:18.00] Wen-Shing Chou: I think enough is I think we have enough historical.... if they want to make some sort of historical argument, [they need] enough information about where objects were from, enough, sort of, documentation to make that next step. If they're not doing a lot of primary research, then there's not a lot of primary research to be done, and how do they advance the argument that's been done before. And if they want to work on earlier materials where we have very few sources then I think the conceptual framing is very important in delivering whether you can deliver something new to the existing scholarship. It's very vague.

[00:40:10.14] Sarah Richardson: So as you as you develop your own research beyond this first book on Wutai Shan. What is your next step? What are you going to be working on from here?

[00:40:21.27] Wen-Shing Chou: Yeah. So I have just a few, so many different projects going on. Some are related to Buddhist art, some are not. I think I see this as an opportunity to really branch out. Now that I have kind of very sort of focused first book. I have a few different written, you know, one project that came out of that first book is what I've just been talking a little bit about, this notion of, I think it really has to do with this notion of time that is being sort of introduced alongside this notion of rebirth lineage. **[00:40:55:26]** So that's one thing I'm interested in, is how did the Qing as in the particular Qianlong era responded to, co-opted and reinterpreted this notion of rebirth and rebirth lineages. And so that's the one book project that will look at how. I think I would I would go back to the time of the Fifth Dalai Lama and look at what was done there.

[00:41:17.15] And then in coming all the way to the Qing to the 18th century, other parts perhaps, examples in Mongolia or Mongolian regions. And also, I would really like to, what part of my interest in this project in the 18th century is how much the narrative is completely interwoven with other senses of time where there's dynastic lineage or sort of empirical time. So succession, that it had to, that the dates of these rebirth lineage figures had to match up such that even though it's a very kind of eulogical attribution, they had to somehow be born and die in times that are conceivable within the sort of modern empirical temporal framework. So there is many sort of elements that are interesting for crafting this rebirth lineage that included multiple senses of temporalities. [00:42:17.26] And that, I think, really persisted up until the 20th century. So I would like to take this project up to the 20th century with painters like Amdo Jampa, for example, who was still perpetuating, articulating these ideas of emanation and rebirth through something like photo realism. So that's the arc of this one project I'm pursuing. A few others, there's one, I'm planning another exhibit. This has nothing to do with Buddhist art so you can edit it out. Because my graduate students as I have said are not are predominately not linguistically trained to do premodern materials and because of my interest in rethinking narratives, genealogies, I'm planning a yearlong curatorial seminar. [00:43:08.00] On the artist collector, connoisseur dealer C.C Wang who was arguably the most important dealer-collector of Chinese literati painting in the 20th century. And he lived and worked half a block away from Hunter for most of his life after he immigrated from China to the United States in 1949. And while he was known primarily as a very important dealer- collector; he also was in fact a very prolific and interesting artist. And so, I would like to use him and his work as an example to think about the completely interconnected, um it's basically two sides of a coin, collecting and artistic practice. And his sort of reinvention of that so-called literati tradition, revival of that tradition in the New York post World War Two context. And how he so seamlessly combined, he collected to paint, to create models. [00:44:18.00] And so to kind of introduce students to this idea. Students will be doing a seminar and students will be curating a show of his of works, thinking about how looking and collecting and practice are completely integral to one another in practice and also too, as a way to also kind of revive what this kind of very interesting history of 20th century New York in the formation of the Chinese art canon that we have now. So it's a very different project, I think.

[00:44:55.06] **Sarah Richardson:** That's fascinating. So C.C Wang as an artist which I didn't actually know about, I knew about him as a writer about literati painting catalogues. But did that art circulate much?

[00:45:12.18] **Wen-Shing Chou:** Yeah, he sold, yeah I would say it still... if you go to auctions now that his art is still for sale and you still see them he lived a long life. So he is fairly prolific too and it was very interesting because he was someone who truly lived and believed and adhered to this tradition of literati tradition of Dong Qichang at the same time, he was never bound by it. So he would just feel free to experiment. He has these paintings of still lives. He, I think, his studio overlooked Mark Rothko studio also on the Upper East Side. [00:45:49.26] And so he had windows that had view of that studio. He experimented with abstract expressionism, various movements. You can call pop art perhaps as well in to experiment with using a Sharpie for example rather than brush. And so he was, and his calligraphy was really sort of, at the same time

you know this was not someone who was looking to go outside of his tradition. [00:46:17.21] He was really someone who embodied that tradition but wasn't bound by it. So I think it's just he's just a wonderful example. I don't know how his art actually doesn't sell for...The value is not as high as somebody like Zhang Daqian who was a friend and a contemporary of his. But they are very interesting, and they are very wonderful works of, he not only works in landscape paintings, and in a way that we can really for students to really access what is so essential in a landscape painting for someone like him. He probably has also, you know, if you think of it that way, he as a person he probably saw more works of Chinese paintings than anyone ever did in the circumstances that he was in. And so what does that mean. How does that translate into his practice?

[00:47:09.24] **Sarah Richardson:** And yourself do you collect art? Do you have an interest in collecting though?

[00:47:13.06] **Wen-Shing Chou:** No I actually I strangely don't. I love looking...no I don't have a collecting practice... it's interesting because I think my relation to art has never been one that is a direct kind of appreciation. It's always come from a probably slightly more distanced and intellectual engagement that may have something to do with it. But I do love looking and I do find that act very engaging, perhaps also for lack of funds maybe.

[00:47:45.23] **Sarah Richardson:** Buying art is very expensive!

[00:47:52.11] **Wen-Shing Chou:** I never also feel like owning anything. I think that's another thing. I think I already have a lot of people to take care of. And I think just that my relationship doesn't, somehow something about it doesn't register with me I think I'm happy to look. But I don't like the idea of owning, it is both burdensome and almost I don't know, it's just not how I relate to them as objects.

[00:48:24.00] **Sarah Richardson:** You're interested in the questions they open up for you right.

[00:48:27.10] **Wen-Shing Chou:** Yeah. I'm not interested in ownership I suppose.

[00:48:31.20] **Sarah Richardson:** So as you've developed as a teacher in the last few years of your teaching what has changed? What do you feel is changing and where would you like to develop more in your teaching?

[00:48:46.21] **Wen-Shing Chou:** I think I would like to slow down, slow down, slow down, as sort of three goals I have for myself. I think when I started out, I feel like I need to cover a certain ground for the time that I spent with my students to be worthwhile. That they need to know certain things and that coverage was something that was important. Less and less I feel that way. I feel that it is much more valuable to take the time with something either there as an object or period in question and just sort of going back to the basics of close looking and close thinking. It's rare that one can really, in a semester's time, master anything beyond that. And so I am still trying to see how I can really, I think, take advantage of the resources of New York City to expose my

students to more close engagement. [00:49:52.10] And so that's and that's something that is difficult to do if you were to recycle the same course over and over again because the exhibit display changes. And so what I felt more comfortable in recent years is to not worry about really mastering anything because if you go to a show that you haven't been to instead of worrying that I can't teach it I just welcome my students and myself to kind of think about it. [00:50:24:07] And so that's been a very liberating experience.

[00:50:28.00] **Sarah Richardson:** Yeah. And they say cover one thing well is in fact probably much more valuable to your students than 50 things cursorily which they can retain little.

[00:50:39.13] **Wen-Shing Chou:** Yeah. So with that also comes the possibility of more creative engagement. So I teach for example this one class a survey of East Asia. We are going to spend a good few weeks on funerary art. And so on the one hand, I want them to really think about what are the things that are made for the afterlife. On the other hand it's a topic that is very directly related to everyone's life. [00:51:08.07] So you know I would like for that, to make that point so that they can just sort of creating some sort of connection that they can hold on to. is all I'm asking. So for example for this class they'll go to the MET, but I would also like them to go to Mulberry Street in Chinatown where they can actually look at contemporary examples of funerary objects. And then there they can really think about that comparison, like, what does it mean to have... how do you compare, a paper Tesla with some sort of a funerary figuring made of ceramics? So I think nowadays feeling very much less burdened by the necessity of sort of creating an accurate historical context but really seeing how we can engage with something closely and relevantly as well.

[00:52:18.24] **Sarah Richardson:** Do you feel that studying art opens up these unique ways to help students and how people understand themselves better? Because it sounds like from that description that it's not so much about feeling that they all need to walk away from your courses with a fine-tuned knowledge of the history of Asian art but maybe with a better understanding of why people make things and then question how they make meaning in the world themselves.

[00:52:54.20] **Wen-Shing Chou:** Yeah, I think so, I think I'm not training a group of Asian art historians. I think it's helping people to think and reflect and be intelligent about the past and especially about pasts that seem really foreign. I think every day I think actually when I go before a lecture, I think every day about the material that I'm covering. I think why that is. Why does this matter to them? Why does it matter to me? I think that's helpful, it's a helpful question.

[00:53:31.20] **Sarah Richardson:** All right, well thank you so much for being here with us on this episode of The Circled Square.

[00:53:37.24] **Wen Shing-Chou:** Thank you so much Sarah for having me.

[00:53:40:15] **Sarah Richardson:** Thank you Wen-Shing. That was Wen-Shin Chou talking about her own experiences in teaching from image cataloging to virtual access to cave sites. I think it's really interesting how Wen-Shing is thinking about space, the ways it determines how we

understand art. For people who are teaching Buddhist Studies. I think this was a really interesting episode to think about art history and its potential in teaching about Buddhism, where we also teach that art is not just historical objects but also still operative in other ways. For instance commodities, still being bought and sold and traded in our contemporary world. For reference to the resources that we discussed in this episode. Please check our show notes if you like what you heard. Please subscribe to our podcast. Also we'd really love to hear from you! So if you're interested please drop us a line. A big special thanks to our creative director Betsy Moss who's making these podcasts here with me. Thanks Betsy. All right! Be well!