Artist Statement
Pema Bhum
Translated by Tenzin Dickie

I went to school during the Cultural Revolution. It was also during the Cultural Revolution that I started to be interested in calligraphy, and to learn and practice calligraphy. The Chinese Communist regime had an incredible number of political slogans, especially so during the Cultural Revolution, many more than even the commercial advertisements we see these days. These political slogans were not just for revolutionaries to proclaim loudly. Written on strips of paper of varying sizes and posted in public places, they could be seen at squares, village centers, intersections, on the main streets in the towns, and even on the walls and doorways of people’s homes. We also had something called Big Character Posters. There was no printing technology or facility available at the time, so all of these signs were handwritten. They were posted on walls everywhere, so that wherever you went there was no way to escape these slogans.

I think this was in the first three years of the Cultural Revolution. I was young so the job of writing these signs and slogans and Chairman Mao’s quotations could never have been mine but every day from morning till night, I saw these handwritten signs and slogans and posters. But after about six or seven years, I actually became one of the people writing these political signs and slogans. At the time I was a Chinese government official in a nomadic area, and the area had very few people who could read or write Tibetan or spoke and knew Chinese. Because I not only knew Tibetan but also knew some Chinese, I was always given the work of translating the signs and slogans, and writing them out on large pieces of paper and putting them up on the streets for everyone to see.

Whenever there was a new political campaign, there were many new political slogans. During the time that I was in the nomadic area, the following campaigns took place: the Anti Lin, Anti Confucius campaign, the campaign against the Water Margin classic, In Agriculture, Learn from Dazhai and Limit the Rights of the Bourgeoisie campaigns, the campaign against the Gang of Four, and so on. For all of these successive campaigns, we had to write the slogans in big letters, translating them from Chinese to Tibetan. We also had to write the big-character posters. All the government staff had to write them. Because we then had to paste these posters on the walls in public places where they were seen by everybody, everyone tried to make their handwriting as nice as possible. But most people didn’t know how to write big letters with ink brushes. Some of my friends from the office would have me write their letters and posters instead. Although they didn’t think to compliment me and say that my handwriting was nice, they often remarked how lightly,
easily, and quickly the words flowed from my brush, and how I managed to keep my lettering so even. Some of them even shook their heads in surprise.

In 1974 I learned some amazing things about Tibetan calligraphy. It was the 20th anniversary of the establishment of the Chinese Communist government in that nomadic area. In order to show the progress and the happiness that the nomads had achieved in that time, an exhibition was organized. One of the key designer-artists on the exhibition staff was a lama from that county. His name was Shingsa Kelsang and he had been assigned to reform through hard labor. He was a scholar who was an expert in the traditional fields of knowledge, and a master of many disciplines. For instance, he was an expert in Tibetan medicine. Shingsa Kelsang was also an expert calligrapher and knew many different calligraphic scripts. I was one of the translators working on the Chinese to Tibetan translations of all the exhibition materials. Shingsa Kelsang wrote all the exhibit titles in beautiful calligraphy. I asked him many questions about these titles, about their length and size and so on. It was astonishing for me to learn that there were so many different Tibetan calligraphic scripts. In total, we ended up using twenty-seven different calligraphic scripts in that exhibit. The Lama had a special method for writing the Uchen script; his letters stayed within the prescribed proportions yet he still managed to write very quickly. I learned his method and not only picked it up but actually used it in the exhibition.

We had a name for these masters of calligraphy. We called them the masters of letters. To become a master of letters, you had to learn of course all the basic fundamentals from your calligraphy teacher, but that didn’t make you a master. After you have learned all the different calligraphic scripts that the teacher has to teach, then you have to fill up book after book with your calligraphy practice. There’s even a saying, “Write the first book and throw it into the wind. Write the second book and throw it into the water. Write the third book and burn it in the fire. Write the fourth book and offer it to your teacher.” Until you have achieved calligraphic mastery, you are not a master. Only after much practice and filling up of many notebooks meant to be thrown away does one finally write in a notebook that may be offered to the teacher.

I didn’t have a real calligraphy teacher that I studied with as such. In the 1980s, I was one of three students to whom Alak Tseten Shabdrung taught Lantsa. That was about it. But my whole life, I never stopped paying attention to calligraphic style, and the aesthetics of calligraphy, and the different kinds of calligraphic scripts out there. I also didn’t study and practice like in the old ways when they filled up book after book in their practice, but writing and exploring different scripts has always been a deep interest of mine.

Tibetan writing and calligraphy is an amazingly rich field. These days Tibetan calligraphy seems to be used mainly to decorate something and isn’t practiced so much as its own art form. In the old days at Latse Library, we had many cultural programs and events, and when we were making the posters, I tried to play with the ways each letter can stack to produce something new and unique. Not a lot of people took notice, but those who did seemed to appreciate it. I still continue to try
out different ways of writing a word, sharing them with the public by putting out the calligraphy on paper, bags, and T-shirts for Latse.

The essence of the art of calligraphy is not just about how beautiful it looks. Calligraphy must inspire a feeling and a recognition in people’s hearts. I think that this “Nga Mandala” is an example of what I mean.
ཞེ་ན་ུན་འབི་གསུང་བའི་དུས་དྲན་ལ་དགེ་རྒན་ཞིག་གི་མདུན་ནས་དམར་ཁྲིད་ཀྱིས་ཡིག་གཟུགས་དུ་མའི་འབྲི་སྟངས་ཆ་ཚང་བ་ཞིག་སྦང་དགོས།  དེ་བོད་ཀྱི་ཡིག་གཟུགས་འབྲི་མཁས་པ་ལ་འབོད་མིང་དུ་མ་ཞིག་ཡོད་པ་ལས།  རྟག་པར་ཡིག་མཁན་ཞེས་འབོད།  ཡིག་མཁན་ཞིག་ཉི་ཤུ་རྩ་བདུན་གྱིས་བྲིས་ཡོད། དབུ་ཅན་གྱི་ཡིག་གཟུགས་ཤིག་བླ་མ་ཁོང་གིས་ཐིག་རྩའི་ལམ་ནས་མགྱོགས་པོར་འབྲི་སྟངས་གྱི་ཁ་བྱང་རིང་ཐུང་སྐོར་ལ་བླ་མ་ཁོང་ལ་བཀའ་འདྲི་མང་པོ་ཞུ་དགོས་ཀྱི་ཡོད།  དེ་དུས་བོད་ཀྱི་ཡིག་གཟུགས་ལ་རྣམ་གྲངས་དེ་ཞིག་ཡིན།  འགྲེམས་སྟོན་གྱི་ལེ་ཚན་སོ་སོའི་ཁ་བྱང་རིམས་བླ་མ་ཁོང་གིས་མཛེས་རྩལ་གྱི་ཡིག་གཟུགས་སུ་འབྲི།  ངས་ལེ་ཚན་གཟུགས་སྣ་མང་འབྲི་བ་ལ་ཧ་ཅང་མཁས་པ་ཞིག་རེད།  ང་ནི་འགྲེམས་སྟོན་གྱི་ནང་དོན་རྒྱ་ཡིག་ནས་བོད་ཡིག་ཏུ་སྒྱར་མཁན་བྱེད་བཞིན་འདུག  ཁོང་ནི་བོད་ཀྱི་གསོ་རིག་གིས་གཙོས་པའི་བོད་ཀྱི་སྲོལ་རྒྱུན་གྱི་རིག་གནས་དང་ལག་ཤེས་སྣ་མང་དང་། ཡིག་དེའི་བླ་མ་ཞིག་ཡིན།  ཁོང་གི་མཚན་ལ་ཤིང་བཟའ་སྐལ་བཟང་ཟེར།  ཁོང་སྐབས་དེར་སྤྱི་ཚོགས་ཐོག་ན་ངལ་རྩོལ་སྒྱུར་བཀོད་སྟོན་ཆེད་དུ་འགྲེམས་སྟོན་ཞིག་གྲ་སྒྲིག་བྱས་པ་རེད།  དེ་ལ་མཛེས་ཆོས་ཀྱི་ཕྱག་ལས་གནང་མཁན་གཙོ་བོ་གཅིག་ནི་རྫོང་ཁོངས་བཙུགས་ནས་ལོ་ངོ་ཉི་ཤུ་འཁོར་བའི་དུས་དྲན་རེད།  དུས་ཡུན་དེའི་ནང་གི་འབྲོག་ཁུལ་དེའི་བདེ་སྐྱིད་དང་ཡར་རྒྱས་ཀྱི་རྣམ་པ་བཤད་ཀྱི་ཡོད།  ཐ་ན་ཁ་ཤིས་ཀྱིས་ཧང་སངས་ཉམས་ཀྱིས་མགོ་བོ་གཡུག་གཡུག་བྱེད་ཀྱི་ཡོད།  ཡང་ཞིས་ནས་བསྟོད་པ་བྱས་པ་མི་དྲན་ཡང་།  ངའི་སྨྱུག་རྩེ་ནས་ཡི་གེ་ཡོང་བ་མགྱོགས་ཤིང་ལྷོད་པ། སྙོམས་པོ་འདུག་ཅེས་ནས་ཡང་
ཡིག་གཟུགས་སྒྱུར་གྱི་ངོ་བོར་འཕོ་བ་ནི་མིག་ལ་མཛེས་པ་ཙམ་མ་ཡིན་པར། སེམས་ལ་ཚོར་སྣང་དང་ཤེས་རྟོགས་འདྲ་མིན་སྐྱད་པ་ཞིག་ཡིན་དགོས། ད་ལྟའི་«ང་ཡི་དཀྱིལ་འཁོར་»ཞེས་པ་འདི་ནི་དེའི་དཔེ་མཚོན་ཞིག་ཡིན་བསམ་གྱི་ཡོད།