

# Plastic Skinscapes in Tibetan Buddhism

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## Abstract

This article takes as its point of departure S. Brent Plate's (2012) compelling metaphor 'the skin of religion' to discuss the increasing presence and impact of plastics in the sphere of religion. What material and imagined properties of plastics allow them to be incorporated into the sacred domain? How are plastics experienced? What are the consequences of plastics' increasing presence? The discussion pivots around observations of three forms of plastics used in contemporary Tibetan Buddhism: (1) acrylic shells protecting sacred text, (2) polyethylene jars containing votives and (3) silicone imitations of Buddhist lamas. The article focuses on the skinscapes co-constituted by these plastics, focusing on the affordances and enactments of plastics in the religious field, not only in terms of how acrylic, polyethylene and silicone are experienced, but also how they enact their material properties even beyond our sensual experiences of them. While the plastic materials protect and prolong the precious items that they contain or imitate, they also raise discussions about disposability, non-perishability, pollution and material doubt.

*Keywords:* acrylic; aesthetics; material religion; materials; permanence; pollution; polyethylene; silicone

## Introduction

Our senses mediate religious experiences. The sight of the Golden Temple in Amritsar awes a Sikh as he approaches the temple, seemingly afloat on a lake. The scent of juniper branches burning in a hearth promises purification to a Tibetan Buddhist enswathed in its smoke. The touch of the lips on the Pope's ring during Mass confirms the respect and devotion of a kneeling Catholic. The taste of *iftar*, collectively shared food and drink after sunset during the Muslim fast, strengthens bonds between family members. The sound of a sacred mantra repetitiously chanted during a funeral procession ensures the

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grieving Hindus that Śiva guides the deceased beyond death. These sights, smells, touches, tastes and sounds are concrete, sensual experiences that create, confirm and maintain feelings of devotion and belonging (see also Baffelli et al. 2021). Aesthetics, S. Brent Plate (2012) argues, is the 'skin of religion':

We begin with the skin. The liminal, semi-porous boundary between inner and outer worlds, between self and world. Here is the edge of productive space: the ebb and flow of sight, scent, sound, touch, and taste.

Herein, I articulate the beginnings of an approach to understanding religion in and through its skin, and through the sensually mediated experience of religion. (Plate 2012: 162).

The skin is the permeable surface that mediates the inner and outer worlds, which defines the body and connects the self and the sacred (*ibid.*). In Plate's writing, the skin is a synecdoche for the senses. To be sentient, means that we are 'responsive to or conscious of sense impressions'.<sup>1</sup> Yet, in the words of Plate: 'The aesthetic body ... does not merely sense, it must be sensing something, some sensational form. At this juncture, meaning, space, and religious experience are produced' (175). This is what he calls the 'skinscape', where 'social-sacred space is created' (165). Plate's conceptualisation is productive because it emphasises two components of religious experience: first, the interface between aesthetics in Aristotle's sense, that is how one comes to know and understand through the senses or the body (Meyer and Verrips 2008; Prohl 2015); second, the 'sensational form' (Meyer 2009) that is being experienced, which might be a text, statue or other kind of object or substance. In that way, thinking in terms of skinscapes illuminates 'the way religion signifies through its materiality, through contact between perceiver and object represented' (Plate 2012: 172).

Plate's compelling metaphor of aesthetics as skin has prompted me to ponder the surfaces of the things that we sense in these dialectically grounded skinscapes. In which ways do materials matter for religious experiences? What happens if the skin is made of plastics? Plastic skin is different from human skin in that it is not permeable and porous. It neither breathes nor undergoes ageing, decay and death like the skin that mediates the bodily experiences of sentient beings. Instead, plastic skins seem to be everlasting. Plastic skins can presumably preserve things by preventing the interior from collapsing or leaching away and protect from contamination. Plastic materials are highly relevant to the

sensorial study of contemporary religion due to their overwhelming ubiquity and stubborn persistence.

In this article, I inquire into the imagined and material properties of plastic materials by examining three kinds of Tibetan Buddhist objects coated in or made out of plastics, each affording different imaginations, utilities and problematics: sacred texts contained in transparent and impenetrable acrylic shells; vulnerable clay votives encased in hard, polyethylene candy jars; and statues coated in flesh-like silicone. They had caught my eye as I perused their surroundings looking for something entirely different. They were unexpected discoveries that, after I noticed them, turned up 'everywhere'. Having once discovered a broken acrylic prayer wheel in a shop in Chengdu, China, I started to see broken wheels in shops and homes in China, India and Denmark. Having noticed a plastic container filled with votives when I walked a circumambulation path that pushed through the woods in Dharamsala, India, the containers kept revealing themselves unexpectedly along the path. Similarly, once I realised the novelty of silicone statue dioramas, I discovered them in the most surprising places - even my interlocutors pulled out their phones to show me pictures of silicone statues in different stages of their production and spectacular consumption. Like Jane Bennet's (2010) 'vibrant matter', the acrylic shells, polyethylene jars and silicone statues were 'strangely vibrant things' that revealed themselves as 'vital players in the world' (4). They have what Bennet (2010: 6) calls 'thing-power' that is 'the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects dramatic and subtle'. Through my observations of these three vibrating things, the article investigates the introduction and impact of plastic skinscapes: What are the material and imagined properties of plastics that allow them to be incorporated into the sacred domain? How do the positive and negative affordances of plastics transform their skinscapes? What are plastic skins doing for the access and connection to the sacred? What are the consequences of the increasing presence of plastics in Tibetan Buddhism?

I am inspired by the emerging field of the anthropology of plastics (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021) with studies into how plastics are imagined, marketed and used (Chao 2018; Gabrys, Hawkins and Michael 2013; Hawkins 2001; Pathak 2020). The field to which this article primarily contributes, however, is the flourishing field of the aesthetics of religion, which Plate (2012) has written so eloquently about (see also Baffelli et al. 2021; Meyer 2009). The dominant focus in this field has

been the investigation of how objects mediate the sacred. Here, I shift the focus onto the materials constituting things. While we begin with the skin as the mediating passageway, as Plate suggests in the above quote, the concept of skinscape invites us to take a second step and consider the objects that we sense. Rather than investigating how an acrylic shell, a polyethylene jar or a silicone statue can represent or become portals to the sacred, I direct my attention to how, as the skins of sacred objects, they matter to our sensual experiences as co-constituents of skinscapes. By drawing on three different examples, I highlight the variety of plastic materials, and how they manifest differently in skinscapes.

Materials, as defined by Tim Ingold (2007: 1), are 'the stuff that things are made of'. I follow his call 'to reverse the emphasis, in current studies of material culture, on the materiality of objects as against the properties of materials' (ibid.). As Ingold (2007: 9) argues, materials 'do not present themselves as tokens of some common essence – materiality – that endows every worldly object with its inherent "thingliness"; rather, they partake in the very processes of the world's ongoing generation and regeneration'. I argue that we must treat plastics, not only as a socially constructed materiality, but also as materials that have properties that are afforded (discovered through our interactions) and enacted (acting out their built-in potential). We sensually experience the acrylic glass, polyethylene container and silicone membrane that hold the sacred text, clay votive and statue; those materials also continue to enact their properties after we have experienced them. In other words, not only do they 'vibrate' (Bennett 2010), but plastics also decay, ooze, crack and leak independently of their cultural boundedness and human interaction.

As Timothy Morton (2013: 1) argues, plastics are hyperobjects: 'things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans'.<sup>2</sup> Spatially, they are everywhere, in our everyday lives, in the environment that we live in and look at, in the foods that we consume, even inside our bodies. They are also temporally vast in the sense that they will outlive us. Plastic has a slow decomposition rate, perhaps hundreds to thousands of years, ensuring 'that wherever it is, it does not "go-away"' (Barnes et al. 2009: 1986). While microbes can digest polymers like hair and proteins, synthetic plastic polymers are strong and indigestible (Liboiron 2016: 95). Given that conventional plastics have only been mass-produced for around 70 years, 'it is too early to say exactly how long these materials will persist' (Barnes et al. 2009:

1993). Consequently, they are difficult to study as their ‘influence on the future will last far beyond the timescales that most people are used to engaging. Plastics’ ubiquity makes them a pressing material for study but also makes them impossible to constrain within one problematic or approach’ (Abrahms-Kavunenko 2021: 17). It is very complicated to follow plastic objects or document their life cycle since all plastics produced so far have yet to reach an end of life. In the following, I invite a discussion based upon a few observations of plastic skinscapes made while conducting ethnographic research on Buddhism and economy in India, China and Denmark, when I photographed a number of Tibetan Buddhist plastic skins and talked with some of my interlocutors about them.<sup>3</sup>

## Plastics in Tibetan Buddhism

Plastics is a broad category of synthetically and semi-synthetically produced polymers. As commonly referred to in the singular, ‘plastic’ is the generic name for a wide-ranging group of flexible materials that include acrylic, polyethylene and silicone. It is one of the most ubiquitous materials in post-World War II consumer economies (Liboiron 2016: 95) and has been incorporated into our everyday lives, religious practices and institutions.

Producers of Buddhist material objects use plastics for mass-producing inexpensive, ‘modern’ commodities. These include 3D-printed Buddha statues, stūpas and ritual tools, polyester ceremonial scarves and prayer flags, offering lamps with LED lights, praying machines that grind automated mantras and computers and tablets streaming sermons and rituals. Even scriptures come in plastic: the Buddhist canon is captured on microfilm and compact discs, and mantras have been printed in colourful plastic relief on t-shirts and inscribed in silicone bracelets. Monks’ robes can be made with polyester. It is now possible to get plastic protective pads for the knees and hands that contain small computers that count the number of body-length prostrations that one performs. Plastics have replaced traditional materials, which also affects the practices in which they partake, such as when monks perform ritual dances wearing heavy fibreglass helmets rather than the more comfortable wood masks (Bhutia 2022). Plastics are also used in Tibetan Buddhism to imitate other materials. One can buy plastic impressions of conch shells (to make shell horns), semi-precious stones (to make prayer beads), coloured and hardened butter

(to make sculptures for the Tibetan New Year), human flesh (to make hyper-real statues) and bone (to make skull cups). Some of these objects were previously rare and used in esoteric practices by initiated tantric practitioners but are now made available as plastic replicas and sold inexpensively. Plastics are also added to products to make them waterproof and durable. In my research, I have come across scrolls wrapped in thin polyvinyl chloride (PVC) film for protection, as well as polyethylene terephthalate (PET) bottles used to collect the oil that lubricates rotating prayer wheels or to make drums for homemade tabletop prayer wheels.

As these examples show, plastics are not only used as materials for producing cheaper products. Plastics – like acrylic glass, polyethylene and silicone – have particular properties that include longevity and malleability. Their most striking property is their endurance, evocatively illustrated in globally circulated images of ‘plastic beaches’. Beyond the aesthetic problem of plastic littering, the problematic post-consumption afterlives of plastics as pollutants are becoming increasingly apparent. Plastic materials shed microplastics and nanoplastics. This kind of debris, so tiny that it is invisible to the naked eye, contaminates our waters, earth, food and bodies. As Liboiron (2016) explains, additional pollution comes from chemical additives called plasticisers or monomers that are added to polymers to make the plastic transparent, coloured, elastic, extensible, pliable, soft, flame retardant, water-resistant, durable and so forth. Through the process of off-gassing, these additives can leach hazardous pollutants that intervene in and interact with our ecosystems and bodies. Plastics, in other words, are problematic.

The first plastics problem that I encountered in Tibetan Buddhism concerned prayer flags. When I started researching the Tibetan Buddhist economy in China a decade ago, discourses about problematic polyester prayer flags circulated on Chinese social media. As levels of disposable income had increased among Tibetan Buddhists, they were buying more religious commodities, including colourful flags with printed sacred writings and symbols that were hung in the sacred landscape. Yet contemporary prayer flags were being mass-produced in polyester, a synthetic polymer product made from petroleum that is cheap to produce but costly in terms of its environmental footprint. These prayer flags were not rotting and perishing when the natural elements interacted with them. Instead, they collapsed into bales of plastic debris littering the environment and becoming hazardous fodder for grazing cattle and wildlife. The toxicity of the plastic’s additives, such

as colourants and softeners, could be absorbed into animals' bodies or seep into the soil and the waters. Stories about the dangerous after-lives of plastics spurred clean-up campaigns in Tibet and the Tibetan diaspora, and nourished circulating narratives about over-consumption, which extended to religious practice. This article contributes to these discussions about the increasing presence and impact of plastics in Tibetan Buddhism, acknowledging the ambiguity of plastics, which have an undeniably high degree of utility and popularity, as well as a problematic presence.

### Acrylic shells for scriptures

The first object spurring a discussion about plastic skinscapes is a tabletop prayer wheel or *maṇi sor skor*,<sup>4</sup> common in Tibetan homes (Figure 1). Prayer wheels can be standing like that in Figure 1, mounted on a wall or handheld. They are considered precious because they contain tightly packed scrolls printed with sacred syllables, very often the mantra *Om maṇi padme hūm*. The efficacy of prayer wheels is related to the sacred text they contain and depends upon a person activating the



**Figure 1. Tabletop prayer wheel in acrylic glass case.**

Source: Photo by Trine Brox, October 2020.

power of the text by turning the wheel. One turn counts as one recitation of the text multiplied by the number of times the text has been reproduced on the scroll. The number of rotations is believed to produce the equivalent amount of merit and good fortune.

The prayer wheel observed here consists of a golden drum encased in a transparent container moulded to a golden, lotus-petalled foot. The axle passing through the inner cylinder sticks out through the cover and is decorated with a red plastic handle, which one twists to set the wheel in motion. The plastic skin is the transparent container, which is marketed as unbreakable acrylic glass (PMMA), a lightweight thermoplastic used as an alternative to glass as it is tough and resistant to breakage (Lefteri 2014). Being transparent, the acrylic skin gives the eye access to the rotating drum and the auspicious symbols decorating the drum's exterior, demonstrating the workings of the wheel. Encased in this acrylic glass, the prayer wheel stands out and attracts attention. It can be compared to the effect of lamination: paper sheets that are laminated become something new when assuming the glossy, shiny surface of plastics. Similarly, the acrylic glass gives the impression of a translucent shield that protects the sacred content, while at the same time it provides an aesthetic quality of transparency, which has novelty value in a Tibetan context.

The other parts of the prayer wheel are probably also made of different plastics, but they are not accessible since the acrylic container seals and keeps the components together, like a skin, denying access to the interior. A prayer wheel consists of several discrete components. Usually, it can be taken apart and the separate parts can be maintained, repaired and replaced when they wear down or break. But this is not the case with modern mass-produced table prayer wheels, like the one in Figure 1. They are often of poor quality and cheap to buy and to replace. Although this kind of wheel has an 'unbreakable' acrylic glass case, the glass can come off its base, but the plastic material itself is durable and not disposable. Such wheels evidently have short lifespans. This was visible in houses or apartments where broken but non-disposable plastic prayer wheels were kept in a remote corner of a home shrine, on the top shelf in the living room or in a cupboard placed high up on the wall. I saw that some had broken even before they left the shop and were stored behind the shop's counter. Plastic prayer wheels were repositioned in these respectful ways because, although they are broken, they do not cease to be containers of sacred text. They still had value and were therefore repositioned rather than discarded. In this way, the high shelf in

the store and the remote corner of a home shrine or cupboard become like Jennifer Gabrys' (2009: 666) 'sinks': 'Sinks are a device within environmental studies that describe spaces and processes that capture and channel wastes' (666). Yet, these sinks that received and contained broken, plastic prayer wheels were attempts to delay ultimate disposal.

For Buddhists, sacred things like scriptures deserve respectful treatment even after they were tattered, broken and expired.<sup>5</sup> Traditionally, they would be given a ritual cremation, immersion, burial or were ingested. Non-disposable sacred objects would be repositied somewhere 'clean' such as a cave in the mountains where nobody would accidentally step upon the sacred but broken object (Brox 2022: 17). With the introduction of plastic materials, not all traditional disposal methods for religious objects were viable. Still, they could not simply be thrown in the bin with the household garbage as this would have breached the Buddhist protocol of treating scriptures respectfully. Furthermore, if the plastic material was burned at an incineration plant, it contributed to the increase of carbon emissions; if buried in a landfill, it emitted greenhouse gasses like methane.

I discussed the difficulty of the ritual disposal of plastic religious objects with a Tibetan lama in his European home. During our talk in April 2017, I noted three broken plastic prayer wheels repositied in a remote corner of his home shrine. The lama explained that he would ritually burn tattered texts in the park near his downtown flat but was unable to take care of plastic materials properly. He argued that there was no other choice but to throw broken sacred objects made of plastics into the garbage bin. At least if disposed of in this way, he argued, they would ultimately be burned at the incineration plant, and at no time during their journey there would someone stomp upon and thus unknowingly desecrate them. While sympathetic to such conundrums, other interlocutors insisted that one should never throw scriptures in the bin; they must be burned or repositied respectfully. Only a few noted the environmental hazard of open-air burning of plastics. One American-based Tibetan lama, in an interview in October 2018, advocated using wooden prayer wheels that could be cremated, saying: 'If un-repairable, you should burn [the prayer wheel or] you can place it on your altar as an article of religious service. When burning your useless wheel, as the smoke and fragrance rise in the air, the formless sentient beings can get merit'.

Being mass-produced and made of plastics contributes to the perception of the tabletop prayer wheel and others like it as 'modern' and

of a different origin than traditional wheels. This was a source of doubt among several Tibetan interlocutors. Although plastic prayer wheels utilise old technology, the production process, materials and design depended upon recent economic developments outside of the Tibetan religious domain. These plastic table wheels were mass-produced in Chinese factories and sold to Tibetan Buddhists globally. I have seen them in the homes of Tibetans living in Denmark, India and China. The European-based lama explained how important design was for Buddhist things to create resonance with the person interacting with them. If that person could connect with the form, the form gave rise to faith and trust. Conversely, appearance could also create doubt, which was not conducive to Buddhist practice. He related to me in a conversation in May 2017:

Nowadays, there are many fake [*rdzun ma*] things, right? ...When they make strange prayer wheels, then we get doubtful [*the tshom skye*]. We think, 'now I wonder what is inside this prayer wheel?' and become doubtful. It is not good if you have doubts. That is an obstacle for you.

The religious skinscapes that these prayer wheels afford depend on the form of their skin and the person's experience of that form. In other words, while new technology and the development of plastics make it possible to produce prayer wheels encased in acrylic glass to protect the sacred text, their appearance can be counterproductive. For some Tibetans, the acrylic prayer wheel did not look right. It looked foreign. It looked Chinese-made. Moreover, this created doubt about the sacred content. Did the wheel even contain sacred text? Several Tibetan interlocutors in China and India doubted the authenticity of this kind of prayer wheel, saying that the sacred text inside could be incorrect, placed upside down in the drum or even be fake (i.e., not imprinted with sacred writing), which would produce misfortune (*sdig pa*). As one elderly Tibetan concluded, 'one must check the mantras inside'. I have witnessed how Tibetans shopping for prayer wheels open the drum to check the scroll, something that was impossible in the case of the acrylic-encased wheel. The producer of the acrylic prayer wheel provided a four-page brochure that gave assurances that the content was sacred and effective. 'All scriptures in the prayer wheel are installed under the instruction of high lamas', it declared. 'The scripture is printed in a continuous, seamless way; the whole scroll is about 90 metres long'. It went on to list the names and quantities of the 21 different kinds of mantras printed on the scroll.<sup>6</sup> Yet, statements like this gave Tibetan sceptics little reassurance. As the acrylic case was moulded

to the base of the wheel, making the sacred text inaccessible, they could not examine the drum to see if it actually contained a scroll and if the scroll had been printed, rolled and placed correctly.

This mass-produced tabletop prayer wheel encased in transparent acrylic glass gave visual access to the workings of the wheel and protected the sacred text inside, but it also prevented access to that text. As such, it challenged conceptions of authenticity and as a sensational form in a skinscape, it became a source of 'material doubts' (Meikle 1997). A major reason for this material doubt was that the plastic material was impossible to dispose of properly, so we can speculate how continued (and possibly increased consumption of this modern and invasive material) will contribute to overloaded sinks; that the repositories of broken prayer wheels in shops and homes will become like Gabrys' (2009) overflowing sinks that are no longer able to receive, absorb and contain.

### **Polyethylene containers for votives**

Polyethylene jars used to store candy, cooking oil, milk powder and the like can be recycled as storage protecting and prolonging votives known in Tibetan as *tsha tsha* (hereafter, *tsatsa*) (Figure 2). Just as turning a prayer wheel is considered a merit-generating act, so too is the act of producing and offering *tsatsas*. *Tsatsa* are mass-produced to be repositated as the content of sacred structures such as stūpas or are produced for merit-making, purification, apotropaic and prophylactic practices (Namgyal-Lama 2013). They are moulded or stamped out of clay, which is sometimes mixed with pulverised body remains, grains of barley or a rolled-up mantra. They can be fired to become hard as stone but are usually just dried in the sun. This means that they can crumble over time. Such votives are traditionally covered with white plaster as part of the consecration ritual, in a session known as 'offering garments' (*na bza' gsol ba*) (ibid.: 144-145). Nowadays, their sacred bodies may be given an extra garment made of plastic.

One can find many *tsatsas* with plastic skins deposited along the circumambulation path encircling the temple and home of the Fourteenth Dalai Lama in Dharamsala in the Indian Himalayan foothills. Tibetan Buddhists walk to the left of sacred objects and architecture. Thus, as one walks clockwise, parts of the path to the right are lined with mounted prayer wheel drums, as well as deposited objects including votives. From the perspective of Tibetan Buddhist tradition,



**Figure 2.**  
**Tsatsas in a plastic container deposited along the circumambulation path, Dharamsala.**

Source: Photo by Trine Brox, September 2019.

the votives are not ‘matter out of place’ (Douglas 2002 [1966]). They belong there. As precious relics, tsatsas are offered as the filling for stūpas or repositied in places considered auspicious, usually in or near sacred places such as holy caves, shrines, stūpas, prayer wheel walls or special shelters (*tsha khang*). It was not their placement but the novelty of their plastic skins that was conspicuous to me and changed the skin-scape, which was both the object and our experiences of it.

As I observed in 2018 and 2019, the tsatsas repositied along the circumambulation path were of two types: conical-shaped votives and tablets impressed with the image of a deity or Buddha. There were usually a few tsatsas on the ledges of the prayer wheel walls and the stūpas along the path and some single-packed votives in plastic wrap or sealable zipper plastic bags. What was conspicuous, however, was the large quantity of clay votives deposited in lidded plastic containers. They had been left along the circumambulation route, stashed behind or on top of the prayer wheel wall, tucked in between the stones,

placed around the stūpas and in the corners of the halls that house large standing prayer wheels (*maṇi khangs*) or simply laid to rest on the forest floor to the right-hand side of the path. The containers lying on the forest floor had to different degrees been swallowed by vegetation. They had been repositied there as this landscape is enchanted by its proximity to the Dalai Lama and Namgyal Monastery and by the Buddhist practices of the people coming here. These votives, five to ten centimetres tall, had been collected and stored in plastic containers of different kinds, with perhaps 20 tsatsa or more in each. For the purpose of discussion, I have taken the most common plastic used for making such containers, the thermoplastic called polyethylene, which is better known in its bottle form with the generic name polyethylene terephthalate (PET) (see Hawkins 2013). As the skin collecting and covering clay votives, it can have different qualities: some jars had hard, coloured and brittle surfaces, while other skins were more flimsy and transparent. Some were still decorated with labels disclosing their previous lives as containers for chewing gum, milk powder and instant coffee.

The plastic signals utility in that it protected and prolonged the survival of clay offerings made, for instance, after the departure of a loved one. Let me give an example of how this utility can be experienced. During an interpretive walk with an interlocutor from East Tibet, a 30-year-old man named Gendun, we came to a *maṇi khang*. I asked him about the many containers filled with votives. There were about 30 or 40 of them stacked in a tower that leaned against the back wall. 'This is not garbage', he explained, 'though it may look similar to garbage'. When we later encountered two gold-painted tsatsas individually sealed in plastic bags behind a row of prayer wheels, he responded enthusiastically: 'That is good!' Perhaps I looked surprised or perplexed at his comment since he quickly added: 'Not that plastic is good, but protecting the tsatsa so that they do not decay is good. So that they last. Someone made these tsatsas for their own purification. Putting them in plastic means they wish continuity'. He elaborated: 'You know, everything is impermanent, even plastic, but as long as the plastic is there, the tsatsa is there'. The tsatsa were protected in their lidded plastic casquets, yet a few of the containers had cracked and lay there on the forest floor with their sacred content exposed to the wearing forces of the weather. Like the acrylic shields of tabletop prayer wheels dismounted from their lotus-petalled, golden foundations, these plastic abodes failed their promise to protect. These jars, cracked open and exposing

their precious content, disrupted the imagined property of plastics as eternal refuges for the precious.

While Gendun's immediate response to the plastic-wrapped votives was one of approval, even enthusiasm, his disclaimer ('not that plastic is good, but...') hinted at another affective reaction to this skin that he was aware of and perhaps ascribed to me (although I had not voiced how I experienced these containers as nasty-looking warnings of a polluted future). He recognised plastic to be a problematic material that can evoke very different feelings (see also Hawkins 2001). When moved by feelings of wanting to protect the environment, these plastic skins were 'matter out of place' (Douglas 2002 [1966]) and invited a whole other set of affective relations. This had been addressed by the Government of India a few years previously when it prohibited the dumping of religious objects in the mountains. The government interpreted such repositied objects as aesthetically displeasing litter and environmental hazards. Consequently, instead of plastic-clad votives and other 'Buddhist waste' being scattered in the surrounding hills, they were now piling up along the circumambulation route. Not only votives but also broken statues, amulets and other sacred objects ended their days in this enchanted landscape as their owners acknowledged their value but wanted to discontinue their stewardship (see Brox 2022). Responding to a government order, local NGOs and Tibetan voluntary groups strapped bags for garbage collection on trees every few metres to the left of the path, put up signs asking people not to litter and organised clean-up campaigns. In this context, plastic bottles and food wrappers discarded in the landscape could evoke feelings of shame and disgust and become the subject of moral condemnation. They were picked up and put in the garbage bags. Yet the votives encased in plastics were not collected and taken to the dumpster. Perhaps they were not classified as waste because they were situated with the religious architecture to the right of the path? When I talked with some of the volunteers, they did not mention sorting things according to left and right, mundane and sacred, but according to whether they looked bad or good and whether they were touching the ground or not. They had not noticed the votives in plastic. Perhaps they were such a common part of the landscape that the volunteers unconsciously expected to see these containers on their clean-up drives and therefore paid them no attention? As Abrahms-Kavunenko (2021: 13) remarks: '...plastics often go unnoticed. Much of their acceptance into our material world comes from the fact that they have become naturalised or made necessary,

depending on one's subject position, in ways that obscure their life histories, present influences, and future trajectories'. Perhaps that is why one interlocutor, who organised clean-up drives, corrected me when I asked about the tsatsas along the circumambulation path, saying 'tsatsa are never wrapped in plastic'. Was his denial of their existence due to plastic-clad tsatsas being normalised – like a necessary skin (see also Hawkins 2018)?

While plastic has value in that it protects and extends the temporality of these precious votives, it also enacts a problematic endurance. Its existence in nature is troublesome because the material is non-perishable and because there is so much of it. These containers do not remain as plastic bubbles floating *on top of* the greenery in the woods. They become integrated with the green. They look like the indestructible remains of Buddhist practices that the forest has incorporated as a structure upon which lush green climbers grow and overflow. When the greenery swallows the containers in this way, the plastic is no longer exposed to direct sunlight. That is in some way good from an environmental perspective. Direct sunlight accelerates the emissions of greenhouse gas (methane and ethylene) from plastic in the natural environment (Royer et al. 2018). When plastic is no longer exposed, we can expect its degradation to slow down. However, this does not prevent toxic substances from leaching into the ground and waterways. Studies show that plastics leach monomers into the soil and sediment, while the lack of direct sunlight and low levels of oxygen will likely prolong their longevity (Barnes et al. 2009: 1993). In other words, when the tsatsa containers are engulfed in greenery, they become polluting capsules with long lifespans because they are not exposed to UV-radiation (although there might be other causes of abrasion, for instance exposure to water). Since plastics 'have the capacity to act over generations, and even over millennia' (Liboiron 2016: 96), we do not know how the ecosystem along the circumambulation route will react to these plastic bubbles containing and sealing the organic material of clay mixed with grains or human ashes.

Polyethylene jars have been repurposed as a practical and proper refuge for votives because they were recognised and trusted for being able to contain, protect and prolong the precious. Ideally, the tsatsas will not perish, nor be polluted. The containers became selectively invisible through this usefulness<sup>7</sup> – unnoticed by people performing everyday religious practices, unnoticed by people who were looking for waste to pick up. People do not seem to notice them nor evaluate

them negatively as litter. Whilst the material and imagined properties of plastics allow them to become abodes of precious votives, the plastic material is not always able to live up to its promise as an eternal protector when the lidded containers crack open or the lids come off, baring the precious content. Even when it stays intact and prevents the pollution of the votives, the plastic material will inevitably fail, as the plastics enact their material properties as pollutants in the environment in which they have been laid to rest.

### **Silicone flesh for lamas**

The final example of a plastic skinscape is the spectacle of three silicone imitations of Tibetan Buddhist lamas observed in the Chinese metropolis of Chengdu in January 2019 and 2020. Such life-size models of historical personages are usually called wax effigies or waxworks. Wax can be naturally or chemically produced for religious, artistic and scientific purposes to make naturalistic models that resemble living beings (Panzanelli 2008: 2). The material used in the statues treated



**Figure 3. Silicone statues with money offerings in a shop in downtown Chengdu.**

*Source:* Photo by Trine Brox, January 2019.

here is silicone (siloxane or polyacrylonitrile). This is a non-recyclable elastomer, a rubber-like material that is very stable (i.e., resistant to water, temperature, fire and impact) and is used in a variety of goods from medical supplies to aerospace products (Lefteri 2014). Here, the silicone rubber has been used for its qualities as mouldable and self-setting. Like other waxworks of Tibetan Buddhist lamas that are dressed up in robes and installed in temples, called *la sku* (wax statue), the statues have metal bodies but the visible body parts – the head, right arm and left hand – are made of silicone (see also Brox 2020). These three statues had been modelled from photographs. The heads were first sculpted in clay. Those sculptures were then used to make a negative mould for the silicone cast. Once cast, the head was coloured and each hair was inserted individually with a special needle. Silicone was perfect for making such mimetic copies.

The three hyper-realistic statues had not been installed in a temple but were on display in a store in the Tibetan market in downtown Chengdu. The store had become similar to a pilgrimage site for Tibetans visiting the city. In a brightly lit room at the back, the three lamas sat behind glass. They were the famous and influential leaders of three important Nyingma monastic centres in Kham, East Tibet, located in present-day Sichuan province (the same province as the city of Chengdu). To the left was Akhyuk Rinpoche (1927-2011), the founder of Yachen Gar, in the middle was the founder of Larung Gar, Jigme Phuntsok (1933-2004), and to the right was the former throne holder of Palyul Monastery, Penor Rinpoche (1932-2009). They sat in the lotus position on top of wooden cabinets like buddhas. They were simulacra, true copies of influential, deceased Tibetan Buddhist lamas.

The glass was greased with impressions of the many Tibetans who had pressed their foreheads against it to show respect and to receive blessings. Visitors moved about quietly. They took off their hats when they entered the room. While some froze in amazement at the liveliness but immobility of the three lamas, others reacted by spontaneously muttering mantras, and one woman threw her body on the floor in prostration. The waxworks were doing 'connectionwork' (Williams-Oerberg 2021), creating and strengthening visitors' bonds with deceased masters and extending their charisma after death through the extraordinary spectacle of these life-like simulacra – that is, if they were successful in connecting with the spectator, if they had resonance. Monks who had studied with one of the figures would remember his teachings or feel peace, compassion and faith. One monk argued that

materials – whether the silicone rubber of the hyper-realistic statue or the copper of a traditional statue – were secondary to the belief that Buddhists have in sacred statues and how they were disposed to respond to them: ‘They get blessings from the wax statue, not because it is made of wax but because they have faith’ he related. As long as one’s belief and devotion were strong, the monk related, the lama will be summoned, and one will be blessed and miracles will occur. Yet, even if efficacy was not dependent upon the material, the silicone had enabled the artist to make the departed lamas come alive, providing followers with the opportunity to connect with them. In a monastic setting, the hollow body of such statues would be filled with sacred ingredients and consecrated to enliven and empower them. There are several *la sku* in temples and monasteries in East Tibet that occupied the empty seat of a master and became the recipient of offerings, the generator of faith and the witness of religious practices – the skinscapes that Plate so evocatively relates as central to lived religion. Yet in the setting of a shop, where there were no ceremonies of the monastic calendar, the waxwork was an empty form with which people connected – ‘a wax statue with only an appearance and no ceremony’ the monk asserted. Although the statues had not been consecrated, pilgrims nonetheless responded by touching their heads against the glass to receive blessings because that is what these simulacra afforded. In that way, these Tibetans were establishing their own skinscapes, their own encounters with the sacred.

We can say that this kind of plastic skinscape creates connectivity between the represented Buddhist teachers and their followers by enacting the effects of presence and liveliness. Waxworks can be hugely inspirational as they extend the presence of the person they imitate; it is as if that person is there. However, silicone was still a new medium for the artisans with whom I spoke in Chengdu; it was only introduced to them in the late 2010s. As a result, they had no idea of the statues’ future trajectories. They hoped that it would afford longevity, but none of the artists understood the durability of silicone rubber; they could only speculate. One artisan guessed forty years. Having worked with silicone for only three years, he had no experience of how the material would transform over the years and at what pace, how the colouring would be affected by the indoor climate, and if the silicone would degrade. He believed that the silicon statues would at least outlive him, the artist who had created them – unless they were eaten by mice, he corrected himself. He must have pondered over my question about

their future. When we were driving in silence from his workshop one day in January 2020, he suddenly related his fear that his clients would start to turn against him when they discovered that his statues defied their promise of permanence. He sometimes imagined that his clients would start contacting him one by one, complaining that the statues had not given their beloved lamas eternal life, but had instead begun to disintegrate. The truth, the artist admitted, was that he did not know anything about the longevity of silicone and whether he could give a three, ten, 30 or 100-year guarantee. This was the problem of plastic as a newly-introduced material: while his livelihood and success depended upon these silicone skins' affordances of mimicry, presence, protection and permanence, he had yet to experience their ageing and death.

These hyper-realistic statues with silicone skins spur a discussion about the presence and preservation of departed, influential leaders of a flourishing Tibetan Buddhist tradition. Silicone affords mimicry and the visual illusion of life, allowing people to connect to the departed teachers and their teachings. Yet, like the acrylic container encasing the tabletop prayer wheel, the silicone skin created to prolong the presence of a precious teacher was a source of doubt, in this case related to the object's longevity rather than its authenticity.

## **Conclusion**

Plastic materials have been incorporated into the sacred domain because they are considered able and appropriate to utilise as skins in order to protect and prolong what they hold or imitate. These plastic skins influence how people experience scriptures, votives and statues – how they resonate with the sensing body in the skinscapes that they co-constitute: the transparency of the acrylic glass makes the prayer wheel stand out, the sturdiness of the polyethylene makes the precious votives look safe and the hyper-realism of the silicone makes departed masters look alive. Plate's (2012) compelling metaphor of aesthetics as the skin of religion is productive, particularly since his emphasis is on an aesthetics constituted by both the sensing body and sensational forms. It is not only the skin and its material properties but also their situatedness that matters: where, how and by whom they are witnessed or go unnoticed – how broken acrylic shells were retired along with the prayer wheels they encased in a remote corner of a home shrine, how the polyethylene containers with votives were engulfed in green climbers, and how the silicone imitations of lamas were displayed in

a downtown shop. The affordances and enactments of these plastic materials in these particular skinscapes were marked by ambiguity as they were used for their positive, material affordances but also provoked negative feelings related to their problematic non-disposability, imperishability, pollution and material doubt.

In the cases examined here, transparent and unbreakable acrylic glass, non-porous and sturdy polyethylene and silicone able to imitate and endure were used to protect something precious. Yet the enactment of their properties extended beyond their intended purpose. The acrylic material, which also gave visual access to the workings of the prayer wheel, protected the sacred text inside but also prevented access to it. As a sensational form, the wheel's plastic skin could therefore become a source of doubt regarding the wheel's authenticity and also enacted problems of disposability. The polyethylene containers housing clay votives also exemplify the utility of plastic materials in containing, protecting and prolonging the sacred or efficacious. The properties that made polyethylene a sturdy, impervious and non-perishable material became problematic when it integrated with the ecosystem, creating plastispheres and pollution. As objects left on a circumambulation path in India, polyethylene containers could offend or excite, but they could also become materials invisible to observers even when in plain sight, evoking discussions about plastics in nature, and how they were unnoticed. Finally, the silicone simulacra speak to the question of plastics' unknown lifespan. The relative permanence of plastics enabled the reproduction of departed lamas, extending their presence as sources of faith, affect, inspiration and connectivity. Yet, there remained uncertainty about silicone's presence and lifespan.

To conclude, we find material doubts in all three cases. Material doubts sometimes outcompete the value that was ascribed to the imagined and material properties of plastics such as the aesthetic affects discovered through seeing a sparkling, rotating wheel encapsulated in transparent acrylic. As reported by historian Jeffrey L. Meikle (1997), material doubts or 'plastic doubts' (284) are related to the shaky reputation of plastic materials: they will always disappoint, giving doubt to the safety, virtue and impact of plastics. Material doubts were present in the case of the acrylic prayer wheel, not noticed in the case of the votives and were an open question in the case of the silicone statues. The ambiguity of plastics was unavoidable despite their properties that helped protect and prolong the precious items that they contained or imitated. Our senses experience the acrylic glass, polyethylene

container and silicone membrane that hold the sacred text, clay votives and statue; those materials also continue to enact their properties after we have experienced them. Like Bennet's (2010: 4) 'stuff that commanded attention in its own right, as existents in excess of their association with human meanings, habits or projects', the acrylic shells, polyethylene jars and silicone statues revealed their thing-power. In other words, although plastic materials were lauded for being versatile, impermeable and highly durable, we see in these three cases how plastics nevertheless have porous materialities: they not only vibrated, but also decayed, oozed, cracked and leaked – independently of how people perceived and experienced their utility and appropriateness in the religious settings in which they appeared, and independently of their cultural boundedness and human interaction.

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## NOTES

- 1 <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/sentient> (Accessed 28 December 2021).
- 2 Thanks to Abrahms-Kavunenko who introduced me to Morton's hyperobjects. Whereas Morton only mention plastics briefly, Abrahms-Kavunenko (2021:4) has convincingly argued for the relevance of Morton's concept when discussing how plastics 'are vast both temporally and spatially'.
- 3 All interlocutors have been anonymised in this article.

- 4 Tibetan terms are italicised and transliterated according to the Wylie-system. Common Tibetan terms such as lama are phonetically transcribed.
- 5 Things like statues, painted scrolls, stūpas and ritual tools can be considered sacred for different reasons, e.g. because they represent the teachings of the Buddha, are consecrated or have biographies entangled with sacred places and persons.
- 6 I bought this prayer wheel at the Tibetan market in Chengdu, June 2016. Drolma Tso translated the brochure from simplified Chinese.
- 7 For a discussion of plastic segregation and circulation practices in another Indian context, see Dey and Michael (2021). They relate how ‘plastic objects are sorted according to their capacities for reuse, linked to material attributes (e.g. shape, size, thickness, texture, light reflectivity) or cultural imports (e.g. white colour and associations with purity, printed brand names.)’ (ibid. 13).

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