Original Article

The Portrait of Buddha:
An Anthropological Approach Toward the Tibetan Religious Painting — *Thangka*

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**Key words**: Tibetan *thangka*, portrait, agency, *inponderabilia*, *corpothetics*,

Among the topics belonging to modern aesthetic and general philosophical notions, the portrait, as a genre of art and as a metaphor of the Cartesian self-present subject, remains crucial. The so-called autonomous portrait is regarded as the representation of an absolute subject itself, not for its attributes, or its relations in which it may be involved (Nancy 2018: 13). Compared with the above notion of the autonomous portrait, this article will explore an anthropological definition of portrait, which is the portrait of relation.

In order to do this, I focus on the Tibetan *thangka*, a genre of

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1 In this article, I use the Wylie (1959) transliteration for transliterating Tibetan. In some areas of Tibet, *thangka* is also called “*thang ga*” or “*thang kha*”. These words are the variations of the ancient Tibetan word “*thang sku*”, “*thang*” means “plain” or “flat area” and “*sku*” is the honorific expression of body, used to infer the body of Buddha, deity or lama. Therefore this word literally means
visual art mostly depicting religious figures from Tibetan Buddhism and the local religion, Bön. Originated in ancient India, thangka has been created and worshiped in most areas of the Tibetan cultural region throughout the centuries. According to Tibetan religious thought, thangka is not only the pictorial representation but also the embodiment of the enlightened beings. Applying, making and worshipping thangka are considered as merit-making deeds which are fundamental to Tibetan ethics. In the vicinity of thangka, an exchanging network that consists of different groups of people, Buddha and deities, supports the local life.

This article, based on my 18-months fieldwork in Lhasa, the capital of the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in China, is seeking to explicate thangka as a portrait of Buddha. There are two motivations for doing this. First, both thangka and portrait are deeply connected with human emotion and desire. Similar to the creation of a portrait for the first time where a Greek girl made the portrait as a replacement of her absent lover, thangka is also frequently made as a replacement of absent people or the deceased. Second, making a portrait is analogous to making thangka which is a kind of interaction involving a series of mimicking behaviors. This point will be explained further below.

“the embodiment of Buddha appeared at the outside”. This etymological fact shows that the fundamental attribute of thangka is its religious function.

I use this term to refer to the large area encompassing parts of China, India, Nepal, Bhutan and Pakistan, normally known as “ethnographic Tibet” (Goldstein 1998: 4).

Thangka is primarily although not exclusively painted. Besides painting, embroidery, patchwork and woodblock are also used in making thangka.

The Tibetan and Chinese expression of portrait are literally translated as “mimicking to an image”.

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Previous Studies

Religious arts share certain visual qualities — schematized, symbolized, highly elaborated and abundant in symmetric expressions. Quoting from Lévi-Strauss, religious art is the “intellectual rather than intuitive representation” (Lévi-Strauss 1963: 246) and the creation of which involves a series of procedures that need to be adhered to strictly. Thangka as a representative of Tibetan Buddhism art, also possesses the features mentioned above. A large amount of doctrines regulates the creation of thangka. Most of them are iconographic and iconometric rules that indicate the proportion of the body and physical features of the appearance of the religious figures. Apparently, those quantitative rules help on preserving the continuity and rigidity of the images of the enlightened beings.

The previous studies of thangka (Chen 2013, Li 2016, Liu 2018) underline these quantitative rules and identify them as “the authentic tradition of thangka-making” or “the local exegesis of aesthetics”. However, this article does not merely focus on the quantitative rules but the unquantifiable, or coined from Malinowski (2007 [1922]: 18), the “inponderabilia part” of thangka-making. Within this frame, the inponderabilia part includes the skills obtained through intimate apprenticeship, countless religious practices, and the relationships built between the painters and the clients through a long period of acquaintances. These elements rooted in daily life keep the whole social network of thangka alive.

In the epochal Art and Agency (Gell 1998), Gell demonstrates how the artifact becomes an agent within the social network, or the nexus, to the extent that objects and human occupy equivalent position. This article shares his point of view and confirms the agency of thangka. However, there is also a deficiency in Gell’s “anthropological theory of art” that is the “resolute indifference towards the aesthetic

This article shares the above corpothetic relation between human and images. To examine this point, besides the act of “worshiping”, I also examine the act of “making”. I argue that making thangka is an interaction between the thangka and painter. Contrary to Gell’s negative view of aesthetics, I posit that the agency of thangka is corpothetic for its worshiping and creation involve a series of sensory and corporal practices.

The Quantitative Rules in Thangka-Making

In chapter 3, after a brief summary of the history of thangka, I introduce the content of thig tshad, a specific type of religious doctrines prescribed in thangka-making. The general content of thig tshad includes four parts: (1) Quantify the physical proportion of figures into a series of iconographic and iconmetric rules. (2) Use metaphoric and poetic expressions to exemplify the physical nuances of figures. (3) Detail each step of the process. (4) Indicate what kind
of merit will be given according to the production methods, and what kind of punishment will be imposed for the violation of the production methods. The first part is frequently emphasized and has even become a primary gauge of some thangka-making competitions held by local government.

The Practices of Thangka-Making in X Thangka Art Center

This chapter focuses on the thangka-making praxis in a local school, X Thangka Art Center (X Center). After the introduction of X Center and the long-term relationships between the painters and their clients, I describe the overall making process of one thangka and my personal thangka-making experience. The above contents demonstrate that thangka-making is not obedience of the iconographic and iconometric rules. It requires various skills and countless religious practices that shape the virtuosity of thangka painters and forms the inponderabilia part that supports the whole process of applying, making and the exchanging of thangka.

The Corpothetics in Thangka-Making

Chapter 5 articulates the corporeal level of thangka-making by introducing the religious practices conducted by painters and the utilization of substances, such as the saliva, into the pigments. The previous studies of thangka consider the utilization of the painters’ saliva a self-sacrifice behavior. However, I envisage it as an act of exchange. By adding the substances into the thangka, the symbol of Buddha is transformed into the index of the painter. Whereas by acquiring these substances, thangka is resurrected as the body of the enlightened being.
The Work of *Thangka*

The last chapter describes how *thangka* arouses emotion, memory and manifests its agency like a person. In the first section, I list the commissions taken by X Center to show the variety of the subjects of *thangka*. In the second section, I introduce a tribute *thangka* to the 33rd *mkhan bo che mo* who passed away in 2017. By delineating the process of the painters depositing this *thangka* on the altar before the consecration, I demonstrate that even without the highlight consecrating ceremony, this *thangka* is already the replacement of the deceased *mkhan bo che mo*. Painters grieve to it, dedicate their blessing to it and share their memories over it. More than a deadee, this special *thangka* communicates with the beholders like a person.

**Conclusion**

Through my analysis, I explicate 3 main features in *thangka*-making. First, *thangka*-making follows a series of rigorous rules. Second, *thangka*-making is underpinned by those *inponderabilia* practices of honing the painters’ making skills, of accumulating religious virtues and of building strong relationships. Those practices can not be indoctrinated through quantitative rules or standardized procedures. Mimicking their masters and even the Buddha himself is the natural way. Third, the utilization of substances accounts for the *corpothetics* of *thangka* that complete the trinity of the *thangka*, painter and the enlightened being.

Gell said, when people see the portrait, they are seen by the

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5 The 33rd *mkhan bo che mo* is a way of calling the Lungtok Tenpai Nyima (1929–2017) who was the 33rd Menri Trizin, the abbot of the Menri Monastery and former leader of the Bön. *mKhan bo* indicates the abbot of a monastery, *che mo* means great.
portrait. In this article, I show that when people make a portrait, the portrait makes them into painters. This is a nested component result of the regression where the painters and the portrait become interdigitated with one another. Like 2 mirrors standing face to face, the painter and the portrait reflect one another and form a great long line of shiny mirrors stretching into an infinite loop of relation.

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