Traveling Thangka Painters: Anthropological and Historical Approach towards the Multi-traveling Experiences of Tibetan Artists

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Abstract
Tibetan thangka is a genre of religious art, mostly paintings, created in the Tibetan Cultural Region since the 12th century. Notwithstanding thangka-making is considered as a sedentary occupation, the itinerant aspect in painters' life is hard to disregard. Most painters travel for economic purposes, opportunities to learn different artistic styles and accumulation of religious merits. Their diverse traveling experiences will be the focus of this article. First, I examine the thangka-making practices in two historical centers—Rebgong and Lhasa. I outline the process of commercialization of Thangka Art within the larger narrative of Tibetan modernization. Second, by analyzing the journeys of two artists—a Sichuan-born Tibetan thangka painter traveling in West China, and a Shikatse-born Tibetan thangka painter traveling the global art world—I illustrate how the modern itinerary is relevant to the historical and institutional background. Additionally, forays into the contemporary art world, can themselves be construed as journeys.
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Situated in the center of the Tibetan Plateau at an altitude of 3,530 meters and containing 293 monasteries (Xinicuichen 2001), Lhasa has been venerated as one of the most prestigious pilgrimage sites in the world. Its geographical height reinforces its remoteness and impenetrability, yet the city itself is a hive of activity. As the
administrative and religious center of Tibet, Lhasa covers an area of 29,500 square kilometers of farmland and pastureland. The urban built-up area—the Chengguan District—is a mere 554 square kilometers yet possesses more than half of the population of Lhasa. The resident population is 559,423, of which 62.9% are Tibetan (Zang Zu), 34.34% are Han, and 1.98% are Muslim (Hui Zu) (Ma & Dan Zeng lun zhu 2006: 135). Recently, due to the development of tourism in western China, Lhasa has become one of the most popular domestic tourist destinations and attracts tourists, immigrants, guest workers, and other transient populations who gather and inhabit this site. According to the survey conducted by Beijing University in 2006, the population of temporary inhabitants, known as the floating people (CH: liu dong ren kou) has risen to 200,000, outnumbering even the resident population of 166,000 during the tourist season (ibid: 169). The subject of this paper is the thangka-makers among them.

The thangka makers, expressed in Tibetan as “lha bso” or “lha bso la”, designates the people who make thangka, a genre of religious

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1 Relating to the range of Tibet, there are two geopolitical categories, known as the Political Tibet and the Ethnic Tibet which need to be clarified. As a result of differing historical experiences, the former one is equivalent to today’s Tibet Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), whereas the later one refers to the ethnic Tibetan area including large areas in Qinghai, Sichuan, Gansu, and Yunnan provinces in China (Goldstein 1998: 4). Besides the ethnic Tibet in west China, some regions in North India, Nepal, Bhutan also share the Tibetan languages and cultures.

2 According to local government officials, the exact number of thangka makers in Lhasa is difficult to confirm. While I conducted my field work in Lhasa, I interviewed more than 100 thangka makers and only five of them were Lhasa citizens. This fact, to some degree, illustrates the considerable proportion of non-local thangka makers in Lhasa and suggests a necessary consideration of their migratory model.
painting belonging to Tibetan Buddhism and the local religion Bön³. Since the 12th century, *thangka* has been widely made as representations of enlightened beings in the Tibetan Cultural region, now including the western area of China, North India, Nepal, Bhutan, and others. Recently, *thangka* has also been included in the Intangible Cultural Heritage List (ICH List) in China. Generally, art-making practices are viewed as sedentary occupations. However, the *thangka* making process involves a range of movements which will be the focus of this paper. After a brief review of the previous studies on Tibetan art, I introduce *thangka* and its makers historically. Second, by examining the *thangka* making practices in two regions, Rebgong and Lhasa—which are both renowned sites for the creation of Tibetan art and artifacts—I outline the process of how the traditionally religious *thangka*-making started to become an industry in the process of modernization in west China. Finally, I analyze two travel experiences, those of a Sichuan-born Tibetan *thangka* maker traveling in China, and a Shikatse-born Tibetan *thangka* maker traveling to the global art world, to illustrate the complexity of the travel experiences of modern Tibetan artists.

**Alternative Tibetan/Art History**

In the last few decades, despite the production and consumption of art having taken a decidedly global turn, the art world is still tied to geographically discrete definitions and has primarily been concerned with terrain; literally and metaphorically (Harris 2012: [3]

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³ In this paper, I translate Tibetan writing by using the Wylie transliteration (Wylie 1959). Most of the data used in this paper were collected during my 18-month fieldwork conducted in Lhasa from 2013–2016. The names of participants and facilities used in this paper are pseudonyms.
152). Even the contemporary art world, which seems like a placeless utopia, as Harris points out, is a difficult domain to enter or inhabit for some artists of a particular background. Through delineating the life stories of Tibetan modern artists, especially their travel experiences in the contemporary art world, Harris renounces the efficiency of the bounded conceptions of “culture” based on nationality or ethnicity in this transnational era when artists and their works are so highly mobile and argues for deterritorializing art history (Harris 2006: 699; 2012: 152). Following Arjun Appadurai’s five divisions of the global cultural flow which are ethno-scapes, media-scapes, techno-scapes, financial-scapes, and ideo-scapes (Appadurai 1996), Harris adds art-scapes. By denoting the acts of production, circulation, and other social participants involved in art-scapes—which lessens specific geographical preferences and focuses more on the mobility of the art objects and artists—Harris shows the necessities and possibilities of an alternative art history to the solid one based on geographical terrain (Harris 2006: 699).

Also influenced by the French anthropologist, Augé’s consideration of the “non-places of supermodernity” which designates places like airports, shopping malls, and hotels where “transitory populations” form new social and cultural communications, Harris argues that the physical structures of the art world—the private galleries, the public museums, the venues for fairs and festivals—also belong to the list of “non-places”. The citizen of the art world—the coterie of the artists, curators, viewers, and visitors—interact face-to-face in this temporary art space where the translations and negotiations over the concepts of art occur. Therefore, anthropologists need to follow the routes taken by multi-sited artwork and travel with its highly mobile informants to elucidate the intercultural translation in the art world and to record the flows of
The analysis of Harris, based on her long-term collaboration with her participants, offers a valuable insight into Tibetan societies, including the Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture (TAP) in China, the diaspora of North Indian Tibetan, and the European Art world, in a period of over ten years. The traveling trajectories mark a process of resisting—Tibetan artists resisting hegemonic social powers such as the nation-state, religious authority, and western-centric art institutions. Furthermore, Harris’s research shows the divergence between the artist and the art world. Tibetan artists see the art world as a sanctuary for their capricious identities, whereas the art world sees them through the prism of their geographical origin.

This high mobile reality and the consequent predicament confronted by the Tibetan contemporary artists is also shared by many traditional Tibetan thangka makers whom I encountered during fieldwork. Today, travel is becoming more diverse and common, or to quote Clifford, “untethered in this post-modern 21st century”. From individuals to groups, capital to technology, culture to images, all of which become the subjects of travel. Dwelling is supplemental and travel is mainstream (Clifford 1997: 2). As the thangka painters travel in the domestic or global dimensions, some locations remain a point of engagement with specific cultural traditions and visual vocabularies, while discrepancies between the artist and audience constantly emerge.

However, there are still some points in Harris’s notions that require scrutiny. Her theoretical departure, Appdurai’s scapes theory is well known for capturing the postmodern situation and shows how the disjuncture between the flows composes a new global order. At the beginning of the 21st century, the studies of globalization mostly focused on the economic or political dimensions. Whereas
Appadurai’s theory emphasizes the cultural aspect. Through the elaboration of the 5-scapes of global cultural flow, he argues that to understand the disjunction between the five dimensions, research needs to focus on the relation within (Appadurai 1996). After his paper was published in 1990 and his book was published in 1996, several empirical social researches adopted the concept of scapes and sought to add new ones (Albrow 1998: 1412).

However, adding art-scapes into the 5-scapes as well as including the art world in the “non-places” merely describes the situation of the global world, which might not necessarily be helpful to understand the global flow as a whole. Instead, it may risk shoehorning the theory into the kind of meta-typology used by Tylorenians who try to include every perspective of culture. Xiang points out that this typology develops from trying to pigeonhole everything and turns itself into an omnipresent key-to-the-universe view which leaves the mechanism of the flow unexamined (2012: 47-8). Instead, Xiang argues that the studies on globalization and migration should focus on “how different regions of the world are related to each other institutionally and structurally” (Xiang 2007: 2).

In Xiang’s ethnography, Global Body Shopping, IT labor is the focus of analysis. By presenting “a configuration of the Indian-based global labor-management system in the IT industry”, Xiang answered the ambitious question posed at the beginning of his book: “how are global high-tech hubs, such as the iconic Silicon Valley of Palo Alto in northern California, intimately connected to women and children in rural India through the processes of IT labor production and surplus appropriation” (Xiang 2007).

The IT industry examined in Xiang’s book may seem irrelevant to the art world. They do, however, share some similarities. Both the IT and the art worlds are “glamorous” places filled with egalitarian
imaginations and tales of success. They motivate people to join in and generate a substantial gap between the top and the bottom strata. In the end, their development celebrates the progress of science and art which are the fundamental deeds of human society.

Sharing these concerns, I clarify how the different destinations, the traditionally famous thangka-making loci—such as Rebgong and Lhasa—are related to each other institutionally and structurally under the backdrop of the modernization of western China, instead of merely documenting the domestic or transnational travel experiences of the Tibetan artists. The institutions of the thangka range from the traditional local thoughts of pilgrimage to the modern cultural institutions, such as the Intangible Culture Heritage Policy, the Master of Chinese Art and Artifacts Evaluation, and Culture Industrialization which are all aspects of the modernization of Tibet. To achieve this, I adopt the perspective of historical anthropology. This does not simply equate to the typical method of relying on historical materials to analyze past events. According to Tanaka, the perspective of historical anthropology is linked to field experiences with a concern for modern problems. Besides, it does not simply thematize past events and distant fields but also focuses on the events that occur at the macro-level and their impacts on the micro-level. From this perspective, the ethnographic reality will extend beyond those simple binary confrontations of nation-state vs. subaltern, religion vs. secularity, or majority vs. minority and focus on the life of the individual (Tanaka 2002: 3). For studying a place as well as a concept of “Tibet” which has long been represented by various groups from different positions, this kind of perspective is particularly valuable.

Harris research documents the journey of the Tibetan diaspora artist, Gyatso, who was born in Lhasa, received art education in
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Beijing, conducted art praxis in several locations and became a notable Tibetan modern art figure. The volatile life of Gyatso has left a series of traces in his artworks as well as his self-reflection of identity and serves as a relevant example to assert the limitation of singular geographic art history. The focus of this article, the artists from the TAP, who have also started to engage the global art market and begun to shake its structure. However, in contrast to the contemporary artist Gyatso, who is a qualified art world citizen, the thangka painters from TAP are still novices and ambiguous members who not only face the stereotypes about Tibetans but also those about non-western art. By examining the travel experiences of the artists from TAP, this paper also complements the historical descriptions relating to the modern art journey made by the Tibetan artists.

Sacred Thangka and Autonomous Thangka Painters

Religion is essential in Tibet. More than spiritual belief or moral discipline, religious knowledge (rig gnas) is all encompassing in Tibetan life and consists of the “total social phenomena” mentioned by Mauss (Mauss 2009(1925)). In Tibetan Buddhism, Buddha is embodied in three types of objects which are all known as rten in Tibetan. Icons and statuaries (sku rten) mean the body of Buddha; as the following consideration shows, thangka-making involves a wide array of techniques such as painting, embroidery, weaving, patchwork and so forth. Modern artistic and cultural institutions divide thangka-making into different projects and grant the people who made thangka with different titles, such as “painter (CH: hua shi)”, “ethnic artist (CH: min zu yi shu jia)”, “artisan (CH: yi ren)”, “craftsman (CH: shou yi ren)” among others. Most participants mentioned in this article who make painting thangka are referred to as thangka painters.

Tibetan Buddhism has a complicated pantheon system in which each god or
scripts, letters, and doctrines (gsung rten) reveal the speech of Buddha; abundant stupas (thugs rten) display the awareness of Buddha. Based on the division above, thangka belongs to sku rten, the body of Buddha, and are not merely representations. According to the local legend, the first thangka is believed to be made by the first king of the Tubo Empire, Srongtsen Gampo who is also regarded as the manifestation of Avalokitesvara, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. After the White Tara, a beautiful kind goddess who came into existence from the compassionate tears of Avalokitesvara, appeared in his dream, Srongtsen Gampo used his blood as pigment and drew a thangka of White Tara. Today painters commonly use this legend to explain the utilization of the substances in the pigments of thangka.

The knowledge of thangka creation belongs to the “bzo rig pa (fine art making field)” and is prescribed by a range of doctrines which are known as thig tshad in Tibetan, which means “the arrangement of lines”. As a crucial step of thangka making, painters need to arrange lines to form a grid background and ensure the correct physical proportions of the figures. In previous research relating to Tibetan art, goddess is a manifestation of Buddha. In this paper, I use Buddha to signify the Gautama Buddha while I use buddha to signify the rest.

In reference to the etymological root of thangka, there is no general truism. Thangka painters have different understandings. For instance, one explanation states that, thang means plain or flat area and ka means to fill, therefore thangka is literalized as “filling the flat area” (with the images of sacred beings).

The utilization of painter’s substances in the pigments—which represent the inseparable relation of the art/object and the artist/subject—is crucial in thangka making. Space does not permit me to explain my thoughts on this issue which I shall analyze in a different paper (Zhang 2021).

Traditionally, the knowledge of Tibetan Buddhism is divided into five fields: inner science (nang rig pa), logic and epistemology (gtan tshig rig pa), grammar and the languages arts (sgra rig pa), health sciences and pharmacology (gsa ba rig pa) and technologies and the fine arts (bzo rig pa).
there has been an inclination to categorize *thig tshad* as iconographic and iconmetric rules (Jackson 1996). Some earlier anthropological studies of *thangka* adopted this perspective and emphasized the iconographic and iconmetric rules by distinguishing those rules as local aesthetic notions (Chen 2013, Liu 2018) or the authentic tradition of *thangka* making (Bentor 1993, McGuckin 1996). However, *thig tshad* has more abundant and complex content, which I introduce below.

The first Tibetan version of *thig tshad* was translated by Tibetan monk Bhuton (1920–1364) from ancient Indian in the 12th century. The most popular one was edited by the famous painter, sMan thang pa sMan bla don grub in the 15th century. The general content of *thig tshad* includes four parts:

1. Quantify the physical proportion of figures into a series of iconographic and iconmetric rules usually depicted as a grid-background.
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 obtained for the violation of the production methods.

The first and second parts quantify and instantiate the appearances of the celestial beings. The third part is a methodological introduction of each step of creation, such as the preparation of canvas, the suggestions of composition, the methods of making pigment, the skills of sketching, staining, and outlining, and the techniques of drawing facial features. The fourth part is the canon of

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9 For a thorough introduction to the procedure for making *thangka*, see
the painter’s behaviors. By listing the deed and the consequent benefits as well as harm, it underlines the necessity of conducting religious practices such as devotion, worshipping, and pilgrimages in the thangka painters’ life. More than iconographic rules, thig tshad functions as an omnipotent guidebook both for making thangka and for being a proper thangka painter.

In Tibet, the people who make thangka are honorifically referred to as “lha bso” or “lha bso la”, translated literally as, “the man who creates god”. To become a qualified lha bso, an artist needs to continually hone their crafting skills as well as cultivate their virtues through countless religious practices under the guide of thig tshad. Particularly, they need to remain humble and anonymous. Consequently, in the nearly one thousand-year-history of Tibetan thangka, only a few great lha bsoes have been acknowledged.

Looking back at the history of a thangka painter’s life the itinerant aspect has been integral. The first generation of thangka painters were immigrants from the Nepal Valley in the 12th century. Later, as Tibetan Buddhism schools split and spread, thangka making skills were concomitantly introduced to various places, merged with local aesthetics, and formed new artistic styles. Transnational and trans-regional moves function as a device that provides the fusion and innovation of the aesthetics of thangka as well as Tibetan culture. Nowadays, the most well-known artistic styles are the sMan ris, the New sMan ris, the mKhyen ris, and the Kar ma sgar ris.10 Besides these major ones, many local artistic styles also exist.

Thangka painters travel to various places and work for the local

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10 The Tibetan word, ris is translated as “style”, “form” or “school”. The artistic features of different ris are well summarized by Jackson (1996).
monasteries while learning the local artistic styles. In addition to the practical purpose, religious benefits also can be obtained during their travels. As painters make thangka or murals for the monasteries of different regions, they visit the adjoining pilgrimage sites and religious sanctuaries to accomplish their religious goals. Some of them even experience revelatory moments.

Here is one episode from the life of the great thangka painter, the founder of the sMan ris, sMan thang pa sMan bla don grub:

He was born in the sMan thang district of northern Lha brang, a region adjoining Bhutan. His birth … is said to have coincided with the discovery of a valuable deposit of native vermilion in Lho brag. He was a brilliant youth who quickly mastered many writing scripts that he was taught … his marriage drove him to despair. Rather than stay together with an incompatible spouse, he ran away and thereupon embarked on a wandering life. Once at Yar ’brog sTag lung, he happened to find a brush case and some example drawings, and from that point on he felt a passionate interest in painting. He then traveled to sTsang and such centers as Sa skya in search of an expert painting master. In the end … he met his teacher, rDo pa bKra shis rgyal po, who was evidently one of the most skilled painters of the day (Jackson 1996: 103).

In the anecdote above, the unpredictable events provided a divination whereby sMan bla don grub committed himself to become a thangka painter and indeed he became a great one. With this tradition, thangka painters in earlier times pursued their voyages to encounter the sacredness of Tibetan culture. During their travels, those widely transmitted legends and well-known anecdotes became a part of their reality. Anderson’s insightful notions on pilgrimage
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illuminate this:

The reality of the imagined religious community depended profoundly on countless, ceaseless travels. During those travels, the sacredness of those religious sites was realized and experienced. The limits of religious communities of imagination were determined by the pilgrimages people made, in other words, their traveling experiences (Anderson 1991: 54).

Contemporary traveling experiences of thangka painters are even more pluralistic considering the background of modernity in Tibet.11

Modernity in Tibet

Despite a few attempts made at the beginning of the 19th century,12

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11 To further consider pilgrimage, see a series of analyses of pilgrimages in Tibet: Huber (1994, 1999), Kapstein (1998) and Bessho (2016). Specifically, Bessho and Kapstein made thorough examinations of the modern changes of Tibetan pilgrimage separately, with the case of the pilgrimage conducted in the Amnye Machen Mountains (Bessho 2016) and the ritual of Dri gung po wa chen mo in TAP (Kapstein 1998). Furthermore, the notion of the Tibetan, as the notable nomad, whose travel is not only motivated by religious purpose. Mentioned in Goldstein’s historical reflection on Tibetan society, some movements, such as the collective transportation contributed to administration. According to Goldstein, the land of Tibet used to be divided into major routes and stations which were run by local holders. As the central government issued permits of transportation, the property owners demanded that their serfs, with hundreds of animals and goods, travel from one station to another. In each station, travelers could receive food and accommodations. Through this transportation convoy, the central government moved people and goods effectively at no expense and with no need to employ extra officials. In Goldstein’s words, transportation travel served as the “backbone of the central government’s administration” (Goldstein 1991: 4).

12 After the Britain-Tibet War (1903–1904), the 13th Dalai Lama (1876–
the state-controlled programs of modernity in Tibet are said to have started in 1951 when the Agreement of Peaceful Liberation of Tibet was made between the Dalai Lama Government and the central government of China. The meaning of modernity kept changing throughout the Great Leap Forward from 1958, the Cultural Revolution from 1966–1976, the Open Door Policy in the 1980s, the Western Development from the late 1990s, and the recent Chinese Dream in this new millennium. Adams coins the phrase “a spectacle of scripted simulation” to describe modernity in Tibet, which includes:

… a whole set of multicultural and transnational mechanisms through which “authentic Tibetanness” is scripted by Chinese and Westerners, and internalized by Tibetans in performances that create and reinforce cultural differences between these groups (Adams 1996: 510-1).

This simulation specifically follows two scenarios: Sinicization and Westernization. Sinicization is often leveled as an accusation by western activists and Tibetan refugees, who claim that Tibetan culture is at risk of total annihilation (see Fisher 2002, 2008; Yeh 2003; Norbu 2006). Adams points out that this argument is premised in the two images which have dominated the western

1933) promoted a series of modern policies in Tibet which included revising the governance and the penal system, introducing the secular education system in addition to the religious education system, establishing a modern hospital and so forth. On the other hand, the Tibetan modernist Dgen ‘dun cho ‘phel (1903–1951), despite his stance in opposition to the government, also endeavored to introduce modern notions into Tibetan society (see Goldstein 1991).
popular imagination of Tibet for the last 20 or so years, which are (1) images of a pre-Mao Tibet that was universally and uniformly religious and where Tibetans, one and all, possessed esoteric spiritual awareness and religious knowledge, and (2) images of Tibet as a place that has been destroyed by Chinese communism and where Tibetans are universally engaged in acts of covert and overt political resistance (Adams 1996: 515).

On the other hand, Westernization is a phenomenon characterized by the processes of free-market modernization, such as urbanization, the influx of consumer goods and tourists, and departure from the traditional lifestyle. Adams recalled the scene that she encountered in a Lhasa Karaoke bar in the 1990s:

One show stands out in my mind: out from the clouds I see a young Chinese fellow accompanied by two Tibetan girls, one on each side. They are all dressed in the latest Hong Kong fashions, or are they New York fashions? He wears a bright yellow long-waisted silk suit with a short, slick hairdo, and the girls are in strapless party gowns of different colors and sequins, each sporting one elbow-length black glove. One girl looks distinctly London mod, her hair in a single ponytail broaching the top of her head (Adams 1996: 513).

The scenery in the bar as well as the existence of the Karaoke bar itself is a metaphor for the modernization of Tibet. Most Westerners who visit Tibet are driven by a vision of imaginative Tibet and tend to see the Karaoke bar as a symbol of the “decline” of Lhasa; the “loss” of authenticity. This kind of Oriental imagination of Tibet is also shared by most Chinese. In a plethora of representations which include painting, photography, song, literature and so forth, Tibet is
commonly depicted as a place offering esoteric Buddhism, as the Shangri-la where bare-chested horseback-riding singing nomads and red cheeked girls take care of rugged yaks, and as a wild frontier for the ultimate challenge of an outsider’s physical endurance. Despite the modernization in Tibet having already lasted over half a century, this kind of representation of Tibet still dominates the imagination of both Chinese and Westerners. In the case of thangka, this imagination interweaves with the examination of some tricky concepts, such as “tradition” and “authenticity”, set against a backdrop of controversy concerning the commoditization of religious objects. Notwithstanding, the two scenarios are sometimes internalized and reinforced by most Tibetan thangka painters especially while they travel in a larger dimension.

From Altar to Auction: Modern Journey of Thangka

Thangka crafting is based on a strict range of rules prescribed in thig tshad which maintains consistency. The accomplished thangka is automatically revered as the body of Buddha and must be treated with all decorum. Although ordering, making, and worshipping of thangka are common in a Tibetan’s life, the exchange of thangka is restricted in the ritualized contexts, sometimes only for one another. Thangka belongs to the “terminal commodities” which usually make only one journey from production to consumption (Kopytoff 1986). So how did the sacred “terminal” thangka begin to be exchanged transnationally and launched on its global journey as a commodity?

Thangka first appeared as a commodity in the 1980s. After the 1959 Uprising, 600,000–800,000 Tibetans left their homes for India and further abroad (Yamada 2016: 242). To overcome the harsh realities of exile, Tibetans were left with no choice but to sell their
precious belongings. Thangkas were among those objects and were sold privately and publically (Tanaka 2005: 163-81). In 1985, after a series of auctions on the theme of Tibetan antiques, the auction company, Sotheby’s, established the Indian, Himalayan, and Southeast Asian Division, and has kept organizing auctions of Tibetan arts and antiques in New York and Hong Kong every year since\textsuperscript{13}. In China, the first thangka auction was held by the Tianjin Cultural Bureau in 2002. During that auction, a thangka of Samantabhadra made in the Qing Dynasty was sold for 55,000RMB\textsuperscript{14}. Due to the rapid growth of the Chinese art market, the economic value of thangka has changed significantly. Only four years later in 2006, in an auction held by the Tian Yi Company in Beijing, a 15-piece thangka collection depicting the biography of Tsong kha pa was auctioned for 18.15 million RMB\textsuperscript{15}. The incendiary news of the sale of the highly-priced ancient thangka drew the attention of the thangka painters in China. As the ancient thangkas came under the spotlight, the modern thangkas also started to appear on the stages of cultural events.

In China, the recognition of the cultural value of thangka and the consequent preservation procedures started in the 1980s. After the implementation of the Open-Door Policy in 1978, the ideological shift entailed more tolerance of religious and traditional practices, and a series of culture-based development policies were put into effect (Svensson & Maags 2018: 14). Launched in 1979, the China Arts and Crafts Master Valuation was the first institution targeting

\textsuperscript{14} According to the website (https://ecodb.net/exchange/cny_jpy.html, last accessed : 20210207), in 2002, 1RMB=15 Yen.
\textsuperscript{15} http://www.cntangka.com/article.php?id=647 last accessed : 20210227.
traditional and ethnic arts and artifacts. By attributing the name of China Arts and Crafts Master (CACM) to an individual who has an established traditional handcraft career\textsuperscript{16}, this appellation entails substantial influence and economic benefit. The price of the work made by a CACM is usually much higher than the work made by a normal artisan. However, the dramatic economic effect was more obvious in southern China, the main target of the 6\textsuperscript{th} and 7\textsuperscript{th} Five-Year Plan (1980–1985, 1986–1990). In western regions, the influence of the CACM valuation was not noticeable until the implementation of the 9\textsuperscript{th} Five-Year Plan (1996–2000) in which the West Develop Plan was inscribed.

Entering the new millennium, a new cultural valuation system was kick-started. Motivated by a new global aspiration, China adopted the recognition of Cultural Heritage and the Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH) of UNESCO and soon became the country that holds the second-largest number of CH sites and the largest number of ICH. The domestic recognition of ICH started in 2005. Tibetan thangka of sMan ris was added into the first ICH list. Sooner after, distinctive styles of thangka were submitted by different regions into the ICH List. Until 2018, thangka was recognized as a National ICH seven times and 13 thangka painters were recognized as the National ICH Transmitters of thangka. The registration of thangka culminated in 2009 when Rebgong Art, including Rebgong thangka, was added to the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage List.

Combined with the ICH recognition system, a range of exhibitions, cultural events, seminars, and contests were introduced in most areas of China. As Svensson and Maags point out, the

\textsuperscript{16} The China Arts and Crafts Masters of the national level requires the candidate to possess more than 20 years experience.
The New Tibetan: Multi-Travelling Experiences of Thangka Painters

In Harris’ research, the art-scapes formed by the highly mobile art objects and artists were addressed as an additional layer to the global flow system to identify the features of the globally artistic endeavors. However, it is noteworthy that travel has always been a feature of the life of thangka painters in Tibet.

The following table (Table 1) was based on my fieldwork in the Xiang Zang Thangka Art Center (XZ Center), a middle-scale thangka operation, established by a Sichuan-born Tibetan Khri btsun (Table 1. No.1) in 2013. Initially, XZ Center had 13 apprentice members, all Tibetan. In 2016, the members grew to 23, including 21 Tibetans and two Han people. Besides the apprentices, two skilled painters (No.16 and No.18) joined in 2016. Sometimes the center is also visited by short-term learners.

Their daily routines include painting, skill training and creation work. Historical and cultural lectures are conducted twice per week. The XZ Center is open from 9:00 to 17:00. In the morning, the novices practice sgyas ris (a charcoal drawing of Buddhist figures based on thig tshad) while the experienced painters produce thangkas for the center. After the lunch break, novices may continue their...
charcoal drawing or help experienced painters. To reinforce the educational purpose, the novices have two tests weekly. One is handing their charcoal painting to the principal and the other is memorizing and reciting *thig tshad*.

While their main task revolves around the painting, their life is far from stationary. Considerable travels are frequent in their day-to-day life, as shown in Table 1, in which the first section illustrates their personal experiences. Most *thangka* painters traveled to multiple sites before they joined XZ Center and have different learning experiences relating to different artistic styles. For instance, the No.1 painter, Khri btsun was born in the rural area of Aba County of Sichuan Province and studied Kar ma sgar bris (K) in a vocational middle school in his hometown. Then he moved to Chendu where he worked as an apprentice and continued to learn Kar ma sgar bris (K). During Khri btsun’s work as a *thangka* apprentice in Chengdu, the *thangka* industry in Rebgong in Qinghai was gradually gaining momentum. So, he went to Rebgong County where he started to learn sMans ris (M). After a brief period living in Rebgong, Khri btsun felt the limitations of local *thangka* making. In 2016 he chose to leave Rebgong for Lhasa. When he first arrived, he worked as a painter in a local *thangka* workshop (①) meanwhile he became an apprentice in another famous *thangka* school (②). Finally, he established his own shop (③) where he made M=sMans ris *thangka* and B= Bön *thangka*.

The second section shows the purposes of the artists’ travels after they entered the XZ Center. I roughly divided their movements into 5 categories: 1) B: business trip; 2) E: attending exhibition; 3) L=learning and communication; 4) R=religious activity; and 5) H=visiting home.
1) B: Business trip

The thangka industry has been thriving in western China over the past two decades. Painters are frequently required to undertake business by themselves. In the XZ Center, most senior members have been on business trips several times. They attend commercial events, meet clients, and deliver thangka works to important clients. In 2014, principal Khri btsun, with his best friend sKal bzang (No.26) and his eldest apprentice gYung drung (No.2) went to Taiwan to meet “an especially important client”. sKal bzang showed me the pictures they took in Taiwan. In one picture sKal bzang is wearing a suit and a waistcoat, sitting in the middle of an expensive-looking leather couch. Just behind him, there are two shelves full of Tibetan Buddhist paraphernalia, including a few pictures of celestial figures, doctrine calligraphy, and an ornamental water vessel. sKal bzang said to me proudly, “See, my suit! I had it made in Shanghai. In those old photos of Tibet, we (Tibetans) are always dressed in the traditional robe, with the typical hairstyle and heavy accessories, standing before thangka. Now, see the new Tibetans”.

2) E: Attending exhibitions

The second purpose of traveling is attending various thangka-themed exhibitions. After thangka was recognized by the UNESCO ICH and National ICH, in addition to a “revival of religion” which gradually started after the new millennium, thangka exhibitions flourished in China. From 2015–2016, the participants in this study, with their thangka pieces, attended 13 exhibitions which were not only held in the large cities in China, but also in some cities of other Asian and European countries. While painters attend exhibitions, they dress in a combination of modern and traditional elements of Tibetan style, which is different from the
Western style of dress when they met their clients. Sometimes young painters wear the traditional Tibetan shirt with modern accessories like a Panama hat or jeans. In Adams’ paper, she depicted Lhasa Tibetans pandering to the image of the “authentic other” created by Western and Chinese perspectives during the modernizations in the 1990s, which “forms a pastiche of aesthetic expression”. Contemporary painters are adding their distinct perspective on modern “Tibetanness”.

3) \( L = \text{Learning and communication} \)

The third motivation for temporarily leaving the center is to attend seminars, training, and courses relating to ICH. After the Tibetan \textit{thangka} was added to the National ICH List, a range of symposiums and seminars targeting \textit{thangka} painters were held in Tibet, most of which were hosted by the ICH Protection Center and Tibet University. In 2016, most young members of the XZ Center were sent to the ICH Transmitters Seminars held at the Tibet University for two weeks. Besides providing the courses relating to the history and the artistic style of Tibetan art, there were also some courses aimed at ideological and patriotic education. As pointed out by Bideau and Yan, in the context of China, “the cultural heritage fulfills many functions. It is linked to political goals and serves as a resource for political legitimacy and soft power, but it is also regarded as an economic asset and used to boost local economic development.”

Showing the political uses of heritage, the ICH law of 2011 states that: “[t]he protection of ICH … is conductive to enhancing the Chinese national cultural identity, to safeguard national identity and national unity and to protect social harmony and sustainable development” (Svensson and Maags 2018: 19).
4) R=Religious activity

Religious practices, such as undertaking pilgrimages, and participating in the rituals and seasonal ceremonies held by monasteries are still important motivations for thangka painters' travel. During their traveling, they make financial and material offerings to monasteries. More than one painter that I interviewed told me that they usually donate one-third of their income to monasteries per year. For the Tibetan Buddhist worshipper, making a substantial donation, and enduring physically challenging pilgrimages are common deeds to generate merit. Additionally, painters are required to add their substances such as saliva or blood in pigments as a form of offering in the traditional process. Only painters who have dedicated themselves to such religious deeds and possess a purified body have the privilege to do so. As a result, the thangka, which embodies the painter's substance is considered to have more religious merits.

5) H=Visiting home

The final reason for travelling documented in Table 1 is visiting home. In reference to citizenship (CH: Hu kou) of the members in the XZ Center, except for one Lhasanese (Table 1 No.11, who quit in 2014), all other members were from other areas of the Tibetan Cultural Region. Even though some of the members have lived in Lhasa for a substantial time, they do not possess Lhasa citizenship. The disparity between the number of painters with and without Lhasa citizenship can also be seen in other thangka operations. Although there is no official calculation on the number of thangka painters and their citizenships in Lhasa, based on my field experience in Lhasa, the number is limited. Since most of them are from other regions in China, visiting their home is an indispensable motivation.
for traveling. Before the Tibetan new year arrives, painters in Lhasa go home with many gifts bought in Lhasa. The rural-born painters also go back home to help with cultivation during the farming season. In the XZ Center, Nagchu-born member Tsimei (Table 1 No.18), goes back to his hometown for Yar tsa gun bu hunting\textsuperscript{17}. Usually, the hunting lasts for 20 to 30 days and results in considerable profit.

Besides the five established types of geographical move, the switch between different artistic styles observed in a \textit{thangka} painter’s career can be considered as an additional type of move. Most painters in the XZ Center have trained in more than one \textit{thangka} style. After they open their own \textit{thangka} shops, painters can provide \textit{thangka} in different artistic styles if the client requests them. This attitude is insouciant because the Tibetan concept of style, \textit{ris}, places more value on the consistency and the inflexible proportion of celestial beings. For this traditional notion, \textit{thangka} painters see style or \textit{ris} as secondary or inadvertent. In contrast, the western artistic style celebrates innovation in art. However, due to the new criteria of the recent cultural institutions, the traditional attitude to style has started to change.

The multi-traveling experiences of \textit{thangka} painters, both physical and abstract, reflect to some degree the ambiguity of the self-reorganization of the modern \textit{thangka} painter. The image of the modern Tibetan businessperson articulates a vision of the new Tibetan, distinct from those clichéd images of Tibetans commonly seen in the old black and white pictures. On the contrary, the image of a pious worshipper, which is one of the most popular imaginations

\textsuperscript{17} Yar tsa gun bu, or dbYar rtswa dgun ’bu in Tibetan, is a wild fungus, which is considered a valuable medical material in Tibet. Recently, the value of Yar tsa gun bu has risen dramatically. Its hunting and selling has become an important source of cash income in rural west China.
of Tibetans is still occasionally observed among thangka painters. The performance of a fashionable ethnic artist is a mixture of modernity and locality. The images of migrant workers and the images of the Yar tsa gun bu hunters might be the byproducts of the marketization of the economy in which people pursue fortune far away from their homes. But they are also generated from the notable traditional images of hardy Tibetan nomads living in the wilderness. Each image mentioned above, like a small piece of the jigsaw, comes together to form a larger picture of modern Tibet. However, there are still glimpses of the past.

I have examined the historical and modern travels of thangka painters. Next, I will focus on the thangka making in two loci which are not only traditionally famous but also considered as strongholds of thangka industry. The first one is Rebgong, “the Home of Tibetan Painting (CH: Zang hua zhi xiang)”.

**Rebgong – the Home of Tibetan Painting**

Rebgong County, or Tongren Xian in Chinese, is the capital of the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in Qinghai Province. Starting from the 15th century, Rebgong has been a place where Tibetan, Chinese, and Mongolians have resided together. Concomitantly, a culture that mixes different elements gradually takes shape and cultivates a unique artistic style, now known as Rebgong Art. According to the painters, both locals and outsiders, the iconographic proportion used in Rebgong belongs to s-Man ris. But compared to those made in Lhasa, Rebgong thangka tends to use high saturation color and full-canvas compositions with an “obsession with elaborate details.”

My first visit to Rebgong was in 2013. When I was about to finish
my fieldwork in Lhasa, my key participant Khri btsun, and another painter Zhuomuqiao, were about to attend a small exhibition held in Xinning. Khri btsun recommended that I should go with them and to visit Rebgong at the same time. “If you want to learn about Tibetan thangka, Rebgong is a place you can not miss.”

Our first destination in Rebgong was Longwu Town, located in the middle of Rebgong County, renowned for making fine Tibetan art and artifact. “Longwu, in terms of scale, is only the size of a palm, but in terms of importance, it is the soul of Rebgong.”

The distance from Xining to Longwu is about a two-and-a-half-hour drive. While we were approaching the town in our taxi, I saw some huge colorful auspicious symbols, such as the bkra shis rtags brgyad (the Eight Auspicious Treaties), the man bcu dbang ldan, the Tara Bodhisattva, and mudras painted on either side of the highway. As we came close to the entrance, eight Chinese characters entered my field of view: “Qing hai re gong zang hua zhi xiang (Rebgong of Qinghai, the home of Tibetan Painting)”. Later I discovered that not all the residents here are Tibetans. Han, Hui, Tu and Bao’an18 people also dwell together here. When we alighted from the taxi, rDo rje, a former employer and a friend of Khri btsun was expecting us.

rDo rje first gave us a tour of Wutun village, one of the main localities of making thangka. The scenery in Wutun is commonly encountered in rural China. The houses are constructed with orange bricks and are one or two stories high. Most of them looked slightly rundown. “Every house is a thangka operation,” rDo rje explained. “In Rebgong, we say every home is the home of thangka, every man is a thangka painter (CH: jia jia shi hua shi, ren shi hua shi)”. Compared

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18 All indicate the local ethnic groups.
to the houses of local people, Wutun Monastery looked opulent. At the entrance of the monastery stood a five-story stupa richly decorated with intricate paintings, five-colored *dar lcog* flags (flags used for worship and prayer), and a gold-plated spire whose construction was nearly finished. A monk painter told us that the construction materials for the stupa, along with all the religious objects in this monastery, such as the *thangkas*, the statues, and even the surrounding buildings are all donated by local painters and villagers. When he heard that we were *thangka* painters from Lhasa, he willingly guided us to his works, two massive *thangkas* of Heavenly Kings adorning the entrance of the Sutra Hall. He told us that he also frequently visits Lhasa. “Last year I stayed in Lhasa for half a year during the leisure season. I worked at a store of my relative. The payment there was good.” He also said many Wutun painters had been visiting Lhasa in recent years, especially the young painters.

In Longwu Town, 70% of males, including monks and laypeople, make Tibetan art for a living. Women are responsible for farming and housework. Besides *thangka*, they also made statues, butter artifacts, and stupas. Traditionally, painters work for the monasteries. Recently orders from hotels or companies have also risen. *Thangka* operations in villages still maintain apprenticeships. Apprentices start *thangka* at an early age, usually around 10 years old. Painter Pan den dar rje told me, “young apprentices have fewer distracting thoughts (CH: za nian) so they can concentrate more on what they do.” Most of the *thangka* operations in the villages of Longwu are small-scale workshops, but a few big *thangka* schools opened in the urban area recently.

Compared to Lhasa, Rebgong received a head-start in the “the Industrialization of *Thangka*”. According to some related investigations, the Rebgong *thangka* industry was reinvigorated in
1980. After the 10th Banchan Lama inspected Rebgong, a series of thangka exhibitions were held in Xining, Beijing, and Shanghai. One year later, the first and only art research institution of Qinghai, The Tibetan Art Research Institution opened in Longwu County which officially inaugurated the collection, preservation, and transmission of Tibetan art. In 1989, the local thangka painter Xiawucairang (1922–2004) was recognized as a CACM. By 2010, another five painters made the list. Besides the CACM, Qinghai thangka and painters are also frequently featured on the ICH Lists. As mentioned above, in 2009, Rebgong Art was added to the UNESCO ICH Lists. Until 2016, the thangka industry was regarded as the core industry in Huangnan Autonomous Region and achieved a 250 million RMB output in 2016\textsuperscript{19}.

Despite the thriving thangka industry in Rebgong, some painters like Khri btsun still decided to leave. “The thangka production in Rebgong is process-oriented”. Khri btsun explained that in Rebgong, a thangka is completed by several painters. Each painter is assigned to one job and keeps doing it. Someone always does the line-drawing. Someone else always does doting and coloring. There are few opportunities for young painters to accomplish one piece from start to finish. Besides, “Every Tibetan wants to have a try in Lhasa. Lhasa is the center of us.” Owing to the longing he harbored, Khri btsun left Rebgong in 2006 and departed for Lhasa.

Lhasa: The Sacred Center

Not exclusive to thangka painters, modern Lhasa is an admirable

\textsuperscript{19} http://www.cssn.cn/zh/article/201603/t20160322_2868115.shtml last access: 20200918.
destination in many respects. Built in the 7th century, Lhasa has long been revered as the foremost pilgrimage city among the people who love Tibet. In the central part of the city, the Jokhang Monastery is surrounded by three pilgrimage roads: Nankor, Bankor, and Linkor (Figure 1). These pilgrimage roads intertwine with adjoining narrow alleys and form the most affluent area in Lhasa. This area is also a competitive arena for thangka painters. In 2016, in this intricate maze area adjoining surrounding Bankor street (measuring a mere 0.715 square kilometers), more than 70 thangka shops were counted. These shops are visited by the locals, pilgrims and of course innumerable tourists.

Even the quality and price of thangkas sold in this area differ significantly because the thangka market in Lhasa does not have the division which is found in the thangka markets of the North Indian and Nepal Tibetan community mentioned by Bentor (1993: 115-6) and McGuckin (1996: 43-5). That is to say, the thangka market in Lhasa does not separate into tourism thangka for “external uses” and the authentic thangka for “internal uses”. Although some painters do not wish to treat thangka as a commodity, the thangka market here has a more hybrid way of managing the business.

In the market of Lhasa, thangka operations can be roughly classified into three categories (Figure 1).

Type I: Commission-based production at home by one or two painters.

Type II: Small-scale production had less than 50 members.

Type III: Large-scale production launched by local thangka experts.

Some additional explanation is provided below.

First, the real number of Type I and Type II operations is supposedly much higher than the number I shown in Figure 1. This is because type I operations are home-based and do not require a
business permit. Type II operations, while holding business permits are often seasonal.

Compared to type I and type III operations, type II has a more flexible way of management and takes more effort to keep the balance between the needs of the market and the unique character of the owner-painter. This policy is reflected by the various names they utilized, such as “store (CH: shan dian)”, “school (CH: xue xiao)” or “training center (CH: pei xun zhong xin)” “painting college (CH: hua yuan)” or “art center (CH: yi shu zhong xin)”. Type II shops take orders from monasteries and lay patrons as well as selling ready-made thangkas. Sometimes they are also involved in thangka-themed events. The apprentices recruited by the shops are from a wide range of ages. When the skills of apprentices improve, they receive a salary from the store. After the apprentice “graduates”, he can run his own store independently or continue to work as a senior painter at the same place. The salary for experienced apprentices is around 2,000 RMB per month, and this can rise to 10,000 RMB for seniors. Communication among type I and type II operations is frequent. When one receives a “large job offer” (for instance a series of thangka with many pieces), the owner cooperates with other shops or hires thangka painters from other shops temporarily to meet the demand.

Becoming a thangka painter was considered as “a job for life”. Apprentices were recruited at an early age, practicing making thangka while doing the chores for their master. Whereas starting from 1980s, a modern way of thangka training with a specific schedule has been adopted by a few thangka schools. In the first two years, young apprentices learn the thig tshad, Tibetan history and practice sketching skills. Usually starting in 3rd year, the apprentices practice more advanced skills, such as color, dotting and outlining. During this period, students also begin to assist with the works taken on by the school. The whole training period is six years. After this, the apprentice prepares the graduation work. After it is finished, the apprentice formally becomes a painter.
There are four large operations in Lhasa: the Ancient Art and Architecture Company, the Danbarodam Thangka Art School, the Tibetan Thangka College, and the Lamulazhuo Thangka College which I classified as type III. Compared to the former two types of operations, type III involves the ICH and CMAA valuation systems in a more profound way. Type III operations are either launched by one or a few famous thangka painters who are recognized as Transmitters of ICH or CMAA and hire some veteran thangka painters as teachers or supervisors. Except for the Ancient Art and Architecture Company, the other three thangka operations each major in one popular thangka artistic style, the sMan ris, the New sMan ris, and the Kar ma ga bris. The Danbarodam Thangka Art School and the Tibetan Thangka College are also identified as the National Transmit Basements of the ICH and maintain a close working relationship with the local government.

One benefit of the thriving thangka market is that people have many opportunities to attend thangka exhibitions in Lhasa. During 2016 when I was conducting my fieldwork here, thangka exhibitions were held in the City Cultural Center nearly every month. Most of them were arranged under the ensign of ICH by a coalition of the local government (The Intangible Heritage Preservation Center of TAP) and the type III thangka operations.

The exhibition halls are usually decorated in Tibetan style. Thangkas mounted with vintage-style silks are hung on the wall. Golden and bronze statues of buddhas and stupas decorated with jewels and elaborate patterns sit on altars, usually accompanied by golden vases which contain peacock feathers or flowers. Incense is burnt. Sometimes ritual performances or Tibetan operas are also included. Those Tibetan elements assemble to form a space filled with Tibetan mood and display multiple aspects of the concept of
“Tibetanness” or “Tibetan characteristics (CH: xi zang te se)”. This contrasts with the White Cube space of contemporary western art exhibitions, which aspire to neutrality. The thangka exhibitions emphasize the images of Tibet, even though the images are sometimes disparaged as Oriental. While attending this kind of event, thangka painters are often observed wearing traditional Tibetan clothes, standing beside their thangka pieces, and providing explanations to the viewers. They are not silent anonymous makers but the interpreters and the transmitters of Tibetan culture. Thangka, painters, along with other Tibetan elements form a syntagmatic configuration that makes a statement about modern Tibet and the global aspirations of modern China.

**Lha bso in Lhasa: The Ambiguity of Being a Modern Thangka Painter**

Khri btsun remembers his first arrival to Lhasa in 2006. “The plane circled for a long time before landing ... Looking out of the window, the mountains pile upon each other like the ocean … the snow on the mountaintop appears like layers of waves.” The vast plateau appears itself as a unique topography which reminded Khri btsun that he had finally arrived in Lhasa, a place different from any other he had visited.

At the beginning, Khri btsun was introduced as an apprentice in Master Tsi dan’s shop. Thanks to his rich experience, Khri btsun was quickly promoted and was capable of completing thangka independently. Owner Tsi dan is a prestigious local thangka painter, who owns three shops in Barkor Street. Tsi dan maintains a fine working relationship with the local travel agencies. Through their introductions, Tsi dan’s shop frequently obtains thangka orders from
the foreign Buddhists introduced by travel agencies. Western customers usually have their preferences for the aesthetic attributes of thangka. “The composition and the use of color here are quite different to thangka made in Rebgong. Compared with the complicated backgrounds and high saturation of color used in Rebgong thangka, the thangka made in Tsi dan’s shop are simpler and more elegant”.

After the work on Barkor was on track, Khri btsun then joined the Danbarodam Thangka Art School in his spare time. He painted thangka in the shop in the daytime and when night came, he returned home and painted his own works. On weekends or in free time, he took his work to Danba’s workshop for advice and then revised it. After two years or so of keeping to this busy schedule, Khri btsun completed three pieces of thangka in his spare time. One even helped him won the First Painter Competition held by the TAP government. After this award, Khri btsun started to attend exhibitions both within China and overseas. From 2011, Khri btsun told me he had been to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, the United States, Europe and Japan. These brief contacts with the outside world stimulated him to re-examine what thangka is and how to be a thangka painter. In Khri btsun’s mind, thangka is always sacred. This sacredness comes from the rigorous method of making it, the profound religious meaning, which is also reinforced by the new concept of art. Thangka is different from ordinary commodities. In 2013, Khri btsun left Bankor’s “increasingly strong commercial atmosphere”, and established his own thangka studio, Xiang Zang Thangka Art Center. According to him, Xiang represents his religion Bön and Zang is for Tibet.

In 2014, Khri btsun commenced with the registration of Bön Painting on the ICH List. In 2017, Bön Painting was inscribed in the
ICH list of Lhasa. However, it failed at the next level. The assertion that Bön painting was the oldest art form in Tibet challenged the authority of the experts who believe in Tibetan Buddhism. According to a secretary presented the conference with the valuation of Khri btsun’s project, especially one expert, Norbu, the principal of Tibetan Thangka College, dissented the application of Khri btsun. “Norbu questioned my experiences. He said I was too young, and my skill is so-so”, Khri btsun reported. “Norbu also said they should find painter from Gali (District) in Tibet to be the Transmitter, not someone from Sichuan”. Khri btsun told me that he was outraged after he heard this. “I never did anything bad or disrespectful to him. I always call him dge rgyan (an honorific expression, meaning master). Why did he do this to me?”

Khri btsun failed at the application for ICH recognition in TAP. Fortunately, he was recognized as a CACM of Tibet in 2016. After he gained this title, he returned to his hometown in Songpan County, Sichuan, and built a thangka school there. The new thangka school opened in 2018 and was soon recognized as an ICH Transmit Basement in Shongpan County, and Bön painting was also identified as the ICH of Sichuan Province. At the opening ceremony of the new school, Khri btsun invited every celebrity involved in thangka in Lhasa except Norbu. Since then, every year, Khri btsun spends half of his time in his hometown Songpan and half of his time in Lhasa.

**Art World: The New Destination**

I will dedicate the last travel story to a thangka painter who was born in Tibet, although he eventually moved out. sKal bzang was born in Shikatse, the second big city in TAP. He started to learn thangka from local monks as a child. In 2006, he met a Han girl, Li,
who had majored in painting and was on an inspirational journey in Tibet, searching for her graduation piece. Li later became his wife. Li studied wood blocking at a university in Guangdong Province. After they married, sKal bzang moved to Shenzhen where then they established a thangka studio in 2009 to promote his works as well as Tibetan culture.

sKal bzang appreciates the strong influence of his wife. “Before I met her, I was just a boy who knew nothing but painting. She was the one that made me think about the concepts such as Tibet, Tibetan culture and art”. After they moved to Shenzhen, sKal bzang has started taking part in art events. In 2013, under the introduction of a Shenzhen-born Chinese American, sKal bzang took his thangka works overseas for the first time, to the International Folk Art Market (IFAM).

The IFAM is an annual cultural and economic event held in Santa Fe, New Mexico, USA, usually during one weekend of July. It was established in 2004. Under the support of the State of New Mexico Department of Cultural Affairs, the Museum of International Folk Art, and the Museum of New Mexico Foundation, it rapidly grew into the biggest folk-art market in the world. The main purpose of this event is to foster economic and cultural sustainability for folk artists worldwide and to “provide an innovative approach in increasing global and cultural understanding”21. Most of the folk artists entering are from developing countries. Through display, on-site crafting, and performance, the artists can interact and communicate with the participants directly. The event is also a flagship attraction and visited by many tourists each year. sKal bzang

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related his experience at Santa Fe to me:

It was a beautiful town, very artistic, with many nice shops, galleries and museums ... an interesting place ... It used to be a place where many Native Americans lived. To preserve the Native American tradition and save their culture, they started this whole project.

When I asked how the audience responded to his thangka, he told me, “They just kept saying amazing”. His wife expressed this compliment:

America is a multi-cultural country that is familiar with various folk arts. When they saw our works, they gave us a lot of compliments. But that is it. If we don’t introduce ourselves, they don’t ask too much. They know Tibet but are not familiar with Tibetan Buddhism. So, we had to explain thangka in an understandable way. We omitted the complexity of Buddhist meaning and focused on the cultural aspects, like how we make it, and what materials we used. But as you know, thangka is more than that. It is not just a picture of some beautiful figures painted with precious pigments. It has high artistic value but is not only about culture. If we only see the cultural aspect of thangka, we only see a small part of it.

After taking part in IFAM three times, Li obtained information about the Salon d’Automne, which is “a famous and historical event. We decided to give it a try”. The application went smoothly. In 2015, sKal bzang took his thangka, the thousand-armed Bodhisattva to the Salon d’Automne. This piece of thangka is a hallmark of his work. It
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represents a white Bodhisattva with a thousand arms with an eye on each palm, each of which is intricately detailed. This piece presents a high challenge even for the experienced painter.

In contrast to the IFAM in Santa Fe, the Salon d’Automne is one of the most prestigious exhibitions of Fine Art in Europe. It started in 1903 and supported many key art movements, such as Impressionism, Cubism, and Fauvism. During its history of more than a hundred years, numerous artistic giants have been on this stage. In sKal bzang’s opinion, this is an “appropriate and more professional” exhibition space for his thangka. The exhibition lasted for five days in the Avenue des Champs-Élysées. During the exhibition, sKal bzang and his wife wore their traditional clothing, stood near his work, and communicated with the audience. Because he could not speak French or English very well, he prepared a small flag with the slogan: “Local tradition is (the) global treasure” with a Chinese version below “Min zu de jiu shi shi jie de”.

However, the responses from the crowd were varied. Li told me:

Some Europeans might have already known thangka. I think so. They were not very surprised when they saw thangka … Not like in America, where thangka was seen as something exotic … thangka, as a type of traditional art, was displayed in a modern art exhibition, but the spectators did not feel odd. Maybe because France is a Catholic country, the local religion has a long history. The French already had a concrete idea about what religious art looks like, and thangka did not fit with the images they associate with religious art. Some spectators saw our work as a kind of folk art. It was inevitable. A few spectators who might have had some knowledge about Tibetan Buddhism said that they felt the energy from the thangka when they contemplated it.
In the exhibition, they met a European-based art agency working for Chinese artists who wanted to promote artworks globally. With their help, sKal bzung obtained an invitation from the Japanese Contemporary Art Association (JCAA) in 2016 after the Salon d’Automne. However, in the end, their JCAA invitation was canceled. The JCAA explained that *thangka*, which represents tradition and ethnicity, did not comply with the theme of their exhibition, which is for contemporary art, representing modernity and universality. It is not all smooth sailing for *thangka* painters traveling in the global sea.

**Conclusion**

According to a survey conducted by the TAP government, in 2016, the output of “fine *thangka* (CH: *Jing pin tang ka*)” made in TAP was over 1000 pieces, with the industry worth over 1 billion RMB. The TAP government optimistically estimated that by the end of the 13th Five Year Plan (2016–2020), the estimated number of “fine *thangka*” made in TAP would increase to 5000 pieces and the economic output of the *thangka* industry would be worth 7 billion RMB. Yet as a twist in the tale of the prosperity of the *thangka* industry, the local government was planning to implement a restriction on *thangka* business. In the 2018 Tibetan new year, Khri btsun told me “From this year, applying for a *thangka* business license will be nearly impossible due to the dramatic increase in the number of *thangka* shops”, which caused the *thangka* market to overheat. This news came as a shock for those aspiring entrepreneurial young painters who were eager to establish their own *thangka* operations. However, risks always create opportunities. This change does not necessarily create an insurmountable barrier for the painter’s careers. The last part of this paper reconsiders the experiences introduced above in
reference to previous research and provides some theoretical and practical insights.

*Thangka* is widely regarded as the key representative of Tibetan Art. In the context of anthropological analysis, it is ethnic as well as local. However, this article argues that it is the trans-regional even transnational travels conducted by *thangka* painters that transformed *thangka* into *Thangka* Art. The multiplicity of the travel experiences of *thangka* painters and the ambiguous status of contemporary *thangka*: as sacred objects, cultural artifacts, and commodities mutually facilitate this process.

This article shares the anthropological perspective proposed by Harris, which is *deterritorialization* of art and reinforces the mobility of the current art world. Furthermore, influenced by Xiang’s analysis on immigration, this article also examines the mechanism of *art-scapes*, specifically, what specific historical and institutional reasons made *thangka* painters travel. Also, what does the awareness of all the stories make possible?

In describing the history of *thangka* in the section “Sacred *Thangka* and Autonomous *Thangka* Painters” in this article, I have emphasized the importance of travel in a painter’s life. In earlier times, travel was a necessary means for improving skill, generating religious merits, experiencing prophetic evocations, and imagining Tibet. Far more than a modern phenomenon, itinerant elements have been a crucial aspect of being a *thangka* painter.

It is indubitable that modernization provides travel with more motivations, therefore makes it more diverse and secular. Under the development of the CMAA and the ICH institutions, Lhasa and Rebgong became famous loci of the *thangka* industry and attracted countless young painters. The contacts with the concept of Art and the art world increased painters’ knowledge about the different
opinions and the significant commercial value of *thangka*. The exhibitions, festivals, and art saloons held in the cosmopolitan cities such as Paris and Tokyo became the painters’ new destinations. Inspired by Augé, Harris categorized the art places, along with airports, hotels, or supermarkets, as the “non-place” which would not be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity. These places are inhabited by transitory populations and pure art objects.

However, Augé’s consideration relating to place and non-place is more relevant in an existential sense. As explained in his book, places and non-places are not two readily divisible categories. Instead, these concepts intertwine in the reality of today’s world.

Place and non-place are rather like opposed polarities: the first is never completely erased, the second never totally completed; they are like palimpsests on which the scrambled game of identity and relations is ceaselessly rewritten (Augé 1995: 79).

According to the above quotation, those places where *thangka* has been made, exchanged, worshipped, and gazed upon, have their cultural roots and historical backgrounds. Lhasa and Rebgong are sacred lands for Tibetans. Painters visit there not only because of the thriving *thangka* industry but also for the monasteries, sacred pilgrimage sites, and autochthonous legends. Even in a city like Paris, *thangka* is still beheld as religious art and the identification of being Tibetan is compatible with being an artist. Painters travel. So does everyone. But the flow of people is not randomly spread like a flood. It is guided—sometimes circumscribed—by institutions, ideology and social constructs. These journeys are reminiscent of those sKor streets in Lhasa, which lead people to ceaselessly circulate around
their holy destinations.

Whereas the travel experiences analyzed by Harris belong to modern artists who are already members of the art world, I present the travel done by TAP thangka painters, who are still pacing in and out of the art world. The life story of Gya-tso shows a variety of explanations of his artworks under different criteria inside the art world. The story of sKal bzang that I introduced in the last section shows how the local artist “gets a ticket” to enter the western art world.

The modern gauges of culture, such as the ICH, the CMAA, as well as the western-centric image of an “ideal artist” tend to value individuals over groups. As a result, the numbers of artists with the title “Transmitter”, “Master” or “notable artist” are limited compared to the whole thangka painter group, in which most are merely moving from one shop to another, and one place to another. This large anonymous group celebrates the glamour of Thangka Art without gaining many actual benefits. The skill held by transmitters is a legacy passed through countless predecessors who remain unrecognized. This kind of modern cultural institution leads to the individualization of artistic skills which, to some degree, conflicts with autochthonous notions.

Thangka Art is supported by countless autonomous painters who travel through space and time. sKal bzang said that ethnic art is global (CH: Min zu de jiu shi shi jie de). I believe that he does not mean to attach art to a particular people or group. The concept of ethnic art is the de-individualization of art.

This article examines the experiences of thangka painters. The views of thangka held by insiders of the art world, is a challenge to be met in a future study.
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