The Portrait of Buddha

An Anthropological Approach Towards the Tibetan Religious Painting—The *Thangka*

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Abstract

A portrait is an image created in imitation of something, and it is always deeply related to human emotions and aspirations. Tibetan *thangkas*, the subject of this paper, are not only representations of the Buddha and deities of theTibetan Buddhist and Bön religion but also can be viewed as a kind of portrait that evokes the emotions and aspirations of their creators and worshippers. This paper examines how the relationship between human and portrait, subject and object, is disturbed through anthropological descriptions of cases of *thangka* creation and worship. *Thangka*-making is characterised by the following three features: (i) the quantitative rules determine the religious authenticity of the *thangka*, (ii) the non-quantitative rules (referred to in this paper as the '*imponderabilia* part', play a significant role in the aesthetic quality of the *thangka*, and (iii) the use of bodily substances is related to both the religious and aesthetic quality of *thangkas*. In previous studies on *thangkas*, (i) has been considered important, but consideration of (ii) and (iii) has been insufficient. This paper focuses on (ii) the 'imponderabilia part' of *thangka*-making and (iii) the painters' use of bodily substances. It then argues for the '*corpothetics*' of the *thangka*, considering that the appeal of the *thangka*, or the emergence of the *thangka*'s agency, lies not merely in its religious meaning or visual beauty but in its creator's attempt to fulfil his or her desire to unify with the *thangka*. Furthermore, the second half of the paper presents examples of the commissioning and use of *thangkas* to show that the 'transformation' between humans and *thangkas* is two-way. A person who creates a portrait is constantly enchanted by the portrait and then become a creator. The creator and the portrait, the person and object, are in an endlessly reflective relationship, like mirrored surfaces placed face to face.

Keywords: Tibetan *thangka*, portrait, agency, *imponderabilia*, *corpothetics*

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□ Introduction

This article focuses on the Tibetan *thangka* and examines its creation and worship[1]. *Thangka* indicates a genre of religious art, generally painting and embroidery, depicting religious elements of Tibetan Buddhism as well as the local religion, Bön[2]. Although the commodification of *thangkas* (known as 'Ch.艺术化 promoting *thangka* to art' and 'Ch.观光化 promoting *thangka* to souvenirs') has occurred in recent years, it remains of high religious value[3]. The creation and worship of *thangkas* brings religious merit[4] to the person concerned, leading to well-being in this life and the next. The creation of *thangkas* is categorised as the *bzo rig pa*[5], which is roughly equivalent

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[1] In the Japanese version, this article uses 'チベット (Japanese katakana)' to indicate the large geopolitical area sharing Tibetan culture, including the southwest region of China and Tibetan communities in North India, Nepal and Bhutan; uses the Chinese characters '西藏 *chibetto*' to refer to the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture in China; and uses the Chinese character '藏区 *zoku*' to refer to the Tibetan cultural regions located in Qinghai, Sichuan, Yunnan, Gansu and other provinces as well as the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture. However, in the English version, for convenience, it uses 'Tibet' to indicate the large area sharing Tibetan culture and uses TAP to refer to the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture and TCC to represent the Tibetan cultural communities inside China. Additionally, this paper follows the Wylie transcription system (Wylie, 1959) to indicate the Tibetan expression of some key concepts.

[2] In Tibetan Lhasa vernacular, *thangka* is also spelt *thang ga, thang kha* or *thang sku*, depending on the region. Accordingly, all the variations mentioned above are derived from the ancient Tibetan word *thang sku*, in which *thang* means wide space and *sku* is the honorific form of the word *lus*, meaning body, and commonly indicates the body of a Buddha or lama. *Thang sku* can be translated as the body of a Buddha appearing in a wide space. The Chinese characters are spelled as '唐卡' or '唐嘎' according to the Tibetan pronunciation.

[3] The commodification of *thangkas* was discussed by the author in a separate article (Zhang, 2018).

[4] The term 'Jap: 功徳 (religious merit)' in this paper corresponds to 'Tib: *bsod nams*' and 'Tib: *yon tan*' in the Lhasa vernacular. Both the Buddhists and the Tibetan Buddhists believe that religious merit is accumulated through religious practice and altruistic acts, bringing positive results in this life and the next.

[5] In Buddhism, the 'Five Sciences' or 'Chi: 五明' are the five major disciplines of knowledge, including the 'Chi: 声明 (the Science of Language)', 'Chi:因明 (the Science of Logic)', 'Chi: 医方明 (the Science of Medicine)', 'Chi:工巧明 (the Science of Fine Art and Crafts)' and 'Chi: 内明 (Inner Science of Spirituality)'.

to the study of fine art and crafts. A *thangka* artist is not only required to follow the rules prescribed in the doctrine of iconometrics and iconography, known as *thig tshad*, but also expected to be constantly active in religious practice and meritorious deeds, which are crucial in assessing the religious merits of *thangkas*. This article examines *thangkas* as portraits of Buddha for two reasons.

First, both *thangkas* and portraits are deeply connected with human emotions and aspirations. Based on the story recounted by Pliny (2013) in *Natural History*, the first portrait was the outlining of the shadow of an outgoing lover, and it was created as an avatar to replace the absent one. In this way, portraits were intially thought to elicit some kind of emotion or action in humans. However, against the backdrop of post-Kantian aesthetic thought, the so-called 'autonomous portrait' has evolved into a representation that 'translates and replicates the spiritual life [of the model] through the art, or technique of the portraitist' and a 'tableau organised around a figure' (Nancy, 2004, p. 10). Furthermore, since Descartes, the 'autonomous portrait' has served as a metaphor for the subject with a self-present structure in modern philosophy (Okada, 2004).[6] This paper considers the *thangka* as an art form based on the original role of the portrait, the manifestation of desire and the evocation of emotion.

Second, the Chinese expression for portrait, '肖像 Pin-yin: xiao xiang; Jap: sho zo', denotes an important aspect of *thangka*-making. '肖' means to imitate or resemble, and '像' means image. '肖像' indicates image that was made through imitating. Creating a portrait, in other words, entails not only the act of making but also the act of imitation, which is 'a component of all human artistic creation', as Georges Bataille argued in the analysis of the Lascaux murals.

> Conceivably, the imitation of wild beasts' cries or postures led the first painter to mark silhouettes on surfaces. This possibility may be of some help in interpreting the finger-painting done with colours on rock or by running the fingertips across, and thus grooving, moist clay. Traces of these exercises (called 'macaroni' by prehistorians) have been found in caves (Bataille, 1955, p. 84)[7].

The creation of *thangkas* begins in the same manner, the imitation of the master artist as well as his predecessors. The goal of a *thangka* artist is to draw 'like his master and other predecessors', not only to make an image that resembles the model.

The Science of Fine Art and Crafts is expressed in Tibetan as *bzo rig pa*.

[6] Nancy himself also pointed out the disturbance inherent in the autonomous structure of the portrait. In the same book, he discusses how the subject–object relationship is often perturbed and overturned, referring to 'the illusion that when you look at a portrait in a museum, it gazes at you' (Nancy, 2004, p. 29).

[7] Also see Bataille (1975, p. 35).

This is evidenced by Figure 1, where several doodles—the 'macaroni' of *thangka*-making—can be seen on the canvas edges. Additionally, the painter's ongoing religious observances and positive deeds might be seen as the imitation of the Buddha or the lamas, who constitute the subject for *thangka*. This study refers to *thangkas* as portraits of Buddha because of the similarities between *thangkas* and portraits in the need for identification with an absent entity and imitation.

Figure 1

Thangka-*making: tShogs zhing of rNying ma School*



Previous research

1 Previous research on *thangka*-making - quantifiable and imponderable

Studies on Tibetan communities in China (Chi: 藏区) (Chen, 2013; Li, 2016; Liu, 2018) as well as tourism anthropological studies on the Tibetan communities in North India and Nepal (Bentor, 1993; McGuckin, 1996) both made beneficial examples of earlier *thangka* research. Notwithstanding the political, economic and historical contexts of the study locations, all the aforementioned studies emphasise 'tradition' as a key concept at the centre of their analyses of the *thangka*-making process. However, rather than defining tradition from an essentialist standpoint, they view it as a custom that has been passed down through multiple generations. Accordingly, Bentor (1993) and McGuckin (1996) examined *thangka*-making in Nepal and Northern India. Both studies analysed the necessity for and obstacles to *thangka* artists upholding the traditions in refugee communities as well as how traditional aspects of *thangka*-making are discarded or maintained during commodification for tourist markets. Traditions such as the male-dominated structure of the artist group and the obvious hierarchical

relation between master and pupil are cast aside, whereas traditions associated with production techniques and the use of specific formative materials are preserved and even reinforced via interactions and negotiations with outside groups. Both studies provided a valuable viewpoint, especially given the period in which they were published, when tourism anthropology tended to see the effects of tourism activities on local communities negatively. However, it is problematic to view the development of *thangka*-making traditions as being a result of negotiation with the outside world.[8]

On the other hand, studies on Tibetan communities in China (Chen, 2013; Li, 2016; Liu, 2018) concentrate on the creation and exhibition of *thangkas* with the background of developing cultural and tourist market. These studies notice that the iconographic and iconometric rules described in the *thig thsad* are highly esteemed by locals and are even identified as *thangka* traditions. Accordingly, Liu argues that 'the *thig tshad* forms local traditional standards that closely link to the aesthetic evaluation system therein… As articulated in iconographic representations, such as *thangka*, Buddhist thoughts and beliefs are quantified and standardised, and become easy to recognise' (2018, p. 103). Chen's ethnography demonstrates an example in which a local *thangka* painter taught his apprentice the physical proportions of Buddha using a ruler (Chen, 2006). These quantified iconographic standards aid in maintaining the consistency and coherence of the images of the unseen Buddhas. Likewise, in the creation of sacred art, a perceived obsession with numbers has long been noted. Quoting Lévi-Strauss, religious art is the 'intellectual rather than intuitive

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[8] Bentor and McGuckin were influenced by the study of Graburn (1976). The study by Graburn contrasts the internal and external audiences and focuses on the commodities used in tourism. In contrast to visitors who are unfamiliar with local customs and culture, the former phrase refers to customers who are members of the same group as the production side (Graburn, 1976). Bentor (1993) and McGukin (1996) build on this categorisation by highlighting the existence of an *intermedia audience* that acts as a bridge between the inside and the outside. Most of the intermedia audience, particularly in the *thangka* market of refugee populations, are Buddhist followers from Western societies. Their acquaintance with Tibetan Buddhism and culture makes it easier to improve the aesthetic qualities of *thangka*s and bring back the old ways. However, the creation of tradition does not always include interaction with and compromise with the intermedia audience. Studies may miss the creativity of local artists and their endurance if they place all of their focus on the role of the intermedia audience. The aforementioned viewpoint also carries the risk of hiding the imbalanced power relations between the host and visitor and putting the local population and the producing side as the 'helped' side.

representation' and as a result calls for a certain level of continuity and rigidity (1963, p. 67).

Both Liu's and Chen's studies concentrate on the continuity and rigidity of *thangkas*. Therefore, both of their works highlight the significance of the quantitative component of the *thig tshad* doctrine. The *thig tshad*, however, is not just about the iconographic descriptions, as will be covered in more detail later; it also encompasses the rules that apply to the making of *thangkas* and the ideal conduct of a qualified *thangka* artist. Such analyses run the risk of reducing the multidimensional descriptions in *thig tshad* to the regulations of iconography and iconometrics and restrict *thangka* study to the field of iconographic or symbolic analysis. The viewpoint concentrating only on the quantitative aspect of *thig tshad* obscures the importance of the negotiations and bodily practices of a wider range of people, which are crucial to *thangka*-making. Given the aforementioned criticisms, this article suggests examining *thangkas* by concentrating on the unquantifiable part, particularly the bodily acts involved in the creation of *thangkas*. Following Malinowski, it refers to such aspects as the '*imponderabilia* part' of *thangka*-making.

The 'imponderabilia part' is derived from Malinowski's usage of 'the imponderabilia of actual life' when he developed the guidelines for conducting anthropological fieldwork. According to him, this concept refers to the part of life that cannot be recorded by questioning or computing documents:

> Here belong such things as the routine of a man's working day, the details of his care of the body, of the manner of taking food and preparing it; the tone of conversational and social life around the village, the existence of strong friendships or hostilities, and of passing sympathies and dislikes between people, the subtle yet unmistakable manner in which personal vanities and ambitions are reflected in the behaviour of the individual and in the emotional reactions of those who surround him. (1922,p.18)

Such insignificant actions, delicate feelings and ambiguous experiences are negligible, but the accumulation of such means significant (Malinowski, 1922; Yanai, 2018).

The creation of *thangkas* involves quantitative descriptions of the proportions of Buddhas, verbalised methodologies and the imponderable practices. In *thig tshad*, the quantitative component is only partly present. The imponderable elements, on the other hand, pertain to activities that are deeply embedded in people's daily lives, such as poetic descriptions of the Buddha's appearance, methods of line drawing and dyeing and ways of making pigments and tools as well as the artist's mannerisms and movements and experiences regarding dealing with and sustaining relationships with clients. Such parts, thus, is impossible to quantify. By examing on the *imponderabilia* of *thangka*-making, this article argues that *thangka* creation cannot be measured or standardised.

Furthermore, one other finding from earlier studies on *thangka* is worthy of note. The painters often mix their bodily substances, including saliva, into the colours when creating *thangkas*. Chen (2016) interprets this behaviour as a sacrifice and asserts that people who practise religion actively and consistently have pure bodies. A sign of their devotion is the fact that they provide their pure bodies as an offering to *thangkas* (Chen, 2016). If one just views the creation of *thangka*s as a religious activity, this analysis might be helpful. However, *thangka*-making combines both the act of engaging in religious practice and that of producing art. The use of physical substances relates to both the religious and aesthetic aspects of *thangkas*. This is evidenced by the following quote from a *thangka* artist: 'using saliva on (drawing) the eyes of Buddha gives the image liveliness'.

The creation of art and religious practice interconnect with one another in the first place. The analysis of Bataille mentioned above and Merleau-Ponty's description of painting both confirm this. In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty (1966) describes painting as a process of *transubstantiation*, in which 'by lending the body to the world the artist changes this world into paintings' (p. 257). In other words, painting is neither a reflection of the physical world nor reliant on the artist's own personal experiences. Painting crystallises out of the secret system of transubstantiation between the artist and the outside world in which the artist uses his own body as the stakes (Merleau-Ponty, 1966; Nakatani, 2013).

The term transubstantiation utilised by Merleau-Ponty is a translation of the Latin word *transubstantiatio*, which, in accordance with Catholic doctrine, denotes the transformation of wine and bread into the blood and flesh of Christ at Mass. This aspect of dedication is shared between religious practices and the creation of all forms of art. The artist's devotion is driven by a desire to reconcile with the image in which his or her own body has been transformed into a part of the object, regardless of whether the object is a work of art or belongs to a set of religious paraphernalia. A human cannot constantly be the subject of something that is being created, and the relationship between the subject and the object becomes ambiguous.

2 Agency and '*corpothetics*'

In examining the relationship between things and humans, Alfred Gell's theory provides a valuable perspective. In *Art and Agency*, Gell acknowledges agency in both humans and artificial objects, such as statues and images. In Chapter 9, by focusing on a wide range of artefacts produced in places ranging from Oceania to South Asia, Gell (1998) examines the relationships among the artwork, prototype, artist and recipient that form a relational chain (*nexus*) in which images perform person-like agency and interact with humans. In his examination of Hindu image worship, Gell cites Eck (1985) and Gombrich (1966) to analyse the relation between humans and images. Quoting Gell's analysis:

The devotee does not just see the idol, but sees herself (as an object) being

> seen by the idol (as a subject). In the exchange of gazes, … the idol's and devotee's perspectives shift back and forth with such rapidity that personal boundaries are effaced and 'union' is achieved. (1998, p. 120)

As though in a scene from a Bollywood movie, Gell vividly portrays the gradually blurring boundaries between human and image, and between self and other, as the gazes interact. To apply this analysis to the relationship between a *thangka* and its painter, the painter becomes the *thangka* and the *thangka* becomes the painter through the interaction of *thangka*-making.

However, as a proponent of 'methodological philistinism', Gell shows an 'indifferent attitude' towards the aesthetic value of things (1992, p. 42). According to Gell (1996), the aesthetic value relates to three attributes: the 'visual appealliness', the 'interpretability due to the tradition of Western art history' and the 'value recognised in the modern Western art world' (pp. 187–189). The three attributes, as Pinney (2001) points out, are all associated with the post-Kantian trend of aesthetics and rather overlook another possibility of aesthetics. In contrast to the modern aesthetics ideas from Kant onwards, Pinney suggests a perspective of '*corpothetics*' based on Susan Buck-Morss's theory (1992) and creates a clear vision of the characteristics of the practices involved in image worship in Hinduism. Aesthetics implies a detached, contemplative attitude of judgement towards the image by the beholder, whereas 'corpothetics' implies the desire that a devotee wants to reach a union with the image. In 'corpothetics', the efficacy of the work of the image is the central criterion of its value (Pinney, 2004). This essay investigates the creation and worship of *thangkas* through the lens of 'corpothetics' and makes the case that the creation of *thangkas* is not a representation of certain images created by the agent but rather a desire to unite with the image and that behaviour causes the desire to become a reality.

3 Structure of this paper and fieldwork

First, Section III gives a succinct description of *thangkas* and a brief introduction to the *thig tshad*, which is used as the guideline for *thangka*-making. Then, through a case study of the competition of *thangka* artists, which adopts the quantitative descriptions of *thig tshad* as the rules, the deficiencies of such rules, as they are used to assess *thangkas* and their creators, are examined. Section IV presents the entire process of making a single *thangka* at X *Thangka* Art Centre in Lhasa. Additionally, through analysing the painters' making practices, including that of the author, the imponderablia part of the *thangka*-making is examined. Section V details the religious practices of the painters and the utilisation of substances to reveal the 'corpothetics' of *thangka*. The final section, Section VI, focuses on the works of the *thangka.* In contrast to the above content, which introduces humans becoming a part of *thangkas*, this section describes how the *thangka* functions like a human being in the case of the offering *thangka*s for the deceased. The participants and institutions in this study are kept anonymous. Age and gender are depicted as, for example, (male, early

30s). The fieldwork was conducted four times over a period of 18 months, from July 2012 to October 2018. The interviews were conducted in both Chinese Mandarin and Tibetan Lhasa dialect.

□ Quantitative rules in *thangka*-making

1 *Thangka*-making

The creation of *thangkas*, as well as other forms of religious art such as murals and sculpture, is termed Tib: *bzo rig pa*. *Thangkas* and sculptures that depict the images of deities and Buddhas are referred to as Tib: *sku rten*, one of the three receptacles of the body–speech–mind of the Buddhas, and are even revered as the embodiments of Buddha (McGuckin, 1996). As a result, both its creation and worship are advantageous for gaining religious merit. Artists who create *thangkas* are called Tib: *lha bzo*. *Lha* is a general term for sacred beings, and *lha bzo* can be translated as the creator of a deity. By creating images of deities and Buddhas, *lha bzo* earn great respect in local society, and as such, they are expected to possess morality and virtues in addition to their artistic proficiency. All *lha bzo*, whether monastic or secular, are required to engage in religious activity to better themselves (Chen, 2006).

The *thangka* originates in ancient India, as the successor of *prabha*, a kind of narrative iconography used by ancient Indian bards (Tucci, 1992). Today's oldest surviving Tibetan *thangka* was made in the 11th century.[9] However, according to the folklore, Srong btsan sgam po (581–649), the founder of the Tibet Empire, created the first Tibetan *thangka*. One day, after the White Tara visited him in a dream, he used the blood from his nose to create a *thangka* of the White Tara. This folklore lends some credence to the idea that the *thangka* artist used a bodily substance to create the work.

Thangka subjects mostly involve three types of Buddhas: *lha zhi ba* (peaceful deity), *lha khro bo* (wrathful deity) and *zhi ma khro* (semi-peaceful-semi-wrathful deity). The *lha zhi ba* represents most images of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas and Tārā deities. The *lha khro bo* refers to images of Vajrapāni, Yaksa (Tib: *gnod sbyin*), Yama, etc. Finally, the *zhi ma khro* includes the images of the lotus-born Padmasambhava, arhats and mahāsiddha as well as semi-wrathful yoginis, the consorts of various male *yi dams* and so forth. Each Buddha is unique in its posture and facial expression. When paired with varied backgrounds, offerings and decorative patterns, Tibetan Buddhas display miscellaneous appearances. Furthermore, the same Buddha may appear differently when produced with different artistic styles. Nowadays, in Lhasa, there are four major styles: the sMan ris style and mKhyen ris style, which both emerged in the

[9] The oldest *thangka* that can be seen today is the Green Tara *Thangka* created in the 11th century by a Nepalese craftsman under the commission of the great Atisha (Yu, 2006; Zhang, 2018).

15th century, the Karma sgar bris style, which developed in the late 16th century and the New sMan ris, also known as the sMan gsar style, which began to form in the 17th century.

2 *Thig tshad*

As already mentioned, the *thig tshad* refers to a series of doctrines that guide the creation of *thangkas*. In Tibet, the first *thig tshad* was translated from ancient Indian by the Yarlung translator Takpa Gyentsen in the 11th century. Since then, numerous variations of *thig tshad*[10] have appeared according to style and region. Among them, the compilation made by the master painter sMan thang ba sMan bla don grub in the 15th century, entitled *bDe bar gshegs pa'i sku gzung kyi tshad kyi rab tu byed pa yid bzhin nor bu*, is considered the most notable. Most *thangka* schools and workshops in the Ü-Tsang region today, especially those located in Lhasa, follow this *thig tshad*. Additionally, Lhasa *thangka* master bsTan pa rab brtan compiled a simplified version of the *thig tshad* above, titled *Tibetan Painting*[11], which is used by the X *Thangka* Art Centre where the author conducted her fieldwork. Despite some differences among the various versions of the *thig tshad*, this paper provides a brief introduction based on the *thig tshad* compiled by sMan bla don grub.

The *thig tshad* of sMan bla don grub consists of seven major sections: (1) an exposition of the major and minor characteristics of Tathāgata, (2) a refutation of the texts belonging to those holding incorrect positions, (3) an explanation of the faults of imperfect proportions, (4) setting forth the system of correct proportions, (5) statement of the virtues of proper dimensions, (6) the characteristics of the artist and patron and (7) a detailed explanation of the steps of artistic practices (Jackson, 1996, 2006). Among these, (1) refers to the descriptions linking to the appearances of deities and Buddhas and forms the basis of the whole making process. (2), (3) and (5) describe the religious effects of the creation. (4) categorises the images of deities and Buddhas that are represented in *thangkas*. In this part, the images of deities and Buddhas are divided into six proportional classes—Buddhas, Peaceful Bodhisattvas, Goddesses, Tall Wrathful Figures, Short Wrathful Figures and Humans—and they exemplify each class, both in standing posture and seated posture, with a grid background to clarify the

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[10] Examples include the doctrine compiled by Bu ston (1290–1364) of the Sakya Lineage (Kaneko,1984; Yu, 2006) and the *dPag bsam ljon bzang* compiled by Sum pa Ye shes dpal 'byor (1704–1788). Additionally, the indigenous Bön religion also has its own *thig tshad* (Zhang, 2018).

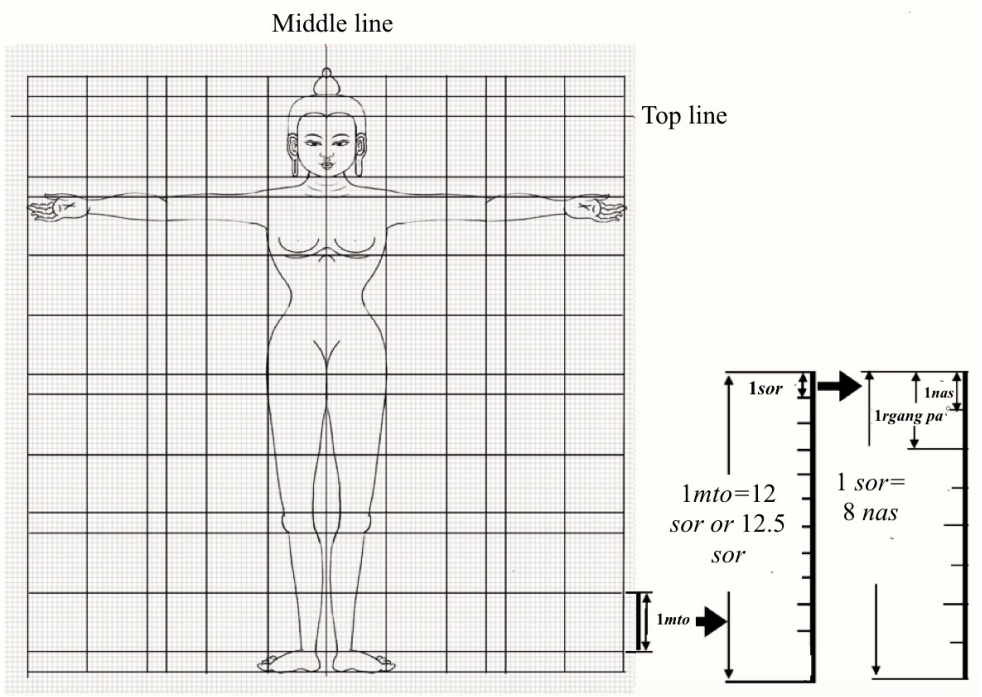
[11] In an interview with the author, bsTan pa rab brtan, he stated that this book was mostly based on the *thig tshad* of sMan bla don grub, but he also went his own way in some details.

physical proportions of the figure (Jackson et al., 1984).

To assure the proportions, firstly, the painter needs to make a 'scale' showing the units of measurement (see Figure 2). The basic units for measuring the proportions of Buddhas are *sor*, *rgang pa*, *nas* and *mto*. Originally, *nas* was the name of Tibetan wheat, *sor* was the width of a human finger and *mto* was the width of the palm. In determining the proportions, *nas*, the smallest unit, indicates the size of the eye of the Buddha. Based on the size of the subject, the length of the unit changes, and each unit has no absolute value. While drawing the facial parts, the basic unit is *sor*, and *sor*, *rgang pa* and *nas* are mostly used, where 1 *sor* equals 4 *rgang pa* and 8 *nas*, whereas while drawing the whole body, *mto* is used as the centre unit. In the Buddha class, 1 *mto* equals 12.5 *sor*. That makes the height of the standing Buddha 10 *mto* or 125 *sor*. In the case of making the other five classes, 1 *mto* equals 12 *sor*. That makes the height of the standing peaceful bodhisattva 10 *mto* or 120 *sor*, that of the goddess 9 *mto* or 108 *sor*, that of the tall wrathful deity 8 *mto,* that of the short wrathful deity 6 *mto*, etc.

Figure 2[12]

The Proportion of Buddha class and the 'scale'



After the 'scale' has been determined, the next step is to draw the guiding lines. The first step is to draw a vertical line through the middle of the canvas and a horizontal line across the top (see in Figure 2). This axis, which runs vertically and horizontally, is used to calculate the proportional sizes of each body part. After finishing the proportional grid, artists draw images by imitating existing samples of the

[12] The author created Figure 2 based on the *thig tshad* of sMan bla don grub.

thig tshad or their master's sketches. According to the *thig tshad*, every proportional error is a severe violation that not only reduces the artistic value of the *thangka* but also causes the painter misfortune or loss[13]. As a result, the principles of proportions are regarded as the essential basis for appraising *thangkas*.

3 Competition for *thangka* painters

In the Tibet Autonomous Prefecture (TAP), *thangka*-related contests and seminars also value the above proportional criteria and use such as the gauge for judging painters. The following section introduces the *Thangka* Artist Skill Competition hosted by the TAP government and discusses the problems of assessing painters' works largely based on the quantitative criteria.

The *Thangka* Artist Skill Competition (hereafter referred to as the 'Competition') is an event organised by the Cultural Industry Department of the Cultural Affairs Office of the TAP government and is aimed at the *thangka* artists residing in this region. This competition, started in 2010, is usually held between autumn and winter every year. Through collaborating with related exhibitions, seminars and tourism events held at the same time, the Competition has gained a great deal of success, and its influence has spread to various areas of the Tibetan cultural communities (TCC, see note 1). Currently, the Tibetan communities of different levels in Qinghai, Yunnan, Sichuan and Gansu Provinces also host similar competitions.

The process of the Competition consists of the following three stages: (i) Participants submit their works to the organisers in advance, and those that pass the preliminary round are displayed at the exhibition. During the exhibition, the artists whose works received a good score from the selection committee participate in the next stage, the final competition. The final competition generally lasts for two days. (ii) Firstly, the participants take part in an examination to test their theoretical knowledge of *thangkas*. (iii) Next, the participants draw a *sgya ris* (a black ink sketch of a deity or Buddha) to show their drawing skills. The subject of the sketch is chosen at random at

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[13] The third section of *thig tshad* of sMan bla don grub details the consequences due to mistaking the proportions of Buddha (explanation of the faults of imperfect proportions). It is written in rhyme and recited by young painters in the early stages of *thangka* learning. Some examples are as follows: 'It is regarded as a huge mistake if a painter draws the chin, the neck or the calf too long. Such behaviour is the taboo and offensive to the conjuror and will cause the painter misfortune such as banishment and family dispersion. It is regarded as a huge mistake if a painter draws the ear, the nose or the finger too short. Such behaviour will earn the displeasure of the conjuror and will harm the benevolence and fortunes of the painter… It is regarded as a huge mistake if a painter makes incorrect proportions of the neck, chest or mudra or draws the eyes asymmetrically. Such behaviour will cause the painter harm, death, sadness and pain' (Menladunzhu & Dumagexi, 1997, pp. 11–12).

this point. The rank of the artist is based on the scores attained in each of the three stages. The best competitors are awarded First-, Second- and Third-level painter's qualifications by the TAP government. In the competition, two paintings are submitted: the pre-made *thangka* and the *sgya ris* sketch drawn at the competition. According to the handbook of the evaluation process published by the organisers since 2015, as shown in Table 1, the criterion of 'form and proportion' accounts for 30% of the total of 100 points and is considered an important part of the scoring.

Table 1

Evaluation Criteria of 2015 Tibetan Thangka Artist Skill Competition

i. Exhibition	ii. Theoretical Knowledge Test	iii. Skill Test	Final Score (Out of 100)
25	25	50	
Form & Proportion (20%)	Form & Proportion (20%)	Form & Proportion (40%)	30
Composition (20%)	Tibetan Buddhist Knowledge (20%)	Overall Finishing (30%)	25
Colour Skill (15%)	Tibetan Painting Knowledge (20%)	Brush Use Technique (20%)	18.75
Contouring Skill (10%)	Tibetan History Knowledge (20%)	Composition (10%)	12.5
Skill of Using Gold (15%)	Knowledge Relating to Tibetan Art Skills (20%)		8.75
Depiction of Facial Features (20%)			2.5

Note: Source: (Liu, 2018, p. 98)

The quantitative rules are crucial in assessing the religious value of a *thangka*. However, for determining the aesthetic value of a *thangka*, it is merely one factor. Even if painters meet the quantitative criteria, they have no guarantee of finally creating an attractive *thangka*. In assessing the beauty of a *thangka*, the criteria and practices that cannot be quantified, the imponderbilia part, are more crucial. This part is discussed through the case study of the X Thangka Art Centre presented below.

□ *Thangka*-making practices in X *Thangka* Art Centre

The X *Thangka* Art Centre is a medium-scale *thangka* operation located in the northeast of Lhasa City. This section introduces the process of creating a *thangka* observed at the centre, but first, a few notes on *thangka*-making in Lhasa are presented.

Based on the author's fieldwork, *thangka* operations in Lhasa can be roughly classified into four types[14]: (1) Individual *thangka* operation: performs commission-based production at home by one or two painters with no business licence. (2) Small-scale *thangka* operation: performs commission-based production and sells ready-made *thangkas*, possesses a business licence and houses fewer than 10 painters. (3) Middle-scale operation: with more than 10 members. This type of operation takes a more flexible management approach and takes more effort to balance the needs of the market and the unique character of the owner/painter. The various names that are used (e.g. 'store (Chi: 商店)', 'school (Chi:学校)' or 'art centre (Chi:艺术中心)') as well as the opening of multiple branches reflect this policy. (4) Large-scale operation: There are about four of these types of operations in Lhasa. All were launched by master painters and have more than 50 members. Depending on the size, *thangkas* can be made by a single person or in groups. Operations of Types (1), (2) and (3) usually communicate with each other daily. Occasionally, one operation receives large jobs that cannot be done alone, and the operation seeks labour from others. The X Centre discussed in this paper falls under Type (3).

The X Centre was established in 2012 by Khri btsun (male, early 30s), a painter from Sichuan, and by 2016, it had around 20 members.[15] Most of the members are from TCC and believe in Tibetan Buddhism or the Bön religion. In 2012, Khri btsun began the creation of a large *thangka* for 'Tib: *mkhan chen*'[16], the 33rd abbot of the Bön Menli Monastery (Figure 3). Before examining the creation process, the motivation of Khri btsun and his relationship with *mkhan chen* are briefly introduced.

Khri btsun was born in M village in Aba County, Sichuan Province, where most of the inhabitants are Bön believers. He was born and raised as the youngest child of six siblings. In the village, household events, regardless of scale, are customarily

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[14] In addition to the *thangka*-making operations, there are also shops that purchase and sell ready-made *thangkas*, embroidered *thangkas* and printed *thangkas* that are mass-produced in factories.

[15] The X-Centre has 13 apprentices and three painters employed as professional craftspeople. In addition to these regular members, there are five additional members including members who visit the X Centre on their every summer vocations and members who enrolled temporarily.

[16] Here, mkhan chen refers to Guru Lungtok Tempenyima (1929–2017), who was the abbot of Menri Monastery in North India. The painters of the X-Centre addressed Guru Lungtok Tempenyima as *mkhan chen* or Chi: 法王. *Mkhan chen* is an abbreviation for *mkhan po chen mo*, consisting of *mkhan po*, indicating abbot, and *chen mo*, meaning great.

attended by a monk to read sutras[17]. As a result, since childhood, Khri btsun had an affinity with the monks and a great respect for the abbot *mkhan chen*. He even made a secret visit to North India after *mkhan chen* switched to the Menri Monastery there.

Khri btsun is locally renowned for his painting skills. After graduating from an arts secondary school in Sichuan, his first assignment was a *ma ni* prayer wheel at the entrance of the local monastery[18]. Later, to gain more experience in painting, he left his hometown and started to travel around the country. However, he still makes a great number of offerings such as *thangka* or cash to his local monastery, especially for the Tibetan New Year and some major religious ceremonies. In 2011, Khri btsun won the Competition in Lhasa and was given the title of 'First-level *Thangka* Painter of the TAP'. After he reported this to *mkhan chen*, Khri btsun received USD 1,000 congratulatory money and a business card case as a gift.

According to Khri btsun, *mkhan chen* has been suffering from physical problems due to old age. Therefore, he decided to create a *thangka* of the 11 wrathful deities, including the Dbal phur 'brug gsas chem pa as the main figure. Dbal phur 'brug gsas chem pa is depicted in the centre of this enormous *thangka*, surrounded by the *khro bcu* (the 10 wrathful deities), who are central to most Bön doctrines. For Bön practitioners, contemplating and practising them is indispensable. This large *thangka* with its numerous figures required a lot of work to complete and accrued many religious merits, helping Khri btsun's wish for *mkhan chen*'s recovery. The project began in 2012 and was completed on 30 March 2016. The day after its completion, Khri btsun departed from Lhasa, via Shanghai and Hong Kong, to New York and delivered it to *mkhan chen*, who was recuperating there.

In this way, *thangka*-making is supported by the social ties that grow over time, whereas written agreements or price negotiations are not traditionally valued. People choose a *thangka* artist based on their intimate connections and intense daily

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[17] Village M, where Khri btsun comes from, maintains close relations with the local Bön Monastery. Villagers actively participate in the monastery's events. In addition, from October to December each year, the entire village population collectively practises the Bön religion.

[18] The *ma ni* wheel is a prayer implement used in both Tibetan Buddhism and the Bön religion. It is shaped as a cylindrical wheel on a spindle with mantras and patterns painted on the outside and sutras inside. By turning once, one can read the sutra once. The ma ni wheel depicted by Khri btsun is about 1 m high and 30 cm in diameter. During a visit to the monastery by the author and Khri btsun, Khri btsun stated, 'I drew the face of a dragon on the top part, the *yi dam* Buddha on the middle part and the mantra at the bottom'.

interactions, and the artist creates a *thangka* for that person in accordance with their expectations.

Figure 3

Finished Thangka of Dbal phur 'brug gsas chem pa



1 *Thangka*-making process

①Preparation of painting surface

This section examines how Khri btsun created the *thangka* for *mkhan chen*. The creation of a *thangka* starts with the preparation of the painting surface. Early on the first morning, the painter who is in charge of this job arrives in the backyard of the X Centre with clean white cotton fabric and a rectangular wooden frame. His work begins with stretching the white fabric over the frame. Then, he mixes a solution of gesso, gelatine and water to a specific ratio and spreads it over the surface of the fabric. In this way, the gesso power gradually covers the tiny holes between the cotton fibres. This step is called 'Tib: *rlon dbur*'. Once the first coat is applied, the canvas needs to be left to dry in the shade.

Thanks to the year-round sunny and dry weather in Lhasa, the canvas usually dries by the next morning. After confirming the canvas is ready, the painter dampens and polishes both sides of the canvas with a smooth alluvial polishing stone. According to Khri btsun, this process needs to be conducted several times, 'until the back side of the canvas is as smooth as a boiled egg' and the front side has a textured surface 'like an eggshell'. Most painters prepare their canvas individually, occasionally with the help of others if necessary. However, this *thangka* is almost 2 metres high, and its preparation required the cooperation of four painters.

② Establishment preliminary sketch

After the painting surface is prepared, the next step is to establish a

preliminary sketch (*bkod pa*). Before the drawing process, the painter first builds four lines on the back of the canvas: two diagonal, one vertical and one horizontal. He then moves the canvas to a bright area where he traces the lines on the back side and draws the vertical and the horizontal axes on the front side. These axes serve as the painter's guides, as they decide where the figures should be placed and the appropriate sizes for the main figure and the subordinate figures. Then, the painter usually forms the proportional grids for each figure to depict them correctly. However, a *thangka* sometimes contains hundreds of figures, and it is impossible to draw proportional grids for all of them. The *thig tshad* indicates the following: 'Draw the large figure by following the proportional grid. Draw the small figures by following your feelings'. At the X Centre, if the size of the image is over 1 *mto*, its delineation requires a proportional line, while if the size of the image is less than 1 *mto*, the painter draws it based on his own discretion. Sometimes, the painter even uses a stencil to copy the contours of the images and make the process more efficient.

For the majority of large *thangkas* at the X Centre, Khri btsun chooses the layout of the figures, while other veteran painters and apprentices draw the proportional lines and collaborate to complete the preliminary sketch. However, since this *thangka* was dedicated to *mkhan chen*, Khri btsun gave extensive input for each component, from the composition to the precise expressions. He claims that the preliminary sketch took him more than 6 months, and according to his wife, he had to draw the sketch at night, sometimes well into the night, because he had other work to do during the day.

③ Colouration

The dyeing process comes after the preliminary sketch. Since a large percentage of *thangka* pigments are attained from minerals and plants, the painter must combine the pigments with glue and water in a specific proportion before dyeing and tinting. The dyeing process begins with the larger areas, like the sky and background, and gradually moves on to the smaller details. Based on the object, the painter selects a particular technique from the seven basic dyeing techniques. For example, two dyeing techniques—'wet dyeing' and 'dot dyeing'—were used to colour the sky. The painter first applies two coats of *tha* (a blue that is a shallower than turquoise) to this area, and then he applies wet dyeing twice with *tha* and *snog* (a greener blue than *tha*). The painter employs this technique while holding three brushes—two in his left hand and one in his right. The two brushes held in the left hand are a clean toning brush and a *snog*-coloured brush. The brush held in the right hand is for *tha*. The artist begins by making a few strokes of *tha*. Then he switches this brush out for the one with *snog* and makes a few strokes in the surrounding area. He then uses the clean brush to blend the two colours together. After applying one wet-dye coat, the painter needs to wait for the pigments to fully dry before applying another to achieve a beautiful and uniform colour.

After wet dyeing, the painter uses dot dyeing (applying tiny dots in layers) in some areas to create gradations. Dotting seems easy, but the painter must adjust the size of the dot according to the object. Like the *thig tshad* mentions, there is 'no need to draw sizable dots if you are not painting the fur of a lion or a leopard. And no need to draw tiny dots if you are not drawing dragons and snakes'. In the case of dyeing the sky, the dots should be small enough to not leave any traces.

④ Outlining and finishing details

The entire *thangka* is almost viewable once the dyeing is finished. Khri btsun, however, consistently asserts that only half of the work is finished at this point. This is due to the difficulty of revising the majority of the subsequent steps, which include contouring, drawing the faces and eyes and using gold. These tasks are a chance for painters to showcase their skills. In *thangka*-making, there are five basic types of contour lines. The painter chooses the appropriate line to express the contours of each object. After the outlines have been drawn, then comes the 'application of gold'.[19] The powdered gold, mixed with gelatine and water, is used to create patterns and designs on robes, gold brocade fabric, ornaments, vessels and the dorsal light's radiating rays to emphasise the appearance of a high-class religious figure.

⑤ Opening of the eyes

The final step is to 'open the eyes' of the *thangka*. However, during this step, not only the eyes but all the facial details are carefully depicted. Since this step is vital, painters generally choose an auspicious day for this process. Before painting, they place flowers, the *mar mi* (butter lamp) and incense at the altar and bow and chant the mantra of the Buddhas whose eyes are about to be opened. When painting, the painter uses the thinnest brush to apply colour to the figure's face and carefully draw the eyes. When the painter completes the drawing, he writes the Sanskrit characters 'Om, Ah, Hum' on each of the head, mouth and heart (middle of the chest) of the main figure on the reverse side of the *thangka*. In reference to this action, the master painter bsTan pa (male, late 70s) made the following narrative while giving a lecture at the X Centre:

> The words 'Om, Ah, Hum' behind the *thangka* can only be written by three different types of people: abbots, lamas and *lha bzo* like us. A good painter not only knows how to paint but also has a deep knowledge of Buddhism. Even when we are not in the process of creating a *thangka*, we need to recite the sutra. If we do this, even without the opening-eyes process, the Buddha will descend to the *thangka*. (bsTan pa, personal communication)

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[19] There are two techniques relating to gold: *gser ris* and *gzi ris*. *Gser ris* refers to drawing lines using gold as paint, while *gzi ris* refers to drawing patterns with a special brush on gold leaf applied to the screen.

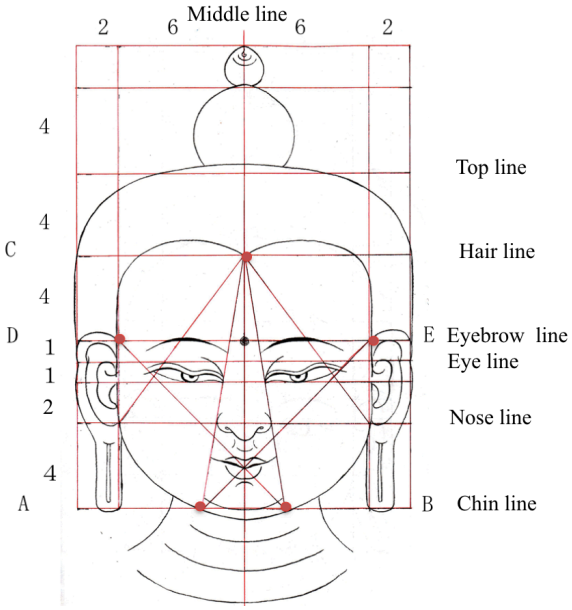
In Tibet, there is the following proverb: 'You should not draw a distinction between the Buddha and the artist (*lha dang bzo bo dbye ma bye*)'. In order to become an artist who cannot be distinguished from the Buddhas, painters must constantly engage in religious practice. In doing so, the *thangkas* they create naturally become sacred items. The ritual of the opening of the eyes can be seen as a continuation of daily religious observances rather than a one-time ceremony that bestows sanctity on the *thangka*. So far, the process of making a single *thangka* has been described. The next section introduces the specific sensations involved in *thangka*-making.

2 Painting face of Buddha

Every painter learns to draw the face of the Buddha as their first lesson after being initiated into the X Centre. Drawing this picture is also the first step in the *thangka* learning and creation process in monasteries, public *thangka* schools and even tourist-oriented *thangka* workshops. In 2013, when the author conducted her fieldwork, she also began to learn from this painting. The following paragraphs describe the author's personal experience and should be read while keeping Figure 4 in mind.

Figure 4

Face of Buddha[20]



On the canvas, start by drawing a vertical line (Middle line in Figure 4), and a horizontal line (Top line in Figure 4). Draw two vertical lines 6 *sor* apart from the middle line to determine the width of the face. Then draw a line to indicate the width of the ears after adding 2 more *sor* to each side. The top of the skull is located 4 *sor* up

[20] The author made Figure 4 based on the proportions prescribed in the *thig tshad* of sMan lab drub lug.

from the top line, and the head protuberance is located 2 *sor* from that point. The positions of the hairline, eyebrows, eyelids, eyes, nose and chin are also indicated from the top line downward at 4, 4, 1, 1, 2, and 4 *sor*, respectively. Then, mark Points A and B 2 *sor* to the left and right of the intersection of the chin line and the middle line. Connect Points A and B with C; the intersections of the middle line and chin line are the positions of the nose and mouth. Connect Points A and E and B and D; the intersection of the middle line with the eyebrow line is the position of the eyes.

Begin to depict the image after setting the proportional lines. Start at the point where the leftmost vertical line and the eyebrow line converge. Draw a curve, passing 5 *sor* above the intersection of the top line and the middle line, to the intersection of the eyebrow line and the rightmost vertical line, which forms the outline of the Buddha's head. Then, to define the outline of the hair, draw a symmetrical arc between Points D and C and between Points C and E. After that, from Point D downward, gradually change direction to the right, just past the chineline, and complete the face's outline in a smooth curve. The face should ideally be rounded and have a little flesh on it. After drawing the face's outline, delineate the ears, hair, protuberance and neck.

After drawing in the broad areas, fill in the details next. The crescent eyebrows, the narrow, bow-shaped eyes, under the slightly pointed nose is the smiling mouth. According to the *thig tshad*, the Buddha is said to have a beak-like mouth, but if one only looks at the lips, they resemble flower petals. Although figures in *thangkas* are not meant to be realistic, add slight shadows to the neck, chin and areas around the mouth and nose to give the face a three-dimensional appearance. Beginners use a pencil or charcoal stick pen to practise drawing this face. When they reach a higher level of development, they start learning line drawing by inking over their pencil draft.

The author began practising the Buddha face in 2013 not long after she started her research. At first, it took her 3 days to finish one, as she did not know where to begin, where the line should go or which point it should connect with. Whenever she drew long curves, she always broke the curve in the middle. The eyebrows and eyes that she drew were never symmetrical. When Khri btsun and other experienced painters observed her 'working', they made the following suggestion: 'When you draw, you don't have to think too much. Give in to your intuition and start'.

Even so, this is a veteran-level conversation. From August 2013 through November 2013, she continued to work on this face of Buddha. One morning during her practice days, she even noticed that the tip of her nose resembled the nose of Buddha when she looked at it in the mirror. The experience of gradually 'becoming' the subject of a painting is frequently portrayed in literature and film. This is merely a metaphor for the state of mind at the moment of creation; it does not imply that it occurs in reality. However, as the following section demonstrates, the painter does become a part of the *thangka* through engaging in religious practices.

□ ‘Corpothetics’ in *thangka*-making

1 Religious practices of painters

Painters who aim to become *lha bzo* need to not only hone their production skills but also constantly perform good deeds and religious practices. In their daily lives, they actively engage in religious practices, such as temple visits and pilgrimages to sacred sites, as well as acquire Buddhist knowledge, reciting scriptures and performing the five-body prostration. For example, bsTan pa, the master of Khri btsun and the ‘Transmitter of Intangible Cultural Heritage’[21] of the national level, has been accustomed to reciting the sutra every day at nine o’clock for more than 20 years. Despite having a packed schedule of lectures and business trips, he never misses a day of his Buddhist lesson.

The X Centre members are influenced by the master, and they place a high value on participating in religious rituals. In the morning, the member on duty brings water and fruit to the alter and the *thangkas* displayed at the exhibition hall. Every member offers incense in front of the altar and does the five-body prostration three times after he or she arrives. At the centre, this is a daily routine. During lunch breaks or on the weekends, members visit temples and sanctuaries in Lhasa. Twice a year, young members organise five-body prostration pilgrimages to the Potala Palace and Jokhang Temple.

From 25 to 30 July 2016, five members of the X Centre made a pilgrimage to Mount Kailash and Lake Manasarovar in the Ngari Prefecture of the TAP. The pilgrims left Lhasa at around 7 am on 25 July and drove for a total of 24 hours over 2 days to reach their destination, sPu hreng County. The five participants first visited Lake Manasarovar in the afternoon of July 26. At 5.30 am on July 27, four of them—with the exception of one who suffered from altitude sickness—left the hotel and started their trek around the sacred mountain. The whole path circling the mountain, about 53 km and 5,300–5,600 m above sea level, took the pilgrims 2 days to complete.

In addition to such pilgrimages to sacred sites, the five-body prostration, which is also a characteristic Tibetan Buddhist bowing ritual, is frequently performed by painters. The prostration refers to the act of paying homage to dignitaries by placing one’s head on the ground, but in Tibet, it is performed in a unique way. First, the

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[21] The selection of ‘Transmitter of Intangible Cultural Heritage’ is part of the registration of the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage in China (Chi: 中国无形文化遗产名单). The registration system was established in 2005 with the decision of the ‘Notice on the Protection of Intangible Cultural Heritage (Chi: 文化遗产保护通知)’. According to the Notice, the items selected in the List of Intangible Cultural Heritage must be systematically protected. The relevant department must have a protection plan and choose the person responsible for the transmission of each item.

practitioner raises both hands with joined palms above the head and lightly places them on the forehead, mouth and chest. Next, he kneels down, stretches the entire body and places his head on the ground. Then he stands up. Some believers perform the five-body prostration for a long time in front of the temple or altar, while others walk along the pilgrimage path while performing this prostration. The author once met an elderly *thangka* painter in Qinghai Province who had been doing the five-body prostration in the same place for so many years that his footprints even left indentations on the floor of the temple.

Regarding the experience of conducting five-body prostration during pilgrimages, Khri btsun recalled his experience as a young man embarking on a pilgrimage in the winter:

> While conducting the five-body prostration on the road, every time I reached forward with my hands, I could see the dust flying. I then turned around and it appeared that I was using my body to separate the flying dust. *Oh, I'm like a car*, I thought. The mountain roads were covered by a lot of snow, and the progress was extremely difficult. When I laid my head on the freezing ground, I even occasionally heard a 'bong'. But, I didn't feel hurt; instead, I felt chilled and refreshed. At night, I simply lay down on the side of the road with the duvet placed on my back. I looked up at the sky. Those stars were so beautiful after the snow, and I will never forget their shining. (Khri btsun, personal communication, 2013)

When doing the five-body prostration along the pilgrimage route, the pilgrim can only proceed as far as his height at a time. This requires quite some time and may result in great difficulty. Such behaviour is often viewed as a religious act of sacrifice and self-denial. This view is not erroneous. However, it is more important to consider how the act affects the feelings and sensibilities of people than categorise the motivation of the act. Such extreme physical experiences gave Khri btsun the experience of losing the self and becoming something else. Such an experience is likewise a kind of *exstasis*, which can also be experienced through other practices such as ritual rites and art making (Weber, 1976).

2 Using bodily substances as materials for *thangka* painting

Via persistent religious practice, the painter purifies his or her own body. A painter with a clean body can use his own blood and saliva for *thangkas*. This is discussed in the following case study.

The following case of using saliva as paint is described by the author:

bSod nams (male, 20s) and I were practising *thangka* in the same room during my fieldwork at the X Centre. He was originally from Nakchu County and had spent 6 years studying at the X Centre. He was amicable, passionate about his studies and occasionally a little pedantic. It was a morning in September 2016. bSod nams arrived at his drawing spot early. Somehow, I heard him groan. 'Oh, dear! This is so much sin!'

It turns out that he felt guilty about the insect remains that had accumulated in his paint dish due to his neglect of closing the window the night before. After much moaning, he finally pulled himself together, picked up the paintbrush and began to dye the *thangka* in front of him. He dipped the paintbrush into the dish that was filled with dead insects, licked it with his tongue and then began to paint.

'Is that not dirty?' I inquired, concerned that he might have licked dirty paint. But he countered, 'No, this is very good'. He mistakenly thought I inferred he was mixing paint and saliva and began to lecture me about how saliva was not dirty but an essential component of the paint.

'The saliva of the painter is a good offering for the *thangka*. Nothing is more precious or valuable to a person than their own body, which is the most treasured possession. Therefore, the best thing to offer the *thangka* (Buddha image) is a part of your own body'.

His views were recognised by Khri btsun and Khri btsun's teacher, bsTan pa. Khri btsun confirmed the effect of saliva by saying, 'For the prominent lamas, the dignitaries with virtue and generations of fine painters, blood and bodily substances are a fundamental part of the pigments of *thangka*. The use of one's own saliva in *thangkas* is what sets fine painters apart from ordinary ones. Especially when saliva is applied for the eyes, it adds the appearance of liveliness'. bsTan pa tells his students the following story to emphasise the value of using saliva:

> A master painter from the Tsang region was commissioned by the Pan chen bla ma to create a *thangka*. The *thangka* was meticulously painted by using the finest colours. But when he handed it to the Pan chen bla ma, the Pan chen bla ma immediately remarked, 'This *thangka* is not good enough, for you have not used saliva'.

The aforementioned examples imply two points. First, using saliva entails more than dedicating the painter's body to the Buddha as an offering. Additionally, it imparts a 'Tib. *gsong nyams* (liveliness)' to the Buddha's eyes. In other words, the usage of bodily substances enliven the *thangka* and make the *thangka* appealing. Moreover, this appealingness, or enchantment, alludes to more than just aesthetic beauty; it relates to a vivid sight of *gsong nyams*. The bodily substance bestows a kind of corporeal agency on the *thangka*.

Additionally, the artist incorporates portions of his own body into the *thangka*, the portrayal of the Buddha, by imparting a piece of himself. Through this action, the painter completes the trinity with the *thangka* and the divinity Buddha. In fact, not only artists but also devotees of the Bön and Tibetan Buddhism seek the experience of union with the Buddha and the deities through *thangka* meditation. According to contemplative practitioners, they first concentrate on the *thangka* in front of their eyes, keeping the apparent characteristics of the Buddhas in their minds, and then mentally project the image in their own realities. By repeating this practice, practitioners can

one day accomplish the union with the Buddha on their own, without the assistance of a *thangka* or other representations[22].

□ Works of *thangkas*

1 Commissions of *thangka*

The previous section discussed the creation of *thangkas*, while this section focuses on the works of *thangkas*. Specifically, after a brief introduction of the status of *thangka* requests in the X Centre, it examines the relationship between *thangkas* and people through the case of *thangkas* created for the deceased.

Table 2 lists the status of *thangka* commissions received by the X Centre between February and December 2016. During this period, in which the author was conducting her research, the X Centre received 40 *thangka* commissions, 20 of which (Nos. 1–20 in Table 2) were from monasteries in Sichuan and Lhasa. The Sichuan monastery is a Bön monastery in the neighbourhood of many members, including the director of the centre, and there has been a long-standing relationship between the monastery and the X Centre, whereas the Lhasa monastery and the X Centre communicate frequently. Members of the centre participate in the rituals and ceremonies held there, and occasionally, monks from the monastery pay a visit to the centre and spend time with the painters.

In reference to the motivation, the construction of new temples as well as religious rituals and practices are some of the reasons monasteries make requests. The content of *thangkas* under these requests is closely related to the Buddhist scriptures. As shown in Table 2, Nos. 1–12 are a collection of 12 *thangkas* featuring Shenrap Mibo, the creator of the Bön religion, as the central figure, with various backgrounds to express his life. No. 13, a devotional sutra *thangka*, is 200 cm tall and 300 cm wide, and it includes all the deities and Buddhas mentioned in the Bön scriptures (434 in total). No. 20 is based on passages from the Buddha's biography that describe the First Sermon.

Twelve of the *thangkas* were commissioned by individuals. Most of the clients were Buddhists, including monks, lay practitioners and Rin po che[23]. These *thangkas* were created for religious practices such as contemplation (Nos. 21, 32, 33), donations to temples and Rin po che (No. 39) and offerings to the deceased (No. 27). In some cases (Nos. 24, 25, 26, 30, 31), *thangkas* were made for a collection of religious artworks.

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[22] In reference to the meditation of Tibetan Buddhism and Bön, see Tachigawa (2015).

[23] Also known as the reincarnated lamas. In Tibetan Buddhist doctrine, Rin po che is the incarnation of the enlightened beings, such as Buddha and bodhisattvas, who have appeared to save people in this world.

The *thangkas* under the commission of temples are relatively large in scale with intricate compositions and a plethora of figures. The complexity of the image embodies the painter's diligence. During the making process, commissioning monks occasionally visit the centres and exchange pleasantries with the painters, but they do not inquire or urge the creation. Individually commissioned works, on the other hand, are smaller and with significantly fewer figures. However, clients have more opinions about the 'appearance' of *thangkas* and often voice them. For instance, the late-30s male client who ordered No. 21 was a Buddhist from Beijing. He travelled to Lhasa and visited several *thangka*-making workshops to make the commission. He cited this rationale for picking the X Centre:

> When I first saw the Vajrapāni (in sMan-ris style) on Master Khri btsun's previous work, I thought, *This is it*. I had heard that the mKhyen-ris style is good at portraying wrathful deities. But the Vajrapāni inside me is just like this. (No. 21 client, personal communication)

Moved by a religious emotion when he saw the Vajrapāni of the earlier *thangka* of Khri btsun, the client decided to commission the same painter.

Table 2

Status of Thangka Requests at X Centre

No.	Requester/Reason for Requesting/Content (Number of figures and size in cm)
1–12	A Sichuan Monastery/Construction of New Temple/Series *Thangka* of Life of Shenlap Mibo (Unknown, 200×300)
13, 14	Same Sichuan Monastery/Construction of New Temple/Devotional Sutra (434, 200×300), Tib: Dbal phur 'brug gsas chem pa (Unknown, 200×300)
15–20	A Gelug Monastery in Lhasa/Religious Practices/Tib: *mkha' 'gro ma* (3, 200×160), Tib: *'khor lo bde mchog* (3, 200×160), The First Dalai Lama (unknown, unknown), Tib: Mi la ras pa (5, 62×45), Tib: Srong btsan sgam po (10, 140×90), the First Sermon (8, 62×45)
21	Devotee/Religious Practices/Tib: Phyag na rdo rje (1,200×160)
22	*Thangka* of Graduation[24]/Tib: Dbal phur 'brug gsas chem pa (Unknown, 90×60)
23	Devotee/Seeking Worldly Benefit-Wisdom/Mañjuśrī (2, 62×45)
24, 25	Devotee/Art Collection/Shakyamuni (1,62×45), Tib: Tsong kha pa (1, 62×45)
26	Devotee/Art Collection/White Tara (10, 70×40)
27	Devotee/Offering for Deceased/White Tara (7, 62×45)
28	Replicas of Previous *Thangka*/*Thangka* Collection of X Centre/Debate between Buddha and Pagan (2, 120×200)
29	Unknown/Atisha (3, 62×45)
30, 31	Rin po che/Art Collection/Four-arm Avalokiteśvara (1, 62×45), Mañjuśrī (3,62×45)
32	Devotee/Religious Practices/Bhaiṣajya Guru (3, 62×45)
33	Monk/Religious Practices & Artistic Collection/Tib: rDo rje 'jigs byed (1, 62×45)
34	*Thangka* of Graduation/Shakyamuni (34, 90×60)
35	Monk/Collection of Religious Art/Tib: Tsong kha pa (9, 62×45)
36	Devotee/Seeking Worldly Benefit/White Tara (2, 62×45)
37	*Thangka* of Graduation/Mañjuśrī (unknown, 90×60)

[24] A graduation *thangka* is the final work that a painter makes after years of study. The painter 'graduates' from the learning environment and becomes a fully fledged painter after finishing this piece. Most graduation *thangkas* are precise replicas of the masterwork of the painter's master. In this sense, the graduation *thangka* serves as a portrait of the painter, of the predecessor painters and of the Buddha.

38	Devotee/Collection of Religious Art/Mañjuśrī (3, 62×45)
39	Offering for Rin po che/Tib: Dbal phur 'brug gsas chem pa (unknown, 200×160)
40	*Thangka* of Graduation/Tib: dPal ldan lha mo (25, 90×60)

The Mañjuśrī and White Tara, which are directly tied to worldly advantages, are the most frequently requested subjects. There are also some petitions for *yi dam* (Nos. 21, 31, 32), which indicates a particular sort of Buddha linked to the devotee most personal among various Tibetan deities and Buddhas. In Tibet, there are nine Buddhas regarded as the *yi dam*: Shakyamuni, Bhaiṣajya Guru, Akṣobhya, Amitayus, Avalokiteśvara, Green Tara, Mañjuśrī, Vajrapāni (Tib: rDo rje 'jigs byed) and Vajrasattva. A person's *yi dam* is determined by the time and date of birth, and based on the Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, the *yi dam* protects the believer from the moment of birth until the moment of death and even after he or she enters reincarnation. After death, the soul goes to the *bar do* [25]realm. With the help of *yi dam*, the soul can smoothly cross the realm. If people regularly meditate on their *yi dam*, their souls can perceive the *yi dam* and follow the *yi dam*'s instructions without hesitation or fear. On the other hand, if they do not practise *yi dam* meditation, their souls might not be able to recognise their *yi dams* and could end up wandering in the *bar do* realm.

For the reasons mentioned above, *thangkas* with *yi dam* as the main figure are used in various forms of worship. For instance, some Tibetans request *thangkas* of their *yi dam*s at the age of 13, 25, 37 or 49 to accrue religious merits and protect themselves from misfortunes (Chen, 2006). It is also customary to make a special *thangka*, *khrungs-rtag*, for the deceased with their *yi dams* as the main figure. This transforms the merits of making a *thangka* for the deceased person as well as the bereaved family (Chen, 2006). In many memorial rites, people pay their respects to the dead by building a statue or *stupa* in honour of the dead. However, *thangkas* are not the only objects used in funerals and memorial services. They can also be lamented on behalf of the departed. The following section addresses this issue with an analysis of the *khrungs rtag thangka*.

2 Offering *thangkas*

The case of Khri btsun visiting *mkhan chen* in the United States and delivering the *thangka* was addressed in the previous section. Unfortunately, on September 14, 2017, *mkhan chen* passed away at the age of 89. Khri btsun, as well as many other Bön followers, mourned for a year. As a memorial contribution, Khri btsun and other members of the X Centre created two identical *thangkas* with *mkhan chen* as the

[25] It refers to the place where the soul is between death and reincarnation in the next life.

main figure and other past abbots of Menri Monastery surrounding him. One was given to the monastery in North India for an offering ritual. The other was displayed in the religious hall of the new *thangka* school in Sichuan. The following episode happened just before the enshrinement of this *thangka*.

The enshrining ceremony was on September 15, 2018, 3 days before the new school opening. On the afternoon of September 14, painter Akure (male, early 30s), with two other members of the X Centre, was preparing for the ritual at the Religious Hall on the fourth floor of the school building. The Religious Hall is about 250 m^2. On the inner side of the hall, there are three large shelves. On the left one was a pile of sutra formed in the shape of a hill. On the right one, a shining golden stupa that held many 'treasures' was placed[26]. The central shelf was empty. People stood nearby and chatted while waiting for the *thangka*. Around 3 o'clock, another young member entered the hall, saying, 'It's here!' Behind him stood painter sTam khrin (male, early 20s) with a long, slender case containing the *thangka* on his back. sTam khrin ascended the central shelf and took the *thangka* scroll that was wrapped in a golden silk *ka tha* out of the case. The other people stopped talking and turned to look at sTam khrin. sTam khrin placed the *thangka* scroll on his forehead while murmuring a mantra. This gesture is also often made by devotees who have worshipped a sacred image or received blessings from a lama or a Rin po che. sTam khrin then placed the *thangka* scroll on the canopy and slowly opened it.

The successive abbots of Menri Monastery were neatly arranged against a light blue background. In the centre, *mkhan chen* cast his gaze towards the audience with a gentle smile. Unlike the other figures, the protector deities and the heavenly maidens, *mkhan chen* was portrayed realistically like a photpgraph.

After the *thangka* was installed, members continued to place butter lamps, tea bowls, sutras and treasure vessels containing peacock feathers on the shelves and then left. At the exit of the hall, a member tried to play with the ritual utensils there. Akure halted him by covering his mouth with a 'shoo'. Then he motioned to the *thangka* on the altar and said, '*mkhan chen* is watching'.

The next day, dignitary lamas from Bön monasteries in Sichuan and Qinghai Provinces performed a grand ceremony to bless the new school by enshrining the *thangka*. However, the event the day before the ceremony was also impressive. Even though the consecration ritual had not yet taken place, the *thangka* had already been looking after the members of the X Centre on behalf of the late *mkhan chen*. While Section V introduced the practice of the painter incorporating himself into the *thangka*,

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[26] Inside the *stupa*, members add things offered by the local temple, such as Tibetan medicine, treasure vessals, tea and fragrant wood as well as brocade bags filling with Tsam pa, barley, wheat, rice, maize and walnuts.

this section showed how the *thangka* works as a substitute for the deceased and adopts the feelings of the living.

□ Conclusion

According to Tibetan beliefs, the *thangka* is the art that epitomises the skills and knowledge of the *bzo rig pa*. On the other hand, it is the religious artefact that can be revered as the sacred 'body' of Buddha. The purpose of this paper was to investigate the creation and worship of such *thangkas* from the perspective of anthropology.

The previous sections explicated the three main features of *thangka*-making. First, the *thig tshad* doctrine is essential to *thangka*-making. The quantitative rules stated therein maintain the consistency and rigidity of the image of Buddha and determine the religious value of *thangkas*. Second, the aesthetic value of *thangkas*, on the other hand, is more linked to the non-quantitative rules. Third, the utilisation of bodily substances accounts for both the religious and aesthetic value. The conclusion is presented by referring to the previous studies below.

Multiple studies on *thangkas* have argued that the *thig tshad*, especially the quantitative rules and the standard procedures, serves as the foundation for *thangka*-making. However, as noted in Section III, the *thig tshad* contains a wealth of information, including figurative descriptions of the appearance of Buddhas, the techniques used in the making process as well as the merits (or misfortunes, see note 2) to be acquired from the creation. It is more than just the rules relating to the physical proportions of the figures. Simplifying the *thig tshad* as a set of iconographic rules may risk limiting the studies of *thangkas* to the frames of iconographic or symbolic analysis.

The quantitative rules preserve the coherence and rigidity of the images and determine the religious merit of the *thangka*. However, meeting the quantitative rules is merely one of the requirements when considering the aesthetic qualities of *thangkas*. The imponderabilia part of *thangka*-making, such as the poetic and figurative depictions of the image and the techniques relating to staining and contouring, seems even more crucial.

Above all, why does the *thangka* appeal to devotees, or, in Gell's words, how does the agency of the *thangka* manifest itself ? And what does the *thangka* do to fulfil human desires, evoke their emotions and trigger their actions? The answers to the above questions lie in the corpothetics of *thangkas*. Despite the significance of the religious background and visual beauty, the agency of *thangkas* motivates painters to act, to unify with the *thangka* by offering their own bodies. This behaviour contributes to the corpothetics of *thangkas*. Such behaviour, as well as the replicated religious practices of the painters, is performed as the mimesis of their master, their master's master or even Buddha himself. Through these practices, the trinity of *thangka*, painter and Buddha is completed.

As illustrated by the example in Section Ⅳ, the 'transformation' between human beings and *thangkas* is two-way. Through their religious practices and *thangka*-making, people become a part of *thangkas*. The *thangka* made for the deceased, on the other hand, is mourned, recalled and gazed upon by the living as a replacement for the deceased.

In the discussion relating to subjects in the modern aesthetic and general philosophical notions, the portrait remains as a crucial theme. Regarding portraits, Nancy noted the following:

> The portrait is a painting organized around a figure… insofar as this figure is itself the real end or goal of representation to the exclusion of any other stage [representation] or scene, any other representational stake or value, any other evocation or signification. (2004).

However, a look at history quickly reveals that the portrait is one of the oldest functional arts. In the beginning, the portrait started its development as the memorial instrument of the deceased. Then, in the Middle Ages and Renaissance, portraits of potentates were depicted as demonstrations of power. From the 18th century onwards, ordinary people gradually appeared on the portrait canvas. Nowadays, caricatures can be viewed as a modern variation of portraiture.

Portraits always appeal to the person who comes face to face with them. According to Gell, when people see a portrait, they are seen by the portrait. This article showed that when people make a portrait, the portrait motivates them to become the painter. This is a nested component result of the regression where the painter and the portrait, person and thing, become interconnected with one another. Like two mirrors placed face to face, the painter and the portrait, intervening with something (a model, a human or Buddha or even an idea), reflect one another and form a great long line of shiny mirrors stretching into an infinite loop of relation.

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