

Between the Religious Act and Art Commodity: The Evolution and Commercialization of Rebgong Tibetan Thangka Paintings

Xiaoyong Wang*

Can a religious act and an art commodity co-exist? Over the past forty years, Rebgong Thangka painters have been seeking the best way to develop and promote Rebgong Thangka, which has experienced a huge transformation since China's economic reform in 1978.¹ Known as "the birthplace of Tibetan art,"² Rebgong is located in the Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in the Qinghai Provinces of China or Amdo, which is prominent as one of the traditional "three provinces" of a greater ethnographic Tibet.³ Rebgong art can be divided into eleven genres, including painted and embroidered Thangka, statues, murals, architectural design, and sculpture in wood, clay, and stone. Of these art forms, Thangka is the most central and important one.⁴ The Tibetan people believe that the Thangka painting, as a meditation tool and object for worship and offering, can give rise to future benefits and happiness for spiritual advancement. For traditionalist Tibetans, the payment that the patron makes to the artist after the completion of a work is a pious offering,⁵ and both patrons and artists believe that religious objects should not be pawned or sold. Selling them was thought to lead to negative karma.⁶ However, a mature commercial model for the production, distribution, and sale of Thangka paintings is gradually being developed, and the external-remote market in the Han area in China Proper has become the focused market for Rebgong Thangka paintings.

In this paper, I shed light on the transformation of Rebgong Thangka's transmission and commercialization models under social change over the past forty years. I argue that, in the course of the commercialization of Rebgong Thangka paintings, several moral strategies and negotiations have been built to maintain a balance between Thangka as a religious object and as a pure commodity. This paper is based on both fieldwork in Rebgong and textual research

* Xiaoyong Wang is a graduate student in the Centre for East Asian Studies, Stanford University
1 The 1978 reform transformed China's economy from a planned economy to a socialist market economy.

2 Mark Stevenson, "Art and Life in Amdo Rebgong Since 1978," *Amdo Tibetans in Transition: Society and Culture in the Post-Mao Era*, ed. Toni Huber (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 197.

3 Toni Huber, "Introduction: Amdo and its modern transition," *Amdo Tibetans in Transition*, XIII.

4 Qian Zhao, Interview by author, Rebgong Art Museum, January 5, 2017.

5 David and Janice Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting: Methods and Materials* (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2006), 11.

6 Alex John Cantanese, "The Commodification of Buddhist Objects in Amdo, Tibet, China" (PhD diss., University of California, Santa Barbara, 2015), 99, ProQuest (ATT 3733586).

in both Chinese and English. My fieldwork in Rebgong was conducted in January 2017 with observation and oral interviews with local Thangka masters, students, government officials, and dealers. A vital part of the fieldwork is that I visited four of the most important and successful local Thangka masters and their painting schools, galleries, and companies.



FIGURE 1. *The Portrait of Preaching Śākyamuni*, displayed at Rebgong Nāgārjuna Painting School.
Photograph by author.

Rebgong Thangka Paintings

Painting Thangka is a sacred and complicated process. Aside from artistic skill, a successful painter requires decades of training and a deep comprehension of Buddhism. Traditionally, the first step was the preparation of the painting surface. In Rebgong, painters used to rub the surface with polishing stones, which left the back of the cloth with a very smooth, even, and glossy surface. Second came the establishment of a design on that surface by means of a sketch. The third step involved laying down the initial coats of paint, and that was followed by steps four and five: shading and outlining. The sixth and last step consisted of adding several finishing touches, which included “eye-opening” (*kaiyan*)⁷ and burnishing of gold.⁸ Many compositions were dictated by Buddhist iconography and artistic tradition, and painters drew from memory or according to standard examples.⁹ Individualism or original

7 “Eye-opening” through painting in the eyes of a deity is one of the acts that bring it to life, which is traditionally one step in the elaborate consecration or vivification ritual.

8 Jackson and Jackson, *Tibetan Thangka Painting*, 15.

9 *Ibid.*, 42.

creation were therefore not of high value within this tradition. Although modern Rebgong Thangka painters still adhere to these basic steps, changes have occurred with the commercialization of Rebgong Thangka in terms of pigments, the painters' study of Buddhist theory and principles of composition, as well as in the conduct of some religious rituals. The details of these changes, that have resulted in the breaking of several traditional taboos, are explained later in this paper.

The Traditional Transmission Model

With the growing prosperity of the Thangka economy, the space where the painting techniques are taught has shifted from households and monasteries to local painting schools and family workshops open to the public. During this private-to-public shift, Thangka masters struggled to find ways to preserve the traditional master-disciple relationship while dealing with the new pressure of mass production required by the commercial needs of wider society. As a result, the education of Thangka has been pushed to the point of threatening its own artistic traditions.

In the past, most Thangka painters were pious laymen who, in the majority of cases, came from families whose hereditary occupation was painting. Additionally, some painters were young monks who studied literature and art in the monastery.¹⁰ According to Gengdengdaji, the khenpo of the Sangeshong Upper Monastery and one of most important



FIGURE 2. Sangeshong Upper Monastery. Photograph by author.

Thangka masters in Rebgong, it is a great honor for Buddhist families to have a son become a monk in the temple. Most of the time, boys were sent to the monastery when they were approximately eight years old.¹¹ When boys were nearing twenty years old, they may have decided either to leave the monastery and begin working as a professional painter, or to reaffirm their commitment to monastic life.¹² In Rebgong, monk painters have a very close relationship to layman painters. Layman painters often taught monk students, and monk painters could also teach layman students. The location geographical location of Rebgong,

10 Huber, "Amdo and its Modern Transition," *Amdo Tibetans in Transition*, 203.

11 In this paper, because all the interviews are conducted in Mandarin Chinese, Tibetan interviewees' name are spelled in the way they themselves render in Chinese using Pinyin system. Khenpo is a degree for higher Buddhist studies given in Tibetan Buddhism. After successfully passing their examination they are entitled to serve as teachers of Buddhism. Sangeshong is also known as Wutun Village, including Upper and Lower Wutun Villages with Upper and Lower Monasteries.

12 Stevenson, "Art and Life in Amdo Rebgong since 1978," 204.

described as “monasteries are inside of villages, villages are around the monasteries,” also contributes to a closer relationship between monastic and layman’s lives.¹³ Generally, in the traditional Thangka teaching, students experienced a long period of training in both Buddhist theory and painting skills in a tough material environment. Meanwhile, under the family or monastery transmission model, a close teacher-student relationship was also generated.

There are some shared experiences in the learning process of Rebgong Thangka masters today: the powerful families’ inheritance of techniques, stringent training, and pious Buddhist belief. For example, when interviewed Master Gengdengdaji explained that he began to secretly study Thangka with his father Xiawucairang when he was eight years old in 1972, during the Cultural Revolution.¹⁴ When 20-year-old Xiawucairang was painting Thangka at Kumbum Monastery (*Ta'er Si*), he was introduced to the great 20th century Chinese landscape painter Zhang Daqian (1899-1983), who was seeking assistance to copy and document the early Buddhist art at Dunhuang. Gengdengdaji told me that the painting skills of his family were deeply influenced by Zhang Daqian.¹⁵ Even today, we can see this influence in the Gengdengdaji family’s Thangka in that the color is lighter and that the layout is looser than other Rebgong Thangka paintings.

Xiawucairang was extremely strict with his son Gengdengdaji. It was not until Gengdengdaji was thirty years old and had learned Thangka for twenty-two years that his father acknowledged his hard work by saying: “Now you can paint by yourself.” In the following, Gengdengdaji states his tough but also peaceful process of learning Thangka:

Since I was eight years old, I sat cross-legged thirteen hours a day for practice and chanted sutras every day. My feet were weighed down by my body for so long, and even nowadays they still hurt. When I am sitting, my mind is peaceful, my hand is stable, and my eyes are accurate. If a line is broken, then the line is dead. Therefore, we have an old saying that “One line is worth a good horse.” I never think about leaving the monastery. It is very quiet in the monastery. In this environment I learned a lot about sutra and theories. The sutra, every icon’s gestures, expressions, color, and tools are all in my mind. When Buddha is in my heart, then Buddha would be in front of my eyes.¹⁶

13 Zhaorong Peng, *Rebgong Thangka kaochalu* (Beijing: Minzu Press, 2012), 29.

14 Gengdengdaji, Interview by author, Sangeshong, January 5, 2017.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid.



FIGURE 3. Gengdengdaji is showing me a photograph of his family. Photograph by author.



FIGURE 4. An old picture: Xiawucairang is teaching Thangka to young Gengdengdaji. Provided by Gengdengdaji.

Lengthy practice and a quiet environment provided these painters with solid skills and sufficient time for meditation and thinking. Without extraneous stimulus from the outside world, painters could effectively immerse themselves in Thangka and Buddhist practice. Without convenient transportation, they instead rode horses with dry food in their bags to different monasteries in Sichuan, Gansu, and even Mount Wutai in Shanxi Province to paint Thangkas. Recalling his experience as a Thangka student practicing in monasteries, Master Xiawujiao said: “I had no idea about the direction of home, but I concentrated on Thangka and sculpture.”¹⁷ In this tough environment alone, these Thangka painters focused on painting Thangka and acquired a solid training.

Master Qu Zhi, the founder of the Rebgong Nāgārjuna Painting School, was also born in a Thangka painter family, the ninth generation in the lineage. Similar to Gengdengdaji, Qu Zhi inherited the talent of painting Thangka from his father and also experienced solid training and spiritual practice by following his teacher. He began painting Thangka with his father when he was eight years old. Four years later, when his father died, he became the student of Jiumeiquzong, the 9th Panchen Lama's painter. In our interview, Master Qu Zhi showed a huge appreciation for his teacher and expressed that he missed him very much:

I really miss my teacher, who is an extremely great person. He left the household, [became a monk] at nine years old, and passed away at ninety-nine years old. Now, I always think that I will take my whole life to learn his quality, and I just regret that I cannot remember everything that he told me. At that time, he felt there were few people learning Thangka. However, now there are more and more people learning Thangka while traditional qualities are fewer and fewer.¹⁸

17 Xiawujiao, Interview by author, Ren Jun Art School, January 6, 2017.

18 Qu Zhi, Interview by author, Rebgong Nāgārjuna Painting School, January 7, 2017.

As shown by these masters, the old-generation Thangka painters received strong and long-term training and practice, which contributed to their skillful painting ability. At the same time, teaching inside of families and monasteries led to closer relationships between teachers and students.

Recent adaptations and the new model of Thangka skill transmission

Nowadays, Thangka schools, companies, and family workshops have become the most important places for students to study Thangka in Rebgong. Under these new models of Thangka teaching, the traditional master-disciple relationship remains partly intact. However, after the students study Thangka in painting schools for several years, the master-disciple relationship can develop into an employer-employee relationship. Through the commercialization of the artistic process and the commodification of the art form, Thangka students are thus faced with more material opportunities and temptation.

Unlike the teacher-student relationship commonly seen in the modern educational system, Thangka masters and their students describe their association as a master-disciple relationship, which implies a more traditional and more intimate relationship. The master-disciple relationship requires teachers to be responsible for educating students not only in the skills of painting, but also in the moral criteria of being a human. “In our Buddhist beliefs, a Thangka teacher is a half father,” said Master Gendeng, a master with around twenty students in his family workshop, which is also a small Thangka company.¹⁹ Qu Zhi feels that he has a strong duty to pass on the techniques of Thangka to the next generation, and he thinks he should consider every student’s future. He is explicit that even though he is the owner of the painting school, for him, the school is like a hotel—he is just a passing traveler. His role is that of a Buddhist and a Thangka painter, and he simply hopes that he can transmit the quality and painting skills that his teacher taught him to his students. To Qu Zhi, both painting and teaching Thangka are ways of accumulating merit:

The first thing I teach my students is how to be a real person. Respecting your parents should be the most important thing. I usually tell them, the process of learning is the process of Buddhist practice. Practice is not only about meditation at home; walking in the way is also a way of practice. You can learn about the painter’s quality [as a person] from his painting. If he has the nature of compassion, then his painting can show compassion. If you draw a Bodhisattva, you must be clear about the experience and teaching of that Bodhisattva. Determination is necessary for a Thangka painter. Being a good teacher is merit, or it would be a sin.²⁰

Qu Zhi holds the opinion that teaching Thangka is his practice as a Buddhist. He has the responsibility to be a good teacher and transfer this Buddhist skill from generation to

¹⁹ Gendeng, Interview by author, Sangeshong, January 6, 2017.

²⁰ Qu Zhi, Interview by author, Rebgong Nāgārjuna Painting School, January 7, 2017.

generation. As a result of this type of mindset, Buddhism still plays an important role in the local Thangka teaching, and the close relationship between teacher and student in traditional teaching models in families and monasteries has partially persisted.



FIGURE 5. Students are painting Thangka at Nāgārjuna Painting School. Photograph by author.

In addition, Thangka teachers engage in philanthropic behaviour to take care of their students, and even their students' families, in this undeveloped Tibetan area. In Rebgong, 80% of people work in art, the majority of artists being Thangka painters.²¹ Thangka masters who had early success in the commercialization of Thangka take on the responsibilities of helping students and villagers. In the three largest Thangka painting schools, Rebgong Thangka Painting Center, Nāgārjuna Painting School, and Ren Jun Art School, all tuition is waived for Thangka students. In Qu Zhi's Rebgong Nāgārjuna painting school, 93% of students are studying Thangka painting, and most of them are from local families.²² Qu Zhi visits every student's family and prepares daily necessities for the students, such as shoes and jackets for winter. On the Lunar New Year, he even purchased food like oil and rice for their families.²³ Thangka Master Niang Ben, the founder and owner of Rebgong Thangka Painting Center, the richest and most prestigious company in Rebgong, often takes care of his students and their families as well. Every year, he works for various charities to help poor families in the village and funds several local students who pass the college entrance examination and enroll in colleges or universities, encouraging them to continue studying.²⁴ These forms of charity

21 Qian Zhao, Interview by author, Rebgong Art Museum, January 5, 2017.

22 Ibid.

23 Ibid.

24 Hua Yang, Interview by author, Rebgong Thangka Painting Center, January 7, 2017.

could be considered a way for Thangka masters to return services back to the local people, while also revealing a closer teacher-student relationship.

The teacher-student relationship becomes even more complicated in painting school, where it has the potential to develop into an employer-employee relationship. As stated before, students in local painting schools do not need to pay tuition. After students complete basic training of approximately two years, these painting schools begin to offer some subsidies to those who have acquired the required painting skills. Each day, these students also participate in the production of commercial Thangka paintings. Most of the Thangka paintings, which are sold by the company as commodities, are painted in collaboration with staff and masters. Distribution of labor depends on different ability levels. For example, the sketch is an important and difficult step which is usually finished by mature painters, whereas coloring can be done by students under the master's instruction.

Students in Thangka painting schools can decide to leave or continue working in the painting school /company after they have studied for around three years. In the Ren Jun Art School, the founder and Master Xiawujiao has approximately 60 students and 120 staff members. When prompted for this information, he smiled with pride and confidence: "My students study and live here all for free. After three years of study, they can choose to work here. The basic salary is 6,000 Chinese Yuan (around \$860 USD) per month; then, the better you do, the higher the income you will have." Unlike Thangka painters of the old generation, students in Thangka painting school do not need to have long-term training and meditation in order to become Thangka painters. To some extent, they seem to study in an assembly line: they are trained by their teachers for a certain number of years, and then they devote themselves to the increasingly commercialized Thangka painting practice.

With the growing reputation of Rebgong Thangka paintings in China, more students in other provinces also choose to study Thangka painting in Rebgong, although local students still comprise the majority of pupils. In Master Xiawujiao's art school, there are Han students coming from Beijing, Sichuan, and Gansu. Xiaofan, one of Master Qu Zhi's students, graduated from the Yantai Fine Art College in Shandong Province with a major in oil painting. In the beginning, he was attracted by Rebgong Thangka and planned to study there for just two years. Now, he has already stayed there for five years, explaining: "There is still a lot about Buddhism and Thangka to learn, and it takes a long time to get the religious understanding."²⁵ His fluent Mandarin helps the school and company greatly when receiving outside visitors. He has even attempted to make some innovations in Thangka, combining it with oil painting techniques while still trying to conform to Buddhist rules. The increasingly diverse background of students like Xiaofan makes the Thangka education in Rebgong more creative, but also at the same time more controversial for those who would wish to adhere to traditional practices.

25 Xiaofan, Interview by author, Rebgong Nāgārjuna Painting School, January 5, 2017.



FIGURE 7. Girls are learning painting Thangka. Photograph by author.

directly related to the painter's understanding of the meaning of the sacred images in Thangka paintings and Buddhist theories. Thus, the older generation of painters spent decades learning sutra, rules of iconography, and theories of iconometry. The deeper the painter's understanding of the canonical theories of the sacred image and principles of composition, the more enlightened they are when drawing the paintings, a process considered to be one of meditation for Tibetan people. However, the ability to take photographs and copy Thangkas has become a means for young painters to paint Thangkas without the same rigorous training in Buddhist theory and principles of composition.²⁷ Xiawujao describes this using an interesting metaphor: "Students can just copy pictures, but they don't know the reason and meaning behind them. It is like if a

Three basic changes have occurred as a result of commercialization in the process of painting. First, the mineral pigment, which is a crucial feature of Rebgong Thangka, is traditionally made from the powder of mineral and vegetable pigments such as pearl, agate, coral, and saffron. However, these pigments are now sometimes made from chemical synthetics in order to save costs. Thangka paintings with mineral pigments are odorless, whereas chemical pigments usually have a strong chemical smell, which is evident when people get close to the paintings. Mineral pigments keep the colors of the real Rengong Thangka fresh for a long time and can usually be preserved for at least 300 years, while the color of chemical pigments easily fade.²⁶

The second change has occurred in the painters' study of Buddhist theory and the principles of composition. The quality of a Thangka painting is



FIGURE 6. Mineral pigment. Photograph by author.

²⁶ Peng, *Rebgong Thangka kaochalu*, 5.

²⁷ Elizabeth Reynolds, "Social networks and the commercialization of Rebgong Tibetan Thangkas," *Columbia East Asia Review* 4 (2011), 93.

person only sees your picture but never meets you in person, which leads to a very different level of understanding and experience.”²⁸

Several traditional taboos have also been broken and some religious rituals have been simplified. In the past, painters were required to bathe, burn incense, and chant sutras before they painted Thangkas. The most significant step, “eye-opening” had to be executed on an auspicious day according to the Tibetan calendar, and chanting sutras was necessary. A good painter should also refuse alcohol and tobacco, because Thangka painters need to lick the paint brush with their tongue and the smell of alcohol and tobacco in the mouth were considered disrespectful to Buddhism. Now, these taboos and rituals are relaxed, and only painters in monasteries still chant sutras before painting Thangkas. Furthermore, while women were forbidden to paint Thangka in the past, more and more women in Rebgong have gradually taken part in the group painting of Thangka since the year 2000. Still, the step of “eye-opening” can still only be conducted by male painters.²⁹

In general, today’s Thangka students are facing a world different from that of older generations. The economic development of the country and the vast amounts of information available through the Internet have inevitably influenced their values and life choices. Students can study Thangka painting in more comfortable environments and in shorter spans of time. Meanwhile, the teacher-student relationship has become more complicated. Painting schools maintain parts of the traditional master-disciple relationship and some pedagogies still incorporate Buddhist theory, but the teacher-student relationship can easily be transformed into a contractual one. In other words, teaching and production have become combined. Thangka students seem to have more opportunities for better material lives in a freer painting environment, but the process of painting Thangka is increasingly faced with more violations of tradition.

Commercial models: A skillful painter? A successful businessman!

Nowadays, family workshops and painting schools and companies are the principal locations where Rebgong Thangka are produced, while some Thangkas are still painted in monasteries but not for sale in outside markets. Sales of Rebgong Thangka rely heavily on reputation and relationships to attract customers. Large companies and famous painters can sell their Thangka paintings through promotional exhibitions, while small companies or family workshops usually choose to sell their Thangka paintings to local or outside dealers.

28 Xiawujiao, Interview by author, Ren Jun Art School, January 6, 2017.

29 Peng, *Rebgong Thangka kaochalu*, 149.

Selling Thangka has become a profitable business. According to one Xinhua article, a “wealthy middle-class appetite for Thangkas has pushed market prices up ten-fold over the past five years.”³⁰ The sale prices of Rebgong Thangka range from 2,000 to 2,000,000 Chinese Yuan (286 to 275,714 USD), and a relatively delicate Thangka with a Buddha image could be sold for anything ranging from 70,000 to 100,000 Yuan (10,000 to 14,285 USD).³¹

The price of a Thangka painting is largely determined by the reputation of the painter, whose title is the most important qualifier before their name. The first factor of the title’s significance is based on the artist’s teacher. For example, Gengdengdaji and Niang Ben have reason to be very proud because both are the students of Xiawucairang, the first Tibetan artist who was awarded a title and golden plaque as a National Master Craft Artist.³² A great teacher not only passes on the best skills of painting Thangka, but also brings their student reputation and profit in the market economy. The second component of the title concerns the geographical scale of their master craft artist status, which can be at the national, provincial or county level. This is the certification awarded by national and local governments based on a demonstration of painting ability. In Rebgong, there are five painters awarded the title of National Master Craft Artists and forty-four painters awarded as Provincial Master Craft Artists.

The large Thangka companies in Rebgong usually include a company, a painting school, and a gallery as a cultural base. In Xiawujiao’s Ren Jun Art School, Thangka workshop and painting classrooms cover an area of 800 square meters, and factories for Buddhist sculptures cover an area of 1,600 square meters. In addition, Xiawujiao designed a gorgeous gallery for his yard. The Rebgong Thangka Painting Center and the Nāgārjuna Painting School also have magnificent galleries, which exhibit their best Thangkas, certifications, and even photographs of painters with celebrities. Master Niang Ben, known as the most successful businessman in the Rebgong area, was named a National Master Craft Artist in 2009. Outside of its wonderful and extremely delicate Thangka paintings, his Rebgong Thangka Painting Center carries many photographs on its walls: Niang Ben with government leaders, with Ban Ki-moon, the eighth Secretary-General of the United Nations, and with the famous Chinese pianist Lang



FIGURE 8. A corner of the yard of Ren Jun Art School. Photograph by author.

30 Lingui Xu, “Lure of big money threatens sacred Tibetan scroll painting,” Xinhua. September 19, 2010. Accessed November 1, 2010, quoted in Elizabeth Reynolds, “Social networks and the commercialization of Rebgong Tibetan Thangkas,” *Columbia East Asia Review* 4 (2011): 97.

31 Peng, *Rebgong Thangka kaochalu*, 63.

32 Stevenson, “Art and Life in Amdo Rebgong since 1978,” 208.