

The Life of a Painting after the End of (This) Life:

What have anthropologists and museum curators missed?

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Abstract

Focusing on a specific genre of Tibetan Buddhist art, this talk illuminates how we can better understand and, in some instances, display agentive images in intercultural settings. The *skyes sgo* thangka, or “thangka for rebirth,” is a genre of Tibetan thangka painting made for the recently deceased, in this instance a member of the artist’s own family in Rebgong, a Tibetan community in northwest China. Encounters in Rebgong indicate that we need to look beyond the direct interaction between the agentive image and human actors to understand how the painting works. By examining Rebgong art makers’ understandings and practices associated with the production and use of *skyes sgo* thangkas, I suggest viewing agentive images as relationship participants and exploring how personal relationships and social conditions intertwine with the life of “icons.” In Rebgong, the *skyes sgo* image not only assists funeral rites or contains personal/familial memories, it is also an anchor for thangka painters to understand, reconcile, and organize relationship changes and to reinforce the religious value of Tibetan thangka in a rapidly commercializing society. With this understanding, we shall look at Tibetan Buddhist images or Tibetan shrine rooms displayed in Western art museums with a new pair of eyes.

Author’s Bio

Ming Xue received her Ph.D. in anthropology from UCLA and is currently a Research Associate at the American Museum of Natural History (AMNH) in New York. Her research focuses on material culture, material religion, museum anthropology, social changes, etc. She has been conducting ethnographic fieldwork and working with thangka painters in Rebgong, a Tibetan community in northwest China since 2009. She is also a documentary filmmaker, curator, and writer. Her recent documentary film, *A Woman Who Paints Thangkas* (2019), was selected for screening at international film festivals and conferences, including the Margaret Mead Film

Festival, Heritales: International Heritage Film Festival, and the AAS Film Expo. Her recent nonfiction book in Chinese, *The Shrine on 77th Street: The Aura of Objects and Stories of Anthropologists in the AMNH*, was published by Shanghai Joint Publishing Co. in 2024. Her English ethnography, *Painting Thangkas on the Tibetan Plateau: Buddhist Art Making in Transition*, will be published by University of Washington Press.