

Sacred and Secular: A Dual Transformation in Thangka Cultural Dissemination across Tibet and Qinghai
— **Based on the Mechanism Transfer and Innovation of the "Hubei International Triennial of Lacquer Art "**

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I. Cultural Empowerment of the Triennial Mechanism

As key drivers of urban cultural regeneration, contemporary art biennials and triennials have empowered global cities to reshape their cultural ecosystems and redefine their international identities, affirming Daniel Bell's observation that "the mark of the modern city is its visuality." From prestigious brands such as the Venice Biennale and Documenta Kassel to domestic practices like the Guangzhou Triennial and Shanghai Biennale, these events have consistently transcended regional boundaries, transforming local culture into global visual symbols. Through the cultivation of academic brands and robust public cultural service systems, they enhance cultural tourism and urban soft power.

Beyond city-branded exhibitions, medium-specific biennials/triennials have also proven highly effective. Leveraging the cultural legacy of Chu lacquerware and its status as a natural lacquer production region, Hubei Museum of Art established the "Hubei International Triennial of Lacquer Art" in 2010. Over five progressively curated editions, it has developed a model for the contemporary reinterpretation of traditional lacquer art. The triennial's curatorial framework follows a step-by-step thematic evolution, tracing a research path from macro to micro: the 2010 inaugural edition, *Material·Method·Spirit*, focused on the material ontology of lacquer, establishing an Eastern material philosophy framework; the 2013 iteration, *Source·Flow*, curated in collaboration with the Hubei Provincial Museum, facilitated a dialogue between Warring States lacquerware and contemporary practice; by the 2023 edition, *Change·Connection*, it had engaged 147 artists from 9 countries, catalyzing the fusion of lacquer art with cross-media experimentation. This intellectual progression not only elevated lacquer art from a traditional craft to a contemporary cultural lexicon but also expanded its global reach through the World of Lacquer touring exhibition, demonstrating how specialized triennials can catalyze the redefinition of traditional arts.

Thangka art, like lacquer art, is a quintessential representative of material intangible cultural heritage (ICH), and its dissemination urgently requires the introduction of modern exhibition mechanisms to activate its traditional DNA. The Hubei experience demonstrates that a triennial could systematically safeguard the cultural roots of Thangka while promoting the creative translation of its sacred elements into the secular realm. Tibet and Qinghai, as core Thangka production regions, could establish a specialized triennial based on the Hubei model: on one hand, inheriting ICH protection traditions by safeguarding religious rituals and endangered techniques through technologies like spectral scanning and video documentation; on the other hand, boldly exploring creative transformation by encouraging young artists to

integrate Thangka iconography and visual symbols into contemporary life contexts through cross-media art, IP derivatives, etc., while preserving core techniques like mineral pigments and gold line tracing. This dual-track approach of "consolidating the foundation" and "opening new sources" will infuse the cultural heritage of the Tibetan Plateau with new vitality for the times.

II. Dual-Track Practical Pathways for a Tibet-Qinghai Thangka Triennial

(1) Dual-City Rotating Exhibition

Lhasa and Xining could establish a dual-city rotating exhibition mechanism, achieving functional complementarity through differentiated allocation of regional resources. The Lhasa venue, leveraging the treasure collection system of the Potala Palace Treasure Museum, could collaborate with the Tibet Museum for in-depth research on religious rituals: hyperspectral scanning technology could be used for non-invasive analysis of ancient Thangkas in collections, establishing a Thangka technique database precisely annotating differences between the Miantang, Qinzhi, and Karma Gardri schools; religious figures and Tibetan studies scholars could form a committee to formulate Traditional Creation Boundary Guidelines clarifying sacred limits—for example, that the facial features of Buddha statues must not be altered. During exhibitions, museum treasures could be displayed alongside rich and detailed documentation, supplemented by AR technology transforming Thangka mineral pigment layers into dynamic geological maps—for instance, tracing lapis lazuli from Afghan mines, transported via Silk Road caravans, finally transformed into the indigo robes of a Buddha mother under the artist's brush, elevating the material journey into a religious aesthetic narrative.

The Xining venue, on one hand, could utilize the Qinghai Art Museum as a hub for contemporary transformation, presenting the lineage from ICH masters, established figures, to young artists through systematic research and progression of exhibition themes, while discovering more contemporary creators driven by the triennial mechanism. On the other hand, leveraging the local advantages of the Rebgong Art Village (in Tongren County), it could extend ICH protection and transmission by setting up live workshops where national-level inheritors demonstrate representative techniques of scroll, embroidery, applique (Tib: Gos-sku), and raised-relief embroidery (Tib: Tshogs-zhing) Thangkas. Experience projects like "Pigment Hunter" could be developed, allowing tourists to collect and mix mineral pigments, thereby boosting local cultural tourism income.

The value of the dual-city collaborative rotation lies in Lhasa providing academic authority for traditional Thangka culture and ritual studies, while Xining outputs technological transformation power through exhibition interactivity and cultural tourism experiences, with both cities sharing databases and coordinating audience engagement.

(2) Four-Tier Collection System

Following the establishment of the Thangka dissemination triennial mechanism, a specialized, tiered Thangka collection system can be built within relevant museums and art galleries, using exhibitions to promote collecting:

Religious Ritual Classics Tier: Systematically collect ancient monastery Thangkas, using technological means (e.g., spectral analysis) and religious certification to doubly safeguard their material and spiritual value.

ICH Gene Bank: Collect not only the physical works of ICH inheritors but also fully document the creation process through video, forming a comprehensive archival database including pigment preparation, line drawing, and gold tracing, etc.

Academic Innovation Archive: Centered on universities/academies, collect experimental creations based on the transformation of traditional symbols—e.g., exploring the conversion of mandala schemas into digital interactive installations while preserving core religious elements (like seed syllables and proportional structures) to explore media innovation.

Youth Power Reserve: Discover creators under 30 through the triennial platform, supporting their innovative practices in non-core areas like clothing patterns and background landscapes, using the collection mechanism to incentivize them to apply these elements to broader artistic creations and derivatives.

(3) Cultural Translation: Pathways for the Secularization of Sacred Symbols

Based on the existing technological foundation and cultural tourism experience in Tibet and Qinghai, practical paths for cultural translation can be bifurcated:

Digitally Empowered Cultural Decoding: Drawing on the multi-sensory interactive technology of the Qinghai Art Museum's "Infinite Sea" exhibition, design an AR ritual analysis system within the exhibition. Scanning a Thangka could reveal the geological traceability path of its mineral pigments.

Local Activation : Combining with the ICH production system of the Rebgong Art Village, develop derivatives that integrate sacred symbols into contemporary consumption scenarios through modern design. Such practices extend the logic of "tactile experience dissolving cognitive barriers" but emphasize multi-sensory synergy—constructing an immersive cultural cognition experience through combinations of visual dynamism, tactile materiality, and auditory ritual sounds.

III. Domestic and International Cultural Tourism Dissemination

(1) Domestic Touring Exhibitions: National Platforms Overcoming Fragmentation

Recent domestic Thangka touring exhibitions have continuously broken through barriers to religious art dissemination via thematic reconstruction and cultural grafting. The 2023 "Beauty in Diversity: Selected Works of Fujian-Tibet Lacquer Thangka Art Exhibition" held in Fuzhou Sanbao City, embedding sacred Tibetan symbols into Fujian's culture. The same year, the Shanghai History Museum and Xuhui Art Museum jointly presented "Confluence of Rivers, Spreading Far and Wide: Sakya Thangka Art from Shigatse, Tibet," using historical themes like "Phags-pa Meeting Kublai Khan" to construct a visual narrative of a multi-ethnic

nation. This exhibition was later selected for the Ministry of Culture and Tourism and the State Ethnic Affairs Commission's "Chunyu Project", laying the foundation for a Hong Kong tour. However, current exhibitions often suffer from insufficient thematic continuity and limited impact radius. For example, the 2017 National Arts Fund project "Form Follows Heart: Thangka Art Masterpiece Series Exhibition," despite covering five cities (Beijing, Xi'an, Dunhuang, etc.), failed to achieve wider impact due to the lack of a systematic academic thread.

The established triennial mechanism could overcome this dilemma by applying for various national projects: applying for the Ministry of Culture and Tourism's "Collection Highlights Exhibition Season" touring project to provide funding and policy support for the dual-city rotation; linking with the National Arts Fund's "Dissemination and Exchange Promotion" project to build a progressively themed touring exhibition, e.g.: first stop Lhasa Potala Palace focusing on historical rituals; second stop Hangzhou grafting Thangka mineral color palettes onto Hangzhou embroidery techniques; final stop Shenzhen deconstructing mandala schemas with digital technology. This three-stage thematic progression across multiple cities enables a synergy between academic depth and public outreach.

(2) International Dissemination: Digital Carriers Crossing Cultural Boundaries

International promotion could borrow the essence of lightweight narrative from the Hubei Museum of Art's "World of Lacquer" project, relying on cultural and tourism departments for cross-cultural dialogue. Building on the model of the 2024 Thailand exhibition "A Glimpse of Millennia: Landscapes of Belt and Road Countries in Thangka Painting," future tours could juxtapose Thangka's "gold tracing" (gser-ris) technique with Thai "gold leaf blessing" (phra phim) crafts, activating resonance through shared technical commonalities. Tailoring to different cultural backgrounds, emphasize spiritual value translation—e.g., using mineral pigment spectral analysis to reveal the visual healing function of lapis lazuli blue, interpreting Thangka as a meditation medium transcending religion.

A key breakthrough could be attempting lightweight digital touring. Establish an "Online Mandala Digital Museum," offering virtual AR exhibitions where audiences view exhibits and Thangka details remotely. Simultaneously conduct live-streamed workshops: while artists demonstrate the creation process, overseas users could participate in creation using virtual tools. This approach reduces costs of artifact transportation and risks of religious sensitivity while potentially generating industrial income through derivative sales on livestream platforms.

IV. Industry Feedback

The industry feedback mechanism for the Thangka Triennial must adhere closely to policy compliance and cultural sanctity, exploring pathways for economic revenue feedback through three directions:

(1) Digital Protection and Copyright Development of Material Heritage

Establish a high-precision digital gene bank to systematically develop digital assets for

museum collections and subsequently added Thangkas. Academically, use non-contact spectral analysis to solidify mineral pigment formulas and document endangered techniques, building a permanent digital archive. Commercially, public institutions (e.g., Tibet Museum, Qinghai Art Museum) could license the use of digital exhibits to domestic and international art galleries and commercial entities, generating sustainable revenue through copyright royalties. This ensures the safety of cultural relics and religious sanctity while providing a source of funds for the feedback mechanism.

(2) Tiered Ticket Operation System

Design differentiated paths for different entities: Public institutions focus on overall exhibition copyright output, sharing ticket revenue with partner museums for exhibition income. Private entities (Rebgong Art Village, private galleries, etc.) adopt a dual-track strategy: on one hand, acting as agents for contemporary Thangka art sales; on the other, implementing a "ticket + derivative" sales model, where visitors purchasing tickets for exhibitions and related experiences receive exclusive discounts on limited-edition derivatives, forming a closed-loop cultural consumption system.

(3) Layered Derivative Development Mechanism

Offline physical derivatives focus on the translation of cultural symbols: Design and develop derivatives based on licensed digital copyrights of collection items. Online lightweight products could include livestreamed workshops for overseas users to learn techniques remotely, driving sales of physical toolkits and achieving symbiosis between cultural dissemination and industrial revenue.

The exploration of a Tibet-Qinghai Thangka Triennial mechanism is, in essence, a dual-track synergy between the preservation of sacred DNA and the reconstruction of secular discourse. It is not a simple transplant of the Hubei experience but rather an attempt, rooted in the cultural logic of the Tibetan Plateau, to forge new paths across multiple dimensions: innovation at the boundaries of cultural translation, symbiotic practice of technological ethics, and the ecological closed-loop of industry feedback. This affirms the profound value of dual-track translation: preserving cultural DNA with reverence while reconstructing narrative contexts with creative power, enabling the millennia-old Thangka to maintain its core essence amidst the tide of globalization while becoming a living symbol connecting the sacred and the everyday, tradition and the future.