

Study on the Dance of Sarasvatī in Tibetan Thangka Art

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Abstract—Tibetan Thangka, with its unique style, variety, and wide circulation, has always been regarded as a crowning jewel by Tibetan people. This paper is the interpretation of its form and function. The dance of sarasvatī is the ideal carrier of Tibetan Buddhism. Therefore, this paper attempts to explain the dance of "sarasvatī" in Tibetan Thangka art, and then discusses the profound cultural connotation and unique artistic value contained in the dance, and provides references for scholars to study Tibetan music and dance.

Keywords: *Tibetan, Thangka art, sarasvatī*

I. INTRODUCTION

The Thangka art of Tibetan Buddhism is an important part of Tibetan painting art. Thangka, also known as Tangga, Tangka, Tanga, and Tongga, is Tibetan-Chinese transliteration name. There are many forms of Tibetan Buddhist paintings, such as murals, scroll paintings, pattern paintings, fine sand paintings and bazaar paintings. Among them, scroll painting is known as "Thangka" painting, which is a kind of Tibetan Buddhist painting composed of painted images mounted in colored satin, similar with the scroll paintings made by artists inside and outside China. It is usually painted with colored mineral and plant-based paints on cloth or paper. Rongduo refers to statue of Buddha, Bodhisattva, and guardian deity. After consecration by living Buddha in Tibetan Buddhist temples, Thangka painting will be enshrined in the Buddhist temple or the Buddhist temple of the people who believe in Buddhism. "Thangka" is actually an artistic work that the artist adopts painting language and special techniques to visualize Tibetan Buddhist teachings, canons, historical stories, folk customs, singing and dancing scenes, and natural sceneries on canvas.

Many people do not know what "Thangka" is, and mistake it for a mysterious object or a photo. In fact, after a visit to a monastery in the Tibetan region, one learns that Thangka is not that mysterious. However, dance researchers must carefully appreciate it when they see the real "Thangka". They should pay special attention to the body and posture of the figures, in each "Thangka" painting, as well as the ornaments, instruments and Dhammapala, so as to appreciate its inner meaning. Tibetan "Thangka" is a kind of colorful painting with rich Tibetan cultural characteristics drawn on the cloth, with various types and forms. There are "Thangkas" that show religious dance forms. The images of

"Thangka" are Buddha, Bodhisattva, Virudhaka, Tara, Dakini, divine mother, Vajrayana, Yogini mother, and so on. They have different postures and hand-held instruments. Some Dakini carry "blood cranium devices" (gabala) that represent the omnipresent bliss of a short life. In terms of posture, the folding of the legs refers to meditation, with one leg pointing inward and the other forward representing semi-meditation, etc. In addition to posture, the color in Thangka is also very exquisite, with a certain emotion and meaning. White represents water. Life comes from water, and water purifies everything. Therefore, it can be said that all the images on white canvas are painted with the painter's original intention. Yellow represents soil, supporting the growth of all living things. Red represents fire, the power of creation and change, and so on. There are many forms of expression in Thangka, including Thangka in dictation, such as biography of master (Padmasambhava), the biography of dharma-ra[^]ja (Phatpa, Milarepa, Tsongkhapa); and Thangka of Tibetan king (Srongtsen Gampo, Trisong Deutsen) and so on. There is also a rich variety of folk culture, entertainment, song and dance, folk activities and so on. "Thangka", with its unique Tibetan style, diverse varieties, large quantity, and wide circulation, has always been regarded as a valuable art work of the Tibetan people. Thangka is finely drawn with a pen and full of charm. In particular, the dynamic image of the character holding the instrument is lifelike and vivid in color. For example, in the Thangka of Yamāntaka, there are nine heads, thirty-six arms and sixteen feet. One of the four Virudhaka holds a musical instrument with compassion in mind, protecting the human beings and their gods, and shows that they converted to Buddhism by dancing. The play performed by Tang Dongjiebu for the construction of the bridge shows the graceful dancing postures of the seven dancing fairies, which was fresh and lively and full of interest.

II. THE SARASVATĪ IN THANGKA

The sarasvatī in Thangka is the Yangchenma in Tibetan Buddhism. According to legend, in the ancient South China Sea breeze blows the still life in the sea, the waves utters beautiful sounds and forms beautiful music and dances. The Brahma is greatly satisfied, so the above-mentioned beautiful music and dance become smart and beautiful sarasvatī. In Tibet, there is a Thangka in the Qing Dynasty, in which the sarasvatī is dressed in gorgeous costumes, sitting in the

middle of the lotus, with the flute fairy and the waist-drum dancing fairy on both sides. (See "Fig. 1")



Fig. 1. Sarasvatī.

The Tibetan Buddhism Thangka is mostly music and dance scenes that reflect the historical theme of the Tibetan dynasty. The highlights are the parade celebrations of the then monarchy, monks receiving the people's song and dance, acrobatics, and playing carnivals, showing artists' talent and the social life of Tibetan people then. The image of sarasvatī exists in a mural of Yuan dynasty in Regong, Qinghai, and in modern painted Thangka. She holds an instrument in her hand and is graceful. People are probably familiar with the twenty-one Taras, and there is a 108 Taras Hall in Regong, and sarasvatī is one of them. Although sarasvatī enjoys many images and names, no matter how different the images are, they always hold a musical instrument in their hands, giving people the feeling of playing. The painted Thangka also shows the fairy who incarnates Dakini, holding the white hada, dancing and so on, bringing the image to life. The most wonderful part of the sarasvatī Thangka is the drum dance, the apsaras dance, the malla dance, the dragon dance, the ribbon dance, the apsaras dance to music, and the donor dance. They have different postures, with both hands flattened with shoulders, facing one direction, crossing the legs. Some lunge horizontally, raising their hands up and down their sides. Others, with one hand akimbo, lunge with both legs, extend their right hand diagonally downward, trying to bend from behind to the hip. There are percussion instruments, string instruments and so on. Dance instruments include flute, trombone, conch, suona, etc. Percussion instruments include battle drum, snare drum, tabour, waist drum, bass drum, flat drum, she, ba, bell, etc. There also involve string instruments such as xylophone. Some of the dance forms are one-leg jumping drumming, some are gentle,

steady and elegant, and some are masculine, bold and unrestrained jumping. The lively scenes fully depict the local people's reproduction of "Thangka" dance art. (See "Fig. 2", "Fig. 3" and "Fig. 4")



Fig. 2. Dancer holding flowers.



Fig. 3. Dancer holding goat drum.



Fig. 4. Dancer holding a pipa.

III. THE DANCE OF SARASVATI

In view of the difference in doctrine and ritual procedure between esoteric and exoteric Tibetan Buddhism, as well as in national language and social life, the music and dance themes reflected in Thangka are also varied. The musical performances in the heavenly palace and Buddhism bliss, which are largely reflected in the exoteric Buddhist paintings in the Han nationality, have not been manifested in the Tibetan Buddhist Thangka. However, images of apsaras, Bodhisattvas, arhats, Vajrayana, and donors holding musical instruments or making musical gestures were also frequently seen against the influence of exoteric Buddhism. The various musical instruments in the Tibetan Buddhist paintings are not tied with ribbons on the top, but scattered in the spaces of the murals. It is not difficult to find that Thangka dance is deeply influenced by the ancient Western Regions. It is not only influenced by India, the birthplace of Buddhism, but also directly influenced by the music and dance from the Western Regions (ethnic minorities in India and Buddhist countries in Southeast Asian) due to the important geographical location of Tibet. The deep influence of the Western Regions can be seen from the detailed analysis of Thangka dancing from below.

The typical posture in Thangka is the cross-back step, that is, the knee to the outside when step, slightly bent supporting leg, giving people a special aesthetic feeling of sinking breath and relaxation. Such cross-back step is only seen in Indian classical dance and Indian murals. Obviously, this comes from the influence of Indian Buddhist art on Thangka dancing posture of Tibetan Buddhist art, which is a typical image of the fusion of classical dance of India and China.

The dance postures in Thangka are mostly back-leg, that is, the supporting leg squats slightly, and the power leg is hooked behind the calf of the supporting leg. This posture is a major part of the S-shape formation, so you must bend your legs and squat when you exhale and sink to the maximum. Such unique leg posture and foot position is similar with the dance posture in Indian murals.

In "Thangka", the dancers mostly have big breasts and small waists, which is based on the Indian fresco dancing posture and combined with the traditional Tibetan dancing form in China: wearing yuntou trousers (i.e. pomegranate skirt), indicating the scene of dancing with long silks in the heaven.

The arms in "Thangka" is angular and curved This is a special movement of the arm formed by the great bending of the wrist and elbow joints. Each posture has its implication. The figure is plump, the curve is fruity, the temperament is implicative and shy, gentle and charming, the dress is luxuriant, and the dancing posture is melodious and graceful. The wrist part is different from that in Chinese classical dance, while the arm part is similar with human flag in Chinese classical dance and side-supporting press in Dunhuang Dance. The arms of Dunhuang Dance in Gansu are angular and zigzag, while those in Chinese classical dance are curved and round, so there are qualitative changes

and differences between Thangka dance and the two above. In a word, the style, temperament, posture, and clothes of "Thangka" all embody the aesthetic characteristics of Tibetan folk customs and national style. The dancing postures involved, such as twisting the body, top crotch, etc., is impossible for ordinary people. This is not caused by the carelessness of the painters at that time, but the artistic exaggeration in the painting, which indicates the extraordinary and superior technique of the dance presented to the Buddha, and gives a visual effect, deliberately shaping a very special and wonderful dance shape. Therefore, the different dancing postures and colorful sculptures of "Thangka" cannot be regarded as a chaotic whole, nor can they be separated from the dancing styles of different times. Instead, their evolution should be seen and their internal relations studied. It is this internal connection that makes the "Thangka" dance of different periods and styles have common characteristics. That is to say, the "Thangka" dance in any dynasty has its basic style in common. It is influenced Indian culture, Islamic culture, and Central Plains culture, and other multi-cultures in its look and temperament. But its posture, dancing, and painting rule have a unique Tibetan style. Some of the instrumental music and dances in "Thangka" are early forms of music and dance. Many Bodhisattvas still maintain their unique style in the application of verve and spirit.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thangka has gradually evolved into a special scroll painting, which is a unique artistic form of painting in Tibetan Buddhism. According to the form and function of Tibetan Buddhism Thangka, it is closely related to the nomadic life of the Tibetan ancestors. In the nomadic life of the Tibetan ancestors, in addition to daily recitation of the Buddhist six-character mantra, there must be a sacred object that can be offered at any time to praise and pay tribute to the Buddha. "Thangka", as a traditional painting art, is an ideal way of offering. The Tibetan "Thangka" has a wide range of artistic themes and diverse varieties, and requires high rendering techniques. Over time, "Thangka" art has become a dazzling pearl in the art history of Tibetan painting, with distinctive national traditional art characteristics, strong religious color, and unique artistic style. It is a kind of painting art that fully absorbs the art styles of ancient India, Nepal, and other Buddhist countries in Southeast Asia, and combines the painting techniques of Tibetan Buddhism to gradually perfect and mature a kind of painting art with plateau national characteristics. Tibetan Buddhist art is famous for its profound Buddhist philosophy, extraordinary imagination and creativity, strong forms of expression, rich subject matter, exquisite craftsmanship, and fabulous pictures. Not only has it become a magnificent and exquisite work in the dance field of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau, but also a bright pearl in the temple of Chinese national art.

Thangka dance is a treasure in the Thangka art of Tibetan Buddhism in China. A careful appreciation of the "Thangka" art will reveal the Tibetan dance civilization contained and recorded in it, which is the great wealth of the Tibetan people

in China and the crystallization of the wisdom of Tibetan Buddhist artists. It provides the best materials for the study and creation of Tibetan songs and dances of Chinese dancers, choreographers, and art theorists, and plays a positive role.

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