

# Comparative Analysis of Online and Offline Modes of Thangkas Selling

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## ABSTRACT

Recently, selling products through live-streaming is a new approach for marketing. However, not all the industries gain benefit from such form. This paper aims at Thangkas, which is both an artistic and religious objects category in Tibetan culture. Similar to the barrier of cultural differences, marketing also faces the challenge from intercultural communication. By comparing and analyzing the major differences of live-streaming and traditional physical stores ways of selling Thangkas as well as utilizing concepts from intercultural and nonverbal communication, this paper attributes the main reasons of the failure of Xizang Duizhuang Culture Development Co., Ltd (Duizhuang) to the lack of nonverbal interaction with the audience during live-streaming sessions, and it also claims that Thangkas industry cannot deviate from the traditional physical store selling mode. In fact, the traditional offline mode of Thangkas selling grasps the asset of nonverbal message during the interaction between seller and customers, and it enables the actualization of fluency within intercultural communication.

**Keywords:** Nonverbal Communication, Intercultural Communication, Live Streaming Selling, Thangkas

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the usage of Thangkas has enriched from religious purpose to commercial value. In Tibetan culture, Thangkas are originally a form of religious arts (mostly Buddhist) which are usually manually accomplished by Lamas and painters. The most common figures on Thangkas are Buddhist deities, but other motifs such as history, politics, and daily life were later added. Tibetan Studies Scholars, such as Alex J. Catanese and Eric McGuckin,[1][2] have elaborated the process of Thangkas' expansion to commodification and souvenirs: Tangkas were first to become artistic collection in ancient time, and, arriving at 1980s (Reform and Open Era of China), this commodification has reached to both Chinese domestic and international tourism. Moreover, since Thangkas are handmade and delicate pieces, many art collectors have become interested in them.

Utilizing live-streaming to promote daily requisite products is a recent and new marketing technique. Such marketing mode attracts people by cheaper prices and entertaining atmosphere.[3] According to Chunlan Tang and Canxing Hua's quoted data, in upper year of 2020, more than 10,000,000 live-streaming sessions were held

and 200,000,000 products were promoted during these sessions (2021).

Comparing to shopping on websites, such as Amazon, eBay, and Taobao, live-streaming way brings better experience to the customers. live-streaming may lead the buyers immerse in a more verisimilar shopping experience, because the anchors may orally introduce the products and live interaction between the viewers and anchors can happen through chat bars, although both traditional online shopping and live-streaming may break the physical boundary for the customers that they can skip the process of shopping in physical locations.[4]

Thangkas industry also capture this burgeoning marketing approach. Normally companies would cooperate with local Tibetan Thangkas painters to "borrow" their works for the live-streaming. Due to Thangkas' own cultural heritage, live-streaming of selling Thangkas have to involves the session of delivering their background knowledge. Thus, intercultural communication is an inescapable process of the Thangkas selling. The live-streaming anchor introduces the details of these Thangkas, such as the personal background of the painters, the meanings of the deities, and elegant elements, to attract more potential buyers. Since the profit of companies comes from labor

residual costs, the Thangkas sold in live-streaming are usually “overpriced” to the viewers, although the prices are not standardized.

## 2.LITERATURE REVIEW

Both Chinese and western scholars have published exhaustive researches on media's role in intercultural communication, nonverbal communication, and live-streaming marketing, which all provide solid theoretical supports and enlightenment to this research.

### 2.1. Intercultural Communication and high-tech

Regarding of the relationship between culture circulation and high-tech, western scholars focus more on intercultural communication and media of arts. For example, Bart Vandenabeele believes that virtual reality, computer, telecommunication technology, and cyberspace indeed bring culture circulation to outsiders, but such median approaches are unable to completely replaced the traditional offline perception (2004).

For Chinese scholars, they pay more attention on the cross-cultural circulation of Tibetan cultures and high-tech. For example, Lanlan Zhang points out that the traditional way of circulating Tibetan culture in China was monotonous; however, nowadays, video games, souvenirs, and social medias are productive methods of alluring more people to be interested in Tibetan cultures (2021).[5] Moreover, Qi Li claims we-media (which is a new form of media that allows people to preside their own virtual channels) also plays an important role in cross-cultural communication. Many people share Tibetan cultures such as religions, operas, and arts through their own views (2021).[6]

### 2.2. Nonverbal Communication

Nonverbal Communication is a key component of the discipline of Communication, which is also one of the main theoretical supports of this essay. Scholars have built up thorough theoretical system. For instance, Mary J. Bitner, Carles Galloway, and Allan H. Ward not only provide detailed introduction toward eye messages, physical surroundings, and body language but also place these nonverbal factors into contexts to analyze such as business and teaching, which are relevant to this research.[7][8][9] Moreover, Chinese scholars, Huijuan Xie and Xia Cao combine the studies of intercultural communication and nonverbal communication, and deliver the importance of body language during cross-cultural interaction, such as eye contact, facial language, and hands movement (2021).

### 2.3. Live-streaming and Live-streaming Selling

The targeted areas of business of this research are

narrowed down to Chinese online and offline marketing analysis during Covid-19 and live-streaming mode of selling artistic objects in recent years. According to China Service Trade Guide Network, the e-commerce transaction volume of 2020 was increased by 4.5% year-over-year .[10] And, western scholars, such as Lauren A. Johnston also points out that during the pandemic period, people incline to e-commerce mode for shopping due to the implements of “social distancing and quarantine for symptomatic people” (2021).[11] Johnston also concludes that China's online retail density of transaction increased 30%-35% during 2020 (2021).[11] Thus, although global economy is negatively influenced by the pandemic situation, online selling of China still gradually and steadily increases.

Among different forms of online selling, live-streaming is one of the newcomers. Most Chinese scholars do not deny the bright side of live-streaming; however, they share different attitudes toward the live-streaming mode of selling arts. For example, Mengyu Jia believes that live-streaming could eliminate the shackle of space and time, so it may strengthen the sense of community which corresponds Chinese people's need for collectivity during pandemic period (2021).[4] Donghua Zhang asserts that many collectors and buyers cannot participate in physical artistic auctions and choosing-buying because of the pandemic situation, but, comparing to other online ways of selling arts, live-streaming approach is the one which is mostly close to the traditional way (2020).[12] However, some Chinese scholars doubt the promising influence that live-streaming brings to the arts industry. For instance, Hongming Xu points out the drawbacks of live-streaming mode that most anchors are not artistic experts, even they do not know art at all. Consequently, live-streaming can lead misunderstanding of arts to their viewers (2020).[13]

## 3.METHODOLOGY

With the prevalence of livestreaming in marketing in today's China, the traditional trading mode of offline selling in physical stores is gradually being partially replaced. However, such phenomenon does not claim for an absolute situation. This research aims at a religious and artistic category of products, Thangkas, to shed light on the factors that would influence the bright and dark sides of traditional and e-trading modes of its industry by applying the approaches of observation and interview. Ideally, by combining the theories from nonverbal and intercultural communications, media, and marketing, this research would also provide some practical advices for the Thangka industry for being compatible with the market. Thus, although the global market (especially real economy) is influenced by Covid-19, online market of China is still benefited from it for certain extent .[14]

This research attempts to answer the following questions. First, what are the factors that make live-streaming way of selling Thangkas failed? Second, comparing to the new way of selling Thangkas online, what are the advantages of the traditional mode of the Thangkas industry? Third, why Thangkas painters in Tibet are not willing to accept online way to promote their works? Fourth, how Thangkas industry should adapt itself in order to fit in this developing information age?

This research applies the qualitative method by utilizing observation and interview of both online and offline approaches as well as participation. During research process, the researcher notices that some Taobao Thangkas stores operate live-streaming sessions, but these stores are not located in Tibet but they are mostly registered in Beijing, Chengdu, and Guangzhou. This research targets at the first company (Duizhuang) in China which was registered and operated in Tibet and mainly focused on utilizing live-streaming methods to sell Thangkas.

On the one hand, the online interviewee was the principle of Duizhuang which was the first company in China to carry out live-streaming of selling Thangkas. The company was founded in March 2020; however, due to the bad management, it broke down in May 2021. The researcher had three online interviews with the principle, and the overall duration was three hours. Moreover, the researcher also observed several live-streaming sessions in 2020.

On the other hand, the researcher visited the physical store “Traditional Miantang Tangkas Artistic Shop” for observation. This shop is located in an alley nearby Bakuo Street which has been to busiest commercial area of Lhasa, and has been opened for more than ten years. The researcher observed the selling situation of the store and interviewed with Bianba (the shop owner/Thangkas painter) to gather information.

## 4.FINDINGS

### 4.1. Business Model

The detailed operation of Duizhuang is necessary to be introduced. Seven employees were involved in this program which did not include the anchors. At first, Duizhuang cooperated with Lhasa Artists Association (LAA) that LAA would contact Thangkas painters for them, and LAA recommended Duizhuang to only sell the Tangkas which were over 100,000 RMB. Duizhang operated approximately three one-hour Thangkas selling sessions a week, and lasted for roughly nine months. During the observation of several Thangkas selling sessions, the researcher noticed that Duizhuang’s promotion approach was different from other products’ live-streamings. Duizhuang’s Thangkas sessions were

calmer, informative, and interview-style. At beginning, because the employments in Duizhuang lacked Thangkas-related knowledge, they invited painters to their live-streaming session as guests to talk about their works. Because Duizhuang claimed that it treated Thangkas as artistic objects rather than religious ones, during the guest talk, the contend focused more on drawing technique, pigment materials, and artistic value from the aesthetic perspective. Comparing to other products’ live-streaming which are loud and intend to stimulate viewers’ consumption impulse, such as make-ups, clothes, and foods, Duizhuang’s Thangkas live-streaming represented the mood of virtual lecture that taught people about Thangkas and their aesthetic and cultural knowledge. However, the invited painters’ Mandarin were poor and the prices of Thangkas were not affordable to most audience, so Duizhuang lost audience’s interest. Then, in order to save this lost, on the one hand, Duizhuang’s employees became anchors to introduce and promote Thangkas by exactly reading from the published books. On the other hand, Duizhuang also reached out some local Thangkas painters by themselves. Moreover, Duizhuang also carried out live-streaming sessions other than Thangkas selling to attract audience by delivering Tibetan culture, such as tour guide to Potala Palace, introducing Tibetan opera, and even selling cheaper souvenirs. During the last months, Duizhuang even offered more price-affordable Thangkas (some of which were lower than 100 RMB) in live-streaming sessions, but the buyer’s population was still in a small scale.

First of all, regarding of marketing mode, Duizhuang operated as a company, which needed it to consider the labor surplus cost, but this concern rarely happens to a physical Thangkas store. When the researcher interviewed with the principle of this live-streaming program, he said that every month’s income through selling Thangkas could not totally cover the seven employees’ salaries. Moreover, the loss of deposits worsened Duizhuang’s financial situation. When they cooperated with LAA’s painters, based on the contract, they pre-paid thirty percent of Thangkas’ prices as deposit, and the painters should return them if their works were not sold. Unfortunately, when Duizhang announced bankruptcy and asked deposits back from these painters, only three painters (out of fifteen painters) returned the money.

However, most offline Thangkas stores still practice master-apprentice mode that it is not necessary for the shop owner to pay salaries to the apprentices. In most cases, the master would like to accept several apprentices and these apprentices are not mandatory to pay tuition fees to their master. On the contrary, the apprentices complete Thangkas and sell them in master’s store and they would deduct a percentage from their Thangkas which are sold. Thus, most Thangkas store owners do not have the burden of offering monthly salaries. In Bianba’s

case, he operates store by himself and has an apprentice who is his cousin. This apprentice has followed Bianba's teaching for more than five years and his drawing skill is mature enough to share production pressure with Bianba. Therefore, for Bianba, the monthly costs are only facilities and store rent.

Second, comparing to the buyer scope of physical stores, that of live-streaming is narrowed. The potential buyers in live-streaming should fulfill two qualities: know and understand the art of Tangkas and would like to spend more than 100,000 RMB on purchasing them. Thangkas are still unfamiliar to many people from Han-majority cities, although more and more people hear about this kind of arts. Thus, such exactly targeted customer group is not easy to attract. Moreover, most live-streamings sell daily products and are necessity goods with lower prices. However, only small portion of people who know arts well would like to purchase expensive artistic objects during live-streamings because they are not able to physically authenticate the arts.

Nevertheless, according to Bianba's words and researcher's observation, the customer composition in physical Thangkas stores is more diverse than that of live-streaming mode. Except those who come to Lhasa for tourism, some native Tibetan who need to purchase Thangkas for religious worships would also come to his store. Some tourists who collect Thangkas would also stay in touch with Bianba, and would like to book Thangkas from Bianba when they leave Tibet. Moreover, it is common for painters to buy each other's Thangkas, and the buyer can sell others' works in their own stores in higher prices. Thus, the customers in physical stores are more stable than Duizhuang's because they have their own marketing circle.

## 4.2. Nonverbal Communication

Thangkas' nature is extended from religious objects to artistic collection, so the outsiders (non-Tibetan Buddhists) who intend to purchase Thangkas would like to learn and understand the culture within this handcraft form. Thus, there must exist a cultural wall during the conversation between the potential customers and Tibetan painters who speak different languages and being cultivated in different cultures. Consequently, the key to success of cultural circulation and purchase in this kind of communication, the message senders should pay attention to cross-cultural interaction, and take good advantage of the techniques from nonverbal communication.

### 4.2.1. Eye messages

In intercultural communication, eye messages could deliver important thoughts and feelings. [15] Although Chinese Han culture and Tibetan culture share many differences, both believe that direct eye contact during

interaction represents respect. Eye messages were missing in most Duizhuang's live-streaming session, but it is a common strategy in Bianba's store. It similar to Xu mentions in his article, the concepts of "art" are still titled as "elitist, niche, and professional," which required the trained anchors with strong artistic background, thus, most of today's art live streamings, at best, lack "academic reference or continuity of knowledge," at worst, deliver the distorted knowledge of arts to the public (2020). Duizhuang realized this drawback of their anchors, so, in order to ensure the accuracy of the information that they delivered, they chose to read the from the published books during the sessions. Duizhuang ignored the importance of the exchange of eye messages, especially when an electronic screen standing between the viewers and speakers. Consequently, almost all the live-streaming sessions of Duizhuang turned into book-reading and tedious lectures about the artistic aspect of Tangkas and lost buyers' interests. On the contrary, when the research spent time in Bianba's store, she noticed that Bianba would carefully introduce every detail of the Thangkas from Buddhist meanings to drawing techniques. Ward claims the importance of eye messages that they are "extremely rich sources of nonverbal information and are attended to extensively in any typical human interaction" (1979). Although his Mandarin is not fluent (because his native language is Tibetan), he could still have eye contact with the customers and deliver his passion of drawing Thangkas through eyes.

### 4.2.2. Body languages

Secondly, body languages are also restricted by the screens during live-steaming. In their book, Liu and Yu summarize the characteristic of body language in intercultural communication. They claim that body language is omnipresent and delivers more credible information than oral one when message senders and receivers has language barriers (2000).[16] During live-streaming, the screen's visual scale of the audience was limited, so they were not able to capture all the body language of the speakers which might not convince them to buy arts through live-streaming. Moreover, Zhang pointed out body language or "actual creating process" is important in art live-streaming selling process, because it guarantees the "authenticity of the arts" (2020). Inviting painters from LAA and borrowing Tangkas from these painters and sometimes invited them to introduce their works was the only thing that Duizhuang could practice to shorten the distance between online viewers and speakers.

However, in most of the physical Thangkas stores, the painters are drawing Thangkas on Tibetan indoor benches, which customers could actually see and touch the details and real process of making Thangkas. This advantage of using hand-drawing usually make the potential costumers believe that the live-making

Thangkas deserve high-price, although there is not a standard market price for handmade Tangkas.

#### 4.2.3. Physical surroundings

Last, physical surroundings also marked the difference between these two modes of Tangkas selling. In this perspective, these two modes actually shared similarity that both online viewers and offline customers can see Tangkas through/from screens or stores. In his article, Bitner asserts that physical environment and surroundings usually create impression and image of that business, which may influence customers' choices (1992). During Duizhuang's live-streaming sessions, usually there were just several works being hung on the red wall which could exactly appear in the screen. The whole setting delivered the sense of artistic exhibition which is exclusive instead of store which welcomes people come and go. On the contrary, in Bianba's store, Buddha's statues, incense, and butter tea pot were easy to find. The different sizes of Thangkas were hung all over the wall. Although Bianba's store is less organized than Duizhuang's live-streaming room, it presented the feeling of a real and warm store of selling Tangkas.

### 5.DISCUSIONS

#### 5.1. *The doubt of copyright*

Copyright is one of the blocks for the Thangkas painters in Tibet to refuse the live-streaming way for promoting their works. The Thangkas painters in Tibet actually do not reject selling their works through the Internet; however, they concern about certain factors. From the painters in Tibet that the researcher knows, including Bianba, they all sell their works from time to time on WeChat, which is the most common social media in China. They sometimes post their works on WeChat's moments to show online friends all over the country. If a person is interested in the works, he or she would transact with the painter through WeChat." Nevertheless, this research is aware of painters' anxiousness about the insecurity of the copyright of their works while exhibiting them through livestreaming. This concern, however, does not come from the deficiency of Chinese juristic system of artistic copyright, rather, mostly originates from the painters' unconsciousness of how to defend for their own rights through law because of the insufficiency of personal awareness and linguistic barrier. Moreover, because of the language barrier, most painters are unable to go through contracts in Chinese written characters when they are willing to cooperate with other median platforms. The literacy rate (both Tibetan and Mandarin) in Tibet is still low, so many Tibetans, even were born after 1970s, are illiteracy. Most painters are fluent in Tibetan language, but they can merely orally communicate simple content in Mandarin. Thus, when talk about their concerns, Bianba said: "I do not even

allow customers to take photos of my works, so I am afraid of giving my works to a company for exhibition mode of selling. I only read some ancient Tibetan words which are common on Thangkas, so I do not whom I could turn to when they [the people from the company] to go through the contract."

#### 5.2. *The invisible cultural code*

Another reason for the persistence of traditional mode of Thangkas selling could be attribute to the physical locations. As McGuckin mentions in his writing, the purpose of Thangkas from the outsiders of Buddhism has become tourist souvenir (1996). Especially recent years, increasing number of tourists from non-Tibetan regions come to Lhasa to visit the landscape and religious sites. Most Thangkas stores in Lhasa is located near Bakuo street which circles one of the most famous temples, Jokhang. Many tourists would walk around this commercial street and hunt for travel gifts. Then, the unique, hand-made, and Buddhist-blessing objects, Thangkas become their first choice. In addition, in physical stores, unlike Duizhuang's settled prices, stores' prices usually have a wide range, from 80 to over 100,000 RMB, which provides some affordable options for the customers. In physical stores, bargain is also acceptable. Comparing to Duizhuang's mode, offline shopping of Thangkas is more flexible. Moreover, the implicit culture may also contribute to the success of offline Thangkas store. According to researcher's observation and interview with the customers, many tourists initially did not have strong intention to buy Tangkas; however, they forced themselves to buy something from Bianba's store because they thought it would violate the cultural code of conduct if they spend Bianba's time of telling them Thangkas' knowledge but end up buying nothing. Many of them said that Bianba served their butter teas and talk to them as friends in a sincere way, so they did not know how to refuse Bianba to consider buying Thangkas. However, live-streaming is a perfect way for people to escape from cultural cangue. During Duizhuang's live-streaming sessions, people showed up anonymously and they had freedom to leave if they were not interested in the content.

### 6.CONCLUSION

Although many traditional industries are gradually replaced by online mode of selling, Thangkas industry still is keen to the offline mode. As one of the cultural carriers of Tibet, Thangkas not only plays the role as an artistic product but also shoulders the mission of circulating Tibetan culture. The cultural barrier is an urgent task which is needed to be solved during Thangkas selling.

Due to its operation and insufficient eye contact, body language, and physical surroundings, Duizhuang's

live-streaming mode of selling Thangkas did not achieve its initial goal, although this mode have potential brightness in the future. Nonverbal messages are even more important and convincing than oral and literate ones. Thus, it is necessary for the people who would like to circulate Tibetan arts through the Internet to consider how to eliminate the limitations of nonverbal communication online.

The selling modes of Thangkas industry are still finding their ways to be compatible to the market. One the one hand, for the subject of circulating Tibetan cultures, Thangkas is one of the cultural carriers, but there are more traditions deserved to be introduced outside of Tibet, such as Tibetan opera, customs, and architectures. One the other hand, for the burgeoning live-streaming mode of selling, hopefully, the aimed cases may spark people to think about how to embrace the new methods of business.

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