



Oral Histories of  
Chinese Folk Arts and Crafts

# CHINESE THANGKA

Narrated by Xi Hedao ♦ Translated by Li Yanhua, An Haiying ♦ Compiled by Wang Wenzhang



Central Compilation & Translation Press



CPG-International-Sydney



China Classics International



# CHINESE TANGKA

Narrated by Xihedao

Collated by Lu Xia

Translated by Li Yanhua, An Haiying

Publisher: He Yan

Translators: Li Yanhua, An Haiying

Editors: Chen Qiong, Wang Zhongbo

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced  
by any means, electronic or mechanical, without written  
permission from the publisher.

Chinese Tangka

**©Central Compilation & Translation Press**

No. 36 Xixiejie Xidan

Beijing, China

**©CPG-International- Sydney**

Suite 23,301 Castlereagh Street

Sydney NSW 2000 Australia

First edition 2011

ISBN 978-7-5117-1312-4

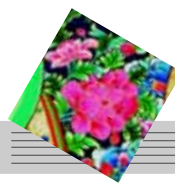
ISBN 978-1-921678-33-2

Printed in China





# Table of Contents



## **Brief Introduction of Xihedao (Tibetan: Chagdor)/1**

### **Chapter one Impression on Regong/9**

Overview/9

Section One My Deep Love of the Mountains and Rivers in the Regong Area/15

Section Two The village event: The June Gatherings/25

Section Three Regong Art and Regong Lha-bzo ((Religions for artists in the Regong area)/34

Summary/38

### **Chapter Two Xihedao's experience of apprenticeship/39**

Overview/39

Section One From Wutun Village to Labrang Monastery: My childhood impression/41

Section Two Back to Wutun Village/52

Section Three The wandering Regong Lasuo/54

Section Four Youth: My memory in the army/56

Section Five My marriage arranged by Heaven/59

Section Six The Station Buddha in HuangYuan Section of the Xining Railway Branch/62

Section Seven Second Return to Wutun Village/64

Summary/73

### **Chapter Three Traditional tools for Tangka painting/77**

Overview/77

Section One The main tools for Tangka painting and their functions/79

Section Two The making of tools for Tangka painting/82

Summary/88



## **Chapter Four Painting process of Tangka and its related theories/90**

Overview/90

Section One The processing skill of the frame and canvas/cloth/92

Section Two Grid-Constructing and position-setting in Tangka painting/96

Section Three Proportion and line drawing/102

Section Four The basic principles of Tangka-drawing theory/109

Summary/133

## **Chapter Five The making of pigment and skill of coloring/135**

Overview/135

Section One The source and making of the five commonly used pigments/137

Section Two The process of color use: coloring, dyeing and outlining /141

Section Three Taboo in the process of coloring/148

Section Four Gold application/151

Section Five Artist's unique skills: opening the eyes of Buddha/158

Summary/163

## **Chapter Six Types of Tangka, its mounting and features of iconography/166**

Overview/166

Section One Types of Tangka/169

Section Two Tangka-mounting/175

Section Three The features of iconography and the consecration/178

Summary/183

## **Chapter Seven Xihedao and Regong art/185**

Overview/185

Section One Xihedao's view on Regong art/187

Section Two Xihedao's exclusive techniques of Tangka painting/190

Section Three Regong artisans' various painting approaches/197



Section Four The preservation, inheritance, and development of Regong Tangka/202

Section Five The custom of honoring the master and the requirement for the apprentice's moral character/204

Summary/207

## **Chapter Eight Life in Wutun/208**

Overview/208

Section One Xihedao in others' eyes/213

Section Two Xihedao's understanding of intangible cultural heritage/222

Section Three Major works by Xihedao/228

Summary/258

Xihedao Chronology/261

Postscript/263



# Brief Introduction of Xihedao (Tibetan: Phyag-rdor)

Xihedao is a well-known Tangka (Tibetan scroll painting) artist in the Regong area, a Tibetan place whose name refers to the Longwu River areas of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in today's Qinghai Province. **Picture 1** Xihedao was born in Wutun Village on the east coast of the Longwu River in December, 1946. **Picture 2** Like other Tibetan boys in the same village, Xihedao was named by the high lama of the monastery as soon as he was born according to local custom. He became Ahka (a nickname for Monk or Lama) when he was just over five years old. In 1953, at the age of 7, he was sent



Laboze



Beautiful Wutun Village

to The bLabrang Monastery, not far from the Regong area in Gansu province, apprenticed with his uncle, Hourijia Gazang, a master Tibetan Tangka painter who was a monk. Under his uncle's guidance, he began to study Sutra (Buddhist Scriptures) as well as painting. After five years, hard work, he eventually managed to master the exquisite Tangka painting skills and could recite all basic Sutras. When he was 12, he just finished his apprentice work and went back home in Wutun with his uncle. A year later his uncle died. He went to primary school because he was still very young. By virtue of the education he received in the monastery, he skipped from first grade to third grade. During his school life, he often learnt to paint Tangka at home under the kerosene lamp. (His primary school classmates still keep the collection of his paper draft work of White Tara which was painted by Xihedao when he was a



Characters: Xihedao couple





pupil.) Hard work pays off. He had always practiced Tangka painting in those years, so his painting skills kept improving.

**Picture 3** In 1963, Xihedao went to “Bola” Temple, located in Gannan Prefecture in Gansu Province, to paint Tangka. According to his memories, his main works were murals and Tangka painting. Besides painting for the monasteries, many Tibetan people asked him to paint Tangka for the purpose of worship. Xihedao lived from house to house for about two years. He lived with the residents who asked him to paint Tangka for them and he only received nominal fees for his efforts.

During the Cultural Revolution, Xihedao returned to his hometown. During that time, he not only participated in a variety of village labors, but also worked as a helping hand to the head of the village. He would record meetings, calculate laborer’s work as a scorekeeper, and often helped the village to make beautiful designs on the blackboard. Occasionally, he painted Tangka at home. He liked to give his Tangka paintings to those religious who returned to secular life, and the paintings served as objects of worship at home.

In the winter of 1969, Xihedao was selected to become a soldier in the army of Lanzhou Military Region. With the help of his comrades, he started to learn Chinese and was able to read Chinese newspaper after nearly three months of hard study. Soon he became the squad leader due to his excellent performance in all aspects. The most unforgettable thing is the third army sports games where he won ninth place in three military competitions (climbing obstacles, throwing grenades and target practice). Seven years’ military life enriched Xihedao’s experience, which enabled him to face whatever happened. He is optimistic, open-minded and peaceful even when in difficulties because there is beautiful bouquet in the depth of his heart - his devotion to Buddhism and love for Tangka painting with Buddhist spirit.

After discharge from the army, Xihedao was appointed to work in the HuangYuan Section of the Xining Railway Branch.



In front of the gate of Lower Wutun Temple

His dedication, integrity and kindness impressed people deeply and all his colleagues affectionately called him “the Station Buddha”.

A farm was established in Haergai by the Xining Railway Branch in 1979, so Xihedao was sent to work there as the head. **Picture 4** In this period, Xihedao began to shoulder the responsibility of rehabilitating the statues and Buddhist paintings in some temples, in accordance with national policies. He was invited to paint Buddha statues by Shatuo monastery (46 kilometers southwest of Gangcha County, Haibei Island in Qinghai province), so he returned to his hometown, Wutun, to recruit forty well-known religions artists from Regong who were skilled at Tangka painting. The group of artists guided by Xihedao, began team work on paintings.

The news that many of the monasteries had begun to recover and needed rebuilding made him excited. He realized that the cause of Tangka painting is ascendant. With the increasing workload of painting, he decided to retire from work and



Picture of Six Longevity on the Left of Lower Wutun Temple



Four Harmonious and Auspicious Picture on Right of Lower Wutun Temple





concentrate on painting at home. To his delight, his request was approved, so he went back home to Wutun Village to devote himself to his painting work. **Picture5,6**

During this period, he made a large number of murals and Tangka paintings for many important monasteries such as the Longwu monasteries in the Regong area. He also guided his fellows to construct the Tsongkapa hall in Wutun and designed the picture of Princess Wencheng's entry to Tibet for the Tsongkapa hotel near the Skum-vbum Monastery, also including the Stupa in Beishan, Xining and other important cultural landscapes.

At the same time, he helped his son, vPhags-pa to paint Tangka at home. Under his strict guidance, his talented son made great progress in little time. In Xihedao's words, his son's painting had surpassed his father's. In his busy and fulfilling painting practice, Xihedao has trained more than forty apprentices who are mostly from the Regong area. With the help of Xihedao, his apprentices have mastered the Tangka painting skills in short time and they have become the new generation of Tangka painting artists in this area. He led his apprentices to Gansu Province, Sichuan Province, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Tibetan Autonomons to paint Tangka. Their exquisite works sparkle in many monasteries of Tibetan Buddhism. Xihedao referred to documented history and many old Tangka paintings and



Xihedao in Paris





portrayed the living Buddha, the first shar-tshang, which is now collected by Rong-ba-tshang Living Buddha dGe-vdun dar-rgyas rgya-mtsho. It is felt this Tangka painting vividly demonstrates the memorable temperament of the religious leader, dGe-vdun rgya-mtsho in the Regong area. Hence, this Tangka painting has been printed into pictures and is widely worshipped in households around this area. Xihedao paints with such great concentration and piety to Buddhism that his works have been highly appreciated by civilians as well as the experts in the world of contemporary culture and art. Chinese Art Academy invited him to be one of the first researchers of folk art in 2005. He was also named Master of the Chinese Arts and Crafts in 2006. He is eager to advance the cause of Tangka and serves as the executive director of Regong Art Association. He is engaged in many other social organizations, such as serving as a leader who is in charge of identifying Tangka paintings, and a member whose duty is to promote Qinghai



As the representative of artist



intangible cultural heritage. **Picture 8** Xihedao has ever displayed the ancient mystery of the Tangka painting techniques at painting demonstration sites at the China Intangible Cultural Heritage Expo, Shanghai Folk Art Exposition, China Human Rights Exhibition, UNESCO Headquarters etc. He himself and his works have also been widely introduced by various media, such as CCTV *Oriental Son Column*, *The Chinese Culture Illustrated*, *The Law Evenings*, *Shanghai Business News* etc. News Networks in *Britain, France and Taiwan* have also promoted Xihedao and his works. At present, he lives in his hometown, Wutun Village in Regong, in a courtyard filled with the fragrances of fruits and flowers, where he quietly keeps working on Tangka paintings. **Picture 9, 10, 11**



The author in Xihedao' home



Xihedao and the leaders of the  
Ministry of Culture



# Chapter One

## Impression on Regong

### Overview

Lying on the east of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau is Regong, meaning “the upper part” in Tibetan. This auspicious place has always been praised as the beautiful, outstanding “Golden Valley”. It refers to the vast area around Tongren County in Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. According to historical records, the Regong area includes Jianzha County in today’s Huangnan Prefecture, Tongren County and eastern parts of Xunhua County, and even includes parts of the Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture in neighboring Gansu Province. The area, with hills and rivers, fertile land and mild climate, all beneficial to both agriculture and animal husbandry, is 180 kilometers from the Qinghai provincial capital Xining. The earliest cultural heritage of Regong can be traced back to Neolithic Age (latest part of the Stone Age beginning about 10,000 BC in the Middle East), when the Qiang people, Tuyuhun people, Tubo people, the Mongols of the Yuan Dynasty, and Chinese military families of the Ming Dynasty had played an important role in this historical stage. From the geographical point of view, Regong, lying in the combined position of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and the Huangtu Plateau, has always been an important place for military to occupy. According to Mr. Li Wenshi in his book *Interpretation of Old Places in Western Borders*, large and small Yu Gu recorded as a place in *Biography of Xiqiang of History of the Han Dynasty* refers to the Regong area in Tibetan. “I have consulted many historians well versed in the history of the Regong area. It is testified that the places, such as large and small Yu Gu, recorded in the history of the Tang and Ming Dynasties, refer to today’s



Regong area including the western part of Gannan, Xunhua County and four other counties (Tongren, Zeku, Henan, and Jianzha Counties) in Huangnan and Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefectures. Large Yu Gu refers to the area around today's Tongren and Zeku Counties; and small Yu Gu refers to the area of Xiahe Gannantan. They are often collectively called Daxiao Yu Gu, a critical place to be in a stalemate with the Han people's military throughout history.

Regong, named differently in history as to be "Yu Gu" in the Han Dynasty, "Yi Gong" in the Tang Dynasty, and "Niegongchuan" in the Ming Dynasty, has always been very important in location, so each Central Plains dynasty regarded it as a "must" passage to rule the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau area.

After the baptism of historical development, today's Regong area has never been so flourishing and beautiful. The attractive Longwu River flows from south to north through the Regong area, where Tibetan and Tu Ethnic People and other ethnic minority's villagers live. As described in this book and closely related to Regong art and Mr. Xihedao's life, four well-known villages (Regong four villages: Wutun, Nianduhu, Guomeri, and Gasari) are famous for their luxuriant vegetation, abundant crops, people's thrift and simplicity as well as a harmonious existence. These villages are surrounded by many legendary mountains, such as the famous Xiaqiong Mountain and



Laboze in Regong





Dehelong Mountain etc. According to traditional Tibetan culture, these mountains are affectionately named “Ami”, which means “Grandfather” in Tibetan. Here people coexist with birds, cattle and sheep interdependently. **Picture 12** People in the Regong area live harmoniously with nature; this can be attributed to their sense of local history and culture. In the 9th century AD, it was recorded in *Buddhist History of Amdo*, when Lang Darma annihilated Buddhism and Buddhists in Tibet, three monks risked continuing propagation of Buddhism in this area. Taking advantage of the chaos, the three monks, with Tibetan Buddhism Sutras, fled to Amdo (a Tibetan area in Qinghai, Gansu). They hid themselves in the cave beside the A-chung-gnam-rdzong-dgon Temple in the Kanbula National Park (gCan-tsha area near Regong), where they practiced Buddhism while preaching. They were known as “Three Saints” in Buddhist history. It is believed that the tonsure of the three saints’ outstanding disciple, bLa-chen dGongs-pa rab-gsal, marked the beginning of the post-propagation of Tibetan Buddhism. The Regong area became the birthplace of the post- propagation of Tibetan Buddhism. Based on such long deep religious history, the Regong area has formed its own cultural traditions and customs with its own national, regional and religious features. The villagers of Tibetan and the Tu people are mixed in the structure of multi-cultures. Along with the influx of various sects of post-Tibetan



Clay Works (Works of Regong Art Exhibition in 2006)



Mural works (Nianduhu Temple)