

Geographical Imagery, Sacrality, and Cultural Identity: the Regong Thangka of Qinghai Through the Humanistic Geography Lens of Yi-Fu Tuan

Yuhan Ye¹, Aike Kan^{1,2*}, Xiao Yang³, Jikun Zhang¹, Laijiacuo Chen⁴

1. College of Geography and Planning, Chengdu University of Technology, Chengdu, China

2. Research Center for Human Geography of Tibetan Plateau and Its Eastern Slope, Key Research Base of Humanities and Social Sciences of Colleges of Sichuan Provincial Department of Education, Chengdu, China

3. College of Geophysics, Chengdu University of Technology, Chengdu, China

4. College of History and Culture (School of Tourism), Southwest Minzu University, Chengdu, China

Abstract As the special aesthetic form Tibetan Buddhism, Thangka has constructed the sacredness in flux through the continuity of aesthetic form, ecological concepts and social functions. In this paper, taking Regong Thangka as an example, explained how religious art building connection between true self and imaginary world through its creation and use, and achieving a balance between local value and sacred attribute, thereby carrying and sustaining the collective memory and cultural identity of a community upon the perspectives of Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic geography. The construction of geographical imagery is essentially a transformation from space to place. Religious doctrines and liturgical rites serve as the carrier for the utopian spiritual world, while the application of native natural and cultural resources enables the transformation of topophilia. A ternary mutual construction relation involving geographical imagery, sacrality, and cultural identity was proposed, which portrayed a symbiotic structure of Thangka cultural ecosystem containing the environment shaping cultural identity, art imbues geography with meaning, and cultural identity feeds back into and amplifies cultural dissemination. Thangka painters transform the physical space into a sacred spiritual place with religious meaning, while practitioners enter a ritualized place from an image space. The above findings respond to and bridge the theoretical viewpoints put forward by Yi-Fu Tuan including space and place, escapism and topophilia, thereby providing a new perspective for interpreting religious cultural heritages represented by Thangka.

Keywords Regong Thangka; Humanistic Geography; Yi-Fu Tuan; Cultural identity

Since modern times, humanist geographers represented by Yi-Fu Tuan have gradually shifted the focus of geographical research from mapping the earth's surface to explore how humans construct meaning and build home on the earth. The emphasized nature, perceiving time

and space, experiencing the world, and further proposed transforming convert natural aesthetics into individualized and enduring realities with integrating the environment with religion and human history (Young, 2025; Mitch, 2021), so human cognition, emotions and geographical

* Corresponding author: Aike Kan

activities, geographical phenomena were taking as the centers in the humanistic geography (Cai, 2011). Through the contextualized correlation analysis of irrational materials including consciousness, emotions, criticalness and creativity, researchers can interpret how humans perceive, and give meaning to, the world through direct experience, intentionality and physical practice, thus will break through the limitations of positivism, dominated by measurement methods, prone to disregard human subjectivity, emotions and agency.

Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic geography has exerted a significant impact on fields such as architecture, literature and art (Yu, 2000; Song, 2014), whose perspective places emphasis on exploring how artistic creation such as ethnic primitivist painting shapes and interprets human understanding of habitats at the material and qualitative levels (Zhou, 2014). As an artistic creation that focuses on natural aesthetics and takes religious culture as carrier, Thangka is not only a spiritual expression of physical space formed by local people's long-term interaction with the environment, but also a spiritual carrier generated by the combined effects of certain natural environment, cultural space and concept, system. As the container of human living environment, the natural geographical environment provides multi-dimensional and multi-level physical elements such as context, place and material for the presentation of Thangka works (Xue, 2024), while the religious and cultural background serves as the source of inspiration for creators to map natural space into sacred cultural landscapes through imagination and reconstruction (Zu, et al, 2024).

As the typical representative of the culture and art of Amdo Tibetan area, Regong Thangka was born in the area where Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and loess plateau interlace. Longwu River Valley runs through the entire area, creating a unique vertical

landform gradient and climatic differentiation. These geographical features exert a direct impact on the area's mixed argo-pastoral economy, and support agro-pastoral social structure, as well as generate reliance on nature-based beliefs. This transitional geomorphic unit with an altitude span of 2,600 meters is world-renowned as the hometown of Tibetan painters, and enjoys a high reputation, as the birthplace of the Regong painting school of Thangka art circle of Tibetan Buddhism art. Regong Thangka was included, among the first group, in the National Intangible Cultural Heritage List in 2006, and it was included in the UNESCO Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2009. For the inherently carries both geographical and cultural meaning, in the transformation of contemporary cultural industries, understanding the mechanism of symbiosis between such geographical and religious cultures and creation, development is crucial to striking a balance between the preservation of traditional arts and regional development.

Across domestic and international research, academic circles have developed a multi-dimensional perspective pattern for exploring Thangka art. First one is the research on crafts and style evolution from the perspective of art history, such as the traceability of Thangka's Indian origin and its localization process in Tibetan region (Ankush Gupta, 2024), as well as picture restoration (Zhang et al, 2025), pictorial symbols (Feng, 2025), archaeological research (Yedron et al, 2024), among others. Second one is the interpretation of sadhana drubtab centered on religious functions, which reveals the sacred construction mechanism for the Iconometric Sutra and consecration rituals (Xia, 2017). Third one is the research on inheritance from the perspective of cultural anthropology, in which case, Ni Man (2018) demonstrated the dual-

track inheritance ecology on monastery and family through field investigations into the painting studios in Wutun Village. There are other explorations made from a commercial perspective, including the tension involving the existence of ethnic characteristics in the industrialization process (Fan, 2014), and the authenticity crisis triggered by the deconstruction of sacredness (Gao, 2019). Existing research has yielded substantial achievements in aspects such as the craft inheritance of Thangka art; however, the cultural and geographical ecological system in which it is rooted has not yet been fully revealed and interpreted, and there still exists a prominent theoretical discontinuity in research on the mechanism under which geographical environments shape the formation of Thangka's artistic language. There is a lack of research on the visual correlation between nature and religious spaces, as well as mechanism under which geographical spatial characteristics affect the generation of Thangka's artistic language. In this article, taking Regong Thangka as an example, the geographical meaning behind its creation and use is interpreted from three dimensions including geographical imagery, sacrality and cultural identity based on Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic geography theory and perspective, and how it shapes community identity, cultural practice and collective meaning through graphical visual language to form a dynamically balanced and mutually symbiotic cultural ecosystem is revealed.

1. Geographical Imagery: The Dialectics of Space and Place

Driven by the need for survival, humans have gradually developed a relationship of integration and mutual construction with geographical space in

the long-term process of adapting to, understanding, and transform nature, namely and continuously creating new humanistic space while surviving in the physical natural space (Xu, 2017). Among them, physical space refers to an abstract, physical and measurable scope, while humanistic space is the place endowed with meaning, emotion and culture, shaped by humans through experience, memory and belief (Tuan, 1977).

The creation of Regong Thangka is an embodiment of converting space into a sacred place through symbols. In terms of geometric composition, the center of the mandala in Thangka usually represents the core or origin of the universe, while the surrounding geometric figures symbolize different levels of space and energy fields. With geometric structure, in mandala, the universe is condensed into a tiny space, the center of which is the Buddha realm, with the outer layers being the celestial realm and the terrestrial realm in sequence, symbolizing the path for practice from samsara to nirvana, with the extensibility of picture alluding to the infinity of the universe; single-deity Thangka can symbolize a microcosm, while intricate mandala Thangka demonstrates the hierarchy and inclusiveness of the universe through its nested composition. The mandala composition in Regong Thangka abstracts Regong's geographical space into a Buddhist cosmological model; it often manifests that Longwu River Valley is the center surrounded by the villages such as Wutun and Nianduhu, and the hierarchical structure of mandala symbolizes the Buddhist worldview of Mount Sumeru and Four Great Continents¹, constituting the physical space of Thangka and embodying the orderliness of the Buddhist cosmological outlook. A case in point is the Qing Dynasty Thangka *Mount Sumeru Diagram* (Figure.1), in which Mount Sumeru stands towering at the center of the universe, with the sun

¹ The four great continents containing Purvavideha, Jambudvīpa, Aparagodānīya, and Uttarakuru are distributed around the central Mount Sumeru.

and moon encircling the mountainside, with Four Great Continents surrounding it on four sides, while the scenes of hell are depicted below. This hierarchical structure embodies the Buddhist theory of the Three

Realms containing the Realm of Desire, the Realm of Form and the Realm of Formlessness, which aligns with the cosmological model in ancient Indian mythology.



Figure.1 Mount Sumeru Diagram

(Photos from Rongfu Museum of Tibetan Classics, Sichuan Province)

Plateau natural landscapes such as sacred mountains, holy lakes, and grasslands are common elements in Thangka composition. They are regarded as sacred spaces and abodes of deities, the axis of the universe as well as bridges connecting humans with the sacred world (Hennessey, 2024). Painters usually employ a visual symbol system to transform abstract space into a concrete, sacred 'spiritual place', which serves as a carrier for believers to meditate and worship. For instance, the worship of sacred mountains, rooted in the Tibetan cosmological outlook within Regong culture, holds that mountains are sacred spaces where deities inhabit, governing natural phenomena such as wind, rain, thunder and lightning, as well as mastering

fortune and misfortune. Mountains such as Qilian Mountains, Kunlun Mountains and Tanggula Mountains are usually expressed, with towering symbols, as Mount Sumeru in the Buddhist cosmological outlook, symbolizing the center of the universe and the supreme status of Buddhist dharma. Qinghai Lake often symbolize purity, sacredness and vitality; in terms of spatial structure, it is usually surrounded by high mountains, forming a geographical imagery of the harmonious coexistence of mountains, lakes and grasslands. For color representation, it is often available in greenish orchid or emerald hues, symbolizing the purity of sacred lake and its source of life. Meanwhile, the statue of Tara or Goddess Guanyin is often

set against the background of the lake, with lotus flowers dotting the water surface, which subtly echoes the ecological characteristics of Qinghai Lake.

2. Sacrality: The Idealized Utopia

Yi-Fu Tuan (1980) stated that due to the fear of chaos, suffering and the unknown, humans would construct an ideal 'Utopia' as a spiritual refuge and ballast. The process of creating Thangka is essentially the construction of a sacred space with rigorous order and eternal beauty. For painters, in the phase of base preparation and icon measurement, it is necessary to strictly follow the 'Three Sutras and One Śāstra', containing the *Canon of Iconometry for Buddhist*, *Canon of Iconometry, Sacred Portraiture and the Śāstra on the Measurements for statue*, as well as intricate religious sadhana drubtab. Therefore, prior to painting, it is essential to eliminate personal will through rituals such as divining an auspicious day, praying by burning incense, purifying bodies and observing precepts, and reciting scriptures to make vows. With repetition of brushwork and observance of sadhana drubtab, they achieve spiritual purification and reach a state of anatta; they depict the ideal order in their minds on the canvas with their brushes, thus completing the self-reconstruction of a utopian world. For practitioners, gazing at the Buddha statues or mandalas in Thangka allows them to enter the pictorial world created by painters, thus completing the conversion from the physical space to the spiritual space expressed by Thangka. The whole process is a utopian experience of purifying the mind and fostering peace, mercy and wisdom. In terms of content creation, painters deify historical heroic figures, depict scenes of them subduing demons and monsters, and the process of leading their nationality from suffering to a state of order. This then evolves into an ideal society with

fairness, justice, peace, and prosperity, which serves as a utopian vision symbolizing both material and spiritual worlds. Regong Thangka reproduces major campaigns and heroic acts of King Gesar descending to the world and claiming throne in epics; for instance, works such as *King Gesar and Thirty Generals* depict the vivid scenes of King Gesar campaigning across the land and subduing demons and monsters (Figure. 2). Meanwhile, unlike fixed temple murals, Thangka originally served as a carrier for nomad's beliefs; mounted in the form of scroll, it is easy to carry, catering to the nomadic lifestyle of Tibetan nationality migrating to wherever water and grass are available as well as the need for Buddha dharma propagation, making it gradually evolve into a religious holy article with the dual functions of disseminating Buddhist doctrine and practicing and worshiping (Wang, 2011). This meets the need for religious enshrinement, and embodies the mobile nature of beliefs in nomadic culture. Overall, Thangka presents a sacred, ideal 'utopian' space characterized by religious order, which is visible, accessible and portable. The massive Thangka work *Grand Color Painting of China's Tibetan Culture and Art*, which is now treasured in the Tibetan Medicine Museum of China in Qinghai, reflects Tibetan history, religion, and cultural life, among other aspects; it depicts the tribal alliances and interactions of Sumpa, Zhang Zhung and others before the Tubo Dynasty, demonstrating that the historical and cultural narratives in Regong Thangka are a carrier for Tibetan historical memory, and also give shape to the moving sacredness by continuing the artistic form, ecological notion and social functions. This retains the nomadic era's pristine expression of nature and beliefs, and demonstrates the resilience of cultural adaptation amid modernization, making it serve as an important window for understanding the diversity and dynamics of Tibetan civilization.



Figure.2 King Gesar and Thirty Generals

(Photos from YuanDan Jiancuo, *Grand Color Painting of China's Tibetan Culture and Art*. Xining: Qinghai Ethnic Publishing House. 2011)

3. Cultural Identity: Topophilia in Visual Aesthetics

Yifu Tuan (1976) stated that profound and enduring attachment to a place stems from the home and memory repository. Whether it is a home or a small object, it can evoke people's shared feelings accumulated through experience, as well as people's memories, imagination and rich emotions. The term Regong meaning Golden Valley in Tibetan, represents the region's booming agricultural economy, and symbolizes a spiritual realm of brightness, hope and completeness. Longwu River Valley, which runs through the entire region, provides residents with farming conditions with abundant water sources and fertile soil as well as plant-based pigments for Thangka making, while the mountains at both sides of the valley offer a steady source of mineral pigments. In the long-term artistic practice, painters in Regong region have sourced materials locally, developing more than 20 types of mineral-based painting pigments by using local cinnabar, copper ore, iron pyrite and wood, among other resources, thus resulting in a unique color-matching system (Wang, 2011).

These pigments are then transformed by painters into brightly colored, colorfast patterns on the canvas, elevating the material elements of their hometown into eternal artwork. Danxia Landform at both sides of the valley, with natural color spectrum of crimson and ochre yellow (Figure. 3.c), has a direct impact on bold and bright colors in Regong Thangka. The visual characteristics of its distinctive nine-color system, comprising white, red, blue, green, yellow, black, gold, and purple. The imagery of the Golden Valley in geographical landscape has been elevated to the artistic gold foil decoration craft. With massive brightly colored, vibrant gold foils and the technique of raised paste gilding, Regong painters create a resplendent visual effect, showcasing a Buddhist world with the splendid golden (Figure. 3.a, b). For other color applications, painters translate the high-purity and high-brightness colors observed in life such as blue sky, white clouds, snow-capped mountains and grasslands into the dominant colors on the canvas. This extraction and application of the inherent natural colors and materials of their hometown have become the most instinctive visual and emotional

expression of hometown.

Meanwhile, the special landform across Regong region have fostered a relatively enclosed geographical environment. Settlements such as Nianduhu, Guomari, Gashari and Wutun are distributed in a belt-like pattern along Longwu River Valley, forming a living space with high concentration and a stable population structure with low mobility. These factors have provided favorable

conditions for Thangka inheritance and continuity. Now, the heritage model centered on families and monasteries, passed down through master-apprentice mentoring and father-son succession, has basically taken shape. Multiple villages at both sides of the valley present a thriving scene of Thangka creation where everyone can paint and every household has a painter (Peng et al, 2012).



Figure.3 Danxia Landform of Longwu River Valley and Thangka Depicting the Buddhist World

(Photos from YuanDan Jiancuo, *Grand Color Painting of China's Tibetan Culture and Art*. Xining: Qinghai Ethnic Publishing House. 2011)

The farming folk customs across Regong region are closely associated with nature worship; rituals such as worshipping mountain deities, smudging ceremonies for blessings, carrying out traditional practices to prevent drought and disperse hail are relevant to the agricultural production cycle. In terms

of Thangka's content and form, these folk activities are life practices, and serve as background materials for Thangka creation. As most Regong Thangka artists were originally local farmers and herdsman, their dual identity has enabled natural infiltration of farming life experiences into religious art creation.

In other words, Thangka is brought to life by hands rooted in agrarian traditions, which means adoption of visual language to express understanding of and affection for hometown. A complete set of Thangka themed on the biography of Master Tsongkhapa is preserved in Ta'er Lamasery, Qinghai. In this Thangka, farming scenes in Huangshui River Valley (such as highland barley fields and waterwheels) are interspersed with monastery dharma assembly rituals, and narrative units are separated by rivers and mountains, reflecting the cultural and geographical character of Huangshui Valley that equally prioritizes farming and Chan (Zen) practice. Besides the above elements, the content and form of Regong Thangka are deeply influenced by the doctrines of Tibetan Buddhism. Meanwhile, the course of Tibetan social development also serves as an important thematic content for Thangka painting. With two-dimensional molding means, painters condense and visually interpret Buddhist doctrines, integrating religious ideals with secular society, thus presenting an artistic style with strong ethnic characteristics and vivid colors.

For instance, With a unique artistic form, *Harmonious Affinity*, a large-scale Thangka series of

Regong art and a magnificent masterpiece stretching 108 meters in length, depicts the complete historical and geographical scenes of Princess Wencheng's journey to Tibet, including secular episodes such as marriage proposal to the Tang Dynasty, princess bidding farewell to her homeland, and commoner's daily life, as well as magnificent natural landscapes like Riyue Mountain, Daotang River and Qinghai Lake. It also integrates local customs, folk traditions and cultural beliefs between the Tang Dynasty and the Tibetan Tubo Kingdom, demonstrating the historical and cultural value of cultural exchanges between the Tibetan and Han ethnic groups (Fig. 4). Overall, Longwu River Valley provides both material and spiritual nourishment for residents; with ultimate visual aesthetic expression, painters have depicted their hometown's folk customs, natural landscapes, history and culture by means of Thangka, thereby expressing their love for and attachment to their hometown and materializing topophilia. In the special geographical environment, under long-term emotional influence, the topophilia has further motivated people to safeguard the craftsmanship and inherit the culture, thus forming a path toward sustainable virtuous circle.



Figure.4 Part of Thangka *Harmonious Affinity*

(Photos from Tibetan Culture Industry Park Museum, Hainan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Qinghai)

4. The mutually constitutive and symbiotic relationship among Geography, Religion and Secularism

4.1 Geographical Environment Shapes the Cultural Characteristics of Religion

The special geographical environment across Himalayan region has generated cultural traits shared by ethnic groups and countries, forming a circum-Himalayan religious and cultural sphere centered on Tibetan Buddhism; its religious art exhibits a high degree of consistency in theme and symbol mark (Liu et al., 2021). Regong region is located in the transitional zone between the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau and loess plateau. Historically it served as a convergence region for nomadic and agricultural civilizations, and was the gathered region where four ethnic cultures, including Tibetan culture, Central Plain Culture, culture of China's western regions and Kham culture. This multi-ethnic characteristic has served as an important foundation for cultural integration of Regong art, enabling Thangka creation to absorb cultural elements from multiple ethnic groups such as Tibetan, Han, Mongolian, and Tu nationality.

For instance, as an important part of Regong art, Duixiu as the important part of embossed embroidery used in Thangka art, has pattern characteristics which embody the religious beliefs of Tibetan culture, and integrates the art elements of other ethnic groups including Tu nationality. The formation of Regong art is precisely a typical case where geographical landscape elements are transformed into identifiers of artistic style. Moreover, with a relatively low altitude, mild climate and abundant water resources, Longwu River Valley region is an important farming region on Qinghai-Tibet Plateau. This geographical environment has provided stable living residences for art creators, fostering a Thangka creation zone which is independent of nomadism and allows for

intergenerational inheritance (Gao, 2015).

4.2 Geographical landscapes express religious implications

As a kind of portable pictorial scrolls, Thangka primarily features religious content and involves diverse aspects such as history, politics, architecture, secular life, and folk legends. Thangka has both traditional aesthetic characteristics and religious sacredness, making Thangka transcend pure artistic expression and become a carrier for spiritual ballast and life beliefs (Feng, 2025; Yuan, 2017). In the process of shaping the Buddhist worldview, it is not merely a simple depiction, and endows natural geographical elements of plateau region such as snow-capped mountains, rivers and grassland with a systematic and concrete expression system, separating it from pure physical existence space. The creation of Thangka has systematically transformed Qinghai-Tibet Plateau from a physical world extremely challenging to human survival into a sacred homeland with religious meaning and guidance. It is not only a geographical artistic expression and a visual carrier for liturgical ritual, but also a comprehensive expression of plateau ethnic groups' outlook on nature, the universe and life. Its religious core shares the same belief system with regions such as Tibet's Ngari and Nepal in the western to central sections of Himalaya. Meanwhile, as the mobile monastery, Regong's local temples were simplified into miniature Buddha halls, and allowed believers to complete pilgrimage by gazing upon Thangka, regardless of location. During religious festivals such as the June Festival and Xiaokang (Deer Dance), giant Thangkas are hung between mountains and rivers, with geographical symbols and pictorial symbols forming a mirror image, thus transforming real space into a temporary mandala and enabling a religious experience where humans and deities coexist in the same domain.

4.3 *Secular Identity Supports, in Turn, Dissemination of Religious Culture*

Since its inception, Thangka has taken the dissemination of Tibetan Buddhism as its core function, and it covers Jātaka, doctrinal philosophy and others, thus having distinct religious implications. Therefore, Thangka is regarded as the mark of conversion to Buddhism and the object of worship (Wang, 2019), it secures a sacred position in the daily life of Tibetan people, and often enshrined in family hall for worshipping the Buddha to pray for auspiciousness and peace. This religious attribute is deeply rooted in the cultural system of Tibetan Buddhism, making Thangka evolve into a religious and cultural product widely recognized by the secular world. Thangka exists in both traditional and print forms. Low-cost prints can meet the needs of daily religious activities and mass consumption, while handcrafted masterpieces have formed a differentiated market of high-value artworks thanks to their scarcity and artistic value. Both complement each other and coexist in harmony. This hierarchical consumption structure has preserved a survival space for traditional painters, allowing them to focus on high-value creations. It has also enabled ordinary believer households to afford the financial costs of daily religious practices, thereby facilitating dissemination, inheritance and development of Thangka culture.

In recent years, Regong Thangka has gradually transformed from a traditional religious item to local artwork and collectible object, generating a cultural industry with high economic value. For instance, the Exhibition of Achievements in Inheritance of Thangka Art at Qinghai Regong Cultural Palace of Nationalities has attracted Thangka enthusiasts to make purchase and collection. With popularization of digital technology, interpreting ancient art through computer language has become an important trend in the development of Regong

Thangka (Shi et al., 2025). For instance, Danzeng Nima, a renowned Regong painter, utilized computer software to conduct 3D modeling and aided design during preliminary composition and color design of *Regong Hundred-Buddha Thangka*, producing a gradient effect of blending the backlight of some Buddhas. Regong art has gradually transformed, through intangible cultural heritage label, the geographical indication of the Golden Valley into an internationally influential cultural symbol. Thangka art schools, inheritance and study centers have emerged, such as Sangzhu Regong Thangka Training Center in Gannan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture and Regong Art Academy of Huangnan Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture. Some thangka artworks are sold worldwide via e-commerce platforms, breaking through the geographical constraints on dissemination and elevating its influence from a regional religious art to a global contemporary art form.

Overall, Regong Thangka art school has taken shape under the combined action of specific geographical environment, Tibetan Buddhist beliefs, and the long-term interactions, exchanges, and integration among multiple ethnic groups. Essentially, the people of Regong region have visually expressed the geographical space where they have long lived and transformed it into a specific ideal space with value, meaning and emotional attachment, named place in human geography. The geographical environment and natural elements of the region have provided the material foundation and source of aesthetic inspiration for Thangka creation, serving as a carrier for cultural expression of religious art. Religion endows geography with sacred meaning and shapes cultural identity on the basis of rigorous sadhana drubtab and spatial symbol system; the social extension of secular identity, rooted in geography and religion, has injected new vitality

into traditional culture through innovative aesthetic expressions and has enhanced, in turn, artistic vitality, thus building a dynamically balanced cultural ecosystem with harmonious coexistence (Figure. 5). The three factors form a symbiotic structure where the environment shapes cultural identity; art imbues geography with meaning; and cultural identity feeds

back into and amplifies cultural dissemination. Their evolution logic is as follows: geographical space provides the material carrier for religious practice; religious sadhana drubtab shapes cultural identity; secular identity and continuity enhances, in turn, artistic vitality, ultimately forming a dynamically balanced cultural ecosystem.

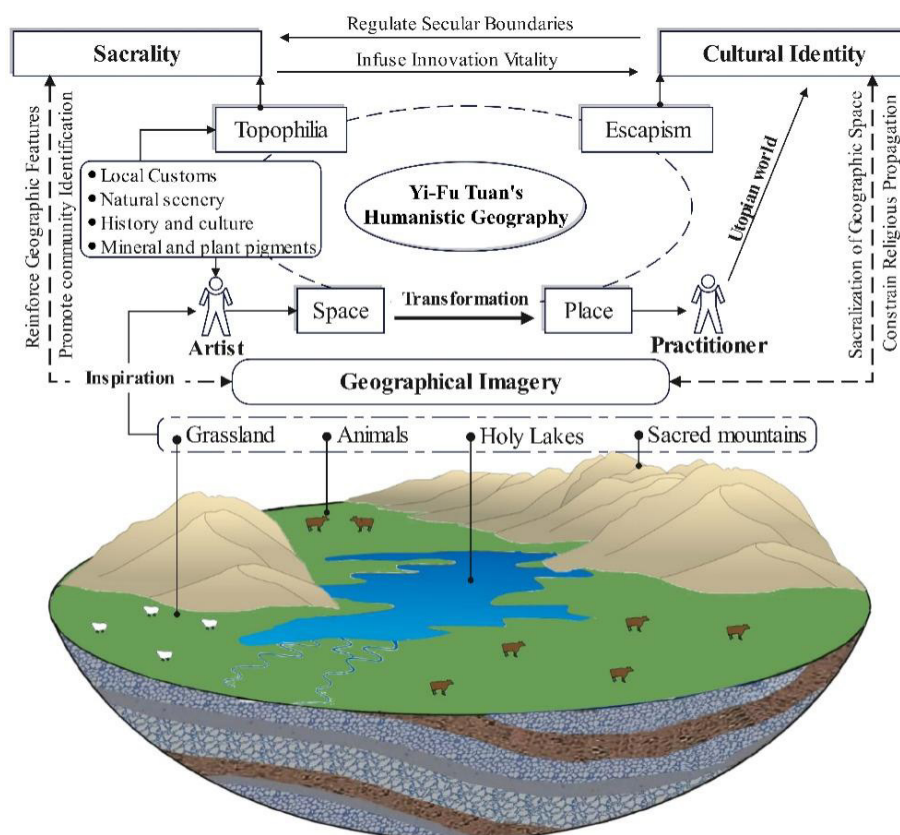


Figure.5 Regong Thangka's Cultural Ecosystem with Ternary Mutual Construction

5. Conclusion

The concepts of space and place, escapism, and toponophilia put forward by Yi-Fu Tuan in his humanistic geography represent a perspective for recognizing the dynamic, emotional, and meaningful human-environment relationship. In this article, it can be regarded as a visualized creative artistic practice, with religious sadhana drubtab as the medium for characterizing the process of adapting to, shaping, and deifying local geographical environment. With Thangka creation, painters utilize pictorial symbols to transform the

abstract physical space into the spiritual place with religious meaning and beliefs, and reinforce cultural identity through the practice of liturgical ritual.

In this article, with a focus on the balance and symbiotic relationship of cultural ecosystem between geographical imagery, sacrality and cultural identity, explorations are made with respect to how religious art shapes the world, as well as how painters and practitioners achieve religious and cultural identity by fostering a place, giving meaning and building emotional connection. Main conclusions are as follows: (1) From the perspective

of Yi-Fu Tuan's humanistic geography, the regional cultural and artistic characteristics and survival mechanism of Regong Thangka are observed, and geographical space is regarded as the material carrier for religious symbols, and religious sadhana drubtab is taken as the production mechanism for spiritual identity, and secularization is considered as the driving force behind social extension; these three aspects constitute a symbiotic network of cultural ecology. (2) Cultural inheritance is not linear continuation, instead, dynamic balance is achieved through mutual construction and support by the cultural ecosystem with ternary mutual construction. It can be thought that the stability of geographical imagery supports the continuity of religious practice, and the normativity of religious core restricts the boundaries of secularization, and secular innovation injects adaptability into the system. (3) The painting style of Regong Thangka is exquisite, vivid and highly decorative. Based on the liturgical ritual, painters used picture elements to transform the abstract physical space into a spiritual place with brush in hands. In this process, the integration of native minerals and plant pigments, natural scenes, folk customs, and historical culture demonstrates the emotional connection between humans and place as well as secular aesthetic identity, and represents a highly ritualized and embodied spiritual practice for painters. Taking Thangka as the medium, practitioners transform abstract doctrines into a visible and accessible spiritual place, named the utopian world. In the process of interaction between creation and utilization, both generate spiritual dialogue and communication through cultural identity.

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