

Transcending the World's Decline

Dai Zhuoqun: How and when did the *Sakya* project begin?

Zhang Xiaotao: It all started in 2007, when I visited many temples in Tibet. I was working on an animated film, *Night*, about Tibetan Buddhism. When I came back, I realized that a lot of stuff warranted further exploration. In late 2007 I did the *Rebirth* project at Peking University, where I worked together with archaeologists from the PKU School of Archaeology and Museology. My 2008 work *Mist* discussed the contradictory encounters of the waves of modernism and materialism, personal experience, public experience, the history of the soul and the history of ideas. At the time, Mr. Wu Hung asked me what I was going to do next. I said I might do something on Sakya, that I wanted to explore the issue of the secularization of religion, and the paradox between faith and material society.

Dai: *Mist* expressed your thinking at the time quite clearly and vividly.

Zhang: I was wondering what to do next. I began the *Sakya* project in 2009, but I first did *Scar*, about earthquakes, and that took a lot of time, because I had to collect material, write the script, organize the documents and make some technical breakthroughs. I always felt it wasn't quite right, and was full of doubts.

Dai: Your 2007 trip to the Sakya Monastery foreshadowed these later events.

Zhang: I investigated over twenty temples at that time. I took a cameraman and a videographer out there for a month. It was too much to digest all at once, and when I got home, I grew very interested in reading up on Tibetology. I'm still using footage from that trip today. I've always had religious sentiments since I was young, and my devotion has influenced by attitude towards art, even though the sacred world has been smashed to pieces. Last November our film crew of ten people entered into Tibet (including an animator, a recordist, a photographer, a videographer, an archaeologist, myself and two drivers), and once again travelled from Lhasa to the Samye and Sakya Monasteries, filming for about ten days. We gained a lot from that trip. This time we went to Tibet in the winter. We suffered from the altitude, and the work was very difficult. We ran into a lot of problems, but we carried through. When I came back from Tibet last year, I had originally wanted to combine an animated film with a documentary, but I discovered that the two mediums are difficult to fuse. Animation is animation, film is film. Now, it is very clear. Perhaps when you watch the first few minutes it seems confusing, but by the end, everything is clear. I am still in a state of the unknown and the uncertain. Right up to the last minute of the film there will be mistakes, and I may even still be fixing them by the time it is first exhibited. That has been my experience. I'm working on the postproduction right now, the hardest part...

Dai: It's like being in labor just before giving birth.

Zhang: I really don't know what will happen next. Will it be a premature birth? A smooth one? A difficult one? I'm quite nervous. It's like an athlete just before a game, that feeling of excitement, anxiety and joy.

Dai: With *Mist* you expended a lot of effort to make animation and new media work. How do you handle the relationship between your painting and your animation?

Zhang: I spend about 60% of my time painting, and 40% of my effort on animation. Painting gives me a basic method for analyzing images. In 2006 I wrote *The Painting Antibody* about the death of painting. What had died was the old conception of painting. The expansion of the boundaries of painting gave new life to painting. The shift from painting to animation and film has provided an entirely new aesthetic and visual experience. How do you analyze problems? How do you solve problems? How do you engage along a certain theme? These are all quite similar to painting. I started experimenting in animation in late 2005. I didn't know why at the time; my intuition just told me that this field would produce new visual experiences, techniques and aesthetics.

Dai: Out of some kind of inner need, you began to move into the field of new media.

Zhang: I was researching the new painting trends and new aesthetic concepts around the world, and animation provided me with a new channel outside of painting. Internet forums, blogs, microblogging and other new mediums have brought a lot of hidden changes. Changes to the amount of reading have altered the knowledge structure, and the rise of information is bringing as yet unknown changes. The microblog is a virtual society, where everyone becomes a source of information and media. This is a distribution point for information as well as an intersection and infection zone for rumors. The microblog is also a channel for discovering hidden realities. It is the first draft of the scene.

Dai: You see the transformation as an inevitability.

Zhang: I just want to use practice to return to theory. For instance, when I first started making films, I wasn't clear on a lot of things, and I made quite a mess. It's all experience. Now I can elevate that experience to the level of a knowledge structure, a knowledge base. In practice, the artist begins to grow, to sift through and rearrange the self. I try to find continuity with my earlier language and themes.

Dai: The internal thread of the true artist is an unbroken one.

Zhang: I worry about not being rigorous enough in my work, so I did a lot of thinking and investigation. I spent a lot of time researching Tibetology and Buddhism, collecting information, documents and pictures. Here I have to mention two teachers: Xu Tianjin, an archaeologist at the PKU School of Archaeology and Museology, and Zhang Jianlin, an archaeologist at the Shaanxi Archaeology Institute. They had a strong influence over my making of the films. In particular, the documentary unfolds around the personal viewpoints of Zhang Jianlin, while the animated film features him as a virtual character.

Dai: When did your interest in Tibetology begin?

Zhang: It began in 2002 with research into Tibetan Buddhist art. Research into the Sakya Sect, into new media techniques and other things came together to form a system. You need a knowledge system about Tibetology, a knowledge base about new media language and experimental animation, as well as the analytical methods from painting. You can see that the transformation of each image is an image-concept shift. It uses obscure image allusions and symbolic references to express the artist's worldview, so it requires the organization and transference of a large knowledge structure. I have tried to create a specific case through cross-disciplinary, cross-medium methods. Knowledge takes place in action; it's not just about learning. Wang Yangming said that knowledge and action are one. Knowledge is the beginning of action, and action is an extension of knowledge. We must return to folkways, to traditions, return to the foundation to engage in bodily practice.

Dai: So you have now researched Tibetan Buddhism and Tibetology for many years. What aspects of this originally attracted your interest, or spurred you to move in this direction?

Zhang: From 1993 to 2010, I made seven trips to the Tibetan area of western Sichuan, southern Gansu and Tibet, and I think I'm just naturally attracted to this atmosphere. The Hechuan Two Buddhas Temple in my hometown of Chongqing is a Tang dynasty temple that has beautiful stone carvings with an air of the ancient. The carvings are not as big as the ones at Dazu, but they are highly accomplished works of art. Perhaps it's connected to the influence of traditional culture over me. I have a sense of reverence for Tibetan Buddhism. In 2002, Taiwanese artist Shi Jinhua held an exhibition at the Tokyo Gallery. He gave me some Tibetan Buddhist music that I've listened to for years. It has a natural feeling of sacredness and beauty. It is very enchanting. Contemporary art is full of contradiction and paradox. It wants to subvert and deconstruct classicalism, but it also must draw nourishment from classicalism at the same time. I do not wish for viewers to habitually view these films as promotions of Tibetan Buddhism or sightseeing videos of the Tibetan Plateau.

Dai: When contemporary art subverted and destroyed classicalism, it applied western methods and western language. That is to say it borrowed external tools to engage in subversion. Now we're discovering that these external tools are less and less powerful, and that they are truly compatible with what they were supposed to destroy.

Zhang: When I was young I studied calligraphy and martial arts, and this had a strong influence over me. In college I studied western art history, psychology, aesthetics, philosophy, sociology and history. Contemporary art is another knowledge system. I was perplexed for a long time about the relationship between traditional roots and contemporary art. But later, things in my memory were activated. I'm not sure what they are, but there has always been some kind of force pulling me back into the river of tradition. I place more emphasis on the investigation of the archaeology of knowledge, sociology and anthropology. How should we view the fate of Tibetan Buddhism today? How should we view the relationships between Buddhism, localization, secularization and globalization? How about the relationships of regional politics? I entered into the *Sakya* project with such questions on my mind. From the beginning, I avoided one-dimensional readings. I think that this is the biggest problem with religion films. I wanted to enter into it with doubts, without standard answers, presenting a process of thought and constant discovery.

Dai: What have you gained from *Sakya*?

Zhang: I'll talk about my perceptions making the animated film. It is an issue of the language and techniques of new media. *Mist* was grand and overbearing, but then I slowly got a better sense for oriental stuff, like reserved language, listening to the heart and the profound digestion of subject matter and language. When making *Scar* I had already begun to change, moving towards the East, towards the inner mind, towards mysticism. When I made this film, I made updates to my team. I no longer worked like before, with fifty people on the project. Now, the making of images, models, editing, sound and everything else were clearly delineated, while the work was the same as before. I had much stricter requirements, and pushed for more systematic work. Through the making of this film, I've had some enlightening insights about the production process of art. I think there are certain things that can only be realized at certain times. When you're young, you may have realizations about strength, power and ruthlessness. Elegantly controlled things require a lot more time and practice, with that flavor only emerging slowly. The union of technique, body and soul is also very important, and that must ferment over time.

Dai: This is part of your own character. I didn't see strength and power in *Mist*. Though it may have appeared as such on the surface, deep down it was still eastern.

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Zhang: The music in *Mist* was a bit overbearing at first, and we made quite a few adjustments. A team must completely fuse together as a unified whole. I like to keep things hidden, to step back a bit. It's like martial arts. Real skill is hidden, kept inside. It's about defense as attack, about passivity. The one with a sword in his hand is not a master. The true master carries no sword in his hand or his heart. I am obsessed with the psychological realm and sentiments of martial arts. The artwork also needs this kind of tone. If we pursue technique in excess, then people will get caught up in the details.

Dai: This makes it easy to get caught up in the superficial level.

Zhang: This time I had the team remove a lot of the fancy stuff. It should be simple, reserved, concealed. Less is more. A lot of technical methods can be used, but the spiritual power is more important. In this animated film I also added a lot of painterly language. I don't want animation to be a continuation of painting, but when the sutras are opened you can see the marks of painting, and it is also applied with the relics, the Buddha sculptures, the scriptures, the ashes and the sound effects such as the wind and water.

Dai: What is Sakya like now?

Zhang: I remember we were in Sakya County and we got up in the middle of the night to climb the mountain and listen to the morning class at the nunnery. It was a distinct experience. In the distance you could hear the sounds of dogs, people and the wind mixing together. The bright moon in the sky reminded me of the verse, "the moon hangs among the sparse stars / the vermilion bird flies south." In the nunnery at dawn, the thick smell of yak butter tea and the sounds of the sutra chanting wove together. I couldn't quite distinguish this complex mix of sight, smell and sound. The older nuns chanted the low notes, a boundless sound that spread out like the waves in the sea. The sounds of the chants spread out across the river of time. It was like traversing the vast seas or climbing a mountain in the dark of night.

Dai: You said that Sakya was connected to the secularization of Buddhism. What is its situation today? Many people probably don't understand.

Zhang: The Mongolians rose in the early 13th century under the command of Genghis Khan. Under his grandson, Kublai Khan, they united all of China and established the Yuan dynasty. Kublai bestowed the title of viceroy to Chogyal Pakpa, with the mission of "spreading Buddhism through the world." He was in charge of the nation's religious affairs, and coordinated the government's rule over Tibet, controlling 130,000 families. Under orders from Kublai Khan, Chogyal Pakpa carried out a census in Tibet, set laws, and established a regional government at Sakya in 1268 that held the same authority as a provincial government. Pakpa became the administrator of Tibet under the Yuan dynasty government, and the Sakya

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Sect reached the peak of its influence. With the fall of the Yuan dynasty in the 14th century, the Sakya Sect's position in Tibet was replaced by the Gelug Sect, but the Sakya Sect survived.

The unity of politics and religion changed the fate of Tibet. During the time of the Tubo Kingdom it was a powerful military force. In the Tang dynasty they often garrisoned troops along the edge of the Wei River, and could attack Chang'an at any time. It was because the Tang could not defeat the Tubo that they married Princess Wencheng to marry their king. Before Tubo converted to Buddhism, its people were strong and fierce, producing great warriors just like the Mongolians. Then all of the people converted to Buddhism, the population decreased, and virtually all of the property of the believers was donated to the temples. Potala Palace contains all of the wealth from all of Tibet's history. The Cultural Revolution brought a lot of destruction to the Sakya Monastery. The north temple is already in ruins. The south temple is still there. Tibet has also become strongly Han Chinese in culture. This is the collapse of traditional roots and the decline of the sacred world.

Dai: It's all secularized. The Shaolin Temple has over forty branches across the world now. They're like a multinational corporation. They're doing business all day with Hollywood and Las Vegas. The abbot flies all over the world doing negotiations and showing up at places like the World Cup.

Zhang: After the Mongolians converted to Buddhism, it changed them a great deal. They became much gentler, domesticated even. After the Manchus entered China, they also converted to Buddhism. They had a policy of promoting Yellow Hat Buddhism to pacify Mongolia and bring the border peoples into line. Here we can see a certain relationship between religion and politics. These changes can be helpful in the problems we face today. This is the era of the globalized free market. Hometown sentiment has been wiped out, traditions exist only in books and memories. At the end of my documentary, the camera pans from the Sakya Monastery to the Sakya Primary School, where the kids are playing a game of soccer. This film is just a kind of microcosm of faith and reality. Tradition and religion are increasingly disappearing. The waves of materialism are unstoppable.

Dai: I really don't know much about the state of secularization in Tibetan religion, including the speed and extent of Tibetan society's transformation.

Zhang: It is very fast, and tragic. Mankind's spiritual world and the sacred land of faith have become very secular. Tibet may be the last outpost of human faith. It is a real tragedy! We were discussing tainted cooking oil on the microblog, and it came up that this era is one of mutual poisoning. Just not poisoning other people makes us good people. In terms of religion, regional politics, commercial consumption, ideology and materialism, Tibet has changed a lot. When we went in the 1990s, it wasn't so bad. The temples have changed a lot now. A lot of them have become very ideological, and are controlled by commerce, with really high ticket prices. They only care about money. It has really become an era where

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you can only get your demons expelled if you have money. I have seen the final sparks of tradition and the decline of the transcendent world.

Dai: Once it's developed, it's gone.

Zhang: I went to Guoqing Temple on Tiantai Mountain, Zhejiang Province. The entry ticket was only 5 yuan. This is the ancestral hall of Tiantai Zong, a massive temple from the Sui dynasty. There are inscriptions from Liu Gongquan, Ouyang Xun, Yu Youren, Chiang Kai-shek, Kang Youwei and many other notable Chinese figures. It has a strong historic and cultural atmosphere. They resist against commercialization. Full market-orientation and commercialization is a big change that has been brought on by globalization. China just might be the most materialistic country in the world.

Dai: I just came back from Europe. I went to see all of the important churches of Rome, Florence, Milan, Zurich and Paris. I think that European religion is also facing the problem of secularization, and they have gone much further down the path, but their sacred world has been carefully preserved. When I think back about all the money-tainted temples and monks in China, Amitabha! The stench of money is everywhere.

Zhang: An impression I had on a trip to Italy this May was about the relationship between religion and the secular world in Italy. Their churches are at the city centers, and the religious life is still part of their everyday lives. This is important. Their morality and conscience is still influenced by their religion. I wanted to make *Sakya* a microcosm of religious life, one that could help us decode the predicament of the sacred religious world in today's reality, and a path for looking at religion anew. Wherever I go I want to see the temples. The churches, museums and cemeteries in Europe are the "souls" of a nation.

Dai: Europe is also moving towards modernization, industrialization and commercial society. They are also destroying their religious civilization and faith, but in Asia, especially in China, these things have been completely wiped out.

Zhang: Ever since the May 4th Movement, we have been constantly deconstructing, overturning and destroying traditions. Part of it was destroyed during the Cultural Revolution. Today's materialism could be said to be completely destroying our cultural roots. We haven't actually built anything. As the fires of war burned during the Second World War, the Southwestern United University was producing academic results that our universities today can't hold a candle to. It's not the material that matters; it is the power of faith and the carriage and evolution of the spirit.

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Dai: The destruction of the Cultural Revolution was direct and solid. It was in essence an ideologically extreme path of burning books and fighting ancient traditions. Now things are just consumed, and once they're consumed, they become meaningless. All of the meaning and value is dissipated.

Zhang: I used ink to paint famous Chinese paintings with poetic inscriptions for my son. He was confused. Why would I write a poem? Why would I paint another painting? This seemingly simple question is actually a very complete question of aesthetics, and is quite difficult to explain. We can only seek out traditions within books and memories. Traditional education for children is very important. We need to give them roots, something that will persist.

Dai: This is also a form. When you educate your child, and you show him things from classical Chinese civilization instead of the paintings of Picasso, though it is only the surface, it can add up.

Zhang: He will enjoy Picasso's paintings later. He always asks me why the ancients always have pine trees next to them, or why they're always carrying zithers, why there are children carrying books for them, or why there are pavilions at the tops of the mountains. He is full of curiosity. I often use a brush to make scribbles for him, and we'll recite classic recitation texts together, like the *Three Character Classic*, *Rules for Students* or the *Analects*.

Dai: Is there any religious content in the curriculum at the Sakya Primary School?

Zhang: No. They have Tibetan language courses, and the rest of the curriculum is about the same as schools anywhere else. We interviewed a Thangka painter. He has five or six apprentices, and they persist in using traditional techniques to paint Thangkas. A lot of the locals go out to do business and find work. None of the kids who get schooling go to the temple anymore to become lamas. This is a very cynical change.

Dai: The more that new education spreads, the more this power will be diminished.

Zhang: Yes. This is a product of contradiction. Mankind should maintain faith, but should also have a progression of secularity and enjoy the rights of modern civilization. It is hard to control the balance.

Dai: The *Sakya* exhibition also contains some thoughts about the public good. What is your thinking on that?

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Zhang: Today's art should be involved in society, should care for society. A lot of people accuse us of being pseudo-sociologists and presuming to be judges of morality, but it's not that simple. I think that real art should be tender and nourishing, having concern that brings together work and social relations. For instance, with this catalogue, we want to make it fun and cheap, and as long as students buy it, we will donate the proceeds to poor schools like the Sakya Primary School in Tibet. In this way, there is a sense of participation. The influence it has on art and the changes it makes to society will elicit rethinking. We shouldn't make a big deal promoting our work; it's just something that everyone should do. I have a lot of catalogues, and I don't care about one more or one less. Can't we do something more interesting?

Dai: *Sakya* seems completely different from *Mist*, but your work, and even your participation in the rights-defense actions in the art zones, all of these things share an internal thread, a shared theme.

Zhang: The "Warm Winter" action was very tough. How do we find artistic language to express this pursuit of legitimate rights, rather than simple, coarse resistance? This is what I mean when I say tender and nourishing. Civil society needs to be built up in a rational way. "Warm Winter" provided our generation with a path for returning to the public experience.

Dai: It amounted to concretizing the voices of individuals facing social change. After *Sakya* is complete, do you have any specific plans?

Zhang: Over the next two years I may be making a film about art students testing into college, a tribute to our difficult youth. Students go crazy taking these tests, and don't pass. This fervor has become a kind of individual religion, the crazed pursuit of ideals that leads to destruction. I want to make it a film about artists. I have to work out the concept. My method is to start with a blueprint and follow that to the letter, so I don't get off course. Over the next two years I want to make a fusion between film and new media. Life is cyclical. Last year, the anniversary celebration for the Sichuan Academy of Fine Art was very lively and festive. It felt like my memories from entering the school in 1992 had come back to life.

Dai: It's like going back to college again. We left without looking back, but never imagined that we would end up going full circle.

Zhang: Life is a series of endless cycles. When I look back at my fervor and distress back then, it still has a powerful influence today. My youthful memories unfolded in an industrial setting. Oh, the memories! Later I experienced a transference, looking at things from the perspective of others. It has changed. After twenty

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years of changes, our ideas about globalization, localization, regional politics and the like have all become clear through changes in time and space.

Dai: So this is an individual experience of yours. I was just saying that traditional civilization, whether it is Han Chinese or Tibetan, all has vitality. It is changing now, dissipating, being discarded and interfered with, but its life is cyclical. We just live in a different phase of it.

Zhang: I believe in this transference. The body is mortal but the spirit is not.

Dai: It's just like the return to traditions. Everyone in our generation has been pushing outwards, and in our minds, the outside world was infinitely beautified and magnified. Now, when you're educating your child, you're giving him the most traditional stuff, because you have already begun your return. You want to give him this kind of culture rather than that kind of culture. You've made a values judgment, and have decided that this kind of culture is better than that kind of culture.

Zhang: Blood runs thicker than water. I think it is more suited to our air; after all, it did grow in our soil. I often think of my youth, studying martial arts, practicing calligraphy, running wild, my devotion, effort and fervor towards things, these have become very important in my life today. They are not tools, but an engine within me, the root and core of an individual.

Dai: A lot of things I've come across recently are like this. I wrote an essay about Lu Peng's "Xishan is Distant yet Clear," entitled *Xishan is Distant, the Breeze Blows Soothingly*. Xishan really is distant now. That ideal about Xishan is just an ancient fantasy. At the same time, while Xishan may be distant, a soothing breeze still blows from the distant mountains. We may be amidst the towering skyscrapers, but we can still find that stuff again, even though it isn't quite what it used to be.

Zhang: This is about all things having spirits and everything changing in cycles. My family would grow vegetables, watering and feeding them every day. He said, nothing ever dies; it is all a cycle. He cut right to the root of it.

Dai: That's what is called folk wisdom.

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Zhang: All things are cyclical, never dying. For instance, in the process of the artist's rights defense action, we always felt this cohesion. What was the source of that cohesion? It is shared traditional values.

Dai: A values consensus.

Zhang: You can struggle for basic rights, but you mustn't violate the rights of others. You can be extreme, but you can't treat others like cannon fodder. We all had this basic bottom line. It is not acceptable to pull others into some "revolution" so that you can become some defender of morality. You take your responsibility, I take my responsibility. It is a kind of traditional sentiment. The masses cannot be used as tools. During "Warm Winter," we saw a lot of the essence of human nature, and people were moved by the things that happen. *Sakya* is essentially about the secularization of religion. It presents a microcosm of tradition, discussing how we view tradition today, and how it influences us. When I spoke at the China-Australia New Media Conference, I said that though I'm talking about new media, the project crosses the boundaries of archaeology, Tibetology and new media, and focuses on the relationships between new technology, the soul and tradition. It is both intersection and transcendence. That is the significance of doing new media. Otherwise it just becomes a symbol, and you're just a slave to a medium, lacking deeper roots and vitality. I hope for a fusion between history, reality, sociology and language. It is not a standoff but a multiple world.