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A study on cultural representation and the construction of cultural spaces in Lhasa's cultural venues

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Abstract. As cultural spaces, Lhasa's cultural venues embody the cultural memory of Tibetan civilization and constitute an important component of China's discourse on Xizang. As the cultural center of Xizang, Lhasa itself also functions as an integrated cultural space. Lhasa's cultural venues neither portray the revolution as a rupture with sacred traditions nor use religious culture to diminish the historical significance of liberation and reform. Instead, through the integration of linear narratives, the transformation of commemorative rituals, the incorporation of cultural themes, and the revitalization of sacred architecture, they present the revolution as the condition for the liberation and renewal of tradition, while positioning tradition as the value foundation of the revolutionary spirit. Ultimately, the two are brought together through the shared pursuit of people's liberation and well-being, with these cultural venues serving as spatial testimonies to the unity-in-diversity of the Chinese nation.

Keywords: Lhasa, memory construction, cultural space

1. Introduction: the sacred city of the snow-covered plateau as a spiritual repository of Tibetan civilization

In Tibetan, "Lhasa" means "holy land" or "land of the Buddha." Originally, the name referred specifically to the Jokhang Temple and its surrounding area. Over time, its geographical scope expanded to encompass the central city of Xizang. Throughout the course of historical development, the image of Lhasa has undergone continuous construction, accumulating multiple layers of specific meaning.

As the world's highest-altitude historic and cultural city, Lhasa possesses a distinctive cultural spatial configuration that serves both as a spiritual repository of Tibetan civilization and as a spatial testament to the unity-in-diversity of the Chinese nation. Lhasa is also a city with a glorious revolutionary history. The peaceful liberation of Xizang ushered in a new era in its contemporary history, while democratic reform fundamentally transformed the social structure of the plateau. The Old Xizang Spirit, forged through the long-term efforts to develop Xizang, has become deeply embedded in the fabric of the city, just as its religious culture has. The religious sanctity and cultural heritage associated with the "Holy City," together with the revolutionary character represented by liberation and reform, may appear to belong to distinct spiritual traditions. In reality, however, they coexist within the same city and are continually organized, negotiated, and accommodated through the spatial construction of contemporary cultural venues. In recent years, with strong support from the

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Party and the state, cultural development in Xizang has made significant progress, and a number of representative new cultural venues have emerged in Lhasa. Through innovative forms of spatial narrative and cultural expression, these venues have established cultural settings in which traditional culture and modern civilization can engage in dialogue. This raises several questions: How, precisely, does the construction of cultural space in Lhasa reconcile and integrate the sacredness of culture with the revolutionary character of history? Through what narrative strategies, power arrangements, and forms of collaboration among different actors is this integration achieved? And what tensions remain unresolved?

2. The spatial interweaving of two traditions: the narrative construction of cultural memory

Cultural memory refers to the history and cultural traditions of a nation and its people. As physical carriers of cultural memory, cultural venues designed to construct and preserve such memory necessarily incorporate elements of historical narration into their spatial narratives, which directly influence the formation and transmission of collective memory. As one scholar has observed, "Contact with the art and artifacts of a country, like contact with its natural landscape, can be highly illuminating for the study of its history [1]." For cultural venues dedicated to presenting history, the selection and display of historical materials depend on the themes established in advance by the venues. The relationship between sacredness and revolutionary character is embedded precisely in this process of selection and arrangement.

2.1. Linear historical narrative: integrating revolutionary turning points into the long course of civilization

The second-floor exhibition hall of the Xizang Museum houses A Long Song of the Snow-Covered Plateau: An Exhibition of Xizang's History and Culture. With more than 2,000 cultural relics and artifacts (sets) on display, the exhibition establishes a framework of historical development extending from prehistoric times to the present through a strictly chronological sequence. Its narrative is divided into five periods, reinforcing the central theme that "Xizang has been an inalienable part of China since ancient times." These cultural relics, carefully arranged as material evidence of history, form a continuous chain of evidence of China's sovereignty over Xizang and establish a comprehensive historical narrative of the country and its ethnic groups. For example, the seal of an Imperial Preceptor from the Yuan Dynasty provides evidence of the central government's system of official appointment and investiture; the Golden Urn used in the Qing Dynasty for selecting reincarnate lamas through the drawing of lots symbolizes the exercise of state sovereignty; and the shackles worn by serfs in the exhibition on democratic reform serve as spatial anchors for traumatic memory. Another example is the seal bestowed by Emperor Kangxi on the Fifth Panchen Lama. This seal was issued as part of the imperial investiture of the title "Panchen Erdeni" to help stabilize the situation in Xizang at the time. The tradition has continued to the present day and also reflects the central government's substantive governance over the local administration of Xizang. This design echoes Walter Benjamin's metaphor of the "Angel of History" [2], in which history is presented as a continuous and irreversible process, shaped into a long trajectory of uninterrupted progress.

It is worth noting that this historical continuum is not interrupted by the emergence of revolution. The narrative begins with the kinship between the ancient inhabitants of the region and the Chinese nation as a whole, proceeds through the Tang Dynasty's conception of shared familial bonds and political unity, continues with the formal incorporation of Xizang into the central administrative system during the Yuan Dynasty, and extends to the continued strengthening of governance during the Ming and Qing dynasties. Cultural continuity

thus forms the underlying theme of the narrative. The contemporary section, entitled A New Chapter for Xizang, presents the peaceful liberation and democratic reform of Xizang as transformative leaps within this historical continuum. In other words, the revolutionary turning point is not portrayed as an external event that brings an alien tradition to an end, but rather as an integral stage in the continuation of civilization and the preservation of culture. Benjamin's insight into the narration of history as a continuous process of progress is particularly useful for understanding the organizing function of this linear narrative. By incorporating revolution into a long-term historical trajectory, the narrative establishes the historical legitimacy of this turning point while assigning ancient traditions a renewed place in contemporary society.

The Xizang Museum also houses the Memorial Hall of the Liberation of One Million Serfs in Xizang, which spatializes traumatic memory and transforms a historical turning point into a reference point for collective memory. The exhibition unfolds through a three-part narrative: the darkness of old Xizang, the renewal brought by liberation, and the progress of the times. Its spatial arrangement symbolically divides the historical experience into three stages: bidding farewell to the old social system, achieving the liberation of the people, and embracing a new era. The significance of this framework lies not in accentuating opposition, but in presenting liberation as an opportunity for sacred culture to break free from an oppressive system and return to the people. In this way, revolution and tradition achieve a dialectical unity along the same historical timeline.

2.2. The ritual structure of biographical narratives: the sacralization of revolutionary commemoration

The Tan Guansan Memorial Park is located within the present-day campus of Xizang Vocational and Technical College, adjacent to the former Lhasa August 1st Farm, where Tan Guansan once led his troops in planting apple trees. The site itself serves as a tangible exhibit of memory, bringing an individual's life history into spatial conjunction with the history of Xizang's development. This exemplifies what Maurice Halbwachs termed the framework of "collective memory and space [3]." Tan Guansan's tomb and memorial monument are situated within the park, where visitors are first invited to pay their respects before entering the exhibition hall. The interplay between space and narrative reinforces a sense of historical immediacy while creating a ritual atmosphere through the spatialization of biography. Inside the memorial hall, Tan Guansan's life serves as the organizing thread of a linear biographical narrative, which traces his journey from joining the revolution and establishing deep roots in Xizang to passing on the revolutionary legacy from generation to generation. The exhibition provides a comprehensive account of his life, from leading troops into Xizang under orders to participating in the region's long-term development. Among its sections, those named after the qualities of being "particularly capable of enduring hardship, particularly capable of fighting, particularly capable of persevering, particularly capable of maintaining unity, and particularly capable of making sacrifices" embody the essence of the Old Xizang Spirit. The visit begins with a bow before the memorial monument, proceeds to an exploration of Tan Guansan's life and contributions, and concludes with visitors signing the commemorative register. Emotional engagement and the internalization of historical understanding are thus achieved in succession, forming a closed loop for the transmission of ideological values.

The distinctive significance of this space lies in the fact that revolutionary commemoration actively adopts the ritual language of sacred spaces. The revolutionary character is expressed through the appearance of sacredness, while revolutionary memory acquires a stable emotional form through ritual. Sacredness and revolutionary character are thus directly united within the memorial site. It should also be noted that the park is primarily open to organized groups that make reservations with an official letter or a certificate issued by

their institution. While this arrangement strengthens the sense of solemnity associated with the memorial's educational activities, it also raises questions about public accessibility.

2.3. Thematic narratives and the encoding of cultural symbols

The Xizang Yak Museum is located within the cluster of public cultural and sports facilities in Liuwu New District, Lhasa. It adopts a modular structure organized around one overarching theme, with four parallel subthemes: "Gratitude to the Yak," "Exploring the Yak," "Companionship with the Yak," and "The Yak's Spiritual Beauty." Named yak skulls, references to yaks inscribed on mani stone piles, and the declaration of the yak spirit as "honest and sincere, loyal and courageous, compassionate, and devoted unto death" are interwoven throughout the exhibition. The four exhibition halls construct the cultural significance of the yak from four dimensions: emotional bonds, natural characteristics, cultural functions, and artistic expression. This narrative strategy echoes Henri Lefebvre's "spatial triad" [4].

Of particular note is the way the museum incorporates revolutionary imagery into its exhibition. Revolutionary historical scenes are displayed before visitors enter the main exhibition area, an arrangement intended to establish from the outset an image of the yak as a symbol of greatness and selfless dedication. This arrangement does not seek to impose an external political label on the yak's image, but rather to extend the meaning of the yak spirit into contemporary society. The yak's long-standing role in sustaining life on the plateau and the sacrifices and dedication made during the revolutionary years are structurally aligned through their shared value of devotion. Inside the museum, yak paintings incorporating Impressionist and Abstract styles, realistic photographs frequently featuring people, plaque inscriptions carved into leather, and yak-hair tents that visitors can touch all engage multiple senses, bringing the yak back from the realm of cultural symbolism into the realm of lived experience.

In terms of spatial mechanisms, the tents built by herders themselves and the skulls whose names are known to their donors incorporate local knowledge into the museum's system of institutional authority. In this way, herders participate in the construction of spatial discourse through their simple and sincere emotional attachment. Here, the three dimensions of space identified by Lefebvre—perceived, conceived, and lived space—are not merely theoretical illustrations imposed from outside, but constitute the actual process through which meaning is generated within the museum. Mediated by indigenous cultural symbols, revolutionary narratives are naturally woven into the emotional framework through which Tibetan people relate to yaks and their homeland.

2.4. The patriotic tradition of sacred architecture and the revitalization of memory

The Jibengang Art Center was converted from Jibengang Lhakhang, an ancient architectural structure featuring a three-dimensional mandala design and the only surviving example of its kind in the old city. Enshrined within its walls are 100,000 clay sculptures created during the Qianlong reign period to celebrate the emperor's longevity. In the late nineteenth century, the local government of Xizang constructed a temple in the heart of the city according to the highest architectural standards of the mandala tradition, with the intention of harnessing religious power to resist threats from British and Russian forces. This patriotic undertaking received financial support from the central government at the time. The temple subsequently became concealed within the surrounding urban fabric, bearing witness to the profound transformations brought about by the British invasion, the peaceful liberation of Xizang, democratic reform, and reform and opening-up.

This historical account suggests that patriotic commitment and national identity have been embedded in Lhasa's sacred religious spaces since their very inception. As an architectural expression of the Tibetan understanding of the cosmos, the mandala features a concentric circular layout that metaphorically represents

the ascent from the secular to the sacred. Meanwhile, the construction of the temple to protect the local community and offer prayers for the nation brought spiritual aspirations together with the practical concern of safeguarding one's homeland and country. Following its conversion into an art center, the exhibition unfolds across three spatial levels: the outer corridor, the inner sanctuary, and the central space. The outer corridor displays Qing Dynasty murals, the inner sanctuary presents the restoration process and artworks, and the central space uses lighting to create a ritual setting. The subdued lighting and carefully arranged contrasts between light and shadow both accentuate the solemnity of the sacred images and bring cultural memory to life within visitors through an immersive experience.

The "Lhasa by Night: A City Filled with Love" nighttime tourism project, scheduled to open in August 2025, features Tibetan opera performers and contemporary dancers performing together amid laser projections. Poems by Tsangyang Gyatso appear to float across water screens, while the historical scene of Princess Wencheng's journey to Xizang is brought to life for audiences through an Extended Reality (XR) experience. Sacred poetry, historical memories of ethnic unity, and contemporary media thus converge, breaking away from static exhibition-based viewing and giving cultural memory an immediate and tangible contemporary form through nighttime tourism.

3. Coordination among multiple actors: who integrates cultural traditions with revolutionary narratives

The construction of cultural space in Lhasa is both a process and an outcome of the joint participation of multiple actors. Through resource investment, knowledge production, and the attribution of meaning, different actors pursue their respective interests within these spaces. The integration of sacredness, cultural identity, and revolutionary character is concretely produced through this process of collaboration.

3.1. Government-led strategic spatial production

The government is the primary driving force behind the construction of cultural venues and the principal actor in shaping cultural spaces. Its role is reflected in strategic spatial planning and resource integration. Lhasa organizes its cultural network through a model of outward expansion from a central hub and connections along designated axes. Barkhor Street serves as the traditional core; the Xizang Museum and the Tibet Autonomous Region Library form an axis of knowledge; Liuwu New District constitutes a modern cultural cluster; and the Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum serves as a hub for the cultural and creative industries. Through cultural investment, the government seeks to alleviate regional development disparities. The Xizang Museum of Natural Sciences is located opposite the new campus of Xizang University. Together with the university library and the Research Base for Building a Strong Sense of Community for the Chinese Nation, it forms a triangular knowledge zone in which the discourses of scientific popularization, cultural inheritance, and ideological education reinforce one another spatially.

The Jibengang project demonstrates the effectiveness of hierarchical governance and public-private cooperation. In 2018, the Chengguan District Government of Lhasa completed the first round of restoration work. It subsequently commissioned a social organization to invest its own funds in a second round of conservation-oriented renovation. After three years of work, the project was officially unveiled in July 2021 and opened to the public free of charge, establishing a revitalization model characterized by "government-led restoration and social-sector operation." This model has not only preserved the public-service nature of the cultural heritage site but also introduced professional expertise to improve service efficiency. The "Lhasa by Night: A City Filled with Love" project, led by the government through government-business collaboration,

completed within a short period the workload originally planned for an entire year, demonstrating the administrative mobilization capacity underlying strategic spatial planning.

3.2. Market-driven innovation in experiential spaces

The large-scale live-action production *Princess Wencheng* was developed with corporate investment. Its theater is located in Cijuelin, directly facing the Potala Palace, creating a spatial correspondence between the performance and its subject matter. The production centers on Princess Wencheng's journey to Xizang, supplemented by a secondary storyline depicting Songtsen Gampo's preparations for their marriage. It combines Central Plains song and dance with Tibetan dance and opera, integrating drama, music, and dance through the use of natural landscapes and advanced audiovisual technologies. The performance ultimately culminates in the emotional theme that "there are no distant lands in the world, for everywhere on earth is home." This theme not only promotes the overarching values of ethnic unity and universal love but also incorporates the sacred landscape symbolized by the Potala Palace into the narrative. State objectives, religious landscapes, and market mechanisms are thus brought together through an immersive experience, generating new momentum for the integrated development of culture and tourism.

The "Lhasa by Night" nighttime tourism project has taken the capitalization of cultural resources to a new stage. Poems by Tsangyang Gyatso are digitally transformed into visual spectacles, while the XR experience A Magical Night of Tang-Tubo operates through a ticketed admission model. Although such innovations have sparked concerns about excessive commercialization and entertainment-oriented presentation, they have objectively broadened the audience for cultural dissemination and extended visitors' length of stay. In this way, intangible cultural heritage has been transformed from an object of protection into a living economic resource.

3.3. The role and agency of cultural participants

Culture is the objectified activity of humanity's constant reflection and continuous innovation in the course of labour, and the results thereof. Human beings are not only the creators, inheritors and bearers of culture; their very existence is also defined by culture. Therefore, the essence of cultural subjectivity lies in human subjectivity [5]. The general public constitutes the principal body of cultural practice, and one aspect of its role is the production of knowledge by professionals. As a professional writer, the director of the Xizang Yak Museum proposed the founding concept of presenting the yak as a carrier of Xizang's history and culture, elevating what might appear to be a museum devoted to a biological subject to the level of cultural anthropology. The systematic exploration of yak-related cultural symbols is, in essence, a process of knowledge reproduction through which academic research transforms everyday objects into cultural symbols.

Meanwhile, public participation is shifting from passive reception toward active co-creation. At the Xizang Museum, the QR-code-based upload feature of the Light of the Times exhibition enables ordinary members of the public to become co-creators of the narrative. At the Yak Museum, herders' donations of yak skulls, accompanied by their personal accounts, enrich the exhibition with insights into ethnic characteristics. The open study spaces provided by the Tibet Autonomous Region Library, meanwhile, create opportunities for everyday cultural practice. Through their spontaneous activities, members of the public transform institutionally designed venues into part of their personal lives, generating spatial meaning through their own practices.

It is precisely at this level that sacredness and revolutionary character acquire their genuine basis for integration. The people are both the bearers of religious culture and the practitioners of faith, as well as the active participants in revolution, liberation, and development. Ultimately, the dual traditions constructed by these cultural venues both point toward the liberation and well-being of the people. Once the people-centered

dimension is recognized as the connecting principle, sacredness and revolution are no longer two opposing elements requiring external reconciliation, but rather two distinct dimensions of the same historical practice.

4. Tensions and prospects: the ongoing formation of the dialectical unity of cultural space in Lhasa

4.1. Unresolved tensions

First, there is the risk of narrative homogenization. Some cultural venues rely excessively on the three-part narrative framework of suffering, liberation, and renewal. The Memorial Hall of the Liberation of One Million Serfs in Xizang and Tan Guansan Memorial Park, for example, exhibit a certain degree of formulaic expression, with the rich and diverse historical context of sacred culture sometimes reduced to a prelude to historical transformation.

Second, there are concerns about technological dependence. While technologies such as Virtual Reality (VR) and Extended Reality (XR) enhance visitor experiences, they may also obscure cultural depth. The entertainment-oriented tendency of projects such as A Magical Night of Tang-Tubo carries the risk of reducing history and culture to mere objects of visual consumption.

Third, there is an imbalance in spatial accessibility and public rights. The group reservation system and official-document requirements at Tan Guansan Memorial Park restrict public access. Meanwhile, the remote location and industrial aesthetics of the Xizang Art Museum, although innovative, inadvertently increase the time and financial costs for local residents seeking to access cultural resources.

4.2. Recommendations for future development

First, a flexible narrative network should be established to move beyond a single linear framework. Horizontal connections between cultural meanings should be introduced. For example, the yak spirit presented at the Yak Museum could be linked to the concept of life in Tibetan medicine, creating an intertextual network of meanings through which sacred traditions and revolutionary values can illuminate one another through more intricate connections.

Second, the ecomuseum concept should be adopted, with the Lhasa River as a whole regarded as an ecological and cultural corridor. Cultural sites along its banks, including the Yak Museum, the Intangible Cultural Heritage Museum, and the Unity Park, should be integrated as interconnected nodes. Greenways and public transportation should connect these dispersed venues, thereby creating a clustered cultural space.

Third, community participation mechanisms should be innovated. Local residents and cultural practitioners should be recruited as guides. In exhibition areas such as the yak-hair tent, herders could personally share their experiences of nomadic life. In addition, well-known artists and inheritors of intangible cultural heritage should be regularly invited to organize activities, enabling cultural participants to become more deeply involved in the production of cultural space.

5. Conclusion: space as both a container and a generator of culture

Through diverse spatial practices, Lhasa's cultural venues have explored a distinctive path of cultural space construction based on the dialectical unity of the national and the local, tradition and modernity, and preservation and development. These venues are not merely repositories of cultural memory or spiritual repositories of Tibetan civilization; they are also sites where cultural meanings are produced. In the era of

globalization, they provide a tangible foundation for the continuity and development of cultural identity in Xizang.

The core value of Lhasa's cultural space lies in its stratification and dialogic nature. For example, the Jibengang Art Center brings together Qing Dynasty murals and contemporary exhibitions; the Xizang Yak Museum displays herder-donated yak skulls alongside abstract paintings; and the Xizang Art Museum integrates industrial heritage with art exhibition spaces. All these examples demonstrate the layering and intertextuality of cultural strata from different periods and contexts. Such stratification is not simply a binary division between tradition and modernity, but rather a living cultural field characterized by historical depth. Moreover, Lhasa itself, as an integrated cultural space, has accumulated multiple cultural images and meanings, including those of a sacred city, a center of cohesion for the Tibetan people, and a beautiful homeland.

The future development of cultural space in Lhasa should further strengthen its commitment to serving the people and embrace the concept of a cultural ecosystem, treating dispersed cultural venues as an organic whole. By connecting them through ecological corridors, integrating them via digital platforms, and coordinating them through community networks, cultural spaces can become the spiritual centers of the urban organism. Public participation should also be expanded to ensure that the public can participate in consultation, development, and the sharing of outcomes. The construction of cultural space is both a process of inheriting and developing tradition and a response to, as well as a means of guiding, contemporary needs. Through multilayered and multidimensional spatial practices, Lhasa's cultural venues can gradually establish a cultural ecosystem characterized by both historical depth and contemporary vitality. As the Yak Museum suggests, genuine cultural inheritance does not lie in specimen-like preservation, but in dedication and creation embodied by the yak's spirit of "devoting itself entirely"—continuing to explore new cultural possibilities while bearing the weight of history.

Lhasa's cultural spatial practices offer an important point of reference for the development of cultural spaces in multiethnic regions around the world. By respecting the cultural agency of different communities and adopting inclusive narratives, creative transformation, and sustainable operation, Lhasa's cultural venues make cultural space a medium for civilizational dialogue, a bond of social cohesion, and a home for the human spirit. On this land known as the "Roof of the World," cultural venues are becoming contemporary "mandalas": within finite physical spaces, they construct infinite spiritual universes, bear witness to the contemporary renewal of an ancient civilization, and demonstrate the enduring vitality of the Chinese nation's unity-in-diversity in culture.

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