

# Threading the past forward

A young artisan reimagines *thangka* embroidery for today's generation, **Palden Nyima** and **Daqiong** report in Lhasa.

Born into a family of artisans, Pasang Dekyi, a 20-something inheritor of Xizang embroidery, has dedicated herself to sustaining this 600-year-old intangible cultural heritage by weaving tradition into contemporary life.

"Xizang embroidery is not something to hang on a wall and forget. It carries warmth and stories in every stitch. When people truly see it, it can become part of their everyday lives," Pasang Dekyi said in an exclusive interview with China Daily.

A distinctive art form of the people of the Xizang autonomous region, the applique embroidery combines folk handicrafts with painting techniques. Unlike traditional *thangka* paintings, it uses silk, brocade and other fabrics cut and pieced together, then layered to create a three-dimensional effect, like a relief on cloth.

A basic applique *thangka* takes three to five months to complete. It involves more than 10 precise steps, from preparing the base and selecting materials to matching colors, cutting shapes, stitching, layering and final ironing.

"For me, beyond the facial details, the hardest part is choosing the right materials and integrating them seamlessly," Pasang Dekyi explains.

"Every Xizang embroidery piece has a soul. The essence lies in cutting, stacking, and pasting," Pasang Dekyi emphasizes, adding that core craftsmanship must never be compromised, even for innovation.

When it comes to patterns, the traditional Eight Auspicious Symbols — such as the parasol, golden fish and treasure vase — are commonly featured alongside floral motifs, lion designs and dragon patterns.

Each element conveys layered meanings, from blessings and prosperity to protection and harmony, she says.

Pasang Dekyi's connection to the craft began long before she consciously chose it. Raised in a family deeply engaged in handicrafts, she absorbed its rhythms naturally.

"I didn't realize I was learning it at first. Later, I understood it had already become part of how I live, not just a career decision," she recalls.

While studying at university, Pasang Dekyi formally joined the family workshop. It was then that she decided to devote her life to Xizang embroidery.

"I chose this path over civil service exams or the internet industry because I value the calm and focus it brings. Each stitch keeps me grounded," she says.

Her father, Norbu, a regional-level inheritor of Xizang embroidery, founded the Lhasa Tsemonling Ethnic Handicraft Inheritance Center in the regional capital, Lhasa, in 2006.

Over nearly four decades, Norbu has trained over 40 craftsmen, including people with disabilities and orphans. The center offers free training and accommodation.

"His lifelong lesson to me is perseverance. He does everything with unwavering determination, and I try to do the same," Pasang Dekyi says.

Building on that foundation, she has begun exploring ways to make Xizang embroidery more



Embroidery *thangka* works by Pasang Dekyi and her team on display at the Embroidery Thangka Inheritance and Training Base in Lhasa, Xizang autonomous region. PHOTOS PROVIDED TO CHINA DAILY



From left: Cultural and creative embroidery products, including fridge magnets, and desktop ornaments, created by Pasang Dekyi's team. Pasang Dekyi works on an embroidery piece in her workshop in Lhasa, capital of the Xizang autonomous region. An embroidered Tibetan opera mask created by her team.



approachable. Her creations range from traditional works to contemporary items such as brooches, bracelets and fridge magnets. Some designs even incorporate familiar pop culture imagery, including Mickey Mouse.

By introducing recognizable elements, she hopes to spark curiosity among younger audiences and people from different cultural backgrounds.

"Many traditional *thangka* subjects feel distant or solemn to newcomers," she says. "Using familiar characters like Mickey opens a door

and creates a bridge. It invites people in and encourages them to learn more."

Her studies in cities such as Suzhou, Jiangsu province, and Beijing further expanded her perspective. There, she experimented with adapting applique embroidery into cultural products and interactive workshops, presenting the craft in ways that feel lighter, more engaging and easier to access.

"This is not about breaking tradition," she says. "It's about continuing it in a language people today can understand."

Looking ahead, Pasang Dekyi envisions two parallel directions. One focuses on high-end custom pieces, using exquisite craftsmanship on formal dresses to showcase the art's grandeur. The other emphasizes minimalist designs for everyday wear, featuring subtle details that resonate with younger consumers.

She also hopes to take Xizang embroidery to international fashion weeks and art exhibitions, letting the world know that Xizang's beauty lies not only in its landscapes but also in its exquisite craftsmanship.

Meanwhile, the center continues to train young apprentices. Among them is 20-year-old Ngakwang Chopel, who began learning at 14 and can now create independent *thangka* works.

"It's inspiring to watch them grow from beginners to skilled craftsmen. They don't just gain a skill — they gain a new direction in life," Pasang Dekyi says.

For her, the most rewarding part is seeing the inheritors stand on their own feet.

"This is the true meaning of our work — passing on the craft and

helping people build stable lives," she says.

Through the combined efforts of practitioners like Norbu, Pasang Dekyi, and many others, Xizang embroidery *thangka* was inscribed on the national intangible cultural heritage list in 2021.

Pasang Dekyi remains committed to her mission, ensuring that this ancient art continues to evolve while staying rooted in its original spirit.

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## Two oceans and three continents: Around the world in 80 hours

I recently circumnavigated the globe in 80 hours, give or take. I checked, and it beat Phileas Fogg's record of 80 days by nearly 77 days, as described in the travel/adventure novel published in serial form by French author Jules Verne in 1872.

I know over a sesquicentennial has passed since that original — feat, conducted mainly by steamboat and balloon. And back in the

day, the Paris-Beijing high-speed railway was in its infancy, so I shouldn't expect a ticker-tape

parade for my *Blitzreise* — as my recent trip around the world mainly took place on a commercial carrier — but I figure I deserve a modicum of public recognition for shaving 11 weeks off the journey, no? Well, it recently happened. No kidding.

By the way, can any aviation experts out there tell me why pre-COVID, whenever I flew between China and North America, I only crossed one ocean and one ocean only, that is, the "Peaceful Ocean," ie: the Pacific? If you take a globe, tightly stretch a string between Beijing and New York, that taut string doesn't get anywhere near the Atlantic, let alone Europe. But on my past few trips to North America, I've transferred through Warsaw,

Casablanca, Tashkent and Brussels. Why? More advantageous trade winds? Scenic routes?

Another thing that's changed over the years is the carrier itself. Pre-COVID, all my trans-Pacific flights were seemingly handled by a single airline company. That made it much easier to plan, scheduling-wise, and getting frequent flyer mileage credit was a walk in the clouds. Also, the chances of striking up a friendship with a fellow traveler were significantly higher if transoceanic sojourns didn't involve playing musical "chairiers" (chairs and carriers).

See what I did there? Anyway, about that recent 80-hour round-trip flight between the US and Beijing. It

was truly Magellanesque in nature. You'll all recall that Portuguese explorer Ferdinand Magellan is often credited with being the first to sail around our planet from 1519-1522 (three years longer than my accomplishment!). I'd be remiss if I didn't mention that Chinese Admiral Zheng He (1371-1433) may have beaten Ferdinand to the punch, but GPS verification at the time was a bit hit-or-miss.

So check out this air travel itinerary I recently purchased via the Chinese travel site *Qunar* (Where are you headed?). Depart Beijing with Air China and beeline over the Pacific for several hours as the crow flies without seeing a spot of terra firma until landing in San Francisco.

Then enough time in the "Old Gold Mountain" City, as they say in Chinese, to grab some local seafood before heading to Orlando, home of Disney World. After some quality time with relatives, I flew to Boston (again, more seafood, specifically a delicious but expensive bowl of New England-style clam chowder), before heading over my second ocean in 12 days, the Atlantic this time, for a two-hour layover in Brussels.

The ticket said so, and I was really hoping to exit the aircraft for the famous Belgian dish *moules-frites* (mussels and fries). As if I need more muscles! But, gosh darn it to heck, we got to Brussels Airport a bit behind schedule, and the cabin crew said there was only time for

refueling, so we couldn't leave the aircraft for snacks and the country's famous chocolate!

Anyway, I just had to wait for Chinese cuisine after a long but smooth flight to Beijing. There you go ... all told with drives to and from the departure airports, navigating snaking lines through customs and immigration, and layover times at three airports, your grand total sir, is some 80 hours. Never did that before. Wouldn't mind trying it again. Maybe in the opposite direction next time, with guaranteed aircraft disembarkation for souvenir shopping.

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Second Thoughts