

Grass Seeds

This is an excerpt of Trachung Palzang's conversation with artists Cao Minghao and Chen Jianjun that took place on December 25, 2021 during their editing process for The Ecology of Sands and "Black Beach." The title of this narration is "Women and Grass Seeds." This text has been edited for clarity.



All 28 thangkas have their origins. These stories are all told by elders, and some of the elders who told these stories are still alive. Some stories may be based on just one sentence. The process of all thangka painting is the same. The final thangka painting features an old woman collecting grass seeds and there is a little girl with her. She's an elder, and a herder. A herder like my mother, who is 84 years old.

I am doing grassland ecological management back in my hometown. One winter almost two years ago: "Mom!" "Son, you're back, have some rice first. After the meal, I'll show you something; I'm not quite sure if it is useful or not." This is what she said. After I finished eating, I thought that she's an elder after all, I'll just be respectful to her and follow her request. When my mom took me to the other room, she had three bags by her side; when she was untying the bag, I stood beside her. My mother was involved in a car accident once so her hands and feet are not very nimble. Because it was particularly strenuous for her, I helped her: "Come on, I'll do it." When I opened it, I saw it was full of grass seeds. At that time, I felt a little strange, then I became angry. "Mom, who gave you these grass seeds?" And so, she began to tell me the story of why she collected grass seeds. She said: "I am also a herder, I herd sheep and cattle."

I was in Lhasa, where I went to school; I left home for further studies. She said, "To be honest, when I was working during the day, I completely forgot that I had a son. But sometimes, lying down like this inside the black tent, when the moonlight shone through the sunroof of the black tent and shone on my head at night; or when the dog (the Tibetan mastiff) barked and woke me up, I suddenly thought, Oh! I have a son! So long without any news; is he dead or alive, did he run away to India? These are the moments when I would not be able to sleep all night long." I finally understood my parents' hearts. I'm in my forties now, and I've never worried about my mom so much that I couldn't sleep all night, ever. So (since then), I understood my mother's heart a little bit more. Young people nowadays are becoming more and more aloof, this would not happen anymore.

But anyway, she just said, "You have come back. The herders rely on cattle and sheep, cattle and sheep rely on this land. If the land is gone, we would not exist either. What you are doing is a remarkable thing. If I were still young and nimble, I would help you and follow you. But I'm too old, I'm really praying that things go well for you, that you achieve your goals." She said that as she was reciting sutras one afternoon, my brother was cutting the autumn grass for future use in the winter, and the grass was stored near a wall: "a grass seed trembled in the sunlight, and I suddenly realized how dumb I am! If I collect one or two grass seeds now, as long as I can collect them, they will be useful for my son next year. One grass sapling is one, and two grass saplings are two." In her words: "As long as my two feet can still stand, I will collect grass seeds for you." Ever since then, and it is the same this year; she collects three bags of grass seeds every year.

But now... the country is so huge, and there are so many seeds of grass. The three bags of grass seeds from my mother are nothing. However, for me, for the grassland, for this love, they are incomparable. So when I'm planting, I secretly take grass seeds from my mother and mix it in with other grass seeds. I have been thinking, what I planted this year is not just ordinary grass seeds, but a mother's love for a herder in the grassland. What I planted today is love, not just ordinary grass. At that time I was especially lonely, even if other people didn't think so, just randomly scattering grass seeds. But no matter what, when I am immersed in slow contemplation, nature may have its own needs. It may be a stalk of grass, a tree, or a drop of water, but what it lacks is love. I believe it's very important, this way of thinking, in this kind of environment, oh...yes! I'll paint my mom.

Another aspect is the changing times. No matter what, the grassland needs someone to manage it, no matter the mentality, no matter the action, the way of life, it needs a guardian. If the grassland is like a beautiful woman, it needs a "husband." And not a casual and reckless "husband." No matter what, in this global coexistence, the grassland needs someone to keep it company. The grassland cannot be empty, so I drew a mother on it. A mother's love is a constant presence.

Trachung Palzang

Trachung Palzang is a well-known environmentalist in the Tibetan areas. He initiated the Grassland Ecological Planting Farmers' Professional Cooperative and established the Tachung Tsang Ecological Cultural Exchange Center. He has been working with the local communities and herders in his hometown in Zoigê to improve grassland sandification and the black mud beaches. He also promoted the sand management techniques rooted in the Tibetan Plateau to regions including Zoigê in Sichuan, Maqu County in Gansu, as well as Guinan and Qumalai counties in Qinghai. He was invited by Peking University as a lecture guest for the series "Conservation Biology." He compiled and edited the thangkas catalogue *Thangka Paintings of the World and Beings of Kurti Kachukha* to share grassland knowledge with herders.