

# **The Inheritance and Development of Tibetan Traditional Weaving Techniques — An Anthropological Investigation into the ‘rtsed ther’ Weaving Technique in Tibet, China**

**Zhou Zidong**  
**Shanghai University**

**Zhou Yuhua**  
**Xizang Minzu University**

*Traditional weaving techniques represent a microcosm of the unique aesthetics of the Tibetan ethnic group and vividly demonstrate the spiritual and cultural connotations of the Tibetan people through intricate details, showcasing distinct regional characteristics. Case studies on traditional weaving techniques contribute to the preservation and development of Tibetan traditional crafts. This paper based on first-hand data collected through multiple field investigations in Rtse Thang, Lhoka in Tibet, aims at a comprehensive analysis of the natural geographic environment, historical origin, imminent crisis faced by the ‘rtsed ther’ weaving technique, and efforts made to revive and pass on this tradition. It argues that through further inheritance of and exploration into the ‘rtsed ther’ traditional weaving technique, Tibetan traditional weaving can be systematically preserved and promoted.*

*Keywords: Tibetan, traditional weaving techniques, ‘rtsed ther’*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Ethnic costumes visually represent the spiritual and cultural identity of a particular ethnic group, embodying a long historical heritage and distinct regional characteristics. The traditional weaving techniques of the Tibetan people, in every intricate detail, encapsulate the unique wisdom and aesthetic perception accumulated by generations of Tibetans. These techniques carry the traces of Tibetan historical evolution and cultural heritage. Nestled in the remote mountains of Lhoka, the Tibetan people there have created a rich and distinct ethnic costume culture and art, typified by the ‘rtsed ther’ (泽帖尔) of Rtse Thang (泽当) (both translated literally according to the local accent), which is deeply rooted in the natural geographic environment, climate characteristics, lifestyle and level of productivity.

## **METHODOLOGY**

With continuous changes in the Tibetan history and the emergence of various modern textile products, the ‘rtsed ther’ of Rtse Thang weaving technique, representing an outstanding traditional cultural heritage, has come close to the brink of extinction for multiple times. Thus, the ‘rtsed ther’ of Rtse Thang was

included in the third batch of representative projects of intangible cultural heritages at the autonomous region level in Tibet and recommended in the fifth batch of national representative projects for intangible cultural heritages in the expansion project of traditional techniques. How was this endangered traditional technique revived and developed to its current prominence and scale? Since our first field investigation in July 2014, the author has been conducting annual follow-up visits to the production base of the 'rtsed ther' of Rtse Thang in Lhoka, tracking and documenting the inheritance of the 'rtsed ther' as a pioneer in the cultural industry thereof, with the aim of helping promote and revitalize Tibetan traditional weaving techniques.

## RESEARCH FINDINGS

### **Rtse Thang, a God-Favored Place**

The location of the 'rtsed ther' production base is Rtse Thang, Lhoka, Tibet Autonomous Region, China. Rtse Thang serves as the administrative center of Lhoka. In Tibetan, 'Rtse Thang' used to be called 'Rtsi thang'. In the Tibetan language, 'Rtse' means playing and frolicking, while 'thang' a flatland or plateau, and thus 'Rtse Thang' refers to a flatland for play and amusement. Situated on the southern bank of the Yarlung Tsangpo River, it has an elevation of 3,551 meters and a population of approximately 15,200. It is located about 191 kilometers away from Lhasa, capital of the Tibet Autonomous Region. Rtse Thang is the transportation hub of southern Tibet and serves as the political, economic, transportation, and cultural center of Lhoka city.

Rtse Thang is backed by mountains and adjacent to the famous river, with an average annual temperature of 8-9°C, with temperature in the hottest month being around 15.7°C, and the average annual precipitation being 302 millimeters. With long hours of sunshine, a mild climate, lower elevation and fertile soil, the place is endowed with favorable conditions for agricultural development, which explains its position as a granary supplying various regions in southern Tibet, earning the reputation of being the 'granary of Tibet'. The main crops cultivated in Rtse Thang include barley, wheat, rapeseed and peas, among others. Additionally, the area is rich in mineral resources, mainly chromium ore (Editorial Committee of Lhoka Local Chronicles 2009).

The abundant resources and fertile soil in Rtse Thang provide the hardworking Tibetan people with material conveniences and leisure time after intensive labor. Based on these advantages, the people of Lhoka have created the 'Yarlung Culture', the source of ancient Tibetan civilization. In addition to being home to the first palace in Tibet, Yum Bu Brla Mkhar, Rtse Thang is also known for its traditional hand-woven pure yak wool weaving technique, 'rtsed ther', that has been passed down for thousands of years and has been approved by the State Administration for Market Regulation for geographical indication product protection and recognized as a national-level intangible cultural heritage.

### **Deep-rooted Historical Origins**

The Tibetan people living on the snowy plateau have a traditional custom of using sheep wool to weave clothing such as spang gdan, rtsed ther, snam phrugs, and Tibetan blankets. "The basic characteristics of Tibetan clothing are long sleeves, wide waists, large lapels and loose-fitting. The materials for and production methods of clothing in agricultural and pastoral areas differ in that clothing in agricultural areas includes Tibetan robes, puma, shirts, etc. Tibetan robes are mainly made of snam phrugs, but they can also be made from wool rtsed ther and other materials." (phrin-las-chos-grags 2006)

Rtsed ther, passed down in Rtse Thang, Lhoka, Tibet, is different from other wool products and is considered the finest of Tibetan snam phrugs. The exceptional quality of Rtsed ther is its soft texture, excellent hand feel, durability, clear patterns, uniform thickness, good breathability, warmth in winter and coolness in summer, no static electricity and resistance to deformation when washed. It is a special tribute fabric to Tibetan lamas, high-rank monks and dignitaries for their clothing making.

In Rtse Thang of Lhoka, various versions of ancient legends exist about Princess Wencheng and 'rtsed ther'. According to historical records, in the year 641 AD, Songtsen Gampo married Princess Wencheng. *The New History of the Tang Dynasty* records: 'Bstan-po led troops to the Baima Lake to personally

welcome the Han princess. Upon seeing Emperor Daozong, he paid respectful homage and was greatly amazed by the beauty of Chinese clothing. ... The princess, having arrived in Tibet, disliked the reddened faces of the people of the country, so Bstan-po ordered a ban on the face-reddening. And he discarded his felt robe and silk dress and adopted the Chinese style.' (Song, et al. 1975) Afterward, 'after Songtsen Gampo's death, Princess Wencheng lived in Bod (Tibet) for another 30 years. During this period, she made contributions to furthering friendly relations between Tang and Bod and established profound customs beneficial to Bod's social life and culture. Among the Tibetan people, there still are stories circulating on Princess Wencheng's development of agricultural production, establishment of water mills and the spinning of snam phrugs.' (Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs 1996) The Tang Princess had been living in the Yalung River Valley of Lhoka, southern Tibet, in the rest of her life, and her entourage gradually introduced advanced Han farming techniques, medicine, textile, pottery, papermaking, brewing, and other cultures and skills to those regions, promoting the economic and cultural development of Bod. The precursor to 'rtsed ther' was derived during this historical period, combining traditional Tibetan textile techniques with advanced Han textile craftsmanship to create handmade wool textile products. With the continuous development of the Tibetan economy and improvement of folk handicraft during the reign of Byang-chub-rgyan-mchan, a prominent figure in the Gelug sect, 'rtsed ther' gained more attention. Craftsmen were organized to improve the production techniques of traditional Tibetan snam phrugs in the Rtse Thang Monastery, changing the weaving method from two warp and weft threads to two warp threads and one weft thread. As a result, the rtse ther became finer and softer in texture, offering a more comfortable wearing feel. Gradually, a unique Rtse Thang textile technique was formed, the product being a double-sided diagonal twill fabric woven with two warp and two weft threads, with a slightly higher warp density than weft density, forming a clear diagonal pattern with a coarse grain texture. 'Rtse' is an abbreviation for Rtse Thang in southern Tibet, and 'ther' is a shortened form of 'ther ma' in the Tibetan language and, therefore, 'rtsed ther' refers to the unique handmade wool textile product in Rtse Thang, Lhoka, Tibet.

With the acceleration of globalization and modernization, the traditional production and lifestyle in Tibet have undergone tremendous changes along with the rapid economic development. Various modern textile products have emerged in the streets, shops and major markets of Tibet. As a result, the market share of 'rtsed ther', a longstanding and excellent ethnic clothing, has continuously shrunk due to the large-scale sale of various trendy and modern textile products, leading to its survival space gradually being reduced and its being on the brink of extinction.

### **Inheritance and Development to Reverse the Shrinking Market**

#### *Collaboration from Various Parties to Promote Inheritance*

After conducting research and investigations in the field of Thang-ga painting, Pa-sangs, a local resident and Thang-ga artist, from Rtse Thang of Lhoka, discovered that textile practitioners in Lhasa, Shigatse, and other areas of Tibet were unfamiliar with the 'rtsed ther' weaving technique. Even in Lhoka, where the textile industry was relatively developed, skilled weavers from Danang and Gonggar County had not learned or mastered this traditional weaving technique. Only a few villagers in Rtse Thang of Lhoka possessed the traditional weaving skills of 'rtsed ther'. Among these few villagers, there were only five individuals who truly excelled in the 'rtsed ther' weaving, with the youngest being over 80 years old. Due to changes in their way of life and production, these elderly individuals had not engaged in 'rtsed ther' weaving for many years.

With the support of the local government, on May 1, 2008, Pa Sangs organized seven farmers from Rtse Thang to establish the first farmer professional cooperative in the Tibet Autonomous Region, i.e. the 'Nedong County Ethnic Handicraft Weaving Professional Cooperative', whose mission was to 'inherit Tibetan intangible cultural heritage' with the goal of 'increasing the income of all members, providing employment opportunities for unemployed youth in the local area, and assisting surrounding farmers and herdsmen in achieving common prosperity' (Tshe-brtan-sgrol-dgar 2013). The cooperative invested heavily in hiring five elderly artisans, including Dpal-rdzoms and Khra-sil, who were over 80 years old and possessed the traditional crafting skills of 'rtsed ther', as 'technical consultants' and 'core members' of the

cooperative. These elderly artisans were brought together to consolidate the traditional production processes and related techniques of the renowned Rtse Thang hand weaving technique in Tibetan history.

In this process of recollection and reconstruction, Pa Sangs and the seven members of the cooperative systematically learned the skills of 'rtsed ther', including wool selection, carding, warp and weft twisting, traditional weaving techniques, dyeing secrets, as well as insect-proofing and anti-shrinkage techniques. Through the selfless 'passing on, helping, and guiding' of the senior artisans such as Dpal-rdzoms, the first group of students gradually acquired the basic skills of the 'rtsed ther' weaving through practicing and spinning under the direct guidance of the elderly artisans, and their individual inadequacies were corrected one by one.

The production process of 'rtsed ther' involves meticulous craftsmanship and precise procedures. The main raw materials and traditional production process are as follows:

- **Material Selection:**

The materials carefully selected in 'rtsed ther' production come from the fine hair of white mountain goats in the Ngari agricultural and pastoral areas, as well as the fine wool from Tibetan sheep raised in six counties: Nedong, Tsona, Tsuome, Lhuntse, Nakartse, and Chosum. These materials are the top-quality fibers from goats. The wool is taken from the back of the goats' necks, where the longer and finer fibers grow. On average, only 0.8 liang (a unit of weight) of wool can be obtained from one goat, so approximately 20 goats' wool from the back of their necks is needed to weave a scarf. According to experienced craftsmen, the materials required for weaving a roll of 'rtsed ther' need approximately 12 to 13 jin (a unit of weight) of wool from the goats' necks, 2 to 3 jin of uncut fine wool for spinning yarn, and 4 to 5 jin of natural silk bamboo.

- **Wool Washing:**

The raw wool is classified according to its quality and washed with clear and clean warm water to remove impurities. To ensure the softness of the wool, it is washed with the root end of the wool downwards and the head upwards. After washing, the cleaned wool is spread out and dried on a smooth and clean surface.

- **Wool Carding:**

After washing and drying, the wool is divided into smaller portions for carding, during which, the wool is grasped alternately from both ends and torn apart with by hand. Then a special bamboo brush is used to comb and loosen the wool, making it more fluffy and soft. The carded wool is then packaged and stored in dustproof bags.

- **Yarn Spinning:**

Depending on the requirements of the desired product, specialized wooden tools are used to manually spin warp and weft threads to different thicknesses. For scarf weaving, the warp and weft threads need to have the same thickness. One jin (0.5 kilogram) of wool can produce 2,000 to 20,000 meters of warp and weft threads, depending on the quality and grade of the scarf. Therefore, the threads used for weaving scarves are spun by skilled artisans. If the yarn is intended for shawl weaving, one jin of fine Tibetan sheep wool can produce approximately 250 meters of warp and weft threads. The warp and weft threads for shawls also require the same thickness.

- **Hand Weaving:**

Before starting the weaving process, the weavers need to arrange the warp and weft threads on a flat and spacious area. The warp and weft thread bobbins are placed on opposite ends of the weaving area, tightly tied or held by 2 to 3 people standing approximately 12 to 13 meters apart. They hold the junction of the warp threads and pull tightly on both sides. The number of warp and weft threads required is as follows: warp density  $\geq 720$  threads per centimeter, and weft density  $\geq 30$  threads per centimeter. After reaching the required number of warp threads, the weavers tighten and bundle the warp threads onto the bobbin. To secure the warp threads, a small amount of water is sprayed in some areas where the warp threads have been pulled.

The weaving of 'rtsed ther' requires highly skilled weavers. The process demands precision, meticulousness, and careful attention to detail to create symmetrical and neatly woven products without irregular edges or missing warp threads. Even the most skilled weavers can only finish 20-30 centimeters in a day. Therefore, it takes at least half a month to produce a set of high-quality handmade Tibetan fabric.

- **Finishing:**

The semi-finished 'rtsed ther' products are carefully roasted over a low fire to remove any loose threads and impurities from the surface, making the product smoother and more comfortable to wear. After roasting, the 'rtsed ther' is soaked in water at a temperature of 30°C to 40°C for approximately 5 to 6 hours, followed by rinsing with cold water to clean off any remaining impurities. Two people hold the 'rtsed ther' from both ends, while another person uses two long wooden hammers to beat and shape it. Once shaped, the 'rtsed ther' is rolled tightly around a wooden rod, wrapped and pressed with large stones for three to four days to prevent shrinkage and deformation.

- **Product Preservation:**

After the 'rtsed ther' has been treated to prevent shrinkage and deformation, the finished products are hung and air-dried in a cool and ventilated place to achieve a natural and smooth appearance. When storing the 'rtsed ther', precautions are taken to protect it from dust, rodents, and insects.

**FIGURE 1**  
**RAW MATERIAL FOR MAKING 'RTSED THER' - HIGH-QUALITY LAMB NECK WOOL**



**FIGURE 2**  
**ROLLING YARN**



**FIGURE 3  
TWISTING YARN**



**FIGURE 4  
WEAVING 'RTSED THER' ON THE LOOM**



**FIGURE 5  
STRETCHING AND BEATING TO SHAPE THE FINISHED PRODUCT**



**FIGURE 6**  
**TIGHTLY BINDING ON WOODEN SHAFT TO PREVENT SHRINKING**



**FIGURE 7**  
**FINISHED PRODUCT WRAPPED WITH HEAVY STONES AND WOODEN SHAFT TO PREVENT SHRINKING**



The Tibetan Autonomous Region and the government of Lhoka have provided strong financial, material and policy support for the inheritance and development of the traditional 'rtsed ther' technique. The cooperative society offers free board and lodging to recruit local and nearby disabled individuals, impoverished farmers and unemployed youth, providing them with more convenient production conditions and income security. The experienced artisans teach the new learners the traditional techniques and methods of 'rtsed ther' production. Through several years of arduous efforts, an increasing number of villagers near rtse Thang have joined the weaving cooperative. As a result, the endangered traditional craft of 'rtsed ther' has gradually been protected and inherited in a positive manner.



**FIGURE 8**  
**‘RTSED THER’ WEAVING COOPERATIVE AS AN ETHNIC HANDICRAFT SKILLS TRAINING CENTER**



**FIGURE 9**  
**NEW FACTORY BUILDING FOR ‘RTSED THER’ IN LHOKA INDUSTRIAL PARK**



### *Adapting to Changes and Innovating for Development*

In order to protect Tibetan traditional craftsmanship and effectively transform it into productive forces, thus contributing to social progress and local ethnic economic development, it is important to ensure that the traditional ‘rtsed ther’ technique aligns with the development of the times and social changes, to the effect of meeting the diverse aesthetic demands of modern society and developing a variety of products. The founder of the ‘rtsed ther’ brand, Pa-sangs, led the cooperative society’s staff of all ages to overcome challenges and brainstorm ideas to break through the bottleneck of the traditional technique, which used to produce only a single type of product at the textile technology level. To achieve product diversification for ‘rtsed ther’ and allow Tibetan excellent intangible culture to play a greater role in poverty alleviation and building a well-off society for farmers and herders in Tibet, the cooperative society’s staff have come up with three innovations and developments based on the traditional ancient folk textile techniques:

**Improvement in Raw Materials.** In the history of ‘rtsed ther’ textile production, pure wool was used as the raw material. After numerous experiments, the ethnic handwoven wool professional cooperative team in Nedong County improved the traditional pure wool by replacing it with high-quality pure cashmere as the warp and weft for textile production. This improvement and innovation resulted in ‘Rtsed ther’ products being made from high-quality pure cashmere, which are softer and more comfortable to wear, providing customers with a better wearing experience and elevating the product to a new level.

**Enhancement of Textile Techniques.** Traditionally, ‘rtsed ther’ textiles had a width of about 20 centimeters, which was narrow and not conducive to producing large-sized products. The technical backbone of the cooperative society proposed widening the width of ‘rtsed ther’ textiles, and after new ideas and approaches were put forward, the technical team repeatedly adjusted the textile machine and improved the quality of the fabric through multiple trial weavings. They designed a more reasonable width,



by which they can now produce semi-finished products with various widths, e.g. 50 centimeters and 70 centimeters, therefore creating the necessary conditions for further processing and making various Tibetan ethnic costumes, modern high-quality wool suits, coats and other products. This also provides a basic guarantee for the subsequent diversification of ‘rtsed ther’ products.

**Product Innovation.** In the past, ‘rtsed ther’ products were exclusively used to make special tribute fabrics for Tibetan historical living Buddhas, high monks and dignitaries, serving only a specific social class with a small number of users. In the new era, with the emancipation of former serfs turning into masters, everyone has the right to choose and enjoy various items or garments according to their preferences. The consumers of ‘rtsed ther’ has significantly expanded. The cooperative society actively broadened the variety of ‘rtsed ther’ products to meet the purchasing needs of different people. After conducting market research and discussions, the producers have diversified current ‘rtsed ther’ products, and the main products developed and produced include: different specifications of shawls, high-quality Tibetan clothing, scarves of different lengths, thick and thin Tibetan carpets, exquisite Thang-ga paintings, diverse Tibetan-style masks, high-quality Western suits, well-made coats, Tibetan shoes of various heights, unique designs of men’s and women’s bags, as well as various ethnic characteristic handicrafts. Many of these products also incorporate traditional embroidery techniques, featuring various Tibetan traditional elements such as the ‘Eight Auspicious Symbols’, combining practicality and artistic value. They not only enrich and enhance the cultural connotation of ‘rtsed ther’ products but also showcase the unique aesthetic and genuine desire for universal beauty of the Tibetan people. These ‘rtsed ther’ products with a strong Tibetan ethnic character have received high praise from governments at all levels and industry peers. They are often presented as precious and distinctive gifts during official government visits and are highly sought after and loved by consumers, especially those from mainland China and abroad.

**FIGURE 10**  
**DISPLAY OF ‘RTSED THER’ SERIES PRODUCTS**



*Entering the Track of Large-Scale Sustainable Industrial Development and Brand Creation*

With the strong support of the government, industry, scholars, media and grassroots organizations, ‘rtsed ther’ gradually began to emerge and improve in the industry. The Nedong County Ethnic Hand-Weaving Professional Cooperative, after years of effort, received recognition and awards from various

sectors, including the government, industry, and consumers. In 2009, the cooperative's submitted products won a 'Silver Award' in the 'First Tourism Souvenir Competition of the Tibet Autonomous Region'. In 2010, the Rtse Thang Tibetan Brocade Weaving technique was listed in the third batch of representative intangible cultural heritages of Tibet by the People's Government of Tibet Autonomous Region and the Department of Culture of China. The founder of the cooperative, Pa Sangs, was honored as a representative inheritor of the Rtse Thang Tibetan Brocade Weaving technique and awarded the title of 'Top Ten Outstanding Inheritors of Intangible Cultural Heritage' in the Tibet in 2017. With the support of the government, this endangered precious traditional ethnic skill was to be better inherited and continued. In order to further inherit and promote the traditional Tibetan textile skills and establish the brand image of Lhoka, the cooperative registered the trademark 'rtsed ther' (Rtse Thang) in 2011. In December 2013, the head of the cooperative, Pa Sangs, registered the Tibetan Brocade Clothing Co., Ltd. based on the cooperative. In 2014, the international trademark 'rtsed ther' was applied for registration, and 'rtsed ther' was officially recognized as a well-known trademark in the Tibet by the local government in the same year. In 2015, 'rtsed ther' was approved for the protection of geographical indicating products by the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine of China. In 2016, the 'rtsed ther' textile work submitted by the cooperative won an 'Excellent Work Award' in the 'First Youth Entrepreneurship Competition for Young Farmers and Herdsmen in Tibet Autonomous Region' organized by the Communist Youth League. In September 2017, the 'rtsed ther' trademark won a 'Trademark Gold Award' at the 2017 China International Trademark Brand Festival. In 2018, it received an 'Excellence Award' at the Second Tibet Carpet Industry Trade Expo and a 'Gold Award' at the 2018 China Brand Trademark Expo. The well-known Tibetan cultural brand 'Rtsed ther' was originated in Lhoka, the birthplace of the Rtse Thang and has risen to prominence.

With the influence of 'rtsed ther', on the occasion of the 70th anniversary of the peaceful liberation of Tibet, 'You Quan, member of the Secretariat of the CPC Central Committee, Minister of the United Front Work Department of the CPC Central Committee and Deputy Head of the Central Delegation, on August 20, 2021, led the Lhoka delegation for a visit to the Nedong County Ethnic Hand-Weaving Professional Cooperative', which was a recognition of the continuous efforts of the Tibetan national brand.

#### *Creating Profits and Assisting in Poverty Alleviation*

As the cooperative gradually enters the right track and a stage of positive development, the initial investment is gradually yielding corresponding returns. In terms of turnover and profit analysis alone, the series of products under the brand 'rtsed ther' have reaped considerable profits, gradually establishing a practical productivity base for the transformation of outstanding Tibetan traditional skills into the wealth and well-being of impoverished people.

In 2011, 'rtsed ther' products and business income reached 680,000 yuan. In 2012, the 'Rtsed ther' Handicraft Cooperative sold 1,100 scarves, 400 shawls, 13 sets of Tibetan clothing, 28 thangkass, 132 Tibetan blankets and 148 Tibetan masks. The annual sales revenue reached 1.62 million yuan, with a net profit of 540,000 yuan. At the end of the year, the cooperative implemented a bonus system for its 73 fixed employees, with a bonus fund of 47,400 yuan, achieving the goal of sharing labor and capital profits. In 2013, the annual sales reached 1.62 million yuan with a profit of 480,000 yuan. The average monthly income per person reached 1,400 yuan (in addition to free meals), laying a solid foundation for future efforts to promote employment and poverty alleviation among more impoverished farmers and herdsmen.<sup>1</sup>

By 2018, the total operating income of the cooperative had reached 5.4 million yuan, with a profit of 2.3 million yuan and a tax payment of about 270,000 yuan. The annual per capita income of cooperative employees reached 35,000 yuan.<sup>2</sup> The increasing trend of these numbers is very encouraging.

The Nedong County Ethnic Hand-Weaving Professional Cooperative has opened up a new path for local farmers to escape from poverty and achieve prosperity by saving, inheriting, innovating, and developing the traditional Tibetan brocade weaving skills of Rtse Thang, thus having made outstanding contributions to the economic development and poverty alleviation efforts in Lhoka. In 2017, the cooperative was jointly awarded, by the local government, the title of 'Top Ten Enterprises with Outstanding Contributions to Poverty Alleviation in Lhoka'. Due to the remarkable contribution of the

'rtsed ther' cultural industry to the economic and social development of Lhoka, the cooperative was set up as a 'National Farmer Cooperative Demonstration Society' and has received 5 provincial and ministerial-level awards. The founder of the cooperative, Pa Sangs, has been awarded the title of 'National Outstanding Individual in Employment and Entrepreneurship' by the State Council of the People's Republic of China, and has also been honored as a 'National Science Popularization Leader for Agricultural and Rural Development' by the China Association for Science and Technology and the Ministry of Finance. In addition, he has been awarded the 'National Poverty Alleviation Award for Dedication' by the Leading Group Office of Poverty Alleviation and Development of the State Council of the People's Republic of China.

Over the past decade, the Nedong County Ethnic Hand-Woven Cooperative in Lhoka City has taken 'inheritance and promotion of excellent Tibetan intangible cultural heritage' as its purpose. With full support from various levels of government, the 'Rtse Thang Tibetan Brocade Weaving Technique', named as an autonomous region-level intangible cultural heritage, has expanded from the initial 7 members to the current 122, continuously expanding the talent pool, which has effectively alleviated the employment pressure and social burden for local farmers who have lost their land and especially for those disabled individuals.

By inheriting and developing the 'rtsed ther' cultural industry and increasing the income of all members, the cooperative has solved the problem of employment transfer for local impoverished farmers and surplus rural labor. It has also furthered the common prosperity of surrounding farmers and herdsmen, resulting in positive social and economic benefits, relieving pressure on various levels of government and society in precision poverty alleviation efforts and making positive contributions to the economic development and the comprehensive construction of a well-off society in Lhoka. Just seen from the initial field survey and interviews conducted by the author in 2014, the statistics were quite remarkable: by June 2014, the various operating projects of 'rtsed ther' products, including production, processing and sales, provided direct employment for 267 people, while the total number of employees indirectly involved in related industries and extended projects reached 342. Starting in 2014, the cooperative implemented a pilot project in Nedong, Danang, and Gonggar counties, allowing farmers and disabled individuals to produce and process 'rtsed ther' products at home during agricultural slack season and receive corresponding labor compensation. The total number of households receiving benefitting from this reached 80.<sup>3</sup> In 2018, the author, during a revisit, found that the cooperative provided employment for 43 people in 2018, and the Disabled Welfare Company for 27 disabled individuals. It has also effectively driven the production and sales of wool and cashmere in pastoral areas outside of Lhoka, as well as the employment of labor in wool washing, carding and ethnic clothing sewing. Through the development of ethnic cultural industries, the cooperative has assisted impoverished farmers, provided support, sponsored impoverished students and helped villagers in need, with a total of 1.324 million yuan in assistance funds. Under Pa Sangs' leadership, the cooperative has followed the trend of the times and invited students and teachers from the Beijing Fashion Institute to participate in the design and production of a variety of products under the 'rtsed ther' brand, including Tibetan clothing, shawls and mats. Traditional fabrics are fused with fashion elements, making them aesthetically pleasing and practical to use. 'Rtsed ther' has moved from Tibet to the world, accomplishing a magnificent transformation, and has increased the annual income of 105 farmers and herdsmen by an average of 36,000 yuan (Pa 2020).

The Rtse Thang Tibetan Brocade Weaving Technique has been handed down from a few elderly people who are still alive, with the guidance and assistance of Pa Sangs, founder of the cooperative. The entire cooperative has worked together in a dedicated and cooperative manner to inherit and develop this traditional skill. The cooperative's behavior of creating profits while benefiting the masses through the inheritance and promotion of traditional skills has received unanimous praise from all sectors of society. The cooperative, with the 'Rtsed ther' brand as its leading one, has embarked on a path of standardized, regularized and scaled stable development in the production, processing and sales of various ethnic cultural products.

## CONCLUSION

The inheritance of a traditional skill, the protection of intangible cultural heritage, the emergence and rise of an ethnic brand have all helped transforming a traditional skill of the Tibetan people into a major driving force for poverty alleviation and prosperity. 'Rtsed ther' has become a distinctive business card for ethnic traditional skills, not only in Nedong County, Lhoka City but also in Tibet and even China as a whole. Over the past decade, the Nedong County Ethnic Hand-weaving Cooperative has gradually established the brand positioning, design, production and sales of 'rtsed ther', and the economic and social benefits it has generated are becoming more and more apparent. We are sure that, through further inheritance and exploration of this traditional weaving technique, Tibetan weaving skills on the whole can be systematically promoted on the present foundation.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Zhou Zidong is a postgraduate in the School of Sociology, Shanghai University. Her research areas cover anthropology, national history and culture. Zhou Yuhua is the director and professor at the Key Research Base of Philosophy and Social Sciences in Xizang Minzu University. His research interests cover Tibetan history and culture, intangible cultural heritage.

## ENDNOTES

1. The data cited in this section is based on the internal statistics of the Nedong County Ethnic Hand-Woven Cooperative over the years.
2. The financial statement data mentioned in this passage was obtained through a telephone interview with the founder of the cooperative, Pa Sangs, and the financial management team in March 2019.
3. The internal statistics data of the Nedong County Ethnic Hand-Woven Cooperative in 2015.

## REFERENCES

- Chab-spel-tshe-brtan-phun-tshogs (恰白·次旦平措), Nor-krang-dbu-rgyan (诺章·吴坚), Phun-tshogs-tshi-ring (平措次仁). (1996). *General History of Xizang-Songshi Treasure String (西藏通史——松石宝串)*, translated by Chen Qingying, Gesang. Yixi, He Zongying & Xu De. Lhasa: Tibet Ancient Books Publishing House.
- Editorial Committee of Lhoka Local Chronicles. (2009). *Lhoka Local Chronicles*. Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Pa Sangs. (2020). Getting Closer to Tibetan Intangible Cultural Heritage 'Rtsed ther': Traditional Skills with a New Look. Retrieved July 20, 2023, from [https://www.sohu.com/a/411167510\\_120104068](https://www.sohu.com/a/411167510_120104068)
- Phrin-las-chos-grags (赤烈曲扎). (2006). *Tibet Local Records*. Lhasa: Tibet People's Publishing House.
- Song, Qi, & Ou Yang Xiu, Fan Zheng, Lu Xiaqing, et al., (1975). *New Book of Tang* (Volume 216, Tubo Chronicle). Beijing: Zhonghua Book Company.
- Tshe-brtan-sgrol-dgar. (2013, June 27). Don't Let 'Rtsed ther' Vanish. *Xizang Daily* (the 6<sup>th</sup> Edition).