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# PRAYER FLAG INSTALLATIONS: A STUDY ON THE SPATIAL FORMS OF PRAYER FLAG ART IN TIBETAN REGIONS OF CHINA

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## ABSTRACT

*Prayer flags are not only religious articles in the Tibetan regions of China but also a form of traditional folk art. From a visual perspective, they appear in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. Uninstalled prayer flags are essentially prints on cloth; however, when combined with other materials and installed in specific spaces, they undergo a process of recontextualization, through which their forms and meanings are transformed and extended. This transformation gives rise to Prayer Flag Installations, whose nature evolves from traditional folk prints to Indigenous Installation Art that shares similarities with modern installation art. Taking the Lhasa region of Tibet as a case study, this paper explores the generative process and main types of Prayer Flag Installations, and compares them with modern installation art, aiming to re-examine folk art from a new perspective and provide new insights for the study of prayer flag art.*

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**KEYWORDS:** Prayer Flags; Three-Dimensional Forms; Prayer Flag Installations; Traditional Folk Art; Tibetan Regions.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Prayer flags are widely used religious articles in the Tibetan regions of China. They are pieces of cloth printed with Buddhist scriptures and images, usually hung in outdoor spaces. In the Tibetan belief system, when stirred by the wind, prayer flags continuously spread the teachings of the Buddha to the four corners of the universe, thereby promoting peace, compassion, strength, and wisdom. Essentially, prayer flags serve as a medium of communication between humans and deities, symbolizing the devotees' wishes and blessings conveyed to the divine, with prayers for a smooth and prosperous life, free from illness, disaster, and evil spirits (Nima Yangzong, 2013).

A single prayer flag is typically square or rectangular in shape, combining text and images. The textual content includes Buddhist sutras, mantras, and prayers, while the images mainly depict five representative animals—the Wind Horse, Garuda, Azure Dragon, Tiger, and Snow Lion—as well as figures such as the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, and various guardian deities. Prayer flags are commonly composed of five colors—blue, white, red, green, and yellow—corresponding respectively to the five fundamental elements of Buddhist philosophy: space, air, fire, water, and earth.

Beyond their religious function, prayer flags also possess aesthetic value. They serve not only as a cultural symbol in Tibetan regions but also as a distinctive form of visual art. Traditional research holds that prayer flags are prints on cloth, usually produced through monochromatic printing, primarily using woodblocks, supplemented by stone or metal plates. The images are typically printed on fabric surfaces, and their subjects are limited to Buddhist themes. After production, prayer flag prints are generally installed in outdoor spaces. Conventional studies classify their methods of suspension or display, regarding them merely as different modes of exhibiting prayer flag prints.

However, based on field observation and investigation, this study finds that once installed in outdoor spaces, the visual form of prayer flags transforms from two-dimensional to three-dimensional. They acquire an independent visual identity that interacts with the specific spatial environment, generating richer cultural meanings and aesthetic values. At this stage, the originally planar prayer flag prints are transformed into three-dimensional Prayer Flag Installations, possessing autonomous aesthetic significance; the printed flags thus become one of the fundamental materials used in constructing the installation. Although the prayer

flag prints themselves retain their unique aesthetic value when viewed individually, the essential characteristics of this art form must be understood in terms of its temporal evolution and spatial generation as a whole. Therefore, this study argues that the three-dimensional form of prayer flag art—Prayer Flag Installations—should not be regarded merely as a display method of prayer flag prints, but rather as a crucial formal language and ultimate visual manifestation of prayer flag art.



*Figure 1: Prayer flags on the grassland*  
Source: Photographed by Pu Wang, 2024.

### 1.2. Research Objectives

1. To investigate the generative process of Prayer Flag Installations.
2. To examine the similarities and differences between Prayer Flag Installations and modern installation art.
3. To redefine the concept of prayer flag art.

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts qualitative research methods, focusing on the prayer flag art of the Tibetan regions. A combination of literature review, field investigation, and comparative analysis is employed to conduct a comprehensive inquiry.

1. Literature Review : The literature review serves as the foundation of this study. By systematically reading and organizing relevant literature on prayer flag culture, Tibetan religion, and contemporary art theory, the researcher establishes the overall framework and academic context of the dissertation. Through this review, the religious

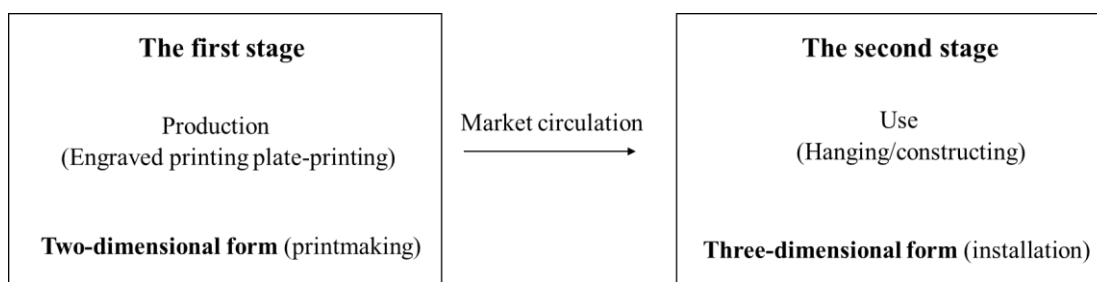
and social significance of prayer flag art within the Tibetan cultural system is clarified, while existing deficiencies in the study of its formal characteristics are identified. This process provides both theoretical support and a space for innovation in the present research.

2. **Field Investigation** : Field investigation constitutes a crucial part of this study. The researcher conducted fieldwork primarily in Lhasa and its surrounding villages and towns in the Tibet Autonomous Region. Through on-site observation and interviews, first-hand data were collected concerning the production techniques, ritual functions, and visual representations of prayer flags.
3. **Comparative Analysis**: In defining the concept of Prayer Flag Installations, this study employs comparative analysis to examine the similarities and differences between Prayer Flag Installations and modern installation art in terms of formal characteristics, material usage, and conceptual expression. By comparing these two analogous artistic phenomena, the study allows for a clearer and more precise understanding of their distinctions and correspondences, leading to more accurate conclusions.

### 3. RESULTS

As two-dimensional prints, prayer flags undergo a process that includes carving the printing blocks, printing, and sewing. After production, they are distributed through market circulation (although a small number are self-made and used directly by devotees) and ultimately reach the hands of believers, who employ them as religious articles in rituals or folk activities. In order to manifest both their religious and aesthetic functions, prayer flags are arranged and installed according to predetermined structures, forming various combinations and presenting diverse three-dimensional visual configurations.

After the first stage (design, production, and circulation), prayer flags exist in the form of prints; in the second stage (the stage of use), they exist in the form of installations. At this point, prayer flag prints become the basic material for constructing installations. To distinguish them from their planar form, this study defines the three-dimensional manifestations of prayer flags as Prayer Flag Installations. These installations constitute a self-contained system that functions simultaneously as a public religious structure with religious, folkloric, and aesthetic significance, and as a distinctive form of outdoor installation art. While Prayer Flag Installations share certain similarities with contemporary installation art, they also differ in essential aspects—a discussion that will be elaborated upon in the following sections.



#### 3.1. The Construction Process and Materials of Prayer Flag Installations

The primary participants in the construction of Prayer Flag Installations are Tibetan Buddhist devotees. During occasions such as the New Year or grand religious festivals, the construction rituals are often carried out collectively at the level of villages or communities. For instance, on the third day of the first month of the Tibetan lunar calendar (with slight variations depending on region), Tibetan families typically erect prayer flags on the rooftops of their homes. In the following days, villagers or community members proceed to hang prayer flags on

mountaintops or near temples surrounding their settlements. During major Buddhist festivals, large-scale Dharma assemblies, or commemorative days of eminent monks, the principal participants are monks.

Another common circumstance reflects individual participation in the temporal dimension. When people encounter significant life events—such as examinations, employment, marriage, or opening a business—or when they experience misfortunes like disasters or illnesses, they usually purchase prayer flags and hang them near sacred mountains or monasteries. Although such acts appear personal, they are in fact collective, since prayer flags are typically hung at designated sites. Over time, as

individuals hang new prayer flags at the same location, the old and new layers accumulate, gradually forming a large-scale Prayer Flag Installation. Thus, the construction of prayer flag installations is essentially a form of mass participation and collective behavior.

The following passage is drawn from the self-narration of Gacuo, a monk from Gongdelin Monastery in Lhasa, describing the custom of his family and village in erecting Prayer Flag Installations during the Tibetan New Year:

“Every year on the eighth day of the first month of the Tibetan lunar calendar, our village temple holds a ceremony known as Taqing (the raising of a prayer pole), which is a highly solemn religious ritual. The Taqing is a giant prayer pole made from a wooden trunk about ten meters long, usually erected in front of or within the courtyard of the temple. New prayer flags are wrapped around the old ones rather than replacing them. On the morning of the eighth day of the New Year, everyone dresses in festive clothing to attend this event. Each household sends a representative—typically a man, since it requires physical labor. People bring khatas (ceremonial scarves), cypress branches, and barley wine, gathering at the temple.

First, the existing Taqing is laid down, a task requiring the collective effort of more than twenty people due to its enormous size. Then, the new prayer flags are tied onto it, proportioned according to the length of the pole, again through collective cooperation. Once the new flags are secured, everyone offers their khata. Before tying them on, each person blesses and prays over the khata, believing that those tied higher can carry their wishes farther. After this, the Taqing is slowly raised back into place while the monks accompanying the event play the tongqing (a traditional religious wind instrument). Amid the long, resonant sounds of the music, the Taqing is gradually lifted and restored to its position. Finally, everyone forms a circle to sing and dance in celebration.”

From this example, several key points can be

observed.

First, collective participation: the process fosters community cohesion and a shared sense of cultural identity through the joint involvement of family and community members.

Second, rituality: the entire activity follows a prescribed ritual order; participants’ attire and ceremonial behaviors reflect solemnity and reverence, expressing respect for religious belief and traditional customs.

Third, publicness: since prayer flags are usually installed in outdoor public spaces, once erected, they no longer belong to any individual but become a form of public religious art collectively created and maintained by the community.


The construction of new Prayer Flag Installations typically follows several traditional models. The process requires selecting an auspicious time and site according to the calculations of monks, determining the appropriate scale, preparing materials, and completing the installation through collective cooperation. If the purpose is merely to replace old flags with new ones, the procedure involves removing the old components and installing the new ones based on the existing structure.






The main materials used in constructing Prayer Flag Installations include not only prints on cloth (prayer flag prints) but also other supporting materials such as wooden poles, metal components (iron wires, frames, etc.), ropes, cement, stones, and earth. Together, these materials constitute the three-dimensional form of the prayer flag installation.




### 3.2. Main Types of Prayer Flag Installations

Prayer Flag Installations can be classified into several types, most of which are constructed following traditional styles. Each type possesses its own distinctive visual characteristics, religious symbolism, and cultural significance. Their locations and functions also vary. The main types are summarized in the following table.

*Types of Tibetan Prayer Flag Installation.*

Type Name	Physical Image	Main Structure and Form	Location and Function	Symbolism and Cultural Meaning
Forked-branch-type		Utilizes naturally forked tree branches, with prayer flags wrapped or tied around them.	Roofs, walls, or forests; to protect the household and venerate nature deities.	Worship of nature, prayers for protection, reflecting harmony between humans and nature.

Pillar-type		A round wooden pillar serves as the pole; prayer flags or khata are wrapped around it layer by layer, standing vertically on the ground.	Monasteries and stupas; to commemorate eminent monks, dispel evil, and bring peace.	Symbolizes firm faith and expresses sacred solemnity.
Victory Banner-type		Uses wood or metal as the frame, with prayer flags hanging from the top; evolved from the Buddhist 'Victory Banner.'	Monasteries, village surroundings, or during Buddhist ceremonies and festivals.	Symbolizes the triumph of justice over evil, prayers for blessings and peace, and universal salvation.
Array-type		Composed of multiple groups of prayer flags arranged horizontally or vertically, creating rhythm and ornamentation.	Along roads, valleys, or riverbanks.	Conveys Buddhist blessings, protects travelers, and promotes local culture.
Parasol-type		Centered around a pillar, stupa, or mani stone mound, radiating outward in all directions.	Commonly found in monasteries, grasslands, sacred mountains, and lakes.	Symbolizes the shelter and peace of Buddhist law, prayers for protection, and purification from sins.
Fortress-type		Four 'walls' of prayer flags form a 'fortress,' often with a smoke-offering altar (sang) in the center.	Grasslands or mountain areas used for rituals.	Symbolizes protection and guardianship, representing stability of faith.
Symbolic-type		Single or grouped prayer flags are arranged to form Buddhist symbols such as stupas, swords, or vajras.	Mountain areas or slopes near monasteries.	Symbolizes cutting through delusions, enhancing wisdom, and dispelling demons.

Free-type		Hung freely depending on the site conditions, attached to natural or man-made objects.	Bridges, cliffs, or mani stone piles.	Expresses individual prayers and the power of folk beliefs.
Hybrid-type		Combines multiple types to form a 'prayer flag landscape.'	Large religious sites, sacred mountains, and lakes.	Promotes Buddhist teachings, symbolizes unity of strength and collective prayer.
Flag-array-type		Mass replication of a particular type of prayer flag, arranged into a large-scale 'flag array.'	Major ceremonies, festivals, or around monasteries.	Symbolizes steadfast faith and grand aspirations.

*Source: Photographed by Pu Wang, 2024.*

From the perspective of formal structure and visual morphology, the above are the basic types of prayer flag installations. In reality, various variations and new creative forms often emerge on the basis of these types. With the development of tourism, local governments in Tibetan regions have begun to design prayer flags as a kind of cultural landscape to attract tourists—such as prayer flag corridors and prayer flag curtain walls. As a result, the original religious functions of prayer flags have gradually retreated to a secondary position, while their artistic and promotional functions have been brought to the forefront. This transformation also brings new possibilities for the formal innovation and semantic reconstruction of prayer flag installations.

### 3.3 Comparison Between Prayer Flag Installations and Modern Installation Art

#### 3.3.1 Similarities Between Prayer Flag Installations and Installation Art

First, the prayer flag installation is a three-dimensional, spatial visual art form constructed from combinations of ready-made objects. In its process of construction, a variety of media and materials are employed—ranging from printed cloth, plants, and chemical fibers to wood, cement, metal, and animal hides. At the same time, it makes use of natural elements such as light and wind as media, bringing viewers a comprehensive emotional experience that integrates both vision and sound. Therefore, in terms of visual form, material application, and perceptual experience, it is essentially identical to modern installation art.

Second, prayer flag installations possess a high degree of symbolism and conceptuality. Their forms are not only components of religious rituals but also carriers of cultural memory and markers of cultural identity. The scriptures, images, and colors printed on the flags, together with their three-dimensional configurations, all carry specific symbolic meanings. The combination of these signs embodies the participants' desire to communicate with the divine, their reflections on their own lived realities, and their concern for the relationships between humanity and faith, humanity and nature, and humanity and the environment.

Third, as a form of public art, prayer flag installations are characterized by strong participation and interactivity. On one hand, the processes of graphic design, woodblock carving, printing, selling, and purchasing prayer flags usually involve different individuals working together. On the other hand, the erection of prayer flag installations is often a collective act by families, communities, or monks from monasteries. Anyone may add new flags or replace old ones at existing sites. Installed in public spaces and open to everyone at all times, they invite people to engage both physically and perceptually—seeing their forms, reading their texts, touching their textures, hearing their sounds, and contemplating their meanings in an immersive way. According to communication theory, each participant is involved in both “encoding” and “decoding,” acting simultaneously as the sender and the receiver of messages.

Furthermore, participants are constantly engaged in interaction—with others (through real

communication), with themselves (through self-reflection on destiny), with the prayer flags (through interpretation and aesthetic perception), and with imagined deities (through spiritual resonance akin to sympathetic magic). In short, through the expression of themes such as faith, culture, and life, prayer flag installations can evoke deep emotional resonance within viewers, prompting reflection on the meaning and value of life. This resonance is not limited to religious belief but can also extend to contemplation and expression of one's personal circumstances and social realities.

Fourth, prayer flag installations are inseparable from their surrounding environment and spatial context. Usually erected in monasteries, dwellings, crossroads, cliffs, and lakes, they establish a relationship with their environment that is simultaneously contrasting and harmonious. Thus, they create distinctive spatial atmospheres that transform viewers' spatial perception and emotional experience.

### 3.3.2. *Differences Between Prayer Flag Installations and Installation Art*

First, the two differ in their origins and cultural backgrounds. Prayer flags originated from the indigenous Bon religion and Tibetan Buddhism, with a history of over a thousand years. They are a synthesis of religion, folklore, and art, primarily serving to express faith. Installation art, by contrast, emerged in the twentieth century as a form of modern art. It is an integrative art form aimed at expressing the artist's personal ideas or emotions, engaging with diverse subjects such as society, culture, and technology, and offering broader expressive freedom and thematic inclusiveness.

Second, prayer flag installations are highly functional and purpose-oriented, designed to disseminate religious beliefs and pray for good fortune. Installation art, however, is mainly intended to provoke thought, emotional resonance, or audience interaction. It tends to be less functional and more open-ended, serving as a medium for personal, social, or conceptual expression.

Third, the materials used in prayer flag installations are relatively limited, bearing fixed religious symbols and texts. Their colors and arrangements follow prescribed religious conventions, and their forms are mainly traditional, with limited innovation. Installation art, by contrast, embraces diverse materials and media—including metal, wood, light, and digital technology—and takes highly flexible and experimental forms unrestricted by convention.

From the above comparison, it can be seen that prayer flag installations exhibit the main features of installation art in terms of visual form, conceptual connotation, interactivity, and spatial engagement, while also possessing dynamism and openness. However, their expressive concepts, functions, materials, and forms remain relatively fixed, functioning primarily as symbols of traditional religious culture. Installation art, on the other hand, serves as a medium for modern artists to express personal or collective ideas, offering greater inclusivity and freedom.

Therefore, prayer flag installations may be regarded as a form of Indigenous Installation Art, integrating elements of aesthetics, spatial perception, cultural symbolism, and social meaning. They are both artistic and religious in nature—a unique art form that unites art and life, faith and culture.

## 4. DISCUSSION

This study shifts the research focus on prayer flag art from two-dimensional forms to three-dimensional forms, revealing that after installation, the prayer flag transforms from a flat print on cloth into a prayer flag installation. Its function and meaning extend beyond the textual, pictorial, and chromatic dimensions of the planar unit, transcending the traditional academic definitions of prayer flag art as either a "religious object" or a "folk print." This discovery expands the scope of prayer flag research and provides a new perspective for reexamining traditional religious art.

Traditional studies have primarily focused on the origins of images and colors, their religious significance and philosophical implications, as well as stylistic and regional characteristics. For instance, Li Lianrong (2008) argues that the visual elements of prayer flags originate from the Tibetan Buddhist belief system and have undergone historical evolution. Gao Cheng (2010) examined the five-color system of prayer flags, pointing out that these colors are not only related to Tibetan Buddhism but also closely tied to the cosmology of the Bon religion. Zhang Yasha (2006) analyzed representative styles of prayer flags across different Tibetan regions. Nima Yangzong systematized the production process of prayer flag prints and categorized their hanging methods. Luolun Zhang (1994) defined prayer flag art from an ontological perspective and was the first to introduce the concept of "print on cloth."

In summary, previous research has remained confined to the two-dimensional form of prayer flags, neglecting the independent value and extended significance of their three-dimensional

manifestation. Moreover, prior studies have tended to regard prayer flags primarily as religious symbols or cultural signs, emphasizing their ritual functions—such as prayer, exorcism, and the dissemination of ethnic culture or identity construction—while overlooking their spatial presentation and participatory process. This study identifies the conceptual, interactive, and spatial characteristics of prayer flag installations, which closely resemble features of modern installation art. This suggests that prayer flag installations are not merely material carriers of religious belief but also spontaneously generated forms of spatial art.

Furthermore, a comparative analysis between prayer flag installations and modern installation art reveals that while they share similarities in form, they differ significantly in their internal generative logic. Installation art often arises from the expression of personal concepts, whereas the formation of prayer flag installations depends on religious belief and folk tradition, serving purposes such as communication with deities, prayer for blessings, and warding off evil. This distinction reflects the intrinsic difference between religious art and conceptual art: the former emphasizes religious transmission and cultural continuity, while the latter stresses individual expression and critical reflection on social reality. Therefore, the prayer flag installation may be understood as a form of Indigenous Installation Art—one that embodies the external characteristics of installation art while maintaining its own religious and cultural foundations.

In addition, the collective participation and spatial openness of prayer flag installations offer a new perspective for understanding the “mechanism of artistic occurrence.” They also provide meaningful reference for contemporary public and community art. The prayer flag installation represents a spontaneously formed mode of public art driven by collective belief. Its core value lies in communal sharing and interaction grounded in cultural identity, rather than in individual creation or artist-led collaboration.

Of course, this study also has certain limitations. First, the textual and visual analyses are based mainly on samples from Lhasa and its surrounding areas, without full coverage of the entire Tibetan region; therefore, the theoretical generalizability of the findings requires further validation. Second, as prayer flags have increasingly been integrated into tourism and cultural industries as regional cultural symbols, their aesthetic value and ethical implications under re-contextualization deserve further exploration in future research.

In summary, as a cultural form combining religiosity, folk tradition, and artistic expression, the prayer flag installation is not only a symbol of the Tibetan belief system and traditional culture but also an important paradigm for understanding the relationship between traditional art and contemporary art.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Academic discussions of the artistic form of prayer flags have long remained inconclusive, since compared to other art forms, it is difficult to categorize. It is at once a religious object and a folk custom; it embodies both religious concepts and artistic aesthetics; it adheres to established conventions yet allows for innovation; it exists as both a planar and a spatial form. Thus, it cannot be neatly defined by any single existing artistic category. Most previous scholarly works have treated it rather superficially as “prints that are hung up,” emphasizing its two-dimensional characteristics while neglecting its spatial dimension, and therefore have failed to offer a comprehensive or accurate definition.

This paper divides the artistic form of prayer flags into two aspects: the planar form and the spatial (three-dimensional) form. These are not only formal distinctions but also temporal stages: the planar form constitutes the condition and foundation for the spatial form. Without the first stage of planar manifestation, the second stage of spatial installation would not exist. As a form of print on cloth, the planar stage has its own artistic value while also serving as the material foundation of the spatial stage. The two are inseparable, forming a unified whole. Any discussion that isolates one from the other can only grasp a fragment of its nature, falling short of understanding its essence.

This study focuses on the three-dimensional form of prayer flag art, summarizing its conceptuality, spatiality, interactivity, and openness. Through comparative analysis with modern installation art, it concludes that the prayer flag installation may be regarded as a proto-installation or pre-modern installation art. Based on the preceding analyses and summaries of its formal characteristics, a relatively precise definition may now be proposed:

Prayer flag art is a comprehensive form of folk art originating in Tibetan regions, integrating religious belief, folk custom, and aesthetic experience. It manifests in both two-dimensional and three-dimensional forms. Its uniqueness lies in the organic fusion of the planar expressiveness of “print on cloth” and the spatial construction of installation,

thereby forming a composite art form that embodies both imagery and spatiality.

This definition reinterprets, synthesizes, and redefines prayer flag art from a new perspective, avoiding the one-sided understandings of previous

studies and clarifying conceptual ambiguities in the existing scholarship. It is hoped that this study may provide insights and references for more in-depth future research.

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