

A Contemporary Artist's Expressions of Buddhas & Pure Lands in the Human Realm



Hwee Koon Tan
Independent Curator

Hwee Koon Tan received an MA (History in Art and Archaeology) from the SOAS University of London and an MA (Comparative Culture) from Sophia University, Tokyo. She is a Singapore-based independent curator with research interests in both modern and contemporary East Asian and Southeast Asian art—particularly on migration/diaspora and transnationalism. More recently, her research has expanded to include the fields of ancient and pre-modern Buddhist Art History, Buddhist Studies and Buddhist Art Museology. Hwee Koon is a versatile curator with a wide breadth and depth and an ongoing focus on Chinese ink and sculpture.





Li Chen (b. 1963, Yunlin) at Artist Studio with *Pure Land* 無憂國土, 1998. Image courtesy of Asia Art Center



2003 OPENASIA, 7th International Exhibition of Sculpture and Installations, Venice. Image courtesy of Asia Art Center

The Western Pure Land does exist but, since for the time being we live in this world, this is where we should concentrate our energies (although Sukhavati certainly acts as a perfect model for our activities).¹

1. Introduction

In *Taiwan's Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups*, David Schak and Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao (2005) highlighted a new religious phenomenon in Taiwan: the rise of socially engaged Buddhism, with Buddhist groups committed to working for the improvement of society and the well-being of the needy and the sick.² The tremendous expansion of Buddhism in Taiwan, especially in the category of a local socially engaged type, is termed *renjian fojiao* (人間佛教 which translates directly as “terrestrial” i.e. “this-world” Buddhism), or expressed as “engaged” or “socially engaged.” Another frequently used phrase is *rushi* (入世 “entering” or “being in” the world), in contrast to *chushi* (出世 “leaving the world”)—

1 Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 47–48.

2 David Schak & Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, “Taiwan's Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups,” *China Perspectives* no. 59 (May-June 2005): 43, accessed July 28, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/24052291>.

mirroring a belief that the Pure Land is this earth, and their goal to purify it.³

Renjian fojiao (人間佛教) originated from the teachings of Master Taixu (1889–1947), who used the term *rensheng fojiao* (人生佛教) in response to the decline of Chinese Buddhism as a result of the emphasis on funerary rites, and as a reminder on the importance of the living (*rensheng*) as a precious opportunity for enlightenment.⁴ Ven. Yinshun (1906–2005) preferred the term *renjian fojiao* (人間佛教) to stress the importance of not just the living but actively contribution to human society instead of over-indulging in worshipping the Buddha like a deity.⁵ Hence the terminology preference of “Humanistic Buddhism” redirects people’s attention from the other realms and lifetimes to present existence in this world. Sakyamuni Buddha was “no spirit or god but a person who was born in this world, cultivated himself in this world, and attained enlightenment in this world.”⁶

In *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization*, Stuart Chandler (2004) highlighted the Humanistic Buddhist viewpoint that has impacted Venerable Master Hsing Yun’s adoption of “establishing a pure land in the human realm” (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土) as Fo Guang Shan’s motto. It was in the footsteps of Master Taixu who first referenced the phrase, and in response to Ven. Yinshun’s in-depth exploration of concept.⁷ It was in the context of this overarching new religious phenomenon that Li Chen (b. 1963,

3 David Schak & Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, “Taiwan’s Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups,” 43.

4 Don A. Pittman, *Towards a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu’s Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2001), 169-181.

5 Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization*, 43.

6 *Ibid*, 43–44.

7 *Ibid*, 46.

Yunlin) was approached by a lay Buddhist practitioner searching for a humanistic expressions to work on his first Buddhist hall commission in 1987—which led on to other major Buddhist hall commissions. Li initially embarked on his journey of studying Buddhist sculpture via museum visits and then by reading Buddhist doctrines to engage on a more profound level.

1.1 New Portrayals and Representations in Response to a Pure Land in This World

In *Li Chen's 'New' Buddhist Sculptures*, Jason Chia Chi Wang (1999) proposed that doctrinal readings of religion that responds to the changes and needs of contemporary society may unlock innovative potentials for the portrayal and representations of religious art.⁸

Additionally, in *Towards a Modern Buddhist Hagiography: Telling the Life of Hsing Yun in Popular Media*, Jack Meng-Tat Chia (2015) presented something that is contrary to the traditional depictions of famous monks as “transcendental beings with superhuman powers and spiritual attainments.” Instead, Chia highlighted the impact of combining Mahayana and Humanistic Buddhist doctrines through the “informal and intimate” portrayals of Venerable Master Hsing Yun as a “worldling bodhisattva *fanfu pusa*” (凡夫菩薩)—“an earthly (human) monk with bodhisattva qualities including compassion and wisdom, who tries his best to propagate Buddhism and to create a ‘Pure Land on earth (this-worldly realm).’”⁹

8 Jason Chia Chi Wang, “Li Chen’s ‘New’ Buddhist Sculpture,” *Chinese Art News* (CANS) issue 12, 1999, No. 28, 60.

9 Jack Meng-Tat Chia, “Towards a Modern Buddhist Hagiography: Telling the Life of Hsing Yun in Popular Media,” *Asian Ethnology* vol. 74, no. 1 (2015): 141-142; 144, accessed September 8, 2019, <https://web-b-ebsohost.com.proxy.lib.sg/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?vid=11&sid=39807c4b-d38f-4fb3-b124-93bcf2520f08%40pdc-v-sessmgr03>

In *The Emergence of the Sahā Triad in Contemporary Taiwan: Iconic Representation and Humanistic Buddhism*, Zhiru (2000) argued that the Sahā Triad (*suopo sansheng* 娑婆三聖)—the configuration of Śākyamuni Buddha flanked by the bodhisattvas Avalokiteśvara (*Guanyin* 觀音) and Kṣitigarbha (*Dizang* 地藏)—is a new phenomenon that “appeared with no antecedent in Buddhist history” as an iconic representation for a contemporary Buddhism that “deemphasizes mythology and icon worship, insisting that bodhisattvas and buddhas are humanized figures, more to be emulated as models of behaviour, than to be worshipped for miraculous efficacy.”¹⁰

1.2 Exploring Li Chen's Innovative Expressions of Buddhas and Pure Lands

In this paper, I will explore contemporary artist Li Chen's expressions of buddhas and pure lands through his early art commissions at Kung-Ming School for the Buddhist Light International Association (BLIA) in Taichung, Taiwan 佛光山光明學苑 (**Fig. 1**) in 1995; and at Sun-Moon Light Semi-Conductor Company in Nantsu, Taiwan (**Fig. 2**) in 1997. It also explores Li's transition from his two buddhas created in 1997, *Maitreya* and *Amitābha* from *The Beauty of Emptiness* series (1992–1997), to his two generic buddha works in 1998, *All in One* and *Three Bodies of Buddha* (**Fig. 3**). Furthermore, it touches on Li Chen's expressions of Amitābha Buddha and his Pure Land from 1997 to 2007 (**Fig. 4**) across three series: *The Beauty of Emptiness* (1992–1997); *Energy of Emptiness* (1998–2000); and *Spiritual Journey through the Great Ether* (2001–).

10 Zhiru, “The Emergence of the Sahā Triad in Contemporary Taiwan: Iconic Representation and Humanistic Buddhism,” *Asia Major*, Third Series vol.13, no. 2 (2000): 83, 84, 86, accessed September 8, 2019, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41645563>



Figure 1: Li Chen’s 1995 Buddhist Hall Commission at Kung-Ming School for the Buddhist Light International Association (BLIA) in Taichung, Taiwan 佛光山光明學苑. Li was given a free hand to interpret the commission brief of creating a Buddhist Hall for the “Triad of the Western Direction” 西方三佛 the most popular triad in Chinese Buddhism, i.e. Buddha Amitābha, Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (觀世音菩薩), and Bodhisattva Mahāsthāmaprāpta (大勢至菩薩) who presides over the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss 西方極樂世界. Image courtesy of Asia Art Center

It examines Li’s interpretations of Amitābha’s role of leading and guiding beings to Western Pure Land in *Amitābha* 接引 (1997); his holding of a lotus which identifies him in *Amitābha Buddha* 阿彌 (1998); Amitābha’s action of leading and guiding beings to the Western Pure Land in *Amitābha* 西來 (1998); and state of bliss in his Pure Land in *Pure Land* 無憂國土 (1998) (**Fig. 5**). Li Chen’s humanized expressions of Pure Land in the Buddha Realm and the Human Realm in his contemporary art practice in 1998 *Pure Land* 無憂國土 from the *Energy of Emptiness: Boundary within Boundary* (1998–2000) 虛空中的能量 series; and 2002 *Float to Sukhavati* 飛行樂土 from the *Spiritual Journey through the Great Ether* (2001–) 大氣神遊 series (**Fig. 6**). In an attempt to answer the question how has a contemporary artist’s expressions of buddhas and pure lands evolved in response the establishment of Pure Land in the Human Realm? And if the subject focus makes a major shift from Superhuman to Human... Is this still considered Buddhist art?

2. Buddhas & Pure Lands in Li Chen's Buddhist Commissions & Early Art Practice

Li Chen's expression of buddhas and pure lands began unexpectedly in 1987 with his first Buddhist hall commission, which led to other major commissions including one at the Kung-Ming School for the Buddha's Light International Association 佛光山光明學苑 in 1995 (**Fig. 1**); and at the Sun-Moon Light Semi-Conductor Company in Nan-tsu, Taiwan 日光半導體楠梓大樓佛堂 in 1997 (**Fig. 2**). At the same time, Li also started exploring the theme of buddhas and pure lands in his early art practice through his dialogue with the Buddhist art tradition in his series *Beauty of Emptiness* (1992–1997) via two significant work from 1997—*Maitreya* 未來佛 and *Amitabha* 接引 (1997).

2.1 Buddha Triads & Pure Lands Buddhist Hall Commissions

Interestingly, both art pieces for the Kung-Ming School for the Buddha's Light International Association 佛光山光明學苑 in 1995 (**refer to Fig. 1**); and the Sun-Moon Light Semi-Conductor Company in Nan-tsu, Taiwan 日光半導體楠梓大樓佛堂 in 1997 (**Fig. 2**) were made at a time Li Chen was torn between “innovation and self-expression” and the “restriction of expression in the canon of Buddhist art tradition”—he was searching for his own language of expression in his art.¹¹ Li Chen accepted the Amitabha and Medicine Buddha triad commissions on the understanding that he would not be bound by traditional convention and would have a free hand in the creative expression of the Western and Eastern Pure Land respectively.¹²

In the process of negotiating for the freedom of artistic expression for the Kung-Ming School Buddhist hall commission, Li corresponded directly with Venerable Master Hsing Yun who was in Hsi Lai Temple, Los Angeles at that time. Li Chen was

11 Jason Chia Chi Wang, “Li Chen's ‘New’ Buddhist Sculpture,” 60.

12 Li Chen, telephone interview by Tan Hwee Koon, August 22, 2019.



Figure 2: Li Chen's 1997 Buddhist Hall Commission at Sun-Moon Light Semi-Conductor Company in Nantsu, Taiwan. Li Chen was given a free hand to interpret the Medicine Buddha flanked by Sun Light Bodhisattva (Sūryaprabha; *riguang bianzhao* 日光边照), as a representative of the *prajñā* (wisdom) light, and Moon Light Bodhisattva (Candrapabha; *yueguang bianzhao* 月光边照) as representative of the *karūna* (wisdom) light. <https://news.tvbs.com.tw/entry/343033>

surprised and moved by Venerable Master Hsing Yun's unconventional openness and acceptance of new Buddhist art concepts for the Buddhist Hall commission.¹³

In both Buddhist hall commissions, Li Chen adopted a similar concept of having the Pure Land Triad at the background altar, a central wall of buddhas in the background, and flanking side walls of 108 arhats in various expressions. In the Kung-Ming School commission, Amitābha Buddha is assisted by two bodhisattvas in his Pure Land: Avalokiteśvara, who embodies the spirit of compassion; and Mahāsthāmaprāpta (大勢至菩薩), who embodies the essence of wisdom. On the other hand, in the commission for the Sun-Moon Light Semi-Conductor Company, Medicine Buddha is flanked by Sun Light Bodhisattva (Sūryaprabha; *riguang bianzhao* 日光边照), who represents *prajñā* (wisdom) light; and Moon Light Bodhisattva (Candrapabha; *yueguang bianzhao* 月光边照) who represents *karūna* (wisdom) light. In the foreground altar table in both commissions, Li Chen adopts the aniconic expressions of a Dharma wheel in the center, flanked by an elephant and lion on each side—suggesting the Sakyamuni Triad with Sakyamuni Buddha in the center, and Samantabhadra and Manjusri riding on their respective animal vehicles on either side.

13 Jason Chia Chi Wang, "Li Chen's 'New' Buddhist Sculpture," 66.

2.2 Early Study of Pure Land Buddhas Form

Maitreya (1997) and *Amitabha* (1997) are the only two buddhas amongst predominantly bodhisattva-themed artworks from Li Chen's *Beauty of Emptiness* series (1992–1997)—his early exploration of pure land related buddha forms. Both works were exhibited in public for the first time in Li Chen's recent solo exhibition at the Aurora Museum, Shanghai 震旦博物館 titled *Through the Ages—Li Chen Solo Exhibition* 股王今來李真個展. Each with a “silhouette outline of an unadorned lightly clad Buddha body defined by simple lines”; “a rounder Buddha head with less prominent usnīsa”; and his early experimentations with introducing “chi”—it could be read as Li's homage and dialogue with the great Buddhist sculpture tradition of the Northern dynasties.¹⁴

The significance of both *Maitreya* (1997) and *Amitabha* (1997) in Li Chen's art practice is the evolvement of his mature, simplified, and stylized buddhas inflated with chi exemplified by *All in One*, (1998), his generic Buddha form (refer to Fig 3). In *Three Bodies of Buddha* (1998), each of the buddhas in the triad look exactly like the generic *Buddha All in One* (1998). They are only differentiated by the object they hold respectively—Sakaymuni Buddha in the center; Amitabha Buddha on his right; and Medicine Buddha on his left (refer to Fig 3).

3. Contemporary Articulations of Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss

Li Chen has played with the various expressions of Amitabha Buddha and the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss in seven works across three series (Fig. 4). At the same time, Li has articulated Amitabha

14 Tan Hwee Koon, “From the Buddha Realm to the Human Realm: A Self-Taught Buddhist Sculptor's Contemporary Interpretations of Buddhist Art Tradition and Doctrine” (unpublished essay for *Through the Ages—Li Chen Solo Exhibition Catalogue*, Aurora Museum, Shanghai).

Buddhas

Beauty of Emptiness series
(1992-1997)



Maitreya
未來佛 (1997)



Amitābha
接引 (1997)



Energy of Emptiness series
(1998-2000)



All in One
合十 (1998)



Three Bodies Of Buddha
三覺者 (1998)

Figure 3: Li Chen's Transition from two 1997 works *Maitreya* and *Amitābha* from *The Beauty of Emptiness series* (1992–1997) were exhibited in public for the first time at the *Through the Ages—Li Chen Solo Exhibition* at the Aurora Museum, Shanghai (2018–2019) to his two 1998 generic Buddhas works *All in One* and *Three Bodies of Buddha* (Sakyamuni Buddha in the middle; flanked by Amitābha Buddha on left, and Medicine Buddha on right). Images courtesy of Asia Art Center

Buddha and the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss (**Fig. 5**) creatively through interpreting the buddha's role, object, and action, as well as the state of bliss in his Pure Land.

Li Chen also pushed the boundaries of his interpretations of the Pure Land from the buddha realm to the human realm in *Pure Land* (1998) and *Sukhavati* (2002) (**Fig. 6**). The theme of Pure Land has played a significant role in Li Chen's contemporary art practice, which took off in early 2000 as he retreated from his thriving Buddhist hall commissions to focus on contemporary art.

3.1 From Conveying Amitabha Buddha's Religious Role & Identity to Pure Land's State of Bliss

Li Chen has consistently explored and experimented with the articulations of Amitabha Buddha and his Pure Land from 1997 to

Beauty of Emptiness series
(1992-1997)



Amitabha 接引(1997)

Energy of Emptiness series (1998-2000)



Amitabha Buddha 彌陀 (1998)



Pure Land 無憂國土 (1998)



Amitabha 西來 (1998)



Amitayus 無量佛 (1998)

Spiritual Journey Through the Great Ether series (2001-)



Float to Sukhavati 飛行樂土 (2002)



Elysium Buddha 西風佛來 (2007)

2001 (**Fig. 4**) across three series: *Beauty of Emptiness* (1992–1997); *Energy of Emptiness* (1998–2000), and *Spiritual Journey through the Great Ether* (2001–).

Amitabha 接引 (1997) from the *Beauty of Emptiness* series (1992–1997) represents Li’s dialogue and engagement with traditional and early interpretations of his generic Buddha form through Amitabha Buddha’s role of leading/guiding sentient beings to his Western Pure Land.

Li Chen arrived at his generic simple stylized Buddha form inflated with “chi” in the *Energy of Emptiness* series (1998–2000). Li Chen created three images of Amitabha Buddha and one Pure Land artwork (**Fig. 4**) in 1998: *Amitabha Buddha* 彌陀, *Amitabha* 西來, *Amitayus* 無量佛, and *Pure Land* 無憂國土. This was all within the same year for his first solo art exhibition that was held in 1999. Li Chen differentiated the otherwise generic looking *Amitabha Buddha* 彌陀 from other buddhas by the object the buddha holds in his hand—a lotus (**Fig. 5**). In *Amitabha* 西來, Li expressed Amitabha Buddha’s action of leading/guiding to the Western Pure Land by “physically scooping the devotees” with his extended left hand and open palm (**Fig. 5**). Last but not least, Li Chen’s creative expression of Amitabha’s state of bliss in the Western Pure Land can be seen through his generic simplified stylized image of the Buddha, who is in a relaxed pose with outstretched arms and crossed legs in his “land of no worries” (**Fig. 5**).

In the *Spiritual Journey through the Great Ether* series (2001–), Li Chen’s expressions of Amitabha Buddha in his Pure Land take on an even more playful twist in *Float to Sukhavati* 飛行樂土 (2002) and *Elysium Buddha* 西風佛來 (2007). The Buddha is depicted sleeping on a bed of clouds on top of the mountain, or levitating sideways above the mountain peak (**Fig 4**).

Figure 4 (left): Li Chen’s expressions of Amitabha Buddha and Pure Land from 1997 to 2007 across three series: *Beauty of Emptiness* (1992-1997); *Energy of Emptiness* (1998-2000); and *Spiritual Journey through the Great Ether* (2001–). Images courtesy of Asia Art Center

3.2 Major Shift from Expressions of Pure Land in the Buddha Realm to the Human Realm

The title of Li Chen's artwork, *Pure Land*, may have religious connotations. The name of Amitābha's world in Sanskrit is *Sukhāvātī* ("blissful land"). It is translated into Chinese as *jingtu* 淨土 ("pure land") and also means "to purify the land" (Fig. 6), while *wuyiu guotu* 無憂國土 translates directly to "land of no worries" which resonates universally across cultures and borders. An inflated simple stylised Buddha figure is seen levitating in a gravity defying position facing upwards. It is a delicate state of balance of being pivoted on a mountain peak with outstretched arms downwards and legs crossed upwards in a relaxed state in "the other world."

On the other hand, the Chinese title of Li Chen's 2002 *Float to Sukhavati* 飛行樂土 (Fig. 6) literally translates to "flying to land of bliss." Perhaps inspired by a scenario somewhere closer in "this world," Li Chen was unable to sleep properly during an overnight stay in the mountains and at day break. It depicts a tired Li yearning for a good night's sleep on the light fluffy clouds he saw floating on top of the mountains. Upon closer observations, the protagonist in *Pure Land* has made a major shift from superhuman to human in *Float to Sukhavati*—from Li Chen's inflated simple stylized Buddha figure with less prominent *uṣṇīṣā* to his child-like round head human figure. This perhaps hints that Pure Land is no longer far away in the Western direction but within reach in this world here and now.

3.3 The Significance of Pure Land in Li Chen's International Art Practice

Both *Pure Land* 無憂國土 (1998) from the *Energy of Emptiness: Boundary within Boundary* (1998–2000) 虛空中的能量 series and *Float to Sukhavati* 飛行樂土 (2002) from the *Spiritual Journey through the Great Ether series* (2001–) 大氣神遊 (Fig. 6)

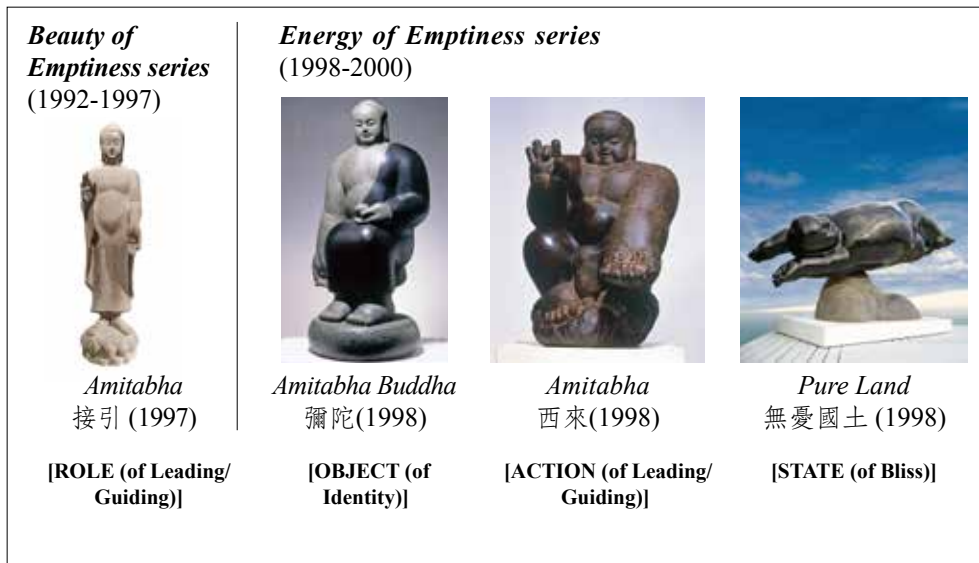


Figure 5: Li Chen's Expressions of Amitabha through his role (of leading/guiding to the Western Pure Land); object (of the lotus he holds identifying him); action (of leading/guiding); and state (of bliss in his Pure Land). Images courtesy of Asia Art Center

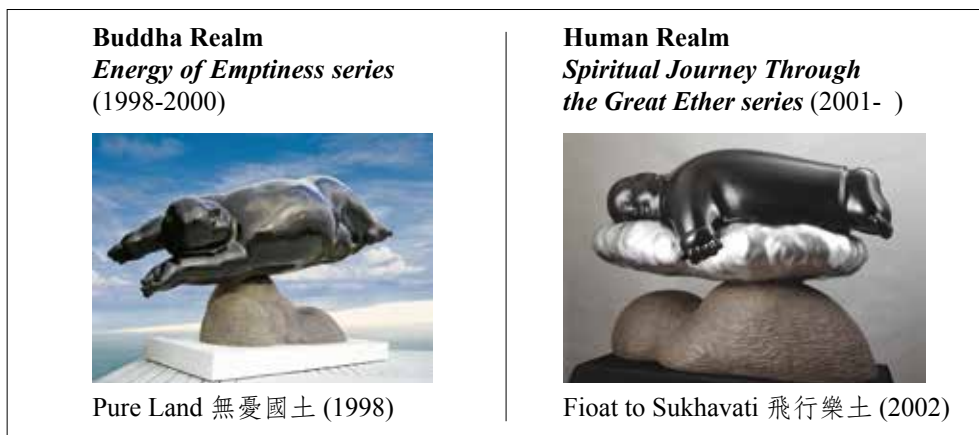


Figure 6: Li Chen's Humanistic Expressions of of Pure Land in the Buddha Realm and the Human Realm

have marked important milestones in Li Chen's contemporary art practice. *Pure Land* 無憂國土 (1998) is a representative artwork from Li Chen's first solo art exhibition titled, *Energy of Emptiness* in 1999 that landmarked his major transition from self-taught Buddhist sculptor to contemporary artist. It was featured on the front cover of the *Chinese Art News* (CANS) issue 12, 1999, No.28 with Wang's highlight of the terms 'new' and 'modern' Buddhist sculpture that Li Chen used to describe his artworks.¹⁵

Pure Land propelled Li Chen into the international art scene with its debut at *China Without Borders* at Sotheby's New York in 2000 and *OPENASIA, 7th International Exhibition of Sculptures and Installations* at Venice in 2004. Both *Pure Land* and *Sukhavati* were the highlights of Li Chen's first major solo outdoor sculpture exhibition in Asia titled, *Li Chen: Mind. Body. Spirit* at the Singapore Art Museum in 2009—placed next to each other at the campus green site in front of the National Museum, Singapore. The inaugural major sculpture exhibition in Singapore led on to the siting of Li Chen's outdoor sculptures in Taipei and Paris at the Chiang Kai-shek Memorial Hall and Place Vendome—both prominent historical landmarks.

4. Conclusion

A chance encounter with a patron searching for a more humanized expression of Buddhist art form embarked Li Chen (a sculptor with modernist background) on his humble self-taught journey exploring the theme of buddhas and their pure lands. Subsequently, Li Chen's career of Buddhist hall commission took off in response to a new demand for a more Humanistic Buddhist art representation. This coincided with the rapid expansion of a type of Buddhism termed *renjian fojiao* (人間佛教)—with the conviction

15 Jason Chia Chi Wang, "Li Chen's 'New' Buddhist Sculpture," 60.

that “Pure Land is in this earth, and the goal to purify it.”¹⁶ It was a redirection of people’s focus from “other realms and lifetimes to the present existence in this world” and following Sakyamuni Buddha’s footsteps—a person (not god) born in this world, who practised and achieved enlightenment in this world.¹⁷ As such, this influenced Venerable Master Hsing Yun in his adoption of Fo Guang Shan’s motto of “establishing a pure land in the human realm” (*renjian jingtu* 人間淨土).¹⁸

In the process of negotiating for more artistic freedom of expression for the Triad of the Western Pure Land for the Buddhist hall commission at the Kung-Ming School for the Buddha’s Light International 佛光山光明學苑 in 1995, Li Chen was in direct contact with Venerable Master Hsing Yun at Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Temple 佛光山西來寺 in Los Angeles. Venerable Master Hsing Yun is an exemplification of Li Chen’s new Buddhist art patron with his “unconventional openness and acceptance of new ideas,” allowing Li to break free from the shackles of tradition to express his personal interpretations of buddhas and pure lands with his innovative approaches (**Fig. 1**).

Interestingly, Li Chen named his 1998 Amitabha artwork *xi lai* 西來, a depiction of Amitabha Buddha via the action of leading/guiding to the Western Pure Land by “physically scooping the devotees” (**Fig. 5**). Perhaps a word play of the Chinese, which has both the connotations of “Coming from the West” or “Coming to the West”¹⁹ depending on the context whether it is the direction of

16 David Schak & Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao, “Taiwan’s Socially Engaged Buddhist Groups,” *China Perspectives* no. 59 (May-June 2005): 43, accessed July 28, 2019, <http://www.jstor.org.proxy.lib.sg/stable/24052291>

17 Ibid, 43–44.

18 Ibid, 46.

19 “About Hsi Lai,” Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Temple—International Buddhist Progressive Society, accessed Oct 17, 2019, <http://www.hsilai.org/en/hlt/>

the Western Pure Land or making references to Fo Guang Shan Hsi Lai Temple 佛光山西來寺 and University of the West 西來大學, the phenomenal expansion of Humanistic Buddhist to the West.

The early Buddhist hall commissions led to Li Chen's early inquiry of pure land buddha forms in 1997, as seen from the only two Buddha theme works from *The Beauty of Emptiness* series (1992–1997): *Maitreya* 未來佛 (1997) and *Amitabha* 接引 (1997). Evolving from the two early prototypes, Li arrived at his generic mature simplified stylized Buddhas inflated with “chi” epitomized by *All in One*, 1998 (Fig. 3).

From 1997 to 2007, Li actively pursued the specific theme of Amitabha Buddha and the most blissful world in his contemporary art practice through seven artworks across three series (refer to Fig. 4)—*Amitabha* 接引 (1997); *Amitabha Buddha* 彌陀 (1998); *Amitabha* 西來 (1998); *Amitayus* 無量佛 (1998); *Pure Land* 無憂國土 (1998); *Float to Sukhavati* 飛行樂土 (2002); and *Elysium Buddha* 西風佛來 (2007). The significance of *Pure Land* (1998) and *Float to Sukhavati* (2002) is the major shift in subject focus from superhuman to human in Li Chen's art, transcending from his previous style of a simplified Buddha relaxing in a gravity defying state in the Pure Land of “the other world” to a child-like figure sleeping face downwards under the pull of gravity on a comfortable bed of clouds in Pure Land on “this earth” or “this world.” The transformation from superhuman to human may have evolved in response to the new Humanistic Buddhism phenomenon as an iconic representation for “a contemporary Buddhism that demystifies idol veneration, upholding that bodhisattva and buddhas are humanized figures to be emulated as models of behavior.”²⁰

For Li Chen, doctrinal interpretations of religion in reaction to the vicissitudes and demands of a contemporary society might have

20 Zhiru, “The Emergence of the Sahā Triad in Contemporary Taiwan: Iconic Representation and Humanistic Buddhism,” 83, 84, 86.

allowed “new possibilities for the portrayal and representations of religious art”—in both his Buddhist hall commissions and his art practice.²¹ The “informal and intimate” portrayal of a child-like round headed figure in *Float to Sukhavati* (2002) reverberated to a certain extent with the portrayal of Venerable Master Hsing Yun as a human realm or “worldling” bodhisattva *fanfu pusa* 凡夫菩薩, i.e. an earthly (human) monk with bodhisattva qualities including compassion and wisdom who tries to create a “Pure Land on earth (this-worldly realm).”²²

In conclusion, Li Chen has pushed the boundaries of the artistic expressions beyond those of conventional Buddhist art to a more personal interpretation responding to the needs of a new religious phenomenon. Not only that, but he has also transcended religious art with his innovative transformation from the superficial depiction of Amitabha Buddha in his role or identity, into the portrayal of both the mental and physical state of bliss in Pure Land (**Fig. 5**)—one that would resonate across cultures and borders. In the process, Li Chen found a unique artistic voice in his contemporary art practice that is local and yet resonates with an international contemporary art audience as well.

21 Jason Chia Chi Wang, “Li Chen’s ‘New’ Buddhist Sculpture,” 60.

22 Jack Meng-Tat Chia, “Towards a Modern Buddhist Hagiography: Telling the Life of Hsing Yun in Popular Media,” 141–142; 144.