

Humanistic Buddhism and Contemporary Chinese Art



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“The founder of Buddhism, Sakyamuni Buddha, was not a god but simply a human being. The uniqueness of Buddhism lies in that it was founded by a human being, that is why it is called Humanistic Buddhism.”

— Venerable Master Hsing Yun¹

“After returning to China, I had a deeper understanding of tradition and religion, which come from ordinary life. I discovered incense ash, door panels, ox hide... New inspirations constantly came to me. Tradition is the body of a race, and religion is its spirit.”

— Zhang Huan²

Introduction

As we enter into the third decade of the twenty-first century, at least two observations can be made. On the one hand, the human condition faces its own extinction as artificial intelligence and climate change substitute basic human habits and habitats. These substitutions simulate—but can arguably never replace—natural human ones. It is not surprising, then, that fundamental aspects of the human world buried by progress into the ashcan of history have risen from the dead. The current renewal of human tribalism and authoritarian systems challenge assumptions of what “progress” and “modernity” as defined by Western Enlightenment is and can be.³ Indeed, cultural critics have discussed the phenomenon of

1 Venerable Master Hsing Yun, *Humanistic Buddhism: Holding True to the Original Intents of the Buddha*, translated by Venerable Miao Guang (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2016), ii.

2 Yilmaz Dziewior, et.al., *Zhang Huan* (London: Phaidon, 2009), 123.

3 Louis Dupré, *The Enlightenment and the Intellectual Foundations of Modern Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

postmodernity as characterizing the late twentieth century.⁴ Can we speak of neo-tradition and post-progress as veins running through the early twenty-first century? We clearly feel the pulse of these veins, but remain unsure of their paths or purpose.

This essay is a preliminary examination of new religions and contemporary art as dominant veins in the pulse of the twenty-first century. Religion and art are pillars of the human condition, yet their autonomy and authenticity are particularly threatened by the market forces of late capitalism and the accelerating realities of the anthropocene.⁵ These threats may be the impetus for the resurgence of religion and art within academic discourse as well as everyday practice in our current time. Given the limited space of this essay, the full implications of religion and art in the twenty-first century are not explored here, but rather indexed as expanding ripples for future research. The outside ripples touch upon Humanistic Buddhism as an expression of twenty-first century religion, and Contemporary Art as the pre-eminent form of visuality within today's art world.⁶ The ripples closer to the center resonate with Fo Guang Shan, a Taiwanese Buddhist order with global reach,

4 Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992).

5 Simon L. Lewis and Mark A. Maslin, *The Human Planet, How We Created the Anthropocene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2018).

6 On the definitions and problematics of defining and translating "Humanistic Buddhism," see Don Pittman, *Toward a Modern Chinese Buddhism: Taixu's Reforms* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2001), Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), and Miao Guang, "Interpreting the 'Humanistic' in *Renjian Fojiao* (人間佛教) as Advocated by Venerable Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guang Shan," in *Humanistic Buddhism and Contemporary Society* (Kaohsiung: Fo Guang Cultural Enterprise, 2019). The literature on contemporary art is vast. For a concise introduction, see Terry Barret, *Why is that Art: Aesthetics and Criticism of Contemporary Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

and the work of Zhang Huan, an important contemporary Chinese artist working on a global scale. The connection between religion and art is particularly relevant in the cases of Fo Guang Shan, the temple, and Zhang Huan, the artist. For example, Venerable Master Hsing Yun (b. 1927), the founder of Fo Guang Shan (founded, 1967), strongly believes in the important role of art in Humanistic Buddhism, as evidenced by its recent publication of the *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Art* in English.⁷ Also, consider the vast Buddha Museum located in the main temple campus in Kaohsiung, Taiwan, and the incorporation of art galleries into its satellite temples around the world. Zhang Huan (b. 1965) is also notable as a contemporary artist that has not only practiced Buddhism for most of his adult life, but one that has made deliberate efforts to incorporate Buddhist meanings into his monumental and spectacular installations and performances.

And at the center, where the stone breaks the water to cause the first ripple, is the focus of this essay, *Pagoda* (2009), a work by Zhang Huan that expands out to consider the relationship between Humanistic Buddhism and contemporary Chinese art, as well as the role of Buddhism within the practices of contemporary life (Figs. 1, 2). And while we continue to process what defines contemporary life during a time of unimaginable technological change and human pressure, three factors emerge as era defining: environmental disasters, the need for visual spectacle, and a growing awareness that spirituality is about to be swallowed by an all-consuming capitalism. All three factors are also fundamentally related to Humanistic Buddhism and contemporary art; it is also a relationship that is explored here in this essay.

7 Hsing Yun, editor, consultant, *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Art* in 20 Volumes (Los Angeles: Buddha's Light Publications, 2016).



Fig. 1. Zhang Huan, *Pagoda*, 2009, gray brick, steel, taxidermy pig, 264 x 335 inches (670 x 850 cm) installation view, Blum and Poe, Los Angeles (artwork © Zhang Huan Studio, photograph © Joshua White)



Fig. 2. Zhang Huan, detail of pig in *Pagoda*, 2009, gray brick, steel, taxidermy pig, 264 x 335 inches (670 x 850 cm) (artwork © Zhang Huan Studio, photograph © Joshua White)

***Pagoda* (2009)**

This essay begins with one of the major environmental disasters of the early twenty-first century, the 7.9-magnitude earthquake that hit a mountainous region of Sichuan on May 12, 2008. The human toll stands at over 87,000 dead and almost 18,000 missing, with an estimated 5,000 students losing their lives in the ruins of collapsed schools.⁸ The disaster was so devastating that many around the world wanted to help. This included Venerable Master Hsing Yun, who instructed Fo Guang Shan to establish relief efforts at the earthquake site. These efforts are prominently commemorated by a display in the Buddha Museum at Fo Guang Shan, which states:

On May 12, 2008, a large earthquake shook Wenchuan County of Sichuan Province, China. Venerable Master Hsing Yun instructed Fo Guang Shan to establish humanitarian relief centers at the disaster areas to ensure that victims can have access to spiritual consolation for the loss of loved ones.⁹

The connection between environmental disaster and spiritual consolation is also present in *Pagoda*, a Buddhism-inspired sculpture completed in 2009 by Zhang Huan, among the most important and well-known contemporary Chinese artists working in the world today. As such, Zhang Huan and his work are powerful vehicles to bring Buddhist art and ideas into one of the most interconnected and global forms of communication today, which is the language of contemporary art. This is because contemporary art has become

8 Bin Xu, *The Politics of Compassion: The Sichuan Earthquake and Civic Engagement in China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2017).

9 Translation after the display in the Venerable Master Hsing Yun's biographical gallery, Buddha Museum, Fo Guang Shan, Kaohsiung, Taiwan.

part of the language of the internet, of social media, of international travel, and of the global art market. So, if a fundamental definition of Humanistic Buddhism is the integration of Buddhist belief, culture, and art into the highs and lows of contemporary human existence, then I would argue that the presence of similar concerns in Zhang Huan's *Pagoda* render it not only a work of contemporary Chinese art, but a work of "Humanistic Buddhist contemporary Chinese art."

Arguably, a central element of *Pagoda* that resonates with principles of Humanistic Buddhism is the pig that pokes its head from a hole carved into the brick structure. In Chinese culture, the pig is an essential part of human life, with the character for home/family, or *jia* (家), represented as a pig under a roof. Zhang Huan has stated that this stuffed pig references an actual farm animal that subsisted for forty-nine days on rainwater and rotten wood in the rubble of the Sichuan Earthquake. Within the environment of Chinese social media, this pig quickly "went viral" and was nicknamed Zhu Gang Qiang (豬剛強), or Pig Steel Strength. The public embraced it as a symbol of heroic survival. The unusual placement of the humble pig within the sacred form of a Buddhist pagoda now makes sense. In Zhu Gang Qiang's forty-nine days of survival, Zhang Huan found resonance with the forty-nine days of purgatory in traditional Chinese Buddhism. It is important to note that Buddhist purgatory is not hell, but rather, the period between death and the six paths of rebirth; which include hell dwellers, hungry ghosts, animals, humans, demi-gods, and gods. Notably, between the extreme poles of hell dwellers at the bottom and gods at the top are the middle strata of humans and animals. Chinese Buddhist purgatory can last from forty-nine days to three years depending on the ritual.

The close relationship between humans and animals have frequently been used to expound upon Buddhist principles in both texts and images. In particular, Buddhist narratives use this

relationship to demonstrate the interconnectedness of sentient beings and to illustrate the laws of karma, in which a human being in this life could have been an animal in a previous life. For example, in visual representations of the Buddha's life, a white elephant appears as a symbol of the miraculous conception of Sakyamuni in the womb of his mother. Likewise, Sakyamuni's horse, Kantaka, stands indirectly for the great departure of Prince Siddhartha from his palace in early Indian Buddhist art. The presence of animals is even more prominent in images of the Buddha's previous lives, or *jātaka* tales, that provide a stimulus for human compassion, thereby improving karma and subsequent rebirths. An example of the former would be the *jātaka* of Prince Mahasattva, when the prince offers the flesh of his own body to feed a starving tigress and her cubs. An example of the latter would be the *jātaka* of the Nine-Colored Deer, when the Buddha was a deer with a beautiful coat. A hunter that the deer had saved from drowning would eventually betray the deer by killing it to present its coat to the ruler as a gift. The kindness and self-sacrifice of the deer illustrates how Buddha-nature is present in all beings, including animals.

The above examples attest to the close connection between animals and humans in traditional Buddhist art, but Zhang Huan also incorporates this tradition into the themes of contemporary art, which has also used animals to reflect upon social phenomena and the nature of art in the twenty-first century.¹⁰ In the case of Zhang Huan, Zhu Gang Qiang's will to live supports the artist's longstanding belief that he, himself, is an artist/dragon perpetually

10 For example, consider the controversial video by Sun Yuan and Peng Yu, *Dogs That Cannot Touch Each Other* (2003), in which harnessed fighting dogs lunge at each other on treadmills; or *The Physical Impossibility of Death in the Mind of Someone Living* (1991) by Damien Hirst, in which a shark is suspended in formaldehyde within a see-through glass case.

striving against social and political currents in order to improve the lives of the Chinese people. The development of this belief coincides with the artist's thirty-year engagement with Buddhist forms and concepts. This spiritual journey began with the folk Buddhist practices of a rural childhood in Anyang, then continued with his formal eight-year study of Zen meditation in New York after he moved to the United States, and finally culminated with his official ordination as a lay follower of Tibetan Buddhism in 2006 after he had returned to live and work in Shanghai. In this way, Zhang Huan's spiritual journey parallels the spiritual journey of many Chinese Buddhists today, who are introduced to basic Buddhist ideas in the informal environment of family life and folk practice, who then advance into independent study, who then, perhaps, develop into a formal acknowledgement of Buddhist identity through ordination.

However, while *Pagoda* is clearly informed by the artist's personal spiritual beliefs in compassion, impermanence, and interconnectedness, the work is nonetheless restrained by the public political narratives that frame both religion and the environment in China. For example, the constitution of China explicitly states that: "no one may make use of religion to engage in activities that disrupt public order."¹¹ With its references to the Sichuan earthquake, *Pagoda* clearly possesses the potential to "disrupt public order," yet its exhibition was allowed in China and the United States. Are the religious and political references in Zhang Huan's *Pagoda* so personal to the artist that they flew under the radar? Does this combination of the spiritual and the political constitute something that might be called Humanistic Buddhist Contemporary Chinese Art? And perhaps just as importantly, what is a pig doing in a pagoda anyway?

11 Winston Kyan, "The Buddhist Resistance of Zhang Huan's *Pagoda*," in *Art Journal Open*, October 16, 2018. <https://artjournal.collegeart.org/?p=10012>.

To consider the last question first, the taxidermy pig plays with the historical meaning of relics as the body parts of holy beings that are both dead and alive, and it is this ambiguous status of relics that humans typically fear in the remains of other humans—not in the leftover parts of animals.¹² For Zhu Gang Qiang to become a relic, then, the pig needed to become human, or at least, more humanistic. The making of Zhu Gang Qiang into something more humanistic increased considerably when Zhang Huan expressed his desire to adopt the pig, which set off a public debate on whether Zhu Gang Qiang belonged to the farmer, the local community, or the state. Giving new meaning to the idea of art as commodity, the farmer was ultimately allowed to sell the pig to the artist in exchange for a new house. Shortly thereafter, the artist quickly transformed Zhu Gang Qiang from local earthquake survivor to global art world superstar.

This international dissemination of Buddhist ideas through contemporary art began with a show entitled *Zhu Gang Qiang* in 2009 at one of London's most high-profile galleries, White Cube. For several weeks, the Chinese pig appeared in a projected live video feed from Shanghai, while his imagined British girlfriend Oxford Flower roamed the actual space of the London gallery. In another section of the gallery, numerous ash paintings of Zhu Gang Qiang were displayed. Zhang Huan's ash paintings are among the most powerful expressions of his religious sincerity, since they are made through the meticulous application of incense ash gathered daily from local Buddhist temples in Shanghai. The collected ash is then sorted into tonal gradations, and then meticulously applied to canvas to give the appearance of traditional Chinese ink painting on paper. Since British health regulations prevented a live Chinese pig from roaming the public space of an art gallery, Zhang Huan

¹² Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

used this travel ban to construct an internet romance between the male pig in Shanghai and the female pig in London, which was recorded as a text dialog in the accompanying catalog to the exhibition. A particularly humanizing exchange between the two lovers relates to the revelation that the female pig, who was named Oxford Flower, had a child from a previous union:

Oxford Flower: I already have a child. Do you mind? When I was in high school. I didn't know any better. I fell for this hot guy. He was the captain of the football team. I ended up having his kid. Later he went to play for Madrid Real and now he's a huge star. He left me and his kid behind. You're a real man. You have a sense of family.

Gang Qiang: Of course, I mind! I didn't plant those seeds!! Send me a photo of your kid. I'll take a look... Well, the child does look really obedient.

Oxford Flower: He looks a little like you.

Gang Qiang: If people didn't know, they might think he was my own child. Not bad.¹³

Sadly, Zhu Gang Qiang died shortly after the close of the White Cube exhibit, but his spirit lived on in the artist's next project as the heart of *Pagoda*, and its display in a major exhibition entitled *49 Days* in 2011 at Blum and Poe, Los Angeles. Thus, we see the contemporary transmission of Buddhism as traveling along the internet and the art market, two of the most active routes of the Silk Road of the twenty-first century. Through Zhu Gang Qiang, Buddhist art traveled from Sichuan, to Shanghai, to London, to Los Angeles. Notably, in the 2011 exhibition at Blum and Poe, *Pagoda*

13 Zhang Huan and Susannah Hyman, *Zhu Gang Qiang* (London: White Cube / Zhang Huan Studio, 2009), 27-28.

was exhibited alongside a set of sculptures made from similar gray bricks. These comprised eleven pigs and skulls that corresponded with the expanded iconography of purgatory in medieval China, which roughly dates from the third to tenth centuries. I have argued elsewhere that *49 Days* reflects a Chinese Buddhist view of death and rebirth, in which the eleven brick sculptures of pigs and skulls would accord with the Ten Kings (十王) and the Bodhisattva Ksitigarbha, or Dizang (地藏), that presided over the courts of purgatory.¹⁴ The first seven kings would meet the deceased every seven days for a total of forty-nine days, then the eighth king would meet the deceased on the hundredth day, the ninth king would meet the deceased on the first-year anniversary after death, and the tenth king would meet the deceased on the third-year anniversary after death. In case the accumulated decisions of the Ten Kings were not favorable to the rebirth of the deceased, Ksitigarbha would appear as the “eleventh king” as a savior of last resort. The presence of *Pagoda* in this exhibition arguably stands as the result of rebirth, a state that blurs the status of animals and humans as well as the lines between memory and impermanence. Just as importantly, this exhibit situates the work of Zhang Huan into a long-standing debate in Chinese Buddhism, which centers on the importance of ancestor worship in making Indian Buddhism into a distinctively Chinese religion. That is, while Indian beliefs in purgatory lasted only one year, the Chinese extension to three years allowed a filial child to fulfill his traditional Chinese duties of performing funerary rituals for deceased parents for three years.

Conclusion

Belief in the Ten Kings and Dizang also included belief that the judgements by the Ten Kings could be influenced by Buddhist donations made by children on behalf of their deceased parents. As

¹⁴ Winston Kyan, *Zhang Huan: 49 Days* (Los Angeles: Blum and Poe, 2012).

noted above, this integration of Buddhist beliefs with filial piety is a distinctive characteristic of Chinese Buddhism. It is also a distinctive aspect of Humanistic Buddhism as envisioned by Venerable Master Hsing Yun. Notably, the exhibit in the Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum devoted to Venerable Master Hsing Yun's life begins with the Venerable Master's mother and his filial devotion to her. Upon entering into the biographical gallery, the viewer immediately sees a half-length portrait of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's mother. The painting is executed in a realistic manner with a Western oil painting technique. The figure is dressed simply in a gray tunic; her white hair is brushed back neatly; her arms come down together at her waist to hold a rosary. But it is the face that captures the viewer's attention. If Buddha images are represented with their eyes downcast in a state of deep meditation, this portrait of a human bodhisattva looks upon the viewer with an expression of radiating love and compassion. The nature of the portrait and its presence at the entrance to the biographical gallery implies that for Venerable Master Hsing Yun, filial piety puts the "humanistic" (人間) in Humanistic Buddhism (人間佛教). But the importance of images, such as the portrait of Venerable Master Hsing Yun's mother (in its own way a work of contemporary art), also testifies to the power of images to communicate Buddhist compassion and Buddhist interconnectedness.



Those who endure are powerful,
brave, wise, and benevolent.

—*Humble Table, Wise Fare*