Inward connection

Connecting External Struggle to Internal Vulnerabilities: A Guide to Using

Religious Items

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Abstract

This research takes the pragmatic religious practice that I observed in the Buddhist temple where I practice Buddhism as a starting point to explore the narrative of the pragmatic group itself and the reasons for practicing religion to solve issues or gain private interest instead of believing in values and principles of religion.

My research question is how to use the religious figure to connect people's external struggle with their internal vulnerabilities. By using the religious weapon of Qian Shou Kuan Yin, a Buddhism god who can help with overcoming struggles and curing diseases, as a design language to reconstruct a religious symbol that people can resonate with. Instead of finding help or solace within Buddhism and other religions, this symbol can aid to link their internal vulnerabilities and help them discover their own strength to face problems by themselves.

My research methods include interviews, fieldwork, and collaborations. Through my processes, I can understand that the message behind many people practicing religion pragmatically, which seems to violate religious doctrines, is not purely for secular utilitarianism such as gaining wealth or power, but to solve the difficulties in life.

My practice includes interviewing pragmatic people, extracting keywords from their needs in regard to overcoming difficulties and generating images based on AI. I will display the image to the interviewee for feedback until the AI-generated image can give the user a feeling of connection with the internal. The final generated image I will be made into a physical product to achieve the goal of connecting the internal crisis.

In working with the He Hua Temple in Amsterdam, I explored a different way for the He Hua Temple to handle the inquiry people bring in. With this research, I understood

that the He Hua Temple did not provide spiritual comfort or assistance based on "supernatural forces". Instead, the He Hua Temple renavigates itself and provides a more realistic therapy.

1. Introduction

My project starts from my prejudgment towards the pragmatic approach that happens in Buddhist temples and the religious practice based on my experience as a traditional Buddhist. The phenomenon of pragmatism in religion has been put on the table for a long time, according to Yanqin Wang, "The rise of Buddhism and Taoism in China was largely influenced by the same utilitarian principles of popular belief. For some intellectuals, they may explore the doctrines of religions and the ways of thinking of religions, but for the public, they are often more concerned with what religion can do for them."[1]. I myself am one of those who criticize approaching Buddhism in a utilitarian way.

I was disturbed by the frequent question of which temple in China works the best, all the temples belong to Buddhism and therefore it should not matter which temple you are going to whereas people always try to find the most efficient one for utilitarian requirements. I could not provide the answer and questioned myself as well: Why can a religious practice only be performed if there is a deeply desired wish to be fulfilled? And does it matter which temple? Based on these observations I attempted to communicate this absurdity by making a tarot project called 'Faithless' to demonstrate a fictional scenario in which each god has its own functions but is left from their duty.[2]

After I came to the Netherlands, the same question did not stop but instead, became more frequent. This inspired me to continue researching this topic by visiting the Amsterdam temple "He Hua"[3], a traditional Chinese Buddhist temple. In visiting the temple I was looking to find a common connection based on my Buddhist background

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[1] Wang Yanqin. (2006). The influence of folk beliefs on the development of religion in China. Studies in Religion, 3, 215-218.

[2] The tarot 3D illustration work I have done in Bachelor, Figure 1.

[3] Traditional Chinese temple located in Amsterdam.

but located in a different culture and country. I paid three visits to the tour and had conversations with monk[4] and volunteer workers. I was surprised about their ideology[5] and position within religion which made me feel disillusioned about the philosophy of "Humanistic Buddhism"[6] they believe in and the practice they have. Even though we believe in the same religion, it is completely different. My research question is how to use the religious figure to connect people's external struggles with their internal vulnerabilities.

The way the He Hua Temple deals with people's struggles inspired me to register to become a volunteer worker at He Hua Temple. My purpose in working as a volunteer was to observe the people who practice Buddhism pragmatically in the He Hua Temple and understand the hidden narrative behind this group. I discovered that He Hua Temple neither brings temporary spiritual comfort through ritualistic blessings nor does it increase profits by selling spiritual objects or amulets with religious attributes to achieve blessing purposes. Instead, He Hua Temple is customizing solutions for individuals who come by searching for solutions for their difficulties. Their aim is not to navigate or comfort people under god name but to listen to what people have exactly been through and provide a realistic method that is more grounded in people's daily life to calm the situation.

This thesis presents my overall practice and thinking trajectories based on my observations in the He Hua Temple where visitors often have a pragmatic approach to Buddhism and how I learn from these visitors' religious practices as a designer. Being

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[4] Clergy serves in Buddhism temple.
[5] Ideology of secularization of Buddhism,

[6] Humanistic Buddhism revives the old traditions of Buddhism and emphasizes the teachings of living joyfully, treating others positively, and devoting love to all in society. The Buddha utilized the small things around him as examples for teaching, without any profound sutras.
Humanistic Buddhism as Conceived and Interpreted by Grand Master Hsing Yun of Fo Guan Shan
Kimball, Richard L. 《Hsi Lai Journal of Humanistic Buddhism》, v.1 (2000), 1 - 52

a Buddhist, I believe I can offer a unique perspective that can contribute to the contemporary design practice, dissecting the complexity between peoples who approach Buddhism pragmatically, the temple, and me. This research attempts to reveal the unwitting solutions that already exist in people's minds and which they practice through a seemingly practical and superficial way, and how these solutions can inspire new kinds of design practice.

2. Inspiration/Background: Approaching Buddhism pragmatically

2-1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will introduce what incited my project, the "pragmatic approaching to Buddhism", and how this whole story starts. In the second section, I am focusing on understanding how and why people approach Buddhism pragmatically. The distribution of the religious situation in China shows a polytheistic and decentralized state. This chapter examines these two aspects to answer the question of why people practice Buddhism with a pragmatic attitude. It also explores how pragmatic attitudes have been combined with religion in the development of Chinese society.

2-2 "Hongbin, can you tell me which temple works the best?"

My grandmother has been a faithful Buddhist from the moment I can remember. I was always surrounded by incense, red and yellow silk fabric, and gigantic brass Buddha statues. The Buddhism philosophy becomes my bedtime before I go to sleep, and a chant would become my morning alarm. Such an experience triggered me to

investigate Buddhist literature and fundamental philosophy[7]. I choose to become a Buddhist after I strongly agreed with the value and principles. I visited my local temple Tian Ning Temple[8] a few times a year, participating in religious events when there was a Buddhism festival. All of this became part of my life.

My route to becoming a Buddhist started when I was a kid. Since my life journey truly began, a lot of questions pointing to Buddhism started making me confused. Friends, classmates, and strangers started asking me: "Hongbin, do you know which temple works the best?" or: "I want to gain some wealth; can you recommend to me which temple should I go to?". At this time I felt that Buddhism as a traditional, classical religion, the holiness of it, started tarnishing. Practicing Buddhism should be cultivating oneself according to a religious doctrine instead of using it to fulfill ones own's desire.

I engaged this phenomenon with a critical attitude and accused such a pragmatic approach as more of worshiping their own desire than true faith. As a designer, my response was to start a project called 'Faithless' during my Bachelor study, It comprised of a set of tarot cards with sarcastic speculative scenario images of each god that is often worshipped in Chinese society and have all left from their duty. In this project, the audience could participate in a tarot reading while observing that each card's illustration depicts a different way that gods no longer respond to requests from the mortal world but instead seeks out gods' own pleasure. Until then, is it worth it to keep praying? This is a work based on my doubts and criticism from my first impression of pragmatic religious practice.

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[7] Buddhists believe that the human life is one of suffering, and that meditation, spiritual and physical labor, and good behavior are the ways to achieve enlightenment, or nirvana.
[8] Traditional Buddhism temple in ChangZhou, China

(Figure 1) Hongbin Yang (2021). Project "Faithless"
(Bachelor work)

(Figure 2) Hongbin Yang (2023). The screenshot of the search result of
"The five most efficacious temples for seeking wealth, how many have you been to?"

(Figure 3) Hongbin Yang (2023). The screenshot of the search result of
"Tips on how to pray at ten efficacious spiritual temples"

国内八大灵验寺庙!消灾、祛难必去!

2023年3月24日 南山寺建有仁王殿、大雄宝殿、东西配殿、钟鼓楼、转轮藏、法堂、禅堂、斋堂、观音院、方丈院、悲田院等，寺院内的吉祥钟亭内有一座高1.8米，重0.8吨的铸铜大钟，遇上重大节庆日，这...

祥云慧语

(Figure 4) Hongbin Yang (2023). The screenshots of the search result of "The eight must-visit most efficacious temples in China to dispel disasters."

However, the problem of using religion as a replaceable tool has been discussed for a long time. After I came to the Netherlands to study, similar issues, including the need to choose the most effective temples and the ongoing advertising of various temples 'effectiveness' in the media and on social media platforms, inspired me to try and understand the behavioral motivations of this group from the perspective of temples, I became interested in learning if we can communicate with the pragmatic group in the temple to get a voice from people's internal story that is different from the criticism of using religion as a tool for utilitarian use?

2-3 Approaching Buddhism pragmatically, How and Why?

In this chapter, I will introduce how people approach Buddhism pragmatically, drawing on my literature review. I will also explain how this phenomenon is situated within Chinese society and has become a particularly visible issue.

Firstly within this research, "Practicing Buddhism pragmatically" is the motivation to perform religious practices to ask for help with immediate, concrete problems. The term refers to an instrumentalization of religion that seeks effectiveness in solving practical problems in real life as a way of assessing whether religion is worth believing in. This term helps me conduct research and relate behavior, concepts, and religion.

In Xia Mianzun's view[9], pragmatism in Chinese history is manifested in four aspects: learning, religion, thought and art.

Xia Mianzun believes that there is no independent academic system in China, and all academic systems are established for practical purposes such as serving the monarch and ruling the people.

The earliest religion in China was 'sky', and phrases such as 'respecting sky' and 'fearing sky' often appeared in ancient books. The reverence for heaven is based on the standards of good fortune, and misfortune. The function of respecting and fearing heaven is to turn misfortune into good fortune and to avoid misfortune and gain blessings.

According to XINZHONG YAO's research, "*Religious Belief and Practice in Urban China from 1995 to 2005*"[10], significant changes in religious beliefs and practices among urban Han Chinese were explored using relevant data from survey questionnaires distributed in 1995 and 2005. The data from 2005 [10] explains that compared with 1995, the proportion of urban Han people practicing pragmatism in religion has increased significantly.

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[9] Xia Mian Zun. Pragmatism of China [J]. Monthly Reading, 2013(7):5.
[10] Xinzhong Yao (2007) Religious Belief and Practice in Urban China 1995–2005, Journal of Contemporary Religion, 22:2, 169-185 http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13537900701331031

Table 1. The Six Cities in the 2005 Survey.

City	Frequency	%
Beijing	353	17.7
Benxi	333	16.7
Qufu	358	17.9
Suzhou	323	16.2
Changsha	331	16.6
Danjiangkou	299	15.0
Total	1997	100.0

Table 2. Whether or not you have taken part in religious activities, you think you are:

		Frequency	%
Valid	Religious	105	5.3
	Non-religious	1035	51.8
	Firm atheist	658	32.9
	Total	1798	90.0
Missing	Refuse to answer	10	0.5
	Don't know/cannot say clearly	189	9.5
	Total	199	10.0
Total		1997	100.0

Table 3. Political Status of Religious Believers (2005).

No/%	Buddhists	Catholics	Protestants
Ordinary people	82.7%	81.8%	78.8%
Member of CCP	5.8%	9.1%	18.2%
Member of CYL	9.6%	9.1%	3.0%

Table 4. Survey question: "Did you pray to or worship (can bai) the following spiritual powers or religious founders in the past year (2005)?"

	Buddhas / Bodhisattvas	God of Fortune	God / Jesus	Confucius	Lord of Guan	Supreme Lord of Laozi	Others
Yes	23.1%	18.4%	4.2%	4.2%	3.7%	2.2%	5.9%
No	76.9%	81.6%	95.8%	95.8%	96.2%	97.8%	94.1%

Table 5. Worship by religious followers.

Worshipping	Buddhists	Daoists	Catholics	Protestants
Buddhas / Bodhisattvas	98.1%	80%	9.1%	6.1%
Christian God	3.8%	20%	81.8%	97.0%
God of Fortune	32.7%	40%	0	6.1%
Supreme Lord Laozi	7.7%	20%	0	3.0%
Confucius	3.8%	20%	0	3.0%
Lord Guan	21.2%	0	0	0

(Figure 5-8) Religious Experience Research Centre at the University of Wales, Lampeter, and the Ian Ramsey Centre at the University of Oxford, with support from the John Templeton Foundation. (2005). The 2005 survey was concerned with religious experience.

"Based on data collected in the 2005 survey, the majority of urban Chinese were mindful of religious impact, whether or not they claimed to be believers. They desired to seek mentorship and blessing from various religions or supernatural powers and also looked for a new spiritual syncretism to overcome pains and hardships that they actually suffered, or to keep their fortune."[10].

"Secondly, the religion of urban Chinese continued to swing between exclusive faithfulness and all-embracing spirituality. Lots of religions prefer to be exclusive regarding identity and allow believers to believe the truth that is unveiled from certain religious scriptures. Lots of Chinese religious orders and traditions are performed in this way under the support of faithful believers."[10].

However, under the impact of diffused religious backgrounds, the Chinese never turn away from the embraceable view of religious doctrines. The majority of people

considered a different religion to be just a different approach to the same ultimate goal. For instance, to a significant proportion of Chinese believers, practicing rituals that belong to Buddhism or Taoism[11] and attending Christian service are not incompatible.

"At the same time, under the influence of commercialization, based on the secularization of religion, restrictions on religion can be reduced even more, making religion more accessible and attractive. But believers will therefore focus more on short-term relief rather than the eternal issues of resuming and maintaining religion. Urban China's religion, economy and interests are highly related. This is particularly evident in the rapid growth of the influence of the God of Wealth. Religious institutions and organizations cater to people's emotional needs in a more pragmatic way, rather than helping people find the ultimate truth. This method gives religion space and influence, but it also becomes more and more commercialized, and pragmatic."[10]

Based on the summary, Most Chinese people who participate in religious practices view religion as a means to achieve their goals, leading to a pragmatic approach to religion that is amplified by the secularization and commercialization of religious practices. Therefore, as a Buddhist, I received many questions about going to Buddhist temples for religious practice for pragmatic reasons. And according to the above chapters, it explains how pragmatism exists in Buddhism under the background of secularization and diffusion of Chinese religion. In the next step, I will try to start with myself and enter the pragmatic group to understand the group's motivation, background story, and the narrative they try to bring into religion.

3. Field Work/Collaboration

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[11] Taoism is an ancient Chinese philosophy and religion that instructs believers on how to exist in harmony with the universe.

3-1 Introduction of Fieldwork

Within this context in developing this research, I wanted to collect the narrative of pragmatic groups and try to explore whether there could be another explanation for why people continue to search for the most efficacious religious place.

Through cooperation with the He Hua Temple in Amsterdam, I was inspired by how they situated themselves into a more secularized religious position and helped in a realistic and scientific way. The pragmatic narratives I collected in the He Hua Temple are often one-sided, many people have only come once, and I have been told by the monk and my colleague that they never come back. Whereas I investigated the situation of friends who had asked me questions about finding the most efficacious temple before through one-on-one interviews and mapped the similarities in internal vulnerabilities between my interviewees and the story in the temple to each other to complete my design process.

3-2 He Hua Temple

On October 9th 2022, I visited the He Hua Temple in Amsterdam. I chose He Hua Temple because I observed there all the pragmatic phenomena of Buddhist temples. However, to further understand the stories of people, I still chose Chinese Buddhist temples for the survey. After studying in The Netherland, I was also very curious about whether different stories would happen in temples in different countries, backgrounds, and politics.

(Figure 9) Facebook (2023). Photo of the front gate of He Hua Temple
(https://www.facebook.com/HeHuaTemple/)

He Hua Temple is a traditional Chinese temple located at Zeedijk 106-118, 1012 BB Amsterdam, the Netherlands. It is the largest Chinese Buddhist temple in Europe. He Hua Temple, which belongs to the Fo Guang Mountain[12] organization in Taiwan, also adheres to the people-oriented spirit of the "Humanity Buddhism"[13] of Fo Guang Mountain, emphasizing that the essence of being a Buddhist is only three principles: "Be kind, speak well, and do good deeds". The monks and nuns at the temple adhere to the four tenets of "giving people faith, giving people joy, giving people hope, and giving people convenience."

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[12] Fo Guang Shan (FGS) (Chinese: 佛光山; pinyin: *Fó guāng shān*; lit. 'Buddha's Light Mountain') is an international Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhist organization and monastic order based in Taiwan that practices Humanistic Buddhism whose roots are traced to the Linji school of Chan Buddhism.

[13] Humanistic Buddhism (Chinese: 人間佛教; pinyin: *rénjiān fójiào*) is a modern philosophy practiced by Buddhist groups originating from Chinese Buddhism which places an emphasis on integrating Buddhist practices into everyday life and shifting the focus of ritual from the dead to the living.

The Buddhism philosophy of the He Hua Temple is "Humanistic Buddhism", which is the overall secularization of Buddhism because the Fo Guang Mountain Organization and the founder of the temple, Master Hsing Yun[14] believe that everyone has the right to receive blessings of Buddhism, and they strive to spread the light of Buddhism across the entire world.

During my first visit, the monk took me to the Ashram on the ground floor to participate in a meeting of the Kuan Yin Shrine[15], to chanting and pray as Buddhist practice.

On October 16th 2022, I registered as a volunteer at the He Hua Temple and obtained consent from the temple to observe and record pragmatic religious practices in order to carry out my research. In my volunteer work at He Hua Temple, I am responsible for standing at the entrance to receive and guide tourists as a receptionist. When tourists or believers want to burn incense, offer candles, or purchase souvenirs, I am the man for selecting and charging. If anyone wants to learn about the specific religion, historical stories, or a specific deity of this temple, I will act as a half-tour guide to introduce it. And when someone wants to ask the monk questions and clarify their doubts, I am responsible for listening and guiding them on whether to choose to ask for a sign or directly seek advice from the monk.

At the same time, in the process of reception, I recorded my dialogue with pragmatism practitioners seeking solutions to problems in the form of a diary and asked the monks in the temple 'An Jin' monk if the temple had given spiritual comfort or solutions after people finished praying.

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[14] Hsing Yun (Chinese: 星雲; pinyin: *Xīng Yún*; 19 August 1927 – 5 February 2023) was a Chinese Buddhist monk, teacher, and philanthropist based in Taiwan. He was the founder of the Fo Guang Shan Buddhist monastic order as well as the layperson-based Buddha's Light International Association. Hsing Yun was considered a major proponent of Humanistic Buddhism and one of the most influential teachers of modern Taiwanese Buddhism.

[15] A religious event commemorating Kuan Shi Yin Buddha, where people gather to chant sutras in honour of Kuan Shi Yin Buddha's compassion.

3-3 Diary and Recording note

When providing volunteer services, I received a girl from Yue Yang, Hunan province who was attending university in Amsterdam. She was plagued by nightmares and came to He Hua Temple to seek a solution. She also mentioned that the temple in her hometown was very effective, but due to geographical location, she wanted to find a relatively effective temple to solve her nightmare.

I had a conversation with Bennie. Bennie is Asian and Dutch and obtained a bachelor's and master's degree majoring in organic agriculture from Wageningen University but encountered financial crises at the same. This prevented him from finding a job smoothly. Bennie eventually went to Singapore to work in the IT field. While working in Singapore, Bennie also believed in Buddhism and chose to volunteer at the He Hua after moving to Amsterdam.

In November, I met a visitor from Shanxi, Perhaps he was a Buddhist, but since he did not ask for my assistance, I did not inquire further. Later in the conversation, I learned that he was from Xi'an, China, and he complained that Xi'an[16] was a tourist city and that the temples in Xi'an had become heavily commercialized and were no longer 'pure' religious sites. After asking monk An Jin later, I learned that the visitor had a family member who was terminally ill and was trying to get answers to his family member's life problems in the He Hua Temple. This was the first time since I had registered as a volunteer that I had seen a difficult look on monk An Jin's face. monk An Jin later told me that this situation seemed to be beyond her capabilities, as it was a natural cause and effect that was difficult to intervene in. What monk An Jin could do was explain the 'Jie Yu'[17] that could be obtained by drawing lots in the

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[16] Capital of Shaanxi Province. A sub-provincial city on the Guanzhong Plain.

[17] A chant from a sutra, a phrase attached to a reading of a sutra or an insight gained from the practice of the sutra.

temple. By explaining the details of the abstract Buddhist Jie Yu, and by combining it with its real-life counterpart in spiritual healing, the visitor could prepare for the next treatment for his family in a calm, positive state of mind, and get prepared for the possible upcoming consequences.

From the stories I collected, I sensed a different situation at He Hua Temple. Usually, temples provide spiritual comfort through objects with religious symbolic significance, such as amulets and small Buddha statues. But the monk An Jin from He Hua Temple said to the girl who had nightmares. 'Many things in the world are fake and non-existent, all imagined by oneself. I think it's because you've been under too much pressure lately, and you need a good rest and relaxation. Only then can your nightmares be solved.' monk An Jin attempts to find the answers people want from themselves.

A brief summary of Buddhism in Guruge's view: "Even a brief examination of Buddhist ethics will show how Buddhism values relationships based on respect, care, duties and responsibilities (see Guruge, 1999)."[18] The He Hua Temple has managed to preserve these wonderful qualities despite being in a highly secular and commercialized environment. This has inspired me to prioritize designing with care as the starting point.

4. Story Telling: External struggle/ Internal vulnerabilities

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[18] Guruge, Ananda W.P. 1999 What, In Brief, Is Buddhism? Mitram Books, Monterey Park, CA.

In this section, I analyze the data collected from the He Hua Temple to explain the external struggle I discovered and examine how postmodernist theory in religion and Toki's theory of "database consumption" shed light on the reasons why people lose their connection to their inner being and become lost in their personal fragmented narratives. The diffused nature of religion in Chinese society and the postmodern nature of religion that has developed within this context may contribute to this phenomenon, as people may stop focusing on problems that can be solved from within and instead turn to gods and Buddhas. This chapter aims to provide a theoretical basis for bridging the gap between external struggle and internal vulnerability.

4-1 External struggle

My observations at the He Hua Temple concludes that not everyone's practical purpose is to pursue secular utilitarianism. Many people choose to seek help at the He Hua Temple after experiencing difficulties or downturns. This is part of pragmatism, but after talking with people in difficult situations, I realized that there is fatalism and fear behind the uncontrollable unknown, rather than pragmatism driven by desire. People who are tormented by difficulties believe that supernatural forces can help them overcome the challenges they are currently facing. However, at this level, religion can only provide spiritual comfort and cannot directly solve people's problems. Therefore, it is important to approach religion with realistic expectations and to seek practical solutions for the problems that can be solved in the material world.

4-2 The Rise of Alternative Forms of Religiosity in Postmodernism

According to Lyotard, postmodernism can be summarized as 'incredulity towards all meta-narratives'.[19] In the context of an institutional religion that only serves one truth, it is already the target of that postmodernist doubts. In the view of Nikolai G. Wenzel: "Although the postmodern questioning of overarching narratives and authority has led to a decline in engagement with institutional and conventional religion, it has not resulted in a complete abandonment of religiosity or participation in religious practices."[20]

Both scholars suggest that postmodernity has resulted in the secularization of traditional and institutional religions such as Christianity and Buddhism and a decline in religious participation. However, this has also led to the rise in popularity of alternative forms of religiosity. These trends align with the phenomenon of "diffuse religion" that is prevalent in Chinese society.

4-3 Diffused Religion in Chinese Society

The insignificance of religion in Chinese society can be answered through the concepts of institutional religion and diffused religion.

According to C.K. Yang: "the Institutional religion in the context of China is Buddhism and Taoism, which can be considered as an independent organization organized by people to make theological concepts simple and understandable while emphasizing ritual worship. With the help of independent concepts, rituals, and

[19]   Lyotard, J. F. (1984). *The postmodern condition: A report on knowledge* (Vol. 10). U of Minnesota Press.

[20]   Wenzel, Nikolai G., ' Postmodernism and Religion', in Peter B. Clarke (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion* (2011; online edn, Oxford Academic, 2 Sept. 2009), https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199588961.013.0010, accessed 6 May 2023.

structures, religion has the attribute of an independent social system, thus becoming an institutional religion."[21]

"Diffused religion can be understood as having theological theories, objects of worship, and believers, which can be very closely integrated into one or more secular systems, thus becoming a part of the concepts, rituals, and structures of secular systems."[21]

"Thus, Diffused religion depends to a large extent on the fate of the secular, and as the strength and effectiveness of the secular system fluctuate, new and useful worship emerges and replaces the old."[21]

In summary, the practice of religion in China has become decentralized, with Buddhism serving as a mere waypoint in people's quest for secular satisfaction. As a Buddhist myself, I have observed that all religions in China have become fragmented, commodified objects that can be consumed. With so many different objects of worship available, individuals can always pin their hopes on the next religion that might meet their secular needs.

4-4 Disconnected from Database

Under the recommendation of my mentor Yin Aiwen, I encountered the book "Postmodernity of Animals"[22] by Hiroki Azuma. The author proposed the viewpoint of 'database consumption'. The concept of database consumption was proposed by Hiroki Azuma, using the otaku[23] as an example. From modern to postmodern, after

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[21] Yang, C. (1961). *Religion in Chinese Society*. Berkeley: University of California Press. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520318380

[22] Hiroki Azuma. (2007) "The Animalization of Otaku Culture" <u>Macadamia</u> 2 175–188.
[23] In modern Japanese, people who are crazy about anime or video games are called "otaku"

the disappearance of the Great Narrative, the postmodern otaku used databases, or 'cute' elements, to consume. The postmodern otaku people no longer focus on the story itself but rather pay more attention to the characters' specific characteristics in the story for consumption.

According to Hiroki Azuma: "As we see again and again, snobbery is no longer necessary for the Database Animals otaku of today. The desire for a grand narrative that gave birth to snobbery is itself now weakening. Instead, demanding the right formula of moe-elements that more effectively realizes emotional satisfaction, they consume and cull new works one after another."[24]

Through the comparison of pragmatic groups and database consumer groups, I discovered high similarities between them. After religion no longer helps people find the ultimate truth, people can only search for the 'ultimate truth' from the scattered and different characteristics of a religion, which is considered databased consuming religion, but this truth can no longer be found, and the grand narrative behind it has disappeared. As a result, people's ways of finding answers have become various forms, including pragmatism and religious practice.

Inspired by the practical approach of the He Hua Temple, which helps people solve their problems rather than just offering temporary solace or blessings, I conducted interviews with people who practice pragmatism at the temple. From their problems and inner realities, I extracted keywords to provide to Midjourney, an AI image generation software, which generated images for me. I then shared these images with the people and continuously adjusted them to get as close as possible to their needs. Using these images, I created 3D models and assembled them into a product, while

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[24] Azuma, Hiroki. (2009). *Otaku : Japan's database animals*. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press

providing instructions for a reality-based therapy to help people connect with their true selves and face their real suffering.

5. Design Language: Qian Shou Kuan Yin

Based on the inspiration given to me by monk An Jin, my first project chose the image of the magic weapon held by Guanyin in the image of Qian Shou Kuan yin. "Qian shou Kuan yin is one of the commonly worshipped Guanyin Bodhisattvas in Chinese Buddhism, and it is one of the incarnations of Guanyin Bodhisattva. As one of the six Kuan Yin, the six ways are Cihang Kuan Yin (saving the hungry ghost path), Qian Shou Kuan Yin (saving the hell path), Matou Kuan Yin (saving the animal path), Eleven-Faced Kuan Yin (saving the Shura path), Zhunti Kuan Yin (saving the human path), and Ruyi Wheel Kuan Yin (saving the heaven path). There are a thousand hands, each with an eye on its palm, hence the name. In general, statues or paintings are represented by forty hands, thirty-six hands, twenty-four hands, and eighteen hands."[25]

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[25] Hodous, L., & Soothill, W.E. (1996). A Dictionary of Chinese Buddhist Terms: With Sanskrit and English Equivalents and a Sanskrit-Pali Index (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203641866

(Figure 10) Qian Shou Kuan Yin Google (2023). Statue of Qian Shou Kuan Yin
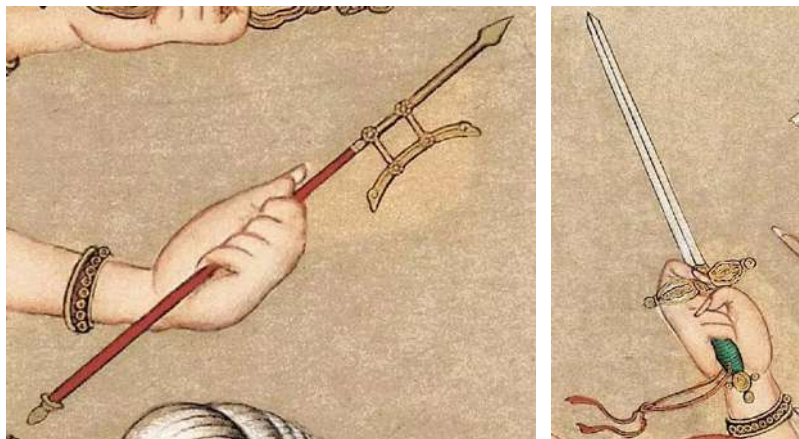
(Figure 11) Wang Yi (2023). Painting of weapon in Qian Shou Kuan Yin's hand
The halberd-bearer: holding a halberd, representing the ability to ward off demons and spirits.

(Figure 12) Wang Yi (2023). Painting of weapon in Qian Shou Kuan Yin's hand
Sword Bearer: Holding a sword, symbolizes the subjugation of all demons and gods and the breaking of troubles.

I asked why the He Hua Temple worships the Qian Shou Kuan Yin as the main deity in the center of the main hall. This is not a common practice in Buddhism, where Shakyamuni Buddha is usually placed in the center of the hall. The monk in the He Hua Temple replied that before, the red-light district where the He Hua Temple was located was a relatively chaotic area, full of drugs and violence. It was hoped that the weapons carried by Qian Shou Kuan Yin can suppress this chaos. I expected that the use of practical Buddha statues in secular temples would be logical.

(Figure 13) Qian Shou Kuan Yin Hongbin Yang (2023). Photo of the Qian Shou Kuan Yin in He Hua Temple

The Qian Shou Kuan Yin's ability to wield weapons that offer solutions to all of the world's problems, coupled with the personalized approach of He Hua Temple in listening to individual needs and providing tailored assistance, presents a sense of 'customized' religion. The temple's efforts to address problems in a practical way rather than solely relying on spiritual forces is a departure from traditional grand narratives but has allowed for a gentler and more intimate outreach to the world.

Inspired by Qian Shou Kuan Yin's weapons and systematic understanding of suffering, I sought to create a set of religious objects that reflect people's inner reality. These new weapons correspond to the metaphorical contents of the human mind, and I have developed instructions for their assembly to promote healing of the inner self alongside real-life therapeutic practices such as sleep therapy and spiritual healing.

6. Redesign the weapon of Qian Shou Kuan Yin

6-1 Introduction

I created two works in cooperation with the He Hua Temple in Amsterdam, inspired by interviews with my friends and peers. Both works are centered on telling the hidden story behind the mask, the external struggle, and how I connect the mask of people's external struggle of people to internal vulnerabilities after being inspired by He Hua Temple.

6-2 "Blade"

In my first work, 'Blade,' I created contrasting images of Qian Shou Kuan Yin's hands and her religious weapons. Qian Shou Kuan Yin's 'sword' is a religious weapon that

can solve problems in Buddhism's explanation. I used the 'sword' that Qian Shou Kuan Yin originally held to represent the reasons for the pragmatism I observed at He Hua Temple. I found that these reasons differed from what I had previously considered to be utilitarian egoism. Instead, they represented a last-ditch effort to turn to the Almighty Buddha for hope when faced with difficult situations in life that are beyond one's control.

In contrast to the delicate hand of Qian Shou Kuan Yin, I coarsened the detail of the hand holding the sword by adding twisted veins and other ugly details. I enlarged the sword and added a heavy blade to create a crude and bulky image that represents the pragmatic practices observed in the temples, viewed through the eyes of conservative, classical believers. These practices are seen as an impure use of religion, a means of satisfying personal selfishness.

The details of the two assembly models, such as the details of the skin and the image of the sword, are not the same. The audience may make mistakes during the assembly process, but in the end, they will discover the shape I initially wanted the audience to assemble.

The design concept involves creating two assembled toys that represent my research journey, from my initial critical attitude toward the pragmatism of Buddhism to my eventual understanding of it. The piece reflects my research and reflections on people's internal vulnerability, providing a solid backstory for the final project.

(Figure 14-16) 'Blade' Hongbin Yang (2023). Prototype render of the product

6-3 "Inward Connection"

In my second work, 'Inward connection', I aimed to create a product that would bridge the gap between external struggles and internal vulnerabilities. Drawing on theories of postmodernity and the database consumption[26] models of Hiroki Azuma[27], I explored how religion has shifted from grand narratives to personal and broken ones, and how this can leave people feeling disconnected from their true selves and their real struggles. Therefore, people try to find the solution to their struggles from the almighty Buddha and perform pragmatism.

After speaking with the monks, I discovered that many of the people I had talked to at He Hua Temple had never returned. So, I decided to start at the beginning by interviewing friends who had asked similar questions or had similar experiences. I asked them about their reasons for bringing pragmatic questions to the temple and how the arms of the Qian Shou Kuan Yin could be redesigned to represent their inner thoughts and feelings. The aim is to create a more personalized and intimate connection between religion and individuals' inner vulnerabilities. This will be achieved through the use of assembled products and customized healing methods for each individual's unique distress, as inspired by the approach of the He Hua Temple. Rather than searching for an effective temple, this approach prioritizes a deeper understanding of individual needs and provides a more meaningful and relevant religious experience.

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[26] LaMarre, T., Hiroki, A., Furuhata, Y., & Steinberg, M. (2007). The Animalization of Otaku Culture. *Mechademia 2*, 175-187. doi:10.1353/mec.0.0023.

[27] Hiroki Azuma (東 浩紀, *Azuma Hiroki*) (born May 9, 1971) is a Japanese cultural critic, novelist, and philosopher. He is the co-founder and former director of Genron, an independent institute in Tokyo, Japan.

My current practice is to input keywords from interviews into Mid Journey and generate images for AI to display to interviewees. Does the generated image meet their expectations? Based on the interviewee's answers, I further adjust the keywords entered AI until my interviewee can engage inner feelings with the images. In the final stage, I will model the final image and present the physical product after 3D printing.

The objects are not meant to work in a realistic sense, but rather to build images that reflect the inner reality of the interviewees. They are designed to emotionally resonate with their visual senses. The instructions for using the objects or offerings are integrated into the therapy method to achieve real problem-solving through self-action

This practice is still being developed as I am continuing to interview people and collect keywords for the AI generator.

6-4 Interviewing

I interviewed friends who have practiced Buddhism pragmatically before and asked them about their reasons for seeking out efficacious temples, as well as their external struggles. I also asked them what they were looking for in terms of solving their problems. Using customized religious objects combined with images that reflect their inner vulnerabilities and instructions for use, I provided them with therapy guidance to help them overcome their challenges.

6-5 Chen Jing 20/April/2023

I spoke with Chen Jing and discovered that she was seeking a solution in a different temple to her happy dreams, which were not providing her with restful sleep. She explained that she needed an image that showed the situation of busyness calming down to help quiet her mind. To address this, I created a 'power off' item using specific keywords and will get input from the sleep therapist or mindfulness meditation,[28] to teach her how to use it effectively.

[28] In the Buddhist texts, meditation -especially mindfulness meditation -is recommended for the alleviation of many problems, including sleep difficulties and pain (de Silva, 1984).
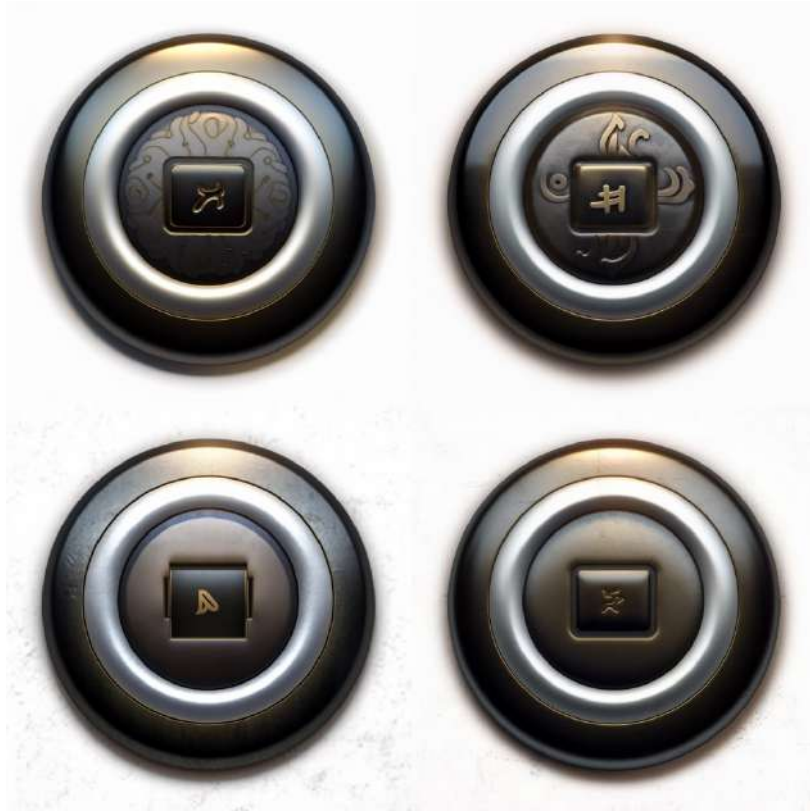
(Figure 17-21) 'shutdown button' Hongbin Yang (2023). The possible solution for Chen Jing

6-6 Wang Mengqing 22/April/2023

During my conversation with Mengqing, she revealed that the only place where she could feel the peace of being away from the city was in a temple and that she was always on the lookout for the most peaceful one. Using the keywords from our conversation, I created three lottery cards with different temple locations for her to choose from. Whichever one she drew, she would have to go there and spend a week in retreat to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and gain inner peace.

(Figure 22-25) 'Peace draw' Hongbin Yang (2023). The possible solution for Wang Mengqing

7. Conclusion

As a designer, my goal is to understand what people truly seek in the temple and use Buddhist symbolic elements as a design language to help them connect with their inner selves. Through fieldwork, investigation, and interviews, I gained a deep understanding of the pragmatic group's story. However, the most crucial aspect of this journey was reevaluating my own personal and professional position.

While pragmatism in religion may attract criticism due to its perceived contradiction with religious principles, it is a natural phenomenon in today's society. By examining the causes and motivations behind the adoption of pragmatic practices in religion, we can better understand and appreciate the human need for care and spirituality.

In this light, I believe that my work is not only about designing tangible objects and instructions but also about creating a space where individuals can connect with their inner selves and find solace. By embracing pragmatism as a way of caring for ourselves, we can cultivate a deeper sense of spirituality and connectedness with the world around us.

My final aim is to instill the determination to face challenges in people through the use of a redesigned weapon of Qian Shou Kuan Yin. By resonating with their inner selves instead of endlessly searching for external answers, people can find the solutions they seek, which lie deep within.

Through this journey, I cultivated friendships with all the volunteers in He Hua temple and new knowledge and new perspectives to bring to the temple to share with others. I hope that after my audience sees this project, they are able to carry the same question I had and start thinking about it. If the same story I had is also experienced by my audience as well, then I know it will be the biggest harvest for me.

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