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# Don't take photos of the Buddha!

Ningshuang Zhao  
*University of Iowa*

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DON'T TAKE PHOTOS OF THE BUDDHA!

by

Ningshuang Zhao

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the Master of Fine Arts  
degree in Art in the  
Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

May 2018

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Laurel Farrin

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Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Ningshuang Zhao

has been approved by the Examining Committee for  
the thesis requirement for the Master of Fine Arts degree  
in Art at the May 2018 graduation.

Thesis Committee:

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Laurel Farrin, Thesis Supervisor

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Terry Conrad

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Ron Rozencohn

---

Sue Hettmansperger

---

Anita Jung

## **PUBLIC ABSTRACT**

This body of work stems from the feeling of paradox between what I learned and how I feel about religion in China. I express these complex feelings through painting, drawing, printmaking, as well as the experimenting of light and dark in the exhibition gallery.

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## **PREFACE**

As I grew up, I saw my mom do a lot of religious rituals, such as worship of Bodhisattva every morning. When I studied at school, the moment I learned these practices should be called superstitious and should be banned, I felt strange.

I asked my mom “Are you religious?” She said no.

Then I asked her “Are you superstitious?” She said no again.

## ARTIST STATEMENT

This body of work stems from the feeling of paradox between what I learned and how I feel about religion in China.

Various kinds of religious rituals and practices are very common, however very few Chinese consider themselves religious. The ruling of Communist Party, which is atheist, heavily influenced the compulsory education in China. In the textbook, religions are characterized as superstition. The word “superstition” is always understood negatively, as the result of The Cultural Revolution. Another underlying cause dates back to thousands of years ago when humanism and secularism were promoted by the government in Zhou Dynasty.

However, some Buddhist concepts such as body-soul dualism, samsara, and karma were also adapted and became rooted in Chinese culture. Despite the radical anti-religious and anti-tradition that happened during The Cultural Revolution, we can still experience influences of Buddhism in Chinese culture and philosophy.

Because of this paradox, I constantly feel confused and start to question a lot of rituals that I see and experience, and a lot of sayings in Chinese culture. Are these religious? Are these superstitious? Or are these just a part of the culture? There is no certain answer.

With this body of work, I examine and express these feelings. All windows and entrances in gallery are covered by blackout to create a dark environment. Viewers are provided with flashlights to explore the work on the walls. Not being able to see the whole show in a glance, viewers are brought to the same position I was at when I try to understand the paradox.