

## **Lecture Report: Buddhist Art for the 21st Century: What Might It Look Like?**

**Yin Cheng Distinguished Lecture Series**

**Lecture by Professor Eugene Wang (Harvard University)**

**22 September 2021**

Report by Junfu Wong (University of Cambridge)

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Screenshots by Carol Lee

Supported by Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation, the inaugural lecture of the Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture Series on Buddhism was hosted virtually by the University of Cambridge on the 22nd of September 2021. The guest speaker was Professor Eugene Wang from Harvard University whose lecture focused on the future of Buddhist art in the 21st century. The lecture attracted more than a thousand participants worldwide, joining in via Zoom or watching the YouTube live stream.

The event started with a welcoming address by the organisers from the University of Cambridge. It then proceeded to the main talk given by Professor Eugene Wang, followed by a brief commentary session led by two discussants, Professor Francesca Tarocco of the Ca' Foscari University of Venice and Professor Tang Hui of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China. After that, the floor was opened to questions from the audience.



Top row: Professor Barak Kushner (University of Cambridge), Professor Noga Ganany (University of Cambridge), Professor Eugene Wang (Harvard University).

Bottom row: Professor Francesca Tarocco (Ca' Foscari University of Venice), Professor Tang Hui (Central Academy of Fine Arts in China).

Professor Barak Kushner, Head of the Department of East Asian Studies and co-chair of the Faculty of Asian and Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Cambridge, first extended his deep appreciation to the Buddhist Tzu Chi Charity Foundation for their generous support. Dr. Noga Ganany, Assistant Professor at the Department of East Asian Studies and the main organiser of the Yin-Cheng Distinguished Lecture Series at Cambridge, expressed our gratitude to the Foundation and introduced the speaker, Professor Eugene Wang.

Professor Eugene Y. Wang is the Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Professor of Asian Art at Harvard University. He is a Guggenheim Fellow and winner of the 2006 Nichijin Sakamoto Academic Achievement Award from Japan for his book *Shaping the Lotus Sutra: Buddhist Visual Culture in Medieval China* (2005). His numerous publications range from ancient to modern and contemporary Chinese art and cinema. He is the art-history editor of the *Encyclopedia of Buddhism* (2004). His current research interests focus on the cognitive art history of luminance and topography of vision. He is also producing and directing a feature-length poetic documentary film, *To the Moon*, which charts the mental journey of Liu Kuo-sung (1932-), whose pictorial vision took off in the 1960s on cue of the Apollo moon landing. He is the founding director of Harvard CAMLab seeking to turn humanistic learning into sensorial experience. Among CAMLab's projects is Shadow Cave, a research and an immersive-theatre exhibition that reconstructs and showcases the early Buddhist imaginary staging of optical experience in encountering Buddhahood and nirvana across Asia, ranging from Afghanistan to Pagan.

Professor Wang's lecture, "Buddhist Art for the 21st Century: What Might It Look Like", heralded the kinds of art that can be pointedly labelled as Buddhist Art in the 21st century. He first took the audiences through certain Buddhism-tinged art events in the 20th century to explore what Buddhist Art meant in the past century. To set the scene, he suggested that the vague nature of Buddhist Art in itself invites new explanations and expectations on how it might look in the 21st century. There is a general perception in scholarship that Early Buddhism is closer to the sensibility and philosophy of the 21st century. He then questioned if the same perception is also valid in the field of Buddhist Art. Before delving into the question, he argued that

one thing we can observe when running through a list of the notable experimental artworks with Buddhist overtones in the past century was a pattern of moving away from conventional art making practices in Buddhist iconic tradition, such as statue-making, to other more expressive, if not symbolic, ways of displaying the presence of the Buddha. In answering this broad enquiry, he took us through multiple major events of the long 20th century, in which Buddhist ideas sparked as a source of inspiration to many inventors and artists, both in the East and the West.

The first milestone he mentioned was the appearance of two completely different modes of artwork in the early 20th century, that can both be understood within the framework of Buddhist art: one was a set of cartoon paintings drawn by Feng Zikai 豐子愷 in his *Protection of Sentient Beings* 《護生畫集》 which sought to arouse Buddhist compassion to all sentient beings, and the other was a set of portraits and photographs that shared the same theme of aligning female nudity with Buddhism through portraying nude ladies posing in the manner of the Buddha. Both of which has challenged the concept of Buddhist Art and added new possibilities into Buddhist iconic tradition.

The second milestone was about electricity. One of the crucial events took place in the year 1897 when Tan Sitong 譚嗣同 and Nikola Tesla both by coincidence published their ground-breaking work on electricity and drew on Buddhist or Indian thoughts in their works. Drawing on concepts like *ākāśa* and *śūnya*, Tesla envisioned the existence of kinetic energy in space and conceived electricity as a wireless medium of communication that could connect disparate entities globally. The same set of concepts also fascinated Tan. He saw electricity as a medium that helped interconnect everything across time and space and fused them into one single organism. Their readings demonstrated a link between electricity and some key notions in Indian Buddhist philosophy.



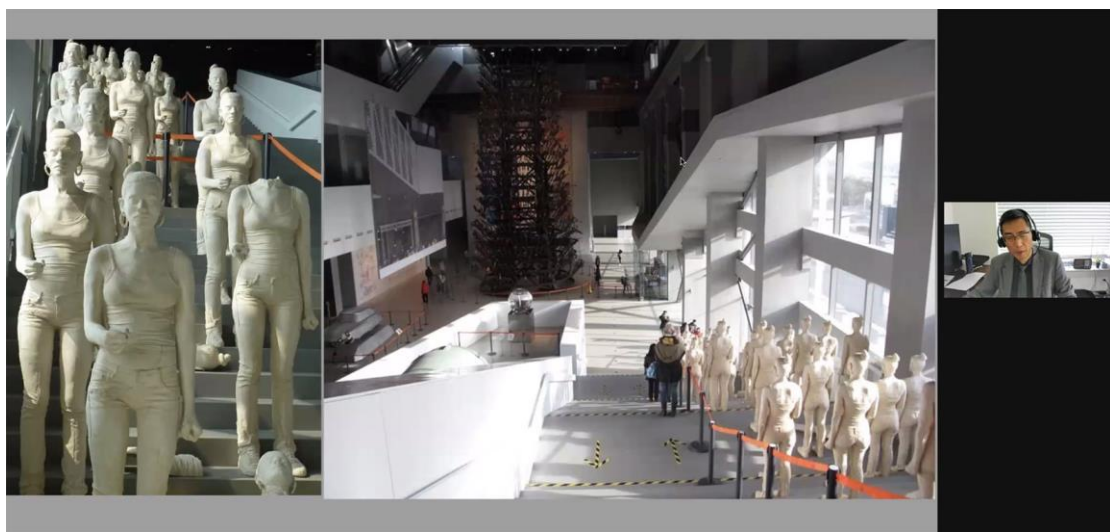
Left: Tan Sitong 譚嗣同, right: Nicola Tesla.

From Tesla and Tan, Professor Wang proceeded to mention another interesting event in history that many modern art exhibition centres were renovated from old power stations, such as the Tate Modern in London and the Power Station of Art in Shanghai. Later in 2012, the latter site also served as the main venue for the Ninth Shanghai Biennale with a general theme Reactivation which unveiled this year's focus on art, energy, and resources. Professor Wang first introduced two drawings produced by Qiu Zhijie 邱志傑, the chief curator of the biennale, which functioned as a map of the exhibition but presented in a style similar to the blueprint of power stations. This design implied a sense of energetic regeneration in resonance with self-organisation or aspiration. Professor Wang then analysed some of the artworks exhibited in the biennale that can be understood as instances of contemporary art with Buddhist overtones. That included the artwork entitled Bodhisattva with Thousand Arms done by the France-based artist Huang Yongping 黄永砵. The artwork incorporated typical iconographical representations of the Bodhisattva with Thousand Arms into a voltage-tower-like base resembling the *Bottle Rack* (1914) of Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968). Next to the line was *Rebekkah*, a group of sculptural replicas done by the British artist Simon Fujiwara who took inspiration from a teenager named Rebekkah who participated in the 2011 London Riot. Fujiwara asked Rebekkah to travel to China to participate in a unique social experiment. About a hundred life-size sculptural replicas of Rebekkah were created as an army that marched on allergically and represented the power of unity and resonance. Likewise, the video photograph *Sixty Minute Silence* done by Gillian Wearing took on a similar notion of creating a sense of

disintegration from uniformity and solemnity. It showed a group of friends and acquaintance who was asked to put on police uniforms and pose for photographs for sixty minutes.



Left: photo of a Thousand Arms Bodhisattva statue. Center: cropped map of *Blue Print*, Qiu Zhijie 邱志傑, installation at the Ninth Shanghai Biennale, 2012. Right: *Thousand-Armed Guanyin*, Huang Yongping 黄永砵, installation at the Ninth Shanghai Biennale, 2012.

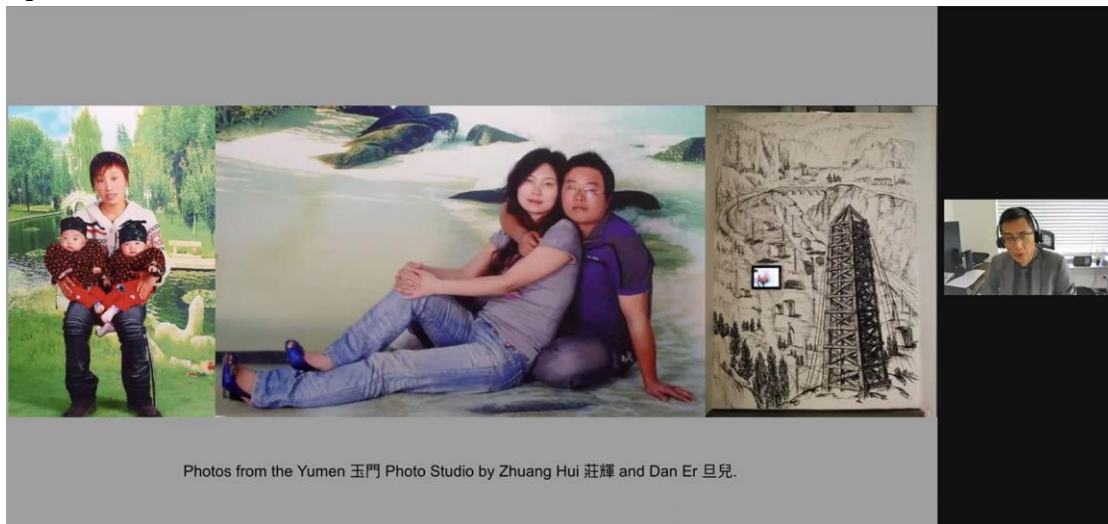


*Rebkkah*, Simon Fujiwaram, installation at the Ninth Shanghai Biennale, 2012.



*Sixty Minute Silence*, Gillian Wearing, film still, 1996.

Professor Wang then compared two photographic projects included in the biennale to discuss how works of art can also communicate across space. One was a set of photographs by Zhuang Hui 莊輝 and Dan'er 旦兒 that surveyed the Yumen 玉門 area in China, where the locals were facing the uncertainty of their future due to the decline of the once-rich oil industry there. The other was a set of photographs titled *Voir la mer* by Sophie Calle of blind sitters who “gazed” at the ocean for the first time. These two photographic projects spoke of deeply humane feelings, which created a sense of synergy that resonated with Martin Heidegger’s concept of dereliction – “having been thrown into the world, abandoned and delivered up to oneself”.



Photos from the Yumen 玉門 Photo Studio by Zhuang Hui 莊輝 and Dan Er 旦兒.

Left and center: *Yumen*, 2006–2009, Zhuang Hui and Dan'er, colour photographs, 2009. On right: installation at the Ninth Shanghai Biennale, 2012.



*Voir la mer*, Sophie Calle, digital films with colour and sound, and framed colour photographs installation at the Ninth Shanghai Biennale, 2012.

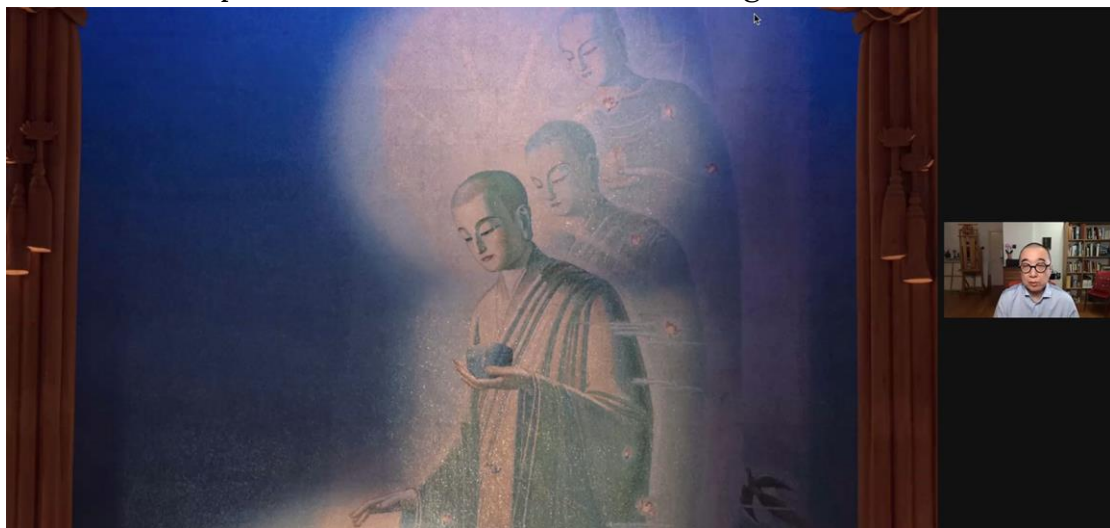
Professor Wang ended the lecture by concluding that the artworks discussed gave rise to speculation of what Buddhist Art might look like in the future. He pointed out once again that Buddhist Art in the 21st century does not necessarily involve statue-making but thrive on other ecological medium or natural elements while harnessing multisensorial media technology geared toward a new horizon.

Following up on the talk, Professor Francesca Tarocco from the Ca' Foscari University of Venice made her remark by once again inviting the audiences to rethink about what Buddhist Art meant, but this time through another form of medium, which was the photograph. She tried to show how these photographs as new outlets for Buddhist visual culture during the late 19th century echoed with the contemporary artworks introduced by Professor Wang in his talk. By introducing the audiences to a different archive of photographs on Buddhist figures taken in late 19th century, Professor Tarocco explained why many Buddhist schools had accepted photographs as a new means for expounding the dharma. Unlike portraits or other traditional visual mediums, Tarocco mentioned, photographs can break down the dichotomy between representation and reality and thus make the original and the copy fused as one. She concluded by highlighting the dynamic interrelationship between agents and objects and addressing the implication of aesthetics and ethics presented by the materiality of Buddhist figures for the development of personhood in this new era of explosive urban growth.



Left: *After Liang Kai's Śākyamuni descending from his mountain retreat* 《仿梁楷釋迦出山圖》, by Hong Lei 洪磊, colour photograph, 1998. Right: *Śākyamuni Emerging from the Mountains* 《出山釋迦圖》 by Liang Kai 梁楷, silk scroll painting, 13th century.

Professor Tang Hui of the Central Academy of Fine Arts in China, on the other hand, contributed by sharing his thoughts as both a scholar and a creator of Buddhist art. By elaborating on the background and philosophy behind one of his major mural works created for the Tsz Chi Jinsi Hall 慈濟靜思堂, Professor Tang explained the challenges he faced while creating this mural work and demonstrated how he used modern unconventional elements to represent Buddhist ideas and teachings.



*Buddha, the Great Awakened One in the Cosmos* 《宇宙大覺者》, Tang Hui 唐暉, mosaic mural, 2000.

The Q&A session that followed was marked by a lively discussion covering



a broad range of topics such as the rise of contemporary Buddhist art and its engagement with the West; Western artists inspired by Buddhist Cave Arts; the circulation of images through the analogy of electronic circuits; the relationship between Darwinism and Buddhism under the lens of universalism; and the possibility of understanding consciousness in this post-human era through exploring Buddhism and technology side by side.