

Under the Gaze of the Buddha Mega-Statue: Commodification and Humanistic Buddhism in Fo Guang Shan

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The Fo Guang Shan Monastery 佛光山寺 near Kaohsiung has been a prominent part of the landscape in southern Taiwan since 1967. Now the largest monastery in Taiwan, its architecture reflects a desire to provide accessible services while consciously incorporating Buddhist symbols.

The neighboring Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum 佛光山佛陀紀念館, opened by Master Hsing Yun 星雲法師 in 2011, ramps up the symbolic content.¹ Overlooking the entire complex, a massive seated image of the Buddha draws the attention of visitors from the moment they enter.

This paper starts with a focus on this mega-statue. How much does it signify, in itself? How should we interpret it? The discussion applies a fixed framework of interpretation, then moves to discuss the importance of context. Finally, the article examines implications for the theory of religious commodification brought to light in this particular example of mega-statues.

¹ The religious entity will be Romanized as Fo Guang Shan instead of Foguanshan, in keeping with the group's own usage. The founder's name is Romanized as Hsing Yun, instead of Xing Yun, again in keeping with group practice. All other Chinese terms, with the exception of place names, are romanized according to *pinyin* usage.

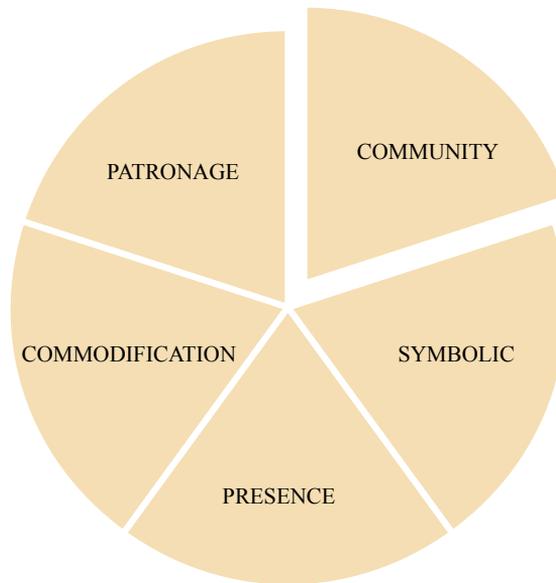
Mega-Statues: A Framework

Mega-statues by their natures dominate the landscape. They serve as visual reference points that feel inescapable. Like having a large mountain nearby, they reorient perspective, economic activity, even ways of thinking. Over time, their presence can also become a source of wonder and mythologizing. The human mind seems to put such objects of immensity in a special cognitive category, and to then build thought systems around them. Until the 1700s Mont Blanc, to use a European example, was known as Mt. Doom, a place inhabited by demons and monsters. At its peak was the land ruled over by “Déesse Blanche,” a fairy who controlled the destiny of people living in the Chamonix valley below.²

The great Buddha at Fo Guang Shan is clearly a mega-statue. The simplest criterion I use to categorize is size: to count as a mega-statue, the image must be at least 20 meters in height. As a religious statue this image also encodes symbolic representations. But there is more to mega-statues than size or symbolism. A previous paper by this author discussed approaches to unpacking their significance. These interpretive dimensions are, briefly: patronage, the material, financial and political capital needed to create the figure; community, the figure’s role in creating and demarking group identity; the symbolic, the layers of meaning attributed to the figure by contemporary viewers; presence, the figure’s immensity and sense of altering the environment; and commodification, the figure’s economic and transactional role in an economic system centered on consumption and leisure.³ This structure is meant to be a platform for discussing mega-statues, not an explanatory model. Nor does it strive to be comprehensive: few mega-statues include all five elements in equal measure. Using the framework as a way to open up interpretations, I will discuss each dimension in relation to the Fo Guang Shan mega-statue.

² “Discover Mont-Blanc, Europe’s highest peak,” on *French Moments* website, <https://frenchmoments.eu/mont-blanc/>.

³ Edward Irons, “Maitreya’s Boundless Gaze: The Religious Implications of Maitreya Mega-Statues,” Chapter Fifteen, *Proceedings from Australia National University Conference*. In press, Brill, 2020.



Unpacking mega-statues: dimensions

Patronage and Financial Support

The religious complex of buildings, gates, gardens, and deity images at Fo Guang Shan is made possible because of massive donations from followers. Like many of the religious organizations in Taiwan, Fo Guang Shan and its related institutions have a large following that reaches around the globe. The scholar of Buddhism André Laliberté estimated that as of 2000 Fo Guang Shan had one million followers. Fo Guang Shan now boasts over 300 subsidiary temples in 173 countries.⁴ Total assets controlled by Fo Guang Shan entities, in one estimate, amount to US\$6 billion.⁵ It is, according the Laliberté, the largest Buddhist organization in Taiwan, and by extension one of the largest in the world.

⁴ “Introduction to Fo Guang Shan,” *Fo Guang Shan Monastery Worldwide Web*, <https://www.fgs.org.tw/en/Organizations/Introduction/>; “Fo Guang Shan” on *Wikipedia* website, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fo_Guang_Shan.

⁵ André Laliberté, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan: 1989-2003: Safeguarding the faith, building a pure land, helping the poor* (London and New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004).

UNDER THE GAZE OF THE BUDDHA MEGA-STATUE



The Great Buddha, Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum



The Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum Visitor's Center Complex

When Hsing Yun (1927-) purchased property and began building the monastery in 1967, none of this was certain. It goes without saying that most if not all of the support given to build Fo Guang Shan can be attributed to reverence for him as an esteemed Dharma holder.⁶ At the same time, those who donate are given some measure of recognition. One wall in the new Buddha Museum complex is inscribed with the names of donors, a common practice in Chinese Buddhist temples.⁷

Fo Guang Shan includes two large religious complexes, the monastery and the Buddha Museum. The new Buddha Museum is extensive and impressive, and clearly represents a large investment. The figures for funding mobilized to build this complex are not available. In fact Fo Guang Shan published sources appear to avoid disclosing such details. One way around this dearth of material is to consider costs from other similar projects. An online article by Peter Wang gives estimates for a few other mega-statues. The Yantai Nanshan standing Sakyamuni Buddha, a 38 meters high bronze figure completed in 2004, was said to have cost the equivalent of \$54 million (360 million Chinese *yuan*). The same source cited a similar figure for the Jilin Dun City Buddha, completed in 2011 at 48 meters. These costs most likely include total project expenses, including grounds and buildings. The project cost for the Spring Temple Buddha in Henan, at 128 meters currently the highest Buddha in the world, is said to have totaled \$55 million, of which \$18 million was spent for the statue alone.⁸ Another online source puts the total cost for the Spring Temple Buddha at 1.2 billion yuan, over \$200 million.⁹ It is safe to assume the Fo Guang Shan Buddha alone cost no less than this \$18 million figure, and we can estimate that costs to build the Museum complex in total, with its extensive halls and world-class museums, at somewhere between \$50 and \$100 million.

⁶ A Dharma-holder is a *dharmadha*, one who is learned in the Dharma. Laliberté, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan*, 67-8.

⁷ For a discussion of the continuing practice of making merit donations, see Gareth Fisher, "The Spiritual Land Rush: Merit and Morality in New Chinese Buddhist Temple Construction," *The Journal of Asian Studies* Vol. 67, No. 1 (February) 2008, 143-170.

⁸ Peter Wang, "China's New Buddha-building Campaign," on the *China Whisper* website, <http://www.chinawhisper.com/chinas-new-buddha-building-campaign/>. This source, while of interest, is undated and its information is not verified.

⁹ Zhou Mingqi, "Buddha Mania: Understanding China's Buddha Building Boom," *Sixth Tone* website, 23 Oct., 2018, <https://www.sixthtone.com/news/1003089/buddha-mania-understanding-chinas-buddha-building-boom>.

The scholar of east Asian religions Stuart Chandler provides other useful information by estimating the scope of Fo Guang Shan assets. At the time of his writing, around 2002, the total value of all properties held by Fo Guang Shan probably exceeded \$300 million, and perhaps equaled \$400 million.¹⁰ Chandler also lists various sources of income, including religious retreats, tourism and pilgrimage, fund-raising drives, dharma functions, alms processions, activities for the laity, and mortuary rites. Of these, alms processions and laity-targeted activities are funding innovations developed at Fo Guang Shan.¹¹

Laliberté explains the need for active fund-raising as the result of Fo Guang Shan's audacious strategy to transform institutional Buddhism. Buddhism has historically been a monastic institution. Hsing Yun, according to Laliberté, seeks to transform it into a congregational religion fully engaged with mundane society. In order to do this the various Fo Guang Shan organizations need to raise funds by selling paraphernalia, books, and tapes, and offering public lectures and conferences.¹² The importance of these activities will become prominent when we consider the Buddha Memorial Museum.

This brief discussion of asset value and income-producing activities illustrates the importance of cash flow and financial management in the planning and completion of mega-statue projects. The management models adopted by such institutions as Fo Guang Shan may differ, but the requirements of **patronage capital**—recruiting donations and managing finances—remain paramount. And as is the case with most Buddhist institutions, the majority of this capital comes not from the government or financial markets, but from the community.

Community

Community in the broadest sense refers to a group with a natural sense of solidarity. In the particular form of community that the sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies called *Gemeinschaft* there is a “common determinative will” uniting people.¹³ Tönnies saw religious communities in particular as representing the “original unity and equality of a whole people, the people as one family....”

¹⁰ Stuart Chandler, *Establishing a Pure Land on Earth: The Foguang Buddhist Perspective on Modernization and Globalization* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2004), 224.

¹¹ Chandler, *Establishing*, 232.

¹² Laliberté, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan*, 69.

¹³ Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society (Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft)*, with a new introduction by John Samples (New Brunswick, USA, and London: Transaction Partners, 2004 [1887]), 49.

This unity is maintained by means of common ceremonies and places of worship.¹⁴ The various parts of Fo Guang Shan clearly form such a religious community. Beyond this, Fo Guang Shan is a specific form, a *founded* religious community, that derives its initial impetus from the religious experience of the founder.¹⁵ Within such founded communities there are additional distinct subtypes, communities of belief as well as religious orders. Fo Guang Shan has both types.

Monuments work in the context of community to mark identity.¹⁶ As a symbol of Chinese Mahayana Buddhism, the great Buddha at Fo Guang Shan identifies a Buddhist religious space. It also serves as a beacon to all Fo Guang Shan followers. Religious followers include the monastics who live and work in Fo Guang Shan monastery. But lay followers far outnumber the monastics. Most lay members belong to the Buddha Light International Association (BLIA, 國際佛光會 *guoji foguanghai*) and its world-wide branches. The BLIA headquarters was formally inaugurated in Los Angeles in 1992.¹⁷ While the BLIA is an organization positioned for future international growth, the majority of the members still reside in Taiwan. And while non-Chinese membership increases year by year, most members continue to be ethnic Chinese.¹⁸ In short, the Great Buddha presides over two major forms of community, the monastic order in the monastery, and the lay members of the BLIA, primarily in Taiwan.

These two communities are readily distinguished in Fo Guang Shan's own statements. A primary purpose of the Fo Guang Shan monastery, as stated in its official website, is "...providing the public with a Pure Land environment in which to *practice* Buddhism."¹⁹ This can be contrasted to the mission of the Buddha Museum. The Museum was primarily built to enshrine the Buddha

¹⁴Ferdinand Tönnies, *Community and Society*, translated and edited by Charles P. Loomis (Mineola, NY: Dover, 2002 [1887]), 219.

¹⁵ "Religious Communities: Religion, Community, and Society," *Encyclopedia.com*, 3 Apr. 2020, <https://www.encyclopedia.com>.

¹⁶ Constanze Rassmann, "Identities overseas? The long barrows in Denmark and Britain," in Martin Furholt, Friedrich Lüth, Johannes Müller, eds., *Megaliths and Identities: Early Monuments and Neolithic Societies from the Atlantic to the Baltic* (Bonn: Rudolf Habelt, 2011), 167-176, p.169.

¹⁷ Laliberté, *The Politics of Buddhist Organizations in Taiwan*, 68.

¹⁸ Stuart Chandler, "Globalizing Chinese Culture, Localizing Buddhist Teachings: the Internationalization of Fo Guang Shan," *Journal of Global Buddhism* 3 (2002): 46 - 78, p. 58.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

relic obtained in 1998 by Hsing Yun.²⁰ But it has another, grander mission than housing the relic. According to Hsing Yun, "...the Buddha Museum serves to acquaint the public with the Buddha's qualities, through which the Buddhist practice can be inspired. The Buddha Museum was thus built not only to venerate the Buddha, but more importantly with the interests of sentient beings kept in mind."²¹ The two neighboring institutions, though managed together, are clearly designed to serve different functions, the monastery a place of practice, and the museum a place of inspiration. We can say the monastery is geared toward current practitioners, while the Buddha Museum is oriented toward the vast pool of potential believers.

The Museum and its mega-statue can be seen as part of the natural evolution of Fo Guang Shan's globalization. This globalization process moved from a focus on ethnic Chinese believers to a broad concern with all beings. The process starts with the particular challenges posed by modernity itself. As Stuart Chandler notes, under conditions of globalization individuals increasingly use religion as the basis for communal identity.²² Providing a familiar space in an unstable world remains an important function. It can be argued that all the larger Buddhist groups, including the "four great mountains" of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism—indeed, all new religions—provide such a sense of community.²³ Fo Guang Shan succeeded well in this function; membership jumped from some 400,000 in 2000 to millions by 2018.²⁴ The next step in Fo Guang Shan's globalization was the establishing of overseas centers. As Fo Guang Shan moved overseas it was also able to offer a "reconstructed sense of

²⁰ "Origin of the Buddha Museum," *Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum* website, http://www.fgsbmc.org.tw/en/intro_origin.html.

²¹ The English translation of the memorial hall complex was originally "Buddha Memorial Center;" it has since been changed to "Buddha Museum" in English language material. The Chinese name, confusingly, continues to be "Buddha Memorial Hall" 佛光山佛陀紀念館. "Origin of the Buddha Museum," *Fo Guang Shan Buddha Museum* website, http://www.fgsbmc.org.tw/en/intro_origin.html. Italics added.

²² Chandler, "Globalizing Chinese Culture," 47.

²³ The phrase "four great mountains" of contemporary Taiwanese Buddhism refers indirectly to the four sacred mountains of Chinese Buddhism while specifically indicating the four most prominent contemporary Buddhist organizations: Fo Guang Shan, Fagushan 法鼓山, Ciji 慈濟, and Chung Tai Shan 中台山.

²⁴ Chandler's figures for 2000 membership, 400,000, are lower than Laliberté's estimate of one million, fn. 5, above. Chandler, "Globalizing Chinese Culture," 54; Yao, Yu-Shuang and Richard Gombrich. "Fo Guang Shan seen through Telescope and Microscope." *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 14, May, 2018. 128-155, 129.

home” to expatriate Chinese seeking something familiar. This aspect aligned with Fo Guang Shan’s religious mission, one that sought to reunite practice with values. The third step in globalization went beyond serving ethnic Chinese membership to expand the religious mission to the entire realm of sentient beings. In short, the unique presence of the Buddha Museum implies the importance of a third community, that of Buddhists around the world.

But globalization was not the only process driving growth in Fo Guang Shan’s community. Another possible factor in this evolution, and the building of the Buddha Museum, is pressure of competition in Fo Guang Shan’s home market of Taiwan. Fo Guang Shan, despite decades of rapid growth, has not been immune to competition from other religious groups. Chandler, writing in the early 2000s, noted that support in Taiwan had thinned due to competition and slower economic growth.²⁵ Ironically, his analysis coincided with, and therefore did not include, the greatest building project in Fo Guang Shan’s history—the Buddha Museum. From our perspective, the opening of the Buddha Museum was a bold move to connect with a community beyond Taiwan Buddhists, the global market.

In sum, a number of **communities** cluster around the Fo Guang Shan Museum mega-statue: the monastic community, the community of ethnic Chinese believers, and the potential community of all sentient beings. These communities have grown in tandem with the forces of globalization, demography, and Fo Guang Shan’s own religious mission.

The Fo Guang Shan Buddha as Sacred Object

The Fo Guang Shan Buddha is a well-crafted Sakyamuni image, with all the religious symbolic associations connected to the founder of Buddhism. For example, the image’s curls symbolizes the Buddha’s renunciation of wealth. The Buddha’s topknot (*ushnisha*) symbolizes the various stages he passed through on the way to enlightenment. His elongated earlobes are another reminder of Sakyamuni’s pre-ascetic lifestyle of opulence, when he wore heavy gold earrings. The *ūrṇā* (circular spot) between his eyes symbolizes his ability to perceive the absolute.²⁶ These interpretations are subtle but very present for the devout.

²⁵ Chandler, *Establishing*, 235.

²⁶ Ananda Coorasmawamy, “The Origin of the Buddha Image,” *The Art Bulletin* 9:4 (1927), 287-328, DOI: 10.1080/00043079.1927.11409514, pp. 289-290. See also Cristina Riche, “Symbolism in Asian Statues of the Buddha,” *Intermountain West Journal of Religious Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 1, Spring, 2014, 32-51, pp. 34-36.

Beyond such overt facets of the symbolic, there are non-visual qualities of symbolic import inherent in the statue. One is the symbolism entailed in the very effort to create the image. The building of the Great Buddha image was the result of close collaboration. The Chinese artist Li Jianming 李健明 sketched over one hundred versions of the Buddha in order to find the right flavor. Once the design was approved, the commission to sculpt the Sakyamuni as a standing figure was given to the Chinese sculptor Guo Xuanchang 郭選昌 in 2007. Due to unspecified engineering problems the standing design was revised to be a seated Buddha, also sculpted by Guo.²⁷ Clearly the interaction between the artist, the sculptor, and Master Hsing Yun, as well as engineers and construction companies, was a major effort, one widely acknowledged by devotees as worthy of gratitude. It was, in Buddhist terms, an act of great merit.

Another invisible support for the image's symbolic significance is the ritual act of consecration. No Buddha image is completed until it is formally consecrated. The Buddhist consecration ceremony, *buddhābhiseka*, is called *kaiguang* 開光 (“opening the light”) or *kaiyan* 開眼 (“eye-opening”) in Chinese.²⁸ The ceremony harks back to the Buddha's original enlightenment. As recorded in the Dhammapada, verse 153, the Buddha is said to have uttered the words *anekajātisaṃsāraṃ* following his enlightenment (“infinitely numerous are the existences in the round of rebirths”). This same phrase is used in all consecration ceremonies. While this ceremony may seem a formality, in the eyes of Buddhist believers consecration is the essential difference between a living statue and a lifeless artifact. By means of the eye-opening ceremony the image becomes a living Buddha.²⁹

²⁷ Hsing Yun, 我與藝術家們 [me and artists], Fo Guang Shan website, <http://www.masterhsingyun.org/article/article.jsp?index=8&item=9&bookid=2c907d494b3ecd70014b42f8b1190001&ch=9&se=0&f=1>.

²⁸ The earliest reference to such consecration ceremonies in the Mahayana canon are relatively late, in the fifth century CE. Richard Gombrich notes that the earliest reference to an eye-opening ceremony anywhere is by Buddhaghosa in the fifth century CE. See Richard Gombrich, “The Consecration of a Buddhist Image,” *Journal of Asian Studies* 26, no. 1, 1966: 23-36, p.26. See also Foshuo yiqie rulai anxiang sanmei yigui jing 佛說一切如來安像三昧儀軌經 (T1418, Sūtra Spoken by the Buddha on the Samādhi of all the Tathāgatas for the Proper Installation of Icons), attributed to Dānapāla of the Northern Song. See James Robson, “The Buddhist Image Inside-Out: On the Placing of Objects Inside Statues in East Asia,” in Tansen Sen, ed., *Buddhism Across Asia: Networks of Material, Intellectual, and Cultural Exchange 1* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2014), 295–96.

²⁹ “Eye-opening ceremony,” Nichiren Buddhism Library, online at <https://www.nichirenlibrary.org/en/dic/Content/E/109>.

The consecration ceremony is essentially a transaction. Meritorious actions are being offered in exchange for the deity's continued compassion and benevolence. It is this interactional quality which results in sacredness. As the art historian Michelle Wang notes, "The interaction between the sculpture and others, whether the Buddha himself or eminent monks, is...key to the endowment and recognition of its sacredness."³⁰ Hsing Yun agrees, saying that consecration is essential. Yet he emphasizes that it is not the Buddha who is in need of initiation. Instead, it is we humans who need the ceremony. For it is the human's "light" which is being consecrated. For Hsing Yun, consecration means *illuminating the minds of humans*.³¹

Already, then, we see how seemingly inert religious symbolism, once brought to life, can be translated into religious experience. This religiosity is amplified by the image's quality of presence.

Presence: Sakyamuni Sees You

The massive image—having been consecrated by a tonsured monk, Hsing Yun himself—has been "given light." This event took place on December 25, 2011. From that point on the mega-statue was charged with religious potency. But how does this change the *viewer*? This fourth dimension of immense statuary deals with its impact on the viewer, its charged presence. This is the phenomenological dimension.

The key feature of the mega-statue, as mentioned previously, is its *immensity*. This immensity creates an immediate and direct connection between image and viewer. As noted in my earlier work,

Each encounter with immensity can be said to create a field where the limited, that which can be measured, is juxtaposed against the limitless, where the Apollonian sense of measured control meets the Dionysian urge to release. Erecting a pole of immensity, a mega-statue, creates the field in which such eternal dualities arise.³²

³⁰ Michelle C. Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures as Animate Bodies and Living Presences," *Ars Orientalis* 46, available online at <http://dx.doi.org/10.3998/ars.13441566.0046.002>.

³¹ "佛像那裡需要人來替他開光，所謂「開光」者，人們為自己的心開光耳!" See "Affairs of humanity, 8-humanity's energy" 人間萬事8-人間的能源, Master Hsing Yun website, <http://www.masterhsingyun.org/article/article.jsp?index=62&item=91&bookid=2c907d49496057d001499dc331700145&ch=4&se=20&f=1>. Emphasis added.

³² Irons, "Maitreya's Boundless Gaze."

The idea of a field is key here. Like an object circling the sun, the visitor senses she is within the gravitational pull of a powerful entity.

A parallel trait to the image's immensity is its *monumentality*. Monuments remind the viewer of something. The viewer asks, what is the referent to which this great monument points? Such a referent is not easily pinned down. It will, firstly, change from person to person. It will also change based on the times, for the modern mind sees things in a different light from the medieval. And it will change with the setting—the same Buddha found on a mountaintop in Afghanistan will *feel* different from one placed on the National Mall in Washington, D.C.

Whatever the association, a monument as an architectural construction, including a sculptured image, is meant to transmit something to posterity, namely the memory of a person, an event, or, for religious monuments, an idea. Monuments are thus intimately connected with memorialization.³³ The presence of this mega-object confirms and verifies the referent's existence. As I discussed above, as a religious symbol there are inbuilt ripples of associations. Most viewers recognize the towering image as Sakyamuni, the enlightened one, the Buddha, and from this may flow a thousand other associations: the Buddha as prototype of a life devoted to enlightenment, the guide, the teacher able to connect with hearers on multiple levels, the wandering monk, the renouncer, Dvija, twice-born, sage.

While not all viewers will have the same associations, most will feel a gravitational pull of immensity. The visitor first becomes *aware* of the image; she steps into the field of presence. Like a magnet, the image's gaze draws one closer. The Buddha is now watching, and somehow seems to be directing thought, if only on a subconscious level. This gaze in turn has the potential to dredge up associations from the viewer's psyche. And in doing so, it becomes a site of negotiation, "making tangible the unseen realm of spiritual response and predestination."³⁴ This at least is the interpretation given to Buddha sculptures in medieval China, as described by the scholar Robert Campany. In this period there was an active trade in miracle stories, and these in turn impacted the experience of seeing the image. In a way the

³³ Cassen, Serge, Pierre Pétrequin, Chrisine Boujot, Salvador Dominguez-Bell, Mikaël Guitavarc'h and Guirec Querré, "Measuring distinction in the megalithic architecture of the Carnac religion: from sign to material," in Martin Furholt, Friedrich Lüth, Johannes Müller, eds., *Megaliths and Identities: Early Monuments and Neolithic Societies from the Atlantic to the Baltic* (Rudolf Habelt, 2011), 225-248, p. 228.

³⁴ Michelle C. Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures."

sculptures came to life because, again in Michelle Wang's words, they had been *written* into life through a milieu already vibrating with their potency.³⁵

We live in a different era. In our age some Buddhas may continue to perform miracles, just as they did in medieval times. But so does science. So does the Great Leader. So does the State. So do millions of competing actors, all claiming agency, potency and power. Such competing claims may lead some to have a sense of individual powerlessness or irrelevance. For such visitors the relevant question that comes to mind may be about the value of subjective experience. Isn't the Fo Guang Shan Buddha, despite the sense of awe felt working its way into awareness, in the end just another site to see, a commodified way to pass the time, another selfie at Disneyland?

Not everyone will be subject to postmodern angst. But the possibility of such gnawing doubt leads to consideration of the final dimension of mega-statues, commodification.

Fo Guang Shan as Commodity

The commodity is something traded, labelled, packaged and stored. The world is awash with commodities. It is fair to call the current middle-class lifestyle one centered on commodified consumption. In this lifestyle tourism, including religious experience, is seen as another commodified experience to be consumed.

Mega-statues today are bound up with tourism. Regardless of when they were built, each statue becomes a site to be experienced. The stream of visitors then becomes a question of traffic flows and headcounts. For many religious institutions, income from tourism supports the entire enterprise, impacting much more than the grounds around the statue. The scholar of Buddhism Justin McDaniel has recently categorized some religious tourism locales as "sites of leisure." Visitors to such sites experience a "socially disengaged" form of Buddhism. Visitors walk around the grounds searching for the best shots and planning their dinners; there is scant evidence of religious motivation.³⁶

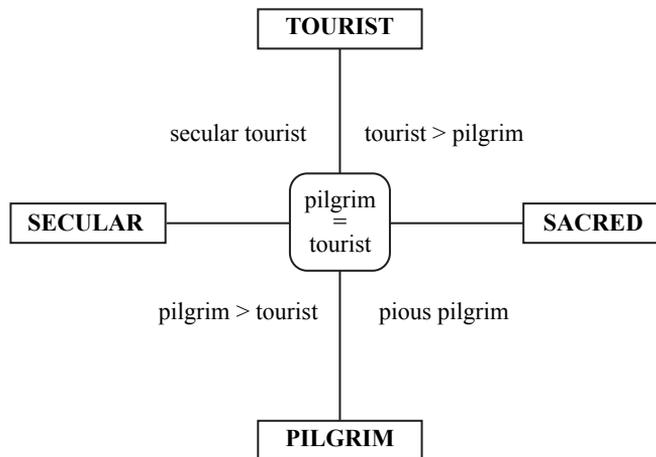
Not all visitors are socially disengaged in this way. Many still come for religious reasons. Religious pilgrims and leisure tourists cross paths repeatedly at sacred sites. Shi Miao Guang 釋妙光, a Fo Guang Shan monastic, offers a convenient model to distinguish the religious from the leisure tourist. The

³⁵ Michelle C. Wang, "Early Chinese Buddhist Sculptures."

³⁶ Justin Thomas McDaniel, *Architects of Buddhist Leisure* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2017), 11-17.

traditional religious pilgrim travels, often from a great distance, and after arrival performs religious acts. Today such trips tend to be fast and short, instead of being once-in-a-lifetime experiences. Nevertheless, these travelers tend to engage in ritual and meditation once they arrive.

Using Miao Guang’s framework we can draw a distinction between religious and secular tourism, focusing on the key variable of participation in religious acts while visiting. And we can now see a third possibility, the secular pilgrim. Secular pilgrimage refers to serious travel for non-religious aims. These may include a desire to understand another culture, reverence for political leaders or events, or a nostalgic desire to return “home.”³⁷ The secular pilgrim’s openness to experiencing the religious site contrasts with the secular tourist’s perspective, which seeks personal satisfaction while remaining in the secular world.³⁸ In the end, however, distinguishing between motives for travel is notoriously difficult. Many of us have mixed or multiple purposes when we visit a site, and in one visit we may pass through various roles. We are dealing with a spectrum of identities, as summarized below:



The Pilgrim-Tourist Continuum (from Collins-Kreiner and Kliot, 2000)

³⁷ Shih, Miao Guang, “Modern Religious Tourism in Taiwan: A Case Study of Fo Guang Shan Buddha Memorial Center,” in 「人間佛教在東亞與東南亞的開展」國際學術研討會 [international scholarly conference on the development of humanistic Buddhism in east and southeast Asia], (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Center for Research in Humanistic Buddhism, 2015).

³⁸ Shih, Miao Guang, “Modern Religious Tourism,” 4.

Miao Guang agrees that visitors may shift roles during a visit to Fo Guang Shan. They often begin with an appreciation of the abundant works of art and a desire to satisfy a cultural curiosity during the long walk up to the central hall. This may develop into an urge to participate in religion. And in some cases the visitor becomes a religious pilgrim.³⁹ Such transformation is encouraged. Indeed, inculcating just such a receptiveness to religiosity in the visitor is one of the major stated aims of building the Buddha Museum.

Beyond these distinctions in types of visitors, there is no question that the Fo Guang Shan's Buddha Museum and monastery have become a major tourist attraction. Miao Guang gives these numbers for annual visitors:

<u>FOGUANGSHA TOTAL VISITORS</u>	
2011-2	9,059,987
2013	10,300,364
2014	11,099,894
2015	7,725,417 ⁴⁰
2016	774,000 ⁴¹

Such numbers are impressive, and comparable to those for the Louvre (9,300,000 visitors in 2014).

The Fo Guang Shan experience, when the Buddha Museum is included, is a good fit for the tourism industry. As such it could be analyzed purely as a commodified tourist product. Yet it is too simplistic to limit discussion of Fo Guang Shan to such terms. Fo Guang Shan has a broader goal, and shares it openly. The religious plan, in Hsing Yun's words, is to "widely establish positive affiliations with others (*guangjie shanyuan* 广结善缘).⁴² "Before achieving the Way of Buddha," he says, "we should first making connections with people" (*weicheng fodao, xianjie renyuan* 未成佛道，先

³⁹ Shih, Miao Guang, "Modern Religious Tourism," 15.

⁴⁰ Figures for 2014 are incomplete. Shih, Miao Guang, "Modern Religious Tourism," 9.

⁴¹ Shi, Xiuhua 石秀華, "高雄最熱門觀光遊憩區 連5年奪冠都是它 [Kaohsiung's most popular tourist spot, champions for the past five years]," on Fo Guang Shan website, 15 April, 2017, http://www.fgsbmc.org.tw/news_latestnews_c.aspx?News_Id=201704080.

⁴² Hsing Yun, official Facebook page, 2013.

結人緣).⁴³ Fo Guang Shan's use of the concept of affinity (緣 "yuan") has been explored by Chandler and others, and will be discussed further below. Here it is sufficient to note that "sowing seeds of affinity" is the movement's major strategy.⁴⁴ Criticisms of Fo Guang Shan as a commodified experience should be tempered with reference to this purpose.

In summing up this first section, the paper has discussed five separate portals to understanding the Fo Guang Shan mega-statue: patronage, community, religious symbolism, presence, and commodification. The reader will notice that discussions can easily lose sight of the image itself and follow threads leading into the surroundings, the realm of context. Rather than being a diversion, an expanded discussion of context appears to be necessary for a full understanding of any image. This expanded context is the topic of section two.

Setting: Moving into the garden

The *Bodhimanda*

The Fo Guang Shan Sakyamuni is impressive on its own terms. As the visitor moves forward, her gaze is repeatedly drawn to the massive image, its refined features hinting at the possibility of another state of being. At the same time the overall impression left from a visit to Fo Guang Shan today is that of an effigy implanted in a unique setting. The site itself is an object of awe. That context adds a new layer to the approach to mega-statues in the preceding section, which primarily focused on the image. This paper suggests that Fo Guang Shan's Sakyamuni, including its phenomenological field, exists in large part as a piece of a larger puzzle, the *religious complex*.

Chinese traditional religion has a specific term for this complex, *daochang* 道場. In Sanskrit this is the *bodhimanda*, the seat of enlightenment. In this original Sanskrit sense the first *bodhimanda* was the site of the Buddha's enlightenment.⁴⁵ This event took place at Bodhgaya, which helps explain the incorporation of design elements from the Mahabodhi Temple at Bodhgaya in the Fo Guang Shan Memorial Center.

⁴³ Li Bo, "First Enticing With Desires: A Material Approach to Fo Guang Shan and Humanistic Buddhism," Master's thesis, University of Alberta, 2014, <https://doi.org/10.7939/R3DF6K93V>." 150.

⁴⁴ Jonathan Mair, "Fo Guang Shan Buddhism and Ethical Conversations across Borders: Sowing Seeds of Affinity," in Leena Kaunonen, ed., *Cosmopolitanism and Transnationalism: Visions, Ethics, Practices* (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2014), 66-89, p. 68.

⁴⁵ "又作菩提道場、菩提場。中印度菩提伽耶的菩提樹下之金剛座上佛陀成道之處。" 舊華嚴經卷一世間淨眼品、悲華經卷三諸菩薩本授記品。" *Fo Guang Dictionary* 佛光大辭典, online at https://www.fgs.org.tw/fgs_book/fgs_drser.aspx.

The classic Mahayana discussion of a *bodhimanda* is found in chapter four of the Vimalakīti Nirdeśa (c.100 CE). In an exchange with the Buddha the novice Prabhāvīyūha explains how he once visited Vimalakīti and learned that a *bodhimanda* is a place of intense practice. Such demanding practice, said Vimalakīti, includes a litany of activities: upholding the precepts, applying vigor, patience, kindness, compassion, joy, and the spirit of giving.⁴⁶

Fo Guang Shan English language materials frequently use the term *bodhimanda* for *daochang*. It is a key term, for instance, in the photo biography of Hsing Yun, *Yunshui sanqian* 雲水三千 [Cloud and water], published in 2003.⁴⁷ But the two complexes at Fo Guang Shan, the temple and the Buddha Museum, appear to be different kinds of *daochang*. They follow different architectural rules, for instance: while the temple complex next door was intended from the start to adhere to an imperial architecture style 中國宮殿式 (*zhongguo gongdianshi*), the newer Buddha Museum is an elegant postmodern pastiche, including replication of elements in the Bodhgaya style.⁴⁸ And what goes on within each space differs. In general the temple complex is a place of devotion where one can also live, study and cultivate. The Museum feels more like public space open to all. It offers classes in chanting, sutra recitation, writing, yoga, drawing, calligraphy, Buddhist painting, Chinese painting, vegetarian cooking, chess, dance, drama, poetry, flower arranging, body-building, taiga, cosmetics, etiquette, and languages.⁴⁹ It has a full schedule of lectures, performances, exhibitions, and conferences. While both complexes are Buddhist *daochangs*, their orientations toward practice differ.

In later Buddhist usage a *daochang* referred to more than the location of enlightenment. It came to refer to a place to worship or cultivate. According to the Avatamsaka sutra, *daochang* activities included recitation, lectures, receiving precepts, writing, and storing sutras—in other words, what happened at a temple. In addition, certain *daochang* were given special reverence.

⁴⁶ “Bodhimanda”, on *Unborn Mind* website, <https://unbornmind.com/2012/03/03/bodhimanda/>.

⁴⁷ Jack Meng-Tat Chia, “Modern Buddhist Hagiography: The Life of Hsing Yun in Popular Media,” *Asian Ethnology*, Vol. 74, No. 1, 2015, 141-165, p. 154.

⁴⁸ Shang Rong 尚榮, interview with Ven. Hui Kong 惠空法師, in 佛光山佛教藝術理念探析—從太虛大師到星雲大師看近現代佛教藝術的開展 [seeing the development of modern Buddhist arts from Master Taixu to Venerable Master Hsing Yun], in 程恭讓/ 妙凡 Cheng Gongrang and Miao Fan, eds., 星雲大師人間佛教理論實踐研究 [practical research in Master Hsing Yun’s theory of humanistic Buddhism], Vol. 2 (Fo Guang Shan Publishing, 2017), 318-355.

⁴⁹ Zheng Zimei, “Explicating Master Hsing Yun,”

Traditionally in Chinese Buddhism there are four primary sites of bodhisattva practice, the four sacred mountains of Mt. Puto, Mt. Hua, Mt. Emei, and Mt. Wutai, each said to be the abode of the four major bodhisattvas—Guan Yin, Kṣitigarbha, Samantabhadra, and Mañjuśrī. All these mountains are *daochangs*. In addition the term *daochang* took on a general sense; to this day it remains a common term used for temple in Daoist and Yiguandao as well as Buddhism. Crucially, there may or may not be a physical structure at the *daochang* site, so in its broadest sense *daochang* refers to sacred sites in general.⁵⁰

Hsing Yun broadens the abstract sense of *daochang* one step further. When asked why he creates so many *bodhimandas* around the world, the Master replied, “Bodhimandas are everywhere. You are a Bodhimanda; he/she is a Bodhimanda; there are at least 93 Bodhimandas illuminating different parts of the world. They shine upon one another and are everywhere. Currently, the energy of murder and violence overwhelms the world and beings suffer greatly. How can we not cultivate with vigor when we see the holy teaching declining and living beings suffering?”⁵¹

As mentioned in the discussion of community, Fo Guang Shan’s temples can serve as “homes” for lay members. But Fo Guang Shan’s *daochang* conceptualization goes beyond community. As Chandler notes, each temple is defined as an archetype of a *homeland*, a miniature pure land.⁵² Fo Guang Shan’s dispersed temples around the world form a pureland network. Hsing Yun says he desires to plant the seed of Dharma in every nation through ensconcing each outpost in a web of local connections. Chandler calls such connections links of affinity 結緣 (*jieryuan*).⁵³ In concrete terms this means establishing ties with wealthy potential donors and patiently waiting for a trickle-down effect to spread the Dharma message.⁵⁴ The process of creating affinity also includes building immense monuments.

⁵⁰ *Fo Guang Dictionary*, 佛光大辭典, online at https://www.fgs.org.tw/fgs_book/fgs_drser.aspx.

⁵¹ Heng Mao, “Dharma Banners Everywhere - A Few Words for Lay Bodhisattva Preceptees.” Angela Li, trans. *Bodhi Field* (金剛菩提海), 7 July, 2007: 32-33. <http://www.drbachinese.org/vbs/publish/447/vbs447p032.pdf>.

⁵² Chandler, “Globalizing Chinese Culture,” 60.

⁵³ Chandler, “Globalizing Chinese Culture,” 60.

⁵⁴ Chandler, “Globalizing Chinese Culture,” 65.

The Fo Guang Shan website specifically defines Fo Guang Shan as a bodhisattva *daochang*. This means, in Fo Guang Shan's terminology, that it prioritizes engagement with the world; saving the living (instead of the departed); first shrinking before enlarging; emphasizing the residents and Buddhist affairs; and promoting such areas as education, culture, charity, and healing.⁵⁵ It is these priorities that led to the building of the Fo Guang Shan Buddha and Buddha Museum.

Popular Culture and Fo Guang Shan: A Marriage Made on Earth

In addition to housing the Buddha tooth, the Buddha Museum is intended to exhibit the “essentials” of Buddhism.⁵⁶ But these essentials are not immediately apparent. The massive museum hall remains distant from the main gate, a long walk up a hill. The first building most visitors enter is actually the Front Hall (禮敬大廳 *lijing dating*), a visitors' center. Once inside, each person should quickly feel as if she has entered familiar ground, because the layout and ambience match such up-scale consumer goods venues as department stores and airport departure lounges. These are the familiar non-spaces of connection and transfer that characterize much of modern life in more and more of the world.⁵⁷ The scene at the Front Hall is vibrant and at times chaotic. Tour groups continuously file in. Some smaller groups gather around individual nuns. Families from China sit where they can, tired from the wear and tear of tourism. The Front Hall, roomy and cool, offers respite. Food and gift booths line up on each side of the main walkway. There are a Starbucks and a few restaurants. Tourist trinkets are prominently displayed.

⁵⁵ Fo Guang Shan Yuanqi 佛光山缘起 [the origins of Fo Guang Shan],” on *Know Fo Guang Shan* website 认识佛光山, <https://www.fgs.org.tw/introduction.aspx>

⁵⁶ Yao, Yu-Shuang and Richard Gombrich. “Fo Guang Shan seen through Telescope and Microscope.” *Journal of the Oxford Centre for Buddhist Studies*, Vol. 14, May, 2018. 128-155, p. 146.

⁵⁷ Marc Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Anthropology of Supermodernity* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1992).

The reason such goods and services are made available is given in a quote from Hsing Yun:

Whatever dharma instruments and Buddhist gifts are needed by contemporary society, Fo Guang Shan can offer and satisfy....⁵⁸

In other words, the visitor's "basic needs," whether dharmic or physical, must be satisfied when they visit Fo Guang Shan. In this way Fo Guang Shan comes to terms with popular culture, which is *consumption* culture. Ultimately this approach is part of the strategy of Humanistic Buddhism 人間佛教 (*renjian fojiao*) espoused by Fo Guang Shan.

The historian Jack Chia notes how Fo Guang Shan harnesses the power of popular culture and technology in depictions of Hsing Yun, in particular as a way to connect with the younger generation.⁵⁹ In his teachings Hsing Yun discourages sole focus on sitting meditation. Instead he urges engagement with the world, in accord with Humanistic Buddhism.⁶⁰ Chia also contends that the frequent focus on the master's hagiography is a way to teach Buddhism to the "IT-savvy" young generation.⁶¹ The Buddhism scholars Yao Yu-shuang and Richard Gombrich add that Fo Guang Shan has a particular strong bias toward "feeding the enthusiasms" of young people."⁶²

It appears that Humanistic Buddhism lies behind much of the Fo Guang Shan activity. What is Humanistic Buddhism, and how is it related to the Sakyamuni mega-statue?

The Garden of Humanistic Buddhism

Humanistic Buddhism as a teaching focuses on the creation of a Pure Land on earth through practices of compassion and kindness.⁶³ For Hsing Yun, Buddhism

⁵⁸ “當代社會需要的法物與佛教精神產品，佛光山 都可以提供並滿足。” Zheng Zimei, 鄧子美, 解读星云大师人間佛教思想 [Explicating Master Hsing Yun's humanistic Buddhism thought], 2016. Article online at Chinese University of Hong Kong website, <http://www.cuhk.edu.hk/arts/cshb/lecture/2016/真實的佛教觀察PPT.pdf>.

⁵⁹ Chia, "Modern Buddhist Hagiography," 144.

⁶⁰ Chia, "Modern Buddhist Hagiography," 146.

⁶¹ Chia, "Modern Buddhist Hagiography," 154.

⁶² Yao and Gombrich, "Telescope and Microscope," 130.

⁶³ Tracy Mann, "Continuing Political Force of Relics in the Modern Asian Society: The Buddha's Tooth Relic at Fo Guang Shan," University of Michigan Thesis, 2011, <http://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/bitstream/2027.42/96469/1/stlymann.pdf>, p. 2.

is not meant to be an abstract theory, it is a religion that brings joy and happiness to humanity. “The greatest treasures in life,” he says, “are happiness and joy. Therefore to live happily, joyously, in the present, is the point of humanistic Buddhism, and is the fulfillment of the spirit of Buddhism in the world. (人生最寶貴的就是歡喜、快樂，因此活得快樂、幸福、自在，就是人間佛教所倡導的，是佛教精神在世間的實踐。)⁶⁴ In this sense Humanistic Buddhism is Buddhism, not a new “brand” or branch.

The roots of the Humanistic Buddhism movement go back to Yin Shun 印順 (1906-2005) and his master Tai Xu 太虛 (1890-1947). Yin Shun’s *New Treatise on the Pure Land* (Jingtu Xinlun 淨土新論, 1952) caused a stir in Taiwanese Buddhism by directly criticizing traditional monastic practice. Yin Shun emphasized that bodhisattvas are not gods. “Relying on others for salvation,” he said, “was only for the “dimwitted who have no other way.” In this work he emphasized the term Humanistic Buddhism, “Buddhism for the human realm” 人間佛教 (*rejianfojiao*), over “Buddhism for human life” 人生佛教 (*renshengfojiao*).⁶⁵

The sociologist Zheng Zimei notes three traits of the Humanistic Buddhism *daochang*:

- A strong spirit of service
- De-emphasis on funerary ritual and chanting
- High educational attainment of the monks, residents, and volunteers⁶⁶

These succinct principles are the animating spirit of the religious complex at Fo Guang Shan.

To sum up, this discussion of the Fo Guang Shan *daochang*, has brought us face-to-face with its animating ideology of Humanistic Buddhism as well as the idea of cultivating a vibrant *daochang* through connection to popular culture.

Conclusion: Liquified culture meets humanistic buddhism

It makes no sense to see the Sakyamuni image without reference to the Fo Guang Shan *daochang*. The mega-statue is but one element in a carefully-

⁶⁴ Hsing Yun 星雲大師. 成就的祕訣:金剛經 [The secrets of attainment: the Diamond Sutra], (Taipei: Route Culture, 2010), 23.

⁶⁵ Tracy Mann, “Continuing Political Force,” 19. “Dimwitted” quote taken from Charles Brewer Jones, *In Taiwan: Religion and the State 1660-1990* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 1999), 126-133.

⁶⁶ Zheng Zimei, “Explicating Master Hsing Yun.”

crafted institutional and built environment that includes traditional sacred relics, the active participation of the sangha, an involved laity, civil society activities, and international image-management, to name only a few elements. Such a complex structure requires management, and cannot be fully unpacked without considering its governance structure, an aspect that will not be discussed here. But how does this situated complexity relate to the mega-statue? We can say the giant Sakyamuni functions as mega-statue, but only within this complex milieu. Its strength is present only in light of the *daochang*.

At the same time Fo Guang Shan itself needs to be contextualized. It is not simply a matter of understanding Humanistic Buddhism. Other new Buddhist groups have risen in prominence since the 1980s, and the humanistic label is insufficient to explain their growth overall. The internationalization of Taiwanese religious groups—here including Yiguandao, Maitreya Great Tao, Lu Shengyan’s True Buddha School, Supreme Master Ching Hai’s organization, and more recently Weishin Shengjiao—is a widespread religious phenomenon that calls for a macro view. All such groups participate in globalization.

The method for approaching mega-statues developed here includes the following proposed elements, now complicated by the two new proposed, dimensions, *bodhimanda* and globalization:

MEGA-STATUE DIMENSION	DAOCHANG (BODHIMANDA) DIMENSION	GLOBALIZED CONTEXT DIMENSION
PATRONAGE	Project management	International expansion and financing
COMMUNITY	Cultural home	Cultural assimilation strategy
RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM	Planting the seeds of affinity	Religious internationalization/ missiology
SACRED PRESENCE	Space of practice	Network of daochang
COMMODIFICATION	Web of consumption	International brand management

The added dimensions result from broadened contextualization. At the level of methodology, we move from the realm of personal psychology (the individual in the presence of the image), to the complex religious institution (*daochang*), to the global stage.

At this point this proposed dimensional framework is suggestive. The one area that calls for immediate explication, in my opinion, is commodification of the *daochang*. This study will close with consideration of the significance of such commodification.

The theologians Eamonn Conway and Vincent J. Miller, in their work on religious consumption, offer provocative ways to think of the relationship between tradition, practice, and consumption. Miller in particular argues that under conditions of modernity the human becomes “enslaved in a lifestyle and value system.” That condition, according to Miller, is ultimately dehumanizing.⁶⁷ Miller contends that ideological battle with the forces of consumption is insufficient, because “consumer culture infects our very capacity to perceive what is valuable.”⁶⁸ The consumerist mode works in two ways. First, through the “liquification” of tradition; second, through the separation of belief from practice.⁶⁹ Over time the individual’s engagement with belief becomes inconsistent and incoherent. It thus becomes necessary to interrogate the consumerist mode of interpretation itself.

It is hard not to see the presence of some such incoherence in the experience of the Fo Guang Shan *daochang*. The visitor to the Buddha Museum is free to dip into any number of troughs: conferences, performances, donations, art appreciation, plus a few religious rituals and some shopping. Despite efforts to tie it all together, centrifugal forces pull at the seams. The overlapping fields of experience become difficult to form into a coherent whole. And unlike the Fo Guang Shan temple complex next door, the Buddha Museum complex is not a place of sustained religious practice. Instead it is a vast site of brief, touristy multiple-exposures. The Museum is thus a truly postmodern *daochang*, one buzzing with activity yet fraught with disjunction.

⁶⁷ Eamonn Conway, “The Commodification of Religion and the Challenges for Theology: Reflections from the Irish Experience.” *Bulletine ET*. 17. 2006/1, 142-163, p. 143; see also Vincent J. Miller, *Consuming Religion: Christian Faith and Practice in a Consumer Culture* (New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2005).

⁶⁸ Conway, “Commodification,” 144.

⁶⁹ Conway, “Commodification,” 144.

This incoherence may not be as negative as Conway and Miller imply. It may arise inevitably in any space in which ideology and practice collide. Instead of serving as a hermetically sealed space of practice, Fo Guang Shan in the Buddha Museum has created a platform for chaotic interaction, a dramatic move full of potential and risk in equal measure.

And where in all this is the mega-statue? Still there, but surrounded by other fields of power. We can conclude that this Fo Guang Shan *daochang* is a complex set of interconnected fields. One of those centers on the mega-statue, but others include the relic (hardly a minor element), the prestige of Fo Guang Shan as a center of world Buddhism, and its status as a tourist center. In all this complexity it is understandable if the mega-statue, like the visitor, may feel a bit overwhelmed.

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