

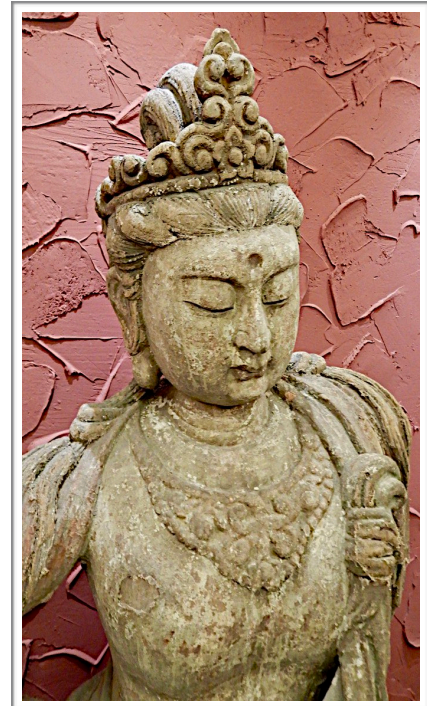
The Supression of Images

Tim Ellis, Vancouver.

Religion and belief, the bulwarks of society, are everywhere in retreat. Gurus from the sub-continent brought their message to the West, confounding all but a few with their message that peace lies within oneself - too difficult to master and only for one... well, it's not for everyone. Catholics speak fondly of Anglicans while Rome burns and the Pope totters between Mass and the masses. Evangelicals twist in the winds of choice. Muslim cohesion is melting away, driven by fear. Autocrats, oligarchs, dictators and bunkered billionaires, shameless and unrepentant, serve only themselves. One despairs of our leaders. Meanwhile, we yearn for the stability and security of our distantly past memories, just as our fathers and theirs before them did. We dream of fertile landscapes, safety and security, dignity and respect - childhood memories unrealizable in adulthood.

Customs and traditions fade from memory soon enough, drawn away by the distractions and certainties of modern life. It is only when they are truly gone that we miss them, but we are witnesses, everyone of us.

Returning to Taiwan twenty five years ago, I revisited the site of our old home above Kuan Du, and then to the mangroves lining the nearby Tamsui River estuary. A walk down to the mangroves along a rough trail brought me face to face with a dozen altar effigies of Guan Yin and Mazu salvaged from the deserted homes of the farmers and labourers since demolished and now replaced with great towers, their owners long since retired to Victoria or Los Angeles. It is hard not to hesitate respectfully



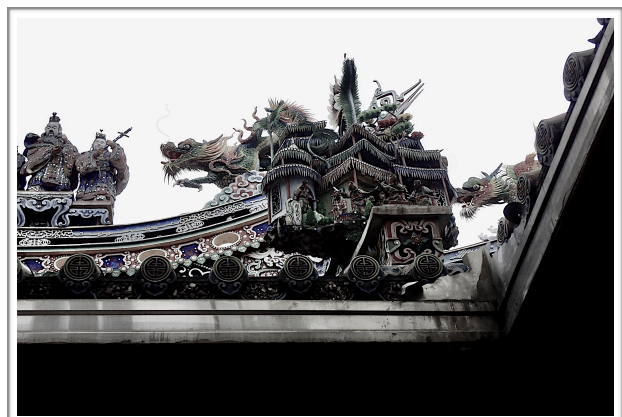
knowing the sincerity and passion of prayerful remonstrance that has been directed to these spirits in effigy. Close examination reveals small signs of upheaval and hard travelling. Yet, there they were, neglected and lonely.

Preserved by conscience. A symptom of a greater malaise - a great loss sustained not by violence and revolution but simply other gods, the passage of time, Mammon, modern distractions and the certainty of immediate pleasure.



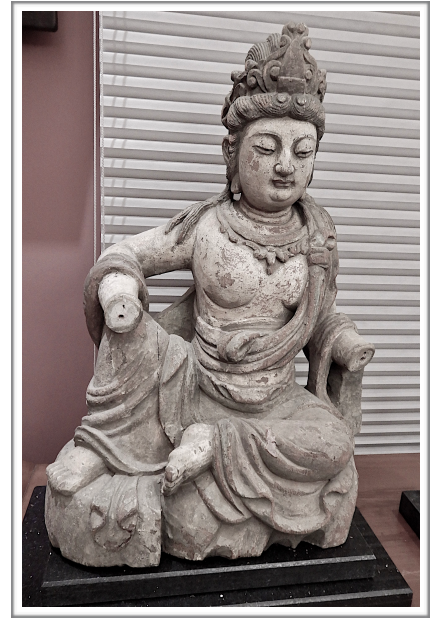
And now, 25 years later another visit has brought us to the home of friends in central Taiwan. Here, in this lovely house, there is a completely unexpected and breathtaking collection of life-sized Guan Yin collected over many years of patient searching throughout China. Some are seated, or are just heads, or are missing an a limb, all pose divinely their subtle differences dictated by geography and their maker's eye. Individually, any such a work of this size and antiquity would be dramatic, but here they are a family of gods, their divinity captured in exquisite effigy, filling every room with their supernatural aura. They share a common appearance of a sympathetic but light restoration, free of adornment, the medium exposed. They are old, some must be ancient, all are beautiful. Such intimacy and privacy is unheard of. This is a temple, where one may slip into the dreamy spiritual caress of an awakening imagination.

An experience so precious and ephemeral that most never experience it, nor the relief, peace and succour it can bring. Crowds are the enemies of experiences. Finding words is hard but finding them for these scribblings brings its own rewards.



The Great Leap Forward, and the Cultural Revolution and the millions who perished in these two upheavals are still uncounted. The peasants, landlords and intellectuals paid a steep price, many with their lives, and many more with their beliefs. The State sought a way to place the organ of the state as the epicentre of life rather than the prevailing primacy of faith and belief in deities. Intellectuals believe in common sense and science, so they had to go too. This has weakened China by anonymizing and reducing the complex values of her people to political anecdote, and thereby heralding the appearance of a great moral void where before resided the aggregate of some five thousand years of cultural and intellectual achievement, the compassion of Confucius, the counsels of Mencius, and all the other remarkable accomplishments of a rich and divers race.

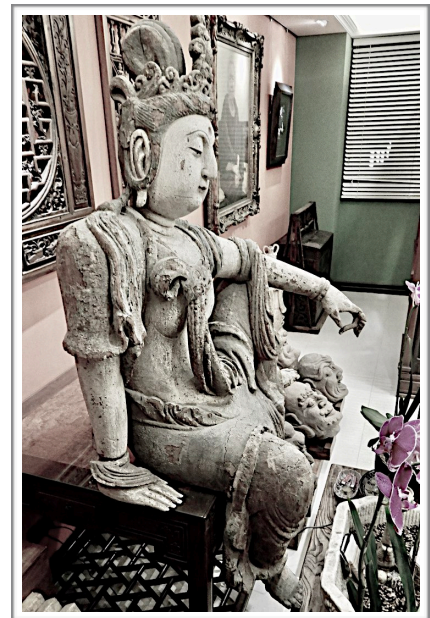
The grim revenge taken by the state on it's farming antecedents, that is, the enforced end of beliefs faithfully practiced since literally the beginning of history, and the elimination by wholesale destruction of their deities and the temples and shrines they occupied. To those for whom these beautiful avatars meant so much - from time immemorial the passage of their lives and of their ancestors depended upon divine interventions, the miracles of birth, fertility, harvest, famine and dearth, death and life, war and peace - then, this Pillar of Heaven to which every mans' spirit is tethered as is a baby to its' mother was torn from that essence by banal intrusion, wanton violence and destruction. One may share vicariously through heartbreakingly written tales the bitterness, suffering, the consternation in the countryside as at first in disbelief, then in anger, and finally in fear, imagining and hoping that their great weight of history would preserve them and their way of life, but it was not to be. When, at last their



worst fears were realized, they attempted to at first disguise and finally to hide their talisman from those who would desecrate and destroy them, perhaps in the soil, or some cave, somewhere, anywhere but in plain sight. Now, 50 years later, the lives of their custodians having long ago expired under their new feudal masters, the hidden are found, but their purpose and their adherents are lost, gone and barely remembered by their successors.

These relics, unusually well preserved, are still being unearthed by crews clearing land and excavating for construction. There is nothing serendipitous about these discoveries. Their finders view them neither with awe nor respect, only opportunity. After anything of value - gold foil, precious stones and metals, ornaments and jewelry are removed the bare-bones remains are traded along through middle-men to dealers in the great cities. The farmers disguised their deities both to render them innocuous and as a means of preservation. Just now and again a survivor can be found intact, but mostly they are plain and unadorned - but even thus they have a formidable potency. To see, touch and feel them gathered in one place is to enter a realm of the imagination that heretofore I could not believe myself capable of entering.

There is also the reality that although these avatars belong in the panoply of Chinese worship, and while one might confidently speculate as to who made them and who came before them to offer their prayers and supplications, in fact nothing of their origins is known - their temples and shrines are gone, their custodians dead and buried. What is one to make of this? How, absent this biography of knowledge do they inspire this intensity of feeling?

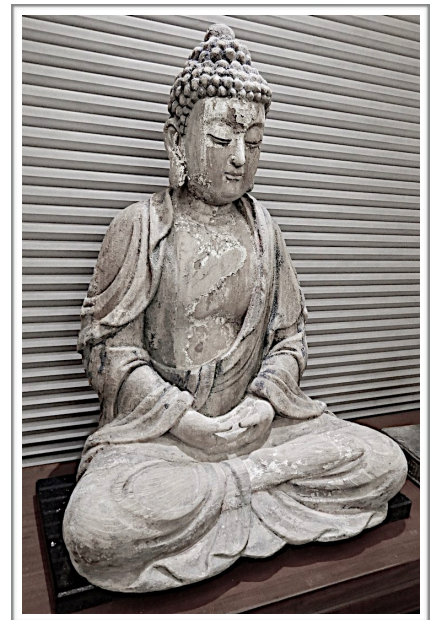


Perhaps, the power in these avatars comes from those ancients who performed obeisance before them, and from our own instinctive awareness of the veneration and supplication that have been dedicated to these divine and enigmatic figures. They are carved and sculpted from great baulks of aromatic timbers, sandstone, granite, marble, moulded in clay, cast in plaster or bronze by hands which imbued each of them with the exquisite

features, grace and dignity that all gods demand at worship. No doubt, skills handed down by the ancients through countless generations. All Her similarities are captured in her enigmatic full lipped beauty and almond eyes, but most of all captured in the implacable force of her benign and profound spirit that projects from every one.

Suppression, exodus and now a resurrection of sorts is occurring though interestingly it is the impoverished who pray to effigies for protection and a better life. The wealthy and the caring who collect and preserve the ancient effigies some in the belief that wealth will protect and provide a longer and better life, and others mourning the loss and seeking to preserve their dignity and divinity as a reminder of earlier times.

In my mind's eye, there is an ancient temple, an indistinct, crowded, dark city of twinkling lights, full of muffled sounds, indistinct shapes confusingly wreathed in subtle layers of smoke curling up from sticks of lighted incense, guttering candles, lidded braziers of leaping flames fed with great handfuls of burning ghost money, dull undulating reflections in the curved polished bamboo plaques intricately carved with patrons and their donations, old, dark intricately carved polished panels peopled with tiny figures locked in the eternal retelling of great stories, stone friezes recording ordeals capturing forever the struggles of good and evil, long altars dripping with exotic silks and piled high with golden yuanbao, prayers inscribed on



folded paper spills standing in shallow bowls of sand, the glittering fringes and decorations of hanging banners, coppery-gold threaded lantern tassels, softly gleaming waxy fruits, packets of cigarettes and wrapped sweets - gifts for the gods, and some for those whom death has taken but who will need them in their afterlives. All around are exquisitely decorated deities angelic and demonic, some are tiny, delicate gifts of those who have come to pray, others are large and fierce, well armed with prayers and cold steel all the better to fight for what's right, and what's wished for. All of these are painted in the traditional hues and chased in gold and silver gilt. Above all the merciful Guan Yin - Guanhsiyin, known as "The One Who Hears the Prayers of the World" where she is worshipped, and as the

Goddess of Mercy in the West, has primacy in the pantheon of Lord Buddha's heavenly spirits on earth. In China, Guan Yin in effigy is mostly female, occasionally male, but always serene, and with a merciful gaze focused upon the suffering of the world. In her temples, one may taste the pervasive ash-laden air thick with smouldering incense sticks, and burning zhizha. Wafts of strange scents tempt and scandalize. Above all the consonant metrical orders of prayer, the gentle sawing sigh of fabric



moving over vague figures engaged in ritual obeisances, the brief happy caresses and coos of lovers blessed, the soft steps of nuns and priests, incense at the altar in a brazier of sand, the flat "tink" of a bianzhong bell punctuating a repetitive prayer chant, and other yayue instruments heard playing distantly in concert with the continuous resonant murmur of recitation by the bonze and his

monks, nuns and acolytes, cries of lament and great sobbing tears of mourning, happy families crying with joy at a new birth, the click of thrown sticks, the slap of sandals, and all around shades from the past. Not a threat, not cacophonous, nor raucous, just the sound of a great multitude passing quietly by.

Their passing is the herald of uncertain times ahead.