Chapter 6
Marks and manifestations: The religious art of Su Renshan

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For centuries, the Lingnan region (broadly encompassing the modern provinces of Guangdong and Guangxi) was seen as remote, dangerous, even outlandish. The magistrate Wang Linheng 王臨亨 (1557–1603) from Suzhou described how 'The Yue [people] vulgarly worship ghosts and spirits, with a fondness for illegal worship. When they are sick, they do not eat medicine, they rather believe in the shaman'.[1] The Chan master Hanshan Deqing 憨山德清 (1546–1623), who was exiled in 1595 to Lingnan, was more sparing but nonetheless noted how 'Guangdong is distinctively different in customs from those in the regions north of the Five Ridges'.[2] Both comments were responses to how vernacular religion threatened state-approved temple practices. Their biases continue today where local rituals and festivals remain a hallmark of Cantonese identity.

This chapter delves into how the Buddhist-related artworks of Su Renshan 蘇仁山 (1814–*c.* 1850) challenge the historical perception of the region. If 19th-century China is an oft-maligned place in time, Lingnan was doubly so, seen by outsiders as being of little cultural relevance. In the Qing dynasty, wealthy merchants and scholars tended to align themselves with literary practices popular in the centre and embedded themselves into networks that included those from Jiangnan and Beijing. For example, in the early 19th century, many followed the principle of evidential scholarship, promoted by the likes of Ruan Yuan, the prominent Jiangnan official who served as the governor-general of Guangdong from 1818 to 1826. This promoted the use of empirical studies of early texts to excavate meanings and histories of local regions, producing anthologies and texts that favoured certain stylistic forms of writings. Ruan also founded the Xuehaitang Academy (學海堂), which was an active hub for literary engagement and formed interregional networks that furthered Guangdong as an extension of China's cultural centre. However, at the same time, this elite literati group also excluded interests that did not reinforce the cultural values and tastes of the typical Qing scholar, including local religious practices, especially those associated with Guangdong's hinterlands, with their threat of being outlandishly vernacular.

Su, unlike his peers, embraced Guangdong's marginality and difference from the cultural centres of Beijing and Jiangnan, and developed a visual mode that emphasised his divergence from literati painters in the region. More specifically, by exploring a different 'local' he devised formal strategies that overturned the expectations of viewers informed by literati taste. His highly individualistic style, iconoclastic in intent, means that using conventional art history methods such as iconographic analysis or tracing artistic influences can lead to frustrating non-conclusions. How do you assess an artist who operates outside the canon? This chapter uses close readings to determine Su's departure from mainstream art with interpretations that echo findings in other fields. It draws on the spatial politics of centre/margin used in frontier histories, as well as scholarship on migratory and exile experiences. It also demonstrates how Su's distinctive style exudes a psychological charge of unfamiliar belonging and a sense of being unsettled. He achieves this through compositional strangeness with a shallow ground plane, and an unusual

hybridity of themes, genres and visual/textual language that can be serene yet confrontational, logical and excessive. Whether this unfamiliar belonging can be considered a characteristic of this period awaits further assessment. But perhaps this is a task worth undertaking because in identifying such traits, this century becomes less hidden within our current art history discourse.

Su Renshan

Su Renshan was from Shunde, an area outside the city of Guangzhou, known for its sericulture, clan lineages and local religious practices. Unusually, as an elder son, he married late in life, to a woman who observed the delay-marriage practice (where a bride stays with her family for three years after marriage or until the couple produces a child). They did not have any children, and as such, his younger brother's son was repositioned as the next head of the family, an honour that normally would have passed to Su's offspring. In Guangdong, lineage rights – where all members share the same foundation of kinship – defined social positions and managed local economies including the all-important land rights. Su's failure to produce an heir meant he effectively lost his standing within his kin group.

Su was also an outsider among his peers, leaving behind no textual trace in the works of his contemporaries. However, in the years around 1841, difficulties with his family led to autobiographical inscriptions from which it has been possible to reconstruct his life. Of relevance is how, on his third attempt at taking the civil examination, he absconded to Guizhou, in Guangxi, whose distinctive rock formations and carvings would influence his artwork. At this time, in 1841, Guangzhou was blighted by the violence of the First Opium War both within the city and on its outskirts. The war had a far greater impact on the people in Guangdong than on those in the north, who considered it a frontier issue contained within the southern port city. In Lingnan, the people witnessed and sometimes took part in violent clashes against the Qing administration and foreign traders. There was an overwhelming sense of disenfranchisement providing fuel for one of China's biggest uprisings, the Taiping Civil War (1850–64), which began in Guangxi.

Despite the political circumstances, Su's absence from the exams was regarded as a reckless abandonment of duty and he was forced to leave home. During this time of familial estrangement, he made some of his most experimental works while staying in Guangzhou city, and in Guilin and Cangwu in Guangxi province. He also voiced strong opinions criticising the restrictions of civil examinations (which was not an unusual position) and how women made better scholars as they did not have to conform to a rigid education system enforced on male scholars (this was a rare opinion). At his most ardent, he condemned Confucius as a bringer of hell, and Confucian learning as corrupt as it is based on the philosophies of a moral hypocrite. These radical opinions may have led to his imprisonment at the local government office (*yamen* 衙門) by his father for filial impiety in 1849.[3] His last dated painting was executed while he was still imprisoned in 1850. Entangled within his politics, Su also embraced the Lingnan frontier as a relevant place of cultural importance that offered an alternative sense of belonging, which he often expressed in artworks related to Buddhism.

Inscriptional space

Su Renshan's focus on Guangdong's marginality finds expression in his distinctive painting style achieved by employing two related formal methods: brushwork as mark-making and compositions that deny a sense of depth. Both are indebted to two transfer-modes of line-making: print and engravings. We see their influence in Su's imitation of the graphic quality of a printed or engraved line, or in the tilted ground plane he uses, echoing the flatness of prints or calligraphic carvings. Su paints within an 'inscriptional space' rather than a 'pictorial one', and his compositions are closer to the spatial aesthetics of text-related forms that inhabit a shallow depth. Related to this, his brushwork is closer to the linear marks of printed books and carved surfaces. He does not rely on the spatial logic of recession with distinct ground planes, and does not use the S-like axial composition often seen in landscape paintings that directs a meandering eye across the surface. An example is seen in his hanging scroll *Landscape with Torrent*, in which the use of a flattened ground plane partitions the scene into geometric-like forms (**Fig. 6.1**). Here, verticality is used to lead the viewer's eyes up and down, as if reading rather than penetrating through the depth of the surface. There are no simple exits out of this painting allowing the viewer to gently ease beyond the frame but rather there is a confrontational force that denies entry into the landscape. At their best, Su's formal strategies create odd pictorial habitats: who can belong in or step into such a shallow space?

Bearing this question in mind, in a small unassuming work, *Two Revered Temple Gardens of Xianjie An and Zhuangyan Si*, the humble structures sit among rockeries and flowing water (**Fig. 6.2**). There are no figures in this painting, but the hemmed-in composition draws us into this enclave as if the temples themselves are waiting to be discovered. As expected, there are no easy entry points, but there is an alertness to the edges of a frame made of cliff and words. Here, the columns of words in clerical script (*lishu* 隸書) and seal script (*zhuanshu* 篆書) allude to an archaic past. The inscription in the top right accentuates this immemorial sense of time:

> The Ancients, considered the heads of clouds, raindrops, lotus leaves, log woods in disarray as symbols of the Six Methods. They found inspiration by imitating the forms of dragons, phoenixes, tortoises, birds, tadpoles, water dragons and cranes.
>
> [These forms] were used to engrave on metal, stone, ceramics and carved forms, vividly appearing as paintings. Now, this belief is revered and chanted as the 'Cloud Script', honouring Kharosthi and Changjie; standing on par with Heaven.[4]

The analogy of calligraphy with natural phenomena is common in the history of Chinese writing, which has long emphasised the centrality of principles associated

Figure 6.1 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, ***Landscape with Torrent* (*Shanshui qijing tu*** 山水奇景圖**), undated, hanging scroll, ink on paper, h. 112cm, w. 48cm. Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Gift of Mr. Ho Iu-kwong, Mr. Huo Pao-tsai, Mr. Lai Tak and others, 1973.0607**

Figure 6.2 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, ***Two Revered Temple Gardens of Xianjie An and Zhuangyan Si* (*Xianjie an Zhuangyan si liangdiyuan tu*** 賢劫庵莊嚴寺兩秖園圖**), undated, hanging scroll, ink on paper, h. 74cm, w. 39cm. Kyoto National Museum, A甲1114**

with movement, growth and the structure of nature as inspiration. Of more interest is Su's attention to the materials for engravings – clay, metal and stone. Their importance is also registered in the painting by the placement and choice of calligraphy. The title and the first inscription appear as if they are carved into Su's depicted cliff face. This meta-play of 'words-of-images-as-image' works to transform, at least conceptually, the material dimension of Su's ink brushwork into engraved markings, and paper into stone. Su extends the material nature of words to the oral world of speech, and more specifically of chanting to the layered meanings of 'cloud script'. He creates a synergy here with *yunshu* (雲書), which literally means 'cloud writing' but is a term for both clerical script and Buddhist sutras, both of which form the general theme of the painting. However, it also alludes to words being cloud-like: short-lived in their shapes like the fugitive nature of the spoken word.

Figure 6.3 Felice Beato and Henry Hering, *Guangxiao Main Hall and courtyard in Canton*, April 1860, albumen silver print, h. 25.4 cm, w. 30.6 cm, The J. Paul Getty Museum, Partial gift from the Wilson Centre for Photography, 2007.26.198.79

The connection of the early invention and transmission of writing and Buddhism is furthered by Su's reference to Changjie, the inventor of Chinese script, and Kharosthi, an ancient Indo-Iranian script. The latter is based on the Arapacana alphabet used in Gandharan Buddhism, the 42 letters of which are said to represent all the phonemes of the spoken language. Once again, Su emphasises the potency of words that are spoken and words that are turned into carved texts that travel through time. Concurrently, Su's *Two Temples* also anchors the visual and sonic power of words into origin myths and transmission histories that expand the borders of China.

The strange pairing in Su's narrative of the transformation and transmission of words extends to the naming of the two temples (Xianjie An and Zhuangyan Si), which identifies them not as actual places but of time. They reference two (of three) Buddhist kalpas (aeons), during which a different number of Buddhas will appear. We are currently living in *xianjie* (賢劫) kalpa, or present time, having moved beyond the *zhuangyan* (莊嚴) kalpa, the Buddhist time of the past. Su offers no explanations for the temples' names but perhaps as Buddhist aeons they become otherworldly timekeepers of myth-histories of the sonic and textual nature of words.

It is also possible that the temples named in the painting are allegories for Guangxiao Main Hall and Liurong Hall, two temple structures inside the Guangxiao Monastery complex. It is likely that Su stayed in the area by the temple during his exile, and it is a place that he has referenced in other works. Moreover, Guangxiao's history is often one of 'firsts' and fits in with the inscription's interest in origins. Founded in the Southern Han period, when Guangdong was an independent kingdom, it was converted from an imperial residence to a Buddhist temple, making it the first monastery in the region. It soon began to play a key role in the development of new Buddhist practices in China, not least because it was often the first stop for foreign monks. According to the temple's records, the *Guangxiao Annals* (*Guangxiao jing* 光孝經), written in 1769, the monk Dharmayasas 達磨耶舍 or 法稱 (dates unknown) from Kashmir arrived in 397, initiated the building of the Main Hall and completed a translation of the *Chamojing sutra* (差摩經), which was the first scripture to be translated in Guangxiao. Bodhidharma 菩提達摩 (fl. 6th century), the Indian founder of Chan Buddhism, stayed in Guangxiao in 527, and Paramartha 真諦 (499–569), from the Funan kingdom (Indochina), stayed from 558–69. During those ten years, Paramartha oversaw the translations of more than 40 Buddhist scriptures, many being written in Chinese for the first time. Liurong Hall is a pagoda next to a bodhi tree, and is associated with the sixth patriarch, Huineng 惠能 (638–713), who was the first Cantonese to be part of the Chan lineage who supposedly preached under the monastery's tree. Huineng is an influential teacher of the Southern Chan School doctrine and believed to be the founder of sudden enlightenment practice. The term Liurong ('six banyans') is associated with Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101), who composed a poem dedicated to a pagoda in the Baozhuangyan temple, which is next to Guangxiao. Su Renshan, who identified with the Northern Song scholar, also had the style-name Seventh Patriarch (七祖), after Huineng. Thus this site, aside from being a place of 'firsts', is also part of Su's personal identification with locale.[5]

Su's historicising of Guangxiao echoes the evidential scholarship practices of his peers, but the temple in his own time was less influential within literary circles, being situated in a poorer part of the city where the Qing bannermen lived, practising archery and horse-riding in the fields.[6] Despite receiving state salaries, many of the bannermen families supplemented their income through activities such as making paper lanterns, a practice that continued through to the late 19th century as evidenced by photographs of the

Figure 6.4 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, ***Nineteen High Kings*** **(*Shijiu dashi*** 十九大士**), undated, hanging scroll, ink on paper, h. 124cm, w. 59.3cm. Guangdong Museum, Guangzhou**

temple's grounds employed for such use (**Fig. 6.3**). In the early 19th century, Guangxiao Monastery was less influential among the scholarly elite than Nanhua Temple and Changshou Temple, despite (or because of) being located near government offices. Nonetheless, it remained popular among the local community.[7]

It may be the temple's attraction to the non-elite that prompted Su to resurrect its significance as the hub of translations central to the spread of Buddhism in China, and the region's international connections. It reflects his strong Cantonese pride in local histories that were outside the purview of his peers. However, *Two Temples* also offers an alternative narrative of Guangdong's role as a major maritime hub, different from the circumstances of his own time when the port city was inflicted with the violence of war. Instead, Su offers a more peaceful message of religious and cultural exchange.

It is worth summarising Su's approach of bringing unlikely themes together, using *Two Temples* as an example. Su first selects one subject (Buddhism), only to then redirect with a comparison that is seemingly random (early writing). Through this unexpected juxtaposition what emerges is a new narrative (of origins and transmission, with Lingnan as the connective point). It is his use of unexpected subjects and a circuitous approach, which some later scholars claimed to be signs of madness, that underscores his difference from other Guangdong painters. As a follower of the Chan monk Huineng, the sixth patriarch, Su may have been inspired to use this method as a form of sudden enlightenment practice, where conundrums and surprises can break one's habits and awaken minds. However, without textual evidence, we can only speculate on the degree to which Chan Buddhism influenced him.

Su's unusual hybrid themes can also be found in a pair of paintings of luohans and bodhisattvas and related to the Guangxiao Monastery. The first, *Nineteen High Kings* (**Fig. 6.4**), refers to the High King Avalokitesvara Sutra, and emphasises the power of spoken words. The sutra is based on a 10th-century story of a man who, while imprisoned and waiting for his death, had a dream in which a monk taught him to chant all the names of 19 High Kings, 100 times. He managed to finish his recitations by the time he was taken to the executioner's block. When the sword came down on his neck, it broke in two and he was saved. Su's inscription reads:

> The Nineteen Great Beings of King Gao,
> [Their sutra] taught in a dream can eliminate wars and punishments.
> Alas, the cycles of karmic entanglements are full of troubled dreams,
> Nanke remains as yet unawakened.[8]

Su's painting can be seen as the manifestation of the chant, with the appearance of female goddesses accompanied by mythical beasts and in one instance being carried by dancing ogres. That we are still within the dream may be indicated by the inscription's reference to Nanke, which has not woken up. 'It was but a dream of Nanke' (*nanke yimeng* 南柯一夢) was a Tang dynasty short story turned into a popular play in the Ming dynasty about a man who dreamt he was the governor of Nanke, only to wake up and discover that it was but a hill of ants (or variations of such). According to researcher Aude Lucas' work on late imperial Chinese novels, the trope of 'It was but a dream of Nanke' was commonly used to conclude a dream narrative, following one's waking and the realisation that the events were only illusory.[9] Su's switch from Buddhist sutras to popular novels is part of his mixing of themes. If this is indeed a painting of the sutra's prayer, it is us, the viewer, who becomes the implied chanter. Still within our dream, like Nanke, we remain caught in the potential of enlightenment rather than living the uncertainty of our illusionary present. Given the political circumstances of Guangdong, it is tempting to read this painting of Nanke as an escapist wish, but it also captures being caught in the moment of chanting, when the gods are only beginning to

manifest in one's dream. As with *Two Temples*, this too captures a sense of being in a different time-space. As a dream, it offers a time-space that departs from traditional depiction of Buddhist realms, lacking the opulence of paradise scenes or the blue and green of magical mountain retreats. It does, however, include highly unusual fantastical elements such as the prancing ogres bearing on their shoulders a Guanyin with a child within a cave-throne.

In the second painting, *Eighteen Luohans of the Guangxiao Temple*, Su develops this concept of a time of the gods in-between that of our own mundane world (**Fig. 6.5**). His inscription reads:

> In the Great Hall of Mahavira stands three Buddha statues,
> Amidst them are also the eighteen luohans.
> But one only sees the falling leaves from Su's abode,
> [X] and grazing horses pass by the walls.[10]

The inscription evokes a scene of an empty Buddhist temple compound where one watches the leaves fall and the horses graze, perhaps from the nearby bannerman training grounds, instead of being devoted to the worship of the gods within. This inscription, unlike that of the *Nineteen High Kings*, suggests a moment of doing little, a passive mood of waiting at (or by) the Hall of Mahavira, also known as the Main Hall. In the painting, there are 21 figures comprising the 18 luohans and the three Buddhas, corresponding to what was recorded as being at the site. In 1663, a triad of bronze sculptures of Shakyamuni, Amitabha and Maitreya was ordered by the Kangxi emperor. In this painting, however, it is difficult to ascertain which of the figures are the three gods and which are the luohans. At top right, we see the back of a bodhisattva with three-faces, which may possibly be Maitreya, but otherwise the identity of the figures, which blend in with one another, is uncertain. The depiction of luohans and buddhas as being so similar that it becomes impossible to distinguish them disrupts the conventions of depicting religious figures. By not conforming to any spatial system that might identify a devotional focus, there is a disregard of hierarchy and ritual order, central to devotional religions. Instead, one of the luohans lies asleep, others look up into the skies or to their sides, some are slouching, a few are turned away and all are looking in different directions, inattentive to each other and the viewer.

This is a daring iteration of a familiar genre of the 18 luohans, one in which Su's beings are portrayed as gods *not* in action – as if they too are simply watching the leaves fall and the horses graze – while waiting to be called upon. These are not luohans who imitate scholars at leisure nor are they possessors of miraculous powers. Comparisons with these typical tropes may better elucidate our interpretation. For example, *Sixteen Luohans* by Shitao 石濤 (1642–1707) shows the subjects in a landscape garden engaged with one another in either literary pursuits or with magical beasts (**Fig. 6.6**). Their faces are lit up with enjoyment, perhaps even wonder, alert to their surroundings and each other. Another example is an anonymous scroll of a group of four luohans meeting tribute bearers in the mountains (**Fig. 6.7**). The importance of these four luohans is emphasised by the scale of the figures, their halos and the greater attention to their dress.

Figure 6.5 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, *Eighteen Luohans of the Guangxiao Temple* (*Guangxiao si shiba luohan* 光孝寺十八羅漢), undated, hanging scroll, ink on paper, h. 124cm, w. 59.3cm. Guangdong Museum, Guangzhou

In comparison, Su's figures are deprived of context and their status is undifferentiated. They appear ordinary, sitting in an in-between state, waiting to be called by devotees into action. If the scene can be read as gods within their own time-space, their spatial proximity to each other conveys a sense of a community. While conventional ritual hierarchies play no role in identification, these enlightened beings are given a different kind of agency, even arguably autonomy. By overturning established tropes and themes within Buddhist representation, Su provides alternative timescales and spaces, strengthens local histories that are often overlooked, and offers a new sense of presence and agency in his religious figures beyond their iconographic functions. In so doing, he reinforces the subjectivities of being on the

Figure 6.6 Shitao 石濤, *Sixteen Luohans* (*Shiliu luohan tu* 十六羅漢圖), 1667, handscroll, ink on paper, h. 46.4 cm, w. 598.8cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Gift of Douglas Dillon, 1985.227.1

Figure 6.7 Anonymous, *Four Luohans*, 15th century, hanging scroll, ink and color on silk, h. 170.5cm, w. 88cm. British Museum, London, 1983,0705,0.2

margins, independent and moving away from narratives constructed by the centre of outlandishness and social exclusion.

A better society?

There is painterly precedence for Su's inscriptional space in the shape of the 18th-century Yangzhou Eccentrics (*Yangzhou baguai* 揚州八怪) and their practices of conveying 'strangeness', an aesthetic mode of claiming artistic individualism that dates from the 17th century. For example, *Shakaymuni Buddha*, by Jin Nong 金農 (1687–1763), mimics an engraving and in so doing exerts an authoritarian voice of history (**Fig. 6.8**). But this archaic effect also entails a doubling of pasts, of one invented (Jin's mimicry) and referenced (the metaphoric). Although the inscription lists a number of famous past masters known for their religious figurative images, Jin claims that viewers should look at his painting as if they were looking at the Buddhist statutes at Longmen. By aligning his pictorial image with those carved from stone, there is an acute awareness of the artwork as object, and a boastfulness that earmarks the artist's 'eccentricity'.[11]

Su Renshan's approach, similar to that of Jin Nong, draws on unconventional sources to create images of gods outside conventional Buddhist iconography. He also uses mark-making brushwork to evoke an archaic past of carved surfaces to reimagine historical narratives. Broadly, it is possible to place Su as part of a history of strangeness, one that connects him to the likes of Jin Nong. Su's mixing of high and low cultures, however, differs from the eccentric artists of the previous century. Rather than using strangeness to stage one's individualism (although that too is present), Su is also interested in moral and social values and questioning what makes a better society. This is understandable as his works intersect with the political uncertainties and the violent trauma of the 19th century. As such, he is closer in ambition to later modern artists who were using their art to envision a new China. Su's works,

therefore, also anchor mid-19th-century Guangdong art as an integral part of China's modernity.

Su Renshan's conviction that Lingnan's distinctive localness has a far-reaching impact on society's welfare is seen in his calligraphy piece entitled *Record of the Iron Ox in Guizhou in the Style of Mi Fu* (**Fig. 6.9**).[12] The inscription reads:

> [Among the] metamorphoses of the Five Elements, that of metal is the most awe-inspiring. Even the birds, beasts, fish and crustaceans, one fears, are insufficient in understanding the origins of ghosts, let alone humans? Laughing at why a beam cannot be used for prognostication, how can one know of all things?
>
> The followers of the Buddha refrain from harming all living beings, and their kitchen is known as the site of 'fragrance accumulation'. Furthermore, they compassionately navigate and deliver beings across the sea of suffering, providing salvation to both humans and ghosts. By practicing this way, one prolongs life, protects the people and expands the welfare to all other beings. In doing so, one can make a bull with metal, without altering the innate qualities bestowed by Heaven.
>
> This is the Way; one can be the master of husbandry, one can be the master of crafts, thus this record was made. Written with the left hand.[13]

This undated work by Su is executed with his left hand, distinguishing himself from the Song dynasty scholar, Mi Fu 米芾 (1051–1107). The title of this scroll is, unsurprisingly, deceptive in that Su is not recording the actual ritual itself. This ritual, which is not uncommon in China, involves placing a cast iron bull in a river as a protective water deity.[14] Su's words, however, are about Buddhism and ghosts. In the first part, he references a work by the Tang poet Han Yu called *Origins of Ghost* (*yuangu* 原鬼), that opens with a scene in which he hears unexplained sounds banging against a beam, thus prognosticating the existence of ghosts. Han Yu, a strong proponent of Confucian learning, proposes that one can revere ghosts but keep them at a distance.[15] Otherworldly elements are forces that only take on voice and form when men break celestial rules, and are otherwise formless and voiceless and therefore inconsequential. According to Han, ghosts are made by men who fail in their Confucian duties.

Han Yu was not only critical of those who entertained the presence of ghosts, but also famously sceptical about

Figure 6.8 Jin Nong 金農, *Shakyamuni* (*Fo xiang tu* 佛像圖), 1760, hanging scroll, ink and color on paper, h. 133cm, w. 62.5cm. Tianjin Museum

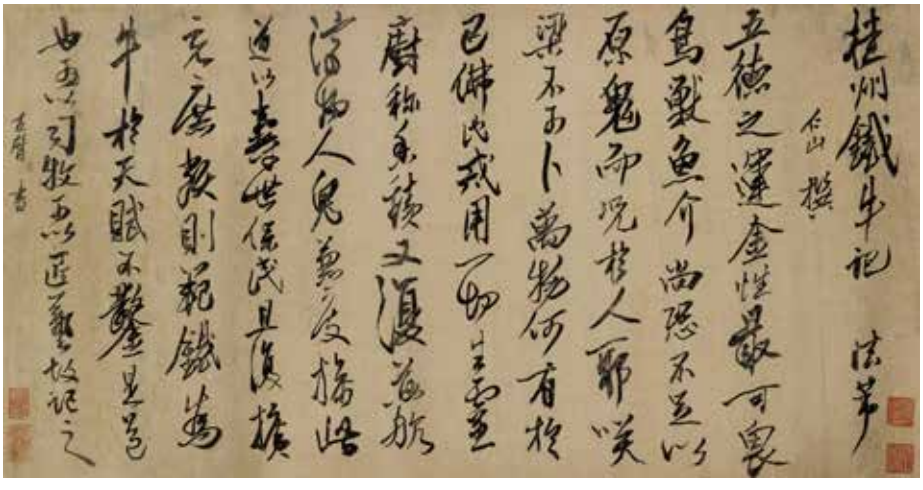

Figure 6.9 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, *Record of the Iron Ox in Guizhou in the Style of Mi Fu* (*Fang Mi Fu Guizhou tieniu ji* 仿米芾桂州鐵牛記), undated, ink on paper, h. 31.6cm, w. 61.2cm. Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, gift of Bei Shan Tang, 1988.0114

Figure 6.10 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, *Figures*, 1848, hanging scroll, ink on paper, h. 237cm, w. 119cm. Guangzhou Art Museum

Buddhism. In his *A Memorial on the Relic of the Buddha*, to the Xianzhong emperor (r. 805–820), he argued that relic rituals 'are simply a frivolous gimmick and a deceitful and exotic spectacle set up for the officials and commoners of the capital in an attempt to [humour] some people at a time when the harvest is good and people are happy'.[16] Han Yu's scorn for those who indulged in the worship of ghosts and other frivolous rituals was typical of criticisms lodged against the Lingnan region. Hanshan Deqing, the exiled Jiangnan monk, had once complained about the practice of ghost worship in Leiyang, but which equally applies to Guangzhou: 'I found that the people there worshiped ghosts and did not have a single Buddhist monk. I found that it was *mleccha* [barbarian frontiers] where people no longer have the Buddha nature…. I cultivated local people with *Ullambana Dharma Service*.[17] Then they knew of the Three Jewels for the first time, and innumerable people were converted to Buddhism.'[18]

Hanshan Deqing's mission to civilise the frontier regions was a common narrative. In 1596, the scholar Guo Fei 郭斐 (1529–1605), citing a Tang dynasty source, explained how it was the making of a road that connected Lingnan to the centre which transformed its backwardness. He wrote, 'In the regions south of the Five Ridges, talented men have emerged, [the barriers to] wealth and goods have been broken through, and the prestige and civilisation of central China spread [southwards], making increasing changes to the customs of [Lingnan] as a remote and secluded region.'[19] Su Renshan's *Iron Ox* calligraphy can be read as a response to these presumptions, with Han Yu, representative of the centre, held as a mirror to a way of thinking about a society that Su believes to be narrow-minded and therefore, neglectful of the common good. In contrast, he embraces the diverse local practices of the south, where one can be Buddhist yet also respect ghosts.

The last line of the inscription, on husbandry and craftsmen, seems out of place in a piece about religion and ghosts. Why is the bull – as a real animal for farming and as a crafted iron object for rituals – used to speak about ghosts or Buddhism? Where is the link to make sense of these seemingly different things? There is perhaps one connection evidenced by the title. In Jiangcheng, north Guangxi, there is a local practice among ethnic minority groups of paying respect to the Bull-King and the souls of dead oxen. Oral traditions hold that in ancient times, eight kings visited Jiangcheng and made rivers that irrigated the land and brought prosperity to the people. The Jade Emperor, on hearing the news, asked to see the kings responsible. They in turn sent the local Bull-King, who had also helped the visiting eight kings, as envoy. When asked by the emperor who were the people who made the rivers, the humble and modest Bull-King named the eight but did not include himself. As a result, the others were immortalised as the Eight Immortals, seen in many popular religious practices. The people of Jiangcheng, however, in recognising the Bull-King's contribution, on the sixth day of the sixth month (this varies among different groups who held similar festivals), paid respect to him and the bovine beasts who were weakened or died by their hard work in the fields by holding rituals to call back the souls of the dead oxen. It is possible that Su's calligraphy expresses his interest in ethnic rituals in Guangxi, or at the very least an awareness of practices in a province where he had spent significant time.

Su's defence of folk religious practices, which challenges Confucian stalwarts such as Han Yu, also prompts questions of who is worthy of emulation. What does a good moral society look like? One answer may be in his painting *Figures*, an unusual grouping of women and children painted with Su's signature graphic quality (**Fig. 6.10**). On the left, an old lady tenderly rests her firm hands on the shoulders of a young child. To the right, a young mother holds a baby in her arms. In the centre is a figure wearing a torque and a belt, and carrying a *ruyi* (如意) sceptre, following the traditional depiction of a court emperor or high official. However, on closer inspection, the figure wears a phoenix crown, identifying her as a woman. Together, this intergenerational group melds into one another with intimate gestures: the grandmother places her hands on her grandchild, and the

Figure 6.11 Anonymous, *Fu Lu Shou*, 19th century, coloured woodblock print. Whereabouts unknown

mother wraps her arms around her child.

This tender painting of women belies a more iconoclastic message. It is based on a popular group of folk gods, who are still used today in New Year's Festivities or in general as auspicious elements found in many domestic quarters (**Fig. 6.11**). Here, the three key characters – the imperial figure, the young mother and the old woman – demonstrate a gender reversal of the three Daoist Star Gods: Fu (福 wealth and happiness), Lu (祿 affluence and achievement), and Shou (壽 longevity). The Star Gods can be found on an array of art forms, particularly in folk prints or as decorative motifs on ceramics bringing wealth, health and fortune. Su Renshan's *Figures* features the empress as Lu, the young mother as Fu, and the elderly woman as Shou. With great wit, Su suggests that a propitious tomorrow is to be found in the alternative world of women.[20]

At the beginning of this chapter, the question of who can inhabit the odd space created by Su was posed. The answer may be gods and those who dare to tread outside of the dominant structures of hierarchies, time and spatial order. In line with this bold departure, Su's overturning of conventional pictorial practice and his use of an inscriptional space were means of unsettling the familiar. Now gods can appear ordinary, women can cross-dress as men, and the textual and the pictorial can blur into marks that enact new futures as well as histories.

Refusing to be 'civilised' by the centre, the last word is left to Su and his painting *Leading the Phoenixes by Playing the Flute*, a scene from a romance story (**Fig. 6.12**). In this graffiti-esque artwork, Su's markings exude an aggressive energy that makes the creation neither wholly a painting nor purely calligraphic. Some of the words are illegible, boldly laying a claim for confusion as part of the painting's pictorial/textual order. If Su's use of inscriptional space and his debt to prints

Figure 6.12 Su Renshan 蘇仁山, *Leading the Phoenixes by Playing the Flute* (*Chui xiao yin feng tu* 吹簫引鳳圖), 1848, hanging scroll, ink on paper, h. 278cm, w. 120cm. Collection of Art Museum, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, gift of Mr. Ho Iu-kwong, Mr. Huo Pao-tsai, Mr. Lai Tak and others, 1973.0615

and engravings as a way to draw on textual practices in order to both rewrite and undo histories and tales, it is here pushed to its limit. Does this open the way for new mediated forms of ethos? Can this painting be considered an extreme version of what 19th-century art was doing: disallowing the long-held authority of the literati aesthetics so it turns in on itself to reveal its ineffable and contradictory nature? Perhaps it took being on the margins to convey an intersectional sense of belonging, one that can be hopeful of alternatives, yet remain unsettled by its separation from a long history of elite art-making. Certainly, in mid-19th-century Guangzhou, to argue for the margins as a place of relevance sometimes also meant knowingly placing oneself at the precarious edge of a centre that cannot hold.

Notes

1 Wang n.d., *juan* 2.

2 Zhang 2023, 498.

3 Koon 2014.

4 古人於雲頭、雨點、荷葉、亂柴，猶六義 象形，采材於龍、鳳、龜、鳥、蝌蚪、蛟、鶴耳。用銘金石窯雕，儼然如畫，茲信沮誦 之為雲書，典佉盧蒼頡而參立天。

5 Koon 2014.

6 Huang 1994.

7 He 2018.

8 高王十九摩訶薩，
夢授能銷兵與刑。
可惜塵緣多劫夢，
南柯終是未夢醒。

9 Lucas 2021.

10 大 雄寶殿三尊佛，
十八阿羅漢在焉。
惟見蘇盧葉葉落，
[X] 時牧馬過牆邊。

11 Hay 1999.

12 It should be noted that the Chinese character 牛 does not differentiate between types of bovine such as water buffalo, ox, steer, cow or bull. The translation uses the term 'bull', which departs from the catalogue entry of this artwork, which uses the term 'ox' as a general descriptor.

13 桂 州鐵牛記。法芾。仁山撰。五德之運，金性最可畏。鳥獸魚介，尚恐不足以原鬼，而況於人耶。笑梁不可卜，萬物何有於己。佛氏戒用一切生靈，厨稱香積。又復慈航濟物，人鬼兼度。操此道以壽世保民，且復擴充庶類，則範鐵為牛，於天賦不鑿。是道也，可以司牧，可以匠藝，故記之。左臂書。

14 Zhang 2016.

15 Fang 2010.

16 Xiong 2005.

17 One key aspect of the Ullambana Dharma Service is to extend compassion to parents of past seven lifetimes, thus connecting filial piety with Buddhist concept of giving.

18 Zhang 2023, 498.

19 Zhang 2023.

20 Koon 2014, 179–80.