

Path to Enlightenment

Born in Hechuan, Chongqing, Sichuan Province in 1970, Zhang Xiaotao graduated from the Oil Painting Department of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute in 1996 and subsequently taught as a professor at Southwest Jiaotong University. In 2010, Zhang Xiaotao co-founded the New Media Art Department of Sichuan Fine Arts Institute, where he continues to maintain his professorship. In 2016, he completed his Ph.D. from the Central Academy of Fine Arts in Beijing, where he lives and works today. Zhang Xiaotao is a leading figure in China's new media art of the 21st century. Incorporating approaches from both traditional oil painting and digital art, he uses multimedia work to explore thousands of years of culture and belief systems across disciplines, to create enduring new arts experiences that transcend time and space.

In 2000, Zhang Xiaotao fell in love with animation on a trip to San Francisco, USA. Since this encounter, he ventured into moving images as a means of exploring a new set of languages of narration. In 2002, he began his research into Tibetan Buddhist art, going on to visit numerous temples in Tibet in 2007. His own religious background and this holy pilgrimage served as the foundation for his artistic mission and led him to carry out the great everlasting project of *Sakya*, completed under the guidance of archeologist Zhang Jianlin. In *Sakya*, the artist wanted to explore the issue of the secularization of religion, and the paradox between faith and material society.

In 2013, *Sakya* represented China in the 55th Venice Biennale. A review in *The New York Times* commented: "In its digital incarnation, *Sakya* is a surreal space where glowing golden Buddhas take form and disappear; Tibetan mandalas spin and become time tunnels that transport virtual pilgrims to new futures and lifetimes."¹ In *Sakya*, film unlocks a new set of possibilities for visual expression beyond the traditional canvas or still image. The project serves as a vast apparatus that presents a wide-ranging selection of research documents, notes, discussions, photography, and documentaries centered around its themes. *Sakya* emerges multi-dimensional, its images rising from emptiness, as ancient knowledge and wisdom shows us the path toward awakening and enlightenment:

"On whichever path you follow — the Mahayana path, and especially the Vajrayana path, which includes visualizations, recitations, and foundation practices — all practices are of course very, very important. But the most important practice of all is the cultivation of compassion. Without compassion, no matter what you do, it will not be the

¹ Kevin Holden Platt, "China's Venetian Quandary: Chinese Artists," *New York Times*, June 11, 2013

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direct cause of enlightenment. For a practice to be a direct cause of enlightenment, you must have enlightenment mind. And to have proper enlightenment mind, you need compassion. Without compassion you can't have the other qualities.”²

Zhang has a mission to benefit others in his lifetime. Through his art, he carries out this mission. The artist states: “Artists should have a place in their hearts for religion. Art is the artist’s personal religion, and the job of the artist is to follow the path of transcendence. Buddhism began its spread into China during the Han dynasty, and brought massive changes to Chinese history and the progression of culture and society. I’m very curious about the history of Tibetan Buddhism, with its fusion of religion and politics during the Yuan dynasty. I want to know about the situation of Tibetan Buddhism today. I want to unlock those secrets from within Sakya Monastery. It’s all rooted in curiosity.”³

Since 2012, *Sakya* has traveled from Beijing to Queensland, Venice, Tel Aviv, New York, Utrecht, Seoul, and many other corners of the world. Let *Sakya* return and begin again...

Sakya is presented by Zhiguan Museum of Fine Art and W.Ming International Ltd., curated by Dechen Drolma, with international advisory from Prof. Amy Heller, and organized by Sienna Yuan and Ying Xu. Special thanks to Tara Dorje, Dr. Lawrence Galae, Lillian Luan, and Su Teng, and to Prof. Xu Tianjin from Peking University and Prof. Zhang Jianlin from Shaanxi Provincial Institute of Archaeology for their scholarly support.

Dechen Drolma
July 4, 2021

² <https://quotes.justdharma.com/category/sakya-trizin/>

³ Zhang Xiaotao, “Sakya: Artist Statement,” 2011