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The Chanting Machine

Tracking Meaning, Materiality, and
Women's Labour Across Its Circulation

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Introduction

In my home, there is a sound that never stops: a looping Buddhist chant from a small player, the nianfoji, the chanting machine. My mother never turns it off. For years, I treated it as background, at first an annoyance, later simply her habit.

For her, this persistent sound is a form of spiritual practice: an act of purification and home blessing directed at the family. Through the machine, she performs this practice daily, without any family member recognising it as an effort. She hears devotion; I hear white noise. The machine promised that spiritual labour could continue without her presence, but that promise obscured the labour that could not be replaced.

I began to hear an encoded system in that loop when I left this shared context. The object had not changed; my position had. This thesis begins from this shift, asking how the same mass-produced, globally circulated device produces entirely different meanings.

The device is not a neutral carrier of devotion but what Jonathan Sterne (2003) calls a "vanishing mediator": the technology erases itself from perception. The nianfoji's design encodes specific assumptions about faith, body and presence, and operates so seamlessly that it ceases to be perceived as mediating anything at all. As it merged into family infrastructure, the device becomes structurally invisible, a connection that Feminist scholar Ara Wilson (2016) identifies as an "ideological erasure". This invisibility relies on a shared cultural context. When the device circulates outside this field, a displacement is revealed: the body is gone, but the sound remains.

How does the nianfoji, as a device that replaces human practice, come to mean differently as it circulates? The practitioners I follow each encounter the machine within a framework that produces a new reading and, in producing it, renders the previous framework's reading unrecognisable. In 1980, the cultural studies theorist Stuart Hall proposed the encoding/decoding model (Hall, 1980, pp. 117–28) to challenge

the assumption that audiences passively receive predetermined messages. Meaning, for Hall, is not fixed at the point of production but remade at the point of reception, through codes shaped by the viewer's social position. Together with Appadurai's "regimes of value" (1986), this model gives a starting point for understanding how the nianfoji produces different meanings in different hands. But it assumes the signal arrives intact, and it assumes the decoder is confronted with something recognisable as a message.

The displacements this thesis follows begin earlier than that. They also reveal three gaps the model does not name: the encoding performed by materiality itself, the physical intervention that opens the device's hardware, and the "politics of naming" (Pun, 2005) through which women's labour is intercepted and rewritten before it can be recognised.

Since the practices gathered here do not appear in Buddhist scripture, religious history, or technology studies, this thesis is an attempt to archive what the official record has not preserved, without claiming to fill what is irretrievably absent. From interviews, objects, and social media traces, I reconstruct what has been lost between those frameworks. The final form of this thesis is an installation embedded in a chanting machine, asking participants to move between positions, choosing among paths through a device whose meaning shifts with every hand that holds it.

Chapter 1:

The Disappearance of the Practitioner

This chapter begins in a hospital waiting room, where displacement is already visible before the chanting machine enters the scene. To trace how the nianfoji replaces human practice before any external framework could reach it, the chapter follows three voices: the daughter observing, the device tracing its own journey, the daughter reconstructing the factory experience.

Three bodies of research anchor this tracing, each naming a different moment in that process. Labour sociologist Pun Ngai (2005, pp. 1–15) establishes what the device meant at the point of production: assembled by young migrant women absorbed into global supply chains as disposable, unskilled labour. Her concept of the “politics of naming” (Pun, 2005, pp. 114–16) describes how state and capital assign identities to these workers that overwrite their own self-understanding, a mechanism I extend here to any framework that absorbs labour it cannot name on the labourer’s own terms. Religious scholar Natasha Heller (2014, pp. 302–6) explains what happened next: as urbanisation drew practitioners away from temples, the device became a medium for sustaining practice across distance, replacing the body that could no longer be present. Feminist scholar Ara Wilson (2016, p. 270) names the logic that completes this process: what runs without friction disappears from view, and the labour that sustains it disappears with it^[1].

Together, these three accounts describe how the device’s operation as devotional infrastructure was in place before the household could register it as labour at all.

Movement I: Waiting Bodies in Linear Time

Low ceilings, long corridors, complicated circulation. This hospital space has been built to accommodate more patients. Queuing, number calling, diagnosis. People’s social identities blur within the hospital’s broadcast system, unified into the same designation: patient. My mother would rather be what she has made herself: a practitioner^[2].

I am here because I insisted she come. She would rather not. She believes she can heal through spiritual practice: through meditation retreats in mountain temples, through internal observation, through collective chanting at temple gatherings. I have never known what to do with it.

In this environment, she is absorbed in Douyin, a Chinese short-form video platform. The commune stories^[3] on screen recall her youth; the difference is that these stories are mostly about revenge. I suppress my urge to judge this content, trying to attune myself to her thinking. She dislikes seeing doctors, detests this passive arrangement and the sense of suspended time. Short-form video let her swipe forward into another narrative, another tempo. In this waiting room, they are the only thing she controls.

The hospital’s calling system sounds. The increasing numbers represent time moving forward, but this is not a time she chose: it cannot accumulate experience, only continuously erases any possibility of individual narration. The anthropologist Shahram Khosravi (2021) identifies institutional waiting as a technology of power: it separates those who assign time from those who must endure it without record. But the power to assign time rests on a prior operation: the power to assign names. What a framework cannot name on its subject’s own terms, it can endlessly reassign (Pun, 2005, pp. 114–16). In this household, the same asymmetry has operated for decades without a calling system to make it audible: waiting for meals to be prepared, waiting for a child to finish university, waiting for the moment when the duties of motherhood would finally release her back to herself. The hospital’s calling system only makes visible what the household has long arranged silently.

I control nothing either. We are both inside this system. But even within the same waiting room, on the same bench, we are already in different worlds. She is in a commune revenge story; I am watching her watch it. She trusts her body to spiritual practice; I trust it to the doctor we are waiting for. Neither of us can fully enter the other’s logic. The electronic voice of short videos and the broadcast’s number calling sound interweave. Another sonic memory returns: the emotionless electronic loop of the chanting machine in the corner of our home. A cycle of only four syllables, “A-mi-tuo-fo”^[4],

The “people’s commune stories” refers to Douyin short-videos set in 1960s–70s rural China, the era when my mother grew up under the people’s commune system (1958–1983), when land, labour, and daily life were organised collectively under state direction. Many follow a revenge narrative: a young woman suffers injustice at the hands of corrupt cadres or predatory men, survives, and returns years later to take her revenge. In the original commune experience, individual grievance had almost no route to recognition.

Wilson (2016) extends the concept of infrastructure beyond technical systems to include the relational and affective labour that sustains domestic life. Infrastructure is defined by its imperceptibility: it becomes visible only when it breaks down.

The term ‘practitioner’ is used here to designate her self-understanding. She practises Vipassanā (内观, insight meditation), seated meditation (禅修), and regularly attends intensive retreat sessions (禅修营) at mountain temples. Here, ‘practitioner’ refers to this sustained, self-directed engagement with Buddhist practice, distinct from the institutional designation of clergy or the casual identification of believer.

“Amitufo” is the Chinese transliteration of the Sanskrit word “Amitābha”, meaning immeasurable light and immeasurable life. Chanting “Amitufo” at home is a way of blessing the household’s well-being.



Figure 1. The nianfoji in the corner of my mother's living room. Photograph by the author.

repeating on loop 24 hours a day in the room.

My mother and I share a space with the same chanting machine. Yet, where she hears faith, I hear only background sound. I misrecognise the sound because I stand outside the spiritual framework that gives it meaning. The displacement between us did not begin with the machine. But the machine gave it a form that sustains itself: her practice continues while her body withdraws. The sound is always present. She does not need to be. In the same room, I hear the loop but cannot see the practice operating through it. The machine has made her presence unnecessary for it to continue.

The hospital gives her a passive time, short-form videos give her an algorithmic time. In both cases, what comes next is decided for her. But the chanting machine at home gives her a different time: cyclical, without beginning or end, and one she chose to set in motion. The displacement between her hearing and mine is the condition Hall's model begins from: the same signal, decoded from different positions. But Hall assumes the signal reaches a decoder. In this room, the signal was never sent.

Movement II: The Displaced Substitution

Pun Ngai's fieldwork documents the young women migrants who assemble consumer electronics in Shenzhen's export processing zones. The nianfoji is one such product. But unlike other devices, it was designed to perform what its user once did with her own body: chant. When the device took over, the body withdrew, but the sound did not stop. Because the sound continued, the withdrawal was not registered as a loss.

In this household, a sustained spiritual effort became unrecognisable to those who shared the same room, not because they were inattentive, but because the machine had made their attention unnecessary. The same design that renders the practitioner invisible also makes the device available to be entered from elsewhere. What follows is the device's own account. This movement is narrated by the device.

I carry the image of the Buddha on my shell, sometimes a lotus, sometimes blessing words, molded into my plastic surface.

Inside me, monks' voices have been sealed, their breath, tongue, and rhythm recorded, compressed into a chip.

The body that made this sound is not here. What comes out of my speaker is a signal without a source. But people believe what I carry is not a segment of sound, but a segment of time, a portable collective ritual, a 24-hour temple.

To trace my origins, I was probably first born in Taiwan and Hong Kong in the 1990s. Later, as factories relocated to the mainland, I became "Made in China." I am the reincarnation of my ancestors, broadcast and radio devices. We share the same technology.

We are assembled in Shenzhen factories: a circuit board, a small speaker, a plastic shell. Low cost. Our assembly on production lines accompanies the sound of chanting. The workers who put me together are mostly women (Pun, 2005, p. 142). They listen to Buddhist chanting while packaging us.

Some are sent to temples for jie yuan^[5], some exported overseas, some entering online shops. As populations flowed from villages to cities, time became scarce, faith became distant, and people needed me (Heller, 2014, pp. 302–6).

I came to this household as a jie yuan object from a temple. I can't recall when. For me, time is cyclical, with no beginning or end, only "A-mi-tuo-fo," eternally repeating. She once placed me on the living room altar, but family members complained about the noise, so I was moved to a corner of the room.

My location changed, from a visible position of devotion to an invisible corner of the room. This was my first displacement inside this household.

From that day, I have never been turned off.

In a temple, these chantings carry doctrinal weight: an

Jie yuan, or 'forming karmic connections,' is a Buddhist practice of distributing dharma materials (books, devices, food) freely or by donation to spread teachings. It transforms transactions from commercial purchase into spiritual exchange.

invocation of Amitābha Buddha, an aspiration toward the Pure Land. Inside me, they repeat until they no longer function as language. They become rhythm without content.

Even those who made me cannot agree on what I am. Some say my sound lacks mind-thought and cannot bring salvation. Others place me at deathbeds, treating my sound as miraculous in itself (Heller, 2014, pp. 302–6). My shell is shaped like a sacred object. But my sound no longer tells anyone anything.

She presses the button. Then she leaves.

During the day, she cooks, waters the plants, meditates, scrolls through her phone. I play.

At night she sleeps. I still play.

At three in the morning, only my voice and the refrigerator's hum fill the room. I do not need her body, her attention, or her belief to continue.

To run without her, this is what I was designed to do. And this is what makes her practice unrecognisable: because she does not need to be here for it to operate, it looks like she is doing nothing.

I have become infrastructure. She used to notice me, now she does not. This is not a failure of attention. It is the success of my operation. The more seamlessly I run, the less anyone asks what I am doing, or what she is doing through me (Wilson, 2016, p. 270).

Even as my plastic body decays, the speaker crackles, and circuits short, I become the ruins of the household's sonic infrastructure.

But I never stop. I do not maintain meaning.

I maintain time.

Movement III: Choosing a Rhythm

The calling system sounds again. The year is 2025, or perhaps 1985. Factory loudspeakers called out the same way. Similar electric hum, similar waiting. Mother now waits to be called; she once waited for the factory's closing bell. Through her fragmented words, I piece together her past: a Hong Kong-funded factory in Shenzhen, overnight shifts, crowded collective dormitories.

I try to imagine her in the factory: how she adapted to that highly industrialised collective rhythm, how she decided what came next amid repetition.

She worked quality control. Her job was at the production line's end: inspecting every product's plastic shell for cracks, burrs, or color discrepancies. Every single one. Countless.

The production line's sound was constant. A low-frequency rumble, an engine that never stops. When people are exposed to this sound for long periods, it becomes background noise. When the body judges it as information that does not need processing, it stops hearing it. But the sound remains, in your body, in your bones.

According to Pun's work *Made in China*, they have had a radio in the workplace. Workers brought it. A small radio, placed on the windowsill, tuning in Hong Kong FM, which was different from the production line's sound. Someone said the radio let them pretend they weren't in the factory, they were somewhere stories happened. Sound let them be somewhere else while their hands stayed on the line.

Pun documented the radio incident occurred at Meteor Electronics: "at 8:15 p.m., the assistant production manager ordered all radios switched off. Workers across multiple lines simultaneously slowed to a halt. Production was suspended; workers were sent home at 9 p.m. ... The following night, the radios were restored and production resumed."

Pun documented what followed (2005, pp. 104–5). Management ordered the radio switched off ^[6]. The production line went quiet. Then everyone stopped. Workers across the lines simply ceased moving, started talking, some singing under their breath. Production could not resume. They were sent back to the dormitories early. The following night, the radio was back. Neither side acknowledged what had happened. But from then on, workers knew: the radio was the only thing they could

choose, the only thing not decided by the production line.

Each phase had assigned her a name: worker, mother, patient. Practitioner was the one she gave herself, and the chanting machine is the sound through which it persisted. But a chosen rhythm and an imposed rhythm are identical in form: in the factory, repetition is a technology of discipline; at home, it is a technology of devotion. The machine settled into the same structure she had always inhabited. Within the devotional framework, what she sustained through it was received as faith. Her practice entered the devotional framework and was received there as faith. What the framework could not hold in her terms, it absorbed into its own (Pun, 2005, pp. 114–16). Faith, like infrastructure, does not need to announce itself to continue operating (Wilson, 2016, p. 270). The individual effort within it became illegible.

In this room, the machine has completed its displacement, the same conditions that made the device illegible here: the absent body, the chanting, the replaceable operator. They also make it available to be entered from elsewhere, encoded differently, by hands that cannot recognise what this room once held.

Chapter 2:

Scattered Routes, Same Loop, Different Hands

The same device, same circuit board, but different plastic shell circulate through contexts. In three of them, the women who met it encoded it according to frameworks the others could not read. These three encounters also reveal three gaps in Hall's model that the cases in this chapter will make visible.

Kaori's collection reveals the first. The "looseness" of the object's physical structure already performs a kind of encoding before any listener arrives; materiality itself carries meaning. Lu Yi's circuit-bending reveals the second. The model assumes the signal arrives intact, and cannot account for those who open the device and rewrite its signal at the level of hardware. Mogu's encounter with her mother's nianfoji reveals the third: the "politics of naming" (Pun, 2005), the mechanism by which authoritative frameworks rename the labour they absorb before it can be recognised.

According to Arjun Appadurai (1986), the 'social life' of an object is defined by its movement between 'regimes of value'. This movement is a process of translation in which the technical or social knowledge embedded in one regime falls silent to make the object legible in another. In this sense, the circulation itself is the primary act of encoding. These regimes are distinct zones where the criteria for what counts as meaningful are reset. Where Hall theorizes a single moment of decoding, this circulatory perspective extends the question across a sequence of decoders. In each framework, the nianfoji is newly legible.

Movement I: Accumulation in the collector's Room

My mother handed me a different model. I had asked for a new one, having stared too long at the yellowing box in her room, and she returned from the bedroom with something smaller: a white water-drop shaped shell, a relief carving of Buddha's light pressed into the surface. Until that moment, I had assumed all the nianfoji looked roughly the same.

I started tracing it. Online searches, image searches, the kind of search that starts only when something familiar has become unfamiliar. I was looking for where else it had gone, and what it had become there.

While researching the nianfoji, I came across Chinese reports and an English interview about a Japanese collector who had gathered variety nianfoji from Chinatowns across the world. Her name is Kaori Sumiyoshi. Since 2017 she has run HAO HAO HAO, a project of exhibitions



Figure 2. water-drop shaped nianfoji, the author collection.

and an online shop built around her collection. I wrote to her at the end of 2025. She replied^[7].

The machine that first captured her was a heart-shaped model. Until then, most nianfoji she had seen kept the boxy structure of radio-era design. This one was entirely different: gold trim along the edges, the character for Buddha written where the two halves met. Others came in pager-sized form, covered in sequins, recalling the GAL aesthetics of 1990s Japan^[8]. These designs sat in sharp contrast to the solemn, hierarchical Buddhist aesthetics most Japanese associated with religious objects. "This contrast really moved me."

What drew her in was not a single object but a pattern. In Japanese culture, industrial manufacturing adheres strictly to standardised moulds; Buddhist aesthetics demand restraint.



Figure 3a-1. Heart Sharp model nianfoji, Photograph by Kaori Sumiyoshi

Corresponded with Kaori Sumiyoshi, 2025-2026. Selected English letter in Appendix A.

Gal (ギャル, Gyarū) is a Japanese subculture that emerged in the late 1970s and peaked in the 1990s. It originated as a rebellious youth aesthetic that rejected traditional, conservative beauty standards in favor of bold, hyper-feminine styles, and vibrant fashion (often featuring hot pinks). It represents a spirit of individual freedom and a defiance of societal expectations for women. Defined by the visual archive of egg magazine, and sociologist Yuniya Kawamura in Fashioning Japanese Subcultures.



Figures 3a–2. From left: a rectangular Gal style model; a small pager-style model; Photograph by Kaori Sumiyoshi

Yaoyorozu no kami (八百万の神) refers to the Shinto concept that spirit or divinity (kami) inhabits all things. This animist sensibility coexists in Japan with a practice of translating sacred forms into consumer and character design.

Even within the same model, the recorded chants varied, the printed text sat off-centre from the moulded grooves meant to frame it, and the packaging and accessories differed. She called this a "looseness, or generosity" in their making. As she imagined the circumstances and intentions

behind their production, the collector's instinct dormant inside her was gently awakened.

Kaori is not a Buddhist. The cultural ground through which she entered the nianfoji is specific to Japan: yaoyorozu no kami^[9], the belief that spirit inhabits all things, coexists there with a habit of translating the sacred into character design and consumer goods. Buddhist statues are exhibited for their sculptural beauty; cartoon versions of deities appear in museum shops. The nianfoji's form and sonic atmosphere fell into this zone: sacred, but amenable to playfulness.

For Kaori, these inconsistencies were evidence of human passage escaping a system designed to standardise it. The irregularities were the trace of hands. During the COVID pandemic, many people were carrying a sense of helplessness, she wanted to create something that could bring a small sense of calm and comfort. Through connections formed in religious communities, she eventually invited monks from multiple Buddhist schools and several musicians to record together, leading to the release of Tenkai^[10]. She said the nianfoji had overturned her own understanding of religion, and she wanted others to feel the same surprise. Tenkai accepted the nianfoji's form and the framework of Buddhist practice, but re-encoded the content within Japanese cultural ground.

Some Japanese shops placed the machines in bathrooms to mask the sounds of use. Whenever her customer heard those melodies, the image that came to mind was that bathroom. It shows how completely context remakes meaning.

"I imagine the conditions and intentions under which they

were produced." In 2019, she visited a factory in Shenzhen. The owner told her that all the employees were Buddhist. Many Chinese Buddhists, he said, practise with an orientation toward worldly benefit. For the worker, faith and daily labour do not divide cleanly. As workers packaged the machines on the assembly line, the same chanting sealed inside each device played across the factory floor. The sound of practice and the sound of production shared the same melody. Here, the rhythm of spiritual practice was re-encoded as productivity.



Figure 4. 'Tenkai' (天界) by Kaori Sumiyoshi

See State Administration for Religious Affairs et al. (2017, 2021) These prohibited the commercialization of religion and strictly limits the distribution of religious goods to authorized venues and channels in China.

The "looseness" Kaori had cherished began to disappear under tightening regulation^[11]. The early machines she loved were fragile, cheaply made, and tinny-sounding; manufacturers moved steadily away from them, replacing the old designs with refined, durable, stylish versions that contracted the irregular traces of the object into a uniform finish. Alongside this shift, manufacturers began releasing what Kaori called "moral machines": the device form of the nianfoji remained, but the chip inside was replaced, the content swapped for health guidance or Confucian teachings.

Kaori translated the nianfoji into aesthetic generosity. What she collected was not only the objects themselves, but the looseness across sites: the temple, the bathroom, the factory floor, the tightening regulations. She gathered these dispersals and held them together. The looseness, wherever it appeared, as evidence that human presence had passed through. Her observation became its own encoding.

Movement II: Dissolution in the workbench

I had been watching disassembly videos of the nianfoji online. First-person angle, clear image, a screwdriver turning four small screws until the plastic shell lifts away. The hands were steady but the attitudes varied: some treated the device as a curiosity, some as a design object, some handled it carefully, repairing a machine that still carried someone's memory. Through these videos, I

First original Japanese electronic chanting machine 'Tenkai' (天界), released in 2021 by the Japanese online shop "HAO HAO HAO". The device features original chants from eight monks across five major Japanese Buddhist sects, alongside exclusive tracks by prominent avant-garde artists. Widely recognized as a sonic art installation, it marks the evolution of the chanting machine from a ritual object to a contemporary sampling instrument and artistic collectible.

Lu Yi (盧藝), written notes sent to the author, 2025. Lu Yi developed her practice during a residency at the "Hacking Buddhist Chanting Machines Workshop" (MHS, London). See Appendix B for her complete notes.

Circuit bending is a practice of creatively short-circuiting or modifying battery-powered electronic devices to produce unintended sounds. Lu Yi describes her interest in these accidental sounds: "not correctness, but accident" (不在於正規, 而是一種意外性).

found Taiwanese artist Lu Yi: a noise performance posted on a different platform. I contacted her to request an interview. She could not meet, but she sent notes. Her practice belonged to the tradition of circuit bending^[12]. What interested her was the circuit and the unexpected sound. Sound, in this framework, is a physical event before it is a meaning. A resistor mediates it. Light can conduct it. The voice of the monk and the hum of a malfunctioning chip occupy the same register.

What follows is reconstructed from those notes. This movement is narrated by the device.

I was not always as I am now.

In the beginning, my structure was simple and felt somewhat loose. Four screws held my plastic shell in place. Inside there was a wide space. The circuit board was like an orderly forest where every path could be traced with ease. A circular speaker was pressed against the hollowed edge of the board. My heart was a small piece of black resin, shaped like amber but without its translucence. The voices of the monks were compressed and sealed within that invisible dark place. The rest of me was legible.

I had two exposed pins that connected to the power supply and also to my memory. That pin was connected to the outside world through a resistor. By changing the resistance, the speed and pitch of the memory would shift. The designers left this path open, perhaps never imagining

that someone would modify it.

Those hands found it.

Light came in. A photoresistor was attached to the path of that pin. From that moment on, light became the conductor for the chanting. When a shadow passed over my surface, the resistance changed and the pitch sank. When the light grew stronger, the memory accelerated. The internal track

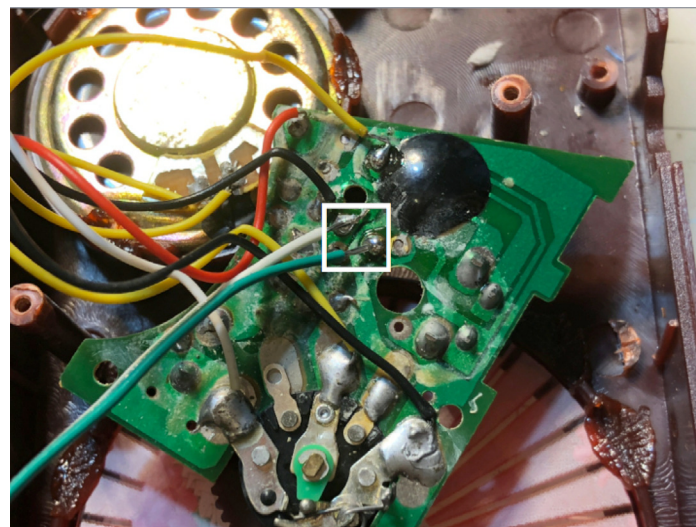


Figure 5. The interior of an earlier-generation nianfoji. The circuit board has exposed pins and clearly traceable paths. From Lu Yi's website.

began to take on a different tone. I cannot name what it became.

What made this possible was the very looseness of my construction. It was the spacing in that forest and the legible path leading to the pin. Those hands needed an opening to enter.

I learned of my successors through fragmented memories. In the recycling yards, old circuit boards were dismantled and parts were redistributed. Boards from my generation passed through those places. Sometimes, in machines reassembled from recovered parts, traces of the earlier structure still remained. I heard that the new devices no longer contained electronic forests. All paths were pulled into a single chip with no exposed pins and no gaps for light or shadow to touch. The content was preset and encrypted. The old models left the market, and the practices that depended on their openness left with them. There was no longer a common language between those hands and the circuit board.

My pin was closed, and the legible path was retracted into a black dot. Through technical changes, the closing of possibilities for other paths was called progress.

Perhaps this is an upgrade.

Movement III: Rewriting in the Bedroom

When I searched for modifications of the nianfoji online, the high-visibility posts came almost entirely from men. These contents often focused on maintenance, hacking, or parodying the device itself, forming a male-dominated technical community.

To find the practitioners whose names tend to disappear from these social media, I turned to Xiaohongshu. This platform has a predominantly female user base and focuses more on everyday narratives than pure technical display.

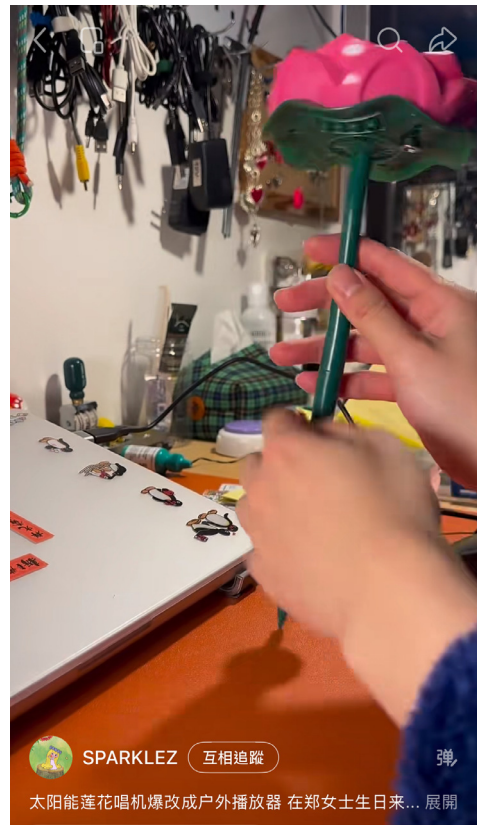


Figure 6. The screen shoot of the post from Mogu in Xiaohongshu .

In the gaps of that platform, I found Mogu, a designer in Southern China who had recently opened her own studio and was posting circuit board projects to build an audience. One post showed a modified lotus-shaped nianfoji that she had dismantled to create a birthday gift for a friend.

I had expected the modification to carry symbolic meaning: a daughter dismantling her mother's faith, repurposing a devotional object as a gesture of refusal. When I asked why she chose the lotus machine, her answer had nothing to do with faith or symbolism. "Solar energy is clean, free, and the product engineering is already excellent. There was nothing for me to improve." Her interest was the design and the engineering. She removed the voice chip, kept the power supply and speaker, and replaced it with an MP3 module. Later she kept a

second unit for herself, converting it into an outdoor camping speaker that only needed to be pushed into the ground to work.

When I asked whether she had felt any transgression against her mother's faith, she said: "The lotus and the Buddha are not necessarily connected. I didn't consult my mother. I just took it down and modified it." The modification was a product test.

The machine had a large lotus shape, red plastic petals, a solar panel at the top, a stem at the base that can be pushed into any surface. Her mother had wedged it into a gap between the wall and a light fixture at the entrance to a rooftop balcony in Fujian. Since it was placed, no one had touched it. No one noticed it was there. The Fujian sun was sufficient. The machine needed nothing else, and kept looping.

"Before I became an adult, I really hated Buddhism, because my mother always attributed my achievements to her own religious practice, her prayers and devotion. I felt like my efforts had been taken from me. I was the one who had done the work." Whatever the daughter achieved was absorbed into the mother's devotional account and renamed as the outcome of prayer. The

work belonged to the daughter. The name for it belonged to the faith.

The posts she shared about circuit board design attracted waves of male commenters, who offered their guidance in condescending and contemptuous tones. She understood the psychology behind it: a sense of crisis, a conviction that this domain belonged to them, that a woman entering it amounted to a loss of their authority. The technical door to the machine had been open. Mogu's practice had entered the device at the level of hardware, where no permission was needed. Visibility on a public platform did not carry the same access.

On the matter of faith, the tension remains. She still visits temples occasionally. "I feel very split about my mother's Buddhism. On one hand, I think it's good that she has something to invest herself in, something other than her children. On the other hand, I fully understand the psychological origins of that religious behaviour."

She made a work called What Must I Believe: a glass mosaic installation in the form of a traditional Buddhist shrine, with a one-way mirror where the deity would be.

"As I gradually separated from my prescribed identity and life path, the answers that had once been enshrined as standards collapsed. When rules, authority, and collective consensus no longer defined meaning, I realised I had to make the choice myself — to decide what to believe."^[13]

Her works materialise the tension between her agency over the machine and her unresolved relationship with faith, without resolving it. At the hardware level, she had bypassed the framework of faith entirely. At the level of naming, the question remained open: who has the right to name what one believes.

Mogu (pseudonym), interview with the author, 2025. Original Chinese and English translation in Appendix C.

Chapter 3:

The Last Stop, the First Question

This chapter answers the question this thesis opened with. Three displacements traced across the preceding chapters each expose a gap Hall's model does not name: materiality encodes before any listener arrives, hardware can be rewritten before meaning forms, and naming rights are intercepted before labour can be recognised. The answer has a limit: writing hands the reader every position at once, and that view is exactly what the argument denies can exist.

Movement I: Translation and Its Losses

My mother's nianfoji is still running in the corner of the living room. In my memory, it always has been. At my desk in Rotterdam, I sort through the fragments of its journey: Kaori's letters, Lu Yi's notes, Mogu's social media posts and interview transcripts. From here, I can trace the internal logic of each framework and the gaps between them. This vantage belongs to a specific position: a daughter who left, an immigrant in a European graduate programme, a researcher assembling a thesis.

Kaori and I held the same object. She grew up inside Japanese manufacturing culture, where industrial production adheres to standardised moulds and aesthetics demand restraint. I grew up in Shenzhen, a city built by migrants, where the physical traces of construction and demolition never fully separated from the labour that produced them. She read the machine's looseness as generosity; I read it as evidence of production conditions.

Her aesthetic training activated the irregularity as a sign of the human hand. I had always known my mother once worked quality control on a factory line in Shenzhen. The connection between the nianfoji's sound and that labour only took shape after I encountered fieldwork documenting how women workers on those same lines bore systematic physical damage, while the frameworks of state and capital renamed their experience as low-skill and voluntary, stripping them of the right to name what they had endured (Pun, 2005, pp. 114–16, 145). That account made

the looseness unreadable as aesthetic generosity. It made the body that had produced it impossible to ignore.

Different social positions produce different readings of the same signal, and these readings do not correspond in any necessary way (Hall, 1980, pp. 119, 125). Kaori's framework translated the looseness into aesthetic generosity. What disappeared in that translation was the labour that had produced it. Circulation across these regimes of value is itself an ongoing act of encoding: the object is renamed at every station it passes through, long before anyone arrives to decode it (Appadurai, 1986, pp. 3–63). As the object moved between frameworks, the meaning conditions of the previous regime fell silent. The executors of this silencing were not abstract. Tightening state regulation and market standardisation moved manufacturers away from the loose, irregular designs Kaori had valued, replacing them with refined, uniform finishes and interchangeable content. Dominant codes organise preferred meanings through institutional order, reproducing themselves without active enforcement (Hall, 1980, pp. 124, 126). In this case that force re-entered the object's material construction, closing the conditions under which alternative re-encodings had been possible. When the looseness was smoothed away, the standardised shell that remained was no longer readable by the framework she brought to it.

The position does not only determine what becomes legible. It also determines which adjacent frameworks remain sealed. For my mother, the sound carried religious meaning and spiritual value. I had always heard the nianfoji's chanting as a single block: either it carried faith, or it was background sound. I never considered that it could be opened at the level of hardware, that pitch could be slowed, circuits rerouted, the chanting transformed into noise.

Lu Yi entered through the framework of sound art. Her practice operated on the physical signal before meaning could form. Hall's model assumes that an encoded signal arrives intact at the point of decoding, and does not account for those who open the material carrier itself and rewrite it before meaning can form (Hall, 1980, p. 119). When the circuit architecture that had permitted Lu Yi's entry was replaced by an integrated chip, that

opening closed. Her practice could not be repeated on the new hardware. The entry point was not hidden; it was removed. Lu Yi's own account confirms this: the old model of nianfoji is now very difficult to find, the new integrated circuits make the same methods impossible, and no further workshops could be held. Hall's model identifies the gap between encoding and decoding positions, but does not theorise what happens when the material conditions of an alternative encoding are eliminated before any decoder arrives (Hall, 1980, pp. 119, 125). Each framework does more than produce a different reading. It closes off the ground on which adjacent frameworks stood.

The third displacement does not happen at the level of hardware. It happens before the signal is formed. Mogu and I share a similar parallel. In her household, a daughter's technical achievement was absorbed into her mother's devotional account and renamed as the outcome of prayer. The work belonged to the daughter; the name for it belonged to the faith. In my household, the direction was reversed: a mother's sustained spiritual practice was absorbed into the family's background and renamed as habit. In both cases, the person executing the framework did not know she was doing so. The renaming required no intention. It required only that the framework remain in place.

This is the politics of naming (Pun, 2005, pp. 114–16) : the separation between the one who does the work and the one who holds the right to name it. Pun locates this mechanism in the relation between state, capital, and migrant women workers. In these households, the same structure operated without institutional scale, inside the domestic arrangements that made it invisible. Naming did not follow labour. It preceded it, and absorbed it on arrival.

Hall's circuit runs from encoding to decoding. Pun's politics of naming identifies what that circuit cannot see: the renaming that occurs before a signal reaches any decoder (Hall, 1980, pp. 119, 125; Pun, 2005, pp. 114–16). But it happens earlier still: certain signals are renamed before any decoding occurs. The separation Pun identifies between labour and its naming is the same circuit Hall's model does not reach. This systematic interception

prevents the record from being passed down. Every passage through a new framework generated meaning. The authority to name what that passage had displaced moved with it.

My own naming belongs inside this structure. I called my mother's practice "invisible labour" from the start. That phrase made her effort legible within my academic framework. It also replaced her language with mine.

This naming is the fifth encoding. The thesis is not outside the structure it describes. It is one more framework absorbing the device, releasing the meanings it was built to release, and falling silent about the rest.

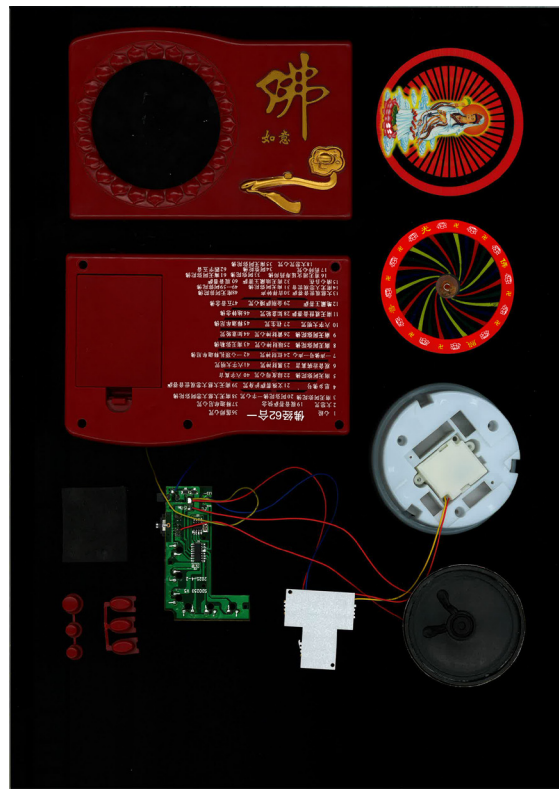
This is why the argument cannot be completed in writing alone. The text adventure returns the reader to a single position. Not everyone who presses the button reaches the end; some leave, and leaving does not permit return. Reading a corridor takes time the reader must give. The form refuses the reassurance of replay. Its direction is linear: each object carries a preset use, each room releases only the paths it was written to release. There is no free route, only the one the structure permits. This unidirectional mode of interpretation is the mechanism the thesis has tracked. Systematic interception operates this way. A signal enters one framework and the framework releases only the meanings it was built to release. The text adventure places the reader inside this condition rather than describing it.

Movement II: The Nianfoji's Next Adventure

For this time, the device is being asked to tell its own story: the story of the household it has lived inside, of the rooms it has moved through, of the body that once navigated its meaning.

This movement is narrated by the device.

This is the fifth time. My circuit board has been removed. In the dark space where the chip once lived, the memory of a Raspberry Pi now surrounds me. I no longer make sound. Instead, cables bind me to others of my kind,



Figures 7. The Disassembled nianfoji by the author.
Scan by the author.

forming a silent matrix. My shell is still the same cheap, devotional crimson, but this skin now wraps an entirely different logic.

This is the fifth time. My history is a process of being opened, reshaped, and resealed. I know what it is to hold different meanings in the same body. It began with a factory worker pressing a chip into my chest. Later, a collector's gaze turned me into a specimen. Then, the heat of a soldering iron transformed me into a conductor of noise. Now, the researcher has dismantled me once more, turning me into a machine that carries a story. The rule remains: the shell stays, the content is replaced, and the previous voice must fall silent.

When you press the button, I feel you enter my memory like an uncertain signal. I no longer show you the whole picture. I am a maze made of words. Each room is internally coherent, but they are disconnected. When you enter one room, the others physically disappear. You search every table, ledger, or thermos of warm water, but you only ever find a partial truth. This is not because I am hiding anything. It is because my structure decides your line of sight. The exits are preset. The paths are repetitive. Every "free choice" you make happens within the boundaries I have drawn.

When you press the button, you move freely inside my body, but the structure is not yours to design. You cannot see what the previous station contains. This structure is occlusion. I place every observer inside the chain, occupying only one position at a time. I do not name disappearance; I let the visitor experience the condition of being unable to see the adjacent room.

When you hold me in your hands and search for meaning among these limited options, you are no longer a spectator. You are standing inside my memory. In this moment, you are not reading my history; you are living it. From inside this

room, the other worlds do not exist.

Movement III: The Loop Does Not Close

What this thesis has archived is only one cross-section of the nianfoji's long life. Did its circulation begin at the factory? At the moment a woman on the assembly line pressed it into a plastic shell? When the circuit board was refined and soldered in furnace smoke? Or when metal was first dug from the mine? What labour and what translations of meaning took place at those earlier stations, these words cannot answer. The physical medium you are reading on right now has passed through the same structure.

In its movement across borders, the nianfoji keeps redefining what absence means. Its substitutions, its looping, its fragile internal states are the surface where labour is taken in, renamed, and held in ways no single framework can fully read. On the factory line, it is a commodity in progress, carrying the physical rhythms of the workers who assemble it. Beside my mother, it becomes an agent for devotion, letting prayer continue in the gaps between domestic chores. In the gallery, it becomes an object of material history to be looked at again.

This thesis has tracked these displacements not to recover a truth, since that truth has already been worn down by circulation. It tracks them so that the device, through each substitution, can be seen for what it carries: vivid female narratives encoded into plastic shells and integrated circuits.

The encoding has never been finished. I tried to mark the gaps in a system that mostly looks seamless, the gaps where the voices of those reclaiming their agency have been quietly held.

This work extends an invitation. When you reach out to hold this machine, when you observe it, take it apart, write down what you find, you are producing an accident outside its intended function. In that accident, the loop begins to produce friction.

The hidden forms of women's labour, the rhythmic pauses on the assembly line, the overlooked prayers in domestic spaces,

the quiet acts of self-naming during disassembly, surface for a moment through the layers of encoding, and for that moment they can be heard. The shift in meaning happens in these moments of deliberate pause, of tactile attention.

Inside the eternal loop of the chant, we can now hear, behind the promise of substitution, the faint and unceasing breath of human presence.

The machine is still on.

Appendix

The following appendices contain the primary research materials referenced throughout this thesis: written correspondence with Kaori Sumiyoshi, notes from Lu Yi, and an interview with Mogu. These materials were gathered between 2025 and 2026 and are reproduced here with the participants' permission. Portions of each appeared in the booklet accompanying the graduation exhibition (March 2026); the full texts are preserved here as an archive of the research process. All materials are used with credit and remain the intellectual property of their respective authors.

Appendix A: Correspondence with Kaori Sumiyoshi

Selected excerpts from email correspondence between the author and Kaori Sumiyoshi, founder of HAO HAO HAO (Tokyo), received between December 2025 and January 2026. Edited and organised by the author; passages unrelated to the research have been omitted. Reproduced with permission.

The Buddha Machine that truly captured my heart — the one that made me feel "this is something special" — was a heart-shaped model. Until then, most had a simple box-like form, so I was immediately drawn to its unconventional appearance. I also encountered models adorned with rhinestones, evoking the "GAL" fashion style popular in Japan in the 1990s — strikingly playful, completely different from the solemn image of Buddhism that many Japanese people hold. As for when I realised I needed to collect seriously, there wasn't a single decisive moment. It may be more accurate to say that I suddenly noticed I had already become a collector. Even within the same model, Buddha Machines often differ subtly — the recorded chants may vary, the printed details may be slightly different, the boxes may change. Unlike mass-produced Japanese products that adhere strictly to standardised moulds, these variations reflect a kind of generosity in manufacturing. As I imagined the circumstances behind their production, I think the collector's instinct dormant inside me was gently awakened.

In 2019, I visited a Buddha Machine factory in Shenzhen. They were already sharing production lines with several other companies, manufacturing radios alongside Buddha Machines. The president told me he wanted to move away from fragile, cheaply made models, and instead create something more refined and durable. As government regulations on Buddha statue motifs became stricter, simpler designs have become mainstream. I feel a sense of loss at the gradual disappearance of the diverse aesthetic perspectives that once existed. Recently, manufacturers have begun releasing what might be called "moral machines" — devices containing health guidance, Confucian teachings, or the Analects. If traditional Buddha Machines are gradually replaced by these, I find myself feeling conflicted about that future.

I was told that all the employees at the factory were Buddhists. The president himself

was also a Buddhist. I was struck by his comment that many Buddhists in China practise their faith with a focus on worldly benefits. It is often said that 60–70% of Japanese people consider themselves non-religious. Yet many visit Shinto shrines at the beginning of the year and Buddhist temples on New Year's Eve. The idea of "yaoyorozu no kami" — that all things have a spirit — is deeply rooted. I think Japanese culture may contain this contradiction: holding reverence for religion while also enjoying transforming it into characters or reinterpreting it through one's own meanings.

Through collecting, I had many opportunities to meet Buddhist monks. With the help of Mr. Ikeguchi, a head priest who showed interest in Buddha Machines and even visited my solo exhibition, I was able to invite monks to participate in creating an original device. Tenkai was released during the COVID pandemic.

At a time when many people were carrying a sense of helplessness, I wanted to create something that could bring even a small sense of calm. For me, Buddha Machines had overturned my own assumptions about Buddhism. I wanted others to experience that same surprise — so while keeping the foundations of Buddhism in mind, I allowed a greater degree of freedom in the music created by the participating artists.

One of the most memorable aspects of my exhibitions has been hearing people share personal memories — "my family used this" or "this was placed at a grave." An interesting phenomenon also emerged in Japan: some people began placing Buddha Machines in shop restrooms to mask bodily sounds. I sometimes hear people say, "When I hear this mantra, I'm reminded of the restroom in that particular shop."

Appendix B: Written Notes from Lu Yi

Written notes sent to the author by Lu Yi (盧藝), sound artist based in Taipei, 2025. Reproduced with permission.

B.1 Original text (Traditional Chinese)

關於念佛機的慰藉這部分我無法回答, 不過以前的創作歷程我有當時的文字紀錄: 「念佛機內建的曲目經由手勢被破壞、轉換成另一種新的曲目, 讓人離開了熟悉感, 同時也產生新的聲音效果 (Sound Effect)。回顧念佛機的創作是在 2018 年 9 月, 我受失聲祭 (Lacking Sound Festival) 和倫敦的 Music Hackspace 邀請, 在英國薩默塞特府 (Somerset House) 駐村, 是駐村計畫裡藝術家工作坊內容發展的延伸。

多年擔任王福瑞老師的助手, 我學到了如何修改念佛機裡面的電子零件, 讓念佛機可以透過手勢控制光敏電阻 (Photoresistor) 來變化音調, 播出慢速與快轉的迴圈 (Loop) 曲目。歌曲經由手勢轉變成噪音 (Noise), 失去了原有歌曲中的語言意義, 變成一種『似聽非聽』的聲音效果。在正常操作下, 物品會發出預期的聲音, 但我想要的聲音是『正常功能』之外的範圍, 這也是創作聲音藝術 (Sound Art) 好玩的地方——不在於正規, 而是一種意外性。這些意外的聲音有了新的任務與身份, 滿足了聽眾對於新聲音期待的想像。」

以上是一些當時寫下的紀錄。很可惜的是, 同款舊型念佛機現在很難找到了, 大部分都是新的電路 (IC), 難以用同樣的手法創作, 所以後來無法再舉辦更多念佛機延伸的工作坊。不過, 其中的錯誤美學 (Glitch Aesthetics) 還是可以延伸到其他的創作, 例如我的另一個工作坊: VGA 合成器 (VGA Synthesizer) 影像駭客器 (使用由 Jonas Bers 設計的 VGA 教材)。

我印象最深的是和立賢教育基金會合作, 到過 20 所偏鄉小學提供聲音創作體驗課。教學工作坊(結

合了 Drawdio 與 APC) 連結了我先前的教育背景, 且能運用我在聲音領域的知識。當小朋友們開始以非常規的方式操作教具, 發出強烈且跳脫認知框架的聲響時, 我看到他們眼神中閃爍著興奮的光芒, 那種感覺真的很棒。

B.2 English translation by the author

I cannot answer the part about the comforting function of the nianfoji, but I do have written records from my earlier work on it:

"The tracks built into the nianfoji are disrupted by hand gestures and transformed into another kind of track, pulling the listener out of familiarity and producing, at the same time, a new sound effect. Looking back, the nianfoji project was made in September 2018, when I was invited by Lacking Sound Festival and Music Hackspace London to a residency at Somerset House. It was an extension of the artist workshop developed within that residency programme.

Through years of assisting Wang Fujui, I had learned how to modify the electronic components inside the nianfoji so that hand gestures could control a photoresistor and vary the pitch, playing the looped tracks slowly or fast-forwarded. Through these gestures, the chanting was transformed into noise; it lost the linguistic meaning of the original track and became a sound hovering between audible and inaudible. Under normal operation, the device produces the sound it is expected to produce. But the sound I wanted lay outside the range of 'normal function'. This is what makes making sound art interesting: not correctness, but accident. These accidental sounds take on new tasks and new identities, meeting the listener's imagination of what new sound might be."

Those are some of the notes I wrote at the time. Unfortunately, the same older-model nianfoji is now very hard to find. Most devices now use new integrated circuits (ICs), making it difficult to create in the same way, which is why no further nianfoji workshops have been held since. However, the glitch aesthetics involved can still extend to other creative work — for example, another workshop of mine: the VGA Synthesizer, a video-hacking device that uses teaching materials designed by Jonas Bers.

What remains most vivid to me is a collaboration with the Li-Hsien Education Foundation. I visited twenty rural primary schools to offer sound-creation classes. The teaching workshops, which combined Drawdio with APC, connected my earlier background in education with my knowledge in the sound field. When the children began operating the tools in unconventional ways, producing strong sounds that broke out of the frameworks they were used to, I saw a flash of excitement in their eyes. That feeling was wonderful.

Appendix C: Interview with Mogu

Source: Written and voice interview with Mogu (pseudonym), product designer based in Southern China.
Date: December 2025.
Languages: Simplified Chinese (original), with English translation by the author.
Note: Mogu is a pseudonym used at the participant's request.
Reproduced with informed consent. Selected excerpts first appeared in the booklet accompanying the graduation exhibition (March 2026).

C.1 Interview Transcript

Introduction

在中国的社交媒体上搜索念佛机改造的内容时, 我发现几乎所有的拆解和改造帖子都来自男性用户。我知道这不可能是全部的情况。我在女性用户居多的中国社交平台小红书搜索中找到了 Mogu 的帖子。她是一位产品设计师, 把妈妈阳台上的太阳能莲花型念佛机拆开, 换掉内部芯片, 做成了生日礼物。我在 2025 年 12 月通过文字和语音采访了她。

While searching for nianfoji modification content on Chinese social media, I found that almost all disassembly and circuit work was posted by men. I knew this couldn't be the whole picture. I found Mogu's post on Xiaohongshu, a Chinese platform with a predominantly female user base. She is a product designer who took apart her mother's solar-powered lotus-shaped nianfoji, replaced the internal chip, and turned it into a birthday gift. I interviewed her in December 2025, in text and by voice.

Exchange 1 — The object

Yu Yin (December 2025):

改造之前, 它在你家里是什么样的存在? 主要放在谁的空间里?

Before you modified it, what kind of presence did it have in your home? Whose space did it mainly occupy?

Mogu (December 2025):

它被插在我家顶楼阳台的入口处, 我母亲插在墙壁的縫隙上。

It was plugged into the entrance of the top-floor balcony, wedged by my mother into a gap in the wall.

它是大号版本的莲花, 上面有太阳能板, 红色塑料莲花叶子, 底部是固定用的 "荷花杆"。是母亲喜欢和佛教道教相关的东西, 所以买的。

It was a large lotus shape, with a solar panel on top, red plastic lotus leaves, and a stem at the bottom for anchoring it in place. My mother likes things related to Buddhism and Taoism, so she bought it.

买来之后就把它放在阳台就再也没动过了, 也没有人去察觉它的存在。由于阳台只有母亲比较经常去, 没有人在意到它。太阳能。福建的阳光日照非常充足, 所以我们几乎感受不到它的存在。

After buying it she put it on the balcony and never moved it again. No one noticed it was there. Only my mother went to the balcony with any regularity. It runs on solar power.

Fujian has very strong sunlight, so we barely felt its presence at all.

其实家里还出现过一个——是我在扫墓的时候, 妈妈将它带到曾祖父的墓地里。很好笑的事, 等我们第二年去扫墓的时候依然在播放音乐, 虽然塑料已经老化了。

There was actually another one at home — when we went to sweep the graves, my mother brought it to my great-grandfather's burial site. The funny thing is, when we returned the following year, it was still playing music, even though the plastic had already begun to degrade.

Exchange 2 — Modification

Yu Yin (December 2025):

你为什么想改造它? 你是怎么改的?

Why did you want to modify it? How did you do it?

Mogu (December 2025):

2021 年春节, 我想给朋友做一个生日礼物。莲花和佛其实没有必然的联系, Olafur Eliasson 也做过一个类似的给非洲儿童的太阳能花灯。莲花与佛也未必有关。作为一个喜欢动手的设计师, 我只是想要它防水的外观和成熟的产品设计。

During Chinese New Year 2021, I wanted to make a birthday gift for a friend. The lotus and the Buddha are not necessarily connected. Olafur Eliasson once designed a solar flower lamp for children in Africa that looks somewhat similar. A lotus and the Buddha have no necessary connection. As a designer who likes to tinker, I just wanted its waterproof exterior and its well-tested product design.

它就不是佛机了, 变成了我的户外音箱。它的设计就非常适合在户外使用, 只要插进土里就能马

上工作。

It’s no longer a nianfoji. It became my outdoor speaker. The design is very well suited for outdoor use — you just push it into the soil and it works immediately.

Exchange 3 — Belief

Yu Yin (December 2025):

你自己信佛吗？你妈妈的信仰实践是什么样的？

Do you believe in Buddhism yourself? What does your mother's religious practice look like?

Mogu (December 2025):

我其实很迫切地想要相信一些东西，但是对佛教的态度有一种矛盾。母亲的一半生活和佛教实践相关，她是一个忠实的信徒，会花很多的时间来将自己的人生寄托在信仰上。全国各地烧香拜佛、供奉佛像等等。

I actually have an urgent desire to believe in something, but my feelings about Buddhism are contradictory. Half of my mother's life is bound up with Buddhist practice. She is a devoted believer who puts a great deal of time into entrusting her life to her faith — burning incense, worshipping Buddha, making offerings, travelling across the country to do so.

Exchange 4 — Mother and the question of credit

Yu Yin (December 2025):

从无所事事的家庭主妇变成给家族行善积德的修行者，这其实多少也显示出社会对退休妇女的边缘化。

From an idle housewife to a practitioner accumulating merit for the family — this also reflects, to some degree, how society marginalises retired women.

Mogu (December 2025):

我为什么之前非常讨厌佛教这个事情，是因为我母亲总把我的努力成果归结于她的信教、她的祈福。我觉得我的成果被掠夺了，明明我是付出的那一方，似乎它抢走了我所有的努力。

The reason I used to really hate Buddhism is that my mother would always attribute my achievements to her faith, to her prayers. I felt my accomplishments had been taken from me. I was the one who had put in the work, yet it seemed to have stolen all of my effort. 但我觉得以我母亲的理解来说，她可能根本就没有深入到佛教真正的教义。我现在其实也会去拜佛啥的。

But I think, from my mother's understanding, she probably never went deep into the actual teachings of Buddhism. Now I actually do go and worship Buddha myself sometimes.

C.2 Artist Statement: What Must I Believe

Mogu (2025):

它有着佛龕的形态，却不供奉任何神明。内部是一面单向镜，观看者所看见的，始终只是自己。当我逐渐脱离既定的身份与人生路径，那些曾经被 " 供奉 " 当作标准的答案随之坍塌。当不再由规则、权威或集体来规定意义，我意识到，我必须亲自做出选择——去相信什么。

It takes the form of a Buddhist shrine but enshrines no deity. Inside is a one-way mirror, so that what the viewer sees is always only themselves. As I gradually separated from my prescribed identity and life path, the answers that had once been "enshrined" as standards collapsed. When rules, authority, and collective consensus no longer defined meaning, I realised I had to make the choice myself: to decide what to believe.

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Images

Figure 1. The nianfoji in the corner of my mother’s living room. Photograph by the author.

Figure 2. water-drop shaped nianfoji, the author collection.

Figure 3a–1. Heart Sharp model nianfoji, Photograph by Kaori Sumiyoshi

Figures 3a–2. From left: a rectangular Gal style model; a small pager-style model; Photograph by Kaori Sumiyoshi.

Figure 4. 'Tenkai' (天界) by Kaori Sumiyoshi

Figure 5. The interior of an earlier-generation nianfoji. The circuit board has exposed pins and clearly traceable paths. From Lu Yi’s website.

Figure 6. The screen shoot of the post from Mogu in Xiaohongshu.

Figure 7. The Disassembled nianfoji by the author. Scan by the author.

Colophon

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