



## The Taotie Nathaniel Grant

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20/20 is an ambitious three-year programme that engaged 20 emerging or mid-career ethnically diverse artists of colour and 20 public art collections across the UK, resulting in 20 new permanent acquisitions.

Generously supported by Arts Council England, Freelands Foundation and UAL, 20/20 combined artist residencies and commissioning at scale, with the aim of catalysing artists' careers and fostering meaningful change in collections - not only through the artworks that will ultimately enter the collections but also through a peer network of artists and curators, and the critical interrogation of collections practices.

‘The anthropomorphism of nature (which is what religion consists of) and the physiomorphism of man (by which we define magic) form two components [...] that vary only in proportion. The notion of the supernatural exists solely for a humanity that attributes supernatural powers to itself and that, in turn, lends the powers of superhumanity to nature.’  
Claude Lévi-Strauss, *La Pensée Sauvage*

One of the primary psychological facets which made itself known to the early human condition was the propensity to share our lived experience in community.

From the organisation of our hunting, gathering, and eating habits, to relational taboos which marked move to exogamy, and the marking of times and seasons by festivals and feasts: our earliest shared human intuition is that those things which are done best, are best done together. What was not so clear, once communal life was taken for granted in our early history, was how far those ties of community (roles, duties, observations) extended once it became clear that members of our community were no longer active in terms of being part of ‘the living.’

Sure enough, there were delineated roles, tasks, and hierarchies of being evidenced in all living nature. The birds of the air had their domain, we worked next to, or consumed, or bedecked ourselves with our land-based animals, and things in water were easily managed so far as our tools allowed. However, what about that unintelligible, mirror world, not much further than six feet underneath us, which belonged to the dead?

It is testimony to the openness of our early psyche that we intuited the possibility of our thanatological life [the scientific study of death, from the Greek ‘thanatos’] needing just as much regulation, classification, and delineations as our lived experiences. That there may be a plethora of equivalent members of the animal kingdom, relatives, and species in a shadow-realm was a serious psychological concern for our shared ancestors.

These anthropological depths are plumbed, excavated, and brought to life in Gayle Chong Kwan’s **20/20** work ‘**The Taotie**’.

From its beginnings as a research project into the Chinese funeral bronze and miniature portrait collections at Compton Verney, Gayle Chong Kwan’s ‘**The Taotie**’ animates (quite literally) objects which may otherwise have been left as funerary data for the tired eyes of so many passers-by, in, yet another, yet-to-be-decolonized museum setting.

Bordering on a type of digital necromancy; **'The Taotie'** first invites us to consider that which stares up at us from the hidden depths of the earth by the power of x-ray. Chong Kwan's early research was illuminated by the revealed phosphorescent glow of x-rayed vessels and masks [bronze and clay respectively] which themselves detailed zoomorphic monsters and, in the fully excavated bronzes, creatures which seemed to be trying to pry themselves free of the very vessels' artistry had bound them to.

Our minds rush to ask the question what purpose such beautiful chimeras and vessels could serve. Is it the logic of the afterlife that so-called beauty be inverted? That for our lips to touch the cups, spoons and bowls of that which is, properly speaking, the property of the dead, we must consort with daemons?

Are they objects of prohibition, propitiation or invitation?

If there is prohibition in **'The Taotie'** it is contra the easy assumptions archives, collections, catalogues make about a past which is connected to a specific culture, by those of which time or heritage leaves too large a gap not to be interrogated. 20<sup>th</sup> century archaeology was, and our own new century is, fraught with the problematics of who finds what, where is it found and which location objects are finally situated in.

These problematics are embraced as part of the creative process in which the artist evidences the bold assessment, self-examination, and reflection of which their own diasporic history of Chinese immigrants to colonial Mauritius plays a prominent feature.

Chong Kwan, as part of **'The Taotie'**, descends into the Hades of the colonial cultural collection and enjoins the hard work of engaging her exhibition piece with their own body as the medium by which we can connect with some curatorial authenticity.

Seven photographic works, alongside physical ritual bronze and clay objects, show the artist in locations around London which emphasize the socio-political significance of that city's colonial foundations, the brutalism's of extraction, collecting, and categorising which so often (too often) marks the culturally precarious and personally challenging realm of artefact management.

The photographs present the artist as a type of conducting rod for the lightening inspiration these locations provide as they wear photographic collage masks in situ, varying in size, bursting, and boiling with images detailing a kaleidoscope of diasporic places, things, persons and objects. It is during our apprehension of the series of artist-featured photographs, that we realise integral link between the masks and the way in which they navigate the artist's own complex diasporic and cultural familial identities.

The artist has in fact become part of the taotie.

Such energy and significance as may attach themselves to ancient ancestral objects contemplated intellectually, also appeals to the viewers senses, visually, when seen in the flesh and blood ritual activity which the placing of object, artist, and photo allows for in **'The Taotie'**.

In a thoughtful curatorial intervention, **'The Taotie'** situates each of the series of seven photographs and sets of clay/bronze models upon an artist's interpretation of a shrine shelf. Often a feature of the private devotional life of Chinese homes and domestic settings, the shrine shelf, in this instance, offers the interlocutor the opportunity to engage with an annual ritual activity set.

It is this ritual activity set which brings to forefront an idea which permeates the metaphysical space when encountering **'The Taotie'**.

Having touched on the potential for such objects as the taotie to make us ask ourselves whether they are objects of prohibition [to be treated with venerable awe] propitiation [as objects which, along with the artist's mask-photos, make us confront and digest the mournful anger produced by colonialism's legacy]: it is in the introduction of ritual that we are stimulated by that third aspect of a schema: an invitation.

As the world grows older it also becomes younger in that much of our present day, Western at least, society has forgotten [is forgetting?] to live life alongside myth and ritual. Last century, it was Lévi-Strauss who began to reverse the attitude, long held, that ancient cultures wanted to capture, in their magical/ceremonial/religious rites, the powers of which their myths spoke. Rather it was us, people in and of themselves, humble, anonymous, or in community: who give power to rites, regardless of the tenuous links they may hold, or no longer hold at all, to myth.

**'The Taotie'** in photographs, in models, via masks, in shrine simulacra, and in ritual provision: intimates these deep truths in a way in which we feel that we are not merely haunted by archived material from the dry and academic past, but-conversely; that it is 'we' who are doing the haunting.

It is we who engage **'The Taotie'** or become such ourselves: ever hungry, as we suppose them to be, for the decolonisation of the academy, museum, and arts: terrible and beautiful in our own unique ways.





The Taotie, 2024, Gayle Chong Kwan.



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