Kuan-Yin:
A Case of Inculturation in Chinese Buddhism

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Introduction

Among the most beloved Buddhist figures in East Asia, none has surpassed Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva. She is known as *Kuan-yin* in China, *Kannon* in Japan, and *Quan Âm* in Vietnam. As the personification of divine benevolence, she displays a unique role in the religious life of the average Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese, among others. To these people, she embodies the virtues of compassion, mercy, and maternal love. Beloved by Buddhists and non-Buddhists alike, one can argue that her popularity even surpasses that of Śakyamuni Buddha in all levels of Chinese society. She was the focus of devotion by members of the aristocracy, monastic communities, and the general population. Her multiple images depicted in Chinese arts, from the caves of Lung-men and Tun-huang to the many shrines, temples, and domestic altars, bespeak the creative adaptation of this compassionate deity.

The intriguing story lies in her evolution from a male deity in Indian Buddhism to an androgynous figure and eventually a "goddess" in Chinese Buddhism. This essay is an endeavor to study the transformation of the Indian Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara to the Chinese goddess Kuan-yin as a case of inculturation of Chinese Buddhism. Her transformation is an example of the interaction between the Buddhist personification of compassion (*karuna*) of the bodhisattva ideal and the influence of indigenous goddess cults and local heroines. The feminization process began in the T'ang period with the appearance of the White-robed Kuan-yin. Since the sixteenth century, she has become the most popular Chinese goddess in arts, folklores, and devotion, who is ready to grant favors to the suffering mass. My narrative of Kuan-yin's inculturation will be traced through the iconography in Chinese Buddhism.

Iconographic Transformation of a Bodhisattva

The earliest depiction of Kuan-yin, in the caves in Western China such as Yün-kang, Lung-men, and Tun-Huang did not have any distinctive features. He appeared as an attendant to the Buddha of the Western Paradise (Amitabha or Amitayu), but, like most other bodhisattvas, he was only identifiable by certain attributes, for example, having an Amitabha figure on his headdress.[1] By the mid-sixth century, Buddhism had already undergone the initial stages of adaptation to Chinese religious and artistic preferences. The Indian features had been

[1] Representative art works are seen in Tun-Huang Mokao Cave 251 (Plate IVc) and Cave 14 (Plate XXXIIIb) in *The Iconography of Chinese Buddhism in Traditional China Vol 1* by H.A. Van Oort (Leiden: Brill, 1986).

transformed into a Chinese form. The most traditional portrait of Kuan-yin during this era was the Padmapani, literally the "Holder of the Lotus flower," in Chinese "Holy Kuan-yin."

The early stage of the process of feminization may be seen with the aesthetic concept in T'ang arts to make the bodhisattva more beautiful. It is important to remember the Confucian strictures against nudity and female anatomy in public arts. Half-naked images of male Buddhist deities were artfully covered with jewels and scarves. The slender body stands in a graceful pose with clinging drapery and a delicate feminine face. Wearing a close-fitting dress and high waist cincture, the deity often has soft round cheeks and pursed lips.[2] The typical female body, however, was never clearly defined, such as with breasts, except in the soft lines of the whole figures and feminine shape of the face. The feminization is not overtly done since some images of the bodhisattva still bear thin moustaches.[3]

Applying a sexual identity to Kuan-yin is somewhat misdirected, for he transcends gender distinction, as does all advanced bodhisattvas. Emphasizing the feminine feature of Kuan-yin in Chinese arts may be an attempt to render the polymorphic nature of the deity who can assume any appearance to help the devotee. Although the original *Lotus Sutra* mentioned sixteen forms of Avalokiteśvara, Kumarajiva's translation represents Avalokiteśvara in as many as thirty forms, several of which are explicitly female: nun, lay woman, merchant's wife, housewife, Brahmin woman, officer's wife, and young girl.[4] Note that the thirty-three forms of Avalokiteśvara only made sense in the Indian universe where Hindu gods and mythical creatures were part of the folklore. Chün-fang Yü suggests that the number thirty-three is only symbolic and not literal, paving the way for later Chinese thirty-three forms of Kuan-yin, which predominantly feminine.[5]

These several images of Kuan-yin as women popularized by the *Lotus Sutra* affect how artists would choose to represent her. According to Chün-fang Yü, the first indigenous form of Kuan-yin appeared at Tun-huang around the tenth century and was called "Water-moon Kuan-yin" (Shui-yüeh Kuan-yin).[6] In iconic representation, Kuan-yin sits in the "royal ease" position with one arm resting on the right knee, looking down on the reflection of the moon on water from her home at Mt. P'u-to.[7] Water-moon Kuan-yin is favored by Ch'an and literati painters, since the moon on water symbolizes the empty and illusory nature of worldly phenomena. The connection of Kuan-yin with Mt. P'u-to in the South Sea gave rise to a later tradition which was

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[2] Tun-huang Mocao caves (Plate VIII) in Van Oort's *The Iconography of Chinese Buddhism in Traditional China Vol 1*.

[3] Tun-huang Cave 276 mural (Sui) (Plate 1) in Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *Guanyin*: *Images of Asia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).
; Sung painting (Plate II) in in Van Oort's *The Iconography of Chinese Buddhism in Traditional China Vol 2.*

[4] Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 517.

[5] Yü, *Kuan-yin,* 46.

[6] Yü, *Kuan-yin,* 233-247.

[7] Tun-huang Yu-lin grottos, Cave 237 (Sung) (Plate 10) in Karetzky's *Guanyin*; Early Ming stone statue [Van Oort 1986-2: Plate XXVIII].

popularized by the sixteenth-century story *Journey to the West*, in which she came to be known as "Kuan-yin of the South Sea" (Nan-hai Kuan-yin).

Of the new form popularized in the late T'ang dynasty was the concept of a female Kuan-yin clad in white—the White-robed Kuan-yin (Pai-i Kuan-yin). The Bodhisattva is depicted in a simple white robe, covering up nearly all of the jewelry and body parts; only a small portion of the crown is visible. The feminine face is clear, but in some portraits, the bare upper chest is covered with an ornate pearl rope necklace, making it more likely an androgynous figure.[8] The image of White-robed Kuan-yin was inspired by Pandara or Pandara-vasini, a deity of Indian Tantrism. The Chinese name is a literal translation of the Sanskrit *Pandaravasini* ("She who is clad in white").

Another feminine form of Kuan-yin also popular among female devotee was the "Child-giving Kuan-yin" (Sung-tzu Kuan-yin). The idea was rooted in the *Lotus Sutra* in which a promise is made.[9] Kuan-yin's compassionate nature made her appealing to female devotees. Chinese women were married early and prized only if they bore male offspring. It is not surprising then that a large number of women worshipped Kuan-yin, praying for deliverance of adversity and the easy birth of a son. This devotion to Kuan-yin as a child-giver gave rise to both the devotion to and the iconography of the "Child-giving Kuan-yin."[10]

This form of Kuan-yin could be associated with fertility goddesses in ancient China, and as Kenneth Ch'en notes, the devotion remained entirely in the realm of popular religion.[11] Such a syncretism was not without justification, for the *Lotus Sutra* teaches that Kuan-yin could take on any forms and shapes to assist humanity. Kuan-yin eventually assumed a role as the guardian of the children in the Ming dynasty, when based on Western iconography of Madonna and child, she is often shown cradling an infant, thus popularized a form of Kuan-yin as a mother holding a child.[12] This "Mother and Child" Kuan-yin could be seen as an extension of the "Child-giving" Kuan-yin of the earlier era.[13]

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[8] An-yueh, Sze-chuan, Hua-yen Cave statue (Northern Sung) [Karetzky, *Guanyin*, 2004.]. Other early image were found at Mai-chi-shan (Cave 165) in Kan-su and Ta-tsou (Cave 180) in Sze-chuan.

[9] "If any woman wanting to have a baby boy pays homage and makes offerings to Kuan-shi-yin Bodhisattva, she will bear a baby boy endowed with good merit and wisdom. If she wants to have a baby girl, she will bear a beautiful and handsome baby girl who has planted roots of good merit and will have the love of sentient being." See Kubo and Yayama trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 2007), 310.

[10] Yu sees this form as a variation of the White-robed Kuan-yin.

[11] Kenneth K.S. Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: A Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 342.

[12] Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 258-259.

[13] For iconography, see Figs 3.8, 3.10, 3.11, 3.12 in Yü's *Kuan-yin.*

Feminine representations of Kuan-yin are best seen in the thirty-three forms of Sino-Japanese representation which is dated no earlier than the Yuan dynasty (1280-1368).[14] She was often depicted holding the water jar or vase of nectar with a willow branch, or sitting on a lotus flower or leaf. These forms represent certain aspects of the bodhisattva or connect her to a particular devotion or legend. Thus we find "Kuan-yin of the Weeping Willow" represents her power to heal, "Kuan-yin of the Fish basket" sacred to fishermen, "One-leaf Kuan-Yin" protects people from drowning, "Moon-Water Kuan-yin" symbolizes concentration, "Kuan-yin of Power and Virtue" reminds the nature of the bodhisattva, for example.

Truly Chinese, Truly Goddess

From the beginning, the saving power of the deity was emphasized in the theme of perils, and this continued to be illustrated over the centuries. However, other attributes also prevail: from her role in leading the dead into the Western Paradise to granting healthy sons found a strong resonance with the central values of Chinese society. The story of Miao-shan represents the struggle of integration of Buddhism into Chinese culture. As a deified Chinese woman, Kuan-yin embodies that integration in a concrete form. With the establishment of Mt. P'u-to as the Chinese Pokatala, Kuan-yin was no longer a foreign deity. She now has a "home" in the soil of China.[15]

Since the end of the Southern Sung dynasty (1227-1279), the female forms of Kuan-yin appeared to be the dominant forms that came down to us today. Even in the esoteric forms, the Eleven-headed Kuan-yin and Thousand Armed Kuan-yin, the male body gradually morphed into a female one. Various legends about Kuan-yin also gave rise to new forms as artists tried to represent these stories for popular consumption. The "precious scroll" (*pao-chüan*) literature have contributed to new images of Kuan-yin, such as "Kuan-yin of the Fish-basket" and "Mrs. Ma Kuan-yin" among others.[16] Sometimes there were attendants to Kuan-yin: a girl is called Lung-nü (Dragon girl) and a boys is Shan-ts'ai. These forms have arisen in China to meet the spiritual needs of Chinese people. Kuan-yin's thirty-three manifestations in Sino-Japanese tradition represent the multiple fabric of social life, from the lowliest to the highest, from the imminent to the transcendent.

By the sixteenth century, Kuan-yin was fully a Chinese goddess which was worshipped not only in Buddhist temples but in popular shrines of folk religions. Though Kuan-yin has been usually identified with her Indian counterpart, Avalokiteśvara, the Chinese transformation of this bodhisattva has altered her characteristics beyond recognition. In popular imagination, she bears

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[14] In actuality, Kuan-yin is represented in many more forms, but the 33 forms are taken (based on the number in Lotus Sutra) as emanations of correspondences, related to Chinese and Japanese legends. Of the listing and iconography see Louis Frederick, *Buddhism: Flammarion Iconographic Guides* (Paris: Flammarion, 1995), 156-171; Shashibalạ, "Bodhisattva in Buddhist Art and Though," in *Buddhist Art and Thought* (New Delhi: Akshaya Prakashan, 2007), 95-99.

[15] Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[16] For a discussion of these stories see Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 419-438.

no resemblance to the early forms attested in the sutras. She is no longer the assistant of Amitabha of the Pure Land traditions, the thousand-armed deity of the tantric traditions, or even the saving bodhisattva of the *Lotus Sutra*. Kuan-yin is a Chinese goddess known primarily through Chinese legends, miracles, arts, novels, plays, and festivals. The fact that Kuan-yin is seen predominantly as female deity does not mean that her earlier forms are completely discarded. Popular representation might depict her in female form, but to many devoted Buddhists, she is an embodiment of Buddhist virtues that transcend gender.

In iconographic representation, we see a step-by-step progression. The image evolved, the legends grew into folklores, reflecting its new home: feature become Chinese; gender permutation from male to female; from a solitary figure to a goddess with attendants. Tibetan Buddhism and its esoteric representation of Kuan-yin exerted influence at the court during the Yüan, Ming, and Ch'ing dynasties, but the general population preferred the White-robed and other motherly images. In the end, both male and female forms prevailed, although the female form is more popular and almost found exclusively in China's neighbors such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam. Her multiple forms exist to serve the multiple needs of the people. Kuan-yin has become a symbol of Chinese adaptability of the highest Buddhist virtues and powers of mercy and compassion that adorns shrines, temples, outdoor sanctuaries as well as domestic altars throughout China and beyond.

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