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Face-To-Face: The Development of Guanyin in China

A Chinese monk once explained, while discussing a statue of the divine Guanyin, "This is not an idol; this is you."[1] Identifying the bodhisattva Guanyin with the self is a Chinese concept not often seen in Buddhism in other regions. Guanyin, originally known as Avalokiteshvara in India, is the personification of compassion. Over time, as Buddhism gradually moved from India into China, the image of the bodhisattva began to take on new, and quite different, characteristics. In this paper, I argue that images of Guanyin allude to a figure who is more integrated into the everyday lives of practitioners, largely as the result of pre-Buddhism philosophies in China. For example, concepts instigated and furthered through Daoist practices, place focus on individuals' relationships with the natural world. Even prior to Daoism, ancestor worship in China points to a belief system where the individual is recognized both on earth and in the afterlife, something not found in South Asian societies, where beliefs of reincarnation negate the need for an afterlife. An example can be seen in ancient Chinese tomb culture. Millennia before Buddhism entered China, the ancient Chinese were highly concerned with ancestral worship, and the personal relationships between the living and their deceased family members. Because of this focus on individual practitioners and kinships, tombs contained

[1] Maria Reis-Habito, "Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 13 (1993): 61

carvings, pottery, and figurines which represented specific individuals and their personal worship of their ancestors.[2]

"Avalokiteshvara" translates in Chinese to "Guan-shi-yin." meaning "the one who listens to the cries of the world."[3] This differs from the Sanskrit translation, "Lord who looks down at the world" with compassion.[4] Rather than being a separate celestial entity that exists in another realm, Guanyin in China listens to the individual struggles of every practitioner. Even through this name, the spiritual role of Avalokiteshvara, known as Guanyin in China, begins to take an active role in connecting with the lives and struggles of Chinese practitioners. As Angela Howard writes in her article "A Gilt Bronze Guanyin from the Nanzhao Kingdom of Yunnan," "[e]ven the most humble and ignorant… knew Guanyin's boundless power."[5] Though the feminization and gender ambiguity of the bodhisattva in China, as well as the frequent occurrence of depictions of Guanyin in contemporary human form, it becomes clear that the transformation of Avalokiteshvara into modern-day Guanyin is the result of thousands of years of focus on the importance of personal and individual worship in Chinese traditions.

It is worth noting that this is study is not meant to imply a linear progression from a male Avalokiteshvara to a female Guanyin. There are still both male and female figures of the bodhisattva in China to this day. Instead, I attempt to outline the possible development of the

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[2] Wu Hung, "From Temple to Tomb: Ancient Chinese Art and Religion in Transition," *Early China* 13 (1988): 79.

[3] Reis-Habito, "Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," 62.

[4] Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 37-43.

[5] Angela Falco Howard, "A Gilt Bronze Guanyin from the Nanzhao Kingdom of Yunnan: Hybrid Art from the Southwestern Frontier," *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 48 (1990): 10.

female form of Guanyin and analyze elements of individuality in Chinese depictions of the bodhisattva.

Avalokiteshvara is a symbol, or personification, of compassion. Meditating on Avalokiteshvara is meant to assist practitioners in understanding the importance of compassion in reaching enlightenment. Images of the bodhisattva in some regions of South Asia and the Himalayas are sometimes merged with images of Hindu deities.[6] It is not unusual for these two practices — Buddhism and Hinduism — to be interwoven in art of the region. Gudrun Bühnemann notes one example in her article "Śiva and Avalokiteśvara" where Avalokiteshvara is depicted in a doorway flanked by Hindu deities (Figure 1).[7] She writes that, in this region, the two religions respond to each other through art, which creates a merging of different types of figures.[8]

This parallels a similar phenomenon which occurs when Avalokiteshvara is introduced in China. Just as Buddhist imagery merges with older Hindu practices in South Asia and the Himalayas, the same imagery merges with philosophy and religion in China which predate the arrival of Buddhism in East Asia by centuries.[9] Many of these practices involve systems of philosophical thought which focus on ethics, humility, and piety. Wing-Tsit Chan explains in his article "Transformation of Buddhism in China" that Confucians have long seen the human body as a treasured gift from one's parents, and Daoists have practiced the healthy maintenance of the

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[6] Gudrun Bühnemann, "Śiva and Avalokiteśvara: On the Iconography and Date of the Golden Window and Golden Door of Patan's Royal Palace," *Bulletin of SOAS* 75 (2012): 337-339.

[7] Bühnemann, "Śiva and Avalokiteśvara," 337.

[8] Bühnemann, "Śiva and Avalokiteśvara," 356.

[9] Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 4.

body in order to prepare it for "everlasting life on earth."[10] The origins of such philosophies can be examined by Chinese death rituals. Since at least the Zhou Dynasty (1046-314 BCE) the Chinese have focused on the importance of tombs and their relationship to the afterlife. Tombs were considered pathways from the realm of the living to the realm of the ancestors. Therefore, each tomb symbolized the realms of the universe itself and focused on the deceased individual and their personal accomplishments which allowed their body to move onto the next realm.[11] This importance on individual bodies and achievements helps explain the ideals of treasuring the body and preparing it for an afterlife. When Buddhism was introduced in China, it entered amidst such practices, which had been engrained into Chinese society over the centuries. Just as Buddhists of South Asia and the Himalayas often incorporated philosophies of Hinduism into their practice, Buddhists in China incorporated their past religions and philosophies into theirs, so they could follow multiple practices at once. Thus, the importance placed on the human body transferred into Chinese Buddhism.[12]

Guanyin's frequent appearances in art, both in human form and as a figure interacting with the Chinese people, reflect these values. Guanyin is often colloquially called the "goddess of mercy," as her place in Chinese Buddhism is closer to that of a deity than Avalokiteshvara's place in Indian Buddhism.[13] This does not, however, separate individuals from their interactions

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[10] Wing-Tsit Chan, "Transformation of Buddhism in China," *Philosophy East and West* 7 (1957): 112.

[11] Hung, "From Temple to Tomb," 90-94.

[12] Chan, "Transformation of Buddhism," 115.

[13] Cathryn Bailey, "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin," *Hypatia* 24 (2009): 182; Chan, "Transformation of Buddhism," 108.

with the bodhisattva. Rather, in many ways, it enhances them. In art, Guanyin is often depicted as an active member of the community. One early example is a gilt bronze Guanyin from the Nanzhao Kingdom, made at the end of the ninth century (Figure 2). At this point, the physical relationship of Guanyin to the Chinese people is still strongly tied to Indian depictions of Avalokiteshvara. This Guanyin is still depicted as a male figure, but Angela Howard's study of the image reveals that it has "local" or "ethnic" features, which is not unusual when religious figures are depicted in different regions.[14] The elaborate headdress that also appears on this Guanyin seems to serve a similar function as the heavy jewelry Avalokiteshvara wears in South Asia (Figure 3), where the bodhisattva is represented as an adorned Indian prince. According to Howard, hats and headdresses were extremely popular among the upper class in the Nanzhao Kingdom, as was piling one's hair into their headdress.[15] This Guanyin is depicted in the same fashion. Here, the function of the bodhisattva's image has not changed a great deal between South Asia and China. However, as Buddhism begins to integrate further into Chinese communities, Guanyin's participation in daily society becomes necessary in order to maintain the region's focus on the practitioner as an individual.

Wang Ling, in his article "Music References in the *Pictorial History of the Nanzhao Kingdom*," discusses depictions of Guanyin both with and as a bronze drum. The drums are references to one of Guanyin's miraculous transformations, where Guanyin appears to Li Mangling — a village leader — in the form of a monk. When Guanyin, now a female figure, reveals herself, Li Mangling runs to beat his bronze drum, thereby telling the people that such a

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[14] Howard, "A Gilt Bronze Guanyin from the Nanzhao Kingdom of Yunnan," 10.

[15] Howard, "A Gilt Bronze Guanyin from the Nanzhao Kingdom of Yunnan," 10.

miracle has occurred (Figure 4).[16] In one version of the story, Li Mangling even melts a bronze drum to create a statue of Guanyin.[17] Ling explains that owning a bronze drum in the Nanzhao Kingdom was a symbol of high social status, and those who had them were usually village leaders.[18] In this instance, Guanyin's direct interaction in sociopolitical systems can be clearly seen. The drum is associated with rulers and leaders, and Guanyin has become associated with the drum, either through the sound of the beating drum indicating her presence, or the creation of a Guanyin statue using the drum itself. Through this, Guanyin is given both the power associated with the drum, and the authority to approve of that power in others, as is done when Guanyin appears to Li Mangling. Although the idea of divine rule is very common in South Asia, it takes on a personal aspect in China, where Guanyin directly hands the power to rule to whom she/he chooses by taking on human form and physically interacting with rulers and leaders.

The very idea of Guanyin appearing in human form is what makes her/his appearances mysterious and supernatural. The transformation itself is considered a display of Guanyin's power, and her/his human form becomes powerful through this transformation. In each of Guanyin's eighteen miraculous transformations, she/he appears in a different form; the form she/he must take in order to best communicate with the practitioner.[19] Again, it is clear that Guanyin

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[16] Wang Ling, "Music References in the *Pictorial History of the Nanzhao Kingdom*," *Music in Art* 38 (2013): 195.

[17] Ling, "Music References," 196.

[18] Ling, "Music References," 195.

[19] Howard, "A Gilt Bronze Guanyin from the Nanzhao Kingdom of Yunnan," 7-8; Ling, "Music References," 192-193.

is assuming a more interactive role in China, in which communication with individuals becomes paramount.

Such communication does not stop at physical interaction. Maria Reis-Habito explains in an article that Guanyin is viewed in China as the essence of the self.[20] Guanyin is a universal, physical representation of each individual's selflessness and compassion. Therefore, meditating on Guanyin brings these qualities to the surface of the practitioner's life. This idea likely derived from the Chinese emphasis — explained in Daoism — on compassion and moderation, as well as the individual connection with the universe. In this case, Guanyin is the vessel through which the compassion of the individual connects to the world at large. This concept reaches its zenith in the Water Moon Guanyin (Figure 5), a manifestation of the bodhisattva which embodies the metaphor of the Water Moon. The basis of the metaphor as it relates to Guanyin begins with the moon's reflection in the water: the moon will always be reflected in the water, whether or not someone is there to see it. Likewise, the compassion required to reach enlightenment is always within each person, whether they have found it yet or not.[21] Once again, Guanyin then becomes the intermediary which connects the viewer to the universal compassion each practitioner seeks. Rather than embodying compassion, as Avalokiteshvara does in India, Guanyin plays a personal role for each practitioner in finding such qualities in themselves.

The feminization of Guanyin is perhaps the most dramatic form of individualizing the bodhisattva. As Cathryn Bailey writes in her article "Embracing the Icon," Guanyin is a figure

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[20] Reis-Habito, "Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," 67-68.

[21] Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 237-238.

who “slips past the male/female binary.”[22] The development of such a Guanyin comes directly from the individualistic role of the bodhisattva, a role Wing-Tsit Chan calls “‘mother’ to millions of devotees.”[23] Chan also describes a shift in Chinese Buddhism from “otherworldliness to this-worldliness.”[24] This shift can be seen in the way Guanyin develops into a female figure. As discussed earlier, “Guanyin" translates as “one ‘who hears the cries of the world.’”[25] This suggests the practice of worshippers going to Guanyin, expressing their worldly complaints, and asking the bodhisattva for favors and assistance. When Buddhism entered China, around the third century CE,[26] the entire life and livelihood of women in China depended on them having children.[27] This need for children continued for over a thousand years after Buddhism’s arrival in East Asia, and would have played a large role in the way women practiced the religion. When they were directly speaking to Guayin, it is likely that the importance of being a mother led Chinese women to ask the bodhisattva for children. This focus on worldliness, on having children in this world and at this moment, leads to Guanyin being associated specifically with

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[22] Bailey, “Embracing the Icon,” 178.

[23] Chan, “Transformation of Buddhism,” 108.

[24] Chan, “Transformation of Buddhism,” 115.

[25] Reis-Habito, “Guanyin and the Virgin Mary,” 178.

[26] Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 4.

[27] Bailey, “Embracing the Icon,” 187-188.

childbirth.[28] This is likely one of the many reasons Guanyin is often depicted surrounded by, or holding, small children (Figure 6).[29]

While, at this point, Guanyin has started to become a more personal figure for all Chinese practitioners, the transformation of the bodhisattva is not yet complete. The Water Moon Guanyin previously discussed remains, until today, one of the most popular forms of Guanyin. This form — still a male incarnation — uses the Water Moon metaphor to call on practitioners to see themselves within the teachings of Guanyin.[30] The intensely individualistic affiliation requires that worshippers have a connection to the bodhisattva. If a connection is difficult to find, worshippers may simply envision Guanyin in another, more relatable, form. This is very common, as it still complies with Buddhist texts, as the *Lotus Sutra* describes Guanyin appearing to practitioners in "whatever form could best save them."[31] Such texts and practices have allowed new forms of Guanyin to be readily accepted.[32] Women worshipping before the Water Moon Guanyin would have been encouraged to form their own individual relationship with the bodhisattva, and may have then envisioned Guanyin in female form, so he, now she, could individually relate to the practitioner's desire and need for children.

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[28] Verena Widern and Gerald Kozicz, "The Temple of Triloknath — A Buddhist Nāgara Temple in Lahul," *South Asian Studies* 28 (2012): 19; J Schubert, "Der tibetische Māhātmya des Wallfahrtsplatzes Trilokināth," *Artibus Asiae* 5 (1935); Reis-Habito, "Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," 65-66.

[29] Reis-Habito, "Guanyin and the Virgin Mary," 66.

[30] Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 247-248 & 262.

[31] Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 180.

[32] Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 180.

The envisioning of a female Guanyin ultimately leads to widespread depictions of the bodhisattva in female form. The White-Robed Guanyin, which became popular in the thirteenth century, is considered, by many scholars, to be Guanyin's first commonly accepted female incarnation (Figures 7 & 8).[33] But the development and establishment of the White-Robed form must have taken place over the course of decades. Although the artists who were famously commissioned to depict Guanyin — such as Muqi Fachang and Zhang Yuehu — were often males, the initial creation of such an image may have originated with female practitioners. As their images were likely only for personal use, they would have remained unattributed throughout history, making it impossible to determine the artist(s) or their names. However, the very feminization of the bodhisattva still reflects philosophies of connecting individuals to the world surrounding them through compassion and moderation.[34]

Scholars commonly point to instances of "divine rule" and female royalty in China as the reason for Guanyin's transformation from male to female.[35] However, while this may have played a role, it fails to address individualism as a core element of Chinese culture which has been shaping views of religion in China for thousands of years. It is agreed that understandings of identity in Buddhism are, overall, non-essentialist;[36] the goal is to reach enlightenment through a full acceptance of non-duality. However, Buddhism in China focuses more on the individual self, and the importance of individuality and personal relationships in the quest for

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[33] Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 262.

[34] Chan, "Transformation of Buddhism," 108-109.

[35] Bailey, "Embracing the Icon."; Yü, *Kuan-yin*.

[36] Bailey, "Embracing the Icon," 189.

enlightenment. As Chan writes, “Salvation… is to be achieved here and now. What is most interesting, it is to be achieved ‘in this very body.’”[37] Such a focus stems directly from philosophies which place importance on individual connections to ancestral and celestial realms, which had been heavily established throughout China centuries before Buddhism entered East Asia. This shift in religious thought manifests in the changing depictions of Avalokiteshvra, or Guanyin. Peoples’ relationships with Guanyin in China are still universal and non-essentialist to an extent. But, the connection itself is made in a very individualistic manner. Guanyin not only encompasses the quality of compassion, but has been physically altered to embody the essence of each individual, as well as their connection to the universal. The emphasis on individuality is what ultimately leads Chinese practitioners to modify the very form of Guanyin so they can relate in a personal manner.

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[37] Chan, “Transformation of Buddhism,” 112.

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Images

Figure 1: Detail of the Golden Window depicting Avalokiteshvara with Amitabha Buddha above and Hindu deities on sides; Patan, Nepal; 18th-19th century

Figure 2: Bodhisattva Guanyin; gilt bronze; China; Nanzhao Kingdom (Yunnan); 9th century

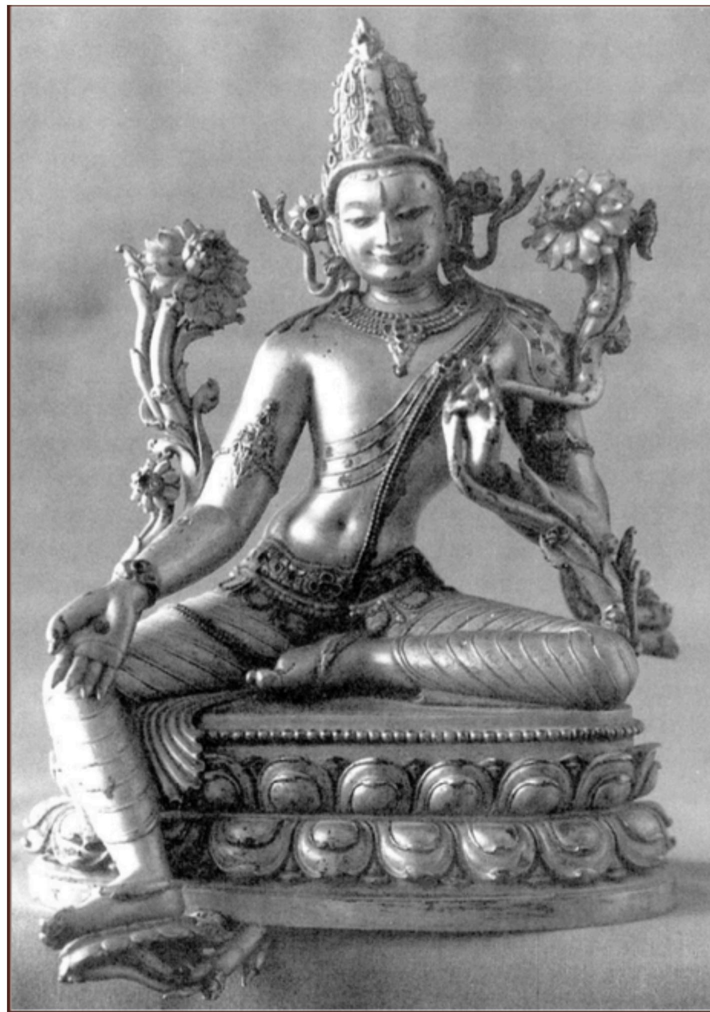

Figure 3: Seated Avalokiteshvara (in form of Padmapani); 12th century; Pala Period; South Asia; gilt bronze

Figure 4: Guanyin’s Seventh Miraculous Transformation; 9th century; China; Nanzhao Kingdom; painting

(left) Figure 5: Guanyin in Water Moon Form; 11th century (Liao Dynasty); China; wood with traces of pigment; H. 118.1cm, W. 95.3cm, D. 71.1cm

(right) Figure 6: Guanyin Holding a Child; 1580-1644; carved ivory; China; 28.9cm

(left) Figure 7: Muqi; Detail of Triptych (Guanyin); mid-13th century; Southern Song Dynasty; hanging scroll, ink and color on silk; 173.3 X 99.3cm

(right) Figure 8: Attributed to Zhang Yuehu; White-Robed Guanyin; late 1200s; hanging scroll, ink on paper; 104 X 42.3cm