

Avalokiteśvara¹ and Compassion: Faith and Practice for Harmonious Living Beyond Asian/Asian American Communities

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Introduction

Discussion of the encounter between Indian Buddhism and Chinese religious culture is a problematic one. Additionally problematic is the traditional notion of syncretism as a characterization of the resultant encounter between Indian Buddhism and Chinese religious culture. Recently, Robert Sharf has attempted to re-evaluate what he calls the “master narrative” of “normative Buddhism” depicting the historical encounter, formalized by Arthur Wright more than forty five years ago.² The inescapable limits of this narrative are doubly problematic for Sharf, particularly the popular theory of “sinification,” Chinese “domestication” and/or “transformation” of an “Indian” Buddhism into a “Chinese” one. On this note, Sharf urges future scholars and their scholarship to “abandon the notion of *Buddhism* altogether in favor of multiple, regionally or culturally specific ‘*Buddhisms*’.”³ Hence, instead of the misleading encounter between Indian Buddhism and Chinese religious culture, Sharf argues for an internal dialogue among the Chinese, because “Buddhism is the product of Buddhists, and the Buddhists in the case at hand were Chinese.”⁴ Sharf’s position is historically situated and culturally particularistic, but rightly so because actual exposure to Indian sources were extremely limited in medieval China.⁵ Sharf wants to move away from an ahistoric culturally essentialistic, homogenous discussion of Buddhism’s encounter with China. Therefore, Sharf argues that an “understanding of local social and institutional structures, cosmology, metaphysics, attitudes toward the spirit realm and the afterlife—in short, the local *episteme*”⁶ is necessary.

Articulating a similar argument, John Kieschnick examines how Buddhism influenced Chinese material culture.⁷ His examination of material culture attempts to debunk the view that Indian Buddhism was purer than its Chinese counterpart—in terms of the struggle to negotiate the contradiction between meaning and words vis-à-vis materiality—an issue that plagued the Chinese. Instead, he emphasizes the “centuries of persistent contact” that it took before an object began to take hold in Chinese society

¹ I will use the name Avalokiteśvara and Guanyin interchangeably in the course of this paper, as well as the inclusive s/he, her/him pronoun designation when appropriate in discussing the process and events that led to the gender transformation. However, after discussing the transformation and after making clear that Guanyin is fully feminized in China, I will use only feminine pronouns. I will spell *Guanyin* (this way with a “g”), but in quotes it may be spelled with a “k” as *Kuanyin*. In other Asian countries where s/he is honored, she has different names: Kannon or Kanzeon in Japan, Quan Am in Vietnam, Kwan Seum Bosal in Korea, and so forth. It is important to note this for quoting purposes.

² See Robert H. Sharf. *Coming to Terms with Chinese Buddhism: A Reading of the Treasure Store Treatise*, pp. 4–7.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 7. Emphasis added.

Yü does this with Guanyin in her book, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 18–19. Sharf notes that the role of immigrant missionaries and translators in the evolution of Chinese Buddhism is easily overstated.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 23. Emphasis original. Sharf focuses on the Chinese notion of “sympathetic resonance” (*gan-ying*) to demonstrate that this complex of ideas “broadly informed the Chinese understanding of Buddhist thought and practice . . . classical ‘Buddhist’ tenets were understood, explicitly or implicitly, in the light of native presuppositions concerning the nature and structure of the cosmos,” pp. 26–27.

⁷ John Kieschnick. *The Impact of Buddhism on Chinese Material Culture*.

(e.g., the chair over a period of seven centuries). Hence he says, “More commonly, however, changes happened only very slowly under constant cultural pressure from Buddhist individuals and institutions. In other words, the persistent presence of Buddhist practices and ideas provided the resources as well as the vast stretches of time needed for the spread and development of particular forms of material culture.”⁸ Similar to Sharf, Kieschnick positions his investigation historically and avoids essentializing Chinese Buddhism. He accomplishes this by examining the histories of particular objects, attitudes toward them, and ways in which they were used over long stretches of time that, taken together, reveal the complex and subtle ways in which Buddhism changed the material life of a civilization.⁹

Following on the heels of Sharf’s and Kieschnick’s methodological invocation, I explore the cultural encounter(s), transplantation(s), and production(s) of the veneration of “Asian” Avalokiteśvara, in the United States. Avalokiteśvara, in the form of the female bodhisattva Guanyin, has been gaining more devotees in the United States and Europe as a result of global immigration patterns, the spread of Buddhist teachings to the western world, and more recently, as a result of the New Age, and neo-pagan trends (i.e., Wicca) with its emphasis on the feminine energies of goddesses/heroines. As a result, many American and European Wiccans have taken to the compassionate energy of Guanyin. For example, Jack Veasey, a gay Euro-American pagan, notes that “In contemporary times, she [Guanyin] is also a patron of gay, bisexual and transgendered people, because of her miraculous gender flexibility. As always, those who worship her call on her primarily for protection and healing.”¹⁰ Many first-generation Asian American immigrant women, in particular grandmothers, will wear a jade pendant of Guanyin for protection and as a reminder to be “compassionate mothers.” Because her compassion is accessible, all devotees of Avalokiteśvara venerate her for it. Avalokiteśvara’s compassion is not restricted: Feminists and pagan/Wiccan appropriations of Avalokiteśvara’s compassion reveal a popular and/or democratic dimension of Buddhism in America.

Avalokiteśvara’s origin

The Bodhisattva Guanyin (Perceiver of Sounds), or Guan-shih-yin (Perceiver of the World’s Sounds), is the Chinese name for the Indian-based Mahayana Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara (He Who Looks Down from on High). Guanyin is the best-known Buddhist “deity” in China, where, for at least the last thousand years of Chinese religious history, she has been generally depicted and represented in the feminine form.¹¹ The Indian Avalokiteśvara was not originally depicted popularly and/or represented in female form. Usually he was depicted as a handsome young prince in India, Tibet, Southeast Asia, and even in China before and during the Tang Dynasty (618–907).¹² Yü posited that literary, epigraphic, and artistic evidence shows that the sexual transformation of Guanyin occurred during the later Tang Dynasty and the Sung Dynasty (960–1279).¹³ Yü has spent a major part of her academic life investigating this gender transformation, but she prefers to view it in terms of “domestication” or as the Chinese “transformation” of Avalokiteśvara.¹⁴

⁸ Ibid, p. 284.

⁹ Ibid, p. 14.

¹⁰ Jack Veasey, “Kuan Yin: My Buddhist Patron Saint” <http://www.paganspace.net/profiles/blogs/my-kuan-yin-blog-originally> 2010 (last accessed March 6, 2011).

¹¹ Yü Chün-fang in “Feminine Images of Kuan-yin in Post-T’ang China,” p. 61.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid. Also see Yü Chün-fang’s *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*.

¹⁴ For a comprehensive explication of Yü’s position, please see *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*.

The process of domesticating Avalokiteśvara in China can otherwise be viewed as the “sinification” of the Indian Avalokiteśvara. Although this differentiation is useful, I suggest another perspective, introducing the concept of examining the gender “transformation” not so much as a “transformation” or “domestication,” but as the “popularization” of the female image of Avalokiteśvara. Guanyin’s popularization—the ways in which the female representation of Guanyin was transmitted—is important to the notion of syncretism that will be discussed later. The “transformation” of Avalokiteśvara to Guanyin is the key element in her rise to fame in the Chinese religious landscape. To speak of “feminization” or “gender transformation” is misleading because Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin through *upāya* may appear in either male or female bodies, in human or non-human bodies, to help those who call upon her/his name in times of peril.

The concept of the “bodhisattva” is a very important one in Mahayana Buddhism. Bodhisattvas are compassionate divine beings who are dedicated to the universal awakening, enlightenment, and/or salvation of all sentient beings. “They exist as guides and providers of succor to suffering beings, and offer everyone an approach to meaningful spiritual life.”¹⁵ Avalokiteśvara is the most popular and important of all the Mahayana bodhisattvas because of his/her many unique virtues, especially his/her compassion for all sentient beings and his/her deep involvement in their welfare. S/he took a vow that s/he would not attain final nirvana until all sentient beings were delivered and saved from suffering, or rather, saved from *samsāra*, the cycle of birth and death and rebirth and re-death. According to Mahayana tradition, s/he is to look after the benefit of humankind during the *Bhadrakalpa*, the present *kalpa*, between the death of the historical Gautama Buddha and the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya.¹⁶

It is generally agreed that the cult of the Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara originated in the northwestern borderland of a unified India.¹⁷ Radha Banerjee firmly contends that there is no doubt that Avalokiteśvara was an Indian god by origin.¹⁸ In Buddhist mythological texts it is narrated that once upon a time, while in meditation, Amitabha emitted a white ray of light from his right eye that brought Padmapani Avalokiteśvara into existence. Amitabha blessed him, whereupon the Bodhisattva uttered the prayers *Om Mani Padme Hum*; thus Avalokiteśvara is regarded as the spiritual “son” of Amitabha. Avalokiteśvara’s connection to Amitabha, “his” spiritual father, is so intimate that the bodhisattva carries a small Amitabha image on “his” crown. This iconographic clue clearly indicates this bodhisattva as Avalokiteśvara, who otherwise would look no different from other bodhisattvas.¹⁹ Some scholars suggest that Avalokiteśvara came into existence as a result of Sakyamuni Buddha’s compassionate gaze, therefore, explaining the name, “He Who Looks Down from on High.”²⁰ Avalokiteśvara plays the role of saving all sentient beings from their afflictions during the Bhadrakalpa. He is the Bodhisattva possessed of all the qualities of the Buddha—especially “his” compassion and skill in means, *upāya*. “He is the eternal outpouring of the compassion that is wisdom and the wisdom that is compassion. The idea of mercy or *karuṇā*, which was an ancient Buddhist concept, was thus concretized in the person of the Bodhisattva who would sacrifice everything—his own personal happiness and his own merit—for the suffering

¹⁵ See Radha Banerjee’s *Ashtamahabodhisattva, The Eight Great Bodhisattvas in Art and Literature*, pp. 1–8.

Also see Daniel Taigen Leighton’s *Bodhisattva Archetypes*, Chapter 1, pp. 1–21.

¹⁶ Radha Banerjee, p. 45 and pp. 48–49.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

I would like to make mention that there are some scholarly works that suggested some Iranian antecedents for Avalokiteśvara. This is a topic that is beyond the scope of this paper. Please see Radha Banerjee pages 45–47 for a brief introductory discussion on this topic and for his references.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 46.

¹⁹ Yü Chün-fang, “Guanyin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteshvara.” In *Latter Days of the Law*, p. 153.

²⁰ Radha Banerjee, p. 47. For other possible translations and interruptions of the name, please see p. 47.

humanity.”²¹ More importantly, Banerjee argues that with Avalokiteśvara Buddhists obtained what they had previously lacked—a personal savior whom they could invoke and in whom they could take refuge.²²

Banerjee suggests that as Mahayana Buddhism spread, the worship of Avalokiteśvara as a savior appealed to the masses and helped make Buddhism a religion of the people.²³ In this way, Avalokiteśvara may also have been considered a personal god, as the Hindu deity Krishna.²⁴ “Like Krishna he came to the aid of his devotees, though he is at the same time an all-pervading principle and this added a theistic element to Buddhism in a remarkable degree.”²⁵ Banerjee thus posits that Avalokiteśvara is a composite figure of Buddhist and Hindu ideas and ideals that seem to have been amalgamated in him in almost equal proportions. Avalokiteśvara is at once the embodiment of Buddha’s compassion,

. . . but when we analyze these features carefully, we discover many Saivite as well as Vaishnavite element in his character besides the cardinal virtues of Buddhism. As he grew into a full-fledged deity, he absorbed many of the traits of Siva, Vishnu, Brahma and Indra, though his base remained Buddhistic.²⁶

Avalokiteśvara, like Buddha, is possessed of *upāya*, skillfulness or skill-in-means. He may employ various means and assume various forms to deliver the Buddha Dharma to various grades in the classification of people and/or creatures according to their inclinations and capacities for understanding. The popularity of Avalokiteśvara in India is attested to not only by the literature concerning him, but also by the large number of his iconic forms discovered, and by the testimony of the Chinese travelers who visited the great Buddhist centers, such as Xuanzang who has noted the popularity of worship of Avalokiteśvara at Mathura, Nalanda, Kanauj and many other places.²⁷

The veneration of Avalokiteśvara was widely prevalent in China, where Avalokiteśvara underwent a gender transformation from male to female. In the early stage of his introduction he was regarded as a male figure, but later he was conceived in female form. Several dynamic factors combined to bring about this final transformation, which is the focus of the next part of this paper.

Making Avalokiteśvara Chinese: Gender Transformation

Several theories have been proposed by scholars in an attempt to explain the complete gender transformation of the male Avalokiteśvara to the female Guanyin in China. Some theories associate Guanyin with Central Asian and indigenous Chinese goddesses; some attribute the socio-cultural religious milieu at the time to have participated in the feminization of Avalokiteśvara; and current scholarship utilizes cultural historical representations of Guanyin in Chinese art and literature to create a narrative that explains the male to female transformation. The objective of this section of the paper is to explore the multiple theories that have been offered on Avalokiteśvara’s gender transformation to become the beloved Guanyin in Chinese religious life is.

Before exploring these theories it is important to mention that Buddhist scriptures on Avalokiteśvara depict her/him as a universal savior who can assume any of thirty-three forms, both female and male, old and young, in response to the needs and cries of any and

²¹ Ibid, pp. 48–49.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid. This is an important point to keep in mind when we discuss the popularization of Guanyin in China.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid, p. 49. For a more complete discussion on the Hindu-Buddhist element of Avalokiteśvara, see pp. 49–51.

²⁷ Ibid, p. 55. For a more comprehensive discussion on the literature concerning Avalokiteśvara, see pp. 51–55.

all sentient beings who are in peril and in need of her/his salvific grace.²⁸ “More than eighty Buddhist scriptures are connected with Guanyin, among which most important and influential ones are the *Lotus Sutra (Fahua jing)*, the *Avatamsaka Sutra (Huayan jing)*, the *Shurangama Sutra (Lengyan jing)*, and the *Heart Sutra*.”²⁹

At some time around the first century CE, a remarkable Buddhist text was composed in Sanskrit, somewhere in the northern parts of India or possibly in areas of what is now Afghanistan. This text is known as the *Saddharmapundarikāsūtra—The Sūtra of the Lotus of the Wondrous Law*, more commonly known and referred to as the *Lotus Sūtra*.³⁰ Chapter twenty-five of the *Lotus Sūtra*, “The Gateway to Everywhere of the Bodhisattva He Who Observes the Sounds of the World,” is also popularly known as the “*Guanyin Sūtra*.”³¹ In the *Guanyin Sūtra* s/he is depicted as a universal savior who can assume any of thirty-three forms and who saves people from eight kinds of peril: fire, water, shipwreck, murderers, ghosts, prisons, bandits, and lust. “If there is one who keeps the name of this bodhisattva He Who Observes the Sounds of the World, even if he should fall into a great fire, the fire would be unable to burn him.”³² Similarly, . . . “if one is carried away by a great river, s/he would find a shallow place; or if there is a woman/man whether guilty or guiltless, whose body is chained or fettered with stocks, if s/he calls upon the name of the bodhisattva He Who Observes the Sounds of the World, s/he shall be saved and gain deliverance.”³³ Further, Guanyin also grants women who desire children either a handsome boy or beautiful girl. The *Lotus Sūtra* states,

If there is a woman, and if she is desirous and hopeful of having a son, making worshipful offerings to the bodhisattva He Who Observes the Sounds of the World, she shall straightway bear a son of happiness, excellence, and wisdom. If she is desirous and hopeful of having a daughter, she shall straightway bear a daughter, upright and endowed with proper marks³⁴

The text goes on to declare that this bodhisattva, He Who Observes the Sounds of the World, can take on any form to reach a person in need of salvation. He can appear in various displays of body types in the utilization and expression of upāya. He may appear in the body of a Buddha, a pratyekabuddha, a householder or a wife of a householder, a bhikṣu or a bhikṣuṇī, an upāsaka or an upāsikā.³⁵ Overall, he may appear in the body of a female or male depending on the needs and circumstances of the situation:

To those who can be conveyed to deliverance by the body of the wife of elder, householder, official, or Brahman he preaches Dharma by *displaying the body of a woman*. To those who can be conveyed to deliverance by the body of boy or girl he preaches Dharma by *displaying the body of boy or girl . . . by displaying the appropriate body*.³⁶

Although Avalokiteśvara may assume female forms none of the Indian forms of the bodhisattva are feminine.³⁷ It is also interesting to note that the feminine transformation of the bodhisattva probably reached its completion during the Yüan Dynasty (1206–

²⁸ See Yü Chün-fang, *Guanyin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, pp. 152–155; *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, Chapter 2, pp. 31–92; and Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay with Man-ho Kwok, *Kuan Yin: Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion*, pp. 3–5.

²⁹ Yü, *Guanyin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, p. 152.

³⁰ Palmer, Ramsay and Kwok, p. 3. Also see Leon Hurvitz’s translation of *The Lotus Sūtra* from the Chinese of Kumārajīva.

³¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 311–319.

³² Leon Hurvitz, p. 311.

³³ *Ibid.*, pp. 311–312.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 313.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 314–315.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 315. Emphasis added.

³⁷ Yü’s *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, p. 9 and Chapter 2, pp. 31–92.

1368), and that since the Ming Dynasty, or the fifteenth century, Guanyin has generally been perceived and represented as completely feminine, although the orthodox Buddhist clergy has refused to acknowledge Guanyin as feminine.³⁸ As a result, “iconic images of Guanyin in the temples continue to be masculine—or at most asexual—in appearance.”³⁹

But the main point to be emphasized is that there are scriptural bases and even theological bases for the multiple sexual identities of Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin. Theologically, the notion of upāya Buddhism also emphasizes non-duality; as a result, some early representations of Avalokiteśvara have been “trans-sexual” in nature. For instance, images of Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin sporting a moustache have been found in the caves in Dunhuang. Another way that this “trans-sexual” nature of Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin is expressed through art is well illustrated by Japanese statues of Avalokiteśvara/Kannon where s/he possesses a very feminine breast-line cleavage. Scripturally and theologically, this openness enhanced the conception of a female Avalokiteśvara in China, particularly with the development of Guanyin. This flexibility in Guanyin devotion is key to understanding the rise of Guanyin devotion among different religious traditions, in America as well as in Asia.

Avalokiteśvara in America

Long before the first Chinese gold miner and or laborer migrated to the United States in the late 1840s, Guanyin devotion in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam was well established. Dating back to the early nineteenth century, there is material evidence of Guanyin veneration among the first waves of Chinese immigrants to the United States. They are found on the altars of historic Chinese Buddho-Daoist temples throughout California’s gold mining towns (i.e., Oroville, Weaverville, and Auburn, California), as well in San Francisco’s Chinatown (i.e., Tin Hau Temple). Like migrants the world over, the Chinese brought their religious rituals and beliefs with them. As Chün-fang Yü notes,

The bodhisattva has also become well known in the United States and Europe, the combined result of feminism and the immigration of Buddhist teachers to the West. Although Buddhism was introduced to the United States in the nineteenth century, political events in Asia since World War II have greatly facilitated the religion’s westward movement. When China became Communist in 1949, many Chinese monks escaped to Hong Kong, Taiwan, Singapore, and the United States. Similarly, while most Tibetan lamas escaped to India, some came to the United States when Tibet was occupied by China in 1959. With the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 and the arrival of new immigrants from Vietnam and other Southeast Asian countries since the 1980s, people in America have been exposed to many forms of Buddhism as well as the different names and identities of the bodhisattva. *Avalokitesvara is present in all of these Buddhist traditions.*⁴⁰

From 1848 to 1965 the veneration of Guanyin was limited to Asian immigrants. The liberalization of immigrant policy after 1965 parallels the changing mainstream attitude and belief in American culture. This period witnessed a spiritual search among Euro-Americans who were disenchanted by Judeo-Christian spiritualities. Their gaze was focused on Asia, primarily on India and China—Hinduism, Buddhism, and Daoism. The initial reaction to Guanyin veneration was not very positive because non-Asian converts approached Buddhist practices with a “reformation style” focus that emphasized quiet

³⁸ Ibid, p. 6.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Chün-fang Yü, Kuan-yin Devotion in China. In *Dharma World* (April–June 2008). http://www.kosei-shuppan.co.jp/english/text/mag/2008/08_456_3.html (last accessed March 6, 2011).

seated meditation (i.e., *zazen*), a non-ritualistic and non-devotional style of Buddhist practice. As Jeff Wilson points out:

After the lifting of racist immigration laws in 1965, immigration from China and other parts of Asia brought significant numbers of Buddhists to the United States, which in turn contributed to a precipitous rise in the number of European Americans converting to Buddhism. However, there was less contribution to convert Buddhism from new immigrants than might be supposed. European Americans were often wary of practicing at Chinese American and other Asian American temples, where they might feel uncouth in the minority, and in many ways the new convert Buddhism was inhospitable to bodhisattva devotions and Buddhist mythology in general. Convert American Buddhists evidenced a marked preference for individualistic meditation practice, disdain for mythology and superstition, prejudice against ritual, and tendency toward psychological approaches to religion. Asian American Buddhism was often conceived by these new Buddhists as being traditional and conservative, loaded with foreign cultural baggage and empty ritualism that needed to be jettisoned so that a purer Buddhism, more authentic to the spirit of the founder, could be recovered. In this approach is clearly seen an instance of the dominant Protestant mindset of North American religion applied to Buddhism by converts from Christianity.⁴¹

As more non-Asians converted to Buddhism, and as more and more Asian immigrants began to openly practice Guanyin Buddhism in America, coinciding with the rise of the feminist movement—expressed in goddess worship and neo-paganism—Guanyin veneration became more popular. Similar to the process by which Guanyin veneration developed in China, Guanyin was popularized in America through publications that focused on Guanyin devotion and rituals, as well as through material representations of Guanyin from mundane garden art, to new depictions of Guanyin as a mother goddess to the world. Wilson's conclusion is useful for us to consider:

Why did devotion to Kuan-yin eventually succeed in the face of the antibodhisattva sentiment of earlier American convert Buddhism? Sometimes historians are faced with a difficult challenge in explaining why a particular figure or image becomes popular with a specific religious demographic. Luckily, no such difficulties pertain in the case of Kuan-yin. This bodhisattva is increasingly favored by convert Buddhists for some very obvious reasons. The first is gender: among a constellation of male buddhas, bodhisattvas, and arhats, Kuan-yin stands out as a *female* bodhisattva. She thus attracts the attention of many convert Buddhist women, particularly those who are actively looking for feminist or at least overtly woman-friendly approaches to Buddhism. For women who have left forms of Judaism or Protestant Christianity that are dominated by male deity images, Kuan-yin is a welcome alternative; for women who have left Catholicism, she is a warm reminder of the Virgin Mary, yet without the same negative implications for women's sexuality. Kuan-yin represents for convert women an affirmation that they, too, have a place in Buddhism. For both women and men, Kuan-yin's female gender makes her more approachable than the Buddha or Manjushri. She proved especially attractive in the wake of a series of sex- and power-related scandals that rocked American convert Buddhism beginning in the early 1980s; the male leaders who misused their positions were widely perceived

⁴¹ Jeff Wilson, *Deeply Female and Universally Human: The Rise of Kuan-yin Worship in America*. In *Dharma World*, April–June 2008.

as abetted by patriarchal Asian Buddhist models, and more egalitarian and woman-friendly models were advanced in many centers as a corrective.⁴²

The way Avalokiteśvara became Chinese is slightly different to the way she became American. Locally produced art and representations played a key role in the Chinese transformation of Avalokiteśvara. In America, Guanyin did not become “American.” Instead, Americans appropriate her in their religious practice because she represents an available cosmic compassion. Changes in the social consciousness of people in the 1960s through 1990s also played an important part in the transplantation of Avalokiteśvara veneration in the United States outside of Asian/Asian American communities.

The Need for the Divine Feminine: Asia and America

The concept of the “bodhisattva” is a very important one in Mahayana Buddhism. Bodhisattvas are compassionate divine beings who are dedicated to the universal awakening, enlightenment, and/or salvation of all sentient beings. They exist as guides and providers of succor to those suffering, and they offer an approach to meaningful spiritual life to all. Avalokiteśvara is the most popular and important of all the Mahayana bodhisattvas because of her many unique virtues, especially her compassion for all sentient beings and her deep involvement in their welfare. She took a vow that she would not attain final nirvana until all sentient beings are saved from suffering and delivered, rather, saved from *samsāra*, the cycle of death and rebirth characterized by suffering. According to Mahayana tradition she is to look after the benefit of humankind during the *Bhadrakalpa*, between the death of the historical Gautama Buddha and the advent of the future Buddha Maitreya.

Martin Palmer and Jay Ramsay, with Man-ho Kwok, understand the historical conception of the female Avalokiteśvara as symbolic of the need for a divine feminine.⁴³ They suggested that this need primarily arose because of the *gylanic* nature of Chinese mythology—whereby female and male are equal—as illustrated by the Chinese creation myth of the half-human/half-snake figures of Fu Hsi and Nü Kua.⁴⁴ Together they created all aspects of Chinese civilization and ruled over the child-like earliest peoples. Other myths reinforce this gylanic nature of early Chinese religious philosophy as well.⁴⁵ Later on, a heavy dose of more conventionally acceptable patriarchal concepts, influenced by Confucianism, were superimposed on these legends.

Now the Jade Emperor has the highest point of the mountain as his sole preserve. Yet the [gylanic] tradition is not all gone. For to enter onto the plateau of the summit itself, you must pass through the Gate to Heaven. This literally is a gate, set into the chasm which leads to the plateau. Behind it is a courtyard where three deities sit and before whom you must pass to enter. The one opposite the gate is the god of T'ai Shan himself. But on either side are Kuan Yin and the goddess of T'ai Shan, the Old Mother, the creator of human beings. There is no entry to the plateau without devotion to all three. *As will be seen later, the link to Kuan Yin is no accident.*⁴⁶

Palmer, Ramsay, and Kwok emphasize that the role of the divine female in the Chinese creation myth before Confucianism seems to illustrate the existence of a culture where women and men were equal, but not matriarchal. “This seems to be borne out by the fact that both men and women were considered capable of being shamans—vehicles for

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ See Palmer, Ramsay, and Kwok, pp. 9–27.

⁴⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

⁴⁵ Ibid, see pp. 9–10 for explanation of the brother and sister god and goddess team that ruled the world from the sacred Daoist Tai Shan Mountain.

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 10, emphasis added.

communication between the spirit world and the material world.”⁴⁷ But they also point out that there is no evidence of any serious patriarchal society either until the Shang Dynasty (c. 1700–1100 BCE).⁴⁸

It should be reiterated that the Queen Mother of Heaven/West is not identified with the Earth but rather is a Heavenly figure. The absence of a matriarchal and patriarchal society lasted until at least the fifth century when the firm hand of Confucianism began to exclude the feminine and the shamanistic dimension of religious life. The “. . . whole emotional world was sacrificed to the demands of law, order, filial piety, and control.”⁴⁹ They posit that during the Warring States Period (403–221 BCE), and, more particularly, in the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–CE 220), accounts of a Queen Mother of Heaven/West began to appear in reaction to the suppression of the older shamanistic models.⁵⁰ “For as the old ways were discredited, it began to be necessary for the goddess to appear more united, more central and thus more powerful to withstand the dismissive attitudes of the Confucians.”⁵¹ As a result, what emerges from these circumstances is a strong, tough, and distant goddess, who is involved with creation and in advising the earliest rulers, but remains distant from the daily affairs of ordinary life.⁵² The authors emphasize the importance of the “west” as it is related to the Queen Mother who is set in the west—the direction of paradise, the direction of true mystics, and the direction of mystery itself. And it is from the West that Buddhism entered China. The salient point is that Guanyin did not just appear out of no-where, but that these elements may have all interacted and contributed to the development of a goddess cult.⁵³

Emerging from the general shamanistic background of China, the Queen Mother of Heaven/West is heavily associated with shamanism.⁵⁴ But by the end of the Han Dynasty (third century CE), the successful attack of shamanism by the Confucian court—which considered it primitive and uncultured—resulted in a major transformation of the Queen Mother of Heaven/West.⁵⁵ As a result, shamanism was forced underground until it later re-emerged in certain forms of popular Daoism from the second century CE onwards.⁵⁶ “Where Confucianism sought logic and control, shamans spoke for and of a world of spirits and uncontrolled forces.”⁵⁷ More importantly, the Queen Mother of Heaven/West was re-defined in Confucian terms but she was so deeply associated with the earlier shamanistic world-view that she was never fully accepted into the newly emerging Confucian one.⁵⁸ At this juncture popular Daoism also added a new dimension to the religious landscape of China—for the first time it posited the possibility of personal salvation.⁵⁹

The Confucians may have won the battle at court, but outside, with the help of popular Daoism and in the lives of the ordinary people, the divine feminine was alive and well, and was now officially part of the Daoistic structure.⁶⁰ Palmer, Ramsay, and Kwok observe that by Tang Dynasty times there was a distinct rivalry between Daoism and

⁴⁷ Ibid, pp.10–11.

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid, p. 13.

⁵⁰ Ibid, pp. 13–14.

⁵¹ Ibid, p. 14.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid, p. 15.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵⁷ Ibid, p. 15.

⁵⁸ Ibid, p. 16.

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid, p. 17.

Buddhism at both the court and popular levels, which is very significant for the rise of Guanyin.⁶¹ They report:

The struggle reached a particularly unpleasant low point in AD 845 when the Taoists gained sufficient control of the court to order the destruction of all Buddhist temples and the return of all monks and nuns to lay life. According to records, 4,600 monasteries and 40,000 temples were destroyed and 260,000 monks and nuns and 150,000 of their slaves were returned to lay life.⁶²

The Buddhists responded in kind, casting aspersions upon the Daoist priests and monks and by mocking their rituals; but the key fundamental appeal of Daoism was that it had a divine feminine figure: It had a goddess.⁶³ Therefore, what Buddhism needed to survive in China was a divine feminine figure to reach out to the ordinary people, to compete with the Daoist's Queen Mother of Heaven/West, and other local female deities—such as the various sea/water goddesses—who could offer salvation to the masses.⁶⁴

They postulate that the divine feminine had always played a key role in the religious life of the Chinese masses, and that the rivalry between Daoism, Confucianism, and Buddhism in the general groundswell of popular religion fused around the eighth century to produce a new deity—or rather to “re-shape” and “re-focus” an older one, the male Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin.⁶⁵ Therefore, they suggest that the female Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin developed

. . . from the need in popular Buddhism for a goddess to compensate for the male-dominated nature of the faith; from the need to compete with the Daoists and their successful goddesses, such as the Queen Mother of West; from the need for a divine feminine aspect in faith; and from the interaction between Buddhists already inspired by the compassionate image of Kuan Yin, helper of mothers, found in the Lotus Sutra, and Nestorian Christians bearing images of their Mother of Christ, the Madonna.⁶⁶

This creation of a female Guanyin was revolutionary! The Chinese had taken a male deity, albeit an androgynous one with “feminine” attributes such as compassion, and turned this around to create a female deity. From there, they created entirely new representations of the deity in statues, depicting her with gentle femininity. These revolutionary developments seem to have been inspired and stimulated by observation and interaction with Daoism and Christianity.⁶⁷

After the female Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin was established, increasing centralization and consolidation of China under the Tang and Sung Dynasties underscored the importance of having a national religious structure. Popular Daoism and popular Buddhism offered an umbrella structure under which they were able to absorb ancient local deities—both female and male—by incorporating them into their respective celestial pantheons.⁶⁸ As this occurred, Guanyin's already-diverse sources of origin took on Daoist and even shamanistic hues, making her identity as a purely Buddhist deity in China somewhat inaccurate.⁶⁹ “For Kuan Yin success in China is precisely that she transcends barriers of specific nomenclature.”⁷⁰ This is also the case in Guanyin's

⁶¹ Ibid, p. 18.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid, p. 21.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

⁶⁶ Ibid, p. 23. Palmer, Ramsay, and Kwok observe that the model for the newer images of the Guanyin was influenced by the encounter with statues or paintings of the Christian Virgin Mary. See pp. 22–24.

⁶⁷ Ibid, p. 24.

⁶⁸ Ibid, pp. 25–26.

⁶⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

American experience. Guanyin can be found not only in Chinese Buddhists temples, but in Japanese Buddhist home shrines, Vietnamese American restaurant altars, and non-Asian women converts' home, and neo-pagan shrines as well.

Guanyin in America: Voices of Devotees

Yü argues that the Chinese transformation of Avalokiteśvara into Guanyin is a case study for the making of “Guanyin Buddhism in China.” Equally informing is her contention that the female representation of Guanyin in paintings, dramas, miracle tales, dhāranī, precious scrolls, pilgrimage sites, and other venues of Chinese material culture is the medium through which the female Guanyin was popularized. Hence, Yü sees popularization and transmission as equal partners in Chinese transformation of the male Avalokiteśvara into the female Guanyin. Or rather, transformation is a process made possible with the simultaneous popularization. Yü writes, in regard to the popularity of the White-robed Guanyin in China, “. . . let us leave off speculating about the origins of the White-robed Kuan-yin for now and move on to examine her popularity in plastic arts, painting, and other artistic media that has been unsurpassed since the tenth century.”⁷¹ Along with this, Yü suggests that the feminization of Avalokiteśvara in China was thus inseparable from the domestication and regionalization of the bodhisattva, resulting in her increasing popularity. Wilson makes a similar argument with the rise of Guanyin veneration in the United States among non-Asian Buddhists:

. . . the expansion of Buddhism in the late 1980s and 1990s also coincided with a growth in outlets for Buddhist information, and both contributed to the heightened profile of Kuan-yin. Such new venues included the Internet—first widely available in the mid-1990s—and many print publications, such as *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review* (established in 1991) and *Buddhadharma* (established in 2002).⁷²

Wilson argues that several publications by noted American Buddhists that espoused acts of devotion and piety to Guanyin popularized her spread of influence beyond Buddhist circles: Taigen Dan Leighton’s book *Bodhisattva Archetypes: Classic Buddhist Guides to Awakening and Their Modern Expression*, and Sandy Boucher’s *Opening the Lotus: A Woman’s Guide to Buddhism and Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion*. Boucher’s work specifically singles out Guanyin as an ideal figure of devotion for non-Asian American Buddhists. Boucher reflects on the role of Guanyin in the lives of American women, saying:

As the feminine reasserts itself in Western spirituality, a towering female figure has arrived on our shores from Asia. Her name is Kwan Yin. She is the most revered goddess in all of Asia, and Chinese, Japanese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants naturally brought her with them when they came here. But her presence has also reached beyond the immigrant communities to enter the lives of countless European-Americans . . . Looking at how Kwan Yin has come to America, I realize that she is making her way in the lives of today’s women, too. Women call upon her for help, revere her, write poems or songs about her, embody her in her pure compassionate energy. Those of both European and Asian descent respond to her wide, tender mercy.⁷³

Among New Agers, Elizabeth Clare Prophet’s voice is influential. Prophet is a Euro-American religious figure who preaches on Guanyin’s compassion. Prophet offers a set of three DVDs that “contains the unique teachings and mantras of these manifestations . . . She explains how to use these Kuan Yin mantras for spiritual healing, transmuting

⁷¹ Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, p. 253.

⁷² Wilson, “Deeply Female and Universally Human.”

⁷³ Sandy Boucher, *Discovering Kwan Yin, Buddhist Goddess of Compassion*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1999, pp. 1, 8.

troublesome habits, and resolving personal and planetary problems.”⁷⁴ Guanyin appeals to marginalized people, as exemplified by gay pagan, Jack Veasey. Veasey recounts his encounter with Guanyin at a Unitarian Church service:

I discovered Kuan Yin in the 1970s. I was a member of a Japanese Buddhist sect based on the scripture *The Lotus Sutra*. Copies of this scripture were hard to find in English. Because a chapter from the sutra dealt with Kuan Yin, I found quotes from it—one before each chapter—in a book called *Kuan Yin: Bodhisattva of Compassion*, by John Blofeld. I was working at a college library in Philadelphia at the time. When I brought the book to work with me to read it over lunch, one of the librarians, a Sufi, exclaimed, “What are you into now?”—as if it was the most way-out thing he’d ever seen.

Later I was Wiccan for six years. When I was initiated I took an oath to devote myself to a deity of my choosing. The Wiccan tradition was Celtic, but I took my oath to Kuan Yin. I grew up Catholic. Many things about Catholicism were negative and hurtful to me, but one thing that wasn’t, was Mary. In Mary I found a kind, gentle, compassionate, healing female deity I could turn to in a way I could not to a harsh, angry, judgmental, male God. Many have noticed the similarities between Kuan Yin and Mary—not in formal religious thinking, but in the way common people relate to her. Kuan Yin is depicted in art, or approached by an individual worshipper, as either male or female. She can appear in many different forms, depending on the worshipper’s needs. The vast majority visualize her as female. So Kuan Yin is female by popular demand. Her name means Hearer of the Cries of the World. This resonates with me because, as a child-abuse survivor, I’ve had to spend a lot of time crying in my life.

Kuan Yin is my Yidam. A Yidam is a patron spirit, similar to a patron saint in Catholicism. But whether you literally believe in your Yidam is irrelevant. The spiritual practice is to behave as though you do. A statue of Kuan Yin is not a knick-knack. If you get one, the box she comes in will likely have a cellophane window in it so she can see. A friend who ordered a statue of her from China also had to buy a seat on the plane for her. You make offerings to the statue—a cup of water daily, fresh flowers every week or so, and fruit, particularly oranges, and bananas. You leave a light burning near her at night—you don’t let her sit in the dark. You can meditate on her by reciting her mantras before the statue, and pray to her in your own words. Even if you don’t literally believe in her, the prayers tend to be answered, often very quickly.

The last time I was hospitalized, my partner made my offerings to Kuan Yin and kept the light lit for me. He brought me a picture of my altar in the hospital so I could draw sustenance from it. You can question it if you want, but I know my recovery was quicker and smoother because of this.⁷⁵

Neroli Duffy offers a similar tale of Guanyin’s power to heal. Duffy was forty-four years old when she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Duffy shares her experience of finding comfort in Guanyin:

I certainly tugged often on Kuan Yin’s white robe during my journey through cancer. For me, she has become the court of last resort: If no help seems to be forthcoming from any master or angel and things are looking grim, Kuan Yin is

⁷⁴ Elizabeth Clare Prophet <http://www.flickr.com/photos/thesummitlighthouse/4727832613/> (last accessed March 6, 2011). Her sermons are also available on YouTube (e.g., http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RPOKF4_RXsM, last accessed March 6, 2011).

⁷⁵ Jack Veasey, Kuan Yin: My Buddhist Patron Saint, <http://www.paganspace.net/profiles/blogs/my-kuan-yin-blog-originally> 2010 (last accessed March 6, 2011).

the one I go to. I gave her mantras each day during my treatment, using a beautiful recording that I have called *Kuan Yin's Crystal Rosary*.

Early in my six weeks of radiation treatment, a friend sent me a glow-in-the-dark statue of Kuan Yin. Although this was half in jest, she also knew that I am very fond of Kuan Yin and that I would sincerely appreciate the gift. The statue made me smile. She was a comforting presence when I turned out the light at night. I could see her glowing silently in the dark and keeping watch over me. Though I am thankfully through the cancer experience, I still keep the statue by my bedside.⁷⁶

Second-generation Asian Americans continue to venerate Guanyin as well. When asked why she venerates Guanyin, Mary Thi Pham, daughter of Vietnamese refugees, cites her compassion.

As a small child, my first introduction into Guanyin's mythical essence began with my encounter with her photo. It's a popular photo of her standing on her dragon amongst dark clouds. I asked my mother about the photo and she shared with me a story.

There's a story that was circulating amongst the Vietnamese refugee communities about Guanyin's rescue of a sinking, refugee boat. Back in 1981 survivors from this boat reignited the Vietnamese communities' devotion to Guanyin with their stories and this photo (which seems to be physical evidence of her existence beyond mythology).

The story goes that a heavy storm was about to capsize the boat and the refugees began crying out for Guanyin's help. Suddenly, the sky grew stormy and cloudy and a photographer on the boat snapped a picture of the cloud. Many believed that it was Guanyin who came to the rescue. They said that she called upon two killer whales to come to their aid, and the whales each took one side of the boat and swam beside it so that it would not capsize. Later, when the photo was developed, it was a photo of Guanyin standing on her dragon amongst the dark clouds.

This story deeply moved me as a child. Knowing my own family's history of arriving on a boat in Malaysia in 1979, it could have been our stories, too. Since then, my fascination with learning more about Guanyin and inviting her into my life grew.

Coming from an extremely violent history and background, I needed something larger than life to make me feel safe. If Guanyin had the capacity to save hundreds of people from a nearly sinking boat, then, she had enough power to save me, too.

At some point in my life, from my deep suffering and fear, I stopped believing in Guanyin. I stopped believing in anything. I was an atheist for seven years. If Guanyin was all powerful and compassionate, why wouldn't she alleviate my suffering? What I found was that I was knocked unconscious by my own hatred, fear, greed, selfishness, and ignorance. I couldn't see any of her gentle lessons because I wasn't conscious.

Ironically, I felt that she intervened in my life when she brought me to my first Al-Anon meeting. At that point, being in so much pain, I was willing to go to any lengths to alleviate my suffering, even attend a spiritual meeting that was grounded in Christian values. I was told that it wasn't a religious program and that if I wanted to get well, I had to find a Higher Power, any power that wasn't me or

⁷⁶ Neroli Duffy, *A Journey through Cancer: A Woman Doctor's Personal Experience with Breast Cancer*. iUniverse, Inc., 2004, p. 198.

another human being. I instinctively turned to Guanyin. In recovery, we were asked to explore our relationship with our Higher Power and to build a deeper, lasting relationship. This led me on a search to find an intimate relationship with Guanyin. Although I did not stay in Al-Anon, I felt as if I was led there in order to help me see that the program wasn't right for me and that all along what I needed has always been with me.

Looking back in hindsight, I feel strongly that Guanyin has guided me all my life. Being in this human existence and coming to understand that all things are impermanent, having Guanyin in my life brings me great comfort. Her compassionate presence in my life makes my suffering bearable. I know that someday, I will lose both my parents, all my siblings, and all my special relationships will be taken away from me, but Guanyin will always be with me. She is vast, powerful, boundless, and not confined by the laws of rebirth and death.⁷⁷

Avalokiteśvara's Compassion and American Religious Pluralism

One of the leading voices on religious pluralism in America, Diana Eck argues that the way in which Americans of all faiths and beliefs can engage with one another to shape a positive pluralism is one of the essential questions—perhaps the most important question—facing American society today.⁷⁸ She advocates, meaningful religious pluralism requires genuine “*energetic engagement with diversity*,” “*the active seeking of understanding across lines of difference*,” “*the encounter of commitments*,” “*based on dialogue*.”⁷⁹

The rise of the Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin veneration in the United States in the recent decades speaks to a model of religious pluralism that is not only idealistic but is also meaningful. However, there is a considerable amount of work that still must be done to achieve meaningful diversity in American society. In the post 9/11 atmosphere, as a result of racist Islamophobia and Arabophobia, meaningful religious diversity is at risk. All Arabs are racialized as Muslims, and all Muslims are racialized as Arabs who are, by extension, “terrorists” and therefore “evil.” The continued suggestion by Conservative and Birthers⁸⁰ that President Barack Obama is a Muslim bespeaks the power of the voice of white racist anti-diversity, anti-religious pluralism in contemporary American politics and society. Meaningful religious pluralists believe and insist that Americans recognize themselves to be a pluralistic people, that there were diverse and legitimate alternative ways of being American. The creative appropriation and expressions of Guanyin's compassion in America, is not a sign or signal of American pluralism, but rather, of its possibilities.

⁷⁷ Personal communication with Mary Thi Pham, February 6, 2011.

⁷⁸ Diana L. Eck, What is Pluralism? In *The Pluralism Project at Harvard University*. http://pluralism.org/pages/pluralism/what_is_pluralism, 1997–2011 (last accessed March 6, 2011).

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Birthers refer to Americans who believe that President Barack Obama was born in Kenya, not Hawai'i, and that he is Muslim, even though he has openly admitted to being Christian. Therefore, Birthers see America as a country for White Christians.

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