



5-4-2020

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Recommended Citation

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The Transition of Guanyin: Reinterpreting Queerness and Buddha Nature in Medieval East Asia

By Robert Wilf

Abstract:

Avalokitesvara, better known by the Chinese name of Guanyin, is perhaps the second most pervasive figure in all of Buddhism after the historical Buddha himself. Part of this popularity comes from his adaptability and willingness to change to order to save everyone, no matter what part of society they might be from. It is thanks to this adaptability that Guanyin's iconography varies wildly by region, with much of Theravada and tantric Buddhism depicting him as a man, while Mahayana Buddhism tends to revere her as the patron of women. From their earliest description, Guanyin was known to transcend boundaries to manifest their compassion in the world in a uniquely queer way. In this thesis I will look at the history of Guanyin's arrival in East Asia through scriptures, miracle tales, and iconography in order to trace what caused their female form to become far more dominant there. Through this we will examine their queer identity and its mainstream acceptance and understanding in China and Japan as well as how these countries differ in interpreting this queer character. Finally, this paper concludes with a push to develop the modern transgender movement.

Introduction

Religion is rarely something that LGBTQ+ individuals today willingly seek out. Religious Orthodoxy has often stood hand in hand with gender regimes to preserve both the social order of men above women and also to keep people constrained in the roles they currently inhabit through monolithic gender regimes. It may surprise many people, both the secularists and the devout, that even within the most stringent gender hierarchies from one thousand years ago, some of the most popular figures have a uniquely queer identity at odds with the larger society. These figures show up time and time again but in this paper I focus on a discussion of the change of gender iconography of the Bodhisattva, Avalokitesvara, in East Asia from between the 8th and the 12th centuries.

Like many transgender individuals, Avalokitesvara has used multiple names in different times and places. Avalokitesvara in India; Guanshiyin, Guanyin, and Miao Shan in China, and Kannon in Japan. I will cycle between them when appropriate to the context but most often use Guanyin to refer to how they are seen throughout the Mahayana world, as that is by far their most popular name. Additionally, I will use the gender-neutral "they" pronouns, when talking about the general idea of the figure in the context of multiple time periods, and gendered pronouns when these are important for the particular place and time period. All these names translate in various languages to approximately, "The Sovereign Lord Who Hears the Cries of the World" or a derivative of this. ¹

¹ Martin Palmer, and RamsayJay, Man-Ho Kwok, "The Kuan Yin Chronicles: The Myths and Prophecies of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion" Hampton Roads Publishing 2009

In English, the figure is sometimes described as “The Goddess of Mercy”.² However, this is a misnomer. Guanyin is a Bodhisattva, not a Goddess. Buddhism often coexists with other traditions that have their own systems of gods, whether it is Hindu deva, Chinese immortals, or Japanese kami. Bodhisattva always remain distinct and separate from these categories. They are conceptualized as people who have reached enlightenment but have forgone Nirvana to help people on earth. In this way they can be thought of as closer to a saint, formerly mortal figures performing the work of more distant divine figures due to their closer connection to the earth. Of course in Buddhism the gods themselves were once human and perhaps demons before that. Everything has a chance to achieve enlightenment.

Compassion is also a better translation than Mercy. The original word is *Karuna*, which is the same in both Pali and Sanskrit.³ It is a major concept in Mahayana Buddhism that separates it from Theravada. While “*karuna*” can also mean pity, it is most commonly used to refer to the unending desire to save others from suffering by helping them along the Buddhist path. Avalokitesvara is the manifestation of this compassion. While this idea is similar to mercy, and mercy might also be apt to describe Guanyin’s role in many miracle tales as well talk about later, it seems that the word “mercy” was chosen only because of its pre-existing religious connotation in Christianity. In Christianity, ‘mercy’ refers to God’s mercy to forgive humans of the inherent original sin. In Christianity, humans are deserving of punishment and are being released from it.

² Mark Schemacher “Kannon Notebook” onmarknotebooks.com

<https://www.onmarkproductions.com/html/kannon.shtml> visited 4-13-2020

³ Regarding the Sanskrit word, see Monier-Williams (1899), p. 255, entry for “*karuṇā*” (retrieved at <http://www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/MWScanpdf/mw0255-karaTa.pdf>), where the noun form of the word is defined as “pity, compassion”. For the Pali word, see Rhys, Davids & Stede (1921–25), p. 197, entry for “*Karuṇā*” (retrieved at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/cgi-bin/philologic/getobject.pl?c.1:1:356.pali>) where it is defined as “pity, compassion”. In general, contemporary scholars, translators and interpreters have consistently translated the word as “compassion,” not “pity.” This can be seen, for instance, in (listed chronologically) *Warder* (1970/2004, p. 95), *Ñānamoli* (Buddhaghosa & Ñānamoli, 1975/1991, *Vsm.* IX.77ff., pp. 306ff.), *Saddhatissa* (1985/1994, p. 3, *Sn* 3.39), *Thanissaro* (1994, *AN* 3.65), *Salzberg* (1995, pp. 102ff.), *Gethin* (1998, p. 187), and *Bodhi* (2000, *SN* 41.7, p. 1325).

In Buddhism, humans are not inherently evil. Nothing is inherent. It is Bodhisattvas like Guanyin who release us from an undeserving yet self-inflicted punishment created from misconstrued desires. This is why 'pity' or 'compassion' are better cognates for *karuna*, as the punishment is not deserved. In Mahayana Buddhism, compassion is one of the two qualities necessary for Buddhahood, along with wisdom. Interestingly enough, in India wisdom was considered the feminine force while compassion was the masculine. In China, compassion was one of the Confucian virtues for dutiful mothers.⁴ These differing cultural roles of compassion could be one of the underlying reasons for Guanyin's change in gender.

Compassion is essential to the queer reading of Guanyin as the actual change in gender. It is the dedication to reach everyone, not only those who fit the societal mold, but those too who were shunned by society. Buddhism has time and time again been associated with rulers including Guanyin herself, but it's roots trace back to a counter-cultural movement against the Hindu class structure. And that anti-authority premise in the theology is one that has been obscured but never removed. Buddhism challenges one to remove any illusions about themselves from the world. This is the concept of no-soul. When applied to the individual level (as it almost always is) it challenges one to erase any assumptions about the self. Anything you think you are is dependent on how you grew up and were trained to be and therefore is not a part of your true self, which is essentially non-existent. What Buddhism rarely focuses on is how people are trained in these ways. They are almost always part of larger cultural traditions in which parents teach their children to see the world in certain ways. for example, through monolithic gender

⁴ Yuhang Li, "Becoming Guanyin: Artistic devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China" Columbia University Press 2019, Pg. 11

hierarchies.⁵ What the text often does not emphasize is that these aggregates are often conditioned on a societal level.

For Guanyin to truly reach people through these aggregates, she appears to them in a form often similar to their own. By doing this, they show the inherent instability of these carefully regimented aggregates and how mortals can transcend them too. One does not need to conform to the monolithic culture because the building blocks in the monolith (gender, sex, sexuality, and social standing) are in themselves constructed. Thusly it is not surprising that a bodhisattva whose identity is based around destroying conditioned forms of identity has a history that when zoomed out looks like one long process of feminization throughout centuries, but in a closer view provides a much more complicated history of inspiring people to transcend the cultural norms, even as Guanyin became exemplary of some of them.

This inspiration to destroy one's outer self to illustrate that one has no inner self is different from the transgender idea of constructing a new outer self to better reflect one's inner self. However, the process is familiar as is the awareness of the artificiality of social regimes. As I travel through the history of Guanyin's gendered iconography and subsequent change within them, keep in mind that I am not saying that Guanyin herself is transgender. No matter your religious beliefs Guanyin is even accepted by many Buddhists as a personification of compassion rather than someone who had once lived a mortal life, although one was later given to them as we'll see in chapter 3. Guanyin is more so a personification of Buddhist Compassion. They embody this to the point that their representation changes multiple times in various contexts.

⁵ Harvey, Peter "An Introduction to Buddhism: Teachings, History, and Practices." Cambridge University (2013) pg. 57

Thusly so her history reflects both the challenge to gender regimes at the time, and also can be inspirational for people today.

In this paper I will travel through a chronological history of Guanyin as manifested in literary tradition, its effects on artwork, and the role Guayin plays in the social norms of various gender regimes of China and Japan. The primary texts I will focus on are the origins of Avalokitesvara in the Lotus Sutra, and the folk origin story of her life in the miracle tale of Miao Shan. These will be the focus on chapters one and three. Chapters two and four will zoom out to give us a broader picture of the different religious and social roles Guanyin represented before and after the idea of a feminine Guanyin was popularized. These chapters will also include analysis of other miracle tales and contemporary art for additional reference. Finally, chapter five will discuss both Guanyin's modern role as it is regularly practiced, as well as what this history can mean in the topic of queer theology.

Chapter One: The Lotus Sutra & Early Mahayana

One of our earliest sources to reference a change in Avalokitesvara's gender transformations is in the first text that ever mentions him. The Lotus Sutra was composed in India circa 100 CE and has served as one of the early bases of Mahayana Buddhism.⁶ It has been translated into Chinese at least six times, but only three of these translations survive today. The earliest translation dates to 286 b.c.e. and was thus one of the foundational works of Mayanna

⁶ "Chronicles" pg. 2

Buddhism.⁷ Out of this Sutra, we receive the "Universal Gateway" chapter that describes Avalokitesvara. In this chapter, Avalokitesvara is described as a gateway whose purpose in the universe is to reach out to anyone, be they men, women, gods, or demons. This shifting identity will first be seen as secondary to their character, but will soon become central to understanding Avalokitesvara's form of queer compassion.

This sutra lists four main responsibilities of Avalokitesvara. These are 1) To save peoples physical bodies should they fall into peril. 2). To save people from the three poisons of desire, anger, and ignorance. 3). To provide either a son or daughter.⁸ This gendering of children already sets up a strong dichotomy of male and female before its revealed that Avalokitesvara can 4) take on thirty-three different forms, some of which are human and some of which are non-human. Out of the human ones, eight are identified as men and seven as women. All of these forms are created to match the practitioner so they can more easily identify with and learn from the bodhisattva.⁹

Let us first look at the stanza about providing children. This will let us know the Sutra's understanding of a gender dichotomy before we can see if Avalokitesvara truly fits that framework. When describing the children, it is stated that Avalokitesvara can provide either a son with "merit, virtue, and wisdom" or a daughter with "all the marks of comeliness, one who is planted in the roots of virtue, and is loved or respected by many persons".¹⁰ The main difference

⁷ Yu Chun-fang "Kuan-yin: The Chinese transformation of Avalokitesvara" New York : Columbia University Press. 2001

⁸ "The Lotus Sutra" Translated by Burton Watson, NichirenInfo.com Accessed April 26 2020. <https://nichiren.info/buddhism/lotussutra/> ch. 25

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

we can see here is the active vs. passive nature of the gifts. The son is virtuous while the daughter is planted in a virtuous world. Likewise, the son must earn merit while it is enough for the daughter to be pretty. This seems to reflect the classical Indian context of patriarchy in which the chapter was written. The men were expected to rule and make decisions while the main concern for parents was to make sure their daughter married well. The daughters weren't as important as what their future husbands thought of them.

It is interesting, too, that boys were the ones given wisdom, which in the introduction was stated to be seen as feminine in the Indian context.¹¹ But as this lack of agency is set up, it is simultaneously undermined by who is making devotional offerings. The passage specifies that in order to receive one of these children the mother should offer obeisance and alms to Avalokitesvara and he will provide her with the preferred child. Thusly the parents attempt to exert control over the children, especially their sex, gender, and social roles that will come with them for the rest of their lives. The worst nightmare of most trans people. However, this control also sets up a unique relationship between this mainly masculine bodhisattva and his women devotees, particularly the lay worshippers who will have children that the clergy will not. This relationship will prove foundational for the popular image of Guanyin as a woman, one that will not be mirrored by the monastics.

So the question becomes: Is this figure supporting these gender roles or reconstituting them? He, and he is always referred to as masculine in the Pali texts, is the one providing the children so it is implied that he also ascribes to these beliefs, though the actual description is put

¹¹ Li "Becoming Guanyin" pg. 11

into the mouth of the historical Buddha. In fact, Avalokitesvara does not speak at all during his description. Since all words are put in the mouth of Shakyamuni Buddha, we can assert that the reader was meant to take it as unerring wisdom. Wisdom that the reader was not meant to believe blindly, but still inevitably figure out for themselves how that is the truth.

So far we see that Avalokitesvara in their origin isn't defying the gender regime as much as shaping it by creating idealized children who will grow up with personalities that will make them suitable for the social roles set out for them even before their births. But what of the 33 manifestations? Not only can the forms Avalokitesvara take on tell us much about the assumed audience and meaning, but even the way they're listed bears significance. First of all, out of the manifestations listed, only half of them are specifically gendered, or even human for that matter. The rest are divine beings in Hindu cosmology, which must've made it quite confusing for the average Chinese reader. Specifically, it begins the list with eight beings that are buddhas, higher ranking devas, and the like. It then lists fifteen mortal forms before listing lower rankings devas, rakshasa, naga, and other demons. This demonstrates that there is a hierarchy here, with more powerful beings, being listed before less powerful ones. This is important as it then goes on to list the non-Buddhist men before the non-Buddhist women, with Buddhist men and women in the middle.

The passage is as follows:

If they need a rich man to be saved, immediately he {Avalokitesvara} becomes a rich man and preaches the Law for them. If they need a householder to be saved, immediately he becomes a householder and preaches the Law for them. If they need a chief minister to be saved, immediately he becomes a chief minister and preaches the Law for them. If

they need a Brahman to be saved, immediately he becomes a Brahman and preaches the Law for them. If they need a monk, a nun, a layman believer, or a laywoman believer and preaches the Law for them. If they need the wife of a rich man, of a householder, a chief minister, or a Brahman to be saved, immediately he becomes those wives and preaches the Law for them. If they need a young boy or a young girl and preaches the Law for them.¹²

What's interesting here is that the construction interrupts itself twice. The second time is to assert that male children are still lower on social status than their mothers, but the first time is to insert the connection of Buddhist practitioners and laypeople as more equal than those of non-Buddhists. The construction is somewhat undermined by the fact that within it, monks are still listed before nuns and laymen before laywomen. However, it does still list nun before layman recognizing that spiritual enlightenment is more important than gender. This by no means states that Buddhist monks were lower status than non-Buddhist men, though this may be true for Buddhist women as many Bhikkuni often found increased social status in their ordination. It was at least a way to leave behind gender regimes and pursue a different path among sisters. However, in practice interactions between Bhikku and Bhikkuni were far from equal. For example, the Theravada tradition requires Bhikkhu to be present for the ordination of a Bhikkuni while the reverse is not true.¹³ Bhikkuni must also follow eight extra heavy laws that enforce the Bhikkhu's higher status.¹⁴ So why is it then that a compassionate teacher like Avalokitesvara

¹² Lotus Sutra ch. 25

¹³ Emma Tomalin. "The Thai Bhikkhuni Movement and Women's Empowerment." *Gender and Development* 14, no. 3 (2006): 385-97. Accessed March 20, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20461161

¹⁴ Ibid pg. 386

would take on the form of a woman to teach in a sutra likely written by men. Is it just to reach people women practitioners? Would Avalokitesvara's teachings be less valid in this form? And why is it that a religion which focuses so heavily on concepts of no-self and universal salvation, enforce such a hierarchy? We may be able to find the answer in an earlier part of the Lotus Sutra.

While chapter twelve of the Lotus Sutra was likely written in a different time period from chapter twenty-five, the fact that they were almost always transmitted together means that the framework chapter twelve sets up for gendered Buddhas often sets the parameters when the topic is reintroduced in Avalokitesvara's manifestations. Chapter 12 has two parts, the first one talks about a rival cousin of the historic Buddha called "Devadatta" who gives the chapter its name. The second is about a Dragon Princess. The connection between the two is clear; both are figures who the audience (both the reader and the in-story assembly of Arhats) would not expect to make it far along the Buddha path, but wind up Buddhahood regardless. It should really be more surprising than it is that Devadatta, who was cruel to Shakyamuni in their most recent lifetime¹⁵, would be easily accepted by the other arhats, and the Dragon Princess is challenged simply for her gender.

It is Mansjushri that introduces and defends the Dragon Princess. And while several deny her right to be among the Buddha and his retinue based on her age in this lifetime, it is the Arhat, Shariputra that challenges her right based on gender. He claims,

¹⁵ Ryūichi Abe. "Revisiting the Dragon Princess: Her Role in Medieval Engi Stories and Their Implications in Reading the Lotus Sutra." *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 42, no. 1 (2015): 27-70. Accessed April 27, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/43551910.

But this is difficult to believe. Why? Because a woman's body is soiled and defiled, not a vessel for the Law. How could you attain the unsurpassed bodhi? The road to Buddhahood is long and far-reaching. Only after one has spent immeasurable kalpas pursuing austerities, accumulating deeds, practicing all kinds of paramitas, can one finally achieve success. Moreover, a woman is subject to the five obstacles. First, she cannot become a Brahma heavenly king. Second, she cannot become the king Shakra. Third, she cannot become a devil king. Fourth, she cannot become a wheel-turning sage king. Fifth, she cannot become a Buddha. How then could a woman like you be able to attain Buddhahood so quickly?¹⁶

This reiterates the claim about not having any past lives despite Shariputra not having any basis for that. Besides, his argument in gender is circular. He says that the Dragon Princess cannot become a Buddha because women cannot become Buddhas or other similar figures. He states that women's bodies are 'soiled and defiled' there's no explanation as to what exactly this means. However, it bears resemblance to other accusations of women's impurities especially later Chinese context it will be read in. For example, one addition Chinese Buddhism makes to Buddhism is the addition of a special hell for women who supposedly insulted the Buddhas through menstruating and thereby defiling the earth.¹⁷ In both this form of hell and in the Shariputra's view here, women are seen as defiled not because of any perceived sexual desire or practices such as in most Abrahamic-based misogyny, but rather the difference in bodily

¹⁶ Lotus Sutra ch, 12

¹⁷ "The Blood Tray sutra" Tranlated by Masatoshi Ueki

functions itself. In short, Shariputra thinks that women can't attain Buddhahood because menstruation is gross.

It's interesting to note that neither Mansjushri nor the Dragon Princess refute Shariputra's allegations. Rather, the princess simply gives Shakyamuni a jewel, asks the audience to mark the time, and then in an even faster moment becomes a man. This introduces the concept of gender transformation for the sake of enlightenment while keeping the gender regime perfectly intact. If Shariputra's accusations are to be taken at face value and women cannot become Buddhas simply because it's not their place in the Buddhist hierarchy, then they simply have to become men. This statement simultaneously enforces the hierarchy while breaking it down. Through this transformation the Dragon Princess introduces the idea of queerness as a form of redemption, as long as it's a female to male transition.

The end goal is still masculinity, the opposite of what Avalokitesvara's transformation will be. So perhaps the readers may see Avalokitesvara's manifestation as women as simply a step to turning more women into men. That is certainly one interpretation that will appear. However, before we see how Avalokitesvara is received in early Chinese and Japanese contexts, let's take a little bit more time to talk about how early Mahayana masters viewed Shariputra's misogyny.

Now it's obvious that the reader is supposed to take the Dragon Princess's side over Shariputra's. While she doesn't challenge his accusations directly; Zhiyi, the 6th-century founder of the Tiantai school does. He writes,

As for Māra, Brahmā, Indra, and women as well, without abandoning their bodies, without taking up other bodies, and in their apparent current bodies, they are capable of attaining Buddhahood.

Therefore, it is said in a verse:

The nature of the Dharma is like a great ocean
in which there is no need to distinguish good and bad;
ordinary beings and holy beings are equal;
there is no high and low between them.

When the mind's stains cease, as swiftly as flipping a palm,
one attains the proof of enlightenment.¹⁸

This new view on non-duality between men and women was repeated by Zharnan two hundred years later. In fact, the modern historian Ryuichi Abe states he could find no major sources in Sui or Tang China (the lead up to Guanyin's change in iconography) that agreed with Shariputra. By this he concludes that Shariputra's accusation was to be taken rhetorically, but acknowledges the Dragon Princess's enlightenment was still unusual.¹⁹ However, the non-duality of gender is not the same as a plurality. Zhiyi's emphasis that women can attain enlightenment without abandoning their bodies contradicts the text, which very much does have a gender transformation. By saying that she didn't need to leave her body behind in order to attain enlightenment, he at once elevates the status of women in Buddhism while removing any suggestion of gender non-conformity. Abe supports this view by claiming that the transformation

¹⁸ Abe "Revisting the dragon Princess"

¹⁹ Ibid. 38

didn't actually happen but was rather a vision The Dragon Princess manifests for Shariputra to understand with his limited facilities.²⁰ While this is a rare instance of a 6th-century man defending the rights of women, it and Abe's interpretation especially ignores and even tries to hide the queer themes presented in the text.

Before we can circle back to Guanyin I'd first like to note that Shariputra has had his own gender transformation, though a far shorter-lived one. While Ruichichi Abe was laying out the rhetorical use of Shariputra in this sutra he briefly touches on another sutra where Shariputra becomes a woman. In the Vimalakirti Sutra, Shariputra is once again challenging a much wiser bodhisattva goddess about why she has decided to remain in a woman's form. In response the goddess has the two of them switch bodies, forcing Shariputra to confront the reality, or rather non-reality of the form. The goddess goes on to state that the forms either of them take on are meaningless. The Goddess explains it like this,

If the elder [Shariputra] could again change out of the female state, then all women could also change out of their female states. All women appear in the form of women in just the same way as the elder appears in the form of a woman. While they are not women in reality, they appear in the form of women. With this in mind, the Buddha said, 'In all things, there is neither male nor female.'²¹

In this the Goddess exposes the non-duality as gender through the Buddhist context of non-self. This highly resembles Judith Butler's ideas of gender performativity. The goddess's

²⁰ Ibid 39

²¹ Vimalakirti Sutra Ch. 6

gender as well as Shariputra are seen as irrelevant because the physical body as well as any sense of the self is illusory. Everything we think we know about gender is an illusion of the physical world propagated by society.

However, to say that gender does not exist is not the same as saying it is not important. It is through Shariputra's physical male to female transformation that he was able to obtain a greater understanding of non-duality as well as greater empathy for those around him. This wouldn't be possible if not for the queer nature of his transformation. Even in the Buddhist context where nothing is intrinsic, the concept of genders and gender regimes must still be acknowledged in order for it to be broken. This is what it means when Avalokitesvara to reach people by expedient means. Their queer nature is a manifestation of not just their compassion to gauge people in forms familiar to their own, but also a demonstration of the underlying mutability of gender. Early Chinese adherents throughout the Sui and Tang are already aware of this, though the clergy will quickly lose control of any grasp they think they have over Guanyin's form.

Chapter Two: A New Orthodoxy

When the Lotus Sutra was translated into Chinese, Avalokitesvara's name was written as 觀世音 or Guanshiyin. However, the 世 or 'shi' was dropped in the 7th century after the new Emperor's edict forbade anyone from writing his previous name.²² 世 was only one character in

²² "The Kuan Yin Chronicles" pg. XII

both names had in common and even though it was not being used to refer to the Emperor, it was better safe than sorry. This shortened version was the one that became popular in North-East Asia becoming Guanyin in China and Kannon in Japan. Despite much initial skepticism of this foreign religion in both countries, Buddhism eventually was not only accepted but embraced by the ruling class within a few centuries of their arrival. And in this new form of Mahayana Buddhism which emphasized learning the dharma through the help of miraculous higher beings, Guanyin's role became paramount. At this time, Guanyin was still seen universally as a man though most monks knew that he could take on a woman's form as outlined in the Lotus sutra. However, as Buddhism gained widespread acceptance, royal courts, monastics, and laypeople would each influence it to make the religion more relevant to them. Each sector of power would strongly influence the queerness of Guanyin.

The ruling classes in both China and Japan were already associated with divine figures in their native Taoism and Shinto. In China, the Emperor was chosen by heaven, while in Japan he was a direct descendant of the Sun Goddess. Through this, these respective Emperors justified their divine mandated rules over the people and made it less likely they'd be challenged. Therefore, when Buddhism rose to prominence in both countries, the respective rulers began to associate themselves with certain buddhas and bodhisattvas as a way of ensuring that they held onto power. Guanyin was a popular choice, and to this day many depictions of her in a masculine form often follow the royal ease position originally reserved for Indian rulers. This first became associated with Guanyin in the late 8th-century china.²³ Even before then, male rulers were often used as a basis for iconography such as with the Prince Shotoku, an early Japanese Emperor who

²³ Princeton University Art Museum <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/23888> accessed April 27th 2020

pushed for the acceptance of Buddhism, is the basis for the standing Yumedo Kannon during the Asuka period.²⁴ What was more unusual was when Empress Wu Zetian in China commissioned a separate masculine Buddha to be modeled after herself.

Empress Wu was one of the first female rulers of China. She took the throne in 690 CE after having ruled the court Queen regent for decades. The male historians that lived near the time of her death did not paint her well, but more interesting to us than the many dubious accusations made against her is her own claim to be a bodhisattva, one of the few female ones. While the few sources I found originally stated that she claimed to be the incarnation of the future Buddha, Maitreya,²⁵ upon further research I realized she “discovered” her own sutra, known as the Cloud Sutra, with a new figure known as Jinguang, a Devi that would descend to earth as a female monarch and become a new champion of Buddhism.²⁶ While this narrative is similar to the Maitreya cult that had real power at the time, it removes the queerness of a change in gender by having the bodhisattva have been a woman in her previous life as well. In cases like these it is the artistic depiction that shows a much clearer queerness of Buddhist architecture. Like Prince Shotoku before her, Empress Wu commissioned iconography in her likeness, this time actually of Maitreya.²⁷ However, unlike Shotoku who did little to actually change how we view Kannon in the long run, Empress Wu's gender meant that the artists had to sculpt statues with male bodies and feminine faces. This change in Maitreya's iconography did not last long

²⁴ Moran, Sherwood F. "The Yumedono Kannon of Horyuji." *Archives of the Chinese Art Society of America* 11 (1957): 59-68. Accessed March 31, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20066992.

²⁵ "stele of Buddha Maitreya" Khan Academy accessed 11-30-2019
<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/art-asia/imperial-china/tang-dynasty/a/stele-of-the-buddha-maitreya>

²⁶Rothschild, Henry M. "Emperor Wu Zhao and her Pantheon of Devis, Divinities, and dynastic Mothers" Columbia University Press 2015

²⁷ "Maitreya" Dunhuang Foundation March 1st 2018 Accessed 2019
<http://dunhuangfoundation.us/blog/2017/10/19/maitreya>

after her death, but it was one of the first clear examples of the purposeful queering of an established Buddhist figure for the sake of helping people understand. Yes, it was done more to consolidate her base of power than to further Buddhist teachings, but it did challenge the standard gender hierarchies of the time, creating a crack in the system that would soon sanction new representations of Guanyin.

These feminine faced depictions and male bodies are today much more associated with the androgynous appearance of some Guanyin and Avalokitesvara statues already in existence at the time. While Empress Wu herself may not have been seen favorably by contemporary historians, her Cloud Sutra likely did get the common people outside the clergy far more accustomed to the thought of a female bodhisattva. With this in mind it is not surprising that the earliest depiction of a fully female Guanyin comes from China in the century following The Empress's death.²⁸ While the connection is indirect, it is interesting to know that both Wu's Maitreya and androgynous Guanyin seem to serve the same purpose of reaching the most amount of people by putting forth inherently queer icons that all people could connect to and see themselves reflected in different ways. Empress Wu knew that to legitimize her rule she needed to attack Imperial Tang China's very notion of gender itself to legitimize why a woman such as herself could rule. The way she did this was through Buddhism's' understanding of compassion and the non-duality of all things. She then found it easiest to queer these extant icons and add new feminine forms that were sorely lacking in the Buddhist pantheon before. While sutras like the Vimalakirti Sutra had preached the non-duality of gender for some time, the iconography in

²⁸ 2nd Half of the 8th century. Eleven-headed Bodhisattva Guanyin. General. Place: Museum of Asian Art, East Asian Art Collection, State Museums in Berlin. https://library.artstor.org/asset/BERLIN_DB_10313804053.

China at the time did not reflect this. So Empress Wu took it into her own hands to make sure that the icons matched the theology.

So why didn't this change last for Jinguang or Maitreya, but it did work with Guanyin? The simple answer might be that the groundwork was already there. We know from the Lotus Sutra that Guanyin is a queer entity capable of taking on multiple forms, but it is the role she would come to play that sealed the transformation. Recall that the Lotus Sutra also gives the role as the figure you call out to when asking for a child.²⁹ This gives Guanyin a unique relationship and closeness with laywomen that was not seen in other bodhisattvas. This explanation was used by some contemporary devotees to explain the fluctuating appearance of the statues. One Japanese legend tells of Empress Komyo, who lived in Japan not long after Wu Zetian's reign, praying to the native Shinto goddess Amaterasu for a male heir. Her prayer is answered in a dream by a male Kannon who gave Komyo a statue of himself to carry with her until the birth. The smaller statue he gave her was also masculine but after the birth she commissioned a statue of Kannon based after herself, holding a baby.³⁰ Unlike Empress Wu's commission of the Maitreya statues, this account is likely fictitious. However, Empress Komyo's reign did mark the beginning of feminine Kannon statues being imported from China and Korea to Japan throughout the 9th and 10th centuries.³¹ These myths as well as dozens of smaller ones helped justify a shifting change in cultural consciousness about Guanyin's fluid gender and heighten its acceptance. After all, shifting gender was justified if it came from a royal decree or divine manifestation.

²⁹ Lotus Sutra 25

³⁰ Guanyin Chronicles 64

³¹ Ibid.

It seems the real impetus behind Guanyin's shift is that none of the other bodhisattva would fill this role. Maitreya is always a future promise, one who may come but never does and is too distant to connect to. Guanyin is as personal a divine figure as you can get, often being said to directly appear to her worshippers and physically saving them from harm when in distress.³² She was also the only prominent figure in Chinese religion to at least sometimes appear as a woman. This is significant because China at this time lacked other mainstream goddesses or other female divinities such as the devi of India, the taras of tantric Buddhism, and the female kami like Amaterasu in Japan. Almost all figures in China's main three religions of Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism were all men with the latter providing ample justification that women should not be followed. However, Guanyin was a bodhisattva whose devotional practices and realms of oversight had a special place for women. And Guanyin would gladly transform to personally reach out to people in a way that made them feel represented which no other bodhisattva really could. This gender transition for the sake of salvation is consistent with the Mahayana concept of 'expedient means' or teaching people about Buddhism by making it relevant to them. Yet it still provides an example of the non-duality of gender. Thus, Guanyin's queerness can be seen as a manifestation of her compassion.

This change in iconography was far from universal though. Bodhisattva in general were depicted more and more femininely during the Tang, with finer features, supple bodies, and layered chins.³³ However, Guanyin received special attention likely due to the growing folk associations between her and womanhood. Despite this, many monasteries instead chose to depict Guanyin with a slight mustache, emphasizing his masculinity. While this form had existed

³² Lotus Sutra, Ch. 25

³³ Yu "transformation of Avalokitesvara" 248

in Chinese iconography for some time, they exploded in popularity during the 10th century in both China and Japan.³⁴³⁵³⁶ Different historians have interpreted this upswing in facial hair in different ways, but in all cases, it was likely more than a fashion statement. The self-styled expert amateur, Mark Schenner, claimed that they were to emphasize the dual nature of Kannon's manifestations as being simultaneously a man and a woman and true non-duality by putting masculine facial hair on a feminine forms.³⁷ However, many of these depictions also have clear masculine bodies with bare flat chests. What seems more likely to me is that this is an attempt from the Buddhist orthodoxy to push back against the change and remind people of the more orthodox, androcentric form. After all, many monasteries well into the Qing dynasty still revered Guanyin's male form.³⁸ The separation between men and women might have been an illusion in the eyes of theology, but it was very real in the practice of these monks.

No movement is complete without its counter movement, and it was not just Guanyin's identity at stake. It was the place for women to exist in Chinese religion and subsequently respect in the culture as a whole. Having a divine feminine figure would help increase women's overall status in society, in terms of both teaching men that women are to be respected and giving women a figure to try and exemplify. Empress Wu's attempt to introduce a new bodhisattva who was always a woman had failed, and yet the hopes of Buddhist women were found in perhaps an unexpected place. Guanyin's queerness lent credence to their continued depiction and renewed

³⁴900-1000, 1994-1996. Hayagriva, horse-headed Guanyin. Painting, Religious painting, Portable painting. Place: Musée national des Arts asiatiques - Guimet, Pelliot Collection. https://library.artstor.org/asset/MIDA_120729241.

³⁵ 900-1000. Eleven-headed Guanyin (Ekadasamukha-Avalokitesvara). Painting, Banner, Painting without a frame. Place: Musée national des Arts asiatiques - Guimet, Pelliot Collection. https://library.artstor.org/asset/MIDA_120729208.

³⁶ 10th C. Juichimen Kannon (Eleven Headed Kannon). Place: Hokkeji (Nara-shi, Japan). https://library.artstor.org/asset/ARTSTOR_103_41822000817179.

³⁷ Mark Schemacher "Kannon Notebook"

³⁸ Li, "Becoming Guanyin" 7

conviction as a woman bodhisattva. Arguments for women's rights were fought in these temples. And the weapons they fought with were and statues and miracle tales, each faction used their own means to try and fit Guanyin into one identity that suited them or another. Meanwhile, Japan would come to accept Guanyin in all her forms, quite literally. Quite literally as both the feminine Moon Water female Guanyins and masculine mustached Guanyins continued throughout to be popular the 10th century. But as the 11th century dawned, a new miracle tale was popularized that would forever cement Guanyin's legacy in China as having lived the life of a mortal woman, and the life of a rebellious daughter at that.

Chapter Three: Miao-Shan, the Mortal

Perhaps the most significant turning point when conceptualizing the gender of Guanyin, comes to us from two steeles, the first of which was erected in 1100 CE. This story differs from many other Guanyin stories as it is a longer narrative that places Guanyin as having lived a mortal life in an ambiguous past. This life was as a human girl in conflict with the expectations set on her by her father, and by rebelling against such patriarchal expectations she was ultimately able to save him and the world as a whole. This concept of Miao-Shan as having been assigned female at birth repeats a consistent trend of any queer connotations, accidental or on purpose, being erased to instead bring greater focus on femininity and the liberation of women as a whole. Miao-Shan's trials were explicitly relevant to women trying to set lives for themselves in the

context of Neo-Confucian China. Overall, the tale serves as a critique of Neo-Confucian gender politics and it is also a rejection of spiritual life that sealed Guanyin's lasting legacy as a feminine bodhisattva.

The first steele was erected at the Hsiang-shan monastery in the modern-day Honan province. It was written down by the prefect of the region, Chiang Chih- Ch'i, recounting a conversation he had with a local abbot, who heard it from a pilgrim, who heard it from the master Tao-hsuan, who received it from a divine spirit.³⁹ A second steele was erected in the Hangchow Monastery in 1104, of which about half the characters can still be read. While this account adds little to the story that wasn't already preserved in some way or another it serves as an additional primary text that gives us a fuller picture of the original. Glenn Dudbridge painstakingly translated these both into English and set them side-by-side so that we may have the full text you may recognize from the oral tradition surviving today.⁴⁰

The full story is as follows: when Miao Shan was born it was clear that a divine being had entered the world. The heavens shook and flowers fell from the sky, and yet her father was disappointed she was not a son. Her father was a king who already had two daughters before her and desperately wanted someone to inherit the kingdom. But when pressed Miao Shan said she could only marry one who could relieve the suffering of mankind. Angered by this her father pressed her into hard work in the gardens until she agreed to marry but she did not relent. Then the king said she could go to a nunnery but again asked the abbess to give her only the hardest

³⁹ Yu, "Transformation of Avalokitesvara" 299

⁴⁰ Glen Dudbridge, "Miao-shan on Stone: Two Early Inscriptions." *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 42, no. 2 (1982): 589-614. doi:10.2307/2718945.

labor. Again, Miao Shan did not relent. Finally, her father burned down the nunnery, killing the bhikkhuni inside, and had Miao Shan publicly executed.

Exactly, what happens during or after the execution varies but the earliest steels say that she was saved by the spirit of Hsiang mountain so that she could fulfill her spiritual destiny. She meditated on top of this mountain for three years. Meanwhile, the father's bad karma caught up with him and he became gravely ill. A monk visited the family and said that the only cure would be the eyes and arms of someone without anger. The family thought no one could fit such a description but the monk told them about a bodhisattva who lived on a nearby mountaintop that would gladly sacrifice her eyes and arms for this medicine. The materials were fetched and the king made a full recovery. After which he and his wife traveled to the mountain to thank the bodhisattva. When they arrived the mother realized that the mutilated woman before them was their daughter and the king realized his cruelty. Miao Shan assured him that she had no resentment towards him and that she felt no pain in having given up her eyes and arms. She was then transformed into Guanyin with one thousand arms and one thousand eyes.⁴¹

Now this story was likely a way for the local official who wrote it to gain favor for his province by turning the local mountain into what is today one of the most important pilgrimage spots for Guanyin. It also serves to explain why she is sometimes depicted with extra arms and heads. While the number one thousand is most often attributed, these statues typically only have forty arms with each arm being able to reach five world systems, thus equaling one thousand. The extra eyes as well are meant to invoke the extra heads Guanyin wears as a crown to gaze out at all the world at once.

⁴¹ Ibid.

Regardless, the real interest behind this piece is what it tells us about gender dynamics of the time and Guanyin's role within them. Unlike almost all miracle tales we've seen previously there is no change in gender. Guanyin was born a woman. This is likely because, by the time this was written, the image of the female Guanyin had already been cemented in popular and religious memory in modern-day Honan as a woman. We have tales concerning Guanyin appearing as a woman to free one man from imprisonment in 484 CE, and several of her appearing to heal people from 561-565 CE.⁴² By the 9th century we already have sources of historical Buddhist nuns and even female Daoist saints being compared to her.⁴³ However while the idea of Guanyin as a woman was already unquestioned in this province, this was not the case in many other places and we see a drastic increase in feminine depictions of Guanyin after this period.⁴⁴

What's of more interest is the way her gender is used in the story. In almost all other circumstances Guanyin's gender is said to better reflect and approach those she appears to. But this is not the traditional miracle tale where Guanyin appears to someone in a dream as a divine helper. In the tale of Miao Shan Guanyin is the hero of her own story and her gender is not only fixed but also her main source of difficulties. As the third daughter of the king, it is Miao Shan's duty to obey her father and continue the line. In the context of neo-Confucianism, she is subject to the two most important relationships, that of a child to a father and a subject to a ruler. As such he was well within his rights to transfer her to the receiving end of yet another of the five

⁴² Yu, "transformation" 302

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Zhang Yuehu Late 13th century "White Robed Guanyin" Hanging scroll, ink on paper Place: Southern Song Dynasty

relationships, that of a husband and wife.⁴⁵ This system meant that Miao Shan would likely never attain meaningful status in her world. But it was these power-imbalances that Song China stable, at least according to neo-Confucianism.

Miao Shan rebelled, and she rebelled in the most Buddhist way possible. She asked whom these relationships were actually helping. Could they save the suffering of the world? Miao Shan cut through the Confucian principles of power-imbalance for the sake of continued stability and asked if it was really causing more suffering in the long run. Yet she took her father's cruelty in stride and did not lash out. While this is partially because she was likely conforming to other gender roles about domesticity, the non-violent action on her part is already another Buddhist virtue and stands in deep contrast with the violence the father will soon bring on her and the nuns.

However, many modern-day feminists have problems with this text due to her ultimate choice to give up her body for her father's.⁴⁶ For all her rebellion and trying to make her life her own, why would she still give it up for that man? That's partially because applying modern feminism is anachronistic. Rather than the whole liberation of women from the patriarchy this text is more concerned with liberation from the constriction of neo-Confucianism to fulfill Buddhist and more deeply rooted classical Confucian values; in particular, that of filial piety. By giving up her body to save her father, Miao Shan performs the ultimate act of filial piety, but she does it on her terms. This is an act that wouldn't be possible if she had simply obeyed her father

⁴⁵ Stephan Feuchtwang(2016), "Chinese religions", in Woodhead, Linda; Kawanami, Hiroko; Partridge, Christopher H. (eds.), *Religions in the Modern World: Traditions and Transformations (3rd ed.)*, London: Routledge, pp. 143–172, ISBN 978-1-317-43960-8.

⁴⁶ Sandy Boucher "The incredible Sacrifice of Princess Miao Shan" Inquiring Mind Vol.28 #1 https://www.inquiringmind.com/article/2801_8_boucher/ Site accessed November 5th 2019

unquestioningly, to begin with. In the end his life was only spared because Miao Shan was able to decide her life for herself. This is an incredibly Buddhist response to neo-Confucianism; that the categories and roles we make for ourselves on earth do not prevent suffering from occurring, but rather hamper us from ending suffering when it does arrive.

Whether or not the Father deserved to be forgiven is one question that about which there is very little disagreement. Of course he didn't, but to ask that is to miss the point. Guanyin's defining characteristic, no matter what form they may appear in, is unconditional love and compassion. She seeks to help everyone regardless of whether they deserve it or what their level in society is. A later version of this story written in 1306 by Kuan Tao-sheng, a female calligrapher, describes Miao Shan's execution and time in hell in far more detail.⁴⁷ No weapon the executioner wielded could hurt Miao Shan. Each one missed or shattered upon touching her. However, during this lengthy ordeal Miao-Shan saw fear in the executioner's eyes and realized that he would die if she did not. Feeling sympathy, Miao-Shan took all of his karmic debt into herself as he strangled her, which caused her to wind up in Hell. Yet her mere presence turned hell into a paradise and she released thousands of denizens of hell to be reborn. The lord of hell had to send her back in order to keep his position intact.

Always, Guanyin will appear to whoever needs it, no matter what part of society they may come from. This begs the question, what happened to the queer themes in this retelling? Up until now many of the miracle tales we've been focusing on had some mention or explanation of Guanyin changing their gender expression or asking believers to depict them in another way. This is partially because of the small selection we've seen as there are also many that briefly

⁴⁷ Dubridge "two early inscriptions" pg.610

mention a wholly masculine or wholly feminine Guanyin, but these were in shorter miracle tales. Longer sutra generally depicted a masculine Avalokitesvara or mentioned their shifting nature. This is the first that gives a lengthy story in which Guanyin is not only a woman but was very clearly assigned this at birth and does not change throughout the story. This seems odd as it is by and large the most popular story about Guanyin told by pilgrims throughout China.⁴⁸ This means that many had traveled throughout different pilgrimage sites and even with Guanyin almost always being depicted as a woman in contemporary culture, the male Guanyin persists in many pilgrimage sites.

So how is this story rectified in this view? Perhaps it reflects a dual consciousness or unspoken acceptance of the flexibility of Guanyin's gender. People can understand them to have multiple identities at once. In the euhemerized account of Guanyin's "life," their gender was less a simple feminization but a complex transition of a woman becoming something completely outside the contemporary understanding of gender and then appearing as a man, woman, or androgynous being depending on who reached out to them. This would be more consistent with the precedent set in the Dragon Princess story of an FtM transition being more acceptable as it was supposedly a higher state. I will discuss more of the Song and post-Song interpretations that resulted from Miao Shan in the next chapter as well the more nuanced Japanese understanding during this period. However, I would first like to propose a new reading that would have more relevance for modern practitioners looking for queer themes: the story of Miao Shan is about coming out as gender non-conforming.

⁴⁸ Yu "Transformation" 293

At the beginning of the story, the King has a very clear understanding of what Miao Shan should do with her life based on her perceived gender. But Miao Shan rebels, creating a path for herself that perhaps was always there due to the ambiguous opening suggesting she might have already achieved enlightenment before this lifetime and was destined to again. By the end of the story Miao Shan is completely changed into a being beyond the understanding of her parents, one better equipped to pursue her path through the world. This reading opens up Guanyin to represent not just trans women, but also a non-binary person assigned female at birth who will then go on to display a more complex and fluid identity as is often the case with their iconography. This interpretation is not meant to invalidate the feminist reading as gender roles often don't fit, even for cis gender people. They are arbitrary and often based on the preservation of the power structure. However, these two readings go hand in hand as this teenage bodhisattva defies her controlling father and the life set out for her, to more directly help the world in a way only she can. What Guanyin will do this with a new name and in a new form that will suit them far better than anything they had on earth.

Chapter 4: A New Role to Play

With Miao Shan spreading as the number one miracle tale throughout China and more and more statues of Female Guanyin being exported to Japan, it makes sense that the role of Guanyin would continue to change as her new identity took route. But how the change would materialize differed vastly in both countries. Chinese art created by laypeople will almost always show Guanyin in a female form. Yuhang Li's book, "Becoming Guanyin" is entirely dedicated to

women of this time using gendered clothing and cultural practices as a form of devotion to Guanyin.⁴⁹ However the Buddhist authorities held that this form was a temporary means of connecting with people and that Guanyin would ‘revert’ to a male form after leaving this world for nirvana. This was a similar idea of MtF salvation expressed in the tale of the Dragon Princess from chapter one.⁵⁰ In Japan however, all forms of Kannon are seen as equally valid as they exist as separate incarnations. In fact, it’s somewhat rare for a Kannon statue to stand alone as most are meant to be displayed in groups with other incarnations.⁵¹ The reason for this difference I believe was the pre-existing circumstances of gendered divinity in indigenous Chinese and Japanese religions that granted much higher stakes to Guanyin’s role as a female divinity in China than in Japan.

Most artists in China by the Ming Dynasty depicted Guanyin as a woman of beauty, even if she remained somewhat androgynous. When the *Journey to the West* was written in the late Ming dynasty, it featured Guanyin prominently as a mentor character and at one point included a description of her form as “fish-basket Guanyin” in which the author both derides and ogles at a common form of Guanyin as a scantily clad fisherwoman.⁵² This continues to seal her connection with women while also perhaps deriding her in a way as the author might have done to other women, though it is interesting to note that in most of *Journey to the West*, Guanyin instead appears as a helpful mentor figure to guide the pilgrims.⁵³ Even then, depictions of masculine Guanyin did not disappear. The Lotus Sutra continued to be an important source of both religious insight and artistic inspiration, which kept the idea of Guanyin’s plurality of

⁴⁹ Li “Becoming Guanyin”

⁵⁰ Kuan Yin Chronicles pg. 33

⁵¹ Fowler, Sherry D. “Accounts and Images of Six Kannon in Japan” University of Hawaii Press 2016

⁵² Li “Becoming Guanyin” pg. 7

⁵³ We Che’eng “Monkey” 1592 trans. Arthur Waley Grove press inc, New York 1943

gender in mind when listing the different forms. However, several of the male forms were singled out by male artists for stand-alone images. This may have been to produce a more traditional style of icon or for male practitioners to connect with the figure that represents them.⁵⁴ While the Lotus Sutra assumes people best learn from a teacher who resembles them, it should be noted that a female Guanyin was popular among women and men.⁵⁵ For men this may have had more to do with the practical role as Guanyin as a protector of childbirth who could ensure the child born would be a son, and a giver of sons. Chinese fathers rarely asked for daughters. The sources that still depicted Guanyin as male during this time had more to do with a theological perspective over the practical one: what was Guanyin in the Pure land?

The idea of whether or not Guanyin had a ‘true form’ is something we touched on in chapter one. Many contemporary writers who subscribe to the idea of women being subject to the five obstacles dismiss the feminine appearances of Guanyin using the same argument Ryuichi Abe uses to dismiss the five obstacles themselves in the tale of the Dragon Princess. Much scholarship written in Chinese argues Guanyin only appears as a woman for that is the only way she can be understood in this “corrupt and degenerate world”. They claim that she will revert to her male form upon entering Nirvana.⁵⁶ This follows the view of MtF salvation outlined by the Dragon Princess and makes quite obvious the patriarchal nature of this view, especially in the world choice of associating womanhood with impurity due simply to a difference in biological functions. However, even within this eschewed view it still manifests as Guanyin taking on a queer identity in order to relate and show compassion for all human beings. Even if this interpretation does not value this outsider perspective itself, this view still sees being queer

⁵⁴ Li “becoming Guanyin”. 7

⁵⁵ Ibid. 11-12

⁵⁶ Kuan yin Chronicles pg.28

as at least useful to teach. I wonder if Guanyin ever appeared to these patriarchs as a stubborn old man. Clearly that'd be the only person they'd ever listen to.

Japan as a whole tends to put less emphasis on Kannon's "true gender".⁵⁷ Many statues made in Japan from this time onwards rarely stand alone. Perhaps the most famous example is that of the Sanjusangendo Temple in Kyoto. Opened in 1169 CE, this temple is considered a national treasure of Japan. Despite its name being derived from the 33 manifestations, it in truth has 1,001 Kannon statues protected by 28 lieutenants. However aside from the primary 1000 armed Kannon, these statues who serve as extensions of their arms were almost identical and done in the style of the Tang-dynasty mustached Guanyin style.⁵⁸ However much more common from this point is the Six Kannon. This set features six different versions of Kannon, one for each of the possible ways to reincarnate. These vary in appearance, including gender. For example the Horse-headed Bato Kannon is always masculine and seen as a "Bright King" or a warrior manifestation.⁵⁹ Meanwhile, the 18-armed Juntei Kannon is described as "The Mother of 70 million Buddhas".⁶⁰ Thusly the singular Kannon has by themselves become their own sub-pantheon of Bodhisattvas, each equipped to save sentient beings on different paths of life. Thusly the reason for this discrepancy between their genders is easily solved by the same reason they have different forms in the first place. Reincarnation. Just as all sentient life reincarnates a myriad of times into different forms, so too does Kannon incarnate to match. Thus other non-crucial aspects of their being may change in these different lifetimes including their gender. When your religion already acknowledges that bodies are temporary and new forms come in different lives,

⁵⁷ Ibid. 33

⁵⁸ Cartwright, Mark. "[Sanjusangendo](https://www.ancient.eu/Sanjusangendo/)." *Ancient History Encyclopedia*. Last modified June 14, 2017. <https://www.ancient.eu/Sanjusangendo/>.

⁵⁹ Six images 20-21

⁶⁰ Six images 24

then it makes sense to have a figure who is also constantly changing and exemplifies a fluidity of gender.

Even statues of the Juntei Kannon tend to have a feminine face and a masculine chest, but the few times Japanese Buddhism is pushed to choose a binary for Kannon to occupy it more often chooses womanhood. While this example comes long after the time period we are looking at, it's interesting to note that in 1920, a man by the name of Mikichi Okada founded a new religious movement that maintained Buddhism was based on the Shinto truths. While this theology has no historical weight, similar claims have been made a thousand years earlier by Chinese Taoists to promote the superiority of their native belief system of the foreign Buddhism. What's interesting to us here is that Okada claimed Buddhism still has merit and the connection between the religions was Kannon herself. In his story Kannon was the sister of the kami, Amaterasu who had to flee Japan in exile after an attack from Korean deities including Susano-o, despite him actually having originated as a Shinto deity and brother of Amaterasu himself. Regardless of the political climate in the early 20th century that may have led to that story, it continues with Kannon stopping at what would be her later pilgrimage site in Ptalaka, China before traveling on to India. There she disguised herself as a man as the people would not listen to a woman teacher, but was eventually able to convince the historical Buddha to leave his life of luxury and spread her 'Shinto' truths. It wasn't until reaching China millennia later that she was able to shed her disguise and reveal her true form as a woman.⁶¹ While Okada's revisionist narrative of Buddhism's origins was almost certainly a product of the rising imperialism of his

⁶¹Kuan Yin Chronicles. 65-67

time, it is interesting to note that at least in terms of gender politics he was fairly liberal. He actively preached that is a woman on earth and beyond.

Now the vast difference in time here is a major factor, but Okada's movement can in many ways be seen as a traditionalist, emphasizing older Japanese values and Shinto practice. Meanwhile, Chinese monks who still use Tang Dynasty artworks and assert that Guanyin will revert to a male form after achieving Nirvana are also traditionalists.⁶²⁶³ The main difference here is how these countries view the divine feminine. In Japan we can see that the divine feminine was very deeply rooted in the culture long before Buddhism arrived, as seen by the status of Amaterasu as the ancestor of the imperial line. While you can technically argue that she's the patriarch, not the matriarch, of the imperial line due to the rather unique circumstances under which the first Emperor's father was born (this is another gender essay I may pursue at a later time) it's nonetheless obvious that female kami had a much greater role in Japan. Genderqueer kami were also far from unheard of. The Inari-Okami who holds the prestigious role as kami of rice and wealth is also known to change gender depending on which prefecture of the country you visit.

China by contrast had very little room for women among its celestial bureaucracy. While earlier Chinese Folk religion revered figures like Nu Wa and the goddess of T'ai Shan, they were almost scrubbed clean by the Tang Dynasty, instead creating a rigid system of immortals who ran the monarchy of heaven.⁶⁴ Thusly the only roles women could see in the heavens were equivalent to ones available on earth such as handmaidens. There was almost no one who could

⁶² Yu "Transformation" pg.6

⁶³ Cathryn Bailey "Embracing the Icon: The Feminist Potential of the Trans Bodhisattva, Kuan Yin." *Hypatia* 24, no. 3 (2009): 178-96. Accessed April 23, 2020. www.jstor.org/stable/20618170 pg.180

⁶⁴ Kuan Yin Chronicles pg.9

be aspired to. This is why the idea of Guanyin as a feminine Bodhisattva was so important in China, and far more contested than it was in Japan. Guanyin was an immensely popular figure and would be able to carve out a place for women in Chinese society through example as well as justify greater freedoms such as through the tale of Miao Shan. The fact that Guanyin started as a masculine figure was almost irrelevant. Guanyin had been accepted and adopted by medieval Chinese women as a figure to model and navigate the strict social climate while being true to themselves. Thusly Guanyin's transformation was not a simple matter of a bodhisattva reaching out to teach people as her theological role provides. It is also about a group of women embracing and promoting the queer identity already present in a foreign icon to the betterment of the society as a whole.

Conclusion

This paper went through many different iterations as I tried to find a thesis. Believe it or not, the queer studies angle was very late addition brought in after most of the research was done. At first I just wanted an overview of how Guanyin changed over time depending on the cultural context into which they were translated. It quickly narrowed focus retelling the shift in gender and the first go-around was an ultimately informative yet dull paper written far too close to the deadline. After presenting it I was asked to think a bit more about what originally drew me to Guanyin in the first place. At which point I tugged on the long skirt I had worn to the presentation. This tongue-in-cheek response proved prophetic. I started this project at a time when I was also forming my own gender identity, so it's natural that for the Religion Studies Honors Project I chose to devote my research to an icon who also had a fluid gender identity. At the risk of leaving the historical analysis to the side, I want to end this paper by exploring what

Guanyin has meant for transgender people who rarely get to see people like themselves represented in popular culture, and much less validated in established religions.

I began this conversation by addressing that LGBT+ individuals as a whole don't have great relationships with institutionalized religions. A survey conducted in 2014 found that only 24% of LGBT+ adults in the U.S. identified as highly religious, about half the national average.⁶⁵ And for a good reason too, due to the open hostility Abrahamic faiths tend to have towards people who fall outside their monolithic understandings of gender and sexuality. A study conducted by the BBC found that approximately one half of homeless LGBT youth come from religious backgrounds.⁶⁶ It's sad when a community dedicated to inspiring love and hope among its members, instead encourages it's families to disown their own children should they not fit the cross-shaped mold. One way that the queer community tries to validate itself and spread awareness is by letting people know this is not a new trend. To do this we find historical or literary accounts of Queer individuals whose true identities or relationships may have been hidden in their lifetime or otherwise white-washed by later historians. To this end, finding a religious icon with an obvious trans or fluid identity that goes back nineteen-hundred years is truly extraordinary.

Despite this, I found little in the way of historical links between queer individuals prior to the 20th century and Guanyin. While many cultures around the world have places for third-gendered individuals, including in Buddhist India and Thailand, Avalokiteshvara had always

⁶⁵ Frank Newport, "LGBT population in the US significantly less religious" News Gallop <https://news.gallup.com/poll/174788/lgbt-population-significantly-less-religious.aspx> August 11, 2014 Last visited April 31st, 2020

⁶⁶ Nomia Iqbal and Josh Parry "LGBT people are being made homeless due to religion" BBC <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-49150753> July 30th, 2019, accessed May 1st, 2020

been considered male there and is not associated with these groups.⁶⁷ Even in China where Guanyin's identity is strictly contested, many people of Chinese descent are not aware of her having ever been considered male. At least this was the case for the blogger Stacie Ku, who did not realize this until growing up.⁶⁸ Although while reading Yuhang Li's "Becoming Guanyin" I did notice a description of a Chinese devotee named Tao Shan who lived a surprisingly short life from 1756-1780. Li describes her as being less comfortable with her role as a woman and tried to emphasize her gender non-specific forms of worship, while feeling shame for her own female body⁶⁹. The details of which bring to mind gender dysphoria in trans-men.

Regardless of the historical precedent, of which I'm sure there's more of than has been recorded, Guanyin has always adapted. New groups constantly adopt her as their new patron depending on where there is a need. Specifically, those who have been held back by class or gender regimes. Why should this be any different? And I am far from the first to notice the connection as multiple queer writers had already advocated for the adoption of Guanyin as a Queer icon. Most notably Cathryn Bailey's article on "Embracing the Icon" encourages just such an adoption. In this she examines how Guanyin's incredibly complex gender identity varies not just over time but also place, or even exist as multiple identities at once without any messy gender assigned at birth to distract us. Thus she concludes that Guanyin "is a quintessentially trans icon in the queerest sense."⁷⁰ Guanyin defies all classifications as well as attempts to shove them off to some unwanted third category. Guanyin is closely tied not just with femininity but with East Asian ideal femininity, while the more conservative movement still holds that he is

⁶⁷ "How Does Buddhism Relate and Help to Formulate A Local Understanding of Transsexuals in Thailand" 123helpme.com <https://www.123helpme.com/how-does-buddhism-relate-and-help-to-formulate-a-local-understanding-of-transsexuals-in-thailand-view.asp?id=163165> accessed April 31st, 2020

⁶⁸ Bailey, "Embracing the icon" 180

⁶⁹ Li "Becoming Guanyin" 13-14

⁷⁰ Bailey "Embracing the Icon" pg. 193

strictly masculine with the undeniable connection to masculine beauty through his stylized mustaches. Thus Guanyin occupies all positions and none, allowing individual practitioners to graft their narratives onto the bodhisattva.

Now, I am in no way suggesting that Guanyin was literally transgender. One of the reasons I was so hesitant to go into the direction of queer theology with this project was simply due to the fact that even a devout Buddhist would rarely say Guanyin ever lived a mortal life, no matter what the pilgrimage tales might say. However even from their origin as a shifting androgynous bodhisattva, to the sprawling and complex change in names and iconography, Guanyin's history as an icon has mainly parallels to the lives of trans and otherwise queer people. Even the many non-religious people in the community can still find a sort of meaning with Guanyin through group identification.⁷¹ To many, Guanyin is no more real than the rainbow on the flag, however that symbol can still unite people in an in-group and demarcate acceptance and camaraderie to help queer individuals find and connect. And unlike a simple pride flag, Guanyin has the added benefit of being a character with identifiable images, stories, and personalities to resonate with people both in and outside the queer communities. When Pauline Park submitted a treaty to the President's Advisory Commission on Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders, she used Guanyin as an example to help explain and promote the growing trans movement. Therefore, we can see Guanyin's role as a figure in art who can both serve as a benchmark and yet also an argument for social change.

Of course if you were to take Guanyin in her full Buddhist context, the average gender non-conforming atheist may find far more tools there for expressing and navigating queer

⁷¹ Ibid. 187

identity than they first assumed. First of all, Buddhism is an open religion with a majority of practitioners not hailing from the region of northern India that spawned it, and it has a focus on teaching others of various backgrounds. While one should be wary of cultural appropriation, as long as the history and practice is understood and respected, the appropriation will likely be minimal. Additionally, Buddhism holds the idea of no-self, or that everything we think we are, are simply how we conditioned to behave and think of the self with no true substance beneath.⁷² This pairs surprisingly well with Judith Butler's idea of gender performativity. Butler argued that there is no true gender and everything we think we know about gender is simply how society conditioned us to act and relate to each other.⁷³ Buddhism takes this a step further by saying essentially everything we may think of as ourselves is formed in a similar way and subject to change. It then gives tools to break down this into five aggregates: form, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness.⁷⁴ This separates one's own body not from any kind of soul, but by four different ways of mentally processing it and the world around it, which will be particularly useful for understanding how dysphoria arises and in which of these stages the disconnect of your own or the perceptions of another might cause it. Buddhism and Butler hold that there is no gender, though this is not the most commonly held view among most modern-day trans-people who very much experience a disconnect from their bodies and an innate gender that they truly are. An innateness of being with which Buddhism disagrees with on principle. So while the average transgender person will still disagree with some of Buddhism's premises, the faith nonetheless gives useful tools for understanding separateness of gender from physical sex and one's perception of it. Finally, theologians like Zhiyi also give precedent for the destruction

⁷² Harvey "introduction" pg. 56

⁷³ Judith Butler "Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity" 1990

⁷⁴ Harvey "introduction" 56-57

of gendered regimes. Divinity like Guanyin and the Dragon Princess gives examples and put personal mentoring faces always available to guide the practitioner along their path and support them no matter how much they may change, for these divine beings also know what it means to have a shifting identity.

If I could continue the project, I want to dedicate more time to looking for real-world practitioners with queer identities that may have been overlooked in the historical narratives. Alternatively, this project might evolve into anthropological research on how both modern-day queer individuals, and devout Buddhists who aren't part of the queer community perceive Guanyin. The views of the latter group will also be especially interesting as it will help illuminate how much of the historical changes and contestation has made its way into the common consciousness and how much has been forgotten or willfully ignored. Yet there's not a doubt in my mind that as time continues, growing communities such as the queer community will not abandon all faith, but some members will continue to seek out and adapt figures like Guanyin to better reflect their changing values and identities. And Guanyin will do what they always have done, which is to shift and transform to reach whoever calls out to them. But the thing that has always defined them will remain constant. Avalokitesvara's uniquely queer form of compassion will continue to break boundaries to reach underrepresented communities. While Avalokitesvara's form may change a myriad times, their compassion can only ever manifest one way - as subversive radical acceptance.

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