Avalokiteśvara: *Bodhisattvas* and Signs of Change

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Bio:

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Abstract:

Bodhisattvas, celestial figures who serve to assist humans on the path towards Buddhist enlightenment, developed new associations with rulers, geography, history, and mythology. None of these developments are quite as striking as the transformation that took place in China. Avalokiteśvara, a traditionally male *bodhisattva* became Kuan-yin, a female *bodhisattva.* Why would the Chinese have found Avalokiteśvara more appropriate as a woman than as a man, where other cultures in Asia were satisfied with Avalokiteśvara being represented in the traditional fashion? When looking at visual and textual evidence we see that Buddhism has the nature to change in relation to its surroundings. The thesis of this research is that Kuan-yin's sexual transformation serves as an example of how Buddhism transforms to take root in its new culture. Kuan-yin's sexual transformation in China is arguably the result of Buddhism's growing isolation from other Indic religious traditions as well as its assimilation of certain elements found in Confucianism and Taoism. Once transmitted and fully integrated in Chinese Mahāyāna Buddhism, Kuan-yin sexually transformed to fulfill the needs of the Chinese population.

Introduction

Siddhartha Gautama, who became the Buddha upon his enlightenment, founded Buddhism in northern India around the sixth century B.C.E. Though Buddhism began in this early period, images of the Buddha did not begin to appear in great quantity until after the first century C.E. During the Kushan period, there were two major schools of art, one in the Gandhara region in northwest India, and a second school near the modern-day city of Mathura. Each of these schools developed distinct styles of portraying the Buddha and *bodhisattvas*.

Bodhisattvas are celestial beings who can be compared to saints because they act as intercessors to humans on the path towards Buddhist enlightenment. A *bodhisattva* is visually distinguishable from images of the Buddha by their ornamentation. In contrast to Buddha images, which typically feature monastic robes and shorn hair, *bodhisattva* images display long hair and a fair amount of jewelry including earrings, necklaces, anklets, and bracelets.[1] Their bodily adornment underscores their engagement in worldly activities. A *bodhisattva* is one who has achieved enlightenment but chooses to stay on earth to help others do the same. *Bodhisattvas* play an integral role in Buddhist artistic and devotional practices. This is especially true in early Buddhism and its transmission from India to China.

This paper will examine Indian images of the *bodhisattva* Avalokiteśvara[2] in connection to early images produced in China and East Asia. The name Avalokiteśvara remains constant to this *bodhisattva* in South and Southeast Asia but changes to Kuan-yin in China. Kuan-yin is one of the most popular *bodhisattvas* in East Asia today. Traditionally we can identify images of Avalokiteśvara through these early attributes: a small Buddha in the crown or matted hair, a long-stemmed lotus held in one hand and a vessel of water held in the other. However, it should be noted that these attributes vary throughout time and place. Of significance, Avalokiteśvara

remains depicted as a male *bodhisattva* in the Indian context but is typically depicted as a woman in China today. Kuan-yin's sexual transformation serves as an example of how Buddhism transforms itself to take root in its new culture. Reasons why this *bodhisattva* underwent a feminization will be explored in examinations of relevant artistic and textual material dating from the first stages of Kuan-yin's feminization. In addition, the roles of other religious traditions and their later impact on this transformation will be considered.

Adaptations of Buddhism in China

While previous scholars have connected the sexual transformation of Kuan-yin to the new political and religious environment of China, it was more than this. With its transmission into China, artistic and literary expressions of Kuan-yin became distanced from the Hindu cultural milieu present in India. By examining the earliest depictions of Avalokiteśvara entering China, we can better understand Avalokiteśvara's transformation of aesthetic and textual characteristics; it allowed him to become a merciful feminine savior who fit the needs of the Chinese people. Moreover, this exploration can serve as a model for understanding other instances of adaptations of religious images in new contexts. By looking at the sexual transformation of Kuan-yin, one can grasp a better understanding of the transformation of Buddhism from India to China.

Buddhism was spread to China via Buddhist monks who traveled the Silk Road. The active pilgrimage of Chinese monks who came to India in search of texts and images was of great importance to this exchange. During their travels, Chinese monks collected a variety of portable images of the Buddha and *bodhisattvas* and selected Sanskrit texts (*sūtras*) to bring back to China for translation. The *sūtras* that were translated were determined by the interest of each of the monks. The *sūtras* chosen for translation were primarily from Mahāyāna Buddhist

traditions, but they also translated texts from other schools of Buddhism. In this way, the Chinese were exposed to a wide range of Buddhist literature from stories of the Buddha's previous lives to manuals of meditation(Yu 16). The *sūtras* served as an aid to visually and textually communicate Buddhist doctrine, mythology, and practice between these cultures. In the second and third centuries C.E, there were more than eighty *sūtras* in which Avalokiteśvara appeared, though he usually played minor roles in them (Yu 31). In the fifth century, the Chinese Buddhist monk and scholar Kumārajīva (ca. 401-413) with his assistants produced the definitive translations of most of the important Mahāyāna *sūtras* (Yu 17).

Many scholars have described the Universal Gateway chapter of the *Lotus sūtra* as being the most important early scriptural source involving Avalokiteśvara. The earliest surviving translation of the Universal Gateway is from 286 C.E. (Yu 37). In this *sūtra,* the devotees are assured that the *bodhisattva* will respond to requests for all sorts of aid from those who call out his name. It is promised that "if they single-mindedly call his name, then at once he will perceive the sound of their voices, and they will gain deliverance from their trials" (Yu 38). Some of the trials that devotees could be saved from include harm or injuries from sinking ships, bandits, and rampaging elephants.

The Androgynous Depiction of Buddha and it Effects on the Feminization of Kuan-yin

During the fifth century when Kumārajīva was translating important *sūtras* and the Universal Gateway chapter was gaining great popularity, there was an aesthetic shift in artistic expression of Buddhist images, especially in northeastern India. Buddhist artworks produced in the workshops at Sarnath became more androgynous in appearance (Brown 166).mages from Sarnath present the body of the Buddha as a slender figure with narrow hips, downcast eyes, and significantly unarticulated genitals. As a result, the gender of the Buddha is more difficult to

determine. These neutral figures are among the images that the Chinese population would have been exposed to, especially through smaller and more portable images brought back by Chinese monks. This aesthetic shift in body-type is also witnessed in *bodhisattva* images.

In order to account for this aesthetic shift, many scholars have looked at changes in Buddhist philosophical thought and monastic practice. For example, in Mahāyāna literature, there was a large amount of writing addressing women's inability to enter nirvana,which seems to be indicative of debate or even conflict around this aspect of Buddhism (Paul 157-201). Texts in Mahāyāna Buddhism began to address women entering nirvana rather than being reborn. The interest in the greater visibility of women in monastic and lay practices may have contributed to the aesthetic shift seen in image production at this time. The "gender neutral" role that the initiate nun or monk takes upon entering the order can also be considered part of that shift. Upon initiation, the nun or monk must have her or his head shaved and don monastic garments. They must also take a vow of celibacy. These practices and the more androgynous appearance of the *sangha* in general may have affected conceptions of the Buddha and *bodhisattva* as more gender neutral beings.

Throughout the fifth and sixth centuries in China, one sees Kuan-yin visually depicted as a man or seemingly genderless. Scholars place the beginning of the feminization of Kuan-yin in the T'ang dynasty beginning in the seventh century and the completion of the feminization in the Ming dynasty in the fourteenth century. By looking at the role that Buddhism played within China and how it interacted with other religions and Chinese history, one can further understand the gender transformation of Kuan-yin.

Dogmatic Combinations that Led to the Creation of Kuan-yin

In the same way that one may define a *bodhisattva* using the Christian term "saint," the Chinese adapted an important term called *ke-y,i* or the practice of matching concepts from Buddhism with those of indigenous traditions (Paul 157-201). Many of the *sūtras* that were translated used a Taoist vocabulary to introduce philosophies, and this became a favorite way of making Buddhist ideas familiar to the educated. *Ke-yi* makes it especially clear how much of an effect surrounding religions had. The thesis of this research is that Ke-*yi* was, in part, responsible for associating Buddhist traditions with that of indigenous cultures.

Chinese-Buddhist studies scholar, Chün-Fang Yü, explains that Confucianism was the state philosophy of China, which left Taoism and Buddhism to compete for patronage. The two religions freely borrowed from one another and often practices of one religion were assimilated with the other of one religion were assimilated with the other. While Neo-Confucianism and monastic Buddhism were more patriarchal in structure, Taoism revered the feminine symbol *yīn* (from *yīn* and *yáng***)** and provided opportunities for the religious aspirations of women (Paul 17). This seemingly corresponded with the growing roles of women articulated in Mahāyāna literature. There is a history of female goddesses in the Taoist tradition that scholars have turned to for explaining Kuan-yin. This movement was noted for its parish organization in which both men and women held leadership roles (Paul 17).

Through movements and fabricated *sūtras,* we see that Taoism and Buddhism helped each shape the other's views and practices. In the fourth century, a Taoist movement known as the *Ling-pao* (Spiritual treasure), borrowed consciously and extensively from Buddhist *sūtras* and was concerned "with *bodhisattva*-like intensity" with salvation of all beings, not just fellow members (Paul 18). In the fifth century, we see a Chinese fabricated *sūtra,* the *T'ai-wei Po-li Ching.* This is the earliest expression of this tradition and represents the first known attempt to

align the *pancasila* (five precepts in Buddhism) with the five Confucian "permanents" (virtues) and the five element theories in Taoism. It had a significant effect on Buddhism in China. It adapted to concepts of *yīn* and *yáng* philosophies, yet remained faithful to a karma doctrine basic to the Buddha-dharma. This was eventually abandoned after the Mahāyānist rebellion, but it mapped out the future for Chinese-Buddhist doctrine (Chappell 11).

Another factor to consider about Kuan-yin's transformation is the different roles that *bodhisattvas* play in Buddhist Asia. Kuan-yin did not become connected with royalty as Avalokiteśvara did in other Asian countries. Due to Buddhism's interaction with Taoism and its previous lack of dominant female goddesses in China, Kuan-yin served to fill this need in order to resonate with the Chinese people. In turn, Chinese native religions lacked a universal savior. For these reasons, Kuan-yin was able to meet these roles successfully (Yu 5).

The Legend of Miào-shàn

At a later point, the transformation of Kuan-yin began to be assimilated into select accounts of China's history; furthermore, the Taoist tradition of turning historical people into gods was significant to Kuan-yin's popularity. The legend of Miào-shàn took place in the seventh century and helped develop the feminization of Kuan-yin in later centuries. Miào-shàn was a princess who wanted to become a nun against her father's wishes. In anger, the king burned down the nunnery and tried to have her executed. Through divine intervention, Miào-shàn survived. Eventually her father grew ill and learned that only medicine made from the arm and eye of one without anger could save him. Miào-shàn willingly gave this to save her father's life. After healing, her father learned of this and begged for forgiveness. Miào-shàn was then transformed into Kuan-yin and would be visually depicted as the thousand-eyed, thousand-armed goddess. Kuan-yin, therefore, was associated with Miào-shàn, a princess, who is very important

in Chinese-Buddhist history. Kuan-yin's association with Miào-shàn can be confirmed by the birthday they share, an event not encountered with other *bodhisattvas* (Yu 293-294).

Conclusion

Buddhism has the nature to change in relation to its surrounding religions. These changes are best understood when examined in their specific cultural contexts. Through aesthetic shifts in Indian-Buddhist art, the transmission of these objects to China, the role that Avalokiteśvara plays in text, and the development of Buddhism alongside Taoism and Confucianism, it is clear that Kuan-yin was more efficacious as a female *bodhisattva* in China. While this is a preliminary study of her feminization, a more thorough look at her popularity in China during the Song dynasty should shed more light on her role in Chinese-Buddhist artistic and devotional practices.

Endnotes

[1] For a number of images of the Buddha refer to Robert Brown, "The Feminization of the Sarnath Gupta-Period Buddha Images," *Bulletin of Asia Institute* vol.16 (2002): 165-179.
[2] For an image of Avalokiteśvara refer to Joanna Gottfried Williams, *The Art of Gupta India: Empire and Province* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982) Figure 97.

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