

***Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Later Imperial China.*** By Yuhang Li. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. xii + 299. \$65.00/£54.00.

For a long time, textual analysis and scriptural exegesis were the primary sources for understanding religious practice; this is all the truer for the study of Buddhism in China. Recent publications have turned to the examination of material culture to understand sacred traditions more deeply. This extraordinary book has found a trove of information in the devotional arts produced by women in the late Ming and early Qing eras. These pious forms of expression include the broad areas of ink painting, calligraphy, dance, and such skills as embroidery and jewellery design. Analysing these forms of reverence has yielded the unsurprising revelation that most worshippers in that era concentrated their prayers on Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion. In the structure of the book, each of the four chapters addresses a specific medium of art, accompanied by an anthropological overview of its practitioners and their motivations. As for visual resources, Li has amassed a collection of different types of art and crafts including painting, illustrated books, embroidery, and jewellery; in addition, she also extensively uses a variety of literary sources—local histories, gazetteers, scriptures, and poetry.

Li devotes most of her attention to late manifestations of Buddhist piety. At this stage, the practice of Buddhism often seems more like a form of popular religion. Its early strict adherence to the precepts of the Eight-Fold Path had been tempered by adaptations to the indigenous spiritual traditions of China—Daoism and, more importantly, Confucianism. Li repeatedly points out that in their pursuit of devout activities, many of these pious women behaved within the confines of Confucian dictates of filial behaviour and secular morality. One of the major themes of this inquiry is the way in which women at this time engaged with the Bodhisattva, who, by the Ming era, had taken on several female personifications, enabling them to transcend their lives by merging with the Bodhisattva through a number of special aesthetic activities.

Chapter 1 examines dance as a form of holy fervour. Images of the Guanyin dance are exceedingly rare, so the author relies upon literary evidence—drama and poetry. The eighteenth-century drama, *The Glory of Switching Bodies* (*Huanshen rong* 換身榮) by Wu Zhensheng 吳震生 (1695–1769), for example, explores the phenomenon of sex change (p. 25): the Bodhisattva helps a male worshipper transform into a woman. Most of this chapter studies the special relationship between courtesans and Guanyin, “between the erotic and sacred, from a historical perspective” (p. 27) during the Ming when the courtesan culture “flourished,” stating that: “Eroticism was viewed as a skillful teaching device to help the laity, particularly agnostic men, reach

goodness. . . . male scholars constantly drew comparisons between the courtesans and eroticized manifestations of Guanyin” (p. 27). Here, more than anywhere, one can appreciate the unique type of worship of the female forms of the Bodhisattva in late imperial China. Li highlights the practices of the courtesan Xu Jinghong 徐驚鴻 (*fl.* mid-sixteenth century) on account of her fame as a performer of the Guanyin dance as recorded in her biography in 1610 (p. 31ff). The author asserts that, like incense and flowers, dance was not an unusual form of offering to the deity, but when a courtesan enacted the Guanyin dance, it became erotic. By means of undertaking the dance and embodying the Bodhisattva in her movements, the dancer thereby achieved identification with her resulting in a mystical union.

A more traditional form of sacred art, painting, is the subject of Chapter 2. A different class of women engaged in this kind of worship, like Xu Can 徐燦 (1617–1698), a seventeenth-century literati and painter from Suzhou who attained fame as a Guanyin specialist: she vowed to make over 5,000 icons dedicated to her mother-in-law. In contrast to the erotic connotations engendered in the Guanyin dance, Li finds paintings that represented the taming of sensuality (p. 61). These ink paintings largely depict the white-robed Guanyin in ink monochrome with delicate lines, or *baimiao* 白描, a style formalized in the Song dynasty, when artists obscured the nudity and jewels of the Indian icon with a plain white cloth, in conformity with *Chan* 禪 (Zen) aesthetic values. Li finds that many middle-aged women without children made such paintings (p. 85). This chapter presents several in-depth portraits, like the seventeenth-century Xing Cijing 邢慈靜 (1568?–after 1640), who dedicated herself to painting the subject (pp. 72–92), and Fang Weiyi 方維儀 (1585–1668), the wife of a renowned member of the gentry, a chaste widow who was both a painter and a writer who died in the early decades of the eighteenth century (pp. 92–105). Fang was a celebrated Confucian and Buddhist devotee for whom the painting of Guanyin was a meditative exercise. These two detailed biographical portraits analyse the religious practices of women who piously expressed themselves with brush and ink. Li seeks a broad interpretation of the importance and meaning of this kind of ink painting both in their personal lives and their roles in society, concluding:

In particular, the feminized Guanyin was a reflective device by which painters who were laywomen expressed affinity with the deity. Such devotion entailed giving form to Guanyin’s virtuous qualities, such as compassion and purity, through the skilled physical act of painting her, and doing so in the *baimiao* style. (p. 105)

Embroidery with human hair is the subject of Chapter 3. For this art, the element of pain and arduous labour enhances the efficacy of the offering. The women plucked the hairs from their scalps and then used them to embroider the face of Guanyin.

Needlework is a familiar medium for pious expression, as the Tang textile from Dunhuang's library Cave 17 (Figure 3.1) attests but differs dramatically from hair embroidery performed by women as virtuous acts. Li affirms, "In a wide range of examples—including the chaste wife or widow, the filial daughter-in-law, and the righteous mother—the attainment of purity is facilitated and indeed enabled by the act of stitching an image of Guanyin" (p. 116). The donation of hair is a sincere form of Buddhist piety. One of the earliest examples is the famous Yuan-dynasty painter, Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262–1319), who stitched the facial features of the divine image with her own hair. The sacrifice of hair proves to have many associations. For one, it relates to impoverished women, who, lacking resources, shave their heads to offer something precious to the Buddha (p. 121). In this chapter, Li also discusses "blood-writing" scriptures because it occurs with examples of embroidery. Here again both genders engage in the skill, but in this study, women's practice is the focus. What is more, Li establishes that the body parts of hair and blood are substances associated with regeneration, pain, skill, and the transformation of materials into devotional objects (p. 122). Then there is a larger consideration of the merits of painful practices in Buddhism: the greater the effort and hardship, the greater the value of the act. As if plucking hairs and using them for embroidery were not enough, Li finds there are three ways they used hair: as a single thread, as multiple strands combined, and the remarkable act of "splitting hair" into four strands. Also recounted is the arduous preparation of the strands to make them pliable as thread. In addition, Li asserts, by using elements of their body in the creation of the icon, the devotees merge with the Bodhisattva (p. 141). It is also interesting that she finds that the use of hair in this way couples with filial piety for ones' parents, while painting relates to concern for in-laws.

The last chapter is quite different from the earlier ones. First, it relies on archaeological evidence—the hairpins found in the tombs of high-ranking ladies. Secondly, women are not directly related to the crafting of the hairpins; rather they are credited for selecting them and arranging them. Luxurious objects made of gold and inlaid with precious stones, the hairpins were the personal possessions of royal women. Here, too, Li draws detailed biographies to show how the women placed ornate adornments in burials as a religious practice. The pins all have an image of Guanyin, but for one which portrays the Buddha Amitābha (Amitofu). And, like the tiny icon of Amitābha in Guanyin's crown, they are placed at the centre. Li maintains the act of wearing the hairpins establishes a relationship with the Bodhisattva:

Instead of Guanyin leading someone to the Pure Land, the hairpin is a device by which Guanyin can "ferry" the deceased to the Pure Land directly through her own body. I suggest that the hairpin icon thus functions both metonymically and as way to help transform and transport the deceased. (p. 148)

Using arduous scholarship and insightful interpretations of the material evidence and historical/literary references, Li creates a compelling narrative of the relationship between women and the worship of Guanyin in later imperial China. Examining these different types of art, Li explains the motives and means of the women's reverence within the socio-religious context of the time. Convincingly Li presents how through these various reverential aesthetic activities, women identified with female personifications of the Bodhisattva of Compassion and how through such behaviour they spiritually merged with her.

What is lacking for me is a clear definition of the identity of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, a short list of his various manifestations, iconographical attributes, powers, and the wide range of pictorial forms. Essential to understanding this Bodhisattva and the extraordinary changes in representation that took place in China is the knowledge that his essential Indian identity was fluid. That is, he had the specific ability to take on any shape to accomplish the goal of saving the worshipper. As delineated in the primary scripture, the *Lotus sūtra* attributed to the first century or so, there are eight perils from which one may be saved by Avalokiteśvara (Guanyin)—fire, shipwreck, wild animals, ogresses, bandits, incarceration, ghouls, and execution, representations of which often accompany the icons of the Bodhisattva in India. There, Avalokiteśvara dresses like a prince wearing a skirt, shawl, numerous necklaces, belts, and bracelets in addition to a crown which holds a small icon of the Buddha the West, for he is one of Amitābha's attendants. Also, this figure holds a lotus flower, for he is called the "holder of the lotus flower" in the scriptures, and a tall-necked jar containing the waters of immortality. In India, the Bodhisattva also has several esoteric forms with three or eleven heads and four, six, eight, or even a thousand arms, each of which holds an attribute.

It is also valuable to point out that by the Ming era, there was a plethora of images of Guanyin, in many materials—white porcelain, jade, bronze, gold, sandalwood, and more. The multitude of tourists who for centuries visited Putuo Island 普陀山 near Hangzhou in Zhejiang province, a very popular pilgrimage destination, found a wealth of representations—small portable icons, printed forms of the Guanyin scripture, and more. Indeed, most Buddhist temples in China by this time displayed on the wall behind the main altar of the main hall a large-scale polychrome sculptural rendering of Guanyin in his mountain island home, replete with forests, animals, and birds, as well as the child supplicant, Sudhana. Most temples also had a Guanyin Hall in which a large thousand-arm incarnation of Bodhisattva looked out from the main altar.

It is important to note that these icons are androgynous: they are extremely feminine but are bare-chested and may sport a moustache. Lately, much has been made of the transition of Avalokiteśvara from a male figure to a female one; but considering the Confucian mores that dominated China, the representation of a bare-

ched woman is hard to realize and, thus, most of the institutional images, despite their superficial femininity, cannot be identified as female. In addition, the transition of Guanyin into a female is presented as an accomplishment of later Chinese religious practices; but there are much earlier depictions based on Sanskrit scriptures that show the thirty-three appearances of the god in a multitude of forms—man, guardian, merchant, monster, and woman, as seen in the mural in cave 45 at Dunhuang from the eighth century. So, as the scriptures make clear, from the start there was a female identity of the Bodhisattva. Somehow, it seems inappropriate to discuss the Bodhisattva in terms of sex, as he is a more highly realized supernatural being, no longer limited by the restraints of a human body. As the focus of Buddhist worship which eschews all attachments especially sensual ones, the Bodhisattva has surely transcended sex and gender distinctions.

No doubt, as Li explains, by the time of the Ming the feminine identity of the fish-carrying Guanyin and other female persona were popular and women naturally related to the female incarnations and, through the acts of reverence described in this book, achieved identification with her. In sum, this exacting analysis is an extremely valuable contribution to Chinese studies, resulting in a more complete understanding of the individual and collective lives of women in later imperial China and the ways in which they turned to the worship of Guanyin to help them live spiritual lives in concert with native religious teachings.

PATRICIA EICHENBAUM KARETZKY  
*Bard College New York*