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### The Evolution of The Bodhisattva Guanyin

The Bodhisattva Guanyin is known throughout Asia but by somewhat different names or spellings of the same name. Other spellings, which are used interchangeably according to sources, are Kwan-yin and Kuan-yin. She is also referred to as Avalokitesvara from the Lotus Sūtra. In Japan, the versions of the name Guanyin are Kannon, Kwannon, and Kanzeon (Bowker 112). There are also various versions of the origin of this Bodhisattva and even of which sex the Bodhisattva may represent. People and texts from mideastern cities in China, including Beijing, Nanjing and Shanghai, refer to this Bodhisattva as Guanyin and present the Bodhisattva as a female; although it is known by some that she is really a male personage that is perceived in the form of a female.

Guanyin, also popularly known as the goddess of mercy, is the Madonna of Chinese Buddhism. Statuary large and small, as well as numerous varieties of paintings of this female deity, can be found in most cities in mainland China. The modern popular Guanyin of China is the ultimate embodiment of several images that span across Asia and down through the development and spread of Buddhism.

In order to better understand the evolution of Guanyin, one should begin with a review of the various Buddhist soteriologies and cultures of Asia. The schools of Buddhism are divided among three main groups which arose at different times and have, to a certain degree, developed independently. However, they have influenced one another over time. These three are

Theravada, Mahayana, and Tantric. Theravada, which means teaching of the elders, is the oldest of the three. It is also referred to by the Mahayanists as Hinayana, which means Little Vehicle. Mahayana, which means Great Vehicle was the second group to develop. The third was Tantric, which is also known as Tibetan Buddhism and as Vajrayana Buddhism. Vajrayana means Diamond Vehicle. The development of the female deity has been different for all three of these schools.

In Theravada Buddhism, the term Bodhisattva is a title that is used to identify the historical Buddhas in their previous lives, before they attained Buddhahood (Bowker 155). The female Guanyin does not exist in Theravada doctrines. The male Avalokitesvara did, however, appear in the Theravada Buddhism of Sri Lanka in the early medieval Sinhala culture (seventh or eighth century CE) through the identification with the cult of Natha (Holt 72). Natha is an important god in Sri Lanka and, as one of the four national guardian deities, he is regarded as an incarnation of the future Buddha Maitre (Holt 209). In popular art of medieval Sri Lanka, Avalokitesvara was portrayed in over one hundred different iconographic forms. His body positions and facial expressions varied but an overall simplicity and ascetic beauty persisted (Holt 78-79).

The idea of what qualifies a perfect being begins with Theravada Buddhism and is expanded in the Pure Land sect of Mahayana Buddhism in the first century of the common era. Walpola Rahula translated texts from the original Pali language. In his discussion on the fourth noble truth, he describes what is required for a man to be perfect.

There are two qualities that he should develop equally: compassion on one side, and wisdom on the other. Here compassion represents love, charity, kindness, tolerance and such noble qualities on the

emotional side, or qualities of the heart, while wisdom would stand for the intellectual side or the qualities of the mind. If one develops only the emotional neglecting the intellectual, one may become a good-hearted fool; while to develop only the intellectual side neglecting the emotional may turn one into a hard-hearted intellect without feeling for others. Therefore, to be perfect one has to develop both equally. That is the aim of the Buddhist way of life: in it wisdom and compassion are inseparably linked together” (Rahula 46).

This ideal trinity, the Buddha himself, the Bodhisattva of wisdom, and the Bodhisattva of compassion, is taken further in Mahayana Buddhism and specifically the Pure Land sect with Amitabha Buddha and the Bodhisattvas Avalokitesvara (Guanyin) and Mahasthamaprapta (Lopez 367). In Mahayana Buddhism, the term Bodhisattva is used to describe any being who takes the vow to become a Buddha in a compassionate gesture to save all sentient beings (Bowker 155). Mahasthamaprapta is the emanation of Amitabha’s wisdom, and he acts on behalf of Amitabha in opening people’s eyes to the need for their salvation from samsara (the world of death and rebirth). The name Mahasthamaprapta means ‘He of Great Power’ (Harvey 131).

Avalokitesvara is the emanation of the compassion of Amitabha. “Amitabha Buddha embodies the primary liberating energy of compassion; Avalokita Bodhisattva embodies its secondary emanation” (Blofeld 22). The name Avalokitesvara means ‘The Lord Who Looks Down (with compassion).’ He is also called Kuan-yin, ‘Cry Regarder,’ or Kuan-shih-yin, ‘Regarder of the Cries of the World.’ Avalokitesvara wears a crown with a small image of Amitabha set in the center. He also wears royal clothes instead of monastic robes to indicate his close contact with the world (Harvey 131).

The invocation of the male Avalokitesvara was first introduced from India to China in the first century CE. Hui-yuan was the first to teach the Pure Land faith in Amitabha (Wright 49). Hui-yuan founded the White Lotus Society, which practiced the Pure Land faith, in 403 CE (Suzuki 23). By the eighth century CE, Mahayana Buddhism was fully integrated in China (Wright 82). According to the sūtras introduced from India, “Avalokita, bearing a lotus flower, was born from a ray of light that sprang from Amitabha Buddha’s right eye; and that this miraculously born being straightway uttered the syllables OM MANI PADME HUM,” which is the mantra that is used to invoke him/her (Blofeld 39).

The worship of Avalokitesvara spread to Tibet in the seventh century CE when Padma Sambhava introduced Buddhism to the people (Blofeld 39). Avalokitesvara took a human form in Tantric Buddhism. The Dalai Lama is the physical incarnation of Avalokitesvara as well as a series of thirteen previous Dalai Lamas (Lopez 171). Avalokitesvara is certainly a male deity in Tantric Buddhism, and according to the Dalai Lama, it would be wrong for Tibetans to think otherwise (Blofeld 39).

In Tibet, there is another being who fills the role of the female deity. “In one account all the creatures lament the thought of Avalokitesvara’s abandoning them as he is about to achieve nirvana. Hearing them, Avalokitesvara sheds a tear of compassion for all beings. That tear becomes Tara, who is thus understood to be the essence of the essence of compassion” (Kinsley 165). In another version, Green Tara and White Tara were born from two tears shed by Avalokitesvara when he saw the horrors of hell (Harvey 137). Also among the myths of Tara’s origins is one in which “she is an incarnation of the prince ‘Moon of Wisdom,’ who in ancient

times, through her supreme thought toward enlightenment, made the vow to help sentient beings caught in the web of suffering” (Allione 63)

In her biography, Nangsa Obum reveals the nature of these deities and her parents in a poem. “The external father is Kunzang Dechen. The external mother is Nyangtse Seldron. The inner father is Avalokitesvara. The inner mother is the white and blue Tara. The secret father is Mahayana Mahasuhka, ‘The Great Bliss of the Great Vehicle,’ The secret mother is Prajna, clear and pure. Homage to the outer, inner, and secret parents in their union of bliss and emptiness” (Allione 68-69). Prajna Paramita is one of three images of the feminine found in Tibetan Tantra. They are “the dynamic, often wrathful, figure of the dakini, who is usually in a dancing or standing position; the seated female figure who represents a philosophical concept from Indian Buddhism such as Prajna Paramita; and the female figure who is embracing a larger male figure in sexual union” (Allione 11).

The Buddha began his monastic order while living in a Hindu social system along with contemporaries such as the Jains, which started the first order of nuns. In this society, there was a general idea that women could not live a religious life outside of the family without threatening the stability of the society. According to the cultural dictates, women were primarily child-bearers and servants to their family. The Buddha was faced with the decision to follow the structure of the Hindu society at large or to allow women the privilege of pursuing the spiritual path to enlightenment, as he believed they were fully as capable as men in attaining (Allione 7).

The following story about Nangsa Obum is a synopsis of a native Tibetan folk drama, performed at a monastery courtyard or village square. The story demonstrates the common role of women and the exceptional “popular female form of the Buddha,” which is Tara (Allione 63).

Tara can always be counted upon to help whoever calls for her in time of need. “Tara is often said to rescue her devotees from such desperate predicaments as being lost in an impenetrable forest, foundering in a storm at sea, being under threat of imminent execution, or being trapped and bound in prison. The many folk stories about Tara show her typically appearing at the request of her devotees to dramatically rescue them from the jaws of certain death” (Kinsley 166-167). She is usually portrayed as a young girl of about sixteen and her behavior is usually playful, energetic, and fraught with humor. Tara is as much a Hindu goddess as she is a Buddhist goddess, but she is not very prominent in the Hindu tradition. Tara is a central figure in Tibetan Buddhism in her role as the “cheater of death” (Kinsley 165-167).

Nangsa Obum was a beautiful young woman, the only child of her parents. She had wanted to practice the Dharma since she was very young and had succeeded for a long time in avoiding marriage. One day she was spotted by a king who wanted her to become the wife of his eighteen-year-old son. She was required to comply and eventually gave birth to a beautiful son. She continued to mourn for her desire to practice the Dharma and was caught in giving alms to handsome young monks. Her husband and later her father-in-law beat her in front of her son because they thought she was soliciting the monks. After all, the jealous sister-in-law told them that this was what she was doing.

Queen Nangsa died from her injuries; but after a visit to hell, she came back to life and demanded the right to go away to practice the Dharma. Her young son and the in-laws convinced her to stay until he came of age. After some time and tears, they allowed her to take her son and go visit with her parents. When Nangsa tried to explain her desire to her mother, the mother also beat her. She left her parents and son to search for the monk, that she had heard of, to take her in

and give her the teachings of the Dharma. Upon finding him and beseeching him for entry, his response was, “If you are an incarnation of Tara, you can be accepted. But ordinary girls cannot practice Dharma.” She was accepted and taught how to meditate and avoid obstacles.

Eventually, the whole family attacked the monastery in their search for the beautiful young Queen Nangsa. In the end, the monk Sakya Gyaltsen and Nangsa Obum, with her scandalously shaven head, flew up in the sky while singing songs and converted the whole lot of them (Allione 61-140).

This story of the queen or princess who turns to the dharma and escapes marriage and is often beaten or killed and then becomes the incarnate Tara is also a common story about Guanyin. Guanyin became the embodiment of both Avalokitesvara and Tara before assimilating the popular Chinese Princess Miao Shan (Blofeld 41). There are many versions of the Miao Shan legend, several of which are recorded by Blofeld in Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan-Yin.

In one version, there was a governor of some province in China who had only one child, a daughter. He kept her protected within the walls of the women’s courtyards. She could see a monastery from a window and she begged him to go visit the beautiful place. No one was allowed to talk to her about it. One day, she slipped out and ventured alone to the monastery. She did not realize that the monks were evil and would have raped her. Her father discovered her absence and knew where she had gone. He pursued her and then had the monastery set afire since he assumed his only child had already been ruined anyway.

The governor was sitting in his private garden when the ghostly apparition of his daughter appeared before him. She spoke, “Father, though you had no pity on an innocent girl who barely

escaped being violated against her will, I cannot help being sad for you, childless as you must now remain. Therefore I have come to bring you some comfort. Know then that Heaven, which often seems as pitiless as you, was moved by my undeserved suffering. As the flames advanced, I was enveloped in a rainbow and wafted above the clouds to the abodes of gods and immortals. There, by way of compensation for my cruel fate, I was promoted to the rank of goddess. It will be my task to comfort the afflicted and rescue those in peril--a task I am peculiarly qualified to perform having so recently plumbed the depths of fear and suffering. Henceforth I shall be known as Kuan Shih Yin, Hearer-of-the-Cries-of-the-World" (Blofeld 67-69).

In other versions, Miao Shan is the third daughter of a King. Upon maturation, she refuses to marry and is eventually killed or maimed by her father. Miao Shan often returns and saves her father's life in an act of self-sacrifice (Blofeld 69-71). In another version, she was a sixteen-year-old girl who was the new wife of a nobleman. She was the nobleman's fifth wife in a polygamous marriage. The nobleman sent his righteous nephew to fetch her and bring her to his home.

The nephew felt sorry for the "fifth lady" but he was a good filial son who wanted to please his uncle. She did not want to go, but she was forced and even physically bound to her horse. When they passed a monastery, she begged him to stop so she could pray to Kuan Shih Yin. While he handled the horses, she slipped into the shrine-room. The boy was overcome when he found that the fifth lady had become the goddess shining with a bright light. She was accompanied by her disciples, Shan Ts'ai and the Dragon King's daughter, Lung Nü. She ordered the nephew to stop. The uncle and his soldiers eventually came looking for them. Once the boy and the fifth lady were found, the uncle/husband had the nunnery destroyed by fire. All



of the nun's bodies were accounted for but not that of the fifth lady. The monk that told this story to Blofeld did not know whether or not the fifth lady was an incarnation of Kuan-Yin (Blofeld 72-79). In this version and others like it, there is an indication that Kuan-yin became the central figure of her own ideal trinity.

By acknowledging the similarities of the display of the female goddess archetype in the characters of Miao Shan and Tara, it can be assumed that they are one and the same spiritual being. These legends have been and are very popular among the laity, simple folk who are mostly uneducated in regards to the sūtras. The laity alone did not transform the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara from male to female. This occurred in China through the combined influences of the balanced yin (feminine) and yang (masculine) aspects of the established religious structure of Taoism and the new foreign movement, namely Mahayana Buddhism.

The Taoist idea of yin and yang symbolizes an equal balance of masculine and feminine energies in the Universe. All of the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas were male, but Avalokitesvara embodied the feminine quality of compassion. When Buddhism moved into China, some teachings were altered to fit the understanding of the people who were being evangelized. The compassionate Tara was already associated with Avalokitesvara and so it seems that there may have been a logical transformation in the merging of the two deities into one, for simplicity in translating Buddhism from the Indian language into the Chinese language.

In addition to the different languages, the highly symbolic and abstract Indian cultural Buddhism needed to be simplified to fit the Chinese humanistic belief structure. In South China, "Buddhism at first allied itself with Taoism; for it was seen as a form of Taoism that Lao-tzu had taught to foreigners in the west. Taoists looked to Buddhism for solutions to certain problems in

Taoist philosophy and, till the fourth century, Buddhist terms were frequently translated by Taoist ones” (Harvey 150). Once Buddhism became established, Taoists considered it a rival philosophy, though not before the changes were begun.

In the Pure Land sect of Mahayana Buddhism, it is said that the Buddha foresaw a decadent period in which people would find enlightenment too difficult to attain. Out of compassion, he presented an easier way to escape from the world of suffering. That way was the Pure Land realm of Amitabha as well as Kuan-Yin’s Potala Island (Blofeld 83). The Pure Land school is known as the Other-Power school because of the monadistic relationship between the devotee and the Buddha or Bodhisattva. In other words, the devotee is a part of the Buddha and they exist together in unity. Amitabha or Guanyin takes on the full responsibility of saving the devotee, unlike the synergism of Christianity where the devotees are partly responsible for their own salvation (Suzuki 55-56). Although some Christians believe that they are separate beings that do good works in order to be saved, other Christians believe that they are saved by the grace of God.

The scriptures that address Amitabha and Guanyin are found in the Lotus Sūtra. The reliance on these deities for salvation became so popular that the book alone was given devotion and was believed to be the causal influence for miraculous events. The miracles became the material for another “genre of Chinese Buddhist writing known as the ‘record of miraculous response,’ or ‘miracle tale,’ for short” (Lopez 427). These miracle tales combined the already existing “tale of the strange or extraordinary” and the biographical tales of people who were considered to be good role models for society (Lopez 427).

There have been some speculations that the Guanyin role model transformed into the feminine aspect in the eleventh century but there is evidence to the contrary. Two Chinese pilgrims, Fa Hsien in the fifth century and Hsüan Tsang in the seventh century, visited India and made no record of a female manifestation of Avalokitesvara in India or China. By the twelfth century, Guanyin was cast as a female throughout China and Japan (Blofeld 39-40). In Tay's work Kuan-Yin: The Cult of Half Asia, old information is brought to a new light. Tay translates from the Chinese encyclopedia-like Fa-yüan chu-lin that was compiled in 668 CE. "Kuan-yin manifested himself in the feminine form in 479 to free the devotee P'eng Tzu-chiao from chains. The histories of Northern Ch'i and the north and south dynasties compiled earlier tell of a similar manifestation to heal the dissolute and emaciated Northern Ch'i emperor Wu-ch'eng (reigned 561-65); and reveal that the last empress of the Ch'en, née Shen, became a Buddhist nun and received the religious name 'Kuan-yin' in 617" (Tay 151). Other examples of female versions of Avalokitesvara before the eleventh century are also listed in this source.

In the sixteenth century, Guanyin became one of the main characters in the popular novel Journey to the West, written by Wu Cheng'en. Wu Cheng'en lived during the Ming Dynasty (1500-1582). The adventures of the historical monk, of which he wrote, occurred during the Tang Dynasty (618-907). The Tang Dynasty was a time when devotion to the Lotus Sūtra was at a high (Lopez 427). The Lotus Sūtra describes Guanyin. Wu Cheng'en based his long novel on old traditional folktales. These stories from regional oral traditions that were reworked by the author were, in essence, "miracle tales." Based on the fact that people of all walks of life became the audience for these continuously retold tales, they "can be understood as 'popular' in the sense of anonymous and generic--a body of literature that reflects religious motifs which are universal

to Buddhist monastic and lay life rather than the province of one particular sector or stratum”  
(Lopez 428).

Guanyin helped the Buddhist monk Sanzang and his disciples travel from China to India to retrieve the sūtras from the Tathagata Buddha. In this story, her powers and personality are revealed as in the following poem in which “all present raised their heads to look at the Bodhisattva:”

Her understanding filling out the four virtues, wisdom filling her golden body.  
From her necklace hang pearls and jade, her bracelet is made of jewels.  
Her hair is black clouds skillfully piled like coiling dragons;  
her embroidered girdle lightly sways, a phoenix wing.  
Sea-green jade buttons, a gown of white silk gauze, bathed with sacred light;  
brocade skirts, a girdle of gold, shielded by propitious vapours.  
Eyebrows like crescent moon, eyes like a pair of stars.  
A jade face full of heavenly happiness, scarlet lips making a touch of red.  
Her pure bottle of sweet dew is ever full, the willow twigs in it are always green.  
She delivers from the eight disasters, saves all living beings,  
great is her compassion.  
She stays on Mount Tai, lives in the Southern Sea, rescues the suffering when she  
hears their cries, never failing to answer every call, infinitely divine and  
miraculous.  
Her orchid heart admires the purple bamboo;  
Her orchid nature loves the fragrant creeper.  
She is the merciful ruler of Potaraka Island, the living Guanyin of the Tide Cave  
(Wu 138-139).

She is again described by “everyone in the temple--monks, nuns, clerics, lay people, scholars, workmen and merchants--” who all beheld her when she came to deliver a special cassock to the monk and encourage the Tang emperor and everyone present that they should forget the doctrine of the Little Vehicle and retrieve the doctrine of the Great Vehicle from the Tathagata Buddha in the Thunder Monastery in the land of India in the west.

The sacred radiance shines around her, the holy light protects her Dharma body.  
In the glory of the highest Heaven appears a female immortal.

The Bodhisattva wore on her head marvelous pearl tassels with golden clasps, set with turquoise, and gleaming golden.

She wore on her body a plain blue robe with flying phoenixes, pale-coloured, patterned with running water, on which curled golden dragons.

Before her breast hung a moon-bright, wind-dancing, pearl-encrusted, jade-set circlet full of fragrance.

Around her waist was a skirt of embroidery and brocade from the Jade Pool made from the silk of ice-silkworms, with golden seams, supported by coloured clouds.

Before her went a white and yellow red-beaked parrot, to fly across the Eastern Ocean, and all over the world in gratitude and duty.

The vase she held gave grace and salvation; and in the vase was a sprig of weeping willow to sweep away the fog, scattering water on the heavens.

Cleansing all evil.

Rings of jade looped over brocade buttons and her golden-lotus feet were concealed.

She was able to visit the three heavens, for she was Guanyin, the rescuer from suffering (Wu, 242-243).

The popular Bodhisattva Guanyin of Wu Cheng'en's novel was the savior that the heroes continuously relied upon whenever their situation was dire. This novel is full of the adventures of the magical and troublesome Monkey King turned monk, the greedy and stupid Pig, Friar Sand, the white horse which is actually a dragon that had been transformed by Guanyin, and the monk who can hardly do anything for himself. The monk is a reincarnation of the Golden Cicada and was in his last incarnation before becoming a Buddha. All of the demons wanted to eat his flesh so they could gain immortality. The gods of Heaven were constantly helping Monkey protect him. Usually the demons captured the monk and sometimes the disciples too. Monkey was always resourceful and was able to go for help when the demons were too strong for him. Occasionally, he had to resort to calling on Guanyin, who had commissioned him to protect the monk.

One time, Monkey and Pig found a Manfruit tree in a Taoist monastery at which they spent some time. It was a tree that had magical fruit that looked like human infants. The fruit

added many years to the life of the person who ate it. A crop of thirty ripens once every nine thousand years so they are considered extremely valuable. Things got out of hand and when the Taoists attacked Monkey, Monkey destroyed the tree. The Taoists captured the monk and were going to kill him unless the tree could be saved. Monkey went for help and came back with Guanyin.

The Bodhisattva dipped her willow spray into the sweet dew in her vase, then used it to write a spell to revive the dead on the palm of Monkey's hand. She told him to place it on the roots of the tree until he saw water coming out. Monkey clenched his fist and tucked it under the roots; before long a spring of clear water began to form a pool. "That water must not be sullied by vessels made of any of the Five Elements, so you will have to scoop it out with a jade ladle. If you prop the tree up and pour the water on it from the very top, its bark and trunk will knit together, its leaves will sprout again, the branches will be green once more, and the fruit will reappear" (Wu 496).

Monkey ordered the supplies and performed as he had been instructed.

Then they presented the sweet spring water cup by cup to the Bodhisattva, who sprinkled it lightly on the tree with her spray of willow and recited an incantation. When a little later the water had all been sprinkled on the tree the leaves really did become as dense and green as ever, and there were twenty-three manfruits growing there....The other one fell on the ground, and the local deity told me that this treasure always entered earth when it touched it...."The reason why I did not use vessels made from the Five Elements was because I knew that this kind of fruit is allergic to them," said the Bodhisattva (Wu 497).

This story is a good example of the kind of power and knowledge that Guanyin possesses and shows the purpose of the vase and willow sprig that she is often seen holding. In some of the statuary and paintings in which she is depicted, she is holding a goldfish in a basket. In another one of the heroes' adventures, the monk had been captured by a giant sea-monster who was about to serve him up as a meal in his underwater palace. After a dramatic fight, Monkey again required the help of Guanyin. He flew off to her Island and, even after arriving, was kept

waiting. Guanyin eventually came out of the purple bamboo grove with a basket, but she was not properly dressed, and her hair was flowing loose. Monkey was shocked. She ignored him and led the way to save the Tang priest.

The Bodhisattva undid the silken sash around her waistcoat, tied one end to the basket, and rose on a coloured cloud. Holding the other end of the sash she threw the basket into the river then pulled it up through the current, reciting, “Die if you go, live if you stay, die if you go, live if you stay.” When she had said this seven times she raised the basket again, and this time it contained a glistening goldfish, blinking its eyes and moving its scales (Wu 907).

Then she told Monkey to rescue the monk. When Monkey returned, he asked her how that goldfish got to be so strong. She replied:

“Every day it would swim up to listen to sūtras, and it trained itself to have magic powers. The nine-knobbed copper mace was an unopened lotus bud that it tempered and made into a weapon. One day, I do not know when, a high tide reached the pool and carried it here. When I was leaning on the balustrade looking at the lotuses this morning I noticed that the wretch had not come to pay his respects, so I examined my fingers and the palms of my hands and worked out that it must have become a spirit and be planning to kill your master. That was why I did not wait to dress before using my divine powers to weave a bamboo basket in which to catch him” (Wu 907-908).

These stories from Journey to the West are popular folktales, and they are not from the Buddhist sūtras, but they do demonstrate what image the laity had in their minds of their beloved Guanyin. This novel does not address the origin of Guanyin but it does explain in beautiful words what “she” became. After the Cultural Revolution and the Communist takeover in China, Buddhism waned in the lives of many people, particularly among the generations of age forty and younger. In the late twentieth century, the Chinese Government applied many resources to restoring Buddhist monasteries, for the most part, as living museums. There are working monasteries in mainland China but they are not as abundant as they once were. However, the

Bodhisattva Guanyin can be found everywhere across the country in the form of statues and paintings. She can even be found in dramatic plays and on public television in the retelling of the “Monkey King” tales.



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