

TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE CHINESE DAOIST GODDESS OF  
IMMORTALITY: THE QUEEN MOTHER OF THE WEST (XIWANGMU)  
AND OF THE CHINESE BUDDHIST GODDESS OF MERCY: THE  
BODHISATTVA GUANYIN (AVALOKITESVARA)

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The literature sources that describe the Chinese Daoist Goddess of Immortality, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu) and the Chinese Buddhist Goddess of Mercy, the Bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokitesvara) reveal an alteration of public image through time. In a comparative study, it can be seen that the images of each of these two deities, as perceived by the Chinese people, has been influenced by the purported abilities and qualities of the other. It can also be seen that these deities reflect the Chinese people themselves during different dynastic periods.

Chinese mythology and ancient religions have supplied us with a pantheon of gods, goddesses, and immortal beings. Two of the major religions that have developed simultaneously within China are Daoism and Buddhism. Throughout their long histories, these religious structures and the icons that represent them have changed in ways that reflect the evolution of the societies that have supported them. There are two female deities that rise above the others as worthy of the worship of multitudes of people in their respective popular cults. There were cultural, mythological and iconographical influences exchanged between the Buddhist deity, the Bodhisattva

Guanyin (Avalokitesvara), and the Daoist deity, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), in medieval China that caused both of them to be changed so that each of them became more like the other. The subtle changes that occurred with these deities are in themselves indicative of the alterations that occurred in the religions in response to the acceptance of the society in which they existed at the time.

Most Westerners are familiar with Guanyin as the goddess of mercy. Beautiful statues and paintings of her can be found in nearly every new age or metaphysical shop in the United States. Most Americans, however, are not familiar with the Daoist deity Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West. Xiwangmu, the Queen Mother of the West, has an obscure origin that may go back to the fifteenth century B.C.E. during the Shang dynasty when the oracle bone inscriptions were being made.<sup>1</sup> Shang society was matriarchal, so naturally the deities that they prayed to in regards to weather conditions and agricultural concerns were female. The word “mu” means mother. There was a western mu and an eastern mu. For the Shang people, east and west were considered the locations of the deities as well as the names of the deities themselves. This early origin of Xiwangmu is uncertain despite the similarities between the Western Mother of the Shang dynasty and the later Queen Mother of the West, so this connection remains an unproven theory.<sup>2</sup> In later times, due to Confucian patriarchal influences, the Queen Mother’s eastern counterpart was considered to be male and specifically the King Father of the East.

The first positively identified reference to the Queen Mother was written by Zhuangzi in a chapter entitled “The Great Instructors.” Zhuangzi listed the beings who had already attained the Dao, including the sun, the moon and the Yellow Emperor. The passage referring to the Queen Mother reads as follows:

The Queen Mother of the West  
obtained it, and took up her seat at  
Shao Kuang. No one knows her  
beginning; no one knows her end.<sup>3</sup>

The Queen Mother sits on a mythical mountain in the west. In later times, Mount Gunlun was named as her place of residence but another deity occupied Gunlun<sup>4</sup> during the lifetime of Zhuangzi (?370 – 301? B.C.E.).<sup>5</sup> Zhuangzi identified the Queen Mother as one of the Great Instructors. She was the instructor of the ways of the Dao and immortality for the Yellow Emperor who, according to legend, ruled at the beginning of the third millennium B.C.E.<sup>6</sup> The Queen Mother saved the Yellow Emperor during a battle and taught him how to civilize the world.

The next ruler that Xiwangmu instructed was the Sage King Shun (traditional dates: 2255 – 2205 B.C.E.). She gave him items that allowed him to control time and space, including maps and a calendar. Then she was the teacher of the Sage King Yu (traditional dates: 2205 – 2197 B.C.E.). King Yu was the founder of the Xia dynasty and according to legend, saved the world from the destruction of the great flood by draining the flood waters off of the agricultural lands.<sup>7</sup> As the instructor and gift bearer for these ancient rulers, Xiwangmu was elevated in status and was considered the superior of them all. Her visits became the mark of legitimacy for future rulers who would claim the Mandate of Heaven.<sup>8</sup>

The two rulers that Xiwangmu associated with in later dynasties were King Mu of the Zhou dynasty (r. 1001 – 946 B.C.E.)<sup>9</sup> and Emperor Wu of the Former Han dynasty (r. 141 – 87 B.C.E.).<sup>10</sup> She offered herself as a spouse to both rulers but both men failed in their efforts and never attained immortality. However, they and others thereafter have been associated as her companions of the East, to whom she makes periodic visits. When she visits the rulers, she brings several peaches to share. These special peaches bestow long life and come from a tree that bears fruit only once every three-thousand years. These Peach Cycles were later used by Buddhists as they tried to explain the large spaces of time in eons and kalpas.<sup>11</sup>

The annual meetings of the Queen Mother of the West and the King Father of the East or any ruler from the east occurred during the night of Double Seven, the seventh day of the seventh month. Double Seven became a Daoist festival to commemorate the

meetings between mortal men and divine women.<sup>12</sup> In addition to the Queen Mother and her consorts, this was also the night when the constellations of the Weaver-girl Stars met the Herd-boy or Oxherd. These were heavenly lovers who had to cross the Milky Way to spend only one night a year together.<sup>13</sup> One Han period poem tells the story sadly:

Far away twinkles the Herd-boy star;  
Brightly shines the Lady of the Han  
River. Slender, slender she plies her  
white fingers; Click, click go the  
wheels of her spinning loom. At the  
end of the day she has not finished her  
task; Her bitter tears fall like streaming  
rain. The Han River runs shallow and  
clear; Set between them, how short a  
space! But the river water will not let  
them pass, Gazing at each other but  
never able to speak.<sup>14</sup>

The Weaver-girl was the daughter of the God of Heaven. He allowed his daughter to marry the Herd-boy but when she stopped weaving, the God of Heaven grew angry and called her back to the east side of the river. Thereafter, she was allowed to visit only once per year on the night of Double Seven.<sup>15</sup>

The Queen Mother, who wears the sheng headdress, has the ultimate power over the constellations of stars and is also known to travel on this night. The sheng headdress, which is shaped like an axle with a wheel attached at either end, is representative of the brake mechanism of a loom.<sup>16</sup> The importance of weaving is found within the Chinese Daoist story of the creation of the world. The Queen Mother was born before the creation of the universe and immediately after the beginning of the two “primal breaths of yin and yang.”<sup>17</sup> After the world was created, she maintained the cosmic harmony by keeping the balance between yin and yang. She was the highest Daoist goddess and embodied the ultimate yin

essence.<sup>18</sup> Some of these elaborations about the Queen Mother and her powers of creation were not well defined until the Six Dynasties era (222 – 589 C.E.) when the Shangqing school of Daoism refined them.<sup>19</sup>

Xiwangmu's relationship as a great instructor to a distinguished line of rulers had been known in Chinese literature during the fourth century B.C.E., and she was mentioned in the second century B.C.E. by the poet Sima Xiangru as a donor of the elixir of immortality. However, the Queen Mother was not described in Chinese iconography on a regular basis as a means of obtaining immortality until the first century B.C.E.<sup>20</sup> One of the earliest iconographic depictions of Xiwangmu can be found near Loyang on a ceiling painting in the Western Han tomb of Po Jianju (86 – 49 B.C.E.). Xiwangmu wears robes and the characteristic sheng headdress. She sits in a three-quarter view position in a far corner of the painting. The Queen Mother is the model of transcendence and leads the souls of the dead to her western paradise.<sup>21</sup> During the Eastern Han dynasty, also known as the Former Han (206 B.C.E. – 8 C.E.), the ritual path to paradise had been to the East by way of Mount Benglai. During the Western Han dynasty, also known as the Latter Han (25 – 220 C.E.), the ritual devotions were paid to Xiwangmu so that the souls of the dead could travel west to her paradise on Mount Gunlun.<sup>22</sup>

The Queen Mother is depicted more in terms of a shamanistic deity in the oldest sections of a geographical encyclopedia called shanhaiqing (Classic of Mountains and Seas). This work is dated to about the fourth century B.C.E.. The following description of her physical appearance is found in a section called "Classic of Western Mountains":

Another 350 li to the west is a mountain called Jade Mountain. This is the place where the Queen Mother of the West dwells. As for the Queen Mother of the West, her appearance is like that of a human, with a leopard's

tail and tiger's teeth. Moreover she is skilled at whistling. In her disheveled hair she wears a sheng headdress. She is controller of the Grindstone and the Five Shards Constellations of the heavens.<sup>23</sup>

In this early account, Xiwangmu is part human and part beast. Her skill at whistling is an indication of her shamanic ability to control her breathing and communicate with spirits. As a shaman, she could receive messages from the gods and relay messages from the faithful mortals to heaven by being possessed, by automatic writing, or by way of astral traveling. The symbol of the sheng headdress represents the Queen Mother as a weaver or creator of life while the symbols of the leopard's tail and tiger's teeth represent her power of destruction. In other depictions of Xiwangmu, her headdress is a star crown, which represents her control of the heavenly constellations as is stated in the last line of the description above.<sup>24</sup>

Three Han dynasty tombs were discovered at Mawangdui near the city of Changsha during the Cultural Revolution. Tomb number 2 held the marquis Li Cang, one of the original supporters of the Han founder. He died in 186 B.C.E.. His wife, Lady Dai, was found in tomb number 1. She died when she was near fifty years of age, soon after her son died, in 168 B.C.E.. Their son, who died at age thirty, was buried in tomb number 3 along with his personal library. On Lady Dai's coffin, a T-shaped banner was found. Lady Dai was depicted on the banner among several scenes that show the worlds to which the dead can travel. At the bottom was the underworld and at the top was the realm of the immortals. Lady Dai is at the middle as she begins her journey. The figure at the center of the top of the banner is a woman in her youth with the lower portion of her body drawn as a serpent's tail. It is arguable whether this woman is Lady Dai as a Daoist immortal or if the woman is the Queen Mother herself, since she presides over the realm of the immortals.<sup>25</sup>

In a later period image seen in a stone relief, the Queen Mother's robes cover her legs as she sits on a throne. However, the two suppliants that stand on either side of her do not have human legs. The lower half of their bodies are serpent tails that coil beneath her throne. The serpent tails were the outward manifestations of the transformation of a mortal into an immortal after drinking the elixir. The transformation into a serpentine form after achieving immortality is not known to appear in other cultures.<sup>26</sup> Although, there are allusions to the connection between immortality and the serpent in the Epic of Gilgamesh. With this in mind, it is easy to assume that the central character in the banner could be Lady Dai. Other beings or symbolic images associated with the Queen Mother of the West also appear on the T-shaped banner. Some of these include the raven in the sun, the toad and the hare in the moon, the attendant birds, the leopards or tigers, and the dragons.<sup>27</sup> These associates of the Queen Mother assure her presence as the one in control of the process of attaining immortality.

The Queen Mother of the West was the highest ranking immortal in the Daoist mythology of the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.). She was the source of eternal life for the adepts who put their faith in her. There was a popular cult movement in 3 B.C.E. that began in the east and swept China until it arrived at the capital in the west. People believed that she would appear soon.

. . . Fanatics were preparing for her advent by transmitting emblems up and down the land, to the accompaniment of highly stimulating music. There were those who behaved in a thoroughly undisciplined manner, regardless of other persons' property; many were terrified. Services were held in honour of the Queen, who was worshiped with singing and dance; a written promise was transmitted,

assuring believers that they would not die.<sup>28</sup>

This popular cult movement was one of the first known in China. More Daoist movements for the search of immortality occurred in the latter part of the second century C.E..<sup>29</sup>

The Queen Mother gave legitimacy to the rulers who journeyed to the west to meet with her. She also controlled the movements of the constellations of stars, including the Weaver and the Oxherd. The mythology of the Queen Mother of the West was apparently unaffected by Buddhist doctrine<sup>30</sup> until the last fifty years of the Han dynasty (170 – 220 C.E.).<sup>31</sup> Buddhism first entered China sometime between 50 B.C.E. and 50 C.E.. The first record of Chinese participation in Buddhist rites was in 65 C.E. when a member of the imperial family performed “gentle sacrifices to the Buddha.”<sup>32</sup> These were non-animal sacrifices. Like the early Daoist adepts, the early Buddhist adepts, and in particular the Theravada school of Buddhism, believed that ascension, was limited to only a few. This changed when the Mahayana school of Buddhism began in China. Perhaps the mythologies of both Guanyin and the Queen Mother of the West evolved together “spontaneously from popular beliefs and cults, rather than being imposed as part of an intellectual policy by an authority.”<sup>33</sup>

Chinese Buddhism evolved under the influence of Daoism. Individual Buddhist propagators had entered China in the late Han dynasty and required the current Chinese understanding of Daoist principles to translate their own ideas to the Chinese people. In fact, early Buddhism was considered to be a new school of Daoism.<sup>34</sup> With the use of Daoist terminology, Buddhist philosophy was flourishing by the fourth century C.E..<sup>35</sup> This interaction between Daoists and Buddhists supplied new forms and practices to the popular religions. “Much of the subsequent textual tradition of Daoism shows distinct traces of Buddhist influence, especially in the areas of morality, eschatology, and iconography.”<sup>36</sup> Eschatology is the study of the end of time and iconography is the study of pictures of gods.



The Bodhisattva Guanyin was unknown in these early times. This female goddess of mercy was first known as the male Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, a deity imported from India. Avalokitesvara was one of the attending Bodhisattvas to Amitabha Buddha as taught by the Pure Land Sect of Mahayana Buddhism. Avalokitesvara was an emanation of the compassionate aspects of Amitabha Buddha. Like the Queen Mother, Avalokitesvara wears a crown; however, this crown bears the image of Amitabha sitting in a lotus position.<sup>37</sup> Avalokitesvara is depicted with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes for the purpose of being a compassionate helper. He is also seen with eleven heads because his head was split open from the pain of looking upon human suffering.<sup>38</sup> These images of multiple body parts was distinctly Indian. This image would change in China as well as the images of the Queen Mother and her various body parts that were part animal. These changes from multiple body parts that may or may not appear animalistic to a more realistic human appearance were due to the influence of Confucianism which stated that the human body was a gift from the parents and therefore a filial child should respect that gift by continuing to keep it in its whole and original form. The irregular foreign images were too unnatural and unrefined for the Confucian influenced Chinese people.

A female aspect was emanated from Avalokitesvara in the form of the goddess Tara who was formed from one of the tears of Avalokitesvara. Tara was the one who carried the faithful into nirvana<sup>39</sup> when they sought the far-distant Happy Land of the Buddha Amitabha in the western region of the universe.<sup>40</sup> In central Asia and China, Avalokitesvara took on a more permanent image of a female, most likely due to the words of the Lotus Sutra. The statement was made that “the Bodhisattva will take on the guise of a woman or any other figure in order to lead sentient beings to salvation.”<sup>41</sup> This change is traceable to the fifth century C.E. during the North and South Dynasties (386 – 589 C.E.); however, Guanyin appeared predominantly masculine until the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 C.E.). Guanyin appeared as a female in 479 C.E. to free Bengziqiao from chains. The last empress of the Southern Chen

dynasty (557 – 589 C.E.) became a Buddhist nun and in 617 C.E. received the religious name Guanyin.<sup>42</sup>

During the middle of the Six Dynasties period (222 – 589 C.E.), a member of the Chinese literati, Huiyuan (334 – 416 C.E.), took an interest in Buddhism. He had been trained in the Confucian classics at a Confucian school. He also mastered the texts of Laozi and Zhuangzi. One day he listened to a famous Buddhist monk lecture on the Prajñā-pāramitā and exclaimed that “Confucianism, Daoism, and all other schools were but chaff compared with Buddhism.”<sup>43</sup> He then became a monk. Huiyuan was the first person to teach the attainment of salvation through faith in Amitabha. He laid the foundation in the fourth century for the Pure Land sect of Mahayana Buddhism which spread widely throughout China.<sup>44</sup> By the middle of the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 C.E.) in the eighth century, Buddhism was fully integrated into Chinese society.<sup>45</sup>

In pre-Buddhist China, immortality was achieved by only a few adepts who appealed to cosmic forces or the symbolic use of particular cosmic patterns<sup>46</sup> such as the TLV mirrors which were placed in burial chambers. These circular bronze disks were cast with varying designs on the front and back. The shapes of the letters T, L and V, as well as inscriptions, were placed strategically around the surface of the non-reflective mirrors to convey the soul of the dead person to the land of the immortals.<sup>47</sup> In later years, the TLV type of mirror was replaced by bronze mirrors with raised scenes of the Queen Mother “in all of her glory with her attributes and acolytes in attendance.”<sup>48</sup>

In the Han dynasty (206 B.C.E. – 220 C.E.), the Queen Mother appeared on the surface of the bronze mirrors as well as on clay and stone reliefs found in tombs. One famous rubbing of a clay funerary tile from Szechwan Province was dated to the Latter Han dynasty in the first century C.E.. The Queen Mother was wearing the sheng headdress but instead of the leopard’s tail and tiger’s teeth, she was fully human. She sat on a throne that had a tiger’s head at her left and a dragon’s tail at her right.<sup>49</sup> The way in which the Queen Mother is depicted in monk’s robes and seated facing straight

out at the viewer is remarkably different from the ceiling painting in the former Han tomb of Po Jianju (86 – 49 B.C.E.) where she sat in a three-quarter view position in a small corner of the picture. This new view may be a reflection of the influence of the similarly seated Buddha image that had been imported to China from Gandhara in northwestern India. This mutual influence between Daoism and Buddhism was also occurring at the doctrinal level simultaneously due to the sharing of scriptures.<sup>50</sup>

Some of the defining characteristic attendants were also on the rubbing with the Queen Mother. A nine tailed fox stands facing the tiger's head. Below the fox is a hare that holds an elixir plant. Directly below the Queen Mother is a dancing toad. There are two human immortal attendants in a seated position located between the toad and the hare. Two more human immortals are on the other side of the toad. One human is kowtowing and the other stands like a soldier behind him. It should be noted that the lower halves of the human bodies are no longer serpentine. A three legged raven is positioned above the kowtowing man and below the dragon's tail on the Queen Mother's throne.<sup>51</sup>

The Queen Mother's throne was part dragon and part tiger. The dragon symbol has long been associated with the powers and authority of the Emperor. Since the Queen Mother was the superior teacher of all of the great rulers, she also had the right to use the symbol of the dragon. The tiger symbol, however, is more importantly connected to the ancient Xiwangmu. The White Tiger was the guardian of the west and the symbol of metal. Sometimes the Queen Mother will send the White Tiger to meet a faithful soul and lead the way back to the western paradise over which the Queen Mother presides.<sup>52</sup> Note that in the fourth century B.C.E., the Queen Mother had a leopard's tail and tiger's teeth but in the first century C.E., she became fully human. The feline creature then became her familiar to command.

During the Six Dynasties era (222 – 589 C.E.), Buddhism became widely popular and the idea of easy access to immortality was introduced. Immortality could then be attained through personal transformation by means of spiritual disciplines and devotions.<sup>53</sup> At

the same time, the Queen Mother's familiar Han image was still reproduced, but new variations of its use was introduced. Adherents of Shangqing Daoism were beginning to use her image for the purposes of worship, meditation, and visualization.<sup>54</sup> Two schools of Daoism had formed by the time of the Six Dynasties. The Shangqing school developed techniques for individual practices that led to immortality. The other school was the Ling-pao school which developed prescribed forms of worship that could be practiced by the whole population as opposed to only certain individuals.<sup>55</sup>

The Buddhist influence can also be seen upon Daoism by reviewing the focus on the persons that the Queen Mother approached with an offer for immortality. The Warring States era (403 – 221 B.C.E.) scholars and poets concentrated on the Queen Mother's regular visits to the sage rulers of antiquity such as the Yellow Emperor, King Shun and King Yu. The writers of the Six Dynasties (222 – 589 C.E.) and the Tang dynasty (618 – 907 C.E.) focused instead on the two later rulers, King Mu and Emperor Wu, probably because of their all too human faults with which people could identify.<sup>56</sup> Finally, another Six Dynasties account of a visit from the Queen Mother emerged and changed the nature of the adherents that were able to achieve immortality. She met with Lord Mao and his two younger brothers on Mount Mao near Nanjing. She revealed secrets and gave them supernatural powers and titles. Though instead of offering herself as a spouse, she arranged marriages between the three brothers and three divine ladies who would then be their teachers. In contrast to the two famous rulers who failed to achieve immortality, the Mao brothers were successful at attaining transcendence.<sup>57</sup>

The cult of the Bodhisattva Guanyin was popular by the Tang dynasty. Buddhism offered a rich mythology and iconography for those who wished to visualize the western paradise and meditate upon the beauty and compassion of Guanyin.<sup>58</sup> The merciful Guanyin even offered entrance into her paradise as an afterlife destination to common lay persons if they called out to her at the moment of death.<sup>59</sup> For women, Guanyin was a savior who could cause a woman to give birth to a baby boy. For travelers, she was a

guardian against the perils at sea, robbers, and wild animals. Some of these miracle stories go back to the late fourth century work known as the *Record of the Miraculous Responses of Avalokitesvara*.<sup>60</sup> Later Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644 C.E.) Daoists also claimed the power to achieve similar miracles.

One story describes a miraculous event after a man read the Treatise, a Daoist morality book fully entitled *Taishang ganying pian* (*Treatise of the Most High on Action and Retribution*). This work was compiled by Huang Zhengyuan in 1755 (Qing dynasty).<sup>61</sup>

A pious Ming official, captured by rebels, who was bathed with celestial light every time he read the Treatise; when he escaped, wild animals could not harm him, a feature directly reminiscent of accounts of early Daoist amulets worn to protect one when venturing into wild mountains in search of herbs.<sup>62</sup>

Early Daoists would have received their amulets and texts from the Queen Mother and they would have searched for the herbs to make her elixir for long life.

In the Tang dynasty, the cult of the Daoist goddess Xiwangmu was also at the height of popularity. The Daoist master Tu Kuanting (850 – 933 C.E.) wrote a religious biography on Xiwangmu for the purposes of providing accurate details for the meditation practices of adepts. This was important in order to avoid attracting a false or evil spirit.<sup>63</sup> Tu Kuanting changed the image of Xiwangmu from the previous fourth century image. She went from the shamanistic half animal with disheveled hair to a refined beauty.

The Queen Mother rides an imperial carriage of purple clouds, harnessing nine-colored dappled ch'i-lin. Tied around her waist, she wears the whip

of the Celestial Realized Ones; as a belt pendants, she has a diamond numinous seal. In her clothing of multi-colored damask with a yellow background, the patterns and variegated colors are bright and fresh. The radiance of metal makes a shimmering gleam. At her waist is a double-bladed sword for dividing phosphors. Knotted flying clouds make a great cord. On top of her head is a great floriate topknot. She wears the crown of the Grand Realized Ones with hanging beaded strings of daybreak. She steps forth on shoes with squared, phoenix-patterned soles of rose-gem. Her age might be about twenty. Her celestial appearance eclipses and puts in the shade all others. She is a realized numinous being.<sup>64</sup>

With an image like this to compete with, the Buddhist adepts required that the image of Guanyin should be just as splendid.

The Queen Mother was also popularized by a nearly countless number of Tang poets (618 – 907 C.E.). The majority of individuals of the Tang society were literate. There is a great collection of Tang Poetry in a Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 C.E.) compilation called the *Complete Tang Poetry*. In this work, there are about fifty-thousand poems written by more than two thousand poets from the seventh through the tenth centuries. Out of this collection, over five hundred poems mention the Queen Mother of the West.<sup>65</sup> Suzanne E. Cahill has studied these poems and the biography written by Tu Kuanting and has written her Ph.D. dissertation on the subject. She followed this up with a book entitled *Transcendence & Divine Passion: The Queen Mother of the West in*

*Medieval China* as well as a chapter in another book entitled *Goddesses Who Rule*. She says that the biographer was conservative and specific in his description of the Queen Mother because he had to preserve proper and correct details for his religious sect. The poets, on the other hand, were more free to express their emotions and romantic ideals.

During the Tang dynasty, Daoists, Buddhists and others freely called upon the images of both Xiwangmu<sup>66</sup> and Guanyin. This practice continued through to the Ming dynasty (1368 – 1644 C.E.) and on to the Qing dynasty (1644 – 1911 C.E.). A Ming dynasty novelist, Wu Cheng'en (1500 – 1582 C.E.), collected folk legends, gathered previous works, and wrote the classic mythological novel *Journey to the West*. This work beautifully combines the deities of Daoism and Buddhism into one long story about the famous Chinese Buddhist monk, translator, and philosopher Xuanzang (599 – 664 C.E.). He is also known as Sanzang, the Tang Priest. Both the Queen Mother of the West and the Bodhisattva Guanyin make appearances in this one hundred chapter long novel.

In chapter five, the Queen Mother arranged a peach banquet for the immortals and sent her fairy goddesses to the orchard to pick the peaches that ripened only once every three thousand years. She soon discovered that the mischievous Monkey King had stolen them. The Monkey King had won immortality with trickery. He caused plenty of other mischief as well. The Queen Mother and other wronged immortals reported these things to the Jade Emperor. No one could control the indestructible Monkey.

The story goes on to tell how the  
Compassionate and Merciful  
Miraculous Saviour from Suffering,  
the Bodhisattva Guanyin of Mount  
Potaraka in the Southern Sea, having  
been invited by the Queen Mother to  
the Peach Banquet, went to the  
precious pavillions at the Jade Pool

with her great disciple Huian the  
Novice. She found the place deserted  
and the banquet ruined.<sup>67</sup>

Eventually, the Buddha himself came and subdued the rascal Monkey. The Monkey King was placed under a rock for five hundred years until the Tang Priest, Sanzang, was ready to go on his journey to the west to obtain Buddhist scriptures. Guanyin came to Monkey in his prison, subdued him with a magic collar, and converted him from a Daoist immortal to a Buddhist monk. His mission was to help Sanzang complete his journey safely. The rest of the story is a fast action journey in which three more converts are acquired and the battles with demons ensue. Guanyin returns several times to help Monkey save the Tang Priest.

Since the Monkey King is an immortal, he has the power of flight. However, like the majority of the other immortal characters of Tang style poetry, he can fly only with the help of his somersault cloud. On one of his flights to get help, he went east toward the blessed land of Benglai and remembered a poem about it.

A great and sacred land where the  
immortal sages still the waves as they  
come and go. The shade of the Jasper  
throne cools the heart of the sky; The  
radiance of the great gate-pillars  
shimmers high above the sea. Hidden  
in the coloured mists are flutes of Jade;  
The moon and the stars shine on the  
golden leviathan. The Queen Mother  
of the Western Pool often comes here  
to give her peaches to the Three  
Immortals.<sup>68</sup>

Even the poets of the Ming dynasty continued to  
revel in the gloriousness of the Queen Mother of the West.  
In this story, however, she takes a minor role or further



removed position from the main characters. Guanyin is more accessible in this story. In a later adventure, the Monkey King and his younger brother monk Pig stole some of the fruits of the manfruit tree. Ultimately the tree was damaged beyond repair and the Tang Priest was captured. The Monkey King had to get Guanyin to bring the tree back to life. This power over the magical properties of plants had long been a trait of the Queen Mother and was not a trait of the early version of Avalokitesvara. The Bodhisattva Guanyin acquired this gift later and had become so well known for it that nearly every image of Guanyin depicts her with the magic vase and willow branch. In the following passage, Monkey King is asking Guanyin if she can heal the broken tree.

“The sweet dew in this pure vase of mine,” she said, “is an excellent cure for magic trees and plants.” “Has it ever been tried out?” Monkey asked. “Yes,” she said. “How?” he asked. “Some years ago Lord Laozi beat me at gambling,” she replied, “and took my willow sprig away with him. He put it in his elixir-refining furnace and burnt it to a cinder before sending it back to me. I put it back in the vase, and a day and a night later it was as green and leafy as ever.”<sup>69</sup>

Guanyin did go on to help Monkey repair the tree with the water from her vase and in the end the Tang Priest was set free. Note that Guanyin lost the gambling bet to Laozi, the author of the *Dao de qing*, (*The Classic of the Way and the Virtue*).

The high goddess of Daoism, the Queen Mother of the West (Xiwangmu), and the high goddess of Buddhism, the Bodhisattva Guanyin (Avalokitesvara), came together in the same mythological

pantheon. Poets, biographers and artists from the Han dynasty to the Qing dynasty influenced one another as they borrowed ideas in the effort to express their beliefs more fully. Both deities led faithful souls to a western paradise. Both lived on mountains. Both of them traveled by means of clouds or by riding on the back of a dragon or sea monster. Both used magical plants in their practice. Both could be called upon to subdue wild animals. Guanyin had a white parrot that attended to her<sup>70</sup> while the Queen Mother had a flock of blue birds that sent messages and brought her food.<sup>71</sup> The Queen Mother was also highly associated with the White Tiger.

The Bodhisattva changed gender from masculine to feminine and changed from the name of Avalokitesvara to Guanyin. She remained a disciple of the Buddha Amitabha but then became just as generously worshiped by the multitudes of followers with whom she came into contact. The ideas of where the soul should go after death changed from the nothingness of nirvana to a western paradise provided by the mind and power of the Amitabha Buddha and then of Guanyin. The focus of Guanyin's intentions had always been to help relieve the suffering of those who called out to her, so the idea of compassion clearly influenced the Queen Mother who also became more compassionate in time.

The Queen Mother went from a half beast shaman to a refined elite member of the court of Heaven. She expanded her accessibility from rulers to faithful adepts. Her focus changed from helping rulers fight battles to helping them groom self-improvement. She changed status from the most high teacher and creator of the world to having a male master, the Celestial King of the Primordial Commencement<sup>72</sup> or the Jade Emperor as depicted in the *Journey to the West*. Daoists believed that the sacred texts and objects were properly passed between members of the opposite sex so as to keep the balance between yin and yang.<sup>73</sup> Therefore, the Queen Mother remained necessary as the one to pass on the gifts herself or as a matchmaker between divine women and mortal men.

In pre-Buddhist China, the Queen Mother of the West was a well established deity in the pantheon of Chinese gods but after the influences of the new religious icons, she changed to become what

the people of the next generation admired the most. From the Han dynasty to the Qing dynasty, both the Queen Mother of the West and the Bodhisattva Guanyin were popular among the common people as sources of power for help in their lives. Both have been preserved through the ages in various images that, like snapshots, reveal the changes as one grows to maturity.

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2 Suzanne Elizabeth Cahill, "The Image of the Goddess Hsi Wang Mu in Medieval Chinese Literature" (Ph.D. diss., Berkeley: University of California, 1982) Copyright 1983, 7-8.

3 Ibid., 8.

4 Ibid.

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- 9 Cahill, *Transcendence and Divine Passion*, 123.
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70 Ibid.

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72 Ibid., 105.

73 Ibid., 38 – 39.