



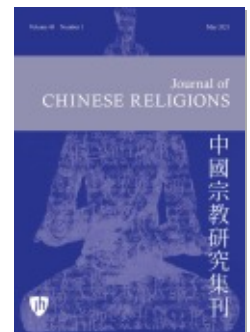
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*Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in
Late Imperial China* by Yuhang Li (review)

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by non-specialists in Huayan directed toward other non-specialists in Huayan, tend to give most attention to Fazang's *Essay on the Golden Lion* (*Jin shizi zhang* 金師子章).² Hammerstrom's study of educational curricula at Huayan universities and institutes in China from the early twentieth century suggests that the doctrines of four *dharmadhātu*, six characteristics, and ten profound gates, as well as practices associated with contemplating the *dharmadhātu*, perhaps merit more attention.³

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YUHANG LI, *Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. xii, 312 pp. US\$65 (hb). ISBN 978-0-231-19012-1

Yuhang Li's *Becoming Guanyin* is a welcome addition examining the religious life of lay Buddhist women in late imperial China. Since its introduction to China in the early centuries of the Common Era, Buddhism had become fully integrated into the Chinese society by the middle period as one of three traditions, alongside Confucianism and Daoism, which informed thoughts and practices. Given the restrictive role Confucianism defined for women since Han times, scholars have noted how Buddhism has provided alternatives for women to participate in religious activities and created space for engagements in the public domain. With the exception of Wu Zetian 武則天 (624–705), the only female sovereign in Chinese history, who largely relied on Buddhist ideology and the support of Buddhist clerics, lay Buddhist women's social participation in Buddhism was largely confined to their roles as benefactors and patronesses of the religion, from making donations to Buddhist institutions, to copying of sūtras, sponsoring Buddhist rituals, and the dedication of monuments and images. Non-canonical literature also gives accounts of their piety and how they resolved conflicts to justify their Buddhist devotion in the Confucian framework that advocated abiding notions of virtues such as filial piety and purity as daughters, obedience to husbands and duty in procreation to continue the family line as wives, and chastity as widows.

Avalokiteśvara, Bodhisattva of Compassion, better known in Chinese as Guanyin 觀音, remains one of the most popular deities among Buddhist worshippers. In China in the later periods, Guanyin's transformation into a female deity is a phenomenon unique in and of itself; however, Guanyin, like other great bodhisattvas, began as an androgynous

² See, for example, translations from the Huayan tradition in Wing-tsit Chan, *A Source Book in Chinese Philosophy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969), 409–424; Justin Tiwald and Bryan Van Norden, eds., *Readings in Later Chinese Philosophy: Han to the 20th Century* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 2014); chapter 8 in Graham Priest, *The Fifth Corner of Four: An Essay on Buddhist Metaphysics and the Catuskoṭi* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018).

³ A standard overview of these topics appears in Francis H. Cook, *Hua-yen Buddhism: The Jewel Net of Indra* (University Park: The Pennsylvania University Press, 1977). Cook mentions the *Essay on the Golden Lion* only in passing (see pp. 76, 133 note 4).

deity, above gender, and not as a male deity, as Li claims (p. 1).¹ That said, Guanyin in the female form offered additional avenues for female worshippers' engagement with the deity and to achieve their religious goals or even identification with the bodhisattva. The book covers a broad social spectrum of Buddhist women, from empresses and imperial consorts to elite, educated women with talents (gentry women who were unmarried, married, or widowed), as well as courtesans outside the conventional framework of the family. Li explores how these women, through material artifacts, performances, as well as through their own bodies, expressed not only their devotion to Guanyin, but also achieved merger and identification with the deity. At times the strategies involved imitation of the deity, in bodily dance or in attire, in what Li calls "devotional mimesis," acts that allow the fusion of the worshipper and the worshipped, and hence the book's title, *Becoming Guanyin*.

The innovative approach in Li's book is the extensive use of evidence from material objects and performances to delve into the Buddhist women's practices and how they constructed meanings for themselves. The knowledge gained, Li maintains, cannot be obtained relying on textual sources alone. The book is divided into four chapters, with each focusing on a type of performative or material practice: dance, painting, embroidery, and jewelry.

Chapter 1, "Dancing Guanyin: The Transformative Body and Buddhist Courtesans," explores the experience of becoming Guanyin through dance. The bodhisattva manifesting as a prostitute, a skillful device (*upāya*), to teach the doctrine of emptiness and illusion is a well-known trope in Buddhist literature, especially in the Chan tradition. Li argues that the late Ming male literati were involved in initiating the practice of having courtesans perform a dance mimicking the movements of Guanyin, called Guanyin dance. Presented as a religious ritual dance with the pretext of using sex to lead men toward enlightenment, Li adroitly explores the impact of the feminization of Guanyin on religious practice, and notions of gender and desire inscribed in the female body. She maintains that that dance led to transcendence for both courtesan performers, who mimicked Guanyin in bodily movements, and the predominantly male viewers. Noting the rich adornments of the dancers and the sensuousness accentuated by their dance movements and gestures, Li observes, "the visualization of a Buddha land became a sensuous reality" (p. 42). The saturation of sensory experience, paradoxically, is an aesthetic experience attained in meditative Buddhist practice and is a metaphor and rhetorical device for the cognition of spiritual bliss or a vision of the pure land, which implies a detachment from the senses—a concept called *alamkāra* (ornament) that Ananda Coomaraswamy so eloquently explains.²

Making images has been one of the most fundamental forms of Buddhist devotional practice early on. The next two chapters investigate ways in which lay Buddhist women in late imperial China participated in creating images of Guanyin, rather than just offering donations for the making of images. In chapter 2, "Painting Guanyin with Brush and Ink: Negotiating Confucianism and Buddhism," Li examines how gentry women exercised their talents in religious practice. Educated and skilled in painting and poetry, these women

¹ In Mahāyāna Buddhism, great bodhisattvas possess magical powers, and Avalokiteśvara, as spelled out in the *Lotus Sūtra*, can manifest in thirty-three forms, including the form of a woman, for the purpose of teaching.

² Ananda K. Coomaraswamy, "Ornament," *Art Bulletin* 21, no. 4 (1939): 375–382.

occupied an elite position in the society within the Confucian framework and resided in the domestic space of the family. Li examines what aspects of Guanyin's attributes they selected to harmonize with the constructed ideal of womanhood, be they daughters, wives, mothers, or widows, and how they expressed their Buddhist piety in making images of the bodhisattva they worshipped. Although paintings of Guanyin in the *baimiao* 白描 (ink drawing) technique began with Ming literati painters, who were predominantly male, and was also favored in the Chan painting tradition, Li explains that *baimiao* depictions of Guanyin became the mode of choice for lay Buddhist women painters. The gendered transformation of Guanyin thus generated new forms of practice for the gendered identity of painters. Embroidery was another popular format for making Buddhist imagery, and there is evidence that female practitioners, both nuns and lay worshippers, had long participated in embroidering Buddhist images. Chapter 3, "Embroidering Guanyin with Hair: Efficacious Pain and Skill," examines the rather peculiar practice of female practitioners plucking their hair to make embroidered images of Guanyin which, Li observes, had become a feminine form of devotion to Guanyin in late imperial China. She points out that the engagement with the devotees' bodies and pain heightens the devotees' experience and assisted in bridging the gap between the deity and the practitioner.

The identification with Guanyin goes beyond the mortal realm. While meditation on the hairpin has been a form of visualization practice, in chapter 4, "Mimicking Guanyin with Hairpins: Jewelry as a Means of Transcendence," Li gathers archeological evidence from tombs to demonstrate how female worshippers include hairpins with images of Guanyin or Amitābha (in conventional iconography a small image of Amitābha adorns the crown worn by Avalokiteśvara) as attempts to identify with or present themselves as the deity. The hairpins mimic the iconographic attributes of Guanyin, but there are also deviations that demonstrate the women practitioners' agency. Li also discusses hairpins recovered from the tombs of several empresses and empress dowagers, examining the additional iconographic elements intended to assist the deceased to achieve rebirth in Amitābha's pure land.

Richly illustrated and described in great detail, Li's book provides a vivid picture of lay Buddhist women's devotion to Guanyin and their various forms of practices that were gender specific—new practices that arose because of the female form of Guanyin, and which enabled "a direct bodily connection with the divine for women at all levels" (p. 171). The topoi of Guanyin's manifestations in female form, female devotees worshipping and identifying with the bodhisattva, sometimes utilizing their bodies as vehicles, are ripe for theoretical inquiry. Li deploys a broad range of Western critical theories to interpret the abundant materials for studying lay Buddhist women's religious life that thus far have been neglected. Most notably, she applies theories of gender and the body as they pertain to the subject matter. Li maintains that the gender transformation of Guanyin enables women of late imperial China to identify with her and that the "shared gender encouraged a mimetic relation between the deity and the worshiper in which the presence of Guanyin was conjured by or through the practitioners' own bodies" (p. 21).

The organization of the book is clear, though the writing is at times dense and the argument not followed through. For example, on elite women's choice of painting Guanyin images in the *baimiao* technique, Li writes, "In this way, the image of Guanyin is mediated by society; the image and its production mutually reinforce a socially constructed ideal, and as we will see, this ideal involves the sublimation of desire" (p. 61). The reader, however, cannot find any further exposition on what the "sublimation of desire" meant in this chapter.

If this reviewer has any particular response to the volume, it is to the author's conscious or unconscious use of binary opposites to construct her arguments throughout: Confucian/Buddhist, secular/profane, matter/spirit, permanent/temporal, male/female, and so on. Li writes, "I argue that laywomen's various material practices locate a liminal space between transcendence and immanence, and their very bodies become the medium by which they manifest immanent transcendence" (p. 20). "Such multimedia representations [of still images and live performance] blur the boundaries of monastic and secular, sacred and profane, and permanent material and temporal performance" (p. 21). Cartesian dualism is the bedrock of Western philosophical thinking; the dialectic method began with Plato and was continued by influential thinkers including Hegel and Marx. The separations of mind and body, human and divine, etc., are also fundamental in Christian theological thinking. Increasingly, however, scholars have pointed out the limitations and pitfalls of using binary opposites to formulate knowledge. Assumptions about the boundaries of paired opposites, such as human and things, part and whole, animate and inanimate, and living and non-living in modern theories, as Caroline Bynum notes, can obscure our understanding of contemporary theories and other kinds of evidence.³ Tyler Roberts also cautions what the binary of religious and secular in academic inquiry might prevent us from seeing.⁴ If we move away from the dialectic method, what other insights would we have gained? What have we missed? Constructing a binary of Confucianism and Buddhism seems obvious, but Daoism seems less oppositional to Buddhism, and Li uses indigenous religious concepts such as *ganying* 感應 (stimulus and response) to explore the relationship of the devotee to the deity. Whether the concept of "transcendence" exists in traditional Chinese thought or not is hotly debated among scholars,⁵ as are the risks of distortion in using well-defined Western terms, such as the transcendence/immanence paradigm, to interpret traditional China's past. What alternative language can we use? Even though the volume has made significant contributions, these are questions Li can ponder, and bring the study of lay Buddhist women's religious practice into the discourse of more current methodological concerns in the study of religions.

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³ Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011), 280–286.

⁴ Tyler Roberts, *Encountering Religion: Responsibility and Criticism after Secularism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 5.

⁵ See the discussion in Karl-Heinz Pohl, "'Immanent Transcendence' in the Chinese Tradition—Remarks on a Chinese (and Sinological) Controversy," in *Transcendence, Immanence, and Intercultural Philosophy*, ed. Nahum Brown and William Franke (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 103–123. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-43092-8_5.