

## Original Paper

# Gender Transformation of Kwan Yin in Central China: The Mother Stereotype

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### **Abstract**

*Kwan Yin, although typically depicted as female in Chinese literature and artworks, is originally a male deity Avalokiteśvara in India. This essay examines the process, reason, and impact of Kwan Yin's feminization in the ancient Chinese context and argues that her gender transformation is a transformation to the mother stereotype.*

*The essay mainly relies on primary source of Buddhist texts and folklores of Kwan-Yin in China and secondary sources researching the gender transformation of Kwan-Yin through historical and sociological lens. The essay concludes that while the female Kwan Yin's popularity could be seen as gender empowering, the mother stereotype she and female deities of other religions embody in fact dismisses woman's individual value.*

### **Keywords**

*Buddhism, Kwan Yin, gender transformation, Avalokiteśvara, China*

## **1. Introduction**

Kwan Yin (Note 1) (观音) is undisputedly one of the most important figures in Mahayana Buddhism and Chinese culture. Although she appears as a compassionate woman in many literary and artistic works familiar to Chinese people today, Kwan Yin originated in India as a male deity Avalokiteśvara. While much study has been conducted on this gender transformation process through a historical or sociological lens, little discussion has been given on its feminist implications. I would argue that Kwan Yin's gender transformation may have been the result of the development of her many characteristics that fit the mother stereotype, which in turn influenced her representation in Chinese culture. While the female Kwan Yin's popularity could be seen as gender empowering, the mother stereotype she and female deities of other religions embody in fact dismisses woman's individual value.

Kwan Yin's transformation in gender could be observed by her appearance in literary work, religious texts, and artistic forms like statues and paintings. Despite the debated origin of Avalokiteśvara, he (Note 2) was explicitly depicted as a male when Buddhism entered into China. According to the *Avalokiteśvara Sutra* translated to Chinese in late Jin Dynasty (226-420 CE), Avalokiteśvara is perceived to be a "brave and fierce man" (勇猛之丈夫) (Zhang & He, p. 117). The Chinese translation of his name Guan Shi Yin appeared for the first time in the *Pure Land Sutra* (252 C.E.) translated by Sangharvarman (Reis-Habito, p. 62). At and prior to this period, the images of Avalokiteśvara found in Dunhuang correspond to a male identity, depicted with mustaches. It is generally agreed upon that Kwan Yin's feminization started in late Nanbei Dynasty (420-589 AD). This process, together with the localization of Buddhism and its adaptation into the Chinese context, completed in Tang Dynasty under the ruling of the female emperor Wu Zetian (690-705) (Note 3) (Jiao, p. 1). The process and reason for this transformation, and the impact of this change are the focus of this paper's investigation.

Before diving into the specifics of Kwan Yin's gender transformation, it is essential to note that bodhisattvas are genderless theologically speaking. According to the *Lotus Sutra* which dedicated a whole chapter to Kwan Yin, he "teaches the Dharma by changing himself (Note 4) into" different forms, male and female alike (The Lotus Sutra). In contrast to the Western binary understanding of gender in Christianity, Buddhism emphasizes transcendence of attachment to the concept of gender. Thus, our discussion would be focusing on why people's representation and perception of Kwan Yin changed from male to female. It is also important to note that we need to separate Kwan Yin's gender change in her appearance from a change in her essence, the latter would represent a completion of her feminization.

## 2. The Process and Reason of Kwan Yin's Feminization through the Mother Stereotype

Kwan Yin's feminization could be attributed to her own "feminine" characteristics, religious need of people at the time, Buddhism's need of localization, and its consequent adaptation of Buddhist beliefs to local culture. These causes suggest that Kwan Yin's identity is not primarily about changing her gender from male to female, but rather it's about her development as a mother figure, which reciprocally influenced the later description of Kwan Yin in myths and art works.

Kwan Yin's popularity soared toward the end of the Nanbei Dynasty, as people searched for spiritual guidance under the political turmoil. Kwan Yin, shortened for Guan Shi Yin, literally means view-see-sound, also translated as the "perceiver of the world's sounds". In the *Lotus Sutra*, her name is explained: "sentient beings who experience suffering...wholeheartedly chant his name", and by doing so he would "immediately perceive their voices and free them from suffering (The Lotus Sutra)". "With benevolence and compassion", Kwan Yin was the deity desired by people at the time (The Lotus Sutra). Her love and rescue are compassionate, responsive, unconditional: just like mother's love. The harsh political environment and suffering of commoners at the time resulted in Kwan Yin's popularity, whose

characteristics of compassion and ability to relieve suffering were uplifted. Under the patriarchal society with male tyrants, a more feminine and less authoritative figure was naturally embraced.

What ideologies, then, enable a female Kwan Yin to be worshiped under the patriarchal society? The answer is to view her as a mother. To see Kwan Yin as a mother provides justification for men to venerate Kwan Yin, as Confucianism though dismissing women's value, emphasizes on the importance of filial love and duty (孝). In other words, while worship of a female would be seen as inappropriate, the veneration of a mother is in accordance with the conventional Chinese teaching.

To think of Kwan Yin as a mother further enhances localization of Buddhism. One of the reasons Buddhism was not immediately popular in China was its emphasis on leaving one's family and becoming childless, an absolute contradiction to traditional beliefs in *The Classics of Filial Duty (Xiao Jing)* that considered filial duty to be "most important virtue and way of conduct" (Zeng Zi, p. 2). To better integrate Buddhism to China, another trait of Kwan Yin that was being emphasized was her ability to help women whose entire value depends on childbearing (Zhao, p. 243). Kwan Yin is always depicted with small children and many folk tales narrated her ability to bring children to pious believers. As described in the *Lotus Sutra* that "If any woman wanting to have a baby boy pays homage and makes offerings to Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, she will bear a baby boy endowed with good merit and wisdom", bearing children is seen as the woman's responsibility, and it is thus only reasonable that Kwan Yin is a female, or at least presented as a female (The Lotus Sutra). It could be argued that the ideal of a woman is a mother, and Kwan Yin as a deity must be a perfect woman, meaning a mother.

The mother stereotype and Kwan Yin was so integrated that the folklores concerning Kwan Yin gradually changed to make her a moral woman, most evidently through the evolution of her manifestation of a woman from Yanzhou. In *Continued tales of mysteries and monsters (续玄怪录)* by Li Fuyan, Kwan Yin manifests as a woman from Yanzhou who "offered to sleep with" (狎昵荐枕) young men in the area in an effort to spread Buddhist beliefs (Li). In some adaptive versions from 1269, this woman from Yanzhou was named as the wife of Mr. Ma (马郎妇), who instead of sex used marriage as the lure for people to read Buddhist texts. She remained a virgin, dying after her wedding ceremony (佛祖统纪, p. 35). A clear distinction emerges from the change in her gender from a male manifested as female to a female in essence. Kwan Yin, thus, is adjusted to fit the female model, a wife instead of a single woman, sexually inactive instead of sexually active. Interestingly, there is a male parallel to the first story in *Buddha-dhyana-samadhi sagara-sutra*, in which a male deity used sex to lure women to teach Buddhism. It is evident that an ideal female deity must be sexually inactive but fertile, thus a mother. It could be argued that rather than feminized, Kwan Yin was motherized. In doing so, although seemingly upholding women, it still dismissed women's value as individuals.

### 3. The Impact of Kwan Yin's Feminization through the Mother Stereotype

This paper by no means overlooks the contribution of Buddhism and the feminization of Kwan Yin in promoting relative gender equality. The only female emperor Wu Zetian in Chinese history was legitimized with propaganda of Kwan Yin whose myths show that women could be powerful figures. In part due to Kwan Yin's popularity and her gender as a female believed by the commoners, Mahayana instead of Hinayana Buddhism flourished in China. In contrast to women's natural inferiority described in Hinayana texts like the *Madhyama Āgama* and *The Sutra On Contemplation Of Amitayus*, Mahayana Buddhism tends to uphold gender equality. In the *Diamond Sutra*, the Buddha addresses both the "fine man and woman" (善男子, 善女子) when referring to people capable of accumulating merit and becoming enlightened (Nhất Hạnh et al.). In the *Lotus Sutra*, "the daughter of the naga king" becomes a Buddha and thus refutes the belief that "female body" can not "become a Buddha". In the story, however, she transforms into a man when becoming a Buddha (The Lotus Sutra). Although this could be understood as a confirmation to the fact that a female body could not become a Buddha before transformation, the gender change embodies her transcendence of gender. The form of Kwan Yin as a female supports the later explanation, emphasizing transcendence of gender instead of attachment to gender, be it belief of superiority as a male or inferiority as a female. The elevation of status of female is apparent considering Wu's eventual ascending to throne and rule that lasted for 15 years.

Even today, Kwan Yin is an example frequently used by Chinese theologians to relieve the myth that men are superior. Unfortunately, their words are challenged through feminist lens. Cheng Yen, a Taiwanese Buddhist nun, argues that "a woman has a precious function, which is also the most beautiful part of being a woman—that is the glory of being a mother" (Lee & Han, p. 62). Admittedly, this uplifting of motherhood is valuable in promoting gender equality through Buddhism, but the emphasis on motherhood for women is suggestive that a woman is less of a childless woman. Comparing Kwan Yin's unconditional compassion to all sentient beings with the more narrow compassion of a mother to her hidden motherhood, demonstrates the increased limitation of a woman's value as an individual. Considering Kwan Yin as the perfect role model and spiritual guide, women embrace the mother stereotype put on Kwan Yin. Such an equation of women's value could be compared with the veneration of the Virgin Mary, whose sole existence in the Bible seems to be giving birth to Jesus. She is also and also the saint to pray to for a child (Reis-Habito, p. 66).

We should not, however, dismiss Kwan Yin or the Virgin Mary for its negative influences, but rather recognize they were constructed under an extremely patriarchal value system. It is also important to remember not to view these figures as static, but rather as changing over time. For instance, Kwan Yin serves as an important spiritual guide for the contemporary U.S. Trans community (Bailey, p. 180). His/her ability to change gender accordingly exemplifies the Buddhist belief that the body is merely an impermanent form that needs to be transcended. His/her transcendence of gender in the many scriptures

embodies the fluidity of gender. Hence, Kwan Yin could be seen as a spiritual guide for social liberation. The understanding of religious texts and figures depends on interpretation and contexts. Recognizing Kwan Yin's historical influences as a representation of motherhood, we should not deny her potential to evolve and embody different, even distinct, values.

#### 4. Conclusion

Kwan Yin exemplifies the mother stereotype: unconditional care, compassion, virginity (sexual inactivity), and lack of individuality. Such characteristics are ubiquitous in female deities in many world religions, most notably the Virgin Mary of Christianity. The prevalence of these figures which equate womanhood with motherhood hinders women's liberation and restrains women under the patriarchal value systems. While recognizing these figures' negative influence in the past, one should remember that religion is inherently embedded in culture. Kwan Yin's gender transformation is not only theological but also cultural, resulting from a distortion of her transcendence of gender by the commoners deeply convinced by the patriarchal beliefs about gender. Like the Trans Community's adaptation of Kwan Yin's symbolism, we should stay aware and cautious of residues of patriarchy on female religious characters while promoting their symbolism of gender empowerment, fluidity, and liberation.

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