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From *Avalokiteśvara* to *Guanyin*: Cultural Transformation and Religious Adaptation

Sapna Kashyap

Ph.D. Scholar, Department of East Asian Studies, University of Delhi.

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Abstract

The transformation of the Indian bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara* into the Chinese deity *Guanyin* is a particularly dramatic example of religious adaptation in world history. Beginning as a *bodhisattva* of cosmic compassion, usually depicted as a young man in India, *Avalokiteśvara* was transmitted to China through scripture, pilgrimage, and ritual exchange. Over the centuries this figure became the gentle and often female embodiment of compassion, rooted in the ethical, aesthetic, and domestic life of Chinese society.

This study examines how and why this change occurred. Rather than treating doctrine, gender, or popular practice separately, it offers an integrated analysis that links textual translation, visual representation, social roles, and devotional literature, paying particular attention to the part played by women devotees in shaping *Guanyin*'s image through patronage, storytelling, and artistic creation.

Drawing on English translations of key Buddhist texts (the *Lotus Sūtra* and, through Studholme's study, the *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*) and on English-language scholarship on Guanyin, miracle tales, gender, and women's devotional art, this paper argues that the feminization of Guanyin was not a dilution of Buddhist doctrine but a culturally resonant rearticulation of its central message: *karuṇā* (compassion). By becoming more accessible, maternal, and attentive to the pain of everyday life, Guanyin brought transcendent ideals closer to lived experience.

In doing so, the study contributes to wider discussions of gendered devotion, religious translation, and the relationship between orthodoxy and popular practice. It shows that religious figures endure not by resisting change but by being continually remade in ways that speak to the aspirations, anxieties, and ideals of new communities.

Keywords: *Avalokiteśvara; Guanyin; Cultural Adaptation; Gender Transformation; Popular Devotion; Sinicization; Mahāyāna Buddhism; Lived Religion*

1. Introduction

The story of how the Indian bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara* found a place in the household shrines of China is a story not only of religious diffusion but also of reinterpretation, negotiation, and creative synthesis. *Avalokiteśvara*, the bodhisattva of compassion, has been worshiped throughout the Buddhist world. In China he became known as *Guanyin* (觀音), “the one who perceives sounds,” or *Guanshiyin* (觀世音), “the one who perceives the world’s sounds.”¹ Images of the *bodhisattva* were already being made in *Gandhāra* and *Mathura* by the second century CE.²

The change of name is itself significant. Scholars have not agreed on how to interpret the Sanskrit compound *Avalokiteśvara*, which has been read in several ways, including “lord who sees (from on high),” whereas the Chinese name points to hearing, and so to responsiveness and care.³ The figure’s image also changed. In India, Southeast Asia, Tibet, and China up to the Tang, the deity was usually depicted as a handsome, princely young man; from the Five Dynasties onward, *Guanyin* was increasingly shown as a woman, and by the *Ming* this process was largely complete.⁴ Among the later forms are the White-robed *Guanyin* and the Child-giving *Guanyin*, which emerged during and after the Song.⁵

Scholarship has approached this transformation from several directions. Chün-fang Yü’s study remains the fullest account of how the Indian *bodhisattva* became the Chinese “Goddess of Mercy,” and she frames the change as one of domestication.⁶ Robert Ford Campney has shown that miracle tales are valuable evidence for the sinicization of Buddhism, that is, for the ways the foreign religion was explained, justified, and accommodated to Chinese audiences.⁷ Bernard Faure’s study of Buddhism, purity, and gender shows that Buddhist images of women, positive and negative alike, are more ambivalent than they first appear, a point worth bearing in mind whenever feminization is read as empowerment.⁸ More recently, Yuhang Li has turned to women’s agency, showing

how laywomen in late imperial China “became” *Guanyin* through painting, embroidery, jewelry, and dance, taking an active part in the production of religious meaning.⁹

Miracle tales in particular presented *Guanyin* as a personal savior. Known as *gǎnyīng* (influence-response) or *língyàn* (efficacious responses), such stories appeared soon after the *Lotus Sūtra* was translated and were gathered in collections as early as the fifth and early sixth centuries.¹⁰

Even so, the interaction among doctrine, gender, art, and social practice over time, and in particular women’s part in shaping *Guanyin*’s imagery, can be examined more closely. This paper takes up that task. It asks: how did *Avalokiteśvara* become *Guanyin* in the Chinese cultural world, not only in form, but also in function, meaning, and social role?

The paper covers the period from the arrival of Buddhism in China during the Han dynasty to the Qing dynasty (seventeenth to nineteenth centuries), when *Guanyin* devotion was especially widespread. It draws on primary sources available in English translation, namely Burton Watson’s translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* and Alexander Studholme’s study of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*,¹¹ together with the earliest Chinese collections of *Guanshiyin* miracle tales, compiled by Xie Fu, Zhang Yan, and Lu Gao between the late fourth and early sixth centuries, as presented by Campney,¹² and on a secondary scholarship that interprets Chinese-language materials for English readers.

The analysis acknowledges its limitations. It does not cover Tibetan, Japanese, or Southeast Asian developments; it relies on scholarly translations rather than on the original Sanskrit or classical Chinese texts; and it is geographically focused on central, eastern, and southern China, with the northwestern site of Dunhuang considered for early iconography. Within these parameters, it offers an integrated account of religious transformation that treats compassion not as

¹ Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 1.

² Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 9.

³ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 14.

⁴ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 294.

⁵ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 95.

⁶ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 26, 419.

⁷ Robert Ford Campney, trans., *Signs from the Unseen Realm: Buddhist Miracle Tales from Early Medieval China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2012), 37.

⁸ Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2003), 20.

⁹ Yuhang Li, *Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2020), 22–23.

¹⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 24; Campney, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 4.

¹¹ Burton Watson, trans., *The Lotus Sutra* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 298–306; Alexander Studholme, *The Origins of Om Manipadme Hum: A Study of the Karandavyuha Sutra* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002).

¹² Campney, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 4.

a fixed doctrine but as a dynamic and adaptable practice.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Grounding

Existing scholarship falls into four main strands. The first concerns the domestication and sinicization of the bodhisattva. Yü traces how Avalokiteśvara was gradually made Chinese through scriptures, miracle tales, divine monks, indigenous iconographies, rituals, and pilgrimage, and she argues that Guanyin's feminization should be understood within this larger process.¹³ Campany's work on early miracle tales adds that sinicization was not only a matter of accommodation: the tales also clarified points at which Buddhist teaching conflicted with non-Buddhist religion.¹⁴ The term "sinicization" is used here in this descriptive sense.

The second strand concerns gender and personification. Faure's work on Buddhism, purity, and gender stresses the ambivalence of Buddhist images of women, including the positive ones.¹⁵ Yü argues that the female *Guanyin* was not engineered by popular religion or by women artists alone, but that once she became popular she did offer options to real Chinese women.¹⁶ This tension between possibility and constraint remains central to research on Guanyin.

The third strand explores popular religion and narrative. Miracle tales portray Guanyin as a responsive, almost conversational deity, and Campany treats such tales as indispensable evidence for how Buddhism was practiced and explained in medieval China.¹⁷ Yü notes that the early compilers of *Guanyin* tales were literati officials, even though the people who reported the miracles came from all walks of life.¹⁸

The fourth and most recent strand emphasizes female agency. Li shows how women in late imperial China used devotional practices, including drawing and painting, embroidery, jewelry, and dance, to create *Guanyin's* presence and, through merit-making, to pursue salvation.¹⁹ Her work moves beyond seeing women as passive consumers of religious imagery and shows them as co-creators of meaning. Yü offers a useful balance: Chinese women contributed to the construction of the female *Guanyin*, but monks, literati, poets, artists, and ordinary women and men all

took part, and no single group should be credited with it.²⁰

Building on this scholarship, the paper draws on three concepts: Yü's domestication, which treats the feminization of Guanyin as part of the bodhisattva's adaptation to Chinese society; Campany's sinicization through narrative; and Li's "devotional mimesis," the idea that a devotee's likeness to a deity can help her transcend the finite world.²¹ Together they treat movement across cultures not as loss but as creative reinterpretation, and they direct attention to how faith was practiced in homes, prayers, and festivals as well as in texts and temples. Guanyin, I argue, is a striking illustration of both: a figure who lived in the daily rhythms of Chinese life and was continually reinterpreted into new forms of care and compassion.

2.1 Research Gaps and Contribution

This study addresses three interrelated gaps:

- *Fragmentation*. Doctrine, art, and gender are often treated separately. This paper integrates them into a single narrative of transformation.
- *Agency*. Women's devotion is widely noted, but their part in shaping Guanyin's imagery deserves fuller examination alongside that of monks, literati, and artists.
- *Continuity across cultures*. The Lotus Sūtra's teaching that Avalokiteśvara appears in whatever form is needed deserves closer attention as the doctrinal basis for Chinese innovation.

By addressing these gaps, the paper shows that *Guanyin's* success lay in her dual identity: doctrinally continuous with *Avalokiteśvara*, yet culturally embedded in the Chinese moral imagination.

2.2 Comparative Framework

The analysis unfolds across four dimensions:

- *Doctrinal continuity*. The unbroken thread of *karuṇā* and *upāya* (expedient or skillful means), which allowed adaptable embodiment.²²
- *Iconographic evolution*. The visual shifts from an Indian princely figure to a Chinese maternal

¹³ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 419.

¹⁴ Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 37–38.

¹⁵ Faure, *Power of Denial*, 20, 57.

¹⁶ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 418–19.

¹⁷ Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 37.

¹⁸ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 24.

¹⁹ Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 22–23.

²⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 22, 418.

²¹ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 419; Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 37; Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 22.

²² Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 301.

woman, through symbols such as the lotus, the willow, and the child.²³

- *Social integration.* Guanyin's role in childbirth, filial piety, and community festivals.
- *Gendered agency.* How women used devotion to claim spiritual and social space.

These layers are not sequential but concurrent, each reinforcing the others over time.

2.3 Scope of the Study

- *Chronology.* From the origins of *Avalokiteśvara* in Indian *Mahāyāna* texts to late imperial China, with the main emphasis on the Song to Qing dynasties.
- *Geography.* India and China, particularly central, eastern, and southern China, with Dunhuang considered for early iconography.
- *Sources.* The Lotus Sūtra (in particular its "Universal Gate" chapter) and Studholme's study of the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*; miracle tales, devotional manuals, and visual art as discussed in secondary scholarship.
- *Focus.* The Mahāyāna tradition; Tibetan, Japanese, and Southeast Asian developments are excluded.

2.4 Limitations

- *Textual.* Reliance on English translations may obscure nuances of the original Sanskrit and Chinese texts.
- *Temporal.* Attention to late imperial China may overlook early medieval or contemporary developments.
- *Regional.* A focus on principal cultural centers may limit insight into local practices.
- *Sources.* Not all primary cultural or ritual materials are accessible for analysis.

3. Historical Foundation: Avalokiteśvara in Indian Buddhism

Avalokiteśvara appears in the Lotus Sūtra, where the "Universal Gate" chapter (chapter 25 in *Kumārajīva's* Chinese version, which Watson translates) presents him as a rescuer who hears the cries of suffering beings and delivers them from fire,

flood, shipwreck, bandits, demons, and imprisonment.²⁴ The chapter also promises that a woman who reveres him will bear a son or daughter as she wishes.²⁵ This responsiveness was not incidental; it was central to his identity.

The *Kāraṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, which Studholme dates to the late fourth or early fifth century, linked him further to the mantra *Om maṇi padme hūm* and described worlds contained within the pores of his body.²⁶ In the sūtra, recitation of the formula is presented as a form of bringing the bodhisattva's name to mind, leading to rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land.²⁷ Early Indian images depict him as a princely figure: an image from Lorian Tangai shows him in royal dress, with a moustache, holding a lotus.²⁸

Critically, Indian Buddhism did not fix his gender. In the Lotus Sūtra he takes whatever form is needed to save beings, among them a monk, a nun, a layman, a laywoman, the wife of a rich man or householder, a young boy, or a young girl.²⁹ This doctrinal openness gave later Chinese devotees scriptural room to fill with culturally specific meanings.

4. Transmission and Translation: Making Buddhism Chinese

Buddhism entered China during the Han dynasty, carried by merchants, monks, and diplomats along the Silk Road. Early translators faced a formidable task in rendering Sanskrit concepts into a language steeped in Confucian ethics and Daoist cosmology.

The name *Avalokiteśvara* posed a particular challenge, and early renderings varied. The Parthian translator An Xuan (c. 180) used a name that Yü renders "He Who Peeks the Sounds"; Dharmarakṣa's translation of the *Lotus Sūtra* (286 CE) called the bodhisattva *Guāngshìyīn* (光世音), "Sound-Illuminator of the World"; and Kumārajīva's translation of 406 CE made *Guānshìyīn* (觀世音) famous.³⁰ *Guānyīn* and *Guānshìyīn* were used interchangeably in the earliest translations. The older view that *Guānyīn* was a Tang abbreviation, adopted to avoid the personal name of Emperor Taizong, is rejected by Yü, because *Guānyīn* already appears before *Kumārajīva's* version.³¹ Whatever the reason for the shorter name, "perceiver of sounds" placed

²³ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 294, 418.

²⁴ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 298–300.

²⁵ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 300.

²⁶ Studholme, *Origins of Om Manipadme Hum*, 6, 13–14, 47.

²⁷ Studholme, *Origins of Om Manipadme Hum*, 6–7.

²⁸ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 10.

²⁹ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 301–2.

³⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 33, 36–37; Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 4 n. 11.

³¹ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 36.

hearing, and so closeness, at the center of the bodhisattva's identity.

Kumārajīva's translation was especially influential. According to the *Record of the Lotus Sutra*, a ruler named Juqu Mengxun, who recovered from illness after chanting the chapter, promoted the "Universal Gate" chapter as an independent scripture, the *Guanshiyin jing*; almost two hundred copies of it from the Dunhuang caves are held in collections outside China.³² Its promises of deliverance from fire, water, swords, and demons to anyone who called on the bodhisattva's name were not abstract theology but practical refuge.³³

Art reflected this shift. At Dunhuang, Guanyin images, like those of buddhas and other bodhisattvas, appear masculine, sometimes with a thin moustache, and paintings from as late as the tenth century still show him with moustaches.³⁴ Dunhuang also preserves more than twenty-eight illustrations of the "Universal Gate" chapter, ranging from the early seventh to the eleventh century.³⁵ The Water-moon Guanyin, an androgynous form datable to the tenth century, was the first truly Chinese image of the bodhisattva, and clearly feminine forms followed after the Song.³⁶

5. Sinicization: Embedding Compassion in Chinese Life

Sinicization was never a one-time event but a centuries-long process of cultural negotiation.³⁷ Before Guanyin appeared as a woman, the bodhisattva was believed to manifest in China through wonder-working monks, a pattern Yü asks us to connect to the later feminization.³⁸ Later legends present Guanyin as a beautiful young woman, as in the Tang tale of the Fish-basket Guanyin, who offered to marry whichever suitor could memorize the "Universal Gate" chapter, or, in miracle tales and notebook literature from the Song on, as an old woman.³⁹

The family became a crucial site of devotion. A Chinese saying quoted by Yü holds that "every household worships Kuan-yin."⁴⁰ The *Lotus Sūtra*'s promise of sons and daughters to women who revere

the bodhisattva gave childbirth a scriptural basis.⁴¹ The legend of Princess Miaoshan, the third daughter of a king, who refused marriage and was punished harshly by her father, circulated in China from at least 1100, when it was inscribed on a stele, and later in the vernacular *Xiangshan baojuan* (*Precious Scroll of Fragrant Mountain*), a text that emerged in written form sometime in the Ming and survives in an edition dated 1773.⁴² In this narrative celibacy was the main cause of her conflict with her father,⁴³ a theme that may have resonated with women negotiating family constraints.

Festivals structured devotion through the year. *Guanyin's* "birthday" is celebrated on the nineteenth day of the second, sixth, and ninth months, and a monastic code of 1317 prescribed offerings of flowers, candles, incense, tea, and fruits for her birthday, as for the day commemorating the Buddha's nirvāṇa.⁴⁴

6. Gender Transformation: From Bodhisattva to Mother

The feminization of *Guanyin* became unmistakable after the Song dynasty (960–1279), when the female Guanyin first made an indisputable appearance.⁴⁵ Yü argues that the transformation was not engineered by popular religion or by women, and that the search for a single origin may be futile; it is better understood within the larger domestication of the bodhisattva in China.⁴⁶ Even then, some people continued to regard the bodhisattva as masculine, and some artists painted Guanyin with a moustache, so that "she/he" is the safest way to refer to the figure.⁴⁷

The White-robed Guanyin (*Báiyī Guānyīn*), a form not found in the sūtras, emerged as a popular image, dressed in white and often seated on a rock.⁴⁸ Lotuses and vases were already established attributes of Avalokiteśvara in India, whereas the willow branch, water, and the moon are connected to healing ritual and scriptural symbolism.⁴⁹ In some images she holds a baby; the Child-giving Guanyin (*Sòngzǐ Guānyīn*), a maternal figure holding a baby boy, is a variant of the

³² Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 75.

³³ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 299.

³⁴ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 2, 223.

³⁵ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 76.

³⁶ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 14, 21.

³⁷ Campamy, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 37–38; Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 26.

³⁸ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 25, 419.

³⁹ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 419, 428.

⁴⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 1.

⁴¹ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 300; Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 37.

⁴² Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 293–94, 296, 318, 321.

⁴³ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 310.

⁴⁴ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 79, 295.

⁴⁵ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 14, 418.

⁴⁶ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 418–19.

⁴⁷ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 6.

⁴⁸ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 14, 94–95.

⁴⁹ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 418.

White-robed form, representing her role as a fertility goddess.⁵⁰

Li shows that women were not merely devotees but active makers of Guanyin's image. There was already a long tradition of women's patronage of Buddhist art, and records refer to women creating icons by embroidery or painting from the Tang to the Yuan.⁵¹ Women also donated money to have scriptures printed in thousands of copies, and inscriptions on some devotional objects name women as their donors.⁵² Yü's caution is nevertheless worth keeping in view: Chinese women contributed to the construction of the female Guanyin, but it would be going too far to attribute it primarily to them.⁵³

Importantly, this feminization did not abolish Buddhist doctrine. The Lotus Sūtra's statement that the bodhisattva may appear as a nun, laywoman, wife, or girl provided scriptural warrant.⁵⁴ Guanyin remained a bodhisattva, but one whose compassion now spoke the language of motherhood, making enlightenment feel near rather than distant.

7. Guanyin in Popular Devotion and Literature

The popularity of Guanyin in Chinese society extended far beyond temple walls and elite education, reflecting her integration into the everyday religious life of lay devotees. Yü notes that she was worshiped by all classes and by both genders, and that even the Child-giving Guanyin was worshiped not only by uneducated women but also by Confucian literati.⁵⁵

7.1 Popular Devotion

Lay devotion to Guanyin was personal, immediate, and often focused on direct engagement with the bodhisattva's saving power. The *Lotus Sūtra* itself teaches that calling the bodhisattva's name brings deliverance,⁵⁶ and the "Universal Gate" chapter, circulating as an independent scripture, became a staple of devotion.⁵⁷ Festivals devoted to Guanyin provided occasions for communal ritual, social bonding, and moral instruction; the Great Compassion Repentance, for example, is an indispensable part of the liturgy celebrating her "birthday" on her three holy days.⁵⁸

7.2 Literature and Narrative Traditions

Literature played a pivotal role in shaping popular understandings of Guanyin. Miracle stories (*lingyàn*) and devotional narratives depicted the bodhisattva intervening in crises. The earliest collections, those of Xie Fu, Zhang Yan, and Lu Gao, were given over wholly to the bodhisattva's "responsive manifestations," and Lu Gao's of 501 contains sixty-nine items.⁵⁹ Later, the Fish-basket Guanyin was celebrated in poems by Chan monks and also appeared in drama, precious scrolls, and paintings.⁶⁰

A notable feature of this literary adaptation is the feminization of Guanyin, who is frequently portrayed as a compassionate mother or as an old or young woman who tests and helps ordinary people. Li documents how Buddhist women actively participated in creating devotional images and objects, embedding Guanyin's presence in domestic and social spaces.⁶¹ This integration of women's agency illustrates the complementary relationship between a gender-fluid religious imagination and social practice.

7.3 Artistic and Visual Culture

The literary and ritual presence of Guanyin was reinforced by a wide range of visual and material culture. Dunhuang wall paintings illustrating the "Universal Gate" chapter show the bodhisattva saving beings from perils;⁶² printed pamphlets of the Ming carried on their frontispieces a portrait of the White-robed Guanyin seated on a rock;⁶³ and women made embroidered images, in some cases using their own hair for thread.⁶⁴ Such works supported contemplation and veneration and also served as vehicles for moral and cultural education.

7.4 Synthesis

Together, religious practice, literature, and visual culture show how Guanyin became a deeply embedded cultural presence. Her accessibility, moral resonance, and protective power allowed her to mediate between doctrinal teaching and the lived experience of devotees. The popularity of Guanyin devotion shows that religious adaptation is both textual and

⁵⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 127.

⁵¹ Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 62.

⁵² Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 84, 156.

⁵³ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 418.

⁵⁴ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 301–2.

⁵⁵ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 22, 418.

⁵⁶ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 298–99.

⁵⁷ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 75.

⁵⁸ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 267.

⁵⁹ Campany, *Signs from the Unseen Realm*, 4; Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 24.

⁶⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 407.

⁶¹ Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 22–23.

⁶² Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 76.

⁶³ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 94.

⁶⁴ Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 23.

experiential, reflecting the dynamic interplay of text, ritual, art, and everyday life.

8. Comparative Analysis: Continuity amid Transformation

At first glance, the shift from the Indian Avalokiteśvara to the Chinese Guanyin appears dramatic: a majestic, princely bodhisattva of cosmic compassion becomes a gentle, often maternal figure embedded in household shrines and village festivals. A closer look, however, reveals not rupture but creative continuity, a process in which core Buddhist principles were preserved even as their expression was reshaped by Chinese cultural sensibilities.

Doctrinally, the central thread remains unbroken: both figures embody *karuṇā* (compassion) and act through *upāya* (expedient means). The Lotus Sūtra's assurance that Avalokiteśvara appears in whatever form is needed to save beings, including that of a woman or a child, provided the doctrinal license that made Guanyin's feminization not only possible but legitimate.⁶⁵ The change in gender was therefore not a deviation from Buddhist teaching but a faithful enactment of its most flexible and inclusive principle.

Iconographically, the transformation is unmistakable. In early Indian art, *Avalokiteśvara* appears as a princely male figure in royal dress, often holding a lotus.⁶⁶ By contrast, the Chinese Guanyin, especially from the Song dynasty onward, is generally depicted as a serene woman in simple white robes, seated beside a rock, holding a vase or cradling a child.⁶⁷ These visual choices reflect a shift in emphasis from cosmic sovereignty to nurturing accessibility, from distant preeminence to intimate presence. Yet even in this new form, key attributes endure; the lotus and the vase were already attributes of *Avalokiteśvara* in India.⁶⁸

Socially and functionally, the adaptation is even more pronounced. In the *Kāraṇḍavyūha*, devotion to *Avalokiteśvara*'s formula is set within the doctrinal and ethical framework of Mahāyāna monasticism.⁶⁹ In China, Guanyin became a deity of the people, worshiped, as Yü puts it, in every household.⁷⁰ She was called upon by women hoping for children, by merchants seeking safe passage, and by the suffering; the *Lotus Sūtra* already promised such help.⁷¹ Her

image was painted in caves and temples, printed in pamphlets, and embroidered by women.⁷² This expansion of role, from cosmic bodhisattva to domestic protector, did not dilute her Buddhist identity but demonstrated the flexibility of the *Mahāyāna* teaching that enlightenment is not separate from everyday life.

Finally, the shift in gender, though culturally specific, served a universal spiritual need: the desire for a compassionate presence that listens, understands, and responds with tenderness. In a society where maternal care was a central moral ideal, Guanyin's feminization made compassion feel immediate and relatable. Women, often excluded from formal monastic authority, found in her a spiritual mirror and a source of agency, creating devotional images and shaping her story alongside monks, literati, and artists.⁷³

In sum, the evolution from *Avalokiteśvara* to Guanyin is not a story of loss or distortion but of contextual adaptation. The form changed to meet the emotional, social, and aesthetic expectations of a new cultural world, but the heart of the figure, the unwavering commitment to hear and relieve suffering, remained constant. This duality of continuity of substance and transformation of expression allowed Guanyin to become not only a Buddhist bodhisattva in China but a cherished symbol of mercy across East Asia.

9. Conclusion

The transformation from *Avalokiteśvara* to *Guanyin* reveals religion as a living process, not a fixed set of beliefs but a conversation between tradition and environment. Indian Buddhist doctrine provided the seed; Chinese culture provided the soil. The result was a figure at once doctrinally authentic and culturally intimate.

Guanyin's feminization was neither accidental nor cosmetic. It responded to real social needs, especially those of women, and offered a vision of spiritual power that was nurturing, accessible, and deeply human. Her presence in homes, not just temples, made compassion tangible.

This case offers a model for understanding religious adaptation more broadly. The same names for

⁶⁵ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 301–2.

⁶⁶ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 10, 294.

⁶⁷ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 14, 95, 127.

⁶⁸ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 418.

⁶⁹ Studholme, *Origins of Om Manipadme Hum*, 6.

⁷⁰ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 1.

⁷¹ Watson, *Lotus Sutra*, 299–300, 305.

⁷² Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 76, 94; Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 23.

⁷³ Li, *Becoming Guanyin*, 22–23; Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 22, 418.

the bodhisattva spread under Chinese influence to Japan, Korea, and Vietnam, yet the sexual transformation of the bodhisattva appears to be a uniquely Chinese phenomenon, absent from the Indian, Tibetan, Sri Lankan, and Southeast Asian traditions.⁷⁴ What endures is not form but the unwavering commitment to hear the cries of the world.

Future research could explore how Guanyin's image has evolved in modern China, or how digital media now reshapes her devotion. For now, her story suggests that the most enduring religious figures are those who learn to speak the language of the heart.

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⁷⁴ Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 1–2.