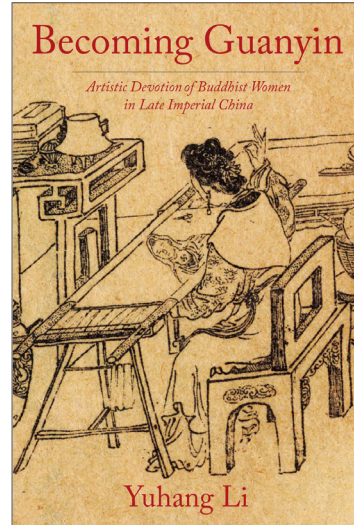


Book Review

Li, Yuhang. *Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2020. Pp. xii +299.



Both real-life observation and scholarly works tell us that women constitute the majority of Buddhist devotees, but the textual record consistently belies this across history: There are only a handful of texts authored by nuns in the most inclusive Chinese Buddhist canon,¹ whereas even texts composed by morally compromised male Buddhist laymen were circulated and cherished. The small number of texts about female Buddhists were mostly penned by men. How then are we to retrieve the historical voices of this ‘silent majority’? *Becoming Guanyin* by Yuhang Li, an art historian by training, takes on this challenge, turning our gaze to women’s non-textual expressions of spiritual longing and experience in late imperial China.

There has never been a single, homogenous ‘Buddhist view on gender’. Rather, they range from the empowering and liberating message delivered by the flower-showering deity in the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra* to the belief in a hell waiting for every menstruating human. Instead of trying to reach an essentialist conclusion, Li focuses on women’s

¹ Grant, *Eminent Nuns*.

interpretations expressed in their creative works. In fact, tensions among conflicting Buddhist views of gender provided opportunities for and stimulated those interpretations.

This book also further debunks the idea of ‘the decline of Buddhism’ in late imperial China. Though we do not see the creation of grand doctrinal treatises in this period, Buddhism became diffused in various aspects of lay people’s lives. *Becoming Guanyin* highlights the non-discursive aspects of this diffusion—aspects that scholars have largely neglected. The non-discursive and female expressions of Buddhist devotion overlap substantially. Especially in an ethos that took writing as a male and/or Confucian enterprise, women may have portrayed themselves in writing as purely Confucian (97) while practising Buddhism in other ways: they plucked their hair to embroider Guanyin images, mimicked Guanyin by using certain hair accessories, temporarily transformed themselves into Guanyin in dance, and related their female experiences such as becoming a mother or a widow by painting Guanyin images.

The book begins with the most complicated and challenging subject among the four: the Guanyin dance. Unlike the other three topics, our knowledge about dance in a time prior to the invention of video recordings inevitably depends on texts, most of which were, of course, composed by men. How can we separate women’s self-expression from men’s gaze? Moreover, since the dancers would be courtesans, the author also must venture into the intricate nexus between Buddhist devotion in the conventional sense and sexual allure as a ‘skilful means’, which can be traced back to Buddhist canonical literature.

This chapter focuses on Xu Jinghong 徐驚鴻 (mid-sixteen century, before 1610), a late-Ming courtesan celebrated for her Guanyin dance and Buddhist faith. It proceeds by examining a multitude of textual materials—very few by her own hand, most by male literati such as Wang Daokun 汪道昆 (1525–1593) about her, for her, and to her—supported by images of dance and courtesans. Although it is impossible to avoid male perspectives, this chapter trenchantly unveils the unintended ironies embedded in the male-dominated discourse. On the one hand, by becoming Guanyin through ‘banquet dance’, courtesans temporarily transcended their low social

status and became active propagators of Mahāyāna spirituality. Some Buddhist courtesans' deaths were even described in a manner similar to that used to depict the deaths of eminent monks (50). On the other hand, in the eyes of other male literati, courtesans remained courtesans and would not shake their evil karma even if they left that world to become nuns (40). In the literary discourse praising Xu as a Buddhist, her Guanyin dance is almost invisible (31). The courtesans for their part felt ashamed for their occupation and worried about their bad karma (41). The author suggests that in most cases, Guanyin in the late Ming was believed to manifest as either a male scholar or a courtesan (55), and 'ordinary' women were considered spiritually inferior to men. In a word, the courtesans' sexual attractiveness, societal marginality, and transgression of social norms became their sources of spiritual power and could generate transcendental feelings in their audience, but their own spiritual status, whether defiled or elevated, inevitably depended on the endorsement of their male spectators.

Chapter 2 investigates gentry women's religiosity and artistic expression in their paintings of Guanyin. Two female painters, Xing Cijing 刑慈靜 (1568?–after 1640) and Fang Weiyi 方維儀 (1585–1668) are the case studies here. Li shows how women, who perceived a gap between the role that they were supposed to play in Confucian social order and their existential situation, projected their prescribed roles onto the Guanyin images they painted (105–6)—in these cases the loving mother of a son and/or a chaste and pure woman. Xing did not bear children until middle age, whereas Fang survived her husband and only child at a very young age and lived as a widow for more than six decades. Both worshipped the White-robed Guanyin and creating Guanyin images helped them to 'become Guanyin' to a certain degree. By drawing images of Guanyin accompanied by a little boy, Xing reflected how becoming a mother had made her mind closer to Guanyin's. Drawing meditative Guanyin brought Fang inner peace as a chaste but talented widow. Through their paintings, Li argues, these women negotiated a middle way between Confucianism and Buddhism (78).

This chapter highlights a painting style called *baimiao* 白描, which literally means 'plain drawing' and refers to monochromic ink

painting. The author argues that it was not only an aesthetic but also 'contained moral judgment and symbolic meaning associated with the identity of a gentry woman', that is, purity and female chastity (67).

Chapter 3 examines hair embroideries of Guanyin images created by gentry women as well as women from the lower classes. This subject is connected to the previous chapter since the under-drawing for embroidery was closely related to and influenced by *baimiao* and its moral connotations. Although male literati like Su Shi 蘇軾 (1037–1101) appreciated embroidery as an expression of women's devotion, they saw its value only in terms of the repetitive labour of stitching, since they themselves never tried their hand at this art. The female embroiderers, however, found the form a way to 'merge with Guanyin both symbolically and physically' (140). Not only demanding intensive labour as all embroidery works do, hair embroidery further requires enduring the physical pain of plucking out one's own hair at its root. Intriguingly, the author notices that 'hair embroideries made to fulfil the duties of filial piety were always dedicated to the embroiderers' birth parents, not to their parents-in-law' (128). Here we see another example of women's negotiation with Confucian ethics, which required a married woman to 'shift her filial devotion from her own parents to her in-laws' (128). While scholars like Steven Sangren have astutely pointed out this conundrum for Chinese women, Li has successfully retrieved their negotiating subjectivity by examining this genre of art.

Chapter 4 scrutinizes devotional hairpins excavated from tombs of upper class or even imperial women of the Ming. Echoing the first chapter on dance, ornaments were similarly problematic from a religious vantage as they too highlight women's physicality. Nonetheless, by wearing a hairpin with a Buddha image at the center-front of her hair arrangement, women could mimic Guanyin and thus to some extent 'become' her, as Guanyin's iconography typically features an image of the Amitābha Buddha on her/his head. Thus instead of visualizing Guanyin and other deities coming to receive the dying person into the Pure Land as the scriptures instruct, women so adorned seemed to envision herself or be envisioned as Guanyin.

Designs of the hairpins, which belong to the realm of fashion, enjoyed more creativity and freedom than paintings and embroideries. This creativity and freedom provide leeway for us to detect regional and cultural variations in religiosity: hairpins excavated from official tombs in the lower Yangzi region stay more faithful to the iconographies described in scriptures, whereas those found in imperial and kingly tombs not only were made of more expensive materials but also have more inventive designs (154).

Hairpins were also used to negotiate the Buddhist view that women, without first being reincarnated as men, cannot be reborn in the Pure Land. The most interesting section in this chapter examines the hairpins Empress Dowager Xiaojing 孝靖 (1556–1611) wore in her tomb, including not only one with an Amitābha image at the front of her hairpiece, which indicates her affinity with Guanyin, but also two bearing Guanyin images worn on each side of her head. On each of the three hairpins a small figure sits on a lotus atop the main deity's head. Comparing these figures with several images related to the Pure Land, the author suggests that they represent Xiaojing's soul reborn in the Pure Land. This provocatively contests the mainstream discourse of texts written by male authors about women's relation to the Pure Land. Yet, the author does not rush to claim Xiaojing's subjectivity. Instead, she suggests that this non-discursive intervention was more likely devised by her son and grandson, who became emperors consecutively after she died, and were determined to give her the title she deserved and reinter her as an empress with luxurious tomb objects including the hairpins (171).

The conclusion does not simply reiterate or summarize what has been teased out in the four chapters. It is surprisingly rich and thought-provoking. Here, turning to the circulation and social functions or impact of women's arts, it discusses the dynamics between the private, domestic space where women created their works and public spaces: Their works were admired, used in rituals, collected and curated in monasteries, presented to the court as gifts (specifically to empresses or empress dowagers), and then distributed to and displayed in various palaces to map the emperor's cultural and religious ideals.

Throughout the book, the author shows how 'women's things'—

dance, painting, hair embroidery, and hairpins—and the gender fluidity of the Bodhisattva Guanyin facilitated the merger of the worshiper and the worshipped. The female Guanyin may be unconventional and use her body and sex as skilful means for teaching, but she is always morally pure and chaste; she might conduct solitary religious cultivation, but she could also be motherly. Did Guanyin provide diverse female archetypes for women to worship and follow? Or did women project themselves and create Guanyin? Li successfully shows us the two-way dynamics. Here, history of Chinese Buddhism is clearly not a ‘string of pearls’² made of great—predominantly male—masters, but a collective, multivalent project, some voices of which can only be recovered through types of materials to which scholars have not yet paid much attention.

Primarily based on non-textual evidence yet supported by extremely diverse textual materials, this book not only challenges the narratives of doctrinal religious texts but also critiques in vernacular anti-clerical (if not anti-religious) literature, which prevailed in late imperial China (197). With its focus on late imperial China, it also provides historical connections to medieval art works and religious practises (e.g. 146), as well as to Japanese arts (e.g. 130). The author collected her source materials from museums and archives in all over the world, meticulously examining everything from index cards at the Shanghai Museum to microfilms from the Harvard-Yenching Library.

This book includes sixty-seven colour photos of artworks, some of which were photographed by the author herself in small local museums and monasteries. In addition to paintings, hair embroideries, and hair pins, the author draws on many other genres of arts and artifacts as cross references, such as woodblock print book illustrations, ceramic and bronze figurines, and blankets used in tombs. As for textual sources, Li cites fictional works like plays and vernacular stories, historical works such as family genealogies (chapter 2, note 52) and local (82) and temple gazetteers (198–99), art manuals such as painting manuals (68, 132) and *The Embroidery Manual* (113), Bud-

² McRae, *Seeing through Zen*.

dhist apocrypha like the *White-robed Sutra* (白衣大悲五印心陀羅尼經, 85) and the *King Gao's Guanshiyin Sutra* (高王觀世音經, 87), a 'pseudo-Buddhist scripture' composed by a lay scholar (27, 51–52), inscriptions on paintings (87), steles (chapter 4, note. 44), and seals (56), and writings by women (63) and about women, such as Zhu Qiqian's biographies of craftswomen (140). Though Li humbly calls her book a 'preliminary attempt' to address the material practices of women's religious lives (204), I believe scholars of Buddhist studies will find it illuminating not only for its arguments and insight but also because of the numerous underexplored sources and topics Li points to (for example, 218 note 84, 226 note 38).

Reading this book has been eye-opening for me, a mainly textual scholar of Buddhism, and it naturally raises some questions. For example, whereas the author is fully aware of the importance of Mātangī in the *Śūramgama Sūtra* as an archetype for Buddhist courtesans in the Ming (29, 56), I wonder why Lady Vasumitra 婆須蜜多女 in the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* is not mentioned. As one of the fifty-three spiritual guides whom the boy Sudhana (Shancai tongzi 善財童子) visits, she claims to use her body and sex as a skilful means to teach the Buddha Dharma (see *T* no 279, vol. 10: 366a1–6). Unlike Mātangī, Vasumitra never repents. According to the *sūtra*, though often being misunderstood as lustful, she is in fact full of wisdom and merit. Since, as Li shows in her book, Sudhana/Shancai's pilgrimage (228, note 51) and his close relationship to Guanyin in Chinese Buddhism (66) were well known in late imperial China, did literati and artists deliberately shun the story of Vasumitra (while only emphasizing Mātangī's daughter) so that it slipped from the author's attention?

The other question concerns usage of the term 'transformation buddha' (*huafo* 化佛). When juxtaposed with the 'reward body' (*baoshen* 報身) as the author introduced this idea by citing a Tiantai treatise (146, the translation of which I have some disagreements with), the transformation body or buddha has to be understood in the *trikāya* doctrine to refer to the *nirmānakāya*, 'the body of the Buddha that manifests itself variously in the world of sentient beings in order to teach the dharma to them'.³ In other words, this transformation, when used in the *trikāya* context, is a 'downward' one from

the Buddha's dharma body (*faśhen* 法身) into, for instance, Siddhārta Gautama, whose body is subject to decay and death. Readers who understand 'transformation buddha/body' as such would feel quite confused when they encounter assertions such as '[Empress Xiaojing's] transformation buddha form in the Pure Land was secured by the symbolic power of her hair adornments' (171); 'this small figure likely represents the transformation buddha form of Zhang Mao' (189); or 'the dead body ... is changing into a transformation buddha' (189). It is true that numerous 'transformation buddhas' (*huafo*) appear in the description related to the Pure Land in the *Contemplation Sūtra* (觀無量壽佛經) analyzed in this book (148–151). But the term *huafo*, nonetheless, does not refer to something that the dying people will soon change into in the Pure Land, but the 'welcoming team' for the dying ones (e.g., *T* no. 365, vol.12: 345a25–26: 'Am-itābha, Avalokiteśvara, and Mahāsthāmaprāpta... transform themselves into five hundred transformation buddhas to welcome this person'). Is Li's usage of 'transformation buddha [form](化佛相?)' an indigenous idea creatively developed in China or even Chinese fine arts?

Becoming Guanyin works at the very intersection of arts, religion, and gender, a vantage that scholars of Buddhism, most of whom have been trained in textual studies, do not usually have. Biased by my own textual studies background, I wish some of the intriguing and rich passages could be examined in a more detailed manner—for example, the woman painter Jin Liying's 金禮羸 (1772–1807) interpretation of the Nāga Princess' story in the *Lotus Sūtra* (155). But I would not have even known of the existence of this interpretation without the help of the art historian. Scholars of Buddhism or Chinese history of the late imperial era will certainly find inspiration and useful information for their own research in the broad scope of this book's textual and visual primary sources, while all readers can enjoy its accessible style, photos and depictions of stunning artifacts and ancient tombs, quirky anecdotes and creative imaginations from vernacular stories, as well as the other 'skilful means' Li employs to

³ Buswell and Lopez Jr, eds., *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*, 923.

discover the repressed and hidden agency of female Buddhists in late imperial China.

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