GUANYIN: SAVIOR, MENTOR, MODEL BUDDHIST

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Guanyin, a deeply revered figure in Chinese Buddhism, takes her origins from the Hindu bodhisattva of infinite compassion and mercy Avalokitesvara, one of the most powerful bodhisattvas in the Buddhist canon. As Mahayana Buddhism spread to China, reshaping China's religious landscape, Avalokitesvara's portrayals also transformed. While the process of Avalokitesvara's evolution into Guanyin remains uncertain, some theories suggest his ability to assume any form necessary to relieve suffering merged with Chinese female deities to create a distinctly feminine figure of mercy that preserved his charitable nature[1]. Thus, the earliest concepts of Guanyin emerged from a blend of Avalokitesvara's Buddhist origins and Chinese religious traditions. Over time, she became deeply embedded in Chinese culture, with key roles in Chinese literature. Guanyin's dual portrayals as a benevolent savior in Chinese folktales and a spiritual mentor in the Chinese classic *Journey to the West* emphasize her enduring significance as an ideal embodiment of Buddhist values and teachings in China.

In Chinese folktales, Guanyin is the epitome of a universal hero, responding to human suffering while reinforcing core Buddhist ideals. One such tale tells the story of To Chuan, an unjustly imprisoned man who, through guidance from a friendly monk, learned that

> "Kuang-shih-yin could save people from danger. If he could concentrate and beg the bodhisattva sincerely, he would quickly receive a response...For three days and nights he took refuge in the bodhisattva with utmost sincerity. He felt the shackles beginning to loosen and when he tried to shake them, suddenly they fell away from his body. He prayed to the bodhisattva, "My own shackles have now become loosened by themselves due to your compassionate protection. But I still have several companions and cannot bear to escape by myself. You, Kuang-shih-yin, save all universally. Please also free them." After the prayer he touched the others, and each one also became free of the shackles, as if

[1] "Avalokiteshvara," Encyclopedia Britannica, October 10, 2024, https://www.britannica.com/topic/Avalokiteshvara.

someone had cut them loose…They escaped and arrived home safely. They became firm believers in Buddhism and showed extraordinary faith and reverence"[2].

Because To prayed with "utmost sincerity", Guanyin freed him from imprisonment, symbolizing her role in breaking physical and mental barriers to enlightenment. His "extraordinary faith and reverence" further underscores the importance of displaying core Buddhist virtues to earn Guanyin's assistance. In addition, To's insistence on freeing his companions reflects his selflessness, mirroring Guanyin's role as the one who "[saves] all universally". Similarly, another tale recalls a monk named Po Faqiao who

> "was a diligent and devout person. He wanted to recite sutras but lacked the voice…He told his fellow monks, 'Kuang-shih-yin can help a person fulfill his wishes in this very life. I will now pray to [her] with singleness of mind. I would rather die than live a long life but without a good voice'"[3].

He proceeds to spend 7 days meditating with food or water, close to death, but

> "on the morning of the seventh day…his voice was so loud that it could be heard two to three li away…because he wanted to chant the sutras with a beautiful voice, which he did not have, he was willing to die in order to get it. He was motivated by a sincere desire to glorify Buddhism, and Kuan-yin granted him his wish"[4].

By "[praying] to [her] with singleness of mind" and being "willing to die" to affirm his devotion to his faith, Po highlights the depth of his dedication to Buddhism, profoundly moving Guanyin to aid him and illustrating the belief that Guanyin helps those who demonstrate genuine virtue. Her selective guidance highlights her significance in folktales as both a miracle worker and a proponent of core Buddhist teachings in China.

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[2] Chun-fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (Columbia University Press, 2000), 169.
[3] Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 165.
[4] Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 166.

In addition, folktales combine Buddhist principles with Chinese cultural principles to sinicize Guanyin, thereby making both her and Buddhism more accessible to a Chinese audience. For instance, Confucian virtues such as filial piety are prominently featured in many Chinese folktales about Guanyin. One story recounts the predicament of a man named Chu Changshu, whose

> "neighbor's house caught fire. Remembering what the Kuang-shih-yin Sutra says, "If one encounters fire, one should call [the bodhisattva]" single-mindedly, he told his family members…to chant the sutra with sincerity. When [the fire] reached the fence outside his own house, the wind suddenly turned back and the fire then stopped…Accounts of filial sons, on which this Buddhist miracle story might be modeled, contain similar miracl of es…the accounts of filial sons were written by the literati to inculcate filial piety among the readers. Writers of miracle stories…wanted to introduce their readers to Kuan-yin and install in them an abiding faith in this new deity…Sometimes, a filial miracle story could be adapted to serve Buddhist ends. Because their readers were familiar with the stories from the accounts of filial sons, they would be responsive to miracle stories about Kuan-yin[5].

Chu's family's rescue from the fire after "[chanting] the sutra with sincerity" clarifies Buddhist ideals of sincerity and devotion while also reflecting broader cultural values. The idea of earning rewards for performing virtuous acts is also a Confucian doctrine. This story exemplifies Guanyin's role in fostering religious syncretism among major Chinese schools of religion and the sinicization of her original Buddhist identity. Because her miracles were intended to promote Buddhist ideals but could be "adapted to serve [different] ends", non-Buddhist audiences might find her miracles relatable to their own faiths, allowing her to

[5] Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 163–65.

> "transcend barriers of specific religious nomenclature...she responds to the heartfelt needs of ordinary people...she is accessible to the most ordinary and the most lowly…It is in this that the strength of Kuan Yin lies–and all this is based upon her basic attribute of compassion"[6].

Guanyin's "miracle tales" emphasize her willingness to answer prayers for all people, particularly "the most ordinary and the most lowly", as reflected in the diverse characters featured in her folktales. Her unlimited grace and emphasis on fundamental human values establish her as not only a central religious figure but also one of the most widely recognized Asian cultural icons, demonstrating Guanyin's ability to transcend religious and cultural boundaries to unite people of different backgrounds[7]. Therefore, through her miraculous deeds, "the Chinese people form a personal connection with Kuan-yin. The stories concretize the knowledge about Kuan-yin provided by the scriptures…miracle tales teach people about Kuan-yin and validate what the scriptures claim the bodhisattva can do"[8]. Guanyin thus emerges as a ubiquitous savior figure in Chinese folk stories, bridging religions, ethnicities, geography, and cultures to make Buddhism more relatable for all.

The folk legend of Miaoshan, the human incarnation of Guanyin, continues to exemplify Guanyin's role as both an embodiment of Buddhist teachings and a universal hero by portraying her as a relatable and aspirational figure whose tenderness resonates deeply with the human experience. From a young age, Miaoshan exhibits a profound awareness of "how fragile life [is] and how much compassion [hurts]", inspiring her to pursue a spiritual life[9]. However, her

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[6] Martin Palmer, *Kuan Yin: Myths and Revelations of the Chinese Goddess of Compassion*, 1995, 26.
[7] Peichun Cai and Suphacha Sriratanaban, "Unpacking the Multiplicity of Chineseness: A Case Study of the Guanyin Shrine in Mueang Mae Hong Son, Thailand," *Journal of Chinese Overseas* 20, no. 2 (October 2, 2024): 130–59, https://doi.org/10.1163/17932548-12341513.
[8] Yu, *Kuan-Yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, 152.
[9] Stephen Levine, *Becoming Kuan Yin: The Evolution of Compassion*, 2013, 9.

anti-Buddhist father resents her devotion and sends her to a monastery, subjecting her to grueling labor designed to deter her faith. There, she

> "saw what a 'privileged' life she had been accustomed to and realized…that only by delving deeper into her innate spiritual memory could she be free of aversion and unhappiness…she felt her helplessness, and her love and prayers, were all she could give in the midst of her inability to relieve [the dying nuns'] prodigious difficulty[10].

After working alongside the "wretched [and] suffering", Miaoshan gains a profound understanding of the world's need for kindness and peace, as well as the innate potential for goodness within humanity that compels her to help others find the same inner peace she has discovered. As Blofeld writes, "the sheer beauty of the concept of an exquisite lovely being whose chief attribute is pure, unwavering compassion is in itself appealing enough to claim our admiration"[11]. Miaoshan continues to exhibit core Buddhist and human values when she saves her father from his sins. In some versions of her story, her father orders her execution for disobeying his orders at the monastery. In response, she

> "allowed the gravity of [his] actions to draw her into hell…Miaoshan saw, as in the monastery…that perhaps no other world needed forgiveness more than this one…and the tormented around her pleaded for forgiveness. And feeling that all deserved a salve for their shame and self-loathing, she taught them how to forgive and be forgiven…Miao Shan even forgave hell for existing"[12].

Miaoshan takes on the karmic debt of her father, showing him mercy despite his horrific treatment of her, because she still believes he is worthy of forgiveness. Moreover, by "[teaching the tormented spirits in hell] how to forgive and be forgiven", Miaoshan exhibits her belief that all

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[10] Levine, *Becoming Kuan Yin: The Evolution of Compassion*, 18–20.
[11] John Eaton Calthorpe Blofeld, *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin*, 1978, 24.
[12] Levine, *Becoming Kuan Yin: The Evolution of Compassion*, 35–37.

souls, no matter how corrupted, can be redeemed if they are "taught" compassion, testifying to a central Buddhist belief that anyone can achieve enlightenment through spiritual transformation. In another version, her father falls ill, with the only cure being "the arms and eyes of one free from anger"[13]. When a messenger tells Miaoshan about her father's illness, she "gladly cut out her eyes and severed her arms…[adding] instructions to exhort the king to turn towards the good"[14]. By "gladly" giving up parts of herself to save the souls of others, including that of her seemingly undeserving father, Miaoshan demonstrates the essence of mercy for all sentient beings present in all bodhisattvas. Her self-sacrifice illustrates not only her unending grace but also the Confucian value of filial piety, emphasizing her devotion to her family as well as her faith. Miaoshan's story bridges various Chinese religious traditions, making her more relatable to Chinese audiences and solidifying her role as an ideal model of Buddhist virtues in China.

On the other hand, in *Journey to the West*, Guanyin primarily serves as a religious mentor, embodying the foundational principles of Buddhism to guide the pilgrims on their journey. Her relationship with Sun Wukong reveals her role as a sympathetic yet disciplined teacher helping flawed characters find their way to nirvana. When Guanyin first learns of Wukong's disturbance in Heaven, she tells her disciple, "I shall… make certain that the enemy will be taken prisoner…when [my willow sprig] hits that monkey, at least it will knock him over, even if it doesn't kill him"[15]. The use of the word "enemy" to describe Wukong is surprising since Guanyin is typically an advocate for peace as the Goddess of Mercy. Additionally, her claim that she wants the willow sprig to "knock him over, even if it doesn't kill him" seems to contradict Buddhist values of preserving and caring for all living creatures. However, through a Buddhist allegorical

[13] Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan* (Oxford University Press, 1978), 33.
[14] Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan*, 34.
[15] Anthony C. Yu, *The Monkey and the Monk: An Abridgment of the Journey to the West*, 1st ed. (University of Chicago Press, 2006), 116.

reading of *Journey to the West*, one could interpret Wukong as a representation of the "monkey mind", the normal state of deluded beings that leads one to cause harm if unrestrained[16]. In this light, Guanyin's actions are necessary to "imprison" the "monkey mind" when it runs unchecked, as Wukong exhibited when he caused havoc in Heaven. Her role as a mentor is not to punish, but to help Wukong learn to "control his desires" and guide him toward enlightenment[17]. Thus, her seemingly harsh actions align with her mission as a bodhisattva because

> "her real powers lie in transforming through the individual, taking what is inherent and bringing the best out of everyone. Perhaps the heart of the appeal of Kuan Yin is at one level that she does not take you over, but works with and through you"[18].

As a true leader, Guanyin recognizes that the most effective way to help the pilgrims reach their full potential is to "work with" them to "[bring] the best out of [them]". Therefore, her discipline, though firm, is rooted in a genuine desire to help the pilgrims succeed in their quest for enlightenment. Later in the journey, Guanyin reveals her power to discipline while remaining charitable through her gift of the Golden Fillet. When Wukong repeatedly disobeys Tripitaka, Guanyin appears to the monk and gives him a golden cap enchanted with "the True Words for Controlling the Mind", which would cause excruciating pain in the wearer's brain when recited, as a means to restrain Wukong. The monkey is deeply dissatisfied with the bodhisattva's actions, crying,

> "'You saved me all right…When you met me the other day above the ocean, you could have chastened me with a few words…that would have been enough…And you even taught him this so-called 'Tight-Fillet Spell' which he recites again and again, causing endless pain in my head! You haven't harmed me, indeed!" The Bodhisattva laughed and

[16] Michelle Zhang, "A Hidden Theory of Mind in Journey to the West," *Journal of East-West Thought*, n.d., 85–87.
[17] Zhang, "A Hidden Theory of Mind in Journey to the West," 87.
[18] Blofeld, *Bodhisattva of Compassion: The Mystical Tradition of Kuan Yin*, 93.

said, “O, Monkey! You are neither attentive to admonition nor willing to seek the fruit of truth. If you are not restrained like this, you’ll probably mock the authority of Heaven again without regard for good or ill. If you create troubles as you did before, who will be able to control you? It’s only through this bit of adversity that you will be willing to enter our gate of Yoga”[19].

While her use of painful force may seem contradictory to her merciful nature, Guanyin’s actions are still rooted in sympathy, as she understands that the only way for Wukong to redeem himself is to complete his journey to the West. Therefore, the Golden Fillet serves as a disciplinary tool rather than a weapon. Furthermore, because Wukong represents the “monkey mind”, Guanyin’s use of the Golden Fillet to restrain Wukong symbolizes the Buddhist value of restricting the mind’s natural impulses to find inner peace, demonstrating her desire to help Wukong reach enlightenment. This fact is proved by the fact that when Wukong finally attains Buddhahood, the Tang monk tells him “‘you were difficult to control previously…now that you have become a Buddha, naturally, [the Golden Fillet] will be gone.’…Pilgrim raised his hand and felt along his head, and indeed, the fillet had vanished”[20]. The disappearance of the Golden Fillet symbolizes the liberation of the mind from physical and mental restraints through enlightenment. Thus, Guanyin’s Golden Fillet saves Wukong from his destructive tendencies and aids him in his true mission, emphasizing her role as a Buddhist mentor.

Moreover, Guanyin serves as a mentor by providing indirect aid to the pilgrims, encouraging them to earn their own merit. Whenever the pilgrims encounter major roadblocks, she offers guidance, tools, and resources to help them rather than directly solving their problems. For example, when Wukong encounters the “monster in the Flowing-Sand river”, he tries to ask

[19] Yu, *The Monkey and the Monk: An Abridgment of the Journey to the West*, 271-272.
[20] Yu, *The Monkey and the Monk: An Abridgment of the Journey to the West*, 545.

Guanyin to "take pity and grant [them] deliverance"[21]. Instead of "[granting them] deliverance", however, Guanyin chastises him for "acting so smug and self-sufficient" before giving him instructions for overcoming the obstacle[22]. By providing the pilgrims with indirect assistance, Guanyin emphasizes the importance of individual growth in the pursuit of enlightenment, as the journey is just as important, if not more so, than the result. Similarly, the pilgrims' ability to defeat the monster with Guanyin's guidance shows that while Guanyin, and Buddhism, can offer guidance, individuals must eradicate "monsters" (sin and misery) from their life on their own to reach nirvana. In addition, Guanyin firmly believes that all the pilgrims can redeem themselves, as she tells them, "Why don't you come into my fold, take refuge in good works…at the time when you achieve merit, your sin will be expiated"[23]. By claiming that "achieving merit" will "expiate" sin, Guanyin introduces the Buddhist principle that enlightenment is not automatically granted but must be earned through sincere self-transformation. Furthermore, at the end of the pilgrims' journey, the deities of heaven declare that the pilgrims "showed genuine devotion and determination" to the cause of Buddhism, deeming them worthy of attaining Buddhahood. Guanyin's presence in *Journey to the West* thus reflects her deeper mission to lead those who have done wrong back to the Way, reinforcing her role as a compassionate yet firm mentor dedicated to helping others in their journeys to spiritual growth.

While Guanyin's interactions in Chinese folktales tend to involve more immediate interventions to alleviate human suffering, she adopts more of a mentor-like role in *Journey to the West*, empowering the pilgrims to grow through indirect aid. In folktales, Guanyin will directly resolve crises and perform miracles for those who request her assistance as long as they demonstrate sincerity. As a caring savior, she realizes the core Buddhist value of inclusive mercy,

[21] Yu, *The Monkey and the Monk: An Abridgment of the Journey to the West*, 320.
[22] Yu, *The Monkey and the Monk: An Abridgment of the Journey to the West*, 321.
[23] Yu, *The Monkey and the Monk: An Abridgment of the Journey to the West*, 143.

reassuring people that all can be redeemed through faith. In contrast, she takes on more of a disciplinary role in *Journey to the West*. Although she intervenes in critical moments by offering wisdom or providing divine tools like the Golden Fillet, she more often encourages the pilgrims to rely on their "inherent" abilities to "[bring] the best out of everyone". Through nurturing individual transformation in *Journey to the West*, Guanyin reinforces Buddhist values of self-improvement and the necessity of personal effort in attaining enlightenment.

Guanyin's contrasting portrayals in folktales and *Journey to the West* illustrate the broad range of Buddhist values she embodies as the bodhisattva of mercy, while also highlighting her adaptability as a role model and divine presence. These variations may be due to the different intended purposes and audiences of these two categories of literature, as folktales present her as a benevolent hero to make faith and reassurance more accessible to people regardless of background whereas *Journey to the West* emphasizes Buddhist teachings of self-discipline and redemption to reflect the importance of an individual's spiritual journey. Both portrayals of Guanyin highlight her universal appeal as a merciful defender and religious leader, inspiring moral and religious growth in Chinese society and beyond.

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