

# The Ambiguity of the Gender of *Avalokiteśvara*: A Comparative Study on the Representations of *Avalokiteśvara* from India and China during Sui-Tang-Period

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## Abstract

Buddhism was transmitted to China during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) and integrated with existing Chinese cultures such as Confucianism and Taoism. Within Buddhism itself, *Avalokiteśvara*, a Bodhisattva who is believed to have made a great vow to assist sentient beings in times of difficulty and postpone his Buddhahood until he has assisted every sentient being in achieving *nirvana*, experienced a long process of change. One of the striking changes in the image of *Avalokiteśvara* in China is the shifting of the gender of *Avalokiteśvara*. The great Sui-Tang dynasties patronized Buddhism as a state cult during the more significant portion of their reign. Many scholars like Wu Yan, Jiao Jie, Sun Xiushen, Cui Feng, etc. observed that the Sui-Tang period was the turning point for the gender transformation of *Kuan-yin*.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, I am going to do a comparative study on the representations of *Avalokiteśvara* from both India and China broadly from the seventh to tenth centuries, to see how *Kuan-yin* transformed in China and whether there might be influences from India in the ways that *Kuan-yin*'s gender is constructed in the iconography.

**Keywords:** Buddhism, *Avalokiteśvara*, Gender, Iconography, Sui-Tang period

## Introduction

Sui-Tang period witnessed the growing significance of the cult of *Bodhisattvas*, especially that of *Kuan-yin*. He<sup>2</sup> became the most popular *Bodhisattva*, and many of his images were represented through various forms and functions that demonstrate his increased popularity

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<sup>1</sup> Scholars like Wu Yan, Jiao Jie, Sun Xiushen, Cui Feng, etc., suggest that it was during the Sui-Tang period that *Kuan-yin*'s gender transformed (Feng, 2013; Xiushen, 1995; Yan, 2015).

<sup>2</sup> The transformation of *Kuan-yin*'s gender took a long process. Though some scholars hold that *Kuan-yin* has completed gender transformation during the Sui-Tang period, there are images of *Kuan-yin* depicted with a mustache, which suggests that the transformation of the gender was still under the process during this period. Hence, the author used the male pronoun for *Kuan-yin* here.

and independence from other figures during this period. Moreover, the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* took on the status of an individual sutra called *Kuan-yin Sutra* (also known as *Kuan-shi-yin Universal Gateway*). In the ninth century CE, the number of *Lotus Sutra* manuscripts decreased, and that of *Kuan-yin Sutra* increased, which further indicates how prevalent the Kuan-yin cult was in this period (Yan, 2015, p. 143). I begin with the investigation of Indian *Avalokiteśvara*. There are several reasons local to the Chinese milieu, but there might also be influences from India in the ways that gender is constructed in the iconography. Meanwhile, I would like to look at the related forms of Kuan-yin in China to see how the iconography transformed and the possible reasons behind these occurrences, along with a brief description of the different types of *Avalokiteśvara* images in Indian art.

Archaeological evidence provides strong proof that the images of *Avalokiteśvara* were first created in *Gandhara* and Mathura by the second century CE during the *Kushan* period. *Avalokiteśvara* was depicted either independently or as a triad member (Figures 1A and 1B). He was often portrayed as *Padmapāṇi*, ‘Bearer of the Lotus’ sitting in a ‘royal ease’ pose (Figure 1A). Sometimes he is also depicted as holding a lotus and water-pot (*kamandala*) as in the earlier iconography of the Bodhisattva. After the fifth century CE, *Avalokiteśvara* images became more ascetic than regal and were gradually promoted to the status of an independent deity. The distinct identity of this figure was the *Amitābha* in his crown (Figure 1C).



**Figure 1** (A) *Padmapāṇi* (B) *Buddhist Triads*, (C) *Avalokiteśvara*

**Source:**

- Figure 1A and Figure 1B: taken by the author
- Figure 1C: <http://pages.vassar.edu/embodyingcompassion/image-gallery>



**Figure 2** (A) *Avalokiteśvara*, (B) *Kuan-yin*

**Source:** Figure 2A and Figure 2B:

<https://www.zjmuex.com/Exhibition/TExhibitionDetails/ZLZX?nid=518>

### Materials

The images of *Avalokiteśvara* mentioned above were also brought to China along with the dissemination of Buddhism. Saunders and Chutiwongs also put forward that the Indian Buddhist images (like the *Gandhara* style) served as prototypes of equal representation in the Far East (Saunders, 1960, p. 130-131). Influenced by India, in the beginning, Kuan-yin was depicted as *Padmapāni* (lotus bearer) (Figures 2A and 2B), holding a lotus and a water pot. As we can see, he was depicted as a man with a masculine body in the early period. However, in the Sui-Tang period, he was depicted as Willow Kuan-yin<sup>3</sup> (Yang-Liu or Yang-Zhi Kuan-yin in Chinese), and this description carries onwards from the Tang dynasty in Chinese art: a willow branch substituted the lotus in Kuan-yin's hand, but the water pot remained (Figures 3A and 3B). His/Her slight S-shaped curvaceous body and dressing (Figures 3A and 3B) did not look like a man, which creates confusion about his/her gender. In terms of *Shi-shi Yao-lan*, even Master Daoxuan of the early Tang period criticized that Kuan-yin at that time was depicted as a lady.<sup>4</sup> Why did this transformation happen?

<sup>3</sup> Willow Kuan-yin: South Korean scholar Jiang Xijing considered Willow Kuan-yin first appeared in the Northern Zhou dynasty (557 CE-581 CE), and Chinese scholar Wu Yan believes the first extant Willow Kuan-yin dating to 539 CE (See Wu Yan (2015), *The History of the Culture of Chinese Kuan-yin*, Zhejiang: Zhejiang University Press)

<sup>4</sup> See *Shi-shi Yao-lan*, compiled by Monk Shi Daocheng in the Northern Song dynasty, including Buddhism's institution, rules, customs, etc.



**Figure 3** (A) *Willow Kuan-yin*, (B) *Willow Kuan-yin*

**Source:**

- Figure 3A: taken by the author
- Figure 3B: <https://m.putuo.org.cn>

In the Post-Gupta period, a large amount of *Avalokiteśvara* figures were produced, which indicates that the cult of this Bodhisattva became more and more prevalent in India. *Avalokiteśvara* in this period inherited the characteristics of representation from *Kushan* and *Gupta* periods as either one of the companions of Buddha or as the principal deity, and developed more elaborately. As we can see from the sculpture from seventh to eighth centuries (Figure 4A), *Avalokiteśvara*, with matted loose curly hair, is depicted with antelope (*ajina*) skin across his shoulder, lotus held in hand, a miniature *Amitābha* above his head, and beads (*aksamala*) worn in the neck.





**Figure 4** (A) *Avalokiteśvara*, (B) *Avalokiteśvara*, (C) *Litany of Avalokiteśvara*

**Source:**

- Figure 4A:

[https://www.asiasocietymuseum.org/region\\_object.asp?RegionID=1&CountryID=1&ChapterID=4&ObjectID=515](https://www.asiasocietymuseum.org/region_object.asp?RegionID=1&CountryID=1&ChapterID=4&ObjectID=515)

- Figure 4B: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cave\\_No-12,\\_Ellora\\_Caves-9.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Cave_No-12,_Ellora_Caves-9.jpg)

- Figure 4C: <https://puratattva.in/2013/07/25/kanheri-cave-complex-2385>

*Avalokiteśvara* was worshipped as a mighty savior and was frequently depicted as the prominent figure with attendants flanking him. As a central figure, he is accompanied by representations of different figures such as Buddha and some other Bodhisattvas, which indicates his power and sublime divinity that sustains the universe. As we can see from the statues from *Ellora Caves* (Figure 4B), *Avalokiteśvara* was depicted accompanied by two female deities *Syamatara* and *Bhṛkūṭi*, who are regarded as the predecessors of *Avalokiteśvara*'s canonized pair of female companions.

Besides, the depiction of a scene of *Avalokiteśvara* saving people from perils ('*Litany of Avalokiteśvara*') was portrayed numerously in the caves of *Ajanta*, *Ellora*, *Aurangabad*, and *Kanheri*. As we can see in the Cave No.2 of *Kanheri* caves, the large *Avalokiteśvara* (Figure 4-C) occupies the major space in the center, in standing pose with a lotus stalk held in his hand while another hand is missing (might be in *Abhaya mudrā*) and a tiny *Amitābha* crowning his forehead. He is surrounded by groups of small figures praying to him to protect them from perils (like lions, poisonous snakes, wild elephants, imprisonment, thieves, conflagration, shipwrecks, and diseases). Chutiwongs and Pia observed that Kuan-yin's manifestation was later-brought to China and pervasively worshiped. (Chutiwongs, 2002, p. 34)

The concept of Kuan-yin as the omnipotent savior that prevailed in Wei, Jin, and Southern & Northern dynasties reached its apogee in the Tang dynasty. Although many of Kuan-yin's icons were made as attendant icons, increasing numbers of images of Kuan-yin were being housed in temples as the principal deity. In Dunhuang grottoes, Kuan-yin became an indispensable theme, and the illustrations of *Kuan-yin Sutra* were depicted mainly, such as No. 45, No. 74, No. 126, and so on in Mogao grottoes. These frescos, similar to India, depict

the scenes of Kuan-yin saving people from perils.<sup>5</sup> The Kuan-yin depicted in such themes covering Sheng Kuan-yin, water-moon, four-armed Kuan-yin, and eleven-faced Kuan-yin. Seen from the wall painting in Cave No. 45 of Dunhuang (Figure 5), the Kuan-yin has mini *Amitābha* in his crown, round, fleshy face, red lips, half-open eyes, small wavy green mustache, jewels on the head, and loose, drifting attire (Figure 5B). He was portrayed in the center of the painting with 33 small scenes of people suffering from dangers on both sides. Inscriptions describe the nature of dangers that Kuan-yin saves them from. It tells the story of Kuan-yin saving people from monkeys and other wild, fierce animals (Figure 5C); it also shows Kuan-yin protecting people from fire (Figure 5D), and Kuan-yin is depicted as preventing the sea from killing people (Figure 5E). Though he was portrayed with a small green mustache, many scholars still believe that this Kuan-yin has feminine features like a round, fleshy face, soft fair skin, and red lips.



**Figure 5** (A) *Kuan-yin*, (B) *detail*, (C) *detail*, (D) *detail*, (E) *detail*

**Source:** <https://zhuanlan.zhihu.com/p/87129856>

## Methods

In the study of Buddhism in general, but particularly in the present case, one must pay equal attention to the image of Avalokitesvara or Kuan-yin found in texts as well as the reality of people's living practices provided by epigraphical, art historical, ritual sources as well as forms of literature.

For the purpose of analysis and comparison, one must familiarize oneself with the iconography of Avalokitesvara as it undergoes changes during these time periods. Iconology as method to study meaning-making of iconography will be utilized in order to draw visual frameworks within which the changes in Avalokitesvara's image making can be understood.

Fieldwork sites include Xi'an (Shaan'xi), Luoyang (He'nan) and Dunhuang (China), Bihar, Orissa and West Bengal (India) wherein art historical material is available at various sites. Through documentation and study, this material will contribute to the analysis and comparison.

<sup>5</sup> There are two types of depiction of Kuan-yin saving people: Firstly, Kuan-yin appears in every scene, and secondly, it depicts the scene that people suffering from danger calling Kuan-yin's name for help. See Wu Yan, (2015), *The History of the Culture of Chinese Kuan-yin*, Zhejiang University Press, Zhejiang.

In this context, it may also be necessary to look at contemporary theory regarding transgenering of forms in order to inform the study of Kuan-yin/Avalokitesvara. Gender transformation as social effect may be studied visually in order to excavate meaning in the making of such figures in the larger realm of power and society.

### Discussion

The depiction of the scene is quite vivid and, together with the crowded composition, creates a tense atmosphere. Amazingly, the mountains, water, and trees compose the background of the paintings, which could be considered as Chinese classic *Qing-lv Shan-Shui-Hua* (green landscape painting)<sup>6</sup> (Figure 6A). The integration of Chinese elements into Buddhist art, on the one hand, implicates the localization of Buddhism in China; on the other hand, it also exhibits that the development of Kuan-yin that happened in India also appeared in China but with its innovations. Thus, it is not surprising to see new forms of Kuan-yin like Water-moon Kuan-yin and Guiding Kuan-yin created in China during the Tang period.



**Figure 6** (A) *Minghuang Xingshu Tu*, (B) *detail*

**Source:**

[https://zh.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Attributed\\_to\\_Li\\_Zhaodao.\\_Detail\\_of\\_the\\_scol.\\_Taipei\\_NPM.jpg](https://zh.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Attributed_to_Li_Zhaodao._Detail_of_the_scol._Taipei_NPM.jpg)

Interestingly, another theme in the depiction of this Bodhisattva is the supernatural form of *Avalokiteśvara*, which occurs with Tantric elements that flourished in north India during the *Post-Gupta* period. *Avalokiteśvara* was depicted with more hands or heads than his previous representations (Figures 7A and 7B). Subsequently, this form of *Avalokiteśvara* was portrayed mainly in India and had a profound influence on China. With the coming of Tantric Buddhism, many esoteric scriptures and texts regarding Kuan-yin also got introduced to China. Thus, the cult of Kuan-yin developed diversely, and different forms of Kuan-yin became prevalent.

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<sup>6</sup> *Qing-lv Shan-shui Hua* (green landscape painting): a type of Chinese landscape painting, using mineral azurite and green as the main color. It started from Six dynasties but till Tang dynasty gradually established the basic characteristics of green landscape painting.



However, regardless of the numerous forms of tantric Kuan-yin like Eleven-headed Kuan-yin (Figure 7C), Thousand-armed, and Thousand-eyed Kuan-yin (Figure 7D), *Amoghapāsa*, *Cichakrantāmanī-cakra*, *Hayagrīva*, etc., they were depicted with religious features: solemn, divine, and sublime. The secularized and feminine features that were discussed previously do not appear on the imagery of the Tantric Kuan-yin, and the ambiguity of the gender would also not bother the viewers because they were depicted as sacred males (Yan, 2015; Juanying, 2006).



**Figure 7** (A) *Four-armed Avalokiteśvara*, (B) <sup>7</sup> *Eleven-faced Avalokiteśvara*, (C) *Eleven-faced Kuan-yin*, (D) *Thousand-handed and eyed Kuan-yin*

**Source:**

- Figure 7A and 7B: are taken by the author.
- Figure 7C: <https://in.pinterest.com/pin/217298750747952626>
- Figure 7D: This image is offered by my Chinese supervisor Prof. Li Ling from Sichuan University.

‘Even where the Bodhisattva is portrayed as a ‘*Savior from Perils*,’ as is his role in the *Lotus Sutra*, there is no indication of his feminine manifestations.’ (Benjamin, 2012, p. 7). As we can see from the image (Figures 1, 4, 7A, 7B), *Avalokiteśvara* in India is a male. Benjamin set a different example that exhibits the mixed masculine and feminine characteristics of *Avalokiteśvara* in the ‘*Litany*’ images. As is shown in Cave No.2 of *Kanheri Caves* (Figure 7B), even though the shoulders of the figure are quite round and fleshy, the hips are considerably wide, and the waist is fairly narrow; still, Benjamin believes that feminine forms of *Avalokiteśvara* are not explored in these images, ‘where the opportunity is perhaps greatest, can only serve to illustrate the strength of the masculine perception of this *Bodhisattva* in the Indian context.’ (Benjamin, 2012, p. 7) ‘Rather than being an exception, this instead appears to be a matter of change in artistic style.’ (Benjamin, 2012, p. 7) Here the solid masculine body of *Avalokiteśvara* indicates that ‘there is not even a hint here of the androgyny which appears in roughly contemporaneous Chinese portrayals’ (Benjamin, 2012, p. 7).

<sup>7</sup> Chutiwongs identified it from the seventh to eighth centuries, but Akira Miyaji considered it made in the sixth century CE.

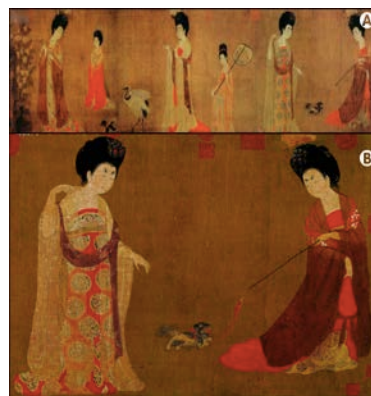


## Results

All in all, irrespective of whether *Avalokiteśvara* is depicted as a companion or as a primary independent deity, irrespective of his portrayal in a traditional form or a Tantric form, archaeological evidence provides strong proof that *Avalokiteśvara* was represented as a masculine figure in India in a parallel period as Tang.

Why did some depictions of Kuan-yin cause the ambiguity of gender but some not? Many scholars believe that it is during the Tang dynasty that the gender of Kuan-yin began to possess feminine features and started to change gender markings. For instance, Wu Yan held the idea that the Tang dynasty is the crucial period for Kuan-yin's feminization. 'There is a great deal of graceful and charming feminine Kuan-yin or neutralized but with the feminine tendency. The feminine and secular tendency started to show up from Kuan-yin's sacred divinity and Kuan-yin's divinity and humanity, religiousness, and secularity integrated' (Yan, 2015, p. 143). From my perspective, Wu Yan's idea, to a certain extent, is quite convincing.

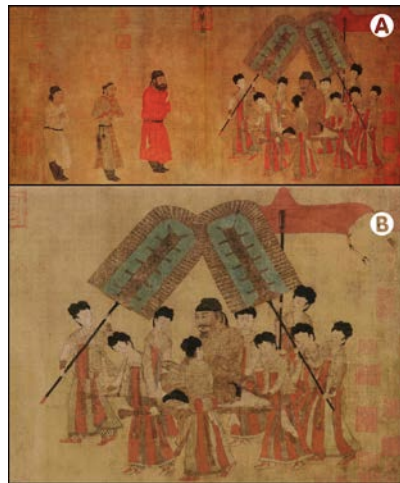
For example, it depicts a standing Willow Kuan-yin (Figure 3B) holding a water pot facing up on his left hand, and a willow branch going downwards on another. With a crown on his head, he is surrounded by beautiful shining jewels and flowing ribbons. Surprisingly, there is no mustache above his lips. And along with features like his slight S-shaped curvaceous body, fine and smooth skin, arched eyebrows, tenuous downward-looking eyes, and soft round face, this gracious figure, however, actually looks more like a court lady of Tang (Figure 8) if one ignores the flattened chest.



**Figure 8** (A) *Zhanhua Shinu/nv Tu*, (B) *detail*

**Source:** <https://baike.baidu.com/item/簪花仕女图>

As we can see from the depiction of contemporaneous women in both paintings and terracotta (Figures 8, 9, 10A and 10B), no matter the face or body proportions, there are many similarities between Kuan-yin and aesthetic depictions of women. The connection between the Kuan-yin and contemporaneous representation of feminine figures needs further detailed study.



**Figure 9** (A) *Bu-nian Tu*, (B) *detail*

**Source:** <https://baike.baidu.com/item/步辇图>



**Figure 10** (A) *Female Terracotta*, (B) *Female Terracotta*, (C) *Mu-ma Tu*, (D) *Warrior Terracotta*

**Source:**

- Figure 10A and Figure 10-B: are taken from the website of the National Museum of China, <http://www.chnmuseum.cn>
- Figure 10C: <https://theme.npm.edu.tw/selection/Article.aspx?sNo=04009118>
- Figure 10D: <http://www.chnmuseum.cn>

One more critical observation when comparing contemporaneous women and men portrayed (Figures 9, 10C and 10D), whether through clothes or facial expressions or body figures, the distinctions between representations of man and woman are quite remarkable, especially in Figure 9. For instance, a man with darker skin, broader eyebrows, a long square face, looks strong, and wears masculine clothes alongside a mustache (Figure 9B). However, in Indian art, the female is depicted with round breasts, a curvaceous body, and a big hip; the male is made with an expanded, muscular flat chest with definite masculine characteristics. This evidence shows that the identification of gendered characteristics in Indian art seems more

related to physiological differences like genitalia, breasts, and chest. Conversely, in Chinese art, the distinction between men and women depended on certain external signs such as clothes, jewels, makeup, and facial hair such as mustache, posture, facial expressions, and skin color. Due to traditional Chinese restrictions borrowing from Confucian rituals and rites, breasts, genitalia, and other private parts of human anatomy could not be shown in art.

Thus, from the points mentioned above, I agree with scholar Wu Yan's idea that the Kuan-yin depicted by Yan Liben in Figure 3B resembles to the imagery of contemporaneous women (Figures 8, 9, 10A, 10B). Nevertheless, from my point of view, Wu Yan's opinion might be one-sided if approached from another aspect. As we can see from the stele (Figure 11), the Kuan-yin here has an added mustache above his lips. If Kuan-yin is a woman, why does she have a mustache? If Kuan-yin is a man, then why is he dressed like a woman? As Gong Gang suggests, the depiction of the mustaches consciously emphasizes the gender of Kuan-yin as a male. Because, as Xuan Zang recorded, both men and women wear jewels and wreaths<sup>8</sup>, but Chinese people could not have been expected to follow Indian customs and would think that even though Bodhisattvas are not female, they are depicted with feminine characteristics. Hence, the mustaches are portrayed to embody his gender. I decline to agree with this idea, because this would not answer another question: Why was the mustache (Figure 3B) removed if he is a male? This creates unnecessary confusion. Before the Tang dynasty, Kuan-yin had been portrayed with a mustache. Then why does the mustache disappear? Does the confusion demonstrate that Kuan-yin was undergoing a transformation in keeping with the times?



**Figure 11** *Kuan-yin stele*

**Source:** Photo is taken by the author

<sup>8</sup> See Xuan Zang, *Da-Tang Xi-yu Ji* (*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*), translated by Ji Xianlin and published by Shaan'xi Publishing House in 1985. It is a narrative of Xuanzang's journey to Western regions of Chinese historiography, compiled in 646 CE.

Besides, Robert Brown argued that the Buddha images, of Sarnath in the Gupta with downcast eyes, absent genitals, and slight bodies, become feminine in appearance. He compared images of Buddha of Sarnath with the bodhisattvas, Hindu gods, goddesses, and courtesans from the same period. Brown argued that the images of the Sarnath Buddha were not male but feminized and speculated that the Buddha of Sarnath might be regarded as a mother figure with a unique gender (Brown, 2002, p. 165-179). With the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, could these feminized Buddha images have influenced Chinese Buddhist iconography? The point of this investigation does not form the basis of the argument of this paper; however, it contains the potential for future study.

Scholars like Xu Huawei, Wang Shuigen, and Meng Man hold that the political factors in the Tang dynasty pushed the gender change of Kuan-yin in China. Much attention has to be paid to the first but only female Emperor Wu Zetian in thousand years of absolute masculinist Chinese monarchy. In the historical records, she, born in a Buddhist family, advocated Buddhism strongly and had a close interest in Buddhist thought and association (Zhongmian, 1982, p. 167). In addition, she achieved renunciation in Ganye Temple (Xi'an Prov.) in 649 CE. Notably she has considered the female manifestation of Bodhisattva Maitreya at that time.<sup>9</sup> Meng Man put forward the idea that the imagery of Kuan-yin changed from man to woman during the ruling period of Wu Zetian. (Man, 2008)<sup>10</sup>

In the Sui-Tang period, political ideals, economics, and culture were highly developed, the society was relatively civilized and open-minded, and a woman could be an emperor. Meng Man considered that it created the conditions for the contemporary ideology and aesthetics being transformed (Man, 2008). In addition, as Chuanming observed, the Maitreya statue's features closely resembled the face of Wu Zetian (Chuanming, 2002). There is indeed literary evidence proving that Kuan-yin appearance shares resemblances with that of women. Even though the face of Wu Zetian was the prototype of the *Maitreya* statue, there is no direct evidence to prove that the iconography of Kuan-yin at that time was also meant to be female. Why did Kuan-yin's gender change and not *Maitreya*'s, since the empress is this *Bodhisattva*'s manifestation? A further examination of the relationship of Wu Zetian and Kuan-yin might be required.

An important opinion held by Jiao Jie involves the worshipping activities of laywomen affecting the feminization of Kuan-yin in the Tang dynasty. The number of believers of Kuan-yin increased in this period, ranging from aristocratic ladies to ordinary women. From the beginning of Tang, the noblewomen had already been fascinated with Buddhist activities and patronized the chanting and copying of the sutras, the building of the temples, the making of the statues and paintings, and to help the monks and the nuns. For instance, Cheng Yang Princess changed the Ling-gan Temple into Kuan-yin Temple (later named Qing-long Temple)

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<sup>9</sup> See Liu Xun, *Book of Tang* (945 CE) or see *Dayun Jing Shu* (691 CE) By referring to the Buddha's prophecy of *Jing-guang Tiannu* that she will be the King of a country and combining the Maitreya cult at that time, Xue Huaiyi made this sutra to create the theoretical basis for Wu Zetian to legitimize her reign of Tang Empire

<sup>10</sup> See An Interview of Meng Man, 2008.

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in Xi'an Prov.; Gui Yang Princess made the Chongyi Temple (Xi'an, Shaanxi Prov.) for her husband; Wu Zetian built the Taiyuan Temple (Henan Prov.) for her mother among others.

Besides, compared to other feudal dynasties, this era does stand out for other reasons. Tang, an era of liberation, is considered the golden age for women. There was a female emperor, but the social status of women improved substantially, compared to other periods. I agree with Jiao Jie's idea that the female aristocrat's upholding of Buddhism somehow influences its visual registers. For example, there are many statues and paintings of Kuan-yin in *Longmen* and *Dunhuang* grottoes in Tang, and many of them are under the patronage of women. In terms of Sun Changwu's observation, among the inscriptions of the stone-carved Kuan-yin in Longmen grottoes (Henan Prov.) (not including the Kuan-yin of West Trinity), one-third of them were patronized by women (Changwu, 1996).

Many of the paintings and terracotta figurines of court ladies (Figures 10A and 10B) were made in Tang, which influenced the making of Buddhist icons, especially Kuan-yin. In the context of open societies and cultural exchanges and inclusion, the artists of Tang absorbed the '*tribhanga* pose' of Indian Buddhist art, gradually abandoning the exotic facial male features (high nose and deep-set eyes) and tending to female appearance (soft eyebrows and sharp eyes). Under the participation and patronage of women, the iconography of Kuan-yin more or less reflects their will. The female patrons would consciously or unconsciously want to integrate their ideology, and the artisans would have had to listen to their opinion when they designed and made the statues of Kuan-yin. This is why Jiao Jie argues that the imagery of Kuan-yin in Tang shares similarities with the court lady in paintings (Jie, 2015). Again, it helps the transformation of Kuan-yin's gender. For instance, many scholars consider the Kuan-yin (Figure 3A) discussed patronized by a nun Zhenzhi as the representative work of female Kuan-yin. Jiao Jie believes that it was made to look like a woman is out of the nun's desire and choice, but he did not explain how this statue bears the nun's desire.

Besides the evidence discussed above, an awareness of the portraits or statues of Kuan-yin kept in the house for women to worship and pray needs to be paid equal attention to. For example, Chen Xuan's wife tried her best to get a Kuan-yin statue in her private room (Jie, 2015), Miss Zhang worships Kuan-yin at home (Shaoliang & Chao, 2001, p. 214), Miss Du stitched the Kuan-yin's portraits on the embroidery (Siwei, 2011)<sup>11</sup>. There are also many gilt-bronze statues of Kuan-yin of Tang excavated in different places (like Lingtong, Qianyang, and so on) of Xi'an in Shaan'xi (Figures 12A and 12B). Kuan-yin here has a slim body, with one leg slightly bent to form an S-shape together with the flying ribbons, a small Amitābha above the head, a willow branch in his right hand and water pot in another. Jiao Jie believed that these gilt-bronze statues of Kuan-yin in Shaanxi were made for personal worship at home. And among them, Jiao Jie believed the plump figures with naked breasts are female Kuan-yin and worshipped by women.

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<sup>11</sup> See Bai Juyi (a poet from Tang dynasty), *The Collation of Bai Juyi's Collection*, collated by Xie Siwei, 2011, Shanghai: China Publishing House.



**Figure 12** *Standing Kuan-yin*

**Source:** Changqi (2004)

It can be argued that, it might remain a much-contested problem, even in the open-minded Tang dynasty, since the upper body of a female is not to be naked. Interestingly, along with the gilt-bronze statues of Kuan-yin, many Taoist statues were also found in the same place, which indicates that Buddhism and Taoism developed simultaneously in the Tang dynasty. There is a stone tablet (*San-jiao Daochang Wen Stele*) made by Buddhists and Taoists together in Chengdu (Sichuan Prov.)<sup>12</sup>, which again strongly embodies the mutual religious and cultural penetration of Buddhism and Taoism. Thus, parallel study of contemporaneous Taoism also is necessary.

### Conclusions

To sum up, Kuan-yin started to be depicted in the same manner as a courtly woman, and the gender of Kuan-yin became ambiguous in the Sui-Tang dynasties. Through a comparison between Indian Buddhist icons and Chinese Buddhist figures during the Sui-Tang period, and a parallel between images of Kuan-yin and contemporaneous male and female figures in China, the gender transformation of Kuan-yin is discussed. This study also concerns itself with how markers of gender become fluid in ancient times, in keeping with artistic styles and values. Apart from the symbolic associations of certain figures with specific emotions, these markers of gender (include mustaches, soft lines of form, breasts, posture, robes, and depiction of genitalia) mutate to inform figures occupying positions of gendered liminality. The markers of the gender identity of Kuan-yin have been utilized within the portraits of contemporaneous male and female figures in the abovementioned discussion, which helps trace how-gender markings were used to create images meant for public consumption. Nevertheless, the above analysis remained inclusive to the question for what the gender of Kuan-yin in Tang is, the ambiguity of the gender of Kuan-yin that indicates the fact that Kuan-yin is under the

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<sup>12</sup> See Wang Jiayou, (1990), *The Notes of Images of Sichuan in Tang*, *Art of Grottoes*, People's Publishing House, Shaan'xi.

process of sinicization in China and gets modified and represented in its larger social context. No matter whether we are looking at folk beliefs, Chinese traditional beliefs, Confucianism, Taoism, there are many other aspects to further explore in greater detail; nevertheless, all contributed to the changing nature of Kuan-yin images throughout the historical period.

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