

From India to China: Willow Branches and the Gender Transformation of Avalokiteśvara's Iconography in China

Lele Huang

*Faculty of Research Center for Buddhist Texts and Art,
School of Foreign Languages, Peking University, Beijing, 100871, China*

Corresponding author's e-mail: huanglele31@gmail.com

Abstract

Avalokiteśvara (Deity who looks down), known as Kuan-yin in China, becomes the most important deity and is popularized throughout *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. *Avalokiteśvara*, a Bodhisattva believed to have made a great vow to assist sentient beings in times of difficulty and to postpone his own 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*. Kuan-yin became the most popular Bodhisattva during the Sui-Tang period (581-907 A.D.), and there were varied manifestations of the Kuan-yin image, one of the most popular being Willow Kuan-yin (Kuan-yin holding willow branches). Willow branches, associated with feminine qualities in Chinese culture, substituted the lotus in the iconography of Kuan-yin in China. This paper argues that the substitution of lotus for willow branches signifies the localization of *Avalokiteśvara* in China and, to an extent, pushed the gender transformation of this deity in the Chinese context.

Keywords *Avalokiteśvara*; Iconography; Transformation; Willow branches; Gender

Received: May 14, 2024

Revised: August 2, 2024

Accepted: September 5, 2024

Introduction

Willows¹ (*Salix spp.*), are known as ‘yang-liu’ or ‘liu-shu’ in Chinese, and willow branches are called ‘yang-liu-zhi’, ‘yang-zhi’, ‘liu-zhi’, ‘liu-mu’ or ‘liu-tiao’. A new form of Kuan-yin was innovated upon and named Willow Kuan-yin (‘yang-zhi Kuan-yin’ or ‘yang-liu Kuan-yin’) due to the attribute (willow branches) held in his/her hand. Furthermore, it is easy to find that the images of Willow Kuan-yin during the Sui-Tang period depict a very feminine appearance. Does this phenomenon result from the feminine quality associated with willows in Chinese culture? Many scholars like Meng Hui, Wang Qing, and Wang Qiang, among others, suggest that the ‘willows’ (yang-liu) or ‘willow branches (yang-zhi)’ held in Kuan-yin’s hand could be traced to India (Meng, 2018; Wang, 2014; Wang, 2015). Thus, could the willow branches associated with Willow Kuan-yin have symbolized Indian cultural influences?

In this paper, the symbolic meaning of willows or willow branches in both Buddhist sutras, ancient Chinese literature, religion, and ritual practices will be studied to map the transformation of the significance of willow as a symbol from the Indian context to the Chinese context. It also investigates the symbol of willow/willow branches in the iconography of Kuan-yin in China to explore further its possible connection with Kuan-yin’s gender transformation and the integration of Chinese local tradition and Buddhism during dissemination.

Context and literature review

The transformation of Kuan-yin from a male to a female is a specific phenomenon in China only. Thus, we need to pay much attention to the process of gender transformation. According to the Lotus Sutra, *Avalokiteśvara* can manifest himself in 33 forms, among which several are female. Sun Xiushen and Sun Xiaogang’s female manifestations of *Avalokiteśvara* result in Kuan-yin’s gender shifting (Sun & Sun, 1995). In my opinion, I do not agree with Sun’s idea. Buddhist sutras like *Lotus Sutra* mention *Avalokiteśvara*’s capability of manifesting himself as a woman as the circumstances may require, but not the physical appearance. Even though Chinese miracle stories depict Kuan-yin saving people from perils, very few record devotees actually seeing Kuan-yin, and the devotees could not describe his appearance. Hence, *Avalokiteśvara*’s capability of manifesting himself as a woman plays a minor role in his gender transformation in China. Besides, in Indian and Pali Buddhist scriptures, *Avalokiteśvara* also has both male and female manifestations, but, different from China, his gender does not get transformed in India or Southeast Asian countries. Thus, one could say that Sun’s idea might be one-sided.

Additionally, scholars like Fang Yao and Bagyalakshmi believe that *Avalokiteśvara*’s association with “compassion” creates the condition for the gender shift of *Avalokiteśvara* in China since generally the female aspect is considered kind, caring, and compassionate (Fang, 2011). These scholars relate the “compassion” of *Avalokiteśvara* to the virtues of women and assume that the “compassion” of *Avalokiteśvara* matched the virtues of women in the Chinese context, and with this connection, it pushed Kuan-yin to start to transform the gender. However, from my perspective, this idea is quite reductive. The concept of “compassion” in China is not limited to women only but is also used for men. “Benevolence” (ren) promoted by Confucius (551 B.C.-479 B.C.) and “universal love” (jian’ai) advocated by Mencius (372 B.C.-289 B.C.) are typical modes of the spirit of “compassion”.¹ Confucius held the idea that a gentleman is someone compassionate. When Mencius discussed the differences between a gentleman and an ordinary man, he emphasized that a gentleman is compassionate and merciful. Hence, it is clear that “Benevolence” and “universal love” are the great

¹ “Universal love” (jian’ai) is mentioned in *Mencius*, a Confucian classic. One important principle of *Mencius* is that human nature is humane.

qualities of being a gentleman (jun-zi), and the spirit of “compassion” in the Confucian philosophical context is closely associated with a man instead of a woman.

During the Sui-Tang period, a new form of Kuan-yin, i.e., Willow Kuan-yin, appeared, and the lotus started to lose significance. Artists depicted this deity as quite feminine, making the gender ambiguous. Scholars did not attempt to connect the willow branches to Kuan-yin’s gender transformation. Hence, in this paper, I will examine the cultural and religious significance of willow branches to investigate its necessary association with Kuan-yin’s gender transformation.

Methods

In the present case, Buddhist sutras mentioning the willow branches are the primary textual source of this research. Literature includes historical records and stories of this genre that inform the understanding of the images. Oral storytelling traditions will also form part of the groundwork of the thesis.

In the study of Buddhism in general, but particularly in the present case, one must pay equal attention to the image of Willow Kuan-yin found in texts as well as the reality of people’s living practices provided by epigraphical, art historical, and ritual sources as well as forms of literature. Hence, this paper’s visual materials, like paintings and sculptures of Willow Kuan-yin, are essential research materials.

For analysis and comparison, one must familiarize oneself with the depiction of willow branches in Buddhist texts and the iconography of *Avalokiteśvara* as it changes during these periods. While you can find some images in online museum archives, obtain others through field visits. Iconology as a method to study iconography’s meaning-making will be utilized to draw visual frameworks within which the changes in *Avalokiteśvara*’s image-making can be understood. In addition, you should also conduct a suitable study of the oral tradition method before applying it.

Fieldwork sites include Xi’an (Shaan’xi), Luoyang (He’nan), and Ningbo (Zhejiang) (China) wherein art historical material is available at various sites. This material will contribute to the analysis and comparison through documentation and study.

Findings

Willows or willow branches, as previously mentioned, are often mentioned in esoteric Buddhist sutras of Kuan-yin. For instance, in *Qing Kuan-yin Jing* (also known as *Qing Kuan-shi-yin Pu-sa Xiao-fu Du-hai Tuo-luo-ni Jing/ Dhāraṇī Sūtra of Invoking Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva to Dissipate Poison and Harm*, translated in 317-420 A.D.), Buddha tells the representative of the elder in Vaishali (*Vaiśālī* in Sanskrit) that ‘(they should) offer willow branches (yang-zhi in Chinese) and clean water (jing-shui in Chinese) to Kuan-yin for requesting his manifestation’ (T 20, pp. 34-36). Also, in *Qian-shou Jing* (*Qian-shou Qian-yan Kuan-shi-yin Pu-sa Da-bei-xin Tuo-luo-ni Jing* or *Sūtra of a Thousand Hands*, translated in the seventh century A.D.), *Qian-guang-yan Kuan-zi-zai Pu-sa Mi-mi-fa Jing/ Sūtra of the Secret Method [Spoken] by Master Perceiver Bodhisattva Who Has a Thousand Luminous Eyes*, (translation date is uncertain) and *Bu-kong Juan-suo Shen-bian Zhen-yan Jing/ Mantra of Amoghapāśa’s Prātihārya* (translation completed in 709 A.D.), the willow is one of the attributes of Kuan-yin. The Willow Mudra (Yang-zhi Shou in Chinese) treats all kinds of body diseases (T 20, p. 111).

The records of willow (‘yang-zhi’ in Chinese) have long appeared in Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures like *Fo-shuo Wen-shi Xi-yu Zhong-seng Jing/ Sūtra on Bathing the Saṅgha in the Bathhouse* (also known as *When-shi Jing/ Sūtra of Bathhouse*) (translated around the second century A.D.), *Pu-sa-xing Wu-shi Yuan-shen Jing/ Sūtra of Fifty Encounters of the Bodhisattvacarya* (translated around the third century A.D.), *Da Zhuang-yan Lun Jing/ Kalpanamaṇḍitikā* (translated in 344-413 A.D.), *Mi-sha-sai Bu He-hai Wu-fen Lv/Mahīsasakavinaya* (translated in the fifth century

A.D., also known as *Wu-fen Lv/ Commandment of Five Categories or Five Part Vinaya*, *Fo-shuo Tuo-luo-ni Ji Jing/ Dhāraṇī Collection Spoken by Buddha* (translated in the seventh century A.D.), *Xian-jie Jing/ Bhadrakalpasūtra* (translated around fourth to fifth centuries A.D.), etc. In *Fo-shuo Wen-shi Xi-yu Zhong-seng Jing* (*Sūtra on Bathing the Samgha in the Bathhouse*), the willow is one of the seven objects required for the method of bathing taught by the Buddha, which helps to avoid seven diseases and gain seven merits (T 16, p. 701). Besides, in terms of *Pu-sa-xing Wu-shi Yuan-shen Jing* (*Sūtra of Fifty Encounters of the Bodhisattvacarya*, translated in 266-316 A.D.), all the Buddhas and Bodhisattvas use willow branches to clean their teeth; hence, the fragrance is linked mainly to the willow (T 17, p. 812). In addition, both *Da Zhuang-yan Lun Jing* (*Kalpanamanḍitikā*) and *Wu-fen Lv* (*Five Part Vinaya*) emphasize that it is necessary to use willow branches to rinse the mouth (T 04, p. 201). As mentioned in *Wu-fen Lv*, monks who do not use willow branches to clean their teeth have malodorous breath; thus, the Buddha suggests that they chew willow branches and that chewing willow branches can lead to the purging of five evils and the gaining of five benefits (T 22, p. 1421).

Besides, Chinese monks' travel accounts like *Fo-guo Ji* (*Records of Buddhist Kingdoms*, completed in 416 A.D.), *Da-tang Xi-yu Ji* (*The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*, completed in 646 A.D.), and *Nan-hai Ji-gui Nei-fa Zhuan* (*A Record of Buddhist Practices Sent Home from the Southern Sea*, written in 689-691 A.D.) have also mentioned the function of willow branches in ancient Indian customs. For example, Faxian stated in his record *Fo-guo Ji* that Buddha had chewed willow branches in the east path of the south exit gate of Sha-qi City (an ancient Indian city known as Saketa); Xuanzang recorded in *Da-tang Xi-yu Ji* that the lush trees beneath the north upper rock of Xiang-jian Stupa (Pilusara Stupa) resulted from the disposed discarded roots of the willow branches chewed by the Buddha and arhats a long time ago.

Discussion

Interestingly, in Yijing's works, the description of the custom that Indians cleaned teeth by chewing the willow branches (a monk from Tang) received different explanations. Yijing insisted on using 'chi-mu' ('chi' meaning 'teeth' and 'mu' meaning 'wood') or 'ya-zhang' ('ya' meaning teeth and 'zhang' meaning stick) to replace the term 'willows/willow branch' (or yang-zhi, liu-zhi, yang-liu zhi, liu-mu, in Chinese). He emphasized that the 'willows/willow branch' (or yang-zhi, liu-zhi, yang-liu zhi, liu-mu, etc. in Chinese) differs from the 'chi-mu' used for cleaning teeth in India. (T54, pp. 208-209)

With respect to Yijing, 'chi-mu' actually is 'dan-do-jia-se-cha', the transliteration of the Sanskrit term 'dantakāṣṭha' ('danta' meaning teeth and 'kāṣṭha' meaning 'twig') used for cleaning teeth in ancient India. Yijing observed that willow branches were not the only objects used for cleaning teeth in ancient India. He emphasized that people in different regions of India used twigs from various trees.³ Similarly, in terms of *Wu-fen Lv*, Buddha mentioned that twigs of five kinds of trees (lacquer trees, poisonous trees, she-yi trees [might be sirkaya trees], mo-tou trees [might be palasa trees], and Bodhi trees) should not be chewed on for cleaning teeth.

According to George, the custom of using a twig for cleaning teeth was practiced in India from the early historical period and is mentioned in Buddhist literature and early Indic traditions (Bobrinskoy, 1932). The literature of Jyotisha and Sushrata-samhita (Lyer, 2018) mentions that the use of dantakastha is expected to adhere to regulations and provides instructions on which trees or plants could be used or should be avoided. In Shiva Purana (*Śivapurāṇa*, date unknown) and Skanda Purana (*Skandapurāṇa*, dated to sixth - seventh centuries A.D.), the length of dantakastha varies according to different castes. In Vaishnavite texts, a twig is offered to Lord *Viṣṇu* for the purpose of cleaning his teeth. These Buddhist sutras, travelers' records, and other literary sources prove that chewing twigs of trees and plants (including willow branches) for teeth cleaning was a prevailing norm in ancient India.

As mentioned previously, apart from Yijing, ‘*dantakāṣṭha*’ in the Chinese translation of Buddhist texts amounted to ‘yang-zhi’, ‘liu-zhi’, ‘yang-liu zhi’, ‘liu-mu’, known as ‘willows’ or ‘willow branches’. However, in esoteric Buddhist sutras, willow branches became one of the attributes of Kuan-yin. This form of Kuan-yin, called Willow Kuan-yin, is primarily represented in the art of the Sui-Tang period. As shown in Fig. 1A, Kuan-yin holds a willow branch in his right hand and a lotus with a pot in his left hand. This statue of Kuan-yin carries specific Indian characteristics. The facial features of Kuan-yin, like the vast eyes and full lips (Fig. 1A), are quite different from that of Kuan-yin depicted in Fig. 1B, and they look Indian.



Figure 1 (A) Willow Kuan-yin, Sui dynasty 581-618 A.D., Xi'an Museum, Shaanxi Prov., (B) Willow Kuan-yin, Sui dynasty 581-618 A.D., Xi'an Museum, Shaanxi Prov.

Source: By author

Deeply influenced by Indian Buddhist iconography, *Avalokiteśvara*/Kuan-yin in China was depicted as *Padmapāni* (one who holds the lotus) or sometimes with a waterpot in one hand before Sui-Tang. It is important to point out that artists depicted this deity as a male in the early stage. They portrayed Kuan-yin with broader shoulders and a moustache. The masculine body of the earlier statues of Kuan-yin indicates that this Bodhisattva was depicted as a male at artists depicted the beginning (Huang, 2022). However, in the Sui-Tang period, he was depicted as Willow Kuan-yin. This description carries onwards from Tang dynasty in Chinese art: a willow branch substituted the lotus in Kuan-yin's hand but the water pot remained. The moustache started to disappear (Huang 2022, p. 11).² We can see that the original significance as *Padmapāni* from India disappeared, and the iconography of the *Avalokiteśvara* transformed. In Chinese art and aesthetics, the distinction between men and women depended on sure external signs such as clothes, jewels, makeup, facial hair such as moustache, posture, facial expressions, and skin colour. The removal of the moustache implies the feminization of the *Avalokiteśvara* in visual arts and the process of his gender transformation in China.

His/Her slightly S-shaped curvaceous body and dressing (Fig. 2A and Fig. 2B) 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 was depicted as a lady at that time. Furthermore, willows and willow branches also have important symbolic meanings in the Chinese context. Thus, one could be raised a question: Are the willow branches held in Kuan-yin's hand adopted from India, or is this attribute an intentional borrowing from Chinese culture?



Figure 2 (A) Willow Kuan-yin, Sui dynasty 618-907 A.D., Longmen Grottoes, Henan Prov. (B) Willow Kuan-yin, Sui dynasty 618-907 A.D., Putuo Mountain, Zhejiang Prov.

Source:

- 2-A: By author
- 2-B: <https://m.putuo.org.cn>

In Tantric sutras, *Avalokiteśvara* holds different attributes, including lotus, cintamani, vajra, sword, noose, and willow branches. However, archaeological evidence proves that Indian religious art Indian religious art rarely depicts willow branches, and *Avalokiteśvara* in India was not shown with willow or willow branches. Compared with willows/ willow branches, lotus is essential in Indian religious art. Artists portray Hindu deities (like *Viṣṇu*, *Brahmā*, *Sarasvatī*, etc.) sitting on a lotus or holding lotuses in hands (like *Lakṣmī*, *Brahmā*, *Viṣṇu*). Similarly, in Buddhist art, they depict important figures sitting on a lotus throne (like Gautama Buddha) or holding a lotus (like *Avalokiteśvara* and *Tārā*).

However, from the Sui-Tang dynasties onwards, willow branches have been widely depicted as Kuan-yin's attribute in China. Before that, artists often depicted Kuan-yin holding a water pot or a lotus. However, especially in later periods (after the Song dynasty), although they might not have portrayed the water pot or even the lotus, the willow branches remained in popular perception. Compared to India, willows or willow branches are associated with the iconography of Kuan-yin in China. Why did the Sui-Tang patrons more favor the willow branches? How did the transformation happen? Did this shift somehow influence the gender transformation of Kuan-yin? It is necessary to look at the significance of willow or willow branches in the Chinese context.

The willow tree, native to China, is one of China's earliest cultivated and widely distributed tree species. The ancient Chinese gradually learned about the willow's 'softness'⁴ and medicinal properties over time. In thousands of years of cultivating and tending to willow saplings, the willow

has achieved great utility due to its specific traits. The farmers cultivated the willow trees for environmental purposes; the painters painted them to praise their beauty; the pharmacists used willows to cure diseases; the literati praised willows in their works to enhance their expressive register. The willow has always been an integral part of ancient people's daily lives, leading to the development of 'willow culture' in China. The willow is one of the most important themes in Chinese literature and a significant image and symbol. The literary works with willows as the main theme constitute an important part of Chinese classical literature.

The 'willow' (or 'liu', 'yang-liu', 'liu-zhi' in Chinese) frequently appears in ancient Chinese literature, especially in poetry. Historical records and literary sources prove that the planting of willows was widespread in the gardens of royal families, on banks of the rivers, and as trees lining the roads, among other locations, seen everywhere during the Sui-Tang period. That is one of the primary reasons why the poems praising willows increased dramatically during the Sui-Tang period. Concerning the *Quan Tang Shi/ Complete Tang Poems* (compiled in 18th century A.D.) alone, there are around 400 poems eulogizing the willow.

The willow is easy to cultivate, and its germination heralds the arrival of spring; thus, the willow or willow branches also symbolize vitality.⁵ Besides, the willow or willow branches represent the sorrow of parting from family members, lovers, and friends, closely related to the Chinese custom of breaking willow branches for farewell.⁶ The Chinese character 'willow' ('liu' with the third tone) shares a similar pronunciation with another character, 'to stay' ('liu' with the second tone). Breaking off a willow branch and gifting it to the one departing is a way to ask him/her to stay, expressing the sorrow and nostalgia related to parting. Xue Wensu observed that the custom of 'breaking willow branches for parting' could be dated back to the Han Dynasty, which later became popular during the Tang Dynasty (Xue, 2018).

Interestingly, the willow also represents the pursuit of living in seclusion and being indifferent to fame and fortune, which, to an extent, accords with the anchoritic life emphasized in Taoist ideology (Xue 2018; Liu & Zhang 2016). Tao Yuan-ming (352/365-427 A.D.), also known as 'Wu-liu (Five Willows)', who resigned from a bureaucratic position and lived in seclusion, was considered to be the first 'Tian-yuan Shi-ren'⁷ of China. Until the Tang dynasty, many literati, especially Wang Wei, highly praised Tao Yuan-ming. Wang Wei's style name 'Wu-liu' frequently appeared in Tang period literature to glorify his anchoritic spirit and indifference to fame and fortune. Furthermore, willows or willow branches are also related to Chinese ritual practices of ancestor worship.

The ancient Chinese believed in gods and their ancestors. Worshipping gods and ancestors is a deeply embedded aspect of Chinese culture, and ancient Chinese had practiced rituals during great events in the community. There are literary sources regarding ritual practices including god worship and ancestor worship collected in the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry, *Shijing/ The Classic of Poetry* (eleventh century B.C. - sixth century B.C.). We can trace the earliest record of willows in ritual practices to the Chunqiu period (also known as Spring and Autumn period, 770-476/403 B.C.). The record of *Gu-wei Shu/ Book of Gu-wei* (date unknown), states that people planted willows where the dead were buried during the Chunqiu period. Till Southern and Northern dynasties (220-589 A.D.), as *Jin-chu Sui-shi Ji/ Records of Stories in Jin-chu* (501-565 A.D.) shows, 'cha-liu (placing willow branches on front doors)' became a norm in the Han-shi festival (Han-shi Jie in Chinese) folk practices.

Because the date of the Qing-ming festival (a festival for sweeping the tombs of ancestors) is very close to that of the Han-shi festival, people extended the folk practice of tomb sweeping from the Han-shi festival to the Qing-ming festival. Moreover, with the support of emperors, sweeping the tombs of ancestors became one of the 'five rites' during the Tang dynasty period. Thus, it is unsurprising to see this folk custom depicted in poetry like *Han-peng* (written by Han Xu, Tang Dynasty) and *Tu-zhong Han-shi* (written by Song Zhi-wen, Tang Dynasty). Thus, one could speculate

at on the possibility of people placing willow branches on their front doors during both festivals. The use of willow branches during the festivals of Han-shi and Qing-ming emphasizes the willows' or willow branches' connection with Chinese ancestor worship.

In terms of the yin-yang theory, willows are considered 'yin' (shade and feminine in English) because willows like to grow in damp places (e.g., near the banks of rivers and ponds). In folk tradition, according to Chinese feng-shui, planting a willow tree in the backyard of a house is considered inauspicious. Because the willow belongs to 'yin' and the backyard also belongs to the 'yin' element, it results in excessive 'yin' and deficient 'yang' within a house, bringing misfortune to the family. People believed that, willow branches, due to their 'yin' quality, were chosen plant in tombs or placed on front doors to honor ancestors during the Han-shi festival and Qing-ming festival.

In ancient times, the ancestors discovered the medicinal properties of willow trees, and many historical records provide evidence for willows' function in curing diseases. For instance, in the light of *Shen-nong Ben Cao Jing/ Shennong's Herbal Classics* (third century B.C. - third century A.D.), the flowers of willows, bitter in taste, can cure jaundice; the leaves of willows help treat scabies; the fruits of willows could prevent the intestines from developing pyemia; the juice of the seeds of willows cure thirst. In terms of *Bie Lu/ Categorical Bibliography* (first century B.C. - first century A.D.), the primary medicinal function of willows is to heal incised wounds, sores, festering, and pus. Based on *Yao-xing Lun/ Pharmacological Theory* (dated to the seventh century A.D.), different parts of willows have different efficacies, like stopping bleeding, relieving pain, and curing phlegm induced heat. Similarly, as discussed previously, the function of willow branches mentioned in the sutras of Kuan-yin is also closely related to treating disease. This resemblance might be one of the reasons why willow branches could have come to replace the lotus held in Kuan-yin's hand.

Using willow branches to cure disease is not limited to Taoism but also appears in Buddhist practices, as recorded in historical records. For example, as mentioned in *Gao-seng Zhuan/ Biographies of Eminent Monks* (dated to the sixth century A.D.), a monk called Qiyu cured Yongwen's disease by splashing clean water held within a willow branch on Yongwen's sick body three times and simultaneously chanting the spell (T 50, 388). Besides, as recorded in *Jin Shu/ Book of Jin* (completed in 648 A.D.), an eminent monk named Fotucheng from India saved Shi Le's son by using the willow branches to sprinkle water onto Shi Le's son's dead body while chanting the spell.

In the Buddhist tradition, willow branches were used to cure diseases and bring the dead back to life. However, it raises a question: Why had the willow branches not been represented in ancient Indian art? Does this mean that the function of willow branches, as mentioned above, should have been paid more attention to in ancient India? Or is it possible that the Indian monks, as recorded in the historical records discussed above, learned how to use willow branches to cure diseases based on their observance of Chinese folk practices on their travels?

Besides, it is important to note that the two records referred to, using willow branches to cure diseases in Buddhist practices, make mention of practices that took place before the Sui-Tang period. However, before the Sui-Tang dynasty, there was no depiction of Kuan-yin holding a willow branch. This could indirectly underline that the willow branch substituting the lotus held in Kuan-yin's hand might not have been the outcome of Indian influences. Otherwise, the form of Willow Kuan-yin could have appeared much earlier. According to Ayurvedic tradition, using *dantakāṣṭha* to clean the teeth has medicinal value and could help avoid diseases and gain merits in line with Buddhist texts. However, as discussed earlier, the principal function of using *dantakāṣṭha* was to keep oral health and hygiene instead of curing diseases, unlike the significance of the willow branches held in Kuan-yin's hand.

In ancient Chinese folk belief, as mentioned in *Huainanzi* (179-122 B.C.), *Zhuangzi* (475/403-221 B.C.), *Dianshu/ Classics* (206/202 B.C.- 8/25 A.D.), and so on, willows not only have medicinal effects but can also exorcise ghosts and spirits. People believed that branches of water willows had the

power to beat and drive the spirits away. The more they used willow branches used to hit the ghost, the weaker the ghost was believed to have become. There is a legend about how the Taoist gods used the willow branches to vanquish the ghosts. Once, the men-shen (God of Door) Shen-shu and Yu-lv fought with a fierce evil spirit for three days and nights. Finally, they captured the evil spirit, but soon realized that they had lost the rope to tie it up. Fortunately, there was a willow tree nearby, and they broke the willow branches, tied the evil spirit up, and fed it to a tiger. After that, people believed that ghosts become scared of willow branches. In *Qi-min Yao-shu* (533-544 A.D.), Jia Sixie, wrote that placing willow branches on the front door could protect the house from spirits at the dawn of the first month of the Chinese lunar year.

Literary materials, precisely poetic sources, extensively depicted Kuan- yin's physical appearance. The status of poems reached a peak during the Tang dynasty. Praise of Kuan-yin became one of the most popular themes. Hereto, *Kuan-shi-yin Pu-sa Xiang Zan* (by Yu Shao), *Guang-tian-zhen Zan Lian-ju* (by Duan Chengshi, Zhang Xifu, Zhen Fu, etc.), *Kuan-yin Da-shi Zan* (by Wang Bo), *Yong Liu* (by Han Wo), *Kuan-yin Zan* (by Jiaoran), etc. are poems praising Kuan-yin and depicting Kuan-yin in more detail.

“Willow” related terms like “willow branches” and “willow leaves” are also frequently used to depict Kuan-yin's physical appearance. It also has to be remembered that the willow symbolizes the beauty of women in the Chinese context. In *Yong Liu*, the lady's slender hand with willow branches is the same as that of Kuan-yin, which suggests Kuan-yin's hands are as slender and soft as a lady's. Willows's flexibility and tenderness corresponded to women's characteristics. The depiction of Kuan-yin holding willow branches in his/her hand started to appear during the Sui-Tang period. Meanwhile, especially during this period, the application of the terms, as mentioned earlier, associated with willows in literature also reached its peak. Literati Chen Mengxing from the Qing dynasty (1636-1912 A.D.) commented that people of the Tang dynasty preferred the use of the willow as a metaphor symbolizing the qualities of women (Feng, 1979). Scholars like Yao Zhiqing observed that during the Tang dynasty, the equating of femininity with the significance of willows and willow branches increased, and willows became the most commonly used metaphor for depicting women during the Tang dynasty (Yao, 2008).

Women's beauty drew more attention and favour in the Chinese literary canon than men's. Specific terms directly depict a woman's figure or body parts (mainly skin, hands, lips and eyebrows, and teeth) to represent her beauty. For instance, “liu-meī” indicates that a woman's eyebrows are as tender and soft as willow leaves; ‘fu-rong ru mian liu ru mei’ (in Bai Juyi's *Chang-hen Jing-qin*) describes the beautiful woman's face which looks like a hibiscus flower and her eyebrows that look like willow leaves; ‘fan-shen ze feng chui ruo-liu’ (in Zhang Zhuo's *You Xian-ku*), showcases the light and graceful body posture of the dancing girl is as tender and swaying as willow branches; ‘ying-ying miao-wu yao-zhi ruan’ (from Liu Yong's *Liu-yao Qing*) embodies the waist of the beautiful woman is as tender and slim as willow branches.

It is easy to see that literature portrays Kuan-yin as a pleasing figure with features similar to those of women. Many terms related to “willow leaves” or “willow branches” are exclusively used in literature to depict a woman's beauty. The substitution of branches for lotus held in Kuan-yin's hand, on the one hand, indicates the localization of *Avalokiteśvara* during the Sui-Tang period in China; on the other, to a certain degree, indirectly suggests Kuan-yin's association with qualities of a female and the gender of Kuan-yin began to change.

Conclusion

Indeed, terms like ‘willow’ (‘liu’ in Chinese), ‘willow leaves’ (‘liu-ye’ in Chinese), and ‘willow branches’ (‘liu-tiao’ in Chinese) are metaphors used mainly for describing a woman's eyebrows, eyes, and waist in Sui-Tang literature. To an extent, the symbolic meaning that willows

carry in Chinese literature has influenced the image-making of Buddhist icons. Even though literature does not explicitly state that Kuan-yin gender is female, a fact that the images of Kuan-yin in visual arts and poems during Sui-Tang share remarkable similarities with that of a woman. The resemblances as such could directly influence the feminization of Kuan-yin's iconography. In return, this kind of imagery of Kuan-yin indirectly influenced prevailing modes of visuality.

Besides, as repeatedly mentioned, willows and willow branches possess the quality of 'yin' (feminine/femininity in English) and symbolize a woman's beauty, tenderness, grace, and delicacy. Hence, it might have been challenging for Kuan-yin, who had always been depicted as holding willow branches and embodying the roles of granting babies and providing puerperal salvation during the Sui-Tang period, to still remain as a male. Thus, willows' association with feminine qualities and women in Chinese literature, to a certain degree, has encouraged people to link Kuan-yin with women, which could have led to the creation of the feminine iconography of Kuan-yin. 'A culture may be attracted by the exotic, but it cannot resist changing the strange to the familiar.' (Zurcher 1991, p. 291) The symbolic meaning willow/willow branches carried in Indian tradition has changed in Chinese context during the dissemination of Buddhism from region to region. The innovation and prevalence of the new form of Willow Kuan-yin in China indicates the integration of Buddhism and local Chinese traditions. The Chinese transformation of Kuan-yin could be considered as a case study for the Chinese transformation of Buddhism.

Notes

a) In Chinese culture, it refers to different meanings when 'yang' and 'liu' are put together as 'yang-liu' or separated from each other. When 'yang-liu' is in one, it either refers specifically to willow trees (like 'yang-liu yi-yi', see *Shi Jing*, eleventh - sixth century B.C.) or indicates the fact that ancient people realized that 'yang' and 'liu' belong to the same species. However, when the two characters are split, they sometimes refer to the same species. In ancient Chinese culture, 'yang' and 'liu' often overlap. For instance, 'yang' is mentioned as 'pu-liu' (big catkin willow) (see *Shi Jing·Xiao-ya Shi-mu*, eleventh - sixth century B.C.) and 'chi-jing-liu' (big catkin willow with red bark) (see *Guang-yun·Yang-Yun*, 1008 A.D.); in *Shuo-wen-Mu-bu* (25-220 A.D.), 'liu' refers to 'xiao-yang' (big catkin willow with dark bark); 'pu-liu' has two species in *Mao-shi Zheng-yi*, one is called 'xiao-yang' (big catkin willow with dark bark) and the other is known as 'da-yang' (big catkin willow with red bark). Therefore, 'yang' and 'liu' are interchangeable in certain circumstances. However, as seen from *Gu-jin Zhu* (by Cui Bao, Jin dynasty, 266-420 A.D.), 'yang' also can refer to 'bai-yang' (white poplar) or 'qing-yang' (Cathay poplar), hence, sometimes, 'yang' and 'liu' refer to different trees. Ancient Chinese scholars like Wang Xiangjin held the idea that 'yang' and 'liu' had always been mixed up with each other down through the ages though the two are different species. (See Wang Xiangjin, *Qun-fang Pu*, Ming dynasty, 1638-1644 A.D.) Moreover, Li Shizhen (a renowned Chinese physician, herbalist, and acupuncturist in the Ming dynasty, 1638-1644 A.D.) put forward that 'yang' and 'liu' belong to the same categories but are different species (See Li Shizhen, *Ben-csao Gang-mu* or *Compendium of Materia Medica*, Ming dynasty, 1638-1644 A.D., completed in 1578 A.D and printed in 1596 A.D in Nanjing).

b) Here 'T' is an abbreviation for *Taishō Tripitaka* (a definitive edition of the Chinese Buddhist canon) and 'T 20: 34-36' means '*Taishō Tripitaka*, Vol. 20, pp. 34-36'.

c) Yijing observed that xylosema branches (zuo-tiao in Chinese) and kudzuvine stems (ge-man in Chinese) were used to clean the teeth in mountainous areas. But, branches of sophora trees, peach trees, willow trees and others were used instead in plain areas (see Yijing, *Nan-hai Ji-gui Nei-fa Zhuang*, Tang dynasty.).

d) Unlike these trees, which are hard and rigid but easily cracked, willows are flexible and can bend without breaking. Willows' quality of flexibility is in line with Chinese ideology of 'softness

can overcome strength'. Thus, in Chinese culture, willows refer to the quality of 'softness', too.

e) The willow mentioned in 'xi-wo-wang-yi, yang-liu yi-yi' (English translation: when I started to leave home, the willow branches were sprouting) refers to spring (See *Shi Jing/Classic of Poetry*, eleventh century B.C. - seventh century B.C.). In *Yong-liu*, 'wan-tiao chui-xia lv-si-tao' (English translation: thousands of branches of willow look like green threads dropping down) indicates the vitality of willow (See *Zhizhang, Yong-liu*, Tang dynasty).

f) For instance, Xiao Yi's *Zhe Yang-liu*, dated to Liang dynasty (508-554 A.D.), tells the custom of breaking willow branches for farewell; Li Bai's *Chun-ye Luo-cheng Wen-di*, dated to 701-762 A.D., witnesses the scene of breaking willow branches.

g) Tian-yuan Shi-ren, (literal translation is an idyllic poet), refers to a poet who depicts natural scenery, rural scenery and the ease of hermit life.

Acknowledgments

I am thankful to Zhan Ru (Professor at the School of Foreign Languages, Peking University) and Y.S. Alone (Professor at the School of Arts & Aesthetics, Jawaharlal Nehru University) for their suggestions, comments and inspiration in improving the article and also for providing the necessary information when I needed it. I also thank Reza, Sarojini, Dollar, Rupee, Apra, Michael, Tang Jianbo, Qiu Xiaoyun, Hu Ziqi, Zhang Jiamei, Wangsong, Li Silong, Wang Li'na Lin Xu'na and Zhong Jianbo for their tremendous encouragement in my academic endeavors.

This paper is research progress and outcome of the National Social Science Fund of China (NSSFC) (2024 年国家社会科学基金青年项目, Grant No.: 24CZJ020), China Postdoctoral Science Foundation (中国博士后科学基金第 75 批面上资助项目, Grant No.: 2024M750120), and State-funded Postdoctoral Fellow Program of 2023 (2023 年度国家资助博士后研究人员计划 (C 档) 资助项目, Grant No.: GZC20230118).

References

A-hospital. (2016). *Shen-nong Ben Cao Jing (The Classic of Herbal Medicine)*. Retrieved from <http://www.ahospital.com/w/%E7%A5%9E%E5%86%9C%E6%9C%AC%E8%8D%89%E7%BB%8F>

Bobrinskoy, G. V. (1932). The rite of Dantadhāvana in Smṛti literature. *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 52(2), 163-167.

Chinese Buddhist Electronic Text Association. (1998). *Taishō Tripitaka*. Retrieved from <http://www.cbeta.org>

Chinese Social Science Today. (2018). *Willows literary symbol for sorrow of separation*. Retrieved from <http://www.csstoday.com/Item/5337.aspx>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *Bie Lu*. Retrieved from <https://ctext.org/searchbooks.pl?if=gb&searchu=ctp%3Awork%3Awb837947&remap=gb>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *Chang-hen Jing-qin*. Retrieved from <https://ctext.org/text.pl?node=191153&if=gb&remap=gb>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *Chun-ye Luo-cheng Wen-di*. Retrieved from <https://ctext.org/quantangshi/zhs>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *Gu Weishu·Liwei·Jiming Zhen*. Retrieved from <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=730899&remap=gb>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *Liu-yao Qing*. Retrieved from <https://ctext.org/quantangshi/zhs>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *Qi-min Yao-shu*. Retrieved from <https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&res=537732&remap=gb>

Chinese Text Project. (2016). *You Xian-ku*. Retrieved from
<https://ctext.org/wiki.pl?if=gb&chapter=290915>

Fang, Y. (2011). The evolution of the image of Avalokitesvara and reason analysis. *Fujian Religion*, 06(1), 22-24.

Feng, H. (1979). *Yu-xi-sheng Shi-ji Jian-zhu (Notes on Poems of Yu-xi-sheng)* (1st ed.). Shanghai, China: Shanghai Classics Publishing House.

Gushiwen. (2023). *Shi Jing/classic of poetry*. Retrieved from
<https://so.gushiwen.cn/gushi/shijing.aspx>

Gushiwen. (2023). *Zhe Yang-liu*. Retrieved from
https://so.gushiwen.cn/shiwen_a124d74b870a.aspx

Huang, L. (2022). The ambiguity of the gender of *Avalokiteśvara*: A comparative study on the representations of *Avalokiteśvara* from India and China during Sui-Tang-period. *Asia Social Issues*, 1(2), 1-15.

Liu, Y., & Zhang, J. (2016). The esthetical psychology evolution of the image of “Willow” in poems from Han Dynasty to Tang Dynasty. *Journal of East China University of Technology*, 35(1), 56-60.

Meng, Hui. (2018). *Chun-jian de Mei-se (The Beauty of the Mouth)* (1st ed.). Nanjing, China: Nanjing University Press.

Sun, X., & Sun, X. (1995). The Sinicization of Buddhism in images of Kuan-yin. *Journal of Dunhuang Research*, 4(1), 1-15.

Wang, Q. (2014). Willow branches chewing: The custom of teeth-cleaning in history. *Folklore Studies*, 01, 75-79.

Wang, Q. (2015). The Buddhist Concept of Dental Care. *Journal of Industry of Oral Care Products*, 25(06), 1-2.

Wikisource. (2017). *Fo-guo Ji (Record of Buddhist Countries)*. Retrieved from
<https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E4%BD%9B%E5%9C%8B%E8%A8%98>

Wikisource. (2023). *Da-Tang Xi-yu Ji (Great Tang Records on Western Regions)*. Retrieved from
<https://zh.m.wikisource.org/zh-hans/%E5%A4%A7%E5%94%90%E8%A5%BF%E5%9F%9F%E8%A8%98>

Yao, Z. (2008). The imagery of Liu and the metaphor of the female in ancient poetry. *Writer Magazine*, 22(1), 112-113.

Zhen, Q. (1992). *Yao-xing Lun* (4th eds.). Beijing, China: People's Medical Publishing House.

Zhonghuadiancang. (2022). *Jin Shu (Book of Jin Dynasty)*. Retrieved from
<https://www.zhonghuadiancang.com/lishizhuanji/jinshu/>

Zurcher, E. (1992). *A new look at the earliest Chinese Buddhist texts* (pp. 277-304). In Koichi Shinohara and Gregory Schopen (Eds.). From Benares to Beijing: Essays on Buddhism and Chinese Religions. Ontario, Canada: Mosaic Press.