

Symbolism of White Colour and the Gender Transformation of Avalokiteśvara¹

Juntao Zhao¹, Lele Huang^{2*}, Weizhu An³ and Zhenghua Li⁴

¹Shenzhen Middle School, Shenzhen 518060, China

²Faculty of World Arthistory Institute, Shanghai International Studies University, Shanghai 201620, China

³Faculty of College of Textile Science and Engineering (International Institute of Silk), Zhejiang Sci-Tech University, 310018, China

⁴Baoshan Monastery, Yueqing, Wenzhou 325600, China

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

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Abstract

One of the most significant transformations in the visual and literary representation of Avalokiteśvara (Kuan-yin) in China is the gradual shift in gender identity. While early depictions followed Indian iconographic conventions that presented the bodhisattva in a male form, Chinese sources increasingly emphasized the color white in textual prescriptions concerning the making of Kuan-yin images. This emphasis later crystallized in the emergence of the “White-robed Kuan-yin,” a distinctly feminized manifestation that came to be widely revered as a goddess. Taking into account the differing criteria for gendered iconographic markers in Indian and Chinese artistic traditions, this paper argues that the association of Kuan-yin with the color white resonated deeply with Chinese aesthetic sensibilities and cultural symbolism. In the Sui–Tang period, this chromatic and symbolic alignment facilitated a gradual yet profound feminization of Kuan-yin in both literature and visual art, marking a pivotal moment in the Sinicization of Avalokiteśvara.

Keywords: Avalokiteśvara, Gender, Transformation, White colour, Feminization, Iconography, China

Introduction

Buddhism emerged as the most powerful *Śramaṇa* tradition in ancient India in the 6th century B.C. and became very popular among the Indian masses in South Asia. Buddhism was transmitted to China during the Han Dynasty (202 B.C.–220 A.D.) According to some scholars, the sinicization of Buddhism could be considered a microcosm of all the foreign cultures' destiny in China (Li, 2006). In the Buddhist pantheon, *Avalokiteśvara* (known as Kuan-yin/Guan-yin, 观音 in China) is considered the most important deity and is revered throughout *Mahāyāna* and *Vajrayāna* Buddhism. In the Chinese Buddhist context, the equivalence between *Avalokiteśvara* and Kuan-yin was established through translation. The Chinese name Kuan-shi-yin (观世音), later shortened to Kuan-yin (观

音), is generally understood as a semantic rendering of the Sanskrit *Avalokiteśvara*, most commonly associated with *Kumārajīva*'s translation of the Lotus Sutra in 406 A.D. This act of translation was not merely linguistic, but also interpretive, as it rearticulated the bodhisattva's salvific function in terms intelligible to Chinese readers and worshippers. The later abbreviation from Kuan-shi-yin to Kuan-yin further facilitated the deity's integration into Chinese religious and visual culture, forming an important foundation for the subsequent sinicization of *Avalokiteśvara*. The perfect embodiment of compassion, *Avalokiteśvara* is deemed important because he is believed to be the Bodhisattva (one who seeks awakening) who straddles the period between the arrival of the *Śākyamuni* Buddha and the advent of the

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future Buddha *Maitreya*. Literally meaning ‘the deity who looks down’, *Avalokiteśvara* guides believers towards knowledge and self-realization to vanquish ignorance. He is 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 *nirvāṇa*.

In China, however, *Avalokiteśvara* is considered a goddess, and is dubbed ‘*Kuan-yin Niangniang* (Goddess Kuan-yin)’. Scholars like Wu Yan observe that the status of Kuan-yin was on par with the Buddha and that ‘nearly every family worshipped Kuan-yin’ (Wu, 2015), giving an indication of the popularity of the goddess’ cult in China, which indicates how popular the cult of Kuan-yin in China was. Significantly, the transformation of Kuan-yin from male to female is a phenomenon that has been observed to be specific to China.

The alternating use of masculine and feminine pronouns in this article is intentional and analytically motivated. It reflects the historical instability and gradual transformation of Kuan-yin’s gendered identity, which constitutes one of the central concerns of this study.

Literature review

Various scholars have noted the gender transformation of Kuan-yin in China. While these studies have identified several important religious and social factors, many of them tend to treat gender transformation as the outcome of a single cause. Less attention has been given to how visual signs, literary language, and symbolic systems (particularly those attached to colour in the Chinese cultural context) interacted to make such transformation culturally intelligible. In this part, I would like to compile how these scholars looked at Kuan-yin’s gender transformation in China and add some interpretations and new lines of investigation to better understand the transformation of *Avalokiteśvara* and study some of those ideas reflected in the Indian images as well. Many

scholars like Yang Yan and Wu Yan hold the idea that *Avalokiteśvara*’s association with “compassion” is closely related to a woman’s quality. However, in China, “compassion” is not only limited to women, but also promoted as an important virtue of a gentleman by Mencius. Besides, according to the “*Universal Gateway*” (the 25th Chapter in *Lotus Sutra*), *Avalokiteśvara* is a savior who delivers people from seven perils, three poisons, and, grants infertile women either sons or daughters. Kuan-yin’s function of bestowing a child was continuously underlined in the miracle stories in Tang and Song dynasties. Thus, it becomes the main support for some scholars (e.g., Jiao Jie, Zhu Ziyang and Wang Rucheng) who claim the gender transformation of Kuan-yin happened due to the most important aspect in Chinese Confucian culture: filial duty. However, in China there is a male immortal called Zhang Xian also considered as baby-giving or song-zi Zhang Xian,² which seems to produce a counterargument against Zhu Ziyang and Jiao Jie’s contention that the baby-giving function leads to the gender change of Kuan-yin.

In addition, the increasing number of female devotees and the rise of highly typified gender roles in Neo-Confucian ideology that severely restricted the role of women as well as the access women would have to men (or even, images of men) may have affected the gender transformation. Philosophers such as Chen Yi and Zhu Xi reinvigorated Confucianism with new commentary, infused with Buddhist ideals, and emphasized a new organization of classical texts that brought out the core doctrine of Neo-Confucianism, which has had a wide-ranging influence into the present. After Tang period, keeping in mind cultural residual tenets such as “three obedience and four virtues”³ that survive as “tradition”, it becomes clear that women were not allowed a range of independent practices. Scholars like Cui Feng argues that women’s worshipping practices of Kuan-yin at home or their personal spaces caused the necessary shift toward Kuan-yin’s gender change (Cui, 2013). But they didn’t further explain how women’s Buddhist activities influenced the gender of

² See Lu Shen, *Jin-tai Ji-wen*, Ming dynasty, Liaoning: Liaoning Press, 1998. It records that Zhang Xian is Meng Chang. See Zhang Tingyu, *Xu Wen-xian Tong-kao*, Qing dynasty, Beijing: Contemporary China Publishing House, 1986. It mentions that Zhang Xian is Zhang Yuanxiao.

³ “three obedience and four virtues”: to be obedient in three situations and possess four virtues; three obedience: obey their father before marriage, obey their husband during married life, obey their sons in widowhood; four virtues: integrity, pleasant appearance, propriety in speech and be a skilled needlewoman

Kuan-yin. Although previous scholarship has provided important explanations for Kuan-yin's gender transformation, most studies have focused primarily on devotional function, women's religious practice, compassion, or Confucian family ethics. Comparatively less attention has been paid to chromatic symbolism, despite the repeated appearance of white colour in textual prescriptions, miracle narratives, and visual representations associated with Kuan-yin. One reason may be that colour has often been treated as a secondary aesthetic detail rather than as a culturally meaningful sign. By foregrounding the symbolic and gendered implications of white colour, this study addresses an aspect that earlier accounts have left insufficiently explained, namely how visual and literary associations of whiteness helped make the feminization of Kuan-yin culturally intelligible in China. From a broader social-theoretical perspective, the feminization of Kuan-yin may also be understood as part of the cultural construction of gender, rather than as the simple reflection of an originally female essence. Gender, in this sense, is not merely a biological category but a historically produced set of visual, moral, and symbolic associations. In the Chinese context, colour symbolism formed part of this process: whiteness was not only linked to ritual purity, but could also evoke ideals of refinement, beauty, delicacy, and femininity in literary and visual culture.

Existing scholarship has offered important explanations for the gender transformation of Kuan-yin, including compassion, child-bestowing functions, women's devotion, and Neo-Confucian gender norms. Yet comparatively little attention has been paid to the role of chromatic symbolism, especially the ways in which the repeated association of Kuan-yin with the colour white may have shaped both textual imagination and visual reception. By foregrounding white colour as a culturally mediated sign, this study seeks to show that the feminization of Kuan-yin was not only a matter of religious function or devotional practice, but also a process embedded in broader aesthetic and social constructions of gender.

Materials and methods

This study adopts a combined methodological framework of iconographic analysis, textual analysis, and comparative historical interpretation. Visual

materials, including sculptures, paintings, murals, and manuscript illustrations, are examined in relation to markers of gender such as body shape, facial features, costume, skin colour, posture, and the presence or absence of facial hair. Textual materials, including canonical sutras, esoteric ritual texts, miracle tales, poems, and historical records, are analysed in order to identify how *Avalokiteśvara*/Kuan-yin was described, imagined, and ritually prescribed across different periods.

The selection of sources follows two main criteria. First, the materials must contain either explicit references to colour, especially white, or descriptions relevant to the bodily and gendered representation of Kuan-yin. Second, the materials must be historically relevant to the question of transformation, with particular attention to the period before the end of the sixth century and the Sui-Tang period, which many scholars regard as crucial for the feminization of Kuan-yin. Rather than privileging one category of evidence over another, this study reads visual and textual sources in dialogue, situating them within the broader social, cultural, and historical contexts of Buddhist transmission and sinicization in China.

It may be observed that though Buddhist sculptures were originally painted with colour, it is very difficult to make out the exact nature of colour, as colours of the images are lost. Matters of colour and clothing of the different forms of Buddhist deities are subjects of elaboration in Indian and Nepali iconographic literature and paintings between 7th-12th centuries. Pratapaditya Pal and Gautamavajra Vajracharya began to observe how knowledge of aesthetics was transmitted from region to region through colour by looking at paintings from Tibet, India, Nepal and Bhutan (Pal & Vajracharya, 2003). *Sādhnamālā*, a collection of *sādhana* texts, gives valuable details regarding iconographies of essential deities. One of the chapters contains valuable information on different tantric forms of Bodhisattva *Avalokiteśvara* in different skin colours and functions, including detailed instructions for ritual practices for worshipping this deity (Bhattacharyya, 2008). Simply put, as described in *Sādhnamālā*, *Avalokiteśvara* could manifest in different colours of complexion like white, red, blue, and yellow. Nevertheless, it is not difficult to discover that among the different complexions described, the

colour ‘white’ particularly emphasised in the iconographic features of *Avalokiteśvara* in *Sādhnamālā*.⁴

There were groups of Chinese travellers who had journeyed to India to get authentic Buddhist sutras and texts during Sui-Tang dynasties. A bulk of scholars observe that Sui-Tang period was the turning point for the gender transformation of Kuan-yin. These sutras and texts, wrapped with the cover, same as those depicted in Pala⁵ paintings, were brought to China, too. Also, the cover of manuscripts would have given the Chinese recipients an idea of the Indian iconographic system.

The colour ‘white’ is emphasized in not only Buddhist texts, but also miracle stories, historical records, poems, novels, etc. Moreover, the white-robed one was considered the first to change the gender and later turned into a goddess (known as ‘*Songzi Kuan-yin*’) in Song dynasty and onwards. It may be observed that in China, not all forms of Kuan-yin turned into a female. Thus, one could ask: What is the symbolic meaning of white colour in the Indian context? Could the symbol of white colour, to an extent, influence Chinese aesthetics? How is white colour related with *Avalokiteśvara* and in what case it is associated with a woman? Hence, a formalistic study of the iconography of Kuan-yin (sculptures, paintings, frescos among others) and the shifts in costume and body postures is required, as well as the significance of symbolism of white colour in the portrait of Kuan-yin in China.

This study adopts a combined methodological framework integrating historical iconography, textual analysis, and comparative interpretation. Visual materials, including sculptures, murals, paintings, and manuscript illustrations, are examined through gendered markers such as body shape, facial features, costume, skin colour, posture, and the presence or absence of facial hair. Textual materials, including canonical sutras, esoteric scriptures, miracle tales, poems, and historical records, are analysed not only for explicit descriptions of *Avalokiteśvara*/Kuan-yin, but also for

the symbolic language through which the deity’s appearance and qualities were culturally imagined.

The selection of materials follows two principal criteria. First, the sources must contain references relevant either to white colour or to the bodily and gendered representation of Kuan-yin. Second, they must be historically pertinent to the periods under discussion, especially the early medieval period and the Sui–Tang era, which are crucial to the formation and transformation of Kuan-yin’s iconography in China. Rather than treating textual and visual evidence separately, this study reads them in dialogue and interprets them within the broader social, cultural, and historical context of Buddhist transmission, translation, and sinicization in medieval China.

This study also concerns itself with the ways in which markers of gender become fluid in successive time periods, in keeping with artistic styles and values. Apart from the symbolic associations of certain figures with specific emotions, these markers of gender mutate to inform figures occupying positions of gendered liminality. These markers of gender across all time periods include moustaches, soft lines of form, breasts, posture, robes and depiction of genitalia. The creation of masculinity straddling the heroic, regal and ascetic is constantly called into question by the depiction of the later feminized *Avalokiteśvara*. Through this iconographic and comparative approach, the study investigates how gender markers became increasingly fluid in the depiction of Kuan-yin, and how such visual shifts corresponded to changing textual, cultural, and aesthetic constructions of the deity in medieval China.

Findings

Colour white associated with Kuan-yin in early times (Broadly before end of 6th century)

Depiction of *Avalokiteśvara* in Buddhist Sutras

In early times, *Fa-hua Jing* (*Lotus Sutra*, translated by Kumarajiva in 406 A.D.), *Wu-liang-shou Jing* (*Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra*, translated around

⁴ The majority of the complexion of *Avalokiteśvara* is white, like *Ṣaḍakṣarī-Lokeśvara*, *Siṃhanāda*, *Khasarpaṇa*, *Lokaṇātha*, *Hālāhala*, *Hariharivāhanodbhava*, *Sugatisandarśana-Lokeśvara*, *Pretasantarpiṭa-Lokeśvara*, *Sukhāvatī-Lokeśvara*, *Vajradharma-Lokeśvara* (reddish white). Other forms like *Padmanartteśvara*, *Trailokyavaśāṅkara* and *Raktalokeśvara* are depicted with red

complexion; *Māyājālākrama Lokiteśvara* and *Nīlakaṇṭha* are conceived with blue complexion and yellow complexion respectively.

⁵ It is named after its ruling kingdom *Pāla* empire (broadly from 8th to 12th centuries, stretching from Bengal to eastern Bihar) in Indian subcontinent.

the 3rd century A.D.), *Bei-hua Jing* (translated by Dharmodgata from 414 A.D. - 426 A.D.) and *Kuan-shi-yin Pu-sa Shou-ji Jing* (*Sutra of Kuan-shi-yin Bodhisattva's Receiving Prediction*, translated by Dharmodgata in 453 A.D.) are the important sutras propagating the cult of *Avalokiteśvara* in China before 6th century.

Among these sutras, few Buddhist texts describe Kuan-yin's physical appearance or instruct the making of Kuan-yin's iconography, except for the *Guan Wu-liang-shou-fo Jing* (*Sutra of Visualization on Amitāyus Buddha*, another Chinese version of *Longer Sukhāvativyūha Sutra*, translated in 5th century CE). As per the *Guan Wu-liang-shou-fo Jing*, the colour of Kuan-yin's face is golden yellow with purple (also known as *Jambūnada-suvarna* in Sanskrit and *Yan-fu Tan Jin Se* in Chinese) the colour of Kuan-yin's body is Purplish gold (*Zi-jin Se* in Chinese), the colour of Kuan-yin's *ūrṇā* (a spiral or circular dot placed on the forehead of Buddhist images as an auspicious mark of a Buddha or a Bodhisattva, *Baihao* in Chinese) is same as Buddhist Seven Jewels (*Qi Bao*) the colour of Kuan-yin's arms are as red as red lotus (*Hong Lian-hua Se* in Chinese), the colour of Kuan-yin's palms is a mixture of 50 billion lotuses (*Wu-bai Yi Za Lian-hua Se* in Chinese). The creation of Kuan-yin images in China is dated as early as 5th century and the mini *Amitābha* in the crown becomes one of the primary identification markers of *Avalokiteśvara*.⁶

Seen from the early depiction of Kuan-yin, the colour 'white' is rarely associated with Kuan-yin's physical appearance in early Buddhist texts. Differently, the colour white started to be associated with Kuan-yin in the miracle stories promoting Kuan-yin.

Depiction of Avalokiteśvara in miracle stories & records

As a mode of propagation of Kuan-yin beliefs, Kuan-yin began to appear in tales, legends, and oral stories from Han dynasty and Wei period onwards. With the prevalence of *Pu-men Pin* (*Universal Gateway*)⁷ during the Wei, Jin, and Southern and Northern

dynasties, the creations of legends, miracle stories, poems regarding Kuan-yin's efficacy gained popularity at the same time, which are considered to be the earliest literary works depicting the beliefs surrounding Kuan-yin. Some scholars like Sun Changwu, Jiang Canteng, and Xia Guangxing have attempted to study Kuan-yin from a literary point of view. However, they paid more attention to the genre and themes of the stories of Kuan-yin in literature. Seen as a whole, the study of Kuan-yin in literature still lacks in-depth analysis.

The stories of Kuan-yin in early period were largely kept in the collections of tales concerning mysterious and supernatural phenomena like *Xuan-yan Ji*, *Ming-xiang Ji*, *Yuan-hun Ji*, *Tai-ping Guang-ji*, etc. Among these tales, *Guang-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji* (compiled by Fu Liang), *Xu Guang-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji* (compiled by Zhang Yan), and *Xi Guan-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji* (compiled by Lu Gao) are the three most important collections that comprehensively record Kuan-yin's efficacious stories. Kuan-yin's miracle stories point out the characters, time, and location at the beginning of each story and provide historical details in narratives, recording the author's and others' experiences. In addition, poems like *Bu-xuan Pu-sa Zhuan* (collected in *Guang-hong-ming Ji*, Vol. 15) were written praising Kuan-yin.

These miracle stories embrace the themes of Kuan-yin's ability and desire to save people from perils. According to *Xi Guan-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji*, two stories mention that the protagonist had met Kuan-yin: in the 19th story, the devotee suddenly saw Kuan-yin, wearing white clothes, in the night after chanting *Kuan-yin Sutra* continuously for three days and three nights; in the 20th story, the devotee (a widow named Li), imprisoned, saw Kuan-yin in white during the day after chanting *Kuan-yin Sutra* for over ten days.⁸ However, there is no specific description of Kuan-yin and there is no written explication on Kuan-yin's physical descriptors. In *Xu Guang-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji*, there are two tales depicting Kuan-yin manifesting in front of devotees: in the 5th story, Monk Daotai saw Kuan-yin with white clothing entering his room with golden light illuminating his feet;

⁶ See Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (Taishō Tripitaka), vol. 12, pp. 273b–279a; or see: https://cbetaonline.cn/zh/T0360_002

⁷ With its first translation by Zhu Fahu (Dharmarakṣa) in 286 A.D., Lotus Sutra later was translated into Chinese six times with 28

chapters, among which the chapter of *Pu-men Pin* (*Universal Gateway*) is the one studied, explained, and noted in great detail.

⁸ See Lu Gao, *Xi Guan-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji*, 501 A.D.

in the 9th story, one intellectual saw an eight Chi (an ancient Chinese measurement) high Kuan-yin clad in white manifesting in front of him with a halo, reflecting bright light in the jail.⁹ Though these two tales make mention of Kuan-yin's physical appearance, especially the 9th one depicting the appearance and height, the depiction of Kuan-yin, as a whole, is done with little detail.

Every story concerns Kuan-yin saving people from suffering, but, Kuan-yin's physical appearance is rarely depicted. He was shown as having manifested as a monk in white, an older man in white, or animals like a white tiger, white wolf, and white crane, but not a woman. Seen from his early depiction in literature, Kuan-yin begins to appear as a traditionally conceptualized religious figure who is compassionate, powerful, illuminating, and omnipresent. One can observe that Kuan-yin's manifestations as a monk, an older man, or animals like a tiger, wolf, and crane are all in white before end of 6th century. In fact, some locations where the stories took places were in India, it implies that the norm of Kuan-yin manifested as one in white might borrowed from India directly.

Depiction of Avalokiteśvara in visual arts

As we can see from the small sized glit-bronze statue of Kuan-yin (Fig. 1), he was portrayed as a standing 'Padmapāni' (one who holds the lotus) with more Indian influences at the early stage. The broader shoulders and masculine body indicates that Kuan-yin was depicted as a male at the beginning. At the bottom of the Kuan-yin statue, it carves the inscription: "May my parents stay with Kuan-shi-yin on Potalaka Mountain". It showcases the prevalence of the belief of Western Pure Land¹⁰ in China. In addition, a large number of images of Kuan-yin (Fig. 2) made in white marble (*Han-bai-yu* in Chinese) were excavated in He' bei Prov. The clothing of Kuan-yin in Fig. 2 resembles Chinese Confucian attire, which shows the localization of *Avalokiteśvara* in China. Though no

paintings of Kuan-yin in earlier time period was preserved and other materials of Kuan-yin statues could not tell the colour of Kuan-yin's clothes and, here, one shall note that the stone is white colour.

Interestingly, *Avalokiteśvara* has a close relationship with the West. On the one hand *Avalokiteśvara*, as a foreign deity, was brought from the West (India) to the East (China), through the dissemination of Buddhism; on the other, as a member of the holy triad of the Western Pure Land (known as *Xi-fang Jing-tu* in Chinese), he plays the role of guiding all sentient beings to the Western Heaven (*Xi-tian*). In Chinese ideology, the colour "white" symbolises "the West". Furthermore, Kuan-yin was depicted as wearing white clothes in miracle stories, poems, and legends. Thus, one could further conjecture that the colour "white" mentioned in these literary sources of Kuan-yin might also match the traditional Chinese theory of colour. The translators and authors might have intentionally selected or emphasised the colour "white" because it fits traditional Chinese colour theory.

One more important point that has to be touched upon here is that, with the development of the concept of colour, ancient Chinese began to classify colours and refine them. After understanding the infinite nature of colour, Chinese artistic forebears summed up the colours simply as black and white. The colour "white" symbolizes "the West" and "femininity" in keeping with the traditional colour theory and the concept of "yi". In addition, the colour "white" is related to the ancient Chinese funeral ordinance system as well. Regarding *Li-yi-Sang-fu* (*Rites-Mourning Apparel*, dated to 5th - 3rd centuries B.C.), China has a long history of the wearing of white clothing during a funeral. Interestingly, Kuan-yin has functioned as a soul guide after death in China, and the Guiding Kuan-yin (Jie-yin) was innovated upon during the Sui-Tang period. Hence, the colour of the material for Kuan-yin's image-making or the clothing of Kuan-yin most probably was chosen selectively by artisans.

⁹ See Zhang Yan, *Xu Guang-shi-yin Ying-yan Ji*, mid 10th century.

¹⁰ The belief of Western Pure Land is a broad branch of *Mahāyāna*

Buddhism which primarily focused on achieving rebirth in *Amitābha's* Pure Land.



Figure 1 Kuan-yin, 512 A.D. (Back)

Source: By authors



Figure 2 Kuan-yin, 552 A.D.

Source: By authors

However, it is helpful to draw attention to the two pieces of historical records regarding Kuan-yin. "... being drunk, Emperor Wucheng saw one beautiful lady standing in the air, in a while she transformed into Kuan-yin..."¹¹ And the Empress Shen (569-627 A.D.) of Southern dynasty became a nun and named herself as

"Kuan-yin" in 618 A.D..¹² Though these two simple records did not provide more detailed information nor mention that the beautiful lady or Empress Shen were in white clothes, it is not difficult to find out that Kuan-yin was beginning to be associated with a "beautiful lady" or "a nun"---- a women around 6th -7th centuries. As

¹¹ See *Northern Qi dynasty-The Biography of Xu Zhicai*. Northern Qi dynasty was dated from 550 - 577 A.D.

¹² See *History of The Southern Dynasties*, Tang dynasty.

abovementioned, Kuan-yin was always depicted as one in white before end of 6th century in the literature, ‘white clothing’, as a symbol of Kuan-yin, started to bear feminine characteristics.

Discussion

Before turning to the Sui-Tang materials in detail, it is necessary to clarify the broader analytical significance of the evidence discussed in this article. The contrast between the early period and the Sui-Tang period is not merely chronological; it reveals a gradual transformation in the symbolic and gendered meanings attached to Kuan-yin. In the earlier sources, white is present, but it does not yet consistently feminize the deity. By the Sui-Tang period, however, the repeated association of Kuan-yin with white robes, fair skin, and female-coded literary and visual features made whiteness increasingly legible within a Chinese aesthetic and gendered framework.

Read together, the textual and visual materials suggest that the feminization of Kuan-yin was not the result of a single doctrinal change, but of a cumulative cultural process in which translation, literary imagination, ritual practice, and image-making interacted with one another. It is in this sense that white colour became historically important: not simply as a ritual marker of purity, but as a symbolic medium through which *Avalokiteśvara* was gradually reinterpreted and re-gendered in China.

Colour white associated with Kuan-yin during Sui-Tang (Broadly from end of 6th – early 10th centuries)

Depiction of *Avalokiteśvara* in Buddhist Sutras

During Sui-Tang period, exoteric sutras related to *Avalokiteśvara*, e.g., *Lotus Sutra*, *Shou Leng-yan Jing* (*Surangama Sutra*), *Longer Sukhavativyuha Sutra*, *Huayan Sutra* (*Mahāvaiṣṭhīya Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra*) and etc., were again translated or newly translated into Chinese. The *Pu-men Pin* (*Universal Gateway*) Chapter of *Lotus Sutra*, glorifying *Avalokiteśvara*, was even promoted as an individual sutra and the cult of Kuan-yin in China became more and more popular. Though these

sutras did not describe the physical appearance of Kuan-yin, however, the Kuan-yin is mentioned as sitting on a diamond rock (*jin-gang shi* in Chinese) in an open field amidst flourishing woods. Here, *Avalokiteśvara*'s gender is clearly depicted as male, more specifically, he is described as a great brave hero (Yong-meng Da-zhang-fu in Chinese) in *Hua-yan Sutra*. Inspired by the *Hua-yan Sutra*, a new form of Kuan-yin: Shui-yue Kuan-yin (i.e., Water-moon Kuan-yin) was invented by a famous painter named Zhou Fang (8th-9th centuries).

However, considering the factum of esoteric influences and rulers' support, many tantric Buddhist texts and sutras were translated into Chinese during the Sui-Tang period. Esoteric sutras and texts like *Tuo-luo-ni Za-ji* (*Dhāraṇī Miscellany*, translated in 6th - 7th centuries A.D.), *Fo-shuo Shi-yi-mian Guan-shi-yin Shen-zhou Jing* (*Sutra of Eleven-faced Kuan-yin Spoken by Buddha*, translated in 6th - 7th centuries A.D.), *Bu-kong Juan-suo Jing-zhou* (*Sutra of Amoghapāśa*), *Qian-shou Jing* (*Sutra of a Thousand Hands*, translated in 7th century A.D.), etc. give detailed instructions on the process of image-making of Kuan-yin.

Interestingly, the colours referred to in the *Sādhanaṃālā* also appeared in the Chinese version of esoteric sutras and texts related to Kuan-yin translated during the Sui-Tang period. Among these texts, it is not difficult to find specifications related to colours in the making of Kuan-yin's images. The colour ‘white’ is strongly emphasized; not only must the material from which the icon is to be made and the objects required for the ritual practices be white, but the Bodhisattva himself is to be depicted as wearing white clothes. In respect of wooden sculpture, as mentioned in both *Fo-shuo Shi-yi-mian Guan-shi-yin Shen-zhou Jing* and *Qian-shou Jing*, the wood from which Kuan-yin's icon is to be made from should be ‘bai tan-mu (bai means “white” in English, tan-mu means “sandalwood” in English)’.¹³

In the case of painting, the cloth on which the image is to be painted should be of fine white fabric, and the pigment should be mixed with cow milk, of white colour, and incense together.¹⁴ Kuan-yin in literature, especially miracle stories and poems, manifested as one who is depicted in white. Thus, it is not unexpected to

¹³ See Taishō Shinshū Daizōkyō (Taishō Tripiṭaka), vol. 12, pp. 149b-151c.

¹⁴ Ibid., pp. 93b-c-94a.

notice the requirement that Kuan-yin should be depicted as wearing white clothes. For instance, in *Tuo-luo-ni Za-ji*, it clearly mentions that if one wants to practice one of the *dhāraṇīs*, the image of Kuan-yin should be painted in white on a fine white cloth.¹⁵

Apart from the materials discussed above and Kuan-yin's clothes, the objects used for ritual practices during the process of making of the icon of Kuan-yin are also associated with the colour 'white'. For instance, *Fo-shuo Shi-yi-mian Kuan-shi-yin Shen-zhou Jing* mentions that on the 14th and 15th day of worshipping Kuan-yin's statues, one should burn a piece of white sandalwood (*bai tan-mu*) in front of the sacred icon. As *Bu-kong Juan-suo Zhou Jing* recorded, in the ashram where devotees worship Kuan-yin, pure white flowers should be sprinkled all around. As referred to in *Qian-shou Jing* (*Sutra of Thousand-armed Kuan-yin*), white mustard seeds could be used to draw the boundaries after *dhāraṇī* being chanted 21 times on them. Besides, white thread after being chanted 21 times upon, could protect people from fear when worn as a necklace.¹⁶

In addition, some of the attributes Kuan-yin holds in his hand, like *bai-fu* ('bai' means 'white' and 'fu' means 'whisk') and *bai lian-hua* ('bai' means 'white' and 'lian-hua' means 'lotus'), are also associated with the colour 'white'. In the Chinese translation of sutras regarding Thousand-armed Kuan-yin, in for example *Qian-shou Jing* which clearly mentions that Kuan-yin holds the '*bai-fu*' mudra (*camarī* mudra) for eliminating evils and keeps the '*bai lian-hua*' mudra (*puṇḍarīka* mudra) for gaining all kinds of merits.¹⁷ However, it is important to note that the word 'white' was emphasized when the Sanskrit texts were translated into Chinese. For instance, the term '*camarī* (whisk in English)' was translated into Chinese as *bai-fu* ('bai' means 'white' and 'fu' means 'whisk'), white whisk; '*puṇḍarīka*' (lotus) was translated into Chinese as *bai lian-hua*. It seems that the colour 'white' was a purposeful choice.

In Chinese Tantric Buddhist texts, the color white is more related to Indian ritual practices and religious purpose. According to the *Viṣṇudharmottara* the artist should be dressed in white clothes when making his

painting. Matteo Martelli also observed that, in chapter 40 of Citrasutras, the white clothes that the artist wears should reflect his pure body and soul. Varsha Shirgaonkar notes the importance of colours during Vedic and Puranic times and suggests, 'the colours prescribed in the rituals are seen in the art forms as the art forms also arose as accessories to the rituals...during sacrificial rituals a beast of white colour was preferred the most.' She summarizes that white colour is symbolic of the Sun and stands for prosperity and intelligence gleaned from the different rituals in Vedic and *Brāhmaṇam* texts. She further posits that 'the colour white was established as a symbol of purity and piousness' in Buddhist literature by giving the example of the life story of the Buddha: Buddha was born after Buddha's mother saw a white elephant holding a white lotus in her dream. Furthermore, Bhattacharya observed that in preparing the ground for wall painting, the plaster should be whitened in a certain way and the cloth a picture is to be painted on should be white with no fringes (Bhattacharya, 1974).¹⁸ The process of making a painting of a deity in ancient Indian texts shares resemblances with that in Chinese translation of Buddhist sutras. The making of images of *Avalokiteśvara* followed the Indian ritual practices. It might be the reason why *Avalokiteśvara* was first depicted as 'the one clad in white' in Chinese records.

Depiction of Avalokiteśvara in miracle stories & records

During the Sui-Tang dynasties, the regimes and political power were largely stable, and there was economic prosperity in the region. However, Kuan-yin could not meet the demands of the people as a mighty savior. As mentioned, blessing family, praying for the dead, curing diseases, getting a child, gaining merits, etc., were more favored by devotees during the Sui-Tang period.

Particularly with tantric influences from surrounding regions, tantric forms of Kuan-yin became important themes in Sui-Tang literature, and the description of Kuan-yin in literature became diversified.

¹⁵ Ibid., p. 612 b-c.

¹⁶ Ibid., vol. 20, p. 109c, or p. 110b-c.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 111a-111b.

¹⁸ See Bhattacharya, K. Asok, *Technique of Indian Painting: A Study*

Chiefly Made on the Basis of the Shilpa Texts, Calcutta: Saraswat Library, 1974, pp. 41-42. (The whitening of the plaster should be obtained from the pure, clear and whitish limestone chips and mixed with proportionate boiled rice and gum.)

Tantric beliefs and practices made Kuan-yin more popular and also bestowed with all kinds of powers. The mythical powers get added to Kuan-yin and the image gets conceptualised accordingly, resulting in many arms, faces, etc. Nevertheless, the functioning of Kuan-yin as Bodhisattva who guides for the benefits and emancipation remains the same. Da-bei Kuan-yin (Thousand Armed and Eyed Kuan-yin), Ru-yi-lun Kuan-yin, Shi-yi-mian Kuan-yin, Bu-kong-juan-suo Kuan-yin became popular in folk belief. For instance, Ji chanted Da-bei Zhou to get rid of pustules according to *Baoying Lu*; Cai's family protected their family from a ghost by chanting *Qian-shou Qian-yan Zhou* according to *Guang-yi Ji*; . Li's sister came back to life after she chanted *Qian-shou Qian-yan Zhou* in *Guang-yi Ji*.

Besides, people's practices of worshipping Kuan-yin during the Sui-Tang period, the importance of making statues of Kuan-yin and embroidering the image of Kuan-yin are also strongly emphasized. There are a large number of records (like Xu Gaoseng Zhuan, Bian-yi Zhi, Xuan-shi Zhi, Quan Tang-wen, Guang-yi Ji, Zhuo-yi Ji, etc.) that mention the ways in which laypeople worshipped Kuan-yin. For instance, in *Fa-yuan Zhu-lin*, it was noted that Xu Yan, who was seriously ill, immediately recovered after getting two statues of Kuan-yin made; *Guang-yi Ji* recorded that Wang Qi recovered from a serious illness after getting a Kuan-yin statue made; *Quan Tang-wen* documented that Li embroidered Kuan-yin's image for blessing her dead father. Sui-Tang's literary records give a vivid description of people piously worshipping Kuan-yin in different ways, like making statues of Kuan-yin, embroidering the images of Kuan-yin, chanting Kuan-yin Sutra, writing Kuan-yin Sutra, calling out the name of Kuan-yin among other activities.

In Sui-Tang's miracle stories, Kuan-yin's mysteriousness also was highlighted. For instance, in *Guang-tian-zhen Zan Lian-ju*, it directly pointed out that Kuan-yin's manifestation is mysterious and supernatural; in *Kuan-yin Ling-gan Lu* and *Xuan-shi*

Zhi, Kuan-yin manifested himself or herself when the chicken eggs under boiling were calling out Kuan-yin's name. Xia Guangxing held the idea that the depiction of Kuan-yin's mysteriousness was to attract more devotees.

In these orthodox sutras, the image of Kuan-yin was depicted as being more religious and strict. In miracle stories, however, the depiction of Kuan-yin is far more vivid. For instance, in *Guang-yi Ji*, Kuan-yin became the protector of the love between an aristocratic woman, who became a ghost after her death, and a humble man.¹⁹ However, Kuan-yin's actual physical appearance was not portrayed much in detail, and Kuan-yin did not appear as a female in miracle stories during the period of Sui-Tang.

Depiction of Avalokiteśvara in poems

Compared with earlier works, other literary materials, specifically poetic sources, extensively depicted Kuan-yin's physical appearance. The status of poems reached the peak in 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. For instance, in Su E's *Du-yang Za-bian*, Kuan-yin is described as "xing-mei duan-xiu"²⁰, which indicates that Kuan-yin has an aesthetically pleasing appearance. Scholars like Han Bingfang and Yu Yue held the idea that the feminized form of Kuan-yin had been prevalent during the Sui-Tang period (Han, 2004).

According to *Guang-tian-zhen Zan Lian-ju*, Kuan-yin is "sui-rong ruo-di"²¹, which again refers to Kuan-yin's aesthetic appearance. 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.²² In *Kuan-yin Zan*, Kuan-

¹⁹ See *Guang-yi Ji* (a collection of ancient stories of strange events), Tang dynasty.

²⁰ Xing-mei Duan-xiu, xing means to shape, and mei means eyebrows; duan means elegant, and xiu means pretty. When the four words are put together, it means the body shape and eyebrows are both elegant and pretty.

²¹ Sui-rong ruo-di, sui-rong means the skin is moist and glossy, ruo-di means good looking. Thus, sui-rong ruo-di depicts the excellent appearance of Kuan-yin.

²² See Han Wo, *Yong Liu*, Tang dynasty, "...yu-xian zhe-de yao xiang-zeng, bian si Kuan-yin shou-li shi".

yin's compassion is likened to rain and purity to wind, and his/her clothing (fang-jin in Chinese) is seen to be swaying with the wind.²³ The term fang-jin, used for Kuan-yin's clothing, particularly refers to a beautiful woman's clothes in the ancient times. Thus, it can be observed that Kuan-yin is portrayed as a pleasing figure who shares similarities with women's features.

Among all poems, Wang Bo's poem *Kuan-yin Da-shi Zan* is the one that describes the Kuan-yin in the greatest detail. It gives an exquisite description of Kuan-yin, including Kuan-yin's residence, clothing, dressing, body, face, attendants, merits, among other traits. For instance, it portrays Kuan-yin as in white (Jiao-ruo-xian-bai-yi-zhi-xiang in Chinese) and wearing a crown adorned with gems (bao-guan yao-huang yuan-guang Lie in Chinese) and jewels ornamenting the entire body, which shines brightly (yin-luo bian-shen ming-jiao-jie). Kuan-yin's clothing is depicted as white as snow (yi-lv-pan-er-li-jing-gao-xue in Chinese). This may again be taken as evidence that, in Sui-Tang China, there was a prevalent belief that Kuan-yin was white-robed and that the colour white was closely associated with this deity. However, it is surprising that many terms, which are

supposed to be used to describe a woman, are applied to depicting Kuan-yin. For instance, it represents Kuan-yin's face as a new lotus arising from the water, with black eyebrows ("mei-heng xian-dai"²⁴) as curvy as a new moon in autumn. Here in "mei-heng xian-dai", as mentioned earlier, both "xian" and "dai" are terms generally used for describing the female to depict her beauty in Chinese literature.²⁵

Moreover, the poem praises Kuan-yin's ten fingers that are slender, smooth, and fair (hong-xian shi-zhi ning-su-ni), and his/her lotus-like eyes are as tender and tenuous as the water waves in autumn (qing-lian liang-mu qiu-bo-xi). Again, "xian", "ning-su-ni" and "qiu-bo" are terms that are generally with respect to women mainly. It depicts that Kuan-yin's body, skin and eyes are same as a lady.²⁶ "Ning-su-ni" particularly emphasizes that the skin of Kuan-yin is as white and soft as the jade. Furthermore, Kuan-yin's neck looks like jade, his/her lips are red (zhu-chun), and teeth are neatly arranged. Here "zhu-chun" (red lips), as continuously mentioned, has always been used for depicting a woman's beauty in ancient times.²⁷

²³ See Jiaoran, *Kuan-yin Zan*, Tang dynasty, "...ci-wei-yu xi hui-ru-feng, sa-fang-jin xi qi qing-feng".

²⁴ Mei-heng Xian-dai, mei means eyebrows, heng means horizontal, xian means slender and thin, and dai is a black pigment used by women for painting their eyebrows in ancient times of China. The literal meaning of "mei-heng xian-dai" is horizontal eyebrows are thin, slim, and dark, which is a paraphrase of the beauty of Kuan-yin's eyebrows.

²⁵ In ancient times, "xian" and "dai" are frequently used for depicting women. Xian means slender and is generally used for depicting a woman's body figure, waist, eyebrows, eyes, hands, or fingers. For example, xian-yao (see Xiao Yan, *Bai-zhu Ci Er-shou*, Southern and Northern dynasties, 420-589 A.D., "xian-yao niao-niao bu ren-yi".) indicates depicts the thin and soft waist of the beauty; xian-shou (see Li Zhi, *Qi-xi Yan-xuan-pu Er-shou*, Tang dynasty, "xian-shou zhuo qing-lan".) refers to the slender hands of a woman; "xian-xian" indicates a woman's slender body figure (see *Kong-que Dong-nan Fei*, Eastern Han dynasty, 25-220 A.D. "xian-xian zuo xi-bu"). Dai, literally means the pigment used for drawing the eyebrows, referring to a woman's eyebrows specifically in Chinese literature. For instance, fen-dai (see Bai Juyi, *Chang Hen Ge*, Tang dynasty, "liu-gong fen-dai wu yan-se".) praises the beauty of Yang Yuhuan (famous concubine of Gaozong of Tang); can-dai (see Liu Yan, *Qi-xi Ge*, Tang dynasty, "yao-hong can-dai sheng chou-se".) indicates the sadness of the beauty; chou-dai (see Wu Rong, *Yu-nu Miao*, "chou-dai bu-kai shan qian-qian".) depicts the depression of a woman. Here both "xian" and "dai" in the poems I have listed above are the same as the

ones in "mei-heng xian-dai".

²⁶ In ancient times, "xian" and "ning-su-ni" are terms applied to women. For "xian", one can refer to footnote 30. In ancient Chinese literature, "ning", "su" and "ni" could depict a woman's skin. Ning means "to coagulate" or "coagulation or solidification", su refers to a kind of pastry that is soft and crispy, and ni signifies "smoothness". In poems, these three terms are always used for depicting a woman's skin. Here, when the three words are put together as "ning-su-ni", it strongly emphasizes the fairness, softness, and smoothness of a woman's skin. For instance, "ning-zhi" refers to "coagulated fat" (see *Shi Jing-Wei-feng Shuo-ren*, from Western Zhou dynasty to Spring and Autumn period, around 11th-6th centuries B.C., "fu ru ning-zhi".), which represents that the woman's skin is as fair and smooth as coagulated fat; "su-ning" (see Han Wo, *Ou-jian Bei-mian Shi-xi Jian-meng*, Tang dynasty, "su-ning bei-jia yu cuo-jian".) signifies soft and smooth skin (of a beauty). In addition, "qiu-bo", the same meaning as "qiu-shui", literally means the water or water waves in autumn and often exhibits a woman's eyes are as clear, bright as waves of water in autumn, (see Li Yu, *Pu-sa Man*, Tang dynasty, "qiu-bo heng yu-liu"; or see Li He, *Tang Er-ge*, Tang dynasty, "yi-shuang tang-ren jian qiu-shui"; or see Bai Ju-yi, *Zheng*, Tang dynasty, "shuang-mou jian qiu-shui".)

²⁷ Zhu-chun, which means red lips, is an address form of a woman's lips and suggests a woman's beauty. It is largely applied in ancient Chinese literature for depicting the good looks of women (see Song Yu, *Shen-nu Fu*, "Zhu-chun di-qi ruo-dan", Warring States, 475-221 B.C.; or see Cao Zhi, Wei dynasty, 220-266 A.D., *Qi Qi*, "dong zhu-

As observed from the descriptions of Kuan-yin in the poems during the Sui-Tang period, Kuan-yin is given vivid descriptions relating otherwise to women without mentioning Kuan-yin's gender. There is no doubt that the application of terms generally used for women to depict Kuan-yin in literature could cause confusion surrounding the gender of Kuan-yin. But, if Kuan-yin was seen as male, why would the terms as such be applied to Kuan-yin and cause unnecessary confusion? The application of female-gendered terms to depict Kuan-yin at least indirectly suggests that the gender of Kuan-yin was under the process of transformation during the Sui-Tang period.

The examples listed above provide a basic understanding of the terms used for the female form in Chinese poems and a glimpse of aesthetic perspectives in ancient China. The Chinese aesthetic perspectives of the literary depiction of Kuan-yin, in a sense, influence the making of Buddhist icons and people's reading of icons of Kuan-yin. In return, the visual representations of Kuan-yin somehow would stimulate the viewers' imagination of this deity.

Besides, in poems praising Kuan-yin dated to Sui-Tang dynasties, willow branches that have been consistently associated with Kuan-yin in Buddhist sutras were also repeatedly emphasized. For example, in *Kuan-shi-yin Pu-sa Xiang Zan* (by Yu Shao), "... (Kuan-yin's) heavenly clothing seems to be flying and willow branches (in Kuan-yin's hand) are seemingly swaying..."²⁸. It is noteworthy that the willow branch has also started to be associated with the iconography of Kuan-yin during the Sui-Tang period, during which time a new form of Kuan-yin named Willow Kuan-yin developed. Moreover, in the successive dynasties, willow branches have substituted the lotus, held in the hand of Kuan-yin.

Though the ritual function of willow branches in Buddhism had been outlined in Buddhist sutras much earlier, it is in the Sui-Tang period that Kuan-yin started to be closely related to willow branches. Since willow branches carry different symbolic meanings in Chinese culture, literati liberally used the symbol of willow branches and mentioned them in many literary works,

especially for depicting women. Furthermore, "willow" is associated with "yin" (feminine) in Chinese culture. Could this, to an extent, have influenced the gender of Kuan-yin? It will be rewarded if one can investigate further in future.

The depiction of Kuan-yin in Sui-Tang literature not only indicates the sinicization of *Avalokiteśvara*, but also witnessed the transformation of symbolic significances of "white colour" in Chinese context. The gendered terms used for depicting Kuan-yin's physical appearance are related to that of a woman. Particularly, the skin colour of Kuan-yin is emphasized as 'white', which is specifically associated with female characteristics in ancient China.

Depiction of Avalokiteśvara in visual art

The feminized depiction of Kuan-yin described in poems was also represented in visual arts and the gender markings of Kuan-yin also started to change during Sui-Tang period. For example, it depicts a standing Kuan-yin (Figure 3) holding a water pot in one hand. With a crown on his head, he is surrounded by beautiful shining jewels and flowing ribbons. Seen from Figs. 4 & 5, Kuan-yin is depicted 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 (Fig. 8) if one ignores the flattened chest. Surprisingly, in Fig. 5, there is no mustache above his lips. The visual representation of Kuan-yin is nothing different from the poetic description of this Bodhisattva discussed previously. For instance, in Wang Bo's poem, it represents that Kuan-yin's eyebrows are as curvy as a new moon in autumn, lips are as red as cinnabar (Zhusha) (Fig. 3) and skin is as fair as jade (Figs. 3 & 5) in Wang Bo's poem (i.e., *Kuan-yin Da-shi Zan*), and Kuan-yin's body is as swaying as willow branches in Yu Shao's poem (i.e., *Kuan-shi-yin Pu-sa Xiang Zan*)

A man with a lush beard is considered "good looking" in Chinese culture; going further, there is a precise classification for men's beard and mustache. For instance, the mustache on the upper lip is called "zi"; and, the one on the lower lip is called "tiao". Besides

chun"; or see Fu Xuan, Jin dynasty, 266-420 A.D., *Ku-xiang Pian*, "su-chi jie zhu-chun").

²⁸ See *Quan Tang Wen (The Whole Collection of Tang period Literature in English)*, Vol. 429, Qing dynasty.

this, the beard on the cheeks is named “ran”, and the one on the chin is known as “xu”. As mentioned in *Zhuangzi*, “ran” is considered as one of the ba-ji (eight excellences of the human body). The importance of men’s beards and moustache is deeply associated with the Chinese traditional culture of filial piety. Hence, a man is depicted with a moustache in Chinese art (Fig. 8). In terms of Confucian *Xiaojing* (*Classic of Filial Piety*), “the body, hair, and skin, all have been received from the parents; thus, one dare not damage them, that is the beginning of ‘xiao’ (filial piety).” Hair here is not just limited to the hair on one’s head but also includes body hair like moustache and beard. Thus, the grooming of moustache and beard not just accords with Chinese aesthetics but also follows the culture of filial piety. Therefore, I believe that the disappearance of the moustache of Kuan-yin symbolizes the transformation of the gender of Kuan-yin.

A bulk of Chinese scholars like Wu Yan, Fang

Yao, Sun Xiusheng and Sun Xiaogang hold the idea that Kuan-yin’s gender transformation reached completion during Sui-Tang period because Kuan-yin had begun to be depicted like a woman. Nevertheless, from my point of view, Wu Yan’s opinion might be one-sided if approached from another aspect. 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 moustaches consciously emphasizes the gender of Kuan-yin as a male. Hence, the moustaches are portrayed to embody his gender. I decline to agree with this idea, because this would not be able to answer another question: If he is a male, why was the moustache (Fig. 5) removed? This creates unnecessary confusion. The phenomenon of Kuan-yin depicted with a moustache and sometimes without, for me, precisely demonstrates the fact that Kuan-yin was undergoing a transformation in keeping with the times.



Figure 3 Kuan-yin Tang dynasty Cave No. 45, Mogao

Source: Dunhuang Academy (2003)



Figure 4 Kuan-yin Tang dynasty Zhejiang, by Wu Daozi

Source: By authors (2021)



Figure 5 Willow Kuan-yin Tang dynasty Zhejiang, by Yan Liben

Source: https://arfjournals.com/image/57413_4_huang.pdf (2022)

Seen from the visual representations of Kuan-yin in China during Sui-Tang, tantric forms of Kuan-yin (Figs. 6 & 7) were depicted more religious and solemn. Even though the colour white is highly emphasized in abovementioned tantric texts, it is not difficult to draw a

conclusion that the colour 'white' associated with making materials and attributes held in hands in both Indian and Chinese ritual practices more relating to purity, virtue, high morality and power.



Figure 6 Qian-shou Kuan-yin Late Tang

Source: Dunhuang Academy (2003)



Figure 7 *Amoghapaśa* Late Tang dynasty

Source: Dunhuang Academy (2003)



Figure 8 *Bu-nian Tu*, Tang dynasty, by Yan Liben

Source: Qianchen youshi, <https://pic.5tu.cn/photo/201509/huihua-1541651.html> (2015)

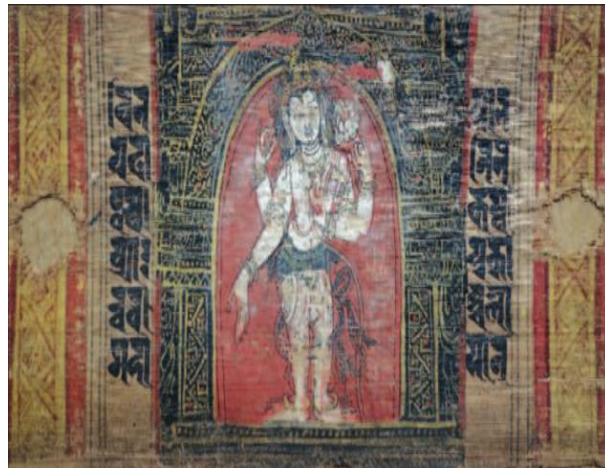


Figure 9 *Avalokiteśvara*, 1200-1216 A.D.

Source: Folio (2003) from a *Aṣṭasāhasrikā Prajñāpāramitā Sutra Manuscript*



Fig. 10 *Avalokiteśvara, Pair of Covers and Colophon Page, pigment on wood*

Source: Folio (2003) from a *Prajñāpāramitā Manuscript: An Array of Buddhist Divinities*

Surprisingly, the practice of illustrating manuscripts of Buddhist sutras and texts became common during the 7th to 12th centuries A.D. As Jinah Kim observed, colour variations like white, yellow, blue,

red, and green are mainly used in Buddhist manuscripts like illustrated manuscripts of *Prajñāpāramitā* produced from Bengal (Kim, 2018). In the collection of Indian paintings illustrated on Buddhist manuscripts on palm

leaves, the number of images of *Avalokiteśvara* (Figs. 9 & 10) is impressive.

Pratapaditya Pal noted the covers of the Buddhist manuscripts and identified the two figures on the Buddha's right as *Avalokiteśvara* depicted on the cover of *Prajñāpāramitā*: one is *Simhanāda Lokeśvara* with a white complexion (riding on a green lion), and the other is an eight-armed form of *Avalokiteśvara* with a white complexion (Fig. 10). Even though the paintings here are dated no earlier than the 10th century A.D., it provides a glimpse into how ancient India used colour in Buddhism. Due to the intellectual and cultural exchanges between ancient India and China, Indian conceptions around use of colours were brought into China through Buddhist sutras and texts. When the artisans and devotees engaged with the depiction of *Avalokiteśvara* with white complexion, it may have encouraged the imagination of the white-skinned *Avalokiteśvara* together with a woman. Because "White/fair complexion" or "pale skin" has been praised and pursued throughout Chinese history.

It is noteworthy that when comparing contemporaneous women and men portrayed, whether through clothes or facial expressions or body figures, the distinctions between representations of man and woman actually are quite remarkable. For instance, as we can see from Fig. 8, a man has darker skin, broader eyebrows and long square face, looks stronger and wears masculine clothes alongside a moustache; but a woman has slender body shape, fairer skin and thin eyebrows. In Indian art and aesthetics, the female is depicted with round breasts, curvaceous body and big hips, however, the male is made with an expanded strong flat chest with definite masculine characteristics. The point of this evidence is that the identification of gendered characteristics in Indian art seems more related to physiological differences like genitalia, breasts and chest, instead of skin colour. It may be observed that the *Citasutras* advocate the body colours based on the *varṇa* hierarchy (a four-fold division of society). Seen from the paintings from Ajanta Caves, there are female figures depicted with darker skin. Conversely, in Chinese art and aesthetics, the distinction between men and women depended on certain external signs such as clothes, jewels, makeup, facial hair such as moustache, posture, facial expressions, skin colour among others. Due to Chinese traditional restrictions borrowing from

Confucian rituals and rites, breasts, genitalia and other private parts of human anatomy could not be shown in art.

As Saraswati suggests, the ability to purchase these skin whiteners gives women "the illusion of privilege, agency, and social mobility" (Saraswati, 2010). Similarly, in ancient times of China, fair complexion symbolizes one's social status and financial background. Mak and Zhang believed that the upper social classes had fair-coloured skin, because only people who were from higher class or wealthy did not have to work or expose themselves in the sun and could afford to take care of their skin (Mak, 2007). However, one shall note that the white complexion actually was more related to female in Chinese context. Thus, one could say that white complexion was not just a symbol of class, hierarchy and wealth, but also a signifier of gender inequality and oppression.

Taken as a whole, the evidence from the two periods demonstrates that the gender transformation of Kuan-yin should be understood as a layered cultural process rather than a sudden iconographic rupture. The early materials establish the symbolic association between Kuan-yin and whiteness, while the Sui–Tang materials show how that association acquired increasingly feminized meanings in Chinese literary and visual culture. The discussion thus confirms that colour operated not as a decorative detail, but as a historically active sign in the sinicization and gendering of *Avalokiteśvara*.

Conclusion

The argument of this paper may be restated more clearly through three interrelated distinctions. First, the evidence shows that "white" did not carry a single fixed meaning: when associated with ritual materials, sacred substances, and liturgical prescriptions, it largely signified purity, auspiciousness, and spiritual efficacy; when associated with bodily appearance, dress, and poetic description in the Chinese context, it increasingly took on aesthetic and gendered meanings linked to femininity. Second, literary and visual materials do not simply repeat one another, but work together to make Kuan-yin's transformation culturally intelligible. Third, the contrast between the early period and the Sui–Tang period reveals that the feminization of Kuan-yin was gradual, cumulative, and historically conditioned rather

than abrupt.

On this basis, the central thesis of the paper can be reaffirmed: the repeated emphasis on white colour in texts and images did not merely decorate the figure of Kuan-yin, but helped mediate the deity's gender transformation in the course of the sinicization of *Avalokiteśvara* in China.

The visual representations of Kuan-yin during Sui-Tang started to undergo visible changes in gender markings like painting fairer/whiter skin, removing the moustache, a more curvaceous body, red lips and tenuous down-looking eyes, the change as such could prove that Kuan-yin's gender was ambiguous and subject to the process of transformation.

The colour 'white' is closely associated with *Avalokiteśvara* and plays a vital role in the gender transformation of this deity in China. The emphasis on the colour 'white' in the depiction of Kuan-yin in literature and visual art most probably is an intentional selection because it matches the Chinese tradition and culture (e.g., direction-colour theory, concept of 'yi' and funeral ordinance system). The symbolic significances of 'white colour' differ from case to case. When associated with making materials and attributes held in hands, as mentioned in Tantric Buddhist sutras, the colour 'white', similar to that of India, related to purity, virtue, high morality and super power during Sui-Tang period. However, when the colour 'white' is used for the depiction of the skin complexion of Kuan-yin in literature and paintings, it is associated with a woman in Chinese aesthetic perspectives, and symbolizes the secularization and feminization of Kuan-yin in China. The significance of the colour 'white' changed during the process of dissemination of Buddhism in China.

Even though it was not explicitly stated that the gender of Kuan-yin was a female in literature, especially miracle stories, it is the fact that the images of Kuan-yin in visual arts and poems during Sui-Tang share great 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. The feminized iconography on the one hand reflects the aesthetic standard of the contemporaneous time; on the other hand, affects reception and acts of seeing. Thus, by constantly being in touch with or seeing the feminine imagery, inevitably people would have

associations and imaginations linked to Kuan-yin, and the imagination of female Kuan-yin unconsciously formed under this kind of visual stimulation. What made this transformation possible was precisely the interaction between symbolic colour, textual representation, and visual reception, all of which gradually reshaped the deity within Chinese cultural expectations. The quiet solemnity alongside feminine qualities indicates that Kuan-yin is "higher than earth but also close to earth". Simply put, Kuan-yin is of the earth and simultaneously not of it.

Declaration of generative AI in scientific writing

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used generative AI tools solely to improve the clarity and readability of the language. The AI tools were applied under full human oversight and control. All content, interpretations, analyses, and conclusions are the sole responsibility of the author. No AI tools were used for data analysis, conceptual development, or substantive intellectual contributions. AI tools are not listed as authors or co-authors of this work.

CRediT author statement

Lele Huang: Conceptualization, Methodology, Writing-Original draft preparation, Visualization, Investigation. **Weizhu An:** Writing- Reviewing, Writing- Editing. **Zhenghuo Li:** Data curation, Writing- Reviewing, **Juntao Zhao:** Data collection, Software.

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