

The Sinicization of Buddhism and Water-Moon Guanyin

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Abstract:

Since its introduction to China in the first century A.D., Buddhism has gradually developed into an important part of Chinese culture and religion. In the process, Buddhism has continuously combined with local culture, detached itself from the original teachings, and localized to form new content. Among them, Guanyin worship has a critical status in China, not only as a part of Buddhist beliefs but also deeply integrated into Chinese culture and folklore. Guanyin, also known as Avalokitesvara, is worshiped and admired by the Chinese for salvation and compassion. Water-Moon Guanyin, a specific image of Guanyin, is usually depicted as sitting on a rock or lotus flower with water reflecting the moon beside her, reflecting the purity and transcendence of Guanyin's image. This paper will explore the origin of the image of Water-Moon Guanyin through the primitive Buddhist scriptures and focuses on the mural paintings of Guanyin in the Yulin Caves and the sculptures of Guanyin in the Nelson-Atkins Museum in the U.S., providing multi-dimensional perspectives. It also makes connections between the Buddhist philosophical thinking behind Water-Moon Guanyin and local Chinese Daoist thinking. It is concluded that the Water-Moon Guanyin was enriched in China as a manifestation of the Sinicization of Buddhism.

Keywords: Buddhism; Guanyin; Chinese culture.

1. Introduction

The image of Water-Moon Guanyin, as one of the specific images of Guanyin, is usually depicted as meditating under the moonlight at the edge of pure water, reflecting the quietness and wisdom of Guanyin, and symbolizing that all things in the world are as illusory as the moon in the water in the metaphor of Buddhism. The Water-Moon Guanyin is not only of high aesthetic value but also carries deep philo-

sophical connotations behind it. It is worth noting that the image of the Water-Moon Guanyin is an almost entirely Chinese expression, not the original image of Buddhism when it was introduced to China. By analyzing the original Buddhist scriptures, paintings, and sculptures, as well as local Chinese philosophical ideas, the "Chineseness" of the Water-Moon Guanyin is particularly obvious.

2. Background

Buddhism originated in India and spread to China along the Silk Road. During its development in China, Buddhism was gradually indigenized and integrated into local ideology, and this adaptability also paved the way for the prosperity of Buddhism in China. After the Tang dynasty, the unity of the country was broken, the north and south were divided, ethnic minorities invaded and regimes were established, and such a turbulent social environment provided the conditions for the development of Buddhism to give spiritual solace to the people. During this period, the cult of the Bodhisattva, Guanyin, flourished as a Buddhist figure who gave up the opportunity to become Buddha and chose to remain on earth to enlighten people. Guanyin, the goddess of compassion, was widely worshipped among them due to her versatility.

3. Concept

In the primitive Buddhist scriptures, Guanyin was a simple, generalized image that was not emphatically represented. The water-moon Guanyin is first traced to the Chinese painter Zhou Fang of the Tang Dynasty. The earliest record of Guanyin in Buddhist scriptures is in the Avatamsaka Sutra, one of the earliest Buddhist classics. The Avatamsaka Sutra was first translated into Chinese during the Western Jin Dynasty. There are three complete Chinese translations of the Avatamsaka Sutra in existence. Despite the different versions of the Avatamsaka Sutra, there are only simple and generalized descriptions of Guanyin in it. The earliest versions state the name of Guanyin and that she sits cross-legged and resides on Mount Guangming, a place rich in water and grass. The latest version is more specific about the place where Guanyin resides, south of the sea, mountain Potalaka. Potalaka was later specified as China's Puto Shan, which became the pilgrimage center for Guanyin worship.

In China, Water-Moon Guanyin is recorded to have first appeared in the eighth century of the Tang dynasty. According to the *Record of the Famous Painting of the Successive Dynasties*, the Tang imperial painter Zhou Fang "painted the Bodhisattva Water-moon Guanzizai: the background scenery, the Bodhisattva, the round halo and bamboo, while Liu Zheng added the color [1]." In contrast to the primitive Buddhist scriptures, Zhou Fang added a background, a circular halo with bamboo, to his painting of the Water-Moon Guanyin. This is an obvious characteristic of Chinese landscape painting. The goal of landscape painting is not only capturing and expressing the beauty of nature, but also often an outlet for the painter's inner emotions, thoughts, and philosophical outlook. In Chinese

landscape painting, the most important thing is to capture the spiritual resonance, to feel the inner essence, and to make the painting alive, influenced by the Taoist philosophical outlook that everything has unity [2]. In Chinese painting, bamboo has a special intention. "Bamboo is like water, humble and quiet, at the service of the world, with no thoughts of praise and harvest. Bamboo is like jade, both smooth and hard, like Yin and Yang. In the literati tradition, bamboo is often a symbol of the strength and integrity of true gentlemen [3]."

4. Characteristic

Although Zhou Fang's Water-Moon Guanyin painting was not preserved, subsequent Chinese artists used Zhou Fang's Water-Moon Guanyin painting as a model to paint. Yulin Cave 2 of the west wall of the door on each side of the preservation of a delicate Water-Moon Guanyin portrait. Yulin Cave 2 can be dated to the Western Xia period. Buddhism was prevalent during the Western Xia period. Western Xia rulers as foreign non-Han people in northern China to establish power, with the help of the same foreign Buddhism, everyone practicing Buddhism could be equal to get liberated. This equality diluted the ethnic distinction between the Han Chinese and the Tangut under the Tangut regime and consolidated the rule. As a nomadic tribe, the Tangut urgently needed to establish their own culture and identity, and Buddhism played a major role in this process. Buddhism was prioritized in Xixia as Buddhist scriptures provided the cultural resources for the establishment of Tangut culture. Language was often one of the main focuses of identity construction, and a great deal of the vocabulary of the Tangut language was derived from the Buddhist scriptures, and the translation of the scriptures was considered to be a national endeavor [4].

The two paintings in Cave 2 of Yulin are based on the landscape background of Zhou Fang's painting, with the circle and the bamboo behind the Goddess of Mercy. Both images are painted in an elegant, cool color palette of stone green, giving them a serene and refined appearance. The south side of the water and the moon Guanyin picture, in the transparent huge light round wheel, reflecting a head wearing a crown, long hair shoulders, waist tie long skirt Guanyin. Guanyin's right arm gently resting on the right knee, the right hand lightly flicked beads, the left hand slightly caressing the rock, leisurely and thoughtfully sitting on the rock at the water's edge. A pair of lotus flowers blooming in the water. On the right side of the rock are a flower plate and a vase with willow branches, behind them are swaying bamboo and jagged rocks, and the sky is full of auspicious clouds and limp birds.

The "Royal ease" posture, with one leg raised and one

hand resting on that leg, is one of the classic features of Water-Moon Guanyin. However, this posture is not consistent with the Lotus pose described in the Avatamsaka Sutra, where the feet are coiled up. Thus, it is highly likely that the “royal ease” was influenced by indigenous Chinese customs. In non-Buddhist paintings, it is not rare to find this kind of sitting posture with one leg raised and one arm resting on that leg. In Zhou Fang’s non-Buddhist paintings, a similar pose occurs in the painting of a lady. In this painting, the lady in a lavish costume leans back on a seat, one hand holding the handle of a chair, the other resting on the chair handle and drooping downward, holding a fan in her hand. The body’s center of gravity is behind and to the side, presenting a very relaxed posture. Another more similar example is Han Xizai’s Night Banquet Painting. In the painting, Lang Ch’ung, the scholar laureate, is sitting on a couch dressed in red and listening to a tune. He has one leg crossed and the other raised, with his right hand resting on the raised leg. The center of gravity of his body is at the back and tilted to the side, giving an atmosphere of relaxation and ease. The last example is a Gao Yi painting by Emperor Huizong of the Song Dynasty, depicting the Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove. The Seven Sages of the Bamboo Grove, a group of literati who lived in seclusion, away from officialdom and social strife, were worshipped by the Chinese literati as symbols of the pursuit of a sense of freedom and nature. Song Huizong’s Gao Yi painting portrays a sage at ease. The sage in the picture, Shan Tao, has a calm face, wearing a wide-breasted robe, his upper body is bare, and his body is plump, leaning on an ornate cushion. This shows that the sitting at ease of Water-Moon Guanyin did not start from the original Buddhist scriptures but is a kind of Chinese indigenous sitting posture. Generally used to portray a sense of ease and contentment in the figure, it is the sitting posture of a sage, so it is not surprising that it is used to portray the Guanyin. Water-Moon Guanyin should be viewed as a Chinese creation of Guanyin based on the concepts of native sages, retired gentlemen, and deities, rather than an Indian prototype [5].

5. Philosophy Thought

The water-moon metaphor of the Water-Moon Guanyin contains philosophical reflections and is used not only in Buddhist scriptures but also in Chinese fables and poems. The metaphor of the water moon means the moon in the water, an illusion. In Buddhism, the path to enlightenment leading to Nirvana is to realize the emptiness of the world. According to Buddhist philosophy, each person is no more than the ‘five aggregates’ An aggregation of psychological, physical, and mental conditions. Relatively stable

and conventionally designated, by name and as an idea, as the same person. But there is no underlying, fixed reality, like ‘soul’ or ‘nature’. Therefore, the Buddha concludes with the insight of anatta, or ‘non-Self’ [6]. Everything in the world is nothingness, like the reflection of the moon in the water. The water moon is one of the ten metaphors, but it is the one that has been used the most. According to statistics, before the Tang Dynasty, ten metaphors were used evenly, but during the Tang and Song Dynasties, the number of uses of the water-moon metaphor in Buddhist texts surged [1]. That is to say, the Tang and Song dynasties were the most common period for depicting Shuiyue Guanyin. The metaphor of water and moon, which can easily be presented pictorially, is the most vivid and poetic of the ten metaphors. In the Metaphysics of the Lotus Sutra of the Wonderful Dharma, Zhi Yi, the founder of the Tiantai Sect, explains the Dharma with the analogy of the water and the moon. “The true body is like the void: when responding to visible objects it reveals itself just like the water that reflects the moon (yingwu xianxing ru shui zhong yue). The reward body is the celestial moon, Buddhahood (the true body) is like the void, and meditation and understanding strengthen and glorify it. Understanding is like the celestial moon, while meditation is like the moon in the water (hui ru tianyue, ding ru shuiyue) [1]. ” And in the Fayuan Zhulin, a Buddhist text from the Tang Dynasty, there is a popular Chinese fable about a monkey fishing for the moon, using the metaphor of the moon. The monkey goes to fish for the moon in the water and falls into the water, which is used as a metaphor for not investing too much energy in illusory things. It is worth noting that the metaphor of the water and the moon is also often used in ancient poems. The Song Dynasty poet Su Shi utilized the water and moon in Red Cliff to demonstrate the Taoist idea of the dynamics and unity of nature. “River and the moon: ‘That which passes away is like this,’ and yet it is never gone; what waxes and wanes is like that, and yet in the end it never diminishes or increases [7].” Here the dialectic between changing and unchanging is embodied in Taoist thought, where the nature of the universe and life is constantly changing, but the one and only Dao is eternal and unchanging. Laozi, the founder of Taoism, believed that the Tao is the origin of all things, “present for the mother of all ten thousand things [8].” The metaphor of water and moon is rich in philosophical meaning. In Buddhism, the moon reflected in the water symbolizes the emptiness of the Buddha’s teachings, while in Taoism, it indicates that the changes in things cannot be separated from the Tao. Therefore, the image of Guanyin is not only worshipped in China because of its religious functionality but also because of the philosophical ideas behind it, which were highly respected by the

Chinese literati.

6. Discussion

Although the image of the Water-Moon Guanyin originally originated in paintings, its representation was not limited to paintings. A large number of sculptures of the Water-Moon Guanyin have been found in China from the tenth to the thirteenth centuries, especially in the Shanxi region of northern China. Most of them are wooden sculptures. Most of the Water-Moon Guanyin have been detached from their original contexts, and therefore information on the relationship between the Water-Moon Guanyin and its environment is difficult to obtain. This paper will focus on the Water-Moon Guanyin from the Nelson Atkins Museum of Art, which dates from the Liao Dynasty in the eleventh century and aims to provide a three-dimensional perspective to analyze the Water-Moon Guanyin. This sculpture of Water-Moon Guanyin sits in a royal ease position, with the foot of the dangling leg resting on a lotus flower, and one arm resting on the raised leg. The upper body is slightly tilted to the left, with the eyes looking forward. The abdomen and chest are not stout, very flashy and soft, or even slender. The head of Guanyin is very small and delicate, not bulky. The facial features are very expressive, with almond-shaped eyes, a long, thin, delicate nose, a small, smiling mouth, and a rounded chin. Guanyin's earlobes are plump and parallel to her mouth. Underneath, she wears an ornate golden floral skirt with many vivid folds that seem to float in the wind.

Similar to the mural in Yulin Cave 2, the Water-Moon Guanyin is ornately dressed, topless, with her upper body covered in jewels and her lower body in a skirt. The difference is that the hair on this sculpture is combed into a bun and is meticulously done up, while the Water-Moon Guanyin in the Yulin Cave 2 is draped in long hair and is more casual in appearance. The Guanyin in the Yulin Cave 2 gives the impression of a more casual, relaxed, out-of-this-world immortal, while this sculpture gives the impression of a solemn, compassionate god. The mural paintings present a complete representation of the Goddess of Mercy and the field she inhabits symbolically and graphically, enhancing the religious atmosphere and spreading of Buddhist ideologies, while the sculpture of Nelson's Guanyin reinforces the divine presence of the Guanyin with its three-dimensional and materialistic nature, emphasizing her presence in the real world. There is also a temporal difference between these two works of art, perhaps indicating that along with the time, the growing cult of Guanyin led to more decorative frescoes that no longer satisfied the people. There was a greater need for a physical image of the bodhisattva to listen to their suffer-

ing and to help them fulfill their wishes.

As a type of Guanyin image, Water-Moon Guanyin also has the same function as Guanyin. Guanyin is considered in Buddhism to be the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion and beings in distress can be saved by chanting its name. The prevalence of Pure Land Buddhism in China after the middle of the Tang Dynasty led to the worship of Amitabha and Guanyin. Guanyin was humanized, shifting from being depicted as a man in the early Northern and Southern Dynasties to a female figure in the Tang Dynasty. In contrast to the original transcendent figure, Guanyin became a compassionate goddess, giving blessings [9]. Guanyin is the attendant of Amitabha Buddha, who is in charge of the Western World of Elysium. Thus, Guanyin is often regarded as the savior of souls, leading people to the Western Elysium and granting a favorable rebirth. For this reason, Guanyin scriptures are often used in funeral ceremonies to pray for the dead. However, one of the most commonly used scriptures in the ceremony, the Sutra of the Bodhisattva Water-moon, is a pseudo-sutra [1]. The appearance of the forged scriptures of the Water-Moon Guanyin indicates that the localization of Buddhism reached a new stage in its development in China. And this was not the only apocryphal sutra. The Guanyin apocrypha flourished in the following dynasties and was widely distributed and printed because it satisfied the imagination of the common people about the practical role of religion. With the rise of Tantric Buddhism in the Tang Dynasty, Tantric rituals were widely practiced and the recitation of Dharahi Sutra could grant wishes. For example, the indigenous Dharahi Sutra prevalent in the Tang dynasty promised that chanting verses in front of a statue of Guanyin would provide protection against loss of money, nightmares, and illnesses, and reduce the risk of childbirth [5]. The emergence of forged scriptures is an inevitable and necessary concomitant in the history of Buddhism as a missionary religion. Although some have argued that forged scriptures undermined the Buddhist heritage, the continued creation of indigenous classics suggests that they played a beneficent role in Buddhism [10]. After the Tang Dynasty, there was constant strife and war, and society was in turmoil. The need for rulers to appease their dead warriors and for people to pray for the repose of their dead family members led to a surge in the worship of Guanyin, the savior of souls. In the case of Yanshan Si, where a water-land ritual is held to comfort the dead warriors, the image of Water-Moon Guanyin is worshipped in this ceremony and is used to care for the dead [1].

It is worth noting that unlike Hinayana Buddhism, which emphasizes a complete severance of ties with the temporal world and sees worldly life as a source of suffering, in China, Pure Land Buddhism is associated with the after-

life, the continuation of worldly life [9]. All human relationships will continue to exist in the Pure Land. People's merits will be passed on to their ancestors to ascend to the Western Paradise. Therefore, good practice in Buddhism to accumulate merit is regarded as filial piety, an essential idea in Confucianism. Moreover, the basic idea of Chinese Pure Land Buddhism is the belief in the indestructibility of the soul, which diverges from the Hinayana Buddhist concept of anatta, no-self, as people are an aggregation of constantly changing psychological, physical, and mental conditions [9].

7. Conclusion

The Water-Moon Guanyin is not only an incarnation of the Buddhist image of Guanyin, but also a symbol of the deep fusion of Chinese culture and Buddhist thought. From the simple representation of a Buddhist canon to the recreation of Chinese painting and sculpture, and to the fusion of Chinese indigenous ideology, the Water-Moon Guanyin is a unique expression of Chinese aesthetics and culture. The description of Guanyin's abode in the Avatamsaka Sutra may have been only the initial basis for the image of Water-Moon Guanyin. Various other indigenous Chinese sources, such as the poses of figures painted during the Tang and Song dynasties and Chinese landscape paintings, may also have influenced the formation of the new image of the Water-Moon Guanyin. The Water and Moon Guanyin places the Buddhist Bodhisattva in a background of landscape and uses moonlight to set the mood, which is not seen in other Buddhist art and is entirely Chinese. Water and the moon are also common Buddhist metaphors that express all the impermanence and emptiness of the world. At the same time water and the moon can be interpreted by Chinese Taoist thought as the unity and dynamism of the world, change, and constancy. It can be

said that the image of Guanyin is a perfect combination of the spirit of traditional Chinese aesthetics and Buddhist philosophy, and it is a typical work in the field of Chinese landscape painting that expresses Buddhist content. The image of Guanyin is constantly enriched in China. Guanyin is honored by both the literati and the public because of the water-moon philosophical idea behind it and her role as a redeemer, bringing people a hopeful afterlife.

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