

Guanyin, China's Transgender Bodhisattva

A Talk by Cheryl Barkey, Ph.D.



Today we want to examine the ways we try to figure out how and why a Buddhist deity who was understood as masculine in India came to be seen as feminine in China.



Historical Knowledge

• We will also look at how historians work, and how we feel confident about what we know, how we carefully speculate about what we aren't sure of and how we admit what we don't know, and why we may never know it.



Lets start by clarifying a few relevant historical concepts that are used in a variety of times and places to make sense of historical phenomenon.



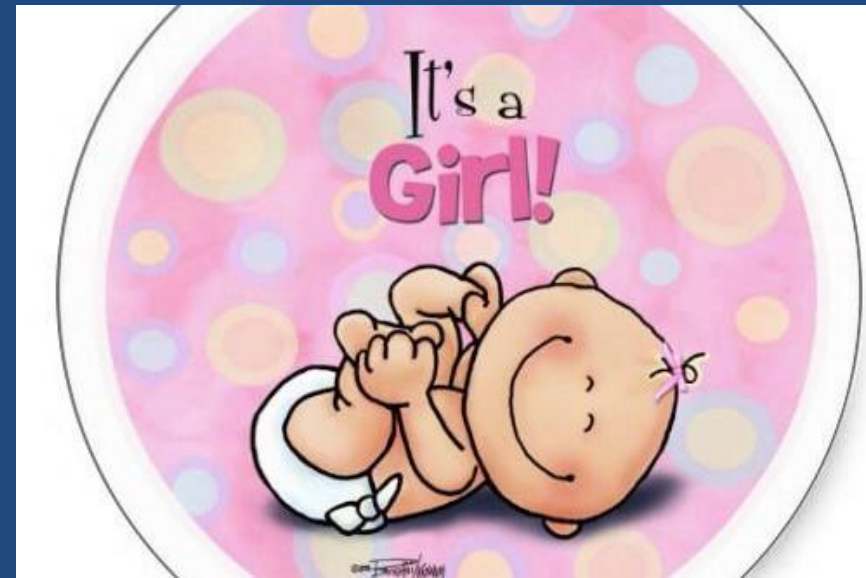
Gender as a Category of Analysis

- You are probably familiar with the concept of gender.
- But I just want to review for you how historians and social scientists use the term today.



Biology is not Gender

In human bodies, we see a range of biological features that have almost always been divided into two main categories, male and female. In the social sciences in the US, we refer to this as biological sex. This is NOT gender.



Gender

- In all human societies, to different extents, cultures have assigned behavioral expectations to the differences we call biological sex.



Gender

So in the social sciences, we use the words *male* and *female* to designate biological sex, and the words *masculine* and *feminine* to designate social expectations, or gender.



Gender

We see gender expressed in things like what clothing people are expected to wear, what kinds of work people are expected to do, which group of people are expected to make decisions, etc.



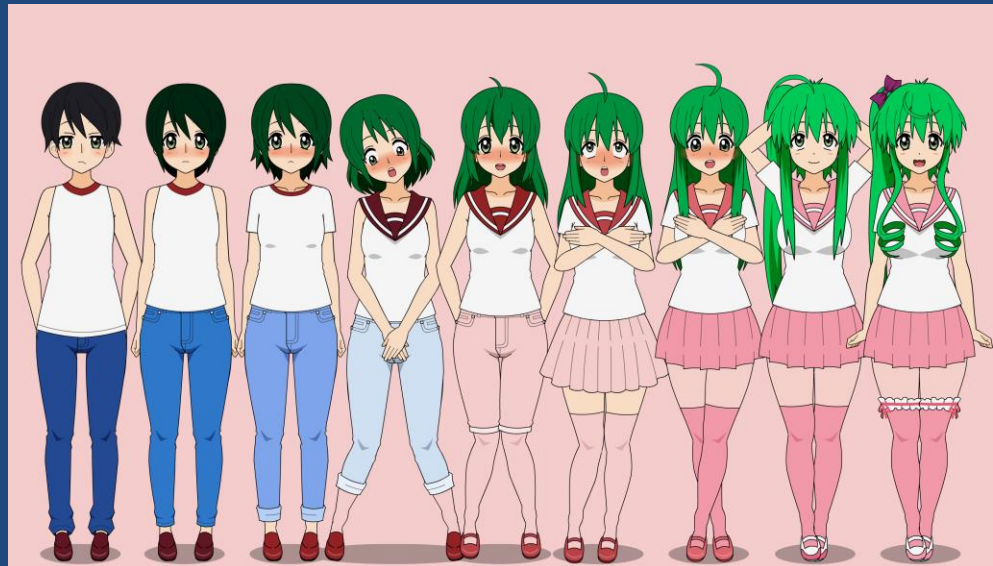
Historical Gender Variation

- In other words, each culture seems to have different things that are seen as appropriate for men to do or not do, and for women to do or not do.
- What are some gender expectations you are familiar with in your culture today?



Gender

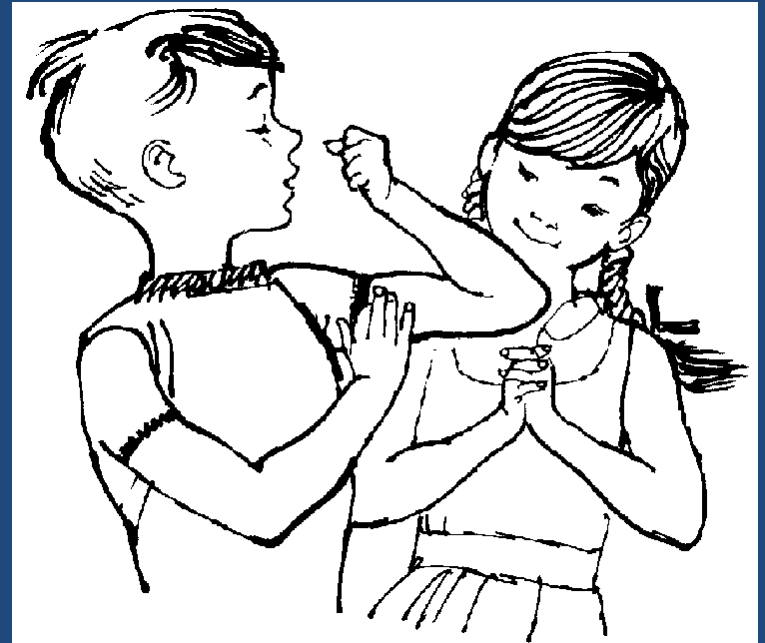
These behavioral expectations vary enormously by culture, location and time, and thus are not universal or 'natural.'



Change

Historians study change over time and place.

Male and female characteristics don't change over historical time, but *gendered* expectations do change. That's how we know they aren't universal or natural.



By studying how these gender expectations change over time and location, we get a better sense of what is going on in a particular society, and another, often different angle on what is important to a society, how it is changing, and why.



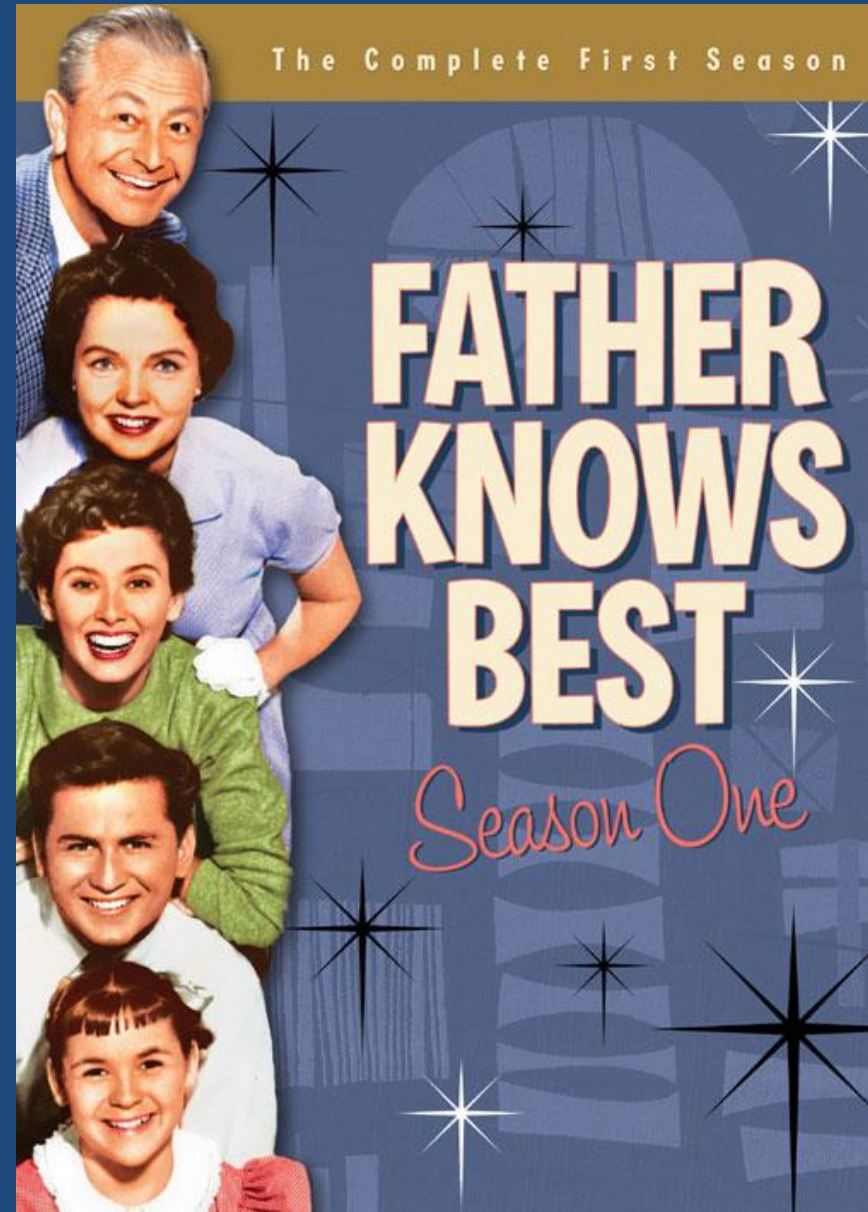
For example, a historian would immediately know that this image would have to be from the 1920s in the US.

What visual cues does the picture give that it is from the 1920s? How are the gender expectations distinct to the 1920s?



Patriarchy

We use the word *patriarchy* to describe a society in which the gender expectations are such that elder men have the capacity to make most decisions, and women and younger men are expected to accept the decisions of older men.



What are some components or functions of a religion?

Holidays

Explain natural phenomenon that are beyond human comprehension

Methods of mediation between this world and another world

Reflection, prayer and meditation

Ecstatic/transcendent experiences

Comfort, solace and explanations for difficult situations

Group identification

Reinforce social norms/morality



Particularistic Religions

Local Places of Power

Local dieties

Local language, often a spoken language

True for a specific group of people

Can include ancestors or specific people who
used to be living



Universal Religions

Universal Religions are said to be true in all times and places, for all people

Single founder, usually male

Sacred Text, usually written

Usually monotheistic

Often associated with empires because they

can break down local distinctions, and create a much larger community of interests



Syncretism

All Universal religions grow out of particularistic local pools of belief

In addition, order to be comprehensible in other times and places, languages etc, most successful universal religions are flexible and become significantly modified when moving outside their area of origin.

Christmas

When Christianity took hold in Europe, the festival celebrating Jesus' birth was placed near the Winter Solstice to coincide with important festivals already in place in Europe.



Christmas

Such festivals included , including those which talk about the birth of the sun after longest night of the year, Yule logs, St. Nick, lighting candles and celebrating evergreens were already prominent features of the celebration of the winter solstice in Europe.



Another Northern European Convention

- The Easter Bunny, is part of a German traditional celebration of the (local/pagan) fertility goddess Oestar at the Spring Equinox.



More Northern European Conventions

Because of its associations with new life and rebirth, Oestar came to be associated with the Christian celebration of the Resurrection of Jesus.



When we remember that Jesus' last supper was a Passover Seder, we see really clear evidence of syncretism.

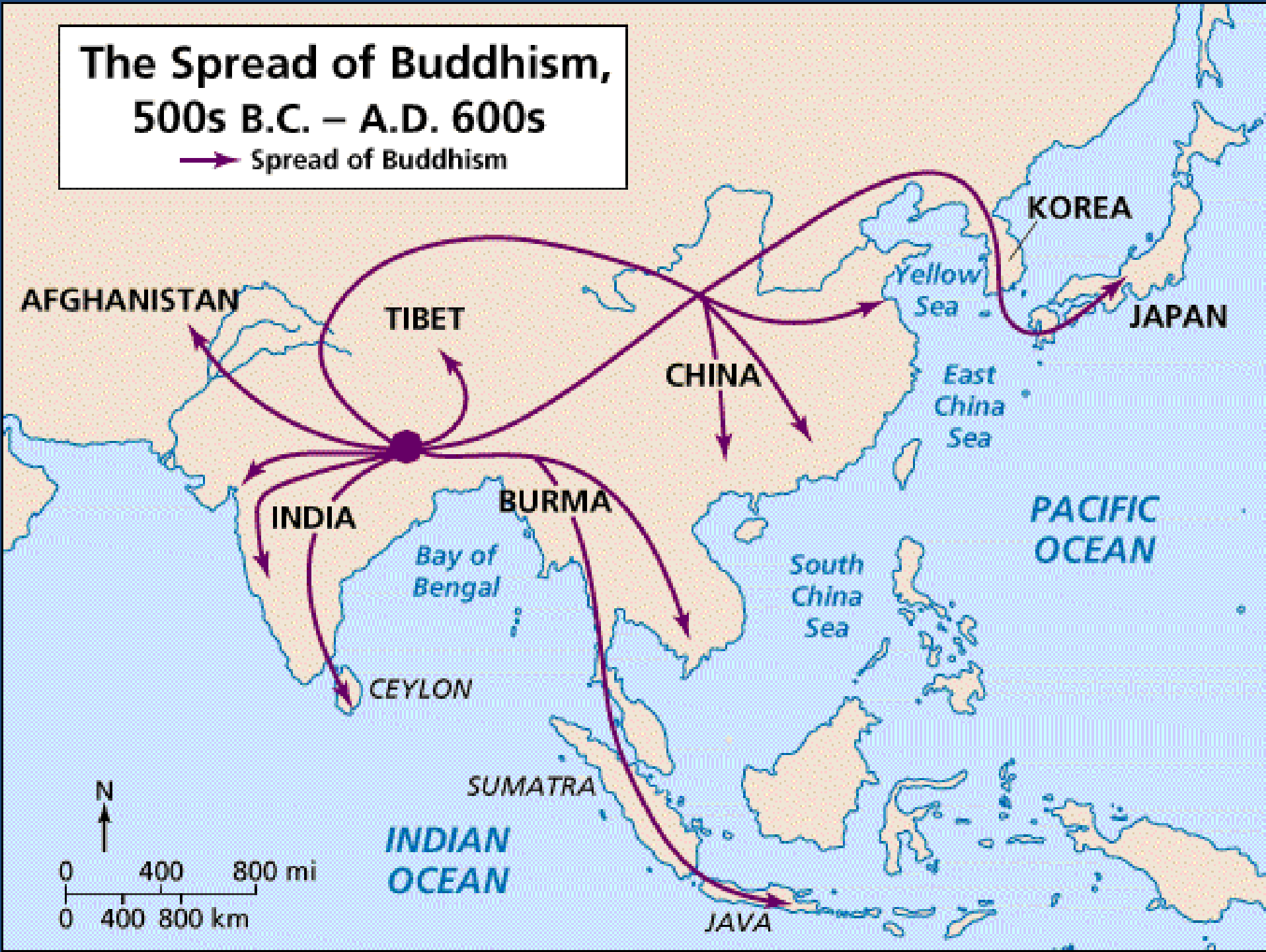


Lets Turn Our Attention to Buddhism



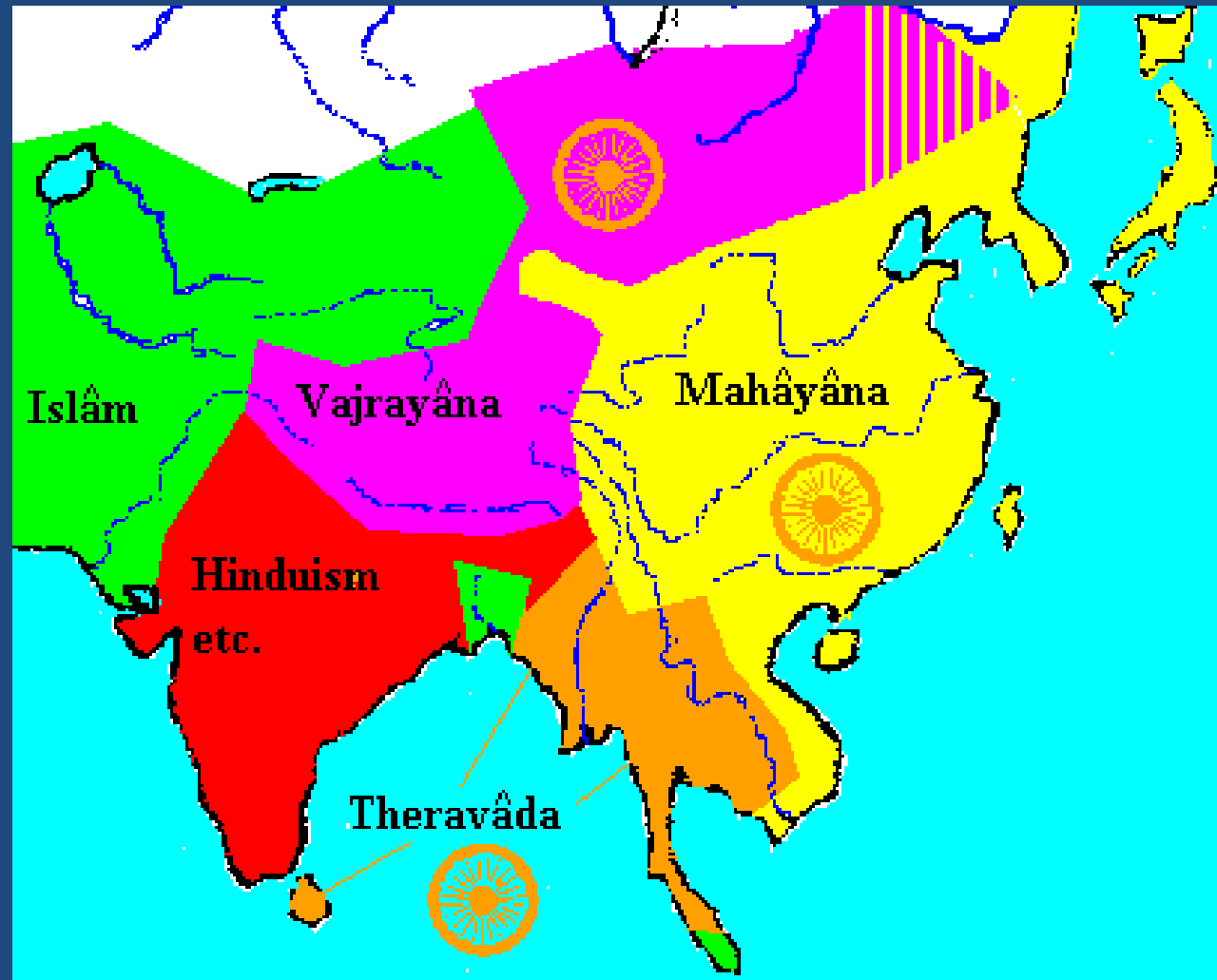
The Spread of Buddhism, 500s B.C. – A.D. 600s

→ Spread of Buddhism



The Great Schism in Buddhism

- Mahayana
- Theravada





Theravada
Buddhism
emphasized
monasticism



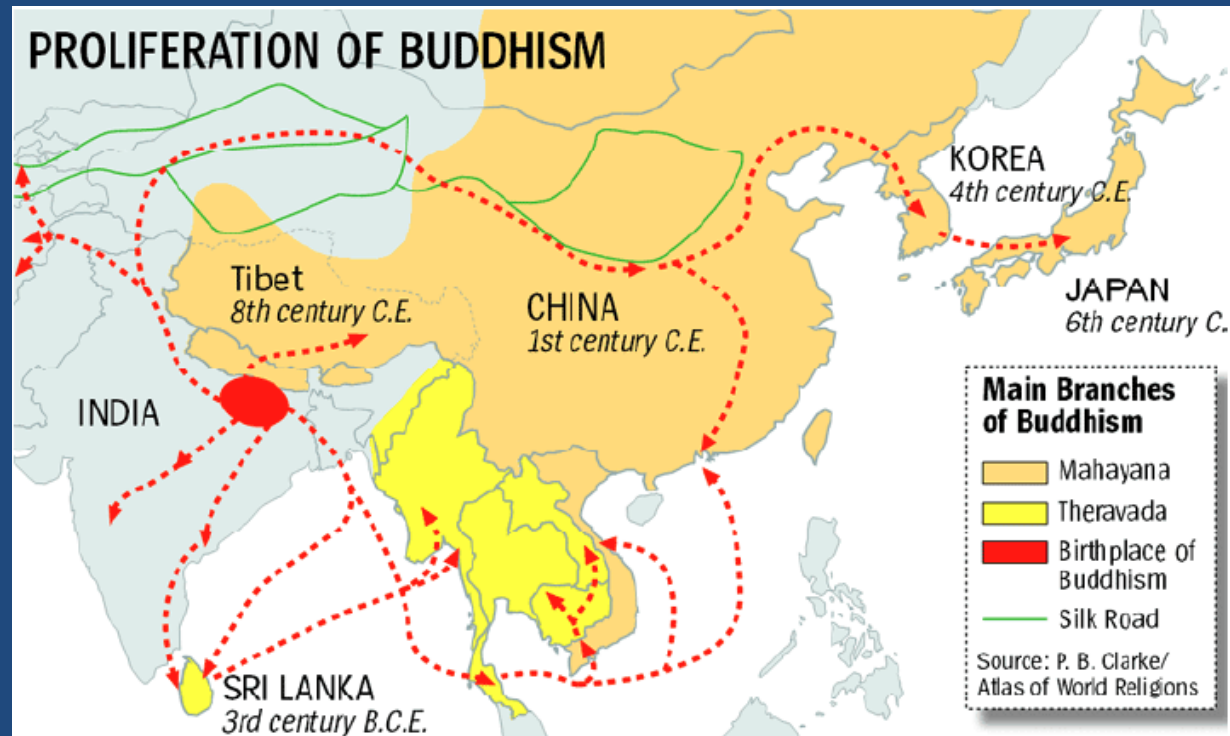
Mahayana
Buddhism
emphasized the
Bodhisattva ideal,
with taking the
Bodhisattva vow
as the ultimate act
of compassion



- Bodhisattvas made Mahayana Buddhism more adaptable to local conditions

Comparative Historical Gender

- Since at least the founding of the Qin dynasty in 221 BCE, the Chinese heartland has been seen to be one of the most patriarchal cultures in world history.



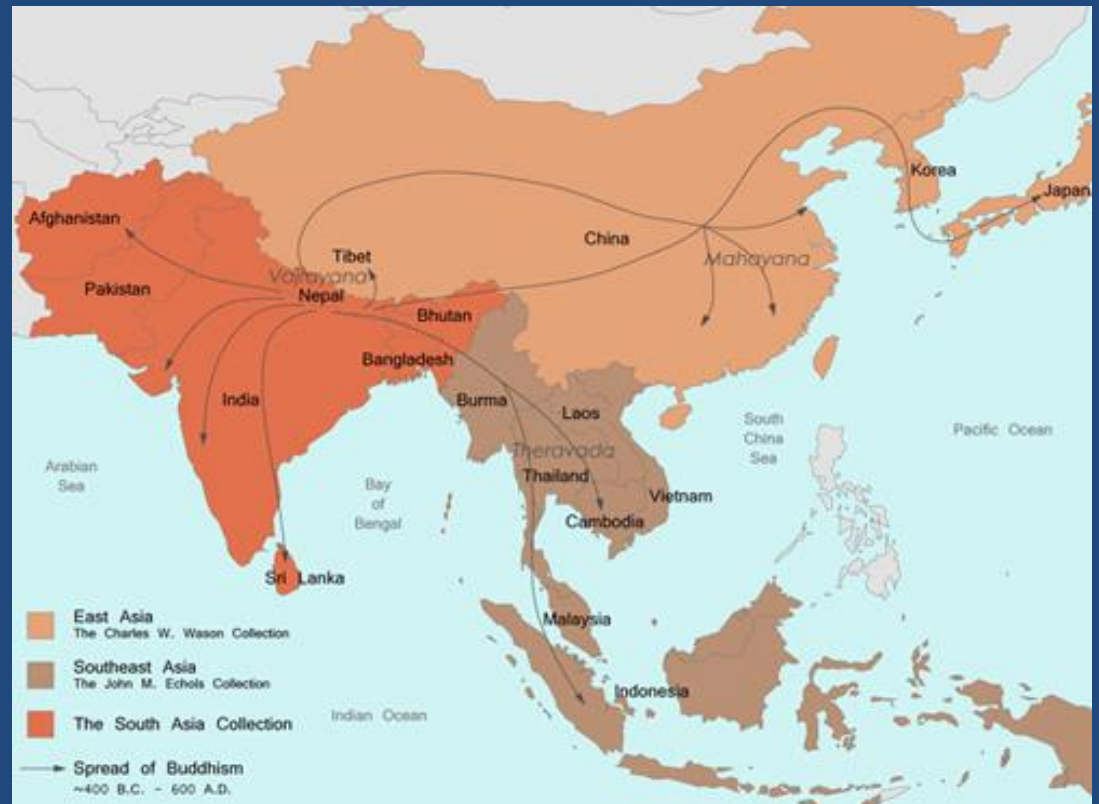
Confucianism emphasizes filial piety, or showing extreme respect for elder males, and the unity or even corporateness of the family, and the family's needs taking precedence over the individuals desires.



The idea of renouncing family life, becoming a monk or nun, and not having children to continue the lineage were huge challenges to Chinese patriarchy.



Among people who study comparative historical gender, the general consensus is that in South Asia, the gender expectations for men and women were not as rigid or hierarchical as they were in East Asia.



- And yet, over the course of about a thousand years, the Bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, seen as masculine in South Asia, came to be seen as feminine in China.





Avalokiteshvara is a Bodhisattva from Northern India. In early Buddhism, this figure was seen as someone who would protect travelers, help people who were ill, and offer compassion to people in trouble.



In a variety of South and Central Asian Buddhist traditions and artistic traditions, Avalokiteshvara was traditionally depicted as a young Indian prince.



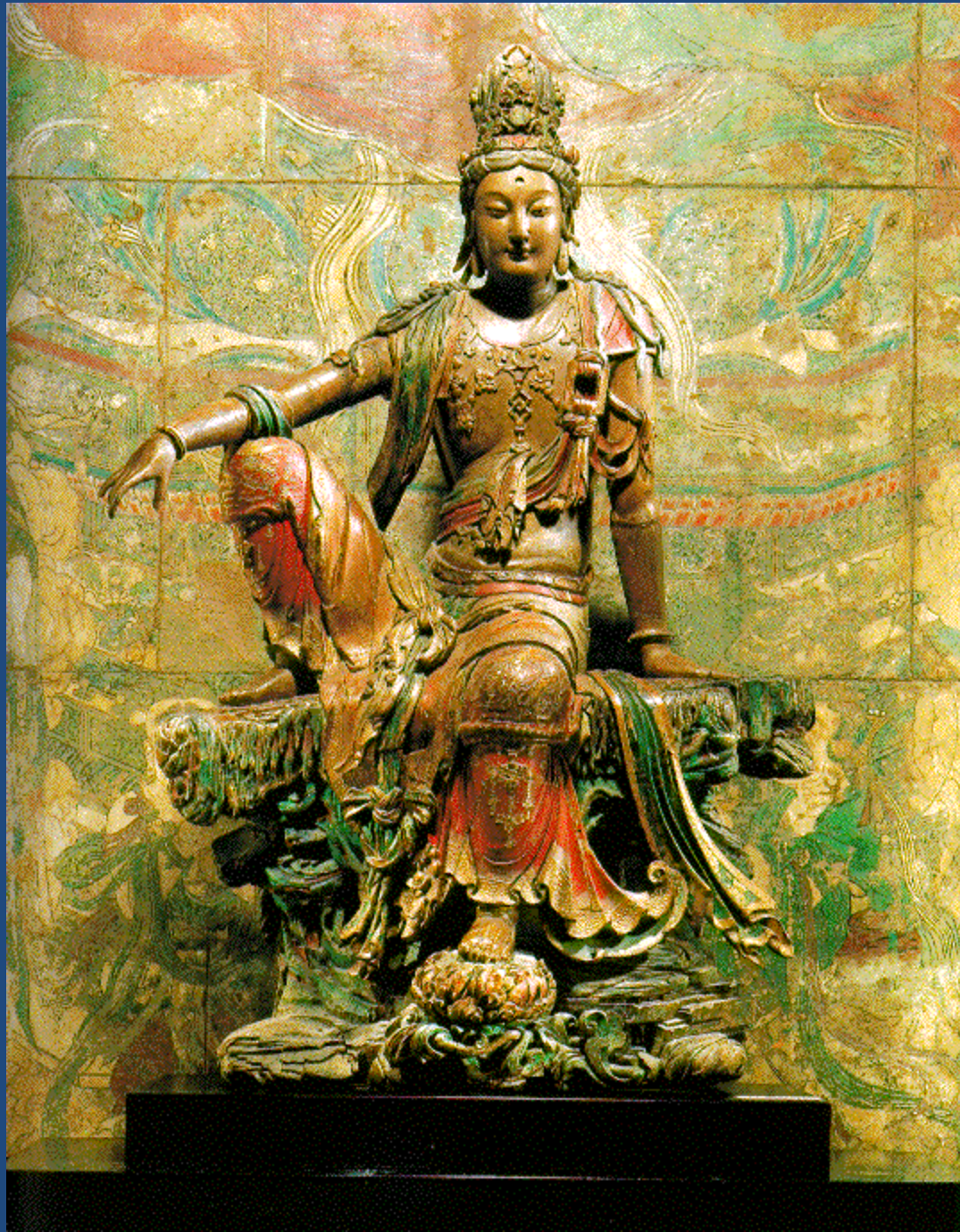
Guanyin,
Circa 700 CE

The Bodhisattva Guanyin, early Central Asia





But during the Tang dynasty in China, (618-907 CE) the feminine characteristics of Guanyin became more prominent. This process took place in visual as well as literary contexts.



This is one of the best-known statues of the Bodhisattva Guanyin

It comes from around 750 CE (mid-Tang), and many people see it as perfectly, and beautifully, androgynous.



After the Tang (617-907 CE), the cult of Guanyin grew in popularity largely due to popular literature, folk stories, and artistic images

Guanyin Statues in China and Cambodia, within about a century of each other, showing a degree of Gender divergence



Left: Avalokiteshvara 11th Century, Cambodia

Right: Guanyin, 12th Century, China

13th Century Chinese
Guanyin Statue



This process continued to the point where ironically, since the Ming dynasty (1368-1644) in China, Guanyin has no longer been seen as an Indian prince, but as a Buddhist deity whose birthplace is on an island off the *East* coast of China.



. By the sixteenth century Guanyin had become a Chinese goddess figure. So what we see is that, over the course of 1000 years or so, a complete indigenization of a South Asian masculine deity into a Chinese feminine deity.



Linguistic Translation

Translation from Pali or Sanskrit (ancient languages of South Asia) was a big challenge for Chinese Buddhism. The languages that the historical Buddha's teachings are written in are extremely different in grammar, meaning, and pronunciation from Chinese.



The image shows a square white box containing two Chinese characters in a bold, expressive calligraphic style. The characters are '觀' (Guān) and '音' (Yīn), which together mean 'Guanyin'. The '觀' character is on the left and the '音' character is on the right. The brushstrokes are thick and fluid, with some ink bleeding into the white background.

Avalokiteshvara's name was translated into Chinese as “Guanyin” (sometimes written Kwan-yin), meaning “One who hears and sees all,” or more romantically, “The one who sees the needs and hears the cries of people in need.”

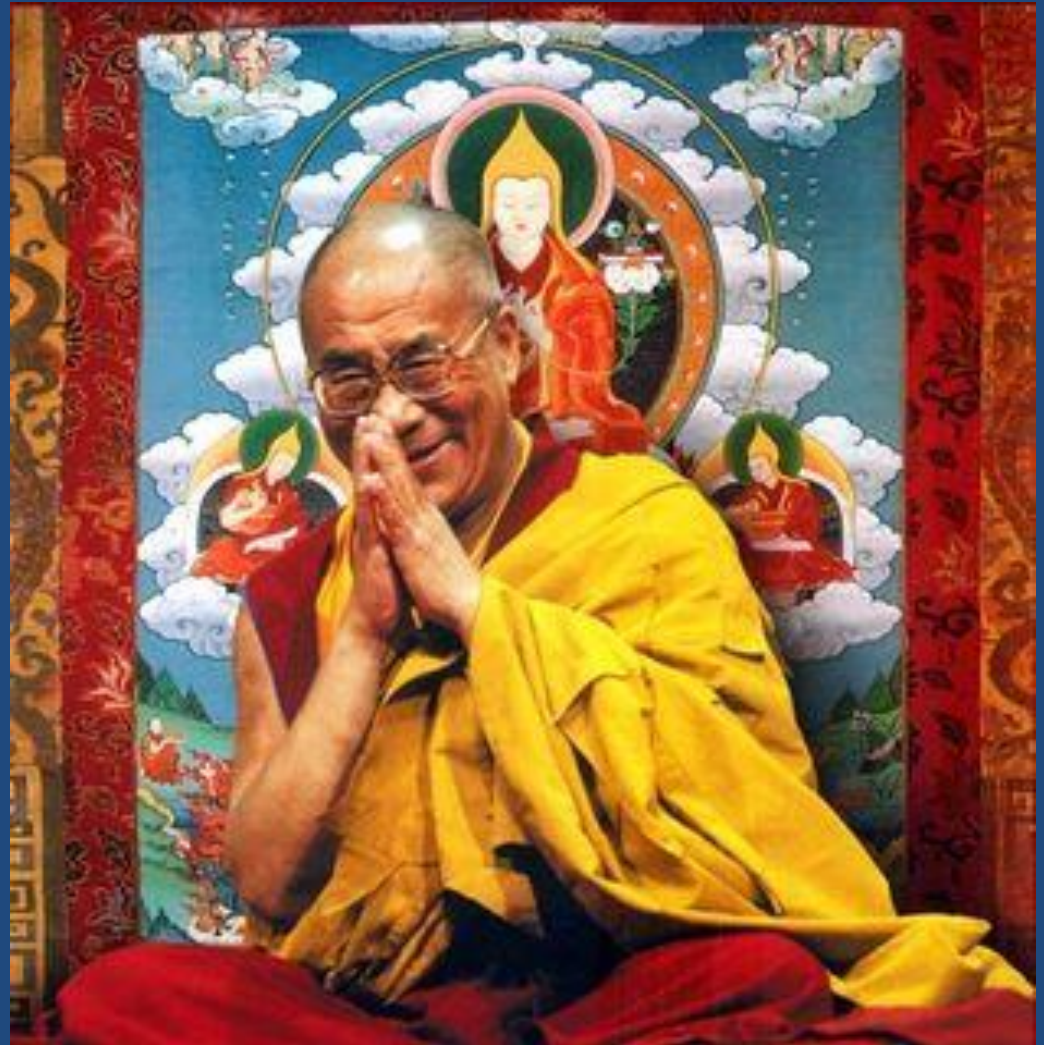
Just as the words of the Buddha needed to be translated into Chinese, it seems that somehow a gender transformation was needed for Guanyin to be meaningful in a Chinese cultural context.



Curiously, other parts of Asia, especially East Asia (where Mahayana Buddhism came to be dominant) the Bodhisattva of Compassion, came to be intensely venerated, particularly in Korea and Japan. But these places did not come to see the diety as feminine.



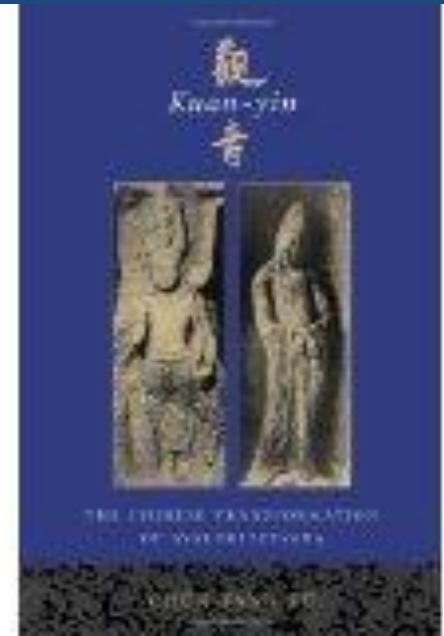
- In Tibet, the Dalai Lama himself is seen as an incarnation of the bodddhisattva Avalokiteshvara, and the position of Dalai Lama is only open to biological males.



Yu Chunfang's book



- The scholar Yu Chun-fang has written an excellent book about the Boddhisattva, which includes an analysis of the gender transformation.
- Historically, it seems clear that the process of the feminization of Guanyin began in the Five Dynasties period (907-960) and was complete by the early Ming dynasty (1468-1644).
- Professor Yu suggests that the emergence of the legend of Princess Miaoshan was crucial in this process.



Thirty three Manifestations

The Universal Gateway chapter of the Lotus Sutra says that Guanyin can appear as 33 different forms in order to serve different types of people.

Seven of these are feminine forms.

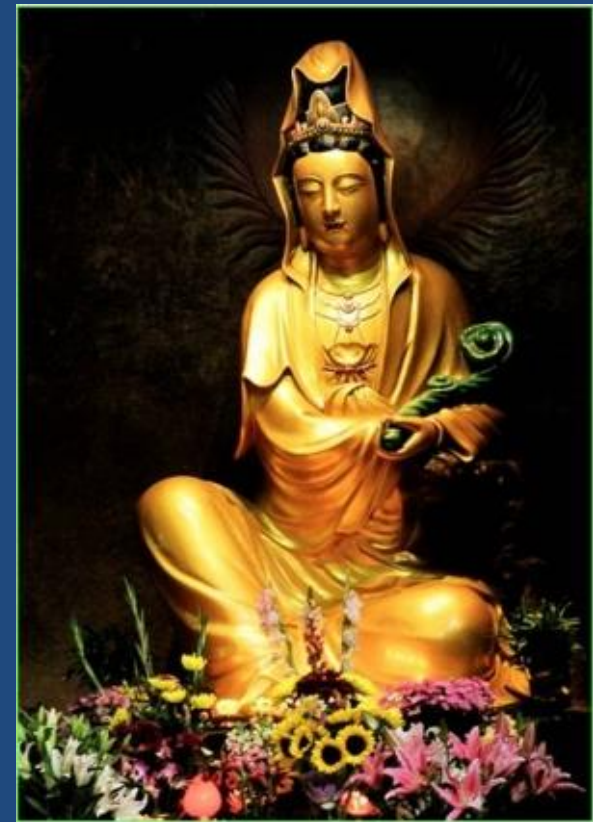
So figuring Guanyin as feminine has a scriptural basis, but not a fully convincing one, as less than ¼ of the manifestations are feminine.

But Miaoshan is seen as one of these.



The Miaoshan Story

The story that Yu Chun-fang says is the crucial turning point in the full feminization of Guanyin in China is that of Miaoshan, the third daughter of a King. Princess Miaoshan was devoted to Buddhism, refused to marry, was punished by her father in various ways, but then when her father was ill, she sacrificed her eyes and arms to make medicine, which cured him.



The Miaoshan Story

Professor Yu identifies this story as the origin of the extremely popular 1000-eyed, 1000 armed Guanyin iconography.



Yu's analysis

Professor Yu says that the Miaoshan story really worked in the context of Chinese culture because Miaoshan can be seen as both devout but also filial, undermining the tensions between Confucianism and Buddhism in the middle dynasties.



Princess Miaoshan

Miaoshan was not a nun, but an activist laywoman, providing a model for women in China to stay at home in accordance with Confucianism, but also pursue Buddhism, which offered them different kinds of logic, morality and fellowship.



Indigenization

Yu explains, “A key factor in the successful indigenization and feminization is that through the myths and legends of Miaoshan, Chinese began to transform the ahistorical buddhist deity into Guanyin who lived in clearly definable times and locations on Chinese soil.”



Yu says that this is a necessary part of the process for Chinese dieties, that they either had to start as culture heroes or be made retroactively into them, in order to be meaningful in Chinese culture.



Conclusions

Many scholars have shown that Buddhism's arrival in China challenged the more patriarchal aspects of Confucianism and Han Chinese culture in general.

But our look at Guanyin's transformation gives us different perspectives on the relationship between gender expectations in South Asia, Central Asia and East Asia.



- Yu Chun-fang's research give us fascinating and complete analysis of an incredible array of sources.
- What I don't see her doing is addressing the question of cross-cultural interactions about gender.



Implications?

- Examining the feminization and localization of the South Asian Boddhisattva Avalokitesvara makes us confront the question of whether seeing Guanyin as a feminine fits the pattern of Buddhism challenging Chinese patriarchy, or whether it confirms the primacy of Chinese patriarchy.
- I see competing answers to this question, and would like to hear your thoughts about these possibilities.



One way to approach the question is to continue to look for a syncretic basis for Guanyin's transformation.

It seems entirely possible that some of matriarchal or feminine deities persisted in western or northwestern China, and that they were similar enough to Guanyin in content that when the concept of Avalokitesvara traveled with Buddhism across the trade routes, it made sense to local people because they already had a local sense of such a deity, who they associated with feminine gender.



- It could certainly be a relatively simple process of syncretism, where the masculine South Asian deity was grafted onto a feminine fertility deity in Northwest China, most likely in the Gansu region.



- The Indigenization of the Bodhisattva Guanyin is not unlike the development of the figure of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the acceptance/indigenization of Catholicism in Mexico, but the Mexican case does not involve a gender transformation.
- Of course, in Christianity there was a feminine figure available, in a way that there wasn't in Buddhism.



In the Mexican case, because it happened relatively recently (only 500 years ago) we have a reasonable amount of primary source information about the indigenization of the virgin.

How do we explain the feminization and indigenization in Guanyin's case, and how does it help us understand premodern gender norms in Asia?



The main problem here is with finding documentary, material, , or even more challenging, oral sources to confirm this hypothesis. Particularly since popular religious practices leave few historical records.



If we suspect that syncretism was at work in Northwest China and that this explains Guanyin's gender transformation, then we might also suspect that seeing Avalokitesvara as feminine may have been a way to resist some of the challenges faced by matriarchal elements in the area due to the increasing strength of Confucian Han patriarchy.



Remember that the time period during which Guanyin became feminized is the same time period in which footbinding was taking hold in China.

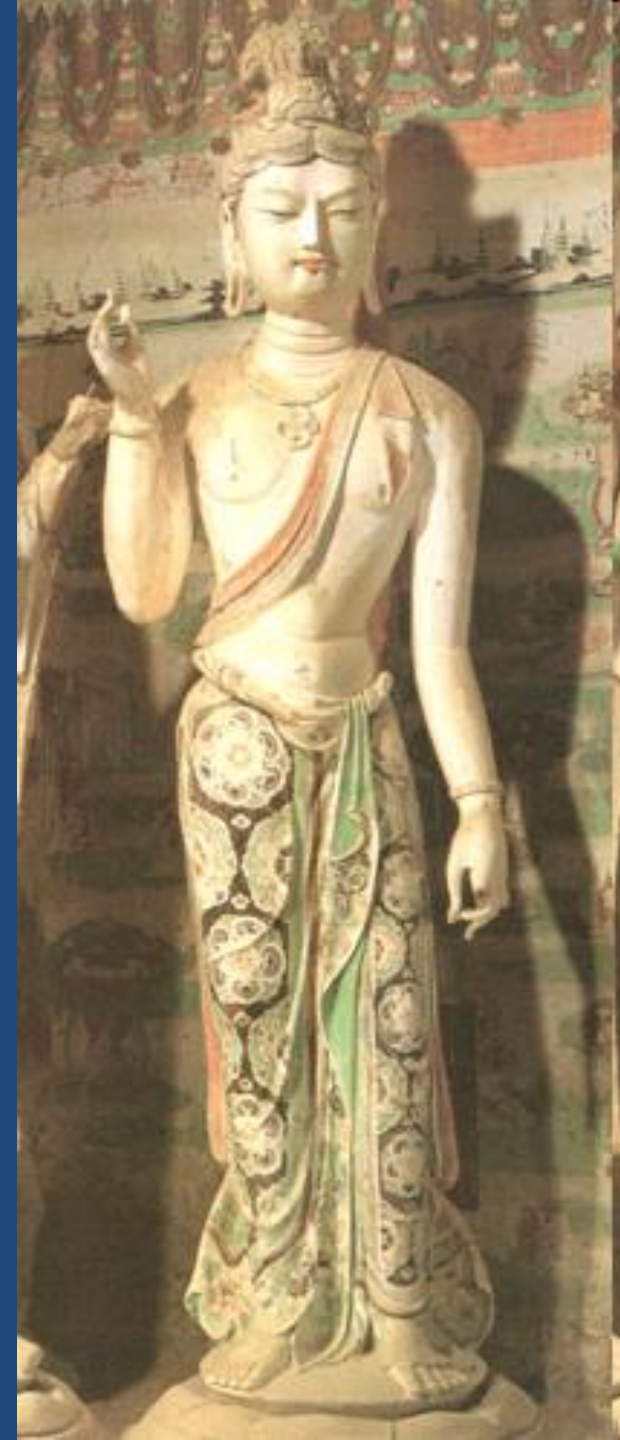
Perhaps these two things represent two extremes, on in which women are ornamental and/or need to be controlled (footbinding) and the other that women can be revered and associated with the most desirable and profound qualities in people (Guanyin.)



Another perspective could be that the transformation of Guanyin reflects Tang dynasty gender dynamics.

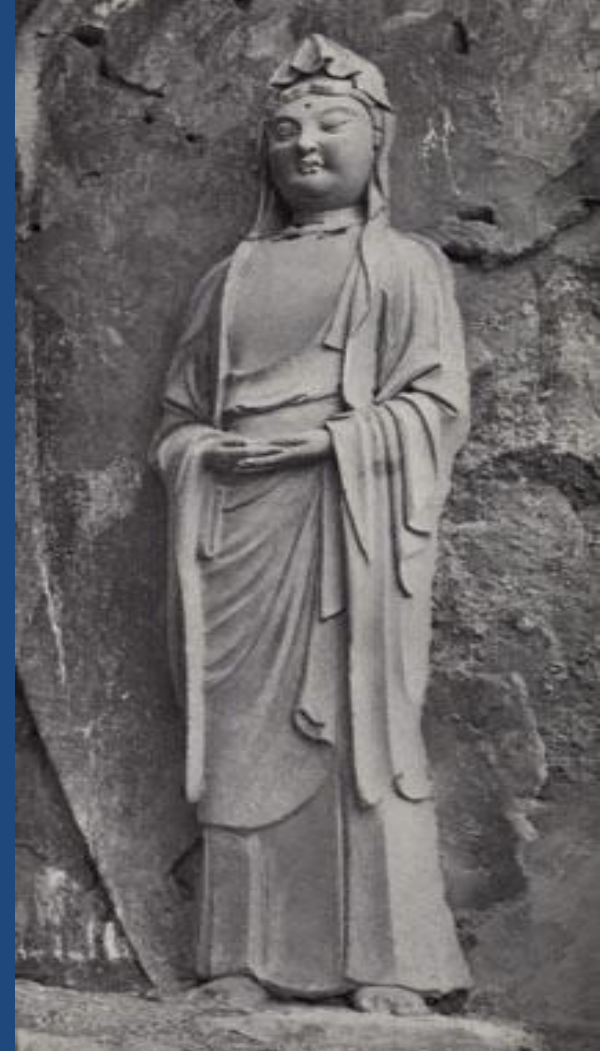
There is an emerging consensus that the Tang dynasty was the period in which women had the most political and cultural options, and that after the Tang ended, and particularly during the Ming and Qing dynasties, which came later, women's status and options became more and more restricted.

Perhaps feminizing Guanyin was a way to institutionalize some of the empowerment of women that we saw in the Tang but seems to have declined precipitously in the later dynasties?



Conversely, another perspective could be that Guanyin's feminization in China could mean increasing expectations of gender binaries meant that there was not room for a masculine representation of compassion and emotional responsiveness in the Chinese gender expectations of the middle dynasties period.

Thus, if Guanyin was to be a deity that humans could look to for help and comfort, the deity had to be feminized to have those qualities and be acceptable.

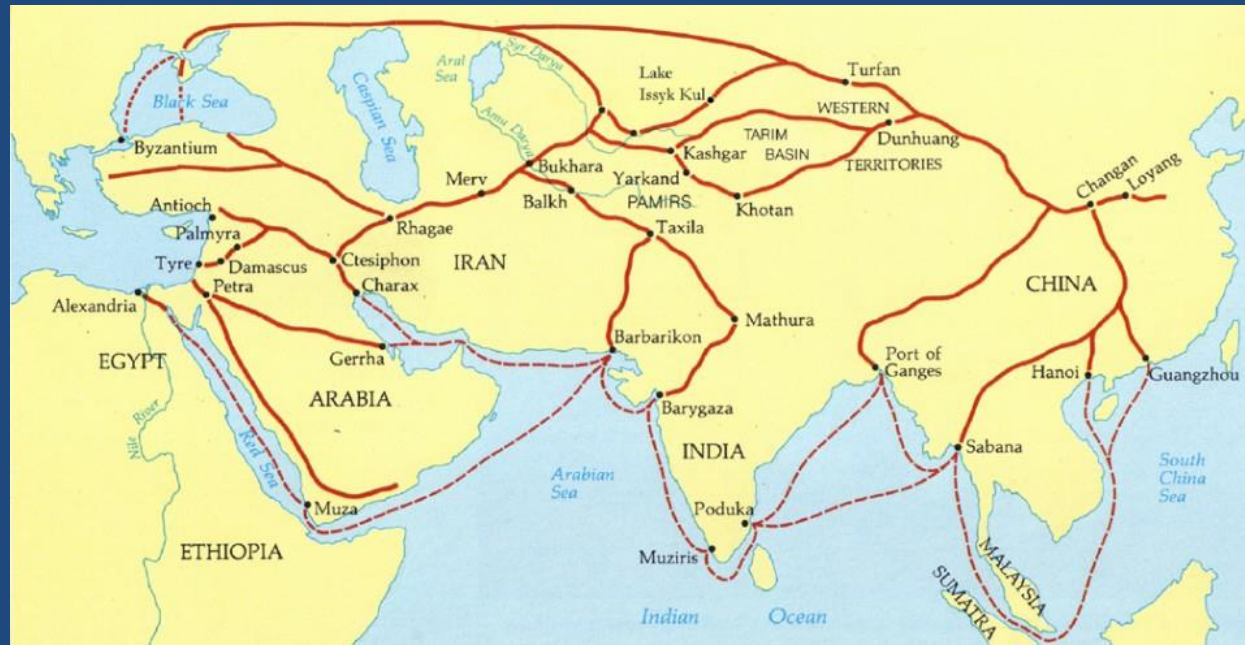


A final way we might look at Guanyin's feminization in China is that Confucian patriarchy was not as strong in East Asia as we have assumed, particularly among the common people.

We could see it as there being room for, or even desire for, a feminine deity associated with compassion, fertility and protection.



Perhaps that space came from the changes brought on by the volume of exchanges on the trade routes, or because of the other developments in Chinese history, but either way, we could see it as a radical reinterpretation of the kinds of gender dynamics that underpinned China during the middle period.



So I'm sorry, but neither Yu Chun-fang nor I have a definitive explanation for Guanyin's gender transformation.

But I do think that it raises questions about gender in Chinese history that have not been addressed, and that are not only fun to think about but also have implications for our knowledge of the conceptual outlines of Chinese history.



Gender and Globalization, Then and Now?

Finally, this kind of investigation may help us analyze our own experiences of how globalization is impacting gender expectations in our current world.

