

Kuan-yin as Gender Neutral Exploring the Significance of the Gendering of Kuan-yin in Chan Buddhism

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ABSTRACT

Kuan-yin, the Chinese form of the Indo-Tibetan male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, has been typically depicted and regarded by Chan Buddhists as a female deity since the Song Dynasty (960-1279 CE). This paper examines various representations of Water Moon, White Robed, and Fish Basket Kuan-yin, drawing the conclusion that the bodhisattva cannot be identified as masculine or feminine but rather gender-neutral. While other scholars have debated the gender identity of Kuan-yin, I offer a valuable new perspective by suggesting the deity transcends dualistic gender categories altogether by embodying both and neither. Kuan-yin's gender neutrality communicates non-essentialism and non-duality, both central concepts in Chan Buddhism.

Kuan-yin, the Chinese manifestation of the Indo-Tibetan male bodhisattva Avalokitesvara, has been typically represented and regarded by Chan practitioners as a female deity since the Song Dynasty. Buddhist

scholars, such as Chun-Fang Yu, attribute the gender transformation of Kuan-yin, in part, to the overwhelmingly masculine character of the political and religious climate in China¹. There is a great deal of scholarship speculating why the “feminization” of Kuan-yin emerged in the Song Dynasty, but the focus of this paper is to explore the significance of his relation to Chan’s conception of gender. The pronoun hu, devised by DeAnn De Luna, is gender-neutral and specifies no particular gender². Analyzing representations of Water Moon, White Robed, and Fish Basket Kuan-yin reveals that it is more accurate to identify this deity as gender-neutral rather than feminine³. By transcending the normative “masculine versus feminine” binary by simultaneously embodying both and neither, Kuan-yin serves as the physical manifestation of non-essentialism and non-duality, both fundamental ideals in Chan Buddhism. The ambiguous, fluid gendering of Kuan-yin promotes an egalitarian spirit that parallels the democratic nature of Chan and reflects the inherent emptiness of gender categories.

Images of Avalokitesvara reached China, and were transformed into the indigenous deity Kuan-yin, as early the fifth century CE⁴. The meaning of Kuan-yin—interpreted as either “the lord who sees” or “the lord who hears the sounds of the world”—aligns with his role as the epitome of compassion and wisdom⁵. Kuan-yin’s mythic evolution and visual transformation into a female goddess was shaped by local traditions and folklore; iconographic elements grounded in particular geographical regions

¹ Chun-Fang Yu, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*. New York: Columbia UP, 2001. 491. Print.

² Weir, William. "New Fix to the Pronoun Problem." *Hartford Courant*. Hartford Courant, 15 June 2007. Web. 8 Mar. 2015. The gender-neutral pronoun “hu,” devised by DeAnn DeLuna, specifies no particular gender.

³ The term “gender-neutral” has been chosen to describe Kuan-yin because it applies to both male and female genders; it does not refer to one gender only. Kuan-yin cannot be assigned a fixed gender identity.

⁴ John Chamberlayne, "The Development of Kuan Yin: Chinese Goddess of Mercy." *Numen* 9.1 (1962): 46.

⁵ Diana Y Paul, *Women in Buddhism: Images of the Feminine in the Mahayana Tradition*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1985. 249. Print.

emerged, and pilgrimage sites devoted to Kuan-yin attracted innumerable devotees⁶. The thirty-three manifestations of Kuan-yin—seven of which are female—inspired artists to create a plethora of representations of the bodhisattva that would appeal to a distinctively Chinese audience⁷. Kuan-yin’s multiplicity of guises reinforces Chan’s egalitarian spirit. Described in the *Lotus Sutra*, a central Mahayana text, as the universal “savior of the distressed world,” Kuan-yin responds to the needs of all people, regardless of race, class, gender, age, and moral righteousness⁸. The textual and verbal means of Kuan-yin’s propagation also reflects the non-discriminatory character of Chan; the illiterate population gained exposure to his benevolence through word-of-mouth transmission⁹.

Before delving into an analysis of the gendering of Kuan-yin in various images, it is necessary to situate the cult of Kuan-yin within its appropriate historical and cultural context. Although gender prejudice existed long before Confucianism emerged as the most dominant and influential school of thought in China, it was Confucianism that firmly established the patrilineal family system in which women were excluded from legal rights. Furthermore, China’s patriarchal social hierarchy was reinforced by the differentiation between the Confucian yin and yang cosmological principles¹⁰. The Three Obediences, formulated during the Han Dynasty, were foundational for Confucianism’s larger project of ensuring male dominance; women were obligated to obey their fathers, husbands, and sons—before, during, and after marriage respectively¹¹. Female behavior was strictly codified, as women were forbidden to work outside the home. Marital status ensured not only social and economic security for women but

⁶ Yu, 21.

⁷ Yu, 232.

⁸ Yu, 5.

⁹ Yu, 232.

¹⁰ Xiongya Gao, “Women Existing for Men: Confucianism and Social Injustice against Women in China.” *Race, Gender & Class* (2003): 114. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Nov 1014.

¹¹ Gao, 116.

also security in the afterlife¹². Childbirth was considered an “act of extreme pollution,”¹³ yet women were expected to bear children nonetheless; failure to produce male offspring was regarded as a “moral crime” and often resulted in public humiliation¹⁴. Due to the impurity and inferiority associated with femininity, scholars have argued that Chinese women often sought Kuan-yin’s compassion and guidance. Although Kuan-yin transcends gender binaries, the visual reinforcement of her femininity, particularly in images of Fish Basket Kuan-yin, renders her more accessible to and favored by Chinese women¹⁵. Therefore, the popularity of Kuan-yin among female Chan practitioners originated, in part, as a result of the repressive patriarchal society that they inhabited¹⁶.

The origins of Water Moon Kuan-yin, the first distinctly Chinese form of Avalokitesvara, are rooted in “Ode to the Portrait of Shuiye Guanyin,” a poem written by Bai Juyi during the Tang Dynasty¹⁷. Water Moon Kuan-yin’s lack of scriptural basis does not detract from her divine significance but rather echoes the unorthodox, anti-textual nature of Chan. Although this manifestation of Kuan-yin is typically known as masculine, examination of images such as *Kuan-yin “with reflections of the moon in the water”* (Figure 1), *Avalokitesvara* (Figure 2), and *Chinese Water Moon Kuan-yin* (Figure 3) calls this fixed gender identity into question. *Kuan-yin “with reflections of the moon in the water”* (Figure 1) depicts Kuan-yin with a thin moustache, an explicitly masculine attribute¹⁸. These three images represent Water Moon Kuan-yin as almost entirely bare-chested, yet another feature

¹² Dora Shu-Fang Dien. *Empress Wu Zetian in Fiction and History: Female Defiance in Confucian China*. New York: Nova Science Publishers, Inc., 2003. 70. Print.

¹³ Barbara E. Reed, "The Gender Symbolism of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva." *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Ed. José I. Cabezón. Albany: State U of New York, 1992. 165. Print.

¹⁴ Gao, 117.

¹⁵ Reed, 142.

¹⁶ Yu, 491.

¹⁷ Bagyalakshmi. "The Creation of the Goddess of Mercy from Avalokitesvara." *Across the Himalayan Gap: An Indian Quest for Understanding China*. Ed. Tan Chung. New Delhi: Gyan House, 1998. 221. Web.

¹⁸ Yu, 223.

associated with masculinity. However, in *Chinese Water Moon Kuan-yin* (Figure 3), Kuan-yin appears more effeminate, due to his slender physique and delicate, carefully rendered facial features. Here, Kuan-yin possesses elongated, upturned eyelids and soft, round cheeks. This image, created during the Ming Dynasty once Kuan-yin's transformation into a female goddess was well under way, evokes a more feminine, soft aura than the earlier two images.

Representations of Water Moon Kuan-yin are usually accompanied by traditional Buddhist symbols that enhance one's interpretation of the gendering of the bodhisattva. In *Kuan-yin "with reflections of the moon in the water"* (Figure 1), Kuan-yin is seated upon a rock amidst dense vegetation and clad in ornate garments, both of which attest to his venerable, sacred status as bodhisattva. Kuan-yin's posture of royal ease, one leg pendant and the other raised, evokes leisure, confidence, and dignity¹⁹. The lotus blossom, upon which Kuan-yin rests his foot, recurrently appears in Buddhist iconography as a symbol of creative power and spiritual purity²⁰. However, in images of Water Moon Kuan-yin, the lotus blossom also functions as a metaphor for transcendence of gender. Just as Kuan-yin rises above the "pollution" of human existence, so too does he exceed the "pollution" associated with femininity—as well as the "polluted," unenlightened dualism of gender differentiation—by avoiding a fixed gender identity altogether.

Just as the lotus blossom reinforces Kuan-yin's gender neutrality, so too does the water and moon imagery, as seen in *Guanyin "with reflections of the moon in the water"* (Figure 1) and *Chinese Water Moon Guanyin* (Figure 3), shed light on the gendering of Kuan-yin. These tropes, symbolizing impermanence and the emptiness of worldly phenomena, are

¹⁹ Yu, 234.

²⁰ Chamberlayne, 52.

employed in numerous Buddhist texts written by monks and laymen alike²¹. In “Ode to the Portrait of Shuiye Kuan-yin,” Juyi associates the water and the “white light” of the moon with “vanishing egos”²². According to Buddhist scholar Peter Hershock, the sky is the image most commonly associated with emptiness in Buddhism, as it orients one outward towards the infinite expansiveness of the cosmos²³. Thus, it is no coincidence that the moon, represented by a white halo, also symbolizes emptiness in these images of Water Moon Kuan-yin. Gender is empty insofar as it lacks a permanent essence; however, emptiness is not defined purely by deprivation but rather by the fluid interdependency that characterizes the human experience²⁴. In both *Guanyin “with reflections of the moon in the water”* (Figure 1) and *Chinese Water Moon Guanyin* (Figure 3), water surrounds the rock upon which Kuan-yin sits. The fleeting quality of flickering reflections in the water resembles the illusory nature of physical phenomena. Moon and water imagery, like the lotus blossom, can be interpreted as symbols of impermanence and non-essentialism, the very principles that constitute the Chan notion of gender.

Representations of White Robed Kuan-yin bear similarities to Water Moon Kuan-yin and provides further insight into how gender is understood in Chan. White Robed Kuan-yin, colloquially known as “Child Giving” Kuan-yin, is recognized as the goddess of fertility, primarily concerned with bestowing children upon childless parents²⁵. The fact that White Robed Kuan-yin is neither fertile nor a mother herself, despite her close association with maternity, sexuality, and life-giving powers, attests to Kuan-yin’s gender neutrality and transcendence of gender²⁶. While Diana Paul, among

²¹ Yu, 235.

²² Bagyalakshmi, 221.

²³ Peter D. Hershock, “The Dissolution of Self and Other in Chan Buddhism.” *Philosophy East and West* (1994): 697. *JSTOR*. Web 15 Nov 2014.

²⁴ Hershock, 697.

²⁵ Yu, 248.

²⁶ Yu, 257.

other scholars, suggests that White Robed Kuan-yin developed as the conflation of Kuan-yin and White Tara, a female consort in the Tantric Buddhist pantheon, Yu espouses the view that Kuan-yin developed independently of Tantric sources²⁷. Regardless of her origins, one cannot deny that White Robed Kuan-yin, as seen in two images both entitled *White-Robed Kuan-yin* (Figures 4 and 5), is more effeminate than Water Moon Kuan-yin. This is due, in part, to the fine, intricate brushstrokes employed by Tu-ling Nei-shih. *White-Robed Kuan-yin* (Figure 4) is attributed to a female artist, the daughter of a famous Chinese painter. Although it is difficult to estimate the degree to which women contributed to the development of visual representations of Kuan-yin, it is important to consider how the gender of the artist may have informed their representation of Kuan-yin. It is not surprising, then, that Nei-shih depicts Kuan-yin as an elegant female deity on a large white lotus blossom. She seems to rise from the paper in all her resplendent splendor²⁸.

Drawing a comparison between the manner in which White Robed Kuan-yin and Water Moon Kuan-yin are dressed also highlights the effeminate nature of this fertility goddess. While Water Moon Kuan-yin is depicted with skin exposed—whether it be uncovered arms in *Avalokitesvara* (Figure 2) or partially bare chest in *Chinese Water Moon Guanyin* (Figure 3)—Nei-shih's Kuan-yin is adorned in a white, shapeless robe concealing her chest and the true shape of her body²⁹. Kuan-yin's modest robe and distinctive veil, worn over her head, has been traced back to the common female clothing style of the Song Dynasty. The resemblance between Kuan-yin's unique garb and that of female commoners not only

²⁷ Paul, 251.

²⁸ Barbara E. Reed, "The Gender Symbolism of Kuan-yin Bodhisattva." *Buddhism, Sexuality, and Gender*. Ed. José I. Cabezón. Albany: State U of New York, 1992. 162. print.

²⁹ Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *Guanyin*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 42. Print.

reinforces the bodhisattva's egalitarian accessibility but also provides a tangible link with contemporary womanhood³⁰. However, the indistinct treatment of Kuan-yin's facial features, in conjunction with the minimalist quality of the images, leaves much to the imagination and subjective interpretation of the viewer. Although White Robed Kuan-yin is recognized as a female goddess in Chan, by no means are these images explicitly feminine. Thus, just as representations of Water Moon Kuan-yin bear different features connoted with masculinity and femininity, so too does the gendering of White Robed Kuan-yin remain rather ambiguous.

The presence of overlapping symbols depicted in images of White Robed Kuan-yin and Water Moon Kuan-yin speaks to the fluidity and harmonious correlation between these indigenous forms of Kuan-yin. Nei-Shih's *White Robed Kuan-yin* (Figure 4) depicts the bodhisattva seated on a lotus blossom. This symbol, as previously interpreted in the context of Water Moon Kuan-yin, represents spiritual purity, which is reinforced by the white hue of Kuan-yin's robe. The faint halo in Jēju Yongzhong's *White Robed Kuan-yin* (Figure 5) resembles the moon-like halo that radiates from Water Moon Kuan-yin's head in *Guanyin "with reflections of the moon in the water"* (Figure 1), *Avalokitesvara* (Figure 2), and *Chinese Water Moon Guanyin* (Figure 3). Both images of White Robed Kuan-yin contain stark, vacant backgrounds that provide a striking contrast to the lush vegetation in images of Water Moon Kuan-yin. By condensing the subject matter and omitting superfluous details, Nei-Shih and Longzhong have ensured that nothing detracts White Robed Kuan-yin, the sole figure in the scene. In both images, Kuan-yin hovers in an otherworldly sphere of absolute transcendence that eludes the empirical world. Along the same vein, Kuan-yin's plain, unadorned robe is devoid of unnecessary ornamentation, alluding to the meaninglessness and transience of physical phenomena.

³⁰ Yu, 255.

Ironically, the austerity that characterizes these images of White Robed Kuan-yin and the lush nature imagery associated with Water Moon Kuan-yin can both be interpreted as expressing the principle of emptiness, a defining aspect of gender as it is understood in Chan.

The elegant simplicity and ephemeral quality of Yongzhong's *White Robed Kuan-yin* (Figure 5) resembles "apparition painting," a technique frequently employed by Chinese artists during the thirteenth century³¹. This ink painting, however, consists of precise contours and lacks the loose, spontaneous brushwork that characterizes apparition painting. Nevertheless, just as the fleeting quality of apparition painting transmutes Chan principles into creative forms, so too does the elegant simplicity of *White Robed Kuan-yin* convey themes such as transience, non-duality, and emptiness, which inform the gendering of Kuan-yin.

Unlike the two previously discussed manifestations of Kuan-yin, the gendering of Fish Basket Kuan-yin stems from narratives and legends surrounding the figure, rather than from traditional Buddhist tropes and symbols. Fish Basket Kuan-yin, perhaps more accurately described a mythic icon rather than a Chan deity, is visually portrayed in a distinctly female guise due to her derivation from indigenous myths. Therefore, visual representations of Fish Basket Kuan-yin cannot be properly understood without establishing the narrative context that gave rise to this mythic icon. Fish Basket Kuan-yin, otherwise known as "Mr. Ma's Wife," is based upon the legend of Lingzhao, a beautiful young woman who promised to marry the suitor who emerged triumphant from a series of sutra recitation competitions³². Lingzhao had no intention to marry any of her suitors, yet employed her beauty as a "skillful means" to share the dharma with

³¹ Carla M. Zainie "Sources for Some Early Japanese Ink Paintings." *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 65.7 (1978): 235. *JSTOR*. Web. 13 Sept. 2014

³² Yu, 420.

unenlightened people³³. Eventually, a man named Mr. Ma prevailed, after memorizing the entire *Lotus Sutra* in three days. However, Lingzhao died before she could marry Mr. Ma, and when a monk examined her corpse, Lingzhao was proclaimed to be the manifestation of a great sage. Inspired by her example, many people living in the region of Shenshi converted to Buddhism³⁴. Although details of the story have been altered to reflect local traditions and beliefs, there is an overarching theme that unites the numerous variations of this narrative: a promise of marriage and sex that remains unfulfilled. This is significant in that Kuan-yin—despite her guise as a young, alluring female—remains pure and employs her sexuality merely as a device to inspire and encourage others to achieve enlightenment.

Chan poems identify this form of Kuan-yin as a fishmonger, frequently seen carrying a basket of fish through the streets³⁵. Thus, *Kuan-yin with Fish Basket* (Figure 6) depicts a graceful, beautiful woman with elongated fingers and delicate facial features carrying a basket of fish in her right hand. Just as fish, specifically carp, symbolized abundance and fertility in India, so too do the fish associated with Fish Basket Kuan-yin serve as an auspicious emblem with sexual undertones³⁶. Thus, Fish Basket and White Robed Kuan-yin are characterized by a similar paradox; both are simultaneously linked to, yet remain untouched by, fertility and sexuality. Although there are no distinctly “male” representations of Fish Basket Kuan-yin, masculine qualities can be occasionally deciphered, as in *Fish Basket Kuan-yin* (Figure 7). This is a unique image in that it portrays Fish Basket Kuan-yin with a flat, partially exposed chest and thin moustache, both attributes that have been previously associated with masculinity. After the Song Dynasty, Fish Basket Kuan-yin was occasionally depicted as an

³³ Yu, 424.

³⁴ Yu, 419.

³⁵ Yu, 420.

³⁶ Yu, 432.

impoverished, haggard, elderly woman—one of her many transformations, which included male guises³⁷. The fact that Fish Basket Kuan-yin’s physical appearance can be transformed and altered at will further attests to the inherent emptiness of physical phenomena.

Chan’s renunciation of a fixed self, as expounded by Hershock, parallels the Chan notion of gender as an empty social construct. The gendering of Kuan-yin as seen in Water Moon, White Robed, and Fish Basket Kuan-yin images aligns with Hershock’s selfhood as a fluctuating series of relations with others, as well as “time, places, actions, and levels of meaning”³⁸. Just as Chan deconstructs normative gender distinctions, so too does it eliminate the boundary between self and other: “[one] is not a character, but rather the coming together of all the characters, all the actions, all the places and events that occur as what we refer to as the ‘world’”³⁹. Hershock stipulates that “inter-personality,” defined as the ongoing process of interpreting, reorienting, and interacting with unfolding narratives, replaces what is typically regarded as the “real and central self” in Chan⁴⁰. The absence of intrinsic selfhood parallels how the gendering of Kuan-yin fluctuates and is modified according to the needs of the devotee. Hershock’s notion of inter-personality, and the body as an “entire cosmos....teeming with ambiguity” mirrors Chan’s view of gender as expressed by Kuan-yin’s mutable guises⁴¹.

The Chan notion of gender cannot be fully grasped without demonstrating how the treatment of gender differs between Mahayana and Theravada, the two major extant schools of Buddhist thought. According to scholars such as Bernard Faure, Buddhism is “relentlessly misogynistic,” yet it is imperative to distinguish how Chan, a subdivision of Mahayana,

³⁷ Yu, 428.

³⁸ Hershock, 691.

³⁹ Hershock, 693.

⁴⁰ Hershock, 693.

⁴¹ Hershock, 708.

attempts to dismantle the discriminatory attitudes towards women that often appear in Theravada Buddhism⁴². After the death of the Siddhartha Gautama, prejudice against women and patriarchal ordinances, such as the Five Obstacles, seeped into the Buddhist order⁴³. The Pali canon is replete with inconsistencies and contradictions regarding female spirituality, yet, for the most part, women were viewed as a threat to the monastic tradition⁴⁴. Gender prejudice can also be seen in the monastic hierarchical structure; even the eldest nun is subordinate to the youngest novice monk⁴⁵. The *Aganna-suttanta*, a Pali text narrating the myth of society's origins, equates sexuality with the fallen state of humanity and describes a state of perfection that assumes an asexual, non-corporeal character⁴⁶. Although the *Aganna-suttanta* does not explicitly address gender, it alludes to the very principles—namely, non-essentialism and the illusory nature of physical phenomena—that lie at the heart of Chan's conception of gender.

According to the *Tathagatagarbha Sutra*, an influential text in Mahayana Buddhism, every individual—regardless of gender—possesses an inherent Buddha nature and originally enlightened mind⁴⁷. This eternal and unchanging “Buddha-Essence” does not represent an intrinsic, substantial self but rather the potentiality to achieve enlightenment through Buddhist practice. In contrast to Theravada, which casts Mara's daughters—Lust, Aversion, and Craving—as obstacles the Buddha must overcome to attain enlightenment, *The Sutra of the Teaching of Vimalakirti* contains a story in which Mara's goddesses receive the Dharma and become bodhisattvas⁴⁸. By portraying these women as capable of intellectual and spiritual

⁴² Bernard Faure, *The Power of Denial: Buddhism, Purity, and Gender*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003. 9. Print.

⁴³ Faure, 326.

⁴⁴ Reed, 65.

⁴⁵ Paul, 170.

⁴⁶ Paul, xxvii.

⁴⁷ Masatoshi Ueki, *Gender Equality in Buddhism*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing, UP, 2001. 68. Print.

⁴⁸ Paul, 221.

achievements, this story repudiates essentialist notions of masculinity and femininity. Just as Kuan-yin is capable of appearing in a multiplicity of guises, there are various examples of gender transformations in the Mahayana canon. For example, in the seventh chapter of *The Sutra of the Teaching of Vimalakirti*, a female goddess transforms Sariputra, a male monk, into a female form. By temporarily and effortlessly altering Sariputra's physical appearance, the goddess demonstrates that gender distinctions are merely illusory; Buddhahood is not only attainable by men⁴⁹. Furthermore, in the *Bhikkhuni-samyutta*, the Discourses of the Ancient Nuns, Soma attests to the erroneous invalidity of dualistic gender rhetoric: "If I asked myself/ Am I a man or a woman in this?/ Then I would be speaking/ Mara's language"⁵⁰. Similarly, Kuan-yin's fluid gender identity embodies the Chan belief that the difference between men and women is relative—not absolute—and aligns with the Lotus Sutra's dismissal of gender as "unknown in the pure world"⁵¹.

By residing outside the sphere of normative gender binaries, Kuan-yin is not only uninhibited by biological and patriarchal constraints but also serves as a symbolic manifestation of Chan spirituality⁵². Although the first stage in the "feminization" of Kuan-yin may be traced back to the aesthetic context of the Tang Dynasty, which promoted delicate, elegant forms, Kuan-yin was not commonly portrayed as distinctly "feminine" until the Song Dynasty⁵³. It is important to recognize, however, that it was not only Kuan-yin, but all bodhisattvas in general, who were assigned quasi-feminine qualities as early as the Tang Dynasty. The "feminization" of Kuan-yin should not be interpreted as Chan's attempt to alleviate gender prejudice or elevate the status of women. Thus, Paul's claim that Kuan-yin embodies a

⁴⁹ Paul, 232.

⁵⁰ Faure, 233.

⁵¹ Karetzky, 21.

⁵² Faure, 204.

⁵³ Patricia Eichenbaum Karetzky, *Guanyin*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2004. 21. Print.

“highly successful and popular image of feminine divinity for both male and female Buddhists” is misdirected, given that divine beings transcend gender identity altogether⁵⁴. The only women valorized in Buddhist discourse are those who are not truly. I argue instead that Kuan-yin is neither masculine nor feminine, given the ambiguous physical attributes and iconography associated with the various manifestations of the bodhisattva. Describing Kuan-yin as “androgynous” is also problematic, given that androgyny implies the possession of both male and female attributes. The term “gender-neutral” is certainly a more appropriate alternative, yet not entirely sufficient, as it retains the same underlying dualism that problematizes other gender descriptors. Fundamentally, the rhetoric of gender inequality—as well as that of gender equality—is unsatisfactory in the context of Chan, as both positions uphold the unenlightened, dualistic view of masculinity and femininity as divergent polarities⁵⁵. Articulating the gendering of Kuan-yin is a challenging—and perhaps even impossible—task given the limitations of language. Thus, visual representations of Kuan-yin serve as a vehicle for spiritual enlightenment, as they communicate the concept of gender in a subjective, nonverbal, accessible way that transcends linguistic constraints.

⁵⁴ Paul, 252.

⁵⁵ Scholars such as Bernard Faure have posited that advocating for gender equality, even in theory, ironically sustains the very unegalitarianism and dualism that constitutes the basis of gender discrimination and prejudice.



Figure 1 (left)
Kuan-yin "with reflections of the moon in the water," tempera votive painting, 875-950,
 Dunhuang, Tang Dynasty, attributed to Zhou Fang



Figure 2 (right)
Avalokitesvara, textile painting, 972, Song
 Dynasty, The British Museum



Figure 3 (left)
Chinese Water Moon Kuan-yin, ink and pigment
 on silk, 1368-1644, Ming Dynasty



Figure 4 (right)
White-Robed Kuan-yin, ink and pigment on silk,
 1368-1644, Ming Dynasty, attributed to Tu-ling
 Nei-Shih, Freer & Sackler



Figure 5 (left) 17
White-Robed Guanyin, 1300, Yuan Dynasty
attributed to Jeuji Yongzhong, inscription by
Zhongfeng Mingben, Cleveland Museum of Art



Figure 6 (right)
Guanyin with Fish Basket
hanging scroll mounted on panel (ink and color
on silk), c. 1500, Ming Dynasty, Freer & Sackler



Figure 7 (left)

Fish-basket Guanyin

ink and color on silk, 17th -18th century, Qing
Dynasty, Freer & Sackler