

Why Guanyin appears female¹

LOVE: UNIVERSAL VS STRUCTURED. In Chinese culture, there are two philosophical views of love, one based on Confucianism, which emphasizes deeds and duties (external conduct), the other based on Mohism,² which champions universal love (internal cultivation and external expression). A core concept in Confucianism is 仁 *ren* (benevolent love), which focuses on duty, action and attitude in a relationship, rather than love itself.

Such a quality must be shown, displayed externally, by actions such as filial piety from children, kindness from parents, loyalty to the king, and so on. It is a sort of *structural* love, that moves upwards through the social hierarchy and finally to the emperor or the most powerful in the land. For this reason, politicians, leaders and the power-minded generally favour such a behaviourist ideology.

In reaction to Confucius's hierarchical or formal love, Micius or 墨子 Mòzǐ proposes the idea of “universal love” (兼愛 *jiān'ài*), in an attempt to replace what he considers to be the Chinese over-attachment to class, clan and family structures and external forms. He pointedly argues against the Confucians who believe that it is natural and correct for people to care about and show deference in degree according to status. Mozi, by contrast, believe people, in principle, should care for everyone equally and fairly.

Mohism stresses that instead of adopting different attitudes towards different people (according to status), love should be unconditional and offered to everyone without regard for reciprocity. Later, in Chinese Buddhism, the term *ài* (愛) was adopted to refer to a deep caring love, regarded as a fundamental desire. In Chinese Buddhism, *ài* is seen as capable of being either selfish or selfless, the latter being a key element towards enlightenment.

GUĀNYĪN IN CHINA. While Mozi's teaching on universal love did not catch on in Chinese culture, the figure of Guānyīn is a universal living icon. Guānyīn belief probably first arrived in China with the introduction of Buddhism there in the 1st century CE, and soon after that reached Korea and then Japan.

Before the Sòng dynasty (960-1279), Guānyīn was depicted in masculine form. Later androgynous images were probably inspired by the Lotus Sutra teaching that Avalokiteśvara has the protean power of assuming any form to relieve the sufferings of others, and also has the power to grant children—as such, she is also a symbol of fertility and continuity of the lineage. Because of her great compassion, she is not only regarded as its embodiment, but also as a mother-goddess and patron of women, especially mothers, and of seamen.

¹ The first section is from **Love: A Buddhist perspective**, SD 38.4 (1.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2010/02/38.4-Love-piya.pdf>, and the later section from **How Buddhism became Chinese**, SD 40b.1 (1.3.2.2-1.3.2.3): <http://dharmafarer.org/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/40b.1-Buddhist-growth-in-China.pdf>.

² **Mohism** or **Moism** (墨家 *mòjiā*, “school of Mo”) was a Chinese philosophy developed by the followers of Mozi (Master Mo, latinized as Micius, c470–c391 BCE). It grew at about the same time as Confucianism, Daoism and Legalism, and was one of the four main philosophy schools during the Spring and Autumn Period (770-480 BCE) and the Warring States Period (479-221 BCE). See <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/mohism/>.

By the 12th century, Guānyīn was already depicted in a very gentle feminine form in China. In our times, Guan Yin is most often represented as a gentle, beautiful, white-robed woman, a depiction related to her manifestation as *Pāṇḍarā, vāsīnī* (the white-clad one), often associated with the Buddha Amitābha. As such, she is very popular with the “Pure Land” Buddhists. As an embodiment of compassion, Guānyīn transcends sexuality, as do all advanced Bodhisattvas.

However, in visual representations, Guānyīn is generally depicted as being androgynous (notice the flat bosom but high coiffure). She is often surrounded by *yīn* (feminine) symbols, such as an empty vessel, water, willow branches, and the moon. She is, however, often depicted as standing on the head or back of a dragon which is a *yáng* symbol)—symbolizing the harmonizing of opposites qualities. Such visual presence of femininity makes her at once relevant to Chinese women, especially those who have difficulties on account of their merely being women.

GUĀNYĪN’S SOCIAL ROLES. The most significant role that Guānyīn plays in China and Chinese society is that of the liberator of women. In imperial China, dominated by patriarchal Confucians and Buddhists, Guānyīn provided a powerful liberation theology for oppressed women. The traditional Chinese family followed “agnatic primogeniture” or “patrilineal primogeniture,”³ where inheritance is according to seniority of birth among the children of the patriarch (head of the family), with sons inheriting before brothers, and male-line descendants inheriting before collateral relatives in the male line, and to the total exclusion of females and descendants through females.

In such a patriarchal system, women who marry were expected to be fertile and bear *sons*. Failure to produce male issue, or worse, not to be able to conceive at all, would severely disadvantage the woman; for example, the husband might take another wife.

Beginning in the Sòng dynasty, the neo-Confucianists expected women to show “the threefold submissions and fourfold virtues” (*sāncóng sìdé* 三從四德). By the threefold submissions (*sāncóng* 三從), a woman must show deference to her father when she is young (*wèi jià cóng fù* 未嫁從父), to her husband when she is married (*jì jià cóng fū* 既嫁從夫), and to her son after her husband has died (*fū sǐ cóng zǐ* 夫死從子). The four virtues (*sìdé* 四德) are morality (*dé* 德), comely appearance (*róng* 容), proper speech (*yán* 言), and skill and diligence in work (*gōng* 功).

So oppressive was such a system that it spawned the Chinese stereotype of the wicked mother-in-law who mistreats or abuses her daughter-in-law. To avoid any such predicament, understandably, women often become fervent devotees of Guānyīn, manifested as the giver of children (*sòngzǐ guānyīn* 送子觀音), especially sons.

Women, as such, are in special need of salvation, and such an upliftment is often depicted in miraculous Guānyīn stories, which abound in Chinese literature. The best known of such stories is that of **princess Miàoshàn** 妙善. This is a powerful model of the Chinese women’s resistance to marriage. Such women not only fear a difficult married life involving over-bearing in-laws, the pain and danger of childbirth, but also the folk belief that women who have given birth to children are punished in the underworld for having produced polluting substances. Traditional Chinese regarded blood of the menses and of childbirth as polluting.

³ Both “agnatic” and “patrilineal” mean “related to the father’s side.”

Women devotees of Guānyīn often formed sororities or sisterhoods (often functioning as Guānyīn temples or “vegetarian halls,” *càitáng* 菜堂, or “observance hall,” *zhāitáng* 齋堂, for mutual support as a safe-house for unmarried women or those who want to avoid the tribulations of marriage, and which also provide a guarantee that upon their dying, the proper final rites are performed for them. Many such sisterhoods are still found in Hongkong and amongst the overseas Chinese. Guānyīn’s compassionate presence pervades the Chinese community to this day.

Happy Mother’s Day.

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[an occasional re-look at the Buddha’s Example and Teachings]

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