

Chinese Cultural Studies:
The Legend of Miao-shan

In China Kuan-yin (Avalokitesvara) came to be most frequently worshipped in female form as the Goddess of Mercy. This transformation from an originally male deity into a female one seems to have occurred sometime during the Northern Sung dynasty (960-1126) and is reflected in Kuan-yin's miraculous appearance in human form in the legend of Miao-shan.

The cult to Miao-shan at Fragrant Mountain Monastery (Hsiang-shan ssu) was first made public in an inscription written by Chiang Chih-ch'i (1031-1104) in 1100. Before then this monastery had been known for its splendid statue of Kuan-yin as the Great Compassionate One (Ta-pei) with a thousand arms and a thousand eyes. The legend recorded by Chiang identifies the Fragrant Mountain Monastery as the location of Kuan-yin's manifestation, where she revealed herself in her Great Compassionate form with a thousand arms and eyes, neatly joining the Miao-shan legend with the image of Kuan-yin enshrined in the monastery. It went on to claim that the relics of Kuan-yin were enshrined in a stupa, thus making Fragrant Mountain Monastery a popular pilgrimage center. An inscription of 1185, commemorating the restoration of the Fragrant Mountain Monastery, noted that since around 1100, "the abbots of this monastery successively built it up on a magnificent scale and with increasing extravagance. Because the bodhisattva's relics were there in the stupa and many miracles were wrought, every spring in the second lunar month people from all parts would come, regardless of distance. The worshippers must have numbered tens of thousands, and they made donations according to their means. The monks of the monastery had no need to go begging to meet their annual budget. They had more than enough to eat."

The oldest extant version of the legend is preserved in a chronicle of Buddhism in China, the Lung-hsing fo-chiao pien-nien t'ung-lun, written in 1164 by Tsu-hsiu. The story, as adapted from the translation by Glen Dudbridge (pp. 25-34), goes as follows:

Tao-hsüan (596-667) once asked a divine spirit about the history of the bodhisattva Kuan-yin. The spirit replied:

In the past there was a king whose name was [Miao]-chuang-yen. His lady was named Pao-ying. She bore three daughters, the eldest Miao-yen, the

second Miao-yin, and the youngest Miao-shan.

At the time of Miao-shan's conception the queen dreamed that she swallowed the moon. When the time came for the child to be born, the whole earth quaked, and wonderful fragrance and heavenly flowers were spread near and far. The people of that country were astounded. At birth she was clean and fresh without being washed. Her holy marks were noble and majestic, her body was covered over with many-colored clouds. The people said that these were signs of the incarnation of a holy person. Although the parents thought this extraordinary, their hearts were corrupt, and so they detested her.

As she grew up the bodhisattva became naturally kind and gentle. She dressed plainly and ate only once a day. In the palace she was known as "the maiden with the heart of a Buddha." By her good grace the ladies in waiting were converted; all turned to the good life and renounced their desires. The king took some exception to this and prepared to find her a husband. Miao-shan, with integrity and wisdom, said: "Riches and honor are not there for ever, glory and splendor are like mere bubbles or illusions. Even if you force me to do base menial work, I will never repent [of my resolve to remain chaste]."

When the king and his lady sent for her and tried to coax her, she said: "I will obey your august command if it will prevent three misfortunes."

The king asked: "What do you mean by 'three misfortunes'?"

She said: "The first is this: when the men of this world are young, their face is as fair as the jade-like moon, but when they grow old, their hair turns white and their face is wrinkled; in motion or repose they are in every way worse off than when they were young. The second is this: a man's limbs may be lusty and vigorous, he may step as lithely as if flying through the air, but when suddenly an illness befalls him, he lies in bed without a single pleasure in life. The third is this: a man may have a great assembly of relatives, may be surrounded by his nearest and dearest, but suddenly one day it all comes to an end [with his death]; although father and son are close kin they cannot take one another's place. If it can prevent these three misfortunes, then you will win my consent to a marriage. If not, I prefer to retire to pursue a life of religion. When one gains full understanding of the original mind, all misfortunes of their own accord cease to exist."

The king was angry. He forced her to work at gardening and reduced her food and drink. Even her two sisters went privately to make her change her mind, but Miao-shan held firm and would not turn back. When the queen personally admonished her, Miao-shan said: "In all the emotional

entanglements of this world there is no term of spiritual release. If close kin are united, they must inevitably be sundered and scattered. Rest at ease, mother. Luckily you have my two sisters to care for you. Do not be concerned about Miao-shan."

The queen and the two sisters therefore asked the king to release her to follow a religious calling. The king was angry. He called for the nuns [at White Sparrow monastery, Po-ch'üeh ssu] and charged them to treat her so harshly that she would change her mind. The nuns were intimidated and gave her the heaviest tasks to do--fetching wood and water, working with pestle and mortar, and running the kitchen garden. In response to her, the vegetables flourished even in winter, and a spring welled up beside the kitchen.

Much time went by, and Miao-shan still held firm to her purpose. When the king heard about the miracles of the vegetables and the spring of water, he was furious. He sent soldiers to bring back her head and to kill the nuns. As they were arriving, mountains of cloud and fog suddenly appeared, totally obscuring everything. When it cleared, Miao-shan was the one person they could not find. She had been borne off by a spirit to a crag in another place, there to live. The spirit then said: "The land here is too barren to sustain existence." He moved her altogether three times before they reached the present Fragrant Mountain (Hsiang-shan). Miao-shan dwelt there, eating from the trees, drinking from the streams.

Time went by, and the king contracted jaundice. His whole body was corrupt and suppurating, and he could no longer sleep or eat. None of the doctors could cure him. He was about to die when a monk appeared, saying he was well able to cure him, but would need the arms and eyes of one free from anger. The king found this proposal extremely difficult to meet. The monk said: "On Fragrant Mountain, in the south-west of your majesty's dominion, there is a bodhisattva engaged in religious practices. If you send a messenger to present your request to her you can count on obtaining the two things."

The king had no choice but to command a palace equerry to go and convey his message. Miao-shan said: "My father showed disrespect to the Three Treasures, he persecuted the suppressed the True Doctrine, he executed innocent nuns. This called for retribution." Then she gladly cut out her eyes and severed her arms. Giving them to the envoy, she added instructions to exhort the king to turn towards the good, no longer to be deluded by false doctrines.

When the two things were submitted to him, the monk made them up into medicine. The king took it and instantly recovered. He generously rewarded the monk-physician. But the monk said: "Why thank me? You should be thanking the one who provided the arms and eyes." Suddenly he was gone.

The king was startled by this divine intervention. Ordering a coach, he went with his lady and two daughters to the hills to thank the bodhisattva.

They met, and before words were spoken the queen already recognized her--it was Miao-shan. They found themselves choking with tears. Miao-shan said: "Does my lady remember Miao-shan? Mindful of my father's love, I have repaid him with my arms and eyes." Hearing her words, the king and queen embraced her, bitterly weeping. The queen was about to lick the eyes with her tongue, but before she could do so, auspicious clouds enclosed all around, divine musicians began to play, the earth shook, and flowers rained down. And then the holy manifestation of the Thousand Arms and Thousand Eyes was revealed, hovering majestically in the air. Attendants numbered tens of thousands, voices celebrating [the bodhisattva's] compassion resounded to shake the mountains and valleys. In a moment, the bodhisattva reverted to her former person, then with great solemnity departed. The king, the queen, and the two sisters made a funeral pyre, preserved the holy relics, and on that same mountain built a

Tao-hsüan again asked: "The bodhisattva can take mortal form in any place and surely ought not to be present solely at Fragrant Mountain." The spirit replied: "Of all sites at present within the bounds of China, Fragrant Mountain is pre-eminent. The mountain lies two hundred leagues to the south of Mount Sung. It is the same as the Fragrant Mountain in present day Ju-chou."

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Further Reading:

Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978).

P. Steven Sangren, "Female Gender in Chinese Religious Symbols: Kuan Yin, Ma Tsu, and the 'Eternal Mother'," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1983), pp. 4-25.

R. A. Stein, "Avalokitesvara/Keuan-yin: Exemple de transformation d'un dieu en déesse," *Cahiers d'Extrême-Asie*, vol. 2 (1986), pp. 17-80.