



AMBIGUITY OF THE GENDER OF AVALOKITEŚVARA IN THE SUI-TANG PERIOD: A Comparative Study of India & China

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ABSTRACT

Buddhism was transmitted to China during the Han Dynasty (202 BCE-220 CE) and was integrated into existing Chinese cultures such as Confucianism and Taoism. Gradually it emerged as a specific cultural phenomenon with Chinese qualities and traits. Within Buddhism itself, Avalokitesvara, a Bodhisattva experienced a long process of change. He is believed to have made a great vow to assist sentient beings in times of difficulty and to postpone his own Buddha-hood until he has assisted every sentient being in achieving nirvana. One of the striking changes in the image of Avalokitesvara, known as Kuan-yin in China, is the shifting of the gender of the deity. The great Sui-Tang dynasties patronised Buddhism as a state cult during the greater portion of their reign. Many scholars like Wu Yan, Jiao Jie, Sun Xiushen and Cui Feng observed that the Sui-Tang period was the turning point for the gender transformation of Kuan-yin (Cui Feng 2013, Sun Xiushen 1995, Wu Yan 2015). What are the reasons for transformations in the visual imagery of Avalokitesvara? It is proposed to make a comparative study on the representations of Avalokiteśvara in India and China during the Sui-Tang period (seventh to tenth centuries), in order to see how Kuan-yin transformed in China and whether there might be influences from India in the ways that Kuan-yin's gender is constructed in the iconography.

Key Words: *Avalokiteśvara, Kuan-yin, Bodhisattvas*

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Introduction

The Sui-Tang period witnessed the growing significance of the cult of *Bodhisattvas*, especially

that of Kuan-yin, i.e. Avalokiteśvara. He became the most popular *Bodhisattva* and a large number of his images were represented through various forms and

functions that demonstrate his increased popularity and independence from other figures. Moreover, the twenty-fifth Chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* took on the status of an individual sutra called *Kuan-yin Sutra* (also known as *Kuan-shi-yin Universal Gateway*). In the ninth century CE, the number of *Lotus Sutra* manuscripts decreased and that of *Kuan-yin Sutra* increased, which further indicates how prevalent the Kuan-yin cult was in this period (Wu Yan, 2015).

Before we investigate the process of transformation of the deity in China, we shall first examine the Indian deity Avalokiteśvara as there might be influences from India in the ways that gender is constructed in the iconography. The related forms of Kuan-yin in China will also be examined to understand how the iconography transformed and the possible reasons behind these occurrences,

along with a brief description of the different types of *Avalokiteśvara* images in Indian art.

Archaeological evidence provides strong proof that the images of Avalokiteśvara were first created in Gandhara and Mathura by the second century CE during the Kushana period. Avalokiteśvara was depicted either independently or as a member of a triad (Fig. 4.1 and Fig. 4.2). He was often portrayed as *Padmapāni*, 'Bearer of the Lotus' sitting in a 'royal ease' pose. Sometimes he is also depicted as holding a lotus and water-pot (*kamandalu*) as in the earlier iconography of the Bodhisattva. After fifth century CE, Avalokiteśvara images became more ascetic than regal and were gradually promoted to the status of an independent deity. The distinct identification of this figure was the Amitābha in his crown (Fig.4.3).



Figure 4.1: *Padmapāni*



Figure 4.2: Buddhist Triads



Figure 4.3: Avalokiteśvara



Figure 4.4: Kuan-yin



Fig.4.5 Kuan-yin

The images of *Avalokiteśvara* mentioned above were also brought to China along with the dissemination of Buddhism. Saunders and Chutiwongs also contend that the Indian Buddhist images (belonging to the Gandhara style) served as prototypes of similar representation in the Far East (Saunders 1960: 130-131). Influenced by India, in the beginning, Kuan-yin was depicted as Padmapāni (lotus bearer) (Fig. 4.4 and Fig. 4.5), holding a lotus and a water pot. As can be seen, in the early period he was depicted as a man with masculine body. However, in the Sui-Tang period, he was depicted as Willow Kuan-yin¹ (Yang-liu or Yang-zhi Kuan-yin in Chinese) and this description carries onwards from Tang dynasty in Chinese art: a willow branch substituted the lotus in Kuan-yin's hand but the water pot remained (Figs. 4.6, 4.7). His/Her slight S-shaped curvaceous body and dressing (Fig. 4.6 and Fig. 4.7) did not look like a man, which creates the confusion of the deity's gender. In terms of *Shishi Yao-lan*, even Master Daoxuan of early Tang period criticized that Kuan-yin at that time were depicted as a lady.² Why did this transformation happen?



Figure 4.6: Willow Kuan-yin



Figure 4.7: Willow Kuan-yin

In the Post-Gupta period, a large number of *Avalokiteśvara* figures were produced, which indicates that the cult of this Bodhisattva became more and more prevalent in India. *Avalokiteśvara* in this time period inherited the characteristics of representation from Kushana and Gupta periods, sometimes as one of the companions of Buddha or as the principal deity, and also developed more elaborately. Thus, from the sculptures from seventh to eighth centuries (Fig. 4.8), *Avalokiteśvara* was portrayed with matted loose curly hair, an antelope (*ajina*) skin across his shoulder, lotus held in hand, a miniature *Amitābha* above his head and beads (*aksamālā*) around the neck.

Avalokiteśvara was worshipped as a powerful saviour and was frequently depicted as a central deity with attendants flanking him. As a central figure, he was always accompanied by representations of different figures such as Buddha and some other Bodhisattvas, which indicates his power and sublime divinity that sustains the universe. As can be seen from the statues from Ellora Caves (Fig. 4.9), *Avalokiteśvara* was depicted accompanied by two female deities *Syamatara* and *Bhrkuti*, who are



Figure 4.8: *Avalokiteśvara*

regarded as the predecessors of *Avalokiteśvara*'s canonized pair of female companions.



Figure 4.9: *Avalokiteśvara*



Figure 4.10: *Litany of Avalokiteśvara*

Moreover, the depiction of *Avalokiteśvara* saving people from perils (*'Litany of Avalokiteśvara'*) was portrayed in many of the caves of Ajanta, Ellora, and Kanheri. As can be seen in Cave No.2 of Kanheri caves, the large *Avalokiteśvara* (Fig. 4.10) occupies the major space in the centre, in standing pose with a lotus stalk held in his left hand. The right hand which is missing might have been in *abhaya mudrā*. A miniature figure of *Amitābha* crowns his forehead. The deity is surrounded by groups of small figures who are praying to him to protect them from perils (like lions, poisonous snakes, wild elephants, imprisonment, thieves, conflagration, shipwrecks and diseases). Chutiwongs and Pia observed that this kind of manifestation of *Kuan-yin* was later brought to China and pervasively worshipped. (Chutiwongs 2002)

The concept of *Kuan-yin* as the omnipotent saviour which prevailed in Wei, Jin and Southern and Northern dynasties reached its apogee under the Tang dynasty. Notwithstanding the fact that many of *Kuan-yin*'s icons were made as attendant icons, increasing numbers of images of *Kuan-yin* were being housed in temples as the principal deity. In Dunhuang grottos, *Kuan-yin* became an indispensable theme and the illustrations of *Kuan-yin Sutra* were largely depicted, such as No. 45, No. 74, No. 126 and so on in Mogao grottos. These frescos, similar to those found in India, depict the scenes of *Kuan-yin* saving people from perils.³ The *Kuan-yin* depicted in such themes were Sheng *Kuan-yin*, water-moon *Kuan-yin*, four-armed *Kuan-yin* and eleven-faced *Kuan-yin*. In the wall painting in Cave No. 45 of Dunhuang (Fig.4.11), the *Kuan-yin* has a miniature *Amitābha* in his crown, round fleshy face, red lips, half-open eyes, small wavy green moustache, jewels on the head and loose drifting attire. The deity is portrayed in the centre of the painting flanked by 33 small scenes of people suffering from dangers. There are inscriptions describing the nature of dangers that *Kuan-yin* saves them from. It tells the story of *Kuan-yin* saving people from monkeys and other wild fierce animals (Fig.4.11-2); also shows *Kuan-yin* protecting people from fire (Fig. 4.11-3); and *Kuan-yin* is depicted preventing the sea killing



Figure 4.11: Kuan-yin



Figure 4.11-1: (detail)

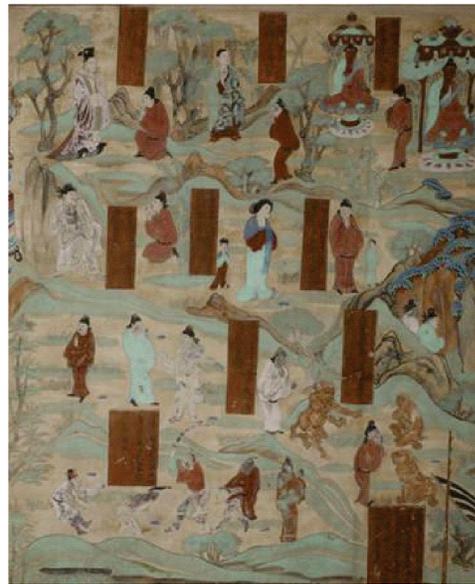


Figure 4.11-2: (detail)



Figure 4.11-3: (detail)



Figure 4.11-4: (detail)

people (Fig.4.11-4). Though he was portrayed with small green moustache, many scholars still hold the idea that this Kuan-yin has feminine features like round fleshy face, soft fair skin and red lips.

The depiction of the scene is quite vivid and together with the crowded composition, creates a tense atmosphere. The mountains, water and trees that comprise the background of the paintings, could be considered as a Chinese classic *Qing-lu Shan-shui Hua* (green landscape painting)⁴ (Fig.4.12). The integration of Chinese elements into Buddhist art implies the localisation of Buddhism in China. It also exhibits that the development of Kuan-yin that happened in India also appeared in China but with its own innovations. Thus, it is not surprising to see new forms of Kuan-yin like Water-moon Kuan-yin and Guiding Kuan-yin created in China during the Tang period.



Figure 4.12: *Minghuang Xingshu Tu*

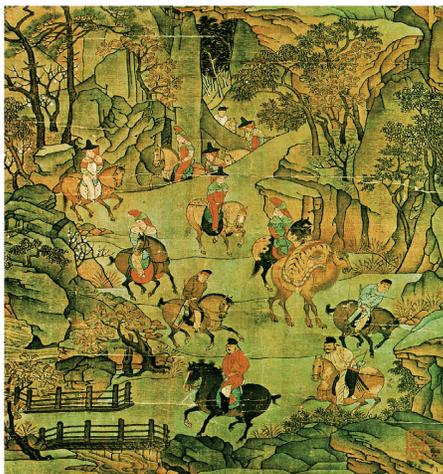


Figure 4.12-1: (detail)

Another theme in the depiction of this Bodhisattva is the supernatural form of Avalokiteśvara which occurs with Tantric elements

that flourished in northern India during the Post-Gupta period. Avalokiteśvara was depicted with more hands or heads than his previous representations (Fig. 4.13 and Fig. 4.14). Subsequently, this form of Avalokiteśvara was largely portrayed in India and had profound influence on China. With the coming of Tantric Buddhism, many esoteric scriptures and texts regarding Kuan-yin were also introduced into China. Thus, the cult of Kuan-yin developed diversely and different forms of Kuan-yin became prevalent. However, regardless of the numerous forms of Tantric Kuan-yin like Eleven-headed Kuan-yin (Fig. 4.15), Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Kuan-yin (Fig. 4.16), Amoghapāsa, Cintāmanī-cakra, Hayagrīva and others, they were all depicted with religious features: solemn, divine and sublime. The secularised and feminine features that were discussed previously do not appear on the imagery of the Tantric Kuan-yin, and the ambiguity of the gender would also not bother the viewers because they were apparently depicted as sacred male (Wu Yan 2015, Yan Juanying, 2006).

‘Even where the Bodhisattva is portrayed as a ‘Savior from Perils’, as is his role in the *Lotus Sutra*, there is no indication of his feminine manifestations.’ (Benjamin2012:7) As we can see from the image (Figs.4.9, 4.13, 4.14), Avalokiteśvara in India is clearly a male. Benjamin does not comment on the mixed masculine and feminine characteristics of Avalokiteśvara in the ‘*Litany*’ images. In Cave No.2 of *Kanheri Caves* (Fig.4.10), even though the shoulders of the figure are quite round and fleshy, the hips are considerably wide and the waist is fairly narrow, Benjamin believes that feminine forms of Avalokiteśvara are not explored in these images, ‘where the opportunity is perhaps greatest, can only serve to illustrate the strength of the masculine perception of this *Bodhisattva* in the Indian context.’ (Benjamin 2012:7) ‘Rather than being an exception, this instead appears to be a matter of change in artistic style.’ (Benjamin 2012:7) Here the strong masculine body of Avalokiteśvara indicates that ‘there is not even a hint here of the androgyny which appears in the near contemporary Chinese portrayals’ (Benjamin2012:7).

All in all, irrespective of whether *Avalokiteśvara* is depicted as a companion or as a main independent



Figure 4.13: Four-armed *Avalokitesvara*



Figures. 4.14^s and 4.15 Eleven-faced *Avalokitesvara*



Figure 4.16: Thousand-handed and eyed Kuan-yin, Tang dynasty

deity, irrespective of his portrayal in a traditional form or in a Tantric form archaeological evidence provides strong proof that Avalokitesvara was represented as a masculine figure in India in a parallel time period as that of the Tang dynasty.

Why did some depictions of Kuan-yin lead to the ambiguity of gender but others did not? Many scholars believe that it was during the Tang dynasty that the gender of Kuan-yin began to possess

feminine features and started to change gender markings. For instance, Wu Yan held the idea that the Tang dynasty is the key time period for Kuan-yin's feminisation. 'There are a great deal of graceful and charming feminine Kuan-yin or neutralised but with the feminine tendency. The feminine and secular tendency started to show up from Kuan-yin's sacred divinity and Kuan-yin's divinity and humanity, religiousness and secularity integrated with each

other' (Wu Yan 2015: 143). This perspective of Wu Yan, to a certain extent, is quite convincing and appears plausible. For instance, Kuan-yin's depiction as Standing Willow Kuan-yin (Fig.4.7) holding a water pot facing up on his left hand, and a willow branch going downwards on another. With a crown on his head, he is surrounded by beautiful shining jewels and flowing ribbons. Surprisingly, there is no moustache above his lips. And along with features like his slight S-shaped curvaceous body, fine and smooth skin, arched eyebrows, tenuous downward-looking eyes and soft round face, this gracious figure, however, actually looks more like a court lady of the Tang period (Fig.4.17) if one ignores the flattened chest.



Figure 4.17: *Zanhua Shinu Tu*



Figure 17-1: (detail)

As can be seen from the depiction of contemporary women in paintings and terracotta (Figs.4.17, 4.18, 4.19 and 4.20), if one ignores or overlooks the face or body proportions, there are many similarities between Kuan-yin and aesthetic depictions of women. The connection between the Kuan-yin and contemporary representation of feminine figures needs further detailed study.



Figure 4.18: *Bu-nian Tu*



Figure 4.18-1: (detail)



Figure 4.19: Female, Terracotta



Figure 4.20: Female, Terracotta

One more important observation when comparing contemporary women and men portrayed (Figs.4.18, 4.21, 4.22), whether through clothes or facial expressions or body figures, the distinctions between representations of man and woman actually are quite remarkable especially in Fig.4.18. For instance, the man has darker skin, broader eyebrows and long square face, looks strong and wears masculine clothes alongside a moustache. However, in Indian art, the female is depicted with round breasts, curvaceous body and big hips while the male has an expanded strong flat chest with definite masculine characteristics. Thus, the identification of gendered characteristics in Indian art seems more related to physiological differences like genitalia, breasts and chest. Conversely, in Chinese art, the distinction between men and women depended on certain external signs such as clothes, jewels, makeup, and facial hair such as moustache, posture, facial expressions, and skin colour among other markers. Due to Chinese traditional restrictions borrowed from Confucian rituals and rites, breasts, genitalia and other private parts of human anatomy could not be shown in art.



Figure 4.21: Mu-ma Tu



Figure 4.22: Terracotta Warrior

Thus, examined from these considerations, the Kuan-yin depicted by Yan Liben in Fig.4.7 is more close to the imagery of contemporary women (Figs. 17, 18, 19, 20). Nevertheless, it is contended that Wu Yan's opinion might be one-sided if approached from another aspect. As can be seen from the stele (Fig. 4.23), the Kuan-yin here has an added moustache above his lips. If Kuan-yin is a woman, why does she have a moustache? If Kuan-yin is a man, then why is he dressed like a woman? As Gong Gang suggests, the depiction of the moustache is to consciously emphasize the gender of Kuan-yin as a male. Because, as Xuangzang recorded, both men and women wear jewels and wreaths⁶, but Chinese people could not have been expected to follow Indian customs and would think that even though Bodhisattvas are not female, they are depicted with feminine characteristics. Hence, the moustache is portrayed to embody his gender. But this view fails to answer the following question: If he is a male, then why was the moustache (Fig.4.7) removed? This creates unnecessary confusion. The Tang dynasty Kuan-yin had been portrayed with moustache. Then why does the moustache disappear? Does the confusion demonstrate that Kuan-yin was undergoing a transformation in keeping with the times?



Figure 4.23: Kuan-yin on a stele

Besides, Robert Brown argued that the Buddha images, with downcast eyes, absent genitals and slight bodies, of Sarnath in Gupta period become feminine in appearance. He compares Buddha images from Sarnath with the Bodhisattvas, Hindu gods, goddesses and courtesans from the same time period. Brown argued that the images of Sarnath Buddha were not male but feminised and speculated that the Buddha of Sarnath might be regarded as a mother figure with a unique gender (Robert Brown 2002: 165-179). With the transmission of Buddhism from India to China, could these feminised Buddha images have influenced Chinese Buddhist iconography? It requires a further study.

Scholars like Xu Huawei, Wang Shuigen and Meng Man hold that political factors in the Tang dynasty pushed the gender change of Kuan-yin in China. Much attention has to be paid to the first and only female Emperor Wu Zetian in thousand years of absolute masculine Chinese monarchy. In the historical records, she was born in a Buddhist family, advocated Buddhism strongly and had a close interest in Buddhist thought and association (Cen Zhongmian 1982: 167). In addition, she achieved renunciation in Ganye Temple (Xi'an Prov.) in 649 CE. Importantly, she was considered as the female manifestation of *Bodhisattva* Maitreya at that time.⁷ Meng Man put forward the idea that the imagery of Kuan-yin changed from man to woman during the ruling period of Wu Zetian. (Meng Man, 2008)⁸

In the Sui-Tang period, political ideals, economics and culture were highly developed, the society was relatively civilized and open-minded, and a woman could be an emperor. Meng Man considered that it created the conditions for the contemporary ideology and aesthetics being transformed. For example: the Maitreya statue was made by copying the face of Wu Zetian (Rui Chuanming, 2002). Literary evidence proves that the appearance of Kuan-yin shares resemblances with that of women. Even though the face of Wu Zetian was the prototype of the Maitreya statue, there is no direct evidence to prove conclusively that the iconography of Kuan-yin at that time was also meant to be female. Why did Kuan-yin's gender change and not Maitreya's, since the empress is regarded as the manifestation of the latter *Bodhisattva*? A

further examination of the relationship of Wu Zetian and Kuan-yin may be required.

An important opinion held by Jiao Jie involves the worshipping activities of laywomen affecting the feminisation of Kuan-yin in Tang dynasty. The number of believers of Kuan-yin increased in this time period, ranging from aristocratic ladies to common women. From the beginning of the Tang period, the noble women had already been fascinated with Buddhist activities and patronised the chanting and copying of the *sutras*, the building of the temples, the making of the statues and paintings, as well as helping the monks and nuns. For instance, among others Princess Chengyang changed the Ling-gan Temple into Kuan-yin Temple (later named Qing-long Temple) in Xi'an Prov.; Princess Guiyang established the Chongyi Temple (Xi'an Prov.) for her husband; Wu Zetian built the Taiyuan Temple (He'nan Prov.) for her mother.

Besides, compared to other feudal dynasties, this era does stand out for other reasons. Tang, an era of liberation, is considered the golden age for women. Not only was there a female emperor, but the social status of women also improved substantially, compared to other time periods. Thus Jiao Jie's idea that the female aristocrat's upholding of Buddhism somehow influences its visual registers is plausible. For example, there are a great number of statues and paintings of Kuan-yin in Longmen and Dunhuang grottoes during the Tang, and many of them were under the patronage of women. In terms of Sun Changwu's observation, among the inscriptions of the stone carved Kuan-yin in Longmen grottoes in He'nan Province, (not including the Kuan-yin of West Trinity), one-third of them were patronised by women (Sun Changwu, 1996).

A large number of the paintings and terracotta figurines of court ladies (Fig.4.19 and Fig. 4.20) were made during the Tang period, which influenced the making of Buddhist icons, especially Kuan-yin. In the context of open societies and cultural exchanges and inclusion, the artists of Tang absorbed the '*tribhanga* pose' of Indian Buddhist art, gradually abandoning the exotic facial male features (high nose and deep-set eyes) and inclining towards female appearance (soft eyebrows and sharp eyes). Under the participation and patronage of women,

the iconography of Kuan-yin more or less reflects their will. The female patrons would consciously or unconsciously want to integrate their ideology and the artisans would have had to listen to their opinion when they designed and made the statues of Kuan-yin. This is the reason that Jiao Jie argues that the imagery of Kuan-yin during the Tang period shares similarities with paintings of court ladies (Jiao Jie, 2015) and helped in the transformation of Kuan-yin's gender. For instance, many scholars consider the Kuan-yin discussed earlier (Fig.4.6) patronized by a nun Zhenzhi as the representative work of female Kuan-yin. Jiao Jie believes that the reason that it was made to look like a woman due to the nun's desire and choice, but he fails to explain how this statue bears the desire of the nun.

Besides the evidence discussed above, an awareness of the portraits or statues of Kuan-yin kept in the house for women for worship need to be paid equal attention to. For example: Chen Xuan's wife tried her best to get a Kuan-yin statue in her private room (Jiao Jie, 2015), Miss Zhang worships Kuan-yin at home (Zhou Shaoliang and Zhao Chao:

214), Miss Du stitched the Kuan-yin's portraits on the embroidery (XieSiwei, 2011)⁹. There are also lots of gilt bronze statues of Kuan-yin of the Tang period excavated in different places (like Lingtong, Qianyang and so on) of Xi'an in Shaanxi (Fig.4.24 and Fig. 4.25). Kuan-yin here has a slim body, with one leg slightly bent to form an S-shape together with the flying ribbons, a small Amitābha above the head, a willow branch in his right hand and water pot in another. Jiao Jie believed that these gilt bronze statues of Kuan-yin in Shaanxi were made for personal worship at home. And among them, Jiao Jie believed the plump figures with naked breasts are female Kuan-yin and worshipped by women.

However, the author is of the opinion that it might remain a much-contested problem, even during the relatively open-minded Tang dynasty era, since the upper body of a female is not to be naked. It is note-worthy that along with the gilt bronze statues of Kuan-yin, many Taoist statues were also found at the same place, which indicates that Buddhism and Taoism developed simultaneously under the Tang dynasty. There is a stone tablet (*San-*



Figure 4.24: Standing Kuan-yin



Figure 4.25: Standing Kuan-yin

jiao Daochang Wen Stele) made by Buddhist and Taoist together in Chengdu (Si'chuan Prov.), which again strongly embodies the mutual religious and cultural penetration of Buddhism and Taoism. Thus, parallel study of the contemporary Taoism also is necessary.

The above analysis regarding the ambiguity of the gender of Kuan-yin indicates the fact that Kuan-yin is under the process of sinicization in China and gets modified and represented in its larger social context. No matter whether we are looking at folk beliefs, Chinese traditional beliefs, Confucianism, Taoism, there are many other aspects to further explore in greater detail, nevertheless, all contributed to the changing nature of Kuan-yin images throughout the historical period.

Notes

1. Willow Kuan-yin: South Korean scholar Jiang Xijing considered Willow Kuan-yin first appeared in Northern Zhou dynasty (557 A.D.-581 A.D.) and Chinese scholar Wu Yan believes the first extant Willow Kuan-yin dating to 539 A.D. (See Wu Yan, 2015, *The History of the Culture of Chinese Kuan-yin*, Zhejiang: Zhejiang University Press)
2. See *Shi-shi Yao-lan*, compiled by Monk Shi Daocheng in Northern Song dynasty, including the institution, rules, customs and etc. of Buddhism.
3. Actually there are two types of the depiction of Kuan-yin saving people: 1st one, Kuan-yin appears in every scene, 2nd one, it depicts the scenes of people suffering from danger calling Kuan-yin's name for help. See Wu Yan, 2015, *The History of the Culture of Chinese Kuan-yin*, Zhejiang: Zhejiang University Press.
4. *Qing-lu Shan-shui Hua* (green landscape painting) is a kind of Chinese landscape paintings, using mineral azurite and green as the main color. It started from Six dynasties but till Tang dynasty gradually established the basic characteristics of green landscape painting.
5. Chutiwongs identified it from seventh to eighth centuries but Akira Miyaji assigns it to the sixth century CE.
6. See Xuanzang, *Da-Tang Xi-yu Ji* (*Great Tang Records on the Western Regions*), translated by JiXianlin and published by Shaan'xi Publishing House in 1985. It is a narrative of Xuanzang's journey to Western regions of Chinese historiography, compiled in 646 CE.
7. See Liu Xun, *Book of Tang* (945 CE) or see *Dayun Jing Shu* (691 CE) By referring the Buddha's prophecy of *Jing-guang Tian-nu/nv* that she will be the King of a country and combining the Maitreya cult at that time, Xue Huaiyi made this sutra to create the theoretical basis for Wu Zetian to legitimize her reign of Tang Empire.
8. See An Interview of Meng Man, 2008.
9. See Bai Juyi (a poet from Tang dynasty), *The Collation of Bai Juyi's Collection*, collated by XieSiwei, 2011, Shanghai:China Publishing House.

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