

# Professor Chun-Fang Yu Gives Lecture on Guanyin and Chinese Culture

## 于君方教授主講「觀音菩薩和中國文化」

Written and translated by Miguel Gracia-Zhang

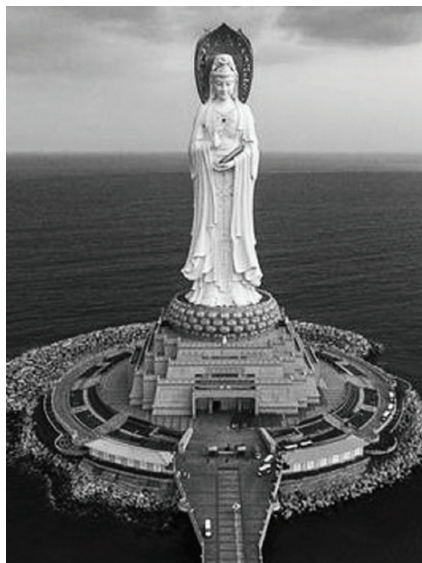
葛親孝文/譯

On May 6, 2021, Professor Chun-Fang Yu from Columbia University gave an online lecture to the Dharma Realm Buddhist University on Guanyin Bodhisattva and Chinese Culture. Yu is the Sheng Yen Professor Emerita of Chinese Buddhism; her research revolves around how Buddhism evolved throughout Chinese history, as well as how Chinese culture influenced Buddhism.

In her lecture, Yu began by asking how Buddhism, originally a foreign religion, came to be one of the three great religions of China (on par with Daoism and Confucianism). The answer, of course, is complicated, and can be attributed to various factors, such as similarities with existing concepts of nothingness and meditation within Daoism, promotion from royals and elites, and the appeal of savior figures.

To illustrate the complicated interactions between Buddhism and Chinese culture, Yu discussed the evolution of how Guanyin Bodhisattva was perceived and worshipped throughout Chinese history. Guanyin, also known as Avalokitesvara, who is present in many different traditions of Buddhism, but has been portrayed in different ways throughout history. For example, Guanyin was not portrayed as feminine at first in China, as tenth century paintings from Dunhuang depict him with moustaches. In addition, Guanyin is associated with different qualities depending on the geographical location. In Southeast Asia, Guanyin is connected with royalty, and is seen as a “legitimizing symbol.” However, this is not the case in China, where the royalty was already legitimized with the Mandate of Heaven.

In China, worship of Guanyin became popularized through the translation of the *Lotus Sutra*, specifically its 25th chapter,



2021年5月6日，于君方教授於法界佛教大學在線講授了「觀音菩薩和中國文化」。于教授是哥倫比亞大學宗教系「聖嚴漢傳佛學講座」榮休教授；她的研究針對佛教在中國歷史上的演變以及中國文化如何影響佛教而展開。

在演講中，她提出：佛教是外來宗教，如何與道教和儒教並駕齊驅，成為中國三大宗教之一？答案當然很複雜，可以歸納出

多種因素，例如佛教教義與道教已有的虛無、冥想近似，來自宮廷和精英知識份子的鼎力支持，以及循聲救苦、廣度眾生的救世形象吸引力。

為了說明佛教與中國文化之間複雜的互動，于教授討論了中國歷史上觀世音菩薩如何被認知和供奉的演變。觀音菩薩，在歷史上有不同的造型。例如，觀音菩薩在中國起初並非女性形象，因為敦煌十世紀繪畫描繪了他蓄有短鬚。此外，觀音菩薩因地理位置相異而具有不同的品質。在東南亞，觀音菩薩與皇室有關，被視為「合法化的象徵」。然而，在中國，皇室已經通過天命合法化了，因此情況不同。

在中國，觀音菩薩是通過《法華經》的翻譯而普及的，特別是第二十五章《普門品》。這部經闡述了一種「新民主

the “Universal Gateway” (translated by BTTS as the “Universal Door”). The sutra expounded a “new and democratic way of salvation,” where all one had to do was recite Guanyin’s name sincerely to be freed from myriad difficulties. In addition to the “Universal Door Chapter,” compilations of miracle stories, which circulated among monasteries since the 4th century, also played a role in popularizing Guanyin. Through these miracle stories, Guanyin transformed from a “mythical figure” to a “real presence.”

Of the artistic depictions of Guanyin, the water-moon Guanyin, the white-robe guanyin, and the child-giving Guanyin were among the most popular. Professor Yu notes that many of the attributes of these depictions cannot be traced to the sutras, but instead are rooted in local legends and regional culture. This was evidence of how Guanyin became indigenized, as artists attempted “to present the Bodhisattva in a way that would respond to the spiritual needs of the faithful.” Through images, miracle stories, and other legends, Guanyin became a regional and historical figure in China, a Chinese goddess.

One of the clearest examples of “indigenization” was the legend of Miaoshan, the “human manifestation” of Guanyin. Miaoshan was a princess who spurned her father’s wishes to marry and instead practiced Buddhism, but was executed for her unfilial conduct. She later returned to the world, achieved enlightenment, and sacrificed her hands and eyes to save her father’s life. Through this story, the Bodhisattva was given a historical setting as well as a birthday, as is the case with all Chinese gods and goddesses.

As Professor Yu concluded the lecture, she noted that the popularity of Guanyin may have in part been a reaction against the antifeminist stance Neo-Confucianism, the established state religion around the tenth and the twelfth century. In addition, though one might assume that Guanyin, as a female figure, was empowering to women, the reality was more complicated. Yu notes that the “feminine images of Guanyin...were not and could not be endowed with a real woman’s characteristics,” and that worshippers perceived Guanyin as “child giving” so that “the domestic religion would never be disrupted by lack of a male heir.”

Throughout her lecture, Yu grounded her discussion of Guanyin as a figure who both influenced and was in turn shaped by Chinese culture throughout several centuries. “In the end, the influence of Buddhism on Chinese culture cannot be separated from the influence of Chinese culture on Guanyin belief,” she concluded. ❀

的救度方法」，任何人只要誠心念誦觀音菩薩，就可以解脫萬難。除了《普門品》之外，四世紀以來，流傳於各寺院的感應奇蹟故事彙編，也起到了普及觀音菩薩的作用。通過這些感應奇蹟故事，觀音菩薩從「神話人物」變成了「真實存在」。

在觀音菩薩的各種畫像造型中，水月觀音、白衣觀音、送子觀音最為普及。于教授指出，這些描繪的許多屬性無法追溯到佛經，而是植根於當地的傳說和地域文化。這是觀音菩薩本土化的證據，因為藝術家們試圖「以一種回應信徒精神需求的方式呈現菩薩」。通過圖像、奇蹟故事和其他傳說，觀音菩薩成為中國地區和歷史人物，中國的女神。

「本土化」最明顯的例子之一是觀音菩薩的「人間化身」妙善公主的傳說。妙善公主無視父親要她出嫁的心願，去修行佛法，卻因被視為不孝而處死。後來她回到人間並成道。為了救父親的命，犧牲了自己的雙手和眼睛。通過這個故事，觀音菩薩被賦予了歷史典故和生日，就像中國所有的神祇一樣。

演講結束時，于教授指出觀音菩薩的普及可能是對新儒家的反女性主義立場反應，新儒家是十世紀和十二世紀左右中國的國教。此外，雖然人們可能認為觀音菩薩作為女性形象，是賦予女性權力，但實際情況要複雜得多。于教授指出，「觀音菩薩的女性形象……沒有也不可能被賦予真正的女性特徵」，信眾相信觀音菩薩會「送子」，因此「家庭宗教信仰永遠不會因缺乏男性繼承人而受到干擾。」

在整場演講中，于教授將觀音菩薩作為一個既影響中國又反過來被中國文化塑造了幾個世紀的人物來討論。她總結道：「歸根結柢，佛教對中國文化的影響，離不開中國文化對觀音菩薩信仰的影響。」 ❀