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Book Review

Book Review: Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial Chinaii

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Abstract: This review examines Becoming Guanyin by Yuhang Li, a groundbreaking study that recovers the devotional lives of Buddhist women in late imperial China through analysis of material culture. Moving beyond text-centered approaches, Li explores how women used embodied practices—such as painting, dance, and hair embroidery—to cultivate religious identities and negotiate spiritual authority within Confucian social constraints. The book's central concept of "becoming Guanyin" highlights the dynamic process through which women identified with the bodhisattva to express agency, devotion, and resilience. By combining art historical analysis with religious studies and gender history, Li offers a compelling interdisciplinary framework. This review evaluates the book's contributions and limitations, especially its treatment of social hierarchy and the broader implications of using non-textual sources in Buddhist studies.

Keywords: Guanyin; Buddhist women; material culture; religious agency; late imperial China

1. Introduction

Yuhang Li's (2019) Becoming Guanyin: Artistic Devotion of Buddhist Women in Late Imperial China addresses one of the most persistent blind spots in Chinese Buddhist scholarship: the systematic erasure of women's voices from religious historical records. Despite constituting the majority of Buddhist devotees throughout Chinese history, women's spiritual experiences have been largely absent from canonical texts and scholarly discourse (Grant, 2008). Li's study confronts this historiographical gap through meticulous analysis of material culture—paintings, embroideries, hairpins, and dance performances—thereby recovering what she terms the "silent majority" of female Buddhist practitioners whose devotional lives have been obscured by centuries of male-dominated religious writing.

The book's central thesis revolves around the transformative concept of becoming Guanyin, whereby women across diverse social strata engaged in embodied devotional practices that temporarily dissolved conventional boundaries between worshipper and deity. Li (2019) appears to tend to suggest that the bodhisattva Guanyin—whose iconographic evolution seemingly encompassed what could be characterized as fluid gender presentations and compassionate accessibility—provided women with what appears to represent a substantially powerful spiritual archetype for navigating the tensions between Confucian social prescriptions and Buddhist aspirations for transcendence.

Li's (2019) methodological insights carry comparable significance here. Her analysis distinguishes itself through systematic elevation of non-textual sources to the rank of legitimate historical archives. Rather than treating devotional art and ritual objects as ancillary to canonical texts, she frames material culture as an alternative epistemological framework for comprehending religious life. Such a shift allows devotional objects to communicate not merely as aesthetic artifacts but as vessels of theological reflection and lived spiritual practices.

By investing these sources with interpretive authority, Li develops a methodology capable of recovering women's suppressed voices and illuminating the subtle negotiations through which female practitioners claimed religious authority within patriarchal structures. This approach reveals that material culture can disclose forms of theological reasoning and embodied spirituality often inaccessible through

textual records alone. It redefines both the archive of Chinese religious history and the analytical tools available for its investigation.

2. Historical and Theoretical Context

The Ming (1368–1644) and early Qing (1644–1912) dynasties unfolded within a cultural climate shaped by the dominance of Neo-Confucian orthodoxy and the persistence of popular Buddhist devotion. For women, this was a period in which daily life and spiritual expression were heavily conditioned by the moral codes of the "three obediences" (sancong 三从)—to father, husband, and son—and the "four virtues" (side 四德)—moral integrity, disciplined speech, modest bearing, and household diligence (Mann, 1997). Such norms reinforced patriarchal control, yet they also opened unexpected avenues for alternative religious practices that existed outside both state regulation and familial authority.

Building on scholarship that highlights lived religion rather than abstract doctrine, Li interprets religious identity as something continually reshaped through devotional activity. Her use of the idea of "becoming" points to a process in which belief was enacted and embodied, rather than fixed in adherence to official orthodoxy. This perspective avoids essentialist definitions and directs attention to the historical and material conditions that framed women's opportunities for spiritual engagement.

Li's examination of Guanyin demonstrates the usefulness of this framework. Although early Chinese translations of Sanskrit texts depicted Guanyin as male, the bodhisattva gradually assumed feminine attributes during the Tang and Song dynasties (Yü, 2001). This shift produced a tradition marked by gender fluidity, enabling women from different social backgrounds to see Guanyin as both a religious exemplar and a source of strength. The richness of Guanyin's imagery mirrors broader debates about gender, sexuality, and authority in Chinese Buddhism, showing how visual culture provided women with a means to negotiate religious agency in late imperial society.

3. Chapter Analysis

3.1. The Paradox of Sacred Performance

Li (2019) turns to one of the most debated practices of women's Buddhist devotion in the late Ming: Guanyin dance performances staged by courtesans. Among them, Xu Jinghong (徐惊鸿) stands out as a renowned performer whose fame spread widely through southeastern literati circles. Her example illustrates the tensions within courtesans' pursuit of religious authority. These women occupied an ambiguous social position—dismissed as morally suspect yet admired as cultivated figures who could engage with elite men as intellectual equals and artistic collaborators (Chen, 2021).

According to Li, such performances created what she calls "liminal moments of transcendence," fleeting occasions in which distinctions between performer and deity, sensuality and faith, or entertainment and ritual temporarily dissolved. Through close reading of contemporary accounts, particularly those by the literatus Wang Daokun (汪道昆), she exposes the ambivalence characterizing male patrons' responses. While praising the artistic mastery and spiritual sincerity of courtesan dancers, these same observers simultaneously questioned whether authentic devotion could emerge from bodies they considered polluted by commercial sexuality.

The chapter also provides evidence that courtesans themselves navigated these contradictions with considerable sophistication. Many embraced Buddhist devotion as a source of meaning and hope for karmic amelioration, even while constrained by social limitations. Some eventually pursued monastic ordination, though their past occupations continued to shape how religious communities evaluated their sincerity and worthiness (Chen, 2021).

Li's (2019) analysis demonstrates that Guanyin dance functioned simultaneously across multiple registers: as entertainment for literati patrons, as crucial income for performers, as authentic opportunities for spiritual expression, and as innovative spaces for cultural experimentation. This multifunctionality exemplifies her broader argument about the ways women's religious practices operated both within and against patriarchal social structures, neither simply conforming to nor directly overturning established hierarchies.

3.2. Elite Women's Devotional Artistry

The second chapter shifts analytical focus to devotional paintings created by gentry women, concentrating on two particularly well-documented practitioners: Xing Cijing (邢慈静, 1573–after 1640) and Fang Weiyi (方维仪, 1585–1668). Both women

turned to artistic practice as a means of processing personal crises while fulfilling social expectations of virtuous feminine behavior.

Xing Cijing's devotional activities serve as an example of how profound personal experiences of loss were able to be converted into visual and religious forms of expression during the late Ming and early Qing dynasties. Having suffered from years of inability to bear children and the successive deaths of her offspring, she turned with exceptional fervor to the White-robed Guanyin, often creating depictions of the bodhisattva accompanied by a child. As Li points out, these artworks did more than merely record Xing's sorrow: they also acted as declarations of her own agency, affording her a certain degree of authority through the very process of artistic creation. The repeated use of child motifs in her works both commemorated her own experience of loss and connected with wider cultural worries about maintaining family lineages under the constraints of Confucian kinship systems.

A notably distinct life path is evident in the case of Fang Weiyi. She was widowed at 23 and not long after lost her only child, yet she resisted family demands to remarry and instead directed her grief into painting. Her images of Guanyin were circulated within literati circles, earning her recognition, support from patrons, and a reputation for moral strength. Through this circulation, Fang successfully constructed a public image centered on perseverance and spiritual cultivation—qualities that both aligned with and subtly reworked Confucian ideals regarding the virtue of widows (Cai, 2021).

Li (2019) highlights the importance of the baimiao (白描，plain-line) technique employed by both women. This understated monochromatic style, which Confucian discourse praised as a symbol of feminine modesty, also proved to be an effective means of expressing religious devotion. What might seem like a tension between Confucian moral norms and Buddhist spirituality was in fact mediated through artistic form: the clarity and discipline of the lines turned painting into a realm where moral expectations and spiritual desires could coexist. Within this integration, engaging in aesthetic practices became not only a way to release grief but also a space where conflicting cultural logics could be harmonized.

3.3. Hair Embroidery as Bodily Sacrifice

In the third chapter, Li turns to one of the most arduous forms of women's devotional practice: hair embroidery. This unusual technique required Guanyin

images to be stitched with strands of the practitioner's own hair, a process that merged aesthetic skill with bodily sacrifice and turned the body itself into an offering.

The labor involved was extraordinary. Producing even a single piece might take years, since every strand had to be plucked, treated, and woven into fine thread. Li emphasizes that this very discomfort was integral to its religious power. In Buddhist thought, the endurance of pain could be reinterpreted as an act of merit-making, and the effort required signaled both authenticity of faith and the accrual of spiritual benefit for the artist and those she dedicated the work to (Lam, 2023).

The cultural resonances of hair embroidery are no less significant. Within Chinese traditions, hair is bound to ideas of vitality and identity; to transform it into sacred imagery was to materialize a link between the devotee and the bodhisattva. Li (2019) suggests that this embodied devotion exemplifies the process of "becoming Guanyin," where the practitioner's own life force was literally woven into the fabric of worship.

Equally revealing is the social context. Many of these embroideries were not offered to a woman's husband's family, as Confucian custom would prescribe, but to her natal household. Such a gesture unsettled expectations of marital loyalty and instead affirmed enduring ties to one's birth family. Hair embroidery thus carried a dual meaning: it satisfied the external ideals of filial devotion while quietly pushing back against the patriarchal order that sought to sever those bonds (Cai, 2021; Lam, 2023).

3.4. Funerary Iconography and Imperial Devotion

The final chapter shifts attention to funerary artifacts, particularly hairpins unearthed from Ming tombs, including those of the imperial household such as Empress Dowager Xiaojing (孝靖太后, 1565–1611). Ornaments bearing Buddhist imagery—most often Amitābha or Guanyin—reproduced established iconographic conventions, especially the placement of sacred figures above the head, a motif that recalled the crowns of bodhisattvas. Li's analysis highlights how such material traces open a window onto women's devotional lives where textual sources are fragmentary or absent. Styles of surviving hairpins vary. They go from simple ones used by merchant families to ornate imperial pieces. This variety shows Buddhist symbols were widely used among women of different social classes. It also reflects differences in wealth and what people found beautiful.

Looking closely at their designs shows these ornaments were more than just decorations. When worn on the head, they expressed hopes of spiritual growth and rebirth. They stood as visual expressions of religious desire. This practice links to long-standing debates in Buddhist teachings. These teachings often stress that women needed to be reborn as men to enter the Pure Land.

A good example is the burial of Empress Dowager Xiaojing. Her tomb had exquisitely made hairpins with Buddhist designs. These seem to have been made to ensure a good afterlife through physical acts of worship. Li (2019) cautions, though, that these items should not be seen only as signs of her personal religious belief. Her hair ornaments also show the concerns of her descendants. They oversaw her burial and may have used religious images to advance their own political goals.

4. Critical Assessment and Scholarly Contributions

Li's study makes significant interventions across several fields while also opening methodological debates. Within Buddhist studies, her turn to material culture and lived practice provides an important counterbalance to the text-centered scholarship that has long marginalized women's roles in shaping Buddhist traditions (Chen, 2021). By showing that meaning was often generated through visual and embodied acts of devotion, she expands our understanding of how Buddhism adapted to varied cultural and social environments.

For gender history, the book complicates conventional narratives about women's place within patriarchal orders. Rather than framing women's experiences in terms of either subjugation or resistance, Li demonstrates how they negotiated constraints while cultivating religious lives that carried personal significance. Her attention to material conditions is especially illuminating: factors such as class, education, and kinship networks shaped both the possibilities and limitations of devotional expression (Wang, 2021).

Art historians, meanwhile, will find her work a reminder that objects must be situated within the religious and social systems that gave them meaning. Through close iconographic analysis, Li reveals theological depth in paintings and ornaments often dismissed as decorative or domestic. This insistence on reading artistic form alongside social and ritual function underscores the value of interdisciplinary approaches that bridge art history with religious and cultural studies.

That said, her interpretations invite further scrutiny. At times, the emphasis on women's "agency" risks overstating the degree to which devotional practices subverted existing hierarchies. The evidence suggests that while artistic devotion created outlets for expression, it often reinforced values such as chastity and maternal virtue, thereby sustaining Confucian moral frameworks rather than destabilizing them (Sangren, 2017).

A second concern is the tendency to generalize across divergent social strata. Imperial consorts, elite widows, merchant wives, and courtesans all operated under markedly different conditions, and their religious practices cannot easily be collapsed into a single paradigm.

5. Methodological Innovations and Future Directions

One of the most significant contributions of Li's research lies in its methodological ambition. By regarding material culture as an independent archive, she shows that women's voices—frequently missing from textual sources controlled by male authors—can still be recovered through objects, images, and practices. This step is more than a mere interpretive adjustment; it redefines what qualifies as historical evidence and expands the range of research into actual religious experiences.

Another strength of the study is its broad disciplinary scope. Drawing on art history, religious studies, and gender history, Li (2019) illustrates that artistic objects can act as religious texts when placed within their cultural and social environments. This viewpoint reveals aspects of women's devotional practices that are often ignored in single-field studies, demonstrating how cross-disciplinary analysis can produce insights that no single approach can achieve on its own (McRae, 2003).

Equally distinctive is her sustained use of visual evidence. Sixty-seven color photographs—many taken during her own visits to monasteries and museums—anchor the analysis in a concrete body of material while foregrounding the global dispersal of Chinese Buddhist art. The careful cataloging that underpins these images highlights the importance of documentation as a foundation for future scholarship.

The book also suggests paths for further inquiry. Extending the framework to earlier or later dynasties could shed light on shifting modes of devotion, and the same

methods might be used to study other religious traditions or marginalized groups left out of textual records. In this respect, Li's work is not only a study of late imperial women's piety but also a methodological guide for recovering suppressed voices in Chinese history.

6. Conclusion

Becoming Guanyin has a significant impact on the study of Chinese religious history, focusing on women's devotional practices through sources long neglected. Li's methodological innovation lies in bringing material culture into dialogue with the social and religious frameworks that shaped it, providing a model for interdisciplinary research. She does not merely recover overlooked practices but clarifies how religious identity takes shape through concrete devotional acts. This approach redefines the evidentiary basis for spiritual history: paintings, embroideries, ornaments and performance traditions are not peripheral artifacts but traces of another realm of Buddhist devotion, one that interacts with official institutions and subtly resists patriarchal authority. This new understanding challenges traditional assumptions about legitimacy and reveals how women built spiritual autonomy within restrictive structures.

In Buddhist studies, the book shifts focus from doctrines or institutions to real faith experiences; in gender history, it shows how women navigated constraints without giving up autonomy, filling a long-standing gap in the field. Art history also benefits, as the book argues that objects often dismissed as mere decorations or household items are actually active sites carrying religious meaning and cultural practices. Its significance goes beyond the late imperial period, showing that everyday actions—like needlework, painting and ritual performances—sustain religious traditions as crucially as canonical texts or theological debates. Li thus calls for more attention to the material and concrete aspects of spiritual life.

Becoming Guanyin is therefore more than a study of women in the late imperial period; it is a methodological inspiration, encouraging scholars to seek out silenced voices, expand historical sources and approach the past with sensitivity to its diverse forms of experience. In this sense, Li's work is both an inspiration and a challenge, continuing to influence discussions on gender, religion and material culture.

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