

KUAN-YIN PILGRIMAGE

BY CHÜN-FANG YÜ

COLOR, DVD, 56:35 MINUTES, 2004

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Kuan-yin (Guanyin), the Bodhisattva of compassion and savior in times of suffering, became one of the most widely worshipped deities throughout all of East Asia. Manifested in various incarnations ranging from a princely man to a white-robed woman to the Dalai Lama(s), Kuan-yin, literally “Observer of the Sounds [of the suffering],” responds to the cries and prayers of the faithful. Worshipers petition the deity directly for personal and family needs: to gain karmic merit, dispel sickness, aid in childbearing, or to benefit ones ancestors. In China, deities are often depicted as officials or rulers, and Kuan-yin is no different. She holds audience in courtly temples, some located in remote places, often on mountains.

The film *Kuan-yin Pilgrimage* details these ritual encounters presenting them squarely within their frame of Buddhist pilgrimage. In this documentary, Chün-fang Yü, professor of religion at Columbia University, whose recent 2001 work, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara*, is the definitive study of the Bodhisattva, records the modes of worship during Kuan-yin’s birthday in the two principal pilgrimage sites for this deity in China—the Tianzhu Monastery near Hangzhou and Putuo Island off the coast of Zhejiang Province. By concentrating on these two cultic centers, this documentary explores the spaces empowered by Kuan-yin, and demon-

strates how space and its constituent elements (landmarks, paths, temples, and architectural features) play a necessary role in the pilgrimage experience. In doing so, the film highlights the significance of mountains in the sacred geography of China, clarifying how their difficulty of access, isolation, and difference from the worldly realm of civilization transform visits into spiritual journeys to a sacred topos, which in turn facilitates a divine encounter.

Much of previous scholarship on Chinese religion and philosophy has examined theological concerns and abstract ideas, giving scant attention to the pious activities and beliefs of the general populus. By examining Kuan-yin’s role in the common person’s spiritual life from birth to death—as giver of children to intercessor for deceased family members and ancestors—and through careful recording of ritual practices, this film achieves a corrective to that bias. For Western students, some of these practices may come as a surprise. For example, the narrator mentions fees paid by the faithful to monks for the performance of rituals, a practice that may perplex students used to a clear divide between secular and sacred domains. Yet, such practices illustrate how, in more traditional societies, otherworldly beliefs mesh seamlessly with this-world realities, including financial ones. Western religions’ reluctance to mention costs, such as stole fees for baptisms, weddings, and funerals, or the practice of tithing, contrast with the film’s observations on explicit monetary exchanges, which are both financial and karmic. Though seemingly exotic in form and context, acts of popular piety shown can evoke western practices (e.g., sticking coins on temple pillars and the tossing of coins into fountains and wells; lighting candles on stands, the tradition of votive candles; and the singing of hymns to Kuan-yin, those to the Christian God).

The film approaches its subject matter descriptively, eschewing explanation. It straightforwardly presents the images and the sounds of the faithful and their devotional activities, situating them in the sacred context of a pilgrimage. This perspective provides rich oppor-

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Its (the film's) exploration of pilgrimage, ritual, sacred space, popular religion, and use of narratives, among other topics, is appropriate not only for courses on Buddhism, but also for courses in anthropology, comparative religion, and cultural heritage studies.

tunity for discussion, underpinning the strength of the film. Shown as an experience involving all of the senses, the "what" unfolds, as adherents worship through multiple types of encounters with the deity and her realm. The "why," however, remains unbroached, permitting students to raise questions. Why, for example, are most adherents women; why are stories about Kuan-yin drawn from popular sources rather than canonical; why do the faithful sing of Daoist deities in a Buddhist temple? In this approach, the documentary recalls earlier ethnographic films that offered little or no interpretation, leaving the viewer to reflect on the activities depicted and their cultural, anthropological, and psychological significance. While this lack of analysis may frustrate instructors, it has the benefit of permitting the film to be of potential interest in a variety of disciplines. Its exploration of pilgrimage, ritual, sacred space, popular religion, and use of narratives, among other topics, is appropriate not only for courses on Buddhism, but also for courses in anthropology, comparative religion, and cultural heritage studies.

With such a broad potential audience, the film's complete lack of pedagogical apparatus is unfortunate. The *Kuan-yin Pilgrimage*, originally shot in 1987 by Chün-fang Yü, was reissued in 2004 as a DVD by Columbia University Press. The re-release of this invaluable footage should have been an occasion to provide educational tools and paraphernalia to enhance the classroom use. There are none. Indeed, the DVD lacks even a title menu.

The film deserves better. *Kuan-yin Pilgrimage* would benefit greatly from a written guide with an outline of core Buddhist concepts and doctrines relevant not only to this paradigmatic Bodhisattva but also to the historical development of Kuan-yin. For example, the film's narrative mentions in passing that Kuan-yin over the centuries metamorphosed from a male to a female. That transformation demands contextualization to support discussion of, say, the sinicization of Buddhism in China or notions of gender in Chinese culture. Chün-fang Yü's excellent research on these and many other issues surrounding Kuan-yin provides a wealth of studies that would amplify the film's classroom potential and promote its use, yet none of this

scholarship is mentioned. Columbia University Press could easily and inexpensively rectify this failure through a printed or Internet-based resource, providing a study guide, a glossary, discussion questions, Internet resources, supplemental readings (see below), and classroom activities geared to both high school and college students. With so little footage of the devotional practices that once were ubiquitous through out China and that constituted the lives of the vast majority of the people, *Kuan-yin Pilgrimage* is an invaluable resource. In this reissue, Columbia University Press needs to provide fundamental educational tools if the film is to reach the many audiences for whom it can provide insight, enjoyment, and a unique set of visual images. ■

SUPPLEMENTARY READINGS:

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NEIL SCHMID completed his DEA (M.Phil) at l'Ecole pratiques des Hautes Etudes (section iv, sciences historiques et philologiques), Paris, and his PhD at the University of Pennsylvania, after graduate study in Taiwan (Department of Literature, Zhengzhi University) and Japan (Waseda University). His dissertation, entitled *Yuanqi: Medieval Chinese Buddhist Narratives from Dunhuang*, examines a corpus of semi-vernacular stories elaborated for recitation in liturgies. He is currently on leave from North Carolina State University as Visiting Scholar and Visiting Professor at the University of Pennsylvania, where he is completing a monograph on Buddhist proselytization in medieval China.