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 demonstrates 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 populace. 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, other-worldly 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-
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.

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