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# Ambiguity of Avalokiteśvara and the Scriptural Sources for the Cult of Kuan-yin in China

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## Summary

The bodhisattva Kuan-yin is also known as Kuan-shih-yin or Kuan-tzu-t'ai, among other names.

The bodhisattva is described as princely and heroic in some scripture

s, although in the Lotus Sutra there is reference to his feminine manifestations.

The paper discusses the ambiguity of the bodhisattva's name, gender, and status by examining the manuscriptal sources for the cult of Kuan-yin as developed in China. Important sutras such as the Lotus, the Surangama, the Pure Land Kuan ching as well as a few esoteric sutras will be discussed. Distinctive beliefs shall be examined together with ritual practices as well as historical evidences.

A comparison between the popular “33 forms of Kuan-yin” with those mentioned in the scriptures will be made in order to suggest some possible processes through which this originally Indic bodhisattva became transformed into the Chinese “Goddess of Mercy”.

**關鍵詞：** 1.Kuang-shih-yin 2.Kuan-shih-yin 3.Kuan-tzu-tsai  
4.Kuan-yin 5.thirty-threemanifestations

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Avalokiteśvara is commonly known as Kuan-yin (Perceiver of Sounds) or Kuan-shih-yin (perceiver of the World's Sounds) in China. [\[1\]](#)

A Chinese saying aptly describes the great popularity of this savior bodhisattva:

“Everybody knows how to chant A-mi-t'o-fo [Amitabha], and every household worships Kuan-yin.”

Neither Kuan-yin nor Kuan-shih-yin, however, corresponds to Avalokiteśvara, but rather to Avalokiteśvara, a name not used in the Buddhist world.

That was why Hsüan-tsang (602~64) considered them as mistakes and suggested the right translation as Kuan-tzu-tsai (the Perceiving Lord).

In a note explaining the name of the bodhisattva which he transliterated as "A-fu-lu-che-t'o-i-shih-fan-lo" in his Records of the Western Regions (TaT'ang hsi-yü chi, T. no. 2087), Hsüan-tsang said,

"This means in Chinese 'Kuan-tzu-tsai'. While 'a-fu-lu che-t'o'

[Avalokita] means 'Kuan' (perceiving), 'i-shih-fan-lo'

[isvara] means 'tzu-tsai' (lord).

The old translations of 'Kuan-shih-yin (Illuminator of the World's sounds), 'Kuan-shih-yin' or 'Kuan-shih Tzu-tsai' are all wrong. " (T. 51:

883b). Hsüan-tsang therefore used kuan-tzu-tsai in all the sutras he translated, including the Heart Sūtra, a scripture as important to Chinese

Buddhists as the Lotus Sūtra, in which the bodhisattva is called Kuan-shih-yin.

Because of the great authority and prestige of these two scriptures, both names have become familiar to Buddhists in China, although they have consistently preferred Kuan-shih-yin or Kuan-yin.

But which name is the correct translation of the Sanskrit name of the bodhisattva? Was Hsüan-tsang right in rejecting the earlier translations as wrong?

Aside from the ambiguity of the name, we are also confronted with the ambiguity of the bodhisattva's "forms" and gender.

Since the period of Five Dynasties, around the 10th century, Kuan-yin has been increasingly represented as a feminine deity (Yü 1994).

Beginning with the Ming (1368~1644), if not earlier, sets of paintings depicting Kuan-yin in different forms, be they five, thirty-two, or

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fifty-three have been created (a point to be discussed later).

There is also the expression "thirty-three forms of Kuan-yin" in Sino-Japanese Buddhist art. [\[2\]](#)

These multiple forms of bodhisattva are supposed to be illustrations of the thirty-three manifestations of Kuan-yin in the Lotus sūtra, or the thirty-two in the Surangama sūtra.

But they in fact do not bear much resemblance to the scriptural sources, as we shall see later.

A final ambiguity is Kuan-yin's status.

Although most scriptures refer to Kuan-yin as bodhisattva, some, however, present a different view. The Pei-hua ching (Karandapundarika, T. no.

157), a sutra translated during 397~439, tells a story stressing the father-son relationship between Amitabha and Avalokiteśvara. When Amitabha was a cakravartin in the past, he had 1000 sons, the eldest was named Pu-hsiun.

When the latter became a monk, he took the name Avalokiteśvara.

In the future, when Buddha Amitabha enters into nirvana, Avalokiteśvara would succeed him and will be known as "Universal Light-issuing Tathagatha King of Merit Mountain"

(Pien-ch'u I-ch'ieh Kuang-ming Kung-te-shan-wang Julai, T. 3:

185c~186b).

The same idea is found in Kuan-yin-shou-chi-ching (Sutra of Avalokiteśvara receiving prediction, T. no.

371) which was translated into Chinese during 420~479.

It is stated there that when Amitabha passes away, Avalokiteśvara will succeed him and he will be known as "Tathagata King of Merit Mountain of Universal Light" (T. 12 : 357a), a title similar to the one above.

The closer relationship between Amitabha and

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Avalokiteśvara might be the reason why the Ta-le chin-kang pu-kung chen-shi san-mei yeching pan-jo p'o-lo-mi-t'i li-chu shih (T. no. 1003), an esoteric sutra translated by Amoghavajra (705~774), equates the two and regards them as manifestations of the same reality.

"A dharmata tathagata who has realized the pure self-nature is just another name for Perceiving Lord Tathagata King (Kuan-tzu-tsi Wang Ju-lai).

He is also no other than Amitayus. When he is active in the pure and wondrous buddha land, he manifests in the body of the buddha.

But when he dwells in the polluted samsaric world during the five kasa ya periods of decay, he appears as Avalokiteśvara bodhisattva" (T. 19:

612a). On the other hand, there are also sutras which see the bodhisattva as a buddha independent of his relationship with Amitayus / Amitabha.

Another esoteric sutra translated by Amoghavajra, Ta-fang-kuang Man-chu-shih-li ching (T. no.

1101), for instance, predicts that Avalokiteśvara will become a buddha known as "Tathagata Universal Illumination of Equal Brightness"

(Ping-teng Kuang-ming p'u-cho ju-lai, T. 20:

450b) without mentioning the other buddha.

A third and certainly most radical view is that Avalokiteśvara was already a buddha in the past under whom Sakyamuni Buddha studied.

Sakyamuni Buddha declares in Ch'ien-kuang-yen-Kuan-tzu-tsai P'u-sha pi-mi fa-ching (Sutra of secret method taught by Bodhisattva Perceiving Lord of Thousand Shining Eyes, T. no.

1065), a sutra translated during the T'ang.

I remember that in the past Bodhisattva Perceiving Lord became a buddha before I.

His name was Brightness of True Dharma (Cheng-fa-ming).

I was a disciple of ascetic practices under him.

Because of his instruction I eventually became a Buddha.

All tathagatas of the ten directions achieve the Supreme Way and turn the wheel of wonderful law in all the wondrous Buddha lands as a result of receiving instructions from him (T. 20: 121a).

The idea that Avalokiteśvara was already a Buddha long ago and is right now appearing as a bodhisattva in order to save beings is expressed enigmatically by the two sharing the same name as stated in the Surangana:

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I still remember that long before numbers of aeons countless as the sandgrains in the Ganges, a Buddha called Avalokiteśvara appeared in the world.

When I was with Him, I developed the Bodhi Mind and, for my entry into Samadhi, I was instructed by Him to precise meditation by the organ of hearing (Luk 135).

It is a great paradox that although Kuan-yin is probably the best known and most beloved Buddhist savior in China, it is not at all clear that we know him / her that well.



There are indeed a number of ambiguities about this bodhisattva in the case of China.

I have chosen to discuss in this paper the scriptural sources for the cult of Kuan-yin in China in the hope that some of the ambiguities can be reduced.

For in the introduction and dissemination of the faith in this bodhisattva, scriptures definitely played an important role.

But the Chinese did not simply adhere to the scriptural depictions and definitions of Kuan-yin, nor did they strictly follow the scriptural stipulations and directions for worshiping Kuan-yin, for otherwise there would not have been any Chinese transformation.

On the other hand, I would argue that many of the changes can still be explained on the basis of some scriptural sources.

Even the indigenous scriptures were not created out of thin air, but are elaboration or modifications of some famous sutras such as the Lotus (Yü 1995).

It is in examining the innovations and comparing them with the scriptural models that we can begin to trace both the sources and the development of the cult of Kuan-yin in China.

## The Chinese Names of Avalokiteśvara

Chronologically, the names of the bodhisattva appeared as Kuan-yin, Kuang-shih-yin, Kuan-shih-yin, Kuan-shih Tzu-tsai and finally Kuan-tzu-u-tsai. Kuan-yin was mentioned in a list of attending bodhisattvas in the Cheng-chü Kuang-ming ting-yi ching (Sutra on achieving the brilliant concentration of mind, T no.

630), a sutra belonging to the Perfection of Wisdom group, translated by Chih-yao, a Central Asian, in 185.

When Sanghavarman translated Wu-liang-shou ching (Sutra of Amitayus, T. no.

360), one of the scriptures glorifying Pure Land in 252, he translated the name as Kuan-shih-yin, who, together with Ta-shih-chih

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(Mahasthamaprabhata), are the two foremost bodhisattvas.

It is obvious that Kuan-yin was not a contraction of Kuan-shih-yin made in the T'ang in order to avoid the taboo name of Emperor T'ai-tsung (r.

627-49), Li Shih-min, as some Chinese scholars including Ting Fu-pao

(1874-1952), the compiler of a dictionary of Buddhist terms claimed (Tay 17).

It is also clear, as Goto Daiyo pointed out, that Kumarajiva was not the first translator who used Kuan-shih-yin, for he did not translate the Lotus sūtra until 406, some one hundred fifty years later (Goto 4).

In these two earliest sutras where the bodhisattva is mentioned, there is no explanation about the meaning of the name.

For that, we have to turn to the Lotus sūtra.

The Lotus sūtra was translated into Chinese six times, and three have survived.

The first is Cheng fa-hua ching (Sutra of the lotus of the true law, T. no. 263), translated by Dharmarakṣa, a native of Yüeh-chih (Bactria) in 286. Chapter 23 is entitled "Universal Gateway"

(P'u-men) and is devoted to Avalokiteśvara who is called Kuang-shih-yin (Illuminator of the World's Sounds), a savior who delivers people from seven perils, frees them from the three poisons of lust, hatred and ignorance, and grants infertile women either sons or daughters.

The relevant passage concerning the name states:

The Buddha told the Bodhisattva Inexhaustible Intent,

"If sentient beings encounter hundreds, thousands, millions difficulties and disasters and their sufferings are unlimited, they will be delivered right away when they hear the name of Kuang-shih-yin and be free from all pain.

That is why he is called Kuang-shih-yin.

If someone keeps the name in his heart and falls into a fire which rages through the hills and fields, burning forests, shrubs and houses, the fire will immediately die down when he hears the name of Kuang-shih-yin.

If a person enters into a river and becomes frightened because of the swift current, when he calls the name of Kuang-shih-yin and takes refuge in him single-mindedly, the authority and supernatural power of the bodhisattva will protect him from drowning and enable him to reach safety.

[This is followed by the bodhisattva's saving people from the perils of winds, weapons, demons, imprisonment and robbers, all resulting from calling his name.] The realm of Kuang-

shih-yin is without limit because it has his authority, supernatural power and merit. Because he is full of illuminating light (Kuang), he is therefore called Kuang-shih-yin (T. 9: 129a).

This earliest surviving version of the Lotus sūtra makes it clear that hearing and calling the name of the bodhisattva are the chief reason the faithful is saved, and that the bodhisattva is closely associated with light.

As John Holt noted in *Buddha in the Crown*, one of the most distinctive features of Avalokiteśvara is indeed the strong presence of the light symbolism (Holt 31~34).

But it leaves the connection between the bodhisattva and "sound" unspecified.

The next surviving translation of the sutra known as *Mio-fa lien-huaching* (Sutra of the lotus flower of the wonderful law, T. no.

262), made by Kumarajiva, the famous translator from Kucha, in 406, as well as the third version known as *Tien-pin mio-fa lien-huaching* (Sutra of the lotus flower of the wonderful law with an additional chapter, T. no.

264) translated by Jnanagupta and Dharmagupta in 601 removed the u

ncertainty. Both versions give the name of the bodhisattva as Kuan-shih-yin (Perceiver of the World's Sounds).

The "Universal Gateway" is chapter 25 in Kumarajiva's translation and Chapter 24 in Jnanagupta-Dharmagupta's version.

Originally, neither Kumarajiva's nor Dharmaraksa's version contains the gatha section at the end of the chapter.

It is found only in the translation made by Jnanagupta and Dharmagupta.

Of the three, Kumarajiva's translation has always been the most popular version in China, and therefore the gatha section was added to his version from the latter.

When the Buddha is asked by Bodhisattva Inexhaustible Intent why Kuan-shih-yin is called this name, the Buddha answers,

"Goodman, suppose there are immeasurable hundreds, thousands, ten thousands, millions of living beings who are undergoing various trials and suffering.

If they hear of this bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds and single-mindedly call his name, then at once he will perceive the sound of their voices and they will all gain deliverance from their trials"

(Watson 298-9, italics mine).

Here, just as we read before, the only requirement for a person to be saved is to call the name of the bodhisattva.

A crucial sentence which I underline above, however, is missing in Dharmarakṣa's translation: the bodhisattva's perceiving of the sound uttered by those who call his

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name. The name "Kuan-shih-yin" now makes perfect sense.

On the other hand, the light symbolism connected with him is still intact.

The gatha praises the bodhisattva thus:

He of the true gaze, the pure gaze,

the gaze of great and encompassing wisdom,

the gaze of pity, the gaze of compassion— —

constantly we implore him, constantly look up in reverence.

His pure light, free of blemish,

is a sun of wisdom dispelling all darkness.

He can quell the wind and fire of misfortune

and everywhere bring light to the world.

. . . . .

Perceiver of the World's Sounds, pure sage— —

to those in suffering, in danger of death,

he can offer aid and support.

Endowed with all benefits,

he views living beings with compassionate eyes (Watson 305~306).

Chinese commentators interpreted the name by emphasizing the connection between the bodhisattva's perception or observation and the sounds made by the faithful who called out his name.

Seng-chao (374~414), a brilliant disciple of Kumarajiva, wrote in his Commentary on the Vimalakirti Sūtra,

Kumarajiva said that when anyone meets danger, he / she should call the name and takes refuge in the bodhisattva.

As the bodhisattva perceives the sounds, the person will receive



deliverance.

He is also named Kuan-shih-nien (Perceiver of the World's Thoughts), or Kuan-tzu-tsai (Perceiving Lord) (Wan-tzu hsü-tsang-ching 27: 350a).

It is interesting to note that Kumarajiva knew that the bodhisattva was also called Kuan-tzu-tsai, but used the other name in his translation instead.

Chi-tsang (549~629), the founder of the Three-treatise School, wrote a commentary on the

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Lotus and explained the name Kuan-shih-yin this way:

"Kuan is the wisdom which can perceive and shih-yin is the realm which is perceived.

When realm and wisdom are mentioned together, we have the name Kuan-shih-yin" (T. 34: 624c).

He also repeated an earlier commentator Fa-yün (467~529)'s elaborate four-fold scheme of interpreting the name. In his commentary on the Lotus, Fa-yün says,

Kuan-shih-yin may be named four ways.

The first is Kuan-shih-yin which means that he delivers by perceiving the sounds of the world.

The second is Kuan-shih-shen [body] which means that he delivers by perceiving the bodily karma of the sentient beings.

The third is Kuan-shih-yi [intentions] which means that he delivers by perceiving the mental karma of the sentient beings.

The fourth is Kuan-shih-yeh[karma] which contains the previous three names.

If you ask me why we only use the name Kuan-shih-yin, my answer is that to create karma by speech is easy, but to do good with regard to body and intention is hard.

Moreover, in the Saha world of ours, we usually worship the Buddha with our voices.

That is why Kuan-shih-yin becomes the established name (Wan-tzu hsu-tsang ching 42: 371a).

The Kuan-wu-liang-shou Fo ching (Visualization of the Buddha Amitayus sutra, T.

365 ), translated by Kalayasas, a monk from the western regions, in 43

0, has always been considered one of the three main scriptures of the Pure Land School (together with the Greater Sukhavativyuha and the Smaller Sukhavativyuha sutras).

This sutra offers sixteen topics for visualization which is the meaning of Kuan.

The tenth topic deals specifically with the visualization of Kuan-shih-yin.

The passage instructs the mediator to visualize the bodhisattva's features in such great detail that some scholars have suggested that it might be based on the model of an actual image (Pas 38).

The minute iconographical description, on the other hand, serves as a standard for later artistic rendition and identification of the bodhisattva.

The light symbolism which is already present in the Lotus receives even stronger emphasis.

Within the circle of light emanating from his whole body, appear illuminated the various forms and marks of all beings that live in the five paths of existence.

On top of his head is a heavenly crown of gems like those fastened (on Indra's head), in which crown there is a transformed Buddha standing, twenty-five yojanas high.....The soft hair between the eyebrows has the colour of the seven jewels, from which eighty-four kinds of rays flow out, each ray has innumerable transformed Buddhas, each of whom is attended by numberless transformed Bodhisattvas; freely changing their manifestations they fill up the worlds of the ten quarters; (their appearance) can be compared with the colour of the real lotus-flower.

(He wears) a garland consisting of eighty-thousand rays, in which is seen fully reflected a state of perfect beauty.

The palm of his hand has a mixed colour of five thousand lotus-flowers. His hands have ten (tips of) fingers, each tip has eighty-four thousand pictures, which are like signet-marks, each picture has eighty-four thousand rays which are soft and mild and shine over all things that exist.

When he lifts up his feet, the soles of his feet are seen to be marked with a wheel of a thousand spokes (one of the thirty-two signs) which miraculously transform themselves into five hundred million pillars of rays.

Buddha, especially addressing Aananda, said,

Whoever wishes to meditate on Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara, must do so in the way I have explained. Those who practice this meditation will not suffer any calamity; they will utterly remove the obstacle that is raised by Karma, and will expiate the sins which would involve them in births and deaths for numberless kalpas. Even the hearing of the name of this bodhisattva will enable one to obtain immeasurable happiness. How much more will the diligent contemplation of him! (Takakusu 182~184)

This sutra is one of six visualization sutras which originated in Central Asia, probably Turfan, and translated into Chinese from the end of the fourth to the middle of the fifth century. [\[3\]](#)

All of them teach the practitioner to engage in

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visualization so that a vision of the buddha or bodhisattva can be created.

Mental concentration, not calling of the holy name, is therefore the central focus.

The obtaining of the divine vision guarantees the meditator's salvation.

Kuan in this case is better understood as contemplation or visualization than observation, perception, or investigation.

The Shou leng-yen ching (Surangama sūtra, T. no. 945), translated by Paramiti in 705, also calls the bodhisattva Kuan-shih-yin or Kuan-yin, but offers a different explanation for the name.

It provides yet a third meaning of Kuan.

The bodhisattva began by describing how he obtained samadhi by meditating on the organ of hearing as instructed by a buddha also named Kuan-shih-yin under whom he studied:

At first by directing the organ of hearing into the stream of meditation, this organ was detached from its object, and by wiping out (the concept of) both sound and stream-entry, both disturbance and stillness became clearly non-existent.

Thus advancing step by step both hearing and its object ceased completely, but I did not stop where they ended.

When the awareness of this state and this state itself were realized as non-existent, both subject and object merged into the void, the awareness of which became all-embracing.

With further elimination of the void and its object both creation and annihilation vanished giving way to the state of Nirvana which then manifested (Luk 135).

The sound mentioned here in the meditation is not that made by the faithful who cry out his name, but any sound which, when examined (Kuan) with penetrating insight, leads to the realization of sunyata.

Although the bodhisattva saves beings from various dangers and grants fourteen kinds of fearlessness in

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this sutra, the reason he can do so is different from that given in the Lotus.

"Since I myself do not meditate on sound but on the mediator, I cause all suffering beings to look into the sound of their voices in order to obtain liberation" (Luk 139). [4]

The bodhisattva concludes by once more linking his name to his meditation on hearing:

"That Buddha praised my excellent method of perfection and gave me, in the presence of the assembly, the name of Kuan-shih-yin.

Because of my all-embracing (absolute function of) hearing, my name is known everywhere"

(Luk 142). In the Surangama sūtra, therefore, Kuan is understood neither as perceiving and responding to the cries for help uttered by the faithful, nor visualizing the divine visage of the bodhisattva, but as investigating the real nature of sound and realizing it as being void.

Let us continue with the survey of the chronological appearance of the bodhisattva's names.

Bodhiruci combined the two names and called the bodhisattva Kuan-sih-tzu-tsi (The Lord Who Observes the World) in Fa-hua ching-lun (Treatise on the Lotus sūtra, T. no. 1520) which he translated in 508.

The name Kuan-tzu-tsai, was used for the first time in Ta-Pan-jo p'o-lo-mi-lo-t'o ching (The great Prajna-paramita sūtra, T. no.

220) translated by Hsuan-tsang in 663, and the eighty-volume version of Hua-yen ching (Avatamsaka sūtra, T. no.

279) translated by Siksananda in 695~699. K'uei-chi (632~

682), Hsüan-tsang's chief disciple, provided an explanation for the name

in his Pan-jo hsin-ching yu-tsan (Profound eulogy on the Heart Sūtra



) and, following his own master, condemned the older name Kuan-shih  
-yin as wrong:

[The bodhisattva] practiced the six perfections in the past and has  
now obtained the fruit of perfection.

Because he is foremost in observing

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everything with wisdom, he has now accomplished ten kinds of  
mastery (tzu-tsai).

First, he has mastery over life-span because he can either prolo  
ng or shorten his life.

Second, he has mastery over mind, for he is untainted by life a  
nd death.

Third, he has mastery over wealth, for he can materialize it whe  
never he so desires and this is the result of his perfection in givi  
ng.

Fourth, he has mastery over karma, for he only does good deed  
and encourages others to do the same.

Fifth, he has mastery over life, for he can go wherever he pleas

es and this is the result of his perfection in discipline.

Sixth, he is the master of superior understanding, for he can change into whatever he so pleases and this is the result of his perfection in patience.

Seventh, he is a master of vows, for he can establish happily whatever he perceives and this is the result of his perfection in vigor. Eighth, he is a master of supernatural power, for he is fully endowed with paranormal abilities resulting from his perfection in samadhi. Ninth, he is a master of insight, for while following words and sounds he penetrates into the wisdom.

Tenth, he has mastery over Dharma, for his understanding always accords with the scriptures and this is the result of his perfection in wisdom.

His position is next in line to become the buddha, but his realization is the same as the buddha.

There is no obscure place that he does not illuminate. He is thus called Kuan-tzu-tsai (Perceiving Master, or Master of Observation). If one calls him Kuan-yin, both the word and the meaning are lost (Wan-tzu hsü-tsang ching 41:439a).

Why did translators give this bodhisattva two different names? Despite the criticisms of Hsüan-tsang and K'uei-chi, they continued to favor Kuan-shih-yin.

There is also no evidence that earlier translation of this name was ever a mistake.

In fact, these two Chinese names are translations from two different Sanskrit originals.

Kuan-shih-yin was the translation for Avalokiteśvara, whereas Kuan-tzu-u-tsai was the translation for Avalokiteśvara which was apparently once also used though later dropped off from usage. Fa-yün who compiled a dictionary of translated terms, *Fan-yi ming-yi chi* (T. no.

2131), commented that the two names resulted from two different versions in the imported scriptures (T.

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54: 1062a).

In an article published in 1927, Mironov confirmed the observation made by Fa-yün in the fifth century.

He studied the Sanskrit fragments of the Lotus sūtra manuscripts brought by Otani's expedition from Eastern Turkestan.

"In one of the three sets of fragments which for palaeographical reasons may be assigned to the end of the fifth century A. D. he happened to find three fragments of the twenty fourth chapter, devoted to the praise of Avalokiteśvara.

The name of the Bodhisattva is spelt Avalokiteśvara. As the name occurs five times on an incomplete leaf, the possibility of a clerical error is hardly admissible.

The circumstance is especially important, as the Petrovsky MS. of SP. from Kashgar has the usual form Avalokiteśvara. Thus a heretofore missing link between the Indian and Chinese traditions seems to have been found.

It cannot be doubted that Avalokiteśvara was the original form, later supplanted by Avalokiteśvara"

(Mironov 243). Basing on this discovery, Goto suggests that Avalokiteśvara was used in scriptures coming into China from Kucha such as those translated by Kumarajiva and other Central Asian missionaries, while Avalokiteśvara in scriptures originating in India such as those translated by Hsuan-tsang who obtained the texts during his long sojourn there (Goto 9).

The translators of the Chinese sutras had therefore access to the two different versions of the bodhisattva's name.

It is interesting that despite strong objections against the name of Kuan-yin voiced by Hsüan-tsang and others, it is this name that all East Asians have come to use in referring to this bodhisattva.

Commentators, as I have indicated before, have also come up with fanciful interpretations of the "sound" part of the name.

On the other hand, if Avalokiteśvara was originally the name of the bodhisattva, why was it dropped and replaced by Kuan-yin in India?

Are there still traces of the former in non-Chinese sources which we can use for comparison?

## **The Forms of the Bodhisattva**

One distinctive feature of Kuan-yin is that he can appear in many forms. Because there are a huge number of scriptures in Chinese connected with Kuan-yin, the sources describing his forms are very rich and diverse. [\[5\]](#)

Since it is impossible to be exhaustive, we have to select the most representative scriptures for discussion.

In general, we can distinguish two types of his manifestations.

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The first is a list of the bodhisattva's manifestation in either superhuman, human or nonhuman forms in order to carry out his work of salvation based on the spiritual principle of upaya (skillful means).

This is the case found in the Lotus, Surangama and Ta-chengchuang-yen pao-wang ching (Sutra on the Precious King of Adornment in Mahayana, Karandavyuha, T. no. 1050).

The second is represented by esoteric scriptures in which the bodhisattva appears with multiple heads and hands holding various symbolic implements and reveals dharanis with marvelous efficacy.

The Lotus sūtra speaks of the bodhisattva appearing in thirty-three different forms. [6] It states,

"Good man, if there are living beings in the land who need someone in the body of a Buddha in order to be saved, Bodhisattva Perceiver of the World's Sounds immediately manifests himself in a Buddha body and preaches the Law for them" (Watson 301).

Following the same formulae, the bodhisattva manifests himself in the

bodies of apratyekabuddha, a voice-hearer, King Brahma, Shakra, Self-mastering God [Isvara], Great Self-mastering God [Mahesvara],<sup>[7]</sup> a great heavenly general, Vaishravana, a petty king, a rich man, a householder, a chief minister, a Brahman, a monk, a nun, a layman believer, a laywoman believer, the wife of a rich man, a householder, a chief minister, or of a Brahman, a young boy or a young girl, a heavenly being [deva], a dragon, a yaksha, a gandharva, an

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Several points need to be made. First of all, the thirty-three manifestations of the bodhisattva had relevance to a religious universe intelligible only to people living in ancient India.

Brahma, Shakra, and Shiva were Hindu gods.

Vaishravana, Cakravartin, and devas were important fixtures of the Indian spiritual cosmos.

Even the non-human inhabitants of that universe such as the asura, naga (dragon) and yaksha were known only by readers brought up in the Indian culture.

That was why Goto argued convincingly that the author of this chapter of "Universal Gateway" of the Lotus sūtra must have been conscious

yaddressing an audience familiar with the Vedic and Hindu mythologies and beliefs.

By making the Buddhist bodhisattva capable of assuming the forms of all the important pre-Buddhist deities, Avalokiteśvara was thus elevated above them all (Goto 294~295).

Moreover, the very number of "thirty-three" was meaningful only in the Vedic and Hindu context.

It had reference to the Vedic belief in the three-tiered universe ( and the existence of eleven main gods in each level of the universe) as well as the thirty-three heavens. The number therefore had a symbolic, but not literal, meaning (Goto 167~

168). Secondly, the forms Avalokiteśvara assumes in order to preach the Dharma more effectively are generic, but not individualized forms.

It does not say that the bodhisattva appears as a king with a specific name, not to mention a biography, but rather as a generic king without any identity. It is more a status than a personality.

Third and finally, of the forms Avalokiteśvara assumes, only seven are feminine. I make these three points now in order to highlight the contrast with the Chinese thirty- three forms of Kuan-yin which replaced the



m (to be shall discuss later).

In the latter case, all the forms with clearly Vedic and Hindu connotations disappeared. The Chinese forms were predominately feminine, and they often refer either to some historical incidents happened in China or some legends familiar to a Chinese audience.

This was one of several means through which Avalokiteśvara was thereby transformed into Kuan-yin.

Before we examine some of the Chinese forms of Kuan-yin, we have to finish the review of Avalokiteśvara's manifestations in the Surangama sūtra and the Karandavyuha sūtra.

Although almost all of the thirty-two forms mentioned in the Surangama correspond to those found in the Lotus, a major difference is that the Surangama provides explanations about why the bodhisattva chooses to

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assume each form. Great care is taken in justifying the appropriateness of each form for each type of the bodhisattva's audience so that the i

mportance of upaya is made clear.

Icitate some relevant passages for illustration:

If there are living beings who desire to be lords of devas to rule over therealms of the gods, I will appear as Sakra to teach them the Dharma sothat they reach their goals.

If there are living beings who wish to roam freely in the ten directions, Iwill appear as Isvaradeva to teach them the Dharma so that they reachtheir goals.

If there are living beings who enjoy discussing well-known sayings andpractice pure living, I will appear as a respectable scholar to teach themthe Dharma so that they reach their goals.

If there are living beings who wish to govern cities and twons, I willappear as a magistrate to teach them the Dharma so that they reach theirgoals.

If there are women who are eager to study and learn and leave home toobserve the precepts, I will appear as a bhiksuni to teach them theDharma so that they reach their goals.

If there are women who are keen to fulfil their home duties thereby setting a good example to other families and the whole country, I will appear as a queen, a princess or a noble lady to teach them the Dharma so that they reach their goals.

If there are young men who are chaste, I will appear as a celibate youth to teach them the Dharma so that they reach their goals.

If there are dragons (nagas) who wish to be freed from bondage in their realms, I will appear as a naga to teach them the Dharma so that they reach their goals (Luk 136~138).

The thirty-two manifestations of the bodhisattva in the Surangama sūtra follow closely those in the Lotus, with the omission of Vajrapani, and the substitution of Vaisravana (Heavenly King of the North) with the Four Heavenly Kings.

The Lotus clearly was the model for the Surangama. Like the Lotus,

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the Surangama promises believers deliverances from various dangers

s.

Sharing a characteristic common to esoteric scriptures glorifying Avalokiteśvara which I will discuss below, the Surangama lists the benefits of one by one and calls them the fourteen fearless powers bestowed by the bodhisattva. [8]

Building on its hermeneutics of "hearing" and "sound", the sutra provides a philosophical link between the insight into the real nature of everything as void and the resultant psychological state of fearlessness.

It is in this way reminiscent of the view put forward in the Heart sūtra where Avalokiteśvara is said to be free from fear

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because he does not have any thought-coverings as a result of having penetrated into the voidness of everything (Conze 164~165).

The Surangama sūtra shares another distinctive feature with the esoteric scriptures in that it refers to Avalokiteśvara as having many heads, arms and eyes:

When I first realized the hearing mind which was most profound, the Essence of Mind (i. e. the Tathagato store) disengaged it

self from hearing and could no longer be divided by seeing, hearing, feeling and knowing, and so became one pure and clean all-pervading precious bodhi.

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This is why I can take on different wonderful forms and master countless number of esoteric mantras.

I can appear with one, three, five, seven, nine, eleven and up to 108, 1,000,

10,000, and 84,000 sovereign (cakra) faces; with two, four, six, eight, ten, twelve, fourteen, sixteen, eighteen, twenty, twenty-four and up to 108, 1,000,

10,000 and 84,000 arms making various gestures (mudras); and with two, three, four, nine up to 108, 1,000,

10,000, and 84,000 clean and pure precious eyes, either merciful or wrathful, and in a state either of still imperturbability (dhyana-samadhi) or of absolute wisdom (prajna) to save and protect living beings so that they can enjoy great freedom (Luk 141).

The Karandavyuha sūtra, translated by T'ien-hsi-tsai into Chinese from a Tibetan version around 1000, has a number of esoteric characteristics as well.

It is in fact included in this section on esoteric sutras in the Taisho canon (T. vol. 20).

This is a very important scripture for the cult of Avalokiteśvara because it is one of the very few sutras where a mythological account about the life of this bodhisattva is given.

Holt provides a succinct summary of this sutra, some parts of which I shall quote below.

He puts the date of text anywhere from the fourth to the seventh century of the Common Era.

The Sanskrit version that he uses may not be identical with the one the Chinese translation was based on, for there seem to be a number of differences.

Once while Gautama the Buddha was performing a meditation at the Jetavana monastery in the midst of his disciples and an attendant heavenly throng, a meditation aimed at the 'purification of everything', bright golden rays began to appear, lighting up the

entire monastery and the surrounding countryside.

Viskambhu, amazed and filled with great joy, asked the Buddha about the source of these glorious rays of light. The Buddha responded by saying that they came from Arya Avalokiteśvara, who was preaching the dharma of nirvana to all the suffering denizens of the troumous Avici Hell (dominated by a woeful lake of fire). To an incredulous Viskambhu, he continued: as a result of

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Avalokiteśvara's preaching of the dharma, the lake of fire in the Avici Hell was cooled and turned into a refreshing lotus pond and the sufferings of all of its inhabitants were thereby overcome.

This miracle was then reported to Yama, Lord of Hell, who wondered what deity this might be.

Recognizing Avalokiteśvara, Yama praised his virtues with a long eulogy.

Anxious for Avalokiteśvara's arrival in the human abode, Viskambhu eagerly asked the Buddha when he might be expected in this realm.

The Buddha replied that Avalokiteśvara had then proceeded to visit pretaloka, where the suffering 'departed' in the form of hungry and thirsty ghosts heard his sermon on dharma in the form of the AGKs [Avalokiteśvara-Guṇa-Karandavyūha].

Like the 'rain of dharma', water flowed from each of his pores to assuage their miserable conditions.

The pretas were thus disabused of their belief in the permanent self, which had led them to commit karmic actions of greed resulting in their unfavorable rebirths.

They were all thus transformed into bodhisattvas to dwell in the world of Amita's paradisaical buddha field, Sukhavatī.

The Buddha then proceeded to tell that once, long ago, when he was incarnated as a merchant during the time of the Buddha Vipasyin, he had heard that former buddha enumerate the many qualities of Bodhisattva Avalokiteśvara.

The bodhisattva originally had appeared from a shot of light emanating from the primordial self-existent buddha of the cosmos, who was engaged in his perpetual, deep meditation.

From Avalokiteśvara's body (that of a mahapurusa), the world a



as we know it was created: the sun and the moon from his eyes, Maheśvara from his brow, Brahma and the other gods from his shoulders, Saraśvati from his teeth, the wind from his mouth, the earth from his feet, and Varuna from his stomach (Holt 47~48).

What comes after this passage in the Chinese translation makes the intention of the writer abundantly clear: to claim Avalokiteśvara's supremacy over Shiva.

"At that time the Bodhisattva Perceiving Lord told Maheśvara saying, 'In the future when the world enters the Age of Degenerate Law, people attached to

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wrong views will all say that you are the lord of the universe from the beginningless beginning and that you have created all beings'.

At that time, sentient beings, having lost the way of enlightenment, they are confused by their ignorance and make the following statement:

The great body of emptiness,  
makes the great earth your seat.

The world as well as all sentient beings,  
are all evolved from this body (T. 20: 49c).

The sutra next mentions that the bodhisattva appears in the following twenty forms to save all beings.

They are: buddha, bodhisattva, pretyeka-buddha, voice-hearer, Mahesvara, Narayana, Shakra, Brahma, God of the Sun, God of the Moon, God of Fire, God of Water, God of Wind, naga, Vinayaka, yaksha, Vairavana, king, minister, father and mother (T. 20: 50c~51a).

It is interesting to note that compared with the earlier thirty-three or thirty-two manifestations, more Hindu gods are mentioned in this sutra which clearly tries to present Avalokiteśvara as the creator of the cosmos as well as a universal savior. On the other hand, only one of the manifestations, that of a mother, is feminine.

The next section is the story of Avalokiteśvara's previous incarnation as a divine horse named Balaha who saved the prince Sinhala who was the previous incarnation of Gautama Buddha.

I turn again to Holt's summation.

After Sinhala led a crew of 500 other merchants on a seagoing venture in search of precious jewels, his ship was taken by storm and wrecked off the coast of the island of Tamradvipa (Lanka).

By the grace of the lord to whom Sinhala was devoted, the 500 shipwrecked sailors safely reached the shores of the island, where they were warmly embraced by troops of celestial nymphs.

In reality, the nymphs were raksasis plotting to devour the captain and his men.

The 'nymphs' feigned shared distress with the merchants, seduced them, and begged them to become their husbands.

One night after Sinhala had spent the evening in the arms of his beautiful nymph, the lamp in his room began to laugh.

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Sinhala asked the lamp the reason for the laughter, and the lamp replied by telling him that a previous group of shipwrecked merchants had been similarly treated by the nymphs but ultimately had been imprisoned and eventually devoured, for the beautiful nymphs in reality were vicious raksasis in disguise.

The light warned Sinhala that he and his comrades were in imminent danger and that there was only one possible means by which they could be saved.

The lighted lamp told Sinhala that on these shores there stood a white winged horse named Balaha ready to take him and his 500 comrades away to safety, but that one should not open his eyes until he had safely landed on the further shore.

Alarmed by the light's revelation, Sinhala quickly assembled his fellow merchants and instructed them in the advice that had been given.

They then hurried down to the shore and mounted the waiting Balaha, who then rose majestically into the sky.

The raksasis, seeing that their prey was escaping, called out in loud lamentations.

The merchants, all except Sinhala, were touched with both pity and desire, opened their eyes to look back, and dropped back down into the ocean, where they were immediately devoured.

Sinhala alone escaped and, after landing on the shore, went back to his father's house in Sinhakalpa (Holt 49 ).

The story in the Chinese version ends with a happy family reunion.

It does not have the gruesome denouement in which the prince's former "wife", a bewitching raksasi, followed him back to the palace, managed to seduce the father who married her and made her the new queen.

She then got all the raksasis to come to the kingdom and eventually devoured the king and his family.

The prince finally made the people to see the truth.

They proclaimed him the new king who succeeded in banishing the raksasis to the forest and restored peace in the country (Holt 49~50).

The last long section of the sutra in the Chinese version is the revelation of and a chorus of praise to the "six-character" dharani om mani padme hum.

The Buddha declares that this dharani is the "subtle and wondrous original mind" of Avalokiteśvara.

The dharani is a wish-fulfilling jewel, but so far nobody knows about it.

If one should come to know the dharani, not only oneself, but one's

ancestors of seven generations back, will all achieve salvation.

That is not all.

The benefit of the dharani even extends to strangers who come into contact with the dharani-keeper of the tape worms living inside his body.

"The worms living inside the body of the person who holds this dharani are destined to reach the stage of a non-retrogressing bodhisattva.

If the person carries the dharani on his body or wears it on his head, anyone who sees him is like seeing a stupa containing a relic or seeing a tathagatha..... When a person chants this dharani as instructed, he attains unlimited eloquence and develops the heart of great compassion..... When the breath of such a person touches someone else, the latter will develop a heart of compassion and leaving anger and other poisons behind, achieve the stage of a non-retrogressing bodhisattva, and speedily realize anuttara-samyak-sambodhi.

If a person wearing or carrying this dharani should touch someone else's body with his hand, the person so touched will also speedily attain the status of a bodhisattva" (T. 20: 59b~c).

Most of the last volume of the sutra is similarly devoted to the wonders of the six-syllable dharani (T. 20: 59c~64a).

I now turn to the forms of Avalokiteśvara found in the esoteric sutras glorifying this bodhisattva who teach saving dharanis, of which the Karandavyūka that I have discussed above can be counted as one example.

One of the earliest such sutras is the Ch'ing Kuan-shih-yin p'u-sa hsiang-shou tu-hai t'o-lo-ni ching (Scripture of the Dharani for Invoking Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva to Dissipate Poison and Harm, T. no.

1043) translated by Nan-t'i during the last years of the Eastern Chin dynasty (317~420).

The T'ien-t'ai school has always put special emphasis on this sutra ever since the T'ien-t'ai master Chih-i (538~

597) used it as one of the sources for the last of the four forms of samādhi: neither walking nor sitting samādhi (Stevenson 1986, 50; Donner and Stevenson 28, 275~280).

Although the bodhisattva appears in this sutra in a human form and not with multiple heads and arms like in the other esoteric sutras discussed below, it places the same degree of emphasis on the keeping of the dharanis as the latter.

The title of this sutra is explained by the story set forth in the beginning of the scripture. A delegation of Vaisali citizens who suffer from all kinds of horrible diseases caused by yaksas comes to the Buddha with an urgent request for help.

The Buddha tells them to invoke Avalokiteśvara by offering him willow branches and pure water.

The bodhisattva appears in front of the Buddha

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and proceeds to teach the people to chant three sets of dharanis, the last of which, consisting of 15 phrases, is particularly powerful.

Known as the "divine dharani of six-character phrases"

(liu-tzu chang-chu sheng-chou), the chanting of which together with the three-fold calling of Avalokiteśvara's name will save people from all kinds of dangers.

For instance, to cite just a few examples, Avalokiteśvara will guide lost travellers by appearing in the form of a human being and lead them to safety; he will create a well and food to save people dying of thirst and hunger.

Women who are on the point of death because of difficult childbirth will



ll live; merchants who lose property to robbers will recover it because the latter will have a sudden change of hearts.

The dharani not only saves people from sufferings in this world, but will enable them not being reborn in the realms of hell, hungry ghosts, animals, and asuras.

Instead, they will be born in a place where they can see the Buddha and become freed after listening to the Dharma.

Avalokiteśvara is called the "Great Compassionate One"

(Ta-pei) in this sutra and is declared to be the savior who "courses in the five realms of rebirth" to carry out the work of salvation (T. 20: 36b).

Beginning with the Northern Chou dynasty (556~681), more esoteric scriptures about Avalokiteśvara with new dharanis were introduced into China.

The deity in these scriptures appears not in a regular human form, but in the esoteric forms of many heads and many arms.

The first of these new forms of Avalokiteśvara to be introduced to China was the Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara (Ekadasamukha, Sih-i-mien). Three sutras, translated by Yeh-she-ch'ueh-to in 563~577 (T. no. 1070), Hsuan-tsang in 659 (T. no. 1071) and Amoghavajra (705~

774, T. no. 1069) are about this deity.

Next, it was Avalokiteśvara holding a lasso (Amoghapaśa, Pu-k'ung-ssu-so) who figures in seven sutras, the earliest of which was translated by Yen-na-ch'ueh-to in the Sui (581 ~

618) and the rest by, among others, Hsuan-tsang and Bodhiruci (d. 727) in the T'ang (T. nos. 1092 ~ 1098).

Sutras on the Thousand-handed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara were translated next and the thirteen sutras were all done in the T'ang (T. nos. 1056 ~ 1068). Aside from those by Chih-t'ung (done in 627 ~ 649, T. no. 1057) and Bhagavadharma (done in 650, T. no. 1060), Hsuan-tsang, Bodhiruci, and the three Tantric masters Subhakarasiṃha (636 ~ 735), Vajrabodhi (670 ~ 741) and Amoghavajra also made their translations.

A fourth esoteric form of

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Avalokiteśvara, that of holding the wheel of a wish-granting jewel (Cintāmanīcakra, Ju-yi-lun) is the subject of yet another nine sutras which were translated by I-tsing, Bodhiruci, Śikṣananda, Vajrabodhi, Amoghavajra and others, all in the T'ang (T. nos. 1080 ~ 1088).

Although these esoteric scriptures are devoted to different forms of Avalokiteśvara, they nevertheless share some common characteristics.

The first of these is, of course, the emphasis on the chanting of the dharanis.

Like the Ch'ing Kuan-yin ching and the Karandavyuha, they promise unfailing deliverance from all possible disasters, the gaining of both worldly benefits and transcendent wisdom.

They always categorize the benefits by listing them numerically.

They emphasize minute, detailed and correct procedures: how to make either a three-dimensional image of the deity (mandala) or a representational image painted on cotton cloth (pata), how to prepare the ritual arena, how many times one should chant the dharani, what ritual ingredients one should use in performing the fire offering (homa) to the deity, what hand gestures (mudra) to perform and what visualizations of the deity to carry out during the rite.

There are also magical recipes for averting specific disasters.

I will select some passages from Fuo-shu shih-i-mien Kuan-shih-yin shen-chouching (T. no.

1070) translated by Yeh-she-chü-to to illustrate what I mean.

The sutra calls for a daily routine of bathing in the morning (if bathing is impossible, then at least rinsing the mouth and washing both hands), followed by reciting the dharani 108 times.

The result is the gaining of ten rewards in one's present life:

(1) does not suffer from any disease; (2) is constantly remembered by buddhas of the ten directions; (3) always possesses money, things, clothes and food sufficiently and without want; (4) can overcome all enemies; (5) can cause all sentient beings to give rise to hearts of compassion toward oneself; (6) no poison, evil charm or fever can harm one; (7) no knife or stake can hurt one; (8) will not be drowned by water; (9) will not be burned by fire; (10) will not suffer a sudden death. On the other hand, the following four compensations will become one's own:

(1) sees innumerable buddhas before one dies; (2) will never fall into hell; (3) will not be harmed by any animal; (4) is reborn in the land of the Buddha Amitayus. If one has committed the four parajikas (deserving expulsion) and the five deadly sins (leading to be born in the Avici Hell), by chanting this dharani but once, all the

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sins will be extinguished.

It then describes the method of worship.

First make an image of the Eleven-headed Avalokiteśvara with white sandalwood. Place it on a high platform facing the west.

Scatter the ground with flowers.

From day one to day seven, chant the dharani three periods each day:

108 times in the morning,

108 times at noon and 108 times in the evening.

One does not have to offer any food, but from day eight to day thirteen, one should offer food, drink and fruits.

Do not put them on plates but on beds woven with clean grass.

The practitioner kneels on a cushion made of sedge grass facing the statue. On the 14th and 15th day, make sandalwood fire offering in front of the image and also place a clean copper container filled with one sheng (pint) of Soma oil in front of the practitioner.

Then take incense made of the Aguru tree and of a thickness as that of a chopstick, prepare 1008 sections of this kind of incense, each being one inch in length. Starting from the noon of the 15th day, the practitioner takes one section of the incense, smear it with Soma oil, recite the dharani over it and then throw it into the sandalwood fire.

He does so until all of the 1008 sections are finished.

He should not eat anything for these two days.

On the night of the 15th day, Avalokiteśvara enters the place of practice and the sandalwood statue shakes by itself.

At that time, the whole earth also shakes.

The face of the Buddha sitting on the topmost head of the statue praises the practitioner and promises to fulfill all his wishes.

The sutra ends with various recipes to deal with moon eclipses, nightmares, diseases of people and animals, and disturbance caused by ghosts.

Here are two examples: place equal amounts of realgar and yellow ochre on leaves, chant the dharani 1008 times in front of the image of Avalokiteśvara, bath with warm water mixed with the above.

All obstacles, nightmares, and diseases will go away.

For getting rid of evil ghosts who have entered one's home: place 108 sticks of incense in front of the image, chant the dharani once over each stick and throw it into the fire. When all the incense sticks are finished, all evil ghosts will scatter and do not dare to stay (T. 20: 149b~151b).

Space does not allow me to discuss sutras on the Amoghapaśa and Cintāmanicakra Avalokiteśvara.

However, I will provide here a synopsis of the Thousand-handed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara sūtra translated by

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Bhagavadharma, by far the most important of all the esoteric scriptures in China.

The sūtra is spoken by the Buddha in the palace of Avalokiteśvara located on the island Potalaka.

Suddenly there is a great illumination and the three thousand chiliocosms turn golden incandescent, shaking all over while the sun and moon become dull by comparison. Bodhisattva Dharanī King (Tsung-chih-wang) asks the Buddha why this is happening and the Buddha answers that it is because Avalokiteśvara is going to reveal the dharanī.

Avalokiteśvara then takes over the center stage.

He speaks with the first person pronoun "I" in the sūtra.

When I practised under a buddha by the name of Ch' ien-kuang-wang ching-chu Ju-lai innumerable kalpas ago, the buddha too

k pity on me and all sentient beings.

Touching my forehead with his golden hand, the buddha instructed me to keep this dharani and work for the benefit of beings living in evil times in the future.

I was at that time a bodhisattva of the first stage, but as soon as I heard the dharani, I advanced right away to the eighth stage of the bodhisattva path. Filled with joy and exaltation, I vowed, 'If I am capable of benefiting and comforting all sentient beings in the future, let me be endowed with a thousand hands and a thousand eyes right away.'

As soon as I made the vow, this happened.

So from that long ago epoch, I have kept the dharani.

As a result, I have always been born where there is a buddha.

Moreover, I have never undergone birth from a womb, but am always transformed from a lotus.

Having explained the origin and efficacy of the dharani, Avalokiteśvara calls upon anyone who wants to keep this dharani to give rise to the thought of compassion for all sentient beings by making the following ten vows after him:



Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly learn  
all Dharma.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily obtain  
the eye of wisdom.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly save  
all

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sentient beings.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily obtain  
skill of means.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly sail  
on the prajñā boat.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily cross  
over the ocean of suffering.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly obtain  
the way of discipline and meditation.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily ascend thenirvana mountain.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I quickly enter thehouse of non-action.

Namah Avalokiteśvara of Great Compassion, may I speedily achieve theDharma-Body.

If I face a mountain of knives, it will naturally crumble,

if I face a roaring fire, it will naturally burn out,

if I face hell, it will naturally disappear,

if I face a hungry ghost, it will naturally be satiated,

if I face an Asura, its evil heart will naturally become tame and  
,

if I face an animal, it will naturally obtain great wisdom.

After making such vows, one should sincerely call the name of Avalokiteśvara as well as the name of Amitabha Buddha who is Avalokiteśvara's original teacher.

If anyone recites the dharani, should he fall into an evil realm of rebirth, or not being born into one of the lands of the buddhas, or not attaining unlimited samaadhi and eloquence, or not getting all the wishes of one's desire in the present life and, in the case of a woman, if she detests the female body and wants to be born a man in her next life, Avalokitesvara promises that all these would become true.

Otherwise he will not achieve complete, perfect enlightenment.

If anyone steals or damages the sangha's property, by reciting this dharani, the sin will be forgiven. Anyone who has committed the five sins and ten evil

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deeds, who slanders the Dharma and corrupts monastic discipline, or who destroys temples and steals monks' possessions, is freed from all the guilt by chanting this dharani.

But if one has doubts about the efficacy of the dharani, then the consequences of even a slight mistake will not disappear, how much more so to a serious sin?

The keeping of the dharani will result in fifteen kinds of good rebirth and the avoidance of fifteen kinds of evil death.

The fifteen kinds of evil death from which one is saved are:

(1) from hunger and suffering; (2) from being imprisoned by a king and beaten by staff; (3) at the hands of enemies; (4) from fighting on the battlefield; (5) by being mauled by wolves or other vicious animals; (6) by being attacked by poisonous snakes and scorpions; (7) by drowning or burnt by fire; (8) by poison; (9) by witchcraft; (10) from madness; (11) by falling from a tree or a cliff; (12) from enemies' curse; (13) being killed by heretic gods and demonic ghosts; (14) from chronic and lingering illnesses; (15) by suicide. The fifteen kinds of good rebirth one enjoys are:

(1) being always ruled by a virtuous king wherever one is born; (2) always born in a good country; (3) always living in a peaceful time; (4) always meeting with good friends; (5) always born without any physical defects; (6) but with a pure and ripe heart for truth; (7) will not break any precepts; (8) having harmonious and virtuous family members; (9) fully endowed with money and food; (10) always respected and taken care of by others; (11) never suffering from robbery; (12) always having one's desire fulfilled; (13) always being protected by nagas, devas, and virtuous gods.

ds; (14) can see the Buddha and listen to the Dharma in the place of birth; (15) can understand and penetrate the correct Dharma.

The dharani consisting of 84 phrases is then revealed.

All the assembled reach different levels of realization.

Some attain the fruit of sotapanna, sakadagami, anagami or arahant.

Others attain the first, second, third, fourth, fifth, all the way to the tenth stage of the bodhisattva path.

Unlimited number of sentient beings give rise to bodhicitta.

In keeping the dharani, one should stay in a clean room, purify oneself by bathing and put on clean clothes.

Hang a banner (with a painting of the bodhisattva?), light lamp, offer flowers, delicacies and food and concentrate one's thoughts without allowing them to wander.

One can expect that Sun-light and Moon-light Bodhisattvas as well as many gods and immortals come to bear

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witnesses.

Avalokiteśvara will look after the practitioner with the thousand eyes and protect him with the thousand hands.

As a result, one will understand all worldly classics, including the Vedas and all heterodox philosophies thoroughly.

By chanting the dharani, one will be able to cure 84,000 kinds of illnesses and order gods and ghosts to subdue Mara and heterodox teachers.

If a person who either studies the sutra or practices meditation in the wilderness is bothered by evil spirits and cannot concentrate, just chant this dharani once, they will be bound and subdued by it.

Any one who gives rise to the thought of compassion to sentient beings and decides to keep the dharani as taught, Avalokiteśvara will order nagas, benevolent gods, deva guardians of the secrets of Vairocana to always follow and surround him without leaving his side.

They will protect him as if he were their eyes or their very life (T. 20: 106b~108b).

Method of setting up a sacred arena is then given: recite the dharani 21 times over a knife.

Use the knife to demarcate the boundary on the ground.

Or one can recite the dharani 21 times over pure water and pour it on the

he four sides to create the boundary. Or use whitemustard seed.

Recite the dharani 21 times and then scatter them on the four sides.

Alternatively, one can also create the boundary by visulization.

Or recite the dharani 21times over clean ashes or five- colored twine.

Either can serve as markings for the arena'sboundry (T. 20: 109b).

Many recipes to deal with various problems or to attain specific goals f

ollow, and here are afew samples.

If one wants to order a ghost around, get a skull from the wild, wash a  
ndclean it.

Set up a sacred area in front of the image of the Thousand-handed an  
dThousand-eyed One, worship it with flowers, incense, food and drink.

Do so for sevendays, and the ghost will appear and do whatever it is o

rdereed. If a woman suffers from adifficult childbirth, recite the dharani

21 times over sesame oil, rub it in her belly button andher vagina and t

he baby will come out easily.

If someone has phobia about the dark and isafraild to go out at night,

make a necklace with white threads, recite the dharani 21 times andtie

it with 21 knots. When this is worn on the neck, fear goes away (T.

20: 110b~c).

The sutra ends by identifying the names of the forty mudras of Avalokiteśvara and the benefits they bestow on the worshiper (T. 20: 111a~b).

I have devoted considerable space to the description of these three esoteric

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scriptures centering around Avalokiteśvara.

This is justified because, with the possible exception of Ch'ing Kuan-yin, they are not very well known.

Most students of Chinese Buddhism, including myself prior to my study of Kuan-yin, usually stay away from the esoteric scriptures, regarding them as a bit too specialized.

As a result, there is a vacuum in the current scholarship on Chinese esoteric Buddhism.

Although a huge body of such scriptures exists, the majority of them having been translated in the T'ang and Sung, it has rarely been used as sources for the reconstruction of the kind of religious beliefs and practices they presented to their contemporary audiences in China. Even a c



ursory summary as I have tried to do above, therefore, might be helpful to provide a concrete sense about this type of literature. The second reason for my going into some detail about the promises Kuan-yin grants to the faithful is because such scriptures create a new identity of this deity not found in the earlier exoteric scriptures.

While the Lotus sūtra, the Surangama-Sutra and the Pure Land Visualization Sutra, the three most important scriptures promoting the faith in Kuan-yin since the Six Dynasties, promise similar worldly benefits as well as salvation from evil rebirths as those vouchsafed by the esoteric texts, Kuan-yin is subordinated to Sakya Muni and Amitabha respectively.

In the esoteric scriptures, on the other hand, Kuan-yin increasingly assumes an independent role as a universal savior.

Responding to the development of the cults of Shiva and Vishnu in Hinduism, esoteric Avalokiteśvara exhibits similar omnipotence and omniscience.

The process reached its culmination in the Karandavyūha Sutra.

As we have seen earlier, Avalokiteśvara is declared to be the creator of the universe, including Shiva himself.

One measure of the popular reception of a scripture is provided by the depiction of its themes in art.

The "Universal gateway" chapter of the Lotus sūtra is a well known example.

According to Fa-hua ch'uan-chi (Record of the Lotus sūtra, T. no.

2068), Tsu-ch'ü Meng-sun (r. 401 ~

433), the king of the Northern Liang dynasty, was credited with the promotion of this chapter as an independent scripture.

The king was a Buddhist devotee.

He suffered from illness and was told to chant the chapter, for "Kuan-yin has a special affinity with people of this land."

He did so and recovered from his illness.

From then on, this chapter, known as Kuan-shih-yin Sutra, started to circulate as an independent