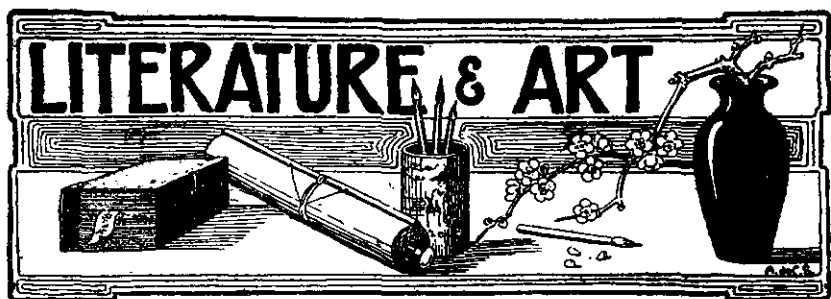




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## KUAN-YIN: GODDESS OF MERCY

BY  
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That Kuan-yin is a vital factor in current Chinese religious thought and worship goes without saying. She represents in popular thinking that element of loving kindness and compassion so dear to human life, and consequently to much in human conceptions of deity. As the Goddess of Mercy, hearer and answerer of prayers, she is the one greatly beloved figure in the Buddhist pantheon. Thousands of prayers are addressed to her by trusting women, especially for the gift of sons, for healing of sickness and for countless other blessings. A brief sketch of her place in Mahayana theology, her character in Chinese tradition, and of the cultus that has grown up about her is, therefore, of interest to all who may have observed the many evidences of Kuan-yin's hold upon the affections of the Chinese people.

Kuan-yin may be traced directly to the Mahayanist God of Mercy, Avalokita, or Avalokitesvara ("The lord looking down"), one of the great Dhyani-Bodhisattvas associated with Amitabha, God of Boundless Light and Life. The Dhyani-Bodhisattva was a "spiritual son," or reflex, of a Buddha in the theology of transformed Buddhism, as it was developed in Nepal and Kashmir before we hear much of it in China. As a world-saviour, the Bodhisat is looked to with great devotion, as being closer to the hearts of men and more accessible than an impassive Buddha, more responsive, and of much more influence in human affairs. In Mahayana Buddhism the older Hinayana ideal of the Arhat is therefore supplanted by the Bodhisat-Saviour ideal. Out of compassion for struggling mortals the Bodhisattva refuses to enter the bliss of Nirvana, but turns his stock of merit to the credit of others, and offers to save all who call upon him in faith. Salvation, then, is by the grace of the compassionate Avalokita, and consists of rebirth in Amitabha's "Pure Land."

Before Buddhism had become fully established in China, a triad had been formed in North India, or Central Asia, consisting of Amitabha as the central figure, together with Avalokitesvara and Mahasthamaprapta, the two Bodhisattvas representing, respectively, the active qualities of



The "Purple Bamboo Kuan-yin." From a Shanghai Print, sold in Hangchow, Shaoshing and other Cities and Towns in Chekiang.

Amitabha, namely, Infinite Compassion and Infinite Strength or Power. On Chinese soil these figures became "O-mi-t'o" (阿彌陀), "Kuan-yin" (觀音), and "Ta-shih-chih" (大勢至). The last named, however, has never gained much prominence as an object of devotion, being quite eclipsed by the other two.

It is interesting to note that in Tibet the figure of Avalokita became more important in the adoration of the devotees of Llamaism than did Amitabha, for the Dalai Lama of Llassa declared himself to be the incarnation of Avalokita, while Amitabha found incarnation in the Grand Lama of Tashilumpo. In China, also, it would seem that the figure of Kuan-yin has become almost more adored than that of Amitabha, if one were to judge from the frequency of her images in temple and grotto, her many pictured representations in art, and the number of *ling pan* (i.e. round plaques with the character "Ling," 靈, meaning "effective") hung around her images in the temples as tokens of answered prayers.

When the name of Avalokitesvara was translated into Chinese, it was rendered as "Kuan-shih-yin" (觀世音), or the "Manifested Voice" of Amitabha. The idea of "the lord looking down" suggested the "All-pitying one, the Lord of Mercy." This meaning is conveyed in the first part of a longer title that was given to Kuan-yin—"Ta-tzu Ta-pei" (大慈大悲), or "Great Mercy, Great Compassion"—namely, "the All-Compassionate, Self-existent Saviour, the Royal Bodhisat Who Hears the Cries of the World." In this connection, the word "Bodhisattva" was transliterated "P'u-t'i-sa-to" (菩提薩多) and subsequently abbreviated to "P'u-sa" (菩薩).

In Buddhist scriptures, Kuan-yin has a place second only to Amitabha. References to her occur in the "Ch'i Hsin Lun" (起信論) or "Awakening of Faith," and in the Greater and Smaller Sukhavati Vyuhās of the Pure Land Sect (In Chinese: the "Wu-liang-shou Ching," 無量壽經, or "Great Scripture of the Endless Life;" and the "Fu-shuo O-mi-t'o Ching," 佛說阿彌陀經, or "The Sayings of Buddha about Amitabha"). More mention is made, however, in the Amitayur Dhyana Sutra (Kuan-wu-liang-shou Ching, 觀無量壽經) or "Reflections on the Boundless Life," the third of the important Pure Land sutras.

The most classical reference to Kuan-yin in Buddhist scriptures is in the twenty-fifth chapter of the "Miao Fa Lien Hua Ching," or "Lotus Scripture of the Mysterious Law," translated in 1910 by Timothy Richard under the title of "The New Testament of Higher Buddhism." There Kuan-yin is described as "The Universal Hearer of Prayer."

"Why is Kuan-yin called the 'Hearer of the World's Prayers?'" is the question put to Amitabha by Wuchini the saint. "Good man," comes the reply, "if innumerable beings are suffering all kinds of troubles, and with all their heart call on Kuan-yin, Kuan-yin immediately listens and delivers them. Whoever lays hold of this name, even if they enter a great fire it will not burn them. This is because Kuan-yin is a Divine Power. If men in danger from floods, shipwreck, attack from men or demons, imprisonment, or evil passions, will but call on her name, Kuan-

yin will deliver. If a woman desires a son and worships Kuan-yin, she will get a happy and virtuous and wise son. If she desires a daughter, she will get a good and beautiful daughter, who will be rooted in virtue, loved and respected by all. I tell you, Wuchini, Kuan-yin has this power." . . . . In answer to another question or Wuchini's, Amitabha continues his praises of Kuan-yin. "My good man, if there are men in any nation who shall be saved by divine incarnation or indwelling, Kuan-yin becomes manifest as Divine and inspires them with the Law."

Kuan-yin is then described as able to appear in all manner of forms and in all lands in order to save all manner of men. If the call comes, she will appear in suitable form so as to preach the Law and save doctors of theology, Buddhists of the old school, Brahmans, Indra, free disembodied spirits, great generals of heaven, gods of luck, small kings, leaders, private scholars, officials, Brahmans, priests, nuns, novices, wives of leaders, wives of officials, wives of Brahmans, wives of scholars, young men and young women, devas, dragons, night-goblins, . . . or to angels who hold sceptres, . . . all in order to save. Having heard this, Wuchini then bestowed upon her his necklace of pearls, saying. "World-honoured one, now I must worship Kuan-yin." She received his gift and act of worship, dividing the necklace into two parts. One part she gave to Sakyamuni, the other to the "temple of the God of all Grace." After this it is said that Wuchini arose and composed a hymn in her honour.

Turning now to the character of Kuan-yin in Chinese tradition, we find the perplexing problem of how the male god of mercy, Avalokita, became transformed into the popular goddess of mercy, Kuan-yin. Many strands of influence have doubtless been woven into the story. It is possible that a worship of the "sakti" or female counterpart of Avalokita in Central Asia may have been the origin of the subtle change. Or it may have been the advent of Hariti, the Indian ogress, into Buddhist thought which affected in some way the conception of Kuan-yin. Under the influence of Gautama she is said to have been transformed from a devourer of children into a giver of sons, a benevolent nun associated with monastic refectories. Or, again, there may have been a borrowing of certain features from the Taoist "T'ien-Hou Sheng-Mu" (天后聖母) or "Holy Mother Queen of Heaven," for we are told by Johnston in his "Buddhist China" (268) that "both (Kuan-yin and T'ien-hou) are worshipped as beneficent and compassionate goddesses who save men from misery and peril, especially from the dangers of the ocean; and both are regarded as the patrons and protectors of mothers and as the bringers of children."

The legend of Miao-Shan has done more than anything else, no doubt, to popularize Kuan-yin as a feminine figure in Chinese tradition. For a full version of the tradition, the reader is referred either to Werner's "Myths and Legends of China," or to Father Henri Dore's "Researches into Chinese Superstitions" (Eng. tr. by M. Kennelly) Vol. VI. The legend was probably composed on the Island of P'u-to by the Buddhist monk, P'u-ming, in the year 1102 A. D., with the evident purpose of giving a truly Chinese origin and background to the precious name of Kuan-yin. In the opinion of many sinologists, however, the evidence

is insufficient to prove either that Kuan-yin is a development of Miao Shan or that a goddess of mercy was worshipped in China before the coming of Mahayana Buddhism. There is internal evidence of a syncretism of Buddhist and Taoist lore; despite its medley of Indian 'yoga' doctrine, Buddhist paradise, and metempsychosis, together with a Taoist belief in Yu Huang Shang Ti (玉皇上帝), the Pearly Emperor of Heaven there brought in as the canonizer of Miao Shan and her family, the tradition is a classic, the model for all later lives of Kuan-yin.

Miao Shan, so the story runs, was a princess of long ago, the youngest of three daughters. Having incurred her father's displeasure by her refusal to marry the man of his choice, Miao Shan was shut up first in the Queen's garden, and later in the "Nunnery of the White Sparrow." Her cheerfulness and piety won for her the favour of the gods, but the distrust of the abbess and the wrath of her father. By the king's order she was summarily executed—strangled with a silken cord when other means had failed.

Her body was carried off by a tiger and preserved in the forest while her soul went touring through Hades. Her presence there caused all hell to be transformed as it were into a paradise of joy, as the prisoners felt their fetters fall away on hearing Miao Shan recite the praises of Amitabha. She was therefore quickly escorted back to earth, where, with the help of "Ju-lai Buddha" (如來佛) she was established at the monastery of the "Fragrant Hill" on the Island of P'u-to. After nine years she reached perfection and was deified as a Buddha in the presence of all the higher gods.

Meanwhile as a punishment for burning the nunnery and killing his daughter, the king had been afflicted with a dire disease. Hearing of it, Miao Shan came to his aid in the guise of a hermit-doctor. She informed him that only by medicine made from the arms and eyes of a person living at the monastery of the "Fragrant Hill" in P'u-to could he be cured. By a magic transporting of her body in the twinkling of an eye, the Immortal Miao Shan was able to furnish from her own body the required members; these she herself in her assumed form prepared in two installments, curing first the left and then the right half of the king's body. But as the queen was watching, she discovered a certain black mark on one hand, recognized it as the hand of her own daughter, and informed the king.

The king, now recovered, and fully believing that the Immortal of P'u-to who had cured him at such great personal sacrifice, was his own daughter become a Buddha, prepared to visit the island to thank her. On the way he and his family were kidnapped by evil genii, but finally, after a series of fights between men, genii, and gods, they were rescued by the disguised Miao Shan. On their arrival at "Fragrant Hill" monastery, they found the Immortal seated on her high altar, with her poor mutilated body gaping and bloody. Prostrating themselves in agony before her, the father, mother, and sisters all fell to weeping, beseeching her if there were not some way in which she could be made whole again. At her direction, the king worshipped heaven, confessing his sins, and she immediately recovered her lost eyes and hands.

To their unbounded joy, Miao Shan then descended from the altar resplendent in her former beauty. The king expressed his determination to abdicate his throne, and, renouncing the world, to practice Buddhist abstinence, under her guidance. The legend closes with an account of the arrival of a decree of cononization from Yu Huang, the Pearly Emperor, for Miao Shan and all her family. "Miao Shan will henceforth be called 'Most Merciful and Compassionate Goddess, Succour of the Afflicted, Miraculous and Ever-Helpful Protectress of Mortals.'" The apotheosis of Miao Shan was thus completed.

In that fantastic and allegorical epic written in the thirteenth century by Ch'iu Ch'ang-ch'un (邱長春), entitled the "Hsi Yiu Chi" (西遊記), or "The Mission to Heaven" in Timothy Richard's translation, Kuan-yin appears as a miracle worker of great resource. In earlier chapters of the book she may be seen assisting in a fight; setting out to find a man of faith to fetch the Sacred Book of Julai; performing a miracle with her bottle of dew and willow branch; finding Huen Chwang to be the Pilgrim; and helping men in distress. In the succeeding chapters she may be found helping people out of difficulty; delivering from false doctrines; bringing trees to life; converting the Demon Child; and working a miracle with a bamboo basket. Through the last part she rescues men, helps in distress, subdues a demon, teaches repentance, converts three rogues, and is finally invoked by all heavenly beings in the "New Anthem of Heaven."

It is apparent from the foregoing that by the end of the thirteenth century the Kuan-yin tradition was pretty well established. For this reason it is a little hard to follow Dr. Reichelt's line of reasoning in his deductions from his discovery of the account of the "Life of Jesus" in the ninth volume of the "Shen-hsien Kang-chien" (神仙綱鑑) of Hsu-tao (徐道) published in 1701 A.D. Commenting\* on the significance of the statement that Maria the Virgin-Mother was caught up into heaven and "placed over the ninth 'p'in' (立於九品之上), he goes on to say, "Of great interest is the closing part, dealing with the ascension of the holy mother. The text here is very clear, so that there is no doubt as to Maria taking the high place of the Buddhist Madonna, Kuan-yin, sitting on the purple-gold lotus, and from the heavenly places reigning over the world with boundless wisdom and mercy. . . . After the discovery of this document, the assumption that the Buddhist Kuan-yin idea was essentially influenced by the Roman Catholic thought of the merciful Madonna is very much strengthened." We are inclined to see an influence in the opposite direction here, for, as Dr. Reichelt admits, "a glimpse at the text given above will soon tell us that certain influences from Buddhism can also be traced."

It would appear as though an already clear Kuan-yin tradition had plainly coloured the Maria account. The narrative of "The Virgin Maria Gives Birth to Jesus" is inserted in a chapter (full of other stories, including an account of Mohammedanism) which purports to be an account of the struggles of Emperor Kuan Wu Ti (A.D. 25-58) with certain western

\* K.L. Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism*, p. 59ff.

tribes from whom the Chinese learned the story. When, however, the author prefaces his story with "People from those Western countries give the following account," it is open to question whether or not he means the western tribes of the first century after Christ, as Reichelt deduces. It is highly possible that Hsu-tao, writing in the closing years of the 17th century, wove into his narrative a Christian tradition, learned from Roman Catholic fathers, in which he sees a likeness of Maria to Kuan-yin, and to which he adds the extra touch of her elevation to the "ninth p'in", where "she was made the Heavenly Mother Empress who rules the whole world. She especially defends the disciples, so that they may go into all the world in their great mission of proclaiming the doctrine." Certainly such a conception would not have been written into the Christian tradition in China as early as the first century A.D. His very use of Catholic terms argues against the acceptance of the story as a first century tradition. There is likewise about as much possibility of the Taoist "T'ien-Hou" colouring the narrative as Kuan-yin.

Having seen something of the place of Kuan-yin in scriptural theology and tradition, our interest will naturally turn to the cultus that has grown up about Kuan-yin, her many manifestations, and her place in household religion.

Kuan-yin's sacred mountain is the Island of P'u-to, just off the Chekiang coast in the Chusan Archipelago. Here she rules not so much as one of the Pure Land triad, but in her own right as patron-bodhisat of the island, protectress of sailors, and mistress of the Southern Seas. In the two great monasteries, Northern and Southern, Kuan-yin is given the place of honour: the former containing not only a large image of the goddess, but also a small one said to have been brought from Tibet; while in the latter, a central Kuan-yin is attended on either side by representations of her various transformations—thirty-two in all. Many parts of the island are associated with her name as a wonder-worker: the Diamond Rock, the Pulpit of Kuan-yin, the Cave of Ch'ao-yin where she reveals herself to devotees, and the Hui-ch'uan, or Spring of Wisdom, with its healing waters. Thousands of pilgrims from all parts of China come every spring and summer to worship at her shrines.

The varied representations of Kuan-yin are more or less familiar to those who have visited temples in any part of China, where certain of the commoner forms may be seen. Father Dore has enumerated most of these forms in Vol. VI of his works on Chinese Superstitions. The most striking of these is the "Thousand-Armed" Kuan-yin (千手觀音), a tantra form borrowed from Tibet or Central Asia, and varying in the number of eyes, hands and heads. It is explained as representing the unlimited directions and forms of the working of Kuan-yin's mercy, or (as Weiger, *Textes Philosophiques*, 467ff) the 1,000 arms and eyes represent rays of light, activity and efficiency. Navarra in his "China und die Chinesen" (449)c calls her "Mutter der Barmherzigkeit," conveying the thought of the essential outgoing love of motherliness.

Another common form is that of "Kuan-yin crossing the sea," (過海觀音) where the goddess is seen standing on the head of a sea monster just emerging out of the waves. A fine specimen of this may be

seen on the relief screen back of the main images in the Ling-yin Monastery, (靈隱寺), Hangchow. As "Giver of Children," (送子觀音) Kuan-yin is sometimes seen either standing with a child in her arms, or seated with one on her knee.

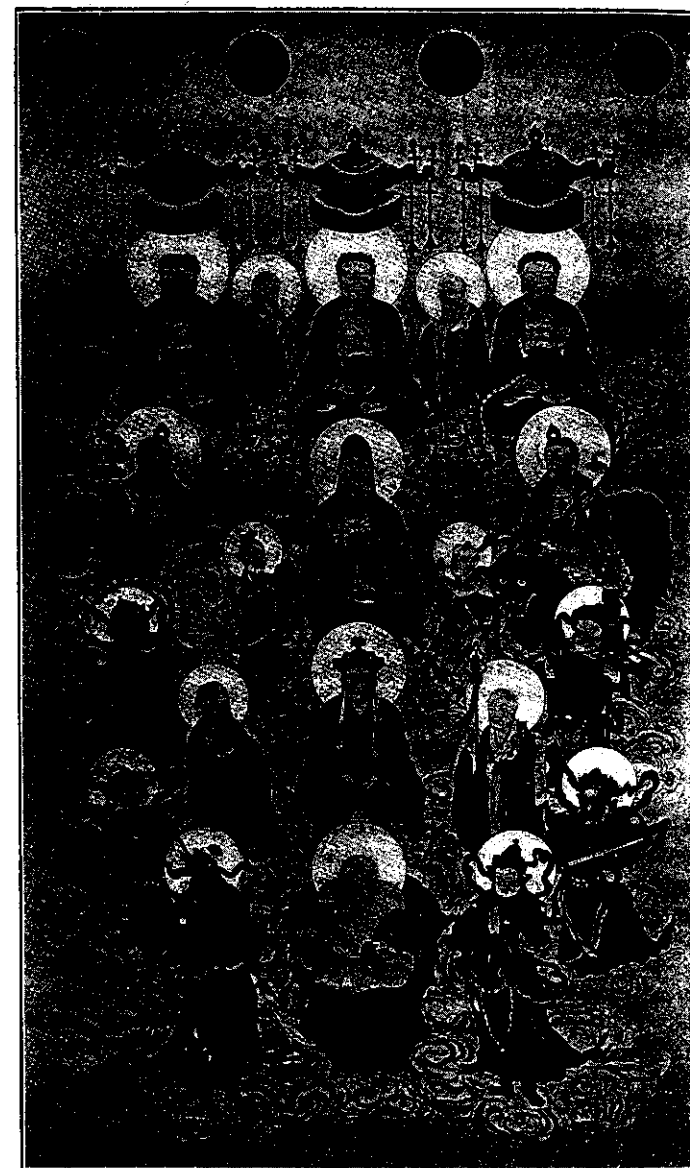
A fine old painting of "Kuan-yin of the Bamboo Grove" (紫竹觀音), the work of one Chu Chan (竹禪) in the 16th year of Kwang Hsu, may be seen on the back of the huge screen behind the image of "P'i-lu Fo" (毘盧佛) or Vairocana in the Chao Ch'ing Monastery (昭慶寺) near West Lake, Hangchow. I first saw it described in G. E. Moule's "Hangchow Past and Present."

The "White-Robed Kuan-yin" (白衣觀音) is quite a common form, often accompanied by the nymph "P'i-to" (毘陀) and a youth with hands joined in supplication to the goddess. These would be easily confused with the more usual attendants, Shan Ts'ai (善才) and Lung Nu (龍女). Besides this, seven other forms are mentioned in Dore's list.

Other female divinities with whom Kuan-yin might be confused are those of Marichi (Chun-t'i, 準提) the Brahmanic Goddess of the Dawn, who has three heads and eight arms; T'ien-Hou, already mentioned as the Taoist stellar deity, "Queen of Heaven" or "Mother of the Southern Dipper" (Dore, VII. 303,311); and also Maya (摩耶), Gautama's Mother, or, quoting Johnston (Buddhist China, 280), "the eternal Mother of all the Buddhas." He says further that "the Buddhists in their religious meditations have generally treated the figure of the human mother of the historical founder of their faith in a manner that does credit to their imaginative delicacy and good taste; and in China and Japan they have found solace for this self-imposed restraint in the rapturous contemplation of the infinite graces of their ever-loving and compassionate Lady, the pusa Kuan-yin."

In the temples around Hangchow, Kuan-yin usually has her place. Especial honour is accorded to her in the upper "Monastery of Heavenly Bamboo" (天竺) where the central figure (according to R. F. Fitch's Hangchow Itineraries) is the "White-Robed Kuan-yin." In different halls of this same temple, may be found also "Kuan-yin of twenty-four manifestations;" a "Sung-Tsu Kuan-yin" (Giver of Children); a "Thousand-Armed Kuan-yin" with eighty-four manifestations ranged on either side; while at the rear of the main hall screen is the "Goddess of the Sea." Dr. Fitch adds that a figure of the goddess as "Healer of Eyes" may be seen near the stairs, but it has not always been clear in the minds of the monks with whom the writer has talked that the "Yen Kuang Niang Niang" (眼光娘娘) or "Healer of Eyes" is a manifestation of Kuan-yin.

In two of the temples, namely, the "Monastery of the Pure Lotus Flower" (清蓮禪寺), better known by its Fish Pond or Yu Ch'uan (玉泉), and the "Monastery of Great Benevolence" (大仁寺) commonly called the "Shih Wu Tung" (石屋洞) at the foot of Nan Kao Feng (南高峯), Kuan-yin may be seen as one of the Pure Land Triad. In each case the three figures are comparatively new, freshly gilded and



The Triad of the "Three Precious Compassionate Honourable Ones," Kuan-yin here appearing in the Centre, with Ju-lai Buddha above and Ti-ts'ang Wang below. The Buddha-to-Come (Maitreya) is added below to complete the Artistic Effect.

encased in glass for protection from dust. The Kuan-yin figure is at the right as you face the trio, though it is hard to distinguish her from the left hand figure of "Ta-shih-chih" (Mahasthama) as for as features go. While both have somewhat of a feminine cast of countenance, yet it may be presumed that Kuan-yin in this case is, like Mahasthama, a male figure.

Kuan-yin may also be found carved on rocks or at the mouths of caves ; or one may even find her enshrined in the deep recesses of a natural cave, such as that at the foot of the path descending on the south side of Nan Kao Feng, where the priest in charge will lead the way with a lighted candle.

In the Chao Yen Szu (招賢寺) or temple of the "White Jade Buddha" a few steps beyond the New Hotel on the north shore of West Lake, Hangchow, the writer was given the rare privilege of a glimpse at the head priest's private collection of Kuan-yins (or rather Avalokitas from Tibet. In his library upstairs stands a glass case with eleven small figures, one having three faces, and one being an image of Ti-ts'ang. The priest also produced a rare old book with fifty-three black rubbings from stone of different poses and manifestations of Kuan-yin. The book was nameless and dateless. The priest had no idea as to the source of the originals. Having then shown me a modern book of fifty-three sketches of Kuan-yin in black and white (a Shanghai publication entitled : 觀音大士慈容五十三現象贊), he turned back to the old one, saying, "But this is more beautiful."

Kuan-yin is worshiped in homes as well as in temples. Crude wood-prints from the printers of "ma-chang" (馬張), or brilliant Shanghai prints are used for devotional purposes. Pilgrims may buy stone-rubbings of famous Kuan-yin carvings, or will obtain from temples lithographs of Kuan-yin, or else procure more expensive hand-painted scrolls on which are a variety of portraits of Kuan-yin to take back for artistic decoration or for devotion. Thus we gain some conception of how large a place Kuan-yin holds in the religious devotion, and, consequently, in the religious art, of the Chinese people.