

Divinity and Salvation: The Great Goddesses of China

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Though Chinese mythology and religion have been dominated by male gods and masters, the presence of female divinities has always been a part of Chinese folk belief. These various divinities, usually identified with the feminine principle of moist, dark, receptive nature, constitute a somewhat obscure pantheon of water sprites, dragon ladies, snake queens, moon-goddesses, and rulers of heaven and earth. Among them may be recognized four divinities whose collective popularity extends from ancient times to the present. These four are Nügua 女媧, the ancient Zhou dynasty creatress; Xiwangmu 西王母, the Queen Mother of the West; Guanyin 觀音, the Goddess of Mercy; and Tianhou 天后, the Empress of Heaven. These four divinities have an interesting and significant relationship with each other, indicative of the dynamic social and cultural history of China. Collectively, they represent the presence of the feminine element, divinized to the highest degree, in an almost unbroken continuity of spiritual potency and significance for both the masses of China, as well as for various religious and political groups. It is the purpose of this paper to discuss these four figures and to show how their interrelationship has developed in the face of a dominant male religious and political environment.

The basic difference between the religious environment of classical and post-classical China might best be characterized as the difference between a warring hegemony of hereditary Chinese warlords and a central bureaucracy, dominated by a structured hierarchy of non-hereditary officials (BODDE 1961, 369). By the end of the Han Dynasty (220 C.E.), the spiritual hierarchy began to resemble, at least officially, the actual structure of the imperial order. Subsequently, the Han

interest in the collection and annotation of the earlier classic sources led to the characteristic Chinese trait of "euhemerization" by which mythic elements were given appropriate historical settings and rationalized in accordance with dominant Confucian values.¹ This tendency, which continued throughout much of Chinese intellectual history, continuously sought to limit and humanize all aspects of the supernatural, making divine personages into exemplary human mortals. As Henri Maspéro wrote, Chinese scholars tended to "eliminate all those elements of the marvelous which seemed to them improbable, and preserved only a colorless residue" (MASPÉRO 1924, 1).² This tendency reflected a definite rationalizing attitude, particularly expressed by general literary and official Confucian circles, which constantly attempted to place all female divinities into a context of subservience to more powerful male divinities who were themselves rationalized reflections of the social order (KAGAN 1980, 4-5). It is therefore only with difficulty that the enduring popular notions regarding the goddesses of post-classical China can be uncovered. Part of this unveiling is possible through a comparative analysis of the goddesses with one another as an expression of a feminine complex of distinct characteristics and traits (SCHAFER 1973, 7).

NÜGUA

The Han literati attempted to record the long-enduring oral traditions of the previous historic dynasties in an effort to create a unified body of characteristic literature (BODDE 1961, 381). It is among such sources that an early tradition of a female creatress is recorded. In the *Fengsutongyi* 風俗通義 (Popular Customs and Traditions; c. 185 C.E.) the powerful figure of Nügua emerges as the one who was before there were human beings. She

. . . created men by putting yellow earth together. But the work tasked her strength and left no free time, so she dragged a cord through mud, thus heaping it up to make it into men. Therefore, the rich and noble are those men of yellow earth, the poor and lowly, those cord-made men (BODDE 1961, 388).

It is perhaps significant to note that women are unmentioned and that there is already a clear social distinction made between upper and lower class males; yet, the creation here is by a celestial woman. Perhaps this is a consequence of a wide-spread folk popularity that the upper class recognized but interpreted to their own benefit. It also appears that Nügua is not quite up to the task of creating those yellow earth men; thus we see at a very early period that beliefs about this goddess

were already being influenced by the Han literati.

In iconography, Nügua is represented as having the tail of a serpent or dragon, showing ancient *yin* 陰 associations with earth, water and caves. As one of the Three August Ones, she is a bringer of civilization as well as a creatress. It has been noted that dragons and serpent women seem to have been worshipped in the early Shang period and Nügua is most likely a manifestation of that early worship (SCHAFER 1973, 30). In conjunction with her role as creatress she is often shown holding a compass, by which the earth is marked off into appropriate quadrants. In this sense, the compass symbolizes social and cultural organization; thus, as a creatress, she is one who imposes order and stability on untamed nature. Also the geometric associations suggest Nügua as a goddess of proportion and division according to the principle of measurement. The following suggest her relationship to both architecture and hydrologic engineering.

Nügua undertook the repair of the heavenly vault as recorded in the *Huainanzi* 淮南子 (c. 150 B.C.), by which she melted five stones of five different colors to patch the heavens that were disturbed by the breaking of one of the pillars of heaven. Then she cut the legs off of a celestial tortoise and set them up to support the four extremities of the earth. She also defeated the Black Dragon to save the province of Ji and collected ashes and reeds by which she "checked the wild waters" (BODDE 1961, 386). Another Han source personifies her as an abstract creative force called the "Transformer of the Myriad Creatures." She is also referred to as a wind goddess and the inventor of the Chinese wind organ (SCHAFER 1973, 31). She is designated as a deified *Wu* 巫 (shamaness) and rain dancer, which emphasizes the ancient historical link between female shamanism and their celestial counterparts.

By later Han times, Nügua came into association with Fuxi 伏羲, a male creator spirit and proto-musician. In this relationship she is pictured as both wife and sister. Among the various ethnographic studies of southern China, it has been discovered that many flood myths involve a brother-sister couple who frequently become the progenitors of humanity (SOYMIÉ 1965, 286). In still later medieval and post-medieval writings, Nügua shows strong associations with Gaomei 高媒 (Supreme Matchmaker) or the Goddess of Go-Betweens (female marriage brokers) who both presides over marriage and bestows children (Werner 1961, 334).³ The laws of marriage as exemplified by the Go-Between are attributed to Nügua who ironically forbade marriage between members of the same family. These laws were legalized by her brother or husband Fuxi, who was elevated to the superior status of

Emperor. The shadowy relationship between an early, mythic brother-sister as primal parents is here given an absolute legal form legitimized by a dominant male figure, one that comes to represent the empire in the form of a divine patriarch. Subsequently, Nügua takes on a less powerful and subordinate role; where once she led, now she follows.

As with all Chinese divinities, Nügua has several particular sacred geographical locations. She was frequently thought to dwell on Zhonghuang Shan 中皇山 (as the seductress of Yü 禹, the ancient flood hero), as well as on another mountain in modern Jiangxi where the rocks form a chamber called the Palace of Nügua. Another tradition relates that near the Mountain of Nine Uncertainties the "Tomb of Nügua" disappeared during a flood, only to reappear a few years later in 759 C.E. (SCHAFER 1973, 48-49). This tomb was apparently a shrine near the He river. Her image has also been found on Tang Dynasty cotton cloth used for burials. Even though feminine personalities are never allowed to intrude into official male documentation, the imagery and shrines of Nügua persisted into post-Tang China. Other remnants may be noted in various folklore concerning the snail girl where she appears in rather inhuman, strangely fishlike form recalling her earliest iconography.

XIWANGMU

Taoism, as an indigenous spiritual tradition, also had a creatress figure in the famous Queen Mother of the West. Called Jinmu 金母 (Golden Mother or occasionally Golden Mother of the Tortoise), she was believed to be the embodiment of the pure *yin* 陰 essence of the western, female *qi* 氣 (air). Linked with the active *yang* 陽 principle who was believed to be the ruler of the eastern, male air, Dongwanggong 東王公, these two together engendered heaven and earth and all beings (DORÉ 1966 IX, 31). Her early appearance is, however, quite distinct from her later humanization. Like Nügua, she has distinct animal characteristics which were later euhemerized. In general, Xiwangmu is associated with Kunlun 崑崙 mountain. But according to the *Shanhaijing* 山海經 (Classic of the Mountains and Rivers), she dwells in a mountain of jade to the north of Kunlun, in a rocky cave, where she sits on a stool with disheveled hair, wearing the dreaded *sheng* 勝 ornament on her head. She is depicted as having a human form with a leopard's tail and a tiger's teeth. Three green birds go to fetch her food. She is also the controller of the spirits of plague and disaster. Dongwanggong (the Lord of the Sky), as Xiwangmu's consort, is pictured as having a human face and the body and claws of a tiger with four tails. Other strange and powerful *shen* 神 (spirits) dwelt there. Also it is a

place where many powerful and rare herbs grow (SOYMIÉ 1965, 284). This early description has many features reminiscent of early shamanism and perhaps Xiwangmu's title of "Mother of the Golden Tortoise" has some associations with oracular, shamanistic practices, as turtle shell divination was an early standard rite.

Later descriptions of the Queen Mother of the West, particularly under various literary influences associated with popular Taoism during the Tang dynasty, humanized and elevated her to a true imperial status as a beautiful ruler of heaven. Accompanied by the phoenix, symbol of eternal life, she became the Keeper of the Peaches of Immortality. This rare fruit grows on the heavenly trees which put forth leaves every 3,000 years and it takes 3,000 years for the fruit to ripen. All the Immortals gather to renew their immortality at the sacred feast, which is regarded as the birthday of the Queen Mother. On the popular level, this is the heavenly celebration which is reflected in the *Pantao-hui* 蟠桃會 (Feast of Peaches), celebrated annually (DORÉ 1966 IX, 34). The celestial celebration takes place on Kunlun mountain in a lofty and magnificent palace surrounded by gold walls and containing twelve blocks of jade structures covering some 300 miles. This palace is the abode of the Immortals and the paradise to which the faithful practitioners of the spiritual way may attain.

Another tradition associates the Queen Mother with Wangmu-niangniang 王母娘娘, the Queen Mother Wang who is the wife of the august Yuhuang 玉皇, the Jade Emperor. This type of conflation is rather typical of the various goddesses, depending on the type of influence brought to bear on a particular figure. The imperial influence is evident here as the Jade Emperor, or the Supreme August One, is a prototype of the earthly Imperial Court. This type of association brings the Queen Mother fully into the patriarchal, hierarchical social context and divests her of much of her autonomy and originality. Further, the questionable origin of the Jade Emperor as promulgated under *Zhenzong* 真宗 (998-1023 C.E.) shows the association to be highly artificial (WERNER 1961, 599). This figure is claimed by both Taoist and Buddhist as a supreme High God and the former consort, Dongwang-gong, is made the subordinate overseer of the human realm (under the Jade Emperor), and is subsequently known as Taiyue dadi 泰岳大帝 (Great Emperor of the Eastern Peak). In the imperial status of Xiwangmu, she presides over the Immortals, rewarding and punishing them according to their deeds. Her nine-storey jade palace is surrounded by seven rows of terraces, with trees whose fruits are precious jewels. Lotus lakes with golden sands abound and birds of many-colored plumage, with divine voices, sing songs concerning the Five

Virtues (OU-I-TAI 1959, 411).

The *Hanshu* 漢書 (Book of Han) relates that Xiwangmu enjoyed extensive popularity, particularly in northeast China. In 3 B.C.E. there was a great drought and a special, apparently riotous, procession was made in honor of the Queen Mother, the devotees carrying stalks of millet as a symbol of the goddess. This may be an indication that the Goddess had strong associations with agriculture or fertility and may have been an ancient grain goddess. Another official document of the period states that "the 10,000 people rely on Xiwangmu" in distinction from the court and the literati (CAHILL 1984, 26). Thus we see that for the populace the Queen Mother was responsible for rain, agriculture, and overcoming the demon of drought. Such associations appear in texts of prayers from various ceremonies of the Queen Mother (CAHILL 1984, 23). Early epiphanies of the goddess are also recorded, as in the *Liezi* 列子, where she appears to the ancient emperor Muwang 穆王 (1001–946 B.C.E.) beside the turquoise or jasper pond on Mt. Kunlun. As described by the Taoist historian Du Guangting 杜光庭 (850–933 C.E.), the goddess was also believed to have appeared to the Han emperor Wudi 武帝 in 110 B.C.E. and to have given to him seven peaches of immortality, thus linking him with the Festival of Peaches. Her appearance as recorded by Du particularly emphasizes her power and beauty as wholly expressive of the supreme *yin* principle. She also served as a divine model for female Taoist priestesses and adepts, appearing to them in dreams and visions, and protecting them at each stage of their spiritual life (CAHILL 1986, 156–158, 163).⁴

An early altar was built to the Queen Mother by Goujian 句踐 (c. 400 B.C.E.), in the western suburb of the capital Luoyang, where offerings were made for happiness and long life. As an early goddess of plague and calamity, she later became the goddess of long life (thus withholding her more primal powers). This is most likely part of her humanization by Chinese scholars. By the Tang Dynasty period, the poets were still writing of her (as they were of Nügua), in rather stylized formats usually inspired by a visit to one of her deserted shrines, with reflections on her relationships with the earlier Chinese rulers (CAHILL 1984, 19). This does not mean all of her seats of worship were deserted. Numerous stelae on Mt. Tai 泰山 of Shandong dated from 661–798 C.E. describe the ritual of "tossing the dragons and tallies," which consisted of tossing metal dragons and inscriptions into a body of sacred water for the purpose of long life and health. The great Taoist temple of Mt. Tai has a turquoise pond in front of it, which in 1980 still went by the name of the Queen Mother's Pond (CAHILL 1984, 28).

There was also an imperial shrine on Huashan 華山, which was

considered to be one of the most important orthodox places of worship. Thus, both popular, small, local shrines and larger, Taoist monastic temples could be found dedicated to the Queen Mother. These smaller shrines, scattered about the countryside, were generally unconnected with orthodox rites and were unsanctioned by religious and secular authorities. Thus, it should be mentioned that it is quite possible that the great popularity of the Queen Mother, particularly as a folk deity, was regarded as a threat to the masculine, hierarchic authorities. The Queen Mother was always given a place of great power by the folk culture that was perhaps inconsistent with the social structure that always tended to suppress and subordinate female divinities.

GUANYIN

This Buddhist divinity enjoyed great popularity in China as the Goddess of Mercy and Compassion. It should be noted that both Taoism and Buddhism, which were able to maintain a degree of autonomy from the imperial hierarchy, both accepted the development of female divinities within the context of their religious ideals. Another form of development, apart from Buddhism and Taoism, might be recognized as intrinsically Chinese, as in the figure of Nügua (as representative of all female water spirits) and the earlier version of Xiwangmu, the mountain shamaness or *wushi* 巫師. The development of the imperial hierarchy integrated these earlier forms into its own rationalized, well-ordered familial structure. However, this subordination of indigenous female divinities created a social context for the importation of foreign goddesses who could then be sheltered by religious sanctions from this humanizing tendency. In the earlier popularity of the Queen Mother, who was brought more and more into a less prominent role through her association with the Jade Emperor, and in the later popularity of Guanyin, may be seen a fundamental collective need constantly asserting itself for an active manifestation of the feminine, imbued with celestial potency. Such a manifestation stands in direct contrast to the particular masculine ideals embodied in both secular and religious authorities. Guanyin thus appears as a shining example of a spiritualized feminine tendency that takes no interest in hierarchical order, but works for the salvation of all beings. This is a tendency she shared with the Queen Mother, who also granted health, long life and happiness, independent of the rank of the petitioners.

In 276 C.E., the first translation of the Lotus Sutra was made by Dharmarakṣa, the *Zhengfahuajing* 正法華經 which was quickly disseminated around Luoyang. As the 24th chapter of the Sutra deals with the saving power and grace of Avalokiteśvara (translated as Guan-

shiyin 觀世音), the cult began to flourish by the end of the fourth century (PAUL 1985, 165). In a second translation made, by the Indian monk Kumārajīva (406 c.e.), Guanyin has thirty-three appearances, seven of which are female. This figure, as a celestial *bodhisattva* or *pusa* 菩薩, who functioned autonomously and who was endowed with various miraculous powers, was distinguished as a great being of forgiveness, mercy, and compassion. In the Chinese context, these attributes came to be seen as primarily feminine characteristics and, by the Tang Dynasty, Guanyin was portrayed as a female goddess, companion to Amitabha or Emitufo 阿彌陀佛, Lord of the Western Paradise.⁵ This association with the Western Paradise led inevitably to a certain sharing of characteristics with the Taoist Queen Mother of the West (PAUL 1979, 251–52). By 828 c.e. there was a statue of Guanyin in most Buddhist monasteries in China, estimated at over 40,000 in all. Later conflation with the goddess Tianhou makes Guanyin also into a goddess of sailors and a protectress of those at sea (see DORÉ 1966 VI, 206).

As a Goddess of Mercy, Guanyin receives the prayers of all those who are suffering or in danger. As an idealized woman of compassion and gentleness, she was believed to have manifested herself as Miaoshan 妙善, third daughter of Baoying 寶應 and the ancient and little-known ruler, Zhuangyan 莊嚴. This story is first recorded in the *Longxing Fojiao Biannian Tonglun* 隆興佛教編年通論 chronicle, under the entry for the year 667 c.e. Being frugal in dress and appearance, she rejected marriage and, choosing to lead a life of religious devotion, was persecuted by her father. Fleeing her father, she lived in solitude for a number of years, most probably on Xiangshan 香山, and having attained enlightenment, rescued her father from serious illness by giving up her arms and eyes for his recovery. Revealing herself to be none other than the celestial bodhisattva of 1,000 eyes and arms, she was miraculously healed and went on to become the great savior, the Goddess of Mercy. This legend has its origins in a purely Chinese context and has been traced to the Xiangshan monastery in Northern China, where it was engraved on stone tablets in 1100 c.e. by the local, eminent administrator Jiang Zhiqi 蔣之奇 (DUDBRIDGE 1978, 10). Eventually, this story was elaborated in the *baojuan* 寶卷 tradition of various popular texts and exclusively identified as a Chinese life of Guanyin. The usual classic text is that written by the Buddhist monk Puming 普明 of the Tianzhusi 天竺寺 in association with a vision he experienced (1103 c.e.).

This story had a very wide circulation and popularity and reveals a number of interesting points. The Miaoshan story had a strong

appeal to women as an alternative to the normative expectations of motherhood and social conformity. As an ideal type, Miaoshan epitomizes the independent female spirit that might choose a life of religious devotion and celibacy to orthodox obligations. The various trials and tribulations suffered by Miaoshan result in her spiritual transformation to a being of great compassion endowed with the highest celestial status. The appeal of such an ideal must have had a powerful effect on the religious sentiments of many Chinese women. Research done by Marjorie TOPLEY (1954, 59) on the *Xiantian dadao* 先天大道 (Great Way of Ancient Heaven) movement among women in southern China uncovered the fact that the Miaoshan story was frequently quoted as a justification for their being vegetarians and unmarried. Thus, Guanyin came to embody an appeal to women through her association with the Miaoshan legend by which the renunciation of dominant male social values could be sanctioned. Further, the religious ideals associated with Buddhism allowed for this sanction in a context of self-affirmation and spiritual potency. The refined and modest character of the spiritual woman transformed into a powerful, celestial being brought the ideal of personal transformation into the social context as a legitimate possibility and alternative to conventional marital obedience.⁶

As a celestial goddess, Guanyin could overcome any calamity or misfortune that might threaten the believer. The followers of the Pure Land school might expect a serene death and a subsequent rebirth in the Western Paradise, similar to the popular Taoist realm of the Queen Mother. This saving grace was pragmatically believed to effect transformation in this world and to promote well-being and health among devoted practitioners (PAUL 1985, 169). In contrast to the more world-renouncing, celibate ideals expressed through the Miaoshan legend, Guanyin became a patroness of childbirth, Songzi Guanyin 送子觀音 and is pictured as dressed in flowing garments holding a child in her arms, either seated or standing. This figure represents some synthesis with the Taoist goddess, Princess of the Flowery Clouds (Yaoji 搖姬), daughter of Xiwangmu and, by association, fathered by the Great Emperor of the Eastern Peak. In this form, Guanyin (and the Princess of Flowery Clouds) watches over women in their confinement and cares for them during childbirth. In such a form, Guanyin takes on a more moderate role for women participating in the normative social milieu. Her celestial compassion extends not only to her celibate devotees but to all women, particularly in the context of their greatest danger and suffering. It is also interesting to note that in the Lotus Sutra, from which this image derives its scriptural origin, the

desire for *female* children is sanctioned (PAUL 1979, 258). Here again may be seen a confirmation of ideals associated with Guanyin that are in contrast to the dominant male desire for male children.

As a goddess associated with the sea and the dangers of the ocean, Putuo Guanyin 普陀觀音 was quite popular. This iconography refers to Putuo Island and is usually represented as a female figure seated in Buddhist fashion where she receives the prayers of the distressed. Guanyin is believed to have practiced meditation for nine years on this island in the Chusan archipelago. As a sea-goddess, she also conveys souls in the "Ship of Salvation," which she pilots to the Western Paradise (DORÉ 1966 VI, 206). As the white-robed Baiyi Guanyin 白衣觀音, she is dressed in white, seated in meditation, eyes closed, a slight smile on her lips. In this form, she is frequently attended by two devotees: the Daughter of the Dragon King, holding flowers in her hands; and, the Young Man of Excellent Qualities whose hands are joined in prayer seeking the blessing of the goddess. In such iconography, the male and female principles appear in symbolic balance. Maspéro argues that the white-robed form may be a Chinese version of the Tibetan tantric White Tara (Pāṇḍaravāsīnī) commonly shown holding in her hand a white lotus, dressed in white. This form is also linked with Putuo Island, particularly with the Grotto of the Sounding Waves (MASPÉRO 1963, 354). There are numerous other tantric forms of Guanyin, such as the goddess of thirty-six arms or the 1,000 armed Guanyin, Qianshou 千手, as previously mentioned.

TIANHOU

It is quite interesting to see how this goddess, styled the Empress of Heaven and popularly known as Mazu 媽祖, received her officially sanctioned divine status, as well as both Taoist and Buddhist recognition. In her development we may discern a summary of tendencies that reach into relatively modern times. First and foremost, the Empress of Heaven is a patroness of the sea that protects all her devotees in ocean voyages, and, in general, responds to those in distress. Secondly, she is also a goddess of procreation to whom prayers are addressed for conception. In this she shares definite associations with both Guanyin and Xiwangmu. She is brought into association with the legendary female figure of Meizhou 湄洲 whose earliest date, according to BOLTZ (1986, 211), is c. 980 C.E. As a young woman of Meizhou Island, she had four brothers, all of whom were sailors. While her brothers were at sea, the sister fainted and fell into a trance from which she was revived with difficulty. She complained of having been revived too soon. When three of her brothers returned and reported having

been saved by her during a storm, she stated that the fourth would have been saved if she had not been revived. After her death, she appeared to sailors in danger and also was responsible for ending serious droughts, a distinct similarity to Xiwangmu. Thus we may see in this legendary figure a shamanistic practice that is particularly associated with female shamans: knowledge of distant events through trance, coupled with supernatural abilities to assist those in distress. It is quite possible that Meizhou was a practicing shamaness whose fame outlived her. These female shamans frequently appealed to female deities to assist them (KAGAN 1980, 14). In Meizhou's case, she was believed to be particularly devoted to Guanyin, thus linking her with a goddess of compassion and mercy.

According to an inscription dated 1228 on her temple at Hangzhou, a supernatural light appeared one night above the island of Meizhou and various inhabitants dreamed that the goddess had appeared commanding a temple to be built. This was in 1092 C.E. In 1122, she was believed to have manifested herself to the ambassador to Korea (Lu Yundi) during a storm, which caused the Emperor to grant her a temple (MASPÉRO 1963, 330). Because of aid given during various droughts, in 1192 C.E. she was given the rank of Queen and in 1198, that of *Shengfei* 聖妃 (Holy Queen). Then in 1270 she was given the title Queen of Heaven by Kublai Khan. In 1409 a public shrine was established for her worship outside the city gates of the capital, Nanjing, and state sacrifices were offered. At this time the Taoist scriptures regarding *Tianfei* 天妃 (Celestial Consort) were being compiled and the official sanctions are reflected in her high status as an avatar of Guanyin (Boltz 1986, 214–216). Finally in 1737 she was given the title *Tianhou* (Empress of Heaven) by the Emperor Gaozong 高宗. Most likely these elevations in status were due to her increasing popularity, as her temples could be found in all the maritime provinces of coastal China as of 1228 (MASPÉRO 1963, 330). In contemporary times, her shrines were found in almost all cities of the coast and she was a particular favorite of the merchants of Fujian. Such a celestial figure, strongly believed in and prayed to by the masses in the context of a highly popular folk tradition, helped to legitimize dynastic authority by its recognizing and sanctioning that popularity. Simultaneously, such a recognition brought that devotion into the context of a male-dominant hierarchy.⁷

As the Empress of Heaven, she appears seated upon waves or clouds, or often on a throne, clad in a long robe with an official girdle, wearing an imperial headdress. She holds an official tablet or a sceptre, as symbols of her imperial status. In rank, she is equal to all male

emperors and subordinate only to the supreme (male) god. She usually has two accompanying personages: Ear of a Thousand Li and Eye of a Thousand Li, by which her observant and attentive powers are symbolized. She sees and hears all those in distress who petition her for assistance and protection. An interesting quote from the *Langye dai-zui bian* 琅耶代醉編 explains her heavenly status:

Heaven is regarded as the Emperor because he is the greatest; . . . the spirit of earth is the Empress (Tian-hou), who ranks immediately after the Emperor. The third dignity is reserved for the Water Spirits, these are the female concubines of the Emperor. (WERNER 1961, 503)

This quotation shows very clearly the official attitude toward female divinities as reflective of the imperial social structure. Regardless of her popularity and the efficacy of her saving grace, it was simply inconceivable that she could attain a higher official status without throwing into question the intrinsic beliefs, particularly promulgated by the Confucian literati, in male superiority. The fact that she attained such a high degree of official recognition is an eloquent testimony of an underlying need to legitimize the power and grace of the feminine principle.

Tianhou has two cognate divinities that are frequently associated with her: Zhunti 準提 and Doumu 斗母. The Buddhist goddess Zhunti is a goddess of dawn and a personification of light. As a Queen of Heaven, she was originally believed to be a male warrior deity who took part in numerous aboriginal battles. She later took on a definite tantric female form having eight arms, each holding a symbolic, ritual object, two of which were the sun and moon (DORÉ 1966 VII, 303-305). Doumu is a later Taoist divinity, most likely influenced by Buddhist iconography, being the North Star Goddess or the Bushel Mother. This is an ancient Chinese goddess of light who is also a Queen of Heaven having a profound knowledge of celestial mysteries. She shines with heavenly light and has a kind and compassionate heart for the suffering of humanity. She was eventually elevated to the celestial sphere with her nine sons, and her palace is the Pivot of Heaven (North Star). She has control over the Book of Life and Death, giving her devotees a full span of years. She is seated on a lotus throne and has tantric associations with eighteen arms and three eyes (WERNER 1961, 511). Both Taoist and Buddhist iconography associate her with Tianhou, particularly in her attributes of savior and deliverer from misery.

CONCLUSION

It may be seen that all of these goddesses share certain attributes or qualities. All of them are divinities who save beings from distress. Nügua stops the floods and defeats threatening dragons, Xiwangmu saves from plague and disaster, while both Guanyin and Tianfei are compassionate goddesses of mercy. All are associated with water. Nügua has a watery form and is a controller of floods; Xiwangmu saves from drought, as does Tianhou; Guanyin, in her manifestation as goddess of Putuo Island, is a goddess of sailors, as is also Tianhou. All find their characteristic qualities as female in acts of salvation and grace by which they rescue mortals in danger. This characteristic grace does not function through any hierarchic channels, but is an immediate responsive, personalized act which was regarded as a primary expression of female virtue and power. In this sense, these divinities represented channels of possible transformation that functioned independently of the male social order. In many ways, the feminine principle is regarded in Chinese mythology as fluid, spontaneous, flowing power also aptly symbolized by its associations with water.

All of these divinities manifest a tension with the dominant hierarchical order of the masculine social structure. Interestingly, they stand as independent (though definitely interrelated) divinities whose association with the male hierarchy is strictly literary and intellectual. On the popular level, these goddesses had a remarkable autonomy and stood out as distinct symbols of female virtue and potency. These qualities are fundamentally embodied in the virtues of love, compassion and forgiveness, and are infrequently manifest as powers of judgement or condemnation. They are qualities which celebrate life and promote both its continuity and its value in a world capable of being freed from suffering and sorrow. That these characteristics should be regarded as primarily feminine is a genuine testimony of the inherent life-giving potency of the female which seeks to promote growth and well-being. Furthermore, this power is not limited to a strictly controlled masculine hierarchy but represents an alternative means for Chinese women to recognize the value of their femininity as embodied by the highest celestial powers, a power that is both dynamic and creative. All these goddesses have shamanistic associations, as the *wu* class of female shamans was very popular and represented a recognized and legitimate means of expression by which women could manifest their spiritual abilities.⁸ In this sense, the non-familial and spiritual value of female power is associated with a free-flowing compassion, spontaneity and ability that was otherwise controlled and conditioned by gender and rank in the masculine social order. It is a tribute to the

folk mentality that these goddesses could be sustained over the centuries and could never be wholly subsumed by an overriding tendency toward dominion and strict rationality. The continuous appearance and affirmation of these female goddesses, particularly in the realm of folk belief, is a powerful witness to the importance of the feminine among religious and mythic structures.

NOTES

1. By "euhemerization," I refer to the classical Greek heritage, initiated by the mythographer Evemerus Euhemerus (second half of the fourth century B.C.E.), by which current mythology is given a rationalistic history. The gods and goddesses are thought to be mortals whose deeds have been magnified over time. In general, euhemerization is a tendency to see celestial figures as deified human beings.

2. It is perhaps relevant to give the original quotation, as it demonstrates a general tendency, particularly among Confucian scholars. Maspéro (1924, 1) writes:

Les érudits chinois n'ont jamais connu qu'une seule méthode d'interprétation des récits légendaires, la méthode évhémériste. Sous le prétexte d'en retrouver le noyau historique, ils éliminent les éléments merveilleux qui leur paraissent invraisemblables, et ne conservent plus qu'un résidu incolore, où les dieux et les héros sont transformés en saints empereurs et en sages ministres, et les monstres en princes rebelles ou en mauvais ministres; et ce sont ces élucubrations qui, mises bout à bout suivant un ordre que diverses théories métaphysiques, surtout celle des cinq éléments, imposaient à la chronologie, constituent ce qu'on appelle l'histoire des origines chinoises.

While I cannot agree fully with the above statement, it does seem to capture something of the literary and dominant historical sense so frequently demonstrated in Chinese cultural analysis.

3. Ping-leung CHAN (1985, 451) suggests that this more modern manifestation of Nügua has ancient roots in fertility rites held in ancient times by the Shang people in various mountain retreats. The *Jiuge* 九歌 verses may in fact be derived from shamanistic songs involving such rites.

4. This article gives an excellent overview of the Tang Taoist conception of Xi-wangmu. See also CAHILL (1984, 20) where she discusses the *Han Wudineizhuang* 漢武帝內傳 version of this night meeting with the goddess. Also of interest, see DORÉ 1966 IX, 32.

5. While the religious history of Guanyin sets this deity apart from the other indigenous female goddesses in this essay, the primary point of concern is to show how even an imported male deity was subjected to a profound transformation expressive of an underlying need for mythic feminine symbols in the context of a dominant male hierarchy. Furthermore, the folk tradition readily accepted this female transformation as consistent with other expressions of indigenous Chinese goddess traditions and in post-Tang China the attributes of compassion and forgiveness became wholly identified with this feminine variant of Guanyin. For a detailed discussion of the transformation of Guanyin from a male to female deity, see TAY (1976) and PAUL (1985).

6. For further discussion of this issue see DUDBRIDGE (1978, 84-89). However,

my point here is not that the Miaoshan legend was a means of sanctioning religious celibacy, but rather acted as a part of the underlying resistance of women to male superiority. Guanyin functions as a representative of power and spiritual virtue specifically as a woman and for women through this connection with a legendary female figure.

7. For more specific information with regard to the Taoist view of Tianhou, Judith BOLTZ (1986) should be consulted. The *Daozang* 道藏 (Taoist Canon) presents Tianhou as the protectress of the state and a guardian of the Imperial Court, thus showing how deeply rooted was the belief in her efficacy. For the Taoist, she was a supreme source of assistance and mercy. Nevertheless, she is still presented as being subordinate to a male divinity (cf. BOLTZ 1986, 223-227).

8. While shamanism has been conventionally thought of as a male phenomenon, both SCHAFER (1973) and KAGAN (1980) discuss the strong female tradition of shamans in China, particularly in more remote times but also including the present.

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