

Lady Linshui: From Woman to Goddess

Paul R. Katz*

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作 者： Kristin Ingrid Fryklund
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One of the great mysteries of Chinese religion involves its goddesses. While there is no shortage of male deities that represent higher learning, martial prowess, or service to the communal good, Chinese female deities tend to have little in common with social and cultural expectations for women. Instead of “Great Mother” (*magna mater*) figures (with the possible exception of some statues belonging to northeast China’s neolithic Hongshan culture 紅山文化), most Chinese goddesses tend to be either lustful unmarried girls who died before their time (*guniang* 孤娘) or virgins who rejected marriage yet are believed to bestow their worshippers with bouncing baby boys (Mazu 媽祖, the Bodhisattva Guanyin 觀世音菩薩, etc.).¹ However, there is one goddess who breaks the

* Research Fellow, Institute of Modern History, Academia Sincia.

1 Zhang Xun (Chang Hsun) 張珣, *Mazu, xinyang de zhushuo: Zhang Xun zixuanji* 媽祖·信仰的追尋：張珣自選集 (Luzhou: Boyang wenhua, 2008); Huang Pingying 黃萍瑛, *Taiwan minjian xinyang “guniang” de fengsi: Yige shehuishi de kaocha* 臺灣民間信仰「孤娘」的奉祀：

mold, Chen Jinggu 陳靖姑 (also known as Lady Linshui or Linshui furen 臨水夫人), the divine guardian of women and their children. A talented young woman who mastered Daoist ritual techniques, Chen ended up getting married against her will (despite concerted efforts to escape such a fate) and becoming pregnant with an heir, only to sacrifice her life and the life of her fetus in order to ensure the fertility of the kingdom of Min 閩.

The Lady of Linshui examines the overall cultural significance of Chen's cult, which arose in the Gutian 古田 area of Fuzhou 福州 (northern Fujian province) during the Tang-Song era, earned recognition by the Song imperial state, and continues to enjoy widespread popularity throughout southeast China and Taiwan today. The author, who teaches Chinese anthropology at Université Paris X (Nanterre) and the Institut National des Langues et Civilisations Orientales (INALCO) (she is also a Director of Research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS)), first published the results of her research in 1988 in French as *La Dame-du-bord-de-l'eau* as the revised version of her 1983 Ph.D. thesis. This new book retains the structure of its French original but has incorporated new research since 1988, especially fieldwork in Fujian. It is also noteworthy for having incorporated the interpretive frameworks formulated by some of France's most renowned sinologists, including Edouard Chavannes (沙畹; 1865-1918), Marcel Granet (葛蘭言; 1884-1940), Maxime Kaltenmark (康德謨; 1910-2002), Henri Maspero (馬伯樂; 1882-1945), Kristofer M. Schipper (施博爾, 施舟人), and Rolf A. Stein (石泰安; 1911-1999).

The book consists of two main sections. The first (chapters 1-6) considers the nature and symbolic import of the deities and demons both worshipped in Chen's temples and also described in one of the most important hagiographical works of her cult, the *Linshui pingyao zhuan* 臨水平妖傳 (History of Lady Linshui's Pacification of Demons). The second (chapters 7-10) considers these spiritual figures in the context of religious practices, particularly those designed to ensure the health and well-being of pregnant women and their children.

Baptandier begins her exploration of Chen's cult by raising the question of what it means to be a woman in China. Arguing that there is much more to this

一個社會史的考察 (Banqiao: Daoxiang chubanshe, 2008); Lin Meirong 林美容, *Mazu xinyang yu Taiwan shehui* 媽祖信仰與台灣社會 (Luzhou: Boyang wenhua, 2006); Chün-fang Yü (于君方), *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001).

cult than mere fertility rites, Bapandier views it as an “elaborate meditation on sexual categories” (p. 1) that attempts to reconcile the patriarchal goal of perpetuating the ancestral cult and the feminine alternative of achieving perfection through self-cultivation, the latter of which reflects a form of original ritual parity between men and women that has been lost (pp. 1-3). Accordingly, women feeling burdened by with social expectations can choose to seek out “an escape from ordinary life by devoting [themselves] body and soul to Chen Jinggu” (p. 33). This analysis is followed by a detailed recounting of Chen’s hagiography, including the epic battle against her double, the White Snake (Baishe 白蛇) demon, which resulted in her death from a hemorrhage caused by a miscarriage/abortion suffered in the course of performing a rain-making rite and subsequent vow to save women during childbirth (pp. 3-15). Bapandier also describes the sacred site known as Mount Lü (Lüshan 閩山; actually located in Liaoning 遼寧, but imagined to be in Fuzhou 福州) and the Daoist movement of the same name, which combined the ritual traditions of Celestial Heart (Tianxin 天心) and Divine Empyrean (Shenxiao 神霄) Daoism, as well as Tantric Buddhism (Mijiao 密教) (pp. 15-21). The remainder of the Introduction summarizes the contents of the *Linshui pingyao zhuan* (pp. 21-31) and traces the development of her cult in Taiwan and Fujian today (pp. 31-41).

Chapter 1 (entitled “Sexual Categories”) commences with a discussion of communities of women who refuse marriage, especially religious specialists (including some lesbians; pp. 46-48). This is followed by a fascinating consideration of women’s attempts to resist assigned gender roles (especially marriage), which is referred to in Chinese as *daban* 打扮 (literally to get dressed up or put on make-up). Here Bapandier makes the important point that in the case of Chen Jinggu’s hagiography, as well the legend of Miaoshan 妙善² and the lives of many women specialists, such resistance usually proves to be futile, and ends up being followed by a process of reincorporation into communal life (pp. 48, 66). The rest of the chapter draws on stories from the *Linshui pingyao zhuan* to examine Chinese conceptions of sexuality, some of which are juicy enough to satisfy even the most dedicated Freudian. One issue features sexual “contests” between men and women, including an account of a monk named “Iron Head” working his

2 Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miaoshan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004; revised edition, first published in 1978).

way into the trigram mandala of the goddess Lin Jiuniang 林九娘, which in turn symbolizes the vagina (pp. 60-61). There is also an episode involving the castration of a monkey sprite known as Great Sage of the Cinnabar Cloud (Danxia dasheng 丹霞大聖), whose unrestrained (and even debauched) yang 陽 powers resemble those of the renowned Monkey (Great Sage Equal to Heaven or Qitian dasheng 齊天大聖), who was also subdued by a goddess (in this case Guanyin 觀音) (see pp. 62-63, as well as Chapter 4). The author also advances a striking comparison between Chen's hagiography and that of the Supreme Emperor of the Dark Heavens (Xuantian shangdi 玄天上帝), which she claims portrays the god as having become "pregnant" with himself and aborting this pregnancy by cutting out his own entrails (which in turn become the turtle and snake spirits; p. 62).

Chapter 2 contains a thought-provoking consideration of the power of female physiology in general, and the spiritual potency of blood in particular, which is viewed in Chinese culture (not to mention numerous other cultures worldwide) as both life-giving yet also polluting (pp. 65-66). Baptandier's analysis covers a wide range of highly important topics, including the practice of ceasing the menstrual flow among women specialists (euphemistically referred to as "slaying the red dragon" or zhan chilong 斬赤龍), as well as the belief that the blood shed while giving birth causes women to incline toward death and punishment in the underworld (pp. 69 & 117).³ The theme of women's blood loss while ensuring familial fertility is especially prominent in Chen's hagiography, which graphically portrays her death from a hemorrhage by using the term beng 崩, literally the collapse of the carnal mountain represented by her womb (p. 81). Another key topic involves women's links to water, with the author drawing on the research of Yvonne Verdier, who emphasizes women's roles in washing both newborns and the newly dead (p. 66). Baptandier notes Chen's symbolic links to the water element, including her home's location at Xiadu 下渡 (Lower Ford) and the fact that her death took place while dancing on the waters of the Min 閩 River, while also raising the idea of submergence (xian 陷; lunxian 淪陷), including the theme of the submerged village. This chapter also features a stimulating discussion of the concept tuotai 脫胎, which Baptandier renders as "liberation from the womb" while also noting its resonance to terms like duotai

3 For more on these issues, see Catherine Despeux and Livia Kohn, *Women in Daoism* (Cambridge: Three Pines Press, 2003); Charlotte Furth, *A Flourishing Yin: Gender in Chinese Medical History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

墮胎 (abortion) and the compound tuotai huangu 脫胎換骨 (“to utterly transform oneself and become an immortal”; literally “escaping the fetus and exchanging the bones”) (pp. 75-76; see also pp. 10-11, 29). Baptandier concludes the chapter with remarks on the mummification of Chen’s body after her death (its transformation into a “flesh body” or roushen 肉身), which symbolizes its transformation from flesh into bone (p. 83). One cannot help by being struck by her subsequent description of Chen’s mummy as being “enveloped in yellow earth as if by a placenta” (p. 149).

Chapters 3-5 contain further observations on Chen’s cult as seen through the *Linshui pingyao zhuan*. Chapter 3 (“The Bridge of a Hundred Flowers” = Baihua qiao 百花橋) explores ideas of death (especially bad death) and rebirth, including the need to cross the Bridge in order to be reincarnated (pp. 85-89, 97-98). In Chapter 4, Baptandier delves further into the significance of the Great Sage of the Cinnabar Cloud, remarking that his castration may have links to concepts inherent to internal alchemy (neidan 內丹), including the attainment of the “true fruit” (zhengguo 正果) (pp. 106, 110-111).⁴ Here the author also utilizes Claude Lévi-Strauss’s analysis of the image of the vagina that has teeth, as well as its links to themes of fertility and castration (pp. 112- 113). Chapter 5 describes the true mother figures of Chen’s cult, the Thirty-six Matrons (Sanshiliu pojie 三十六婆姐), often movingly portrayed as wet nurses engaged in the act of breastfeeding or trying to mind unruly children (pp. 123, 138-141). Like Chen, they are charged with watching over pregnant women, “registering” their pregnancies (zhutai 註胎; see Chapter 6), guiding the fetus into this world, and helping small children make their way through the passes (guan 關) that threaten their development.

In Chapter 6, Baptandier displays her versatility as a sinologist by exploring both the feminine and chthonic aspects of Chen’s cult. Noting the symbiotic links between her cult and that of the Lady of the Birth Register (Zhusheng niangniang 註生娘娘), the author treats the Lady as an integral component of Chen’s cult, while also pointing to the similarities between them and the goddess known as the Sovereign of Azure Clouds (Bixia yuanjun 碧霞元君). While the Sovereign’s cult differs from Chen’s in being associated with female fox spirits

4 Similar allegorical readings of Chinese fiction have been examined in Andrew H. Plaks, *The Four Masterworks of the Ming Novel: Ssu ta ch’i-shu* 四大奇書 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), which unfortunately is not cited in this book.

(hulijing 狐狸精) (as opposed to snakes),⁵ both she and Chen are represented with bound feet (symbolizing tamed womanhood?) and have beds included in their temples (pp. 143, 153-158). Baptandier also provides a fascinating analysis of Chen's role as a chthonic deity. While her cult lacks the judicial features of better-known underworld gods like the Emperor of the Eastern Peak (Dongyue dadi 東嶽大帝) and the City God (Chenghuang shen 城隍神),⁶ she does possess their exorcistic functions. It also seems noteworthy that the cult of the Sovereign of Azure Clouds originated at Mount Tai (Taishan 泰山), a sacred mountain that represents the female principle of nature (kun 坤; yin 陰). The end of the chapter contains discussions of Lady Seventh Star (Qixing niangniang 七星娘娘) and the women's festival of the seventh lunar month (qixi 七夕), as well as the territorial aspects of Chen's cult and the importance of division of incense (fenxiang 分香) networks (pp. 150-151, 159-165).⁷

Chapter 7 marks a shift to the ethnographic data that the author has painstakingly collected over the decades, particularly at the cult's primary sacred site, the Lady Linshui Temple in Tainan city, which continues to attract worshippers from all over Taiwan.⁸ Baptandier's analysis centers on specialists known as "red-headed" ritual masters (hongtou fashi 紅頭法師; ang-thau huat-su in Hoklo) who perform a wide range of rites for the cult's worshippers.⁹ The

5 Kenneth Pomeranz, "Power, Gender, and Pluralism in the Cult of the Goddess of Taishan," in Theodore Hutters, R. Bin Wong, and Pauline Yu, eds., *Culture and State in Chinese History. Conventions, Accommodations, and Critiques* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), pp. 182-204. See also Kang Xiaofei (康笑菲), *The Cult of the Fox: Power, Gender, and Popular Religion in Late Imperial and Modern China* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006).

6 Paul R. Katz, *Divine Justice -- Religion and the Development of Chinese Legal Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009).

7 Kristofer M. Schipper, "The Cult of Pao-sheng ta-ti 保生大帝 and its Spreading to Taiwan—A Case Study of fen-hsiang 分香," in E.B. Vermeer, ed., *Development and Decline of Fukien Province in the 17th and 18th Centuries* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1990), pp. 397-416.

8 More recent work includes Kang Shih-yu 康詩瑀, "Linshui furen xinyang de yishi huodong – Yi Tainan Linshui furen miao wei li" 臨水夫人信仰的儀式活動—以台南臨水夫人媽廟為例, *Minsu quyí* 民俗曲藝, 164 (2009), pp. 133-200.

9 It is quite surprising that the author completely overlooks relevant research by Xu Liling (Hsu Li-ling) 許麗玲, including her article "Jibing yu eyun de zhuanli: Taiwan Beibu hongtou fashi Dabuyun yishi fenxi" 疾病與厄運的轉移：台灣北部紅頭法師大補運儀式分析, in Lin Meirong 林美容, ed., *Xinyang, yishi yu shehui: Disanjie guoji Hanxue huiyi lunwenji* 信仰、儀式與社會：第三屆國際漢學會議論文集 (Nankang: Institute of Ethnology,

chapter begins with the interesting question of why Chen's cult survives in this age of readily available contraception, better health care, and women's rights, and also considers the problem of what has been preserved and what has changed (pp. 166-167). This is followed by a rather abrupt digression pertaining to Charlotte Furth's work on the development of a new clinical system of gynecology (fuke 婦科) that accompanied the growth of Neo-Confucianism during the Song dynasty, according to which the fetus was imagined as a destabilizing spirit and female blood impure (pp. 167-168). The author then proceeds to analyze the symbolism of pregnancy rites (referred to as "the Bridge of a Hundred Flowers in practice"), which involve cultivating flowers (zaihua 栽花), planting seedlings (zhongzi 種子 = descendents), and distributing embryos (fentai 分胎, the equivalent of planting rice seedlings (fenyang 分秧) (pp. 171-174, 183-186). Based on this data, Baptandier maintains that female networks (including sworn sisterhoods) might best be viewed as "rhizomes" (a mass of roots; genjing 根莖 in Chinese) (pp. 172-173). This chapter is also marked by a stimulating discussion of the demonic forces that threaten pregnancy and childbirth, many of which represent a women's own malevolent powers. One example is the Celestial Dog (Tiangou 天狗), which is sometime equated with black dogs, the blood of which can be said to symbolize menstrual blood (pp. 174-179, 186-193). Data on the monthly postpartum rest period (zuo yuezi 坐月子) and rites that accompany the infant's survival of its first month of life (manyue 滿月) round out this chapter's diverse contents (pp. 181-183).

Chapters 8 and 9 provide detailed descriptions of the rituals discussed in Chapter 7, beginning with an analysis of the passes (guan 關) that obstruct a child's growth. These rites of passage are in turn related to cultural representations of childhood, including concepts of fate (yun 運) and terror/fright (jing 驚), with many of the demons encountered being the same as those that endanger pregnancy (pp. 204-208, 211-221, 229-241). Baptandier's analysis, which also encompasses rites for reaching sixteen years of age (guo shiliu 過十六) performed in the presence of Lady Seventh Star (pp. 202-204), illuminates the need for scholars working on childhood¹⁰ and those studying ritual to engage in more active interaction. These chapters deserve special attention for their portrayal of how gender roles are

Academia Sinica, 2003), pp. 339-365.

10 See for example Ping-chen Hsiung (熊秉真), *A Tender Voyage: Children and Childhood in Late Imperial China* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005).

reversed in ritual contexts, particularly in terms of ritual masters employing the same implements and wearing same clothes as Chen, in effect becoming ritual transvestites (pp. 224-226). Take for example this passage from one ritual manual: “I wear the shoes of the Lady on my feet (one wonders if these were also meant to be bound?)...The crown on my head is the headdress of the Lady...My body...transforms itself and becomes the body of the Lady” (p. 226).

The book’s ultimate chapter contains a colorful and moving account of one of Chen’s Taiwanese mediums, a woman named Xie Fuzhu (謝富珠?). Xie’s life story bears remarkable similarities to Chen’s hagiography, especially her failed attempt to escape unwanted marriage and pregnancy at age 24, which recalls the previously mentioned themes of resistance and reincorporation (pp. 244, 247). However, the author’s claim that Xie “only vaguely knew the story of Chen Jinggu, so she was not trying to imitate the legend” (p. 244) is rather unconvincing, especially in light of her emphasis on the popularity of Chen’s hagiography (including in temple art). Chapter 10 also emphasizes the importance of Xie’s mother and daughter serving as her interpreters (which recalls Margery Wolf’s concept of the uterine families),¹¹ while her husband provides his own form of support to her career by shuttling her around on his motorcycle (p. 246). Baptandier also deserves credit for showing that while Xie is not officially attached to Tainan’s Linshui temple, she remains a highly influential figure in terms of the cult’s development (p. 251), an analysis that effectively overturns previous models advanced by scholars of Daoism that postulate a hierarchy of three groups placed along a vertical axis, with Daoist priests (daoshi 道士) at the top, ritual masters (fashi 法師) in the middle, and spirit-mediums (wu 巫; jitong 乩童) at the bottom.¹²

The Conclusion begins with a description of the flourishing state of Chen’s cult today, including in China, where it is nominally under the control of the Daoist Association (Daojiao xiehui 道教協會) and earns some legitimacy from being the subject of scholarly conferences (pp. 260-261). Baptandier also points to paths for future research, including the historical development of cult networks and biographies of women believers and specialists (p. 261). She concludes

11 Margery Wolf, *Women and the Family in Rural Taiwan* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1972).

12 For more on these issues, see Paul R. Katz, “Daoism and Local Cults — A Case Study of the Cult of Marshal Wen,” in Kwang-ching Liu (劉廣京) and Richard Shek, eds., *Heterodoxy in Late Imperial China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai’i Press, 2004), pp. 172-208.

with further discussion of the tensions women face in terms of balancing family life and spiritual pursuits (pp. 261-263), arguing that Chen dies “because of her inability to combine motherhood, rituality, and the self-discipline of internal alchemy” (p. 262). At the same time, however, the data presented in Chapter 10 reveals that Xie Fuzhu was successful in finding her own balance, which indicates that there is always hope.

The Lady of Linshui represents an invaluable achievement in terms of its thoroughgoing treatment of the complexities embodied in women’s experiences of Chinese religion. This topic has only recently begun to attract the attention it deserves, and Bapandier’s interdisciplinary approach, which combines an impressive variety of written texts with moving accounts collected in the course of ethnographic research, marks a milestone in our knowledge of the ways in which Chinese women have been culturally constructed.

The book’s main weakness lies in its organization. While it presents fascinating data and insightful (even breath-taking) analysis, these materials are often arranged in a haphazard fashion. To list just a couple of examples, the treatment of hair as a sexual symbol on pages 101-103 would have fit far more aptly in Chapter 1, as would the discussion of Furth’s work at the beginning of Chapter 7. Bapandier concedes this point on page 261 (“No doubt [this book] jumbles the way historians would arrange things...”), but regardless of how one might choose to organize one’s data, the tendency to jump from one idea to another constitutes an unnecessary distraction for readers intent on grasping the book’s key points (especially students).

Moreover, there are a number of key ideas/themes pertaining to the importance of gender in Chinese religion that could have been more rigorously analyzed in the book’s Introduction, which, following the first three pages, is simply devoted to describing the main topics covered in the book, as opposed to the systematic presentation of the author’s conceptual framework. For example, page 241 presents a path-breaking analysis of how goddesses like Chen, Guanyin, and the Sovereign combine different aspects of female sexuality, with Guanyin representing the cessation of passions and neutering of gender, the Sovereign two conflicting visions of women as progenitors and temptresses/succubae, and Chen the attempt to escape assigned roles via a “journey in reverse” (ni 逆) to the “the embryo of immortality”. These points would have made a far greater impact had they been raised in the Introduction and rigorously considered throughout

the book. Another instance involves Bapandier's brilliant observation about the paradoxical nature of Chen's cult: "...far from being a goddess-mother, the symbol of feminine fertility, [Chen] was a woman who died of an abortion after rejecting marriage" (p. 65). This argument (also raised at the beginning of this review), as well as subsequent remarks about Chen sacrificing her own fertility for the fertility of the Min 閩 kingdom (p. 127) and even representing "a sort of Chinese Persephone" (p. 157) are diminished by the lack of thoroughgoing analysis.

One key issue raised a number of times but not accorded detailed consideration in any one section of the book centers on the fear of untamed female sexuality. Chapter 1, for example, considers the significance of tiger women (p. 49), which reminds one of Barend Ter Haar's research on female were-creatures becoming personified in the form of Auntie Old Tiger (Laohu waipo 老虎外婆; Hugupo 虎姑婆 in Taiwan), a phenomenon that could spark occasional persecutions of elderly women.¹³ There is also a stimulating analysis of how the word for demon (yao 妖) is made up of the characters for woman (女) and people who died young (夭), thereby recalling cults to the ghosts of unmarried girls (pp. 50, 53). Female sexuality is again considered three chapters later, including discussions of how "obedient" feminine sexuality should be procreative only (p. 126), as well as the empress' role as mistress of the emperor's concubines, thereby regulating and also guaranteeing the fertility of the imperial line (p. 128). All of these points represent significant contributions that shed new light on issues of gender in Chinese culture. One only wishes that they had been treated in a more systematic manner.

The book also suffers from occasional questionable understandings of Chinese Buddhism. For example, portraying the act of cutting off a piece of one's flesh to heal a senior family member (gegu liaoqin 割股療親) as a Buddhist practice (p. 27) overlooks its links to the indigenous Chinese cult of filial piety.¹⁴ Similarly, the Lake of Blood (Xuehu 血湖) in the Chinese underworld is not a punishment reserved for women who "fail to produce a child and die in childbirth" (p. 70), but (depending on the text consulted) could also include any

13 Barend J. ter Haar, *Telling Stories: Witchcraft and Scapegoating in Chinese History* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2006).

14 See Qiu Zhonglin (Chiu Chung-lin) 邱仲麟, "Buxiao zhi xiao - Sui-Tang yilai gegu liaoqin xianxiang de shehuishi kaocha" 不孝之孝——隋唐以來割股療親現象的社會史考察 (Ph.D. dissertation, National Taiwan University, 1997).

woman who had given birth to a child, had an abortion, or even menstruated.¹⁵ One might also question the claim that people who died bad deaths were “bad at life” and “inherited the bad karma of their predecessors” (p. 97), especially since the latter belief seems more like the Daoist idea of “inherited burden” (chengfu 承負). One also regrets the lack of a glossary and the limited use of Chinese characters in the notes, bibliography, and index.

Despite these flaws, however, *The Lady of Linshui* succeeds admirably in advancing our understanding of women’s multifaceted participation in (and construction of) Chinese religious traditions. It also raises numerous topics meriting future research, including the possible origin of Chen’s cult in local traditions involving the worship of female snakes (especially the White Snake), as well as the extent to which such traditions may derive from the cultures of the She 畚 and other non-Han peoples.

15 Wolfram Eberhard, *Guilt and Sin in Traditional China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1967); Daniel L. Overmyer, “Values in Chinese Sectarian Literature: Ming and Ch’ing *pao-chüan* 寶卷,” in David G. Johnson, Andrew J. Nathan and Evelyn S. Rawski, eds., *Popular Culture in Late Imperial China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), pp. 219-254; Stephen F. Teiser, *The Scripture on the Ten Kings and the Making of Purgatory in Medieval Chinese Buddhism* (Honolulu: Kuroda Institute, 1994); Chün-fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara*, pp. 334-335.