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**EMBODIED SPIRITUALITY AND SELF-DIVINIZATION:
A RE-READING OF THE *LEGEND OF PRINCESS MIAOSHAN***

Thomas Jansen

Miaoshan dwelt there [at Xiangshan], eating from the trees, drinking from the streams....

Miaoshan said: 'My father showed disrespect to the Three Treasures, he persecuted and suppressed the True Doctrine, he executed innocent nuns. This called for retribution.' Then she gladly cut out her eyes and severed her arms. Giving them to the envoy, she added instructions to exhort the king to turn towards the good, no longer to be deluded by false doctrines.

(The Legend of Miaoshan; Dudbridge 2004, 138-9)¹

INTRODUCTION

Religion and food exist in a symbiotic relationship. What we eat and how we prepare food has an immediate effect on the physiology of our bodies and therefore how we experience the world around us. The consumption of certain foodstuffs, or, conversely, the refusal to consume food, enables us to induce altered states of consciousness – think of the effects of chocolate or prolonged fasting – as a result of physiological transformations within the body. The centrality of food for human survival, the enormous efforts we have to invest in its production, as well as how food can affect our psycho-somatic balance, our sense of being in the world, go a long way towards explaining the preeminent role that food has played as a multifaceted metaphor in religious belief systems, but perhaps even more so in the material culture of religions across the world. Food symbolizes the materiality of our earthly existence

but also the potential, in analogy to the cooking process, to transform our bodies and minds into something more spiritual and ethereal.

The aim of this chapter is to offer a re-reading of a well-known example of vegetarianism and self-inflicted bodily violence in China and analyse it in its historical and cultural context. My main aim is to outline various ways in which Chinese males and females tried to appropriate, reject, subvert, and contest the relationship between food and body. The example is that of Princess Miaoshan (Marvelous Goodness), the youngest daughter of King Miao Zhuang, who cured her ailing father by cutting off her eyes and arms so that they could be made into medicine. Because of her compassion, Miaoshan is also worshipped as a manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin in Chinese or Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit. The core of the legend can be traced back to a stele inscription entitled *Dabei Pusa zhuan* (Biography of the Bodhisattva of Great Compassion). It was composed by a local prefect named Jiang Zhiqi (1031-1104) and inscribed on a stele in 1100 (Dudbridge 2004, 12).

The story in its original version is quickly told (Dudbridge 2004, 24-34): Princess Miaoshan defies her father's plans to marry her off in order to pursue a religious vocation instead. Angered by her resoluteness and concerned about the influence Miaoshan's piety might have on the female members of his court, the king casts her out into the flower garden at the rear of the palace. He cuts off her food and drink and sends Miaoshan's mother and two elder sisters to persuade her to change her mind and take a husband. When this does not work he sends Miaoshan to a Buddhist nunnery, suspecting that it is the nuns who are behind Miaoshan's religious zeal. The king promises to completely decorate the monastery should the nuns be able to persuade Miaoshan to follow his instructions. Otherwise the nunnery is to be burned down and its inhabitants killed. Miaoshan counters the nuns' entreaties to return to the palace with the argument that as followers of the Buddha they should have an insight into the illusory nature of the body and hence not fear death. The nuns are speechless after this reprimand and decide to make her life hard. Miaoshan has to toil in the kitchen garden, being charged with providing vegetables for the convent. She is able to discharge her duties with divine assistance in the form of the dragon spirit. The king, upon hearing that the nuns were unable to effect a change in his daughter, orders troops to surround the monastery, behead the nuns and burn down their quarters. Miaoshan, however, is taken by a spirit and thus able to

escape unscathed. She finds refuge at Mount Xiangshan where she lives the life of a hermit. Meanwhile, as a result of his bad actions, the king has contracted jaundice that no doctor can heal. A monk tells him that there is a cure, but that he needs the arms and eyes of one free of anger to blend into a medicine and take it. When the king suspects this medicine to be hard to find, the monk reassures him by saying:

‘In the southwest of your dominion is a mountain named Fragrant Mountain. On its summit is a hermit practicing religious cultivation with signal merit, though none knows of it. This person has no anger....In the past this hermit had a close affinity with you. By obtaining the hands and eyes this sickness of yours can be cured instantly, without any doubts’

(Dudbridge 2004, 31).

When a royal envoy arrives at Miaoshan’s thatched hut to relate the story of the king’s illness, she willingly gouges out her two eyes and severs both arms with a knife, handing them over to the envoy. Back in the capital the monk presents the cure to the king who recovers from his sickness. Later, when the royal couple visit Fragrant Mountain to convey their gratitude to the hermit, they recognize their own daughter who just at this moment reveals herself as the All-merciful Bodhisattva Guanyin of the Thousand Arms and Thousand Eyes. The king thereupon builds a shrine and a precious *stūpa* on the summit of Fragrant Mountain where he later also erects a thirteen-storeyed pagoda to house the ‘true body’ of the Bodhisattva.

Miaoshan’s sacrifice is generally understood to be essentially an act of ‘filial piety’ (*xiao*) (Dudbridge 2004, 107-110; Yü 2001, 312-17; Idema 2008, 23-30; Yu 2012, 87). Wilt Idema, who studied and translated a much later, elaborated version of the legend printed in AD 1773, has further made a case for reading the story as a ‘family-complex tale’ that reveals the sexual tension between father and daughter in China’s patriarchal family system. While acknowledging that the story has often been used as a charter opposing marriage, Idema argues that it ‘may also be read as a guide to marriage under the conditions of the sinfulness of female sexuality: a woman behaves without sin and virtuously, as a filial daughter, not if she agrees to marriage because of her own lustful desire, but rather if she agrees of her own free will to make a sacrifice of her own body for the sake of her father’s well-being and the continuity of his patriline. By this act of hers, her father is retroactively freed from the sin of

forcing her to sin, and the patriline can be vigorously continued' (Idema 2008, 25).

According to this reading, the fascination Miaoshan's story exerted on later, especially female readers or listeners lies in its heroine's ability to exculpate both her father and herself in one single stroke. However, this reading does not satisfyingly explain the popularity of the story especially among unmarried women, because it still seems to suggest that marriage is the only acceptable option.

In the following I would like to offer my own reading of the *Legend of Miaoshan* by focusing on three interrelated questions:

1. Is Miaoshan's sacrifice of her flesh an act of utmost filial piety? Is it, in other words, a confirmation of the values of patriarchal society or a challenge to those values?
2. What is the meaning of Miaoshan's act of self-inflicted violence?
3. What role does food play in the story? More specifically, how are Miaoshan's abstinence from meat and the sacrifice of her flesh related to her transformation into a goddess?

I will argue that Miaoshan's act of slicing her flesh does not necessarily signify filial piety and conformity to the values of patriarchal society, as previous interpreters of the legend have claimed, but that it can alternatively be interpreted as an act of self-sanctification or even self-divinization through which she achieves a new form of self-embodiment, both in a spiritual and corporeal sense. Her refusal to *incorporate* certain foodstuffs, especially meat and alcohol, can, but does not have to be understood as the renunciation or the disciplining of the flesh by virtue of a severe vegetarian food regimen. I propose to read Miaoshan's vegetarianism as a preparation for and celebration of the sanctified body of a goddess which Miaoshan becomes at the end of her trials. Exploring the legend of Miaoshan, I will argue that like their sisters in medieval Europe women in China skilfully used food and eating—or the rejection of it—to carve out an autonomous sphere for themselves rather than to subjugate themselves under the dictates of the male patriarchy.

Miaoshan's offering of her own flesh was a sacrifice. It is therefore useful to start with a brief summary of the role of sacrifice, especially of meat sacrifice, in Chinese religious culture.

FOOD AND SACRIFICE AS PILLARS OF THE POLITICAL AND SOCIAL ORDER IN CHINA

Food as a catalyst in the transformation towards transcendence was at the heart of the Chinese religious experience since at least the Bronze Age (the first two millennia BCE). Especially prepared food offered in sacrificial bronze vessels during the various stages of the mortuary ritual ‘symbolized the flesh that transmutes in and out of the unseen world through birth and death’ (Cook 2005, 11). Both the bronze vessel and its culinary content had pivotal roles in securing the safe passage of the deceased human soul to Heaven where it would assume the position of an ancestor. Food production, as well as fecundity, were seen as gifts from Heaven; gifts that obliged the living to enter into a reciprocal nurturing relationship with their deceased ancestors. The ancestors received sacrifices and would in return confer their blessing upon their descendants in the form of food and progeny. The hierarchical structure of the ancient sacrificial system, which flourished during the late Shang (1200-1046²) and Western Zhou (1046-771) periods, mirrored and thereby reaffirmed the hierarchical lineage system of the Shang and Western Zhou with the royal lineage at the top of the hierarchy. Food production and sacrifices thus provided an important cornerstone of the (male centred) political order of ancient China.

The political role of food for maintaining social and political order survived the gradual decline of the Zhou feudal order which began in the mid-eight century. Sacrifices and feasts continued to be used as tools for forging social bonds and political alliances. In the philosophical discourse of the Warring States and the early empire, the step towards agriculture was seen as the hallmark of civilization. Consider the following passage from *Huainanzi* (Campany 2005, 99-100 – with minor modifications)

‘In ancient times people ate vegetation and drank from streams; they picked fruit from trees and ate the flesh of shellfish and insects. In those times there was much illness and suffering, as well as injury from poisons. Thereupon the Divine Farmer (Shennong) for the first time taught the people to sow the five grains and diagnose the quality of soils—which were arid or wet, fertile or barren, highland or lowland. He tasted the flavors of the hundred plants and the sweetness and brackishness of streams

and springs, causing the people to know which were to be avoided and which used. In the process he himself would suffer poisonings seventy times a day.’

The Divine Farmer, one of the mythical culture heroes of antiquity, led people into farming, upon which other cultural achievements such as the ‘invention’ of writing, flood control, silkworm raising were to follow.

Meat

The ritual efficacy of meat (and alcohol, for that matter) is acknowledged in the earliest Chinese writings (Sterckx 2011). Both the Shang oracle bones and Zhou bronze inscriptions are replete with references to meat and alcohol that are shared among ritual participants, spirits and humans. However, meat had an ambivalent status in the value system of ancient and traditional China. The nutritional value of meat and the fact that it was practically out of reach for all but nobles and high officials, made meat a luxury product and symbol of high status. As Roel Sterckx has noted, ‘[t]he sacrificial meat exchange in early China operated at the heart of social and political relationship. The acceptance or refusal to accept sacrificial meats functioned as a symbolical reaffirmation or rejection of interpersonal and interstate allegiances. In the ritual gift economy of early China, the symbolical stature of meat superseded its relative economic value’ (Sterckx 2011, 28). On the other hand, the temptation of overindulgence and wastefulness through using food as entertainment were never far off, as in the hymn ‘Summoning Back the Soul’ (Zhao hun) from the anthology *Chuci* (Verses of Chu). ‘Summoning Back the Soul’ was originally a shamanistic ritual to resuscitate a dying or recently deceased person by catching his/her soul before it had gone too far away and restore it to the body. The literary reworking contained in the *Chuci*, however, was written for entertainment and cure of the ailing King Xiang of Chu (Hawkes 1985, 223). To achieve this goal, beautiful women are presented alongside a range of delicacies, including ‘ribs of the fatted ox, tender and succulent; sour and bitter blended in the soup of Wu; stewed turtle and roast kid, served up with yam sauce; geese cooked in sour sauce, casseroled duck, fried flesh of the great crane’ (Hawkes 1985, 227-28) – and the list goes on. In other words, the soul of the unwell king is lured back into the body with the promise of food and sex.

The association between meat consumption and pleasure was the main reason for abstinence from eating meat during periods of mourning or grave loss. The ruler of the ancient state of Qi is said to have adopted a vegetarian diet after he was defeated in battle by another state and lost some of his territory (Pu 2014, 63).

The tension in culinary matters between moral behaviour on the one hand, and entertainment, eroticism and personal indulgence on the other, is also highlighted through the food symbolism employed in the sixteenth century novel *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (*Jin ping mei*) – to give another, much later example. The title of the novel itself is highly suggestive of sexuality. The way the food motif is charged with sexual connotations and used to characterize the different female characters in the novel both mirrors and reinforces the male discourse on the subjugation of women, creating a striking ‘tension between eroticism and religious moralism’ (Yue 2013, 97).

The central role of food production and consumption for maintaining the political, social and religious order in China calls for an answer to the question: what does it mean when individuals or groups of people shun certain types of food or refuse to eat altogether? More specifically, what is the cultural significance of vegetarianism, the abstinence from meat and alcohol, both of which were considered essential ingredients in ancestor worship, mortuary feasts and banquets alike?³

(MALE) BUDDHIST ARGUMENTS IN FAVOUR OF VEGETARIANISM IN CHINA

China is an exception with regard to Buddhist food practices insofar as it is one of the few countries (including Vietnam and Korea) where Buddhist monks observe a vegetarian diet. In many parts of the world Buddhist monks and nuns are not vegetarians. The standard narrative of vegetarian practices in China would start with the observation of the tension that existed between the prohibition of meat in the sutras and the monastic regulations which allowed the consumption of meat under certain circumstances. According to the monastic regulations of the *Sarvāstivāda vinaya* and the *Dharmaguptaka Vinaya*—these two were most influential in

China—the Buddha had allowed the consumption of meat under three conditions (Kieschnick 2005, 188; Ruegg 1980):

‘There are three types of unclean meat that should not be eaten. What are these three? If one has seen, heard or suspected. What is meant by “seen?” This means that one has seen that a life has been taken for one’s sake. This is what is meant by “seen” .What is meant by “heard?” This means that one has heard from a reliable person that the animal has been killed for one’s sake. This is what is meant by “heard”. What is meant by “suspected?” This means that one has cause for suspicion. If there is no butcher in the area and the animal has not died of itself, it must be that the donor has carried out the evil deed and taken life for one’s sake. This is what is meant by “suspected”. These three types of unclean meat are not to be eaten.’

The key rationale behind the formula of the ‘three types of pure meat’ is to avoid any association with the killing of an animal or knowledge thereof prior to the actual meal. Purity or impurity relate to the consciousness of the eater and not to the context in which the meat was prepared, whether the kitchen was clean or not, and not to the properties of the meat itself – was it fresh or not. Two ideas are of particular relevance here: the first is the idea of *karma*, according to which all actions performed by a person leave a ‘footprint’ in the world, an attachment which prevents a person from leaving the world of attachments and desires and condemns them to be part of the continuous cycle of birth, decay and death. The second is the capacity for compassion and selflessness which is destroyed by the consumption of meat. This *externalist* argument, which associated eaters with certain social values, is further illustrated by the reasons that are given for the proscription of certain types of flesh: elephant flesh, horse, serpent, dog, or human flesh. Elephant and horse flesh are forbidden because both come from animals used by rulers while the consumption of snake meat would offend the powerful *naga* gods – semi-divine serpent creatures, the females of which are called *nagis* or *naginis* – remember the name of Lord Voldemort’s snake Nagini! Monks avoid dog meat because it is associated with people of lower standing. For the same reasons – to show compassion with one’s fellow beings and in order not to jeopardize one’s own spiritual cultivation the eating of human flesh is taboo despite the acknowledged medicinal value meat eating, including eating human meat can have as a cure for illness. I will come back to this point later.

Let us also make a note here that the main reason for abstaining from meat is the eater, not the suffering of the animal. The focus of the argument against meat remains firmly on the negative effects on the eater, his or her ability to be compassionate. John Kieschnick notes that '[c]oncern for animal welfare – not to mention other modern motivations for vegetarianism such as environmental impact and health – is for the most part absent from discussion of vegetarianism in Indian Buddhism' (Kieschnick 2005, 192-93).

A meat rich diet was a sign of high social status, in China as elsewhere (Sterckx 2011, 28 and 51). The spread of vegetarianism among the Chinese ruling elite and aristocracy during the early medieval period – roughly between AD 300 and 600– largely followed the arguments presented before – one should not add to the suffering in the world by engaging in the killing of living beings, but instead cultivate compassion. In a 'Statement of Confession and Repentance' (*Chanhui wen*), written around 485 CE, the literatus and fervent Buddhist Shen Yue (441-513) reflects on his past dietary preferences:

'From early youth my heart has been given to excessive desire. I never knew the meaning of compassion nor discerned the retribution of my wrongdoing. I consigned the furry, finny and feathered tribes to my kitchen, and, since their previous incarnations were not directly confronting me, they were not subject to my pity. Chopping them up every morning and cooking them every night, month after month, year after year. I stuffed my belly to satisfy my appetite. It was all I ever did' (Mather 1981, 422).

The rejection of meat is embedded within a self-cultivational discourse, which is driven mainly by political interests of the imperial house and the aristocracy to distinguish themselves from commoners as well as by the desire of the emperors to keep tight control over the wealthy and powerful Buddhist monasteries by setting the standards by which the monks and nuns have to abide. The idea of religious merit takes hold at this time, the idea that high social status and political power would have to be based on religious merit – *gongde*, literally 'virtue through works' – and the ability to transfer religious merit to those who cannot save themselves. The most religious Chinese emperors at that time saw themselves as imperial bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who postpone their entry into

paradise in order to lead the suffering beings in this world to salvation. Vegetarianism was one practice through which one could generate such merit. The release of animals was another which shows that genuine concern for the animal enters the discussion. In a letter to his friend, the official Zhou Yong (d.488) writes to his friend: '[For the animal] it is its life at stake, and it holds to it dearly; for us it is a flavour, something we can do without' (Kieschnick 2005, 196)

FEMALE RENUNCIATIONS OF MEAT/FLESH

The discourse on vegetarianism that I have examined so far provides but one perspective on the relationship between body and food in the Miaoshan legend. The story also inserts itself into an older medical-meritorious discourse, in which the eating of human flesh serves both as an effective cure for diseases and meritorious religious act of a Bodhisattva. Chinese medical compendia promoted the eating of human flesh as an effective cure for diseases as early as the 8th century (Yu 2012, 66), while the gift of flesh (eyes, head, or body) to succour ailing parents is a standard theme in stories of the previous lives of the Buddha (*jātaka*). The figure of the Bodhisattva as a universal healer, who sacrifices part(s) of his body to save another human being, is an established figure prior to the composition of the Miaoshan story (Dudbridge 2004, 90-91).

The significance of food and body in the Christian religious tradition of medieval Europe has been treated most extensively by Caroline Bynum in her 1987 landmark study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Bynum 1987). Bynum, who focuses on female spirituality, outlines the connections that one strain in medieval moral teaching saw between female food consumption and sexual pleasure, laziness, loquacity, scurrility and boldness, all of which had to be controlled by the opposite of culinary indulgence, namely asceticism and abstention. Bynum confirms that food practices of medieval women 'sometimes appear to be efforts not just to control but even to attack or punish the body' (Bynum 1987, 216). Underlying such a negative sense of the female body was a practical and symbolical (rather than philosophical) dualism which juxtaposed the weak and inferior female flesh and the superior male spirit or reason. However, while one cannot deny that misogyny was an element in women's self-perception to some extent,

perhaps even a strong one, Bynum's key argument is that medieval asceticism and female ways of dealing with food do not represent, at the most basic level, a dualistic perception of female flesh versus male reason, of female corporeal indulgence versus male rational control; nor is female spirituality and women's role within religion characterized by an internalized negation of the body. Radical asceticism is emphatically not embodied misogyny or self-torture. Female food behaviour, Bynum argues, was, first, an effective way for women to manipulate their environment in a world where food was an important economic and symbolic resource. For example, wives and daughters used fasting as a means to escape the role of food preparer or provider (breastfeeding) or to avoid the sexual advances by men. Second, women's asceticism was an expression of their rejection of the medieval church and its increasingly positive view of the body; a church, in which their role was defined as inferior. Female refusal to eat can, third, be interpreted as preparation for the ultimate fusion with the body of Christ (*imitatio Christi*). Thus, through ways of dealing with food women created new forms of spirituality which allowed them to bypass the male dominated ecclesiastical hierarchies and to forge a new type of charismatic spirituality in which a woman could enjoy union with Christ beyond the constraints of the church.

We find a very similar creative use of food consumption, abstinence and even bodily sacrifice in the story of Miaoshan. It shares with its European counterparts the main topics of marriage resistance, the questioning of patriarchal hierarchy, the challenge to the Buddhist monastic ideal (remember the reprimand of the nuns in the convent) and the religious ideal of bodily fusion with a deity.

In its twelfth century recension, Miaoshan's story is that of a girl who follows her predestined path towards bodhisattva-hood with unshakable conviction. Throughout the story she remains completely unfazed by the trials and attempts of persuasion she is subjected to by her family (especially her father), showing no signs of wavering or self-doubt. Her birth is accompanied by unmistakable signs that something wonderful is happening: At the time of conception, the queen dreamed about 'swallowing the moon' (*tun yue*), a reference to a lunar eclipse announcing the birth of a great person (Yang and An 2005, 138). At birth, signs on her body mark her out as a bodhisattva, a saviour who delays his/her own entry into nirvana in order to save other sentient beings.

Already at the start of the story Miaoshan observes a vegetarian diet, limited to one meal after noon, in line with her Buddhist nature. As the story unfolds her diet becomes the more restricted the greater the distance between Miaoshan and her family gets. After her first altercation with her father regarding her refusal to marry, Miaoshan is sent to work in the garden, while her food and drink are reduced (Dudbridge 2004, 137). However, the word used for 'food' in this particular passage (*shan*, 'delicacy', 'meat') refers to food suitable for a member of the royal family.⁴ When Miaoshan has to leave the palace after an unsuccessful attempt at persuasion by her mother and sisters, she runs the kitchen garden of the nunnery to which she is confined. The implication is that she still has access to food (vegetables) but of an inferior variety. Her diet finally reaches a low-point at Fragrant Mountain to where she retires as a hermit after her father burned the nunnery down to the ground: 'Miaoshan dwelt there, eating from the trees, drinking from the streams' (Dudbridge 2004, 138). The simplicity of her diet stands in direct contrast to her spiritual growth that is soon to reach its first culmination point: the gift of her eyes and arms turns Miaoshan from a consumer of food into a food provider. Miaoshan's apotheosis, her transformation from a daughter into a deity reaches its climax when her parents recognize in the crippled hermit their own daughter, and the king is about 'to lick her eyes with his tongue.'⁵ This intimate gesture of care, offered by the father, was normally performed by children on their aged and ailing parents. The use of this gesture by Miaoshan's father indicates a complete reversal of roles. Furthermore, the act remains unfulfilled, because 'before his mouth had touched her eyes, Miaoshan was suddenly not to be found' (Yü 2001, 502). The expected reconciliation and propitiation between father and daughter does not take place. Her symbolic re-integration into the family, even with reversed roles, remains incomplete, because

'At that moment heaven and earth shook, radiance blazed forth, auspicious clouds enclosed all around, divine musicians began to play. [And then] the All-Compassionate Guanyin of the Thousand Arms and Thousand Eyes appeared, solemn and majestic in form, radiant with dazzling light, lofty and magnificent, like the moon amid the stars' (Yü 2001, 503).

Miaoshan's apotheosis was complete.

The acknowledgment and acceptance of Miaoshan's gift of her body, the fact that she successfully transformed her body into 'sacrificial meat', completes her spiritual journey towards self-divinization and realization of her own true nature. She has successfully elevated herself above all worldly familial ties. In her new light, holy body, which the king is unable to burn, Miaoshan is able to become the recipient of sacrifice and worship herself. This is acknowledged by the royal couple who erect both a shrine and a *stūpa* housing Miaoshan's 'true body' (*zhen shen*) on the spot of her apotheosis.

The various terminology used to refer to Miaoshan's body or rather bodies – in the final passages of the story is significant. After Miaoshan reveals herself as a Bodhisattva, her parents address her saying: "We pray you, Bodhisattva, in your compassion, to return your *original body* [*ben ti*, TJ] and permit us to make offerings.' In a moment the hermit returned to her *original person* [*ben shen*, TJ], with her hands and eyes quite intact.' Terms used to designate Miaoshan's (mutilated?) body are 'holy body' (*sheng ti*) and 'numinous body' (*ling qu*) (Dudbridge 2004, 33). The holy body is indestructible, for when the parents try to burn the holy body of the hermit on a funeral pyre, surrounded by all kinds of pure incense, something unexpected happens: 'The fragrant fuel was consumed, but the numinous body towered there still and could not be moved' (Dudbridge 2004, 33).

Miaoshan's deification manifests itself in two types of presence: a mediated presence (holy body; numinous body) which highlights the transcendental qualities of its owner, and an unmediated, real presence (true body, original body) which can be worshipped and serves 'as the tangible and reliable agent through which the divine becomes more perceivable' (Lin 2014, 191).

CONCLUSIONS

Miaoshan's defiance in the face of social expectations, her steadfastness in adversity as well as her ability to eventually transcend all imposed limitations and obstacles towards self-realization have fascinated laypeople of both genders but especially women ever since the story began to be popularized in the twelfth century. In fact, stories like the *Legend of*

Miaoshan paved the way for lay Buddhist movements and created spaces for religious engagement outside of the structures of monastic institutions.

Another important aspect of *Miaoshan*'s transformation into the All-merciful Bodhisattva Guanyin concerns the gender associated with Guanyin. While Yü Chün-fang (2001, 407-448) has shown that there were female Guanyins much earlier than the *Miaoshan* legend, Guanyin was probably still mostly conceived as a male deity around 1100. Guanyin's metamorphosis into a female deity is very likely connected to the spread of the *Miaoshan* legend after 1100. In addition, there seems to be a strong link between the feminization of Guanyin and the creation of other female deities (Yü Chün-fang 2001, 418).

Anthropological research by Marjory Topley in southeast Asia in the 1950 and recent fieldwork in China today confirm that scriptures elaborating on the *Miaoshan* story are regularly used as leisure reading material in vegetarian religious groups – 'We have had this story quoted to us several times by vegetarians as a justification for their own single state' (Topley 2011, 115).

The *Legend of Miaoshan* has been related to particular social contexts and the social problems faced by adolescent girls: their duty to marry at her parents' behest and assume a predetermined social role in life. One scripture describes the dilemma thus (Dudbridge 2004, 103):

'For ten months, while a girl is in her mother's womb, she turns her back to her mother, facing outward, staying aloof. If the mother moves about, the unborn child begins to stir. When the child is born everyone is disgusted. While the child is in the womb, the mother suffers as if in prison; once the child is out of the womb the mother meets only disgust. Everyone in the family, young and old, is displeased, objecting to us women for being born to our mothers. Our parents have no choice but to raise us, and when we grow up we are married to someone else ... When our husband's parents are angry we must hasten to please them with smiles. When our husband furiously curses us we must not answer back. If we slit or tear fine fabrics, it is a sinful crime, and it's a serious offence if we drop the basket in the water when washing rice. We taint heaven and earth when we give birth to children, and in

washing filth from our bloodstained skirts we offend the river gods. If we put on make-up we attract attention and are punished for flouting the law as loose women. If our parents-in-law are kind, we may see our own families once or twice in a year. But if we don't meet with their approval we will never return to our homes again.... Once you are married to a husband you are under his control for your whole life: all your pleasures and miseries are at his discretion. When you are a man's wife you are bound to know the sufferings of childbirth, you cannot avoid the bloodstained water, and the sin of offending the sun, moon and stars. [...]'

The sermon concludes: (Dudbridge 2004, 103).

'If you are a wise and clever woman, **you will eat vegetarian food**, recite the Buddha's name and start religious cultivation at once. How favoured and honoured you will be when **you migrate from a woman's to a man's body!** In your next existence you can once again follow the way to the Pure Land.'

I have tried to make a strong case against reading the *Legend of Miaoshan* and its main female protagonist as an example of supreme filial piety. Instead I have tried to demonstrate the radicalism that characterized Miaoshan's actions, which were from the start geared towards carving out a space for the personal pursuit of religiosity unfettered by family obligations or religious institutions.

In making this point, I do not intend to principally negate the validity of other interpretations that read the story as an example of filial piety. Jimmy Yu, in his analysis of the practice of *gegu* or 'slicing a piece of flesh from one's thigh' to make a medicine for sick parents or elders in the family, has provided several examples of men and women who cut off their own flesh in pursuit of the ideal of filial piety (Yu 2012, 62-88). I agree with Yü Chün-fang who has described the *gegu*-practice as 'domesticated religiosity' (Yü 2001, 338):

'Through rendering extreme acts of fidelity and filial piety to one's husband, parents or parents-in-law who were in this process transformed into religious absolutes, a woman attained a kind of sainthood.'

The difference between these later (1500-1700) examples and the original story of Miaoshan is that, as I have tried to show, Miaoshan's parents are not transformed into religious

absolutes, and their daughter is not successfully reintegrated into the Confucian family. It is interesting in this context that Miaoshan's name does not appear in these later *gegu*-stories; Guanyin is referred to as the Great Being (Yü 2001, 345).

By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, offering one's own flesh had become firmly established as a way for women to gain public recognition for pious behaviour. The literary genre of 'exemplary women' is replete with examples of self-inflicted violence and suicide of women that catered to male obsessions with filial piety and spousal devotion (Yu 2012, 83-84). These mainstream (male) discourses of domesticated female agency are comparatively well documented. Much less understood is how acts of extreme female devotion are interpreted and used in the numerous sectarian religious groups that emerged under female leadership at roughly the same time and circulated their own religious scriptures (Overmyer 1999). Was there a non-domesticated version of the Miaoshan story in which the contestation over the female body took a different turn, i.e. in which female agency is not compromised?

Both Bynum (1987) and Yue (2013) emphasize the very significant differences in perceptions as well as practices women and men have in relation to food and body. Food is intimately tied up with gender dynamics. The gendered nature of the major themes discussed in this paper – food, body, marriage, self-sanctification – requires that we look at a wider range of primary sources representative of both male and female voices, if we want to get to a balanced view of the religious phenomena in China. In the case of Chinese Buddhism this means that we need to include material from the fringes or outside of the recognized Buddhist mainstream traditions, such as the teachings, social values and devotional practices of the sectarian religious groups, which were stigmatized as 'heterodox' or 'evil' teachings by members of the religious mainstream. In other words, we should be careful not to draw the lines between different Chinese religious traditions – Buddhism, Daoism, or Confucianism – too sharply, because how we draw the religious map will affect which parts of the religious landscape we are able to see and how we perceive its topography.

A fundamental obstacle to settling on a single line of interpretation of the story and its main character is the oversaturation with meaning that characterizes a highly complex religious

symbol as the Bodhisattva Guanyin. I owe the idea of 'saturation' to Robert P. Weller and his book *Resistance, Chaos, and Control in China* (Weller 1994). Studying religious movements and patterns of resistance in China, Weller has argued that Chinese popular religious practice is defined by a surplus in possible interpretations that leads to an overloaded religious indeterminacy until one interpretation precipitates from the unlimited interpretive potential. As a result of the numerous elaborations and re-workings of the 'original' material for different audiences in written texts, operas, images, paintings and orally transmitted stories, the story of Miaoshan has over time accumulated such a surplus of meanings that it is problematic to encapsulate its multivocality in one concept: filial piety. Rather it is the ability of stories such as the *Legend of Miaoshan* to continuously generate new meanings and thereby contribute to an already oversaturated pool of potential interpretations that secured its popularity over the centuries.

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NOTES

* When quoting from the work of other scholars I have tacitly adjusted transcriptions in Wade-Giles to Pinyin for the sake of consistency.

¹ In this chapter I rely mostly on Dudbridge's textual reconstructions and translations of the various versions of the Miaoshan legend. However, I use different versions of the legend to support my argument rather than rely exclusively on the composite version of the original story which Dudbridge presents (2004, 24-34).

² All dates are BCE unless otherwise stated.

³ Abstinence from grain, another core item in China's sacrificial culture, is discussed in Campany (2005), why I will not include it here.

⁴ I am referring here to the version by the monk Zuxiu (fl. 1164). In the version of the stele inscription (dated 1100 CE), the king cuts off food and drink for his daughter. However, his decision is undermined by his wife who secretly supplies her daughter with nourishment. Dudbridge 2004, 26.

⁵ In Dudbridge's (1978, 33) text it is the queen who was about to lick the eyes. The practice, which was practiced by filial children on their elderly parents, was thought to restore failing eyesight. It is mentioned, among other texts, in the official histories of the Yuan, Jin, and Qing dynasties as well as in the medical text *Bencao congxin* by Wu Yiluo (1704-1766).