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King of Masks: The Myth of Miao-shan and the Empowerment of Women

Abstract

King of Masks represents a particular type of mythic film that includes within it references to an ancient sacred story and is itself a contemporary recapitulation of it. The movie also belongs to a further subcategory of mythic cinema, using the double citation of the myth—in its original integrity and its re-enactment—to critique the subordinate position of women to men in the narrated world. To do this, the Buddhist myth of Miao-shan, which centralizes the Confucian value of filiality, is re-applied beyond its traditional scope and context. Thereby two prominent features of contemporary China are creatively addressed: the revival of interest in Confucianism and the growing concern about the declining number of female births to male ones.

Keywords

Miao-shan, China, Women, Religion, Confucianism, Myth

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Introduction

King of Masks is representative of the type of mythic film that embeds an abbreviated, traditional, sacred story—thus maintaining something of its original integrity—in an updated retelling of it. The narrative here is the Buddhist one of Miao-shan and the key episode that is cited in the movie, and thus abbreviates the story as a whole, is her descent into “hell.” The recapitulation, in addition, critiques the marginal and subordinate position of women to men in the narrated world and calls for women’s social empowerment. The Miao-shan myth has always had a lot to say about women and historically has helped provide increased religious opportunities for them. The myth, however, has not been applied to women in the larger secular society. This is what *King of Masks* tried to do in 1996. When such a narrated social re-application of the myth was accomplished in the story, a girl in 1930s Sichuan is allowed to learn and inherit a cultural vocation that had previously been the exclusive domain of males. Finally while this film seems to have set off no debates in the larger social world it inhabited, either in China or globally,¹ it did address two issues in contemporary China that need to be elucidated in this paper: a new appreciation of Confucianism and a devastating underpopulation of women. So after examining the original myth and then its recapitulation in the film, a final section will look at these concerns in some detail.

The Original Myth

The great male Bodhisattva of Compassion, Avalokitesvara,² had already developed into a female Kuan-yin (or Guanyin)³ for a number of pious people in China (seen as the Bodhisattva and eventually as the Goddess of Mercy) by the time the myth of her incarnation as Miao-shan

was first written in the early 12th century.⁴ As developed through its first two literary stages, which form the basic plot, the story starts with Miao-shan being born the youngest daughter of a king. When she is of age, her father insists that she marry like her older sisters have done, but Miao-shan opposes him, embracing instead an ascetic religious life as a Buddhist. The king finally allows her to join the nuns at the White Sparrow Monastery, but not before he arranges with them to make her life unbearable, so she will return to the palace, submit to his wishes, and be properly filial. Informed that she is accepting all tasks—no matter how severe—with equanimity, her father sends his soldiers to deal with her; in the story, this often results in the death of all the nuns and the destruction of the monastery, and in Miao-shan’s disappearance—either before they can find her or immediately after she is executed by strangulation. She generally descends into “hell” where she becomes a full savior figure, either by delivering all those her father killed in the monastery or by reciting teachings for the benefit of all who are suffering there.⁵ She is then restored to earthly existence and lives a life of utter piety, secluded from general society.

Some time later, the king comes down with a jaundice that is seemingly incurable until a monk appears promising deliverance if the king can obtain the arms and eyes of one free of anger, from which to make medicine. He directs the king to a distant Bodhisattva, who will most certainly honor such a request, and the king sends a messenger to her forthwith. She gladly complies and the king recovers. The whole family then travels to thank the Bodhisattva for her sacrifice. Upon entering her presence the queen recognizes this maimed young woman as her daughter, Miao-shan, but before she can tend to the wounds, Miao-shan is restored, often in an epiphany of the thousand-eyed, thousand-armed Kuan-yin. The family converts and Miao-shan reverts to her human form and dies.

This myth centers on the story of a woman and so its themes are immediately applicable. Part of its appeal over the centuries has been an internal justification for women to refuse marriage and its institutional forms of enforced subordination, and to embrace the alternatives of formal (monastic) or more informal (e.g. small communities of single, celibate women) types of religious life.⁶ But it also works out a reconciliation of this with the broadly held Confucian social value of filial piety. Miao-shan's refusal of the secular value of marriage, with its goal of maternal devotion to her sons as the guarantors of her husband's father's line, actually turns out to save her own father from death and to convert the family to Buddhism. So the religious life is not seen as incompatible with the "family value" of children showing continued care and devotion to their parents.⁷

What the myth has not been used to address, of course, are entrenched patriarchal biases of secular society that have devalued women and marginalized them from centers of public power. Chün-Fang Yü describes the condition of women in China in light of this story's development as intrinsically linked through their bodies with the "uncleanness" and "pollution" of menstruation, sexual intercourse, childbirth, and death. Thus bodhisattvas and goddesses like Kuan-yin had to transcend the conditions of real women, impure by nature, by being the impossible combination of both a virgin and a mother. By becoming objects of worship and emulation, then, although they could not socially empower women in any secular forum, they did, as noted above, offer new forms and expressions of religious practice to them.⁸ The 1996 film, *King of Masks*, set in Sichuan, in Southwest China, during the 1930s, does attempt to apply the myth to women in a secular manner, while still upholding the Confucian communal value of filial piety.

The Re-application of the Myth

Near the beginning of the film, two performers share tea together: one is a handsome, celebrated female impersonator of the opera, Liang Sao Lang (Zhao Zhigang), popularly called “The Living Bodhisattva;” the other is an older street performer, known as Wang Bianlian (Zhu Xu), “The King of Masks.” Master Liang is trying to proposition the King of Masks to join his troupe of actors, but the latter misunderstands him and thinks he is trying to learn the secret of the art of *bian lian*, or “face changing.”⁹ He makes clear to Master Liang that he can pass on his craft only to a son, and since he has none, it will die with him. As they part the King of Masks thanks Master Liang for his patronage, calling him “brother,” but this provokes a poignant reply: “No one values girls. Even you’ll only make a boy your heir. As for me, I’m a minor character, half a woman. I’m not worthy of being called ‘brother’ by you.” He finishes by encouraging the King of Masks to find himself an heir. “Don’t let your magic die.” The King of Masks shuffles off, but is stopped by the call of a street vendor: “Buy a Goddess of Mercy. Give birth to a son.” He buys a statue of the Child-giving or White-robed Kuan-yin in a pose that has long reminded Westerners of the Virgin Mary, that of her holding a child in her arms.¹⁰ He then moves through a dark section of town where children are being sold. Rejecting the girls that are offered him for free and who even throw themselves at his feet, he finally pays for an eight-year-old son whom he calls Gou Wa or “Doggie” (Zhou Ren-ying).

For a while he exults in his grandson, even sacrificing an heirloom for his health, until a pivotal scene when he discovers “Doggie” to be a girl.¹¹ He breaks into tears, calls her a crook, and himself a stupid pig for letting her trick him. Since he travels on a small boat on the river, he

gets on board, gives her a little money, wishes her luck, and pushes off, leaving her on the bank. She runs along the edge calling to him not to abandon her, until finally she drops the money and enters the river, provoking the King of Masks to desert his boat and dive in after her. Joining him again on the boat, she looks downcast and he mumbles discontentedly that she is “like a leech on a cormorant’s foot” and a “stupid girl, making trouble for [herself].” Forcing her to work for her keep and to call him “Boss,” he finds she has natural talent and soon she masters a number of acrobatic poses and joins him in the street performances.¹² Sooner than he realizes it, a new comfort level prevails between them, and he is enjoying her company again. It is at this point of reconciliation that she accompanies the King of Masks to watch Master Liang perform “Attaining Nirvana,” where she sees a rendition of the Miao-shan story.

The scene we see is a variation on Miao-shan’s descent into hell. Her father has been sent there, “his soul never to be released,” a Buddhist patriarch declares. But then the princess arrives on the Boat of Kindness and pleads for mercy: “The burning of the White Sparrow Temple was not my father’s intention. He fell into a trap set by a wicked minister.”¹³ But the patriarchs appeal to the law—it can have no exceptions. Miao-shan replies, “If you show no compassion, I shall cut this rope and fall into the pit of death, so that I may share my father’s suffering!” The patriarchs cry out that she must not take her life so lightly, but one dismisses her: “Pay her no heed! Let her do as she will!” The princess concludes, “I haven’t been as filial as I could have been,” and cuts the rope, falling into the abyss.¹⁴ But she rises up therefrom, to the shouts of the audience, as Amitabha, Buddha of Infinite Qualities¹⁵ and the play ends.

We need not tarry over the divergences from more standard renditions, because the film immediately glosses on it. Gou Wa, a little confused by the play, asks the King of Masks

whether the princess is a good person. The King of Masks notes that she has turned into a god, the Bodhisattva, and that she “does good deeds and rescues souls in strife.” Gou Wa, looking for a female model, starts emulating Miao-shan’s filial piety, deeply pleasing the King of Masks, but his discontent remains. “If only you were a boy,” he muses a little later. “What do boys have that I don’t?” she asks. “Just a little teapot spout.” Gou Wa immediately becomes indignant: “Does the goddess have a teapot spout?” “What goddess?” he puzzles and she retorts, “Bodhisattva!” She brings out the Child-giving Kuan-yin statuette and holds it before him. “Look! She has bosoms. Why do you worship her?”

Nothing comes of this at the time, and then tragedy hits. While the King of Masks is gone in town, Gou Wa inspects the masks that she, as a girl, is forbidden to learn to use, and holds one too close to the flame. It catches fire, she drops it, and soon the boat is engulfed in flames; she is able only to save his monkey and the tools of the trade he carries on his back to a performance. Gou Wa and the King of Masks separate, and Gou Wa is easily snatched up by some kidnapers and given the task of caring for the young boy of a local prominent family they are holding. She helps him escape and when she sees him urinate (within sight of a statue of Kuan-yin), she knows immediately where to take him. She and he travel no inconsiderable distance, and she leaves him on the King of Masks’ boat, which has been partially restored. Meanwhile the King, in town, worships before a statue of Kuan-yin and a priestess/oracle tells him his heir will be found to the north, by water.¹⁶ The use of two statues of Kuan-yin in the closely related scenes alerts us that the story is unfolding under her watchful eyes; she is more than a character in the original myth or a statue to be worshiped now—she is a real providential presence. Anyway, when he returns to the boat and sees the boy, he has no doubt this is his heir; his name is even Tianci, meaning “Heaven Sent.” But this is a boy who is the subject of an

intense search, given the importance of his family, and the King of Masks is soon apprehended and convicted of all the kidnappings recently plaguing the region. He is sentenced to death.

Gou Wa finds this out and becomes desperate. She visits the King in jail and finds him passively unresistant; she tracks down Master Liang causing him to marvel at her filiality, and he responds by going to see a general who is a proud benefactor of the opera—but he says that it is a local matter and out of his jurisdiction. Gou Wa sobs as Master Liang tries to console her: “We’re just actors . . . We don’t count for much in society.” Meanwhile the prison guard brings water to the King of Masks to help his cough and congratulates himself: “I’ve never even served my own father this well. But you don’t have much longer to live.” No filiality here. Gou Wa is left with the resignation to fate modeled by the most important men in her life or with the example of Miao-shan, who faced the law’s inflexibility with the compassion of self-sacrificial, filial devotion. She mounts the roof of the building where Master Liang is performing, ties a rope to her ankle, and when the play is complete, drops headfirst into sight of the audience, some thirty feet above the stairs. “General! The King of Masks was framed. . . . I rescued that boy and took him to the King. If you won’t help, I’ll cut the rope and die!” The general dismisses her, as the patriarch did Miao-shan in the opera, and Gou Wa cuts the rope. Master Liang, dressed still in costume, having interceded with both parties in their tense exchange, runs and dives to catch Gou Wa, rolling down the stairs with her in his arms. He stands and confronts the general, carrying the limp body of Gou Wa. “Are you truly not moved by this child’s actions and her plea? Can you just stand by doing nothing?” The general is speechless at first but eventually answers, “You live up to your nickname of the Living Bodhisattva. Though merely an actor, you have courage and character. . . . She’s touched my heart too. I’ll take care of this matter.”

The King of Masks is released and he is taken to Master Liang, where the early scene is recapitulated. They sit together sipping tea and now the King of Masks offers to teach Master Liang his trade secrets. When Master Liang denies any interest in this, the King of Masks throws himself on the ground before him to thank him for saving his life. He is immediately pulled to his feet and told that he should be thanking Gou Wa instead. “Doggie is your true savior.” This scene is taken directly from the myth of Miao-shan where the king thanks the doctor for his healing and is told he should direct his gratitude to the real benefactor, the Bodhisattva. The King of Masks finds the filial Gou Wa on his boat, scrubbing the floor. After displaying for us their tearful reunion, the movie ends with the King of Masks teaching her the art of *bian lian* as his heir, and then tossing her in the air while she shouts, “Grandpa!” a name she had been forbidden to use since she was discovered to be a girl. In order to reinforce further the idea that Gou Wa now functions as a son, this scene visually replays an earlier one when the King of Masks plays with Tianci.

Situating the Texts

Stories of self-sacrifice had long been esteemed within Buddhism,¹⁷ but one of the aspects of the myth of Miao-shan that distinguished it from so many of the others was that her giving of herself was for her father. Miao-shan received spiritual exaltation for her filiality, but the *King of Masks* advocates a more secular recognition for Gou Wa—equal treatment of daughters in the family, equal concern for their livelihood in society. This brings us to the first of the two primary issues of contemporary China that the movie can be seen as addressing: The Confucianist Revival. Confucianism has always had a strongly hierarchical vision of society, but

it has protected this from authoritarian ossification by stressing, *inter alia*, reciprocity and self-cultivation. Concerning the first, we can see already in the *Analects*¹⁸ that elders are not automatically due respect, that they must earn it: “[T]he Master said: ‘Showing no deference or respect when young, accomplishing nothing worth handing down when grown, and refusing to die when old—such people are nothing but pests’” (14.43). And elders are to judge young people only on the basis of their actual accomplishments: “Hold the young in awe. How can we know their generation will not equal our own? Only when they’ve lived to be forty or fifty without any distinction—only then are they no longer worthy of our awe” (9.23). It is not just about the obedience of the lower orders to the higher. Add to this self-cultivation, the individual nurture of excellence in character. So even the *Xiao Jing* or *The Classic of Filial Piety*, which places so much emphasis on the duties of the lower ranks to the higher, still insists on the necessity of inferiors correcting their superiors. Parents, for example, should be open to remonstrance from their children: “With a son who will dispute him, a father will not fall into unrighteousness. So when there is unrighteousness, the son must not refrain from disputing his father and the subordinate must not refrain from disputing his lord. So when there is unrighteousness one must dispute it. How can obeying the father’s orders be considered [filial piety]?” (15).¹⁹

A son and father. Without getting into details, early Confucianism shares deeply in cultural, sexist assumptions, but does not develop or depend on them. Confucianism, in its second stage, became the state religion in the Han dynasty (206 BCE-220 CE) when it formed the ideological basis for training government officials.²⁰ Dong Zhongshu (179-194 BCE) systematized Confucianism to meet this task and in so doing he made a fateful move to essentialize the dynamic, interrelated complementarity of *yin* and *yang* as woman and man,

identifying the latter with the principles of superior action and the former with inferior passivity.²¹ These then were politicized, since this form of Confucianism became the standard of hierarchical order and stability in the empire. With the fall of the Han dynasty, institutional Confucianism waned in influence until its revival in the Song dynasty (960-1279). Here the great systematizer was Zhu Xi (1130-1200) and he too saw *yin* and *yang* as fundamental ordering principles, and could reify them in gendered terms: “To do wrong is unbecoming to a wife, and to do good is also unbecoming to a wife. A woman is only to be obedient to what is proper;” “Good and evil can be applied to describe *yin* and *yang*. It can also be applied to describe the male and the female.” Zhu Xi’s Neo-Confucianism became the basis of the civil service examination system in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties, and it was then that the lives of women—at least women belonging to the literate elite—became seriously restricted, although, this was by no means uniform.²² Nevertheless we have a systematic ideology subordinating women to men and political institutions to enforce it.

It has been typical in Chinese historiographies until recently to decry premodern China as feudal and as typified by a static Confucianist worldview that consistently denegated women. And this is not without justification. But actually elite women in the early Qing dynasty (the 17th and 18th centuries), for example, already developed quite a public voice through publishing and the 19th century even saw an intellectual movement in favor of women’s rights,²³ as well as reformist activism that eventually resulted in an end to the practice of foot-binding, a tradition dating back to the 10th century.²⁴ In 1912, the last emperor abdicated and the thirty-seven years of the Republic of China began. Confucianism was harshly criticized by many; for example “by the writer Ba Jin in his novel, *The Family* [published in the early 1930s], which portrayed the stifling and lethal influence of Confucian family values on both women and men.”²⁵ Still, under

Chiang Kaishek (ruling from 1928-1949), the New Life Movement was launched: “This was supposed to be a complete spiritual renewal of the nation, through a modernized version of traditional Confucian values.”²⁶ “Although the Nationalist Party, in government from 1928, did little fundamentally to challenge gender roles, it did give women citizenship rights and (theoretically) equal rights to status in marriage and inheritance.”²⁷ The People’s Republic under Mao Zedong (1949-1976) tended to be obsessively anti-Confucianist—reaching a high (or low) point during the devastating Cultural Revolution when youth were encouraged to rise up against their elders. As a tract from that time put it: “Confucius was a reactionary who doggedly defended slavery and whose doctrines have been used by all reactionaries . . . throughout the more than 2,000 years since his time.”²⁸ Under the banner slogan that “women hold up half the sky,” Mao stressed the full equality of the sexes, but the Cultural Revolution underlined the fact that the whole sky was symbolically masculine: “Women were shown in . . . posters of the era wielding rifles; men were not shown feeding babies.”²⁹

One of the consequences of the Open Door policy in post-Mao China was a sudden tension between the drive to appropriate from the West and desire to re-claim indigenous cultural traditions, preserving a “national essence.”³⁰ This was fundamental to the “culture craze” of the 1980s. Borrowing from a renewal of interest for Confucianism in Singapore, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, and even the US, scholars in China began a re-evaluation of Confucius, commencing what has been called its third period of development: New Confucianism. The central government came to support this, funding about fifty scholars in the endeavor. “According to the research done by scholars involved in the project, during 1986-89 alone, some two hundred and fifteen articles on New Confucianism were published in various journals, newspapers, and anthologies.”³¹ This contemporary revival of Confucianism in the post-Mao era

is very different than the second period of development typified by Zhu Xi, or even early Confucianism. As Patricia Ebrey writes, “None of those who identify themselves as Confucians argue that the separation of the sexes should be reinstated, that parents should have control over their children’s marriages, that wives or children should endure mistreatment out of devotion to fidelity or filiality, or that widows should renounce remarriage. Confucians today . . . want Confucianism to evolve in a way that accommodates all the changes that have occurred in the family system as well as ideas about the equality of males and females introduced by feminism.”³²

It seems reasonable to believe that screenwriter Wei Minglun and director Wu Tianming either consciously or unconsciously weighed in on the discussion with this film. They are re-setting or contemporizing the Buddhist Miao-shan myth in order to highlight therein the Confucian value of filial piety, which is central to the original story anyway. Gou Wa, as a boy, is scrupulously cared for by the King of Masks, but when he is discovered to be a girl and the King feels free to abandon her, she pleads with him: “I’ve been sold seven times. Because I’m a girl, they’ve all abused me. Only you’ve treated me well, like family. I was scared you wouldn’t want me.” Although the King does try to leave her, he nonetheless jumps in the river to save her. Although he requires her to work and to call him “Boss” rather than “Grandpa,” he soon treats her like family again. After the fire and they split up, he is seen repeatedly and pensively wishing for her return. Even while he rejoices over his “heaven-sent” son, when he learns that Gou Wa brought him to the boat, he shouts out after her into the fog and descending night. But she is gone. This is a filial love story filled with other Confucian values like humanity, reciprocity, sympathy, and responsibility.

It is called “the daughter deficit,” “the dearth of women,” even “the worldwide war on baby girls” and “the slaughter of Eve;” they are named “the lost girls” or “the missing girls.” The signs were already quite noticeable by the mid-1980s.³³ Anthropologist Laurel Bossen describes how she chose to do field research in Hunan Province starting in 1989, because the sex ratios there had already risen well above the norm of 106 male births per 100 female ones—providing a “warning sign that female children [were] endangered.”³⁴ By 1989, she reports, the ratio was 116 to 100. In 2000, the data showed that for children aged 1-4 (so covering the years 1996-1999), the ratio had risen to 136 males per 100 females, with a national average of 121 to 100. Studies by 2003 were estimating over 40 million girls and women were already “missing” in China.³⁵ Li Weixiong, advisor to the political consultative conference on population issues, warned in 2004 that China could be dealing with the combined frustration of as many as 40 million single men by 2020.³⁶ Martin Walker has called them “[t]he lost boys of Prof. Albert Macovski,” the inventor of the ultrasound scanning machine, since abortion due to gender is the primary method of eliminating female babies.³⁷

Something like this is causally complex, but it was quite obvious from the beginning that in China this development was linked closely to post-Mao reforms. Fascinating as this may be, however, we need not be detained now by its origins, its demographics, or any potential political solutions—with one exception. One reaction of the government has been to launch publicity campaigns that girls are good. Banners on building have read, “Girls are as good as boys” and national campaigns have featured slogans like “Girl children are the nation's future.” Bossen calls this “blowing in the wind,” and, considering the magnitude and entrenchment of the problem, she is no doubt right, but artists have also weighed in on this, and I think it is fair to say among them are the creators of this film, *King of Masks*. And this is not insignificant especially

since demographer Monica Das Gupta has found that higher socio-economic status does not necessarily affect gender bias and prejudice against daughters, and may even exacerbate them,³⁸ so urban, film-going audiences would need to be “targetted” with the message of equality along with those in the rural countryside.

The movie’s concern, as we have seen, is on the Confucian value of filial piety. Filiality was not enough for the King initially, because Gou Wa was not a boy with a “teapot spout” and her appeal to Kuan-yin was quickly lost on him. The turning point in the film is when Gou Wa visits him in jail, days before his scheduled execution. It is a scene probably meant already to train our mind on Kuan-yin and her incarnation, before Gou Wa recapitulates Miao-shan’s self-sacrificial act. The King is resigned: “Doggie, I don’t blame you. It’s fate. I accept it. . . . In a former life, I must’ve wronged you badly and now I’m repaying the debt. It was karma. . . . I’ve given you comfort, taught you some skills. Burn spirit money for me in the Ghost Festivals and you’ll have done the right thing by me.” Kuan-yin is associated with this yearly festival and it seems even to have acted as a model for the original story of Miao-shan’s descent into hell.³⁹ Julien Fielding summarizes: “An heirless person who dies is unanchored in this world; therefore, he doesn’t receive any food, spirit money, or paper clothing that gets showered on ancestors. Many of them come to resent this, and that’s why they are considered dangerous.”⁴⁰ The purpose of the festival, in part, is to provide the “hungry ghosts” with these things. The central importance of this scene in this context is that he is asking *her* to do this, for to do so is treating her already as a son.

Das Gupta draws attention to this same yearly ritual as one of the reasons for the lethal preference of sons in China. “One’s entire afterlife is at stake: without sons, grandsons and

great-grandsons, one's afterlife is insecure. Not fulfilling one's filial duty to continue the family line constitutes a major dereliction of duty, and the consequence is that one's own soul and that of one's predecessors will become . . . 'hungry ghosts.' This is as important a filial duty as taking care of one's aged parents . . . Men suffer private grief at their lineage coming to an end, a sense of having let down the ancestors, and fear of being untended in one's own afterlife. Thus it is not unusual for old men (comfortably supported in this life by their own savings and pensions) to visit clinics and ask nurses for information on how their daughter-in-law could bear a son. No amount of savings in this life can assure well-being in the next, in the absence of a son to carry out the necessary rituals."⁴¹ Gou Wa tries to comfort the King by giving him his "most precious things," his masks. In tears he declares, "I've played with these my whole life. They're useless now. . . . I've broken the tradition." He tears them up: "Broken it. It'll truly be a lost art." It is then he asks her to represent him at the Ghost Festival, and indeed all his ancestors, for it is their tradition that he has broken. In so doing, he is raising her to the status of heir.

This is playing out for audiences one of the most important solutions to the problem of the underpopulation of women: continuous contribution to and significance in the biological family. Although a saying that originates in India, it is equally valid in China: "Raising a daughter is like watering your neighbor's garden." However successful Mao's campaigns for gender equality were, they never addressed this fundamental problem; it surged again under the development plans of his successors.⁴² The issue is that when a daughter marries, she spends her entire productive life contributing to her husband's family. The biological family, therefore, sees little reason and has little incentive to put equal resources into a daughter as into a son. Or any resources at all. Xinran Xue tells a chilling story of a visit she made to a rural home in Shangdong province where the wife was delivering a baby. "There was a low sob, and then a

man's gruff voice said accusingly: 'Useless thing!' . . . Suddenly, I thought I heard a slight movement in the slops pail behind me. . . . To my absolute horror, I saw a tiny foot poking out of the pail. . . . The little foot was still now. . . . 'That's a living child,' I said in a shaking voice, pointing at the slops pail. . . . 'It's not a child,' [an older woman] corrected me. . . . 'It's a girl baby, and we can't keep it. . . . Around these parts, you can't get by without a son. You have no one to burn incense at the ancestors' shrine. . . . Girl babies don't count.'"⁴³

Gou Wa is made to count in the film. It can be safely assumed that she will not abandon the King of Masks when she marries,⁴⁴ that she will use her skills to contribute to the household, take care of him as he ails and dies, and ritually serve him and his/her ancestors after death. This, I think, is part of the significance of using the myth of Miao-shan; it is the story of a mature woman caring for her biological father, not her father-in-law. It seems probable, therefore, that Gou Wa's marriage will be uxori-local, with the husband joining her family, rather than vice versa (vivilocality). Laurel Bossen notes that while uxori-local marriage is exceptional among Han Chinese, it is not unheard of, and Monica Das Gupta argues for precisely such representations in the mass media: "[S]oap operas can be used to portray women (and also their husbands) helping her parents, emphasizing that this is socially acceptable. Parents can be shown dividing inheritance equally between children of both sexes The fact that the relationship with a daughter is often emotionally more rewarding can be emphasized, and parents can also be portrayed living with married daughters."⁴⁵

Conclusion

The myth of Kaun-yin's incarnation as Mao-shan tells of how a young woman's unfilial choice, for religious reasons, to refuse her father's demand that she marry results in her attaining

a position where she can commit the ultimate filial service to him—giving her life to preserve his. *King of Masks* utilizes the story of Miao-shan’s self-sacrifice as a turning point in the life of eight-year-old Gou Wa, leading her to dedicate herself to filial service, and preparing her to commit suicide, if necessary, something Confucianism can countenance for the sake of virtue, to save the King of Masks from the shame of execution.⁴⁶ While Miao-shan attains a spiritual exaltation, Gou Wa obtains a secular one—she is given the status of heir and can learn a trade hitherto reserved only for males.

The concern of the film is China in the twentieth century, whose modernization has meant an extensive erosion of politicized Confucianism along with its ideology of the systematic subservience of women, and a rather uneven trend toward their increased participation in public life. Recent policies for China’s measured participation in globalized capitalism, with the attendant high disparities of wealth and power, and the vacuous spirituality of market materialism, have resulted in a renewal of interest in Confucianism, now shorn of the informal, cultural sexism of its early stage and the institutionalized patriarchy of its second. The film plays to this third-stage revival by focusing on the Confucian dialectic of the values of filial piety and parental responsibility in the life of a peasant girl adopted as heir by an aging street performer.

Another result of the entrance of China into neoliberal transnational development is more sinister: a resurgence of the priority of male births and the consequent dearth of daughters due to abortion, infanticide, and early neglect. The film tries to address this as well. Here the age difference between the characters in the myth and in the cinematic retelling becomes significant. Part of the desire to avoid daughters is the widespread practice of vivilocality, having a daughter leave her biological family and give her productive life to her husband’s family, making a daughter a “wasted” expenditure to the former. The film not only releases the girl from sexist

vocational limits but, because it is the re-enactment of the story of Miao-shan, a mature woman giving herself to aid her biological father, it also takes on overtones of a future uxori-local marital commitment, so that Gou Wa's learned livelihood will redound to her own (adopted) family's benefit in perpetuity.⁴⁷

¹ In fact, very little interest in the film has been generated at all, as far as I can see, either in journals or in books on films in China or on religion and film. A notable exception among the latter is Julien R. Fielding, *Discovering World Religions at 24 Frames per Second* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008). Her careful analysis of the film is found on pages 249-259.

² To my mind, the best introduction to the spirituality associated with Avalokitesvara is in Buddhist scripture itself: the Mahayana classic *The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law*, chapter 25. "Perceiver of the World's Sounds [or Cries]" translates Avalokitesvara or Kuan-yin, as he becomes known in China.

³ It is better transliterated "Guanyin," as it is in Pinyin, but it is vastly more popular in the West under the older Wade-Giles transliteration, Kuan-yin. In Wade-Giles the "K" receives a hard "G" sound. The longer name of Guanshiyin or Kuan-Shih-Yin is used far less often and so will not figure in this paper. Elsewhere I will privilege Pinyin for terms and names.

It is not insignificant that in chapter 25 of *The Sutra of the Lotus Flower of the Wonderful Law* a number of the manifestations of Kuan-yin are female.

On Kuan-yin, the best study I know is Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokiteśvara* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001). It is comprehensive, well researched, and intimately personal.

⁴ The transition from a male to a female character seems to have begun in the tenth century. A masterful treatment of the story of Miao-shan as written text is by Glen Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan* (London: Ithaca Press, 1978). Therein, by the way, a cogent argument is made for the influence of the aforementioned *Lotus Sutra* (particularly chapters 23-27) on the original development of this myth. This argument is confirmed in Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 303-5. Yü has an extensive chapter and her first appendix on Miao-shan. She cautions against looking simply to Buddhist sources for the origin of the story, directing our attention to Taoist antecedents as well.

⁵ Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan*, draws attention to how the second-stage addition of the descent into hell, renders the ending anticlimactic and therefore is in some tension with it. See pages 39-43 for its first textual appearance in the story and page 83 for the claim that the ending seems to pale before it.

⁶ Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan*, 44-50; 71-72; 85-89. Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 310f., notes resemblances to Wang Feng-hsien and the other twenty-six Taoist women saints compiled in the tenth century, so it need not be seen solely in a Buddhist context.

⁷ Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan*, 89-91. He holds that the later addition of the descent into hell, although creating a surface tension with the ending, actually acts as a transition between the first and final stages of the plot, functioning as a rite of passage, in which Miao-shan is separated from her family's destiny as she becomes a mediatrix between the divine and human, and is thereby prepared to rejoin her family on a new level. "As Miao-shan dies to her old life and awaits rebirth in the new, she performs the saving act which defines the essential character of her new status" (p. 96). She thus now can save her father. He finds its model in Chinese society as the "Feeding of Hungry Ghosts" ritual, which is a conclusion developed much further by Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 320-333.

⁸ *Kuan-yin*, 414, 418, 492f. Cf., Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan*, 85-87.

⁹ *Bianlian* is the title of the original release.

¹⁰ See Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 126-137; 247-262. Pages 258-259 deal with the Virgin Mary parallel.

¹¹ The idea of cross-dressing—that of Master Liang as a female and Doggie as a male—so frequently observed in reviews, is not important to this study.

¹² Zhou Ren-ying was herself “sent away from her impoverished family to join an acrobatic troupe at the age 3.” Janet Maslin, “Bridging Loneliness Despite the Disguises,” *New York Times*, 28 April 1999, accessed April 16, 2012, <http://movies.nytimes.com/movie/review?res=9901E6DB143DF93BA15757C0A96F958260>.

¹³ Dudbridge, *The Legend of Miao-shan*, notes this variation in passing on p. 69.

¹⁴ This functions as a dramatic substitute for the all-important Buddhist “gift of the body,” which is normally performed by the sacrifice of her arms and eyes. On this theme, see Chün-Fang Yü, *Kuan-yin*, 312-317; 338-347. It is an apt abbreviation since Miao-shan becomes a savior figure in hell and since filial piety, dramatized by her bodily sacrifice and being so central to the story, is not lost at all here, but may even be heightened. In addition, this is much easier to recapitulate. Julien Fielding, *Discovering World Religions at 24 Frames per Second*, notes parallels with another popular Chinese opera, *Mu-Lien Rescues His Mother* (p. 257).

¹⁵ Avalokitesvara or Kuan-yin is fairly often closely associated with the Amitabha Buddha, occasionally seen as an emanation of him.

¹⁶ Oracles and divination are often associated with Kuan-yin at her temples. Indeed there are divination poems regularly used in her worship.

¹⁷ See footnote 14.

¹⁸ I will quote from *The Analects* trans. David Hinton (Washington, D.C.: Counterpoint, 1998).

¹⁹ *Xiao Jing—The Classic of Xiao*, translation and commentary by Feng Xin-ming (2008), 30, accessed April 16, 2012, http://www.tsoidug.org/Papers/Xiao_Jing_Comment.pdf. Such remonstrance, however, is quite narrowly limited to cases of obvious unrighteousness.

²⁰ I am dependent for this summary on Joseph A. Adler, “Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva? Women in the Teaching of Chinese Religions,” *ASIANetwork Exchange: A Journal for Asian Studies in the Liberal Arts* 14, 2 (Winter 2006), accessed April 16, 2012, <http://www.asianetwork.org/exchange/2006-winter/anex2006-winter-adler.pdf>.

²¹ Sin yee Chan argues that *yin* and *yang* played no significant role in early Confucianism and that before the Han dynasty, all Confucian investigations focused on their complementarity not on their hierarchical status. “The Confucian Conception of Gender in the Twenty-First Century,” in *Confucianism for the Modern World*, ed. Daniel A. Bell and Hahm Chaibong (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003)

²² Joseph Adler has written, “we should note that the limitations placed on women in Confucian texts never really applied to the peasant class, for whom the restriction of women to work within the home and with children was a luxury they could not afford. And since the percentage of the literate elite was tiny in the Han dynasty and still relatively small even in the Qing, we should not assume that the majority of women were even aware of these restrictions—which, in any case, were idealized norms rather than descriptions of the prevailing state of affairs.” “Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva?” p. 15.

²³ For instance, “Kang Youwei, . . . a Confucian in his assumptions, proposed a new society in which men and women would be equal, and marriages would operate on one-year renewable contracts.” Rana Mitter, *Modern China: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 77.

²⁴ It was discontinued by the 1920s. Mitter, *Modern China*, 75-77.

²⁵ Joseph A. Adler, "Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva?" 11,

²⁶ Mitter, *Modern China*, 44.

²⁷ Mitter, *Modern China*, 79. He also notes certain benefits redounding to peasant women as well.

²⁸ Joseph A. Adler, "Daughter/Wife/Mother or Sage/Immortal/Bodhisattva?" 13. The pamphlet was entitled: *Workers, Peasants, and Soldiers Criticize Confucius and Lin Piao*.

²⁹ Mitter, *Modern China*, 80.

³⁰ A most helpful introduction to this is provided by Song Xianlin, "Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China: The 'Culture Craze' and New Confucianism," in *New Confucianism: A Critical Examination*, ed. John Makeham (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003). John Makeham has written a careful analysis of it in *Lost Soul: 'Confucianism' in Contemporary Chinese Academic Discourse* (Cambridge, MS: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Daniel Bell has himself entered the discussion as a "left Confucianist" in his recent book, *China's New Confucianism: Politics and Everyday Life in a Changing Society* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010).

³¹ "Reconstructing the Confucian Ideal in 1980s China," 91-92.

³² "Forward" to *The Sage and the Second Sex: Confucianism, Ethics, and Gender*, ed. Chenyang Li (Chicago: Open Court, 2000), x.

³³ On April 9, 1983, for example, the *China Daily* published an article entitled "Female Infanticide Evokes Danger of Sexes Imbalance." This is reported by Ansley J. Coale and Judith Banister, "Five Decades of Missing Females in China," *Demography*, 31, 3 (August 1994), 475.

³⁴ "Land and Population Controls in Rural China," *Bulletin of National Museum of Ethnology* 30, 3 (2006), 429, accessed April 16, 2012, http://ir.minpaku.ac.jp/dspace/bitstream/10502/3313/1/KH_030_3_003.pdf.

³⁵ Stephan Klasen and Claudia Wink, "'Missing Women': Revisiting the Debate," *Feminist Economics* 9, 2-3, (2003), 263-299, accessed April 16, 2012, <http://csde.washington.edu/~scurran/files/readings/April28/recommended/MissingWomen.pdf>.

³⁶ Justin McCurry and Rebecca Allison, "'One child' policy leaves China with huge shortage of women," *The Guardian*, 23 Mar 2004, 9, accessed April 16, 2012, <http://www.taipeitimes.com/News/editorials/archives/2004/03/23/2003107449>. The phenomenon is known as *guanggun*, or "bare branches," i.e., branches that will never bear fruit. Concerns have been expressed about the antisocial consequences of this, using the metaphor that bare branches can be used as clubs. For example, see Valerie M. Hudson and Andrea M. Den Boer, "Bare Branches and Security in Asia," *Harvard Asia Pacific Review* 9, 1 (2007), 18-20, accessed April 16, 2012, http://www.hcs.harvard.edu/~hapr/winter07_gov/hudson.pdf. They have also written a book on the subject, *Bare Branches: The Security Implications of Asia's Surplus Male Population* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 2004). A more recent book covering this is Mara Hvistendahl, *Unnatural Selection: Choosing Boys Over Girls, and the Consequences of a World Full of Men* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2011).

³⁷ "The Geopolitics of Sexual Frustration," *Foreign Policy Magazine* (March/April 2006).

³⁸ Monica Das Gupta, "Selective Discrimination against Female Children in Rural Punjab, India," *Population and Development Review*, 13, 1 (March 1987), 77-100. Higher socio-economic status often results in a reduction of children, so if discrimination against daughters persists, their birth is seen as tragic. The trends, looking especially at second-order births, from 1990-2011, have only reinforced Das Gupta's original research. See Prabhat Jha et al.,

“Trends in selective abortions of girls in India: analysis of nationally representative birth histories from 1990 to 2005 and census data from 1991 to 2011,” *The Lancet*, 24 May 2011. Declines in second-order female births, where the first was a girl, were greater in mothers with 10 or more years of education than in mothers with no education, and in wealthier households compared with poorer households. There is no reason to think that China is any different than India in this respect.

³⁹ See footnote 7.

⁴⁰ *Discovering World Religions at 24 Frames per Second*, pp. 256-257.

⁴¹ Monica Das Gupta, et al. “Why is Son Preference so Persistent in East and South Asia? A Cross-Country Study of China, India, and the Republic of Korea,” *Policy Research Working Paper 2942* (December, 2002) World Bank, Washington, D.C., 12, 20, cf., 29, accessed April 16, 2012, <http://ideas.repec.org/p/wbk/wbrwps/2942.html>.

⁴² In 1994 an important paper was published that analyzed male/female birth ratios from the 1930s to the late 1980s. There was, the study revealed, a large excess of female mortality in the 1930s and early 1940s, due to the practice of female infanticide. The ratio fell in the waning years of the Republic of China and, taking into account unevenness due to famine during the People’s Republic (“The Great Leap Forward,” where women suffered more than men), in the 1960s the ratio had settled to just above normal. In the mid-1970s, excess female mortality began to increase again with the disproportionate ratio in the late 1980s roughly equaling that of the early 1940s: about 113 males to 100 females. This was linked now primarily to female-selective abortion, rather than infanticide. Ansley J. Coale and Judith Banister, “Five Decades of Missing Females in China.”

⁴³ *Message from an Unknown Chinese Woman: Stories of Loss and Love*, trans. Nicky Harman (New York: Scribner, 2011), 26-29.

⁴⁴ It is a “when” not an “if,” since lineage is a preoccupation for the King. The celebacy of Miao-shan is not seen by the movie as a virtue to be followed by Gou Wa.

⁴⁵ Bossen, “Land and Population Controls in Rural China,” 440-441. Monica Das Gupta, et al. “Why is Son Preference so Persistent in East and South Asia?” 28.

⁴⁶ See the intriguing essays by Ping-Cheung Lo, for example: “Confucian Views on Suicide and Their Implications for Euthanasia,” in *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach*, fourth edition, ed. Larry May, Shari Collins-Chobanian, and Kai Wong (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2006) and “Confucian Ethic of Death with Dignity and its Contemporary Relevance” in *Applied Ethics: A Multicultural Approach*, fifth edition, ed. Larry May, Kai Wong, and Jill Delston (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 2011).

⁴⁷ I would like to thank Lisa Williams, librarian at Watkins College of Art, Design, and Film, for tirelessly and cheerfully acquiring resources for this article and for others through interlibrary loan, as well as Cary Beth Miller, director of General Education, an indefatigable advocate for the adjunct faculty.

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