INTRODUCTION

It is well known that symbols invented in India have a great appeal in other countries. Apart from Buddha, no other Indian symbol has, perhaps, as great an international appeal in Asia as Avalokitesvara. More significantly, the non-Indian version of this symbol is the most popular "Goddess of Mercy" in East and South East Asia whose spiritual dominance in China, Korea, South East Asia (among Chinese overseas, Thai, Vietnamese and many other peoples) has expanded hundreds of times as compared with its influence in the land of its creation - India. The expanded Indian symbol of Avalokitesvara in non-Indian cultural milieu is popularly called "Guanyin" (also spelled as "Kuan-yin") and its non-Chinese variations (e.g. "Kannon" or "Kwannon" in Japanese, "spyan-ras-gzigs" in Tibetan, "Lokeśvara" in the languages of Indo-China).

This symbolic multiplication of Avalokitesvara has created a hybrid Indian-non-Indian cultural synthesis on non-Indian soil. No other deity in the world has shown such a symbolic projection of multiplication of identity, value, social function, cultural appeal, and visual variation. The cultural traditions of the East, particularly East Asia, have been greatly enriched by this single Indian symbol of Avalokitesvara. All this has resulted in an unusually rich wealth of visual representations of Avalokitesvara in Asian art. Today, Avalokitesvara images
are present in virtually all art museums of the world, where Asian artifacts are preserved. Legends of Avalokiteśvara spread to the grassroot folk culture in Asia where even Buddhism does not hold sway. Avalokiteśvara is one of the most creative symbols of culture and art in the Eastern Hemisphere.

This unique Avalokiteśvara phenomenon in the arena of Asian culture and art, calls for far more close academic attention than what has been devoted to it so far. My study may be just an additional brick in the existing edifice of Avalokiteśvara studies; but I also venture to use this brick as an appeal to the academia for greater dedication to the subject. The present edifice of research on Avalokiteśvara is too small and not commensurate with the actual significance and influence of the Bodhisattva in the field of world culture and art.

In the existing studies on Avalokiteśvara we see scholars limiting the scope of their enquiries on either iconography or textual interpretations. Seldom have scholars delved into the depth of intercultural dynamics. Avalokiteśvara deserves to be treated in our academic enquiries as an ever-changing and ever-developing symbolism. Its trans-national, trans-cultural, and trans-religious expansion deserves to be dealt with, not as a fixed and stereotyped category, but as an inspiration that has enjoyed universal appeal, or an idealism that explores new space outside human physical existence. Buddhism, as a matter of fact, any religion, is such an idealism.
Avalokiteśvara not only exemplifies this idealism but extends it to the farthest nook and corner of popular belief and idolation both in concept and visuals. Here, we come to the two dimensions of the issue. The first is the innate appeal in the Indian symbol. The second is the right chemistry that enabled this symbolism to interact with non-Indian aspirations to open up new vistas. All the metamorphoses of Avalokiteśvara in non-Indian cultural milieu should be examined in this light.

For instance, much energy has been spent by scholars to find a satisfactory answer to the feminization of Avalokiteśvara who is conceived as a male deity in India. Obviously, there is no surgery involved in this sex-change. No amount of textual interpretation and reinterpretation can satisfy the puzzled mind. We need to adopt a macro intercultural perspective to understand that new attributes are gathered when the Indian symbol of Avalokiteśvara settles in foreign cultural milieu. As sex-change of Avalokiteśvara has assumed a vital status in the existing studies, I propose to take it up as a focal point in this study. I propose to examine the issue in an intercultural perspective, and hope to take the existing academic concerns on Avalokiteśvara to a deeper layer of appreciation and understanding.

There is no doubt that the sex-change of Avalokiteśvara took place in China, although no one has said for certain when and how this happened. The Chinese do not like foreign-sound names particularly for their
gods. The name of Avalokiteśvara went through a process of re-casting (or Sinification) in China as will be discussed later. Over the last one thousand years, not only the Chinese, but also the Koreans and Japanese seem to have settled for "Guanyin", the abridged version of "Guanshiyin" as in the Chinese pronunciation (while Koreans and Japanese pronounce them differently, they have adopted the Chinese titles in writing). Here, we have before us, a whole process of Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin transformation in China, the study of which is the main highlight of this research.

This Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin transformation process is not just a linguistic affair. It is an entire process of Sino-Indian intercultural synergy which involves the aspirations, ethos, needs, fancies, cults and other socio-cultural elements of the peoples of India and China encompassing many centuries. To trace the entire course of this synergy is a complex task, but not beyond human approach. This dissertation attempts to make a small step towards that goal.

The subject of this dissertation is related to symbolism. Avalokiteśvara and its Chinese version Guanyin are such symbols which carry with them a popular appeal. Such a popular appeal can motivate people to do extraordinary things, nurse extraordinary ideas, donate their property for religious and charitable purposes, change their life styles, undergo self sacrifice etc. Here is a phenomenon of an imaginary symbol commanding
people to perform concrete acts. Here is a spiritual creation generating material forces. We study the Guanyin cult not only for the symbolic value of the deity, but also for the social change which the Guanyin symbol has wrought in the Eastern cultures. All idols have their social functions, Guanyin, as a very powerful idol, has also a powerful social function.

This brings our attention closer to the related socio-political realities of China which contributed inputs to the Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin transformation process. Avalokiteśvara arrived in China at a juncture when there was a great socio-political transformation. With the downfall of the Han Empire, Han-Confucian socio-political institutions were confronted with a crisis. North China became an open ground for foreign invasions, and foreign regimes were established one after another. These foreign regimes helped to transplant alien socio-political institutions and values on Chinese soil; they also helped China to embrace Buddhism and the accompanying Indian cultural ingredients whole-sale. It was in this period of socio-political fervour that many of the Indian symbols developed their roots in China’s socio-cultural milieu.

An extraordinary event that occurred in Chinese history was the ascendance of Wu Zetian, an obscure consort of the second emperor of the Tang Dynasty (and a temporary inmate of a nunnery) to the dazzling height of China’s absolute ruler -- the only feminine "Son of
Heaven" in Chinese history. It is my belief that this sex-change from male to female in the highest level of Chinese politics was in a way related with the sex-change of Avalokiteśvara. Both the phenomena involved China's socio-political dynamics and the social functions of symbols. This dimension takes my study beyond the normal scope of iconographic studies to a much wider socio-political plane.

Such a multi-disciplinary approach may result in the loss of focus if no keylink is clung to. What I propose to do is to take the visual presentations of this deity as the major media. My study will eventually turn out to be a sociological study of artifacts. The advantage of my artifact-orientation is quite obvious. From a variety of presentations of Guanyin I can clearly see how this Sino-Indian hybrid symbol has accumulated within it a wide range of legends, folklore, artistic creation, etc. of the civilizations of India and China.

Intercultural studies have horizontal dimensions. When Avalokiteśvara travelled east to China it sent signals to the Chinese masses and received feedback from them. It was this give-and-take which wrought the Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin transformation process. This Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin transformation was thus a laborious journey across cultural frontiers. But, it may not be just conceived as an ongoing journey in one single direction. Sometimes, the journey also went back and forth. As the visual presentations of different times
show, the journey passed through not only along the Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin lane, but also crossed path to other communication lines. This study will show that there was participation of other Indian deities, not just Avalokiteśvara alone, in this historic Avalokiteśvara-Guanyin transformation. There was the participation of Padmapāṇi, Manjuśrī, Tārā, even such Hindu gods like Viṣṇu, etc., let alone the help of Nāga and other Indian symbols. Guanyin was thus a creation of cross-boundary, cross-cultural, cross-religious intercourses.

A study of such a dimension is bound to have an extended matrix. Its multi-disciplinary perspectives will have to cover civilizational, historical, metaphysical, sociological, anthropological and iconographical arenas. From a holistic viewpoint there is no watertight compartment in categorization, and one cannot separate Chinese culture from Indian culture, and Chinese art from Indian art. However, in intercultural studies we have to go into specifics and identify particular entities. Thus, there is the dual dimension of generality versus specificity in my study. On the one hand, I must not make the mistake of, as the Chinese say, "putting Mr. Zhang's hat on Mr. Li's head." (Zhang guan Li dai). That is to say, not to confuse the visual images of Guanyin with non-Guanyin images. But, on the other hand, I do not want to adopt any pedantic approach in the identification. There is, as it is, a large number of historical visual symbols of the Bodhisattva category which are not identified by
any study. Again, even those which have been identified, a second opinion can be pronounced about them. All this opens the scope for me to cross the already demarcated boundaries to arrive at new interpretations. This freedom I derive from the overall perspective of treating different visuals as various ramifications of the same symbolism.

For my study I have retraced Avalokiteśvara's journey from India to East Asia not only by means of reading books and learned articles, but also by my physical presence in China, Japan, Hongkong and Southeast Asia and, of course, in India, the land of my residence. In all my foreign travels, my stay in Dunhuang for a couple of months in the summer of 1994 was most educative. As to be revealed in the following pages, the first-hand information gathered from Dunhuang is an important prop of my thesis.

As the entire world has helped China to preserve her artifacts, it is also important to utilize the valuable collections in the leading museums of the world. In this utilization I have benefited by Prof. Tan Chung's little treasury of photographs which he had taken from visits of European and American, and also Chinese museums and living temples.

Existing studies on Avalokiteśvara and particularly on the sex-change phenomenon, are few. Dr. Lokesh Chandra's book on the thousand armed Avalokiteśvara¹ deals

essentially with the origin of Avalokiteśvara, assimilation of Hindu deities into the concept of the Bodhisattva, the evolution into the thousand-armed thousand-eyed form etc. Besides this study, there are only relatively short discourses written by a number of scholars. Because of limited space, these articles do not delve into any depth. But, all these studies by my academic seniors have provided the required tutorial classes for me. They have also, as it were, beckoned me to go ahead with my path-finding adventure.

While Lokesh Chandra has focussed on the thousand-armed Avalokiteśvara and the dharanis (hymns) invoking Avalokiteśvara, my study encompasses a wider area and a larger number of manifestations of the deity. It is Lokesh Chandra's theory that the 33 manifestations of Avalokiteśvara in China confirm the continuous process of assimilation of Indian and indigenous deities into Guanyin. According to him the incorporation of Buddhist goddesses into Guanyin and the natural propensity of women towards feminine forms are some of the factors which led to Guanyin in female form becoming dominant in China. While I am in agreement partly with his findings, I am also trying to seek additional answers to the questions raised by him.

My thesis consists of seven parts. In the first part, i.e. Chapter 1, I have referred to the occurrence of Avalokiteśvara in the Buddhist texts with depictions of this deity as well as Tara who is the consort of
Avalokiteśvara in South Asia and Tibet.

The next chapter discusses the earliest iconic representations in China as also the vicissitudes gone through in China in the transformation of the name and the form.

Chapter 3 gives an account of the incredible phenomenon of the rise of Empress Wu Zetian in Chinese history and her quest for acquiring the symbol of Shengmu. Wu Zetian epoch in Chinese history seemed to indicate two major shifts in Chinese culture. 1. A woman to proclaim herself the "Son of Heaven" and the consequences thereof. 2. The bodhisattva cult.

The next chapter deals with a new Guanyin cult from Tang Dynasty till date. It discusses various manifestations of the deity which are different from the original.

A separate chapter has been devoted to the study of Guanyin images which were not in situ but found in the museums of the world outside China. As has happened in many other countries under colonial rule, rich artifacts were removed or purchased by eager collectors and China is no exception. A study of Guanyin will not be complete without an examination of these figures.

Chapter 6 examines the configuration of multiple images of Guanyin, the phenomenon of feminization of Avalokiteśvara, how the Bodhisattva in China had assimilated the roles of other gods and goddesses both Hindu and Buddhist and the extraordinary powers attributed
to Guanyin by the common folk in China.

The last chapter relates to the conclusions made out from the study.

Avalokiteśvara first appeared in the extant Buddhist literature of China in the *Chengju guangming dingyi jing* translated by the Indo-Scythian monk Zhiyao in 185 AD in Luoyang. It is the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* which speaks of the Bodhisattva’s extensive and mighty powers. The Bodhisattva became so popular that the chapter devoted to Avalokiteśvara in the *Saddharmapuṇḍarīka* became a separate sutra called the Avalokiteśvara Sūtra. A significant chapter in this sūtra was the Universal Gate of Avalokiteśvara (*Guanshiyin Pumen pin*).

Indian culture was rich in symbolism which the Buddhist religion made use of, transported the symbols to the countries it passed through and finally arrived in China. Though the Chinese were overwhelmed by the numerous symbols initially, they gradually internalised these. Cave No. 249 of Dunhuang shows ample proof of Buddhism using Hindu symbolism. This cave is a Buddhist temple where Gaṇeśa figures to serve the Buddhist tenets. More important is that the Chinese chose symbols to suit their local traditions and in course of time sinicized it completely. The feminization of Avalokiteśvara/Guanyin is a case in point.