

Film Notes for *Avalokiteshvara* (Zhang Xin, 2013)

Avalokiteshvara is a dramatization of how Mount Putuo came to be identified as a Buddhist site devoted to the bodhisattva Guanyin (or more properly Guanshiyin 觀世音)—literally, the bodhisattva who “perceives world sound” or the cries of those in need and responds with unlimited compassion. The film is set in early 9th century Tang Dynasty China and neatly brings together the institute subthemes of religion, politics and art. Just as interestingly, it also serves as an object lesson in the contemporary revival of Buddhism in China that we will look at in the final week—a revival in which religious practitioners, state actors and artists are all quite intimately involved.

The film was approved by the PRC’s State Administration for Religious Affairs and the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television prior to production and was released to theaters in July 2013, and Venerable Master Yicheng, a former President of the government-sanctioned Buddhist Association of China was the film’s principal consultant. The filming was done in and around Mount Putuo—an important Buddhist site since the mid-Tang—in Zhejiang Province.



John Thomson photograph taken in 1867; Guanyin statue at contemporary Putuoshan

The film’s action is set against the backdrop of Tang court intrigue, and opens with appearances (in order) of the Empress Dowager Zheng, her son Prince Li Yi (810-859) who later becomes Emperor Xuanzong, and (presumably) Emperor Muzong. With modest historical license, the action is set 20-some years later, during the short reign of Emperor Wuzong, a “nephew” of Prince Yi Li, who was responsible for the Huichang Persecution of Buddhism in 842-845. The film presents Yi Li’s situation with reasonable accuracy, including his act of portraying himself as dimwitted until his ascent to the throne, after which he proved to be a capable ruler and regained most of the lands lost to nomadic peoples and Tibetans in the mid-8th century and the turning point event of the An Lushan rebellion. A usefully detailed summary of the film’s plot can be found online at: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokitesvara_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avalokitesvara_(film))

In keeping with the Institute sessions on Buddhist material culture and the arts, the film’s plot centers around a famed ceramic craftsman, his grandson, and a foundling girl, Lianmei or “Little Lotus,” who is presented as an earthly incarnation of Guanyin’s kind and merciful character. The

other major character is a Japanese monk, Hui'e, who has been given the imperial charge by the Empress Danrin (Tachibana no Kachiko) to bring the figurine to Japan for the purpose of securing the Japanese imperial state. The stories of Lianmei and the statue could well have been lifted out of "Signs from the Unseen Realm" and are in good keeping with Tang beliefs in the ritual efficacy of religious icons. Mount Wutai, the intended destination of the Guanyin statue, remains one of the five great Buddhist sacred mountain complexes in China.

In viewing the film, some of the more melodramatic (and low tech special effects) will need to be forgiven, but the film does a good job of touching on the lived experience of Buddhist religiousness in the Tang and its connections with both state interests and the arts. The final scene transports viewers to the present moment and invites rethinking the purposes of the film given its state-approved filming and release, the resurgence of religious practices in China, and the extent to which the state's interests are often entwined with the commercial rewards of religious tourism—issues that will be raised in the final week of the Institute.