The Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin became a protean salvific figure in Chinese religion. In the *Lotus Sūtra*, the cardinal scripture of Mahayana Buddhism, Guanyin is portrayed—as the literal meaning of the bodhisattva’s name, “listening for sounds from the mortal world,” implies—as a compassionate figure whom the devout faithful invoke to avert calamity and rescue them from life-threatening peril. A large body of miracle tales featuring Guanyin circulated widely throughout China. In the Tang period, a Tantric version of Guanyin as “Great Compassionate Bodhisattva Guanyin who Delivers us from Suffering” emerged that portrayed the bodhisattva as an awesome deity and ubiquitous guardian angel with “a thousand arms and a thousand eyes.” Guanyin subsequently became the most important savior figure in Chinese religion.

The early Song period also witnessed the most significant development in the history of the Guanyin cult: the metamorphosis of the bodhisattva into a female deity. The potential for this transformation already was inherent in the *Lotus Sūtra*, which listed thirty-three bodily forms, including seven female ones (nun, laywoman believer, wife of rich man, wife of a chief minister, wife of a brahman, young girl, palace woman), that Guanyin assumed according to the needs and station of the supplicant. Nonetheless, down to the end of the Tang dynasty the iconography of Guanyin featured male, or at most androgynous, forms. The earliest known examples of Guanyin iconography utilizing distinctly female forms come from the Dazu caves in Sichuan and are dated to the twelfth century. The White-Robed Guanyin, which became a popular cult figure in the tenth century, acquired an unmistakably feminine form, perhaps because of indigenous scriptures that identified this figure as a goddess who granted children to worthy supplicants. The Water-Moon Guanyin, perhaps the most widely reproduced iconographic form of Guanyin in Song times, still appeared in androgynous form. In the Ming period, however, the Water-Moon Guanyin became indelibly identified with the shrine at Mount Putuo, on an island off the coast of Ningbo, where Guanyin was typically depicted in female form. Mount Putuo’s prominence as the most important Guanyin pilgrimage site in the Ming-Qing period gave strong impetus to the conversion of Guanyin to a purely feminine image.

Perhaps the image of Guanyin that contributed most to the popularization of the bodhisattva’s female identity was that inspired by the cult of Miaoshan. The Miaoshan myth centers on a pious young woman of royal birth who spurns the enticements of marriage and a life of idle leisure to devote herself completely to Buddhist practices. The earliest extant version of Miaoshan’s story is recorded in a stone inscription erected in the year 1104 at the Upper Tianzhu Monastery, near Hangzhou, which housed a statue of Guanyin renowned for its curative powers. This inscription was a replica of another monument raised at Ruzhou, in Henan, four years earlier. Fragrant Mountain, the site of Miaoshan’s transfiguration, was said to be located in Ruzhou. The prefect of Ruzhou reported that had obtained a book, the *Life of the Great Compassionate Bodhisattva of Fragrant Mountain*, which recounted the story of Guanyin’s incarnation as a mortal girl. This tale reportedly was told by a divine spirit to Daoxuan, a renowned Buddhist teacher of the seventh century. The prefect ordered that a revised version of the story (he deemed the original to be too vulgar) be carved on a stone monument as everlasting testimony to the bodhisattva’s saving grace.
In the eighth month of the second year of Qianfeng (667), Daoxuan, the vinaya master of Nanshan, died...

Master Daoxuan once asked a divine spirit about the history of the bodhisattva Guanyin. The spirit replied, “The bodhisattva’s appearances follow no fixed rule, but the preeminent site of his bodily manifestation is Fragrant Mountain.”

The Master inquired, “Where is this Fragrant Mountain?”

The spirit replied, “Over two hundred leagues to the south of Mount Song there are three hills in a row. The middle one is Fragrant Mountain—that is the bodhisattva’s place. To the northeast of the hill there was in the past a king whose name was Zhuangyan. His lady was named Baoying [“Precious Response”]. She bore three daughters, the eldest Miaoyan [“Sublime Visage”], the second Miaoyin [“Sublime Sound”], and the youngest Miaoshan [“Sublime Goodness”].

“At the time of Miaoshan’s conception the queen dreamed that she swallowed the moon. When the time came for the child to be born, the whole earth quaked, wonderful fragrance and heavenly flowers were spread near and far. The people of that country were astounded. At birth she was clean and fresh without being washed. Her holy marks were noble and majestic, her body was covered over with many-colored clouds. The people said that these were signs of the incarnation of a holy person. Although the parents thought this extraordinary, their hearts were corrupt, and so they detested her.

“In the palace she was known as ‘the maiden with the heart of a Buddha.’ By her good grace the ladies in waiting were converted: all turned to the good life and renounced their desires. The king took some exception to this and prepared to find her a husband.

“Miaoshan, with integrity and wisdom, said, ‘Riches and honor do not last forever, glory and splendor are like mere bubbles or illusions. Even if you force me to do base menial work, I will never repent of my resolve.’

“When the king and his lady sent for her and tried to coax her, she said, ‘I will obey your august command if it will prevent the three misfortunes.’

“The king asked, ‘What do you mean by “three misfortunes”? ’

“She said, ‘The first is this: when the men of this world are young their face is as fair as the jade-like moon, but when they grow old their hair turns white, their skin is wrinkled; in motion of repose they are in every way worse off than when they were young. The second is this: a man’s limbs may be lusty and vigorous, he may step as lithely as if flying through the air, but when suddenly an illness befalls him he lies in bed without a single pleasure in life. The third is this: a man may have a great assembly of relatives, may be surrounded by his nearest and dearest, but suddenly one day it all comes to an end with his death; although father and son are close kin they cannot take one another’s place. If it can prevent these three misfortunes, then you will win my consent to a marriage. If not, I prefer to retire to pursue a life of religion. When one gains full understanding of the Original Mind, all misfortunes of their own accord cease to exist.’

“The king was angrily cast out Miaoshan, forcing her to work in the flower garden at the rear of the palace, cut off her food and drink. Even her two sisters went privately to make her change her mind, but Miaoshan held firm and would not turn back.

“The queen personally admonished her. In reply Miaoshan said, ‘In all the emotional entanglements of this world there is no term of spiritual release. If close kin are united, they
must inevitably be sundered and scattered. Rest a tease, Mother. Luckily you have my two sisters to care for you. Do not be concerned about Miaoshan.’

“The queen and the two sisters therefore asked the king to release her to follow a religious calling.

“Furious at hearing this, the king summoned Huizhen, a nun of the White Sparrow monastery, to take her off to the monastery to grow vegetables. He charged the nuns to treat Miaoshan so harshly that she would change her mind. The nuns were intimidated, and gave her the most laborious tasks to do—fetching wood and water, working with pestle and mortar, running the kitchen garden. In response to her, the vegetables flourished even in winter, and a spring welled up beside the kitchen.

“Much time went by, and Miaoshan still held firm to her purpose. The king heard about the miracles of the vegetables and the spring of water, and became even more enraged. He sent envoys to bring back her head. When the king’s men arrived, Miaoshan obeyed the royal command said to the community of nuns, ‘Retire at once, all of you. I am to suffer execution.’ Miaoshan then came out to meet her death. At the moment when she was about to receive the blade, the god of Dragon Mountain, who knew that Miaoshan, the bodhisattva of great power, was on the point of fulfilling her spiritual destiny and delivering the multitude of living beings, but that her evil royal father was wrongly about to behead her, used his divine power to dispatch dark, violent winds, thunder, and lightning. He snatched away Miaoshan and set her down at the foot of the mountain. The king’s envoys, no longer knowing where Miaoshan was, rushed in haste to report to the king.

“The king, again shocked and enraged, sent off five hundred soldiers to behead the entire community of nuns and burn all their buildings. His lady and the royal family all wept bitterly, saying that her daughter was already dead and beyond hope of rescue. The king said to his lady, ‘Do not grieve. This young girl was no kin of mine. She must have been some demon who was born into my family. I have managed to get rid of the demon—that is cause for great delight!’

“Now, having been snatched away by divine power to the foot of Dragon Mountain, Miaoshan looked around and found no one there. Then with slow steps she climbed the mountain. Suddenly she noticed a foul, reeking smell, and thought to herself, ‘The mountain forces are secluded and quiet. Why is there this smell?’

“The mountain god took the form of an old man and met Miaoshan with the words, ‘Gentle one, where do you want to go?’

“Miaoshan said, ‘I wish to go up into this mountain to practice religion.’

“The old man said, ‘This mountain is the abode of creatures with scales and shells, feather and fur. It is no place for you to practice your cultivation, gentle one.’

“Miaoshan asked, ‘What is the name of this mountain?’

“‘It is Dragon Mountain,’ the old man replied. ‘Dragons live here, hence it is named after them.’

“‘What about the range to the west of here?’

“He answered, ‘That too is an abode of dragons, for this reason it is called Lesser Dragon Mountain. Only between the two mountains there is a small ridge named Fragrant Mountain. The lace is pure and clean, a fit place for you to pursue your cultivation, gentle one.’

“Miaoshan asked, ‘Who are you, to show me a place to live?’

“The old man replied, ‘Your servant is not a mortal, but the god of this mountain. You, gentle one, are going to fulfill your spiritual destiny, and I your servant have sworn to protect and keep you.’ With these words he vanished.
“Miaoshan went up into Fragrant Mountain, climbed to the summit and looked around. It was peaceful, without any trace of man, and she said to herself, ‘This is where I shall transform my karma.’ So she went to the summit and built a shelter for her religious cultivation. She dressed in grasses, ate from trees, and no one knew of her whereabouts for three whole years.

“Meanwhile her father the king sickened with kāmalā on account of his sinful karma. It spread all over his skin and body, and he found no rest in sleep. The best doctors throughout the land were unable to heal him. His lady and the royal family were morning and night in anxiety about him.

“One day a strange monk stood in front of the inner palace, saying, ‘I have a divine remedy which can heal the king’s sickness.’ When the king’s attendants heard these words they hastily reported them to the king, and he on hearing them summoned the monk into the inner palace.

“The monk addressed the king, ‘I, a poor man of religion, have medicine to cure the king’s sickness.’

“The king inquired, ‘What medicine do you possess that can cure my disease?’

“I have a prescription which requires the use of two major medicinal ingredients,’ the monk answered.

“The king asked what the ingredients were, and the monk replied, ‘This medicine can be made by using the arms and eyes of one without anger.’

“Do not speak so frivolously,’ the king retorted. ‘If I take someone’s arms and eyes, will they not be angry?”

“The monk said, ‘Such a one does exist in your land.’

“The king asked where this person is now, and the monk replied, ‘In the southwest of your realm is a place named Fragrant Mountain. On its summit is a hermit practicing religious cultivation with great merit, though none knows of this person. This person is devoid of anger.’

“The king said, ‘How can I get this person to surrender their eyes and arms?’

“‘No one else can seek them; they are available only to you, O King,’ the monk replied. ‘In the past this hermit had a close affinity with you. If you obtain the hermit’s arms and eyes, this sickness of yours can be cured instantly, without any doubt.’

“When he heard this the king burned incense and offered this prayer: ‘If my terrible sickness can really be cured, may this hermit bestow on me his arms and eyes without stint or grudge.’ His prayer completed, the king commanded an envoy to go, bearing incense, up into the mountain. When the envoy arrived he saw, inside a thatched cottage, a stately and impressive hermit, sitting there cross-legged. He burned fine incense and announced the royal command: ‘The king of the land has suffered the kāmalā sickness for the past three years. The great physicians, the wonder drugs of all the land are all unable to cure him. A monk has presented a remedy, a medicine concocted by using the arms and eyes of one without anger a medicine. And now, with deep respect, we have heard that you, holy hermit, practice religion with great merit, and we believe that you must be without anger. We venture to beg you for your arms and eyes to cure the king’s illness.’

“The envoy bowed twice, and Miaoshan reflected: ‘My father the king showed disrespect to the Three Treasures;1 he persecuted and suppressed Buddhism; he burned monastic buildings and executed the community of nuns. He himself has invited retribution in the form of this sickness. With my arms and eyes I shall save the king in his distress.’ Having conceived this idea she said to the envoy, “It must be your king’s refusal to believe in the Three Treasures that

1 The Buddha, his teachings, and the Buddhist clergy.
has caused him to suffer this evil malady. I shall give my arms and eyes to provide medicine for him. My one desire is that the remedy may match the ailment and will drive out the king’s disease. The king must direct his mind toward enlightenment and commit himself to the Three Treasures. Only then will he achieve recovery.’

‘With these words she gouged out both her eyes with a knife, then told the envoy to sever her two arms. At the moment the whole mountain shook, and from the sky came a voice commending her: ‘Rare, how rare! She is able to save all living beings, to do things impossible in this world!’

‘The envoy was terrified, but the hermit said, ‘Have no fear. Take my arms and eyes back to the king, and remember what I have said.’ The envoy accepted them and returned to report to the king.

‘When the king received the arms and eyes he felt a deep shame. He told the monk to blend the medicine, and then took it. Before ten days had passed he recovered completely from his sickness. The king and his lady, his kin, officials, and all down to the most humble subjects of his realm began to rejoice. The king sent for the monk to give him thanksgiving offerings, saying, ‘No one but you, Master, could save us from that terrible sickness.’ The monk replied, ‘It was not my power. How could you have recovered without the hermit’s arms and eyes? You should go up the mountain to offer thanks to the hermit.’ With these words the monk vanished.

‘The king was astounded. He brought his palms together and said, ‘So slight a cause as mine has moved a holy monk to come and save me!’ Then he commanded his attendants, ‘Tomorrow I shall go to visit Fragrant Mountain and make thanksgiving offerings to the hermit.’

‘The next day the king had carriages prepared and set out from the walled city with his lady, two daughters, and palace retinue. Coming upon Fragrant Mountain, they lavishly laid out the finest offerings. The king burned incense and offered thanks with the words, “Hermit, when I suffered that foul disease I could not possibly have recovered without your arms and eyes. Today, therefore, I have personally come with my closest kin to visit the mountains and offer thanks to you.’

‘When the king with his lady and palace maidens all moved forward to gaze upon the hermit without arms or eyes, they were moved to sorrowful thoughts, because the hermit’s physical deficiency was brought about by the king. His lady made a minute examination, gazed at the hermit’s physical characteristics, and said to the king, ‘When I look at the hermit’s form and appearance, she is very like our daughter.’ And with these words she found herself choking with tears and lamentation.

‘The hermit suddenly spoke, ‘My lady mother! Do not cast your mind back to Miaoshan: I am she. When the king my father suffered the foul disease, your child offered up her arms and eyes to repay the king’s love.’

‘Hearing these words, the king and his lady embraced her with loud weeping, stirring heaven and earth with their grief. The king cried, ‘My evil ways have caused my daughter to lose her arms and eyes and endure this suffering! I am going to lick my child’s two eyes with my tongue and join on her two arms, and desire the gods and spirits of heaven and earth to make my child’s withered eyes grow again, her severed arms once more to be whole!’

‘When the king had expressed this resolve, but before his mouth had touched her eyes, Miaoshan suddenly was not to be found. At that moment heaven and earth shook, radiance blazed forth, auspicious clouds enclosed all around, divine musicians began to play. And then was seen the All-Compassionate Guanyin of the Thousand Arms and Thousand Eyes, solemn
and majestic in form, radiant with dazzling light, lofty and magnificent, like the moon amid the stars.

“When the king with his lady and palace maidens beheld the form of the Bodhisattva, they rose and struck themselves, beat their breasts with loud lament, and raised their voices in repentance: ‘We your disciples, with our mortal sight, failed to recognize the Holy One. Evil karma has obstructed our minds. We pray you to extend your saving protection to absolve our earlier misdeeds. From this time on we shall turn toward the Three Treasures, we shall rebuild Buddhist monasteries. We pray you, Bodhisattva, in your great compassion, to return to your original body and permit us to make offerings.’

“In a moment the hermit returned to her original person, with her arms and eyes quite intact. She sat cross-legged, brought her palms together, and with great solemnity passed away, as though entering into meditation.

“The king and his lady burned incense and made a vow: ‘We your disciples will provide an offering of fragrant wood, will commit your holy body to the funeral pyre, and, when we return to the palace, will raise a stupa and make offerings to it in all perpetuity.’ Having made his vow, the king surrounded the transcendent body with all kinds of pure incense, cast flames upon it, and burned it. When the fragrant fuel was consumed, the transcendent body towered there still, and could not be moved. The king made another vow: ‘It must be that the Bodhisattva will not depart from this place, and wishes to cause all living beings to see and hear, and make offerings.’ Having said these words, the king and his lady together lifted the body, and immediately it lightly rose.

“The king then reverently established a precious shrine with the Bodhisattva’s true body inside, and outside he built a precious stupa. In all solemnity he buried her on the summit of the mountain, beneath the site of her hermitage. And there on the mountain, with court and kin, he watched and protected her day and night without sleeping.

“At length he returned to his capital and rebuilt Buddhist monasteries, increased ordination of monks and nuns, and paid reverence to the Three Treasures. He drew resources from his private treasury and built upon Xiang Mountain a pagoda with thirteen stories, to cover the true body of the Bodhisattva.

“Master, you have asked me, your disciple, about the holy traces of the Bodhisattva, and I have given a brief account of the broad essentials. As for the Bodhisattva’s secret incarnations, there are not know to me.”

Master Daoxuan asked, “What is the present state of the precious stupa on Fragrant Mountain?”

The divine spirit said, “The stupa has long been abandoned. Now there remains only this pagoda, and few know of it. The traces left on earth by a holy one prosper and decay in their own time. Only after three hundred years will a revival occur.”

Now that his questions were finished Master Daoxuan brought his palms together and uttered these words of praise: “How great is the spiritual power of the Bodhisattva Guanyin! Were it not for the amplitude of the Bodhisattva’s vow, these signs could not have been revealed. If the living beings of that land had not brought their karmic conditions to maturity, they could not have attracted this response. How mighty, this merit without measure! It cannot be conceived!”

He told his disciple Yichang to set it down in writing, actually on the fifteenth day of the second summer month in the second year of the Shengli reign-era [20 April 699].”

2 Since Daoxuan had died in 667, this date raises doubts about the attribution of this story to him.