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Chapter 4

**Spirituality and Wellbeing in Traditional China:
Food, Self-Sacrifice, and Spiritual Practice in
a Chinese Buddhist Legend**

Thomas Jansen

Introduction

China’s search for happiness, to use a synonym for wellbeing employed in two landmark studies of Chinese discourses of happiness (Bauer 1976; Wielander and Hird 2018), always involved both material and spiritual aspects. The triad of folk popular deities displayed in many Chinese homes and during religious festivals comprises the gods of longevity, prosperity and posterity. They represent the aspiration for a long life, material wealth and (male) descendants. The spiritual life and values of many Chinese are thus inextricably linked to and expressed in material goals: the values of the spiritual sphere and the material sphere are seen as complementary and mutually dependent on each other, rather than as being in opposition to each other or even as mutually exclusive. Leading a long life secured by wealth and the affectionate care of one’s children is as much a prerequisite for individual happiness as it is its perfect expression. The idea that material wealth constitutes in itself an impediment to spiritual advancement has not entered Chinese religious thinking, at least not its mainstream.

The symbiosis between the material and the spiritual in Chinese religious life is replicated in the role the human body can play in the process of spiritual growth. The relationship is most clearly shown by the significance attached to food both as a means of sustaining the body and as an agent of spiritual transformation. 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. Food symbolizes the materiality of our earthly existence (Steel

and Zinn 2017), but also the potential, in analogy to the cooking process, to transform our bodies and minds into something more spiritual and ethereal.

In this chapter I will explore the interrelationship between bodily nourishment, spirituality and wellbeing in Chinese religions, using the well-known Chinese Buddhist tale of the Princess Miaoshan as an example.¹ The *Legend of Miaoshan* touches upon several interrelated broader themes that are relevant for mapping out the relationship between spirituality and wellbeing in Chinese religions: filial piety, spiritual cultivation, body, gender and sexuality, and female empowerment.² My aim is to draw out the links between these various themes and to explain their significance with reference to concepts of individual and social wellbeing in China.

The *Legend of Miaoshan* is a tale about one of the most popular deities in the Chinese world, Guanyin, the Bodhisattva of Compassion or 'Goddess of Mercy'. Guanyin is the Chinese name for Avalokiteśvara, who is worshipped across the Buddhist world. However, the deity's manifestation as a female figure seems to be unique to China. In India, Sri Lanka, Southeast Asia and Tibet, Avalokiteśvara is worshipped as a male deity. In Tibet, the Dalai Lama is considered to be the reincarnation of this bodhisattva (Hedges 2012; Huang, Valussi and Palmer 2011, 107; Wu 2013, 149–151). Avalokiteśvara's transformation into a female deity in China is inseparably connected to the tale of Princess Miaoshan.

The story of Miaoshan is important and illuminating for a discussion of Chinese approaches to wellbeing because through her behaviour the story's main protagonist poses a fundamental challenge to the values centred on leading a long life, enjoying material wealth and having (male) descendants. The fact that this challenge of commonly accepted values also involved a challenge to patriarchal authority by a young woman raises interesting questions regarding gender and the status of female deities, particularly the relationship between religious social practices, on the one hand, and the symbolic constructs of gender relationships in religious texts on the other. This issue, which has been addressed by several scholars with varying results (Wing 2011; Jansen 2017a; Sangren 1983; Huang, Valussi and Palmer 2011) can be condensed into the questions: Did the story of Miaoshan contribute to the social empowerment of women in traditional China? And if it is so, how exactly did this happen? What does the story tell us about the respective approaches of women and men to spirituality and the pursuit of wellbeing? If we concede that gender identities, asymmetrical power relationships or the conceptualizations of our bodies, emotions and cognitive faculties influence how we define and experience wellbeing, then it makes sense

1 to look at the above themes through the lens of a twelfth century reli- 1
2 gious tale. 2

3 However, before we can proceed in our discussion of these themes and 3
4 how they are related to ideas of wellbeing, it is necessary to provide the 4
5 gist of the story. 5

6 Princess Miaoshan (Marvelous Goodness) is the youngest daughter of 6
7 King Miaozihuang, who cured her ailing father by cutting out her eyes 7
8 and severing her arms from the body so that they could be made into 8
9 medicine. Because of her compassion, Miaoshan is also worshipped as a 9
10 manifestation of the Bodhisattva of Compassion, Guanyin in Chinese or 10
11 Avalokiteśvara in Sanskrit. The core of the legend can be traced back to a 11
12 stele inscription entitled *Dabei Pusa zhuan* (Biography of the Bodhisattva 12
13 of Great Compassion). It was composed by a local prefect named Jiang 13
14 Zhiqi (1031–1104) and inscribed on a stele in 1100 (Dudbridge [1978] 2004, 14
15 12; Chen 2012). 15

16 Princess Miaoshan defies her father's plans to marry her off in order 16
17 to pursue a religious vocation instead. Angered by her resoluteness and 17
18 concerned about the influence Miaoshan's piety might have on the fe- 18
19 male members of his court, the king casts her out into the flower gar- 19
20 den at the rear of the palace. He cuts off her food and drink and sends 20
21 Miaoshan's mother and two elder sisters to persuade her to change her 21
22 mind and take a husband. When this does not work he sends Miaoshan 22
23 to a Buddhist nunnery, suspecting that it is the nuns who are behind 23
24 Miaoshan's religious zeal. The king promises to completely decorate the 24
25 monastery should the nuns be able to persuade Miaoshan to follow his 25
26 instructions. Otherwise the nunnery is to be burned down and its inhabi- 26
27 tants killed. Miaoshan counters the nuns' entreaties to return to the pal- 27
28 ace with the argument that as followers of the Buddha they should have 28
29 an insight into the illusory nature of the body and hence not fear death. 29
30 The nuns are speechless after this reprimand and decide to make her 30
31 life hard. Miaoshan has to toil in the kitchen garden, being charged with 31
32 providing vegetables for the convent. She is able to discharge her duties 32
33 with divine assistance in the form of the dragon spirit. The king, upon 33
34 hearing that the nuns were unable to effect a change in his daughter, or- 34
35 ders troops to surround the monastery, behead the nuns and burn down 35
36 their quarters. Miaoshan, however, is taken by a spirit and thus is able to 36
37 escape unscathed. She finds refuge at Mount Xiangshan where she lives 37
38 the life of a hermit. Meanwhile, as a result of his bad actions, the king has 38
39 contracted jaundice that no doctor can heal. A monk tells him that there 39
40 is a cure, but that he needs the arms and eyes of one free of anger to blend 40
41 into a medicine and take it. When the king suspects this medicine to be 41
42 hard to find, the monk reassures him by saying: 42

1 In the southwest of your dominion is a mountain named Fragrant 1
 2 Mountain. On its summit is a hermit practicing religious cultivation 2
 3 with signal merit, though none knows of it. This person has no anger 3
 4 [...]. In the past this hermit had a close affinity with you. By obtaining 4
 5 the hands and eyes this sickness of yours can be cured instantly, with- 5
 6 out any doubts. (Dudbridge [1978] 2004, 31) 6

7 When a royal envoy arrives at Miaoshan's thatched hut to relate the 7
 8 story of the king's illness, she willingly gouges out her two eyes and sev- 8
 9 ers both arms with a knife, handing them over to the envoy. Back in the 9
 10 capital the monk presents the cure to the king who recovers from his 10
 11 sickness. Later, when the royal couple visit Fragrant Mountain to convey 11
 12 their gratitude to the hermit, they recognize their own daughter who just 12
 13 at this moment reveals herself as the All-Merciful Bodhisattva Guanyin 13
 14 of the Thousand Arms and Thousand Eyes. The king thereupon builds a 14
 15 shrine and a precious stūpa on the summit of Fragrant Mountain where 15
 16 he later also erects a thirteen-storeyed pagoda to house the 'true body' 16
 17 of the Bodhisattva. 17

18 My aim is to first examine the tale of Miaoshan with regard to the 18
 19 aspects linking the materiality of the body, its nourishment and healing 19
 20 with Miaoshan's spiritual path leading up to her transformation into a 20
 21 deity. In a second step I will then extend the discussion to include the 21
 22 themes of gender and filial piety, reflecting on the significance of a deity, 22
 23 whose exemplary life stood for the possibility to dissolve the tensions 23
 24 between the conflicting roles of filial daughter, nurturing mother and 24
 25 religious leader, for the wellbeing of men and women. 25

26 Spirituality, Food and Healing 27

28 The conflict between Miaoshan and her father plays itself out in the 28
 29 realm of eating (Jansen 2017a). From the vegetarianism imposed by her 29
 30 Buddhist beliefs to the sacrifice of her own flesh to nourish her ailing 30
 31 father, Miaoshan's food consumption forms a constant thread running 31
 32 through the story. Food as a catalyst in the transformation towards tran- 32
 33 scendence was at the heart of the Chinese religious experience since at 33
 34 least the Bronze Age (the first two millennia BCE). Especially prepared 34
 35 food offered in sacrificial bronze vessels during the various stages of the 35
 36 mortuary ritual 'symbolized the flesh that transmutes in and out of the 36
 37 unseen world through birth and death' (Cook 2005, 11). Both the bronze 37
 38 vessel and its culinary content had pivotal roles in securing the safe 38
 39 passage of the deceased human soul to Heaven where it would assume 39
 40 the position of an ancestor. Food production, as well as fecundity, were 40
 41 seen as gifts from Heaven—gifts that obliged the living to enter into a 41
 42 42

1 reciprocal nurturing relationship with their deceased ancestors. The 1
 2 ancestors received sacrifices and would in return confer their blessing 2
 3 upon their descendants in the form of food and progeny. The hierarchical 3
 4 structure of the ancient sacrificial system, which flourished during the 4
 5 late Shang (1200–1046 BCE) and Western Zhou (1046–771 BCE) periods, 5
 6 mirrored and thereby reaffirmed the hierarchical lineage system of the 6
 7 Shang and Western Zhou with the royal lineage at the top of the hierar- 7
 8 chy. Food production and sacrifices thus provided an important corner- 8
 9 stone of the (male centred) political order of ancient China. 9

10 The political role of food for maintaining social and political order 10
 11 survived the gradual decline of the Zhou feudal order which began in the 11
 12 mid-eighth century. Sacrifices and feasts continued to be used as tools for 12
 13 forging social bonds and political alliances. In the philosophical discourse 13
 14 of the Warring States and the early empire, the step towards agriculture 14
 15 was seen as the hallmark of civilization. Consider the following passage 15
 16 from *Huainanzi* (Master Huainan; second century BCE): 16

17
 18 In ancient times people ate vegetation and drank from streams; they 18
 19 picked fruit from trees and ate the flesh of shellfish and insects. In 19
 20 those times there was much illness and suffering, as well as injury from 20
 21 poisons. Thereupon the Divine Farmer (Shennong) for the first time 21
 22 taught the people to sow the five grains and diagnose the quality of 22
 23 soils—which were arid or wet, fertile or barren, highland or lowland. He 23
 24 tasted the flavors of the hundred plants and the sweetness and brack- 24
 25 ishness of streams and springs, causing the people to know which were 25
 26 to be avoided and which used. In the process he himself would suffer 26
 27 poisonings seventy times a day. (Campany 2005, 99–100, with minor 27
 28 modifications) 28

29 The Divine Farmer, one of the mythical culture heroes of antiquity, led 29
 30 people into farming, upon which other cultural achievements such as the 30
 31 ‘invention’ of writing, flood control, silkworm raising were to follow. 31

32 Meat 32

33 The ritual efficacy of meat (and alcohol, for that matter) is acknowledged 33
 34 in the earliest Chinese writings (Sterckx 2011). Both the Shang oracle 34
 35 bones and Zhou bronze inscriptions are replete with references to meat 35
 36 and alcohol that are shared among ritual participants, spirits and hu- 36
 37 mans. However, meat had an ambivalent status in the value system of 37
 38 ancient and traditional China. The nutritional value of meat and the fact 38
 39 that it was practically out of reach for all but nobles and high officials, 39
 40 made meat a luxury product and symbol of high status. As Roel Sterckx 40
 41 has noted, 41
 42 42

[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 the entertainment and cure of the ailing King Xiang of Chu (Hawkes [1959] 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 [1959] 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?

(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:

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. (Kieschnick 2005, 188; Ruegg 1980)

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. What was important was the consciousness of the eater (was it pure or impure), not the context in which the meat was prepared (was the kitchen clean or not) and not 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

1 of certain types of flesh: elephant flesh, horse, serpent, dog, or human 1
 2 flesh. Elephant and horse flesh are forbidden because both come from 2
 3 animals used by rulers while the consumption of snake meat would of- 3
 4 fend the powerful *naga* gods. These were semi-divine serpent creatures, 4
 5 the females of which are called *nagis* or *naginis*. The idea lingers in the 5
 6 name of Lord Voldemort's snake Nagini! Monks avoid dog meat because 6
 7 it is associated with people of lower standing. For the same reasons—to 7
 8 show compassion with one's fellow beings and in order not to jeopardize 8
 9 one's own spiritual cultivation, the eating of human flesh is taboo despite 9
 10 the acknowledged medicinal value meat eating, including eating human 10
 11 meat, can have as a cure for illness. I will come back to this point later. 11

12 Let us also make a note here that the main reason for abstaining from 12
 13 meat is the eater, not the suffering of the animal. The focus of the argu- 13
 14 ment against meat remains firmly on the negative effects on the eater, his 14
 15 or her ability to be compassionate. John Kieschnick notes that '[c]oncern 15
 16 for animal welfare – not to mention other modern motivations for vege- 16
 17 tarianism such as environmental impact and health – is for the most part 17
 18 absent from discussion of vegetarianism in Indian Buddhism' (Kieschnick 18
 19 2005, 192–93). 19

20 A meat rich diet was a sign of high social status, in China as elsewhere 20
 21 (Sterckx 2011, 28 and 51). The spread of vegetarianism among the Chinese 21
 22 ruling elite and aristocracy during the early medieval period—roughly 22
 23 between AD 300 and 600—largely followed the arguments presented be- 23
 24 fore—one should not add to the suffering in the world by engaging in the 24
 25 killing of living beings, but instead cultivate compassion. In a 'Statement 25
 26 of Confession and Repentance' (*Chanhui wen*), written around 485 CE, the 26
 27 literatus and fervent Buddhist Shen Yue (441–513) reflects on his past 27
 28 dietary preferences: 28

29
 30 From early youth my heart has been given to excessive desire. I never 29
 31 knew the meaning of compassion nor discerned the retribution of 30
 32 my wrongdoing. I consigned the furry, finny and feathered tribes to 31
 33 my kitchen, and, since their previous incarnations were not directly 32
 34 confronting me, they were not subject to my pity. Chopping them up 33
 35 every morning and cooking them every night, month after month, year 34
 36 after year. I stuffed my belly to satisfy my appetite. It was all I ever did. 35
 37 (Mather 1981, 422) 36

38 The rejection of meat is embedded within a self-cultivational dis- 38
 39 course, ~~which is driven mainly by political interests of the imperial house~~ 39
 40 ~~and the aristocracy to distinguish themselves from commoners as well as~~ 40
 41 ~~by the desire of the emperors to keep tight control over the wealthy and~~ 41
 42 ~~powerful Buddhist monasteries by setting the standards by which the~~ 42

1 ~~monks and nuns have to abide~~. The idea of religious merit takes hold at 1
 2 this time, the idea that high social status and political power would have 2
 3 to be based on religious merit—*gongde*, literally ‘virtue through works’— 3
 4 and the ability to transfer religious merit to those who cannot save them- 4
 5 selves. The most religious Chinese emperors at that time saw themselves 5
 6 as imperial bodhisattvas, enlightened beings who postpone their entry 6
 7 into paradise in order to lead the suffering beings in this world to salva- 7
 8 tion. Vegetarianism was one practice through which one could generate 8
 9 such merit. The release of animals was another which shows that genuine 9
 10 concern for the animal enters the discussion. In a letter to his friend, the 10
 11 official Zhou Yong (d.488) writes to his friend: ‘[For the animal] it is its life 11
 12 at stake, and it holds to it dearly; for us it is a flavour, something we can 12
 13 do without’ (Kieschnick 2005, 196). 13
 14 14

15 Female Renunciations of Meat/Flesh 15

16 16
 17 The discourse on vegetarianism that I have examined so far provides but 17
 18 one perspective on the relationship between body and food in the Miaoshan 18
 19 legend. The story also inserts itself into an older medical-meritorious 19
 20 discourse, in which the eating of human flesh serves both as an effective 20
 21 cure for diseases and meritorious religious act of a Bodhisattva. Chinese 21
 22 medical compendia promoted the eating of human flesh as an effective 22
 23 cure for diseases as early as the eighth century (Yu 2012, 66), while the 23
 24 gift of flesh (eyes, head, or body) to succour ailing parents is a standard 24
 25 theme in stories of the previous lives of the Buddha (jātaka). The figure of 25
 26 the Bodhisattva as a universal healer who sacrifices his/her body to save 26
 27 another human being is an established figure prior to the composition of 27
 28 the Miaoshan story (Dudbridge [1978] 2004, 90–91). 28

29 The significance of food and body in the Christian religious tradition 29
 30 of medieval Europe has been treated most extensively by Caroline Bynum 30
 31 in her 1987 landmark study *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Significance of Food* 31
 32 *to Medieval Women* (Bynum 1987). Bynum, who focuses on female spirit- 32
 33 uality, outlines the connections that one strain in medieval moral teach- 33
 34 ing saw between female food consumption and sexual pleasure, laziness, 34
 35 loquacity, scurrility and boldness, all of which had to be controlled by 35
 36 the opposite of culinary indulgence, namely asceticism and abstention. 36
 37 Bynum confirms that food practices of medieval women ‘sometimes ap- 37
 38 pear to be efforts not just to control but even to attack or punish the 38
 39 body’ (Bynum 1987, 216). Underlying such a negative sense of the female 39
 40 body was a practical and symbolical (rather than philosophical) dualism 40
 41 which juxtaposed the weak and inferior female flesh and the superior 41
 42 male spirit or reason. However, while one cannot deny that misogyny was 42

1 an influencing factor in women's self-perception to some extent, perhaps 1
 2 even a strong one, Bynum's key argument is that medieval asceticism and 2
 3 female ways of dealing with food do not represent, at the most basic level, 3
 4 a dualistic perception of female flesh versus male reason, of female cor- 4
 5 poreal indulgence versus male rational control; nor is female spirituality 5
 6 and women's role within religion characterized by an internalized ne- 6
 7 gation of the body. Radical asceticism is emphatically not embodied mi- 7
 8 sogyny or self-torture. Female food behaviour, Bynum argues, was, first, 8
 9 an effective way for women to manipulate their environment in a world 9
 10 where food was an important economic and symbolic resource. For ex- 10
 11 ample, wives and daughters used fasting as a means to escape the role of 11
 12 food preparer or provider (breastfeeding) or to avoid the sexual advances 12
 13 by men. Second, women's asceticism was an expression of their rejection 13
 14 of the medieval church and its increasingly positive view of the body; a 14
 15 church, in which their female role was defined as inferior. Female refusal 15
 16 to eat can, third, be interpreted as preparation for the ultimate fusion 16
 17 with the body of Christ (*imitatio Christi*). Thus, through ways of dealing 17
 18 with food women created new forms of spirituality which allowed them 18
 19 to bypass the male dominated ecclesiastical hierarchies and to forge a 19
 20 new type of charismatic spirituality in which a woman could enjoy union 20
 21 with Christ beyond the constraints of the church. 21

22 We find a very similar creative use of food consumption, abstinence 22
 23 and even bodily sacrifice in the story of Miaoshan. It shares with its 23
 24 European counterparts the main topics of marriage resistance, the ques- 24
 25 tioning of patriarchal hierarchy, the challenge to the Buddhist monastic 25
 26 ideal (remember the reprimand of the nuns in the convent) and the reli- 26
 27 gious ideal of bodily fusion with a deity. In its twelfth century recension, 27
 28 Miaoshan's story is that of a girl who follows her predestined path towards 28
 29 bodhisattva-hood with unshakable conviction. Throughout the story she 29
 30 remains completely unfazed by the trials and attempts of persuasion she is 30
 31 subjected to by her family (especially her father), showing no signs of wa- 31
 32 vering or self-doubt. Her birth is accompanied by unmistakable signs that 32
 33 something wonderful is happening: At the time of conception, the queen 33
 34 dreamed about 'swallowing the moon' (*tun yue*), a reference to a lunar 34
 35 eclipse announcing the birth of a great person (Yang and An 2005: 138). At 35
 36 birth, signs on her body mark her out as a bodhisattva, a saviour who de- 36
 37 lays his/her own entry into nirvana in order to save other sentient beings. 37

38 Already at the start of the story Miaoshan observes a vegetarian diet, 38
 39 limited to one meal after noon, in line with her Buddhist nature. As the 39
 40 story unfolds her diet becomes the more restricted the greater the dis- 40
 41 tance between Miaoshan and her family gets. After her first altercation 41
 42 with her father regarding her refusal to marry, Miaoshan is sent to work in 42

1 the garden, while her food and drink are reduced (Dudbridge [1978] 2004, 1
 2 137). However, the word used for 'food' in this particular passage (*shan*, 2
 3 'delicacy', 'meat') refers to food suitable for a member of the royal family. 3
 4 When Miaoshan has to leave the palace after an unsuccessful attempt 4
 5 at persuasion by her mother and sisters, she runs the kitchen garden of 5
 6 the nunnery to which she is confined. The implication is that she still 6
 7 has access to food (vegetables) but of an inferior variety. Her diet finally 7
 8 reaches a low-point at Fragrant Mountain to where she retires as a her- 8
 9 mit after her father burned the nunnery down to the ground: 'Miaoshan 9
 10 dwelt there, eating from the trees, drinking from the streams' (Dudbridge 10
 11 [1978] 2004, 138). The simplicity of her diet stands in a directly reciprocal 11
 12 relationship with her spiritual growth, which is soon to reach its first 12
 13 culmination point: the gift of her eyes and arms turns Miaoshan from a 13
 14 consumer of food into a food provider. Miaoshan's apotheosis, her trans- 14
 15 formation from a daughter into a deity reaches its climax when her par- 15
 16 ents recognize in the crippled hermit their own daughter, and the king 16
 17 (in another version the queen) is about 'to lick her eyes with his tongue'. 17
 18 This intimate gesture of care, offered by the father, was normally per- 18
 19 formed by children on their aged and ailing parents to restore eyesight. 19
 20 The use of this gesture by Miaoshan's father indicates a complete rever- 20
 21 sal of roles. Furthermore, the act remains unfulfilled, because 'before his 21
 22 mouth had touched her eyes, Miaoshan was suddenly not to be found' (Yü 22
 23 2001, 502). The expected reconciliation and propitiation between father 23
 24 and daughter does not take place. Her symbolic re-integration into the 24
 25 family, even with reversed roles, remains incomplete, because 25

26
 27 At that moment heaven and earth shook, radiance blazed forth, aus- 27
 28 picious clouds enclosed all around, divine musicians began to play. 28
 29 [And then] the All-Compassionate Guanyin of the Thousand Arms and 29
 30 Thousand Eyes appeared, solemn and majestic in form, radiant with 30
 31 dazzling light, lofty and magnificent, like the moon amid the stars. (Yü 31
 2001, 503)

32
 33 Miaoshan's apotheosis was complete. 33

34 The acknowledgement and acceptance of Miaoshan's gift of her body, 34
 35 the fact that she successfully transformed her body into 'sacrificial meat', 35
 36 completes her spiritual journey towards self-divinization and realization 36
 37 of her own true nature. She has successfully elevated herself above all 37
 38 worldly familial ties. In her new light, holy body, which the king is unable 38
 39 to burn, Miaoshan is able to become the recipient of sacrifice and worship 39
 40 herself. This is acknowledged by the royal couple who erect both a shrine 40
 41 and a stūpa housing Miaoshan's 'true body' (*zhen shen*) on the spot of her 41
 42 apotheosis. 42

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*) and permit us to make offerings.” In a moment the hermit returned to her original person (*ben shen*), 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 [1978] 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 [1978] 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).

‘Kuan-yin is Said to Manifest as a Man in Order to Save Men and a Woman in Order to Save Women’—Male and Female Approaches to Conversion and Renunciation

The quote in the heading of this section (Yü 2000, 475) makes two assumptions: first, that there is a difference in how men and women approach salvation; and second, that male deities predominantly appeal to men as female deities do to women. On the basis of these assumptions we would expect a clearly drawn boundaries between female and male approaches to spirituality, even though the different paths are ultimately unified by the fact that they represent different manifestations of a single deity, Guanyin. The question therefore is, do we have a clear dichotomy between male and female forms of spirituality, and by extension to wellbeing, in twelfth century China? Does the tale of Miaoshan primarily address a female audience? Statements such as ‘female deities, unlike their male counterparts, do not favour the wealthy and influential over the poor, insiders over outsiders, or men over women’ re-inforce the idea of a clear division of labour and responsibilities regarding the securing of wellbeing between male and female deities. While male deities are ‘associated with hierarchy, authority, and legitimacy’, their female counterparts, invested with motherly characteristics and aspirations, represent the ultimate wholeness and inclusivity of the community. A corresponding idea

1 is that female deities are symbolic of and for women, while male deities 1
2 overwhelmingly represent male concerns and aspirations. 2

3 Sherin Wing has presented strong arguments against such a reading 3
4 of the Miaoshan tale, which in her view results from an unexamined 4
5 androcentrism that has shaped the scholarly discourse on Chinese 5
6 Buddhism, especially the role of women in Buddhism, and the inter- 6
7 pretation of Buddhist texts. According to Wing, the Miaoshan tale is a 7
8 male-gendered story, as its core secular theme focuses on marriage and 8
9 the particular significance of this institution to the patrilinear fam- 9
10 ily of the Song and hence to men. ‘Marriage was [...] an arena in which 10
11 men could create mutually beneficial ties economically, politically, and 11
12 socially’ (Wing 2011, 18). Thus, Miaoshan’s refusal to marry ~~directly~~ 12
13 impacted on the King’s financial situation—in the likely case of an ux- 13
14 orilocal arrangement the King would have retained the large dowry as 14
15 well as received the bride-price—and also his ability to forge beneficial 15
16 social and political alliances through marrying his daughter. In terms of 16
17 secular values, Miaoshan’s actions are described as defiant, disobedient 17
18 and subversive of the Confucian value system and social order; in short, 18
19 she is a veritable nightmare for every male lineage head, gentry member 19
20 or scholar-official. The tale thus serves as a public warning addressed to 20
21 men about the dangers of female wilfulness and subversiveness, justify- 21
22 ing the severe measures that may be needed in dealing with such a threat 22
23 (Wing 2011, 24–25). 23

24 As much as Miaoshan appears as the antithesis of the Confucian ideal of 24
25 femininity, her apotheosis at the end of the story vindicates her rejection 25
26 of conventional Confucian values in favour of her Buddhist faith. More 26
27 than that, it provides a resolution to the tensions between Confucian and 27
28 Buddhist commitments by demonstrating the superiority of the Buddhist 28
29 interpretation of filial piety and thus of Buddhism’s superiority vis-à-vis 29
30 the Confucian order. Miaoshan’s deification does not, however, entail a 30
31 victory of the female over the male; rather, through her apotheosis, she 31
32 leaves the realm of human gender distinctions and dichotomies behind, 32
33 which signals a “shift away from women and their agency” (Wing 2011, 33
34 27). The dominant use of ‘male protocols’—for example the sharp sepa- 34
35 ration of the monastic lifestyle Miaoshan is drawn to from conventional 35
36 Confucian lifestyles; the emphasis of the superiority of Buddhist notions 36
37 of filial piety over Confucian ones; the practices of renunciation, solitary 37
38 cultivation and extreme self-sacrifice displayed by the protagonist, or the 38
39 public display of the story in form of a stele inscriptions—provides strong 39
40 indications that the story is part of a predominantly male religious dis- 40
41 course. In other words, Miaoshan’s renunciation of conventional values, 41
42 her Buddhist piety and subsequent transformation into a deity appealed, 42

1 according to Wing, even more to men than they did to women, making 1
 2 Miaoshan into a role model and patroness for men. What appealed to 2
 3 Song men was how the story captured the hierarchical and dichotomic 3
 4 structure of Song gender relations, on the one hand, and how these hi- 4
 5 erarchies could be radically renounced through an inversion of gender, 5
 6 on the other hand. The mechanism of inversion of gender symbols is 6
 7 central here and involves two separate instances. In the first instance, it 7
 8 is Princess Miaoshan herself who ‘rejected her mortal, female gender by 8
 9 enacting *male* protocols. She behaved like an aristocratic man pursuing 9
 10 Buddhism through social inversion’ (Wing 2011, 26). She then inverted 10
 11 her gendered position again into that of a male ascetic, which then al- 11
 12 lowed her to produce the Buddhist piety of a male renunciant. 12

13 Wing’s interpretation has a lot in its favour. Caroline Bynum, on whose 13
 14 work on later medieval religious imagery Wing’s argument is largely 14
 15 based, has demonstrated convincingly that medieval men and women 15
 16 used religious symbols differently, with women ‘say[ing] less about gen- 16
 17 der, [making] less use of dichotomous gender images, speak[ing] less of 17
 18 gender reversal, and [placing] more emphasis on interior motivation and 18
 19 continuity of self’. By contrast, men ‘use more dichotomous images, are 19
 20 more concerned to define “the female” as both positive and negative, and 20
 21 speak more often of reversal and conversion’ (Bynum 1992, 156). 21

22 The fact that the tale of Miaoshan was written by a male and conse- 22
 23 quently reveals strong male concerns does not mean that the story caters 23
 24 exclusively for male audiences. In fact, it held equally great significance 24
 25 for female audiences, as I will show next. At this point it is worth not- 25
 26 ing that every time we speak about wellbeing or happiness—I use both 26
 27 words synonymously—we operate within a ‘shared discursive terrain’ 27
 28 (Wielander and Hird 2018) of symbolic and narrative constructs to char- 28
 29 acterize and define what we mean by these terms. Narratives of wellbe- 29
 30 ing speak of the world as it *could* or *ought* to be, not as it really is. These 30
 31 narratives are shaped by gender, power relations, and social hierarchies 31
 32 in complicated and often inconspicuous ways. Though these different 32
 33 symbolic constructs do not directly translate into reality, they do influ- 33
 34 ence what is deemed to be socially and morally acceptable. A thorough 34
 35 understanding of previous symbolic constructs of wellbeing is therefore 35
 36 a prerequisite to any future project of creating greater happiness through 36
 37 laws, social and political action or spiritual cultivation. 37

38 38

39 39

40 40

The Wellbeing Benefits of Spiritual Practice

41 The difficulties the Miaoshan tale presents to the modern interpreter 41
 42 can be partially circumvented once we put aside the question of symbolic 42

1 constructions of wellbeing at the textual level and focus instead on how 1
 2 the Miaoshan story might have been used by people in real life. It is one 2
 3 thing to assume that a literary text caters primarily to a male or female 3
 4 audience based on the interpretation of the text's imagery, the ways in 4
 5 which it constructs gender and so forth. It is another to have evidence, 5
 6 textual or other, about how a particular text was used, by whom and with 6
 7 what purpose. In this last section I will thus shift the focus to the *practices* 7
 8 connected to the Miaoshan story and similar texts. My question is what 8
 9 people are actually *doing* with religious texts, and I aim to demonstrate 9
 10 that engagement with material such as the Miaoshan story through reci- 10
 11 tation, reading, copying and so forth was in itself seen as a way to improve 11
 12 wellbeing, independent from the question of how certain readers might 12
 13 understand the complex religious symbolism of a religious tale. I will also 13
 14 suggest that while a religious symbol like the Princess Miaoshan might 14
 15 be male-gendered in certain textual contexts, this does not preclude its 15
 16 being used by female religious practitioners in other, more practical con- 16
 17 texts. To ~~do so~~, I will extend the investigation to later periods to include 17
 18 examples that may or may not be directly related to the Miaoshan tale. 18
 19 Let us look at the evidence ~~one can find~~. 19

20 In her study of everyday lives of women in Fujian province during the 20
 21 Song dynasty, Xu Man provides a comprehensive overview of the reli- 21
 22 gious life of women during the Song period. Xu's description of women's 22
 23 real lives, although she too has to heavily rely on male-authored writ- 23
 24 ings, i.e., epitaphs, in her analysis of female activities, comes to quite 24
 25 different conclusions than what we might expect on the basis of our 25
 26 interpretation of the Miaoshan legend. Xu demonstrates that ~~female~~ 26
 27 involvement in Buddhist practices ~~widespread among elite women~~ was 27
 28 not only widespread—Mark Halperin (2006, 6164), based on an empire 28
 29 wide survey of epitaphs, has calculated that 22 percent of elite women 29
 30 practised Buddhism—but that it was also widely accepted by male up- 30
 31 holders of Confucian ideals. '[E]lite men's anti-Buddhist approach did not 31
 32 lead to widespread resentment over women's engagement in Buddhist 32
 33 practice, although they viewed Buddhism men [Sic!] as a different and 33
 34 more serious problem' (Xu 2016, 166). To be sure, it is not difficult to 34
 35 find male voices who condemned the religious interests of their wives 35
 36 and other female members of the household. Zhu Xi (1130–1200), the 36
 37 prominent Confucian revivalist, issued an official admonition as Prefect 37
 38 of Zhangzhou calling for Buddhist temples to refrain from 'gathering 38
 39 men and women day and night with the excuse of respecting Buddha and 39
 40 preaching sutras' (Xu 2016, 203). He also castigated monks for maintain- 40
 41 ing close ties with female believers and talking to them on every possible 41
 42 occasion. Zhu Xi's admonition suggests that women played an active part 42

1 in Buddhist monastic affairs as visitors and patrons, who at times gen- 1
 2 erously contributed money, time or other skills (e.g., their own skills in 2
 3 handicraft) to the different good causes centred around a monastery or 3
 4 temple. In many cases they did this together with their husbands. It is 4
 5 also worth noting that Zhu Xi's admonition addressed the religious pro- 5
 6 vidors, the clerics, not the women whose personal spiritual pursuits he 6
 7 seems to have approved of or at least tacitly accepted. Confucian reviv- 7
 8 alists such as Zhu Xi were concerned with upholding the public image of 8
 9 the Confucian order and maintaining the separation between the 'inner' 9
 10 (domestic affairs) versus the 'outer' (public affairs) spheres of social re- 10
 11 sponsibilities. Spirituality was one area of life that cut across these gen- 11
 12 dered boundaries by allowing women to extend their personal spirituality 12
 13 into the public realm through participation in networks based in temples 13
 14 and other local organizations. Female spirituality blurred the boundary 14
 15 between secularity and spirituality, between personal belief and public 15
 16 engagement. 'Although physically practiced in the inner chambers, the 16
 17 "domestic religion" exposed women to the highly fluid society charac- 17
 18 terised by extensive networking and intensive communication between 18
 19 inner and outer' (Xu 2016, 194). Xu (2016, 202) further notes that 'Song 19
 20 literati were not bothered by women's external religious pursuits as 20
 21 much as Ming-Qing authors; very likely they had more flexible and di- 21
 22 verse views of the matter'. 22

23 The reasons that prompted male tolerance towards female religious 23
 24 practices despite their own philosophical convictions—and here we re- 24
 25 turn to the main theme of this essay—was the view that female spiritual 25
 26 endeavours contributed to the wellbeing of both family and community. 26
 27 Buddhist spirituality was credited with being able to reduce female 27
 28 anxiety and to ease domestic tensions. Sources summarizing the lives 28
 29 of Buddhist laywomen frequently mention 'tranquillity', 'calmness', 29
 30 'harmonious relationships', 'compassion', 'patience' or 'composure' in 30
 31 difficult situations to characterize the exemplary behaviour displayed by 31
 32 these women and praised by men. The sense of tranquillity and calmness 32
 33 attributed to religious practice was further supported by the fact that 33
 34 many elite women created a separate space in their homes devoted to 34
 35 daily meditation and consumption of religious texts or images. Xu states: 35

36 A Buddhist image, an incense burner and flowers are typical props 36
 37 that facilitated Buddhists' communication with deities in a temple. By 37
 38 furnishing an unoccupied room in the inner quarter with these reli- 38
 39 gious objects, a laywoman created a ritual space greatly resembling a 39
 40 monastery. By shutting the door and blocking the relatives' inquiry, she 40
 41 created herself an isolated space, for the sake of spiritual independence 41
 42 instead of gender segregation. Enclosure did not necessarily indicate 42

women's subordination, but on the contrary may exemplify their agency, depending on the context. (Xu 2016, 179–180)

Note the monastic quality of the spaces created by pious women. This and the extensiveness of laywomen's involvement in monastic affairs is a powerful counterargument against the notion that the Miaoshan tale merely projects 'a series of androcentric monkish behaviors onto Miaoshan' (Wing 2011, 21). The evidence suggests that many Song women were attracted to monastic lifestyles of their own accord and independent from male projections.

A Buddhist manual associated with the worship of Miaoshan/Guanyin, the 'Methods of Worshipping the Water-moon Master Perceiver' (*Shuiyue guanzizai gongyangfa*), provides an insight into the practices associated with such private religious spaces:

Recite the mantra facing the image. All your desires will be fulfilled in a short time. If you want to have food and clothing, stay in an uninhabited place, choose either a pure place or an ordinary place, burn incense and prepare flowers to worship the Great Compassionate Worthy One (Dabei zunzhe). All your sins will be dissolved. Your worldly and otherworldly desires will be accomplished. (Quoted from Xu 2016, 179)

The beneficial effects of reciting a Buddhist scripture (*sutra*) or mantra were well established by the Song dynasty and informed religious practice during the later imperial period. Given the centrality of procreation in Chinese conceptions of wellbeing and gender it is not surprising to find strong links between spiritual practices and childbirth (Chuu 2001). A very good example for the practical benefits sought through common religious activity is provided by a Ms You who put her eclectic taste in books to good use during her pregnancy:

[Ms. You] chanted the *Admonitions for Women* and other [Confucian] classics every day to keep herself alert. She also believed in and respected Buddhism quite a lot. Whenever she got pregnant, she sat upright in a quiet room, burned incense and read Confucian and Buddhist books. She did not shout loudly or state angrily, and said, 'This is the way ancient people did prenatal education'. (Xu 2016, 182)

Scholars researching the use of religious texts sometimes state that religious scriptures were used to help in handling daily life affairs (e.g., Xu 2016, 183; Jansen 2017b, 224). This is an area where more research is required, but the issue of childbirth is certainly one area where women turned to religious writings for help. The following two examples from different time periods but both related to the worship of Miaoshan/Guanyin show how one and the same story could be used to opposite

ends. In the first case, the supplicant addresses Miaoshan/Guanyin with a prayer for children, while in the second example the same or a very similar text is used to justify marriage refusal. The following quote is a short excerpt from a Precious Scroll entitled *Explanatory Precious Scroll of White-robed Kuan-yin Who Comes into the World Bringing Children* (Xiaoshi Baiyi Guanyin Pusa song yinger xiasheng baojuan), a sectarian scripture printed between 1572–1620:

Turn your heart to goodness, keep a vegetarian diet, and call the name of the Buddha. When you chant the precious scroll once yourself, your blessing will be increased many times. Your sons and daughters will live long. When you ask someone else to chant it, you will be protected from disasters and your sins will be reduced. Members of your present household will be safe and sound, and your dead ancestors will be delivered from suffering and go to heaven. If you do not have any children, then you ought to get the White-robed Bodhisattva. You may build temples for her, or cast images of her, or chant the precious scroll. As long as you are sincere in your prayer, the Bodhisattva will show her compassion and send you a child and maiden. They will continue your line and bring glory to you. In case people may have doubts, there will be the evidence of the white caul. Everyone will then know for sure that it is true that the child is indeed sent to you by the Venerable Mother. Merciful, merciful, truly merciful! (Yü 2001, 468)

Anthropological research conducted by Marjorie Topley in Hong Kong, Singapore and rural Guangdong province during the 1950s has provided evidence of the undiminished importance of the Miaoshan/Guanyin cult in sectarian and folk Buddhist milieus centred around ‘vegetarian halls’ (*zhaitang*). These halls, which are part of the organization of several Chinese religions, provide ‘members of the connected faith with a place where they can meet and engage in common worship and also practice certain individual religious tasks, especially in the sect. They are usually residential today’. The halls were popular as retirement homes for female workers or servants who would make regular payments to the hall during their working lives, thus securing a place for later on (Topley 2011, 406). While sectarian halls were normally open to men and women—sectarian groups stressed sexual equality and allowed men and women to pray together, hence the negative views of officialdom—certain aspects of their practice especially appealed to women looking for inspiration and moral support for refusing to marry.

Aimed expressly at women was the “precious volume” (*pao-chuan* [baojuan]), which contained biographies of model women, usually recounted in ballad form. One such story, about Kuan Yin [Guanyin], the

Goddess of Mercy, who is popularly believed to have been a princess who became a nun over her parents' objections, points out that she had no husband to claim her devotion, no mother-in-law to control her, and no children to hamper her movements. Many of my informants had "precious volumes" they acquired in their homeland which further emphasize that refusing to marry is not morally wrong and even that religion can help those brave enough to resist; that men cannot be trusted; and that suicide is a virtue when committed to preserve one's purity. (Topley 2011, 431)

The above case of women reading religious scriptures in support of their life choices leads us back to the question of the relationship between religious symbols and the real lives of practitioners, both male and female, of spirituality. Huang, Valussi and Palmer (2011, 112), writing about conceptions of the role of women and the female body and sexuality in Daoism, have argued that

it is certainly true that Chinese religion, and Daoism with it, is populated by a large number of female goddesses and that these goddesses have a large number of female followers, often these goddesses [...] circumvented the need for expected duties as wives and mothers by performing exceptional deeds in exchange for their unwillingness to marry. They are viewed and accepted as 'exceptional.' The women who worship them, however, are still expected to act according to the tenets of a highly patriarchal Confucian society: thus, neither the concept of 'the feminine' in Daoism nor the exceptionality of the female goddesses has an impact on the balancing of gender power in society. Therefore, when we look at the reality of Daoist women's lives, in historical as well as contemporary terms, we need to recognize that it is influenced much more by social, political, and cultural concerns than by Daoist ideology. (Huang, Valussi and Palmer 2011, 112)

According to these authors there is a clear dichotomy 'between the idealized female goddess and the real woman' (Huang, Valussi and Palmer 2011, 113). However, field studies like the ones conducted by Topley (2011) in the 1950s or more recently by DeVido (2010), Guggenmoos (2014) or Huang and Weller (1998) suggest a more nuanced interpretation of the interaction between symbolic constructions and individual or social practices. The Taiwanese Buddhist Compassion Relief Tzu Chi Foundation (Ciji Gongdehui), for example, has successfully exploited the symbolism of the Guanyin/Miaoshan cult to build an international charitable organization based on 'feminine' and 'maternal' virtues. The life story of its founder, the Ven. Zhengyan, mirrors key elements in the stories of goddesses who left home and remained unmarried. Zhengyan took an oath to Guanyin that she would become a Buddhist nun. While

religious symbols may not have the power to influence the balance of gender power in society directly, they can be interpreted in ways that lead to a change in self-conception with real life impact. Guggenmoos writes about one of her interviewees, a Ms. Xu:

As she grew up, her increasing involvement in Buddhism brought her into conflict with her father and society, who did not understand her desire to lead a monastic life. She does not bring this confrontation to a head, but instead finds a compromise that fits her circumstances, defining herself as an intellectual lay Buddhist who engages actively in society and envisions herself as a translator of Buddhist texts in the future. She also offers courses in Buddhist English, which is in line with her aim of supporting the international spread of Buddhism. She has lost sight of the monastic order during this process. (Guggenmoos 2014, 172)

Two things are worth noting here: the first is the fact that Ms Xu's self-perception contains elements reminiscent of the Miaoshan story, as was the case with the Ven. Zhengyan mentioned before. It would be worth examining in more detail to what extent the narrative self-constructions of Buddhist laywomen and laymen are shaped by tales of Miaoshan or other deities. While I would not go as far as to argue that Miaoshan necessarily provided an example which women would normally choose to follow, it is evident that some, such as the founder of the Ciji-Foundation, did precisely that. The other interesting point is that Ms. Xu is very conscious of both the personal 'conflict' as well as the potential 'confrontation' with her father and society as a result of her individual religious choice. The solution to this conflict/confrontation, however, is not a radical choice between two ends of a scale of possibilities, but a personal development which translates—her work as translator of Buddhist texts is perhaps no coincidence—the tensions into a transformed self-perception and action. 'Ciji succeeds in combining a very traditional idea of womanhood with a very modern sphere of action in the world' (Huang and Weller 1998, 390). The stark contrasts between religious ideology and peoples' social reality postulated by the exceptionality of the female goddesses are conspicuously absent from the self-portrayals of real people, as is in many cases the vocabulary of 'rejection', 'suppression or renunciation of gender roles', 'role reversal' and so forth. As DeVido (2010, 69) with reference to Qin (2000) has argued, 'Contradictory identities are not necessarily problematic, nuns in China "make use of their feminine, masculine, and 'neutral' characteristics according to necessity and circumstance.'" The same is true for laypeople. Instead of using sharply defined conceptual dichotomies to highlight gender differences, the spiritual practices of laypeople, at least as far as women are concerned,

1 are characterized by fluidity, adaptation and transformation rather than 1
 2 suppression and renunciation. It is worth quoting Caroline Bynum's re- 2
 3 marks on gender-related imagery in the religious writings of the later 3
 4 middle ages in Europe. While male writers conceptualized the genders 4
 5 as dichotomous, '[w]omen writers used imagery more fluidly. Personal 5
 6 and social characteristics were more often shared by the two genders 6
 7 in women's writings' (Bynum 1992: 175). A second prominent symbol in 7
 8 male-authored narratives is equally absent in women's spiritual writings 8
 9 due to the male-female power differential; this is the female as a symbol 9
 10 of renunciation or reversal. 10

11
 12 Because women were women, they could not embrace the female as 12
 13 a symbol of renunciation. Because society was male-dominated, they 13
 14 could not embrace the male as a symbol of renunciation. To become 14
 15 male was elevation, not renunciation, and elevation was a less signifi- 15
 16 cant reversal given the values at the core of medieval Christianity. Thus, 16
 17 women did not in their writings play with male and female oppositions; 17
 18 they did not tell their own stories or the stories of other women as 18
 19 reversals or conversions. They did, however, explore and play in very 19
 20 complicated ways with what femaleness meant in the theological tradi- 20
 21 tion—that is, physicality. (Bynum 1992, 171) 21

22 More research is needed on how women and men in China in the past 22
 23 conceptualized gender roles in religious writings, an endeavour made 23
 24 more difficult by the lower number of female-authored spiritual autobi- 24
 25 ographies compared to the abundance of male-authored writings about 25
 26 men and women. However, field studies in contemporary China and 26
 27 the comparative information provided by Bynum and others strongly 27
 28 points into a direction that forces us to reconsider approaches to gen- 28
 29 der and spirituality in Chinese history that rely heavily on dichotomous 29
 30 conceptualizations. 30

31 I would like to conclude this section with some brief reflections about 31
 32 how the Chinese material which I introduced above could be brought into 32
 33 a dialogue with more recent Western approaches to spiritual develop- 33
 34 ment. A fundamental question that shines through several of the sources 34
 35 quoted above is that of personal and, more generally, human develop- 35
 36 ment. What are we meant to be as human beings, caught up in a world of 36
 37 conflicting material and spiritual interests? Where do we go from here? 37
 38 How do we overcome the dichotomies and tensions of the here-and-now 38
 39 and move towards a stage characterized by greater inclusivity, interre- 39
 40 latedness, authenticity, and spirituality? An evolutionary perspective, a 40
 41 strong sense of the possibility of 'growing towards further stages of de- 41
 42 velopment' (Leonardi 2010, 60) is discernible both in the Miaoshan tale 42

1 and, for example, the accounts of female Buddhist practitioners. This 1
 2 evolutionary vision, which is characterized by a strong spiritual dimen- 2
 3 sion, provides the common ground between Miaoshan's life story and 3
 4 Carl Rogers's view of 'the Person of Tomorrow' (Leonardi 2010, 60–63). 4
 5 The following characterization of the spiritual yearning of 'the Person of 5
 6 Tomorrow' is equally applicable to Miaoshan: 6

7
 8 These persons of tomorrow are seekers. They wish to find a meaning 8
 9 and purpose in life that is greater than the individual. Some are led into 9
 10 cults, but more are examining all the ways by which humankind has 10
 11 found values and forces that extend beyond the individual. They wish to 11
 12 live a life of inner peace. Their heroes are spiritual persons – Mahatma 12
 13 Gandhi, Martin Luther King, Teilhard de Chardin. Sometimes, in altered 13
 14 states of consciousness, they experience the unity and harmony of the 14
 15 universe.(Rogers 1980, 352; quoted from Leonardi 2010, 62) 15

16 Of the twelve key qualities a fully realized person displays, Princess 16
 17 Miaoshan displays all but scepticism regarding science and technology: 17
 18 openness, a desire for authenticity and for wholeness, the wish for in- 18
 19 timacy, a view of personhood as a process, a caring attitude, attitude 19
 20 toward nature, authority within, unimportance of material things, and 20
 21 a yearning for the spiritual (Rogers 1980, 350–52). The evolutionary vi- 21
 22 sion culminates in the 'relinquishing and transcending of the self as the 22
 23 ultimate reference point' (Leonardi 2010, 62), by way of which the per- 23
 24 son does not give herself up but, on the contrary, becomes a fully func- 24
 25 tioning person in both Rogers's person-centred approach and religious 25
 26 terms (Leonardi 2010, 63). A core idea shared by Chinese thinkers, Carl 26
 27 Rogers and a Christian philosopher like Teilhard de Chardin (1881–1955) 27
 28 is the notion that 'there exists a dialectical relationship between growing 28
 29 personalisation and increasing socialisation, the centring of the human 29
 30 person and the strengthening of bonds between persons in the human 30
 31 community' (King 1997, 45; Leonardi 2010, 65). Spirituality is a key ingre- 31
 32 dient that enables us to bond with other human beings and thus realize 32
 33 our own true self. 33

34 35 Conclusion 35

36
 37 What is the significance of the Miaoshan tale for approaches to wellbeing? 37
 38 Through the examples discussed in this essay I have tried to demonstrate 38
 39 that the Miaoshan legend engages themes that lie at the heart of Chinese 39
 40 ideas of both wellbeing and spirituality. Guanyin/Miaoshan symbolizes 40
 41 cultural characteristics—motherhood, spiritual aspirations, physicality, 41
 42 social engagement—that go beyond conventional gender-related images 42

1 but embrace general human concerns. By absorbing all these ‘nested cul- 1
2 tural characteristics’ into one, Miaoshan/Guanyin and other deities, such 2
3 as the Lady of Linshui (Baptandier 1996) or the Eternal Venerable Mother 3
4 (Wusheng laomu), became the ‘mediator for spiritual enlightenment but 4
5 also for worldly happiness’ (Yü 2001, 486). 5

6 The fact that women and men engaged with the tensions exempli- 6
7 fied by Miaoshan’s story in diverse and sometimes contradictory ways 7
8 has wider ramifications for how we conceptualize wellbeing. The *Oxford* 8
9 *English Dictionary* defines ‘well-being’ as ‘the state of being comfortable, 9
10 healthy, or happy’. The formation of the English word ‘well-being’ is re- 10
11 vealing. It refers to a condition that exists at a specific time rather than 11
12 to a process directed towards a future goal. The Chinese material dis- 12
13 cussed in this essay suggests a different approach to wellbeing. Wellbeing 13
14 could be conceived not as a *state of being* defined by certain objectively 14
15 measurable indicators such as income, life expectancy, social status and 15
16 so forth, but rather as a fluid *process of becoming* in which the different 16
17 actors constantly negotiate the meaning of wellbeing from personal, 17
18 inter-personal or societal perspectives (Rogers 1961). There are two, 18
19 probably more, reasons why it is better to conceptualize wellbeing not 19
20 as a *state of being* but as a *process of becoming* instead. The first reason 20
21 is that any state of being is of only limited duration whereas a process 21
22 can more easily be conceived as a recurrent or open-ended movement 22
23 towards a future goal. Second, as long as we live in an imperfect world, 23
24 the unavoidable gap between normative concepts of wellbeing (the world 24
25 as it ought to be) and the realities of human lives (the world as it is) will 25
26 undoubtedly persist, creating tensions that present obstacles to the cre- 26
27 ation of wellbeing. In view of these tensions, wellbeing goals will become 27
28 more achievable if those in pursuit of these goals are guided by concepts 28
29 that are non-static, non-dichotomous and open to constant adaptation. 29
30 The implications of this conceptual shift are significant. It means, for 30
31 instance, that government-imposed wellbeing targets are impossible 31
32 to reach unless achieving these targets allows for the possibility to ne- 32
33 gotiate, subvert or resist them through a variety of social and cultural 33
34 practices and discourses, thus avoiding reification and those hard bound- 34
35 aries that undermine individual and social wellbeing in the first place. 35
36 The value of religious narratives, spiritual biographies of individuals or 36
37 groups, or stories of gods and deities, lies in their unlimited power to 37
38 create discursive spaces and practices that constantly challenge what we 38
39 define as ‘wellbeing’. 39

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Biographical Note

Thomas Jansen is Associate Professor in Chinese Studies at the University of Wales Trinity Saint David, Lampeter. He has published *Höfische Öffentlichkeit im frühmittelalterlichen China. Debatten im Salon des Prinzen Xiao Ziliang* (2000) and several articles on early medieval China. He co-edited *Globalization and the Making of Religious Modernity in China Transnational Religions, Local Agents, and the Study of Religion, 1800–Present* (2014). His current project is entitled *Religious Text Production in Late Imperial China: Social, Religious, and Performative Aspects of Chinese Sectarian Scriptures from the 16th to 19th Centuries* and will explore the manifold interactions between religious texts and their users.

Notes

1. I use Pinyin transliteration throughout this essay. When quoting from the work of other scholars I have tacitly adjusted transliterations in Wade-Giles to Pinyin for the sake of consistency.
2. 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 ([1978] 2004, 24–34).

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