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Artistic Agency, Feminine Labor, and the Female Body in Buddhist Hair Embroideries of
the Ming and Qing Dynasties

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Introduction

A hanging scroll by Guan Daosheng (1262-1219), the best known woman painter of her period in China (Yuan dynasty), depicts a standing feminine figure, the bodhisattva Guanyin (Sk. Avalokiteśvara; fig. 1). Guanyin stands at the center of the vertically oriented silk, but turns slightly to face towards the viewer’s left. She is barefoot, wearing her hair half-up in an adorned top knot and long, white flowing robes, the outline and folds of which are represented in clean, minimal lines. The outlines of the clothing are done in blue thread, and the entirety of the figure is filled in with off-white stitches, with some highlights of white around curves of the body and facial features. The fabric of her clothes and her untied hair drift gently to the viewer’s left carried by an unseen breeze. Her arms are folded in front of her chest with rosary prayer beads clasped in her hands in a seemingly personal and private gesture. Her face is ovular, with delicate lines denoting facial features. Her facial expression is serene, with closed eyes, unfurrowed eyebrows, and a neutral mouth; it seems as if she is just closing her eyes for a moment while looking off into the distance.

The work is embroidered, done with great care and skill so that the countless individual stitches appear as solid continuous brushstrokes. Though most of the figure’s body and clothing is embroidered with silk, Guanyin’s hair, eyebrows, and eyelashes are rendered with the artist’s own hairs. While representing Guanyin in painting and sculpture was a common practice, inserting hair raises questions of intent and materiality. What religious and artistic inclinations motivated Guan Daosheng to use her own hair? Guan Daosheng is not the only artist to do so; using hair in religious devotional embroideries was already a set and more widespread practice. Using real hair for the hair of a representational Guanyin seemingly adds a dimension of hyper-realism. Representing clothing with silk and hair with hair allows the depiction of Guanyin
to echo physical reality, making the two-dimensional hanging scroll more lifelike. However, proximity to physical reality is not necessarily the goal. The lack of background and minimalist representation of Guanyin’s clothing are evidence of Guan Daosheng’s choice to avoid close approximation of reality, since she has demonstrated competence in depicting detailed backgrounds in other works (fig. 14). The use of hair functions as an artistic choice of medium for both the aesthetic of the work and also for the religious implications. Other than artistic quality, the use of hair suggests incorporating concepts of spirituality, especially since the subject matter is a Buddhist deity.\(^1\)

Besides the embroidered image of Guanyin, Guan Daosheng embroidered in silk an inscription that provides an artist’s signature and location. Along the bottom third of the right edge, the inscription reads: “至大己酉六月八日，呉興趙管仲姬拜畫,” which translates to “In the year of zhida jiyou (1309) on the eighth day in June, Zhao Guan Zhongji (courtesy name) from Wuxing respectfully painted [this].”\(^2\) This inscription provides a signature with the artist’s courtesy name, marking the work as an art object as well as one with religious connotation. Wuxing district is a center for literati painting, which emphasizes Guan Daosheng’s connection to the court art world. Also along the eastern coast of China is Shanghai, which was known for pictorial embroideries, geographically locating this work in a context of embroidery not solely for function or expected gendered labor, but aesthetic practice. While the work is religious and devotional, the geographical context, Guan Daosheng’s inscription and biography hint that this work was intended for circles greater than private worship.

Guan Daosheng remained well-known in the following centuries with a reputation based on knowledge transmitted by her husband Zhao Mengfu in a literary anthology. Guan Daosheng

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2 Li, "Embroidering Guanyin,” 2012.
was an influential female artist of Chinese art history whose work set stylistic and iconographic precedents for women artists who came after her, not solely for hair embroideries. Even in Guan’s own time, contemporary writings of Guan’s art depict her as a virtuous woman that other women should model their art and personal character on. Characterizing Guan Daosheng as an exemplar applies to her virtuosity, character, and artistic ability. This leads to the question: what does hair embroidery have to do with womanly morality? Morality appears in the work through the process of making, in the bodily sacrifice, and gendered labor under the religious frames of Buddhism and Confucianism.

Following the precedent of Guan Daosheng’s work, other female artists explored religious iconography rendered with the technique of embroidery medium of human hair. An anonymous artist (fig. 2) and Miss Yang (fig. 3) similarly stitched a feminized version of Guanyin, though in comparison to Guan’s work, they showcase differences in how devotion is practiced and expressed. Artists such as Ni Renji, who stitched Buddha (fig. 4) in 1649, and Li Feng, who stitched a seated Guanyin (fig. 5) in 1691, both come from gentry classes, with a similar social background to Guan Daosheng. This elite class in China passed imperial exams to become eligible to hold office, and thus wielded intellectual and political power. Ni Renji’s Buddha deviates from the other works in the study because she chooses to depict the Buddha rather than Guanyin, and dedicates the work to her parents. Though she is not the only person to do this, both these choices present a certain type of agency achieved by complying with the very structures that limit it. Li Feng’s Guanyin demonstrates advancements in technique, highlighting

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the progression of artistic innovation in the centuries following Guan Daosheng. From
comparison between all works, differences in representation, subject matter, style, and technique
point to the extent of freedom female artists were able to explore in their acts of making and lives
in both religious and secular realms.

While I do not have evidence of direct connections between the five artists, female hair
embroiderers influenced each other through sharing techniques and visual sources. Especially
among the literati class, male court painters referenced each other and past painters consistently
in their art practice. Artistic referencing and technique sharing appears in the tradition of women
sharing techniques and learning from each other in labor practices, notably in textile creation.
However, while elite male painters were expected to and garnered respect from this type of
sharing and reappropriating, the knowledge sharing among women was not celebrated and
respected in the same way.

Hair embroidery was primarily what pious women did as Buddhist devotional practice.
During the Ming and Qing periods, the conception of hair embroidery as a technique
proliferated, and so the process became more technologically advanced. According to extant hair
embroideries and textual sources, the general subjects were Guanyin, Buddha, and Bodhidharma
in that order of prevalence. There were also some hair embroideries that featured non-Buddhist
subjects, but are not included in this study. In order to understand how hair embroideries opened
space for women to practice religion and create requires an understanding of Buddhist and
Confucian structures at the time.

Buddhism is fundamentally patriarchal, and women faced limitations in how they could
worship, as well as a stigma on the female body. For instance, in the Buddhist sangha, there are
more rules for nuns than monks (311 rules compared to 227), which ban intimate relationships,
and order strict rules for life habits including eating. In addition, exemplar tales of monks who reject marriage and sexual relationships with women laud the monks while painting women as dangerous and seductive. Women are portrayed as more attached to the material world and will keep men seeking nirvana attached to carnal pleasures, a hindrance in their paths. Mahayana Buddhism began as an exclusively male religion, and even when women gained access, it was understood that the female body was not able to achieve enlightenment. Despite these limitations on the female body, female hair embroideries present an example of female bodies achieving a level of spiritual perfection, along with the existence of the bodhisattva Guanyin.

Guan Daosheng’s choice to represent Guanyin is an intentional one, and aligns with the popular practice of female artists representing this Buddhist Chinese female deity with Indian (South Asian) origins, a choice rooted in the character of Guanyin herself. Guanyin (觀音), translating to “Perceiver of Sounds” is the Chinese name for Avalokiteśvara, the compassionate savior bodhisattva. As a bodhisattva, Guanyin is a being who achieves enlightenment, but delays leaving the material world in order to help the beings still living in it. Guanyin appeals to women because of her role as universal savior and abilities to grant children, but most of all, she is the only example of a feminine deity under a traditionally androcentric religion. With the traditional understanding that only male bodies can achieve Nirvana, Guanyin’s existence as a female deity is inspirational, resonating with female devotees. However, Guanyin did not begin as a feminine deity, but rather underwent a transformation of representation across several centuries in China in visual and literary media, and popular thought. It was not until the 12th century that Guanyin became understood as a completely feminine deity in China, with established canonical forms that female artists like Guan Daosheng utilized in their hair embroideries.

Buddhist practitioners believe incorporating hair serves as an act of generating merit for
oneself or others that will inform a better reincarnation. Buddhist practice is centered around the idea of reincarnation, and every action in one life accumulates karmic merit that will influence the next life. The only way to break out of the cycle of suffering (all life is suffering) is to achieve Nirvana. Sacrifices work to generate karmic merit, and generally, the bigger the sacrifice, the greater the merit. The sacrifice alludes to the devotional aspect of the work, which exists as more a metaphysical creation rather than a representation of physical reality. But, what is the significance of practicing bodily sacrifice in order to create an image rather than in a transient ceremony? In addition, how and why did women incorporate their own bodies, which Buddhist tradition considered to be “polluted,” in devotional images?

Women’s bodies were also regulated under Confucianism, where rigid hierarchies demanded their obedience to the men in their lives. Confucianism discourse also associated embroidery and work with textiles as the expected work of a virtuous woman, juxtaposing woman’s embroidery with men’s writing. Men also made devotional embroideries, but their work was compared to that of painting, a more intellectually lofty art form, while women’s work remained products of handicraft. And so, while performing the labor expected of them, hair embroideries present an access point to greater autonomy and choice, as Confucian limitations open an entryway to Buddhist practice. But, how big is the entryway? How much space did women have to pursue artistic agency in their acts of making?

**Literature Review**

Given the few surviving examples of this practice, Chinese hair embroideries are relatively understudied in scholarly discourse. These objects sit at the intersection of several issues, including art, religion, and gender, and so scholars have approached Buddhist hair embroidery from diverse perspectives, from the devotional nature of the objects themselves, and
others the discourse of female labor under Confucianism. Art historian Yuhang Li is a primary scholar on these hair embroideries. In her work, she focuses on how the practice of hair embroidery acquired its devotional significance, by analyzing its ritual process and functionality. Li situates the practice within its greater religious and cultural context, understanding embroidery as religious devotion amplified by the use of hair and also a womanly craft. Li analyzes the hair embroidered objects as a material manifestation of a unique gendered practice that provided women artistic and religious agency. She draws on primary religious and literary texts and the objects themselves to trace the circumstances in which human hair was applied to an icon, in most cases to accumulate karmic merit through labor, pain, and sacrificing the physical body. In her arguments, she incorporates concepts of bodily sacrifice and female labor studied more deeply by other scholars. Ultimately, Li Yuhang argues that the gift of labor and the self to create an image of Guanyin allows women to accumulate merit to achieve transcendence and merge with the deity. Building off Li’s work and insights, I have further questions on not only the relationship between the maker and the deity but the one between the maker and herself. Relationship to self materializes in the choices each artist makes in creating the embroidery, whether in dedication, subject matter, or style, and is enhanced through the incorporation of the physical self.

Li Yuhang contextualizes these hair embroidered works within the feminization in the iconography of Guanyin, which I agree is significant for specifically Chinese female Buddhist practice. Guanyin’s gender transformation in China is described as an aspect of a process sometimes referred to as “sinification.” Sinification broadly refers to Chinese culture adapting practices and thoughts that originated outside of China. The term can be problematic because it assumes clear boundary lines of a culture and a certain inevitability in (Chinese) cultural change,
which negates the complexities of culture and conscious choices of individuals involved in such transformations. While I do not have an improved term, it is important to note the ways Buddhism changed in its transition from India to China. Indian Buddhism became “Chinese” by meshing with Confucianism, which was the basis of Chinese society and political system, and incorporating Chinese visual language in Buddhist art, including dress and settings. In addition, Buddhism in China saw the transformation of the deity Avalokiteśvara from male in Indian Buddhist roots to completely female in China. Li utilizes the research of Yu Chun-fang to state that a feminized Guanyin, coupled with the practice of womanly labor of embroidery, afforded women the opportunity to practice religion in their own domestic spaces.

Historian of religion Chun-fang Yu traces the feminization of Guanyin through visual and literary media. She identifies several key Chinese representations of Guanyin that proliferated and popularized during the Song dynasty (10th - 12th century), arguing that the 12th century marks the point where Guanyin had become completely feminine in China. I will utilize and build upon Yu’s research by placing the hair-embroidered depictions of Guanyin within the existing canonical forms. By comparing the works of the study to canonical forms, visual differences become apparent, which can be explained by personal stylistic choices and artistic agency.

Li also argues the nature of creating the hair embroideries requires intense embodied engagement, as the creator gives a physical part of the body to form the image, and the laborious process of creating it is also taxing on the body. The “gift of the body” and self-sacrifice are lauded concepts in Buddhism, which emphasizes extending compassion to all living beings.

James Benn studies the idea and practice of abandoning the body in Chinese Buddhism, using

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the “Hungry Tigress” tale in the *jatakas*, popular stories of the past lives of the Buddha. In the “Hungry Tigress,” a Prince sacrifices himself so that a hungry tigress can eat his body and feed her offspring, as a key primary source. He argues that in Chinese Buddhism, sacrificing the body is not discarding it, but part of a larger exchange and transformation, and the offer can benefit all beings. Benn’s arguments are relevant to the artists’ use of hair because the hair similarly is not discarded but transformed into an image. The sacrifice of creating hair embroideries is complicated by the dual nature of it: it is both a physical incorporation of the body and the more (sometimes intentionally so) hidden component of labor.

The embroiderers not only give the body the physical inclusion of their hair in the object, but also involve their body in the painstaking labor of creating the embroidery. While under Chinese Buddhism, canonical texts suggest that women’s bodies are inherently polluted, and Buddhism itself was founded as a patriarchal religion, women creating hair embroideries were able to put their own bodies in the image of a divine being. This is in part due to the technical process of their making: sewing, a historically female domain. Francesca Bray’s studies focus on the interaction between technology, defined as the knowledge, practice, and *material* objects associated with it and construction of gender in late imperial China. She uses this analytic framework to study domestic spaces and gendered labor. When examining domestic productive work, she focuses on historical changes in the production of cloth, which was a traditionally female domain parallel to the male domain of farming (exemplified by the saying “men till, women weave”). She traces the history of women’s involvement in the production of textiles, through a social and economic lens, and argues that though traditionally, weaving was associated

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with women’s labor and virtue, by the Ming dynasty, the production of textiles was controlled by men. Even so, the concept of nü gong, “womanly work,” persisted as a Confucian value, and continued to link women to weaving practices in the gentry classes. I will connect Bray’s arguments on “womanly” work in Confucian discourse to the Buddhist devotional practice of hair embroideries by expanding her definitions of technology and labor to religious and artistic practices, rather than being limited to economic spheres.

These arguments fall under broader themes of gendered labor, women’s access to religion, art agency, and innovation. The hair embroideries can help us think about how women navigate access to realms from which they are excluded: religion, social hierarchies, in this case through the production of an art object. Ultimately, I want to use these works as a way to expand definitions of female agency and innovation, using definitions of feminist theorists.

Anthropologist Saba Mahmood’s definition of female agency is expanded beyond the binary of resistance and conformity to instead consider the multitude of ways women can “inhabit” norms through embodied practices. Furthermore, Kelsy C. Burke suggests a “compliant” approach in which women conform to gendered religious teachings and expectations out of personal choice. In the same vein, innovation does not require the advent of something entirely new, but the use of preexisting ideas in new methods and combinations.

Building on these scholars, I would also like to consider these hair embroideries from the perspective of their creators as artists. I owe much to Li Yuhang’s research and agree that the religious aspect highlights devotional content, but will expand on the existing literature by asking more questions about technology and stylistic choices. In the same vein, in what ways were the

women being innovative with technology (including method and process) and representation? These hair-embroidered objects demonstrate the interaction between innovation with agency, each being an aspect of the other. I define agency as the ability to exercise choice, with regards to artistic production and religious practice. In addition, agency involves one’s control over their own physical and spiritual body, though not necessarily changing the restrictions placed on them. I argue these women artists were able to subtly manipulate the limiting expectations imposed on them by structures of Buddhism and Confucianism, demonstrating technological innovation and artistic agency through the production of hair embroideries. Innovation becomes apparent in the development of techniques through comparison between the works. With the limited examples, the later ones show a progression in technological variation, an advancement that suggests innovation on an artistic level. Looking at the works closely and individually, each demonstrates differences in subject matter, technique, and style, all of which emphasize the artistic agency of the maker. Without negating that the embroideries are religious objects, I would like to draw attention to the choices of their makers. Besides being pious women, devoted daughters and wives, these women were also artists.

A Female Icon for Female Artists: The Iconography of Guanyin

The iconography of Guanyin is diverse and varied, allowing each new generation of artists more forms to reference. Guanyin’s forms in China specifically are relevant because in China, Guanyin became a fully female goddess despite her original canonical forms from India as male (Avalokiteśvara). Buddhist doctrine conventionally treats all Bodhisattvas, though the iconography is typically seen as androgynous, to signify a distinction from regular earthly bodies. Bodhisattvas are just one step away from Buddhahood, a classification under which all beings inhabit male bodies. And so, the Chinese understanding and presentation of Guanyin as a
female deity overturns Buddhist androcentric tradition. Chün-fang Yü focuses on this transformation of Guanyin as a specific aspect of how Buddhism adapted to its Chinese context. When Buddhism entered China in 150 CE, it interacted with and adapted to preexisting local customs and spiritual practices, creating a new form of Buddhism. Marsha Weidner writes about this cultural adaptive process of Buddhism in China, sinification, in which the foreign entity of Buddhism becomes adapted to indigenous Chinese thought and practices, using pictorial art to ground her argument. Weidner emphasizes the popularization of Buddhist themes in Chinese visual art beginning in the Yuan, such as secularized images of the Buddha, Confucius, and Laozi.\(^\text{10}\) I argue images of Guanyin were also secularized to an extent as Guanyin was a popular deity among women, and often depicted by female artists in a way distanced from devotion.

Representations of Guanyin in China from the arrival of Buddhism to the time of the hair embroideries (1600s) came in diverse iconographic forms. Small sculptures of Guanyin popularized in China after the Song, and were diverse in representation; these portable forms enabled the proliferation of iconography.\(^\text{11}\) This provided a rich, though structured visual language female artists of later periods had to draw on in their depictions of Guanyin. Marsha Weidner identifies Guanyin as the most common subject matter of Buddhist art by female painters, perhaps because Guanyin provided a particular religious connection for women’s needs and therefore an outlet for women to express fears and hopes to be saved.\(^\text{12}\) She is appealing as a female deity, compassionate, and providing children.

The development of various forms of Guanyin functions much like a tree, with common roots and extending branches. New forms of Guanyin do not replace older forms but rather add


to the existing canon. Though various Guanyin forms began with distinctive characteristics, they ultimately cross-pollinated and melded with each other, providing a robust selection of various forms artists could replicate or depart from. Therefore, by the time of the Ming and Qing dynasties when the artists were embroidering their works, choosing to represent Guanyin meant choosing from a variety of forms to depict, a choice that depended on a specific personality trait or narrative of Guanyin the maker wished to tell. Thus, female makers could also be attracted to depicting Guanyin with this diversity of options with different pathways for each.

Yü traces the feminization of Guanyin through literary and artistic media, such as sutras, miracle tales, pilgrims’ reports, sculptures and paintings. The earliest visual and textual appearances of Guanyin in China are located in Dunhuang and Longmen in written sutras and visual representations. The cult of Guanyin in China has scriptural basis in the *Avatamsaka Sutra*, which, similar to the *Lotus Sutra*, depicts Guanyin as a compassionate savior who is able to save beings from various perils. Chapter 25 of the Lotus Sutra details the introduction of the Bodhisattva Perceiver of Sounds, explaining that Guanyin is a universal savior that is able to hear the call of any being who needs saving. In this chapter, Guanyin has 18 listed different manifestations that they take on in response to the specific situation:

13 If they must be saved by someone in the body of a Pratyekabuddha, he will manifest in the body of a Pratyekabuddha and speak Dharma for them.
14 If they must be saved by someone in the body of a Hearer, he will manifest in the body of a Hearer and speak Dharma for them.
15 If they must be saved by someone in the body of the Brahma King, he will manifest in the body of the Brahma King and speak Dharma for them.
16 If they must be saved by someone in the body of Shakra, he will manifest in the body of Shakra and speak Dharma for them.
17 If they must be saved by someone in the body of the God of Sovereignty, he will manifest

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14 *Lotus Sutra* Chapter 25
in the body of the God of Sovereignty and speak Dharma for them.\textsuperscript{15}

The sutra goes on in this pattern, listing thirty-three different forms, which speaks to Guanyin’s compassionate nature and universality of their benevolence. Some of the manifestations are explicitly the bodies of women, including a “nun, laywoman believer, wife of a rich man, of a householder, a chief minister, or a Brahman.”\textsuperscript{16} Guanyin’s ability to manifest in any form, enabled iconography of Guanyin to flux, and completely feminize in China without diverging too far from the canon.

Based on the visual and textual evidence, Yü argues that in China by the 16th century, Guanyin had become “completely Chinese,” the only Buddhist deity to undergo a successful transformation of being a distinctly Chinese goddess. While the explanation for the mechanisms of the transformation is reasoned through the nature of Guanyin’s universal compassion and ability to take on a variety of forms, many of them women, the motivations for the transformation are less clear. By this time, new different forms of Guanyin images with indigenous Chinese characteristics such as clothing were prevalent and established. In China, Guanyin therefore developed independently from the other deities of the Buddhist pantheon. Yü identifies several key distinct representations of Guanyin that developed in China. The existence and proliferation of these various forms provides the iconographic basis that the female hair embroiderers draw on in their own representations.

The Thousand-Hands and Thousand-Eyes representation of Guanyin (fig. 6) is based on canonical Buddhist sources and shares iconographic elements with images of Avalokiteśvara in other Buddhist traditions. The embroidered \textit{Eleven-Headed Bodhisattva Guanyin} dated to 1778 depicts a central standing figure, with eleven heads that represent steps on the path to

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
enlightenment. A thousand arms radiate from the body, creating a circular shape of which the main head perfectly in the center. Each hand has an eye on it which alludes to Guanyin’s ability to find beings who need saving, and then extend help. Several hands are larger and perform specific tasks, as two are held in front of the body, almost in prayer position, and five hold props, all of which symbolize an aspect of Guanyin’s abilities as a bodhisattva. For instance, the wheel Guanyin holds to the viewer’s left is the dharmachakra, which symbolizes the Buddha’s teachings. This form of Guanyin bears little to no resemblance to the feminized forms of Guanyin, as the dense, colorful composition contrasts the singular depictions of Guanyin of the hair embroideries. In addition, the work was produced under the Qing court, which differs from the more private, unsponsored nature of the women’s hair embroideries. With the fantastical setting and Guanyin’s superhuman form of multiple heads and hands, this work visually demonstrates Guanyin’s quality of universality, to be anywhere, and take on any form. Guanyin’s ability to manifest in any body thus allowed feminized forms of Guanyin to take root, as they do not contradict Guanyin’s characterization in sutras.

Yü identifies Princess Miaoshan as a gateway form of Guanyin that links Avalokiteśvara to other feminine forms. In the folkloric story of the 11th century, Guanyin takes on the body of Miaoshan, the third daughter of mythical King Miaozhuang. The princess practiced Buddhism, and sacrificed her own body to cure her father, after which she revealed her true form as the thousand hands and thousand eyed Guanyin. In reverting to her “original” form, the iconography of Princess Miaoshan connects older iconography of Guanyin to later feminine representations with indigenous Chinese characteristics such as dress and setting. Though there is no fixed iconography associated with Miaoshan, images of Miaoshan tend to appear extremely similar to White-Robed Guanyin, as a woman with long hair wearing white robes. This particular story also
allowed the cult of Guanyin to take off in China because it connected the deity Guanyin to core Chinese values of filial piety and feminine chastity. Thus, the feminization of Guanyin demonstrates Chinese adaptations and modifications of Buddhist ideas to incorporate ideas of morality and gender expectations.

White-Robed Guanyin (fig. 7) represents Guanyin as a feminine deity with a long, flowing white cape, an appearance essentially the same as Princess Miaoshan, who provides a departure point for other female forms of Guanyin. Yü and other scholars tentatively argue White-Robed Guanyin is the Chinese form of the White Tara and tantric goddess Pandaravsini, the chief female consort of Avalokiteśvara. I argue White-Robed Guanyin acts as a template Guanyin which with added props or details can become a Guanyin with Fish Basket, or Guanyin as Old Woman because of the iconographic parallels. During the 10th century, the cult of Guanyin began to take off, a claim that Yü supports with indigenous texts such as Miaoying baojuan and Baiyi Guanyin jing. These are examples of folkloric texts that describe Guanyin’s manifestation as a young woman, once again emphasizing themes of filial piety. White-Robed Guanyin is also attributed with the power of gifting children, especially sons, with primary texts of miracle accounts concentrated in the Ming dynasty. Some representations of Guanyin with child-giving power resemble the iconography of Madonna and Child. White-Robed Guanyin also came to be known as the White-Robed Great Being Who Saves beings from Sorrow and Suffering (Baiyi Dashi Jiuku Jiunan). White-robed Guanyin also appears as the basic iconographical form of most of the hair embroideries, including the ones by Guan Daosheng, Miss Yang, and the anonymous maker.

As Guanyin’s ability to take on any form provided an opportunity for female depictions of Guanyin to proliferate, these feminine forms provided opportunity for female Buddhist
worship and practice. In the worship of Guanyin, values of women’s purity, chastity, and filial piety intertwine with Buddhist practice, through stories of Guanyin and the lessons they prescribed. Describing the impact that feminized Guanyin had on women’s lives, Yü Chün-fang uses the term “domestic religiosity,” which applies to women’s religious practice in two aspects. First, the home was the primary place for women to conduct religious activities (of Pure Land Buddhism), such as repeating the Buddha’s name, chanting Buddhist sutras, worshiping Guanyin, or creating hair embroideries. Second, through fulfilling women’s domestic obligations realizing virtues of filial piety and chastity, women could achieve religious enlightenment. In other words, by complying to set expectations of a woman's place and labor, a woman could attain religious liberation, able to worship to this certain extent of freedom. Hair embroideries provide an example under both these categories, as an activity of interior spaces, and one that fulfills womanly virtues, thus enabling women to exercise creative and religious freedom.

As Guanyin opened opportunities for women to worship in their inner chambers, these interior spaces became spaces for making and creativity. Li adds to Yü’s point, contending that women’s domestic spaces were not only spaces of religious liberation, but also creative. Li identifies Buddhist tenets of image-making as merit making, Confucius dogma relevant to pious women, and the promotion of women’s talent as concepts creating space for a new type of agency, exercised with the production of hair embroideries. Women were encouraged to use resources from their own homes with their specific womanly skills and expected labor, and own bodies to ultimately utilize the objects they create for themselves and worship the icon.

Having examined the feminized iconography of Guanyin, and its impact on female worship, I will now turn to analysis of a specific example of a depiction of feminine Guanyin in

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17 Li 2012.
hair embroidered form. *Guanyin* by an anonymous artist dated by Li Yuhang to 1689, the Qing Kangxi period, is an embroidered representation of a Guanyin image, *The Thirty-fourth Manifestation of Benevolent Visage* from *Fifty-Three Manifestations of Guanyin* where *baimiao* painting, a specific brush technique in which an outline is produced without color or wash, is intertwined with hair embroidery. Here, Guanyin is represented as a beautiful woman, in flowing robes that accentuate her crescent-like posture, curved to look over her right shoulder. All the details of the hairpins, jewels, and iconographical attributes of the vase and willow branches are transferred from the original illustration. However, the artist chooses to omit Sudhana, a youth who seeks enlightenment. This focuses the viewer on Guanyin as the singular subject matter, which seems to function more as a devotional image of Guanyin rather than a narrative presentation of an interaction between Guanyin guiding Sudhana. While this choice does reflect an artistic choice, the embroidered work overall is a close copy of a preexisting image, which seems to negate arguments of artistic agency. However, the choice to embroider the image over a *baimiao* outline with hair demonstrates agency in terms of technique and medium.

Because most of the hair floss has deteriorated, our understanding of this Guanyin image comes from the remaining ink outline drawing. The hair used in these embroidered objects is referred to as hair floss because strands of hair are manipulated so that it acts as thread and takes on different textural appearances. For instance, grouping multiple strands together looks distinct from using a single strand. Because the underdrawing is so complete, this demonstrates that it is more than just the outline and a complete image in itself. This drawing was created in the *baimiao* style, which was commonly associated with a metaphorical meaning of female purity. Therefore, eminent women painters such as Xing Cijing, Ni Renji, Xu Can, and Qian Hui

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18 Ibid.  
19 Ibid.
produced both *baimiao* paintings and hair embroidery. This work aligns with the tradition of Buddhist devotional image-making, in which two processes of two mediums are carried out on the same silk surface. As Guanyin provides women access to worship, hair embroideries provide similar access to female makers. Representing Guanyin with hair affords them a special ability to place themselves in a divine body.

With this undertaking, the anonymous artist is engaging in a restricted practice, highlighted by the lack of information surrounding the artist or her creation. Especially in contrast to the collection of surviving visual and textual works by and about Guan Daosheng, a prominent gentry artist of her time, it is almost as if this artist never existed. Information about this work and artist is relatively scarce, which suggests it is an undertaking by a lesser trained and renowned artist. This choice to participate in the practice despite being relatively lacking in technique and social standing also reflects the agency the anonymous maker exercises in the production of this work. Her status also alludes to the possibility that the creation of hair embroideries is more widespread than we might think given the few readily accessible remaining works. The artist likely is not as highly trained as Guan Daosheng, Ni Renji, or Li Feng, as the work closely copies a pre-existing image rather than inventing a new image based on canonical forms. The work thus provides some evidence that amateur women participated in this practice. I believe that they were able to participate in this through the support of other women, and the sharing of knowledge demonstrates a form of innovation. In addition, the choice to represent Guanyin with her own hair further demonstrates the access the subject matter of Guanyin and materiality of embroidered her allows perhaps more middle-class women to worship as they choose to.

While both these examples by an anonymous maker and Guan Daosheng depict a

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20 Ibid.
feminine Guanyin much like White-Robed Guanyin, other forms of Guanyin were also popular and serve as reference points for other works in the study. Water and Moon Guanyin (fig. 9) is a prominent form of Guanyin iconography that served as a basis for later forms. Water and Moon Guanyin is more androgynous, sometimes appearing as male, and is most often depicted seated, with one knee up and an arm resting on it. The moon and water are symbolic, alluding to the illusory nature of phenomena. Li Feng’s Guanyin builds on this form because of likeness in postures. Yü argues that Water and Moon Guanyin served as a departure point for several other forms of Guanyin, including Guanyin with Fish Basket, Guanyin of South Sea, White-Robed Guanyin, Child-giving Guanyin, and Guanyin as old woman, which are all Chinese creations based on sources outside Buddhist canon. Guanyin of the South Sea has a more fixed iconography as a feminine deity, sitting on a rock or a fish, or riding on waves, encircled by the moon. She often appears with mythological attendants, and/or a white parrot. Guanyin of the South Sea (fig. 10) demonstrates an iconographic form of Guanyin with specific telltale visual details, and primary texts that concentrate on location, creating a distinct representation of Guanyin. However, the visual linkage to Water and Moon Guanyin is still apparent in posture and dress. The proliferation of all these varied types of Guanyin required a project of artistic agency, to build upon the visual canon, as the different forms of Guanyin spread largely through visual media. While new forms necessarily contribute a novel concept to Guanyin’s image, no change completely undoes the form that it builds on; in fact, most of the core representation is retained. Similarly, the artistic agency and innovation that hair embroiderers express in their works is not an overt complete renewal of preexisting artistic practices but rather a subtle addition to the canon.

Though Guanyin’s presentation as an enlightened female body already challenges
traditional Buddhist canon, one form of Guanyin takes the resistance against Buddhist patriarchal
tradition one step further. Guanyin as seductress, also known as Mr. Ma’s wife or Guanyin with
Fish Basket (fig. 11), provides a visual and literary example of embellishing preexisting stories
in a subtle act of resistance against limitations on the female body. Her associated folkloric tales
contrast the story of Miaoshan, who was a symbol of virginal chastity. Guanyin as seductress is
described and represented as young, beautiful, and sexually alluring. She utilized beauty and
physical attraction to manipulate people into memorizing Buddhist texts, thus saving them and
encouraging them towards Nirvana. In addition, though sexual and marital availability were
hinted at, she remained a virgin, thus retaining character of feminine purity. Though the earliest
version of the story did not make the connection to Guanyin explicit, as the cult of Guanyin
developed, this detail was added in succeeding centuries until Guanyin as seductress became
common knowledge.\textsuperscript{21} The existence of this character provides subtle subversion to society’s
status quo, as she is utilizing something normally seen as taboo, sexual availability and
attraction. However, she forces the taboo to be accepted because it benefits a greater social and
spiritual good, much like some of the female hair embroiderers who negotiate their access to
social and religious realms. Broadly, Guanyin as a deity inhabiting a female body goes against
the fundamental patriarchy of Buddhist tradition.

The practice of embroidering Guanyin is known as \textit{xiu guanyin} (繡觀音), or the practice of
manifesting Guanyin through needle, thread or hair with one’s own hands. Guanyin represents
the promotion of “domestic religiosity,” which increased relevancy and opportunities for female
worship. While worshiping Guanyin and creating objects, women wielded control over their own
salvation and virtue. This type of control in religious experience is a form of agency that
enhances the artistic agency expressed through artistic choices taken in making the embroideries.

\textsuperscript{21} Yü 2001.
Women were able to directly access Guanyin by using their own hands to create images, an act requiring technical skill and artistic vision as well as time-consuming labor and the physical sacrifice of hair.

**Subverting Religious Constraints: Ni Renji’s Buddha**

Despite Guanyin being made accessible to female worship, religious tenets of bodily self-sacrifice and inadequacy of the female body come into tension in hair embroideries made by women. Ni Renji, a gentry female artist, stitched an image of the Buddha when she was 43 years old, in 1649. The main Buddha figure is placed centrally on a vertically oriented, mostly symmetrical composition. The central Buddha figure wears long flowing robes, represented in concentric waved lines that billow outward, creating a bell-like shape through which the Buddha’s lower legs and feet emerge. The figure’s left arm crosses the front of the body, possibly holding an object, while the right extends to the side. Each foot stands on a lotus lower, the layers of cloth spilling over the sides. The density of the lines contrasts an equally dense but different textured fluffy cloud background, which is clustered around the figure, with an abundance of clouds beneath the figure’s feet. A few fluffy lotus flowers are placed scattered in the blank surface of the composition, outside the cluster of clouds and figure.

The composition places an emphasis on the body of the Buddha, a male being, an image materialized with the hair of a woman. An arc circles over the Buddha’s head and shoulders; the emptiness within the arc draws the viewer’s attention to the Buddha’s head within it and accentuates the aura of calm and spirituality. The Buddha’s hair is in tight snail shell curls, with one bigger knot on top. The topknot, halo, as well as extra long earlobes are visual markers of the Buddha (fig. 12). The entire composition is embroidered with Ni’s own hair. The Buddha, though enlightened and therefore not attached to any physical gendered body, is a being that is
inherently male. This differentiates the Buddha from Guanyin, who is understood as a female goddess at this time period in China. Therefore, Ni, as a female artist representing this body with her own hair is a subversive choice, given Buddhist limitations on the female body.

Ni Renji also embroidered an inscription of three vertical lines in the lower third of the left edge of the hanging scroll, which subtly resist political and societal expectations. The inscription reads: “In the fourth month of the year of yichou (1649) this pious woman, née Wu, in honor of my parents plucked my own hairs and made this image of the Buddha to be worshiped and handed down from generation to generation in my family” 已丑四月信女吳氏上為父母拔髮繡佛傳家供奉. The information provided in this inscription is notable for a few reasons, outlining subtle ways of subverting the Confucian hierarchical system and the government. First, her dating system does not use the Ming emperor dating system where the emperor’s year of ruling was the year written and instead uses the system of the Chinese zodiac. By rejecting the acknowledgement of the emperor, Ni Renji is demonstrating her loyalty to the Ming dynasty and not recognizing the Qing emperor as legitimate. The Manchus overthrew the Ming dynasty, establishing the Qing dynasty in 1644, and as this work was created just shortly after, individuals such as Ni Renji still expressed loyalty to the past government. Therefore, Ni Renji is expressing political dissent explicitly in written form, while resisting religious and social structures through her creation of the work.

Second, Ni Renji is explicit that the work was created in honor of her own parents, which disrupts the order of traditional Confucian hierarchical structure that a woman once married should always prioritize the husband’s family, even as a widow (Ni’s husband died in 1626). For instance, in books such as Guanshiyin pusa linggan lu 觀世音菩薩靈感錄, wives practice gegu 割股 (cutting flesh) in an attempt to rescue their in-laws. These stories often feature a parent
with a grave illness that can only be cured with the offering of a portion of their child’s flesh, such as part of the thigh, arm, or even liver.  

These stories commonly feature in paragons of filial piety, even the Peking Gazette. Ni Renji’s dedicatory hair embroidery is both similar and different to these accounts because she performs her bodily sacrifice for her natal rather than marital parents. Hair embroidery seems to have a particular connection to the natal family rather than the marital one, evident in the surviving objects and textual accounts. Li Yuhang attributes this to the connection between hair and regeneration, since regeneration is linked to birthing and birth parents rather than in-laws.  

In addition, the link between embroidery and womanly labor is considered Confucian discourse, though hair as a material in devotional image making draws from Buddhist doctrinal text. Therefore, Ni is able to manipulate existing societal limitations of both Buddhism and Confucianism to subtly subvert them and act in accordance with her own personal wishes.

In representing the Buddha with her own hair, thus incorporating the female body into the representation of a divine, masculine being, Ni Renji subtly subverts the gendered limitations of Buddhism. Ni Renji’s choice to use material from her own body, dedicate the work to her parents and acknowledge the emperor in the inscription presents the embroidered work as an act of defiance, given the limitations imposed by Buddhist tradition. At the same time, Ni Renji may be aligning the set Buddhist structure rather than overturning it. By inserting her body into a male body, this perhaps reinforces the idea that one must first become a man to become enlightened, introduced in Buddhist sutras. In doing so, however, she is still exercising control over her religious practice and creation of an object, a form of agency that operates within the bounds of the possibilities dictated by Buddhist and Confucian structures. Through her sacrifice,

23 Li 2012.
in accumulating karmic merit for others, Ni acts for herself, making decisions on the mechanisms, appearance, and final dedication of her embroidery. These choices reflect the agency she exercises in her art-making and sacrifice.

Even though self-sacrifice is an established practice of Chinese Buddhism, grounded in Buddhist canon and Chinese apocryphal text, male and female bodies were viewed differently under Buddhist tradition, therefore the giving of their bodies did not have equal importance. The female body was traditionally viewed as polluted and incapable of achieving Nirvana. The Devadatta chapter of the *Lotus Sutra* demonstrates this idea. This story provides an example of female salvation, as the Dragon King’s daughter was known to be a model Buddhist, knowledgeable and empathetic. In reciting a verse, she surprises Maṇjuśrī and the other Bodhisattvas, who express: “You claim quick attainment to the Supreme Path. This is difficult to believe… Why? The body of a woman is filthy and not a vessel for the Dharma.”24 The Dragon Princess then offers a precious pearl to the Buddha, who accepts. Noting how quick that transaction was, she states she can become a Buddha even quicker. She then transformed to take on the body of a man and then a Buddha. This canonical story was historically referenced in explaining the disparity between men and women in Buddhism: women’s bodies are inherently unable to achieve enlightenment.

Different parts of the body have different meanings. Sutras such as *Xuepenjing* 血盆經, the Blood Bowl Sutra, which describes a place in hell where women are punished for polluting the earth with the blood from their bodies by being forced to drink their own menstrual blood, stress the impurity of women’s bodies, particularly their blood. However, hair does not have the connotation of being filthy, and is intimately related to female devotees. For instance, cutting

24 Lotus Sutra Chapter 12
hair and exchanging it for offerings was a religious act that only female devotees practiced.\textsuperscript{25} Offering the body in exchange for karmic merit or physical gifts is a concept introduced in sutras and finds a physical example in hair embroideries. Indigenous Chinese texts such as the *Commentary on the Great Perfection of Wisdom (Da zhidu lün 大智度論)*, dated to around 400 CE, likely drew on these older stories, *Dazhidu lün* distinguishes between gifts of the body (internal) as opposed to a gift of an object (external), both of which serve to gain recognition from divine forces and accumulate karmic merit. Hair embroideries fall under both categories, with the internal gift of hair externalized as a devotional art object. The inscriptions explicitly detailing how hairs were plucked from the head on a few of these examples, including this one by Ni Renji and Miss Yang emphasize the gifting aspect of incorporating hair. In another example in the Shanghai art museum dated to 1480, Lin Jinlan, a well known courtesan from the Chenghua period (1464-1487) used *jishen fa* 己身發, hair from her body to make an embroidery of Guanyin on Guanyin’s birthday.\textsuperscript{26} Being explicit about the mechanism and material of their sacrifice alludes to the Buddhist tradition of self-sacrificial practice.

Buddhism emphasizes learning to realize the impermanence of all things, including the body, and therefore some monks would undergo harsh processes of self-inflicted pain to bring themselves closer to enlightenment. Selfless offering and giving are themes of canonical Buddhist texts, especially in the *Lotus Sutra*. These include Indian tales of bodhisattvas giving away their body for the benefit of other beings. Furthermore, in the Chinese text *Dazhidu Lun*, bodhisattvas are expected to surrender their own body and even the bodies of loved ones before reaching awakening. The lineage of selfless stories and paradigms of generosity, including stories of Prince Visvantara, King Saravada, Prince Candraprabha are modeled after the *Jatakas*,

\textsuperscript{25} Li 2012.  
\textsuperscript{26} Li 2012.
which tell stories of past lives of the Buddha, a male being. Thus, they all feature male characters, which reveals an exclusive attitude towards female bodies.

Despite the inequality in how different gendered bodies were perceived, stories of bodily sacrifice emphasized values of empathy and compassion to ultimately generate karmic merit for others. *Ganying* 感應, translating to sympathetic resonance, is the idea that actions of an individual can be felt in other beings across the universe and alludes to the interconnectedness of the cosmos, where everything—all people, animals, spirits—is interrelated and interdependent. In an interaction between a practitioner and Buddha, the devotee “stimulates” or “affects” the Buddha (*gan*)，which then elicits the compassionate response from the deity (*Ying*). Affecting the Buddha *gan*fo manifests in different actions, including calling the name, chanting sutras, or creating devotional objects. Across all these activities, the idea is to demonstrate “sincerity” to stimulate the divine power.\(^{27}\) The effort to demonstrate sincerity can thus explain the commitment to performing labor, time-consuming sacrifices that also involve a level of physical pain in the creation of hair embroideries.

In Buddhism, the physical body is an illusion and impermanent. However, the body can have purpose when sacrificed or gifted as food and medicine. Indian Buddhist sources cite stories of heroes who offered their bodies as food, which demonstrates how detachment from the physical body is something celebrated in Buddhist canon. Similar stories with grotesque narratives of self-inflicted violence exist in China, with Chinese settings, for instance the two biographies in the *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 narrating the lives of monks Daojin and Sengfu. Hair embroideries involve a sacrifice of the body both by incorporating human hair and by the labor-intensive physical process.

Recognizing the impermanence of the body and learning to abandon it was a key

\(^{27}\) Ibid.
component of an intentional and “successful” bodily sacrifice. Benn analyzes the practice of bodily sacrifice, particularly extreme sacrifice and self-immolation in Chinese Buddhism. His research covers how the Buddhist miraculous world described in sutras and represented in artworks took root in China by studying specific cases that concentrate on bodily practice as recorded in biographical materials. He uses the Medicine King story in the Lotus Sutra (Yao Wang) as the primary canonical source in his analysis; in which Yao Wang burned his own body in a ritualized act of public devotion to the Buddhas.\(^{28}\) He identifies selfless offering as a theme of the Lotus Sutra, which carries over to ideas of abandoning the body in Chinese Buddhism, where the practice of auto-cremation was “reinforced, vindicated, and embellished” by Chinese apocryphal sutras (sutras written in China but purported to be translated from Sanskrit).\(^{29}\)

Though this concept has roots in Indian Buddhist tradition, this carries over to Chinese Buddhist tradition with evidence in Chinese texts that incorporate relevant concepts from Confucianism and Chinese politics. Benn also utilizes indigenous Chinese texts about monks to emphasize the point of how Chinese Buddhism sought to abandon the body. In the 500s, Monk Daodu in Yangzhou fasted from food and water, then died at 66 by self-immolation. This act was contentious because Emperor Liang Wudi disapproved of his desire to self-immolate, stating that it was better to die a natural death, since burning the body would hurt the parasites living in it. Emperor Liang Wudi practiced both Confucianism and Buddhism and was a patron of Buddhism, earning him the nickname “Bodhisattva Emperor.” Daodu therefore chose to burn himself in secret, after which a number of miracles occurred at the monastery.

This story illustrates a couple key points on the practice of bodily sacrifice and who has access to it, which illuminates the circumstances under which Ni Renji was able to create her

\(^{28}\) Lotus Sutra Volume 7 Chapter 23.

work. The tension exhibited by Monk Daodu between devotion to the Buddha as opposed to devotion to the emperor. In the late 4th century when this event occurred, Buddhism was sponsored by the court, the Weidner lays out how Buddhism had a different status under each dynasty. At this time, monks theoretically would only bow down in front of the Buddha but they also served the emperor. However, Chinese politics circumvented this restriction by calling the emperor a manifestation of the Buddha. Therefore, Confucian structure reaffirms Buddhism and the overlap and negotiation between the two enables certain limitations to be circumvented, such as with hair embroideries. Ni Renji takes advantage of this opportunity, practicing Confucian filial piety by dedicating the work to her parents, in order to explore greater freedom within Buddhist worship. Both of these structures coexist with political realities, which appears in Ni Renji’s embroidery in her rejection of the current government.

Even though the practice was widely known, actually engaging in extreme bodily sacrifice was restricted to certain monks. Monk Daodu was a relatively uncommon case of self-immolation, which was a practice limited to monks, and only those that had the adequate religious background. Further material about self-immolation is preserved in collections of *Biographies of Eminent Monks - Gaoseng zhuan* by Hui Jiao, dated to 530. Though the cults of self-immolators were local as the practice was limited to and celebrated only in particular places, biographies and written accounts such as this made the knowledge more widespread, even universal. While there is no concrete evidence for this, I believe that the female hair embroiderers were somewhat familiar with this practice, at the very least the broader Chinese Buddhist discourse of giving away the body. While familiar with the practice, extreme bodily sacrifice was restricted to specific devout men, a limitation with precedence in early Buddhist sutras.
One key primary text of sacrificing the body is the Hungry Tigress jataka tale, which sets a precedent for giving away the body for the benefit of other beings. In it, Prince Mahasattva, a previous incarnation of the Buddha, sacrifices his body so that a hungry tigress mother can eat him and not her own children. This donation was not a spontaneous idea because it was inspired by the actions of Bodhisattvas in Buddhist canon, however this was a more or less spontaneous act as it did not have physical or ritual preparations. Before his sacrifice, Mahasattva made a vow that the offering of his body was for all beings, which is continued in Chinese self-immolators’ practice, as they made similar vows. The idea of a personal sacrifice generating karmic merit for a greater collective rather than an individual also reappears in Ni’s hair embroidery, as the inscription dedicates the embroidery to her parents. In addition, this sacrifice of the body did not discard it, but participated in an exchange, transforming the body from one impermanent purpose to another, serving other beings. In relation to the hair embroideries, the use of hair does not discard hair, but utilizes it in a physical artistic object, transforming the material into something more devotional. Lastly, the death of Mahasattva (along with the other notable self-sacrifices) is described and depicted as graphic and grisly. Physical pain was a significant component of stories of Buddhist self-sacrifice, as well as Confucian stories of extreme filial piety. The more pain, the greater the sacrifice. The bodily sacrifice required of hair embroideries involves pain in two ways: plucking hair from the head and the painstaking labor required to create the object. Therefore, the merit generated from the bodily sacrifice comes not only from the gift of the physical body but the laborious process of making.

Blood writing presents a parallel practice to hair embroidery that includes both the process and physical component as a sacrifice more proximate than extreme sacrifice such as self-immolation. Blood writing was a practice that entailed copying out sutras with one’s own
blood, collected by pricking the body. While it evokes comparison to hair embroidery because they both involve materializing the body in a physical devotional form, the two practices contrast each other with gendered implications. Blood scriptures were created mostly by Buddhist priests and hair embroideries by Buddhist lay women. These parallel traditions reflect the conventional discourse that men use paper and brushes, while women use needles and thread. In an anecdote dated to the Song Dynasty, Zhou Zhenguăn 周貞觀, a young girl, utilizes both methods in one object. After losing her father at age six, because she did not have brothers, she vowed to take care of her mother and remain unmarried. After her mother later passed away, she felt she had nothing to repay her mother with. And so, she vowed in front of the Buddha she would prick her tongue and copy the seventy-thousand characters of the *Lotus Sutra* with her blood and then stitch every character with hairs plucked from her head. She started this project at thirteen and completed it after 23 years.\(^\text{30}\) This example is extreme both in terms of the length of time and that Zhou combined blood writing and embroidery. But, in carrying out both practices on the same surface, she highlights the commonalities of the two practices in terms of effective bodily sacrifice. First, hair and blood are both parts of the body that are regenerated, which makes the practices more accessible to more people, as most people would be unwilling to perform a total sacrifice. Both practitioners experience pain pricking for blood or plucking hair from the head, and both require certain levels of skill, in transferring hair and blood from the body to paper or silk.

The act of using blood or hair in making transforms the medium, from merely a byproduct of the body to a material imbued with religious and artistic meaning. Using it also transforms the object, by adding a layer of value through the sacrifice of the maker’s physical form and added labor, since utilizing hair is less accessible than utilizing thread. This ultimately

\(^{30}\) Li 2012.
transforms the maker, as the meaningful act of making allows her to fulfill moral virtue and achieve spiritual goals. Jimmy Yu argues that self-violence is a way of exercising power.\footnote{Jimmy Yu, \textit{Sanctity and Self-inflicted Violence in Chinese Religions, 1500-1700}, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.} While plucking hair and performing the labor of embroidery is not necessarily violent, choosing to subject the body to this act for personal fulfillment demonstrates an exercise of agency and self-development as an artist and woman. Even though embroidery is traditionally seen as feminine work, work expected of a virtuous woman, this act of making is more than merely fulfilling the expected duties of labor. Incorporating the body is a choice that enhances the meaning of their making, as the instrumentality of their bodies helps accomplish goals of filial piety, chastity, loyalty, benevolence, self-cultivation of the way (\textit{dao}).\footnote{Li 2012.} I agree with Li’s argument here on the achievement of spiritual, moral obligations and goals, however I also identify an achievement of artistic creation and expression of agency in the presentation and ownership of the female body. The sacrifice of time and labor compounds the use of the body to enhance the value of the embroidered works.

**Gendered Labor: The Miraculous Act of Making Creating**

A finished embroidered work documents the accumulation of labor created through the progression of adding stitches one at a time, where the repetitive, additive nature of embroidery lends to its spiritual Buddhist meaning. Writing on Buddhist embroidery during Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1276) signifies that each stitch symbolizes the body of the Buddha.\footnote{Ibid.} Each reproduction of the Buddha, through a stitch, image, or chanted passage of sutra accumulates karmic merit. More stitches reproduces more Buddhas and therefore more karmic merit. This helps explain why in early stages of Buddhist embroidery, the image and background is filled in

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with stitches, for instance Guan Daosheng’s Guanyin. Therefore, the use of hair is not the only sacrificial component of a hair embroidery, but also the time and labor. While the labor garners Buddhist meaning because of the idea of repetitively reproducing the Buddha, it also holds virtuous significance for women.

Laymen and monks also embroidered Guanyin and other Buddhist images, as referenced in Huang Tingjian’s *Shangu ji*. However, the practice held different connotations for men and women, as the handiwork component was emphasized when the image was made by a woman. While for both, the images materialize through their hands, the materialization through the mind was emphasized for men while the actual needle work was minimized or described in terms of brushwork. This conventional discourse parallels women’s needlework with men’s calligraphy. The difference in perception of the same action distinguishes womanly gendered labor from a man’s intellectual, aesthetic practice.

One work displays a devotional inscription that combines the traditionally male laborious act of writing with the female act of embroidery. *Guanyin* by Miss Yang from the Sichuan region, daughter of Yang Yuchun (1761-1837), a governor of Shaanxi and Gansu depicts a feminized Guanyin on a cluster of rocks with a bamboo grove in the background. This image presents another example of an image of white-robed Guanyin by a female devotee. This feminine form of Guanyin invites comparison to Guan Daosheng’s Guanyin, with the long hair and robes and feminine facial features. This work also utilizes baimiao painting and layers embroidered stitches over the ink outline. The figure is a bit convoluted and ambiguous, but seems to be kneeling, with palms pressing down on a rock or perhaps her folded leg. The inconsistencies in representing the body suggest that Miss Yang is not as technically advanced an artist as the other women in this study. Her clothing cascades over the body, sweeping low across
the chest and across her left arm. Guanyin’s hair is less textured than in other examples, which demonstrates a range in how hair is used and represented.

However, the work still holds likeness to that of the others, which suggests Miss Yang was drawing from shared canonical references in the creation of her own. She departs from their examples in the inclusion of a developed background, not seen in any other of these hair-embroidered works, demonstrating an artistic choice and intentional departure from the preexisting mold. The invented background and added props are artistic choices that do not diverge from canonical representations of Guanyin but do demonstrate her agency. To the figure’s left is a vase holding a willow branch, which provides miniature visual resemblance to the bamboo rising up and slightly over Guanyin. The vase and willow branch are symbols of Guanyin, and in depictions of her she commonly appears with both (fig. 7 and 8) The vase symbolizes good fortune, while the willow branch represents flexible, though durable strength. Including these symbols demonstrates knowledge of the Buddhist visual language and artistic choice in the placement. The bamboo curves slightly to the left, over Guanyin, which adds a sense of protection. The addition of the decorative vase and bamboo demonstrates an interest in imagining and constructing a setting. Both are superfluous detail that is lacking in the other examples, and also clash interestingly, as the natural world and human creation coexist. On the metaphysical plane, the natural world and human creation also coexist as the hair is utilized to represent an imagined reality.

Miss Yang also adds an embroidered religious inscription, which adds an element of written devotion to the work. Above the work is a Buddhist text of devotional prayer to Guanyin that reads: “南無 大慈大悲 救苦救難 廣大靈感 觀世音菩薩 / 南無佛 南無法 南無僧 / 怛只他唵伽囉伐多 伽囉伐多 伽訶伐多囉 伽伐多囉 伽多娑婆” which translates to “Namo great
mercy great compassion, savior of suffering, savior of hardship, great inspiration, Avalokiteśvara
/ Namo Buddha Namo Namo Sangha /.” The first lines pay respect to the Buddha and the
Sangha. The last lines are a series of Sanskrit chants phonetically translated to Chinese
characters. This inscription suggests a devotional aspect, especially because male monks
practiced writing out Buddhist texts and chants repetitively as a method of generating karmic
merit. When Miss Yang does so in stitching here, she is replicating that practice that was
normally reserved for men.

Though the work is clearly religious in subject matter and inscription, the addition of
background and its stylistic representation demonstrate an attention to artistry besides a singular
goal of religious devotion. The differing textures apparent in the bamboo, rocks, and figure
demonstrate a painterly style even though the work was created with a needle rather than a brush.
This suggests the effort to create pictorial embroideries that simulate paintings, a shared goal of
pictorial embroidery makers, rendering the act of embroidery as one less of labor and rather
art-making. Moreover, the addition of details such as bamboo and the vase that are not directly
related to the accumulation of karmic merit in the recreation of the icon Guanyin with a
devotee’s hair, marks the work as one of artistic exploration and creation.

The labor women put into stitching aligns with conventional discourse of gendered labor
under Confucianism outlining the specific activities women were expected to do, namely work
with textiles. However, aligning with the Confucian structures created an entryway for female
embroiderers to express artistic agency while completing their expected womanly work. Bray, a
historian and anthropologist of Imperial China, defines women’s work or womanly work (nü
gong) as labor that women of every class were expected to perform. Womanly work is one of
four attributes (along with virtue, speech, conduct) of virtuous women as prescribed by Ban
Zhao, female scholar of the Han period in *Instructions for Women* (*nü jie*). Bray expands on this primary definition by identifying the homophones associated with *gong* - which refers to 1. Work of any kind (工), 2. Merit or value (功), or 3. The production of textiles. Thus, women’s work included both craftsmanship and fundamental occupations. Bray maintains that the production and silk itself had symbolic meaning related to its moral value, historically associated with women up until the Song period. Starting in the Yuan, anecdotes on textiles that had featured women as skilled workers, inventors, and managers, replaced the female characters with men, signifying a shift in the possession of technical knowledge and ability. However, in educated elite classes, men thought this shift unnatural and threatened social order, making efforts to restore the centrality of women in weaving and textile production. And so, for most of the women included in this study via textual anecdotes or surviving objects, their creations did not overstep boundaries of the expected labor of women.

Confucian expectations of filial piety and female obedience to male power intertwined with the moral obligations of womanly labor, all of which informed a limited realm of how women should act. The Three Obediences (father, husband, sons), dictated that women must follow the instruction of the men in their lives, in that order of priority. In a collection of short tales *Ye Yu Qiudeng Lu* 夜雨秋燈錄 by Xuan Ding dated to 1877, he writes of a young girl creating a hair embroidery of a Buddha. The girl, 14-year-old Ye Pingziang, was desperate to save her father, a wrongly convicted state official, from being sentenced to death. She prayed to a spirit, who responded by urging her to make an image of a deity using her skill: embroidery. To do so, Ye Pingziang plucked out strands of her own hair and split each hair into four strands with a sharp knife. She finished the piece after two years, losing her eyesight in the process. In return for her sacrifice, her father was miraculously released. This story points to the overlap of
Confucian moral ideals and Buddhist practice, which increases her demonstration of piousness and morality, as a daughter and a Buddhist. Like Ni Renji, Ye Pingziang utilizes her own body to materialize an image of the Buddha, but does so for her father. Perhaps by centering the story of a man (her father), she is able to utilize Confucian morals to negate her feminine body. In other words, by complying with her role as an obedient daughter putting her father first, and completing womanly duties of embroidery, her female body, instead of being polluted, becomes a source of miraculous power.

In this transformation of the female body, devotional embroidery practice is one of miraculous spiritual power, where the act of making is miraculous. Li notes that hair embroideries combine women’s bodies with womanly skill (embroidery) to form a gendered practice. The practice is gendered and specific to women, but I argue also allows women to overcome certain limitations of their gender. By complying with gender expectations, women hair embroiderers gain access to a space of creation where they dictate their own pursuit of virtue and spirituality. Li argues that hair is a medium that expresses women’s deep desires and emotional needs, while allowing them to fulfill virtuous expectations, such as filial piety. Ni Renji and Ye Pingziang indeed express filial piety in their dedications, but all women fulfill the virtuous expectation of engaging in the labor of embroidery.

Under traditional discourse, engaging in labor related to textiles and weaving is expected of virtuous women. Bray discusses the involvement of gentry women in weaving and textile production from a historical, socio-economic lens with extra attention to gender roles. She starts by identifying a gap in this field, where the conventional history of knowledge is rigid and focuses on the production of commodities and development of scientific knowledge. She notices that this approach excludes the idea of relations of power and politics embodied in everyday
technologies, notably of gender dynamics or between social classes. She therefore expands this approach by looking at how new technologies reformed and transmitted ideologies and traditions, especially how technology contributed to the construction of gender in late imperial China. Bray’s study also builds on Dorothy’s Ko argument that women acted as moral educators in late imperial China, as material labor was connected to achieving womanly “virtue” under Confucian ideals of an orderly society.\(^{34}\) She maintains that women were actors in developing and spreading new technologies in terms of techniques and tools related to fabrics.

The Ming and Qing saw a shift in the division of labor; while textile labor was traditionally delegated to women, this flips during the Ming and Qing. Bray notes that historically, up to the Song period, all women worked in the production of textiles, which was an entirely female domain. The ingrained connection between fabrics and women traces back to fifth century BCE political philosophers and later institutionalized tax systems, which demanded women to contribute to society by producing cloth (while men produced grain). However, by the late Song, new ways of organizing production diminished the average woman’s work in textiles.\(^{35}\) With new technologies that simplified the process of textile production, textiles became more commercialized and specialized. Many upper-class women therefore transitioned from spinning and weaving to embroidery. By the Ming and Qing, textile production was entirely male dominated and no longer associated with women. This coincides with the rise of embroidery as an artistic technique, rather than mere obligation, especially among women.

Even as the industry shifted, the traditional ideas of womanly virtue did not change in the cultural mindset. Performing womanly labor continued to be related to practicing familial and civic virtues. But the social circumstances that impose limiting expectations of women’s

\(^{34}\) Ko 1995.
\(^{35}\) Bray 1997.
behavior become opportunities for female production. Because by necessity, women worked in textiles, this allowed them to continually expand on the required practice and develop new artistic expressions. When writing about female court artists of the Ming and Qing dynasties, Dorothy Ko introduces the idea of women’s agency and power in domestic spaces, contradicting earlier analytic models that characterize women as passive and oppressed. The idea of understanding domestic spaces of an arena where a woman can exercise power also relates to Yu’s argument of domestic religiosity. Worship and manual production thus intertwine in hair embroideries, works that demonstrate women’s practice of self-determination and power.

In creating hair embroideries, women are able to exercise choice and agency, while still complying with what Confucianism dictates of a virtuous woman. Ko examines women’s activity and lives through a lens of inner and outer circles (inner chambers, to social realms, to public spheres), placing focus on social relationships and women’s intellectual and religious lives. She uses this to reinterpret the traditional virtue of womanly work, arguing that women’s handiwork is both art and commodity, where necessity allotted women freedom to explore artistic freedom and choice. She argues that thus, women put new meaning into the labels of Confucianism, particularly the 3 Obediences and 4 Virtues (speech, deportment, virtue, and work). While not actively disrupting Confucian structure, women are able to redefine their relationships and their own values, through the artistic project of creating a hair embroidery.

**Artistic Agency and Technological Innovation**

While the Confucian discourse of womanly work defined certain expectations of women’s labor, women artists were able to navigate these constraints and explore artistic agency within the work they were expected to perform. Though the hair embroidered works do not present overt arguments of resistance, details in technique and process of creation demonstrate an

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36 Ko 1995.
effort to innovate, and push the bounds of artistic possibilities.

*Lai* 40

*Guanyin* by Li Feng 李鵬 (1691) is a hanging scroll split slightly unevenly on a horizontal axis between pictorial representation and textual inscription, with slightly more area given to the hair-embroidered figural representation. The central figure is a seated Guanyin appearing as a Water and Moon Guanyin identified by posture in a cross-legged “half-lotus” pose, the left foot exposed and resting on the right upper thigh. Guanyin’s left arm rests casually on the left knee, while the right hand comes down, not quite to the ground plane, which gives the illusion of floating precariously in space, adding to the divine quality.

Guanyin sits on a grass mat, with the patterning of blades of grass peek out from under the folds of cloth. Her outer cape billows outward, creating a rough triangle shape with the head at the top and grass mat forming the wider bottom. Guanyin’s clothes here are more elaborate than previous examples, with more twists and folds of layered cloth, rather than the more roughly parallel lines of Guan Daosheng and Ni Renji. Guanyin’s dress also reveals the body more than previous examples, as it follows the curves of bent knees and exposes the chest. Guanyin’s chest is adorned with a chain attached to the nipple with two embellishments that dangle down the chest. Guanyin’s chest is flat, which is a masculine feature, further emphasized by the embellishments. In addition, Guanyin has shoulder length snail-shell curls, also adorned with a small crown-like accessory, which are a mark of the Buddha, an inherently masculine deity. Therefore, this work diverges from feminized Guanyin depictions often seen in Ming and Qing images.

The inscribed poem embroidered in silk in the top half of the work is a poem by Wang Xinzhan about Guanyin originally published in the painting manual *Thirty-Two Guanyin Manifestations*. The first four lines (the four lines to the right) contain the content of the poem,

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37 Li 2012.
which reads: “婆娑眾浊，如大苦海。菩萨安噓，得大自在。乃知沸镬，自有清洁。雨华生香，云眸脸月。” The poem recounts how the material world is like a vast, turbulent sea of suffering, though Avalokiteśvara is able to attain a state of calmness in the midst of tumult. The third line alludes to how purity can be found in a boiling cauldron (a wok cleans itself), and sweet fragrance is found in the rain. The line to the far left reads: “康熙辛未古扬弟子王心湛书” which translates to “Wang Xinzhan 王心湛, disciple of Kangxi Xinwei Guyang 康熙辛味固陽,” identifying the scholar writer Wang Xinzhan, the year of Kangxi Xinwei (1691) and the location Guyang. Kangxi refers to the second emperor of the Qing dynasty, who reigned from 1661 to 1722. Along the right edge of the work is another inscription by Li Feng, “辛未二月珠山弟子李和南敬绣” dates to February, 1691 and identifies Li Feng (courtesy name Li Henan) as a pious woman who created the hair embroidery. The work also exhibits three seals, which point to ownership.

This work follows style of baimiao painting and reproduces ink outline in outline stitches, gunzhen 滾針, which literally translates to “rolling needle.” Different parts of the body are stitched in different tones of black, achieved by different colored hair strands and density of the stitching. The closely stitched snail-shell curls become the darkest part of the embroidery, while the outline of Guanyin’s exposed body is rendered in brownish hair and thus appears lighter than hair, eyebrows, robes, and jewels. Feng splits a single hair into multiple strands, a more difficult method of utilizing hair, that also reflects the development of hair embroidery over time and also individual ability. Li Feng utilizes different methods of stitching for varying textures to enhance the artistic expression of the work, because her techniques of utilizing the hair exceed the simple obtaining and application of hair if this were a merely ritual devotional object. Splitting the hair may not have religious implications but rather is likely adapted from the

38 Ibid.
pictorial embroidery practice of splitting a silk thread into several strands. The labor and time of
the ritual act in creating the embroidery is elevated by the artist’s attention given to refining the
appearance of the object. Thus, Li Feng repurposes pre-existing techniques of painting and
pictorial embroidery for her own depiction of Guanyin, demonstrating artistic innovation. Even
in Guan Daosheng’s earlier example, Guan varies the types of stitches between hair floss and silk
threads. Stitches used to render her hair are chang duan zhen 長短針, or long and short stitches.
Guan groups three or four hairs together in one strand, and the stitches, longer than the single
silk thread stitches, point in all directions. The layeredness and direction of the lines thus
vividly communicate the materiality of hair. Years after Guan Daosheng, Li Feng continued to
push the bounds of this technique by adding more variation in stitching, with the added variable
of strands of different hair colors. She explores variations of iconography, technique and
medium, demonstrating technical innovation.

Li Feng’s work demonstrates a rather advanced way of using thread, out of a few
different possibilities explored by the women artists. A few different ways of using hair as thread
include grouping multiple strands of hair together as one strand (Guan Daosheng), using a single
hair as a single thread, or one single hair split into multiple strands (Li Feng). These different
techniques reflect technological development of hair embroidery and also individual skill level,
as different women will have different artistic backgrounds. Splitting a hair does not have roots
in religious meaning, but likely derives from the practice of splitting silk strands, which
contextualizes hair embroidery among the technical development of other pictorial embroidery
committed to enhancing aesthetic rather than religious meaning. Splitting hair is even more
difficult than splitting silk, emphasizing the difficulties and pain-staking labor associated with
the craft. *Shoubofa* 手擘髮, using one’s hands to split hair, is a phrase used in various accounts

39 Li 2012.
of hair embroidery, such as in an article about Madam Zhao in the Pingyuan gazetteer. This source details how she was able to draw a baimiao Guanyin and split the hairs to make an image of Guanyin. This also speaks to the emphasis on baimiao, which syncretizes ritual practice with artistic technique. The Ming and Qing dynasties saw a shift from partially hair, partially silk embroidery to complete hair embroidery done in baimiao style. As the use of hair within a single object increased, as did the effort to emulate baimiao style, which is an artistic, technical choice independent of devotional or moral pressures.

The late Ming period marked a development in pictorial embroidery broadly, where the innovation and development in artistry was spearheaded by women. Huang argues that Late-Ming embroideries by the Gu family exemplify technical and artistic innovation, despite having not been labeled as “innovative” in the past. Huang covers the gendered characterization of embroidery, and how women in the Late-Ming repurposed and developed new techniques to make their craft even more complicated and advanced. Women shared techniques and learned from each other when creating new methods and technologies of embroidery. Overall, the trend in development of new techniques brought the appearance of embroidery closer to painting. Huang also notes that women’s talent in embroidery was attributed to specific characteristics from the heavens, which reveals how spiritual and semi-religiosity was involved in the seemingly secular division of labor set forth in Francesca’s Bray argument. She notes that during the Ming and Qing, women had more creative freedom than past eras, perhaps due to their diminished role in economic production. Overall, she argues that the idea of innovation

40 Li 2012.
historically excludes women, but in the Gu family embroideries, repurposing local, existing knowledge is also a form of innovation, and so the female artists are innovators.

The development of non-functional aesthetic embroidery began before the time of the hair-embroidered examples, but starts to boom technologically just before the Ming and Qing dynasties. During the Northern Song period, pictorial embroidery developed artistically to take on non-functional aesthetics—specific types of stitching to enhance the appearance of the representational work. This trend was facilitated by technological developments of the Song period, which included the new satin stitch, finer threads, the act of splitting threads, and utilizing contrast between the embroidered part versus blank surface. Because of these new technologies, embroidery became more visually impressive and was considered a form of painting. The practice of embroidering Buddhist subjects proliferated through the Yuan and Ming dynasties, to express religious devotion and sometimes served as imperial gifts. These small changes in the mechanisms of embroidery seem minute, but result in clear differences in the final product. In addition, adding variety to the possibilities of embroidery increases the dynamism of the work, as different types of stitching can be combined.

While none of the female embroiderers of this study were part of the Gu family, they created pictorial embroideries exhibiting much of the same lauded qualities. Though no hair embroideries by Wang Yuan 王瑗 survive, writings on her works demonstrate an emphasis on her technical ability, a perspective framing her as artistic agent rather than domestic laborer. A contemporary of Li Feng, she was the daughter of Wang Xinzhan (the writer that provided the poem Li Feng inscribed on her work) and wife of Li Bingdan, both prestigious literatus in Gaoyou. These connections likely provided her access to the elite literati world. In the Gaoyou gazetteer, she was listed in the section of “talented women,” where her biography stressed her

42 Huang 2012
skill at hair embroidery. Similar to Ni Renji’s dedicatory Buddha, she promised to make an image of Guanyin when her parents fell ill. Her biography reads: “She split one hair into four strands. Its refinement was magical, and it was just like a brush painting without any trace of the needle. Viewers celebrated this as a unique skill.”

This seemingly improbable act speaks to the broader aesthetic standards of the time, referenced by Huang I-fen writing about Gu family pictorial embroideries. In nonreligious decorative embroidery, the ultimate goal was to reproduce the visual effect of painting by hiding the tiny holes made by needle pricks. Li Yuhang argues that hair is an intimate material that in embroidery, artists try to efface its materiality and mimic painting. Certainly in the case of skilled artists such as Li Feng and Wang Yuan, artists take extra measures to enhance the vivacity of the image and conceal the physical process. While skill and technique hides the artist’s hand, the medium of hair showcases the artist’s body. Therefore, under the two ways of giving the body, the laborious aspect is hidden. While the labor aspect is what enables women to create embroideries, their labor is not immediately recognized when looking at one of the images. This thus emphasizes the artistic components of the work, rather than the sacrificial.

While technical ability is evidence for how the embroideries exist as admirable art objects as well as being useful for private devotion, ability does not equate to artistic expression nor sincerity of devotion. Li Yuhang identifies a tension and possible contradiction with how skill meshes with devotion, as women with less technical skill may be less equipped to express devotion or accumulate karmic merit (for instance, not being able to add as many stitches, or accurately materialize the image in the mind through hand to object). For instance, the gazetteer of Qizia Temple contains a record of an embroidered Buddha by Mrs. Chen from Dinghai.

43 Li 2012.
44 Ibid.
(modern day Zhouzhan), which praises Mrs. Chen’s needlework, equating technical skill and refinement with sincerity. Indeed, making hair embroidery was a special skill that not every devout woman nor embroiderer possessed. The asset of ability, or *neng* 能 is stressed in accounts of women who can create Buddhist images using their hair and needles, for instance Xu Can 徐燦 was recorded as being “able to use hairs to embroider the icon of Great Being.” This skill encompassed a number of procedures, not just applying thread to silk, including rinsing and treating the hair. Rinsing and treating is important so that the hair is clean and soft enough to be manipulated. Experienced women such as Li Feng also utilized this step to achieve the effect of some hairs being thinner and lighter than others. In this case, technical ability strengthens the maker’s intent of artistic expression, as they have greater skill to materialize the mental image.

But, that is not to say less technically advanced works such as that of Miss Yang or the anonymous maker are disregarded as less refined or valuable, as they are still engaging in exploratory creation and painstaking processes of making. When Wu Hung categorizes the material nature of objects produced for ritual purposes, the three factors of costly art he identifies are: precious material, specialized craftsmanship, and unusual amounts of human labor. Hair embroideries, regardless of the maker’s skill, qualify in all three categories, as they involve the precious material of hair, specialized craftsmanship of embroidery, and labor. Skill in craftsmanship can enhance the legibility of artistic expression, but in the case of hair embroideries, completing one at all is already impressive. Devotional practice during the Ming and Qing was also tied to women’s artistic talent, therefore it is unclear whether lower class devotees with less training also produced hair embroidery. If they did, that would also reveal agency and innovation, regardless of the quality of the work, for engaging in a restricted practice.

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45 Ibid.
Women had varying levels of skill informing the control they had over the image they chose to materialize, but engaging with the practice, creating something from nothing, is nevertheless an expression of artistic agency.

Conclusion

While Buddhist hair embroideries created by women in Late Imperial China are devotional, religious objects, they simultaneously mark an achievement of artistic innovation and an exercise of agency. Even as the works are dedicated to other people (parents) or devoted to spiritual beings (Guanyin, the Buddha), the makers are the most important individuals connected to the work. Accumulating Buddhist karmic merit and garnering Confucian virtue as a woman required specific ways of being, putting the men in their lives first, engaging in particular labor. Though Guanyin provides a model of an enlightened being in a female body, women nonetheless navigated a restricted access to Buddhism. The female body was thought to be inherently polluted. Without stepping outside the prescribed norm, women were able to overcome restrictions on their bodies and life choices through creating embroideries through an exertion of hand, mind, and gift of hair.

Works by Guan Daosheng, Ni Renji, and Li Feng provide examples of technically refined hair embroideries by gentry women. While their works showcase skill and attention to detail, hair embroideries by Miss Yang and the anonymous maker similarly demonstrate artistic choice and technical skill to manifest the vision. Writing about Guan Daosheng, art historian Jenny Purtle argues that Guan developed a graphic language of self-expression and consistently characterizes her as “genius.” Huang also refers to this term “genius” to criticize how it is normally reserved for men. While Guan is certainly an influential, fierce artist, utilizing the term “genius” for her does not necessarily break down the barriers that gate-keep the term. If

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47 Purtle 2011.
developing a “language of self-expression” defines an artistic genius, I would characterize all the female artists in this study as such. By incorporating their own hair, they wielded control over medium and technique, their self-expression enhanced by the inclusion of their physical body, materialized into devotional image by their own hands. In the materialized image of an icon, they exercised choice in how to interact with the spiritual realm. Hair embroideries present works made by the women’s own hand, with their own hair, for their own usage.

A hair embroidery by Miss Diao dated to 1947 presents a more current example of this practice. Her embroidery depicts a feminized Guanyin in layered robes, standing on a lotus flower, a halo encircling her head as she looks slightly downward. Similar to many of the other female artists, she made a vow to pluck her hairs and create a Guanyin embroidery. This recent example demonstrates that the hair-embroidered works of several hundred years ago continue to inspire female spiritual practice and artistic pursuits. Despite the technical challenges of creating the work, of experiencing realities of the female body, women continue to perform the miracle of making. What they make is truly miraculous, materializing an image of the divine with their own, ordinary bodies.
Appendix

Fig. 1 Guanyin, attributed to Guan Daosheng (1262-1319), hanging scroll, human hair and silk floss on silk, embroidery, Nanjing Museum Collection
Fig. 2 Anonymous *Guanyin*, 1689. Hair embroidery, ink and hair on silk, the collection of Beijing Palace Museum.
Fig. 3. *Guanyin*, Miss Yang, 1800s. Hair embroidery, ink and hair on silk.
Fig. 4 *Buddha*, by Ni Renji (1607-1685); human hair on silk, embroidery, collections unknown.
Fig. 5 Guanyin, Li Feng (d. 1691), human hair on silk, Beijing Palace Museum Collection.
Fig. 6 Eleven-Headed Bodhisattva Guanyin, China, 1778, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City
Fig. 7 White-Robed Guanyin, Qiu Zhu, hanging scroll. China, first half of the 16th century, Ming Dynasty, National Palace Museum, Taipei
Fig. 8 *White Robed Guanyin*, attributed to Zhang Yuehui, hanging scroll, ink on paper. China, late 1200s, Southern Song Dynasty, Cleveland Art Museum.
Fig. 9 Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara in Water-Moon Form (Shuiyue Guanyin), sculpture, Wood (willow) with traces of pigment; multiple-woodblock construction, China, Liao dynasty, 11th century, the Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 10 Guanyin of the Southern Seas, sculpture, wood and paint, China, Lin or Jiao Dynasty, 10th-12th century, the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art.
Fig. 11 *Fish Basket*  
*Guanyin*, anonymous, China, Ming dynasty, 15th century, ink and color on silk, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery, Smithsonian Institution, Washington D.C.
Fig. 12 *Seated Buddha*, anonymous, 1411, Lacquered and gilded wood. China, Ming dynasty, The Metropolitan Museum of Art.
Fig. 13 Miss Diao, *Guanyin*, 1947. Hair embroidery. Baoguang Temple, Chengdu.
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