

Embroidering Guanyin: Constructions of the Divine through Hair*

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Abstract: Hair embroidery was a particular technique practiced by lay Buddhist women to create devotional images. The embroiderers used their own hair as threads and applied them on silk to stitch figures. This paper will analyze the religious connotation of hair embroidery, the ritual process and the techniques for making hair embroidery in the Ming (1368-1644) and Qing (1644-1911) dynasties. By tracing its appearance in both literary texts and actual surviving objects, this essay will ask how and in what circumstances human hair was applied to embroidery? What was the significance of transferring one's own hair onto an icon? How did hair embroidery combine women's bodies (their hair) with a womanly skill (embroidery) to make a unique gendered practice in late imperial China?

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In 1877, Xuan Ding 宣鼎 (1832-1880)¹ published a collection of short tales named *Yeyu qiudeng lu* 夜雨秋燈錄 (The Record of an Autumn Lantern on Rainy Nights). One of the stories is entitled “Faxiu fo” 髮繡佛 (Hair Embroidered Buddha).² Ye Pingxiang, a fourteen year old girl, was desperate to rescue her father, a wrongly convicted state official, from being sentenced to death. When she prayed to a spirit (*shen* 神) for help, crying day and night, she experienced *ganying* 感應, meaning that the spirit responded to her prayers by urging her to make an image of the deity using her skill, namely, embroidery. Ye purchased a large piece of satin in the market. She then plucked out strands of her own hair, and, using an extremely sharp metal knife, further split each hair into four strands. She used these split hairs to embroider an image of the Buddha and a scripture on the same piece of satin. After two years, she finally finished the piece, but lost her eyesight in the process. In return for her effort and sacrifice, her father was miraculously released.

This story is highly suggestive of the ways that hair embroidery of Buddhist icons—the highest form of devotional embroidery in the late imperial period—was seen as a practice of miraculous spiritual power. This story epitomizes hair embroidery of Buddhist images in many ways. It not only allows us to speculate about the purposes and functions of hair embroidery in general and the techniques of hair embroidery in particular, but also leads us to ponder why hair embroidery was chosen as a medium to express women’s profound emotional longings, in the case of Ye Pingxiang, her filial piety. How did hair embroidery combine women’s bodies (their hair) with a womanly skill (embroidery) to make a unique gendered practice in late imperial China?

Scholars outside the field of textile studies have gradually begun to address embroidery as a material practice in literary, cultural, art historical and anthropological studies of women’s lives in pre-modern China during the past two decades.³ However, up to now, scholars have concentrated

¹ Xuan Ding, courtesy name Ziju 子久, was a native of Anhui. He adopted the sobriquets Shoumei 瘦梅, Lata shusheng 邈邈書生, and Jinshi shuhua gai 金石書畫丐.

² See Xuan Ding, *Yeyu qiudeng lu, xuji, juan 2*, in *Lidai biji xiaoshuo daguan* 歷代筆記小說大觀, Vol. 22, p. 219. The first half of this tale is also included in Chai E 柴萼, *Fantian lu conglu* 梵天廬叢錄. See entry “Faxiuji erze” 髮繡集二則 in 8 *ce, juan 15*, 15a-16a.

³ For instance, in order to demonstrate how embroidery is a “field of knowledge” that constructs the subjectivity of women, Grace Fong (2004) has exhaustively studied both poetic writings produced by gentry women on the experience of doing embroidery as well as surviving embroidery manuals from the Ming and Qing periods. She suggests that the aesthetics of embroidery became internalized as a facet of elite feminine identity. Dorothy Ko’s (2009) thorough

primarily on the secular production of embroidery; the relationship between embroidery and religious practice has not been adequately addressed. Despite brief mentions of the connection between embroidery and women's Buddhist beliefs, there has been little sustained work on embroidery as a religious practice, such as its functionality and performativity, ritual processes, the symbolic meanings of needle pricking, and the subject matter of the embroidery.⁴ In this essay, I hope to illuminate the religious connotations of embroidery, in particular hair embroidery. From the perspective of practice, I will then shift my lens to the making of hair embroidery, and ask precisely how and in what circumstances human hair was applied to embroidery. Hair embroidery reflects religious enchantment in relation to art as inseparable from technical activity. Simultaneously, these dual enchantments further signify embroidery as a socially defined womanly skill, and a medium that enables women to fulfill Confucian virtues, such as filial piety.

The Early Discourse of Making Buddhist Embroidery

The creation of any object, regardless of its material medium, embodies time and action. The traces of the handiwork are usually concealed behind a polished surface. Embroidery, however, vividly displays the amount of human labor expended in the process of its creation. Every stitch appears on the surface of an embroidered object, and each stitch indicates an action of needle pricking. Embroidery, a labor-intensive activity, is based on the progression of the accumulation of one stitch after the other, and it is the accumulated labor that is cherished in the embroidering of Buddhist imagery.

Writing on Buddhist embroidery during the Tang (618-907) and Song (960-1276) periods indicates three important factors: firstly, each stitch symbolizes a Buddha. In devotional Buddhism, the reproduction of the Buddha, whether as a stitch, as an image, as a chanted passage of a sutra, or as a book is at root all the same matter: the body of the Buddha. Secondly, repetition is central to Buddhist devotional practice, hence in the case of embroidery, performing more stitches would not only reproduce

study of Shen Shou, a modern embroiderer, relates innovations in embroidery stitches that produced the visual effects of oil painting to a historical moment when Chinese traditional embroidery encountered a new way of seeing the world.

⁴Susan Mann has touched on the importance of embroidering Guanyin as a symbol of women's piety in Mann (1997), pp. 182-183. In a short account of hair embroidery Guanyin, Ko placed it within a discussion of the birth of a woman's culture in the late Ming, Ko (1994), pp. 172-173. For a broader review of women and textile art, see Weidner (1988), pp. 21-23.

more Buddhas, but would also accumulate more merit.⁵ This perhaps explains why in the early stage of Chinese Buddhist embroidery, the image and the background are all fully covered by stitches or *manxiu* 滿繡.⁶ Thirdly, the practitioner/embroiderer's physical body is linked to her or his needle when making a divine image.

In the study of Chinese women's history, many scholars have pointed out that works related to making cloth are defined as womanly work or *nühong* 女紅, *nügong* 女功 and *nügong* 女工, all which were interchangeable phrases in imperial China.⁷ In her discussion of women's roles as textile producers, Francesca Bray introduces two concepts of "woman's work" and "womanly work." "Woman's work" is a wider concept that refers to any work done by women. Womanly work, however, is a "moral activity linked to a gendered identity."⁸ These two concepts were not really separate when women performed their crucial roles in textile production. However, during the Tang and Song dynasties, embroidering Buddhist images was not confined to woman's work. Accounts of laymen and monks' embroidering Guanyin and other Buddhist images can also be found in literature.⁹ Both men and women were considered to link needle, thread, hand and mind when making Buddhist images. Nonetheless, the rhetorical devices used to describe each gender were different. The idea of handiwork involved when women made Buddhist images was always stressed. A woman's contemplation of a Buddhist image is materialized from her mind to her hands, then to needle and thread, to finally take form on silk or cloth as an image of a Buddhist icon.¹⁰ For men, however, the actual needle work was either minimized or described in terms of brush work.¹¹ On the surface, the examples of men embroidering Buddhist

⁵ Angela Sheng also speculates that every movement of needle-pricking on textile symbolically represents "chanting a line of sutra, a Buddha pearl and one time practice perfection." Sheng (2003), p. 71.

⁶ "Each stitch a Buddha" applies to every stitch on a complete image, which includes both an image of a religious icon and the background.

⁷ For a fruitful discussion of the concept of *nühong* from early China to the late imperial period, see Liang (2001), pp. 10-12.

⁸ Bray (1997), p. 256.

⁹ See Huang Tingjian 黃庭堅, "Liao guan shi xiu Guanyin zan" 了觀師繡觀音贊 and "Pang daoren xiu Guanyin zan" 龐道人繡觀音贊, in *Shangu ji* 山谷集 (1983-1986), pp. 1113-1119.

¹⁰ Su Shi 蘇軾, "Jing'an xian jun Xushi xiu Guanyin zan" 靜安縣君許氏繡觀音贊 (A Eulogy for Embroidered Guanyin Done by Madam Xu from Jing'an County), in *Dongpo quanji* 東坡全集 (1983-1986), p. 524.

¹¹ Dugu ji 獨孤及 composed a eulogy with a preface entitled "Guanshiyin pusa dengshen xiang zan bingxu" 觀世音菩薩等身繡像贊並序 (Eulogy and Preface of the Life Size Embroidered Bodhisattva Guanshiyin) in *Pilingji* (1929), *juan* 13, 11b-12a.

devotional image seem to subvert the prevailing ideology of needle work as a womanly practice. However, deeper questions concern how such practices are interpreted by practitioners and other people in society. On this deeper symbolic level, we can see that the same action has a different meaning depending on whether it is performed by a man or a woman. This distinction strongly suggests that needle work was still considered womanly work, and that when men did embroidery it was seen as an alternative way of using the brush. It thus re-inscribes sexual difference even though men might be performing the same type of actions.

Embroidering Guanyin as Woman's Virtuous Behaviour in Late Imperial China

It is unclear when laymen and monks stopped embroidering Buddhist images. We can find only a few records of amateur male embroiderers stitching secular motifs from the Yuan to the Qing dynasties.¹² When demand for embroidery greatly increased in both domestic and foreign markets in the nineteenth century, male professional embroiderers appeared in Shanghai and Guangdong.¹³ While men ceased to embroider Buddhist images as a devotional practice, records demonstrating that more and more women, including both gentry women and women from lower classes, committed themselves to this practice increase during the Ming and Qing periods.¹⁴ The earliest existing embroidery manual *Cixiu tu* 刺繡圖 (The Illustration of Embroidery), which was included in the late Ming collectanea *Lüchuang nüshi* 綠窗女史 (Women Scholars by the Window of Green Gauze),¹⁵ presupposes that *xiufo* 繡佛 (embroidering Buddha) was the most common subject for embroidery.¹⁶

Xiufu was a general term for embroidering Buddhist imagery, the subjects of which included the Buddha, Guanyin 觀音 and Arhats. The most familiar subject was the bodhisattva Guanyin (Perceiver of Sounds), or Avalokiteśvara (the Bodhisattva of Compassion). The unique nature of

¹² The Yuan dynasty painter Xia Mingyuan is believed to have embroidered a landscape in hair. See entry "Faxiu tengwangge huanghelou tu" 髮繡滕王閣黃鶴樓圖, in Zhu Qiqian (1933), *Cixiu biji*, juan xia 39 b.

¹³ See Huang (2010), pp. 20-41.

¹⁴ The records of incidences in local gazetteers, women's biographies, anthologies and extended objects of embroidered Guanyin images increased during the Ming and Qing period.

¹⁵ For a more complete introduction to the *Lüchuang nüshi*, see Fong (2004), pp. 21-46.

¹⁶ *Cixiu tu*, p. 1b.

Guanyin is that s/he can transform herself or himself into roles that encompass all hierarchical and gender differences. Therefore, the self-transformative nature of Guanyin enabled believers to create a wide range of options for the presence of Guanyin that could satisfy their needs. In the early history of Buddhism in India and China, Guanyin was often represented as a male deity. Following sinicization, Guanyin was gradually feminized, and became the most popular female deity in late imperial China.¹⁷ Guanyin empowered women by accompanying them through different stages of their life cycles. From a teenage girl like Princess Miaoshan, a reincarnation of Thousand-handed and Thousand-eyed Guanyin, to a middle-aged woman like White-robed Child Giving Guanyin, Guanyin's diverse feminine manifestations provided solutions for women's various problems. These problems or concerns were mostly initiated by Confucian ideology.

The cult of women's purity, chastity and filial piety in late imperial China is interwoven with women's Buddhist practice and in particular with the worship of Guanyin. In a discussion of the feminized Guanyin and its impact on women's life in Ming-Qing China, Chun-fang Yu uses the term "domesticated religiosity" to categorize women's religious practice from two aspects: First, the home became a "physical arena" for women to conduct their religious activities, primarily Pure Land Buddhism. These activities included repeating the Buddha's name, chanting a Buddhist sutra, worshipping Guanyin, doing meditation, and keeping to a vegetarian diet. Secondly, through fulfilling women's domestic obligations such as realizing the virtues of filial piety and chastity, women could achieve religious enlightenment.¹⁸

Based on Yu's insightful observation, I would like to point out that a woman's inner chamber was not just a space for recapitulating orthodox ritual, but also a space for creativity in this context. The Buddhist ritual of image-making as merit-making, the Confucian dogma concerning virtuous women, and the promotion of women's talent at the time together constitute a new type of agency. Instead of entrusting someone else to make a Buddhist icon or purchasing it, women were encouraged to use resources from their own boudoirs, including their womanly skills and labor, their physical bodies such as hair, to consume the products made by their own hands and worship at the icon day and night.

Xiu Guanyin 繡觀音 (embroidering Guanyin) or *zixiu Guanyin* 自繡觀音 (embroidering Guanyin by oneself), a practice by which to manifest the presence of Guanyin through needle, thread or hair by one's own hands,

¹⁷ For important pioneering studies on this topic, see Yu (2001), Lee (2000), pp. 10-39, and Wong (2007), pp. 255-302.

¹⁸ Yu (2001), pp. 336-338.

demonstrates a mode of practice that reflects the promotion of domestic religiosity during that time. It speaks to one's own salvation and virtue; one has control over it and can assert it by one's own will. The association of embroidering Guanyin and the construction of an ideal womanhood had already circulated in the Tang dynasty. However, the promotion of virtuous womanhood was much more vigorous during the late imperial period.¹⁹ The image of the diligent and pious woman was reflected in the making of an image of the feminized Guanyin, a practice that raised the former image to the level of a moral ideal: that of chaste womanhood. In Susan Mann's words, "embroidering Guanyin was an act of spiritual devotion, to be sure. But it was also a creative work of art, a sign of sexual purity and fidelity, and a discipline of self-cultivation."²⁰ The action of embroidering Guanyin itself was to enact an ideal Confucian womanhood that reflected women's social roles of a chaste wife/widow, a filial daughter-in-law and a righteous mother.

The ideological connotations behind this self-made icon seem clear; however, the question of why a personally-stitched icon was considered efficacious remains unanswered. To be able to understand the logic between these two, we have to grasp the concept of *ganying* (sympathetic response) embodied in the stories of Ye Pingxiang. *Ganying* reflects the belief that everything in the world is interrelated and interdependent. An aspect of traditional Chinese cosmology assimilated by Buddhism, as Robert Sharf explains, "*kan-ying* [*ganying*] is the principle underlying the interaction between practitioner and Buddha—the supplicant is said to 'stimulate' or 'affect' (*kan*) [*gan*] the Buddha, an action that elicits the Buddha's compassionate response (*ying*)."²⁰ How to "affect the Buddha" or *ganfo* 感佛 becomes crucial in Buddhist practice. Its initial forms are more related to calling aloud the name of Buddha or Guanyin, chanting sutras and so on. The main agenda is to demonstrate enough sincerity to stimulate the divine power. When women used their own hands to create images of a Guanyin icon, it required time-consuming labor. This demonstrated their earnestness, which then would stimulate a response from Guanyin. Hair embroidery was the highest devotional embroidery of this kind. Through the sacrifice of their hair, enacted through the difficult technique of hair embroidery, women asked this female deity to solve their mundane problems or to help them fulfill their filial duties.

¹⁹ See Liang Su 梁肅's "Xiu Guanshiyin pusa xiang bing xu" 繡觀世音菩薩像贊併序 (The Eulogy and Preface of Embroidered Guanshiyin Bodhisattva), "Yaoshi liuliguang Rulai xiuxiang zan" 藥師琉璃光如來繡像贊 (The Eulogy of the Embroidered Bhaisajyaguru), in *Qinding Quantangwen* 欽定全唐文 (1818), *juan* 519, case 17, 14b-16b. See Kai-wing Chow (1994), pp. 211-214.

²⁰ Mann (1997), p. 183.

Why Hair?

Hair embroidery or *faxiu* 髮繡 uses natural human hair as thread to stitch images on textiles.²¹ There are no documents clearly indicating when and how hair embroidery began.²² Unlike the modern conception of hair embroidery as a technique (that can be used to represent different subjects), during the Ming and Qing periods hair embroidery was primarily what pious women did as Buddhist devotional practice. The majority of extant hair embroideries and textual sources reveal that the general subjects consisted of images of Bodhisattva Guanyin, Buddha, and Bodhidharma, in descending order of popularity. In addition, we also find hair embroidery of auspicious motifs related to promotion and prosperity. The reasons for the existence of non-Buddhist subjects in hair embroidery are unclear at the present stage. Such works could have been produced by commercial embroidery shops as well as by individuals.²³

A hair-embroidered portrait of Guanyin attributed to Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262-1319), the best-known woman painter of the Yuan dynasty (1271-1368), provides an early example (Fig. 1). On this embroidery, only Guanyin's hair, eyebrows and eyelashes are represented with hairs, while the rest of the image, such as Guanyin's robe, face and other part of the body, is stitched in silk thread.²⁴ This kind of hair embroidery is similar to a type found in Japan. According to Elizabeth ten Grotenhuis, Japanese hair

²¹ Another term *moxiu* 墨繡 (black embroidery) has been used for hair embroidery by modern scholars. However, this term needs to be further investigated, since it could also refer to silk embroidery that copies the style of *baimiao* painting. Indeed, during the Qianlong period, *moxiu* was considered as a substitute for *bimo* or brush and ink. See the entry in "Mingxiu dashi sanshier bianxiang yi juan" 明繡大士三十二變相一卷, *Midian zhulin* (1983-1986), *juan* 14, pp. 823-642, 823-643.

²² Sun Peilan 孫佩蘭 thinks that along with writing scriptures in blood, hair embroidery first started in the Wu 吳 area during the Song period. See Sun (1994), 31. The evidence that supports Sun's argument is a record of a young lady called Zhou Zhenguan 周貞觀 from the Song dynasty. For a discussion of this woman, please see the later sections of this paper.

²³ Further research is needed on the issue of commercial hair embroidery. Jiang Shaoshu 姜紹書 records that Xia Yong 夏永, courtesy name Mingyuan 明遠, a Yuan dynasty *jiehua* painter did hair embroideries of two famous towers, *Teng wang ge* and *Huang he lou*. For the record of Xia Yong's hair embroidery, see *Yunshizhai bitan* 韻石齋筆談 (1997), pp. 110-111. A Qing dynasty hair embroidery entitled "Rank Promotion" with a signature and a seal of *Jijin tang* indicates that this embroidery was probably made by a professional workshop. See Shan (2005), p. 72.

²⁴ Another example is the Big Belly Maitreya embroidery possible done by someone from the Gu school of embroidery. It is now in the Liaoning Museum collection. Piao Wenying (2010), pp. 207-216.

embroidery first appeared in the Kamakura period (1185-1333) and then continued in the Muromachi era (1392-1573) (Fig. 2). She further makes clear that Japanese hair embroidery was often related to Pure Land Buddhism, and that hairs from a deceased person were offered by relatives and stitched into the hair of the image of Amitābha Buddha and two of his assistant Bodhisattvas, Avalokiteśvara and Mahāsthāmaprāpta, in the hope that the deceased be re-born in the Pure Land.²⁵ On both Guan Daosheng's Guanyin and the Japanese hair embroidered Amidā Triad, the chosen replication of hair mirroring the location of the hair on the body would first suggest a kind of hyper-realism. However, beneath the visual representation, direct transplanting of a person's hair to an icon's hair indicates the logic of hair as regeneration. "Regeneration" in this context can perhaps be understood as "rebirth" as well.²⁶

Our common understanding of hair symbolism in the Buddhist context is always connected to the head-shaving ceremony. When a person enters monastic life, s/he has to shave her or his hair, hair being a symbol of attachment to the mundane world. However, a Confucian prescription for filial piety was not to harm one's hair and body, as these were bequeathed by one's parents. Thus, shaving off the hair of one's head would be a direct violation of this precept, and a symbolic cutting off from the mundane world. Nonetheless, with respect to lay people, the nature of hair as regeneration may be more important. In the discussion of why hair is used as an important signifier in Asian cultures, Patrick Olivelle draws our attention to the ways different cultures impose their own grammar upon the root meaning of hair.²⁷ The notion of the regeneration of hair is woven into different practices using hair in the Chinese cultural context. In Chinese medical discourse, in particular, hair is linked to blood, another part of the human body associated with regeneration. In the human body chapter of *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目 (Materia Medica, Arranged according to Drug Descriptions and Technical Aspects), hair is prescribed as a medicine for problems related to loss of blood, such as nosebleed, coughing up blood from the lungs, urinary bleeding, rectal bleeding and several other ailments. As a general rule in these prescriptions, hair is to be burned into ash and combined with other ingredients. It is used either externally or internally depending on the symptom. One of the prescriptions for nosebleed is to blow the hair ashes without any other content into the nose

²⁵ Ten Grotenhuis (2004), pp. 31-35.

²⁶ It is as yet unknown whether Guan Daosheng's hair embroidery of Guanyin had any association with mortuary practice, but the direct transplanting of a person's hair to an icon's hair indicates a similar logic of regeneration.

²⁷ Olivelle (1998), pp. 11-49.

when bleeding happens.²⁸ This is perhaps the most direct contact of hair and blood prescribed in the text. Hair serves as a means to stop bleeding. Hair and blood are not only linked together in medical practice but are also connected in a general way, in Buddhist devotional practices like hair embroidery and the writing of scriptures in blood.

When hair is used as medicine, practitioners do not focus on gender, except for one problem, namely menstruation, in which case equal amounts of both women's and men's hair are required.²⁹ Though the idea of the impurity of women's reproductive blood is promoted through Chinese indigenous Buddhist sutras, such as the *Xuepenjing* 血盆經 (Blood Bowl Sutra), women's hair does not have the connotation of being filthy. Conversely, given that the root meaning of hair as "to regenerate" in the Buddhist discourse of using hair as a gift, the hair is intimately related to woman devotees. While in Buddhist canonical texts there are accounts of both male and female devotees spreading their hair on the ground for the Buddha or monks to walk on, the cutting of hair as a gift seems restricted to female devotees in Buddhist miraculous stories.³⁰

A story about an impoverished woman who sold her long hair in exchange for offerings to Buddha was first included in the sixth century Buddhist encyclopedia *Jinglü yixiang* 經律異相 (Different Forms of Sutra and Vinaya).³¹ Similar plots also appeared in Ming Buddhist story collections, such as *Fahua lingyan zhuan* 法華靈驗傳 (The Record of Responsive Manifestations of Lotus Sutra).³² Two distinctive features are shared among

²⁸ See entry "luanfa" or messy hair. This is the term used for hair by Li Shizhen 李時珍 (1518-1593) in *Bencao gangmu* 本草綱目, *renbu* 人部, *juan* 52. 4b-7b.

²⁹ Menstruation indicates woman's reproductive potential. According to the prescription, when women encounter the problem that menstruation does not flow smoothly, she should take ash produced with equal amounts of hair from a woman and a man (*ibid*).

³⁰ The most well-known story is that when Śākyamuni was a child, he laid down his hair on the mud for Dīpaṅkara to walk on, which is taken as a sign to predict his Buddhahood. *Foshuo taizi ruiying benqijing*, *juan shang* 佛說太子瑞應本起經卷上, CBETA T03n0185_p0473a26(03)-29(03). For women's long hair used for a monk to walk on, see *Fayuan zhulin*, *juan* 98, *dunü bu, disi*. CBETA T53n2122_p1007a05(10)-06(07).

³¹ *Jinglü yixiang* 經律異相, *juan* 45, "長髮女人供養佛" (Woman with Long Hair Offering to Buddha), in *Taishō Tripitaka*, Vol. 53, No.2121. CBETA T53n212_p0235a08-21.

³² *Fahua lingyan ji*, CBETA X78n1539_p0013b14(02)-19(00). In the *Guang qingliang zhuan* 廣清涼傳 (Expanded Accounts of the Clear and Cool Mountains), Mañjuśrī also manifested as a deprived woman and sold her hair for offering. However, her hair did not re-grow afterwards. See the entry of "Bodhisattva Transformed to a Poor Woman."

the protagonists of these stories. First, these women are extremely poor and have nothing to offer but their hair. Second, after they cut their hair, it miraculously grows back again to the same length as before, so they can continue to use their hair as a means of exchange for offerings. Women were not the only people with long hair during the time when these stories circulated, but long hair became a medium that only women used as source for offerings. Therefore there is an added gendered dimension to hair, which is related to a particular type of religious exchange value.

When hair was used as thread and transferred onto the images of divine figures, hair, as part of the body, becomes a gift or *bushi* 布施. In Buddhist canonical texts, such as *Dazhidu lun* 大智度論 (Commentary on the Perfection of Wisdom), gifts are divided into internal gifts, which stand for gifts of the body, and external gifts, which refer to gifts of objects.³³ Reiko Ohnuma categorizes both of them as material gifts (*wu bushi* 物布施) in contrast with the gift of dharma (*fa bushi* 法布施).³⁴ The hair in hair embroidery is part of the body externalized as an object.

The stories of Bodhisattvas relinquishing their bodies to the Dharma are cherished in Buddhist tradition.³⁵ A passage from the *Flower Ornament Scripture* contains a particularly important account of sacrificing part of the body and transforming it into a material object.

Since he first vowed to attain Buddhahood, Vairocana Buddha has been extremely diligent in practice and has offered untellable numbers of bodies and life. He has peeled off his skin and used it as paper, broken off his bones and used them as pens, and pricked himself to draw blood for ink. The scriptures he has copied in this manner are piled as high as Mount Sumeru. He did this out of his great reverence for the Dharma.³⁶

Vairocana Buddha serves as a model for copying scriptures with his body. As Jimmy Yu has correctly observed, “his body parts are not only used to produce the scriptures, but the scriptures are his bodies.”³⁷ Though only Vairocana Buddha could make such sacrifice, practitioners try to follow in his steps by copying scriptures in blood. Such blood writing has been widely practiced throughout the history of Buddhism in China, and is still

³³ *Da zhidu lun*, *juan* 11, T1509, 143b.

³⁴ Ohnuma (1998), p. 104.

³⁵ *Ibid.* and Yu (2008), pp. 40-41.

³⁶ 毗盧遮那如來。從初發心。精進不退。已不可說不可說身命為布施。剝皮為紙。折骨為筆。刺血為墨。書寫經典。積如須彌。為重法故。See *Dafang guangfo huayan jing* 大方廣佛華嚴經, *juan* 40. CBETA T10n0293_p0845c07(03)-08(03).

³⁷ Yu (2009), p. 39.

practiced by both monastic and lay people. In most cases, they use blood from their own fingers and tongues to copy Buddhist scriptures.

Although the above reference primarily demonstrates Vairocana Buddha using his skin, bones, and blood as utensils to pass on the material form of Dharma or the scripture, the idea of utilizing part of his body as a substitute for a secular tool, such as a pen, paper and ink, is apparent. Moreover, the example of Vairocana using his body as a medium to convey the Dharma raises questions about gender. Although Vairocana is a male, he becomes a paragon for both lay men and women to follow. In other words, Vairocana using his body turned into an opportunity for both men and women to express themselves and their religious feelings. However, the bodily sacrifice is closely associated with the person's skill. This skill could help the devotee to turn his or her sacrifice of a body part into a material object, and the skill itself is heavily determined by the gender. In early Buddhist texts, the ways prescribed for women to dedicate their bodies were probably limited to the natural sources of their bodies; for instance, woman's long hair could be exchanged for offerings. However, from the fifteenth century onward, more and more women combined their skill and talent with resources they found in their bodies. They used their hair instead of thread to stitch the images of Buddhist deities as a way to emulate bodily practice, such as writing scriptures in blood.

One anecdote relates that a young woman from the Song dynasty, named Zhou Zhenguan 周貞觀, lost her father at age six. Since she did not have brothers, she determined to take care of her mother and remain unmarried. Zhou then received Buddhist precepts and changed her secular name. One day, she suddenly smelled the aroma of sandalwood while she was boating on a pond, and decided to build a small shelter nearby and meditate there. When her mother passed away, Zhou was devastated, and felt she had nothing with which to repay her mother. Therefore she vowed in front of the Buddha that she would prick her tongue and copy the seventy thousand characters of the *Lotus Sutra* with her blood, and then that she would split the hairs from her head and use them to stitch every character. She started to do this at thirteen, and finished only after twenty-three years. After she finally completed the piece, she passed away while sitting cross-legged.³⁸ This is perhaps one of the most extreme examples of devotional hair embroidery, because of the length of time the practitioner

³⁸ Zhu Qiqian recorded Zhou Zhenguan's story in both entries of "Zhou Zhenguan" 周貞觀 and "Yu Ying" 俞穎. According to Zhu, Zhou's Lotus Sutra scroll was handed down from the Song to the early Qing period. The first section of this scroll was lost during the Ming dynasty, and then was restored by a woman from Qiantang. By the time of the Shunzhi period (1644-1661), after Yu Ying became a widow, a nun asked her to continue to restore Zhou's embroidered scroll. See entries "Zhou Zhenguan," and "Yu Ying" in Zhu (1931), pp. 9a-b, 14b-15a.

engaged in its making, and the combination of both the blood writing and hair embroidery.

The dual practices of blood writing and hair embroidery have not been found coexisting in surviving objects. In actual practice, these two practices contrast with each other with respect to the gender of the practitioner and practice. Blood scriptures have been mainly done by Buddhist priests, and hair embroidery was mainly made by lay Buddhist women.³⁹ These parallel traditions somehow reflect the conventional discourse that men use paper and brushes, while women use needle and thread. This idea is transmitted on to religious practice and manifested as man holding a brush to write in blood on paper and woman threading a needle with hair to stitch on silk. Nonetheless, the two practices share much in common: First, as I explained above, both hair and blood were considered parts of the body that can regenerate. Second, practitioners undergo pain by pricking blood from their tongues and fingers and plucking hair before creating devotional objects.⁴⁰ Third, both blood writing and hair embroidery required certain levels of skill in order to write and stitch. Fourth, in their respective practices, blood and hair are both transplanted from the body on to paper or silk. They are used as supplies in the creation of calligraphy or images and transformed into devotional objects. These practices initiate a subjective transformation. Those who create these objects of devotion externalize a part of their own bodies in the form of a religious object and thereby transform themselves through dedication. Different from relics or bodily remains in the Buddhist context, though blood and hair are part of the human body, they became a medium for other objects. In other words, the blood or hair persists through an icon or scripture. But a relic or bodily remains are not mediated by others, they are just the body.

Plucking Hair or *bafa* 拔髮 – a Buddhist Practice of Self-inflicted Pain

Hair embroidery is a highly ritualized practice: from obtaining the hair to stitching the image, each step contains certain religious elements. There are two main steps – plucking hair and splitting hair. In cases where traditional hair embroideries were used as offerings, they were usually made of hair taken from the embroiderer herself. The inscription on an image of

³⁹ Ibid. This is a very loose and general observation, as Jimmy Yu's research indicates that, in modern times, women followers sometimes could serve as blood providers, see Yu (2008), p. 50, f.68.

⁴⁰ Though Jimmy Yu's study on blood writing demonstrates that sometimes blood writing could be life-threatening. See Yu (2008), pp. 57-58.

Guanyin produced in 1480 clearly indicates that Lin Jinlan 林金蘭, a well-known courtesan from the Chenghua period (1464-1487), used *jishen fa* 己身髮, "hair from her own body," to make the embroidery on the day of Guanyin's birthday on the nineteenth day of the second month in order to heal her eye disease.⁴¹ Inscriptions on hair embroideries from later periods also note the action of extracting hair from the woman embroiderer's head. Ni Renji 倪仁吉 (1607-1685), a renowned poet and artist, stitched an image of the Buddha when she was around forty-three years old (Fig. 3).⁴² She embroidered her signature in the following manner: "In the fourth month of the year *jichou* (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."⁴³ The word *bafa*, or *choufa* 抽髮, "plucking hair," is also found on two other extant hair embroideries of Guanyin from later periods. Miss Yang, the daughter of Yang Yuchun 楊遇春 (1761-1837), the governor of Shaanxi and Gansu during the Daoguang period (1820-1850), made a hair embroidered Guanyin sitting on rocks under bamboo trees. A colophon mounted on the margin of the scroll records that Miss Yang, from Sichuan, extracted her own hairs (*choufa*).⁴⁴ This ritual practice continued into the Republican Period.⁴⁵

These various surviving objects confirm the ritual nature of plucking hair described in the Ye Pingxiang story. The action of plucking hair certainly caused physical pain to the practitioner. The precise nature of the process of extracting hairs from the embroiderer's own head is unclear. Whether the hairs were gradually accumulated during the process of

⁴¹ 大明成化庚子二月十九日信女林金蘭為脫眼疾堅誠[?]大士慈悲己身發敬制大士神像一尊供養佛堂同千秋同識。See Shanghai Museum collection. Though needlework was probably a major cause of loss of eyesight for women like Ye Pingxiang, it is unclear how much needlework a courtesan would do.

⁴² For an introduction to Ni Renji's life and artistic achievements, see Dorothy Ko, *Teachers of Inner Chamber*, pp. 172-173. For a discussion of Ni Renji's hair embroidery of the Buddha, see Hong Liang 洪亮 (1958), pp. 21-22. Hong records the deity represented on this embroidery as *Dashi* (Guanyin), but the iconography and Ni Renji's inscription confirm that it should be the Amitābha Buddha or *Jieyin fo* 接引佛。Given the fact that this embroidery was made for Ni Renji's deceased parents, apparently she hoped that they could have a better afterlife.

⁴³ 己丑四月信女吳氏上為父母拔髮繡佛傳家供奉, *ibid.* p. 22.

⁴⁴ Apparently, Defeng, who composed the inscription in 1916, was not familiar with the tradition of making hair embroidery Guanyin. Defeng admits that he has never heard of this practice, and praises Miss Yang as its innovator.

⁴⁵ A young lady, Miss Diao, who grew up in Chengdu in the 1930s to 1940s, plucked her hair to stitch a Guanyin image before she started her monastic life. I will discuss this object in the later part of this paper.

making the embroidery or if all the hairs were pulled out before the first stitch was made is not known. Either way, plucking hair entails that women embroiderers endured pain as they accumulated enough hair strands to embroider an image. The amount of hair needed for making an embroidery naturally varied according to the size, style, length of each stitch and embroiderer's skill.⁴⁶ Although it is difficult to speculate the actual number of hairs needed for each hair embroidery, it is important to keep in mind that the practitioners of hair embroidery do not aim to deform themselves. They do not pluck themselves bald; rather they accumulate enough resources to make a devotional object.

Bafa is one of many forms of extreme ascetic practice in Buddhism. For instance, the *Bailun* 百論 or *Treatise of the Hundred* (*Sata śāstra*), the Chinese translation of a Mādhyamika Buddhist text attributed to Āryadeva clearly states that along with branding the body, plucking hair is a good method of self-inflicted physical suffering.⁴⁷ However, compared to other forms of self-violence in Buddhist contexts, such as burning one's body and self-cremation, plucking hair is not life-threatening.⁴⁸

Religious pain can be found across time and cultures. In an examination of the role pain plays in religious rituals around the world, Ariel Glucklich provides an explanation of the psychological reaction when devotees experience pain. In his words:

Religious pain produces states of consciousness, and cognitive-emotional changes that affect the identity of the individual subject and her sense of belonging to a larger community or to a more fundamental state of being. More succinctly, pain strengthens the religious person's bond with God and with other persons.⁴⁹

In other words, pain increases one's proximity to the divine. In the Chinese context, we must understand this transformation of distance from the divine in the context of the idea of sympathetic response, which implies compassion for the pain of others. When a given subject inflicts pain on herself in a religious context, she tends to transcend her finitude and

⁴⁶ In my interview of contemporary hair embroidery artist Meng Yongguo, he used one finger to show the amount of hair that he needs for one hair embroidery in the style of western sketches. Sketch style hair embroidery is different from the outline drawing style. The size of the hair embroidery is about 40cm x 40cm. Meng Yongguo is a professor at the Hair Embroidery Research Institute in Wenzhou University.

⁴⁷ See *Bailun* 百論, CEBTA T30n1569_p0168b11(05).

⁴⁸ For a full study of self-immolation in Chinese Buddhist practice, see Benn (2007).

⁴⁹ Glucklich (2001), p. 6.

approach the Buddha or Guanyin, and in this way she gets the feeling that she is the recipient of divine sympathy. Divine sympathy is usually considered to be universal, and self-inflicted pain can serve to individuate the practitioner and construct a personal relationship with the divine. Specifically, in the present case the process of voluntarily suffering pain through the plucking of hair is an integral part of the constitution of a visible form of Guanyin. Hair embroidery is certainly the highest devotional form of embroidery, since in order to demonstrate enough sincerity to stimulate the divine powers, devotees not only use their own hands to make embroidery, but more importantly, they endure physical pain and dedicate part of their body to the devotional object. The personal relationship between the divine and the devotee is built on her physical pain, her hair, her skill and her devotion.

More importantly, as Glucklich points out, through enduring the pain, the devotee can also identify herself with a larger community. Jimmy Yu's research on a wide range of bodily practices of self-inflicted violence in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century China merits our attention. As Yu demonstrates, practices such as blood writing, body slicing and burning part of one's body all should be seen as linked to a larger phenomenon of people who implemented the "instrumentality of their bodies" to accomplish their various goals of filial piety, chastity, loyalty, benevolence, self-cultivation of the way (*dao* 道) and many others.⁵⁰ Yu connects this observable fact to social, political, doctrinal and personal crises in the late Ming and early Qing periods. He argues that people used the practice of self-violence as a way of "exercising power and affecting the environment." By so doing, they "demonstrate[d] moral values, reinstitute[d] order, forge[d] new social relations, and secure[d] boundaries against the threat of moral ambiguity." Therefore, in his view, bodies became in these practices sites of "contestation and transformation, both for themselves and for others who witnessed or narrated their stories."⁵¹

The message in the account of Zhou Zhenguan is filial piety. It is similar to that of Ye Pingxiang, who, in the *Hair Embroidered Buddha*, wanted to rescue her father by a plea for help from the Buddha in the form of a work of hair embroidery. In these two cases, and in others, the women were unmarried. This fits into the pattern of the legend of Miaoshan, a form of Guanyin who relinquished her eyes and hands to her own father.⁵² Hair embroideries made for the purpose of fulfilling filial piety, as evidenced in both surviving objects and textual references, were always dedicated to the embroiderers' birth parents, not to their parents-in-law. In the case of Ni

⁵⁰ Yu (2008), p. 1.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁵² Yu (2001), pp. 321-347.

Renji, by the time she made her hair embroidery of the Buddha's image, she had already been widowed for more than twenty years and had fulfilled all her duties as a daughter-in-law. After she returned to her natal home to avoid the turmoil caused by the Manchu conquest, she created the piece in the name of her own parents. This phenomenon seems different from that of the ideal of the exemplary women promoted by Confucian ideology in which a woman should always prioritize her husband's family. Stories of daughters-in-law practicing *gegu* 割股 (cutting flesh) in the hope of rescuing their parents-in-law's life are recorded in books such as *Guanshiyin pusa linggan lu* 觀世音菩薩靈感錄 (Record of Bodhisattva Guanshiyin's Efficacious Responses).⁵³ Nonetheless, hair embroidery seems to have taken on a particular significance that is connected to a woman's own ancestors rather than matrimonial links. The deep association of hair with regeneration probably played a role in this practice.

Splitting Hair – Exemplifying a Difficult Technique through the Making of a Devotional Object

After obtaining the hair, preparing it for stitching is crucial in this ritual process. From surviving examples, we can observe that there were at least three different ways of using hair as thread: 1.) multiple strands of hair were grouped together as one strand, 2.) a single hair was used as a single thread, 3.) one single hair was split into multiple finer strands. These different techniques probably reflect the development of hair embroidery over time as well as individual skills.

The type of hair embroidery that uses multiple strands is evidenced by the image of the Guan Daosheng hair embroidery (Fig. 1-1) and the Japanese hair embroidered Taima Mandalas made by the monk Kunen from the seventeenth century.⁵⁴ The embroidered inscription on the image indicates that it is most likely based on one of Guan's paintings of Guanyin.⁵⁵ Wearing a white robe, Guanyin holds prayer beads in her left hand and stands in the middle of an ambiguous open space. Parts of Guanyin's hair are piled up on the top of her head. The loose hairs on the right of her face

⁵³ Ibid, pp. 343-344.

⁵⁴ Hioki (2009.2), pp. 19-56, and (2009), pp. 48-69.

⁵⁵ The authenticity of this embroidery needs to be further investigated. There are outstanding questions concerning both original painting and the embroidery. For a detailed discussion of this subject, see Yuhang Li's dissertation, "Gendered Materialization: An Investigation of Women's Artistic and Literary Reproductions of Guanyin in Late Imperial China" (Ph.D. dissertation, University of Chicago, 2011), Chapter Two, f.116.

are blowing in the wind, while those on her left side rest on her left shoulder. Contrasting with the fine stitches in silk thread on Guanyin's face and robe, the stitches used for rendering her hair are primarily *changduan zhen* 長短針, long and short stitch. Three or four strands of hair are grouped together as one strand. The length of each stitch is much longer than a stitch made using a single silk floss. In order to express the effect of hair dancing in the wind, the hair stitches point in all directions. The materiality of hair is vividly carried out.

With respect to the second type of embroidery, where a single hair functions as a single thread, there is also only one surviving example. In 1947, a period much later than that of any of the objects mentioned in this paper, a certain Miss Diao from Sichuan made a hair-embroidered white-robed Guanyin. An ink outline was first laid out, and brownish hairs were applied on top of the ink line with very meager stitches. Since the stitches do not follow each other closely and are inconsistent in terms of direction and size, the outline of Guanyin is not smoothly rendered. Traces of broken hairs can be easily observed.

The above two examples seem to represent the periods before and after the Ming and Qing dynasties, showing a change from partial hair embroidery to complete hair embroidery in *baimiao* 白描 style or outline drawing. Unlike that which preceded and followed it, hair embroidery from the late imperial period can be categorized as a third group featuring the splitting of hairs. Wang Yuan 王瑗 was a native of Gaoyou 高郵, and was active in the early Qing period. The only Qing woman listed in the section of "talented women" in the Gaoyou gazetteer, her skill in hair embroidery is described in her biography. Her parents' sickness led her to promise to make an image of Guanyin. With respect to technical aspects, the biography reads, "she split one hair into four strands. Its refinement was magical and it was just like painting without any trace of needles. Viewers celebrated this as a unique skill."⁵⁶ With respect to the latter, as for decorative embroidery in general, the highest goal of fine embroidery is always to reproduce the effect of painting.⁵⁷ The principle of emulating painting through needle and thread is that different colored threads function as pigments to cover the painted area, where the background was usually left untouched. Although *baimiao* as a painting style had already developed during the Song period, the imitation of *baimiao* in embroidery appears rather late. The style of hair embroidery from the Ming and Qing periods is clearly based on *baimiao* painting.

⁵⁶ 拆一髮為四,精細入神,宛如繪畫,不見針跡,觀者歎為絕技。See the entry "Wang Yuan" 王瑗, in *Gaoyou zhouzhi* 高郵州志, *juan* 10 (*xia*), pp. 1602-1603.

⁵⁷ Weidner (1988), pp. 21-23.

Embroidery with split silk thread is already difficult enough, but embroidery with split hair required even more refined technique, further reinforcing the symbolic order. The idea of splitting a hair might not have been driven by religious concerns, but rather may have been inherited from the practice of splitting a silk thread into several strands. However, the complex skills required for the difficult task of splitting a hair itself added significant value to the embroidery as a devotional object. Although none of Wang Yuan's hair embroidery survives, a hair embroidery of Guanyin done by one of Wang Yuan's contemporaries, Li Feng 李蠶 (c. seventeenth century) provides us with one of the finest examples of this kind. Wang Yuan's father Wang Xinzhan's 王心湛 (c. seventeenth century) calligraphy of a poem was also stitched with silk threads on this embroidery.

A seated Guanyin in the usual position of half *ruyi* posture on a grass mat is represented (Fig. 4). The whole image is rendered in *gunzhen* 滾針 or outline stitch. It follows *baimiao* painting closely, rendering different parts of Guanyin's body in three different tones of black, from lightest to darkest. Any outline of Guanyin's exposed body is rendered by hairs that appear lighter in color than Guanyin's hair, eyebrows, robes and jewels. Unlike a feminized Guanyin with long hair, often seen during the Ming and Qing periods, here Guanyin's hair is rendered shoulder length with "snail-shell" curls, a type of curl typical of the Buddha, sometimes also borrowed to represent an Arhat. Because of the intensified snail-shell curls, the hair on Guanyin's head becomes the darkest part of the embroidery.

Shoubofa 手擘髮 or using one's hands to split hair is the phrase that is often used in various short accounts of hair embroidery. For instance, in the Pingyuan gazetteer, Madam Zhao is recorded as being able to draw *baimiao* Guanyin, and to be able to split hair to make an image of Guanyin.⁵⁸ In the case of Zhou Zhenguan, who combines both blood writing and hair embroidery on the same devotional object, pricking blood from the tongue and splitting hairs by hand are juxtaposed as elements in a narrative of her sincerity.

Besides the ambiguous phrase *shoubofa*, the only reference about how to split a hair is from the story of the *Hair Embroidery Buddha*. This asserts that Ye Pingxiang, the woman who made the hair embroidery in the story, "used a metal blade, which was as sharp as the tip of the awn of an ear of rice, to split hair into four strands."⁵⁹ It is difficult to determine whether this description was the product of the author's literary imagining of how a hair was split, or whether it actually reflects a true method of splitting a hair. Splitting hairs certainly required special knowledge. This technique was not acquired by everyone who made hair embroidery in the past, and

⁵⁸ See the entry "Zou Tao zhiqi" 鄒濤之妻趙氏 (Zou Tao's Wife Madam Zhao) in Zhu (1931), 20b.

⁵⁹ *Yeyu qiudeng lu, xuji, juan 2*, p. 219.

has been lost. However, textile scholars have pointed out that from observing existing hair embroideries, the traces of hairs being split have been discovered under a microscope.⁶⁰

Technique, Artistic Refinement and Devotion

An important issue raised in the discourse of making hair embroidery concerns how one combines a complicated skill with the making of a devotional object. Here the issue concerns the possible contradiction between being skillful and being devotional. Tim Ingold's discussion of art and technology in nonreligious craft-making helps us to theorize this issue.⁶¹ Often, as the practitioner learns more deeply the protocols of skillfully creating an object, s/he becomes increasingly alienated from the ritualistic and religious dimensions of creation, which inevitably involve experiencing an immediate connection with the divine. From this perspective skill becomes a type of mediation that serves to cover up a more elemental relationship to the object. This is especially evident in hair embroidery, since someone skilled at hair embroidery may conceal the presence of hair, thus obscuring the religious meaning of hair. On the other hand, someone less skilled would, perhaps not because of choice, allow the hairs to be perceived in the completed object. Moreover, Alfred Gell shows that enchantment works at many levels, and encourages us to re-think the role of technology in making religious art. As in the case of hair embroidery, the technique of splitting hair requires remarkable skill, but it should not be considered as a mere means towards the making of an art object. Rather, the process of preparing to embroider is as much part of the religious enchantment as the making of the actual object. In short, we should think of religious enchantment in relation to art as inseparable from technical activity. We could also say that there is a triple enchantment at work here, one related to the technical process of splitting the hair, one in the process of making the embroidery, and finally in the religious relation to Guanyin.⁶²

The achievement of applying a difficult skill itself becomes part of devotional practice during the Ming and Qing periods. In a record of an embroidered Buddha by Mrs. Chen from Dinghai (today's Zhoushan) in

⁶⁰ For an example of split hair embroidery, see the collection entitled "Rank Promotion Hair Embroidery with the Seal of 'Jijin Tang'." This embroidery was also made in the Kangxi period (1661-1722), Shan (2005), p. 72. Also see Piao (2010), pp. 207-216.

⁶¹ Ingold (2001), pp. 17-18.

⁶² Gell (1992), pp. 40-63.

the gazetteer of Qixia 棲霞 Temple, the compiler praises Mrs. Chen's needle work by saying that "looking at the meticulousness of her knife and ruler, we know the extremeness of her sincerity" (*guan pi dao chi zhi wei, zhi qi qian cheng zhiji* 觀彼刀尺之微, 知其虔誠之極).⁶³ Here *dao chi* or knife and ruler are a metonym for needle work. The logic behind this appraisal is that the more technical refinement the embroidery displays, the more sincerity we can ascribe to its creator, the embroiderer. In other words, there is a direct connection between the degree of artistic refinement and the quality of devotion.

In a discussion of early Chinese ritual art, Wu Hung employs the term "costly art" to categorize the material nature of objects produced for ritual purposes. This type of object is mostly "made of precious material and/or requires specialized craftsmanship and an unusual amount of human labor."⁶⁴ Wu contends that these three factors are constructive for probing the relationship between artistic technique and the value of devotion. Though the making a devotional object such as hair embroidery is different from that of producing "ritual art," these three elements are still operative, with the exception that a woman makes use of her own body as a resource: her hair, her skill, her time and labor.

In the case of hair embroidery, the precious material is suggested through the status of the hair taken from the woman's body, and the way that devotees obtain hair through suffering pain. As for the specialized craftsmanship required, making hair embroidery itself is considered as a special skill, one that not every embroiderer acquires. The word *neng* 能 or ability is underlined in the accounts of women who can create Buddhist images using hair and needles. For instance, Xu Can 徐燦 (Xiangping 湘蘋), the well-known woman poet from the seventeenth century, besides her filial commitment to drawing five thousand and forty-eight Guanyin images as a way to pray for her mother's longevity, was also recorded as being "able to use hairs to embroider the icon of Great Being."⁶⁵

This skill includes, though not exclusively, a set of procedures that range from preparing hair, cleaning and softening it, to splitting hair strands, to stitching hair on to silk. As for the stage of preparation, according to the modern scholar Chen Chaozhi, the oils and dirt on hair need to be washed away with alkaline water first, then rinsed with clean

⁶³ See the entry "Dinghaixian Chenshi" 定海縣陳氏 in Zhu (1931), p. 9a.

⁶⁴ Wu (1995), p. 24.

⁶⁵ *Neng yi fa xiu dashi xiang* 能以髮繡大士像, see the entry for Xu Xiangping 徐湘蘋, in Zhu (1931), p. 23b. One of the five thousands paintings may have survived in Zhejiang Provincial Museum. It was created in 1658, and the inscription indicates that the painting is for praying for her mother's longevity. See *Zhongguo gudai shuhua jian ding zu* (1994), pl. zhe1-295, vol. 11, p. 88.

water, and finally a special treatment is required to soften the hair.⁶⁶ Though we do not know whether embroiderers applied similar methods to hair several hundred years ago, through observing the surfaces of surviving objects, we can at least infer several factors. First, during the Ming and Qing periods, women often applied oil to their hair.⁶⁷ Since there are no oil stains on the background silk of the embroidered pieces, the hair must have been cleaned. Secondly, as we can see from the hair embroidery Guanyin done by Li Feng, her needle stitches are meticulous and tidy, and the hair thread needed to be soft enough to be manipulated as easily as a silk thread (Fig. 4-4). Hence, some kind of treatment was probably applied to the hair. Thirdly, when we observe the outline of a body part, such as face, nose, arms and hands, on Li Feng's Guanyin, we see that the hair strands are much thinner and appear as a lighter black color. How was this visual effect created? Are they made of the legendary split hairs? Due to a lack of scientific analysis, we cannot draw any substantial conclusions at this stage. However, we can at least say that an innovation of this kind of difficult skill represents the endeavors of making religious objects with finer effect. From Guan Daosheng's multiple strands of hair to form one stitch, to the technique of splitting one hair into several strands, the finer techniques represent an increased amount of time put in by the practitioner, since it takes the practitioner's time to learn a skill and to perform a skill. But the type of labor externalized in a skill is more intense and produces objects of a different type of aesthetic quality.

The connection between sincerity and artistic refinement is not necessarily proportional. A good visual example from the modern period might help us to problematize this issue. According to inscriptions on the embroidered Guanyin found in Baoguang Temple near Chengdu that I have briefly mentioned already, Miss Diao from Sanhechang in the county of Chengdu studied Buddhism for many years, and promised to pluck her hair and use a needle to create a Guanyin embroidery. In 1947, before she entered a monastery and changed her secular name to the monastic name Chengguo 澄果, she embroidered the image of Guanyin with her own hair, and offered it to the main temple of Guchuan in Shihuixiang.⁶⁸ In this image, Guanyin holds a willow branch with one hand, and is standing on

⁶⁶ The author does not clarify what kinds of treatments are used for softening the hairs. Chen (1994), p. 48.

⁶⁷ In the encyclopaedia of daily life for woman, *Kunde baojian* 坤德寶鑑, there is a list of the hair oils used in the eighteenth century. See the section "Matters Related to Inner Chambers" 閨閣事宜, *Wutou shexiangyou* 烏頭麝香油 and *Cha tou zhuyou* 搽頭竹油 are the two recipes used by women to make hair oil themselves. See *Kunde baojian*, vol. 4, 24a.b. There are also instructions for dyeing hair, as well as other hair treatments in the same section.

⁶⁸ The collection is now in Baoguang Temple near Chengdu.

lotus flowers. Her haloed head faces down slightly with compassion in her eyes. Comparing it with other hair embroidered Guanyin images from the Ming and Qing periods, the humble quality of Miss Diao's piece clearly indicates that she did not have sophisticated training in needle work. However, can we conclude that she had less sincerity than her predecessors while making this Guanyin image? Indeed, the roughness of her stitches did not erase the materiality of her hair; on the contrary, it brings out the physical qualities of the hair. In particular, Miss Diao made it before she became a nun. By using her hair, the symbol of her secular attachment, she proved her determination to leave the secular world. Her skill may have been no more than average, but her sincerity is vividly reflected.

It is unclear whether, during the Ming and Qing periods, lower class devotees with less training in embroidery also produced hair embroidery Guanyin. The existing textual references and surviving examples of hair embroidery reflect that this devotional practice was bound up with women's artistic talent during the late imperial period. The religious meaning is suggested in the act of pursuing a better artistic effect. The practice of drawing *baimiao Guanyin* 白描觀音 or *baimiao dashi* 白描大士 became especially popular among gentry women in the Ming and Qing. This straightforward outline painting style was not just an aesthetic choice, but seemingly contained moral judgment and symbolic meaning associated with the woman's identity. The feminized Guanyin configuration in *baimiao* painting or monochrome ink fashion mirrored their chastity. Simultaneously, this painting style itself reflected the taste of the literati class, and was accordingly adopted by gentry woman as well. It is unclear whether the practice of using hair to stitch Buddhist icons first initiated the choice of *baimiao* painting as its medium or vice versa. However, more important is that the making of *faxiu dashi* 髮繡大士 hair embroidery Guanyin should be viewed in the light of women drawing Guanyin via *baimiao* style.

Conclusion

By investigating the techniques and religious connotations of hair embroidery in late imperial China, we can better understand how women creatively used parts of their body to link themselves to religious icons, Guanyin in particular. Women devotees expressed their wishes through this highly personal devotional practice. We have seen how this form of devotion served to bridge the gap between the devotee and the exalted being through externalizing a bodily part, namely hair. But the symbolic function of hair embroidery could also make it an object of a type of spiritual exchange. We have seen that by bringing hair and embroidery together, women fused labor and pain. Embroidery was valued partially

because of the amount of labor that went into completing a work, and this was thought to be recognized by Guanyin. Hair embroidery intensified the object, because of the intense feeling of pain experienced in the process of making the object. This intensity served to channel Guanyin into the secular realm. In other words, intensity and pain, feelings of the secular realm, came to signify closeness to the deity.

The cases of Ni Renji, Wang Yuan, and Lin Jinlan illustrate that women used hair embroidery not to become one with Guanyin, but either to show filial piety, or, in Lin's case, to cure her eye disease. Her actions and aims indicate the belief that the practice of hair embroidery could also have worldly effects, and thus become a type of medium through which Guanyin intervenes in the mundane world. The detachable parts of the body can become magical. Guanyin hair embroidery had a number of different significations and functions all linked to the particular situations of women in late imperial China, but in some way these functions served to bring women closer to transcendent dimensions. At times, such practices were connected to their obligations, and sometimes to the bitter nature of their conditions in the secular realm.

Figures

**Figure 1. *Guanyin*, attributed to Guan Daosheng 管道昇 (1262-1319);
human hair and silk floss on silk, embroidery, 105x50cm.**



SOURCE: Nanjing Museum collection
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

**Figure 1-1. *Guanyin* (detail),
attributed to Guan Daosheng (1262-1319);
human hair and silk floss on silk, embroidery, 105x50cm.**



SOURCE: Nanjing Museum collection.
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

**Figure 2. Welcoming Descent of the Amidā Triad,
Muromachi period, 15th century;
hanging scroll, silk floss and human hair embroidery on silk,
109.1x37.2 cm.**



SOURCE: Cleveland Museum of Art. American foundation for the Maud E. and Warren H. Corning Botanical Collection. 66.513.
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

Figure 3. *Buddha*, by Ni Renji 倪仁吉 (1607-1685);
human hair on silk, embroidery, d. 1649, collection unknown.



SOURCE: *Wentou cankao ziliao*, 9 (1958), p. 21.

Figure 4. *Guanyin*, by Li Feng 李飜 (d. 1691); human hair on silk, embroidery, 68x35cm.



SOURCE: Beijing Palace Museum collection.
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

**Figure 4-1. *Guanyin* (detail), by Li Feng (d. 1691);
human hair on silk, embroidery, 68x35cm.**



SOURCE: Beijing Palace Museum collection.
For the picture in color see the online edition of EASTM.

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