

Eötvös Loránd University  
Faculty of Humanities

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION  
ABSTRACT

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**Potalaka Faith in East Asia:**

Buddhist worldmaking examined through Chinese, Korean and Japanese Avalokiteśvara bodhimaṇḍas

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Budapest, 2022

## I.

The Sanskrit term *bodhimaṇḍa* can be translated as ‘the throne of enlightenment’ or ‘the platform of enlightenment’, and originally denoted the place where a buddha attained enlightenment. The Chinese equivalent, *daochang* 道場 (Jp. *dōjō*; Kr. *doryang*), is also used to indicate places where Buddhist (or, in general, religious) practice takes place, or a particular buddha or bodhisattva is worshipped. Thus, Avalokiteśvara *bodhimaṇḍas* are places of worship for the bodhisattva of compassion (*karuṇā*), where at the same time the ‘presence’ or ‘spirit’ of the bodhisattva can be assumed, so in a sense believers can get in touch with the qualities this bodhisattva represents. This dissertation examines a limited scope of Avalokiteśvara *bodhimaṇḍas*, namely religious sites identified with the mountain thought to be the worldly abode of the bodhisattva, Potalaka. The most well-known among these *bodhimaṇḍas* are Mount Putuo (Putuo-shan 普陀山) in China, Naksan Temple (Naksan-sa, 낙산사, 洛山寺) in Korea and the religious complex consisting of Kumano Nachi Shrine (Kumano Nachi Taisha 熊野那智大社) and Fudaraku-san Temple (Fudaraku-san-ji 補陀洛山寺) in Japan.

This dissertation attempts to compare the three sites from two viewpoints, which may contribute to understanding the Potalaka cult. One of these viewpoints is the philosophical background based on the different Buddhist schools these places were associated with, the other one is the influence of local traditions, with special emphasis on mountain and sea worship. The aim of this dual approach is to point out the unique and universal, as well as the local and translocal elements in the cults of the three regions. In other words, I search for patterns that are to be found in the wider Buddhist world and characteristics that are created by the specific religious environment of the given culture. The philosophical background of the faith in Potalaka especially lacked scholarly interest until now, therefore I believe that this dissertation can supplement already existing academic achievements with new insights, which in turn might serve as a basis for future research. I regard local beliefs as particularly worthy of attention, since it reflects the spirit of a given culture in the most visceral and ancient form, and thus this can give a truly unique expression to an internationally popular religious theme.

‘Duality’ and ‘interrelation’ are the two main keywords in the dissertation. In terms of ‘duality’, at each region I examine the religious site’s natural environment (including the duality of mountain and sea) and its relation to the sacred and profane world. As far as ‘interrelation’ is concerned, I studied the relationship between different belief systems and different cultures.

I used Chinese, Korean and Japanese texts as primary sources to shed light on the historical and cultural relations among the three regions. In order to trace the influence these three cultures had exerted on each other and to locate the changes in the image of Avalokiteśvara in the process, I also used oral literature and artistic remains.

## II.

Following the introductory part of the dissertation, in chapter II, based on the two keywords mentioned above, I give an overview of the formation and nature of Avalokiteśvara and the concept of Potalaka. In part 1, by using chosen passages from sūtras I examine the image of the bodhisattva to demonstrate that religious pluralism played an important role in the formation of Avalokiteśvara cult, and from an early time on other traditions' certain motifs or deities were frequently adopted into it (from Hinduism or Zoroastrism, for example). Transformations of the Potalaka cult in East Asia can be seen as a continuation of this tendency. Next, I refer to the dual approach to Avalokiteśvara, clearly observable in East Asian cults as well: the devotional approach that sees the bodhisattva as a compassionate savior and the practice-oriented approach that aims to follow an example set by the bodhisattva. Here, two important scriptures for the topic of the dissertation are used: the *Lotus Sūtra* (*Saddharma Puṇḍarīka Sūtra*) and the last chapter of the *Flower Ornament Scripture* (*Mahāvaiṣṭya Buddhāvataṃsaka Sūtra*), i.e. the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*.

Part 2 of chapter II examines Potalaka in the light of the duality of sacred and profane. First, based on Xuanzang's 玄奘 (602–664) travel records, the *Da Tang Xiyuji* 大唐西域記 ('Records from the Regions West of the Great Tang', 646), I explore the geographical location of the mountain, and then I proceed to examining the relationship of Potalaka with reality by using different translations of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*. In the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, the natural surroundings of Mount Potalaka are emphasized and although the depiction contains some supernatural elements, like the jewelled throne and the presence of the bodhisattvas, Potalaka evokes the image of a place in this world. In this respect it is worth adopting a new point of view regarding the origins of Avalokiteśvara cult, namely tracing back the origins of the bodhisattva to a local mountain or sea deity. The *Flower Ornament Scripture* in 80 fascicles depicts Potalaka as 'a mountain in the sea', and textual references mention its close connection with water, especially in the form of sea. Based on this insight, a few scholars have already suggested that the cult of Avalokiteśvara had originally emerged out of the cult of a local

mountain or sea deity, which may have been in close relation with the maritime trade on the Indian Ocean.

The cult of the bodhisattva appearing partly as a mountain or sea deity preserved the characteristics of nature worship even after it had spread to other regions in the world. Moreover, the image of the bodhisattva incorporated elements from local mountain and sea cults, which helped the domestication of its worship. Although we cannot find any symbolic interpretation of the Potalaka in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra*, the protagonist of the sutra, Sudhana, wandering in his own realm, visits 53 spiritual friends (*kalyāṇa-mitra*), among whom one find not only bodhisattvas and deities, but also lay people, including women and children. Thus, the realm of the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* is a world where sacred and profane aspects share the same space, while the plot depicts the realization process of this fact.

This is in accord with the philosophical content of the *Flower Ornament Scripture*, which depicts the world as Gautama Buddha experienced it after his enlightenment. The sutra calls this true nature of existence *dharmadhātu*. According to this, the foundation and source of all phenomena in the universe is the same Buddha nature or pure mind, therefore all beings are interconnected and can influence each other in countless, infinite ways. Consequently, ultimate reality, that is the realm of buddhas, and conventional truth are not mutually exclusive, and *samsāra* is none other than the realm of enlightenment. The pilgrimage in the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* thus becomes the symbol of spiritual journey.

The chapter ends with touching on the description of Potalaka in esoteric scriptures. These scriptures also mark the beginning of a symbolic interpretation of Potalaka. In the *Amoghapāśakalparāja Sūtra* (Ch. *Bukong shenbian zhenyanjing* 不空羂索神變真言經), translated by Bodhiruci (Ch. Putiliuzhi 菩提流支) in 707, reaching or seeing Potalaka is presented as a goal to be attained not by a concrete journey but by religious practice. By this the mountain appears not as a geographical location but a kind of ideal that can be experienced in dream or meditational visualisation.

### III.

Chapter III focuses on mountains' and seas' separating and connecting functions. First I examine the symbolic interpretations of mountains (Mount Sumeru, mountains as dwelling places of bodhisattvas or sites of sermons) and sea (sea as the symbol of *samsāra*, infinity or the all-encompassing nature of the universe) in the Buddhist tradition, with special emphasis

on the cult of Avalokiteśvara. In this chapter I also elaborate on the development of these ideas in the *tiantai* and *huayan* commentaries, such as Zhiyi's 智顛 (538–597) *Guanyin yishu* 觀音義疏 ('The interlinear commentary on the *Avalokiteśvara Sūtra*') or Chengguan's 澄觀 (738–839) *Da fangguang fo huayan jing shu* 大方廣佛華嚴經疏 ('Commentary on the *Flower Ornament Scripture*'). Potalaka combines the image of sea as the milieu of passions and suffering with the mountain as the area of rising above this mundane existence. As a symbol it expresses the two-way dynamism of descent and ascension, which is the key to understand the nature and practice of Avalokiteśvara.

Next, I dwell on the role of religious concepts about mountains and sea in East Asian cultural exchanges, and describe the main maritime routes these ideas spread along. I also introduce the textual and folklore tradition centering around Mount Penglai (Penglai-shan 蓬萊山) and Xu Fu 徐福, which, I argue, played a prominent role in each of the three regions' Potalaka cult.

#### IV.

The subsequent chapters discussing the Potalaka faith in each of the three regions (chapters IV–VI) follow the same pattern: after explaining the historical background of the cultic site, the philosophical background of the beliefs is examined, finally the question of interrelation with the local belief system is addressed.

Chapter IV focuses on Mount Putuo in China. Part 1 examines the role of international relations in the formation of Guanyin worship in Zhejiang region, as well as in the foundation of the Temple of 'Guanyin Who is Unwilling to Leave' (Bukenu Guanyin 不肯去觀音). Primary sources used to investigate the historical background of Mount Putuo include Xu Jing's 徐兢 *Xuanhe fengshi Gaoli tujing* 宣和奉使高麗圖經 ('Illustrated Account of the Xuanhe Embassy to Goryeo', 1124), the *Fozutongji* 佛祖統紀 ('Comprehensive History of the Buddhist Patriarchs', 1269) written by Zhipan 志盤 and the *Baoqing siming zhi* 寶慶四明志 ('The Gazetteer of Mount Siming from the Baoqing Era'), compiled in 1227. Mount Putuo was located at an international maritime route. Its founding was intimately connected to the sea trade among India, China, Japan, and Shilla. This special position reinforced the role of Guanyin of the Southern Sea (Nanhai Guanyin 南海觀音) as a savior of those who are in danger at sea, a role rooted in the teachings of the *Lotus Sūtra*. At the same time, her image, as

well as that of Potalaka, was also changed by incorporating indigenous Chinese religious elements, like the concept of ‘stimulus-response’ and local deities.

Part 2 examines the concept of *ganying* 感應 (stimulus-response) as the philosophical background of Chinese Potalaka cult thorough gazetteers (*shanzhi* 山誌) of Mount Putuo, including Sheng Ximing’s 盛熙明 *Butuoluojiashan zhuan* 補陀洛迦山傳 (‘Gazetteer of Mount Potalaka’, 1361) and the *Nanhai Putuoshan zhi* 南海普陀山志 (‘Gazetteer of Mount Putuo at the Southern Sea’, 1698) by Qiu Lian 裘璉. Part 3 touches on the influence of indigenous deities (for example, the Dragon King and Xiwangmu), the lore of Mount Penglai and Daoist immortals as examples for integrating local beliefs into the cult.

## V.

Chapter V focuses on Nak-san Temple in Korea. As a first step, I examine the founding of the temple, as well as its relationship with Mount Putuo in China. Primary sources to examine the history of Naksan include the ‘Two Saints of Nak-san, Avalokiteśvara, Ananyagāmin, and Choshin’ (Nak-san idaesōng Kwanūm Chōngch’wi Choshin 낙산이대성 관음 정취 조신, 洛山二大聖觀音正趣調信) chapter in the *Samguk yusa* 三國遺事 (‘Memorabilia of the Three Kingdoms’, ca. 1282–1289) compiled by Iryōn 一然, and the *Shinjūng Tongguk yōji sūngnam* 新增東國輿地勝覽 (‘Augmented Survey of the Geography of Korea’, 1530). Naksan Temple was established by the monk Uisang 義湘, therefore the founding legend of Naksan shows the strong influence of the Hwaōm school. Religious practice is emphasized, which aims at entering Potalaka envisioned as a pure land on earth through enlightenment.

Part 2 stresses the importance of religious practice, as well as the role of Potalaka (Nak-san) as a pure land on earth in the philosophy of Ŭisang through the *Paekhwa toryang parwonmun* 白花道場發願文略解 (‘Vow made at White Flower Enlightenment site). As a final point, elements of mountain and sea worship are examined through the legends about Ŭisang and Wonhyo in the abovementioned chapter of the *Samguk yusa*. The cult of Kwanūm was influenced by indigenous beliefs about local mountain goddesses, thus was the motif of fertility incorporated into the bodhisattva’s imagery. At the same time, the influence of female

immortals and the dragon king of the East Sea can also be observed, the latter adding a state-protecting element to the narrative.

## VI.

Chapter VI focuses on the Kannon cult of the Kumano region in Japan. Part 1 of this chapter examines the domestication of Avalokiteśvara in Japan in the light of cultural exchanges taking place via the sea. Kannon cult at Kumano can be linked to mountain ascetism, later known as *shugendō* 修験道, which already anticipates the presence of religious plurality and the influence of international relations. In this respect, it is important to clarify the overseas sources of the *yamabushi* 山伏 tradition, which can suggest a relationship with the other two *bodhimaṇḍas*. Part 2 examines the problem of rebirth in the practice of *Fudaraku tokai* ('crossing the sea to Potalaka'), while adverting to the philosophical background of *shugendō*. The ritual of 'crossing the sea to Potalaka' was practiced at Kumano, a region supervised by *shugendō* affiliated to the Tendai school. For this reason, it reflects the *Lotus Sūtra*'s soteriology merged with the esoteric Buddhist concept of becoming a Buddha in one's present body (*sokushin jōbutsu* 即身成佛). The last part investigates the influence of immortals, the Dragon Palace and the indigenous concepts of the underworld on the Fudaraku beliefs in the Kumano Nachi region, with special emphasis on the association of the outside world with the otherworld. The belief that the abode of Kannon can be reached from the shores of Nachi was based on the concept that the otherworld or the land of immortals was found across the sea, and the palace of the Dragon King was lying under the sea. For examining the mythological and local context of Fudaraku beliefs we can refer to chronicles like the *Kojiki* 古事記 ('Records of Ancient Matters', 712) or the *Nihon shoki* 日本書紀 ('Chronicles of Japan', 720), as well as collections of Buddhist legends like the *Konjaku monogatari shū* 今昔物語集 ('Anthology of Tales from the Past', 12th century).

## VII.

The major findings of the research can be summarized as follows:

The ideological framework of Potalaka beliefs differs according to the historical and religious background of the region. Mount Putuo was influenced by the *Lotus Sūtra*, Nak-san

by the *Flower Ornament Scripture* (Hwaōm) and Kumano Nachi by the *Lotus Sūtra* (Tendai) along with esoteric beliefs.

Potalaka beliefs incorporated various elements from indigenous sea and mountain worship. Due to their geographical location near the sea, the integration of local dragon worship is widespread at all Avalokiteśvara *bodhimaṇḍas*.

The influence of immortal lore, especially Mount Penglai imagery, is remarkable in all three regions.

Besides examining the *bodhimaṇḍas* of the three regions together, one of the main contributions of the dissertation is shedding light upon the symbolic interpretation of Potalaka. For this purpose, not only did I draw attention to the symbolic interpretations in the Buddhist *sūtras* (the *Gaṇḍavyūha Sūtra* and esoteric *sūtras*), but I also examined the traditional mountain and sea symbolism of Buddhism, supplemented by interpretations from Tiantai and Huayan commentaries. Another contribution of the dissertation is investigating the relationship between the three *bodhimaṇḍas* and different Buddhist schools or traditions, which has lacked scholarly attention until now.

Through my research I undertook to provide insight into the cultural exchanges between Buddhism and local traditions of three East Asian regions, and concurrently qualify the image of Avalokiteśvara, who is predominantly well-known for her devotional cult. Identifying geographical places with Potalaka was not a superficial imposition of Buddhist names and concepts on local topography, but each region created its own specific religious space based on its traditions, thus creating a realm that is timeless and universal, and, at the same time, specific and local. Places associated with Potalaka were inter-religious, cross-cultural spaces where the Buddhist realm met not only with the region's natural, geographical space, but also with its spiritual, mythical dimension.



Papers about the topic of the submitted dissertation:

‘Searching for a Bodhisattva Land on Earth: Potalaka Faith in East Asia.’ *Religions*. Special issue: Social Life History of Chinese Buddhist Monks (Submitted: 05/05/2022; accepted: 23/05/2022; expected publication: 2023).

‘A Tale of Two Potalakas: Intercultural Relations Between China and Korea Examined Through Maritime Buddhism.’ *East Asian Cultures* (Submitted: 12/2021; accepted: 05/2022; expected publication: 2022, autumn).

‘Searching for a Bodhisattva Land on Earth: Potalaka Faith in East Asia.’ Submitted to: a collection of conference papers presented at the East Asian Buddhist Worldmaking conference administered by the FROGBEAR project and hosted by Harvard FAS CAM (2021.08.14–16.). (Submitted: 11/2021; under evaluation).