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Resemblance or Influence? George Smith, W.A. Cornaby, and the Comparison Between Guanyin-Virgin Mary

Luna Jiayi Yu

Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, USA
lunay6555@gmail.com

Abstract. This paper examines how British missionaries George Smith and W. A. Cornaby interpreted the resemblance between the Buddhist bodhisattva Guanyin and the Christian Virgin Mary figure in nineteenth and early twentieth-century China. Rather than asking whether the two religious images were historically connected, this paper focuses on how missionaries used Christian interpretive frameworks in order to explain their resemblance. Through close readings of Smith's *A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit* (1847) and Cornaby's *The Call of Cathay* (1910) publications, this paper argues that the two missionaries share similar visual evidence yet different historical meanings. Smith recognized the parallels between Buddhism and Christianity but separated religious resemblance from historical causation, while Cornaby treated resemblance as evidence of earlier Christian influence on Buddhism. This comparison shows that missionary writings did not simply record religious similarities. Instead, missionaries actively produced historical explanations by deciding what counted as evidence, how religious influence moved in an unfamiliar region, and what kinds of historical relationships were produced between religions.

Keywords: Guanyin, Virgin Mary, British missionaries, religious comparison, Christian-Buddhist encounters

1. Introduction

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, British missionaries in China often explained Chinese Buddhism through ideas that were already familiar to Christian audiences. An example was the comparison between Guanyin, the Buddhist bodhisattva of compassion, and the Virgin Mary. In China, Guanyin has developed several female forms, including images of child-giving and child-holding, that could appear visually similar to the Christian representations of the Virgin Mary and Child [1]. However, missionaries who noticed this resemblance did not always explain the similarities as meaning the same thing.

The difference can be seen clearly in the writings of British missionary George Smith (1815-1871), and W.A. Cornaby (1860-1921). Smith recognized several similarities between Chinese Buddhism and Christian practice and imagery, including the resemblance between Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. However, he argued that most of these similarities were accidental, and rejected the idea that early Christian influence was their historical origin [2]. Cornaby, on the other hand, believed that Buddhism had adopted parts of Christian ideas, and connected the child-giving

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Guanyin directly with images of the Virgin Mary and Child [3]. The disagreement between the two scholars raises a more specific question: How did George Smith and W.A. Cornaby use Christian interpretive strategies differently when explaining the resemblance between Guanyin and the Virgin Mary as a case study?

This paper argues that even though Smith and Cornaby both understood and acknowledged the resemblance through Christian frameworks, they used the frameworks differently. Smith separated religious similarities from historical causation, while Cornaby turned resemblance into the evidence of Christian transmission. Their disagreement suggests that missionary writings do not simply record religious similarities; They actively produce historical meanings from what they observed by deciding what counted as evidence, what kind of historical relationship was possible, and where religious influence between them originated or not.

2. Background

I first became interested in this topic when I came across a seventeenth-century sculpture titled "Guanyin the Bringer of Sons" on the official website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. The visual similarity between the figure of Guanyin and the Virgin Mary has made me assume that the two images might hold similar religious meanings or shared background stories, and it drew my interest in how familiar religious images can shape the interpretation of unfamiliar traditions.

Later on, I found that British missionaries in nineteenth-century China (during the Qing dynasty) had already made similar comparisons between Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. British missionary activity had expanded in the nineteenth century in China during the Qing dynasty especially after the First Opium War, and the Treaty of Nanjing in 1842, where several ports were opened to British trade and residence [4]. This new position created more opportunities for the missionaries to travel and study Chinese society for missionary work [4]. During the following decades, British missionaries became one of the most important writers who produced work including travel accounts, missionary reports, translations, and studies of Chinese society and religion to the audience in British [4].

However, the cultural difference created a problem, where missionaries had to explain religious ideas, images, and practices that most of the readers had never learnt before. One possible method was comparison, where Buddhist monasteries could be compared with Christian religious institutions, Buddhist rituals with Christian rituals, and Buddhist figures with Christian figures. Thus, the bodhisattva Guanyin became a notable case of this kind of comparison. In most situations, Guanyin appears holding a child, which made comparison with the Virgin and Child possible for Christian observers [1]. Yet, the comparisons were not always objective.

3. Secondary source discussion

As mentioned above, missionaries were not merely "objective" while recording Chinese Buddhism and the comparison between Guanyin and Virgin Mary. Their own Christian identities, religious experiences, and pre-existing frameworks influenced how missionaries perceived and described the difference. In other words, missionary writings were a form of interpretation, rather than neutral observations [5].

Scholar Eric Reinders' book *Borrowed Gods and Foreign Bodies: Christian Missionaries Imagine Chinese Religion* points out that people understand unfamiliar cultures through categories that already seem natural to them, even though these categories come from thor own background. For British missionaries, one important part of this framework was anti-Catholic thought, and

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Reinders notes that missionaries consistently applied anti-Catholic categories to Chinese religion [5]. This provides an explanation of why figures such as Guanyin could be understood as a familiar yet different Christian image.

Dr. Isaac Yue makes a similar argument in his paper "Missionaries (Mis-)Representing China: Orientalism, Religion, and the Conceptualization of Victorian Cultural Identity." Yue argues that Christianity was an important part of the British identity and worked together with Orientalist ideas to shape how British observers understood foreign cultures [6]. In this framework, missionary descriptions of China were influenced not only by what missionaries encountered, but also by their existing ideas about Christianity, morality, and cultural difference.

Other scholarship also helps explain the different missionary contexts in which Smith and Cornaby wrote. David W. Kling discusses the expansion of Protestant missions after the Opium Wars and the opening of treaty ports [7], while John T. P. Lai shows that missionaries in the 1840s were still debating how Christian teachings should be translated, printed, and presented to Chinese audiences [8]. Lian Xi, by contrast, shows how missionary work later expanded through education, translation, medicine, and other institutional forms [9].

4. Methodology

This paper uses close readings of British missionary texts. The two main primary sources are George Smith's *A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit to Each of the Consular Cities of China*, published in 1847, and W. A. Cornaby's *The Call of Cathay*, published in 1910. I use Smith and Cornaby not because they can represent every British missionary, but their writings give unusually clear and different answers to a similar question. Both compare Christianity and Chinese Buddhism, both discuss imagery related to Guanyin and the Virgin Mary. This makes it possible to separate the act of recognizing similarity from the act of explaining the resemblance.

Smith and Cornaby also wrote more than sixty years apart. Thus, I do not use the difference to argue for a development from one missionary to another viewpoint. Instead, their different historical settings provide context for two distinct ways of producing knowledge about religious resemblance.

5. Primary source discussion

The two main primary sources for this paper are George Smith's *A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit to Each of the Consular Cities of China* (1847), and W.A. Cornaby's *The Call of Cathay* (1910). I chose these two missionaries' work not because they can represent all British missionaries during the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but because they provide clear yet contrasting answers to the same interpretive problem.

5.1. George Smith: resemblance without historical borrowing

George Smith went to China in 1844 on an exploratory mission for the Church Missionary Society. His *A Narrative of an Exploratory Visit*, published in 1847 records his observations made during the travels in Hong Kong and other newly opened treaty-port cities after the First Opium War. His writing was based on an environment in which British Missionaries observers were collecting information about Chinese society, while also trying to classify unfamiliar institutions and religious practices for the readers at home.

In Chapter XV, Smith narrowed down a list of similarities between the two religions through his observations, including monasteries, nunneries, celibacy, religious clothing, incense, bells, prayers,

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and so on. He then adapted another visual similarity as an example: a female religious figure given the title "Queen of Heaven" and "Holy Mother", represented by the image of holding a male child, which later became known as Guanyin [2]. However, Smith described most of these parallels as "purely accidental resemblances [2]." This phrase is significant as Smith did not deny the similarities exist. Instead, he clearly recognized them and viewed them as striking enough to describe in detail. What he rejected later is the assumption that visual or ritual similarities automatically prove a historical relationship: he first stated that earlier Christians in China might have produced these Buddhist similarities, but denied it as "destitute of probability [2]." Therefore, Smith separated two questions that might be treated as one: whether Buddhism and Christianity can appear alike, and whether that similarity proves that one religion borrowed from another historically.

By reading alongside Reinders, where he stated that nineteenth-century Protestant missionaries did not encounter Chinese religion as neutral observers. Their descriptions of Buddhism were much shaped by their own religious background and experiences, which influenced the way they classified it. To be specific, Protestant missionaries consistently applied anti-Catholic categories to Chinese religion: when they described ritual, obeisance, monastic institutions, devotional practices, sacred images, and idolatry, Roman Catholicism often provided a familiar language of comparison. Additionally, Protestants' discussion of China usually overlapped with Protestant-Catholic polemics, so the comparison between ritual, monasticism and religious practices was already a part of the Protestant way of interpreting religion from the East [5]. This explains why Smith's writing organized Buddhism through a list of examples such as incense, prayers, and sacred figures in order to create a legible way for Western audiences to easily understand.

Smith's following statement makes this interpretive framework even clearer, showing more explicitly how he distinguished Buddhist practices through a Protestant Christian lens. After Roman Catholic missionaries arrived in China, Chinese observers noticed the similarities between images of the Virgin Mary and their own "Goddess of Mercy [2]." He supported this interpretation by quoting Sir John Francis Davis, who reported that Chinese people in Canton sometimes called Guanyin "the Virgin" when speaking with Europeans and also applied the name Guanyin to Catholic images of the Virgin [2, 10]. This suggests that comparison moves in both directions: Guanyin can be explained as Mary, at the same time Mary can also be explained as Guanyin. Smith therefore provided an alternative explanation for similarity: that people can identify unfamiliar images through familiar ones after cultural contact without proving that one image historically originated from the other. Thus, Smith's mechanism was not simply skepticism. Instead, his writing demonstrated a particular way of deciding what counts as historical evidence. Visual resemblance may establish analogy, and cultural contact may explain later identification, but neither automatically proves historical borrowing.

In order to further understand Smith's way of reasoning, we will also need to put ourselves into his background of the unusually fluid missionary environment of the 1840s. In David W. Kling's "Protestant Entrance and Christian Expansion (1840-1950)", he points out that Anglo-French military pressure and the unequal-treaty system created unprecedented opportunities for Christian expansion beginning in the 1840s, bringing Protestant missionaries into a newly opened field with strong evangelical ambitions but without a mature, settled missionary infrastructure [7]. Reinders similarly emphasizes that nineteenth-century missionaries operated in a very different political environment from earlier missions: newer Protestant and Catholic missions had much greater military and commercial power behind them, traveled increasingly inland, and consciously attempted to penetrate more deeply into Chinese society [5]. Yet increased access did not mean missionaries already knew how to interpret or evangelize China. John T. P. Lai's study of the

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Shanghai Tract Committee in "Doctrinal Dispute within Interdenominational Missions: The Shanghai Tract Committee in the 1840s" shows that, immediately after the Treaty of Nanking opened the treaty ports, missionaries were actively debating how Christian teachings should be translated, printed, distributed, and presented to Chinese audiences; interdenominational cooperation existed alongside doctrinal disagreement over the content of missionary literature itself [8]. Smith's 1844 exploratory journey therefore belonged to a moment in which Protestant missionaries were simultaneously gaining access to China and still working out how to understand, classify, translate, and communicate across religious and cultural differences. Seen in this context, his method makes sense: familiar Christian and especially anti-Catholic categories gave him a vocabulary for recognizing Buddhist parallels, while the unsettled missionary and intellectual environment left the historical meaning of those parallels open to debate [5]. The list and the rejection therefore were not doing the same work: the list answered what Buddhism resembled, while the rejection answered whether resemblance was enough to prove historical transmission.

5.2. W. A. Cornaby: resemblance as Christian influence

W. A. Cornaby, a Wesleyan Methodist missionary who arrived in China in 1885, wrote more than sixty years after Smith. Cornaby spent around eighteen years working in Hankow and Hanyang and later became involved in Christian editorial and literary work in Shanghai [11]. His book The Call of Cathay, published in 1910, presents Chinese history, religion, and missionary opportunity to a Christian readership [3].

Compared to Smith, Cornaby used a different approach. In the earlier chapters of his publication, he talked about the history of Christianity and Buddhism in China. Rather than viewing the Guanyin-Virgin Mary resemblance as an "accidental" or the product of later identification, Cornaby placed it inside the historical narrative of Christian influence. He argued that Buddhist monks had "materialized various Nestorian (Christian) elements", and then connected this claim directly to the images of the child-giving Guanyin and Virgin Mary. In page 32, Cornaby wrote that from such an image Buddhist adopted a new goddess, a child-holding figure whom he identifies as the "Son-giver" Guanyin. He argues that Buddhist monks had "materialised various Nestorian elements" and claims that they "adopted a new goddess" from images of the Virgin and Child, which he identifies with the "Son-giving" Guanyin [3].

As mentioned above, it is essential to look at Cornaby's background in order to understand his text. By the time The Call of Cathay was published in 1910, Protestant missions had already been established in China for decades, and missionaries were no longer entering a newly opened field in the same way that Smith had in the 1840s [10]. Reinders notes that British Protestant missionary culture itself had also developed over the nineteenth century. The relatively "strident evangelical urgency" from the earlier Victorian period had gradually shifted toward a more institutional and pastoral missionary culture [5]. Missionary activity had also expanded beyond direct preaching into schools, hospitals, translation, publishing, and other forms of cultural work [9]. Thus, Cornaby wrote at a time when missionaries possessed a much larger archive of writing about Chinese religion, earlier Christian presence in China, and the history of missionary contact than Smith had possessed in 1847.

Within this context, Cornaby's treatment of Guanyin does more than compare two similar religious images. He argues that Buddhist monks had "materialised various Nestorian elements" and that, from images of the Virgin and Child, they "adopted a new goddess," whom he identifies with the child-giving Guanyin [3]. The language of "materialised" and "adopted" is important because it turns resemblance into a historical movement: something Christian exists first, Buddhism

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encounters it, and Buddhism then incorporates it. Cornaby makes the direction of this movement especially clear when he rejects Western travelers who had suggested that Christianity might have borrowed from Buddhism; instead, he argues that they misunderstood the chronology and place Christian influence earlier [3]. In his interpretation, therefore, resemblance becomes evidence not simply of contact but of Christian historical priority. This fits a broader missionary culture in which Christianity and Chinese religion were rarely treated as historically equal alternatives. Lian Xi presents that Protestant missionary work in China remained fundamentally oriented toward evangelization, while missionary institutions also expanded through education, translation, medicine, and other forms of cultural work [9]. Reinders similarly shows that even when early twentieth-century missionary rhetoric softened, older hierarchies between "Christian" and "heathen," spiritual and material, rational and superstitious remained influential in missionary representations of China [5]. Cornaby's genealogy can therefore be read as a Christian-centered diffusionist explanation: rather than allowing the child-giving Guanyin to emerge entirely from an independent Buddhist development, he places the origin of this particular form outside Buddhism and gives Christianity explanatory priority. This does not prove that Cornaby consciously wanted to "take credit away" from Buddhism, and I would not claim that as his personal motive. What can be demonstrated is the effect of Cornaby's explanation: Christianity is the source, Buddhism is the receiver.

6. Conclusion

Smith and Cornaby are useful together not simply because they disagree, but because they show two different ways of turning religious resemblance into historical explanation. Both begin with the same basic observation: Guanyin and the Virgin Mary appear comparable. Yet they give that resemblance very different meanings.

For Smith, resemblance leads to comparison, but not necessarily to historical borrowing. He recognizes similarity while questioning whether it is strong enough evidence to prove influence. Cornaby moves in the opposite direction. For him, resemblance becomes the evidence of transmission, allowing him to argue that Christian imagery had historically influenced Buddhism. The key difference is therefore not what they see, but what they believe similarity can prove. Similarity does not automatically explain itself; the observer must decide what counts as evidence, what kind of historical relationship is possible, and in what direction influence moves.

This comparison also develops the arguments of Reinders and Yue. Both scholars show that missionary representations were shaped by Christian and British frameworks [5, 6]. Smith and Cornaby, however, demonstrate that sharing a Christian framework did not produce one uniform missionary interpretation. Smith's Protestant and anti-Catholic framework helped him recognize Buddhist practices through Catholic parallels, but he limited the movement from resemblance to genealogy. Cornaby instead used a more diffusionist explanation, turning resemblance into evidence that Christian forms had entered Buddhism.

To conclude, this paper is not trying to decide which missionary was correct about the origin of child-giving Guanyin. Their disagreement reveals how missionary knowledge was produced. Missionaries did not simply observe similarities; they selected what appeared comparable, interpreted it through familiar Christian categories, and then decided what historical meaning that resemblance should carry. The comparison therefore moves beyond simply saying that missionaries were "biased." Smith and Cornaby show that similar Christian assumptions could still produce different ideas about evidence, causation, transmission, and religious history.

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