RESEARCH ARTICLE

Guanyin's Limbo: Icons as Demi-Persons and Dividuating Objects

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ABSTRACT How do objects and humans relationally constitute one another? In this article, we examine statues of Guanyin, the bodhisattva of compassion, in Hong Kong to illuminate the forms of personhood and agency that arise through human–icon relations in a modern metropolis. We follow the life course of Guanyin statues, investigating their production, circulation, animation, and disposal—teasing out worshippers' contradictory discourses on whether the deity is present in the statue or in the mind of the worshipper. These ethnographic observations lead us to consider how anthropological debates about the nature of cultural objects as *representations* or as *agents* parallel Guanyin practices and discourses in Hong Kong. We suggest how the ambivalent status of Guanyin statues is negotiated for practitioners as "demi-persons" and can be understood for anthropologists through the concept of the "dividuating object." [*material religion, animism, agency, personhood, icon, Hong Kong*]

RESUMEN ¿Cómo se constituyen relacionalmente objetos y humanos los unos a los otros? En este artículo examinamos las estatuas de Guanyin, la bodhisattva de la compasión, en Hong Kong para iluminar las formas de la condición de ser una persona individual y de agencia que surgen de las relaciones humano-icónicas en una metrópolis moderna. Seguimos el curso de vida de las estatuas de Guanyin, investigando su producción, circulación, animación, y eliminación – desenredando los discursos contradictorios de los devotos sobre si la diosa está presente en la estatua o en la mente del devoto. Estas observaciones etnográficas nos llevan a considerar cómo los debates antropológicos acerca de la naturaleza de los objetos culturales como *representaciones* o como *agentes* paralelan las prácticas y discursos de Guanyin en Hong Kong. Sugerimos cómo el estatus ambivalente de las estatuas Guanyin es negociado por practicantes como "semi-personas" y puede ser entendido por antropólogos a través del concepto de "objeto dividuante". [*religión material, animismo, agencia, condición de ser persona, ícono, Hong Kong*]

RÉSUMÉ Comment les objets et les humains se constituent-ils mutuellement? Dans cet article, nous étudions l'usage à Hong Kong des statues de Guanyin, bodhisattava de la compassion, pour mener une réflexion sur l'agentivité et la personnalité de l'icône religieuse dans une métropole moderne. Nous retraçons la trajectoire des icônes de Guanyin, de la production à l'animation et jusqu'à l'abandon, mettant en exergue le discours contradictoire des adeptes quant à savoir si la divinité réside dans la statue ou dans l'esprit de l'adepte. Ces données nous mènent à réfléchir sur le débat anthropologique sur la nature des objets culturels comme *représentations* ou comme *agents*.

AMERICAN ANTHROPOLOGIST, Vol. 000, No. 0, pp. 1–14, ISSN 0002-7294, online ISSN 1548-1433. DOI: 10.1111/aman.13317

Nous proposons les concepts de « demi-personne » et d' « objet dividuant » pour comprendre le statut ambigü des icônes de Guanyin. [*religion matérielle, animisme, agentivité, personne, icône, Hong Kong*]

摘要 究竟神像之中有沒有神?神像是不是只是一件幫助信徒觀想神明的物件?本文以香港各處敬奉的觀音像為例, 研究人與神像兩者之間如何構成信仰關係。我們調查觀音像的整個流通歷程, 研究其生產、流通, 研究人們如何理解「開光」的意義, 也研究人們為何棄置神像於特定的地方。本文將觀音信徒的話語矛盾：神像本身是否靈驗, 還是神像只不過是用以敬奉的象徵符號? 此矛盾同樣存在於當代人類學理論之中：只有人類才具有能動性, 還是物件也具有能動性 (agency of objects) ?我們如何理解物件具有的人格?觀音像實則體現「半人格 (demi-persons)」的特點, 故此信徒對觀音像的理解是曖昧不清的, 他們解釋自己與觀音的關係在於「緣分」, 而我們對此以人類學的觀點作出分析。[宗教物象、泛靈主義、能動性、人格、神像、香港]

At the western edge of Hong Kong Island sits a purgatory for abandoned deity statues. In a lush city park in Wah Fu, at the threshold of the sea, are several thousand statues in winding rows on a hillside that resemble ordered chaos (Figure 1). Shaded under bamboo and banyan trees, the statues line paths and rest atop makeshift terraces. They all stand upright, and many are held in place with cement or mud. The air is filled with incense—evidence of the innumerable offerings that have been made here. The statues include a range of figures, from the Chinese folk god Tudigong (Earth Lord) to the Japanese waving cat *maneki-neko*. But most are figures of Guanyin, the bodhisattva[1] of compassion, who is likely the most common Buddhist figure throughout Asia and beyond (Tay 1976).

The statues were brought here because they could no longer be tended. Perhaps the owner converted to Christianity or passed away. Whatever the reason, the statues have all been abandoned. Exposed to the elements, many are broken and blanketed in grime. Yet they are all cared for by a small group of Guanyin followers, who spend hours each day keeping the area clean, burning incense, building shrines, and ensuring that the figurines are maintained. This site is not a cemetery; the effigies are forsaken but not dead. But why can't these statues—most of which are mass produced and easily replaced—simply be trashed? Why must these particular figurines—by the thousands—be kept "alive" in this limbo?

FIGURE 1. *Ms. Tang, a Guanyin follower, prays to the abandoned statues at Wah Fu. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

The answer to this ambiguity is itself ambiguous, according to Uncle Wang, an eighty-eight-year-old retired butcher who is one of the site's self-appointed caretakers. On the one hand, he explained that Guanyin herself occupies each statue, and thus each statue must be shown respect, even when its usefulness has faded. "Don't throw the statue away . . . they will be safe here," he said. On the other hand, Uncle Wang occasionally dismissed the statues' inherent personhood. He claimed Guanyin is not in any statue at all. When we asked him about the typhoon that struck Hong Kong in 2018 and destroyed dozens of statues, Uncle Wang shrugged away the loss. He replied, "It's no big deal . . . the gods are in the sky and everywhere."

Uncle Wang's ambivalence about the statues' agency—they have a life of their own, but they are also "just things"—is not limited to Guanyin statues in Hong Kong: it is an ambivalence that has absorbed anthropology itself. In this article, we highlight these parallel conversations to illuminate how they can inform each other. First, we outline the tension between anthropological theorizations of statues as *representations* or as *agents*, a tension that mirrors the ambivalent discourses of Uncle Wang, other Guanyin worshippers, and Buddhist doctrine itself. Second, we introduce historical and anthropological background on Guanyin, as well as the emplacement of her statues within homes and localities in Hong Kong. Third, we follow the life course of Guanyin statues, through the transitional phases of production, ritual activation, abandonment, and adoption. Fourth, we propose the concept of *dividuating object* to understand how multiple statues of a single deity can each acquire as many "personalities" as there are relationships between it and people who worship it. Finally, we discuss how the power of Guanyin statues can be linked to the very ambiguity of their status as demi-persons.

In the summer of 2018 and spring of 2019, we undertook an ethnographic study of Guanyin statues across Hong Kong, conducting observations and sixty semistructured interviews at thirty-two locations, including Buddhist monasteries, shops, temples, popular/folk shrines, and Daoist halls. We also conducted participant observation, prompting communications through divinatory practices surrounding our adoption of two Guanyin statues. Following Morgan's (2017, 15) approach of addressing three key moments in an object type's life cycle, we tracked not only the statues' physical appearances but also "the registers of sensation that apprehend the object, the techniques of the body that the object activates, and the value or salience that is generated by the use of the object in religious practice" (see also Appadurai 1986; Hoskins 1998). All of these registers offer ways to consider the object's agency, to the extent that the object can be said to induce or prompt people to feel, act, or think in a specific way (Gell 1998, 16–23; Latour 2005; Mitchell 2010).

Through these methods, we followed the trajectories of Guanyin statues in Hong Kong and found how different actors mobilize different discourses, techniques, and practices around the bodhisattva, turning the statues into mediators of endlessly extensible known and unknown networks and agents. Each statue has a life course that intersects with the stories of places, shrines, and people who have engaged with the icon, which combine and intermingle through their circulation.

We encountered two paradoxes as epitomized by Uncle Wang. First, interviewees claimed that Guanyin is everywhere and that statues are unnecessary, and yet statues and figures—whether in the form of a tiny jade necklace or a 180-foot-tall bronze statue—could be found in abundance, and everyone said that they must be respected. Second, Guanyin statues appear to be, and are recognized by all worshippers as, representations of the same bodhisattva, and yet each statue has its unique "personality" and power such that, in practice, one might treat each as a distinct deity. If they are all representations of the same deity, why the scene, commonly found in Hong Kong, of dozens of redundant images of the same deity being worshipped in the same place? If many producers, worshippers, and Buddhist monks agree that the statues are merely unimportant symbolic *representations* of Guanyin, why do they continue the practice of ritually animating the statues to make them efficacious and take such precautions in discarding them, often preferring to leave them to be tended in purgatories of the gods? These paradoxes are not unique to Guanyin statues; they are common to deity statues in Chinese religions and many other religions.

On the one side is what we might call the argument of *representation*: the view that deities are immaterial symbols and statues are only the symbol's material representations. A long tradition in Western philosophy and the social sciences—from Feuerbach (1841) to Durkheim (1912) to Guthrie (1993)—has postulated anthropomorphic deities as projections of an image of the individual or collective onto a material reality that, in reality, lacks any of the divine qualities attributed to it by humans. Once we are aware of the object's symbolic function, this frame suggests, we can focus on its symbolic message; the object becomes disenchanted, a mere prop for aesthetic appreciation, remembrance, or mindfulness.

On the other side is what we might call the argument of *agency*: the view that objects have not only material properties and symbolic meanings but also interactive capacities (DeLanda 2006, 10; Gell 1998; Harris and Crellin 2018). A growing body of anthropological literature has emphasized that we should question Cartesian binary categories, such as the ideal and the material, nature and society, persons and things (Bird-David 1999; Hallowell 1981; Henare, Holbraad, and Wastell 2007; Heywood 2012; Morrison 2000; Pedersen 2011; Strathern 1980; Viveiros de Castro 1998).

However, while much work in these debates on the "new animism" has considered the attribution of personhood and/or agency to nonhumans in the cases of human–animal and human–object relations, less attention has been paid to relationships between humans and "idols," a term we use not in the polemic or pejorative sense of "false gods" but, following Alfred Gell (1998, 96), in its literal sense of a material image used as an object of worship. In recent years, there has been a scholarly shift to consider "material religion" (Davis 1997; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Hutchings and McKenzie 2017; Mohan and Warnier 2017; Vásquez 2011), even as there have been only a scattering of anthropological studies of idols (e.g., Kendall, Vũ, and Nguyễn 2008; Kendall and Yang 2015; McDaniel 2011; Nguyễn and Phạm 2008). Notably, Amy Whitehead's work in Spain and England on "statue persons" is an important comparative example for us, as she shows how "the 'personhood' of religious statues is dependent on relational engagements where objects and subjects (statues of the Virgin and the Glastonbury Goddess and their devotees) bring each other into forms of co-relational *being* through encounters, or in moments of active relating" (Whitehead 2013, 4–5; emphasis in original).

While most animals exist independently of the personhood attributed to them by humans, and most human-made objects are not created as persons, idols form a specific category of objects made by humans with the avowed purpose of being endowed with a personhood and agency distinct from that of its producers or users (some dolls, puppets, and robots could also be included in this category; see Vidal 2007). Thus, idols present an important case for the study of nonhuman personhood and of the agency of objects. Gell (1998), in his anthropological theory of art and agency, which builds on an extensive discussion of idols' agency, laid the foundations for this domain of inquiry. Santos-Granero (2009, 9) has drawn a typology of objects with personhood, including "subjectified objects," which "require the intervention of human beings to activate their agency."

Bruno Latour (2002, 2010), in his essays on "factish gods" and "iconoclash," has explicitly brought the tension between representation and agency into anthropological theory. He questions the assumptions underlying the pervasive

iconoclasm of modern culture, which pits enlightened "non-believers" who "know" that idols are "merely" fabricated and thus can have no intrinsic power against those who are so naïve as to "believe" that the objects of their own creation have power over them. Turning the tables in an act of symmetrical anthropology, Latour argues that worshippers do not "believe" in an absolute sense but have an ambiguous and transparent understanding of both the impotence and power of their icons, while critical thinkers, in their eagerness to deny the agency of objects, construct an array of invisible, alienating agents (social forces, capitalism, etc.), which, they believe, wield a virtually omnipotent power over the worshippers. Both the worshipper and the critic are engaged in making material or intellectual objects that capture something, that enable certain things to be said and done, and that end up having some sort of power that escapes the maker. Rather than engaging in iconoclastic discourses, then, we should pause at moments of "iconoclash," which Latour (2001) defines as what happens "when there is an uncertainty about what is committed when an image . . . is being smashed." The case of Guanyin statues we describe here is one of iconoclash, when, under such uncertainty, people would rather leave statues in limbo than let them be trashed. In this article, we look at how the clash of discourses around Guanyin icons contributes to peoples' ambivalent relationships with them. Further, we will see how this ambiguity is intrinsic to many of the discourses themselves.

This perspective is especially relevant to Buddhist and Asian studies (Dudbridge 1998; Faure 1998; Strickmann 1996), where much scholarship has focused on canonical texts (Fleming and Mann 2014, 2, 5). Guanyin has been predominately analyzed in China as a theological, historical, and aesthetic—rather than material—subject (Bingenheimer 2016; Karetzky 2004; Larson and Kerr 1985; Reed 2003; Yü 2001). Given that Guanyin is one of the most prominent Buddhist material figures across Asia and is ubiquitous in the Chinese cultural landscape, it is surprising that, with a few notable exceptions (e.g., Sangren 1983, 1987), she has been largely ignored in the anthropological study of Chinese religion or material culture. While recent studies have used ethnographic approaches to analyze the production of popular-deity statues in the Chinese province of Hunan (Arrault 2019; Fava 2013; Robson 2014), they have not focused on anthropological debates about agency. This article thus points to how scholars in Buddhist and Asian studies can further engage in the question of whether objects are mere *reflections* of religion and lifeworlds or essential components of *creating* them.

GUANYIN

Once described as the cult of half of Asia, Guanyin is the bodhisattva of compassion, who has miraculous powers to help those who appeal to her. Originating in India, the Sanskrit name Avalokiteśvara came to be designated by the Chinese characters transcribed as Guanyin (Perceiver of Sounds) or Guanshiyin (Perceiver of the World's Sounds).[2] According to tradition, several millennia ago, a prince vowed to obtain Buddhahood and could have reached Nirvana but delayed doing so to become dedicated to hearing the cries of the suffering and rescuing them (Shi 2015, 2). The earliest written description of the bodhisattva appears in the twenty-fifth chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, authored around AD 200, which is devoted to Guanyin (Harvey 1990, 125). The chapter details how those facing fires, floods, shipwrecks, and other disasters can receive deliverance from their trials by single-mindedly calling to the bodhisattva. Unlike most Buddhist deities, who are dedicated to helping sentient beings transcend into other worlds, Guanyin has an immediate presence in people's lives so that she can help them in this world (Wang 2006, 259).

After the *Lotus Sutra* was completed and disseminated, Guanyin became a popular deity across China (Ueki 2003, 285; Watson 1993, 105). In the last thousand years, "the image of Guanyin has gradually become the most popular Buddhist icon and has appeared in the widest range of iconographic incarnations," from "a moustached male to a plump and tender female" (Wang 2006, 259). Indeed, the spread of Buddhism across Asia was first largely due to the "material movement" of statues, which impressed new believers even when they knew little about Buddhist doctrine (Horton 2007, 1; Karetzky 2014). Guanyin is widely depicted in paintings and carvings (Karetzky 2004), and can take dozens of different forms (Wang 2005, 68). Generally, worshippers believe that Guanyin will manifest in the form most needed by her petitioner (Yü 2001, 151–94). By AD 1100 in China, Guanyin had taken on a subtle female appearance, becoming not only a savior but also a "mother figure and bestower of children" (Tythacott 2011, 24).

Sangren (1983, 25) has suggested that, in the context of Chinese popular religion, goddesses such as Guanyin "are important (perhaps even necessary) counterpoints to the hierarchical, bureaucratic orthodoxies of state religion, territorial cults, and ancestor worship." While male gods, similar to earthly officials, can be "bribed, manipulated, threatened and cajoled," and generally limit their protection to a specific territory or corporate group, Guanyin is a pure, universal mother figure whose compassion is accessible to all, regardless of their social identity (Sangren 1983, 14). Guanyin is thus the ideal deity for intimate, personal devotion in the Chinese context of Chinese religion. Elsewhere, Sangren has argued that divine efficacy (*ling*) in Chinese religion is often associated with deities or spirits who combine the *yang* quality of heavenly transcendence with the *yin* quality of transgressing boundaries. Guanyin exemplifies this powerful combination, associating the heavenly virtues of a bodhisattva and the unbounded territoriality that she shares with ghosts (Sangren 1987, 148–56).

Locating Guanyin

The use of Guanyin statues begins in one of several ways. A statue may be inherited from family members and passed on for generations. Statues can also be purchased at stores

FIGURE 2. *This Guanyin altar at Tung Po Tor Monastery contains all of the five offerings that are typically made. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

specializing in Buddhist paraphernalia, and in antique shops and high-end retailers. Yet another option is to reclaim a statue that has been abandoned at a monastery, temple, or shrine, where used Guanyin statues can be taken in exchange for a donation to the institution or shrine for the place's upkeep.

Every worshipper we spoke with maintains a home altar. If new, the statue must be "invited" home and ritually activated. The statue may be placed in an ornate wood niche, which helps frame the Guanyin in space but also may be left out on a table. Before the statue should be the five standard offerings: flowers, fruit, water, oil/light, and incense (Figure 2). Among the most elaborate presentations of Guanyin statues can be found in temples and monasteries. Guanyin statues are ubiquitous in three major types of religious sites in Hong Kong: Buddhist, Daoist, and popular/folk temples and shrines. These presentations are consistent and immediately recognizable, with Guanyin statues prominently on altars surrounded by offerings and incense.

At temples and monasteries, outdoor statues do not have as many trappings. These statues may be of carved stone or bronze, but most often are made from concrete or fiberglass and left a natural off-white or painted a brilliant white. They are often in clearly demarcated spaces, either at the end of pathways or behind fencing and under pagodas with carved scrolls relating dicta. They usually have an incense burner but may lack other offerings.

Statues of the bodhisattva can also be seen in various types of shrines. These may include shrines that are for specific ceremonies, such as the shrines for the "beating the mean person" ritual, in which petitioners pay a ritual specialist to symbolically beat the mean-minded people in the petitioner's life (Chau 2011, 77–78; Figure 3). Guanyin also has a presence in many other shrines, such as informal and untidy ones that are erected to demarcate boundaries, such as between properties (Figure 4). One may also find statues of Guanyin casually placed on or near graves (Figure 5).

In Hong Kong, Guanyin seems to have specific ties to places within the territory. For example, the temples Chuk

FIGURE 3. *Translator and fieldworker Eunice To participates in a ritual at the Wan Chai Petty Person Beating Shrine, with Guanyin looking on. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 4. *This boundary shrine contains a Guanyin statue. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 5. *At Sha Tin cemetery a pond is decorated with a Guanyin statue. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 6. *A rock that was once worshipped had Lin Fa Kung (Lotus Palace) built around it, with a Guanyin altar in background. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 7. *The rounded summit of Guanyin Mountain is said to resemble Guanyin. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

Lam Sim Yuen (Bamboo Forest Meditation House) and Lin Fa Kung (Lotus Palace) both began as cults to a rock that was occupied by a spirit; at each locale, as the rock was worshipped, a temple was built around it, and Guanyin came to be a central figure within the temple (Figure 6). In other words, the Guanyin worshipped at these places emerged directly from the presence of the spirit rocks in those specific locations. The power of Guanyin can thus become anchored, emplaced. Similarly, some shrines with Guanyin seem to have grown out of places recognized as being special, if not dangerous. The Aberdeen shrine we visited was initially a place where fishermen who perished at sea were buried, and at the Wah Fu Estate, the purgatory for abandoned Guanyin statues was described as a ghostly landscape because of a Japanese bombardment during World War II. The bodhisattva also takes on a very literal geographical embodiment at Guanyin Mountain, in northwestern Hong Kong, where local residents say a mountain's shape resembles that of Guanyin's head and sloping shoulders (Figure 7).

At other sites, caretakers may insist that the statues there are different from the ones situated in homes (Kieschnick 2003, 57). For example, while conducting an interview at Guanyin Grotto, a caretaker said, "It's hard to find a statue as merciful and benevolent as this one here." But if Guanyin is everywhere, we asked, how can one statue be more effective than others? First, she claimed that this place was particularly powerful because of its special magnetic field. Second, she said that in Guanyin worship, one must express real sincerity. The grotto is hard to get to: it is in a quiet corner of Hong Kong and requires walking up a long, steep, mosquito-filled path. By coming all the way up to the cave, the worshipper demonstrates sincerity to Guanyin.

Producing Guanyin

Cries and supplications make Guanyin respond, while her statues make people respond: a statue's presence induces people to burn incense and give offerings, to express their private wishes, their fears, and their desires. Statues are mediators of Guanyin's and worshippers' agency. But they also mediate and combine other agencies. In the market, the form, substance, and display of statues expresses the agency of producers trying to induce buyers to spend and of consumers who may seek to not only express hopes and wishes but also impress on others their social status and distinction through the types of Guanyin icons they display on their bodies or in their homes. In the religious field, temple statues express the agency of temple leaders or sponsors who may seek to attract more visitors or to impress rival temples through the size, beauty, or power of their statues. Thus, the material, form, size, and display of a statue form a nexus of multiple networks of agencies.

The network of production and sale of statues is expansive. The production of Guanyin statues unfolds today in myriad ways. There perhaps is a loose division between those modest-sized Guanyin statues made for personal use and for small shrines and those larger, more dramatic statues created expressly for temples and monasteries. One example of the first type was found at the Jade Market in Yau Ma Tei, where every seller had icons of Guanyin, ranging from small necklace pendants to statues a half meter tall (Figure 8). Perhaps the most common Guanyin statue across Hong Kong today is a type known as blanc de Chine or Dehua, a white China porcelain, which famously began production in the city of Dehua in Fujian Province around AD 1350 (Blumenfield 2002). These statues are glazed in a beautiful pearl white, with occasional touches of soft pastel colors. Given the importance of the medium used to produce religious objects (Morgan 2017, 16), their dreamy white skin tone seems to reflect Guanyin's own positionality of hovering between a real, everyday person and an otherworldly being (Figure 9).

An example of the second type of production was provided during an interview with an elderly carver who had been creating wooden Guanyin statues for sixty-three years, including, he showed us, a 4.5-meter-tall thousand-armed Guanyin. At various monasteries, we also interviewed

FIGURE 8. *A jade Guanyin is for sale at the Jade Market in Ya Ma Tei. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 10. *An elaborate fiberglass 1,000 armed Guanyin was made for the 10,000 Buddhas Monastery. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 9. *Yue Hwa Chinese Products offers dozens of Guanyin statues for sale. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 11. *Craftspeople make Guanyin and other statues in Dehua, China. (Photograph used with permission © Kashba, Ais Loupatty and Ton Lankreijer) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

caretakers who discussed how artisans would be employed to make new statues out of almost any material, ranging from cement to fiberglass (Figure 10).

Somewhat counterintuitively, with Guanyin statues, production rarely seems to be the beginning point for imbuing personhood into the objects. Notably, none of those close to Guanyin production in Hong Kong felt the process of creation was religiously significant, in contrast to a place like Japan, where "modern sculptors of Buddhist images often speak of their task as revealing the Buddha that already exists inside the wood" (Horton 2007, 86). The jade sellers we interviewed consistently claimed that the power of the jade Guanyin figures was in the jade rather than the bodhisattva's iconic representation. A salesman of Dehua statues also related that the factory workers separate their beliefs from the products they create. He pointed out that the same factory that produces Guanyin might also produce Christian figurines, but that does not mean they celebrate Christmas (Figure 11).

All interviewees insisted that state, size, and material are irrelevant to a statue's meaning or efficacy. But occasionally, worshippers would comment on a statue's material and maker. For example, at the Daoist temple of Shang Shin Chun Tong in Kowloon Tong, a caretaker named Mr. Leung related with pride that a stunning Guanyin statue was created in an art academy in Canton—and that it was plated in gold. "That's why it's so beautiful—it's very personal," he said. "The Guanyin here gives me the best impression of what a Guanyin should look like." A carver expressed that Guanyin statues made of wood are more special because they take longer to produce than with other materials. But in the end, she felt that all Guanyin statues are equally effective. It's not about the object, another follower insisted, "It's about the heart."

Animating Guanyin

Every interviewee spoke to the personal relationship between the statue and the worshipper. The statue should be selected based on one's reaction and engagement with it. There is not one correct presentation of Guanyin, no one standard of beauty. The selection is entirely based on "karmic eye connection" (*heyanyuan*), a personal and idiosyncratic reaction to a specific statue. As one caretaker at Guanyin Grotto explained, when talking about how to select a statue that has been left at a monastery, "Each statue is different; it depends on the condition between the two of you. If you can generate happiness, then you can take it. It's like a girlfriend. Some will say she is beautiful, others not! I was once on the Mainland and saw a statue I loved. I thought she was so sweet, so I took it home."

While the above refers to the appearance of a personal, even intimate, relationship between a worshipper and a statue, it is through the *kaiguang* ritual that the statue's personhood is formally activated. Indeed, once in one's possession or ready for public exhibit, the statue is often ritually "animated." *Kaiguang* literally means "opening the light" but is understood to mean "opening the eyes" of the statue, a procedure originating in India by which the inner light of the deity's eyes can shine outward and come into contact with the worshipper's eyes (Eck 1981; Gell 1998, 116–21, 149–53). A Buddhist monk or Daoist priest is hired to chant a sutra over the statue, make a burned offering, paint red dots (the eyes) on the statue, or clean the statue with water—all of which initiate the statue into practice. Some worshippers take a statue to a specific monastery that they believe is powerful for eye opening; others will buy statues from the monasteries where activation has already been done. The ritual signals the statue's passage from being a mere object to being animated.

Through the *kaiguang* ritual, the statue is separated as a sacred object requiring special handling and as distinct from mundane, profane objects—but this separation is also an opening. The sacralized object is personalized and becomes a mediator for an intimate relation between the worshipper and Guanyin, the worshipper investing their hopes, desires, and fears into the statue through prayerful acts and supplications. After the statue has been animated, the ritualized five offerings that are made to statues are a key means by which the relationship is not only materialized but also concretely bookended to mark off the relationship in space, to signal and enclose it, and the desires it contains.

Abandoning Guanyin

When a worshipper can no longer care for a statue, it is taken to a monastery, temple, or shrine. At the monastery or temple, if it is deemed worthy, then it may be added to the Guanyin altar, where it joins other statues. If it is not deemed worthy of inclusion on the altar, then it may be sold at the gift shop (typically for a very modest price), where someone may adopt a statue that calls out to them. The statues may also be taken to neighborhood shrines, where they live on and are typically tended by informal, self-appointed caretakers.

Worshippers who abandon statues at such sites are often conflicted. We heard multiple stories of believers crying in turmoil as they left statues at these sites. On the one hand, the worshipper is jettisoning a responsibility to care for the statue, which risks being a tangible demonstration of disrespecting Guanyin herself. On the other hand, at least the owner is placing the statue in the care of others, ensuring that the statue continues its life.

In short, Guanyin statues should not be destroyed or trashed but rather kept alive indefinitely. These shrines thus become sites where Guanyin statues can live on and perhaps even be adopted. That said, most people would prefer to install a new statue rather than purchase or adopt a previously used one. The reason is that once a statue has been animated, it is open to the needs of its supplicants, and thus the statue has absorbed the feelings and hopes of unknown people. Because these requests to Guanyin are private and personal—and therefore ultimately unknown—they become all the more dangerous to others. Any given adopter or keeper does not know the sum of desires and attachments invested in any given statue by its previous owners.

Just like many Chinese deities were originally ghosts who became divinized through being worshipped (Harrell 1975), orphaned deity statues revert to a status similar to that of ghosts, the carriers of untended and unknown attachments and desires. As a result, constant attention must be given to the icons, tending to them in "purgatories" to fix them and prevent them from becoming as ghosts.

Adopting Guanyin

The implications of abandoning Guanyin were impressed upon us following our visit to the Dai Wong Gong temple in Aberdeen, a temple traditionally frequented by the Tangka fishing community, which is tended by Mrs. Lee, a woman in her early seventies. The main deity in the shrine is dedicated to a local Earth God, but there are also side shrines to Guanyin and other deities. In the Guanyin shrine, around the main statue, are a collection of orphaned Guanyin statues. Mrs. Lee performs a ritual (*huanshen*) to pay off old debts to those deities, and they share in receiving the incense and offerings that worshippers present to the Guanyin shrine. If a worshipper wishes to adopt an orphan statue, Mrs. Lee will throw divination blocks to determine if the deity is willing to be adopted by the new owner (Figure 12). If the answer is positive, she gives the new owner pomelo leaves to clean the statue. When two of us (Colwell and Tse) visited the shrine in 2018, we were encouraged to select two statues and followed the procedure with Mrs. Lee. While the result was positive for one of the statues (selected by Tse), the result was negative for the second statue (selected by Colwell). Mrs. Lee reassured the second statue, saying, "Don't be afraid! He is going to take good care of you!" She threw the blocks again. This time, the result was positive. "Thank you, thank you!" she told Guanyin.

FIGURE 12. *Ms. Lee speaks to the Guanyin collected at the Aberdeen shrine. (Photograph by Chip Colwell, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

FIGURE 13. *Chip Colwell and Eunice To look on as Master Caihao, a spirit-writer, ritually cleanses a possessed Guanyin at Sin Chai Buddhist-Daoist Hall. (Photograph by Martin Tse, 2018) [This figure appears in color in the online issue]*

The next day, we visited the Guanyin Temple in Hung Hom and cast divination sticks (*qiu qian*), a procedure by which one shakes a cylinder full of sticks until one stick falls out. Colwell asked the temple's Guanyin before him if he should bring the adopted statue back to the United States. The stick that fell out was highly inauspicious, according to the temple's divination-slip interpreter. After confirming that the statue had been ritually animated (*kaiguang*), the interpreter advised Colwell to take it back, saying that the statue had been abandoned by other people and might contain "something dirty."

The next day, we visited the two most high-end orthodox Buddhist temples in Hong Kong and asked for comments on the results of that divination session. Very different interpretations and suggestions were offered. At the Tsz Shan Monastery—a luxurious new temple in the New Territories that boasts the world's tallest bronze Guanyin statue—a monk suggested that Colwell return the statue to its original shrine because his heart was ill at ease. But at the Chi Lin Nunnery in Kowloon, a resident scholar dismissed the divination as superstitious and advised Colwell to stop visiting such places. He commented on the statue's aesthetic beauty and suggested that he display it in his museum.

Later that evening, we visited the Sin Chai Daoist spirit-writing group located in an apartment in Kowloon Bay, where worshippers ask questions to the deity Jigong and a medium reveals the answers in the form of classical Chinese verses. As soon as we mentioned the Guanyin statue, but before mentioning the previous divination results, the medium interjected: "You've got trouble . . . that Guanyin is possessed by a spirit." The mediums exorcised the statue by washing it and reading sutras, and they asked for a cash donation in the form of a red packet (Figure 13). After the rite, they looked closely at the statue and, pointing to a stain on the statue's forehead, claimed to have goosebumps: "The forehead was smashed . . . it's blood." A man had fallen and ruptured his head, they said; his ghost had gone inside the statue, hoping to receive the warmth of Guanyin worship. The mediums cleaned the statue more thoroughly. Now the statue was purified; they noted that it now looked warm and smiling. They "sealed" the statue through a de-animation procedure; it was now "a new Guanyin," they claimed, who could be safely displayed in a museum without being worshipped. Jigong revealed verses promising to save the expelled spirit at the next ghost festival.

A CLASH OF DISCOURSES

The multiple voices and interventions arising from our adoption of a Guanyin statue reveal how divination procedures—throwing blocks, casting sticks, spirit writing—are integral to communicating the statue's intention, to impressing a mood and course of action on the client, and to identifying the agent within the statue. Ritual procedures such as the *kaiguang* ensure that the statue is animated by Guanyin herself, while exorcisms can remove other entities from the statue, and a "sending off" or "sealing" ritual can deactivate the statue and turn it into a purely aesthetic object (see Gygi 2018, 97). But at the same time, our interviews show how Guanyin's personhood and agency are the subjects of two other discourses circulating among her worshippers and audiences. These discourses reject treating the statues as living beings or animated by a possessed spirit. The first discourse is the secularist, naturalist discourse, which sees Guanyin as nothing more than an inanimate thing on which humans project beliefs, symbolic meanings, superstition, cultural heritage, or aesthetic appreciation. This type of discourse governs the treatment of Guanyin statues in the art market and in tourism and heritage promotion, and it is prevalent among most people who have no personal relationship with Guanyin statues.

Second is the orthodox Buddhist discourse, which overlaps with the secular one in discounting the material object but does affirm Guanyin's spiritual efficacy. Buddhist worshippers consistently told us that Guanyin did not live in the statue or, more to the point, that the question was irrelevant

(cf. Horton 2007, 3). As one follower and shopkeeper in Wan Chai told us, Buddhas and Guanyin do not have a fixed form; they do not live in objects per se, but in one's heart and mind. The statue only helps you, he insisted, "tune your mind." The Hong Kong Buddhist Association has stated that the *kaiguang* ritual is superstitious. Some Guanyin followers told us that the ritual is not needed—that the statue merely needs to be respected to work. These Buddhist discourses can be linked to Buddhist modernizing projects that have striven to recast the religion as a rational philosophy and spirituality, and to purge it of superstition—even as the practice of worshipping statues and *kaiguang* rituals continues unabated among Buddhists (Reinders 2005).

But the paradox of Buddhist "idolatry" has existed throughout Buddhism's history, whose orthodox discourses deemphasize or reject the material, even as material culture is so central to its social existence (Kieschnick 2003). The tension between iconic practice and iconoclastic rhetoric defines what Faure (1998, 770, 788) calls "the opposition between presentation and representation," leaving Buddha statues in "suspended animation." On the one hand, Buddhist doctrines of no-self, of dependent origination, and of the five aggregates deny the very personhood not only of statues but of humans—the meanings and attachments we give to statues are merely the mind's projections, a karmic fruit, as are the meanings and attachments we give to our own, illusory selves. On the other hand, Guanyin worshippers, in their everyday practice, experience themselves as persons—as singular, intact sources of willing action. They engage with statues that have the physical form of persons and are, to varying degrees, treated as persons.

Buddhist doctrines can be juxtaposed with recent post-humanist theorizing inspired by Deleuze and Guattari (1984, 1988) on assemblages and by Latour (2005) on actor networks, which question the very locus of causality, the existence of willing subjects, and anthropocentric representations of relationships (Barad 2003, 808; Ott 2018). Following this line of theorizing, one might take such human–object actor networks as dissolving the very notion of the person. Karen Barad (2007, 33), for instance, puts forth the concept of "intra-action" to describe "the mutual constitution of entangled agencies" that emerge in a relational process as a substitute for the notion of "interaction," "which assumes that there are separate individual agencies that precede their interaction." Barad's framework helps us see how the fabrication, materiality, and disposition of shrines and statues, the embodied techniques of worship, the ritual and divinatory procedures, and the discursive practices surrounding Guanyin constitute an "apparatus" that sets in motion the "intra-actions" through which agencies emerge. In this account, neither the worshipper nor Guanyin has preexisting agency; any agency that arises is a property of the intra-action itself.

While such a proposition can be entertained at a purely theoretical level, how can it account for the ethnographic reality of our case, in which anthropocentric personhood remains a fundamental category of experience? Guanyin statues are made to have the appearance and intentions of agentive human persons, and worshippers experience themselves as agentive persons when they engage with Guanyin. One post-humanist option, paralleling the orthodox Buddhist discourse, might be to take an iconoclastic stance, exposing the anthropocentric illusion of both subject and object as persons possessing independent agency: Guanyin worshippers misrepresent themselves and their statues. Another option is to examine the processes by which the agencies of Guanyin worshippers and statues are constructed through their intra-action.

GUANYIN STATUES AS DIVIDUATING OBJECTS

Guanyin stories and narratives depict the type of agency that she is seen to exercise: a feminine, maternal, intimate agency, one that "hears" all cries of suffering and responds with compassion to all sentient beings. She can take multiple forms to come to the rescue. On the one hand, Guanyin is a singular figure, who manifests herself through the mediation of countless statues, sites, texts, experiences, and miracle tales. On the other hand, each of her statues has its distinctive personality, powers, and trajectory. How can this seeming contradiction be explained by the outside observer? We propose the concept of the "dividuating object," drawing on Marriott's (1976) and Strathern's (1988) conceptions of personhood.

Western notions of the person or "individual" depict an internally coherent, undivided self that is defined in contrast to other selves and objects outside of it. In contrast, the "dividual" is a composite of qualities, components, and relationships, characterized by the emergence of differentiated attributes in the context of the unfolding of specific interactions. A relationship between two persons is thus a process of mutual "dividuation" (Bird-David 1999) through which each partner expresses and develops a differentiated self that is emergent and unique to the roles and trajectory of the interactions in a mutually constituting process. Mosko (2010, 218) has stressed how such a person "is a product of the gifts, contributions, or detachments of others" and needs, in an exchange, to give part of him- or herself to draw forth a desired part of another person. In relations between humans and deities, for example, the deity absorbs hopes, problems, offerings, and sacrifices from the worshipper, who in turn may absorb divine protections, blessings, and numinous qualities.

Here, we posit that the concept of dividuation can fruitfully be applied to human–idol intra-actions. In a relationship between Guanyin and a worshipper through the mediation of a specific statue, the series of acts and experiences, unique to the worshipper but mediated by the constraints of the material form, location, and ritual prescriptions for approaching the statue, inflects the unfolding of the worshipper's life in a dividuating process (McDaniel 2011, 250).

This dividuating relationship may or may not inflect other relationships and trajectories in the worshipper's life.

In some cases, the worshipper's family and friends may be unaware of the worshipper's relationship with Guanyin. At the other extreme is someone like Mau Fung, the founder of Tung Po Tor Monastery, who strove to live out Guanyin's values and influenced countless people by building the monastery.

Meanwhile, the statue itself, through its own life course embedded in a network of producers, ritual handlers, and worshippers, as well as physical sites, shrines, and accompanying objects and structures, is continually dividuated, becoming a unique repository of narratives and associations—some of which are widely shared but others of which are particular to each worshipper. Thus, not only are there countless Guanyin statues, but each statue is potentially dividuated into as many human–statue hybrids as there are people who engage with it in worship. The importance of the heart or "eye connection" for believers points to this relational dimension of Guanyin statues. The statue's personhood is not an isolated essence enfolded within the statue and determined by the quality of its material or the maker's intentions, but it appears through the beholder responding to the statue and treating it as a person. In this dividuating process, a different person (or no person) emerges from the contact between different humans and the same statue based on their different "eye connections." This is why a place of abandoned statues is both powerful and dangerous; it is a collection of statues, each the product of unique intra-actions.

In spite of this endless dividuation, however, all of these materializations and experiences are understood to be instantiations of a single person: Guanyin. One might say that they are different *representations* or interpretations of Guanyin, multiple signifiers of the same signified. This formulation would lead one to ask about the signified: What is the *true* Guanyin? Where and when did the ur-Guanyin appear? What are the values symbolized by Guanyin? What is the social structure that is signified by Guanyin as a mystification or alienation? These are all legitimate theological, historical, and sociological questions. But here, we think it more productive instead to identify Guanyin as the "prototype," defined by Gell as the entity that is represented by an icon. As he explains: "A depiction of an imaginary thing (a god, for instance) resembles the picture that believers in that god have in their minds as to the god's appearance, which they have derived from other images of the same god, which this image resembles" (Gell 1998, 25–26).

The prototype, by this definition, does not refer to a single ur-Guanyin but to contextually proximate Guanyin images and stories that have provided the imitative norm according to which the statue has been made, engaged with, and experienced. Thus, each Guanyin refers to other Guanyin, forming a chain of statues, stories, and texts extending through space and time, which constitute the person of Guanyin as a prototype. We can say, then, that Guanyin is a "distributed person," an agent that can be located in many different places and times simultaneously (Gell 1998, 21, 104).

Buddhist discourses conveyed by some of our interviewees resonate with this anthropological conception of dividuating intra-action. These discourses reflect the teachings of the "Universal Gate" chapter of the *Lotus Sutra*, which is commonly chanted during Guanyin worship—a practice that was recommended to us by the divination-stick interpreter at the Guanyin temple mentioned above. According to this account, Guanyin, as an enlightened bodhisattva, has no form; she is neither male nor female. Having no self and no desire, she is undifferentiated—or, we might say, "undividuated." But having made the compassionate vow to hear the cries of the suffering and to rescue them, she appears in any form in different realms to accomplish her mission of saving all sentient beings. The form she takes will depend on the *yuan*, or karmic affinity, between a person and Guanyin. She may take the form of a statue, but she may even take the form of a spirit or of a human; she could appear as a child, a nun, a king, or a lady. Karmic affinity is the fruit of a person's past desires and intentions, which propels the person's agency and leads them to continual dividuation as they follow their desires, encountering other beings and circumstances that reflect and reinforce those tendencies, like a mirror of one's deepest motives. Guanyin, too, dividuates out of her compassion, coming into the world to respond to the suffering's desires. The karmic affinity expresses the union of Guanyin and the worshipper in a unique dividuating pair.

Here, the Chinese term *ou*, contained in the modern term for "idol," *ouxiang* (lit. "statue-image") may give us some insights. In its early meaning, recorded in the *Shuowen jiezi* dictionary of the second century AD, *ou* referred to a wooden figurine. Almost one thousand years later, however, the term was recorded as meaning "to conjoin, to fit, a pair of two, a couple, harmony" in the *Guangyun* dictionary. Indeed, today the term also appears in the modern word for "mate" or "spouse." Why is the notion of a wooden figure associated with that of a couple? Perhaps, the statue is a "double" of its prototype. Or is it the "companion" of its maker or worshipper? Either way, it is more than the "representation" or "projection" of something more real than itself but rather a partner that acquires its own agency as a "half" of the couple. However, as such, it is only half—it is not an independent agent.

GUANYIN STATUES AS DEMI-PERSONS

In the broader context of Hong Kong as a highly but not fully secularized metropolis, with its competing discourses on the nature of deity statues, the personhood of Guanyin is ambivalent: regularly performed ritually, suggested by many as a subjective connection, experienced by some but contested by others. She is perhaps but a "demi-person": fully treated as neither a person nor object. This condition might be inherent to an idol, as a fabricated object or "secondary agent" (Gell 1998, 36) that depends on human agency for its activation. But this demi-person status may well enhance its power; as suggested by Boyer (1996), deities are salient to

human cognition because they violate intuitive assumptions about the distinctions between living and inanimate beings. In another context, discussing the scientist Masahiro Mori's ideas on empathy between humans and robots, Vidal (2007, 919) notes that "while a certain degree of human appearance seems effectively to facilitate the interaction between robots and human beings, one would obtain negative results if one attempted to build robots which mirrored the appearance of human beings too closely." Consequently, the ambiguity that surrounds the bodhisattva in modern Hong Kong—whether deities are real, and, if so, whether they live in statues, and, if so, what dangers lurk in their animation and networks of human and spectral agency—furthers an on-the-ground reality of cautiously treating Guanyin and other deities as demi-persons.

Guanyin's demi-personhood may be also enhanced by the weakening of ritual practices in modern Hong Kong. In his analysis of animated objects among native Amazonians, Santos-Granero (2009, 18–19) notes how a wide range of objects used in daily life are subjectivized. As a result, it is dangerous to put them into circulation, and deactivation rituals are commonly practiced before they change hands. In a society in which ritual practices regulate relations with nonhuman persons daily, widely practiced ritual procedures can clearly establish the beginning and end of an object's subjectivation in a manner understood and validated by all. But in Hong Kong, activation rituals for statues are common, while de-activation rituals are now rarely practiced. Those who discard statues are likely to be nonworshippers—often those of a younger generation who have inherited the statue. They are not aware of ritual procedures but still maintain a residual belief in the statues' potential power.

CONCLUSION

In Hong Kong, Guanyin statues begin their trajectories as mere objects. Once obtained, they are then brought to life by the words and beliefs, stories and entreaties, of worshippers. What is in someone's heart combines with material practices—offerings, the *kaiguang* ritual—to bring the statues as persons into being. Once a statue's agency has been established, however, the worshipper can no longer fully control it. In other words, human agents initiate the object's agency, but then the object takes on a form of agency that is almost but not quite beyond human influence. Once a statue has been activated, followers can shape the actions of Guanyin by having a good heart and treating the statue respectfully. If they do this, Guanyin will care for them. If they do not, the consequences can be serious. As Uncle Wang, the caretaker at Wah Fu, told us, "If you disrespect it, harm can come to you and the generations that follow you." The statue becomes a kind of echo chamber that reflects what is in a person's heart and what that person does.

The Guanyin statue is thus ambiguous, containing the potential to be either object or subject. We argue that this ambiguity is navigated for Guanyin followers by their treating the statues as demi-persons, as both inanimate representations and as animate agents. As ethnographic observers of Guanyin statues, we could be tempted to selectively read this case study to advocate for either a representational theory or an agentive theory of the idol. But we suggest, instead, that scholarly analysis embrace the ambiguous status of icons: they can be seen as either representations or agents, or both at the same time. As noted by Whitehead (2013, 83) in her study of Marian statues, worshippers sometimes use an idiom of representation and sometimes an idiom of personhood. The iconoclash need not be resolved; the statue's enchantment lies in its indeterminacy.

Thus, when unwanted, Guanyin is left in limbo, discarded but not dead. As demi-persons orphaned at the margins of urban space—under trees, in small outdoor shrines, in the purgatory of Wah Fu—the Guanyin statues acquire a ghostly power.

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NOTES

Acknowledgments. We begin by thanking Deborah A. Thomas for her careful and thoughtful approach to the review and editing process. We were also fortunate to have such critical and helpful comments from the anonymous reviewers, who truly helped push the article in productive directions. Eunice Wun Ling To greatly contributed to this work by participating in some of the field research and serving as a translator. Funding for this research was in part supported by the generosity of the Schlessman Fund for Asian Ethnology at the Denver Museum of Nature & Science, the Hong Kong Institute for the Humanities and Social Sciences, and the Hong Kong Research Grants Council (Project ref. HKU37000518). Finally, we are exceedingly grateful to all of the people across Hong Kong who generously gave us their time and insights through interviews.

1. The Mandarin name is also variously spelled Kuan-yin or Kuan Yin. Her Cantonese name is often romanized as Gwun Yam, Gun Yam, Kwun Yam, or Kun Lam. In English her name is often glossed as the Goddess of Mercy. In each language, ranging from Tibet to Japan, Mongolia to Indonesia, she has a name in the local language that varies from Guanyin. Although this article focuses on Hong Kong, and thus locally she is referred to in Cantonese, throughout this article we use the Mandarin spelling because that is the most common spelling used across the English-speaking scholarly literature.
2. A person who obtains Enlightenment but postpones Nirvana to help others.

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