The Little Red Shrines: Islands of Chinese Culture in the West.

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The Little Red Shrines: Islands of Chinese Culture in the West

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The Chinese God, 关羽 Guan Yu, is largely unknown in the west. Sources that do discuss him and his cults are often superficial and diminish his importance. Although he has been characterized in the West as a “Chinese Mars”, merely a god of war, he has endured as a cultural icon for centuries because his mythology has been open to transformations. Unlike more widely known Chinese figures, Guan Yu is found in art and statuary in Chinese communities in western nations and throughout the world. To illustrate this I will use the place of Guan Yu in the shrines of Chinese restaurant culture as a case study of cultural identity within Overseas Chinese (華僑 Huaqiao) communities. I will first introduce my readers to the figure of Guan Yu in his historical context and then explain how he has undergone apotheosis into one of the single most important figures in the Chinese world. I will explain the concept of the domestic colony wherein solidarity can be created between people who are ethnically similar but not related by family who then form new bonds, just as those made by their patron god, Guan Yu and his oath-brothers. I will conclude with an explanation of the prominence of Guan Yu and answer a simple question: Why would the God of War be installed in the little red shrines of Chinese restaurants the world over?

At the Lunch Counter Lurks a Martial God.

If one enters a Chinese restaurant, one will find it populated by a variety of gods; many of them will be familiar to you visually if you are indeed familiar with the insides of Chinese restaurants. The gods who reside in Chinese restaurants came with their devotees from their ancestral homes. It is common within immigrant communities that religious ideas would travel with the religious into foreign lands: Jesus and Mary come with Christendom,

1 For this paper I will use the Hanyu Pinyin Romanization which is the standard. I will also use the historical name “Guan Yu” exclusively, rather than a religious or honorific name. Chinese gods have many various titles and Guan Yu is typical of this. He can be referred to as “關公/Guan Gong”, Lord/Duke Guan, which is popular among Huaqiao and in Taiwan; “關帝/Guandi,” Emperor Guan, one of the Celestial Emperors; his historical style name “雲長/Yunchang,” or its alternate, “長生/Changsheng.” Other honorifics include: “關帝爺/Guan Di Ye,” “Demon Smasher,” and “the Red-Faced God.”

Ganëśa and Śiva with Hindus and religious symbols come with aniconic traditions. What remains unexplained about the gods of Chinese restaurants is this: among the rather extensive Chinese pantheon and members of the Celestial Bureaucracy, specific figures are chosen. The most ubiquitous is Guan Yu who is one of the two male archetypes in Chinese society.³ Guan Yu is instantly recognizable because he is an imposing figure with a huge black beard, hulking stature, barrel chest, and his distinctive red face.

**Literature and Apotheosis.**

After the collapse of the Han Dynasty a three sided war erupted and three kingdoms arose—曹操 Cao Wei, 蜀漢 Shu Han and 東吳 Dong Wu—each controlled by a warlord and each vying to dominate and restore imperial order under their banners. The warlord 劉備 Liu Bei (161-223 CE), who was a distant cousin of the Han imperial line, raised an army to fight the Daoist millennial rebels called the Yellow Turbans. According to historical and mythological accounts, a giant of a man named Guan Yu (160-221 CE) was one of the first eager recruits. A third man, a butcher named 張飛 Zhang Fei (died 221 CE), joined and the three men formed a brotherhood that was central to their identities and more important than wealth or their own families. Liu Bei, was senior and tied to the Han court, so he assumed the senior brother role and in a now sanctified Peach Orchard the three of them resolved to set things to right as brothers.⁴ There is some disagreement between the official historical account—the 三國志 San’guo zhi—and the popular accounts—such as the 三國演義 San’guo Yanyi,⁵ opera, chantefables, and folk tales as to what exactly the Peach Orchard Brotherhood set out to do, their motivations⁶, their personalities, the details of their exploits and their legendarium. The sources agree that Guan Yu was on the run for killing a minor imperial bully, hence his eagerness to join Liu’s army. In the exceedingly popular San’guo Yanyi—usually translated as the Romance of the Three Kingdoms—it is clear from the start that

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³ Paired and contrasted with Confucius; as exemplars of wu (martial) and wen (civil) culture. See below. Cf. Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, The Politics of Chinese Language and Culture: the Art of Reading Dragons, 120-121; Christian Joachim. Flowers, Fruit, and Incense Only: Elite versus Popular in Taiwan's Religion of the Yellow Emperor, 32; Kam Louie, Theorizing Chinese Masculinity, 23, 25.


⁵ 三國志 San’guo zhi is ascribed to 陳壽 Chen Shou (3rd century); 三國演義 San’guo Yanyi, is ascribed to 羅貫中Luo Guanzhong (14th century).

⁶ Kam Louie, Theorising Chinese Masculinity, 23-24. Guan Yu, “was probably illiterate and made no attempt to save ‘China’ or serve any emperor against any foreign enemy.”
those forming the Brotherhood of the Peach Orchard are all noble and that their efforts are entirely for the good of the entire nation, rather than glory for themselves, riches, or regional concerns. Moreover the actions of Guan Yu and his brothers were justified.7 As the tales become more modern and postmodern the brothers become more ridiculously heroic and superhuman and their rivals, 曹操 Cao Cao of Wei and 孫權 Sun Quan of Wu, become more villainous and maligned.

The conflict between the three kingdoms lent itself to many short-term alliances. When captured in battle by the warlord Cao Cao, Guan Yu agrees to surrender and serve Cao until such time as he was able to re-join the Shu Han camp and his brothers Zhang Fei and Liu Bei. Although conflicted of loyalties, Guan Yu eventually returns to his brothers. After rejecting the riches and power offered by Cao Cao and Sun Quan, Guan Yu returned to his brothers and re-joined their campaign. However, his spurning of Sun Quan’s offer of allegiance cost him; his generals deserted for Wu; and he fell into his enemies’ trap. He and his son 關平 Guan Ping were captured and beheaded by 呂蒙 Lü Meng an agent of the rival king of Dong Wu.8 However, for Guan Yu that was just the beginning of a successful career. Posthumously he has become more powerful than his lord and brother, Liu Bei and indeed, any other figure in Chinese history. Since his murder Guan Yu's position in Chinese discourse has grown to universality.9

The divinized Guan Yu is characterized as a war-saint (武聖 wusheng) and an apotheosis of strategy, yet is merely one of many such deities; later Guan Yu is raised to higher office as the God of War. This is an organic development considering his mortal beginnings in the Three Kingdoms period (三國 220-280) when he was merely a mortal general under his lord and brother, Liu Bei.10 Although Guan Yu’s fame may have arisen from his military origin, the importance of Guan Yu stems from the Oath of the Peach Orchard; his loyalty to Liu Bei; and the partnership between the three brothers which become especially significant and popular. Because of the myths and legends that arose in the seventeen hundred years after his beheading, he has acquired many other different qualities and portfolios and has entered into three different religious canons.

For the Daoists it is strange that he would be revered at all considering he was famously involved in putting down a Daoist rebellion. According to Kristopher Schipper,

7 Luo Guanzhong, San’guo Yanyi, chapter 1:11. Luo alludes to the mercenary lifestyle of 武俠 wuxia novels and folktales which continue to be popular today.
Guan Yu’s first posthumous supernatural act was to revenge himself on Lü Meng, the general who had captured him and ordered his execution. Lü’s greatest achievement was ruined by the unquiet spirit of Guan Yu. In the court of Sun Quan, the king of Wu, the unquiet spirit of Guan Yu seeks his vengeance by possessing Lü Meng’s body and killing him. In the body of Lü Meng, Guan Yu hurled “a long series of insults directed at the king.” After humiliating his rival, Guan Yu’s spirit kills Lü Meng. “It was because of this demon power that [Guan Yu] became the object of worship in the first place.”11 Daoists and folk religion are very concerned about placating spirits of the dead because they threaten the living and crave ‘bloody food’ as sacrifice and also because they also can be made to serve the communities they haunt if treated properly.12

For the Buddhists, the loss of Guan Yu's head is karmic retribution for the heads he took in war. Once schooled by the noble Buddhist monk, 智顗 Zhi Yi (538-597 CE), Guan Yu has a posthumous conversion and enlightenment.13 After this conversion, the site of his execution, 玉泉山 Yuquan Mountain, became one of the first Buddhist holy sites in China—and “thus did Buddhism also become sinicized.”14 For the Confucians, Guan Yu became integrated into the tradition through political appropriation of his already potent presence in nonsectarian religiosity by the Ming and the Qing Dynasties and through his newly Confucianized hagiography, which revisits the character of Guan Yu and makes certain that he is an avid reader of Confucian classics.15

Apotheosis for the Chinese is a rather unpleasant process for a rising godling and usually for the people around them. Kristofer Schipper notes that

In popular legends, none of the gods has died of natural causes; they have all either been executed, or have committedicides, or died virgins—a terrible fate. . . . [A]ccording to the normal scheme of things, [Guan Yu] or [others like him] ought to have become fearsome demons. . . . [Guan Yu] killed many men during his life and after his death used his homicidal power to accomplish his vengeance. His worship is therefore primarily of a propitiatory nature: one must appease the avenging spirit before channelling its forces towards more positive ends.16

Barend ter Haar agrees that, the soul reason for Guan Yu’s apotheosis is his demonic powers. The blood that was on his hands and all the violence and death that he had wrought as a

11 Schipper, 39.
13 Chang; Duara 779.
14 Duara 779, 781.
15 Duara, 784.
16 Schipper, 40.
mortal made him a fierce figure in the afterlife. Because of his violence, his own personal charisma and potency (靈 ling), and the violent manner of his own death, he was made an unquiet spirit. Guan Yu became a demon that threatened the living and had to be placated with bloody food and offerings; which was common for many who had died inauspiciously.\textsuperscript{17} If he was not tamed he would be harmful and remain haunting the site of his beheading near Yuquan Mountain.\textsuperscript{18} The Daoists and nonsectarian pacified the demon by placation; the Buddhists brought him into the fold through enlightening\textsuperscript{19} him to the suffering he had caused;\textsuperscript{20} and the Confucians brought him into the fold by civilizing him through classical Chinese literature.

"THE MOST GLORIFIED."

Kam Louie argues that Guan Yu is a masculine ideal, embodying the martial side of Chinese culture. Louie writes, Guan Yu “is often placed alongside Confucius in temples as the 武 (wu, military) god with Confucius the 文 (wen, civil) god.” Moreover, “He is the most glorified and worshipped of all characters in Chinese history and literature.”\textsuperscript{21} Yet Confucius is widely known outside of China and Guan Yu is not.

Edward W. Said’s indictment of the Western analysis of the Orient posits among other things, that it emasculates Asian men. This is perhaps the best reason to note the significance of Guan Yu. In the Orientalist model, the Asian male is denied power and agency. The model of Asian masculinity is a sexless\textsuperscript{22} scholar; in modern parlance, the over-achieving academic, studying hard and good with math. This racist polemic maps nicely onto the scholarly figure that the west is more familiar and comfortable with, Master Kong, Confucius. Within China, Guan Yu and Confucius serve as an obvious pairing of the ideal masculine goals. As a warrior Guan Yu represents an active and strategic mindset. Although noted for his egregious acts of violence, his idealized qualities are not violence, but loyalty and agency as intrinsic parts of being male.

\textsuperscript{17} Ter Haar, 186-187.
\textsuperscript{18} Schipper 40, Duara 779.
\textsuperscript{19} Chang.
\textsuperscript{20} Duara, 779. The disquiet spirit of Guan Yu encounters the monk 智顗 Zhi Yi who “reminded Guan Yu of the severed heads of Guan Yu’s own victims. Deeply impressed by the logic of karmic retribution, the spirit of Guan Yu sought instruction in the Buddhist faith...”
\textsuperscript{22} Louie, “Sexuality,” 835; Louie, Theorising, 3,8,13.
In contrast to intellectuals and scholars, Guan Yu represents “the activist ideal”, who “protects the principles and perfects the exercise of power” and violence.\(^{23}\) He represents aggressive male agency, powerful, controlled and self-directing. His potential for righteous violence is central to his character. As Schipper has described him, he is a demon who must be pacified. He is still fierce despite seventeen hundred years of civilization.

In the Ming Dynasty other narratives are found that emphasize the destructive aspects of Guan Yu. In the Ming Dynasty chanteffectables and performed narratives were created which extolled various idealized qualities of historical and mythical figures. It is here that the violence of Guan Yu is revisited. The Brotherhood of the Peach Garden values brotherhood over everything; so much that they are willing to do great violence to sustain their bonds.

[In] order to make sure that all the men are whole heartedly devoted to one another as sworn brothers, Guan Yu and Zhang Fei agree to kill each other's family members to address Liu Bei's concerns over the possible negative effects that the burdens of family might have on their brotherhood. (Liu Bei himself is said to be unmarried at that time.) The act of killing wives or family members as a way of asserting one's \textit{yìngxión} masculinity (the inclination toward violence) tends to be celebrated more in literature associated with the oral tradition, probably reflecting aspects of a rather different notion of masculinity at a more popular level.\(^{24}\)

Guan Yu, despite his virile appearance and vitality is ennobled for his sexual restraint and his heroic (英雄 \textit{yìngxión}) potential for violence.\(^{25}\) Indeed Guan Yu's chastity is how the villain of the \textit{San’guo Yanyi}, the warlord Cao Cao, manipulates Guan Yu for his evil ends. Thus we have examples of two very different aspects to Guan Yu. One Guan Yu is committed enough to his brothers to murder his own family lest they render him disloyal. The other Guan Yu is loyal enough to his principles to contain his sexual potency without becoming a sexless scholar.

**The Domestic Colony and Identity.**

Post-colonial theory is a useful tool when unpacking the study of Huaqiao; Kam Louie calls this process “reading dragons.” In \textit{Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter}, Fred Dallmayr, posits that within the hegemony of the West, there exists a post-colonial experience within subaltern communities which include immigrants. The art, iconography,

\(^{23}\) Duara, 784.

\(^{24}\) Martin Huang, \textit{Negotiating Masculinities in Late Imperial China}, 94-95; Louie, “Sexuality,” 844.

\(^{25}\) Huang, 95; Louie, \textit{Theorising}, 28.
colour scheme, dishes and furniture in Chinese businesses can be either traditionally Chinese, thoroughly western or, as is most often the case, a melange of the two. In this bi-cultural space, there exists a tension between the assimilation models of the dominant milieu and traditional cultural identity of the immigrant communities.\textsuperscript{26} This creates a need for new and re-examined identity among the immigrants. Through religious solidarity, tensions within the domestic colony can be addressed. Like the Brotherhood of the Peach Orchard—Guan Yu and his brothers Lord Liu Bei and Zhang Fei—Overseas Chinese have united through their shared religious devotion to Guan Yu regardless of their specific Chinese origin, faith, history and even across linguistic divides\textsuperscript{27}. The Brotherhood of the Peach Orchard serves as a model for this among various groups from academics, from gangsters to merchants to professional groups, and even restaurateurs.\textsuperscript{28} Prasenjit Duara says plainly, “I know of no god who was more identified as a representative of Chinese culture than [Guan Yu].”\textsuperscript{29} In the alien environment of the domestic colony, Guan Yu and his brothers are emblematic of a chosen Chinese identity that is communal but not necessarily tied to familial bonds. Thus in Huaqiao communities we find Guan Yu in in small red shrines. Newer and more prosperous communities may have temples which are broken down along sectarian lines; the shrines in businesses are not overly sectarian.

My suspicion is that the lack of research into the Guan Yu cult is an artefact of the legacy of Orientalism, which cast Chinese men as an emasculated scholars, and Protestant anthropological research—which dismissed popular religion—whilst simultaneously, erroneously seeking the pure original tradition. Edward W. Said says it much better than I: “abstractions about the Orient, particularly those based on texts representing a 'classical' Oriental civilization, are always preferable to evidence from modern Oriental realities.”\textsuperscript{30} A prime example is the prominence by which the \textit{Dao De Jing} is given as representative of Daoism as whole when, for Daoists, it is merely part of a much larger corpus of literature.\textsuperscript{31}

The legacy of Orientalism has prefigured Master Kong in Western thought; his \textit{Analects} name him prominently enough that he gets his own Latinate name: we know him as Confucius. Even Laozi, the mostly legendary author of the \textit{Dao De Jing}, although not as well-

\textsuperscript{26} Fred Dallmayr, \textit{Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter}, 14.
\textsuperscript{27} Davis, 68. The shared Guandi (Emperor Guan) temple in Houston, Texas has services in Vietnamese and Mandarin, because it serves two distinct Overseas Chinese communities (http://guanditemple.org.shared-servers.com).
\textsuperscript{28} Duara, 778; Davis 68; Cf. Purdie, “Those Who Came with Their Dreams.”
\textsuperscript{31} As evidenced by the hundreds of translations of the \textit{Dao De Jing} in the book collections in mainstream and New Age bookshops including versions made by authors who do not read Chinese and are unfamiliar with the context of the texts.
known enough to warrant his own Latinised name, is recognized as significant, the ultimate authority of Daoism. With each subsequent Daoist author, Zhuangzi for example, held with less stature. Popular religious trends have not warranted enquiry being low cultured superstition.

Even without looming assimilation, Chinese identity is under threat. In light of postmodernity, technology, and recent Chinese history, Myron L. Cohen describes “being Chinese [as] far more problematic, for now it is as much a quest as it is a condition.” With the advent of Western ideas, technology, science and hegemony, the Chinese national and ethnic identity became threatened internally and globally. Postmodernity required a new identity.

For those most immediately involved in these novel circumstances, such as students in the new schools, treaty port merchants and workers, and many others, the cultural crisis was most acute. Many must have felt that they were living in a cultural vacuum, which could only be filled both by the creation of a new cultural design and, of necessity, through the redefinition of being Chinese. These were the conditions leading to the emergence of the cultural realignments and cleavages that have remained characteristic of modern Chinese society.

Cohen describes this "major crisis self-identification "as "anticulture,"which is predicated upon the Western domination of China in the 19th century. In a sense the model of China, the “Middle Kingdom” — a literal reading of Zhongguo, the characters rendered into China — was no longer tenable. It is reasonable to assume that the crisis of Chinese anticulture described by Cohen would only become more problematic for those who had left the Middle Kingdom for adventure and/or prosperity (fu) elsewhere. Indeed with see this in sojourner and immigrant literature.

In Overseas Chinese communities the struggle for identity is doubly alienating from the disconnect between national identity and ethnicity and the deconstruction of classical identity back “home” in China. Myron Cohen says, “Those who today identify themselves as Chinese do so without the cultural support provided by tradition.” Both those within China, and those without, across the world in Overseas Chinese communities, find their traditional culture maligned and challenged, “derided as backward and actively suppressed by China's

33 Cohen, 126.
34 Ibid.
35 Davis, 68. Cf. also Purdie, “Those Who Came with their Dreams.”
36 Cohen, 113.
modern political and intellectual elites” in China, and on the receiving end of the pressures to assimilate in the domestic colony overseas.

**Red Face and Green Sword.**

The iconography of Guan Yu has been remarkably consistent across time and various religio-cultural traditions. Depictions of Guan Yu always render him as a striking figure that serves as a visual cue for his loyalty and righteousness. With a “furrowed brow, long mustache and beard, and brandished sword, He has a florid red face, a long black beard and an intense gaze; he is almost frightening.” Statues of Guan Yu in restaurants are merely smaller versions of those found in temples. Patricia Chang, in an article about Guan Yu in the restaurants of Toronto said: “He looks slightly evil at first glance.”

Recall that he was once a famous warrior and an angry ghost; his fierceness serves to scare off demons. He is famous for his magnificent beard such that in the court of Cao Cao, the puppet emperor called him, “lord with the beautiful beard” (美髯公 meiran gong); Cao Cao gave him a special cloth to sac to protect it. He is almost exclusively depicted holding in his right hand his eponymous signature weapon, the Guan Dao, which is a sort of modified halberd. Like Guan Yu, the 關刀 Guan Dao (literally, “Guan’s greatsword”)—has other names—it is most often called the Green Dragon sword and sports a dragon motif on the blade.

There are three variants in his posture: astride a horse, sitting or standing. The latter two are most common. He is dressed in elaborate armour with a dragon motif; and his clothing is usually rendered in green. The most important features which do not change are his beard, red face, intense expression and the Green Dragon sword. These are the signifiers that mark his identity, despite artistic flourishes, choice of media, style changes and era.

Chinese iconography varies according to religious affiliation—certain tropes are distinct to one tradition—but as we have seen, Guan Yu is prominent for the three mainline traditions of China. Chinese Buddhist images (佛像 foxiang) have serene and indistinct facial features and typically of Buddhas of other lands, they wear robes and sit cross-legged; Daoist statues (聖像 shengxiang) often wear crowns and carry a gourd or a switch, they often have long black beards; and representations of Confucian and popular deities (神像 shenxiang) are

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37 Kam Louie, Theorizing, 24, 28.
38 Chang.
39 Moss Roberts, Romance, 421; Kam Louie, Theorising, 27-28
40 Louie, Theorising, 28; also known as the 青龍刀 Qinglong Dao, the “Green Dragon Sword,” is “a creation of story-tellers that has achieved permanence” and it is unlikely that the historical Guan Yu ever bore such a weapon.
often scholar-official figures. Depictions of Guan Yu in statuary and art blur these distinctions. Guan Yu’s sharp and fierce expression separate him from most Chinese bodhisattvas which are serene and compassionate; he has no crown but a top knot and war helm, but he holds a Daoist posture, and black beard; he is not dressed as a scholar—he has ornate usually dragon encrusted armour—although frequently holds a book (usually the 春秋 Spring and Autumn Annals) in addition to his Green Dragon sword wherein the sword and dragon motifs speak to Guan Yu’s virility and potency (靈 ling). Clearly, Guan Yu is a hybridized figure at home in both Daoist and popular religious iconography despite also receiving veneration of Chinese Buddhists and Confucians. His depictions, his iconography, render him in a liminal space between Chinese traditions, yet comfortable in all of them. It is this hybridized version of Guan Yu that appears time and again in various visual media including but not limited to paintings, opera masks, statuary and in more modern and postmodern settings—video games and action figures. There was even a Guan Yu made in the image of a Michael Bay styled Transformer that was constructed, appropriately enough, of an old Chinese military jeep built by students of the China Central Academy of Fine Arts.

“EVERY STORE WILL HAVE HIM IN IT.”

The various cults of Guan Yu have created a pan-Chinese transnational identity whereby ethnic Chinese across language, cultural and historic boundaries have a figure that is accessible and powerful. By functioning in multiple roles as patron of wealth, war, secret societies, elite and subaltern, Guan Yu “is one of the most popular gods found not just in China but abroad, to the extent that little shrines in his honour can be found in Chinese restaurants from out-back Australia to metropolitan London.” In the context of Chinese

41 Keith Stevens, Chinese Gods: the Unseen World of Spirits and Demons, 11.
42 Guan Yu would find good company with fierce bodhisattvas and avenging demons of Buddhism, but he is strikingly different from the ethereal serenity of 觀音 Guan Yin or the rotund bemusement of 布袋 Budai. Cf. Ruthless Compassion by Rob Linrothe and Kristopher Schipper on Guan Yin.
43 “Guandi liked to read the Spring and Autumn Annals. When on horseback, his one free hand would always hold a volume” as cited in Duara (784). The scholar-warrior aspect is part of the Confucianization of Guan Yu which Barend J. ter Haar argues is a late imperial addition (196, 200).
45 Duara, 785.
46 Only Guan Yu’s red face and green sword were made separately, all the other pieces were made of truck parts. http://www.clonedinchina.com/2010/06/transformer-goi-shanzhai-ed-in-china-built-from-an-old-truck-9-7-meters-in-height.html and http://technabob.com/blog/2010/06/06/giant-transformer-truck-descends-on-china/ the latter site shows the original jeep used to construct the robot; the former site has an animated video of the jeep becoming Guan Yu.
businesses, two of Guan Yu's aspects, the celestial policeman and the god of wealth have
made him doubly useful if only for his stern gaze and the threat of his big Green Sword to
protect restaurateurs from theft⁴⁸, corruption and economic recession.

The alienation that afflicts modern Chinese identity is felt more acutely by Huaqiao in
the Chinese diaspora. As my informants described: in the West they are labelled as Chinese
(as indeed all East Asians are regardless of ethnicity), but in the East they are at best not
Chinese enough, at worst not Chinese at all: they are viewed as Westerners. A recurrent
existential question of personal identity is created when Huaqiao are faced with this
inexplicable dissonance. Second and third generation Chinese who have assimilated are
rarely fluent in their ancestral tongues; this further distances them from their ethnic and
cultural heritage. It is not surprising then that there are books, comics, video games,
television programmes, card games and other forms of visual media that extol Chinese
virtues and which feature Guan Yu prominently.⁴⁹ The English and French language versions
of these media are not widely marketed, but do exist. As the narratives in comic books and
manga such as, Guan Yu: Blood Brothers to the End,⁵⁰ clearly illustrate, the goal is to integrate
Chinese identity in the children of immigrants who are alienated from their history and
culture in the languages of the majority. One young Chinese server in a restaurant told me
that he did not know why they had a Guan Yu idol, as he is Christian, but he knew Guan
Yu’s name and story; his boss, an older first generation Chinese, knew and added more
details. Attempting bridge the gap between Chinese parents and multicultural children new
media and video games have brought the narrative of Guan Yu into the west—making him
champion of choice for ethnic Chinese and foreign audiences.

Chinese restaurateurs in the west have created a bi-national space by the very act of
opening their restaurants. Guan Yu’s place is certain as he is the patron of businesses and an
aggressive spirit who will scare off bad influences whether they from flawed human nature
or supernatural in origin. Why Guan Yu among the myriad gods of the Celestial
Bureaucracy? Guan Yu is pan-Chinese; and I have shown how he has become integrated into
the three traditions of China. He is thoroughly Chinese. Guan Yu began as troubled young
man who was redeemed through his service as a general. Through the bonds of loyalty he
swore to Liu Bei and Zhang Fei in a peach orchard he was ennobled. After his violent death
he became an unequited spirit. He was placated by locals becoming part of local religiosity.
Literature cast him as a hero of legend extolling Chinese masculine virtues. His relationship

⁴⁸ It is important “if you have many employees and a cash register nearby . . . We pray to him ultimately for
protection. Every store will have him in it,’ Chin said.” Cited in Chang.
⁴⁹ Bob Hodge and Kam Louie, 119-120, 127.
⁵⁰ Dan Jolley and Ron Randall, Guan Yu: Blood Brothers to the End, 6.
Purdie

to his brothers, putting them above himself, made him a worthy of role model for fraternal orders, military groupings, policemen and gangsters. As Guan Yu became more widely celebrated he rose in rank and was assimilated by Buddhists, Daoists and Confucians. As a patron of artificial familial bonds—relationships that one chooses even over actual family—Guan Yu rests comfortably in businesses run by allied but not necessarily related Chinese. There is no question of his place in islands of Chinese culture throughout the world. From Sydney to Calgary and to Montréal, his is a place of honour in the Little Red Shrines of the Chinese businesses.
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Purdie


### Image

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Buddhist Images:</th>
<th>Daoist Images:</th>
<th>Non-Sectarian and Confucian Images:</th>
<th>Guan Yu Images:</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>serene Face</td>
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<tr>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Standing, leaning, sitting, or riding a horse</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>war helm, dragon armour, Guan Dao, sometimes holding a book</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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*Figure 1 Chinese iconographic tropes.*
Figure 2: Guan Yu at Chuan Xiang Qing restaurant, Montréal, Québec. Photograph by Philip Campbell.
Figure 3: Restaurant Shrine. Montréal, Québec. Photograph by Philip Campbell.
Figure 4: Restaurant Shrine, Montréal, Québec. Photograph by Scott Loudon.

Figure 5: Restaurant Shrine, San Francisco, California. Photograph by the author.