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“Finding the Bodhisattva”

As my knowledge of the history, literature, philosophy and language of China increased, I knew this was the subject to which I wanted to dedicate my academic life. This epiphany came to me in my very first Chinese history class in 2005. As part of my travels to Taiwan in summer 2007, I decided to study the aspect of Chinese philosophy which had most captured my imagination: Chan 禪 Buddhism. In Chan (as well as other forms of) Buddhism, a Bodhisattva is a person who is close to achieving ultimate enlightenment. The Bodhisattva Guan Yin 觀音 is unique in that she has denied herself enlightenment, choosing instead to help others in their own spiritual journeys. She is seen as the ultimate embodiment of wisdom and compassion and the female counterpart to the male Buddha.

Upon arriving at the largest and most popularly known temple in Taiwan, Long Shan 龍山, I noted the throngs of people entering with their mala prayer beads, buying orchids and snacks of rice cakes, sweet buns and juice to present on the altars. I saw the silent nuns with their kind eyes and begging bowls braiding small bracelets. I could hear the waterfall to my immediate right, falling into a pond of well fed koi fish. The sweet smoke from a multitude of candles and incense sticks stung my eyes at first, but added to the atmosphere and splendor after only a few moments. I beheld the beautiful architectural treasure that is Long Shan, first completed in 1738 A.D. I was seeing my history and philosophy lessons spring to life before my very eyes.



On entering the inner, open air courtyard, I saw the central structure to which people in the crowd slowly approached a few at a time. Holding incense sticks and mala beads, they bowed their heads before an iron gate and prayed. I slowly approached, mindful of the worshipers, and stood on tip-toe to peer over the iron gate. It was then I beheld three statues in the center of a room adorned with jewels, gold and rich fabrics: the first I noticed was the



Bodhisattva Guan Yin, radiant and wise, compassionate and serene. I am only slightly aware of photographing her through the iron gate. It was in the moment I saw her that I felt that same joy and excitement I felt in my first Chinese class, when I approached my now mentor and said “I want to be a Chinese history professor”. It was Guan Yin who reminded me. And I thank her.

Photos by Kellie

Location: Taipei, Taiwan, June 2007