

# REVISITING THE "NANJING MIRACLE"

## THE CULT AND YOGIC PRACTICES OF THE BODHISATTVA AVALOKITEŚVARA IN MING CHINA

LECTURE BY SHEN WEIRONG (TSINGHUA UNIVERSITY, BEIJING)



Mural painting of Avalokitesvara at Khro skyabs thugs rje chen po (Chinese: Guanyin miao), at Chuchen Dzong (Jinchuan), Ngaba, Sichuan (Eastern Tibet), Autumn 2023  
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In the fifth year of the Yongle Reign in the Ming Dynasty, the Emperor Zhu Di invited the Fifth Karmapa Patriarch bDe bzhin gshegs pa to preside over the Universal Liberation Rite of Water and Land (Pudu Dazhai) at Linggu Temple in Nanjing in order to transfer his deceased parents into the Realm of Super Bliss. The entire ceremony was accompanied by rare auspiciousness and wonders, and it was recorded in a long painted scroll with inscriptions in five languages, thus depicted as the "Nanjing Miracle" by later generations. Undoubtedly, it was a major event in the political and religious history of the early Ming Dynasty. People usually regard this "Universal Liberation Rite" as a political show successfully organized by the Yongle Emperor to establish his political legitimacy. However, there is a lack of basic understanding of its religious form and nature, which leads people to wonder: Why did a "Universal Liberation Rite of Water and Land" for the salvation of ancestors need to specially invite a Tibetan Buddhist master from the distant dBus gtsang to preside

over it? A careful examination of Chinese and Tibetan sources related to the life and deeds of the Fifth Karmapa reveals that the wondrously performed Universal Liberation Rite was actually the "Obstacle Removal Ritual of Avalokiteśvara" passed down by the Karmapa sect. The fourteen-day ritual is completely in accordance with the pith instructions of the Obstacle-Removing Ritual of Avalokiteśvara transferred by the Third Karma pa, Patriarch Rang byung rdo rje. This event was not only purposed to save the Ming Taizu couple, but also to save all sentient beings who lost their lives in the wars in the early Ming Dynasty. This may indicate that this "Universal Liberation Rite" was not just a political show, but a religious act with a clear religious purpose. Combining various other documentary materials for a comprehensive investigation, we may think that the Emperor Yongle had very clear Tibetan Buddhist beliefs.

SHEN Weirong holds a PhD in Central Asian Science of Language and Culture from Bonn University (1998). He is Professor of Tibetan and Buddhist Philology at Tsinghua University, Beijing, and is the author of *Leben und historische Bedeutung des ersten Dalai Lama dGe 'dun grub pa dpal bzang po (1391–1474). Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der dGe lugs pa-Schule und der Institution der Dalai Lama* (Styler Verlag, 2002) and *Philological Studies of Tibetan History and Buddhism* (Shanghai Press of Chinese Classics, 2010). He is currently Numata Visiting Professor of Buddhist Studies at the Department of South Asian, Tibetan and Buddhist Studies of the University of Vienna.

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