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# The future cakravartin-maitreyan soteriology in early China

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*University of Iowa*

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**THE FUTURE CAKRAVARTIN  
-MAITREYAN SOTERIOLOGY IN EARLY CHINA**

by  
Meng Yin

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Master of Arts degree  
in Religious Studies  
in the Graduate College of  
The University of Iowa

July 2012

Thesis Supervisor: Associate Professor Morten Schlütter

Graduate College  
The University of Iowa  
Iowa City, Iowa

CERTIFICATE OF APPROVAL

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MASTER'S THESIS

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This is to certify that the Master's thesis of

Meng Yin

has been approved by the Examining Committee  
for the thesis requirement for the Master of Arts degree  
in Religious Studies at the July 2012 graduation

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## INTRODUCTION

Maitreya is well known in China as the Laughing Buddha with a round belly and a large bag, and seldom venerated as the Future Buddha. However, the image of the Laughing Buddha was actually a rather late development of Chinese Buddhist iconography, occurring during the Song Dynasty.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless, known as the Future Buddha, Maitreya is venerated in both pre-Mahāyāna schools and Mahāyāna tradition. Although the specific origin of the notion of Maitreya as the Future Buddha remains obscure, such a notion has been adopted by both Hīnayānists<sup>2</sup> and the Mahāyāna Sutras. In the canonical literature of the Hīnayānists, though it was generally understood that it was since Mahāyāna Buddhism that the conception of more-than-one-buddha as well as that of bodhisattva as the Buddha-to-be came into being, the *Mahāvastu* had already developed the concept of bodhisattvas as supernatural beings and initiated a list of future Buddhas with Maitreya at its head.<sup>3</sup> The *Mahāvastu* describes four stages in the career of a bodhisattva. Upon the completion of the fourth stage, the bodhisattva will be anointed by a Buddha as his successor and will attain rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise<sup>4</sup>. The

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<sup>1</sup> A narrative in *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元, under the title of “Mingzhou Budai Heshang 明州布袋和尚”, records a monk who used his large bag to make a kōan, and thus was identified as the Budai Heshang, the bag monk. He was said to chant a Buddhist hymn before passing away, which said, “Maitreya, the true Maitreya, he has millions of incarnated bodies. He frequently reveals himself to human beings at current time, but they don’t recognize him. 彌勒真彌勒，分身千百億。時時示時人，時人自不識” This hymn implies the identity of the monk as the incarnation of Maitreya. It is generally believed that the transformation of the image of Maitreya to the Laughing Buddha is traced to this narrative. See Puji 普濟, *Wudeng huiyuan* 五燈會元 (Beijing: Zhonghua press 1984), 121-3.

<sup>2</sup> Though the term “Hinayanist” has a strong bias, it is perhaps the most convenient term for embracing all the schools of thoughts in Buddhism other than Mahāyāna. Therefore, I would rather employ it for the sake of convenience alone, in this paper.

<sup>3</sup> Padmanabh S. Jaini, “Stages in the Bodhisattva Career of the Tathagata Maitreya,” Alan Sponberg and Alan Hardacre ed., *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* (Cambridge University Press, 1988), 55.

<sup>4</sup> Maitreya is distinguished from other Mahāyāna Buddhas by his possession of two paradises. One is the Tuṣita paradise, the heavenly paradise; the other is the Ketumati paradise, the earthly paradise. In both the Hīnayāna schools and Mahāyāna traditions, Maitreya is identified as a bodhisattva in Tuṣita before his

bodhisattva's final incarnation from Tuṣita will be his last birth, when he will become a Tathāgata and will attain Nirvāṇa in the Ketumati paradise.<sup>5</sup> In Early China, Mahāyāna teachings and Hīnayāna teachings came in almost at the same time, and the Chinese did not strictly distinguish them from each other. Therefore, though in Hīnayāna tradition Maitreya was basically worshiped as the Future Buddha who was specifically helpful in meditation practice, the Maitreya belief in Early China was merged with the Pure Land belief in Mahāyāna tradition.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, I find that the ideal of cakravartin played a key role in the Maitreyan soteriology of Early China.<sup>7</sup> Therefore I would like to start with a quick overview of the ideal of cakravartin. According to Thomas:

The original meaning of this term [cakravartin], as even Kern admitted, was probably “one who controls or rules over the sphere of his power (cakra),” but it came to be understood as “one who turns a cakra.” With this change of interpretation cakra became a blank term to be given a meaning according to the ideas of fitness of the commentators. It is usually understood as “wheel,” but how the wheel was conceived never clearly appears in the legend.<sup>8</sup>

A Thai Buddhist text provides a detailed description of the ideal of cakravartin in religious myth. The gem wheel Cakkaratana, brought into being by the merit of a cakravartin, empowers and blesses people who worship it, and causes people willing to

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descent as the Future Buddha who will preach to the Three Assemblies under the Dragon Flower Tree in Ketumati.

<sup>5</sup> Jaini, “Stages in the Bodhisattva Career,” 55-6.

<sup>6</sup> In Mahāyāna cosmology, the universe consists of numerous worlds. Some of these worlds are fortunate enough to become Buddha realms in which resides a Buddha who preaches sermons and performs deeds. These Buddha realms belong to the seventh realm outside of the traditional six realms. There can be only one Buddha in a world at a time. It becomes a popular goal for Buddhist practitioners to gain rebirth in one of these worlds in Mahāyāna Buddhism.

<sup>7</sup> As for Early China, basically it means in this paper the period from Han 漢 dynasty (202BCE-220CE) when Maitreyan belief was first introduced to China to Tang 唐 dynasty (618-907CE) when Maitreyan belief had been largely declined in China.

<sup>8</sup> E. J. Thomas, *The Life of Buddha as Legend and History* (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1949), 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., 219.

accompany the cakravartin.<sup>9</sup> The Sanskrit term “cakravartin,” according to the *Encyclopedia of Religion*, thus signifies that all-powerful monarch “whose chariot wheels turn freely” or “whose travels are unobstructed,” “referring to an ideal universal king who rules ethically and benevolently over the entire world.” The actual term was probably first used in the late fifth and early fourth centuries BCE by the compilers of the *Maitri Upaniṣad*.<sup>10</sup>

In this essay, I would like to discuss the Maitreyan soteriology in Early China from the angle of the ideal of cakravartin embedded in the image of Maitreya, who rules over a heavenly paradise and will come down to effect universal salvation in an earthly paradise. In the first section, I will present the social conditions as well as the indigenous schools of thought in Early China, and make an analogy with those in ancient Hindu society, so as to reveal the collective appeal to an ideal cakravartin as the future savior in Early China. In the second section, I would like to survey the development of the image of Maitreya in both scriptural and sectarian sources, and how it is related to the ideal of cakravartin. Then in the third section, I will discuss Maitreyan soteriology from the perspective of Pure Land belief and how the ideal of cakravartin has contributed to the development of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China. I will examine sutras in which Maitreya appears, and texts, including inscription, which record the actual practices of Maitreya worship, as well as the sculptures bearing those inscriptions, so as to present a comprehensive examination of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China.

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<sup>9</sup> *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press 1982), trans. Frank E. Reynolds and Mani Reynolds, 137-59.

<sup>10</sup> William K. Mahony, “Cakravartin,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion* (Detroit: Gale, 2005), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Lindsay Jones, ed., 1350-1.



**SECTION ONE.**  
**THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**  
**IN EARLY CHINA**

I would like to start from the survey of the social conditions as well as the indigenous schools of thoughts before I proceed into the discussion of the Maitreyan soteriology in Early China. This is based on an observation of the obvious similarity between Ancient Hindu culture and Early China, and a conviction that the social conditions, as well as cultural backgrounds, have played a pivotal role in constructing the Maitreyan soteriology in Early China. Durkheim raises the sociological idea that religion emerges from the cauldron of collective effervescence and that religion is a symbol of the social life of the community. A totem, which symbolizes the divinity, is the collective consensus of an idealized society. As Durkheim writes:

We have arrived, then, at the following definition: a religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions- beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church. The second element that takes its place in our definition is therefore no less essential than the first: demonstrating that the idea of religion is inseparable from the idea of a church suggests that religion must be something eminently collective.<sup>11</sup>

Namely, Religion comes from social appeal and reveals collective opinions. Yoshizu summarizes three characteristics of the notion of “teaching” in Chinese ethics, the third of which also emphasizes that a “teaching” in the Chinese context has to benefit the society in important ways. Yoshizu points out that Buddhism suffered severe persecution due to its incompatibility with Chinese social ethics, such as exemption from taxes and military recruitment, as well as familial responsibility.<sup>12</sup> However, I would

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<sup>11</sup> Émile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), Carol Cosman, trans., 46.

<sup>12</sup> Teachings in Early Chinese society all have close connections with religious ideas, therefore, teachings can be understand as religious traditions here. Yoshizu Yoshihide, Paul Groner, trans. & ed., “The Relation

insist that Buddhism was in accordance with Chinese social ethics in many other respects, naturally and intentionally, which functioned to have facilitated the development of Buddhist soteriology, especially Maitreyan soteriology, in Early China.

### **The Mythical Tradition of the Ideal of Cakravartin and Its Social Roots**

The Ancient Hindu cosmos appeared to be a hierarchical structure, with the king at the center, and all the other castes listed in a pyramidal sequence. According to *Manusmṛti, The Laws of Manu*, Manu, the first king and dharma-holder of pre-Buddhist myth, is an emanation from the King of the Cosmos. He was a great deity in human form shaped from fragments of the different Vedic gods. The king was paid allegiance to as both the ritual and political center in ancient Hindu society. Take as an example the horse sacrifice, a ritual performed by a king who aims at increasing his realm. Different parts of the horse are equated with corresponding constituents of the universe. It is through the consolidation of the central importance of the king that other inferior realms as well as the order of the whole cosmos are both consolidated consequently.<sup>13</sup>

Such a hierarchical cosmology precisely corresponds to the socio-political structure of the Hindu kingdom. In Vedic society, the Hindu kingdom is also segmented hierarchically from village, and locality to supralocality, with the king as the political center. The worldly power was legitimated by identifying the king in the medieval period with the god Visnu, a tradition that can be traced to its earliest roots in Indra, who rules his subjects as their king, encircling all this as a rim encircles spokes. “Because a king is made from particles of these lords of the gods, therefore he surpasses all living beings in

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between Chinese Buddhist History and Soteriology,” Robert E. Buswell and Jr. Robert M. Gimello, eds., *Paths to Liberation: The Marga and Its Transformations in Buddhist Thought* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), 315-6.

<sup>13</sup> Gavin Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 68.

brilliant energy, and like the Sun, he burns eyes and ears, and no one on earth is able even to look at him. Through his special power he becomes Fire and Wind; he is the Sun and the Moon, and he is (Yama) the King of Justice, he is Kubera and he is Varuna, and he is great Indra.”<sup>14</sup> This account in *Manu* explicitly states not only the divine identity, but also the moral obligation of the king. A cakravartin is expected to safeguard his realms from outside invasion, as well as maintain peace and justice within his realm. A cakravartin also highlights his conquest of lands, which is seen in the *Cakkavattisīhanāda-sutta*.<sup>15</sup> The *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* also writes that other kings will come to pay their respects to the cakravartin, and the cakravartin will teach the Dharma to these kings.<sup>16</sup>

The ideal of universal monarch who rules over the cosmos was passed down from the Vedic society to the Buddhist soteriology. The symbol of cakra has been assimilated to Buddhism and become a central conception of Buddhist philosophy. The Dharmacakra, the Wheel of Life, which contains the cosmic realms, the Eightfold Path, etc., depicts the Saṃsāra that human beings are trapped in. Śākyamuni, frequently referred to as a “cakravāla cakravartin,” who has attained Nirvāṇa outside of the Saṃsāra, turns the wheel and liberates all sentient beings from the endless sufferings of Saṃsāra. Śākyamuni is also depicted as “dharmacakrapravartayati,” “he who sets the wheel of law in motion,” where the wheel serves to be the symbol of universal sovereignty.<sup>17</sup> Huxley

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<sup>14</sup> Flood, *An Introduction to Hinduism*, 68.

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Huxley, “The Buddha and the Social Contract,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24 (1996), 429.

<sup>16</sup> *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, 156-9.

<sup>17</sup> Buddhist literatures have distinguished three types of cakravartin, the pradeśa cakravartin, a local king who leads the people of a specific region, the dvīpa cakravartin who governs all of the people of any one of the four continents posited by ancient Indian cosmologies, and the cakravāla cakravartin, the monarch who rules over all of the continents of the world, whose dominion is compared with the Buddha’s religious supremacy. See Mahony, “Cakravartin,” 1350-1.

makes an assessment of the *Cakkavattisihanāda-sutta* and suggests that “A cakkavatti [cakravartin] king, the only kind who can stem humanity’s downward spiral, must be as enlightened about cause and effect as a Buddha.”<sup>18</sup> Indeed, in *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, it is explicitly stated that “The great Cakkavatti king knows merit and Dhamma, and teaches the people to know the Dhamma; it is just as if a Lord Buddha had been born and was teaching the people to live according to the Dhamma.”<sup>19</sup>

King Aśoka is regarded as an exemplified cakravartin in Buddhist history. In 268 BCE, King Aśoka rose to throne. He launched warfare towards kingdoms in the neighborhood and unified most parts of the Hindu area. However, once upon a time, watching the bloody scene of his own conquests, Aśoka burst into regrets and determined to renounce military acts. He adopted the ideal of non-violence, established Buddhism as the state religion, and transformed his rule into a much more benevolent one. He also made great contribution to the development of Buddhism by spreading Buddhist messages to other Hindu kingdoms. Aśoka is also said to have convened the Third Council to restore harmony to the Sangha, and distributed the relics of the Buddha throughout India.<sup>20</sup> It is perhaps due to his contributions to the consolidation of the foundation of Buddhism, as well as his conquests of other Hindu kingdoms that had unified a large area, that Aśoka was set as an example of the universal ideal king, cakravartin in Buddhist history.

In a word, it is very likely that the segmentary social conditions have catalyzed the ideal of cakravartin, the crystallization of the collective longing for a wise king who will bring about a unified society. The social conditions and the ideal of cakravartin have been

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<sup>18</sup> Huxley, “The Buddha and the Social Contract,” 417.

<sup>19</sup> *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, 147.

<sup>20</sup> Donald W. Mitchell, *Buddhism: Introducing the Buddhist Experience* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 70-4.

intimately interrelated with each other, and mutually propelled the each other's development. The distribution of the political power as well as the ideal of kingship in Early China had a striking resemblance with the ancient Hindu kingdom, and I would assume it was under the interaction between the social conditions and the ideal of kingship that Maitreyan soteriology in Early China gradually took its shape. Thus, I would like to give a general account of the social conditions in Early China at the outset.

### **The Social Conditions and Schools of Thought in Early China**

China has undergone a long history of feudalism, the economy of which was fundamentally established upon agriculture. Thus, the ownership of lands has an important part in building the sociopolitical systems. Social turbulence frequently broke out when tension of land-owning became exacerbated. Indigenous schools of thought consequently revealed great concerns with the stabilization of the social order. I will give a general description of the social conditions and schools of thought in Early China in this part, mainly based on the works of Roberts and Ch'en, as well as several original Chinese sources.

From the Xia 夏 dynasty (2070-1600BCE) onwards, the hereditary system of kingship in China was established; the succession was passed to surviving brothers at the outset, and later to the firstborn son.<sup>21</sup> There were other regimes that overlapped with and threatened the reign of the Xia dynasty, including the Shang 商 dynasty (1766-1122BCE) which overthrew the reign of the Xia. There were other competing regimes that coexisted with the Shang as well. The Western Zhou dynasty 西周 (1046-771BCE) which succeeded the Shang dynasty united seven regimes under the central control, and formed a reciprocal relationship between the central ruler and these regimes. While the central

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<sup>21</sup> The kingship in Chinese history was principally inherited by the first son. However, there might be exemptions when the firstborn son was dead, or the firstborn son was not from the first wife, etc.

government granted fiefs to these regimes, these regimes in return provided military support to the Zhou king. The famous verses from *Shijing* 詩經 demonstrate such a sociopolitical hierarchy: “Everywhere under vast Heaven, there is no land that is not under the reign of the king. To the borders of those lands, there are none are not the servants of the king.溥天之下莫非王土率土之濱莫非王臣”<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the ninth century BCE, the power of the Zhou king has been severely compromised. The subordinate regimes had in fact ceased to pay loyalty to the central government, and fiefs were assuming the character of independent states. It was in this period that Confucianism and other schools of thought such as Daoism came into being and began to flourish. All these schools of thought revealed their concerns with the segmented and turbulent situation as well as their efforts towards promoting the progression into a unified condition. For example, Daoism claimed the harmony of heaven and human in its nature, and insisted that the perfect governmental rule was realized through non-action. Legalism emphasizes a strict and even severe governmental manipulation of people, which guarantees a unified political system strictly centered on kingship. It teaches that a stable reign is guaranteed by strict laws, punishments, military supports, etc., and the moral example that people should absolutely pay obedience to is set by the government. Confucianism, which has established the ideal of kingship in Early China, was definitely not exempted from such concern, either. Different from Daoism, Confucianism emphasizes the necessity of the active participation of individual human in the establishment of a harmonious society, and contrary to Legalism, Confucianism insists upon Ren 仁, which is the principle of altruism and humanness in terms of social relations, and Li 禮, which is a system of rituals and norms that standardizes individual and communal behaviors so as to achieve harmony between

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<sup>22</sup> *Maoshi zhengyi* 毛詩正義 (Hong Kong: Zhonghua press, 1964), vol.4, 1072.

human and heaven. Confucianism also emphasizes loyalty to family, monarch and friends, aiming at the formation of a harmonious relationship between every constituent of the society.

The Qin 秦 dynasty (227-201BCE) established a unified central government for the first time in Chinese history. However, taking a political stand echoing with Legalism, employing oppressive military recruitment, exacting heavy taxes, and meting out severe punishments, the Qin dynasty suffered notoriety as a tyranny, and was soon subverted by uprisings. The Han dynasty became the regime which unified large parts of China for the second time. After an expedient attempt to institute the Daoist ideal to govern the kingdom, Confucianism eventually overrode all the other schools and gained royal support under the reign of Han Wudi 漢武帝 (156-87BCE). The royal support of Confucianism in the Han dynasty was also based on the concern to form a unified kingdom. Though owning nominal fame as a unified kingdom, the Han dynasty was not exempted from segmented and turbulent social conditions, either. There were ten kingdoms to the east and the south of the Han territory. Though the rulers of these kingdoms were replaced with members of the imperial family, a hereditary system was adopted in the reign of Han Wudi, which severely compromised the central political power and factually formed a military threat to the central government. Besides, the local governments also had great executive freedom in their own districts, which had also largely weakened the central government control. In the later Han dynasty, the competition for power between the family of the empress and the eunuchs further exacerbated the segmentation and turbulence of the society. It was generally believed that Buddhism was introduced to China during this time, under the reign of Han Mingdi 漢明帝 (58-72CE). The stability of the society gradually collapsed as the Han dynasty came to its end.

However, this was not the end of the painful segmentation of society in Early China at all. After a period of interregnum, the empire was divided into three kingdoms, while minor military forces were still active and the society still suffered a turbulent condition. After a short period of unification in the Western Jin 西晉 dynasty (265-316CE), the social conditions went back to a prolonged chaos. The Han ethnic group migrated to the south and successively established six dynasties. The north was dominated by non-Han ethnic groups, and underwent an extremely segmented period known as the Sixteen Kingdoms 十六国 (304-439CE). Up to this time, Buddhism has already experienced a long period of interaction with indigenous schools of thought, mainly Daoism and Confucianism. Besides, under the influence of the different social conditions, Buddhism produced a bifurcated development in the south and in the north. In the south, Buddhism was brought by literati of the upper class, and its development went into a philosophical and literal dimension. Monks formed a congenial association with the literate elites, and large quantities of scriptures were translated and introduced to China. More interaction with Daoism and Confucianism took place as well. Gentry Buddhism arose, which emphasized both Buddhist and indigenous traditions. It appealed to Confucians with teachings of morality and ritual, and to Daoists with its spiritual pursuit of enlightened wisdom. In the north, Buddhism was almost established as a state religion, and was employed as an instrument to exercise governmental control over the general populace.<sup>23</sup> Buddhist monks offered to be political, diplomatic and military advisors, and rather than

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<sup>23</sup> The Han ethnic group showed distrust and contempt towards non-Chinese ethnic groups and depreciated them as 'barbarians', an opinion based on a sense of ethnic as well as moral superiority, which was very likely to derive from the Confucian cosmological view that the Han ethnic group was in the central position of the cosmos, by virtue of the mandate of heaven. Though wielding military power over Chinese, the non-Chinese rulers were painfully challenged by the belief in ethnical superiority of the Han ethnic group. After periods of adversity towards and persecution of Buddhism, the non-Chinese rulers changed their attitude towards Buddhism and even came to identify themselves with the Buddha, taking advantage of the fact that Buddhism had already been largely assimilated into and accepted by the general populace in Early China, so that they themselves, with a non-Chinese origin could be approved by the Chinese.



scriptural study and attainment of insight, religious practices were mostly magical rites focusing on worldly benefits, such as prophecy of the outcome of battles and the vicissitude of the empires, etc.

The Sui 隋 dynasty (589-618CE) terminated the turbulent period of the Northern and Southern Dynasties. However, the Sui dynasty went on the same legalistic path that the Qin dynasty had gone. The Sui dynasty was also subverted during the reign of its second emperor, as a consequence of its oppressive recruitment, heavy taxes and abusive punishments. The Tang 唐 dynasty followed and inaugurated a new era in Chinese history in which the country enjoyed a prosperity of both material wealth and cultural development. However, the Tang dynasty was not exempted from social chaos, either. The warfare with Eastern Turks, the threat from Mongolia and Manchuria, as well as the rise of Tibet, all compromised the stability of the Tang society. The An Lushan Rebellion which erupted between 755 and 763 severely weakened the economic basis, and military forces, as well as the central control of the Tang government. The reign of the Tang dynasty was shaken to its foundation and the society never recovered from a turbulent condition.

The pathos of the enormous suffering resulting from the segmented, turbulent social conditions, the wistful yearning for a universal, powerful monarch, the advent of whom would put an end to all these worldly sufferings and inaugurated a brand new, peaceful and prosperous era, has been vividly displayed by this survey of the social conditions in Early China. Buddhism, either naturally responding to such a social appeal, or intentionally appropriated by the imperial court, grasped its opportunity to flourish in Chinese history.

### **The Ideal of Kingship in Early China**

Aside from the turbulent social conditions, the sympathy for a divine monarch conceived as an amalgam of Buddhist and Confucian ideal was another significant contributing factor to the dissemination of Buddhist soteriology in Early China. The Western Zhou dynasty established in Chinese history the justification of the reign of a dynasty by appeal to ethical ideals for the first time. According to *Shangshu* 尚書, also known as *Shujing* 書經, the tyranny of the last Shang king was blamed for the fall of the Shang dynasty, and the mandate of heaven was consequently taken away from him and awarded to the Western Zhou rulers. In the preface of the Chapter “Weizi 微子” in the Book “Shangshu 商書”, it is written that “the Shang dynasty has failed the heavenly mandate, 殷既錯天命” and one of the malfunctions was that “the Shang dynasty levied heavy taxation enforced by way of massive slaughter and severe punishment, which aroused the resentment of its subjects, but it wouldn’t loosen its despotic rule. 用又讎斂, 召敵讎不怠”<sup>24</sup> Before Neo-Confucianism was established in the Song dynasty, the main teaching of Confucianism had been largely systemized in the Han dynasty. Confucianism had particularly enjoyed a great opportunity of development after Han Wudi issued the edict which embraced Confucianism as the only and exclusive orthodox state ideology and meanwhile renounced all the other schools of thought. Although intrusive and pivotal efforts to disseminating Buddhist teachings were made by Daoists in China, the compatibility between Buddhism and Confucianism was not neglected. After all, Confucianism was the only official and orthodox school of thought in this period, and was deeply rooted in the minds of Chinese literati, who were the first group of people espousing Buddhism in Early China. In Confucian cosmology, the world is basically separated into heaven and earth. While in the heaven resides the supreme god Shangdi 上帝 who rules over all the ancestral spirits, the earth is the realm that consists of human

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<sup>24</sup> Zhu Junsheng 朱駿聲, *Shangshu guzhu biandu* 尚書古註便讀 (Taipei: Guangwen press, 1977), 105-8.

beings who will proceed to heaven after death. There is a reciprocal relationship between the heavenly spirits and human beings. The heavenly spirits accept and live on the offerings from human beings. The conduct of a man is expected to be in accordance with the heavenly order so as to attain blessings and protection from the heavenly spirits. If man fails to act in accordance with the heavenly order, warnings and penalties will fall on him.

The cosmology of Confucianism is strikingly coherent with that of ancient Hindu society, and the belief in rewards and punishment for good and evil echoes the basic teaching of karma in Buddhism. Likewise, the emperor who rules over the Earth with the heavenly mandate, in the belief system of Confucian cosmology, precisely corresponds to the ideal of cakravartin as a universal monarch.<sup>25</sup> Huxley has observed the interacting relationship between popular consent and kingship. On the one hand, it is the divine will rather than popular consent that entitles a king; on the other hand, the popular consent puts a moral and reciprocal pressure on the king.<sup>26</sup> Indeed, by the eighth century,

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<sup>25</sup> The king is identified as Tianzi 天子, the Son of Heaven, and is crowned by the heavenly mandate. The king, who is at the apex of humanity in the Earth realm, has an obligation to act in accordance with the heavenly mandate and rule for the welfare of the general people, so that his kingdom will enjoy peace as well as prosperity of both material and cultural development. However, if the king fails to act in accordance with the heavenly mandate, his kingdom will suffer from disasters, depression, and even subversion. Essentially, the ideal of a Buddhist community, which exists as an independent entity immune from political power and governmental control, is contradictory to imperial expectation of an assistant to help consolidate the central government, and indeed, as a consequence, Buddhism suffered persecution from the imperial court in Chinese history many times. Nevertheless, as I will discuss later in the following section, when the image of the cakravartin was appropriated and merged with that of the emperor, the problem of sangha-state relationship was then solved, and the worship of Maitreya thus gained imperial support and rapidly developed.

<sup>26</sup> Huxley observes that in the Aggaññ-sutta the popular consent to a king comes from, first, his benevolence to his subjects, and second, his personal charm. Huxley has also observed the *Mahābūārata* legend, the “Great Uncrowned” prototype of kingship, which, echoing with *Manu*, claimed that it was Vishnu and the ancient rishis who appointed the first king, and the tyrant Vena is killed by the ancient rishis and replaced by a new king. This provides a precedent for armed rebellion when the king failed to meet Dhamma’s high standard. This echoes the idea of heavenly mandate in Confucianism, which is said to deprive a king of his ruling right if the king fails to rule for the benefit and welfare of his subjects and appoint a new king to fulfill the sociopolitical responsibility of the kingship. Huxley also observes a transformation that appears in the Buddha’s satire on the legend of Manu, which held that the first king was appointed by people rather than by God. See Huxley, “The Buddha and the Social Contract,” 407-16.

Buddhism had triumphantly established its teaching throughout China in the price of becoming largely syncretized with indigenous traditions. The most influential Buddhist schools in China had been consequently established precisely during this time.

It needs to be pointed out that the development of the schools of thought mentioned above basically took place in the upper class of the society. The indigenous tradition appeared with an entirely different visage, which elicited another interesting phenomenon in the development of Buddhism in Early China, the bifurcated development of Chinese Buddhism. One line was situated in the intellectual elites who emphasized doctrinal teachings, and the other was practiced by the peasantry who relied heavily on magical rites.<sup>27</sup> In fact, the general populace had little idea of the complicated belief system of these orthodox traditions. As Erik Zürcher has shown, the vast majority of Buddhist monks were barely literate, and Buddhism had been largely fused with sectarian mythical tradition at the popular level, which gave rise to beliefs and practices such as spirit possession and spirit writing.<sup>28</sup> As I will present later, the Maitreyan soteriology in a major sectarian mythical tradition claims that the world is created and directed by a mother goddess who sent messenger buddhas to the world for the sake of universal salvation. All of these godly beings had been quite outside of the pantheon of Confucianism. However, I would assume that the conception of the heavenly mandate in Confucianism had been acknowledged and approved by sectarian traditions to a large extent. It is firmly believed that the heavenly mandate is compatible with the will of the

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However, this is obviously a fundamental transformation that has little to do with the discussion in this paper, so I won't bother to spend time and space to discuss this point in this paper. I would assume here an increasing emphasis on social appeal instead of divine will.

<sup>27</sup> See Kenneth Ch'en, *Buddhism in China: a Historical Survey* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964) and Arthur F. Wright, *Buddhism in Chinese History*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959).

<sup>28</sup> Erik Zürcher, "Perspectives in the Study of Chinese Buddhism," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1982), part2, 167-76.

general populace, and if a rebel leader succeeds in deposing the ruler and ascending the throne, it is a sign that the heavenly mandate has left the previous ruler and fallen on the new king. The success of the revolution alone sufficed for its justification and sanctification. The Maitreyan soteriology which supported a regeneration of the decaying era was very likely to be accepted consequently as a justification for sociopolitical rebellions in Chinese history.

In a nutshell, the society in Early China remained in a constantly unstable social condition, even in the periods under the most powerful and effective reign. Such a social background undoubtedly appeals to a universal cakravartin who can terminate all the chaos, bringing peace and prosperity. Another factor which calls forth the ideal of cakravartin is its compatibility with the indigenous traditions in Early China, both the orthodox tradition Confucianism and the sectarian traditions. The social conditions as well as schools of thoughts in Early China foreshadowed the formation of Maitreyan soteriology.

**SECTION TWO.**  
**THE DEVELOPMENT OF**  
**THE IMAGE OF MAITREYA**

Maitreyan soteriology in the orthodox tradition consists of two parts, the Tuṣita soteriology, proclaiming an ascending movement of worshippers from earth to heaven, and the Ketumati soteriology, proclaiming a descending movement of Maitreya from heaven to earth. Basically, Maitreya in Tuṣita is identified as a bodhisattva, and in Ketumati as the Future Buddha. In sectarian traditions, such a distinction between the image of Maitreya in Tuṣita and Ketumati has been intentionally blurred, and thus the Maitreyan soteriology has correspondingly transformed to a large extent. In each case, the ideal of cakravartin has been largely assimilated into the image of Maitreya, which is the basis on which the Maitreyan soteriology was constructed on and from which it developed. Thus, I believe it is better not to have the discussion of Maitreyan soteriology neglect the image of Maitreya. Therefore, before I open up the discussion of Maitreyan soteriology, I would like first to trace the development of the image of Maitreya in Early China.

**The Compassionate Bodhisattva**

The overlap of the image of Maitreya and that of cakravartin frequently occurs at this stage of development of the concept of bodhisattva in original Indian narratives, even before Mahāyāna texts came into being. In an account in *Mahāvastu*, Mahā-Maudgalyāyana, who had served thousands of Buddhas in his previous lives, learned from Śākyamuni, who presented a narration of his previous life story. In this narration, Maitreya was mentioned as the Cakravartin Vairocana. “Suprabhasa was the name of the Tathāgata when bodhisattva Maitreya, as the universal king (cakravartin), Vairocana, was

aiming at the perfection of enlightenment in the future, and thus first acquired the roots of goodness.”<sup>29</sup> In an account in *Divyāvadāna*, the father king Vāsava and the son king Dhanasammata were in conflicts. Vāsava went to the Buddha Ratnaśikhi when his defeat proved to be irreversible, enquiring “at whose feet do all kings prostrate themselves?” The Buddha answered with “cakravartin” and prophesized that he would become a cakravartin named Śaṅkha. Dhanasammata then approached the Buddha and enquired “at whose feet do the cakravartins prostrate themselves?” The Buddha answered with “Tathāgata” and prophesized that he would become a Tathāgata named Maitreya.<sup>30</sup> In another *Divyāvadāna* account, maitreya himself was identified with a cakravartin king named Saṅkha. Saṅkha fulfilled his promise that he would give away the throne to the one who would inform him of the coming of a Buddha, leaving this throne to the messenger who brought him the news that the Buddha Sirimata had come, and set out to search for the Buddha. Then came the impressive story that after hearing the Buddha’s sermon, Saṅkha cut off his own head and presented it to the Buddha as a worshipful gift. Such a deed fulfilled the perfection of giving and he consequently achieved rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise.<sup>31</sup>

Undoubtedly, the conception of compassion, especially in terms of giving, which is essential to Mahāyāna soteriology, namely the bodhisattva path, plays an important role in Mahāyāna tradition. I would like to present here the correspondence between the image of bodhisattva and that of cakravartin in terms of compassion. The *Three Worlds According to King Ruang* has explicitly stated the responsibility and restraint of a cakravartin. A cakravartin must not kill sentient beings, and should share property with

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<sup>29</sup> Jaini, “Stages in the Bodhisattva Career,” 56.

<sup>30</sup> Jaini, “Stages in the Bodhisattva Career,” 57.

<sup>31</sup> Jaini, “Stages in the Bodhisattva Career,” 58-59.

family members and other members of the royalty.<sup>32</sup> The *Cakkavattisīhanāda-sutta* also records a narrative in which the king broke his promise to give money to the poor and resorted to committing murder instead. As a consequence, the life of people was largely cut short, and their beauty was also diminished.<sup>33</sup>

The conception of compassion had an important part in the image of Maitreya in Early China as well. The Maitreya belief was introduced to China as early as the Han dynasty, when Buddhism first stepped into Chinese territory. An Shigao 安世高 (?-168CE) was among the first group of Buddhist priests who helped to bring Maitreya beliefs into China. He translated the earliest scripture associated with Maitreya, which was the *Dacheng fangdeng yaohui jing* 大乘方等要慧經. In this scripture, Śākyamuni taught Maitreya who apparently was identified as a bodhisattva, the eight ways for attaining supreme knowledge, with the main concern of compassion.<sup>34</sup> In the *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經 translated by Sanghadeva (4<sup>th</sup> cen.), Śākyamuni prophesized that Maitreya would become the Future Buddha after 30 kalpas.<sup>35</sup> The four bodhisattva deeds are mentioned in this scripture, giving alms to others equally, giving alms without reservation, giving alms to all beings without intention for achieving enlightenment, and constantly bearing all the previous thoughts in mind.<sup>36</sup> Obviously, the main teaching of this text is concerned with compassion.

The Maitreya belief further developed in the Jin 晉 dynasty (265-420CE). During this period, twenty Buddhist scriptures concerning Maitreya existed, though half of them

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<sup>32</sup> *Three Worlds According to King Ruang*, 148, 152.

<sup>33</sup> Steve Collins, “The Lion’s Roar on the Wheel-Turning King: A Response to Andrew Huxley’s ‘The Buddha and the Social Contract’,” *Journal of Indian Philosophy* 24 (1996), 431-2.

<sup>34</sup> *Foshuo dacheng fangdeng yaohui jing* 佛說大乘方等要慧經, T12, 186b25-29.

<sup>35</sup> *Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經, T02, 600 a20-2, 754b17-18.

<sup>36</sup> *Zengyi ahan jing*, T02, 645b3-8.



are lost to the present time. It is interesting to note that the image of Maitreya has shifted its focus from the conception of compassion to identification with the ruler of Tuṣita among this group of scriptures, such as the *Zhengfahua jing* 正法華經 translated by Dharmarakṣa (230CE-?), and the *Guan mile pusa shangsheng doushuaitian jing* 觀彌勒菩薩上生兜率天經 (abbreviated as *Shangsheng jing* 上生經) translated by the Duke Anyang in the Southern dynasties, which also conveys a detailed description of the appearance of the Tuṣita paradise.<sup>37</sup> In particular, the image of Maitreya was going through a shift of emphasis from the compassionate bodhisattva to the powerful cakravartin. This is very likely to be a consequence of the increasing social appeal to a universal savior due to the exacerbation of social chaos. I will discuss this point more fully in the third section.

### **The Insightful Future Buddha**

In the Mahāyāna sutras in earlier times, Maitreya frequently appears in a minor role, often presented as a slothful disciple of Mañjuśrī or Śākyamuni in their numerous previous lives, who lacked confidence and wisdom.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, as Janai points out, such an image of Maitreya is limited to the situation in which Śākyamuni hasn't achieved Enlightenment. After Śākyamuni attained Buddhahood, Maitreya began to play a part in the perfection of wisdom, either participating in dialogues with the Buddha instigated by other disciples, or initiating an insightful discussion with the Buddha by raising an enquiry, or preaching as an independent sage. For example, in the *Aṣṭasāhasrikā-Prajñāpāramitā-sutrā*, Subhūti led a discussion in which Maitreya participated, enquiring

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<sup>37</sup> Yu-min Lee, *The Maitreya Cult and Its Art in Early China* (The Ohio State University, 1983), 46. *Zhengfahua jing* 正法華經, T09. *Foshuo guan mile pusa shangsheng doushuaitian jing* 佛說觀彌勒菩薩上生兜率天經, T14.

<sup>38</sup> Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career," 59-61.

about the fundamental difference between the actual deeds that produced merit and the underlying intention which elicited the jubilation of the bodhisattvas.<sup>39</sup> In *Lalitavistara*, Maitreya was singled out to plead for the performance of the miracle dharmacakra, the Turning of the Wheel of Law in a bodhisattva gathering. The Buddha responded to Maitreya's plead, and explained to Maitreya the true nature of the dharmacakra.<sup>40</sup> In the *Śālistamba-sūtra*, Śāriputra approached Maitreya when he was practicing walking meditation, and enquired of the words uttered by the Buddha concerning the doctrine of the pratītya-samutpāda and the identification between perceiving the Dharma and the Buddha. Maitreya then offered a long sermon to clear Śāriputra's doubts.<sup>41</sup>

Maitreya was recognized as the heir of Śākyamuni, the Future Buddha, with the feature that the guardianship and transmission of the sutra is frequently bestowed on him. In the *Guhyasamāja Tantra*, Śākyamuni spoke to the lay disciples after both Maitreya and these lay disciples were perplexed by a sudden appearance of a large congregation of bodhisattvas, "O sons of good families, wait a while. Maitreya bodhisattva, who has been proclaimed to be the successor to the Lord Śākyamuni, is asking questions concerning this matter to the Lord Śākyamuni. He will explain this matter. Listen to him."<sup>42</sup> In *Lalitavistara*, the Buddha had also entrusted the sutra to Maitreya.<sup>43</sup> It is interesting to note that in these accounts Maitreya was still subject to doubts. In other words, compared to the accounts in which he was able to preach independently, Maitreya hadn't achieved

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<sup>39</sup> Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career," 66-7.

<sup>40</sup> Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career," 67.

<sup>41</sup> Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career," 68.

<sup>42</sup> Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career," 65.

<sup>43</sup> Jaini, "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career," 67.

the perfection of wisdom in the accounts where he still appeared to be subordinate to the Buddha.

This kind of accounts was found in Early China as well, and some of them were actually quite influential, such as the *Vimalakīrti Sūtra*, *Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經 translated by Kumārajīva (344-413CE). Vimalakīrti, the hero of this scripture, was a layman but with great perfection of wisdom. It is generally understood that his identity as a layman contributed to the dissemination of this scripture among the general populace. Vimalakīrti had encounters with numerous disciples and bodhisattvas and displayed his superior wisdom in these interlocutions. These disciples and bodhisattvas were even embarrassed by their inferior attainment of wisdom. Maitreya was among the bodhisattvas who had encounters with Vimalakīrti. Therefore, when Vimalakīrti fell into illness and the Buddha asked these disciples and bodhisattvas to enquire Vimalakīrti's illness, Maitreya, like all the others, was reluctant to obey the Buddha's request. Under such circumstances, Maitreya related his encounter with Vimalakīrti when he resided in Tuṣita and preached on the irreversible stage of a bodhisattva. Vimalakīrti approached and said,

(You) Honorable Maitreya have received a prediction from the Blessed One that after only one birth will you attain enlightenment. With regard to which birth did you receive this prediction? Is it the past birth, the future, or the present one? If it is the past birth, the past birth has already happened; if it is the future birth, the future birth hasn't arrived yet; if it is the present birth, the present birth is dependently arising (and lacks stable foundation)...彌勒。世尊授仁者記。一生當得阿耨多羅三藐三菩提。為用何生得受記乎。過去耶。未來耶。現在耶。若過去生過去生已滅。若未來生未來生未至。若現在生現在生無住 How then would Maitreya receive the prediction?雲何彌勒受一生記乎<sup>44</sup>

Obviously, Maitreya is identified with the Future Buddha who will inherit the transmission from Śākyamuni. Nevertheless, he still plays a minor role as someone who hasn't attained the supreme enlightenment.

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<sup>44</sup> *Weimojie suoshuojing* 維摩詰所說經, T14, 542b1-9.

Scriptures in which Maitreya played an active and dominant role, such as the *Zengyi ahan jing* and *Shangsheng jing* mentioned above contributed much more in constructing Maitreyan soteriology in Early China. In these scriptures, Maitreya was undoubtedly perfect in wisdom, and began to have connections with the ideal of cakravartin. Compared with Śākyamuni who arose without a cakravartin preceding him, the ideal of cakravartin stands out in the Advent of Maitreya. The sutras concerning the descending beliefs in Maitreyan soteriology all record that, before his Advent, a cakravartin will rise and pave his way in this world by turning the dharmacakra, so as to create a beneficial environment for Maitreya to preach religious truth and to lead human beings to attain enlightenment. Although the ideal of cakravartin is not identical with, but rather subordinate to, the image of Maitreya, they are also essentially inseparable. It is their combined karmic forces that will inaugurate a heavenly world on earth in which human beings can be freed from worldly sufferings and attain the utmost bliss.

However, it is worth noting that Maitreya belief in Early China has a comparatively ambiguous attitude towards Maitreya's identity. In some sources, Maitreya is referred to as a bodhisattva in Tuṣita who is on his way towards the attainment of Buddhahood after his descent into Ketumati, while in others, he is regarded as a Buddha who resides in his own Buddha realm just as all the other Buddhas do in their own realms.<sup>45</sup> The ambiguity of Maitreya's identity as Buddha or bodhisattva was also observed in the Buddhist teaching in Early China, which belonged to the Mahāyāna

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<sup>45</sup> One reason I would like to offer is the interference of Pure Land belief as mentioned at the outset, though the case of Tuṣita is much more complicated. Rather than the realm outside of Saṃsāra, it is actually regarded as a heavenly god realm, one of the six realms inside Saṃsāra. The ambiguity of Maitreya's identity might also be attributed to the conception of "Buchu pusa 補處菩薩", the heir apparent bodhisattva, who will become Buddha after the previous Buddha left the world. Tuṣita is regarded as the residence of such heir apparent bodhisattva, including Śākyamuni before he was reborn into the world where he achieved enlightenment. It is because Maitreya has already been eligible for the position of Buddha that he has been frequently referred to as a Buddha. See Chen Yangjiong 陈扬炯, *Zhongguo jingtuzong tongshi* 中国净土宗通史 (Nanjing: Jiangsu guji press, 2000), 28-9.

tradition. Two inscriptions both dated 504 BCE and found in Longmen Caves, mentioned that the donor wished to meet Maitreya Buddha in a heavenly paradise. A similar confusion is seen in an inscription dated 506 BCE, in which the donor Yang Xiaofei 楊小妃 wished her deceased parents to be reborn in the heavenly paradise to partake in the Three Assemblies of Maitreya.<sup>46</sup> The ambiguity of Maitreya's identity as bodhisattva or Buddha was still seen in the Tang dynasty. Two famous Chinese pilgrims who journeyed to India in search of Dharma made references to Maitreya. One was Xuanzang 玄奘 (602-664CE), who left China in 629 and went on a pilgrimage to India. Some pirates detained him on his way and plotted to offer him as a sacrifice to their bloody goddess. Xuanzang asked for a few moments, sat under a tree and meditated on Maitreya and his Tuṣita paradise. While praying for rebirth into Tuṣita, Xuanzang had a vision of Maitreya, and a furious wind sprang up around him and the pirates. The pirates, terrified by the miraculous wind, repented for their brutal deeds and paid homage to Xuanzang.<sup>47</sup> In this account, Maitreya was referred to as a bodhisattva. However, a little while after Xuanzang's time, Yijing 義淨 (635-713CE) left China in 671 for India for a pilgrimage. In his own record, Maitreya was referred to as a Buddha.<sup>48</sup>

### **The Powerful Messiah**

As Zürcher points out, the image of Maitreya in sectarian traditions, though managing to identify itself with that in the orthodox tradition, had actually undergone

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<sup>46</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 130.

<sup>47</sup> Huili 慧立 and Yancong 彦棕, *Daciensi sanzangfashi zhuan* 大慈恩寺三藏法師傳 (Beijing: Zhonghua press, 1983), 55-6. Similar narrative is also seen in the biography of Xuanzang in *Xu gaosengzhuan* 續高僧傳, T50, 449c10-21.

<sup>48</sup> Joseph M. Kitagawa, "The Many Faces of Maitreya: A History of Religion's Reflections," Alan Sponberg and Alan Hardacre, eds., *Maitreya, the Future Buddha* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 11.

transformation combining with the conception of mofa 末法, the Age of Degenerate Dharma. Basically, Maitreya serves to be a teacher and revealer who will fulfill the universal salvation by way of clearing doubts and achieving enlightenment in his Advent down to the world. However, under the influence of the belief of mofa, the image of Maitreya had appeared to be a messiah whose first task turned to be terminating the worldly chaos rather than preaching the religious truth. Consequently, Maitreya appeared to shoulder the responsibility of relieving the distressed and exorcising the evil.<sup>49</sup> This kind of messianic scriptures was rebuked by both the orthodox tradition and the government as spurious texts that spread heretical beliefs and caused severe catastrophes. Though these scriptures had most been lost to the present, the title of these scriptures can still be traced in some sources of that time. The *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄 compiled by Dao'an 道安 (312-385CE) records *Mile chengfo benqi jing* 彌勒成佛本起經, *Mile xiasheng guanshiyin shizhubao jing* 彌勒下生觀世音施珠寶經, *Mile chengfo fumo jing* 彌勒成佛伏魔經 and *Mile xiajiao jing* 彌勒下教經.<sup>50</sup> The *Mile xiajiao jing* was also recorded in *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄 compiled by Zhisheng 智昇 (8<sup>th</sup> cen.).<sup>51</sup> Besides, the *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* also records similar texts, including *Mile xiasheng qian guanshiyin dashizhi quanhua zhongsheng she'e zuoshan shoule jing* 彌勒下生遣觀世音大勢至勸化眾生捨惡作善壽樂經, *Suishen benguan mile chengfo jing* 隨身本官彌勒成佛經, *Mile moni foshuo kaiwu foxing jing* 彌勒摩尼佛說開悟佛性經, *Mile xiasheng*

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<sup>49</sup> There are altogether three periods in a cycle of time in Buddhist cosmology, the Age of Right Dharma, zhengfa 正法, in which the Dharma is well preached and enlightenment is easy to approach, the Age of Semblance Dharma, xiangfa 像法, in which the preaching of the Dharma turns to fall but enlightenment is still attainable, and the Age of Degenerate Dharma, mofa, in which the Dharma has collapsed and it is impossible to achieve enlightenment. A detailed discussion is seen in E. Zürcher, "Prince Moonlight'-Messianism and Eschatology in Early Medieval Chinese Buddhism," *T'oung Pao*, Second Series, Vol. 68, Livr. 1/3 (1982), 17-20.

<sup>50</sup> *Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄, T55, 126c9-13.

<sup>51</sup> *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄, T55, 674a14.

*jiudu ku'e jing* 彌勒下生救度苦厄經, *Yongyi pusa jiangseng renjian mile bingshi diyu jing* 勇意菩薩將僧忍見彌勒并示地獄經, and *Mile xiasheng zhenbie zuifu jing* 彌勒下生甄別罪福經.<sup>52</sup> Overmyer also points out that the revolutionary mission of Maitreya has already been seen in some non-canonical sources in the sixth century. In these sources, Maitreya appears in the image of a militant savior who descends into the chaotic world, cleanses evils and establishes a purified and perfected world under the rule of the Buddha.<sup>53</sup> This, as I will discuss more fully in the third section, has established the basic tone of Maitreyan soteriology in sectarian tradition in Early China, which serves as the theoretical and religious justification of numerous military rebellions in Chinese history.

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<sup>52</sup> *Kaiyuan shijiao lu*, T55, 672c15-16, 672c19, 673a1, 677c9, 677c24, 678a12.

<sup>53</sup> Daniel L. Overmyer, "Messenger, Savior, and Revolutionary: Maitreya in Chinese Popular Religious Literature of the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," Alan Sponberg and Alan Hardacre, eds., *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1988, 113-4.

### SECTION THREE. THE PURE LANDS OF MAITREYA

The Pure Land teaching is one of the most important doctrines in Mahāyāna Buddhism. It claims that the Pure Land is out of the traditional six realms in Saṃsāra in Buddhist cosmology. There are many such paradises, in each single one of which resides a Buddha who rules over the realm. People can take refuge in these Buddha realms through insightful practice, devotional worship, etc. I would like to construct my discussion of the Maitreyan Pure Land belief by considering respectively the beliefs and practices of the two paradises ruled by Maitreya, namely Tuṣita and Ketumatī in the orthodox tradition, and then examine the Maitreyan soteriology in sectarian traditions. I will present the scriptural support, and theories propagated by literary elites, as well as the ritual worship that really occurred and was recorded in literatures and inscriptions. I will touch on how the ideal of cakravartin has played a key role in Maitreyan soteriology.

#### **Tuṣita Maitreyan Soteriology**

In Maitreyan soteriology, the scriptural Pure Land teaching was closely related at the outset to the practice of meditation rather than devotional worship. Yu-min Lee offers the supposition that the specific meditation of the Tuṣita paradise is based on the *Shangsheng jing*, which states that practitioners should meditate specifically on the Tuṣita paradise in order to become Maitreya's disciples.<sup>54</sup> In the *Bozhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經, which was first brought to China by Lokakṣema (147CE-?), the Buddha explicitly states the superiority of meditation to other religious practices.

There is one Dharma practice which you should always rehearse and preserve, which you should always cultivate without following any other

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<sup>54</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 67.



dharmas; which is most exalted and foremost among all meritorious qualities. What is that foremost Dharma practice? It is this meditation called the Meditation in Which the Buddhas of the Present All Stand Before One. 佛告颰陀和菩薩。一法行常當習持常當守。不復隨餘法。諸功德中最第一。何等為第一法行。是三昧名現在佛悉在前立三昧。<sup>55</sup>

Dao'an was said to have made great efforts to study the sutras translated by An Shigao and to work in Dharmarakṣa's translation team, and thus had made a significant contribution in propagating the practice of meditation.<sup>56</sup> Kumārajīva, who was most known for bringing in the Mādhyamaka teaching to China, was also known for his propagation of meditation.<sup>57</sup> The teaching of the Maitreyan soteriology by Jizang 吉藏 (549-623CE) is very likely to be associated with that of meditation as well. The Tang royal family pronounced a eulogy on Jizang: "The material world is impermanent. The master Zang had a thorough knowledge of tri-yāna. He already reached the tenth stage of the bodhisattva path, and always bore the propagation of prajñā in mind. His teaching led people to salvation. He established his virtue in accordance with Pure Land Buddhism and explained the teaching of dhyāna practices."<sup>58</sup>

There were plentiful accounts that support the belief in ascent into Tuṣita by virtue of meditation. There are two accounts in *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳 compiled by Huijiao 慧皎 (497-554). One recorded that Zhiyan 智嚴 (d.u.) was recorded to consult with an arhat about his previous encroachment of the five precepts. The arhat, who dared not to judge himself, sat in meditation whereby he ascended to the Tuṣita paradise to seek for Maitreya's judgment.<sup>59</sup> The other recorded that Daofa 道法, a monk in the Liu Song

<sup>55</sup> *Bozhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經, T13, 904b19-22. Translation see *The Pratyutpanna Samādhi sutra*, tran. from the Sanskrit by Lokakṣema, tran. from the Chinese by Paul Harrison (Berkeley: Numata Center for Buddhist Translation and Research, 1998), 14.

<sup>56</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 30.

<sup>57</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 42.

<sup>58</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 53.

<sup>59</sup> *Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳, T50, 339c5-12.

dynasty (420-479CE), had a vision of Maitreya in a state of meditation as well.<sup>60</sup> The account of Daofa is also seen in *Mingseng zhuanchao* 名僧傳抄 compiled by Baochang 寶昌 (6<sup>th</sup> cen.).<sup>61</sup> Other accounts, such as those of Tanbin 曇斌 in the Liu Song dynasty, Sengyin 僧印 in the Northern Wei 北魏 dynasty (368-534) and Huilan 惠攬 in the Liu Song dynasty recorded in *Mingseng zhuan* also indicate the remarkable role of meditation in terms of rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise.<sup>62</sup> Another account in *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳 also written by Baochang recorded that in 441 BCE, a nun named Guangjing 光靜 practiced meditation on the Tuṣita paradise for four month before her death. Her room was said to fill with fragrance on the day she passed away.<sup>63</sup> In fact, the practice of meditation was frequently combined with the study of scriptures in Maitreyan worship in Early China. An account by Sengrui 僧睿 (371-438CE) says “when my master [Dao’an] stopped reading and sighed, he wanted to consult with Maitreya on his question.”<sup>64</sup> Rather than a refuge that people seek to escape from the incurable evil of the contemporary world, people who make a vow to be reborn into Tuṣita were more inclined to listen to Maitreya’s teaching face to face so as to achieve enlightenment; and aside from devotional worship towards the Buddha who rules over the paradise, the insightful practice was regarded as indispensable to attain Maitreyan salvation.

However, the monopoly of insightful practice as the only means to get access to the Tuṣita paradise in scriptural tradition was terminated by the *Shangsheng jing*. This scripture insists that one must have heard or recited the name of Maitreya so as to obtain

<sup>60</sup> *Gaosheng zhuan* 高僧傳, T50, 399b11-12.

<sup>61</sup> *Mingseng zhuanchao* 名僧傳抄, X77, 358a6.

<sup>62</sup> *Mingseng zhuanchao* 名僧傳抄, X77, 354b23-c2, X77, 356a3-5, X77, 356a10.

<sup>63</sup> *Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳, T50, 939b11-13.

<sup>64</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 30.

rebirth into the Tuṣita paradise. It says, “(You) should constantly bear the image of the (Maitreya) Buddha in mind, and invoke the name of Maitreya. 應當繫念念佛形像稱彌勒名。”<sup>65</sup> The earliest reference mentioning the practice of repeating Maitreya’s name in order to be reborn into the paradise of Maitreya is the biography of Tanjie 曇戒 (4<sup>th</sup> cen.), one of Dao’an’s disciples. It was recorded that Tanjie bowed five hundred times before a Buddha image every day and kept reciting the name of Maitreya.<sup>66</sup> There is also an account of Tanyan 曇衍 (6<sup>th</sup> cen.) recorded in *Huayanjing zhuanji* 華嚴經傳記 compiled by Fazang 法藏 (643-712CE). Tanyan was said to have repeatedly recited the name of Maitreya before his death, and ascended to the northwestern sky.<sup>67</sup>

The worship of Maitreya in the hopes of rebirth into Tuṣita was perhaps first ritualized by Dao’an, who was famous for his devotion to the worship of Maitreya and contribution to the propagation of Maitreya beliefs. In his biography in *Gaosengzhuan*, Dao’an was said to make a collective vow to attain rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise together with seven disciples. Before his death, an eccentric monk came to his monastery, and granted him a vision of the Tuṣita paradise.<sup>68</sup> In his preface for the *Poxumi jing* 婆須密經, Dao’an himself also reported a vision of Maitreya in the Tuṣita paradise when he was practicing meditation after compiling this text.<sup>69</sup> *Mingseng zhuan* recorded many other monks who reported vision of or rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise, such as Daowang 道汪 in the Liu Song dynasty and Tanfu 曇副 in the Southern Qi dynasty (479-502CE).<sup>70</sup> In

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<sup>65</sup> *Foshuo guan mile pusa shangsheng doushuaitian jing* 佛說觀彌勒菩薩上生兜率天經, T14, 420a14.

<sup>66</sup> *Gaoseng zhuan*, T50, 356b29-c2.

<sup>67</sup> *Huayanjing zhuanji* 華嚴經傳記, T51, 160a1-10. Though it did not explicitly state the place he ascended to was Tuṣita, it still could be inferred that he ascended to Tuṣita from the description, the northwestern sky, which has been frequently used to refer to the Tuṣita paradise.

<sup>68</sup> *Gaoseng zhuan*, T50, 353b27-c11.

<sup>69</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 30.

<sup>70</sup> *Mingseng zhuanchao* 名僧傳抄 X77, 356c19-21, 359b4-5.

*Fahua zhuanji* 法華傳記, a monk Huiyuan 慧緣 in the Sui dynasty prayed for rebirth in Tuṣita where he would meet Maitreya for twelve years.<sup>71</sup> Another reference of a vow for rebirth in Tuṣita is seen in *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳, in which a monk Zhixi 智晞 (7<sup>th</sup> cen.) reported a vision of Tuṣita in which it was prophesized that Guanding 灌頂 (561-632CE) would be reborn into Tuṣita in six years.<sup>72</sup> In *Biqiuni zhuan*, there is also an account of a nun Xuanzao 玄藻 (d.u.) who is recorded to pray for rebirth in Tuṣita.<sup>73</sup>

I would like to include building sculptures and carving inscriptions into the category of devotional worship as well. Though doctrinally refuted as based on false beliefs, constructions of large icons in hopes of attaining divine powers and blessings from the buddhas or bodhisattvas has never ceased. A large Maitreya Buddha shrine sponsored by a lay society from Luoyang 洛陽 in 648, the early Tang dynasty, revealed its main concern on Maitreya, who was presented as the future Buddha after he has been reborn on earth from the Tuṣita paradise. This inscription provides a strong taste of devotional worship:

Thus, when this venerable image was first manifest, it was as if Maitreya had descended from his palace in Tuṣita, and when its marvelous lakṣaṇa were initially complete, it was as though he was under the Bodhi tree. With an ūrnā like moonlight and dark blue hair like mist crystallized, his lotus eyes seem to move, while his fruit-red lips appear to speak. Of those who offer worship at the feet of this Buddha and look up with reverence at this venerable face, none will fail to have their hair stand on end in awe and their ears open in comprehension. This is what Indra and Brahmā took refuge in, what dragon kings and devas guard and protect. 於[是], 尊儀始著, 似降兜率之宮, 妙相初成, 若在菩提之樹。白豪月照, 紺發煙凝, 蓮目疑動, 果唇似說。其有禮[拜][佛]足瞻仰尊嚴者, 莫不肅[然]毛豎, 豁爾心開。寔釋凡所歸依, 龍天所護衛<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> *Fahua zhuanji* 法華傳記, T51, 78c14-19.

<sup>72</sup> *Hongzan fahua zhuan* 弘贊法華傳, T51, 18c11-16

<sup>73</sup> *Biqiuni zhuan*, T50, 938b11.

<sup>74</sup> Amy McNair, *Donors of Longmen: Faith, Politics, and Patronage in Medieval Chinese Buddhist Sculpture* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007), 91, 174.

Yu-min Lee conducted research on his collection of inscriptions associated with Maitreya, mainly from the Longmen Caves, including inscriptions on Maitreya images as well as other sculptures which state prayers in connection with Maitreya, such as rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise and participation in the Three Assemblies of the Dragon Flower Tree. The most popular religious goal in the prayers is to pray for rebirth into the paradise of Maitreya after death.<sup>75</sup>

In a word, the Pure Land teaching constitutes the main part of the Tuṣita Maitreyan soteriology in Early China. Though the conception of a Pure Land is most frequently referred to Amitābha's Sukhāvātī in Chinese Buddhist tradition, Maitreya's Tuṣita and Ketumati, as well as Akṣobhya's Abhirati, were already widely known as Pure Lands in Nagarjuna's time.<sup>76</sup> However, the worship of the Tuṣita Maitreya has been confused with that of Amitābha quite frequently. Therefore, I would like to make a comparison of these two branches of Buddhist soteriology in Early China, so as to present the Maitreyan soteriology more explicitly.

Such confusion first originated from scriptures. The first canonical reference to Maitreya's residence in Tuṣita is to be found in *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, the *Lotus Sutra*. After Śākyamuni expounded the sutra, the bodhisattva Samantabhadra responded that in the future he would protect those who recite this sutra and those who write it down.

People will not fall into fright, neither will they be reborn into bad realms. They will directly and immediately ascend to the Tuṣita paradise, where the bodhisattva Maitreya resides. The bodhisattva Maitreya has 32 marks, and is surrounded by thousands of millions of bodhisattvas and heavenly damsels. 令

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<sup>75</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 122-125.

<sup>76</sup> Beatrice Lane Suzuki, *Mahāyāna Buddhism* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1949), 113. Also see Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 393. I would like to have a discussion of the soteriology of Tuṣita Maitreya in comparison with that of Amitābha in the following part, so as to delineate the frame of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China more explicitly.

不恐怖，不墮惡趣，即往兜率天上彌勒菩薩所。彌勒菩薩，有三十二相  
大菩薩眾所共圍繞，有百千萬億天女眷屬<sup>77</sup>

At the end of *Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經, the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, Ānanda requested a vision of the Amitābha Buddha and the bodhisattvas residing in his Sukhāvātī. Maitreya shared the vision and enquired the Śākyamuni Buddha whether bodhisattvas could be reborn into Sukhāvātī. Śākyamuni gave a positive answer, with a list of bodhisattvas who had successfully been reborn into the Sukhāvātī paradise.<sup>78</sup> This sutra doesn't make explicit whether or not Maitreya has chosen to be reborn to the Sukhāvātī paradise, and apparently, in orthodox tradition, Maitreya did not ascend to Sukhāvātī but to Tuṣita, waiting for his descent back to the world. Nevertheless, following the general pattern of Buddhist scriptures, there are all the possibilities that Maitreya would ascend to the Sukhāvātī paradise, especially after Śākyamuni entrusted the sutra to him eventually. In fact, when the practice of invoking the name of Maitreya first came into being, the *Shangsheng jing*, the scriptural support of this practice in Maitreyan worship, had not been translated yet. Yu-min Lee thus provides a supposition that the practice of invoking Maitreya's name is probably influenced by the teaching of the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, considering that the earliest mention of "invoking a Buddha's name" is found in two early translations of the *Larger Pure Land Sutra*, namely, the version translated by Lokakṣema and the version translated by Zhiqian 支謙 (3<sup>rd</sup> cen.).<sup>79</sup> Besides, the *Bozhou sanmei jing*, though mainly concerning with Amitābha belief, has incorporated Maitreya belief in its soteriology as well.<sup>80</sup>

<sup>77</sup> *Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經, T09, 61, c9-12.

<sup>78</sup> *Foshuo wuliangshou jing* 佛說無量壽經, T12, 278b28-c29.

<sup>79</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 61.

<sup>80</sup> See the Chapter "Shoujuepin 授決品" in *Bozhou sanmei jing*, T13, 911b11-912b17.

The devotional worship of Maitreya also involves that of the *Lotus Sutra*, including the practice of invoking the name of Maitreya. An account recorded in the *Fahua zhuanji* mentions that in the reign of the emperor Qi Gaodi 齊高帝 (427-482CE), an official had a dream in which he met Maitreya in the Tuṣita paradise, and was told that the emperor and his ministers would all ascend to the Tuṣita paradise by virtue of their earnest study of the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>81</sup> Another account in *Hongzan fahua zhuan* recorded a monk Huisi 慧思 in the Chen 陳 dynasty (557-589CE) who was recorded to have visions of Śākyamuni and Maitreya, a dream in which Maitreya and Amitābha responded to his enquiry, and a dream in which he took part in the Assemblies of the Dragon Flower Tree, as a reward of his study of the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>82</sup> A monk Sengming 僧明 in the Liang 梁 dynasty (502-557CE) was also recorded to have heard a voice of admiration every time he recited the *Lotus Sutra*.<sup>83</sup> Another account of a monk Huibin 慧斌 in the Sui dynasty also reported a vision of god before his death due to the merit he had gained from studying the *Lotus Sutra*. After his death, his friend Zhihai 智海 had a dream in which Huibin said he had attained rebirth in the Tuṣita paradise.<sup>84</sup>

In Early China, the worship of Maitreya and that of Amitābha were indeed frequently blended with each other. According to Yun-min Lee's research on inscriptions, there are ten sculptures identified as the image of Maitreya whose inscriptions express the desire to be reborn into the Sukhāvātī paradise.<sup>85</sup> The inscription of a Northern Wei stele also reveals such confusion. The inscription reads:

In the 23<sup>rd</sup> year of T'ai-ho era of the Great Tai, when the year is Chi-mao (in cyclical number), the twelfth month is Jen-shen, and the ninth day is

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<sup>81</sup> *Fahua zhuanji*, T51, 87b28-c2.

<sup>82</sup> *Hongzan fahua zhuan*, T51, 22a15-16.

<sup>83</sup> *Hongzan fahua zhuan*, T51, 24b29-c1.

<sup>84</sup> *Hongzan fahua zhuan*, T51, 33c14-18.

<sup>85</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 127.

Keng-chen (January 25, 500A.D.), the Bhiksu, Seng Hsin, had a stone image of Maitreya made for his causally related parents, family, and his master priests. May they be reborn in the Paradise of the Wu-liang-shou (Amitayus) Buddha; May they be able to attend the Three Assemblies (of Maitreya) under the Tree of Dragon-flowers, and to descend to this mortal world as marquis or princes, and their children be reborn together with the great bodhisattvas.<sup>86</sup>

Doctrinally, the worship of Maitreya is distinguished from that of Amitābha by its emphasis on insightful practices. Regardless of the scriptural confusion, I would assume the confusion of Maitreyan worship and Amitābha worship actually indicates an increasing social appeal to devotional worship. As the social conditions in China stayed in constant chaos, the collective desperation toward the sociopolitical conditions was accumulated, especially when the notion of mofa in Amitābha beliefs had been infiltrated into the mind of the general populace. Such a notion crystalized the idea that it was quite impossible for people to attain enlightenment by way of insightful practice if they relied on their own power under such circumstances, and resort to another power, basically the power of the Amitābha Buddha, was indispensable to personal salvation. Indeed, the ideal of cakravartin in Tuṣita Maitreyan soteriology is not remarkable. Rather, similar with the Pure Land belief of Amitābha, there is emphasis on a refugee asylum for worshippers to hide from the chaos of the incurable degeneration of the social conditions. However, the image of Maitreya as the ruler of his paradise, which has an intimate relationship with the ideal of cakravartin, and which can be found in many scriptures popular in Early China, constitutes the foundation of Tuṣita Maitreyan soteriology.

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<sup>86</sup> Wai Kam Ho, "The Future Buddha Maitreya in a Northern Wei stele," in *The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art*, Vol. 47, No. 8 (Oct. 1960), 187.



### **Ketumati Maitreyan Soteriology**

The Ketumati Maitreyan soteriology relies heavily on the conception of a future savior. Lokakṣema was famous for his propagation of Pure Land belief, as well as for introducing the concept of Maitreya as the Future Buddha to China. The *Bozhou sanmei jing*, which reveals an emphasis on the practice of meditation as mentioned above, also promises the opportunity to meet with Maitreya if the practitioners dedicate themselves to the teaching of this sutra.<sup>87</sup> Dharmarakṣa translated four Maitreya scriptures, one of which was *Mile xiasheng jing* 彌勒下生經 (abbreviated as *xiasheng jing* 下生經). In this scripture, Śākyamuni anticipated Maitreya's mission of universal salvation as the Future Buddha after he attained rebirth and achieved enlightenment in the Ketumati paradise. There is also a detailed description of Ketumati in this sutra. Ketumati, ruled by a cakravartin whose name is Śaṅkha, enjoyed peace and prosperity. People living in Ketumati enjoyed happiness and longevity. The prophesized story of Maitreya has a striking resemblance with the life story of Śākyamuni. Maitreya would also be born from his mother's side, and have 32 major marks and 80 minor marks to indicate his identity as the Future Buddha.<sup>88</sup> Similar narrative is also seen in *Zengyi ahan jing*.<sup>89</sup> Difference also exists. While Śākyamuni was born into a Warrior family, Maitreya was born into a Brahman family. While Śākyamuni went through a 49-day meditation under a Bodhi tree before his enlightenment, Maitreya attained enlightenment on the same day he sat in meditation under a Dragon Flower tree.

It is interesting to note that, in contrast to other paradises of absolute perfection, there are eight weaknesses, which are coldness, hotness, defecating, urinating, desire,

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<sup>87</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> *Foshuo mile xisheng jing* 佛說彌勒下生經, T14, 421c5-17.

<sup>89</sup> *Zengyi ahan jing*, T02, 788 a29-b11.

drinking, eating and old age, in Maitreya's earthly paradise mentioned in *Madhyamāgama*, a scripture mainly concerns with Maitreya's earthly paradise, Ketumati.<sup>90</sup> However, these weaknesses do not appear in Dharmarakṣa's translation of *Xiasheng jing*. Kumārajīva translated the *Foshuo mile xiasheng chengfo jing* 佛說彌勒下生成佛經 and *Foshuo mile dachengfo jing* 佛說彌勒大成佛經, both of which were translations of the *Maitreyavyākaraṇa Sūtra*, and both of which mention part of the weaknesses of the earthly paradise, urinating and defecating, thirst and hunger, as well as old age.<sup>91</sup> Very likely, there was an intentional effort to perfect the Ketumati paradise in Early China. An anonymous translation in the Jin dynasty, *Mile Laishi Jing* 彌勒來時經, also mentions three weaknesses of Ketumati, desire, thirst and hunger, as well as old age.<sup>92</sup> Such a description of Ketumati probably indicates that the original concept of Ketumati is different from that of those celestial paradises. Rather than a perfect sacred realm, Ketumati is more of an ideal world which can be accomplished in the contaminated world by human efforts. It might consequently empower the Ketumati Maitreyan soteriology to fit in with the sociopolitical appeal to a powerful and stable governmental control.

Two dynasties of Early China specifically witnessed the intimate relationship between Buddhism and the imperial court. One was the Northern Wei dynasty, during which period the worship of Maitreya began to flourish; and the other was the Tang dynasty, especially the period after Empress Wu ascended to the throne.<sup>93</sup> The sangha-

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<sup>90</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 38.

<sup>91</sup> *Foshuo mile xiasheng chengfo jing* 佛說彌勒下生成佛經, T14, 423c19-20. *Foshuo mile dachengfo jing* 佛說彌勒大成佛經, T14, 429a29.

<sup>92</sup> *Foshuo mile laishi jing* 佛說彌勒來時經, T14, 434c1-2.

<sup>93</sup> Empress Wu was the only empress in Chinese history. Her ascension to the throne constituted the most intrusive event in Chinese political history. On the one hand, the Confucian ethics do not allow women to intervene governmental affairs, so that Empress Wu had to seek justification outside of Confucian ethics. Since the surname of Laozi, that of the acknowledged founder of Daoism, was identical with the surname of the ruling family of the Tang dynasty, Daoism was propagated by the Tang rulers as an instrument to justify their rules. Therefore, Empress Wu had to avoid Daoism as well. Buddhism seemed to be the only

state relationship was observed in the magnanimous art works in the Yungang 雲岡 Caves and Longmen 龍門 Caves. Using the inscriptions which were dated, Tsukamoto Zenryu has done a statistical survey concerning the development of Buddhism in China during 500-750. It reveals that the periods of intensive rock-cutting occurred during 500-530, the period in which the Northern Wei court had been transferred to Luoyang, and 650-710 when Empress Wu rose to power and elevated the position of Buddhism in the state.<sup>94</sup> Convincingly, the main project in the two caves were sponsored and supported by the imperial court to a large extent, for the sake of justifying and consolidating the state control.

In the Northern Wei dynasty, there arose a strong tendency to identify the non-Chinese rulers with the Buddhas, especially Śākyamuni and Maitreya. The emperor Wei Wenchengdi 魏文成帝 (440-465CE) set up a stone statue of the Śākyamuni Buddha in the capital, which shared an identical appearance with himself, including black spots on

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and the best choice then. Indeed, Empress Wu elevated the position of Buddhism in the state and sponsored large scale of Buddhist constructions.

<sup>94</sup> Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 172. However, as Duan Tali points out, the decrease of sculpture-building projects alone does not suffice the conclusion that Maitreya belief had declined on the popular level, which requires a comprehensive examination of all the other forms of worship, such as copying and reciting sutras, gathering and offering incense, etc. Duan Tali 段塔丽, "Wu Zetian Chengdi yu Tangchu Shehui de Milexinyang 武则天称帝与唐初社会的弥勒信仰," in *Zhongguo Dianji yu Wenhua* 中国典籍与文化 No.4 (2002), 88. Nevertheless, since building sculptures cost much more and had a much wider influence, I would insist that the financial as well as political support from the upper class, including the imperial house, had undoubtedly revealed a declining tendency, which must have largely affected the development of Maitreya soteriology in Early China. Tsukamoto's statistical survey also proves a gradual substitution of Maitreyan worship by Amitābha worship in Early China. Among the inscriptions which recorded the names of the buddhas and bodhisattvas carved in the Longmen Caves, Amitābha, Avalokiteśvara, Śākyamuni and Maitreya were the most popular figures. While during the Northern Wei dynasty the leading figures portrayed were Śākyamuni and Maitreya, and Amitābha and Avalokiteśvara played minor roles, in the Tang dynasty, this distribution was reversed. Such a displacement of Maitreyan worship by Amitābha worship foreshadowed the degeneration of the former, which perhaps provided an explanation of the situation that the identity of Maitreya as the Future Buddha has been seldom mentioned in the popular belief in contemporary China. One of the factors that catalyzes such a displacement is perhaps that the continually exacerbated social conditions intensified the social appeal to the termination of the current degeneration as well as the inauguration of a new era, and the Amitābha soteriology better catered to such a social appeal. It was also around the period of Empress Wu that Pure Land Buddhism achieved recognition at the imperial court.

the face and feet.<sup>95</sup> In 454, five bronze statues of Śākyamuni were constructed in the Yungang Caves, according to the imperial order in memory of the five predecessors before Wenchengdi. This was very likely to be the outcome of the imperial adoption of the idea raised by Faguo 法果 (369-397CE) that the emperors were the present-day Tathāgatas.<sup>96</sup> In earlier times during the period 396-398, Faguo propounded a bold doctrine that the ruling emperor Wei Taizu 魏太祖 (371-409CE) was the incarnation of Tathāgata, therefore, revering the earthly ruler was actually paying homage to the Buddha. Whether or not this doctrine was propounded intentionally on behalf of the imperial rulers won't change the fact that this doctrine had served as a justification for the subjection of Buddhist communities to the political control.<sup>97</sup> There are a series of eight shrines in the Guyang 谷陽 Grotto, in which sit seven Central Asian-style Buddhas plus another Buddha statue which was strongly suspected to be Maitreya. It was a well-known theme on votive stone stupas in the fifth century, of the Seven Buddhas of the Past plus Maitreya, the Future Buddha. McNair suggests that the seven Central Asian-style Buddhas represent the six past and one present emperor of the Northern Wei dynasty, and the eighth statue represent the ruler to come, who should be the emperor's first son, Tabgatch Xun.<sup>98</sup>

Though Amitābha worship had been prevalent over Maitreyan worship in the Tang dynasty, Empress Wu chose to identify herself with Maitreya. The identification of the incarnation of Maitreya with female must have contributed to this decision of Empress Wu. There was a scripture, *Mile wei nvshen jing* 彌勒為女身經, which

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<sup>95</sup> Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 152.

<sup>96</sup> Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 146, 167.

<sup>97</sup> Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 146.

<sup>98</sup> The heir apparent was designated in 493, matching with the inauguration date of this shrine. See McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 17-8.

proclaimed that Maitreya was reborn as a female when descending into the world. This scripture has been lost to the present but still had an influence in the Tang dynasty.<sup>99</sup> The *Dayun jing* 大雲經, with narrations in which females rose to throne and ruled over the kingdom, provided a scriptural support for Empress Wu to justify her political control over the state, and was largely propagated by her. In this scripture, a female divinity named Jingguang 淨光 was told by the Buddha that she would be reborn as a universal king in female form after she heard the Buddha preaching. The Buddha also prophesized that a girl in a small country in south India would succeed her father's throne and rule over the kingdom seven hundred years later.<sup>100</sup> These narratives have broken the limitation of gender. Namely, the qualification for the throne is no longer confined to male gender; female is justified in wielding political power as well. In the biography of Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義 (?-694CE) in *Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書 compiled by Liuxu 劉昫 (887-946CE), the monk and his followers copied the sutra while adding comments, claiming that Empress Wu was the incarnation of Maitreya, and her reign was well justified.<sup>101</sup> In the biography of Zhang Renyuan 張仁願 (?-714CE), Guoba 郭霸 (7<sup>th</sup> cen.) was also recorded to claim that Empress Wu was the incarnation of Maitreya.<sup>102</sup> During that period, there had already been a social consensus that Maitreya would soon descend into this world as the Future Buddha, which perhaps contributed to the consolidation of Empress Wu's reign. The inscriptions carved in the Longmen caves served as a good indication of

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<sup>99</sup> Duan, "Milexinyang," 89.

<sup>100</sup> Duan, "Milexinyang," 89-90. According to Ch'en, there were already two Chinese translations of the *Dayun jing* available at this time. One was translated by Dharmakṣema (385-433CE). See Ch'en, *Buddhism in China*, 220-1. However, there seemed to be another argument that this scripture was actually fabricated for the benefit of Empress Wu's political propaganda. Whichever was the historical truth, it would not compromise my argument here that it was because of a strong motive to justify her political rule that the Maitreyan soteriology was strongly propagated.

<sup>101</sup> Liuxu 劉昫, *Jiutangshu* 舊唐書 (Beijing: Zhonghua press, 1975), 4742.

<sup>102</sup> *Jiutangshu*, 2981.

the identification of Empress Wu as Maitreya. There are the twin cave-shrines called the Paired Grottoes, which consist of one grotto containing a Buddha of the Three Periods Assembly and another with a Maitreya Buddha and the Thousand Buddhas of the Present Kalpa. Zhang Naizhu believes that Śākyamuni was made for her husband Emperor Tang Gaozong 唐高宗 (628-683CE), and Maitreya for Empress Wu, and suggests that the Paired Grottoes were actually sponsored by Empress Wu with purpose of equating the importance of Maitreya to that of Śākyamuni, so as to equate her position with that of her husband.<sup>103</sup> Undoubtedly, the ideal of cakravartin embedded in Maitreyan soteriology precisely corresponded to the political plan of the imperial court, so that the imperial monarchs spared no effort to identify themselves with Maitreya and to propagate Maitreyan soteriology in Chinese society.

In fact, not only the ruling house itself took advantage of the Ketumati Maitreyan soteriology to justify and consolidate its own reign, but its subjects had been convinced by such an ideal as well. According to Yu-min Lee, the earliest extant inscription which sits on behalf of the imperial family is traced to the Northern Liang 北凉 dynasty (397-439CE).<sup>104</sup> Fifty-one out of 195 inscriptions Yu-min Lee collected were written for the benefit of the imperial family.<sup>105</sup> Among the motives most frequently on display in these inscriptions was a prayer for peace and prosperity for the realm, as well as power and longevity for the imperial family, in the hopes that the emperor could be like a universal monarch, spread Buddhist teachings, and enhance both the material and spiritual benefit of his subjects. For example, in 683, a small grotto for Emperor Gaozong and Empress

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<sup>103</sup> McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 126.

<sup>104</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 116-7. Yu-min Lee also suggests that the tradition of carving a Buddhist sculpture for the benefit of the emperor in the Northern Wei dynasty is probably introduced from the Northern Liang dynasty, as a result of the transfer of 30,000 Northern Liang families to the Northern Wei capital.

<sup>105</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 115-6.

Wu was sponsored by a laywoman whose first name was Li 李. In this inscription, Li prays for her own ascension to the Tuṣita paradise, and for companionship with Maitreya in his descent into the earthly Ketumati. She also prays for partaking in the Three Assemblies under the Dragon Flower Tree, the ending of her worldly suffering and attaining enlightenment. It says at the end:

Humbly I pray for the Celestial Emperor and Celestial Empress who are sagacious and divine. With the Wisdom-sun may they perpetually shine, and by the Dharma-cloud may they be together shaded. In all the lands of the ten directions, may all sentient beings plant good seeds of causation, and may all arrive at the scene of blessing. 伏願天皇天後惟睿惟神。與慧日而恒明，將法雲而並蔭。十方國土一切眾生俱植善緣。鹹臻景福<sup>106</sup>

In fact, according to Yu-min Lee's research, most of the inscriptions reveal the donor's desire for the stability of the country and of their life. Apparently, the turbulent social conditions due to the constant vicissitudes of dynasties constitute a sufficient reason for such mundane pursuits in the name of religion. The prayer for the benefit of the emperor perhaps is not only the consequence of political brainwashing on behalf of the ruling house, but also a collective effervescence that longs for a powerful savior who can rescue people out of the social chaos.

Aside from prayers for secular benefits, prayers for rebirth and participation in the Three Assemblies of the Dragon Flower Tree in Ketumati were also frequently seen among prayers concerning Ketumati soteriology. Senghu 僧護 (5<sup>th</sup> cen.-6<sup>th</sup> cen.) was recorded to have many visions of Maitreya on Mount Shicheng 石城, and as a thanks offering, he uttered a vow to cut into the mountain and carve a hundred-foot Buddha image in reverence of the thousand-foot form of Maitreya in India. He was also recorded to have gathered clerics and laypeople in reverence of Maitreya's Three Assemblies of the Dragon Flower Tree during the Jianwu 建武 era (495-597CE).<sup>107</sup> Huisi was also said

<sup>106</sup> McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 92, 175.

<sup>107</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 59.

to have a dream in which he accompanied Maitreya in the Three Assemblies of the Dragon Flower Tree.<sup>108</sup> Prayers for rebirth into the Ketumati paradise and for participation in the Three Assemblies of the Dragon Flower Tree held by Maitreya were also frequently seen in inscriptions. For example, the inscription of a Maitreya shrine dedicated by the nuns Fawen 法文 and Falong 法隆 reads: “At the three sermons under the Dragon Flower (Tree), we pray we may take our place in the stream (of those who achieve enlightenment). 龍華三唱，願在流次”<sup>109</sup>

In fact, according to Yu-min Lee’s research, both the scriptures and the prayers for rebirth into Ketumati evidently outnumbered those for rebirth into Tuṣita.<sup>110</sup> I would like to make a bold supposition here that this might be ascribed to the conception that the final stage of Maitreyan soteriology is his advent into Ketumati-- those who have ascended to Tuṣita will eventually come down to Ketumati with Maitreya as well. Such a belief was seen in the inscription attributed to the laywoman whose first name was Li. She prayed for rebirth into Tuṣita paradise so as to escape from the present incurable degeneration, stay in peace and concentrate on practices that would lead to enlightenment, with the firm belief that the constant turbulence in the sixth century was to constitute the end of the Degenerate Age of the Dharma, and that Maitreya would descend into Ketumati ruled by a cakravartin at the apex of the next cycle of time.<sup>111</sup> In contrast to prayers for secular benefits on behalf of the imperial family, this kind of prayers reveals its concern with religious quest of spiritual attainment. The ideal of cakravartin, though

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<sup>108</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 59.

<sup>109</sup> McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 56, 170.

<sup>110</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 126-8,

<sup>111</sup> McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 93. It is also demonstrated by Li’s example that there are many prayers for other religious achievements aside from rebirth into paradise, such as listening to Maiteya’s teaching, escaping difficult spiritual conditions and being away from bad realms of rebirth, attaining enlightenment and Buddhahood, etc.



not remarkable, constitutes the foundation of Ketumati soteriology of this kind as well. After all, the cakravartin who paves the way for Maitreya's descent into Ketumati is indispensable to Ketumati soteriology over all.

### **Sectarian Maitreyan Soteriology**

Yu-min Lee infers that there is no clear distinction between different Pure Lands on the popular level, either. It is not surprising to find the inscriptions on Śākyamuni images stating an expectation of rebirth in Amitābha's Pure Land, and the inscriptions on Amitābha or Avalokiteśvara statues speaking of the yearning to meet Maitreya. For example, the inscription of the Śākyamuni shrine, dedicated by a laywoman named Song Jingfei reads:

I relied on my late parents, who compassionately raised me with profound kindness, until I attained maturity. My insignificant self, looking respectfully upon their labor to raise me, but lacking the means to recompense them, has now parted with half my hairpins and girdles, and respectfully, for my late father and mother, has reverently had made one image of Śākyamuni . With this bit of merit, I pray that my late father and mother may be reborn in the land of marvelous joy in the West, there to meet the Buddha and hear the Dharma, then to see Maitreya manifest in the world. 賴亡父母慈育恩深得長。輕軀是以仰尋助養之勞，無以投報，今且自割釵帶之半，仰為亡考比敬造釋加像一區。借此微功，願令亡考比托生西方妙樂國土，值佛聞法，見彌世勒<sup>112</sup>

Contrary to the aforementioned accounts in which the Maitreyan soteriology resembles more of the ascending path, the sectarian texts mentioned in the second section is an example mostly follow the descending path. Therefore, the Maitreyan soteriology was frequently taken advantage of by sociopolitical rebellions in sectarian traditions, in the hopes of overthrowing despotic regimes and inaugurating a new reign of peace and prosperity. Thus it was often ironically viewed with suspicion by official incumbents. A Tang edict in 715 concerning the Maitreyan sect reads:

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<sup>112</sup> McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 53, 169.

There are those who wear white clothes and long hair, falsely claiming that Maitreya has descended and been reborn into this world. They spread deceitful rumors and gathered disciples in a wide area. They claim that they expound Buddhist teachings, and falsely prophesize good and evil omens. Some of them compose fake scriptures and falsely claim these scriptures were spoken by the Buddha. Some of them collect disciples and call them monks, most of whom don't marry. They deceive and mislead the general populace and have a wide influence. They have seriously corrupted the political control of the state. 比有白衣長發。假托彌勒下生。因為妖訛。廣集徒侶。稱解禪觀。妄說災祥。或別作小經。乍雲佛說。或輒蓄弟子。號為和尚。多不婚娶。眩惑閭閻。觸類實繁。蠹政為甚

The edict closes with a threat that officials who do not expose and arrest such groups will be demoted.<sup>113</sup> Indeed, as shown in the *Zhongjing mulu* and *Kaiyuan shijiao lu* discussed in the second section, large quantities of forged scriptures were circulating among the general populace, which had greatly disturbed the social conditions. The activity of and the adversity against sectarian Maitreyan sects lasted for hundreds of years, and were further exacerbated in the Ming dynasty.<sup>114</sup> Though the oppression of Maitreya cults did not equal to the abandonment of Maitreya belief, it still compromised the development and dissemination of Maitreya beliefs to a large extent, and consequently constituted one of the main reasons contributing to the fall of Maitreya belief.

Indeed, rebellions in the name of Maitreya frequently burst out in sectarian tradition. Some leaders of the rebels claimed that Maitreya would soon come and they were paving the way for his Advent, which was exactly the mission of the cakravartin in Ketumati soteriology. Other leaders claimed themselves to be the incarnation of Maitreya, descending into this world to overthrow the despotic rule and establish a purified kingdom. In the biography of Pei Liang 裴良 in *Weishu* 魏書, it was recorded that several

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<sup>113</sup> *Tang dazhaoling ji* 唐大詔令集 (Shanghai: Shangwu yinshu press 1959), ed., Song Minqiu 宋敏求, 588.

<sup>114</sup> Daniel L. Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religions* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1976), 26-9.

people claimed the title of emperor and fought the governmental army.<sup>115</sup> *Suishu* 隋書 recorded that in 610 bandits wearing white ribbons and clothes and holding flowers, proclaimed that the Maitreya Buddha had descended to the world and launched a rebellion.<sup>116</sup> *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 also records a monk Faqing 法慶, who proclaimed that “the New Buddha has descended into the world, and will exorcise all the evil spirits 新佛出世，除去眾魔”. He was said to get married and distribute to his disciples psychedelic that caused them to fight. He was also said to desacralize Buddhism by way of demolishing temples, slaughtering monks and burning scriptures as well as sculptures. Faqing was regarded to lead a heretical cult, and was soon eradicated by the governmental army.<sup>117</sup> In 613 Song Zixian 宋子賢, proclaiming himself to be Maitreya, led a rebellion against the present political authority. In the same year a monk named Xiang Haiming 向海明, proclaiming himself to be the incarnation of Maitreya, also led a rebellion aimed at establishing a new dynasty. He proclaimed himself emperor and established the new royal title Baiwu 白烏.<sup>118</sup> In the eighth century, a man named Wang Huaigu 王懷古 stated that the temporal cycle of Śākyamuni had degenerated, and that a new Buddha would descend into this world and inaugurate a new era. The activity of Wang Huaigu was very likely to have influenced movements in the name of Maitreya in the same area 300 years later.<sup>119</sup> Susan Naquin also discusses several other eighteenth

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<sup>115</sup> Weishou 魏收, *Weishu* 魏書 (Beijing: Zhonghua press, 1974), 1531. Though this group was not explicitly identified with a Maitreya cult, it still could be inferred that it was a Maitreya cult since these people were said to be wearing white, a typical feature of Maitreya cults.

<sup>116</sup> Linghu Defen 令狐德棻 and Wei Zheng 魏徵, *Suishu* 隋書 (Beijing: Zhonghua press, 1973), 662.

<sup>117</sup> Sima Guang 司馬光, *Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑑 (Beijing: Zhonghua press, 2009), 4615-6.

<sup>118</sup> Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religions*, 83.

<sup>119</sup> Overmyer, *Folk Buddhist Religions*, 48-9.

and nineteenth century claims that sect leaders were Maitreya incarnate.<sup>120</sup> In some cases such leaders became involved in militant uprisings. These accounts obviously indicate a long-range rebellious tradition supported by the Maitreyan soteriology, which was very likely to be based on the deep-rooted ideal of cakravartin.

Maitreyan soteriology was even conflated with soteriology in indigenous traditions. There are inscriptions on two Daoist statues dated 506 and 520 CE, in which the donors prayed to participate in the First Assembly of the Dragon Flower Tree by virtue of the merit gained from making the statue.<sup>121</sup> It is astonishingly persuasive that the wish for rebirth into Ketumati and attendance in the Assembly of the Dragon Flower Tree had so infiltrated Chinese indigenous religious traditions that even the Daoists had incorporated it into their religious quests. Besides, there also occurred the infusion of ancestor worship into the sectarian worship of Maitreya. According to Yu-min Lee's research, the most popular motive for making statues in Early China was for the benefit of family members, including deceased members of the family. Thirty-two inscriptions dated from 434-587CE stated that the image was carved on behalf of the parents of the seven generations, which, as pointed out by Sato, probably reflects the close connection between the worship of ancestors and Buddhism in Early China.<sup>122</sup> Therefore, I would rather suggest an ignorance of and indifference to the orthodox Maitreyan soteriology among the general populace, perhaps as well as syncretized pressure from Confucianism, in which filial piety and loyalty towards the imperial court constitute the basis of its sociopolitical ideal. Both implied the contribution made by a collective longing for the

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<sup>120</sup> Susan Naquin, *Millenarian Rebellion in China* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1976), 21, 92-3.

<sup>121</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 128-9.

<sup>122</sup> Lee, *The Maitreya Cult*, 120.

improvement of social conditions by virtue of an ideal cakravartin, rather than mere religious doctrines in terms of the prevalence of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China.

It is also worth noting that generally one inscription is not confined to only one group of beneficiaries or one type of prayer. Aside from family members, and the emperor as well as the imperial family as I have already discussed, other beneficiaries seen in inscriptions include the country, all living beings, the priestly teachers and the donor themselves, etc. It is quite often the case that one inscription combines several prayers as well as beneficiaries together. For example, an inscription dedicated by the nuns Daoyang 道揚, Daoji 道積 and Daobao 道保 prays:

...for the emperor and the empress dowager, all teachers of distant kalpas, seven generations of ancestors, living parents, living dependents, Dharma realms of all directions, and those born in the path of the heavens, in rebirth after rebirth, generation after generation, may they serve the Thousand Buddhas of the Present Kalpa, and whether they have a mind for good or for evil, at the three assemblies of Maitreya, we pray they may ascend at the head of the first group and at once become Buddhas. 仰為皇帝階下，皇太後，曠劫諸師，七世父母，所生父母，見在眷屬，十方法界，天道眾生，生生世世，侍玄劫千佛，發善惡心，彌勒三會，願登初首，一時成佛<sup>123</sup>

Anyway, it is pretty demonstrable that worship and prayers among the general populace concerns much more worldly benefits such as peace, prosperity and posterity than the attainment of religious wisdom. Thus, rather than spiritual cultivation, it was the collective social appeal to a beneficial living environment that had essentially contributed to the development of Maitreya worship in Early China. Considering the present social conditions, it was doomed that such an appeal would resort to a cakravartin ideal.

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<sup>123</sup> McNair, *Donors of Longmen*, 70-1, 171.

## CONCLUSION

The ideal of cakravartin, originating from ancient Hindu mythical tradition, has been largely assimilated into Buddhist philosophy. The necessary preliminary step to be a cakravartin is to rule in accordance with dharma, to be compassionate to one's subjects, and to gain one's own merit. Huxley, though he has attempted to avoid the direct application to the several Buddhist texts of Hobbes' theory of social contract, is still willing to employ the conception of a "popular consent" political theory.<sup>124</sup> This view has been challenged by Collins, who thinks these Buddhist texts primarily concerns with moral admonition, rather than the establishment of constitutional Buddhist laws or monarchy. It needs to be clarified that a cakravartin, who is still trapped in Saṃsāra and cannot grant the religious welfare of Nirvāṇa, is not as enlightened as and thus inferior to a Buddha in a Buddhist context. However, as Collins acknowledges, there is a parallel between a Buddha and a cakravartin that, "though not standardly elaborated in terms of military imagery, does implicitly contrast the physical strength of a king with the spiritual strength of a Buddha".<sup>125</sup> Whether these Buddhist texts are aimed at the establishment of laws or the admonition of morality, there is no controversy that it is the collective longing for both material and spiritual welfare among the general populace that requires and supports the rule of kingship as well as the ideal of cakravartin, which stands as a political power complementary to the spiritual enlightenment of a Buddha. As Durkheim states, religion is unconsciously fabricated as an instrument maintained by society whereby the society exercises its control over its members.

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<sup>124</sup> Huxley thinks that both the theory of social contract and the conception of a "popular consent" political theory indicates that the rule of a king earns the support from his subjects only if he manages to preserve peace in the society, and that it is the support from these subjects that is decisive in crowning a king. However, Huxley thinks that the theory of social contract implies legality, which is "absolute and unbreakable", but the actual relationship between the Buddha and the disciples is "mutable and contingent". See Huxley, "The Buddha and the Social Contract," 407-10.

<sup>125</sup> Collins, "The Lion's Roar on the Wheel-Turning King," 440.

The main point of this paper is that the success and prevalence of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China was largely due to its embedded ideal of cakravartin. The social conditions in Early China were in constant chaos, including warfare, fission of the states, as well as the despotic rule under myriad monarchs. Naturally and consequently, there arose a collective social appeal to a sagacious, benevolent and portentous monarch who would terminate all these worldly sufferings and embraced a new age of stability, prosperity and beatitude. The Chinese indigenous schools of thought had all expressed their concerns for such a social condition. Confucianism, the orthodox cultural and religious tradition in Early China, specifically systemized its sociology revolving around the conception of heavenly mandate, which echoed with the ideal of cakravartin rooted in ancient Hindu society and permeating the Buddhist tradition. The ideal of cakravartin was observed in the Maitreyan soteriology in Early China, probably as a consequence of both its compatibility with the social appeal and its resonance with the essence of Confucianism.

Traditionally, Maitreya had undergone a progress from a numbed, unenlightened disciple to an active, sagacious preacher as the heir of Śākyamuni who would become the Future Buddha. Therefore, he is identified as a bodhisattva before his advent into the world as the Future Buddha. Compassion constitutes a remarkable propensity of Maitreya, as of every other follower walking on the bodhisattva path. Maitreya has also revealed his insightful wisdom in many Buddhist texts, making him eligible for the trust of Śākyamuni to inherit and guard the transmission of that wisdom. However, the clear demarcation of Maitreya's identity has been blurred in Early China; there seemed to be an ambiguity in identifying Maitreya as a bodhisattva or as a Buddha. Such an ambiguity was further developed in sectarian traditions, in which the orthodox Buddhist doctrines has been blended and synthesized with indigenous schools of thought as well as mythical

traditions. Maitreya has been transformed from a spiritually supreme being to an intermediate messenger subordinate to a Mother goddess.

The ideal of cakravartin embedded in the image of Maitreya in orthodox tradition is observed in the following ways. Firstly, on his bodhisattva path, Maitreya himself had previous lives in which he was reborn as a cakravartin. Secondly, the conception of Maitreya as the ruler over Tuṣita echoes the ideal of cakravartin as well. Thirdly, a cakravartin will rule over Ketumati before the advent of Maitreya so as to assist in the career of a universal salvation that Maitreya will lead. In sectarian traditions, Maitreya, though no longer the supreme leader but rather a secondary religious leader subject to a Mother goddess, is connected even more coherently with the ideal of cakravartin, the universal king, in accordance with the popular understandings and for the benefit of military purposes in a sociopolitical structure. In fact, as Collins points out, there is a pair of hidden opposing values in the ideal of cakravartin in Buddhist context. On the one hand, the cakravartin is supposed to administrate justice and preserve peace in the society, which largely relied on his military power. On the other hand, the cakravartin is expected to execute his rule without violence, which is very likely to be a resistance to the employment of violence against violence. The ideal of non-violence was fully revealed both in the Buddhist scriptures and in the prayers among the general populace in Early China.<sup>126</sup>

The Maitreyan soteriology basically consists of three parts, the Tuṣita soteriology, the Ketumati soteriology and the sectarian soteriology. The Tuṣita soteriology is known as the ascending path, which is to achieve rebirth and meet Maitreya in his heavenly paradise Tuṣita. The Ketumati soteriology is the descending path, which is to wait for the Advent of Maitreya into the earthly paradise, Ketumati. While in Tuṣita, Maitreya

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<sup>126</sup> Collins, “The Lion’s Roar on the Wheel-Turning King”, 442.



protects and teaches people who attain rebirth into the paradise, in Ketumati he is preparing and striving for a universal salvation for all beings. In fact, there seems to be a contradictory attitude towards the earthly world between Tuṣita soteriology and Ketumati soteriology. While the former proclaimed irreversible degeneration of the age and salvation realized by leaving this world, the latter maintains a much more positive attitude in remaining and reforming this world. This perhaps provides an explanation why the ideal of cakravartin as a worldly ruler was mainly taken advantage of in Ketumati soteriology. The ideal of cakravartin has played an important role in sectarian soteriology as well. In sectarian traditions, Maitreya performed his universal salvation more in the sense of being a messenger and deliverer who was strong in military power. Some accounts have even witnessed that the blueprint of the paradise astonishingly resembled the sociopolitical structure during that period. The prevalence of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China was largely due to, first, the propagation from the imperial court which managed to identify the emperor with Maitreya and the cakravartin ideal so as to make his subjects willingly support his rule, second, the acknowledgement of an incurable degenerate cycle of time among the general populace who approved Maitreya as the only path of liberation and salvation, and third, the proclamation in the name of Maitreya by the rebels who aimed at overthrowing the present despotic rule and establishing a new reign. In each case, the ideal of cakravartin had undoubtedly played an essential part.

A likeness ran through the Tuṣita soteriology and the Amitābha soteriology, and indeed, in the actual ritual worship, a conflation of these two beliefs was seen quite frequently even among people who embraced the orthodox tradition. On the one hand, different understandings, even misunderstandings of the orthodox Buddhist teachings must have risen in the circulation of Buddhist scriptures and dissemination of Buddhist doctrines. On the other hand, under the influence of social conditions and indigenous schools of thoughts, there must have been an effort, though perhaps subconsciously, to

shape Maitreyan soteriology suitably to the present situation in Early China as much as possible, even at the price of doctrinally false conflation. In fact, it is quite difficult to draw a distinction in terms of ritual worship of Maitreya between sectarian traditions and the orthodox tradition as well. Cases of monks and advanced laypeople who were engaged in devotional worship rather than meditation practices, even religious rites such as spirit possession, were not rare at all. There must have been an ongoing interaction between the orthodox tradition and sectarian traditions which had played a nonnegligible role in the formation of Maitreyan soteriology in Early China.

## GLOSSARY

- An Shigao 安世高  
 Baiwu 白鳥  
 Baochang 寶昌  
*Biqiuni zhuan* 比丘尼傳  
*Bozhou sanmei jing* 般舟三昧經  
 Buchu pusa 補處菩薩  
 Chen 陳  
*Dacheng fangdeng yaohui jing* 大乘方  
 等要慧經  
 Daobao 道保  
 Daofa 道法  
 Daoji 道積  
 Daowang 道汪  
 Daoxuan 道宣  
 Daoyang 道揚  
*Dayun jing* 大雲經  
 Faguo 法果  
*Fahua zhuanji* 法華傳記  
 Falong 法隆  
 Faqing 法慶  
 Fasheng 法盛  
 Fawen 法文  
 Fazang 法藏  
*Foshuo mile dachengfo jing* 佛說彌勒大  
 成佛經  
*Foshuo mile xiasheng chengfo jing* 佛說  
 彌勒下生成佛經  
*Gaoseng zhuan* 高僧傳  
 Guoba 郭霸  
 Guyang 谷陽  
 Guanding 灌頂  
*Guan mile pusa shangsheng*  
*doushuaitian jing* 觀彌勒菩薩上生兜率  
 天經, *Shangsheng jing* 上生經  
 Guangjing 光靜  
 Han 漢  
 Han Mingdi 漢明帝  
 Han Wudi 漢武帝  
*Huayan jing* 華嚴經  
*Huayanjing zhuanji* 華嚴經傳記  
 Huibin 慧斌  
 Huijiao 慧皎  
 Huilan 慧覽  
 Huisi 慧思  
 Huiyuan 慧緣  
 Jianwu 建武  
 Jin 晉  
 Jingguang 淨光  
*Jiu Tangshu* 舊唐書  
 Jizang 吉藏  
*Kaiyuan shijiao lu* 開元釋教錄  
 Li 禮  
 Li Xiangshan 李向善  
 Liang 梁  
 Liuxu 劉昫  
 Longmen 龍門  
 Luoyang 洛陽  
*Miaofa lianhua jing* 妙法蓮華經  
*Mile chengfo benqi jing* 彌勒成佛本起  
 經  
*Mile chengfo fumo jing* 彌勒成佛伏魔  
 經  
*Mile Laishi Jing* 彌勒來時經  
*Mile moni foshuo kaiwu foxing jing* 彌勒  
 摩尼佛說開悟佛性經  
*Mile wei nvshen jing* 彌勒為女身經  
*Mile xiajiao jing* 彌勒下教經  
*Mile xiasheng guanshiyin shizhubao jing*  
 彌勒下生觀世音施珠寶經  
*Mile xiasheng jing* 彌勒下生經,  
*xiasheng jing* 下生經  
*Mile xiasheng jiudu ku'e jing* 彌勒下生  
 救度苦厄經

- Mile xiasheng qian guanshiyin dashizhi quanhua zhongsheng she'e zuoshan shoule jing* 彌勒下生遣觀世音大勢至勸化眾生捨惡作善壽樂經  
*Mile xiasheng zhenbie zuifu jing* 彌勒下生甄別罪福經  
*Mingseng zhuan* 名僧傳  
 Mituo 彌陀  
 Northern Liang 北涼  
 Northern Wei 北魏  
 Pei Liang 裴良  
*Poxumi jing* 婆須密經  
 Qi Gaoqi 齊高帝  
 Qin 秦  
 Randeng 燃燈  
 Ren 仁  
 Senghu 僧護  
 Sengming 僧明  
 Sengyin 僧印  
 Shang 商  
*Shangshu* 尚書  
 Shangshu 商書  
 Shicheng 石城  
*Shijing* 詩經  
*Shujing* 書經  
 Sixteen Kingdoms 十六国  
 Song Zixian 宋子賢  
 Sui 隋  
*Suishen bengan mile chengfo jing* 隨身本官彌勒成佛經  
*Suishu* 隋書  
 Tanbin 曇斌  
 Tanfu 曇副  
 Tanjie 曇戒  
 Tanyan 曇衍  
 Tang 唐  
 Tang Gaozong 唐高宗  
 Wang Huaigu 王懷古  
*Weishu* 魏書  
 Wei Taizu 魏太祖  
 Wei Wenchengdi 魏文成帝  
*Weimojie jing* 維摩詰經  
 Weizi 微子  
 Western Jin 西晉  
*Wuliangshou jing* 無量壽經  
 Wusheng Laomu 無生老母  
 Xia 夏  
 Xiang Haiming 向海明  
 Xuanzang 玄奘  
 Xuanzao 玄藻  
 Xue Huaiyi 薛懷義  
 Yang Xiaofei 楊小妃  
 Yijing 義淨  
*Yongyi pusa jiangseng renjian mile bingshi diyu jing* 勇意菩薩將僧忍見彌勒并示地獄經  
 Yungang 雲岡  
*Zengyi ahan jing* 增壹阿含經  
 Zhang Renyuan 張仁願  
*Zhengfahua jing* 正法華經  
 Zhihai 智海  
 Zhiqian 支謙  
 Zhisheng 智昇  
 Zhiyan 智嚴  
 Zhixi 智晞  
*Zhongjing mulu* 眾經目錄  
*Zizhi tongjian* 資治通鑒

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