

Messianism in Civilizational History: The Transformation of the Buddhist Messiah via Maitreya

DINH Hong Hai

Dinh Hong Hai earned two bachelor's degrees; one from Hanoi University of Industrial Fine Arts in 1996 and the other from Vietnam National University Hanoi in 1998. After being educated in the M.Phil program at the University of Delhi (India) in 2006, Hai attended Harvard University from 2008 to 2010 and then defended his Ph.D. dissertation at the Graduate School of Social Sciences, VASS, in 2011. He now serves as a faculty member at Vietnam National University-Hanoi City, and deputy general secretary of the Asian Semiotics International Association (ASIA)



JDTREA 2024,3(2): 71–92

Original Articles

Correspondence to

Dinh Hong Hai

National University-Hanoi City, Vietnam

haidinh@vnu.edu.vn

ORCID

<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8007-5306>



Journal of Daesoon Thought and the Religions of East Asia Vol. 3, Issue 2 (March 2024): 71–92

© 2024 by the Daesoon Academy of Sciences, Daejin University, Korea

<https://doi.org/10.25050/JDTREA.2024.3.2.71>

Day of submission: 2024.01.25.

Completion of review: 2024.02.10.

Final decision for acceptance: 2024.03.20.

P-ISSN: 2799-3949

E-ISSN: 2799-4252

Abstract

The world we live in is becoming more convenient thanks to the inventions of science and technology. Still, the world is also becoming more and more unpredictable with the current situation of VUCA (Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity, Ambiguity). The Covid-19 pandemic brought the biggest global disaster ever with 774,631,444 infected people and 7,031,216 deaths (WHO on February 11, 2024) but it seems that humanity is gradually forgetting this disaster. Meanwhile the economic stimulus packages worth trillions of dollars from governments after the pandemic have further caused the world debt bubble to swell. The bubble burst scenario is something that many economic experts fear.

Apparently, in the transitional period of the early decades of the 21st century, the world's economic, cultural, political, social, natural, and environmental aspects have undergone profound transformations: from the real estate and finance crises in the United States since 2008; through the melting of the Arctic ice over the past several decades; to the double disaster of the earthquake and tsunami in Japan in 2011. Especially, in the context of the world economic crisis after the COVID-19 pandemic, the human achievements of the past thousands of years are in jeopardy of being wiped out in an instant. Many people are predicting a bad scenario for a chain collapse.

Facing the signals of an imminent economic catastrophe based on the appearance of “the Gray Rhino, Black Swan and White Elephant,” many drawn in by Eschatological thought declare that Doomsday will occur shortly. This is the time for many other people to hope for the incoming Messiah. The Messiah is said to appear when people feel despair or suffer a great disaster because faith in the Savior can help them overcome adversity mentally. This research will find out how adherents of Buddhism view and deal with civilizational crises by examining history via symbols associated with Maitreya as based upon the Buddhist Messiah, Maitreya.

Keywords: Messianism; Buddhist Messiah; Maitreya symbol; civilizational history

Introduction

The original English meaning of the word Saviour/Savior is derived from the Latin for “a person who rescues or saves somebody/something from danger, failure, loss, etc.” (Crowther 1995, 1044). However, the term Messiah is used more often these days due to Christianity’s modified use of the Jewish concept, which is explained in a subsequent section. According to the majority of dictionaries and encyclopedias, a Messiah is a person who saves the world from pain or a “person who is expected to come and save the world” (Crowther 1995, 733). In reality, each religion and culture will differ based on their respective concepts and traditions. In almost Asian cultures in general and Buddhist cultures in particular, the Savior does not exist continually in the same way that the Messiah does in the existing Western society. Instead, the Savior is sometimes invisible, strong, or weak, depending on the economic, cultural, political, and social environment of the time and location.

Understanding the beliefs surrounding Maitreya, the Buddhist Messiah, in Asian cultures can provide insight into the cultural, social, economic, and political developments of various countries throughout history. This article takes a new approach by connecting the changes in beliefs surrounding Maitreya to the cultural marks established on the Silk Road during the medieval period and their appearance as symbols in the 21st century. It is an interdisciplinary approach that draws from fields such as history and anthropology to gain a deeper understanding of Maitreya’s significance as a research object, specifically in his role as a Buddhist Messiah. This new perspective sheds light on the various aspects of Maitreya’s influence in contemporary social political and economic life.

Messianism in Non-Buddhist Religions

A belief similar to that of the Messiah likely existed in the social lives of ancient humans. When confronted with the might of nature and its limited powers, humankind requires (at least psychologically) the assistance of supernatural forces. Moreover, the physical and mental agony that people experience is persistent and seemingly eternal. Consequently, only a Savior can bring a stop to their misery. In addition, the concept of eschatology and the end times in several of the world’s major faiths has contributed to the building of the conviction that a brighter, happier millennium (as portrayed in the *Biblical Book of Revelation*) will usher in the end of the current, suffering-filled world. Possibly this is why the desire for a millennium devoid of suffering and grief has always been so strong. The more difficult life becomes, the more the desire for the Messiah to arrive and to eradicate evil and provide happiness and prosperity to all grows. Because of this, the Messiah in each religion or culture is vastly different, from the name to the moment of birth, from the background to the manner of the “Savior of the world,” even though they all share the same name: the Messiah. First, we need to

know the differentiation of the Messiah in different religions.

—*The Messiah in Zoroastrianism.* The earliest text on Messianic beliefs is written in Avestan (an ancient language of the present-day nation of Iran) which refers to the Messiah in Zoroastrianism from approximately 1000 BCE. The concept of the Messiah holds a central place in Zoroastrianism, one of the world's oldest religions. Rooted in ancient Persian texts, the notion of the Messiah, known as Saoshyant in the Avesta, embodies the promise of a savior figure who will bring about the final renovation of the world (Lotha 2011). Within Zoroastrianism, Saoshyant is envisioned as a divine being who will lead humanity to a state of everlasting righteousness and perfection, heralding the triumph of good over evil. This belief in the coming of the Saoshyant has profoundly influenced subsequent religious traditions, including Buddhism. In particular, it finds resonance in the Buddhist concept of Maitreya, the future Buddha expected to appear on Earth in a time of darkness and strife to usher in an era of peace and enlightenment. The parallels between the Zoroastrian Saoshyant and the Buddhist Maitreya highlight the interconnectedness of religious ideas across cultures and epochs, underscoring humanity's enduring quest for salvation and spiritual renewal (Scott 1990).

—*The Messiah in Hinduism.* India boasts a rich tapestry of religions, making the identification of a singular messianic figure amidst its diverse pantheon a daunting task. With a civilization spanning over five millennia, India's religious landscape is as varied as it is ancient. Among the plethora of deities worshipped across the subcontinent, scholars have endeavored to uncover traces of a messianic archetype within the vast expanse of Indian mythology and tradition. One prominent figure or perhaps concept that emerges from the labyrinthine depths of Indian religious texts is the "Chakravartin," a term derived from ancient Sanskrit and translated into Chinese as the dharma-wheel-turning king or the dharma-wheel-turning sagacious king (轉輪王 *zhuǎnlúnwáng* or 轉輪聖王 *zhuǎnlún shèngwáng*). While navigating through the labyrinth of Indian religious lore, researchers have pointed to the Chakravartin as a potential manifestation of the messianic ideal (Rosenfield 1967).

In Indian tradition, the Chakravartin is often intertwined with the cosmic order, associated with Vishnu, one of the principal deities in Hinduism. Vishnu, revered as the preserver of the universe, is depicted as the embodiment of divine wisdom and righteousness. Within the Vishnu Purana, an ancient Hindu scripture, the avatar of Vishnu named Kalki assumes the role of the Messiah, tasked with the restoration of order and the establishment of righteousness during pivotal epochs known as "yugas," including the Millennium alluded to previously. He is described to appear in order to end the Kali Yuga, one of the four periods in the endless cycle of existence (Krita) in Vaishnava cosmology (Brockington 1998). Chakravartin refers to a universal ruler, often considered a righteous king who rules over the entire world or a vast empire that brings about a period of peace, prosperity, and moral order. As such, the identification of the Chakravartin as the Indian counterpart to the messianic archetype underscores

the profound spiritual resonance embedded within India's multifaceted religious traditions. Despite the complexities and controversies surrounding this identification, the enduring allure of the Chakravartin persists as a testament to India's enduring cultural and religious legacy. The concept of Chakravartin is the most influential notion in the establishment of the Buddhist Messiah.

—*The Messiah in Judaism.* The concept of the Messiah holds profound significance within Judaism, a faith tradition that, despite its relatively small size with approximately 10 million adherents, has exerted a monumental influence on global civilization, particularly shaping the development of Christianity. The prominence of Judaism in that historical and cultural landscape has resulted in the frequent usage of the term “Messiah” in English, surpassing the usage of “Savior,” underscoring the enduring legacy of Jewish religious thought. Within the Hebrew Bible, the Messiah is depicted not only as the spiritual leader of Israel but also as a priestly and kingly figure. This multifaceted portrayal is evident in passages such as *Exodus* 30:22–25, where the Messiah's role encompasses both priestly and royal duties. Anointing, a ritual act symbolizing divine consecration and empowerment, plays a central role in the investiture of the Messiah (or Moshiach in Hebrew, means God's anointed one). This is “a person expected to come and save the world” (Crowther 1995, 733)

Historically, the prophet Samuel is recorded as having anointed King Saul, signifying his consecration as the chosen ruler of Israel. Subsequently, during the illustrious reign of King David, the anticipation of a future Messiah who would deliver Israel from adversity and establish universal peace became deeply ingrained within Jewish eschatological expectations. This messianic hope, rooted in the prophetic vision of a redeemed and perfected world under the benevolent rule of the Messiah, continues to resonate within Jewish theology and collective consciousness. The Messiah is envisioned as the ultimate redeemer, tasked with restoring the glory of Israel and ushering in an era of justice, righteousness, and spiritual renewal for all humanity. The enduring belief in the coming of the Messiah serves as a testament to the enduring faith and resilience of the Jewish people throughout the centuries that the term Messiah became a common word in modern-day language in many cultures and religions.

—*The Messiah in Islam.* The concept of the Messiah holds a significant place within Islam, where the awaited savior is known as al-Mahdi. This figure, also referred to as Muhammad al-Mahdi or simply Mahdi, is central to Islamic eschatology and is believed to play a pivotal role in the redemption and renewal of the Muslim world. According to Islamic tradition, al-Mahdi is associated with the lineage of the Prophet Muhammad and is considered the twelfth Imam in the Twelver Shia branch of Islam. The Twelver Imam Doctrine maintains that al-Mahdi, whose full name is Muhammad ibn al-Hasan al-Mahdi, was born on July 29, 869. He is believed to be the final and ultimate savior of humanity, destined to emerge at the end of times to bring about justice and righteousness.

One of the distinctive aspects of the belief in al-Mahdi is the concept of his

occultation or concealment. According to Shia tradition, al-Mahdi entered a state of occultation, or hiding, in the late 9th century, and he is believed to be currently in hiding, awaiting the appointed time determined by Allah for his reappearance. This period of occultation is seen as a test of faith for believers, who anticipate his eventual return to establish justice and equity on Earth. Islamic eschatological narratives envision al-Mahdi and Isa (Jesus in Islamic tradition) as pivotal figures who will collaborate in ushering in a golden age of peace, prosperity, and harmony. It is believed that al-Mahdi will lead the Muslim community to victory over oppression and tyranny, and together with Isa, he will establish a reign of justice and righteousness (Amini 1999). The belief in al-Mahdi serves as a source of hope and inspiration for Muslims worldwide, emphasizing the ultimate triumph of good over evil and the fulfillment of divine promises. The anticipation of al-Mahdi's advent underscores the enduring faith of Muslims in the ultimate victory of truth and justice, reinforcing their commitment to upholding moral values and righteousness in anticipation of his arrival (Zeidan 2019).

—*The Messiah in Christianity*. Within Christianity, the belief in Jesus Christ as the Messiah holds central importance. Christians consider Jesus to be not only the founder of their religion but also the long-awaited Messiah prophesied in the Hebrew Scriptures, known as the Old Testament in Christianity. According to Christian theology, Jesus fulfilled numerous Messianic prophecies found in the Hebrew Scriptures, such as being born of a virgin (Isaiah 7:14), being of the lineage of King David (2 Samuel 7:12–13), and being born in Bethlehem (Micah 5:2). Jesus' life, teachings, death, and resurrection are seen as the fulfillment of God's plan of salvation for humanity. As the Messiah, Jesus is believed to have come to Earth to reconcile humanity with God, to offer forgiveness of sins, and to bring about the establishment of the Kingdom of God. Christians view Jesus as the ultimate expression of God's love and grace, and through his sacrificial death and resurrection, believers are offered the gift of eternal life and salvation.

The belief in Jesus as the Messiah is fundamental to Christian faith and practice, shaping the Christian understanding of salvation, redemption, and the nature of God. Christians affirm Jesus' identity as both fully human and fully divine, emphasizing his role as the unique mediator between God and humanity. Throughout Christian history, the figure of Jesus as the Messiah has been a central focus of worship, devotion, and theological reflection. The Christian faith is founded upon the belief in Jesus as the promised Messiah who brings hope, salvation, and reconciliation to all who believe in him. Jesus was given the title "Messiah" because he was believed to be the man sent to earth by the Father to rescue humanity from sin and suffering (thus, Jesus is also referred to as the Son). According to the Christian Bible, Jesus Christ is both a human teacher and the Son of God. By means of incarnation, this divinity coexists with time and history.¹

Through the preceding examples, it is clear that the Messiah is a shared belief among numerous religions and cultures, but that conceptions of the Messiah vary greatly from

one place to the next. Referring to this theme, Kitagawa remarked: “Clearly, the concept of a better future than the present has led to successful accomplishments. Well-executed work at the end of the world that is not only based on intuition but also speculations and assertions. Most of these speculations and assertions are frequently associated with a religious illusion of a sovereign, a king of the universe, or an ultimate savior, which can be found in many long-established Eastern and Western religions” (Sponberg and Hardacre 1988, 8). Consequently, it can be seen that the prevalent belief in religions and cultures today is the faith in the Messiah, and the Buddhist Messiah, Maitreya, is the most influential messianic symbol in Asia.

The Buddhist Messiah Maitreya in Civilizational History

The concept of Maitreya, often referred to as the “Future Buddha,” occupies a significant place in Buddhist tradition and civilizational history. Foretold in Buddhist scriptures, Maitreya is believed to be a bodhisattva who will eventually attain enlightenment and become the next Buddha, succeeding Gautama Buddha. Throughout Buddhist literature, Maitreya is depicted as a compassionate and wise figure who will appear in the distant future to teach the Dharma, the path to enlightenment. The belief in Maitreya has been influential across various Buddhist traditions, serving as a source of hope and inspiration for practitioners as they strive towards spiritual awakening. The anticipation of Maitreya’s arrival has had profound implications for Buddhist thought and practice, shaping the development of Buddhist communities and institutions. In times of social and political upheaval, the belief in Maitreya has provided solace and encouragement, reminding believers of the ultimate goal of liberation from suffering.

The concept of Maitreya has also played a role in broader civilizational history, influencing art, literature, and cultural expressions across Buddhist societies. Depictions of Maitreya can be found in Buddhist art and iconography, symbolizing the aspiration for a future of peace, harmony, and enlightenment. Furthermore, the idea of Maitreya as a universal savior figure has resonated beyond the boundaries of Buddhist communities, inspiring dialogue and exchange with other religious traditions. In some instances, parallels have been drawn between Maitreya and messianic figures in other faiths, highlighting shared themes of redemption and spiritual renewal. Overall, the concept of Maitreya in Buddhist civilizational history serves as a testament to the enduring appeal of the bodhisattva ideal and the universal quest for enlightenment and liberation from suffering. Whether as a symbol of hope for future generations or as a catalyst for social and spiritual transformation, Maitreya continues to inspire believers around the world, embodying the timeless values of compassion, wisdom, and altruism central to the Buddhist path.

In many religions, a single Messiah is known for saving people and the world at the end of the current age. However, in Buddhism, the Messiah has multiple manifestations,

including the Buddha and the Bodhisattva. The Maitreya Buddha holds the third position among the Three Worlds Buddhas (past, present, future), and is referred to as the Future Buddha. Currently residing in Tushita heaven, Maitreya in his Bodhisattva incarnation will be reborn in the distant future. By comparing the concept of the Messiah in other religions, we gain a better understanding of Maitreya's expected role in the future and how it differs from that of other Saviors. This also helps us appreciate the unique aspects of Buddhist belief in Maitreya and the unexpected variations in the Buddhist conception of the Buddhist Messiah.

According to the *Five Great Treatises* of the Yogacara of Mahayana Buddhism written by Asanga, Maitreya is the Bodhisattva who descended to earth and passed on the teachings to Asanga in order for him to compose the above sutras. Asanga was said to "receive teachings from Maitreya Bodhisattva on emptiness, and how he continued to travel to receive teachings from Maitreya on the Mahayana sutras" (Rahula 2015, xiv). As for the recorded teachings of Maitreya Buddha by Asanga, there is little evidence to indicate that he is the incarnation of a "flesh and blood" savior like Jesus in Western Christianity or manifestations of messianic figures in the other religions. The texts claiming the birth of Maitreya Buddha, meantime, are extremely ambiguous, mysterious, and difficult to identify. However, among the authors of these treatises were two notable great commentators, an Indian and a Chinese, named Asanga and Xuanzang, who particularly addressed Maitreya in their works.

These are the most intriguing documented shreds of evidence of Maitreya Buddha's birth and existence, as well as Maitreya's beliefs. Notably, these significant treatises attributed to Asanga were written under the pseudonym Maitreyanatha. According to Asanga, it was because he received those teachings directly from Maitreya Buddha. However, Asanga describes Maitreya Buddha's identity in these sutras in a rather obscure manner (Kim 1997, 28). Hence, the period in which Asanga penned the aforementioned Great Treatises might be considered a defining moment for the textualization of Maitreya's image and Maitreya doctrines.

At this juncture, the following issue must be posed: Did Maitreya order Asanga to produce the above-mentioned texts, or was Asanga himself the author of the sutras written under the pseudonym Maitreyanatha? This is the key that will allow us to establish who Maitreya is adjacent to the rather hazy and nebulous signs of the Future Buddha. However, other than folklore and mythical tales, no one has discovered any actual evidence of a person named Maitreya.² This demonstrates that the Savior Maitreya is, first and foremost, a religious figure developed by Buddhists to "save" their own spiritual lives. Therefore, it can be argued that the manifestation of messianic symbols in sociocultural life depends on the society itself and the culture from which it is derived. How are the symbols associated with the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya depicted in Buddhist societies? How do these modifications occur? The article will now explore answers to these questions commencing with the transformation of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya as a symbol in the Medieval period below.

Transformation of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya as a Symbol in the Medieval Period

During the Medieval period, the symbols and representations associated with the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya underwent significant transformation, reflecting changes in religious, cultural, and artistic expressions across Buddhist societies. Several key factors contributed to these transformations, including the spread of Buddhism to new regions, interactions with other religious traditions, and evolving political and social contexts. In the medieval period, Maitreya's iconography evolved, with new symbols and representations emerging in Buddhist art and sculpture. While earlier depictions often portrayed Maitreya in a traditional seated posture, later representations began to incorporate regional artistic styles and cultural influences. As Buddhism spread to new regions, particularly East Asia, Maitreya's symbols and imagery assimilated with local cultural traditions. In China and Japan, for example, Maitreya became associated with concepts of benevolence and good fortune, leading to the incorporation of symbols such as the laughing Buddha or "Budai" into Maitreya's iconography. These cultural adaptations reflected the syncretic nature of Buddhism as it encountered diverse cultural contexts.

In some Buddhist traditions, particularly during periods of social and political upheaval, there was a heightened emphasis on eschatological expectations associated with Maitreya's arrival. Artistic representations and religious texts from this period often depicted Maitreya as a messianic figure who would bring about a golden age of peace and prosperity (Kitagawa 1981, 108–10). These depictions served to inspire hope and resilience among believers amidst challenging circumstances. The medieval period witnessed the emergence of new ritual practices and devotional expressions centered around Maitreya. Pilgrimages to sacred sites associated with Maitreya's future advent became increasingly popular, and devotees engaged in acts of worship and supplication in anticipation of his arrival. These practices contributed to the proliferation of symbols related to Maitreya and imagery within Buddhist communities that will be mentioned below.

As Buddhism interacted with other religious traditions, such as Hinduism and Daoism, Maitreya-symbols and attributes were sometimes assimilated or adapted into the religious iconography of these traditions. One of the clearest appearances is the Laughing Buddha in the Sinosphere. "Apart from some local factors originating in Northeast Asian legends regarding those gods, some of the main characteristics revealed are aspiration to have a full stomach, happiness, wealth, and longevity. The aspiration is made concrete by the images of a fat old man with a look of satisfaction on his face" (Dinh 2013, 168). This interreligious dialogue led to the exchange of ideas and the enrichment of symbolism associated with Maitreya through cross-cultural influences. In general, the transformation of Maitreya-symbols in the medieval period reflects the dynamic nature of Buddhist religious expression and the adaptation of

religious beliefs and practices to changing historical and cultural contexts. Through these transformations, these symbols continued to inspire devotion, offer solace, and convey spiritual aspirations to believers across diverse Buddhist societies. For example, this symbol is shown in Thangka paintings by Tibetans, in craft and souvenir stores in Nepal and Bhutan, in Buddhist halls in China, Korea, Japan, and Vietnam, and in Buddhist households throughout Asia. Specifically, this kind of symbol also takes the shape of the Colossal Buddha on the Silk Road in Central Asia (Dinh 2010, 56).

Thus, this research, which disregards the stories surrounding Maitreya Buddha, examines the socially significant components of the Maitreya-symbol from an overlapping approach derived from history and anthropology. Consequently, it investigates the economic, cultural, and political elements that have impacted the lives of individuals in Buddhist countries, particularly believers of Maitreya as a Messiah, based on apparent symbols as well as invisible but ubiquitous phenomena in these communities. The manifestations of the messianic Maitreya in Medieval Times document an era of peak development of this type of belief in the Asian cultural realm, particularly the Buddhist civilizations that existed and prospered under the impact of the Silk Road's dissemination of Buddhism with artifacts from that time period that are still in existence today.

The Maitreya-symbol first formed in India's Early Buddhism with iconography of Maitreya Buddha at Buddhist relics in Ajanta, Elora, Gandhara, Mathura, and Sanchi before it expanded throughout medieval Asian civilizations. Small-sized icons, reliefs, and murals representing everyday life in society were the most typical depictions of Maitreya at that point in time. The small size of these symbols hints at the ambiguity surrounding this Buddhist Messiah's role in Early Buddhist India. These Maitreya-symbols, for instance, are commonly referred to as "attendants" of Buddha Shakyamuni and are often smaller in size than Shakyamuni when Maitreya is depicted as a member of the Buddha's retinue. In Theravada Buddhism, Ajita, the crown prince, plays a minor but significant role alongside Shakyamuni Buddha in the preservation of this early vestige of the Maitreya. However, Maitreya's function and status as a Messiah were clearly defined after the three main branches of Buddhism (Mahayana, Theravada, and Vajrayana) were divided approximately two millennia ago. Accordingly, the belief in the Messiah Maitreya plays an incredibly crucial role in Mahayana Buddhism. This is attested to in part by the mega icons of Maitreya that flourished in the civilizations that developed along the Silk Road.³ "Through cultural transmission which occurred from the East to the West and vice versa, this route played an extremely crucial part during the ancient and medieval time, particularly during the period of flourishing of Mahayana Buddhism and Mahayana Buddhist Art" (Dinh 2013, 52).

The most significant phase of mega icons of Maitreya along the Silk Road growth occurred between the 1st century BCE and the end of the first millennium due to the rapid growth of Mahayana Buddhism and the necessity for international commerce during this time, the Silk Road became a very successful evangelistic instrument. This

trade network linked India's civilizational centers with those of Central Asia, traversing the Himalayas and the Taklimakan Desert to reach the Chinese mainland. During this period, several Buddhist centers such as Bamiyan (Afghanistan), Khotan, Kurcha, Tufan, Dunhuang, Pengcheng, Luoyang, and Longmen emerged along the Silk Road (now in China). Nonetheless, Bamiyan, Dunhuang, Yungang, and Longmen are the only surviving Buddhist centers from this time. These are significant remnants of the early propagation of Mahayana Buddhism. Considering the Buddhist centers that arose along the Silk Road, a "hierarchy" of symbols can be seen which was a crucial aspect of Buddhist art that grew in this direction. The foundation of this hierarchy is a clearly stratified society. Accordingly, significant icons like Shakyamuni are sometimes shown as robed Greek rulers, while bodhisattvas are frequently portrayed as images of Asian princes. Specifically, Maitreya is expressed in both buddha and bodhisattva forms, allowing him to be viewed both as an emperor and a prince (Dinh 2010, 173).

Upon the establishment of Mahayana Buddhism, the Maitreya symbol rapidly spread over the whole Asian continent to the Himalayas, Central Asia, China, the Korean peninsula, Japan, and Vietnam. In the Himalayas, Maitreya is known as *Byamspa* in Tibetan, *Mile* in Chinese, *Mireuk* in Korean, and *Miroku* in Japanese. When Buddhism was freshly internationalized in Asia, Shakyamuni Buddha was still at the core, thus Maitreya-symbols were enshrined or placed in such a manner which made it clear that they were not meant to compete with symbols of Shakyamuni Buddha in Buddha halls. Maitreya is held to be a Bodhisattva who dwells in the Tusita heaven and will be born into the human world in the far future. After the era of Shakyamuni Buddha ends, it will be the time of Maitreya Buddha's birth to rescue sentient beings. Therefore, Maitreya Bodhisattva in the current time is set to be the Buddha in his forthcoming life (Ritzinger 2017, 13). This specific incarnation of the Maitreya-symbol is the basis of innumerable stories and myths about Maitreya and its various expressions in Mahayana Buddhism have led to the production of many symbols of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya.

Depictions of Maitreya during this era are often show him as being seated on a throne with straight legs (the position of an emperor), with the legs sometimes crossed or standing (Figures 3, 4, 11, and 12). Far fewer paintings and sculptures have him appear as a seated figure in a meditative posture (which is characteristic of icons of Shakyamuni Buddha). Maitreya's hands in these images often are held in the Dharmachakra gesture, which is associated with the Chakravartin, "Wheel-Turning Sacred King." Nonetheless, several more Buddhist symbols bearing the Dharmachakra mudra (gesture) are also visible. Maitreya Buddha's high bun adorned with ribbons and ornate beads signifies his function as crown prince (who would ascend the throne) and sets him apart from the great majority of other sculptures of this time. In addition, there are other ornamental components such as capes, arrows, crowns, and bracelets. These expressions demonstrate unequivocally that Greek art had a significant impact on Indian Buddhist art; starting with Gandhara which expanded over the Himalayas

and Central Asia. In Central Asian areas along the Silk Road, the Maitreya symbol gradually changed form, particularly in the size of icons, while retaining the basic features that were shaped in ancient Indian art from the center of Gandhara, such as the mega icons of Maitreya in Bamiyan, Dunhuang, Longmen, and Yungang (Figures 9 and 12).

The creation of the mega icons of Maitreya along the Silk Road throughout the Medieval period is intimately connected to the development of the Buddhist Messiah. Theoretically, this is a concrete manifestation of Messianic beliefs that have their origin in Hinduism (via the Chakravartin concept). This idea merges Buddhist teachings with Zoroastrian mythology to produce a Buddhist Messiah. In other words, the Chakravartin symbol of Hinduism has “joined” Buddhism in order to evolve into a new sign: Buddha Shakyamuni’s future “successor.” Perhaps it is for this reason that Maitreya’s early appearances often resemble a crown prince. In reality, this shift assisted not only the missionaries in establishing the Buddhist Messiah but it also enabled the Indian “domestic savior” to expand into the non-Hindu global community.

After its development in Silk Roads, Maitreya-centered messiah beliefs were transmitted to China. The symbol of Maitreya was progressively converted into a new emblem with Chinese characteristics: Venerable Budai (also known as the cloth-bag monk, *Budai Hesbang*, 布袋和尚) (Leighton 1998). Therein, the Maitreya emblem evolved into a new form of expression with a seated posture, a large physique, potbelly, and broad grin (Figures: 5,6,7,8,14). Venerable Budai is the picture of the cloth-bag monk, who traveled frequently with a cane and large canvas bag. Budai was said to have had an odd temperament. He used to beg for alms, place the items he received in a cloth bag, and then distribute them to others while eating and drinking like an ordinary person. Budai veneration gained prominence in the Southern Song Dynasty likely originating at Lingyin Pagoda in Hangzhou, where the earliest icon of Budai was found (1127–1279).

Venerable Budai (commonly known as the Fat Buddha or the Laughing Buddha) has no connection to the Maitreya symbol in India, the Himalayas, or Central Asia from the standpoint of visual arts (while the symbol of Shakyamuni Buddha retains many of the basic features of the Indian archetype). This demonstrates that the Maitreya symbol underwent a “cultural secession” after it was introduced to the central region of Chinese civilization. This sign not only diverged from its precursors in Indian culture to become the fat, smiling buddha as seen in Lingyin Pagoda⁴ but also evolved into countless more forms of folk expression with several new uses. This new style of expression established not merely a new form of Maitreya, but also a new type of belief that extended beyond the boundaries of Buddhism.⁵

During the Medieval period, Buddhism spread rapidly to various Asian cultural centers, leaving its mark on many civilizations along the Silk Road. One of the most prominent symbols of this religion was Maitreya, whose likeness appears in numerous important Buddhist relics across India, Afghanistan, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, and China.

Examples include two mega icons in Bamiyan, Afghanistan that were 33m and 54m high (which were unfortunately destroyed in 2001 by the Taliban regime, despite being world cultural heritages), and a 72m high statue in Mount Emei, China (which is the world's largest Buddha statue and also a world cultural heritage). Currently, designers and architects in India have completed a design for a 152-meter-tall bronze Maitreya Buddha monument, which will become the world's largest Buddha statue and the world's largest bronze statue once completed (Dinh 2009). (Figures. 11,13).

At this juncture, the question must be answered: why were so many Maitreya sculptures erected along the Silk Road rather than sculptures of Shakyamuni Buddha? The response relates to the primary focus of this study. Accordingly, the influence of the Messiah idea is the reason why people here believe in the limitless power of Maitreya Buddha - the Future Buddha who can save all sentient beings from their current sorrow. Based on a comparative viewpoint, we can see that the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya has a close relationship with the Messiahs of Hinduism and Zoroastrianism, particularly the role of the Chakravartin. The building of these giant statues, on the other hand, necessitates an enormous investment of human and material resources. Consequently, only those with sufficient sociopolitical-economic power can implement their ideas and direct the creation of these monumental structures. The aforementioned gigantic monuments are also emblems of the riches of the dynasties who constructed them and are frequently associated with rulers or reigning dynasties. This is the phenomenon of the politicization of the Buddhist Messiah in Medieval Buddhist societies like China. Thus, the Buddhist Messiah has become a unique type of belief in Buddhist civilizations and a powerful political instrument of the regimes.

When surveying the many thousands of icons Buddhism, Maitreya's depiction frequently includes the following styles and features:

- Gandhara-style standing statue (Figure 1)
- Standing structure of Himalayan design (Figure 2)
- Sitting figure in the Gandhara style - legs extended (like on Emei Mountain, Figure 11)
- Gandhara-style sitting statue, cross-legged (Figure 12)
- The form of a Himalayan-style seated figure with its legs extended (Figure 4)
- Chinese-style standing statue – Venerable Budai (Figure 14)

It might be claimed that the symbol of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya, as represented by the mega icons is the most convincing evidence of the Medieval Buddhist messianic faith. Their expressions reveal not only the cultural and religious lives of the people but also the economic and political circumstances of that time period. In this context, the Maitreya symbol not only demonstrates the significant role of the Buddhist Messiah but also emphasizes the “universal” status that Buddhism attained, as do the mega icons

of Maitreya Buddha. It is also one of the highest points of Buddhist art and sculpture in general. The unique cultural features of this sign; however, appear to be concealed in folklore and in the culture in which it resides by way of indigenization in Medieval society. This will be explored further in the next section.

The Buddhist Messiah Maitreya in Buddhist Societies

Based on the transformation of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya symbols in the Medieval period above, we can see that kind of symbols has held a significant and enduring presence in Buddhist societies throughout history, playing diverse roles and inspiring various expressions of devotion and religious practice. Across different Buddhist cultures and traditions, Maitreya has been venerated as a symbol of hope and compassion because of the belief that he will be the Future Buddha. In Mahayana Buddhist societies, Maitreya is said to await his appearance in a distant age wherein he will bring about a new era of spiritual renewal and enlightenment. That is the reason why the symbol of Maitreya is prominently featured in Buddhist art, sculpture, and iconography to show his role as a Buddhist Messiah across historical periods. Thus, the belief in Maitreya as a way to improve compassion and inspires individuals to cultivate virtues such as generosity, kindness, and altruism. This fosters harmony and mutual respect in societies as a form of interreligious dialogue.

This interreligious dialogue enriches the cultural and spiritual landscape of Buddhist societies, fostering mutual understanding and respect among different faith communities whether through artistic depictions, devotional practices, or ethical teachings. In contrast to what is represented in Buddhist teachings, Buddhist symbols in society are frequently a blend of Buddhist teachings and the local culture where Buddhism was introduced. Therefore, in order to identify the cultural “layers” created by this process, it is necessary to “unpack” at least two fundamental cultural layers, namely original elements and indigenous elements. When Buddhism was internationalized as a world religion, cultural elements originating in India merged with indigenous cultures in the regions it passed through to create new cultural elements. Thus, in this study, the process of interference between Indian culture and the indigenous Chinese cultural background will be focused upon through investigation of the transformations of the Maitreya-symbol in Chinese culture during the Medieval period.

Before Buddhism was introduced to China, numerous indigenous religions and belief systems already existed, with Confucianism and Daoism dominating. During the feudal period of the Medieval Times, these religions were elevated to the level of “national religions,” with Confucius and Lao Tzu serving as kind of “national symbols” for Confucianism and Daoism, respectively. Perhaps this explains why Chinese society was initially resistant to the reception of a new religion such as Buddhism and a new symbol such as Maitreya. In the first century CE, Buddhism was introduced to China.

While it did not clash with Confucianism, as Confucianism was not classified as a religion, it did face opposition from Daoism. However, over time, the feudal Chinese regimes in the Medieval period skillfully incorporated Daoist beliefs with the concept of a Golden Age, leading to the emergence of the Maitreya faith in Chinese Buddhism. This movement not only influenced culture, society, and art, like many other religions but also had a significant impact on Chinese politics. It also had an impact on neighboring countries such as Korea, Japan, and Vietnam.

Once Buddhism and the belief in the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya became established in mainland China, it had a profound impact on the spiritual life of the people. That is the reason why the Chinese feudal dynasties utilized religion and belief to gain political power, using the motto “Mandate of Heaven” (天命, *tianming*) to impose regulations, institutions, and laws without taking personal responsibility, as it was considered to be the will of God. Examples of figures who did this include Empress Wu Zetian (625–627, personal name Wu Zhao) and Hongwu Emperor (1328–1398 personal name Zhou Yuanzhang). During the end of the Yuan dynasty, there was a rebellion against the Yuan court led by Zhou Yuanzhang, known as the Red Turban rebellion. This rebellion is a notable example of the manipulation of the influence of the Maitreya religion in Chinese politics. Zhou Yuanzhang, who was a monk, used his affiliation with Buddhist organizations such as the White Lotus Sect (白蓮教) and Maitreya Sect to propagate the belief in Maitreya as the savior and incite a revolt against the royal government. Due to the poverty of the people and his anti-imperial court sentiments, the revolt was successful, and Zhou Yuanzhang formed the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644).⁶

The evidence above shows that the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya went beyond the border of the religion of the Medieval period to “intervene” in the real world in Asian societies like China. It has evolved from a mere symbol of Maitreya’s beautiful intentions in Buddhist teachings to the change of social, political, and cultural life. These shifts are increasingly pronounced and pervasive in contemporary life. Indeed, the evolution of the concept of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya has seen its influence extend far beyond the boundaries of Buddhist teachings, impacting various aspects of social, political, and cultural life throughout history and continuing to do so in contemporary times. Over time, as Buddhist ideas and practices interacted with broader societal contexts, the symbolism and significance of Maitreya underwent profound transformations. Thus, the intervention of Maitreya in the real world can be seen in how the concept inspired social and political movements aimed at fostering justice, equality, and compassion heading revolutions. In some cases, belief in Maitreya’s imminent arrival served as a rallying cry for resistance against oppressive regimes or as a catalyst for social reform and renewal. It can be said that Maitreya’s imagery and symbolism have been incorporated into diverse cultural traditions, reflecting a universal aspiration for spiritual awakening and social harmony to make great changes in Asian societies.

The emergence of Maitreya as a figure of significance in contemporary life

underscores the enduring relevance of Buddhist teachings and values in addressing pressing global challenges. In an increasingly interconnected world, the principles of compassion, altruism, and mindfulness espoused in Buddhist teachings find resonance among people of diverse backgrounds and beliefs. Moreover, the shifts observed in the perception of Maitreya reflect broader trends of religious pluralism and interfaith dialogue, where religious symbols and figures serve as points of convergence and mutual understanding among different faith traditions. Therefore, the evolving significance of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya demonstrates the transformative power of religious ideas and symbols to inspire positive change in society. As Maitreya continues to exert influence in contemporary life, the teachings attributed to this figure serve as a beacon of hope and guidance for individuals and communities seeking to navigate the complexities of the modern world with compassion and wisdom.

Conclusion

From its position as the Future Buddha and the Buddhist Messiah according to Mahayana teachings, the Maitreya-symbol has evolved into a powerful faith after being transmitted all over Asia, focusing on the Chinese and Sinosphere cultures. The symbol of Maitreya in this process not only changes the form of expression (from Maitreya in the Indian archetype to Chinese Maitreya) in Mahayana Buddhism, but it also generates a type of Buddhist symbol with new nuances, even a new type of belief in addition to the roles of the Buddhist Messiah as well as the Future Buddha.

In its journey from its origins in Indian Mahayana teachings to its adoption and adaptation within Chinese and Sinosphere cultures, the Maitreya symbol has undergone a process of cultural assimilation and reinterpretation. This process has not only changed the outward form of expression, as seen in artistic representations and religious iconography, but it has also imbued the symbol with new meanings and connotations unique to the cultural contexts in which it flourished. One notable aspect of this transformation is the blending of Maitreya with indigenous Chinese cultural and religious elements, resulting in the emergence of a distinctively Chinese Maitreya figure. This fusion of cultural influences has enriched the symbolism of Maitreya, incorporating aspects of Chinese folklore, and philosophical traditions into the narrative surrounding the future Buddha. Furthermore, the symbol of Maitreya in Chinese and Sinosphere cultures has given rise to new forms of belief and devotion, distinct from its original portrayal as the Future Buddha and Buddhist Messiah in Indian Mahayana teachings. In addition to serving as a figure of hope for future enlightenment, Maitreya has become associated with concepts of prosperity, longevity, and worldly blessings within Chinese folk religion and popular culture.

Thus, it can be said that the Maitreya symbol has played a role in shaping the religious landscape of Chinese Buddhism, inspiring new forms of religious practice, ritual worship, and spiritual devotion. Pilgrimages to Maitreya temples and sacred sites,

as well as the offering of prayers and incense, reflect the deep reverence and faith that devotees hold towards this revered bodhisattva. In this way, the evolution of the Maitreya symbol within Chinese and Sinosphere cultures exemplifies the dynamic interplay between religious traditions and cultural contexts, resulting in the creation of a rich tapestry of beliefs, practices, and symbols that continue to shape the religious and spiritual lives of millions of people across Asia and beyond.

Acknowledgements

I want to express my gratitude to Anne-Marie Hilsdon, Curtin University, Australia, for her advice and guidance throughout the article, as well as for English proofreading.

Conflict of Interest

No potential conflict of interest relevant to this article was reported.

Notes

- ¹ According to John 3:16–17, Jesus, the Messiah, is the gift of the Father's love for the world's salvation; he gave his life for humanity (2 Corinthians 5:15). See: <http://biblescripture.net/>. Accessed 17 June 2023.
- ² Xuanzang (also known as Sanzang/Hsuan Tsang/Hsien Tsang -玄奘), unlike Asanga, was a Zen monk of the Tang Dynasty who was born after the Maitreya cult had become widespread in India. Above all else, he was a thorough scholar of Buddhist teachings. He was a famous missionary, and a great scholar, and had enormous merit in promoting Buddhism in China. Because of this profundity, Xuanzang's works are widely regarded for their precision. In Xuanzang's literature, Maitreya Buddha is frequently mentioned as in Asanga's writings, this material does not allow us to pinpoint the origin of Maitreya Buddha, but it does indirectly accept his presence as the Future Buddha (Hsien Tsiang 2004, 137).
- ³ The cult of Maitreya is also well developed in the other branch, Vajrayana Buddhism; nevertheless, it is not as powerful as Maitreya's role as a Buddhist savior in Mahayana Buddhism, where mega icons of Maitreya were made along the Silk Road during the Medieval Times.
- ⁴ *Budai Heshang* is a legendary Chinese monk, whose name literally means "Hemp Sack"; also occasionally referred to as *Fenghua Budai*, and *Changtingzi*. He is said to have hailed from Fenghua county in Ningbo prefecture of Zhejiang province. Budai is often depicted as a short figure with an enormous belly and a staff or walking stick on which he has hung a hemp bag or sack (*budai*), whence derives his name. Budai wandered from one town to the next begging for food, some of which he saved in his sack. This jolly figure is remembered as a thaumaturge who was particularly famous for accurately predicting the weather. See more detail in: *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* by Robert E. Buswell and Donald S. Lopez Princeton University Press 2014.
- ⁵ Maitreya - God of Wealth is a new symbol in Vietnamese culture that appears as a combination of Maitreya worship and the cult of the God of Wealth in Vietnam. See more detail in: Dinh, H. H. 2018. "Maitreya-God of Wealth: A Case Study of Culture Change in Vietnam," *Vietnamese Studies* No.1 (207), 2018, pp.53-82.
- ⁶ Zhou Yuanzhang not only used Buddhism as a highly efficient weapon to defeat the Yuan dynasty but

also as a highly effective tool to manage his followers by combining the Three Religions (Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism) into the regime's hands. This tendency is essentially the politicization of religion for the Ming Dynasty's benefit. It demonstrates the deliberate "fabrication" of Buddhist teachings in order to construct Chinese-imprinted Buddhist symbols by feudal governments of medieval China for political purposes. Therefore, the symbol of Maitreya in Buddhism became the most popular and "profitable" idea among Chinese feudal kingdoms. Future Buddha instantly converted into the current Messiah to serve the monarch, royal family, and centralized politicians.

References

- Amini A. I. 1999 *Al-Imam Al-Mabdi: The Just Leader of Humanity*. Translated by Dr. Sachedina. Ansariyan Publications.
- Brockington, J. L. 1998 *The Sanskrit Epics*. BRILL Academic.
- Buswell, Robert E 2003 *Encyclopedia of Buddhism*, MacMillan Books.
- Buswell, Robert E and Donald S. Lopez. 2014 *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Chan Nguyen – Bach, Nguyen Tuong 2014 *Dictionary of Buddhism*. Hue: Publishing House. [Vietnamese Language Text] N. Bách, Trường Từ Điển Phật Học.
- Crowther, Jonathan 1995 *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Das, Asha 2003 *Maitreya Buddha in Literature, History, and Art*. Kolkata: Punthi Pustak Kolkata.
- Dinh, Hong Hai 2009 “Maitreya Images in Asian Buddhist Fine Arts.”, Harvard-Yenching Institute Working Paper Series. https://www.harvard-yenching.org/wp-content/uploads/legacy_files/MAITREYA%20image%20IN%20ASIAN%20BUDDHIST%20FINE%20ARTS_Dinh%20Hong%20Hai.pdf
- 2010 “The Role of the Silk Road on the Development of Mahayana Buddhist Arts.” *Dialogue April-June* 11(4). http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_Apr10/dinh.htm
- 2014 “Symbolism in the New Era of Buddhism.” *Dialogue Journal* 15(1). Accessed on 02 Feb 2024. http://www.asthabharati.org/Dia_July%20013.pdf
- 2018 “Maitreya—God of Wealth: A Case Study of Culture Change in Vietnam.” *Vietnamese Studies* 1: 53–82.

- Hsien, Tsang 2004 *Si-Yu-Ki: Buddhist Records of the Western World* S. Beal. Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Keenan, John P. 1989 “AsanGa’s Understanding of Ma^ˆDhyamika Notes on the Shung-Chung-Lun”. *Journal of the International Association of Buddhist Studies* 12(1): 93–108. Accessed on 10 FEB 2024. <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:bsz:16-jiabs-87495>
- Kim, Inchang 2007 *The Future Buddha Maitreya : An Iconological Study*, Foreword by Lokesh Chandra. Delhi: D.K. Printworld.
- Kitagawa, Joseph M. 1981 “The Career of Maitreya, with Special Reference to Japan.” *History of Religions* 21(2): 107–125.
- Lao, Tư and Lê Thịnh 2001 *Confucianism—Buddhism—Taoism*. Hanoi: Literature Publishing House. [Vietnamese Language Text] *Hà Nội. về Từ điển bách khoa Nho-Phật-Đạo*, Hà Nội: Nhà xuất bản Văn học.
- Leighton, T. D. 1998 *Bodhisattva Archetypes: Classic Buddhist Guides to Awakening and Their Modern Expression*. New York: Penguin Arkana.
- Lotha G 2011 Encyclopaedia Britannica, accessed on 19 FEB 2024. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Saoshyans>.
- Rahula, Walpola 2015 *Asanga, Abhidharmasamuccaya: The Compendium of the Higher Teaching*. S. Boin-Webb (trans). Fremont, CA: Jain Publishing Company.
- Ritzinger, J. 2017 *Anarchy in the Pure Land: Reinventing the Cult of Maitreya in Modern Chinese Buddhism*. Oxford University Press.
- Rosenfield, J. M. 1967 “The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans”. *California Studies in the History of Art*. University of California Press
- Scott, D. A. 1990 “The Iranian Face of Buddhism” *East and West* 40(1/4).
- Sponberg, Alan and Helen *Maitreya, the Future Buddha*. Cambridge: Cambridge

Hardacre University Press.
1988

Zeidan, Adam “Muḥammad Al-Mahdī Al-Ḥujjah.” *Encyclopedia
2019 Britannica*, 15 Mar. 2019, accessed on 5 July 2023.
[https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-al-
Mahdi-al-Hujjah](https://www.britannica.com/biography/Muhammad-al-Mahdi-al-Hujjah)

Appendixes

Group 1: Maitreya symbols in India



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

Figure 1. Maitreya symbol in Gandhara, India. Photo by Dinh Hong Hai

Figure 2. Maitreya sign in Ladakh, India, is 15.24m tall and carved directly into a cliff. Source: <https://asianartnewspaper.com/travel-ladakh-and-three-maitreyas/>

Figure 3. Maitreya symbol in Ladakh, India, is from the 10th century. Photo by Dinh Hong Hai

Figure 4. Maitreya symbol in Nubra valley, India, 32m high. Source: <https://travelseu.com/guide/maitreya-buddha-statue-tourism>

Group 2: Maitreya symbols as Budai Monk in China and Vietnam



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7



Figure 8

Figure 5. The Maitreya Budai Monk in Lingyin Temple, Hangzhou, China. Photo by Dinh Hong Hai

Figure 6. The Maitreya Budai Monk in Vietnam. Photo by Dinh Hong Hai

Figure 7. Maitreya Budai Monk, and the Six Thieves in Vietnam. Photo by Dinh Hong Hai

Figure 8. Maitreya Budai Monk, folk statue. Photo by Dinh Hong Hai