CHAPTER ONE

THE SYNCRETISM OF MAITREYAN BELIEF AND MANICHAEISM IN CHINESE HISTORY

(马西沙，“历史上的弥勒教和摩尼教的融合”)*

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Abstract

With the introduction of Buddhism into China during the Former and Later Han Dynasties, belief in the Maitreyan Pure Land also arrived and exerted a great influence on Chinese society. The influence of the Maitreyan faith also found an expression by its involvement in the original doctrine of the Chinese Manichaecism. During the Southern and Northern Dynasties, the Maitreyan Great Vehicle Teaching (Mile dacheng jiao 弥勒大乘教) emerged under the influence of the belief in the Maitreya Buddha.

This chapter begins with textual research on the absorption of Maitreya belief into the original Manichaean doctrine. Then, it examines historical facts of the syncretism of the two sects in Sui, Tang and the Five Dynasties. Afterwards, it unveils the Incense Gathering (Xiang hui 香会) in the Northern Song and Yuan dynasties. Finally the paper explores the Incense Army (Xiang jun 香军) and the Incense Assembly at the end of Yuan. All these efforts point out that current Chinese scholarship, which maintains that the peasant rebellion in the last days of Yuan was a White Lotus uprising, is an incorrect understanding of the history of that period.

Keywords: the Maitreyan belief; Manichaeism; Incense Gathering

Maitreyan Messianic Belief

(3, original page number, similarly hereinafter) We can distinguish between the Great Vehicle (Mahayana) and the Lesser Vehicle (Hinayana) in Buddhism, both of which were introduced into China from India. In comparison with the Lesser Vehicle, the Great Vehicle was more adaptive and attractive. It had some convergences with

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the Confucian ideas of consolidating society, such as cultivating oneself, harmonizing one’s own clan, effectively governing the state and establishing peace throughout “All Under Heaven.” Consequently, it became the predominant Buddhism in China. Mahayanan belief in the Pure Land produced two genres: one was the Amitabha Pure Land (Mituo jingtu 弥陀净土), (4) and the other was the Maitreya Pure Land (Mile jingtu 弥勒净土). The Pure Land of Maitreya was far more influential than the Pure Land of Amitabha during the Southern and Northern Dynasties. This conclusion could be drawn from the fact that the Maitreya Buddha statues far outnumbered those of Amitabha. By counting both stone sculptures discovered in the Yungang (云冈) and Longmen (龙门) Grottoes and Gong County (巩县 of Henan Province) and gold and bronze Buddhist statues handed down, Sato Chisui (佐藤永智), a Japanese scholar, concluded in his paper that there were one hundred and fifty Maitreya Buddha statues made in the Northern Wei and other dynasties, but in contrast there were only thirty-three of Amitabha.¹

The strong attraction of the Maitreya Pure Land comes, above all, from the close connection between world salvation and the image of the Tuṣita, an otherworldly paradise depicted in this teaching. Contrasted with the tribulation and chaos in this world, such vision inspired people, who were not content with their lot, to rise in rebellion to establish a “Buddhist Pure Land,” which was characterized by “complete equality for all,” “unanimous consent,” “no personal suffering,” “abundant and cheap grain,” and so forth. Hence, these rebels held a variety of “pseudo-scriptures” (伪经) that were claimed to be derivatives of the three principal Maitreyan Scriptures—The Sutra of Maitreya’s Ascension (Mile shangsheng jing 弥勒上生经), Maitreya’s Attaining Buddhahood (Mile chengfo jing 弥勒成佛经) and The Sutra of the Descent of Maitreya into the World (Mile xiasheng jing 弥勒下生经)—as their ideological weapons.

The faith in the Maitreya Pure Land is hierarchized into two categories. One says that Maitreya, as an unenlightened mortal, obtained the