The Princeton Conference on Maitreya Studies

The Princeton Conference on Maitreya Studies was held at Princeton University on May 1-3, 1983. Sponsored by the Department of Religion and the Program in East Asian Studies, the Conference was funded in part by a grant from the Division of Research Programs, National Endowment for the Humanities and was co-directed by Helen Hardacre and Alan Sponberg.

Drawing upon scholars in various disciplines, representing specialists in the major cultural areas of Buddhist influence, the purpose of the Conference was to clarify the significance of Maitreya in Buddhist history, thought and culture. Specifically, the Conference addressed the following questions: What forms does the cult of Maitreya take in various Asian societies? What iconographic and ritual symbols are associated with Maitreya? What expectations do believers have of Maitreya? Under what circumstances does the Maitreya cult develop millenarian tendencies?

Since papers were distributed in advance, Conference discussions were devoted to issues raised by each author. The following is a listing of papers presented at each of the four panels.

First Panel: Overview
Discussion of J. M. Kitagawa, "The Many Faces of Maitreya"
Moderators: H. Hardacre and A. Sponberg (Princeton University)

Second Panel: South and Southeast Asia
Moderator: John Holt (Bowdoin College)
J. Barbaro, "A Typology of Maitreya Beliefs"
P. Jaini (University of California), "Stages in the Bodhisattva Career of the Tathāgata Maitreya"
M. Nagatomi (Harvard University), "Maitreya in Terms of Buddha Lineage"
S. Tambiah (Harvard University), "Maitreya in Southeast Asia"

Third Panel: China, Korea, and Viet-nam
Moderators: Yu Chun-fang (Rutgers University) and Miriam Levering (University of Tennessee)
M. Strickman (University of California), "Heralds of Maitreya"
Among the issues discussed by Conference participants, the following were central: the relation between the notions of cakravartin and future Buddha; the association of Maitreya both with the latter days of the Dharma and with the "good eon," the bhadra-kalpa; the relative importance within Buddhism as a whole of Maitreya and Ambitābha; the relative importance to the scholar of texts and cultic practices regarding Maitreya; the question of millenarianism as it relates to Maitreya.

Each of the issues above provided valuable stimulus towards a general clarification of the significance of Maitreya, but it was the last point that attracted perhaps the most attention. Discussion revealed that most participants had assumed that Maitreya's status within Buddhism as a whole derives most importantly from the motif of his descent from the Tusita Heaven to this world in the latter days, here to inaugurate a reign of righteousness. Although many of us had tended to think of Maitreya as a savior, a messiah, we found instead that both textually and cultically this motif is much less important than that of Maitreya as ruler of an ideal world, variously conceived. In fact, only rarely is Maitreya (or persons assuming his identity) held to be directly instrumental in the creation of that world or in the disposition of the preceding era. Instead, he presides over an ideal realm and sums up in himself the oppositions and contradic-