

Who is Maitreya: Buddha, Bodhisattva, or God of Wealth?

A comparative iconography in contemporary Vietnamese culture

[Maitreya kimdir: Buddha mı, Bodhisattva mı, yoksa Zenginlik Tanrısı mı?]

[Qui est Maitreya : Bouddha, Bodhisattva ou Dieu de la richesse ?]

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Abstract

Maitreya is currently recognized in Buddhist doctrines as both Bodhisattva and Buddha, a symbol and an original expression. Though diverse and challenging to identify its origins, Maitreya's expressions and symbolism can be broadly categorized into two original styles, Indian and Chinese. Using comparative iconography this research traces the development of Maitreya in Vietnam from its origin in the Chinese style, often depicted as a large, jolly man with a smile to its representation. In this research, the syncretization process is employed to analyze the evolution of the Maitreya symbol and its expressions in Vietnam through these same two incarnations of Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva. The Maitreya icon in China contrasts with the Indian icon with a serious face, slender body and calm vibe. The research explores the emergence of and differentiation between Maitreya and quasi-Maitreya symbols in modern Vietnamese culture to emphasize the persistence of cultural syncretism. Finally, a new hypothesis emerges in the late 20th century: against a background of changed economic circumstances in Vietnam, the Maitreya symbol evolves into a new deity: Maitreya - God of Wealth (MGW).

Keywords: Maitreya, God of Wealth, Maitreya – God of Wealth (MGW), comparative iconography, cultural syncretism

Özet

Maitreya şu anda Budist doktrinlerinde hem Bodhisattva hem de Buddha, bir simge ve özgün bir anlatım olarak kabul edilmektedir. Çok çeşitli ve kökenlerini belirlemek zor olsa da Maitreya'nın ifadeleri ve simgeciliği genel olarak Hint ve Çin olmak üzere iki özgün biçime ayrılabilir. Bu araştırma, karşılaştırmalı ikonografiyi kullanarak Maitreya'nın Vietnam'daki gelişimini, genellikle gülümseyen, büyük, neşeli bir adam olarak tasvir edilen Çin tarzındaki kökeninden temsiline kadar izler. Bu çalışmada Maitreya simgesinin evrimini ve Vietnam'daki ifadelerini Maitreya Buddha ve Maitreya Bodhisattva'nın aynı iki bürünümü üzerinden incelemek için birleştirme süreci kullanılmıştır. Çin'deki Maitreya simgesi ciddi yüzü, ince vücudu ve dingin havasıyla Hint simgesiyle karşıtlık oluşturmaktadır. Araştırma, kültürel birleştiriciliğin sürekliliğini vurgulamak için çağdaş Vietnam kültüründe Maitreya ve yarı-Maitreya simgelerinin ortaya çıkışını ve bunlar arasındaki değişimi incelemektedir. Son olarak 20. yüzyılın sonlarında yeni bir ileri sürüm ortaya çıkmaktadır. Vietnam'da değişen ekonomik koşullar karşısında Maitreya simgesi yeni bir tanrıya dönüşmektedir: Maitreya - Zenginlik Tanrısı (MGW).

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Anahtar Kelimeler: Maitreya, Zenginlik Tanrısı, Maitreya - Zenginlik Tanrısı (MGW), karşılaştırmalı ikonografi, kültürel senkretizm

Résumé

Maitreya est actuellement reconnu dans les doctrines bouddhistes comme étant à la fois Bodhisattva et Bouddha, un symbole et une expression originale. Bien que diverses et difficiles à identifier, les expressions et le symbolisme de Maitreya peuvent être classés dans deux styles originaux, l'indien et le chinois. En utilisant l'iconographie comparative, cette recherche retrace le développement de Maitreya au Vietnam depuis son origine dans le style chinois, souvent représenté comme un grand homme jovial et souriant, jusqu'à sa représentation. Dans cette recherche, le processus de syncrétisation est utilisé pour analyser l'évolution du symbole de Maitreya et de ses expressions au Vietnam à travers ces deux mêmes incarnations du Bouddha Maitreya et du Bodhisattva Maitreya. L'icône de Maitreya en Chine contraste avec l'icône indienne avec un visage sérieux, un corps mince et une vibration calme. La recherche explore l'émergence et la différenciation des symboles Maitreya et quasi-Maitreya dans la culture vietnamienne moderne pour souligner la persistance du syncrétisme culturel. Enfin, une nouvelle hypothèse émerge à la fin du XXe siècle : dans un contexte de changement des circonstances économiques au Viêt Nam, le symbole de Maitreya évolue vers une nouvelle divinité : Maitreya - Dieu de la richesse (MGW).

Mots-clés : Maitreya, Dieu de la richesse, Maitreya - Dieu de la richesse (MGW), iconographie comparée, syncrétisme culturel

1. Introduction

Maitreya as a symbol of Buddhism is mentioned in many scriptures and books. The vast majority of publications focus on Maitreya within the scope of Buddhist teachings or Buddhist art. Very few scholars, however, investigated Maitreya in a social role beyond the scope of religion. Around four decades ago a progressive turn in studying Maitreya emerged. Renowned scholars gathered at Princeton University for the "Princeton Conference on Maitreya Studies". This unique conference brought together experts from different fields and different universities to analyze the topic of Maitreya. Unlike other conferences that focused on Maitreya solely within the context of religious Buddhism, this conference primarily explored the social aspects of Maitreya worship. Their mandate was to "consider the status and place of Maitreya, (and in so doing it) might be helpful to locate him in each of the three levels of meaning that we usually associate with Buddhism, that is, (1) Buddhism as religion, (2) Buddhism as culture, and (3) the Buddhist-oriented sociopolitical order" (Sponberg & Hardacre, 1988, p. 12). This approach became crucial to understanding the symbol of Maitreya in Asia where Mahayana Buddhism has now expanded beyond the solely religious aspects. Nowadays, in Vietnam, Maitreya symbols exist not only in Buddhist temples. They go beyond the religious scope of Buddhism itself, blending into the flow of contemporary life through the symbol of Maitreya – God of Wealth (now and then MGW).

In order to understand the emergence of new belief systems such as MGW, this research has used comparative iconography. This approach helps in the development and identification of newly formed elements over time that are now expressed in Vietnam through the MGW symbol. Differentiation between Maitreya and the MGW of modern Vietnamese culture is difficult if based on appearance alone. Therefore, this study additionally explores the symbolism of Maitreya within Vietnamese society, and its transitions and transformations into MGW. This investigation is closely aligned with syncretic practices characteristic of Vietnamese culture where people worship many different gods from different religions simultaneously, without adhering to any specific doctrine. In Vietnam, such blending of beliefs has led to the simultaneous worship of Maitreya, the God of Wealth, and Maitreya, the God of Earth. The fusion of beliefs has made it challenging to identify each deity due to their complex manifestation.¹ Based on research conducted over the last few decades by scholars who follow this approach, however, we need to understand these complexities to reveal the accurate interpretations of the Maitreya symbol.

There have been several studies conducted of the Maitreya symbol using the iconographic approach. The *Iconography of Chinese Maitreya (Ikonographie des chinesischen Maitreya)* by Max Wegner in Berlin 1930 is one of the first monographs on this symbol. It is a slim volume, as is the book, *Maitreya*, by Severo Sarduy (1987). The notable in-depth monograph on Maitreya is Inchang Kim's "The Future Buddha Maitreya: An

¹ In Section 4, the research will analyze these mixtures in detail and demonstrate how comparative iconography can help us distinguish each deity.

Iconological Study” which I will discuss further below. Specialized studies on Maitreya began in 2003 with “Maitreya Buddha in Literature, History, and Art” by Asha Das (2003) which illustrates the Maitreya Buddha in literature, history, and art. Many book chapters and journals focusing on the Maitreya symbol in connection with Buddhism such as “Empress Liu’s “Icon of Maitreya”: Portraiture and Privacy at the Early Song Court” by Heping Liu (2003), “The Iconography and Iconology of Maitreya in Gandhara” by John C. Huntington (1984), “The Power and Authority of Maitreya in Mongolia Examined through Mongolian Art” by Uranchimeg Tsultemin (2015), in Vesna Wallace ed., *Buddhism in Mongolian History, Culture and Society*, etc. These have also been useful as background to the current research.

Inchang Kim’s research on Indian Buddhism contributed substantially to the progressive shift in scholarship, outlined above. He used an iconographic approach to focus on the earliest representations of Buddha and Bodhisattvas in various anthropomorphic forms. His study exemplified the progressive shift to social and societal interpretations, from both religious and broader social points of view. This landmark research comprised a thorough view of Maitreya’s changing manifestations in the history of Indian Buddhism. Kim’s contribution to identifying Maitreya symbols from an iconographic perspective helps us recognize not only the differences in the Maitreya symbol through each historical period, but also the substantial differences over time between the Maitreya symbol and other Buddhist symbols. Kim’s extensive fieldwork and his use of early Indian literary sources analyzing iconography in different regions of the Indosphere constitute a thorough mapping of the historical evolution of the Maitreya cult in India. While his research addressed the origin and role of Maitreya in Hinayana, Mahayana and Yogacara Buddhism, Kim argued the analysis of the symbolism in Maitreya iconography was incomplete: there are many gaps and missing links in the historical process (Kim, 1997, p. 249). My research on Vietnam represents an attempt to fill some of these spaces and omissions and provide additional knowledge about the societal interpretations of Maitreya in Asia.

For these “gaps and missing links”, Kim mentioned, do not occur within India alone: a more complete history of Maitreya will continue to be revealed along with the social development process in Asia to the present. Thus, we need to continue to examine the gaps on a larger scale in both the Indosphere and Sinosphere, spanning from early Buddhism to contemporary societies. In 2005 and 2006, I conducted research on Maitreya in Asian Buddhist art at the University of Delhi which revealed that Maitreya had become a significant symbol of happiness and hope amongst Asian Buddhist followers. However later, I found the Maitreya symbolism had truly spread beyond Buddhist art. In the Sinosphere it had become popularized at a high level, generating a trend of worshipping and display of Maitreya symbol(s) among people who were not Buddhist devotees. Importantly, such popularization of an orthodox religious symbol is nonexistent in other major religions, such as Catholicism or Islam. Through various incarnations we note that Maitreya has been transformed, transcending religious boundaries (Dinh, 2009). Nowadays, Maitreya became a widely recognized symbol in many Asian cultures and known by various names, such as Laughing Buddha, Lucky God, and Pu Tai He Shang/Bu Dai He Shang 布袋和尚. Unlike other orthodox religions, then, Buddhism manifests a rare phenomenon: its symbols are secularized and used as souvenirs or interior decor. This popularity can be attributed to the merging of Buddhism and secularism, into a blend of religious and folk elements. The widespread use of the Maitreya symbol beyond religious boundaries has been evident in folk culture, folk arts, and syncretism.

This research will focus on religious and cultural syncretism in contemporary Vietnam leading to the emergence of the MGW as a new “incarnation” of Maitreya in line with historical economic and social change. It will compare the iconographic appearance of Maitreya both in Buddhist religious spaces and modern Vietnamese society. And it will focus on the significant transformation of Maitreya into MGW. The research will trace the evolution of the Maitreya symbol in Vietnam from its two main incarnations of Buddha and Bodhisattva from the Indosphere to the Sinosphere. It will show how the Maitreya symbol has undergone a transformation process due to the influence of folk culture. To understand the transition from the Buddhist symbol of Maitreya to a folk deity like MGW, it is crucial to return to the origin of this symbol more than two thousand years ago and trace the similarities and the differences between Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva from then to contemporary Vietnam. In the section below the article makes a comparison between the Maitreya symbols in the Sinosphere and the Indosphere, as a necessary prerequisite to understanding the quasi-Maitreya symbols which later formed in Vietnam.²

² Folk deities such as the God of Wealth and the God of Earth have undergone similar changes in Vietnam, so folk art has played an important role in the syncretic effect of the Maitreya symbol there too. In the same way, the symbol of the Laughing Buddha Maitreya (*Bu Dai He Shang*) has grown in popularity in China due to its recognizable features and jolly

2. Origin of Maitreya in Buddhism

The Maitreya symbol was introduced in China from India during the spread of Buddhism along the Silk Road in the Later Han Dynasty (25–220 CE) known as Budai Heshang (布袋和尚) or Qici (契此). Its worship gained popularity during the Jin Dynasty (266–420 CE) and continued to spread even more during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE). Empress Wu Zetian (624–705) helped promote the trend of Maitreya worship, leading to the construction of colossal statues of Maitreya Buddha that can still be seen across the Sinosphere today. In Vietnam, which was influenced by both Chinese and Indian cultures, the earliest references to the Maitreya symbol, namely the Four Wonders of National Treasures with (An Nam tứ đại khí - 安南四大器), date back to the Ly Dynasty (1009–1225). The statue of Quynh Lam Pagoda was considered as one of these national treasures of the period.³

According to general Buddhist doctrines, Maitreya or Metteyya, Ajita in India, Miruk in Korea, Miroku in Japan, Mile in China and Di Lặc in Vietnam are the names given to a particular Bodhisattva or Buddha who will appear on the earth, acquire ultimate enlightenment, teach sentient beings the Buddha’s dharma and attain Buddhahood (in this interpretation the Maitreya Buddha is also known as Future Buddha, i.e. the next Buddha after the historical Buddha Shakyamuni). The interior of Tusita Heaven is the instructional domain of this Bodhisattva. The Maitreya narrative is present in the canonical texts of all Buddhist traditions (Theravada, Mahayana, and Vajrayana) and is acknowledged by the vast majority of Buddhists. In the future when the Buddha Dharma has long been forgotten on Earth, the Maitreya Bodhisattva will illuminate the Dharma and deliver it to sentient beings.

Maitreya was first referenced in the Pali Canon’s Digha Nikaya 26, Cakavatti (Sihanada) Sutta (Horner, 1975). This Sutra mostly covers the context surrounding Maitreya Buddha’s birth (Maitreya-vyākaraṇa) and was translated into Chinese numerous times after it arrived from India, resulting in a large number of translations (e.g. 彌勒下生經 in China or, Sutra on Maitreya’s Previous and Future Lives). The Sutra depicts Maitreya’s eventual enlightenment as a Buddha. Maitreya Bodhisattva was born in the Tushita heaven and left his home to practice. Maitreya taught people how to be considerate beneath “the Tree of Dragon Flowers” (Bodhi-tree) after he became a Buddha. In the Pali canon, like the Cakkavati-Shanāda Sutta and the Buddhavamsa Sutta, many writings indicate that Maitreya will emerge in a future world. In the later Pali Canon, the “Future History” (Angatavasa), which covers Maitreya’s life from birth to Buddhahood, is considered to have been compiled in the late 12th century by Kassapa of South India (Thanissaro Bhikkhu, 2013).

By comparing the manifestations of Maitreya symbols in the Sinosphere with those in the Indosphere, we can observe both similarities and differences. As mentioned above, in terms of physicality, Maitreya icons in India are usually depicted with thin bodies, while in Vietnam and China, their bodies are commonly portrayed as fat or plump. Regarding their appearance, Indian Maitreya symbols are typically austere, while in Vietnam and China, they are mostly depicted with a smile. In terms of their posture, the main difference is that the Indian Maitreya symbol is seated on a throne, while the Chinese symbol is sits on the ground. Another significant difference between these icons is their gestures (mudra). While Indian Maitreya symbols often have the Dharmachakra gesture, Chinese Maitreya symbols frequently depict hands holding a rosary and a cloth bag. The Maitreya symbols in Vietnam are most often similar to the Chinese Maitreya symbols, but there can also be mixed forms with slightly casual attire. Table 1 comprising the Maitreya symbols in India, China, and Vietnam shows these differences in iconographic comparison. They provides valuable insights into the social aspects of Maitreya as a turning point. They show changes in social significance, place and status which have not been explored in many iconographic studies before.

	Source	Expression	Appearance	Posture	Gesture	Dressing
1	India	Slim	Austere	Sits the on throne	Dharmachakra	Aristocratic
2	China	Fat	Smile	Sits on the ground	Hands hold rosary and cloth bag	Casual

physiognomy. This phenomenon also occurred during the process of Sinicization of the Maitreya in Vietnam that we will discuss in the next section.

³ These were four wonders or national treasures made in bronze during the Ly and Tran dynasties including the *Quynh Lam statue*, *Qui Dien bell*, *Bao Thien tower*, and *Pho Minh cauldron*. The statue of Maitreya Buddha in the Quynh Lam pagoda was about 20m high.

3	Vietnam	Fat	Almost smile	Depends on the sources	Mixed	Slightly casual
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Table 1: The rationale for iconographic comparison between the Maitreya symbols in India, China, and Vietnam

3. Maitreya symbol in iconographic perspective

Investigating the evolution of the Maitreya symbol is a turning point in iconography because it emphasises the dynamic and changeable nature of art and religious symbols within different cultural contexts. Below, I backtrack a little to provide a more comprehensive overview of the complexities surrounding the emergence of the symbol of Maitreya in Buddhist history and art in the whole of Asia. This effectively highlights the adaptation and localization of Maitreya's cult across different cultures in Asia during the spread of Buddhism internationally. The inclusion of different names and explanations of incarnations of Maitreya, for example, in Korea (Mireuk), and in Japan (Miroku) adds depth to the understanding of the Maitreya symbol of Di Lạc in Vietnam. This section also focuses on the transformation from Maitreya to a quasi-Maitreya in Vietnam with a dual role as both an object of worship and a decorative item.

Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva

According to Buddhist teachings, Buddha is a person who has gained Buddhahood (or enlightenment, like Siddhartha Gautama), whereas Bodhisattva is a deity who mercifully refrains from obtaining nirvana in order to save another. Thus, the primary distinction between Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva is the role of the latter: Currently Maitreya Bodhisattva “residing in the Tushita Heaven” he will later evolve into a Buddha (the Future Buddha, Maitreya). As mentioned above, this Bodhisattva will descend to earth to preach anew the dharma when the teachings of Gautama Buddha have completely decayed” (Gorlinski, 2022). The second distinction between Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva lies in action: in the future (as a Buddha), the current Maitreya Bodhisattva will teach the Dharma, but at present he tries to awaken others on the path to Buddhahood. Hence the two figures are distinguished: Buddisattva appears in Vitarka mudra, the gesture of teaching exposition (Figure 1) while Maitreya Bhuddha is depicted in Dharmachakra mudra, the gesture of holding a prayer wheel in his left hand as Sacred King, wearing a crown and seated on a throne (Figure 2).



Figure 1: Maitreya Bodhisattva in Vitarkamudras⁴



Figure 2: Maitreya Buddha in Dharmachakramudras. Ladakh, India

In Early Buddhism⁵, however, there were no anthropomorphic statues only Buddha’s footprint and an empty chair. The earliest Buddha and Bodhisattva human statues were discovered at Mathura, a particular school of Indian art dating back to the 2nd century BCE. These Buddha and Bodhisattva statues (Figures 3 and 4) were nearly identical to the teaching Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva respectively, seated on the ground, ready to rise and instruct living beings. This transformation of Buddhist symbols from non-animated forms (aniconism, e.g. empty chair) to human figures (iconism) was directly influenced by Greek culture, brought by the great conquests of Alexander the Great. The Shift to iconism can be seen through the distinctive decorative details of Maitreya’s statues. These details indicate the role and position of Buddha and Maitreya. For instance,

⁴ All unreferenced photographs taken by the author.

⁵ Early Buddhism is a living spiritual tradition based on the original teachings of the historical figure known as the Buddha, or Awakened One, who lived in northern India in the fifth century BCE.

Maitreya is often depicted as a Prince with symbolic ornaments on his hands, neck, or hair bun whereas Buddha is represented by gesture of fearlessness (or Abhaya mudra). This serves as the basis for iconographers to determine the identity of each Maitreya statue.



Figure 3: Shakyamuni in Abhaya mudra



Figure 4: Bodhisattva Maitreya, Mathura, 2nd century CE. (Myer, 1986).

The most prominent characteristics of Maitreya symbols found in Mathura include:

- a. A coil of hair, without a scarf and decorative characters of a Bodhisattva such as earrings, necklace, bracelet;
- b. Holding a jar of water (kamandalu) in the left hand;
- c. A halo covering two shoulders (Bodhisattva) and a jar of water;
- d. Yogi seated with crossed legs, holding a jar of water in his left hand;
- e. Yogi seated with crossed legs, his right hand in the position of Abhya mudra.

While these are the most well-known attributes of the Maitreya figure in Mathura this does not imply that all Maitreya symbols originating in Mathura shared these qualities (Dinh, 2009, p. 10). Maitreya Bodhisattva got increasingly specific to locality as time passed, as in Gandhara, Ladakh, Tibet, China, Korea, Japan and Vietnam. The Maitreya symbol has undergone various changes in each indigenous culture that has received it after its discovery in Mathura, leading to increasing differences from the prototype found in both Gandhara and Mathura. Consequently, studying the Maitreya symbol, so far, has not provided a comprehensive and systematic understanding of the transformations of the symbol in Asian culture. To achieve this, it is necessary to classify Maitreya symbols in Asian culture, into those which constitute either the Sinosphere or Indosphere.

The Difference between Maitreya in the Indosphere and Sinosphere

As mentioned above, there are differences between the representations of Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva, as well as variations between how Maitreya is portrayed in the Indosphere and Sinosphere and over time. Across the Indosphere, which includes Ladakh, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet, Cambodia, Laos, Sri Lanka and Thailand, Maitreya is depicted through various Indian style symbols such as physicality, i.e as a thin figure. By contrast, in China, Maitreya has always been depicted as a pleasant, chubby, childlike figure, an incarnation from the 10th century. This portrayal of Maitreya is a result of the “Sinicization” of the Maitreya symbol from Indian Buddhism. It is called Maitreya but with the addition of a Chinese root (Qici - 契此) (Maitreya-Qici, Figure 5).



Figure 5: Maitreya in Sinosphere (Lingyin Temple, Hangzhou)

Many dictionaries and encyclopedias introduce Maitreya in East Asian Buddhism, as “in a particularly graceful form as the bodhisattva appearing in the lovely ‘pensive prince’ pose and also as the ‘laughing Buddha,’ commonly encountered in the entryways of Chinese monasteries (and restaurants), the latter form based on the semi-historical sixth-century monk Putai, who was especially beloved for his kindness to children” (Buswell, 2003, p. 507). However, how do we reconcile these two different poses, the lovely ‘pensive prince’ and the ‘laughing Buddha?’ To solve this problem, we might need to clarify the difference between Maitreya in the Indosphere and Sinosphere. Depending on the time of creation, however, these two depictions of Maitreya (ie in Indian or Chinese style) may exist in the same country. For instance, using comparative iconography we note that the Maitreya symbol in seventh-century Korea has Indian elements (Figure 6) but subsequent statues have a Chinese appearance (Figure 7). This also occurred in Japan (Figures 8-9) and Vietnam (Figures 10-11). Table 2 below (Figures 6-11) provides an iconographic overview of Maitreya as Mireuk in Korea, Miroku in Japan, and Maitreya in Vietnam.


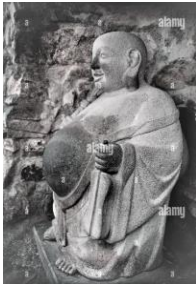


	Country	Maitreya symbol in Indian style	Maitreya symbol in Chinese style	Local name
Figure 6-7	Korea	 <p>Figure 6: Korean, 6-7th century CE</p>	 <p>Figure 7: Bonggungsa, Busan, South Korea</p>	Mireuk
Figure 8-9	Japan	 <p>Figure 8: Kōryū-ji, Japan</p>	 <p>Figure 9: Kiyomizu-dera Temple, Japan</p>	Miroku



Figure 10-11	Vietnam	 <p data-bbox="619 459 807 515">Figure 10: Dalat, Vietnam</p>	 <p data-bbox="858 459 1021 515">Figure 11: Hanoi, Vietnam</p>	Di Lạc
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Table 2 (Figure 6-11): The appearance of Maitreya as Mireuk in Korea, Miroku in Japan, and Di Lạc in Vietnam

The table above shows us clearly the differences between representations of Maitreya originating in the Sinosphere and Indosphere with their distinctive Indian and Chinese expressions and styles found in the each Asian country. In Vietnamese cultural space, however, iconography is even more complex: symbols that might look similar have completely different functions. We refer to such differences in contemporary Vietnamese culture as Maitreya and quasi-Maitreya symbols.

The Difference between Maitreya and Quasi-Maitreya Symbols in Contemporary Vietnamese Culture

The evolution of iconography in Vietnam has revealed more significant changes to the Maitreya symbol than in other countries in Asia. During the country's economic boom after doi-moi⁶ in 1986 the Chinese-style Maitreya symbol transformed into a new kind of god, (MGW), which was not only depicted as a religious icon but also as a decorative item to display in newly wealthy Vietnamese families (Figure 13). These changed Quasi-Maitreya symbols are now found in office spaces as well as private residences. Hence MGW is represented as a folk god and a decorative object. Figures 12 and 13 below show the definitive change from the Chinese Maitreya style with a rosary in hand, to the God of Wealth (MGW) with gold bars in hand. How do we understand how a kind of god becomes a decorative object in the minds of many people in Vietnam? Why did Vietnamese people use MGW statues with gold bars in hand? Are they for decoration or worship, or both? The answer lies in mixing beliefs, once again within a process of syncretism within contemporary Vietnamese Culture.



Figure 12: Maitreya with rosary in hand



Figure 13: quasi-Maitreya (MGW) with a gold bar in hand

The transformation from Maitreya Buddha into a god of wealth was considered surprising to many, including Buddhist researchers. But it's even more surprising when the Maitreya Buddha symbol in Vietnam turns into a statue for display rather than worship. Gold bar in its hand, this decorative object adorns public places and residences. Why is such a statue located in Vietnam and not in other cultures? The impact of the period of economic boom in Vietnam after the “doi-moi” policy of the Vietnamese government in 1986 provides an explanation. Moreover, the particular syncretic culture of Vietnam, discussed below, is also an important part of the answer.

4. The phenomenon of syncretizing in contemporary Vietnamese culture and the birth of Maitreya – God of Wealth

Since the middle of the 20th century, theories of syncretism have explained the fusing of diverse beliefs into one theological system. It has long been controversial in scholarship that “the current approaches to (religious) syncretism are not so much concerned (in the West) with defining the notion in relation to its problematic past in theology” (Leopold & Jeppe, 2005, p. 318). Meanwhile, in Asia, scholars have a different approach to

⁶ TA special process of reform policies launched in Vietnam in 1986, literally meaning like “restoration”.

syncretism, because folklore aspects unambiguously convey integration within contemporary cultures there. For instance, in contemporary Vietnam, the religions of Caodaism, Hoahaoism, and the merging of Buddhism with Taoism and traditional beliefs continue to develop by mixing folklore, religion and philosophy. Throughout history, syncretism has played a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape not only of Vietnam, but also in other Asian countries. This phenomenon is not limited to now outdated social structures but is manifested in contemporary, transitional, and folk cultures of today. In the next part of this paper, we will take a closer look, from an iconographic perspective, at the modern transformation of Maitreya in Vietnam, from a religious symbol to a folk icon. This exploration will delve more deeply into the integration of folk beliefs, syncretic phenomena, and the religious changes that have occurred in Vietnam in the decades after doi-moi. By examining the Vietnamese MGW symbol and related concepts, we can better understand how individuals assign meaning to them which explains the socioeconomic reality of contemporary Vietnamese society.

The discussion so far has established Maitreya as one of the most significant Buddhist symbols in Asia. “Maitreya is the Future Buddha in Mahayana Buddhism and is viewed as the savior of Buddhism, in addition to his role as a bodhisattva, which has been established in India since the earliest Buddhist period” (Robert & Buswell, 2004, pp. 507- 508). However, after thousands of years of the existence of Buddhism in Vietnam, the Maitreya symbol has now grown in importance beyond the Buddhist religious sphere. Specifically, the Maitreya symbol has been “assigned” new cultural functions fostering belief in a god of wealth. Explaining the origin and development of the MGW in Vietnam involves exploring the syncretism that occurred in earlier forms of Maitreya in Asia right up to the MGW symbol in present-day Vietnamese society. This history is closely linked to the doi-moi, a period of economic liberalization that started in 1986 and continues to this day. Opening up to a market economy in Communist Vietnam has had a significant impact on the religious and socioeconomic landscape.⁷

This is a clear example of the integration of Vietnamese folklore and a reflection of the significant religious changes that have occurred in Vietnamese society since the economic boom of the “Doi-moi” period. To understand the religious or social significance of the symbol, we need to consider the context of the research object, the various interpretations connected to the image. Essentially, we need to understand both the meaning the symbol holds for its users and the social reality it represents. The current syncretism of the Maitreya comprises a unique social reality of contemporary Vietnamese society, combining early religious beliefs with the changing religious landscape of modern times. In this case, a triple aspect of the MGW symbol in Vietnamese culture is apparent. This triple aspect, derived from a Buddhist symbol, contains core elements of the old faith which have led to the creation of the MGW and other new deities. To fully grasp the 3-in-1 feature of the MGW we need to identify and track the history of MGW, Maitreya Buddha, and the God of Wealth as three separately existing symbols in Vietnamese culture. Furthermore, we must separate the religious, folk belief and social components from the behavioral implications of symbol usage, as depicted in the historical change in iconography of the Maitreya symbol.

5. The historical change of Maitreya symbol in iconographic perspective

The Maitreya denotation has changed historically and experienced numerous alterations in Vietnam as in other Asian countries. Each time the transformation represents a turning point in the history of Buddhism in general, and specifically in the changes in Maitreya symbolism in each Asian country. These alterations have occurred not just in appearance, but also in religious ideals and social movements (Table 3). From an iconographic perspective, the most significant transformations in the history of the Maitreya symbol in Asia are: 1) Becoming a Future Buddha in the period of Early Buddhism; 2) Buddhist Savior or Buddhist Messiah in Medieval Times; 3) Fat Buddha in China; and 4) MGW in Vietnam.



Table 3: The historical change of Maitreya symbol from an iconographic perspective

Maitreya became the Future Buddha Maitreya in Early Buddhism

⁷ It is virtually impossible to distinguish between Maitreya and the God of Wealth if we do not analyze their function and standing in secular society in great detail. For example, while some people use a particular statue to represent Maitreya, others refer to the same statue as the God of Wealth.

The historical change of Maitreya in Theravada and Vajrayana Buddhism primarily occurred in the Indosphere where Buddhism started its internationalization process. After the period of Mathura art, Maitreya symbols underwent significant transformations, namely dividing the system of gods into distinct classes, each with its own mode of expression. Maitreya, the Future Buddha, secured a prominent role in Buddhist temples throughout this process, especially in Mahayana Buddhism. Maitreya Buddha's transition to Maitreya Bodhisattva and then his appearance as Future Buddha Maitreya in ancient Indian Buddhist art marked an historical turning point that aided Maitreya's transition from Shakyamuni Buddha's attendant to Future Buddha Maitreya and Buddhist Messiah Maitreya of Medieval Times. (Table 3 shows these first three transformations).

Maitreya became the Buddhist Messiah in Medieval Times

According to many Buddhist doctrines, the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya was created to “rescue” people's spiritual lives. Numerous incarnations of the Buddhist concept of the saviour exist, most notably the Buddha and Bodhisattva incarnations. As indicated above, the embodiment of the Buddha in the future is also known as the Maitreya Buddha. Maitreya Buddha occupies the third position among the Three Worlds Buddhas (past, present, and future), and is hence also known as The Future Buddha. Maitreya Bodhisattva (the bodhisattva incarnation of the Maitreya Buddha) currently resides in Tushita heaven and will be reborn in the distant future. These two types of representations (Future Buddha and Bodhisattva) are accountable for the vast and surprising disparities in the Buddhist conception of the Buddhist Messiah Maitreya.

After Buddhism became internationalized beyond India, especially after Buddhism was introduced into Chinese culture, there existed two main concepts of Maitreya: 1) Maitreya appears in the Tushita heaven to be reborn in the distant future. And 2) Maitreya will appear in the near future, right in this world to bring salvation during the Dharma-Ending Age (like eschatology). This second concept of Maitreya Buddha is one of the important causes of historical rebellions in China spanning thousands of years, such as the White Lotus and Yellow Turban Rebellions. If we consider the changes from Bodhisattva Maitreya to Buddhist Messiah Maitreya in Medieval Times as changes in Buddhist concepts (that had a great influence on Chinese society), this constitutes a turning point in the history of Buddhism.

Maitreya becomes the Fat Buddha in China

There are a number of important questions that Buddhist scholars have left unanswered for many years such as ‘why has the Maitreya symbol in China transformed into a Fat Buddha? And ‘when did this transformation take place?’ In the course of research comparing the MGW in Vietnam to other Gods of Wealth in Asia over two decades, I discovered that the Chinese Maitreya resembled Kubera (the Indian god of wealth) rather than the Indian Maitreya. The great transformation of the Maitreya symbol from Indian Maitreya to Chinese Maitreya in China comprised the birth of the Fat Buddha Maitreya in China (according to Chinese legends). This form of the Chinese Maitreya that was found at Lingyin Temple, Hangzhou. Kubera is one of the oldest Gods of Wealth in Indian culture, which appeared thousands of years ago, predating Buddhism's presence in Vietnam. Kubera is immediately identifiable as a topless masculine god with a huge belly who is typically shown in a squatting position, holding in his left hand a mongoose as a symbol of prosperity, and a pomegranate in his right hand representing grain or a money bag (Figure 14).

On a fieldtrip to China in 2018, I discovered the first Laughing Buddha - Maitreya symbol (or Budaihesang symbol) together with Kubera in Lingyin temple, Hangzhou, China. At this temple I also found that the Fat Buddha Maitreya's formation in Chinese based on 毘沙門天王/Pishamentianwang or Vaisravana (Figure 15) coexisted at the birthplace of the Fat Buddha. I have since observed that a substantial proportion of Kubera statues have the same expression as the Chinese Maitreya (Budai Monk) compared to other Kubera statues such as Buddha for Wealth - 發財佛 (Figure 16). Based on these findings, I suspect that the ancient Chinese Buddhists may have “composited” the shape of the God of Wealth, Kubera, with the name Maitreya to create a Chinese Fat Buddha or Maitreya symbol in Chinese form (Figure 17). If this hypothesis is correct, it is a fascinating revelation that the ancient Chinese have reproduced ancient Indian cultural elements in their Maitreya symbols. Similarly, I argue, the Vietnamese later replicated the Chinese Maitreya symbol to form the symbol of MGW.

I now return to the questions raised above about why the Maitreya symbol in China transformed into Fat Buddha, and when this transformation took place. Based on the discussion above, the Chinese Maitreya symbol is a combination of Maitreya's name and the form of Kubera or Vajravana. Further, this transformation too

place during the Song Dynasty around the 11th century, and we can find the earliest appearance of the Chinese Fat Buddha Maitreya (Budai Monk) at Lingyin Temple in Hangzhou.




			
Figure 14: Kubera style	Figure 15: Vaisravana/毘沙門天王	Figure 16: Buddha for Wealth - 發財佛	Figure 17: Fat Buddha Maitreya (Budai Monk)

Table 4: The development from Kubera to the Fat Buddha in Lingyin temple

Why and how Fat Buddha Maitreya becomes the Maitreya – God of Wealth in Vietnam?

After its birth in China more than 1000 years ago, the Fat Buddha Maitreya symbol quickly spread throughout the Sinosphere creating a popular Chinese symbol. This symbol has also dominated the Vietnamese cultural space for thousands of years. Recently, however, this symbol has transformed into a new type of god of wealth in Vietnam: the belief in worshipping the Maitreya Fat Buddha has combined with the appearance of a God of Wealth to form MGW. To understand this combination, we need to go back to the period before the Chinese Fat Buddha finally became MGW in Vietnam. During this period, a phenomenon of mixing beliefs between the Chinese God of Wealth with the Earth God in Vietnam occurred, which was also implicated in the transformation of Maitreya into the MGW.

When the Chinese God of Wealth (Figure 19) was imported into Vietnamese culture several centuries ago, the archetype of this god, with distinctive black beard and Futou headgear, remained intact in the Chinese communities of both China and Vietnam so far. However, when the Vietnamese adopted the Chinese practice of worshipping the Chinese God of Wealth, they employed the Chinese God of Earth with a white beard. The depictions of “God of Wealth with a white beard” and “Vietnamese Earth God” (Ông Địa) made a pair on the same altar (called Ban Thần Tài - Ông Địa) (Figure 20).


	
Figure 19: Chinese God of Wealth (God of Wealth in black beard)	Figure 20: Vietnamese God of Wealth in the altar of Thần Tài – Ông Địa (God of Wealth in white beard and Earth God (- Vietnamese style))

Table 5: Figure 19-20. The difference between Chinese God of Wealth and the Vietnamese God of Wealth in the altar of Thần Tài – Ông Địa

To avoid confusion between the Maitreya Fat Buddha, MGW and the Earth God in Vietnam, we should focus on the “hand-held objects” represented in each statue. Maitreya Fat Buddha often holds a rosary (a prominent Buddhist emblem) coupled with a cloth bag and a cane, whereas Earth God (Ông Địa) typically wields a big fan and wears a head scarf. Note that Maitreya and Earth God possessed neither a money string nor a gold bar in their hands. Consequently, when fat, short, bald, smiling, and beardless statues are connected to the hands of money and gold bars, devotees interpret it as a new form of the God of Wealth, Maitreya God of Wealth (MGW). The iconic appearance of a big tummy and baldness are emblematic (Table 6).

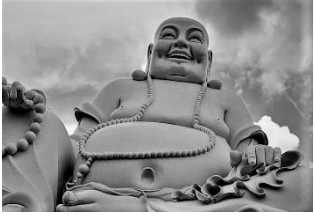


		
<p>Figure 21: Maitreya Buddha (Hand-held objects: rosary and cloth bag)</p>	<p>Figure 22: God of Wealth (Hand-held objects: Gold bar)</p>	<p>Figure 23: Earth God (Hand-held objects: Fan)</p>

Table 6: Figure 21-23. Big tummy and bald icons: Maitreya, MGW, and Earth God in contemporary Vietnamese culture

6. Conclusion

Throughout the history of Buddhism, the depiction of Maitreya Buddha, Bodhisattva, and the God of Wealth (as in the case of MGW) has undergone a process of iconographic transformation. This comparative iconographic research has focused on recognizing Maitreya's expressions and the evolution of the Maitreya symbol through its two incarnations of Maitreya Buddha and Maitreya Bodhisattva. Depending on the time and place they were depicted, each icon has reflected the beliefs and values of the people which consequently influenced the art of that era. Returning to the question: Is Maitreya Buddha, Bodhisattva, or God of Wealth? I would like to conclude several points about the relationship between the Maitreya symbol in contemporary Vietnamese culture and in Asia more generally.

Firstly, the symbol of Maitreya in Vietnam is an original attendant of the Buddha. In early Buddhism, the Maitreya symbol became the Future Buddha. Then in Medieval times Future Buddha transformed into the Buddhist Savior or Buddhist Messiah. At the end of the First Millennium, the Fat Buddha in China emerged from the Messiah and was adopted by the Vietnamese during Chinese colonisation. Finally, this symbol became MGW in modern-day Vietnam.

Secondly, the research has explained how Chinese people combined the name of Maitreya and the body of Kubera to form an embodiment of Chinese Maitreya-Budai Heshang or Fat Buddha/Laughing Buddha in Lingyin Temple, Hangzhou of China a thousand years ago. Further it has examined how the Vietnamese combined their own Earth God symbol with that of the God of Wealth and Chinese Fat Buddha Maitreya to create a completely new kind of God of Wealth in Vietnam: (MGW). The incorporation of the Fat Buddha Maitreya and quasi-Maitreya symbols such as in modern Vietnamese culture exemplify the syncretization process in Vietnam. This process constitutes the evolution of the Maitreya symbol to form a new deity, MGW. This particular symbol, however, is a composite one, an instance of contemporary syncretism taking place after after “doi-moi”. It blends religious and social elements to produce a unique post-reform Vietnamese societal phenomenon.

Thirdly, to fully appreciate this symbolism in contemporary Vietnam we must then evaluate MGW not only from a religious perspective but also in terms of culture and economics. Tracing the emergence of MGW explains religious transformation in contemporary Vietnamese culture during the economic boom after “Doi-moi”. However, just as Vietnamese people have previously accepted the coexistence of multiple religions, they have now been able to unite symbols from different belief systems to form a completely different one, MGW, which has both societal and religious meanings.

The syncretization surrounding the Fat Buddha Maitreya symbol represents the significant impact globalization has on all aspects of socio-cultural life. The influence of the Maitreya symbol throughout Asia has been demonstrated the global relationship between religion, art, and iconography. The Maitreya symbol, originating from one of the most important icons of Buddhism, has generated a unique cultural phenomenon: folk characteristics of Asian cultures via syncretism have inspired a completely new symbol in Vietnam. This phenomenon helps us further understand complex multi-layered cultures thus deepening the connections between religion, culture, and art. Moreover, this article has cleared the ground for perhaps further research in Vietnam. The social reality linked with the MGW symbol stems from a singular concept: “Có thờ có thiêng, có kiêng có lành - Pray for sanctity, wait for the best life in the future” (Vietnamese proverb).

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