

The Maitreya Cult and its Imagery from the Northern and Southern Dynasties

Lee Yu-min

Department of Painting and Calligraphy
National Palace Museum

Abstract

The Maitreya cult spread in China during the Northern and Southern Dynasties, and a considerable number of Maitreya sculptures were produced at this time featuring complex imagery. This study takes a regional approach to these images using the methods of iconography and iconology. Along with the inscriptions on sculptures and historical documents, they offer a means to discuss issues related to the development of imagery, regional characteristics, the origins and circulation of various types of Maitreya imagery, and religious contents related to the cult during the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Buddhism originated in India, which had a profound impact on early Chinese Maitreya imagery. By the middle and late Northern Wei dynasty, the Maitreya cult reached a peak. Not only were many sculptures produced, their imagery underwent considerable change, among them appearing many Maitreya images with Chinese innovations. In addition, this study has discovered that the Maitreya imagery circulating in various regions during the Northern and Southern Dynasties demonstrate not only differences between north and south, but also east and west of the Taihang Mountains. Finally, this study points out that, according to the placement of Maitreya sculptures, iconographic features, the names of images and prayers mentioned in inscriptions, etc., although the Maitreya cult in the Northern and Southern Dynasties consisted of two aspects, that is, descending to Ketumati with the Maitreya Buddha and ascending to Tuṣita Heaven to meet the Maitreya Bodhisattva, the goal of the two actually reveals no differentiation, for they reach the same end only using different methods.

Keywords: Northern and Southern Dynasties, Southern Dynasties, Northern Dynasties, Maitreya cult, Maitreya imagery, regional study