A Study on the Cult and Imagery of the Bodhisattva Mārīcī in the Tang and Song Dynasties

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Abstract

Mārīcī originally was a deity in "mixed" Esoteric Buddhism. As Esoteric Buddhism evolved, the deity gradually was transformed from a devī into a bodhisattva, even rising to the rank of Buddha-mother. The cult surrounding this figure has a long history, with this study focusing on the development of the Mārīcī cult and imagery by sifting through materials from the period before Tibetan Buddhism was introduced to China as well as the Tang and Song dynasties.

In the early sixth century, Bodhiruci translated the *Sutra of the Mārīcī Devī* into Chinese, but it largely went unnoticed at the time. Not until the middle of the eighth century, when Amoghavajra was actively engaging the support of the imperial clan, did the Mārīcī cult finally began to take root and flourish in China, also corresponding to the time when images of Mārīcī became popular. The Song dynasty was a key period for the development of the Mārīcī cult in China. In the early Song dynasty, Devasanti translated *Sutra of the Mārīcī Bodhisattva Spoken by the Buddha*, which greatly enriched the contents of the cult and related imagery. In the Southern Song period, efficacious stories about Mārīcī abounded as a greater importance attached by the active promotion by high monks led to the rapid development of the Mārīcī cult. Iconographically speaking, Song dynasty images of Mārīcī are much more diverse than those of the Tang dynasty. Though the form of a devī holding a fan is still retained from the Tang dynasty, the form of a multi-headed and multi-armed bodhisattva became the mainstream. And by the late Southern Song, some Daoist elements were also incorporated into the iconography, yielding images of Mārīcī Bodhisattva holding a sun and moon.

Keywords: Mārīcī, Tang dynasty, Song dynasty, Amoghavajra, Devasanti, Pāla dynasty, Sino-Indian exchange

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