

# The Growth and Decline of Maitreya Belief in the Ming and Qing Dynasties and Religious Policies

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## Abstract

**The evolution of the core deities of folk religion in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties involves the changes in the internal composition and external social relationships of folk religion, and is worth further exploration. Based on historical materials such as folk religious scrolls, official archives, and folk notes, this paper explores the relationship between the growth and decline of the core deity Maitreya belief and religious policies. It is pointed out that the Maitreya belief and its rebellious tendency in folk religions are not natural, but closely related to the increasingly extreme religious policies of the feudal ruling class during the Ming and Qing dynasties.**

## Keywords

**The folk religion; The Maitreya belief; The core deities; Rebellious tendency; The religious policy.**

## 1. Introduction

Folk religion has fluctuated several times, and its core deities have gone through an evolutionary process, from the late Yuan and early Ming dynasties, when Maitreya was the most honoured deity, to the mid-Ming Dynasty, when Wusheng was the main deity, supplemented by Amitabha, and then after the end of the Ming Dynasty, when Wusheng was the main deity, supplemented by Maitreya. If we leave aside the Wusheng Old Mother, we can clearly see that from the Yuan to the Qing Dynasty, in folk religion, The Maitreya belief subsides from the upsurge and then recovers again and goes to the spiral cycle of upsurge.

So what are the reasons for the evolution of the core deities of the Yuan, Ming and Qing folk religions, or for the growth and decline of Maitreya's beliefs? Scholars are divided on this question. Mr Yang Ne firmly believes that the White Lotus sect, which originated in the Southern Song Dynasty, shifted from Amitabha belief to Maitreya belief, and thinks that the reason for this is twofold: firstly, "due to the inseparable kinship between Amitabha and Maitreya, a part of White Lotus believers can effortlessly take over the legend of 'Maitreya coming down to life' for their own use." Secondly, it is "related to the excessive secularisation of the White Lotus religion." [1] Mr Yu Songqing, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on the poverty of the people. He argues, "What attracted the toiling masses to the ranks of religious associations was poverty rather than faith, and even if it was entirely out of a 'pure faith', it was because of the root cause of poverty. The peasants and artisanal workers, who had suffered from the cruel economic exploitation and political oppression of the feudal ruling class, were desperate for a change in the miserable conditions before them." [2] Mr Ma Xisha tends to look for answers in the historical tradition of the Maitreya belief, and regards Han Shantong's Maitreya belief as a kind of inheritance and development of Wang Zi Maitreya's belief in the Northern Song Dynasty through the organization of the "Incense Society." [3] Mr. Tian Hai, on the other hand, sees the "White Lotus Sect" as an external label of group prejudice constructed by governments and elites in the course of persecution of folk religions in successive generations, drawing attention

to the role of persecution by the officialdom and its elites in the turn to Maitreya belief and its mainstreaming [4].

In the author's view, the reasons for the decline and growth of Maitreya belief are not the unidirectional movement of any one of these factors, but the result of the combined efforts of folk religions and their belief traditions, changes in the living conditions of the masses in the external environment, and the official governments and their elites through the ages. Previous studies have either taken the position of civil religion, taking the social system and political corruption upheld by the official government as the key factors inspiring civil religious uprisings and placing them in the context of the external environment, or the official position, attacking civil religion as a cult. On either side, the significant role played by the official policy on civil religion has not been given closer attention and more in-depth study. To this end, this paper will focus on the relationship between the rise and fall of Maitreya belief and the religious policies of the Ming and Qing dynasties.

## 2. The Religious Policies and Enforcement in the Ming and Qing Dynasties

After the founding of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the Maitreya belief not only did not withdraw from the stage, but also continued to occupy the position of its core deity. This was not related to the deterioration of the external environment, but rather had a high degree of reverse correspondence with the folk religious policies of the two dynasties' governments. At the beginning of the founding of the country, in view of the lessons learnt from the destruction of the Yuan dynasty, both the Ming and Qing dynasties explicitly stipulated in their legal provisions that they would crack down on folk religions, and they were not lenient in their implementation, especially during the Qing dynasty. On the contrary, in the mid Ming Dynasty, when religious control was relatively relaxed and more inclusive, the Maitreya belief and its rebellious activities were relatively rare. In this way, it is necessary to reflect on why the policy of strict prohibition of folk religions contributed to the continuation and development of the Maitreya belief.

At the beginning of the Ming and Qing dynasties, legal provisions were formulated to prohibit folk religion. The Da Ming Law explicitly stipulates that, "All witches and wizards falsely surrender evil gods, write spells on water, and pray to the Holy One. They falsely call themselves Maitreya Buddha, Bailian Society, Mingzun Sect, Baiyun Sect, and other sects. They use the techniques of the Left Way's chaos and maybe hide their images, burn incense, gather at night and disperse at dawn, pretend to do good deeds, call themselves Duan Gong Taibao Shi Ma, and incite the people, and the leader will be hanged, and each of his followers will be given a hundred strokes of the cane and banished for 3,000 miles." [5] On the basis of following the relevant regulations of the Da Ming Law, the provisions of the Da Qing Law are more detailed, The punishment is even harsher." Those who preach evil cults such as the White Yang and White Lotus Eight Trigrams, recite absurd incantations, and deceive others through apprenticeship and preaching will be executed by hanging their heads." [6], "Creating Demonic Books and Words", it is stated that: "Anyone who spreads lies, writes and posts them to incite people's hearts and minds, and whoever is in charge of them will be executed." [7]

These legal provisions were extremely harsh during most of the early Ming and early Qing dynasties. Because Tang Saier escaped without a trace, the Yongle Emperor was so enraged that executed Qin Ting, the Right Minister of Prefecture, and severely punished Liu Sheng, the Marquis of An Yuan, who had defeated Tang Saier. In order to capture Tang Saier, he spared no effort in bringing tens of thousands of nuns from Shandong, Hebei and Anhui to Beijing for trial, for which countless people were killed and injured. At the beginning of the Qing Dynasty, the government suppressed the followers of the Wenxiang Sect, He killed the sixteen leaders of the group and tortured the others just because they were 'ganging up with the others, making seals

and making false statements against the people'. This case was open, counting the Qing people off two hundred and sixty-five years, only the Kangxi, Yongzheng era of sentencing for leniency, the other emperors on the 'cults' do not take the policy of killing." [8]

Such a harsh policy of prohibition, resulting in a pile of bloody cases, the Maitreya belief of folk religions not only did not disappear, but was constantly activated to activate, spread and grow, and further brewed into the Ming and Qing dynasties countless folk religious rebellion. Especially in the Qing Dynasty, "'cults' killed more and more, 'cult case' more and more big. Even after the end of the Qing Empire, folk religions still existed." [9]

### 3. The Strengthening of Maitreya Belief and Harsh Folk Religious Policies

Therefore, why would strict folk religious policies trigger such a serious adverse effect? The reason lies in the fact that these folk religious policies are by no means the result of learning from and correcting the lessons of history. Rather, they are rooted in the deep-rooted official cult of power and the fear of losing power, as well as in the arrogance and prejudice of the elite class due to the exclusivity of the Confucian ideology, which has led to the folk religious policies deviating from the rationality and righteousness of reason and becoming irrationally blind, extremist, and frantic religious persecution, and pushing all folk religions and their believers towards the official antagonism without leaving any way back. official opposition, leaving no way out. In a perilous predicament, or even a desperate situation, the belief in Maitreya, who was born at the end of the world and saved the world, was naturally activated and replaced the belief in Amitabha and became the mainstream of folk religious beliefs, and peaceful religious activities could easily be radicalised into stressful armed unrest. In this sense, the extremism of the religious policies of the officials and their elites contributed to the upsurge and mainstreaming of the Maitreya belief. Take the example of Eastern Mahayana sect and the White Lotus Uprising in the five provinces.

In the transformation and strengthening of Maitreya belief, Wang Haoxian's change to the incarnation of "Maitreya" had a great deal to do with the shift in civil religious policy at the end of the Ming Dynasty. At the end of the Wanli reign, in the eyes of the government, "the Luo zu sect, the Nanwu sect, the Jingkong sect, the Wuming sect, and the Mahayana Wu-wei sect, all of them avoided the name of the White Lotus, but in fact practised the White Lotus sect. If there is a name of a sect, there is a master of the sect. Foolish husbands and wives are so confused that they would rather be afraid of public service than enjoy private meetings; they would rather be thin to their flesh and blood than thick to their partners; and they would rather die than disobey the orders of their masters. This is prevalent everywhere in the world, and the Gui Fu is the most serious. If it is not strictly prohibited today, I am afraid that it will become more and more prevalent with each passing day, and that Zhang Jiao, Han Shantong, and other scourges will come to pass today." [10] Wang Sen, the master of the Wenxiang Sect, was arrested and imprisoned for the second time in the 42nd year of the Wanli reign (1614), and died in prison in the 47th year of the Wanli reign (1619). Wang Haoxian also took over as the head of the sect in the midst of all the chaos. As the successor of the Wenxiang Sect who had been in the military and official circles for many years and had deep contacts with the government, Wang Haoxian was first faced with the problem of how to deal with the relationship with the officials. However, being in a dangerous situation where there was no way to retreat, Wang Haoxian had to take more radical attitudes and behaviours to take risks, gather people's hearts within the sect, and step up liaison with the Yellow Sky Sect and the Stick Association to prepare for the uprising. Replacing the belief in Maitreya with the belief in Maitreya and naming oneself as Maitreya was the core of this. The steep escalation of the civil religious policies of the officials and their elites provided the opportunity and impetus for Wang Haoxian's turn to Maitreya belief.

More noteworthy is the civil sectarian uprising in the five provinces at the end of the eighteenth century. Despite the fact that the Three Suns and the Western Paradise Mahayana Cults preached first and believed in Maitreya, the preachers also had no subjective attempts at rioting. This is fairly well reflected in two magistrate's memorials of the time. "According to Sun Ziyuan retestimony: "last winter months, because of illness and poverty, remembered Li Conghuo originally said that preaching and recruiting students can make money, only to start to re-establish the cult of cheating money to use. Villagers heard that the chanting of the scriptures can be eliminated to obtain blessings, easy to believe, but also at the time of the New Year free, so more than a month that there are more than 20 people to listen to the religion, in addition to there is no other gangs with the incitement of the affair and so on." [11] It can be seen that the folk religion believers preaching is just to eliminate disasters and obtain blessings, make money to earn a living, and didn't have any intention of political rebellion. Even so, officials remained relentless and determined to crack down. "Whether the criminal is the same case party in Sichuan and Shaanxi provinces, in addition to whether there are leaders of the same religion, we must strictly follow up and investigate as many as possible, in order to eliminate the root cause and not to leave a slight legacy. "[12] At the same time, the local bureaucrats and magistrates are like flies to maggots, using this to create prisons, extortion and blackmail, all kinds of extreme. Without this, how can it be pushed to the desperate situation of ' if it does not rebel, it will not stand ', thus imagining the rebellion of the official and its elite as a reality, thus opening the prelude to the decline of the Qing Dynasty. In this regard, the reverse impetus of the Qing government's inter-religious policy is of paramount importance.

The official paranoid and extremist religious policies can hardly be blamed for the consequences of the above-mentioned matters. Against the severe suppression of folk religions, it was impossible for the masters of folk religions and their followers to obtain official tolerance, no matter whether they moved forward or backward. Thus, in the face of the crackdown, folk religions had to choose resistance rather than retreat or surrender, thus shaping the heretical mentality of folk religions, which tended to turn to the left and become more radicalized. As a result, the severe repression and persecution of official politics, instead of disintegrating them, may strengthen their religious beliefs and provide opportunities and resources for the cohesion of their internal organization. This logic is clearly demonstrated in the way that the Jaishu sect handled the murder of Yin Zu. The General Catalogue of the Causes and Causes of Grand Master Taishang III " tells us that the official who victimized the ancestor had already suffered an evil retribution. "After Li Taishou killed Yin Zu, Li's grandparents, as well as the spirits of his nine tribes of the dead, said to Taishou Li in his dream, 'You harmed the Mahayana Taoist.' ..... The Underworld officials took the nine clans of Li's ancestors in chains and went away, and the Taishou woke up crying in his sleep, with two eyes without light." [13] From this can be proved, " Slander of the Tao is bound to bring disaster, and those who frame people will naturally suffer the wrath of heaven. The king of the underworld will reward and punish you for what you have done, and you will be able to distinguish between good and evil. "[14] And, "The later student said: 'How could the Ancestor, the Lord of Humanity and Heaven, be subjected to such a great difficulty, and why?' The answer was: 'The Ancestor gave up his body and made a wish to make all beings into the practice of patience and humiliation, and all the enlightened sages and fools were universally dispensed with'" [15]. Through the mythological reconstruction of the story, the feudal bureaucrats who persecuted the folk sects were symbolically punished, and the suffering Yin Zu was portrayed as a savior who sacrificed his life for the sake of universal enlightenment, thus crushing the official intention of eliminating the folk sects, and attracting the believers and rallying them once again under the sacred aura of the Godfather and the sect's beliefs.

Foucault believed that "power is a form of creation; it creates reality, the realm of objects, and the ritual of truth. The individual and the knowledge it obtains belong to this product." [16]

Power not only has a suppressive function, but also a creative and productive function. During certain periods of the Ming and Qing dynasties, the government's extremely paranoid religious policies tended to put folk religion to death. Under the premise of having no way out in the future, folk religions have to attract the masses and strengthen themselves with the Maitreya belief that is closest to the bottom of the population in order to survive. The so-called rebellion and turmoil are often the result of the intensification of conflicts through official folk religious policies. It can be said that the turning and mainstream of the Maitreya belief was to some extent created by the official irrational folk religion.

#### 4. Summary and Suggestions

Of course, it is not only religious policies, but also the fact that natural and man-made disasters had brought the lives of the underclass into difficulty or even extinction, all of which were factors that had fuelled the mutation of folk religious beliefs. There are also the religious and cultural traditions of the folk religions themselves. In addition, there are some issues worth exploring. For example, since the middle of the Ming Dynasty, in the process of the decline of the Maitreya belief, the penetration of Amitabha belief factors, and the integration with the original beliefs of folk religions to form new beliefs, what is the significance of the Amitabha belief, and the relationship with the Maitreya belief, still need to be further researched.

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