In early medieval China the cult of Maitreya was an important focus of Buddhist belief. The cult originally was associated with the goal of monk-scholars to be reborn in “Tusita heaven” and to hear the dharma directly from the future Buddha Maitreya.

The cult of Maitreya (Mile) in China originally was associated with the vows of monk-scholars to be reborn in what they called “Tusita heaven.” Their goal was to hear the dharma (divine law) directly from the mouth of the future Buddha Maitreya and thus attain Buddhahood. These elite monk-scholars and the royalty and aristocrats who patronized them commissioned images of Maitreya, both sitting and standing in meditation, as objects of worship and as aids for contemplation and visualization. Images of Maitreya standing were indicative of his preaching in Ketumati (generally thought to be modern Varanasi, India) and images of Maitreya sitting were indicative of his waiting in Tusita. The styles were closely connected in the art of the North and South Dynasties (220–589 CE) and the Tang dynasty (618–907 CE) and show that these two aspects of the cult of Maitreya were related in early medieval China.

The beginnings of the monastic aspect of the cult of Maitreya in China can be traced to the exegete (relating to exposition) Daoan (312–385), whose worship was focused on his desire to be reborn in Tusita heaven in the presence of Maitreya so that Daoan’s doubts about the scriptures could be resolved. The Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang (Hsuan-tsang, c. 596–664) was a devout devotee of Maitreya who wished to be reborn in Tusita, thus the cult became closely associated with his school of Chinese Yogacara.

In early medieval China the cult of Maitreya was an important focus of Buddhist belief. Because the sutras (precepts summarizing Vedic teaching) about Maitreya suggested that he would descend from Tusita to being a peaceful Buddhist millennium after years of warfare and the decline of the Buddhist teaching (mofa), worship of Maitreya spread throughout Chinese society. During the chaos that reigned at the end of the Sui dynasty (581–618 CE) and the rise of the Tang dynasty, a few Buddhist monks and laymen justified their rebellions by claiming to be Maitreya, thus drawing upon the beliefs and imagery common to the cult. The Empress Wu Zetian (624–705) later justified her usurpation of the Tang dynasty throne by identifying herself with Maitreya. Throughout the Song dynasty (960–1279) followers of Maitreya rebelled frequently, and rebels drew upon Maitreya cult imagery to lend religious fervor and authority to their rebellions.

The cult of Maitreya and his image have gone through many transformations in Chinese society. He eventually was reinterpreted iconographically, changing from a slim and sleek figure in earlier dynasties to the roly-poly Budai (Pu-tai) of the Song dynasty. The “Laughing Buddha,” as he is commonly known, spread throughout Chinese popular culture during the late imperial period (1368–1912).
It is a staple image of traditional Chinese culture that has been exported to the West through immigrant Chinese.

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Further Reading