

THE INFLUENCE OF CHINESE PLANT PATTERNS ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THAI BUDDHIST PLANT PATTERNS—A CASE STUDY OF THE BANGKOK DYNASTY PERIOD

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ABSTRACT

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Buddhist botanical motifs are an important visual art for spreading Buddhist teachings and cultures of different regions. Chinese culture has always influenced Thai culture, of which Buddhist plant motifs are a clear example. However, there are fewer studies on the influence of Chinese plant motifs on the development of Thai Buddhist plant motifs, which is not conducive to developing and disseminating Buddhist plant motifs in the two countries. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to (1) study the influence and reasons of Chinese botanical motifs on the development of Buddhist botanical motifs during the Bangkok Dynasty period in Thailand (2) study the role of Buddhist botanical motifs as visual art in cultural exchanges and Buddhism and (3) study the importance of cultural exchanges for cultural development. This study adopts: (1) literature research method, (2) historical analysis method, and (3) comparative analysis method. The study found that although both China and Thailand have incorporated plants in Buddhist art, each country has its own unique culture, history, and religious culture so there are differences in symbolism and artistic expression. Buddhist plant motifs also promote cultural exchange and artistic integration between the two countries, Chinese culture inspires Thai art, and the commonality between China and Thailand in Buddhist plant motifs strengthens the cultural identity of the East Asian Buddhist circle. By exploring these questions, the study emphasizes the cultural significance and artistic integration facilitated by Buddhist plant motifs. The findings highlight their value not only as religious symbols, but also as mediums for cross-cultural dialogue and artistic innovation, contributing to a deeper understanding of the interplay between art, culture, and religion in East Asia.

Keywords: Buddhist plant motifs; cross-cultural communication; traditional cultural development

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Research background

As a cultural phenomenon, Buddhist plant motifs carry profound religious significance in the dissemination of Buddhism, facilitating its development across various regions and social strata. These motifs play a pivotal role in Sino-Thai cultural exchange and are uniquely valuable in articulating Buddhist doctrines and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Despite a diminishing familiarity with Buddhist culture among contemporary youth, the visual arts, exemplified by Buddhist plant motifs, render Buddhist concepts more tangible and vivid, thus contributing to the preservation, development, and propagation of Buddhist culture. This article examines the role of visual art in cultural transmission through a study of cultural interactions and Buddhist plant motifs during the Bangkok Dynasty era, exploring the effectiveness of visual artistry in cultural dissemination (Dang, 2009; Zhang, 2014; Zhao, 1982; Duan, 2022).

1.2 Reasons for the study

(1) Buddhist plant and floral motifs in Buddhist art across regions like China and Thailand carry symbolic meanings and foster cultural exchange in Southeast Asia. Analyzing these patterns aids in comprehending how they articulate religious concepts and cross-cultural influences as well as their role in the visual artistry of Buddhism in both nations.

(2) Different historical periods and dynasties have left their mark on Chinese and Thai Buddhist art. Analyzing botanical motifs can help determine the age and context of these artworks, thus providing insights into the socio-political and cultural dynamics in each era.

(3) Both China and Thailand have different regional traditions. Studying botanical motifs can reveal regional differences in Buddhist art and show how local botanical and artistic preferences influenced the depiction of plants and flowers in different regions.

1.3 Significance of the study

The main significance of this study is as follows:

(1) From a cultural development perspective, this study centers on Buddhist plant motifs, analyzing their evolution and characteristics in China and Thailand to contribute to the theoretical research of Buddhist art.

(2) From the aspect of visual symbolism, it delves into the form, structure, and artistic traits of Buddhist plant motifs to thoroughly understand their essence and provide a wealth of creative resources for modern design applications.

(3) As for the cultural heritage preservation, comprehending the historical and cultural significance of plant motifs in Buddhist art aids in their protection and inheritance, ensuring their survival over time for future appreciation and study.

2. SCOPE, OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

2.1 Scope of the study

This study focuses on the importance of the influence of Chinese culture on the development of Buddhist plant motifs in Thailand and cross-cultural communication, so the scope of this study is as follows:

(1) The influence of Chinese botanical motifs on the development of Buddhist botanical motifs during the Bangkok Dynasty in Thailand.

(2) The role of Buddhist plant motifs in the dissemination of Buddhist ideas.

(3) The role of cultural exchange between China and Thailand.

2.2 Research objectives

(1) To understand the influence of Chinese plant motifs on the development of Buddhist plant motifs during the Bangkok Dynasty in Thailand.

(2) To understand the role of Buddhist plant motifs as visual arts in cultural exchange and Buddhism.

(3) To understand the importance of cultural exchange for cultural development.

2.3 Research methods

(1) Literature research method: The literature review methodology in this study encompasses the following steps: First, literature searches were conducted using databases such as Google Scholar and CNKI, employing keywords such as “Buddhist thought,” “plant motifs,” and “cultural exchange.” During the selection process, emphasis was placed on English and Chinese journal articles, books, and dissertations published

within the past decade, with priority given to works of high academic impact and citation counts. Subsequently, the selected literature was thematically analyzed and organized.

(2) Historical analysis method: To study the historical background of Buddhist art in both China and Thailand, with a particular focus on the era during which extensive cultural exchanges took place between the two countries. To investigate how botanical motifs transformed over time.

(3) Comparative analysis method: Horizontally, by conducting a comparative analysis of the characteristics of Buddhist plant motifs, a comprehensive understanding of the decorative essence of these motifs can be achieved. Vertically, by exploring the modeling of diverse decorative themes, the evolution and historical roots of the patterns can be sorted out and elucidated.

3. LITERATURE REVIEW

Religious dissemination leverages the language of art to convey spiritual and doctrinal messages, as can be seen during the era of Emperor Ashoka in India when symbolic art was used to spread Buddhism. Plant motifs serve as visual metaphors in temple murals and Buddhist artifacts, communicating Buddhist values. Their representation of the cycle of life resonates with the Buddhist concept of *samsara*, the cycle of birth, death, and rebirth (Wang, 2004).

3.1 The role of botanical motifs in Buddhism

Plant motifs, particularly the lotus symbolizing purity and enlightenment, were initially designed to convey philosophical thoughts, with their religious significance surpassing aesthetic values, thus becoming a central symbolic figure in Buddhist art (Zhang, 2005; Wang, 2004). Beyond their profound symbolism in Buddhism, motifs like the lotus are employed in temples, statues, and murals to cultivate a religious ambiance, drawing the attention of devotees (Figure 1 and Figure 2), and fostering a serene and auspicious Buddhist Pure Land ambiance (Wang, 2004). Furthermore, Buddhist plant motifs illustrate the intimate connection between Buddhism and nature. By depicting the flourishing of plants, they convey reverence for nature and the principle of harmonious coexistence. In doing so, they remind devotees of the interdependent relationship between themselves and the natural world.



Figure 1: Chinese temple
Source: Fan (2014)



Figure 2: Thai temple
(Photograph taken by the authors)

3.2 The influence and reasons of Chinese plant patterns on Buddhist plant patterns during the Bangkok Dynasty in Thailand

3.2.1 History background

The Bangkok Dynasty era marked a period of intense cultural exchange between China and Thailand, with Chinese culture profoundly influencing Thai art. From the Sukhothai through the Ayutthaya to the Bangkok Dynasty, China and Thailand established close ties in art, culture, and trade. Elements of Chinese literature, architecture, and sculpture became deeply integrated into Thai culture, with decorative patterns of Chinese style becoming an integral part of Thai art (Leksukhum, 2007; Zhu, 2010).

During the Bangkok Dynasty, Sino-Thai trade increased significantly, leading to the subtle influence of Chinese aesthetics on Thai craftsmen, evident in the decorative patterns on imported Chinese artifacts, e.g. in Chinese Stone Statue of Wat Pho (Figure 3). The construction of the new palace during the reign of King

Rama I, undertaken by Chinese craftsmen using primarily Chinese building materials, also marked the influence of Chinese architectural art on Thai architectural styles and the aesthetic sensibilities of Thai artisans. (Zhu, 2010; Uluchada, 1987).



Figure 3: Wat Pho Chinese stone statues
(Photograph taken by the authors)

3.2.2 Art analysis

There were many Chinese living in Thailand during the Bangkok Dynasty period. This led Chinese craftsmen to build many Chinese-style buildings in Thailand and decorated these buildings with Chinese decorative patterns. This also had a subtle influence on the aesthetics of Thai craftsmen at that time. For example, Wat Yai Suwannaram was mainly built by Thai craftsmen, but their way of thinking added Chinese aesthetics, so it is difficult to distinguish many decorative plant patterns and real Chinese patterns in this temple (Figures 4–6) (Leksukhum, 2007).



Figure 4: Wat Yai Suwannaram window frame
Source: Uluchada (1987)



Figure 5: The pattern
(The authors illustrated)



Figure 6: The wood carvings in the royal courtyard
Source: MeiPian (n.d.)

For Rama I Period, there are few clear examples of the influence of Chinese culture on Thai Buddhist botanical motifs left behind by Rama I, but an example can be used from a mural on a door at Wat Rakhang Kositaram Woramahawihan (Figure 7). In this painting, the branches of the trees are curved and raised in a way that appears in previous Chinese paintings, so it is possible to know that the painting borrowed forms from Chinese painting (Figure 8) (Leksukhum, 2007).



Figure 7: The Chinese style mural on the door of the temple dormitory of Wat Rakhang
Source: Leksukhum (2007)



Figure 8: Chinese "listening to the pine breeze", Southern Song Dynasty. Malin
Source: Sohu Culture (n.d.)

The Rama II period absorbed a great deal of Chinese culture and art as well as literature and imitated the art of the Tang royal family. Flower motifs and leaf motifs also started to imitate Chinese pattern forms, such as peony, plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum (Figure 9). By the late period of Rama II, the imitation and admiration of Chinese art were taken to the extreme (Figure 10) (Leksukhum, 2007).



Figure 9: Wat Pho Chinese style decoration above the threshold
(Photograph taken by the authors)



Figure 10: Gate of the National Museum of Thailand
(Photograph taken by the authors)

There is also Wat Chom Thong which was rebuilt during the Rama II, and the entire temple imitates Chinese art (Figure 11). Both temples, monasteries, lecture halls, bell towers, and stupas were influenced by Chinese art. Many of the motifs in the temple were assembled in Thailand from raw materials shipped from China. The triangular-shaped mountain wall in front of the temple is decorated with Chinese-style auspicious motifs using glazed tiles (Figure 12). The influence of Chinese culture in Thailand can also be felt in this set of walls. This temple is also considered the prototype of the Royal Art Temple of Thailand, which was later imitated by many temple styles (Uluchada, 1987). These emulated Chinese motifs also became the dominant form of motifs during the Bangkok Dynasty period and were intertwined with those of the inherited Aradhana period (He, 2012; Uluchada, 1987).



Figure 11: Wat Chom Thong Temple
(Photograph taken by the authors)

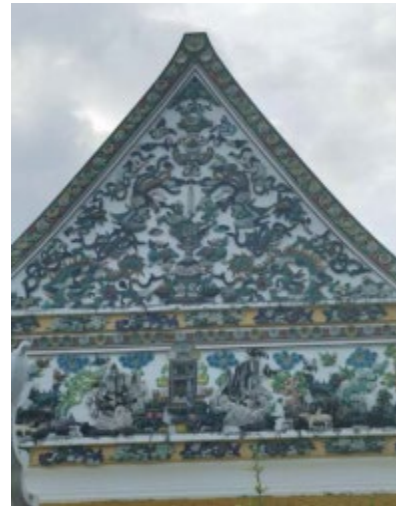


Figure 12: Wat Chom Thong gable
(Photograph taken by the authors)

The Rama III Period: Many Chinese elements were used in the Temple of the Reclining Buddha (Wat Pho) during the reign of Rama III and have been preserved to this day. The tiles in the Temple of the Reclining Buddha are decorated with the Chinese chrysanthemum motif (Figure 13), which was a favorite of Thai craftsmen during the reign of Rama III and is still used today. The painted pillars in the temple also incorporate features of Chinese botanical motifs, such as flower stalks, stems, leaves, and peony blossoms along with the color scheme (Figure 14), which is an example of the aesthetics of the craftsmen of the Rama III period (Leksukhum, 2007).



Figure 13: Chrysanthemum motif in Wat Pho
(Photograph taken by the authors)



Figure 14: The pillars in Wat Pho
(Photograph taken by the authors)

In addition to the mother-of-pearl motifs on the feet of the reclining Buddha, the plants and landscapes within them are also inspired by Chinese art (Figure 15). However, Thai artists did not directly transfer and apply them. Instead, they adapted the motifs to cater to the aesthetic preferences of the Thai people, endowing them with a sweeter and softer style (Uluchada, 1987).



Figure 15: The sole of the reclining buddha
(Photograph taken by the authors)

As well as the floral motifs on the door frames of Wat Praya Siri Lyasawan (Figure 16), this form of motifs with leaves enclosing flowers also originated in China (Figure 17) and became popular for use on door and window frames during the reign of Rama III (Uluchada, 1987).

In Chinese art, bouquet motifs resembling stems, leaves, and coils were known as floral designs from about the mid-13th century, and such designs became popular in the Song Dynasty until the Yuan Dynasty (Figure 18). The expression of lines in Chinese botanical motifs also influenced the development of kranok, a traditional Thai botanical motif (Leksukhum, 2007; Uluchada, 2017).

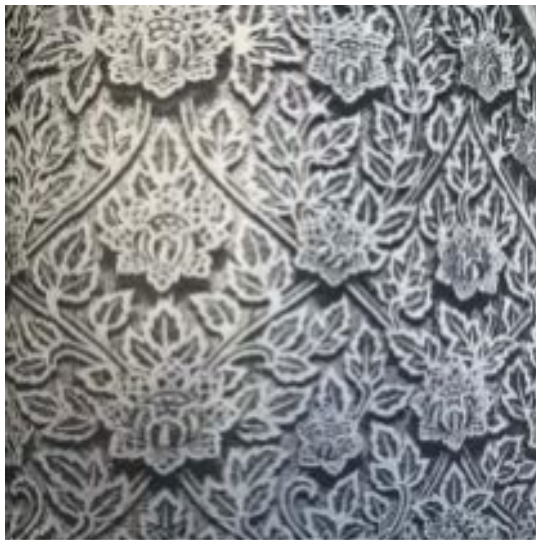


Figure 16: Floral motif on the door frame of Wat Praya
Siri Lyasawan
Source: Uluchada (1987)



Figure 17: A Chinese example Twine pattern
Source: Wang (2022)

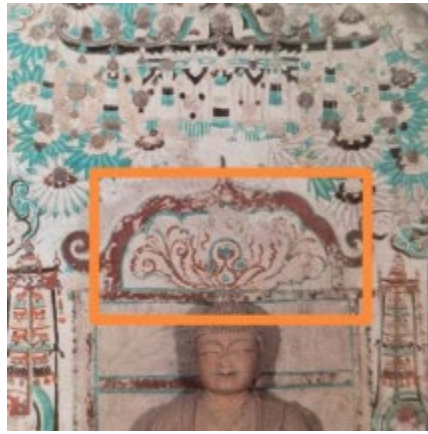


Figure 18: Dunhuang cave murals of the Song Dynasty
Source: Fan (2014)

A comparison of the Chinese bouquet pattern on the base of the Chinese cement lion statue in the Temple of the Reclining Buddha (Figure 19) and a floral pattern in Wat Sri Chum temple in Thailand (Figure 20) shows that there are many similarities between the two patterns. There are similarities in the curves of the lines of the motifs, and in the way, the whole bouquet is presented. In the case of Wat Sri Chum, the lower left corner of the branch is in the shape of a crank tail (Uluchada, 2017).



Figure 19: Chinese bouquet pattern
Source: Jongjitpottah (2018)

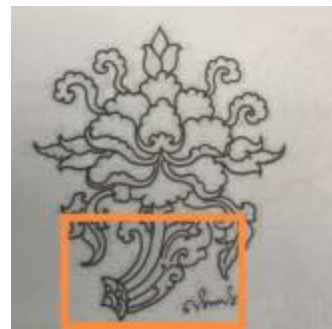


Figure 20: Floral pattern in Wat Sri Chum
Source: Jongjitpottah (2018)

3.2.3 Cultural significance

In summary, Buddhist plant patterns are one of the results of the cultural exchanges between China and Thailand. Under the nuanced influence of early Chinese culture, Thai Buddhist plant patterns have integrated numerous elements of Chinese plant patterns.

Religious Trends: The integration of Chinese elements into Thai botanical patterns not only reflects an appropriation of artistic forms but also demonstrates Thailand's acceptance and reverence for Chinese Confucian and Mahayana Buddhist philosophies. This fusion elevates botanical motifs to a medium for transmitting cultural values and religious philosophies.

Art Trends: The fusion of botanical patterns may reflect a fusion of artistic styles from both countries. The delicate and symbolic artistic elements of Chinese tradition may be combined with Thailand's emphasis on color and decoration to form unique and layered botanical patterns. It provides more possibilities for the development of art in both countries.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS

4.1 Main manifestations of Chinese cultural influence on Thai Buddhist plant motifs

In the early Bangkok Dynasty because of the frequent trade with China, so many absorbed Chinese cultural elements. This imitation of Chinese motifs also became the main form of motifs in the Bangkok Dynasty period and was combined with the inherited motifs of the Asadhyaya period and used in many buildings (He, 2012; Uluchada, 1987).

The influence of Chinese cultural elements on Thai plant motifs is mainly expressed in the following aspects:

(1) Types of plants: Because of the influence of Chinese elements, Thai craftsmen added peonies, chrysanthemums and other plants in the temples' decorative patterns (Figure 21).



Figure 21: Wat Chom Thong
(Photograph taken by the authors)

(2) Combination: Based on the original combination of Thailand, Thai craftsmen also added Chinese motifs to make combinations, or learn the layout of branches, stems, leaves, and flowers in Chinese botanical motifs, as in Figure 11.

(3) Artistic expression: Influenced by the painting style of Chinese national paintings, Thai craftsmen also learned the artistic style of Chinese national paintings and the way of painting plants (Figure 22 and Figure 23), or the way of expressing stems and leaves (Figure 24).



Figure 22: Wat Molilokayaram Ratchaworawihan gat
Source: Jongjitpottah (2018)



Figure 23: Chinese traditional painting trees
Source: Meishu5 (n.d.)



Figure 24: Wood Carvings on the door of Wat Molilokayaram Ratchaworawihan
Source: Uluchada (1987)

4.2 Cultural similarities and differences in Buddhist botanical motifs in China and Thailand

In terms of symbolism and cultural significance, although Buddhism occupies an important place in China, traditional Chinese art may not always be centered around Buddhist themes. In this case, the plants, and flowers may have some secular symbolism.

In Chinese and Thai Buddhist art, the “Four Noble Ones” (plum, orchid, bamboo, and chrysanthemum) symbolize virtues, as shown in artworks like the Dunhuang murals (Figure 25). Thai art, deeply influenced by Buddhism, adopts these and local plants like lotus and jasmine, merging religious themes with local culture, as seen in the Wat Pho stupa (Figure 26) (Shuwen, 2022).



Figure 25: Bamboo in a mural at Dunhuang, China
Source: e-Dunhuang (n.d.)



Figure 26: Wat Pho stupa
(Photograph taken by the authors)

In terms of artistic style, most traditional Chinese paintings emphasize brushwork and calligraphy, depicting elegant and fluid flowers and trees; ink painting is a well-known style in Chinese art. Chinese artistic motifs will often incorporate elements of seasonal changes to create a sense of natural harmony (Figure 27).

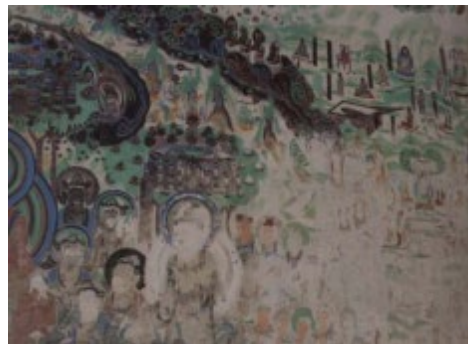


Figure 27: Dunhuang mural
Source: e-Dunhuang (n.d.)

Traditional Thai art is known for its intricate and vibrant patterns, which may include floral elements as a larger decorative motif. Thai art exists in mediums, including sculpture, murals, and temple decoration. The incorporation of seasonal elements will not be as much as in China, and Thailand will focus more on the religious significance of the plants and they associate with, as well as aspects related to, Buddhist rituals (Figure 28).



Figure 28: Wat Pho gate
(Photograph taken by the authors)

4.3 The role of Buddhist botanical patterns in cultural communication

The language difference between China and Thailand is large, some cultures may not be able to communicate through the language image specific, but Buddhist plant motifs as a visual art can easily cross the language barrier, spreading the different national spirit so that the culture has a more intuitive image. As Buddhist plant motifs are viewed with the eyes, it is easier to understand culture and feel different national cultures through our organs of perception (Long & Li, 2014).

Buddhist plant motifs play an important role in cultural exchange, as a form of visual art expression, it has the following aspects:

(1) symbolism and spiritual significance: Buddhist plant motifs, such as the lotus flower symbolizing purity and transcendence, and the linden tree symbolizing inspiration and enlightenment, carry a rich symbolism and religious spirit. Through these motifs, people can perceive the doctrines and philosophical concepts related to Buddhism and promote the understanding and transmission of faith.

(2) the expression of cultural traditions: Buddhist plant motifs reflect the aesthetic and artistic views of specific cultural traditions in different countries. For example, the Baoxiang flower pattern in China symbolizes holiness and dignity. The Gardenia pattern in Thailand symbolizes purity and sanctity. Through these patterns, culture can be expressed and spread visually, providing a rich medium for cultural exchange.

(3) Cross-cultural communication bridge: The Buddhism plant pattern has a universal religious background, so it acts as a communication bridge between different cultures. For example, Chinese Buddhist plant motifs will be integrated into Chinese Confucianism, chrysanthemum in Confucianism symbolizes elegance and indifference to fame and fortune. The Chinese Baoxiang flower pattern (Figure 29) is based on the lotus flower pattern and incorporates peonies, chrysanthemums, and other plants, thus incorporating Chinese Confucianism into the original Buddhist symbolism. Such motifs can convey messages within the Buddhist community and serve as a platform for cross-cultural dialogue, promoting understanding between different faiths and cultures.



Figure 29: Baoxiang flower pattern
Source: Wang (2022)

(4) Artistic creation and innovation: Buddhist plant motifs provide artists with a wealth of creative elements. In cultural exchanges, artists can reinterpret these patterns and integrate their cultural elements to create works of art with unique styles, which promotes artistic innovation.

(5) Religious buildings and rituals: Buddhist plant motifs are widely seen in temple architecture, sculpture, painting, and other artworks, as well as in the decoration of various religious ceremonies. This not only beautifies the religious places but also conveys the deep connotation of faith through the patterns.

4.4 Positive effects of cultural interaction between China and Thailand

Cultural interaction between China and Thailand through Buddhist plant motifs can promote mutual understanding of the cultures of the two countries: Through this cultural exchange and interaction to achieve the dissemination of culture, there is mutual absorption of each other's excellent achievements in the development of civilization, enriching the development of the national culture of their respective countries. This helps to promote people's interaction and friendship through cultural exchanges: and to promote the development of the relationship between the two countries through cultural exchanges (Bai, 2019).

5. CONCLUSION

This study offers fresh insights into Sino-Thai cultural interactions and the evolution of Thai Buddhist botanical motifs, positively influencing the cultural connectivity and intercultural artistic comprehension between the two nations. Additionally, it facilitates Chinese tourists' profound engagement with and comprehension of Thai culture during their visits, thereby enriching the cultural depth of their travel experiences.

During the Bangkok Dynasty, increased trade with China integrated Chinese cultural elements and styles into Thai Buddhist plant motifs, making these patterns a prominent feature of the era. The influence of Thai culture by China can be attributed to three main factors: trade, skill transmission by artisans, and Chinese immigration, reflecting a long history of cultural exchanges between the two nations.

Buddhist plant patterns play a role in conveying Buddhist teachings and decorating the environment in Buddhist activities. As visual art plays an important role in connection, expression, and innovation in cultural exchanges, it provides a unique channel for the interaction and understanding among diverse cultures. Therefore, it is evident that visual art can confer the subsequent benefits upon contemporary society:

(1) Cultural plurality: Visual arts cultural exchange promotes global cultural plurality. People can have easier access to different forms of cultural expression from all over the world, enriching the cultural experience of individuals and society.

(2) Innovation and creativity: The collision of different cultures has prompted the emergence of innovation and creativity. This exchange of creativity is not only beneficial to the arts themselves but also brings new thinking in other fields such as technology and business.

(3) Global awareness: The exchanges of visual arts help to cultivate global awareness. Through works of art, people can deeply understand the challenges, values, and aesthetics of other societies, leading to cross-cultural dialogue and understanding.

(4) Social integration: Visual arts cultural exchanges contribute to social integration and promote communication and cooperation among different communities. Shared artistic experiences help to narrow cultural differences and build a more inclusive society.

In conclusion, the study of botanical motifs in Buddhist art is an important way to explore the intermingling of culture, religion, and art. It enables a more profound comprehension of the diverse influences that have molded these traditional arts and imparts valuable insights regarding the spiritual and artistic expressions of Buddhism in the corresponding regions.

Given the findings and significance of this study, future research in related fields could focus on the following areas:

(1) Comparative analysis across more regions: The research scope should be extended to include other countries in Southeast Asia, such as Myanmar, Cambodia, and Laos, to explore the broader influence of Chinese Buddhist plant motifs on the region.

(2) Contemporary applications and innovations: It should be investigated how traditional Buddhist plant motifs can inspire modern art, design, and architecture, as well as their potential integration into digital or multimedia art forms.

(3) Interdisciplinary approaches: Interdisciplinary methodologies, such as combining art history with digital humanities tools like pattern recognition and cultural analytics, should be utilized to analyze and map the evolution of motifs over time.

(4) Symbolism in modern contexts: There should be a study on the relevance and reinterpretation of Buddhist plant motifs in contemporary religious practices and their role in modern cultural identities.

(5) Environmental and ethical perspectives: The representation of Buddhist plant motifs as a reflection of ecological awareness and respect for nature, should be explored aligning with the principles of sustainability and environmental ethics.

(6) Deeper historical investigations: Further research should focus on less-studied historical periods or transitional eras to understand the nuanced shifts in the symbolism and artistic styles of botanical motifs.

These suggestions aim to cultivate more profound and comprehensive understandings of Buddhist art, cross-cultural exchanges, as well as the dynamic role that traditional motifs play in contemporary societies.

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