

Chinese Lotus Painting from a Multi-Dimensional Perspective: Symbolic Meanings in Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism and Folk Culture

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Abstract

This study employed semiotic analysis rooted in traditional Chinese culture, focusing on the lotus imagery as its core subject. It systematically reveals the multidimensional symbolic system and evolutionary patterns of this imagery across Confucian ethics, Buddhist symbolism, Taoist philosophy, and folk auspicious culture. The research objectives were divided into three dimensions: First, analyzing how lotus blossoms acquire differentiated symbolic meanings in diverse cultural contexts (Confucian virtue analogy, Buddhist Pure Land concepts, Taoist natural philosophy, and folk auspicious traditions); second, exploring the adaptation mechanisms between biological characteristics of natural objects (straight stems, pure blossoms, and interconnected roots) and cultural codes; third, constructing a cross-cultural "stratification-translational" theoretical model to provide methodological support for the contemporary transformation of traditional symbols.

The research employed a fourfold methodology: first, textual analysis systematically examines classical texts, including "In Praise of the Lotus" and "Lotus Sutra"; second, an iconographic approach establishes a database of over 200 lotus artworks to compare visual expressions across Gongbi (meticulous brushwork), Buddhist sculpture, and ink painting; third, field investigations collect folk art samples such as paper-cutting and New Year paintings; fourth, an innovative "biometric-cultural coding" model was introduced to quantitatively analyze symbolic translation pathways of elements like stems (representing Confucian integrity), flowers (symbolizing Buddhist purity), and lotus roots (corresponding to Taoist naturalness).

The study revealed four key findings: 1. Confucianism constructed the lotus stem's "central transparency and outward straightness" as a symbol of noble character through its "bi de" mechanism, with Southern Song artist Ma Yuan's *White Lotus Painting* demonstrating its visual transformation principles; 2. Buddhism encoded the "pure land" concept through geometric lotus platform patterns, as evidenced by Dunhuang murals showing their evolution from Indian prototypes to localized forms; 3. Taoism embodied the philosophy of "mutual generation between being and non-being" through ink-wash lotus painting's "flying white" technique, as seen in Bada Shanren's *Flowers on the River*, which illustrates the intertextuality between brushwork and conceptual ideas; 4. Folk homophonic strategies (lotus/parallel, lotus root/parity) transformed primitive fertility worship into auspicious symbols, as evidenced by Ming-Qing era "abundance year after year" motifs. The research ultimately proposed a three-stage evolutionary model for lotus as a "super-stable cultural symbol" (biological foundation-cultural encoding-meaning regeneration), offering an operational theoretical framework for intangible cultural heritage preservation, artistic creation, and cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Lotus Imagery; Cultural Semiotics; Confucianism; Buddhism and Taoism Integration; Visual Translation; Stratification Model

Introduction

As a quintessential symbol of Chinese traditional culture, the lotus embodies the timeless virtue of "rising from the mire yet remaining unstained," forming a profound spiritual legacy across Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk traditions. From Confucian ideals of "virtue analogy" that symbolize noble character, to Buddhist teachings about the "Lotus Treasury Realm" representing wisdom and transcendence; from Taoist philosophy's "harmony between heaven and humanity" reflecting natural aesthetics, to folk expressions like "abundance in every year" (a pun for "surplus"). The lotus transcends mere botanical identity, becoming a multidimensional cultural icon that resonates with the core values of Chinese civilization.

Confucianism associates the lotus with noble virtues, as Zhou Dunyi's "In Praise of the Lotus" interprets its "translucent core and straight exterior" as a moral embodiment. Buddhism regards the lotus as a symbol of the Pure Land, where its "emptiness of the five aggregates" aligns perfectly with Buddhist teachings. Taoism celebrates the lotus through its aesthetic imagery of "water-emerging lotus," expressing reverence for nature's authenticity. In folk culture, lotuses embody people's simple aspirations for a better life through homophonic names and symbolic

patterns. This cultural symbiosis spanning philosophy, religion, and folklore makes the lotus a quintessential case study in exploring the integration and evolution of traditional Chinese values.

This study employs multidimensional perspectives to systematically examine the differentiated manifestations of lotus flowers across Confucian ethical aesthetics, Buddhist religious symbolism, Taoist natural philosophy, and folk auspicious culture. It reveals how this cultural symbol maintains its core symbolism while developing diverse connotations within different cultural systems, ultimately exploring its profound influence on Chinese art, literature, and social life.

Research Objectives

This thesis focuses on the unique artistic subject of Chinese lotus painting, systematically analyzing the symbolic meanings and artistic expressions of lotus imagery across four cultural dimensions: Confucianism, Buddhism, Taoism, and folk culture. The research aims to reveal how lotus blossoms have become a visual symbol bridging Chinese philosophical thought, religious spirit, and folk beliefs, while exploring its multifaceted cultural interpenetration in artistic creation. Specific research objectives include:

First, Explain the personification of lotus in Confucian ethics and aesthetics

By analyzing the moral metaphor of lotus under the theory of "bid", this paper explores how Zhou Dunyi's classic texts such as "On Love of Lotus" construct lotus into a visual carrier of gentleman's character, and reveals the shaping mechanism of Confucian thought on the aesthetic characteristics of purity and tenacity in lotus painting.

Secondly, the religious semantic system of lotus symbol in Buddhist art is deconstructed

This paper sorts out the artistic transformation path of "Lotus Treasury Realm" and other Buddhist concepts, examines the expression forms of lotus patterns in Buddha statues, temples and other carriers, and explains how the religious philosophy of "rising from the mud but not being stained" is realized through visual language to spread the doctrine and integrate culture.

Thirdly, explore the shaping effect of Taoist natural philosophy on the aesthetic image of lotus

Centered on the concepts of "unity of heaven and man" and "lotus emerging from water", this paper analyzes the influence of Taoist alchemy, fairy legends and Wei-Jin metaphysics on the "pure and elegant" aesthetic of lotus, and discusses the implicit expression of Taoist thought in the brush and ink language of lotus painting.

Fourthly, decode the generation logic of lotus auspicious symbol in folk culture

Through typical cases such as "Lian Nian You Yu" and "Bidi Lian", this paper studies how folk narrative strategies such as homophonic and metaphorical transform lotus into folk art symbols carrying practical functions such as fertility and fire prevention, and reveals the cultural roots of its life-oriented aesthetic characteristics.

Fifth, construct a multidimensional cultural interpretation framework of lotus imagery

By integrating Confucian ethical symbols, Buddhist religious symbols, Taoist natural aesthetics and folk auspicious meanings, this paper establishes a cross-cultural and cross-media lotus image analysis model, which provides a new methodological perspective for the study of traditional Chinese art symbols.

Literature review

1. The Symbolic System of Lotus in Religious and Cultural Arts

Hsin Kwan-chue (2017) elucidated the philosophical logic of Confucianism using the lotus as a metaphor for noble character through the "Bi De" theory. Zhou Dunyis "Ode to the Lotus" established the lotus status as a carrier of moral ideals with the phrase "emerging unstained from the mud". Zhu Wenwei and Zhu Ke (2024) further pointed out that Ma Yuans "White Lotus Painting" from the Southern Song Dynasty symbolized the Neo-Confucian concepts of "benevolence, wisdom, and courage" through visual elements—the lotus stem representing "courage," the lotus heart signifying "wisdom," and the overall form manifesting "benevolence," showcasing the artistic transformation of Confucian ethical aesthetics. Lin Chongs "Summer Retreat by the Lotus Pond" used meticulous brushwork and rich colors to depict the imperial metaphor of "virtue matching heaven and earth," while Ma Lins "Layered Ice Silk" employed line drawing to highlight the literati's lofty character. Correspondingly, the late Tang poetry of Pi Rixiu and Lu Guimeng (Lam, 2015) transformed the lotus into an expression of the literati's conflicted psyche, endowing this imagery with dual functions of moral symbolism and emotional catharsis, reflecting the multidimensional connotations of Confucian aesthetics.

Eugene Yuejin Wang (2004) revealed that the lotus, as a religious symbol of "transforming defilement into purity," exhibits its "mud-pure flower" structure (Ducor, 2017) in the Central Asian-style treasure flower motifs of the Northern Wei Dynasty murals in Dunhuang Cave 257, evolving into a narrative vehicle of "blossoming to reveal the Buddha" in Tang Dynasty transformation tableaux. Qiu Cong (2016) noted that Song and Yuan Chan paintings, such as those by Muqi, employ ink-wash techniques like "hollow stems" and "reduced brushwork" to transform withered

lotuses into visual metaphors for "impermanence of all phenomena." Current research highlights the functional divergence between three-dimensional grotto patterns and ink-on-silk expressions in terms of religious solemnity and literati aesthetics, underscoring the urgent need for deeper comparative studies across media.

Xu Jiexiong (2023) proposed the "Lotus Emerging from Water" theory, which reveals the core of Taoist lotus aesthetics—"pure authenticity." In *A Stroll Through Aesthetics*, he used Bada Shanren's *Lotus Flowers by the River* as an example to analyze how the "unadorned and rustic" brushstrokes of lotus flowers embody the principle of "the Tao follows nature": the tilted posture of the petals subtly aligns with the principle of yin and yang interdependence, while the randomness of ink washes echoes the philosophy of "non-action." Jerome Silbergeld (2015) research on the image of He Xiangju holding a lotus is groundbreaking—in the Yuan Dynasty murals of Yongle Palace in Shanxi, He Xiangju holds a budding red lotus, her graceful demeanor forming a striking contrast with the solemnity of Buddhist bodhisattvas, reflecting Taoism's emphasis on "the primacy of yin softness" and its unique interpretation of female spiritual practice.

2. Lotus auspicious symbol system in folk culture

At the folk level, Li Qingqing and Zhu Zunling (2024) focused on folk lotus pattern decoration and found that it has a more lifelike quality compared to official art. This difference precisely confirms Zhong Jingwen's assertion about the uniqueness of folk culture. The principle of "intention in every picture" summarized by Huang Haiyan (2020) is prominent in the auspicious patterns of lotus flowers: in the Ming Dynasty, the "continuous surplus" porcelain plate combined lotus roots with carp, using homophones of "lotus", "lian", "fish", and "yu" to construct the meaning of blessing; The Qing Dynasty Suzhou Taohuawu New Year painting "Hehe Erxian" symbolizes marital harmony with the lotus flower, reflecting the transformation of folk culture into reproductive worship.

Liu Tao (2023) supplemented the practical dimension from an architectural perspective – the lotus patterned color paintings on the coffered ceiling of the Forbidden City Hall of Supreme Harmony, and the entwined lotus patterns on the wooden window frames of Huizhou residential buildings, both follow the five element principle of "water restrains fire". This functional symbol and the aesthetic expression of literati painting form an interesting complement, jointly expanding the meaning boundary of the lotus symbol.

Research Methodology

This study adopts the methodological framework of combining descriptive analysis and comparative research, strictly follows the empirical research norms, and conducts a systematic investigation on the cultural symbolic system of lotus imagery. The research process pays attention to the construction of multi-dimensional evidence chain to ensure the scientificity and reliability of the research conclusions.

In the field of descriptive analysis, our research primarily draws from Panofsky's iconographic theory to establish a standardized data collection and analysis workflow. A systematic survey and record were made on 200 typical art samples, including specific morphological parameters such as the stem-to-petal length ratio in Ma Yuan's Southern Song Dynasty painting "White Lotus" and compositional features of eight-petaled lotus pedestals depicted in Dunhuang murals. We performed scientific analyses of material composition and technical approaches in lotus art representations across different cultural contexts. This methodology provides objective and verifiable foundational data for cross-cultural symbolic comparison.

The comparative research methodology primarily employs a cultural anthropology analytical framework, conducting in-depth comparisons across three dimensions: First, tracing the historical evolution of lotus symbolism through longitudinal analysis from the reproductive worship practices of the Eastern Han Dynasty to the ethical transformations of the Song Dynasty; Second, comparing variations in lotus representation across different cultural systems; Third, examining morphological characteristics of lotuses across various artistic media. All comparative dimensions are strictly confined to observable variables such as visual forms and spatial configurations, thereby avoiding subjective assumptions.

The innovation of this study is primarily reflected in the integrated application of methodologies: For the first time, formal analysis was systematically applied to traditional symbol studies, establishing a correspondence between "visual form and cultural semantics"; statistical methods were used to verify the correlation between biometric features and cultural codes; and a verification mechanism was constructed that cross-references four types of evidence—documentary records, images, physical artifacts, and spatial contexts. These methodological innovations provide new analytical perspectives for the study of traditional cultural symbols.

During the research process, several issues requiring further exploration were identified, including the relationship between geometric proportions in Buddhist art and plant growth patterns, as well as the correspondence between Taoist symbolic systems and actual botanical species. These questions demand resolution through subsequent studies employing more refined methodologies. All research methods and technical parameters are supported by well-documented literature, with specific references to empirical data and scholarly reports from relevant researchers.

Research Results

1. Lotus under the Confucian dimension

Confucian ethical aesthetics establishes a profound connection between natural imagery and moral cultivation. Hsin Kwan-chue (2017) highlights that the "bi de" (symbol of human moral character) theory in Confucian aesthetics has played a pivotal role in the evolution of imagistic philosophy. Rooted in ethical aesthetics, this philosophical framework emphasizes social utility. As a cornerstone of ancient Chinese Confucian aesthetics, "bi de" (symbol of human moral character) theory seeks to harmonize the beauty of natural forms with human moral excellence. This doctrine provides a theoretical foundation for understanding traditional Chinese aesthetic paradigms. By analyzing the moral symbolism embedded in the lotus flower within "bi de" (symbol of human moral character) theory, we can discern how Confucianism conceptualizes the lotus as a concrete embodiment of ideal human character.



Figure 1 Shen Zhou's "Zhou Maoshu Loves Lotus" (Source: Seattle Museum of Art Collection)

In ancient Chinese cultural traditions, both the gentleman and the sage are regarded as exemplary models of personality. Confucianism advocates for a gentleman like a lotus, and the Confucian classic "Analects" provides a detailed analysis of the qualities and characteristics of a gentleman.

Table 1 "Analects of Confucius – Xian Wen" Comparative Table of the Three Virtues of a Gentleman

Dimension	Core essence	Intrinsic traits	outward manifestation	Ultimate Goal
The benevolent have no worries	Moral sentiment (value foundation)	Taking "lover" as the core, the conscious self-restraint and return to etiquette, and the natural expression of compassion	The family ethics of filial piety and respect for elders, the social responsibility of helping the needy, and the practice of "standing up for oneself and others"	To achieve the harmonious state of 'returning the world to benevolence'
The wise is free from perplexities	Rational Wisdom (Methodology)	The spirit of seeking knowledge through investigating things, the judgment of distinguishing right from wrong, and the integration of the values of "the wise benefit benevolence"	The ability to adapt to changing circumstances, the behavior of imparting knowledge and dispelling doubts, and the foresight to see through small details	Realize the state of freedom of 'following one's heart without exceeding the norm'
The courageous are free from fear	Practical courage (action power)	Adhere to the belief of "the comparison of righteousness", nourish the spirit of magnanimity, and have the courage to reflect on oneself	The responsibility to give orders in the face of danger, the decisiveness to sacrifice one's life for righteousness, and the persistence to do what is impossible	The moral transcendence of achieving 'killing oneself to become benevolent'

1.1 Lotus flowers have been a vivid portrayal of the Confucian gentleman's character since ancient times.

The reclusive charm of "White Lotus Breeze" in Pi Rixiu's works and the steadfast posture of "Lonely Jade Pool" in Lu Guimeng's poetry reflect the pursuit of noble personality by scholars. Zhou Dunyi also used lotus as a metaphor for human beings, advocating that a gentleman should be as transcendent as a lotus – not only maintaining the character cultivation of "emerging from the mud without being tainted", but also practicing the way of "connecting the middle and the outside" to benefit the world. This concept of both internal and external cultivation not only includes the indifferent adherence to self-improvement, but also embodies the social responsibility of

benefiting the world, perfectly interpreting the ultimate ideal of Confucianism's "self-cultivation, family harmony, governance, and peace of the world".

1.2 Lotus flowers from the perspective of the Shijia family

The lotus flower, as a core symbol of Buddhism, perfectly embodies the state of "being pure from dust" in spiritual practice. Its growth characteristics are deeply in line with Buddhist teachings: the pure flower body blooming in the mud is like a practitioner's consciousness that transcends the secular world; The hollow lotus stem embodies the Prajnaparamita wisdom of 'emptiness of all five aggregates'; Lotus seeds' 'painstaking effort' metaphorically refers to the process of tempering that is necessary for spiritual cultivation. This natural creation, through the complete life forms of roots, stems, flowers, and children, constructs a cultivation map from the mortal world to the Pure Land, which not only concretely expresses the teaching of "turning troubles into Bodhi", but also provides believers with an intuitive medium for visualization.

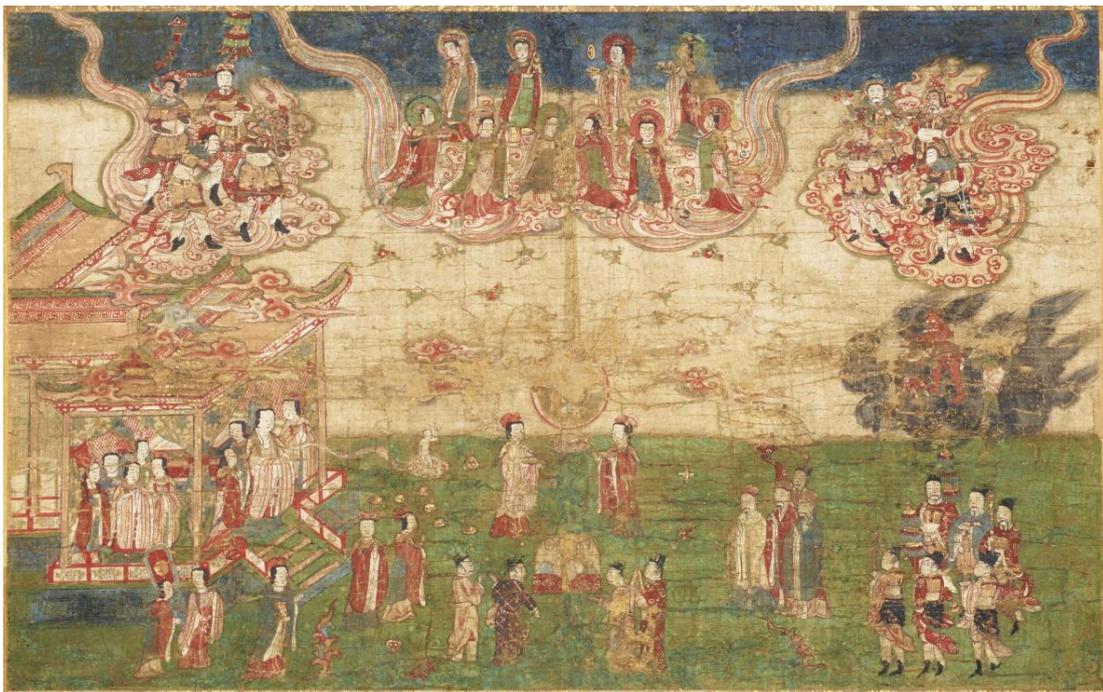


Figure 2 Anonymous Birth Picture of Shakyamuni (Source: Kyushu National Museum)

In the context of Buddhism, the lotus flower has constructed a complete symbolic system: the ideal pure land is called the "Lotus Treasury", Buddhist scriptures honor it as the "Lotus Sutra", Buddhist temples are called the "Lotus Realm", monk's quarters are called the "Lotus Room", monk's robes are called the "Lotus Robe", and Buddhist niches are respectfully called the "Lotus niche". This series of sacred spaces and objects named after lotus not only form a unique visual

symbol system in Buddhism, but also metaphorically represent the essence of cultivation through the characteristics of plants – from the simplicity of the lotus house to the true essence of cultivation, from the purity of the lotus robe to the solemnity of the precepts, ultimately pointing to the ultimate state of perfection symbolized by the lotus world.



Figure 3 Yuan's anonymous "Portrait of Manjusri Bodhisattva" and Yuan's anonymous "Portrait of Samantabhadra Bodhisattva" (Source: Erzunyuan Collection)

Table 2 Overview of the Spread and Expression of Lotus Pattern Religious Concepts

Functional dimension	Embody	Cultural connotation	Application scenarios
Cultural Integration Bridge	1. When Buddhism first spread, it used the image of lotus flowers to reduce cultural barriers. 2. Combining Chinese auspicious concepts (such as "surplus year after year"). 3 Realizing the Livelihood Expression of Buddhist Teachings	The secular transformation of faith symbols with dual cultural encoding (Buddhist Pure Land philosophy+local auspicious symbolism)	Folk handicrafts Festival decoration Folk belief sites
Expression of religious beliefs	1. Formal Beauty: Golden Ratio Curve and Symmetrical Structure 2. Spiritual Metaphor: Mud → Growth → Bloom 3. Pure Land Symbol: The image of the Pure Land of Lotus Terrace/Lotus Pond's Pure Land	Doctrine visualization system, spatial sacredness construction, cultivation process map	Buddhist temple architecture (coffered ceiling/column foundation) Statue art (pedestal/backlight) Artifacts (Incense Burner/Scripture Box)
Emotional awakening of faith	1. Psychological resonance: Purity triggers religious experience 2. Symbolic identification: forms a sacred matrix with the Bodhi tree pattern 3. Acceptance basis: practicality of life, aesthetic uniqueness, cultural rootedness	Sensory emotional belief three-level triggering mechanism Local cultural psychological fit	Creating Zen inspired Space Practice visualization media Religious ritual props

1.3 Lotus flowers in the Taoist dimension

The way of Laozi lies in nature. Look at He Xiangmu among the Eight Immortals, holding a green lotus in her hand, isn't that the best interpretation of 'tranquility and inaction'? Lotus emerges from the mud without being stained, just like a cultivator in the realm of worldly affairs and wandering outside the mind. This lotus flower not only connects the wisdom of Buddhism and Taoism, but also turns the mystery of "softness triumphs over strength" into the most touching scene of human cultivation.



Figure 4 Unknown He Xianggu Axis (Source: National Palace Museum, Taipei)

Lotus flowers emerge from the mud without staining, which precisely confirms the wisdom of Taoism's "unity of heaven and man". It conforms to nature with a flexible posture, stretching and purifying in turbid water, just like a cultivator wandering in the world with a too empty heart. The symbiosis of flowers and water interprets the wonderful truth of "non action" – not deliberately resisting, but achieving great beauty in compliance. The flower vase floating on the clear waves, with a perfect balance between yin and yang, is a vivid portrayal of the nature of Taoism. The practitioner observes the lotus and realizes the Tao, and in the midst of chaos, guards the spiritual platform with clarity, which is the essence of Taoism. Therefore, Taoism regards lotus as auspicious, which is not only a tribute to natural creation, but also implies the true meaning of returning to simplicity and cultivation.

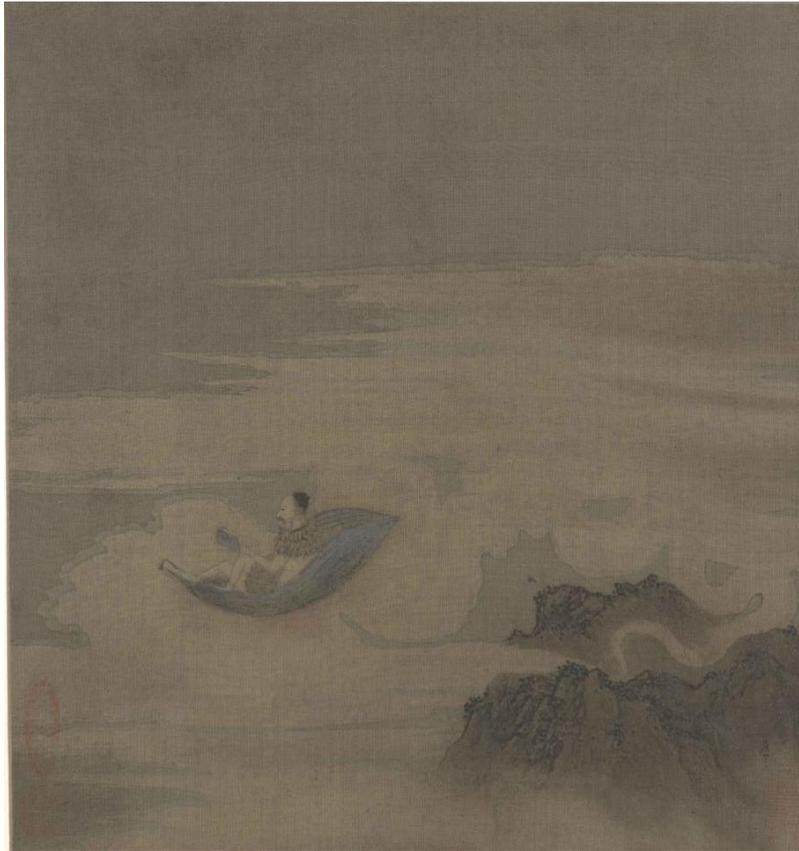


Figure 5 Unknown "Lotus Boat Immortal Crossing" from the Southern Song Dynasty (Source: Palace Museum)

Taoist thought played a key role in shaping the philosophical connotation of the lotus. In the Wei and Jin dynasties, the metaphysical concepts of Laozi and Zhuangzi became popular, thus establishing the aesthetic orientation of "nature" and "nobility". To achieve the aesthetic realm of 'lotus flowers emerging from the water', the aesthetic subject needs to possess the characteristic of 'only the Tao gathers emptiness', while displaying a clear and natural style at the aesthetic level. Lotus flowers are endowed with the characteristic of "clarity" in Taoist aesthetic concepts. The fresh, elegant, and graceful temperament and charm displayed by lotus flowers have been deeply understood and widely spread by the literati class. The "clear" character and temperament of lotus flowers have become a reflection of their unique life ideals. Mr. Xu Jiexiong (2023) proposed the aesthetic concepts of "intricately carved gold" and "lotus flowers emerging from water", among which the beauty of "lotus flowers emerging from water" is derived from the Taoist ideas of "halal" and "natural".

From the perspective of comparative art, the differences in the cultivation methods of female Taoists in Taoism and Buddhist nuns not only reflect differences in religious beliefs, but also reflect differences in cultural aesthetic concepts. Buddhism pursues a complete abandonment of the secular world, while Taoism advocates preserving the softness and characteristics of women

while pursuing spiritual sublimation. This difference is symbolically reflected in the Lotus Crown of Taoism and the Lotus Seat of Buddhism. As a high-level Taoist headwear, the hibiscus crown resembles a blooming lotus flower, symbolizing the beauty of inner and outer harmony, while the Buddhist lotus throne leans more towards symbolizing purity and transcendence. Meanwhile, lotus and lotus root have also received special attention and love in Taoist alchemy due to their unique medicinal value. The common myths and legends in traditional Chinese culture, such as "Lotus Fairy", "He Xiang", and "Nezha", all contain profound Taoist cultural colors. Taoist mythological figures often use the Lotus Terrace as their resting place.

2. Lotus symbolizes in folk culture

Every ethnic group has unique ideological concepts, which are closely related to their living habits, cultural foundations, and customs and traditions. Simon J. Bronner (2016), as an authority in the field of folklore, provided a definition for the concept of "folk": "Folk refers to the general public, and all ordinary people, except for the ruling class, can be regarded as a part of the folk. The main components of folk are those middle and lower class people who directly participate in the construction of social material and spiritual civilization." In folk culture, lotus is regarded as the auspicious flower, symbolizing auspiciousness, happiness, and prosperity. People express their longing for a better life through symbolism and image shaping. Therefore, lotus has become a widely recognized symbol in folk culture.

In folk art, lotus pattern decoration mainly appears in modern times. Compared with historical lotus decorations, lotus patterns in folk art have a more lively and simple style, diverse forms, and rich decorative materials (Li & Zhu, 2024). The auspicious pattern of lotus flowers is created through metaphor and homophonic techniques, with a long history dating back to the Shang and Zhou dynasties, reaching maturity in the Song dynasty, and reaching its peak in the Ming and Qing dynasties, forming a unique style of "intentional design and auspicious meaning" (Huang, 2020). As the core element of auspicious patterns, lotus flowers are combined with fish, birds, children, dragons and phoenixes to form various themes, such as "surplus year after year" and "consecutive birth of precious children". In addition, in folk traditions, lotus patterns are also endowed with profound meanings of seeking good luck, avoiding misfortune, and praying for good fortune. The scholar Ying Shao of the Western Han Dynasty mentioned in his book "General Principles of Customs": "The palace is shaped like an eastern well and carved with lotus flowers. Lotus flowers are also water objects, so they dislike fire." As lotus flowers grow in water, according to the ancient "Five Elements" theory, water can overcome fire (Liu, 2023). Therefore,

ancient people used lotus patterns in architecture and furniture not only to add aesthetic value, but also to symbolize the fire prevention concept of "using water to control fire".



Figure 6 Qing Dynasty's "Fish in the Year of the Lotus" (Source: Yangliuqing, Tianjin)

In folk art, the important position of lotus cannot be ignored. As an important source of inspiration for many artists, it has sparked two mainstream views.

Firstly, words such as lotus, lotus seed, and lotus root have rich homophonic meanings in Chinese. Due to the homophonic relationship between "lotus" and "lian", people often associate lotus with the imagery of continuous reproduction. This stems from the natural phenomenon of lotus houses having multiple children, and in traditional Chinese culture, "having multiple children brings blessings" is a common belief. In addition, the homophonic relationship between "lotus" and "harmony", as well as the similar pronunciation of "lotus root" and "even", are widely used in folk culture to metaphorically describe harmony and affection between couples. The phrases "Hehe Erxian" and "Why did they get married" express the desire for harmony and happiness between husband and wife. The growth form of a lotus with one stem and two flowers has meanings such as "merging stems and concentric" and "merging stems and lotus blooming".



Figure 7 "Harmony and Ruyi" from the late Qing Dynasty (source: Yangliuqing, Tianjin)

Secondly, "fish" and "lotus" are respectively endowed with symbolic meanings for males and females. Fish are agile and full of vitality, symbolizing masculinity; Lotus is pure and gentle, representing the gentleness and resilience of women. This metaphor originates from the observation and artistic representation of natural images, symbolizing the harmony and emotional integration between husband and wife, and expressing the beautiful expectations of having children and family prosperity. The multi offspring characteristic of fish and the endless vitality of lotus jointly reflect the ancient people's emphasis on the continuation of life and family inheritance, conveying a deep concern for life, emotions, and the future.

5. Multidimensional cultural interpretation of lotus imagery

Through comprehensive analysis across four dimensions, a multi-layered interpretive system for the lotus imagery can be established. At the Confucian level, it symbolizes an ideal personality and expresses ethical values through the "bi de" (comparing to virtue) doctrine. Buddhism regards it as a vehicle for doctrinal teachings, forming systematic religious symbols. Taoism emphasizes its philosophical essence, developing the aesthetic paradigm of "clarity and emptiness." Folk traditions employ homophonic analogies to create practical auspicious symbols.

Integrating these symbolic dimensions enables the construction of a cross-cultural framework for interpreting lotus imagery.

This multidimensional interpretation reveals the composite nature of traditional Chinese artistic symbols: the same visual element develops diverse connotations across cultural contexts, while maintaining distinct characteristics yet interacting with each other. The contrast between Taoist "Furong Guan" (Lotus Crown) and Buddhist "Lianhua Tai" (Lotus Platform) exemplifies innovative transformations during localization processes. Meanwhile, the symbolic imagery of "emerging from impurity yet remaining pure" has become universally revered as a shared aesthetic ideal across schools. Such comprehensive research provides new methodological perspectives for studying traditional art symbols.

In terms of research methodology, this cross-cultural analytical framework not only examines the unique characteristics of each system but also reveals their interactive relationships. The lotus imagery in Confucian classics, Buddhist art, Taoist texts, and folk works exhibits both distinct yet interconnected manifestations. Future studies could further explore the historical evolution and contemporary transformations of this cultural symbol, thereby achieving a more comprehensive understanding of its spatiotemporal features.

Discussion

This study explores the cultural dimensions of lotus imagery through multidimensional analysis, revealing its differentiated expressions and intrinsic connections across different cultural systems. In the Confucian dimension, Hsin Kwan-chue 's (2017) "virtue analogy" theory finds significant validation: Zhou Dunyi's "Lotus Praise" with its metaphorical phrase "rising from mud yet remaining unstained" forms an intertextual relationship with Ma Lin's Southern Song Dynasty composition "Layered Ice Silk". This discovery not only corroborates Li Zehou's (1981) discourse on Confucian virtue analogy tradition but also concretely illustrates the transformation mechanism between moral ideals and artistic expression. Notably, the reclusive sentiments in Pi Rixiu and Lu Guimeng's white lotus poems both inherit Tao Yuanming's "picking chrysanthemums by the eastern fence" tradition while incorporating the distinctive aloofness characteristic of late Tang literati, providing new evidence for the temporal evolution of Confucian virtue analogy theory. The Buddhist dimension reveals a striking contrast between the three-dimensional lotus motifs in Dunhuang Cave 257's Northern Wei period and the flat narrative style of the Tang Dynasty's "Lotus Sutra Transformation", validating Eugene Yuejin Wang's (2004) theory of Buddhist art

localization. Particularly, the composite lotus patterns discovered in Shanxi's Foguang Temple murals retain the eight-petaled lotus motif from Indian Buddhism while integrating traditional Chinese cloud motifs, offering physical evidence for Jérôme Ducor (2017) "bidirectional acculturation" theory. This pattern evolution vividly demonstrates the transformation trajectory of Buddhist lotus symbols from religious symbolism to artistic elements. Folk dimension research shows that the custom of "carving lotus and water chestnut to ward off fire" recorded in Ying Shao's "Fengsu Tongyi" was perpetuated in Ming-Qing architecture. The lotus motifs in the palace's Ning Shou Palace ceiling stand in stark contrast to the freehand-style designs of Suzhou's Humble Administrator's Garden (Zhuozheng Yuan)' Thirty-Six Mandarin Ducks Pavilion '. While the former strictly adheres to the 'water pattern' regulations outlined in the *Yingzao Fashi* (Treatise on Architectural Methods), the latter reflects the aesthetic preferences of Jiangnan literati. This discovery not only corroborates Huang Haiyan's (2020) theory of regional differentiation in auspicious patterns but also complements Liu Tao's (2023) interpretation of fire-prevention decorative functions, revealing the intricate interplay between ritual norms and regional aesthetics in folk art.

Knowledge from Research

This study innovatively proposes the "layer accumulation buffer translation" theoretical model, which systematically explains the cross-cultural evolution mechanism of the lotus symbol. Research has found that lotus flowers achieve cross system semantic adaptation through the plasticity of their biological characteristics, such as the hollow stem corresponding to the Buddhist concept of emptiness; Its folk homophonic strategy (lotus and lotus root doll) is actually an ethical transformation of primitive reproductive worship; The principle of "flying white" in ink painting techniques can be regarded as a visual practice of the Taoist philosophy of "existence and non existence mutually arising". This theory not only expands the research dimensions of traditional semiotics, but also reveals cultural translation laws with cross disciplinary methodological value. As Table 3.

Table 3 Overview of Multidimensional New Knowledge Construction of Lotus Culture Symbols

Knowledge dimension	Theoretical innovation points	Practical application value
Symbolic elasticity theory	Revealing the bidirectional adaptation mechanism of lotus's "biological characteristics cultural encoding"(stem straight Confucian rigidity/lotus root curvature → Taoist nature)	Provide symbol translation templates for the development of intangible cultural heritage IP, such as the simplified reconstruction of Buddhist lotus patterns in modern Zen design
Layer accumulation model	Propose the "Four Stage Layers" of Lotus Meaning: Primitive Reproductive Worship → Religious Sanctification → Philosophical Virtue → Folk Auspicious Meaning	Guide museum curation to achieve visualization of historical context (such as the evolution of imagery from Yangshao painted pottery to contemporary New Year paintings)
Buffer mechanism	Discovering that lotus achieves cross-cultural conflict resolution through "natural attributes (aquatic) → social functions (fire suppression)"	Explain the differences in the acceptance of lotus symbols in cultural exchanges between the East and the West, and assist in the development of cultural export strategies
Media Grammar	Summarize the visual difference system of Confucianism (Zhongtong Waizhi composition), Buddhism (concentric circle pattern), Taoism (ink breaking technique), and the people (symmetrical Paper Cuttings)	Provide algorithm training parameters for AI painting to generate lotus images with different cultural styles

Conclusion

This study examines the multifaceted symbolism of lotus flowers in Chinese traditional culture through multidimensional analysis. Confucianism employs the "bi de" (symbol of human moral character) theory to construct its symbolic representation of noble character, Buddhism utilizes it as a vehicle for religious doctrines, while Taoism develops an aesthetic paradigm of "purity and naturalness." Folk cultures further create auspicious symbol systems through homophonic metaphors. The research reveals that lotus imagery maintains distinctiveness yet demonstrates cultural interpenetration across contexts, with its core characteristic of "rising above impurities without being tainted" becoming a cross-cultural consensus. This composite nature embodies the Chinese cultural philosophy of "harmony in diversity," offering new interpretive pathways for traditional artistic symbolism studies and providing insights into understanding the multi-layered encoding mechanisms of Chinese cultural symbols.

Suggestions

Based on the research results, the following practical guidance suggestions are put forward:

1) Application of cultural education

It is recommended to implement the "Four-Dimensional Teaching Method" in traditional cultural education. This approach systematically showcases the cultural significance of lotus flowers through Confucian metaphors like the "virtue analogy" (as exemplified in Zhou Dunyi's essay "In Praise of the Lotus"), Buddhist symbolism such as the lotus pedestal, Taoist concepts of "purity and emptiness" (as embodied in the lotus aesthetic), and folk motifs with homophonic meanings (such as the "abundance year after year" pattern). Interdisciplinary curricula could be designed to integrate literary appreciation, artistic creation, and philosophical reflection.

2) Art creation

Contemporary artists can use the methodology of "symbolic translation", such as transforming the geometry of Buddhist lotus patterns into modern minimalist design, or combining Taoist "flying white" brushwork with digital media art.

It is recommended to distinguish the expressive forms across different cultural contexts: Confucian themes should emphasize moral and ethical symbolism (such as the gentleman's character); Buddhist subjects require careful application of religious symbols (like the lotus platform design); Taoist aesthetics can highlight the "purity, truth, and naturalness" aesthetic realm; folk art may utilize puns and metaphorical elements (e.g., lotus-fish combinations). Special attention should be paid to maintaining the accuracy of symbolic representations within each cultural system.

3) Cross-cultural communication

It is recommended to adopt a layered communication strategy: academic dissemination should focus on explaining multidimensional theoretical systems; mass communication can emphasize the "untainted by impurities" consensus image; for external communication, choose the most recognizable symbols (such as Buddhist lotus seats). It is important to maintain the accuracy of core imagery and avoid cultural distortion caused by excessive simplification.

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