

УДК 7:7.043:582.724.4:7.045(531)(045)

DOI <https://doi.org/10.32782/facs-2024-6-21>

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To cite this article: Ponomarenko, M. (2024). Symbolika ta ikonohrafiia lotosu v sakralnomu mystetstvi Kytaiu [Symbolism and iconography of the lotus in the sacred art of China]. *Fine Art and Culture Studies*, 6, 173–181, doi: <https://doi.org/10.32782/facs-2024-6-21>

SYMBOLISM AND ICONOGRAPHY OF THE LOTUS IN THE SACRED ART OF CHINA

The article deals with the works of sacred art of China (sculpture and paintings) belonging to the dynastic periods: Northern Wei (386–534), Western Wei (535–557), Sui (581–618), Tang (618–907), and Yuan (1271–1368) dynasties, which include the image of a lotus flower. In the context of Buddhist symbolism, the article analyses the image of the lotus in the sculptural reliefs of the Lotus Flower Cave in the Longmen Grottoes and the frescoes in the Mogao cave temples. Particular attention is paid to the iconography and Buddhist connotations of the lotus as a component of the image of the Pure Land, a metaphysical space with which the concept of a lotus paradise in the western sky is associated according to the Mahayana tradition and the teachings of Amitabha Buddha. The purpose of the article is to study the peculiarities of the symbolism and iconography of the lotus flower in the sacred art of China on the examples of religious sculpture and paintings depicting the Buddha and ritual scenes of offering gifts to the deity. The aim and objectives of the study determined the use of comparative studies, hermeneutics, iconographic and iconological analysis, and comparative analysis as the main research methods. The scientific novelty of this study lies in the comprehensive study of the symbolism and iconography of the lotus in Chinese sacred art in the context of the peculiarities of its ritual aspect and religious and philosophical content. The following conclusions were drawn because of the study. It has been established that the lotus in Chinese sacred art has a complex multi-layered symbolism associated with its unique natural abilities: the flower grows in muddy swamp waters, but emerges to the surface, remaining clean, untainted by mud. It has been found that these natural qualities of the lotus are used in sacred Chinese art as a metaphor for the highest transcendence of the spirit; the lotus flower is a symbol of eternal continuous time, in which the temporal boundaries of the past, present and future are not defined.

Key words: lotus, China, sacred art, Buddhism, iconography, symbolism, sculpture, paintings.

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Бібліографічний опис статті: Пономаренко, М. (2024). Символіка та іконографія лотоса в сакральному мистецтві Китаю. *Fine Art and Culture Studies*, 6, 173–181, doi: <https://doi.org/10.32782/facs-2024-6-21>

СИМВОЛІКА ТА ІКОНОГРАФІЯ ЛОТОСА В САКРАЛЬНОМУ МИСТЕЦТВІ КИТАЮ

*У статті розглянуто твори сакрального мистецтва Китаю (скульптура та розписи), що відносяться до династичних періодів: Династія Північна Вей (386–534 рр.), Західна Вей (535–557 рр.), Суй (581–618 рр.), Тан (618–907 рр.), Юань (1271–1368 рр.), у композиції яких є зображення квітки лотоса. З огляду на буддійську символіку проаналізовано зображення лотосу в скульптурних рельєфах печери Лотосової квітки у гротах Луньмень та фрески в печерних храмах Могао. Особлива увага акцентується на іконографії та буддійських конотаціях лотоса, як складової образу Чистої землі – метафізичного простору, з яким пов'язана концепція лотосового Раю на західному небі за традицією Махаяни та вченням про Будду Амитабху. **Мета статті** – дослідження особливостей символіки та іконографії квітки лотоса в сакральному мистецтві Китаю на прикладах релігійної скульптури і розписів з зображеннями Будди й ритуальних сцен підношення дарів божеству. Мета та завдання дослідження обумовили застосування компаративістики, герменевтики, іконографічного та іконологічного і порівняльного аналізу як*

основних методів дослідження. Наукова новизна даного дослідження полягає в комплексному вивченні символіки та іконографії лотоса в китайському сакральному мистецтві в контексті особливостей його ритуальної спрямованості та релігійно-філософського змісту. В результаті дослідження були зроблені наступні висновки. Встановлено, що лотос в китайському сакральному мистецтві має складну багатопланову символіку, пов'язану з його унікальними природними здібностями: квітка росте у мутних болотяних водах, але вириває на поверхню, залишаючись чистою, незаплямованою багном. З'ясовано, що ці природні якості лотоса використані в сакральному китайському мистецтві як метафора найвищої трансцендентності духа; квітка лотоса є символом вічного безперервного часу, в якому темпоральні межі минулого, дійсності та майбутнього не визначаються.

Ключові слова: лотос, Китай, сакральне мистецтво, іконографія, символіка, скульптура, розписи.

The relevance of the problem. The Chinese civilisation is one of the oldest in the world and remains an inexhaustible source for researching the peculiarities of the fine arts. The aesthetic, religious and philosophical dominants of Chinese civilisation have distinguished the worship of flowers as an important part of the ritual culture rooted in Buddhism, Taoism and Confucianism. A special place in this culture is occupied by the depiction of flowers in sacred art, among which the lotus plays a central role. In the fine arts of Asian cultures, the lotus has been a leading motif for centuries. The aesthetic beauty and extraordinary qualities of the lotus are embodied in its symbolic meaning and captured in works of Chinese sacred art: paintings of ancient temples, small plastic arts and sculpture, and ornaments decorating ritual products.

The study of the symbolism and iconography of flowers in Chinese art is one of the leading areas of scientific discourse in world art history. Despite the existence of a large amount of literature on the subject, scholars focus on the peculiarities of the depiction of flowers in the «hua-niao» (flowers and birds) and «shan-shui» (mountains and water) compositions. At the same time, the symbolism and iconography of flowers in Chinese sacred art can be significantly expanded and new important conclusions can be drawn from the study of the lotus image. This is important for understanding intercultural exchanges and relations and artistic dialogue between the West and the East.

Analysis of recent research and publications.

The multidisciplinary nature of this study has led to the use of scientific literature in several areas. The main core was the materials containing interpretations of the symbolism of the lotus and stylistic and figurative features of Asian art: the fundamental work of Titus Burckhardt, in which the scientist revealed the connection between the image of the lotus and the symbolism of Buddhism (Burckhardt, 1986); an article by Robert L. Brown, which discusses the symbolism

of ancient Buddhist art and the features of Buddha's iconography (Brown, 1990); Joel P. Brereton's article comparing the symbolic content of the lotus image in Indian and Chinese culture (Brereton, 1987); a book edited by Kwok Man Ho and Joanne O'Brien on the legends of Taoism (Man Ho, O'Brien, 1991).

The ideas revealed by scholars in these sources have been further developed in the works of the twenty-first century: important studies include the history of Chinese art written by Li Lingkang (Lingkang, 2005) and books by Donald S. Jr. Lopez, Smith Jo D., that reveal the peculiarities of Buddhism (Lopez, 2001; Smith, 2017); Coleman Fletcher reveals the peculiarities of the reconstruction of the composition known as 'Offering Procession of the Empress as Donor with Her Court', which was the part of the bas-relief from Binh Yang Cave (Coleman, 2018); in Lai Yuege's dissertation, one of the chapters is dedicated to the image of the lotus in the context of the mutual influences of Asian and European fine arts (Yuege, 2020); in the study of the image of the lotus, Xurong Kong examines literary monuments that mention the lotus and explains the origin of the name of the flower itself (Kong, 2022); Zhou J. contains a detailed description of the Lotus Sutra and an analysis of the rituals associated with it (Zhou, 2023); in the dissertation 'National Identity and External Influences in the Architecture of the Dunhuang Temple Complex (IV–XIV centuries)' Wang Shizhu provides a timeline and reveals the artistic and figurative features of the Dunhuang cave murals (Shizhu, 2024); Guo, W analyses the Dunhuang murals in terms of the role of women in Chinese society in dynastic times, raising gender issues (Guo, 2024).

The purpose of the article is to study the peculiarities of the symbolism and iconography of the lotus in Chinese sacred art.

Presentation of the main research material.

According to many researchers of Chinese art, flowers were distinguished into a special plot

structure in the middle of the Tang Dynasty (VII–X centuries). However, the image of the lotus appears in Chinese and Central Asian art much earlier. First of all, in the ritual art of sculpture associated with religious cults: small plastic and stelae depicting Buddha and Bodhisattvas.

The lotus embodied the qualities associated with the spiritual transformation of a person. Thus, in his fundamental work on the symbolism of the lotus, Titus Burckhardt reveals the idea of its connection with Buddhism (Burckhardt, 1986). One of the most recent studies that further developed this idea is Lai Yuege's dissertation, which is based on the research of a well-known scholar and writes that the lotus 'is an attribute of many deities and a sign of one of the eight victories in Buddhism and symbolises purity, miraculous birth, spiritual enlightenment and compassion' (Yuege, 2020, p. 50).

The introduction of the lotus image into sacred art is explained by the observations of the ancient Chinese on the unique characteristics of the flower. The lotus appears as an image of cosmic creation, the emergence of the world from the darkness of primordial waters. This universal principle of the birth of life corresponds to the model of lotus buds appearing on the surface of the water, emerging from its dark depths. The flower is born in muddy swamp water and rises to the light

untainted, making its metaphorical image a symbol of purity and harmony.

In the first and fourth centuries, Buddhism began to penetrate China from India and Central Asia. With the spread of Buddhism and its transformation, centers of Chinese Buddhism gradually formed, and at the same time, the iconography of the lotus image known in India (Lopez, 2001). Most often, the lotus is depicted as a halo around the Buddha's head (a blossoming lotus) and as a lotus throne (single or double) on which the Buddha or the Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara sits or stands (fig. 1, 2).

However, in China, lotus flowers were worshiped as sacred long before the spread of Buddhism and personified purity, virginity and fertility. According to Chinese legends, the image of a white lotus as a symbol of purity is associated with the maiden, He Xian-gu, one of the eight immortals (Man Ho, O'Brien, 1991).

Another connotation was erotic. The lotus represented birth and sensual beauty. Joel P. Brereton writes that 'in the folk traditions of China and India, the lotus endowed humans with the power and ability to fertilise: both folk traditions have legends of immaculate conception that occurred after young women bathed in lotus ponds or ate lotus flowers' (Brereton, 1987).



Fig. 1. Maitreya Buddha.
The stele. Limestone.
Height 114.3 cm, width 37.5 cm.
Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534). China.
Metropolitan Museum of Art. USA



Fig. 2. Bodhisattva Avalokiteshvara. Limestone with traces of pigment. Height 100.8 cm. Sui Dynasty (581–618) or early Tang Dynasty (618–907). Late sixth – early seventh century China. Metropolitan Museum of Art. USA

Another common form of the image was a stylized lotus turned downwards, which was found in the form of a plinth on which the stele was mounted. An example of this is the stele 'Pure Land', which dates back to 758 (fig. 3). The composition of the stele is divided into three horizontal parts. The image of a lotus is consistently repeated in each of these parts in a different interpretation: lotus buds, a blossoming lotus, and lotus thrones.

In Chinese Buddhism, the image of the Pure Land (Chinese: *Jingtu* 淨土) (Sanskrit: *Sukhavati* सुखावती) plays a key role. This is due to the Mahayana tradition and the teachings of Amitabha Buddha and rebirth after death in the Pure Land, a metaphysical space equivalent to the Christian Paradise. The lotus is associated with the concept of the western sky – the Lotus Paradise. According to Buddhist beliefs, in the western heaven, in the Lotus Paradise, there is a lotus lake made of jewels. In the middle of the lake, surrounded by bodhisattvas, sits Amitabha Buddha. Amazing lotuses of different colours bloom on the surface of the lake water – each flower represents the soul of a dead person (Brown, 1990).

In the ritual art of sculpture, the lotus was also depicted as a flower with a blossoming stem. For example, the iconography of the lotus in the scenes of the Buddhist stele commissioned by Helian Jiyue (赫蓮子悅) (533–543) is presented in several variations: blossoming lotuses on long plastic stems growing out of the ground; lotus flowers

on stems in the hands of bodhisattvas, disciples of the Buddha and donors of this stele; lotus crowns on the disciples of the Buddha; a tiered lotus throne in Manjushri; lotus halos in Manjushri and Shariputra, the main disciple of the Buddha; a ritual bowl in a lotus bud (fig. 4, 5).

The stele's compositions are dedicated to the debate between Manjushri and Vimalakirti, a story described in the *Vimalakirti-Nirdesha*



Fig. 4. A stele commissioned by Helian Jiyue. Limestone. Height 308 cm, width 112.4 cm, depth 30.5 cm. Eastern Wei Dynasty (534–550). Around 533–543. Metropolitan Museum of Art. USA



Fig. 3. Pure Land. A stele. Limestone. Height 83.8 cm; width 41.9 cm. Tang Dynasty (618–907). Around 758. Metropolitan Museum of Art. USA



Fig. 5. Fragment of a stele commissioned by Helian Jiyue. Limestone. Eastern Wei Dynasty (534–550). Around 533–543. Metropolitan Museum of Art. USA

Sutra (the canon of Mahayana Buddhism). Vimalakirti is a rich and powerful layman from India, a wise follower of the Buddha's teachings. Manjushri is a Bodhisattva of wisdom sent by the Buddha to the sick Vimalakirti to demonstrate his understanding of the Dharma (the Buddha's teachings) and transcendental power. On the right, Vimalakirti is seated on a bed. On the left, on the lotus throne, is Manjushri. They are surrounded by Bodhisattvas and disciples of the Buddha. Devakanya (celestial maiden) showers the audience with flowers.

Among a number of lotus sculptures, the Lianhua Karst Cave (莲花洞) in the Longmen Grottoes in Luoyang, dating back to 527, is particularly expressive. The compositional centre of the ceiling in the cave is a large sculptural relief – a lotus with open petals and a seed box in the core, stylised as a round shade (fig. 6–7). The lotus, which symbolises purity in Buddhism, is surrounded by three apsaras on the north and south walls: they face inwards towards the sacred flower. The iconography of an open lotus is repeated in the form of a Buddha's halo depicted on the surface of the ceiling, which serves as a backdrop for a five-metre-high statue of the deity.

According to Joel P. Brereton, the lotus flower represents time, which has no temporal boundaries: past, present and future are merged into one. This is due to the natural form of the lotus flower, which is a metamorphosis of transformation: when it opens, the lotus is a bud, an open flower and a seed pod at the same time. Thus, the flower contains past, present and future life. The scholar writes that it is for this reason that 'the lotus was considered

a symbol of rebirth and was used in burial rituals by the Greeks, Romans, and early Christians' (Brereton, 1987).

As you know, the iconography of Buddhism was a universal language of symbols that expressed ideas about the structure of the world and its moral laws. The lotus was one of these symbols. The iconography of the frescoes in the Mogao cave temples (Northwest China) created from the fourth to the fourteenth centuries proves this. The uniqueness of Mogao frescoes lies in the combination of 'Han Chinese artistic tradition and styles learned from ancient Indian and Gandharan customs, integration of the arts of the Turks, ancient Tibetans and other Chinese ethnic minorities' (Mogao Caves, 2024). According to a study by Wang Shizhu, who classifies fresco compositions, one of the types of Mogao wall paintings is 'compositions with a combination of Zaojing' techniques and Feitian images, an example of such a hybrid composition, formed from two distinct types is the 'lotus-Feitian-zaojing' (lianhua-feitian-zaojing 莲花飞天藻井), where the centre of the composition is a lotus made up of fourteen smaller lotuses and fourteen wave-like patterns' (Shizhu, 2024, p. 101).

In addition to images of the Buddha, Bodhisattvas, Apsaras, and other characters approved by the canons of Buddhism, the Mogao wall paintings and sculptural reliefs from the Lunmen Caves contain examples of compositions that are donor portraits in terms of typology and iconography. The heroines of the compositions are female benefactors who financed the construction of the grottoes. Although they are part of cult Buddhist complexes, their



Fig. 6–7. Lotus Flower Cave. Dragon Gate Grottoes in Luoyang. Longmen Caves. VI–VII centuries. Henan Province. China

images are secular in nature, which corresponded to the court traditions of imperial palace paintings (fig. 9, 10). It is noteworthy that women play an important role in Mogao's paintings. According to Wei Guo, who devoted his research to this issue, there were few figurative murals with female figures in Dunhuang before the Western Wei Dynasty, 'because early Buddhist art focused more on religious teachings and the representation of the Buddha than on specific scenes of social life, combined with the low level of female participation in public and religious affairs' (Guo, 2024, p. 496). Wei Guo further concludes that there is a combination of different cultural influences along the Silk Road, which are also embodied in the female images made in the Chinese artistic tradition with elements of foreign influences from India, Persia and Central Asia (Guo, 2024).

The figures of the women in the Binyan Cave bas-relief are depicted in elongated proportions, fragile in exquisite clothing with delicate lines of draperies and sleeves. The two central figures wear lotus crowns, which allows us to identify them as members of the imperial family. The court ladies hold gifts in the form of lotus flowers and containers with incense, fruit and water. The reliefs are intended to be perceived as permanent memorials of the emperor and empress in the act of worshipping the Buddha image. They are proof of the Northern Wei imperial family's devotion to Buddhism (Coleman, 2018).



Fig. 9. Two female donors. Fresco. Cave 98. Mogao Caves. Dunhuang, Gansu Province. The Five Dynasties period (907–960). China

An example of the depiction of lotuses in sacred compositions of a later period is the painting 'Medicine Buddha Bhaisajya Guru' (1271–1368) from the eastern pediment of the lower Guangsheng Temple in Shanxi Province, which contains a repeated image of lotus flowers in different interpretations (fig. 11). The painting was created during the Mongol reign, a period in which Chinese court art was influenced by Himalayan and Tibetan trends. Despite the fact that the iconography in temples and monasteries remained unchanged because paintings (as well as sculpture) on Buddhist themes were always created by artists under the supervision of monks, 'The Buddha of Medicine Bhaisaja Guru' is atypical: the subject and iconography raise many questions among experts. Since the role of the Yuan Dynasty 'was to unify China, which influenced artists' access to new, borrowed styles of painting, especially Tibetan Buddhist art,' it is likely that the atypical plot and iconography were the result of a combination of Buddhist, Taoist, and Confucian art traditions (Shizhu, 2024, p. 124).

The centre of the composition depicts Buddha Bhaisajya Guru in monk's clothes, symbolising his exit from earthly life. He is seated on a lotus throne in the lotus position. Next to him are the Bodhisattvas in rich robes, indicating their connection to the earthly realms and their intention to help sentient beings overcome the wheel of samsara, and they are also depicted on a lotus



Fig. 10. Offering Procession of the Empress as Donor with Her Court. The central cave of Binyang. Longmen Grottoes, Henan Province, China, Northern Wei Dynasty (386–534). 193 x 276.9 cm. The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art. USA



Fig. 11. Buddha of Medicine Bhaishajya Guru (Yaoshi fo). Water-based pigment (clay mixed with straw). Height 751.8 cm; width 1511.3 cm. Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). Around 1319. Metropolitan Museum of Art. USA

throne. They stand on a large pedestal decorated with lotus flowers. In the lower part of the composition, small lotus pedestals with gifts are depicted. It is noteworthy that it was in this temple that the sacred Buddhist texts of the 'Lotus Sutra' were found in 1930.

The Lotus Sutra is a significant Mahayana Buddhist scripture that was compiled in the first century. With the spread of Buddhism, it came to China and was translated by monks many times. During the Eastern Jin and Southern and Northern Dynasties, the influence of the Lotus Sutra spread widely in central China, which is discussed in the article by Zhou J., where the author reveals the content of the ritual of 'transforming all forms and bodies of those who have heard the power of the Lotus Sutra' (Zhou, 2023).

Based on the text of the Lotus Sutra, he summarises the Buddhist idea that a person who has led a pious life will be able to return to the peaceful land of the Buddha after death. In that land, Amitabha Buddha, surrounded by many great Bodhisattvas, is born from a lotus flower and sits on his throne. He is no longer irritated by greed, anger, ignorance, envy and other defilements. He has attained the power of a Bodhisattva and is not intolerant. After reaching this state, his eyes become pure and flawless (Zhou, 2023, p. 27).

Conclusions. The article shows that the image of the lotus is a central symbol of Chinese

sacred art. Its allegorical content was formed on the basis of ancient Chinese mythology (in the Taoist tradition, the image of a white lotus is a symbol of the purity of the virgin He Xian-gu) and the influences of Indian culture, where the lotus has a significant place in the visual language of dharmic religions. Associated with the image of the Pure Land, Amitabha Buddha and the rebirth of the soul, the lotus in Chinese sacred art has the following symbolic meaning a symbol of the sun, as the lotus emerges from the water and opens at sunrise and sinks into the water at sunset; a symbol of transcendence and purity, by analogy with the natural qualities of a flower that emerges from marsh waters, remaining pure and untainted by mud; a symbol of time and rebirth, which has no temporal boundaries: past, present and future are merged into one; a symbol of imperial status, which is associated with solar symbolism and the personification of the divine nature of the monarch.

In Chinese sacred art, the iconography of the lotus can be found as a halo around the head of the Buddha and his disciples; a lotus throne on which the Buddha or Bodhisattvas sit or stand; images of the Lotus Lake; shoes in the form of lotuses; lotuses as sacred gifts from donors and ritual bowls in the form of a lotus bud; as hair ornaments and imperial crowns in the form of a lotus flower; and as stele plinths.

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