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The Manifestation of Buddhist Thought in Chinese Buddhist Plant Patterns Taking the Tang Dynasty as an Example

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Abstract

Buddhist plant patterns are an important form of visual art for disseminating Buddhist doctrines and various regional cultures. This paper aims to explore the symbolic meanings of plant patterns in Chinese Buddhist art during the Tang Dynasty and how they reflect Buddhist thought. Therefore, the objectives of this study are: (1) to enhance understanding of Buddhist culture; (2) to advance the development of art history and aesthetics research; (3) to promote the protection and utilization of cultural heritage; and (4) to deepen the recognition and transmission of traditional culture. The methodologies employed in this study include: (1) literature review; (2) case study analysis; (3) semiotic analysis; and (4) field research. By analyzing specific artworks and documentary materials, the study reveals that Buddhist plant patterns not only had a profound influence on the aesthetics of Tang Dynasty art but also played a significant role in conveying Buddhist teachings and beliefs.

Keywords: Buddhist Thought; Plant Patterns; Cultural Dissemination; Auspicious Meanings, Tang Dynasty.



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1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

As a cultural phenomenon, Buddhist plant patterns have facilitated the spread of Buddhism across different regions and social strata through their rich religious connotations. These patterns emerged during the spread of Indian Buddhism as an important cultural phenomenon and medium for conveying Buddhist faith and propagating its teachings. Different Buddhist plant motifs carry various Buddhist implications, promoting the development and dissemination of Buddhism across diverse regions and social classes.

The Tang Dynasty, a golden era for the development of Buddhism in China, witnessed a deep integration of Buddhist culture with traditional Chinese culture, resulting in a unique religious art style. The Buddhist plant pattern decorative art of the Tang Dynasty, characterized by its distinct features and widespread popularity, had a significant impact on the dissemination of Buddhist culture and the decorative arts in later Chinese generations, meriting in-depth study (Dang Jiaxuan, 2009).

1.2 Reasons for the Study

- 1. Cultural Integration and Dissemination:** The Tang Dynasty was a period of high openness to the outside world in Chinese history, with frequent exchanges between Eastern and Western cultures. After Buddhism was introduced to China from India, it integrated with native Chinese culture, creating many unique cultural phenomena. By studying Buddhist plant patterns, we can gain insights into how Buddhist culture merged with traditional Chinese culture during this period and how Buddhism influenced Chinese art and aesthetics.
- 2. Interaction between Art and Religion:** Buddhist plant patterns are more than decorative art; they often embody profound religious meanings and philosophical ideas. Through the study of these patterns, we can explore the characteristics of Buddhist art in the Tang Dynasty, understand how religious beliefs were expressed through art, and discuss the interplay between religion and art.
- 3. Reflection of Social and Historical Context:** The Buddhist plant patterns of the Tang Dynasty reflect the religious beliefs, cultural orientations, and aesthetic tastes of the time. Studying these patterns helps us understand the historical background, religious concepts, and lifestyle of the Tang Dynasty society, which is significant for the study of the Tang Dynasty and the entire history of Chinese culture.
- 4. Exploration of Plant Symbolism:** In Buddhist culture, many plants are endowed with specific symbolic meanings. For example, the lotus symbolizes purity and transcendence, while the Bodhi tree represents enlightenment. By studying the Buddhist plant patterns of the Tang Dynasty, we can delve into the origins, development, and changes in the symbolic meanings of these plants, as well as their role in Buddhist doctrines and faith practices.
- 5. Archaeology and Cultural Relics Study:** The study of Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns can also provide new perspectives and materials for archaeology and cultural relic conservation. Research on plant patterns in Tang Dynasty Buddhist temples, murals, sculptures, and other art forms can reveal more about Tang society and offer scientific evidence for cultural relic restoration and conservation.

1.3 Significance of the Study

- 1. Enhancing Understanding of Buddhist Culture:** By exploring the symbolic meanings and uses of plant patterns in Buddhism, we can uncover how Buddhist thoughts and culture were

accepted, transformed, and developed in China, enriching our understanding of the religious elements in Chinese culture.

2. **Advancing Art History and Aesthetics Research:** As an integral part of Tang Dynasty Buddhist art, the study of Buddhist plant patterns is crucial for understanding the art styles, aesthetic preferences, and artistic techniques of the Tang Dynasty and ancient China in general. This contributes to constructing a more comprehensive and in-depth framework for Chinese art history.
3. **Promoting Cultural Heritage Protection and Utilization:** Research on Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns not only aids in the protection and dissemination of cultural heritage but also encourages its rational use. It also provides rich content and forms for cultural heritage display and education.
4. **Deepening Understanding and Transmission of Traditional Culture:** This study can enhance contemporary people's knowledge and understanding of traditional culture, especially the ecological and natural concepts within Buddhist culture.

2. Research Scope and Methods

2.1 Research Scope

1. **Types of Buddhist Plant Patterns in the Tang Dynasty:** Identifying typical Buddhist plant patterns utilized during the Tang Dynasty period.
2. **Symbolic Meanings of Patterns:** Analyzing the symbolic significance of these plant patterns within Tang Dynasty Buddhist culture, including the Buddhist doctrines, thoughts they represent, and their application in religious practices.
3. **Historical and Cultural Background:** Investigating the historical and cultural context of the Tang Dynasty, especially the development of Buddhism during this period, and how it influenced the use and evolution of plant patterns in artistic works.
4. **Artistic Expression and Techniques:** Exploring the artistic expression methods and technical characteristics of Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns, analyzing how style, color, composition, and other elements reflect the art style and aesthetic trends of the Tang Dynasty.

2.2. Research Methods

1. **Literature Review:** Conducting in-depth research into Buddhist scriptures, historical documents, descriptions of artistic works, and critiques of Buddhist art through the ages to find information related to Buddhist plant patterns. This will aid in understanding the origin, development, and changes of specific plant patterns within Buddhist history and culture.
2. **Semiotic Analysis:** Approaching from a semiotic perspective, analyzing the Buddhist thoughts and symbolic meanings represented by plant patterns. For example, the lotus symbolizes purity in Buddhism; this method can reveal the deeper meanings behind the patterns.
3. **Field Research:** Conducting on-site visits to Buddhist temples, museums, and art collections to directly observe and record the actual use of Buddhist plant patterns.
4. **Case Study Analysis:** Selecting representative cases of Buddhist plant patterns for in-depth analysis to study their significance, use, and dissemination within specific cultural and historical contexts.

3. Literature Review

3.1 Overview of Buddhism during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE)

Buddhism experienced its golden age of development during the Tang Dynasty in China, characterized by multiple dimensions:

Sect Development: The Tang Dynasty witnessed the prosperity and diversification of Chinese Buddhist sects, including the rise and development of Chan (Zen), Esoteric Buddhism (also known as Tantric Buddhism or Tangmi), and Pure Land Buddhism. Chan Buddhism emphasized direct insight into one's nature to achieve Buddhahood; Esoteric Buddhism focused on rituals and secret practices as means to enlightenment; and Pure Land Buddhism advocated for reciting the Buddha's name to be reborn in the Pure Land (Fang Litian, 2002).

Cultural Exchange: Through trade routes such as the Silk Road, Tang China engaged in extensive cultural and religious exchanges with India, Central Asia, and beyond. The famous pilgrimage of the monk Xuanzang to India for scriptures is a representative event of this period's cultural exchange.

Interweaving of Politics and Religion: The interaction between Buddhism and political power marked another characteristic of Tang Buddhism, where Buddhism was often utilized as a tool to maintain social stability and legitimize imperial authority.

Social Structure: The spread and development of Buddhism had a profound impact on the social structure and culture of the Tang Dynasty. Buddhist temples served not only as centers for religious activities but also as institutions for education, healthcare, and social welfare.

Folk Beliefs: Buddhism deeply penetrated the hearts of people, leading to the formation of many religious practices and festivals combined with folk beliefs.

Overall, the Tang Dynasty represents a pinnacle in the development history of Buddhism in China. Buddhism reached a high level of development in doctrines, practices, and organization and profoundly influenced Chinese culture, art, society, and even politics.

3.2 The Impact of Buddhism on Tang Dynasty Art

Buddhist plant patterns, which gradually emerged during the spread of Indian Buddhism, became a significant cultural phenomenon and reached their zenith during the Tang Dynasty (Dang Jiaxuan, 2009). Before the introduction of Buddhism, Chinese plant motifs were not well developed, with decorative patterns primarily featuring native mythical creatures, immortals, and cloud designs. The cultural exchanges between China and the Western Regions, including India, led to the rapid development of Buddhist culture, including plant patterns (Dang Jiaxuan, 2009). As the influence of Buddhist thought deepened, it also had a significant impact on Buddhist fine arts. The content of art became richer, and the Buddhist art of the Tang Dynasty surpassed that of previous dynasties in terms of richness and variety of patterns, which underwent significant transformations (Ma Chao, 2017).

3.3 The Status and Significance of Plant Patterns in Tang Dynasty Buddhist Art

In Tang Dynasty Buddhist art, plant patterns held a crucial position. They commonly appeared on Buddha halos, murals, stone carvings, sutra decorations, and architectural embellishments of temples. These patterns were used not only for beautification and decoration but also to symbolize some of the core concepts in Buddhist doctrines, such as samsara, nirvana, purity, and peace.

Through the use and interpretation of these patterns, the teachings of Buddhist philosophy on life, purity, wisdom, and liberation were conveyed, making plant patterns a bridge between reality and Dharma and between mortals and Buddha. The widespread application and profound significance of these patterns showcase the unique charm and deep connotations of Tang Dynasty Buddhist art.

4. Case Study

According to the studies by Zhang Xiaoxia (2005) in "The Origin and Development of Ancient Chinese Plant Decorative Patterns," Xu Jialu (2019) in "Research on the Application of Buddhist Decorative Patterns in Jewelry Design—Taking Animal and Plant Motifs of the Tang Dynasty as Examples," and Chang Shana (2004) in "Chinese Dunhuang Decorative Patterns Through the Ages," the primary Buddhist plant patterns employed during the Tang Dynasty include the precious appearance pattern, scroll pattern, lotus pattern, camellia pattern, and grape pomegranate pattern.

4.1 Precious Appearance Flower

4.1.1 Development

Named after the "Precious Appearance" in Buddhism, the precious appearance flower pattern is a composite and idealized motif based on the lotus, integrating elements from peonies, honeysuckles, chrysanthemums, and other plants. Its form, structure, and compositional elements evolved across different periods (Wang Qunshan, 2022).

The development of the precious appearance flower can be divided into three stages: from the early Tang to the early Zhenguan period, characterized by fragmented pomegranate flower forms with richly varied petals, representing the early image of pomegranate flowers (Figure 1). From the mid-Zhenguan to the mid-Kaiyuan periods, the patterns were simplified with little variation (Figure 2). From the mid-Kaiyuan period to the end of the Tang, the patterns tended towards peonies, with rounded petals that conveyed a sense of volume (Figure 3) (Zhang Xiaoxia, 2005; Dang Jiaxuan, 2009). The overall structure often employed a cross (swastika) configuration.

Figure 1: *Pomegranate precious appearance pattern*

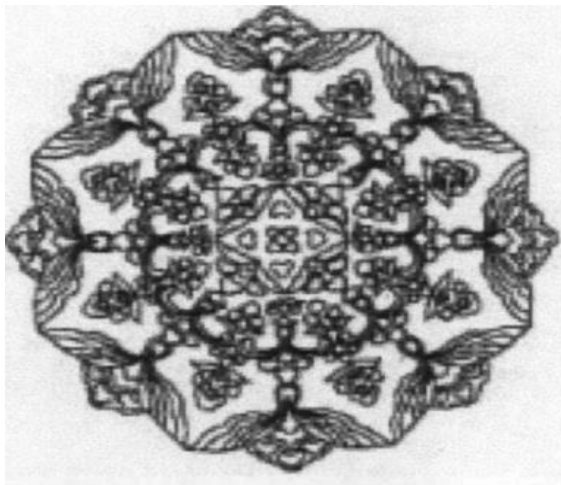


Figure 2: *Simplified precious appearance pattern*



Figure 1. Source: "Collection of Dunhuang Patterns Through the Ages"

Figure 2. Source: "Dunhuang Costumes Patterns Through the Ages"

Figure 3: *Full precious appearance pattern,*



Source: "Dunhuang Costumes Patterns Through the Ages".

4.1.2 Meaning

"Precious Appearance" originally refers to an honorific title for Buddha, with the earliest documented evidence found in the Southern Dynasties' "Selection of Enlightened Literature." The precious appearance flower, introduced to China with Buddhism, originates from Buddhist lotus motifs, symbolizing purity and "samsara." Initially used in Buddhist contexts to represent sanctity and dignity, the precious appearance flower motif, as Buddhism became Sinicized during the Tang Dynasty, was integrated into secular contexts as a symbol of auspiciousness and wealth. It was often combined with peonies (wealth), lotuses (continuity), and chrysanthemums (longevity, elegance), displaying a comprehensive beauty. The cross (swastika) structure has been a symbolic pattern in China since ancient times, associated with the sun and solar deities (Zhang Xiaoxia, 2005).

4.2 Scroll Pattern

4.2.1 Development

The scroll pattern does not refer to any specific plant in reality; its skeletal shape is derived from the vines of climbing plants, incorporating features of the precious appearance and entwined branch motifs, named for its curled floral and foliate designs. Influenced by societal and economic factors during the Tang Dynasty, the scroll pattern predominantly featured flowers, with vines playing a supporting role, making the pattern extremely lavish and free (Figure 4) (Dang Jiaxuan, 2009). The Tang Dynasty scroll pattern combined honeysuckle motifs with cloud scroll motifs, and through the analysis of scroll pattern shapes, it can be summarized that the basic pattern units of honeysuckle and cloud scrolls evolved into the scroll pattern (Figure 5) (Zhang Xiaoxia, 2005).



Figure 4: *Scroll pattern.*

Source: "Collection of Dunhuang
Patterns"/91

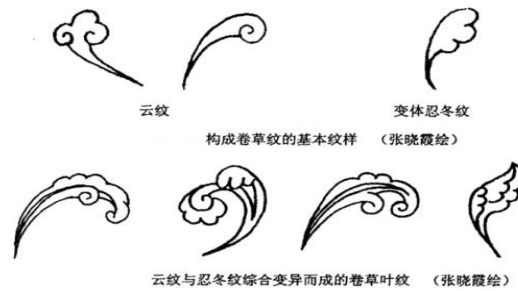


Figure 5: *Evolution of the scroll pattern.*

Source: "The Origin and Development of
Ancient Chinese Plant Decorative Patterns"/113

4.2.2 Meaning

The endlessly flowing form of the scroll pattern, combined with Daoist principles of mutual generation of opposites and Buddhist concepts of samsara, expresses the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature and the imagery of life's cycle. Its fluid and lively shape symbolizes auspicious clouds and the rotation of the universe, imbued with profound meanings. When integrated with different themes, the scroll pattern encapsulates a variety of cultural significances, reflecting the inclusivity and unchanging core values of traditional culture (Wang Qunshan, 2022).

4.3 Lotus Pattern

4.3.1 Development

The lotus pattern in China, originating from primitive society and flourishing during the Tang Dynasty, was widely disseminated under the influence of Buddhism. Due to the absorption of foreign cultures, the lotus pattern during the Tang Dynasty showcased rich and varied styles, especially with the emergence of the precious appearance flower, reflecting the strength of the nation and a culture of openness and inclusivity. The style of lotus patterns transitioned from early exaggeration and intricacy to later softness and simplicity (Xu Lijuan, 2012).

Taking the lotus in Dunhuang caisson paintings as the research object, the lotus patterns in Dunhuang caisson paintings underwent significant changes from the early to the late Tang Dynasty. In the early Tang, the lotus transitioned from single petals to clustered flowers, with Buddhist Wheel of Law patterns and cloud motifs beginning to appear (Figure 6). During the height of the Tang, the lotus pattern shrank in the center of the caisson, with increased and enriched decorations around the edges (Figure 7), leading to the "Precious Appearance Flower." In the middle Tang, the patterns simplified, with colors and decorations becoming more restrained and structures shifting from divergent to centripetal (Figure 8). The late Tang style continued the middle Tang, with further simplified patterns and more focused structures (Xu Lijuan, 2012).

Grotto 329



Figure 6: *Early Tang in Mogao*
Source: "Decorative Patterns of Dunhuang Dynasties China" /33

Grotto 320



Figure 7: *High Tang in Mogao*
Source: Decorative Patterns of Dunhuang Dynasties, China /41



Figure 8: *Middle Tang in Mogao Grotto 201*

Source: "Chinese Dunhuang Decorative Patterns Through the Ages"/46.

4.3.2 Meaning

In Buddhist temples, the lotus symbolizes sanctity and brightness, representing the rebirth of the soul and the pure land. Its importance lies in its natural beauty and symbolism of rebirth, also symbolizing the origin of life, the beginning of all things, and the growth of national spirit and soul potential (Chang Shana, 2004; Ma Chao, 2017).

In terms of structural design, Buddhist art creation often employs circular shapes, reflecting the aesthetic concepts of completeness and perfection. Although Buddhist scriptures do not explicitly mention it, the widespread use of circles in Buddhist art reflects the pursuit of the beauty of "roundness." This aesthetic concept, introduced from India to China, blended with the traditional Chinese concept of seeking blessings, profoundly influencing Chinese aesthetic ideals and enriching the connotations of decorative patterns (Dang Jiaxuan, 2009).

4.4 Camellia Pattern

4.4.1 Development

The camellia pattern emerged as a new style in the middle Tang period, with camellia flowers depicted from both frontal and lateral views. Common in middle Tang grotto decorations, the pattern initially adorned caissons (Figure 9) and later appeared in borders, flat areas, and backlighting. According to Dunhuang Grotto decorative patterns, the camellia pattern evolved from the Hundred Flowers pattern of the high Tang period to become an independent camellia motif (Xu Jialu, 2019).



Figure 9: Middle Tang camellia pattern in caisson of Dunhuang Mogao Grotto 180.

https://www.hellorf.com/image/show/hi2241763218?utm_source=bdimg&utm_content=local&utm_term=hi2241763218.

4.4.2 Meaning

In Tang Dynasty art, the camellia pattern symbolized elegance and purity, representing fearlessness in the face of adversity. Valuing culture and aesthetics, Tang society appreciated the camellia for its refreshing and unworldly image, symbolizing cultural refinement and sophisticated taste. Its resilience in blooming during the cold season embodied a steadfast vitality, thus symbolizing in the culture purity, strength, and enduring courage in the face of hardships. Additionally, the camellia's characteristic of blooming in winter also symbolized vitality and hope.

4.5 Grape Pattern

4.5.1 Development

Grapes, as an exotic fruit introduced to China during the Han Dynasty, saw the development of grape patterns alongside. In the early Tang period, grape patterns appeared primarily in two forms: one was the realistic type (Figure 10), which portrayed grape berries with true-to-life delicacy; the other was the stylized type (Figure 11), featuring tri-lobed leaves with multiple layers, where small arc lines painted on the leaves resembled bunches of grapes or flowers. The grape pattern also served as one of the main motifs in grotto caissons and was painted on borders and backlighting (Xu Jialu, 2019).



Figure 10: *Early Tang in Mogao*

Source: "Chinese Dunhuang Decorative Patterns through the Ages"/34 Tang Dynasty Textiles"



Figure 11: *Reconstruction of grape pattern*

Source: "Analysis of the Themes and Meanings of Grape Patterns on Han and

4.5.2 Meaning

The grape pattern, combined with human and tree patterns, symbolizes abundance and the proliferation of life. The combination of human figures with grape patterns may represent two concrete scenes: one is the scene of grape harvest; the other is the scene of worshipping the wine god. When combined with purely plant-based and bird-and-flower patterns, the grape pattern expresses people's longing for nature and a better life, embodying the freedom of the spiritual world (Li Jiawei, 2023).

5. Discussion

5.1 The Role and Importance of Buddhist Plant Patterns in Religious Communication during the Tang Dynasty

1. **Symbolism and Spiritual Meaning:** Patterns such as the lotus, symbolizing purity and transcendence, and the scroll, representing the harmonious coexistence between humans and nature, as well as the imagery of life's cycle, carry rich symbolic meanings and spiritual essence. Through these patterns, people can perceive Buddhist doctrines and philosophical concepts, fostering an understanding and transmission of faith.
2. **Expression of Cultural Traditions:** Buddhist plant patterns reflect the aesthetics and artistic views within specific cultural traditions of different countries. For example, the Precious Appearance flower pattern in China symbolizes sanctity and dignity. These patterns allow for the visual expression and dissemination of culture, serving as a rich medium for cultural exchange.
3. **Religious Architecture and Ceremonies:** Buddhist plant patterns are extensively found in temple architecture, sculptures, paintings, and various religious ceremonial decorations. They not only beautify religious sites but also convey the profound connotations of faith through their designs.

5.2 Conveyance of Buddhist Faith through Plant Patterns

1. **Plant Seasonality:** Assigning auspicious meanings based on the growth seasons of plants, such as camellias blooming in cold seasons, symbolizes vitality and hope.
2. **Plant Characteristics:** Assigning auspicious meanings based on the growth characteristics and structures of plants, such as grapes bearing many fruits, symbolizes the proliferation of life and blessings.
3. **Expression through Pattern Structure:** Enhancing the meanings assigned to patterns based on their structural features, like the circular structure commonly used in lotus and Precious Appearance flower patterns embodying the aesthetic concepts of harmony and perfection; the cross (swastika) structure symbolizing the sun and solar deities; the fluid and lively form of scroll patterns symbolizing the Buddhist concept of samsara, auspicious clouds, and the rotation of the universe.
4. **Derivative Mythical Plants:** Some plant patterns used in Chinese Buddhism are not actual plants but are developed by combining other plants and auspicious patterns. For example, the scroll pattern combines the honeysuckle and auspicious cloud patterns, carrying the auspicious meanings of both; the Precious Appearance flower pattern, developed from the lotus and incorporating peonies and chrysanthemums, thus has diverse meanings determined by the combined elements.

6. Conclusion

The study shows that the openness of the Tang Dynasty promoted the development of plant motif art, absorbing foreign artistic elements to form unique pattern types. There was greater diversity and maturity in composition and themes, displaying the Tang Dynasty's lavish and grand visual art characteristics, reflecting the pursuit of auspicious and fulfilling thoughts, and advancing the further development of traditional Chinese decorative patterns.

In terms of impact on future generations:

1. **Artistic Inheritance:** The artistic forms and symbolic meanings of Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns were adopted and developed by later generations, becoming an important part of the Chinese Buddhist art tradition.
2. **Cultural Integration:** Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns not only influenced Chinese Buddhist art but also affected the Buddhist art of neighboring countries and regions, facilitating the exchange and integration of Buddhist culture in East Asia.
3. **Modern Appreciation:** Today, Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns remain popular elements in art and design, widely applied not only in religious artworks but also in various aspects of modern life, such as fashion design and home decor, showcasing their timeless aesthetic value and cultural significance.

Buddhist plant patterns are not only a vital component of Buddhist art but also a precious element of East Asian cultural heritage. These patterns express Buddhist meanings through (1) plant seasonality, (2) inherent plant characteristics, (3) structural features of the patterns, and (4) mythical auspicious plants, thus playing a role in conveying doctrines and decorating the atmosphere in Buddhist activities. In the Tang Dynasty, the use of these patterns was especially rich and intricate, reflecting society's high regard for and reverence for Buddhist culture at that time.

Future research directions and fields can innovate and apply the ways in which Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns convey Buddhist meanings to modern design, aiding the transmission and development of cultural heritage. This can be deepened and expanded in several directions.

1. **Artistic Design Innovation:** Integrating the expression methods and meanings of Tang Dynasty Buddhist plant patterns into modern design to create artistic works and lifestyle products that possess traditional cultural depth while conforming to contemporary aesthetic standards. This not only promotes the transmission of traditional culture but also provides new inspiration for modern design.
2. **Application of Technology:** Exploring how modern technologies, such as digitalization, augmented reality (AR), and virtual reality (VR), can be used to protect, display, and disseminate Buddhist plant patterns. Technical means can allow more people to understand this cultural heritage in a more intuitive and interactive manner.

Cultural Exchange and Education: Promoting mutual understanding and respect between Eastern and Western cultures through international exhibitions, cultural exchange programs, and educational courses centered around Buddhist plant patterns. It is also worth exploring how these patterns and meanings can be integrated into modern Buddhist education and practice to help.

Conflict of Interest

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