
The Symbolic Connotations of the Lotus in the ShuiLu Ritual Paintings of Baoning Temple

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Abstract: Lotus is a common plant in Chinese society, but in Buddhism, it represents other meanings besides being a symbol of cleanliness and purity. This article starts with the original meaning of lotus, and then analyzes the symbolic significance of lotus in Buddhism, in order to deepen the intention of lotus. At the same time, the author also starts with the water and land paintings of Baoning Temple to interpret the connotation of lotus flowers from an image perspective, and then extends it to other images.

Keywords: Baoning Temple; ShuiLu Painting; Lotus Flower

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1. Introduction

The lotus is extensively documented in Buddhist scriptures, symbolizing the Buddha's purity and compassion while serving as one of the fundamental components of the sublime landscapes of the Buddha-realm. It embodies the faithful's aspiration for the Western Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss. In Buddhist practice, flowers constitute a common offering, widely employed and indispensable in Buddhist ritual assemblies. Numerous related pictorial works have been preserved, such as the ubiquitous floral motifs in Dunhuang murals and water-land ritual paintings^[1].

The lotus image in the Lotus Sutra can be roughly divided into three categories. The first is to use lotus as a metaphor for mutual benefit. The second is the transformation of lotus flowers. The third is the Lotus Seat. The Avatamsaka Sutra also provides a wonderful metaphor for flowers and fruits, using "tree roots" and "flowers and fruits" as metaphors for sentient beings and Buddhas respectively, demonstrating the importance of universal salvation for the cultivation of Buddha. Flowers are also used for offering in Buddhism, which generally refers to offering to Buddha, Dharma, and monks. Among them, flowers represented by compassion and purity are at the forefront of offerings. Offering flowers to Buddha not only achieves supreme bodhi, but also accumulates merit and blessings. In the Tang Dynasty, there were certain rules for offering flowers to Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, Vajrayana, etc.^[2] Buddhist scriptures recorded that the flowers offered were all fresh flowers, but in practical operation, some regions would use raw flowers instead. At the same time, depending on the region, the flowers offered also vary. For example, in the Dunhuang manuscripts, it is recorded that the Dunhuang clans often used flowers produced locally in Dunhuang to offer to Buddhas and Bodhisattvas. This also indicates that Buddhism does not have many requirements for the flowers used for offering to Buddhas, and all water and

land flowers can be used.

Currently, academic research on this subject remains limited. Zhang Tongbiao examined the early Buddhist lotus imagery, drawing on scriptures of the Lotus Sutra corpus to explore the origin and evolutionary trajectory of the lotus's influence on Buddhism. Lu Xixing noted that due to the difficulty of preserving fresh flowers for extended periods in Buddhist floral offerings, artificial flowers were often substituted. Tan Chanxue argued that the practice of crafting artificial flower trees in Buddhism emerged as early as the Northern and Southern Dynasties. Sha Wutian et al. pointed out that floral offerings are an integral form of Buddhist worship, with all flowers growing in aquatic or terrestrial environments being suitable for such use. Building on prior scholarship, this paper investigates the symbolic meanings and visual representations of the lotus. Any inadequacies herein are subject to correction by esteemed scholars.

The lotus, a symbol of the Dharma and a vessel for offerings, took on additional roles in Buddhist ceremonies after the Tang Dynasty with the prevalence of yoga teachings. Beyond its symbolic association with Buddhist teachings, the lotus increasingly served to enhance the solemn and grand atmosphere during Dharma gatherings. This is evident in the diverse forms of lotuses depicted in extant Buddhist preaching illustrations. While the scriptures do not specify the exact methods for offering flowers to the Buddha, various floral offerings can be inferred from textual records and visual representations. In iconographic depictions, figures holding flowers—such as bodhisattvas, devas, and disciples—are richly varied. For instance, in the murals of Bao Ning Temple, bodhisattvas are shown holding lotuses and seated in meditation on a lotus throne. Among the celestial beings of the Four Pure Abodes in the formless realm, one deity is depicted with a single head and eight arms, standing on a white lotus, while holding a lotus in its upper right hand. The hand-held floral tray is also a common offering form in Buddhist rituals. As recorded in Dunhuang manuscripts, floral trays were frequently used in temple offerings. At the waist hall of Qinglong Temple in Jishan, a thousand-armed Guanyin mural is painted behind the fan screen of the water-land painting, with attendant bodhisattvas holding floral trays and facing Guanyin. In the water-land painting of Baining Temple, a female attendant in the assembly of Brahma holds a tray bearing a single lotus. In the assembly of the Great Emperor of the Northern Purple Crape, a pink-robed attendant stands to the right rear of the Emperor, holding a basket containing a lotus.

The lotus not only serves as an offering in water and land paintings but also appears as a decorative element. The most common example is the lotus throne, on which the Buddha and Bodhisattvas sit to preach. This has profound significance. Bodhisattva Nagarjuna explained the reason why the Buddha sits on a lotus. He believed that first, the lotus is soft and pure; second, it is large enough to accommodate a person sitting in the lotus position; and third, preaching on a lotus can help believers achieve Anuttarā Samyak Sambodhi.

Next is the depiction of standing on a lotus. The murals of Baoning Temple's land and water paintings feature multiple images of figures standing on lotuses, such as the Bodhisattva Tianzang, who wears a jeweled crown, dons a red kasaya, is adorned with necklaces, and treads on a blue lotus; a multi-armed deity from the Four Sky Realms of the Formless Realm, depicted with one head and eight arms, holding objects while standing on a white lotus; Brahma, the principal deity among the upper four heavens of the Formless Realm, holding a blue fan and standing on a blue lotus; and the Bodhisattva Cundi, clad in a blue robe, wearing a red kasaya, holding a lotus, adorned with a jeweled crown, decorated with necklaces, and stepping on a blue lotus. Standing on a lotus is a significant symbol of the Buddha's enlightenment, and in Buddhism, this act is considered highly sacred and solemn. In the context of paintings, this not only symbolizes the transmission of Buddhist teachings in a direct manner but also uses the sacred lotus to metaphorically represent the holiness of the artwork.

Finally, lotus flowers appeared in the form of character decorations and headwear. In the water and land paintings of Baoning Temple, the clothing of Buddhas, Bodhisattvas, and gods in the heavenly realm are decorated with lotus patterns, which not only reflect the Buddhist and Taoist nature of lotus flowers but also demonstrate their artistic sense. The appearance of lotus flowers as headwear is also a major feature of water and land paintings, such as the great Wei De stepping and throwing the attendants beside the Ming king, wearing red clothes and adorned with lotus flowers on the head; There are three gods wearing lotus decorations in the four heavens of the colorless realm; In the colorless realm of the Great Brahma, there are four heavens and all other heavenly beings who share two sets of lotus flower headdresses.

There are many lotus flower headdresses of this kind, which will not be repeated here^[3].

The lotus flowers in the water and land paintings of Baoning Temple symbolize Buddhism, and as offerings, they symbolize the sacred and solemn nature of the water and land Buddhist ceremony. Lotus flowers, as offerings, are also prominently depicted in the water and land paintings of Baoning Temple. The majority of people sitting on lotus pedestals are Buddhas and Bodhisattvas, which is in line with the six Paramita teachings mentioned earlier. Holding lotus flowers and deities adorned with lotus flowers are mainly seen among Bodhisattvas and heavenly beings, while gods below the heavenly beings have not yet seen lotus flower ornaments. The Water and Land Dharma Society was originally a Buddhist dharma society with a strict hierarchy. According to the order of Buddha, Bodhisattva, Ming Wang, Arhat, Heaven, Earth and Lonely Souls, the gods with high status only enjoy the provision, transcend all the lonely souls on the water and land, and the gods and lonely souls with low status accept the transcendence. Therefore, the lotus flower, which symbolizes Buddhism and is the provision, mostly supports the gods in heaven and above.

There are countless examples in Buddhism where lotus flowers are used as a metaphor for Buddha. This article first starts with Buddhist scriptures such as the Lotus Sutra and the Avatamsaka Sutra, pointing out that lotus flowers are the pure cause and effect theory of Buddhism, and make them the overall symbol of Buddhism. Wherever Buddha and Bodhisattva appear, lotus flowers always follow closely. At the same time, the lotus flower image, which symbolizes Buddhism in ancient texts, also appears as a form of offering in Buddhism. In the water and land paintings of Baoning Temple, Bodhisattvas and the main gods of the heavenly realm appear holding lotus flowers, and their attendants also appear holding lotus flowers. Regardless of the specific image, the large number of images in Buddhist paintings depicting flowers as offerings to Buddha are important image materials for our study of Buddhist flower imagery, and there is room for further exploration.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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