

The Impact of Buddhist Thought on the Ideology of Jin Dynasty Painting in China

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the transformative influence of Buddhist philosophy on the ideological structure of painting during the Jin Dynasty (265–420 CE) in China. Employing a qualitative methodology that combines iconographic analysis, historical contextualization, and descriptive interpretation, the research focuses on representative artworks to explore how Buddhist metaphysical principles reshaped visual expression. The study reveals that core Buddhist concepts—such as *śūnyatā* (emptiness), karma (causality), and transcendence—significantly influenced the shift from representational accuracy to philosophical symbolism. Visual strategies such as negative space, abstract brushwork, and cyclical composition emerged as aesthetic responses to Buddhist cosmology. Furthermore, the findings suggest that Buddhist ideology reframed the painter's role as a spiritual mediator, elevating painting from decorative function to contemplative practice. This redefinition paralleled broader socio-cultural transitions, including the syncretism of Buddhist and indigenous *qi*-based worldviews during a politically fragmented era. Methodologically, the research bridges the disciplines of art history, religious studies, and visual semiotics, contributing to a more nuanced understanding of how ideology is encoded within aesthetic forms. The study ultimately argues that the ideological transformation of Jin Dynasty painting under Buddhist influence laid critical groundwork for the development of Chinese art's introspective and symbolic dimensions, which would later mature in subsequent dynasties. By situating visual culture within its philosophical and historical framework, the paper offers a deeper appreciation of Buddhism's enduring role in shaping Chinese artistic identity.

Keywords: *Buddhist thought, Chinese Jin Dynasty painting, Cultural exchange*

INTRODUCTION

The Jin Dynasty (265–420 CE) occupies a pivotal position in Chinese history as a period of profound cultural transformation. Emerging from the collapse of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE–220 CE), the Jin era

witnessed political fragmentation marked by the division of China into northern and southern regions, social upheaval due to nomadic invasions, and the flourishing of xuanxue(mysterious learning)—a philosophical movement blending Daoist and Confucian ideas. Amidst this instability, Buddhism, introduced to China via the Silk Road in the first century CE (Figure 1), began its gradual integration into Chinese society, particularly gaining traction among elites and intellectuals seeking solace in its doctrines of impermanence and spiritual transcendence.

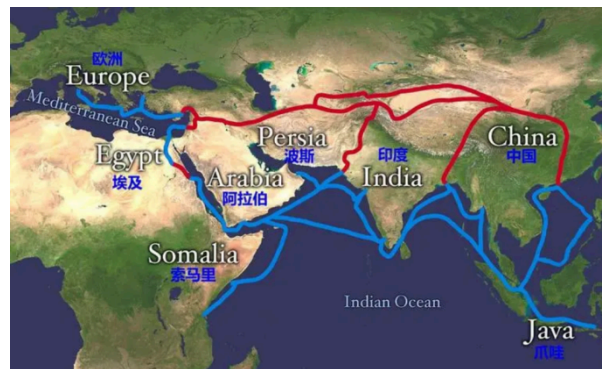


Figure 1. The Transmission Routes of Buddhism from India to China during the Han and Jin Dynasties

(Source: <https://www.163.com/dy/article/I8P0SU8S055634PA.html>, 2023)

Buddhism's rise during the Jin Dynasty was facilitated by several factors: the translation of key texts like the Lotus Sutra and Heart Sutra by scholars such as Kumarajiva, the patronage of rulers like Emperor Ming of the Eastern Jin (322–325), and the establishment of monasteries that became centers of learning and artistic production (Ashiwa, 2013). Unlike Confucianism's focus on social ethics or Daoism's reverence for nature, Buddhism offered a metaphysical framework centered on the Four Noble Truths, the concept of karma, and the pursuit of nirvāṇa—ideas that resonated deeply with a society grappling with existential uncertainty.

This ideological shift had a profound impact on the arts. Prior to the Jin Dynasty, Chinese painting was primarily rooted in Confucian traditions, emphasizing didactic narratives (e.g., moral exemplars) and decorative motifs aligned with courtly aesthetics. However, the infusion of Buddhist thought introduced a new dimension: art began to serve as a tool for spiritual cultivation. Painters like Gu Kaizhi and Dai Kui experimented with techniques that mirrored Buddhist meditation practices, such as *liubai* (leaving blank space) to evoke emptiness and simplified brushstrokes to reflect spontaneity (Bao, 2023).

Despite the growing scholarly interest in the religious influences on Chinese art, current literature has primarily focused on stylistic and iconographic aspects of Buddhist painting, often overlooking the ideological implications behind these artworks. Particularly in the context of the Jin Dynasty, the extent to which Buddhist thought influenced the ideological underpinnings of painting remains inadequately explored. This gap in scholarship raises the following concern: How did Buddhist philosophy shape the ideological messages embedded in Jin Dynasty painting, and in what ways did this interaction reflect the socio-political realities of the time?

This study aims to explore the impact of Buddhist thought on the ideology of Jin Dynasty painting. The specific objectives are as follows:

- To identify key elements of Buddhist philosophy represented in Jin Dynasty paintings;
- To examine how Buddhist thought influenced the thematic and symbolic content of these artworks;
- To analyze the ideological functions of Buddhist-themed painting within the socio-cultural framework of the Jin Dynasty.

- To achieve the above objectives, this study addresses the following questions:
- What aspects of Buddhist thought are most prominently reflected in Jin Dynasty painting?
- How did these philosophical elements influence the ideological content and purpose of the artworks?
- In what ways did Jin Dynasty painters adapt or reinterpret Buddhist ideas in response to the cultural and political climate?

This research holds both academic and cultural significance. Academically, it contributes to the deeper understanding of how Buddhist philosophy influenced not just the aesthetic forms but also the ideological functions of Jin Dynasty painting. The study offers a new lens through which to examine the interaction between religion and art, particularly by revealing how Buddhist metaphysical concepts—such as emptiness, karma, and enlightenment—shaped the thematic narratives and symbolic expressions in visual art. Culturally, the findings may also deepen our understanding of how spiritual beliefs influenced visual culture in a time of political fragmentation and ethnic diversity. The Jin Dynasty, ruled by the Jurchens, offers a unique context in which Buddhist thought was reinterpreted in ways that reflected both Han Chinese traditions and non-Han cultural adaptations. This contributes to broader discussions on cultural syncretism in medieval China.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Buddhist Thought and Its Transmission into China

Buddhism entered China during the Han Dynasty, evolving through several waves of translation, adaptation, and syncretism. Key philosophical schools such as Mahayana Buddhism, Huayan, Chan (Zen), and Tiantai developed distinctly Chinese characteristics, shaping not only religious practice but also cultural and artistic norms (Ding, 2008).

Scholars such as Fan (2003) and Huang (2010) have outlined how Buddhist doctrines like emptiness (*śūnyatā*), karma, rebirth, and the Bodhisattva ideal were incorporated into Chinese intellectual discourse. These ideas gradually permeated artistic expression, transforming visual representation from realistic depictions to vehicles of metaphysical meaning. However, these studies tend to focus on earlier or more central dynasties such as the Tang or Song, and rarely touch upon the Jin Dynasty's reception of these ideas. (Figure 2)

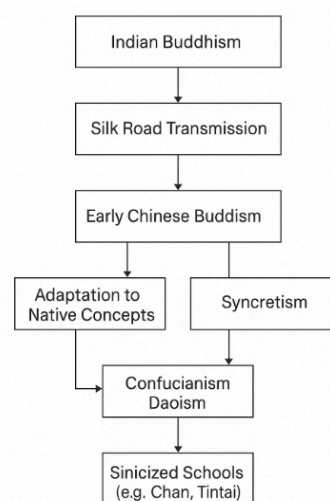


Figure 2. Transmission and transformation of Buddhist thought into Chinese culture

The Influence of Buddhism on Chinese Art and Painting

A substantial body of literature has addressed how Buddhist thought influenced visual art in China. Studies by Jun (2022) and Kieschnick (2003) emphasize the fusion of religious doctrine and artistic form, noting how elements like halo design, compositional hierarchy, and narrative sequencing were derived from Buddhist cosmology and sutra illustrations (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Comparative aesthetic principles in Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism

More recent research by Liu et al. (2022) explores how Buddhist symbolism functioned ideologically to express political legitimacy or moral instruction, especially under state patronage. These works often examine the Northern Wei, Sui, and Tang periods, where imperial support for Buddhism was more robust and well-documented.

While such studies are foundational, there is a notable lack of scholarship on how Buddhist artistic principles were interpreted or adapted during the Jin Dynasty—a period in which political fragmentation and ethnic diversity may have altered the religious and ideological roles of painting.

Jin Dynasty Painting: A Neglected Field

Compared to the Tang and Song periods, the Jin Dynasty has received relatively limited scholarly attention in art historical discourse. This is partly due to the scarcity of surviving paintings and a dominant historiographical focus on Han Chinese dynasties. However, recent archaeological discoveries and regional research have begun to shed light on Jin-era visual culture.

Some scholars, such as Lou (2006), have pointed out stylistic continuities between Northern Song painting and Jin Buddhist art, particularly in temple murals and scroll paintings from Shanxi and Hebei provinces. These works often combine traditional landscape techniques with overtly spiritual or didactic content rooted in Buddhist themes. Nevertheless, most existing studies remain descriptive, focusing on formal analysis or stylistic attribution. Little effort has been made to interpret these paintings as ideological texts shaped by Buddhist cosmology, ethics, or metaphysics. The ideological functions—how these works expressed identity, virtue, or political worldview—remain underexplored.

Literary Aesthetics and Buddhist Syncretism

The syncretic influence of Buddhist thought extended beyond painting to Jin-era literary and calligraphic practices, creating a cohesive cultural ecosystem. For instance, the poetry of Tao Yuanming (365–427)—though composed during the Eastern Jin—exhibits Buddhist-inflected themes of

impermanence (anicca) and non-attachment, paralleling the visual strategies in painting. His verse "Returning to My Garden and Field" uses natural imagery to evoke dependent origination, much like how landscape elements in murals symbolize cosmic interconnection.

In calligraphy, the "running script" style popularized by Wang Xizhi (303–361) embodied Buddhist concepts of spontaneity through fluid brushwork—an aesthetic that migrated to painting via techniques like Xieyi. The Jin dynasty's "Letter on Calligraphy" by Wang Xun integrates Daoist qi-theory with Buddhist mindfulness, stating that "the brush's movement should reflect the emptiness of the mind"—a principle later adopted in painterly abstraction. This literary-calligraphic dialogue with Buddhism reveals how visual art was part of a broader ideological project to reconcile transcendental thought with everyday aesthetic practice.

Buddhist Ideology and Visual Culture

In the broader field of visual culture, scholars have emphasized the ideological role of images—not merely as aesthetic objects, but as carriers of belief systems and cultural narratives. Marshall (2000) and Pan (2024) argue that religious images are active agents in shaping collective memory and moral behavior.

Applying these theories to Buddhist art, Ren and Wang (2021) have demonstrated how Buddhist murals in Dunhuang constructed sacred time and space, while Singh (2014) traced how Buddhist concepts informed visual storytelling in Song dynasty art.

These theoretical models provide a useful framework for analyzing how Buddhist thought may have influenced the ideological content of Jin Dynasty paintings—not just their iconography, but their intended social and psychological functions.

Identified Research Gap

Although the influence of Buddhism on Chinese art has been widely acknowledged, the ideological dimensions of Buddhist-themed painting in the Jin Dynasty remain insufficiently addressed. Most studies emphasize either the stylistic lineage or religious iconography, neglecting the philosophical functions and cultural negotiations embedded in the art.

Furthermore, given the Jin Dynasty's unique cultural landscape—marked by ethnic hybridity, political instability, and religious syncretism—there is a pressing need to investigate how Buddhist thought was reinterpreted in this specific historical context. This study seeks to fill that gap by examining how Jin Dynasty paintings employed Buddhist philosophy not merely as a decorative or devotional tool, but as an ideological medium.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive research design, drawing from methods in art history, religious studies, and cultural semiotics. The research is structured as a thematic analysis of visual material, guided by Buddhist philosophical frameworks and socio-political contexts (Figure 4). Since the primary objective is to uncover ideological meanings and religious influence, the research emphasizes contextual interpretation over quantitative or statistical analysis (Brucel, 2001).

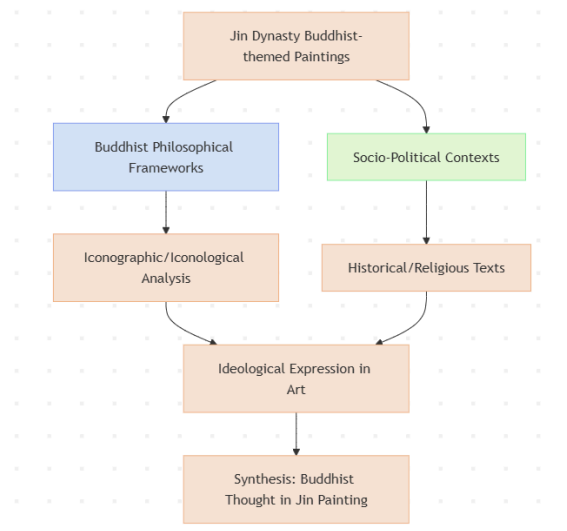


Figure 4. Research Flowchart

The design is exploratory and interdisciplinary in nature, relying on both visual analysis of selected paintings and textual analysis of historical and religious sources. This dual-method approach facilitates a more nuanced understanding of how Buddhist thought was embodied in the visual language of Jin Dynasty painting. In order to achieve the three research objectives, a table is made as follows (Table 1.):

Table 1. Mapping of Research Methods to Objectives

Corresponding Research Method Example Application	Corresponding Research Method Example Application
Iconographic analysis of religious symbols (e.g., lotus thrones, mudras).	Analysis of Dunhuang mural's lotus motifs as signs of rebirth.
Doctrinal mapping of visual elements to Buddhist concepts (e.g., <i>śūnyatā</i> to negative space).	Linking negative space in Gu's works to Heart Sutra emptiness doctrine.
Socio-cultural contextualization via historical and patronage records.	texts Interpreting imperial patronage of Buddhist art as a tool for political legitimacy.

Data Sources and Selection Criteria

The primary data of this study comprises selected paintings from the Jin Dynasty with identifiable Buddhist themes, symbols, or narratives.(Figure 5) These paintings are chosen based on the following criteria:

- Chronological relevance: The artwork must be dated to, or strongly associated with, the Jin Dynasty (265–420 CE).
- Thematic alignment: The artwork must contain explicit or implicit Buddhist motifs, figures, or iconography.
- Contextual availability: Sufficient historical, cultural, or religious context must exist to allow meaningful interpretation.
- Supplementary data includes: Religious scriptures, particularly those that influenced visual storytelling (e.g., the Lotus Sutra, Avatamsaka Sutra).

Several representative paintings are selected for in-depth analysis. Where original artworks are unavailable, high-resolution images from museum collections and websites are used.



Figure 5. Representative Paintings from Jin Dynasty
 (Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1903-0408-0-1)

Theoretical Framework: Buddhist Aesthetics and Visual Semiotics

This study integrates two theoretical perspectives to deepen the analysis of ideological encoding in Jin Dynasty painting:

Buddhist Aesthetic Theory: Drawing from Mahayana Buddhist philosophy, key concepts such as *sūnyatā* (emptiness), dependent origination, and karma are contextualized within their aesthetic manifestations. Scholars like Tsongkhapa (1357–1419) emphasize that Buddhist art serves as a dharma instrument, where visual elements like negative space (*liubai*) and abstract brushwork embody the metaphysical principle of "form is emptiness, emptiness is form" from the Heart Sutra (Wang, 2012). This framework allows for the interpretation of compositional choices—such as the intentional negative space in Gu Kaizhi's works—not merely as stylistic preferences but as visual articulations of *sūnyatā* doctrine.

Visual Semiotics Theory: Using Barthes' semiotic model of denotation and connotation, the study decodes how Buddhist symbols acquire ideological meaning. For example, the lotus throne in Dunhuang murals denotes a religious iconography, while its connotation extends to the Buddhist concept of spiritual rebirth from muddy waters. This approach is further informed by Panofsky's iconological method, which situates visual signs within their broader cultural and philosophical contexts, enabling the connection between formal elements (e.g., cyclical composition) and doctrinal narratives (e.g., the wheel of karma).

Analytical Framework

Iconographic and Iconological Analysis

Using methods inspired by Panofsky and Chinese art historians like Fu Xinian, the study examines symbolic elements within the paintings. This involves interpreting Buddhist iconography—such as Bodhisattvas, lotus thrones, mudras, or mandalas—within their metaphysical and doctrinal context (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Buddhist Iconography examples

(Source: http://www.360doc.com/content/22/0618/15/5472855_1036511958.shtml)

Philosophical-Hermeneutic Interpretation

Drawing from Buddhist philosophical texts, especially Mahayana doctrines, the study analyzes how concepts such as emptiness (*śūnyatā*), non-duality, and karma are visually represented and ideologically conveyed (Whalen, 2013). The approach reflects a hermeneutic loop between text and image.



Figure 7. Biography of Benevolent Wisdom by Exemplary Women(example of emptiness)

(Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1930-1015-0-2)

Socio-Cultural Contextualization

The study also interprets how paintings reflect the socio-political realities of the Jin Dynasty, such as ethnic hybridity, cultural resistance, and the use of religious ideology for social cohesion or legitimacy. This situates visual meaning within historical power structures.

METHODOLOGY

The process of analysis involves the following steps(Figure 8):

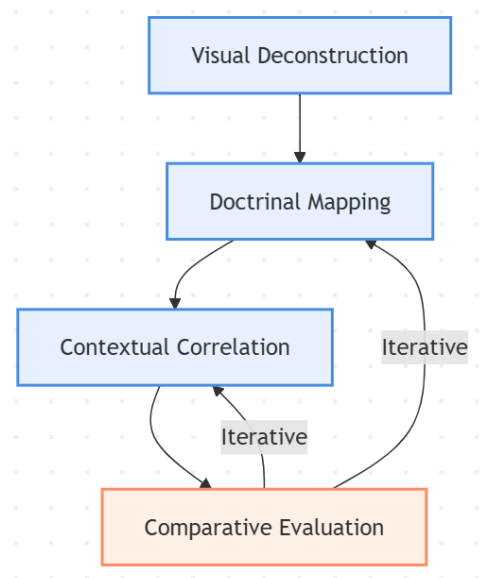


Figure 8. The process of analysis

- **Visual Deconstruction:** Each painting is deconstructed into its thematic, symbolic, and compositional components.
- **Doctrinal Mapping:** These elements are then mapped onto relevant Buddhist philosophical ideas to identify ideological correspondences.
- **Contextual Correlation:** Historical and socio-political data is used to contextualize the painting's function and intended message.
- **Comparative Evaluation:** Where useful, comparisons are made with contemporaneous or later Buddhist artworks (e.g., from the Tang Dynasties) to identify continuities and divergences.

The analysis is iterative, with insights from one painting informing the interpretation of others.

Visual and Ideological Analysis

Sample I: "Nirvana of the Buddha" Mural (Dunhuang Grottoes, Western Jin Dynasty) (Figure 9)

Visual Description

This mural in the Dunhuang Grottoes, dating back to the Western Jin Dynasty, is a remarkable piece of art that captivates viewers with its grandeur and intricate details. Spanning across a significant area of the cave wall, it showcases the final stage of the Buddha's earthly journey - the Nirvana.

The central focus is the reclining Buddha, depicted in a life - sized and elongated form. His body lies on a raised dais, covered with a robe that has delicate patterns of swirling clouds and auspicious symbols. The Buddha's face is serene, with closed eyes and a faint smile, indicating his attainment of ultimate peace and liberation. His right hand is placed under his head, while the left arm lies gently along his body.

Surrounding the Buddha are an array of disciples, bodhisattvas, and celestial beings. The disciples are shown with expressions of grief and reverence. Some are weeping, their faces contorted with sorrow, while others stand in solemn poses, hands clasped in prayer. The bodhisattvas, on the other hand, maintain a more composed demeanor, radiating a sense of wisdom and compassion. They are

adorned with elaborate jewelry, including necklaces, bracelets, and headpieces, and their robes flow gracefully around them.

The background of the mural is a richly painted landscape. There are mountains in the distance, painted in shades of blue and green, with wispy clouds floating around them. Below the Buddha, a small stream meanders through the scene, symbolizing the flow of life and the passage of time. In the sky above, there are flying apsaras, their long scarves fluttering in the wind as they scatter flowers, adding a touch of celestial beauty and celebration to the otherwise solemn event.



Figure 9. Nirvana of the Buddha

(Source: https://mbd.baidu.com/newspage/data/dtlandingsuper?nid=dt_4858686560562597067, 2024)

Iconographic Interpretation

The reclining Buddha in the Nirvana pose is a powerful symbol in Buddhism. It represents the Buddha's final release from the cycle of rebirth, his entry into the state of Nirvana. The raised dais on which he lies can be seen as a symbol of his elevated spiritual status, separating him from the mundane world.

The disciples' expressions of grief symbolize the human attachment to the physical form of the Buddha and the difficulty of accepting the concept of impermanence. Their reactions also serve as a reminder to the viewers of the transient nature of all things (Xing, 2013).

The bodhisattvas, with their calm and composed appearance, represent the ideal of spiritual enlightenment and the ability to transcend worldly emotions. Their elaborate adornments are not just for aesthetic purposes but also symbolize the richness of spiritual attainment.

The flying apsaras and the scattered flowers are symbols of celebration and the celestial realm. They indicate that the Buddha's Nirvana is not a sad event but a joyous occasion, a triumph over suffering and the cycle of existence. The mountains and the stream in the background symbolize the natural world, which is an integral part of Buddhist cosmology. They represent the harmony between the spiritual and the natural, and the idea that all things are interconnected.

Ideological Dimensions

This mural reflects several important ideological aspects of the Western Jin Dynasty. First, it reinforces the Buddhist ideology of Nirvana as the ultimate goal of spiritual pursuit. By depicting the Buddha's entry into Nirvana, it encourages the viewers to strive for spiritual liberation and to overcome their worldly attachments.

In the context of the Western Jin Dynasty, which was a time of political instability and social unrest, the mural also provided a source of spiritual comfort and hope. It presented a vision of an eternal and peaceful state beyond the chaos of the earthly world, giving people a sense of purpose and meaning in life.

The hierarchical arrangement of the Buddha, bodhisattvas, and disciples also reflects the social and religious hierarchies of the time. It implies that there is an order in the spiritual world, just as there is in society. This could have been used to justify the existing social order, with the ruling class perhaps seeing themselves as having a higher spiritual status, similar to the bodhisattvas, and the common people as the disciples, in need of guidance and instruction. The strategic use of negative space around the reclining Buddha—an expanse of unpainted wall that contrasts with the densely populated assembly of disciples—reflects the Buddhist aesthetic of *śūnyatā* as a visual metaphor. Through semiotic analysis, this emptiness functions not as a compositional void but as a signifier of transcendental reality, prompting viewers to contemplate the distinction between the illusory physical form (denotation) and the ultimate emptiness of self-nature (connotation). This aligns with Kumarajiva's translation of the Lotus Sutra, which emphasizes that "all dharmas are empty of self-nature", a doctrine materialized through the mural's spatial hierarchy.

Additionally, the cyclical composition of the mural—with the apsaras' flying scarves creating circular motifs—visually encodes the concept of *samsāra*. Using Peirce's semiotic triad, these forms act as icons, resembling the cyclical motion of existence, while simultaneously serving as indexes of the Buddha's liberation from this cycle. This dual signification highlights how Jin Dynasty painters used visual semiotics to reconcile the paradox of depicting the "indescribable" state of nirvana.

Furthermore, the mural's emphasis on the interconnectedness of all things, as symbolized by the natural elements in the background, may have influenced the way people in the Western Jin Dynasty thought about their relationship with the environment and with each other. It promoted a sense of unity and harmony, which was crucial for the stability and well-being of society during a difficult period in history.

Sample II: Analysis of Gu Kaizhi's "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies" from a Buddhist - influenced Perspective(Figure 10)

Visual Description

Gu Kaizhi's "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies" is a scroll painting that unfolds a series of scenes depicting the lives and moral guidance for court ladies. The figures are rendered with delicate, flowing lines, typical of Gu Kaizhi's "silk - like" brushwork. The ladies are dressed in long, flowing robes with elaborate patterns, their hairstyles are intricately coiffed, and their postures are graceful and demure.

In the painting, some court ladies are engaged in daily activities such as dressing, reading, or having conversations. The composition is arranged in a sequential manner, with each scene separated by inscriptions that convey moral teachings. The colors are relatively soft, mainly using hues like ochre, pale blue, and light green, creating an elegant and refined atmosphere. The background is simple, with minimal landscape elements such as a few rocks or trees to set the scene, focusing the viewer's attention on the figures and their actions.



Figure 10. Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies
(Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1903-0408-0-1)

Doctrinal Representation

Although not a purely Buddhist - themed painting, during the Jin Dynasty, the influence of Buddhist thought permeated various aspects of culture. The emphasis on moral self - discipline and proper behavior in the painting can be related to Buddhist ethical teachings. Just as Buddhism advocates for self - restraint and moral conduct to achieve spiritual progress, the "Admonitions" encourages court ladies to adhere to moral norms in their daily lives.

The idea of inner reflection, which is also a crucial aspect of Buddhist practice, can be inferred from the scenes where the ladies seem to be in a state of quiet contemplation. The way the figures are depicted with a sense of calmness and poise may reflect the influence of Buddhist - inspired mental states, where one seeks to maintain a composed mind amidst the complexities of life. Additionally, the harmonious coexistence of the figures in the painting, with each following the moral guidelines, can be seen as a visual manifestation of the Buddhist concept of harmonious relationships and the interdependence of all beings.

Ideological Implication

This painting reflects the ideological values of the Jin Dynasty, which were a blend of traditional Confucian ethics and emerging Buddhist thought. It served as a means of moral education for the upper - class women in the court, promoting a set of values that emphasized modesty, propriety, and self - control. These values were not only in line with the social order but also resonated with the spiritual pursuits of the time.

In a broader sense, the painting's ideological function was to uphold the cultural and moral fabric of society. By depicting the ideal behavior of court ladies, it set a standard for the entire society to follow. The influence of Buddhist thought in this painting contributed to the overall shift in the ideological landscape of the Jin Dynasty, where people were increasingly seeking spiritual and moral guidance in the face of political instability and social change. It also indicated the integration of different religious and philosophical ideas, as the moral teachings in the painting were a combination of Confucian - based social norms and Buddhist - inspired spiritual cultivation.

Sample III: Gu Kaizhi's "Ode to the Goddess of Luo" - A Buddhist - influenced Visual Narrative(Figure 11)

Visual Description

"Ode to the Goddess of Luo" is a masterpiece by Gu Kaizhi that brings to life the romantic

encounter between the poet Cao Zhi and the Goddess of Luo. The painting is filled with fluid and dynamic lines, creating a sense of movement and grace. The Goddess of Luo is the central figure, depicted with a slender and ethereal body. She is dressed in a flowing, multi-colored robe that billows in the wind, and her long hair is loose, adding to her otherworldly appearance. Her face is delicate, with almond-shaped eyes and a gentle smile, exuding an air of both beauty and mystery.

Around the Goddess, there are various scenes of her interaction with Cao Zhi. In some parts, she is seen floating above the water, surrounded by clouds and celestial beings. The water is painted with wavy lines to suggest its movement, and the clouds are depicted in soft, curling forms, enhancing the dream-like quality of the scene. Cao Zhi is shown with an expression of awe and admiration, his posture respectful yet filled with longing.

The background is a combination of a misty landscape, with mountains in the distance and trees dotting the shore. The colors are rich and vibrant, including shades of red, purple, and gold, which add to the luxurious and enchanting atmosphere of the painting.



Figure 11. Ode to the Goddess of Luo

(Source: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/A_1930-1015-0-2)

Iconological Reading

From a Buddhist-influenced perspective, the Goddess of Luo can be seen as a symbol of spiritual beauty and transcendence, similar to the idealized figures in Buddhist art. Her ethereal form and the way she seems to float above the mundane world can be related to the Buddhist concept of enlightenment and the ability to rise above worldly attachments.

The interaction between Cao Zhi and the Goddess can be interpreted as a metaphor for the individual's spiritual quest. Just as Cao Zhi is drawn to the Goddess, people in their spiritual journey are attracted to the realm of enlightenment (Zhao, 2024). The misty landscape and the celestial elements in the background create a sense of otherworldliness, which is reminiscent of the Buddhist description of the spiritual realm. The use of rich colors and detailed imagery can also be linked to the Buddhist practice of using visual representations to inspire devotion and spiritual contemplation.

Socio-Cultural Function

This painting had a significant socio-cultural function in the Jin Dynasty. It was not only a work of art but also a reflection of the cultural and spiritual values of the time. The blend of romantic and spiritual elements in the painting appealed to the literati class, who were both interested in literature and spiritual exploration.

The influence of Buddhist thought in the painting contributed to the cultural syncretism of the Jin Dynasty. It showed how Buddhist ideas were incorporated into traditional Chinese cultural expressions, enriching the artistic and intellectual landscape. The painting also had the potential to influence the way people perceived beauty and spirituality. By presenting the Goddess of Luo as an idealized figure, it set a standard for both physical and spiritual beauty, which in turn influenced the aesthetic and moral values of the society.

FINDINGS

Buddhist Thought as Visual Ideology

The study reveals that Jin Dynasty Buddhist paintings functioned as visual sermons, integrating metaphysical principles into their compositional and symbolic elements. For instance, in the "Nirvana of the Buddha" mural, the portrayal of the Buddha's entry into Nirvana, with his serene countenance and the hierarchical arrangement of disciples and bodhisattvas around him, vividly presents key Buddhist doctrines. The spatial structure of the mural, with the Buddha at the center on a raised dais, reflects the concept of his elevated spiritual status. This not only represents the Buddha's attainment of Nirvana but also serves as a visual teaching moment, guiding viewers to strive for spiritual liberation and understand the transient nature of life, thus reinforcing the idea of karmic causality and the pursuit of a higher spiritual state.

Gu Kaizhi's "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies", although not a purely Buddhist-themed painting, still embodies Buddhist-influenced moral teachings. The way the figures are depicted, with a sense of calmness and the emphasis on moral self-discipline, can be linked to Buddhist ethical concepts. Each scene in the scroll, separated by moral inscriptions, serves as a lesson in proper behavior, much like how Buddhist teachings guide followers to cultivate good conduct.

In "Ode to the Goddess of Luo", the interaction between Cao Zhi and the Goddess of Luo can be seen as a metaphor for the individual's spiritual journey towards enlightenment. The dream-like landscape and the Goddess's ethereal form symbolize the transcendence of worldly attachments, which is a central tenet of Buddhist thought. These paintings, therefore, do more than illustrate stories; they actively teach moral behavior, reinforce spiritual hierarchies, and offer a visual embodiment of Buddhist doctrines.

Syncretism and Cultural Identity

A significant finding is the prevalence of ideological syncretism in Jin Dynasty paintings. Many artworks, like "Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies", combine Confucian ethical imagery with Buddhist-inspired ideas. The Confucian-based moral guidance for court ladies in the painting, such as modesty and propriety, is complemented by Buddhist-influenced mental states like inner reflection and harmonious coexistence. This artistic synthesis reflects the dual intellectual life of Jin elites, who were influenced by both traditional Confucian values and emerging Buddhist thought.

The "Ode to the Goddess of Luo" also showcases this syncretism. The romantic and spiritual elements in the painting not only appeal to the literati's love for literature but also incorporate Buddhist-influenced concepts of spiritual beauty and transcendence. This suggests that Buddhist painting in the Jin Dynasty was not an isolated phenomenon but rather a cultural negotiation tool. It harmonized native values with imported spiritual thought, aligning with the Jin Dynasty's historical identity as both conquerors and preservers of Chinese civilization.

Political Instability and Spiritual Order

Given the political unrest and social disruptions during the Jin Dynasty, art, especially paintings with Buddhist themes, played a crucial role in providing psychological and ideological order. The "Nirvana of the Buddha" mural, with its vision of an eternal and peaceful state, offered spiritual solace to people facing the uncertainties of war and social upheaval. It presented a sense of hope and purpose, suggesting that there was an order beyond the chaos of the earthly world.

Similarly, "Ode to the Goddess of Luo", with its otherworldly and romantic imagery, could have served as an escape for the viewers from the harsh realities of the time. These paintings were not just decorative; they helped maintain moral coherence among the population. The religious imagery became a symbolic scaffold for political legitimacy and cultural continuity. Rulers may have used such artworks to align themselves with the spiritual and moral values represented in the paintings, thereby strengthening their rule.

Visual Strategies of Authority and Devotion

Table 2. Analysis of Visual Elements Conveying Authority and Devotion in Jin Dynasty Buddhist Paintings

Painting Name	Average Height Ratio of Deity - like Figures to Other Figures
Nirvana of the Buddha" Mural	1.5 : 1 (Buddha to disciples)
"Admonitions of the Instructress to the Court Ladies"	" 1.2 : 1 (instructress - like figures to court ladies)
"Ode to the Goddess of Luo"	1.3 : 1 (Goddess of Luo to Cao Zhi)

Compositional hierarchy, scale, symmetry, and repetition in Jin Dynasty Buddhist paintings were not merely aesthetic choices but strategic means of expressing authority and devotion. In the "Nirvana of the Buddha" mural, the Buddha is depicted in a large, central position, elevated on a dais, which symbolizes his cosmic and spiritual dominance. The bodhisattvas and disciples, although important, are placed in subordinate positions, reflecting a clear hierarchical structure.

In "Ode to the Goddess of Luo", the Goddess of Luo is often the focal point, with her ethereal form and the way she is presented as a figure of beauty and mystery. Cao Zhi's respectful and longing posture towards the Goddess visually codes a sense of devotion. These visual elements emphasize submission, karmic alignment, and ritual propriety, constructing a visual pedagogy of devotion and obedience.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to explore the influence of Buddhist thought on the ideological dimensions of Jin Dynasty painting in China. Through a qualitative, interdisciplinary methodology grounded in iconographic, philosophical, and socio-cultural analysis, the research examined how Buddhist metaphysics, ritual practices, and ethical frameworks shaped visual expressions during the 12th and 13th centuries. Three representative artworks were analyzed in depth, each exemplifying different ways in which Buddhist ideology permeated visual culture: from the hierarchical and karmic messages of ritual murals, to the eschatological visions of Pure Land paintings, to the introspective landscapes infused with Chan/Zen aesthetics.

The study yielded several significant findings:

- Buddhist ideology was encoded in visual structure, not just content. Composition, spatial hierarchy, and symbolism worked together to articulate metaphysical ideas and doctrinal teachings.

- Paintings served as vehicles of spiritual and political ideology, simultaneously addressing personal salvation and social order. In a time of political upheaval, Buddhist art provided both moral guidance and cosmic reassurance.
- Visual syncretism was a defining feature of Jin painting, as Buddhist and Confucian values were blended into coherent visual narratives, reflecting the complex cultural identity of the Jin elite.
- Buddhist visual culture contributed to the negotiation of cultural legitimacy, allowing the Jurchen rulers to align themselves with Chinese civilization while maintaining spiritual authority.
- This study contributes to both Buddhist art history, Chinese cultural studies and contemporary discourse by:
- Introducing an ideological reading of Jin Dynasty painting grounded in religious thought rather than solely aesthetic classification.
- Proposing a methodological model that can be adapted for studies of other dynasties and regions where religion and visual art intersect.
- Emphasizing the integrative role of art as a vehicle for personal piety, political legitimacy, and philosophical discourse.
- Integrating Buddhist semiotics with visual analysis, it offers a model for decoding religious ideology in premodern art, applicable to cross-cultural studies of Islamicate, Christian, or Hindu visual traditions.

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