

Decoding Symbolism in Tang Dynasty Baoxiang Floral Patterns: A Semiotic and Art Historical Study

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Abstract

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) represents a pinnacle of cultural and artistic development in China, exemplified by the Baoxiang floral patterns with their sophisticated aesthetics and symbolic richness. This study aims to analyze and interpret Baoxiang floral patterns by integrating fundamental art principles and semiotic theory. It seeks to reveal their inherent visual language and cultural meanings. Using a qualitative descriptive approach, the research applies visual analysis to samples from cave murals to examine their shape, composition, and color. The findings indicate that these patterns feature symmetrical and radial compositions, naturalistic motifs such as lotus and vine tendrils, and contrasting color schemes that reflect Buddhist symbolism and Tang Dynasty aesthetic ideals. This study contributes to a deeper understanding of Baoxiang floral patterns as significant cultural artifacts, enriching scholarship on Chinese decorative art and informing contemporary art and design practices.

Keywords: Tang Dynasty, Baoxiang Floral Patterns, Art Principle, Semiotic Theory, Cultural Significance

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Introduction

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) is renowned for its political stability, economic prosperity, and cultural vibrancy. As a golden age of cultural exchange facilitated by the Silk Road, China became a hub for East-West interactions. Among the artistic innovations of this period, the Baoxiang floral pattern (Figure 1) holds a significant place. "Baoxiang," meaning "precious and auspicious forms," originates from Buddhist iconography, highlighting its spiritual and cultural significance. This pattern is found extensively in Tang Dynasty architecture, textiles, and murals, and is characterized by intricate geometric designs and botanical motifs such as lotus flowers and vine tendrils (Clunas, 2009).

The profound connection of Baoxiang floral patterns to Buddhism further enhances their cultural significance. In these designs, the lotus motif—a symbol of purity, enlightenment, and rebirth in Buddhist iconography—serves as a conduit for spiritual and philosophical concepts, mirroring the Tang Dynasty's integration of Buddhist principles (Chen, 2022). The widespread use of Baoxiang floral patterns in sites such as the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang demonstrates their enduring appeal and the substantial impact of Buddhism on Tang artistic expression (Steinhardt, 2019).

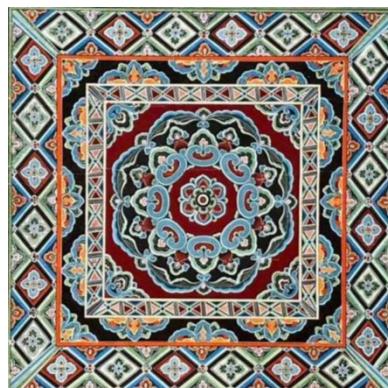


Figure 1 Cave 320 in Dunhuang Mogao Grottoes
(Source: Author's photograph, 2023)

Despite existing studies on the historical origins and stylistic features of Baoxiang floral patterns, there remains a lack of systematic research examining their aesthetic characteristics in conjunction with semiotic analysis to uncover their deeper cultural meanings. Current literature has focused primarily on descriptive and stylistic analyses, with limited integration of semiotic theory to interpret how these patterns function as visual symbols conveying specific cultural values and beliefs.

Therefore, this study aims to address this gap by applying fundamental art principles and semiotic theory to analyze Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns. Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions: (1) What are the key aesthetic features of Baoxiang floral patterns as reflected in shape, composition, and color? (2) How do these patterns function as cultural symbols within the context of Tang Dynasty art and Buddhist iconography? By addressing these questions, this research contributes to a deeper understanding of Baoxiang floral patterns as significant cultural artifacts within Chinese art history and their relevance to contemporary art and design studies.

Research Objective

1. To define the characteristics and cultural significance of Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns.
2. To analyze and categorize Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns by applying fundamental art principles and semiotic theory.

Research Framework

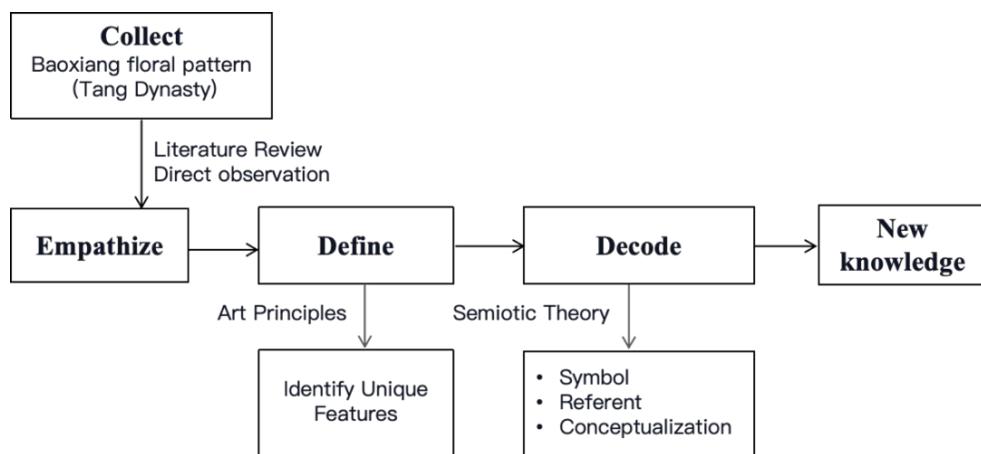


Figure 2 Research framework

Literature Review

Historical and Cultural of Tang Dynasty Baoxiang Floral Patterns

The Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) represents one of the most prosperous epochs in Chinese history, characterized by its political stability, economic prosperity, and openness to cultural exchange. During this era, China became a pivotal center for East-West interactions, with the Silk Road serving as a conduit for the trade of goods as well as cultural and artistic exchange.

(Liu, 2019). This cross-cultural interaction significantly impacted the creative landscape of the Tang Dynasty.

The Baoxiang floral patterns, symbolic of this cultural synthesis, are a testament to the artistic ingenuity of Tang artisans. These patterns, often seen in textiles, ceramics, and architectural decorations, demonstrate how Tang artisans assimilated artistic influences from regions such as India, Persia, and Byzantium to create unique decorative motifs (Liu, 2018). The adoption of foreign aesthetic principles and their integration into a distinctly Chinese context was remarkable. For example, the exchange with the Indian subcontinent introduced new iconographic elements, such as the lotus and vine scroll motifs, which were transformed into integral components of Baoxiang patterns, symbolizing purity and eternal life. These patterns exemplify the intricate interplay of diverse cultural elements, reflecting Tang society's dynamic and pluralistic nature.

Artistic Features and Fundamental Art Principles of Tang Dynasty Baoxiang Floral Patterns

Building on this historical and cultural background, previous studies have also examined the artistic features of Baoxiang floral patterns, focusing on their aesthetic principles. Baoxiang floral patterns from the Tang Dynasty exemplify fundamental art principles, including shape, composition, and color, which collectively define their aesthetic appeal and cultural significance.

Shape plays a critical role, with the motifs often incorporating geometric designs that utilize natural forms such as lotus flowers and vine tendrils, creating a harmonious blend of nature-inspired aesthetics (Steinhardt, 2019). These decorative patterns are a testament to the Tang Dynasty's artistic innovation and cultural synthesis, drawing on influences from across Asia to create distinctly Chinese motifs yet universally appealing (Clunas, 2009).

The form of Baoxiang patterns, emphasizing symmetry and balance, is a visual marvel that reflects the Tang Dynasty's broader aesthetic ethos of order and harmony. This principle is evident in the meticulous arrangement of motifs, creating a visual rhythm that captivates viewers.

Color is another pivotal element, with Tang artisans employing innovative color schemes that enhance the luxury and vibrancy of Baoxiang patterns. Using contrasting colors and intricate detailing in the patterns demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of color theory and its impact on visual perception (Fong, 2011).

Previous studies have highlighted how Tang artisans synthesized aesthetic beauty with symbolic meaning, reflecting the era's pursuit of natural harmony and artistic sophistication.

Semiotic Theory and Cultural Interpretation

Beyond their artistic features, scholars have also employed semiotic theories to interpret the deeper cultural meanings embedded within Baoxiang floral patterns. Semiotic theory, anchored

by the Semiotic Triangle Theory, serves as a robust framework for dissecting the symbolic and cultural aspects of traditional patterns such as the Baoxiang motifs of the Tang Dynasty. The Semiotic Triangle Theory, proposed by Ogden and Richards (1923), elucidates the interplay between symbols (the form of the sign), referents (the object or concept that the symbol represents), and thoughts or references (the mental interpretation of the symbol). This theory provides an effective framework to analyze how these visual motifs function as cultural symbols within their historical context.

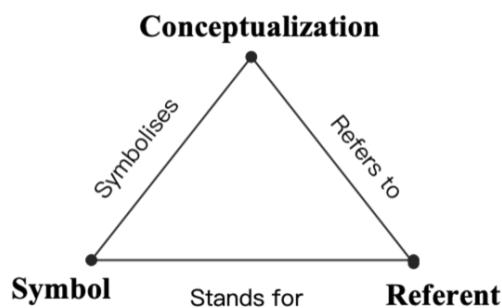


Figure 3 Semiotic triangle theory model (Ogden and Richards, 1923)

In the context of Baoxiang floral patterns, the lotus is a prominent symbol often utilized within these designs. The lotus is not merely an aesthetic element but a symbol rich with cultural and religious significance. In Buddhist iconography, the lotus is emblematic of purity, enlightenment, and rebirth (Cheng, 2020). When viewed through the Semiotic Triangle Theory, the lotus in Baoxiang patterns can be understood as a conduit that connects the physical form of the design (symbol) with its cultural connotations (thought) and its deeper meaning rooted in the religious and philosophical ideals of the Tang Dynasty (referent).

Furthermore, Baoxiang floral patterns encapsulate a broader narrative of Tang Dynasty culture, reflecting the time's aesthetic values and social identity. They serve as a repository of collective memory, embodying the harmony between nature and spirituality central to Tang society. By employing the Semiotic Triangle Theory, scholars can unpack the layered meanings of these motifs, revealing the intricate interplay between visual representation and cultural context.

Research Methodology

This study adopts a descriptive qualitative research approach. Analyzing literature and images reveals the symbolic meanings and aesthetic characteristics of Baoxiang floral patterns

(Denzin and Lincoln, 2005). The primary objective of this research is to report a taxonomy of visual symbols and their meanings rather than to make hypotheses or predictions.

During the collection phase, Baoxiang floral patterns from various regions and mediums are selected as research samples, ensuring the diversity and representativeness of the samples. Empathizing is a fundamental stage of this research. It involves directly observing the collected photographic materials and organizing and analyzing the descriptions and interpretations of Baoxiang floral patterns found in literature, focusing on their historical evolution, cultural significance, and importance in Tang Dynasty society.

In the definition process, art principles such as shape, composition, and color are applied to analyze images, describing the aesthetic characteristics and design elements of Baoxiang floral patterns. Semiotic theory is utilized to classify and interpret the symbolic elements within the Baoxiang floral patterns, analyzing their symbolic meanings and their functions and roles in Tang Dynasty society.

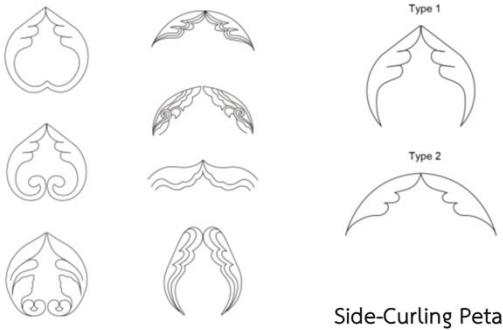
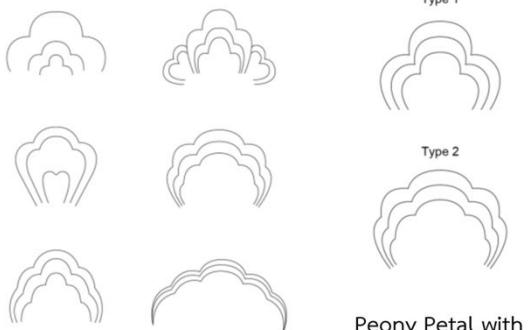
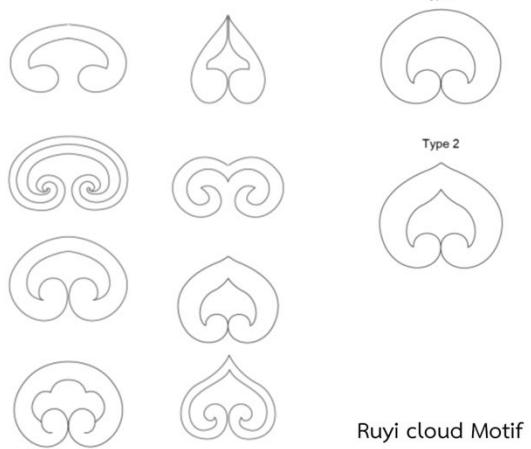
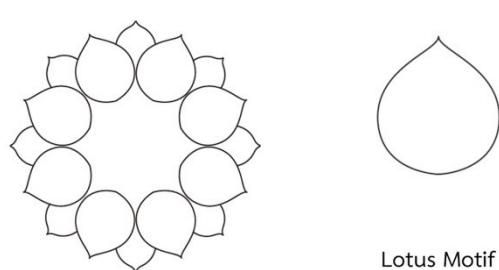
Finally, scientific reference materials were used to evaluate the essential visual symbols and their meanings in the Baoxiang patterns of the Tang Dynasty. The practical application of this scientific method culminated in a taxonomic catalog that could be used to understand further and appreciate Tang art and symbolism.

Findings

1. Definition of the Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns

The Tang Dynasty's Baoxiang floral pattern is a decorative design that, while complex and intricate, is imbued with auspicious meanings. This motif reflects the profound Buddhist faith and the opulent aesthetic characteristics of the Tang era (Wang, Shan, and Zhang, 2019). It incorporates various symbolic plant elements, such as honeysuckle, peony, and lotus, as detailed in Table 1. These elements also embody Taoist reverence for nature and vitality. Each visual symbol is meticulously symmetrical, expressed through elegant curves, and arranged in circular, radial structures. The pattern symbolizes good fortune and prosperity, a sentiment that has endured through the ages. In contemporary design, this traditional motif is adapted and innovated upon, used to convey wishes for good fortune and well-being, thus highlighting its continued relevance.

Table 1 The symbols catalog of the Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns

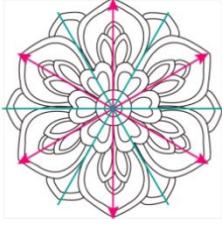
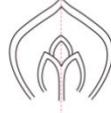
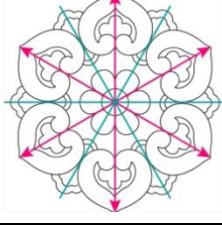
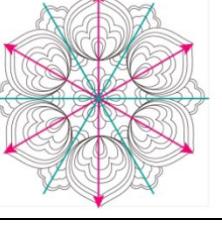
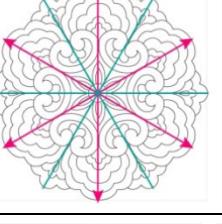
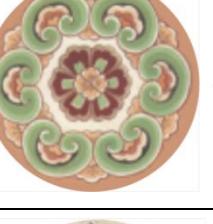
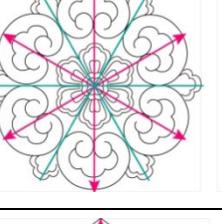
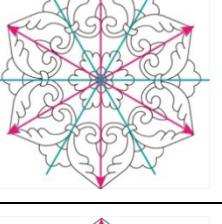
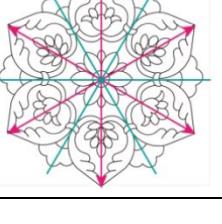
Shape	Symbol	Referent	Conceptualization
		Lonicera japonica	The vitality of the Lonicera japonica plant symbolizes longevity and eternity. The curling shape and adaptability of the plant symbolize wisdom and resilience.
		Peony	Eternity & Wisdom
		Ruyi Scepter	The Ruyi pattern symbolizes good fortune and happiness, representing the idea that everything will go smoothly and as desired. It holds profound religious significance in both Buddhism and Taoism.
		Ganoderma	
		Cloud	Good fortune & Happiness
		Lotus	The lotus symbolizes purity, nobility, and spiritual enlightenment. Particularly in Buddhism, the lotus is a symbol of sacredness and liberation.
			Purity & Nobility

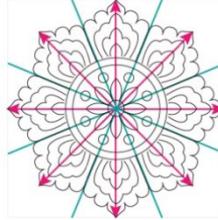
2. To analyze and categorize the Tang Dynasty Baoxiang Floral Pattern

This study collected two of the most representative carriers of Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns: the ceiling paintings of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves and the Tang ceramic plates. The original patterns were vectorized and traced to facilitate detailed analysis. A thorough examination focused on three key aspects: form, shape, and color. The analysis results were then summarized in Table 2, clearly presenting the most important artistic features and common elements of the Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns.

Table 2 The catalog of the classic Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns

Original	Form	Shape	Color						
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Element: Symmetrical Composition

The Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns exhibit a perfectly symmetrical form, a characteristic often seen in Buddhist art intended to convey cosmic order and balance (Liang and Tang, 2018). The vectorized tracings in the images demonstrate how floral elements at various levels are arranged in a mirrored alignment along a central axis. This method of arrangement emphasizes the completeness and harmony of the pattern. The symmetry not only enhances the aesthetic value of the design, evoking a sense of beauty and elegance, but also reflects the Tang society's appreciation for the beauty of harmony.

Overall: Radial and Circular Composition

The Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns are also characterized by their striking radial composition. These patterns typically feature six or eight petals, with each petal and leaf radiating outward from a central point, creating a strong visual focal point. This radial layout embodies vitality and dynamism, symbolizing the Buddhist philosophy of "pratityasamutpada," which emphasizes the interdependence and interconnectedness of all things, originating from a central source (Wang, 2005). This design naturally guides the viewer's gaze outward from the center, allowing them to perceive the flowing energy within the pattern.

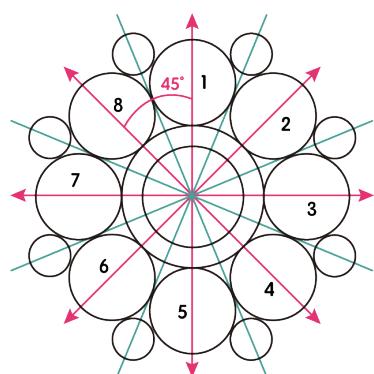


Figure 4 Eight-petal radial ring

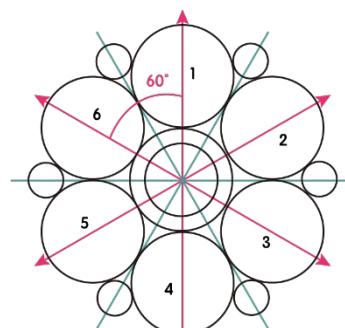


Figure 5 Six-petal radial ring

Moreover, the circular composition in Baoxiang patterns frames and guides the visual experience. This circular design not only represents the notions of completeness and eternity but also reflects the Tang Dynasty's cultural emphasis on the cosmic cycles and the continuity of life (Wan and Zhang, 2023).

Outer contour shape

The outer perimeter of Baoxiang patterns consists of continuous curves that form a broad, rounded dome, symbolic of the Chinese aesthetic preference for softness and fluidity. Traditional designs are characterized by their "organic quality" and natural fluidity, which connect the audience to the rich tradition of Chinese art (Ledderose, 2000). Additionally, the pointed tips at the top of the pattern provide a contrasting sharpness that complements the smoothness, creating a dynamic interplay that symbolizes harmony and resilience.

Internal line shape

Within the pattern, the spiral curls convey a sense of movement and continuity, enhancing its visual appeal while symbolizing growth and eternity. Additionally, the spirals are connected to the cyclical nature of life and the universe, emphasizing their philosophical significance. These curves are mainly front and side figures of various elements overlapping each other to form flower shapes. The petal shape is shown in a flat row of flowers. Large five-petal petals or small three-petal petals occupy the tip of the petal (Zhang and Wang, 2016).

Color: Contrasts and cultural symbols

These patterns typically employ natural tones such as terracotta, green, and blue gray, combined with contrasting color pairings to create a vivid visual impact. Due to the diverse coloring techniques applied to different materials, the colors of Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns exhibit variability. The same shapes may appear in various color combinations. However, the overall color characteristics consistently reflect the Tang Dynasty's high aesthetic standards in art.

Discussion

This section discusses the findings in relation to previous literature and theoretical frameworks to highlight the significance and originality of this study. This study analyzed Tang Dynasty Baoxiang floral patterns to reveal their aesthetic characteristics and cultural meanings.

The first catalog showed diverse motif variations, such as the Side-Curling Petal with horizontal and vertical types, the Peony Petal with three-petal and five-petal forms, and the Ruyi Cloud motif with rounded and pointed variations. In contrast, the Lotus motif maintained a single full-bodied petal type. These findings are consistent with Clunas (2009), who emphasized the intricate botanical and geometric diversity of Baoxiang patterns in Chinese decorative arts. However,

this study extends Clunas' descriptive analysis by applying semiotic theory to interpret these motifs as symbols conveying Buddhist concepts of purity, enlightenment, and cosmic order (Chen, 2022; Cheng, 2020).

Moreover, the results demonstrate that Baoxiang floral patterns are not merely decorative elements but serve as reconstructed cultural symbols embodying religious and philosophical meanings. This aligns with Steinhardt (2019), who highlighted the integration of Buddhist symbolism into Tang Dynasty art and architecture. The conceptualization of these motifs, summarized from their inherent meanings and formal characteristics, shows how the Tang artisans synthesized aesthetic sophistication with spiritual symbolism to create designs reflecting cultural beliefs.

The second catalog highlighted the symmetrical, radial, and layered compositions of Baoxiang floral patterns, consistent with findings by Liang and Tang (2018), who noted the emphasis on cosmic balance and order in Buddhist art. This study further contributes by explaining these visual forms through the Semiotic Triangle Theory (Ogden and Richards, 1923), where the physical motifs (symbols) connect to cultural connotations (thoughts) and deeper religious meanings (referents). For example, the radial lotus motifs function as visual representations of Buddhist ideas of interdependence and cyclical existence (Wang, 2005).

While the Semiotic Triangle Theory provides an effective framework for analyzing visual symbols in Baoxiang floral patterns, it primarily focuses on the relationship between the sign, referent, and thought. This approach may overlook other dimensions of meaning-making, such as social and cultural contexts beyond individual interpretation. For example, Peirce's triadic model, which incorporates representamen, object, and interpretant within a broader cultural framework, could complement the current analysis by addressing how these motifs function within Tang society's semiotic systems at large. Future research could integrate multiple semiotic perspectives to enrich the interpretation and uncover additional layers of cultural significance embedded in Baoxiang floral patterns.

However, this study has limitations. The sample was primarily derived from Dunhuang cave murals, excluding other mediums such as ceramics and textiles, which may present different stylistic features. Additionally, as a qualitative visual analysis, the findings reflect interpretive perspectives that could be complemented by archaeological or ethnographic approaches in future research.

Overall, this study addressed the research objectives by (1) identifying the aesthetic features of Baoxiang floral patterns in terms of shape, composition, and color, and (2) explaining how these motifs function as cultural symbols within Tang Dynasty Buddhist art. By integrating

semiotic theory with art principles, this research deepens understanding of Baoxiang floral patterns and contributes to scholarship on Chinese decorative arts and their cultural significance.

Acknowledgment

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