

Article

Sea Rhythm and Buddhist Chant: Exploring Marine Elements in Chinese Buddhist Art

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Abstract

Since its introduction to China during the Han Dynasty, Buddhism has been deeply integrated with local culture. As an important carrier of Buddhism, Buddhist art has gradually formed a variety of expression forms. Marine culture, as an important part of Chinese civilization, has inextricable connections with Buddhist culture. This paper employs literature review and image analysis methods to systematically investigate marine elements in China's Buddhist art, trace the historical origins of Buddhism and the ocean, analyze the specific manifestations of marine elements in Buddhist artifacts, paintings, and murals, explore their influence on the aesthetic style, regional development, and narrative content of Buddhist art, and reveal the cultural significance and spiritual value of marine elements in Buddhist art. The study finds that Buddhism has been closely related to the ocean since its origin, and the Maritime Silk Road has further promoted the in-depth integration of the two. Marine elements are widely integrated into Buddhist arts in the forms of artifacts such as corals, tridacna shells, and conchs, as well as paintings and murals, such as sea waves and navigation scenes. They not only shape the vivid and inclusive aesthetic characteristics of Buddhist arts and promote the innovation and regional development of artistic forms, but they also enrich the narrative content and spiritual expression of Buddhist arts, becoming an important witness to the visualization of Buddhist doctrines, the inheritance of regional culture, and the exchange between Chinese and foreign cultures.

Keywords: Chinese Buddhist arts; marine elements; Buddhist artifacts; Dunhuang murals



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1. Introduction

During the spread of Buddhism, the ocean served as a vital transportation route, facilitating the exchange and dissemination of Buddhism across regions. Western scholars have paid relatively little attention to marine elements in Buddhist art; most only mention them briefly when examining the relationship between Buddhist transmission and maritime transportation ([Himanshu 2012, 2019](#)). In contrast, Chinese scholars focus on this framework, and many achievements have been made concerning the Maritime Silk Road and Sino-foreign Buddhist cultural exchanges. However, according to existing research on Buddhism and the ocean, studies combining Chinese Buddhist art with marine elements remain relatively weak; comprehensive and systematic research on marine elements in Chinese Buddhist art is still generally lacking. Therefore, based on Buddhist cultural relics and images, combined with Buddhist scriptures and relevant documents, this paper sorts out the development of Buddhist art and marine culture, deeply explores records and descriptions of marine elements, and analyzes the value and significance of marine elements in

Buddhist art from multiple dimensions, so as to provide new references for the protection, inheritance, and innovation of Buddhist art.

2. The Origin of Chinese Buddhism and the Ocean

2.1. Marine Elements in the Origin of Buddhism

Buddhism originated in ancient India. In the process of its birth and development, marine elements played an important role, reflecting the early Buddhist cognition and worship of the ocean.

India is located on the South Asian subcontinent surrounded by the sea on three sides, and this geographical environment has made Indian culture inherently contain certain marine elements. The Buddhist cosmology also contains many descriptions of the ocean. Buddhism holds that the world where people live is centered on Mount Sumeru, surrounded by “nine mountains, four seas, and four continents”. The descriptions of the ocean in the early Buddhist cosmology were formed based on their living environment and the boundless imagination of the deep and mysterious ocean. For example, the Buddhist classic *The Sutra of the Eight Virtues of the Sea*, translated by the Tripitaka Master Kumarajiva, more directly shows the unique Buddhist understanding of the ocean. This Buddhist scripture tells the story of the Buddha preaching the Eight Dharma to the monks by the river in the Kingdom of Wusheng. “Behold that vast sea, which has eight virtues. Its breadth is boundless and endless; its depth has an unfathomable bottom, and as one enters deeper, there is no obstacle before them—this is the first virtue. The tide does not come before its time—this is the second virtue. The sea contains all treasures, embracing everything; rotten corpses, however, the sea does not tolerate, and the divine wind blows them to the shore—this is the third virtue. The sea harbors all treasures: gold, silver, lapis lazuli, crystal, coral, dragon pearls, bright moon divine pearls, all kinds of strange and extraordinary things, which can be obtained without seeking—this is the fourth virtue. Under heaven, there are five great rivers flowing into the sea: the one flowing west is named the Ganges; the one flowing south is named Xieyun; the two flowing east are named Shalu and Ayiyue; the one flowing north is named Mo. The five rivers flow forward, and all enter the sea, abandoning their old names and merging into the sea—this is the fifth virtue. The five rivers and ten thousand streams, even when the rain ends, since the establishment of heaven and earth, the rain falls, and the rivers flow into the sea, yet the sea remains the same, neither increasing nor decreasing—this is the sixth virtue. The sea has many fish with towering huge bodies: the first fish is four thousand li long, the second is eight thousand li long, the third is twelve thousand li long, the fourth is sixteen thousand li long, the fifth is twenty thousand li long, the sixth is twenty-four thousand li long, and the seventh is twenty-eight thousand li long—this is the seventh virtue. The seawater is all salty, the same from the edge to the center—this is the eighth virtue.” (Foshuo Hai Bade Jing 1940). In this scripture, the Buddha described in detail the eight virtues of the ocean, comparing the characteristics of the ocean with the Dharma. The boundlessness of the ocean symbolizes the profound wisdom of the Dharma, covering all sentient beings; the regularity of the tides is like the constancy of the Dharma, unaffected by external disturbances; the ocean embraces all things, whether rivers, streams, or dirt and debris, which implies the equal compassion of the Dharma for all sentient beings, saving them regardless of their good or evil, nobility or inferiority; and the abundant resources represent that the Dharma contains endless treasures, which can meet the spiritual needs of all sentient beings. Through the elaboration of the ocean’s virtues, *The Sutra of the Eight Virtues of the Sea* uses the ocean as a metaphor to interpret the connotation and value of the Dharma in a simple and in-depth way, indicating that the ocean has profound symbolic significance in the Buddhist ideological system, providing a vivid and intuitive way for the dissemination and understanding

of Buddhist doctrines. In addition, the description and use of the world sea in the Avatamsaka Sutra are closely related to the marine background of South India, revealing that the relationship between Buddhism and marine civilization began after the birth of Buddhism. Buddhist theories on the creation of the universe and disasters are also closely related to marine culture (Huang 2016).

2.2. The Connection Between the Spread of Buddhism and the Ocean

Buddhism was introduced into China through diverse routes, among which the Maritime Silk Road played a crucial role as an important channel for the transregional spread of Buddhism, profoundly influencing the development of Buddhism in China and its integration with indigenous Chinese culture (Gyosho 1971). The spread of Buddhism into China via the Maritime Silk Road generally followed a route starting from South India, passing through maritime routes to Indonesia, Myanmar, Cambodia, Thailand, and other regions, with some branches landing along the coastal areas of South China and then further developing into the southern regions of China. As early as the Eastern Han Dynasty, with the gradual prosperity of maritime trade, Buddhism began to spread quietly in coastal areas with the help of merchant ship exchanges (Liu 1988; Himanshu 1994). At the end of the reign of Emperor Ling of Han (157–189 AD), Moroji Yu 摩罗耆域 from India once traveled to Jiaozhi 交趾 with the Brahmin monk Qiu Tuoluo 丘陀罗 and the governor Shi Xie 士燮, and then traveled eastward (Luo 1960). During the Three Kingdoms Period, Kang Senhui 康僧会 came to Jianye 建业 (now Nanjing, Jiangsu Province) from Jiaozhi (now Northern Vietnam), brought Buddhist scriptures, and built temples to propagate Buddhism, laying the foundation for the spread of Buddhism in the Jiangnan region. The scriptures he translated, such as the *Sutra of the Six Perfections* 六度集经, were widely circulated in the Jiangnan region, exerting an important influence on the local culture and ideology and enabling Buddhism to take root and germinate there.

During the transmission of Buddhism to China, although it passed through regions such as Central Asia or Southeast Asia, it most likely entered China in the form of “long-distance dissemination”. Prior to the third century AD, there were virtually no archeological discoveries related to Buddhist temples, and Southeast Asia lacked evidence of Buddhist temples before the fifth century. Thus, it was impossible to determine the role these regions played in the introduction of Buddhism to China (Erik 1990; Jason 2011). Monks from South Asia did not begin appearing in large numbers until the end of the fourth century (Tansen 2012). Starting from the mid-fifth century, marine elements such as sea turtles and merchant ships began to appear in Buddhist architecture across Southeast Asia and the Indian Ocean region (Himanshu 2019). Numerous trade delegations from South Asia and China established bases in Southeast Asia, participating in commercial activities along the Bay of Bengal and the South China Sea. These maritime interactions gave rise to various trade networks, through which Buddhist ideas and imagery spread between South Asia and Southeast Asia and entered China alongside merchant ships (Tansen 2012). This demonstrates that Buddhism exerted a profound influence on the marine elements in Chinese Buddhist art via the waters of Southeast Asia.

The Dharma-seeking journey of the eminent monk Faxian 法显 in the Eastern Jin Dynasty can be regarded as a typical case of the spread of Buddhism via the Maritime Silk Road. Faxian set off from Chang'an, endured numerous hardships, and traveled westward to Tianzhu (ancient India) by land to seek the Dharma. After studying and practicing in Tianzhu for many years, he returned to China by sea on a merchant ship. During his voyage at sea, Faxian encountered many difficulties and dangers, such as violent storms and loss of direction, but he finally succeeded in returning with his firm faith and tenacious perseverance. His book *Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms* 佛国记 recorded in detail his expe-

periences and observations during the maritime voyage, including the customs and Buddhist beliefs of the places he passed through. It not only provided valuable first-hand materials for later generations to understand the maritime transportation and the spread of Buddhism at that time, but also vividly showed the arduous course of Buddhism spreading through the Maritime Silk Road.

“Tong Siyi Dao” 通四夷道 in “*Dili Zhi*” 地理志 of *Xin Tangshu* 新唐书 contains a detailed description of “The Sea Route from Guangzhou to Foreign Lands” 广州通海夷道 (Ouyang and Song 1973), which is the earliest record of the Maritime Silk Road in surviving Chinese historical materials. Compared with the previous dynasties, religion connecting China with foreign countries through the ocean gradually became the main form of exchange, accompanied by a significant increase in marine elements in religious stories. For example, Li Fang recorded in *Taiping Guangji* (太平广记) that a foreign monk “exhibited his illusory magic and resided on a sea peak... When his magic was about to be completed, the sea water rolled up into the sky like clouds” (F. Li 1961), which is the narrative transformation of Buddhist monks coming to China by ship in literary works. Wang Qingyun noticed that Buddhist scriptures often involve the ocean, and the process of Buddhism entering China via sea routes made the image of Buddhist monks marine-oriented, stimulating the development of Chinese marine narratives (Q. Wang 1999).

Through the ocean, Buddhism also spread from China to other regimes in East Asia. Starting from the mid-Tang Dynasty, the landing points for exchanges between the Korean and Japanese regimes and China gradually shifted south from Dengzhou to Mingzhou, and the Guanyin Taoist site on Putuo Mountain emerged in this context. Subsequently, the Silla Naksansa Temple was rebuilt, and the Chishan Zen Temple in Kyoto, Japan, was successively established (Cho 2010; Woller 2018). The construction process of these Buddhist temples is an embodiment of the new form of Buddhism under the influence of marine culture.

In summary, the ocean was not only a geographically significant channel in the process of Buddhist spread, but also a catalyst for cultural integration. With the introduction of Buddhism through land and sea routes, cultural elements from India, the Western Regions, and other places also came along, showing obvious differences in cultural integration. Buddhism introduced via the Northern Silk Road was deeply influenced by the religious culture of Central Asia; monks coming to China via the Maritime Silk Road either came directly from India or via India, and most of the Buddhism they introduced also came directly from India. This difference was very obvious in the field of art. In the north, Buddhist grottoes, sculptures, and murals appearing in the Wei and Jin dynasties, such as the Longmen Grottoes, Yungang Grottoes, and their statues, were influenced by Indian Gandharan art. In the south, for example, the Buddha statues in the Yangtze River Basin from the 2nd to 4th centuries AD, and the cliff Buddha statues halfway up Guanyin Peak in Xishan, Guilin, during the reign of Emperor Gaozong of Tang, had significantly different styles from those in Dunhuang and Yungang in the north (Luo 1960).

3. The Manifestations of Marine Elements in Chinese Buddhist Art

3.1. Marine Imagery in Buddhist Artifacts

Buddhism, both in its native India and after its spread abroad, has a large number of ritual implements from the ocean.

The status of coral as one of the Seven Treasures of Buddhism was explicitly documented in early Chinese translations of Buddhist scriptures, and it was introduced to China via the ancient land-based Silk Road through the Western Regions (Ban 1962). Red coral holds an important position in Tibetan Buddhism, being regarded as the symbol of “Amitabha Buddha of the West” and an auspicious object, often used in religious cere-

monies and daily wear. Red coral not only has an important religious status, but also reflects the bold and unrestrained spirit and religious beliefs in Tibetan culture (Xu 2020). Red coral products in Tibetan Buddhism, such as gau boxes, prayer beads, and inlays on ritual implements, often retain the natural form of coral, with gold and silver wrapping the joints. This treatment method not only respects the natural properties of the material but also enhances its religious sanctity through metal processing.

Tridacna belongs to the Tridacnidae family of the Veneroida order, which is the largest bivalve mollusk in the world. The gemstones made from tridacna shells are Buddhist holy objects, and were even ranked first among the Seven Treasures during the Song and Ming dynasties. In June 1984, the Ningbo Municipal Institute of Archaeology conducted an archeological excavation of the underground palace of Tianfeng Pagoda, which was first built in the Tang Dynasty, and unearthed more than 140 cultural relics, including silver palaces and silver pagodas, among which was tridacna, one of the Seven Treasures of Buddhism, which is now preserved in the Ningbo Museum (Figure 1). There are 14 lines of red characters on the surface of this tridacna, roughly meaning “In the Great Song Dynasty, Liangzhe Circuit, Mingzhou Yin County, Weiguo Camp, 5th Bao, sincerely offering this tridacna to Tianfeng Pagoda for the eternal continuation of the Buddha’s life. Shangyuan Jiazi Year, the third month of the 14th year of Shaoxing” (Lin 1991). This fully demonstrates the use of marine organisms in Chinese Buddhist rituals.



Figure 1. Tridacna in Ningbo Museum; photograph by the author.

The conch is also an artifact of the Dharma protectors in ancient India, and the huge conch shell proclaims the bravery and victory displayed by people in battles. Brahmanism

regarded the conch used in battles as a ritual symbol of its religious rule. The auspicious sound can drive away evil spirits, enable people to avoid natural disasters, and intimidate all harmful creatures. Early Buddhism also regarded the conch from the Vedic period as a symbol for preaching Buddhist doctrines, symbolizing that he fearlessly propagated the Dharma to the ten directions (Gaut 1934; Robin 2002; Hajime 1994). As a symbol of the Buddha's "verbal" power, the conch's penetrating sound joyfully proclaims the rule of the Dharma, its supremacy over the "three realms", and its power to intimidate all demons and evil spirits. The opening of common natural conch shells is generally left-handed, while right-handed white conchs are very rare and are regarded as auspicious objects in rituals. In addition, conchs of different colors were used to distinguish India's four castes: smooth white conchs represented the Brahmin (monk) caste, red conchs represented the Kshatriya (warrior) caste, yellow conchs represented the Vaishya (merchant) caste, and dark gray conchs represented the Shudra (slave) caste. As a handheld artifact, the conch is generally held in the "wisdom" left hand of the gods (Bill 2014).

After Buddhism spread eastward, the conch (Sanskrit: śaṅkha), as one of the "Eight Auspicious Symbols", was introduced into China. Its symbolic meaning is continuously integrated with local culture, gradually becoming an indispensable ritual implement in Buddhist ceremonies and an important carrier of the exchange and integration between Buddhist culture and indigenous Chinese culture. In Chinese Buddhism, the conch symbolizes the Buddha's voice spreading all over the world, and its characteristic of far-reaching sound is consistent with the Buddhist doctrine of the boundlessness of the Dharma (Y. Li 2020). Shortly after Buddhism was introduced into inland China, during the Three Kingdoms Period, there were records of blowing conchs in rituals in Chinese Buddhism (Wu and Hong 2021). During the Tubo period, Buddhism was introduced into Tibet from inland China and India, and the conch gradually became a unique ritual implement of Tibetan Buddhism. The conch in Tibetan Buddhism is both a Dharma horn, used in combination with gongs, drums, bells, cymbals, and other musical instruments in Buddhist activities, and an offering in front of the Buddha, an important part of the "Eight Auspicious Symbols" and the "Five Sensual Desires".

As a Buddhist artifact, the conch also appears repeatedly in Dunhuang murals. In Dunhuang murals, the musical instrument combinations in Cave 254 (Northern Wei) Heavenly Palace Musicians, Cave 220 (Early Tang) Northern Wall Medicine Buddha Sutra Illustration Band, Cave 172 (High Tang) and Cave 112 (Mid Tang) murals all include conchs (Zhuang 2008), and "all those holding conchs in Mahayana murals, silk paintings or Mahayana sutra illustration bands belong to Mahayana musicians" (Peng 2004), while those holding conchs in Esoteric Buddhist sutra illustrations or Esoteric Buddhist mandalas are divided into ritual implements and incense applicators, reflecting the functional differences of conchs in different Buddhist sects. The same situation exists in the murals of Yungang Grottoes, where conchs appear in all groups of musicians in Cave 12. In the Northern Wei band, especially when occupying the "central axis" of the band, the conch, as a ritual implement, has far greater significance than its role as a musical instrument, that is, to announce the existence of the Buddha to the audience (Li and Xie 2024). On the left side of the southern wall of Cave 29 in Dunhuang Yulin Grottoes, there are meditative sitting musicians, the first of whom is a musician putting away a white conch (Figure 2). Coincidentally, on a Five Dynasties relief unearthed from Longxing Temple in Zhengding in Hebei Province, there is a clear depiction of a musician bodhisattva blowing a conch (Figure 3), which is a vivid embodiment of the conch, a marine element as a Buddhist holy object, in Central Plains Buddhist art.



Figure 2. White conch in a Buddha in Yulin Cave 025, South Wall of the main chamber. (<https://www.e-dunhuang.com/cave/10.0001/0001.0002.0025>) accessed on 28 June 2026.



Figure 3. Relief of Guanyin Pedestal of Dabei Pavilion in Longxing Temple, Zhengding, Hebei (photo by the author).

Tibetan Buddhist conchs are often decorated with gilded silver sleeves and inlaid with gemstones at the blowing mouth and conch mouth. The Great White Conch enshrined in Sakya Monastery is the earliest existing conch relic in Tibet. According to *“The History of the Sakya Dynasty”*, this conch was given by Kublai Khan (Ngawang 2005). In addition, there are many fired conch-shaped porcelains among Buddhist artifacts. In May 1969, an amazing white-glazed porcelain conch fired in the Northern Song Dynasty was unearthed from the pagoda base of Jingzhi Temple in Dingzhou City, Hebei Province (Figure 4). This conch has a lifelike shape, a pure and transparent glaze color, dense wave patterns carved on the spiral shell, and a blowing hole at the tail, with a clear and loud sound (Cui 2010). It imitates the shape of a natural conch but is fired with porcelain clay, making it a typical representative of the localization and artistry of Buddhist artifacts. At present, this

precious cultural relic is collected in the Dingzhou Museum and has become one of the representatives of Ding Kiln masterpieces.



Figure 4. White-glazed porcelain conch of Northern Song Dynasty in Dingzhou Museum, Hebei (<http://www.dzhmuseum.com/Resource/ewzs/%E7%93%B7%E5%99%A8/T-By-faluo/T-By-faluo-0.jpg>) accessed on 28 June 2026.

Another marine-related physical object among Buddhist cultural relics is the Song Dynasty Pearl Sarira Treasure Banner collected by the Suzhou Museum (Figure 5). The treasure banner is placed in two layers of wooden boxes. On the front wall of the black outer wooden box, there are two rows of white lacquer regular script: “The Pearl Sarira Treasure Banner in the Third Layer Tower of Ruiguang Courtyard” (Jin 2024). The main body of the treasure banner is made of nanmu, divided into three parts: the Sumeru base, the Buddha palace, and the spire. The Sumeru base is octagonal, with a double-layer square step below, tapering upward in an arc. The main components of the Sumeru base are placed in the balustrade platform, which is a nanmu mountain and sea: the mountain and sea are fully gilded, with towering waves at the bottom, magnificent, with a diameter of 24 cm. The four great continents are painted with gold paste on the sea. Eight wooden auspicious clouds rise from the sea surface, with four Heavenly Kings and four Heavenly Maidens standing on the cloud heads respectively. A hollowed-out mountain pillar rises in the center of the round platform, 14 cm high. It also supports a Sumeru treasure mountain composed of sixteen stacked mountains, 9.7 m high. The Buddha palace is at the top of the Sumeru mountain, guarded by eight Dharma protectors outside the palace. It forms a layout of four great continents, seven layers of fragrant water seas, seven layers of golden mountains, and small iron encircling mountains. The Pearl Sarira Treasure Banner fully reflects the highest level of arts and crafts in Suzhou during the Northern Song Dynasty. The whole banner comprehensively uses various professional techniques such as wood carving, gilding, jade carving, bead stringing, and gold and silver filigree, using more than 40,000 pearls in total. It is made of precious materials, with a unique conception and beautiful shape, embodying the wisdom and painstaking efforts of the skilled craftsmen at that time, and is a precious religious work of art.

In addition to ritual implements, the patterns of some daily artifacts are also based on Buddhist themes related to the ocean. The “Dharma Master Bodhidharma Crossing the Sea Pattern Mirror” collected by the National Museum of China is a very typical Song Dynasty bronze mirror with Buddhist cultural themes (Figure 6). The mirror is octagonal and rhombus-shaped, with a round knob and a plain edge. The back of the mirror is cast with a realistic scene of Dharma Master Bodhidharma crossing the sea with the wind and waves: on the right, Bodhidharma stands barefoot in the waves wearing a cassock; on the

left, a temple-like building looms among the rolling waves. The flowing folds of Bodhidharma's robe and the curled waves reflect the localized characteristics of Buddhist art, and the images of waves and buildings reflect the social cognition of Buddhism's spread at that time. Another Jin Dynasty "Dharma Master Bodhidharma Crossing the Sea Pattern Mirror" collected by the Inner Mongolia Museum has a similar statue. The back of the mirror is covered with sea wave patterns, interspersed with other wave patterns. On the right side of the knob, a monk wearing a cassock stands in the sea. The monk holds an umbrella-shaped bamboo hat in his right hand and places his left hand on his chest. In the sea on the left side of the knob, there is an object floating, like a sea beast, from which a wisp of auspicious cloud rises, holding a temple-like building in the auspicious cloud (Ding 1997).¹ Such religious theme patterns were relatively popular in Song Dynasty bronze mirrors, providing important physical evidence for the study of the sinicization process of Buddhist culture and cultural exchanges on the Maritime Silk Road.



Figure 5. Pearl Relic Treasure Building in Suzhou Museum (<https://www.szmuseum.com/Collection/List/ltgb?page=2>) accessed on 28 June 2026.



Figure 6. "Dharma Master Bodhidharma Crossing the Sea Pattern Mirror" (G. Yang 1994).

3.2. Depictions of Marine Scenes in Buddhist Paintings and Murals

As a treasure of Chinese Buddhist art, Dunhuang murals include many wonderful depictions of marine scenes, showing us the unique charm of marine elements in ancient Buddhist art. The marine scene paintings in Dunhuang murals have diverse forms of expression, ingenious compositions, and bright colors. In some murals, the ocean is depicted as a magnificent scene, with surging waves rolling like giant dragons and white spray splashing, showing the power of the ocean. For example, in the “Avalokiteshvara Transformation” mural (Figure 7) in Cave 3 of Yulin Grottoes of the Western Xia Dynasty, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva rides an elephant, sits half-cross-legged on a lotus throne with his right leg stretched out, his crown ribbons, silk scarves and necklaces fluttering in the wind, holding scriptures in his hand, looking down at the mortal world with a compassionate expression. In the sky, Bodhisattvas, Heavenly Kings, Arhats, and Taoist-transformed Heavenly Beings surround Avalokiteshvara, floating above the sea on clouds; in the “Manjushri Transformation” mural, Manjushri Bodhisattva sits half-cross-legged on a lotus throne on the back of a green lion, holding a ruyi scepter, with a plump, elegant, firm, and calm image. The green lion, symbolizing wisdom and power, steps on red lotus flowers with strong and vigorous steps. The lion keeper pulls the reins hard. Manjushri and the surrounding Devaraja, Heavenly Kings, Bodhisattvas, Arhats, boys, and other sacred beings form a sea-crossing procession above the clouds. The painter used smooth and dynamic lines to outline the shape of the waves, filling the picture with a sense of movement. At the same time, he skillfully used the hierarchical changes in colors, such as dark blue, light blue, and white, to show the depth and light and shadow effects of the sea water, making the marine scenes more realistic and vivid. For example, in the “Water-Moon Avalokiteshvara” on the southern wall of Cave 2 of Yulin Grottoes of the Western Xia Dynasty, the picture shows a vast sea and a vast scenery. In a huge transparent halo, Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva is shown wearing a golden crown, with long hair hanging down, adorned with necklaces and bracelets, and wearing a long skirt around her waist.



Figure 7. Samantabhadra in Yulin Cave 003 West Wall South Wall of main chamber (<https://www.e-dunhuang.com/showmural/10.0001/0001/0002/0003/0001/0003/01>) accessed on 28 June 2026.

The sea-related works of art in Dunhuang murals also include descriptions of maritime navigation activities, the most representative of which is the “Maritime Distress Scene” (also known as “Avalokiteshvara Rescuing Sea Distress”) (Figure 8) at the lower

part of the “Avalokiteshvara Sutra Illustration” on the southern wall of Cave 45 of the High Tang Dynasty. The sea ship in the painting is very large, sailing on the sea with a very high mast, on which a wide sail is hung. This sail turns into a bow shape under the strong wind, indicating that the ship is sailing at a fast speed. At the same time, there are boatmen steering the helm on the ship, and others rowing to help increase the sailing speed. The risks of maritime navigation include violent storms that can destroy ships, man-eating sea monsters, and underwater reefs, but under the protection of Avalokiteshvara in the sky, the sailing ships can finally reach their destination safely. The large sailing ship in the painting is a typical sea ship image, “with one mast and one sail, and five sail buckles are carefully drawn on the top of the mast, indicating that the ship can adjust its speed at any time according to the wind force” (D. Wang 2024). In addition, the mural in Cave 296 of the Northern Zhou Dynasty describes the story of Prince Shan You entering the sea to seek treasures. For the sea ship images in the Dunhuang murals, some scholars have made detailed textual research. For example, the sea ship image on the southern wall of Cave 205 of the Tang Dynasty is a large wooden sailing ship, the sea ship on the northern wall of Cave 31 of the Tang Dynasty is a tower ship, and the sea ship in Cave 38 of Yulin Grottoes of the Song Dynasty is a culmination of all ship images with double heads, double tails, cabins, sails and other features in the Tang, Five, and Song dynasties (Ma 1995).

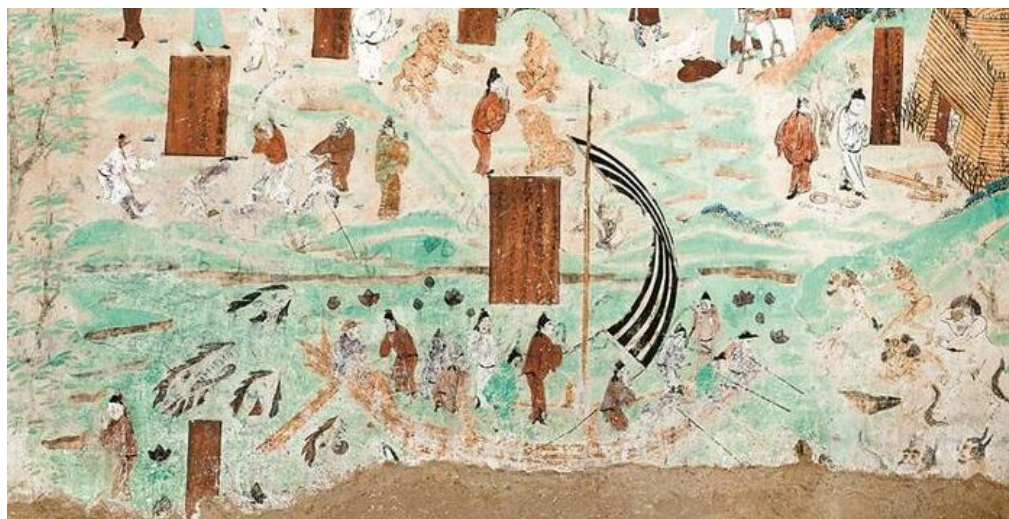


Figure 8. “Guanyin Rescuing in the Ocean” in Dunhuang Cave 045, South Wall of the main chamber. (<https://www.dha.ac.cn/info/1425/3691.htm#>) accessed on 28 June 2026.

These marine scenes play an important role in the expression of Buddhist stories and the transmission of beliefs in Buddhist paintings and murals. Firstly, marine scenes provide rich backgrounds and contexts for Buddhist stories. Many Buddhist stories are related to the ocean, such as the Maritime Distress Scene. By depicting marine scenes, these stories become more vivid and intuitive, making them easy for believers to understand and accept. When audiences appreciate the murals, they can almost feel as if they are on the scene, experiencing the various challenges faced during maritime navigation, thus more deeply understanding the spiritual connotation conveyed by the Buddhist stories. Secondly, marine scenes symbolize Buddhist doctrines and wisdom. In Buddhism, the ocean is regarded as a symbol of the Dharma. Its vast and unfathomable characteristics imply the boundlessness of the Dharma and the profoundness of wisdom. The marine scenes in Buddhist paintings and murals, through artistic techniques, visualize the abstract Buddhist doctrines, helping believers better comprehend the essence of Buddhism.

3.3. Marine Creatures in Buddhist Art

There are also many marine creatures in Chinese Buddhist art. The makara is a sea beast from Indian mythology, symbolizing water that accumulates energy (Jayita 2020; Miyaji 2009). In the Buddha's life stories, the makara is a giant sea monster that can devour ships. Monk Huilin 僧慧琳 explained in Vol. 40 of "Sound and Meaning of All Sutras" — 切经音义: "Makara is a Sanskrit term. It is a big fish in the sea that devours everything", "Buddhist scriptures use it as a metaphor for Bodhisattvas, who support all sentient beings with love and compassion and will never give up until they achieve complete Buddhahood. In addition, because the makara feeds people with its flesh and benefits all living beings, it later became a Buddhist holy object." (Shang and Pei 2017).

The relatively primitive makara image is usually in the shape of a beast's head, fish's tail, elephant's trunk, and ferocious fangs, so it is translated as Sea Monster in the Western context. With the spread of Buddhism from India to China, after evolution, its image was gradually sinicized and became an auspicious beast praying for good weather, national peace, and prosperity.

During the Eastern Jin Dynasty, the makara was already described in the "Middle Agama Sutra" translated by Monk Sanghadeva: "Once upon a time, all the merchants in Jambudvipa gathered in the merchant hall and thought: We might as well take a sea-equipped ship and enter the sea to get treasures to support our families... We might as well each prepare sea-crossing tools, such as goatskin bags, large gourds, and rafts... Then they entered the sea. There, in the sea, the king of makara destroyed their ship" (Institute of Chinese Buddhist Culture 1999). It can be seen that the makara, a marine creature in Buddhism, entered the Central Plains region through Buddhist scriptures relatively early.

At present, the artistic images of makara can be seen in both Buddhist-related historical relics and archeological discoveries. The makara image in Gu Kaizhi's 顾恺之 painting "Nymph of the Luo River" 洛神赋图 is the earliest existing cultural relic example (Figure 9). There are also typical makara patterns on the grottoes excavated during the Tang Dynasty in Longmen 龙门, Luoyang (Figure 10). So far, the earliest makara cultural relic image found in China is the pattern on the top cover of the stone coffin of Li He's 李和 tomb of the Sui Dynasty, excavated in Sanyuan County, Shaanxi Province² (Figure 11).

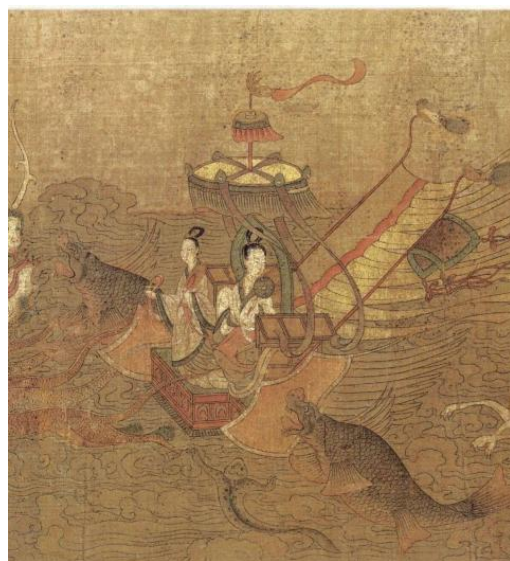


Figure 9. Sea monster in "Nymph of the Luo River", collected in The Palace Museum (<https://minghuaji.dpm.org.cn/paint/appreciate?id=69037b434240e1bbaa99067ca79e94f3>) accessed on 28 June 2026.



Figure 10. Sea monster in Longmen Cave 龙门石窟, Luoyang, Henan (photographed by the author).



Figure 11. A line drawing of a sea monster on the coffin lid of Li He 李和 (Shaanxi Provincial Cultural Relics Management Committee 1966).

There are many makara images on Tang Dynasty artifacts. A stone carving artwork was also unearthed in the site of Tiantang 洛阳天堂遗址, the Eastern Capital of the Sui and Tang Dynasties in Luoyang, which was identified as a drainage device of the Luoyang Palace during the Wuzhou 武周 period of the Tang Dynasty—the stone chiwen 鸱吻 (Figure 12). At present, new research, starting from its shape and combining with Wu Zhou's use of the Wheel-Turning King to justify its regime, holds that this stone carving work should be a Buddhist makara (Shang and Pei 2017). The reason why its image is different from that of the previous generation is the result of the long-term local evolution of the image. Makara are also often painted on gold and silverware of the Tang Dynasty (Figure 13). In addition to retaining the distinct characteristics of a curled long nose and wings on the body, their overall shape is slightly rounded, no different from that of a fish, and they no longer have the fierce and harsh appearance. After the Tang Dynasty, we can still see makara images on the surface of some secular utensils, but their religious signif-

icance is obviously weakened. After long-term sinicization transformation, they became daily patterns symbolizing auspiciousness.



Figure 12. “Sea Monster from Luoyang Tiantang Ruins 洛阳天堂遗址”, displayed in Luoyang Museum (photographed by the author).



Figure 13. “Sea Monster in Golden Cup of Tang Dynasty”, displayed in Shaanxi History Museum (photographed by the author).

In summary, after the image of the makara was introduced into China from India along with Buddhism, it gradually merged with traditional Chinese culture, evolving from a marine creature in original Buddhist art to part of a style widely used in daily life. This illustrative example is not only the embodiment of marine elements in Chinese Buddhist art, but also a successful demonstration of the local transformation of foreign culture in the process of Sino-foreign cultural exchange.

4. The Influence of Marine Elements on the Style of Chinese Buddhist Art

4.1. The Shaping of Regional Styles of Buddhist Art Under the Influence of Marine Culture

The natural characteristics and cultural connotations of the ocean have profoundly influenced the aesthetic orientation of Chinese Buddhist art. While retaining the inherent solemnity and sacredness of Buddhism, it has added vivid, inclusive, and magnificent aesthetic connotations, forming a distinct stylistic difference from the Buddhist sculpture art of the Northern Dynasties. Early Buddhist art introduced into China was deeply influenced by Gandharan art, with rigorous and regular shapes, solemn expressions, focusing on conveying the sacredness and authority of Buddhism, and its aesthetic expression tended to be introverted and calm. With the prosperity of the Maritime Silk Road, the infiltration of marine culture gradually broke through this limitation, making the aesthetics of Buddhist art present the characteristics of vividness, freedom, and inclusiveness.

The fluidity and variability of the ocean have endowed Buddhist art with a vivid and stretching linear beauty and dynamic tension. This influence is particularly prominent in Buddhist paintings and murals. The depiction of sea waves in Dunhuang murals abandons rigid line drawing and adopts smooth, graceful, and rhythmic curves to show the dynamic scene of surging waves and splashing spray. For example, the sea waves in the “Avalokiteshvara Rescuing Sea Distress” in Cave 45 of the High Tang Dynasty have elegant and vivid lines, undulating with the sea breeze, forming a sharp contrast with the panic of the navigators and the calm of Avalokiteshvara in the painting. It not only highlights the natural vitality of the ocean but also enriches the aesthetic level of the picture.

The Guanyin belief has a long history in eastern Zhejiang, and Guanyin has been endowed with various connotations under the influence of marine culture. Kumarajiva 鸠摩罗什, a Buddhist scholar, mentioned in the translated The Lotus Sutra: “If there are hundreds of millions of sentient beings who enter the sea to seek treasures such as gold, silver, lapis lazuli, tridacna, agate, coral, amber and pearls, and if a black wind blows their ships and drifts them to the Rakshasa ghost country, if even one person among them calls the name of Avalokiteshvara Bodhisattva, all these people will be freed from the disaster of Rakshasa.” (Kumārajīva 1994) It can be seen that Guanyin belief already contained marine elements when it was first introduced into the Central Plains. The active maritime trade in regions represented by eastern Zhejiang enabled the Guanyin belief with marine characteristics to take root in coastal areas and form a regional style.

The Buddhist temple on Putuo Mountain was developed during the Southern Dynasties, and a Guanyin Temple was built. In the late Tang Dynasty, a local resident named Zhang founded the Bu Ken Qu Guanyin Yuan (Unwilling-to-Leave Guanyin Courtyard) (Feng and Guo 1990). Since then, Guanyin on Putuo Mountain has not only been worshiped by local people who make a living from the sea, but also recognized and revered as the sea god by Japanese and Silla merchants and envoys traveling in the East China Sea (Cho 2010). After continuous renovation in the Song Dynasty, Putuo Mountain became the most important Taoist site for Guanyin at the official level, which was also an important step in the deification of Guanyin belief as a sea god (Chen and Hu 2018). As some scholars pointed out when talking about the relationship between sea god belief and marine fishery in coastal areas during this period, “The more types of sea gods enshrined together, the more comprehensive their protective functions are in marine fishery production. This phenomenon of joint enshrinement is a manifestation of the complex religious psychological needs of fishermen who make a living wandering at sea.” (R. Wang 2000) During the Wanli era 万历 of the Ming Dynasty, Emperor Wanli renamed the Haichao An 海潮庵 on Putuo Mountain as “Huguo Zhenhai Chan Temple” (National Protection and Sea Defense Zen Temple) 护国镇海禅寺. The process of Guanyin evolving from a purely Buddhist deity to

an important patron saint of the coastal areas is precisely the regional transformation in connotation of the Buddhist Guanyin belief after it flowed from the Central Plains to the coast, under the infiltration of the marine society and environment. It is also “the result of the integration of Buddhism into the marine society and its combination with marine consciousness in the process of secularization, a kind of belief adjustment and reconstruction” (Chen and Hu 2018).

When visiting Putuo Mountain 普陀山 now, the Buddhist buildings influenced by marine culture are still visible. The ridges of Buddhist temples are decorated with wave patterns and sea beast shapes, which not only adapt to the windy and rainy natural environment along the coast, but also highlight the characteristics of marine culture; the Guanyin statues on Putuo Mountain are mostly combined with marine elements, such as the Aoyu Guanyin (Sea Turtle Guanyin) 鳌鱼观音 and Dishui Guanyin (Dripping Water Guanyin) 滴水观音. As a marine mythical beast, the Aoyu symbolizes peace and auspiciousness, and the pure bottle of Dishui Guanyin contains sea water, implying that the Dharma nourishes all sentient beings like sea water. It not only conveys the compassionate doctrine of Buddhism, but also integrates the respect and prayer of Zhoushan 舟山 fishermen for the ocean. After being endowed with the responsibility of protecting the coastal areas and the safety of people going out to sea, the artistic statues of Guanyin are more gentle, vivid, elegant, and stretching, as natural and smooth as being blown by the sea breeze, with a sense of affinity close to all sentient beings, which is highly consistent with the vivid characteristics of the ocean.

Marine culture not only affects the new connotations and aesthetic styles of Buddhist culture, but also promotes the regional development and innovation of expression forms of Buddhist art, making it break away from a single religious narrative framework, expand the expression carriers and creative techniques of Buddhist art, and inject new vitality into the development of Buddhist art.

Quanzhou 泉州 has been an important port on the Maritime Silk Road since the Song Dynasty. Especially from the Southern Song Dynasty onwards, many foreign ethnic groups arrived in Quanzhou via the Maritime Silk Road to do business or settle down. The convergence of diverse cultures enabled the integration of artistic characteristics of other religions into Buddhist temples in Quanzhou. In the 13th and 14th centuries, Persians and Arabs accounted for the largest number of foreign groups in Quanzhou, which can be confirmed by the existing stone carving materials (D. Chen 1984). The stone pillar carvings of Kaiyuan Temple 开元寺 include not only figures and patterns from Buddhist stories, but also marine elements such as sailing ships, sea beasts, and coral, as well as decorative patterns from Persian and Arab cultures. It shows the in-depth integration of Buddhist art and diverse regional cultures against the background of maritime trade, and has become a typical representative of regional Buddhist art.

It is very common in the communication and exchange of ancient foreign cultures that the same source culture generates and extends different contents in different regions due to different transmission paths. For example, the Christian four-winged angel stone carving collected in the Quanzhou Maritime Museum of History and Culture, according to research, its artistic origin should be the typical four-winged patron saint in Assyrian culture (Alfredo 2007). Such art has been unearthed in the Arabian Peninsula and West Asia (Olmstead 2010). However, no four-winged patterns have been found along the Land Silk Road for the time being; only similar images of four-armed patron saints have been found. The reason is that when it spread eastward through the Sogdian region in Central Asia, it was influenced by Indian culture, and the original four wings were replaced by four arms (J. Li 2024), and it continued to be introduced to Northern China. The prosperity of the Maritime Silk Road enabled people from Mesopotamia to come directly to Quanzhou

and other places by ship, which also led to the discovery of Christian images containing Assyrian elements in Quanzhou.

It can be seen that the vastness and inclusiveness of the ocean have shaped the inclusive aesthetic pattern of Buddhist art. As a channel for cultural exchange, the ocean not only promoted the spread of Buddhism and expanded the connotation of Buddhist deities, but also promoted the integration of artistic styles from different regions, enabling Chinese Buddhist art to absorb diverse cultures and integrate with China's local marine folk culture, forming an aesthetic style of pluralistic coexistence.

4.2. Marine Elements Enrich the Narrative Connotation and Spiritual Expression of Buddhist Art

Marine culture not only influenced the aesthetics and forms of Buddhist art but also enriched its narrative connotation and spiritual expression. It made the religious narrative of Buddhist art no longer limited to the simple transmission of the Buddha's life and Buddhist doctrines, but integrated the spiritual connotation of marine culture, combining the compassion and wisdom of Buddhism with the inclusiveness and tenacity of the ocean, endowing Buddhist art with a deeper spiritual heritage and humanistic value.

For human beings, the ocean has always been dualistic. On the one hand, the boundlessness of the ocean, which implies inclusive wisdom, makes people yearn for it; on the other hand, the disastrous nature of the ocean itself leaves human beings helpless when encountering maritime disasters while sailing or going to sea. This contradictory emotion is the breeding ground for faith. "Thus, the phenomenon of worshiping sea gods pervades all corners of social life and people's spiritual world in coastal areas, forming an important part of marine spiritual culture" (Situ 2009), and the worship of the ocean became increasingly intense.

In terms of narrative connotation, marine elements have provided new narrative scenes and story carriers for Buddhist art, enriching its narrative content. The narratives of traditional Buddhist art mostly revolve around core stories such as the Buddha's birth, practice, enlightenment, and nirvana. The integration of marine elements extends the narratives of Buddhist art to sea-related stories such as seeking the Dharma by sea, rescuing at sea, and seeking treasures in the sea.

As mentioned in the previous section, early Buddhism was introduced into the Central Plains through the Land Silk Road via Central Asia. By the Tang Dynasty, many monks came by merchant ships through maritime transportation, so many stories of foreign monks and maritime disasters inevitably included the figures of monks. There are also many poems from ancient times describing the "thrills" of maritime trade. Huang Tao 黄滔 in the late Tang Dynasty wrote a poem: "A large ship brings great profits, but the vast sea has no shallow waves. The greater the profit, the deeper the waves—what is your intention? The road is lined with the teeth of whales and squids; why not pass by less often?" (Huang Tao). Faced with the unpredictable ocean, monks with divine powers became an important guarantee for the smooth navigation of merchant ships.

The formation of Guanyin 观音 belief on Putuo Mountain 普陀山 also has a narrative inseparable from marine elements. According to historical records, in the Dazhong period of the Tang Dynasty, "Monk Hui' 僧慧愕 from Japan obtained the auspicious statue (of Guanyin) from Wutai Mountain 五台山 and intended to return to his motherland. When the boat arrived at Xinluo 新螺 Reef, it would not move. Hui'e prayed: 'If the sentient beings in my country have no karma to see the Buddha, I will build a temple wherever the boat goes.' After a while, the boat sailed and finally anchored under Chaoyin Cave 潮音洞. A local resident named Zhang witnessed this miracle, immediately donated his residence on Shuangfeng Mountain to build a nunnery to enshrine it, calling it Bu Ken Qu Guanyin Yuan (Unwilling-to-Leave Guanyin Courtyard) 不肯去观音." (Feng and Guo 1990). There

were not a few Korean and Japanese monks who crossed the sea as recorded above, leaving many marine anecdotes during their arduous journey across the East China Sea.

As an important region connecting the three East Asian countries, eastern Zhejiang also promotes the rich spiritual connotation of Chinese Buddhist culture due to its inherent marine culture. Jianzhen's 鉴真 eastward voyage not only showed the arduous course of Buddhist dissemination, but also conveyed the spirit of perseverance and dedication to faith of Buddhists. It combined the compassion and kindness of Buddhism with the mystery and danger of the ocean, enriched the narrative connotation of Buddhist art, and made the transmission of Buddhist doctrines more vivid and intuitive. Zhi Yi 智顗, the actual founder of the Tiantai School 天台宗, also embodied the attributes of the ocean in the Dharma in his work *Kemo Zhigan*, extending the unique qualities of the sea, such as purity, vastness, depth, and unity, to many marine outlooks such as faith, equality, compassion, harmony, and integration (Lang 2016). Compared with other sects of Chinese Buddhism, which were mainly introduced through the Western Regions, the concept of "sea" originally contained in Buddhist scriptures mostly appeared in Zen poems as "Shanshui" 山水. Only Tiantai Mountain, due to its location in eastern Zhejiang, still retains the element of "sea" in its thought (J. Chen 2015). These examples are all the marine connotations unique to eastern Zhejiang endowed by the unique natural environment of the ocean.

In summary, marine culture has enriched the narrative content of Buddhism, and its integration with sinicized Buddhist doctrines has reactivated the original marine spiritual connotation in Buddhism. As an important context for the development of Chinese Buddhist art, marine culture has profoundly influenced the style, narrative, and spirit of Chinese Buddhist art, making Chinese Buddhist culture not only retain the religious core of Indian Buddhism, but also integrate the characteristics of China's local marine culture.

5. Conclusions

This study systematically explores the marine elements in Chinese Buddhist culture, sorts out the historical origin between Buddhism and the ocean and the manifestations of marine elements contained therein, discusses the influence of marine elements on the style of Buddhist art, and reveals the cultural connotation and spiritual value of marine elements in Buddhist art. Firstly, the connection between Buddhism and the ocean has a profound historical foundation and ideological origin. Buddhism has been inextricably linked with the ocean since its birth. In the myths, legends, and classic documents of ancient Indian Buddhism, marine elements have occupied an important position, thanks to South Asian and Chinese merchants who established footholds in Southeast Asia. Buddhist ideas and images were also disseminated from South Asia through Southeast Asia to China via these networks, which reflects the early Buddhist cognition and worship of the ocean (Tansen 2014). In the process of Buddhism being introduced into China, the Maritime Silk Road became an important channel, which not only promoted the spread of Buddhism but also promoted the in-depth integration of marine culture and Buddhist culture, laying the foundation for the integration of marine elements into Buddhist art. Secondly, marine elements present diverse and rich manifestations in Buddhist art, running through various carriers such as artifacts, paintings, and murals. These Buddhist artworks depict marine scenes and Buddhist stories with vivid artistic techniques, showing the perfect combination of marine elements and Buddhist art, which not only conveys Buddhist doctrines but also shows the natural charm and humanistic connotation of the ocean. Thirdly, marine elements have profoundly influenced the stylistic characteristics of Chinese Buddhist art, promoting the aesthetic reconstruction, regional development, and form innovation of Buddhist art. In terms of aesthetic style, marine elements have endowed Buddhist art with vivid, inclusive and stretching characteristics, which distinguishes it from the solemn-

nity of northern Buddhism, forming a regional aesthetic difference of “northern grandeur and southern elegance”; in terms of regional development, it has promoted the formation of regional Buddhist art schools in coastal areas such as Zhoushan 舟山 and Quanzhou 泉州, enabling Buddhist art to be deeply integrated with coastal regional culture and folk customs; in terms of form innovation, it has expanded the carriers and creative techniques of Buddhist art, promoting Buddhist art from the sacred to the secular, and enhancing the communication power and influence of Buddhist art. Finally, marine elements in Buddhist art contain profound cultural connotation and spiritual value, which are not only the concrete expression of Buddhist doctrines, but also the witness of regional culture and Sino-foreign cultural exchanges. Marine elements symbolize the boundlessness of the Dharma, the depth of wisdom and the breadth of compassion, becoming important symbols for the transmission of Buddhist doctrines; at the same time, marine elements integrate the respect and prayers of coastal people for the ocean, reflect regional cultural characteristics, and witness the history of cultural exchanges between ancient China and neighboring countries and regions through the Maritime Silk Road, becoming an important carrier of Sino-foreign cultural exchanges.

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Notes

- ¹ Some scholars, however, hold a different view regarding the story depicted on the mirror, suggesting that it should actually be “Bodhidharma Crossing the River” 达摩渡海 instead (Y. Yang 2013).
- ² The Tomb of Li He 李和, a burial site dating back to the second year of the Kaihuang era 开皇 of the Sui Dynasty (582 AD), unearthed in Shuangsheng 双盛 Village, Lingqian 陵前 Township, Sanyuan 三原 County, Shaanxi Province, in 1964.

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