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Harmony in Bloom: The Philosophical and Aesthetic Framework of Baoxianghua Patterns in Tang Dynasty Decorative Arts

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ABSTRACT: The baoxianghua (treasure-flower) pattern, a ubiquitous decorative motif in the murals of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), is frequently analysed through the lenses of historical chronology, Silk Road cross-cultural exchange, and iconographic evolution. However, its profound theoretical dimensions as a visual manifestation of classical Chinese philosophical thought remain under-explored. This article provides a comprehensive philosophical and aesthetic analysis of the baoxianghua pattern, moving beyond its formal and historical attributes to examine how it embodies the syncretic intellectual milieu of the Tang Dynasty. By integrating Buddhist cosmology, Daoist metaphysics, and Confucian moral aesthetics, the study demonstrates that the baoxianghua is not merely an ornamental device but a profound theoretical construct. The radial symmetry and geometric precision of the motif are analysed as visual articulations of Confucian cosmic order and societal harmony. Its circularity and evolving abstraction are interpreted through Daoist concepts of cyclical time, wu wei (non-action), and the transcendence of material form. Concurrently, the motif's structural evolution from sacred Buddhist iconography to secularized aestheticism is examined as a reflection of the broader ontological shifts in Tang society. Utilizing theoretical frameworks from Chinese aesthetics and comparative philosophy, this article argues that the baoxianghua pattern serves as a dynamic philosophical palimpsest, encoding the metaphysical aspirations, moral paradigms, and aesthetic sensibilities of one of China's most intellectually vibrant epochs.

KEYWORDS: baoxianghua patterns, Chinese aesthetics, Buddhist philosophy, Daoist metaphysics, Confucian ethics, Tang Dynasty, Dunhuang, ornamental art, philosophical aesthetics

1. INTRODUCTION

The study of Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE) visual culture has long been dominated by the analysis of narrative figuration, monumental sculpture, and landscape painting. Within the sacred spaces of the Dunhuang Mogao Caves, scholarly attention has predominantly focused on the elaborate depictions of Jataka tales, the majestic biographies of the Buddha, and the intricate cosmological diagrams that adorn the cave walls. In this hierarchy of art historical value, decorative and ornamental elements—such as the ubiquitous baoxianghua (treasure-flower) pattern—have frequently been relegated to the periphery. Often characterized as mere aesthetic backdrops or secondary framing devices, these motifs are conventionally interpreted as the visual by-products of Silk Road cultural exchange, reflecting the amalgamation of Indian lotus forms, Persian palmettes, and Central Asian vine scrolls (Hansen, 2012; Whitfield, 2004).

While the cross-cultural and historical dimensions of the baoxianghua pattern have been thoroughly documented (Yan & Mokhtar, 2025), a purely historical or formalist approach obscures the profound theoretical depth of these motifs. The ornamental arts of the Tang Dynasty were not created in an intellectual vacuum; they were produced within a highly sophisticated philosophical milieu characterized by the syncretism of Buddhism, Daoism, and Confucianism. In classical Chinese thought, aesthetics and philosophy are inextricably linked. As Li (1994) articulates in his seminal work on the Chinese aesthetic tradition, visual forms are not merely representations of the external world but are fundamental expressions of cosmic order, moral virtue, and metaphysical truth.

This article seeks to re-centre the baoxianghua pattern within the discourse of Chinese philosophical aesthetics. Moving beyond the identification of its constituent botanical elements or its chronological evolution, this study investigates the baoxianghua as a theoretical construct—a visual language that articulates the metaphysical and ethical paradigms of the Tang Dynasty. By examining the motif through the integrated lenses of Buddhist soteriology, Daoist ontology, and Confucian ethics, the article argues that the baoxianghua is a dynamic philosophical palimpsest. Its geometric structures, rhythmic repetitions, and evolving levels of abstraction encode profound concepts of harmony, cyclical time, and the relationship between the sacred and the secular.

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The theoretical framework of this analysis is grounded in the understanding that in traditional Chinese aesthetics, the distinction between the "decorative" and the "meaningful" is a false dichotomy (Loehr, 1967). Ornamentation functions as a primary vehicle for cosmological expression. By decoding the philosophical grammar of the baoxianghua pattern, this article demonstrates how abstract visual forms actively participate in the construction of ideological and spiritual meaning, offering a new paradigm for the study of decorative arts in Chinese antiquity.

2. THE SYNCRETIC PHILOSOPHICAL MILIEU OF THE TANG DYNASTY

To comprehend the theoretical depth of the baoxianghua pattern, it is essential to first contextualize the intellectual environment of the Tang Dynasty. The Tang era is frequently celebrated as a golden age of cosmopolitanism and cultural flourishing, but it was equally a period of profound philosophical synthesis. The intellectual landscape was defined by the dynamic interplay of the "Three Teachings" (sanjiao): Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. Rather than existing in isolated dogmatic silos, these philosophical systems engaged in continuous dialogue, mutual borrowing, and conceptual integration (Fung, 1952). This period witnessed a unique intellectual climate where state-sponsored Confucianism provided the structural framework for society, Daoism offered a profound metaphysical connection to nature and the cosmos, and Buddhism introduced sophisticated soteriological paradigms that addressed the ultimate nature of reality and human suffering.

2.1 The Integration of the Three Teachings

Confucianism provided the ethical and socio-political foundation of the Tang state. It emphasized hierarchical order, moral cultivation, and the alignment of human society with the mandate of Heaven (Tianming). In the Confucian worldview, harmony (he) is achieved when every element of society and the cosmos occupies its proper place and functions according to ritual propriety (li). This concept of cosmic and social order deeply influenced the aesthetic theories of the period, where visual balance and symmetry were equated with moral rectitude (Li, 2010). The Tang court actively promoted these values, integrating them into the very fabric of state architecture, public rituals, and officially sanctioned art forms. The imperial examination system, which tested candidates on their mastery of Confucian classics, ensured that the educated elite shared a common philosophical vocabulary that permeated all aspects of cultural production.

Daoism, conversely, offered an ontological perspective focused on the natural, the spontaneous, and the transcendent. Daoist philosophy posits that the ultimate reality—the Dao—is formless, eternal, and in a state of constant, cyclical transformation. Concepts such as wu wei (effortless action) and the interplay of yin and yang (complementary opposing forces) shaped an aesthetic sensibility that valued fluidity, abstraction, and the suggestion of the infinite over rigid representation (Sullivan, 1999). Daoism provided a counterbalance to Confucian rigidity, encouraging artists to look beyond the immediate material world and capture the underlying energetic currents of existence. The Tang imperial family itself claimed descent from Laozi, lending Daoist thought an unusual degree of political legitimacy during this period.

Buddhism, having been thoroughly sinicized by the Tang period, introduced sophisticated metaphysical frameworks concerning the nature of suffering, the illusion of the material world, and the path to enlightenment. Mahayana Buddhist concepts, particularly the idea of emptiness (sunyata) and the interconnectedness of all phenomena, provided a profound spiritual vocabulary. As Guang (2013) notes, the integration of Buddhist thought into Chinese culture necessitated the translation of abstract Indian metaphysical concepts into the visual and conceptual language of indigenous Chinese philosophy. This translation process was not merely linguistic but profoundly visual, resulting in new iconographic forms that synthesized foreign doctrines with local aesthetic sensibilities. The flourishing of Buddhist schools such as Chan, Huayan, and Pure Land during the Tang Dynasty further enriched the philosophical discourse, each offering distinct perspectives on the nature of reality and the path to liberation.

2.2 Aesthetics as Applied Philosophy

In the Tang intellectual tradition, art was not merely a mimetic exercise; it was a method of philosophical inquiry and expression. The concept of qi yun sheng dong (spirit resonance and life motion), originally formulated by Xie He in the context of painting, permeated all visual arts, including ornamentation. The goal of the artist or artisan was to capture the vital energy (qi) of the cosmos and render the invisible principles of the Dao visible (Abe, 2002). This principle dictated that a successful artwork must not only look like its subject but must also possess an inner vitality that resonates with the universal life force. In this framework, the artisan who created a baoxianghua pattern was engaged in an act no less philosophically significant than the calligrapher who inscribed a poem or the painter who rendered a mountain landscape.

Within this syncretic environment, the baoxianghua pattern emerged not as a simple decorative invention, but as a sophisticated visual synthesis of these competing yet complementary worldviews. The motif's ability to simultaneously evoke Buddhist purity, Daoist cyclicality, and Confucian order made it the quintessential aesthetic symbol of the Tang Dynasty's intellectual harmony. It functioned as a visual lingua franca, capable of communicating profound philosophical truths to a diverse audience, ranging from highly educated scholar-officials to devout lay practitioners who may have lacked formal philosophical training but who intuitively grasped the cosmic resonance of the forms surrounding them.

3. CONFUCIAN AESTHETICS: SYMMETRY, ORDER, AND MORAL GEOMETRY

The structural foundation of the baoxianghua pattern is characterized by its rigorous geometric organization, predominantly manifesting in radial symmetry. While this formal characteristic is often described merely in terms of its visual appeal or its derivation from Central Asian mandalas, a deeper theoretical analysis reveals its profound connection to Confucian moral aesthetics and cosmology.

3.1 The Visual Articulation of Cosmic Order

In classical Confucian philosophy, the universe is conceptualized as a highly structured, hierarchical entity. The concept of Tian (Heaven) represents not only the physical sky but the ultimate source of moral and cosmic order. Human society, to achieve peace and prosperity, must mirror this celestial organization. This alignment is achieved through the practice of li (ritual or propriety), which dictates the correct relationships and behaviours within the social hierarchy (Fung, 1952). The Confucian cosmos is not chaotic or arbitrary; it is a meticulously organized whole in which every element—from the emperor to the humblest peasant, from the stars to the rivers—has a designated role and function.

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The radial symmetry of the baoxianghua pattern serves as a visual metaphor for this Confucian cosmic order. The motif is invariably organized around a central axis or core—often a stylized lotus receptacle—from which multiple layers of petals, leaves, and abstract forms radiate outward in perfect balance. This centripetal structure reflects the Confucian ideal of a society radiating outward from a virtuous centre, traditionally embodied by the Emperor, who acts as the conduit between Heaven and Earth (Rawson, 1995). The pattern's organization thus mirrors the political cosmology of the Tang state, where the Son of Heaven sat at the centre of a vast, concentrically organized empire.

Every element within the baoxianghua design occupies a specific, mathematically precise position relative to the centre. There is no randomness or asymmetry; the visual weight is perfectly distributed. This geometric precision articulates the Confucian belief that harmony (he) is not the absence of difference, but the perfect organization of diverse elements into a unified, balanced whole. As Li (2010) argues, in the Chinese aesthetic tradition, beauty is inextricably linked to goodness; a visually balanced form is inherently a morally correct form. The baoxianghua thus operates not merely as a pleasing visual arrangement, but as a silent affirmation of the moral order that underpins the universe.

3.2 Symmetry as a Moral Imperative

The insistence on symmetry in Tang decorative arts, and particularly in the baoxianghua, transcends mere stylistic preference; it operates as a moral imperative. In the chaotic and often violent reality of the medieval world, the creation of perfectly ordered visual spaces served an apotropaic and ideological function. By adorning the walls and ceilings of the Dunhuang caves with mathematically precise baoxianghua patterns, artisans were not just decorating a space; they were ritually constructing an idealized microcosm of the universe. The act of creating order from chaos, of imposing geometric perfection upon raw stone, was itself a deeply Confucian endeavour.

This concept aligns with what scholars of Chinese aesthetics term the "aesthetics of harmony" (he zhi mei). The baoxianghua demonstrates how disparate botanical elements—the Indian lotus, the Persian palmette, the Chinese peony—can be integrated into a single, cohesive structure without losing their individual identities, yet completely subordinated to the overall geometric order. This visual synthesis mirrors the Confucian political ideal of an expansive, cosmopolitan empire that maintains internal cohesion through the universal application of moral law and ritual order (Lewis, 2009). The pattern becomes a microcosmic representation of the Tang state itself: diverse, expansive, yet fundamentally unified.

Furthermore, the structural stability of the baoxianghua pattern evokes the Confucian virtue of zhongyong (the Doctrine of the Mean). The motif avoids extremes; it is neither chaotic nor overly rigid, balancing intricate internal detail with a clear, overarching boundary. In this way, the pattern functions as a visual didactic tool, silently reinforcing the principles of moderation, balance, and hierarchical order that were foundational to the Tang state. The zhongyong ideal teaches that virtue lies not in the extremes but in the balanced centre, and the baoxianghua, with its perfectly calibrated equilibrium, embodies this teaching in visual form.

4. DAOIST METAPHYSICS: CIRCULARITY, CYCLICAL TIME, AND THE TRANSCENDENCE OF FORM

While the geometric structure of the baoxianghua aligns with Confucian order, its dynamic internal rhythms and evolving levels of abstraction are deeply informed by Daoist metaphysics. Daoism introduces a fluid, process-oriented understanding of the universe, emphasizing constant transformation, the cyclical nature of time, and the ultimate formlessness of the Dao. In contrast to the rigid, hierarchical structures of Confucianism, Daoist thought encourages an appreciation for the spontaneous, the organic, and the spaces between defined forms. It is this Daoist dimension that gives the baoxianghua its sense of life and movement, preventing it from becoming a sterile geometric exercise.

4.1 Circularity and the Eternal Return

The fundamental shape of the baoxianghua is circular, a form laden with profound ontological significance in Daoist thought. Unlike the linear conception of time prevalent in many Western traditions, Daoism conceptualizes time and existence as inherently cyclical. The Dao operates through continuous processes of expansion and contraction, birth and decay, returning always to its source. The Daodejing famously asserts that "reversal is the movement of the Dao" (Fung, 1952). This principle suggests that all phenomena, upon reaching their extreme, inevitably revert to their opposite, ensuring a perpetual cosmic balance.

The circularity of the baoxianghua pattern visually encapsulates this concept of the eternal return. The eye is drawn continuously around the perimeter of the motif, finding neither a definitive beginning nor an end. The radiating petals often exhibit a subtle rotational energy, suggesting a spinning wheel or a cosmic vortex. This dynamic circularity transforms the static image into a representation of kinetic energy, evoking the Daoist concept of the universe as a continuous, self-generating process (Wu, 2010). The motif becomes a visual meditation on the cyclical rhythms of nature—the changing of seasons, the rising and setting of the sun, the endless cycle of life and death that constitutes the fabric of existence.

Moreover, the circular form represents wholeness and completeness (yuanman). In a universe characterized by the constant interplay of yin and yang, the circle is the ultimate symbol of the harmonious containment of opposing forces. The baoxianghua, with its intricate internal divisions perfectly resolved within a circular boundary, serves as a visual meditation on the unity that underlies the apparent multiplicity of the phenomenal world. It reminds the viewer that despite the chaotic diversity of existence, everything is ultimately contained within the encompassing embrace of the Dao. The circle does not exclude or reject; it encompasses and reconciles, holding within itself the full spectrum of cosmic possibility.

4.2 Abstraction and the Principle of Wu Wei

As the baoxianghua pattern evolved over the course of the Tang Dynasty, it exhibited a marked trajectory toward increasing abstraction. In the Early Tang period, the constituent floral elements—while stylized—retained a clear connection to their botanical origins. The viewer could still discern the specific characteristics of the lotus or the peony. However, by the Middle and Late Tang periods, the petals and leaves transformed into highly abstracted, cloud-like (yunwen) or arc-shaped forms. The motif became less a representation of a specific flower and more a study in pure form and rhythm.

This progressive abstraction can be interpreted through the Daoist principle of transcending material reality. Daoist aesthetics prioritize the capture of inner essence (shen) over outward physical resemblance (xing). A highly realistic depiction of a flower is, from a Daoist perspective,

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limited by its adherence to the mundane, transient material world. By abstracting the floral forms, the artisans of the baoxianghua elevated the motif from the realm of the specific to the realm of the universal. The flower ceases to be a biological entity and becomes a metaphysical concept—a symbol of the generative, blossoming nature of the cosmos itself.

The abstracted, cloud-like forms that dominate later baoxianghua patterns evoke the Daoist concept of qi (vital breath or energy). The pattern ceases to be a static object and becomes a visualization of energy flowing through space. This aligns with the Daoist ideal of wu wei—often translated as non-action, but more accurately understood as action that is perfectly in harmony with the natural flow of the universe. The effortless, fluid lines of the abstracted baoxianghua suggest a state of being unencumbered by artificial constraints, a visual manifestation of the Daoist sage who moves seamlessly with the currents of the cosmos (Sullivan, 1999). The artisan's brushstrokes, fluid and unhesitating, mimic the spontaneous creativity of nature itself, suggesting that the highest form of artistic creation is one that does not impose upon its material but rather allows the inherent potential of the form to emerge organically.

5. BUDDHIST SOTERIOLOGY: EMPTINESS, PURITY, AND THE MANDALA

The historical origins of the baoxianghua are inextricably linked to Buddhist art, specifically the iconography of the lotus. While Confucianism and Daoism provided the structural and energetic frameworks for the motif, Buddhism supplied its core spiritual vocabulary and its soteriological function within the cave temples of Dunhuang. Buddhism, with its profound focus on liberation from suffering and the realization of ultimate truth, infused the decorative arts with an unprecedented level of existential urgency. The baoxianghua was not merely beautiful; it was, in its original context, a tool for spiritual transformation.

5.1 The Lotus as Metaphysical Symbol

In Buddhist philosophy, the lotus is the preeminent symbol of purity, enlightenment, and the true nature of reality. Rooted in the mud, growing through the murky water, and blossoming immaculately above the surface, the lotus represents the potential of the human soul to attain enlightenment (nirvana) despite being immersed in the suffering of the material world (samsara). This powerful metaphor resonated deeply with practitioners, offering hope and a clear visual articulation of the spiritual path. The lotus does not reject the mud; it transforms it, drawing nourishment from the very conditions that might seem to impede its growth.

The baoxianghua is fundamentally an elaborate, idealized reimagining of the lotus. However, it is not a representation of a physical flower found in nature; it is a "treasure flower," a manifestation of the pure, uncorrupted reality of the Buddha-fields (Pure Lands). By transforming the simple lotus into the hyper-complex, multi-layered baoxianghua, Tang artisans were visually articulating the infinite depth and multifaceted nature of the Dharma (Buddhist teachings). The sheer abundance of petals and the jewel-like embellishments signify the inexhaustible wealth of spiritual wisdom available to those who seek it.

The dense layering of petals within the baoxianghua can be analysed through the Mahayana Buddhist concept of sunyata (emptiness). In Buddhist ontology, emptiness does not mean nothingness; rather, it signifies that all phenomena are devoid of independent, inherent existence because they are entirely interdependent. The baoxianghua, with its countless overlapping elements that only derive meaning from their relationship to the whole, serves as a visual metaphor for the Buddhist doctrine of dependent origination (pratityasamutpada). The "flower" exists only as a composite of its parts, just as the self is merely a temporary aggregation of elements (Sharf, 2001). This visual deconstruction of the singular form into an interdependent matrix encourages the viewer to contemplate the illusory nature of independent existence and to recognize the profound interconnectedness of all things.

5.2 The Baoxianghua as Mandala

The structural complexity of the baoxianghua pattern strongly parallels the spatial organization of the Buddhist mandala. A mandala is a sacred geometric diagram representing the universe from the perspective of an enlightened being; it is both a map of the cosmos and a guide for meditation. The mandala functions as a psycho-cosmogram, a tool for internalizing the vastness of the universe and recognizing the divine potential within the practitioner. Its concentric structure invites the viewer to journey inward, from the chaotic periphery of ordinary experience toward the still, luminous centre of awakened consciousness.

Like a mandala, the baoxianghua is organized concentrically around a sacred centre. In Buddhist meditation practice, the practitioner visualizes entering the mandala from the periphery, moving through successive layers of spiritual understanding until reaching the centre, which represents ultimate truth or the deity itself. The multi-layered, inward-drawing structure of the baoxianghua facilitates a similar phenomenological experience. The eye is inevitably drawn from the complex, agitated outer edges toward the still, unified core, mirroring the journey of the mind from distraction to focused concentration.

When painted on the ceilings (the caojing) of the Dunhuang caves, the baoxianghua functions as a cosmic canopy. It defines the architectural space not merely as a physical room, but as a sacred precinct. The viewer, positioned beneath the radial pattern, is symbolically situated at the axis mundi, the centre of the spiritual universe. In this context, the baoxianghua is not passive decoration; it is an active ritual technology designed to induce a state of contemplative focus and to visually manifest the presence of the divine (Wong, 2016). The pattern serves as a threshold between the mundane world and the realm of the sacred, inviting the viewer to transcend their ordinary perception and glimpse the true nature of reality. The ceiling, adorned with the baoxianghua, becomes a visual representation of the heavens themselves, transforming the dark, enclosed cave into a luminous, infinite spiritual domain.

6. THE ONTOLOGICAL SHIFT: FROM SACRED TO SECULAR AESTHETICISM

One of the most profound theoretical insights derived from the study of the baoxianghua pattern is its trajectory across the four subperiods of the Tang Dynasty (Early, High, Middle, and Late). This evolution is not merely a chronicle of stylistic change; it is a visual record of a fundamental ontological shift in Tang society—a movement from the dominance of religious sacrality to the rise of secular aestheticism. This

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transition, subtle and gradual, reveals the changing relationship between art, spirituality, and political power over the course of nearly three centuries.

6.1 The Early and High Tang: The Zenith of the Sacred

During the Early Tang period, the baoxianghua was deeply embedded in its Buddhist context. Its forms, while exhibiting the beginnings of complex synthesis, were primarily austere and spiritually focused. The emphasis was on cosmological clarity and the articulation of religious devotion. The pattern served a distinct soteriological function, acting as a conduit between the earthly worshipper and the divine realm. The geometric precision and symbolic density of these early forms suggest an intentional artistic vocabulary aimed at legitimizing the new Tang authority while simultaneously affirming the cosmic order that the dynasty claimed to embody.

As the dynasty transitioned into the High Tang period, the baoxianghua reached its zenith of complexity and opulence. The integration of the peony—a flower associated with earthly wealth, beauty, and imperial glory—alongside the sacred lotus marked a critical theoretical juncture. The motif expanded its semantic range to encompass not only spiritual enlightenment but also material prosperity and political supremacy. The High Tang baoxianghua represents a moment of supreme confidence, where the sacred and the secular were viewed not as contradictory, but as mutually reinforcing aspects of a glorious, divinely mandated empire. The lavish polychromy and intricate layering of this period reflect a worldview that celebrated the material universe as a valid manifestation of cosmic order (Lewis, 2009). The empire, at the height of its power, saw no contradiction between spiritual aspiration and worldly magnificence; both were expressions of the same underlying harmony.

6.2 The Middle and Late Tang: The Turn Inward

The devastating An Lushan Rebellion (755–763 CE) fractured the political and economic foundations of the Tang empire, precipitating a profound psychological and cultural shift. The boundless optimism and expansive cosmopolitanism of the High Tang were replaced by introspection, anxiety, and a retreat from grand imperial narratives. The empire, though it survived, never fully recovered its former confidence or territorial integrity.

This societal trauma is vividly recorded in the aesthetic evolution of the baoxianghua. During the Middle and Late Tang periods, the motif underwent a process of simplification, standardization, and secularization. The vibrant, contrasting colours of the High Tang gave way to muted, cooler palettes. The dynamic, individualistic variations in the patterns were replaced by repetitive, formulaic grids. What Guo Lianfu (1998) terms "patterned collectivism" emerged as the dominant aesthetic strategy—a shift from individual artistic expression to standardized, mass-produced decoration that prioritized surface uniformity over internal differentiation.

From a theoretical perspective, this transition signifies a decoupling of the motif from its profound religious and cosmological anchors. As Zhang Ying (2018) articulates, the evolution represents a movement from "sacrality to aestheticization." The baoxianghua increasingly functioned as pure ornamentation, valued for its rhythmic beauty and cultural familiarity rather than its spiritual efficacy. The religious resonance, once palpably encoded in every petal and curve, became muted, replaced by an emphasis on visual rhythm, symmetry, and aesthetic completeness for their own sake.

This phenomenon carries deep philosophical implications. The repetitive, grid-like application of the baoxianghua in the Late Tang reflects a psychological desire for order and predictability in a chaotic world. The profound philosophical depth of the earlier periods was sublimated into a generalized aesthetic of elegance and nostalgia. The motif became a cultural signifier of a lost golden age, retaining its formal beauty but hollowed of its original metaphysical urgency. Tradition, in this context, became what Liu (2020) describes as "an empty shell—preserved in outward appearance but devoid of the creative spirit that had originally animated it." The baoxianghua thus serves as a poignant visual record of a civilization grappling with the tension between its illustrious past and its uncertain present.

7. THE PHENOMENOLOGICAL ROLE OF ORNAMENTATION

The theoretical analysis of the baoxianghua necessitates a re-evaluation of the role of ornamentation in art historical discourse. In Western aesthetic theory, particularly since the Renaissance, there has been a persistent hierarchical division between the "fine arts" (painting, sculpture, architecture), which are deemed capable of intellectual and emotional expression, and the "decorative arts," which are often dismissed as superficial embellishment. This Eurocentric bias has historically hindered a full appreciation of the profound theoretical depth inherent in non-Western ornamental traditions.

However, the application of this binary to traditional Chinese art, and specifically to the murals of Dunhuang, is fundamentally flawed. In the context of the Buddhist cave temples, the baoxianghua patterns are not ancillary to the narrative frescoes or the central statues; they are co-constitutive of the sacred space. They do not merely decorate a pre-existing architecture; they actively participate in the creation of the architectural experience itself. Without the enveloping ornamental programme, the cave would be merely a room; with it, the cave becomes a cosmos.

7.1 Constructing the Immersive Environment

Drawing upon phenomenological theories of space and perception, the baoxianghua can be understood as an environmental technology. The repetitive, rhythmic nature of the patterns—covering ceilings, framing niches, and delineating architectural boundaries—creates an immersive visual field. Unlike a narrative painting, which demands focused, linear reading and often positions the viewer as an external observer, the baoxianghua operates on the peripheral vision, establishing the atmospheric and emotional tone of the space. It envelops the viewer, creating a totalizing sensory experience that cannot be fully grasped through isolated observation.

The continuous, unbroken nature of the patterns enveloping the viewer dissolves the boundaries of the physical cave, simulating the infinite expanse of the Buddhist cosmos. The intricate geometry and vibrant colours (in the earlier periods) serve to elevate the mind, disorienting mundane perception and preparing the consciousness for spiritual contemplation. In this sense, the "decorative" baoxianghua is actively engaged in the phenomenological construction of the sacred experience (DeMarrais et al., 2004). It acts as a visual mantra, repeating its structural logic across the architectural surfaces until the viewer's perception aligns with its underlying rhythms. The repetition is not monotonous; it is hypnotic, designed to quiet the discursive mind and open the consciousness to a deeper mode of awareness.

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7.2 The Rhetoric of the Surface

Furthermore, the baoxianghua challenges the assumption that profound meaning requires narrative representation. The motif demonstrates that abstract geometry, colour relationships, and rhythmic repetition possess their own sophisticated rhetoric. By articulating concepts of cosmic order, cyclical time, and interdependent existence through pure form, the baoxianghua operates as a form of visual philosophy. It demands a mode of reading that is not literary or narrative, but structural and intuitive. The meaning is not "behind" the pattern, waiting to be decoded through some external key; it is fully present in the formal relationships on the surface itself.

Recognizing the theoretical weight of the baoxianghua elevates the study of ornamentation from the realm of antiquarian taxonomy to the centre of intellectual history. It reveals that the artisans of Dunhuang were not merely skilled decorators, but visual theologians and philosophers, translating the complex intellectual currents of their time into enduring forms of beauty. Their work demonstrates that the surface of an object or an architectural space is not a superficial layer, but a profound interface where culture, philosophy, and aesthetics converge. The baoxianghua thus stands as a powerful argument for the communicative capacity of non-representational art, urging a more nuanced and theoretically rigorous approach to the study of global ornamental traditions.

8. COLOUR AS PHILOSOPHICAL RHETORIC

No analysis of the philosophical dimensions of the baoxianghua would be complete without addressing the role of colour. In the Chinese aesthetic tradition, colour is never merely decorative; it is a form of rhetoric, a language through which philosophical and cosmological values are communicated. The wuxing (Five Phases) system, which correlates five fundamental colours—blue-green (qing), red (chi), yellow (huang), white (bai), and black (hei)—with the five elements, five directions, five seasons, and five virtues, provided a comprehensive chromatic vocabulary that permeated all aspects of Tang visual culture (Fung, 1952).

During the Early Tang period, the colour palette of the baoxianghua was characterized by bold, saturated hues, particularly reds and greens, which carried strong Buddhist associations. Red, symbolizing the vital energy of the Dharma and the compassion of the bodhisattvas, was used to convey spiritual warmth and urgency. Green, associated with growth, renewal, and the verdant landscapes of the Pure Lands, reinforced the motif's paradisiacal connotations. The juxtaposition of these complementary colours created a visual vibrancy that was intended not merely to please the eye, but to energize the spirit and stimulate devotional feeling.

In the High Tang period, the chromatic palette expanded dramatically, incorporating gold, deep blues, and rich purples. Gold, in particular, carried profound Buddhist significance, evoking the radiance of the Buddha's body and the incorruptible nature of enlightened wisdom. The introduction of gold into the baoxianghua elevated the motif from the realm of the earthly to the celestial, transforming the cave walls into shimmering approximations of the Pure Land itself. The use of mineral pigments such as lapis lazuli and malachite, imported along the Silk Road, further underscored the cosmopolitan character of the High Tang aesthetic and the material investment that the creation of these sacred spaces demanded.

By the Middle and Late Tang periods, the colour palette underwent a significant transformation, shifting toward cooler, more muted tones—pale greens, soft blues, and earth tones. This chromatic restraint can be interpreted philosophically as a visual manifestation of the Daoist principle of returning to simplicity (fan pu gui zhen). The retreat from bold, assertive colours toward subtlety and understatement reflects a broader cultural turn toward introspection and the valorization of inner cultivation over outward display. The colours of the Late Tang baoxianghua whisper rather than shout, inviting quiet contemplation rather than awe-struck wonder.

9. CONCLUSION

The baoxianghua pattern of the Tang Dynasty is a masterpiece of visual synthesis, standing at the nexus of art, religion, and philosophy. By moving beyond the conventional analyses of its cross-cultural origins and stylistic chronology, this article has demonstrated that the motif is a profound theoretical construct, deeply embedded in the syncretic intellectual milieu of classical China.

Through its radial symmetry and precise geometric organization, the baoxianghua visually articulates the Confucian ideals of cosmic order, hierarchical balance, and moral rectitude. Its circular forms and evolving abstraction encode Daoist metaphysical concepts of cyclical time, the eternal return, and the transcendence of material reality. Concurrently, its origins in the lotus motif and its mandala-like structures serve as potent vehicles for Buddhist soteriology, expressing doctrines of emptiness, purity, and the interdependent nature of the cosmos. The chromatic evolution of the motif further reinforces these philosophical readings, demonstrating how colour functioned as a rhetorical tool for communicating cosmological and spiritual values.

Moreover, the historical trajectory of the baoxianghua—from the spiritually charged, dynamic forms of the Early and High Tang to the standardized, secularized aestheticism of the Late Tang—provides a compelling visual narrative of the ontological shifts within Tang society. The motif acts as a sensitive cultural barometer, recording the empire's journey from supreme confidence and religious fervour to introspection and the pursuit of pure aesthetic pleasure. This trajectory is not unique to the baoxianghua; it mirrors broader patterns in Tang cultural production, from poetry to ceramics, suggesting that the decorative arts are as sensitive to historical change as any other cultural form.

The phenomenological analysis presented in this article further demonstrates that the baoxianghua was not a passive ornament but an active agent in the construction of sacred space. By enveloping the viewer in a totalizing visual field, the pattern facilitated the transition from mundane perception to spiritual contemplation, functioning as a form of visual meditation technology. This insight has significant implications for the study of religious art more broadly, suggesting that the experiential dimension of sacred spaces—the way they feel, the way they transform consciousness—is as important as their iconographic content.

Ultimately, the philosophical and aesthetic analysis of the baoxianghua challenges the marginalization of decorative arts within art historical scholarship. It reveals that ornamentation is not a superficial addition to the visual world, but a primary language through which a culture articulates its deepest understandings of the universe, society, and the self. In the intricate, harmonious, and eternally blooming forms of the

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baoxianghua, we find the intellectual and spiritual essence of the Tang Dynasty rendered visible. Future scholarship would benefit from extending this philosophical approach to other ornamental traditions, both within the Chinese context and across the broader landscape of global visual culture, thereby enriching our understanding of how human societies have used abstract form to grapple with the most fundamental questions of existence.

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