

A Visual Analysis of the Deer Symbol in Daoist–Buddhist Painting: A Peircean Semiotic Perspective

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Abstract: This paper takes the imagery of the deer as its research subject and examines its processes of formation, transformation, and dissemination across Buddhist and Daoist textual traditions, religious art, and contemporary visual culture. Employing semiotics as the theoretical framework and combining textual and image analysis, the study investigates how the deer gradually evolves from a natural animal image into a visual symbol that carries religious concepts, cultural memory, and social meanings. The analysis is conducted through three semiotic dimensions: the iconic, indexical, and symbolic levels.

The study shows that in Buddhism, the deer is primarily associated with the Deer Park, the First Turning of the Dharma Wheel, and Jātaka narratives, reflecting functions related to sacred site memory, doctrinal transmission, and narrative symbolism. In Daoist contexts, the deer is commonly linked to visions of immortality, longevity beliefs, and the auspicious symbolism of fortune and prosperity, forming a symbolic structure that integrates both religious and secular meanings. In traditional Buddhist and Daoist art, the deer is not merely a representation of nature but also serves as an important medium connecting images, spatial settings, ritual practices, and cultural imagination. In contemporary contexts, the deer image has gradually detached from its original religious iconographic systems and has been continuously translated and recontextualized in painting, animation, design, and brand communication, becoming an open and fluid cultural symbol.

This paper argues that the historical evolution of deer imagery reflects the ongoing transformation and regeneration of traditional symbols across different cultural contexts, and it provides a valuable analytical pathway for understanding the relationship between Chinese religious art and contemporary visual culture.

Keywords: Deer; Semiotics; Buddhism; Daoism; Contemporary Art; Recontextualization; Cross-media Communication

Published: Mar 31, 2026

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.62177/chst.v3i2.1192>

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

In the development of religious art, animal imagery is often endowed with symbolic meanings that transcend its natural attributes, becoming an important visual medium for expressing ideas such as cosmic order, the origin of life, and the destiny of the soul. As noted by David Morgan Byzantine icons function as “mediators pointing toward heavenly prototypes,” demonstrating the translational role of religious images within cultural contexts. Similarly, animal figures assume symbolic roles in many cultures: lions signify authority and courage, while birds often refer to the elevation of the soul (Morgan, 2014). These examples reveal a universal mechanism through which humans employ concrete imagery to construct abstract concepts (Balla, 2012).

Within religious narratives, animals also act as intermediaries linking the sacred and the secular, forming a “third space” between humans and the divine—a concept associated with Homi K. Bhabha (2016, p. 53). Through such mediating roles, they reinforce both the emotional and cognitive dimensions of religious belief (Waldau, 2006). Among these symbolic animals, the deer—characterized by gentleness, agility, and spiritual sensitivity—appears repeatedly in religious narratives, mythological traditions, and ritual practices across cultures. Over time, it has developed into a distinctive cultural symbol system, providing an important case through which to examine the visual construction of the human–divine relationship in different religious traditions.

1.2 Research Significance

As a representative animal symbol in religious visual culture, the deer reflects how different religious traditions interpret sacredness and the meaning of life. At the same time, it offers an important perspective for examining the mediating role of religious images in cultural exchange and religious experience. Studying the imagery of the deer helps reveal how religious art contributes to the construction of human–divine relationships, the formation of cultural memory, and the shaping of collective identity, while also expanding the theoretical scope of research on animal symbolism and the history of religious art.

Focusing on the deer as its central motif, this study employs textual interpretation, image analysis, and symbolic interpretation to examine its symbolic meanings in classical Buddhist and Daoist texts as well as in religious artworks. Furthermore, it explores how deer imagery is translated and re-created within contemporary visual culture, revealing how the deer functions as a cross-cultural visual mediator between traditional religious narratives and contemporary artistic contexts.

1.3 Research Methodology

In examining both the religious and contemporary expressions of deer imagery, this study adopts semiotics as its primary theoretical framework. Semiotics focuses on the structure of signs, the production of meaning, and the mechanisms through which cultural symbols circulate. According to the triadic model of signs proposed by Charles Sanders Peirce, the imagery of the deer can be understood as a sign system composed of the representamen (the visual form of the deer), the object (the symbolic meanings assigned by religious and cultural traditions), and the interpretant (the viewer’s cultural experience) (Fisch, Ketner, & Kloesel, 1986).

Peirce distinguished three kinds of signs—icons, indexes, and symbols (Fisch, Ketner, & Kloesel, 1986). In Buddhist and Daoist art, the deer functions simultaneously as an icon (a visual resemblance to the animal itself), an index (pointing to religious narratives or sacred spaces), and a symbol that conveys religious doctrines. In contemporary artistic and branding contexts, deer imagery continues to generate new cultural meanings through processes of cross-media translation and recontextualization.

1.4 Limitations

Given the large number of religious traditions and the relatively limited use of deer imagery in some of them, this study focuses primarily on two major religious systems—Buddhism and Daoism—in order to conduct a more in-depth discussion within a limited scope. It therefore examines the formation and reinterpretation of deer imagery mainly in Daoist–Buddhist art and contemporary visual culture.

The term “Dao–Shi” (道释) refers to the combined designation of Daoism and Buddhism. It is commonly used to describe their parallel relationship within the Chinese cultural context and their interactions in terms of thought, ritual practice, and religious art.

2. Deer Imagery in Buddhist and Daoist Classics and Textual Traditions

The multiple symbolic meanings of the deer are deeply rooted in religious concepts and cultural traditions. As an important component of religious symbolic systems, the deer is not merely a natural image but also carries ethical, cosmological, and spiritual connotations. Its qualities of gentleness, agility, and spiritual sensitivity lead to its repeated appearance in religious narratives, where it symbolizes both the harmony between humans and nature and the communicative link between the sacred and the secular.

This symbolic system gradually developed through the long-term evolution of religious thought and ritual institutions

and was continuously reinforced and disseminated through classical texts, rituals, and visual imagery. Religious literature endowed the deer with meanings such as auspicious spiritual creature, moral exemplar, and symbol of sacred space, thereby laying the foundation for its standardized representation in visual art.

Focusing on the two major religious traditions of Buddhism and Daoism, this chapter traces the ideological origins and religious interpretations of deer imagery, revealing how it developed into a multivalent cultural symbol within different religious systems and providing a theoretical framework for the subsequent analysis of visual imagery.

2.1 Deer Imagery in Buddhist Scriptures

The core origin of deer imagery in Buddhist culture lies in the religious narrative of the sacred site of the Deer Park. The Deer Park is located approximately 600 kilometers north of Varanasi in present-day Uttar Pradesh, India (Wu Ping, 2017). It is the place where the Buddha first turned the Wheel of Dharma and established the monastic community, and it is also one of the four major sacred sites of Buddhism. After attaining enlightenment, the Buddha preached the Four Noble Truths and the Noble Eightfold Path there to the five ascetics, marking the formal establishment of Buddhist doctrine. This event is known as the “First Turning of the Wheel of Dharma.”

The Chinese translation of the Buddhist scripture *Saṃyukta Āgama* records: “At one time, the Buddha resided in the Deer Park at the hermitage of the sages in the kingdom of Varanasi”, providing a canonical textual basis for the sanctity of the Deer Park (Wu Ping, 2017). The site takes its name from the deer that inhabited the area’s natural environment, and its tranquil and secluded setting was regarded as an ideal place for spiritual cultivation. Consequently, the deer became not only the origin of the place name but also a symbol of purity, peace, and detachment from worldly concerns.

This concept established an important symbolic foundation for Buddhist art, giving rise to the highly standardized motif of the “Dharma Wheel flanked by two deer.” The paired deer surrounding the Dharma Wheel not only recall the narrative of the Deer Park but also symbolize the perpetual turning and transmission of Buddhist teachings. Depicted as respectfully listening to the Buddha’s teachings, the deer represent the devotion and acceptance of the Dharma by sentient beings.

2.2 Deer Imagery in Daoist Texts

Unlike Buddhism, which emphasizes the symbolism of learning and receiving teachings, deer imagery in Daoist culture more often points to the dual meanings of a spiritual creature of the immortal realm and an auspicious sign within the secular world. The deer is both an animal associated with the realm of immortals and a symbol of the human aspiration to transcend worldly existence and attain longevity.

In Daoist hagiographical and supernatural literature such as *Shenxian Zhuan* (Biographies of Immortals) and *Yunji Qiqian* (Seven Slips from the Cloudy Satchel), descriptions frequently appear of immortals riding deer or traveling on them. In these narratives, the deer functions as both a means of transport in the celestial realm and a symbolic auspicious creature. Such imagery also resonates with traditional Chinese cultural values associated with reclusion in the mountains and harmony with nature.

For example, the *Shenxian Zhuan* records in the biography of Wei Shuqing: “Suddenly a person appeared, riding a cloud chariot drawn by a white deer, descending from the heavens and arriving before the hall” (Ge Hong, 2015). In another passage describing Lü Nüsheng, it states: “She encountered the maiden before the temple at Mount Hua, riding a white deer” (Ge Hong, 2015). Similarly, *Yunji Qiqian* records descriptions such as “riding a chariot of azure clouds, drawn by a blue dragon or riding a white deer” and “The Supreme Lord Lao rides a white deer, while the Celestial Master Zhang rides a white crane” (Zhang Junfang, 1996). These accounts further reinforce the status of the deer as a spiritual creature within the Daoist pantheon.

Regarding the motif of a white deer guiding the way, *Yunji Qiqian* also records that in the twenty-eighth year of the Kaiyuan era of the Tang dynasty (740 CE), when the imperial court ordered Daoist priests to perform a sacrificial ritual with the “Dragon Bi” jade, a white deer appeared from the eastern side of the altar and disappeared near the tomb of the maiden Hua Gu—believed to be the burial place of sacred bamboo slips (Zhang Junfang, 1996). This unexpected appearance of the deer was interpreted as an auspicious and spiritually efficacious sign, symbolizing both the presence of divine beings and their affirmation of the ritual activity. It also reflects the distinctive nature of Daoist ritual space: the deer functions as a spiritual

mediator guiding participants beyond ordinary boundaries into sacred space.

These accounts emphasize the spiritual sensitivity and supernatural qualities of the deer, making it a symbolic creature associated with transcendence and the pathway to the immortal realm.

At the same time, in Daoist culture the deer is not only a spiritual creature of the immortal realm but also a bearer of auspicious wishes in the secular world. In Chinese linguistic culture, the word “deer” (鹿 *lu*) is homophonous with “emolument” or “official salary” (禄 *lu*), giving rise to the auspicious phrase “blessings and prosperity.” Daoist texts such as *Yunji Qiqian*, when describing ritual imagery and depictions of immortals, frequently place the deer alongside longevity symbols such as *lingzhi* mushrooms, cranes, and pine trees, thereby enriching the visual motif of “longevity and prosperity.” This symbolic system not only expresses the pursuit of transcendence and immortality but also integrates the worldly desire for prosperity and longevity, illustrating the fusion and transformation of the aspirations for transcendence and worldly fortune within Daoist culture.

2.3 Intertextuality and Integration between Buddhist and Daoist Traditions

Although Buddhism and Daoism interpret deer imagery in distinct ways, both traditions provide important symbolic foundations for religious art. Buddhism regards the deer as a symbol of the first transmission of the Dharma and the receptive mind of disciples, while Daoism attributes to the deer the dual meanings of a spiritual creature of the immortal realm and an auspicious symbol.

These two traditions did not develop in isolation but continuously interacted through long-term cultural exchange. As noted by Jin Weinuo, “In the early period of Buddhism’s transmission into China, Buddhist scriptures were often translated and interpreted with reference to Lao-Zhuang Daoist thought, and ritual offerings to Buddhist images also adopted established Chinese sacrificial practices. This indicates that early Buddhist artworks, shaped within the cultural and religious environment of Han China, were closely related to Chinese cultural traditions and aesthetic consciousness” (Jin, 2013).

Consequently, within religious imagery, the gentle and receptive deer depicted in Buddhist murals often coexist intertextually with Daoist images such as immortals riding deer or white deer guiding the way. This coexistence reflects the process of localization and cultural translation in the transmission of religious imagery.

Such multilayered symbolism also provided abundant visual resources for later artistic and craft traditions. From temple sculptures and murals to folk New Year prints and textile decoration, deer imagery not only conveys religious belief but also embodies secular aspirations for prosperity and longevity, making it a widely recognized visual motif across society.

From a semiotic perspective, the meaning of deer imagery can be understood on three levels:

Iconic layer: The symbolic foundation of the deer derives from its actual form and behavioral characteristics, enabling it to enter religious narratives and visual representations as a recognizable image.

Indexical layer: The deer establishes associations with sacred sites, historical events, and ritual spaces—such as the Deer Park—thereby functioning as an index of religious memory.

Symbolic layer: Within broader cultural contexts, the deer gradually becomes a cultural symbol carrying auspicious meanings and ethical values.

These three levels are not static but are continuously reinforced and reinterpreted through the interaction of texts, images, and rituals, enabling deer imagery to persist and circulate across religious traditions and historical periods within visual culture.

3. Visual Analysis of Deer Imagery in Traditional Buddhist–Daoist Art

Deer imagery is systematically interpreted in religious texts and gradually becomes an important medium for communication between humans and the divine through its visual presentation in religious art. As an iconographic motif, it repeatedly appears in religious spaces, ritual objects, murals, and sculptures, enabling doctrines to be communicated through visual means while reinforcing believers’ recognition of religious authority and sacredness.

Religious art constructs collective memory of belief through standardized and symbolic visual forms. As an important motif, the deer develops into a stable visual symbol through repeated representation and standardized expression. In this process, it plays a significant role in religious rituals and devotional life by promoting moral instruction and strengthening communal cohesion.

3.1 Deer Imagery and Visual Paradigms in Buddhist Art

In Buddhist art, the motif of the “Dharma Wheel flanked by two deer” is one of the most symbolic and widely recognized visual themes. It frequently appears in Buddhist sacred sites, particularly in temple architecture and religious ornamentation, symbolizing the Deer Park where Gautama Buddha first turned the Wheel of Dharma (Singh, Shinde, & Rana, 2024). The typical composition places a Dharma Wheel at the center with two calm deer arranged symmetrically on either side, such as the well-known “Wheel and Two Deer” motif on the roof of Jokhang Temple (Figure 1). The wheel represents the dissemination of Buddhist teachings, while the two deer symbolize sentient beings respectfully receiving the Dharma.

Formally, this motif emphasizes symmetry and balance. The Dharma Wheel is often decorated with lotus petals, cloud patterns, or flame motifs, symbolizing the solemnity and radiance of Buddhist teachings. The deer on both sides are typically depicted with gentle and tranquil postures, conveying the Buddhist ideals of compassion and moral instruction.

In *The History of Chinese Buddhism: Volume on Buddhist Art*, detailed descriptions of such symmetrical compositions are provided. For example, in the discussion of the Ruyi-Wheel Avalokiteśvara statue in Cave 149 at Beishan of Gulonggang Mountain, it notes: “The sculpture is made in the form of a single-faced, two-armed figure. Together with two other Avalokiteśvara statues carved on the same wall, the three figures are all seated on waist-bound lotus thrones and wear floral crowns. Male and female donor figures are carved separately on the left and right sides of the three statues (Jin Weinuo, 2013, p. 283). Such sculptural arrangements demonstrate the formal principles of symmetry, balance, and solemn order characteristic of Buddhist image-making, reinforcing the tranquil atmosphere and sacred presence of the ritual space. Through such balanced compositions in sculpture, murals, and architectural ornamentation, viewers are visually guided to experience the moral authority and spiritual influence of the Dharma.

In addition, as an important decorative element in Buddhist architecture, the “Dharma Wheel and Two Deer” motif appears widely on temple roof ridges, lintels, stone carvings, murals, and ritual implements. As Buddhism spread across different regions, this motif developed diverse stylistic variations, reflecting the processes of regional adaptation and cultural integration within Buddhist art.

Figure 1. Dharmachakra on Jokhang Temple, Lhasa, Tibet.



Photo by Chris Falter, June 3, 2006. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 International. Retrieved from <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Dharmachakra.jpg>

The Jātaka (Pāli: Jātaka) narratives recount the previous lives of Śākyamuni before attaining Buddhahood. They originate from the ancient Indian concepts of rebirth and karmic retribution. Prior to enlightenment, Śākyamuni is believed to have undergone numerous incarnations as sages, virtuous figures, and even benevolent birds and animals, accumulating countless meritorious deeds that ultimately led to his Buddhahood (Chong, 2008). Many of these narratives adapted and transformed long-circulating Indian fables, myths, and folk traditions. In early Buddhism, they were systematically compiled into Jātaka scriptures and illustrated as Jātaka paintings, serving as important pedagogical tools for the dissemination of Buddhist teachings.

The “Deer King Jātaka” mural on the middle register of the west wall of Cave 257 at the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang is a representative example of this narrative theme (Su, 2014). In the mural, the deer is typically depicted as gentle and serene, reflecting the Buddhist ideals of compassion, moral instruction through gentleness, and skillful guidance. The scene vividly recreates the story in which the Deer King sacrifices himself to save a human life, visually embodying the bodhisattva’s compassionate spirit described in Buddhist scriptures. The depiction of the Deer King courageously rescuing others and willingly offering himself carries a clear moral and didactic message. At the same time, through refined line work, delicate coloration, and a narrative composition involving multiple figures, the mural creates an engaging religious visual drama.

Figure 2. *Deer King Jataka (Detail), Mogao Cave 257, West Wall, Center.*



Image courtesy of Dunhuang Academy. Licensed under Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International. Retrieved November 16, 2023, from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Deer_King_Jataka_painting,_Mogao_Cave_257_west_wall_center.png

The presence of such imagery within cave-temple worship spaces transforms complex doctrinal ideas into visually perceptible ethical models, making it easier for both monastic and lay audiences to understand and internalize Buddhist concepts of compassion and generosity during rituals, sermons, and devotional practices. In terms of composition, the Deer King Jātaka mural adopts a continuous horizontal narrative arrangement that gradually progresses from both sides toward the center, strengthening the continuity and dramatic tension of the story. This compositional strategy guides viewers, during the act of worship, to gradually comprehend the compassionate deeds of the Buddha in his previous lives. The mural thus functions both as a visualized textual counterpart to Buddhist scriptures and as an important motif within the visual culture of the Mogao Caves, serving educational and moralizing purposes. It demonstrates how deer imagery in Buddhist art fulfills multiple roles, including the dissemination of doctrine, moral guidance, and the consolidation of religious faith.

The motif of the “Dharma Wheel flanked by two deer” and the Deer King Jātaka mural represent two principal modes of expression for deer imagery in Buddhist art: ritual symbolism and narrative symbolism. The former employs symmetrical and solemn compositions together with symbolic elements to fix abstract doctrines into architectural and sculptural forms. The latter, through sequential narrative murals, transforms the compassionate acts of the Buddha’s previous lives into visible ethical paradigms.

From a semiotic perspective, both motifs can be interpreted across three dimensions: the iconic, indexical, and symbolic levels.

At the iconic level, the “Dharma Wheel and Two Deer” motif is based on the recognizable form of the deer, whose symmetrical arrangement and decorative treatment produce a stable visual identity. By contrast, the Deer King Jātaka mural enhances narrative realism through detailed depictions of the deer king and the surrounding natural environment.

At the indexical level, the “Dharma Wheel and Two Deer” motif points to the historical context of the Deer Park and the Buddha’s first turning of the Wheel of Dharma, visually linking the origin of Buddhist teachings with the ritual space of religious architecture. The Deer King Jātaka mural, on the other hand, refers to the narrative of the Buddha sacrificing himself to save others, thereby connecting the image with canonical texts and the ritual environment of the cave-temple.

At the symbolic level, the “Dharma Wheel and Two Deer” establishes a stable religious symbolic system: the Dharma Wheel signifies the eternal turning of Buddhist teachings, while the paired deer symbolize respectful receptivity to the Dharma and

the compassionate instruction of sentient beings. In the Deer King Jātaka, the deer king's self-sacrificial act represents the Bodhisattva ideal of compassion and altruistic generosity.

Such a multilayered symbolic structure allows deer imagery to transcend mere natural representation and become an important medium linking doctrine, sacred space, and religious belief. On the one hand, fixed visual paradigms in architecture and sculpture reinforce the sacred order of religious space; on the other hand, narrative murals employ emotionally engaging imagery to facilitate the dissemination of doctrine and its internalization by believers. In this sense, the deer in the Buddhist symbolic system fulfills multiple functions simultaneously, serving as a spatial marker, a religious symbol, and an ethical narrative.

3.2 Visual Representation and Symbolic Structure of Deer Imagery in Daoist Art

In Daoist painting, deer often appear together with immortals and celestial landscapes, forming idealized scenes imbued with a supernatural atmosphere. Such images possess both decorative qualities and religious significance, conveying aspirations for longevity, auspiciousness, and transcendence from worldly life through refined brushwork and symbolic motifs.

Within these compositions, the deer is commonly regarded as a spiritual creature of the immortal realm, symbolizing auspiciousness and supernatural communication. It functions as a mediator between the human world and the realm of immortals. Artists create layered and poetic celestial landscapes by combining deer with figures of immortals, pine trees, rocks, clouds, and lingzhi mushrooms. The gentle and tranquil demeanor of the deer not only enriches the decorative qualities of the composition but also reflects the Daoist spiritual ideal of transcendence and harmony between humanity and nature.

An example is the Song-dynasty painting *Immortal Cliff and Longevity Deer* (Figure 3), which depicts a celestial maiden holding a jade ruyi scepter while a white deer stands proudly beside her, as if about to ascend the clouds to celebrate the birthday of the Queen Mother of the West. The deer is rendered with delicate detail: the lines are smooth and refined, and the coloring is elegant and restrained. The depiction not only conveys the characteristics of an auspicious spiritual creature but also reinforces the transcendent atmosphere of the composition and the Daoist cultural symbolism of longevity and good fortune.

Through the combination of deer, celestial maidens, pine trees, and rocks, such works create richly layered idealized landscapes that evoke Daoist ideals of reclusion, transcendence, and immortality. Within these compositions, the deer is not merely a decorative element; it assumes an important cultural role as a symbol of auspiciousness, a bearer of blessings, and a mediator between the human and immortal realms. In doing so, it reflects the integration of religious belief, folk aspirations, and aesthetic expression within Daoist painting traditions. A comparable example of this motif can be found in the Ming-dynasty painting *Fu, Lu, and Shou* (Figure 4) by Shang Xi. The composition depicts the classic scene of an immortal leading a white deer to offer birthday congratulations, symbolizing blessings of longevity and auspicious wishes for human life. The painting features a carefully structured composition, vigorous brushwork, firm and powerful lines, and restrained coloration, reflecting a style that continues the traditions of Song-dynasty painting. The drapery lines of the figures are influenced by the brush techniques associated with Ma Yuan, characterized by angular folds and strong structural tension, which contribute to the solemn and dignified atmosphere of the work. The white deer strides forward with its head raised, symbolizing guidance toward immortality and the offering of longevity blessings. It thus expresses both the aspiration for long life and the cultural practice of celebrating birthdays with auspicious imagery.

The composition also incorporates several auspicious symbols derived from folk culture. Bats symbolize happiness and good fortune because the Chinese word for bat (fu, 蝠) is a homophone of "blessing" (fu, 福). The word "deer" (lu, 鹿) is homophonous with "emolument" (lu, 禄), implying prosperity and official success. The longevity peach held by the immortal symbolizes long life. These symbolic elements enhance the decorative richness of the composition while simultaneously expanding its cultural meanings, establishing a close relationship between visual aesthetics and popular aspirations for blessings and prosperity. Through the combination of immortals, the white deer, longevity peaches, and bats, the painting constructs an auspicious celestial realm and demonstrates the composite nature of Daoist painting, in which religious concepts and folk beliefs are interwoven.

Immortal Cliff and Longevity Deer and *Fu, Lu, and Shou* represent two typical paradigms of Daoist longevity-themed

painting from the Song and Ming dynasties. Although their compositional styles and brushwork techniques differ, both works construct a clearly structured symbolic system through the combination of deer, immortals, and auspicious objects.

At the iconic layer, *Immortal Cliff and Longevity Deer* depicts the deer, celestial maiden, and auspicious clouds through meticulous brushwork, using fine line drawing and decorative environmental elements to create an idealized celestial landscape. The forms retain recognizable natural characteristics while maintaining a stable visual identity. In contrast, *Fu, Lu, and Shou* presents the deer, immortals, longevity peaches, and bats in a more realistic manner, with a well-ordered composition and clearly defined forms, resulting in a typical auspicious visual arrangement.

At the indexical layer, the deer in *Immortal Cliff and Longevity Deer*, together with clouds and celestial figures, points to the ritual context of longevity celebrations and ascension to immortality, thereby linking the image to Daoist beliefs in longevity. In *Fu, Lu, and Shou*, the deer, immortals, longevity peaches, and bats indicate the cultural context of birthday blessings and auspicious wishes, establishing connections between the image, religious beliefs, and folk ritual practices.

At the symbolic layer, the deer in *Immortal Cliff and Longevity Deer* carries auspicious meaning through the homophonic relationship between *lu* (deer) and *lu* (emolument), and together with celestial imagery symbolizes ideals of longevity and transcendence. In *Fu, Lu, and Shou*, the deer, bats, and longevity peaches correspond respectively to prosperity (*lu*), blessings (*fu*), and longevity (*shou*), forming the complete auspicious symbolic system of “Fu–Lu–Shou.” Within this system, the deer becomes a key visual symbol in traditional birthday-celebration culture.

This three-layer symbolic structure does not exist in isolation; rather, it forms a dynamic network of meaning through the interaction of compositional grammar, visual rhetoric, and cultural context. Within this network, the deer functions as a central mediating symbol—simultaneously a representation of a natural animal and a symbolic vehicle for guidance toward immortality and the extension of life. It thereby connects the human world with the immortal realm, religion with folk culture, and visual representation with conceptual meaning. Through this semiotic operation, Daoist longevity paintings not only convey religious ideals and popular aspirations but also achieve a visual integration of belief systems, cultural memory, and aesthetic form.

3.3 Exchange and Integration of Cross-Religious Visual Elements

In summary, Buddhist and Daoist art display distinctive approaches to the representation of deer imagery while also revealing certain shared cultural characteristics. In Buddhist art, the motif of the “Dharma Wheel flanked by two deer” originates from the narrative of the Deer Park and presents the deer as a symbol of gentleness, receptivity, and peace, emphasizing the dissemination of doctrine, ritual order, and compassionate instruction. In Jātaka narratives, the Deer King’s self-sacrifice to save others further expresses the Buddhist ethical emphasis on sacrifice and generosity.

By contrast, Daoist painting highlights the deer as a spiritual creature of the immortal realm and an auspicious guide, often combined with immortals, longevity peaches, bats, and other auspicious elements to construct idealized visions of the celestial world and aspirations for immortality. At the same time, these images incorporate secular wishes for happiness, prosperity, longevity, and joy derived from popular culture.

Although the two traditions differ in iconography, ritual context, and religious meaning, long-term cultural exchange has led to processes of mutual borrowing and integration. In its localization within China, Buddhist art absorbed symbolic vocabularies from Han Chinese culture, while Daoist painting adopted compositional symmetry and standardized visual forms that had also been developed within Buddhist artistic traditions. Because of its associations with gentleness, vitality, and auspiciousness, the deer became an important visual symbol capable of continual reinterpretation within both religious artistic systems. It not only carries distinct doctrinal meanings within each tradition but also reflects the broader processes of integration and transformation within the cultural context of Chinese religious art.

4. The Translation of Deer Imagery in Contemporary Visual Culture

Entering the modern and contemporary context, deer imagery has gradually detached from the original carriers of traditional religious painting. However, it has not disappeared from the visual cultural system; rather, it has been reused in more open and diverse ways. Compared with the relatively stable symbolic relationships found in ancient religious art, deer in contemporary visual expression functions more as a cultural symbol that can be repeatedly invoked, recombined, and

reinterpreted. It continues the traditional associations of auspiciousness, elegance, and natural vitality while generating more complex visual meanings within new media environments and aesthetic mechanisms.

At this stage, the transformation of deer imagery is no longer primarily expressed through extensions within religious iconography itself, but rather through cross-media migration and recontextualization. Whether in contemporary painting, animation, digital imagery, design, brand communication, or popular culture, the deer has gradually moved beyond its original ritual and narrative functions. It has instead become a fluid and open visual resource. This shift suggests that the deer is no longer merely a fixed motif within traditional iconographic systems, but has evolved into a visual mediator connecting historical memory, cultural imagination, and contemporary visual experience.

4.1 Contemporary Translation of Traditional Image Resources

In contemporary visual production, deer imagery is frequently reintroduced as a cultural resource derived from traditional visual heritage. Unlike the clearly defined ritual or narrative spaces of ancient religious art, deer in contemporary contexts often appears within visual structures oriented toward exhibition, aesthetics, and conceptual expression. It may retain certain formal characteristics of traditional imagery while simultaneously acquiring new modes of viewing through changes in composition, medium, and spatial relationships.

In terms of visual composition, deer in contemporary works is often juxtaposed with mountains, rocks, the moon, clouds, cave-mural backgrounds, geometric spatial structures, or exhibition-like environments. These elements do not simply reproduce traditional images but recombine them to create visual fields that resonate with historical echoes. Within such contexts, the deer is no longer merely a subordinate figure in religious narratives but becomes a focal point within the pictorial structure, a cultural signifier, or a medium through which historical imagery is translated.

Thus, one of the most significant transformations of deer imagery in contemporary visual culture lies in its shift from a symbolic unit within traditional imagery to a cultural mediator within contemporary visual systems. Its meanings are no longer confined to religious interpretative frameworks but instead acquire more open interpretive possibilities within new modes of viewing.

4.2 Expansion of Deer Imagery in Cross-Media Dissemination

Beyond painting, deer imagery in modern and contemporary contexts has also entered animation, digital media, craft design, and brand visual systems, demonstrating strong cross-media adaptability. Within popular visual culture, the deer—due to its high recognizability—has often been transformed into a visual symbol with decorative, narrative, or identificatory functions.

In animation and digital media, deer figures are often redesigned by drawing upon traditional murals, folk legends, or historical imagery, thereby granting them new visual vitality within modern media environments. In design and consumer culture, deer frequently appears in simplified silhouettes, stylized antler forms, or symbolic graphic motifs, becoming a common element in logo design, cultural-creative products, and brand storytelling. In these contexts, the cultural meanings of the deer are often distilled into more easily communicable visual semantics, such as nature, elegance, auspiciousness, and vitality.

This cross-media expansion indicates that deer imagery has evolved from an iconographic motif within traditional religious painting into a flexible visual symbolic resource capable of continuous transformation across different media. Its circulation has likewise shifted from the relatively closed system of religious imagery toward a more open field of public visual culture.

4.3 Transformation of Meaning through Recontextualization

From a semiotic perspective, the continued emergence of deer imagery in contemporary culture can essentially be understood as a process of continuous recontextualization. Once detached from its original historical context, this traditional symbol is inserted into new media environments, exhibition spaces, and consumer settings, where its meanings undergo processes of transformation and expansion.

During this process, the traditional symbolic meanings of the deer do not completely disappear but persist through mechanisms of residual continuity, translation, and recombination. On the one hand, viewers may still associate the deer with traditional concepts such as auspiciousness, mountains and forests, celestial realms, and prosperity. On the other hand, these meanings are often weakened, detached, or reconstructed within new visual structures, allowing the deer to function as

a “floating symbol” with open interpretive possibilities. It simultaneously evokes historical cultural memory while serving contemporary aesthetic experiences and the logic of visual consumption.

Therefore, the transformation of deer imagery in contemporary visual culture should be understood neither as simple continuation nor as complete rupture. Instead, through processes of migration and reinterpretation, the deer has acquired a renewed visual vitality. This transformation makes deer imagery an important point of entry for examining how traditional symbols enter and adapt to modern visual cultural systems.

Overall, deer imagery in contemporary visual culture has evolved from a motif in religious iconography into a cultural symbol capable of being repeatedly invoked and reinterpreted across diverse media. While preserving traces of traditional visual memory, it simultaneously generates new structures of meaning within contemporary visual mechanisms and communication environments, demonstrating the translational capacity and regenerative potential of traditional symbols in modern contexts.

5. Conclusion

By examining deer imagery across Buddhist and Daoist textual traditions, religious art, and contemporary visual practices, this study reveals the multiple symbolic functions and ongoing transformations of the deer as a religious visual mediator across different historical contexts. From its ethical and auspicious connotations in classical texts to standardized iconographic motifs such as the “Dharma Wheel and Two Deer” and “Immortals Riding Deer,” deer imagery gradually developed into a cultural symbol that transcends religions, media, and historical periods. Although Buddhist and Daoist art emphasize different aspects of deer symbolism, both traditions demonstrate intertextuality and localization within their visual language and cultural memory.

In contemporary artistic contexts, deer imagery has moved beyond the singular semantic framework of religious ritual and has become an important resource for reflecting on history, exploring cultural identity, and reconstructing visual language. Artists reinterpret traditional symbolism through media such as new gongbi painting, installation, animation, and design, thereby providing these symbols with new expressive possibilities in modern society.

From a semiotic perspective, the evolution of deer imagery can be understood as a process of encoding, dissemination, and re-encoding across different cultural contexts. Its meanings emerge through the interaction of visual form, cultural reference, and symbolic construction, and they continue to evolve through cross-media translation. Future research may further compare animal symbols across different cultural traditions in order to deepen our understanding of religious art, cultural memory, and the mechanisms of visual communication. Using deer imagery as a case study, this paper provides a concrete example for examining how traditional symbols are regenerated and transformed within modern society.

Funding

No

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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