

Sacred Images, Social Values: Buddhist Socio-Ethical Iconography in Polonnaruwa (Sri Lanka) and the Dazu Rock Carvings (China) from a World Historical Perspective

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Introduction

For centuries, Buddhist art has functioned as a vital medium for conveying religious teachings, ethical values, and social ideals across diverse cultural contexts. Across Asia, Buddhist visual traditions have depicted sacred narratives and reflected the social, political, and moral concerns of their respective societies (Leidy, 2008). As Buddhism spread beyond its place of origin, its artistic forms adapted to local cultural environments while maintaining core doctrinal and ethical principles. Consequently, Buddhist visual culture became a significant means of transmitting moral teachings, reinforcing social norms, and shaping collective identities throughout Asia (Huntington, 1990). Prominent examples of Buddhist artistic heritage include the sculptural complexes of Polonnaruwa, Sri Lanka, and the Dazu Rock Carvings, China. Polonnaruwa, the medieval capital of Sri Lanka from the eleventh to the thirteenth centuries, exemplifies the close relationship among Buddhist devotion, royal patronage, and statecraft (Seneviratna, 1994). Its monuments, particularly the Gal Vihara sculptures, embody ideals of kingship, piety, and religious merit that are central to Sri Lankan Buddhist society. The Dazu Rock Carvings, created primarily during the Song Dynasty, demonstrate the integration of Buddhist teachings with Chinese social and ethical values, including filial piety, compassion, moral responsibility, and communal harmony (Karetzky, 2000). Together, these sites illustrate how Buddhist imagery bridged sacred doctrine and everyday social life.

Despite extensive scholarship on Buddhist art in South and East Asia, comparative studies that address the socio-ethical dimensions of Buddhist iconography across these regions remain limited. Most existing research has focused on stylistic development, religious symbolism, or historical context within individual regions, often overlooking how visual representations mediated the relationship between sacred teachings and secular concerns (Howard, 2006). Addressing this gap is essential for understanding how Buddhist civilization adapted to local social realities while maintaining broader ethical and religious foundations. This study undertakes a comparative analysis of Buddhist socio-

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ethical iconography in Polonnaruwa and the Dazu Rock Carvings from a world-historical perspective. By examining selected pictorial narratives, symbolic representations, and socio-cultural themes, this research explores how Buddhist art served as a medium for communicating ethical values, social norms, and religious ideals. In doing so, it contributes to the fields of Buddhist Civilization, Art History, Cultural History, and World History by highlighting both the shared foundations and regional adaptations of Buddhist visual culture across Asia.

Objectives

This study compares the socio-ethical iconography of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka and the Dazu Rock Carvings in China to show how Buddhist visual culture expressed religious teachings, ethical values, and social norms in different times and places. Taking a global historical perspective, the research examines how shared Buddhist ideas were adapted to local societies while maintaining wider connections across Asia. The analysis focuses on how sacred Buddhist concepts were combined with everyday concerns like morality, governance, family, social responsibility, and daily life. By examining selected visual stories, sculptures, and symbols, this study identifies both common ground and unique qualities of Sri Lankan and Chinese Buddhist art traditions. It examines how Buddhist images were used for religious devotion, to transmit ethical values, to support social norms, and to influence group behavior. Comparing these two important centers of Buddhist art helps us better understand how religion, society, and culture connect in Buddhist civilizations. In the end, the research shows how Buddhist iconography helped link sacred and everyday life, and how Buddhist communities across Asia used visual culture to share moral ideas and adapt to social and cultural changes.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative comparative research design to explore the socio-ethical iconography of Polonnaruwa in Sri Lanka and the Dazu Rock Carvings in China from a global historical perspective. The approach unites visual analysis, historical interpretation, and comparative iconographic methods to examine how Buddhist visual culture expressed ethical values and social ideals in different cultural and historical settings. The main data sources are sculptures, relief carvings, inscriptions, and iconographic images from both sites. Supplementary context comes from archaeological reports, site records, and historical documents. Field notes and photographs from a research trip to the Dazu Rock Carvings in Chongqing, China, are also included. Secondary sources, such as academic books, journal articles, and studies on Buddhist art, cultural history, and Buddhist civilization, further support the analysis. A comparative

iconographic approach is used to identify and examine visual representations of Buddhist ethical doctrines and social values. The main themes are compassion, morality, merit-making, governance, filial piety, and daily social life. Thematic analysis helps group recurring socio-ethical motifs and shows how Buddhist teachings were adapted to local cultures. Comparing the two sites shows both similarities and differences in how Buddhist communities used visual culture to link religious teachings with daily life across Asia.

Results

The analysis demonstrates that both Polonnaruwa and the Dazhu Rock Carvings employ Buddhist imagery to communicate ethical values and social ideals that extend beyond religious doctrine. At both sites, the artwork emphasizes key Buddhist virtues such as compassion, generosity, moral discipline, and the accumulation of merit, illustrating the integration of spiritual teachings into daily life (Leidy, 2008). These findings indicate that Buddhist art functioned not only as a medium for sacred concepts but also as a means to reinforce social norms and ethical conduct within local communities, as shown in Figure 01. Nevertheless, significant differences exist in the representation of social and ethical themes across sites. At Polonnaruwa, the artwork primarily emphasizes royal patronage, religious devotion, and the connection between Buddhist kingship and moral leadership, reflecting the political and cultural context of medieval Sri Lanka (Seneviratna, 1994). In contrast, the Dazhu Rock Carvings depict a broader spectrum of social themes, including filial piety, family responsibilities, charity, and moral instruction, which embody Chinese traditions and local interpretations of Buddhism (Karetzky, 2000; Howard, 2006). These distinctions indicate that, although both sites are grounded in Buddhist ethics, their artistic expressions were adapted to align with their respective social and cultural environments.





Figure 1 Comparative representation of Buddhist socio-ethical iconography in Polonnaruwa (Sri Lanka) and the Dazu Rock Carvings (China).

Table 1 Comparative representation of Buddhist socio-ethical iconography in Polonnaruwa (Sri Lanka) and the Dazu Rock Carvings (China).

Theme	Polonnaruwa (Sri Lanka)	Dazu Rock Carvings (China)
Moral Values	Merit, compassion, devotion	Compassion, filial piety, cha
Social Function	Legitimation of kingship	Moral education of society
Religious Focus	Buddhist kingship and monastic patronage	Integration of Buddhism with family ethics
Sacred–Secular Relationship	Governance and religious authority	Everyday social life and ethical conduct

This research demonstrates that Buddhist social and ethical art served to bridge religious teachings and everyday life. Table 1 summarizes the key comparative findings. This artistic tradition enabled Buddhist communities in Sri Lanka and China to transmit moral values, guide social conduct, and maintain cultural identity through visual representation. From a global historical perspective, the comparison reveals both shared foundations and localized adaptations within Buddhist civilization across Asia (Huntington, 1990).

Discussion / Conclusion

The analysis shows that Buddhist iconography in both Polonnaruwa and the Dazu Rock Carvings served a purpose beyond religious art. It served as a medium for communicating social and ethical values and shaping behavioral norms. Although both sites are grounded in Buddhist teachings, their visual

accounts reflect particular cultural, political, and social contexts. In Polonnaruwa, Buddhist imagery is associated with kingship, religious patronage, and moral leadership, showing how Buddhism legitimized political authority and maintained social order (Seneviratna, 1994). In contrast, the Dazu Rock Carvings emphasize filial piety, familial obligations, charity, and daily moral conduct, highlighting the adaptation of Buddhist concepts to Chinese traditions and society.

The results indicate that Buddhist civilization was not a monolithic cultural phenomenon but a flexible tradition that adapted to local contexts while upholding core ethical principles. This study explains how Buddhist art mediated between religious doctrine and everyday social life, permitting communities to express and transmit moral values in culturally relevant ways. By comparing different regions, this research adds to the fields of Buddhist Civilization, Art History, Cultural History, and World History. It demonstrates the varied strategies Buddhist societies employed to integrate religious concepts within daily life. Furthermore, it improves understanding of cultural exchange, local adaptation, and the dissemination of ethical ideas within the Buddhist world, providing new perspectives on how Buddhist art facilitated continuity and transformation across Asia (Huntington, 1990).

Keywords - Buddhist Iconography, Buddhist Civilization, Polonnaruwa, Dazu Rock Carvings, Socio-Ethical Values

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