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Article

“Ritual and Magic” in Buddhist Visual Culture from the Bird Totem

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Abstract: Despite numerous research findings related to medieval Chinese Buddhism, the witchcraft role of bird totems in Buddhist history has not received sufficient attention. In order to fill this gap, this paper analyzes how Buddhist monks in medieval China developed a close relationship with bird-totem worship. This relationship has been documented in Buddhist scriptures, rituals, oral traditions, biographies, and mural art. Although bird-totem worship was practiced in many regions of medieval China, this paper specifically examines the visual culture of bird totems in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhism. Furthermore, some details of this culture were recorded in Buddhist texts and images. According to these works, various bird-totem patterns and symbols are believed to be effective ritual arts used by Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist monks to influence nature and the supernatural through ritual and magic.

Keywords: Tibetan-Buddhist religion; Dunhuang; bird totems; bird shamans; scriptures; rituals; magic; visual culture; worship



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1. Buddhism in Tibet and the Bird Totem

The bird-totem symbols of Tibetan Buddhists and other religions are considered to be artifacts, and their actual implications are rarely understood. As worship objects, these items are often associated with ethnic traditions or believed to bring fortune and prosperity. In addition, the bird-totem symbols also help beings understand the true nature of all existence through ritual and magic. Monks sharing this tradition have a wonderful experience, which can be regarded as ritual arts of efficacy. This experience includes hearing Buddhist teachings in the sound of birds, worshipping a bird as a shaman in an important ritual, or revealing sacred ritual space through images. In this study, the relationship between Buddhist monks and bird totems is examined. The results reveal the development of the relationship and how the ritual traditions were transformed into bird-totem images and became an important religious symbol for Buddhism in the Middle Ages¹.

Bird-totem symbols are widespread in China, dating back to the Middle Ages. Bird ornaments have been found on Neolithic pottery from Majiayao 马家窑 culture, and round-eyed, straight-beaked, divergent-crowned bird ornaments have been found at ritual and religious sites of Sanxingdui 三星堆. In addition, bird symbols are found on jade vessels at religious sites of the Liangzhu 良渚 culture in areas of Shanghai. These bird symbols were part of Chinese religious and ceremonial culture from ancient times. Currently, Chinese Buddhist monks regard them as a mythological metaphor instead of a ritual device or a mystical symbol, significantly diminishing their significance². However, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries and places have unique rituals, generally determined by special factors. Most Tibetan Buddhist traditions are based on myths and legends³, such as the belief in the Gesarized Guandi 格萨尔化关帝 (Y. Jia 2016). Some traditions result from sacred supernatural phenomena in Tibetan Buddhism (Xiang 2009). There is also the lineage of living Buddhas, which is a unique feature of Tibetan Buddhism (Awang 1996).

Bird totem symbols appear in Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist literature and archaeological excavations, including documents and records from Buddhist scriptures, rituals, oral traditions, biographies, and mural paintings. These records provide evidence for a powerful ritual art capable of taming natural and supernatural forces through rituals and magic.

Studies of bird-totem worship reveal the richness and diversity of primitive religions. Although there are many commonalities among these traditions from a religious and cultural perspective, this study will not discuss the phenomenon of primitive religious bird-image worship and its social origins⁴. It is necessary to refer to the works of Chinese scholars such as *Study of the Art of Rock Wall Painting and the Cultural Origins of the Sunbird Sunsnake*, and *The Cultural Origins of the Dragon and Phoenix* to obtain this information (Li 2015; Wang 1988). Some scholars, such as Tylor, D.E., and Tokarev, have referred to the status of bird totems in primitive religions (Tylor 2005; Tokarev 1985). However, this topic has not been specifically discussed nor examined in the context of indigenous religions in China.

Despite the importance of the relationship between bird-totem images and Chinese Buddhism, scholars have studied it from an archaeological perspective, as introduced in the study of S. Huang (2009). From the perspective of witchcraft⁵, there is no need to consider subsequent changes as long as historical and cultural developments have not fundamentally altered the understanding of the subject (and their influence must be recognized). The variation in research findings adds depth, richness, or extensiveness to the interpretation of the subject. Therefore, the focus of this study is established based on earlier sources: the magical effects of Buddhist bird-totem worship, with particular reference to their witchcraft utility in texts and images. This study can make a great contribution to the history of Buddhism, and it is necessary to perform an in-depth investigation to gain a deeper understanding of bird-totem worship.

Based on the above introduction, this study is not an exhaustive exploration of primitive religious bird-image worship and its social origins. Many ideas have not been discussed, and many perspectives have not been explored. In order to make this study more comprehensive, the findings of numerous studies are discussed. These findings are not exclusively related to magic or ritual effects. They are part of the context of a circumscribed culture or a particular excavated archaeological document, such as a brief discussion of cultural phenomena and particular pictorial features on birds.

Despite the limitations of previous studies, this study can contribute to basic understanding, further research, and discussion. In future studies, the magic and rituals of Buddhist bird iconography will be further discussed, and the magical space created by the relationship between the musical motifs in Buddhist bird-image worship and the Buddhist philosophical term “meditation” will be explored.

Although there are research findings on Buddhism, the witchcraft role of bird totems in Buddhist history has not been adequately examined, especially a witchcraft perspective on Buddhist bird-totem worship. Therefore, this paper will focus on how the symbols of bird totems became sacred in Buddhist culture and how the revelation of sacred-ritual space is conveyed pictorially in religious art. The role played by bird-totem symbols in the sorcery and magical practices of Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist monks⁶ in medieval China will first be discussed.

2. Tibetan and Buddhist Classical Literature: Bird Totems

In the widely influential work *Totem and Taboo*, the Eastern civilizations and religions, including Buddhism, were not discussed (Д.Е.Хайтун 2004). According to Altimir (2012, p. 139), “as anyone who is familiar with Freud’s work will know, references to the Far East are almost nonexistent, including references to Japan and its culture.” The reason for this is due to Freud’s personal motivation to remain silent about Buddhism and Chinese or Indian thought. The primitive Bön 苯教⁷ concept of “animism” merged with the Buddhist idea of “compassion”. Thus, studies on the relationship between animal totems and religion have

argued that Tibetan Buddhism influenced the development and spread of life-releasing practices (i.e., “blessing release” and “relief release”). The practices of “blessing release” and “relief release” have also developed and gained popularity, with new connotations attached to them (San 2015; Wang 2018). The ritual of releasing animal totems created a new connotation, transforming the original concept of blood sacrifice into a Buddhist practice of stopping the killing and protecting life. It is no longer considered a valid ritual art with magical or sorcerous effects but an ordinary creature requiring healing.

Scholars have expressed doubts about the magical powers possessed by Buddhist animal totems or have argued that it is incorrect to examine animal totems in the context of magic and witchcraft. In this study, the close relationship between Buddhist monks and bird-totem worship in medieval China is investigated. Monks from Buddhism with experience as shamans try to embody the unusual magical powers of a shaman and maintain spiritual alignment with the sacred bird through the image of a “Bird Shaman” when performing pujas. Bird shamans⁸ are an extension of the ancient native Chinese and Tibetan “bird totem” culture. For Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist monks, this experience was authentic rather than merely symbolic. Cleary (2005, p. 458) describes this mystical creature as a “rise from the ashes of self-death enlightened one”⁹.

The bird totem symbolizes peace and prosperity, fertile harvests, and the good fortune of Tibetan Buddhist monks. In addition, it is also a gift from God that takes one beyond the tangible world into religious truth, allowing a glimpse to every corner of the mysterious organisms in the universe. Information about the connection between Tibetan Buddhism and bird totems can often be found in contemporary Chinese libraries, popular websites, and widely read public articles. In a recent Chinese public article and popular book, bird totems are described as the integral cultural system of Tibetan Buddhism, which incorporates the roc in primitive Bön 苯教 and the ancient totem¹⁰ in Zhang-Zhung 象雄 (the “Jong” bird). A researcher believed that the Tibetan creation song “Spar Formation Song”¹¹ had the myth of the roc being born from a human egg¹² and becoming the founder. The roc was merged with Tibetan Buddhism to become the sacred protector in Tibetan hearts. Another scholar argued that Tibetan Buddhism continued to absorb elements of the original Bön 苯教¹³. According to legend, when Master Lian Peanut came to Tibet to preach, all the different mountain gods from the original Bön 苯教 were incorporated along the way to become the patron deities of Buddhism. In contrast, Tibetan Buddhist monks and scholars presented the origin of the bird totems on their websites and explained their role in providing protection and magic to an area. There has been little discussion about the relationship between bird totems and monastic life or their role in spiritual affairs. Based on these studies, it can be found that the bird totem, as a supernatural Buddhist agent, became a direct local protector in its unique supernatural way, which, in turn, leads to miracles.

Although the relationship between bird totems and Tibetan Buddhism is introduced in popular websites and books, it is not mentioned in traditional religious texts, including orthodox Buddhist¹⁴ texts. In contrast, in *When God Was a Bird: Christianity, Animism, and the Re-enchantment of the World*, Wallace (2018, p. 2) argued that, in authoritative biblical texts and artworks, the phenomenon of “the ancient image of God in the form of bird life” cannot be ignored. Although this position challenged contemporary dogma, it undermined the traditional belief that Christianity and animism are mutually exclusive. The author argued that restoring “bird totemism” in Christian thought and culture is crucial to paving the way for the spirituality of the earth. Shemesh (2018) argued that the biblical texts assign great importance to the role of bird knowledge in King Solomon’s abilities, especially the use of bird divination. Bird knowledge allows King Solomon to best use his military skills and talents as a magician.

Since there are no authoritative sources, Chinese and Tibetan Buddhist monks referred to informal exegetical texts, biographies, and oral traditions to explain the relationship between bird totems and Buddhism. However, there is no difference between Buddhism and Christianity regarding bird-totem worship. Buddhism bird-totem worship is considered a source of inspiration and revelation for meditation or practice and a method for monks to

experience supernatural powers. The Buddhists were fully aware of how to use bird-totem symbols in sorcery and rituals to manipulate nature and the supernatural, with a great influence on the spirituality of the monks.

The literature review was conducted by reviewing popular online articles, books written by contemporary Chinese and Tibetan scholars, and relevant journal articles published in recent years. Based on these studies, the function of Buddhist bird-totem worship was divided into two categories: the worship of rebirth utilizing the divine and magical energy of music; and the worship of omens and divination. For Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist monks, bird totems became an important gateway to the supernatural world, where the experiencers could sense an unexplained and mysterious magical power. The purpose of this discussion is to question the previously overwhelmingly static historical narrative of Buddhist bird totems and emphasize the role of sorcery and magic in their potential form.

2.1. Bird Totem: The Divinity of Music, Magical Energy, and Rebirth

Bird-totem-related descriptions were first introduced in *Fo shuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 or *Xiao jing* 小經 (One of the fundamental scriptures of Pure Land Buddhism is this book). It is one of the three Sutras of the Pure Land, and the other two Sutras include *Fo shuo wuliangshou jing* 佛說無量壽經 (It is one of the three sutras of the Pure Land of Ultimate Bliss) and *Fo shuo guan wuliangshou fo jing* 佛說觀無量壽經 or *Guan jing* 觀經 (One of the fundamental scriptures of Pure Land Buddhism is this book). They are the oldest versions of the Pure Land scriptures in existence. The authors of the Lesser Sutras often include commentary texts, which explain that the bird totem is not only the ultimate mirror image of Amitabha 阿彌陀佛 but also a symbolic object linking the image of the Buddha realm to the ritual space of bird song that allows for rebirth in the Pure Land.

As an example, the Small Scripture describes the bird totem of the *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* (*Fo shuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 or *Xiao jing* 小經) in detail:

Again, Śāriputra, in that land, there are always many kinds of rare and beautiful birds of various colors, such as white geese, peacocks, parrots, śaris, kalavīnkas, jīvaṃjīvakas. Six times during the day and night, birds sing with melodious and delicate sounds, which proclaim such teachings as the five roots of good, the five powers, the seven practices leading to enlightenment, and the Noble Eightfold Path. On hearing them, all the people of that land become mindful of the Buddha, Dharma, and Sangha.

復次舍利弗！彼國常有種種奇妙雜色之鳥—白鵠，孔雀，鸚鵡，舍利，迦陵頻伽，共命之鳥。是諸衆鳥，晝夜六時出和雅音，其音演暢五根，五力，七菩提分，八聖道分如是等法。其土衆生聞是音已，皆悉念佛，念法，念僧。(Hisao and Harold (2003, p. 92) quoted in Marchman (2021, p. 3))

The scriptures describe numerous rare and beautiful birds in different colors as if they were real and beautiful. Although scenes have important ornamental characteristics, they can also serve as a magical space for someone who wishes to experience the Pure Land on earth. In the commentary on the *Visualization of Amitāyus Sūtra* (*Fo shuo guan wuliangshou fo jing* 佛說觀無量壽經 or *Guan jing* 觀經), Shandao 善導 (613–681) analyzed the effectiveness of bird totems in demonstrating the miraculous power of cultivating the Pure Land. This treatise played a significant role in developing the Pure-Land belief systems in China and Japan. Zen Buddhism explained how human beings are endowed with the four heavenly virtues through the Cintāmaṇi gems. In addition, it also introduced that a wide variety of birds were created by the light of the gems in the Pure Land and became important leaders in the human spiritual realm¹⁵ (Marchman 2021, p. 7).

Marchman (2021, p. 7) contends that the Good Shepherd’s statement implies that the purpose of the bird’s existence is to convey the Buddha’s teachings. Interestingly, it was found that the chant described in the *Smaller Sukhāvātīvyūha Sūtra* (*Fo shuo Amituo jing* 佛說阿彌陀經 or *Xiao jing* 小經) corresponds to that in the *Ritual Hymn to the Afterlife* 往生禮贊歌. As the Buddha states in the *Ritual Hymn to the Afterlife* 往生禮贊歌, birds belong to the world of magic and witchcraft instead of the real world. As mentioned in the hymn, “Birds are born in the pearl, but humans are born on the lotus 鳥本珠中出,

人唯华上生”, which means that the bird totem is derived from the Cintāmaṇi gemstone, and humans are reincarnated sitting on the lotus (Marchman 2021, p. 12). The spiritual orientation of the bird totem can be reflected in this poem. The monks rely on their belief in the supernatural to attain sublimity in rebirth through magical effects and suggestions, referred to as “nirvana¹⁶”.

By analyzing texts such as the Jodo scriptures, codices, rituals, and popular stories, Marchman (2021, p. 15) concluded that the bird totem “is not only seen as a symbol of connection to Amitabha, but a symbol of the need for magical rebirth by replicating the behavior of the bird in ritual, i.e., by performing the mirror image of the ritual”.

Similar themes can be found in the biographies of Chinese Han Buddhists. In the stories about bird totems in the Xu Gaoseng zhuan 高僧传 collected by Dao Xuan 道玄, the fantastic tales of birds demonstrate the connection between their supernatural behavior and the phenomenon of famous monks performing rebirth rituals. In the Xu gaoseng zhuan 高僧传 collected by Dao Xuan 道玄, Shinohara mentioned a story about a bird coming back from the dead, heralding the return of a seriously ill princess to health. No doctor could help Tiantai master Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597) during her seven-day golden-light penance ritual. On the sixth day, a strange bird (yiniaio 異鳥) flew to the altar, walked around, and died. After a while, the bird came back to life and flew away. The sound of pigs was also heard. Zhiyi 智顓 (538–597) said:

Signs appeared. The princess will be cured. The bird died and came back to life—expressing that the coffin was closed, but the corpse rose again. The strange sound of pigs indicates that the merits of the ceremony are realized [Xu gaoseng zhuan. ((T. 2060: 50.567a13–17; p. 632) quoted in Shinohara (2019, p. 14))

Shinohara (2019) argued that the names of birds often appear in the anthology of Dao Xuan when well-known monks perform rebirth rituals. Their appearance, especially the birdsong at the time of death, often marks a crucial transition in the rebirth process. Tibetan literature also references the resurrection of men and gods through ritual birds, including the famous myth of the Celestial Emperor in the Dunhuang Tibetan Chronicle (PT 1287). As Daniel Berounský describes it:

After Drigon Shambo (the sky emperor god) was killed, the body of this god was sliced into pieces and swallowed by a female water spirit. To recover his body, the god Tendai required the salvation of a man with the characteristics of a bird. ((Haarh 1969, pp. 209–12) quoted in Berounský (2016, p. 531))

From Buddhist canonical literature and monastic biographies, it can be seen that bird totems possess the magic power of resurrection. All of them can restore life and resurrect a person or a god.

2.2. The Bird Totem: An Omen and a Divination

The role of the bird totem in omens and divination is discussed in this section. After reviewing studies on bird totems and divination in different parts of China, we found that scholars agree with the following theory: the ancient Chinese believed birds symbolize good omens because good things happen whenever birds appear. In addition, birds were also used for divination to predict the development of events (Sheng 2019, p. 50). Tibetan Buddhism combines the benevolent concept of animism with the out-of-body spirit. Together with the ancient concept of totem worship and the reverence for divination, a fantasy world filled with spirits and ghosts is produced. This phenomenon is reflected in the Tibetan bird totem.

Bird divination is explained in the Danjur-Umong Sutra 丹珠尔-乌鸣经 in the centuries-long tradition of constructing the Tibetan Daizang Sutra. For example, crow calls are generally associated with the stopping state of travelers and their travel state:

Firstly, the Danjur-Umong Sutra 丹珠尔-乌鸣经 explains the meaning of crow calls that appear on the fourth watch and the ninth side. Secondly, regarding human travel, the omens given in this section are relevant to pedestrians. Finally,

the auspiciousness is differentiated based on how crows construct their nests. In the last section, the various characteristics of the crow's call and its omens are described in detail. (S. Huang 2009, p. 50)

In the collection of ancient Mongolian texts under the title of Aldan Ma'adil in the National Museum of the Republic of Tyva, there is a description of the signs associated with the omens of magpie calls. Muzraeva and Sumba (2019, p. 417) examined texts in which magpies are mentioned as the most common object associated with omens: "One of these is the Sutra 经文 (Sanskrit text, or 'work attributed to the Buddha'), which is about omens and divination and entitled The Sutra on the Knowledge of the Language of Magpies". The next step is to examine the handwritten material related to magpies. In a postscript, Muzraeva and Sumba (2019) extracted a prophetic verse from the text and indicated that if a person hears such a call at a specific time of day and from a specific direction, something significant is about to happen.

If (its cry) occurs at dawn, fresh meat and hot weather will arrive. If [it] cries at sunrise, guests will arrive from afar. If [it] cries at dusk, you will be able to learn interesting news. If [it] cries at lunchtime, everyone will enjoy the good weather. If [it] cries at night (i.e., when the sun sets), livestock will be lost.

«Если [прокричит] на рассвете, то придут мясо, горячительные напитки, вещи. Если [прокричит] на восходе солнца, то издалека придут гости. Если [прокричит] в сумерках, услышишь интересную новость. Если [прокричит] в обед, погода будет обычной. < . . . > Если [прокричит] на склоне дня (т.е. когда солнце склонится к закату), то будет падеж скота». (Sibayun-u sudur (n.d., л. 3b-3a) quoted in Muzraeva and Sumba (2019, p. 418))

The preface to *the Tibetan Writing Scrolls of Dunhuang* 敦煌藏文卷轴 also mentions that crows foretell future fortunes and misfortunes (Huang 2009, p. 36). In addition, bird divination, initially interpreted by lamas (Tibetan Buddhist shamans), has developed into a widely accepted form of folk divination among Tibetans. They no longer need to consult shamans to perform bird divination.

3. Buddha's Bird Shamans Patterns, Mystical Rituals, and Magic

Buddhist monks used the magical power of bird totems to foretell future fortunes, misfortunes, and resurrections as part of their artistic expression. There were several images associated with the identification of bird totems, such as the golden-winged bird, the Garuda 迦楼罗, and the kalavinlka 迦陵频伽. As a starting point for this paper, the bird totems of Tibet and the Dunhuang cave paintings were examined. Through a systematic compilation of Buddhist bird totems, their pictorial features are analyzed. Furthermore, the mystical rituals and magical effects of their images are discussed based on Buddhist scriptures and folklore.

Although many people believe that the "bird totem" represents a visible substance, it represents the invisible soul and the power of supernatural beings in the minds of Buddhist monks and shamans. "Bird totems" have always played an important role in the subjective world of deities shaped by Buddhist monks and shamans. Throughout the ages, shamans have always appeared with the mysterious "bird totem", cast various spells, and mysteriously disappeared. In various religious rituals where people interact with God, there must be a place for the "bird totem" since it is a tool for communicating with God. Consequently, some Buddhist monks and shamans were no longer satisfied with performing magical rituals inspired by bird shamans. They resolved to express the scenes of their rebirth in hallucinatory magic spaces in a more artistic way, creating murals or sculptures with the property of warding off evil spirits and trying to convey a mysterious and unpredictable quality through their artworks.

The ancient Zhang-Zhung 象雄's bird shaman totem in Tibet (the birthplace of Tibetan Buddhism) and the Dunhuang cave frescoes of the human-headed, bird-bodied kalavinlka 迦陵频伽 are excellent examples.

3.1. Ancient Zhang-Zhung 象雄's Bird Shaman Totem in the Tibetan Region: A Ritual Related to Omens

The ancient Zhang-Zhung 象雄 in Tibet is depicted in Figures 1 and 2: the upper half shows a man kneeling before an altar, and the lower half shows a larger, bird-like figure. Tibetan shamans have a special fondness for bird feathers, and their bodies are usually covered with feathers, making them bird shamans. Some shamans transform their bodies into birds, becoming bird-headed shamans, while others employ birds for divination and sorcery rituals. It is believed that Tibetan rock paintings possessing a supernatural symbolism of bird images are the result of an ancient belief system related to Zhang-Zhung 象雄 and the shaman deity “khyun 穹”¹⁷ (Zhang 2006, p. 55). Based on representations of “Bird Shamans” in Tibetan rock paintings, it has been demonstrated that ancient shamans dressed as birds during their practices to cast their unusual spells and to align themselves with the divine bird “khyun 穹”. The Tibetan scholar Sister Nan and Cheng (2015) also pointed out that birds played a key role in the religious practices of the ancient Benjamins. Early rock art in Tibet often depicts the Bön shamans of Elephantine as birds, and these shamans were considered birds in the celebrations of all major religious festivals. The feathers on their heads resembled birds with horns, symbolizing the magical power they possessed (Nan and Cheng 2015, p. 75).



Figure 1. People worship at an altar wearing the representative of the original Bön 苯教 shaman of the bya-ru 甲茹 (rock painting from Zhaxi Island, Namucuo, northern Tibet 纳木错扎西岛) (Zhang 2006, p. 55).



Figure 2. Bird shaman holding a bird in the left hand and dancing with hands (rock painting of Rurirangka, Ritu 日土鲁日朗卡, Tibet) (Zhang 2006, p. 56).

According to texts in the original Bön 苯教, this head resembles the shadow of the *bya-ru* 甲茹¹⁸, suggesting a close relationship between shaman and bird. In addition, this ancient cultural concept also facilitated the development of Tibetan culture in later generations, especially the development of Tibetan Buddhism. The birds were highly valued in the ancient Zhang-Zhung 象雄 region due to the teachings of the Bön religion. Since the original religion of the ancient Tibetans was Bön, its teachings influenced all Tibetan Buddhism doctrines throughout history. Therefore, the original Bön 苯教 religion and Tibetan Buddhism are in the same lineage. The evolution of the bird shamans from the original Bön 苯教 shamanistic image to the bird totem of Tibetan Buddhism has made them suitable partners for Buddhist monks in auspicious divination rituals.

3.2. Mural Bird Totems in Dunhuang Cave: The Divine and Demonic Energy of Music

The variation of the *Sutra of the Visualization of Amitāyus Sūtra* (*Fo shuo guan wuliangshou fo jing* 佛说观无量寿经 or *Guan jing* 观经) from Cave 25 of the Yulin 榆林 Cave in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang is shown in Figure 3. Three human-faced birds are posed in different positions, with lutes in their arms and drums around their waists. A person plays the drum and jumps on a pedal while holding a lute in the left hand. A musician holding a clapperboard is on the right side of the fresco, gazing at the kalavinlka 迦陵频伽 hovering in the center of the stage. Furthermore, two dancers dressed differently appear in this work (Figure 4). The dancer on the left side of the picture (Figure 5) has two heads and wears a mask, representing the everyday birds in the Buddhist theme. Thus, there are two heads on one wall and two heads within one body. The other dancer wears a crown of birds, with the upper half of her body visible and konghou¹⁹ surrounding her. As she rolls her tail like a cloud, the upper half of her body becomes naked. There are two large wings on each side, spread like a peacock in front of the sphinx, and the tail is decorated with flowers. The long neck turns toward another dancing musician, echoing the musician behind.



Figure 3. The variation of the *Sutra of the Visualization of the Amitāyus Sūtra* (Fo shuo guan wuliangshou fo jing 佛说观无量寿经 or Guan jing 观经) from Cave 25 of the Yulin 榆林 Cave in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (Zhang 2018, p. 20).

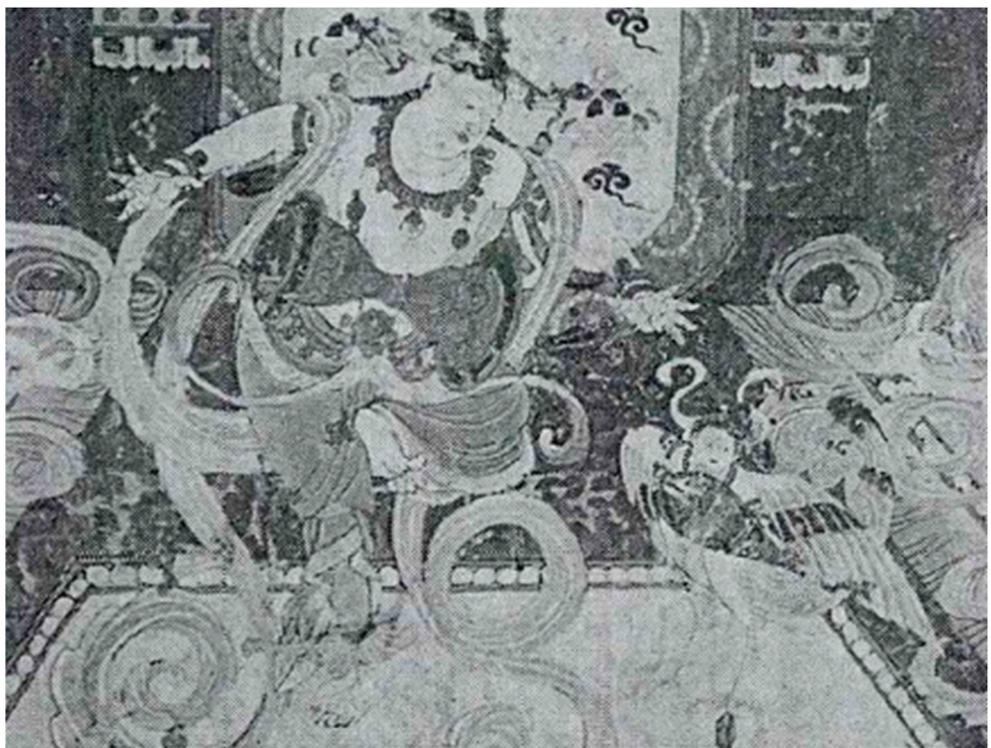


Figure 4. Partial image: The variation of the *Sutra of the Visualization of the Amitāyus Sūtra* (Fo shuo guan wuliangshou fo jing 佛说观无量寿经 or Guan jing 观经) from Cave 25 of the Yulin 榆林 Cave in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (Zhang 2018, p. 21).

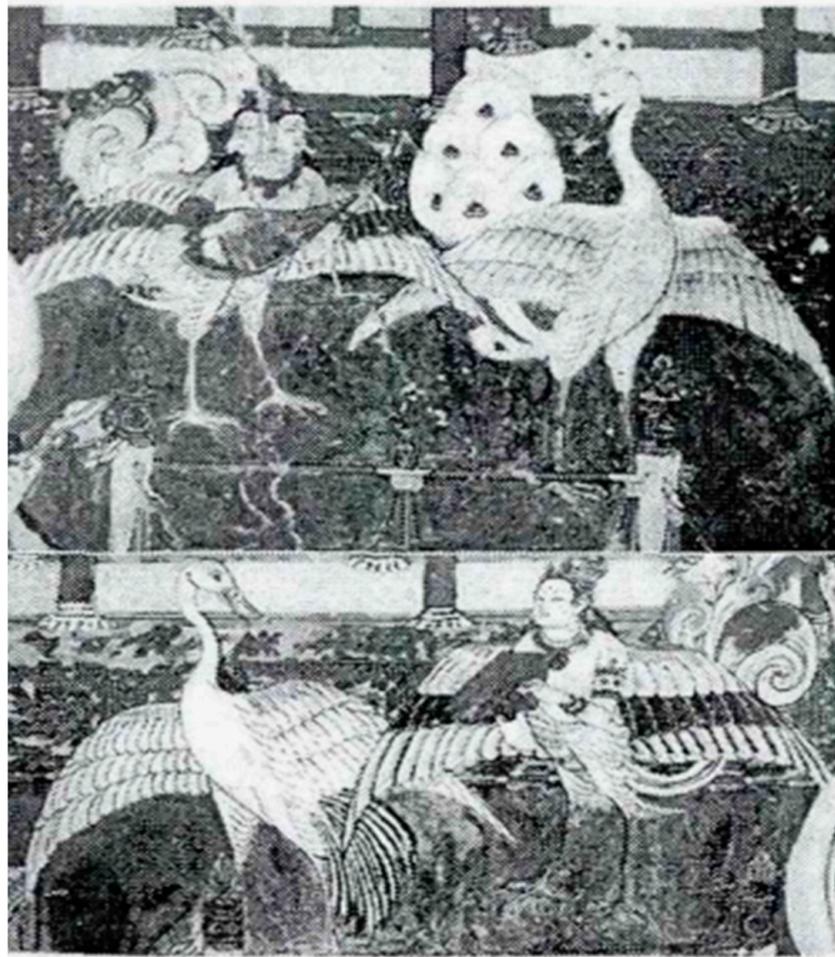


Figure 5. Partial image: The variation of the *Sutra of the Visualization of Amitāyus Sūtra* (Fo shuo guan wuliangshou fo jing 佛说观无量寿经 or Guan jing 观经) from Cave 25 of the Yulin 榆林 Cave in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang (Zhang 2018, p. 21).

In addition to the paintings of the Pure-Land Sutra from the Dunhuang caves, images combining human heads, birds, and musical instruments in Buddhist iconographic subjects can also be found in East-Asia caves, such as those in India and Japan.

A human-headed bird above a Bodhisattva is also shown in the Grotto of the Visualization of Amitāyus Sūtra Cave 1, which is an example of ancient Indian wall art. Compared to the feet and legs of typical birds in Central Asia, the upper part of the body appears more realistic. It has features such as a bun on the head, drooping ears, a beak-like nose, eyes pointing forward, a lute²⁰, and a luthier seated in a majestic pose beneath a wing-tailed cloak. It is titled “kiṃnara (Sanskrit)” and is painted on the upper right side of the lotus-handed Bodhisattva. The string instruments in his hands are very intriguing, and his music is appealing. Scholars have observed that the music performed by a person can interfere with truth seekers (Liu 2021, p. 120). Japanese Buddhist iconography also depicts dancers who are half human and half bird. For example, Sandoji plays the flute on a kagura (Figure 6), and Vishnu holds a lute on a kagura (Figure 7).

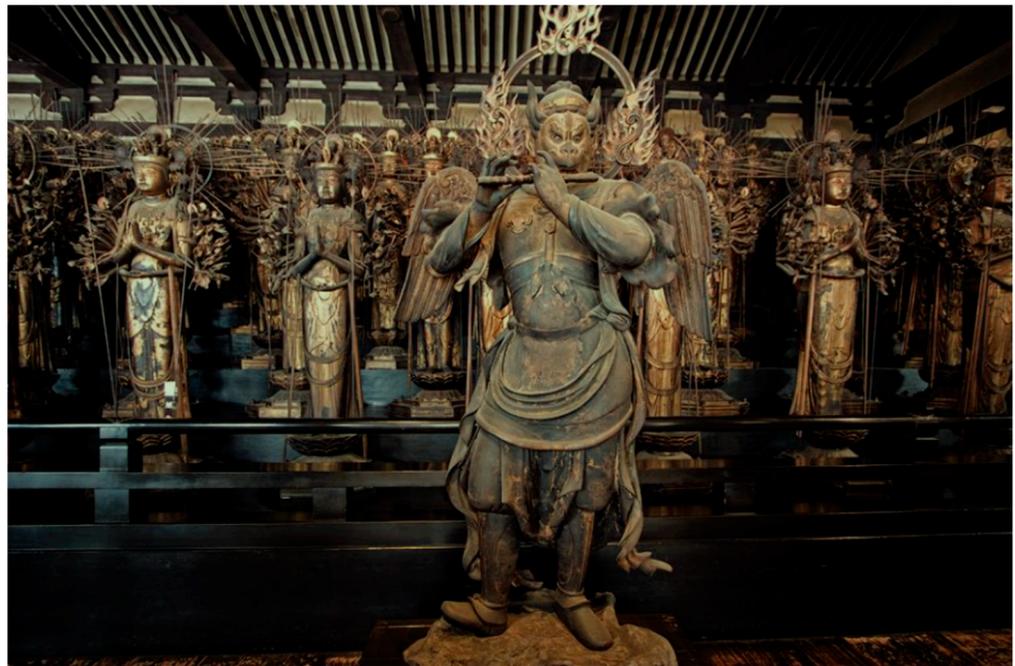


Figure 6. Sanju: the sculpture of Garuda 迦楼罗 on the Sando Temple. According to the iconography of this temple, Garuda is playing the flute, which may be fixed. It could be a stage of meditation on sound (this meditation practice originated in India and was taken up by Buddhism) (Esipova 2018, p. 26).

From this comparison, it can be observed that the kalavinlka 迦陵频伽 of the Dunhuang Caves, the Japanese half-human/half-bird dancer of the Garua 迦楼罗, and the human-headed and bird-bodied instrumentalist “kiṃnara (Sanskrit 梵)” of the Ajanta Caves in India are similar in both images and musical characteristics. Esipova (2018, p. 17) explains the significance of the musical pattern in the image of the bird shaman: “In ancient Hinduism, the sound was considered to be the essence of God (Sanskrit 梵). Through it, God presented himself to the world. The role of musical sound in Hinduism and Tantra is extremely important. Meditation on sound takes on a special significance in Indian culture”.

This type of music is often a common theme in the imagery of Buddhist bird shamans: the enlightenment of the Buddha is often associated with the ritual space of bird songs. Monks can purify their minds, break their karma, and gain rebirth in religious music. In addition, they intuit the nature of God (Sanskrit 梵) and realize the true meaning of life through the bird’s sound of Hoya (the sound of the five roots of the Buddha). This sound is an attribute of Buddhist music with divine and demonic energies. Thus, traditional Buddhism highly values music as the most sacred aspect of the religion²¹. In Buddhist meditation, monks dive into the supra-mundane realms by contemplating and perceiving the magical sounds of the transcendent (e.g., the hoyo sound made by birds). Nonetheless, such results are often overlooked by orthodox Buddhist scholars.



Figure 7. On Garuda, Vishnu holds a lute. In the Nageri Propinsi Museum, Bali²² (Esipova 2018, p. 26).

4. Conclusions

This paper analyzes how Buddhist monks in medieval China became closely associated with bird-totem worship. The results are based on the findings of Buddhist scriptures, rituals, oral traditions, biographies, and murals.

The function of Buddhist bird-totem worship falls into two categories: the worship of rebirth utilizing the divine and magical energy of music; and the worship of omens and divination. For Tibetan and Chinese Buddhist monks, bird-totem worship became an important gateway into the supernatural world, allowing monks to experience a mysterious magical power that cannot be explained. The magical powers of these bird totems were incorporated by Buddhist monks into religious art. As an example, the human-headed, bird-bodied kalavinka 迦陵频伽 and Tibetan religious bird totems have become the most powerful murals and sculptures in Chinese religious shrines with anti-evil effects.

In Buddhism, bird-totem worship is considered a source of inspiration and revelation for meditation or practice and a method for monks to experience supernatural powers. Monks were fully aware of how to use bird-totem symbols in sorcery and rituals for effective ritual art to manipulate nature and supernatural purposes, which had a significant influence on the spirituality of the monks.

According to exegetical texts of Buddhist scriptures, because Tibetan Buddhism incorporates Bön rituals, Taoist biographies, and mural art (Mogao Caves at Dunhuang), the Chinese-Buddhist bird totems are viewed as one side, rather than as a positive reflection as a whole. The purpose of this study is to identify the commonalities of previous findings, thus providing a new perspective for the research²³. Despite the insufficient research results, the summarized analyses can arouse the general public's interest in the few rituals and magic of the ancient Chinese-Buddhist canon on the subject of bird shaman totems.

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Notes

- 1 The timing of the introduction of Buddhism to China (to the exact century): Buddhism was introduced to China from ancient India in the first century A.D., nearly two thousand years ago. There have been three main branches of it throughout its history. Tibetan Buddhism (also called Lamaism), Chinese Buddhism and Pali Buddhism (also called Hinayana Buddhism) are three forms of Buddhism.
- 2 Thanks to the anonymous reviewers for bringing this to our attention: “Consider the possibility that they are decorative, and then argue why they are not ‘merely’ decorative”. In his book *Experiences of Religion in all Their Forms: A Study of Human Nature*, William (2017) pointed out that object worship and witchcraft predate inner piety. Consequently, our accounts of inner piety are not as old as those of the first two (William 2017, p. 31). Thus, bird-totem image worship is considered the earliest stage of religious development, while personal religion, such as Buddhism, is a later development. Although many anthropologists, such as Frey, have explicitly opposed “religion” to “sorcery”. It can be inferred from this that the whole system of ideas that led to witchcraft and object worship, such as the worship of bird-totem images, has gradually reduced in its sacredness and ritual in favor of ornaments and artifacts that are compatible and secular. It turned into a battle of nomenclature, and our knowledge is always so speculative that I do not consider it worthwhile to discuss further.
- 3 We aim to demonstrate in this paper that the rituals of monasteries and places in Tibet in China, especially Tibetan Buddhism, are driven by special factors, particularly myths and legends. Several Chinese Tibetan scholars have asserted this point, see Jia 2016; Xiang 2009; Awang 1996. We will summarize their sources here, even though it is not clear that their claims are true. There may be numerous arguments for defining our conclusion in such an arbitrary manner, but it would make more sense if we treated this as an open question to avoid this problem. We appreciate the reminder provided by the anonymous reviewer.
- 4 As suggested by an anonymous reviewer of this article, we would like to provide literature related to the topic. The phenomenon of primitive religious bird-elephant worship and its social origins has been extensively examined in dissertations and journal articles, see (Huang 2004; Huang 2009; Peng 2020; Xiao 2013; Wu 2010; Wang 1994; Sun 2004). We are grateful to my reviewer for providing me with such a useful reminder.
- 5 The concept of witchcraft was known in ancient times as witchcraft for women and wizard craft for men. To achieve certain purposes, witchcraft involves performing rituals that use and manipulate some superhuman power to affect human life or events in nature. In witchcraft rituals, symbolic songs and dances were often performed, as were various objects and incantations believed to contain witchcraft magic. Thanks to one of our anonymous reviewers for asking this question.
- 6 We note the reviewer’s reminder regarding the differences between Tibetan Buddhism and Chinese Buddhist culture. In fact, in an article published in 2020, Zheng Du, a researcher at the Chinese Center for Tibetan Studies, argues that Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism belong to the same major school of Northern Buddhism and that they both share a common origin and symbiosis, as well as being closely related and distinct from one another. Chinese Buddhism and Tibetan Buddhism share a long tradition of cultural exchange, meaning they have not only absorbed and integrated each other, but also closely incorporated traditional Chinese culture, giving rise to the Chineseness of Buddhism. Please refer to Zheng (2020).
- 7 The original Bön 苯教: it is a sect of Tibetan Buddhism, where “Bön 苯教” refers only to the Tibetan language. Additionally, Yongzhong Bön 雍仲苯教 is referred to as “Bön 苯教”, is the teaching of Sinrao Miwo 辛饶弥沃.
- 8 An anonymous reviewer reminded us to pay attention to the explanation of the bird shaman’s terminology. A bird is an important theme in ancient Manchu mythology and an important object of worship in shamanic ceremonies. Bird shamans are known as intermediaries between heaven and earth and man, reaching states of ecstasy through dancing, beating drums, and singing, as well as going between heaven and earth and communicating with spirits in a natural way.
- 9 Zen Buddhism and Pure-Land Buddhism are two of China’s most flourishing Buddhist sects. To achieve nirvana rebirth and liberation from ego, Zen must break through the three levels of enlightenment. When one experiences what one is personally, this is the rebirth that follows the death of the ego. Thus, Crowley’s quote illustrates that Zen Buddhism views the bird totem as a phoenix reborn in nirvana. This is a symbol of our inner ego’s need to be broken and to rise above that ego, which is reborn after death. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the intricate relationship between Zen Buddhism and Tibetan and Chinese

Buddhism, as well as being somewhat off-topic. As a result of the reviewer's comments, we have added the above discussion to the notes in that paragraph for the reader's convenience.

10 According to the existing documents and their research, it appears that "Zhang-Zhung 象雄" is an ancient Xiongnu word, where "Zhang" 象 means place or ravine. Zhung 雄 is the shortened form of Zhang-Zhung (male warrior), an ancient name for a tribe of the Zhang-Zhung 象雄.

11 The "Spar Formation Song" states that "heaven and earth are mixed together, and the only thing that separates them is the great roc", and it is believed that the great roc was born from the egg of man and became the ancestor of the Tibetan people. Tibetan-Buddhist statues depict wrathful Buddhas with the roc and goldfinch flying above their heads. Tibetans seemed to believe that wearing them will bring them good luck, wisdom, and power.

12 Among China's ethnic minorities, the "egg-birth myth" is a phenomenon unique to their mythology.

13 Tibetans practiced this primitive religion before Buddhism was introduced to the region. As a result of the rise of Buddhism and the suppression of the royal family of Tubo, the original Bön 苯教 declined after the 8th century. It later absorbed some of the contents of Buddhism and evolved into a sect like Buddhism. The original Bön 苯教 was initially practiced in the southern part of the present-day Ali region, the ancient area called the ancient Zhang-Zhung 象雄, and then along the Yarlung Tsangpo River from west to east, which spread widely throughout all of Tibet; see Xiong (2005).

14 We are grateful for the commenter's reminder that the term "orthodox Buddhists" in this article refers to those who adhere to the teachings of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhism, such as those in the *Avatamsaka* 华严经, *Mahabharata Nirvana* 摩诃般涅槃经, the *Larger Sukhāvātyūha Sūtra* (*Fo shuo wuliangshou jing* 佛说无量寿经) and the *Dhatuvibhanga-sutra* 阿含经, which represent the teachings of Mahayana and Hinayana Buddhist classics and are recognized as orthodox by Buddhists. Whether Zen is a sect of orthodox Buddhism remains a complex question and cannot be addressed in this paper.

15 Kendall's quotation regarding Shantou's commentary on the Kama Sutra. See Pas (1995).

16 Nirvana: In ancient Tianfang 天方 country, there was a sacred bird named "Phoenix". At the age of 500, she gathered incense wood and burned herself, and was reborn from the ashes, fresh and unusual, and no longer died.

17 While many articles translate khyung 穹 as roc, scholars generally believe that khyung 穹 and roc are two completely different cultural phenomena. Although they share some similarities, they also differ greatly, so they view the phonetic translation as being more accurate to convey the meaning of khyung 穹.

18 Zhang-Zhung 象雄's eighteen kings have left behind a variety of Kaju, one of the unique elements of Zhang-Zhung 象雄 culture. "Bya 甲" means bird, and here it refers to the khyung 穹 of bird, or the bya-brgya-khyung (the king of a hundred birds). "Ru 茹" refers to the horn. There is also the "dome bird horn", which is the ancient Zhang-Zhung 象雄's kings' hat decoration which indicates their authority. In Tibetan literature, the difference in the texture of the bya-ru 甲茹 indicates the difference in kingship and social status.

19 Konghou, an ancient plucked stringed instrument.

20 The lute is a plucked string instrument with a curved neck.

21 The reviewers reminded us that this part of the discussion must be included in the annotated text of the manuscript, and we are grateful for the reviewer's assistance. Our deduction of the relationship between bird-totem image worship and the utility of music and magic is not intended to be representative of the overall Buddhist cultural phenomenon (for the claim that Buddhist music is an important component of Buddhism, which has been shared by several Chinese scholars, see Zhang 2021; Zhao 2018; Jia 2017). However, Chinese scholars have pointed out that Chinese Buddhist music gradually localized, with its sacredness and ritual gradually dissolving in favor of compatibility and secular features. An important innovation in this study consists in rediscovering the sacredness and ritualism of Chinese Buddhism: the magical effect of worshipping bird-totem images.

22 In 2018, Esipova (2018) published related research in the journal *Japanese Studies in Russia*. The following is an excerpt from her original text: Among early Vajrayana Buddhist sculptures, there is a statue depicting Vishnu playing the lute in front of Garuda. The sound of the Garuda and the sacred lute is the Bodhisattva's connection with the god Vishnu. "Мө: он-босацу (бодхисаттва Чудесный Звук) изображается играющим на лютне бива, и в Индонезии (где был распространёнранний ваджраянский буддизм) есть редкое скульптурное изображение Вишну, стоящего на Гаруде играющего на лютневом инструменте. Здесь связующими нитями бодхисатвы Чудесный Звук и бога Вишну являются Гаруда и звучание божественной лютни". As seen above, the standing sculpture depicts a goddess named Vishnu riding a goose-looking Garuda and holding a lute instrument in her arms. The general gender of Vishnu in Hin-du contexts is intersex, which means it can be either male or female to play the role of Vishnu, whereas Garuda is often represented as a bird, sometimes appearing as a peacock or eagle.

23 In fact, this discussion arises from a reviewer's concern about whether the above evidence represents the overall picture of Chinese-Buddhist bird totems, and assertion that it would be helpful to specify the purpose of the study in the text. Thanks to one of our anonymous reviewers for asking this question.

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