

Interlocking Symbols as Transcultural Visual Theology: Buddhist and Islamic Adaptations

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Abstract. Interlocking symbols, characterised by geometric precision and semantic richness, functioned as transcultural mediators of theological meaning in Buddhist and Islamic visual cultures between the 2nd century BCE and 14th century CE. This study examines how morphologically similar motifs—such as the Buddhist Baoxianghua (precious floral rosette) and Islamic seven-circle interlacing—acquired divergent religious significances while retaining structural coherence. Adopting a dynamic semiotic framework, it argues that these symbols were not passively transmitted but actively recontextualised across material and doctrinal boundaries. Case studies include Tang Dynasty reliquaries (Buddhism) and Liao Dynasty ceramics (Islam), demonstrating their role as mobile visual symbols. The research challenges static paradigms of symbolic transmission, highlighting instead adaptive processes of hybridisation and reinterpretation. Findings reveal a shared visual grammar that articulated core theological concepts—saṃsāra, tawḥīd, and sacramental unity—through recursive geometries, bridging cultural and cosmological divides.

Keywords: Interlocking symbols, translation zone, religious symbols

1. Introduction

Geometrically precise yet semantically rich, interlocking symbols occupy a significant position within the religious visual cultures of East and Central Asia, particularly between the Han and Yuan dynasties (206 BCE–1368 CE). Comprising repeated circles, loops, and polygonal configurations, these motifs appear across Buddhist and Islamic material traditions (see Figure 1). Their recurrence suggests a shared visual grammar capable of articulating divergent cosmological, doctrinal, and metaphysical concepts through structured and recursive forms.

This thesis investigates how morphologically similar interlocking symbols operate as theological mediators across cultural and religious boundaries. Specifically, it explores how ring-based geometries embody distinct religious meanings: saṃsāra (cyclical rebirth) in Mahāyāna (Great Vehicle) Buddhism and tawḥīd (divine indivisibility) in Islam. Rather than focusing on material determinism, the study adopts a semiotic and morphological framework to examine how form communicates belief—how visual logic becomes a vehicle for cosmology.

A central research question underpins this investigation: How do interlocking symbols acquire and adapt religious meanings across Buddhist and Islamic traditions, and what enables their semantic resilience over time, across regions, and in various ritual contexts?

This inquiry adopts a dynamic analytical framework. While religious ornamentation has been widely studied, much of the scholarship remains anchored in static, unidirectional models of transmission, particularly in the case of interlocking motifs. Existing studies tend to trace these symbols from a singular cultural origin to their points of reception, often overlooking the nuances of cross-cultural adaptation and exchange. In contrast, this thesis foregrounds transformation over provenance. It investigates how interlocking symbols are not merely transmitted but actively recontextualised, hybridised, and reinterpreted within diverse religious and material environments, thereby functioning as mobile carriers of theological meaning.

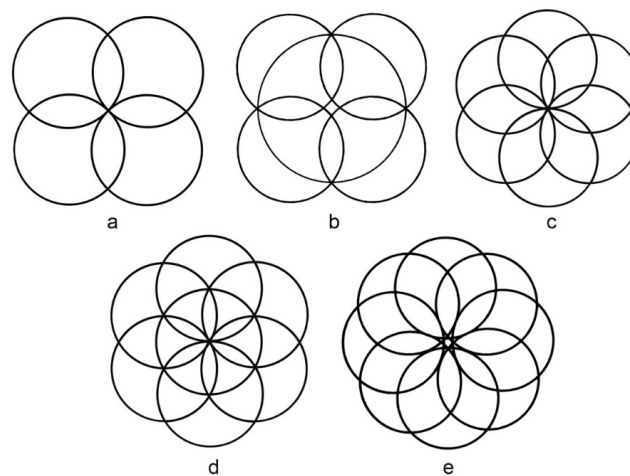


Figure 1. This diagram illustrates five core configurations of interlocking motifs based on circular geometry. Diagrams are created by the author

These variants of interlocking symbols are exemplified in Figure 1, from diagrams (a) through (b). At the forefront, diagram (a) features four interlocking circles arranged in a cruciform pattern, establishing a foundational compositional logic. Building upon this schema, diagram (b) introduces a central circle, forming a five-fold structure. Diagram (c) presents six radially arrayed circles forming a rosette, potentially derived from, or parallel to, the seven-ring interlace prevalent in Chinese folk visual culture. Nevertheless, diagram (d) depicts a seven-circle configuration encircling a central hexagon, a form closely associated with Islamic religious traditions. In Islamic art, interlocking circles generate recursive geometries that visually articulate *tawhīd* (divine unity), translating theological abstraction into symmetrical expansiveness [1]. These intricate designs encourage contemplative interaction, translating abstract theological principles into visually meditative ornamentation. In Buddhist mandalas, similar forms articulate the metaphysics of dependent origination and the path to enlightenment, as illustrated in diagram (e). The stylised lotus, composed of eight interlocking circles, closely aligns with Buddhist cosmology, mandala structure, and the configuration of the Eightfold Path, all centred around the axis of the *dharmadhātu* (the realm of ultimate reality) [2, 3]. This form eventually evolved into the *Baoxianghua* motif in East Asian Buddhist art.

Drawing on Lotman's theory of semiotic translation [4], this study examines how interlocking symbols transmit and accrue divergent theological meanings across distinct religious contexts. Analysing artefacts from the 5th to 15th century CE, it argues that these symbols function as a

transcultural visual lexicon, transmitting meaning across doctrinal, spatial, and temporal boundaries while retaining their structural coherence.

2. Research context – static vs. dynamic paradigms

Recent interdisciplinary scholarship in art history, archaeology, and semiotics has substantially enriched our understanding of interlocking motifs. Frequently found in Buddhist and Islamic material cultures, these motifs function as a semantically rich carrier of theological and ideological meaning. Their persistence across divergent traditions has prompted scholars to adopt one of two interpretative models: the static paradigm, which foregrounds fixed origins and unidirectional transmission, and the dynamic model, which emphasises the adaptive transformations these motifs undergo across cultural and religious contexts.

The static paradigm conceives religious symbols as doctrinally fixed and transmitted along linear trajectories. Fu [5], for example, interprets the interlocking ring as a stable visual correlate of Islamic monotheism, presuming semantic continuity across time and space. However, such readings risk overlooking the interpretive shifts and formal reconfigurations that occur when motifs are transposed into new religious and material contexts. By neglecting the contingency and adaptability of symbolic forms, this framework ultimately constrains a more nuanced understanding of their cross-cultural dynamism.

In contrast, recent scholarship has increasingly advanced a dynamic interpretative model, which considers symbolic meaning as inherently polysemic and contextually contingent. As exemplified by Cronbach and Pöder [6], religious symbols are conceptualised as mutable entities that circulate within dynamic cultural translation zones [7]. Within these zones, motifs such as the interlocking ring operate less as static signifiers than as adaptable visual lexicons—capable of encoding multiple theological frameworks while maintaining structural recognisability. This notion of translational elasticity provides a critical conceptual foundation for the analysis that follows.

Alongside discussions of symbolic mobility, increasing scholarly attention has turned to the cognitive and ideological dimensions embedded in geometric motifs. Characterised by symmetry, rhythm, and repetition, such motifs have been examined for their resonance with ritual practices, cosmological order, and metaphysical abstraction. Nasser's [8] authoritative study on Islamic architecture interprets geometric configurations as visual theology—materialising concepts such as *tawhīd*. Extending these insights beyond religious settings, Angeli [9] examines Neolithic Greek ceramics, suggesting that geometric motifs serve as cognitive metaphors and repositories of collective memory derived from perceptual experience rather than formal doctrine. Together, these underlying factors clarify the enduring translatability of interlocking motifs.

Nevertheless, critical voices, such as Piluso [10] and Bagley [11], urge caution against overgeneralising geometric symbolism. Bagley distinguishes between decorative and deliberately symbolic motifs, while Piluso underscores the importance of ritual performance and repetitive enactment in sustaining symbolic significance. Despite their critiques, both scholars affirm that geometric motifs—especially interlocking forms—remain deeply embedded in religious and ideological expression.

In sum, contemporary scholarship has shifted decisively from a static, origin-focused framework towards a dynamic model of symbolic translation. Interlocking motifs, once confined to doctrinal specificity, are now understood as mobile, structurally resilient forms that adapt across religious and cultural ecologies. This dynamic perspective underscores their function as transcultural visual languages—entities that simultaneously accommodate variation and sustain theological resonance.

3. Material analysis

This study employs the dynamic analytical framework. Drawing on semiotic theory, cognitive archaeology, and material culture analysis, it considers how these motifs operate as potent symbolic mediators within complex religious and ideological frameworks.

3.1. Interlocking symbols in Buddhist material culture

The interlocking lotus motif—the Baoxianghua, is here understood as a key variant of the interlocking symbol (see Figure 2). Such realisation is achieved through its recursive geometry and circular symmetry, serving as material articulations of Mahāyāna Buddhist cosmology. Rooted in muddy waters yet blooming with immaculate clarity, the interlocking lotus symbol metaphorically expresses the Mahāyāna ideal that all sentient beings possess the latent capacity to transcend delusion and realise Buddha nature [12].

This interlocking Baoxianghua symbol recurs consistently throughout the archaeological corpus of the Famen Temple in Shaanxi Province. These forms coalesce into a visual cosmology of interdependence, articulated through recursive and circular composition (see Figure 2a-c)—formal strategies that mirror Mahāyāna Buddhist doctrines, such as *pratītyasamutpāda* (dependent origination) and *śūnyatā* (emptiness). As Bose [13] notes, “the self reflects all other selves, and all other selves reflect the self,” underscoring a metaphysical worldview grounded in ontological reciprocity. This symbolic implication is further intensified by Famen Temple’s unique status as a ritual and political epicentre of Tang imperial Buddhism, functioning as a mediating nexus between the sacred and the sovereign [14].

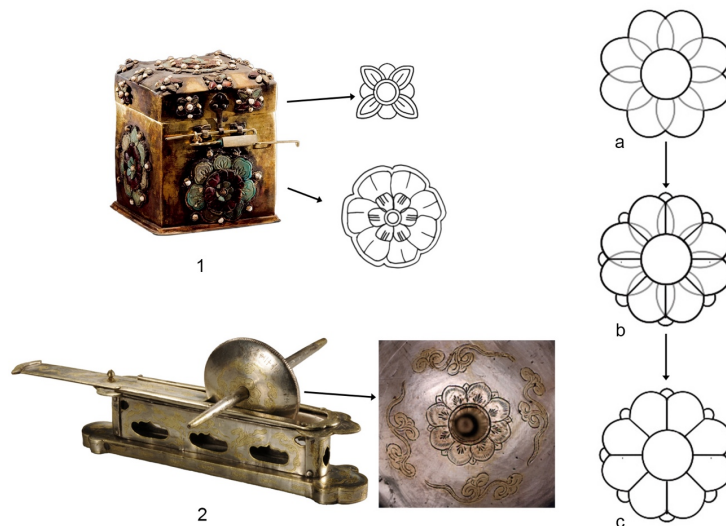


Figure 2. This diagram traces the morphological development of the Baoxianghua—a sacred floral motif prominent in Mahāyāna Buddhist material culture—from an interlocking schema of eight overlapping circles (a) into increasingly stylised forms (b–c), characterised by axial symmetry and layered petal articulation. Diagrams are created by the author

Among the most significant finds in Famen Temple were an eighth-level nested gold reliquary and a gilt-silver ceremonial tea grinder, both densely adorned with interlocking Baoxianghua. The sixth tier of the reliquary displays concentric gem-studded medallions of rubies, emeralds, and pearls set in gold filigree [15]. Its *luding* (hip-roof lid) is topped with stylised sea-hibiscus forms and

centred on a circular interlocking rosette, surrounded by four axial and four diagonal roundels—producing an eightfold radiative schema. Concurrently, a distinct configuration of six- and seven-lobed motifs is arranged across the main body. Such configurations visualise mandala logic: a microcosmic universe with a central axis and symmetrical emanation. In Vajrayāna (Diamond Vehicle) iconography, mandalas frequently depict a central Buddha encircled by eight deities, symbolising the radiant expansion of enlightened consciousness [16, 17]. Here, the interlocking motif does more than ornament—it materialises the metaphysical structure of universal interconnectivity and causality.

This interlocking geometry is accentuated in the ceremonial tea grinder, whose lid surface features twenty Baoxianghua arranged in concentric rings. These floral motifs are enclosed by interlocking scrolls and framed by kunmen (recessed niche portals), architectural thresholds that denote the transition between the profane and sacred. Though initially intended for elite domestic use, the grinder was later consecrated at Famen Temple [18]. In this altered context, its visual logic assumed theological potency, functioning as a cosmogram that aligned the emperor's earthly governance with the celestial order of the Dharma (cosmic law) [19]. Hence, such artefacts were not passive objects but diagrammatic instruments: mediatory devices that synchronised ontological beliefs with performative rituals.

Within the ritual economy of the underground palace, such interlocking symbols functioned simultaneously as devotional emblems and instruments of imperial legitimacy. They asserted the emperor's position as a cosmic mediator and inscribed Buddhist soteriology into state ideology [15, 20]. The interlocking symbol thus emerges as a hybrid medium, both a theological mechanism and a sovereign signifier.

Comparable cases are also evident in the Mogao Caves at Dunhuang, presenting distinct yet harmoniously integrated forms of interlocking visuality. Specifically, Cave 79 [21] and the silk canopy from Cave 17 [22] (Figure 3) exemplify this intricate schema within their domed ceilings. Given Dunhuang's historical significance as a pivotal nexus along the Silk Road, these motifs likely integrated and synthesised diverse visual idioms, incorporating mandalic diagrams derived from early Indian Buddhist cosmology, Sogdian vegetal scroll patterns, Persian arabesques, and Daoist cloud band motifs [23, 24, 25]. These interlocking patterns served as portable theological instruments that embodied a tripartite symbolic logic—validating sovereign authority, delineating ritual spatial frameworks, and consecrating mortuary architectures.

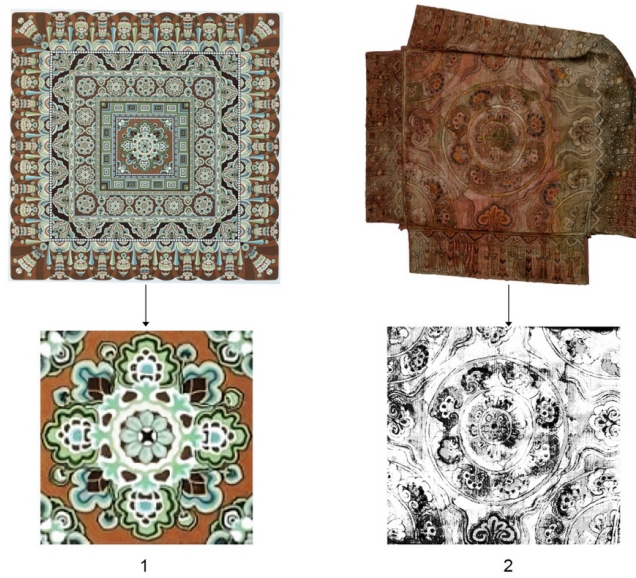


Figure 3. Interlocking lotus motif from Dunhuang, structurally analogous to figure 2c

3.2. Interlocking symbols in Islamic material culture

Interlocking symbols in Islamic material culture establish a profound visual dialogue between geometry, abstraction, and theology. Though structurally comparable to interlocking forms in Buddhist traditions, their conceptual foundations are distinctly Islamic. Rooted in the doctrine of *tawhīd*—the absolute unity of God—and the Qur’anic account of creation in six days, Islamic interlace patterns visualise the emergence of multiplicity from divine singularity [1, 26]. Whether inscribed on tomb ceramics, integrated into mosque architecture, or featured in illuminated manuscripts, these motifs serve as visual theologies, translating metaphysical tenets into highly ordered, symmetrical compositions that participate in broader transcultural exchanges.

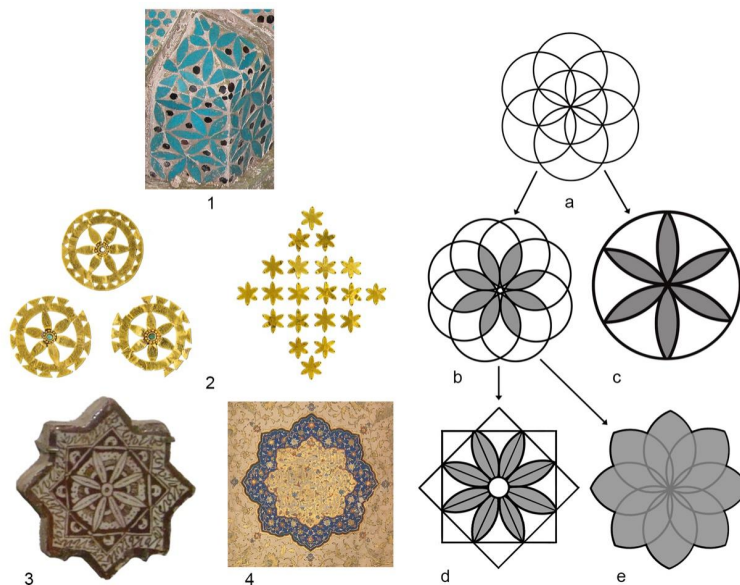


Figure 4. The translation and evolution of the Islamic interlocking symbol across various materials.
Diagrams are created by the author

3.2.1. Visualising divine order across media

Figure 4 illustrates the morphological evolution of the seven-circle interlocking motif through diagrams (a–e) sourced from materials (1–5). Diagram (a) delineates a foundational geometric structure integral to Islamic design traditions. By introducing an additional circle, diagram (b) generates an eight-petal radial schema that underlies the Palma pattern (d), as realised in the star-shaped tile (3) [27]. Furthermore, diagram (c) abstracts the central overlapping area from diagram (a), yielding a six-pointed petal motif that is prominently manifested in the glazed ceramic mihrab (1) [28] and gold circular floral ornaments (2) [29]. Extending this evolutionary trajectory, diagram (e) extracts and develops an outer-layer floral interlace pattern from diagram (b), echoing the radial motif evident in the Qur'an manuscript commissioned by Ibrahim Sultan (4) [30].

Across diverse media, Islamic interlocking patterns articulate a coherent cosmological vision: the boundless proliferation of creation from a central, unified source. Like Buddhist visual systems, Islamic geometry relies on symmetry, modular repetition, and limitless expansion. A notable example is the 13th-century glazed ceramic mihrab of the Aslanhane Mosque in Ankara (see Figure 4.1), composed of a central ring encircled by six evenly spaced circles (see Figure 4a), which directly references the six-day creation narrative and the unifying principle of *tawhīd* [5]. Executed in turquoise and white glazed tiles, such an interlocking design operates as a contemplative diagram of divine order [31].

Nevertheless, this geometric logic also extends to portable artefacts from Central Asia. As demonstrated by a series of circular floral ornaments (25–50 CE) in the Hidden Treasures from the National Museum of Afghanistan exhibition (Figure 4.2) [5, 29, 32]. In which the interlocking pattern serves as the foundation for these materials. These configurations consist of a central circle encircled by multiple equidistant rings, forming a latent hexagon that underlies the entire composition. This structural matrix, though often obscured by surface ornamentation, aligns with the geometric foundations of Islamic tiling systems [33]. Even when visually concealed, the interlocking design encodes theological principles: unity through multiplicity and abstraction as a pathway to divine intelligibility [32]. In this way, geometry transcends mere decorative form, functioning as a sacred visual architecture grounded in metaphysical order.

Extending the transmission of geometric paradigms, interlocking motifs in Islamic visual culture demonstrate continual evolution in both form and structure. By joining the midpoints of a regular hexagon's edges, two interlaced equilateral triangles produce a hexagram, referred to as the *khatam* (seal of Solomon or signet) [32]. Traditionally associated with the Ring of Solomon, believed to summon djinn, this emblem, when tessellated, generates intricate visual fields. Therefore, hexagons and interlocking stars alternate in reflective symmetry. Such geometric logic underpins the design of 14th-century Kashan fritware tiles (see Figure 4.3), which integrate *girih* (Islamic strapwork patterns), *kufic* (Arabic calligraphy), and interlocking palmette motifs within octagonal frames [27].

Likewise, the 1427 Qur'an of Ibrahim Sultan features interlocking gold and lapis medallions to delineate textual divisions, illustrating how geometric logic structures not only architectural space but also the sacred act of navigating scripture (see Figure 4.4) [30, 34]. Despite their material variance, such artefacts articulate a shared theological architecture, wherein the central ring or star motif symbolises divine unity while evolving fluidly across media and contexts [35]. In this sense, interlocking geometries function as metaphysical diagrams, transforming visual repetition into instruments of contemplation, devotional focus, and doctrinal transmission.

3.2.2. Transcultural transmission and localisation in China

The formal coherence of Islamic interlocking motifs enabled their dynamic transmission across cultural boundaries, particularly along Central and East Asian exchange networks. This adaptability is especially evident in ceramic artefacts excavated from Liao dynasty tombs, such as a sancai (three-colour) glazed basin from Inner Mongolia [36] and a white-glazed polychrome bowl, likely produced at the Nanshan Kiln [37]. Both objects feature prominently carved interlocking ring patterns on their interior bases, exemplifying the visual integration of Islamic geometric principles into Chinese funerary material culture (see Figure 5). This motif is formally analogous to the design in Figure 4a, illustrating the adaptation of Islamic geometric logic within the aesthetic vocabulary of Chinese ceramics.



Figure 5. Examples of interlocking motifs observed in ceramic ware from the Liao dynasty

These configurations, grounded in hexagonal logic, mirror the structural principles of classical Islamic interlacing, attesting to both the visual resilience and trans-material adaptability of the motif across cultural boundaries [5, 38]. Embedded within tomb interiors, these patterns simultaneously participate in Chinese ritual aesthetics and echo Islamic visual theology. Their interlocking geometric precision and spatial rhythm evoke the formal austerity of Islamic sacred ornamentation. Simultaneously, their cosmological placement within mortuary architecture suggests ritual functions aligned with Chinese metaphysical concerns—spiritual purification, the harmonisation of yin and yang, and celestial protection [5].

These artefacts should not be understood as passive instances of artistic diffusion but as dynamic sites of transcultural reconfiguration, wherein Islamic interlocking symbols were semantically reactivated within local religious and philosophical systems. As such, they exemplify what Lotman defines as translation zones—semiotic environments where visual forms traverse cultural frontiers while generating new symbolic meanings [7]. Hence, these interlocking symbols are best understood as evolving semiotic entities that are transformed through intercultural contact while retaining their metaphysical core.

4. Conclusion

This study adopts a dynamic analytical perspective to examine how interlocking symbols are articulated across Buddhist and Islamic visual cultures (see Table 1). By tracing their formal evolution and theological transformation, the research demonstrates that these motifs are not

confined to fixed religious systems but emerge as adaptable symbolic structures that mediate between metaphysical doctrines and material expression.

Table 1. Comparative framework of interlocking symbols

Religion	Formal Logic	Theological Meaning	Material Medium	Core Spatial Context
Buddhism	Radial symmetry	Pratītyasamutpāda (dependent origination), saṃsāra (cyclical rebirth)	Gilded metalwork, silk textiles	Stūpas, reliquaries, cave temples
Islam	Six-fold interlace grid	Tawḥīd (divine unity), six-day cosmogenesis	Glazed ceramics, architectural surfaces	Mosques, tomb complexes

Across Buddhist and Islamic traditions, interlocking symbols reveal a shared visual logic that transcends cultural, religious, and material boundaries. Despite their distinct theological foundations, these motifs consistently serve as mediators between abstract cosmological models and material cultural practices. Whether visualising Buddhist notions of dependent origination or Islamic doctrines of divine unity and cosmic expansion, interlocking forms translate metaphysical worldviews into structured, repeatable, and embodied visual systems. Such adaptability demonstrates their formal resilience and capacity to absorb diverse cosmological frameworks without losing their essential logic of symmetry, repetition, and infinite extension.

Rather than passive ornamentation, interlocking motifs perform active semiotic labour. They materialise theological principles through compositional repetition, rendering cosmological thought perceptible across a spectrum of media—liturgical, funerary, architectural, and devotional. Their persistence across sacred and secular domains illustrates not only formal resilience but also conceptual versatility. These motifs articulate both universal metaphysical ideals and localised cultural identities.

In doing so, this thesis proposes a new interpretive pathway: a trans-religious geometry of theology. By foregrounding the interlocking symbol as a cross-faith visual grammar, the study offers a conceptual framework for integrating semiotic analysis with cognitive approaches to belief. This trans-religious perspective offers a foundation for future research into shared symbolic grammars across belief systems and their role in shaping religious cognition, visual epistemology, and transcultural sacred aesthetics.

5. Discussion

As Lotman [4] notes, symbols operating within the universe of culture participate in “different mechanisms of the single intellectual life of humanity.” Interlocking motifs exemplify this principle through their remarkable cross-religious adaptability, manifesting across media, epochs, and theological systems. This adaptability is vividly illustrated by two case studies spanning over a millennium: the sixth-century Yicihui Shizhu (Yicihui Stone Pillar) [39, 40] and the Ming dynasty Shihong Pan Taoduo Hua Songjin (Persimmon-Red Song Dynasty Brocade with Interlocking Floral Medallions) [41].

Each material embodies layered visual vocabularies shaped by transcultural intersections. As shown in Figure 6.1, the interlocking seven-circle motif carved into the Yicihui Stone Pillar exemplifies the geometric synthesis of Sogdian, Islamic and Buddhist traditions. In contrast, the brocade detail from the Shihong Pan Taoduo Hua Songjin textile reveals Buddhist interlocking lotus motifs integrated with Daoist iconographic structures (Figure 6.2). The accompanying diagrams in Figure 6a–d illustrate the recontextualisation of Daoist pattern forms in relation to the Baoxianghua

pattern: (a) guibei (turtle-shell hexagrams), (b) fangsheng (square-knot configurations), (c) guqian (ancient coin emblems), and (d) suozi (interlocking lock patterns) [42].



Figure 6. The cross-cultural translation of the interlocking symbol, demonstrated through the Stone Pillar and textile brocade

Nonetheless, interlocking motifs extend to various religions as exemplified by late medieval Christianity (c. 1300–1500 CE). In their recursive, modular geometries—manifested in floral and circular interlace designs (see Figure 7)—they resonate with the compositional logic of Buddhist mandalas and Islamic girih patterns. This process of visual translation is exemplified by the evolved interlocking geometry in a pre-1521 embroidered textile from Albrecht Dürer’s workshop (Figure 7a–b) [43], as well as the symmetrical quatrefoil structure of a Eucharistic paten dating to c. 1230–1250 (Figure 7c) [44]. Such interlacements are imbued with Christian metaphysical symbolism, particularly the doctrine of unity-in-plurality (the Trinity) and the aspiration toward divine perfection [45, 46].

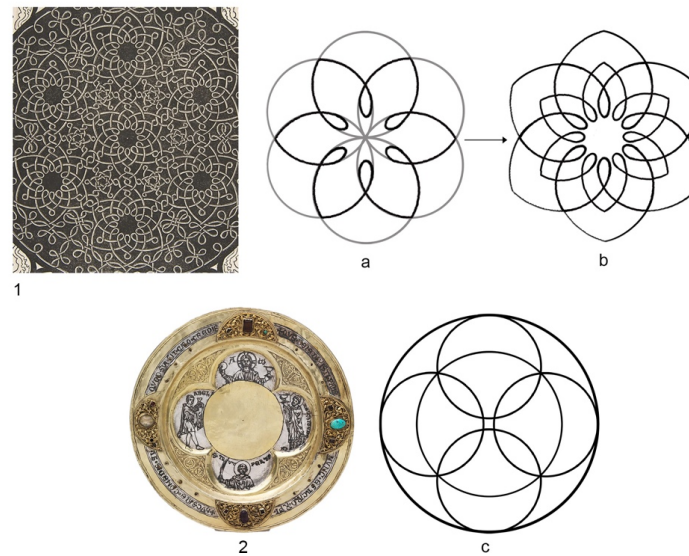


Figure 7. Interlocking patterns identified in Christian material culture. Diagram created by the author

As Angeli [9] suggests, this adaptation process reflects a form of semantic layering in which spiritual meaning is sustained through formal continuity, even as ritual function and cultural context shift. In these cases, interlocking motifs act not merely as aesthetic embellishments but as dynamic carriers of metaphysical and political meaning. Their geometries engage what Lotman defines as translation zones—semiotic spaces where forms traverse cultural frontiers while generating new symbolic potential [4]. Interlocking patterns thus operate within a transcultural visual-linguistic system: structurally recognisable yet semantically fluid.

Ultimately, their resilience lies in this semiotic elasticity. Whether carved in stone, woven into textiles, or printed on paper, interlocking motifs bind form to belief and cosmology to material practice. They enact a visual theology grounded in repetition, symmetry, and spatial coherence yet remain adaptable to diverse doctrinal systems and ritual functions.

While this study has focused on elite institutional contexts, such as imperial commissions, monastic artefacts, and courtly ritual objects, it necessarily leaves vernacular traditions underexplored. Practices rooted in Chinese folk religion and Daoist popular culture warrant closer attention. Future research should extend to community-based ritual materials: paper talismans, incense burners, temple wall images, spirit tablets, and cut-paper ornaments. Attending to these media would enrich our understanding of how visual metaphors for cosmic unity permeated beyond elite cosmopolitan spheres into the everyday devotional lives of ordinary practitioners. By tracing how sacred geometry circulated among diverse communities, we may begin to chart a more comprehensive and pluralistic cosmography of transcultural belief.

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