

The Transmission and Transformation of the Bhavachakra ("Wheel of Life") Imagery in China

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Abstract. This paper examines the transmission and transformation of the Bhavachakra ("Wheel of Life") imagery in China, tracing its evolution from Indian origins to distinct regional adaptations. Through case studies of the Yulin Caves, Dazu Rock Carvings, Tibetan thangkas, and the Alzhai Grottoes, the analysis reveals two primary trajectories: the faithful preservation of doctrinal and iconographic integrity along the Hexi Corridor, and the creative, localized reinterpretation in regions such as Inner Mongolia, where the motif was adapted to express political and cultural narratives. The study highlights how the Bhavachakra served not only as a vehicle for Buddhist teachings but also as a dynamic medium for cross-cultural dialogue, reflecting processes of assimilation, adaptation, and symbolic reinvention within Chinese visual and religious traditions.

Keywords: Bhavachakra, buddhist art, cultural transmission, iconographic adaptation

1. Introduction

Bhavachakra Imagery is a special symbol in Buddhism, the distant Buddhist teachings have been converted into pictorial stories that are easily available and educative to the people [1]. There is a direction of its growth and development. Today we still find the Bhavachakra represented in the numerous thangkas of Tibet which are everywhere used in China, and whose imagery has had a vital growth, as well as in the Han Buddhist temples and in the grottoes which litter the land. In this case, we learn narrative and symbolic variants of the Bhavachakra motif, which is usually reformulated using a second-order artistic work [2]. This imagery cannot and has not been trans-regionally present, exerting same influence, and developing in Asia, without its long evolutionary history [3,4]. It is not just a religious artifact, but rather an evolving cultural aspect, which has been continuously developing, changing, borrowing as well as redefining [5].

Bhavachakra image combines the philosophical ideas and teachings of Buddhism. In the broad cosmology and context of Buddhism, the idea of rebirth is used as a holistic explanation to the faithful people to understand the character of existence [6]. The effective introducing of this abstract philosophical principle in Asia can be greatly attributed to the creation and second or even third building of its depictions in art. The Bhavachakra also known as the Wheel of Life or Wheel of Existence (in Chinese Buddhism called the Wheel of Five Realms of Rebirth, Wheel of Five Paths, Wheel of Existence and Diagram of Twelve Links of Dependent Origination) [7].

This paper tries to create a comprehensive system of the rebirth theme analysis in the context of the indigenous development of history, its derivative works, and the original interpretations [8]. Before making an adequate analysis, we must first examine carefully the forms of these images possessed in China, and the present day social and religious context. Presently, these illustrations have been found in the Arzhai Grottoes in Inner Mongolia [9], The Dazu Rock Carvings in Chongqing [10] and the Yulin Grottoes in Anxi County (Figure 1). A distinctive image of particular character and diversity of style, these are specimens of the eastward passage of the Bhavachakra imagery. In addition, Buddhist Jataka stories are often illustrated with backdrops in the background about reincarnation. These stories are depicted as animal fables and as stories in the human world, which examine the theme of Buddhism like rebirth, karma and retribution. Murals and sculptures have also been found in the Mogao Caves of Dunhuang, Gansu Province, and the Kizil Thousand Buddha Caves in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region, this is mostly in the form of murals and sculptures.

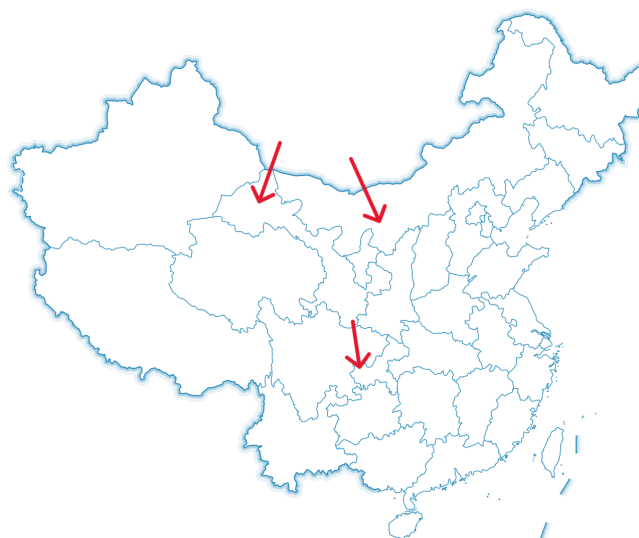


Figure 1. The location of Dazu, Alzhai, Yulin

2. Indian origin of Bhavachakra imagery

As the motherland of Buddhism, India is the most vital element of research before analyzing the development of the Bhavachakra image in China [11]. The evolution of this imagery took place during some four centuries here, and the lines of development consisted in the progressive elaboration of the simplest groupings of individual histories into a complete statement of the Bhavachakra motif [12]. This line of development could be traced in the sculptures of Buddha in his former lives at Balaram and the unfinished but complete series of murals on the rebirth in the Ajanta Caves. It appeared in a growing cultured religious background, where the emphasis was no longer on the fruit of rebirth (the individual pieces of life in the cycle), but the cause of rebirth (the entire pattern of rebirth).

Indian Buddhist art is outstanding in expressing the doctrine symbolically and in story form. The first visual artistic reference to the doctrine of Bhavachakra can be seen in the reliefs of Bharhut (c. 2nd century BCE, citation) and the Great Stupa of Sanchi (c. 1st century BCE -c. 1st century CE, citation). In this case we do not have the detailed Bhavachakra charts of later times, but a focused representation of a collection of so-called jataka stories. The jataka stories in the stupa describe the past lives of the Buddha as a bodhisattva when he underwent a myriad of lives as a king, a deer, an

elephant, and others (associated with the various levels of samsara) to earn merit. Similar themes are shown on the continuous scenes on the eastern gate of the Great Stupa at Sangi including the Jataka of the Six-Tusked Elephant and the Jataka of the great monkey (Figure 2). This technique of juxtaposition of stories of life forms of various worlds of Bhavachakra: human, animal, and celestial, in a single pictorial space is one of the first, most immediate visual reflections of the sense of Bhavachakra. The Jataka tales are regarded as the first endeavor to convert the time reincarnation into the space art [13]. These images show to the devotees the variety of forms of life in the vast web of Bhavachakra, and the decisive influence the moral actions (karma) may have in utmost range through a variety of different illustrate examples of karma and its karma outcome. They are full of Indian symbolism of the antique: the compositions are crowded with lots of characters, figures and fauna are depicted in bold simplicity, the characters are defined through characteristic features, and the stories are impressively told.



Figure 2. The figure of Jātaka of the Six-Tusked Elephant' and the 'Jātaka of the Great Monkey

Following the Bharhut Stupa, the Ajanta Caves (c. 2nd century BCE -5th century CE) were carved, and introduced the first Bhavachakra imagery. They are the oldest known artistic expression of this theme in the world and the only known surviving cave complex in India containing artwork of the Bhavachakra (Figure 3). The Ajanta complex is located between a shape of a horse in a rock

face in Maharashtra, and it houses twenty-nine sequentially carved cave faces. The building is integrated to combine with the environment, representing the shift between the profane and the divine. There not only are the Jataka tales (as in Cave 10 Buddha and the Six-Tusked Elephant story or Cave 17 Buddha and the Biography of Buddha) and the life stories of Buddha (as in Cave 1 strains of set of three images), but the first representation of the Bhavachakra in Indian history (with three images assembled together). It is the earliest attempt to abstractly, in a macro-summarized way, to visualize the Bhavachakra, an important Buddhist concept, in ancient India.



Figure 3. The Bhacachakra image in Ajanta Caves

Even though the Six realms of Bhavachakra Diagram of Ajanta does not in any way bear the high level of standardization of Tibetan Buddhism, it, however, holds the seeds of the key explorations. According to the analysis by Zhang and Liang, a diagram of Bhavachakra was based on the Vinaya texts of the Sarvastivada school translated by Yijing, which are considered the central point in their work. The basic necessities of such a diagram can be perceived in the 34th volume of the Pali Vinaya Pitaka: large and small circular wheels, the images of the five realms, the hungry ghosts, and animal beings are located in a lateral position, whereas the heavenly beings and humans are located in the upper areas. The composition is supposed to have the symbolization of the four continents, and the three Buddha figures in the centre of the wheel representing greed, hatred and delusion. It must have pictures of Bhavachakra and the outer rim must have pictures of the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination.

Cave 17 At Ajanta Wheel diagram, The murals of Cave 17 have a high correspondence in the areas that can be distinguished [14,15]. This mural is really ruined, only the part where the human world is located (human birth) in the upper left part is left. More importantly, in the fragments which can be discerned, these collections are grouped in a huge wheel gripped by a huge demon, as they appear in various scenes. The horizontal and vertical lines partition the wheel diagram into four parts, all visible human realm is located in the upper left half of the diagram- all of which are the essential parts of the cycle of existence diagram.

In Ajanta: Paintings and Sculptures Spink notes: The Ajanta artists imply that all the forms of life are found within an enormous, interconnected system of rebirth through the inclusion of narrative scenes in an interconnected visual space [16].

This transition of telling personal stories of reincarnation to implying the whole of the Bhavachakra is one of the most important stages in the development of the reincarnation imagery. The erythrine of pictorial development above which this movement proceeds is a very fertile soil of religion. Bhavachakra was not the property of Buddhism only, but rather of the older Indian tradition

of the ascetics, and was continually refined in correspondence and rivalry with Jainism and Brahmanism (precursors of Hinduism).

At the back of this course of pictorial development is a very rich fertile soil of religious thinking. The idea of Bhavachakra was not Buddhist, but an ancient Indian ascetic one that continued to evolve by means of dialog and competition with Jainism and Brahmanism (the forerunner of Hinduism) [17].

The peculiar contribution of Buddhism was that it had removed the Brahmanical divinely predeterminedness of the Bhavachakra in favor of a strict philosophical framework, based on the dependent origination. This transformation has a same developmental rationale like transformation of the diagram cycle of existence of the scattered jataka scenes into the strict Five Realms of Bhavachakra. This radical underlining of dependant origination- of the causes and effect relationships of phenomena was actually what drove the artistic form beyond the loose narrative collections into more formal, strict schematics [18]. Simple representations of creatures in various worlds would not be able to represent their logic any more, and as such, the Bhavachakra diagram was born. The Bhavachakra diagram which had reached its mature form by the late Gupta period (c. 4th6th centuries CE) was the one based on the design of the Wheel of life with Yama gripping the wheel, and approached the form we know nowadays. That visual system became more than a simple visual amalgamation of stories to a strict philosophical system, integrating cosmology, ethics and liberation theory into a single system [19]. It later became the model on which Buddhist art in other parts of the world like Tibet and Central Asia was developed [20].

After following the Indian roots of the Bhavachakra, now dwell on the two major changes that occurred to this iconographic motif when it was introduced into China. The former can be considered a tradition of conserving the original form of the design such in the case of the Yulin Caves, the Dazu Rock Carvings and subsequent thangka pictures, which retained relatively intact iconographic features and articulate doctrine. The second is the artistic adaptations with the usage of historical figures, such as the Six Realms of Bhavachakra of Genghis Khan in the A'erqie Caves. This illustrates great localizations of the foreign imagery in the native historical and cultural settings. Comparing these two followings, we can examine the ambivalent development of the Bhavachakra in China, the faithful transplantation and the creative transformation.

3. The faithful transplantation of the Bhavachakra

The major path was the Hexi Corridor part (or Gansu Corridor, a series of oases laid along the whole of Gansu which make a portion of the Northern Silk Road) of the Silk Road without going deep into the mainland of the Han national consciousness in the selections that have been made in this research [21]. The most notable feature of this path was its preference of faithfully communicating the visual design and fundamental dogmas of Bhavachakra prototype in Hinduism.

3.1. Yulin caves of Anxi

There is, first, the Yulin Caves of Anxi or the Valley of Ten Thousand Buddha in Guazhou County (formerly Anxi County) in the Jiuquan City, Gansu Province. Their reconstruction date has not been documented but the cave structure and the materials that are found indicate that no later than during the Northern Wei period they were excavated. Comparable to the cave architecture, mural composition, thematic sculptural representations, art form, the Yulin Caves are heavily reminiscent of the famous Mogao Caves of Dunhuang, Gansu Province- a prime of the Chinese cave art. As a result, they could be considered as an important division of the Mogao art culture [22]. What is

discussed in this section is a painting of the Six Realms of Bhavachakra that was portrayed in Cave 19 and was created in the period of Five Dynasties [23]. This mural is the only known work in the entire body of the Dunhuang cave art to use the Bhavachakra as its visual form of explaining the fundamental doctrine of Buddhism itself the Twelve Links of Dependent Origination (Figure 4). It is the oldest surviving one ever found in China, and its composition is the closest in any way to its Indian prototypes.



Figure 4. The Bhavachakra in Yulin Cave

This mural is located in the south wall of the first passage of the front of the cave. The exposure to the natural elements is extended, the pigments are badly faded and peeled off as a result of extended exposure to the sun, rains and wind-widened sand erosion and most of the image cannot be identified. It deteriorates with historical damages that are the effectiveness of man carving and the collapse of the structure at the western part of the cave, which has made its preservation state highly worrisome [24]. Anxi played a central role on the Silk Road during the period of Five Dynasties. In contrast to the situation in the Central Plains where turmoil ensued, The Hexi region was relatively stable thus allowing the Buddhist artistic patterns to be carried on. Bhavachakra of this cave is found on the south wall of front passage way. Its location is reminiscent of Ajanta Caves 17 in India, where the Wheel of Life is located at the entrance. This is to remind the practitioners of the samsara nature where only after facing the truth of such a reality can one access the pure land of the Buddha (the main chamber in the cave) in order to seek liberation [25]. Entire cycle motive is evident in the pattern without paying attention to the damaged area in the southeast which is distinctly close to the recognizable portions in Ajanta.

The composition is in a strict accordance of the features of the Bhavachakra diagram. The variations against the original Indian version include differences in the method of painting as well as depiction of heaven and the man world including the Han-style robes with wide sleeves and minor Sinicised differences in the clothing that are used by the officials of the heaven (Figure 5) [26]. The Bhavachakra at Yulin Grottoes can be seen as the standardised form of the Indian iconography paradigms finding their way into China. It shows that at the early periods of transmission, the main task of monks and painters was to properly and visually articulate the complicated background of the Buddhist philosophical systems, and the localization in the smallest of details was a second issue.

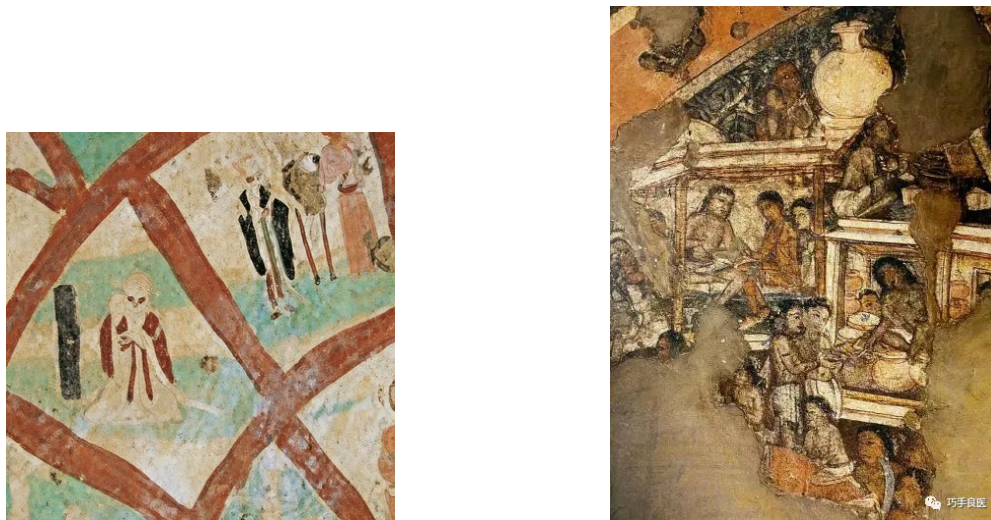


Figure 5. The detailed comparison between the two Bhavachakra diagrams

3.2. Dazu Rock carvings

The same can be seen also in the Dazu Rock carvings of Chongqing. These carvings are found on the Baoding mountain in Dazu District, Chongqing and can be traced to the Southern Song Dynasty (12 th -13 th centuries) [27]. The Bhavachakra relief (Figure 6) of the Cave 20 in the Baoding Mountain is the largest and most storytelling Bhavachakra representation in Chinese cave paintings, and it is a part of the "Vast Treasure Pavilion". Probably the only remaining poly-chrome carvings in China are the Dazu reliefs of the Six Realms of Bhavachakra, which clearly illustrate Buddhist reincarnation. They are a perfect culmination of religious and artistic expression, and in the popularization of the idea of karmic retribution. Overland Silk Road trade would reduce slowly during its construction because of the disturbance in the northwest. However, Buddhism, which has absorbed Confucian and Taoist philosophies in other areas such as Sichuan, had created new focal point of worship.



Figure 6. The Bhavachakra in Dazu, Chongqing

In the Bhavachakra in Dazu, although still retaining the underlying paradigm, the elements are greatly Sinicised and systematised: Yama, the Lord of Impermanence holding the wheel, has been slightly gentrified out of his Indian shape into the terrifying Lord of Death, and now looks more like a giant expounding the Dharma. At the same time, Bhavachakra is surrounded by verses of sutra content that is philosophically dense including the sutra verses: Within the wheel of the three realms, myriad forms arise, all due to the karma of desire and attachment. It is this combination of imagery and classical Chinese texts that stress didactic and educative purposes [26]. The Dazu cycle is not a solitary image of the Bhavachakra like any depiction of it. It exists alongside other significant narrative collections, such as the 'Three Saints of the Flower Garland Sutra,' the versions of the Parental Kindness Sutra, and the Hell Variations, to create a great Buddhist cosmology and system of Buddhist existential narratives. The Bhavachakra explains the cycle of life and how the life cycle works, where other parts of it explicitly demonstrate the karmic effects of good and bad action in the life cycle and, thus, makes its doctrines more practical. Not just is the Bhavachakra at the Dazu Rock Carvings the earliest and the most severe expression of the wheel motif it is also the indication of its adult expression in the context of the Han culture: it starts adapting Chinese ethical principles and aesthetic systems.

3.3. The Bhavachakra depicted in thangka paintings

In addition to cave temples, murals and sculptures, the subsequent descriptions of the Bhavachakra in thangkas, which survived until modern times, are regulated by rigid scriptures in terms of metrical character. This has made it develop in thangka art to become defined in its exact format and explicit doctrinal content [27]. Beginning around the 10th century, as different schools emerged and developed in Tibetan Buddhism, thangkas, the portable religious relic in the form of the Bhavachakra, laid down the graphic essence of the Bhavachakra, and spread throughout the entire Qinghai-Tibet Plateau in northwest China (and the imperial court in Mongol-Yuan) [28]. The Bhavachakra often extends the descriptions of the Six Realms to the Six Paths, with much more standard pictorial format, of Tibetan Buddhism. The right hand side of the picture also has the common image of a Buddha or Bodhisattva who is the way to freedom (Figure 7). .



Figure 7. Bhavachakra imagery in thangkas

The Bhavachakra of the thangkas is the highest symbol of the main motif of the lineage itself, of India. Without modifying the traditional rules of iconography, it reduces the changes and additional meanings of the transmitted text as much as possible and thus preserves purity of doctrine. It is a paradigm of cross-regional dissemination of iconographic preservation.

4. The "creative transformation" of the Bhavachakra

Running parallel and sharply contrasting with the main line of transmission is another, more creative variant. The archetypical example would be the "Six Realms of Bhavachakra of Genghis Khan" of cave 31 in the Alzhai Grottoes of Inner Mongolia, showing the way the Bhavachakra was so artfully used in order to promote a certain political and historical program.

The Alzhai Caves (or the Hundred-Eyed Kiln) are located in Alzhai Caves, the Ordos City, Inner Mongolia. Cave 31 Bhavachakra mural is a mural that was painted in the Yuan or Northern Yuan dynasty (13th-14th century or later) the content of the mural bearing no relation to classical iconography, such as the Yulin Caves. By then, the Mongol Empire had been instituted and Tibetan Buddhism (the Sakya) had become the state religion and it started diffusing among the elite of the Mongols. The Alzhai Caves are located on the deepest territory of Mongols and were described in folk lore as where Genghis Khan recovered after injury and thus have acquired a good spiritual and political and ethnic significance to the people of Mongol-Yuan. Old forms of Bhavachakra in the caves were revolutionized. Since its early structural design, it lost what the Bhavachakra originally represented; a large demon holding a disc-shaped wheel in hand, and assumed a more vertical tiered design which resembled more of a stupa (Figure 8). This grid-shaped compositional scheme is very unique in the Alzhai Cave murals, and the content mixtures with the aspects of the Mongolian primitive religious ideological thinking, Mongolian society, customs, and the scenery of the grassland, considering the local features of the Buddhist doctrine of the Six Realms, as per the Mongolian culture (Figure 8).



Figure 8. The creative style of Bhavachakra imagery

The first such image of the Bhavachakra in China is this grid-patterned image. The hierarchy positions the six realms of existence (and which is supposed to be circular) in a downward sequence starting with heaven, followed by humans, to livestock, etc [29]. In addition, its composition is not fully based on the traditions of the original Bhavachakra. Not only the portrayal of birth and death, the personification of greed, hatred, and delusion, is not accepted, but also the illustration of massive demons operating the wheel. Rather, these aspects are substituted by sequences clearly based on the Mongolian life [30].

It not only includes some unique instances of Mongolian warfare, but also such aspects like sky burial (the ritualistic act of letting the vultures eat the dead), as well as Mongolian robes, which undoubtedly contain the traces of Mongolian shamanism. In addition to that there has been an artistic layer seventh in the original six realms which represent Genghis Khan as a celestial deity. This replacement is highly politics and religious.

The current opinion is based on the assumption that, though this diagram adheres to the six realms of the Bhavachakra, it is more narrative in nature and that the figures are located in the heavenly realm most probably just commissioned as a cult of personality burial diagram used by the personal heavenly kingdom of Genghis Khan.

The reincarnation scheme at Alzhai was the first scheme to abandon the central principles of disseminating the original doctrine of the Bhavachakra into the alternative of simply producing the wheel diagram to not only serve the worship of local devotees towards Genghis Khan himself, but it also resulted in the fusion and the articulation of native shamanism as well as Buddhism [31]. This is definitely a successful localized production of the Buddhist art to fit the political course of the Mongol rulers. An example of the Alzhai Caves proves that Bhavachakra during its development in the Chinese context was no longer a strict symbol. Once inserted into a powerful local cultural

landscape, it may become a compound cultural icon that has a political, historical and ethnic memory.

The differences at the Alzhai Caves and the primary source of transmission at the Yulin Caves and the Dazu Stone Carvings obviously indicate the essential difference between the evolution of the Bhavachakra in the western parts of China (the Western Regions-Hexi Corridor-Tibet) and the Central Plains-Northern Grasslands:

The western China was mainly used as a cultural conduit. In this case, the development was focused on the development of the interpretation of the doctrine and the incorporation of the visual language (in the case with the Dazu Stone Carvings), or the development of the ritual use (in the case with thangkas). Its force of motivation was using internal religious developments and dissemination needs.

The northern steppes, typified by the Alzhai Caves, on the contrary were more subversive and utilitarian in their creative variations. Where the Bhavachakra was introduced to cultures having strong local monarchies or historic ancestor venerations, imagery was vigorously and imaginatively borrowed and reorganized to serve socio-political purposes other than simply religious interests, including the divinification of royalty and the formation of ethnic oneness.

5. Discussion

The development of the Bhavacakra icon can be traced back to the models of Ajanta, which were advanced by the Sinicised elements of the Dazu Rock Carvings, the perfected spread of the Bhavacakra icon within the Thangka art and eventually succeeded by the variations of the icon within the Arxai Caves. This lineage over the millennia is a clear indicator of the individual process of development of the Bhavacakra propagation in China. This direction not only shows the observance of the wheel imagery to the main dogmatic principles in the cross-cultural transmission but also demonstrates its active process of significant interaction with regional cultures in China. The Hexi Corridor Yulin Caves were the first attempts at replacing the wheel motif with its Indian background with the Sinicization. These murals conspicuous at a very important crossroads of the Silk Road still shared the basic design of Indian Bhavacakra representations but displayed an early Sinicized trait of colour usage and some ornamentation. This conservative accommodation was the beginning of the Sinicization of the Bhavacakra imagery, which preconditioned further, much more drastic, localised development. As one develops toward the cultural realm of the Central Plains the Bhavacakra image in the Dazu Stone Carvings has more noticeable aspects of Sinicised attributes. The artists of the Song Dynasty cleverly blended Indian Buddhist samsara with the local religious beliefs and put abstract ideas of karma in tangible moral admonitions. This transformation was not just followed in the aspects of change in pictorial elements but was more evident in the creative integration of the Buddhist thought with the conventional Chinese ethical considerations. In the Tibetan Buddhist culture, thangka painting was devoted to the retention of the formal and doctrinal integrity of Bhavacakra. With the strict adherence to the metric scriptures, thangka painters added certain religious meaning to all details of the Bhavacakra, making it a highly sophisticated diagram with didactic and spiritual guidance purposes. Such an unchanged preservation of the original form is another effective example of a culture spread. The Artistic variation of the Bhavacakra motif in the Alzhai Caves is an interesting form of localized evolution. The ability of the Bhavacakra motif to be beyond mere adaptability and vitality itself is strongly illustrated by this combination of ideas of Buddhist rebirth with the native worship of ancestors accompanied by a shift in the original meaning of the imagery.

By juxtaposing these two histories of development, we shall be able well to realize that the metamorphosis of the Bhavacakra image in China was not only a process of cultural reception, but a process of cultural re-creation as well. Losing its central features with every spatial shift and change of time, the Bhavacakra imagery made a self-adaptation on the roads of the Hexi Corridor to the Central Plains, of Tibetan monasteries to the Mongolian steppes. This was not a compromise or a mutation but a visual museum of the great dialogue between the Buddhist thought and the various ethnic cultures all through China as seen in the Bhavacakra imagery. This iconic representation faithfully supported the main principles of Buddhism cyclical life and at the same time was flexible enough to absorb the new aspects of the culture and preserve its resonance throughout the different historical periods.

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