

An Analytical Study of the Form and Decorative Motifs of the Baoqieyin Pagoda from the Perspective of the Mount Sumeru Spatial Paradigm

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Abstract: The Baoqieyin Pagoda (Hōkyōintō in Japanese), a distinctive type within the Buddhist stupa tradition, uniquely combines rich cultural symbolism with architectural innovation. Its origin and development reflect the dynamic processes of cultural synthesis and localization that accompanied the dissemination of Buddhism into East Asia. While scholarly research on the Baoqieyin Pagoda has expanded in recent years, its significance within Buddhist cosmology, particularly its connection to spatial conceptions, remains underexplored. This study investigates relevant Buddhist scriptures to demonstrate a profound relationship between the Baoqieyin Pagoda and the Mount Sumeru spatial paradigm. Through a detailed examination of surviving Chinese examples, the paper further analyzes how the imagery associated with Mount Sumeru is intricately embedded in the structure and decorative patterns of the Baoqieyin Pagoda.

Keywords: Baoqieyin Pagoda; Decorative Motifs; Mount Sumeru Spatial Paradigm; Design Concept

1. Overview of the Baoqieyin Pagoda

1.1 Evolution of the Terminology of the Baoqieyin Pagoda

The Baoqieyin Pagoda is a distinctive type of Buddhist pagoda, originally designed to enshrine the *Sutra of the Whole-body Relic Treasure-chest Seal of the Heart-secret of the Tathagatas*. Before this precise term came into use, the pagoda was referred to by various names in historical texts, reflecting a long process of terminological ambiguity and confusion. Firstly, it was commonly called the Śāriṃra Pagoda, a broad term used for any pagoda housing relics or sacred scriptures. However,

this label is too general, encompassing numerous styles and forms and thus lacking specificity. Secondly, the term Ashoka Pagoda became widespread, linking these towers to the legendary Indian emperor Ashoka, who was traditionally credited with building 84,000 stupas. Yet, historical evidence shows Ashoka's influence never reached East Asia, and existing so-called Ashoka Pagodas in China bear little resemblance to Mauryan stupas. This name was largely a retrospective attribution aimed at imbuing the pagodas with ancient prestige. As a result, "Ashoka Pagoda" referred to various pagoda types and was not exclusive to what we now recognize as the Baoqieyin Pagoda [1]. Thirdly, the designation Jintu Pagoda (gold-lacquered pagoda) emerged during the Five Dynasties period with the pagoda built by Qian Hongchu, King of Wuyue, and is documented in the *Jiatai Kuaiji Zhi* (*Jiatai Gazetteer of Kuaiji*, a Southern Song gazetteer) as well as in poems by Jiang Kui and Zhou Wenpu. This term specifically describes small pagodas made from metals such as bronze, iron, or silver, often gilded on the exterior. However, "Jintu Pagoda" describes material and craftsmanship rather than architectural form, thereby excluding the large brick-and-stone ground-based Baoqieyin Pagoda structures.

The term "Baoqieyin Pagoda" itself, which precisely identifies a square, single-story pagoda topped with a hemispherical bowl and decorated with mountain flower and banana leaf motifs, appeared comparatively late in history. From the Kamakura period onward, such pagodas flourished in Japan with a unified nomenclature, and the term "Baoqieyin Pagoda" gradually reentered Chinese scholarship during the late Qing and early Republican era. It was first clearly recorded in the 1919 *Great Dictionary of Buddhism* compiled by Ding Fubao. The name "Baoqieyin Pagoda" is grounded in two main reasons: its shape resembles a sutra storage box,

and its primary religious function is to enshrine the *Baoqieyin Sutra*. Compared to the overly broad “Śarīra Pagoda”, the historically inaccurate “Ashoka Pagoda”, and the materially focused “Jintu Pagoda”, the term “Baoqieyin Pagoda” accurately and unambiguously defines both the form and sacred purpose of this pagoda type. Alternate terms like “Baoqieyin Sutra Pagoda” or “Baoqieyin-style Pagoda” share this specific meaning and are used interchangeably in modern scholarship [2].

1.2 Current Distribution of Surviving Baoqieyin Pagoda

The extant stone Baoqieyin Pagoda are predominantly and densely concentrated within Fujian Province, with their numbers radiating both northward and southward from the epicenter of Quanzhou. As the foremost eastern maritime hub during the Song and Yuan dynasties, Quanzhou alone boasts 29 surviving towers [3], accounting for over sixty percent of the nation’s total. These are predominantly clustered within districts such as Jinjiang, Luojiang, and Licheng. Notable examples among these relics include the Candraprabha Bodhisattva Tower (Moonlight Bodhisattva Tower) on Luoyang Bridge and the two Song Dynasty towers at Kaiyuan Temple. The majority of these pagodas are strategically situated adjacent to rivers, seas, bridges, and harbors, underscoring their intrinsic connection to maritime commerce and trade. Beyond Fujian, surviving Baoqieyin Pagoda are exceedingly rare and generally represent isolated instances of cultural transmission. The Prince’s Tower on Putuo Mountain in Zhejiang, erected during the Yuan Dynasty, serves as a testament to the Buddhist exchanges along the maritime routes between Fujian and Zhejiang. Similarly, the Four Great Continents Towers at Kaiyuan Temple in Chaozhou, Guangdong, dating to the Northern Song Dynasty, reflect the religious and artistic interactions between Lingnan and southern Fujian. The relic tower in Changsha, Hunan, although styled as a Sui Dynasty pagoda, is in fact a reconstruction from the Republic era, bearing only the name of the ancient tower it replaces. The sporadic and isolated nature of these towers beyond Fujian further reinforces the province’s pivotal role in the origination and propagation of the Baoqieyin Pagoda tradition.

2. Form and Historical Periodization of the

Baoqieyin Pagoda

2.1 Northern and Southern Dynasties: Emergence of Iconography

The structural origins of the Baoqieyin Pagoda can be traced back to the ancient Indian early stupas, with the Great Stupa at Sanchi serving as a quintessential exemplar. Its fundamental architectural features—including a square pedestal base, a dome-shaped (garbha) body, and crowning elements such as the finial and decorative motifs of mountain flowers and banana leaves—embody the primordial symbolism intrinsic to Indian Buddhist stupas. This pagoda form entered China long before its specific appellation was established. By the era of the Northern and Southern Dynasties, this architectural motif had already become prevalent within Buddhist art. Notable instances include the relief carving of a dome-shaped pagoda in Cave 14 at the Yungang Grottoes (Figure 1), and the small shrine-like niches adorning the body of the tower at Songyue Temple in Dengfeng, Henan (Figure 2). Both exemplify the distinctive combination of a square, single-tier base topped by a hemispherical dome and embellished with mountain flower and banana leaf patterns [4].

2.2 Northern Song Dynasty: Definitive Establishment of the Form

The Northern Song Dynasty marked a crucial period in solidifying the architectural form of the stone Baoqieyin Pagoda. During this era, these pagodas proliferated particularly across the central and southern coastal regions of Fujian, evolving into monumental structures characterized by a stable and coherent design. A prominent example is the Candraprabha Bodhisattva Tower on Luoyang Bridge, constructed no later than 1059 CE (the fourth year of the Jiayou reign). Thanks to its limited restorations, this tower retains a high degree of historical authenticity. From the very outset of the Northern Song, the Baoqieyin Pagoda displayed a complete and mature formal composition with distinctive foreign stylistic influences. Its architectural elements are arranged hierarchically from the bottom upward: beginning with the platform foundation, followed by the sumeru pedestal, the base altar, the main body of the pagoda, then the decorative mountain flower and banana leaf motifs, and culminating in the finial at the apex. This well-defined structure and ornamental scheme

established during the Northern Song laid the fundamental framework for the later evolution of the Baoqieyin Pagoda form.



Figure 1. The Dome-Shaped Pagoda in Cave 14 of the Yungang Grottoes (Image Source: Chang Mengting, Characteristics and Evolution of Stupa Forms in Yungang Grottoes; Jin Shen, The Ashoka Pagoda Built by the King of Wuyue)

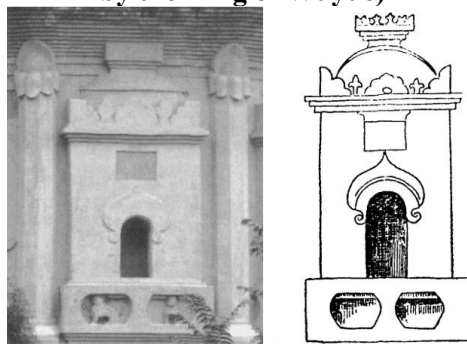


Figure 2. Small Shrines Carved on the Body of the Tower at Songyue Temple (Image source: Xu Yongli, Tower within a Tower: An In-depth Study of Songyue Temple's Pagoda Form; Jin Shen, The Ashoka Pagoda Built by the King of Wuyue)

2.3 Southern Song Dynasty: Transition towards Secularization and Localization

During the Southern Song period, the stone Baoqieyin Pagoda underwent a significant transformation characterized by both regional adaptation and increasing secularization. Although the overall architectural form largely continued the traditions established in the Northern Song, the decorative details became deeply infused with local artistic styles and lay religious beliefs, reflecting the burgeoning economic and cultural vitality of southern China. In terms of form, the pagoda's carvings became markedly more restrained. Instead of being densely adorned with intricate patterns, each face of the tower typically featured a single recessed niche housing a sculpted Buddha or

Bodhisattva figure, while earlier iconographies, such as the Garuda, gradually vanished. The subject matter of the carvings also shifted from elaborate narrative scenes drawn from Buddhist scriptures to more singular representations of Buddhas or Bodhisattvas, as exemplified by towers like the Panhu and Tangyuan Pagodas. Modifications were also evident in the base structures. Some monuments, like the Panhu Pagoda, adopted a concise design composed of nine tiers of stacked stone blocks, whereas others, such as the Tianzhong Wanshou Pagoda, incorporated a more complex arrangement by adding an extra sumeru pedestal beneath the main base. Additionally, ornamental motifs formerly adorning the sumeru pedestal's waist—such as lions clutching embroidered balls—were frequently replaced by inscribed steles documenting the construction process, dates, or benefactors' names. This evolution reveals a gradual shift in function—from purely religious symbolism toward serving as commemorative vessels for devotees' merit-making and expressions of faith.

2.4 Ming and Qing Dynasties: Functional Transformation

During the Ming and Qing periods, the development of stone Baoqieyin Pagoda distinctly reflected a shift in function. As Buddhism's overall influence waned, the original religious significance of these pagodas gradually faded. The construction of new large-scale stone towers sharply declined, and their designs became increasingly simplified and standardized, with a marked reduction in the sophistication and expressiveness of their carvings. Although sporadic examples continued to appear across various regions, the core purpose of these structures largely transformed. No longer serving primarily as Buddhist reliquaries, they were repurposed as feng shui towers, literary honorific monuments (*wenfengta*), or funerary towers, evolving into cultural landmarks within local communities sought for invoking scholarly success, warding off malevolent forces, and protecting the spiritual harmony of the environment.

3. The Spatial Paradigm of Mount Sumeru

The spatial paradigm of Mount Sumeru lies at the very heart of Buddhist cosmology. Its conceptual framework originated over two millennia ago within the ancient Vedic

civilization of India and was subsequently assimilated and adapted by a variety of religious traditions including Brahmanism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Hinduism, each shaping it into their distinctive mythological systems. The earliest widespread textual references to Mount Sumeru appear in Buddhist scriptures with the emergence of the *Āgama Sūtras* around the first century BCE; thereafter, the concept disseminated throughout China, Japan, and Southeast Asia via the spread of Buddhism [5]. The name “Sumeru” derives from the Sanskrit term “Sumeru”, also rendered as “Miaogao Mount”, “Sumi-xū”, “Sumi-lú Mount”, or “Milou Mount”, signifying a “treasure mountain” or “exalted luminous mountain”. Within the cosmological schema of the Mount Sumeru world, the mountain itself towers to a height of eighty-four thousand yojanas and occupies the cosmic center (Figure 3). Encircling it are eight great mountains arranged concentrically, with Mount Sumeru as the highest peak; each of the eight mountains diminishes progressively by half in elevation, and each pair is separated by vast expanses of sea—hence the designation “Nine Mountains and Eight Seas.” Beyond them lies the outermost salty ocean, within which are distributed the Four Great Continents and the Eight Intermediate Continents.

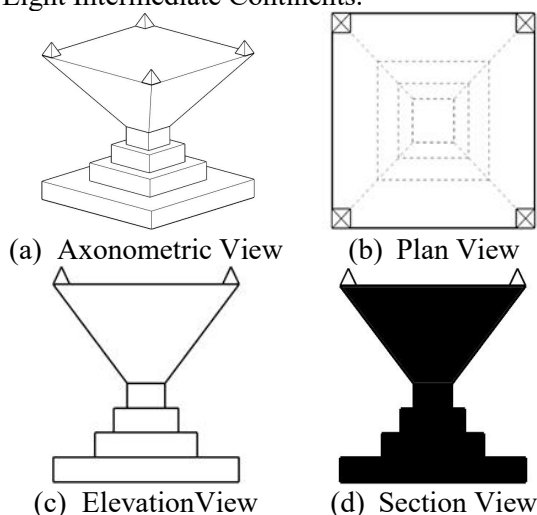


Figure 3. Graphical Representation of the Mount Sumeru Massif (Drawn by the Author)

4. The Expression of Mount Sumeru Spatial Imagery in the Baoqieyin Pagoda

4.1 The Pedestal: Symbolism of the Mount Sumeru Massif

The pedestal of the Baoqieyin Pagoda, serving

as the vertical compositional starting point and spatial foundation of the entire pagoda, constitutes one of the principal visual carriers for the transmutation of the Mount Sumeru spatial paradigm. Existing Baoqieyin Pagoda pedestals predominantly comprise two segments: the platform base and the Sumeru pedestal. The platform base frequently employs the technique of horizontally and vertically stacked stone slabs, gradually receding inward with each ascending tier. This method not only fortifies the structural stability but also cultivates an impression of towering slenderness. Regarding the tower base, the Sumeru pedestal motif prevails widely, manifesting as single, double, or even triple stacked layers. Prior to the Tang Dynasty, pagoda bases tended to be low-profile and minimally adorned, exuding a plain and austere aesthetic. However, from the Tang period onwards, the pedestal’s significance intensified progressively, evolving into an indispensable component of the pagoda’s overall structure, accompanied by a steady increase in height. Concurrently, the Sumeru pedestal style gained widespread popularity. A conventional Sumeru pedestal comprises detailed elements such as stacked moldings, waist moldings, beam bands, and bracket-like forms. The constricted waist molding notably recesses inward, thereby mirroring the narrowed midsection of the mythical Mount Sumeru itself (Figure 4). By the Northern and Southern Song dynasties, pagoda foundations frequently adopted the Sumeru pedestal schema, with dual-layered Sumeru pedestals becoming commonplace—the Baoqieyin Pagoda serving as a quintessential example. Craftsmen ingeniously combined multiple layered Sumeru pedestals in repetitive sequences to amplify the pagoda’s formal expressiveness. Moreover, as time progressed, the number of stacked Sumeru pedestal layers tended to increase, reflecting a growing complexity in spatial and symbolic articulation.

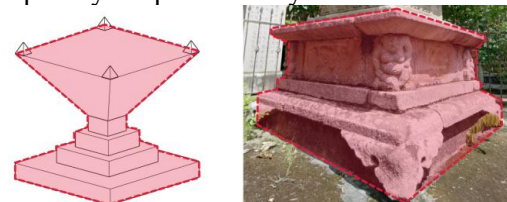


Figure 4. Symbolic Correspondence between the Waist Molding of the Sumeru Pedestal in the Baoqieyin Pagoda and the Contoured Silhouette of Mount Sumeru (Drawn by the Author)

Within the spatial paradigm of Mount Sumeru, the Four Great Heavenly Kings are positioned along the midsection of the mountain, tasked with guarding the Buddhas atop the summit and protecting the Dharma. As described in the Buddhist scriptures: “To the east of Mount Sumeru, at a distance of forty thousand li, lies the city of the Heavenly King Dhritarashtra, known as the Seat of the Wise Sovereign. To the west, forty thousand li away, is the city of Virupaksha, vast and expansive, measuring twenty-four thousand li in breadth. To the south, at the same distance, stands the city of the Heavenly King Virudhaka, named Good Vision. The cities of the Four Heavenly Kings, Mount Sumeru, its groves and gardens, and the wondrous ponds. To the north, likewise at forty thousand li, is the city of the Heavenly King Vaishravana, encompassing three cities each twenty-four thousand li in length: the first is called Sama, the second Pakara, and the third Anipana.”

In the Baoqieyin Pagoda, sculptures of these guardian kings or warrior figures (Lokapalas and Dvarapalas) are meticulously carved at the Sumeru pedestal’s recessed waist band [6]. Notable examples include the Ashoka Tower at Luoyang Bridge, the Xi’an Bridge Tower of Fantian Chan Temple, The Taiping Tower in Xianyou, Putian, and the Wanshou Tower in Tianzhong (Figure 5).



Figure 5. Sculptural Depictions of Guardian Deities on the Sumeru Pedestal Waist Moldings of Baoqieyin Pagoda (Photographed by the Author)

Additionally, an inscription on a stone stele beside the Tangyuan Tower references four warrior statues supporting the base of the stone tower, although it remains unclear whether these sculptures were lost due to restoration or erosion, as none have been recently observed. These guardian and warrior figures are often depicted either crouching or kneeling, with their hands or shoulders raised in a supportive posture. By incorporating such sculptures, the Baoqieyin Pagoda reinforces the symbolic spatial imagery

of Mount Sumeru, manifesting the protective presence of the celestial kings at the tower’s architectural waist band (Figure 6).

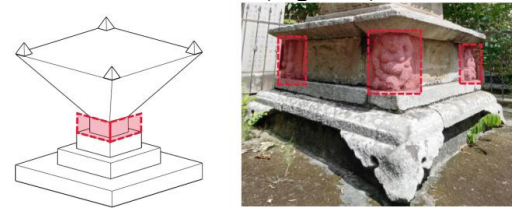


Figure 6. Iconographic Correspondence between Lokapalas, Dvarapalas on the Sumeru Pedestal Waist Moldings, and the Cosmology of Mount Sumeru in Baoqieyin Pagoda (Drawn by the Author)

The nine mountains and eight seas motif adorning the base of the Prabhutaratna Pagoda on Mount Putuo represents a particularly vivid and tangible manifestation of the Mount Sumeru spatial paradigm. Also known as the Prince’s Pagoda, this edifice was erected in the second year of the Yuantong era (1334) during the Yuan Dynasty and stands as one of the largest extant Prabhutaratna-style stone pagodas from that period. Rising to an approximate height of eighteen meters, the tower comprises three principal components: a two-tiered granite platform base, a three-tiered pagoda body made of Taihu stone, and the finial crowning the structure. The three-tiered body of the pagoda emerges centrally from the apex of the uppermost platform tier [7]. The four walls of the base employ a horizontally stratified compositional scheme featuring three successive bands of intricate carvings: the tumultuous flowing waves below, auspicious ruyi clouds in the middle, and a series of nine overlapping mountain ranges above (Figure 7). These iconographic elements correspond precisely to the “nine mountains and eight seas” cosmological configuration encircling Mount Sumeru as detailed in Buddhist scriptures. The lowest tier’s wave patterns, formed by continuously curling lines, evoke the churning waters of the salt sea; the intermediary cloud motifs function as a spatial transitional element bridging the watery realm and the mountainous domain; and the uppermost nine mountain ridges, symmetrically arrayed, symbolize the nine surrounding mountain chains enveloping Mount Sumeru. Collectively, these carvings visually articulate the hierarchical cosmos centered on Mount Sumeru within Buddhist worldview. This vertically tiered decorative schema transforms the abstract Mount Sumeru spatial paradigm into

an engaging and perceptible ornamental narrative. Atop the granite platform's corners stand sculpted effigies of the Four Heavenly Kings (Figure 8), representing the protective deities stationed at the periphery of Mount

Sumeru's realm. Together with the nine mountains and eight seas motifs, these sculptures coalesce into a comprehensive embodiment of the Mount Sumeru cosmological structure.



Figure 7. The Nine Mountains and Eight Seas Pattern on the Base of the Prabhutaratna Pagoda on Mount Putuo (Photographed by the Author)



Figure 8. The Four Heavenly Kings Statues at the Base of the Prabhutaratna Pagoda on Mount Putuo (Photographed by the Author)

4.2 The Pagoda Body: A Symbol of the Heavenly Palace atop Mount Sumeru

The square form and intricate carvings adorning the shaft of the Baoqieyin Pagoda are imbued with profound and multifaceted symbolic connotations intimately linked to Mount Sumeru, arising from the confluence of functional requisites and a rich emblematic system. The pagoda's cuboid structure initially served as a reliquary box designed to enshrine the *Baoqieyin Dharani Sutra*. Yet, within the symbolic lexicon of Buddhist architecture, the square body transcends its role as a mere sutra container, instead alluding to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven perched atop Mount Sumeru. The Śakra (Indra) deity resides in the city of Śakrodaya, depicted in Buddhist scriptural and iconographic traditions as a quadrangular, majestic palace with gates on all four sides. Thus, the pagoda's square footprint and its fourfold façade spatially embody the heavenly palace's order—centered authority upheld by guardians on every side. The sculptural themes carved on the four faces of the pagoda further cement and enrich this connection to the Mount Sumeru cosmology. Each side typically portrays episodes from the Jātaka tales, chronicling the Buddha

Shakyamuni's virtuous deeds and ascetic practices in his previous lives as a bodhisattva, such as enduring great hardships, practicing patience, and offering self-sacrifice. The earliest extant Baoqieyin Pagoda from the Northern Song Dynasty commonly features a fixed sequence of Jātaka narratives on the four aspects of the tower body [8] (Figures 9 and 10). Historical textual evidence for this iconographic program appears in the Record of Great Monk Tang Dahe's Eastern Expedition (779 CE), which recounts that the Baoqieyin Pagoda at Maoshan bore reliefs depicting, on four sides respectively, the episode of Prince Sadāttaputra, the Eye-Abandoning episode, the Brain-Emerging episode, and the Dove-Rescue episode. According to the *Kṣitigarbha Bodhisattva's Original Vow Sutra*, Shakyamuni ascended to the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven to preach to his mother, and the Jātaka narratives encapsulate his manifold past lives devoted to the Bodhisattva Path. Consequently, the pagoda's sculpted body functions as a celestial pavilion, symbolizing the Buddha's heavenly abode from which he expounds the Dharma.

The corners of the Baoqieyin Pagoda's pagoda body are customarily adorned with carvings of Garuda, also known as the Golden-Winged Great Roc—a formidable mythical bird from Indian lore renowned for its fierce temperament. According to the *Encyclopedia of Buddhist Studies* under the entry "Golden-Winged Bird": "Also called the Wonderful Winged Bird, known in Sanskrit as Garuda, Suvarna, Kārura, among other names. It ranks among the Eight Legions (Aṣṭa-Mahābhūta), bearing golden-hued wings hence its epithet. Its wingspan extends

three million six hundred thousand li, dwelling at the lower strata of Mount Sumeru, habitually preying on dragons [9].” There also exists the Garuda King, regarded as the supreme among Garudas and often used as an allegory for the Buddha. The *Ekottara Agama* describes: “This bird daily consumes one great dragon king and five hundred lesser dragons, traversing the four continents continuously in cyclical succession.” Within Mahayana scriptures, Garuda is enumerated among the Eight Great Legions alongside devas, dragons, and asuras, collectively attending the Buddha’s preaching assemblies. In esoteric Buddhism, Garuda manifests as the incarnation or emanation of deities such as Brahma, Vishnu, and Maheshvara, or is sometimes identified with Manjushri, residing in the southern direction of the Vajra division outside the Womb Realm Mandala. Garuda performs dual roles: as a dharma protector and as a vanquisher of aquatic calamities. By carving the Garuda figure at the projecting four corners of the pagoda’s body—positions symbolizing their geographical abode around Mount Sumeru—this decorative motif accentuates their celestial guardianship, safeguarding the heavenly palace gates from malevolent forces (Figure 11).



Figure 11. Sculptural Depiction of Garudas at Four Corners of Baoqieyin Pagoda Bodies (Photographed by the Author)

4.3 Mountain Flowers and Banana Leaves: The Symbolism of the Four Peaks atop Mount Sumeru

Mountain flowers and banana leaves are characteristic architectural elements of the Baoqieyin Pagoda, also known as ma’er (“horse’s ears”), typically situated at the four corners of the deyu (the roof canopy). These elements are shaped like triangular prisms, slightly inclined outward. Each has four faces: one inserted into the deyu, two facing outward, and one facing inward. The outward-facing sides often bear carvings illustrating the Jātaka tales, while some are decorated with honeysuckle or arabesque patterns, and a few remain unadorned. The inward-facing side usually remains plain, though occasionally it features a seated Buddha figure.

The design of these mountain flowers and banana leaves traces its origin to the decorative corner brackets found on the harmika—a square railing atop ancient Indian stupas. In the Baoqieyin Pagoda, these elements are significantly enlarged and refined into four grand, upward-curving leaf-like structures that crown the pagoda’s square body at its four corners. This evolution is closely linked to Buddhist scriptural descriptions of Mount Sumeru’s summit. The *Abhidharmakosha (Treasure Chamber of the Abhidharma)* (Volume 11) clearly states: “The magnificent summit extends eighty thousand li and is home to the Thirty-Three Heavens. At its four corners rise four peaks, the abode of Vajrapāṇi, the protector of the Buddha’s teachings [10].” This passage reveals that the summit of Mount Sumeru is not a flat plateau but features four distinct peaks, each housing the guardian deity Vajrapāṇi. The four mountain flower and banana leaf motifs on the Baoqieyin Pagoda faithfully represent these peaks: their number, positioning at the four corners, and their outward-and-upward inclination symbolically reproduce Mount Sumeru’s sacred summit. Visually, they mark the boundary and highest



Figure 9. The Carved Stone Body of the Baoqieyin Pagoda at Chaozhou Kaiyuan Temple (Photographed by the Author)



Figure 10. Intricate Carvings Adorning the Body of the Baoqieyin Pagoda at Fantian Chan Temple (Photographed by the Author)

points of the mountain's heavenly domain, creating a transition from the pagoda's main bodied structure—symbolizing the celestial palace—to even loftier cosmic heights (Figure 12).

Furthermore, Vajrapāṇi, the powerful protector deity of Mount Sumeru, is often depicted sculpturally atop these leaf-like forms, marrying the spatial symbolism with the deity's guardianship role. For example, several stone pagodas from the Sui Dynasty display clear carvings of Vajrapāṇi wielding his vajra atop the banana leaves, making tangible the scriptural notion of the four sacred peaks and their divine occupants (Figure 13).

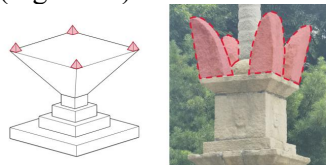


Figure 12. The Correspondence between Mountain Flowers and Banana Leaves and Mount Sumeru's Four Peaks



Figure 13. Carved Representations of Vajrapāṇi on the Mountain Flower and Banana Leaf Motifs (Photographed by the Author)

Moreover, the extant carvings adorning the mountain flowers and banana leaves of the Baoqieyin Pagoda exhibit a remarkable diversity of subjects. Beyond the prevalent depiction of Vajrapāṇi, common motifs encompass: (1) seated Buddha figures or episodes from the Buddha's previous lives; (2) bodhisattvas such as Avalokiteśvara and Maitreya; (3) guardian deities like the Heavenly Kings; (4) celestial beings including flying apsaras and offering attendants; and (5) intricate vegetal patterns such as honeysuckle and lotus blossoms. This rich iconographic variety must be understood within the holistic framework of Buddhist symbolic imagery. Although the specific subjects vary,

their essential function converges—to reinforce through figurative or decorative means the fundamental significance of the mountain flowers and banana leaves as emblems of Mount Sumeru's summit, the sacred abode of the heavenly realms. The iconography of Vajrapāṇi remains the most direct and scripturally resonant embodiment of this concept, while the other motifs serve as meaningful and appropriate elaborations within the overarching symbolic system (Figure 14).



Figure 14. Diverse Carving Themes on Mountain Flowers and Banana Leaves (Photographed by the Author)

4.4 The Finial: Symbolism of the Celestial Realms atop Mount Sumeru

The finials of the Baoqieyin Pagoda predominantly take the form of ringed finials, most commonly composed of an inverted bowl-shaped base, seven ascending concentric rings, and a gourd- or jewel-shaped pinnacle. Certain examples exhibit greater complexity—for instance, the Shishan Stone Pagoda incorporates a hexagonal eave canopy structure atop the finial—while others omit components such as the base or the rings entirely, as seen in the Panhu Pagoda and Heshan Tulou Stone Pagoda. Only a handful deviate from the ringed finial typology; for example, the Niuweii Pagoda features a gourd-shaped finial, and the Hancuo Stone Pagoda bears an inverted lotus base, an inverted bowl, and a gourd-shaped top.

Within the cosmology of Mount Sumeru, the summit's celestial palace is surmounted by a series of layered heavens. The term "heavens" evokes a concept of spatial suspension and vertical stratification. Buddhist scriptures systematically classify the heavens into three broad domains—the Desire Realm (kāmadhātu), the Form Realm (rūpadhātu), and the Formless Realm (ārūpyadhātu)—each further subdivided into multiple celestial levels, collectively constituting the heavenly abodes of divine beings. The prevalence of the ringed finial in the Baoqieyin Pagoda aligns harmoniously with this notion of the heavens as a vertically stacked, floating spatial hierarchy atop Mount Sumeru.

The Chinese character “chà” originally transliterates the Sanskrit term for “land” or “domain”; within Buddhist parlance, it refers to the realm of a Buddha’s pure land or celestial sphere. Owing to its towering, soaring form and profound religious significance, the finial naturally serves as an ideal architectural metaphor for these celestial realms. Variations in the number of rings reflect both the interpretive flexibility of Buddhist cosmological texts and pragmatic constraints imposed by stone-carving technology. Stone finials must mitigate structural risks associated with excessive height, thus often employing simplified designs that nonetheless symbolically convey the gradual ascent through successive layers of the Buddhist cosmos (Figure 15).

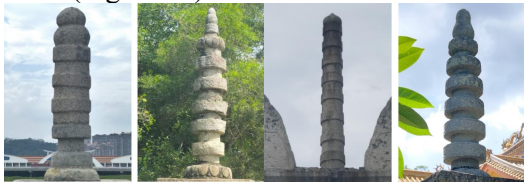


Figure 15. Partial Finial Components of Baoqieyin Pagoda Towers (Photographed by the Author)

5. Conclusion

Through a comprehensive comparative analysis of extant Chinese Baoqieyin Pagoda exemplars alongside pertinent Buddhist canonical texts, this study posits that the form and ornamentation of the Baoqieyin Pagoda are far from isolated artistic inventions. Instead, its architectural typology and decorative motifs embody profound symbolic correlations with the spatial paradigm of Mount Sumeru. The pedestal section, articulated through the Sumeru base, constricted waistband, and sculptures of the Heavenly Kings and guardian figures, replicates the structural contours and hierarchical spatial order of Mount Sumeru’s mass. The pagoda’s square plan signifies the Trāyastriṃśa Heaven, while narrative reliefs depicting Jātaka tales and the Garuda further intensify the Mount Sumeru imagery. The mountain flower and banana leaf motifs, as hallmark components, correspond in quantity, position, and form to the canonical depiction of the mountain’s “four corners and four peaks.” Iconographic elements such as Vajrapāṇi sculptures realize a harmonious integration of spatial symbolism with ornamental artistry. The layered ringed finial evokes the stratified, floating heavens above

Mount Sumeru, epitomizing the celestial realms’ hierarchical spatiality. This decorative art system not only manifests the localization of the Indian stupa archetype but also reveals the inventive interpretive agency of Chinese artisans in apprehending and reconfiguring the spatial schema of Mount Sumeru. Such insights offer valuable reference points for the contemporary inheritance and creative revitalization of traditional cultural motifs.

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