

Representation of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* Holding a Skull Stick: Symbolism in Buddhist Art

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the depiction and symbolism of the skull staff held by *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* in Korean Buddhist art during the Joseon Dynasty (1392-1910). The research utilizes a descriptive-analytical approach, involving a comprehensive search for relevant sources through Google and the Research Information Sharing Service of Korea (RISS). Buddhist texts were also sought through the “Archives of Buddhist Culture.” The study reveals that in paintings and sculptures of the 42-armed *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara*, one hand holds a skull-shaped staff. This symbolism is also evident in the royal version of the “Five Great Dhārāṇis Collection” published in 1458. The skull staff is aligned with one of the verses from the “42-Hand Mantras,” aimed at communicating with and controlling spirits. This research fills a scholarly gap by providing a detailed analysis of the skull motif in Korean Buddhist art, enhancing the understanding of *Avalokiteśvara*'s representations and the cultural interplay between art, religion, and society during the Joseon Dynasty.

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Introduction

In Buddhist art, the image of *Avalokiteśvara* having many hands has long been a subject of great interest. One interesting aspect of this representation is the depiction of *Avalokiteśvara* holding various objects in his hands, symbolizing various qualities and functions. Among the many attributes of *Avalokiteśvara*, one is the skull staff held by one of his 42 hands. The use of this skull staff attracts attention because the skull, in the general context, symbolizes death and the inability of humans to achieve immortality (Jung, Hwang, & Hwang, 2024).

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The existing literature on the depiction of Avalokiteśvara extensively covers various forms and manifestations across different cultures, emphasizing the adaptability and extensive cultural significance of this figure in Buddhist art. Studies have examined the Thousand-armed and Thousand-eyed Avalokiteśvara, the serene Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara, and the more specific White-Robed Water-Moon Avalokiteshvara, illustrating the diversity and richness of his representations in the Buddhist tradition (Hamada, 2021; H. J. Lee, 2021; Wang, 2018; Yang, Lee, & Yi, 2021). Additionally, the cultural significance of Avalokiteśvara is well-documented, particularly in regions such as China, Korea, and Tibet, where his presence has significantly influenced local beliefs and artistic practices (Hamada, 2021; Kozicz, 2020; H. J. Lee, 2021; Minji, 2020; Musillo, 2022; Polosmak, Shah, & Zotkina, 2023). The literature also delves into the detailed iconography and attributes associated with Avalokiteśvara, including the depiction of his attendants, the offerings presented, and the materials used in creating these religious artworks (Gao et al., 2016; Sang-Leun, 2022). This body of work highlights both the theological and the material aspects of Avalokiteśvara's representations, which are crucial for understanding his role and significance in Buddhist art and culture.

Despite the broad coverage in existing literature on various forms and attributes of Avalokiteśvara across different Buddhist traditions, there remains a notable gap in the specific exploration of skull imagery in Korean Buddhist art, particularly during the Joseon dynasty. Most scholarly works have focused on the general iconography and cultural significance of Avalokiteśvara without delving into the particular symbolism and context of skull representations in Korea. This oversight is significant given the unique role and interpretation of skull imagery in Korean depictions of Avalokiteśvara, which contrasts sharply with those found in Tibetan or Chinese contexts where such imagery is more commonly explored.

This research seeks to fill this scholarly gap by specifically investigating the representations and meanings of skulls in Korean Buddhist art, with a particular focus on the depictions of Avalokiteśvara during the Joseon dynasty (1392-1910). By examining artifacts, paintings, and sculptures, this study aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the skull motif and its cultural significance. This focus on a less-studied aspect of Korean Buddhist iconography will not only enrich the understanding of Avalokiteśvara's representations in Korea but also contribute to a broader comprehension of the symbolic interplay between art, religion, and society in historical and cultural contexts. This research focuses mainly on the depiction of Avalokiteśvara having multiple hands, as *Avalokiteśvara* is often chosen as the main subject holding various objects, including the skull staff (Jung et al., 2024).

In addition, this research tries to understand the meaning and context of *Avalokiteśvara's* use of the skull staff by observing paintings and statues of *Avalokiteśvara* and searching Buddhist texts. In addition, this research also compares the use of the skull staff in the Korean Buddhist tradition with other Buddhist teachings, such as those in the *Susiddhikara Sutra*, in the hope of uncovering differences in meaning and interpretation between them.

Method

This research uses a descriptive-analytical approach to explore the images and meanings of skulls in Korean Buddhist art, particularly in the Joseon dynasty

period (1392-1910). The research focuses mainly on the depiction of Avalokiteśvara, who has many hands holding a skull staff. Sources of data taken include, *first*, through a Google search (www.google.com) using the terms [Buddhist], [painting], and [Korean] to identify relevant sources related to Korean Buddhist art. *Second*, a search on the Research Information Sharing Service of Korea (RISS, <https://www-riss-kr-ssl.openlink>) using the terms [Buddhism] (佛敎), [art] (美術), and [skull] (骸骨) to access journals, articles, and other sources related to the research topic. *Third*, a search for appropriate Buddhist texts was conducted at the "Archives of Buddhist Culture" (<http://kabc.dongguk.edu>) to obtain references related to Buddhist teachings concerning the use of skull sticks in *Avalokiteśvara*. Then, the corresponding data from the "Archives of Buddhist Culture" was collected to better understand the Buddhist teachings related to *Avalokiteśvara's* use of the skull staff. Using this method, this study aims to comprehensively investigate the image and meaning of the skull stick in Korean Buddhist art and interpret the context of its use in relation to *Avalokiteśvara*.

Findings

The Meaning of the Depiction of Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara with a Skull Stick in Korean Buddhist Art

In Buddhist art, the image of the 42-armed *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* with one of his hands holding a skull staff has profound significance. This representation reflects the aesthetic beauty of the art and reveals the rich philosophical and spiritual aspects of the Buddhist tradition (Chandra, 1988). Depictions of the skull staff held by *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* can be traced in art such as paintings and sculptures. As one of the signature symbols in Buddhist iconography, the skull is often associated with the meaning of death, humanity's inability to attain immortality, and the impermanent nature of existence in the phenomenal world. In the context of *Avalokiteśvara's Sahasra-bhuja*, using the skull as a staff adds a profound symbolic dimension to the representation. The importance of this depiction is further revealed in the royal version of the "Five Great *Dhārāṇis* Collection (五大眞言集)," published in 1458. In this work, a skull is found in the staff held by *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara*. This corresponds to one of the stanzas of the "42-Hand Mantras" (*Om dhuna vajra ha*). This *mantra* has a specific purpose: to communicate with and manipulate ghosts (Stutterheim, 1989).

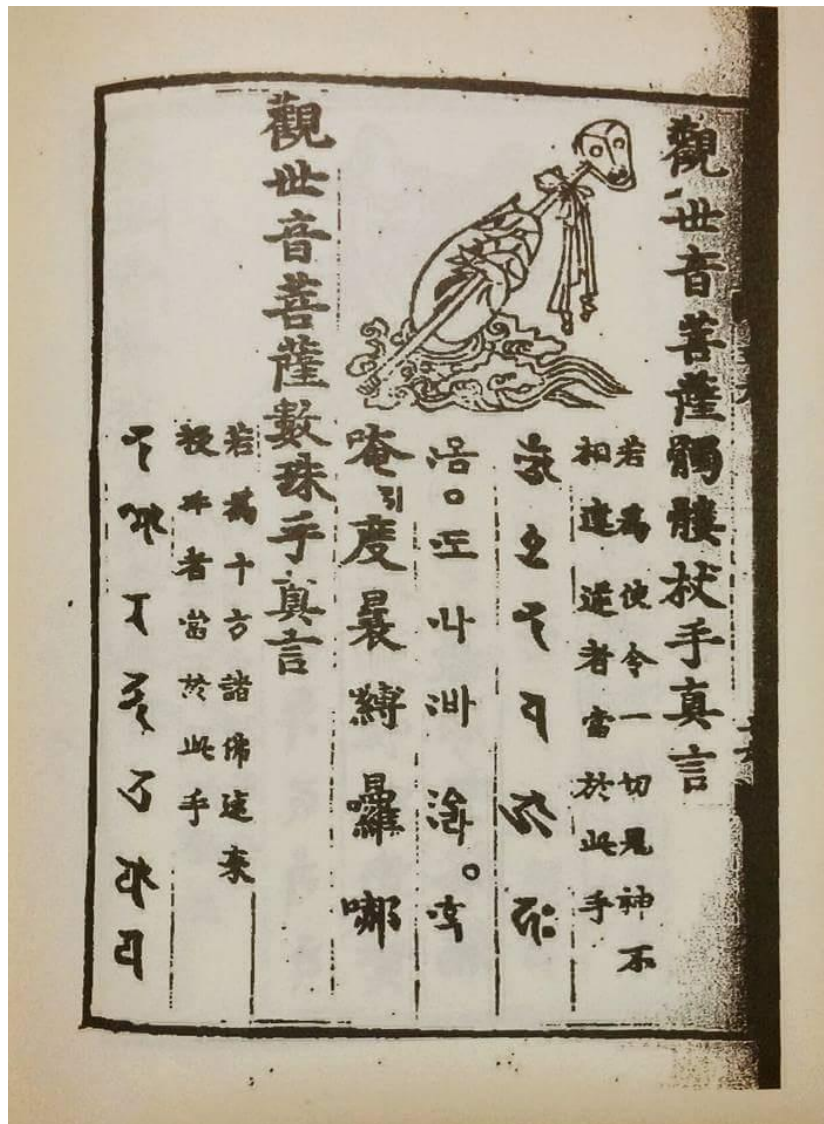


Figure 1. A hand of the 42-armed Avalokiteśvara holding a skull rod in the royal version of the “Five Great *Dhārāṇis* Collection (五大真言集).”

Through these representations, we can see how Buddhist spiritual practices and beliefs are manifested in fine art. *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara's* use of a skull staff reflects the complexity of Buddhist teachings and enriches our understanding of the role and meaning of symbolism in Buddhist iconography (S. Y. Lee & Lee, 2021).

In a historical and cultural context, this depiction also reveals the dynamic interaction between art, religion, and society during the Joseon period in Korea. Art became a powerful medium for conveying spiritual and philosophical messages to the broader public, and the depiction of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* with a skull staff became an essential part of Korea's artistic heritage and Buddhist spirituality.

Influence of Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara in Korean Culture and Spirituality

Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara, a famous Buddhist Bodhisattva representing the great compassion of Buddhism, has a significant role in the Buddhist tradition.

Along with the spread of Buddhism in East Asia, veneration of *Avalokiteśvara* flourished, especially during the Tang Dynasty period in ancient China. During that time, many sutras emphasizing devotion to *Avalokiteśvara*, including the "Thousand Armed Sutra" (千手經) were translated into Chinese. These translations brought a rich and promising flavor of esoteric Buddhism, giving followers a deeper understanding of complex spiritual practices. Amidst this influx, the figure of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* emerged as a symbol of infinite wisdom, compassion, and spiritual power (K. M. Kim, 2018).

The influence of the Tang Dynasty was felt in China, Korea, and Japan, bringing with it profound Buddhist teachings and practices. In Korea, particularly during the Joseon Dynasty, the influence of Chinese teachings and culture was strong, especially in the development of art and religion. Therefore, veneration of *Avalokiteśvara* and its representations, including the *Sahasra-bhuja* image of *Avalokiteśvara* with a skull staff, became integral to Korea's spiritual and artistic heritage (Gwak & Kwon, 2019). This understanding shows how Buddhist teachings and practices undergo transformation and adaptation in different cultural contexts. The veneration of *Avalokiteśvara*, primarily through the *Sahasra-bhuja* image of *Avalokiteśvara*, not only reflects the continuity of Buddhist tradition but also shows the creative adaptation of the ancient teachings in the life and culture of the Korean people.

When the thousand-armed *Avalokiteśvara* realizes that two arms alone are insufficient to reach out to all those needing help, this event illustrates the *Bodhisattva's* infinite sensitivity and compassion. His limitations prompted *Avalokiteśvara* to seek a better solution, which he eventually found through the grace of *Amitābha*, a Buddha (Tomotari, 2017). *Amitābha* gave *Avalokiteśvara* a thousand hands as tools to help many suffering people. This gift was not just a symbolic act but also reflected a deep appreciation of *Avalokiteśvara's* dedication and determination to alleviate suffering in the world. In Buddhist teachings, this story highlights the importance of awareness of the suffering of others and the commitment to act with compassion.

Through the representation of *Avalokiteśvara's Sahasra-bhuja* holding the skull staff, we can see how these symbols depict the spiritual journey and struggle to overcome human suffering. The skull staff held by *Avalokiteśvara* symbolizes the courage and resolve to face the reality of life entirely of suffering and uncertainty. The depiction of the thousand-armed *Avalokiteśvara* with a skull staff is a beautiful artistic image and contains a profound message of compassion, courage, and devotion to alleviate suffering in the world. It reinforces the core values in Buddhist teachings and inspires adherents to develop the same attitude in living their daily lives.

The development of the *Mantra* (40 shouzhou 手呪) into the 41 Hand *Mantra* and 42 Hand *Mantra* throughout the Tang period in China to the Goryeo and Joseon dynasties in Korea reflects the adaptation and evolution of Buddhist teachings in different cultural contexts. As Buddhism spread in East Asia, ritual practices and mantras became increasingly diverse and complex (Moon, S. L., & Kim, 2021). The development of the 41 Hands *Mantra* and the 42 Hands *Mantra* from the 40 Hands *Mantra* shows increased complexity and nuance in spiritual practices. These changes may reflect the evolution of understanding of Buddhist teachings and the

evolving spiritual needs of the people at the time. In addition, influences from local cultures and traditions may also have played an essential role in this transformation.

In the Korean context, influences from China brought with them innovative and diverse Buddhist practices, including the development of the 41 Hands *Mantra* and the 42 Hands *Mantra*. These adaptations reflect the dynamic interaction between Buddhism and Korean culture and demonstrate an attempt to adapt Buddhist teachings to the unique local context. The development of the 41 Hands *Mantra* and the 42 Hands *Mantra* became an essential part of East Asia's spiritual and religious history. These developments reflect the continuity and adaptation of Buddhist teachings and demonstrate the diversity and complexity of spiritual practices on the path to enlightenment and liberation from suffering.

Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara paintings became one of late Joseon dynasty Korea's most diverse and distinctive forms of artistic expression. In this period, icons of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* were not only limited to paintings but also penetrated the art of embroidery and woodblock prints (J. H. Kim, 2012). This diversity of formats enriched admirers' spiritual and aesthetic experience, demonstrating the complexity and richness of Korea's Buddhist artistic heritage. The *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* paintings produced in the late Joseon dynasty exhibit unique characteristics, showcasing the artists' technical skill and reflecting the depth of their understanding of Buddhist teachings.

One of the highlights of the painted icons of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* of the period is the significant difference with the widespread representations in China. The unique images created based on the *Avatamsaka Sūtra* (華嚴經), *Puṇḍarīka Sūtra* (法華經), and *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara Sutras* (千手經) illustrate a deep understanding of Buddhist teachings and their application in daily life. Through painting, embroidery, and woodblock prints, artists of the late Joseon dynasty had the opportunity to express their admiration and devotion to *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara*. In each brush stroke and embroidery stitch, they tried to transmit the spiritual messages and wisdom contained in Buddhist teachings and illustrate profound spiritual experiences (K. M. Kim, 2018).

The *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* painted icons of the late Joseon dynasty were not just artistic representations but also became a powerful medium for conveying spiritual messages and supporting religious practices in Korean society. The diversity of formats and the uniqueness of the resulting images add a profound dimension to our understanding of Korea's Buddhist art heritage and its influence on the spiritual and cultural life of the people of the time. In the 15th century, the belief in *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* experienced significant development in Joseon society. One of the main factors that contributed to this development was the publication of the royal version of the "Five Great *Dhārāṇis* Collection (五大眞言)," in 1458. This text strongly influenced shaping and deepening the belief in *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* among Joseon society.

The importance of the publication of this text cannot be overstated, primarily due to the support provided by Empress Dowager Insu, who played a crucial role in facilitating the process. Empress Dowager Insu, who actively ruled between 1437 and 1504, not only supported the publication of this text but was also instrumental in paving the way for the transliteration of the *Dhārāṇis* (陀羅尼) from Sanskrit and Chinese into the Korean alphabet. This action aims to make it easier for people to

chant the mantras, thereby expanding the accessibility of spiritual practices and enhancing the sustainability of religious traditions (Moon, S. L., & Kim, 2021). Through collaborative efforts between the government and religious leaders, belief in *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* became more pervasive in Joseon society. The practice of chanting *Dhārāṇis* embodied in the publication of this text became one of the main aspects of the spiritual expression of the people at that time. This reflects the important role of religion in shaping the cultural identity of Joseon society and emphasizes the role of political leaders in supporting and maintaining traditional religious practices.

Thus, the publication of the royal version of the "Five Great *Dhārāṇis* Collection" (五大眞言集), in 1458 became an important milestone in the history of belief in *Avalokiteśvara Bodhisattva* in Joseon society. The support of Empress Dowager Insu not only secured the continuation of spiritual practices but confirmed her essential role in promoting religious tolerance and social harmony in a multicultural society (S. A. Kim, 2016). The *mantra* (*Om dhuna vajra ha*) associated with the hand holding the shaft of the skull, is first found in the *Susiddhikara Sutra* (蘇悉地羯羅經), one of the esoteric texts in the Buddhist tradition, as noted by Giebel (2006). The *Susiddhikara Sutra* provides instructions on performing *homa*, a ritualistic practice which emphasizes the importance of holding a vajra, or ritual lightning bolt, in one's hand. The sutra instructs practitioners to chant "Om dhuna vajra ha" a thousand times or a hundred times to give the vajra the spiritual power to accomplish various actions.

However, it is essential to note that in the context of the *Susiddhikara Sutra*, the "*Om dhuna vajra ha*" *mantra* is not related to communicating with or manipulating ghosts. Instead, it aims to empower the vajra to complete ritualistic actions successfully. This demonstrates the multifaceted nature of Buddhist texts and mantras, which may have different purposes and interpretations depending on the context and tradition in which they are practiced. Hence, while the *mantra* "*Om dhuna vajra ha*" is used in the *Susiddhikara Sutra* for ritualistic purposes, its association with the hand holding the skull shaft in the *Sahasra-bhuja* representation of *Avalokiteśvara* reflects the reinterpretation or adaptation of its meaning in specific cultural and religious contexts over time. This highlights the dynamic nature of Buddhist practices and beliefs as they evolve and interact with various cultural influences and interpretations (Gwak & Kwon, 2019).

Symbolism and Spirituality in Korean Buddhist Art

This research found that the representation of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* holding a skull staff in Korean Buddhist art has profound philosophical and spiritual significance. It reflects not only aesthetic beauty but also the complexity of Buddhist teachings embodied in the symbolism of the skull staff, which relates to the understanding of death and impermanence.

This research delves deeper into the symbolic significance of the skull staff in the representation of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* in Korean Buddhist art, highlighting its profound philosophical and spiritual importance. Comparing this with existing literature reveals that, although representations of *Avalokiteśvara* are widely recognized and explored across various forms and cultural manifestations,

the specific use of the skull staff rarely takes center stage in other studies. For instance, previous research has focused on various forms of Avalokiteśvara such as the Thousand-Armed and Thousand-Eyed, and the Water-Moon Avalokiteśvara, emphasizing Avalokiteśvara's generosity and protective nature (Hamada, 2021; H. J. Lee, 2021). However, the aspects of death and impermanence, crucial in the Korean context, are often underemphasized in studies that focus on the aesthetic and theological representations of Avalokiteśvara.

Furthermore, the use of the skull symbol in Korean art and spirituality indicates a unique adaptation of broader Buddhist iconography, potentially linked to specific cultural and historical influences in Korea. This differs from the more common emphasis on aspects such as compassion and wisdom typically depicted in Buddhist practices and art in China or Tibet (Kozicz, 2020; Minji, 2020). Thus, this research not only complements but also expands our understanding of how diverse practices and artistic representations of Buddhism interpret Buddhist teachings in accordance with their respective cultural and historical contexts.

The findings of this research serve as a testament to the dynamic interplay between cultural specificity and religious expression, suggesting a broader phenomenon where religious artefacts and their iconographies are not merely preserved but actively shaped by the cultural and historical contexts in which they are embraced. In the case of Korean Buddhist art, the skull staff carried by Sahasrabhuja Avalokiteśvara transcends its traditional symbolism of mortality and impermanence to embrace a role that is distinctly Korean. This adaptation reflects deeper societal values that prioritize a unique interaction with Buddhist teachings, possibly due to Korea's historical trajectory and its distinctive religious landscape.

This phenomenon is not isolated to Korea but can be observed in various religious traditions worldwide, where localized interpretations of universal symbols or teachings lead to unique religious expressions. For example, similar to how Christian symbols are variably interpreted across different cultures (Webb, 2014), the adaptation of the skull staff in Korean Buddhism illustrates how local traditions and historical experiences influence religious practice and art, embedding them with layers of meaning that resonate specifically with the local populace. This reflection underscores the importance of considering cultural context in the study of religious practices, as it significantly enriches our understanding of religion as a living, evolving dialogue between tradition and the diverse contexts of its adherents.

The implications of these findings are multifaceted, highlighting the critical role of cultural nuances in shaping religious iconography and its interpretation. First and foremost, the study enriches the discourse within the field of religious studies by illustrating how localized cultural elements infuse traditional symbols with new meanings, thereby broadening the scope of their relevance and application. This particular examination of the skull staff in Korean Avalokiteśvara iconography not only adds a significant layer to our understanding of Buddhist art in Korea but also challenges and expands the academic conversation around how religious symbols are contextualized globally.

The distinctive findings of this research are primarily rooted in the unique historical and cultural milieu of Korea, which has shaped its religious and artistic expressions in profound ways. Korea's historical experiences, particularly the integration and adaptation of Buddhism from Chinese influences and its evolution

within a distinctly Korean context, have deeply influenced how religious symbols like the skull staff are interpreted and utilized. This is further exemplified by Korea's unique approach to Buddhism, which often intertwines shamanistic elements with Buddhist practices, thus creating a rich tapestry of religious life that is reflective of Korea's complex history and societal norms (S.-E. T. Kim, 2018). As Park (2010) points out, the interplay between native religious beliefs and imported Buddhist practices has fostered a fertile ground for the development of unique religious symbols that carry both universal Buddhist meanings and localized spiritual significance. This blend of influences is what allows for the distinct representation of Avalokiteśvara as seen in Korean art, differentiating it from other regional interpretations and highlighting the adaptive nature of religious practices as they intersect with cultural narratives. Thus, the results of this study reflect the broader narrative of how local histories and cultural identities mold and redefine religious expressions across different contexts.

Conclusions

This study reveals that the depiction of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* holding a skull staff in Korean Buddhist art during the Joseon Dynasty has profound symbolic significance. Surprisingly, the meaning of the mantra "Om dhuna vajra ha" transformed from its original ritualistic purpose in the *Susiddhikara Sutra* to a tool for communicating with and controlling spirits in the Korean context. This highlights the integration of esoteric Buddhist elements with Chinese and Korean folk religions, resulting in a unique interpretation within Korean Buddhist tradition.

This research makes a significant contribution by addressing the academic gap regarding the skull motif in Korean Buddhist art. By analyzing the symbolism of the skull staff in the representation of Avalokiteśvara, this study enhances our understanding of the interaction between art, religion, and society during the Joseon Dynasty. The study underscores the importance of cultural context in interpreting religious symbols, providing new insights into the adaptation and evolution of Buddhist teachings in various cultural settings.

However, this study has limitations in terms of data source scope and analysis. It primarily relies on available online and archived written and visual sources, which may not encompass the full spectrum of *Sahasra-bhuja Avalokiteśvara* representations in Korea. Future research directions could include broader field studies to identify and analyze undocumented artifacts and deeper exploration of local cultural influences on symbolism in Buddhist art. Additionally, future studies could delve into comparative analysis of Avalokiteśvara symbolism across different East Asian Buddhist traditions to understand broader dynamics of cultural adaptation.

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