

Musical Symbols and Their Symbolic Meanings in Song Dynasty Literary Works

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Abstract: Musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature form a unique literary and artistic phenomenon with their diverse textual representations and profound symbolic meanings. These musical symbols not only integrate into poetry, prose, and drama as aesthetic imagery but also reflect the Song literati's deep understanding of nature, culture, and the relationships between the individual and society, through their rich emotional expression and cultural transmission functions. This study analyzes the textual forms, functional types, and genre differences in the representation of musical symbols, revealing their symbolic meanings in emotional expression, cultural identity, and philosophical significance. It further explores the unique contributions of musical symbols to artistic innovation and aesthetic value, showcasing the cross-media fusion of literature and music in the Song Dynasty.

Keywords: Song Dynasty Literature; Musical Symbols; Emotional Symbols; Cultural Identity; Contemporary Transformation

Introduction

Musical symbols hold a significant place in Song Dynasty literature. As key carriers of artistic emotion and cultural meaning, they represent the deep integration and mutual influence of literature and music. The Song Dynasty, a peak period in Chinese ancient culture, saw a flourishing of literary creation, with music also playing a complementary role, becoming an indispensable element in literary expression. During this period, writers and artists used musical symbols to present personal emotions, societal values, and philosophical reflections in a vivid, emotional way. Researching the musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature and their symbolic meanings can reveal the Song literati's profound reflections on nature, society, and life, and provide a new understanding of the complex relationship between music and literature. Additionally, the use of musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature deepened the cross-media characteristics of Chinese ancient literature, making the fusion of music and literature one of its unique artistic appeals. By exploring this phenomenon, we can expand our understanding of the cultural spirit of the Song Dynasty and provide valuable insights and references for the integration of arts in contemporary creative practices.

1. Analysis of Musical Symbols in Song Dynasty Literature

1.1 Textual Forms of Musical Symbols

In Song Dynasty literature, musical symbols are presented in various textual forms, showcasing the deep integration of artistic expression and cultural meaning. Poetry, particularly, is one of the main carriers of musical symbols, where poets skillfully use rhythm, cadence, and musical instrument imagery to create a unique musical aesthetic. For example, in the phrase "The clear breeze, the bright moon, with no one to manage, both make the south tower feel a coolness," the beauty of rhythm is conveyed, and hidden within it is a sense of musical tempo and melody. Terms like "beat," "meter," and "tune" further evoke an auditory experience, blending visual and auditory aesthetics. These musical symbols not only enrich the artistic expression of poetry but also enhance the emotional function of the work, injecting a dynamic beauty into Song Dynasty literature.

In prose and drama, musical symbols serve different functions through their distinct narrative styles. In prose, musical symbols are often used to describe performance scenes and the forms of musical instruments, which infuse the work with visual imagery and emotional tension. For instance, in travel essays, writers often use musical imagery to record the harmony between nature and their own emotional states, creating an aesthetic space where humans and nature coexist in harmony. Drama, as a comprehensive art form combining literature, music, and performance, integrates musical symbols into the progression of the plot. Through the fusion of melody and lyrics, dramatic works present a narrative feature of "interwoven sound and image," making musical symbols a key medium for conveying emotion and deepening the theme of the work.^[1]

1.2 Types and Functions of Musical Symbols

The musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature are diverse, ranging from natural rhythms to human cultural symbols, and even ritual and ceremonial music symbols, all of which display a rich complexity and multiple functions. Natural rhythms are primarily represented through the imitation and poetic rendering of natural sounds, such as the wind, raindrops, and birdsong. These natural sounds not only serve as imagery in poetry, lending the work a fresh, flowing sense of rhythm, but also imply the author's philosophical contemplation of the harmony of nature. Such natural rhythmic symbols often transcend simple description, becoming an important bridge that connects the natural and human worlds, reflecting the Song literati's profound insight into the vitality of nature.

Human cultural symbols are more specifically related to musical instruments, musical pieces, and performance settings. Traditional instruments like the qin (zither), se (a type of string instrument), di (flute), and xiao (another type of flute) frequently appear in Song Dynasty poetry and prose, symbolizing cultural identity while also providing a medium for emotional expression. Meanwhile, ritual music symbols, as a reflection of Confucian values, convey a recognition of social order and ethical principles through depictions of sacrificial ceremonies and formal musical performances. These symbols, in Song Dynasty literature, not only serve as cultural carriers but also play an important role in the structure of the text. For example, ritual music symbols often serve as important narrative threads, advancing the plot or deepening the theme of the work through their symbolic meanings, thereby showcasing the artistic height and philosophical depth of Song Dynasty literature.^[2]

1.3 Genre Differences in the Use of Musical Symbols

There is a significant difference in how musical symbols are employed across different literary genres in the Song Dynasty, with these genre characteristics giving a more dimensional presentation of the function and meaning of musical symbols. The lyric poetry genre, due to its intrinsic connection with music, is the most important field for the expression of musical symbols. Poets combine tonal patterns and rhythmic cadences, making the poetry possess a singable and rhythmic quality. At the same time, musical instrument imagery, such as "jade flute" or "precious zither," frequently appears in poetry, not only enhancing the artistic atmosphere but also symbolizing the emotional depth of the text. In Song lyrics, the musical symbols, supported by the genre's characteristics, achieve a high degree of unity between literary and musical elements, setting a model for later artistic creation.

In contrast, prose and drama employ musical symbols in distinct ways, giving them unique expression. In prose, musical symbols are often used to describe specific musical scenes in detail, showcasing the deep interaction between the writer's emotions and nature and society. For example, in describing a serene mountain forest, Ouyang Xiu uses the sound of the qin and se to express his profound appreciation of the landscape. Drama, by nature of its script-based format, incorporates musical symbols through the integration of melody names, rhythmic patterns, and lyrics. These elements not only drive the plot forward but also provide a dynamic form of expression, introducing an innovative cross-media approach to literary representation. The genre differences in the use of musical symbols illustrate the creative application of these symbols in Song Dynasty literature, offering a multi-dimensional perspective on the relationship between music and literature.

2. Symbolic Meanings of Musical Symbols in Song Dynasty Literature

2.1 Emotional Expression through Musical Symbols

In Song Dynasty literature, musical symbols carry rich emotional connotations and serve as an

important medium for expressing emotions, as well as a key tool for enhancing literary aesthetic imagery. These symbols, through specific instruments, melodies, or musical scenes, form a strong resonance with the author's emotional world, creating a cross-sensory form of artistic expression. For example, musical images like “the sound of the xiao fades” or “the zither’s voice breaks” are often used to symbolize the sorrow and loneliness associated with separation, allowing readers to directly sense the author’s emotional fluctuations through auditory imagery. These musical images not only convey profound personal experiences but also resonate with specific literary contexts, intensifying the emotional depth and aesthetic appeal of the work. Furthermore, different musical instruments contribute to a deeper symbolic system: the se (a stringed instrument) symbolizes sorrow, the di (flute) conveys longing, and the qin (zither) expresses tranquility and elegance. This symbolic system forms an “emotional code” with strong cultural characteristics, adding a more delicate and layered artistic quality to Song Dynasty literature.^[3]

Additionally, musical symbols are widely used to depict characters and their psychological states, subtly portraying the diversity and complexity of emotions. In Song Dynasty lyric poetry, poets cleverly use variations in the tempo and intensity of music to metaphorically represent emotional fluctuations, creating an artistic effect where “music follows the movement of emotions.” For example, the harmonious sound of the qin and se symbolizes harmony and marital bliss, while a solo performance on the xiao or di represents solitude and introspection. Through these associations, the poets incorporate personal emotions into musical imagery, making the literary works more emotionally impactful and expressive. This organic fusion of music and emotion not only represents an innovative literary technique but also reflects the Song literati’s acute sensitivity and creativity in emotional expression, infusing Song Dynasty literature with unique emotional tension and artistic vitality.

2.2 Cultural Identity and the Transmission of Values

In Song Dynasty literature, musical symbols are not only vehicles for expressing personal emotions but also serve as carriers of cultural identity and societal values. Through depictions and references to the ritual music system, musical symbols become a central medium for promoting Confucian thought, reflecting the Song literati’s admiration for and inheritance of the rites and music of ancient China. In contexts such as sacrificial rituals, court ceremonies, or feasts, the sounds of bells and drums are frequently mentioned, symbolizing respect for the rites and the maintenance of social order. The symbolic meaning carried by these musical images transcends individual emotions, becoming an integral part of collective cultural memory, metaphorically representing the pursuit of social harmony and moral values. Such symbolic expressions of music not only enrich the cultural depth of the literature but also reflect the Song literati’s contemplation of social responsibility and cultural concerns in their literary creations.^[4]

At the same time, musical symbols deeply reflect the literati’s pursuit of an ideal personality and their cultural identity. In many Song Dynasty poems and essays, the qin (zither) serves as an important symbol of the scholar-official’s culture, representing the pursuit of refined sensibilities and inner cultivation, embodying the spiritual world of the scholar class. Through descriptions of the qin, se, xiao, and di, the literati intertwine personal emotions, cultural ideals, and social values, constructing a value system that is both symbolic and inheritable. For instance, the qin is regarded as a medium for self-cultivation and emotional refinement, representing the Song literati’s dual pursuit of inner peace and outer propriety. This use of musical symbols in literature is not only a vivid manifestation of the fusion of Confucian rites and music with literary aesthetics in Song Dynasty works but also makes music a key cultural bridge for conveying the spirit of the era, highlighting the unique artistic appeal and cultural responsibility of Song Dynasty literature.

2.3 Philosophical and Aesthetic Implications

The symbolic meanings of musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature not only contain rich emotional expression and cultural identity but also profoundly reflect the blending of philosophical reflection and aesthetic ideals. Song literati used music as a medium to explore the cosmic order, the cycle of life, and the meaning of human existence by describing the qualities of musical rhythms, melodies, and instruments. For example, the sound of the qin, with its clear and expansive tone, is often used to symbolize the Confucian idea of “the unity of heaven and humanity,” representing the harmonious unity between nature and the human spirit. The philosophical ideas conveyed through these musical images reflect not only the Song literati’s deep exploration of natural laws and human nature but also their inner pursuit of spiritual freedom and transcendence. Moreover, the dynamic changes in musical

rhythm and the shifts between virtual and real suggest metaphors for the impermanence of life and the ever-changing world, resonating with the Song literati's "life philosophy through music" (yueguan dao). Therefore, musical symbols became an important carrier for transmitting the literati's philosophical views, expressing deep thoughts that transcend ordinary experience through poetic language, and infusing Song Dynasty literature with both philosophical meaning and humanistic depth.

In terms of aesthetic implications, musical symbols granted Song Dynasty literature a unique sensory experience and aesthetic beauty, making the works both artistically dynamic in form and profound in content. The formlessness of music and the visual nature of literary language combined to create a distinctive dynamic aesthetic system. In Song lyrics, musical imagery often intertwines with depictions of natural landscapes, creating a multi-dimensional aesthetic space where "sound" and "sight" resonate together. For example, the blending of qin music with the flowing water of a mountain stream, or the pairing of di music with the clear moonlight, creates an artistic atmosphere that is both abstract and concrete. This fusion of "sound" and "scenery" not only enhances the expressive power of musical symbols but also grants the literary works greater imaginative space and emotional intensity. This aesthetic pursuit reflects the Song literati's heightened sensitivity to the beauty of nature and harmony, as well as their ideal of beauty through music.

The philosophical and aesthetic implications of musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature further reflect the close alignment between artistic expression and the spiritual world. Through the clever integration of music and literature, the literati constructed an artistic realm that was both grounded in reality and transcendent. This realm not only made musical symbols an indispensable artistic language in Song Dynasty literature but also showcased the high achievements of Song literati in aesthetic innovation and cultural transmission. As a carrier for the intersection of literature and philosophy, art and life, musical symbols injected deeper intellectual substance and unique aesthetic charm into Song Dynasty literature, making it an irreplaceable and significant part of Chinese literary history. ^[5]

3. Artistic Innovation and Aesthetic Value of Musical Symbols in Song Dynasty Literature

3.1 Innovative Expression of Musical Symbols in Song Ci

As a representative literary form blending literature and music, Song Ci (a type of Song Dynasty lyric poetry) showcases a distinctive artistic innovation in its use of musical symbols. In the creation of Song Ci, poets focus on musical imagery, combining the tonal beauty of traditional poetry with the rhythmic patterns of actual musical performance to create a unique literary form that is "both recitable and singable." For instance, the meticulous descriptions of musical characteristics such as "slow," "fast," "clear," and "muddy" not only enhance the rhythmic and melodic beauty of the language but also allow readers to imagine the specific musical expressions, thus creating a simultaneous experience of words and melody. Through the rich use of musical symbols, Song Ci achieves a high degree of unity between "sound," "emotion," and "meaning," elevating its artistic expression far beyond the poetry of the pre-Qin Yuefu (Folk Songs) or the regulated verse of the Tang Dynasty.

This innovation is also reflected in the depiction of musical scenes with alternating real and imaginary elements. Poets often create an artistic atmosphere that lies between auditory experience and imagination through phrases like "heard but not heard" or "the sound fades, but the sentiment continues." For example, in Liu Yong's poem, "Why should the Qiang flute complain about the willow trees? The spring wind does not pass the Jade Gate," the metaphor of parting sorrow is deepened by the virtual sound of the instrument, enhancing the emotional expression. This innovative use of musical symbols not only provides broader artistic space for Song Ci but also offers valuable insights for the literary exploration of music, positioning the Song Ci as a unique artistic peak in the history of Chinese literature.

3.2 Cross-Media Aesthetic Fusion of Literature and Music

The musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature reflect the deep integration of literature and music on the aesthetic level, laying an important foundation for the development of cross-media art. Song literati were skilled at using musical symbols to break the boundaries between written language and musical rhythm. Through narration, depiction, and lyricism, they achieved a high degree of unity between the auditory experience of music and the visual expression of literature. For instance, when depicting a scene of playing the qin (a stringed instrument) under the moonlight, literary works not only convey the ebb and flow of the melody but also use language to evoke an image of the moonlight blending with the sound of the qin. This "cross-media" fusion allows Song Dynasty literature to break through the

singularity of traditional literary forms, creating a comprehensive artistic effect that resonates with both the senses and emotions. ^[6]

Furthermore, the rise of Song Dynasty theater further promoted the literary and musical integration of musical symbols. As a comprehensive art form combining literature, music, and performance, Song Dynasty drama deeply influenced the literary creation through the use of musical patterns, lyrics, and rhythms. This cross-media aesthetic fusion not only expanded the expressive domain of literature but also facilitated the diversification of artistic forms, providing an important historical model for the collaborative development of literature and music. This fusion demonstrates that musical symbols were not only a means of expression but also the aesthetic core of Song Dynasty literary creation, fully reflecting the Song literati's profound understanding and pursuit of multi-dimensional artistic expression.

3.3 The Legacy and Influence of Musical Symbols in Literary History

The artistic innovation and aesthetic value of musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature not only had significant importance in their time but also had a far-reaching impact on later literary creation. The musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature, with their delicate forms of expression and rich system of imagery, became an important reference in the creation of Yuan, Ming, and Qing period drama and poetry. Yuan dynasty zaju (variety plays) inherited and developed the use of musical symbols from Song literature, making them play a more prominent role in narrative and emotional transmission in playwriting. Meanwhile, the poetry of the Ming and Qing Dynasties, building on the Song Ci, further deepened the symbolic meanings of musical symbols, giving them a more personalized color and making literary emotional expression and artistic form more diverse.

Additionally, Song Dynasty musical symbols have provided valuable insights for modern literary creation. Contemporary poets, for example, often evoke "auditory spaces" through imagistic language, which can be traced back to the artistic tradition of Song Ci and its use of musical symbols. By tracing the legacy and influence of Song Dynasty musical symbols in literary history, it becomes clear that they were not only a core element of Song Dynasty literature but also a significant force driving the mutual development of literature and music. This lasting artistic value highlights the profound significance and immortal status of Song Dynasty literature in the history of Chinese culture.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the musical symbols and their symbolic meanings in Song Dynasty literature demonstrate profound cultural depth and unique artistic charm. These musical symbols are not only important tools for expressing emotions and creating atmospheres but also carry rich cultural connotations. The analysis shows that musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature serve multiple functions: they are both a medium for emotional expression, conveying individual inner worlds with subtlety, and a metaphor for societal culture, reflecting the deep integration and innovative interpretation of ritual and musical culture in literature. Moreover, the diverse representations of musical symbols in different literary genres showcase the high integration of form and content in Song Dynasty literature and the openness of creative thinking.

This study, by analyzing the specific use of musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature, expands the perspective of cross-disciplinary research between literature and music and offers new insights into the internal connections of ancient art. Future research can explore the literary representations and cross-cultural influence of musical symbols from the perspectives of comparative literature and cultural transmission. At the same time, modern music theory and digital analysis techniques can be used to explore the dynamic characteristics and cultural value of musical symbols in Song Dynasty literature, promoting the innovation and development of ancient Chinese literary theory.

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