

## Harmony between Qin and Painting: A Study on the Function, Identity, and Imagery of the Guqin in Southern Song Paintings

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### Abstract

*The guqin, emblematic of the spirit of Chinese literati, frequently appears in Southern Song dynasty paintings. Transcending its identity as a mere musical instrument, the guqin assumes specific roles as a prop, even serving as a symbolic representation of the ancient scholar-official, embodying significant aesthetic connotations. This paper begins by categorizing the depictions of the guqin in Southern Song paintings based on their contextual settings, classifying them into three primary types: "Solitary Performance and Appreciation," "Ensemble Performance or Elegant Gatherings," and "Journeying with the Qin." Through subsequent iconological interpretation, it explores how the guqin became an identifier of scholar-official status and delves into its role in conveying the painting's implied meaning. Finally, it distills and summarizes the aesthetic connotations inherent in the image of the guqin, revealing its profound resonance with the zeitgeist and literati psyche of the Southern Song era.*

**Key words:** Southern Song Painting; Guqin; Iconology; Literati Identity; Aesthetic Imagery

### I. INTRODUCTION

Confucianism advocated that "a scholar should not be without the qin and se," considering that "while all eight musical instruments cultivate virtue, the qin's virtue is supreme." Influenced by this, scholars began practicing the qin for self-cultivation, gradually forming an elegant tradition of companionship with the instrument. Within the political landscape of the Southern Song's precarious hold on the south and its relatively prosperous cultural environment, literati painting further developed. Painting was no longer confined to depicting natural landscapes but progressively moved towards more poetic and introspective expression, becoming a unique medium for scholars to express their sentiments and signify their character. As the foremost of the "Four Arts of the Scholar" (qin, chess, calligraphy, painting), the guqin, with its qualities of clarity, harmony, subtlety, and elegance, became an object through which literati cultivated themselves and projected their ideals. Consequently, its image abundantly entered Southern Song paintings, aiding in the portrayal and expression of depicted figures. This paper presents a systematic classification and interdisciplinary interpretation of the guqin's imagery in Southern Song painting. From an art historical perspective, it categorizes these appearances and, integrating iconology, sociology, and Sino-Western aesthetic theories, analyzes and interprets them, aiming to reveal the aesthetic spirit and humanistic imagery embedded within the image of the guqin.

## II. Functional Analysis: Classification and Schematic Interpretation of the Guqin Image in Southern Song Painting

By classifying works featuring the guqin in Southern Song painting according to its social attributes and narrative expression within the composition, we can categorize them into the following three types:

### *(A) Solitary Performance and Appreciation: Contemplation of the Secluded Mind and Inner World*

In this category of paintings, the guqin often serves as an object through which the scholar engages in a dialogue with his own soul. The figure may be gently playing amidst mountain forests and streams or sitting quietly in a studio or courtyard after playing. The qin functions both as an instrument for performance and, simultaneously, as a companion, joining the figure in an act of mental contemplation. In Ma Yuan's "Appreciating Plums under the Moonlight," within the characteristic "One-Corner Ma" composition, a plum branch extends from the left, conveying a sense of resilience and beauty. Shielded by rocks, a lofty scholar sits under the moonlight with the qin laid across his knees, not playing it, but looking up to admire the plum blossoms. Here, the qin becomes a substitute for a "kindred spirit," forming a visual triad of transcendence and purity with the plum blossoms and the moon. Its presence suggests that although the figure dwells in solitude, his spiritual world is enriched by the qin (representing high culture). In "The Zither's Pleasure in a Secluded Hall" (Anonymous, housed in the Palace Museum, Beijing), a scholar is depicted playing the qin in a hall, while a servant boy dozes off outside the door. The framing composition using the "door" separates the player from the outside world, intensifying the interior's privacy and spirituality. The qin's music is not played for an external audience but fills the individual's own mental space.

The guqin in scenes of solitary performance and appreciation visually embodies its ethical function as "an instrument of restraint, to restrain from depravity and rectify the human heart" ("History of the Qin"). It symbolizes the scholar-official's stance of retreating inwards to preserve personal integrity amidst turbulent times. Its iconography points to "reclusion," "introspection," and "self-cultivation," while its deeper iconology relates to the fusion of Daoist "quietude and non-action" (qingjing wuwei) and the Confucian ideal of "maintaining one's own integrity in solitude" (dushan qishen).

### *(B) Ensemble or Elegant Gatherings: Identity of the Literati Community and a Sense of Ritual*

Such scenes depict gatherings of multiple literati, centered around the qin, accompanied by activities like tea tasting, painting appreciation, and poetic discourse. Although Liu Songnian's "Pounding Tea" focuses on tea preparation, a scholar in the lower left corner is intently playing the qin, while another listens attentively, creating an independent musical space within the painting. Here, the guqin is an essential component of the gathering's ritual, a cultural bond connecting like-minded friends. The composition is intricate and refined, with closely related figures, and the detailed environment (elegant tea utensils, furniture, Taihu rocks) all highlight the participants' refined taste and affluent status. Another schema can be seen in various Southern Song copies or variations of "The Nine Elders of Xiangshan" or "Elegant Gathering in the Western Garden," where the guqin appears as a standard feature of such gatherings.

Its function approximates a "cultural rite," confirming the sense of belonging to the literati community among those present.

In ensemble and gathering scenes, the guqin's significance moves from the private to the public sphere, its function expanding from "self-cultivation" to "harmonizing the family" (cultural networking among elite families) and even "governing the state" (an idealized imagination of a literati-political community). It symbolizes the display and sharing of cultural capital. Its iconography points to "literary gatherings," "fellowship," and "elegance," while its deeper symbolism connects to the Confucian "ritual and music" (liyue) tradition and the collective endeavor of Southern Song literati to construct cultural identity and seek spiritual solace within specific circles.

*(C) Journeying with the Qin: Dynamic Anticipation and the Emplacement of Ideals*

These paintings capture the moment a scholar, accompanied by a qin-bearing page boy, or carrying the qin himself, traverses landscapes on his way to an appointment or to visit a friend. The qin here is a promise "yet to sound," a poetic suspense. In Xia Gui's album leaves like "Twelve Views of Landscape: Distant Mountains, Scribe Geese," tiny figures often carry qins. A more classic schema is the early paradigm of the later immensely popular "Visiting a Friend with a Qin" theme. The composition typically depicts a lofty scholar (sometimes accompanied by a page boy) walking along mountain paths or stream bridges, his destination often a thatched lodge or a hermit's dwelling deep in the mountains. The guqin is carefully wrapped, carried by the page or held by the scholar, demonstrating its cherished status. The composition emphasizes the journey's extension and directionality, guiding the viewer's gaze towards the unknown distance, full of narrative potential and anticipation.

The guqin in "journeying" scenes is a mobile symbol, a bridge connecting the "here" and "there," the self and the other. It symbolizes the eternal search for a kindred spirit (the典故 "zhiyin" or "knowing the music" originates from Bo Ya and Zhong Ziqi, intrinsically linked to the qin). Its iconography points to "visiting," "anticipated encounter," and "aspiration," while its deeper symbolism profoundly reflects the Southern Song literati's contradictory psyche: the desire to withdraw from society (into the landscape) while simultaneously yearning for spiritual resonance (seeking a zhiyin). It represents the poetic transformation and substitutive fulfillment of the Confucian ideal to "benefit all under heaven" (jianshi jiantian) from the axiom "In obscurity, one maintains his own integrity; in prominence, he makes the whole world virtuous" (qiongze dushan qishen, daze jianshi jiantian).

### **III. Proof of Identity: The Guqin and Southern Song Scholar-Officials' Self-Identification**

In all the aforementioned paintings, the guqin is, without exception, the exclusive accessory of the scholar-official class, never depicted in the hands of farmers, merchants, or entertainers. This clearly indicates its core function as an identity marker.

*Materialization of Cultural Capital:* The complex craftsmanship required to make a guqin, the high cost of learning it, and the deep cultural literacy needed to understand its artistic conception naturally excluded most other social strata. Owning and mastering the guqin was a crucial measure of one's belonging to the scholar-official

elite. Depicting the guqin in painting was thus a visual statement and reinforcement of the painter's own and his class's cultural identity.

*Symbol of the "Vessel of the Dao" and Personality:* The qin instrument itself was regarded as a vessel of the "Dao." Its structure embodies a cosmic worldview (the rounded surface represents heaven, the flat base earth, the thirteen hui markers represent the twelve months plus the intercalary month). Therefore, playing or being in the company of the qin implied that the scholar was not merely engaging in an artistic activity but was undertaking a form of moral cultivation and cosmic dialogue. Through their juxtaposition with the guqin, the figures in the paintings are endowed with the aura of "vessels of the Dao," their personalities sublimated and sanctified.

*Marker of Distinction from Professional Musicians:* While Southern Song urban culture flourished, with numerous professional qin players, a fundamental distinction existed between the literati playing the qin ("qin scholars") and entertainers playing it ("qin artisans"). The qin players in literati paintings appear detached from worldly concerns, their posture relaxed and natural, their environment refined and tranquil, emphasizing "self-entertainment" rather than "entertaining others." This contrasts sharply with court or genre paintings depicting musical performances, deliberately distinguishing the boundaries between the "elegant" (ya) and the "vulgar" (su), thereby consolidating the literati's sense of identity superiority.

#### **IV. Creation of Ambiance: The Resonant Poetic Interaction Between Player, Listener, and the Painting**

Painting is a static art, while qin music is fluid. Southern Song painters, through ingenious conception, made the interaction between player and listener key to creating the painting's ambiance and stimulating the viewer's imagination.

In solitary scenes, the "listener" is often nature itself. In "Appreciating Plums under the Moonlight," the scholar takes the plum blossoms and moon as his kindred spirits; in "Listening Quietly to the Wind in the Pines," the celestial sound of the wind through the pines responds to the qin's music. The player's intense concentration merges him with nature, co-creating a profound ambiance of "forgetting both self and object," "heaven and humanity as one" (wuwo liangwang, tianren heyi). Here, the listener (nature) is silent, yet through the player's posture and the environment's enhancement, seems filled with beautiful resonance.

In gathering scenes, the listeners are real people. Their presence is crucial. In "Pounding Tea," the absorbed expression and body language of the listener provide a "visible" certification of the qin music's beauty. They constitute an internal, ideal field of reception, guiding the external viewer to imagine and experience the invisible sound. The subtle interaction between playing and listening—one pouring out their heart, the other comprehending intuitively—together composes a visualized "High Mountains, Flowing Water." The意境 lies in the mutual understanding and spiritual communion between kindred spirits.

In journeying scenes, both playing and listening are imminent. The意境 lies in "suspense" and "anticipation." The journey itself, with the qin in tow, is a poetic process. The depth of the landscape and the length of the road are preemptively imbued with the future glory of encountering a zhiyin and sharing culture. The意境 is fluid, incomplete, inviting the viewer to complete the elegant story about to unfold.

## V. Condensation of Connotation: The Aesthetic and Spiritual Imagery of the Guqin

In summary, the image of the guqin in Southern Song paintings condenses multiple layers of aesthetic and spiritual significance, becoming a concentrated symbol of the era's spirit.

*Beauty of "Ethereal Emptiness" (Qingkong):* The qin's clear, cold tone and simple, elegant form harmonized with the "one-corner, half-side" compositions and extensive blank space of Southern Song landscapes, jointly shaping an aesthetic realm of "ethereal emptiness." This realm rejected superfluity, clamor, and vulgarity, pursuing spiritual clarity and spatial transparency, reflecting the unique subtlety and refinement of Southern Song art.

*Aspiration of "Lonely Loftiness" (Gugao):* Whether sitting alone in a secluded grove or visiting a recluse with qin in tow, the guqin was often associated with imagery of the lone plum, pine, crane, or secluded orchid. It symbolized the scholar-official's "lonely lofty" resolve to uphold his integrity and resist vulgar trends amidst political frustration or dynastic decline. This was a tragic form of heroism, an individual's spiritual stance to preserve dignity in the face of vast historical forces.

*Longing for "Seeking Friendship" (Qiuyou):* The motif of "visiting a friend with a qin" profoundly reveals the deep spiritual yearning of Southern Song literati—the craving for understanding and like-minded companions (zhiyin). In an era of partial peace and factional strife, true understanding and shared ideals were particularly precious. The guqin, as the most elegant gift and a cipher for spiritual connection, carried their eternal "seeking friendship" desire, traversing landscapes to unite with kindred souls. This was both a social longing and an aspiration for constructing an ideal cultural community.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The guqin in Southern Song painting is far from a simple depiction of a musical instrument; it is a comprehensive cultural symbol integrating function, identity, ambiance, and spirit. Through the classification into "solitary performance," "gatherings," and "journeying," we can clearly see how the guqin moved through the private spaces, social spheres, and idealized journeys of the Southern Song literati. It was both a verifier of scholar-official status and an objectification of their inner state of mind; a key element in creating pictorial poetry, and, moreover, a perfect vessel bearing the era's aesthetics and spirit of "ethereal emptiness," "lonely loftiness," and "seeking friendship." Its interpretation provides an essential key to understanding the Southern Song literati's way of life, values, emotional structure, and the interactive relationship between art and spirit. The harmony between qin and painting resonates with the very soul of an era.

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