

On Artistic Characteristics of the Bold and Unrestrained School's Song Ci Set to Music

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Abstract: *In ancient Chinese literary forms, Song Ci is the pinnacle of musical literature, mainly divided into two schools : one is the bold and unconstrained school, the other is the graceful and restrained school. Among them, the Song Ci set to music of the boldness school is known for its broad themes, sincere and passionate emotions. By using the methods of literature analysis and case studies, this paper finds that the bold and unrestrained Song Ci has the characteristics of penetrating the past and present as for time, covering the universe as for space, being grand and powerful in subject matter, being sincere and passionate in emotion, and being straightforward in expression, and thus have a strong artistic appeal. Ci writers of bold and unrestrained school are represented by Su Shi and Xin Qiji. This paper mainly takes Su Shi's classic work „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff” and Xin Qiji's classic work „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou” as examples to analyze the artistic characteristics of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci from both literary and musical perspectives, thereby deepening the understanding of the artistic essence of the Song Ci in both Chinese and English academic circles. It is helpful for the inheritance and development of Chinese excellent traditional poetry and music culture.*

Keywords: *Bold and unrestrained Song Ci; Artistic characteristics; music; Su Shi; Xin Qiji;*

Introduction

In terms of the political and historical context of the emergence and development of Song Ci set to music, China experienced a period of turmoil and division known as the „Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms”, from 902 AD to 979 AD, until the Song Dynasty, established in 960 AD, eliminated the last of the „Ten Kingdoms”, in 979 AD, achieving a relatively unified situation. The words „relatively unified” here imply that in history of the Song Dynasty, the regime was in a state of confrontation with northern kingdoms named Jin and Western Xia, and later the Mongol regime, and did not complete the overall unification of China, even being conquered by the Mongols in 1279. So, relatively speaking, although the Song Dynasty was once very prosperous in terms of economy and culture, there was always a serious external threat. The anxiety of the people of the Song Dynasty over such threats and their grief over the failure of the unification cause were also reflected in the musical literary form of the dynasty known as „Song Ci”, especially in the works of the bold and unrestrained poets such as Yue Fei, Lu You and Xin Qiji.

In terms of the artistic status of the Song Ci set to music, Song Ci, which has always been sung with music and is loved by the Chinese public, especially the lower classes, to this day, is a peak in the history of Chinese art. In terms of style, it is mainly divided into two schools:

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one is the bold and unconstrained school, the other is the graceful and restrained school. The former is represented by writers such as Su Shi and Xin Qiji, who are concerned about the fate of the country and the nation in terms of subject matter, and are known for expressing either lofty aspirations or grief, anger and anxiety in terms of emotions. The representative writers of the latter are Li Qingzhao, Yan Shu and others, who mostly focus on love between men and women and express emotions more euphemistically and delicately. Both schools have had a profound influence on contemporary China in terms of subject matters, forms and aesthetics.

1. Topic, Current State and Methods of the Research

In terms of research topic, this paper aims to focus on the artistic characteristics of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci set to music. By systematically sorting out the literary and musical characteristics of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci set to music, we will gain a deeper understanding of its artistic charm and lay a theoretical foundation for subsequent research. We will take representative figures such as Su Shi and Xin Qiji, as well as their works, as examples to explore the causes of their style, artistic achievements and their influence on later generations. Ultimately, I hope to help contemporary lyricists and composers through my research and contribute to the better inheritance and promotion of Chinese excellent traditional poetry and music culture.

In terms of the current state of research on this subject in both Chinese and English academic circles, there have been previous studies on the relationship between Song Ci and music², but no results have been seen specifically on the artistic characteristics of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci with music.

We will conduct the study using two methods: One is the literature study method, which will analyze the creative background of the representative lyricists of the bold and unrestrained school through literature, and explore the artistic characteristics of their music in terms of subject matter, imageries, structure, rhetorics, rhythms, and cadences. The other is to use case study method to focus on the representative musical compositions of Su Shi and Xin Qiji, the representative figures of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci. This paper selects „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff”³ of Sushi and „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou”⁴ of Xin Qiji as example. Composers throughout the ages have composed many pieces of music for these two poems. From these pieces, we have chosen the two composed by Yin Qing for the former and by Huang Zi for the latter.

2. The language style and musical style of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci

The bold and unrestrained Song Ci often gives readers a strong visual impact and auditory shock by depicting grand time and space in imagery, creating interlaced long and short sentence combinations, and pursuing contrast in tones and rhyming at the end of words. The

² Jia Zhong. 2012. „A Study on the Influence of Song Dynasty Music and Literature Consumption on the Development of Song Ci”. *Musical Composition*, (05): 115-117.

³ Su Shi. (n.d.). „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff”. translated by Xu Yuanchong. 2007. *100 Tang And Song Ci Poems*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, pp. 149-151.

⁴ Xin Qiji. (n.d.). „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou”. translated by Xu Yuanchong. 2007. *100 Tang And Song Ci Poems*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, p. 289.

most notable feature of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci is the combination of boldness and delicacy. The two characteristics interpenetrate, complement and enhance each other. The poets of this school love the country, care about the people, have lofty ideals, strong wills, open-minded characters, passionate emotions, broad visions, delicate observations and direct expressions. For instance, in terms of the observation of the real world, Su Shi's „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff" and Xin Qiji's „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou" have both mentioned the Long River. The Long River, which is over 6,300 kilometers long, is the longest in Asia and the third longest in the world. It has been a battlefield of many wars. During these wars, many heroes emerged, such as Cao Cao, Sun Quan, Liu Bei and Zhou Yu. When Su Shi or Xin Qiji stood by the river, looking at the surging and flowing river, remembering the wars that took place here and the heroes in them, and comparing their own unfulfilled ambitions, they couldn't help but sigh at the vastness of the world, the smallness of human beings, the aging of life, the difficulty in finding great leaders, and the difficulty in establishing great achievements. However, their observations of all this conceals their carefulness, and their directly expressions of their rich inner feelings conceals delicacy, which is artistically infectious. The bold and unrestrained school breaks away from the traditional euphemistically and delicately way of expression, dares to confront life, and dares to express their true feelings directly even when they suffer a serious political blow, thus facilitating the reader's understanding of the meaning of the work. For instance, in „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff", Su Shi directly expressed his boundless yearning for ancient heroes, and also revealed his deep sigh over his own failure to achieve political success, with intense and touching emotions. In addition, the bold and unrestrained poets are good at using vivid and straightforward language, supplemented by rhetorical devices such as metaphor and hyperbole, to make the expression of emotions more distinct and powerful. Xin Qiji, in „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou", uses the flowing water of the Long River as a metaphor for the ever-changing history, which also reflects the author's inner emotions surging like the waves of the river, thus making a comprehensive expression of time and space, external environment and inner emotions. In form of language art, it brings a full sensory impact to the reader.

The bold and unrestrained Song Ci achieves the mutual response, amplification and harmonious unity of the two artistic means of music and Song Ci in the creation of grand artistic conception and the expression of intense emotions. The bold and unrestrained Song Ci often employs rhetorical devices such as hyperbole and metaphor, while the melodies of the music complement them through variations and repetitions, making the artistic conception and emotions more rich and full. The combination of the rhythm and cadence of the music and the cadence of the lyrics itself creates a multiplier effect of artistic charm. For instance, Su Shi's „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff" not only depicts the distant historical space of the wars among ancient Chinese heroes, but also provides literary space for them to display their heroic spirit on the battlefield, and leaves musical space for first-class Chinese composers like Yin Qing to express their emotions through music.

3. Representative Figures and Works of Bold and Unrestrained Song Ci Set to Music

3.1. Representative Figures

3.1.1. Introduction to Su Shi

Su Shi (1037-1101 AD) was the pioneer of the bold and unrestrained school in the Song Dynasty. He experienced many ups and downs in the Northern Song officialdom, but remained optimistic and open-minded, diligent in governance and caring for the people. As one of the eight most famous literary figures of the Tang and Song dynasties, he broke through the limitations of the form of Ci, which had previously only depicted love between men and women, elevating it from an accessory to music to independent lyric poems and enhancing the literary status of Ci. His lyrics are characterized by the interweaving of boldness and delicacy, and the coexistence of grandeur and refinement. For instance, in „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff”, Su Shi depicted the magnificent river scene with

*„The Great River eastward flows,
With its waves are gone all those
Gallant heroes of bygone years.”*

Then, with admiration and envy for the heroes represented by Zhou Yu, he depicted their wisdom, optimism, bravery, strength and grace in the war. This combination of boldness and delicacy is the unique charm of Su Shi's lyrics. Su Shi's poems are also known for their direct expression of emotions. He was bold enough to express his true feelings without reservation. For example, in his „Hunting in Mizhou”⁵, he wrote:

*„Rejuvenated, I my fiery zeal display:
On left hand leash, a yellow hound,
On right hand wrist, a falcon gray.
A thousand silk-capped, sable-coated horsemen sweep
Across the rising ground
And hillocks steep.
Townsppeople pour from out the city gate
To watch the tiger-hunting magistrate.*

*Heart gladdened with strong wine, who cares
About a few new-frosted hairs?
When will the court imperial send
Me as their envoy?
With flags and banners then I'll bend
My bow like a full moon, and aiming northwest, I
Will shoot down the fierce Wolf from out the sky.”*

⁵ Su Shi. 1075. „Hunting at Mizhou”. translated by Xu Yuanchong. 2007. *100 Tang And Song Ci Poems*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, pp. 123-125.

The poem, through concise and vivid language, conveys his unrestrained character and his aspiration to achieve great things. This candid expression of emotion gives his lyrics a strong appeal that can deeply touch the hearts of readers. In addition, he is adept at using various rhetorical devices to create imageries, giving his words a distinct sense of rhythm and strength. For another example, in his „Prelude to the Melody of Water”⁶, he wrote:

*„How long will the bright moon appear?
Wine-cup in hand,I ask the sky.
I do not know what time of year
It would be tonight in the palace on high.
Riding the wind,there I would fly,
Yet I fear the crystal palace would be
Far too high and cold for me.
I rise and dance,with my shadow I play.
On high as on earth,would it be as gay?*

*The moon goes round the mansion red
Through gauze-draped windows soft to shed
Her light upon the sleepless bed.
Against man she should have no spite.
Why then when people part is she oft full and bright?
Men have sorrow and joy, they part or meet again;
The moon may be bright or dim, she may wax or wane.
There has been nothing perfect since the olden days.
So let us wish that man
Will live long as he can!
Though miles apart,we'll share the beauty she displays.”*

The poem expresses the love for the bright moon, the imagination of heaven and the contemplation of lives in concise and powerful language.

3.1.1. Introduction to Xin Qiji

Xin Qiji (1140-1207 AD) was both a literary artist and a martial artist, as well as a wise and courageous general capable of commanding an army. Unfortunately, the Southern Song officialdom he was in was defeated by the Jin kingdom, which was founded by the northern nomads. The trend of seeking peace and indulging in pleasure was prevalent. As a hawk, he was repeatedly suppressed. Despite of his talent, he was unable to realize his dream of recovering his homeland through the northern expeditions and could only grow old and die in despair. In terms of historical background, in 1127 AD, the Jin army captured the capital of the Northern Song

⁶ Su Shi. (n.d.). „Prelude to the Melody of Water”, translated by Xu Yuanchong. 2007. *100 Tang And Song Ci Poems*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, pp. 131-133.

Dynasty, Bianjing (today's Kaifeng City, Henan Province), and captured a large number of people of the Northern Song Dynasty, including the emperor's father Zhao Ji and the emperor Zhao Huan, and took them away. In the same year, Zhao Gou, another son of Zhao Ji, established the Southern Song Dynasty with Lin'an in the south (today's Hangzhou, Zhejiang Province) as its capital. This dynasty was militarily weaker than the Northern Song, and like the Northern Song, it was under the threat of the Jin, with its defensive border moving southward to the Qinling Mountains-Huai River. After the Mongols conquered the Jin in 1234 AD, they conquered the Southern Song in 1279 AD. Xin Qiji lived during the period between the fall of the Northern Song and the fall of the Jin. His poems deeply reflect the era full of internal and external troubles for the Southern Song, filled with anxiety about the fate of the country and the people and the longing for the northern expedition to recover the homeland, as well as the grief, anger and despair of being suppressed by the Southern Song officialdom and unable to launch a northern expedition to serve the country. He once wrote,

*„Recovering the lost land for the sovereign,
'Tis everlasting fame that we would win.
But alas!white hair grows!”*

This expressed his determination and confidence to make achievements for the country, and his concern that he would not be able to realize his dream of recapture due to his old age.⁷In his old age, he expressed his helplessness and lamentation in the poem „Congratulations to the Bridegroom”⁸, saying:

*„That I should have aged so!
And my fellows, alas! how many still remain?
Life spent with naught to show
But hair turned silvery in vain.
Yet with a smile I part
With all that is mundane,
Whereof nothing gladdens the heart.”*

3.2. Analysis of Musical Characteristics of Representative Works

3.2.1. „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff” composed by Yin Qing

Let's take a look at this poem first:

⁷ Xin Qiji. 1143. „Written for Chen Liang”. translated by Xu Yuanchong. 2007. *100 Tang And Song Ci Poems*. Beijing: China Translation & Publishing Corporation, pp. 271-273.

⁸ Xin Qiji.(n.d.). „Tune: Congratulations to the Bridegroom”. translated by Xu Yuanchong. 2012. *300 Song Lyrics*. Beijing: Intercontinental Press, pp. 175-176.

*The Great River eastward flows,
With its waves are gone all those
Gallant heroes of bygone years.
West of the ancient fortress appears
The Red Cliff. Here General Zhou won his early fame
When the Three Kingdoms were all in flame.
Jagged rocks tower in the air,
Swashing waves beat on the shore,
Rolling up a thousand heaps of snow.
To match the hills and the river so fair,
How many heroes brave of yore
Made a great show!*

*I fancy General Zhou at the height
Of his success, with a plume fan in hand,
In a silk hood, so brave and bright,
Laughing and jesting with his bride so fair,
While enemy ships were destroyed as planned
Like shadowy castles in the air.
Should their souls revisit this land,
Sentimental, his wife would laugh to say,
Younger than they,
I have my hair all turned gray.
Life is but like a passing dream,
I'd drink to the moon which once saw them on the stream.*

Throughout history, many composers have composed music for Su Shi's „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff“. Here, we take the piece composed by composer Yin Qing for this poem as an example to illustrate the musical characteristics of the bold and unrestrained Song Ci set to music. There is a work performed by Chinese famous singer Song Zuying at her doctoral graduation concert in 2012 based on this version available for appreciation on the Internet⁹. In the prelude, the tempo gradually changes from slow to fast, and the pitch gradually changes from soothing to passionate, like the sound of water that a person hears slowly approaching the Long River from a distance, which naturally leads to the scene of the great river flowing eastward, and the scene of the great waves washing away the sand triggers the imagination that all the heroic figures in history seem to have drifted away with the river. Then, the singer slowly introduces the

⁹ Su Shi. (n.d.). „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff“. Sung by Song Zuying. 2012. Retrieved May 22, 2025, from https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1hP4y1f7Lp/?spm_id_from=333.337.search-card.all.click&vd_source=b0bdf15b76f1ad6573d82b743a509c5c.

location of the ancient military fortress and the ancient battlefield of Red Cliff through singing, and depicts the battlefield environment with the ability of strong winds to stir up sand and stones and snow like waves, allowing people to feel and imagine the intense atmosphere of the battlefield. In this picturesque setting, a long „ah” is used to evoke the remembrance of the many heroes of ancient times. Among them, the most memorable is Zhou Yu, who led the Wu army to defeat Cao Cao’s army. With a silk scarf on his head and a feather fan in his hand, he had led his army burning down the enemy’s warships with a fire attack soon after the war began, leaving the enemy in a crushing defeat. But this is not the climax, for the climax will come later when Su Shi sighed about the life. He imagined that if Zhou Yu and Xiao Qiao, the couple of ancient times, were transported to the present, they would mock him for his premature graying hair because of sentimentality. Hair turning white means old age, meaning that one’s life is coming to an end, and thus the life looks like a dream. Rather than feeling sad, it’s better to toast to the moon’s shadow in the river. The singer should sing Su Shi’s imagined dialogue with Zhou Yu and his wife twice, and sing the exclamation „Life is like a dream” four times. At this point, the melody and the singing reach a climax and then come to an abrupt end, leaving an endless aftertaste.

念奴娇 赤壁怀古
(宋祖英演唱)

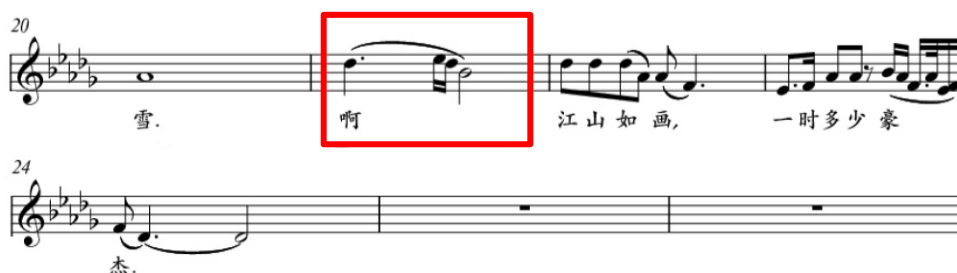
苏 轼 词
印 青 曲
白栋梁配伴奏

Adagio

The musical score is written for piano accompaniment. It begins with a tempo marking of *Adagio*. The first system shows the right hand playing a melody of eighth and quarter notes, while the left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment with chords and eighth notes. The second system continues this pattern, with the right hand featuring a long, sustained note (likely the 'ah' mentioned in the text) over a series of chords. The third system shows a change in dynamics to *f* (forte), with both hands playing more active, rhythmic patterns. The score is marked with 'pp' (pianissimo) and 'f' (forte).



Example 1: Prelude to „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff” Sections 1-8



Example 2: „Memories of the Past at Red Cliff” Sections 20-24

3.2.2 „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou” Composed by Huang Zi

There have been many composers who composed for Xin Qiji’s „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou”, and here we choose the version composed by Huang Zi, the great master of Chinese music. There is an online version of the work performed by Chinese famous singer Liao Changyong in 2017 based on this version¹⁰. Jingkou is now the city of Zhenjiang, Jiangsu Province. There is a Beigu Tower on Beigu Hill where one can climb to look north of the Central Plains. The poem unfolds in the form of three questions and three answers, expressing deep concern about the rise and fall of the nation and lamentation about one’s own destiny. The first part of the poem begins with „Where is the Central Plain?” The question and answer begins with the magnificent view of the Beigu Tower, while expressing the hero’s grief and remembrance of the lost Central Plain. He went on to ask and answer his own questions, saying that there have been many rise and fall of nations in history, just like the Long River, flowing ceaselessly. The melody moves on here, embodying a mix of boldness and sentimentality. Then, in the second section, the author looks back on the history of the young general Sun Quan leading the Wu army to occupy the southeast of China and resisting Cao Cao’s army from north of China by means of wars. Then the question is who among the heroes of the world is qualified to be Sun Quan’s opponent, and the answer is only

¹⁰ Xin Qiji. (n.d.). „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou”. sung by Liao Changyong. 2017. Retrieved May 22, 2025 from https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1JD4y1D7T7/?spm_id_from=333.1387.favlist.content.click&vd_source=b0bdf15b76f1ad6573d82b743a509c5c.

Cao Cao and Liu Bei, to the extent that even Cao Cao once said that he wished his son would be a hero like Sun Quan. By praising Sun Quan, the author implies that although he had many skills, he had not encountered a political leader or military commander wise enough, expressing his helplessness and frustration of having no way to serve his country and wasting his time.

南乡子·登京口北固亭有怀

辛弃疾（南宋）词
黄自（1904-1938）曲

Largamente ♩=78

何处望神州？满眼风光北固楼。

Example 3: „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou” Sections 1-6

天下英雄谁敌手？曹刘。



Example 4: „Reflections on Ascending the Tower on the Northern Hill at Jingkou” Sections 18-25

4. Conclusions

This paper reveals the multiple values of the musical literary genre through an in-depth analysis of the artistic characteristics of the Song Ci with bold and unrestrained music. It showcases the depth of Chinese culture through grand spatio-temporal imagery, direct emotional expression, and the perfect blend of music and words.

First of all, the bold and unrestrained Song Ci with musical accompaniment, with its unique artistic expressiveness, transcended simple literary creation and became a comprehensive art form. The works of Su Shi and Xin Qiji, as representatives, not only reflect the ups and downs of their personal destinies, but also carry profound thoughts on the rise and fall of the nation and social changes. This way of combining individual emotions with patriotic sentiments gives the bold Song ci a strong sense of universality and contemporary significance, enabling readers to resonate across time and space.

Secondly, the role of background music in the unrestrained Song Ci cannot be ignored. The musical melody further enhances the emotional tension and artistic conception of the lyrics through variations in rhythm, cadence and pitch. For example, composers Yin Qing and Huang Ziyi have given new life to ancient Song ci, enabling them to breathe new life in the modern context. This shows that the music is not only a complement to the lyrics, but also a process of recreation, providing a rich source of inspiration for later artists.

Finally, the study of Song Ci with bold and unrestrained music has important implications for promoting the international dissemination of China's fine traditional culture. Only by combining modern technological means and fully exploring the intrinsic value of traditional culture can ancient art forms regain their lasting vitality. Future research could further explore the application of artificial intelligence in music composition technology in the dissemination of Song Ci, while strengthening exchanges and mutual learning of music cultures with other countries and regions to jointly promote the diversity of world culture.

To sum up, the bold and unrestrained music of Song Ci is not only a precious heritage of Chinese culture, but also a bond connecting the past and the future. Through in-depth exploration of its artistic characteristics, we can not only better understand the essence of this art form, but also provide new ideas and directions for the creative transformation and innovative development of China's fine traditional culture.

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