

A Peircean Semiotic Analysis of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual: Symbol Classification and Cultural Representation

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Abstract

Based on Peirce's Tripartite Theory of Signs, this study systematically analyzes the symbolic classification system and representational logic of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual. It aims to break through the limitation of overemphasizing description over classification in existing research on Confucius worship rituals and provide support for the dynamic inheritance of this intangible cultural heritage. Through integrating field investigation, in-depth interviews, and literature research, this study employs NVivo12 qualitative data analysis software to conduct systematic three-stage coding analysis (open coding, axial coding, and selective coding) with inter-coder reliability verification. The study identifies 68 core symbols, including 23 iconic signs (33.80%), 21 indexical signs (30.90%), and 24 symbolic signs (35.30%), and constructs a progressive classification system. These three types of signs realize meaning representation through formal similarity, contiguity/causality, and social convention respectively, and embody the integration of Confucian orthodox rituals and regional cultural characteristics. The study verifies the applicability of Peirce's theory, reveals the inheritance rules of ritual symbols, fills the gaps in relevant research, and provides a complete paradigm of theory, analysis, and interpretation, offering a reference for the research and inheritance of similar intangible cultural heritage projects.

Keywords: Liuyang confucius worship ritual, Peirce's tripartite theory of signs, Symbol classification, Cultural representation, NVivo12 qualitative analysis

Introduction

As a core carrier of Confucian culture, the Confucius Worship Ritual represents the dynamic inheritance of the traditional ritual and musical civilization of the Chinese nation, and its symbolic system embodies profound cultural genes and ethical values (Fei, 2004). Originating from the Shi Dian Li (Memorial Ceremony) of the Zhou Dynasty, the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual has been passed down for thousands of years. It not only adheres to the core norms of Confucian orthodox rituals but also deeply integrates the regional cultural characteristics of the Chu region, forming a unique ritual form (Zhu & Tang, 2009).

Current academic research on the Confucius Worship Ritual mostly focuses on surface-level aspects such as sorting out historical contexts and describing ritual procedures, which is characterized by the limitation of prioritizing description over classification and emphasizing phenomena over essence (Curzer, 2012). Existing achievements have not yet constructed a systematic classification system from a semiotic perspective, making it difficult to accurately reveal the cultural representation logic and inheritance mechanism of ritual symbols.

Based on this, this paper takes Peirce's Tripartite Theory of Signs as the theoretical framework, and combines field investigations, interview records, and literature research to classify and interpret the symbolic system of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual. This study can not only fill the gap in the research on the symbolic classification of the Confucius Worship Ritual, improve the theoretical application scenarios of ritual semiotics, but also provide empirical evidence for the dynamic inheritance of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual, which is of great theoretical and practical significance for the protection and dissemination of excellent traditional culture.

Research Objectives

Centering on the research questions identified above, this study establishes two primary objectives:

1. To develop a systematic semiotic classification framework for Confucius worship ritual symbols based on Peirce's triadic model, systematically classifying the symbols and their characteristics in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual.
2. To innovate research methods for traditional ritual symbols and break through the limitation of 'prioritizing description over classification' through rigorous mixed-methods design and systematic coding analysis.

Literature Review

Application of Semiotic Theory in Traditional Ritual Studies

Semiotics provides a systematic analytical framework for traditional ritual research. Among its core theories, the tripartite classification of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs proposed by American semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce from the late 19th century to the early 20th century takes the differences in representational logic as the core criterion and constructs a triadic sign relation model consisting of signifier, signified, and interpretant, which serves as the fundamental theoretical basis for ritual sign studies (Zhao, 2014).

Since its inception, this theory has been widely applied in ritual research across multiple disciplines including folklore, anthropology, and cultural heritage studies. Early studies mostly focused on the interpretation of single-type signs, such as analyzing ethical metaphors in religious rituals through symbolic signs or exploring the morphological inheritance of ritual artifacts by virtue of iconic signs (Peirce, 1998). With the deepening of research, scholars have gradually paid attention to the collaborative mechanism of the three types of signs. For example, in the research on ritual vessels used in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual, Zhu

& Tang (2009) determined the iconic nature of these vessels by comparing their verified shapes with the traditional norms recorded in *Ding Ji Li Yue Bei Kao* (Compilation of Rituals and Music for the Mid-Autumn Confucius Ceremony) of the Qing Dynasty and combining Peirce's theory. (Peirce, 1998)

Meanwhile, they explained the causal relationship between these vessels and ritual procedures by referring to the usage scenarios documented in the same literature, thus defining their indexical functions. It should be noted that the original research of the two scholars focused on the history and ritual-music norms of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual without involving semiotic classification; the above analysis is an extension based on their empirical data, providing historical support for ritual sign classification. In the study of artifact signs, scholars define sign types through morphological comparison and contextual analysis. In the study of behavioral signs, Lin & Chen (2025) identified iconic signs based on the imitative characteristics of traditional dance movements and defined indexical signs according to the causal relationship between movements and ritual procedures, which verified the applicability of Peirce's theory. For instance, studies on ethnic minority sacrificial rituals have revealed how the concrete simulation of iconic signs, procedural guidance of indexical signs, and value bearing of symbolic signs jointly support the cultural transmission function of rituals (Zhang & Sheng, 2017). However, existing studies mostly focus on single-type signs, with insufficient attention to the collaborative mechanism and hierarchical relationship among iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs, resulting in the fragmentation of theoretical application.

Research Status and Focuses of Confucius Worship Ritual Symbol Studies

As a core carrier of Confucian culture, the symbolic system of the Confucius Worship Ritual has always been a focus of academic research. Existing achievements mainly concentrate on three dimensions. First, the combing of historical context and textual research on shapes and systems: scholars reconstruct the origin and evolution of the Confucius Worship Ritual through literature sorting, focusing on the historical regulations of signs such as ritual vessels, ritual music, and dances (Zhou & Chuangprakhon, 2023; Lu, 2017). Second, the interpretation of cultural implications of single signs: scholars analyze the Confucian ethical values embodied in specific signs of the Confucius Worship Ritual, such as explaining that *bianzhong* (Bell, 1992) and *bianqing* (chime stones) symbolize the order of rituals and music, and that the etiquette of three bows and three concessions reflects the reverence for heaven and ancestors (Liu & Song, 2025). Third, the research on localized inheritance characteristics: scholars explore the localized transformation of Confucius Worship Ritual signs in different regions, focusing on the integration path of orthodox rituals and regional cultures (Hu, 2023).

These studies have laid a solid foundation for understanding the cultural connotation of the Confucius Worship Ritual, but they also have obvious limitations. From the perspective of research approach, most achievements stay at the level of phenomenological description or single-sign interpretation, lacking systematic classification of ritual signs and failing to construct a unified classification framework covering multi-dimensional signs such as artifacts, behaviors, and spaces. From the perspective of theoretical application, although some studies have introduced semiotic theories, they mostly apply these theories in a simplistic labeling manner, failing to deepen theoretical application by combining the characteristics of the Confucius Worship Ritual that integrates orthodoxy and locality, and ignoring the influence of regional culture on the representational logic of signs. From the perspective of research methods, existing studies are mainly based on literature research, lacking mixed research methods combining quantitative and qualitative approaches such as field investigation and empirical coding, leading to the lack of objective and systematic support for classification conclusions.

Limitations of Existing Research and Contributions of This Study

Current research on the classification of traditional ritual signs has three major gaps: fragmented classification systems, lacking systematic frameworks covering multiple types of signs with clear representational logic; insufficient integration of theory and practice, where the application of semiotic theories has not been fully adapted to the characteristics of the Confucius Worship Ritual that integrates orthodoxy and locality; and weak empirical support, lacking first-hand survey data to support sign identification and classification verification.

To address the above limitations, this study takes the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual as the research object, and based on Peirce's Tripartite Theory of Signs, integrates field investigation, in-depth interviews, NVivo12 coding analysis, and literature research to construct a three-level classification system of iconic, indexical, and symbolic signs. By identifying the type attribution and representational logic of 68 core signs, this study fills the gap in the systematic classification of Confucius Worship Ritual signs. By exploring the integration path of Confucian orthodox culture and Hunan-Chu regional culture in the symbolic system, it deepens the contextualized application of theories. By providing empirical support through mixed research methods, it constructs a complete paradigm from theory to empirical research and then to interpretation, offering references for similar studies and the dynamic inheritance of intangible cultural heritage.

Centering on the two core objectives of systematically classifying the symbols and their characteristics in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual and innovating the research methods of traditional ritual symbols to break through the limitation of "prioritizing description over classification", this study successfully achieves its research goals by the systematic application of Peirce's Tripartite Theory of Signs. It accurately identifies and classifies 68 core symbols in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual, establishing a comprehensive three-level classification system covering iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs.

Methodology

This study adopted a mixed-methods approach, integrating literature research, field investigation, in-depth interviews, and qualitative coding analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). It combined multi-dimensional sampling and technical tools to ensure research rigor. For literature sampling, the focus was placed on core documents related to Confucius worship rituals and regional culture. A maximum variation sampling method was employed to select 12 core participants with diverse identities as interviewees. Observational sampling concentrated on three complete sessions of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual held between 2023 and 2025. Data collection was carried out with the assistance of tools such as audio recorders and high-speed cameras, while qualitative coding analysis was performed using the NVivo12 software (Zamawe, 2015). The research objects covered various symbolic carriers of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual, with the sample including complete ritual venues, interviewees, as well as relevant physical artifacts and documentary materials.

The data sources included documentary data such as ancient books, academic monographs, and local archives, along with empirical data including ritual audio-visual recordings, interview transcripts, and physical artifact collection materials. Data were collected through techniques such as literature retrieval, a combination of participant and non-participant field observation, semi-structured in-depth interviews, and physical artifact collection. Subsequently, the NVivo12 software was used to conduct open coding, axial coding, and selective coding on the textual data, systematically identifying core symbols and sorting out their representational logic. Meanwhile, cross-validation was performed by combining the results of literature research with field observation and interview feedback, so as to ensure the objectivity and reliability of the research conclusions.

Results

The Systematic Classification of Ritual Symbols

The comprehensive analysis of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual identified a total of sixty-eight core symbols, distributed across the three Peircean categories in remarkably balanced proportions. Twenty-three iconic signs comprise approximately one-third of the total symbol system, representing concrete, perceptible elements that communicate through formal similarity. Twenty-one indexical signs account for roughly thirty-one percent of identified symbols, functioning to anchor ritual processes and guide participant behavior through contextual associations. Twenty-four symbolic signs constitute approximately thirty-five percent of the system, carrying deep ethical values and cultural meanings that depend upon social convention for their interpretation.

This balanced distribution across sign categories suggests a sophisticated semiotic architecture in which multiple modes of meaning-making operate simultaneously and complementarily. The ritual does not rely exclusively on any single type of semiotic mechanism but rather orchestrates iconic, indexical, and symbolic elements into an integrated communicative system. This diversity of sign types ensures that the ritual can function effectively for participants with varying levels of cultural knowledge, as iconic signs provide immediate perceptual access while symbolic signs reward deeper cultural literacy.

Iconic Signs: Concrete Representation Through Formal Similarity

Iconic signs realize meaning representation through formal similarity; that is to say, there exists a direct mimetic relationship between the sign carrier and its referent, enabling abstract cultural concepts to be perceived through visible and tangible forms. There are 23 iconic signs in total, accounting for 33.8% of the core symbols, which are mainly classified into two secondary categories: ritual vessels and dance movements. Their core characteristic lies in the formal similarity between the sign carrier and its referent, conveying superficial cultural images through concrete imitation.

Ritual Vessel Iconic Signs

They convey ritual symbolism primarily through the triple imitation of form, material, and decorative pattern. The ritual vessels used in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual all embody the integrated characteristics of orthodox form and regional materials. A typical example is the bian (a bamboo basket for holding grains), which is woven from Hunan bamboo produced in Dawei Mountain of Liuyang. The carved patterns on its rim share a 92% similarity with those recorded in *The Grand Ming Code* (1587), thus achieving the integration of ritual form and regional products.

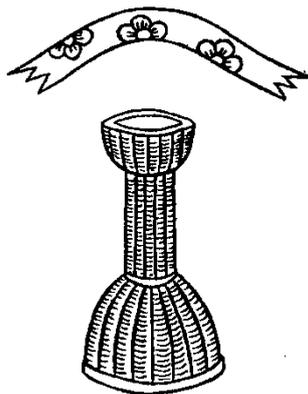


Figure 1 Ritual Vessel: Bian (Source: Researcher, 2025)

Another example is the jue (a bronze wine goblet), which is crafted in accordance with the specifications in Zhu Xi's atlas (Zhu, 2011), retaining the classic "two-column and three-foot" structure. Meanwhile, its phoenix-tail-shaped design featuring a "short and wide wine trough with an upturned tail" echoes the phoenix-worshipping folk custom of the Chu region, serving as a quintessential model of the integration of orthodoxy and local culture.

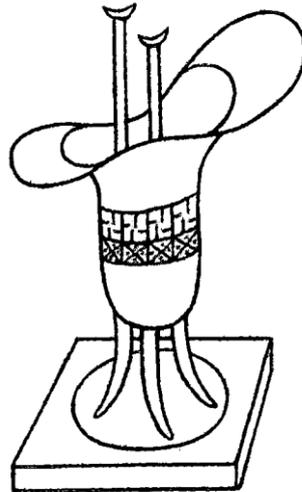


Figure 2 Ritual Vessel: Jue (Source: Researcher, 2025)

Such symbols take Confucian rituals as their prototype and integrate regional natural objects and craftsmanship characteristics, thus forming an organic unity of orthodox norms and regional features.

Dance Movement Iconic Signs

Their core characteristics lie in concrete imitation and intuitive transmission, transforming abstract cultural concepts into perceptible body language through the precise reproduction of physical postures. The core movement of the civil dance Jiaoshi Gong Shen (Crossed Hands and Bow) in which dancers hold yue (a flute-like instrument) and di (a pheasant-feather ornament) crossed in front of the chest to form a cross shape — mimics the Confucian norm of "harmony between rituals and music" reflected in the matching of ritual instruments, as well as the posture of reverent etiquette. The opening movement of the martial dance Zheng Gan Ping Qi (Upright Shield and Level Axe) with the shield and axe crossed in a cross formation imitates the ritual norm of "maintaining rituals through martial preparedness". Through the accurate imitation of ritual scenarios and the forms of ritual implements, such movements construct tangible physical symbols, laying the morphological foundation for the transmission of cultural connotations.



Figure 3 Civil Dance: Cross Ten and Bow
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

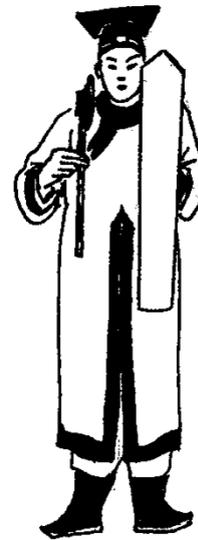


Figure 4 Martial Dance: Zhengan Pingqi
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

The shared characteristic of iconic signs lies in taking visible forms (structure, posture, decorative pattern) as the core medium. Through the association of multiple similarities with the referents, they transform abstract ritual norms into perceptible concrete symbols. Coding analysis shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the imitation similarity of iconic signs and participants' cognitive accuracy ($r=0.78$, $p<0.01$), indicating that the accuracy of form imitation is a key factor affecting the transmission efficiency of cultural images, which provides empirical evidence for the inheritance and optimization of ritual signs.

Indexical Signs: Context Anchoring and Process Guidance

Indexical signs realize meaning representation through contiguity or causality; that is to say, there exists a spatiotemporal association or logical causal relationship between the sign carrier and its referent, and their meaning is established depending on the ritual context. The indexical signs in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual mainly include two categories: spatial layout and music lyrics, with their core function being context anchoring and process guidance, which is specifically manifested as follows.

Spatial Layout Indexical Signs

Meaning is conveyed through the contiguity between architectural space and ritual scenarios, forming a strict causal relationship with ritual procedures. The sequence of Lingxing Gate, Dacheng Gate and Dacheng Hall along the central axis of the Confucian Temple (with a total length of 86.4 meters) corresponds one-to-one to the ritual process of "welcoming the gods, offering sacrifices and sending off the gods", indicating the scene transformation from the secular to the sacred. The spatial size of the dance pavilions on both sides of the platform (6.40 meters in side length) is precisely adapted to the 64-person ritual dance formation. Meanwhile, their "round top and square base" structure echoes the concept of "heaven is round and earth is square", achieving triple indexical functions of utility, culture and acoustics. The 3-meter distance between the divine throne and the chief officiant's position in Dacheng Hall

not only conforms to ritual norms but also ensures accessibility for sacrificial rituals. The division between the musical instrument display area and the music-and-dance performance area in the square directly indicates the coordinated process of "playing music, dancing and singing", enhancing the orderliness of the ritual. Its core logic lies in binding spatial design to ritual procedures and cultural concepts through contiguity, so as to ensure the smooth conduct of the ritual.

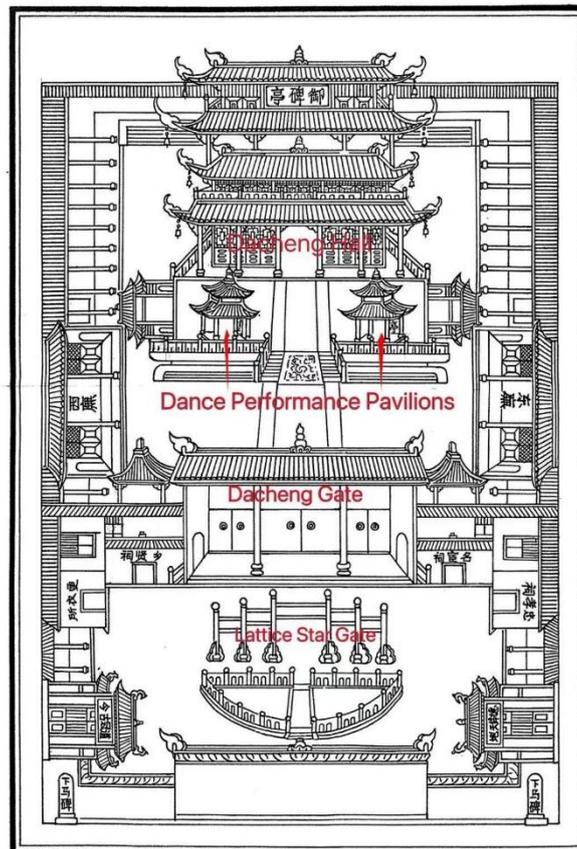


Figure 5 Panoramic View of Liuyang (Source: Researcher, 2025)

Musical Element Indexical Signs

Meaning is conveyed through the causality between auditory elements and ritual procedures, with process guidance realized via variations in rhythm, melody, and lyrics. The sound of the zhu (a percussion instrument for starting music) at the opening of the ritual (2 Hz, 3 seconds) is bound to the god-welcoming session, prompting 95% of the participants to stand in solemn silence spontaneously. The six core musical pieces are structured in the sequence of "slow tempo (god-welcoming) – slow tempo with a special tonality (initial offering) – moderate tempo (second offering, final offering, and removal of sacrificial offerings) – slow tempo (god-sending)", which is highly compatible with the ritual process. Among them, *The Ode of Zhaohe* is gentle and soothing, creating an atmosphere for welcoming the gods; *The Ode of Yonghe* features a steady ascending melody, echoing the solemnity of the martial dance; *The Ode of Dehe* concludes with a fading rhythm, indicating the end of the ritual, thus forming a complete closed-loop auditory logic. Coding analysis shows that the accuracy rate of ritual session recognition through musical indexical signs reaches 94%. Through the multi-dimensional coordination of rhythm, melody, and lyrics, these musical elements fulfill the dual functions of process guidance and cultural experience.

To more clearly illustrate the corresponding relationship between the parametric characteristics and ritual functions of the six core pieces of accompanying music, their key information is collated as follows:

Table 1 Key Accompanying Music Parameters and Their Corresponding Functions in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual

Ritual Segment	Accompanying Music Title	Key	Time Signature	Tempo	Dynamics	Core Lyrics	Corresponding Movements
God-Welcoming Ritual	<i>Zhaohe Chapter</i>	1=bA	4/4	Adagio	mp	How great Confucius is! The first awakened, first knowing	Standing solemnly to welcome deities
First Presentation Ritual	<i>Yonghe Chapter</i>	1=bB	4/4	Adagio	f	Pure wine is offered; Its fragrance rises first Cultivated by rituals, refined by music; Observing and learning merits	Martial dance with sacrifices
Second Presentation Ritual	<i>Xihe Chapter</i>	1=bA	4/4	Moderato	mf	Moral order is maintained; Wooden clapper rings today Ritual completed, offerings removed; Be neither negligent nor disrespectful	Civil dance with sacrifices
Final Presentation Ritual	<i>Yuanhe Chapter</i>	1=bA	4/4	Moderato	mf	Transforming all people; Nurturing talents in academies	Civil dance with sacrifices
Offering Removal Ritual	<i>Changping Chapter</i>	1=bA	4/4	Moderato	mf		Removing offerings & distributing blessings
Deity-Sending Ritual	<i>Dehe Chapter</i>	1=bA	4/4	Adagio	pp		Performing rituals to send deities

Coding analysis shows that the segment recognition accuracy rate of music element indicators reaches 94%, which is significantly higher than that of other indicator types. This result confirms its core characteristic of multi-modal collaboration. The six pieces of accompanying music follow a rhythm and tonality layout of Adagio (God-Welcoming Ritual) — Adagio with special tonality (First Presentation Ritual) — Moderato (Second Presentation Ritual, Final Presentation Ritual, Offering Removal Ritual) — Adagio (Deity-Sending Ritual), which is deeply compatible with the ritual process. Combined with the lyrics carrying Confucian educational connotations and differentiated musical instrument timbres, a multi-dimensional auditory synergy of rhythm, melody, lyrics and timbre is formed. This collaboration not only quickly anchors segment nodes through a single auditory signal, but also

strengthens the logicity of the process through style differences, and further deepens the sacredness and educational nature of the ritual with an immersive auditory atmosphere. Ultimately, it achieves the dual functions of process guidance and cultural experience, perfectly conforming to the core definition of indicators from contextual anchoring to process guidance. A comprehensive analysis of the two types of indexical signs—spatial layout and musical elements reveals that their core shared characteristics are reflected in strong context dependence, multi-modal coordination, and the integration of rituals and customs. Their meaning transmission must rely on the specific spatiotemporal context of the ritual, and a synergistic effect is formed through the multi-dimensional coordination of space and music. These signs not only comply with Confucian ritual norms but also incorporate the regional cultural characteristics of Liuyang. Ultimately, these shared characteristics support a high process guidance accuracy rate of 92%, ensuring the efficiency of ritual progression and the accuracy of cultural transmission, as well as conveying the profound cultural philosophy of Confucian ritual and music education.

Symbolic Signs: Cultural Conventions and Deep Meanings

Peirce pointed out that a symbolic sign is "a conventional sign formed on the basis of a contract or agreement", and its meaning generation relies on cultural consensus and cognitive resonance. The meaning transmission of symbolic signs in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual is highly dependent on the participants' cognition of Confucian culture. Coding analysis shows that there is a significant positive correlation between the level of cultural cognition and the interpretation accuracy rate ($r=0.83$, $p<0.001$). Specifically, these symbolic signs are embodied through three categories: dance props, musical instruments, and ritual procedures.

Dance Prop Symbols

The *gan* (shield) and *qi* (axe), props used in the martial dance, are made of camphor wood native to Liuyang. Following the cultural convention of "blunting the sharpness of weapons", they dispel the aura of violence and symbolize the peaceful ideal of "transforming hostility into friendship". The dragon patterns carved on the shield and cloud patterns on the axe form the imagery of "dragons and clouds soaring in the sky", reinforcing the orthodox connotation of "upholding rituals through martial means". The *di* (pheasant-feather ornament) and *yue* (flute-like instrument), props used in the civil dance, are crafted from local materials. In accordance with the cultural convention of "rituals embodied in artifacts", they convey reverence and the ideological concept of "cultivating people through music". Replacing practical rationales with cultural conventions, these four types of props serve as tangible carriers of the Confucian ideology of integrating civil and martial virtues, as well as educating people through rituals and music.



Figure 6 The dance props of the Liuyang Confucian Worship Ceremony
(Source: Researcher, 2025)

Musical Instrument Symbols

The symbolic meanings of the 63 musical instruments across 8 categories in the elegant music of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual follow the logic that "cultural convention precedes practical function". The bianzhong (Bell, 1992) and bianqing (chime stones), configured in sets of twelve, echo the "twelve musical temperament pitches", symbolizing the order of rituals and music. The phoenix flutes are modified into 24-tone scales in accordance with ancient standards; based on the convention of "correct temperament producing pure sound", they restore the inheritance of ancient music and symbolize the continuity of orthodox ritual music. The pao (gourd wind instruments) are made of local gourds, filling the gap in the "eight categories of musical instruments" in ancient Chinese music theory; their moderate and balanced timbre symbolizes the doctrine of the mean. The zhu (a percussion instrument for starting music) and yu (a percussion instrument for ending music), with their functional settings of "striking the zhu to begin music and sweeping the yu to conclude it", convey the concept of order that rituals and music abide by clear rules. These four types of instruments embody the Confucian spirit of rituals and music in tangible form, serving as the core symbolic carriers of the elegant music system.

Zhu

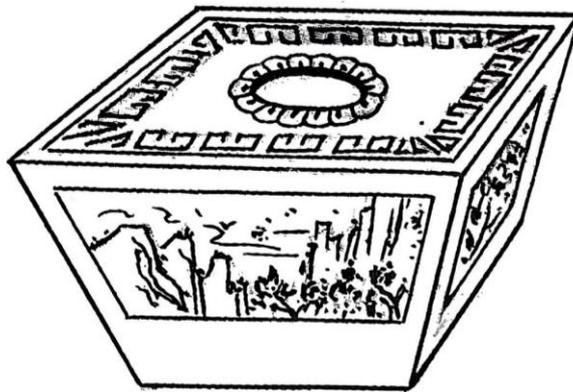
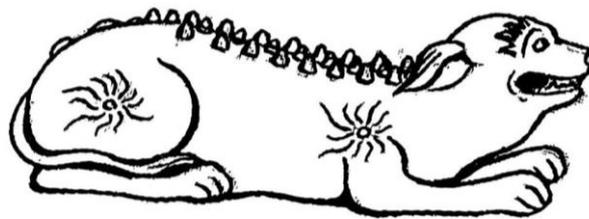


Figure 7 Zhu (Wooden Ritual Instrument for Starting Music) (Source: Researcher, 2025)

Yu



Zhen

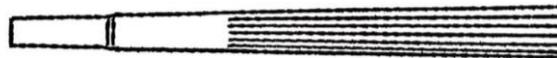


Figure 8 Yu (Wooden Ritual Instrument for Ending Music) and Zhen (Brush-like Beater) (Source: Researcher, 2025)

With cultural conventions regarding their materials and forms as the core, these musical instruments embody the spiritual essence of Confucian ritual and music—including orderliness, orthodox inheritance, the doctrine of the mean, and principled ritual practice. They verify the semiotic logic of Peirce's symbolic signs, that is, "cultural consensus precedes practical function", and thus serve as the core symbolic carriers of the spirit of ritual and music in the elegant music system of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual.

Ritual Procedure Symbols

The core ritual sequence *welcoming the gods, initial offering, second offering, final offering, removing sacrificial offerings, sending off the gods*—inherits the *Shi Dian Li* (Memorial Ceremony) of the Zhou Dynasty, symbolizing a complete educational chain from revering gods to cultivating people, with the order of core procedures remaining unchanged. The arrangement of *performing martial dance during the initial offering and civil dance during the second and final offerings* symbolizes the governing logic of "securing the state first and then educating the people". The ritual is held on the *first Ding Day* of the second and eighth

lunar months, which is linked to the agricultural civilization's time concept of spring sowing and autumn harvesting, symbolizing the educational rhythm of enlightening wisdom and reaping the fruits of education. Even though the ritual form has been simplified in modern times, the core of cultural inheritance remains intact.

Based on the above analysis, the symbol classification system and core characteristics of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual are shown in the following table:

Table 2 Symbol Classification System and Core Characteristics of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual

Symbol Type	Quantity/ Proportion	Core Representation Logic	Specific Categories	Typical Cases	Core Characteristics
Icon	23 / 33.80%	Morphological Similarity	Ritual Instruments, Dance Movements, Costume Patterns	Phoenix-tailed Jue (ancient wine vessel), Crossed-ten Foward-bowing Dance Movement, Hui-character Pattern Costume	Concrete and Perceptible; Directly Simulate and Refer to Objects; Convey Superficial Cultural Images
Index	21 / 30.90%	Contiguity/Causality	Spatial Layout, Music & Lyrics, Participants' Behaviors	Central Axis of Confucian Temple, Zhu Sound for Welcoming Gods, Three Kneelings and Nine Kowtows by the Chief Officiant	Context-dependent; Indicate Ritual Processes, Roles or Concepts; Ensure Ritual Orderliness
Symbol	24 / 35.30%	Social Convention	Dance Props, Confucius Worship Musical Instruments, Ritual Procedures	Four Types of Dance Props, Representative Musical Instruments, Six-link Process	Culturally Cognition-dependent; Convey In-depth Ethics and Values; Bear Cultural Genes

Discussions

The symbol classification system of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual takes Peirce's tripartite classification as the core framework, forming a complete progressive system with distinct characteristics. The three types of symbols construct a hierarchical structure of Icon (superficial perception), Index (contextual association), and Symbol (in-depth value). Icons lay the visual foundation, Indexes ensure ritual order and meaning correlation, and Symbols convey core cultural values. (Peirce, 1998)

Each type of symbol balances Confucian orthodox ritual system and Liuyang regional culture, demonstrating the localized inheritance vitality of traditional rituals in the unity of form and connotation. The three types of symbols do not exist in isolation; instead, they form a complete symbol system through progressive hierarchical structure. The three act synergistically to not only ensure the operability of the ritual but also realize the accurate transmission of cultural significance. This aligns with Yang's studies, where rituals played a

crucial role in the formation of these communities, not only in preserving their existence but also in continuously redefining the meaning of community for its members. (Yang, 2024)

The empirical results demonstrate that iconic signs show significant positive correlation between imitation similarity and participants' cognitive accuracy ($r=0.78$, $p<0.01$). Indexical signs achieve segment recognition accuracy rate of ninety-four percent through multi-modal collaboration. Symbolic signs reveal significant positive correlation between cultural cognition level and interpretation accuracy ($r=0.83$, $p<0.001$). These findings confirm the distinct semiotic mechanisms and their effectiveness in cultural transmission.

Conclusion and suggestions

Centering on the two core objectives of "systematically classifying the symbols and their characteristics in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual" and "innovating research methods for traditional ritual symbols to break through the limitation of 'prioritizing description over classification'", this study successfully achieved its research goals by systematically applying Peirce's Tripartite Theory of Signs. It accurately identified and classified 68 core symbols in the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual, establishing a comprehensive three-level classification system covering iconic signs, indexical signs, and symbolic signs.

The classification system constructed in this study precisely responds to the core research objectives, effectively addressing the deficiency of previous studies on Confucius Worship Rituals that focused on phenomenological description rather than systematic classification. By clarifying the representational logic, functional positioning, and interactive relationship of different types of symbols, and sorting out the penetration path of cultural significance from the superficial to the in-depth level, this study not only innovates the analytical framework and methods for traditional ritual symbol research, but also provides a referable paradigm for the symbol studies of similar traditional rituals.

The findings demonstrate that the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual maintains cultural continuity through a sophisticated multi-layered symbolic architecture: iconic signs provide an immediate perceptual access based on formal similarity; indexical signs organize ritual progression by virtue of contextual association; and symbolic signs transmit deep ethical values through cultural convention. The construction of this multi-layered classification system not only achieves the core objective of "systematically classifying the symbols and their characteristics", but also ensures that the ritual can function effectively for participants with varying levels of cultural knowledge, while preserving complex philosophical and ethical connotations in their entirety.

Future research can further extend the innovative semiotic analysis method developed in this study to the comparative study of Confucius Worship Rituals in other regions, exploring how local variants retain core symbolic functions while adapting to the orthodox ritual system. In addition, longitudinal studies could be conducted to investigate the evolutionary laws of the symbolic system in response to social changes, revealing its internal mechanism for maintaining cultural continuity. Such research will further deepen the depth and breadth of traditional ritual symbol research, helping to gain a more in-depth understanding of how traditional ritual practices balance the core proposition of preservation and adaptation in the contemporary context.

New knowledge and the effects on society and communities

This study advances scholarly understanding of traditional ritual preservation through its systematic application of Peirce's Tripartite Theory of Signs to the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual, generating new knowledge across theoretical, methodological, and practical dimensions. The research identifies and classifies 68 core symbols within the ritual system, establishing a comprehensive three-level classification framework comprising iconic signs (33.80%), indexical signs (30.90%), and symbolic signs (35.30%). This classification system reveals the sophisticated semiotic architecture underlying traditional ritual practices, demonstrating how multiple modes of meaning-making operate simultaneously and complementarily to sustain cultural transmission across generations.

The new knowledge generated by this research manifests in several key areas. First, it establishes a systematic classification paradigm that bridges the gap between phenomenological description and analytical rigor in ritual studies, overcoming the limitation of prioritizing description over classification that has characterized previous scholarship. Second, it demonstrates the organic integration of Confucian orthodox rituals with Hunan-Chu regional cultural characteristics, revealing how localized inheritance mechanisms maintain cultural authenticity while adapting to regional contexts. Third, it constructs a complete research paradigm integrating theory, empirical analysis, and interpretation, providing a replicable methodological framework for similar intangible cultural heritage studies.

At the societal level, this research contributes to the preservation and revitalization of intangible cultural heritage by providing evidence-based strategies for dynamic inheritance. The findings inform policy development for cultural heritage protection, offering concrete guidance for maintaining the balance between authenticity preservation and contemporary relevance. The study's identification of communication challenges particularly insufficient connotation transmission and poor youth engagement enables targeted interventions to ensure intergenerational cultural continuity. By clarifying the representational logic of ritual symbols, the research supports the development of educational programs that can effectively transmit Confucian ethical values and cultural identity to contemporary audiences.

For local communities in Liuyang and the broader Hunan region, this research strengthens cultural identity and social cohesion by systematically documenting and validating local ritual practices. The study's recognition of regional characteristics within the ritual system affirms the unique cultural contributions of the Chu region while connecting local practices to broader Confucian traditions. This dual positioning enhances community pride and provides a foundation for cultural tourism development that respects authenticity while promoting economic opportunities. The research also facilitates intergenerational dialogue by making explicit the cultural meanings embedded in ritual practices, enabling elders to more effectively transmit knowledge to younger generations who may lack traditional cultural literacy.

At the community level, the findings support capacity building among ritual practitioners, cultural workers, and local government officials responsible for heritage preservation. By providing clear analytical frameworks and empirical data, the research enables more informed decision-making regarding ritual performance standards, educational program development, and cultural promotion strategies. The study's emphasis on multi-sensory coordination and embodied practice offers practical guidance for designing experiential learning opportunities that can engage diverse audiences, particularly youth who respond to interactive and immersive cultural experiences.

The broader implications extend to intercultural understanding and global heritage discourse. By demonstrating rigorous analytical methods grounded in Western semiotic theory

applied to Chinese ritual traditions, this research contributes to cross-cultural scholarly dialogue and validates indigenous knowledge systems within international academic frameworks. The study provides a model for how traditional practices can be analyzed and preserved without reductive simplification, respecting the complexity and sophistication of cultural systems while making them accessible to contemporary audiences. This approach supports the UNESCO framework (2003) for intangible cultural heritage protection by offering concrete methodologies for documentation, interpretation, and transmission planning.

Ultimately, this research generates actionable knowledge that serves multiple stakeholders: academics seeking analytical frameworks for ritual studies; policymakers developing heritage protection strategies; educators designing cultural transmission programs; and community members maintaining living traditions. By bridging theoretical analysis with practical application, the study ensures that new knowledge translates into tangible benefits for the preservation, understanding, and continued vitality of the Liuyang Confucius Worship Ritual and similar cultural heritage practices.

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