



# Introduction: The Primacy of Sound in Chinese Poetry

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“The sound must seem an echo to the sense.”<sup>1</sup> This famous line by Alexander Pope is often cited concerning the roles of sound in Western poetry. In Chinese poetry, too, sound is an echo to the sense, and much more. However, the primacy of sound in Chinese poetry has long been overlooked. A demonstration of the pivotal roles of sound in various major genres is the primary goal of this special issue. Each article explores the aural dimensions of Chinese poetry from a unique perspective and sheds new light on the interplay of sound and sense in one or more particular genres.

We begin with two articles that investigate the symbiotic relationship between sound and sense in the earliest ancient-style *shi* poetry: the tetrasyllabic poems of the *Shijing* 詩經 (*Book of Poetry*) and the pentasyllabic poems of the Han dynasty. Jonathan Smith begins from linguists’ observations of nonarbitrary relationships between sound and meaning in many languages: in English, for instance, consider the /gl/ of *glare*, *glow*, and *gleam* and its persistent relationship to the intensity of light. Focusing on the reduplicative words of two identical syllables (*dieyinci* 疊音詞) so common in the *Shijing*—*zang-zang* 牂牂, *jiu-jiu* 糾糾, and the like—Smith suggests the existence of a comparable “sound symbolic” phenomenon in the Old Chinese language. While not carrying any firm conceptual meanings in themselves, these reduplicatives tend to be highly descriptive, effectively conveying often-elusive impressions of various aspects of sensory experience. Smith argues that this is due in large part to the sound-meaning connections these words exploit, and he suggests that such words are

rightly classed as what some modern linguists call “expressives” insofar as their primary function is to express via sound an emotive response to an external scene. A recognition of these sound-symbolic effects, Smith argues, shall inspire readers to a more nuanced appreciation of ancient Chinese poetry.

Zhao Minli and Benjamin Ridgway’s article demonstrates a close relationship between prosodic rhythm and linguistic change in the formation of pentasyllabic *shi* poetry. What distinguishes the pentasyllabic *shi* poetry from the *Book of Poetry* and the *Chuci* 楚辭 (*Lyrics of Chu*) is its unique prosodic rhythm of a “balanced foot” (two syllables) plus an “unbalanced foot” (three syllables). As compared with 2 + 2 rhythm in a typical *Shijing* line or the top-heavy 3 + 兮 (or a connective) + 2 rhythm in a typical *Chuci* line, Zhao and Ridgway maintain, the 2 + 3 rhythm of pentasyllabic *shi* poetry allows for an unprecedented grammatical flexibility within a line and a smooth flow from one line to the next. In addition, this new rhythm facilitates greater use of parallel syntax between two lines in a couplet and lays the ground for a tonal regulation of pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic *shi* poetry centuries later.

After exploring the roles of sound in the ancient-style poetry, we investigate the development of tonal regulation in the ensuing dynasties, from the Wei (220–65) through the Liang (502–57). The origin, in both time and space, of tonal regulation is an issue with which both traditional and modern critics have been consumed. In probing this enduring issue, four contributors, Chenqing Song, Hongming Zhang, and Du Xiaoqin and Li E, adopt an almost identical approach without any prior mutual consultation. They all employ quantitative analysis to accomplish a twofold goal: to challenge certain widely held views concerning a particular stage in the development of tonal regulation, and to formulate an original view of their own based on hard statistical evidence.

Chenqing Song’s article takes issue with the claim by Wang Li 王力 (1900–1986), Xu Qing 徐青, and others that pre-Yongming poets had already attempted to create tonal contrast effects in pentasyllabic poems. To assess the validity of this claim, Song undertakes a quantitative analysis of tonal contrasts in three early collections: the “Nineteen Ancient Poems” and Cao Zhi’s 曹植 (192–232) and Xie Lingyun’s 謝靈運 (385–433) works. In interpreting the ratios of the tonal contrast in these three collections, Song compares them with two sets of data: the ratios of tonal contrast in narrative texts written during the same period and the ratios of contrasting tone pairs in texts in which tones are randomly arranged. The results of these statistical comparisons reveal that tonal contrast found in these three collections arose out of an intuitive fondness for musical cadence rather than an intentional manipulation of tones to achieve a desired aesthetic effect. Song also notes that the proportion of *ping* tones in the three collections is higher than what is expected in random tonal arrangement.

To Song, this statistical abnormality indicates that the period between the Later Han and the early Six dynasties was a transitional stage when new features of tonal prosody were incubated. Although tonal contrast was most likely unintentional when it first appeared, it would become ever more prominent in the late Six dynasties, heralding the eventual establishment of a well-codified tonal prosody during the Tang.

Hongming Zhang's article brings us to the *Yongming* 永明 period (483–93), known for its innovative experimentation with tonal prosody in poetry. Among the poets who consciously employed patterns of tonal contrast, none is more famous than Shen Yue 沈約 (441–513). It is widely believed that Shen Yue formulated the theory of “Four Tones and Eight Defects” (*sisheng babing* 四聲八病). But critics have long been puzzled by the fact that Shen's poems do not follow the prescriptions of his own theory, particularly those against the eight defects. Zhang's case study presents us with two important findings. First, the tonal patterns found in Shen's poems do, in fact, square with his theory of the four tones; it's just that some of the patterns he used did not survive into the Tang and therefore seem unfamiliar to us. Second, the so-called contradictions between Shen's tonal patterning and the “eight defects” theory are nonexistent. This is simply because the theory of eight defects is, Zhang argues, not Shen's but was formulated after Shen's time. Given this, Zhang raises questions about Victor Mair and Tsu-lin Mei's well-known argument that the rules of the eight defects were designed by Shen Yue under the influence of the prosody of Sanskrit poetry. Zhang also seeks to show that *śloka* meter is not a viable model for tonal patterning in Chinese regulated verse, nor did *yamaka* influence the rise of the “eight defects” theory in Chinese poetry. Zhang's article is likely to ignite a new debate on the provenance of Chinese tonal prosody.

Du Xiaoqin and Li E's article focuses on the new experimentation of tonal prosody in the Datong 大同 reign period (535–46), forty-one years after the Yongming period. Based on an exhaustive statistical analysis of their works, Du and E argue that the leading poets of the period, Liu Xiaochuo 劉孝綽 (481–549), Liu Huan 劉緩 (fl. 549), and Xu Chi 徐攤 (471–551), cemented the rule of required tonal differentiation between the second and fourth syllables in a pentasyllabic line, setting the stage for the development of the intricate tonal patterns found in Tang recent-style poetry. To accentuate this culmination of the 2–2–1 tonal patterning, Du and E trace the gradual evolution of the 2–2–1 line from Han *yuefu* poetry through the “Nineteen Old Poems,” and on to the poetry of Xie Lingyun (385–433), Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464–499), and others, complete with statistical data. In investigating the formation of tonal patterns, Du and E have paid careful attention to the corresponding syntactical experimentation conducted by the same poets. They conclude that the new Datong tonal regulation is

closely associated with the growing desire for refined aesthetic expression among the literati at the time.

Our investigation of the rise of tonal prosody ends with Meow Hui Goh's article on what she calls "tonal and rhyming" culture, in which the major experimentations of tonal regulation discussed above took place. Through a case study on the compilation of Lu Fayan's 陸法言 (fl. 581–601) *Qieyun* 切韻 (Spelling Rhymes), Goh brings to light the complex dynamics of this culture, as evidenced by vibrant, diverse, and competitive endeavors to codify tonal and rhyming registers of essential Chinese characters. Compiled around 601, Lu's rhyme book marks the culmination of century-old experiments of tonal regulation and rhyming by the Qi-Liang elites and lays the foundation for a broad use of tonal prosody and standardized rhyming by Tang and later poets. However, as Goh points out, Lu's rhyme book was not the only one that emerged in the pre-Tang period, and its canonization as an authoritative "official rhyme book" in the Tang was anything but "natural." To emphasize that the canonization of *Qieyun* was the result of complex cultural and political construction, Goh brings to our attention an unprecedented collective search for an ideal language among the cultural elites of pre-Tang times, marked by persistent disagreements rather than a consensus on what this ideal language should be.

The last group of articles by five contributors shifts attention from tones back to rhythm. But here rhythm is explored not within the confines of poetic genres but in the context of a dynamic interplay of poetry and prose. Shengli Feng and Ash Henson's article explores the dynamic interplay of poetry and prose from the perspective of prose. Feng and Henson take a balanced blending of poetry and prose rhythms to be the hallmark of "parallel prose" (*pianwen* 駢文). They argue that the "four-six prose," an alternate name of parallel prose, literally reveals the origin of this genre as a hybrid of poetry and prose. Using Bao Zhao's 鮑照 (417–450) "Wucheng fu" 蕪城賦 (Rhapsody on the City Overgrown with Weeds), they discover that the "four" (four-syllable lines) almost invariably exhibits a typical 2 + 2 poetic rhythm, while the "six" (six-syllable lines) follows an assortment of prose rhythms. To Feng and Henson, the beauty of the four-six prose form lies in its perfect combination of the expressive cadence of poetry on the one hand and the forward momentum of prose on the other. This combination produces an effect of one plus one being larger than two, as the dynamic tension between poetry and prose yields another kind of beauty, arising out of the mutual repelling and mutual attraction between poetic diction and prosaic speech. Beyond all this, an extraordinary variation in rhythm, diction, and syntax within parallel prose allows it to attain the polyphonic richness of a symphony.

Moving into the Tang, Ge Xiaoyin's article probes Du Fu's 杜甫 (712–770) appropriation of prose rhythms in his *wugu* 五古 poems (pentasyllabic

ancient-style poems). According to Ge, *shi zhong you wen* 詩中有文 (There is prose within poetry) is a general impression many critics had of Du Fu's *wugu* poems. As to what constitutes *wen* (prose) vis-à-vis poetry in these poems, however, these critics offered no clarification of any kind. Through her close reading of key passages from Du Fu's mid-to-long *wugu* poems, Ge shows that *wen* 文 (prose) in these works should be perceived in terms of both content and form. As Du's social and political commentary is reminiscent of the prose essay, so is his frequent employment of narrative rhythm. What differentiates Du's use of narrative rhythm from Bai Juyi's 白居易 (772–846) and Su Shi's 蘇軾 (1037–1101) is that Du always keeps instances of narrative rhythm *local* by interspersing them within the *global* structure of expressive poetic rhythms. A recognition of this dynamic between prose and poetic rhythms, Ge contends, permits a nuanced appreciation of the artistic achievement of Du's *wugu* poems.

Chen Yinchi and Paula Varsano's article brings us all the way to the Qing dynasty (1644–1911) and into the realm of literary criticism. Chen and Varsano focus on examining how leading figures of the Tongcheng *guwen* (ancient-prose) school, including Liu Dakui 劉大櫟 (1698–1779), Yao Nai 姚鼐 (1731–1815), Fang Dongshu 方東樹 (1772–1851), Zeng Guofan 曾國藩 (1811–1872), and others, theorized about sound as the very foundation of literary creation of all kinds—not just poetic composition but the writing of prose as well. These *guwen* writers stressed sound as the sole intermediary between the spiritual (the spirit 神 and vital breath 氣) and the technical (words, sentences, sections, and a completed composition). Given the pivotal importance of sound, the bodily practice of chanting and reciting ancient texts emerges as the primary means through which a writer imbues himself with the language—the spirit and voice—of the ancient masters. It is in this way that they gradually become able to compose a fine prose essay themselves. Chen and Varsano also note that the Tongcheng theory of sound represents a prime example of a cross-pollination of poetry and prose, mitigating perceptions of a clear and rigid distinction between them. Inspired by earlier discussions of spirit and vital breath in poetry criticism, this prose-centric theory in turn influences the writing of poetry in the late Qing.

My concluding article for this issue approaches many questions explored in the preceding articles from a theoretical perspective. In conjunction with their assertion of the pivotal roles of sound, I launch a comprehensive inquiry into how the “monosyllabicality,” namely, monosyllabic pronunciation, of Chinese characters has given rise to a unique merging of prosodic and semantic rhythms in Chinese poetry; how prosodic-semantic rhythms in turn delimit the range of possible syntactic constructions in a given genre; and how, yet in turn, the subject + predicate and topic + comment syntax provides the basic frameworks for stanzaic and compositional organization, giving birth to three archetypal structures of Chinese

poetry. While some traditional Chinese critics intuitively spoke of sentences, sections, and the entire composition being unified by sound, I have provided an analytical account of the gestalt of Chinese poetic form, with sound as its foundation.

This collection of ten articles has shown that sound does not merely echo the sense in Chinese poetry. On the level of individual words, many non-conceptualized sounds, in pairs or alone, *are* the sense itself, as in the case of *Shijing* reduplicatives studied by Smith. On the sentence level, rhythm—formed of clusters of monosyllabic sounds—is a creator of meaning in that it determines which syntactical constructions can be accommodated, as shown by the contributions by Zhao and Ridgway, Feng and Henson, and myself on the rhythms-syntax interconnectedness. As shown by Chen and Varsano’s article as well as mine, the impact of sound reaches the structural level as well and may even bring about suprasensory communion with the spirit breath.

In planning this study, I had two criteria in mind: broad coverage and balanced perspectives. It is gratifying to note that the finished articles have come together as planned. A good range of genres—tetrasyllabic and pentasyllabic poetry, ancient-style and recent-style poetry, parallel and ancient-style prose—is covered. Chronologically, the ten articles span the period from the earliest times through the Qing, giving a broad view of continued primacy of sound. Our articles also reflect a balanced participation by American and Chinese scholars, by literary scholars and linguists. The approaches employed, too, display a balance between literary interpretation and statistical analysis, between practical criticism and theoretical inquiry. It is our hope that this special issue will draw more scholarly attention to the primacy of sound in Chinese poetry and contribute to the broader discourse on the sound of poetry/the poetry of sound initiated by scholars of Western poetry.<sup>2</sup>



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### Notes

1. Pope, "Essay on Criticism," 29.
2. For the recent studies on the sound-sense relationship in Western poetry, see Perloff and Dworkin. "Sound of Poetry."

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