

Chinese classical poetry is based on universal principles of singing

by Ray Wen Wei

For more than twenty-two centuries, the evolving art of Chinese classical poetry has demonstrated the universal truth that music comes from the singing of poetry. As a matter of fact, the English word "poetry" finds its Chinese equivalent as "*shi ge*," literally, "poem" and "song" respectively. This article will explore how this idea ripened during the golden age of the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.), when both poetry and music developed dramatically. The reader is also invited to explore the affinity of poetry and music as it develops along the course of art history in China as well as in the West.

The *Book of Odes*, edited by Confucius (551-479 B.C.), is a collection of poems from previous centuries. As early as 1000 B.C., the ancient Chinese had already developed the system known as the "old-bells," an equal-tempered instrument which brought us polyphonic music. This suggests to us where to look for the best of China's cultural heritage.

To understand how poetry evolves into music, I will start with Mao Chang, a Han scholar, who in the Second Century B.C. codified his ideas in the "Great Preface" to the *Book of Odes*. The *Book of Odes*, which has become the standard of orthodox poetry for the past 22 centuries, was reconstructed by Mao Chang from memory after all existing copies were burned by the Chin Emperor (ca. 220 B.C.). In this famous "Great Preface," Mao Chang said:

"Poetry, comes from '*chih*.' When retained in the mind, it is '*chih*,' when conveyed into words, it becomes poetry. When words are inadequate to express '*chih*,' we chant; when chanting is inadequate, we sing. If singing it is inadequate, unconsciously our hands sway to it and our feet dance to it."

It is hard to find an English counterpart for the Chinese word *chih*. According to the classic definition, it means "will, ambition, aggressive inspiration, or progressive ideas." It is something nonlinear in the human mind. *Chih*, the nonlinear progressive idea, or the will, comes from the imitation of natural beauty, from the passion for truth inherent from one's inner reality. This notion then is expressed in words to form poetry, to conceive songs, and thus to generate instrumental music. Mao Chang viewed the human voice as the natural musical organ, imitated by the man-made instruments. This obviously opposes some modern arguments that music comes merely from rhythm, chanting in heavy labor, or dancing to

celebrate the harvest.

It is not only music which comes as the fruits of singing classical poetry, but the language itself. The Chinese language, based on pictographic written symbols, contributes powerfully to the unity of the Chinese nation. It was augmented, enriched, and perfected through the centuries by the development of classical poetry. The masters imposed a strict and rigorous structure upon the composition of poetry. Rather than limiting the power of expression, these strict rules of prosody forced the development of more powerful forms of language than existed in common speech, breaking the chains on human thought. Despite the chains on their feet, these distinguished poets danced freely to the internal music of their minds to bequeath us those beautiful poems.

Out of the efforts of these great "shackled dancers," Chinese ancestors offered their offspring one of the richest languages in the world. The language, that has been tuned to the music, that has never stopped its own growth, extends varieties of artistic and creative styles to the patriotic poets for generations to come.

'Shih,' 'tsih,' 'ge,' 'fu,' and rules of prosody

About 1,000 years after the "Great Preface," comes what is considered the golden age of classical Chinese poetry: the Tang Dynasty (618-907). About 50,000 poems composed by 2,300 poets in the Tang indicate the extensive searching for verses to be chanted or sung.

The wide thematic range of Chinese *wen ren me ke* (men of literature and letters) in the Tang already found expression in a wide stylistic range. The most important of these are: the strict style of "*shih*" (rows of regulated poetic lines); "*tsih*" (long and short lines of lyrics); and the free styles of "*ge*" and "*fu*" (two types of essays with rhetoric). Both "*shih*" and "*tsih*" are strictly regulated by patterns of tones, syllables, and rhymes, while the other two are not.

In *shih*, a set pattern of tones has to be maintained throughout the whole poem with little exception. (In Chinese, the tone in which a word is spoken can change its meaning.) If the pattern is broken, other changes are required in order to maintain the musicality of the line.

In *tsih*, a set of long and short lines with a given rhyme scheme, called its "*diao*," makes the poem fit into a specific

standard musical composition. This style is also called “long and short sentences.” *Ts'ih* was at its best in the Sung Dynasty (960-1276), right after the Tang.

In the West, poems could be composed into songs by various songwriters or composers, but in this circle of Chinese poets the situation seems rather different. The “*diao*” (the title of a certain melody with specific rules of rhymes and patterns of long and short sentences) is usually learned and memorized by the singer and the musicians who accompany the singer. When the “blank spaces” of the “*diao*” is “filled in” with words of a specific *ts'ih*, it can then be sung instantly.

Both “*ge*” and “*fu*” are usually essays depicting natural scenes to express *chih*, which sometimes reflect the author’s traveling experiences or political beliefs. “*Fu*” was developed as early as the Han Dynasty (206 B.C.-A.D. 220). Both are forms used to protest social abuse, to state one’s cherished values, or to express one’s political beliefs. These are the forms usually required in the examinations for official positions.

For the purposes of this article, I will give a more detailed discussion only of the *shih*.

‘Shih,’ rows of the regulated verse

Shih is a modern style of poetry (“*jin ti shi*”) matured during the early Tang. It constrains a poem to eight lines of five or seven syllables each. With a single rhyme running through it, the poem is divided into four pairs, namely “starting,” “extending,” “turning,” and “completing,” respectively. These appear in the western classical sonata form of music in the same order, as the “theme,” “development,” “transition,” and “recapitulation.” The rhyme used throughout the poem is chosen from one of two divisions of the vowel sounds. In general, these are divided as either long, bright sounds (called “*yang*” rhyme) or short, dim sounds (called “*yin*” rhyme). The choice of this rhyme determines the mood of the poem, similar to the choice of a major or a minor key in music.

The middle two couplets are both composed of two parallel and antithetical lines, in which the parts of speech are matched and their meanings are contrasted. For instance, in “A Night on the Jiande River,” Meng Hao-ran wrote:

In the vast wilds, the sky touches the tree.
On a bright river, the moon comes to me.

where “vast” is matched to “bright,” “wild” to “river,” “sky” to “the moon,” “tree” to “me,” and the verb “touches” to “comes.”

Beside these parallels of the parts of speech, the patterns of tones which establish the euphony of the verses must also follow prescribed forms. Chinese characters are all single syllable units with four tones. The “flat” (symbolized as “-”) and “rising” (“/”) tones are called “even” (“*ping*”), while the

“falling” (“\”) and the “low-rising” (“V”) tones are called “inflected” (“*tze*”). The paired words must be of the *opposite* types, “even” or “inflected.” Taking the same example from above, the Chinese equivalent of the lines would read:

Ye	Kuo	Tien	Di	Shu,
V	\	-	-	\
tze	tze	ping	ping	tze
(wild	vast	sky	touch	tree,
Jiang	Chin	Yue	Jin	Ren
-	-	\	\	/
ping	ping	tze	tze	ping
river	bright	moon	come	me)

where the rhythm combined with proper tones generates melody very naturally.

Another demonstration comes also from a piece of well-known poetry:

The body doesn’t have the two flying wings of a colorful phoenix,
But the mind can still possess the single insight of that fairy buffalo.

The “fairy buffalo” comes from a Chinese legend about an intelligent buffalo who gained his wisdom by pointing his horns towards the moon. Here the poet believes that a physically constrained body could have a transcendental mind.

This poem has seven characters per line, setting two extra words in front of the five-character line pattern we saw in the previous example:

Sen	Wu	Ts’ai	Fung	Suan	Fei	Yi,
-	-	V	\	-	-	\
ping	ping	tze	tze	ping	ping	tze
(body	no	colorful	phoenix	two	flying	wing)
Hsin	Yo	Ling	Hsi	Yi	Dian	Tung
-	V	-	-	\	V	-
ping	tze	ping	ping	tze	tze	ping
(mind	has	fairy	buffalo	one	point	insight)

Notice that the poet violates the pattern of “opposite” tones at the first character of the second line, “Hsin,” a character with a *ping* tone instead of a *tze* tone. This demonstrates how a poet occasionally breaks the rules to develop his idea, and to draw the attention of the reader to a specific point (here, the comparison of body to mind).

For the more formal type of *shih*, known as “*lue-shih*” (regulated verse), there are four possible rhyme patterns for the four couplets. If *R* is for rhyme and *N* for no-rhyme, these patterns are *R-R-N-R*, *R-R-R-R*, *N-R-N-R*, *N-R-R-R*.

范一音

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"A Mid-Autumn Night," a Chinese classical poem composed by the author in 1980. Calligraphy is in the author's hand.

today's Mandarin (the official language), some Tang poems have to be vocalized in their ancient accent.

Out of many poems written by this writer, only a few have integrated ideas that flow naturally from these rules of composition developed by the masters. The following was titled "A Mid-Autumn Night," dated on the Moon Festival of 1980, using the same pattern of *ping* and *tze* tones as the example given above:

Chung	Chiu	Leng	Tzuo	Guan	Shan	Yue,
-	-	V	\	-	-	\
Yu	Hsiang	Mong	Long	Yin	Wei	Tzen.
\	\	/	/	\	\	-
Du	Bei	Bu	Ke	Fu	Yao	Shang,
/	-	\	V	/	/	\
Lei	Shih	Ying	Pan	Chao	Chien	Sheng.
\	\	/	/	\	\	-

Poems written for events like traditional Chinese festivals (the Moon Festival, for instance, a night for separated families and lovers to remember each other) often suggest sentimental feelings of missing one's home, recalling family stories, or remembering a historical person. It is more difficult to translate such poems which are touched with a national culture of another language and traditional references. With-

身
無
彩
鳳
雙
飛
翼
心
有
靈
犀
一
點
通

張
建
勳
書

A modern calligrapher's rendering of a well-known Chinese poem written during the Tang Dynasty (618-907 A.D.).

Another rule is that if the first word of the poem is a *ping* tone, then the first couplet ends in a rhyme (i.e., either the first or the second of the four patterns), while if the first word is a *tze* tone, then the first couplet does not have the rhyme (i.e., one of the last two patterns). The following is a typical form:

ping ping tze tze ping ping tze (rhyme)
 tze tze ping ping tze tze ping (rhyme)
 ping ping tze tze ping ping tze (no rhyme)
 tze tze ping ping tze tze ping (rhyme)

Notice that although each Chinese dialect has its own tones (up to nine in some southern areas), they all divide these tones into either *ping* or *tze*. Due to the evolution of sound in

out the rhyme, this poem is rendered as follows:

Sitting in the cold Mid-Autumn Night, I watch the
mountain moon.
Your jade image appears vague as it mirrors imperfect.
I grieve I can not soar on high,
To wipe with tears the silver plate, to unveil your true
beauty.

(“Silver plate,” or “Yin Pan” in Chinese, refers to the moon.)

As in many Chinese classical poems, the sentimental theme of romantic love is borrowed to represent a more philosophical concept.

Li Pai and Du Fu in the Tang era

Poets today often sigh that “The Tang poets have done all one can do with poetry.” Among more than 2,300 poets in the Tang, both Li Pai (701-762) and Du Fu (712-770) enjoy the most readership up through today. The legendary Li Pai, praised as “the Sage among Poets,” explored all the elegant variations in the prosody, while Du Fu expressed an extensive variety of themes with a *savoir faire* of grace. Du Fu is regarded as the “Historian Poet.”

Li Pai, in one of his vast number of poems, composed a scene where he heard a flute which brought up a feeling of homesickness:

Furtive music from whose jade flute tonight
Steals forth upon spring winds to fill the town?
Recognizing the tune of Breaking Willow Boughs
Who could be untouched by thoughts of home?

“Breaking Willow Boughs” refers to a sad tune traditionally played at parting. As a token of enduring thought, willow branches were often presented to those who were departing. A typical scene like this often inspired Li Pai’s *chih*, which is highlighted by Mao Chang’s quote at the beginning of this article.

Historical events are among the many themes of our “Historian Poet” Du Fu. He had written a piece in memory of the Chu Prime Minister Chu Ge-Liang of the Three Kingdoms Period (220-280 A.D.), who was known for his simple lifestyle and political talent. He was invited three times by the founder Liu Pei of the Kingdom of Chu to serve the state. He then served the son of Liu Pei and died leading troops in battle. Observing the great man’s neglected tomb, Du Fu commented:

Where would I find the Prime Minister’s shrine?
Somewhere outside Jinguan, in a dense cypress glade
Where the grass covered steps don the color of spring
And the orioles’ fine songs unheard.
Requested three times to guide the nation,
He served two monarchs with utter devotion,



Terracotta figurine of a lady playing the harp, from the Tang dynasty, the golden age of poetry. (Cleveland Museum of Art)

And died before he was the triumph of his troops.
For him, generations of heroes shed tears.

Out of about 50,000 poems in the Tang, these two serve to introduce these two great poets, who are regarded in China in the same way that Dante and Shakespeare are in the West. Their poems are available today in many languages throughout the world.

The difficulties of translation, however, have hindered the presentation of the beauty and grace of Chinese poems to the West. As Robert Frost puts it, “Poetry is what gets lost in translation.” English translations for the above two poems of Li Pai and Du Fu are borrowed from Zhang Ting-chen and Bruce M. Wilson’s book, *100 Tang Poems*, to whom this writer owes much credit.

To end this discussion, let us see what Mao Chang also said about music and government:

“The emotions emerge in sounds; when the sounds have patterning, they are called ‘tones.’ The tones of a well-managed age are at rest and happy; its government is balanced. The tones of an age of turmoil are bitter and full of anger; its government is perverse. The tones of a ruined state are filled with lament and brooding; its people are in difficulty.”