

Characteristics of Chinese Poetic-Musical Creations

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Abstract: *The present study introduces a series of characteristics related to Chinese poetry. It shows that, together with rhythmical structure and intonation (which has a crucial role in conveying meaning), an additional, fundamental aspect of Chinese poetry lies in the latent, pictorial effect of the writing. Various genres and forms of Chinese poetry are touched upon, as well as a series of figures of speech, themes (nature, love, sadness, mythology etc.) and symbols (particularly of vegetal and animal origin), which are frequently encountered in the poems.*

Key-words: *rhythm, intonation, system of tones, rhyme, system of writing, figures of speech*

1. Introduction

In his *Advanced Music Theory* course, Constantin Râpă shows that: “we can differentiate between two levels of the phenomenon of rhythm: the first, a general philosophical one, meaning, within the context of music, the ensemble of movements perceived, thus the macrostructural level; the second, the micro-structure, where rhythm means durations, (...) intensities and tempo. (...) Moreover, we can say that rhythm does not exist, but rather just the succession of sounds in time [does].”² Studies on rhythm, carried out by ethnomusicology researchers, can guide us to its genesis. A first fact that these studies point towards is the indissoluble unity of the birth process of artistic creation: poetry, music (rhythm-melody) and dance, which manifested syncretically for a very lengthy period of time. These aspects are not singular or characteristic for just one culture, as it appears that they have manifested everywhere from the very beginning of mankind. There is proof both in Chinese culture, as well as in ancient Romanian culture, that certifies the existence of a syncretic development of the arts and language. Although originating from ancient cultures and spaces that are so far apart, it seems that the historical-artistic heritage was developed based on certain principles that can be assumed to be common.

2. Objectives

Involving the students in examining the musical sources, using the theoretical researches and instruments of theoretic-informative and practical-actional nature, through implementing a manner of training and, why not, in an aesthetic research, in a desirable development which points at the theoretical component as well as at the practical one.

3. The influence of rhythm in Chinese poetry

In *The Dictionary of Musical Terms* it is stated that “what we call metrics in music fully corresponds with the metrics of poetry, as these two art forms are partnered by their rhythmic character as arts of time, where rhythmic order is so greatly dominant.”³

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² Râpă, Constantin. 2002. *Teoria superioară a muzicii. Ritmul* (Advanced Music Theory. Rhythm.), vol. II. Cluj-Napoca: Media Musica Publishing House, pp. 8 - 9.

³ *Dicționar de termeni muzicali (The Dictionary of Musical Terms)*. 2010. Institutul de Istoria Artei (The Institute for the History of Art) scientific coord. Gheorghe Firca, coordinating editors: Lucia Monica Alexandrescu, Olga Grigorescu, Daniel Suceava, Bucharest: Univers Enciclopedic, pp. 416 - 417.

The same dictionary stresses that “the theoretical horizon of rhythm was founded on social reality, interpreted as a creation of man, engaged in a community where culture is not a divine revelation, but possesses the necessary character of certain achievements that are deeply connected to labor (itself conceived and performed in multiple circumstances under the sovereignty of rhythm).”⁴

We can find conceptions that are in agreement with these statements in Chinese thought, as well as aesthetics. Thus, the succession of seasons, the alternation of day and night, the rise and fall of the lunar phases, the annual rebirth of nature, every individual’s heartbeat and our inspiration-expiration cycles are undeniable examples of the existence of rhythmicity in all aspects of life on Earth. The obstinate repetition of a certain rhythm can have hypnotizing effects on people; it can even change the pulse and frequency of the heartbeat.

Associating a rhythm or a melody with a pleasant experience can create a certain state of dependency. The organization of movement according to certain laws can generate rhythmicity, and, regarding the arts, this organization must generate affective states, it must move people. At the same time, the effects of rhythmicity on the masses of people who tend to manifest as a single organism are well known. This can be noticed when chanting a slogan while marching as well. In this respect, we should mention *Arbeit und Rhythmus* (Labor and Rhythm) by Karl Bücher,⁵ published at the end of the 19th century, by means of which he drew attention to the close connection between rhythm and the process of labor among various peoples. When it appeared (1896), the book provided information that was absolutely new to European culture, on the origin of rhythm, which was considered an artistic abstraction.

From a linguistic point of view, rhythmicity has a fundamental role in the succession of syllables and ensuring the pulsation of the poetic lyric, which generates a certain melodicism. The metrical pattern resulting from the association of the various syllables generally stands out in ancient Chinese poetry, thus generating different rhythmic formulas. Initially, in this specific type of poetry, all words were required to rhyme, with no exception.

It is important to mention the spoken character of ancient Chinese poetry, as it was specifically created to be sung, with or without instrumental accompaniment. We should also keep in mind that, in any spoken culture, rhythmic feet, respectively metrics, are a parameter of maximum importance, generating formulas with a mnemotechnical function. Without them, it would not be possible to memorize hundreds or even thousands of lyrics. Romanian folk poetry also exhibits an oral character, and it should come as no surprise, as we are referring here to ordinary, uneducated people who did not know how to read or write. Even in the case of “high” creations, the coexistence of lyrics and music is a visible fact, as the poems exhibit a profoundly chantable character.

4. The importance of intonation in Chinese poetry

It is now essential to bring up “the four tones of Chinese poetry and dialectics” (Sì shēng-四声), which we mentioned earlier; they have been used ever since ancient times in China. They represented four categories of tones used in Chinese pronunciation, with a very important role in the intonation of words within poetry, but also in comparative studies on the linguistic evolution of the tone (from ancient to modern Chinese).

⁴ *Idem*, p. 417.

⁵ Karl Bücher (1847-1930), German economist, the founder of journalism as an academic discipline.

| | |
|----------------|-----------------|
| 上 <i>shǎng</i> | 去 <i>qù</i> |
| 平 <i>píng</i> | 入 <i>rù (p)</i> |

The so-called “Dictionaries of Rhymes” are important works charting the evolution of the Chinese language and, implicitly, that of Chinese poetry. The first work of this kind referred to traditional rhymes and is known as *Qieyun* - 切韵. This document contained 12,158 initial characters that were divided into 193 groups, depending on the end rhymes. These spanned five volumes and were published in 601 during the Sui dynasty⁶. In fact, the dictionary was a guide on how to correctly read ancient texts, using the method of *Fanqie* - 反切, meaning that it indicated the pronunciation of Chinese characters. This text became very popular during the Tang dynasty and underwent a series of revisions and expansions, the most renowned being *Guangyun* (1007-1008).

Zhongyuan Yinyun (中原音韵), which can be translated into “Rhymes of the Central Plain”, is one of the oldest writings on the subject of musical rhyme, published in 1324 during the Yuan dynasty⁷, and authored by Zhou Deqing (周德清). It is an extremely important work in the domain of Chinese phonetics, given that it contains details regarding the changes that occurred throughout the passage of time, such as the reduction and disappearance of final consonants, as well as the reorganization of tones in Old Chinese.

Zhou had a profound understanding of poetic creation, as well as of the particularities of the vocal tone in the intonation of songs. He also realized that, oftentimes, the composers and performers within traditional theaters were not adept at rhymes, something that subsequently generated confusion in the musical circles of the time. This required regulation through clear linguistic rules on rhymes and intonation in poetry.

*Yunjing*⁸ - 韵镜 (1150) is the oldest “rhyme table” that offers a detailed phonetical analysis of the system featured in *Qieyun*. *Yunjing* was created several centuries after *Qieyun*, and the authors attempted to adapt a phonetical system that significantly differed from the one of ancient China.

Each of the 43 *Yunjing* tables was divided into four columns, in accordance with the four tones of ancient Chinese poetry: the level tone (平声 - *píngshēng*), the rising tone (上声 - *shǎngshēng*), the falling tone (去声 - *qùshēng*) and the entering tone (入声 - *rùshēng*). Depending on the direction of the intonation, these, too, could be categorized as level tones (平声 - *píngshēng*), while the other ones were deemed rising tones (上声 - *shǎngshēng*). Every table was also split into six columns, specifying the position of the tongue when articulating the syllables:

- “Labial sounds” (唇音 - *chúnyīn*)
- “Lingual sounds” (舌音 - *shèyīn*)
- “Molar teeth sounds” (牙音 - *yáyīn*)
- “Dental sounds” (齿音 - *chǐyīn*)
- “Laryngeal sounds” (喉音 - *hóuyīn*)
- “Linguo-dental sounds” (舌齿音 - *shèchǐyīn*)

The main columns are divided into two to five smaller columns that can represent one of the four possible subcategories:⁹

⁶ The Sui dynasty (581-618) preceded the Tan dynasty and was important in the unification of China.

⁷ The Yuan dynasty (1271-1368).

⁸ Pulleyblank, Edwin G. 1998. *Qieyun and Yunjing: The Essential Foundation for Chinese Historical Linguistics*, Journal of the American Oriental Society. pp. 200 - 216.

⁹ Baxter, William. 1992. *A Handbook of Old Chinese Phonology*. Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter.

- “Clear” sounds (清) – voiceless
- “Secondarily clear” sounds (次清) – voiceless aspirated
- “Muddy” sounds (浊) – through expiration
- “Clear-muddy” sounds (清浊) – nasal stops

The image shows two pages from the Yunjing, a medieval Chinese phonetic dictionary. The left page is titled '韻' (Rhyme) and the right page is titled '內轉等一開' (Internal Transformation, etc., 1st Opening). Both pages are organized into columns and rows, with characters and their phonetic classifications (清, 次清, 濁) listed. The characters are arranged in a grid-like format, with some characters circled or highlighted. The right page includes a vertical title '內轉等一開' on the far right.

The first *Yunjing* “rhyme table”

Researcher William Baxter shows that “Old Chinese sometimes used flexions of the forms. It possessed a system of sounds where harsh aspiration or respiration was used for the differentiation of consonants, but the Chinese language probably did not feature the tones that are in use today. The efforts behind the reconstruction of Old Chinese were made by the philologists of the Qing dynasty”.¹⁰

The role of employing two or more rhyming words in the same locality was to emphasize the resulting beauty of their sonority. Words like “shang” or “lang” contain the vocal “a”, which is similarly pronounced (in both words?), thus producing a rhyme. In ancient Chinese poetry, rhyme was usually aimed for at the end of the sentence. These terminations were known as “rhythmic pillars”.

In order to exemplify the aforementioned details regarding the importance of intonation in Chinese poetry, I will refer to lyrics from two Chinese poems, imagined musically by the composed Huang Zi (1904-1938). The level tones (平声 – píngshēng) and the rising tones (上声 - shǎngshēng) are marked underneath the text.

Song from the Southern village - (南乡子·登京口北固亭有怀), words by Xin Qi Ji¹¹

何处望神州？满眼风光北固楼。To no avail I gaze towards the tower rising
in the north,

/ / / _ _ ? / / _ _ / / _ .

¹⁰ Baxter, William. *op. cit.*, p. 21.

¹¹ Important Chinese poet (1140 -1207); also a military commander during the Southern Song dynasty (960-1279).

千古兴亡多少事？悠悠，不尽长江滚滚流。 *When in its shade there rose and fell
so many dynasties, And all have
passed, and so has time,
Like springwater flows over stones.*

// _ _ _ // ? _ _ , // _ _ // _ .

年少万兜鍪，坐断东南战未休。 *Even as a boy, Sun commanded over
thousands of armies, He defended his
Southern land in gory battle.*

/ / _ _ _ / / ? _ _ , / / _ _ / / _ .

Flowers in the Mist - (花非花) words by Bai Ju Yi¹²

花非花，雾非雾 *Flower, does it merely seem to be*
_ _ _ , / _ / *or will it be the mist of night indeed ?*

夜半来，天明去。 *that which trickles through in the midst of night,*
/ / _ , _ _ / . *and wears off at dawn, before the first ray of light?*

来如春梦不多时，去似朝云无觅处。 *It comes into sight like a dream, then vanishes into*
_ _ _ / / _ _ , / / _ _ _ / / . *oblivion, then vanishes into oblivion.*

5. The influence of the Chinese writing system on poetry

Researchers have attempted to discover to what extent the latent, pictorial element of Chinese characters has influenced classical Chinese poetry. The etymology of Chinese characters is connected to, yet distinct from the evolution of the language in itself. Similarly to many ancient writing systems, such as the Phoenician alphabet, a series of old characters were, at first, probably pictograms. These corresponded to one word which corresponded to a certain image or idea, as we can see in the following examples:



The evolution of the pictogram shān – “mountain”



The evolution of the character rì – “sun”

In the classical period of Chinese poetry, a writing system evolved; it was extremely complex, comprising many pictograms, which were the result of an association of multiple characters that were similar in terms of meaning and sonority. The resulting graphic images possess an emotional weight and meaning that is very powerful in comparison to the phonetic element, common in European languages (Romanian or English). Sinologist and translator A.C. Graham¹³ warns against the exaggerated accentuation of this visual effect, which he

¹² Chinese poet (772-846), who lived during the Tang dynasty. He wrote over 2800 poems.

¹³ A.C. Graham (1919-1991) – Scottish researcher and sinologist, professor of Classical Chinese at the School of Oriental and African Studies of the University of London.

states “can act upon imagination like a Rorschach test.¹⁴ It is quite hard to weigh this effect, since a common reader of Chinese writing will hardly be aware of their own reactions and might give too much importance to the visual aspect of Chinese writing. The poems of China are, just as those in other areas of the world, models of sound first...”¹⁵

Every syllable in Chinese (corresponding to a single character) represents an independent morpheme, which leads to the false understanding of Chinese as “a language of monosyllabic words”. It is actually a morpho-syllabic language, as there is a strong link between characters and words. We must also specify that poetry was not recited, but psalmodized,¹⁶ in the same way Greek tragedies, or sacred texts were, to a great extent, in various cults.

6. Forms and genres of Chinese poetry clusions

The first forms of Chinese poetry date back to the 10th-7th centuries B.C. and are relevant for the different formal and technical aspects found in poems: meter, rhythm, vocabulary or style. These forms and modes are, generally, independent from the classical genres of Chinese poetry. Most of them became prominent during the Tang dynasty, and the usage and development of Chinese poetry and classical genres have been evolving, and not just until the May Fourth Movement. The evolution continues today.

The typical poetic forms are divided into: shi - 诗, ci - 词 and qu - 曲.¹⁷ Fu literature - 赋 is also part of the category of poetry. This term is translated often as “rhapsody” or “poetic exposition”, and actually means a sort of “poetic prose”, which was the dominant literary form of the Han dynasty. During this period, poets used an elevated, affected language with a rich vocabulary, alternating between prose and poetry. The length of the lyrics varies, containing numerous alliterations and onomatopoeias.

In the 20th century, qu poetry was harshly criticized by Chinese linguistic researchers, as they considered it to be hindered by useless ornamentation, devoid of real emotion, and quite ambiguous in terms of its moral messages. Due to these reasons, this type of poetry was no longer studied in China for a long time (1949-1976), after which, upon the conclusion of the Chinese Cultural Revolution, it regained its rightful place in the history of literature.

Shanshui (山水诗) is a poetic movement influenced by the painting style of shanshui (landscape), which prominently represents scenes from nature. The personalities of this movement practiced “a landscape poetry”. Some poems were conceived so that they could be presented along with a certain work of art, while others were created in order to evoke a certain scenery in the mind of the reader. Shanshui is one of the most important classical genres of Chinese poetry, and it emerged in the 3rd and 4th centuries, during the Six Dynasties.¹⁸ The Shanshui style contributed to the process that formed a unique aesthetic perspective in Chinese poetic art.

¹⁴ The Rorschach test is a psychological projective personality test where ten standardized abstract models (ink blots) are used, and their interpretation by the subject represents a standard for the analysis of their intellectual and emotional functions. The ambiguous blots have different meanings to different people.

¹⁵ Graham, A. C. 1977. “Poems of the Late T'ang” (translation). *The New York Review of Books*.

¹⁶ Tatiana Segal. 2018. “Traduceri literare” (“Literary Translations”) Magazine, no. 27, an homage to Florentina Vişan. Retrieved April 15, 2020 from <https://www.fitralit.ro/31-01-2018-shi-o-poezie-impersonalizata-formalizata-dar-mai-ales-poezie>.

¹⁷ Even if, in Chinese, the word *shi* can mean “poetry” (more or less generically), *shi* refers, first of all, to a specific tradition within the larger category of poetry, which relates to the poems collected in *Shi Jing* throughout time. *Ci* is a type of lyrical poetry in the tradition of classical Chinese poetry that uses a certain metrical pattern with a fixed rhythm and a variable or fixed intonation. *Qu* poems are lyrics of various lengths, set in accordance to certain models (“the rhyme tables”), following the rhymes and intonation of pre-established musical pieces.

¹⁸ The Six Dynasties lasted from 220 to 589 A.D.

Another genre, which is very widespread in Chinese poetry, is known as Huaigu - 怀古, and it expresses the poet's vision in what concerns the past and their ancestors. According to American savant Burton Watson, it is fair to consider that this type of poetry illustrates "one of the perennial themes of Chinese poetry," wherein "the poet contemplates the ruins of glory past."¹⁹ Li Bo (or Li Tai-Pei, 701-762) was a poet who cherished this genre. The general emotions conveyed by this type of poetry are sadness and nostalgia. In other words, it imposes a state of reflection on man's transient destiny.

7. Stylistic devices, themes, symbols

Personification is frequently employed in Chinese poetry. The author writes the poem by presenting another person's point of view, e.g. the wife who has been left home alone or the soldier sent into battle far away from home.

Images and symbols are essential in understanding classical Chinese poetry. Thus, the image of falling autumn leaves actually reflects a person's collapse, or the downfall of a dynasty. Although they seem simple in expression and style, many Chinese poems are profound, with deep meanings and a wealth of emotion. Many times, they contain allusions or references to folk literature and myths. This type of symbolism can surely be found in any culture.

It must be mentioned that, due to the specifics of the Chinese language, which is so different from European languages, the translations are not very exact (when it comes to gender, number, case and person), and the deftness, level of culture and knowledge of the person undertaking such a challenging task are vital.

8. Conclusions

Thus, following this succinct exposition of the most important phases marking the evolution of Chinese poetry, we are now able to list its most important traits as the following:

- the strong interconnection between music and poetry;
- the morpho-syllabic structure of the Chinese language;
- the overwhelming importance of intonation, both in everyday speech, as well as in poetry, as the vocal inflections contribute to establishing meaning;
- the mnemotechnical function of metrical feet / rhythmic-intonational formulas during the times where poems were transmitted orally;
- the link between painting, calligraphy and poetic art;
- the link between the graphic and sonic aspect of words (most of the time).

We shall present the main aspects of Chinese poetry in the form of a table here:

¹⁹ Watson, Burton. 1971. *Chinese Lyricism: Shih Poetry from the Second to the Twelfth Century*, New York: Columbia University Press.

| Historical and Stylistic Periods | Creations | Characteristics | Representatives |
|---|--|---|---|
| Ancient China (the Classical period) 8500-221 B.C. | - folkloric - “high” (4 th -3 rd century B.C.) | - initially, music accompanied poetry and dance. - <i>shi-ge</i> – the symbiosis between music and poetry. - lyrics that are equal in length, generally consisting of four characters that form verses. - subjects: historical, mythological or inspired by legends. - some poems were ritualistic in nature. - the appearance of a writing system permitted the transition of these legends from oral tradition to written. | - Qu Yuan |
| Imperial China 221 B.C. – 1912 | - folkloric - “high” | - the epic poem, inspired by the life and deeds of emperors, and life at the Royal Court. - poems that brim with delicacy and passion, reminiscent of the natural expression of folk lyricism. | - Tao Qian - Li Tai-Pe - Tu Fu |
| Modern China 1912 – present day | - “high” | - the strong relationship between poetry and other art forms, such as painting and calligraphy. - the diversification of the poetic forms. | - Guo Moru - Lu Xun - Xu Zhimo - Yu Dafu |

9. References

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