Tonal Prosody in Yongming Style Poems

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Preface

Poetry, as opposed to prose, is characterized by more salient prosodic features, both language-general and language-specific. Versification is the process of the formation of meters, or a set of prosodic rules, based on the prosodic features inherent in the language. In this process, the selection and the application of the prosodic features are both linguistic and artistic. So it is not surprising that this research topic has been explored by two kinds of scholars: literary researchers and linguists, especially phonologists. This book's authors belong to the latter group.

Poetry has held an unrivaled status among all genres in ancient Chinese literature, which is apparent from the number of poems composed since the Book of Odes and from the number of recognized poets from the past two millennia. The composition of poetry reached its golden age in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), when a new style and new meter—known as Chinese Regulated Style, *gelü shi* 格律詩, or the Recent Style *jinti shi* 近體詩—became standardized. Due to the predominant status of the Regulated Style, three of the most important topics in the history of versification in Chinese literature are: the formation of pentasyllabic poetry or *wuyan shi* 五言詩, the formation of heptasyllabic poetry or *qiyan shi* 七言詩, and the creation of tonal prosody. In studying the first two topics, it is hard to pinpoint a particular poet or a particular movement that invented and/or promoted the new style or new meter. Often, scholars focus on tracing the influences of earlier literary forms in the rise of these two types of poems. In other words, the rise of pentasyllabic poems and the rise of heptasyllabic poems are often analyzed as trends that stemmed from one or older traditions. In contrast, tonal prosody seems to be more "man-made," and it is addressed as an abrupt new form that had no predecessor. Such distinctions allow researchers, including us, to narrow the pool of data that they investigate. This is the first reason why we started this research. The three major Yongming-era poets that this book covers are the

most famous from their era and are the most likely creators of Yongming tonal prosody (although possibly only the creators of a primitive version).

Chinese is a tonal language today, but this was not true of Archaic Chinese. The formation of tones (tonogenesis) is itself a somewhat contentious research topic in Chinese linguistics. Tone is the most prominent prosodic element in modern Chinese, just like stress is the most prominent prosodic element in many languages, including English. Poetic meters in many languages have been built using stress to form contrast, and contrast is the core of any meter. The authors of this book studied tones in both modern Chinese (including various dialects) and ancient Chinese. Being familiar with tones in general allows us to handle tonal prosody in a more reliable way.

This book is only made possible by new tools and methodology. In order to study the creation of tonal prosody in Chinese poetry, researchers have to analyze a large number of lines from various authors. Even though we have narrowed the pool of data used in this book down to the works of three major Yongming poets, this is still a pool of several thousand lines. In the early years of this research, we were handicapped by a lack of tools, and we were only able to mark the tones manually and examine patterns with our eyes and brains. There are four tones and five positions in a line. Using line as the unit of investigation, there are 4^5, or 1024, possible tonal combinations. Therefore, it is very hard to detect any contrastive or frequency characteristics of tones from the hundreds of lines in a single poet's work. With the help of a computer program and database, we were able to much more quickly mark the tones and analyze any given kind of tonal relationship within a line or within a couplet. Moreover, computerized research tools allow us to add conditions and divide the pool of lines according to different conditions for separate parameters of analysis. The methodological improvements are even more crucial than the advancements brought about by the new tools. Based on the idea of "language probability models" proposed by Gasparov (1987), we proposed a model for studying Chinese tonal prosody which is applicable not only to the research questions in this book, but also to many other similar questions. In this sense, the methodological improvements that this book proposes are as important as, if not more important than, the factual discoveries found in the Yongming poems. By introducing the concepts of a baseline and statistical testing, this model allows us to compare tonal data obtained from the target collections

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with those from the baseline, which in turn allows us to isolate any "abnormal" features of tonal distribution. Such abnormalities or deviations from the norm are strong indicators for the artistic manipulation of tones.

There are many books and articles studying Chinese tonal prosody and Yongming tonal prosody specifically. But this book is the only quantitative study that covers almost all pentasyllabic poems written by the three most important poets (Shen Yue, Wang Rong and Xie Tiao) of the Yongming Style, and the two most important poets (Cao Zhi and Xie Lingyun) who preceded them in the Wei-Jin period. Compared to previous quantitative studies on this topic, this book also investigates more pair-wise contrasts. Most importantly, the publication of this study marks the first time that two tonal contrast rules (with exceptions amounting to less than 3%) have been identified. This book also provides strong evidence for the existence of dominant five-tone patterns in the Yongming Style poems, which have not been touched upon at all in any previous studies.

Shen Yue, Wang Rong, and Xie Tiao are the most famous and productive poets of the Yongming period. But other members of their circle also left poems behind. This book does not include the data from these poems because each of the other Yongming poets wrote a relatively small number of poems, which would not provide a large enough sample for statistical testing. In future studies, we will include data from these smaller collections as supporting evidence.

This book is only a first solid step towards a much more ambitious research project, which aims to reveal the entire process of the versification of tonal prosody from Late Han to Tang. All the discoveries, hypotheses, and speculations included in this book will serve as foundations for following studies related to this research. On the other hand, all of our discoveries and hypotheses are also subject to verification by future research to be conducted on post-Yongming poems. For example, we found that XZXPP is a dominant pattern in the three Yongming collections. We would expect that it also had a significant status in the poems written in slightly later times. This result has been confirmed in the poems of Yu Xin and a couple of his contemporaries. As we are publishing this book, our research project is extending its depth and time span resulting in many other results.

It is our wish that this book will receive attention from literary scholars

who also work on this topic from a literary perspective. We by no means want to replace their role in this area of study. On the contrary, our views, methods, and discoveries are intended to be complementary to theirs. Our weaknesses lie in analyzing the meanings, imageries, lives, and social backgrounds of the poets. The very nature of our research method dictates that we are more tuned to see "forest" rather than the "trees." But the nature of tonal prosody is such that artistic creativity and linguistic features both play important roles. On the one hand, this book serves as a tool or a reference for those who need it for more literary exploration. On the other hand, we wish to receive feedback, suggestions, or even objections from literary scholars after they have kindly taken the time to read this book. This feedback—whether positive or negative—will help us make adjustments to the methods, data, and conclusions of this extremely ambitious and lengthy research project on tonal prosody.

Contents

Chapter 1

Introduction to the Puzzle

The Yongming 永明 Era (483-493) saw the birth of an important and unique feature in traditional Chinese poetry—tonal prosody, in which the four tones were arranged into certain combinations in lines of pentasyllabic poetry (*wuyan shi* 五言詩). This Yongming tonal prosody then allegedly developed into the tonal prosody of the Tang Dynasty Regulated Style. Shen Yue 沈約 (441-513), Wang Rong 王融 (476-493) and Xie Tiao 謝朓 (464-499)— the most famous Yongming poets—were recognized as the most active and brilliant proponents of Yongming-style tonal prosody (Victor Mair & Tsu-Lin Mei 1991, Zhang Peiheng & Luo Yuming 1996, Yuan Xingpei 1998, Fu Xuancong 1999, Lin Jiali 1999, etc.). Shen Yue's description and discussion of tonal prosody has incited many researchers to study the exact nature of this invention. Though some scholars have examined the actual tonal arrangements in Yongming poems, such research has yet to reach conclusive results. This book takes a quantitative approach to the investigation of tonal rules in the work of the three most important Yongming poets. In this chapter, we will present the major issues surrounding Yongming tonal prosody, as well as the objectives and the organization of this book.

1.1 Tonal prosody in Tang Regulated Style verses

To begin this investigation, we would like to clarify the term Regulated Style. Used almost exclusively in Chinese literature, the term Regulated Style or *lüshi* 律詩 denotes a specific poetry style that rose to extreme popularity in the Tang Dynasty (618-907). As the word-for-word meaning of the term indicates, the language of the poems composed in this style is subject to a "mandatory

implementation of syntactic, structural, and tonal regulations" (Cai Zongqi 2007: 162). But in a sense, all poems follow some type of "regulation." For example, Nigel Fabb and Morris Halle (2008) believe that the fundamental characteristic of all poetry is the "line." So one might say that being divided into lines is a shared "regulation" among all poems across different literary traditions. However, the regulations observed in Chinese Regulated Style are very specific in nature. The term Regulated Style can be used interchangeably with the term Recent Style Verse or *jinti shi* 近體詩, which is opposed to the Ancient Style or *guti* 古體, which designates all poems (pentasyllabic and heptasyllabic) that do not follow this set of specific regulations.

The Regulated Style requires poets to follow a set of rules. Among the regulations governing Regulated Style, some are metrical or prosodic in nature, while some are syntactic and others thematic. (1) below outlines the basic metrical rules:

(1)   Basic rules of Regulated Style (revised from James Liu 1962: 26)
    a. A poem should consist of either four or eight lines.
    b. The lines must all be either pentasyllabic or heptasyllabic.
    c. The same rhyme is used throughout a poem. In a pentasyllabic poem, rhyme is used at the end of the 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th lines; rhyming at the end of the first line is optional. In a heptasyllabic poem, rhyme occurs at the end of the 1st, 2nd, 4th, 6th and 8th lines; rhyme at the end of the 1st line is at times omitted.

In addition to these most basic rules, there are more complex regulations. The first kind of regulation is syntactic, and the second tonal. We will use an example from Cai's 2007 book, *How to Read Chinese Poetry*, to illustrate these two types of rules. The poem reproduced in (2) below is a pentasyllabic eight-line poem or 五言律詩 *wuyan lüshi* written by Du Fu 杜甫 (712-770).

(2)   Chinese   Word-for-word gloss

[國破][山河在] Country	broken	mountain river		remain
[城春][草木深] city	spring	grass	wood	thick
[感時][花濺淚] feel	time	flower	shed	tear
[恨別][鳥驚心] hate	separation	bird	startle	heart

[烽火][連三月] beacon	fire	span	three	month
[家書][抵萬金] home	letter	equal	ten thousand	gold tael
[白頭][搔更短] white	head	scratch	even	shorter
[渾欲][不勝簪] simply	be about to	not	able	hairpin

("Chun wang" 春望 ("Spring Scene") by Du Fu 杜甫, quoted from Cai Zongqi 2007: 162)

Translation (quoted from Cai Zongqi 2007: 162):
> The country is broken, but mountains and rivers remain,
> The city enters spring, grass and trees have grown thick.
> Feeling the time, flower shed tears,
> Hating separation, a bird startles the heart.
> Beacon fires span over three months,
> A family letter equals ten thousand taels of gold.
> My white hairs, as I scratch them, grow more sparse,
> Simply becoming unable to hold hairpins.

First, the syntactic regulations mandate that the major pause in each line be placed between the second and third words/characters/syllables of the line, resulting in a caesura in the same position in each line[①]. This is indicated by the bracketing notation in the Chinese text. Secondly, the syntactic rules require that in an eight-line *lüshi* poem, the syntax of the two lines in the second and third couplets should strictly parallel each other, matching both in terms of part of speech and syntactical relationship between words.

The tones of each word/syllable of a Regulated Style poem have to follow certain patterns. In (3) below, we have marked the tonal categories of the poem "Chun Wang" 春望.

(3)	Chinese	*Ping-ze* pattern	Four-tone pattern
	國破山河在	v v - - v	R-Q-P-P-S
	城春草木深	- - v v -	P-P-S-R-P
	感時花濺淚	- - - v v	S-P-P-Q-Q

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① This rule is occasionally violated by poets to achieve special rhythmic effects. One example is 犬迎曾宿客, 鴉護落巢兒 from Du Fu's "Chongguo Heshi wushou" 重過何氏五首. These two lines have 1+4 structure, syntactically and prosodically.

恨別鳥驚心	v v v - -	Q-R-S-P-P
烽火連三月	- v - - v	P-S-P-P-R
家書抵萬金	- - v v -	P-P-S-Q-P
白頭搔更短	v - - v v	R-P-P-Q-S
渾欲不勝簪	v v v - -	P-R-R-P-P

Ancient Chinese (also called Middle Chinese) has four tonal categories, known as *ping, shang, qu,* and *ru.* The contrast in the required tonal patterns of the Regulated Style verses was made between the *ping* tone category (marked as "-" in the examples in this book[1]) and *ze,* which includes the other three tonal categories (marked as "v"). To compose a Regulated Style verse, a poet would have to use words from the correct tonal category in the correct positions in each line. The canonical patterns are given below (from Mathew Chen 1979).

(4) Canonical Tonal Patterns of Chinese Regulated Style (Mathew Chen 1979: 373)

Heptasyllabic A	Pentasyllabic A
v v - - - v v	- - - v v
- - v v v - -	v v v - -
- - v v - - v	v v - - v
v v - - v v -	- - v v -
v v - - - v v	- - - v v
- - v v v - -	v v v - -
- - v v - - v.	v v - - v
v v - - v v -	- - v v -

Heptasyllabic B	Pentasyllabic B
- - v v - - v	v v - - v
v v - - v v -	- - v v -
v v - - - v v	- - - v v
- - v v v - -	v v v - -
- - v v - - v	v v - - v
v v - - v v -	- - v v -

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[1] We will also use P, S, Q and R to designate the four tones *ping, shang, qu* and *ru,* respectively.

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v v - - v v -            - - - v v
- - v v v - -            v v v - -
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Chen (1979) only lists the patterns for the eight-line *lüshi* 律詩 poems, but the four-line *jueju* 絕句 patterns are just the first halves of the *lüshi* 律詩 patterns. The canonical tonal pattern shown in (4) designates a tonal category for each syllable in a poem. In practice, however, some deviations from the canon are allowed. Chen (1979) states, "Departures from the canon are regarded as extracanonical but not ipso facto unmetrical." In fact, a simple comparison of the tones in (3) and (4) reveals that the tonal pattern of the poem "Spring Scene" contains some deviations from the canon. Since "Spring Scene" is pentasyllabic, we can ignore the heptasyllabic canonical patterns. It is obvious that "Spring Scene's" *ping-ze* tonal pattern is related to Pentasyllabic B, as it is almost the same as Pentasyllabic B. In (5) below, we have marked the tonal deviations from the canonical pattern in "Spring Scene" by putting the deviating tones in parentheses.

(5) Deviations from the canonical pattern in "Chun wang" 春望 (Spring Scene)

Chinese	*Ping-ze* pattern
國破山河在	v v - - v
城春草木深	- - v v -
感時花濺淚	- - - v v
恨別鳥驚心	v v v - -
烽火連三月	(-) v - - v
家書抵萬金	- - v v -
白頭搔更短	(v) - - v v
渾欲不勝簪	v v v - -

There are two tonal deviations found in this poem: the first tone of line 5 should be *ze* (marked as v) and that of line 7 should be *ping* (marked as -) according to the canonical pattern, but the actual tones seen in this particular poem are the opposite. A commonly observed rule of thumb is that such deviations are allowed in the 1st and 3rd positions in the lines of a pentasyllabic poem, or the 1st, 3rd and 5th positions in the lines of a heptasyllabic poem. However, it has been

pointed out (e.g. Wang Li 1958, Stephen Ripley 1979, Duanmu San 2005) that even in these positions, deviations are not random.

The intricately regular appearance of the canonical patterns has led scholars to believe that the patterns are constructed according to a set of principles. In the field of literary study, most researchers agree that these patterns follow the following principles:

(6) a. Contrast of tones within a line;
     b. Contrast of tones between the two lines in a couplet;
     c. Tonal harmony between adjacent lines in two adjacent couplets;
     d. Contrast and harmony based upon *ping* versus *ze* bifurcation.

Please note that these are only principles in that they cannot fully explain the patterns tone by tone. Many attempts have been made to generalize the canonical patterns into a set of rules by which each tonal value in the pattern can be determined. Mathew Chen (1979) summarizes some earlier philological and linguistic solutions. More recent phonological models can be found in Duanmu San (2004).

There is one important point that we must clarify here: these rules themselves are synchronic and linguistic in nature. Neither the rules nor the order of their application reflect how these tonal patterns were created historically. The rules and patterns also do not reflect the mental tonal selection process that occurs in poem composition.

1.2 The legendary origin and the outstanding issues

As section 1.1 shows, the tonal rules governing the Chinese Regulated Style form a complex system, which is unlikely to be the result of a simple one-step invention that took place over a short period of time. It is even less likely that this complex system would have won its unsurpassable popularity over a short period of time. Most sources on Regulated Style assert that it originated in the Qi-Liang 齊梁 period (479-557). During this period, Yongming Style was recognized as the predecessor of Regulated Style, and the leader of the Yongming Style movement, Shen Yue (441-513), is believed to be the main inventor of the concept of tonal prosody. For example, in their very

influential 1991 paper, which quoted research from a variety of scholars (including Konishi Jinichi 1980, Richard Bodman 1978, and Wang Liqi 1983), Victor Mair and Tsu-Lin Mei stated, "Previous studies on the subject have traced the origin of tonal prosody to the theory of 'four tones and eight defects,' traditionally attributed to Shen Yueh." (Victor Mair and Tsu-Lin Mei 1991: 376)

If Shen Yue was one of the inventors of Yongming Style tonal prosody, and if Yongming Style was the predecessor of Regulated Style, then what exactly did Shen Yue propose? Shen's theory is traditionally believed to include two key concepts: the "four tones" and the "eight defects." In this section, we will briefly introduce these two terms and the issues surrounding them.

1.2.1 The "four tones"

The "four tones" refer to the four tones in Middle Chinese, namely, *ping*, *shang*, *qu*, and *ru*. These tones had been formed by the end of the Han 漢 Dynasty[①], but they were only discovered around the Qi-Liang period. A famous anecdote recorded in the *Liang shu* 梁書 (*History of Liang*) is often quoted as one of the earliest uses of the term "four tones."

(7) 約撰四聲譜，自謂入神之作。武帝雅不好焉。嘗問周舍曰："何謂四聲？"
舍曰"天子聖哲"是也。

(《梁書》沈約傳)

> Shen Yue composed the book *Register of the Four Tones*. He thought it to be a divine piece of work. Emperor Wu is gracious and does not like it. Once he asked Zhou She, "What are the 'four tones' all about?" Zhou She said, "[Your Majesty] heaven's son is sage and wise."
> ("Shen Yue zhuan" (The Biography of Shen Yue) in *Liang shu*)

[①] Traces of Archaic Chinese, which led to the formation of the *qu* tone, could still be detected in transliteration data in the Northern-Southern Dynasties period. See Zhengzhang (2003: 202-219). The existence of these traces does not disprove that the four tones already had distinct pitch values or that they became noticeable and phonetically distinguishable to speakers during the Northern-Southern Dynasties period. Whether the four tones were already phonemic or not is another issue. For more details on this issue please see Hirayama Misao (1991).