

Notes on Poetry

General Remark

The first two sections are based on Brooks and Warren's *Understanding Poetry* (1976), although I have added my own understanding and interpretation. The rest are mostly my own. They reflect the basic theory behind my current poem writing. I use some of Wang Li's works as key references. The following poem captures some important ideas discussed here.

诗艺

参差音节一线穿，
铿锵音韵奏和弦。
一线一线精心编，
织锦如歌成诗篇。

海上诸岛巧相链，
烟波袅绕境若仙。
语词群峰忽隐现，
诗意尽在云雾间。

鲜活情景呈画卷，
七彩人生文中见。
写下爱憎与悲欢，
道出无奈和期愿。

古人技艺达顶尖，
今人当开新局面。
惟有不拘形式限，
方能重把诗魂延。

(2011)

A Unique Way of Saying

Poetry is as old as human language. Long before scripts were invented tales from ancient time had been passed down generation after generation in the form of poems. These were normally among the earliest written records of a particular human language (e.g., 《诗经》, *Beowulf & Nibelungenlied*). Other literary forms, such as drama, prose and novel, came into existence much later and underwent significant development. But none of these new forms could replace poetry. On the contrary, poetry has survived to this day and gone through remarkable evolution itself. Some speculations naturally come to our mind. Something must stand behind this longevity. There must be some uniqueness of poetry which makes it irreplaceable.

Compared with other literary forms, two distinct features of poetry stand out: First, poems are written in a particular format. The words are arranged in a regular way and there are often obvious patterns among them. Second, poems are normally short. The shortest poems could consist of just two lines. These two features may help a layman to identify poems.

If this is all that poetry is about, it wouldn't have had such power of survival. To get a deeper understanding of poetry we have to go behind these superficial characteristics. Brooks and Warren discussed several essential features of poetry at the beginning of their book, which I summarize as follows:

Form Is as Important as Content

Human language has several different key aspects: phonetics, morphology, syntax and semantics. For many speech and text objects, such as business contracts and scientific talks and papers, only semantics matters. What's most important in these cases is that the meaning has to be conveyed

precisely. Things lying under the meaning, such as the sound of the words and the structure of the sentences, don't matter. This even applies to prose, novel and the major part of drama. However, the case with poetry is quite different. Obviously words in a poem also carry meaning and almost all poems convey certain concepts or ideas, or at least express certain attitudes. But at the same time things lying under meaning are important as well. For Western languages the form of poetry mostly lies on the phonetic level. Both rhythm and rhyme are phonetic phenomena. As we'll see later, the form of Chinese poems involves all the key aspects mentioned above.

However, it's inappropriate to match content with semantics, although a significant part of content lies on the semantic level. On the one hand, some elements of form also reside on the semantic level. Patterns could be formed based on meaning. On the other hand, the content of a poem could go beyond the meaning of words. In this case we also need to talk about pragmatics besides semantics. Anyways, form is as important as content in poems. In this sense poetry has the most intimate relationship with its language. It's involved with almost all aspects of the language. Since each language has its particular features, poems, especially good poems, written in one language cannot be translated into another without losing some important aspects of it. In this way poetry is truest to its language.

Saying Is Much More than Statement

It was once held that the sole function of language was to describe facts. A narrative tells a story, which is a sequence of facts spreading over the time axis. An opinion is just somebody's belief of certain facts. This turns out to be a very simplistic view of language. The phenomenon of human language is much richer than what this view depicts. We speak and write not only to share some knowledge, but also to express our feelings and attitudes, or initiate certain actions. This clearly distinguishes literary language from scientific language, even philosophical language. Although scientific language is effective to handle its own subject matter, it has limitations. As Brooks and Warren put it,

For better or worse, certain kinds of material and certain kinds of concern are not amenable to scientific treatment, and when science does attempt to treat such things, it is so much the less science. The specialized language of science permits precision of statement in - but only in - its specialized field. (p. 8)

Emotions are expressed directly in poems, and often in a vibrant way. This could constitute the major content of a poem. It separates poetry from other literary forms. Even for those poems which have emphasis on ideas, the ideas shouldn't be stated directly like in a philosophical essay. In Brooks and Warren's words, a good poem should have a dramatic structure. The meaning should come out of the drama. And the common ground of poetry understanding, even of poems from a different culture, is that, "*we are witnessing and taking part in the great human effort to achieve meaning through experience.*" (p. 270) Both drama and experience require that a poem should contain concrete aspects of life. Although poems are short and their meanings very often are abstract, they are concerned with life in its full manifestation. In this way poetry is closest to human life.

Less Is More

Finally poems are short for deep reasons. It is still related to the nature of human life and language. In the old time people's life was simple and the language developed out of it was straightforward. The language mainly contained names of everyday objects and verbs of basic actions. As life became complex language evolved with it. A critical way of language expansion is through metaphor. Through metaphor many primary words of a language obtained abstract meaning. The word "abstract" itself offers a good example. Its primary meaning was "to pull away from". The meaning of the word when it's used in the phrase "abstract meaning" above was obtained later, derived from the primary meaning through metaphor, essentially analogy in a certain sense/context. Metaphor doesn't have to be involved with abstract meaning. Words as concrete as "needle eye" and "table leg" also obtained their meaning through metaphor. When we look at words in a modern dictionary, a majority of them have multiple meanings, connected with each other through metaphor at close scrutiny.

What's unique to poetry is that it keeps metaphor alive. In scientific speech and writing ideally every word should have precisely defined meaning. Ambiguity is the first thing to avoid with every effort. The language of poetry is just the opposite. The meaning of scientific words is crystal clear and stable, but also static. The meaning of poetic words is vague and variable, but dynamic. Poetry keeps the metaphorical expansion of the meaning of words open. For poetry the meaning of words looks like cloud. We may call it *connotational cloud*. The meanings listed in the dictionary are just some important reference points. They are the historical deposit or crystallization of language development.

The subjects of poetry are often complicated. It's very likely, if we use those reference points in the meaning of words to capture the idea we would miss the target. *Zhuang Zi* contains the dictum 言不尽意 (words cannot capture all the idea), which may be interpreted in this sense. In this case we have to use the connotational cloud. When the connotational clouds of some key words in a poem are nicely bound together, they could demonstrate unexpected power to capture unusual meanings. The whole poem creates the appropriate sense/context to unleash the hidden power of words. That constitutes a crucial part of creativity in poetry. In this case more words could destroy the effect. Because more words mean more restrictions, that could shrink the cloud and make it less powerful. The general motto is that, the less we say, the more we could mean.

Different Aspects of Poems

The main body of Brooks and Warren's book was devoted to various aspects of poetry. Specifically the essential chapters are titled as follows:

1. Dramatic Situation
 2. Description: Images, Moods, and Attitudes
 3. Tone
 4. Analogical Language: Metaphor and Symbol
 5. Theme, Meaning, and Dramatic Structure
- Appendix B. Metrics

On the basis of my understanding I propose the following aspects of poems: form, story, scene, emotion and idea. Form corresponds to metrics and story to dramatic situation. Chapter 2 is related to both scene and emotion. Although these two are often connected, we could still handle them as separate aspects. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 are all concerned with idea. All the aspects other than form belong to content.

Form 形

Generally speaking the form of a poem is the structure and pattern we could find in it. Although poems are short, the structure of a poem involves quite a few layers, ranging from phonemes to paragraphs and beyond. These layers don't strictly correspond to linguistic layers. For one thing sentences are not as significant as verses in poems. And poetry doesn't give all the phonemes in a poem equal attention. The most significant component of a poem is a verse, a single line in it. Under the verse layer a syllable is another key unit. Syllables are decomposed to construct rhymes and grouped into feet. Above the verse layer there are stanzas, chapters, (component poems in a suite) up to the whole composition.

The main part of poetic form in Western languages lies on the phonetic level. Rhythm and rhyme are two major components. Rhythm is an inner-verse feature. It's the pattern of syllables within a verse based on phonetic features such as accent or stress. Rhyme could be used within a verse, but mostly it's inter-verse and located at verse-end. Besides rhythm and rhyme stanza form is a feature beyond the phonetic level. These three components jointly determine the form of a Western poem. For instance, an English sonnet contains 14 verses of iambic pentameter in a single stanza, with strictly defined verse-end rhyme scheme.

As will be discussed in details below, the form of Chinese poems is more complex than this. It contains not only all the components mentioned above, but some features which are unique to the Chinese language.

Story 事

Poems are short, but they could tell stories, certainly in a poetic way. They don't include every detail, but not exclude every detail either. Story telling is the main content of narrative poems. However, more poems have the narrative aspect.

Scene 景

Scene description is another aspect of poetry. No poem can stand by the image itself. It suggests either some feeling or thought. The image makes a poem concrete and vivid, and hence adds to its drama.

Emotion 情

Feeling and thought are two basic aspects of human mind. Certainly poetry should be concerned with them. In fact they constitute the main content of poetry. Human emotions are diverse, rich and complex. But all the facets could be found in poems. In emotion expression nothing can compare music and poetry in their directness. They are often combined in songs.

Idea 意

Thought expression is the main function of language. As a language art poetry inherits this function, but it performs the function in a very unique way. This has been explained in the previous section.

Chinese as a Poetic Language

Chinese is the oldest living human language. And in most part of its history it has had the most native speakers. Some unique linguistic features contribute to this astonishing longevity and scope. Chinese characters are an important component of it. Combined with other features they also make Chinese very conducive to poem writing, traditionally a basic part of literacy.

Mono-Syllabic Normalized Ideographs

Chinese characters are mono-syllabic normalized ideographs. Three aspects are obviously involved here:

- **Ideographs** Unlike syllabic scripts, which correspond to the sound of a word, ideographs represent the meaning. This has a crucial advantage in terms of stability. The sound of a word varies much more easily. In only a few centuries an English word could become unrecognizable. Modern English speakers even have some difficulty in reading Shakespeare's plays, let alone *Beowulf*. In contrast, modern Chinese speakers can read *The Analects of Confucius*, written over two thousand years ago, with minimal training. Certainly the sound of Chinese characters has changed a lot in history, but that didn't disrupt their identity. On the other hand, Cantonese or Shanghainese are almost unintelligible to a Mandarin speaker, but this fact doesn't prevent most people in China from sharing the same language. The Chinese language is an essential basis of the unity of Chinese culture.
- **Normalized** Chinese characters are normalized in the sense that they all have the same size and almost all are independent semantic units.
- **Mono-syllabic** All Chinese characters are mono-syllabic. Combined with the above feature, there are nice correspondences among phonetics, semantics and visual properties. Poets definitely love

these. For one thing, in Chinese poems each syllable carries meaning independently. In this way when one wants to change a word in a well metered verse he/she doesn't need to worry much about the change of syllable count. For another, in Chinese poems each syllable has the same size in script. This adds an extra dimension to the poems. To have each stanza in a matrix form is just one of the possibilities.

Counterpoint 对仗

An important feature of Chinese poetry is a unique type of correspondence between verses, based on the above linguistic features. The word "counterpoint" is borrowed from music and used here metaphorically. More elaboration is needed to make the concept clearer. The correspondence of words between verses could happen on multiple layers. The following poem by the famous poet Du Fu 杜甫 in the *Tang* Dynasty is an excellent example to explain that:

两个黄鹂鸣翠柳，
一行白鹭上青天。
窗含西岭千秋雪，
门泊东吴万里船。

Normally such a poem (seven-character *Jue Ju* 七言绝句) has contrapuntal first and second verses of the single stanza. But in this poem the third and fourth verses are also contrapuntal.

Next we look at the first contrapuntal couplet in details. The correspondence between the first two verses of the poem happens on phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels:

- **Phonetic level:** Apparently both verses have seven characters/syllables. And they are also metered. The meter in Chinese poems is based on tone instead of stress. Roughly the first and second tones in modern Mandarin are *Ping* 平 tones and the third and fourth are *Ze* 仄 tones. So we have the following contrapuntal meters:

仄仄平平平仄仄
平平仄仄仄平平

- **Morphological level:** Chinese is a non-inflective language and in traditional Chinese most words contained a single character. So morphology is minimal. But here we do have an exception. 黄鹂 and 白鹭 are two contrapuntal compound words. They both have the same morphological structure: color + noun stem, like "brown bear."
- **Syntactic level:** Both verses have the same syntactic structure:

两	个	黄鹂	鸣	翠	柳
一	行	白鹭	上	青	天

number unit 2-character subjective noun verb adjective ablative noun

- **Semantic level:** First, the two subjective nouns are both birds. Second, the verb in the first verse is static (perching and singing) whereas that in the second verse dynamic (flying upward). Third, the two adjectives are both color.

The general principle of counterpoint in Chinese poetry is that the corresponding words in two contrapuntal verses have to be the same in one sense (normally of the same genus), but different (often opposite) in another (normally of different kinds).

Rhyme

A syllable is an important phonological unit. Its structure can be depicted with the following scheme:

[C] V [C]

where *C* is a consonant group and *V* a vowel group. Things within [] are optional. For the sake of distinction we rewrite the scheme as:

[C₁] V [C₂]

C_1 is normally called onset, V nucleus and C_2 coda.

Hence, we have the following significant relations between two syllables:

- **Alliteration:** two syllables share the same onset, $[C_1] V [C_2]$ and $[C_1] V' [C'_2]$ in scheme, e.g. Mike and made.
- **Rhyme:** two syllables share the same nucleus and coda, $[C_1] V [C_2]$ and $[C'_1] V [C_2]$ in scheme, e.g. Mike and bike.
- **Assonance:** two syllables share the same nucleus, $[C_1] V [C_2]$ and $[C'_1] V [C'_2]$ in scheme, e.g. Mike and bite.
- **Consonance:** two syllables share the same onset and coda, $[C_1] V [C_2]$ and $[C_1] V' [C_2]$ in scheme, e.g. Mike and make.

Of all the above relations rhyme is the most used in poetry. And verse-end rhyme is the most dominant type in turn. Verse-end rhyme is associated with meter in metered poems. In English verse-end rhyme starts with the last stressed syllable. Every phoneme after that has to be identical. So "sorrow" rhymes with "tomorrow," but not "arrow." In Chinese strict verse-end rhyme requires a *Ping* tone.

What's unique in Chinese in terms of rhyme is that there are only about a dozen of nucleus and coda combinations in phonetics. In other words there are only about a dozen of rhymes in Chinese. That means hundreds of words could rhyme with each other in the broad sense. Poets love this for sure. In Chinese poetry we could easily have dozens of verses with the same verse-end rhyme. Since it's so easy, strictly metered poetry has put more restrictions on rhyme, as appeared in the traditional *Rhyme Book* 《韵书》. But rhyme is rhyme. Rhyming words sound similar.

Metaphor

The fact that Chinese is poetic is more manifested in syntax and semantics than script and phonetics. Chinese has no inflection, neither declension nor conjugation as in Indo-European languages. The same words are used across persons (first, second and third), numbers (singular and plural) and genders (masculine, feminine and neuter), even tenses (past, present and future), aspects (neutral, progressive, perfect, etc.), moods (indicative, imperative, subjunctive, etc.) and voices (active and passive). That doesn't mean Chinese is a crippled language. When necessary, Chinese is expressive in all the above elements. The difference lies in the fact that the mechanisms used for those purposes belong to syntax, semantics and pragmatics, rather than morphology. Word order, word meaning and context carry most of the weight.

In the extreme cases the same words are used across parts of speech. Just take the character 美 as an example. It could be put in the following parts of speech:

- Noun as in 真善美 (truth, goodness and *beauty*)
- Verb as in 美其名曰 (*beautify* its name as)
- Adjective as in 美景 (*beautiful* scene)
- Adverb as in 美化环境 (*beautifully* change the environment)

In this case one even cannot tell the part of speech of a word by itself. However that's a trivial task for a Chinese native speaker. How is that done? Well, one has to look around. The clues lie in the word order and the meanings of surrounding words. We've run into some manifestation of holistic thinking. But more is yet to come.

Further, the meanings of Chinese words are rich and dynamic. Many have been used for thousands of years and so had the chance to gather a rich set of meanings. Apparently a word cannot be understood without its context. And more importantly even the rich set of dictionary meanings is not fixed. It's always open to novel metaphors. So very often one has to read between the lines.

To summarize, first, Chinese needs to be understood as a whole. Second, it further needs to be understood beyond the linguistic whole. That's why Chinese is much more difficult to learn as a

foreign language. If the poetic way of saying is a special way in Western languages, it's a normal way in Chinese.

Attitude toward Form

Since form is so important to poetry, the attitude toward form constitutes an essential part of poetry theory. Modern poets in the West have more or less moved away from the traditional forms. Some denounced certain traditional forms as sheer burden. Others experimented with new forms. Under the impact of Western modernity Chinese poets have adopted very dramatic attitude toward their own rich poetry tradition. Some advocated to throw away all the tradition. Some tried hard to imitate poetic forms of Western languages. It's still an ongoing effort to construct modern Chinese poetry theory. What follows represents my current thinking.

Balancing Freedom and Restriction

The dialectic of freedom and restriction

- **Thesis** Freedom means to go beyond restriction. In order to be free one has to overcome certain restrictions.
- **Antithesis** Freedom in the genuine sense depends upon restriction. In other words, no restriction, no freedom. What if we loosen all the rules of basketball, say, let each player play their own ball? The beauty of the game immediately disappears.
- **Synthesis** Restriction provides the basis on which genuine freedom may develop. The key is to have the appropriate set of restrictions.

Implications for poetry

Form is definitely restriction, but that's one of the crucial things which make poems beautiful. No distinct form, no poetry! The art of poetry lies in what kind of restrictions a poet wants to accept and transcend. Free verse is free in a sense. But if one throws away all the restrictions s/he is not writing poems any more.

Harmonizing Form and Content

The dialectic of form and content

- **Thesis** Form often hinders content expression. In the extreme cases form turns into a hollow shell.
- **Antithesis** Content essentially depends upon form. It has to be expressed in a certain form.
- **Synthesis** Form shouldn't become a burden. It's rather an essential tool. The key is to have form work for content.

Implications for poetry

Although form can stand on its own to a certain extent, content has higher priority in poetry. The stories and scenes and the expression of feelings and thoughts are more important. Different contents require different forms.

Combining Tradition and Modernity

The dialectic of tradition and modernity

- **Thesis** Modernity broke away from tradition. It discarded many elements of tradition.
- **Antithesis** Modernity essentially was a continuation of tradition. The foundation of a culture hasn't change.
- **Synthesis** Modernization was (should be) development without loss of identity. Western modernity appeared to be a complete break-away from Christianity, but the essential features of it, including the scientific world view, capitalism and democracy, were all developments within the

fundamental Christian framework put in a larger multi-cultural context. Other cultures should develop their own form of modernity on the basis of their own tradition.

Implications for poetry

Although cross-lingual borrowing has been an important way of development, the form of poetry has intimate relationship with its own language. Self-denial in the form of throwing away all traditional poetic forms and blindly imitating those from a foreign language is equivalent to committing suicide. The responsible action should be self-development.

Writing Poems

Like all the other art creation activities, poem writing is also a very personal endeavor. Although all the ideas presented in this essay are individualistic to a certain extent, this section contains mostly my personal take on it.

General Principles of the Self-Development of Chinese Poetry

The concept of self-development of Chinese poetry becomes more meaningful when it's put in the general framework of my theory of Chinese modernity. In summary Chinese modernity shouldn't be a break-away from Chinese traditional culture, just like Western modernity is essentially a continuation of the Christian culture. Instead of the self-denial initiated in the New Culture Movement and culminated in the Cultural Revolution, what we need is self-development. Certainly the event trigger was the impact of Western modernity. In the end Chinese modernization should be the self-development of Chinese culture in this new context, rather than Westernization. More discussion could be found in my dissertation. I was educated with the standard view, and it took me a couple of decades to go beyond and reach this new conception.

Back to poetry we may list the following general principles:

- **Loyalty to language** Chinese poetry should be true to Chinese language. If a poem can be rendered into a foreign language without loss of non-superficial features then it's not loyal to Chinese language.
- **Loyalty to culture** The content of Chinese poetry should better reflect, or at least not go against the basic beliefs, attitudes, sentiments of Chinese culture.
- **Advancement with time** Chinese poetry should progress with time. Outdated elements shouldn't be held onto forever, even though they were once great achievements. New elements should be introduced in new ages.
- **Openness to foreign elements** Chinese poetry shouldn't be closed from foreign elements. Appropriate foreign elements could be adopted organically, although blind imitation is unacceptable.

Principles and Elements of Form

A Broad Notion of Poetic Form

The form of a poem refers to the patterns we may find in it. A pattern in turn is the regularity we may discern in the relations among the components of the poem.

Meter and verse-end rhyme scheme are two most important traditional form elements. They are both patterns. Meter is the regularity in certain relation (e.g., stress relation or tone relation) among the syllables within a verse. Verse-end rhyme scheme is the regularity in the rhyming relations among the verse-end syllables. We can see both are patterns on the phonetic level. And that's the focus of traditional poetic form.

Certainly these are just two of many possibilities. First, form doesn't have to exist on the phonetic level. Second, even phonetic form doesn't have to have the shape of traditional ones. A broad notion of poetic form makes us tolerant to new forms, new phonetic forms and forms on syntactic and semantic levels. In this view many modern free poems are just free from traditional forms, but not from poetic form *per se*.

This broad view requires us first to be clear about the various elements of form and then apply the appropriate elements to a particular poem as the content demands. But before we discuss the specific elements we need to clarify the linguistic and poetic layers so that we have a good reference framework.

Linguistic Layers

- **Phonetics/phonology** 语音 Like Western languages, Chinese phonetics and phonology have changed a lot in its long history. The residue of Han & Tang Chinese phonetics can be discerned in some modern dialects, such as the fifth tone 入声. Modern Mandarin was formed under heavy influence of Northern minority groups. The original Chinese phonetics was preserved mostly in Southern dialects today. An evidence is that many rhymes in Tang poetry still hold in some Southern dialects, but not Mandarin. Given this fact, when we write poems today we still need to follow Mandarin phonetics, as systemized in *Pinyin* 拼音, due to its predominant influence.
- **Morphology** 词法 Morphology has expanded a lot in modern Chinese, mostly in the form of compound words. Most traditional Chinese words consisted of single character. Compound words were very rare exceptions. In contrast, most modern Chinese words contain more than one character (mainly two characters). However, the component characters of compound words still keep their independent meanings. This gives modern compound words distinct structure.
- **Syntax** 句法 The syntax of modern Chinese is also very different from traditional Chinese. The influence from Western languages is obvious. One reason is that the majority of the founding writers of modern Chinese literature had Western background. Another effort was popularization. Traditional Chinese was concise and difficult for ordinary people, whereas modern Chinese tries to spell everything out and so make it easy to understand.
- **Semantics** 语义 There doesn't seem to be comparable dramatic change of semantics in modern Chinese. Certainly recently introduced words should carry new meanings. But the meanings of most Chinese characters keep the same. And the Simplification was mostly a change on the script level. Modern Chinese semantics generally has followed normal evolution.

Poetic Layers

- **Syllable** 音节 The syllables have been simplified in modern Mandarin. Compared with Cantonese, Mandarin has less rhymes and tones. The traditional *Ru* tone 入声 was lost. The traditional *Ping* tone 平声 split into two. The Mandarin syllables are constructed with a limited set of single consonant onset 声母 followed by a limited set of rhymes 韵母 with one of five tones. The Mandarin syllable onsets are the following: *b p m f d t n l g k h z c s zh ch sh r j q x*. The Mandarin rhymes can be grouped as follows:
 Single vowel: *a o e i u ü*
 Diphthong: *ai ei ao ou*
 Vowel + nasal consonant (front nasal *n* or back nasal *ng*): *an ang ong en eng in ing*
 Semivowel *i* + stem rhyme: *ia ie iao iu(iou) ian iang iong*
 Semivowel *u* + stem rhyme: *ua uo uai ui(uei) uan uang un(uen) ueng*
 Semivowel *ü* + stem rhyme: *üe üan ün(üen)*
 And the five tones are: 阴平(flat), 阳平(ascending), 上声(descending then ascending), 去声(descending) and 轻声(light).
- **Foot** 诗步 Poetic feet in Western languages are solely based on phonetics. Feet are not aligned with syntactic or semantic units. In fact, it's almost impossible with syllabic scripts. But it's not the case in Chinese poetry. In strict Chinese meter the feet are based on phonetics, syntax and

semantics at the same time. In other words, there are correspondences between feet and phonetic, syntactic and semantic units. Today even if we want to loosen the phonetic restrictions, we still should keep the rest.

- **Verse 诗行** Again, verses in Western languages are mainly based on phonetics. There are no required correspondence between verses and sentences, even phrases. A verse could end almost anywhere in the sentence. This is often a necessary practice to meet strict metric requirements. In Chinese it's much easier to align verses and sentences (or at least phrases), even with strict meter. To imitate this foreign practice in Chinese poetry is just like imitating a crippled man in order to walk better.
- **Stanza 诗节** Stanza played less important role in traditional Chinese poetry. Tang metered poems normally only contained a single stanza. Song metered poems often contained two stanzas with identical meter. Much more variations appear in modern Chinese poems under the influence of Western poetry. This could be an area of significant development.
- **Chapter 诗章 & component poem 组员诗 (组诗之一)** This is an even weaker area in Chinese poetry and could be developed substantially.

Rhyme 韵

Now we come to specific elements of poetic form. Rhyme is arguably the most popular element of phonetic form. It spread across languages and ages. Rhyme in traditional Chinese poetry was very strict, but has been loosened in modern poetry. A major development was that rhyme in modern Chinese poetry became insensitive to tones. Two rhymes rhyme with each other regardless of their tones. In my personal opinion, given the great change of Chinese phonetics, sticking to the traditional *Rhyme Book* violates the principle of advancement with time. Rhyme should evolve with phonetics. With this relaxation of rules rhyming becomes so easy. The burden claim is no longer a reasonable excuse for giving up rhyme altogether. In terms of function, rhyme not only makes poems sound better, but it's also an effective structuring tool.

Key rhyme concepts and elements are listed and explained below:

- **Strict rhyme 严韵 & loose rhyme 松韵** Strict rhyme requires identical rhymes or stem rhymes in two rhyming syllables. So semivowel derivation is not a problem for strict rhyme. For instance, *an ian uan üan* all belong to the same strict rhyme group. An exception is *e ie üe*, which are treated as different rhymes. Loose rhyme only requires sound similarity. Often used pairs are *o / e*, *ong / eng*, *i / ü*, and *ie / üe*.
- **Inner-word alliteration 双声 & rhyme 叠韵** In the former case the characters in the same word share the same onset, e.g. *xixiao* 嬉笑, *pengpai* 澎湃, *fenfang* 芬芳。 In the latter the characters in the same word share the same rhyme, e.g. *miantian* 腩腆, *xiaoqiao* 小巧, *lanman* 烂漫。 Some Chinese words consist of repeated characters. The above two features are combined in them. For instance, *mangmang* 茫茫, *nuannuan* 暖暖, *longlong* 隆隆。
- **Double rhyme 双韵** In this case the two characters in two different words rhyme with each other correspondingly. E.g. *beishang* 悲伤 / *huihuang* 辉煌; *mingti* 鸣啼 / *xingxi* 信息。
- **Cross-lingual rhyme 跨语韵** Certainly two words from different languages could rhyme with each other. This is more frequently used in this globalized world. Mandarin and English share the following rhymes: *a e i u ei ou an en in ing*. Window / *chuangkou* 窗口 & do / *shu* 数 were used in my poems.
- **Inner-verse rhyme 行内韵 & inter-verse rhyme 行间韵** We've seen that in Chinese rhyme could exist between words, but within the same word as well. The latter case is rare and insignificant in Western languages. *Singing* is an English example and *l'enfant* is a French one. However, in all these languages rhyme could exist both within the same and between different verses. Among these verse-end rhyme is predominantly used. The verse-end rhyme gives a poem rhythm. It's also a nice tool to structure the verses in a poem, along with the stanzas. The pattern in verse-end rhyme is called verse-end rhyme scheme, or simply rhyme scheme. Three most important building blocks of rhyme scheme are continuing rhyme 随韵 (AA),

alternate rhyme 交韵 (ABAB) and enclosing rhyme 抱韵 (ABBA). Continuing rhyme dominates Chinese poetry. Alternate rhyme was already used in traditional poems, but very rare. I have more personal favor for alternate rhyme, due to its variation and rhythm. Enclosing rhyme doesn't seem to be very suitable for Chinese poetry.

Rhythm 节奏

Rhythm is another common feature of poetry. Like Rhyme, it's a phonetic feature. But its basis could be quite different. The rhythm of Greek poems was based on the length of syllables. The rhythm of poems in Germanic languages (e.g. English & German) is based on the stress of syllables. The rhythm of traditional Chinese poems was based on the tonality of syllables. These are all phonetics-based inner-verse rhythms. Of course we could have other types of rhythms. The key concepts are explained below.

- **Phonetic rhythm 语音节奏** Phonetic rhythm is phonetics based. We've listed three important phonetic factors above, i.e., the length, stress and tonality of syllables. In fact rhyme is another factor, which may be used as a basis of rhythm.
- **Syntactic rhythm 句法节奏** Syntactic rhythm is syntax based. The rhythm in traditional Chinese poems was also syntactic rhythm. Due to some unique features of Chinese, the phonetics and syntax in Chinese poems were well aligned. Today, we've suppressed the importance of tonality, but the syntactic basis should be kept, and could even be strengthened. In this case the rhythm is based on phrases and the syntactic strength of words.
- **Inner-verse rhythm 行内节奏** Inner-verse rhythm exists within a single verse. The rhythm is created out of the pattern among the syllables in a verse. This was the focus of traditional rhythm.
- **Inter-verse rhythm 行间节奏** Rhythm may also exist among the verses. In this case the units are the verses instead of the syllables. Verse-end rhyme is an important basis of inter-verse rhythm. Stanza-fication is another. These two are more effectively used in Western poetry than traditional Chinese poetry. They have been strengthened in modern Chinese poetry. But a third mechanism was already well practised in Song poetry 宋词. It's based on the length of verses. So this type of poetry was also called Uneven Verses 长短句. An example is the following poem by Su Shi 苏轼.

十年生死两茫茫。
不思量，自难忘。
千里孤坟，
无处话凄凉。
纵使相逢应不识，
尘满面，鬓如霜。

夜来幽梦忽还乡。
小轩窗，正梳妆。
相顾无言，
惟有泪千行。
料得年年断肠处，
明月夜，短松冈。

- We see 3-character, 4-character, 5-character and 7-character units nicely arranged in this short poem. Remember in Chinese one character means one syllable. The inter-verse rhythm is clearly discernible.

Counterpoint 对仗

Counterpoint has been explained above. Here we discuss more about the possible ways of its application. The counterpoints in Tang metered poems were mainly strict ones and almost all appeared in the form of couplet. New ways could certainly be developed and used in modern poetry.

- **Loose counterpoint 宽对 vs. strict counterpoint 工对** What's elaborated above was strict counterpoint. The correspondence in it has to happen on phonetic, morphological, syntactic and semantic levels. In contrast, loose counterpoint only requires syntactic correspondence. The same character may also be used in the two contrapuntal verses correspondingly. The counterpoints in modern poetry are mostly loose ones.
- **Couplet counterpoint 对偶** If the counterpoint happens between two consecutive verses in a poem, the verses are called contrapuntal couplet. This is the traditional form.
- **Inner-stanza counterpoint 节内对仗** Of course, the contrapuntal verses could stand inconsecutively in a stanza.
- **Inter-stanza counterpoint 节间对仗** Further, the contrapuntal verses could appear in different stanzas at corresponding locations, and could be more than two.

Refrain 重复

Perhaps due to the underdevelopment of stanzafication in traditional Chinese poetry, refrain was very rare. Repetition of verse within the same stanza looks unnatural. Refrain normally happens across stanzas. This is an element that was well developed in modern Chinese poetry under foreign influence.

- **Verse repetition 行重复** A verse is sometimes repeated in one or more different stanzas, usually at the same location.
- **Stanza repetition 节重复** In this case a whole stanza is repeated.
- **Variations 不完全重复** The verses could be repeated with minor variations.

Logical Relationship 逻辑关系

Rhyme and rhythm are phonetic form elements; counterpoint (mostly) and refrain are syntactic form elements. Poetic form could also be constructed on the semantic level. Here we focus on sentences and stanzas as the semantic units and logical relationship as the semantic element.

- **Elaboration 诠释** The following stanzas elaborate the idea expressed in the preceding stanza.
- **Sublimation 升华** A stanza makes a jump or generalization based on the ideas in the preceding stanzas.
- **Continuation 承继** A stanza or sentence continues to express the idea of the preceding stanza or sentence.
- **Development 递进** A stanza or sentence develops the idea of the preceding stanza or sentence.
- **Turning 转折** A stanza or sentence follows a different (often opposite) direction than the preceding stanza or sentence.
- **Parallelism 排比** Two stanzas or sentences stand in parallel to each other.
- **Comparison 对比** Two stanzas or sentences stand in contrast to each other.

With these elementary relations we could build the logical structure of a poem.

Summary

Rhyme, tonality and counterpoint were three key elements in the form of traditional Chinese poetry. To these our strategy is to play down tonality, but further develop rhyme and counterpoint at the same time. We do this for good reasons. Tonality only started to play significant roles in Tang metered poetry. It lost its significance in modern poetry. Anyways, Chinese phonetics has changed a lot. The tonality today is quite different from centuries ago. The same tonal difference may have different effect today. On the other hand, Chinese is a language with rich rhyme. *Shi Jing* 《诗经》 was the first collection that used rhyme among all languages. It's just not right to give up rhyme altogether in Chinese poetry following Western free verses. Finally, counterpoint is a unique feature of Chinese poetry and shouldn't be abandoned either. The basis of counterpoint continues to exist, or even has been strengthened today. And it could be developed into a powerful structuring tool.

Among the form elements in Western poetry, the major thing we need adopt is stanzaification and beyond. This is a weak part in traditional Chinese poetry. Rhyme and counterpoint can both be extended to this level. Refrain is a related element we could directly borrow. At last, logical structure can also be regarded as a borrowed element from the West. Nonetheless, I don't see much meaning in imitating a Western poetic form as a whole, such as sonnet. Just imagine how much sense it makes to write Tang metered poem in English.

Principles and Key Aspects of Content

Poetic form is about regularities, so we can list various elements of it. There is much less regularity in poetic content. Almost all poems, especially good poems have their particular contents. Therefore, when we talk about general content here we can only discuss some very abstract concepts and ideas.

The Unity of Scene, Emotion and Idea 景情意三位一体

One distinct feature of Chinese traditional poetry in terms of content was the unity of scene, emotion and idea. The description of a scene always carried certain emotions (情景交融). And emotions and ideas were often mixed together (情意不分). This can be clearly seen in Du Fu's 《望岳》:

岱宗夫如何，齐鲁青未了。
造化钟神秀，阴阳割昏晓。
荡胸生层云，决眦入归鸟。
会当凌绝顶，一览众山小。

The first four verses (put on two lines) focused on the description of scene. Emotion explicitly entered in the fifth. The last two verses came to an important idea, which was closely related to the scene and emotion and had further metaphorical connotation.

The above distinct feature in Chinese poetry goes along well with the holistic Chinese philosophy. Based on organic naturalism man and nature are intimately connected. The dichotomy between reason and emotion doesn't exist either. Today, if we want to write poems which are loyal to the fundamental thought of Chinese culture, we should try to keep this practice alive.

God's Eye View

A fundamental difference between Chinese culture and the Western Christian culture is the so-called one-world and two-world contrast. Chinese culture was developed directly out of shamanism. Once the classical philosophy was established in the pre-Qin period and solidified in the Han dynasty, higher form of religion had had little chance to develop. Although some (e.g. the Daoist religion) were established under foreign influence, or some (e.g. Buddhism and Christianity) were introduced, they didn't have enough power to dominate. What dominated Chinese culture for over two thousand years has been Chinese philosophy, with Confucianism and Daoism as the two essential and somewhat complementary pillars. So the focus of at least the mainstream of Chinese culture has been the human world. The world beyond has little significance. On the contrary, the human world always takes a subordinate place in the Christian culture. Traditionally the human world was subordinate to the world of God. And in the modern period it gradually became subordinate to the material world as depicted and emphasized by modern science. So the dichotomy between the human world and beyond has never changed.

This fundamental difference in philosophy was certainly reflected in poetry. Human life was the predominant content of Chinese poetry. So a natural scene seldom was described on its own. One could always see human thoughts and feelings permeating it. And meditations on human life was often performed from within, like in the famous verse "人生如梦，一尊还酹江月。" In contrast, in Western poetry we often see content which had little to do with human life. Or when human life is the major concern it's often controlled by some outside force, even if it's not God. Let's take a look at one of my favorite poems by Hesse:

Vergänglichkeit

Vom Baum des Lebens fällt
Mir Blatt um Blatt,
O taumelbunte Welt,
Wie machst du satt,
Wie machst du satt und müd,
Wie machst du trunken!
Was heut noch glüht,
Ist bald versunken.
Bald klirrt der Wind
Über mein braunes Grab,
Über das kleine Kind
Beugt sich die Mutter herab.
Ihre Augen will ich wiedersehn,
Ihr Blick ist mein Stern,
Alles andre mag gehen und verwehn,
Alles stirbt, alles stirbt gern.
Nur die ewige Mutter bleibt,
Von der wir kamen,
Ihr spielender Finger schreibt
In die flüchtige Luft unsre Namen.

Here the "ewige Mutter" doesn't sound directly like God, but it's still some outside force which dominates our transient human lives.

Given this fundamental cultural difference, can we still borrow something from the West in this respect? My answer is the God's eye view. We Chinese don't believe in an almighty God that created and controls the whole world including human beings, but we could still have a God's eye view of human life from without. With this view we could still keep our focus on human life. With the heavy cultural exchange in this globalized world this kind of deeper level borrowing becomes more significant. (Borrowing presupposes the keeping of identity. When the self is lost with complete self-denial and blind imitation, we can no longer talk about borrowing.) In fact, we may easily discern oriental influence in Hesse's poems. If we interpret the "ewige Mutter" in the above poem as Mother Nature, we bring the poem much closer to Chinese philosophy.

Metaphor

Metaphor is so crucial to poetry that it deserves further discussion. Metaphor is essentially abstract analogy. In other words, abstractness and analogy are two essential features of metaphor. They distinguish metaphor from simile and symbol respectively, another two important elements of poetry. Let's take a closer look:

- **Metaphor vs. simile** Metaphor and simile are both analogy. The distinction between them is not syntactic (the use of words such as "like" or not), as some have proposed. Rather, it lies in the abstractness of the analogy involved. When we say "a mushroom is an umbrella," we are using simile, although the word "like" is absent. The analogy between a mushroom and an umbrella is in shape. It's visual, but not abstract. In contrast, when we say "the world is a stage and people are players on it," we are drawing abstract analogies. These analogies are not sensual, but intellectual. So we are using metaphors in the latter case.
- **Metaphor vs. symbol** Metaphor and symbol are often mixed together, because many symbols are also abstract. However, they are very different. Although symbol is often based on abstract association, just like metaphor, the association involved in a symbol must NOT be an analogy. We often use roses as a symbol of love. But there is no analogy between a rose and love. The association between a rose and love is conventional. It's abstract, but not through analogy. We can see some arbitrariness in symbolic association, so it's somewhat shallower than metaphorical

analogy. However, symbol is deeper than metonymy, which is based on very arbitrary association. An example of metonymy is to substitute "10 Downing Street" for the British government.

We've seen that metaphor is deeper than simile and symbol by definition. It's deeper than simile due to deeper analogy. It's deeper than symbol due to the analogy it reveals. The dilemma of symbol is that, if the association involved is too obvious then it doesn't reveal much; if the association on the other hand is too hidden then it falls into mystery and so still cannot reveal much.

Metaphor could become more powerful when multiple metaphors are put on top of one another. The popular saying "I smell a rat, but I'll nip him in the bud." contains two metaphors on different layers. On the first layer something wrong is compared to a rat. Then on the second layer the rat is further compared to a bud. Every analogy has a context, or the sense in which it stands. Something wrong is analogous to a rat in the sense that they are both bad. The rat is further analogous to a bud in the sense that the bad thing just appears and hasn't developed. We can see the two metaphors are intertwined. They work together, but are not independent. That's the basis of the power of layered metaphors.

Generally metaphor works in this way: A deep, hidden and/or difficult fact is revealed by a shallow, obvious and/or easy fact through analogy between them. For a metaphor to work well, first, the reference fact has to be familiar; second, the analogy has to be accurate; and third, the analogy cannot be too difficult to figure out. If all works well the quality of the metaphor depends upon the fact one wants to reveal. Given all these criteria, now you may evaluate Forrest's Mama's famous words, "Life is like a box of chocolates. You never know what you're gonna get."

Personal Style

With so many complicated poetic elements - we've definitely only discussed a part of them - a particular poem cannot include all of them. Selection and preference are inevitable. Style appears when a group of poems display distinct characteristics in terms of employing a chosen set of elements. If a poem can be generally analyzed into its form and content, we could also divide style into these two parts. Although they are closely related, there is no strict one-to-one correspondence between them. The form part mainly includes what form elements are preferably most used. In comparison the content is much more open-ended. The subjects are various and the ways of mood construction and feeling/thought expression are diverse.

The poems by a particular poet often show clear style, which can be called personal style. It's based on the poet's personality and thoughts, but could also change over his/her life time. Depending on his/her character and personal experience a poet may favor certain form elements, subjects and ways of expression.

As mentioned above, the items discussed in this section are very personal. The list already shows my personal preferences. Generally I'm a philosophical person. On the one hand, I favor order (unlike a pure artist). On the other hand I hate pre-defined rules and premises and love openness (unlike a pure scientist). So when I write a poem I don't set the form beforehand. Instead, the form naturally comes out in the writing process. But the poem finally has to have some form or structure. So some effort in form building is necessary. The end result is that all my poems have distinct form, but none of them have the same form. To achieve that I need to be open to various form elements. But logical structure stands out among all the elements. In terms of content, my philosophical thoughts permeate my poems. Following Chinese philosophical tradition I find metaphor the most useful tool to express ideas in poetry.

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