

Analyzing Li Qingzhao's Poem "Sheng Sheng Man"

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聲聲慢

尋尋覓覓，冷冷清清，淒淒慘慘戚戚。

乍暖還寒時候，最難將息。

三杯兩盞淡酒，怎敵他、晚來風急。

雁過也，正傷心，卻是舊時相識。

滿地黃花堆積。憔悴損，如今有誰堪摘。

守著窗兒，獨自怎生得黑。

梧桐更兼細雨，到黃昏、點點滴滴。

這者次第，怎一個、愁字了得。

Note: The tonal mark for each character below is indicated by these symbols: ○ (ping or level tone); △ (ze or deflected tone); ● (rhyme in ping or level tone); ▲ (rhyme in ze or deflected tone).

It was pointed out that the character at a certain position can be either in ping tone or in ze tone, depending on the number of characters that comprise the line. On a six-character line, characters corresponding to the first, third, and fifth position are usually replaceable. On the other hand, characters associated with the second, fourth, and sixth positions are not as flexible because they occupy a more important tonal

position. In the case of 卻是舊時相識, the tonal pattern is: $\Delta\Delta\Delta\circ\circ\Delta$. It is actually derived from the normal pattern of $\Delta\Delta\circ\circ\Delta\Delta$ by swapping the two tones that correspond to the third and fifth positions. Similarly, it is acceptable to replace a ze tone with a ping tone at the fifth position in the following line: 滿地黃花堆積.

As can be seen by the ▲ indicator, the rhyming scheme involved in “*Sheng Sheng Man*” is the ze sound. The ze rhyme is especially appropriate for conveying strong emotions, such as feeling depressed or indignation. But reading this poem in Mandarin may not be as intense as reading it in some southern dialects such as Cantonese. The reason is that those ru-sound (入聲) characters used as rhyming words in Li’s poem are now pronounced as ping sheng (平聲) in Mandarin. A ru-sound character is characterized by a sound that tends to be short and cut off.

Thus, if you speak both Mandarin and Cantonese, you will be able to tell the difference in its tonal effect. The reason is that in Cantonese, the ru-sound characters are still retained, whereas in Mandarin, all former ru-sound characters are now pronounced in either ping or qu sheng (去聲). Qu sheng, a ze, is the fourth tone in modern Chinese phonetics. Let’s take a look at the rhyming characters used in Li’s poem “*Sheng Sheng Man*” and see how they sound in Mandarin and Cantonese.

Pronunciation of the Rhyming Words in Mandarin and Cantonese

戚	息	急	識	積
qī	xī	jí	shí	jī
chik	sik	gàp	sik	jik

摘	黑	滴	得
zhāi	hēi	dī	dé
jaahk	hàk	dihk	dàk

As we can see, the rhyming characters in Li’s ci poem differ a lot in pronunciation, depending on which Chinese

dialect we use to read the poem. In Mandarin, we can say each of these characters (the first row) in long duration, but the sound will inevitably come to a quick stop when we say the same words (the second row) in Cantonese. The reason is that in Mandarin these Chinese characters are now pronounced in the level tone. Since in this cipai the rhyming characters must be in ze tone, reading this poem in Cantonese will more easily feel the actual feelings as conveyed by the writer.

The same thing can be said when we read Yue Fei's famous ci (written to the tune of Man Jiang Hong) aloud. In this poem, Yue used a series of ze-sound words to express his strong emotion of indignation and agitation. These strong and agitated feelings can best be appreciated by reading the poem in Cantonese in which 入聲 (ru-sound), the fourth tone in traditional Chinese phonetics, is still retained.

Let's break-up Li's poem into sections according to its rhyming scheme. Try to pay attention to the tonal pattern of each line and reconstruct what the poet was trying to convey by mentally filling the missing elements. I will give my version of interpretation and translation below for your comparison. If you like, you can also write up your own version of translation.

尋○尋○ 覓△覓▲
xún xún mì mì
search and search seek and seek

冷△冷△ 清○清○
lěng lěng qīng qīng
so cold so dreary

淒○淒○ 慘△慘△ 戚△戚▲
qī qī cǎn cǎn qī qī
so miserable so woeful so sorrowful

For what am I looking?
For what am I seeking?
So chilly, so dreary;

so miserable, so woeful, and so sorrowful.

In her poem, Li Qingzhao repeated the first seven characters in a row to convey her inner feelings: the feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. In 尋尋覓覓, she describes succinctly her pattern of behavior. That is, searching and seeking for something intangible without consciously knowing exactly what she wanted. Presumably these were the things that were lost after the death of her beloved husband. In 冷冷清清, she told us of the condition in which she lived: desolate and dreary both inside and outside the house. These words suggest that she was alone and that the time of the year could be late autumn. Her depressed feelings were strongly revealed in these words: so miserable (淒淒), so woeful (慘慘), and so sorrowful (戚戚).

乍△暖△ 還○寒○ 時○候△
zhà nuǎn huán hán shí hòu
suddenly warm and suddenly cold at such a time

最△難○ 將○息▲
zuì nán jiāng xī
most difficult to rest; calm down (the mind)

At a time of sudden warmth and sudden chill,
it is hard to keep my mind still.

The phrase 乍暖還寒 suggests that it was the time of the year at which temperature could fluctuate from warm to cold on the same day. Most likely, it was late fall when imagery associated with autumn feelings could make it hard for the mind to be at peace.

三○杯○ 兩△盞△ 淡△酒△
sān bēi liǎng zhǎn dàn jiǔ
three cups two small cups light /weak wine

怎△敵△他○ 晚△來○ 風○急▲
zěn dí tā wǎn ái fēng jí
how can it resist arriving in the evening hurried wind

Two or three cups of light wine

hardly can quiet the gust wind at night.

The fact that Li enjoyed wine drinking is not at issue here. But scholars are divided on the phrase wan lai (晚來). Some argue that it should have been xiao lai (曉來) on the assumption that the writer was to describe what she actually saw and experienced in the order of occurrence on that particular day. But a different assumption is just as valid: she was to relate what she did, felt, and experienced as a general pattern, not a reflection of any particular day and in a particular order. It is also a bit far-fetched to construe that she would start drinking at the early morning hour. To me, wan lai (晚來) is more consistent with the spirit of the poem as a whole. After all, poetry writing is different from events reporting.

雁△過△也△ 正△傷○心○
yàn guò yě zhèng shāng xīn
swan geese passing by just break my heart

卻△是△ 舊△時○ 相○識▲
què shì jiù shí xiāng shí
turn out to be old time acquaintances

Seeing a flock of geese passing by
only breaks my heart.
For they once were my old acquaintances from afar.

In traditional Chinese poetry, “swan goose” was often used as a metaphor for a message delivered from a distance far away. It was a sight of hope and comfort. Seeing a flock of geese after the death of her husband could only bring back old memories and pain.

滿△地△ 黃○花○ 堆○積▲
mǎn dì huáng huā duī jī
everywhere yellow flowers pile up

憔○悴△ 損△
qiáo cuì sǔn
withered damaged

如○今○ 有△誰○ 堪○摘▲
rú jīn yǒu shéi kān zhāi
now who will bear to pluck

The ground is piled up with yellow flowers,
so pallid, hurt, and withered.
Who now cares to pick them up?

Yellow flowers most likely were chrysanthemums, which also renders support to the idea that the background of the poem was in late fall when chrysanthemums start to wither and fall. The fact that Li, who used to love and care for yellow flowers, would let them pile up on the ground unattended further tells something about the mood and state of her mind: preoccupied, helpless, and despondent.

守△著△ 窗○兒○
shǒu zhāo chuāng ér
watching by window

獨△自△ 怎△生○ 得△黑▲
dú zì zěn shēng de hēi
alone how to wait until dark

Alone by the window, how long must I
wait until it gets dark?

In the above lines, the writer tells us that she was sitting (or standing) by the window alone. Obviously, it was still hours until nightfall, from the tune of the language. The time, to her, seemed moving very slowly as nothing exciting could divert her attention away from her sorrowful feelings. To her, life at that moment was but a dread, with nothing promising to look forward to.

梧○桐○ 更△兼○ 細△雨△
wú tóng gèng jiān xì yǔ
parasol tree with also drizzle

到△黃○昏○
dào huáng hūn
when dusk sets in

點△點△ 滴△滴▲
diǎn diǎn dī dī
drip by drip drop after drop

Drizzling rain drifts
from the parasol tree at dusk,
drip by drip, drop by drop.

In these few lines, Li used the imageries of Chinese parasol tree, drizzling rain, and dusk to convey her inner feelings, which were intensified by the sound of the dripping rain. The use of four ze sounds in a row was an effective way to convey strong emotions. To give the reader a feel of the ze sound in the Chinese original, I also try to use, in my translation, some key words that are pronounced in short vowels such as drizzle, dusk, set, drip, and drop.

這△次△第△
zhě cì dì
at such a moment

怎△一△個△愁○字△ 了△得▲
zěn yī gè chóu zì liǎo dé
how can one word of “sorrow” be enough

To sum up my feelings at this very moment,
how can one single word of “sorrow” be enough!

In the last two lines, Li used all but one ze-sound characters to depict her feelings of loneliness, helplessness, and sadness.

Such a tonal pattern is rare in Chinese poetry, but it is an effective way, if used sparingly, to convey feelings of sorrow and despair. If you read them aloud, you would probably feel the sound resonant in her (or your) mind.

(Excerpts from: Chang, Edward C. *The Best Chinese Ci Poems: A Bilingual Approach to Interpretation and Appreciation*. 2012. All rights reserved.)