

Basic Tonal Patterns of Ci Poetry

E. C. Chang

鷓鴣天 晏幾道

彩袖殷勤捧玉鍾。當年拚卻醉顏紅。舞低楊柳樓心月，
歌盡桃花扇底風。從別後，憶相逢。幾回魂夢與君同。
今宵剩把銀釭照，猶恐相逢是夢中。

Yan Jidao's poem, just like many other ci poems, was written in the ci style. In contrast to shi poetry, which may take the form of lushi (regulated verse) or jueju (truncated verse) with equal length in each line, ci poetry can follow any one of the established tune patterns called cipai or cipu. There are more than eight hundred tune patterns from which a poet can choose for composing his or her poem. The tune of Yan Jidao's ci poem is called Zhe Gu Tian, which literally means "Partridge Sky." Unlike shi poetry, ci lyric can contain lines of irregular length. Ci is sometime called song lyric poetry because the lyric was initially based on songs composed for entertainment purposes. Ci originated during the Tang period, but it did not become more popular and widespread until the Song Dynasty.

In the beginning, lyrics were written as part of the melody composition, often done by musicians themselves. In time, more and more poets began to write lyrics for the cipai after the original melody had been lost. In its place, tone and rhyme pattern, as well as the number of words, were set for that particular cipai. So what began as a lyric for a song had gradually evolved into a popular poetic genre. Today, cipai, such as Zhe Gu Tian (鷓鴣天), actually bears no resemblance to its original tune or melody. Therefore, I will not translate the tune title so as to spare the readers from associating with something no longer used.

Although there are more than eight hundred titles of such cipai, they all share something in common with shi poetry in

terms of tonal patterns and lyrical harmony. Yan Jidao's ci poem is a case in point. If you compare Yan's poem with Du Mu's jueju (see below), you will notice that the tonal patterns of seven-character lines are very similar. The number of cipai may be large, but the ping-ze (flat or deflected tone) patterns, though with some exceptions, are comparable from cipai to cipai.

贈別 杜牧

多情卻似總無情
唯覺樽前笑不成
蠟燭有心還惜別
替人垂淚到天明

Common Tonal Patterns for Lines of the Same Length

So what are the most common ci tonal patterns for lines of the same length?

In ci, the number of characters in each line usually falls within the range of two to seven. As you read more ci poems, you will notice that the tonal patterns in terms of ping-ze arrangement are quite similar. Following are the basic patterns, as grouped by the number of Chinese characters:

Two-character line: (a) ○○ (b) △△ (c) ○△ (d) △○

Three-character line: (a) ○○○ (b) ○○△ (c) △○○ (d) ○△△ (e) △△○ (f) △△△

Four-character line: (a) ○○△△ (b) △△○○ (c) △○○△ (d) ○△△○

Five-character line: (a) ○○△△△ (b) △△△○○ (c) △△○○△ (d) ○○△△○

Six-character line: (a) ○○△△○○ (b) △△○○△△ (c) △○○△△△ (d) ○△○○○△ (e) △○○△○○

Seven-character line: (a) ○○△△○○△ (b) △△○○△△○ (c)
△△○○△△ (d) ○○△△△○○ (e) △○○△○○△ (f) ○△△○○△○

How to Remember Tones and Tonal Patterns? E.C. Chang

The Four Tones in Chinese Poetry

Let's face it, even native Chinese find it challenging to master the tones and tonal patterns used in ancient Chinese poetry.

This section will not make you an instant expert on tones and tonal patterns, but I hope you will have the working knowledge you need to fully enjoy reading ci poetry. Further familiarity with the Pinyin system of Romanization will be beneficial, too.

Chinese is a tonal language in which the same set of sounds can have different meanings depending on the voice pitch or tone. Tones are used to tell whether the voice pitch is high, medium, or low. They also suggest whether the pitch is level, falling, or rising. A clearly defined voice pitch is the basis for determining the meaning of a Chinese spoken word.

First, let me briefly mention about the four tones used in modern Mandarin Chinese, namely, the first, second, third and fourth tones.

Take a look at these four characters below: 媽 (mother), 麻 (hemp), 馬 (horse), or 罵 (to scold). The Pinyin transliterations for the above words, in the exact order, are the following: mā, má, mǎ, and mà.

As you can tell from the above example, characters that have the same sound (ma) can have different tones with different meanings.

The four tones in ancient Chinese poetry

To study shi and ci poetry, we need to understand the four tones in ancient Chinese poetry: ping (平), shang (上), qu (去), and ru (入).

ping (平) is the level tone which includes the first and second tone in modern standard Chinese pronunciation. Examples: 媽 (mā), 麻 (má), 平 (píng) 東 (dōng), 山 (shān), 川 (chuān).

shang (上) is the falling-rising tone (the third tone in modern standard Chinese pronunciation). Examples: 馬 (mǎ), 好 (hǎo), 我 (wǒ), 水 (shuǐ), 古 (gǔ), 口 (kǒu).

qu (去) is the falling tone (the fourth tone in modern standard Chinese pronunciation). Examples: 地 (dì), 未 (wèi), 路 (lù), 外 (wài), 大 (dà), 下 (xià).

ru (入) is the “entering” tone which is pronounced in a short and abrupt manner. Examples: 玉 (yù), 日 (rì), 月 (yuè), 仄 (zè) 葉 (yè), 力 (lì).

It should be pointed out that in Mandarin Chinese today, there is no ru or “entering” tone. Those characters classified as “ru” tone in classical Chinese now can fall under any one of the four tones in Mandarin pronunciation. For example, the following “ru-sheng” words (入聲字) are now pronounced in either the first, second, or third tone: 出 (chū), 菊 (jú), 白 (bái), 學 (xué), 國 (guó), 敵 (dí), 雪 (xuě). However, the ru tone is still retained in some southern dialects such as Cantonese. In classical Chinese poetry, shang, qu, and ru are all considered ze or deflected tones.

Some Helpful Tips

You may find the following mnemonics helpful for differentiating and remembering these tones:

A ping tone comes very close to the “actual” sound of the pronunciation of the syllable. It is represented by a macron accent which suggests that the word is pronounced with a constant high but flat pitch. You will get a good idea about its general characteristic by saying the following English words aloud: an, ban, fan, pan, song, sun, tan, you. Incidentally, these syllables would be called ping tone if the Chinese characters they represent are as follows: 安 (ān), 斑 (bān), 番 (fān), 攀 (pān), 鬆 (sōng), 孫 (sūn), 灘 (tān), and 幽 (yōu).

We can tell from the tonal mark that mā, pān, tān, and yāng are all in the ping tone. Now repeat the same sound by pretending that, instead of just saying it, you were actually asking a series of one-syllable questions, such as “mā?” “pān?” “tān?” “yāng?” When you do that, you will be inclined to change the pitch from the first to the second tone (má, pán, tán, yáng) without being conscious about it. As you can tell, the tonal mark for this tone is an acute accent which suggests that a word starting in a relative high pitch continues to rise even higher.

The shang (上) tone could be the most tricky one for native English speakers because, to my knowledge, there is no equivalent (one syllable) sound in the English language. To say a word in the shang tone, you will most likely go through these three steps in rapid succession: start a sound in low pitch, lower the pitch further, and then raise the pitch higher than its starting point. We can also represent the pitch variation of the shang tone by following the sequence of these three numbers: 2-1-4, where 1 represents the lowest pitch and 5 represents the highest pitch. You may get the picture intuitively if you try to mimic Santa’s voice when he utters “ho ho ho.” However, instead of saying it in three syllables, try to pronounce “ho” in the 2-1-4 pitch pattern.

The qu (去) tone, the fourth tone in Mandarin Chinese, is represented by a grave accent. The tonal mark implies that the tone starts high in pitch and then falls rapidly below its initial pitch. You may get a better “feel” if you pretend that you are yelling at somebody as you are pronouncing this tone.

The ru (入) tone tends to fall rapidly and come to an immediate halt. The quality of its sound somewhat resembles the short-vowel words in the English language such as “dug, luck, cut, rig, dig, fit, and dog.” Pretend that you are very “impatient” and “upset” as you pronounce the ru-sheng words.

Tonal Patterns

In ci poetry, the tones of ping and ze must be taken into account when one chooses his or her verse line. A verse line is defined by the tonal pattern which is basically the assignment of tones in a specific order so as to produce a harmonious effect.

If you find it difficult to differentiate ping (平) from ze (仄), as well as to remember the common tonal patterns, try to imagine that you are beating a drum. When you beat at the center of the drum, you will hear a sound that appears to be leveling and lingering. When you beat at the edge or the side of a drum, you will hear a sound that seems abruptly stopped or cut short. The leveling and lingering sound is close to the ping tone, while the cut-short tone resembles the ze tone. Of course, we don't talk about ping and ze in the English language. In English metrical verse, stressed and unstressed syllables are used to harmonize the rhythmical effect of a line. But the long and short vowels may be more analogous to the ping-ze modulation. In our drum-beating analogy, the “doom” sound, which involves a long vowel, can be considered a ping. On the other hand, the short vowel “dug” is equivalent to a ze sound. In the Chinese phonetic system, words in ping tone such as 陽 (yáng), 年 (nián), and 山 (shān) can be elongated in speech, but words in ze tone such as 淚 (lèi), 月 (yuè), and 歲 (suì) will have to come to an immediate stop soon after the words are uttered.

The tonal pattern of $\Delta\Delta \circ\circ \Delta\Delta$ would be like first beating the side of a drum twice (dug, dug), followed by a short pause, then two beats at the center (doom, doom), short pause, two

beats again from the side (dug, dug). For pattern (a) of the seven-character line (○○△△○○△), the tone will sound like this:

doom doom, dug dug, doom doom, dug

Let's take another look at the tonal patterns of Yan Jidao's ci poem: Zhe Gu Tian.

彩△袖△ 殷○勤○ 捧△玉△鍾●
當○年○ 拚△卻△ 醉△顏○紅●
舞△低○ 楊○柳△ 樓○心○月△
歌○盡△ 桃○花○ 扇△底△風●

從○ 別△後△
憶△ 相○逢●
幾△回○ 魂○夢△ 與△君○同●
今○宵○ 剩△把△ 銀○釭○照△
猶○恐△ 相○逢○ 是△夢△中●

If you don't know how to read the Chinese characters in Mandarin, you may still get a feel on the tonal patterns of Zhe Gu Tian by humming the following sounds or by beating the drum yourself:

dug dug doom doom dug __ dug **doom**
doom doom dug dug dug __ doom **doom**
dug doom dug dug doom doom dug __
doom dug doom doom dug dug **doom** __
doom dug dug
dug doom **doom**
dug doom doom dug dug __ doom **doom**
doom doom dug dug doom doom dug __
doom dug doom doom dug __ dug **doom**

In the tonal patterns of the *cipai Zhe Gu Tian* shown above, the underlined tones indicate that they can be switched to a different tone if you like. The tone denoted in bold face is the rhyme tone. In this case, ping-tone characters must be used as rhyme.

Please be reminded that in shi poetry, the character corresponding to the first, third, and fifth position in a seven-

character line can be changed to a word with a different tone, provided that certain conditions are met. The same rule applies to ci except that it is made even more flexible. For example, in the seventh line of Yan's poem, the tone pattern of "dug doom doom dug dug doom doom" is actually a variation of the tone pattern of "doom doom dug dug dug doom doom."

Although there are more than eight hundred names of cipai used in ci poetry, the tone variations in each line are actually quite limited. For the tune of Zhe Gu Tian, the basic tonal patterns line by line, as discussed above, can be summarized as follows: 7b, 7d, 7a, 7b, 3d, 3c, 7a, and 7b. You may notice that the above tonal patterns are very close to that of Du Mu's shi poem: 7d, 7b, 7c, and 7d.

The similarity between Du's jueju and Yan's ci is expected since most, if not all, names of cipai are derived from the set tonal patterns of shi poetry. Although there are exceptions, the basic principles are quite similar in tonal modulation. This is why poets who used to write shi poems can usually master the genre of ci poetry with ease.

Later, we will look at another cipai that employs some unusual tonal pattern in an attempt to intensify the effect of strong emotions. The poem was written by Li Qingzhao, who has been universally acknowledged as the best female poet in the Song Dynasty. The poem to the tune of Sheng Sheng Man was written after her husband died and she was in a state of financial distress and loneliness. This cipai may also be rhymed in the ping tone.

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