



The “Natural Rhythm” of Chinese Poetry: Physical and Linguistic Perspectives since 1919

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Abstract During the literary revolution, Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) advocated the concept of natural rhythm, emphasizing the liberation of sound and the segmentation of meaning. Since 1919, his writings have attracted a great number of writers to reconceptualize the meaning and function of poetry and language. This study reviews critical discussions of the relationships among sound, meaning, and poetry by a number of Chinese scholars, from Tang Yue 唐鈺 (1891–1987) and Hu Pu’an 胡樸安 (1878–1947), to Chen Shih-hsiang 陳世驥 (1912–71), among others. Their discussions of rhythm and the relation it has to emotion and motion have yet to attract enough critical attention in the English-speaking world. This article explains how these scholars built on or challenged Hu Shi’s findings to provide new ways of assessing the production of sound and meaning in Chinese language and literature.

Keywords natural rhythm, Hu Pu’an, Chen Shih-hsiang, Chinese poetics, gesture

Introduction

In September 1915, while the renowned Chinese scholar Hu Shi 胡適 (1891–1962) was riding a train from Ithaca, New York, to New York City, he came up with the declaration: “When does the revolution begin in the world of poetry? It begins only when one writes poetry as if one were writing an essay” 詩國革命何自始? 要須作詩如作文。¹ The analogy formulated by Hu between poetry and prose touches on two core issues concerning the potential literary revolution in Chinese poetry: (1) it is necessary to create a new form of poetry by eliminating

the shackles of classical poetic conventions; and (2) vernacular language should be used instead of classical Chinese. Along the same lines, when Hu published his seminal essay “Tan xinshi” 談新詩 (On New Poetry) in 1919, he proposed that Chinese words have their own “natural rhythm” (*ziran de yinjie* 自然的音節) that differs from the rigid tonal requirements found in classical poetry.²

The concept of natural rhythm was first advocated by Hu merely as a strategy to liberate poetry from its more regulated form. Yet, during the 1920s, this notion received a lot of scholarly attention and developed into a quest for the relationship between the sound and meaning of each Chinese character. First, criticizing Hu’s obliviousness to the very natural rhythm he himself had promoted, Zhu Zhixin 朱執信 (1885–1920) argued for the importance of the term by calling Hu’s attention to how the sound of each Chinese character varies with respect to the meaning of the word.³ Intrigued by Zhu’s response, one of Hu Shi’s friends in Ithaca, Tang Yue 唐鉞 (1891–1987), set out to explore how the linkage between sound and meaning came into existence. Tang concluded that certain acoustic attributes of Chinese characters reflect an attempt to mimic the natural sounds in the world, as well as the internal feelings of a human being.⁴ A similar view is shared by Zhu Guangqian 朱光潛 (1897–1986), who proposed that the phonological aspect of Chinese characters corresponds with the feelings a writer wishes to express in his works.⁵

The aforementioned discussions provided a solid foundation for later scholars to further investigate the natural rhythm of poetry. From a philological and phonological perspective, Hu Pu’an 胡樸安 (1878–1947) attempted to explicate how Chinese characters are assigned their pronunciation and meaning. Not only did he propose that Chinese words are created to imitate natural sounds or depict certain circumstances, he also delved into the formation of compounds and phrases in the Chinese language. Furthermore, he introduced a biological dimension into the discussion of natural rhythm by drawing an analogy between the rhythm of poetry and a person’s pulse and breathing process. The dynamic movements of muscles were thus used to discern the relation between human emotions and the rhythm of poetry.⁶ This emphasis on the intricate relationship between bodily movements and language greatly influenced Chen Shih-hsiang 陳世驥 (1912–71), a student of Zhu Guangqian. As early as 1948, when Chen published his translation of Lu Ji’s 陸機 (261–303) “Wen fu” 文賦 (Essay on Literature), he began to use the term *zi* 姿 (gesture) to reflect on the ties among motion, enunciation, and language.

Addressing issues ranging from syllables to bodily movement and from the meaning of words to the signification of gestures, the works of Hu Pu’an and Chen Shih-hsiang inspire us to more thoroughly examine the role of Chinese language in poetry. Instead of focusing on the meaning of words, the acoustic quality of each character should also be taken into consideration, as the

difference in pronunciation often facilitates the distinction between different morphemes. Apart from realizing the correlation between sound and meaning, it is also crucial to keep in mind that the sound and meaning of a certain language can potentially gesture toward a rhythm manifested in motion and toward emotions that can transcend language. An analysis of the connections between physical movement and linguistic utterance sheds light on the study of Chinese characters, which in turn facilitates a better understanding of the rhythm of Chinese poetry. What follows is an attempt to trace the scholarly discussions concerning the idea of natural rhythm and to explain how Hu Pu'an and Chen Shih-hsiang built on, or challenged, Hu Shi's findings in order to provide new ways of understanding the production of sound and meaning in Chinese language and literature.

Formation of Chinese Words and the Rhythm of Chinese Poetry

As early as 1924, Hu Pu'an tried to define *sound* (*sheng* 聲) and *voice* (*yin* 音) through alluding to "Yueji" 樂記 (Record of Music):

According to the "Record of Music" in the *Book of Rites*, "all the modulations of the voice arise from the mind, and the various affections of the mind are produced by external things. The affections thus produced are manifested in the sounds that are uttered. Changes are produced by the way in which those sounds respond to one another; and those changes constitute what we call the modulations of the voice." . . . When the "Mao Great Preface" states that "when the sounds have patterning, they are called voice," the formulation is similar. According to the *Explanation of Pattern and Elucidation of Graphs*, "the character *sheng* 聲 (sound) means voice, it comprises the *er* 耳 (ear) radical and *sheng* 戠, the phonetic component." Notice the *sheng* 戠 radical also conveys its meaning. "Sounds arising from the mind to form an external rhythm are known as *yin* 音 (voice), which consists of the radical *yan* 言 (words) holding *yi* 一 in its mouth." The radical *yi* 一 signifies the sense of rhythm, and this refers back to the aforementioned "modulations" and "patterns." Thus, we call the meaningless utterances "sound" (*sheng*) and the meaningful ones "voice" (*yin*). This explains why the "Record of Music" in the *Book of Rites* once stated, "Even beasts know sound, but not its voice."

《禮記·樂記》云：「凡音之起，由人心生也。人心之動，物使之然也。感於物而動，故形於聲。聲相應，故生變；變成方，謂之音」……〈毛詩大序〉云：「聲成文，謂之音」，其義略同。《說文》：「聲，音也，從耳，戠聲」，戠亦義，「聲生於心，有節於外，謂之音。從言含一」，「一」者，有節之意，所謂「方」與「文」也。據此，無意義謂之「聲」，有意義謂之「音」，故《禮記·樂記》云：「知聲而不知音者，禽獸是也」。⁷

The account in "Yueji" points out that human beings utter sounds as they are moved by external things. As this response differs depending on circumstances,

various sounds may emerge in harmony with or in response to the given situation. These variations gradually give rise to distinguishable tones—hence, the reference to how “sounds have patterning” or “those changes constitute what we call the modulations of the voice.” With this correspondence between mind and sound, the modulation and pattern become a rhythmic voice, the speed and pitch of which can signify happiness and sadness and can represent both chaotic and harmonious times.

The above passage is an excerpt from Hu Pu’an’s “Yinyun tonglun” 音韻通論 (A General Introduction to Phonology), which aims at reconstructing the phonemes of Chinese from antiquity to the modern era. In this work, Hu argues that reading ancient texts without knowing the voice of the ancients may beget confusion. In other words, to identify differences in voice (i.e., pronunciation) is to understand the meaning of words. This is why Hu Pu’an, at the very beginning of his essay, emphatically refers to “Yueji” to separate meaningful “voices” from meaningless “sounds.” His goal is to discuss the ways meaning is constructed through sound in the Chinese language. For Hu Pu’an, this means that from existing written characters one has to search for the cultural traits of a language once spoken in the past.

Going back from written characters to the spoken language and then to sounds, Hu Pu’an proposes a process of reconstruction. His full theory concerning how meaning is constructed through sound first appears in his 1941 book, *Cong wenzixue shang kaojian Zhongguo gudai zhi shengyun yu yanyu* 從文字學上考見中國古代之聲韻與言語 (An Investigation of Ancient Chinese Sounds and Spoken Language through the Study of Philology). In the foreword, Hu first identifies the difference between sound and speech: *sound* refers to modulations produced unconsciously, whereas *speech* refers to modulations made consciously.⁸ Sound forms the basis for spoken language, whereas spoken language serves as the foundation for the written script. Obviously, “spoken language” is the core concept connecting sound and script. Hu Pu’an argues that Qing phonological scholarship can merely reproduce sounds described on paper and not real sounds spoken by the ancients. Thus, Hu attempts to adopt a different methodology: using Chinese characters as his source, Hu tries to trace how the unconscious sounds uttered in antiquity turn into language as conscious utterance. This research consists of two sections: the first part introduces the concept of “four types of sounds” (*siyin* 四音) and depicts how these four categories express meaning; the second focuses on how words are constructed through “four types of words” (*siyu* 四語).

Let us begin with the four types of sounds. First, Hu defines “natural sounds” (*ziran yin* 自然音) and “mimicking sounds” (*xiaowu yin* 效物音) as sounds aimed at depicting nature and imitating external things. From there, he

proceeds to define "circumstantial sounds" (*zhuangkuang yin* 狀況音) as sounds that seek to make an analogy for more abstract concepts (as opposed to describing concrete objects). For instance, the vowel height (openness) can be used to exhibit the size of an item. In fact, all three categories can also be found in the theory proposed by Tang Yue and Zhu Guangqian, where Tang distinguishes sounds into those of explicit and implicit imitation, and Zhu argues that the tone of each word has a "symbolic" function. All these scholars point out that sounds can express feelings and make reference to and mimic concrete objects as well as abstract concepts. As phonemes and language are formulated, the fourth category of sound—"transferred sounds" (*zhuanyi yin* 轉移音)—emerges. This refers to the situation in which people use similar sounds to denote words with related meanings. For example, since *hu* 戶 (a single-leaf door) serves to protect a household or a dwelling, it borrows the sound *hu* from the character *hu* 護, which means "protection."⁹

Whereas the first three types of sounds represent different levels of mimicry, "transferred sounds" draw our attention to a conscious association between sound and meaning. Therefore, Hu Pu'an's theoretical framework reminds us that the transfer of sounds is inseparable from a word's meaning. Moreover, it also contributes to the distinction between traditional and modern poetry. One of the issues concerning the particularity of modern poetry is that its syllabic structure differs from the more regulated verse forms composed in the past.¹⁰ Hu's proposal suggests that the distinction and variation of sounds, tones, or rhymes are intimately connected to the physical and cognitive development of humans. Speech can be used to express feelings, refer to things, and describe circumstances, because one consciously inscribes, through articulating sounds, the varied correspondences that one's mind and body have with all things in the world. Rather than contesting whether the length of a poetic line is determined by its meaning or sound, it is perhaps more fruitful to make a direct inquiry: what really constitutes the possibility of expression in a certain language? For Hu Pu'an, all biological sounds are first created by biological activities, and in time we come to the realization that a specific act at a given moment gives rise to a specific sound. As time proceeds, the sound from a specific act comes to represent that act.

During this process of transformation from sound to language, it becomes apparent that the emergence of language has to do with more than just vocal organs such as one's mouth, tongue, and lips. The origin of language cannot be explained as an outcome of some impulse or passion. Mimicking sounds that external things make is also an inadequate explanation for this process, to say nothing of the possibility that one simply learns to enunciate by passively following established rules and imitating others. The cognitive processing of

sound, in addition to using it to conduct effective communication, comes into being when humans (as distinct from other animals) use their physical and mental abilities to feel and sense. Through identifying and differentiating the traits of things, emotions, and actions, humans formulate an understanding of the world. The possibility of expression and enunciation comes hand in hand with this formulation.

The process of the differentiation among various sounds and concepts (both concrete objects and abstract ideas) takes place simultaneously. While one constructs these distinctions internal and external to oneself, each sound is assigned a meaning. These sounds may combine or acquire extensive meanings so as to be distinguished from one another. Hu Pu'an further categorizes the words created by these processes into four distinct types: "singular word" (*dandu yu* 單獨語), "compound word" (*lianhe yu* 聯合語), "extended word" (*tuizhan yu* 推展語), and "explanatory word" (*shuoming yu* 說明語). Through this formulation, Hu Pu'an demonstrates how it is necessary from a semantic perspective to separate one type of sound from another. Then he moves on to explore how Chinese characters join together to form words with different numbers of syllables. Ultimately, Hu Pu'an is not concerned with the number of syllables found in each word. Instead, what is noteworthy is the transition from the formation of singular words to that of compound words (i.e., from monosyllabic to polysyllabic words), because this shows that people are inclined to create new words through semantic drift instead of phonological borrowing. Hu Pu'an calls attention to this transformation because he believes it explains how the Chinese language changed from a monosyllabic language to a polysyllabic one.

In Hu's theory, singular words denote monosyllabic words that can be used in isolation with semantic content. As there are too many homophones within the language, oral communication using only monosyllabic words can be challenging. Two singular words are thus attached to one another to form polysyllabic morphemes to facilitate better communication, and Hu terms these polysyllabic morphemes "compound words." Hu believes that "the emergence of compound words is not only related to sounds but also to meanings" 聯合語之發生，不僅聲韻之關係，已有意義之關係矣。¹¹ In the beginning, we could find compound words like *jinyu* 瑾瑜 (fine jade) and *meigui* 玫瑰 (rose), which may be created based on joining the sounds of some singular words. Subsequently, however, compound words are used to represent a range of meanings. For instance, the term *lianlou* 譚譚 means to mumble trivially and incessantly, whereas *lianlou* 連連 depicts incessant pacing. Hu argues that since there is a need to express feelings and thoughts that have become increasingly complex, compound words have been created. In other words, compound words are not

created merely to bring together two sounds but to convey a new and clear concept. The core issue here is not the number of syllables but the creation of words with new meaning. This is more evident when Hu points out that sometimes compound words are produced by “joining a verb, a noun or an adjective together as a word” 以動詞、名詞、形容詞聯合為一言語也. Hu provides examples of nouns with preceding adjectives: *gongniu* 公牛 (male bull), *muniu* 母牛 (female cow), and *xiaoniu* 小牛 (small calf). For examples of nouns followed by verbs, he has *niaofei* 鳥飛 (birds fly), *tuzou* 兔走 (rabbits run), and *jiming* 雞鳴 (roosters crow). Apart from joining the sounds of two singular words or the extension of meaning of one compound word, Hu Pu’an introduces here various ways to combine different parts of speech as a way to create new words.¹² This paves the way for a more flexible formation of words. With the different types of polysyllabic words that are created, Hu’s theory demonstrates the multiple possibilities for the rhythmic structure of a poetic line.

The major concern in the debates over traditional and modern poetry is the need to discern the number of syllables in one semantic unit. A reconsideration of this from the perspective of how compound words came into existence reveals that what matters here is neither the acoustic qualities of words nor the number of syllables or characters. Rather, the flexible production of meaning through the formation of word units has a direct impact on poetic cadence. If we reevaluate the composition of quadrisyllabic and pentasyllabic verses made up of disyllabic or trisyllabic word units, the core question is not simply the addition of a syllable but that an additional word “indeed signifies an additional syntactic element, an additional relatively independent semantic unit” 實際上等於增加了一個語法成分，增加了一個相對獨立的語言意義單位。¹³ If we agree that the distinction of syllables is an ongoing activity performed to express human thoughts and facilitate effective communication, it is unlikely that there exists a phonetic or semantic unit in poetry that has remained unchanged since its inception. This offers a new vantage point from which to understand the debates surrounding “free verse” (*ziyou shi* 自由詩) and “new regulated verse” (*xin gelü shi* 新格律詩) since the late 1910s.

Hu Shi, as well as other advocates of free verse, vowed to discard all prosodic requirements. He singled out alliteration (*shuangsheng* 雙聲) and assonance (*dieyin* 疊韻) as the epitome of metric regularity and criticized disyllabic word units as unnecessary constraints. Hu Shi argued that the meter of a poem should be determined by the meaning and grammatical relations of words. However, his emphasis not only forces a complete disassociation between traditional and modern poetry but also disregards any attention to the symbiotic relationship between sound and meaning. All too casually, Hu Shi dismissed the metric regularity of classical poetry as merely symptomatic of prevailing recitation methods.

Later, the famous poet Wen Yiduo 聞一多 (1899–1946) proposed a new set of “form and rules” (*gelü* 格律) for modern Chinese poetry. On the one hand, Wen took the meaning of words as the dominant factor in determining the meter of a poem. On the other hand, he demanded an equal number of metrical feet in each poetic line and an equal number of characters for the feet. Lin Geng 林庚 (1910–2006) proposed that one can determine the meter of a poem by comparing the number of characters in the first half of a line with that of the latter half. Strong criticism has already been directed against these proposals: Wen’s poems are referred to as “dry bean-curd verse” (*dougan ti* 豆干體), and Lin is condemned for his “bean-counting-ism” (*jishu zhuyi* 計數主義). More important, their theories ignore the fact that the formation of polysyllabic words happens simultaneously at the phonological and physiological levels. Through the joining of sounds, the transfer of meaning, and the combination of words with different parts of speech, new words and phrases continue to emerge. The emergence of new vocabularies continues to alter the meter of any given poetic line, and this process is crucial to the development of modern poetry written in the vernacular. If we take Hu Pu’an’s theory into consideration again, we can see that the research into the formation of words in the Chinese language provides a foundation for further exploration of the prosodic features and rhythmic patterns of Chinese poetry.

Gesture and the Embodiment of Rhythm

As mentioned, Chen Shih-hsiang began to pay attention to the concept of *zi* 姿 (gesture) around 1948, when he was translating Lu Ji’s “Wen fu.” His 1956 essay “*Zi* and Gesture” (姿與 Gesture) offers a reading of Sir Richard Paget’s (1832–1908) research on the origins of language in relation to the sounds and tones humans and animals make.¹⁴ For Paget, the “pantomimic action” of the lips and tongue is related to the speaker’s senses and emotions. For instance, alveolar consonants (*l, t, d, n*)—uttered with the tongue close to or touching the ridge behind the teeth on the roof of the mouth—indicate an upward movement. Using Chinese characters such as *tian* 天 (heaven) or *dian* 巔 (mountain top), which also have alveolar consonants and denote something high above, Chen observes a similar relationship between oral utterances and inner thoughts in the Chinese language. Whereas Hu Pu’an emphasizes how humans “consciously” turn sounds into meaningful words, Chen stresses the importance of gestures and bodily activities. Chen believes that the conveyance of thoughts must rely on the movement of hands, arms, feet, legs, and mouth. Moving beyond Hu’s main theory concerning the creation of words, Chen argued that one can trace the origins of language not only to sound but also to the physical gestures of each body part. Physical gestures, holistically, influence oral

utterance to the extent that the sounds and tones of language may well be their "by-products" (*fu chanpin* 副產品).¹⁵ In this respect, Chen demonstrates another approach to the debates and discussions regarding the sound and meaning of language since the literary revolution. By choosing "gesture" as the basis of his discussion, Chen broadens the conversation beyond the question of how and why sound expresses meaning. In other words, Chen's account of "gesture" elucidates why an informed discussion of poetry must take more than just the sounds and meanings of language into consideration.

Does the rhythm of poetry express itself only in language? Can the syllabic structure of a language arising from the distinction of sounds and meanings fully explain the rhythm of poetry? Apart from poetry or language in general, can rhythm originate somewhere else? If so, what are other ways of understanding the origins and nature of rhythm? In 1918, Ren Shuyong 任叔永 (1886–1961), a friend of Hu Shi who used to discuss literature and write poetry with him in Ithaca, mentioned in a letter to Hu that the supporters of modern poetry relied too unreflectively on the notion of the "natural" to realize that even it needs a definition:

No activities of any living beings move in one direction without return. There is necessarily a process of circulation. For instance, the circulation of blood inside the human body, inhalations and exhalations, as well as the cycle of action and rest, are all manifestations of this common principle. Within literature, there is poetry; within poetry, there is sound and rhyme; and within music, there is harmony. These are merely the results of this principle. Because we humans have such biological predispositions, we feel uncomfortable if we go against them. Recently psychologists have employed machines to gauge the best poems and prose composed by ancient writers. [According to the findings,] the duration and the accentuation of the sounds of the words fall in a similar range and show a consistent pattern. I believe this type of study is related to the poetic meter (tonal patterns?) and to the syntactic structure of Chinese. 大凡有生之物，凡百活動不能一往不返，必有一個循環張弛的作用。譬如人體血液之循環，呼吸之往復，動作寢息之相間，揭示這一個公理的現象。文中之有詩，詩中之有聲有韻，音樂中之有調和 (harmony)，也不過是此現象的結果罷了。因為吾人生理上既具有此種天性，一與相違，便覺得不自在。近來心理學家用機器試驗古人的好詩好文，其字音的長短輕重，皆有一定的次序與限度。我想此種研究，于詩的 meter (平仄?)，句法的構造，都有關係。¹⁶

Ren intends to justify the prosody of traditional poetry by comparing it with our biological nature. His view stands in stark contrast to Hu Shi's emphasis that a "natural rhythm" should be devoid of any tonal requirements. Ren seeks to explain how "nature" works, particularly from the vantage point of human

experiences of respiration, activity, and rest—experiences that were temporally repetitive. As a result, he introduces a new corporeal or physiological perspective to the discussions on natural rhythm. Even though Ren did not explain further how and why the connection between physiology and rhyme came into existence and even though he also overemphasized the “pattern” of conventional prosody, he did open up a new field for discussion by calling attention to concepts such as “freedom” (*ziyou* 自由), “natural endowments” (*tianfu* 天賦), and “basic instinct” (*benneng* 本能).¹⁷

This discussion of natural rhythm based on the human body moved beyond all previous discussions that focused on the sounds and meanings of words. Ren is not interested in the natural division of syllables in poetry but why poetry “naturally” has rhythm, be it prominent or subtle, acoustic or semantic. On the one hand, this discussion is ontological in the sense that it involves the history of the genre’s development (and therefore gave rise to related discussions of how poetry, dance, and music share the same origins, or of the similarities and differences between prose and poetry). On the other hand, it further explores the connection between rhythm and expression. This investigation extends beyond the relationship between language and syllabic structures as it touches on how (the body of) a person, as receptor and conveyor of feelings and senses, can use “rhythm” to represent her thoughts and emotions.

In a 1921 treatise, “Shige jiezou de yanjiu” 詩歌節奏的研究 (A Study of the Rhythm of Poetry), Wen Yiduo discusses the “biological basis” (*shengli jichu* 生理基礎) of rhythm, including pulse, tension, and relaxation. Wen also brings in other kinds of rhythm—from the rhythm in poetry, dance, and music to that of visual art. He deduces that rhythm originates from the “adaptation to nature” (*shiying ziran* 適應自然) or the “imitation of nature” (*mofang ziran* 模仿自然). Wen concludes that before the emergence of singing, dancing, and rhetorical articulation, humans expressed their emotions by way of “rhythmic bodily movement” (*shenti de yaoba jiezou* 身體的搖擺節奏) and “rhythmic vocalization” (*you jiezou de fasheng* 有節奏的發聲).¹⁸ Later, when Guo Moruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978) analyzes the origins of rhythm in “Lun jiezou” 論節奏 (On Rhythm), he is particularly interested in emotional tension and relaxation regarding rhythm. He argues that as the subjectivity of a man can focus only on one thing at a time, he thus develops a comparatively stronger feeling on the issue he is focused on and other feelings are generally weaker. The alternation of the intensity of feelings can then give rise to a rhythm. Accordingly, Guo criticizes those who argue that rhythm has a purely objective or biological origin and insists that respiration and pulse are mere unconscious acts.¹⁹ The following passage best illustrates Guo’s position on how emotion becomes the expression of “rhythm”:

As we are in the throes of emotions, our voices tremble, our bodies move, and our thoughts shift. Trembling voices evolve into music. Moving bodies evolve into dancing. And shifting thoughts are expressed in the form of poetry.

我們在情緒的氛氳中的時候，聲音是要戰慄的，身體是要搖動的，觀念是要推移的。由聲音的戰顫，演化而為音樂。由身體的動搖，演化而為舞蹈。由觀念的推移，表現而為詩歌。²⁰

This passage states that emotions permeate the body and produce movements of sound, body, and thought, which also constitute the source of music, dance, and poetry. Zhu Guangqian focuses directly on the word *dong* 動 (motion) and concludes that “the heart moves as it feels things. Emotions, thought and language are all fragments of the heart’s ‘motion’” 心感於物而動，情感思想和語言都是這『動』的片面：

“Motion” spreads in the cerebral and nervous systems and gives birth to consciousness. The flow of consciousness is what we commonly refer to as “thought.” “Motion” spreads in all the muscles and organs within one’s body, instigating biological changes in each organ governing our respiration, circulation, endocrine system, and action, and thus “emotion” comes to being. “Motion” spreads in our organs of articulation, including our throat, tongue, and teeth, and “language” comes to being. This process is completely in reaction to environmental changes.

「動」蔓延於腦及神經系統而生意識，意識流動便是通常所謂「思想」。「動」蔓延於全體肌肉和內臟，引起呼吸循環分泌運動各器官的生理變化，於是有「情感」。「動」蔓延於喉舌齒諸發音器官，於是有「語言」。這是一個應付環境變化的完整反應。²¹

In Zhu’s formulation, motion appears to be more than just subjective. It vacillates between sense and sensibility, the physical and the mental, the personal and the circumstantial. Zhu also attempts to cite some psychological reports that argue for an intimate correlation between the appreciation of poetry and the motion of auricular and ocular muscles.²²

No matter how body, sound, ideas, thoughts, emotions, and language implicate one another, it is more important to notice that language participates in this intricate interaction that results in expression. That is to say, language is never a self-contained concept; it exists in a network governing the delivery of and response to information, as well as the resonances with and manifestations of information. Thus, according to Zhu, language is “natural, creative, and emerges or dies out with emotion and cognition” 自然的，創造的，隨情感思想而起伏生滅的。²³ Each emotion and act of cognition has its own rhythm, and the body is ever ready to respond to a particular stimulus. Psychologists understand such a sense of readiness for action as a “motor set” (*dongzuo qushi* 動作趨勢):

Rhythm entices emotions, usually by activating its specific “motor sets.” As we listen to sounds and rhythm, we adjust the degree of our attention. Meanwhile all our muscles and all the related organs are also listening quietly, preparing to synchronize their responses to the rhythm they hear. A certain rhythm activates a certain “motor set,” which arouses a certain kind of emotion.

節奏引起情緒，通常先激動它的特殊的「動作趨勢」。我們聽聲音節奏，不僅須調節注意力，而且全體肌肉與相關器官都在靜聽，都在準備著和聽到的節奏應節和拍地動作。某種節奏激動某種「動作趨勢」，即引起它所常伴著的情緒。²⁴

Note that rhythm exists before everything else in this passage. It is rhythm that triggers the motor sets to make responses and hence to feel emotions. Rhythm can thus instill in the “whole mechanism of body and mind” a kind of “emotional response” that manifests itself uniquely in the way we see things, as well as our facial expressions, breath, gestures, and tone of voice.²⁵ In other words, the rhythm of language is nothing more than a specific “symptom” (*zhenghou* 徵候) that gestures to an a priori rhythm, which could initiate all kinds of responses.²⁶

Since the rhythm of language constitutes only a small part of the whole resonance mechanism, Chen believes that one should go beyond the pronunciation of a word and try to capture the a priori rhythm from multiple aspects. From Ren Shuyong, Wen Yiduo, and Guo Moruo to Zhu Guangqian, the discourse on rhythm has moved from a “biological motion” to an “emotional response.” Our attention is directed to how the stirring of emotions can spur certain movements. The a priori rhythm has nothing to do with tonal requirements or the intensity, duration, and pitch of each word. It pertains instead to a new understanding that the linguistic rhythm is inseparable from the movement of the entire body and mind.

Chen Shih-hsiang’s discussion of the relationship between poetry and gesture perceptively heeds certain clues ignored by previous scholarship. He begins his investigation with the character 止 *zhi*, which serves as the etymon of *shi* 詩 (poetry) and *zhi* 志 (intent). The character 止 *zhi* represents the image of a foot, and since it can refer either to the action or inaction of a foot, two opposite meanings are derived: it can refer to *zhi* 之, which means “pacing forward,” and *zhi* 止, which signifies “stop.” The action and inaction of a foot represents precisely the “original image of rhythm” 節奏的原始意象 and is “the most natural act that creates a rhythm” 原始構成節奏之最自然的行為。²⁷ With their etymological connection to the motion of the feet, *shi* 詩 (poetry) and *zhi* 志 (intent) are thus both tied to physical motions.

Chen also draws our attention to the character *xing* 興 (inspiration), whose form in oracle bone script symbolizes four hands joined together to carry an object in the middle (𠄎). At the center of the graph, we see the component 𠄎

which signifies *pan* 般 (which means *pan* 盤, that is, a tray; in one of the oldest surviving Chinese dictionaries, *Erya* 爾雅 [Approaching Refinement], *pan* 般 is said to have the meaning of *yue* 樂 [music]). For Chen, *xing* denotes a sound made when high-spirited ancient people held up an object together and orbited around it in a communal gathering. The sheer delight in the joint movement of limbs and bodies in these festivities grew and developed with rhythmic repetition and variation. *Xing* represents the essence of a collective movement that gave pleasure; it may even be like an uplifting trance.²⁸

We can observe from the above cases that expressions of emotion are often intertwined with the motions of limbs and evoke a certain kind of rhythm. Advancing Zhu Guangqian's analysis of "motor sets," Chen Shih-hsiang turns to the notion of "gesture." While Zhu states that rhythm can activate one's muscles, direct one's attention, and bring about certain types of emotions, Chen draws from the theory proposed by R. P. Blackmur in arguing that bodily gestures are fundamental to the linguistics of words. Chen finds this concept similar to the proposal made in Lu Ji's "Wen fu," in which Lu states, "A composition comes into being as the incarnation of many living gestures" 其為物也多姿.²⁹ Chen believes that the most meaningful moments in literary and artistic creation are the times when gestures are formed. In other words, the a priori rhythm that exists before language will first be manifested through gesture. Gesture is the origin of all poetic intent. The rhythm shown here is not a momentary bodily movement; rather, it is the "essence of a gesture" (*zitai xing* 姿態性) that can endure even after language and dancing are separated and each becomes an independent medium of expression.³⁰ This essence of a gesture exists not only in primeval times when dancing and singing were inseparable, because rhythm does not only belong to language, nor is it confined to poetry, singing, and dancing. Gesture even goes beyond the moment when oral and bodily movements take place. Chen's theory of gesture focuses on an ontological inception wherein the entire body and mind become an interface for generation, correspondence, and resonance. This principle of gesture is the embodiment of rhythm, which transcends all space and time and lies in the heart of all works of art.³¹

Chen Shih-hsiang was not the first Chinese scholar to pay attention to the topic of rhythm. He nevertheless sets out to conduct the most comprehensive investigation of the different vocabularies used to describe gesture. He brings together a list of words—*zi* 姿 (gesture), *yi* 意 (intent), *tai* 態 (posture), *si* 思 (thought), *rong* 容 (appearance), and *ci* 次 (order)—by showing how these words have similar pronunciations in antiquity or were once semantically tied to one another. He proves that *zi* 姿 (gesture), *tai* 態 (posture), and *rong* 容 (appearance) are related to the manifestation of an intent (both thoughts and emotions). In particular, he points out that the phonetic component of the character *zi* 姿

(gesture) is *ci* 次 (order), and therefore gesture not only represents movement but also conveys a sense of order.³² In terms of literary creation, both “movement” and “order” capture the most fundamental expression of motion. If we compare Chen’s inquiry with the discussions on poetry since the 1920s, we may observe that all these debates concerning the phonological qualities of words, various prosodic requirements, or the grammar and semantics of a poetic line could not give a satisfying explanation of the emotion conveyed by poetry. Here, we can surmise that Chen was possibly in search of an underlying rhythm that goes beyond tonal requirements and semantics.

In Chen Shih-hsiang’s proposal, we find a rhythm that exists together with our thoughts and emotions. A certain type of gesture has always governed human feeling and expression. Following Chen’s line of argument, he advocates the concept of “scansion” (*lüdu* 律度) or “rhythm” rather than delving into formulaic prosodic requirements; he focuses on “poetic signification” (*shiyi zuoyong* 示意作用) rather than “meaning.”³³ Through this shift in terminology, Chen offers us a new point of departure from which we can move beyond the existing debates on “natural rhythm” that date from the 1920s discussions of “sound” and “meaning.”

Coda: Instrument or Medium

Although scholars have had different opinions on the introduction of foreign expressions or the treatment of classical Chinese, since Hu Shi’s promotion of vernacular Chinese most scholars tend to consider language solely as an instrument to express thoughts and Chinese characters as no more than a tool for recording language. This view was shared by many of Hu Shi’s contemporaries, and Hu himself once elucidated, “The history of Chinese literature is the history of evolution in the form of script (as a tool)” 一部中國文學史只是一部文字形式（工具）新陳代謝的歷史。³⁴ From this perspective, the study of the instrumentality of language seems to have replaced the study of literature itself.³⁵ In contrast to such trends, both Zhu Guangqian’s proposal of an a priori rhythm that could have originated in singing, dancing, and music and Chen Shih-hsiang’s theory of the expressive gesture found in poetry were a breath of fresh air. The views of Zhu and Chen are consistent in that they both call our attention to rhythm’s mediating role. For them, rhythm is not a transparent instrument; rather, it represents a nexus that can connect humans to the world, body and mind, language and nonlanguage. Rhythm allows us to engage with a greater world, and it invites various bodily movements, which in turn induce emotions. Rhythm brings forth numerous expressive gestures through which one can participate in a boundless textual world.³⁶

This textual realm constructed through the mediation of rhythm is not limited to oral or literary texts. Aside from Zhu Guangqian and Chen Shih-hsiang, Zong Baihua 宗白華 (1897–1986) also employs the notion of the “rhythm of life” (*shengming de jiezou* 生命的節奏) in his theoretical treatises penned during the 1930s and 1940s. Through a comparative study of Western and Chinese paintings, Zong points out how Chinese paintings require a sense of movement through spiritual consonance. This sense of movement is “the rhythm of life” that premodern Chinese painters found to be in harmony with the rhythm of the whole universe.³⁷ The Taiwanese musician Jiang Wenye 江文也 (1910–83) shares a similar view of the natural rhythm that can be found in poetic and musical expressions. In his book, *Kongzi de yuelun* 孔子的樂論 (Confucius’s Treatises on Music), Jiang cites the ancient Chinese “Yueji,” which states that music is “the harmony between Heaven and Earth” 天地之和. He thus draws an analogy between music and certain ethereal substances that may bring together heaven and earth. He then explicates the resonance one may experience listening to certain kinds of music. In other words, music serves as an intermediary that can join the experience of the composer with its audience and lead to a sublime form. This sublime form resembles what Chen Shih-hsiang referred to as *xing*, or what Chen referred to as the “gesture” found in Chinese poetics.³⁸



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Notes

1. Hu Shi, “Bishang Liangshan,” 121.
2. Hu Shi, “Tan xinshi,” 158–78.
3. Zhu Zhixin, “Shi de yinjie,” 30–41.
4. Tang, “Yinyun zhi yinwei de wenxue gongyong.”
5. Zhu Guangqian, “Zhongguo shide jiezou yu shengyun de fenxi (shang): lun sheng.”
6. See Hu Pu’an, *Cong wenzixue shang kaojian Zhongguo gudai zhi shengyun yu yanyu*.
7. Hu Pu’an, “Yinyun tonglun.” The excerpts of the *Book of Rites* 禮記 (Li Ji) Hu quotes here are drawn from James Legge’s translations, and the translation of the “Mao Great Preface” 毛詩大序 (Maoshi daxu) is taken from Stephen Owen’s *Readings in Chinese Literary Thought*. Both have been slightly modified.
8. Hu Pu’an, *Cong wenzixue shang kaojian Zhongguo gudai zhi shengyun yu yanyu*, 1.
9. *Ibid.*, 2–3.
10. Here the “more regulated verse forms” refer to “recent-style poetry” (*jinti shi* 近體詩), which includes the eight-lined verse (*lüshi* 律詩), the four-lined quatrains (*jueju* 絕句), and the linked couplets of indeterminate length (*pailü* 排律).

11. Hu Pu'an, *Cong wenzixue shang kaojian Zhongguo gudai zhi shengyun yu yanyu*, 49.
12. *Ibid.*, 44.
13. Zhao, "Siyan shi yu wuyan shi de jufa jiegou yu yuyan gongneng bijiao yanjiu," 88.
14. Chen, "Zi yu Gesture," 68–72.
15. *Ibid.*, 69.
16. This is an excerpt from a letter from Ren Shuyong to Hu Shi and is quoted from Hu Shi's reply; see Hu Shi, "Da Ren Shuyong," 88.
17. Hu Shi takes issue with Ren's position and argues that Ren allows tonal requirements to restrain natural expression. He also pokes fun at the machine-based experiments. *Ibid.*, 90–93.
18. Wen, "Shige jiezou de yanjiu." This article was originally prepared in English; on the dates of composition, please refer to the translator's notes in *The Complete Collection of Wen Yiduo*, 61.
19. Guo, "Lun jiezou," 1–7.
20. *Ibid.*, 7.
21. Zhu Guangqian, "Lun biaoqian: Qinggan sixiang yu yuyan wenzi de guanxi," 84.
22. Zhu Guangqian emphasizes that the reader can experience the so-called vigor (*qishi* 氣勢) and aura (*shenyun* 神韻) through the physiological activities of the ears, eyes, and muscles. See his "Cong shenglixue guandian tanshi de 'qishi' yu 'shenyun'."
23. Zhu Guangqian, "Lun biaoqian: Qinggan sixiang yu yuyan wenzi de guanxi," 92.
24. Zhu Guangqian, "Shi yu yue: jiezou," 123.
25. See also, Zhu Guangqian, "Lun biaoqian: Qinggan sixiang yu yuyan wenzi de guanxi," 84.
26. *Ibid.*, 92.
27. Chen, "Zhongguo shizi zhi yuanshi guannian shilun."
28. Chen, "Yuan xing: Jianlun Zhongguo wenxue tezhi," 235–37.
29. Chen, *Literature as Light against Darkness*, 38.
30. Chen Shih-hsiang's argument is inspired by R. P. Blackmur's seminal essay "Language as Gesture." In Chen's formulation, he argues, "language originates from gesture made for expressive purposes. Though language is formed and becomes an independent way of expression, by nature it still contains the essence of gesture" 語言之來源，始於全肢體為示意而做成之姿態；至語言構成而獨立後，猶在本質上常含姿態性。See Chen, "Zi yu Gesture," 76.
31. Chen believes that the concept of rhythm can be applied to different forms of art. See "Zi yu Gesture."
32. *Ibid.*, 86–88.
33. Chen defines *scansion* as a relatively fluid concept as opposed to a formulaic placement of words with different tones. Using the temporal dimension as an example, Chen argues that in Chinese poetry, the flow of time is often signified without explicit reference. For Chen, "poetic signification" refers to the power poetry possesses to signify the world. For a detailed discussion of this terminology, see, Chen, "Shijian he lüdu zai Zhongguo shi zhong zhi shiyi zuoyong," 91–95.
34. Hu Shi, "Bishang Liangshan," 108.
35. Hu Shi's ideas can be found in his essay "Bishang Liangshan," 99–131. Fu Ssu-nien 傅斯年 (1896–1950) considered both language and script as tools: "Language is an instrument to express thoughts, and script is an instrument to record language" 語言是表現思想的器具，文字又是表現語言的器具。See Fu, "Hanyu gaiyong pinyin wenzi de chubu tan," 392. For a detailed discussion on how scholars viewed language as a tool starting in 1919, see Luo, "Wenxue de shiyu: zhengli guogu yu wenxue yanjiu de kaojuhua."

36. For a discussion on language as a medium, see Yoshimi, *Media bunkaron*, 2–16, 81–86.
 37. Zong, "Lun zhongxi huafa de yuanyuan yu jichu," 108.
 38. Jiang, *Kongzi de yuelun*, 40–41.

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