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A Brief Analysis on the Modern Style Poetry's Rhyme and the Middle Chinese Pronunciations

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Respected provost, Miss Deng, good morning. My name is Manyu Yang. Today I would like to share with you the topic on the Modern Style Poetry's Rhyme and the middle Chinese pronunciations.

1. Introduction

The rhyme of classical Chinese poetry usually refers to the 'correspondence of sound'¹ between the ending words of each line. If the vowel of the last word repeats again and again, the sense of rhythm appears in the poetry. This is why ancient Chinese value the poetry's rhyme, and constructed many rules for it. The rhyme books are also written for uniting the system of rhyme. However, due to the changes of time, the pronunciations of Chinese characters have changed a lot. Some ancient poetry no longer rhyme perfectly in today's pronunciation, and it actually affects the reading experience. However, through restructuring the Chinese middle Chinese pronunciations, people can still know the original pronunciations for rhyme of ancient Chinese poetry. Through this presentation, I will firstly inform you some basic rules of constructing rhyme for the modern-style poetry. Then I will briefly introduce how phonology scholars reproduce the middle Chinese pronunciations, and finally try to use Chen Xinxiong's restructuring system to show the original rhyme of a modern-style poetry.

2. The level tone, oblique tone and the modern-style poetry's rhyme

¹ Oxford University Press (2020), Lexico.com, <https://www.lexico.com/definition/rhyme>, accessed in 29th May 2021.

The ancient Chinese poetry can be divided into two types, which are the ancient style and the modern style. The modern style has stricter form and rules for rhyme than the ancient style. It rises in the Wei and Jin dynasties (魏晉南北朝), a scholar called Sheng Yue (沈約) had brought up an idea of enhancing the rhythm of poetry, which is called ‘four sounds and eight faults (四聲八病)’, and he thought that a poet should ‘make the rhythm various within one piece of work, let the punctuation be different within two lines (一簡之內，音韻盡殊；兩句之中，輕重悉異。)’.² This is the start of modern-style poetry.

To understand the rules of making modern-style poetry, it is important to know the four-tones of Chinese at first. In modern Chinese, the four tones are the level tone (陰平), the rising tone (陽平), the falling-rising tone (上聲) and the falling tones (去聲). However, in comparison, the four tones of middle Chinese pronunciations are the level tone, the falling-rising tone, the falling tone and the entering tone (入聲). The entering tone no longer exists in the modern Chinese, it has been combined into the four modern tones. According to the regulations of the changes between the modern tones and the middle Chinese tones concluded by Chen Xinxiong,³ there are one-third of falling-rising tones in middle Chinese pronunciations has become the falling tones in modern Chinese. The middle Chinese level tone did not decrease as it simply divided into the level tone and the rising tone. When discussing the rhyme of the modern-style poetry, it takes the middle Chinese tones as the standard. The level tone is an independent genre, the other three tones are called oblique tones (仄聲). Using these two tones, people can create the rhythm spectrum for poetry to describe the rules of rhyme. Through analysing the rhythm spectrum, it is easy to understand the

² Dong Xiaowei 董小偉, Wang Bin 王兵, *Zhongguo gudai shici lilun yaojie* 中國古代詩詞理論要解 [An Analysis of theory of Ancient Chinese poems] (Taipei: Bafang Press, 2019), 66.

³ Chen Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Yinlue zhengbu* 音略證補 [The Prove and Supplement of Phonology] (Taipei: Wenshizhe Press, 2006), 133-134.

basic rhythm changes of the modern-style poetry.

3. Understanding the construction of modern-style poetry through reading the rhythm spectrum

In this part, let us use a rhythm spectrum's example to explain. Here is the rhythm for a seven-character quatrains (七言绝句), with its first line fits to the rhyme:

Oblique ⁴ 仄	Oblique 仄	Level ⁵ 平	Level 平	Oblique 仄	Oblique 仄	Level 平
Level 平	Level 平	Oblique 仄	Oblique 仄	Oblique 仄	Level 平	Level 平
Level 平	Level 平	Oblique 仄	Oblique 仄	Level 平	Level 平	Oblique 仄
Oblique 仄	Oblique 仄	Level 平	Level 平	Oblique 仄	Oblique 仄	Level 平

First of all, the rhythm should obey the rules of that the level tones' pairs and the oblique tones' pairs must appear alternately within one line, as two syllables forming one pair. However, at the end of the line, there are could be a single level tone or a single oblique tone.

Secondly, two lines constitutes one couplet. The level tones' pairs and the oblique tones' pairs should appear oppositely between two lines within one couplet. However, the second line of the couplet must be in the same rhythm with the first line of the next couple. Therefore we can see, the first line is opposite with the second line, the second line is same with the third line.

However, there are still some insignificant differences. For example, the order of the level-tone pair in the second line should have been opposite with the first line.

⁴ 'Oblique' refers to the oblique tone.

⁵ 'Level' refers to the level tone.

This difference is caused by the setting of rhyme of each line. Usually, the rhyme should be the level-tone characters. The odd lines must not rhyme when the even lines need to rhyme. The first line of the poetry can either rhyme or not. Hence the last character of each odd line must be the level tone. However, in this spectrum, if the rhythm pairs appear to be completely opposite in the first line and second line, the last character of the second line becomes the oblique tone. In this occasion, people change the order of the last two pairs and it causes a small difference. This is a brief introduction of the rhythm and rhyme of the modern-style poetry.

4. Finding the middle Chinese pronunciations through rhyme books and rime tables

After understanding the strict rules of modern-style poetry, people may feel pitiful that if we can no longer feel the beauty of rhythm of some poetry, due to the change of pronunciations. However, restructuring the middle Chinese pronunciation can help people to revive the rhythm. In a limited sense, the middle Chinese pronunciation means those were used in between the Wei and Jin dynasties and the Sui and Tang dynasties.⁶ Therefore, if people want to restructure the pronunciation of Tang poetry, the system of Sui and Tang dynasties is the right choice.

How do scholars find out the clue and traces of restructuring the ancient Chinese pronunciations? I would like to explain this part through introducing *fanqie* 反切. In the past, the system like the international phonetic alphabet had not been invented, people used two Chinese characters to describe a character's pronunciation. This two-character pair is called *fanqie*. The first character defines the consonant, the second one defines the vowel and tone. To combine the information contained in these two characters, the pronunciation can be found. Therefore, in earlier times, there were not

⁶ Zhu Jianing 竺家寧, *Shengyun xue* 聲韻學[Phonology] (Taipei: Wunan Tushu Press, 1992), 290.

clear definitions for the consonants and vowels in Chinese. In order to conclude the consonants and vowels, people must study the characters used in *fanqie*. One of the representative scholar who had done this work is Chen Li who lived in Qing dynasty. He had created the basic principles, analysing principles and supplementing principles, using these principles to connect the *fanqie* characters. For the first characters (反切上字), he classified them into 40 kinds. The second characters (反切下字) are classified as 311 kinds. Although the scholars later on hold many different opinions for this classification, the amount of kinds does not change much.

However, knowing the classification is not enough for people analysing the slight differences between each consonants and vowels. Fortunately, there are still the rime tables bridging the knowledge gap of this part. Rime tables are the instructions of the pronunciation and tones of the rhyme books. Ancient Chinese had also known about the limitations of *fanqie* in describing a particular sound, hence they wrote rime tables to supplement this part. As we can see in this copy of rime table, in the top of it, the classification of consonants, the phonetic organs, the aspiration and tenuis are clearly indicated. The left hand side is the space for the vowels in *Guangyun*, the right hand side has marked the *kaikou* 開口 and *hekou* 合口, it is to describe the shape of the mouth. The last part is most difficult, we can see the characters are divided into four different levels, this was thought to be expressing the more detailed differences. For example, a Phonology scholar called Jiang Yong says, ‘Pronunciations are divided into four levels. The first level is totally opened, the second one is semi-opened, the third and fourth are relatively small, and the fourth one is especially small (音韻有四等，一等洪大，二等次大，三四皆細，而四尤細).’⁷ However, Lin Yin does not agree with him. He indicated that

⁷ Li Xinkui 李新魁, *Hanyu dengyunxue* 漢語等韻學[Chinese Traditional Phonetics](Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press, 1983), 418.

‘The differences between *kaikou* and *hekou* is the way of ending the syllable (收音聲勢不同), the *kaikou* and *hekou* has two different levels each, it should be total four genres. The rime table set them into eight genres is because the author had to cope with the unreasonable settings of *Guangyun*’.⁸

Even though there are many controversies around the rime tables, they still provided the evidence for restructuring the middle Chinese pronunciations, making the restructuring more authentic.

5. Conclusion: Reproducing the rhyme with middle Chinese pronunciation

To sum up, the modern-style poetry has strict rules for rhyming to maintain the phonological charm. It is a pity that if people lose them simply because of the change of pronunciations. Fortunately, phonology scholars kept the chance for later generations by studying the ancient phonological materials and restructuring the middle Chinese pronunciations. After figuring out the basic theories of pronunciation restructuring, let us use this system to return the rhyme of *Du Fu*’s *Chunwang* 春望 to its original pronunciations. This poetry read in modern Chinese is unrhymed. However it is perfectly rhymed in restructuring middle Chinese pronunciations. The restructuring system I chose is created by Chen Xinxiong⁹:

Lines	The Rhyme Character	IPA of Modern Chinese	IPA of Chen Xinxiong’ restructuring	The rhyme of <i>Guangyun</i>
國破山河在	N/A			
城春草木深	深	ʂən55	ɛ ɪəm	侵
感時花濺淚	N/A			
恨別鳥驚心	心	ɛm55	s ɪəm	侵

⁸ Lin Yin 林尹, *Zhongguo shengyunxue tonglun* 中國聲韻學通論[The Analysis of the Chinese Phonology](Taipei: Liming Wenhua Shiye Press, 2019), 125.

⁹ The restructuring of consonants is from : Chen Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Shengyunxue* 聲韻學(上)[Phonology:I] (Taipei: Wenshizhe Press, 2007), 126.

The restructuring of vowels is from : Chen Xinxiong 陳新雄, *Shengyunxue* 聲韻學(上), 252.

烽火連三月	N/A			
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白頭搔更短	N/A			
渾欲不勝簪	簪	tsan55	tʃ ǐəm	侵

This is all for my presentation today, any suggestions and feedbacks are appreciated, thank you very much for listening.

6. Bibliography

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