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COVER SHEET

Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm:

A Research Approach to Reimagining Traditions of Chinese Poetic ‘rules of rhythm’

Ling Liu

Abstract:

Throughout the history of China, from early dynasties into contemporary times, aspects of poetry, painting, and writing have been grounded in varied but deeply connected ‘rules of rhythm’. These ‘rules’ permeate in diverse yet identifiable and recognizable forms. The research in this project is aimed at both adopting and adapting these rules of rhythm or rhythmic patterns in an experimental form that reimagines a tradition of ‘lyric aesthetics’ in the context of the contemporary interplay between sound, image, and writing. In this sense, the investigation is at once one of ‘reclamation’ and extension. The basic ‘question’ in these experiments is whether it is possible to represent sonic patterns themselves — that is, by both visualizing sound structures and ‘sonifying’ visual forms (irrespective of textual content). The text focuses on the historical establishment of methodological approaches (as a way to identify their forms) and then transforming/translating these in combinations made possible by blending the sonic and visual. As a particular attribute of Chinese expression, these ‘rules’ or forms are cultural traits that have endured through many centuries and challenges and, more importantly in this case, can be (re)iterated in dynamic, fluid, and revitalized contemporary artistic configurations that aim at seeing sound, writing sound, and performing rhythm.

Keywords:

sonic-visual, Chinese art, Chinese aesthetics, rules of rhythm, multimedia, sound art, sound space, acoustic, rhythm

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Video description: A video offering a visual and sonic tour of the exhibition *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. Accompanied by a vocal score, the video depicts the various rooms in the exhibition. In one a video work on a monitor shows a hand painting lines on paper with a thick brush, alongside these, hung on the wall are the finished works on paper, arranged in a column from the ceiling to the floor. In a second room, bathed in dim blue light, a visitor enters to listen to an immersive sound work. Click <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3063482#tool-3076702> to watch the video.

Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm

A Research Approach to Reimagining Traditions of Chinese Poetic 'rules of rhythm'

Ling Liu

Introduction

This body of research has been developed over four years. With a background in Chinese art and history, traditional and historical perspectives have always been a foundation of my education. For over a decade, I have been traversing countries, languages, media, literature, and art, searching for precisely the necessary means to represent the significance and complexity of the tradition and culture, as well as why they matter today. However, after spending so long away from home, there has often been a struggle with the tremendous difference between East and West and with identifying or bridging the crucial aspects that constitute this difference. Therefore, with my solid studies in Chinese painting and my knowledge — as well as enthusiasm — for traditional poetry, and as an artist who has also studied electronic media and is working primarily with sound and visual experimental and performative works, I start this journey of investigating, reclaiming, and creating.

Chinese poetry, writing, and painting (like all cultural forms of expression), in the context of Chinese aesthetics, contain both meaning and form. My current focus involves vocal and visual performance, in an attempt to disclose/reveal (with sonic–visual means) the formative rhythmic patterns that constitute deeply rooted traditions of Chinese cultural expression.

Writing, painting, and singing in Chinese are embodied forms, incorporating intricate vocal nuances and subtly 'drawn' gestures — gestures of writing and gestures of speech. Indeed, in Chinese, even writing is performative. And rather than consider the particular textual content of the poems or lyrics, in these works I focus instead on revealing the sound patterns, lyrical intonation, rhythmic precision, and methods of representing or drawing rhythm. [1] How the historical and theoretical considerations of continuity extend into a contemporary form in this research project are detailed in the sections below.

[1] It is worth noting that the point of this project is not to undermine the cohesion of the rhythmic rules in the history of China, but to investigate how intricately organized they are with the artistic experiments. ↩

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Part One: Theoretical, Historical and Artistic Backgrounds

An Approach to Chinese Lyric Aesthetics

As we look back into Chinese history, where sound can only be represented as words in poetry, including both acoustics and imagery, we are actually dealing with the relationship between words and images. Poetry, calligraphy, and painting, as three representational art forms in pre-modern China, have had a long history and a very complex and integral relationship within the context of Chinese aesthetics. This intricate situation stands as a significant inspiration related both to history and the phenomena of sound and visuals in contemporary Chinese art practice.

In their important study *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, Wen C. Fong and Alfreda Murck clearly articulate the special importance of the reciprocal link between image and language:

The relationship between words and images in Chinese art developed from one of complementary illustration to one of complex integration — with a major shift occurring during the late Song (1205–1279) and the early Yüan (1271–1368) painters turned increasingly to symbolism. When eventually the image became overladen with symbolic meaning, it could no longer be expressed without the help of language. (Fong and Murck 1991: xv)

This ultimate integration means words and images no longer exist without each other. Poetry, calligraphy, and painting together became a kind of mixed art form, one element always being within another. As the leading scholar-artist of the late Northern Sung dynasty (960–1127), Su Shi (苏轼, 1037–1101) was the first who advocated 'poetry in painting and painting in poetry' (ibid.: xv). Similarly, calligrapher Xie Zhiliu (谢稚柳, 1910–1997) also sees the relationship between painting and poetry as one of shared 'visual thinking' (ibid.: xvi).

As a fundamental issue of my research project that is discussed in this article, the question 'how are the traditional "rules of rhythm" in Chinese aesthetics applied across contemporary creative practices in acoustic/visual space' indicates that an essential aspect of this study is the relationship between sound and visuals in the context of Chinese aesthetics. Yet, before we investigate this integration directly, in practice, I will outline some basic historical background to Chinese aesthetics [1], as well as its relation to sound and imagery — how they

are integral to understanding sound–image relationships and how they ‘replicate’ long traditions of rhythmic forms and relate these within the investigation of my own artistic work.

The pivotal issue of Chinese *lyric aesthetics* is an essential component of this inquiry. Much has been written about this issue and I draw from the work of Yu-Kung Kao to draw attention to specific aspects of the connections and inter-relationships between word/image — related particularly to the expressions that emerged from their performance. In this sense, I think of aesthetics as artistically integrated principles or rules that underlie the creation of various kinds of art. From these principles, the basic aesthetics underlying the creation of traditional Chinese art — especially the integration of poetry, calligraphy, and painting — can be decisively articulated.

Yu-Kung Kao states:

The Chinese aesthetic tradition, which has successively focused on music, on poetry, and then on painting, has revealed, despite the great diversity of genres and many controversies in interpretation, certain consistent characteristics that epitomize what I shall call lyric aesthetics. (Kao 1991: 47)

Yu-Kung Kao uses the term ‘lyric aesthetics’ to describe the underlying principles that are basic to all representational art, which presents a particular artform that aims to present mental images and emotional states rather than to reflect the physical world realistically. Kao continues:

How music, prose, poetry, and calligraphy were transformed for lyrically expressive ends through two essential processes. First, internalization, second, symbolization, turns signs — whether oral, written, or painted — into symbols to preserve and transmit the significance of meaningful experience. (ibid.: xvi–xvii)

Thus, in the context of *lyric aesthetics*, both sound and visual art forms as signs can be transformed into symbols to preserve layers of meaning. We can think of the historical progress of integration in the three art forms:

Certain simple underlying aesthetics developed into comprehensive and highly complex repertoires of artistic principles and technical rules, principles and rules that influenced and shaped almost all major art forms and artistic products in early China. (ibid.: 47)

Rather than considering the theory behind the combination of these three art forms, we need to understand the *lyric aesthetics* underlying this integration. In traditional China, these aesthetic principles and rules altogether are called the idea of *fa* (法). [2] *Fa* here includes all of the aesthetic principles and rules of poetry and lyrics in early China. The concept of ‘rules of rhythm’ in this research is also included in *fa*. In other words, the ultimate research question can be understood as ‘how to apply the principles of lyric aesthetics to contemporary integrated art forms combined with sound and visual elements’.

The Relationships between Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting

In *Words and Images: Chinese Poetry, Calligraphy, and Painting*, Wen C. Fong and Alfreda Murck state:

No art form alone was sufficient; neither poetry nor calligraphy fit the requirement of a total art, for neither one covered a broad spectrum of form and content, and neither one encompassed all phases of the creative act. The emergence as this juncture of painting as a lyric art provided a focus for the gradual culmination of a lyric aesthetics. (Murck and Fong 1991: 82)

In the historical process of the development of Chinese art, early figure painting was a descriptive or narrative 'image'. Painting at this stage could neither internalize nor symbolize and therefore did not fundamentally correspond to lyric principles or regulations. By the Tang Dynasty (618–907), landscape painting gradually replaced figure painting as the mainstream, while calligraphy began to profoundly influence painting. At the same time, influenced by the poetics of the time, poetry and calligraphy found their ideal forms of self-expression in the theory of painting. Du Fu (杜甫, 712–770), a poet from the Tang Dynasty, established a pattern of thinking about painting in poetic terms, which made possible the creation of an integrated poem-painting (Murck and Fong 1991: xxi). Thus, 'literati painting' [3] was formed. Later, as a powerful aesthetic form, literati painting recognized and elaborated the formal and symbolic qualities of brush and ink. In this process, the role of Chinese painting changed. It became one of the tools for expressing beauty in the same way as poetry and calligraphy.

One essential aspect of painting after the Song Dynasty (960–1297) was that painters would express their inner feelings through the painting of landscapes (Shanshui painting; 山水画) or flowers and birds (Huaniao painting; 花鸟画). Especially, the 'literati painters' explored their personal feelings in their paintings in search of self-awareness. It was only with the help of language that the personal agenda and meaning of the painting could be expressed through symbolism and personal associations, so the painters started inscribing poems in their works. Taking Xu Wei's [4] *Ink Grapes* (墨葡萄) is an example of a work in which the artist has written a poem of his own composition directly on the image, weaving together the three art forms (painting, calligraphy, and poetry) and evoking an integrated world for viewers to experience. In this case, the poem and its carrier, the calligraphic writing, expanded the visual world of the painting. Altogether, this artwork became a 'space' in which one can see and hear the poetic singing simultaneously — the simple scene of grapes is transformed into an emotional expression of the painter's sadness and loneliness, in which the principle of lyric aesthetics is indeed represented.

Images descriptions:

Left: Xu, Wei. (1582-88) *Ink Grapes* 墨葡萄. [ink on rice paper]. A painting from the Ming Dynasty depicting grapes growing on hanging branches, which can be found in The Palace Museum in Beijing. The top half of the painting contains a poem, written in calligraphic hand, using ink and brush.

Right: The textual content of the poem from the painting *Ink Grapes* 墨葡萄, transcribed in characters and in Pinyin, showing the rhythmic rules and an English translation. The

translation reads: *I've spent half of my life as a poor man, standing alone in my study, blowing in the evening breeze. I have no place to sell my paintings, tossing them into the wild vines.*

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3076858#tool-3083224> to view the images.

Therefore, many of the image/sound experiments in my research aim at analyzing and exploring rhythm in poetry and the visualization of acoustics. The visualization here is the most tangible part of the poetic imagination; it is the internalization and symbolization of the acoustic art form. Thus, the two essential characteristics of *lyric aesthetics*, movement (which applies to all objects in this world) and interaction (which suggests that empathetic resonance exists between different entities), are formulated and applied in this project as well. We can understand sound as the movement of the poem/voice, the painting/visual as the physical movement of listening, and the transition between the vocal and the painting as the interaction between the voice of rhythm and the gestures of the brush strokes within the art form. The sound and visual aspects are different parts of this integrated art form and they work as shared 'visual thinking', which cannot survive without each other.

The Integral Relationship between Sound and Visuals

In the Tang Dynasty, the aesthetics of the time can be expressed in two short phrases:

'To let the mind roam between spaces' (游心空际, *you-xin kong-ji*) and 'to express ideas outside the object itself' (写意物外, *xie-yi wu-wai*) [...] This brings us back to the internalized world first, and then to the symbolic meaning [...] This lyric experience is summed up in the formal terms of design: *Pattern in space and rhythm in time*. Both the fluidity of quality and the indeterminacy of interpretation are fundamentally antithetical to the rigidity of pattern and rhythm. The two phrases point to the need to create a volatile and variable world of the mind to accommodate lyrical qualities. (Kao 1991: 80)

This 'antithetical' combination of creative interpretation and pattern and rhythm sets the fundamental logic of this integrated art form. As a poetry–painting integration, all kinds of expressive methods can be employed to enrich the final artwork while the ultimate principles and rules underlie them. In the context of this project, we can see the *rules of rhythm* as the basic principles and rules, with sound and visual works being vivid expressive interpretations to accompany their fundamental logic. The intent of *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* (Liu 2022a), a sound-based multimedia spatial installation, is to bring viewers to this internalized as well as symbolized sonic–visual world with various expressive methods that can enrich each other as a whole, for an immersive spatialized sensation that is based on the logic of rhythmic patterns.

As a 'preface' to the more extensive and detailed examinations of the complex linkages in my performative works, *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* is both an experiment and a demonstration of the way in which, to use the French term, a '*son image*' (or sound image) can

be articulated. Yet with this as a preliminary step, it is crucial in this research to outline several particular aspects of what constitutes the marked difference between Eastern and Western cultures and to firmly establish the pivotal conceptual and historical frameworks in which my artistic research is embedded.

Chinese Pre-Modern History

China entered the twentieth century confronted by a foreign modernity rooted within a radically different pre-modern origin. Contradictions quickly emerged. The upheavals in the West's early century were reverberating in the consolidation of the Euro–American strategic alliances as the 'victory' of Western hegemony. In China, there soon came decisive challenges to a 'world order' steeped in the social logic of the West. Reactions quickly appeared. With the May Fourth Movement (五四运动, from 1919) and the New Literature Movement (新文化运动, from 1915), key watershed moments of pre-modern and twentieth-century China, the country confronted the strained adoption of an 'other' modernity. The 'reformers' embraced a Western modernization not wholly compatible with pre-modern China. For many, this was a denial of Chinese history and a loss of its cultural legacy. It was believed that it was the only way to enter the modern age, the only opportunity to have an enlightened 'future'. This fraught capitulation affected many generations. As a consequence, our foothold on being fully Chinese leads us to ask: where do we stand? For too long, we tentatively tried to fill this inner void with Western ideas, but it never worked.

Following the May Fourth period, intellectuals offered tangled explanations for the oversimplified, over-zealous reforms — including overthrowing Confucius and sons, the 'reforms' of vernacular Chinese, new poetry, the Latinization of Chinese characters, etc. One pivotal example is that classical Chinese was abandoned and vernacular Chinese became the 'national language'. In the reformation of poetry, the reformers abandoned the classical language and the traditional rules of rhythm that came with it, advocating new poetry using vernacular Chinese with no rules. The traditional rules were broken down and overthrown as merely pre-modern. Everything from the past was wrong. This unavoidably caused a far-reaching cultural exile of the traditional Chinese language, eventually resulting in the erosion of traditional knowledge for generations to come. For the younger generations, there remains a gap between classical and vernacular Chinese. We can hardly fully understand a pre-modern China, creating a stronger feeling of being uprooted from our Chinese heritage. The question is how to make a change to prevent the homogenization of Chinese history and identity from becoming an 'impressionistic' pre-modernism.

With the need to achieve the agenda of establishing a modern China, to a certain extent, the May Fourth Movement occurred willingly. After the movement, on the one hand, the historical logic of Western modernization dominated the ideology of twentieth-century China. On the other hand, the traditional culture continued in daily lives, cultural memories, lifestyles, and even social structures — including poetic and artistic practices. So the historical values of Western modernization and traditional China were carried on by the Chinese successors simultaneously. Swinging between the two parallel histories, the struggle between the two was also vivid.

Reclaiming Traditional Chinese Culture

Within this struggle, another cultural movement emerged in the twenty-first century. As China finally reclaimed the space for its own development both economically and geopolitically, it started to redeem its pre-modern history. For many, this deep-rooted disregard of traditional Chinese history for almost a century was not to be continued. In the process of regaining their tradition, they rediscovered that its history was not stagnant and that the development of this culture had been evolving step by step, solidly, under Eastern-focused systems that differentiated it from the West. Therefore, the traditional history needed to be retrieved, historical knowledge restored, and historical awareness recovered.

A significant issue emerges as to how a contemporary Chinese public can conceptualize and experience pre-modern history, including the history of prior forms of artistic expression and meaning. Rather than being a historical question, this is more a realistic question for contemporary China. Traditional Chinese culture has its own vitality, balance, and inclusion. On the one hand, there were strict rules like ‘three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues’ (三纲五常). [5] On the other hand, there were also actions breaking the rules, such as the question ‘why do all the gentries have to be born with blue blood?’ (‘王侯将相宁有种乎’). This is an internal self-evolutionary characteristic of culture. ‘Tradition’ in Chinese (‘传统’) is not a word for the past, but a word for inheriting (传承) and reforming (创新). Thus, the process of reclaiming pre-modern history and rediscovering the ontology of Chinese culture is a multi-faceted task.

A vital question is how to deal with the relationship between the fully modernized and deeply Westernized contemporary Chinese society and the main body of traditional Chinese history and culture underlining this current society. Over the past years, we have seen many artworks that struggle between Western modernity and Chinese pre-modernity, of which the most iconic and famous is Xu Bing’s *A Book from the Sky/Tianshu* (1991). This struggle is real and inescapable. Thus, if one wants to reimagine a contemporary Chinese culture, one will have to go through this struggle and find the answer. In this fashion, there is the legendary stage performance *Poetic Dance: The Journey of a Legendary Landscape Painting* (只此青绿) (2021), which was inspired by the painting *A Thousand Miles of Rivers and Mountains* from the Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127). There are experimental musicians who work in depth with traditional instruments, expressive methods, and artistic aesthetics, such as Tan Dun and Li Jianhong. There are definitely artists who recuperate traditional culture through the adoption and expansion of modern technology, such as the important multi-sensory visualization project *典章和韵 林壑蔚然: The Repetition Structure of the Book of Songs and the Visualization of Phonic Rhythm* (2022). And this is also where this artistic research project fits in — although it is essential to acknowledge the boundaries of this practice-based research and the difficulty of reimagining Chinese contemporary art that is based on China’s indigenous cultures by reclaiming thousands of years of tradition from pre-modern history. But here I bear in mind that this project is an artistic experiment, using art-making as the ultimate methodology in an attempt to reclaim both its efficacy and potential. The project does not cover all of the history or theories from pre-modern China; it is merely one of many attempts in this field of research.

Traditional Chinese Rules of Rhythm

Traditional rhythmic rules, as aspects of aesthetics, constitute the point of entry into traditional Chinese culture. *The rules of rhythm*, understood in Chinese as the term 合辙押韵 (*hé zhé yā yùn*), are the fundamental *fa* or method of poetic composition. Deconstructing this term, 合辙 is a combination of ‘合’ (*hé*) and ‘辙’ (*zhé*). ‘合’ in this context means meeting a kind of criterion, and ‘辙’ originally means ‘车辙’ or ‘rut’. This word can be understood as the rut or rules of the tones together; 合辙 means meeting the rules of using ‘平’ (*píng*; flat) and ‘仄’ (*zè*; non-flat) tones. 押韵 is combined with ‘押’ (*yā*) and ‘韵’ (*yùn*). ‘押’ in this case is the same as ‘压’, meaning ‘in control’, and ‘韵’ means ‘the rhymes’, thus 押韵 is about keeping the rhyming syllables aligned with each other. 合辙 is about the pronunciation/sound and 押韵 is about the specific forms of the rhymes themselves. Both deal with the use of sound in poetry. Thus, the singing of poetry, its tone, and its form can be understood as the most representative manifestations of the traditional rules of rhythm.

In the traditional Chinese language, characters are monosyllabic and the pronunciations of the rhymes of each specific character can be categorized into four tones: 平 (*píng*) or flat; 上 (*shàng*) or rising; 入 (*rù*) or departing; and 去 (*qù*) or entering. These four tones can be separated into two categories: 平 (the first tone; flat) and 仄 (the other three tones) (Wang 1978: 6). These two can be roughly represented as:

- 平: flat in traditional Chinese, including the first tone (‘ā, ō, ē’) and the second tone (‘á, ó, é’) in Pinyin. [6]
- 仄: rising, departing, and entering in traditional Chinese, including the third tone (‘ǎ, ǒ, ě’) and the fourth tone (‘à, ò, è’) [7] in Pinyin; the entering tone no longer exists in Mandarin.

In the composing of poetry, rhymes as well as the tones of each character are central. Those characters with the same end syllables and tones are rhymed. In the singing of a poem/lyric, the 平 (*píng*) tone is flat and rising and the 仄 (*zè*) tone is departing and entering. At the same time, the 平 tone is long and 仄 is short. This sets the basic rhythm/flow of the whole poem/lyric (Wang 1978: 6).

It is essential to know that the tones are, at the end, rhymes of a single character, not of a full word. In Chinese, one word comprises several characters. Each character has its own pronunciation and tone, which means it can be a rhyme by itself and, thus, one word can have multiple rhyming elements. This rhythmic form is different from that of Western alphabetic languages or rhyme schemes.

Moreover, it is because of the monosyllabic features of Chinese characters that the antithesis in Chinese poetry is very orderly; one character/tone matches with another. Thus, because of these symmetric features, even with only the appearance of the characters we can tell the difference of Chinese poetry from a poem in an alphabetic language (ibid.: 8).

Here is an example:

In 汉语诗律学 [*Chinese Poetic Rhythm*], Wang Li [8] makes the comparison in different ways by using rhymes of both Chinese and English poetry (1978: 8). This offers direct visual contrasts between the appearances/patterns of the two. In the example in his book (below), one can easily recognize the format of the Chinese poem visually, without understanding the

language, and its difference compared with the English one. [9]

Chinese poem and English poem: Two images comparing the symmetrical structure of a Chinese poem (on the left side) and the asymmetrical structure of an English poem (on the right side). Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3076858#tool-3085217> to compare the poems.

The strict rules on how to place the 平 (flat) words and the 仄 (non-flat) words have been applied throughout the long history of poetry writing, in order to express a fluent rhythm for the vocal presentation. Therefore, 平仄 (*píng* and *zè*) and antithesis are essential characteristics of Chinese poetic composition. Poems and lyrics [10] following these rules will be simple to ‘read’ and sound harmonious — otherwise, they will be difficult to read and lose rhythmic nuance. The rules in this context are *the rules of rhythm*.

Ye Jiaying’s *yinsong* (吟诵) [11]

In order to represent rhythmic patterns without consideration of the textual content, the sound works of this project also aim to make the rhymes sound more accurate. In the series of acoustic works in *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*, I adopted Ye Jiaying’s *yinsong* into the vocal performances of the poetry, as it appeared in her 2021 course that I took, 中华诗词 [*Chinese Poetry and Lyric*] (Ye 2021), in a tongue based on Mandarin [12] and combined with the tones of ancient Chinese.

In the previous section on ‘Traditional Chinese Rules of Rhythm’, I introduced the four basic tones for each character in classical poetic form. The tones identified as ‘entering’ (入) no longer exist in Mandarin. However, the ‘entering’ tone is crucial for building up the rhythm in classical poetry. It is something that cannot be absent in this work. Fortunately, there are at least two dialects still being widely used in current China that retain the most complex ‘平’ and ‘仄’ tones. These include the four basic tones and the slightly twisted ‘平’ and ‘仄’ tones, such as ‘阴平’ and ‘阳平’ (the *yin* and *yang* flat tone), ‘阴仄’ and ‘阳仄’ (the *yin* and *yang* non-flat tone), etc. They are the Yue dialect or Cantonese (粤语; which is widely used in Southern China) and the Wu dialect (吴语; which is widely used in Southeast China), both of them keeping the entering tone from ancient Chinese (Wang 1978: 5).

The singing of the poetry of Professor Ye is based on Mandarin and adopted tones from the Yue and Wu dialects, in order to mimic the tunes sung in ancient times. Therefore, in order to make the rhymes sound more accurate, the method of *yinsong*/singing the poems and lyrics in this project is adopted from Professor Ye.

An audio clip of Ye Jiaying’s *yinsong*: 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither* [13]

Audio description: An audio clip of Ye Jiaying’s *yinsong*: 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*. The audio is from Ye Jiaying’s online course 中华诗词 [*Chinese Poetry and Lyric*]. Click on <https://>

[1] Chinese aesthetics — it is worth noting that Chinese aesthetics is a broad idea in current China. In the context of this text, I approach the ‘Chinese aesthetics’ that evolved from the integrated relationship between words and images in pre-modern China, or ‘lyric aesthetics’.↵

[2] *Fa* (法): a character/word that has the meanings of ‘law’, ‘model’, ‘method’, and ‘pedagogy’ at the same time.↵

[3] Literati painting (文人画), also known as ‘literati freehand brushwork’ (士大夫写意画), generally refers to the paintings of the literati in pre-modern China (starting from the early Song Dynasty, 960–1127). It emphasizes the ‘feel’ of ink and brush, of the resemblance to the object, and how it underlines the spirit, and it pays attention to calligraphy, literature, and the expression of *yijing* in the painting. It had a great influence on the development of traditional aesthetic education, such as ink painting and freehand brushwork.↵

[4] Xu Wei: 徐渭, 1521–1593, a famous Chinese writer, calligrapher, painter, opera singer, and militarist of the Ming Dynasty.↵

[5] 三纲五常, three cardinal guides: ruler guides subject, father guides son husband guides wife; Five constant virtues: benevolence (humanity), righteousness, propriety, wisdom and fidelity.↵

[6] Pinyin: 拼音 (*pīn yīn*). The Chinese phonetic alphabet is the official romanization system for standard Mandarin Chinese in China.↵

[7] ‘a, o, e’ are examples; they work for all the vowel letters in Pinyin.↵

[8] Wang Li: a Chinese linguist and phonologist, the founder of Chinese modern linguistics.↵

[9] It is clear that the Western poetic tradition also has a long tradition of applying rules for structure, grammar, and rhyming in alphabetic languages, but the focus of this article as well as this research is on the traditional rhythmic rules that are applied in the Chinese hieroglyphic and phonetic language.↵

[10] It is worth noting that there are differences between poetry and lyric, but these differences are not relevant in this research project. Thus, I will put poetry and lyric together to discuss the concept of the rhythmic rules in this text.↵

[11] *Yinsong* / 吟诵 (*yín sòng*) means singing poetry without music and using the sound and tones of the characters to build rhythm, in order to form the melody.↵

[12] Mandarin, which is based on the Beijing dialect (one of the official dialects in northern China in the Qing Dynasty), is the official Chinese language in current China. It is the most widely used Chinese language in contemporary society and its pronunciation has also been widely used in contemporary poetry composing and reading.↵

[13] Details in Ye, Jiaying. 2021. 中华诗词 [Chinese poetry and lyric], <https://www.bilibili.com/video/BV1D54y1s7fA/?spm_id_from=333.788.recommend_more_video.0> [accessed 28 September 2022]↵

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Part Two: Artistic Methodologies

Methodology for Approaching the Question Why the 'rules of rhythm' Matter: Sound Practice

In order to examine the use of traditional rhythmic rules in contemporary practice, I started with the essential question of why the rules of rhythm matter. Using two sound experiments — *The Sad Zither* and *Yumeiren (Tune): Spring Flower and Autumn Moon* — the work *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* explores rhythmic form in both repeating and 'breaking' rhythmic rules; in other words, to emphasize the rhymes first, then to disassemble them completely. To probe the necessity of rules from a practice-related perspective, I first establish the formal rhythm, then dissect these rules to demonstrate that *any* interference causes the loss of articulation of a poem/lyric. In this process, my aim is not merely to demonstrate that the shattering of 'rules' causes the loss of meaning or order, but rather to explore the latent, potential, or expressive results that unravel into acoustic and visual 'layers' that both echo and dissolve. The gradual dissection of rhythmic order is key to my work. The progress of the disassembly can be experienced slowly, in the listening process, which not only matches with my hypothesis theoretically, but also resonates with my sonic aesthetics personally. In this section, I use *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm: The Sad Zither* as an example to demonstrate the art-making process.

Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm: The Sad Zither

The Sad Zither [1] (锦瑟; Liu 2021b) is a vocal performance I made in 2021, which investigates the formal repetition of rhymes within individual poetic patterns. In previous sound works in 韵 *echoed* (Liu 2021a), I examined the rhythm of a whole poem/lyric, in order to deal with the question *what are the rules of rhythm*. However, in this project, my aim was to find the reason *why* rhythmic rules matter, playing with the rhymes of entire poems or lyrics that no longer 'work'. Thus, while investigating why the rules matter, the content of the poem was disregarded and I dealt with *the rules of rhythm* solely by focusing on the particular rhymes within individual poetic patterns.

Audio description: An audio clip of the sound work 易水歌 in the previous project 韵 *echoed* (2020). 韵 *echoed* is a multimedia installation work made in 2020, it can be seemed as the previous step to *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080523> to listen to the audio clip.

Chinese poem with English translation: Pinyin version, textual content, rhythmic rules (on the left side) and English translation (on the right side) of the poem 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080525> to see the poem and its translation.

In this, I benefited from Ye Jiaying's poetry course (as mentioned in the previous section) and adopted her *yinsong* — which are closer to ancient Chinese and in which the rhymes of each phrase can be heard clearly. Then I disassembled the stanzas and focused on the rhymes themselves, specifically the end rhymes (the details of the 平 and 仄 tones are illustrated above), playing with the repetition of the end rhymes, from three end rhymes toward the end, with only the last one remaining. The idea is to constantly repeat the rhymes to the point where words lose meaning, showing that what matters is the sound of the form.

The repetition of the end rhymes is key in *The Sad Zither* and feedback from both the native and the non-Chinese-speaking audience is pivotal for testing this artistic experiment. The work begins with the entire poem, but is then broken down as the rhymes start repeating. Taking the first line of the poem, '锦瑟无端五十弦' (*jǐn-sè-wú-duān-wǔ-shí-xian*) as an example, the *yinsong* starts with the entire line. In the first repetition, the three end rhymes '五十弦' (*wǔ-shí-xian*) are repeated. Since the rhyming tones of *wǔ-shí-xian* are '仄-仄-平' (departing-rising-flat), the sonic rhythm of the vocal performance moves from 'departing' to 'rising' and to 'flat'. In the second repetition, the end rhymes *wǔ-shí-xian* are repeated twice, and the rhyme scheme 'departing-rising-flat' is then repeated twice as well. In this way, in the constant repetition of the sound performance, the rhythmic patterns of the end rhymes are also repeated in the *yinsong* process. Toward the second half of the work, with the pace speeding up, words lose their meaning and one can hear only repetitive sound/rhythmic patterns. By the end, for the end rhymes of the first line *wǔ-shí-xian*, the textual meaning is completely lost, as one can only hear 'departing-rising-flat, departing-rising-flat, departing-rising-flat, departing-rising-flat...' Both the sound design sketches and the sound editing window offer clear visual representations of the vocal repetition.

Audio description: An audio clip of audio recording of 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*. It is recorded with the artist's own voice. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080537> to listen to the recording.

Images descriptions: The sound design sketches and the sound editing window of 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*.

Top Left: The sketch illustrates the initial design of the end-rhyme repetition for 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*. Number one is the repetition of the entire poem, the longer lines stand for the poem itself, the vertical lines separate each stanza of the poem, thus, number one can be understood as the basic pattern of the poetry. The repetition of the end-rhymes starts from the number two playback and adds up in each playback incrementally. Each short line means one repetition, for instance, six short lines in number seven means in the seventh playback, the end-rhymes are repeated for six times.

Top Right: A depiction of the module of the sound track, which is based on the design shown on the left. This is a visual representation of the sonic repetition itself and it also shows how the repetition of the end-rhymes would break the sound of the end characters down. It is a slow reduplication of the end-rhymes in a visible soundtrack.

Bottom: An image of the editing window of 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*. It can be understood as the computer representation of what is shown above right, which demonstrates a much more intense visual representation of the end-rhyme repetition.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080529> to view the images.

A clip of the sound work 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither* [2]

Audio description: An audio clip of the sound work 锦瑟 *The Sad Zither*. This is a short clip exploring the repetition of the rhythmic rules that happened in the sound work. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080527> to listen to the audio.

The Sound Space

The presentation of the sound works, *Hearing Rhythm*, *Seeing Rhythm*, occurred in two different exhibitions, in Ireland and China, in 2022. One was an immersive sound space isolated from the visual works (Liu 2022a, document image of the immersive sound space), while the other was an integrated visual–sound space (Liu 2022b, document image of the sonic–visual space). The original design of the sound space was an isolated dark sonic space. In a dark and isolated room, two speakers face each other, in an *echo space*. This ‘echoing space’ creates a strong ‘conversation’ between ‘opposing’ speakers/voices (literally and figuratively), to emphasize the character and texture of the vocal performances. With the dim surrounding lights in the space, it is essentially a space that situates the listener with no distractions from the experience of listening. A bench in the center of the room allows the experience to echo in a sonic atmosphere, an immersive sonic space with no place to escape to. (The visual–sound space will be discussed in more detail in the next section.)

Methodology for Approaching the Relationship between Sound and Imagery in Chinese Aesthetics: Sonic–Visual Space

The exhibition titled *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* has two different installation designs for two different exhibition spaces. The first version involved an isolated sound space and an independent visual wall. The installation design basically focused on transforming poetry into sound waves in one's mind in this dim sound space. I created a series of paintings to transform the visualization of the sound waves into symbolic paintings outside the acoustic space. The process was more fluid, traversing across the physical space. Meanwhile, the viewers extend each part of the work to connect the two spaces. In the second version, 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] (Liu 2022b), with visual and sound components in the same isolated space, the surround speakers and open-back headphones layer the acoustic patterns together, synchronized with the movement of the brush strokes and the rhythm of the ink in the paintings. For viewers, the sound and visual components are mirroring one another; they can see/hear the connection directly in one space. Sound is in the painting, and painting is in the sound. It was an integrated sonic–visual space for the visitors to experience physically.

The initial aims for both designs were similar — to evoke the relationship between sound and imagery and, more specifically, to employ this deep connection in the context of lyric aesthetics, as discussed in the previous section, between the verbal and the pictorial world. In the process of making and presenting art, the completely different layouts also carried on this discussion of the necessity of an integrated sonic–visual physical space in this research. Further, I am attempting to mobilize the physical space of the gallery to mix the acoustics and the visuals, in order to test whether this methodology of employing this integration of sound and visuals, poetry and painting, in Chinese lyric aesthetics can be applied in contemporary creative artistic practices.

Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm (2022)

Sound and imagery in separate spaces.

Images descriptions: Documentation images of the immersive sound space in *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. The images present two different views of the dark and isolated sound space with dim blue lights.

Audio description: A clip of the sound work 虞美人 *Yumeiren: Spring Flower and Autumn Moon*.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3085237> to view the images and listen to the sound work.

Image description: A documentation image of the visual wall of *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. The video monitor on the left with the headphones attached to it is presenting the process of painting the rhythm (*Paint the Rhythm I*), while a column of paintings (*Paint the Rhythm II*) are presented on the right side from the ceiling to the floor. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3085257> to view the image.

Paint the Rhythm I and II

Paint the Rhythm I (video, 6 minutes and 44 seconds, in Liu 2022a) is an attempt to represent the singing of poetry in ‘real time’ — a form of performed visual transcription using Chinese painting as a visual representation of the rhythmic vocal patterns in the sound. The video shows the process of drawing the sound patterns while listening to the sound work. I created the Chinese landscape paintings only with the sound patterns of the rhythmic voice I heard, discarding the content of the lyric.

A television monitor to the left, with headphones, is playing the video, with a column of paintings from the ceiling to the floor to the right, presenting the paintings from *Paint the Rhythm II*. The monitor is nearly the same size as the painting, and the column of paintings represents the sequential process as a flowing vertical column.

Paint the Rhythm II (ink on rice paper, 68 x 34 cm, in Liu 2022b) continues the experiment of *I*, offering a kind of rhythmic landscape from the accumulation of painted sonic gestures. The paintings are all slightly different, as the sensation of listening and the motions of the gestures are different each time. The series of paintings is presented as a column from the ceiling to the floor, which represents the repetition of the rhythmic patterns visually, weaving the visual components into sonic patterns.

Image description: An image of *Paint the Rhythm II* (2022), brushwork on rice paper, presenting details of the rhythmic record of the sound work in *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080626> to view the image.

Installation Design for *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*, with Sketches

Images descriptions:

Top: An image of the final installation design for the visual wall in the gallery for the exhibition *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. (sketches on paper)

Middle: An image of the final installation design for the sound space in the gallery for the exhibition *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. (sketches on paper)

Bottom: An image of the initial installation design for both the sound space and the visual

wall in the gallery for the exhibition *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at BCA Gallery, Ireland. (sketches on paper)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080613> to view the images.

The Visualization of the Rhythmic Patterns

I have been professionally trained in Chinese painting, especially in freehand brushwork, as 大写意 (*dà xiě yì*) in Chinese. The ‘大’ in this word, which can be understood as ‘grand’ in this context, often expresses the grandness of personality and the profoundness of the mind. The ‘写’ can be understood as ‘writing’, which is different from the ‘painting’ or ‘drawing’ of Western painting; rather, it is based on the spirits of ‘painting and calligraphy sharing the same origin’ (in part one), which can be understood as adopting the method of calligraphy or, more specifically, cursive script [3] to write the shape, the atmosphere, and the lyricism. The ‘意’ in the word stands for the *yijing* (意境) of the art work, also an essential aspect of Chinese aesthetics. My approach to the fundamental logic of artistic practice is profoundly influenced by freehand brushwork. Like the rhythmic flow in my sound performance works, freehand brushwork is another influence on me as an artist coming from a background of Chinese traditional painting. Thus, in the progress of this research, I have worked in depth with Chinese painting in *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*, as the primary means for the visualization of the sonic rhythm as well as the visual representation of the rhythmic patterns. Later on, I also adopted the methodology and spiritual core of freehand brushwork in the creation of the ultimate integrated sonic–visual space of 听见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] (2022). As an integral part of my artistic practice, as well as this research project, freehand Chinese painting is undoubtedly deeply embedded in the experimental sonic–visual integration of art-making.

听见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] (2022)

The Sonic–Visual Space

In this exhibition (Liu 2022b), both *Hearing Rhythm* (the sound works) and *Seeing Rhythm* (the visual works) were presented in the same space. With less physical space for the sound installation, and more depth for the visual components, I designed another version of installation. Originally, the sound and the visual components were separated and woven together by the audience. In this version, the sound and visuals are connected together not only spatially, but also within the single space, to heighten the sonic and visual experience.

The video piece *Paint the Rhythm I* is projected on the back wall of the space. Two columns of paintings presenting *Paint the Rhythm II*, hanging from the ceiling on both sides of the gallery, extending to the center of the floor, are gathered with the projected video, creating a three-dimensional visual space for viewers, as well as offering more spatial depth for the visual experience. The gentle breeze across the space moves the light rice papers in the air, making

this visual ‘box’ much more vivid.

A pair of ‘invisible’ speakers play both *The Sad Zither* (锦瑟) and *Yumeiren (Tune): Spring Flower and Autumn Moon* (虞美人·春花秋月何时了), to make sure they are the first thing the audience experiences when they enter the space. Visually, the two columns of paintings also work as the visual joint between the two components, to relate the endless imagery to the overwhelming voice. Acoustically, the open-back headphones add sonic layers of the overall sound space to the visuals and vice versa, bringing the two parts of this multifaceted work closer together. This space design brings a completely different visual and sonic experience of this work.

Images descriptions:

Top: An image of the overall installation view of the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. The video work *Paint the Rhythm I* is projected on the back wall of the space. Two columns of the paintings from *Paint the Rhythm II* are presented on the two sides of the gallery space, hung from the ceiling to the floor.

Middle: A detailed installation view of the paintings from *Paint the Rhythm II* at the abcdefg Gallery, China. The image shows how the light rice paper used for the paintings can move gently off the wall, while the viewers are walking by.

Bottom: An image of the open-back headphones in the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. The image shows how one of the viewers left the headphones on the floor with the paintings from *Paint the Rhythm II* in the gallery space.

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3085275> to view the images.

Installation Design for 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*], with Sketches

Images description:

Top: An image of the overall space design for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. (sketches on paper)

Bottom: An image of the detailed space design for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. (with sketches on the paper)

Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080220#tool-3080621> to view the images.

[1] *The Sad Zither*, 2021, Sound Installation, 11min 30sec. It is based on the poem by Li Shangyin (李商隐, Tang Dynasty, a.d.813-858). It is worth noting that as in most of my sound works, I used my own voice in the two sound performance pieces and I only did very basic/minimum post editing on the voice itself. ↩

[2] It is worth noting that in all of the sound pieces in this project, I use very limited post-production 'effects' other than layering sound tracks. I do not change the frequencies or timing of any sound recordings or add post-effects to the sound tracks. I simply layer the sounds to experiment with the rhythmic flows. In the case of the two sound experiments in *Hearing Rhythm*, *Seeing Rhythm*, I repeat and break the rhymes down to experiment with the ideas mentioned in both sections, and the working processes are presented with illustrative sketches as well. The 'music-like' rhythmic flows of the audio tracks do not come from post-production; they come from the rhythmic rules and patterns inside the Chinese language, which, in turn, further supports the thesis of this particular research. ↩

[3] Cursive script (草书), a style of calligraphy. ↩

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Video description: Video documentation of the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. This video offers a visual and sonic tour of the multimedia space of the exhibition. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080232#tool-3082676> to watch the video.

Results and Outcomes

When reflecting on this project, it is also necessary to be aware of what was happening in the field of sound art in the West. From the twentieth century to the present, we have witnessed many outstanding Western sound artists, as well as many excellent voice-, language-, and rhythm-related sound works, from Samuel Beckett's *Krapp's Last Tape* (1958) to Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969) to Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller's *Forty Part Motet* (2001) and to Meredith Monk's *Dancing Voice* (2017). Each explores the boundaries of voice, the auditory perception of rhythm, and the deep relationships between sound and space.

Let us take Cardiff and Miller's *Forty Part Motet* (2001) as an example, which is a sound installation consisting of forty speakers defining a space inhabited by a choral work by English Renaissance composer Thomas Tallis, *Spem in Alium* (1573), itself written for 40 voices. Arranged in an oval and in sound clusters, one can move between the speakers/voices or remain still amid the intersecting harmonies, resonances, individual voices, and distinct textual lines. It is indeed a 'sonic choreography' of the space. Indeed, Cardiff and Miller deal with the acoustic atmosphere of the sonic space they create. What I am doing in this project definitely shares some similarities, but the working process and the ultimate goal are very different. My goal is to create a kind of visual representation of rhythmic patterns, and the visualization of sonic rhythm itself is achieved through the contemporary recreation of traditional visual artistic forms. Meanwhile, as a vocal performance investigating the formal repetition of rhymes within individual poetic patterns, with a constant repetition of rhymes and an almost unrecognizable voice in the later stages of the piece, *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm: The Sad Zither* is indeed influenced by Alvin Lucier's *I Am Sitting in a Room* (1969). Yet, in this project, the context of the research is different, as is the purpose of it. In the research, I experiment with traditional Chinese rhythmic rules, explore their visualization possibilities, and then investigate the relationship between sound and visuals through an integrated sonic-visual space, in order to explore the feasibility of establishing a contemporary Chinese art with my artistic methodologies.

This ultimate goal is shared by many other Chinese artists as well. An artist-designer team from Zhejiang University created an award-winning multi-sensory visualization project, 典章和

韵 林壑蔚然: *The Repetition Structure of the Book of Songs and the Visualization of Phonic Rhythm*, an artistic visualization project that works with the rhythmic *repetition structure* (复沓结构) of traditional Chinese poetry in the *Book of Songs*. [1] The project visualizes the repetitive rhythms of the songs and poems in the book and creates music based on the rhythmic notes with traditional Chinese instruments, investigating the intricate relationship between sound and imagery, as well as the profound relationship between tradition and the contemporary. Li Jianhong is a contemporary Chinese musician who works deeply with the methodology of traditional artistic aesthetics. His environmental sound improvisational work *Twelve Moods* (十二境) presents the difference between this attempt and contemporary Western music and sound-making, as well as its internal and profound connections with ancient acoustic and musical expressions. Therefore, the sound, imagery, and multi-sensory, multimedia, and interactive artistic practices of contemporary Chinese artists, including myself, can be understood as various attempts to reclaim the tradition of pre-modern Chinese art and culture. It is precisely these attempts that are building, bit by bit, a Chinese contemporary art that comes from indigenous Chinese culture itself.

For both exhibitions, I received feedback from a questionnaire I handed out. The feedback offered the experience of the work from the audience's view point. (A detailed examination of the questionnaire results is given in the Appendix.) This work, *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*, has been exhibited in both China and Ireland. With both the Chinese audience, the native speakers, who understood the language and grew up with these poems/lyrics, and with the Irish/international audience (the non-Chinese speakers), who did not understand the language or the original poems, the two exhibitions tested theories of reclaiming traditional culture via the use of the rules of rhythm as principles and patterns solely in sound (disregarding the specific content), as well as the relationship between sound and visuals within the context of Chinese lyric aesthetics, combined with methodologies (including sound installation works) dealing with the repetitions and breakdowns of verbal rhymes performed as visual transcriptions of the singing process joined with Chinese painting.

With the feedback from the questionnaire, I learned that both native Chinese speakers and non-Chinese speakers managed to focus on the sound and recognize the breakdown of rhythm, regardless of the content. For the non-Chinese-speaking viewers, the rhythm was very clearly identified in the listening process and the connection between the sound space and the visual wall was widely understood. The Chinese audience brought a fascinating and imaginative 'reading' of a sonic-visual world related to tradition and history and even expressed a kind of 'mind-roaming' inside Chinese painting. The different designs of the sound and visual spaces caused varied reactions from the audience. The space that separated the visual and sound components offered a much more dissociated sensorial experience, urging viewers to merge two forms of sensory experience. Meanwhile, the integrated sonic-visual space was a more immersive physical space, combined with voice and imagery, which offered the visitors an integrated sensorial experience. In other words, the two contemporary artistic experiments dealing with the relationship between sound and imagery demonstrated that, in accordance with my attempt in this project, the integrated sonic-visual art form can offer a stronger presentation in investigating the rules of rhythm in the specific context of the Chinese aesthetic experience.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that in the historical time frame, Eastern rhythmic rules

developed in parallel with Western poetic and musical rhythmic schemes and forms of notation. Eastern forms are distinct compared to Western systems and are the sole theoretical foundation of this research. Yet, I also need to clarify that even though the rules of rhythm have evolved over thousands of years of China's long history, the historical and theoretical contexts of this project have many layers, since it stands as an artistic practice-based project and is not about the research, *per se*. Rather, it is about assimilating rules and expanding the research to create an experimental framework for the practice. This project necessitates a kind of contextualization of theory and historical facts, but it is a practice I use as a methodology for reclaiming and visualizing traditional rhythmic rules. I work within and also break the layers of the rules or regulations I found in my historical and theoretical research in order to gain a deeper and more complete understanding of pre-modern Chinese culture, and in this way I reimagine contemporary Chinese art in the context of Chinese aesthetics.

At the same time, this work also reaches out to younger audiences outside Chinese cultural circles. Though I use Chinese history and the Chinese language as a case study, it relates to other cultures struggling with cultural reclamation as well. It considers a specific kind of loss of indigenous history, culture, and language, one that has occurred in Ireland, Africa, South America, and all cultures surviving forms of linguistic colonialism. I think this is what I can offer as an artist in this time of dramatic reevaluation of cultural identity.

[1] *The Book of Songs* (诗经), the earliest general collection of poetry in ancient China, collects 311 poems from the beginning of the Western Zhou Dynasty to the middle of the Spring and Autumn Period (eleventh to sixth centuries BC). The rhythmic patterns from the poems and lyrics in this book profoundly influenced later poets. ↩

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Appendix

Feedback from Two Exhibitions (Questionnaire)

Aim

With the questionnaire, my aim was to find out *why the rules of rhythm matter* through the sound works, by playing with the repetition and breakdown of rhythmic patterns for both native Chinese speakers and non-Chinese speakers, as well as finding out how to represent the investigation into the relationship between sound and the visual in different layouts.

The three questions were posed to ascertain how and whether the intentions of the work compared with the responses from the audience. First, whether the rhythmic 'flow' was experienced by the viewers; second, what thoughts occurred as one experienced both the voice and images; and third, what were the physical reactions? The analyses in this section are based on the various responses I received.

Image description: An image of the questionnaire for the exhibition *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082731> to view the questionnaire.

Example One: *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* (Exhibition in Ireland, 2022)

Sound and visuals in separate spaces

Selected examples:

Images descriptions: Images of three selected examples of the feedback for the exhibition *Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm* at the BCA Gallery, Ireland. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082734> to view the examples.

1. As in the image.

2. *Call across the void. Glitch. Airplane lighting. Mountains right and meeting left. Sinusoid.*

3. *A mother calling to a child: restrained concern. Amidst disorder.*

1. *I liked the glitch in the overlap, especially evident in the TV audio accompanying the paintings. The rhythm reveals itself more clearly the more time I spend with it.*

2. *The halting rhythm and pauses reminded me of when I'm anxious and struggling to speak — especially when trying to express a boundary or uncomfortable topic — I tend to stutter and repeat myself.*

3. *A bit of discomfort at first, tenseness, but then I feel into the repetition and found it calming — especially in the blue room installation. I felt shivers in my chest and shoulders and lower back.*

1. *The words of each speaker finish what seemed to be a thought from the other, in a broken rhythmic fashion. When it sped up toward the end, and the voices restarted, it felt very hypnotic. The repetitive drawings also had a relaxing, meditative quality, especially with the sound accompanying it.*

2. *I wondered what they were saying, and if it had any meaning at all. I felt anxious when the speaking sped up, and shock from the beeping. Meditation during the voices, letting my mind relax and listen without thinking.*

3. *Tingling, as I didn't move for a while, and eventually I no longer felt the bench I was sitting on. I finished with the beeping noise. It was very impactful. This work is very strong and evokes emotions from the listener.*

Analysis of the responses:

In the feedback, almost all the listeners responded to the repeating and broken rhymes and rhythm, which were revealed more clearly as one spent more time in the space. The wave-like circular flow of the sound at the beginning and the disorder and tension in the voices at the end gave the audience the most vivid impressions. The back-and-forth conversation between the opposing speakers, the syncopation of sound, as well as the repetition of the voices echoing one another also worked for many listeners. The glitches and pauses in the ruptured sound caused emotional, even physical, reactions in the audience, some of them being intense.

In another way, the rhythm revealed itself fully in the sonic patterns, with no more struggle to grasp the content. At the same time, the broken rhymes also caused discomfort for many during the listening process, which clearly demonstrated *why the rules of rhythm matter*. As an experimental sound work exploring the repetition and breaking down of different components in sound, it brought up very strong physical and emotional experiences (as was hoped for). This suggests that this sonic experiment worked from the perspective of the non-Chinese-speaking viewers.

Example Two: 听见·韵 [Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm] (Exhibition in Hangzhou, 2022)

The sonic–visual space

Image description: An image of the questionnaire for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3086776> to view the questionnaire.

Translation: (In the Chinese version, I added one more question (no. 2) for native speakers.)

1. How did you experience rhythm in the work?
 - a. I hear the rhythm and I can feel the beauty of it.
 - b. The rhythm has been broken down a bit, I can hardly feel the beauty of it.
 - c. The rhythm has been completely broken down, and it turned into noise by the end.
2. While you were listening to the work, which part got more of your attention?
 - a. The content of the poem/lyric.
 - b. The sound itself.
 - c. Both.
3. What thoughts came to mind when you were experiencing the work?
4. What feeling did you have in your body when you were experiencing the work?

Selected examples:

Images descriptions: Images of three selected examples of the feedback for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082741> to view the examples.

1. *How did you experience rhythm in the work? I hear the rhythm and I can feel the beauty of it.*
 2. *While you were listening to the work, which part got more of your attention? Both.*
 3. *What thoughts came to mind when you were experiencing the work? From a distant ancient time to the complex contemporary time, traversing history.*
 4. *What feeling did you have in your body when you were experiencing the work? Too many things in my ears, wanted to escape.*
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1. *How did you experience rhythm in the work? I hear the rhythm and I can feel the beauty of it.*
 2. *While you were listening to the work, which part got more of your attention? The sound itself.*
 3. *What thoughts came to mind when you were experiencing the work? Traversing from an ancient traditional school to the modern metropolis.*
 4. *What feeling did you have in your body when you were experiencing the work? The noise by the end made my body uncomfortable.*
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1. *How did you experience rhythm in the work? I hear the rhythm and I can feel the beauty of it.*

2. While you were listening to the work, which part got more of your attention? The content of the poem/lyric.
3. What thoughts came to mind when you were experiencing the work? The sound is very theatrical, feels like being surrounded by layers and layers of mountains.
4. What feeling did you have in your body when you were experiencing the work? My breath became rapid with the noise, my ears felt uncomfortable.

Analysis of the Responses:

In question 1, most viewers chose the first answer ('I hear the rhythm and I can feel the beauty of it'), which was a bit far from my expectations, because during some of the conversations I had in the exhibition, the viewers had very strong reactions when the rhythm started to break down. However, after many tours, I started to understand why people made this choice. For most Chinese, the rhythmic patterns of this poem/lyric were in their mind naturally. Even though the sound had been broken down in the listening process, it nonetheless continued in the right rhythm in the audience's mind, thus its beauty could still be heard vividly.

Image description: An image showing an analysis of the responses for question 1 for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082746> to view the analysis.

How did you experience rhythm in the work?

- a. I hear the rhythm and I can feel the beauty of it. (88.89%)
- b. The rhythm has been broken down a bit; I can hardly feel the beauty of it. (8.89%)
- c. The rhythm has been completely broken down, and it turned into noise by the end. (2.22%)

The second question was designed for native speakers, to find out if they could focus on the sound, even though they knew the original content well. More than 90% of the audience focused on the sound or both the sound and the content, which demonstrated my point that when a sound work is completely focused on the sound and rhythm, the native speakers can put their attention on the sound, despite knowing the content and words very well. This was an essential point I needed to test out with the local audience. This was a great opportunity to prove that this methodology I have been adopting was right for this research.

Image description: An image showing an analysis of the responses for question 2 for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082748> to view the analysis.

While you were listening to the work, which part got more of your attention?

- a. The content of the poem/lyric. (6.67%)
- b. The sound itself. (40%)

In question 3, with the illustration below, we can see that the top two words were mentioned over ten times — 韵律 (rhythm) and 声音 (sound). 抑扬顿挫 (an idiom, meaning cadence) was mentioned nine times. The following words were mentioned seven times: 身处 (being in...), 声韵 (sound and rhythm), 山水 (landscape painting), 历史 (history), and 穿越 (traversing); those mentioned six times were 早读 (morning reading lesson), 层峦叠嶂 (an idiom, meaning layer upon layer of mountains), and 戏剧性 (dramatic); and those mentioned five times were 空旷 (spacious) and 之美 (the beauty of...).

Image description: A map of the words most often mentioned in the feedback for question 3 for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082750> to view the word map.

This shows that many of the audience heard the sound and rhythm, felt the cadence of the sound work brought to them, and, with these feelings, saw themselves traversing through mountains, space, and time. It was interesting to see all these answers with their beautiful, even poetic, words and varied imaginings. The sonic–visual space definitely helped with the process of mental visualization (compared to the first version), and the vivid images beyond the sonic space touched me deeply. With these answers, the viewers brought me into an otherworldly sphere, which pushed me to think even more about the relationship between sound and vision as a kind of dream. Eventually, with the conversations I had in the gallery space, as well as the research I conducted over the summer, I came across this traditional concept of Chinese lyric aesthetics and started to work with an integrated sonic–visual art form in the next stage of my project.

Image description: An image showing detailed answers and translations of question 3 for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082751> to view the answers.

In question 4, the top word in the center of the chart below, which was mentioned seven times, was 呼吸急促 (polypnea). The next top words were mentioned six times, being 耳朵不舒服 (feeling uncomfortable in the ears) and 抓耳朵 (capturing the attention of the ear). The words mentioned five times were 共鸣 (resonance), 噪音 (noise), and 起鸡皮疙瘩 (goosebumps), and those mentioned four times were 窒息 (suffocating), 信息爆炸 (information explosion), and 烦躁 (set one's nerves on edge).

Image description: A map of the words most often mentioned in the feedback for question 4 for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082754> to

view the word map.

With the most mentioned word 呼吸急促 (polypnea), it was very interesting that the listening process in a visually ‘open’ space (compared to the earlier version) could still affect the breathing of many viewers. The next two words 耳朵不舒服 (feeling uncomfortable in the ears) and 抓耳朵 (capturing the attention of the ear) were contrary, yet some of the answers brought them together. For example, ‘Want to escape when it turns into noise, but the sound catches my ear, I want to keep listening’. These responses opened my mind as well. The words mentioned five and four times also show that most of the viewers had negative, even dramatic, physical reactions toward the broken down rhythm/noises. In the conversations I had with the visitors, I learned that these physical reactions were mostly coming from an ‘emotional’ friction for Chinese natives who grew up with these beautiful poetries.

Image description: An image showing detailed answers and translations of question 4 for the exhibition 听·见·韵 [*Hearing Rhythm, Seeing Rhythm*] at the abcdefg Gallery, China. Click on <https://www.researchcatalogue.net/view/1900487/3080248#tool-3082755> to view the answers.

Conclusion

With the detailed analyses of the questionnaire for this exhibition, I learned that for native speakers who understood the rhythmic rules very well, they still felt the rhythm and the beauty. At the same time, the sound works managed to make the native speakers focus on the acoustic layers, despite the presence of the content, demonstrating that sonic patterns can be presented without the interruption of the textual context.

Meanwhile, compared to the initial exhibition, the audience brought compelling insights related to tradition and history and even imagined mind-roaming inside Chinese paintings themselves. This was because, first, the space offered them a place to roam around physically, and second, the traditional knowledge and images deeply embedded in viewers’ minds transformed the space into an otherworldly spiritual space for some. The responses enriched the sonic space itself, as well as opened my mind up as the artist of this work.

Most importantly, the feedback opened my mind; I have started to think about the relationship between sound and imagery as an integrated art form since this exhibition, which brought me to the other essential traditional concepts of Chinese lyric aesthetics and the visual–sonic space, and I have started to imagine the next phase of this ongoing project.

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