CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 65. No. 3, 2025

RETRACTED: Poetic Prosody and Musical Rhythm in Chinese Art Song: A Comparative Study of Text–Music Alignment

Beibei Wang

Hunan Normal University, Changsha, China (Ph.D. Candidate)

Guangxi Normal University, Guilin, China (Lecturer)

Email: libeikewang@outook.com

Retraction Note:

This article has been retracted by the publisher due to serious ethical violations by the author.

Following acceptance and publication, the author initiated a false financial dispute and reversed the article processing charge (APC) after the work had been duly published. This deliberate act of misrepresentation constitutes academic misconduct and a breach of author integrity. Such behavior aligns with patterns commonly associated with predatory or paper-mill activity.

The journal considers this a clear case of unethical manipulation of the publication process. As a result, the article has been formally retracted and the author's future submissions to *Cineforum* will not be considered.

Reason for Retraction: Author's deliberate misrepresentation and breach of ethical and financial integrity.

Date of Retraction: Oct 23rd, 2025

Publisher: *Cineforum Journal*

CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 65. No. 3, 2025

Abstract

This article examines how poetic rhythm interacts with musical rhythm in Chinese art song, and how this differs from the stress-based logic of the German Lied. Building on Malin's (2010) study of rhythm and meter in nineteenth-century Lied, I suggest that Mandarin—a tonal, syllable-timed language—offers composers unusual freedom. Because its accents arise not from predictable alternations of strong and weak syllables but from shifting patterns of tone, duration, and grouping, it invites very different solutions to the problem of setting poetry to music.

Two case studies illustrate this flexibility. In Qing Zhu's *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu* (1927), each syllable is treated as a beat, producing an almost mechanistic regularity that suddenly breaks at the end, giving the final line its rhetorical weight. Ying Shangneng's *Diào Wúsōng* (1930s), by contrast, bends rhythm away from prosody in order to intensify grief: syllables are shortened, displaced, or weakened so that the music itself becomes the carrier of emotion.

Rather than viewing Chinese art song as a derivative of the Lied, these examples suggest that it follows its own logic. Rhythm may either mirror the structure of the verse or magnify its meaning, and often does both. What might look like irregularity from a Western perspective is, in fact, a resource: the freedom of Mandarin prosody. By foregrounding this freedom, the study contributes to cross-cultural theories of text–music alignment and points toward a broader understanding of how language shapes musical imagination. In doing so, it reframes Chinese art song not as derivative but as a vital site for cross-cultural theorization.

Funding Information:
This research is supported by the *Guangxi Higher Education Young and Middle-aged Teacher Research Basic Ability Promotion Project* (Project No. 2021KY0044), entitled [A Study on the Relationship between Poetic Prosody and Musical Rhythm in Chinese Classical Poetry Songs].

1. Introduction

The relationship between poetic rhythm and musical rhythm has long been a central concern in song composition. In the German Lied tradition, the stress-based structure of language exerts a strong influence on musical rhythm: the alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables supplies a metrical framework that guides phrasing and accentuation. As Malin observes in *Songs in Motion: Rhythm and Meter in the German Lied* (Oxford University Press, 2010), nineteenth-century Lied is deeply conditioned by the prosody of a stress-timed language, such that poetic meter becomes a structural determinant for musical design.

Chinese art song, rooted in Mandarin, operates under very different linguistic conditions. Instead of periodic alternation of stress, Mandarin prosody is defined by lexical tone, variable syllable length, and flexible grouping. These features afford composers greater latitude in aligning text with music, often producing a tension between semantic clarity and prosodic aesthetics.

This study focuses on two representative works: Ying Shangneng's *Diào Wúsōng* (*Dirge for Wusong*) and Qing Zhu's *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu* (*I Live by the Head of the Yangtze*). Both composers belonged to the earliest generation of professionally trained Chinese musicians in the 1930s. They consciously borrowed from the German–Austrian Romantic Lied tradition, fusing its compositional techniques with classical Chinese poetry. Their songs have not only remained among the most frequently performed pieces in the modern repertoire but also exerted a lasting influence on subsequent art song settings of Chinese verse. This combination of historical significance, stylistic hybridity, and enduring performance value makes them exemplary case studies for understanding the intersection of Mandarin prosody and musical rhythm.

Through these case studies, I propose that Chinese art song tends to follow two complementary pathways: rhythm as an expressive magnification of meaning, and rhythm as an amplification of linguistic form. Set against the stress-timed baseline of Lied, these strategies underscore how language type shapes compositional logic and invite us to rethink theories of text–music interaction beyond Eurocentric assumptions.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Rhythm, meter, and three accent types

From a musical perspective, spoken rhythm is shaped by two main dimensions: duration and prominence. In song, these yield three interacting accent types: metrical accent (beat-based stress), durational accent (length-based salience, often perceived as agogic weight), and tonal accent (salience derived from pitch contour or tone).

In stress-timed languages, poetic rhythm is organized by the number and type of feet—binary and ternary groupings of stressed and unstressed syllables—that map readily onto duple or triple musical meters. As Malin demonstrates for the Lied, poetic meter often determines musical rhythm, though composers may adjust details for expressive or formal reasons.

By contrast, Mandarin and classical Chinese verse lack stable periodic alternations of stress. Accents certainly occur, but they are non-periodic, context-dependent, and influenced by tone

and duration. Moreover, Mandarin exhibits flexible syllabic grouping—what some musicologist have called "looseness" of prosodic coupling (Liu, 1982). Consequently, the three accentual forces often compete. Composers must negotiate among them, deciding whether to prioritize semantic salience (durational), tonal contour, or musical meter.

2.2 Stress-timed poetry and Lied as comparative frame

In the Lied, stress-timed verse provides a predictable scansion. Accented syllables usually coincide with strong beats; unaccented syllables occupy weaker positions. Musical meter, more periodic than speech, reinforces and transforms poetic accentuation. Even when misalignment occurs—as in Schumann's deliberate declamatory distortions—it serves expressive purposes within the same underlying framework where verbal stress predominates (Kreb, 1999). This comparative model clarifies the distinct challenges facing composers of Mandarin art song.

2.3 Example: Schubert, *Der Lindenbaum* (*Winterreise*, No. 5)

As Malin (2010, pp. 10–11) observes, Müller's poem scans as anapestic trimeter. The strongest stresses fall on the first and third feet of lines 1 and 3, with the middle foot relatively weaker; lines 2 and 4 present more balanced accents. Schubert preserves this hierarchy in two ways:

- Metrical and durational alignment. In line 1, the primary beats and lengthened notes fall on *Brún-* and *Tó-*, reinforcing the strongest stresses; the weaker *vor* lies off the tactus.
- Pitch-accent compensation. In line 2, a descending triplet figure places emphasis on the middle foot, partly compensating for its metrically weak position.

This design illustrates Lied craft: effective settings distribute metrical, durational, and pitch accents to render poetic scansion intelligible while allowing musical nuance. Even when "prosodic dissonance" appears, the premise remains that verbal stress strongly conditions musical rhythm.

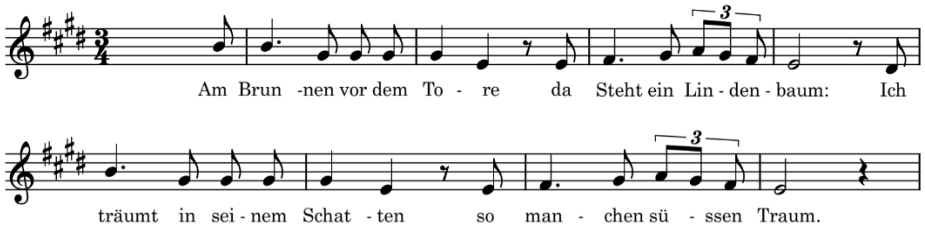
Am Brúnnen vòr dem Tóre,

Da stéht ein Líndenbáum:

Ich träumt'in sèinem Schátten

So mánchen sűssen Tráum.

Figure 1. Schubert, *Der Lindenbaum, Winterreise* No. 5, vocal line, mm. 9–16. Example discussed in Malin, Y. (2010). *Songs in motion: Rhythm and meter in the German Lied* (pp. 10–11). New York: Oxford University Press.



2.4 Chinese Phonological Perspectives on Rhythm

While Western theories of rhythm often reduce the concept to patterns of stress, Chinese phonologists and poetics scholars have consistently emphasized the multi-dimensionality of rhythmic construction. Wang Li, in his classic essay *The Tradition of Regulated Verse and the Problem of Modern Regulated Verse* (1959), argued that of the four phonetic elements of speech—timbre, pitch, intensity, and duration—three (pitch, intensity, and duration) can independently or jointly constitute rhythm. This already points to a framework in which rhythm is not bound to stress alone, but to the interaction of several parameters working together.

The question of whether Mandarin exhibits regular stress alternation has long remained unsettled. As Wang Hongjun has observed, native speakers themselves disagree on whether a prosodic foot is front-stressed or back-stressed. Stress therefore tends to surface as emphatic or focus stress, arising at the level of discourse rather than as a predictable periodic alternation (Ke, 2018). Zhao Yuanren captured this quality by describing Mandarin as having a "freedom of rhythm," while Lu Bingfu and Wang Xiaodun (1982) spoke of the "arbitrariness of prosodic grouping." In other words, in Western languages stress determines the closeness of syllables, but in Mandarin the relative looseness or tightness of grouping determines whether a syllable is felt as strong or weak (Ke, 2018).

This linguistic contrast has profound musical consequences. Ethnomusicologists such as Shen (2019) and Li & Zhao (2021) have argued that the regular alternation of strong and weak syllables in Western languages underpins the entire edifice of metricity in Western music. By contrast, Mandarin rhythm often arises from the conflict and negotiation between durational accents (long vs. short syllables) and tonal accents (high vs. low, leap vs. step). As Yang (1983) notes, these tonal and durational forces frequently override any sense of metrical placement, producing rhythms that are at once irregular and expressive.

Taken together, these perspectives explicitly resist reducing rhythm to stress alone. Instead,

they highlight that Chinese rhythm emerges through the interplay of pitch contour, loudness, and temporal length, with grouping and emphasis adding further nuance. Such a framework helps explain why Mandarin prosody does not impose a fixed alternation of strong and weak beats: rhythm is not derived from stress in isolation, but from the cooperation—or sometimes the collision—of tone, duration, and force. This perspective grounds the analysis of Chinese art song within a distinct phonological and poetic tradition, one that not only complements but also challenges Eurocentric models of prosody.

3. Case Studies

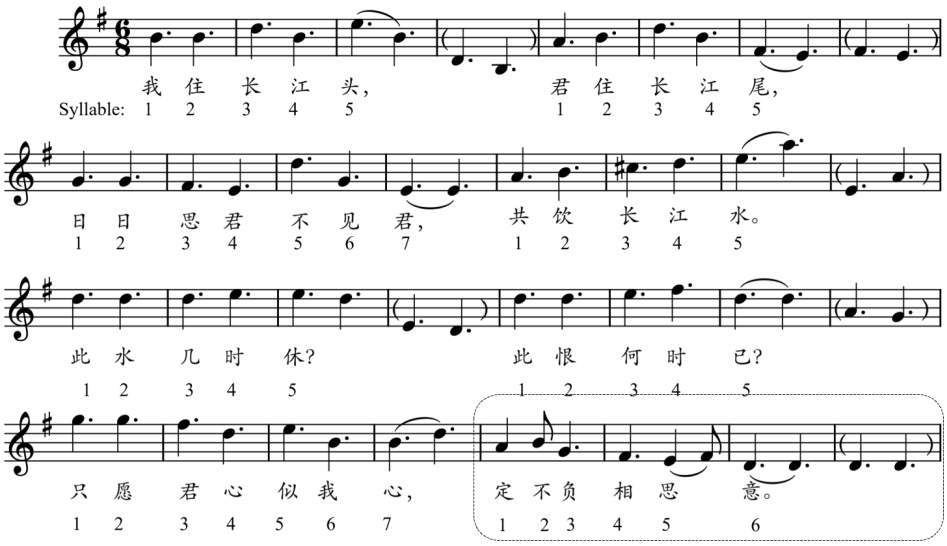
3.1 Qing Zhu, *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu*: Prosodic Freedom and "Every-Syllable Stress"

Qing Zhu, one of the first generation of Chinese composers formally trained in Western compositional techniques, wrote *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu* in 1927. The piece is among the earliest attempts to combine German–Austrian art song methods with Chinese classical poetry, and it remains one of the most frequently performed Chinese art songs today. His setting of Li Zhiyi's five-character verse demonstrates how Mandarin rhythm can operate without periodic stress. Each poetic line—*wǒ zhù* | *cháng jiāng* | *tóu* (我住丨长江丨头), *jūn zhù* | *cháng jiāng* | *wěi* (君住丨长江丨尾)—is cast in a pattern resembling compound 3/8: five syllables span six beats, with the final syllable extended for two. The effect is twofold. First, the near-isosyllabic pacing creates the perception of every-syllable stress, in marked contrast with the alternating stress of German poetry. Second, the consistent lengthening of final syllables recalls Lied practice, though achieved here by duration alone rather than stress hierarchy.

This framework re peats across the first seven lines, building an almost mechanical sense of regularity. The final line—*dìng* | *bú fù* | *xiāng sī jìng* (定丨不负丨相思竟)—breaks the pattern: rhythm accelerates, grouping shifts, and accents redistribute. The disruption dramatizes the poem's rhetorical turn, suggesting that Mandarin prosody enables closure not by stress but by strategic deviation from established grouping. The song thus exemplifies a form-driven strategy, magnifying the internal rhythm of the text.

Figure 2. Qing Zhu, *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu* (text by Li Zhiyi), vocal line, mm. 1–5, showing the alignment of syllables and musical rhythm.

CINEFORUM
ISSN: 0009-7039
Vol. 65. No. 3, 2025

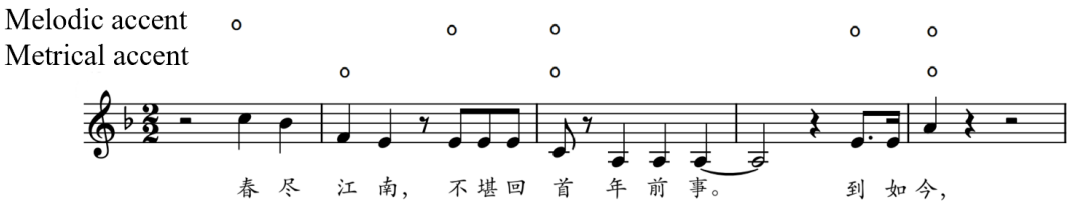


3.2 Ying Shangneng, *Diào Wúsōng*: Content-Driven Rhythmic Magnification

Ying Shangneng, a pioneering Chinese art song composer and one of the earliest trained bel canto singers, was also an influential theorist. In 1933, he explicitly argued that song composition should respect the natural alignment of linguistic tone and rhythm. Yet in his *Diào Wúsōng* (*Dirge for Wusong*), expression takes precedence over prosodic fidelity. The work thus provides a striking example of rhythm reshaped for emotional force rather than linguistic regularity.

In mm. 11–18, the text *chūn jìn jiāng nán* | *bù kān huí shǒu* | *nián qián shì* (春尽江南丨不堪回首丨年前事) is semantically grouped as 2+2, 2+2, and 2+1. Musically, Ying modifies duration and accent: "不堪" (*bù kān*) enters with shortened values, intensifying negation; the stress shifts to "首" (*shǒu*), creating expectancy. Most strikingly, "事" (*shì*) is placed on a metrically and melodically weak position, producing an audible collapse rather than closure. Elsewhere, in *yī cùn shān hé, yī cùn shāng xīn dì* (一寸山河，一寸伤心地), symmetry is maintained while accents fall emphatically on "山/伤," heightening affect.

Figure 3. Ying Shangneng, *Diào Wúsōng* (text by Wei Hanzhang), vocal line, mm. 11–18, illustrating prosodic grouping and rhythmic amplification.



Song rhythm 春 尽|江 南，0 不堪回|首 0 年 前 事| - - -
Poetic rhythm 春 尽|江 南，不 堪|回 首 | 年 前 |事- - -

Here rhythm does not simply reflect prosody; it magnifies semantic force by bending musical time. This illustrates a content-driven strategy, where rhythm is reshaped in order to articulate emotion more vividly than text alone can achieve.

4. Discussion

When placed side by side, these two songs show just how differently composers can answer the same question: how can poetry and music walk together in Mandarin? The contrast is sharp, but not contradictory. Each composer is negotiating with the same linguistic facts—the absence of periodic stress, the presence of tone and duration—yet each finds his own way through. Qing Zhu appears almost captivated by the inherent rhythm of the language itself. His setting of *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu* effectively turns each syllable into a beat, creating a sense of "every-syllable stress." The mechanical regularity of the first seven lines makes the final disruption all the more dramatic, suggesting that Mandarin prosody enables meaning through strategic deviation.

Ying Shangneng, by contrast, treats rhythm as a tool for emotional amplification. His *Diào Wúsōng* compresses, displaces, and weakens syllables not to disregard the poem but to intensify its affective impact. The weakened cadence on "事" produces a sonic collapse, dramatizing grief. Here rhythm functions less as reflection than as interpretation.

Together, the two strategies—form-driven amplification and content-driven magnification—underscore that Mandarin, lacking periodic stress, does not dictate one compositional solution. Instead, it compels the composer to choose which accentual dimension to privilege—metrical, durational, or tonal. Perhaps this freedom—this refusal of the language to dictate a single path—is what most defines rhythm in Chinese art song. It is less a problem to be solved than an opportunity to be explored.

5. Conclusion

The two case studies explored here—Qing Zhu's *Wǒ zhù Chángjiāng Tóu* and Ying Shangneng's *Diào Wúsōng*—do not yield a single rule, but they do open a field of possibilities. Qing Zhu mirrors the prosody of the poem almost to the point of rigidity, only to let the final rupture speak with unusual force. Ying Shangneng, by contrast, twists and bends rhythm until it carries an emotional weight the words alone cannot bear.

Taken together, these strategies remind us that Chinese art song is not a failed imitation of the Lied, but something shaped by the peculiarities—and possibilities—of Mandarin prosody. Where the Lied relies on stress-timed verse, Chinese song relies on a different set of levers: tone, duration, grouping. Sometimes rhythm reflects the structure of the text; sometimes it amplifies meaning. Very often it does both.

The larger point is that what looks like instability from a Western perspective is in fact a creative resource. The freedom of Mandarin prosody does not limit the composer; it gives them choices. And those choices, whether toward form or toward content, have left a lasting mark on the repertoire of Chinese art song and continue to shape how poetry and music "walk together" today.

Reference

柯航. (2018). *韵律和语法* [Prosody and grammar]. 上海: 学林出版社.

李西安, & 赵冬梅. (2021). *汉族语言与汉族旋律研究* [Research on Han Chinese language and melody]. 北京: 现代出版社.

刘尧民. (1982). *词与音乐* [Poetry and music]. 昆明: 云南人民出版社.

陆丙甫, & 王小盾. (1982). 现代诗歌声律中的声调问题——新诗宜用去声、非去声的对立来取代平、仄的对立 [The issue of tonal patterns in modern poetry: Replacing the level/oblique distinction with falling vs. non-falling tones]. *天津师大学报* [Journal of Tianjin Normal University], (4), 45–53.

Malin, Y. (2010). *Songs in motion: Rhythm and meter in the German Lied*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Lawrence, K. (1984). *Music and poetry: The nineteenth century and after*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

沈恰. (2019). *音腔论* [Theory of tone and timbre]. 上海: 上海音乐出版社.

王力. (1959). 中国格律诗的传统和现代格律诗的问题 [The tradition of regulated verse and the problem of modern regulated verse]. *文学评论* [Literary Review], (3), 1–12.

应尚能. (1981). *以字行腔* [Setting text by syllables]. 北京: 人民音乐出版社.

杨荫浏. (1983). *语言与音乐* [Language and music]. 北京: 人民音乐出版社.

Youens, S. (1986). Poetic rhythm and musical metre in Schubert's *Winterreise*. *Music and Letters, 67*(3), 28–40. https://doi.org/10.1093/ml/67.3.28

于会泳. (2008). *腔词关系研究* [Research on the relationship between melody and text]. 北京: 中央音乐学院出版社.