

How to Write Classical Chinese Poetry:

The Art of Composing Poems

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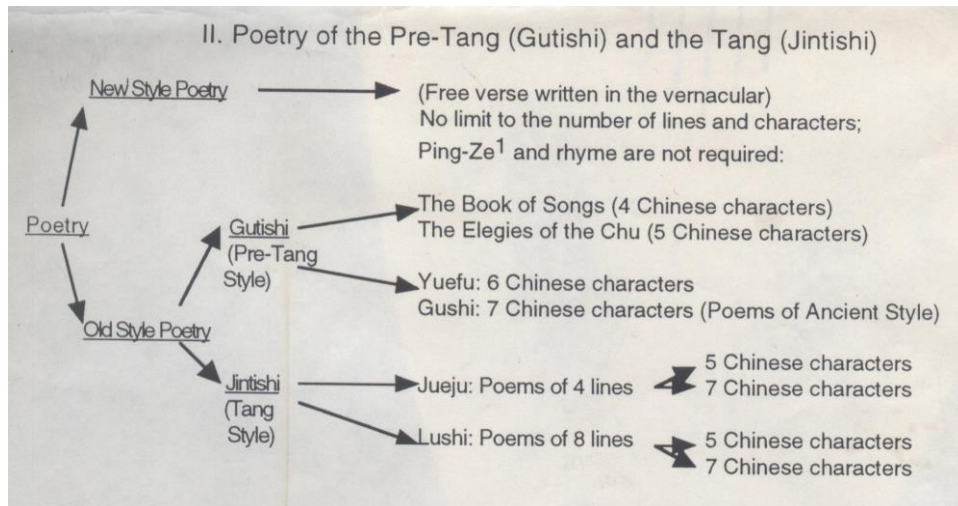
I. Introduction -- Poetry Suggests Painting

Chinese poetry is a unique cultural art form, because Chinese is written with "characters". Each has its own pronunciation, meaning, and form, and this combination of attributes gives Chinese poetry special qualities unmatched by other languages.

As to the relationship between poetry and painting, poetry expresses the poet's feelings, aspirations, and meaning with written language, while painting uses drawing and color to achieve the same goals. However, Chinese poems are also meant to be chanted and listened to, and may be set to music, so poetry is an aural as well as a written medium. Painting uses brushwork to create a visual medium. Both poetry and painting convey their creators' feelings and artistic ideas for people to enjoy.

So poetry and painting complement each other, the former using sounds and the latter pictures. It can be said that a poem is a picture with sound, while a painting is a silent poem. The great Tang Dynasty poet Wang Moji put it vividly: "There are pictures in poetry and there is poetry in painting". The two art forms share the same purposes.

When you read and recite poems you feel refreshed and at ease, look noble and refined. If you write a poem yourself, your feelings are even stronger, and you feel as if you lived in that poetic world all the time.



¹ Ping-Ze is a tonal pattern used in classical Chinese poetry since the Tang Dynasty (618-896). "Ping" means level tone and "ze" means oblique tone. These will be explained in detail later.

In order to write poems in the old style, we must first know about the development of Chinese poetry. Classical Chinese poetry is divided into Pre-Tang and Tang styles. The latter are written according to strict rules and forms.

What is Gutishi (poetry of pre-Tang style)? "The Book of Songs" and "The Elegies of Chu" are examples of Gutishi poetry, with 4 or 6 characters per line. All the other poetry written before the Tang, mainly that of the Han (206 B.C. -220 A.D.), Wei (385-555), and Six Dynasties (420 - 589) periods, was also called Gutishi, which includes "Yuefu" ballads and "Yuefu" folk songs (poetic genres of the Han Dynasty as well as poems in that style written in other periods). Ancient poems were usually divided into lines with either 5 or 7 Chinese characters. Poems that included 3, 5, and 7 characters per line were called "poems with mixed characters," and were sometimes included in the category of 7 characters per line. Here is an example of an ancient poem with 5 characters per line:

A strange tree in the courtyard,
Green leaves sprout from branches.
Breaking off twigs vitality hurts,
Distracting away my new longings.
Bosom, sleeves full of fragrance,
Too far away to send my regards.
What new value is object of this?
While departing clearly one feels.

What are the characteristics of poetry written in the pre-Tang style?

1. It can be called free verse poetry, which had no fixed rules, particularly that written in the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties periods. Some free verse poetry was written during and after the Tang Dynasty, following the earlier examples, but most poets were influenced by the introduction of fixed rules (uniform lines, antithetical couplets, Ping-Ze) and used them, particularly in poems with 7 character lines.

2. Yuefu was originally an official conservatory in the Han Dynasty for collecting and composing folk songs and ballads. Yuefu poetry before and during the Han, Wei, and Six Dynasties periods was a genre that was often written to accompany music to make a song. Poets of later generations sometimes also used the Yuefu form to write poems about current events. Such poems were called "new Yuefu poems".

3. There were no strict rules for poems in the ancient style. Some lines were longer, some shorter; no attention was paid to Ping-Ze and antithetical couplets. Rhyme was quite free: one could use level tone or oblique tone rhyme, or mix them together; use one rhyme scheme throughout the poem or change it at any time.

What is Jintishi (Tang style poetry)? It was also called Gelushi, which was started by Shen Yue (441-513), a poet of the South Dynasty, who applied Ping (level tone) and Ze(oblique tone) to writing poetry, using the four tones, ping(level tone), shang(falling-rising tone), qu(falling tone), and ru(entering tone), discovered by Zhou Yixin who lived at the same time as Shen Yue. From then on, the patterns of Chinese poetry changed greatly from the free ancient style into a style with strict rules. Because this kind of poetry was perfected during the Tang Dynasty, it was called then Jintishi

(poetry of the "modern" style, i.e., Tang style) or Gelushi.

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What are the characteristics of Jintishi?

1. It can be divided into Jueju, Lushi, and Pailu according to the number of lines used: Jueju, a poem of 4 lines with strict rules, Lushi, a poem of 8 lines with strict rules, and Pailu, also called Changlu, an extended form of Lushi (more than 8 lines) with strict rules.

2. Jintishi can be further divided according to the number of characters per line, which can be either 5 or 7, so we can have Jueju, Lushi, and Pailu of either 5 or 7 characters per line. Jueju with 5 per line will have 20 characters (4 lines of 5 characters each), and with 7 per line 28 characters (4 lines of 7 characters each), while Lushi will have 40 characters (8 lines of 5 each) or 56 characters (8 lines of 7 each). Pailu usually has 5 characters per line (called "Pailu of 5 characters").

3. Beside the rules for number of lines and characters, Jintishi is also very particular about Ping(level tone) and Ze(oblique tone).

4. Jintishi also pays great attention to rhyme.

5. If the Jintishi is a Lushi, there must be two antithetical couplets in the poem: the 3rd and 4th lines (leading antithetic couplet) and the 5th and 6th lines (following antithetic couplet).

III. Learning to Write 7 Character Jueju

As mentioned above, Jueju is divided into Jueju of 5 and 7 characters per line. Why should you start by learning a 7 character Jueju?

1. It is better for a beginner who is not familiar with Ping(level tone) and Ze (oblique tone) to start with Jintishi, which is harmonious and smooth, because Jintishi is not harmonious and smooth.

2. Jueju should be the first form learned, because Lushi has 8 lines and antithetical couplets, which make the form difficult to master.

3. A Jueju of 7 characters should be chosen first, followed by one of 5, because the authors who wrote 5 character Juejus were fond of using rhyme of oblique tones(Ze) and Aoti². Since few Aoti poems were harmonious and smooth, it is more appropriate to learn how to write a 7 character Jueju first.

Jueju is shorter than Lushi and originated before it, although both were commonly written in the same era. It is easy to learn how to write Jueju, but very difficult to master this poetic form, because of the difficulty of expressing fully one's feelings and ideas in only 28 characters.

IV. How Do We Distinguish Ping and Ze?

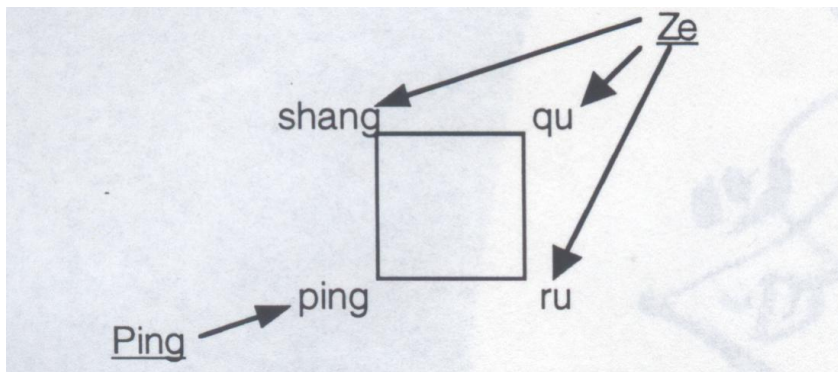
A Chinese poem is more than simply for people to read and enjoy. The soul of a

² As mentioned above, Lushi has a strict rule for ping-ze rhyme. If a poet didn't follow the rule completely, and made some alterations, the variation was called Ao. The usual practice was to change the Ping or Ze of the 2nd, 4th, or 6th character, and especially the 5th of a 7 character line or the 3rd of a 5 character line. Whenever Ao is used, it must be saved by using the opposite tone in the next line at the same position. But there are exceptions.

poem is to be found when it is chanted or set to music, and only with a mastery of the pattern of Ping and Ze can a piece of writing truly be called a poem.

The Chinese language is written using characters whose most important characteristic is that one character equals one word equals one sound, and the sounds of different characters, their pronunciations, differ in their tones -- some high, some low, some long, some short, some slow, some hasty, some rising, some falling -- which consist of the tones of Ping and Ze.

How do we distinguish Ping and Ze? A Chinese word is pronounced with ping(level tone), shang(falling-rising tone), qu(falling tone), or ru(entering tone). Ping means ping sound, i.e., level tone, and Ze includes the other three tones:



Ping and Ze are to be pronounced in the following ways:

Ping: long, light, high, forte, slow, rising.

Ze: short, accented, low, piano, hasty, falling.

Throughout Chinese history there have been various opinions about how to explain the way the four tones sound. For instance:

1. "Shen Ying Ge" (The Song for Sound Distinguishing) of the Ming Dynasty said: "Ping (level tone) is to be pronounced in level tone without rising or falling, shang (falling-rising tone) is to be shouted strongly, qu (falling tone) is to be pronounced clearly like a sorrowful sound in the far distance, and ru (entering tone) is to be pronounced very briefly and end quickly."

2. "Ping, sorrowful and peaceful; shang, stern and rising; qu, clear and far away; ru, straight and brief."

3. "Accented and hasty for shang, qu, and ru, light and slow for ping."

4. "Ping is the longest, the next is shang, ru ends abruptly without lingering sound."

5. "The difference among the four tones lies in the number of beats: ping is the longest with 4 beats, shang has three beats, qu has 2, while ru is the shortest with only one beat or half a beat."

6. "Ping is long and hollow like a ringing bell or a beaten drum, while shang, qu, and ru are short and sound like mud, wood, or stone being hit."

One needs to practice as much as possible so as to make a clear distinction between Ping tone and Ze tone. When in doubt, one can look up tones in a rhyme book, where each word is given with its tone. Remember that all tones except Ping are Ze. As for shang-ping (level tone for the first half) and xia-ping (level tone for the second half), which are given in the rhyme book, both are pronounced with the level tone.

V. Rhyme

The study of rhyme started in the Sui Dynasty (589-618), before the Tang. Based on the results of earlier research, words of the same tone and the same rhyme were compiled into separate categories. Words in the same category can be rhymed with each other. Because poems are rhymed at the ends of lines, rhyme is also called "Yunjiao" (foot rhyming) or, in the English language, ".end rhyme".

Because rhyme schemes are either in level tones (ping) or oblique tones (shang, qu, ru), it is Ping-Ze that determines the rhyme scheme. Most poems are rhymed using words of level tone.

In a poem of Jueju, rhyming is made with the last words(characters) of the 2nd and 4th lines, and they must be from the same rhyme category. Since they are at the end of the line the rhyme scheme is called foot rhyming or end rhyming. The last word of the 3rd line does not rhyme, and the poet is left to choose whether to rhyme the first line. Two examples follow:

1. With the first line rhymed:

qing	ming	shi	jie	yu	feng	feng
Pure	brightness	the	time	rain	endlessly	
lu	shang	xing	ren	yu	duan	hun
Road	o n	travellers		soullessly		
jie	wen	jiu	jia	he	chu	you
Excuse	me	wine	shop	where	there	is
mo	tong	yao	zhi	xing	hua	cun
Buffalo-boy	in the distance	pointing	Xinghua		village	

At the time of pure brightness endlessly raining
The passengers on the way soulessly along travelling
Where is there any wine shop nearby they are inquiring
To Xinghua Village in the distance a buffalo-boy pointing

2. With the first line not rhymed:

ceng	zai	yang	liu	jiang	nan	an
Had	planted	willow	tree	jiang	nan	bank
yi	bie	jiang	nan	liang	d u	chun
one	leaving	jiang	nan	two		spring
yao	yi	qing	qing	jiang	an	shang
remote	memory	green	green	Jiang	an	on
bu	zhi	pan	zhe	shi	he	ren
don't	know	pull down	break up	is	who?	

On the bank of Jiangnan I've planted willow trees "

Since I left Jiangnan, have passed springs two

On the green river bank far away in my memory

Pulling down and breaking off the twigs is who?

What is rhyme in Chinese poetry? Put briefly, words that rhyme are those that share the same vowel with or without the terminal n or ng, since every Chinese character is composed of an initial consonant and a simple or compound vowel, sometimes with a terminal n or ng:

Consonant (Sound): p, h, m, n, g, f, j, d, etc...

Vowel(Rhyme): ing, oung, eng, ian, an, long, ong, etc...

Rhyme Group "ing":		Rhyme Group 'an":	
Sound	Rhyme	Sound	Rhyme
p ----	-ing ping	y -----	uang yuang
m ---	--ing ming	t --	----uang tuang
ch -----	ing ching	t ----	--jan tian
		j-----	jan jian
		j-----	an nan
		f-----	an fan

Those who know how Chinese words are written in spelling languages (i.e., English) will understand rhyme in Chinese poetry more easily. This is a particular advantage for foreign students.

There are several rules for rhyming Jintishi that need to be mentioned:

1. For both Lushi and Jueju, with either 5 or 7 characters, all rhymes have a level tone (ping sheng) all the way through, with no change possible half way. (Some Jueju use oblique tone in their rhyme scheme. These are called ancient Jueju (Gujue)).

2. The last words of the even lines must be rhymed, and the odd lines are to end in an oblique tone. (If the first line is rhymed, level tone must be used.)

3. It is absolutely forbidden to use the same rhyming word twice in one poem, or to use two words that have the same pronunciation.

The sounds used in rhyming are the pronunciations of the Tang Dynasty period, i.e., ancient pronunciation. The Guangdong, Hakka, and Shanghai dialects retain some "Tang" pronunciation, so that reading aloud in these dialects would make the rhyme schemes work more smoothly. For instance, "jian," "huan," "shan," "yan," all belong to Section No. 15, the "Shan" rhyme. Look at the following verse:

hong	jun.,	bu	pa	yuan	zheng	nan
red	army	not	fearing	long	march	difficulties
wan	shui	qian	shan	zhi	deng	xian
ten thousand	water	thousand	mountains	are	nothing	serious
san	jun	gu	he	jin	kai	yan
three	army	passed	all	beaming	with	joy

No difficulties of the long march the Red Army fearing,
 Thousands of waters and mountains are really nothing,
 Mountains crossed with joy, the whole army beaming.

According to the rhyme book, nan, xian, and yan are in the same section and rhyme with each other, because in ancient times they were pronounced with the same vowel. But they are pronounced differently in modern Chinese, so we should consult the ancient rhyme book, the Book of "Shi Yun" (The Rhymes of Poetry) if unsure of a rhyme when composing a poem of Jintishi. In that book we find:

Ping sheng (level tone):

Shang Ping (level tone in the first half) -- the 15th rhyme

Xia Ping (level tone in the second half) -- the 15th rhyme

Ze sheng (oblique tone):

Shang (falling-rising) -- the 29th rhyme

Qu (falling) -- the 30th rhyme

Ru (entering) --the 17th rhyme

VI. Fixing Tone and Pattern

Just as in composing music one must first choose a key, so before writing Jueju one has to fix the tone to start with, that is either Ping(level) or Ze(oblique). Then one can write the poem according to the rules. How do we determine the tone?

The way to do this is to look at the second word of the poem you are going to write. If it is ping sheng (level tone), the poem is labelled "Ping start". If it is ze sheng (oblique tone), the poem is labelled "Ze start".

The following examples show how this works for a Jueju with 7 character lines:

1. Ping start with the first line rhymed:

Ping ping ze ze ze ping ping
 ze ze ping ping ze ze ping
 ze ze ping ping ping ze ze
 ping ping ze ze ze ping ping

Example: "Morning Start from Baidi Cheng" by Li Bai

zhao	fa	bai	d i	cai	yun	jian,
morning	leaving	Bai	di	colorful	clouds	in
qian	li	jian	ling	yi	ri	huan,
thousand	li	jiang	ling	one	day	return
liang	an	yuan	shen	di	b u	zhu,
two	banks	ape	sound	crying	not	stop

qin	zhou	yi	gu	wan	chong	shan.
light	boat	already	pass	ten thousand rows		mountains

In colorful clouds in the morning Baidi leaving,
 Thousand li to Jiangling is one day travelling,
 On both banks apes are endlessly crying,
 Through thousands of mountains the light boat passing.

2. Ze start with the first line rhymed:

ze ze ping ping ze ze ping
 ping ping ze ze ze ping ping
 ping ping ze ze ping ping ze
 ze ze ping ping ze ze ping

Example: "Extempore Verse of Jiangcun" by Sima Shu

ba	diao	gui	lai	bu	xi	zhou
ending	fishing	return	home	not	tie	boat
Jiang	cun	yue	luo	zheng	hao	mian
Jiang	cun	moon	setting	just	good for	sleeping
zong	ran	yi	ye	feng	piao	qu
even	though	one	night	wind	float	away
zhi	zai	lu	hua	qian	shui	bian
only	remain	reed	flower	shallow	water	side

Leaving the boat untied, returned from fishing,
 Moonset at Jiangcun a good time for sleeping,
 Even if it should float away with one night wind,
 In the reed flower shallows it would be floating.

3. Ping start with the first line not rhymed:

Ping ping ze ze ping ping ze
 Ze ze ping ping ze ze ping
 ze ze ping ping ping ze ze
 ping ping ze ze., ze ping ping

ceng	zai	yang	liu	jiang	nan	an
had	planted	willow	tree	jiang	nan	bank
yi	bie	jiang	nan	liang	d u	chun
one	leaving	Jiang	nan	two		spring

yao	yi	qing	qing	jiang	an	. shang
remote	memory	green	green	jiang	an	on
bu	zhi	pan	zhe	shi	he	ren
don't	know	pull down	break up	is	who	

On the bank of Jiangnan I planted willow trees,
 Since I've left Jiangnan have passed springs two
 On the green bank far away in my memory,
 Pulling down and breaking off twigs is who?

4. Ze.start with the first line not rhymed:

ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping

Example: "Remembering the Brother in Shangdong on the Ninth Day of the Ninth Month (Lunar Calendar)" by Wang Wei

d u	zai	yi	xiang	wei	yi	ke
alone	at	strange	place	as	stranger	
mei	feng	jiang	jie	bei	si	q in
whenever		festival		double	missing	dear ones
yao	zhi	xiong	di	deng	gao	chu
faraway	know	brother		ascending	heights	
ian	zha	zhu	yu	sao	yi	,ren
everywhere	planted	dogwood		short of	one	person

I am a stranger alone in a strange place,
 Whenever the festival comes my dear ones all the more missing,
 Far away they are ascending the heights I am imagining,
 Dogwood planted everywhere with one person not coming.
 To recapitulate:

1. Ping start with, the first line rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ping	ping	.. ze	ze	ze	ping	ping ³
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping
ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping

³ Ping means means not rhymed."

2. Ze start with the first line rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping.
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping

3. Ping start with the first line not rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping
ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping

4. Ze start with the first line not rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping

**VII. 1st, 3rd, and 5th Words Free Choice;
2nd, 4th, and 6th Words Follow Rules**

While the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words of a 7 character Jueju are at your choice, the 2nd, 4th, and 6th must follow strictly the appropriate rules.

In the past, when poets taught others how to write a poem, they would say "the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words are at your choice, but the 2nd, 4th, and 6th words must follow the rules exactly". Why? Because, if we pay attention to the patterns of rising, falling, pause, and transition -- the modulations in tone -- we see that the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words are not the important ones, while the 2nd, 4th, and 6th words are the "key points", the marrow of a poem, the focus for lightness and stress, the melody of high and low, the important tones. If the word should have Ping sound, you must use a level tone. If it should be Ze, you must use an oblique tone. You are not free to make changes as you wish at the 2nd, 4th, and 6th words. If you do so, the rhythm will be lost and the poem will sound awkward. For example, if a poem is Ping start and we change the Ping and Ze at the 2nd, 4th, or 6th words in the first line, see what will happen:

The original pattern is:

ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping
ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping

If you change it into						"
ping	ze	ze	ze	ze	ze	ping
ze	ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ping
ping	ping	ping	ping	ze	ping	ze
ping	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping

you can't feel any modulation at all. It's like chewing wax -- insipid. Let's take this poem for example, which is ze start with the first line rhymed:

han	yu	lian	jiang	ye	ru	wu
cold	rain	over	river	night	enter	Wu
ping	ming	song	ke	chu	shan	g u
at	dawn	see off	guest	Chu	Mountain	lonely
luo	yang	qin	you	ru	xiang	wen
luo	yang	relatives	friends	if	should	ask
yi	pian	bing	xin	zai	yu	h u
one	piece	icy	heart	in	jade	pot

Coming to Wu at night over the river in cold rain,
 Seeing off guests at dawn with Chu Mountain alone,
 In case Luoyang relatives and friends ask,
 A heart as clear as ice is there in the jade pot.

If we change either the 2nd, 4th, or 6th word we will get:

lian	jiang	han	yu	ye	ru	wu
over	river	cold	rain	night	enter	Wu
ping	ming	chu	shan	song	ke	gu
at	dawn	Chu	Mountain	see off	guest	alone
qin	you	luo	yang	ru	xiang	wen
relatives	friends	Luo	yang	if	should	ask
yi	pian	bin	xin	zai	yu	h u
one	piece	icy	heart	in	jade	pot

The first three lines are awkward to read and rather insipid. Compare the two versions of the second line (4th and 6th words have been switched, and 3rd and 5th along with them so as to maintain the meaning):

Line two:

ping	ming	song	ke	chu	shan	g u
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping

changes to:

ping	ming	chu	shan	song	ke	g u
ping	ping	ze	ping	ze	ze	ping

(In addition, as we will see below, the second line also now violates one of the taboos: it contains a "lonely Ping".)

VIII. The Two Taboos of Writing Poetry

The two taboos are: three Ping tones at the end of a line and a lonely Ping.

While we have seen in the discussion above that the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words are at the poet's choice, we must understand that it is more important to avoid the two taboos when writing a Jueju poem.

1. Avoiding three Pings in a row at the end of a line (the 5th, 6th, and 7th words).
Take this line as an example:

ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

If the ze at 5 is changed to Ping, the last three words are all Ping, which is not allowed. So we see that although the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words are at the poet's choice, the Ze at 5 cannot be changed.

2. Avoiding a lonely Ping. There should not be a Ping all by itself, isolated by Zes as if in a sandwich (a slice of Ping sausage between two pieces of Ze bread). For example:

ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

If we change the Ping at 3 into Ze, we get:

ze	ze	ze	ping	ze	ze	ping
1	2	3	4	5	6	7

Words 3, 4, and 5 are Ze Ping Ze, like a sandwich.

What this discussion has tried to make clear is that only if we avoid the two taboos can we understand what it means to say that the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words are at the poet's choice.

In the four patterns of Jueju, we can keep track of whether words must stick to the rules or not by circling the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words that cannot change. Any of the 1st, 3rd, and 5th words that are not circled are free choice. See the following examples:
Ping start with the first line rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping(rhymed)
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ze	ze

2. Ze start with the first line rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ze	ze	ping	ze	ze,	ze	ping(rhymed)
ping	ping	ze	ze.	ze	ping	ping
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ze	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping

3. Ping start with the first line not rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze(not rhym.)
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	p i n g
ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping

4. Ze start with first line not rhymed:

1	2	3	4	5	6	7
ze	ze	ping	ping	ping	ze	ze(not rhym.)
ping	ping	ze	ze~	ze	ping	ping
ping	ping	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping

Did poets in ancient times ever violate the two taboos? I have checked over 10,000 poems in "A Complete Collection of Tang Poems" and found only one case of three pings at the end of a line and only two cases of a lonely ping. The latter error was made in "A Country Old Man's Exposing His Back in the Sunshine" written by Li Xin:

bai sui lao wong bu zhong tian
ze ping ze

(An old man of a hundred years farms no more.)

and also in a poem written by Gao Shi:

zui duo shi bu chou
ze ping ze

(very drunk so without worries)

These might be careless mistakes by Li Xin and Gao Shi. However, since they lived at the beginning of the Tang Dynasty, when the rules of writing poetry were not strictly obeyed, it is possible that they simply didn't think it was important. I have also checked poems written in the Song Dynasty, and can't find even one poem that violates the two taboos. It is thus clear that three pings at the end of a line and a lonely ping were indeed taboo for ancient poets.

IX. The "Ao Saving" of Poems

Although, as we have seen, the tone pattern of the 2nd, 4th, and 6th words is supposed to follow strictly the rule of Ping and Ze, sometimes, because of theme or content, the rule must be violated, resulting in a kind of line called an "Ao" sentence. If this happens, what should be done about it? Poets of ancient times adopted remedies which are called "Ao Saving". Two of them are:

1. "Self-Correcting", which means changing another word in the same line so as to keep the balance of Ping and Ze and maintain a harmonious tone pattern. In the following example, word 5 should have been Ping but was changed to Ze, so Word 6 must be changed from Ze to Ping:

zan	shi	jiang	nan	hau	fung	jien
just	is	river	south	good	sign	seeing

2. Changing the line that follows immediately after an "Ao" line by altering the Ping-Ze of the word that is at the same position as the one in the "Ao" line that violates the rule. Such a change will harmonize the tone of the two lines. An example of this comes from Su Shi's poem "On the Way to Xincheng":

The original "Ao" sentence is:

ye	tao	han	xiao	zhu	li	duan
wild	peach	smiling		bamboo	fence	low

The word zhu (bamboo) in this line should be of level tone (Ping), but zhu is of oblique tone(Ze), so the line is an "Ao" sentence, or an abnormal sentence.

The next line is:

qi	liu	zi	yao	sha	shui	qin
creek	willow	serf-	swaying	sand	water	clear

The word at the place of sha (sand) should be of Ze tone, but sha is Ping.tone, which provides a harmonious tone balance with the previous line.

X. The Structure of a Poem

Poems, like expository writing, have proper organization and structure, being made up of four parts: qi (start), cheng(linking), zhuan(changing), and he(combining or conclusion). In the case of Jueju, the structure is:

The first line -- qi(start)

The second line -- cheng(linking)

The third line -- zhuan(changing)

The fourth line -' he(conclusion)

An example is "Extempore Verse of Jiangcun" by Sima Shu:

ba	diao	gui	lai	bu	xi	zhou (qi)
ending	fishing	return	home	not	tie	boat
Jiang	cun	yue	luo	zheng	hao	mian (cheng)
Jiang	cun	moon	setting	just(for)	good	sleeping
zong	ran	yi	y.e	feng	piao	qu
even	though	one	night	wind	float	away
zhi	zai	lu	hua	qian	shui	bian (he)
only	remain	reed	flower	shallow	water	side

Leaving the boat untied returned from fishing, (start)
Moon-set at Jiangcun a good time for sleeping, (linking)
Even if it should float away with one night wind, (changing)
In the reed flower shallows it would be floating. (conclusion)

This poem describes a scene at a particular place and an event that occurs there. The first line leads us into the poem whose theme is expressed in the second line, which also serves as a link to the rest of the poem. The third line introduces a new idea, a change, and the fourth provides a conclusion, a boat floating to mirror the poet sleeping in the second line.

Another example is "Anchoring at Qinhuai":

Cold water shrouded in fog sand under moon shine, (qi, start)
: Anchoring at night on Qinhuai River near a wine shop, (linking)
Singing girls don't know the hatred of a nation conquered, (changing)
Over the river still singing Houtinghua echoing in the sky. (conclusion)

The first line describes the scenery: moon, night, water and sand shrouded in fog; a scene of autumn or winter, a feeling of ending and cold, implying the decline of the court. The second line brings out the theme, anchoring at Qinhuai, and connects the scene to the poet's opinion, something new, in the third line, and the conclusion in the fourth line. Looking at the structure of this poem, we see that the first three lines -- start, link, and change -- focus the reader's attention on the last line: "girls were still singing Houtinghua".

Another example, by Su Shi: "Writing in Drunkenness in Wanghulou on the 27th Day of the 6th Month":

With mountains not yet hidden dark clouds waving black, (start)
Into the ship splash springing pearls of rain white, (linking)
'Sweeping wind suddenly blowing away all clouds, (changing)
Water under Wanghulou is as clear as sky. (conclusion)

Although this poem follows the correct structure, it is fascinating to see that the poet's thought has not ended, but is still developing with a momentum that suggests something more to come.

XI. The Implied Intention of Poetry

Wang Fuzhi made an excellent remark. He said that all writing, whether long articles or poetry, is led by intention. Intention is like a commander, without whom the soldiers are a disorderly mob. Li Bai and Du Fu are great poets because fewer than 10-20% of their poems lack clear intent. Intention commands. With intention, a poem is fascinating, its author a great master. A poet whose poems do not have an intention cannot be of any importance.

By intention, I mean that a poem should express something, have a point of view. When we read a poem and attempt to understand it, we should take into account the time in which it was written and the nature of the poet's experience, situation, and mood. Only in this way can we understand what the poet is trying to express, what his artistic conception is, what his aspirations are, what injustice he is raising His voice against.

It is often said that misfortune makes good poems. This idea of misfortune refers not only to a lack of wealth and material goods but also to the inability of the poet to achieve promotion in his official career, and to his inability to cope with events and get along with people around him. In the face of these so-called "four misfortunes", the poet feels strong emotions, and such emotions lead to strong poetry.

If you want to write good poems, you should read as many others' poems as possible and write as many of your own as possible. In the former case you have more examples to learn from; in the latter case practice makes perfect.

You cannot hope to write good poems without repeated practice and revision. At the start, you may very well imitate, alter, or even "steal" lines from outstanding poems from ancient times, before you have created your own style, just like children who trace over with black ink the characters written in red when they are learning to write with a brush.

When you write a poem you should weigh the words over and over to find the best. Famous poets of the past provide us good examples. For instance, Wang Anshi weighed his words again and again while he was writing his famous poem "Spring Breeze Greened the Bank of Jiangnan Again". At first he used "reached," then "passed," then many others, before finally choosing the best -- "greened".

Another example is Jia Dao's verse "Birds perching on the tree in the pool, A monk knocking at the door under the moon". Originally he used "pushing" instead of "knocking", i.e., "A monk pushing at the door under the moon". After thinking about it over and over again, he finally decided to use "knocking," surely a much better choice. These examples make clear how painstaking the great poets of antiquity were.

What concerns us is not how many poems you have written but their quality. If you can write just a few good ones, that's enough. Some ancient poets may have left us

only a single poem, but if it was good enough, it has been remembered and passed down for a thousand years. Take Jin Changxu's "Spring Sadness," written during the Tang Dynasty:

I chased the yellow orioles away
 To keep them from singing in the trees
 Their cries scared away my dream
 Kept me from reaching Western Liao

XII. The Way of Poetry Chanting

Poems are meant to be chanted or recited, or, as we say in modern language, read aloud. In the past, people would call this activity "chanting poem, making couplets". Everyone who has studied in a "private study" has seen the scholar-teacher in his long gown, mandarin jacket, and skullcap, leading his students in chanting poetry, his head and body swaying evocatively with the rising and falling of the poem's tone and rhythm. One can chant poems and recite fu (descriptive prose interspersed with verse) to music, since poems have Ping-Ze and fu have couplet verses, and one can sing qu⁴, which are written to match a melody. How should poems be read aloud?

When reading aloud Jueju of 7 characters, the 2nd and 4th words of each line are very important. If the word is ping sheng(level tone), it should be drawn-out and stressed. If it is ze sheng(oblique tone), just the opposite. If the last word (7th) of a line is rhymed, it should be stressed, but not so much as the 2nd and 4th when they are ping sheng. If the 7th word is not rhymed, it should be pronounced lightly and quickly.

The ways of chanting are as follows (---- means stressed and drawn-out; -- means stressed but less drawn-out):

1. Ze start with the first line rhymed:

ze	ze	ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping --
zhu	que	qiao	bian----	ye	cao	hua --
red	sparrow	bridge	side	wild	plant	flower .
ping	ping----	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping --
wu	yi----	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping --
Wu	yi	xiang	entrance	setting	sun	
ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
jiu	shi----	wang	xie	tang	qian	\ yan
old	times	Wang	Xie	house	front	swallow
ze	ze	ping	ping	ze	ze	ping --
fei	ru	xun	chang	bai	xing	jia --
flying	into	ordinary		common	people's	home

⁴ A type of verse for singing, which emerged in the Jin and Southern Song Dynasties and became popular in the Yuan Dynasty.

2. Ping start with the first line rhymed:

ping	ping----	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping --
ze	ze	ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping --
ze	ze	ping	ping ----	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping----	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping --

3. Ze start with the first line not rhymed:

ze	<u>z.e</u>	ping	ping----	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping----	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping --
ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping --

4. Ping start with the first line not rhymed:

ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping	ping	ze
ze	ze	ping	ping----	ze	ze	ping --
ze	ze	ping	ping----	ping	ze	ze
ping	ping----	ze	ze	ze	ping	ping --

While reciting and chanting a poem, then, we should pay attention to two things:

1. The 2nd and 4th words are very important. We can see that the stressed syllables in lines 3 and 4 must mirror the stressed syllables in lines 1 and 2. Using "Anchoring at Qinhuai" as our example, a stressed syllable at word 2 in line 1 requires a stressed syllable at word 2 in line 4, while a stressed syllable at word 4 in line 2 requires a stressed syllable at word 4 in line 3. If the words at those positions in lines 3 and 4 have oblique tone (ze sheng) instead of level tone (ping sheng), reciting the poem would be very awkward. So these are the key places, called "banyan" in Chinese.

2. Ping sheng (level tone) is like beating a gong or drum, which gives a loud long sound, while ze sheng (oblique tone) is like hitting wood or stone, which gives a short quick sound.

These are the key points in understanding, distinguishing, and mastering the use of Ping and Ze. In short, Ping and Ze in poems are just like notes in music. Using them in the correct different patterns gives the rhyme scheme variety and charm.

(translated by Wang Yintong and Wang Dehua)