

# Ye Xiaogang's Lin'an Qibu II: exploring the "Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé" structural thinking in "Sailing on West Lake After a Morning of Sunshine and Rain"

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**Abstract.** Modern Chinese music has, from its inception, demonstrated creativity rooted in native linguistic and cultural traditions. Particularly after the mid-1980s, this creativity was no longer limited to the mere use of Chinese traditional musical materials or the presentation of national styles, nor simply an expression of Chinese cultural spirit and thought. Instead, it manifested as development and innovation within modern compositional techniques themselves. It is evident that Chinese composers have made distinctive contributions in many areas, including pitch structures, harmonic organization, and contrapuntal logic. In particular, regarding pitch structures and related harmonic techniques and tonal thinking, Chinese composers have pursued developments and innovations based on the language and forms of Chinese traditional music [1]. As a prominent contemporary Chinese composer, Ye Xiaogang possesses a profound and distinctive understanding of musical structure. His works demonstrate a high degree of innovation and integration in structural design. Rather than adhering strictly to traditional forms, he tailors and innovates structures according to expressive needs. In an interview, he stated, "Chinese musical structure follows "Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé" (beginning–development–turn–conclusion). My musical structures cannot be found in any Western musical forms; this is my unique advantage." Ye skillfully draws on structural techniques from Western modern music while simultaneously integrating structural thinking rooted in Chinese traditional music. This Sino-Western fusion in structural thinking allows his compositions to be both innovative in the modern musical sense and imbued with the aesthetic charm of Chinese traditional music, forming a contemporary artistic expression of China's rich cultural heritage.

**Keywords:** Ye Xiaogang, Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé, musical structure

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## 1. The "Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé" structural statement of Sailing on West Lake after a Morning of Sunshine and Rain

Ye Xiaogang's Lin'an Qibu (Seven Episodes of Lin An), composed in 2011, is a large-scale vocal symphonic work written for soprano, tenor, baritone, and orchestra. Its texts are drawn from the poetry of renowned classical Chinese poets such as Bai Juyi, Su Shi, Ouyang Xiu, Lu You, Wang Changling, Yang Wanli, and Lin Zexu.

This work integrates a variety of orchestral and vocal techniques, expressing the composer's deep admiration for the brilliant culture of ancient China. Through the medium of music, Ye aims to showcase the richness of China's traditional spiritual heritage to a global audience. Folk songs and melodies from Hangzhou, Jiaxing, and Huzhou in Zhejiang Province are skillfully woven into complex musical textures, whose emotional character traces back to the artistic conception of classical Chinese literature and the profound cultural foundation of the Wu-Yue region.

The composition consists of seven movements, each based on a classical poem, portraying distinct scenes: the first movement Yi Jiangnan (Remembering Jiangnan) depicts the Jiangnan landscape; the second, Yin Hu Shang Chu Qing Hou Yu (Sailing on West Lake after a Morning of Sunshine and Rain), depicts the night view of West Lake; the third, Cai Sang Zi, portrays mulberry picking; the fourth, Lin'an Chun Yu Chu Ji, depicts a spring day in Lin'an; the fifth, Yu Yan Qiantang Deng Zhangting Wang Hu Zuo, portrays the viewing of tides; the sixth, Xiao Chu Jingci Si Song Lin Zifang, depicts a friend's farewell; and the seventh, Liuhe Ta, depicts the lake tower.

The second movement is based on a combination of Su Shi's poems Yin Hu Shang Chu Qing Hou Yu Er Shou – Qi Er and Ye Fan Xi Hu Wu Jue – Qi Si.

The earliest extant records of the concept of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” (beginning–development–turn–conclusion) appear in three Yuan dynasty texts: Yang Zai’s *Shifa Jia Shu*, Fu Ruojin’s *Shifa Zheng Lun*, and Chen Yiceng’s *Wenshi*. Among these, *Shifa Jia Shu* is relatively well known and is frequently cited in modern discussions of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé”. The relevant statements in *Shifa Zheng Lun* are records of Fan Feng’s remarks [2]. Other scholars suggest that the concept of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” is closely connected not only to China’s inherent cosmological and academic traditions but also to foreign influences such as the doctrinal classifications in Buddhism [3].

In Yuan dynasty poetic theory, “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” initially emphasized that a poem could be divided into four structural parts and that these parts are linked through a chain of openings and closings. Taking the “Essential Rules of Regulated Verse” in *Shifa Jia Shu* as an example, the text divides a *lǚshi* (regulated verse) into four sections—*po ti* (opening line), *han lian* (second couplet), *jing lian* (third couplet), and *jie ju* (closing line)—emphasizing that the *han lian* must connect with the *po ti*, and the *jing lian* must correspond to and contrast with the preceding couplet. Previous studies on the method of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” have tended to focus on these two aspects. Overall, discussing poetry in terms of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” can be decomposed into three elements: first, dividing the poem into four parts; second, emphasizing the logical relationships between the parts; and third, highlighting the relationship between each part and the poem’s theme or poetic meaning.

**Table 1.** Illustration of the relationship between text and structural expression in *Sailing on West Lake after a Morning of Sunshine and Rain*, from *Seven Episodes of Lin An*

Poem	Yin Hu Shang Chu Qing Hou Yu Er Shou – Qi Er		Ye Fan Xi Hu Wu Jue – Qi Si	
Section	Po Ti	Han Lian	Jing Lian	Jie Ju
Lines	水光潋滟晴方好 山色空蒙雨亦奇	欲把西湖比西子 浓妆淡抹总相宜	菰蒲无边水茫茫 荷花夜开风露香	渐见灯明出远寺 更待月黑看湖光
Expression	Qǐ (Beginning)	Chéng (Development)	Zhuǎn (Transition)	Hé (Conclusion)
Measures	8-15	16-23	24-35	36-53

Su Shi’s two West Lake poems, *Yin Hu Shang Chu Qing Hou Yu Er Shou – Qi Er* and *Ye Fan Xi Hu Wu Jue – Qi Si*, are recombined through cross-textual structural organization to form a complete narrative logic system of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé”.

Qǐ (Beginning) – Po Ti: “水光潋滟晴方好, 山色空蒙雨亦奇” introduces both sunny and rainy scenes of West Lake, establishing the descriptive foundation and clarifying the thematic focus.

Chéng (Development) – Han Lian: “欲把西湖比西子, 浓妆淡抹总相宜” continues the scenic depiction through metaphor, praising West Lake’s beauty under any weather and demonstrating the “development” function of thematic elaboration.

Zhuǎn (Turn) – Jing Lian: “菰蒲无边水茫茫, 荷花夜开风露香” shifts from the previous sunny-and-rain perspective to the vast night scenery and the fragrance of lotus blossoms, realizing the “turn” by expanding the descriptive dimension.

Hé (Conclusion) – Jie Ju: “渐见灯明出远寺, 更待月黑看湖光” concludes the piece, integrating night imagery through the imagined “lamplight in distant temples” and “moonless lake glow,” closing the structural arc and elevating the aesthetic sentiment.

Although these two poems were originally independent, the composer’s textual recombination ensures that the “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” structure runs consistently throughout. It rigorously adheres to the primary structural relations and elements of this classical framework, forming a coherent structure: the introduction of West Lake’s weather scenery (*qǐ*), metaphorical praise (*chéng*), nighttime transition (*zhuǎn*), and final observation of the lake at night (*hé*). This demonstrates Ye Xiaogang’s ability to integrate multiple texts according to traditional poetic structural thinking. His innovation across poetic forms breaks the constraints of the four-line regulated verse.

Liu Xiaolong of Peking University’s School of Arts commented, “Overall, the music of the four poetic sections in this work precisely reflects the structural relationship of ‘Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé’” [4]. Liu also provides detailed observations regarding musical details, such as “the second poetic section uses the same thematic music,” “the composer gives the line ‘菰蒲无边水茫茫’ a punctuated melody, clearly indicating continuation,” and “the main theme reappears in the fourth section.” These musical progressions are not elaborated here. Interestingly, from an objective textual perspective, the transition from the clear, misty lake scene of “水光潋滟晴方好” to the philosophical reflection of “更待月黑看湖光” presents a hazy, semi-ambiguous overlay of two emotional transitions. The true integration into a complete “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” structure is realized through Ye Xiaogang’s unified shaping of the entire composition within a structural system.

## 2. The “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” musical structure in *Sailing on West Lake after a Morning of Sunshine and Rain*

“Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” is a common and widely used formal structure in musical composition. The term “qǐ” (beginning) refers to the first presentation of the core musical idea; “chéng” (development) denotes its repetition and consolidation; “zhuǎn” (turn)

represents contrasting variation; and “hé” (conclusion) integrates, recapitulates, or elevates the preceding elements. In this way, it forms a complete and logically coherent structural process. The relationship of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” can manifest not only between musical materials but also across other musical elements. For example, as Schoenberg described, a musical “sentence” can consist of four parts—“short motif,” “repetition,” “contrast,” and “closure”—whose interrelations naturally satisfy the logical framework of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” [5].

Moreover, “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” is a structural principle widely employed in Chinese literary and artistic works, characterized by a seamless narrative flow and a balanced, symmetrical aesthetic. In Chinese traditional music, the content of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” similarly includes four stages: presentation, continuation, transition, and conclusion of thematic musical ideas. In terms of form, it usually manifests as a single musical movement, which may function as either an independent piece or a component of a larger work [6].

Based on the textual-logical behavior of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé”, this study deconstructs the musical structure of the piece into four fundamental musical cells:



Figure 1. Oboe part, measure 1 – five-tone polyphonic motif cell a



Figure 2. Flute part, measure 7 – five-tone polyphonic motif cell b

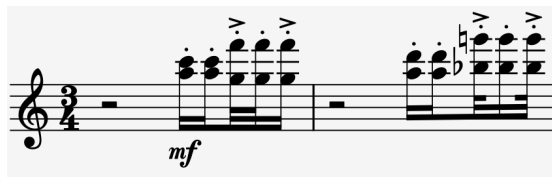


Figure 3. Oboe part, measures 3–4 – five-tone polyphonic motif cell c



Figure 4. Flute part, measures 3–4 – rhythmic cell

In this composition, the “introduction” functions like an “armory,” clearly revealing the composer’s ingenious structural conception. The construction of the basic musical cells, as illustrated above, mainly consists of three five-tone polyphonic motif cells and one rhythmic cell.

## 2.1. “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” in the melodic development process: the case of the solo tenor

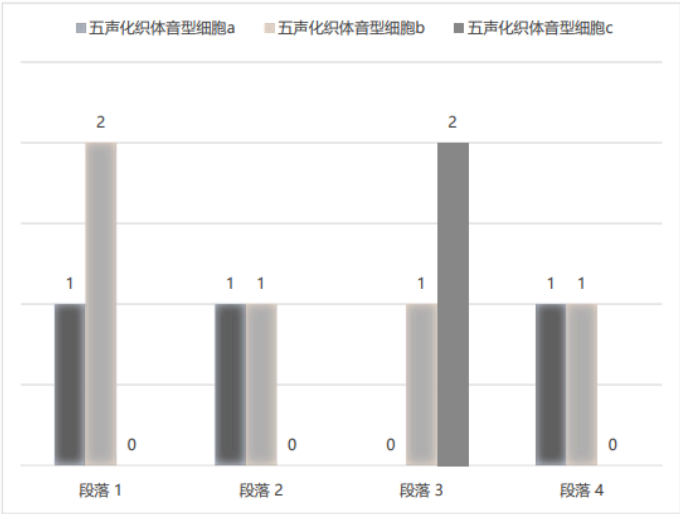
The three five-tone polyphonic motif cells, labeled a, b, and c, appear alternately and interwoven throughout the four sections of the solo tenor line, forming the primary vertical framework of the composition.

The presence of the rhythmic cell adds a distinctive rhythmic vitality to the piece. Through its organic integration with the five-tone polyphonic motif cells, the harmony and texture of the music are rendered richer and more varied. This combination

not only reflects Ye Xiaogang’s innovative compositional thinking but also demonstrates his careful deliberation in musical structure.

These basic musical cells, through various combinations and interweavings, constitute the core of the introduction. They establish the harmonic and textural foundation of the work while simultaneously providing abundant possibilities for the development of the entire piece. The layout of this cellular structure exemplifies the composer’s unique understanding and skillful use of structure, harmony, and texture.

Table 2. Distribution of five-tone polyphonic motif cells a, b, and c in the solo tenor line



If the five-tone polyphonic motif cells in the solo tenor line are extracted for analysis, it becomes clear that Professor Liu Xiaolong’s assessment—that the music of the four poetic sections precisely reflects the “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” structural relationship—is well-founded. From the perspective of the solo tenor, motif cells a and b clearly serve as the structural backbone of the work, forming the absolute thematic core, while motif cell c functions as a “variable cell,” acting as a key element for timbral and coloristic transformation. In the fourth section, the texture returns to being dominated by cells a and b, thereby completing the network of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” structural relationships.

2.2. “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” in the overall structural process

Certainly, the basic cell combinations alone cannot fully satisfy the composer’s harmonic conception or achieve the desired sonic effects within a modern musical framework. To enrich the musical substance, Ye Xiaogang applies varying degrees of “splitting” to five-tone polyphonic motif cell b and the rhythmic cell, creating more complex “variants.”

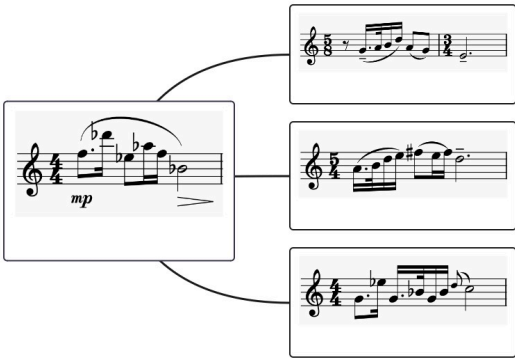
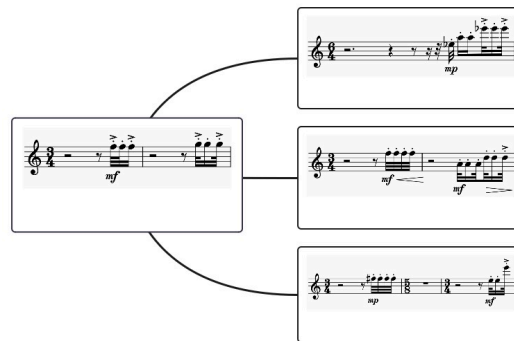


Figure 5. Major variants of cell b

In compositional practice, the variants of cell b manifest as distinctive rhythmic transformations. Within different metric frameworks, the composer subtly adjusts and adapts the microstructure of cell b. These adjustments are primarily reflected in nuanced rhythmic variations, allowing cell b to exhibit fresh and captivating rhythmic characteristics each time it appears.

Although cell b demonstrates rich and diverse rhythmic changes at the micro level, its macrostructural role remains relatively stable. This means that, despite the variations, the fundamental musical framework, melodic trajectory, and harmonic layout of cell b maintain coherence and consistency. The combination of macro-level stability and micro-level variation endows the variants of cell b with both novelty and structural unity, enhancing the work's layers and expressive depth.

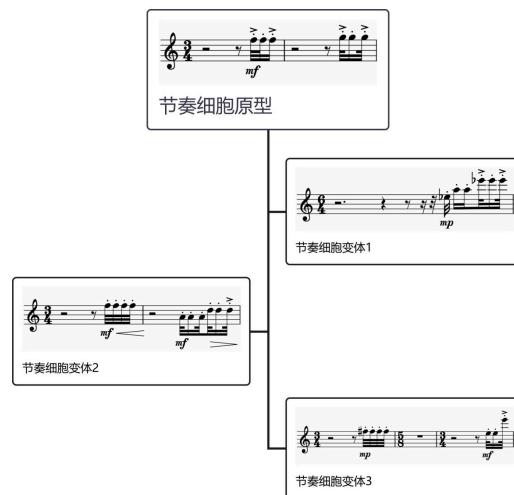


**Figure 6.** Major variants of the rhythmic cell

The variants of the rhythmic cell demonstrate exceptional flexibility and creativity in compositional practice. These variations are primarily realized through horizontal temporal development, such as compression or expansion of the cell. Specifically, the composer can adjust the rhythmic cell's duration according to the overall style and emotional needs of the work.

It is noteworthy that, whether compressed or expanded, the composer strives to maintain the structural stability of the cell. This ensures that the basic rhythmic framework, sense of meter, and musical character are preserved. Ye Xiaogang's skillful use of this organizational principle exemplifies a compositional approach that seeks stability within change, and simultaneously pursues variation within stability.

Unlike the five-tone polyphonic motif cells, which permeate the entire composition, the rhythmic cell appears less frequently, making its role as a “structural backbone” more prominent. By arranging its original form and three variants along the musical timeline, one can observe its strategic deployment.

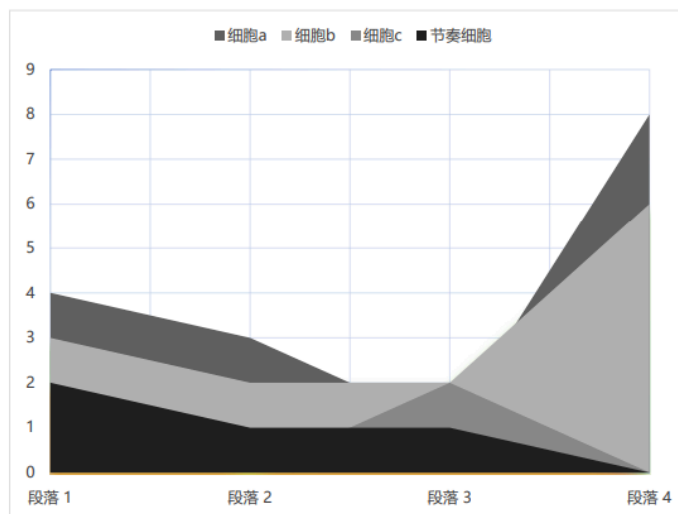


**Figure 7.** Timeline of the rhythmic cell and its variants

Along the musical timeline, the rhythmic cell undergoes a progression of compression—restoration—expansion. This temporal modulation regulates the overall development of the piece, forming a guiding undercurrent that propels the music forward.

At this stage, it becomes possible to grasp the overall cellular structure of the work in terms of harmony, the full complement of solo line cells, and their variants (see Table 3).

Table 3. Overview of cell concentration across the entire composition



As illustrated, the distribution of the cells across the four sections is clearly delineated. The texture and harmonic space formed by cells a and b, along with the musical language they generate, dominate the structural direction of the work. Cell c functions as a “variable” cell, while the rhythmic cell serves as an undercurrent. Together, these elements interweave to produce both variation and unity throughout the piece. Audibly, this achieves the so-called “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” effect, forming the foundation of Ye Xiaogang’s unique compositional approach that blends Chinese and Western structural thinking.

### 3. Conclusion

The compositional practice of the second movement of *Seven Episodes of Lin An* demonstrates how a Chinese composer innovatively transforms traditional structural thinking in a contemporary musical context. By cross-textually integrating two independent poems by Su Shi, the composer realizes the musical translation of the “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” poetic structure. Through the “musical cell” framework, a sonically living organism is constructed. This creative path, which fuses traditional Chinese structural thinking with Western modern compositional techniques, transcends the formal limitations of individual poems and achieves a deep continuity of cultural “genetic” material in musical form. This study reveals threefold significance in Ye Xiaogang’s music: First, at the level of structural thinking, the cross-textual musical interpretation of “Qǐ-Chéng-Zhuǎn-Hé” validates the narrative potential of traditional poetic structures in contemporary music. Second, at the level of technical integration, the combinatory variations among the five-tone polyphonic motif cells provide a practical paradigm for the modernization of Chinese musical language. Third, in terms of cultural inheritance, this compositional practice establishes a dialogical space between the aesthetic imagery of traditional literature and modern sonic artistry, thereby providing a culturally confident foundation for the international expression of Chinese music. It should be noted that this study, through the analysis of a single work, attempts to explore the contemporary transformation of traditional Chinese structural thinking within a globalized musical context, aiming to offer new perspectives for the construction of national identity and the modernization of Chinese music composition.

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