

A study on the formulaic patterns in the oral performance of folk singer Shoubo Zhang

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Abstract. The ability of folk singers to master and perform a large repertoire of ballads fundamentally relies on oral formulas. Taking Shoubo Zhang, a folk singer from Shanxi Province, as a case study, this research applies oral formula theory to analyze his oral performances. The analysis shows that his performances depend on a system of formulas composed of metrical units and narrative elements. Furthermore, the study finds that the singer's performance ability manifests as a dynamic generative capability, enabling flexible transitions within individual ballads as well as between different ballads through the use of formulas. Based on this, the paper extends this mechanism to the phenomenon of poetry generation in the Book of Songs, arguing for the universality of formulaic transitions as an intrinsic law of oral tradition.

Keywords: singer, metrical unit, emotional narrative, formulaic study

1. Introduction

Research on oral performance should be grounded in the factual realities of oral performance itself, aiming to construct theories of oral performance rather than merely importing Western theories or generalizing from particular Chinese experiences. Our theoretical work is primarily based on fieldwork data, through which various theoretical elements are developed and applied in practice [1]. One of Parry's contributions is the concept of the formula: "a group of words frequently used to express a specific basic idea under the same metrical conditions." Later, Lord, in *The Singer of Tales*, emphasized that oral epics differ from textual epics. He defined formulaic expression as a line or half-line of verse constructed according to a formulaic pattern. A formula is not a rigid cliché but is capable of variation. Attention should be focused on the "song" itself, as each performance constitutes an individual song. Storyteller-singers belong both to tradition and act as individual creators [2]. Mr. Wang Jingxian was among the earliest scholars to study the compositional characteristics of the *Book of Songs (Shijing)* from the perspective of oral poetry creation. In his book *The Bell and the Drum: Formulas and Compositional Methods in the Shijing*, he conducted an in-depth analysis of formulas (set phrases) in the *Shijing* [3]. Professor Xi Huimin, in analyzing the Northwestern hua'er folk songs, categorized their metrics into stanzas, rhythm, and rhyme, and proposed the concepts of form and subject [4]. Ao Dongbailige, based on the oral performance of the folk songs of the Mongols in Dedu, established a generative grammar theory for oral songs. Starting from the phenomenon of formulaic system transitions between songs, he used an axiomatic symbolic system to derive the basic framework of a theory on the generative structure of oral songs [5].

Research in both epic studies and ballad studies typically proceeds through four steps: hypothesis, deduction, conclusion, and verification [1]. This paper seeks to demonstrate how the singer Shoubo Zhang operates. By applying oral formula theory to Shoubo Zhang's performances, it is shown that not only the melodies—or metrical units (steps) he sings—are formulaic, but also the emotional narratives of the protagonist's actions can be decomposed, organized, and transformed according to formulas. Shoubo Zhang uses these methods to complete his performance repertoire (the sample analyzed in this study). Finally, by referencing the *Shijing*, the study demonstrates that formulaic transitions are a common phenomenon within ballad repertoires. It is evident that formulas exist within oral performance; these formulas form a system in the singer's mind as part of his singing tradition and naturally vary during performance, which constitutes the singer's performance ability.

The primary research method of this study is interviews. Multiple conversations were conducted with Shoubo Zhang to gather information about him personally. The research materials mainly consist of performance videos and audio files sent by the singer via WeChat, as well as videos uploaded on Douyin. A total of 40 songs were collected and organized for analysis, including 29 songs performed by Shoubo Zhang himself and 11 songs performed by fellow village artists such as Pei Dashen and Shu Fang.

2. The oral performance of folk singer Shoubo Zhang

Creation and performance are two aspects occurring simultaneously. A person reciting epic songs before us is not only a carrier of tradition but also an original artist, actively creating tradition in the process [2].

2.1. The singer's training

Folk singers possess distinctive creative techniques. Initially, they mainly learn by listening to others or studying printed versions, laying the groundwork. They then begin to perform on their own, during which they accumulate sufficient formulas and thematic material to form a system. A mature singer navigates tradition with ease, skillfully mastering formulaic techniques, possessing ample thematic resources, and capable of creating according to their own intentions [2].

From May to August 2025, multiple interviews were conducted with Shoubo Zhang. This section presents a summary of the information obtained about him and his performances to provide a basic understanding. Shoubo Zhang grew up in Yin Jiao Village, Yushe County, Jinzhong City, Shanxi Province. The local musical tradition of *kaihua diao* was popular, and many elderly villagers who tended cattle and sheep loved to sing. Zhang enjoyed listening to them and began trying to sing himself. From a young age, he showed remarkable talent: he could sense the next melody after the previous one and had a smooth, resonant voice. As he said, "All the rhythms follow the beating of our hearts."

After graduating from elementary school, he went to the mountains to tend cattle. Often spending an entire day alone on the mountain with a radio, he would sing while tending the cattle: "Sing towards the mountains, and the mountains echo back; sing what comes to mind, sing what you see." He continued this practice for four years, accumulating a large repertoire of songs and personal insights. At age fifteen, he began working in the city, gaining diverse experiences. He worked in various jobs—road construction, traditional building painting, house construction, among others—while frequently reading and singing in his spare time. During this stage, he developed his own song system. As he put it, "Once you learn the first song, the rest follow naturally."

Later, although he continued mainly farming in his village, he began participating in competitions and events such as the Jinzhong Migrant Workers' Folk Singer Competition, the Shanxi Provincial Folk Culture Talents Contest, and the Nineteen Provinces Folk Song Showcase. Recommended by the county to the city and then by the city to the province, these events provided opportunities to perform, learn, and exchange ideas with fellow enthusiasts and senior singers, as well as participate in training. During this period, he also embraced contemporary trends, recording and uploading his singing videos online. He sings both popular songs and traditional folk songs, performing works by others as well as his own compositions.

From Shoubo Zhang's experience, we can see the trajectory of his training and development as a folk singer. He grew up immersed in a singing environment, learning from fellow villagers as well as media and textual sources. His experiences were extensive, having worked in various fields and traveled to different places, yet he remained embedded in the contexts of his songs. His life and his songs were inseparable.

2.2. The storyteller-singer

Lord's *The Singer of Tales* addresses this issue in depth, highlighting that the storyteller-singer is a creator of stories. Even when performing the same folk song, each rendition by the same singer is unique. This demonstrates that every performance is singular and bears the singer's personal imprint. In the singer's conception, focused stability does not reside in fixed words; for him, words are never static, and the non-essential elements of the story are likewise fluid. His performance is constructed upon a stable narrative framework, which is how the singer experiences the song [2].

A specific song varies across different singers [2]. For example, in the Shanxi folk song *Praising Local Produce*, Shoubo Zhang orally performs the final line as "The dry flour cakes of Yushe smell so fragrant." Being from Yushe, he naturally incorporates local characteristics into the song. Another singer, when performing the same passage, sings "The sandpot of Pingding shines brightly."

A specific song also changes across different stages of a singer's career [2]. For instance, in his 23rd year of performing *Da Yao Da Bai*, Zhang sang, "I gave Daxi a motorcycle" (Daxi is a friend frequently appearing in his lyrics and videos). By April of his 25th year, he sang, "I gave my sister a motorcycle," and in his most recent performance, it became, "I gave my sister a motorboat." Furthermore, endings of lines continue to vary: sometimes he sings "ai," sometimes "hai." Clearly, there is no notion of an "original" versus "adapted" version; each performance reflects the singer performing in a specific place and context. In one interview, he explained that the motorboat reference arose because he was visiting Yun Zhu Lake and riding a motorboat at the time.

Each performance is a specific song while simultaneously representing the general song [2]. Every rendition is an act of creation. This aligns with Shoubo Zhang's earlier statement: "Once you learn the first song, the rest follow naturally."

3. Typical formulas in Shoubo Zhang's oral performance

A formula is a set of words frequently used to express a specific meaning under the same metrical conditions. Formulaic expression is a line or half-line of verse constructed according to a formulaic pattern. Formulas are not rigid clichés; they are flexible and often generate new formulas [2]. In Shoubo Zhang's folk song performances, certain words and phrases frequently recur. Based on Professor Xi Huimin's theory and classification of "filler words" in *Northwest Hua'er Studies* [4], as well as Lord's theory of basic formulas in *The Singer of Tales*, this chapter analyzes the typical formulas appearing in Shoubo Zhang's performances, helping to understand formulaic structure and its transformations in oral performance.

3.1. Filler words

Filler words are commonly used in vocal art to supplement the main lyrics that express the theme, serving singing needs rather than carrying semantic meaning [4]. In Shoubo Zhang's performances, he often employs meaningless single or two-character words. These words reflect both local linguistic habits and the singer's personal preferences, and they also help regulate rhythm. Common examples include “那个” (that), “那” (that), “了” (particle), “个” (classifier), and “来” (come). Sample usages in songs include:

2024, *Erdao Gelang*: “三一道道那圪梁梁上，哎嘿呦哎嗨呦，双骑上个马哎。”

2022, *Wuge Fangshe*: “正月个里来正月正，正月那个十五哎，挂上那红灯。”

2025, *Hui Ge*: “每日里想你你不在，这些日子你在哪些来。”

He also repeatedly uses meaningless phrases to complement meaningful sentences, strengthen expression, and convey emotion. These phrases also regulate sentences and passages. Examples include “呀小亲圪蛋。呀小亲圪蛋,” “呀亲呀亲呀个蛋呀个蛋,” “哎呦呦哎嗨呦,” and “哎嘿呦哎嗨呦.” Sample usages:

2023, *Qin Ge'dan Goes to the River to Wash Clothes*: “亲圪蛋下河洗衣裳，双圪顶跪在石头上。呀小亲圪呆，呀小亲圪呆。”

2025, *Hui Ge*: “每日里想你你不在，这些日子你在哪些来。呀亲呀亲呀个呆呀个呆。”

2024, *Shang Yi Dao Dao Po Po Xia Yi Dao Dao Liang*: “上一道那个坡了坡，哎呦呦哎嗨嗨。”

3.2. “Kaihua” structure (floral melody structure)

As Shoubo Zhang explained in field interviews: “For example, some traditional lyrics are passed down, combined with certain melodies. In our area, we sing mostly kaihua melodies. We can sing whatever we see on the spot.” These songs share basic metrical patterns, though the lyrics differ. They often begin with “...kaihua” and are usually preceded by three syllables. Even when the object has only two syllables, a dummy word may be added or a syllable lengthened, such as “玉蕉的” (jade banana), “扫帚哎” (broom hey), or “门哒哒” (door da-da). The first line typically follows a 3–2 pattern, with the last three syllables describing the preceding object. The second line usually expresses emotion or tells a story, typically 4–5 syllables, often ending with “妹妹呀” (little sister), even if it does not literally refer to a sister. This formula is also a simplified form of transformation. Examples from 2025–2022:

2025, Shoubo Zhang: “拖拉机|开花，在路上。你住|在城里，妹妹呀，俺下了乡。青石板|开花，光溜溜。俺要|比你，妹妹呀，没啦一头。”

Pei Dashen: “苦苦菜|开花，苦更苦。可怜|的我们，是没文化|受了苦。”

2022, Shu Fang: “玉蕉的|开花，半中腰。早就|把你，妹妹呀。”

2022, fellow village artist: “扫帚哎|开花，落了子。不想|那旁人，妹妹呀。”

2022, village singer “Mao Ge”: “小锄头|开花，入了土。看见|你来呀，不想走。核桃树|开花，黑夜开。白天走了，黑夜来。”

4. Transformations in Shoubo Zhang's oral performance

We assume the existence of a set of oral songs within a particular community and define this set through a single song (the song) [6]. In this study, Shoubo Zhang's folk song performances are treated as a set S , consisting of elements $s_1s_2s_3\ldots s_n$, with his singing ability encompassing the entire song set. How, then, does his performance ability enable transformations between these songs? To facilitate understanding of oral performance transformations, the oral texts are arranged axiomatically, and the rhythm of the performance is represented using the symbol x .

Each song is an emotional narrative. The poetic structure of “the song” forms an emotional story. Its basic structure can be conceptualized as a second-order projection relationship of an emotional action. First, there is an emotional action; second, its causal trigger is introduced, expanded, and the emotional trajectory is explained; finally, these elements are integrated into a complete emotional story. Here, an emotional action is projected as the cause and, through its course, projected again as the

trajectory. This second-order projection relationship is referred to as the “second-order projection structure of emotional action formulas” [7]. Emotional action is represented as α , cause as β , expansion as δ , and emotional trajectory as γ , providing a clear framework to understand the emotional narrative of the performance.

4.1. Case 1: transformations within a single performance

Every oral performance contains transformations. First, the metrical structure is analyzed axiomatically, and second-order projection structures are applied to interpret Shoubo Zhang's lyrics across different performances. The first analysis is of S1, the song *Erdao Gelang* (Figure 1). The second performance, *Shang Yi Dao Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Dao Liang*, is denoted S2.

Text of *Erdao Gelang* Oral Performance

头一道圪梁梁哎呦呦哎呦呦

Tou yi dao ge liang liang aiyouyou aiyouyou

二一道那洼

Er yi dao na wa

三一道道那圪梁梁上哎嘿呦哎嘿呦

San yi dao dao na ge liang liang shang aiheyiyou aiheyiyou

双骑上个马哎

Shuang qi shang ge ma ai

骑马你不要骑哎呦呦哎呦呦

qi ma ni bu yao qi aiyouyou aiyouyou

带了驹驹的马

Dai le jv jv de ma

马了驹驹那想了娘哎嘿呦哎嘿呦

Ma le jv jv na xiang le niang ai aiheyiyou aiheyiyou

人想那个家哎

Ren xiang na ge jia ai

Metrical Structure of *Erdao Gelang*

S1

X x x| x x x| x x x| x x x

X x x x| x

X x x x x| x x x x| x x x| x x x

X x x x| x x

X x x| x x x| x x x| x x x

X x x x x| x

X x x x x| x x x x| x x x| x x x

X x x x| x x

Based on the singer's pauses, the song can be divided into two sections, D1 and D2, each consisting of four lines. The metrical pattern for both sections is roughly 3-3-3-3, (4/5)-1, 5-4-3-3, 4-2. Filler words such as “那” and “了” appear, and lines one and three in each section include filler interjections “哎呦呦|哎呦呦” and “哎嘿呦|哎嘿呦.” The primary rhyme is “a,” appearing in “梁,” “洼,” “马,” and “家.”

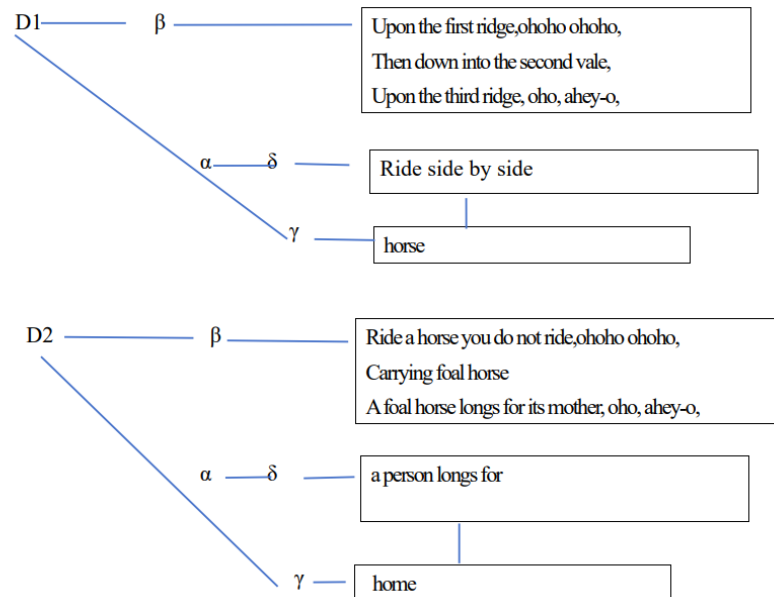


Figure 1. Second-order projection of emotional actions in *Erdao Gelang*

Erdao Gelang is an emotional narrative. Its structure, divided into $S1 = D1 = D2$, demonstrates internal transformations. In D1, the protagonist is on the ridge, riding horses side by side. The action “ride” projects the cause “ridge,” and as the action unfolds, it projects the trajectory “horse,” forming a narrative unit. In D2, the emotional action “long” projects the cause “foal longs for its mother” (β) and subsequently projects the final emotional trajectory “home” (γ). From both the metrical and emotional narrative perspectives, D1 and D2 are transformable units, showing that internal transformations generate continuity in the song. Overall, the action “ride,” the cause “ridge” (as an initiating formula), and the trajectory “foal longs for its mother → human longs for home” integrate into a complete emotional story. According to the singer and his other folk songs, “longing for the mother” is also used metaphorically to express longing for a loved one, consistent with the story prototypes described in interviews.

Text of *Shang Yi Dao Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Dao Liang* oral performance

上一道那个坡了坡哎呦呦哎嗨嗨

Shang yi dao na ge po le po aiyouyou aiheihei

下一道道梁

Xia yi dao dao liang

想起了我那小妹妹哎呦呦

Xiang qi le wo na xiao mei mei aiyouyou

嗨嗨

haihai

好心慌啊嗨嗨哎

Hao xin huang ahei haihai

你不去那个掏了菜哎呦呦哎嗨嗨

Ni bu qu na ge tao le cai aiyouyou aiyouyou

崖畔上那个站

Ya pan shang na ge zhan

把我们那个年轻人儿呦

Ba wo men de na ge nian qing qing reneryou

嗨——

Haihai

心忧乱啊嗨嗨嗨

Xin you luan ahahai haihai

Metrical Structure of *Shang Yi Dao Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Dao Liang*

S2

X x x x x | x x x | x x x | x x x

X x x x | x

X x x x x | x x x x x | x
 x x
 X x | x
 x x | x x
 X x x x x | x x x | x x x | x x x
 X x x x x | x
 X x x x x x | x x x x x x | X
 x x
 X x | x
 x x x | x x

The song S1 can be divided into two sections, d1 and d2. In the first section, the metrical pattern is roughly 5-3-3-3, 4-1, 5-6-1, 2, 2-1, 2-2; in the second section, it is 3-3-3, 5-1, 6-6-1, 2, 2-1, 3-2. Each section's first line ends with the interjection “哎呦呦|哎嗨嗨.” In the third line, the interjections vary slightly: in the first section “哎呦呦,” in the second section “人儿哟,” but they correspond in function. The endings are also similar: “啊嗨|嗨哎” and “啊哈嗨|嗨嗨,” with slight lengthening in the second section for closure. A recurring “心+adjective” formula links each section of the song.

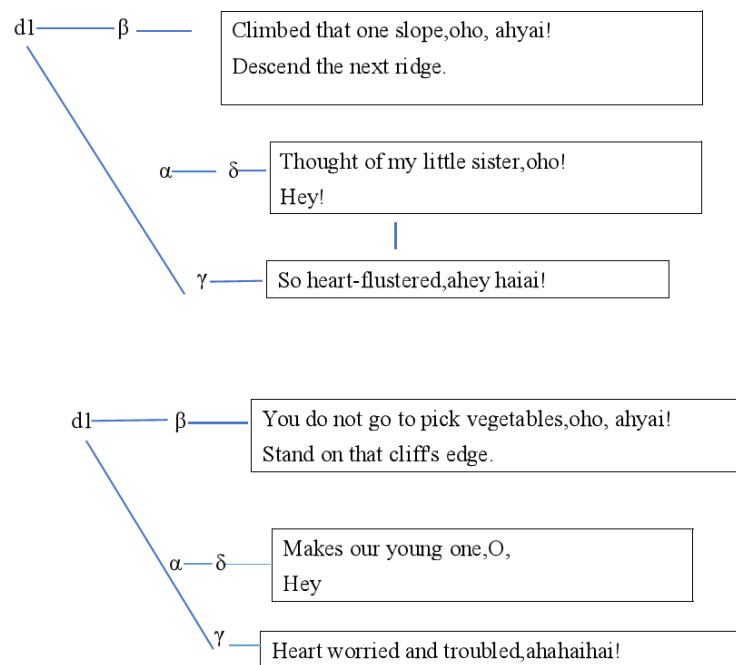


Figure 2. Second-order projection of emotional actions in *Shang Yi Dao Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Dao Liang*

Shang Yi Dao Dao Po is an emotional narrative (Figure 2). Its structure, divided into two sections, demonstrates internal transformations. In the first section d1, the protagonist walks or works on the slope, recalling a loved one, and feels flustered. Here, the emotional action “think” projects the cause β — the setting of “up slope, down ridge” — then, through the action δ , recalls the loved one, projecting the emotional trajectory γ — inner agitation. This forms a narrative unit. In the second section d2, the emotional action “think” projects the cause β — the loved one standing on the cliff — and, through δ , focuses on the young person, projecting the emotional trajectory γ — internal disturbance. The protagonist may imagine or actually see the loved one, and by affecting the young person’s heart, expresses their own emotional turbulence. This is a second-order projection relationship regarding “thinking”: the emotional action “think” is followed by the cause (setting), expansion (recalling the loved one), and finally the emotional trajectory (the protagonist’s agitation), integrating into a complete emotional narrative.

The recurring “heart+adjective” formula serves as the emotional trajectory of the performance. From both the metrical and narrative perspectives, the two sections d1 and d2 are transformable. Comparing these two case studies shows that later sections can be generated from earlier ones, demonstrating that each oral performance internally exhibits generative transformations.

4.2. Case 2: transformations between specific songs

The previous section discussed internal transformations, showing that within each oral performance, every segment is formulaic and can be generatively transformed. The next step is to examine transformations between two songs, specifically between S1

and S2. Many folk songs contain words or phrases that can be added or omitted, such as “那个” (that), “那” (that), “了” (le), “哎” (ai), “哎呦哎呦” (aiyouyou aiyouyou), “嗨嗨” (haihai), and “哎嗨” (aihui). According to interviews with the singer and observations of his performances at different times, he sometimes adds or omits these elements. Therefore, modifying the number of words or adjusting sentence structure is relatively flexible in performance. We first consider the transformation of the first segments, D1 of S1 and d1 of S2; the later segments follow a similar pattern.

D1

X x x | x x x | x x x | x x x
 X x x x | x
 X x x x x | x x x x | x x x x
 X x x x | x x

d1

x x x x x | x x x | x x x | x x x
 x x x x | x
 x x x x x | x x x x x x | x
 x x
 x x | x
 x x | x x

In terms of meter, D1 follows roughly 3-3-3-3, 4-1, 5-4-3-3, 4-2, whereas d1 is 5-3-3-3, 4-1, 5-6-1, 2, 2-1, 2-2. The first line of D1 can be changed to 5-3-3-3 by inserting words like “那个,” “哎,” or “了,” or by lengthening a syllable, which is common in performance. The pattern 5-4-3-3 can transform into 5-6-1 similarly, using added particles or interjections such as “嗨嗨哎.” In terms of rhyme, S1S_1S1 uses “a” as a rhyme in places (“洼,” “马,” “家”), whereas S2S_2S2 rhymes with “ang” and “an” (“梁,” “慌,” “站,” “乱”). Transforming a word like “洼” to a semantically similar “梁,” or adding interjections such as “哟” or “嗨” at line endings, allows rhythmic and rhyming adjustment (Figure 3 and 4).

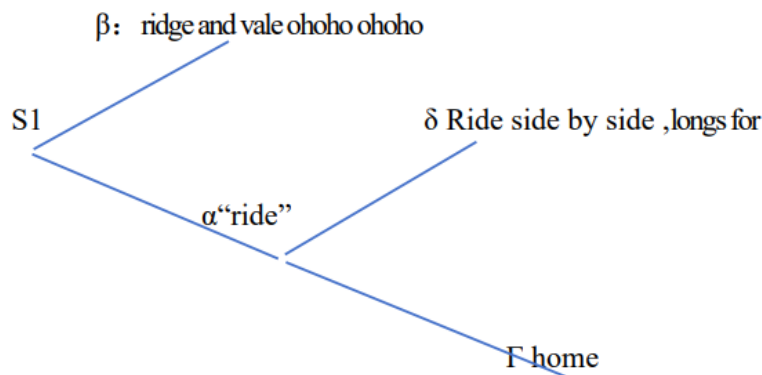


Figure 3. Overall emotional-action formulaic second-order projection structure in *Erdao Gelang*

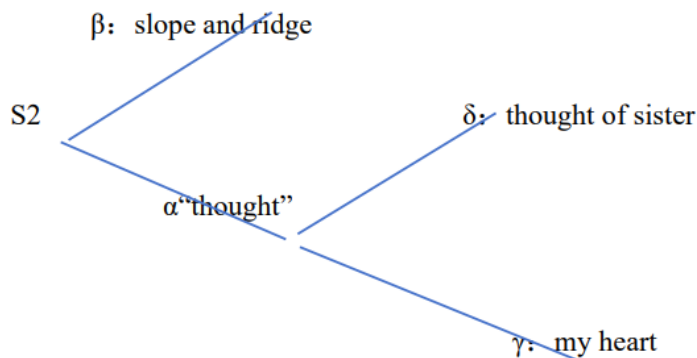


Figure 4. Overall emotional-action formulaic second-order projection structure in *Shang Yi Dao Dao Po Xia Yi Dao Dao Liang*

From the narrative generation perspective, both stories express longing. Each begins with an emotional action α that projects a cause β — a scene setting — followed by the expansion of the emotional story. In S1, the scene is “ridge and vale,” while in S2

it is “slope and ridge,” so the transformation required is minor, sometimes unnecessary. The emotional action α differs slightly: in S1, it is a physical action, “ride,” which expands through δ as “ride side by side, carrying the foal horse, foal longs for mother,” metaphorically expressing longing for a person, projecting to γ — the protagonist’s emotional destination “home.” In S2, the emotional action “think” expands through δ as “thought of sister, young person,” projecting to γ — the protagonist’s agitated heart. To perform the transformation, δ is adapted from S1’s literal horse-to-person imagery to S2’s imagined loved one appearing before the singer. In γ , the emotional outcome changes from S1’s longing to S2’s frustrated yearning or agitation. Through analysis of metrical structure and narrative projections, it can be inferred that other songs can also be mutually transformed using similar methods. This demonstrates that Shoubo Zhang, as a folk singer, possesses this generative performance ability: in his mind exists a collection of folk songs in which all elements can be transformed and recombined, forming a dynamic oral tradition.

5. Transformations in the *Shijing*: *He Guang* and *Guan Ju*

In Chapter 3, we analyzed transformations between two different folk songs performed by Shoubo Zhang, demonstrating that his song repertoire can be generatively transformed. In this chapter, we examine whether transformations also exist within the *Shijing* (Classic of Poetry) by focusing on two poems: *Guan Ju* (s3) and *He Guang* (s4). This serves to show that formulaic structures and the ability to transform between songs are broadly present, not limited to oral folk traditions.

Guan Ju — Full Text with Pinyin

关关雎鸠，在河之洲。guan guan ju jiu, zai he zhi zhou窈窕淑女，君子好逑。yao tiao shu nv, jun zi hao qiu
参差荇菜，左右流之。cen ci xing cai, zuo you liu zhi窈窕淑女，寤寐求之。yao tiao shu nv, wu mei qiu zhi
求之不得，寤寐思服。qiu zhi bu de, wu mei si fu悠哉悠哉，辗转反侧。you zai you zai, zhan zhuan fan ce
参差荇菜，左右采之。cen ci xing cai, zuo you cai zhi窈窕淑女，琴瑟友之。yao tiao shu nv, qin se you zhi
参差荇菜，左右芼之。cen ci xing cai, zuo you mao zhi窈窕淑女，钟鼓乐之。yao tiao shu nv, zhong gu le zhi

Metrical Structure of *Guan Ju*

x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x

From a metrical perspective, *Guan Ju* consists of five stanzas, each with four lines. Pauses are determined by sound, aligning with meaning. Each line contains one pause, with two characters per pause, forming a double-character line ending. Rhymes generally fall on content words such as nouns, verbs, or adjectives. Stanza 1 rhymes: 鸠 (jiu), 洲 (zhou), 逑 (qiu) Stanza 2 rhymes: 流 (liu), 求 (qiu) Stanza 3 rhymes: 得 (de), 服 (fu), 侧 (ce) Stanza 4 rhymes: 采 (cai), 友 (you) Stanza 5 rhymes: 芼 (mao), 乐 (yue) The structure is regular and formulaic, providing a rhythmic and semantic framework for oral or performative recitation.

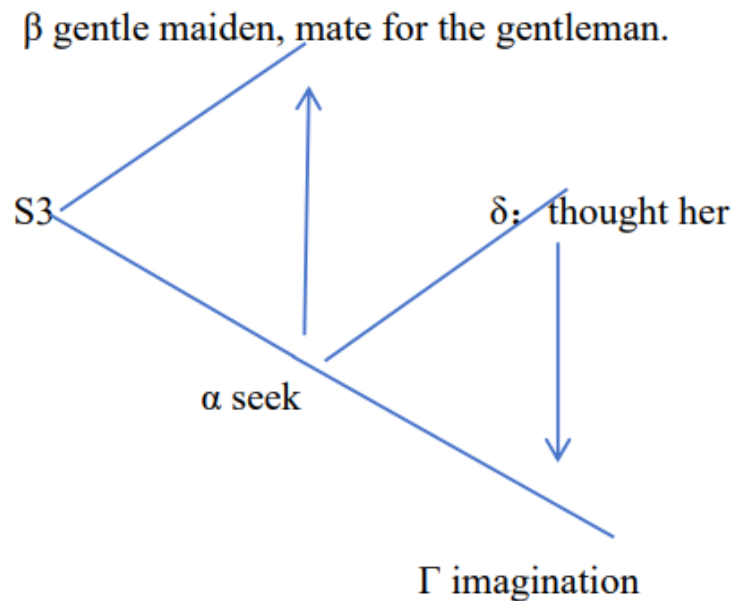


Figure 5. Overall emotional-action formulaic second-order projection structure in *Guan Ju*

The poem *Guan Ju* is a narrative of longing [8]. The protagonist longs because he cannot obtain his desire. Denote it as s_3 . As shown in Figure 5, the emotional action α “seek (逌)” indicates that the protagonist pursues the gentle maiden but fails to obtain her, thus thinking of her both day and night. This “seek” is projected onto the cause β “the gentle and fair maiden, a fine mate for the gentleman (窈窕淑女，君子好逌)”: the protagonist encounters a beautiful maiden and naturally desires to pursue her. This is the first-order projection. The extension or development δ of “seek” is “with zither and lute we befriend her / with bell and drum we delight her (琴瑟友之 / 钟鼓乐之)”, in which the “long and short waterlilies (参差荇菜)” formula is clearly used. The protagonist’s longing reaches its peak as he imagines interacting with the maiden. The “think” action, after expansion, projects onto the emotional outcome γ , appearing in every stanza as “her (之)”, that is, the gentle maiden, imagining a happy union. Overall, this poem is an emotional story of “seeking (逌之)”. The poem’s stanza structure itself imitates the protagonist’s initial encounter, the inability to obtain, the longing, and the imaginative interaction, forming a complete story, as shown in Figure 6.

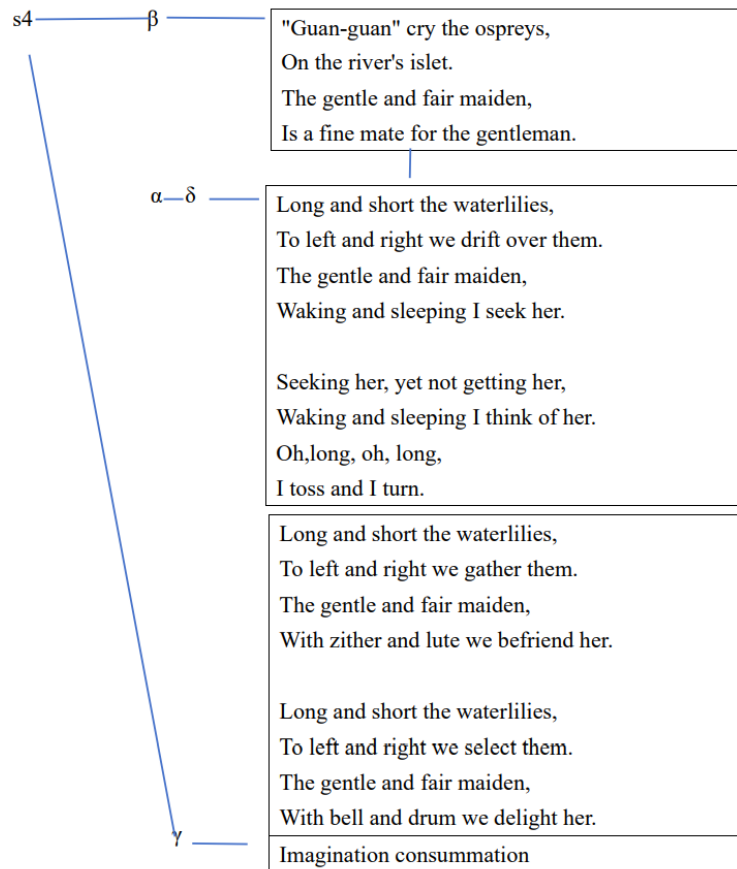


Figure 6. *Guan Ju* overall emotional-action formulaic second-order projection structure diagram

5.1. The meter and emotional formula of *He Guang*

He Guang with Pinyin:

谁谓河广？一苇杭之。Shui wei he guang, yi wei hang zhi
谁谓宋远？跂予望之。Shui wei song yuan, qi yu wang zhi
谁谓河广？曾不容刀。Shui wei he guang, ceng bu rong dao
谁谓宋远？曾不崇朝。Shui wei song yuan, ceng bu chong zhao

He Guang Meter:

x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x
x x | x x

Denote the poem *He Guang* as s4. From the meter, the poem has two sections, each with four lines. Each line has one pause, each pause contains two syllables, and the final pause has two syllables forming a double ending. Rhymes are marked above: the first section rhymes on “ang” (hang, wang), the second section rhymes on “ao” (dao, zhao).

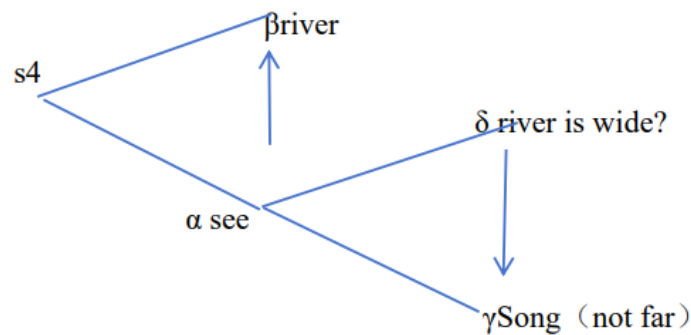


Figure 7. *He Guang* overall emotional-action formulaic second-order projection structure diagram

As shown in Figure 7, from the perspective of plot or narrative formula, *He Guang* is a story of a traveler longing to return home but unable to do so. The “river wide” lines are the title, and the “Song far” lines are the theme. Since the poem is in a self-questioning style, we can infer the emotional action α is “look/long (望)”. This action projects onto the cause β , which is “the river”, traditionally used as a scene for longing. The protagonist walks by the river as if gazing across to his hometown. The action “look/long” is expanded spatially (“A single reed can sail me to the other side / I can see it standing on tiptoe”) projecting to “Song not far”. Temporally, “cannot hold a tiny boat / could be there before morning” also projects to “Song not far”. The emotional story is longing across the river for Song, using “Song not far” to console his own thoughts. The full structure is shown in Figure 8.

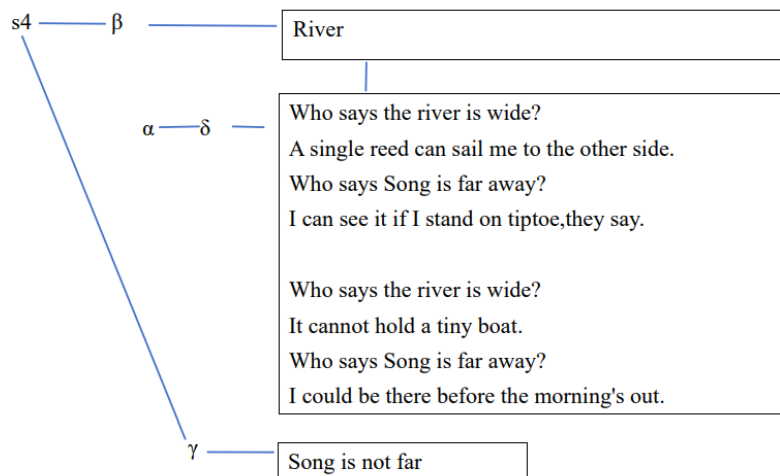


Figure 8. *He Guang* overall emotional-action formulaic second-order projection structure diagram

5.2. Conversion between *Guan Ju* and *He Guang*

From the meter, both poems share a similar structure: two-two rhythm and rhymes at line endings. Both poems involve the theme of a river: in *Guan Ju*, the ospreys are on a river islet, later gathering waterlilies; in *He Guang*, the protagonist gazes across the river to the opposite shore. Regarding the story, both core emotions are longing: *Guan Ju* expresses longing for a mate, *He Guang* expresses longing for one’s homeland.

Structurally, *s4* has two sections, *s3* has five sections, so to convert *s4* to *s3*, three sections need to be added or removed. To preserve completeness, *s4* is converted into *s3*. The additional sections should correspond to the β and γ parts of the emotional story. The emotional action α in *s4* is “look/long”; therefore, before “Who says the river is wide...”, one can add descriptions of walking along the Yellow River, corresponding to “guan guan ju jiu” in *Guan Ju*. After “cannot hold a tiny boat”, two sections can be added: gazing into the distance, seeing the silhouettes of carriages and wheels, imagining returning home, hearing familiar dialect, smelling hometown food, approaching the family gate, reuniting with family—corresponding to the imagined happy ending in *Guan Ju*. Ultimately, *He Guang* can be structured similarly to *Guan Ju*. Thus, the conversion mechanism exists broadly across different collections. Not only Shoubo Zhang’s folk song performance, but also *Shijing* poems can be generated through

conversion. Therefore, the ability to convert among song sets is universal. Folk singers possess this ability, enabling them to perform numerous folk songs, each performance being meaningful and effective.

6. Conclusion

This study, based on in-depth interviews with the folk singer Shoubo Zhang and an analysis of his oral performances alongside his personal reflections, applies the theory of oral formulae to examine his singing practice. The research finds that through long-term training and accumulated experience, Shoubo Zhang has mastered a system of formulae composed of both metrical patterns and emotional narratives. His oral performances exhibit formulaic structures—not only in terms of rhythm and metre, but also in the organization of the stories themselves. These formulae, forming a coherent system in the singer's mind, naturally vary in performance, demonstrating the singer's interpretive and creative capabilities. Extending this mechanism of transformation to the generative processes of poetry in the Shijing, the study further confirms that formulaic transformations represent a universal principle within oral traditions. Evidently, the singer achieves both generativity and creativity in oral performance through the dynamic use of folk-song formulae.

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