

Chinese Patterned Texts

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In China shaped poetry is closely linked with palindromes. The earliest examples are attributed to the fourth century A.D. An important source for early patterned poems was published in the twelfth century; another anthology appeared ca. 1693. The article includes examples of patterned poetry in translation and some remarks on the technique of 'deciphering' patterned poems.

The arrangement of a text into a shaped pattern is not unknown in Chinese literature. It belongs to the range of literary playforms in which the educated elite indulged, particularly since the Sung dynasty (960-1279). Such shaped texts were frequently devised as literary puzzles, because it was left to the ingenuity of the reader where to begin the reading and in which direction to proceed. The peculiarity of the Chinese script where a character is a word, and of the syntactic structure of literary Chinese where grammatical morphemes are relatively rare, has from early on linked shaped texts with palindromes (*hui-wen*). In a language like literary Chinese it is much easier to compose intelligent palindromes than in Indo-European languages, for example. It is therefore significant that in another East Asian language which is largely monosyllabic like Chinese, namely Vietnamese, we find palindromes, too (in Vietnamese they are called *thuan ngich doc*, "downstream and upstream reading"). Palindromes were recognized early as a legitimate art form in Chinese literary criticism. Already the *Wen-hsin tiao-lung*, a critical discussion of literary genres by Liu Hsieh (ca. 465-522), mentions palindromes as a genre by itself (Shih 1970: 45). A similar work of literary criticism, the *Ts'ang-lang shih-hua* by Yen Yü (fl. ca. 1200) lists palindromes along with shaped poetry (Debon 1962: 80-1) and other literary puzzles.

Shaped texts in Chinese can be poetry or prose. The text might be composed in order to be arranged in a pattern, or a pre-existing text can be shaped ex post. The pattern itself is either geometrical or abstract; circular arrangements are quite frequent. It can also be arranged so that the resulting shape is the visual representation of an object, animal or plant, etc. Each Chinese shaped text belongs to one or more of the categories listed above.

The first Chinese author who systematically collected palindromes and shaped poetry seems to have been Sang Shih-ch'ang, the author of the *Hui-wen lei-chü* ("A collection of palindromes according to categories"). Unfortunately not much is known about him. The date of his birth can roughly be

estimated as ca. 1140. In addition to the *Hui-wen lei-chü*, Sang also wrote a treatise on the famous calligraphy by Wang Hsi-chih (303-79), the "Orchid pavilion preface" (*Lan-t'ing hsü*). This treatise is preserved and has been many times reprinted.

It seems that the *Hui-wen lei-chü* was printed during Sang's lifetime, but no copy of the original edition has survived. In the sixteenth century the work was reprinted by the anthologist Chang Chi-hsiang (1507-87) but also of this edition no original copy could be traced in the bibliographies. Only the reprint of ca. 1692 by Chu Hsiang-hsien (for whom see below) is still extant, but even this edition is quite rare. It includes Sang Shih-ch'ang's original, undated preface and several other prefatory materials. The work consists of four chapters: chapters one and two deal with shaped poetry, whereas chapters three and four are an anthology of palindromes. Chu's edition has a fifth, unnumbered chapter, *Chih-chin hui-wen t'u* ("The palindrome on woven brocade with illustrations"). This chapter consists of the poem block attributed to Su Hui (for whom see below) and explanations on how to read this block. There follow nine woodcut illustrations based on the paintings of Chin Shih, a seventeenth-century painter, which illustrate scenes from the story of Su Hui. Each woodcut is accompanied by a poem from Chu Hsiang-hsien's brush in a variety of calligraphic styles.

This poem block, in Chinese *Hsüan-chi t'u*, is one of the most famous literary tours de force in Chinese civilization. It is an arrangement of $29 \times 29 = 841$ characters in a square which can be read in various ways "backwards and forwards, up and down, in squares, whorls, diagonally, and in a dozen other combinations" (Lin 1965: 308). The *Hsüan-chi t'u* is attributed to Su Hui, the wife of the official Tou T'ao (4th Century). Tou had taken a sing-song girl as a concubine. Su Hui became understandably jealous, particularly after her husband had taken the concubine to accompany him to a distant office. Su Hui then wove a piece of brocade on which the 841 characters were represented in order to give expression to her sorrow and love, and sent it to her husband. Tou T'ao was so impressed by this piece of female ingenuity that he was reconciled with his wife. Ever since, the poem block has been regarded in China as a sublime piece of female skill, as C. T. Hsia has shown recently (Hsia 1977: 288-9). Most major literary critics in traditional China at least mention the poem block (e.g., see Debon 1962: 80, 169). The story of Su Hui and her ingenious piece of poetry is also the subject of a novel in colloquial Chinese, the *Hui-wen chuan* ("The story of the palindrome"), and there exist several theater plays with the same subject. A hand-scroll attributed to the Ming painter Ch'iu Ying (ca. 1494-ca. 1552) in the New York Metropolitan Museum of Art illustrates the story of Su Hui.

Another shaped poem written by a woman is the "Poem written on a round plate" (*p'an-chung shih*) attributed to the wife of Su Po-yü (2nd Century). This poem is arranged in seven concentric circles around the character *shan* ("mountain") just as the character *hsin* ("heart") is in the middle of Su Hui's poem block. In the *Hui-wen lei-chü* the poem in the plate appears in chapter 2, page 1b-2a; it is also reproduced in Debon (1962: 170). The *Hui-wen lei-chü*

has, apart from the poem block, altogether seventeen shaped poems. The shapes are abstract, mostly in circles, but there are also three in other forms (squares or lattice shapes). The fact that they are all riddles is shown by the explanations on how to read the poems. Indeed, poems with a "hidden beginning" (*ts'ang-t'ou*) are at the basis of the anacyclic compositions.

It should be added that the poem block (*Hsüan-chi t'u*) has also been imitated in Japan, although the Japanese language makes it much more difficult to construct a shaped text. For an impressive example, see the catalog of a recent exhibition in Köln (Sho 1975: 142-5). It was composed by the Japanese emperor Go-Mizuno-o in 1648 and can be read in different ways so that the block yields sixteen different poems. The number of poems to be extracted according to the different ways of reading in the original Chinese poem block of Su Hui is much greater. It is possible to produce hundreds of readings of poems in various prosodic meters (for examples, see Wang 1976: 11f.; for illustrations of the *Hsüan-chi t'u*, see plates 1-10). The *Hsüan-chi t'u* also plays a certain role in the novel *Ching-hua yüan* (for a translation see Li 1965: 242-3; for the original Chinese version see Li 1979: 290-301).

Chu Hsiang-hsien, the editor of Sang Shih-ch'ang's *Hui-wen lei-chü* was an elusive person. He was a native of Su-chou. He seems to have been a publisher because he had the blocks for the xylograph reprint of the *Hui-wen lei-chü* carved privately. We can cull some information about him from the various prefaces to his compilation, *Hui-wen lei-chü hsü-pien* ("A continuation of the *Hui-wen lei-chü*"). One of the prefaces to the continuation is dated 12th month of the year 1692 (in European chronology, January 6 to February 5, 1693). The *Hsü-pien* must therefore have been published privately some time after 1693. The book itself is relatively rare but very important because it includes a great number of shaped poems. The *Hsü-pien* consists of ten chapters, of which one to seven are an anthology of shaped texts and eight to ten are an anthology of palindromes by authors not represented in Sang Shih-ch'ang's *Hui-wen lei-chü*. Chu Hsiang-hsien's collection is partly based on an earlier work. Chapters three to six are a re-edition of the *Hsüan-chi ts'ui-chin* ("Fragmented brocades of the *Hsüan-chi*") by the late seventeenth-century author Wan Shu. This work had originally two chapters with thirty shaped poems in each chapter, which Chu Hsiang-hsien in his version spread over four chapters of his own anthology. Chapter seven of Chu's anthology consists of additions to Wan Shu's work, whereas chapters one and two are independently collected shaped poems.

There can be no doubt that Chu Hsiang-hsien's *Hui-wen lei-chü hsü-pien* is the most comprehensive anthology of shaped poetry in Chinese. The works by the twentieth-century author Wang Chung-hou (Wang 1966 and 1976) on palindromes largely rely on Chu Hsiang-hsien's work; they are, for the sinologist, useful because they include many punctuated readings of the literary puzzles in Chu Hsiang-hsien's and Sang Shih-ch'ang's books. A thorough analysis of the materials in the *Hsü-pien* would require much space and further research into the provenance of individual shaped poems. We shall therefore give in our survey a few results only. The total number of shaped pieces

(poetry and prose) in Chu's anthology is 108. In not a few cases earlier poems have been put into shapes. These include poems by the famous author Tu Fu (712-70), by the Ming emperor Hsüan-tsung (1399-1435, r. 1425-35) and by the Ming literatus-painter T'ang Yin (1470-1523). In other cases the names of original authors are given but no identification was possible. Chu Hsiang-hsien himself contributed some pieces, and so did several of his learned friends.

Regarding the shapes of the texts, we can distinguish three types: poems derived from the *Hsüan-chi t'u* poem block, geometric arrangements (mostly cyclical), and poems shaped into representations of objects. Within this group we can again differentiate between poems which show a contentual relation to the shaped figure, and those which do not. As far as prosody is concerned, we find poems with four, five, six, or seven words per line, and also songs (*tz'u*). Song prosody is particularly difficult because of the complicated verse structures. In each case Chu Hsiang-hsien has added rules for the correct reading of the shaped text; he thus provides the solutions for the literary puzzles.

We might perhaps ask what the motives were for this purposely difficult genre. The answer is that such poems were intended to show off skill in mastering the complicated prosodic patterns of Chinese versification. At the same time, readers were tested for ingenuity and perceptiveness. In other words, patterned poems were a literary play-form of the *homo ludens* among the literati. It should also be noted that the content of these poems remains within the poetic traditions and conventions. The poems never try to open up unusual or non-traditional subject matter, nor do we find formal innovations or new prosodic patterns. Shaping poems did not mean much more than re-arranging a normal poem into a shape where it had to be "deciphered" in order to reappear as a regular poem. It is by no means easy to understand a patterned poem in Chinese because one has first to find out where to start reading and in what direction. Without the comments explaining the method of reading one would have to rely on a trial-and-error method. All this is difficult enough, but some authors were not content with the degree of difficulty and added more puzzles, for example, by indicating the technique of "dissected characters." This means that in some poems one has to start reading or to use only a part of the character concerned. In the following we shall give some examples of poems included in Sang's and Chu's anthologies. The simplest form are poems arranged in a circular shape.

The first example of a circular poem is deceptively simple (Figure 1). The circle consists of only sixteen characters, but these characters can be used for a poem of twenty-eight words (four lines with seven words each). The trick consists, apart from finding out where to start reading, in repeating for each line the last three words of the preceding line. The poem is a winter poem from a series of four describing the four seasons. A free translation follows:

Everywhere white snow dances around the veranda.
When snow dances around the veranda, its ornaments
are adorned like jade.
The veranda ornaments like jade make the silver
park pure.

圖詩字折字藏

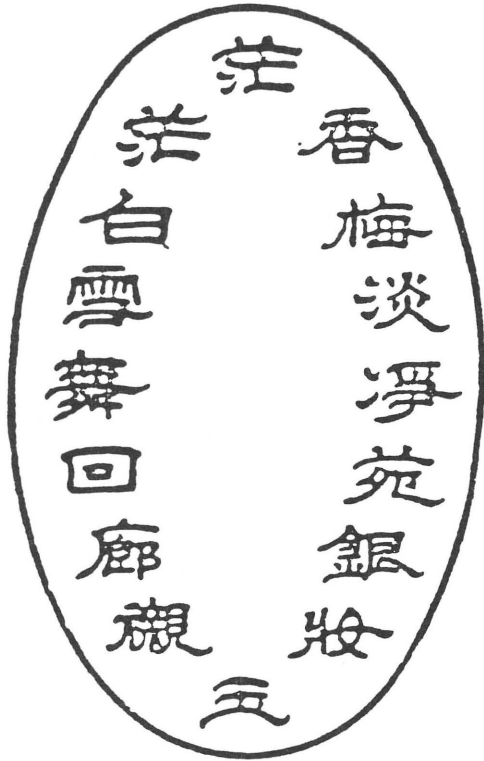


Figure 1. Wang (1976) pl. 19. Based on *Hui-wen lei-chü hsü-pien*, ch. 1, p. 5b.

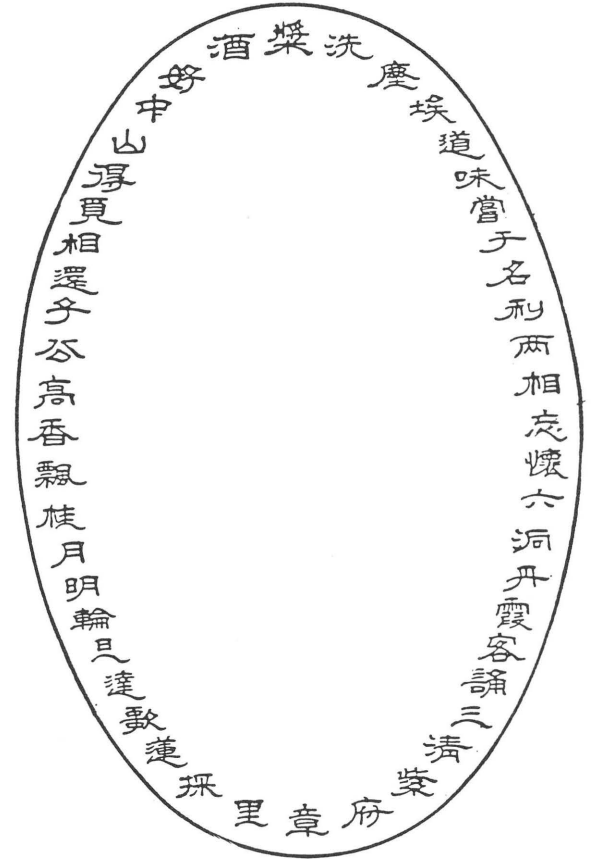


Figure 2. Wang (1976) pl. 22. Based on *Hui-wen lei-chü hsü-pien*, ch. 2, p. 10b.

The park with silver adornments is pure, and
light is the fragrance of the plum trees.

This anonymous poem uses conventional clichés for the winter: the white fragrant flowers of the plum blossom when it still snows. Silver and jade evoke purity. The important point is, however, that the poem is at the same time a palindrome and can be read backwards; the general sense remains more or less the same. Not only the last words of lines one, two, and four rhyme, but also the first words of lines four, three, and one.

A more complicated example is based on a poem attributed to the T'ang poet Po Chü-i (772-846) (Figure 2). It is arranged in an oval shape and combines "hidden beginning" with "dissected characters." There are altogether 48 characters from which a poem of eight lines with seven words each can be formed. The missing eight characters ($8 \times 7 = 56 - 48 = 8$) are supplied by dissection of the last characters of each line; the lower part of this character is a character by itself and serves as the first word of the following line. The title of the poem is "Wandering in the palace of purple mist," and the content has a distinctly Taoist flavor, praising the quietness of a deserted palace garden and the absence of worldly ambitions and cares.

After water has washed away dust and dirt
I can sample the taste of the Tao.
It is sweeter than fame and riches.
These two are now forgotten.
In my heart I think of the guests from the Six
Caves and the Cinnabar Clouds [the Taoist paradise].
I recite texts from the Purple Palace of the Three Pure Ones [Taoist gods].
Over ten miles I gathered lotus, singing until dawn.
One round wheel: the clear moon.
A breeze from the cassia tree brings fragrance.
When the sun rises again, noble gentlemen will return and look for me.
They will find me in the middle of the hills
With a drink of good wine.

We find also other more or less geometrical arrangements, such as lattice work like that used for windows, or a honey-comb pattern. Many of the shapes in Chu's collection do, however, represent objects (but not human figures). The variety of objects is great: fruits, flowers, cloud patterns, buildings (for example, a Buddhist pagoda). Sometimes there is no connection between the content and the shaped form. In other cases, the relationship between content and shape is obvious. A poem shaped like a lamp describes the lantern festival of the first full moon in the new year. A poem on the mallow flower is shaped like the flower. The title of the arrangement is "Heart of the mallow," and, indeed, the character *k'uei* ("mallow") forms the "heart," i.e., the middle of the shape (Figure 3). A pattern titled "Three-fold play of the plum blossom" consists of three ornaments shaped like the flower; the resulting verses are a poetic description of the flowering plum (Figure 4). The contours of a memorial stele are used for shaping five poems in praise of beautiful women of the

Figure 7. Hui-wen lei-chü hsü-pien, ch. 3, p. 7b.

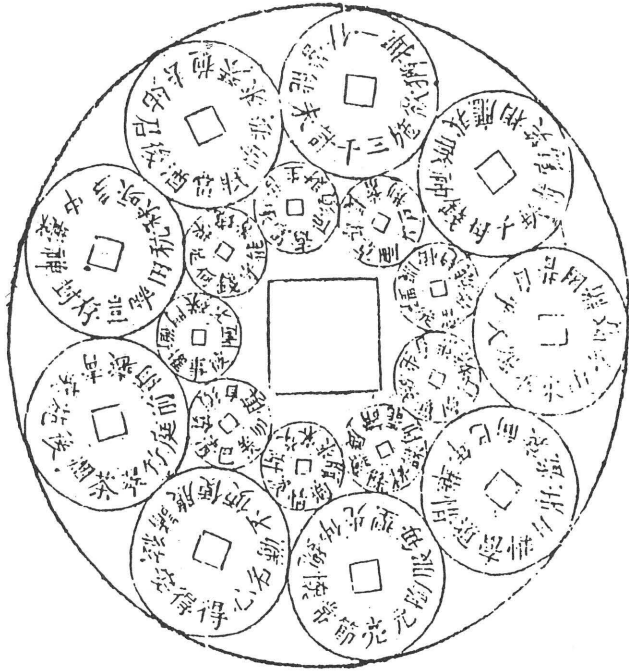


Figure 8. Hui-wen lei-chü hsü-pien, ch. 7, p. 10b.



past whose names are skillfully interspersed in the pattern. The title is "Memorial stele for many beauties" (Figure 5).

In some cases the poems are birthday congratulations and the objects represented are therefore symbols of long life, such as chrysanthemums, peaches, or pine-trees. A poem on old age expresses the ideas associated with long life by arranging the characters of the poem so that they form the character *shou* ("longevity") (Figure 6). Some irony is expressed by a poem on a poor scholar's idyllic dwelling, or, rather, two poems because the 180 characters can be used for one seven-word poem (126 characters) and one five-word poem (90 characters). Also in this case some characters must be repeated. The 180 basic characters are arranged on 18 coins which, in turn, are inserted in two concentric circles within the contours of a big coin (Figure 7). The pattern has the title "Mother-and-child coin."

In order to give an idea of this kind of poetry, a relatively uncomplicated example has been selected. It is a poem of four lines with seven words each. The twenty-eight characters are arranged so that they form the outline of a peach (Figure 8). This is the so-called peach of the immortals (*p'an-t'ao*), a mythical fruit growing in the Taoist paradise which when eaten gives immortality. These peaches ripen only three times in ten thousand years. The reading of the poem has to start with the character *ken* ("root") near the fruit-stem of the picture. A rough translation follows:

Their roots are here at the origin of the immortals.
They are universally [beneficent like] dew and rain.
They ripen three times.
They flower for ten thousand years.
On the day of a reunion with wine-cups and a banquet
One comes to sample and to gather them.
At the time when the flowers open fully,
They compete with rose-colored clouds.

This poem is a palindrome. The meaning, if it is read backwards, is more or less the same, only the syntax and the sequence of images is, of course, different. In a "normal" reading, the last words of lines two and four rhyme with each other; correspondingly, when read backwards, the first words of lines one and three in the "normal" reading become the rhyming last words of the anacyclic reading: *hua* ("to flower") and *hsia* ("rose-colored clouds") are rhyming words, and so are *tsun* ("wine-cup") and *ken* ("root"). It should be added that the words *ken* and *tsun* have a different modern pronunciation, but they both belong in the same rhyming category in ancient Chinese.

As a rule, the poems included in Sang's and Chu's anthologies are undistinguished and conventional. Their authors are either anonymous or belong to the *poetae minores*. Some poems deal with the theme of female chaste love. This might be a reminiscence of the poem-block developed by the Lady Su Hui, who is considered in Chinese tradition as a paragon of female erudition and cleverness. Several of the shaped poems from Sang's and Chu's collections have been used as decorations of ink-slabs. Some examples can be found

in T'ao (1929: 5b) and in Togari (1953: 44 [poem shaped like a peach stone] and 86 [sunflower]). See also Franke (1962: pl. V, ill. 16 [abstract star pattern]).

Among the prose texts patterned into a representational shape some pieces collected by Henri Doré have been more than once reprinted: the ox being formed from a text discouraging the eating of beef (Doré 1912: v. 3, p. 308); the shape of a Buddhist monk (Doré 1912: v. 4, p. 366) is equally well known in Western literature. This is also true for the wine jar formed by a poem against wine drinking in Smith (1965: 173), originally published in 1914. It is fairly certain that many more such examples could be found if the popular literature of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries would be searched for shaped texts.

A beautifully executed specimen of shaped prose is preserved in Japan. It is the Chinese version of the Buddhist sutra *Tsui-sheng-wang ching*, commonly called the Golden Light Sutra. Its text consists of ten chapters, and in medieval Japan each of the chapters was shaped into a pagoda, surrounded by pictorial scenes illustrating episodes in the sutra text. For reproductions, see Brinker (1979: p. 6) and, in colors, *Hōbōgin* 4 (1967: xxvii). The ten scrolls of this painting can be dated ca. 1150; the original is now in the temple Chūsonji in Hiraizumi, prefecture Iwata, Japan, and is classed as "important cultural property."

A typically Chinese (and Japanese) device is the fanciful calligraphy where one or several characters are written in a way which makes the characters appear as a painting. A well-known example is the calligraphy of the character *k'uei*, the name of the patron deity of literature. The resulting grotesque shape is hardly recognizable as the character *k'uei*, but at the same time it is a dynamic and impressive creation. This calligraphy is by Ma Te-chao (19th century) and has been frequently reproduced — e.g., in Bowler (1970: 120); and in Brinker (1979: 63-4). Bowler has another calligraphic piece in which a whole sentence is written in flowing brush strokes to produce a painting of the god of longevity. Many more examples of this type of calligraphy could be adduced; they are usually to be found on inscription stelae and were reproduced in China by rubbings. A particularly striking example of this intermediate art form which combines calligraphy and visual representation is the *Jū-nyoze* ("The ten like this") attributed to the Japanese Buddhist monk Kūkai (744-835). This calligraphy consists of ten Buddhist sayings in Chinese, all beginning with the words "like this" (in Sino-Japanese, *nyoze*). Some characters are fancifully changed by replacing purely graphemic elements with representations of persons, trees, or animals (Brinker 1979: 63 and pl. III). Such playful art forms are, however, not so much shaped poetry in the accepted sense as they are fanciful calligraphic works.

Taoist talismans have sometimes been regarded as a sub-group of shaped texts. Examples are to be found chiefly in Doré (1911), but even today such talismans can be seen in the folk-calendars and almanacs printed in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. It would, however, be misleading to consider these strange compositions as real texts. Only in exceptional cases have the characters any linguistic meaning so that they can be read as a text (as, for

instance, in Doré's illustration 116, where the only pictorial element in a Taoist imprecation are the six stars of the dipper constellation which appear instead of its name). The overwhelming majority of the talismans are artificial characters which have a symbolic meaning but cannot be "read" because they have no pronunciation. They can therefore not be regarded as coming under the same category as shaped texts.

There exists a curious piece of poetry attributed to the great scholar and artist Su Shih (1036-1101). Su Shih is said to have tested the literary skill of an envoy coming to China from the Khitan empire of Liao in the north by presenting him with a puzzle poem (see Su Shih: 5b-6a). This poem distorts standard characters but the distortion is indispensable for the understanding of the text. For example, the character *shan* ("mountain") is written very small and has to be read as "small mountain." The character *t'ing* ("pavilion") is written in an elongated shape and is to be read as *chang-t'ing* ("high pavilion"). There exists also a structuralist interpretation of Su Shih's poem (Chang 1977: 47).

In closing it must be said that the shaping of texts is still today a favorite play-form of some Chinese literati. Even in the People's Republic of China one can find examples. When I visited the Wild Goose Pagoda in Hsi-an in 1977, I discovered on the walls of the pagoda a graffiti poem in praise of Mao Tse-tung and the Chinese revolution, shaped like a pagoda with seven stories.

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