

4588

UNIVERSITY OF HAWAII LIBRARY

**LINGUISTIC AND GRAPHIC MANIPULATION IN THE  
MISCELLANEOUS FORMS OF TRADITIONAL CHINESE POETRY**

**A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE DIVISION OF  
THE UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE  
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF**

**DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**IN**

**EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES AND LITERATURES  
(CHINESE)**

**MAY 2005**

**By**

**Yanfeng Li**

**Dissertation Committee:**

**David McCraw, Chairperson  
Chin-tang Lo  
Tao-chung Yao  
Hsin-I Hsieh  
Roger T. Ames**

To Professor Frank van Aalst and Professor Ruichang Lü

## **Acknowledgements**

The first person that I must thank is Professor David McCraw, who taught me all these years and supervised both my MA thesis and this dissertation. Without the good times and hard times I spent with him, this project wouldn't have grown into this shape. I also must thank other professors on my dissertation committee.

Professor Chin-tang Lo, though retired from his teaching position, never retires from teaching his students. His profound knowledge in traditional Chinese literature saved me a lot of research time. Professor Tao-chung Yao provided many detailed and important comments. Professor Roger Ames' direction on the philosophical level always broadens my view. Professor Hsin-I Hsieh provided me with important linguistics knowledge. Professors Victor Mair, Ying-che Li and Jianhua Bai pointed to important reference books for my research. Anne Henochowicz carefully proofread the draft in different stages and also made important comments and suggestions; Mrs. Judy Jones thoroughly checked the final draft and offered many insightful ideas; Professor Leon Serafim painstakingly examined and corrected errors related to the format and style.

Finally, many thanks to my wife Bihong Huang for all the sacrifices she made, and of course I am also indebted to my parents for helping take care of the children so I could concentrate on my work and study.

## **Abstract**

The miscellaneous forms of poetry (MFP) this dissertation addresses refer to a large body of traditional Chinese poems that involve witty linguistic or graphic manipulations. Examples of these poems are: poems with unusual syntactic structure; poems required to contain or composed of particular words; poems with unusual phonetic features; poems that play with the graphic structure of characters and graphic textual formation. These poems emerged in the Six-Dynasties Era (220-589), matured in the Tang and Song dynasties, and flourished throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties. Because of their special formal or structural features, these poems caught the attention of literary commentators from the time they first appeared. However, these poems have not been systematically examined and seriously evaluated until the past few years, and they remain largely unknown to English readers. This dissertation collects poems in this genre from all kinds of classical and modern sources, classifies them with consistent criteria, and analyzes their formal features and themes. This dissertation proposes that MFP should not be read with the standard for reading the main forms of poems because in the latter, the physical images of the linguistic signs (characters) do not matter, while MFP make use of not only the images of the characters and their sound effect, but also “loopholes” in the grammatical structure and parts of speech. MFP are a combination of linguistic art and graphic art. The formal techniques experimented with MFP are also useful for the main forms of Chinese poetry. MFP make us rethink the role of form in poetry, and let us see that the Chinese writing system plays many important supralinguistic roles in Chinese culture.

## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction .....</b>	1
<b>Chapter One Poems with Structural Prerequisites.....</b>	12
I. Palindromes (回文诗) .....	12
II. Thimble Poems (顶针诗) .....	30
III. Restructurable Poems (变体诗词 and 异读诗词).....	35
<b>Chapter Two Poems with Content Prerequisites.....</b>	46
I. Number Poems and Name Poems (杂数诗 and 杂名诗).....	46
II. Assigned-Character Poems (嵌字诗) - Including Hidden-Head Poems (藏头诗), Assigned-Line Poems (嵌句诗), and Omitted-Tail Poems (歇后诗).....	62
III. Assembled Poems and Adapted Poems (集句诗 and 隐括诗).....	67
<b>Chapter Three Poems Manipulating Sound Effects.....</b>	79
I. Poems Manipulating Puns (双关语).....	79
II. Poems Manipulating Unusual Sound Effects (双声叠韵, 叠音诗, 叠韵诗, 单音诗).....	83
<b>Chapter Four Poems Manipulating the Images of Characters.....</b>	90
I. Character Splitting-Reassembling Poems (离合诗 and 神智诗).....	90
II. Identical-Doublet Poems and Common-Classifier Poems (叠字诗 and 联边诗) .....	115
<b>Chapter Five Poems of Unusual Textual Formation.....</b>	123
I. Historical Development of Poems of Unusual Textual Formation .....	123
II. Wan Shu (万树) and His Pictorial Poem (图形诗) Anthology <i>Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk</i> (璇玑碎锦) .....	135
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	165
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	185

## List of Abbreviations

QTS – *Complete Tang Shi*

QSS – *Complete Song Shi*

QSC – *Complete Song Ci*

HYDCD - *Hanyu Dacidian*

Poems and lines from the Tang dynasty are cited from the *Quantangshi* (全唐诗) – *Complete Tang Poetry* (QTS), published by Beijing Zhonghua Shuju in 1960. *Shi* poems and lines from the Song dynasty are cited from the *Quansongshi* (全宋诗) - *Complete Song Shi Poetry* (QSS), published by Beijing University Press in 1991. *Ci* poems and lines from the Song dynasty are cited from *Quansongci* (全宋词) – *Complete Song Ci Poetry* (QSC), published by Beijing Zhonghua Shuju in 1965. For example, QTS 7950 refers to page 7950 in *Quantangshi*, QSS 33456 refers to page 33456 in *Quansongshi*, and QSC 3465 refers to page 3465 in the *Quansongci*. These three books are available online at Beijing University's *Quantangshi* and *Quansongshi/Quansongci* web sites: *Quangtangshi* is available at <http://chinese.pku.edu.cn/tang/>; *Quansongshi* and *Quansongci* are available at <http://162.105.161.41/songpoem/>. HYDCD refers to *Hanyu Dacidian* (汉语大词典) - *The Grand Chinese Dictionary* (Shanghai Cishu Press, 1987). HYDCD 9-1297 refers to page 1297 in volume 9.

## Introduction

### 1. The Definition of Miscellaneous Forms of Poetry

The miscellaneous forms of poetry (*zatishi* 杂体诗, hereafter MFP) this dissertation addresses refer to a large body of traditional Chinese poems that involve witty linguistic or graphic manipulations. Examples of these poems are: poems with unusual syntactic structure; poems required to contain or composed of particular words; poems with unusual phonetic features; poems that play with the graphic structure of characters and graphic textual formation. These poems emerged in the Six-Dynasties (220-589), matured in the Tang and Song dynasties, and flourished throughout the Ming and Qing dynasties. Because of their special formal or structural features, these poems caught the attention of literary commentators from the time they first appeared.<sup>1</sup> By the Tang dynasty, poetry commentators started to put these poems into their own categories. For example, the Tang poetry commentary book *Essential Explanations of the Ancient Topics of the Music Bureau* (乐府古题要解) mentions character splitting-reassembling poems (离合诗), the “Tray Poem” (盘中诗, a pictorial poem), palindromes (回文诗), sixteen types of name poems (杂名诗), and six types of number poems (杂数诗).<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Palindromes (回文) and character splitting-reassembling (离合) are mentioned in Liu Xie's (刘勰 465-522) *Carving the Dragon with a Literary Mind* (文心雕龙): “Character splitting-reassembling poems can be traced back to the divination with graphic images; palindromes originated from Dao Yuan” (离合之发, 则明于图畿; 回文所兴, 则道原为始). Liu 2000 (Vol. 1): 66.

<sup>2</sup> Wu 2001: 61-66.

In Chinese poetry, poetic forms usually refer to the number of characters in a line, the number of lines in a poem, parallelism, and rhyme and tonal patterns.<sup>3</sup> Ideally, any poem with an uncommon number of lines, or an uncommon number of characters in each line, should be considered MFP. However, this is not what MFP is usually referred to. For example, of the six major poetic commentaries (five from Tang and Song, one from Ming) that define MFP Yan Huazhi (鄢化志) presents in his book, only the Ming book considers some non-manipulation poems part of MFP, such as three line poems, five line poems, and three-syllable poems.<sup>4</sup> In modern times, all major dictionaries adopt the Tang and Song sense, that is, excluding poems of unusual line syllable numbers, and humorous poems on the thematic level. See the following definition in the *Cihai* (辞海) Dictionary:<sup>5</sup>

杂体诗,诗体中的一类,多从字形,句法排列,声律或押韵等方面别出心裁,常常带有文字游戏的性质。

MFP is a cluster of poems that most often make unusual manipulation in character forms, syntactic arrangement, phonetic or rhyming, etc., and often feature word games.

Yan Huazhi considers the Tang and Song sense of MFP inadequate, and he proposes a definition based on the Ming sense that includes the following categories: 1) poems whose line-lengths are different from that of the majority of the mainstream poems,<sup>6</sup> such as two-syllable (二言), three-syllable (三言), six-syllable (六言), eight-syllable (八言),

---

<sup>3</sup> Classical Chinese poetic form has four basic features: line and syllable numbers (字数), parallelism (对仗), rhyme (韵), and tonal patterns (平仄), see Shi Wende 2003: 6.

<sup>4</sup> These six commentaries are the Tang books *Yiwen Leiju* (艺文类聚), *Yuefu Guti Yaojie* 乐(府古题要解), and *Zatishi Xu* (杂体诗序), the Song books *Canglang Shihua* (沧浪诗话) and *Songwen Jian* (宋文鉴), and the Ming book *Wenti Mingbian Xushuo* (文体明辨序说) by Xu Shizeng's (徐师曾 1517-1580). Xu Shizeng's book also considers humorous poems (诙谐) part of MFP. See Yan 2001: 36-38.

<sup>5</sup> For this and the similar definitions in other major dictionaries, see Yan 2001: 46.

<sup>6</sup> Five-syllable, seven-syllable and four-syllable are the most common syllabic types in mainstream poems (especially the first two types).

and nine-syllable (九言) poems; 2) poems whose number of lines does not fit into the recent forms, such as poems of three lines, five lines, seven lines, etc.;<sup>7</sup> 3) poems that fit into the category of recent forms in terms of number of syllables and lines, but not in terms of tonal pattern (平仄规则); 4) poems that involve all kinds of formal manipulation as well as poems with humorous and entertaining themes.<sup>8</sup>

In Yan's definition, the first two categories do not involve linguistic and graphic manipulation, and they can be called "poems of miscellaneous number of syllables" (杂言诗) and "poems of miscellaneous number of lines" (杂句诗) respectively. The majority of the third category can be called "poems of miscellaneous rhyming patterns" (杂韵诗). In category 4, "poems with humorous and entertaining themes" are often called "doggerels" (打油诗), which do not involve linguistic and graphic manipulation either. For these reasons, the Tang and Song sense of MFP only covers the first half of category 4, as well as some poems of sound manipulation from Yan's Category 3.<sup>9</sup> If one were to include poems that do not use linguistic manipulation in one's definition of MFP, one would have to study them separately anyway; therefore, this dissertation uses the Tang and Song definition, as expressed in the *Cihai* (辞海) dictionary above.

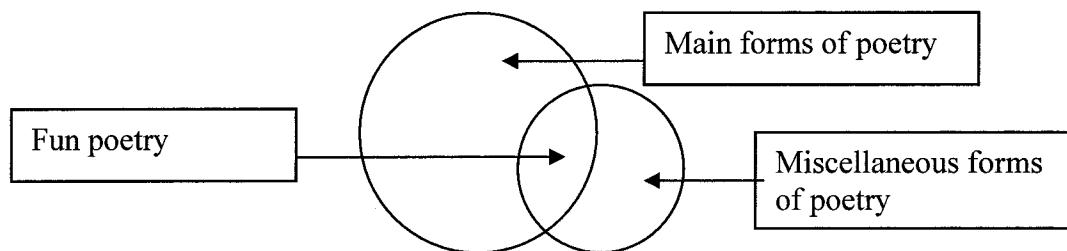
---

<sup>7</sup> The recent forms (近体诗) refer to the regulated verses (律诗), extended regulated verses (排律) and quatrains (绝句), which became popular during the Tang. These poems are either pentasyllabic or heptasyllabic. Regulated verses have eight lines, extended regulated verses have more than eight lines, and quatrains have four lines. The recent forms also have strict requirements about parallelism, rhyming and tonal patterns.

<sup>8</sup> Yan 2001: 48.

<sup>9</sup> Yan puts poems with formal manipulation and poems with humorous or entertaining themes (e. g., doggerels 打油诗) in the same category (p. 48). This is not reasonable, because doggerels are purely for entertainment and do not involve formal manipulation. Yan also considers super-witty poems (神智诗) and doggerels similar, which is again unreasonable, since super-witty poems involve a high level of formal manipulation, and their themes are mostly serious; super-witty poems are witty in terms of form, not theme. See Chapter Four.

In the modern era, the term “fun poetry” (趣味诗词) is often used instead of MFP, but “fun poetry” often misleads people to think that MFP are all for fun, while in fact, just like mainstream poetry, many poems in MFP are about serious subjects. “Fun poetry” will be a suitable name only if the reader understands that “fun” here means the fun of formal manipulation. The relation between the main forms of poetry, fun poetry, and MFP may be illustrated like this:



To summarize, the difference between MFP and the main forms of poetry does not lie in formal aspects such as line numbers, characters numbers, parallelism, and rhyming and tonal patterns,<sup>10</sup> but rather in the simple presence of linguistic or graphic manipulation. For example, a palindrome can be a standard regulated verse, but it is its regressively readable lines that make it an MFP poem.

## 2. Objectives of this dissertation

Because of the heavy emphasis on achieving unusual linguistic and graphic effects, which inevitably restricts the poet’s expression, MFP has often been considered unworthy of serious discussion in history, even though its creative use of the linguistic structure and

<sup>10</sup> The main forms of poetry or mainstream poetry in this dissertation refer to the recent forms and the ancient forms. The latter do not have specific requirements about line numbers, parallelism and tonal pattern, or even syllables, even though they tend to be pentasyllable or heptasyllable. The “recent style poetry,” as the most important part of mainstream poetry, has strict requirements for all of the four elements Shi Wende listed (see Footnote 3).

the graphic features is appealing to readers and commentators. See the following comment by Zhao Yi (赵翼 1727-1814):<sup>11</sup>

[杂体诗]皆词人翻新斗巧之作，虽不足语于大方，要亦一格也。

[Miscellaneous forms of poetry] are all written by poets to demonstrate their competence in creating something new and witty. Although they are not worth mentioning in serious occasions, they after all have a distinctive mode.

Obviously, MFP has been undervalued because it has been held up to the same standard as mainstream poetry. When reading mainstream poetry, people only need to pay attention to the literal and symbolic levels of a text. MFP, on the other hand, also experiments with the physical structure and the graphic images of the characters. This means some MFP are not only poems, but also involve graphic artwork closely related to painting, architecture, calligraphy, and inscription.

As a marginal genre of literature, MFP did not receive close attention until the 1990s, when several anthologies have been published. 2001 saw the first academic book on MFP - Yan Huazhi's *General Discussions on the Miscellaneous Forms of Traditional Chinese Poetry* (中国古代杂体诗通论). If other historically neglected Chinese literary genres, such as drama and popular fiction, can prove to be valuable subjects for study in modern times, then it is now time for the miscellaneous forms of poetry to take a turn.

Yan's book is about the historical development of the main genres of MFP, while this project is concerned with the distinctive formal features in MFP, which means that poems from different historical periods that employ common techniques are grouped together for examination. This project focuses on the micro level by providing relatively detailed linguistic analyses as well as critical readings. In addition to poems, antithetic couplets

---

<sup>11</sup> Zhao 1975 (vol. 23): 24b.

(对联) that use the same techniques are also discussed. Though conventionally collected in their own anthologies, antithetic couplets are poetic lines themselves, because all the middle couplets in regulated verses are antithetic couplets. This project looks at MFP as a “language lab”: many techniques developed in this lab are also used in mainstream poetry, some more than others.

This dissertation is also aimed at introducing Chinese MFP to English readers. Up to today, publications in English that touch on MFP are few.<sup>12</sup> This dissertation presents about 132 poems and about 80 antithetic couplets.<sup>13</sup> By categorizing, illustrating, translating, and critically analyzing these poems and couplets, this dissertation hopes to answer questions such as how linguistic rules and the graphic images of the characters function in the art of poetry, how MFP are related to the mainstream Chinese poetry, and how MFP reflect traditional Chinese ways of thinking.

### 3. Methodology

The methodology of this dissertation belongs to the “linguistic approaches” to literature.<sup>14</sup> How linguistic issues may affect the interpretation of literary works has been recognized as an important subject and has been studied by many important scholars in the field of Chinese linguistics and literature. Wang Li’s *Hanyu Shilu Xue* (汉语诗律学, 1958) demonstrates that classical Chinese poetic lines include many different structures

---

<sup>12</sup> Dick Higgins’ book *Pattern Poetry* (1987) contains an eight-page appendix written by Herbert Franke, which briefly introduces eight Chinese pictorial poems. John Marney’s book *Chinese Anagrams and Anagram Verses* (1993) illustrates about a dozen poems that belong to the character splitting-reassembling category, plus a few poems that involve puns, herbal names, and place names. The book provides a detailed bibliography related to these poems.

<sup>13</sup> This poem number includes the multiple readings of a poem, such as the regressive reading of a palindrome. The antithetic number includes a few individual lines.

<sup>14</sup> For introduction to the “linguistic model,” see Jameson 1972: vii.

when viewed from a linguistic perspective. Mei Tzu-lin and Kao Yu-kung published two articles in 1968 and 1971 to exercise what they call “linguistic criticism” on some traditional Chinese poems. James Liu’s book *The Interlingual Critic* (1982) and *Language-Paradox-Poetics* (1988) are especially important books that address linguistic issues related to the interpretation of traditional Chinese poetry. In the last decade, “cultural linguistics” (文化语言学, also called “linguistic culture” by some) emerged as a significant subject in China, and many books related to this subject discuss how linguistic issues affect literary interpretation.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, these publications are part of the global awareness of the new role of language in the twentieth century. To be specific, this dissertation analyzes how formal manipulation contributes to the artistry in MFP.

To better study MFP, a reasonable classification is essential. MFP are often loosely classified by different criteria. Gai Guoliang’s (盖国梁) *Three Hundred Fun Poems* (趣味诗三百首) includes seventy-one kinds of unclassified poems. Yan provides a classification in the appendix of his book, but the criteria for his classification are unclear, especially on the sub-category level. This dissertation divides MFP into two broad categories: those manipulating the linguistic aspect of the Chinese writing system, and those manipulating the graphic aspect.<sup>16</sup> The Table of Contents in this dissertation reflects this division: Chapters One, Two and Three concern the linguistic aspect, while Chapters Four and Five concern the graphic aspect.

---

<sup>15</sup> For the study of cultural linguistics or linguistic culture in China, see Huang Wei and You Rujie 2002.

<sup>16</sup> This division is based on an important idea raised by Zhou Youguang (周友光) in 1958 regarding the study of Chinese characters: the study of a writing system should be divided into the development of its script and the development of the rules that organize the script signs into linguistic structures. In 1994, William Boltz pointed out that a writing system can be spoken of in two senses: the material sense and the linguistic sense, which is parallel to the signs and the rules Zhou talked about. See Zhou 1958, and Boltz 1994: 9-10.

Chapter One addresses poems that involve structural manipulation, or poems with structural prerequisites. Palindromes (Section I) have the structural prerequisite that they be grammatical when read regressively. Thimble poems (Section II) require that within a poem, the ending character or characters of a line be used as the beginning of the next line. Restructurable poems (Section III) are poems that can be repunctuated into different poems. Palindromes and restructurable poems share the same feature of having one text represent more than one poem.

The poems discussed in Chapter Two all share content-based prerequisites. “Content” here refers to particular kinds of words that are required to appear in the poem. For example, the number poem requires certain numbers be used in the poem; the name poem is partially or completely composed of certain kind of names; the assigned-character poem requires that a certain character or characters appear in every line of the poem; and the assembled poem is composed of existing poetic lines.

Chapter Three deals with poems of unusual sound effects or phonetic structure, such as those involve puns, alliterations, and rhyming doublets.

Chapter Four is dedicated to poems involving the graphical manipulation of characters. The character splitting-reassembling poems (Section I), which involve the separation and recombination of the elements in characters, are the most important category in this chapter. The identical-doublet poems and repeated character poems discussed in Section II make use of the graphic images of words and lines.

Chapter Five is focused on pictorial poems: poems with textual formations designed as graphic artwork. Among the limited number of sophisticated pictorial poems, most were created by one person, Wan Shu (万树), in the early Qing dynasty. Because Wan

Shu's pictorial poems involve all the techniques discussed in the previous chapters, the second section in this chapter is dedicated to these poems.

There are often overlapping areas between different categories of poems. For example, a half-character thimble poem is also a character splitting-reassembling poem. It would be difficult to classify the poems discussed in this dissertation any more accurately. The point of classification is to be as reasonable as possible for the convenience of discussion, rather than to achieve scientific standards of accuracy.

The important features of MFP may be grouped by three aspects: multimeaning, multimedia, and multifunction. Multimeaning includes linguistic meanings, metaphorical meanings and “material meanings.” The manipulation of linguistic structure creates multiple linguistic meanings, which may lead to different meanings on the metaphorical level. The graphic effects also contribute to multiple meanings. Multimedia refers to the manipulation of graphic and audial effects. For example, the physical appearance of the characters or character formations in a poem may resemble a painting or calligraphy, and a poem of unusual tonal pattern may strike the reader with a special musical effect. Multifunction means MFP has many uses other than its literary merits. For example, a poem composed of medicine names may be mainly for the purpose of helping memorize these medicines and their functions. In other words, MFP sometimes has functions beyond the idea of *shiyanzhi* (诗言志) - “the poem articulates what is intently on the mind.”<sup>17</sup> Maybe we could use the term *shiweiyong* (诗为用) - “poetry can be used for practical purposes.” as a supplement to *shiyanzhi*. *Shiyanzhi* refers to the literary

---

<sup>17</sup>James Liu pointed out *shiyanzhi* has two connotations: poetry expresses the moral inclination, will or ideal in the mind, and poetry expresses one's personal wish, desire and emotion. “The poem articulates what is intently on the mind” is Stephen Owen's translation, which actually is a combination of Liu's two connotations. See Liu 1962: 72 and Owen 1992: 40.

function of poetry, while *shiweiyong* can include other functions. Some poem in MFP we see today are only the texts of what was originally meant to be graphic artworks, such as poems originally inscribed on mirror-backs, seals, ink stones, or carved walls, windows, and furniture as graphic decorations. These extra-linguistic functions are important in Chinese culture. Again, it is precisely because the non-literary aspects were ignored that MFP have been under-evaluated.

MFP should also be understood in the cultural context of traditional China. Many MFP poems were composed on all kinds of social occasions for which literati needed to demonstrate their literary wit, skills, and knowledge. For example, composing matching poems (和诗), completing antithetic couplets (对对联), composing poems with assigned rhyme (限韵诗), improvising poems (即席赋诗), and group composition (联诗) were all common poetic activities. The Eight-legged essay (八股文) required by the Civil Service Exams for many centuries is also a style with strict formal restrictions, and the Recent Style poetry popular from the 7<sup>th</sup> century on has very strict formal requirements. Since there was a need for high linguistic skills in both informal social occasions and formal writing, naturally there were all kinds of experiments on how to strategically use the Chinese language for maximum effect. The special features of the Chinese syntax and characters also allow more possibilities for formal construction.

The poems discussed here are selected from a variety of sources, such as classical poetry anthologies, commentaries, and fiction, as well as the Internet, and they are all translated into English. In order to best retain the structure, form, and meaning of the original poems, the translations are most often literal rather than poetic (in terms of

rhythm and rhyme). Most poems are critically read, especially with consideration on how the formal features contribute to the theme.

## Chapter One Poems with Structural Prerequisites

### I. Palindromes (回文诗)

The Six Dynasties saw the earliest creation of palindromes among the literati.<sup>18</sup> For example, the Martial Emperor of Liang (梁武帝 464-579) exchanged palindromes with other poets, and a poetry anthology *New Songs from the Jade Terrace* (玉台新咏) compiled by Xu Ling (徐陵 506?-583?), contains quite a few palindromes. By Tang, palindromes were quite common, and the late Tang well-known Japanese visiting scholar and Buddhist monk Master Kukai (空海 774-835) considered palindromic parallelism one of the twenty-nine types of poetic parallelism in his influential book *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror* (文镜秘府论). The following is an example of palindrome parallelism (回文对) in his book:<sup>19</sup>

情亲由得意, 得意遂情亲。  
True feelings come from understanding,  
With understanding, there will be true feelings.

Actually, what involved here is chiasmus, because the second line is obtained by switching the position of the two words (情亲 and 得意) in the first line, and because there is no other change in character order. This kind of chiasmus may be viewed as a special kind of palindrome. Since *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror* discusses poetic techniques in Chinese poetry in general, we can see that at that time palindrome was

<sup>18</sup> Liu Xie (刘勰) attributes the creation of the palindrome to a person named Daoyuan (道原), whose identity is unknown. See footnote 1.

<sup>19</sup> Kukai 1983: 247.

already considered a technique applicable in mainstream poetry. The book *Classified Palindromes* (回文类聚), compiled by Sang Shichang (桑世昌 around 1208) in the Southern Song Dynasty, is the most important anthology for palindromes. In the Qing Dynasty, Zhu Guang (朱光, also known as Zhu Cunxiao 朱存孝) compiled a supplement to Sang's volume, *Supplement to Classified Palindromes* (回文类聚补遗). However, neither of these two books seriously classifies the poems. Yan Huazhi's book divides palindromes into seventeen categories, but these categories often overlap. Besides, some types are not included, such as the *ci*-style palindrome (回文词). In the following sections, five categories of palindromes will be discussed, and categories one through four actually cover most of Yan's seventeen types, while category five is not mentioned in Yan's book.

### 1. Whole-Poem-Regression Palindrome (倒章回文)

This is the most common type of palindrome, in which the regressive reading starts with the last character in the last line. See the following example:<sup>20</sup>

题龟山 (Written on Turtle Mountain)

潮回暗浪雪山倾, Tides return with dark waves like falling snow mountains,  
远浦鱼舟钓月明. On the distant surface, fishing boats fish the brightness of the moon.  
桥对寺門松径小, The bridge faces the temple gate, and the pine path is narrow,  
檻当泉眼石波清. The balustrade is by the fountain, and the water on the rocks is clear.  
迢迢綠树江天晓, Far-stretched are the green trees, where the river sky breaks into dawn,  
靄靄紅霞海日晴. Mistily spread is the red glow, against which the ocean sun is clear.  
遙望四面雲接水, Looking into all distant directions, I see clouds connecting waters,  
碧峰千点数鷗轻. Green peaks in the thousands, and several light gulls.

---

<sup>20</sup> Sang 1987: 814. The poet's name is Zhou Zhiwei (周知微). Also see Liang Yusheng 1993: 104-105. Liang mentions that the poem is attributed to Su Shi, but he provides no information regarding this attribution.

The regressive reading is:

轻鸥数点千峰碧, Several gulls are light, and thousands of peaks are green;  
水接云面四望遥. Waters connect cloud surfaces, and in all directions things are distant.  
晴日海霞红靄靄, As the sun emerges, the dawn clouds above the sea are red and misty,  
晓天江树绿迢迢. And at dawn, river trees are green and stretch far away.  
清波石眼泉当槛, The clear fountain from the rock crack is just beside the balustrade,  
小径松门寺对桥. And with a small path and a pine gate, the temple faces the bridge.  
明月钓舟鱼浦远, The bright moon, the fishing boats, and the fishing place are distant,  
倾山雪浪暗回潮. And the snow waves are like falling mountains in darkness.

The first poem starts with a night scene – the big rough waves around the islet and the peaceful fishing boats under the bright moon in the distance. Lines two and three describe a temple on the islet and a fountain in the temple. In lines five and six, morning comes, the sky dawns, and the sun rises from the ocean. The last two lines describe the numerous distant hills, and a few “light” gulls in the air. In the regressive reading, the poem starts with the distant scenery of the day – the distant hills, the gulls, and the surrounding waters. Lines three and four are no longer about one particular morning, but about the scenery on the islet on clear sunny mornings. Lines five, six, and eight are not very different from the first poem, but line seven (明月钓舟鱼浦远), in addition to the above translation, may also mean “with the bright moon and fishing boats, the fishing waters appear distant.” Line seven also suddenly changes from day time into night time, and this change seems to make the regressive poem less smooth than the first poem. However, overall, both readings are grammatically clear, fitting the rules for regulated verse; and the scenes portrayed are coherent.<sup>21</sup>

---

<sup>21</sup> For more comment, see Liang Yusheng 1993: 105.

The following is a series of four poems under the title *Four Poems on Four Seasons* (四时四首). The palindromic effect highlights the sense of the seasonal cycle during the year.<sup>22</sup>

春

Spring

花朵几枝柔傍砌, Flowers, several of them, are growing tenderly by the stairs;  
柳丝千缕细摇风. Thousands of willow tendrils are trailing gently in the wind.  
霞云半岭西斜日, Glowing clouds cover half of the mountain in the setting sun,  
月上孤村一树松. And the moon rises above a pine tree in a lonely village.

夏

Summer

凉回翠簟冰人冷, Coolness returns to the green bamboo mat, making people feel cold;  
齿沁清泉夏月寒. Fountain water cools one's teeth, and the summer moon is wintry.  
香篆袅风青缕缕, The incense smoke in the breeze is light blue and delicate,<sup>23</sup>  
纸窗明月白团团. And on the paper window, the moon is bright, like a white circle.

秋

Fall

芦雪覆汀秋水白, Snow-colored reeds cover the beach, and the autumn river is pale;  
柳风凋树晓山苍. The willow-wind fells tree leaves, the morning mountains are gray.  
孤帏客梦惊空馆, In the lonely canopy in an empty inn, a traveler is startled in a dream:  
独雁征书寄远乡. May the migrating goose bring a letter to my home far away.

冬

Winter

风卷雪蓬寒罢钓, Wind rolls up snowy grass, and cold keeps people from fishing;  
月辉霜柝冷敲城.<sup>24</sup> In moonlight, the frosty watch clappers clap coldly in the city.  
浓香酒泛霞杯满, Wine emits a strong fragrance, and a glow fills the cup;  
淡影梅横纸帐清.<sup>25</sup> Light shadows of *mume* branches stretch on the papery canopy.

The progressive readings of these poems are grammatically and semantically clearer than their regressive readings. Some phrases may seem to be ungrammatical, but they are all more or less justifiable within the Chinese grammatical system, especially in poetry.

<sup>22</sup> *Classified Palindromes* attributes the series to Xue Tao (薛涛), a well-known courtesan and poetess in the Tang Dynasty, but it is not found in Xue Tao's anthology. See Sang 1987: 824, also see Gai 2001: 136 and Liang Yusheng 1993: 102-104.

<sup>23</sup> 香篆(*xiāngzhuàn*) refers to curly smoke of incense that looks like the *zhuan* style script. HYDCCD 12-436B.

<sup>24</sup> 霜柝 (*shuāngtuò*), clapping of watch clappers in a frosty night, see HYDCCD 11-710B.

<sup>25</sup> 纸帐 is a kind of bed-curtain. See HYDCCD 9-770A.

For example, “一树松” can be viewed as an inversion of “一松树” to keep the rhyme.<sup>26</sup>

“树” can also be read as a measure word, similar to “一树花” (a tree of flowers).

Composing a matching poem (和诗 or 和韵诗) was a common poetic activity among Chinese *literati*. One person can compose a poem in response to another person’s poem by using the same rhyming characters. This makes the composition of matching poems a challenging job. To compose a matching poem for a palindrome is even more challenging. Yet this is done in the following example, which is a series of palindromic poems that matches the above series:<sup>27</sup>

春                      Spring

芳树吐花红过雨, Beautiful trees let flowers fall like passing red rain,  
入帘飞絮白惊风. Catkins fly through the curtain, like a startled white breeze.  
黄添晓色青舒柳, Yellow adds to the dawning sky, and green spreads on the willow;  
粉落晴云雪覆松. Pink falls off clear clouds, and the pine is covered by snow.

夏                      Summer

瓜浮瓮水凉消暑, Melon floats in the water jar, and its coolness reduces the heat;  
藕叠盘冰翠嚼寒. Jade lotus root slices are laid in an ice-like dish, too cool to chew.  
斜石近阶穿笋密, By the slanting rocks near the stairs, bamboo shoots are dense,  
小池舒叶出荷团. And in the small pool, round lotus leaves sprout.

秋                      Autumn

残石绚红霜叶赤, The broken rocks are scarlet, and the frosted leaves are red;  
薄烟寒树晚林苍. In light mist, cold trees and the evening woods are dark.

<sup>26</sup> Switching the positions of the last two characters in a line for the purpose of rhyming is occasionally seen in mainstream poetry. In MFP, there are poems that purposefully play with this in every line, and this kind of poem is called “inverted rhyme poem” (翻韵诗) or “inverted phrase poem” (倒语诗). For specific examples, see Yan 2001: 294-295.

<sup>27</sup> Tian’s series is not in *Classified Palindromes*. According to Liang Yusheng (1993: 103), a story has it that a Ming dynasty scholar Tian Mengyi (田孟沂) managed to invite the ghost of the Tang courtesan Xue Tao, who told him the four season series, and Tian composed this series to match Xue’s. Liang’s book does not indicate the source of this series. Liang’s book also mistakenly switches Xue’s winter poem and Tian’s winter poem.

鸾书寄恨羞封纸, I wrote a letter to mail my sentiments, but I am too shy to seal it,  
蝶梦惊风怕念乡. And being disturbed by the wind in my butterfly dream, I am too  
afraid to think of home.<sup>28</sup>

冬                    Winter

天冻雨寒朝闭户, Sky freezes, the rain is cold, and the morning doors are closed;  
雪飞风冷夜关城. Snow flies, the wind is bleak, and at night the town gates are shut.  
鲜红碳火围炉暖, We gather around the scarlet coal fire in the stove,  
浅碧茶瓯注茗清. To drink from the light green teapot filled with a fresh tea scent.

In mainstream poetry, it is of course common for some lines (especially couplets) to be better written than others, the result of which is that these lines are even better known than the poem they belong to. This is also true with palindromic poems. If we treat palindromes fairly, we should also give special recognition to the better written lines in a palindromic poem. Liang Yusheng (梁羽生) points out that the following couplet (from the first winter poem above) is especially well written in the above poems:<sup>29</sup>

浓香酒泛霞杯满, Wine emits a strong fragrance, and its glow fills the cup;  
淡影梅横纸帐清. Light shadows of *mume* branches stretch on the papery canopy.<sup>30</sup>

Regressive reading:

清帐纸横梅影淡 Inside the thin canopy curtain, papers and light *mume* shadows lay;  
满杯霞泛酒香浓 In the full cup, glow spreads, and fragrance of wine is strong.

There are also *ci* (词) poems that belong to the category of whole-poem-regression palindromes; that is, the regressive reading starts with the last character of the poem. Whole-poem-regression *ci* palindrome is more complicated than the *shi* palindromes

---

<sup>28</sup> Butterfly dream is an allusion from the Zhuangzi, in which Zhuangzi is not sure whether he dreamed about a butterfly or a butterfly dreamed about him.

<sup>29</sup> Liang Yusheng 1993: 104.

<sup>30</sup> “Papery canopy” (纸帐) is a kind of bed-curtain. See HYDCD 9-770A.

because the regressive reading involves reparsing. See the following poem “To the Tune of ‘Bodhisattva Barbarian’” (菩萨蛮) by the Ming poet Zhuo Renyue (卓人月):<sup>31</sup>

春霄半吐蟾痕碧, Spring night reveals half of the Toad’s light blue image:<sup>32</sup>  
斜窗愁脸如相忆. By the slanting window, the grievous face seems to recall someone.  
空捻两三弦, Emptily, she plucks the strings two or three times -  
朱扉寂寂然. While the red door is still quiet.  
依期郎践约, At the expected time, he arrives  
悄步人疑鹤. In steps as quiet as a crane’s.  
小舒轻雾纱, Gently she releases the light mist-colored silk gauze.  
收袂蘸红霞. When it is time to dress, the clothes are soaked with morning glow.

Regressive:

霞红蘸袂收纱雾, Glowing red soaks her clothes and drives away the gauzelike mist,  
轻舒小鹤疑人步. Gently, she walks like a cautious little crane.  
悄约践郎期, They have secretly set the date,  
依然寂寂扉. But the door is still quiet.  
朱弦三两捻, Plucking the red strings two or three times,  
空忆相如脸. She thinks of the Xiangru’s face in vain:<sup>33</sup>  
愁窗斜碧痕, On the grievous window are slanting jade-like stains,<sup>34</sup>  
蟾吐半霄春. Where the Toad reveals a half-night of spring.

Notice that the first line in the regressive reading is made up of the characters from the last two lines in the original poem. This means that the regressive reading changes the textual structure of the original. This is different from the regulated palindromic verses, whose regressive readings do not involve reparsing or repunctuation. For this reason, a whole-poem-regression *ci* palindrome is also called a “changing-discourse

---

<sup>31</sup> See Gai 2001: 151.

<sup>32</sup> “Toad” (蟾 *chán*) refers to the moon.

<sup>33</sup> “Xiangru” is Sima Xiangru (司马相如), a Han dynasty handsome scholar., here refers to her lover.

<sup>34</sup> “Slanting jade-like stain” refers to moonlight on the window paper.

palindrome” (变章回文).<sup>35</sup> Here, “discourse change” refers to a change in the internal structure of a poem.

This poem also has the distinctive feature that the progressive reading and the regressive reading are very different in meaning (in most palindromes the two readings are similar in meaning). Gai says that the first poem is about the arrival of a secret lover, and the second poem is about the departure of the lover.<sup>36</sup> It seems more likely, however, that the second poem means the lover never shows up. To be specific, in the first line in the regressive reading, “霞” (*xia*, glow in the sky) can mean either morning glow (朝霞) or evening glow (晚霞) in the sky. Since the ending line “蟾吐半霄春” (The Toad reveals the half-night of spring) indicates that it is midnight, “霞” in the beginning should mean evening glow. Therefore, the second line “轻舒小鹤疑人步” (in the regressive reading) most likely means the woman walking gently to see if her lover is arriving. The fourth line “依然寂寂扉” (the door is still quiet) and the rest of the poem quite clearly expresses that the expected person never arrives.

## 2. Line-by-line-regression Palindrome (倒句回文)

Unlike a whole-poem-regression palindrome, the regressive reading of a line-by-line-regression palindrome starts with the last character of the first line. This means that the regressive reading does not change the sentence order of the original poem, just the order of the characters in each line. See the following poem by the Qing scholar Fan

---

<sup>35</sup> Among the seventeen types of palindromes in the appendix of Yan’s book (p. 402) is the “changing-form and changing discourse palindrome” (变体变章回文), but he does not offer any example of this type in his book. This dissertation will discuss changing discourse (变章) and changing form (变体) palindromes separately.

<sup>36</sup> Gai 2001: 151.

Zengxiang (樊增祥) entitled “Jade House in Spring” (玉楼春). The poem on the right is the regressive reading:<sup>37</sup>

蝶衣金瘦花房粉	粉房花瘦金衣蝶
雪燕双雕钗玉冷	冷玉钗雕双燕雪
霜情薄怨素心兰	兰心素怨薄情霜
月恨天如圆靥杏	杏靥圆如天恨月
迭笺秋雁书传锦	锦传书雁秋笺迭
叶堕疏桐金蚀井	井蚀金桐疏堕叶
人中画字写炉灰	灰炉写字画中人
白露秋期归心准	准心归期秋露白

When printed side by side, the regressive reading and the original mirror each other, which is why this kind of palindrome is also called a symmetric palindrome (对称回文). The following is the translation of the original poem (the right above. The regressive reading on the right has a similar meaning):

In golden and tight clothes, she looks like a butterfly powdered with pollen,  
In the shape of a pair of snow swallows are her cold jade hairpins.  
In her orchid-pure heart are frosted feelings and complaints,  
And the moon in the sky is like a dimple of her sentiment.  
When the letter is folded, autumn geese may bring it,  
When leaves fall from *wutong*, the golden balustrade around the well appears eroded.  
By observing her Middle Person point, and by writing characters in the stove ash,<sup>38</sup>  
She predicts that he will return in late autumn, by the White Due Day.

Symmetric palindromes are also common in antithetic couplets. See below:

客上天然居，居然天上客。<sup>39</sup>  
Guests step onto the Natural Residence, and they become guests in Heaven.

人过大佛寺，寺佛大过人。  
People pass by the Big Buddha Temple, and the Temple Buddha is bigger than people.

---

<sup>37</sup> Yan 2001: 361.

<sup>38</sup> The Middle Person is an acupuncture point between the nose and upper lip, which is used for fortunetelling. Writing character in the ash from a stove is also a way for divination.

<sup>39</sup> This couplet and the next one are in Liang Yusheng's book (1993: 98-99). “天然居” literally means “natural residence,” but according to Liang's explanation, it was also the name of a restaurant in old Beijing, and this couplet is said to have been found in that restaurant.

The following couplet is a “phonetically symmetric” palindrome (谐音回文):<sup>40</sup>

画上荷花和尚画; The lotus flower in the picture was painted by a monk;  
书临汉帖翰林书. The imitations of the Han stone rubbings were written by a *hanlin*.<sup>41</sup>

Each line in the couplet sounds the same when regressively pronounced, but the regressive writing does not make sense. This kind of palindrome is rare.

The following is a line-by-line-regression *ci* palindrome to the tune “Bodhisattva Barbarian” (菩萨蛮), composed by Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130-1200) in the Song dynasty:<sup>42</sup>

晚红飞尽春寒浅,	Late red has flown away, and the spring is slightly chilly;
浅寒春尽飞红晚.	The slightly chilly spring is ending and flying red is late.
樽酒绿荫繁,	Wine in the cup reflects the dense green trees,
繁荫绿酒樽.	And the dense trees green the wine cup.
老仙诗句好,	The old immortal's poetic lines are good;
好句诗仙老.	The lines are good, but the poetic immortal is old.
长恨送年芳,	One always hates to send away the year's youth, <sup>43</sup>
芳年送恨长.	And the youth of the year forever sends away sentiments.

Retrogressive reading:

浅寒春尽飞红晚,	The slightly chilly spring is ending and the flying red is late;
晚红飞尽春寒浅.	Late red has flown away, and the spring is slightly chilly.
繁荫绿酒樽,	The dense trees green the wine cup,
樽酒绿荫繁.	And the wine in the cup reflects the dense trees.
好句诗仙老,	The lines are good, but the poetic immortal is old,
老仙诗句好.	And the old immortal's poetic lines are good.
芳年送恨长,	The youth of the year forever sends away sentiments forever,
长恨送年芳.	And one always hates to send away the year's youth.

Each of the above poems contains four couplets, and if we put each couplet in one line, we will get the following symmetric text:

<sup>40</sup> Found in: <http://www.5zh.com/cms/app/info/doc/index.php/22634>

<sup>41</sup> A *hanlin* is a scholar in the Imperial Academy.

<sup>42</sup> Sang 1987; 819. Also see Gai p. 147.

<sup>43</sup> “The year's youth” refers to spring.

晚红飞尽春寒浅，浅寒春尽飞红晚。  
樽酒绿荫繁，繁荫绿酒樽。  
老仙诗句好，好句诗仙老。  
长恨送年芳，芳年送恨长。

If we switch the left side and the right side in the above poem, we will get the regressive reading, which is also symmetric:

浅寒春尽飞红晚，晚红飞尽春寒浅。  
繁荫绿酒樽，樽酒绿荫繁。  
好句诗仙老，老仙诗句好。  
芳年送恨长，长恨送年芳。

This means that the regressive reading of a line-by-line-regression *ci* palindrome is just a rearrangement of the original poem, which means this kind of poem also has a graphic effect. From *Classified Palindromes*, we can see the majority of the *ci* palindromes are of this type, because it is relatively easy to compose (since the regressive reading does not require reparsing).

### 3. Self-symmetric palindrome (本句对称回文)

A self-symmetric palindrome is a poem in which every line is symmetric, and therefore the regressive reading is exactly the same as the original. See the following poem entitled “Spring Boudoir” (春闺) by a Qing dynasty poetess Li Yang (李旸):<sup>44</sup>

垂帘画阁画帘垂，The drooping curtains of the painted house are drooping,  
谁系怀丝怀系谁。Who is tied to my heart, my heart is tied to whom?  
影弄花枝花弄影，Shadows fondle flowers and flowers fondle shadows,  
丝牵柳线柳牵丝。Silk connects to willow tendrils and willow tendrils connect to silk.  
脸波横泪波横脸，Face is crossed with tears, tears cross the face,  
眉黛愁浓愁黛眉。On dark eyebrows grief is thick, and grief darkens eyebrows.  
永夜寒灯寒夜永，Long night chills the lamp, and the chilly night is long,  
期归梦还梦归期。The hope-to-return dream still dreams of his time of return.

---

<sup>44</sup> See Yan 2001: 353.

This is a boudoir poem about a woman missing her lover. In each line, the subject and the object are switched around, which may help stress the close relationship between the loving woman and the one she loves. In addition, the last three characters of each line mirror the first three characters of the line, creating an impression of entangled feelings.

The following are three self-symmetric antithetic couplets:<sup>45</sup>

雾锁山头山锁雾, Fog locks the mountain top and mountains lock the fog;  
天连水尾水连天. Sky connects the waters and waters connect the sky.

浅水湾里湾水浅, In the Shallow Water Bay, water is shallow;  
红莓谷里谷莓红. In the Red Strawberry Valley, strawberry is red.

上海自来水来自海上, Shanghai's tap water comes from the sea;  
黄山落叶松叶落山黄. Yellow Mountain's falling-leaf pines drop leaves and the mountain becomes yellow.

This kind of palindrome is based on the fact that Chinese verbs and nouns do not change forms in a sentence; verbs can be used as nouns, adjectives can be used as verbs, and so on. Besides, many double or triple character words in Chinese can naturally be read regressively, such as “我爱她”-“她爱我” (I love her – she loves me), “上海”–“海上” (Shanghai – Above the sea), 山上–上山 (on the mountain – climb the mountain), “浅水”–“水浅” (shallow water – water is shallow).

In rare cases, self-symmetric palindromes can be made of symmetric characters, thus creating a “mirror effect” on the character level. Below is a line of this kind that is waiting for a matching line:<sup>46</sup>

山大王大山 – Great Mountain King Great Mountain

<sup>45</sup> The first couplet is written in a tourist site on the Gulangyu Island near Xiamen City in Fujian province. For the second couplet, see Liang Yusheng 1993: 89. The third couplet is anonymous.

<sup>46</sup> Anonymous, found in the internet discussion room of the Beijing University Chinese Department's website: <http://chinese.pku.edu.cn/bbs/>

“山大王” (Great Mountain King) refers to the head of the bandits in the mountains. 大山(Great Mountain) is the name of this particular bandit head. There is also an audial trick in this line: the left 大 is read *dai*, because “大王” (a bandit head) is pronounced as *daiwang*, while the right 大 is pronounced as *da*. This means the matching line should also have such a sound structure. This kind of couplet is called an “absolutely parallel couplet” (绝对), which is the most difficult type of parallelism.

#### 4. Palindromes of Unusual Textual Formation

The poem in the picture below is in a circular formation, and one can start reading it from any character on the circle, either forwards or backwards. For this reason, it is also called a “hidden-head palindrome” (藏头回文) or an every-character palindrome (字字回文). For example, by starting with “风” and reading clockwise and counter-clockwise, we will get poem 1 and poem 2 below respectively:<sup>47</sup>

##### Poem 1

风舞艳花落, Wind dances, colorful flowers fall,  
雪飞芳树幽. Snow flies, flowery trees are quiet.  
红雨淡霞薄, In the red rain, the twilight clouds are thin,  
月迷香雾流. The moon is hazy and fragrant fog flows.

##### Poem 2

风流雾香迷, Wind flows, fog's fragrance is bewildering,  
月薄霞淡雨. The moon is thin and the twilight is like light rain.  
红幽树芳飞, Against the tranquil red clouds, tree blossoms fly,  
雪落花艳舞. Flowers fall like now, and dance colorfully.



If we draw lines to connect the characters on the opposite side of the circle, we will see that each pair of characters connected by a diameter share a common rhyming sound:

<sup>47</sup> Gai 2001: 6.

“落” (*luo*) – “薄” (*bo*), “花” (*hua*) – “霞” (*xia*), “艳” (*yan*) – “淡” (*dan*), “舞” (*wu*) – “雨” (*yu*), etc. This explains why the twenty characters on the circle can be read as forty poems by rhyming. Gai Guoliang notes that the poem was originally inscribed around a teapot to allow the reader to start from whichever character directly faced him, and to read in either direction, therefore the poem was meant to serve as decoration, and its literary meaning was less important.

The following is a poem found among the Tang documents kept in Dunhuang (敦煌), the famous town on the Silk Road. Because it is in the shape of a cross, it is called a “cross poem” (十字诗).

唐  
到  
西  
动马人山见日光  
水  
流  
长

Gai provides the following reading for this text:<sup>48</sup>

唐到西山水流长, From Tang to the West Mountains, water flows long,  
长流水山见日光. The long-stretching water and mountains are under the sun.<sup>49</sup>  
光日见山人马动, Bright sun appears above the mountains, people and horses move,  
动马人山西到唐. Moving horses, people, and mountains go westward and reach Tang.

The regressive reading is about a similar journey. Actually, since both the horizontal line and the vertical line in the cross are palindromes, we can get the following poem with these two lines and their regressive readings:

---

<sup>48</sup> Gai 2001: 29.

<sup>49</sup> It makes better sense to pronounce 见 as *xian* in this poem, which means “to show/appear” rather than “to see.”

唐到西山水流长, From Tang to the West Mountains, water flows long,  
 长流水山西到唐. The ever-flowing water flows westward to reach Tang.  
 光日见山人马动, Bright sun appears above the mountain, people and horses move,  
 动马人山见日光. The moving horses and people are like mountains under the sun.

These two poems also have a thimble structure (顶针诗, see Section II). In the first poem, the last two characters of each line are reused as the beginning of the next line. However, because the positions of last two characters are first switched and then used in the next line (e. g. “流长” in the first line becomes “长流” in the second line), it is not a typical thimble poem, but a partial thimble poem. Besides, the thimble structure occurs only between the first two lines and the last two lines. The cross may represent an intersection of two crossing roads, which is relevant to the travel scene presented in the poem.

The following poem combines a cross-shaped palindrome and a rhombus-shaped palindrome. It is attributed to Su Shi, and can be read horizontally, vertically, and from one corner to another,<sup>50</sup> earning it the title “multi-way poem” (反复诗) .



<sup>50</sup> The poem is selected from a web page: <http://www.powerba.com/poem/ancient/20011003001.htm>. The original source is unknown.

In this poem, one can find thirty pentasyllabic poems by starting with any character on the four sides and reading either clockwise or counter-clockwise. For example, if we start with the character “红” and read counter clockwise, we will have the following poem:

红衬冷烟雨， Against the red (flowers) are the cold mist and rain,  
藏山远水洼. Hidden mountains seem distant from the water marshes.  
东隐笋尖吐， Tips of the bamboo shoots hide in the east,  
香含远蕊花. But their fragrance covers the distant flowers.

One can also get four pentasyllabic poems with the thirteen characters on the cross within the rhombus – by reading from right to left, left to right, top to bottom or bottom to top. The twenty-nine characters in the diagram can also be read as heptasyllabic poems. Notice that in the diagram, characters on the opposite sides of the central character “老” rhyme, for example, “烟” (*yan*) – “尖” (*jian*), “雨” (*yu*) – “吐” (*tu*), etc.

Like the circular poem above, the cross palindrome and multi-way palindrome may also have been composed as graphic artwork, to be inscribed on objects as decorations. Pictorial poems of this kind will be discussed further in Chapter Five.

## 5. Accidental Palindrome

All the palindromes discussed above are intentionally created. There are also many reader-discovered palindromes that may not have been intentionally created. These palindromes may be called “accidental palindromes.” Accidental palindromes often occur only on the sentence or couplet level, rather than on the poem level. As Yan points out, the creation of Chinese palindromic poems is never completely accidental, because

many classical Chinese phrases can be read regressively naturally.<sup>51</sup> Chen Wangdao (陈望道 1890-1977) was probably the first modern scholar who touched on this issue. In his influential book *Xiucixue Fafan* (修辞学发凡), he points out that accidental palindromes can be found not only in poetry, but also in prose essays. He presented the following examples from the *Daodejing* (道德经):<sup>52</sup>

知者不言, 言者不知.     One who knows does not speak;  
                                One who speaks does not know.

信言不美, 美言不信,     True words are not beautiful;  
                                Beautiful words are not true.

善者不辩, 辩者不善.     Good people are not good at talking;  
                                Good talkers are not good people.

However, in each line, the second half is not a complete regression of the first, so these lines are actually chiasmi, close relatives of palindromes. The chiastic features of these lines retains the paradoxical meaning in them: language is not capable of expressing knowledge or one's moral quality, yet we have to rely on language (even Laozi himself), as James Liu pointed out.<sup>53</sup>

Accidental palindromic lines are quite often seen in poetry. For example.<sup>54</sup>

树接南山近, Woods connect the southern mountains that approach;  
烟含北渚遙. Mist covers the north side [of the river], which is distant.

Regressive:

近山南接树, Nearby mountains connect the woods in the south;  
遙渚北含烟 Distant riverside in the north is covered by mist.

<sup>51</sup> The examples Yan offers include “吉日兮辰良” – “良辰兮日吉” (“Lucky day, the hour is pleasant” – “Pleasant hour, the day is lucky”); “浮云明月” – “月明云浮” (“Floating clouds, bright moon” – “Moon is bright, clouds are floating”). See Yan 2001: 180-181.

<sup>52</sup> The first couplet is from chapter 56 of *Daodejing*, and the third is from chapter 81.

<sup>53</sup> Liu 1988: 5-11.

<sup>54</sup> The following five examples are respectively from QTS 691, 2505, 4770, 2914 and 2559.

翠深开断壁, Green is deep and opens the cracked cliff;  
红远结飞楼. Red in the distance connects the flying house.

Regressive:

壁断开深翠, The cracked cliff splits the deep green;  
楼飞结远红. The house seems flying and connects to the distant red.

净落金塘水, Purity falls into the golden pond water;  
明浮玉砌霜. Brightness floats on the jade stairs' frost.

Regressive:

塘水金落净, In the pond the golden color has sunken;  
霜砌玉浮明. On the frosty stairs jade reflects brightness.

柳塘春水漫, From the willow pond, spring water is overflowing;  
花坞夕阳迟. Above the flower ferry, the setting sun is slow.

Regressive:

漫水春塘柳, Overflowing water is around the spring pond willows;  
退阳夕坞花. Slow sun is over the evening ferry flowers.

The regressive reading of some accidental palindromes requires rhythmic change. In the following examples, the original lines are in “4 characters + 3 characters” structure, while the regressive readings are in three-four structure. This rhythmic change in fact is a structural change, though the regressive reading and the progressive reading have the same number of characters in each line, and have the same number of lines, and are even composed of the same characters. See below (the hyphen indicates the rhythm):

樽当霞绮-晴初散, The wine cup glows in twilight - the sky has just cleared,  
棹拂荷珠-碎且园. Oars touch the lotus leaf pearls – they break but remain round.<sup>55</sup>

Regressive:

散初晴-绮霞当樽, Clouds Disappearing and clearing, the glow shines in the wine cup;  
园且碎-珠荷拂棹. Round and small, the pearl-shaped lotus leaves touch the oars.

---

<sup>55</sup> “Leaf pearls” here refer to the small drops of water on the lotus leaves.

When reading a palindromic poem, we need to first treat it as a poem, just like other normal poems. It is true that the palindrome structure restricts the poet, but the recent poetry in general all “dance in chains.” Palindromes just have a stronger degree of formal restriction. The restriction is not always negative, because it also adds additional features to the poem. A palindrome has two poems that present a scene or theme simultaneously from two perspectives, like a hologram. The differences between the two poems may be subtle or large. The two readings may not be equally good, but they do not have to be – we may treat one as the main poem and the other as the auxiliary poem. If a regular poem is a right-handed or left-handed person, then a palindrome poem would be an ambidextrous person. Each hand of the ambidextrous person may not be as skillful as a one-handed person’s hand, but the ambidextrous person certainly has advantages that a right-handed or left-handed person does not.

## II. Thimble Poems (顶针诗)

A thimble poem is one in which the ending character or an element of the ending character is used as the beginning of the next line, or several ending characters of one line are used as the beginning of the next line, which means that each line regularly overlaps with the next line. Thimble poems can be divided into one-character thimble poems (一字顶针诗), half-line thimble poems (半句顶针诗) and half-character thimble poems (半字顶针诗). The following is a one-character thimble poem, in which the last character of each line is used as the beginning character of the next line:

月华如水满园秋, Moonlight is like water, and the whole garden is in autumn;  
秋风瑟瑟入画楼. Autumn wind briskly enters the painted house.

楼上少妇深自悔, In the house, upstairs, the young wife is deep in regret,  
悔让夫婿觅封侯. Regretting that she let her husband go out to seek success.

This poem is an adaptation of Wang Changling's (王昌龄 698-757) well-known poem "Boudoir Complaint" (闺怨).<sup>56</sup> The adapted thimble style has a stronger sequential feature than Wang Changling's poem: “秋” (autumn) in the end of the first line leads the reader to “秋风” (autumn wind) in the second line, “楼” (house) at the end of the second leads the reader to the regretful “少妇” (young wife) in the third line, and “悔” (regret) connects the “少妇” to what she is thinking.

Poems in which two or more characters in a line are reused in the beginning of the next line are called half-line thimble poems (半句顶针诗). In the square poem on the right, the last four characters in a line are reused. Because it is written in a circular formation and can be read continuously, it is also called a “hidden-head” poem (半句顶针藏头诗), or a “strung-pearls” poem (联珠诗).<sup>57</sup> The normal layout of the poem is:

赏花归去马  
暮如已飞时  
微力酒醒

赏花归去马如飞, After enjoying flowers I return on a flying horse;  
去马如飞酒力微. The returning horse flies, but being drunk, I have no strength.  
酒力微醒时已暮, When I wake up from drunkenness, it's already dusk,  
醒时已暮赏花归. When waking up, it is dusk, and I return from enjoying flowers.

<sup>56</sup> Wang Changling's poem is (QTS 1446):

闺中少妇不曾愁, The young wife in the boudoir doesn't know what worry is,  
春日凝装上翠楼. And on a spring day she heavily makes up and goes upstairs.  
忽见陌头杨柳色, Suddenly she sees the willow color over the field,  
悔教夫婿觅封侯. And she regrets letting her husband leave home to seek fortune.

<sup>57</sup> Zheng and Zhu point out that the strung sentences can also be found in prose, called “strung-pearls sentences” (联珠句), see Zheng & Zhu 1993: 540-541. The poem here is collected in *Classified Palindromes* (Sang 1987: 808), in which the text is arranged in a circle. The square formation is in Gai's book (2001: 4). Also see Yan 2001: 303-304. The poem is attributed to Su Shi.

Below is another half-line thimble poem. Because it is also a palindrome, it can be called a “strung-pearls palindrome” (回文联珠体). It is entitled “Four Season Landscape Poem” (四时山水诗):<sup>58</sup>

莺啼岸柳弄春晴夜月明  
香莲碧水动风凉夏日长  
秋江楚雁宿沙洲浅水流  
红炉透炭炙寒风御隆冬

The four lines represent four poems, respectively about spring, summer, autumn, and winter. For example, with the half-line thimble structure, the first line is read 莺啼岸柳弄春晴, 柳弄春晴夜月明, and then, by reading these two lines regressively, we get 明月夜晴春弄柳, 晴春弄柳岸啼莺. When putting the four lines together, we get the following quatrain:

莺啼岸柳弄春晴, Orioles chirp on the waterside willows and play in the clear spring,  
柳弄春晴夜月明. Willows play in the clear springtime and the night moon is bright.  
明月夜晴春弄柳, The moon is bright, the night is clear, and spring plays in the willows,  
晴春弄柳岸啼莺. Clear spring plays in the willows, and the waterside orioles chirp.

We can get three more similar poems from the other three lines in the original text, and all the four poems are palindromes whose regressive readings are exactly the same as the progressive readings.

The thimble technique may also be applied on the character element level – an element of the last character of a line is used as the first character of the next line. This kind of poem is called a half-character thimble poem (半字顶针诗). Half-character thimble

---

<sup>58</sup> Yan (2001: 353) points out it is found in a Ming dynasty book *Talks of the Chang'an Guest* (长安客话), but it is actually in the Song dynasty book *Classified Palindromes*, see Sang 1987: 808. In Sang's book the text is in a circle, while in Gai's book (2001: 143) it is a square. Also see Shi 2001: 118 and Gai 2002: 143.

poems involve the image of characters, therefore they are also character splitting-reassembling poems (see Chapter Four). See the following example:

八月中秋会佳期下弹琴诵古诗中不闻钟鼓便深方知星斗移少神仙归古廟中宰  
相运心机时得到桃源洞与仙人下盘棋<sup>59</sup>

It is said that this unpunctuated text was a test given to Ji Xiaolan (纪晓兰 1724-1805, also known as Ji Yun 纪昀) by his wife-to-be when he proposed to marry her. She asked that this text be read as a regulated poem. It has forty-nine characters and does not fit any forms of regulated verse, but Ji passed the test by reading it as the following:

八月中秋会佳期, The Mid-autumn in the eighth month is a good time for dating,  
月下弹琴诵古诗. Therefore under the moon we play the zither and recite ancient poetry.  
寺中不闻钟鼓便, In the temple no bell or drum is heard,  
更深方知星斗移. And only late at night can we know the motion of the stars.  
多少神仙归古廟, Many immortals retreated to ancient temples,  
朝中宰相运心机. While the Prime Minister in the court is exhausting his mind.  
几时得到桃源洞, When can we get to the Peach Blossom Cave,  
同与仙人下盘棋. To play chess with the immortals?

Ji Xiaolan took the elements “月,” “寺,” “更,” “多,” “朝,” “几,” “同,” “其” respectively from the characters “期,” “诗,” “便,” “移,” “廟,” “机,” “洞,” “棋,” and used each of these elements (which are also independent characters) as the first character of the next line in the poem. In other words, the first character in the second line (月) is the right side of the last character of the first line (期); the first character in the third line (寺) is the right side of the last character in the second line (诗), and so on.

There are also irregular thimble poems and thematic thimble poems, in which the ending part of a line is slightly changed before being used as the beginning of the next

---

<sup>59</sup> Liu Zhonghua 2003: 16-17. The poem is also included in Gai's book (p. 33), with minor differences.

line, or a theme of one line is readdressed in the next line. For example, Gai considers the following poem of Li Bai (李白) a thimble poem of this kind:<sup>60</sup>

白云歌送刘十六归山	White Clouds Song - Sending Liu the Sixteenth Back to the Mountains
楚山秦山皆白云,	The Chu and Qin Mountains both have white clouds,
白云处处长随君.	And the white clouds follow you wherever you go.
长随君 -	Always following you -
君入楚山里,	As you go into the Chu Mountains,
云亦随君度湘水.	Clouds will also follow you cross the Xiang River.
湘水上,	On the Xiang River,
女萝衣,	There are dodders,
白云堪卧君早归.	Where clouds are good for sleeping on, so you should return soon.

From the title we see this is a farewell poem to a friend who was going back to the Chu Mountains. On the surface, lines 4 and 5 (君入楚山里, 云亦随君度湘水) seem to be past events, but reading them as such makes it hard to explain the last line (白云堪卧君早归), which means the person has not gone yet. If we read the lines 4 and 5 in the future tense, the problem will be solved (see translation above). In this poem, the thimble feature gives a clear sequence of the actions, and provides a strong linkage between the images.

The thimble style is often found in folktales. For example, one commonly seen children's game is to find a final answer for a string of endless questions. See the following two anonymous folklores:

那猫呢? 钻山了. Where is the cat? - It went to the mountain.  
那山呢? 水淹了. Where is the mountain? - It was flooded.  
那水呢? 和泥了. Where is the water? - It was used to make mud.  
那泥呢? 抹墙了. Where is the mud? - It was pasted on the wall.  
那墙呢? 猪拱了. Where is the wall? - It was nosed down by the pig.  
那猪呢? 狼吃了. Where is the pig? - It was eaten by the wolf.

---

<sup>60</sup> QTS 1721. Also see Gai 2001: 79.

那狼呢？ 打死了. Where is the wolf? - It was killed.  
那皮呢？ 蒙鼓了. Where is the wolf's skin? - It was used to make a drum.  
那鼓呢？ 打破了, Where is the drum? - It was broken,  
娃娃女子长大了. And boys and girls have grown up.

In this dialogue, how to provide a final answer is the witty part. The ending suggests that by the time the drum is broken, children have grown up, and therefore there will be no more questions of this kind. Another way to stop the asker is to lead back to the beginning, so that the dialogue becomes endless. See the following common “story”:

从前有个山, 山里有个庙, 庙里有个和尚正在讲故事. 讲的是: 从前有个山, 山里有个庙, 庙里有个和尚正在讲故事. 讲的是: ...

Once upon a time, there was a monk in a temple in the mountains who was telling a story, and the story was about a monk in a temple in the mountains who was telling a story, and the story was ...

This kind of “circular” story is similar to the circular teapot poem and the square hidden-head thimble poem discussed above. Also see the half-character-hidden-head circular poem attributed to Bai Juyi (白居易) in Chapter Four.

### III. Restructurable Poems (变体诗词 and 异读诗词)

According to legend, when Ji Xiaolan wrote the following well known Tang poem by Wang Zhihuan (王之涣 688-742) on a fan for the emperor, he forgot to write the character “间” in the first line. He was accused of trying to fool the emperor. This is the poem:<sup>61</sup>

黄河远上白云间, The Yellow River flows into the distant white clouds,  
一片孤城万仞山. A lonely town sits among the tens of thousands of mountains.  
羌笛何须怨杨柳, Why should the *Qiang* flute complain about the willows?<sup>62</sup>  
春风不度玉门关. Because the spring breeze does not cross the Jade Gate Pass.

---

<sup>61</sup> QTS 2849.

<sup>62</sup> *Qiang* was a minority in northwest China.

Fortunately, at that time there was no punctuation, so Ji Xiaolan explained that he had just composed his own poem, which happened to look like Wang Zhihuan's, but it should really be read like this:

黄河远上, The Yellow River flows into the distance,  
白云一片, Where there is a layer of white cloud,  
孤城万仞山. And a lonely town and ten thousand mountains.  
羌笛何须怨? Why should the *Qiang* flute complain?  
杨柳春风, Because the spring willow breeze  
不度玉门关. Does not cross the Jade Gate Pass.

In fact, even without forgetting the character 间, Wang Zhihuan's poem can be similarly adapted by replacing lines 2 and 3 with “白云间, 一片孤城万仞山” (Among the white clouds, are a lonely town and ten thousand of mountains).

The following famous poem by the Tang poet Du Mu (杜牧 803-853?) is another such example:

清明                          On The Spring Memorial Day  
清明时节雨纷纷, On the Spring Memorial Day, rain continues to fall,  
路上行人欲断魂. And people on the road are all heart-broken.  
借问酒家何处有, May I ask where there is a tavern?  
牧童遥指杏花村. A herdboy points at the distant Apricot Village.

Adapted:

清明时节雨, On the Spring Memorial Day, it rains,  
纷纷路上行, And on the road many people are walking –  
人欲断魂. Almost heart-broken.  
借问酒家何处, May I ask where there is a tavern?  
有牧童, There is a herdboy,  
遥指杏花村. Who points at the distant Apricot Village.

Some poems can be reparsed into prose. For example, Li Bai (李白) wrote the following poem “To Du Fu for Fun” (戲贈杜甫):<sup>63</sup>

饭颗山头逢杜甫， I met Du Fu on top of the Rice-Grain Mountain,  
头戴笠子日卓午。 Who wore a bamboo hat under the noon sun.  
借问別來太瘦生， I asked him why he was so thin,  
只为从前作诗苦。 (He said) Only because writing poems is a pain.

The following is the prose adaptation:

饭颗山头，逢杜甫头戴笠子。日卓午，借问：“別來太瘦生？”“只为从来作诗苦。”  
On Top of Rice-grain Mountain, I met Du Fu wearing a bamboo hat. The sun was right  
at noon. I asked: “Why are you so thin since our parting?” (He said) “Only because  
writing poems is a pain.”

The following strung-pearl thimble poems discussed above can also be reparsed into  
prose:

赏花归去马	赏花归去，马如飞。酒力微，醒时已暮。
暮        如	When returning from enjoying the flowers, my horse was
已        飞	flying-fast, and I felt weak because I was drunk. When I woke
时醒微力酒	up, it was already dusk.

The whole-poem regressive *ci* poems discussed in Section I involve inter-sentence restructuring, but they can still be sung to the same tune as the regressive readings. However, the following example is different:

皱眉愁，	The frowning eyebrows are grievous,
忧多喜少，	Grief is more abundant than joy,
袖衫长掩泪珠，	The sleeves constantly cover tears.
酒病花愁容颜瘦。	Being sick from wine, the flower worries, and the face is thin.
楼空锁燕，	The house is empty, locking swallows inside,
楼空锁燕，	The house is empty, locking swallows inside,
燕锁空楼。	The swallows are locked in the empty house.

<sup>63</sup> QTS 1892. The adaptation is found in the following web site: <http://www.iqstar.net/cgi-bin/topic.cgi?forum=12&topic=494&show=120>

This is a drama (*qu* 曲) style of palindrome to the tune “All Happy” (普天乐) composed by Zhong Longzi (仲龙子) in the Yuan Dynasty,<sup>64</sup> and it can be read either as a whole-poem-regression palindrome (starting with the last character of the poem) or a partial line-by-line-regression palindrome. Below is the whole-poem-regressive reading:

楼空燕锁,	The house is empty, locking swallows inside,
燕锁空楼,	The swallows are locked in the empty house.
燕锁空楼.	The swallows are locked in the empty house.
瘦颜容愁花病酒,	The thin face is grievous, the flower is sick from wine,
珠泪掩长衫袖.	Tears are covered with the long sleeves.
少喜多忧,	Little joy, much grief,
愁眉皱.	The grievous eyebrows frown.

Notice this reading has a different tune as compared with the original poem. This means that it is in the category of changing-form poem. This poem also largely alludes to the following lines of a poem by the Song poet Su Shi (苏轼 1027-1101):<sup>65</sup>

燕子楼空, The Swallow House is empty,  
佳人何在? Where is the beautiful person?  
空锁楼中燕. Only swallows in the house are locked in emptiness.

These lines are from a poem of Su Shi to the tune “Forever Meeting Happiness.” Both poems use a happy tune ironically.

We can imagine that if a *ci* has the same number of characters as a regulated verse (律诗), then it will be possible for the regressive reading to become a regulated verse. The tune “Beautiful Lady Yu” (虞美人) has fifty-six characters, so there are some palindromes to this tune whose regressive readings are in heptasyllabic regulated verses

---

<sup>64</sup> Gai 2001: 156.

<sup>65</sup> For Su Shi’s whole poem, see QSC 302.

(which also have fifty-six characters). See the following *ci* poem by poetess Zhang Fen (张芬) of the Qing dynasty:

秋声几阵连飞雁, Several sound links autumn to the migrating geese,  
梦断随肠断. A broken dream follows a broken heart.  
欲将愁怨赋歌诗, I wish to turn grief into songs and poems,  
叠叠竹梧移影月迟迟. Layers of bamboos and *wutong* trees move their shadows, and the moonlight lingers.

楼高倚望长离别, In the long separation, I look from the tall house;  
叶落寒阴结. Leaves fall, and cold clouds gather.  
冷风留得未残灯, Chilly wind did not blow out the dying lamp,  
静夜幽庭小掩半窗明. And over the quiet night in the dark courtyard, the slightly closed window is half bright.

The regressive reading is a *shi* poem:

明窗半掩小庭幽, The bright window is slightly closed and the yard is reclusive,  
夜静灯残未得留. Night is quiet, the lamp is burning out and cannot last.  
风冷结阴寒落叶, The wind is chilly, and in the cloudiness, cold leaves fall,  
别离长望倚高楼. Since the separation I constantly look from the tall house.  
迟迟月影移梧竹, Slowly lingering, the moon moves through the *wutong* and bamboos,  
叠叠诗歌赋怨愁. Layers and layers of poems express my sentiments.  
欲将断肠随断梦, I wish to let my broken heart follow my broken dream,  
雁飞阵阵几声愁. The migrating geese constantly fly by, with occasional cries of grief.

Both the irregular *ci* and the regulated *shi* are grammatically and semantically clear, and their meanings are also similar, except that the original *ci* starts with the migrating geese in the sky and ends with the window of the quiet house, while the *shi* starts with the window and house and ends with the migrating geese.

The following *ci* palindrome (also to the tune “The Beautiful Lady Yu”) by Zhu Xingsun (朱杏孙) in the Qing Dynasty is even more sophisticated than the above one, because first, when read regressively, it can be reparsed into another poem of the same

tune, and second, the original poem can be reparsed into a regulated verse, and the regulated verse is still a palindrome. Below is the original *ci* poem:<sup>66</sup>

孤楼倚梦寒灯隔，  
细雨梧窗逼，  
冷风珠露扑钗虫，  
络索玉环园鬓凤玲珑。 With the hairnet and the jade ring, phoenix-shaped hair is  
In the lonely house, my dream is separated by the cold lamp,  
While thin rain falls on the window by the *wutong* tree.  
Chilly wind with dew drops blow the insect-shaped hairpins,  
endearing.

肤凝薄粉残妆消，  
影对疏栏小。  
院空芜绿引香浓，  
冉冉近黄昏月映帘红。With dusk slowly approaching, the moon shines on the red curtain.  
There is still thin powder on the skin when make-up is removed.  
Shadows are cast in front of the small sparse railings.  
The yard is empty, the lawn is green, attracting dense fragrance,

The regressive, which involves repunctuation, is as follows:

红帘映月昏黄近，  
冉冉浓香引，  
绿芜空院小栏疏，  
对影消妆残粉薄凝肤。The red curtain reflects the moonlight, as dusk approaches,  
Gradually, thick incense fragrance grows.  
On the green lawn and the empty yard, small railings are sparse,  
She removes her makeup in front of her shadow, and a thin layer  
of powder remains on her skin.

玲珑凤鬓园环玉，  
索络虫钗扑。  
露珠风冷逼窗梧，  
雨细隔灯寒梦倚楼孤。The phoenix-shaped hair and the round jade earrings are exquisite,  
On the hairnet are insect-shaped ornaments.  
Dew drops in the cold wind fall on the *wutong* by the window,  
The rain beyond the lamp is thin, and in her cold dream in  
the house, she remains alone.

The following is the regulated verse repunctuated from the original *ci* poem:

孤楼倚梦寒灯隔， The lonely house and the dream is separated by the cold lamp,  
细雨梧窗逼冷风。 And in the thin rain, the window by the *wutong* blocks cold wind.  
珠露扑钗虫络索， Dew falls on the insect-shaped ornaments on her hairnet,  
玉环园鬓凤玲珑。 The round hair shape with the jade ring is like a delicate phoenix.  
肤凝薄粉残妆消， Light powder remains on the her after the make-up is removed,  
影对疏栏小院空。 With the sparse railings facing their shadows, the small yard is empty.  
芜绿引香浓冉冉， The green lawn attracts growing incense fragrance,  
近黄昏月映帘红。 The moon that approaches dusk shines on the red curtain.

---

<sup>66</sup> The poem here is cited from the China *Shi* and *Ci* Website (中华诗词网  
<http://zhsc.sdedu.net/Html/200451124039-1.html>).

And this poem can be read regressively as follows:

红帘映月昏黄近, The red curtain reflects the moon, evening is coming,  
冉冉浓香引绿芜. And the slow-moving incense fragrance spreads to the green lawn.  
空院小栏疏对影, In the empty yard, low railings face their sparse shadows silently,  
消妆残粉薄凝肤. And after taking off her makeup, there is still thin powder on the skin.  
珑玲凤鬟圆环玉, What delicate is the phoenix-shaped hair, what round is the jade ring,  
索络虫钗扑露珠. On the hairnet insect-shaped ornaments meet the dew.  
风冷逼窗梧雨细, Chilly wind falls on the window, and the *wutong* rain is thin,  
隔灯寒梦倚楼孤. Beyond the lamp is the cold dream in a lonely house.

All of the four readings portray a woman's beautiful hair shape, hair ornaments, and makeup, yet no one is around to appreciate her beauty. All what she has is a dream in a lonely house, and no matter what form the poem takes, the dream and the lonely house remain the same.

The above two reparsable poems show that the regressive reading of a palindrome can be a different form of poem, not just one with a different internal structure, therefore they can be called changing-structure and changing-form palindromes (变章变体回文).<sup>67</sup> The above examples demonstrate that, with the right rearrangement, many existing poems are not what we originally thought they were. Poems hide within one another, just like in palindromes. Sometimes poetic lines hide within seemingly prosaic texts.

The **switching-line poem** (换位诗) is another kind of changing-discourse poem. It is created by either switching the position of lines in a poem, or the position of characters between lines. The following is a poem by Li She (李涉) of the Tang:<sup>68</sup>

终日昏昏醉梦间, I've been muddleheaded all day long as if in drunkenness and dream,  
忽闻春尽强登山. Suddenly hearing the end of spring, I forced myself to tour a mountain.

<sup>67</sup> Yan's book mentions "changing-form palindrome" (变体回文)" in the appendix, but he did not provide any example.

<sup>68</sup> For Li She's poem, see QTS 5429. For the story related to this poem discussed below, see Yan 2001:284-285.

因过竹院逢僧话, Because I came across a bamboo yard and heard a monk's talk,  
又得浮生半日闲. I got half a day of relaxation again.

In his poem, “僧话” (a monk's talk) in the third line has a positive sense of enlightenment, which relaxes the poet. In the Song dynasty, when a scholar named Mo Zishan (莫子山) was on excursion on a mountain, he was annoyed by a preaching monk, so he rearranged Li She's poem in the following manner:

忽闻春尽强登山, Suddenly hearing the end of spring, I force myself to tour a mountain,  
又得浮生半日闲. And I enjoy relaxation for half a day again.

因过竹院逢僧话, Because I came across a bamboo yard and heard a monk's talk,  
终日昏昏醉梦间. I've been muddleheaded all day long as if in drunkenness and dream.

In this poem, the monk has bewildered the listener instead of enlightening him. This kind of poem shows that in a regulated or quatrain verse, the semantic or logical connection between the lines can be quite flexible. For instance, in some regulated verses, the two middle couplets can be switched without affecting the coherence of the poem. Switching-line poems are also similar to assembled poems (集句诗, see Section III in Chapter Two) in the sense that they are all created from exiting poems. The line-by-line-regression *ci* palindromes discussed above are also switching-line poems, because their regressive readings can be viewed as physically switching the positions of the odd-numbered and the even-numbered lines in the original readings (see Zhu Xi's “To the Tune of ‘Bodhisattva Barbarian’” in Section I).

The following is a couplet that involves switching individual characters between different lines:<sup>69</sup>

---

<sup>69</sup> Liang Yusheng 1993: 101.

山空雾罩松堤曲, The mountain is empty, fog covers the winding pine dike,  
浦远烟笼柳径前. Along the distant river, mist gathers in front of the willow path.

This couplet can be read as a palindrome, and it can also be read in the following:

山 空 雾 罩 松 堤 曲  
浦 远 烟 笼 柳 径 前

山 空 雾 罩 松 堤 曲  
浦 远 烟 笼 柳 径 前

山远烟罩松径曲, The mountains are distant, mist covers the twisting pine path,  
浦空雾笼柳堤前. The river appears empty, fog gather in front of the willow dike.

We can view this couplet as a number of images lined up in two rows. No image is bound to a row, but rather each can be combined with an image in the other row. For example, in the first line, there are pines along the dike, and in the second line, there are willows along the path. The dike is comparable to the path because they are both “lines,” and the pines are parallel to the willows because they are both trees. The switched images parallel each other. This couplet is also a special case of the rhetorical technique “splitting and interlocking parallelism” (互文交错对), in which certain words can be split and rearranged to achieve parallelism.<sup>70</sup> This couplet actually involves the same technique that is used in the “Star Formation Poem” (璇玑图) in Chapter V, breaking up the boundary between lines and problematizing any dominant linear word order.

The above examples demonstrate that, with the right rearrangement, many existing poems are not what we originally thought they were. Poems hide within one another, just like in palindromes. Sometimes poetic lines hide within seemingly prosaic texts. David McCraw demonstrates that rhymed lines are often found in the *Zhuangzi*, and that this

<sup>70</sup> For more discussion of *huwen* (互文) and *jiaocuo* (交错), see Zheng and Zhu 1993: 935-936.

phenomenon is not accidental, but rather is a kind of rhetorical patterning.<sup>71</sup> This is also what Su Shi calls “横看成岭侧成峰” (Viewed from front it looks like a mountain but viewed from side it looks like a peak).

The palindromes, thimble poems, switching-position poems, and restructurable poems discussed in this chapter all share the common feature of structural manipulation. A palindrome controls its grammatical structure through character order. In a thimble poem, the end of each line is “wedged” into the next line, making the poem both structurally and semantically well linked. Restructurable poems make use of the multiple structural possibilities in lines and between lines without punctuation marks (classical Chinese texts were mostly printed without punctuation marks), so that a poem may even be viewed as prose. These structural manipulations are based on the fact that Chinese word classes are relatively flexible as compared to European languages, the latter being bound more strictly by morphology.<sup>72</sup> Entertaining stories about the flexible structure of classical Chinese are many. For example, one story has it that when a newly hired private teacher is asked how he expected to be paid, he wrote the following line: “无鸡鸭也可, 无鱼肉也可, 无米面也可, 无钱粮也可。”<sup>73</sup> Since “鸡鸭” (chicken and duck), “鱼肉” (fish and meat), “米面” (rice and flour) and “钱粮” (cash and grain) are common words, the employer thus assumed he meant, “No poultry is fine, no fish or meat is also fine, no rice or flour is also fine, and no money or grain is also fine.” However, at the end of the month he demanded to be paid by saying his statement meant to following:

---

<sup>71</sup> McCraw 1995.

<sup>72</sup> Chinese language is called by some linguists a “tolerant type language” (宽式语言) and European languages “strict type” (严式语言). See Chen Baoya 1993: 76-85.

<sup>73</sup> Anonymous.

无鸡, 鸭也可; Without chicken, duck will be fine;  
无鱼, 肉也可; Without fish, meat will be fine;  
无米, 面也可; Without rice, flour will be fine;  
无钱, 粮也可. Without money, grain will be fine.

Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋 1901-1987) told a story about a fortuneteller who used the line “父在母先亡” as a one-fits-all answer for his patrons, because this line has six possible meanings:<sup>74</sup>

1. Your father is alive, your mother died.
2. Your mother is alive, your father died.
3. Your father will die before your mother.
4. Your mother will die before your father.
5. Your father died before your mother did.
6. Your mother died before your father did.

Of course, there are only two ways to parse “父在母先亡”: “父在, 母先亡” (father lives; mother died) and” 父在母先, 亡” (father dies before mother), but because each of the parsing may be read as past, present, and future tense, the fortuneteller was able to change the meaning depending on what the client says. We can imagine that all the fortuneteller needed to do was to declare this line to the patron and then wait for the latter to tell the real situation about his or her parents. No matter what the real situation is, the fortuneteller could always say “Oh yeah, that is what I meant!”

---

<sup>74</sup> See Liang Shiqiu 1993: 184.

## **Chapter Two      Poems with Content Prerequisites**

The term “content prerequisites” means to require a poem to include certain characters, words, or even lines. The assigned-character poem (嵌字诗) is the most obvious type of this kind, because one or more characters are required to appear in each line. Conventionally, assigned-character poems are considered different from number poems and name poems (see below), but they are not really that different, since the numbers and names used in these poems are also content prerequisites. Assembled poems (集句诗), which are composed of lines selected from other poems, are even more typical assigned-character poems. An adapted poem (隐括诗), which draws on a previously existing poem, is also an assigned-character poem. For these reasons, I consider all these types of poems members of the assigned-character poem family.

### **I. Number Poems and Name poems (杂数诗 and 杂名诗)**

**Number poems** (杂数诗) are various kinds of poems that involve numeric listings. Yan Huazhi classifies number poems into twenty-three types, including poems about the four seasons (四季), the four colors (四色), the five elements (五行), the twelve earthly branches (十二地支), the twelve zodiac signs (十二属相), the twelve months (十二月), the twenty-four “seasonal periods” (二十四节气), and the twenty-eight stars (二十八宿).

Numbers “hundred” (百), “thousand” (千), and “ten thousand” (万) are also often used.

In number poems, one through ten are the most commonly employed.<sup>75</sup> For example:

一去二三里，Walking for two or three *li*,  
烟村四五家. I see four or five houses in a misty village,  
亭台六七座, And six or seven pavilions,  
八九十枝花. And eight, nine, or ten flowers.<sup>76</sup>

As a pentasyllabic quatrain, the poem is already quite short, yet among the twenty characters in the poem, ten are numbers, which makes it even simpler. These facts are coherent with the theme of poem, which is about the simple life in the countryside. The following poem by Yi Shunding (易顺鼎 1858-1920) uses number in a similar way:<sup>77</sup>

一笔一墨复一砚, One brush pen, one ink stick, and one ink stone,  
一筇一笠复一扇, One bamboo cane, one bamboo rain hat, one fan,  
一菜一蔬复一饭. One vegetable dish and one bowl of rice.

一云一石还一松, One wisp of cloud, one rock, and one pine,  
一涧一瀑还一峰, One valley pond, one water fall, and one peak,  
一寺一桥还一钟. One temple, one bridge, and one bell.

In this poem there are eighteen singular objects mentioned. Besides, there is also an implied singular person who lives in this environment. The first stanza presents what the poet has in his room, and the second stanza what he sees outside. The vegetarian food and the temple indicate the person is possibly a Buddhist monk or a hermit.

---

<sup>75</sup> For Yan's categorization, see Yan 2001: 401. Xie Zhen (谢榛 1495-1575) considered Bao Zhao (鲍照 405-466) one of the earliest to write a poem in the “ten-count style” (十数体), see Xie 1998: 51. Zhang Dexin (张德鑫) points out that in folklore, a “ten-count style” poem is also called a “ten-number poem” (十字令), see Zhang 1999: 335.

<sup>76</sup> Attributed to a Yuan dynasty poet Xu Zaisi (徐再思), see Yan 2001: 372.

<sup>77</sup> Lin 1977: 170.

The following poem is attributed to Zheng Banqiao (郑板桥 1693-1765), Ji Xiaolan and others by different sources:<sup>78</sup>

一片两片三四片，One flake, two flakes, three four flakes,  
五片六片七八片，Five flakes, six flakes, seven eight flakes,  
九片十片十一片，Nine flakes, ten flakes, eleven flakes –  
飞入梨花都不见。Fly into the pear blossoms and all disappear.

“片” (*pian*) in the poem is a measure word for snowflakes. The poem describes somebody counting snowflakes, which all fly into the snow-covered trees and disappear. Pear blossoms (梨花) are white, and so they are used to represent the leafless trees covered with snow. The “bold” use of numbers in the first three lines creates puzzlement (悬念) in the reader’s mind, because counting is not poetic language. However, the last line suddenly turns the poem away from “danger” (one more line of counting would make a truly dumb poem). Being able to escape from this kind of “dangerous” poetic situation is a special type of rhetorical skill called “last-minute rescue” (逆挽) or “witty mending” (妙补).<sup>79</sup> The counting also keeps the readers’ attention focused on the snowflakes, discreetly leading their eyes to the “pear blossoms.”

十九夜月八分光，The moon on the nineteenth night of the month is eight tenths round,  
七姊留来嫁六郎。A remaining seventh daughter is married to a sixth son.  
睡到五更三四点，Sleeping until three or four o’clock in the fifth watch,  
二人相爱共一床。The two of them lovingly share one bed.<sup>80</sup>

---

<sup>78</sup> A legend has it that the first three lines were composed by the Qianlong Emperor of the Qing in a poetry party in which everybody was expected to compose a poem on snow, as it was snowing outside. When it was the Emperor’s turn, because he was not a good poet, he kept on counting the snowflakes outside, and it was Ji Xiaolan who “rescued” him by providing the last line. Different sources also have slightly different texts for the poem; some have “梅花” (*mume* flowers) and “芦花” (reed flowers) instead of “梨花” (pear blossoms) in the last line.

<sup>79</sup> See Yan 2001: 368-369.

<sup>80</sup> Anonymous. See Gai 2001: 168.

Numbers ten through one are included, but they are not used for counting. For example, “十九,” “八分,” “七姊,” “六郎” are common words that happen to contain a number. However, these numbers do create a “count-down” impression – the newly wed shy young couple finally shares one bed when the night is almost over.

The following poem is related to a story about the Han dynasty scholar couple Sima Xiangru (司马相如) and Zhuo Wenjun (卓文君). When Sima Xiangru passed the Civil Service Exam and became an official in the capital, he wanted divorce his wife Zhuo Wenjun who had been waiting for him in the countryside. He sent a letter that said “一二三四五六七八九十百千万” to her. Zhuo Wenjun realized that it meant “no feelings,” as the line contains all the numbers except “亿” (*yi*, a hundred million), and “亿” is the homophone of “意” (meaning, affection), “义” (brotherhood), and “忆” (memory, to think of). Sima Xiangru employed the “omitted-tail” technique and puns in this line. Zhuo Wenjun also employed numbers in her reply.<sup>81</sup>

万言千语說不完, Thousands of words cannot express how I feel,  
百无聊赖十倚栏. And there is nothing I can do except for standing by the railings.<sup>82</sup>  
重九登高看孤雁, On the Double-Yang Day, I climb high, to see only a wild goose flying.  
八月中秋月圆人不圆, On the Mid-Autumn Day, the moon is full, but my family is not.  
七月银河鹊桥断, In the Seventh Month the Magpie Bridge on the Silvery River  
breaks,<sup>83</sup>  
六月伏天我心寒. And in the Sixth Month the weather is hot but my heart is cold.  
五月石榴如火, In the Fifth Month, the pomegranate flowers are as red as fire,

---

<sup>81</sup>The original poem has two stanzas, and here only the second stanza is presented and translated. The poem here is quoted from Zhang Dexin's book *World in Numbers* (数里乾坤). See Zhang Dexin 1999: 340.

<sup>82</sup> 倚栏 is a very common term in classical poetry. It indicates that the poet is looking into distance and lost in thought.

<sup>83</sup> This line alludes to the folk story “The Herdboy and the Weaving Girl,” in which a celestial princess secretly married a herdboy on the Earth. When the celestial Queen learned it, she took her daughter back. The herdboy followed to the sky, but the Queen created a river to keep him away. Later, the Queen allowed them to meet on the seventh day in the seventh month every year. On that day every year, all the magpies fly to the sky to form a bridge for the two lovers to meet. Magpies are considered auspicious.

偏遇冷雨澆花端; But a cold rain pours on top of them.  
四月枇杷未黃, In the Four Month, the loquat is not yellow yet,  
我欲對鏡心意亂. I want to look at myself in a mirror, but my mind is too disturbed.  
急匆匆三月桃花隨水轉, In the Third Month, peach flowers flow away fast on the water;  
飄零零二月风筝線兒斷, Solitarily, in the Second Month, a kite breaks from the string.  
泪涟漣一片痴心却盼了个負心漢. With many tears: what I have been waiting for he  
who turns out to be One heartless man!

The language and style of this poem tells us that it was not composed in the Han Dynasty, but is more likely from a late imperial drama. This poem uses numbers to organize different images common in poetry, such as “倚栏,” “重九,” “中秋月,” “鹊桥,” “石榴,” “桃花,” and “风筝.” The poem also includes nine months of the year, and therefore it is also a “month poem” (月令诗), another common type of number poem.

Below is a number-oriented antithetic couplet found in a temple for Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮 181-234):<sup>84</sup>

收二川, 排八阵, 六出七擒, 五丈庙前点五十四盏明灯, 一心只为酬三顾;  
取西蜀, 定南蛮, 东和北拒, 中军帐里变金木土圭爻卦, 水面偏能用火攻.

Taking two rivers, arranging eight battle formations, six marches, seven captures, in the Five-Zhang Temple lighting fifty-four lamps, and one heart thinking only of repaying the three visits;

Getting Shu in the West, stabilizing the Southern Barbarians, making peace with the East to confront the North, in the headquarters tent predicting with hexagrams, and being able to attack with fire on the surface of the water.

The first line contains the numbers one through ten, and the second line contains the five directions (east, west, south, north, and middle) and the Five Elements (金木水火土), which can also function as numbers for listing things. For example, in the first line, 八阵

---

<sup>84</sup> According to Liang Shi and Liang Dong (1995: 350), the couplet is in a Zhuge Liang temple near Nanyang city in Henan province. Zhuge Liang was the Prime Minister of the Shu Kingdom in the Three-Kingdom period, the hero of the novel *Legends of the Three Kingdoms*.

refers to Zhuge Liang's use of the “八卦阵” (Eight Trigrams Battlefield Formation), “六出” refers to “六出岐山” (Zhuge Liang marched out of the Qi Mountains in attempt to unify North China for six times), “七擒” refers to “七擒孟获” (capturing Meng Huo, a rebellious minority chief, seven times). “五丈庙” refers to a temple in which Zhuge Liang's headquarters were located in his last battle. “五十四盏明灯” refers to the story that Zhuge Liang predicted whether he could survive his last illness by keeping fifty-four lamps lit (at that time he was fifty-four years old). “三顾” refers to King Liu Bei's three visits to Zhuge Liang's home to invite him to be his chief advisor. “东, 西, 南, 北, 中, 金, 木, 土, 水, 火,” in the second line also have the function of categorizing and listing things.<sup>85</sup> With these numbers, this couplet efficiently summarizes Zhuge Liang's major life achievements.

In the following two couplets, number addition is involved:<sup>86</sup>

世外凭临, 一面峰峦三面海 Coming to this spot outside of the human world, I see mountains on one side and the sea on three sides;  
 云中结构, 二分人力八分天 The buildings in the clouds are two tenths human labor, and eight tenths Heaven's.

In the first line, “一面” + “三面” = “四面” ( $1 \text{ side} + 3 \text{ sides} = 4 \text{ sides}$ ), and in the second line, “二分” + “八分” = “十分” ( $2 \text{ shares} + 8 \text{ shares} = 10 \text{ shares}$ ). As Liang Shi

<sup>85</sup> In the book *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror*, “天” (sky), “地” (Earth), and “东,” “西,” “南,” “北,” “中” are used instead of numbers or “甲,” “乙,” “丙,” “丁” to list the chapters.

<sup>86</sup> See Liang Shi and Liang Dong 1995: 366, 543. Zhang Tianjian (张天健) points out that adding numbers in poetry can be traced back to the Tang monk poet Han Shan (寒山 627-649), who used the following lines in his poem “Five Hundred Five-Syllable Poems” (五言五百首):

五言五百篇, I have five hundred pentasyllabic poems,  
 七字七十九, And seventy-nine heptasyllabic poems,  
 三字二十一, And twenty-one three-syllable poems,  
 都来六百首. Which make up six hundred poems in all.

Notice that the numbers in the first three lines, when added up, are equal to the number in the fourth line. See Zhang 1995: 506.

and Liang Dong point out, the use of “一面” (one side), “三面” (three sides), “二分” (twenty percent), “八分” (eighty percent) is not only because they are necessary for describing the scene, but also because they can help avoid using the words “四面” (four sides, every side) and “十分” (100 percent, very) which are used too often in poetry.

北斗七星, 水底连天十四点 The seven stars in the Big Dipper, together with their reflections in water, make fourteen points.

南楼孤雁, 月中带影一双飞 The single wild goose above the southern house, bringing its shadow under the moon, makes a flying pair.

In this couplet, the first line presents some still images, while the second line presents two moving images: it is as if the goose and its shadow are moving against the still line of fourteen points. The shadow is the goose's companion, but in fact “bringing its shadow” makes the goose even lonelier.

Number poems also appear in the visual arts. The design below is composed of ten coins, each coin having the inscription of a four-character idiom. Numbers one through ten help link the ten idiom-coin images together.<sup>87</sup>

一本万利 One capital brings ten thousand profits.

二人同心 Two people share the same heart.

三元及第 Three top candidates pass the exams.

四季平安 The four seasons are peaceful.

五谷丰登 Five crops all have good harvest.

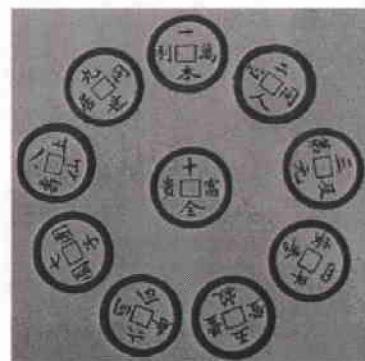
六合同春 Within the six sides spring is everywhere.<sup>88</sup>

七子团圆 Seven sons reunite at home.

八仙上寿 Eight Immortals attend a birthday celebration.

九世同居 Nine generations all live together.

十全富贵 The ten desires for rich and noble are all satisfied.



<sup>87</sup> Nozaki 1961: 91.

<sup>88</sup> “The six sides” (六合) refers to the whole country or world.

The ten idioms are all good luck words. Notice that in the seventh coin, “七子” is also a homophone of “妻子” (*qizi*, wife and children), so “七子团圆” also means “reunion with wife and children.”

Numbers in China are not just for counting. Many words and idioms contain numbers. For example, “千万” (ten million) may mean “absolutely,” “万一” (one out of ten thousand) means “in case,” and in the structure “—...就...,” “—” means “as soon as.” Even when numbers are used to indicate quantity, the Chinese often tend to be less precise, so that a number-oriented expression may have other implications. For instance, in the above lucky coin design, “五谷” (five major grains) means crops in general rather than just five kinds of crops, and “六合” (six sides) refers to the country rather than to the six sides that enclose an area. In modern English, numbers usually seem to be used in a more precise manner. Besides, English words related to the same numeric concept may not contain numbers or may not look the same: for example, “January,” “Monday,” and “first” do not contain the word “one,” while their Chinese equivalents “一月,” “星期一” and “第一” all contain the number “一.” Numbers “一” (one) through “十” (ten), “百” (hundred), “千” (thousand), and “万” (ten thousand), are also very common in mainstream poetry, especially when forming parallel structures. For example, “窗含西岭千秋雪, 门泊东吴万里船” (A window frames the snow lain for a thousand years on the West Mountain, the door harbors boats coming from Eastern Wu ten-thousand-*li*-away).<sup>89</sup> Number poems are just an extension of this tradition.

---

<sup>89</sup> Du Fu 绝句四首(三), QTS 2487. For more information regarding the use of numbers in Chinese culture, refer to Zhang's book (1999) *World in Numbers* (数里乾坤).

Name poems (杂名诗) are poems that include various names, and they are as abundant as number poems. *Essential Explanations of the Ancient Topics of the Music Bureau* (乐府古题要解) classifies name poems into sixteen types, including personal names (人名), place names (地名), medicine names (药名), grass, tree, bird and animal names (草树鸟兽名), drama names (戏剧名), acupuncture points names (针穴名), and other categories.<sup>90</sup> Yan's appendix lists twenty-nine types of names poems.

Poems composed of personal names were also humorously called “counting-ghost records” (点鬼簿),<sup>91</sup> because the names used are mainly those of famous historical figures. It should be noted that the generation name poems (字辈诗 *zibeishi* or 傀行诗 *beihangshi*) used in some Daoist sects, drama troupes, as well as prominent families, can be viewed as a special kind of personal name poem. While name poems are usually composed of existing names, generation name poems are composed of names to be given to children. The following is such a poem of the Orthodox Yang Daoist Sect (正陽派):<sup>92</sup>

阴阳生造化，Yin and yang shape the transformation of all things,  
动静合本源. Motion and stillness are of the same origin.  
自得神仙旨，It is from the time I received the instruction from the immortals  
方知妙中玄. That I have understood the wonders in the mystery.

This kind of poem is usually written by the sect founder or master. A member of the sect will keep his or her family name and use a character from the poem as the first character of his or her given name. In the above poem, the first-generation followers of

---

<sup>90</sup> Wu 2001: 62-65.

<sup>91</sup> *Shuo Fu* (說郛, vol. 118): “Yang Jiong liked to continuously use ancients’ names in his writing, and people in his time called his writings ‘ghost counting records’” (杨炯为文好以古人名连开, 时人号“点鬼簿”).

<sup>92</sup> He 2001: 280.

the master will all be named “[surname] 阴 [given name],” and those in the second generation will all be called “[surname] 阳 [given name].” The characters in this poem can thus be called the “generation characters,” because from these characters people can tell which generation the person belongs to. When all the characters in the poem have been used, another poem may be written to carry on the lineage.

The following is a *ci* tune name poem (词牌名):<sup>93</sup>

小镇西湖月照梨, In the little town by the West Lake, the moon shines on pear trees.  
花非花犯浣纱溪. Flowers that do not look like flowers invade the Washing Silk Creek.  
闲中好望仙门探, In times of leisure, I enjoy visiting the Immortal’s Gate,  
春锁寒窗乌夜啼. Where spring locks the cold windows, and crows caw at night.

This poem is completely composed of the following *ci* tune names (词牌名) without adding any other characters: “小镇西,” “西湖月,” “月照梨(花),” “花非花,” “花犯,” “浣纱溪,” “闲中好,” “望仙门,” “探春,” “锁寒窗,” and “乌夜啼.” The thimble technique enables these names to share some common characters. For example, in the first line, 西 is found in both 小镇西 and 西湖月, and 月 is in both 西湖月 and 月照梨花. In other words, while usually the thimble structure occurs between lines, in this poem it is within each line. We may perhaps call it an “intra-linear thimble poem.” With the above twelve *ci* names hiding in it, the poem gives us an impression that “there are poems within a poem” (诗中有诗 or 诗中有词).

The following is a riddle style county name poem that has both a hidden head and an omitted tail. It was written by the Tang poet Pi Rixiu (皮日休 834-883), with the title

---

<sup>93</sup> The poem is in Wan Shu’s *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk*. See Wan 1987: 751. The title for the picture is “Black Silk Winding Railing” (乌丝曲欄), and the title for the poem is “Ci Tune Name Poem” (词牌名诗).

“Two Splitting-Reassembling Poems in Memory of Deer Gate County” (怀鹿门县名离合二首):<sup>94</sup>

十里松萝阴乱石, Ten miles of pines and vines shade the jumbled rocks,  
门前幽事雨来新. In front of my door, the scenery is beautiful and the rain is fresh.  
野霜浓处怜残菊, Where frost is thick, I sympathize with the remaining chrysanthemums,  
潭上花开不见人. Around the pond, flowers are opening but nobody can be seen.

In this poem, the last character of each line and the first character of the next line make up the name of a county, and there are in total three county names in it: “石门” (Stone Gate), “新野” (New Wilderness) and “菊潭” (Chrysanthemum Pond). The county names are formally split, but they can still be read together. If we arrange the four lines into one without punctuation and read the long line with the thimble technique, the split county names will be restored:

(十里松萝阴乱石;) 石门前幽事雨来新; 新野霜浓处怜残菊; 菊潭上花开不见人。  
(Ten miles of pines and vines shade jumbled rocks;) In front of the stone gate,  
scenery is fresh when rain comes; in new wilderness I am sympathetic with the  
remaining chrysanthemums in places where frost is thick; on the chrysanthemum  
pond, flowers are blooming but no one is around.

In other words, because these “石门,” “新野” and “菊潭” are fixed words, they “glue” the lines together and make the poem a “camouflaged” prose.

The following is a modern name poem composed of China's provinces and autonomous regions (excluding the four Centrally Governed Cities of Beijing, Tianjin, Shanghai, and Chongqing, and two Special Districts of Hong Kong and Macao):<sup>95</sup>

---

<sup>94</sup> Also see Gai 2001: 179.

<sup>95</sup> Liu Yulin points out that the poem was seen in the *Guangzhou Daily* (without providing the date of publication) and points out that this poem is adapted from a similar poem composed by the former premier Zhou Enlai. See Liu 1996: 191-192.

两广两湖两河湾, Two vast areas, two lakes, and two river bays,  
青云黑内藏两山. The darkness of the dark clouds hides two mountains.  
双江浙贵辽四海, The double “Jiang,” Zhe and Gui are as vast as the Four Seas.  
吉安福宁新陕甘. “Luck,” “Stability,” “Happiness” and “Peace” refresh the new Shan  
and Gan (Provinces).

This poem quite successfully arranges these seemingly unrelated characters into four lines that all have a relatively clear meaning, as translated above.<sup>96</sup> The following couplet has a similar technique:<sup>97</sup>

中国捷克日本, [Words meaning] China, Czechoslovakia, Japan;  
[Sentence meaning] China victoriously defeated Japan;  
南京重庆成都. [Words meaning] Nanjing, Chongqing, Chengdu.  
[Sentence meaning] Nanjing again celebrates becoming the capital.

The two sentences are also consistent with historical events. During the Sino-Japan War (1937-1945), the Chinese government moved the capital from Nanjing to Chongqing, and after the war, Nanjing again became the capital.

Some mainstream poems that contain place names can also be considered the “relatives” of name poems. For example, Du Fu’s couplet “即从巴峡穿巫峡, 便下襄阳向洛阳” (Let’s immediately go through the Wu Gorge from the Ba Gorge, and then head to Luoyang from Xiangyang) contains four places (see bold and underlined characters), and Li Bai’s couplet “朝辞白帝彩云间, 千里江陵一日还” (I leave the White Emperor town in the morning glow, and within one day I returned to Jiangling) contains two

---

<sup>96</sup> In the first line, 两广 is 广东 (Guangdong) and 广西 (Guangxi), 两湖 refers to 湖南 (Hunan) and 湖北 (Hubei); 两河湾 means 河北 (Hebei), 河南 (Henan) and 台湾 (Taiwan). In the second line, “青云黑内藏” refers respectively to 青海 (Qinghai), 云南 (Yunnan), 黑龙江 (Heilongjiang), 内蒙古 (Inner Mongolia) and 西藏 (Tibet); “两山” refers to 山东 (Shandong) and 山西 (Shanxi). In the third line, “双江” refers to 江苏 (Jiangsu) and 江西 (Jiangxi); “浙贵辽四海” represents respectively 浙江 (Zhejiang), 贵州 (Guizhou), 辽宁 (Liaoning), 四川 (Sichuan) and 海南 (Hainan). The seven characters in the fourth line respectively represents 吉林 (Jilin), 安徽 (Anhui), 福建 (Fujian), 宁夏 (Ningxia), 新疆 (Xinjiang), 陕西 (Shaanxi) and 甘肃 (Gansu).

<sup>97</sup> This couplet is found in the following website: <http://www.lnd.com.cn/ylylzs/2003101234305.htm>.

places.<sup>98</sup> Liu Yulin points out that the use of place names in these two lines produces an impression of fast traveling.

The following is a *ci*-tune name couplet:<sup>99</sup>

水仙子持碧玉箫, 风前吹出声声慢. Water Fairy holds a jade flute, and in the wind she plays a slow tune.

虞美人穿红绣鞋, 月下引来步步娇. Beauty Yu wears red embroidered shoes, and when she walks under the moon, every step is lovely.

This couplet contains six *ci* tunes in total (bold and underlined). “风前” and “月下引” are also pre-existing poetic words, because they allude to the Tang poet Chen Ji’s (陈季) lines “风间传藻质, 月下引清声” (In wind circulates the water plants’ scent, under the moon comes clear singing).<sup>100</sup> This is an incomplete name couplet, since the author added characters or words other than the name words.

Among name poems, medicine name poems are especially common. Chinese medicine includes much more than herbs. In Li Shizhen’s (李时珍 1518-1593) *Categorized Medicines* (本草纲目), animals, insects, crops, and all kinds of minerals are listed. The names for medicines sometimes do not follow the Chinese naming conventions. The Chinese people usually name things according to their species – for example, plants all have the classifier “木.” In contrast, a medicine name may be an adjectival phrase, such as “合欢” (all happy); a verb, such as “续断” (connect and break); a verb-noun pair, such as “知母” (know mother), and “防风” (prevent wind); and even a sentence, such as “冬虫夏草” (In winter it’s a worm and in summer it’s a grass). Some

---

<sup>98</sup>Du Fu’s couplet and Li Bai’s couplet are respectively in QTS 2460 and QTS 1844.

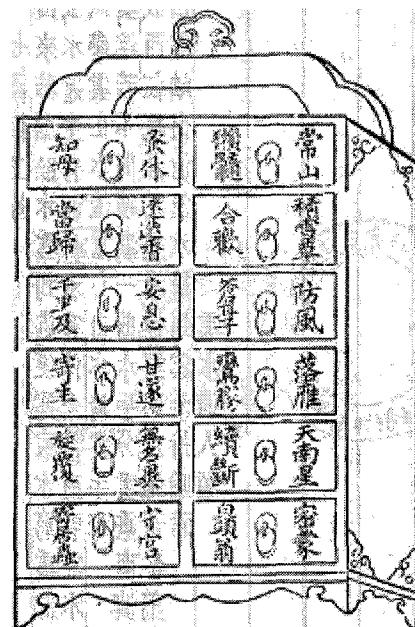
<sup>99</sup> See Liang Shi and Liang Dong 1995: 130.

<sup>100</sup>QTS 2132.

of these names give no clues as to whether the medicine comes from an herb, animal, or mineral: take, for example, “white-headed man” (白头翁, root of Chinese *pulsatilla*). Chinese doctors are most often also *literati*, not scientists; *literati* in general all have some knowledge of medicine. Chinese medicine is not a subject that is related only to the sick; besides healing illness, it also deals with preventing disease, or “nourishing life” (养生), and is therefore closely related to eating, drinking, and exercise. With this background, it is natural that medical terms are used in everyday life, as well as in poetry.

Just like other name poems, a medicine name poem can be completely composed of medicine names, or the medicine names may be integrated in the poem indirectly. The following is example of the former, which is designed by Wan Shu (万树).<sup>101</sup>

On the right is a design entitled “Medicine Cabinet” (药笼), and the poem title is “Medicine Name Poem” (药名诗). The picture shows a medicine cabinet (commonly seen in a Chinese medicine store) with medicine names written on each drawer. Starting with the character 常 on the upper-right corner, and reading down vertically, we will get the following poem:



常山积雪草防风, On Chang Mountain's accumulated snow, grass reduces wind.  
 落雁天南星迷蒙. Geese land from the southern sky, where stars are hazy.  
 獭髓合欢苍耳子, Otter Marrow is happy with the Black Ear,  
 鸟胶续断白头翁. Bird Glue connects and disconnects the White-haired Man.

<sup>101</sup> For more pictorial poems of Wan Shu, see Section II in Chapter Five.

蚤休迷迭香安息, Quick Rest is bewildered by the fragrance of Peace,  
甘遂无名异守宫. Sweet Success is not well-known – unlike Palace Guard.  
知母当归千里及, The one who knows his mother returns from a thousand *li* away.  
寄生旋覆寄居虫. The living-on-others Fast Turnover is a parasite worm.

Some lines in this poem are not very coherent in terms of meaning, but the idea of arranging the medicine names and the drawers to naturally form a poem is very creative, since usually a name poem is a mixture of names and other necessary characters.

The following poem by Xin Qiji (辛弃疾 1140-1207) of the Song dynasty quite successfully integrates medicine names in a poem of a serious theme.<sup>102</sup>

Title: 定风波 (To the Tune ‘Stilling the Waves’)

Foreword: 用药名招婺源马荀仲游雨岩. 马善医.

Using medicine names to invite Ma Xunzhong, who lives in Wuyuan, to tour the Rain Rocks. Ma is good at medicine.

山路风来草木香, On the mountain road, wind comes, the plant scent is fragrant,  
雨余凉意到胡床.<sup>103</sup> And after a rain, cool air reaches my portable bed.  
泉石膏肓吾已甚, I already have too much incurable River Rock suffering,<sup>104</sup>  
多病, And with so many illnesses,  
提防风月费篇章. I should prevent getting more by writing about beautiful scenery.

孤负寻常山简醉,<sup>105</sup> I have let down my accustomed mountain drinking,  
独自, And in solitude,  
故应知子草玄忙. I know that you have been busy.  
湖海早知身汗漫, Over the lakes and oceans, I have been going restlessly,  
谁伴, And who will accompany me?  
只甘松竹共凄凉. Only the pines and bamboos share my dreariness.

<sup>102</sup> The poem is also mentioned in Liu Yulin’s book, with three characters misprinted. See Liu 1996 p. 204.

<sup>103</sup> 胡床: a kind of portable bed. HYDCD 6-1211A.

<sup>104</sup> According to HYDCD 5-1013B, “泉石” refers to “山水” (mountains and rivers). In this poem, it probably means the mountains and rivers that Xin Qiji has traveled across as a military commander. “膏肓” (*gāohuāng*) is from the idiom “病入膏肓” – “Illness is incurable.”

<sup>105</sup> “山简醉” here means “get drunk,” see HYDCD 3-797.

The underlined words in this poem are medicine names or homophones of medicine names. Notice that in the first line, “木香” is an herb, but the line is read as “山路 – 风来 – 草木 – 香” (as translated above); in the second line, “雨余凉” is the homophone of the medicine “禹余粮,” but the line is read as “雨余-凉意-到胡床.” Other underlined medicine names are treated in a similar manner. This means the medicine names in the poem do not function as semantic units for the literal meaning of the poem, but are hidden. “身汗漫” may be read as “having the sweat of weakness” (出虚汗), which is a symptom of physical weakness in Chinese medicine, and it also means “wandering in different places” (湖海汗漫). The foreword indicates that this poem was written to invite a doctor to visit a place, but in fact the poet seems to be saying: what I need is medicine. Of course, the illness here may not only represent physical illness, but also other sufferings in life; the “medicine” may also mean “the medicine of your companionship” (notice that he asks “Who will accompany me?” in the second stanza), and for this reason, the doctor also represents an understanding friend (知音). There are also other tricks in this poem. “孤负” (*gufu*) and “汗漫” (*hanman*), which are rhyming doublets (叠韵词, to be discussed in Chapter Three).

Number poems and name poems may function as memory aids, or “oral instructional poems” (口诀 *koujue*). For example, elementary students in China are required to memorize the “multiplication poem” (乘法口诀), while high school students memorize

the “square poem” (平方口诀).<sup>106</sup> The “Four-Corner Code Poem” (四角号码诗) is a number poem that helps users understand the stroke code for using dictionaries with the four-corner code index.<sup>107</sup> The above province name poem helps student memorize the provinces in China. The classical Chinese medicine booklet “Prescription Song” (汤头歌诀) is also a long poem for memorizing the names of many medicines and their healing functions.<sup>108</sup>

## II. Assigned-Character Poems - Including Hidden-Head Poems (藏头诗), Assigned-Line Poems (嵌句诗), and Omitted-Tail Poems (歇后诗)

In an **assigned-character poem** (嵌字诗) one or more characters are required to be used in every line. In the following poem entitled “Pine Moon” (松月), “pine” (松) and “moon” (月) appear in every line:<sup>109</sup>

天有月兮地有松,	Heaven has the moon, earth has the pine,
可堪松月趣无穷.	And indeed pine and moon are forever of interest.
松生金粉月生兔,	Pine produces golden powder, moon produces a rabbit,
月抱明珠松化龙.	Moon holds a bright pearl, pine becomes a dragon.
月照长空松挂衲,	Moon shines in the boundless sky, pine hangs my gown,
松回禅定月当空.	And pine returns to Zen stillness when moon stays in the sky.
老僧笑指松头月:	The old monk points at the moon on top of the pine and laughs:
松月何妨一处供.	Why not worship pine and moon together?

Zhao Yi considered this a thematic thimble poem, because the lines in the poem alternatively talk about the moon and the pine, but it is certainly also a typical assigned-

<sup>106</sup> The following are some lines from the multiplication poem found in many arithmetic textbooks: 一一得一, ...九九八十一 ( $1 \times 1 = 1$ , ... $9 \times 9 = 81$ ). The following is the square poem for whole numbers from 11 to 31: 一一一三一, ... 三一九六一 ( $11 \times 11 = 121$ ... $31 \times 31 = 961$ ).

<sup>107</sup> For the poem, see *Wang Yunwu Concise Dictionary* (王云五小字汇), or any dictionary that has the four-corner code index.

<sup>108</sup> Wang 1999.

<sup>109</sup> The poem is in Zhao Yi's *Gaiyu Congkao* (陔余丛考), attributed to a Yuan dynasty “poet monk” (诗僧) Ming Ben (明本). See Zhao 1975.

character poem. The moon represents the process of enlightenment, while the pine is the enlightened being. Inserting both of them in every line indicates that the “enlightening” and the enlightened exist together harmoniously. In line five the monk identifies himself with the pine (the enlightened), as he is just like the pine, on which a monk’s gown hangs. The last line indicates that once one is enlightened, he will enjoy the same position as the enlightening object. The middle four lines alternatively talk about the moon and the pine, producing an impression that they are closely related.

Sometimes the assigned characters may be required to appear in assigned positions in a poem and form a sentence, making the poem an **assigned-line poem** (嵌句诗). See the following example:

芦花滩头有扁舟， There is a small boat on the Reed Flower Marsh,  
俊杰黄昏独自游。 Where a hero visits alone in dusk.  
义士若能明此理， If he can understand this reason,  
反躬逃难可无忧。 He will be able to escape from a danger without worries.

If read vertically, the left column is “芦俊义反” (Lu Junyi rebels).<sup>110</sup>

This technique may be used to organize four-character idioms for the convenience of memorization. In the following text, each row is an idiom:<sup>111</sup>

博古通今 Know the ancient and be familiar with the current.  
大千世界 The world of the myriad things.  
精妙绝伦 Extremely precise and well done.  
深知灼见 Deep knowledge and keen insight.

---

<sup>110</sup> The poem is from the novel *The Water Margin* (*Shuihu* 水浒). In the novel, the poem was written by Wu Yong (吴用) to Lu Junyi (芦俊义). Lu Junyi did not recognize the hidden line, which is “Lu Junyi Rebels,” but later somebody else recognized it, and got Lu arrested. This kind of poem is also called a hidden-head poem (藏头诗).

<sup>111</sup> This is one of the eight hundred idioms that two brothers in Guangzhou city organized. See the online news of Hong Kong’s *Mingbao Newspaper* (明报), 2004/2/14:  
<https://webmail.sas.upenn.edu/horde/imp/compose.php?uniq=1213667790402ea019526af10767975062691076797627333>.

The left column is yet another idiom: “博大精深” (Both extensive and deep in learning). From this, we can see that the idioms can be divided into those that can serve as the “head” (the vertical one) and those that serve as the “body” (the conventional horizontal ones). Organizing idioms with the assigned-character technique is very helpful for memorizing them. The characters that make up the hidden message in a poem can also be inserted in different positions, not only the beginning of each line. An assigned-line poem is not only content-oriented, but also structure-oriented, because assigning a character to a fixed position in a poem directly affects the grammatical structure of the poem.

The following is a series of four poems composed by four people, with the line “一片飞云掩洞门” included in each poem. The four people were required to use this line as the first, second, third, and fourth line of their four poems, respectively:<sup>112</sup>

1)

一片飞云掩洞门, A wisp of flying cloud covers the cave entrance,  
洞中云气净无痕. In the cave the clouds and air are pure, without a trace.  
忽闻响雷来岩底, Suddenly thunder is heard from the below the rock,  
九叠泉流壑口奔. Nine layers of spring flow to the valley exit.

2)

在山泉冷出山温, The spring is cold in the mountain, but warm when flowing out,  
一片飞云掩洞门. A wisp of flying cloud covers the cave entrance.  
奇秘如何关得住? How can the mystic and secret cave shut the spring water?  
依然斧凿到乾坤. It still cuts into the world like an axe or a chisel.<sup>113</sup>

3)

渴来玄洞纵游眺, I came to visit the mystic cave to entertain my eyes,  
洞里乾坤罗众妙. The world in the cave gathers all the wonderful things.

---

<sup>112</sup> Yan 2001: 77.

<sup>113</sup> The axe is likely to allude to the myth that a god Pangu (盘古) used an axe to cut a space between the Earth and the sky.

一片飞云掩洞门， A wisp of flying cloud covers the cave entrance,  
应知洞外江山好. But I should know the rivers and mountains outside are great.

4)

仙境琅环万古存， The immortal land is like a jade world a million years old,  
探奇揽胜乐无垠. To explore the wonders here is an endless joy.  
流连直欲此间住， I linger around and wish to live here,  
一片飞云掩洞门. A wisp of flying cloud covers the cave entrance.

“一片飞云掩洞门” is not only the assigned topic for this group composition, but also determines the physical structure of this series of four poems. The different position of the line in each of the four poems suggests a sense a progression, from outward movement to inner mystery. This series of poems may also be read as the inner *qigong* exercise (气功 breathing exercise) practiced by the Daoist for pursuing an ideal physical and mental state, with “飞云” (flying cloud) representing the circulating *qi* (气 energy generated through a breathing exercise).

The assigned-character technique is also often seen in mainstream poetry, though not in every line. For example, in the Tang poet Zhang Ruoxu's (张若虚, around 711) “Spring River and Flower-and-Moon Night” (春江花月夜), the five characters in the title appear frequently in the poem.

An **omitted-tail poem** (歇后诗) is a poem in which each line implies the omission of a character in the end of the line. The following poem satirizes a couple, Xia the Fifth (夏五) and his wife. Xia Wu is short, and his wife is tall.

夏五先生罔谈彼， Mr. Xia the Fifth likes to comment on others,  
夏五娘子靡寺已. Mrs. Xia the Fifth is too proud of herself.  
有时堂前相遇见， Sometimes when they meet in the hallway,  
刚刚撞着果珍李. They always happen to encounter Guozhen Li.

The meaning of “Guozhen Li” (果珍李) in the last line is not clear, which is because this is an omitted-tail poem – one has to know the omitted part to understand it. The poem here alludes to the lines “罔谈彼短，靡寺已长” (Emptily criticize others' shortcomings, proudly boast one's own advantages) and “果珍李柰，菜重芥姜” (When eating fruits, respect even plums and the crabapples, when eating vegetables, respect even mustard leaves and ginger) from the well-known four-syllabic poem *Thousand Character Text* (千字文), with which scholars in premodern China were very familiar.<sup>114</sup> When the omitted characters are restored, the poem will be like this:

夏五先生罔谈彼短，Mr. Xia the Fifth likes to talk about others' shortcomings,  
 夏五娘子靡寺已长。Xia the Fifth's wife is too proud of her own advantages.  
 有时堂前相遇见面，When they meet in the hallway,  
 刚刚撞着果珍李柰。They always learn the lesson of “Respecting even the lowliest.”

The last line indicates that only when the couple learns to be modest will they stop fighting.

The following is a couplet that has both a hidden-head and an omitted tail. It is a full antithetical couplet, with a horizontal title (横批) and two vertical lines (上联 and 下联).<sup>115</sup>

南北		South North	
六	二	Two	Six
七	三	Three	Seven
八	四	Four	Eight
九	五	Five	Nine

<sup>114</sup> The *Thousand Character Text* was one of the most fundamental tests in traditional China for the moral training of children. In the lines alluded here, plums and crabapples are cheap and insignificant among fruits, and mustard leaves and ginger are insignificant among vegetables.

<sup>115</sup> Liang Yusheng 1993: 160.

According to Liang Yusheng, this couplet widely spread across China during the Civil War (1945-49), when people were short on clothes, food, and other living supplies. The title “南北” implies that “东西” is missing, because “东西南北” is a common term that means the four directions. Since “东西” also means “things,” “南北” here actually implies “缺东西” (lack of things). In the right column, the number 一 (*yi* one) is missing; since “一” is the homophone of “衣” (clothes), the right column implies “lack of clothes.” In the left column, the number 十 (*shi* ten) is missing, and since “十” is the homophone of “食” (food), the left column implies “lack of food.” The whole couplet therefore expresses the idea that “We are short on food, clothes, and things.” This is also a couplet with audial effect, because puns are involved.

An omitted-tail poem is a special kind of assigned-character poem in which the assigned characters are invisible. Omitted-tail poems make use of common expressions such as proverbs and idioms or quotations from famous essays or poems, so that when a character or word is missing from the expression, the reader or listener will easily know what it is. Omitted-tail expressions speak with what is not spoken (言外之意), which is most commonly seen in the “omitted-tail proverbs” (歇后语).<sup>116</sup>

### III. Assembled Poems and Adapted Poems (集句诗 and 隐括诗)

An **assembled poem** (集句诗) is composed of lines selected from other poems. Yang Shen's (杨慎 1488-1559) *Rising Hut Poetry Discussions* (升庵诗话) points out that the first assembled poem is the “Seven-Classics Poem” (七经诗) by Fu Xian (傅咸), written

---

<sup>116</sup> The word “歇后” (Omitted-tail) is also translated as “enigmatic” or “truncated.” For more information of this kind of proverbs, see *ABC dictionary of Chinese proverbs* by John S. Rohsenow.

in the Jin (晋) Dynasty.<sup>117</sup> By the Song assembled poems became popular, and that Wang Anshi (王安石) was particularly interested in the genre.<sup>118</sup> The assembled poem is also a special kind of assigned-line poem, because all the lines are required to be lines already written previously.

The following poem entitled “The Fifth Month” is from a series of “month poems” in which each poem portrays a month.<sup>119</sup>

槐柳荫荫五月天, Locust and willow trees are shady in the Fifth Month;  
卷帘初听一声蝉. Rolling up the curtain, the first cicada cry is heard.  
中庭自摘青梅子, Picking green plums alone in the middle of the yard,  
碾玉蜻蜓缀鬓偏. A jade-like dragonfly presses down a wisp of hair.

This poem presents an early summer scene in the fifth lunar month. We see a number of images: the shady locust and willow trees, a sound of a cicada, a courtyard, green plums, a dragonfly, and a wisp of hair. We also see three actions: the person rolling up the curtain and picking plums. The person is not directly presented; it is only from the dragonfly pinning a wisp of hair that we know she is a woman.

The following is an assembled poem about the Yellow Crane Tower:<sup>120</sup>

#### 题黄鹤楼 (Written for the Yellow Crane Tower)

江边黄鹤古时楼, By the Yangtze River is the ancient Yellow Crane Tower,  
崔颢题诗在上头. On which there is a poem written by Cui Hao.  
云静独看秦塞雁, When clouds are still, you alone can see wild geese on the Qin frontier;

<sup>117</sup> Yang 2003: 5.

<sup>118</sup> See Yan Yu 1961: 175.

<sup>119</sup> This poem is found in Huang Zhijun's (黄之隽 1668-1748) *Collection of Fragrant Bits* (香屑集), an assembled-poem anthology dedicated to “boudoir feelings.” The four lines are respectively from a poem by Xue Feng (薛峰), Lady Stamen (花蕊夫人), Han Wu (韩武), and He Ning (何宁). See Huang 1972 (vol. 2): 12b.

<sup>120</sup> The assembler is a Qing scholar named Li Yixian (李义贤), see Liu 1996: 153. The eight lines are selected from eight Tang poems, respectively of Bai Juyi (白居易), Li Bai (李白), Shangguan Yi (上官仪), Zhao Gu (赵嘏), Cui Lu (崔鲁), Du Guangting (杜光庭), Wu Yuanheng (武元衡), Meng Binyu (孟宾于). The Yellow Crane Tower is a famous historical site in Wuhan, by the Yangtze River.

日高遥望洞庭头. When the sun is high, you can see the distant Dongting Lake's end.  
岸南岸北往来渡, Between the southern and the northern banks, boats come and go;  
烟淡烟浓远近秋. In the light and thick mist, autumn is far and near.  
行子不须愁夜泊, Travelers need not worry about where to dock at night,  
碧山重叠水环流. Because among the layers of green mountains, the river circulates.

Ever since the Tang poet Cui Hao's poem, the Yellow Crane Tower has become a nostalgic image, a place for poets to sigh over the past.<sup>121</sup> However, this poem has a "mild and neutral" tone, not sad, yet not joyful either. Liu considers this a weakness, because the poem "has enough scenery but not enough feeling expression" (写景有余, 抒情不足). However, lacking feeling expression is not necessarily negative. Letting images speak for themselves without the poet's direct comment is a distinctive style in traditional Chinese poetry. In this poem, the poet presents himself more as an observer than a commentator, and the ending is similar to the last two lines of a poem by the Tang poet Wang Wei (王维): "You ask the pattern of failure and success? – the fisherman's song reaches deep past the shore" (君问穷通理, 渔歌入浦深).<sup>122</sup> To Wang Wei, spontaneity represented by the fisherman's song is the ultimate answer, and therefore there is no need for further explanation. In this poem, similarly, the river that flows between the green mountains represents peace and spontaneity, which explains why the travelers do not need to worry about where to stay at night. This ending is quite the opposite to the ending of Cui Hao's poem: "Now it is getting dark, but where is my hometown? The misty river makes me worried" (日暮乡关何处是, 烟波江上使人愁).

---

<sup>121</sup> For Cui Hao's poem, see QTS 1329. It is this poem that made the Tower famous.

<sup>122</sup> From Wang Wei's Poem "To Young Master Zhang" (酬张少府 QTS 1267). The lines here are translated by Owen, see Owen 1996: 391.

The Tang poet Liu Jia (刘驾) wrote five heptasyllabic quatrains, each ending with a line in which the first three characters are the same. The following four of the five are related to assigned-line and assembled poems.<sup>123</sup>

Poem 1: 岁岁干戈阻路岐, 憶山心切与心违. 时难何处披衷抱, 日日日斜空醉归.

Poem 2: 一別杜陵归未期, 只凭魂梦接亲知. 近來欲睡兼难睡, 夜夜夜深闻子归.

Poem 3: 清秋新霁与君同, 江上高楼倚碧空. 酒尽露零宾客散, 更更更漏月明中.

Poem 4: 倦年曾住此中来, 今日重游事何哀. 忆得几家欢宴处, 家家家业尽成灰.

Since only the last line in each poem is relevant to the discussion, I will not provide translations for these poems. The titles of these poems suggest that they were not created to be a series of related poems, but they are somehow linked by their last lines, because if we put the last line of each poem together, we get an assembled poem:

日日日斜空醉归, Day after day, at sunset, I emptily return in drunkenness.  
夜夜夜深闻子规. Night after night, and late at every night, I hear the caw of cuckoos.  
更更更漏月明中, Watch after watch, the clock drips in the bright moonlight.<sup>124</sup>  
家家家业尽成灰. In house after house, people's livelihood turn to ashes.

This is a special kind of assembled poem because it is composed of the last line of each of the four poems. This also means the four original poems are “hidden-tail assigned-poem poems” (藏尾嵌诗诗), similar to the poem that hides “Lu Junyi rebels” discussed above, which is a “hidden-head assigned-line poem” (藏头嵌句诗).

Semantically, the assembled poem presents a person who returns home at sunset in drunkenness, hears the cuckoo and the water clock at night, and sighs over the troubles in

<sup>123</sup> These poems are briefly mentioned in Lu Ying's (陆莹) *Asking-Flowers House Poetry Discussions* (问花楼诗话), See Guo 1983 (vol. 2): 2298. Poems 1 and 2 are in QTS 6785; poems 3 and 4 are in QTS 6786.

<sup>124</sup> The clock here is a water clock.

his life. The identical triplets in the beginning of each line should be read as a 2+1 structure, for example, 日日-日斜空醉归 (Everyday, I return home drunk at sunset”), and 家家-家业尽成灰 (Every family’s property is ruined). This reading agrees with the fact that 日日, 夜夜 are commonly used di-syllabic words that mean “everyday,” “every night.” This interpretation also fits the background of the original poem to which “家家家业尽成灰” belongs, as the original poem is about the poet’s visit to a once-prosperous place which has been ruined by war. In addition, since the first line tells the speaker is drunk, the triplets are also playing an audial effect: the speaker is stuttering because of his drunkenness.

Assembled poems are abundant in pre-modern China. Some assembled poems are composed of lines or words from a specific anthology. For example, poems composed of lines from the *Book of Songs* are called “assembled Mao poems” (集毛诗), and poems composed of lines from Du Fu’s anthology are called “assembled Du poems” (集杜诗). Assembled antithetic couplets are also very common. For example, Liang Zhangju’s (梁章钜 ?-1849) *Antithetic Couplets Series* (楹联丛话) includes an anthology of parallel couplets composed of phrases from the *Four Books* (四书), called *Four Book Couplets* (四书对语), as well as an anthology of parallel terms from *Shuowen Jiezi* (说文解字) entitled *Best Quotations from “Shuowen Jiezi”* (说文凝锦录).<sup>125</sup> The following are three assembled couplets:

---

<sup>125</sup>Liang Zhangju 1996: 357-361 (楹联丛话全编).

云山起翰墨，Cloud mountains rise like ink,  
星斗焕文章。Stars shine like words in writing.<sup>126</sup>

独抱琵琶寻旧曲，Alone, I hold a *pipa* instrument and look for my old music,  
数教鹦鹉念新诗。Several times, I taught the parrot to recite a new poem.<sup>127</sup>

深林闲数新添笋，In the deep woods, I leisurely count newly sprouted bamboos,  
残烛贪看未见书。By a burning-out candle, I hungrily read a never-before-seen book.<sup>128</sup>

Assembled poems show that in traditional China, when poets write poems, they were writing within a conventional framework that can be deconstructed and rearranged. Take the pentasyllabic regulated verse as an example, although they are innumerable, they all share the same external form and similar internal structure: each has eight lines, and each has two parallel couplets in the middle. In addition, most of the classical Chinese poems center on a limited number of motives, such as the appreciation of natural scenery, nostalgia, boudoir sentiments, friendship, etc. This means it is relatively easy to construct an assembled poem. However, constructing one with a distinctive style or theme does require certain level of creativity.

An assembled poem that is composed of lines from famous poems can give the reader a chance to taste a little bit of different best dishes in one meal. Some original poems are mediocre as far as the whole poem is concerned, yet they may each contain one or two high-quality lines. An assembled poem may “recycle” the high-quality lines from mediocre poems, just as Lang Ying (朗瑛) said, “[assembled poems] Can really make

---

<sup>126</sup> The two lines are respectively from a poem of Wang Ju' (王琚, QTS 1061) and a poem of Du Mu (杜牧, QTS 5950).

<sup>127</sup> “独抱琵琶寻旧曲” is a variation of Tang poet Wei Zhuang’s line “闲抱琵琶寻旧曲” (QTS 10076). “数教鹦鹉念新诗” is the variation of Lady Stamen’s (花蕊夫人) line “看教鹦鹉念新詩” (QTS 8972).

<sup>128</sup> “深林闲数新添笋” is from a poem of Lu You (陆游 QSS 25647). “残烛贪看未见书” is the variation of “残烛贪传未见书” is from a poem of Huang Tingjian (11583).

remarkable poems out of mediocre ones; and it is not just the small skill like carving a worm” (真可为化腐成奇, 岂只雕虫小技哉).<sup>129</sup>

An **adapted poem** (隐括诗) is adapted from an existing poem. One reason for poetic adaptation is that an existing poem has not fully expressed what the reader wishes it to have expressed, or there is room for improvement. Another reason is for the purpose of singing. For example, *The Adaptable Studio* mentions a singing girl changed the rhyming words in Qin Guan’s (秦观 1049-1100) well-known poem to the tune “Courtyard Filled with Fragrance” (满庭芳), and the adapted version was applauded by Su Shi.<sup>130</sup> Another example is the famous vocal song “Three-time Repeated Yang Pass” (阳关三叠), which is adapted from Wang Wei’s “Song of Wei Town – Sending off Yuan the Second to Anxi” (渭城曲 送元二之安西).<sup>131</sup> Adaptation may also be from one form of literature to another, for example, from *shi* to *ci*, or even from fiction to a poem.<sup>132</sup>

Adapted poems are different from restructurable poems. Restructurable poems just change the structure of the original text, while adapted poems may change both the content and structure. In this section, I will discuss several adapted poems from a case found in Wu Zeng’s (吴曾 1127-1160) *Poetry Discussions in the Adaptable Studio* (能改宅诗话).

---

<sup>129</sup> Lang 1961: 484.

<sup>130</sup> For this story, see Yan 2001: 295-296.

<sup>131</sup> QTS 1307

<sup>132</sup> An example of this Tang poet Bai Juyi’s famous poem *Song of Eternal Grief* (长恨歌 QTS 4818), which is adapted from Chen Hong’s fiction *Story of Eternal Grief* (长恨传).

The following poem “Fisherman” (漁父) by the Tang poet Zhang Zhihe (张志和 744?-773?) was later adapted by several Song dynasty poets.<sup>133</sup> Zhang Zhihe’s poem is:

西塞山前白鷺飛, In front of the West Mountain, white egrets fly;  
桃花流水鱖魚肥. Peach flowers float over the water, and the mandarin fish is fat.  
青箬笠, 绿蓑衣, Wearing a green bamboo hat and palm raincoat,  
和風細雨不須歸. I need not go home in this mild breeze and light rain.

The Song dynasty scholar Su Shi (苏轼 1027-1201) thought Zhang’s poem was “extraordinarily fresh and beautiful, but the music was lost” (语极清丽, 恨其曲度不传), so he adapted it into the tune “Sand of Silk-washing Stream” (浣溪沙):<sup>134</sup>

西塞山前白鷺飛, In front of the West Pass Mountain, white egrets fly,  
散花洲外片帆微, Off the Scattered Flower Islet, a sail is tiny,  
桃花流水鱖魚肥. Peach flowers float over the water, and the mandarin fish is fat.

自庇一身青箬笠, Sheltered by a green bamboo hat,  
相隨到處綠蓑衣, And with a green palm coat,  
斜風細雨不須歸. I need not go home in this mild breeze and light rain.

Huang Tingjian (黃庭堅 1045-1105) “clapped his hands with appreciation” (击节称赏) when he saw Su Shi’s poem, but he considered it a pity that Su used the character 花 twice, and that a fisherman’s boat usually does not have a sail, so he combined Su Shi’s poem with two lines of Tang poet Gu Kuang’s (顾况 around 757) and composed another ci poem to the tune “Sand of Silk-washing Stream.”<sup>135</sup>

---

<sup>133</sup> Wu 2002: 49-50.

<sup>134</sup> This poem is also quoted in Yan’s book for the discussion of “expanded poems” (扩体诗), which is a kind of adapted poem. Yan says Su Shi later expanded this “浣溪沙” into a “鵲鵠天” (see Yan 281), but he did not indicate his source of this poem, but, according to *The Adaptable Studio*, this “鵲鵠天” is composed by Huang Tingjian, not Su Shi. See Wu 2002: 50.

<sup>135</sup> Gu Kuang’s lines are: “新妇矶边月明, 女儿浦口潮平” (The moon by the New Wife Islet is bright, the tide at the Maiden River has receded), see QTS 2972.

新妇矶边眉黛愁, The New Wife Islet looks like a sentimental eyebrow,  
女儿浦口眼波秋, The autumn Maiden River is as clear as eyes of a girl,  
惊鱼错认月沉钩. The startled fish thinks the curling moon is a sinking hook.

青箬笠前无限事, In front of my green bamboo hat numerous things happen,  
绿蓑衣底一时休, But under my green palm coat I am at ease for a time,  
斜风细雨转船头. I just need to turn the boat around in the slanting wind and light rain.

Another Song dynasty scholar Xu Fu (徐俯 1075-1141, also known as Xu Shichuan 徐师川) composed four more poems based on Zhang Zhihe's poem and the adapted ones. The following is one of them, to the tune "Partridge Skies" (鷓鴣天):<sup>136</sup>

七泽三湘碧草连, The Seven Lakes and Three Xiang Rivers are linked by green grass,  
洞庭江汉水如天. In the Dongting Lake, the Jiang and Han Rivers, waters are like sky.  
朝廷若觅玄真子, If the court looks for the Mystic True Man,  
不在江边在酒边. He will be found either by the river or by the wine.  
明月棹, 夕阳船, The bright moon is like an oar, the setting sun a boat,  
鲈鱼恰似镜中悬. And perch fish seems to hang in a mirror.  
丝纶钓饵都收却, After collecting the fishing string and bait,  
八字山前听雨眠. He goes to the 八-shaped Hill to sleep while listening to rain.

"Mystic True Man" (玄真子) is the style name (号) of Zhang Zhihe, and the third line refers to the fact that Emperor Xian of Tang (唐宪宗) used to look for Zhuang Zhihe.<sup>137</sup> The fourth line indicates that Zhang Zhihe prefers to stay on the rivers and lakes (江湖) drinking wine rather than serving the court. The sixth line indicates that if water looks like a mirror, then fish in the water would appear to be hanging in the mirror. "悬" (hang) may also mean a fish is hanging on the fisherman's hook. The last two lines suggest that

<sup>136</sup> These two "Partridge Skies" (鷄鴣天) are also quoted (with different characters in certain lines) in Yan's book, but they are attributed to Su Shi. Yan did not indicate which source he used, so the version and authorship in *The Adaptable Studio* should be more reliable. Xu Fu is Huang Tingjian's nephew and also an important Song scholar.

<sup>137</sup> See Wu 2002: 50.

the fisherman only needs to get enough for a basic living – he can then spend the rest of the day sleeping.

After Xu Fu, poems focusing on the theme of Zhang Zhihe continued to appear. See the following poem of Zheng Banqiao (郑板桥) in the Qing dynasty, which is the first in a series of ten poems under the title “Expression of Feelings – Ten Poems” (道情十首):<sup>138</sup>

老渔翁，一钓竿，The old fisherman, with a fishing rod,  
靠山崖，傍水湾，Leans against the mountain cliff, and sits at the waterside.  
扁舟来往无牵绊。He comes and goes carefreely in a small boat.  
沙鸥点点清波远，The gulls on sand are like dots, and clear waves stretch far.  
荻港萧萧白昼寒。The reed ferry is isolated, and the daytime is cold,  
高歌一曲斜阳晚。He sings loudly at sunset.  
一霎时波摇金影，In no time the waves have started to shake the golden reflections,  
蓦抬头月上东山。And, raising his head, he suddenly realizes the moon is already above  
the East Mountain.

The poems of Su Shi and Huang Tingjian are adapted poems, which are composed of mostly lines or words from the original poem, while the poems of Xu Fu and Zheng Banqiao allude to Zhang Zhihe's poem in a more common way. These poems all involve allusion. Assembled poems and adapted poems use lines from the original poems explicitly, while poems of common-sense allusion refer to the original poems in a more limited and indirect manner. Alluding poems often surpass the original poems. For example, Tang poet Weng Hong (翁宏) wrote the lines “落花人独立，微雨燕双飞” (Among the falling flowers, the person stands alone; in the light drizzle, a pair of

---

<sup>138</sup>Lo 1983: 259.

swallows fly), but it was Yan Jidao's (晏几道 1030-1106) *ci* that made this couplet famous.<sup>139</sup>

The following drama style poem – to the tune “Frontier Geese Autumn” (塞鸿秋) is both an assembled poem and an adapted poem:<sup>140</sup>

到春来梨花院落溶溶月, When spring comes, the pear blossom yard is filled with moonlight,  
到夏来舞低杨柳楼心月, When summer comes, she dances the moon low in the courtyard willows.  
到秋来金铃犬吠梧桐月, When fall comes, the dog with a gold bell barks at the moon above the *wutong* tree,  
到冬来清香暗渡梅梢月, When winter comes, the clear fragrance quietly reaches the moon on top of the plum top.  
呀, 好也么月, Alas, these wonderful moons –  
总不如咱寻常一样窗前月. Are never as good as the ordinary moon in front my window.

In this poem, the underlined parts are either existing lines or adapted from existing lines.<sup>141</sup> Because the last character of every line has “月,” the poem is also a special kind of assigned-character poem called a “single-log bridge style” (独木桥体), which means the whole poem uses the same rhyming character.<sup>142</sup>

Assembled poems, adapted poems and poems of common allusions are also all assigned-character poems, because certain words related to previous poems are required to appear in the new poem. These poems demonstrate the composer’s familiarity with

<sup>139</sup> For Weng’s poem, see QTS 8656. For Yan Jidao’s *ci* poem, see QSC 222.

<sup>140</sup> By a scholar’s maid named Jiang Dounu (江斗奴) in the Ming dynasty. See Lin 1977: 121.

<sup>141</sup> “梨花院落溶溶月” is from Yan Shu’s (晏殊 991-1055) poem “To the Far Away” (寄远), see QSS 1941. “舞低杨柳楼心月” is from Yan Jidao’s (晏几道) *ci* poem to the tune “Cuckoo Weather” (鶲鵴天), see QSC 0225. “金铃犬吠梧桐月” is from Tang poet Wei Zhuang’s (韦庄, 9<sup>th</sup> century) poem “The Noble Young Man” (贵公子), see QTS 8000. “寻常一样窗前月” is from the Song dynasty poet Du Lei’s (杜耒) poem “Cold Night” (寒夜), see QSS 33637. “清香暗渡梅梢月” seems to be alluding to the following two lines from the first stanza of a *ci* poem of the Song dynasty poet Xie Yi’s (谢逸 1077-1111), to the tune “The Beautiful Lady Yu” (虞美人): “角声吹散梅梢雪, … 风送清香满院” (The bamboo trumpet blows off the snow on the *mume* branches, … breeze brings fresh fragrance all over the yard), see QSC 0645.

<sup>142</sup> For more examples on this style, see Yan 2001: 293-294.

existing poems. In Chinese culture, while original poems are valued, being able to quote or allude to a suitable existing poem in a situational speech is also an advantage, just like being able to use idioms properly. Readers can take each line of an assembled poem as an allusion. The layers and layers of allusion in traditional Chinese poetry let us see that Chinese poetry as a whole is highly intertextual, which coincides with the emphasis on collectivism in the Chinese social activities. Similarly, Western poetry's emphasis on being original coincides with the recognition of individualism in Western society.

## Chapter Three Poems Manipulating Sound Effects

Up to the Han dynasty, Chinese poetry generally emphasizes only rhyming, not tones and parallelism. In the Six Dynasties era, with the discovery of the four tones by Shen Yue (沈约 441-513) and others, tones and their combining patterns gradually became important in poetry. The year 601 saw the publication of the first rhyme book, *Qieyun* (切韵), written by Lu Fayan (陆法言 around 601), which became the most important prosodic guide for Tang dynasty poetry. From the Tang on, the regulated verses demanded strict rhyming and tonal patterns. MFP may feature regulated prosody, but they also feature other kinds of patterning. This chapter discusses the manipulation of sound effects in MFP in three categories: the manipulation of puns, unusual sound effects, and unusual tonal and rhyming patterns.

### I. Poems Manipulating Puns

Of the twenty-nine types of parallelism in the Tang book *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror*, five are related to sound: sound parallel (声对), alliterative doublet parallel (双声对), partial alliterative doublet parallel (侧双声对), rhyming doublet parallel (叠韵对), and partial rhyming doublet parallel (侧叠韵对). Among these five types, the first type involves homophonic puns, see the following two couplets:<sup>143</sup>

- 1) 形驺初惊路, The red horse messenger is startled on the road,  
白简未含霜. The white imperial letters are not frosted.

---

<sup>143</sup> See the Eastern Volume (东卷) of *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror*.

- 2) 初蝉韵高柳, Early cicadas sing in tall willows,  
密茑挂深松. Dense cypress vines hang in deep pine woods.

In couplet 1, “路” (*lu*, road) is not parallel to “霜” (*shuang*, frost), but because it sounds the same as “露” (*lu*, dew), which is parallel to “霜” (frost) in meaning, therefore “路” (*lu*) is considered phonetically parallel to “霜” (*shuang*). Similarly, in couplet 2, “茑” (*niao*, cypress vines) and “蝉” (*chan*, cicada) are not semantically parallel (because one is plant and the other is insect), but phonetically parallel, because “茑” (*niao*) sounds the same as “鸟” (bird), which is parallel to “蝉” (cicada).

The sound effects in the above two couplets do not produce double meaning; we cannot actually replace “路” with “露,” because “彤驺初惊露” (The red horse messenger startles the dew) does not make very good sense. Similarly, in couplet 2, if we replace “茑” with “鸟,” the line “密鸟挂深松” (dense birds hang in deep pines) will also be problematic, because birds usually do not hang on trees. However, in many cases, sound parallelism does bring forth double meaning. See the following couplet from a poem by Wang Anshi:<sup>144</sup>

清江无限好, The clear river is extremely beautiful,  
白鸟不胜闲. The white birds are at incomparable leisure.

“清” (*qing*, clear) puns on “青” (*qing*, dark blue), and both of them work semantically well in the couplet, though “青” (dark blue) is parallel to “白” (white) and “清” (clear) is not, because “青” and “白” are both colors while “清” (clear) is not.<sup>145</sup> In other words, if a listener hears this couplet without knowing the characters, he or she

---

<sup>144</sup> Wang Anshi (王安石), “Looking into the Distance in the Evening” (江亭晚眺), QSS 6590.

<sup>145</sup> See Shi 2003: 12. Shi uses the term “loaned sound” (借音) instead of “sound parallel” (声对).

could interpret it in both ways: the river can be clear or dark blue. A better-known example of pun is Liu Yuxi's (刘禹锡 772-842) couplet “东边日出西边雨，道是无晴却有晴” (The east side is sunny while the west side rains, so I wonder whether we should call it a clear day or not), in which “晴” (clear) is a pun of “情” (love).<sup>146</sup>

The following is a very unique sound effect couplet, in which every character is a pun:<sup>147</sup>

独览梅花扫腊雪 Alone, I watch the *mume* flowers sweeping the Twelfth Month snow;  
细睨山势舞流溪 Carefully, I peruse the mountains' outline dancing in the running creek.

If read in some Eastern China dialects, the first line sounds like *do-re-mi-fa-so-la-xi*, which is the Chinese pronunciation of music notes (*sofege*) 1-2-3-4-5-6-7, and the second line sounds like *yi-er-san-si-wu-liu-qí*, the Chinese pronunciation of the numbers 1 through 7. This couplet is also very successful in terms of meaning, given its unique sound restriction. A similar example is using a poetic line “山巅一寺一壺酒” (*shan dian yi si yi hu jiu* - On top of the mountain there is a temple and a bottle of wine) as a memory aid for the approximate value of π – 3.14159 (*san dian yi si yi wu jiu*), because they sound similar.<sup>148</sup>

Most humorous omitted-tail proverbs (歇后语) also rely on puns. The following is an example:<sup>149</sup>

---

<sup>146</sup> QTS 396 and 4110.

<sup>147</sup> The couplet is found in Liang Yusheng's book (p. 764), which does not indicate its original source. π is the ratio of the circumference to its diameter in a circle. In most southern Chinese dialects, “山势” is pronounced “san.”

<sup>148</sup> Zhang Dexin 1999: 33.

<sup>149</sup> Zheng and Zhu 1993: 282.

猪鼻子插葱 – 装象.

The pig puts a green onion in its nose – pretending to be an elephant.

“装象” (pretending to be an elephant) is the homophone of “装相” (pretentious, acting).

The following poem by the Qing dynasty poetess Wu Jiusi (吴九思) has several puns:<sup>150</sup>

水底月团圆, The moon is full in the water,  
一似芙蓉镜. Just like a lotus mirror.  
人向碧溪行, The woman walks toward the blue creek,  
如把菱花映. As if to reflect herself against the water chestnut flowers.  
断藕两分开, The lotus root is broken in two halves,  
惟有丝难尽. But its silk-like fibers stay linked.  
豆蔻已开残, The cardamom petals have withered  
无复同心并. And no longer share the same stamen.

Here, “芙蓉” (*furong*, lotus flower) is a pun on “夫容” (husband’s face); “断藕” (*duan’ou*, broken lotus root) is a pun on “断偶” (losing one’s spouse); “丝难尽” (*si’nanjin*, the fibers that connect a broken lotus root stay linked) is the pun on 思难尽 (thinking endlessly of somebody); “无复” (*wufu*, no longer) is the pun on “无福” (no luck/fortune); “心并” (*xinbing*) is a pun of “心病” (love sickness).

Roger Ames points out that in classical Chinese, phonetically similar characters may also be semantically similar or cognate, and this is not accidental. For example, “政” (*zheng*, good governance) and “正” (*zheng*, proper) are homophones, and they are also semantically associated: to govern effectively means to govern properly. The same is true with “道” (*dao*, the way) and “蹈” (*dao*, tread): the way is made by walking, and “君”

---

<sup>150</sup> Gai 2001: 292.

(*jun*, lord, exemplary person) and “群” (*qun*, crowds, gathering): an exemplary person often attracts crowds.<sup>151</sup> “夫容” (husband’s face) and “芙蓉” (lotus flower) in the above poem are even better examples, because they not only share the same sound, the former is actually hidden in the latter, implying the sense that the lotus flower reminds the woman of her husband both phonetically and visually.

## II. Poems Manipulating Unusual Sound Effects (双声叠韵, 叠声诗, 叠韵诗, 单音诗)

### 1. Poems Employing Alliterative Doublets and Alliterative Lines

Alliterative doublets (*shuangsheng* 双声词) and rhyming doublets (*dieyun* 叠韵词) are very common in Chinese poetry. The former are disyllabic words in which the two syllables share the same initial sound element; for example, in the word *chouchang* (惆怅), both characters phonetically start with “ch.” The latter are disyllabic words in which both syllables share the same rhyme, such as *menglong* (朦胧, “eng” and “ong” are considered rhyming). In mainstream poetry, alliterative and rhyming words are quite common, while in MFP, alliteration may be expanded to a whole line or a whole poem. See the following poem by the Tang poet Yao He (姚合) entitled “Grape Vines” (葡萄架).<sup>152</sup>

葡萄洞庭头, daw dəŋ dawŋ deŋ dəw (Grape vines at the end of the Dongting Lake)  
引叶漾盈摇. jin jiap jiaŋ jiaŋŋ jiaw (Are reflected on the water as they shake the leaves.)  
皎洁钩高挂, kew kət kew kaw kwaij (When the clear moon hangs high in the sky.)  
玲珑影落寮. leŋŋ ləwŋ ?iajp lak ləw (Their exquisite shadows are cast on the house.)  
阴烟压幽屋, ?im ?en ?aip ?jiw ?əwk (Like dark smoke pressing the house in shade,)

<sup>151</sup> Ames 2004: 2-4.

<sup>152</sup> The romanization used in this and the poems below is of E. G. Pulleyblank’s Early Middle Chinese pronunciation, see Pulleyblank 1991.

濛密梦冥苗. məwŋ mit muwŋ mejŋ muaw (Their hazily dense shoots are like a dream.)  
清秋青且翠, tsiajŋ tsuw tsejŋ tsejŋ tswi (In clear autumn, they are green and fresh.)  
冬到冻都凋. tawŋ taw təwŋ tɔ tew (And when winter arrives, all their leaves fall.)

This poem is often improperly called an “alliterative doublet poem” (双声诗), because *shuangsheng* refers only to a doublet, while in this poem, every line is composed of characters with the same initial sound (except the character “影” in the fourth line), therefore it is better labeled an “alliterative poem” (*diesheng* 叠声诗).<sup>153</sup> Alliterative poems are often used for creating what Yan calls the “literati tongue twisters,”<sup>154</sup> see the following poem by Su Shi:

吃语诗 戏和正辅一字韵

Tongue twister Poem – To Match the Mono-Rhyme Poem of Zhengfu for Fun

故居剑阁隔锦官, kɔ kiə kiam kat kəijk kim kwan,  
柑果薑蕨交荆菅. kam kwa kiaŋ kuat ke:w kiajŋ kain.  
奇孤甘挂汲古绠, ki kɔ kam kwaij kip kɔ' ke:jŋ',  
侥覬敢揭钩金竿. ke:w' ki kam kiat kəw kim kan.  
己归耕稼供藁秸, ki kul ke:jŋ kai kuawŋ kaw kəit,  
公贵干蛊高巾冠. kəwŋ kuj kan kɔ' kaw kin kwan.  
改更句格各奢吃, kəj' ke:jŋ kuě kaijk kak kian kej,  
姑固狡狯加间关. kɔ kɔ kc:w kwaj kai ke:n kwain.

In this poem, every syllable starts with the sound “k” (in Medieval Chinese pronunciation), and these sounds make combinations that are awkward to pronounce. The meaning of the poem is just as difficult as its pronunciation, but we could take it as an impressionistic poem that is not intended to be clear.

<sup>153</sup> See Shi 1996: 115-116, and Gai 2001: 119.

<sup>154</sup> Yan 2001: 297.

## 2. Poems Employing Rhyming Doublets and Rhyming Lines (叠韵诗)

Just like alliterative doublets, rhyming doublets are also very common in mainstream poetry. For instance, in the line 窈窕淑女 (The slim beautiful girl) from *Book of Songs*, 窈窕 (yaotiao) is a rhyming doublet. The line 后牖有朽柳 (*hou you you xiu liu* – There is a rotten willow outside of the rear window), written by the Martial Emperor of the Liang dynasty (梁武帝), is widely recognized as one of the earliest experiments with line-level rhyming (叠韵). The following poem, which is one of the “Two Sharing-rhyme Palace Poems” (叠韵宫词二首), by Lu Guimeng (陆龟蒙) of Tang, is frequently quoted as an example of line-level rhyming poems. Since the characters in each line rhyme well in modern Mandarin, I will provide the *pinyin* instead of the Romanization for Middle Ages Chinese:

肤渝吴都姝, *fu yu wu du shu* (The Wu palace girls are beautiful,)  
眷恋便殿宴. *juanlian bian dian yan* (And they indulge in the King's banquet hall.)  
逡巡新春人, *qun xun xin chun ren* (While they are enjoying the spring,)  
转面见战箭. *zhuan mian jian zhanjian* (Suddenly they see the enemy's warship coming.)

The poem is about the King of Wu indulging in women and thus losing his Kingdom to the Yue in the Warring States Period.

The following is a line level rhyming antithetic couplet:<sup>155</sup>

屋北鹿独宿, ?əwk pək ləwk dəwk suwk (To the north of the hut a deer sleeps alone)  
溪西鸡齐啼. kəj sej kej dzəj dej (To the west of the creek roosters crow together)

In this couplet, all syllables in the first line have the “əwk” (or “uwk”) rhyme sound, and the syllables in the second line all have “ej.” “ej” is often used as an onomatopoeia for birds, and the continuous use of it in the second line highlights the roosters’ crow. In

---

<sup>155</sup> The couplet is attributed to a Ming dynasty scholar official Xu Xi (徐晞). See Liu 1996: 203.

addition, because the syllables in the first line all have a lower pitched sound “əwk” and an “oblique tone” (仄声), and those in the second line all have a higher pitched sound “ɛj” and “level tone” (平声),<sup>156</sup> therefore, there is a phonetic contrast between the two lines that is parallel to their semantic contrast: the first line presents a quiet scene, while the second a noisy one.

In the end of Qing dynasty, a group of scholars in Beijing had a poetry party, during which everybody composed a poem with the title “Boudoir Sentiments” (闺怨 *guiyuan*), and with the prerequisites that numbers “一二三四五六七八九十百千万” be included, and that the rhyming characters must include “溪西鸡齐啼.” This is a matching poem activity. The following one is attributed to a scholar named Wu Bingli (伍炳离), which is considered by some to be among the best.

红楼百尺俯清溪, The red mansion is one hundred-*chi* tall and overlooks a clear creek,  
三十六桥月已西. The moon over thirty-six bridges is already setting in the west.  
二八羞窥双宿燕, The shy sixteen-year-old girl secretly watches a pair of swallows.  
万恨千触五更鸡. And the crow of the rooster at five stirs thousands of sentiments.  
四周一顾愁弥远, Looking around, her sentiments spread even further,  
两黛半锁画不齐. And she is unable to paint her half-frowning eyebrows evenly.  
七弦抚罢肠九断, Playing the seven-stringed instrument breaks her heart nine times,  
丈人峰外夜乌啼. Beyond the Father-in-Law Peak, a crow caws.

The measure words “丈,” “尺,” “寸,” “双” and “半” are also assigned characters. We can see this poem has the features of an assigned-character poem, a number poem, and an assigned line poem (with “溪西鸡齐啼” being the assigned line), and an assigned rhyme.

---

<sup>156</sup> For more information about the poetic tones, see Liu 1962:20-38.

### 3. Mono-Sound Poems

A mono-sound poem (同音诗) is one which all the characters have the same sound.

See the following example:<sup>157</sup>

唧唧鸡, 鸡唧唧, jījījī, jījījī (The “*jiji*” chickens make “*jiji*” sound,)  
几鸡挤挤集矶脊. Jī jī jī jī jī jī (Several chickens cram on a rock by a creek.)  
鲫极疾, jījíjī (Crucian carps are extremely fast,)  
鸡饥极, jījījī (And the chickens are extremely hungry,)  
鸡冀已技击几鲫. jījījī jījījī jī (Chickens use their skills to attack crucian carps.)  
鸡疾极, jījījī (Chickens are extremely quick,)  
鲫极悸, jījíjī (And crucian carps are extremely scared,)  
急急挤集矶级际. Jí jí jí jí jí jí jí (So they hurriedly hide below the rock.)  
继即鲫迹极寂寂, jì jí jī jí jí jí jí (Then the crucian carps are extremely quiet,)  
继即几鸡饥, jì jí jī jī jī (Afterwards several chickens are still hungry,)  
即唧唧。 Jí jī jī (So they make “*jiji*” sound.)

This poem is composed of just one sound *ji*, and the tonal variation become crucial for identifying the meaning. The Chinese, *ji* is also an onomatopoeia, resembling the sound of a bird, therefore, the poem is also a “bird language poem” (禽语诗 or 禽言诗), which is one of the miscellaneous forms of poetry that involve sound that imitates a bird.<sup>158</sup>

Characters with multiple pronunciations (多音字), and different characters with the same meaning and pronunciation (通假字), are also good materials for creating unusual sound effects. See the following well-known couplet in Lady Mengjiang’s Temple (孟姜女庙):<sup>159</sup>

<sup>157</sup> Anonymous. The poem is in Yan’s book, and it is also seen on a website, but both have some characters that do not make sense. The poem printed here is slightly adapted by the author of this dissertation. See Yan 2001: 393-394, and <http://www.6753.com/scyy.htm#>.

<sup>158</sup> For more information regarding Bird Language Poems, refer to Xu 2002.

<sup>159</sup> According to legends, Mengjiang’s husband was sent by the Qin Emperor to build the Great Wall far away from home. She traveled for a long time to look for him, only to find that he had died of hard labor

海水朝朝朝朝朝朝落，浮云长长长长长消

In the first line, some “朝” are pronounced as *zhao* (morning), some are pronounced as *chao*, which is the homophone of “潮” (tide); in the second line, some “长” are pronounced as *zhang* (grow), while some are *chang*, the homophone of “常” (often). Therefore, the couplet is usually considered to mean the following:<sup>160</sup>

海水潮，朝朝潮，朝潮朝落 *Haishui chao, zhaozhao chao, zhaochao zhaoluo*;  
浮云长，常常长，常长常 *Fuyun zhang, changchang zhang, changzhang changxiao*.

Ocean waters tide, and every morning tide; morning tides recede in the morning;  
Floating clouds grow, and constantly grow; constantly grow and constantly vanish.

Sometimes, the graphic image of certain characters or elements may help produce a sound effect. See the following couplet:<sup>161</sup>

六木森森：桃梅松柏杨柳； Six kinds of trees grow densely: peaches, plums, pines,  
                          cypresses, poplars, and willows;  
八口囂囂：呜哇唉叹咒骂 Eight mouths are noisy: “oohing,” “Ahing,” “Heying.”  
                          sighing, swearing, and cursing.

This couplet involves both character splitting-reassembling and common-classifiers, which will be discussed in the next chapter. Notice that in the second line, “八口” refers to the fact that the two characters “囂囂” contains eight “mouths” (口) in total. “呜哇唉叹咒骂” are also characters that each contains a “mouth.” In addition, “呜,” “哇,” “唉” are onomatopoeia words, therefore, the graphic images of the “mouths” in the second line

---

and was buried under the Wall. Her weeping moved the Heavenly Emperor, who had eight hundred *li* of the Wall demolished.

<sup>160</sup> He 2000: 280-281.

<sup>161</sup> Anonymous. See

<http://www.abbs.com.cn/bbs/post/view?bid=7&id=2248220&sty=1&tpg=1&age=30&ppg=11>

help graphically represent the noisy effect.<sup>162</sup>

Liu Zhiji (刘志基) sees the sound structure of a character as a “sound block” (composed of the initial and final), as compared with what he calls the graphic block structure (块体构型) of a character.<sup>163</sup> The poems discussed above share similarities with poems which manipulate the graphic block structure of characters discussed in Chapter Four. For example, structurally, alliterative poems (叠声诗) and all-line rhyme poems (叠韵诗) are similar to the common-classifier poems (联边诗). The mono-syllabic and mono-graphic features of the Chinese characters reinforce each other in the construction of poems with unusual graphic and audial effects. Chinese has many characters, but the pronunciations for these characters are very limited, therefore homophonic characters are many. For example, Yan Huizhi points out that according to Lü Shuxiang’s (吕叔湘) statistics, in the *Word Source Dictionary* (词源, 1979 edition), 203 characters share the pronunciation *zhi*, and 241 characters share *ji* (ignoring tones).<sup>164</sup> This means compared with the English language, Chinese language has more phonetic “loopholes” for poetic manipulation.

---

<sup>162</sup> Graphic representation of audial effects in poetry is seen in the following line from a poem of Shen Jiong (沈炯): “囂囂宫阁路” (The road along the magnificent buildings is noisy). In this line, each character contains one or more “口” (mouth) elements.

<sup>163</sup> Liu 1999: 151.

<sup>164</sup> Yan 2001: 394.

## Chapter Four Poems Manipulating the Images of Characters

### I. Character Splitting-Reassembling Poems (离合诗 and 神智诗)

A story has it that when the well-known Qing dynasty scholar Ji Xiaolan (纪晓岚) was in jail, the jailer predicted his future by asking him to write a character. Ji wrote the jailer's surname “董” on the ground. The jailer then told Ji that he would be exiled to a distant grass land, because the character contains the element “千” (*qian* - thousand), 里 (*li* – distance measure unit), and a radical “艹” that means “grass.” Ji later was indeed exiled to Xinjiang, the grasslands in northwest China. This story reveals Chinese people's long tradition of divining by interpreting various kinds of signs, including characters.<sup>165</sup> This kind of character deconstruction is also common in MFP, called character splitting and reassembling poems (离合诗). The following is a poem that deconstructs the characters related to “田” (*tian* land):<sup>166</sup>

一声水来田舍没, When flood comes, land and houses are gone,  
田家有泪和水流. Peasants' tears will be flowing with the water.  
只望田为富字底, Only hoping 田 (land) is the foundation of 富 (wealth),  
那想它是累字头. Who would know that it is also the head of 累 (toil)?  
拖下脚来甲字首, When stretching down its foot, 田 becomes the head of 甲 (soldier),  
伸出头来不自由. When stretching up its head, it becomes 由, but not 自由 (freedom).  
田在心上常思苦, When 田 is on 心 (heart), it means 思 (to think or wish),  
田在心中慮不休. And when 田 is in the heart one gets 慮 (worry).  
纳甸出在躬田汉, 甸 (tax) comes from men working in the land,  
租佃实为坂田奴. 佃 (tenant) is actually a land slave.

<sup>165</sup> Ye Mengde (叶梦得 1077-1148) pointed out in his *Stone Woods Poetry Discussions* (石林诗话) that the character splitting-reassembling poem started with Kong Rong (孔融 153-208) in the Three-Kingdom era. See Ye 1981 (vol. 1): 418.

<sup>166</sup> Anonymous. See Gai 2001: 39.

莫道诗吟田为福, When you say “poems say 田 means 福 (blessing),”  
应加田家壘壘愁. You should also consider the layers (壘壘) of worries of the tenants.

In this poem, ten characters that contain “田” (land) are interpreted: “富” (rich, wealth), “累” (exhaustion, toil), “甲” (soldier, army duty), “由” (freedom, as in “自由”), “思” (to think), “慮” (worried), “甸” (tax), “佃” (tenant), “福” (blessing, fortune), “壘” (layers). The meaning of some of these characters is not related to “land” (田), but the poet related them to “田” to serve the theme. Since each line in the poem contains the character or element 田, it is also an assigned-character poem.

The following is a folk story related to the novel *The Three Kingdoms* (三国演义), and it involves three splitting-reassembling poems.<sup>167</sup> One day, when Zhou Yu (周瑜, Prime Minister of the Kingdom of Wu, who was jealous of Zhuge Liang), Zhuge Liang (诸葛亮, Prime Minister of the kingdom of Shu) and Lu Su (鲁肃, Zhou Yu's advisor, who was sympathetic with Zhuge Liang) were playing chess by a creek, Zhou Yu composed a poem that deconstructs the character “溪” (xi, creek) to humiliate Zhuge Liang:

有水也是溪,	With the water radical 氵, the character 溪 is pronounced xi,
无水也是奚.	Without the water radical, the character 奚 is also pronounced xi.
去掉溪边水,	Removing the water radical 氵 in 溪,
添鳥便是鷄.	And adding the bird radical 鸟, 溪 becomes 鷄 (chicken).
得勢貓兒雄似虎,	A cat in favorable times is as strong as a tiger,
落毛鳳凰不如鷄.	A phoenix without feathers is inferior to a chicken.

<sup>167</sup> Gai 2001: 40. A story published on the World Daily (世界日报) (date unavailable) says the poems are related to the *Three Kingdoms*, but Gai's book says the poems are wine games (酒令). The origin of the poem is unknown.

In this poem, Zhou Yu compared himself to a powerful cat, and Zhuge Liang to a featherless phoenix, because at that time Zhuge Liang just lost a war and had to rely on Zhuyu's Kindom for support. Zhuge Liang came up with a similar poem that deconstructs the character “棋” (*qi*, chess):

有木也是棋,	With the wood radical 木, 棋 is pronounced <i>qi</i> ,
无木也是其.	Without the wood radical, 其 is also pronounced <i>qi</i> .
去掉棋边木,	Removing the wood radical 木 from 棋,
添欠便是欺.	And adding the radical 欠, 棋 will become 欺 (bully).
鱼游浅水遭虾戏,	Fish swimming in shallow water may be harassed by shrimp,
虎落平阳被犬欺.	And a tiger trapped on the prairie can be bullied by a dog.

Here, Zhuge Liang fought back by referring himself to a fish and tiger, and Zhou Yu to shrimp and dog. Fearing that the fight between them may spiral out of control, Lu Su came up with the following poem that deconstructs the character “湘” (the name of a river) to make peace:

有水也是湘,	With the water radical 氵, 湘 is pronounced <i>xiang</i> ,
无水也是相.	Without the water radical, 相 is also pronounced <i>xiang</i> .
去掉湘边水,	Removing the water radical 氵 in 湘,
加雨便是霜.	And adding the rain radical 雨, 湘 will become 霜 (frost).
各人自扫门前雪,	One should just clear the snow in front of his own door,
莫管他人瓦上霜.	And not touch the frost on others' roofs.

In each of the three poems, the first four lines portray images, while the last two lines express the intended message. This kind of poem is also like antithetic couplets because they are strictly parallel to each other in structure.

Character deconstruction is commonly seen in the games of character riddle poems (字迷诗) among the literati in traditional China. The following is a Tang dynasty riddle

poem written in the Daming Temple (大明寺) in which each line is a riddle for a character, as explained in the parentheses.<sup>168</sup>

一人堂堂 (一 + 人 = 大)

二曜同光 (二曜 = 日 + 月 = 明)

泉深尺一 (尺一 = 一尺一寸 = 十一寸 = 寺<sup>169</sup>)

点去冰旁 (冰 without the radical = 水)

二人相连 (二人 = 天<sup>170</sup>)

不欠一边 (不欠一边 = 下 - “下” looks like “不” with the left slash missing)

三梁四柱, 烈火而燃 (= 無 has 4 vertical and 3 horizontal lines above fire radical)

除却双勾, 两日不全 (= 比 looks like two 日 together, each 日 is missing the top and right sides)

If we put together all of riddle characters, we will get this line: “大明寺水，天下無比” (The fountain in the Daming Temple is matchless in the world).

The following is another riddle poem written by a scholar to curse the monks in a temple who have bullied him.<sup>171</sup>

龕龙去东海, The 龙 (dragon) in the 龕 (shrine) has gone to the East Sea,  
時日隱西斜. The 日 (sun) in 時 (time) disappears into the West.

敬文今不在, The 文 (literature) in 敬 (respect) no longer exists today,  
碎石入流沙. And 石 (stone) in 碎 (crushed) disappears in the flowing sand.

Each line in the poem is a riddle. The answer for the first line is the character “合,” because when the “龙” element in the character “龕” is gone, we will get “合” (he, whole). Similarly, the answer to the second line is “寺” (si, temple), for the third line is “苟” (gou, temporary), and to the fourth line is “卒” (zu, soldier). Therefore, the answer

<sup>168</sup> Gai 2001: 65.

<sup>169</sup> Viewed top-down, “寺” looks like “十” + “一” + “寸.”

<sup>170</sup> “天” looks like the combination of “二” and “人.”

<sup>171</sup> Gai 2001: 77.

to the whole poem is “合寺苟卒” (*he si gou zu*). Since “苟” is the homophone of “狗” (dog), the line actually means “合寺狗卒” - “The whole temple is full of dogs.”

In the novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦), there are some riddle poems that involve character deconstruction. See the following one:

霁月难逢,	Clear Moon is difficult to meet,
彩云易散.	Colorful clouds easily vanish.
心比天高,	Her ambition is higher than the sky,
身为下浅,	Yet her position is too humble,
风流灵巧招人怨.	Her beauty and smartness only invite jealous.
寿夭多因诽谤生,	And her life is shortened by slander -
多情公子空挂念.	The affectionate young master can only worry about her in vain.

In this poem, the first two lines is a riddle for 晴雯 (Qingwen), one of Jia Baoyu's (贾宝玉) favorite maids, because “霁” (*qi*) means “晴” (*qing*, clear weather), “彩云” (*caiyun*) means “雯” (clouds of colorful pattern).<sup>172</sup> The poem appears in Chapter Four in the novel to foretell Qingwen's tragic future – she will eventually commit suicide because of slander.

The following is a number-assisted character splitting-reassembling poem attributed to Qing dynasty female poet Gu Taiqing (顾太清 1799-1876):<sup>173</sup>

元宵夜,兀坐灯窗下.	At the lantern festival night, I alone sit by the window light.
问苍天,人在谁家.	I want to ask Heaven: whose house is he in now?
恨玉郎,全無一點真心話,	I hate him, because he never tells me the truth.
叫奴欲罷不能罷.	I want to forget about him, but I just cannot.
吾今舍口不言他.	Now I am not going to talk about him anymore.
论交情,曾不差. <sup>174</sup>	As for our relationship, it used to be good.
染生皂,难說清白話.	[But now] in this mess, it's difficult to speak clearly.

<sup>172</sup> Zheng & Zhu 1993: 289.

<sup>173</sup> For Gu Taiqing's poem, see Lin 1998: 571. Also see Zhang 1999: 340-341 for both Gu Taiqing's poem and Zhu Shuzhen's poem.

<sup>174</sup> “不差” is the pun of “不叉,” as “叉” means an X-shaped cross in the character “交.”

恨不得一刀兩斷分两家。 I wish I could break the relation with a sword,  
可怜奴, 手中无力难抛下. But I do not have the strength to throw him away.  
我今设一计, 教他无言可答. Now I will plan a trick to make him unable to answer.

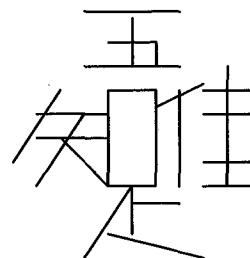
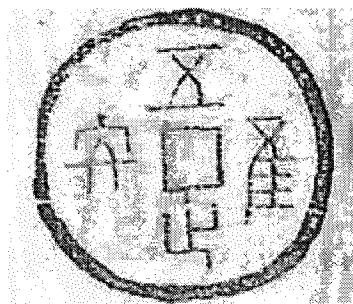
The poem is attributed to Qing dynasty female poet Gu Taiqing (顾太清 1799-1876); Zhang Dexin (张德鑫) points out this poem is one of the several imitations of the Southern Song dynasty female poet Zhu Shuzhen's (朱淑真) poem “Heart-broken Riddle” (断肠谜), see below:

下楼来, 金簪卜落; (When “卜” in “下” is gone, what remains is “一.”)  
问苍天, 人在何方? (When “人” is missing from “天,” what remains is “二.”)  
恨王孙, 一直去了, (When the vertical line in “王” is gone, what remains is “三.”)  
詈冤家, 言去难留. (詈 li: curse. When “言” leaves “詈,” what remains is “四.”)  
悔当初, 吾错失口, (“吾错失口” means “吾” loses “口,” what remains is “五.”)  
有上交, 无下交. (When the “cross” in “交” is missing, what remains is “六.”)  
皂白何须问, (When “白” in “皂” is gone, what remains is “七.”)  
分开不用刀. (Take away ‘刀’ in ‘分,’ what remains is “八.”)  
从今莫把仇人靠, (Take “人” away from “仇,” what remains is “九.”)  
千里相思一撇消. (Get rid of the top slash in “千,” what remains is “十.”)

In Gu Taiqing's poem, the narrator is a wife who is ignored at home by her husband. The first line, the “兀” part in “元” is sitting by the window alone, which implies the stroke “一” (one) is gone. Similarly, the second line says when the “人” part is gone from “天,” what remains will be “二” (two). This way, we find that lines one through ten respectively hides the numbers one (一) to ten (十). For this reason, this poem can also be called a number poem. In this poem, every line suggests a sense of “missing,” and characters “无” (have not), “不能” (be unable), “不言” (not speaking), “不差” (no bad), “难說” (hard to say), “無力” (no strength) and “无言” (no words) suggest a sense of being negative. These senses “coincide” with the fact that the negative husband is

“missing” from the woman’s life. The character splitting-reassembling (离合) style the poetess uses also suggests that she wishes to split with her husband and “reassemble” a family. I will call the translation above the “linguistic meaning,” and character deconstruction the “material meaning.” These two terms will be further used for convenience in discussion.<sup>175</sup>

Because split and reassembled characters can save strokes or elements, they are often used in poems to be inscribed on objects, such as seals, ink stones, mirror backs and porcelain. See the following three examples.

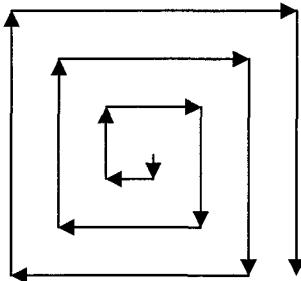


The above (left) is a seal read as “唯吾知足” (Only I know what “to be content” means). Because each of the four characters has the “口” element, and “口” is respectively in the left, bottom, right, and top in the four characters, the seal maker cleverly put “口” in the middle to be shared by all the four characters, instead of inscribing it four times (the right is a clearer illustration). Maybe we could call this kind of text “condensed text.” The following is a seal inscription called “Whirl Text Seal” (*huiwenyin* 回文印):<sup>176</sup>

<sup>175</sup> The word “material” is borrowed from William Boltz, who divides the function of a script into linguistic aspects and material aspects. See Boltz 1994: 9-10.

<sup>176</sup> The seal text is found in Wan Shu’s *Xuanjisujin* (璇玑碎锦). There is a set of four texts of this kind

泉髮任生潘月鏡  
 茗同醉衲冠粧門  
 煮高起烽烟異無  
 燒眠鼓中詠似夢  
 常樹鼙原閒頑足  
 外篇志樂棲仙餘  
 墅棋圍賭共陰年



The text is to be read as a heptasyllabic regulated verse by starting with the character “中” in the middle, and then go down to “原,” and then continue counter-clockwise, as indicated by the arrows on the right.

中原鼙鼓起烽烟， In the Central Plain army drums raise fire and smoke,  
 因詠閒棲樂志篇. Therefore I recite poems about being happy with a simple life.  
 竹樹眠高同醉衲，<sup>177</sup> Among bamboo and trees I sleep soundly like a drunken monk,  
 衣冠裝異似頑仙. My clothes and hat are strange, like those of a slovenly immortal.  
 山陰共賭圍棋墅，<sup>178</sup> In the north side of the mountain we play chess in the chess hut,  
 野外常燒煮茗泉. And in the wilderness we often boil spring water to make tea.  
 白髮任生潘岳鏡， Let gray hair grow in the mirror that used to reflect a young face,<sup>179</sup>  
 金門無夢足餘年，<sup>180</sup> At the Golden Gate, we have no dreams of filling out what remains  
 in our years.

We can see that from the second line on, the beginning character of each line is an element of the last character in the previous line, and therefore it is a half-character

---

under the title *huiwenyin*. The character *hui* used in the original text is “回” with “雨” on top, which is a character not found in modern Chinese dictionaries. Since the text is not a palindrome, *huiwen* here should be translated as whirl-text, because it is read from the middle and spirals to the outside, like a whirlpool.

<sup>177</sup> “衲” is the *kasaya* of a monk, also refers to a monk. “眠高” is the inversion of “高眠” – sleep soundly.

<sup>178</sup> Here, the character “赌” (gamble) does not imply gambling, since “赌棋” simply means to play chess. “赌棋” alludes to Tang poet Yao He’s (姚合) line “Playing chess may create an enemy” ( 賭棋招敵手). QTS 5698.

<sup>179</sup> “潘岳,” a third century handsome poet. “潘岳鏡” therefore means the mirror that used to reflect the poet’s young face.

<sup>180</sup> “金門,” Also known as “金马门” (Golden Horse Gate) gate of the Emperor’s palace, which symbolize political success.

thimble poem. This structure allows the seal maker to use forty-nine characters on the seal to represent the poem of fifty-six characters in its normal layout. The following is a similar poem, but because it uses a circular formation, only forty-eight characters are needed to represent the fifty-six-character poem. The poem is attributed to the Tang poet Bai Juyi (白居易 722-846), and is entitled *Bai Letian Tours the Purple Heaven Palace* (白乐天游紫霄宫).<sup>181</sup>



Conventional layout:

水洗尘埃道味嘗, Water washes away the dust and I have tasted the flavor of the Way,  
 甘于名利两相忘. Therefore I am content to have forgotten to pursue wealth or fame.  
 心怀六洞丹霞客, In my heart are the Morning Clouds Guests in the Six Caves,  
 各诵三清紫府章. Who each recite the *Three Purity Purple Palace Scripture*.  
 十里采莲歌达旦, For ten *li*, songs for picking lotus seeds are heard throughout the night,  
 一轮明月桂飘香. And under a bright moon the sweet scent of osmanthus floats.  
 日高公子还相觅, The sun is high but the young master is still searching,  
 见得山中好酒浆. To find the good wine in the mountains.

<sup>181</sup> The poem is found in *Classified Palindromes* (Sang 1987: 808), but not in *Complete Tang Poetry*.

In this poem, the “水” element in the character “浆” on the very top of the left picture is used as the beginning of the poem, and the bottom radical of the ending character in each line is used as the beginning of the next line. Because the poem is a circle, and that the beginning character of a line is hiding in the last character of the previous line, it is hard for one to find the beginning of the poem, therefore it can be called a “half-character thimble hidden-head poem” (半字顶针藏头诗). The split characters in the poem all have a top-bottom structure, and it is always the bottom element that is reused in the next line. For this reason, I think the original poem was meant to be in a vertically arranged circular formation (as shown in the picture on the right above).

On the literary level, the poem is obviously related to the Daoist religion. “Morning Clouds Guests in the Six Caves” refers to Daoist masters or immortals. The girls who harvest lotus seeds and the young searching master in the second half seem to be images for a new theme (love), but in fact, they are religious metaphors. Harvesting lotus seeds throughout the night represents meditation during the night for *qigong* (breathing exercise) or religious practice, and the bright moon is a symbol of enlightenment. The young searching master represents one who searches for the Dao, which is represented by the wine in the mountains. The hidden-head feature of the poem cleverly echoes the hidden Way. This is a convenient time to mention that circular formation poems are quite often seen in MFP, as mentioned in Chapter One (see *Classified Palindromes* for more examples). These circular poems can be linked to the concept of *yuan* (圆 circle) in Chinese cultural tradition, as Qian Zhongshu discussed in his *Tangyi Lu*.<sup>182</sup>

---

<sup>182</sup> Qian 1984: 111-114.

Character splitting-reassembling is also very common in antithetic couplets; see the following.

二人土上坐 Two people sit on the earth,  
一月日边明 One moon shines by the sun.

One story attributes this couplet to the Southern Song Emperor Zhao Ji (赵佶) and his favorite concubine. One evening when they were sitting on a mound in a garden, the emperor said the first line, and the lady matched with the second line.<sup>183</sup> On the material level, “二人土上坐” refers to the fact that the character “坐” (sit) looks like two “人” (person) located on top of the character “土” (earth, dirt) and “一月日边明” refers to the fact that the character “明” (bright) looks like “月” (the moon) stays beside “日” (the sun). On the metaphorical level, since the sun often symbolizes the emperor, and the moon a beautiful woman, the lady’s line is indeed very appropriate: “Your Majesty’s light makes me bright.”

Here are some similar examples. The material meaning is provided below each couplet:

鸿是江边鸟 The wild goose is the riverside bird,  
蚕为天下虫 The silkworm is the first under-Heaven worm.<sup>184</sup>  
鸿=江+鸟; 蚕=天+虫

筮乃巫弄竹 Divination means a shaman handling bamboo strips,  
龟乃短尾鱼 A turtle is a short-tailed fish.  
筮=竹+巫; 龟 looks like a short-tailed 鱼

<sup>183</sup> For the story, see Liang Shi and Liang Dong 1995: 134. Another source (<http://www.xwbs.com/2004/6-24/115047.html>) attributes the couplet to Emperor Zhangzong in the Jin dynasty (金章宗) and his concubine.

<sup>184</sup> This couplet is widely cited by couplet anthologies and websites, and it is attributed to the Qing dynasty official Lin Zexu (林则徐 1785-1850): when the young Lin Zexu was walking with his teacher by the ocean, his teacher said the first line, and Lin matched with the second line. See <http://www.pupils.com.cn/qtq/g1849.htm>. Also see Zhang 1976: 130. For the other three couplets following it, see <http://chinaseek.cn/xq/printpage.asp?boardid=7&ID=200&replyID=200>

贼是戎抢贝 A thief is an armed person robbing treasure,  
仙为山旁人 An immortal is a person living by a mountain.  
    贼=贝+戎; 仙=人+山

武是戈来止 Martial artistry means when a weapon comes you can stop it  
智为日有知 Wisdom means every day gains some knowledge  
    武=止+戈; 智=知+日

These couplets both play with the physical image of the characters and reveal some kind of truth or wisdom. For example, the character “鸿” presents the image of a bird (鸟) beside a river (江), and “蚕” a worm (虫) under sky/heaven (天). In reality, wild geese do often live by the water, and the silkworm was important to China's economy, so calling it “the first worm under Heaven” is quite reasonable. These examples also point out that many characters were created by combining others, and there is often a semantic link between a character and the elements that make it up.

The following examples employ character splitting-reassembling with humor and wit:

- 1) 王老者一身土气 Senior Wang is a bumpkin,  
    朱先生半截牛身 Mr. Zhu's upper body looks like a bull.<sup>185</sup>

王, 老, 者 all contain the 土 part,  
朱, 先, 生 all have the upper part of 牛.

In the first line, 王老者 refers to both the three unrelated characters “王,” “老,” “者,” and the word “王老者” (senior Wang). “土气” also means both the smell of soil and a country bumpkin. The second line can be read similarly. The second line also implies Mr. Wang is stubborn, since stubborn is another meaning of “牛” (bull). This couplet is said to have been exchanged between a man with the surname Wang and one with the surname Zhu to make fun of each other.

---

<sup>185</sup> Liang Shi and Liang Dong 1995: 160.

2) 人曾是僧, 人弗能成佛. A man used to be a monk, but Man cannot become Buddha,

女卑为婢, 女又可称奴. A woman will be a maid if her position is humble, and women can also be called “servants.”

人+曾=僧, 人+弗=佛; 女+卑=婢, 女+又=奴.

According to a story found in Liang Shi and Liang Dong's book, the first line was said by Su Shi's younger sister to make fun of Monk Fo Yin (佛印), Su Shi's good friend, and the second line was Fo Yin's reply. “女又可称奴” in the second line may also be translated as “women can also refer to themselves as ‘servants’ (*nu* 奴),” because in traditional China, women humbly refer to themselves as “*nu*”.<sup>186</sup>

3) 此木是柴山山出 This wood is the firewood that every mountain produces,  
因火成烟夕夕多 Because of fire it turns into smoke that is copious at each dusk.

此 + 木 = 柴; 山 + 山 = 出  
因 + 火 = 烟; 夕 + 夕 = 多

This couplet is said to have been composed by scholar official Li Tiaoyuan (李调元 1704-1803) and a woodcutter: when Li met a woodcutter on the road, he said the first line, and the woodcutter matched with the second line.<sup>187</sup>

4) 四口同圖, 內口皆從外口管 There are four squares in 圖, and the inner ones are all within the outer one's control,  
五人共傘, 小人全仗大人遮<sup>188</sup> When five people share an umbrella, small people are all sheltered by the big person.

圖 has four 口 s, and the internal 口 s are all within the external 口,  
傘 has five 人 s, and the small 人 s are all under the big 人.

<sup>186</sup> “奴” may also be translated as “slave,” however, in medieval China, it means servants. For the story, see Liang Shi and Liang Dong 1995: 131.

<sup>187</sup> Liang Shi and Liang Dong 1995: 526. This couplet is also introduced in Marney's book. See Marney 1993: 199.

<sup>188</sup> See <http://www.xwbs.com/2004/6-24/115047.html>

The couplet is attributed to the Ming dynasty official Yang Pu (杨溥). When his father was taken away to fulfill labor duty, the young boy went to the magistrate to appeal for his release. The magistrate said the first line to him to let him know that ordinary people are subject to the control of the officials. Yang Pu then matched with the second line, to suggest that ordinary people should be under the protection of the officials. The magistrate was impressed by the boy's wit and released his father.

5) 琴瑟琵琶,八大王一般头目 The eight great kings on top of 琴瑟琵琶 all have similar heads,

魑魅魍魉,四小鬼各具肚肠 The four small ghosts in 魑魅魍魉 each has a different stomach and intestines.

In the first line, the first four characters are three kinds of musical instruments (*qin*, *se*, and *pipa*), each with a double “王” radical on top, and in total there are eight “王.” In the second line, the first four characters each has the character “鬼” (ghost), and the phonetic elements “离,” “未,” “罔,” “两” are viewed as the intestines (肚肠) of the radical “鬼.” “琴瑟琵琶” and “魑魅魍魉” are also common-classifier lines, which will be discussed in Section II. Phonetically, “琵琶” (*pipa*) is an alliterative doublet, while “魑魅” (*chimei*) and “魍魉” (*wangliang*) are rhyming doublets, and in medieval pronunciation, there is assonance in “琴瑟” (*kiəmsiət*).

6) 骑奇马,张长弓,琴瑟琵琶八大王,王王在上,單戈成戰;  
伪为人,袭龙衣,魑魅魍魉四小鬼,鬼鬼犯边,合手即拿.

Riding an unusual horse, stretching a long bow, everyone of the eight great kings (王) in 琴瑟琵琶 is high above, and can fight with a single spear;

Pretending to be people, wearing dragon gowns, the four small ghosts (鬼) in 魑魅魍魉 invade the border, and take away anything they can lay their hands on.

This couplet is a combination of couplet 5) above and the following one: “**骑奇马, 张长弓, 單戈成戰; 伪为人, 袭龙衣, 合手即拿.**” For this reason, it is an assembled couplet (集句联). Notice that on the material level, “**骑=奇+马, 张=弓+长, 戰=單+戈; 伪=人+为, 袭=龙+衣, 拿=合+手.**” The term “**犯边**” has two meanings: invading the border, or staying aside (which refers to the fact that the radical “**鬼**” stays on the side in each of the four characters 魁魅魍魎). Couplet 5) is more like a character game, while this assembled couplet sounds like an allegory about the Chinese Emperors and their invading enemies on the borders.

7) 鳥入風中, 啾出虫而作鳳 A bird enters a wind, throws out the worm, and becomes a phoenix;

馬來芦旁, 吃完草而成駄 A horse comes to the reeds, eats up the grass, and becomes a donkey.

When 鳥 replaces the 虫 element in 風, 風 will become 鳳;

When 馬 combines with 芦 without the 驴 radical, we will get 駄.

Traditional China has a large number of anomalous stories, in which objects, animals, and people transmogrify.<sup>189</sup> This couplet tells a similar story: some characters are viewed as transformations of others, and there does not have to be a logical reason for such a transformation.

---

<sup>189</sup> The following is an example: “In the region of Huiji, the crabs suddenly all became rats. They were numerous and all over the fields, eating crops and creating an catastrophe. At first, they had flesh and hair but no bones, and could not cross the paddy dividers. A few days later, they all became female.” For more information regarding this story and anomalous transformation, see Li 1999: 14.

- 8) 棗棘为薪，截断劈开捆成四束<sup>190</sup> When using date shrubs for firewood, chop up the long and split the thick, then tie them up in four bundles;
- 闾门起屋，移多补少盖作两间 When the Palace builds houses, extra materials are moved from one site to make up the insufficiency of another, so that two even houses can be built.

Chopping 棗 in the middle, splitting 棘 into two halves, you will get four 束 s.  
Taking one 𠔎 out of 闾 and putting it in 门, you will get two 间 s.

This couplet makes use of the three main forms of character structures: top-bottom (棗), side-by-side (棘), and inside-outside (闾). Characters are treated like construction materials, and they can be handled in the way a carpenter handles his material.

The last three couplets show that characters can be personified, animated, transformed, or reconstructed, and that some characters can be created through one of these processes. Characters can also be materials for creating humorous or entertaining stories.

Another kind of antithetic couplet game played among literati is the “wine poetry games” (酒令). One person speaks a line of certain structure, and others are expected to come up with lines of a similar structure. The following Qing dynasty triplet was composed at a farewell party to an official named Chen Xunwu (陈询忤) who was to be exiled far away.<sup>191</sup> The first two lines were composed by two friends of Xu, and the last one is Xu’s own match.

---

<sup>190</sup> This couplet is attributed to the Qing Emperor Qianlong (乾隆) and his mister Liu Yong (刘墉).

<sup>191</sup> Lang 1961: 746 (七修类稿 vol. 1). Wine poems are quite common in traditional China, and couplets and poems of this kind are quite abundant. For example, Chapter 557 in volume 34 of the *Complete Books of the Four Libraries* (四库全书) is dedicated to wine poems.

轟字三个車; 余斗字成斜; 車車車, 远上寒山石径斜.

The character 轰 has three 車 (chariots), and characters 余 and 斗 make up the character 斜 (slanting); carriage, carriage, carriage, climbs on the cold mountain on which the rocky path is aslant.

品字三个口, 水酉字成酒; 口口口, 劝君更进一杯酒.

The character 品 has three 口 (mouths), and characters 水 and 酉 make up the character 酒 (wine); Mouth, mouth, mouth, I advise that you drink one more cup.

蠹字三个直, 黑出字成黜; 直直直, 焉往而不三黜?

The character 蠹 has three 直 (upright), and characters 黑 (blacken) and 出 (out) make the character 黜 (exile). Upright, upright, upright, where should I go in order not to be thrice exiled?

Notice that the end of each line is a quotation,<sup>192</sup> and in each line there is a connection between the split character and the quotation. For example, in the first line, “車” (carriage) is related to “远上寒山石径斜” in the sense that it is the carriage that can climb the mountain. Thus “車” and “远上寒山石径斜” indicates the exiled person’s forthcoming journey. In the second line, “口” (mouth) is mentioned because it is the mouth that will drink the wine, and the character “品” (quality) suggests high moral quality (品德). In the third line, the leaving official uses “直” (straight, upright) to say that it is due to his upright character that he was “blackened out.” At the first glance, this triplet seems to be a pure word game playing with characters, but in fact the characters and poetic lines are carefully selected and they fit the theme of the party very well.

Sometimes a couplet is not generated by a character game, but it has the features of such a game. See the following:<sup>193</sup>

---

<sup>192</sup>“远上寒山石径斜” is from a poem of Du Mu’s (杜牧, QTS 5999), “劝君更进一杯酒” is from Wang Wei’s (王维, QTS 1307). “焉往而不三黜” is from the Confucius’ Analects (论语).

<sup>193</sup>Liang Yusheng 1993:764.

日晒雪消，檐滴无雲之雨 Sun shines and snow melts – eaves drip cloudless rain,  
风吹尘起，地生不火之烟 Wind blows and dust rises – earth makes fireless smoke.

In this couplet, since the character “雲” contains the character “雨,” and “烟” contains “火,” “无雲之雨” and “不火之烟” give the impression of both the actual scenes and the images of the characters. This effect may not be completely coincidental, if we take into consideration the fact that the making of a character is often related to its meaning. For example, the character “雲” suggests “clouds means the rain stays in the sky,” and “烟” suggests “smoke is caused by fire.”

Liang Yusheng points out that the Ming book *Zhongzhou Caotang Yiji* (中洲草堂遺集) has a story in which a scholar came up with the line “烟锁池塘柳” (Mist locks the pond willows) to describe a pond view, and he found the five characters in the line happened to respectively contain “火, 金, 水, 土, 木,” the Five Primary Elements (五行) in Nature. From Ming until now, many people have searched for a perfect match for this line, but so far there has not been a perfect one yet. For example, “烽销极塞鴻” (Beacons burn down the flying geese in the remote frontier) and “炮镇海城楼” (Cannons secure the Ocean City Gatehouse) are formally good matches, but their war related themes are not harmonious with the garden scenery in the matched line. “灯深村寺钟” (Lights deepen the peals from the village temple) is a relatively good thematic match, but the order of the five elements in it is different from the matched line, and therefore it is not good formally.<sup>194</sup> “烟锁池塘柳” is another example of “absolute couplet” (绝对),

---

<sup>194</sup> Liang points out that “灯深村寺钟” and “烽销极塞鴻” are found in the Qing dynasty book *Classified Qing Unofficial Anecdotes* (清稗类钞). “炮镇海城楼” is attributed to Guo Moruo (郭沫若) by a web site.

just like “山大王大山” discussed in Chapter One. However, “山大王大山” is a pure formal game without a serious meaning, while “烟锁池塘柳” is the opposite - the author chose these characters because he thought they were necessary for describing the scenery, not because they contain the Five Elements. “烟锁池塘柳” is probably as effective as Xie Lingyun’s (谢灵运) famous lines “池塘生春草, 园柳变鸣禽” (Pond grows spring grass, garden willows become chirping birds) in terms of presenting a pond view with simple images.

The effort of searching for a perfect match for “烟锁池塘柳” is also comparable to the Tang poet Jia Dao’s (贾岛) “bitter composition” (苦吟), when he tried to choose between “僧推月下门” (A monk pushes the door under the moon) and “僧敲月下门” (A monk knocks at the door under the moon). The difficult in matching “烟锁池塘柳” lies in the fact that people expect the matching line to be equally good in meaning, not just in form. One legend says that the Qing Emperor Qianlong (乾隆) once used this line to select the top Civil Service Exam candidate (状元): two equal finalists were asked to match this line. One candidate was shocked upon seeing it, and immediately acknowledged that he could not do it, but the Emperor announced that he was the winner, because the one who could instantly recognize a line to be unmatchable must be more knowledgeable than the other. Yuan Mei (袁枚 1716-1798) tells of a scholar who found

---

The following are a few more proposed matching lines Liang’s collects, see Liang Yusheng 1993: 88-105: 1) “灯垂锦槛波” (Lamp hangs over the silky balustrade by the waves). 2) “鍾沉臺榭燈” (Bell sound sinks the lamp in the houses and pavilions). 3) “湖增錦樹燈” (Lake increases the number of lamps on the splendid houses). 3) 燕銜泥垒巢 (Swallow picks mud to build a nest). 4) “茶烹鑿壁泉” (Tea is made with the Chiseled Cliff Fountain). More matches are seen in contemporary antithetic couplets related web pages.

two good lines but “did not want to mix them with mediocre lines” (不愿以常语杂之).<sup>195</sup>

Perhaps Emperor Qianlong and his top candidate were right: “烟锁池塘柳” should better be left alone.

Character splitting antithetic couplets often need to be understood in the context in which they were created. It is because many of the stories and contexts were forgotten that these couplets are often viewed purely as the result of word games. For example, it was the background story about the Emperor and his consort that makes “二人土上坐, 一月日边明” (Two people sit on the earth, One moon shines by the sun) an elegant poetic lines about love. Yang Pu’s line “五人共傘, 小人全仗大人遮” (When five people share an umbrella, small people are all sheltered by the big person) reflects that in traditional China, to have a good knowledge about the characters and being able to use them poetically are practical skills. The stories behind these couplets are an essential part of the aestheticism, just like the stories behind the Chinese idioms: without knowing the story related to an idiom, we will not be able to understand and use it properly.

The **super-witty poem** (神智詩), also called the “riddle picture poem” (謎像詩), is a unique type of poem especially based on the manipulation of the graphic images of characters. This kind of poem gets the name because it requires the reader to interpret the deconventionalized characters. The following story in *Classified Palindromes* attributes the invention of this style to Su Shi:

---

<sup>195</sup>Yuan 1982: 9. The two lines are: “暮雨衣犹湿, 春风帆正开” (Clothes are still wet from the evening rain; in the spring breeze the sail is being set up). Yuan also points out that *The Complete Tang Poetry* (全唐诗) collects some individual lines or couplets (句) in addition to complete poems.

宋神宗熙寧間，遼使以詩詰軾，軾曰：“賦詩易事也，觀詩難事也！”遂作神智體“晚眺詩”以示之。...遼使觀之，惶惑不知所云，自是不復言詩。

During the Xining period in Emperor Shenzong's reign, an ambassador from Liao tried to embarrass Su Shi with poetry topics. Su Shi said: "It is easy to write a poem, but reading one is a difficult matter." He then wrote a super-witty poem, "*Looking into the Distant in the Evening*," to show the ambassador, who, upon seeing it, was frightened and confused and did not know what it was about. From then on, he never talked about poetry again.

Su Shi's poem looks like the following:<sup>196</sup>

晚眺  
長亭短景無人畫  
老大橫拖瘦竹筇  
回首斷雲斜日暮  
曲江倒蘸側山峰

### 晚眺 - *Looking into the Distance in the Evening*

長亭短景無人畫, Long pavilion and short scenery – no one paints them,  
老大橫拖瘦竹筇, Grown old, I drag my bamboo cane.

回首斷雲斜日暮, Turning my head, I see broken clouds and the setting sun at dusk,  
曲江倒蘸側山峰. And the twisting river reflects upside-down riverside hills.

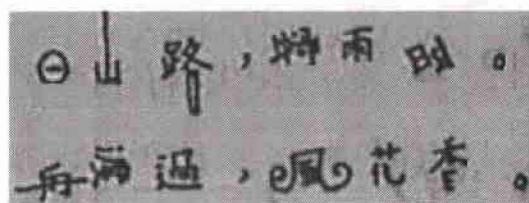
This reading is based on interpreting the physical images of the characters in the original poem: “亭” (pavilion) looks long, therefore it is called “长亭” (long pavilion), “景” (scenery) looks short, therefore is read as “短景” (short scenery), “畫” (to paint) doesn't have the “人” element in the “box” (畫 is a variation of 畵 - paint), thus called “无人畵” (nobody paints it). “老” (grown old) looks big, therefore is called 老大 (the oldest son). 首 is the reverse printing of “首” (head), therefore called “回首” (turning head). In 斷, 雨 and “云” are far apart, therefore is called “断”雲 (broken clouds). In 墓, the bottom element 曰 is slanting, therefore it is called 斜日暮 (slanting sun in the dusk).

<sup>196</sup> This quatrain poem is recorded in *Classified Palindromes*, but without the estranged characters, see Sang 1987: 812. Also see Gai 2001: 1 and Yan 2001: 315.

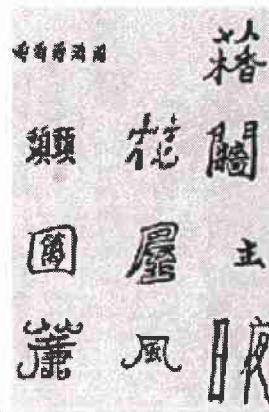
In 江, the middle stroke in “工” is twisted, therefore it is called “曲江” (twisting river).

倒蘸 is the upside-down “蘸” (reflect in water), therefore is called “倒蘸” (reflected in the river up-side-down). The 山 radical on the left of 峰 is not upright (leaning toward the right), therefore it is called “侧山峰” (hills on the riverside).

Below are two later super-witty poems:



Picture 1



Picture 2

Picture 1 on the left is entitled *Country Spirit* (野兴),<sup>197</sup> and is read in the following manner:

日圆山高路口长, The sun is round, the mountains are high, and the road is long,  
横云细雨倒斜阳. Horizontal clouds and thin rain are in the slanting sun.  
扁舟横渡无人过, A small boat lies by the ferry but no one crosses the river,  
风卷花残半日香. Wind rolls, flowers are falling, half of the day is fragrant.

Picture 2 is a poem entitled *Clear and Bright Spring* (清明) by Li Zhiqi (李知其),<sup>198</sup>

細雨連綿草木香, Drizzle is continuous, grass and trees are fragrant,  
並頭花影入門牆. Double-headed flowers' shadows cross the gate and wall.  
圍籬白屋無人住, A fence encloses a white hut, where nobody lives,  
簾捲風飄日夜長. A curtain rolls, the wind flows, the days and nights are long.

<sup>197</sup> Anonymous. See Yan 2001: 69 and Liu 1996: 201.

<sup>198</sup> The picture here is found on a website: [http://www.yasue888.net/si\\_chui.html](http://www.yasue888.net/si_chui.html). The web page does not provide information about the author Li Zhiqi.

The original form of the poem, as shown in picture 2, has three created characters: “口” with “离” inside, “門” with “牆” inside, and the character composed of “艹,” “木” and “香.” The five skinny “雨” in the upper-left corner of the picture suggests the sense of “continuous small rain” (細雨連綿), and the two “頭” suggests the sense of “double-headed.” The poem also employs color to express meaning: the “屋” written in white color means “white hut” (白屋).

Technically, super-witty poems are similar to character splitting-reassembling poems, because they both involve the separation and re-assembling of characters, and they both have double meaning (linguistic and material). Of course, super-witty poems utilize the physical images of characters to a larger extent. They make use of not only the character elements, but also the shape, size and even color of the characters. To write a super-witty poem, the poet has to create a picture of the strange characters first, and then write a poem based on that picture. Since sometimes there are several ways to interpret the picture, the poems can be slightly different. For example, in Su Shi's poem, “长亭” (long pavilion) may be replaced with “高亭” (tall pavilion), “斜日暮” (slanting sun in the dusk) may be replaced with “暮日斜” (evening sun is slanting); in the Country Spirit poem, “日圆山高” (The sun is round, the mountains are high) can also be “圆日高山” (round sun and high mountains), and Li Zhiqi's “細雨連綿” (drizzle is continuous) may also be “連綿細雨” (continuous drizzle). To find the best reading is part of the “super wit.”

The character-reassembling technique is occasionally seen in mainstream poetry. *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror* points out that “character-element parallelism”

(*xizidui* 析字对), or “partial parallelism” (侧对), is one of the many types of parallelism. As an example, it offers this: although “冯翊” and “龙首” (two place names) are not parallel to each other, they can be used as parallel terms because “冯” contains the radical “马” (horse), which is matchable with the character “龙” (dragon) in “龙首,” because they are both “animals.” Similarly, “翊” contains “羽” (feather), which is matchable with “首” (head), because they are both body parts. Another example is “泉流” (creek flow) and “赤峰” (red peak). These two terms do not have parallel features either, but the element “白” (white) in “泉” is matchable with “赤” (red), and the water radical in “流” is matchable with the mountain radical “山” in “峰.” We may use an English analogy to help further explain this kind of parallelism: China and the United States do not share similar geographical features, but if a province in China and a state in the US are similar geographically, then we will consider the two countries “partially parallel.” Because the parallel feature is hidden in the characters, partial parallelism may also be called “crypto parallelism.”

In Li Bai’s (李白) line 西风吹古月, “古月” may be read as “胡,” the invading minorities in the north frontier,<sup>199</sup> thus giving the line a double meaning: “The west wind blows the ancient moon” and “The west wind blows the Huns.” In the Song dynasty poet Wu Wenying’s (吴文英) line “何处合成愁, 离人心上秋” (Where is sentiment produced? – it is produced in the autumn on the heart of the left alone person), “心上秋” in the second line refers to the character 愁 in the first line, because “愁” is composed of “秋”

---

<sup>199</sup> Wang 1992: 240. Also see Marney 1993: 193-194.

and “心.”<sup>200</sup> In Qin Guan’s (秦观) line “天外一勾横月带三星” (Beyond the sky the hook-shaped moon is accompanied by three stars), the character “心” is disassembled into a hook and three dots.<sup>201</sup> From the title of the poem “To Tao Xin’er” (赠陶心儿词), we see the deconstructed character “心” refers to the name of the courtesan to which the poem is written.

Character splitting-reassembling is the most important technique for the poems discussed in this chapter. In fact, the technique of splitting-reassembling occurs not only to characters. We can divide the splitting-reassembling technique into four categories:

- 1). Characters splitting-reassembling (字体离合), such as the couplets discussed in this chapter.
- 2). Word splitting-reassembling (词语离合), such as the place name poem of Pi Rixiu, and the idiomatic formation.
- 3). Sentence splitting-reassembling (句子离合), such as the poem about “Lu Junyi Rebels,” in which the line “卢俊义反” is split and arranged in four lines.
- 4). Poem splitting-reassembling (诗篇离合), such as the four poems of Liu Jia, whose last lines form another poem.

Assembled poems also belong to “poem splitting-reassembling” verses, because they are composed by splitting the original poems. This broad sense splitting-reassembling shows that restructuring existing poetic materials (character, words, lines, poems) for new poems or new meanings is an important part of the Chinese poetic creativity.

---

<sup>200</sup> The two lines are from Wu Wenyi’s poem “Tangduoling” (唐多令), See Jiang 2000: 36.

<sup>201</sup> Hu Yinglin’s (胡应麟) *Tiaoxi Yuyin Conghua* (苕溪渔隐丛话, vol. 3) quotes this from another book *Gaozhai Shihua* (高斋诗话). Also see Zhang 2002: 92.

## II. Identical-Doublet Poems and Common-Classifier Poems (叠字诗 and 联边诗)

The graphic connotations of characters, phrases, and poetic lines have long been noticed and frequently utilized by poets. For example, “common classifier doublets” (联边词) are words composed of two characters which share a common radical or element, such as “窈窕” and “芙蓉.”<sup>202</sup> and the common classifier often helps to portray a graphic image or scene (绘景), as Wang Li (王力) pointed out.<sup>203</sup> A special kind of twin-character phrase is the identical doublet (叠字词). A poem that uses identical doublets in each line is called an identical-character poem (叠字诗). Because the two characters in an identical doublet have the same pronunciation, an identical doublet is also called an identical sound phrase (叠音词). This is to say an identical-character poem also has a special audio effect.

Identical doublets are already commonly seen in the *Book of Songs* (诗经), but the earliest one that uses identical doublets consecutively in up to six lines is the following poem from the Nineteen Ancient Songs (古诗十九首):<sup>204</sup>

青青河畔草, Green green, riverside grass,  
郁郁园中柳; Flourishing flourishing, willows in the garden.  
盈盈楼上女, Gentle gentle, the girl in the house upstairs,  
皎皎当窗牖; Clear clear [as the moon], standing by a window.  
娥娥红粉妆, Charming charming, her red and pink makeup,  
纤纤出素手. Delicate delicate, her hands out of her sleeves.  
昔为倡家女, In the past she was an entertainment girl,  
今为荡子妇. Now she is the wife of a good-for-nothing man.  
荡子行不归, The good-for-nothing wanders without returning home,  
空床难独守. It is difficult for her to stay alone in bed.

<sup>202</sup> Zheng & Zhu 1993: 292.

<sup>203</sup> Wang 1984: 386.

<sup>204</sup> This poem is in *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, vol. 1, see Xu 1985: 19-20.

The following is a *ci* poem to the tune *Sky Clear Sand* (天净沙) by Qiao Ji (乔吉) of the Yuan dynasty:

莺莺燕燕春春， Oriole oriole swallow swallow spring spring,  
花花柳柳真真， Flower flower willow willow genuine and pure,  
事事风风韵韵。 Thing thing pleasant pleasant harmonious harmonious.  
娇娇嫩嫩， Lovely lovely tender tender -  
停停当当人人。 The perfect girl.

The first six lines all start with an identical doublet. Because the poem is about love, the identical characters give the reader an impression of two lovers or double happiness. “莺莺燕燕花花柳柳” also presents a graphic impression of many birds, flowers, and willows. The poem can also be viewed as a physical combination of two identical poems:  $(X+Y+Z) + (X+Y+Z) = 2X + 2Y + 2Z$ . The following is the X+Y+Z poem:

莺燕春， Orioles and swallows bring in spring  
花柳真， Flowers and willows are clear.  
事风韵， Everything is pleasant,  
娇嫩停当人。 Lovely and tender: that perfect person.

The following is a Qing dynasty poem entitled *Looking into the Distance at the Riverside* (临江远眺),<sup>205</sup> in which every line has two identical couplets.

渺渺茫茫墨泼天, Boundless ink is dumped on the sky,  
霏霏拂拂雨和烟. Continuous and swaying rain mixes with mist.  
苍苍翠翠山遮寺, Dark green mountains hide the temple,  
白白红红花满前. White and red flowers are everywhere in the front.  
整整齐齐沙上雁, In neat formation are the geese on sand,  
来来往往渡头船. Coming and going are the boats in the ferry.  
行行坐坐看无尽, I walk and sit to view the endless world,  
世世生生作话传. Which is the topic of generation after generation.

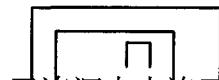
---

<sup>205</sup> This introduction is found on a web page. The poem is also seen in Gai's book, but is attributed to a different poet, and the text is slightly different. See Gai 2001: 48.

The two middle couplets emphasize the plurality of things – layers of green mountains, all kinds of colorful flowers, many geese and boats. “来来往往渡头船” portrays the boats moving on the river against the geese formation on the riverbank.

Repeated characters are not always identical doublets; see the following poem entitled “Passing by the West Lake” (过西湖):<sup>206</sup>

(identical columns)



天连泗水水连天, Sky connects the Si River, and water connects sky,  
烟锁孤村村锁烟. Smoke locks the lonely village, village locks smoke.  
树绕藤萝萝绕树, Trees surround vines, vines wind around trees,  
川通巫峡峡通川. The River goes into the Wu Gorge, the Gorge joins the River.  
酒迷醉客客迷酒, Wine attracts drunken guests, guests attract wine,  
船送行人人送船. Boats send people away, people send away boats.  
此会应难难会此, This meeting is hard to bear, and it will be difficult to meet here again,  
传今话古古今传. Comments on history and the present have existed in history and the  
present.

Zhao Yi put this poem in the category of identical-character poems (叠字诗), because each line includes three pairs of identical characters, even though the identical characters are not always next to each other. Yan Huazhi considers this poem a variation of the symmetric-line palindrome (as discussed in Chapter One), because if the positions of column three and column four (counting from the left) are switched, the text will become a self-symmetric poem. However, since switching these two columns only enables the last three characters in each line to be palindromic, it can only be called a partial palindrome (半句回文). The poem may be better viewed as a line-level thimble poem: in a normal thimble poem each line reuses the ending character or characters of the previous

<sup>206</sup> This poem is seen in Zhao Yi's *Gaiyu Congkao* (陔余丛考) 1975 (vol. 23). It attributes the poem to a Japanese traveler in China. The poem is also mentioned in Yan's book, but with two characters printed differently. See Yan 2001: 353.

line, while in a line-level thimble poem, in each line the second half (in this case, the last three characters) starts with the ending character or characters of the first half, as in 天连泗水-水连天 (for line-level thimble poem, see the *ci* name poem of Wan Shu discussed in Chapter Two). This means the two connected identical characters (such as 水水) in each line do not form a word. This poem demonstrates that a poem can involve different kinds of linguistic manipulation at once, and can be multiply categorized.

The couplet “海水朝朝朝朝朝朝朝落，浮云长长长长长消,” as discussed in Chapter Three, is also a special kind of identical-characters poem in which “朝朝朝朝朝朝” and “长长长长长长” presents the graphic effect of “being long.” “朝朝朝朝朝朝” suggests numerous mornings (when 朝 is pronounced as *zhao*), which in turn represents the eternity of time, while “长长长长长长” suggests the clouds in the sky stretching very far, which represents the vastness of the universe.

Repeated character phrases may not always be consecutive, and they can be in “ABA” structure. For example, a poem of the Song dynasty poet Dai Fugu (戴复古, born in 1167) contains two well-known lines of this structure: “春水渡傍渡，夕阳山外山” (By the spring water, ferries are next to each other; in the twilight, mountains are beyond mountains).<sup>207</sup> The following poem by the Ming dynasty poet Huang E (黄娥 1498-1567) uses the structure in every line.<sup>208</sup>

---

<sup>207</sup> QSS 33531.

<sup>208</sup> Yan 2001: 276. This is a dramatic style poem to the tune *A Flower in the Southern Mode* (南吕一枝花).

好恩情花上花, True love is like a flower on top of flowers,  
都翻作梦中梦. Which is turned into a dream in a dream.  
隔春水渡傍渡, The two ferries next to each other across the spring water,  
胜蓬莱冬夏冬. Are better than the summers and winters on the Penglai Island.<sup>209</sup>

Yan calls this kind of “ABA” structure “split identical character phrases” (间隔叠字体), but in fact, this structure does not have anything to do with identical doublets, because if we take away the splitting character, the remaining repeated characters do not form a word. A suitable name for this kind of structure should be “non-consecutive repeated characters phrases.” Examples of this kind of words are many, such as “人上人” (a person above others), “天外天” (the sky beyond sky).

There are also poems using the “ABAC” structure. See the following two poems.<sup>210</sup>

半水半山著柳, Half a river and half a mountain are covered with willows,  
半風半雨催花. Half wind and half rain urge the flowers to open.  
半沒半浮漁艇, Half submerged and half floating is a the fishing boat,  
半藏半見人家. Half hiding and half showing is a household.

看山看水獨坐, Looking at mountains and looking at waters, I sit alone,  
聽風聽雨獨眠. Listening to wind and listening to rain, I sleep alone.  
客去客來日日, Guests come and guests go, day after day,  
花開花落年年. Flowers open and flowers fall, year after year.

The first poem is about a landscape painting. It focuses on four pairs of half images, making them appear doubled. The evenly divided images also bring forth a symmetric impression. The second poem has a similar effect, except that it has repeated actions (rather than still images), which is to show the poet enjoys a hermit’s simple life.

---

<sup>209</sup> Penglai is a legendary island in the Eastern Sea on which immortals live.

<sup>210</sup> These two poems are found in Lin 1977: 129. The first is by Mei Dingzuo (梅鼎祚 1553-1619), and the second is by Xu Ben (徐贲, 18<sup>th</sup> century).

The poems discussed above all contain repeated characters. As mentioned previously, the identical doublet is a special kind of the twin-character phrase (连绵词) in which two characters share a common classifier or radical. In poetry, the graphic effect of common classifier doublets may be expanded to make a common-classifier line (联边句), in which all the characters in a line share a common radical. A poem that is entirely composed of common-classifier lines is called a common-classifier poem (联边诗 or 同旁诗). See the following poem of Huang Tingjian (黄庭坚), the one best known:<sup>211</sup>

Foreword: 冲雨向万载，道中得逍遙观，遂托宿，戏题

On the way to Wanhai in rain, we passed by “Free Wandering Temple,” so we lodged there, and I wrote this poem for fun.

逍遙近道邊，The Free Wandering Temple is on the roadside,  
憩息慰怠憊。So we rest in it to recover from exhaustion and distress.  
晴暉時晦明，The sky switches between cloudiness and clearness,  
諺語諧訛論。And the local dialect mixes with our official language.  
草萊荒蒙蘢，Desolate grass is all over the yard,  
室屋壅塵坌。And the rooms are covered with dust.  
仆僮伺偏側，Servants are busy round in this cramped space,<sup>212</sup>  
涇渭清浊混。And on the ground clear water and muddy water merge.<sup>213</sup>

The common classifier in each line helps visualize the idea expressed in that line: line 1: journey; line 2: feelings; line 3: weather; line 4: speech; line 5: yard surroundings; line 6: interior; line 7: people; line 8: waters on ground. Line 8 may suggest that in this small temple, different elements - languages, people, changing weather, and moods of the poet - are mixed together.

---

<sup>211</sup> See Gai 2002: 12.

<sup>212</sup> “偏(biān)側” means a cramped space. In medieval sound, the word is also a rhyming doublet. Servants may refer to those who accompany the poet official in the journey.

<sup>213</sup> Jing is a clear river that flows into the muddy Wei River, which is the largest branch of the Yellow River. At the meeting place of Jing and Wei there is a clear division between the clear and muddy waters, and this is base of the idiom “泾渭分明” – Jing and Wei are clearly different.

The common-classifier technique can also be found in antithetic couplets. For example, the following is a current poetic line posted on a web page that is waiting for a matching line:<sup>214</sup>

涓涓溪流，浅浅深深澎湃澎湃江海。

The trickling creek grows from shallow to deep, and surges into a great river and enters the sea.

The common classifier in this line makes the impression of a long river. The following couplet was often seen on boats in traditional China:

江河湖海清波浪，On the clear waves of rivers, lakes and oceans,  
通达逍遥远近遊。I can tour freely everywhere.

This couplet cleverly combines the water classifier and the boat classifier together to indicate the water-boat relationship. Common-classifier lines are also seen in mainstream poems. The following is a common-classifier line from a poem of the Tang poet Yuan Zhen (元稹):<sup>215</sup>

清冷淺漫流 Clear cold shallow water flows at ease.

The poems discussed in this chapter all involve the image of characters and character elements, and thus can all be classified into the character splitting-reassembling family, with the distinguishing feature of manipulating materials together with the linguistic signs.

In an alphabetic script, it is also possible to split and reassemble a word. For example, we may make a double meaning statement based on the word “seagull”: “Seagulls are gulls by the sea,” which is similar to the Chinese statement “鸿是江边鸟” (A wild goose is a riverside bird). It is also possible to play a “super-witty” game in English. For

---

<sup>214</sup> Anonymous, see [http://www2.beareyes.com.cn/bbs1/h/2004/02/24\\_156945.htm](http://www2.beareyes.com.cn/bbs1/h/2004/02/24_156945.htm)

<sup>215</sup> QTS 3775 and 4635.

example, we could write the word “river” in a long shape to suggest the sense of “long river,” or read the word “Hold” as “old bridge across a river,” because Hold = H + old, and “H” looks like a bridge over a river (with the two vertical lines representing river banks and the horizontal line a bridge), or by interpreting “hold” as “old chair,” because hold = h+old, and “h” looks like a chair. Another example is Lu Xun’s use of “Q” in his story 阿 Q 正传, which has been interpreted by some people to be the head with a queue of a Qing dynasty Chinese. However, it is not the English convention to view the word “Hold” as being composed of “H” and “old,” and “H” and “OLD” are not equivalent to Chinese classifiers. Due to this and many other reasons, it is much less possible to manipulate the English script as materials than in Chinese.

## Chapter Five Poems of Unusual Textual Formation

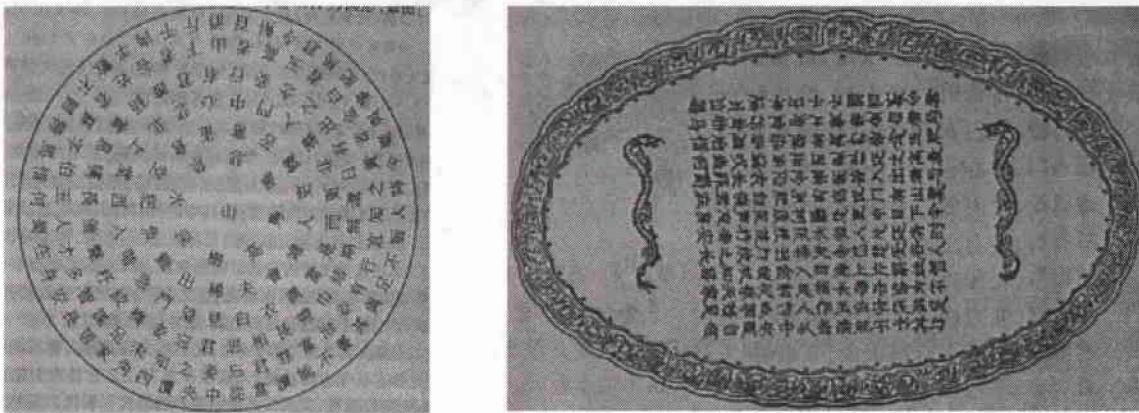
### I. Historical Development of Poems of Unusual Textual Formation

Poems with unusual textual formation have already appeared in previous discussions. We see this in the circular palindrome, multiple-way palindrome and the cross palindrome in Chapter One; the whirl text seal poem and the circular hidden-head poem of Bai Juyi in Chapter Four. This section will introduce the more influential poems of this type as they developed.

As mentioned in Chapter One, the Tray Poem (盘中诗) in the Latter Han dynasty (25-220 C. E.) is the earliest extant poem with an unusual textual formation. The normal text of the poem is first recorded in Xu Ling's (徐陵 507- 583) *Songs from the Jade Terrace* (玉台新咏), and the earliest circular arrangement of the poem (below left) is in *Classified Palindromes*.<sup>216</sup> In 1961, Guo Moruo (郭沫若) argued that since the poem itself mentions that it should be “read from the center to the four corners,” the formation should be square rather than circular, and he thus presented a square formation.

---

<sup>216</sup> For the circular formation, see Sang 1987: 804. Also see Yan 2001: 182. The text here is based on the *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, See Xu 1985: 406-407. This poem dates to the latter Han or the early Jin (晋), and it is believed to have been written by a wife to her husband who was assigned to work in a distant place.



Guo's formation is certainly more reasonable (above, right).<sup>217</sup> In both arrangements, the reader needs to turn the "tray" around in order to read the poem. When reading the circular formation, one needs to turn the tray counter-clockwise and clockwise alternatively, while when reading the square formation, one only needs to turn the tray clockwise (notice some characters in the square formation are rotated). The text of the poem is:

山树高, 鸟鸣悲, Mountain trees are tall, bird cries are sad.  
 泉水深, 鲤鱼肥. The fountain water is deep, and carps are fat.  
 空仓雀, 常苦饥, Birds in the empty storehouse often suffer from hunger,  
 吏人妇, 会夫稀. An official's wife rarely gets a chance to see her husband.  
 出门望, 见白衣, I go out of the door to look and see a man dressed in white,  
 谓当是, 而更非. I thought he was my husband, but he actually is not.  
 还入门, 中心悲, I step into the house again with grief in heart,  
 北堂上, 西入阶. I go to the north hall, and then ascend the west stairs.  
 急机绞, 杵声催, I weave at a fast pace, and the shuttle's sound is pressing,  
 长叹息, 当语谁. I sigh on and one, but who will hear me?  
 君有行, 妾念之; You travel away, I miss you,  
 出有日, 还无期. You have a date to leave, but no date to return.  
 结巾带, 长相思, I tied up a ribbon for you to remember my endless yearning,  
 君忘妾, 未知之. But maybe you already forgot me, who knows.  
 妾忘君, 罪当治. If I forget you, I will deserve punishment,  
 妾有行, 宜知之: If I travel away, I always know:

<sup>217</sup> Yan points out that Guo's article on this issue appeared in the *Bright Daily* (光明日报) on March 24, 1961. See Yan 2001: 183.

黃者金, 白者玉, What's yellow is gold, and what's white is jade,  
高者山, 下者谷. What's tall is the mountain, what's low is the valley.  
姓者苏, 字伯玉, His surname is Su, and his given name Boyu,  
人才多, 智谋足. He is talented, wise, and intelligent.  
家居长安身在蜀, His family is in Chang'an but he is in Sichuan,  
何惜马蹄归不数. Why does he treasure his horse's feet so much instead of returning?  
羊肉千斤酒百斛, [If you come home] there will be plenty of lamb and wine for you,  
令君马肥麦与粟. And wheat and grain to fatten your horse.  
今之人, 智不足; Today's people are not smart;  
与其书, 不能读, Give them a letter, they will be unable to read -  
当从中央周四角. It should be read from the center to the four corners.

Because the poem was collected in *Classified Palindromes*, it is often called a palindrome, but actually only a few phrases like “鸟鸣悲,” “泉水深,” “人才多” can be read regressively, and these lines are most likely accidental palindromes. What Sang Shichang called *huiwen* (迴文) does not always mean “palindrome,” because *hui* (迴) also means to move in a circular manner, as in the word *huixuan* (迴旋, to whirl). Thus the Tray Poem is called a *huiwen* mostly likely because the text is arranged in a whirl. This poem is the primitive form of pictorial poems because its pictorial form has nothing to do with the internal structure of the poem, that is, any poem can be arranged in this form. The poem was very likely to have been engraved in a wooden tray,<sup>218</sup> as engraving texts on utensils for decoration was an old tradition. For example, *Classified Palindromes* mentions that Cao Zhi (曹植 192-232) wrote a “wine tray inscription poem” (酒盘铭).

---

<sup>218</sup> The text here is based on *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, see Xu 1985: 406-407. The character “盘” means either a porcelain dish or a wooden tray (usually of wood) that is used for carrying smaller dishes. The Tray Poem is more likely to have been engraved on a wooden tray rather than written on a porcelain dish.

The Star Formation Poem (*xuanjitu shi*璇玑图诗) was the first and the most influential poem of unusual textual formation that involves structural manipulation. It was created by a Jin dynasty (晋 265-420 C. E.) woman named Su Hui (苏惠). The poem is in a square formation, with twenty-nine characters in each row and column. The version in *Classified Palindromes* has 841 characters, as shown below.

琴清流楚激弦商秦曲发声悲摧藏音和咏思惟空堂心忧增慕怀惨伤  
 芳廊东步阶西游王恣淑窈窕伯邵南周风兴自后妃荒经离所怀叹嗟  
 兰休桃林阴翳桑怀归思广河女卫郑楚樊厉节中闱淫遐旷路伤中情  
 调翔飞燕巢双鸠土迦透路遐志咏歌长叹不能奋飞妄清帏房君朗  
 茂流泉情水激扬卷顾其人硕兴齐商双发歌我衰衣想客明葩光纷为  
 熙长君思悲好仇旧蕤葳粲翠荣曜流华观治容为谁追感所笃明  
 阳愁叹发容摧伤乡悲情我感伤情徵多英曜感珠谁终志庭闹  
 春方殊离仁君荣身苦惟艰生患多殷忧缠情将如何钦苍穹誓  
 墙禽心浜均深身加怀忧是婴藻文繁虎龙宁孜伤形未在  
 面伯改汉物日我兼思何漫漫荣曜华凋旗孜侧君想劳形时  
 殊意感在者之品润乎是苦艰是丁丽壮观饰容绣衣梦仁颜  
 故尼飘施愆殃少章时柔诗端无终始诗贤丧物识别渐至  
 遗亲飘生思衍少精微盛翳风比平始璇情别行调松愆居  
 新旧闻离天罪辜神恨昭兴作苏心玑显行微察远祸在  
 霜废远微地积何幽遐微恨业孟鹿理怨土容是旧行微  
 冰故离隔德怨因齐洁子我木平根尝远悼宣鸣辞感年衰  
 齐君殊乔贵其备远叹永感悲怀岁殊浮华翳曜潜阳林移  
 志惟同谁均难苦离凤知我者谁世异浮沉英西光蒙疑危  
 清新衾阴匀寻辛麟沙流颓逝异浮华翳曜潜阳林移  
 纯贞志一专所当神龙驰若有然倏逝惟日不何何激与  
 望微精感通明神龙驰若有然倏逝惟日不何何激与  
 四谁云浮寄身轻飞昭亏不盈无倏必盛志将与谁  
 思辉光饬粲殊文德离忠体一违心意丽饰身通神祇推  
 想群离散妾孤遗怀仪容仰俯荣华丽志节上通神祇推  
 怀悲哀声殊乖分圣赀何情忧感惟哀志节上通神祇推  
 所春伤应翔雁归皇辞成者作体不遗葑菲采者无差生  
 亲刚柔有女为贱人房幽处已悯微身长路悲旷感生民  
 梁山殊塞隔河津

There are two explanations for the creation of this poem: one is that Su Hui's husband went away with another woman, and the other is her husband was exiled to a distant

place.<sup>219</sup> In either case, the poem expresses the grief of separation. The word *xuanji* (璇玑) first appears in the Yaodian (尧典) Chapter One in the *Book of Documents* (尚书), which refers to the first four stars in the Big Dipper. The Song dynasty painter Li Gonglin (李公麟) argued that since *xuanji* means the motion of the stars in the sky, in the poem it implies a particular way of reading the poem – from the center to the edge, and from one side to the other.<sup>220</sup> Though *xuanji* can mean “sky signs” (天象), its use in the title of this poem is not to suggest the direction in which the poem is read, but rather to suggest that the ways to read it are as “numerous” as stars. *Xuanji* is the homophone of “玄机,” “hidden message,” and it can also be related to the neo-Daoism metaphysics (*xuanxue* 玄学), which emerged in the poetess’s age.

The character “心” (heart) in the center of the text is likely to suggest “this poem represents my heart.” The eight characters surrounding 心 comprise the signature of the author: “The *Xuanjiu* Poem, by Su, a native of Shiping” (始平苏氏璇玑图诗).<sup>221</sup> Yan’s book also provides an 840-character version of the poem hand copied by the Song dynasty poetess Zhu Shuzhen (朱淑贞 fl. 1095-1131), which does not have 心 in the center<sup>222</sup> - 心 in the center may have been purposefully omitted to suggest the sense that “my heart is broken.” According to the preface attributed to the Tang Empress Wu Zetian

<sup>219</sup> The first explanation is seen in Fang Xuanling’s (房玄龄 578-648) *Biographies of Outstanding Women* in the *Book of Jin* (晋书 烈女传 窦滔妻苏氏传). The second explanation is seen in a preface to the poem attributed to the Tang Empress Wu Zetian in *Classified Palindromes* (回文类聚), see Sang 1987: 796.

<sup>220</sup> For more information on the meaning of *xuanji*, see Yan 2001: 190.

<sup>221</sup> See Fang Xuanling’s biography on Su Hui says “Dou Tao’s wife Su is a native of Shiping” (窦滔妻苏氏，始平人也).

<sup>222</sup> Yan 2001: 186-187.

(武则天), the poem was originally on a piece of square silk cloth designed with silk of different colors, but the version was lost later.

The following is a poem based on reading from left to right, the first row in the picture:

琴清流楚激弦商, On the instrument, clear-flowing music strikes the strings,  
秦曲发声悲摧藏. The Music of the Qin Kingdom is sad and can destroy one's heart.  
音和咏思惟空堂, The sound matches my reciting and thinking in the empty hall,  
心忧增慕怀惨伤. My heart worries about the increasing longing and is full of grief.

For most people, the most striking feature of the poem is the large number of poems that can be found within it. The preface in Kang Wanmin's book says that a Buddhist monk Qi Zong (启宗), whose identity is unknown, found 3,752 poems from the text, and Kang Wanmin increased the number to 7,958. Yan Huazhi points out that in 1996, Li Wei (李蔚) divided the text with computer technology and increased the poem number to 14,005.<sup>223</sup> However, most of the discovered poems are “only concerned about rhyme and grammar, without worrying about the meaning” (但求协韵成句, 不问文意之如何).<sup>224</sup> The significance of this poem lies in the fact that it is the first experiment with multiple textual structures, and it has great influence over the later development of this style. From Tang on, it was alluded to constantly in poetry.

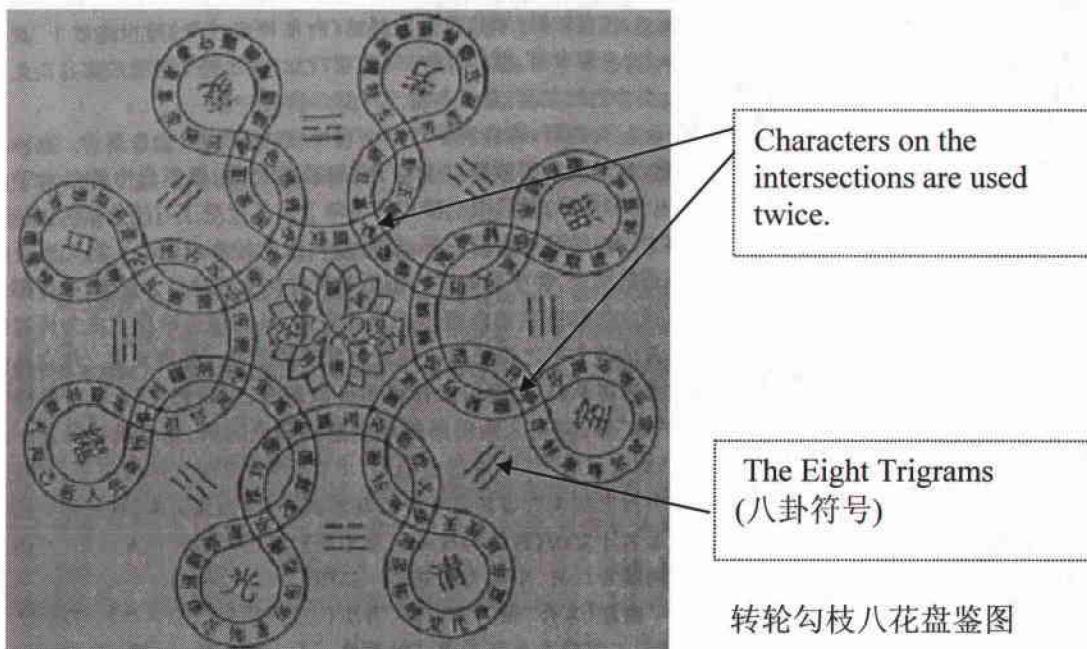
The following is a Tang poem called “Spinning Wheel Linked Branch Eight-Flower Mirror Back Decoration” (转轮勾枝八花盘鉴图, hereafter the Mirror Poem). *Classified*

---

<sup>223</sup> Yan 2001 189.

<sup>224</sup> From the same preface in Kang's book, see Kang 1972: 3b

*Palindromes* has a preface to this poem attributed to the famous Tang poet Wang Bo (王勃 650-675), which says it was designed by a woman.<sup>225</sup> See the image below:



This picture contains three parts: the eight characters in the flower-shaped design in the center: “清, 波, 皎, 雪, 澄, 河, 晓, 月,” the curving and knotted “belt” which has 176 characters, and the eight larger characters separately encircled by the “belt”: “清, 室, 照, 芳, 菱, 日, 耀, 光.” Each part is a circular text. The characters in each circle form a hidden-head four-syllable palindrome poem (藏头回文), that is, one can start reading with any character on the circle and get a four-syllable poem.<sup>226</sup> Of course, the “knotted

<sup>225</sup> Sang 1987: 793. The picture is also found in *Sancai Tuhui* (三才图会). See *Xuxiu Siku Quanshu* (续修四库全书 vol. 1235: 510). Yan also mentions this poem in his book, see Yan 2001: 321-322. Yan points out that “盘鉴” in the title is a decorative mirror on a belt buckle.

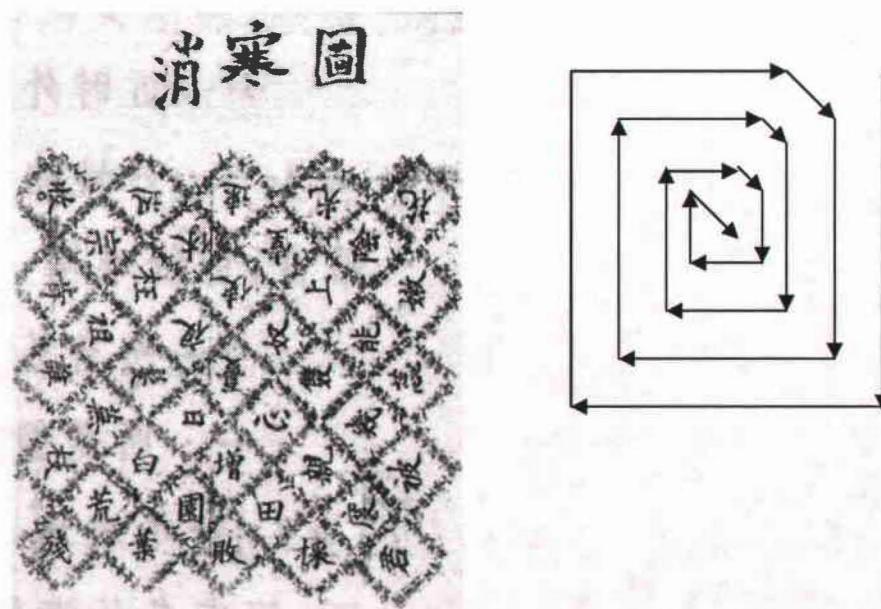
<sup>226</sup> Hidden-head palindrome is also called character-by-character palindrome (字字回文), see Section I in Chapter One.

“belt” is the largest circle, on which there are 176 characters, forming a long four-syllable poem that allows one to read from any character. See the following six lines:

池清透影, The pool is so clear that shadows fall through it.  
羽翠含鲜. The feathers [of birds] are light green with freshness.  
尊卑尔敬, Respect both the noble and the humble,  
志节斯全. Remain integrated in both commitment and morality.  
眉分翠柳, Eyebrows are clearly divided like two green willow leaves,  
鬓约轻蝉. Hair on temples are as light as the wings of a cicada.

The meaning of these lines is related to the symbolic mirror: it reflects beautiful images such as the pool and the birds, it helps one to beautify one's brows and hair, and it also reflects one's moral quality.

The following poem is entitled “Picture for Keeping out the Cold” (消寒图). The right illustration indicates the reading direction.<sup>227</sup>



The picture contains big characters in the rhombi and the characters that form the borders. Starting with 花 on the upper right corner by adding “娇” before “花,” the forty-

<sup>227</sup>This poem is a private letter fund in the Ming and Qing Miscellaneous Records in the Huizhou area of Anhui Province (徽州文书). See Wang 2002: 324-325.

two big characters (including “娇,” which is probably among the small characters on the border) form the following poem:

娇花嫩蕊被君采, The lovely flower and fresh stamen was plucked by you,  
败叶残枝谁肯收. Now it's withering and who would want it?  
迅速光阴能几度, Time is flying away and how much is remaining?  
田园荒芜祖宗休. Our land is wasted and our ancestors forgotten.  
堂上双亲增白发, Our parents' hair is graying,  
枉使奴心日夜忧. I can only worry day and night in vain.

The small-character text on the borders is the wife's narrative, which explains that her husband has been doing business away from home for six years. At the end of the narrative there is another poem:

寒衾夜夜孤眠枕, The quilt is cold, and every night I sleep alone with the pillow,  
面瘦朝朝懒画眉. My face is thin and I don't bother to make up in the morning.  
料想贤夫贪乐境, I think my decent husband is enjoying a happy land,  
不思少妇空守闺. Not thinking of his young wife waiting in the empty room.  
面梁桥上肝肠断, My heart is broken on the Mianliang Bridge,  
诗绚相期不见归. And the poems I sent are never answered.  
日日阶前奴自望, Every day I look in front of the gate stairs,  
朝朝踏得枯草萎. And the grass I walk on every morning is withered.  
飞禽也要回乡转, Even the flying birds return to their original place,  
贤夫何不早思归. Why is my decent husband not thinking of coming back?  
书封到日莫思想, When you receive this letter, don't hesitate,  
百味无心贪欲尝. And don't be attracted by the delicious things where you are.  
我自青春何足计, It doesn't matter that my young years are wasted,  
双亲养育顿成灰. But don't forget the parents who raised you.  
独伴孤灯两泪流, The lonely lamp is accompanying my tears,  
几番春去几番秋. How many springs and autumns have passed by?

Wang Zhenzhong (王振中) points out that the graphic design of this poem resembles a game called “Nine Linked-Rings” (九连环) played by girls, which involves complicated rings, thus the image of this poem expresses the poetess' complicated

feelings.<sup>228</sup> However, the text does not mention anything about the “Nine Linked-Rings” game. This poem is an imitation of two poems of similar design found in *Classified Palindromes*,<sup>229</sup> except that the poem here involves character rotation. Since the text mentions “田园荒芜祖宗休” (Our land is wasted and ancestors forgotten), the rotated characters may represent the crops growing in bad shape in the field (东倒西歪 – leaning this way that that way). The small characters that form the border remind the reader of the small ridges that divide the field; furthermore, they look like grass growing on the ridges, which is another sign of poor cultivation.

The following is a “quilt poem” with a similar theme.

老	人	今	日	路	遥	妻	夫	抛	难	地	同	来	醒	
美	知	催	远	受	寡	山	离	妇	天	老	不	日	睡	
谁	貌	情	往	配	孤	去	衣	问	恩	见	年	枕	月	
老	难	青	枝	暑	时	凄	但	寒	泪	深	同	婆	人	
尽	偕	烛	春	嘱	来	扉	鸿	淋	少	思	久	生	公	
冷	望	成	吩咐	永	巢	寒	滴	雁	相	上	何	别	去	
早	落	真	发	入	不	夜	迟	里	传	故	身	伴	离	
会	情	空	对	结	鸟	齐	梦	归	各	书	同	因	鸳	
语	期	对	房	双	初	违	更	东	亦	夫	因	鸯	又	
焉	雀	定	双	懒	相	当	西	想	与	信	枕	未	米	
阳	料	寻	女	久	画	牛	飞	想	家	上	带	共	便	
宿	旧	如	今	织	郎	眉	本	双	泪	中	柴	鸽	飞	

<sup>228</sup> Yan 2001: 82-84.

<sup>229</sup> Both poems in *Classified Palindromes* are entitled “Imitation of the Star Formation Silk Picture” (拟织锦图). See Sang 1987: 809.

Liu Yulin's book indicates that the original text was embroidered on a quilt, which was to be sent from the poetess to her distant husband.<sup>230</sup> The poem contains fourteen columns and twelve rows, and it is read by starting with the character “夫” (husband), then going diagonally to the right: “夫妇恩深久别离;” then it starts with the character “鸳” under “离” and heads diagonally to the left, “bouncing” up when it reaches the border of the “quilt”: “鸳鸯枕上泪双飞.” In this way, the poem eventually ends with the character “妻” (wife):

夫妇恩深久别离, We, loving husband and wife, have been separated for so long,  
鸳鸯枕上泪双飞. On the double-duck pillow my tears double-flow.  
当初结发成偕老, When we got married we were to grow old together,  
谁知今日受孤凄. Who would know that today I suffer in loneliness.  
鸿雁传书因未便, It is not easy to have the migrating geese pass a letter to you,  
飞鸽带信亦归迟. And it is too late to have the pigeons bring a message.  
寒来暑往催人老, Winters and summers come and go, making people old,  
美貌青春永不齐. My beauty and youth will never return.  
更想家中柴共米, While I am worrying about food for the family,  
又因身上少寒衣. I realize that I also need winter clothes.  
山遥路远情难尽, The mountainous road is long, and my feelings are endless,  
冷落空房懒画眉. Left behind in this empty room, I don't bother to paint my brows.  
本想与夫同伴去, I had hoped to go with you,  
公婆年老难抛离. But our parents were old and hard to leave behind.  
去时嘱咐真情语, When you were leaving, I reminded you of my true love,  
焉料如今久相违. But I didn't know that you would be gone for so long.  
梦里相思同枕睡, In dreams I often think of you, sleeping with you on the same pillow,  
醒来不见泪淋漓. But when I wake up and do not see you, my tears flow.  
夜鸟双双寻旧宿, At night, paired birds look for their old nesting place,  
阳雀对对入巢扉. During the day, birds enter their nests in pairs.  
但问天地同日月, I just want to ask the sky, earth, sun and moon:  
人生何故各东西. Why should people be separated in life?  
牛郎织女定期会, Even the Herdboy and the Weaving Girl meet regularly,  
早望烛枝配寡妻. I hope you come soon to accompany your “forsaken” wife.

<sup>230</sup> Liu 1996: 219-221. Liu did not indicate where the poem was originally found, but its style is similar to the “Keeping out Cold Picture,” so it is likely to be another Ming or Qing dynasty poem.

In the original text, arranging characters “夫” (husband) and “妻” (wife) side by side in the middle of the upper side presents an image of the husband and wife staying together, or even lying side by side under the quilt, which is the wife's dream when she is under the quilt. On the other hand, when the poem is printed in a standard layout, the character “夫” is in the top-left corner, and the character “妻” is in the bottom-right corner, creating the impression that the husband and wife are far away from each other, which is the wife's reality when she leaves the quilt in the morning. The intricate method for reading the quilt text suggests that it is difficult for the wife to find her husband - it is as if she was searching for him in a maze.

In fact, the unusual textual formations of the above five pictorial poems all employ “mazes” of sorts to highlight the women's entangled feelings – the difficulty in finding their husbands and related anxieties. “堂上双亲增白发” (Our parents' hair is graying), “双亲养育顿成灰” (But don't forget the parents who raised you), “本想与夫同伴去, 公婆年老难抛离” (I had hoped to go with you, But our parents were old and hard to leave behind) express the concern of serving parents-in-laws; 田园荒芜祖宗休 (Our land is wasted and our ancestors forgotten), “更想家中柴和米, 又因身上少寒衣” (While I am worrying about food for the family, I realize that I also need winter clothes) indicate economic hardship. The following lines imply sexual frustration 空仓雀, 常苦饥 (Birds in the empty storehouse often suffer from hunger), “寒衾夜夜孤眠枕” (Every night I sleep alone with the pillow), “鸳鸯枕上泪双飞” (On the double-duck pillow my tears double-flow), “夜鸟双双寻旧宿, 阳雀对对入巢扉” (At night, paired birds look for their old nesting place, During the day, birds enter their nests in pairs). In traditional China, it

was very common for men to travel away from home to take civil service exams, do business, or fulfill labor or military duties, creating many separated families. For the women left at home, marriage often just made their life worse, because if not married, they would still have a chance to marry somebody else, but now they are just forsaken wives (notice in the end of the Quilt poem the poetess refers to herself as “寡妻” – forsaken wife).

Women were more likely to design this kind of poem, because embroidering, sewing, and weaving were women's daily work. The above wives impress the intended readers (the husbands) with how much time and labor they spent in creating these poems; the “husbandless” time has been long enough to create these poems. The “Star Formation Poem” is said to have been woven with silk of different colors, and to engrave a poem in a tray or embroider one on a quilt were probably just as time-consuming. The materials are also meaningful: the tray may suggest “don't forget me when you eat,” and the quilt suggests “don't forget me when you sleep.”

## II. Wan Shu (万树) and His Pictorial Poem (图形诗) Anthology Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk (璇玑碎锦 )

According to *The Grand Dictionary of Chinese Literature* (中国文学大辞典),<sup>231</sup> Wan Shu (1630?-1688) was a native of Yixing (宜兴) in Jiangsu Province. He was styled (字) Red Friend (红友) and Flower Farmer (花农), and was also nicknamed (号)

---

<sup>231</sup>The dictionary here refers to the one published by Shanghai Dictionary Press and the one jointly published by Taiwan Hundred River (百川) Press with Tianjin People's Press. They both have an introduction to Wan Shu, with slight differences. The information in this dictionary about Wan Shu is based on *Records of the Region Yixing in the Jiaqing Reign* (嘉庆宜兴旧志) and the preface of *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk*.

Mountain Man (山翁) and Mountain Farmer (山农). Additionally, he was a nephew of the well-known late Ming official and dramatist Wu Bing (吴炳 1595-1648). Influenced by his uncle, Wan also wrote some plays. His writings include four poetry anthologies, one poetry commentary, and several plays.<sup>232</sup> Wan Shu's best-known book is *Regulations of Ci Poetry* (词律). Surprisingly, his *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk*, a unique contribution to the history of Chinese poetry, is largely overlooked.

Background information about *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk* is found in a preface written by Wan Shu's close friend, Honglun (宏伦, who also referred to himself as the "Clinging Bonze" – 泥絮道人).<sup>233</sup> The preface says that when Wan Shu first showed his one hundred pictorial poems to some influential scholars in his hometown, everybody was greatly surprised and impressed:

装潢精致, 纵横联络者, 阅者不能读, 读亦不能尽, 唯有啧啧健羨而已。

The poems were finely designed and beautifully decorated. The characters in the textual formations were linked to each other in various directions, and the readers could hardly read; and even if they could, they were unable to finish all the possibilities, and they could only exclaim with admiration.

But one day, when Wan Shu opened his box, the poems were all missing. Luckily there were fifty copied ones kept in Honglun's home, so Wan Shu reproduced the lost poems, based on his earlier drafts. Then Wan Shu's wife died, and in his despair and poverty, he moved to Guangdong Province, where, under the patron of the Guangduang Mayor, he wrote several plays. Several years later, when Wan Shu fell ill, Honglun accompanied him on the return to his hometown, Wan Shu died on the way. Later, most

---

<sup>232</sup> The poetry anthologies are: *Duixuyuan Ji* (堆絮园集), *Huanong Ji* (花浓集), *Xiangdan Ji* (香胆集), and *Xuanji Suijin* (璇玑碎锦). Of these only the last two are extant. The three extant plays are collectively called *Yong Shuangyan Sanzhong Qu* (拥双艳三种曲). The poetry commentary book is *Cilü* (词律).

<sup>233</sup> The preface is in Wan 1989: 729-730.

of the fifty copied poems Honglun had were taken away by a monk, but Honglun managed to gather sixty poems in total from Wan Shu's friends. He gave them to a friend named Xu Ruohui (徐若会) to copy, but when the copying was done, a certain Chen Cishan (陈次山) borrowed the copies and never returned them, making the excuse that they were lost in an inn in Chang'an. Xu Ruohui, who had the original set, was killed by bandits when traveling in mountains alone. By then Honglun thought the poems had been lost forever. However, many years later Honglun's grandson found the sixty original poems in Xu Ruohui's home. Thrilled, Honglun sent these sixty pictures to a printing house.

The unfortunate fate of *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk* resembles that of the manuscripts of Cao Xueqin's (曹雪芹 1717-1763) novel *Dream of the Red Chamber* (红楼梦). In fact, with the ingenious designs of these poems, *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk*'s position in Chinese MFP is equivalent to *Dream of the Red Chamber*'s position in Chinese fiction – both were unmatched by those before and after them. It is also unfortunate that since its printing, the book has not caught the attention of any major literary commentators. One may say that this may be because of the fact that MFP has not received enough attention in general (as explained in the introduction), yet at least MFP has been recognized as an important poetic genre. For example, the “Tray Poem” and the “Star Formation Poem” have been recognized as important poems by poetry scholars, and are mentioned in some modern books on poetry history. *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk* has never been printed independently in mainland China or Taiwan

since 1888,<sup>234</sup> and none of the anthologies of MFP published in the past two decades that I have seen include any poems from Wan Shu's anthology. Yan Huazhi's book (2001) is the first to introduce Wan Shu and several of his poems, but Yan fails to give adequate recognition. Since many of the techniques Wan Shu used in designing his pictorial poems are unique, and these poems represent one of the most sophisticated uses of the Chinese character system for linguistic and graphic effect, this section will be dedicated specially to the *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk*. For the convenience of discussion, selected poems will be put into four categories. These categories are rough classifications according to graphic design technique, since most of the poems are mixture of different techniques.

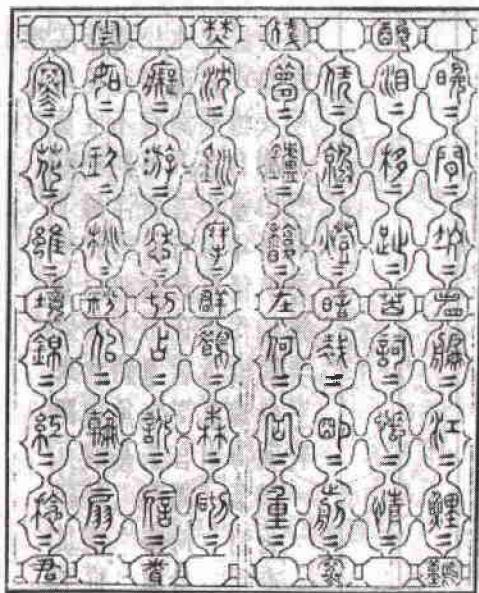
### 1. Poems with Character Slitting-Reassembling Techniques (离合类图形诗)

Each poem in Wan Shu's anthology has two titles, one for the picture and one for the poem. There is also a brief reading instruction for how to read the pictorial text. The following poem's picture title is “Window with Layers of Linked Curtains” (重重结绮窗), and its poem title is “Boudoir Sentiments” (闺恨).<sup>235</sup> The picture below (left) is the original picture, in which the characters in the seal script (篆书) are carved on a window

<sup>234</sup> In my online research, I found that only Beijing University's library, the China National Library, and the Harvard-Yenching Library have them. The earliest edition of the book was printed by the Baixiangtang (柏香堂) in 1741; in 1876 Shikaitang (世楷堂) printed an edition that contains thirty-four pictures. In 1888 Sijingzhai (似静斋) printed the sixty-picture edition. In 1974, Hong Kong published a book called *Xuanji Sujin Forty-Eight Pictures* (璇玑碎锦四十八图), the only modern independent printing of *Xuanjisujin* since 1888, but this is a coarsely and incompletely printed book not widely known. *Congshu Jicheng Xubian* (丛书集成续编, containing 280 volumes in all), published in Taiwan in 1989, contains the thirty-four picture version based on Shikaitang's edition. *Siku Quanshu Cunmu Congshu* (四库全书存目丛书, containing 1200 volumes in all), published in China in 1997, contains the minimized Baixiangtang edition.

<sup>235</sup> The term “结绮窗” (Window of linked Curtains) in the title alludes to the line “交疏结绮窗” in the poem “There is a Tall House in the Northwest” (西北有高楼), one of the Nineteen Ancient Songs. See *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, vol. 1 (Xu 1985: 17).

as a decoration. The text on the right is the reprinting. The two tables, separated by the vertical space, represent the two halves of the window.



	雲		焚
褰	如	癡	沉
花	攷	游	釧
雖	桃	愁	摩
境	粉	切	群
錦	似	占	鵠
紅	輪	訛	森
稔	扇	信	砌
君		聞	

殘		酸	
夢	凭	泪	晚
鑪	风	移	閒
馥	燈	趾	竚
在	暗	苦	看
何	裁	詞	騙
岳	明	恨	江
重	剪	情	鯉
君	寒		灘

晚日閑門竚立看, In the end of the day I stand by the door and look,  
 艇舟江水鯉魚灘. What I see are small boats, river water, and the Carp Beach.  
 心情長悵言詞苦, My feelings have long been down and my words are bitter,  
 足趾多移目淚酸. My feet move too much and my tears grow sour.  
 凭几臨風灯火暗, When I lean on the tea table, cool wind darkens the lamp light,  
 裁衣明月剪刀寒. When I tailor clothes under the moon, the scissors are cold.  
 千重山岳人何在, Thousands of mountains – where is he?  
 香馥金鑪夕夢殘. My evening dream fades away by the fragrant gold incense burner.

石砌林森鳥鵠群, In front of the stone stairs, trees are dense and birds gather,  
 手摩金釧水沉焚. Hands rub the gold bracelets, and aloes wood incense burns.  
 癡疑游子愁心切, Suspicious of the wanderer, I am intensely worried,  
 占卜訛言信口聞. The fortunetellers' words and rumors fill my ears:  
 羽扇車輪人似粉, [You must be among] feather fans, carriage wheels, and pink women,  
 木桃玉攷女如云. Peach and jade colored women must be surrounding you like clouds.  
 賽衣花艸雖佳境, Being among fancy clothes, flowers and grass must be nice.<sup>236</sup>  
 錦帛紅絲稔念君.<sup>237</sup> [But don't forget] The person in common red clothes is waiting for  
 you year after year.

<sup>236</sup> Fancy clothes, flowers, and grass (*qianyi huacao* 賽衣花艸), as well as the jade like women in the line before, refer to entertaining women, such as courtesans.

<sup>237</sup> “紅絲 (sī)” is the same as “紅絲” – red silk threads or clothes, here referring to the female speaker.

“稔” (rén) means crops. Zhang Zilie's book *Zhengzitong* (正字通) says “Ancient people call a year a *ren*,

In the picture, characters with the small character “二” below them should be read as a two-character phrase.<sup>238</sup> For example, “晚” should be read as “晚日,” and “閑” should be read as “閑門,” etc. In this way, the first column of the window (on the right side) is read as the following two lines: “晚日閑門竚立看, 艘舟江水鯉魚灘.” The reading instruction calls this “half-character borrowing reading” (半字借读), which is similar to the half-character thimble technique (半字顶针). We can perhaps also call them “divisible characters” or “monographic doublets,” because each character represents a two-character word. This saves the carpenter much labor in carving.

The character 風 in the fifth line in the first poem is composed of “风” and “京” – it is not a real character (in the dictionary sense). Based on this context, it should be a substitute for the character “涼” (cool). We can assume that because the poet needed such a character to make a monograph doublet, he combined “风” and “京” to create this character. Created characters are also seen in some super-witty poems (see picture 2 in the super-witty poem section in Chapter Four).<sup>239</sup>

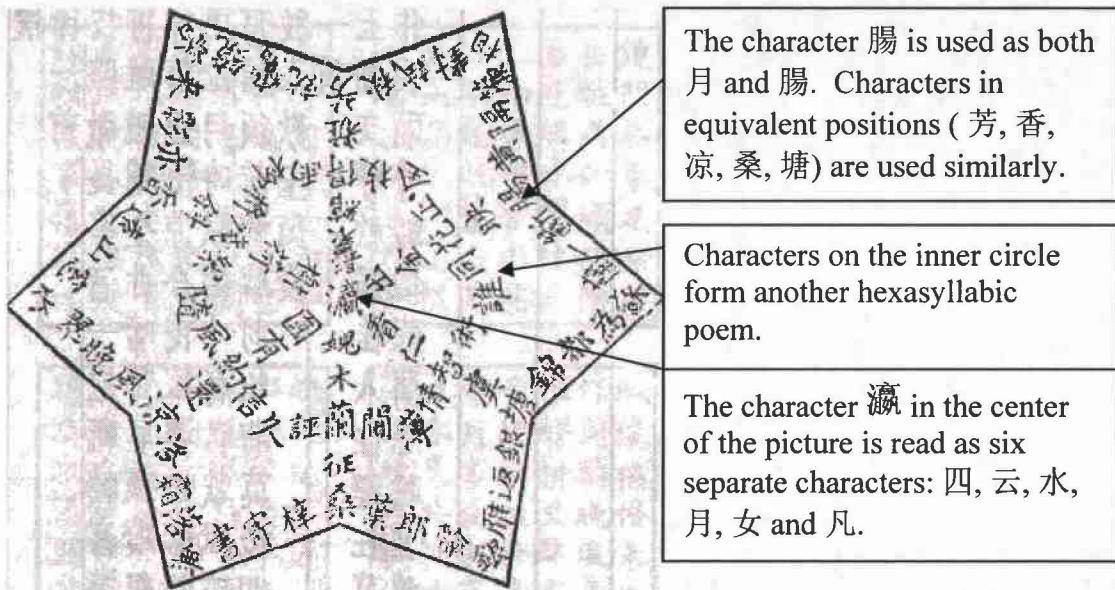
The following poem’s picture title is “Sharing Heart Cape-Jasmine Flower” (同心栀子), and the poem title is “Autumn Boudoir Recitation” (秋闺吟):

---

because crops ripen once a year” (古人谓一年为一稔, 取谷一熟也). See Zhang 1996.

<sup>238</sup> The use of a small “二” in this manner is a common practice in traditional China for abbreviating repeated characters. E. g., “日二湖山日二春” is the short form of “日日湖山日日春” (The lakes and mountains are in spring everyday). See Shi 1992: 1205. The shortening is for the convenience of seal inscription - to avoid engraving the same character twice. In the window poem here, “二” is used slightly differently: it means the character and an element of it form a word.

<sup>239</sup> Maybe we could call this “creative spelling.” The seal text of “唯吾知足” discussed in Chapter Four is also an example. Liu Zhiji (1998) points out that creative spelling is still occasionally seen today as decorative images.



The picture is composed of a center “瀛” (a created character), six rhombus-shaped “petals,” and two circles – the outer circle in the shape of a cape jasmine (white-edged morning glory), and the inner hexagon. The character “瀛” in the center of the picture is read as six separate characters: “四,” “云,” “水,” “月,” “女,” “凡.” These characters and the characters that form the rhombus-shaped petals make up the following poem (排律):

四出金花映月黄, Golden flowers are everywhere, shining under the moon,  
隔簾相对试秋芳. Across the curtain she enjoys the beautiful fall scenery.  
云鬟绾得妆方就, Her cloud-shaped hair and her makeup are just finished,  
鸾镜簪来影亦香. And even her reflection in the mirror is fragrant.  
水榭荷残斜日远, By the waterside pavilion, lotus leaves remain, the slanting sun is far,  
山窗竹翠晚风凉. By the mountain window, bamboos are green, evening breeze is cool.  
月圆有约还京洛, He promised to return to the capital when the moon is full,  
霜落无书寄梓桑.<sup>240</sup> But now frost has fallen, he hasn't even sent a letter home.  
女媧木兰征木叶,<sup>241</sup> She is ashamed of being unable to march to Muye like Mulan,  
郎输银雁返银塘. He fails to return like the white migrating geese returning to the pond.  
凡看仁智虞唐锦, Those who have read the Star Formation Brocade,  
都为苏兰一断肠. Are all deeply sympathetic with Su Lan.<sup>242</sup>

<sup>240</sup> “梓桑” (zǐ sāng) means one's homeland. See HYDCD 4-1058A.

<sup>241</sup> “媧” (kui) is the same as “愧” (kui). In this poem, “木叶” refers to the Muye Mountain (木叶山) in today's Liaoning, where Hua Mulan is said to have fought the war. See HYDCD 4-674B.

<sup>242</sup> “仁智虞唐锦” is quoted from “Star Formation Poem,” since it contains the line “仁智怀德圣虞唐.”

The first half of the poem describes a well-dressed and well made-up lady enjoying a beautiful sunset from behind the bamboo curtain. The second half indicates that now it is frost time (fall), but her lover (husband) still has not returned. This poem can also be viewed as an assigned-character poem (嵌字诗), with six characters “四,” “云,” “水,” “月,” “女,” “凡” assigned respectively as the first characters of lines 1, 3, 5, 7, and 9 and 11. Notice the six characters located on the meeting points of the spokes and the outer circle (芳, 香, 凉, 桑, 塘, 肠), are all splittable characters. For example, the phonetic element “方” in the character “芳” (in the first line) reappears in the third line. This is also the “half-character borrowing technique,” but it is not the monograph doublet, because “芳” and “方” do not form a word.

The characters on the inner circle (starting with 花 on the upper right side) form another hexasyllabic quatrain (六言绝句):

花正全枝得雨, Flowers bloom all over the branches, and they receive the rain,  
柳将残絮随风. Willows let the remaining catkins follow the wind.  
约信久诬兰阁,<sup>243</sup> The expected letter has never arrived to the boudoir.  
薄情智术谁同. Who can match his heartlessness!

The six characters at the crossing points of the spokes and the inner hexagon (花, 得, 残, 约, 兰, 智) are shared by both poems. Since shared characters are so common in Wan Shu's designs, perhaps we can call this the “sharing-character technique” (共字法). Shared characters are already seen in the Tang “Mirror Poem” presented above (in that design, the characters on the intersections are all used twice). The monograph doublets,

---

<sup>243</sup> “苏兰” (Su Lan) in the next line refers to 苏若兰 (Su Ruolan), another name for 苏惠 (Su Hui), the author of “Star Formation Poem.”

<sup>243</sup> “阁” (kun) is the women's chamber in traditional China.

the splittable characters, and the shared characters are all necessary for using the minimum number of characters to form a poem. Thus the sharing-character technique is very important for the design of special textual formations.

## 2. Poems with Emphasis on Character, Words, and Line Images (反字, 叠字, 联边)

The following poem is a special type of identical doublet poem. The design is entitled “Repeated ‘Yang Pass’” (阳关叠), and the poem title is “To Hua Xiaoxing, Who Is Traveling to Yan – Uneven Lines of Two Hundred Characters” (送华小邢燕游, 长短句二百字):

柳柳	色色	青青	青青	满满	城城	烟烟	雨雨	春春	光光
送送	远远	行行	君君	向向	燕燕	山山	路路	前前	去去
旗旗	亭亭	芳芳	草草	青青	无无	数数	山山	翠翠	水水
潺潺	湲湲	行行	路路	难难	时时	往往	还还	多多	是是
名名	场场	客客	行行	急急	宁宁	论论	山山	水水	程程
千千	百百	人人	恋恋	芳芳	春春	不不	似似	君君	家家
有有	老老	亲亲	长长	倚倚	门门	望望	君君	马马	到到
金金	台台	下下	桂桂	花花	香香	报报	高高	堂堂	正正
届届	稀稀	龄龄	寿寿	春春	酒酒	迟迟	君君	衣衣	锦锦
倾倾	金金	斗斗	泛泛	春春	风风	人人	共共	醉醉	融融

The following is the conventional reading for the above text:

柳色青, Willows are green,  
柳色青青青满城. Willows are green, and green fills the whole town.  
满城烟雨春光送, The town's misty rain is sent by spring,  
烟雨春光送远行. Misty rain and spring see [you] off to travel far away.  
远行君向燕山路, Traveling to the distance, you head to the road in the Yan Mountains,  
君向燕山路前去. You are going to the road in the Yan Mountains ahead.  
前去旗亭芳草青, On your way there will be messenger posts and green grass,  
旗亭芳草青无数. Messenger posts and green grass will be numerous.  
无数山, Numerous mountains,  
山翠水潺湲. Mountains are green and waters flow with ease.  
翠水潺湲行路难, Green waters flow with ease but the road is difficult to travel,  
行路难时时往还. And when the road is difficult to travel, people often come and go.

往还多是名场客, Those who come and go are mostly those who seek fame,  
多是名场客行急. Because they are fame-seekers, they travel in a hurry.  
行急宁论山水程, In a hurry, no one cares about the scenery and distance,  
宁论山水程千百? Or care whether the distance is thousands or hundreds of miles.  
千百人, 恋芳春, Thousands of people love the beautiful spring,  
人恋芳春不似君. People love spring, but they are unlike you.  
不似君家有老亲, [They] are unlike you who has old parents at home,  
家有老亲长倚门. And at home old parents often wait at the gate.  
长倚门, 望君马, Waiting at the gate and expecting your horse,  
望君马到金台下. Expecting your horse to arrive at the golden stairs.  
到金台下桂花香, You arrive at the golden stairs, osmanthus flowers are sweet,  
桂花香报报高堂. The sweet scent of osmanthus tells your old parents of your arrival.  
高堂正届稀龄寿, Old parents are celebrating an old age birthday,  
正届稀龄寿春酒. They are of old age and drinking the spring birthday wine.  
春酒迟君衣锦倾, The spring wine detains you in the silk official's robe,  
迟君衣锦倾金斗. Detaining you in the silk robe, you bottom-up the gold cup.  
金斗泛, 泛春风. The gold cup is shining, shining in the spring breeze,  
春风人共醉, In spring breeze and people get drunk together,  
人共醉融融. And get drunk together happily.

This reading is based on the thimble technique, but it is an irregular thimble poem, because different numbers of ending characters in a line are reused in the next line. The poem has the strong oral style of folk poems. The title suggests it is a farewell poem to a friend who is returning to his hometown, and the term “衣锦” in the ending lines suggests the friend has successfully acquired an official post, and now is returning to his home to honor his family.<sup>244</sup> The picture title “阳关叠” refers both to the ancient vocal song “阳关三叠” (Thrice Repeated “Yang Pass”), whose lyrics comes from a poem by Wang Wei:

渭城朝雨浥轻尘, The Wei town's morning rain washes away light dust,  
客舍青青柳色新. Around the inn green willows are fresh.  
劝君更进一杯酒, I advise you to drink one more cup of wine,  
西出阳关无故人. Because once you go out of the Yang Pass in the west you will have no acquaintances.

---

<sup>244</sup> “衣锦” alludes to the idiom “衣锦还乡” – “Returning to one's hometown in the silk robe of an official.”

Notice “柳,”“色,”“青,”“城,”“雨,”“客,”“君,”“酒” in this poem are also the main images repeated in Wan’s poem. There are other ways to read the original text. For example, by reading the twin-characters as one character, and without using the thimble technique, the first few lines in the original text can be read in the following two ways:

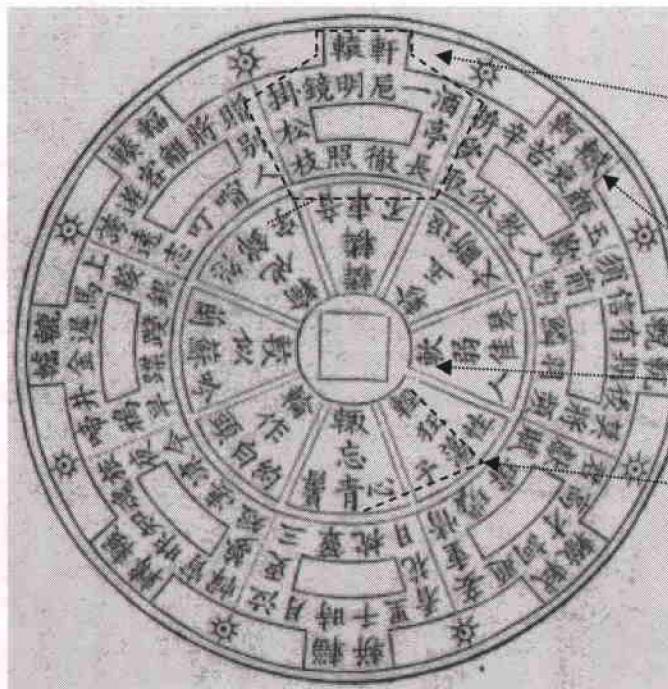
1.

柳色青青，	The willows are green,
满城烟雨，	The town is full of misty rain,
春光送远行。	And the spring scenery sees you off for a distant travel.
君向燕山路前去，	You are traveling toward the road in the Yan Mountains,
旗亭芳草青无数。	Along which messenger posts and green grasses are numerous.

2.

柳色青青(青)满城，	The willows are green, and green fills the whole town,
烟雨春光送远行。	Misty rain and the spring scenery see you off for a distant travel.
君向燕山路前去，	You are traveling toward the road in the Yan Mountains,
旗亭芳草青无数。	Along which messenger posts and green grasses are numerous.

The following poem manipulates common classifier doublets (连绵词).



The four outer layers are made of eight “bottle-shaped” parts like this. Each “bottle” has two lines: 軒轅明鏡掛松枝, 照徹長亭酒一卮.

The twin-character phrases on the outer layer and the characters on the inner layer all contain 車.

The three inner layers form a pentasyllabic regulated verse:  
麟麟车不返, 轸玉断文琴.  
软弱佳人性, 轻狂荡子心.  
辄忘青鬓约, 轮作白头吟.  
较似苏兰怨, 输他锦字音.

- 軒轅明鏡掛松枝,<sup>245</sup> The carriage's bright mirror hangs among pine branches,  
照徹長亭酒一卮。And it shines through the clear wine cup in the farewell pavilion.
- 輻輳客遊誇遠志,<sup>246</sup> The traveler is speaking of his great ambition,  
叮嚀人別贈將離。The lady is giving him cautionary words.
- 轆轤金井啼鴉早,<sup>247</sup> On the windlass by the golden well, crows caw early,
- 蹀躞銀鞍上馬遲。<sup>248</sup> By the silvery saddle, the traveler hesitates in getting on the horse.
- 輾轉昨宵緯夢短,<sup>249</sup> The dream in the bed-curtain last night was too short,  
淒涼今夜旅魂知。And the traveler should know tonight's loneliness.
- 輜輶千里看花日,<sup>250</sup> While the traveler enjoys flowers for a thousand *li*,
- 枕簟三更泣月時。<sup>251</sup> Somebody will be crying on a pillow under the midnight moon.
- 軾轍才高君獻賦,<sup>252</sup> You will be writing essays like the talented Su Shi and Su Zhe,
- 璿璣情重妾題詞。<sup>253</sup> And I will be writing poems like the devoted Star Poem Lady.
- 輶輶有信須前約,<sup>253</sup> If you have a promise, please make it now in front of the carriage,
- 鱗羽頻將莫后期。<sup>254</sup> And send me letters frequently, without delay.
- 輶輶苦辛拏受取,<sup>255</sup> Let the difficult wandering end soon,  
休教人叹玉顏衰。And do not make me sigh that my young face is growing old.

The title for the above design is “Carriage Wheel” (車輪), and the poem title is “Farewell Feelings” (懷別). This poem presents a scene in a farewell pavilion, where, among other parting people, a woman is saying goodbye to her traveling husband. The

<sup>245</sup> 軒轅 (*xuānyuán*): Carriage. The “bright mirror” refers to the moon, which functions as the light for the carriage traveling at night. Xuānyuan is also the name of the Yellow Emperor, so this line may also mean the moon that shone in the Yellow Emperor’s time is still hanging among the pine branches.

<sup>246</sup> “輻輶” (*fúcóu*) is often used as metaphor for many people gathering in a central place, like spokes around the wheel center.

<sup>247</sup> 轆轤 (*lùlù*): Windlass. “金井” refers to the well with golden railings around it, indicating a rich household or the royal palace. “轆轤金井” often represents a boudoir or palace women.

<sup>248</sup> 蹤躞 (*diéxiè*): Walk in small steps; walk back and forth: lingering.

<sup>249</sup> “輾轉” (*zhánzhuǎn*) means tossing and turning.

<sup>250</sup> 輜輶 (*zīpíng*): Covered carriage. See HYDCCD 9-1297.

<sup>251</sup> “簟” (*díàn*): Bamboo mat.

<sup>252</sup> “璿璣” (*xuánjī*) is the same as “璇玑,” refers to “Star Formation Poem.”

<sup>253</sup> 輶輶 (*yuènì*): Here refers to wagon or carriage, as Tang poet Xue Neng (薛能) means by it in the following lines: “十萬旌旗移巨鎮, 幾多輶輶負孤莊” (A hundred thousand army flags move big town; numerous wagons are as if carrying a village). See QTS 6484.

<sup>254</sup> “鱗羽” here means messenger or letter. “鱗” (fish scale) here refers to fish, which alludes to the poem “Yinma Changcheng Ku” (饮马长城窟), one of the Nineteen Ancient Songs, in which a letter was found in a carp’s belly. See *New Songs from the Jade Terrace*, vol. 1 (Xu 1985: 35). “羽” (feather) refers to the migrating geese, which also represent messengers.

<sup>255</sup> “輶輶” (*kǎnkǎn*) is the same as “坎坷” – uneven road or difficulties in life.

wheel-shaped design and the words with the radical “車” (carriage) are consistent with the travel or wandering theme in the poem. Lines three through twelve alternatively talk about the man and the woman. The narrator in the first ten lines is a third person who observes the farewell scene, while the last six lines are obviously narrated by the woman, who refers the traveler as “君” (Sir, lord) and refers herself humbly as “妾” (concubine).

Besides the common classifier doublets that all contain “車,” there are also the following common classifier doublets: “叮嚀,” “蹀躞,” “淒涼,” “璿璣.” Among these doublets “轔軻” (*kǎnke*) is an alliterative pair, while “軒轅” (*xuānyuán*), “叮嚀” (*dīngníng*) and “蹀躞” (*diéxiè*) are rhyming doublets. “轆轤” (*lùlù*) is an identical sound term (叠音词). These doublets highlight the sense of “pair,” since the poem is about two lovers.

Below on the right is a geometrical poem entitled “Mixture of Five” (五杂俎),<sup>256</sup> which contains a series of five triangle-shaped common-classifier poems, under the general title “Boudoir Sentiments” (闺怨). In each triangle poem, an edge is composed of one of the Five Elements: “金,” “木,” “水,” “火,” “土.” Illustrated below on the left is the “wood (木)-edged triangle” poem (in the lower left corner of the original design). The arrow diagram indicates the reading direction. Other triangles can be read in the same way.

---

<sup>256</sup> “俎” was a kind of food container in pre-Qin times. Later, “杂俎” refers to a collection of miscellaneous things. “五杂俎” is also a form of poem in the Han. The title here represents mixed feelings in the boudoir.

木 (title)

木 吾

木 肖 月

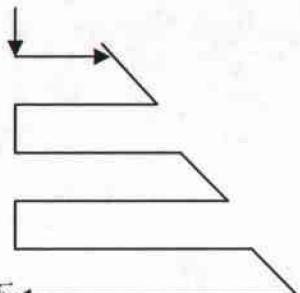
木 蘭 畫 上

木 喬 遍 倚 妆

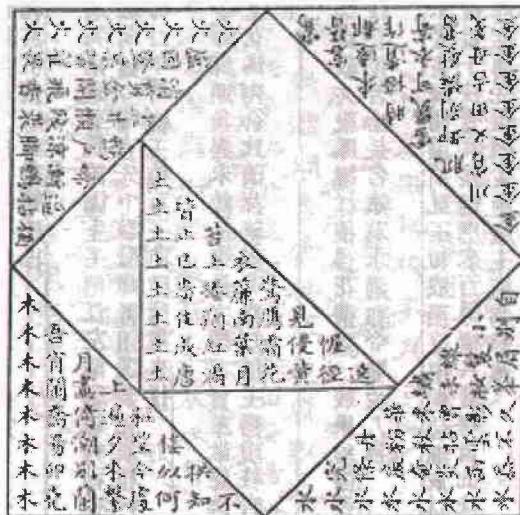
木 易 潮 夕 望 樓

木 卯 別 来 今 似 拱

木 尧 蘭 寄 處 何 知 不



These two separate columns are of the same column of characters. For example, 木 尧 should be read as 橡.



In this triangle text, the characters on the left edge all share the radical “木” (tree or wood). Below is the conventional format of the poem:

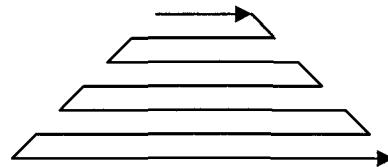
梧梢月上画栏桥, The moon on top of the *wutong* rises above the painted-railing bridge,  
倚遍妆楼望夕潮. I've been looking at the evening tide from everywhere in the house.  
杨柳别来今似拱, Willows have become as thick as rafters since his departure,  
不知何处寄兰桡. And I wonder where the harbor for my little orchid boat will be.

The word “妆楼” (boudoir in a tower house) in the second line indicates it is a boudoir poem. “别” in the third line suggests the departure of somebody (possibly the woman's lover). The harborless orchid boat symbolizes the uncertainty of the woman's marriage. The 木 on the very top also gives the reader the impression that the trees in the poem are taller than the house. The triangle shape of the poem resembles the triangle-shaped rooftop of the house. The triangle's leaning toward the left coincides with the poet's leaning against (倚) the wall of the house looking at the evening tides. Notice that characters “梧,” “梢,” “栏,” “桥,” “楊,” “柳,” “桡” are respectively printed as 木 吾,” “木 肖,” 木 兰,” “木 乔,” “木 易,” “木 卯,” “木 尧;” this printing allows “木” to become

a separate column on the left, and therefore more visible, because wood (木) is the central image in the poem (trees, house, boat are all related to wood). The line of “木” on the left also gives the reader an impression of a tall tree.

The following design is entitled “Sundial’s Shadow under the Moon” (土圭月影), and the poem title is “Moon Poem” (咏月诗):

月 (title)  
沽月上  
魂兔月童瞳  
幽光日月忽散一  
银垂已向月兆胸秋天  
钓圆绽今其月漾玉球馥郁  
收中镜色山胧月蒙落外云芳桂  
凭栏深夜看逾良月何处笙箫作胜游



The sundial (土圭) is a device used in ancient times for measuring the motion of the shadow of the sun, while in this design, it is night and the sundial stands under the moon with its shadow. In this triangle formation, “月” on the top is the title of the poem. From the second line on, the “月” in the middle column combines alternatively with the character on the left and right, as indicated by the underlining. For example, “沽” combines with “月” to make “湖,” and in the next line “月” combines with “童” to make “瞳.” Reading in the direction indicated by the arrow illustration, the triangle formation can be rearranged in the following manner:

湖上瞳瞳兔魄幽, Above the hazy lake, the spirit of the Rabbit is solitary and dim,<sup>257</sup>  
光明忽散一天秋. But suddenly it gives out light in the sky of autumn.  
朏朓向已垂银钩, It used to hang like a silver hook,<sup>258</sup>  
圆绽今期漾玉球. But today it is full and like a floating jade ball.  
馥郁桂芳云外落, A sweet osmanthus scent falls from beyond the clouds,<sup>259</sup>  
朦胧山色镜中收. And blurry mountains are reflected in the mirror.<sup>260</sup>  
凭栏深夜看逾朗, By a railing at late night, the more I stare at it, the clearer it becomes,  
何处笙箫作胜游. And I also wonder: where is the flute music from?

By comparing the original triangle text to the regular poem formation, we can see that in the triangle, the seven “月” are arranged in the middle column and therefore stand out, while in the regular textual formation, they are hiding in different characters in the poem. This highlighting is important for the moon related theme.

Yan calls the above two poems “character splitting-reassembling common-classifier poems” (离合联边诗),<sup>261</sup> but in fact they only involve printing the two elements of a character apart, such as printing “梧” as “木 吾,” and “湖” as “沽 月.” The separately printed elements are not independent characters, nor do these elements combine with other characters. Therefore, the above two poems are common-classifier poems in the pictorial designs, but not character splitting-reassembling poems.

The following design is entitled “Silk Brocade Mud-Shield” (锦障泥), and the poem title is “Farewell to a Friend Traveling to the North in Late Spring” (春暮送友北上):

---

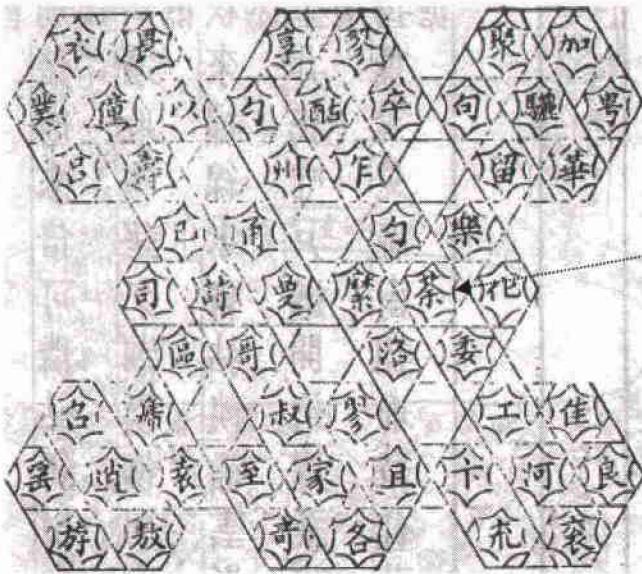
<sup>257</sup> “Spirit of the Rabbit” (兔魄) refers to the moon.

<sup>258</sup> “朏朓” (*nùtiáo*) refers to the crescent moon in the beginning of a lunar month, see HYDCC 6-1245.

<sup>259</sup> The Chinese myth has it that there is an osmanthus tree (and a rabbit) on the moon.

<sup>260</sup> “Mirror” in this line refers to the moon.

<sup>261</sup> Yan 2001: 361.



The picture contains eight hexagons. Each hexagon has seven characters. Only the one in the center is printed in full shape, e. g., in this hexagon, the character 荼 (tú) is written in its full form, while 糜, 勺, 樂, 化, 委 and 洛 are not, because their ‡ radical is omitted. However, in normal layout of the poem (below), these characters borrow ‡ from 荼, and are written as 荼靡芍药花萎落.

驪駒驃駕聘骅骝， Beautiful horses and carriages used to come often,  
酣酌醇醪醉酢酬。<sup>262</sup> Parties used to be merry with good wine drinking.  
僮仆依偎似侍侶，<sup>263</sup> The master used to be surrounded by loyal servants,  
诗词記誦漫謌讴。 And there used to be happy times of poetry reading and singing.  
荼靡芍药花萎落， But roseleaf raspberry and herbaceous peony flowers withered,  
河汴江淮浪滾流。 And waves in Yellow, Bian, Yangtze and Huai Rivers fast flew away.  
家室寂寥宜客寄， The house has declined, and it's time to leave,  
逍遙迢遞遠遨遊。 To wander far and near at will.

This poem is an imitation of Huang Tingjian's common-classifier poem discussed in Chapter Four. A mud-shield is usually made of leather or cloth, hanging over the belly of a horse to shield the rider from mud. The use of silk brocade as a mud-shield is parallel to the degrading of the man in the poem: he used to be a rich noble man, but now he is just a muddy wanderer.

Below is a design entitled “Eight-line Letter Paper” (八行笺 *bahangjian*), and the poem title is “Drinking under the Moon” (飲月辭). In the picture, every character is

<sup>262</sup> 酢酬 (*zuòchóu*): to toast.

<sup>263</sup> 侍侶 (*chílù*): companions.

printed in reverse, which is to suggest that each character should be read as its antonym: “春” (spring) should be read as “秋” (fall), “晴” (clear) as “雨” (raining), and so on. This way, we find the following three poems:

Poem 1:

秋雨寒偏早, Autumn rain makes it cold early,  
连阴薄暮同. The continuous cloudiness is like dusk.  
今来先取醉, Now let me get drunk first,  
明月远浮空. The bright moon is floating in the  
distant sky.



Poem 2:

天高圆月明, The sky is high and the round moon is bright,  
坐久夜深长. I sit for a long time, and the night is deep.  
举首东山上, I raise my head to look at the top of the East Mountain,  
新开绿酒香. And the newly opened green wine is fragrant.

Poem 3:

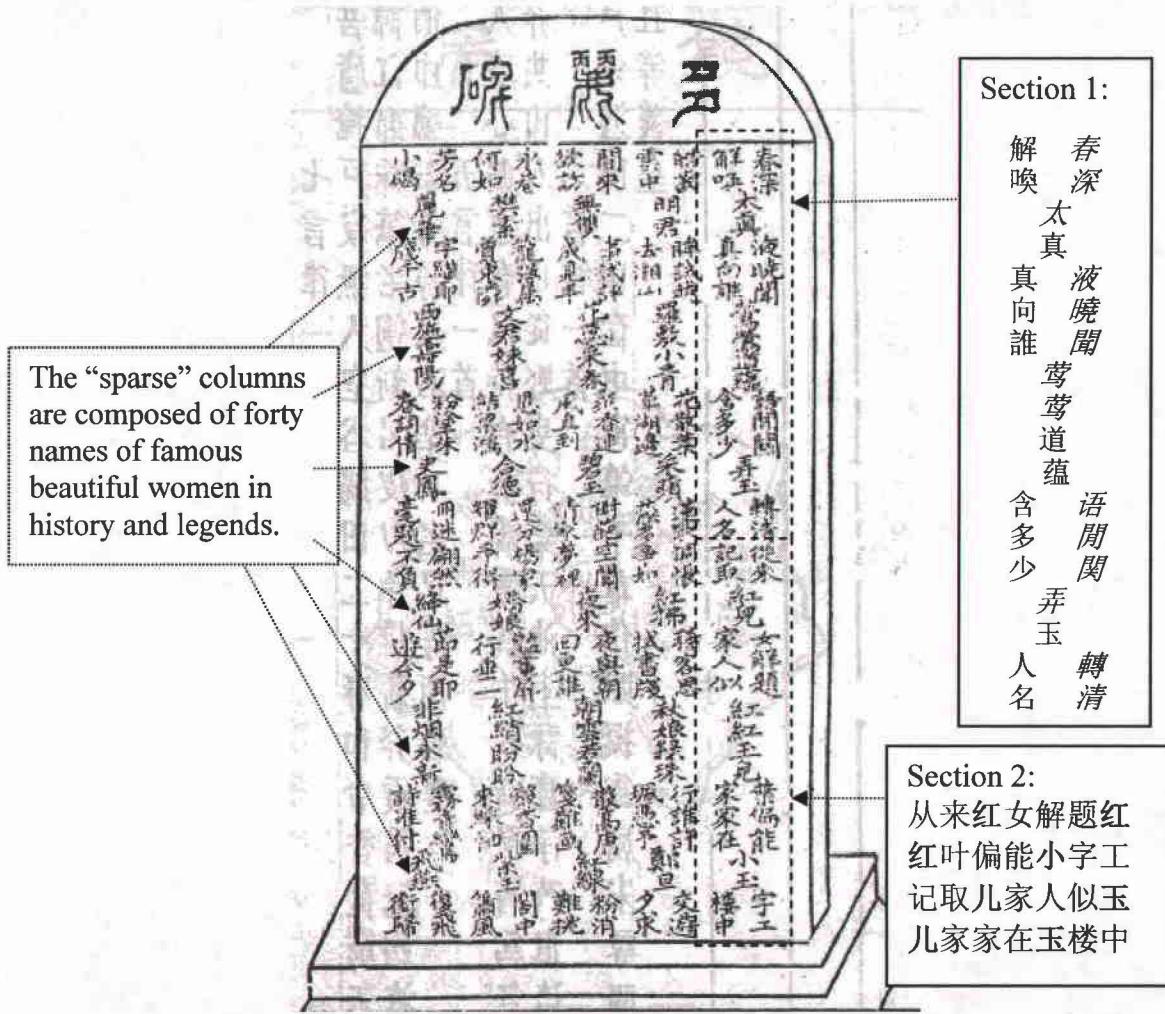
老我无他好,	Aging, I have no other hobbies,
清尊向此君.	Except for turning to this gentleman with a clear cup. <sup>264</sup>
喜添物外賞,	I am glad I have this heavenly blessing,
月底終成文.	Which will eventually turn into poetry under the moon.

This kind of poem is called a “replacing character poem” (换字诗), because each character in the original poem needs to be replaced with a different one according to certain rules. *Seven Times Revised Classified Drafts* (七修类稿) has another example of this kind, and in that case, a poem of Yue Fei (岳飞) is changed into another poem by replacing each character with its synonym.<sup>265</sup>

<sup>264</sup> “This gentleman” (此君) refers to wine.

<sup>265</sup> Lang 1961 (vol. 2): 725.

### 3. Poems Featuring Assigned-Characters and Thimble Techniques (嵌字, 嵌句, 杂名)



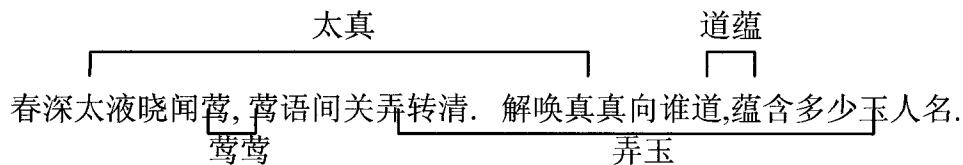
The above design is entitled “A Stone Tablet for Many Beautiful Women” (多丽碑),

and the poem title is “To the Beautiful Women in Ancient Times” (咏古美人). The text in the picture is divided into ten sections (the two boxes formed by the line of dashes contain the first two sections, while other sections can be identified in the same manner). Each section forms a heptasyllabic quatrain. In the reprinted text for the first section (as shown in the vertical box on the right side of the tablet), the italicized characters form the

first two lines of the quatrain, and other characters form lines three and four. Texts in the other sections are to be read in the same way. The following is the first poem:

春深太液晓闻莺， In late spring at the Royal Lake, orioles are heard in the morning,  
莺语间关弄转清。 And their chirping is musical and pleasant.  
解唤真真向谁道， They sound like talking, but to whom are they speaking?  
蕴含多少玉人名？ And how many beautiful women's names are mentioned?

In the reprinting of the first section above (the vertical box to the right of the picture), the characters in the middle column are four personal names: “太真,” “莺莺,” “道蕴,” and “弄玉。”<sup>266</sup> Notice that while in the picture the name characters stay together, in the poem they are separated. For example, in the above poem formation, the two characters in “莺莺” are placed in two separate lines (so is 道蕴). This design is a special type of assigned-character poem (嵌字诗), and it also involves the re-assembling technique (离合), not on the character radical level, but on the word level – that is, it separates the characters in a name so that they appear in different lines. This technique was used by Pi Rixiu (皮日休) in “Two Reassembling Poems in Memory of Deer Gate County” (怀鹿门县名离合二首), as discussed in the name poems section in Chapter Two. However, in this poem by Wan Shu, the assigned character and splitting-reassembling techniques are used more subtly:



<sup>266</sup>“太真” (Taizhen) is Lady Yang (杨贵妃), “莺莺” (Yingying) is the heroine in Wang Shifu’s (王实甫) drama *Romance of the Western Chamber* (西厢记). 弄玉 (Nongyu) was a daughter of Duke Mu of Qing (秦穆公). According to legend, she married a young man from a Xiao family who was good at playing the vertical flute, and the couple eventually rode on a phoenix and flew to Heaven. “道蕴” (Daoyun) refers to the fifth century poetess Xie Daoyun (谢道蕴).

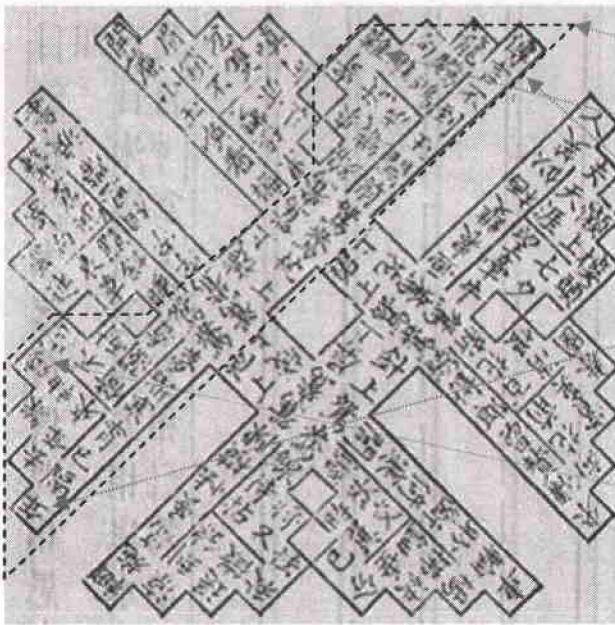
The above illustration shows that each linked pair of characters forms a name. We can see that the splitting of “莺莺” and “道蕴” employs the same technique as Pi Rixiu's, but the splitting of “太真” and “弄玉” is different. These name characters are evenly distributed in the poem when printed in normal formation, see the right (name characters are bold).

The poem starts with the Royal Lake (太液), which was a pool in a royal garden outside of Chang'an (長安), the Tang capital. Lady Yang (杨贵妃, or 太真, consort of a Tang Emperor) often visited there. The orioles are witnesses of the women who wasted their lives in the palace generation after generation. The second poem (in the lower box on the right of the tablet – translation is omitted) shares a similar theme by alluding to the leaf poem story.<sup>267</sup> The stone tablet (碑) is a monument to commemorate the women it mentions, as the idiom “树碑立传” (set up a tablet as a biography) indicates. It also symbolizes the tragic death of many beautiful women in history, as another idiom “红颜薄命” says – “Pretty faces are all ill-fated.”

The following design is entitled “Upside-down Mandarin Ducks” (颠倒鸳鸯), and the poem title is “Boudoir Feelings” (闺情):

---

<sup>267</sup> The leaf poem story is in Meng Qi's (孟棨) book *True Story Poems* (本事诗). In the story a woman in the Emperor's palace in the Tang dynasty wrote a poem on a big *wutong* leaf and let the leaf flow out on a creek that runs through the palace. Gu Kuang (顾况), a scholar and poet, found the leaf and the poem, and he wrote a poem on another leaf and let it flow into the palace on the other side of the palace. See Meng 2001: 6.



The two linked “flat-topped pyramids” in this part form the first two poems.

The first poem starts with 難, and ends with 年. The second poem starts with 年 and ends with 難.

In the first poem, 傳 (top right corner) is used twice.

In the second poem, 殘 is used twice.

Below is a reprinting of the characters surrounding the central square in the picture.

鴛	鴦	上	鸞	機
鴦	鴟	下	鸞	織
池	丁		裙	丁
上	翻		上	紗
鸞	機	𠙴	上	鴛
織	鴟	上	鴦	鴟

These characters form the following phrases that are used by each of the eight poems respectively:

鴛鴦池上鴛鴦	鴛鴦機上鴛鴦
鴛鴦屏上鴛鴦	鴛鴦針上鴛鴦
鴛鴦枕上鴛鴦	鴛鴦裙上鴛鴦
鴛鴦花上鴛鴦	鴛鴦牋上鴛鴦

The original picture contains eight pentasyllabic quatrains, which are divided into four pairs, with each pair linked in a thimble manner. See the first pair:

难向雕笼鹦鹉传, It is difficult to ask the parrot in the cage to pass words along,  
传言不到玉关前. For it cannot deliver the words to the Jade Pass.

鸳鸯枕上鸳鸯梦, On the double-duck pillow is the double-duck dream,  
梦断寒宵已隔年. When the dream breaks in a cold night, one year has passed.

年去年来彩袖残, Year comes and year goes, colored sleeves have become worn-out,  
残花不耐倚栏看. By the railing, I cannot bear to see the withered flowers.

鸳鸯机上鸳鸯锦, On the double-duck loom is a piece of double-duck silk –  
锦织成来欲寄难. The silk is ready, but mailing it out is difficult.

Like the rest of the eight poems, these two poems portray a young wife missing her soldier husband at the distant Jade Pass. Notice the last character of the first poem (年) is also the first character of the second one, linking the two poems in a thimble manner. In each quatrain, the first two lines and the second two lines each also form a thimble structure. For example, in the first poem, the first two lines are linked by the character “传,” and second two lines are linked by the character “梦.” The reprinted picture shows that the “鸳” (the male duck) and “鸯” (the female duck) are always printed in different directions, which is what the title “Upside-down Mandarin Ducks” (颠倒鸳鸯) means. This symbolizes the displacement of the husband and wife.<sup>268</sup> The series of eight poems in this design are also special assigned-line poems (嵌句诗), with “鸳鸯 A 上 鸳鸯 B” as the assigned line.

#### 4. Poems Featuring the “Weaving Technique” (编织诗句)

Any poem can be rearranged into a single line by omitting the punctuation marks and placing the lines one after another, just as a hand-knitted garment can be changed back into a single thread. In other words, any poem can be viewed as the rearrangement of a single line - by “cutting the line into pieces” and adding punctuation marks. This is indeed one of the most common techniques of Wan Shu, which may be called the “weaving technique.” Of course, Wan Shu’s weaving is usually more complicated – he often manages to put certain characters in certain positions. The design below is entitled

---

<sup>268</sup> This poem alludes to two pictorial poems in *Classified Palindromes*, which are both long poems about a wife weaving a piece of silk to send to her distant soldier husband. See Sang 1987: 809.

“Taiji Picture” (太极图), and the poem title is “Traveler’s Feeling” (客怀).

The characters on the white background form the first poem, and those on the black background form the second. Notice that the four pairs of antonyms are arranged symmetrically on the horizontal diameter that goes through the center of the circle: “实东左阳阴右西虚” (solid-east-left-yang-yin-right-west-loose), as indicated by the dashes. This arrangement highlights the contrast between the *yin* and *yang*.

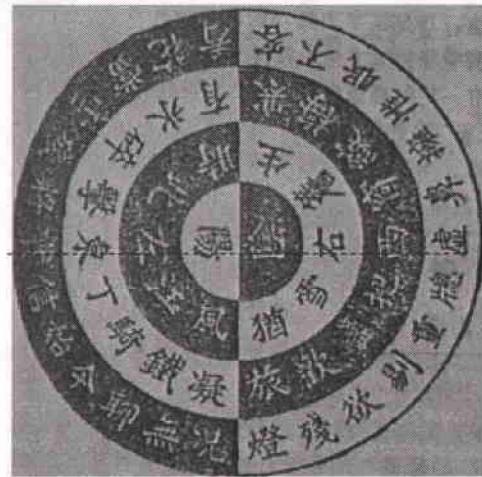
Poem 1 (black characters):

阳生檐右雪犹凝, Sunlight appears to the west of the eaves, but the snow is still frozen,  
铁骑叮咚击碎冰. The wind bells tinkle like horses stepping on broken ice.<sup>269</sup>  
有客不眠唯拥鼻, The traveler is unable to sleep, and he can only recite a poem,  
虚窗重剃欲残灯. By the dim window he again trims the dying lamp.

Poem 2 (white characters):

阴风江左此时寒, At this time, East of the River, the wind must be chilly,  
梅绽窗西把盏欢. But at the west side of the window, *mume* must be blooming, and  
people must be drinking merrily.  
旅况无聊今始信, It is now that I start to believe traveling is tiresome,  
实将残雪当花看. And I can only pretend that the remaining snow is flowers.

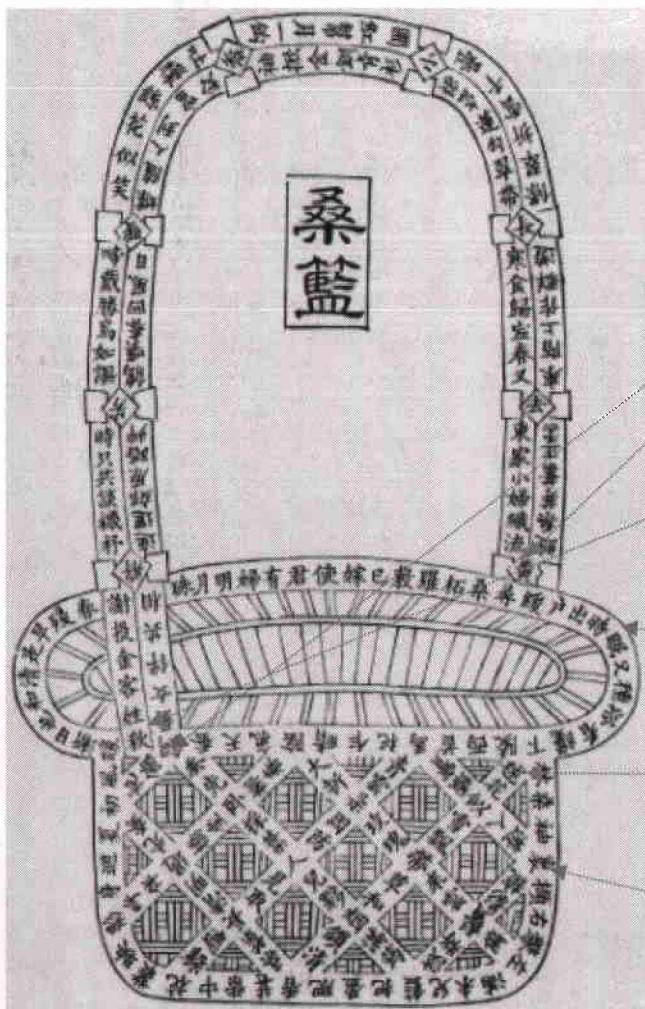
From the different rhyme we can see these are two poems, but they are closely related, both semantically and graphically, as the *taiji* picture is a symbol in which its *yin* and



<sup>269</sup> “铁骑” (iron horse) is another name for a wind bell. “拥鼻” in the next line literally means “covering ones nose” (with a hand), but in poetry it is an allusion, referring to the story that in the Jin dynasty, there were scholars who covered their noses when reciting poems so as to imitate the famous poet Xie An’s (谢安) recitation. Xie An had a nose illness and his voice naturally had a nasal sound. See HYDCD 6-930.

*yang* aspects are mutually related. The first poem indicates the poet is a traveler staying in an inn or a temple, where wind bells tinkle. The first two lines of the second poem talk about a place far away, the lower region along the Yangtze River, possibly where the traveler is from. In the first poem, “sunlight” (阳) is a positive image, yet the traveler’s lodging is cold. In the second poem, “cold wind” is a negative image, yet the scene in which people drink wine and enjoy winter *mume* is cheerful. This is to say there is *yin* within *yang*, and there is *yang* within *yin*, which is what the *taiji* picture symbolizes.

The following design is entitled “Mulberry Leaves Basket” (桑篮):



The basket handle is formed by two heptasyllabic poems. The first starts with 飼, going clockwise along the inner layer, and ends with 黃, which is the first character of the second poem. The second poem goes counter clockwise along the outer layer, and ends with 秋 (to the left of 飼).

Starting with the character 飼 and reading counter-clockwise along the “edge” and the outline of the basket body, we can get a *ci* poem to the tune “Going Along the Royal Street” (御街行). Starting with 餵, the crossing lines on the body of the basket form another *ci* poem to the tune “Road full of Flowers” (滿路花).

The title for the poem is “Mulberry Leaves Pickers” (采桑人):

饲蚕女伴共相将, The silkworm girls walk together,  
迤逦郊原踏草芳. And step on the fresh grass field in the suburb.  
鹃唤风回春日暖, Cuckoos sing, the breeze returns, and the spring day is warm,  
蝶随人到钿钗香. Butterflies follow the girls because their hairpins are fragrant.  
袖掀金钏青衫小, The sleeves of their small blue shirts are rolled up to bracelets,  
裙罩莲勾翠带长. And the skirts that cover their lotus feet trail long ribbons.  
寒食归宁春又去,<sup>270</sup> After the Cold Food Festival homecoming, spring is gone,  
东家小妇织流黄.<sup>271</sup> And it is time for the young wife next door to weave yellow silk.

This is one of the two poems that form the handle of the basket. The body of the basket forms two *ci* poems. This design allows us to see how the poet works as a craftsman: 1) arranging heptasyllabic regulated poems into two single lines; 2) placing them side-by-side in opposite directions, then “tying” them up at eight spots (将, 芳, 暖, 香, 小, 长, 去, 黄, which are shared by both lines); 3) “bending” the two tied lines into a U-shape; 4) “wedging” both ends into the edge of the basket (which is another circular poem). Characters at the intersections on the body of the basket are shared by both lines. Regarding meaning, in the above poem, since it is about several girls going out to pick mulberry leaves (to feed their silkworms) in spring, the handle of the basket looks like the road, and the body of the basket looks like a field with crossing paths.

There are several issues that we can talk about concerning Wan Shu’s pictorial poems. Regarding the technique, sometimes Wan Shu is like a craftsman, sometimes a calligrapher, sometimes a painter, sometimes a carpenter, and sometimes a weaver. The designs discussed in Section I of this chapter are the most sophisticated pictures seen

<sup>270</sup> “归宁” means a married woman’s homecoming. See HYDCCD 5-378A.

<sup>271</sup> “流黄” (*liuhuang*) is a kind of yellow silk cloth. Han Yuefu poem “Meeting on a Narrow Road” (相逢狭路间) has the following lines: “Older women weave luyi silk, middle women weave *liuhuang* silk” (大妇织罗绮, 中妇织流黄). See *New Songs from the Jade Terrace* (Xu 1985: 10).

outside of Wan Shu's book, but the techniques involved in them are still much simpler than Wan's. Of the five pictures discussed in Section I, the "Tray Poem," the "Keeping out Cold Poem," and the "Quilt Poem" are just regular poems arranged in different formations. The "Star Formation Poem" is more an experiment with rhyming characters than a carefully planned text in terms of meaning. The "Mirror Poem" design is more sophisticated than the others discussed in Section I, but it cannot match the sophistication in Wan Shu's design. Of course, Wan is largely influenced by the "Star Formation Poem" on the strategic level, which is why he named his anthology *Smaller Pieces of the Star Picture*. He also alluded to the "Star Formation Poem" several times in his poems. Wan Shu's anthology stands among the Chinese MFP like "a crane standing among chickens" (鹤立鸡群), as the idiom says. See Yang Lingxiao (杨凌霄) comments in another preface:<sup>272</sup>

兵贵精而不贵多。织锦回文，特此体之权舆也，虽读法至千余首，词义牵率...后盘鉴，龟形诸制，...抑未人夺天工也。自得红友先生璇玑碎锦一书，鬼斧神工，出神入化，乃叹技至此乎观止矣。

As for soldiers, skill is more important than numbers. "The Star Formation Poem" is the origin of this style [of pictorial poems], but although it can be read into thousands of poems, their meaning is not clear. The "Spinning Wheel Mirror Back Poem" and the "Turtle Poem" that appeared afterwards were not impressive technically either. But when I received Red Friend's *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk*, [I could see that the designs] were as if done with "the axe of a ghost and craft of an immortal," and have gone beyond the superior and entered perfection. Therefore I have to exclaim that since Wan Shu's techniques have reached such a level, I will not expect anybody else to do better.

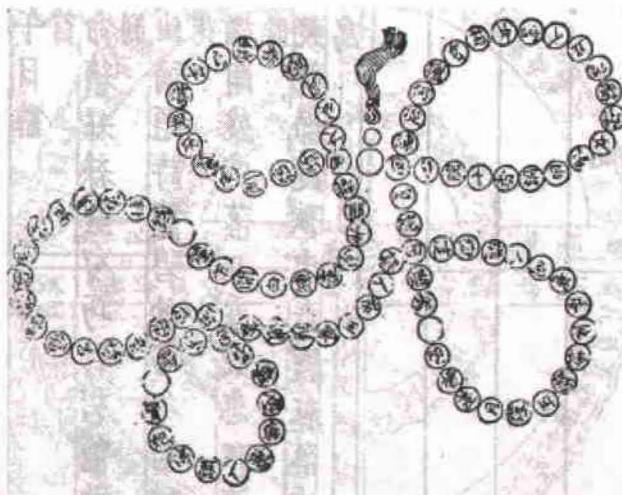
---

<sup>272</sup> The preface indicates that Yang Lingxiao seems to have lived not long after Wan Shu, and he edited Wan Shu's anthology for printing. See *Congshu Jicheng Xubian* (丛书集成续编) vol. 218, pp. 746-747. "The Mirror Back Poem" mentioned here has been discussed in section I of this chapter. The Turtle Poem's text is seen in the *Complete Tang Poetry*, p. 8992, with the title "Embroidered Turtle-Shaped Poem" (绣龟形诗) by "House Wife Hou" (侯氏). The poet's husband was a military general and had been staying away from home for a long time, so she presented the poem to the emperor to appeal the return of her husband, and the poem was arranged in a turtle shaped formation to indicate the sense of "return," as "gui" (turtle) was the homophone of "归" (gui, to return).

Wan Shu's poems are apparently an accumulation of what he designed over a long period of time. For example, “阳关叠 送华小邢之燕” suggests it is dedicated to a friend named Hua Xiaoxing, who was going to the Yan area; “锦障泥 暮春送友人北上” is for sending off a friend to the North; “百念龄 自寿” is written on Wan Shu's own birthday; and “卌字 题虞美人画” is written upon viewing the painting of a beautiful woman. The pictures are usually relevant to the theme of the poem. This helps to answer the question Yang Lingxiao raised in his preface about whether there were poems first or pictures first: they seem to have been created simultaneously.

Wan Shu's poems have various themes, but boudoir subjects are the main topics. The poems in Section I were all created by women, while Wan Shu is a man who speaks for women, and sometimes in a woman's voice. Maybe we can summarize Wan Shu's compassion for women with the following

poem, with the picture title “Changing Mind Tear Necklace” (回心珠泪), and the poem title is “Written after Reading *Burning Pepper Records* – to the tune “Changing Mind Courtyard” (回心院 题焚椒录).



堕怀差, Born ill-fated,  
月落玉勾斜. The Falling moon is like a slanting jade hook.  
生世竟同人彘狱, Life is like the jail for the Human Pig,  
这回误入帝王家. This time I mistakenly entered the Emperor's house.

堕怀差,<sup>273</sup>

回波贖.<sup>274</sup>

Born ill-fated,

The Returning Waves song lasts.

The “Changing Mind Courtyard” is a quarter in the Tang royal palace, where a queen was jailed,<sup>275</sup> and the term later became a *ci* tune. “焚椒录” (*Burning Pepper Records*) is a book written by Wang Ding (王鼎) about tragic queens and consorts in history.<sup>276</sup> Wan Shu’s title “题焚椒录” (Written after Reading *Burning Pepper Records*) indicates this series of poems were written to express his feelings after reading the book. In this poem, “human pig” (*rénzhì* 人彘) refers to Lady Qi (戚夫人), the First Emperor of Han’s favored consort who was cruelly tortured to death by Queen Lü (吕后) after the death of the Emperor.<sup>277</sup> While the book *Burning Pepper Records* is about particular women’s tragedies that happened in particular Emperor’s homes, in this poem, the speaker is a woman in any palace, and the line “这回误入帝王家” (This time I mistakenly entered the Emperor’s home) is about any Emperor’s home, this poem concludes that in general, entering any emperor’s home is a severe tragedy, which makes the poem likely to be the boldest one among the poems that show sympathy to palace women - because poets usually all avoid commenting on the emperor’s private life. The privacy of the palace is a very sensitive issue. Gao Qi (高启), an early Ming scholar, was beheaded because he

<sup>273</sup> 堕怀: to reincarnate. The Buddhist book *Jingtu Shengxian Lu* (净土圣贤录) has the following line: “母梦日堕怀而生琦” (Qi’s mother dreamed a sun fell into her bosom and then gave birth to him).

<sup>274</sup> “回波” means shining water surface, and it is also the title of a poem and a music tune, composed during the Middle Emperor of Tang (唐中宗). See *Yuefu Shiji*, vol. 80 (乐府诗集 卷 80), see HYDCD 3-611.

<sup>275</sup> HYDCD 3- 609 A.

<sup>276</sup> See HYDCD 7-90A. “椒” (*jiao*) is Chinese brown pepper, pasted on the wall in women’s chambers in the royal palace, because its scent can keep away mosquito and other insects. Therefore, women’s chambers in the royal palace are also called “椒房” (pepper rooms).

<sup>277</sup> Queen Lü had her hands, feet, nose, ears, and eyes cut off, jailed her in the toilet, and called a “human pig.” See the chapter on the biography of Queen Lü in Sima Qian’s *Records of History* (史记 吕太后本记).

was accused of “exposing the privacy of the palace” in a poem, though the poem was quite “mild” compared with Wan Shu’s.<sup>278</sup> Fortunately, Wan Shu had the picture to hide his poem. This poem lets us see that of all the men who caused women to suffer, the emperor was the worst.

---

<sup>278</sup> For Gao Qi’s poem and the story, see Liu 1996: 234.

## Conclusion

The relationship between language and meaning is an important philosophical question. When Zhuangzi made the analogy that language is the bamboo trap and meaning is the fish – once one catches the fish he can forget about the trap,<sup>279</sup> his implication is that the trap is reliable, and language is capable of conveying meaning. As far as communication for practical purpose is concerned, this is usually true. However, when language is used for artistic purposes, such as in poetry, the situation is often different: ambiguity or multiple meaning is likely to happen. W. Empson's *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (1931) is one of the most important books that address this issue concerning English literature. Classical Chinese literature is even more likely to generate ambiguity and multiple meaning; see the following comment of Ye Jiaying (叶嘉莹).<sup>280</sup>

中国语言的组合在文法上是极为自由的, 没有过去, 现在与未来事态的区分, 没有主动与被动的语气, 也没有阳性与阴性及单数与复数的区分, 而且对于一些结合字句的词语如前置词, 接续词, 关系代名词等也都不加重视, 一切都有着绝大的自由. 因此在组成一句话时, 主语, 述语与宾语以及形容词或副词等都可以相互颠倒或竟尔完全省略.

The grammatical arrangement of [classical Chinese] is very flexible. It does not have past, present, or future tense; it does not have the active or passive mode, neither does it have gender or number. In addition, it does not take auxiliary words like prefixes, conjunctions, and relative pronouns seriously. There is tremendous freedom. For these reasons, when making a sentence, the subject, predicate and object, as well as adjectives, adverbs, etc. may all be switched around or even omitted.

---

<sup>279</sup> “The purpose of the trap lies in the fish; once you get the fish, you forget the trap...The purpose of words lies in the meaning: when you get the meaning, you forget the words.” See Liu 1988: 11. Of course, Zhuangzi’s discussion on language is not limited to this statement.

<sup>280</sup> Ye 2000: 184.

The factors Ye mentions are very important for the linguistic manipulation in MFP as discussed in the first three chapters, and maybe we could call them “linguistic loopholes.” “Linguistic loopholes” are not unique to MFP, but are also common in mainstream Chinese poetry. For example, Wang Wei’s line “松风吹解带”<sup>281</sup> has been noticed by many scholars as having a double structure: “解” may either go with “吹” to form a verb-complement structure to mean “blow loose,” or it can combine with “带” to form an adjective-noun structure meaning “untied sash.” There are many other poetic lines whose linguistic based hidden meanings remain unnoticed. The following are some examples involving multiple meanings generated by flexible grammatical structures and parts of speech.

### 1. Words That Can Be both Nouns and Adverbs

Using nouns as adverbs is an important feature in classical Chinese. This usage of nouns is more obvious in prose text than in poetry. “岭忽蜂腰断, 溪还燕尾分”<sup>282</sup> is a case in which the adverbial use of nouns is obvious: “蜂腰” (bee waist) is a noun that modifies the verb “断” (break): “像蜂腰一样断开” means “[The mountain range suddenly] narrows like the waist of a bee”); “燕尾分” means “像燕尾一样分开” - “[The creek] splits like the tail of a swallow.” “柳色黄金嫩, 梨花白雪香”<sup>283</sup> means “Willow color is as tender as gold; pear flowers are as fragrant as white snow.” In many other cases, the noun may have a double sense – it functions either as a noun or an adverb. For

---

<sup>281</sup> QTS 1267.

<sup>282</sup> Also see Qian 1984: 496 for more discussion on this couplet.

<sup>283</sup> QTS 408 and 1702.

example, concerning the line “淡烟流水画屏幽,”<sup>284</sup> if we read “画屏” as a noun, the line means “With the light mist, and flowing water, the painted screen is still.” If we read “画屏” as an adverb, the line means “The light mist and flowing water [outside of the window] appear as still as a painted screen” (象画屏一样幽). In fact, many poetic lines that have the structure of “noun phrase 1 (NP1) + noun phrase 2 (NP2) + verb” can be read in two ways: either as a topic-comment sentence, with NP1 as the topic (object), and NP2 + verb as the comment or description, or as a line that uses NP2 as an adverb.

## 2. Words That Can Be both Adjectives and Verbs

In the couplet “疏钟清殿月, 幽梵静花台,”<sup>285</sup> “清” and “静” may either be adjectives or verbs. Here are two possible translations:

- a) Sparse bell sound is heard in the clear hall moonlight; soft Buddhist chanting is around the quiet flowery terrace.
- b) Sparse bell sound clears the hall moonlight; soft Buddhist chanting quiets the flowery terrace.

In Zhang Zhihe’s lines “西塞山前白鹭飞, 桃花流水鳜鱼肥” (see the section on adapted poems in Chapter Two), “桃花流水” can be read either as two nouns (peach flowers and flowing water), or “桃花流于水上” (peach flowers flow on water).<sup>286</sup> Adjectival readings make these verses static and often passive; verbal readings make them active and lively with unique turns of phrase.

---

<sup>284</sup> QSC 461.

<sup>285</sup> QTS 1411.

<sup>286</sup> For the whole poem and its translation, see the adaptable poems section in Chapter Two.

### 3. Words that Can Be both Nouns and Verbs

In his *Hanyu Shilu Xue*, Wang Li provides two examples that involve the use of nouns as verbs (The bold characters are nouns used as verbs):<sup>287</sup> “子能渠细石, 吾亦沼清泉” (You can make a dike with small pebbles, I can also make a pond with clear fountain water), and “宁问春将夏, 谁怜西复东” (People often ask when spring will become summer, but who would care for these who travel to the west and then east?). “声” (sound) and “色” (color), which usually are read as nouns, can also function as verbs. In the idiom “声东击西” (Make a sound on the east while attack from the west), “声” is a verb, and in “雨匀紫菊丛丛色, 风弄红蕉叶叶声,” “色” and “声” are also more likely to be verbs:<sup>288</sup>

Rain evenly drops on the each of the purple chrysanthemums and they all color;  
Wind plays with the red canna and each leaf makes a sound.”

In the Tang poet Meng Haoran’s famous lines “夜来风雨声, 花落知多少,” “风雨声” is usually considered a line of noun phrase (Last night I heard the sound of the wind and rain, and I wonder how many flowers fell), but if we read it as a verb, it also works: “Last night wind and rain sounded, and I wonder how many flowers fell.” The following are more examples in which “声” and “色” can be either nouns or verbs:<sup>289</sup>

日晃百花色, 风动千林翠:

- a) Sun shines on the colors of hundreds of flowers;  
Wind moves the greenness of thousands of trees.

<sup>287</sup> Wang 1989: 309-310. The couplets discussed here are respectively from QTS 2502 and QTS 1281.

<sup>288</sup> This couplet and Meng Hao ran’s couplet below are respectively from QTS 7978 and QTS 1667.

<sup>289</sup> The following four couplets are respectively from QTS 8, QTS 1318, QTS 7930 and QTS 1279.

- b) When the sun shines, hundreds of flowers color; (“color” is a verb)  
When wind moves, thousands of trees green. (“green” is a verb)

In this line, the character “翠” also has a double function – it can be either a noun or an adjective. As Kao and Mei point out, traditional Chinese poetry often separates the quality (such as the color red, green, etc.) from the object it belongs to and treats it as a noun.<sup>290</sup>

草色新雨中, 松声晚窗里:

- a) The grass color is in the new rain; the pine sound comes into the evening window.  
b) Grass colors in the new rain; pines sound in the evening window.

一雨三秋色, 萧条古寺间:

- a) A rain and the scene of the third phase of autumn, desolate in the ancient temple;  
b) After a rain, the third phase of fall changes color, and the ancient temple is desolate.

江流天地外, 山色有无中:

- a) The river’s flow is beyond heaven and earth;  
The mountain’s color is between the visible and the invisible.”<sup>291</sup>  
b) The river flows outside of heaven and earth;  
Mountains change color between being and nonbeing.”

#### 4. Words That Can Be both Intransitive Verbs and Causative Verbs:

风鸣两岸叶: 风鸣[于]两岸树<sup>292</sup> Wind makes a sound on trees on both sides of the river.  
风使两岸树鸣      Wind causes the trees on both sides of river to sound.

两个黄鹂鸣翠柳: 两个黄鹂鸣[于]翠柳 Two yellow orioles chirp in the willow tree.  
两个黄鹂使翠柳鸣 Two yellow orioles cause the willow tree to chirp.

枳花明驿墙: 枳花明[于]驿墙 Orange flowers are bright by the wall of the courier post.  
枳花使驿墙明      Orange flowers brighten the wall of the courier post.

---

<sup>290</sup> See Kao & Mei 1971: 78.

<sup>291</sup> This is the translation of Kao and Mei, see 1971: 108.

<sup>292</sup> This and the two examples below are respectively from QTS 1635, 2487 and 6741.

Multiple meanings based on the linguistic loopholes in the examples above are very important for the structural manipulation discussed in Chapter One, especially for palindromes and restructurable poems. In contrast, the content manipulation discussed in Chapter Two mainly derives from semantic aspect, that is, the different meanings of a word can all be accepted in a poem's context. For example, in Wan Shu's line “铁骑叮咚  
击碎冰,” “铁骑” does not mean “iron horse” as it appears to be, but is another name for a wind bell that hangs under an eave. Tang poet Zhang Ji's (张继) wrote a famous poem that contains the lines “月落乌啼霜满天…江枫渔火对愁眠” (When the moon fell, crow cries, and frost fills the sky...Face to face in worries, the river maples and the fires on the fishermen's boats fall asleep).<sup>293</sup> There is evidence to prove that “乌啼,” “江” and “枫” are the names of three bridges (乌啼桥, 江村桥 and 枫桥), and 愁眠 is the name of mountain (愁眠山). This means the lines can mean “When the moon fell behind the Crow Cry Bridge, The fires on the fishing boats by the Riverside Village Bridge and the Maple Bridge are faced with the Worried Sleep Mountain.”<sup>294</sup> Sometimes a word can be read as both a name and an image. For example, in Mao Zedong's lines “烟雨莽苍苍, 龟蛇锁大江,” “龟” (turtle) and “蛇” (snake) refer to two hills along the Yangtze River – “In the dark mist and rain, the Turtle Hill and the Snake Hill lock the Great River.” Without knowing this, one may also take the turtle and snake as two mythical or legendary creatures, which is not contradictory to the first reading, since the two hills are very likely to have gained the names from a myth or legend in the first place.

---

<sup>293</sup> QTS 2721.

<sup>294</sup> For Zhang Ji's poem, see QTS. For information regarding the historical disagreement over this poem, refer to Zhang Tianjian 1990: 115-123.

The content based manipulation in Chapter Two sometimes also involves structural manipulation that Chapter One features. In an assigned-line poem, the assigned characters may determine both the structure and the content of the poem. For example, “卢俊义反” (Lu Junyi rebels, see Chapter Two) and “一片飞云掩洞门” (A wisp of cloud covers the cave’s entrance, see Chapter Two) are lines that determines both the content and structure, because on the one hand, they are the assigned lines, and on the other hand, function on the structural level.

Chinese MFP collect all kinds of “leaking traps” which allow “fish” to slip in and out. This is related to the notion of “望文生意” (producing meaning out of the text) raised by Ma Jianzhong (马建忠 1844-1900) in his *Mashi Wentong* (马氏文通), the first Chinese work on Chinese grammar:

字各有义,而一字有不止一义者. 古人所谓“望文生意”者此也.

Characters have different meanings, and each character may have more than one meaning. This is why the ancient people say “producing meaning by looking at the text.”

“望文生意” was first used by Zhu Xi in the Song dynasty to mean reading a literature superficially without understanding what the author originally intended to mean.<sup>295</sup> The different attitudes that Ma and Zhu had toward this term are parallel to text-based literary interpretation versus biography-based interpretation. We cannot say that one is completely right and the other is completely wrong, because in practice, both historical and textual factors should be taken into consideration. However, in Chinese MFP, “望文生意” often plays a dominant role.

---

<sup>295</sup> See Zhu Wengong Wenji (朱文公文集), vol. 48, in the article “Letter for Replying to Lu Ziyue” (答吕子约).

Closely related to the multiple meanings demonstrated in MFP is the search for hidden meaning in the Chinese tradition, such as interpreting the Eight Trigrams and inscriptions on oracle bones. Multiple meanings and hidden meanings are also connected to the “concept games” played by the “school of logicians” (名家), such as claiming “a hard white stone is two things” (坚白石二) because it contains the attributes “white” and “hard.” Allusion is also a kind of hidden meaning.

Chapters Four and Five discuss various kinds of graphic maneuvers in MFP. T. E. Hulme (1883-1917) said that poetry “is not a counter language, but a graphic concrete one” which “makes you continuously see a physical thing.” Hulme was comparing poetry and prose when he made this remark, and what he meant is that poetry relies on imagery and metaphors more than prose does.<sup>296</sup> Hulme also said that “images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language,” and what he meant by “images” were the images words bring into the reader’s mind. However, in the case of Chinese MFP, images can mean the physical shape of characters, phrases, and text formations. For our purposes, we may adapt Hulme’s logic as follows: In Chinese MFP, the graphic or physical images presented in the characters themselves are not only linguistic signs that introduce intuitive images in one’s mind, but part of the very essence of the poem.

---

<sup>296</sup> Hulme 1936: 134-135. “In prose as in algebra concrete things are embodied in signs or counters which are moved about according to rules, without being visualized at all in the process... Poetry, in one aspect at any rate, may be considered as an effort to avoid this characteristic of prose. It is not a counter language, but a graphic concrete one. It always makes you continuously see a physical thing. Graphic meanings can only be transferred by the new bowl of metaphor; prose is an old pot that lets them leak out. Images in verse are not mere decoration, but the very essence of an intuitive language. Verse is a pedestrian taking you over the ground, prose – a train which delivers you at a destination.”

The notion of “graphic (or physical) images” here is different from the concept of a “pictographic language,” the latter implying that characters physically resemble the objects or action they represent. Let’s look at three important historical commentaries regarding the relationship between characters and the concepts they represent. Xu Shen (许慎, around 120), the author of *Explaining the Primary Graphs and Analyzing the Compound Graphs* (说文解字), said “to write is to be similar” (书者如也), but he did not indicate to be similar to what. Duan Chengshi (段成式 ?-863) in the Tang dynasty thought what Xu Shen meant is “to be similar to what things look like” (如其事物之状).

In the Song dynasty, Zheng Qiao (郑樵 1104-1162) further elaborated that:

书画同源: 书与画同出...凡象形者, 皆可画也. 不可画则无其书矣, 六书者, 皆象形之变也.<sup>297</sup>

Script and pictures have the same origin; writing and drawing emerged at the same time. All images can be drawn. Undrawable things will be unwritable. The six forms of characters are all variations of pictographs.

These ideas of Duan Chengshi and Zheng Qiao make many people (both within and outside of China) believe that Chinese characters are pictographic.<sup>298</sup> Ernest F. Fenollosa (1853-1908) was among the earliest Western scholars who followed the pictographic point of view and applied it in reading Chinese poetry. See the following passage from his booklet *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*:

But the Chinese notion is something much more than arbitrary symbols. It is based on a vivid shorthand picture of the operations of nature. In the algebraic figure and in the spoken word there is no natural connection between thing and sign: all depends upon sheer convention. But the Chinese method follows natural suggestions... Chinese poetry has the unique advantage of combining both

---

<sup>297</sup> Lin 1998: 571.

<sup>298</sup> For example, Francis Bacon said in 1605 that “Chinese...expresses neither letters nor words in gross, but things or notions.” See Boltz 1994: 4.

elements. It speaks at once with the vividness of painting, and with the mobility of sounds... In reading Chinese we do not seem to be juggling mental counters, but to be watching things work out their own fate.<sup>299</sup>

Fenollosa compared the following two poetic lines to demonstrate his idea:

The curfew tolls the knell of parting day.  
月耀如晴雪

Fenollosa pointed out that the first English poetic line is more like music, “weaving its unities out of successive impressions of sound,” while the second Chinese line is both musical and graphic – “The character may be seen and read, silently by the eye, one after another: Moon rays like pure snow.”

There were also scholars who challenged the pictographic and ideographic ideas regarding Chinese characters. See S. Du Ponceau’s remarks from 1838:

The letters of our alphabet separately represent sounds to which no meaning is attached, and are therefore only the elements of our graphic system; but, when combined together in groups, they represent the words of our languages, and those words represent or recall ideas to the mind of the reader. I contend that the Chinese characters, though formed of different elements, do no more.<sup>300</sup>

In the field of literary criticism, Fenollosa’s idea was supported by some and criticized by others. Among the former was Ezra Pound, and among the latter were William Huang and James Liu. Here is one of Liu’s comments on the issue:

While one has no wish to deny the additional aesthetic enjoyment afforded by the form of the characters in Chinese poetry, the fact remains that a line of poetry written in Chinese characters is not a mere sequence of images like a film in slow motion, as Fenollosa thought, but a highly complex organic development of sense and sound (like poetry in any other language), with not a little suggestion, but little more than a suggestion, of the graphic aspect of what is being described.<sup>301</sup>

---

<sup>299</sup> Fenollosa 1936: 8.

<sup>300</sup> See Boltz 1996: 3-9 for Boltz’s discussions mentioned on this page.

<sup>301</sup> Liu 1962: 18-19.

To Liu, the literary value of Chinese poetry is based on its linguistic aspect, not its graphic aspect. Liu is worried that Fenollosa may mislead people to think Chinese poetry is different from poetry of other languages and can be read “graphically” without going deep into the literary meanings represented by characters as normal linguistic signs, and his worry parallels the linguists’ concern that characters are viewed as pictographs. Liu’s “additional aesthetic enjoyment” would belong to the material aspect of the Chinese characters, not the linguistic aspect on which literary meanings are based. Fenollosa overlooked the difference between linguistic signs and graphic signs, thinking that Chinese characters are the latter. The difference between a linguistic sign and a picture is that the former can only be understood through learning. Chinese characters are conventionalized signs, not real images or signs (such as a skeleton that indicates danger).

Du Ponceau was correct in saying that characters do not reveal meaning themselves – one can not determine the meaning a character just by looking at it without knowing the Chinese language. However, he was wrong in saying that Chinese characters “do no more” than Western languages – he failed to recognize the functions of the material aspects of the characters. Studies have shown that characters do have graphic functions that alphabetic languages lack; see the following remarks of Liu Zhiji (刘志基):

An important aspect of the Chinese character’s physical shape is its square structure: each character can form an independent “picture”... The square shape of an independent and unified character has the effect of a graphic artwork. Besides, there are various number of elements in a character, and these elements have various ways to combine with each other, making it possible for one to produce artistic effects both within a character and between characters.<sup>302</sup>

---

<sup>302</sup> Liu 1999: 149.

For example, the character “天” (sky, universe) may suggest the Chinese perception of the world, “天人合一” (Universe and Man are one), since “人” (Man) is part of “天.” One may even go a step further with “天”: the first horizontal line represents the sky, the second represents the earth; man exists between the sky and the earth, and he is more related to the earth – he grows out of the earth and cannot go beyond the sky, which is indeed what the *Daodejing* (道德经) says: “人法地，地法天” (Man observes the principles of the earth, and Earth observes the principles of the sky).

Liu also reminds us of the “montage effect” in Chinese characters, which means a reader can see the elements of a character simultaneously. The arrangement of the elements in a character is dimensional – some are above others, some are within others, etc. In pictorial poems, montage is applied on the text level, not just the character level. For example, in the “Sharing-Heart Cape-Jasmine Poem” of Wan Shu discussed above, the character “瀛” in the center of the picture is meant to be read not as one character, but as a unit of six characters (水, 云, 四, 月, 女, 凡), each of which leads to a line in the poem. The poem is not arranged linearly, but in a flower shape, with petals coming out from the center (瀛), thus simultaneously presenting the lines of the poem to the reader, and forcing the reader to first look at the design as a whole before he or she figures out how to read the poem line by line. The montage effect can also be seen in an alphabetic word; for example, the word “seagull” may be viewed as two images (“sea” and “gull”) arranged side-by-side. Therefore, the montage effect is quite limited.

The use of characters as materials for poetry is different from the etymological study of characters. For example, Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书) pointed out that in the Song

dynasty, Wang Anshi explained the meaning of characters from the ideographic approach (解字), and Xie Shi (谢石) physiognomized characters (相字).<sup>303</sup>

在宋则颁于朝者有王安石之“解字,”获于野者有谢石之“相字。”王学不数世而斩,焰灰死,而谢术薪火传承七八百年,痴人仰识趋避,黠者挟以觅衣食.

In the Song dynasty, in the court, there was Wang Anshi's “explaining characters,” and outside of the court there was Xie Shi's “physiognomizing characters.” Wang's study diminished after only a few years, while Xie's practice was carried on over seven or eight hundred years, on which foolish people relied to head to good fortune and avoid bad luck, and with which smart ones make a living.

This passage says that Wang Anshi's intention of drawing serious etymological conclusions from characters failed, while those who used characters in less serious manners, such as for divination, lasted longer. The antithetic couplets that deconstruct characters discussed in Chapter Four mostly belong to Xie Shi's practice, with the purpose of creating artistic effects rather than demonstrating the ideographic function of the characters. For example, the above comment on the character “天” uses the character as a material for artistic effect or philosophical ideas; whether these effects and ideas were the intention of the ancients who created “天” is not important. Similarly, whether “波为水之皮” (波=氵+皮: Waves are the skin of water) and “鸿是江边鸟” (鸿=江+鸟: A swan is riverside bird) reflect that the original meaning of “波” and “鸿” is not important either. What matters is the fact that characters allow us more space for artistic and philosophical imagination, just like Zhou Gongliang (周公亮) said in his *Characters That Strike the Eye* (字触):

---

<sup>303</sup> For the quotation here and below, see Qian Zhongshu 1996 (vol. 3): 978-979.

六书之学莫妙于会意，…已开后人离合相字之门矣… “触”者随意所触，引而深之，不必其字本义也。

Among the Six Functions of characters, “ideograph” is the most interesting… [and it] already opened a door for character splitting-reassembly and character physiognomy… [which means] people can interpret a character as they wish whenever it strikes their eyes, without having to worry about the character’s original meaning.

Thus, we can add one more line to the above remarks of Qian Zhongshu: “文人用以作离合诗” (With Xie Shi’s practice, literati can compose character splitting-reassembling poems). Zhou Gongliang’s notion of “eye-touching the character” (触字) is also parallel to Ma Jianzhong’s “producing meaning out of the text” (望文生意).

Zhou Youguang says: “Literature that uses the physical forms of characters as materials can be called ‘literature of the character forms’” (以字形为资料的文学，可以称为“字形文学”).<sup>304</sup> In poems that use the graphic images of characters, characters are often not only materials (in Boltz’ words) for constructing a literary work, but also images, just like mountains and rivers. In Chinese poetry, it is very common that the poet first portrays scenery or images and then expresses feelings (借景抒情). For example, in the Tray Poem discussed in Chapter Five, the first three lines (“山树高，鸟鸣悲。” “泉水深，鲤鱼肥。” “空仓雀，常苦饥”) are all images, and from the fourth line the poet starts to express her feelings: “吏人妇，会妇稀。” This is the common practice of “stirring” (*xing 兴*), one of the three fundamental poetic techniques established since the *Book of*

---

<sup>304</sup> Zhou 1995: 20.

*Songs* (诗经),<sup>305</sup> which means to use scenery or images to arouse what one wants to express. In the poems that manipulate the images of characters, instead of starting a poem with actual scenery or imagery, the poet can use characters as “arousers” for feeling, or for meaning expression (借字抒情). In each of the three poems attributed to Zhuge Liang, Zhou Yu and Lu Su discussed in Chapter Four, the first four lines do this (e. g. “有水也是溪, 无水也是奚. 去掉溪边水, 添鳥便是鷄”). The wine game triplet composed in the farewell party has the same pattern (“品字三个口, 水酉字成酒”).<sup>306</sup> Common-classifier poems, repeated character poems, and pictorial poems rely on the formation of character arrangement to create a visual effect, so they also involve various forms of character scenery or text scenery. These poems show that in traditional Chinese poetry, in addition to “风景” (landscape scenery), there can also be “字景” (character scenery or imagery). “字景” should be recognized as an important poetic technique in MFP.

Su Shi’s line “诗中有画, 画中有诗” (There are pictures in a poem and poems in a picture) is also related to “字景.” This line is usually read on the linguistic level: a reader can mentally visualize the scenes represented in a poem. With the recognition of “字景,” we can say that certain characters and character formation can be interpreted graphically. The manipulation of “字景” is also comparable to calligraphy. Calligraphy is an art that typically focuses on how to write or “paint” characters as graphic images. Of course, calligraphy is not purely a graphic art, because the content of a calligraphy work is most often a meaningful linguistic structure, such as a word or a poem. Therefore, calligraphy

---

<sup>305</sup> The other two techniques being *fu* (赋 exposition) and *bi* (比 comparison).

<sup>306</sup> See Chapter Four.

is a combination of graphic art and literary art, with emphasis on the graphic aspect. Poems involving “字景” are also a combination of graphic art and linguistic structure, with emphasis on the latter. One who views calligraphy without any knowledge of the meaning of the characters will fail to understand the literary aspect of the art; conversely, one who reads MFP only as poetry will fail to recognize its graphic artistic merit.

The following quotation from *Wenxin Diaolong* also suggests that, at least in certain periods in history, the images of characters played beyond-linguistic role:

是以缀字属篇，必须炼择。一避诡异，二省联边，三权重出，四调单复，诡异者，字形瑰怪者也… 联边者，半字同文者也… 重出者，同字相犯者也… 单复者，字形肥瘦者也。瘠字累句，则纤疏而行劣；肥字积文，则黯黓而篇暗。故善酌字者，参伍单复磊落如珠矣。

...when arranging characters into a text, one must be selective. One needs to 1) avoid tricky and strange characters; ...4) balance the simple and the complicated characters... “tricky and strange characters” refer to characters with unclear meaning and unhandsome shapes... “Simplified and complicated” refers to whether a character looks fat or thin. If a sentence is full of thin characters, then it will appear skinny and poor; if a passage is full of fat characters, then it will appear dark. Therefore those who are good at selecting characters are able to keep a balance between the simple and the complicated, and make them look as clear as strings of pearls.<sup>307</sup>

Liu's expression “arranging characters into a text” (缀字属篇), rather than “writing,” indicates that the beauty of a literary work not only lies in its meaning, but also in its physical form (the character “缀” also means “to decorate”). This idea of Liu Xie is consistent with his interpretation of *wen* (文 writing) in the same book: the literature of human beings is part of the cosmological patterns (纹, also pronounced “wen”), such as the sun, the moon, mountains and rivers.<sup>308</sup> This sense of “*wen*” is the foundation for the

<sup>307</sup> See the " Selecting Character " (炼字) chapter in Liu Xie's *Wenxin Diaolong* (文心雕龙).

<sup>308</sup> Liu Xie's connection between human writings and the patterns in nature is well recognized. For more discussion on this issue, refer to Owen 1985: 18-19.

important concept of *xingshen* (形神 form-spirit) in Chinese aestheticism.<sup>309</sup> *Xing* refers to the visible form of whatever is portrayed or presented, and *shen* refers to the invisible effect the art brings forth. A balance between the *xing* and *shen* (形神兼备) is often the ideal of artistic creation. The graphic image of the characters and the poetic text demonstrate that of the three properties of the Chinese characters “形” (graph, form), “声” (pronunciation), and “义” (meaning), “形” plays an especially important role.

The separate discussion on the linguistic and graphic techniques above does not mean they are completely different. In fact, these modalities share much in common, for example, the symmetric structure in some palindromes (such as “山大王大山”), and the regularly overlapping structure in a thimble poem (such as ...A, A...B, B...C, C...D), are examples that involve both structural and graphic play. Many of Wan Shu’s pictorial poems also demonstrate both manipulations.

The linguistic and graphic significances of MFP make us rethink the definition of *shiti* (诗体). *Shiti* is usually defined as “poetic form,” but this definition is a little problematic, because “form” is more an equivalent of *xing* (形 form), which means mainly the external form. *Ti* (body 体), on the other hand, is associated with both the internal components, structure and the external form, such as in words like *shenti* (身体 human body) and *wuti* (物体 object). This means in Chinese, a poetic structure is not just a matter of external form related to line numbers and syllable numbers, but can also involve intralinear and intra-character play, such as with parallelism, balanced tonal patterns, the manipulation of

---

<sup>309</sup> Han 1995: 27-35. Han points out that *xingshen* (形神论) is one of a dozen most important notions in traditional Chinese aesthetics.

content words, and the structure of characters. For this reason, the word “poetic structure” (诗体) is indeed more fitting than “poetic form.” Let us use an example to further illustrate this issue:

金钗影搖春燕斜, Gold hairpins' shadows move, spring swallows fly,<sup>310</sup>  
木杪生春叶. On the tips of the tree branches, spring leaves grow.  
水塘春始波, The spring pond surface begins to wave,  
火候春初热, The temperature in the start of spring begins to warm,  
土牛儿载将春到也. And the earth ox has carried spring here.

This is a drama style poem with the title “Spring Beginning Day” (立春), sung to the tune “Clear River, A Prelude” (清江引) by the Yuan dynasty Dramatist Guan Yunshi (贯云石 1286-1324). In the first line, “金钗” (gold hairpin) implies a well made-up and dressed-up woman; “影” implies it is a sunny day, “搖” implies the woman is walking. Therefore the first line presents a woman on an excursion in early spring, when the swallows have come. The second line talks about trees, the third line ponds, lakes, or rivers, the fourth line about temperature, the fifth about insects<sup>311</sup>. One can certainly treat “金钗,” “木梢” (tree branch tips), “水塘” (pond), “火候” (climate), “土牛儿” (earth ox) as five individual images in the poem; however, the fact that “金木水火土” (metal, wood, water, fire, and earth) are respectively assigned at the beginning of each line indicates the poet has another intention. These are the Five Elements (五行), representing the functions of certain primary natural elements in the objects they modify (the same is true with the five internal organs, the heart, liver, spleen, lung and kidneys of a human body in Chinese

---

<sup>310</sup> “春燕” may also mean the paper-cut swallow that women wore as hair ornament for the celebration of the Spring Beginning Day in ancient times. “土牛” is an ox made of earth for the same celebration.

medicine). In this poem, the assigned character “春” (which appears in every line) and the Five Elements (金木水火土) both determine the structure of the poem and contribute to the meaning of it. MFP make us rediscover the significance of the form.

From the above example, we can see that in MFP, the form can be an essential part of the value of the poem, rather than just serve the content or theme of the poem. This is related to the view of the human body in Chinese medicine. For example, in Chinese medicine, *xin* (心, heart) refers to the broader function of the heart rather than the physical heart. We have to understand the concept of *xin* in terms of its relation to other organs. Similarly, *qi* (气) may not be the air we breathe, but a function related to it. The Chinese writing system should not be viewed only as a system that for communicating meaning, but a system that has a broader function. The structurally generated multiple meanings in palindromes, restructurable poems, name poems, hidden-head circular poems, as well as the lines involving flexible parts of speech listed above, demonstrate the senses of being flexible or adaptable, which are also important skills in social interaction between individuals (变通, 圆通, 随机应变, etc.). This, coupled with the flexibility and preference for evoking multiple meanings in literary Chinese, also runs parallel with the fact that the relationship between Chinese individuals is more governed by personal coordination. “仁” (*ren*), “the central virtue of Confucianism, [which] asserts the relationality and interdependence of human beings,”<sup>312</sup> has always been more important than “法” (law) in the Chinese tradition. Perhaps not coincidentally, the

---

<sup>312</sup> Ames 1998: 84.

character “仁” is composed of the element “人” (person) and “二” (two) to emphasize the inter-personal relationship.

Chinese MFP allow us to see that poetry is linguistic art, and it can also be a visual art, as well as an efficient practical tool for information recording and memory aid. In MFP, the relation between the signifiers and the signified, and the relation between the form/structure and the content, are redefined. MFP demonstrate that when evaluating the role of the Chinese writing system in Chinese culture, every aspect needs to be taken into consideration. Chinese MFP is an example in which the linguistic aspect and the material aspect combine artistically and meaningfully. MFP are indeed as an unique and valuable treasure in Chinese literary history, and they are also an important contribution to world literature.

## Bibliography

Ames, T. Roger. *Thinking from the Han*, Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press, 1998.

---- "Paronomasia: A Confucian Way of Making Meaning," Unpublished Article, 2004.

Boltz, William G. *The Origin and Early Development of the Chinese Writing System*. New Haven, CT: American Oriental Society Press, 1994.

Chen Baoya (陈宝亚). *Language and Culture* (语言文化论), Kunming, China: Yunnan University Press (云南大学出版社), 1993.

Chen Wangdao (陈望道). *General Introduction to Rhetoric* (修辞学发凡), Shanghai Education Press (上海教育出版社), 1979.

Empson, William. *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, Edinburgh, Scotland: T. and A. Constable Ltd., 1953.

Fang Xuanling (房玄龄 578-648). *Book of Jin* (晋书), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局出版社), 1974.

Fenollosa, Ernest Francisco (1853-1908). *The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry*. San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1920.

Fu Xuancong (傅璇琮) et al. *Complete Song Shi Poetry* (全宋诗), Beijing: Beijing University Press (北京大学出版社), 1991.

Gai Guoliang (盖国梁), ed. *Three Hundred Fun Poems* (趣味诗三百首), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 2001.

Guo Shaoyu (郭绍虞), ed. *Qing Dynasty Poetry Discussions – Continued* (清诗话续), Vol. 2. Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 1983.

Han Linde (韩林德). "World" Emerges Outside of Image (境生象外), Shanghai: Sanlian Bookstore Press (三联书店出版社), 1995.

He Jiuying (何九盈). *Cultural Study of Chinese Characters* (汉字文化学), Shenyang, Liangning: Liaoning People's Press (辽宁人民出版社), 2000.

He Xiaoming (何小明). *Names and Chinese Culture* (姓名与中国文化). Beijing: The People's Press (人民出版社), 2001.

Higgins, Dick. *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1987.

Hu Yingling (胡应麟 1147-1167). *The Broom Creek Fishing Hermit's Poetry Discussions* (苕溪渔隐丛话), Beijing: People's Literature Press (人民文学出版社), 1962.

Huang Wei (黄玮) & You Ruijie (游汝杰). "Summary of the Study of Cultural Linguistics from 1994 to 1997" (1994-1997 年文化语言学研究综述), in *The Yearbook of the Study of Chinese Linguistics Between 1995-1998* (中国语言学研究年鉴), 2002.

Huang Yaping (黄亚平) & Meng Hua (孟华). *Semiology of Chinese Characters* (汉字符号学), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 2001.

Huang Zhijun (黄之隽 1668-1748). *Fragrant Bits Collection* (香屑集), in *Separately Printed Rare Books from the Complete Books of the Four Libraries* (四库全书珍本散集) vol. 379, ed. Wang Yunwu (王云伍). Taiwan: The Commercial Press (台湾商务印书馆), 1972.

Hulme, Thomas E. *Speculations*. New York: The Humanities Press, 1936.

Jameson, Fredric. *The Prison House of Language*, Princeton, NJ: University of Princeton Press, 1972.

Jiang Shaoyu (蒋绍愚). *A Study of the Language in Tang Poetry* (唐诗语言研究), Zhengzhou, Henan: Central China Classics Press (中州古籍出版社), 1990.

Kang Wanmin (康万民). *Ways of Reading the Star Formation Poem* (璇玑图读法), in *Separately Printed Rare Books from the Complete Books of the Four Libraries* (四库全书珍本散集), vol. 232, ed. Wang Yunwu (王云伍). Taiwan: The Commercial Press (台湾商务印书馆), 1972.

Kao Yu-kung & Mei Tzu-lin. "Syntax, Diction, and Imagery in T'ang Poetry," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.31 (1971): 49-136.

Kukai (空海 774-835). *Secret Mansion of the Literary Mirror* (文镜秘府论), annotated by Wang Liqi (王利器). Beijing: The Academy of Social Sciences Press (中国社会科学出版社), 1983.

Lang Ying (郎瑛 1487-1566). *Seventh Revised Classified Drafts* (七修类稿), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1961.

Li Yanfeng (李延风). *Tracing the Didactic in the Anomalous: The Pre-Tang Chinese Animal Stories in Shanghaijing and Soushenji*, Master's Thesis, Honolulu, HI: University of Hawaii, 1999.

Liang Shi (梁石) & Liang Dong (梁栋). *Chinese Ancient and Modern Witty Couplets* (中国古今巧对妙联大观), Beijing: Chinese Writers' Association Press (中国文联出版社), 1995.

Liang Shiqiu (梁实秋). *Complete Short Writings of the Elegant Room* (雅舍小品全集), Shanghai: Shanghai People's Press (上海人民出版社), 1993.

Liang Yusheng (梁羽生). *Entertaining Talks on Famous Antithetical Couplets* (名联趣谈), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 1993.

Liang Zhangju (梁章钜 1775-1849). *Serial Talks on Antithetic Couplets – Complete Edition* (楹联丛话全编), Beijing: Beijing Press (北京出版社), 1996.

Lin Chengtao (林成涛). *World in Characters* (字里乾坤), Beijing: China Records Press (中国档案出版社), 1998.

Lin Shoucheng (林守城). *Unusual Poems – Let's Enjoy Together* (奇诗共赏), Taiwan: Water Lotus Press (水芙蓉出版社), 1977.

Liu, James. *The Art of Chinese Poetry*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1962.

---- *The Interlingual Critic*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982.

---- *Language – Paradox – Poetics: A Chinese Perspective*, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Liu Xie (刘勰 465-522). *Carving Dragon with a Literary Mind with Additional Annotation* (增订文心雕龙校注), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 2000.

Liu Yuejin (刘跃进). *Study of Songs from the Jade Terrace* (玉台新咏研究), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 2000.

Liu Yulin (刘玉霖). *Interesting Topics in the Ocean of Poetry* (诗海趣话), Xi'an, Shaanxi: Three-Qin Press (三秦出版社), 1996.

Liu Zhiji (刘志基). *The Form and Shape of Chinese Characters* (汉字体态论), Guangxi Education Press (广西教育出版社), 1999.

---- *General Discussion on Chinese Character Culture* (汉字文化综论), Guangxi Education Press (广西教育出版社), 1993.

Liu Zhonghua (刘中华). *The Legend of Ji Xiaolan* (纪晓岚传奇), Beijing: People's University Press (人民大学出版社), 2003.

Lo Chintang (罗锦堂). *History of Chinese Dramatic Style Verse* (中国散曲史), Taipei: The Chinese Culture University Press (中国文化大学出版社), 1983.

Marney, John. *Chinese Anagrams*, Taiwan: Chinese Materials Publications Center, 1993.

McCraw, David. "Pursuing Zhuangzi as Rhymester: a Snark-Hunt in Eight Fits," *Sino-Platonic Papers* 1995 (67).

Mei Tzu-lin & Kao Yu-kung. "Tu Fu's 'Autumn Meditations': An Exercise in Linguistic Criticism," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, vol.28 (1968): 44-80.

Meng Qi (孟棨 fl. 875). *True Story Poems* (本事诗), in *Poetry Discussions from Different Dynasties* (历代诗话) vol. 1, ed. Ding Fubao (丁福宝 1874-1952), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 2001.

Ni Tao (倪涛 fl. 1709). *One of the "Six-Ones"* (六一之一录), In *Complete Books of the Four Libraries* (四库全书), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 1987.

Nozaki, Nobuchika (野崎成近). *Chinese Decorative Designs of Good Luck* (中国吉祥图案), Taiwan: Zhongwen Tushu Gufen Youxian Gongsi (众文图书股份有限公司), 1981.

Owen, Stephen. *An Anthology of Chinese Literature*, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 1996.

---- *Omen of the World – Traditional Chinese Poetry and Poetics*, Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985.

Peng Feng (彭锋). *Poetry Can Stir* (诗可以兴), Hefei, Anhui: Anhui Education Press (安徽教育出版社), 2003.

Peng Dingqiu (彭定裘 1645-1719). *Complete Tang Poetry* (全唐诗), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1960.

Pulleyblank, Edwin G. *Lexicon of Reconstructed Pronunciation in Early Middle Chinese, Late Middle Chinese, and Early Mandarin*. Vancouver, B. C., Canada: University of British Columbia Press, 1991.

Qian Zhongshu (钱钟书). *Notes of the Discussions of the Art of Poetry* (谈艺录), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1984.

---- *Collection of Limited Views* (管锥编), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1996.

Sang Shichang (桑世昌 fl. 1208). *Classified Palindromes* (回文类聚), in *Complete Books of the Four Libraries* (四库全书), vol. 1351, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 1987.

Shi Chengjin (石成金 16<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> Century). *Family Heirloom* (传家宝), Tianjin: Tianjin Social Sciences Press (天津社会科学出版社), 1992.

Shi Weigong (师为公). *The Han Language and Han Culture* (汉语与汉文化), Nanjing, China: Jiangsu Education Press, 1996.

---- *The Fun Chinese Language* (趣味语文), Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press, 2001.

Shi Wende (施文德). *Classical Chinese Poetic Rules* (诗词格律), Shanghai: Shanghai Dictionary Press (上海辞书出版社), 2003.

Tang Guizhang (唐圭璋). *Complete Song Ci Poetry* (全宋词), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1965.

Tao Zongyi (陶宗仪 1360-1368). *Shuofu* (说郛), Shanghai: The Commercial Press, 1927.

Wan Shu (万树 17th Century). *Small Pieces of the Star Formation Silk* (璇玑碎锦), in *Additional Collected Book Series* (丛书集成续编), Vol. 218: 727-754. Taiwan: Xinwenfeng Press Inc. (新文丰出版公司), 1989.

Wang Ang (汪昂 b. 1615). *Prescription Song* (汤头歌诀), in *Complete Medicine Books of Wang Ang* (汪昂医学全书), Beijing: China Chinese Medicine Press (中国中医药出版社), 1999.

Wang Li (王力). *Theory of Chinese Grammar* (中国语法理论), in *Anthology of Wang Li* (王力文集) vol 1. Ji'nan, Shandong: Shandong Education Press, 1984.

---- *Chinese Prosody Rules (A)* (汉语诗律学[上]), in *Anthology of Wang Li* (王力文集) vol 14. Ji'nan, Shandong: Shandong Education Press, 1989.

Wang Qi (王圻) & Wang Siyi (王思义). *Illustrated Encyclopedia of Heaven, Earth and People* (三才图会), in *Complete Books of the Four Libraries – Continued* (续修四库全书), vol. 1235, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press, 2002.

Wang Zaixi (王在希). *This is Chinese* (这就是汉语), Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press, 1992.

Wang Zhenzhong (王振忠). *Probing the Society and Cultural History of the Hui Region* (徽州社会文化史探微). Shanghai: Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences Press, 2002.

Weinberger, E. & O., Paz. *Nineteen Ways of Looking at Wang Wei*, Mount Kisco, N.Y. : Moyer Bell, 1987.

Wu Jing (吴兢). *Essential Explanations of the Ancient Topics of the Music Bureau* (乐府古题要解), in *Continuation of “Poetry Discussions from Different Dynasties”* (历代诗话续编), vol. 1, ed. Ding Fubao (丁福宝 1874-1952), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 2001.

Wu Zeng (吴曾 1127-1160). *Poetry Discussions of the Adaptable Studio* (能改斋词话), in *Collected Ci Poetry Discussions of the Dynasties* (历代词话), ed. Zhang Zhang (张璋), etc. Beijing: Daxiang Press (大象出版社), 2002.

Xie Zhen (谢榛 1495-1575). *Four Mythic Oceans Poetry Discussions* (四溟诗话), Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1998.

Xu Ling (徐陵 506?-583?). *New Songs from the Jade Terrace with Annotation* (玉台新咏笺注), Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1985.

Xu Shen (许慎 around 120). *Explaining the Primary Graphs and Analyzing the Compound Graphs* (说文解字), Taiyuan, Shanxi: Shanxi Press (山西出版社), 2000.

Xu Shizeng (徐师曾 1517-1580). *Preface to “Discerning Literary Forms”* (文体明辨序说), Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1962.

Xu Yuan (徐元). *Selected “Bird-language” Poems of Different Dynasties* (历代禽言诗选), Hangzhou, China: Zhejiang Classics Press (浙江古籍出版社), 2002.

Yan Huazhi (鄢化志). *General Introduction of the Miscellaneous Forms of Traditional Chinese Poetry* (中国古代杂体诗通论), Beijing: Beijing University Press, 2001.

Yan Yu (严羽 12<sup>th</sup> century). *Canglang Poetry Talks* (沧浪诗话), edited and annotated by Guo Shaoyu (郭绍虞). Beijing: People's Literature Press, 1961.

Yang Shen (杨慎 1488-1559). *The Rising Hut Poetry Discussions* (升庵诗话), in *Poetry Discussions from Different Dynasties – Combined Edition* (历代诗话统编), vol. 3, ed. He Wen Huan (何文焕) and Ding Fubao (丁福保 1874-1952). Beijing: Beijing Library Press, 2003.

Ye Jiaying (叶嘉莹). *Wang Guowei and His Literary Criticism* (王国维及其文学批评), Taiwan: Guiguan Book Ltd. (桂冠图书股份有限公司), 2000.

Ye Mengde (叶梦得 1077-1148). *Stone Woods Poetry Talks* (石林诗话), in *Poetry Talks From Different Dynasties* (历代诗话), ed. He Wenhuan (何文焕 1732-1809). Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju Press (中华书局), 1981.

Yuan Mei (袁枚 1716-1798). *Poetry Discussions of the Sui Garden* (随园诗话), Beijing: People's Literature Press (人民文学出版社), 1982.

Zhang Dexin (张德鑫). *World in Numbers* (数里乾坤). Beijing: Beijing University Press, 1999.

Zhang Tianjian (张天健). *Interesting Anecdotes about Tang Poetry* (唐诗趣话), Beijing: Xueyuan Press (学苑出版社), 1990.

Zhang Tiejun (张铁君). *Innitiative Discussion on the Study of Antithetic Couplets* (楹联学创论), Taiwan: Xiangwen Yinshuachang, 1979.

Zhang Zilie (张自烈 1597-1673). *Guide for the Orignal Meaning of Characters* (正字通), Beijing: International Cultures Press (国际文化出版公司), 1996.

Zhao Yi (赵翼 1727-1814). *Study Series from My Spare Time after Serving Parents* (陔余丛考), Taiwan: Xinwenfeng Press Inc. (新文丰出版公司), 1975.

Zheng Yishou (郑颐寿) and Zhu Dinggeng (诸定耕). *Grand Dictionary of Chinese Literary and Linguistic Art* (中国文学语言艺术大辞典), Chongqing: Chongqing Press (重庆出版社), 1993.

Zhou Youguang (周友光). *The Story of Alphabetic Letters* (字母的故事), Shanghai: Shanghai Education Press, 1958.

---- *Free Talks on Chinese Language (A)*, 语文闲谈(上), Shanghai: Sanlian Bookstore Press (三联书店), 1995.

Zhu Guang (朱光 Qing dynasty). *Supplement to Classified Palindromes* (回文类聚补遗), in *Complete Books of the Four Libraries* (四库全书), vol. 1351, Shanghai: Shanghai Classics Press (上海古籍出版社), 1987.

Zhu Xi (朱熹 1130-1200). *Collected Writings of Zhu Xi* (朱文公文集), in *Complete Edition of the Four-Collection Series* (四部丛刊整编), Taiwan: Taiwan Commercial Press (台湾商务印书馆), 1979.