

Introduction to the Calligrams Edition



As if a Ring

月亮是圓的
詩也是——

The moon is round
and so is the poem—

Zhou Mengdie (1921–2014)

It is a love story that has survived the centuries, through embellishment and expansion, rhetorical invocation, literary allusion, emotive fictionalization, and illustrative depictions in paintings. Glancing references to it appear in poems dating back to the fifth and sixth centuries. By the first half of the seventh century, the story's narrative begins to take shape with the appearance of a brief biography in a history of the Jin (265–420). As recorded in the chapter on "Exemplary Women," Su Hui 蘇惠 (style name Su Ruolan), a gifted poet native of Shiping (a town located in present-day Shaanxi), wove a brocade of a "reversible circular-picture poem" (*huiwen xuantu shi* 迴文旋圖詩) for her husband Dou Tao, the prefect of Qingzhou who had been exiled to the place of "flowing sands." This mournful poem of love's longing consisted of 840 characters and could be read "circularly, in any direction."

A gloss on the poet Jiang Yan's fifth-century "Rhapsody on Separation," also written in the early Tang dynasty, added a scandalous spin: although Dou Tao swore not to marry again, soon after his banishment to the desert wastes he married another woman. Only then did Su Hui weave her circular poem for him, as an attempt to win back his heart.

The most renowned version of the love story is attributed to Wu Zetian and officially dated 692 AD. During the Ming and Qing dynasties it circulated as a preface to Su Hui's reconstructed poem. While its authenticity cannot be proven (the compilers of an eighteenth century descriptive catalogue of the imperial collection, for one, deemed it a forgery), it's not hard to see why Su Hui would appeal to Wu Zetian or to someone pretending to be her. Well-versed in the classics and accomplished in music and poetry, Imperial Majesty Wu was the only woman in Chinese history to establish her own dynasty (the Second Zhou) and rule as Emperor. She practiced Daoist rituals and exalted Buddhism above Confucianism as an intellectual and spiritual pursuit, while supporting all three belief systems in different ways to maintain peace in the realm. A prophecy in a canonical commentary pointed to her as being an incarnation of Maitreya, reborn to rule over the island of the terrestrial world, *Jambudvīpa*. She had begun her life in the palace as a concubine; fourteen hundred years after her death, her towering memorial tablet remains blank.

In her record of Su Hui, Wu Zetian dramatized a love triangle between the poet, her husband, and his concubine, Zhao Yangtai. When Dou Tao was given a new military appointment, Su Hui, angry at her husband's infidelity, refused to accompany him and so he took Zhao Yangtai instead. Feeling remorse, Su Hui wove her *huiwen* poem and sent a servant to deliver it to him. Eventually, husband and wife reunited and their love for each other reignited

with a ten-fold devotion. Wu Zetian said that the square brocade, measuring eight-by-eight inches and woven in a five-color pattern, contained more than eight hundred words that could be read horizontally, vertically, backward, forward, circularly to make over two hundred poems. To others who saw it and didn't know how to read it, Su Hui just laughed and replied, "Turning and twisting in every direction it forms poems on its own accord. No one but my beloved can be assured of comprehending it."

Wu Zetian, or her imposter, wanted to preserve the memory of Su Hui's talent in the official annals of history. She wrote that her poem "represented all of the laments of recent generations from the inner chambers and should be taken as a model by all literary scholars" and serve as a moral lesson for future generations (as Dou Tao showed remorse and a willingness to rectify his mistakes). She also mentioned a text Su Hui composed of over five thousand words that was lost during the civil unrest at end of the Sui dynasty (581–618). At some point the silk-embroidered masterpiece was also lost, along with its original design. The poem's square layout was transmitted through the ages as a post-Tang reconstruction and became known by its Wu Zetian-recorded name: *xuanjitu* 璇璣圖, or *la carte de la sphère armillaire* ("the map of the armillary sphere") as translated by Michèle Métail in her remarkable anthology of *huiwen* poems, *The Flight of Wild Geese*, originally published in France as *Le Vol des Oies Sauvages* in 2011.

Su Hui's *Xuanjitu* has also been translated as "Picture of the North Star," "Picture of the Turning Sphere," "Chart of the Constellations," "Diagram of the Armillary Sphere," "The Maze Pattern," and recently by David Hinton, who has posted his translation of one quadrant of the poem online, as "Star Gauge." "Xuan" literally means "precious jade" and "ji" means "any rotatable instrument." The two words together denote the four stars in the bowl

of the Big Dipper, the single star Polaris, a prayer wheel, or a type of armillary sphere. Astrophysicist T. D. Lee thinks the *xuanji* was originally an astrometric tool made of a bamboo tube encased by a stone support called a *cong* and fitted with a three-notched, turning jade ring also called a *xuanji* (or *bi*) that could determine the position of the Celestial Pole. Consulting an astronomical almanac, he has traced it back to pre-Shang times, around 2700 BCE.

The third word, *tu*, can signify a picture, map, chart, drawing, diagram, or pattern. In Sui Hui's multi-directional pictorial pattern, text and textile converge at their etymological source in a seamless celestial weave of poetry. Art historian Eugene Wang believes Su Hui's pattern received its astral overlay during the Tang, when a historical-cultural astrological shift occurred that led to her *huiwen* poem being called a *xuanjitu*, as other visual works of the time were also named. In his article "Patterns Above and Within," published in the essay anthology *Books in Numbers*, Wang discusses various Tang and pre-Tang artifacts, like a colorful Han-dynasty brocade armband unearthed from the Lop desert in the Tarim Basin that integrates Chinese characters and animal images into a planetary design, which have an affinity with Su Hui's poem. Such artistic works he describes as providing a "visual form through which one can both reach heaven and the innermost recess of the human heart."

Remarkably, the three Tang dynasty records mentioned above—the Jin history, the gloss on Jiang Yan's rhapsody, and Wu Zetian's account—are more or less the only primary historical texts on Su Hui that all later discussions and imaginations of her life and work has been based on (besides local histories and legends that have added to the story). In the thirteenth century, for instance, Zhu Shuzhen (not the celebrated Song dynasty woman poet) is thought to have written a note on Su Hui's love poem that the

seventeenth-century poet Wang Shizhen included in his *Random Talks North of the Pond*. It draws directly from Wu Zetian's narrative and goes on to describe her father's purchase of the diagram after seeing it hanging on the wall of a local official's residence, and then her own awakening to the diagram's principle asterism after many hours of study:

The *xuanji* functions like the Heavenly Platter itself. While the longitudes and latitudes are the moving tracks of the constellations, in the middle a single "eye" is preserved that serves as the Heavenly Heart [the character xin, "heart," in the very center]. This is like the fixed star [Polaris] that does not move. The constellations revolve in their paths, never straying by a single degree, guided by this controlling star that sits in the middle.

The Central Square [of eight characters around the central character xin] can be equated with the constellation Grand Palace. When each character is repeated once, a four-character poem emerges. One then goes on to the Second Square, which can be equated with the Purple Palace. Four-character palindromic poems are located here. The four rectangles growing out of the four sides of the Second Square form five-character palindromic poems, while in the four squares off of the corners of the Second Square one finds four-character palindromic poems. In the four rectangles growing out of the four sides of the Third Square are four-character poems, if only the last character of one line is repeated as the first character of the next line. (These lines, however, cannot be read in reverse.) In the four squares adjacent to the corners of the Third Square are three-character palindromic poems. The perimeter of the Third Square and the perimeter of the entire diagram are all seven-character palindromic poems which can be read in different directions following the boundaries.¹

Métail includes a black-and-white gridded reproduction² with crisscrossing diagonals of Su Hui's brocade attributed to Zhu Shuzhen as a geometric equivalent of the spherical design which translates the armature of the armillary onto the page of the poem. This image appeared in the earliest extant anthology of *hui-wen* verse, edited by Sang Shichang and published by the Imperial Academy during the Northern Song. Unfortunately, Sang's original anthology was also lost. It was later revised and expanded in the Ming, and again in the Qing around 1662 by Zhu Xiangxian, this edition of Sang's book surviving the ages and becoming a classic of experimental Chinese literature.

A beautiful handscroll painting on silk of Su Hui in the style of Zhu Shuzhen can be seen in the collection at the Sackler Museum at Harvard University. The painting is attributed to the celebrated thirteenth century woman poet and painter, Guan Daosheng, though thought a forgery from the seventeenth century. Su Hui's portrait precedes the square reproduction of the diagram with sections of the poem dyed in five different colors and the center heart character (*xin*) absent, an empty word, followed by examples of how to read different blocks of the poem as well as Zhu's note on the brocade, as quoted in part above. Another handscroll painting at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, said to be a copy of Qiu Ying's sixteenth-century rendering of the poet, illustrates Su Hui and Dou Tao's story in a series of scenes. Zhu's note also appears with the title "Transformations of the *Xuanji* Diagram," along with many examples of her reading of the embedded poems, some correlating the constellation "enclosures" of traditional Chinese astronomy with the square walls of text in the poem.

The writer Li Ruzhen (c. 1763–1830) popularized Su Hui's brocade in his fantastical novel *Flowers in the Mirror*. He reproduced

two different layouts of the armillary map: one as the simplified geometric grid with crisscrossing diagonal lines of text found in Sang's anthology, the other as the whole textual brocade with blocks of text highlighted in five colors. Li also gives detailed instructions on how to read the poem through the voice of one of his characters, Tang Min, speaking to his niece. Su Zhecong included an image of the *xuanjitu* as a frontispiece to her groundbreaking anthology of Chinese women writers *Zhongguo lidai funü zuopin xuan* 《中國歷代婦女作品選》 published in Shanghai in 1987. That same year Dick Higgins—poet, artist, core member of the intermedia “happenings” movement Fluxus—published his seminal anthology, two decades in the making, *Pattern Poetry: Guide to an Unknown Literature*. One can find the grid-patterned reproduction of Su Hui's poem in Higgins' book along with a caption noting it can be read in 40,000 different ways. The German sinologist Herbert Franke contributed a section on “Chinese Patterned Texts” as an appendix where he described Su Hui's “love letter” as “one of the most famous literary tours de force in Chinese civilization.” Higgins' anthology opens with an epigraph by the Spanish Jesuit P. Juan Eusebio Nieremberg (1633): “El mundo es un labirinto poetico...”

Su Hui's woven labyrinth is at once the foundational text and aesthetic apex of the *huiwen* poetic tradition, a tradition often connected with the patterned poetry of *wenzi youxi* 文字遊戲 (“games of words”), though the latter was normally reserved for comic satire and light verse. The verb *hui* can be written in a few different ways and means “to return, revolve, curve, cycle.” *Wen* means “writing, language, text, culture” among other secondary definitions depending on context. One of its pictographs on oracle bones look like two x's, one atop the other, and is thought to mean

“pattern, design, vein,” signifying the “origin of forms.” Stitched together into a new word, *huiwen* has been translated as “reversible,” “palindromic,” “anacyclical,” “circular,” or “palin-textual.” It refers to any text that is syntactically and semantically reversible. Unlike your usual palindrome in English where individual letters read the same forward and backward (“A man, a plan, a canal, Panama!”), *huiwen* consist of words that can be read forward and backward. The lack of articles and grammatical inflections—adjective and noun declensions, verb conjugations, agreement—along with the language’s monosyllabic morphemes lend Chinese its predisposition to reversibility. So much depends on the position of words, as a rearrangement in word order can cause a transmutation between parts of speech and a change in meanings. Colloquial Chinese contains innumerable examples of reversibility. The simple sentence *wo ai mama* 我愛媽媽 (“I love mommy”) for instance, functions perfectly in reverse to mean “Mommy loves me,” making the declaration an infinite loop of love. And even many strictly palindromic constructions like *qu bu qu* 去不去 (“Are we/you going?”) exist. But the art of reversibility is hard to master, and some types of writing are nearly impossible to adapt to the *huiwen* form, such as Buddhist chants with their many phonetically adopted Sanskrit names.

Huiwen poetry enlarges and absorbs other classical poetic styles through a diversity of patterned forms, achieving its reversible efficacy through the usual poetic determinants of sound and tonal pattern, rhythm and meaning, imagistic turns (including those of an auditory and olfactory nature), thematic continuity, visual elegance (down to the micro-level of varying radicals in a line), the elusive expression of the ineffable, and so on, thus exacting a high level of skill and creative manipulation to elevate it from a conventional

game to an art of spiritual grace, infused with the *dao* 道 (“road,” “route,” “way”) of poetry.

Wang Rong’s ten-line, five-character-per-line poem “Spring Stroll” in this volume exemplifies this kind of aesthetic accomplishment. Its forward reading moves from the woman’s thoughts of her beloved far out on the frontier, past twirling catkins, flowering groves, pond lotuses, the brocade curtain, and finally closes in on her aching presence in the inner chamber. In reverse her thoughts wander out in search for her beloved, from the inner chamber beyond the eastern pass north to the frontier. The two readings form an endless cycle of longing that returns and departs, zooming in and out, without ever reaching the object of her desire. The scholar Meow Hui Goh has mapped out the complex tonal prosody in Wang Rong’s poem where at least three tonal patterns overlap and the shift from outside to inside and inside to outside in the middle of the poem is complemented by a diagonal mirroring of tones.

One could imagine that reversibility has been an integral part of the Chinese language since Cang Jie invented writing from observing birds making tracks in the dirt. Early palindromic intimations can be found in the binary reversals of the hexagrams in the *Book of Changes* (*Yi Jing*), repetition in the ritual hymns of the *Classic of Poetry* (*Shi Jing*), the parallel inversions in the *Book of the Way* (*Dao De Jing*), rhetorical chiasmus in the *Records of the Grand Historian*. Some trace the *huiwen* form to the anonymous eight-character “jade linked rings” (*yü lian huan*) inscribed in a circle on Han and Jin-era bronze mirrors, ink stones, and wine cups. The two “Exhortation” poems by the Daoist Lü Dongbin in this anthology are examples of these linked rings. The sixteen couplets that emerge out of each ring create an inescapable vicious loop that speaks directly to each poem’s content. In the *Grand Survey of*

Chinese Reversible Poems 《中國回文詩圖大觀》 published in Shanxi in 2006, the editors Wang Qifeng et al. point to the Three Dynasties Daoist poet Cao Zhi as the first known author of this type of *huiwen*.

Liu Xie, the fifth-century author of China's first book of literary criticism *The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons*, had a dream at age seven of climbing into the sky to pluck colored clouds that looked like brocaded silk. It's a dream that could have been dreamt by Su Hui in her pursuit of the ideal literary form. Liu Xie said the originator of *huiwen* poetry was Dao Yuan, a mysterious figure no one can identify. He wrote, "Patterned words express the mind of the universe." The *Book of Sui* (c. 636) lists four works of *huiwen* verse dating back to the Southern and Northern dynasties (420–589), including a lost anthology compiled by the renowned landscape poet Xie Lingyun.

A precursor to Su Hui's lyrical maze that both Métail and Wang Qifeng reproduce from Sang Shichang's anthology is the illustrious "Poem on a Platter" inscribed in a series of concentric circles by the anonymous wife of Su Boyu and sent as a gift to her husband in the distant land of Shu where he had been sent on official duties. The shuttle click-clacks back and forth in the poem as the lovesick wife works the silk on the loom, heart full of sorrow, awaiting her husband's return. A notable admirer of this poem, Chairman Mao, marked the editor's comments in his edition: "This is deep love. Learn it well."

Tang poet Pi Rixiu traced the first *huiwen* poets to the early Jin, saying that the circular form, as Eugene Wang translates, "shows the tortuous wandering of the pensive mind, far-reaching and lonely. This accounts for the rise [of the art] of reversal." Indeed, it became a particularly fitting poetic form for the articulation of