



# A Contemporary and Comparative Study of English and Chinese Palindromic Structure

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**Abstract.** Palindromes have a long history as a rhetorical device and word game in various cultures. This paper analyzes the popularity, development trends, and significance of contemporary palindromes in English and Chinese contexts, especially in the Internet era. The paper compares the formation mechanisms and pragmatic meanings of palindromic structures in English and Chinese and focuses on the translation of English palindromes into Chinese. The discussion also includes appreciating famous translations to explore how to create palindromic translations that are stylistically similar to the original.

**Keywords:** Palindrome · Palindromic Structure · bilingual analysis · translation appreciation

## 1 Palindromic Phenomenon and Its Internet Image

Palindromes, the words, sentences, or paragraphs that can be read the same backward or forward, exist in various languages. As a formalistic creation, palindromic structures can produce various aesthetic senses and are widely appreciated by word enthusiasts. In the modern era, palindromic-related hot topics and palindromic creative groups and accounts have emerged, in addition to traditional printed literature, oral expression, and antique carvings.

For instance, 2020 saw the rise of various hot topics related to palindromes, including “International Palindrome Day” on February 2 and the release of the film “Tenet” by director Christopher Nolan, which featured both content and form with palindrome characteristics, enhancing modern readers’ understanding of palindromes. On social media platforms like Instagram and Twitter, accounts such as @PalindromeWorld and @PalindromicPoet are regularly releasing original palindromes and creative works. Some creator also closely connects palindrome with their life. For example, @iizcat, an Instagram comic artist once posted: “Tacocat, Tacocat!” along with a heart-melting sketch of a kitty wrapped by a roll of taco. These creations can be found through searching hashtags on the internet.

Moreover, modern research on palindromes is applying auxiliary tools such as corpus retrieval, algorithm strings, and artificial intelligence interaction. For example, a search for the word “palindrome” in English corpus COCA and Chinese corpus BCC shows

that palindromes are still a niche literary topic with a low demand for translation, and most translators translate them out of their own interest.

Overall, palindromes continue to fascinate and inspire both literary enthusiasts and researchers in various fields, and the emergence of modern palindromic-related creations and technologies has enhanced our understanding and appreciation of this unique literary form.

## 2 Differences in Palindromic Structures Between English and Chinese

English and Chinese belong to different language families, the Indo-European and the Sino-Tibetan, respectively. As a result, palindromic sentences in English and Chinese differ in their structures, including symmetry, number of characters, and odd or even structure.

- Palindromic Structures in English:

1. Letter-based palindromic sentences - total number of letters is odd.
2. Word-based palindromic sentences - total number of words is odd.

As English uses an alphabet for its writing system, the smallest palindromic structure is a word, whose letters can form a palindrome within the word, such as “Tenet” and “not on.” Palindromic sentences formed around a letter-axis involve larger changes in meaning, and sometimes, single words can be split apart and combined when read backward, using a consonant-vowel-consonant structure. This reflects the diversity of English vocabulary and word formation.

On the other hand, the second type of palindromic sentence, formed around a word-axis, is not strictly considered a “palindrome.” This type of sentence is more similar in structure to Chinese palindromic sentences. The diverse nature of individual word’s part of speech, polysemy, and homophones with different meanings are the key elements that make up the structure of these sentences. For example, in the sentence “Fall leaves after leaves fall,” the words used are both verbs and nouns, and they are used harmoniously twice.

Whether based on a letter-axis or a single word-axis, the “oddness” of palindromic sentences is a crucial feature of English palindromic structure. This suggests that the reversal of the structure is not usually achieved within the sentence structure, and this step requires the reader’s own interpretation.

- Palindromic Structures in Chinese:

1. Palindromic poetry separated by commas or periods - total number of characters is even.
2. Palindromic couplets with symmetrical single characters - total number of characters is odd.

Unlike English, Chinese uses ideographic characters, and each character is a basic unit for constructing palindromic sentences. The former type can be read forwards and

backward consistently, such as “Shou Hong Bing Wan Ou, Ou Wan Bing Hong Shou.”<sup>1</sup> Or they can be read differently, as in Su Shi’s poem *Inscribed Jinshan Temple*.

The latter type is a strictly circular structure, such as “Wu Suo Shan Tou Shan Suo Wu.” (a palindromic couplet word-by word meaning “Fog lock mountain head mountain lock fog”), and is considered an accidental exception or a very rare occurrence.

When reading backward, Chinese palindromic sentences retain most of their constituent elements, and the meanings revolve around the central idea. Furthermore, Chinese is an inflection-free language, where words can be used flexibly in a sentence without any change in tense or aspect, providing greater creativity for palindrome creation.

In summary, English has two types of symmetric palindromes that correspond to one type of Chinese symmetric palindrome. Compared with English, Chinese palindrome sentences have a looser grammatical structure. In terms of character numbers, Chinese palindrome sentences can have both odd and even structures, while English is mainly odd.

### 3 Creative Mechanisms and Translations of English and Chinese Palindromes

Aside from differences in textual structure, English and Chinese palindrome creators have different motivations and create palindromes with varying semantic and pragmatic meanings. For example, in the Chinese palindrome poem the imagery is reflected symmetrically, while “Live not on evil” carries a dialectical philosophy, and “Able was I ere I saw Alba” and “As I pee, sir, I see Pisa” convey historical, social, and cultural knowledge. These palindromes are important cultural expressions in various ethnic cultures.

#### 1. English: Sentences with Center-First Structure.

Howard Richler suggests that English palindrome sentences can be created using a small center structure [1]. For example, the center structure of “Live not on evil” is “not on.” Based on this, one can simply add words with reversed letter order on both sides of the center structure to create multiple palindromes. However, it should be noted that English also has creatively constructed palindromes that break from this pattern, such as those with a non-central letter as the center of the palindrome.

#### 2. Chinese: Expressing Lyrical Pleasure of Appreciating Scenery and Objects.

In contrast, the diversity of word categories in Chinese palindrome sentences allows for more than just sequential imagery. They have a bilateral, interactive, and humorous sense of enjoyment. Chinese palindrome sentences often contain variations in word class. For example, in the aforementioned Chinese palindrome poem, the word “ice” serves as an adjective modifying “plate” to form a center-first structure in the first half of the sentence, but becomes a verb in the second half to modify “hand” in a subject-verb-object structure, thus showing the visual beauty of red hands in white lotus root and a red plate in white ice. The exchange of subject and object creates a playful effect.

<sup>1</sup> A palindromic poem, literally translated as “Hand holding a red lotus root, on a plate of ice, with the plate being red and the lotus root being white.” From Su Shi’s *Bodhisattva Man · Palindromic Xia resentment*.

### 3. Commonalities in English and Chinese: Writing Poems for a particular place, animal or item.

Apart from “Tacocat” mentioned earlier, Emperor Qianlong once wrote a poem for the Beijing restaurant “Tianranju” that goes “Ke Shang Tian Ran Jun, Ju Ran Tian Shang Ke.”<sup>2</sup> while English palindrome master Leigh Mercer created “A Man, A Plan, A Canal, Panama!” for the Panama Canal. Both examples showcase the unique promotional power of place names in palindromes. However, such palindromes with proper nouns pose a common challenge in translation, as in the case of the Chinese palindrome “Shang Hai Zi Lai Shui Lai Zi Hai Shang,” where “Shanghai” is a proper noun for a city, while “from the sea” represents an image that is not directly related to the same center.

## 4 Appreciation on Palindrome Translations

On the one hand, the different mechanisms for forming palindromes result in different forms of English and Chinese palindromic sentences, providing various options for translation. On the other hand, authors of palindrome translations should fully consider the semantic emphasis of the source language information and strive to restore the palindrome form while being faithful. The specific process is limited by the author’s language proficiency, translation practice, and the inherent untranslatability of English and Chinese. In practice and appreciation, some translation ideas can be summarized as follows:

The following are three translations of “Able was I ere I saw Elba” by translators:

1. “Ying Xiong Fu Yu E Dao Chu, Chu Dao Wo Yu Fu Xiong Ying.”, translated by Kong Xianghui and Hu Xiaoshen. [2].
2. “Ying Xiong Luo Yu E Dao Chu, Chu Dao Wo Yu Luo Xiong Ying.”, translated by Kong Xianghui and Hu Xiaoshen. [2].
3. “Bu Dao E Dao Wo Bu Dao.”, translated by Xu Yuancong [3].

The three translations provide the following inspiration for the translators:

(1) Fuzzification of proper nouns, such as place names and personal names: using abbreviations, alternative names, and referring to them indirectly. For example, the place name “Elba” was fuzzified to “E Dao”. The three translators transformed the four meaningless letters of “Elba” into a single Chinese character. The spelling of “Er” and “Wo” even overlap, which is considered exquisite handling. At the same time, “E Dao” may cause ambiguity, as readers may mistake it for “an island belonging to Russia.” “E” and “Wo” have slight differences in spelling and pronunciation. This has certain implications for the previously mentioned palindromes such as “Shang Hai Zi Lai Shui Lai Zi Hai Shang.”

However, it should be noted that when comparing the sentence of “Shanghai” with “Able was I ere I saw Elba,” the latter has richer pragmatic information and historical and cultural background, providing translators with more room for choice and expression. Therefore, the translated work is not only limited to finding purely equivalent forms of “word games” in bilingual languages, but also conveys valuable information to readers.

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<sup>2</sup> Literally translated as “Enter Tianranju as a guest, surprisingly become a guest in the sky.”

If the pragmatic information density of the original text is already low, and the resulting translation becomes as awkward as “Aroma from amora,” it is inevitable that there will be a suspicion of far-fetched associations, and the beauty, fun, and meaning of translation will be lost.

(2) Transformation among “three beauties”: Chinese has a rich set of homophones, homographs, and transformed words, which makes the direct transformation among “sound beauty,” “meaning beauty,” and “form beauty” possible.[4] All three examples have successfully translated the “form beauty” of English palindrome sentences, i.e., the repetition of words, into the “sound beauty” of Chinese, i.e., homophones, such as “hero” for “eagle,” “Erdao” for “backwards,” “want” for “to,” “place” for “out,” etc., resulting in excellent translations. Inspired by this, the author can try to translate the English palindrome sentence “STRESSED? NOT ON DESSERTS” as “Ku Le? You Dan Gao Jiu Bu Ku Le!”.<sup>3</sup>

In addition, when palindrome structures are not isolated but used in specific contexts, a certain degree of “assimilation” is required, prioritizing the reader’s understanding of the entire article. Different translation strategies should be adopted for palindrome translation in different contexts. For example, in a museum, palindrome structures often exist in isolation from other discourse and can provide foreign language readers with an opportunity to learn about exotic cultures. In such cases, it is advisable to retain the original language as much as possible and use annotations in the reader’s language to convey information. For isolated palindrome sentences that are not urgently in need of translation, translators can take more time to contemplate and enjoy them. In particular, if too much emphasis is placed on form rather than content in translating communicative palindrome structures, it may lead to a confusion of priorities.

Xiong Jun proposed the “indirect illustration method” for palindrome translation and provided 16 translation examples [5]. Although the translated text is almost completely unrelated to the palindrome, it still has a positive effect on readers’ understanding of the original text.

## 5 Conclusion

Palindromes are considered the embodiment of formal beauty, and excellent palindrome translations represent an innovative expansion of the boundaries of translatability between languages. Creating a palindrome that is formally equivalent, stylistically consistent, and meaning-preserving requires translators to accumulate a wealth of linguistic materials and practical experience, as well as rely on “wondrous strokes of good luck” within the limits of translatability.

Although, as noted in *Introduction to Rhetoric*, palindromes were “really not a particularly valuable thing [6],” the underlying rules behind them represent the human experience, insights, and wisdom that resonate within each language and cultural life. In contemporary times, palindrome creation has been revitalized, and palindrome writing has become an interactive way to cultivate sentiment. From this perspective, palindrome translation has gained an intercultural significance that goes beyond language itself.

<sup>3</sup> The original text of Chinese can be literally translated into “You cried out? You will feel less bitter with a dessert!”.

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