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# **Visualizing Poems**

**By**

**Qiran Cui**

**A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of  
Master of Fine Arts in Visual Communication Design**

**School of Design  
College of Art and Design**

**Rochester Institute of Technology  
Rochester, NY  
May 5, 2024**

## Committee Approval

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Mike Strobert  
Graduate Program Director, Visual Communication Design program/ Thesis Advisor

Date

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Associate Professor, Visual Communication Design/ Thesis Advisor

Date

## **Abstract**

With its profound expressions of emotion and insights, Chinese poetry has long been revered as a cultural heritage. However, its intricacies often challenge non-Chinese speakers seeking to appreciate its depth. This thesis proposes an exploratory approach to interpreting Chinese poetry, using geometric shapes and motions to discover potential emotional and thematic interpretations. The geometric shapes and their associated motions—circles for continuity, squares for stability, triangles for conflict, and rounded rectangles for historical depth—reflect their psychological and cultural significance in conveying specific emotions within the poems. From Chinese poetry's subjects, structure, content, and emotional resonance, the exploration delves into how visual elements can enhance its interpretation. The versatility and efficacy of the method are illustrated through case studies exemplifying diverse poets, themes, and periods. The analysis showcases the interpretive possibilities of visualizing poems and evaluates their effectiveness in bridging cultural gaps. While acknowledging emotional expression's inherent subjectivity and complexity, the envisioned approach fosters cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of Chinese poetry. By unlocking the beauty and wisdom in these verses, readers could embark on a journey of discovery and enlightenment for the language of Chinese poetry.

## **Keywords**

**Chinese Poetry, Visual Interpretation, Geometric Shapes, Emotion Expression**

Chinese poetry is revered in global literature and admired for its lyrical beauty, emotional depth, and philosophical insight. From the traditional verses of the Tang and Song dynasties to the modern innovations of contemporary poets, Chinese poetry encompasses a diverse array of themes, styles, and techniques. However, for non-Chinese speakers, the intricate nuances and cultural context embedded within these poems often challenge interpretation and appreciation. A novel approach to visualizing Chinese poems through geometric shapes and motions is proposed in response to this challenge. By leveraging the psychological and cultural associations of shapes and motions with specific emotions, a visual framework for unlocking the essence of Chinese poetry is established, transcending linguistic and cultural barriers.

To fully appreciate the significance of visualizing Chinese poems, it is essential to understand the cultural and literary context from which they emerge. Themes such as nature, love, history, and war in Chinese poetry echo the rhythms of life and the human experience. By delving into the thematic richness, structural complexity, and linguistic beauty of Chinese poetry, the groundwork for exploring how visual elements can enhance its interpretation and appreciation is laid.

Geometric shapes have long been used as symbols in art, literature, and culture, conveying meanings and emotions beyond their literal forms. In visualizing Chinese poems, specific geometric shapes are associated with emotions based on their psychological and cultural associations. Circles symbolize objects within the poem; squares represent scenic elements; triangles depict war-related themes; and rounded rectangles signify historical references. The choice of circles to represent continuity stems from their geometric property lacking a beginning or end. In Chinese culture, circles symbolize harmony, unity, and eternity. They evoke a sense of fluidity and interconnectedness, mirroring the seamless flow of emotions and themes within the poetry. Squares, with their balanced and symmetrical structure, symbolize stability and order. Squares are associated with the earth, representing groundedness and security. The interpretation emphasizes themes of stability, tradition, and rootedness by employing square shapes and motions. Triangles, characterized by their sharp angles and dynamic lines, evoke a sense of tension and conflict. Triangles symbolize change, challenge, and adversity. By incorporating triangular shapes and motions, the interpretation highlights moments of emotional intensity and dramatic conflict within the poetry. Rounded rectangles, combining the stability of squares with the softness of curves, represent historical depth and cultural continuity. Rounded rectangles are associated with ancient scrolls and engraved tablets, signifying wisdom and tradition. By visually mapping out these elements, readers can gain a straightforward understanding of the poem's subject matter and thematic focus.

Motion adds a dynamic dimension to visual representations, imbuing them with rhythm, energy, and narrative flow. In the approach explored, different types of motion—such as fluid, abrupt, and rhythmic—are used to convey specific emotions within Chinese poems. For instance, fluid motions may evoke a sense of tranquility or melancholy, while abrupt motions may evoke tension or urgency. By integrating motion into visualizations, Chinese poems' emotional resonance and narrative impact are enhanced, inviting readers to immerse themselves in the unfolding drama of the verses. In addition, Vertical motions are used to signify sadness and melancholy, reflecting a sense of gravity and solemnity. Broken lines evoke sorrow and longing, mirroring the fragmented nature of human emotion. Circular movements convey happiness and joy, with their smooth and continuous flow symbolizing a sense of harmony and contentment. Squarial movements represent anger and frustration, characterized by their sharp and angular movements. By integrating these line motions into the visual representation of the poem, readers can discern the emotional undercurrents that permeate the verses, deepening their engagement.

The technical and creative process behind creating motion graphics for interpreting Chinese poetry involves thoughtful consideration of animation styles and principles of motion to convey the emotional and thematic nuances of the poems effectively. Different animation techniques can significantly impact the viewer's understanding and emotional engagement with the poetry by aligning visual dynamics with poetic themes. Different animation styles and transitions can be employed to convey the emotional tone of the poetry. For somber or reflective passages, slow fades and gentle transitions can create a sense of melancholy and introspection. In contrast, moments of tension or conflict may be accentuated with sharp cuts and dynamic transitions, evoking a sense of urgency and intensity. By aligning the pacing and style of animations with the emotional nuances of the poetry, the motion graphics effectively enhance the viewer's emotional response and understanding. A key aspect of the creative process involves layering animations that correspond to the poem's emotional trajectory. Just as a poem may traverse through various emotional states, the motion graphics should dynamically evolve to mirror these shifts. For example, in a poem that begins with a sense of tranquility and gradually builds towards a moment of tension, the motion graphics could start with subtle animations and gradually intensify with layered movements, culminating in a dramatic climax.

Two case studies, each focusing on different subjects, conveying different emotions, and written by different poets, illustrate the effectiveness of this approach.

Poem A: "The Hard Road" by Li Bai:

Li Bai, one of the most revered poets in Chinese literary history, often explored themes of nature, travel, and the human experience in his works. "The Hard Road" is a poignant example of Li Bai's mastery, depicting life's arduous journey and the human spirit's resilience.

The poem's content is ingeniously represented by geometric shapes, with circles embodying the obstacles and challenges strewn along the road, squares mirroring the rugged terrain and desolate landscapes, and triangles evoking the tumultuous twists and turns of the journey. The motion in the visual representation mirrors the poem's emotions, with fluid movements symbolizing the traveler's determination and perseverance strategically placed to echo the poem's rhythm. This visual representation beckons readers to immerse themselves in the journey depicted in the poem, fostering a deeper understanding of its themes of resilience and endurance in the face of adversity.

Poem B: "Drinking" by Tao Yuanming:

Tao Yuanming, often revered as the "Poet of Reclusion," is celebrated for his lyrical descriptions of rural life and the joys of simplicity. "Drinking" is a quintessential example of Tao Yuanming's poetry, capturing the tranquility and contentment of nature and companionship.

In the motion graphic video, circles symbolize the friendship of the drinking companions, squares evoke the peaceful countryside setting, and rounded rectangles suggest the tradition of sharing stories and laughter over a drink. Fluid motions represent the ease and relaxation of the drinking experience, while rhythmic motions signify the harmonious rhythm of life in nature. In "Drinking," the rhythmic motions of circles convey the soothing tempo of rural life, enriching the poem's tranquil mood." Through this visual representation, readers are brought to the idyllic countryside described in the poem, experiencing the warmth and friendship of the drinking companions and the serenity of the natural world.

To expand this project, one could explore virtual or augmented reality (VR/AR) applications in poetry visualization. VR/AR technologies offer immersive experiences that could deepen the viewer's engagement with the poetry, allowing them to interact with visual elements and perhaps even modify them to see how different interpretations can alter their emotional response.

The approach's effectiveness in enhancing the understanding and appreciation of Chinese poetry is assessed, considering its strengths and limitations. While the method offers a valuable tool for visual interpretation, the inherent subjectivity and complexity of emotional expression are acknowledged. Potential avenues for future research and refinement, including additional visual elements and the development of interactive platforms for engagement, are discussed. Moreover, reflections on the broader implications of visualizing poetry to foster cross-cultural understanding and appreciation are shared, envisioning a future where the beauty and wisdom of Chinese poetry are accessible to readers worldwide.

In conclusion, this paper presents an approach to interpreting and appreciating Chinese poetry through visualizations using geometric shapes and motions. By leveraging the psychological and cultural associations of shapes and motions with specific emotions, the paper offers a fresh perspective on the richness and depth of Chinese poetry. This thesis not only sheds light on the interpretive possibilities of visualizing poetry but also underscores the potential of such innovations to foster deeper cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of literature. Through further exploration and refinement, the method is envisioned as a valuable tool for promoting cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of this timeless art form, inviting readers to embark on a journey of discovery, enlightenment, and profound gratitude for the universal language of human emotion.

## **Appendix A: References and Bibliography**

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## Appendix B: Thesis Defense Presentation





## Prompt

Poems are consistently held in high regard in China. Poetry provides a format for expressions of deep emotion, offering an audience insight into the inner life of Chinese writers across more than two millennia. However, because of the cultural gap, it's hard for foreigners to understand the meaning and emotion of poems.

## Solution


In this project, I use different elements (graphics, motion, lines) to explore the expression of content and emotion in poems.

# Visualizing Poems





## Research

- When people view shapes, a multitude of psychological occur. Each element attributes different emotions, thoughts, and perceptions that resonate with the viewers' brains.

 much friendlier shape than the others for encompassing other images within.

 a sense of reliability and security and these attributes make people feel safe and contained.

 energetic and dynamic shape attributes that makes triangles used to represent motion and direction.

 the abstract shapes retain their symbolism from their original shapes.



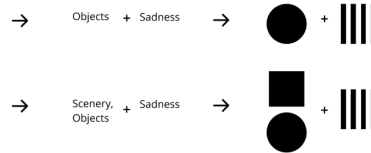
	Sadness	Fear	Happiness	Angry
Lines				
Motion				

## Motion Design

### The Hard Road

Written by Li Bai

Pure wine in golden cup costs ten thousand coins, good!  
 Choice dish in a jade plate is worth as much, nice food!  
 Pushing aside my cup and chopsticks, I can't eat;  
 Drawing my sword and looking around, I hear my heart beat.  
 I poise a fishing pole with ease on the green stream  
 Or set sail for the sun like the sage in the dream.  
 Hard is the way. Hard is the way.  
 Don't go astray! Whither today?  
 A time will come to ride the wind and cleave the waves;  
 I'll set my cloud-like sail to cross the sea which raves.

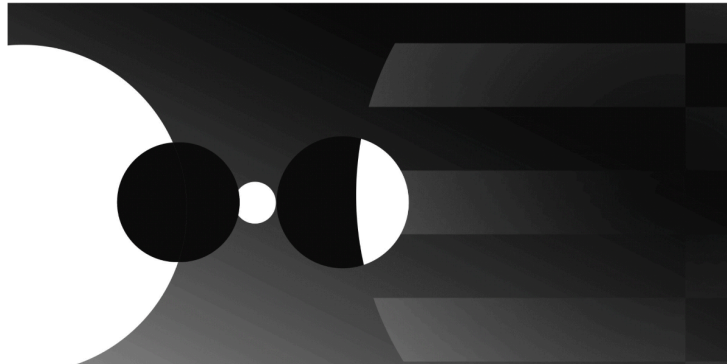


### • Poem A

Pure wine in golden cup costs ten thousand coins, good! Choice dish in a jade plate is worth as much, nice food!



Pushing aside my cup and chopsticks, I can't eat; Drawing my sword and looking around, I hear my heart beat.



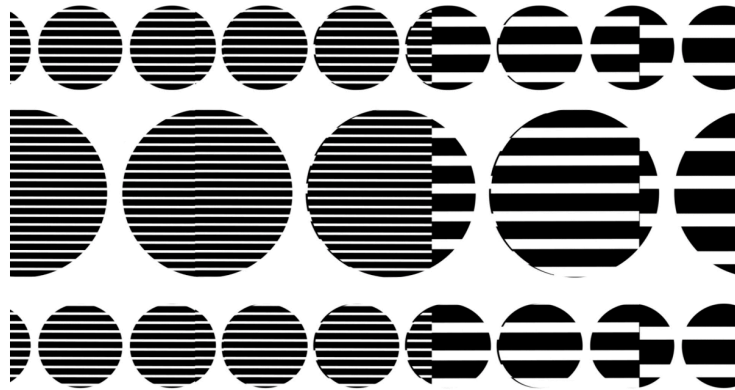
I poise a fishing pole with ease on the green stream, Or set sail for the sun like the sage in the dream.



• Poem B



I can't cross Yellow River: ice has stopped its flow; I can't climb Mount Taihang: the sky is blind with snow.



I can't cross Yellow River: ice has stopped its flow; I can't climb Mount Taihang: the sky is blind with snow.

I poise a fishing pole with ease on the green stream, Or set sail for the sun like the sage in the dream.



• Poem B

Drinking

Written by Tao Yuanming

Finished building my small house within the sphere of human activities;

Without the noises of horses and carriages.

I hear you ask, "Why would you do this?"

My heart and mind secluded in this remote area.

Gathering chrysanthemums below the eastern fence;

Leisurely and carefree, within the sight of the Southern Mountains.

Sunset on the mountain mists make a beautiful glow;

Flying birds come back together.

Within this natural scene lies the artistic mood necessary for creation, and the real meaning of the Dao;

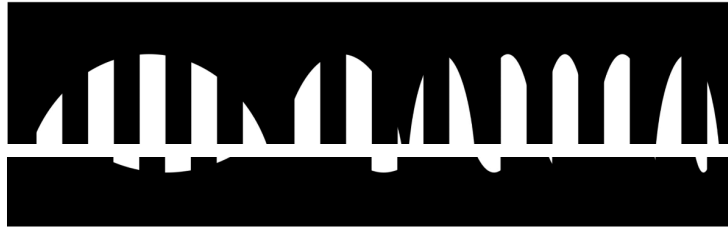
When approaching the end of discrimination and analysis, words are forgotten.

→ Objects + Happiness → ● + ☉

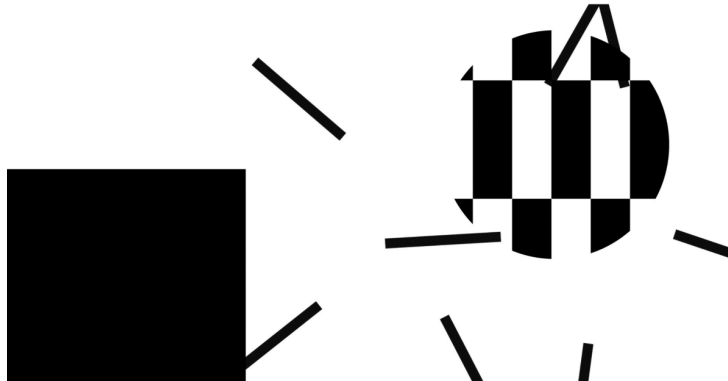
→ Scenery + Happiness → ■ + ☉

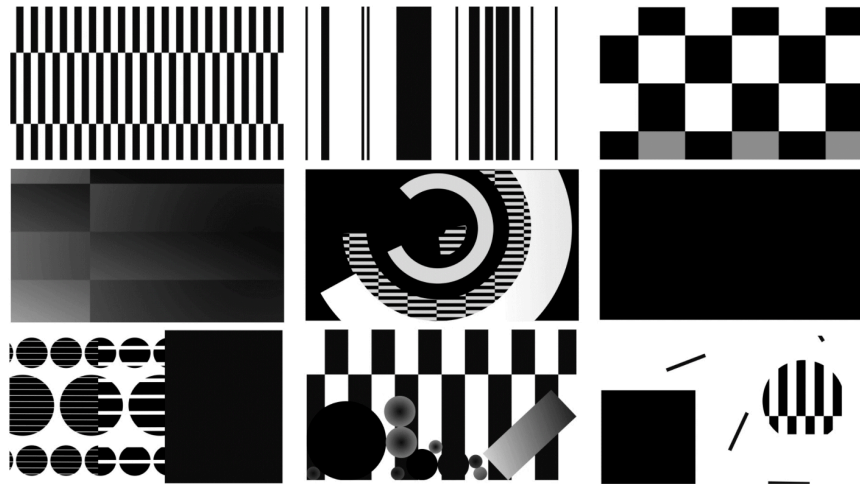
→ Objects, Scenery + Sadness → ● + ☳

I hear you ask, "Why would you do this?" My heart and mind secluded in this remote area.



Within this natural scene lies the artistic mood necessary for creation, and the real meaning of the Dao; When approaching the end of discrimination and analysis, words are forgotten.





## Visualizing Poems



Card Design





Thanks for Watching!

Designer  
Qiran Cui

Advisors  
Adam Smith, Mike Strobert

Tools  
Adobe After Effects, Adobe Photoshop

Visual  
Communication  
Design  
MFA

Communication  
Interaction  
Motion & 3D  
Design Studies

About the Program

[https://designed.cad.rit.edu/vcdthesis/project/qirancui?preview\\_id=8296&preview=true](https://designed.cad.rit.edu/vcdthesis/project/qirancui?preview_id=8296&preview=true)