

Left-to-Right or Right-to-Left? An Inquiry into the Text Direction of Chinese Characters

Louis Chor

University of Alberta, Canada

Do Text Directions Matter to Libraries?

A while ago a scholarly book published by the East Asia Program of Cornell University in 2008 came to my desk for adding to the library collection. The book caught my attention because it is bound in the East Asian style with the spine on the right-hand side and opens from the left side. As usual with East Asian publications that open from the left, I affixed a note on the front cover of this American publication to alert staff so that the book would be processed properly and the library ownership plate would be pasted correctly. This book, *Teishinkōki : The Year 939 in the Journal of Regent Fujiwara no Tadahira*, includes a reproduction and transcription of the original text of *Teishinkōki* in classical Japanese (*kanbun*). Even though the book is an English publication, the book designer probably intended to preserve the heritage of traditional texts with their vertical columns progressing from right to left on the medium.

European and East Asian text directions follow opposite principles and heritages. Etymological studies of individual Chinese characters abound, but inquiries into why written or printed characters come together semantically in the top-to-bottom and right-to-left (tb-rl) manner appear to be few. The text direction of Chinese characters, a “marginal phenomenon” (*bian yuan xian xiang*)¹ as one scholar referred to it, is intellectually intriguing and worthy of more thought.

This essay mainly discusses the lateral leftward movement – from our perspective – of columns of characters. Why characters are written vertically will necessarily be part of the discussion. The use of bamboo strips as media for the Chinese script, commonly held as an explanation of the tb-rl phenomenon, may merely be a corollary of deep-seated psychological preferences hardwired in the mind of the past.

Our Right Side is the Left of the Entity Facing us: Architecture and Text

The right side is the side of our right hand, and the left side is that of our left hand. Let there be a person or something--any entity--facing us, then our right side is in fact that entity's left side.

When I visited the Forbidden City (*Zi jin cheng*) in Beijing two years ago, it was bewildering to see on the plan of the palace complex that the gate on the right side – from my perspective – of the Hall of Supreme Harmony² (*Tai he dian*) is called Middle Left Gate (*Zhong zuo men*), and the gate on the left side – from my perspective – of the Hall is called Middle Right Gate (*Zhong you men*). In Kyoto, the imperial capital of Japan before the Meiji Restoration, there are the Left Capital Ward (*Sakyō-ku*) and the Right Capital Ward (*Ukyō-ku*). Seen on a map, however, *Sakyō-ku* is on our right side while *Ukyō-ku* is on our left. With some thought, it becomes clear that the designation of left and right in *Zi jin cheng* and in Kyoto is based on regarding the palace and the capital as entities of their own, independent of our perspective. The Middle Left Gate is really flanking the left of the Hall of Supreme Harmony, while the Right Capital Ward is truly the right of the imperial capital itself.

The interface between the reader and a piece of writing is not different from the interface between an individual and the front façade of the imperial palace in Beijing or the cityscape of the imperial capital of Kyoto. The written text, the palace and the city all have their own existence independent of the reader or visitor. Seen in this light, East Asian scripts written or printed vertically move actually from left to right in columns. To the reader, the text progresses from the right; for the text itself, it begins from its own left and moves rightwards.

If we acknowledge that a piece of vertical text, whatever medium it is on, has its own existence as an entity, we may then ask why the text begins from its left side, that is, our right side.

The Left/Right Side is the East, the Beginning

In early summer of 2011 while on a trip in Taipei I visited the National Revolutionary Martyrs' Shrine (*Guo min ge ming zhong lie ci*) which enshrines the name tablets of people who gave their lives for the sake of the National Revolution in China. Surrounding the main shrine – its own left, rear and right sides – is a garden with a corridor. On the wall of the corridor is a chronological series of descriptive diagrams each of which displays a campaign or war in the National Revolution dated from around

the 1900s to the 1950s. The series of diagrams begins from the left of the corridor, continues across the rear, and ends on its right side. To the spectator viewing from the front of the main shrine, naturally the beginning of the sequence of diagrams is from the spectator's right. Figure 1 illustrates this left-to-right chronological arrangement of historical events.

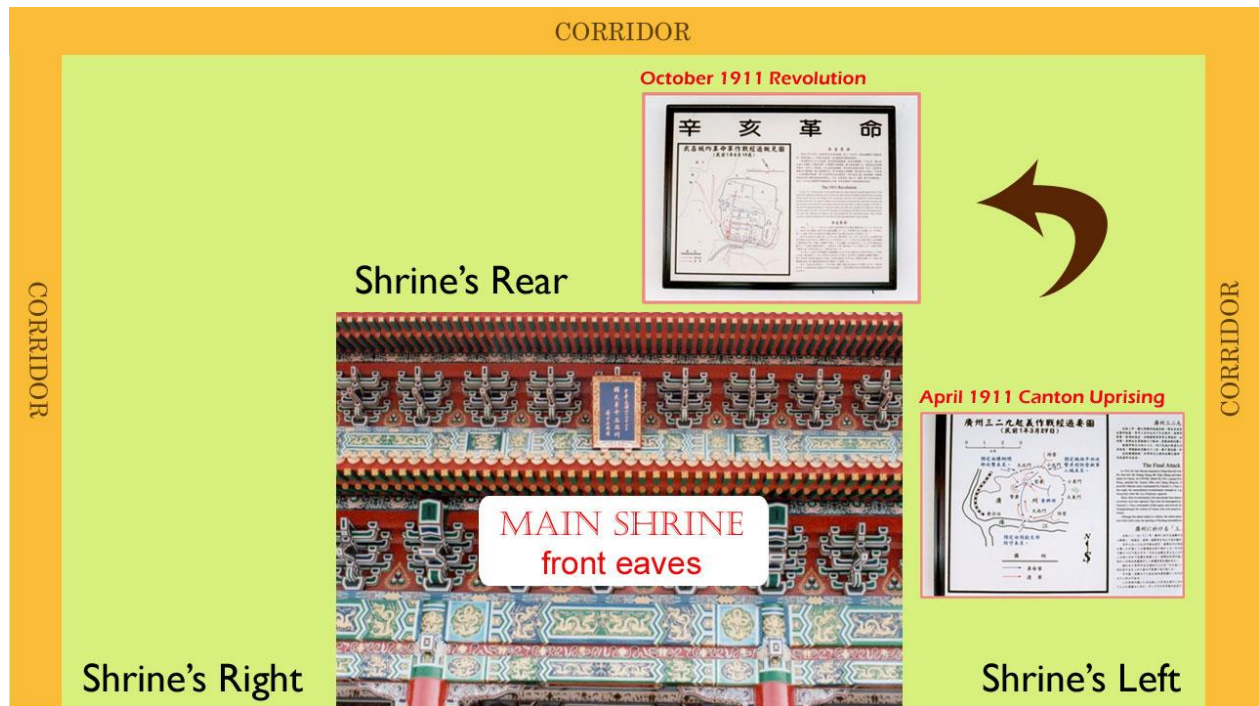


Fig. 1
Direction of the chronological flow of historical events as displayed in the Martyrs' Shrine in Taipei, with the first two events as examples³

This display of historical events in temporal terms from the left of the entity--the shrine, which faces south--towards its right signifies that the left is the beginning. In spatial or celestial terms, that side is also the east, where the sun and the moon rise.

Behind the throne in the main hall of the palaces of the Joseon dynasty in Seoul -- for instance, Kyongbokkung and Changdokkung--there is a painting which invariably is the *Sun, Moon, Five Mountains Painting (Irwöl oakto)*. As figure 2 shows, on the painting's own top left--that is, our right side--is the sun; on its top right--our left side--is the moon. The day begins in the east with the rising sun which brings life to many things. As was also true in the case of the chronology above, everything starts from the east, that is, the left of the entity. Incidentally, this generic painting, which I also saw painted on an exterior wall in the popular Insa-dong area in Seoul, always includes two waterfalls and several trees in addition to the five mountains. They may echo the theme

of deep-rooted trees and long-flowing rivers depicted in the beginning of the epic poem *Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven*,⁴ first printed in Hangeul characters in 1447.



Fig. 2
The main throne in Kyongbokkung (Gyeongbokgung Palace), Seoul,
with the *Sun, Moon, Five Mountains Painting*

“On the left is the Green Dragon, on the right is the White Tiger,” is a common saying when referring to spatial or celestial orientations. The Green Dragon and the White Tiger are guardian deities of the east and the west respectively. The left in this context is an entity’s own left.

In the same vein therefore, we may visualize a piece of vertical text in which the character columns are progressing from their beginning in the east towards the west, completing the text from *its* left to *its* right. This is a natural movement identical to that of the sun and the moon. To put it simply, we may claim that vertical texts begin where nature begins.

Attempting to Solve the Puzzle of Vertical Text: Materialistic or Psychological?

Calligrapher Ishikawa Kyūyō explains “writing in right-to-left columns [from the writer’s and reader’s perspective]”:

Another consideration that weighs in favor of right-to-left columns is that of forward-looking perspective. With left-to-right columns, a right-handed person can see what he or she has just written, but the writing hand obscures the space that lies ahead on the paper. The past is visible but the future is hidden. Conversely, right-to-left columns result in a right-handed person’s hand obscuring the past, but the future unfolds, fully visible, to the left. The writer keeps an eye on what lies ahead while writing in the present, and his or her “stroke to the right, move to the left” progress invests the writing with a consistent, modulated energy.⁵

Furthermore, viewing the oracle bone inscriptions of Shang dynasty as the earliest form of written scripts in East Asia, Ishikawa explains the vertical progression of these Chinese characters as a form of communication between heaven and earth. Oracle bone characters, vertically inscribed, are “a script with religious nature, since the characters were born from the dialogue between the king and the heavenly deity through divination.”⁶

In contrast to this explanation of vertical text in psychological or spiritual terms, some authors postulate that the formation of vertical text is attributable to the use of bamboo strips as the medium for written characters.⁷ They maintain that the practice of writing on bamboo strips may have appeared even before the age of oracle bones, when bamboo trees grew in abundance in central China where Chinese civilization was developing. Holding a narrow strip of prepared bamboo with the left hand, the writer used brush and ink to write characters in a single column on the strip with the right hand. Each completed strip was then laid down on the left side--from the writer’s perspective--of the previous strip of characters. In this way, the text direction of top-to-bottom right-to-left-- was born.

There is a fundamental flaw in this view that treats the bamboo strip--a human artifact--as a driving force constraining the written script in a certain direction of progression. Bamboo strips do not exist in nature, although bamboo trees do. To turn bamboo trees into narrow strips suitable for writing and preserving involved a laborious process, a purposeful process not unlike that of making shoes to fit our feet, or making chopsticks to suit our eating habits. Before they cut trees up to make writing materials, early people probably already had the urge to write in the way they liked. We may legitimately argue that cloth (not necessarily silk from silkworms) coexisted

with, or even predated, any other kind of writing media, since cloth is what people use to cover up their bodies, a use which surely predated writing. But even on cloth, the width and length of which pose no constraints on writing directions, we find Chinese characters in their unique heaven-to-earth and east-to-west orientations. Seen in this light, psychological explanations of the text direction of East Asian scripts appear to be more convincing than the materialistic approach exemplified by the bamboo strip theory. Bamboo may be a reinforcing factor, but not the cause of vertical text formation. We use bamboo probably because it fits our choice of style.

Chinese characters may have a dimension much deeper than being merely a written script. Aesthetician Li Zehou posits three sources of Chinese culture: the dragon, fish, and Chinese characters. Li says that Chinese characters constitute a standard system of symbols, signifying life, living, authority and social order.⁸ They are not phonetic representations of verbal utterance. With their predecessor in the form of string knots (*jie sheng*) of various shapes and sizes, Chinese characters in the early days developed as inscriptions on pottery, oracle bones, bronzes and stone, exhibiting a religious characteristic from the outset, and serving the ruling class as a tool of governance. As characters multiplied, grammar was formed and meanings increased. Later on, written characters began to align with spoken language, developing into classical Chinese (*wen yan wen*) as a result. Across the vast land mass of the country with its huge variety of dialects, classical Chinese, as the written language, has always been in the role of authority vis-à-vis the verbal language and dialects.

Li makes no mention of text direction in his essay. But if we agree that Chinese characters possess the transcendent status that he elucidates, we may venture to conclude that vertical text, as the systematic visual display of the written script, may be a purposeful choice of style that matches and gives form to this transcendence, independent of any medium of writing. The written or printed text, composed of multiple characters semantically integrated as a whole, is a presentation, an embodiment of the writer's mind. It may not be overly extrapolating to claim that the vertical text stands for the writer who is thus face-to-face with the reader. Like the Forbidden City, the imperial capital of Kyoto, or the throne painting in Seoul, the vertical text's own left side--our right--is the east, whence the sun and the moon rise.

The concept of vertical text as presentation may throw light on a related question about Chinese characters: in writing individual characters, why do we begin writing horizontal strokes from the west side? An explanation may be that in constructing individual characters, the convenience of moving the writing instrument--for example, a brush--in certain directions is the main consideration. For right-handed people, a west-to-east movement in this writing action should be convenient. However,

the completed text with meaningfully grouped characters is an entity with its own existence, meant for presenting to the reader. The process of constructing characters and the resulting text are based on considerations on two different levels. When King Sejong and his erudite scholars invented the Proper Sounds for Instructing the People (*hunmin chŏngŭm* or *hunminjeongeum*)⁹ in the fifteenth century, the symbol for the initial sound – the initial consonant – was also placed on the west side of the full character, if not at the top. Columns of completed characters, however, were to move from east to west.

Sustaining Vertical Text in the World

In print resources of today, vertical text still lives on, mainly in Taiwan, Hong Kong and especially in Japan, where newspapers and the majority of print books in the humanities use vertical text layout. In a promotional photograph advertising the latest electronic book reader in Japan, the Japanese text displayed on the screen is vertical.

The role of publishers is paramount in whether in the future we will be able to read books with vertical columns, or whether this heritage will become history. In order to know more about the sustainability of vertical text, I made a special trip to Taipei in May 2011 to interview two renowned literary publishers of long-established standing. Their publications are almost without exception printed as vertical text.

I was interested in the reasons for their policy of using vertical text. Specifically, my questions to them were: Why is vertical text used instead of horizontal text? Are there any government guidelines on text layout style in publications? How do readers think about reading vertical text?

Briefly, their replies were: As publishers they have been publishing in the vertical style from the beginning; that is the way their books are laid out. The government has made no attempt to provide guidelines for them on text layout. The books they publish in the vertical style are well-received by readers. One of the two publishers, nevertheless, told me over coffee that the trend of horizontal text direction is irresistible; nonetheless, he will insist on maintaining the vertical style in his publications.

Concluding Thoughts

This essay puts forth a non-materialistic explanation of the nature of vertical text. Individual Chinese characters are essentially symbols of ideas, not symbols for pronunciation. That Chinese characters can be understood across China and across East Asia testifies to this fact. A piece of text with characters arranged in a meaningful way in the top-bottom (heaven-earth) and east-west style conveys another layer of meaning: the writer is there communicating with the reader, face-to-face. This is my understanding of the nature of vertical text.

Are there any differences between horizontal text and vertical text in writing and reading East Asian scripts? Ishikawa Kyūyō's book on vertical text introduces some interesting survey results on this question.¹⁰ As I mentioned to the publisher in Taipei, when I read an East Asian book printed in the heritage way, I am usually led by the heaven-to-earth sentences to ponder deeper and think broader.

Notes

¹You Shunzhao 游顺钊, "Gu Han zi shu xie zong xiang cheng yin: liu shu yi wai de yi ge tan tao" 古汉字书写纵向成因: 六书以外的一个探讨 [Reasons for the vertical orientation of ancient Chinese characters: an inquiry beyond the six categories of characters], *Zhongguo yu wen* 中国语文, 1992, no. 5:371.

²English names of architecture are from various sources; they are not definitive.

³Photographs in this essay were taken by the author.

⁴*Songs of the Dragons Flying to Heaven: A Korean Epic*, trans. James Hoyt, 2nd ed. (Seoul: published for the Royal Asiatic Society, Korea Branch, by Seoul Computer Press, 1979).

⁵Ishikawa Kyuyoh, *Taction: The Drama of the Stylus in Oriental Calligraphy*, trans. Waku Miller (Tokyo: International House of Japan, 2011), 61-62.

⁶My translation of Ishikawa Kyūyō 石川九楊, *Tate ni kake!: yokogaki ga Nihonjin o kowashiteiru* 縦に書け!: 横書きが日本人を壊している [Write vertically!: horizontal writing is ruining Japanese people] (Tōkyō: Shōdensha, 2005), 68.

⁷Examples of this line of thinking are: Hou Kaijia 侯开嘉, *Zhongguo shu fa shi xin lun* 中国书法史新论 [New discussions on the history of Chinese calligraphy], zeng ding ben (Shanghai: Shanghai gu ji chu ban she, 2009), 224-234; Li Bin 李宾, “Gu Han zi xia xing, zuo xing hang kuan tan yuan” 古汉字下行, 左行行款探源 [An inquiry into the beginning of the downward and leftward text direction of ancient Chinese characters], *Heze xue yuan xue bao* 荷泽学院学报 29, no. 4 (August 2007): 102-105; Yang Qiusheng 杨秋生, “Gu dai Han zi shu xie hang kuan kao bian” 古代汉字书写行款考辨 [Investigation into the writing direction of ancient Chinese characters], *Quanzhou shi fan xue yuan xue bao* 泉州师范学院学报 25, no. 1 (January 2007): 74-78.

⁸Li Zehou 李澤厚, “[ji yong ji ti de Han zi: san lun Zhonghua wen hua de yuan tou fu hao](#)” 即用即體的漢字: 三論中華文化的源頭符號 [Chinese characters as function and form: third discussion on the source codes of Chinese culture], *Ming bao yue kan* 明報月刊 40, no. 9 (September 2005): 78-81.

⁹The original name *Hunmin chǒngǔm* (訓民正音) has been standardized as Han’gul or Hangeul (한글) by Chu Si-gyǒng (周時經).

¹⁰ Ishikawa, *Tate ni kake*, 160-167.