

VISUAL PALINDROMES IN HANGUL

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Hangul (or hangeul) script was introduced in Korea in mid 15th century by king Sejong in order to spread literacy, as Chinese characters were hard to learn for the commoners. Until the 20th century Hangul was generally despised by Korean learned class as being too simplistic. Nowadays it is regarded as Korean national treasure and often praised for its ingenuity.

Though sometimes confused with hieroglyphic writing, Hangul is an alphabetic system, with letters organized in syllabic square patterns, which makes a semblance of logograms. Unlike many other writing systems that evolved over extended period of time, Hangul's design remained almost unchanged throughout the centuries.

Hangul letters are stripped of any complexity, while mimicking sound articulation process and some philosophical concepts (Sky, Earth, Man). They embed the most basic geometry of vertical and horizontal lines, a square, a circle and a triangle.

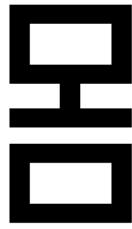
Probably, it is the combination of traditionality with constructivism, befitting modern trend for minimalistic graphic design, which makes Hangul curious subject of visual trickery.

Due to inherent raw geometric appeal, sometimes words in Hangul, though purely alphabetical, seemingly go beyond their sound based platform and converge with abstract semantic ideas behind a word. These spontaneous quasi-philosophical manifestations could be also interpreted as a drift of alphabetical construct into the realm of hieroglyphity.

Provided as an example is the word 'beauty' (*mi* in Korean), a nice piece for contemplation.



As Korean words are blocked into syllables, Korean palindromes are also syllabic, and letter-by-letter reversals are never composed. In this essay however we are more interested in Hangul words, frequently containing just one-syllable, which are visually symmetrical, while not necessarily being an actual palindrome. Below is the list of a few such words, selected by the author.



Body (*mom*)



Forest (*soop*)



Ticket (*pyu*)



Spring (*pom*)



Cloth (*ot*)



Flower (*kot*)



Milk (*uyu*)



Sound (*eum*)



Shaman, nothing, radish (*moo*)

And perhaps the best known Korean visual palindrome is ‘door bear’ (*moon kom*), with a second word being a vertical and mirror flip of the first one:

