Volume 3, Chapter 7: Distinguishing Genuine Tuan-Wen on Ancient Ch'in

After a ch'in has aged for several hundred years, its lacquer-powder mixture will vaporize to such an extent that tuan-wen (斷紋)[1] will be formed. There are three varieties. After an initial period of seventy or eighty years, niu-mao (牛毛 "cow hair") cracks are formed. These cracks are fine and crosswise across the ch'in. After a hundred years or so, she-fu (蛇蚹 "serpent belly") cracks are formed. These are coarse, crosswise, and disorderly. After two or three hundred years, b'ing-lieh (冰裂 "ice cracks") bursts are formed, the form having five to six corners. These are both horizontal and vertical; that is, helter-skelter, so they are also called mei-hua (梅花 "plum blossom") bursts. To have cow hair or snake belly cracks on a given ch'in is not a very common occurrence. There may be cracked ice or plum blossom bursts. Occasionally then one may see a few tuan-wen, but they are not really necessary. One need only understand that a ch'in is very old and no more. Beautiful sound does not depend on them, but does depend instead on good material. It also depends on age for beauty. If the material is not good and the craftsmanship is average or poor, then although the ch'in may have plum blossom bursts, it still may not be worth playing. Those people who are only fond of antiquity value the tuan-wen. This is merely an empty convention. Those scholars fond of playing will feel beautiful music is better, and that there is no need for tuan-wen.

For tuan-wen to occur, it is necessary that the lacquer-powder mixture should have been put on with care when the ch'in was make, otherwise it might flake later. Sometimes flaking will occur in some spots (on the surface), but after repair the ch'in can still be played. Nevertheless it may occur that if the mixture is not put on with skill, then there may be no need for the ch'in to age two or three hundred years! Tuan-wen have been formed in only ten to twenty years. So in the great majority of cases peeling comes about because the mixture was not applied correctly or sometimes because pig blood was mixed in with the powder. So then after a long time the lacquer-powder mixture is not able to stick onto the ch'in wood and peeling and flaking occur. The ch'in then is not fit for the fingers to touch. How can one play it then? This then is a case where tuan-wen cannot be considered beautiful. One must scrape off the lacquer-powder mixture and the tuan-wen and then again apply the mixture to fix it. How can it be bad to replace the tuan-wen with lacquer? If a ch'in is old and has formed tuan-wen naturally, one should take his hand and feel the ch'in. It should be without any sharp places or obstacles (to fingering).

If one desires false tuan-wen: Use a ch'in that has just had lacquer-powder applied and wait for a big snowfall. Take some snow and pile it up four or five inches deep in a long box. Now set up a fire and put coals in it. Heat the coals until they are red hot. Now

[1] Tuan-wen are cracks in the lacquer, and are prized by ch'in connoisseurs for their beauty. Tuan means "broken", and wen means "lines" or "cracks".

using a frame put the ch'in over the fire so that it is not too far or too near the flames. *[If it is too far, then it will not get done. If it is too near, then it may get scorched.]* Wait until the ch'in is extremely hot and then quickly put it in the snow. In so much as the lacquer-powder mixture has been heated up to an extreme degree and then quickly thrust into cold snow, tuan-wen are then formed instantaneously on the ch'in. If one heats it up after it has been cold and again puts it in the snow and does this several times, eventually the whole body will be covered with tuan-wen. However the nature of the lacquer-powder mixture really has not been changed, so the ch'in will look new. Also when one puts his hand on it, the hand will be able to feel the cracks. In this fashion, what is genuine and what is false can be distinguished.