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A combinatorial proof of a decomposition property of reduced residue systems

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In this paper, we look at three common theorems in number theory: the Chinese remainder theorem, the multiplicative property of the Euler totient function, and a decomposition property of reduced residue systems. We use a grid of squares to give simple transparent visual proofs.

1. Introduction

Let m and n be positive integers. Construct an $m \times n$ grid of squares. We place the sequence of positive integers $1, 2, 3, \ldots$ into the grid beginning with the upper left-hand corner cell and moving from the cell numbered i to the cell numbered $i+1$ by going one box down and one to the right. If this is not possible (at the last row or the rightmost column of our $m \times n$ table), we wrap around to the opposite edge and continue. It is easy to see that the i-th row has numbers that are congruent to i modulo m and the j-th column has numbers that are congruent to j modulo n.

We observe that two positive integers x and y fill the same cell if and only if $x \equiv y \bmod m$ and $x \equiv y \bmod n$, which is equivalent to $x - y$ is divisible by $[m, n]$, the least common multiple of m and n. From this, it follows that there is a repetition after we get to $[m, n]$ and, of course, that $[m, n]$ is the first integer to arrive at the lower right-hand corner. Thus we have the positive integers from 1 to $[m, n]$ in the table. Notice that we can number all mn boxes in this way if and only if m and n are relatively prime. This follows from $(m, n)[m, n] = mn$. Here (m, n) denotes the greatest common divisor of m and n. When $m = 3$ and $n = 5$, the above explanation can be illustrated by a glued 3×5 table and a discrete torus, which appear in [Terras 1999]; see Figure 1.

In what follows, we point out some applications of this elementary construction. It provides not only a visual verification of two common theorems in number theory, namely, the Chinese remainder theorem and the multiplicative property of the Euler

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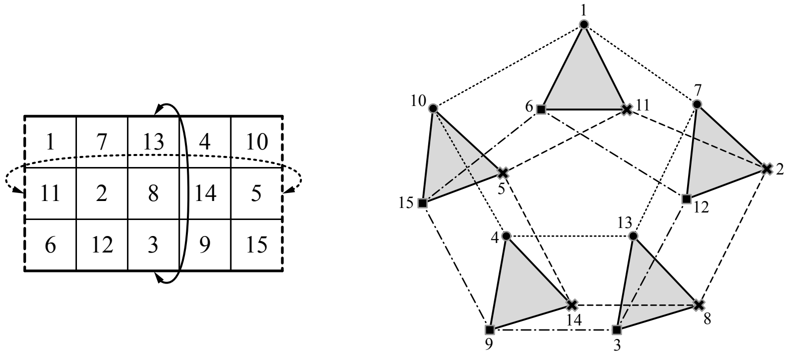

Figure 1. A glued 3×5 table and its corresponding discrete torus.

totient ϕ-function, but also gives a constructive proof for a decomposition property of reduced residue systems, to be defined below. The results are presented in Sections 2 and 3, respectively.

2. The Chinese remainder theorem

Let $d = (m, n)$. We can split the $m \times n$ table into $(m/d) \times (n/d)$ subtables so that each of them is a square $d \times d$ table as shown in Figure 2.

By the above filling method, each subtable has numbers only in its diagonal. For example, the upper left-hand corner subtable will be filled with integers from 1 to d. We move from one subtable to another by going one subtable down and one

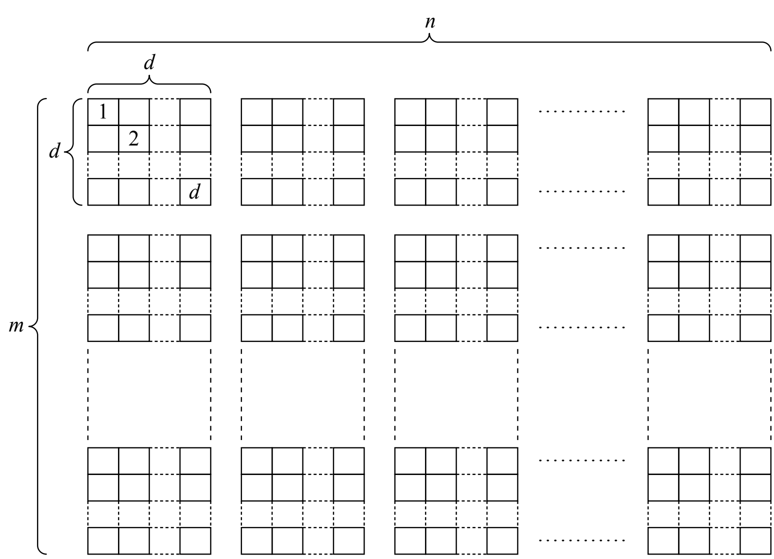

Figure 2. Our division of the $m \times n$ table into $d \times d$ subtables, where $d = (m, n)$.

to the right and wrap around as explained before. Hence a square $d \times d$ subtable can be viewed as a block in an $(m/d) \times (n/d)$ table. Since $(m/d, n/d) = 1$, all $d \times d$ cells have the subsequence

$$(l-1)d+1, (l-1)d+2, \ldots, ld \quad \text{for some } l \in \left\{1, 2, \ldots, \frac{mn}{d^2}\right\}$$

in their diagonals. Thus, the $m \times n$ table is transformed into an $(m/d) \times (n/d)$ table with $(m/d, n/d) = 1$ and we can now number all of the mn/d^2 boxes with $1, 2, \ldots, mn/d^2$. Now observe that the integers in the original table appear only in the positions $(k + id, k + jd)$, where $k \le d, i \le m/d - 1$ and $j \le n/d - 1$. In other words, the positions of the integers are (a, b) with $a \equiv b \bmod d$, that is, $d \mid (a - b)$. Furthermore, as mentioned earlier, there is a repetition of solutions modulo $[m, n]$. Therefore we have proved the Chinese remainder theorem:

Theorem 1. *Let m and n be positive integers. For integers a and b, the congruences*

$$x \equiv a \bmod m \quad \textit{and} \quad x \equiv b \bmod n$$

admit a simultaneous solution if and only if (m, n) divides $a - b$. Moreover, if a solution exists, then it is unique modulo $[m, n]$.

The result when $(m, n) = 1$ was also described by Ledet [2007]. We demonstrate Theorem 1 by the following example.

Example 2. Let $m = 6$ and $n = 8$. Then $(m, n) = 2$ and $[m, n] = 24$. Filling the 6×8 table with the numbers from 1 to 24 as previously described, we obtain

1		19		13		7	
	2		20		14		8
9		3		21		15	
	10		4		22		16
17		11		5		23	
	18		12		6		24

According to this table, one easily sees that $x \equiv 22 \bmod 24$ is a simultaneous solution for $x \equiv 4 \bmod 6$ and $x \equiv 6 \bmod 8$, and there is no x for which both $x \equiv 5 \bmod 6$ and $x \equiv 4 \bmod 8$. □

If m is a positive integer, the *Euler totient function* $\phi(m)$ is defined to be the number of positive integers not exceeding m which are relatively prime to m. By a *reduced residue system modulo* m, we mean any set of $\phi(m)$ integers, pairwise incongruent modulo m, each of which is relatively prime to m. Notice that if p is a prime, then $\phi(p) = p - 1$ and $\{1, 2, \ldots, p - 1\}$ is a reduced residue system modulo p. It is also immediate that $\phi(p^s) = p^s - p^{s-1}$ for all $s \in \mathbb{N}$.

Next, we investigate the decomposition property of the reduced residue systems by our combinatorial technique. Let $a = mn$, where m and n are positive integers.

We arrange the positive integers $1, 2, \ldots, [m, n]$ into the $m \times n$ grid of squares by using the above filling method and delete the i-th rows and j-th columns of the table for all i and j with $(m, i) > 1$ and $(n, j) > 1$. For a better understanding of this construction, one may erase all even (second, fourth, ...) rows and all even columns of the table in Example 2. Recall that the i-th row has numbers that are congruent to i modulo m and the j-th column has numbers that are congruent to j modulo n.

Let l be a remaining positive integer in the table. Notice that $l \equiv i \mod m$ with $(m, i) = 1$ and $1 \le i \le m$; that is, $l = i + km$ for some nonnegative integer k. Since $(m, i) = 1$, there exist integers x and y such that $mx + iy = 1$. Consequently, we choose $x' = x - ky \in \mathbb{Z}$ and $y' = y \in \mathbb{Z}$. Then $mx' + ly' = 1$, so we have $(l, m) = 1$. Similarly, we can show that $(l, n) = 1$. Since $a = mn$, we also have $(l, a) = 1$. Hence all positive integers left in the table after deletion are relatively prime to a and less than $[m, n]$.

For $(m, n) = 1$, we can place the positive integers from 1 to $[m, n] = mn = a$ in the $m \times n$ grid by the means above. Erase the i-th rows that are not relatively prime to m and cross out the j-th columns that are not relatively prime to n. Then we obtain $\phi(m)\phi(n)$ undeleted cells and eliminate all numbers that are not relatively prime to m and n. Since $(m, n) = 1$, the entries left in the table coincide with positive integers less than and relatively prime to a, so the number of these entries is equal to $\phi(a)$. Hence we can conclude the well-known multiplicative property of the Euler totient ϕ-function, namely, if $(m, n) = 1$, then $\phi(mn) = \phi(a) = \phi(m)\phi(n)$. This combinatorial proof is the one given in the famous book on number theory [Niven et al. 1991]. Since $\phi(p^s) = p^s - p^{s-1} = p^s(1 - p^{-1})$ when p is a prime and $s \ge 1$, the multiplicative property gives a formula for computing

$$\phi(M) = M \prod_{p \mid M} (1 - p^{-1})$$

for any positive integer M.

3. Decomposition property of reduced residue systems

Let m' be the product of primes in m not in n with the same exponents that they have in m. It is easy to see that m' and n are relatively prime. Place the positive integers from 1 to $m'n$ in the $m' \times n$ grid and erase the rows that are not relatively prime to m' and the columns that are not relatively prime to n. Let l be a positive integer left in the table after deletion. Then $(l, m') = 1 = (l, n)$. Assume that there exists a prime p dividing l and $a = mn$. Thus $p \mid m$ or $p \mid n$. But $(l, n) = 1$, so p is not in n and thus p is in m. Therefore $p \mid m'$, which contradicts the fact that $(l, m') = 1$. Hence the remaining $\phi(m')\phi(n)$ positive integers in the table are relatively prime to a. Consider them as a $\phi(m') \times \phi(n)$ matrix. The set of all members in each row of this matrix is a reduced residue system modulo n and $x \equiv y \mod n$ for all integers x and y that are in the same column.

Let A_0 be the above $\phi(m') \times \phi(n)$ matrix and

$$A_i = A_0 + i \begin{bmatrix} m'n & \dots & m'n \\ \vdots & \ddots & \vdots \\ m'n & \dots & m'n \end{bmatrix}_{\phi(m')\times\phi(n)} \qquad \text{for } i = 0, 1, \dots, \frac{\phi(mn)}{\phi(m')\phi(n)} - 1.$$

The identity $\phi(M) = M \prod_{p|M}(1 - p^{-1})$ shows that

$$\frac{\phi(mn)}{\phi(m')\phi(n)} = \frac{m}{m'},$$

so the index i ranges from 0 up to $m/m' - 1$, which implies that the entries of A_i do not exceed a. It is also obvious that each entry in A_i is relatively prime to a. We augment A_0 by the matrices

$$A_1, \dots, A_{\frac{\phi(a)}{\phi(m')\phi(n)} - 1},$$

respectively, to form a new $(\phi(a)/\phi(n)) \times \phi(n)$ matrix. Then the entries of this matrix are integers from 1 to a, relatively prime to a, with the condition that the set of the entries in each row is a reduced residue system modulo n and $x \equiv y \mod n$ for all integers x and y that are in the same column. Hence we have a constructive proof for a theorem on a decomposition property of reduced residue systems modulo a summarized as follows.

Theorem 3. *Let S be a residue system modulo a, and let $n \geq 1$ be a divisor of a. Then we have the following decompositions of S:*

(1) *S is the union of $\phi(a)/\phi(n)$ disjoint sets, each of which is a reduced residue system modulo n.*

(2) *S is the union of $\phi(n)$ disjoint sets, each of which consists of $\phi(a)/\phi(n)$ numbers congruent to each other modulo n.*

Remark. Another proof of this theorem and its application on character sums can be found in Apostol's book [1976].

Example 4. Consider $a = 48$ with $m = 6$ and $n = 8$. Since $8 = 2^3$ and $6 = 2 \cdot 3$, let $m' = 3$. Filling a 3×8 table with numbers by our technique, we obtain

1	10	19	4	13	22	7	16
17	2	11	20	5	14	23	8
9	18	3	12	21	6	15	24

Delete the rows that contain numbers not relatively prime to 3 and the columns that contain numbers not relatively prime to 8. We have then the 2×4 matrix formed from the remaining numbers given by

$$A = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 19 & 13 & 7 \\ 17 & 11 & 5 & 23 \end{bmatrix}.$$

Augment this matrix with $\phi(3) = 2$ rows obtained by adding $m'n$ to all entries of A, so we finally reach the decomposition

$$A' = \begin{bmatrix} 1 & 19 & 13 & 7 \\ 17 & 11 & 5 & 23 \\ 25 & 43 & 37 & 31 \\ 41 & 35 & 29 & 47 \end{bmatrix}$$

as desired. □

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