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Memesis and Contemporary Chinese Poetry

*A Distributed View on World Literature**

Tong King Lee

It may be difficult to conceive of a world literature entirely without translation; but is there a world literature *beyond* translation? My question is premised on an understanding of translation in the interlingual sense, where a literary work is seen to traverse the space between discrete languages. But let us pause for a moment and consider Maria Tymoczko (2014) rescaling translation into a cluster concept, that is, as a network of mediating practices within which translating between languages is a prototype, or nucleus, but not its sole *modus operandi*. This enlarged view of translation enables us to consider interlingual translation in conjunction with affiliated semiotic practices that rearticulate a work: a text may thus be "translated" in the sense of being rendered into a different language, but also (even simultaneously) in the sense of being resemioticized into a different mode or onto a different media platform.

The implication of this rescaling of translation is that a literary "work" can no longer be seen as contiguous with a singular, discursive "text": a work is a virtual, relational entity, whereas a text is a semiotic, discrete one. A literary work is thus capable of distributing itself into a plenitude of networked semiotic entities (texts), including but exceeding verbal translations. Distribution, then, becomes a more inclusive heuristic for imagining the multimodal trajectories of works as their semiotic potentialities unravel into assemblages of myriad texts. The story of how a singular work becomes a member of world literature, then, has to change.

Distributed Literature and Semiotic Assemblages

In this chapter, I propose a conception of world literature based around the idea of distribution, drawing on contemporary Chinese poetry as an illustrative case. My notion of distributed literature is informed by that of distributed language (Cowley

* Part of this research is supported by a General Research Fund from the Research Grants Council, HKSAR (Project No.: 17602219).

2017; Love 2017; Steffensen 2014; Thibault 2017), an approach that conceives of language not primarily as an autonomous, rule-based system locked in as part of an individual's cognitive capacity. Rather, it treats language as a second-order construct constituted through the first-order process of languaging—that is, language as embodied, embedded, enacted, and extended across repertoires. A repertoire, as opposed to a linguistic code, comprises diverse modalities of communication (languages, dialects, registers, gesture, mime, dress, posture, bodily orientation, movement, touch), but also the spaces, artifacts, and bodies that bear on a communicative event (Pennycook 2018, 52).

In a distributed view, communication does not occur within the abstract mind of an individual but through the concrete unraveling of semiotic assemblages that encompass linguistic and nonlinguistic resources. The idea of assemblage originates in the work of Deleuze and Guattari as *agencement*, referring to "the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as to the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well" (Delanda 2016, 1). According to Martin Müller's account (2015, 28–29), assemblages are *relational* (they are formed through a contingent arrangement of autonomous entities); *productive* (they produce new organizations, behaviors, expressions, actors, and realities); *heterogeneous* (they can be formed by relating things of very different orders); *de-* and *re-territorializing* (they form concretions as various components come together, but constantly undergo mutation, transformation, and disintegration); and *desired* (they are motivated by the desire for fragmentary entities to come together in continuous flows).

Applying assemblage thinking to language as used alongside people, places, and things in urban settings, Alastair Pennycook proposes that we see language use in terms of "vibrant, changeable exchanges of everyday life" whereby a diverse range of "linguistic, artefactual, historical and spatial resources [are] brought together in particular assemblages in particular moments of time and space" (2018, 54). Thinking of language use in terms of distributed language and semiotic assemblages moves us away from individualistic and systemic accounts of language to a more inclusive perspective that foregrounds "a greater totality of interacting objects, places and alternative forms of semiosis" (Pennycook 2018, 55).

What if we adopted a distributed/assemblage lens on literature? One consequence would be a shift in our understanding of literary writing from one based on individualistic (language-, culture-, author-centered) accounts of creativity to one based on the idea of semiotic repertoires, whereby texts are reimagined as "concrete collections of heterogeneous materials that display tendencies towards both stability and change" (Adkins 2015, 14). Elsewhere (Lee 2015), I attempted this line of thinking in respect of Hong Kong literature, proposing to balance the fetishization of the local by dispersing the notion of the text. A literary text is, in this view, an assemblage of semiotic features that contingently accrue into particular forms under

the hands of individual authors but are also eminently distributable to recombine with other resources to create different repertoires.

A distributed view thus compels a revision of our ontology of literature, prompting us "to view literature not as encapsulated in self-contained entities called texts . . . but rather as a gamut of semiotic resources that are distributive and mobile, and which, in each specific instance, converge on a text via a creative nexus—typically an author" (Lee 2019). Taking this argument further, I argued for an understanding of world literature as "a vibrant assemblage of semiotic resources . . . a repertoire of repertoires drawn upon by a plenitude of situated, place-based literatures, including the plethora of Sinophone literatures in the world. Each literature is, in this sense, an instantiation of the global with local inflections; or, alternatively, an articulation of the local with global extrapolations, thus enacting a kind of recursive loop between different scalarities" (Lee 2019).

Memes and Memesis

In the following, I build on this argument by recourse to the concept of memes. In so doing, I seek to put an intersemiotic and transmedia spin on Damrosch's conception of world literature as "a mode of circulation and of reading" (2003, 5); an "elliptical refraction" of placed-based literatures (2003, 282);[1] and "writing that gains in translation," where translation becomes an exercise in productive critical engagement (2003, 291).

Memes are the nonbiological counterpart of genes. As originally defined by Richard Dawkins in *The Selfish Gene*, a meme refers to a "unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" that propagates itself "by leaping from brain to brain via a process which, in the broad sense, can be called imitation" (2006, 192). A meme must be "sufficiently distinctive and memorable" (Dawkins 2006, 195) to be abstractable from the whole in which it subsists, such as a phrase from Beethoven's Symphony No. 9, as singled out and used by broadcasting stations as a call-sign. Besides tunes, Dawkins's own examples of memes include ideas, catchphrases, sartorial fashions, architectural styles, and ways of making artifacts.

Analogizing this to literature, I define memes as the motifs, concepts, structures, and themes abstracted from their material signs in a given text, with the potential to be disseminated from one text-body to another. A word or expression is not a meme; it is a meme "vehicle" (Dawkins 2006, 192), the concrete instantiation of a meme. A literary meme is thus a prelexicalized semiotic resource, tentatively locked into specific textual formations, yet susceptible to propagation across languages, modes, and media. This is where the notion of memes connects with a distributed and assemblage view on creative writing: like language, literature is an infinite series of momentary constellations of memes (semiotic resources) put together in particular moments of time and space; and as assemblages, literature is deterritorializable (memes can scatter) and reterritorializable (memes can combine with other memes

to partake of different repertoires). What we call literary quality or literariness is therefore not a discrete property located exclusively within the material confines of *a* particular text or within the mind of *an* author—although a particular text or author can legitimately claim originality with respect to a specific configuration of memes. It is instead a *distributed effect* that emerges through interaction among the affordances of the medium of writing, the materialities of the platform on which the text is produced and consumed, and memes.

A memetic (not mimetic) perspective allows us to dislodge the motif, concept, structure, or theme of a piece of writing from its linguistic-semiotic substance; in virtue of this, literary memes are capable of "leaping" out of its text-body to take shape in different formations. Rather than imitation, or *mimesis*, the process involved here is more aptly characterized as a form of semiotic rearticulation, or *memesis*. Memesis includes a range of translational procedures, be they intralingual (within the same language), interlingual (across languages), or intersemiotic (across visual, verbal, oral-aural, kinetic, and other modes). It is akin to what Linda Hutcheon and Siobhan O'Flynn call adaptation—a "transcoding process that encompasses recreations, remakes, remediations, revisions, parodies, reinventions, reinterpretations, expansions, and extensions" (2013, 181)—and affiliates with Tymoczko's (2014) cluster concept of translation.

Illustrations from Chinese Concrete Poetry

To illustrate the workings of memesis, I now turn to my own engagement with the concrete poetry of the Taiwanese poet Chen Li. Although my notion of memes is meant to have a general applicability to all forms of literary composition, concrete poetry is exemplary with its cognitive-perceptual focus on linguistic materiality, more specifically the iconographies (visuality-verbality) and sonographies (orality-aurality) of scripts, to use Andrea Bachner's (2014) terms. Here the question of interpretation, though not irrelevant, takes a back seat. This allows us to downplay for the moment the perennial problem of meaning in its classical, hermeneutic sense—although its spectre will continue to haunt us. If the reader (and translators are exemplary readers) seems to be occasionally suppressed in this analysis, it is for the purpose of highlighting the mobility of memes and the materiality of the media in which they subsist. Memes, as mentioned above, are an abstraction from lexical meaning and hence from readerly interpretation, which makes concrete poetry, with its strong focus on schematic form, a good test case in this regard. This is also in line with the sociolinguistic notion of distribution, which represents a radical departure from both logocentricism (privileging verbal language) and anthropocentricism (privileging human agency). Yet we must recognise that human agency is never altogether missing from the picture, for it is always through social and historical bodies (of readers, writers, translators) that memes are invented, mobilised, and transposed. The point here is to foreground the dynamic of literary assemblages

by bringing our attention to the artefact and the media, without necessarily obliterating the human and the social.

Figure 8.1 shows Chen Li's "Nation" (Guojia). The poem hinges on the sinograph 家 ('home') in the title, deconstructing it into 冖 (*mi*), appearing in the first line as a linear series, and 豕 (*shi*), immaculately arranged into a block constellation underneath. Both of these radical-components are pictographs on their own, the former meaning "to cover" and the latter, "boar" (its cognate character being the more familiar 豚 [*tun*]). Configuring them in a top-down structure creates a non-character that closely resembles 家 but is ultimately unrecognizable. Yet by virtue of its constitution, this non-character is capable of giving rise to an ideographic reading: "pig under (a) roof," hence invoking the etymology of 家, notwithstanding that the latter figures the 宀 (*mian*) radical instead of the 冖 radical.[2]

And this is where reading, as such, ends; the poem really is meant more to be seen than to be read. As when viewing a painting, one takes a step back to gain a holistic perspective on the poem as a gestalt: we can see, literally, that Chen Li's "nation" is one populated by pigs, in lieu of humans, lined up under its overarching structure—the "roof" extending over the "pig" characters. I am aware that interpretation is already sneaking in here, apparently contradicting my earlier point about interpretation taking "a back seat." Still, such interpretation is semiotically rather than hermeneutically driven; any "meaning" espoused in the process remains "thin," insofar as it serves only to be abstracted toward a global concept, or meme. In the present case, the meme may be formulated as: the *irony* of giving form to the lofty idea of "nation" while *deconstructing* that form to *subvert the humanness* of its people.

Here, a detail from Chen Li's own account of his creative process is revealing. Upon completing this piece, the poet was reminded of the opening scene of Charlie Chaplin's *Modern Times*, which depicts a flock of trotting goats fading into a herd of men walking up from a subway station, onto the streets, and into a factory to take up their respective positions. The superimposition of animals over factory workers constructs an analogical relationship pointing to the objectification of ordinary people in an age of industrial modernity. This imagery has somehow stuck with Chen Li, who might have subconsciously transposed its visual schema into the textual shape in his poem (Chen Li, personal communication). Using the terms developed in this chapter, what we have here is a meme emanating from the film and passing through Chen Li's mind into his poem, in which the configuration of pig-characters gains an intertextual-intersemiotic significance against the image of goats-turned-workers in the Charlie Chaplin scene.

Germane to the point of this chapter is how we can take the meme beyond the Chinese script to the threshold of world literature. Enter translation. Let us take a look at my own translation (with Tao Huang) of Chen's poem, titled "Nation." As seen in Figure 8.2, I start the poem with a series of the neologism *demoncracy*. This is my coinage, inspired by a term from New Chinglish (English as appropriated

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Figure 8.1: "Guojia" (2008) by Chen Li. Courtesy of Chen Li.

Nation

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Figure 8.2: "Nation" (2019), translated by Tong King Lee and Tao Huang

by Chinese netizens): *democrazy* ("democracy" + "crazy"). A ludic and subversive distortion of "democracy," *democrazy* is used in Chinese online forums to "mock the so-called democratic systems of the [W]est and in some parts of Asia where certain legislations such as ownership of firearms can be protected due to political lobbying and, in the case of Taiwan, parliamentarians get into physical fights over disagreement" (Li 2016, 16).

My treatment of "democracy" involves inserting an N in the middle of the string, meshing "demon" with "democracy" to create a kind of portmanteau. The N is rendered salient through capitalization and boldface to create visual cohesion with the N of "nation" in the title, serving also as a visual reminder that democracy and nation are affiliate concepts. Thus, a "demon" lurks within my *demoncracy* to the same ironic effect as the embedding of "crazy" within *democrazy*. The "pig" characters in the original poem are turned into the word "demon" in my translation to enact an orthographic serendipity: just as the coupling of 冖 (not 宀) and 豕 in the original poem produces a non-character that evokes yet evades the shape of 家, so my *demoncracy* is an uncanny word that triggers the sound-image "democracy" while subverting it from within. By virtue of these transpositions, "Nation" evinces a different, perhaps darker, narrative than Chen Li's original: a democratic nation is populated by demons.

Clearly, "Nation" is not a translation in the unmarked sense. Apart from the title, it manifestly ignores the surface-level signification of Chen Li's poem, indeed displacing the central sign altogether. What is retained in the English version is instead the meme of the original, formulated earlier as "the *irony* of giving form to the lofty idea of 'nation' while *deconstructing* that form to *subvert the humanness* of its people." As explained above, the new sign *demoncracy* is an ironic deconstruction of "democracy"—both the form and the concept—through the insinuation of "demon," possibly evoking "demagoguery" as often associated with populist politicians, and which etymologically overlaps with "democracy." The "nation" of this new poem is replete with demons instead of humans, or pigs for that matter, hence reiterating the idea of subverting humanness with recourse to a different sign. The translation therefore demonstrates a privileging of meme over meaning, semiotics over semantics; it attempts to perform the Chinese poem in a way that would elicit a similar aesthetic response from an Anglophone readership.

In order to replicate and transmit the meme of the original, the translation taps into the semiotic resources of the target language—in this case, English. More specifically, it borrows from New Chinglish a method of appropriating normative English for creative and critical purposes to coin a contingent lexical formation (*demoncracy*). In so doing, the translation introduces a new ingredient, for the "democracy" motif does not figure in the original Chinese. In other words, the translation *adds value* to Chen Li's poem by way of another thematic layer, although it also compromises on the reference to "home" in the original.

As a further example of the value-adding potential of translation, Figure 8.3 shows Chen Li's "Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain" (Xiaofang duizhang mengzhong de aiji fengjing zhao). This poem takes the shape of a pyramid, filled with multiplications of the pictograph *huo* 火 (fire). If pressed to explain the meaning of the poem, one might say: a pyramid catches fire in the dream of a fireman. Yet what is more interesting is how the poem works semiotically, in other words, its meme—here based on the ideographic potential of the character 火, whose architectonic structure generates several graphically related characters. Thus, two 火 characters read top-down make up *yan* 炎 (flame or heat); three of those characters arranged triangularly give us *yan* 焱 (flame); and with four of them forming a square we have *yi* 燚 (fiery flame). Chen Li's pyramid is thus not to be seen as a simple stacking of "fire" characters into an interesting shape; it conceals, beneath an apparently simple configuration, a complex series of overlapping frames recursively looping the pictograph 火, thereby turning the discursive pyramid into an iconic one that visualizes a conflagration.

Hence, an English translation that substitutes the word "fire" for all the "fire" characters clearly misses the point (i.e., the meme) of the Chinese original.[3] What is needed here is not a semantic but a semiotic treatment. Figure 8.4 shows my translation (with Steven Chan), titled "Pyramid on Fire: A Fire Captain's Dream."[4] This translation abandons the word "fire" and goes straight for the poem's meme by way of inventing an overlapping, recursive reading frame that works in English and yet intertextually resonates with the Chinese original. That frame is the string *redflared*, made up of "red," denoting the color typically associated with fire (in English at least), and "flared," cohering with the fire theme. The design concept behind *redflared* is that the segment "red" with which the string begins and ends allows the string to loop back onto itself. This generates a visual series (*redflaredflaredflared*) where discrete segments of *redflared* interlock each other to form chains (thus, *redflare* would not work) that dynamically perform the visual concept of the original poem.

On the premise that a translation can performatively exceed its original, we further use typographical devices to enhance the setup of our multimodal rendition. Specifically, we color the word "red" in red, to sharpen the visual contrast, and further italicize "flared" to suggest the image of a wavering flame. None of these devices are used by Chen Li in his poem, such that our translation has inscribed a degree of typographical variation that has not been contemplated nor materialized by the author. Yet in memesis there is nothing to prevent the translation from *outperforming* the original, in a manner of speaking, by using resources that are either not available in the source repertoire or not exploited by the author. This outperformance, I contend, is a *remainder*,[5] or surplus, through which translation adds value to a literary work, productively distributing that work via a different semiotic assemblage and reterritorializing it into another language.

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Figure 8.3: "Xiaofang duizhang mengzhong de aiji fengjing zhao" (2001) by Chen Li. Courtesy of Chen Li.

Pyramid on Fire

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Figure 8.4: "Pyramid on Fire: A Fire Captain's Dream" (2018), translated by Steven W. K. Chan and Tong King Lee

From Texts to Text-Complexes

The above examples serve to demonstrate memesis as the process by which a text moves beyond its linguistic-semiotic perimeters. In this distributive movement, a work mutates itself from one language to another through a procedure that encompasses but also exceeds translation. A literary work, therefore, can be seen to have several extensions, each drawing on a different set of semiotic affordances that happen to be available. In other words, a single cognitive-perceptual schema can find reverberations and repercussions in different concrete formations. This recalls Deleuze and Guattari's concept of *folding*, through which "a single abstract Animal", or topological animal, "can be folded and stretched into the multitude of different animal species that populate the world" (Delanda 2016, 151). As Deleuze and Guattari assert (1987, 255): "A unique plane of consistency or composition for the cephalopod and the vertebrate; for the vertebrate to become an octopus or Cuttlefish, all it would have to do is fold itself in two fast enough to fuse the elements of the halves of its back together, then bring its pelvis up to the nape of its neck and gather its limbs together, into one of its extremities."

Applying this to literature: a literary text, analogous to Deleuze and Guattari's "abstract Animal," can *enfold* itself into other languages, or into different registers of the same language, such that a singular work can be said to reincarnate its memes in different textual infrastructures or semiotic assemblages. This also means, in the vocabulary of assemblage thinking, that any literary work can be seen as a topological text which can spin off into different concrete manifestations as virtual options. This is the text's *diagram*, which, according to Manuel Delanda, "captures the structure of the space of possibilities associated with an assemblage's variable components" (2016, 130). Thus, for Slavoj Žižek, the transposition of Shakespeare's plays into contemporary settings with "a different twist without losing their effectiveness" demonstrates the workings of a literary assemblage whose elements are relatively autonomous and therefore subject to "radical re-contextualization" (2018, 20).

In the same vein, we can speak of Chen Li's concrete poetry as a semiotic assemblage whose components are capable of being reconfigured into different linguistic-semiotic formations, each existing as a virtual option in the diagram of the Chinese original and giving it their own twist. Hence, my translations above are but one among several possibilities, even within the English language; the original poems contain within them the seeds of alternative formations in English and in other languages, waiting to be disseminated and distributed. The beauty of this theory lies in the way it alters the relationship between texts and world literature. We normally think of a text's becoming world literature by way of being translated and circulated. Now we can equally think of world literature as being potentially embedded within the matrix of a literary work, where world literature is conceived as "the virtual structure of possibility spaces" (Delanda 2016, 151) constituting a text: that is, all possible manifestations in which a text can be actualized.

Chen Li's most widely translated work, "A War Symphony," (Zhanzheng jiaoxiang qu) is Sinophone literature's best response to assemblage theory. The semiotics of this poem has been discussed many times over (Bachner 2014, 89–90; Chiu 2018, 32–34; Lee 2015, 81–88). In short: the poem starts with several neat rows of the character 兵 *bing* (soldier), which splinters into 乒 *ping* and 乓 *pang* (visually representing soldiers with lost limbs and aurally, the plosive sound of gun shots) in a haphazard arrangement, before amassing again into neat rows, but this time in the form of 丘 *qiu* (mound)—visually, the body of soldiers with both limbs truncated; semantically, a mass grave; and aurally perhaps, the feeble moaning of dying soldiers, although this last effect surfaces only in the recital version (more on this below).

"A War Symphony" is a simple but effective demonstration of the visual-verbal and oral-aural potentialities of the Chinese language. And despite being seen as the hallmark of untranslatability,[6] the work has in fact been reworked many times in several languages, including English (multiple versions), Russian, Japanese, and German.[7] Each remake of the poem distributes its memes, which are in each case mobilized into a different linguistic assemblage on the basis of a different set of semiotic resources. "A War Symphony," then, can be said to embody a topology of memes that encapsulates within its virtual structure many possible variant options, some realized and others not. Some of these options may be deemed more aesthetically effective than others from a prescriptive point of view; but the perceived quality of a translation is quite beside the point here. The acts of translation themselves attest to how the semiotic potential of Chen Li's poem becomes iteratively constituted within different linguistic-semiotic regimes.

Herein lies my theoretical intervention: the potential of a work to become world literature is always already there. Yet this potentiality need not be imagined as a pure In-itself, as some essence locked into the linguistic sign. Žižek uses an interesting analogy to make the point that "what an object is in itself . . . is not immanent to it independently of its relations to others" (2018, 34): "In the same way, in eroticism, new "potentialities" of sexual pleasure are what a good lover brings out in you: s/he sees them in you even though you were unaware of them. They are not a pure In-itself, which was already there before it was discovered; they are an In-itself that is generated through a relationship with the other (lover)" (2018, 33). Analogously, the potentiality of a literary work to become world literature is not so much immanent as it is relational; it arises through the interactions of the work's memes with the affordances of languages (and media) as well as the distribution of these memes into other semiotic frameworks. And it is through such interaction and distribution that this potentiality becomes instantiated in concrete forms that enter into an intertextual relation with the originating text. The resulting network emerging from such intertextuality is what I have called elsewhere a *text-complex* (Lee 2015, 90–97), defined as a linear, non-hierarchical repertoire of discrete but related texts held together by memes-in-distribution.

The various iterations of “A War Symphony,” in this view, converge into a text-complex that may have originated with a single text by Chen Li, but does not reside entirely in that text or with Chen Li himself. The ownership of this text-complex is shared between the poet and his translators.[8] In translating the “Nation” and “Pyramid on Fire” poems, for instance, I worked in close consultation with Chen Li, enquiring about his motivations behind certain details of textual design (he was always happy to supply more information than I needed), while making sure to maintain my autonomy in the course of conceiving the translation. It is in this sense that we can speak of a *distributed authorship* alongside the distribution of the work. Crucially, the work is also distributed through nonhuman *actants*—entities with agency, to use a term from Actor Network Theory—namely, the semiotic resources afforded by each language and media platform into which Chen’s poems enfold.

This line of thinking opens up the virtual space for a translation to add value to the source text, even to outstrip the original by reworking its memes in a way that exceeds it far beyond the author’s anticipation. My elaborative translations of Chen Li’s poems can be said to extend and enfold each of his texts into text-complexes that include the original Chinese, my translation, and other potential renditions to come. (And in so doing, am I not already nudging Chen Li’s work into the world republic of letters, albeit in my own small way?) A distributed perspective thus serves to defetishize the perceived organicity of a work, reconceptualizing it as being virtualized across a repertoire of nodal works shared among human and nonhuman actants, among whom are the author and the translator.

It is worth noting that distribution is a necessary, not sufficient, condition for a work to become world literature. As mentioned earlier, while some virtual options may enjoy an uptake, others may remain latent. Whether or not memes, as a textual potentiality, will eventually be realized through translation or transcreation will depend on extrinsic factors, including the availability of resources and the subjectivity of relevant actors (the willingness of authors, the motivation for translators—and this is where human agency still maintains a grip on the process). Indeed, even when memes are successfully distributed (e.g., with the publication of a translation or completion of a film adaptation), it does not follow that a work will automatically become part of world literature. Whether the latter will happen is contingent on a host of complex factors quite independent of memesis, such as the prevailing poetics and ideology influencing the reception of “local” literatures on international platforms and the efficacy of the marketing apparatuses surrounding a work’s distribution.

Memesis across Media

Nonhuman actants in literary assemblages include not only linguistic-semiotic resources, but also the material-technological platform on which a literary work manifests itself. Memes therefore proliferate by leaping not only from one text to

another but also from one mode/medium to another. This is what Bolter and Grusin (2000) call remediation, the refraction of existing forms and practices through a different medium, both effacing (their original materialities) and enabling their incarnation.[9]

A prime example is Shakespeare's oeuvre, which Stephen O'Neill construes as "an available template repeated across YouTube" acquiring "meme-like properties" (2014, 44). The Bard, through multiple remediations on YouTube, is turned into "a network of connections between disparate digital objects" (O'Neill 2014, 16) These digital objects, including vernacular film productions, fan-made videos, classroom-based performances, online Shakespearean quote generators, and Shakespeare-related mobile apps, embody various *memeings* of Shakespeare, through which "we can see how Shakespeare's meaning is invariably filtered through and contingent on the present, on the specificities of a time, place and their cultural dominants" (O'Neill 2014, 47). We can thus speak of a global Shakespeare not just in terms of the translation and circulation of his plays in the world's languages, but also in terms of a transmedia poetics derived from their memesis.

Looking back at Chen Li through this lens, the poet has a YouTube channel that houses remediations of his works, including recitals, musical renditions, and ambient videos. In some cases, a symbiotic relationship obtains between the poem in print and the poem as it is performed in a different mode and medium. For example, "A War Symphony" has at least two notable transmedia spin-offs, an animated version and a recital version.[10] The animated version dramatizes the poem into a virtual battle, splitting the textual configuration of the original into two mobile masses of 兵 characters, whose two "limbs" at the bottom are made to move left and right in emulation of marching soldiers. The two armies are coded in blue and red, and as they collide on screen, we see 兵 characters from both sides striking out the "limbs" of their opponents into 乒 and 乓. And when these characters lose their only remaining limb, they turn into a 丘 in black. The animation concludes with a black-and-white display of 乒, 乓, and 丘 sprawled out and overlapping one another. In the terms I have developed earlier, this animated version adds value to the poem by way of the mobility and color-coding of the Chinese characters, which are made possible by virtue of the affordances of its medium.

The recital version by Chen Li himself is value-adding in a yet different way. The oral-aural nuances afforded by Chen's reading gives his poem a semiotic dimension that is at most latent in the printed text, specifically his rendition of *qiu* 丘 in an "extended, lingering breath . . . [that] suggests the last, languid breathing of dying soldiers" (Chiu 2018, 33).[11] Here the interaction between "the spatiality of visual poetry and the temporality of sound poetry" (Chiu 2018, 33) extends "A War Symphony" from a written text into a verbal-sonic assemblage.

The question at hand is whether, and how, such remediations dovetail into world literature. The animated and recital versions of "A War Symphony" above can be said to extend the poem intersemiotically, distributing its memes into the virtual

realm via YouTube. Such distribution triggers a new mode of circulation that taps into the affordances of new media technologies, but also a new mode of reading that straddles print and digital interfaces. For Kuei-fen Chiu, this phenomenon "heralds a world-literature-*to-come* in the new world of cross-mediality," where the amenability of Chen Li's works to remediation "places the peripheral Taiwanese writer at the forefront of world literature-*to-come*" (2018, 34, 35; emphasis added). Why "to-come?" For me, this is because remediation has not been fully theorized as an integral process of world literature, where there is still a preoccupation with interlingual translation. More specifically, in the case of Chen Li, the current evidence is probably still too thin for us to posit the existence of a global Chen Li in world literature.

Be that as it may, I want to end by way of a last example that points toward the direction of this "world literature to-come," namely: memesis across media. Chen Li's *Microcosmos* (Xiao yuzhou) is a corpus of haiku-inspired (three-liner) poems, debuted in 1993 with 100 works, then expanded in 2006 with 200 works (incorporating those published in 1993), and taking fuller shape in 2016 with 266 works.[12] Selected poems from *Microcosmos* have been translated into several languages, including into German by Rupprecht Mayer; into Korean by Kim Sang-Ho; into Spanish by Rachid Lamarti; into French by Marie Laureillard; into Dutch by Silvia Marijnissen; into Japanese by Tetsuji Ueda; and into English by Chang Fen-ling. Chen Li was also featured as part of the Marquee Poetry project during the 2018 National Poetry Month in the United States, where Chen's haiku poems were placed alongside those of the Japanese haiku masters Kobayashi Issa, Yosa Buson, and Masaoka Shiki. Based on the above, we can already see the *Microcosmos* poems tracing out a preliminary trajectory in world literature via translation and circulation.

More intriguing to me, however, are the multiple remediations of Chen Li's haiku-style poems that represent semiotic rearticulations distributing *Microcosmos* through specific modalities and materialities. Some examples are as follows:

- Figure 8.5 shows a poem from the collection framed and displayed inside a metro train in Taipei, in the poet's handwriting and with sketches added on the sides. This emplacement of the poem in a public space, together with its paratextual and graphic embellishments, transforms it from a written text for private reading into a multimodal artefact for viewing.
- At the Macau Literary Festival on March 4–6, 2017, the poet recited two of his haiku poems in Chinese and English at a public event at The Poet's Café,[13] where the spontaneity, embodied performativity, and interactivity of the event can be seen to animate the otherwise "inert" poems.
- On July 30, 2017, the radio program "Encountering Literature" by the RTHK (Radio Television Hong Kong) did a retrospective on Chen Li, where poems from *Microcosmos* were recited in Cantonese by a local university professor in modern Chinese literature.

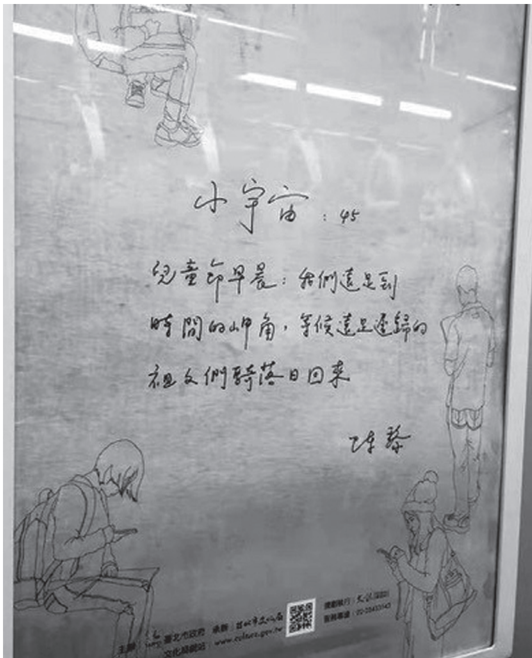

Figure 8.5: A poem (#45) from *Microcosmos* emplaced in a train car in Taipei. Courtesy of Chen Li.

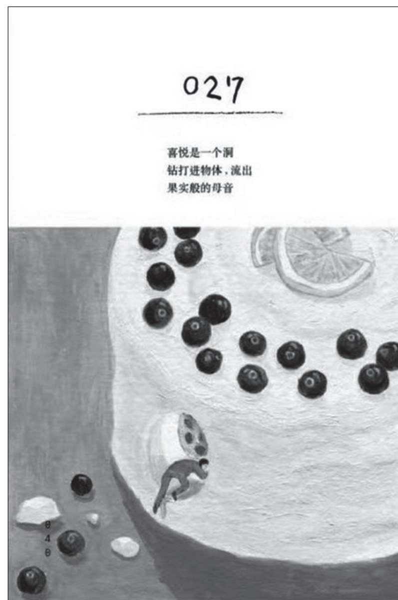

Figure 8.6: A poem (#27) with illustration, from *Microcosmos: 266 Modern Haikus* (full-color illustrated version). Courtesy of Chen Li and Ghiholi Studio.

- More recently, in 2018, Chen Li collaborated with a Taiwanese artist to publish an illustrated version of *Microcosmos* titled *Microcosmos: 266 Modern Haikus (Full-Colour Illustrated Version)*. Each poem in the illustrated volume is layered with a thematically relevant sketch to extend a visual aesthetic—we might venture to say *prosthetic*—beyond the original text. Figure 8.6 shows an example from the book. The poem reads: "Happiness is a hole/ Drilled into objects/Out flows fruit-like vowels." The picture below the text shows a man crawling into a hole on the side of a cake topped with blueberries and lemon; these graphical details correspond to the image of happiness being a "hole" oozing "fruit-like vowels" in the poem.
- Remediations are not restricted to formal print publications, but can also appear in other modes of vernacular creativity, such as architectural initiatives: for example, in 2014, the Hualien County government constructed a "poetry wall" outside a school using excerpts from *Microcosmos*.[14]

Apart from translations and remediations, *Microcosmos* has been subject to memetic processes where what is distributed is the work's concept, even just an ineffable strain of influence. For example, the award-winning Taiwanese singer and lyricist Wu Qingfeng, himself a fan of Chen Li, titled his 2006 album *Microcosmos* in tribute to Chen's book. The New Zealander poet Janet Charman was inspired by Chen Li's Chinese haiku to create her own brand of English haiku in her 2017 collection *Surrender* (仁). A most interesting example in this regard is a percussion rendition titled *Microcosmos: For a Percussionist*, composed by the poet's daughter Lily Chen and performed by Shih-San Wu in 2010. Taking its inspiration from three haiku poems in *Microcosmos*, the piece is a musical elaboration of Chen's work based on the affordances of the timpani, the Chinese zither, the cymbal, and other nonmusical items, seeking "to explore multi-acoustic effects, exploit new possibilities of music, and create a simple but substantial musical microcosm" (Lily Chen 2015, n.p.). The music-poetry nexus is formed by the composer's transduction of "the energy she has felt while reading the poems into material to develop musical motives" (Lily Chen 2015, n.p.). This also means translating poetry into a mode beyond language as such and extending it into an open semiotic space accessible through one's senses.

Although there is no one-on-one correspondence between music and poetry, in the YouTube version of the performance, the bilingual versions of the source poems are nonetheless conjured up on the screen. This enables the viewer to construct a vague translational relationship between the texts on the one hand and the sounds of the instruments, as well as the kinetics of the performer's bodily movement, on the other. As the first poem appears on the screen: "A swift and downward glissando: / someone puts a ladder / against my childhood window," the music starts with an abrupt and forceful strum of the zither strings. At a few junctures, the performer strikes the wood of the zither to produce a knocking sound—which we

Figure 8.7: "Microcosmos: For a Percussionist" (2010), composed by Lily Chen and performed by Shih-San Wu, with bilingual version of the source poems. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=323&v=uOjpY4rJZPs. Courtesy of Chen Li.

might intersemiotically imagine as the sound of a ladder being placed on a windowsill. With the second poem, "I wait and long for you: / a turning die in the empty bowl of night / attempting to create the 7th side," the performer places several beads into two black bowls, swirling the beads with her fingers to a rolling auditory effect. The third poem reads: "Silent soyabean milk: day after day / from my bowl to my body flows / the blank music," and here the performer surprisingly takes out a ladle to brush the top of the timpani and to strum the zither, in circular motions—movements that evoke respectively the act of grinding soyabeans into milk and the sound of flowing water.[15]

Another transmedia experiment is done by Lin Hwai-min (Lin Huaimin), a 2017 theatrical masterpiece called *Formosa* (*Guanyu daoyu*) in which poetic language interacts with music, dance, and visual effects in a completely stunning way. The dance choreography is designed around nineteen excerpts of prose and poetry, three of which are from Chen Li's work. As the performers dance to vigorous drumbeats on the stage, a huge mass of dark Chinese characters is mobilized on the screen behind (and on the stage floor), darting around chaotically, splitting up, and violently crashing into each other before coalescing into the character 麗 (*li*, beautiful: Taiwan has the alternative appellation of Meilidao, literally "beautiful island"), signifying reconciliation amidst tension. Within this intense visuality, orality-aurality, and body-kinetics come the poems, as recited by renowned Taiwanese writer Chiang Hsun (Jiang Xun).

Among the three works by Chen Li selected for the piece, one (#191) is from *Microcosmos*. In this poem, Chen Li paratactically juxtaposes sixteen place names from Taiwan,[16] tapping into the literal meaning of the characters to contrive a "road condition report." By referencing rougher road conditions amidst more agreeable ones, the poem hints at the possible tensions underlying relations among the various ethnic communities in Taiwan. The corresponding segment in *Formosa* features a frail woman at the centre of the stage, apparently injured. Supported by a man beside her, with several others revolving around in stylistic manoeuvres, she eventually faints (dies?). The woman's frailty may speak to the pessimistic conditions mentioned in the poem (sharp stones, dark clouds, congested roads, mountain fog), but there is a limit to imposing a direct relation between text and embodied movement. It might be more sensible instead to see the choreography as being aesthetically inspired by the language, and the poem (recited in the background) as "speaking back," as it were, to the moving bodies, hence creating an emerging, amorphous intertextuality across the semiotic divide. What we have, then, is a transmedia poetics that transcends and transgresses perceived semiotic boundaries, yielding an assemblage that brings its components together into an enriched repertoire and taking itself into the universal realm of embodied and visual language.

Conclusion

Microcosmos is an illuminating case of Chinese literature as world literature in its recapitulation of all the pertinent themes: translation, circulation, reading, and, of course, memesis. It demonstrates in particular the potential for a work to gain visibility beyond its material confines, not just via translation in the usual sense, but also via remediation across modes and media, transgressing conventionalized strata of culture (e.g., highbrow versus lowbrow). What accrues from these semiotic practices in combination is what I have called text-complexes, which ties in with what sociolinguists call semiotic assemblages. Thus, the diverse manifestations of *Microcosmos* discussed above—the handwritten poster version in the metro, the picture book version, the various recital versions, and the poetry wall version, as well as all the "inspired" multimodal renditions—can be seen as a penumbra of related texts orbiting around and extrapolating the original *Microcosmos* beyond its original site of production and consumption. It is in this sense that the latter is a distributed work, incarnating into other texts while retaining its spectral presence.

Further, *Microcosmos* may itself be an intermediary point within a larger memetic nexus. Chen Li's poetic sensibilities as expressed in his Chinese haiku poems possibly originate from his long-term engagement with the classic works of Japanese haiku masters as a translator.[17] On the other hand, when translating traditional Japanese haiku poems, Chen Li is conscious that the syntax of his Chinese haiku in *Microcosmos* has a bearing on his phrasing, such that he often feels as though he were writing his own haiku in the course of his translation (Chen Li, personal communication). This illuminates the dialectic between creative writing and translation, and also a transcultural memesis from Japanese into Chinese. Considering the further interlingual and transmedia extensions of *Microcosmos*, we can truly see the shaping up of what Karen Thornber (2009) calls a literary contact nebula—but one that cuts across not only languages, texts, cultures, and literary traditions, but also across modes and media.

A semiotic view on world literature foregrounds shifting constellations of memes rather than stable canons of texts. My hands-on engagement with Chen's concrete poetry has shown that memes are as much a unit of distribution as lexical units (words, phrases, clauses) are a unit of translation. The diverse instantiations of his oeuvre—crosslingual, intersemiotic, and transmedia—demonstrate that world literature must consider the potentialities of translation beyond language; that is, where a work may distribute itself across linguistic as well as modal and medial repertoires to herald a new global literary imaginary.

Notes

1. Damrosch uses the term "national literatures" broadly to include ethnic or cultural groups (2003, 283). Yet the term can be problematic in respect of contemporary

literatures for which the nation is an elusive, contested, or irrelevant category. I prefer the term "place-based literatures," a term I borrow from Sinophone studies (Shih 2011) to indicate geopolitical as well as other kinds of situatedness.

2. The use of 冖 instead of 宀 is motivated by the overall visuality of the piece that Chen Li is trying to create. Chen intends his poem as a whole to assume a rectangular shape in line with the frame of the character 國 in the title; the use of 宀 with the additional stroke on top would compromise the desired shape (Chen Li, personal communication).
3. See http://faculty.ndhu.edu.tw/~chenli/book8.htm#htmPhoto_of_Egyptian_Scenery.
4. This translation was first published in Lee and Chan (2018). In that version, I used the title "Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain," a close translation by Chang Fen-ling of the original Chinese title. In the present version, I use a different title to accord with how it might sound if the poem were originally written in contemporary English.
5. My notion of remainder is adapted from Lawrence Venuti (1996, 92), who argues that literary texts written in so-called minor languages can "[submit] the major language to constant variation, forcing it to become minor, delegitimizing, deterritorializing, alienating it . . . In releasing the remainder, a minor literature indicates where the major language is foreign to itself." In appropriating Venuti, I reimagine "minor literature" into translated literature and "major language" into source language. Also, Venuti maintains that "[a]lthough literature can be defined as writing created specially to release the remainder, it is the stylistically innovative text that makes the most striking intervention into a linguistic conjuncture by exposing the contradictory conditions of the standard dialect, the literary canon, the dominant culture, the major language" (1996, 92). In an analogous vein, concrete poetry takes the role of such a "stylistically innovative text" that defamiliarizes the language of its writing, in this case Chinese, by exposing its semiotic conditions—the architechtonics of the Chinese script.
6. Chen Li's translator and wife Fen-ling Chang opines that "the linguistic symbolism and cultural specificity" of "A War Symphony" defies translation (2014, 17), which motivates her to leave the main text of the poem intact in *The Edge of the Island* (an anthology of Chen Li's poetry in English translation), translating only the title and supplying notes in English.
7. The poem has also been featured in anthologies in Dutch, French, Spanish, and Korean, although in these versions, the text is reproduced as it is, with an added explanatory footnote in the respective languages.
8. According to copyright requirements, at least in common law jurisdictions, the author's consent is needed before a translation of his or her work can be published; interestingly, however, this does not prevent the translator from being legally considered an "author" of the translation.
9. Katherine Hayles's preferred term is intermediation, which highlights the role of the "mediating interfaces" as well as "interactions between systems of representations" in this process (2005, 33).
10. Both the animated and recital versions can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZjj5y-7e9Q.
11. In reading the poem, Chen Li himself imagines the elongated coda in *qiu* as onomatopoeic of the "eerie autumn winds": *zhenzhen guimei de qiufeng*, where *qiu* (autumn) bears an ambivalent sound-meaning value (Chen Li, personal communication).

12. Among these 266 works, sixty-six were recycled from the previously published 200 poems, where characters used in earlier pieces were selected and reassembled into new pieces.
13. See https://www.facebook.com/macaulitfest/videos/the-poem-microcosmos-by-chen-li-shared-in-two-languages-in-a-special-moment-at-t/1324407957652809/.
14. This brings to mind Rotterdam's poetry trail BKOR, where the last two lines of Chen Li's poem "Wall" (Qiang) are inscribed on a structure in Mathenesserplein by the Dutch artist Toni Burgering. The original Chinese poem in full and a Dutch translation by Silvia Marijnissen are also displayed on-site. See https://bruggedichten.nl/poezie/mathenesserplein/.
15. The percussion piece can be viewed on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=323&v=uOjpY4rJZPs.
16. These are: Xi Zhi, Bai Sha, Ying Ge, Lin Bian, Nuan Nuan, Chun Ri, Wan Li, Mei Nong, Jian Shi, Ji Ji, Tong Xiao, Wu Ri, Fan Lu, Ba Du, Shui Shang, and Wu Feng.
17. In 2019, Chen Li published three volumes of his Chinese translation of traditional Japanese haiku poetry, with one volume devoted each to Yosa Buson, Matsuo Basho, and Kobayashi Issa.

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