The Translation and Transmission of Concrete Poetry

Edited by
John Corbett and
Ting Huang

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4 Writing and Translating Concrete Poetry in Chinese Characters[1]

Chen Li

I have always been interested in words. Growing up in Hualien, on the east coast of Taiwan, I soon became interested in the form of words and their etymology. When I was young, I read dictionaries and encyclopaedias, and, as Taiwan has retained traditional Chinese orthography, I became sensitive to the many roots and forms of Chinese characters, ideograms and pictographs. My own name, for example, is 'Chen Li' but it was originally 'Chen Ying-wen' (陳膺文)—'chen' (陳) means 'to express,' while 'ying' (膺) means 'bosom,' and 'wen' (文) means 'words,' and consequently, as a child, I thought, 'Oh, I am meant to be someone who speaks or writes from his heart'. So I have always been fascinated by the mysterious, formal components of Chinese words and their histories. But I also became aware that Hualien is culturally diverse, and that this diversity, too, is reflected in language. I learned that Hualien was first called 'Rio Douro' or 'River of Gold', a name given by early Portuguese colonists who found the precious metal in the nearby Liwu river. For this reason, my interest in the hidden history of Chinese words became intertwined with a fascination for the effect that different cultures and languages have had on our history. I discovered that about a hundred years ago, Japanese immigrants in Taiwan, ordinary people, had written thousands of poems about Hualien, using the Japanese forms of tanka and haiku, and I started to translate them into Chinese. I liked the formal discipline of these poems, the three-line haiku of 5-7-5 syllables and the five-line tanka of 5-7-5-7-7 syllables. My own poetry, then, is in part an extension of ancient Chinese traditions but it is also certainly influenced by other cultures.

I began writing poetry of my own in 1974, beginning with the poem, 'Impression of the Sea.' In this poem, the sea is a woman, rolling with her many lovers under a blue quilt, and the way in which the Chinese characters are spaced in the final two lines is an attempt to give a visual impression of the rolling waves. The poem shows that I was interested in the visual qualities of poetry from the start. Then, when I was a student of English at Taiwan Normal University, just before I graduated, a kind librarian gave me an old copy of the *Chicago Review,* a special edition from 1967 that was an anthology of concrete poetry.

I could see from the names that the poets came from all around the world – America and Britain, Italy and France – but my eye was caught by Chinese characters, or kanji, in a poem by the Japanese poet, Seii-chi Niikuni (1925–1977). I saw that he had written a poem using two separate components, for 'river' (川) and 'shore' (州) to produce the combined poem, 'river or shore' (*kawamatawashū,* 川または州). I was very impressed by this poem, and by another, 'rain' (*ame,* 雨), which deconstructed the Chinese character and aligned the components to give the visual impression of falling raindrops. These examples inspired me to start experimenting myself with poems that exploited the visual characteristicsof Chinese characters.

By no means all of my poems are experimental in nature, but for the past two decades I have written many types of concrete poetry: hidden-character poems, obsolete-character poems, non-character poems and poems which I call 'modern Chinese haiku' and 'Tang po-etry haiku', attempting not only at visual and audio effects, but at the specific features of Chinese characters or 'Chineseness'. These exper-imental poems do offer creative challenges to translators. However, sometimes only a gloss is required to understand them. When I was on my way to my first international poetry festival, in Rotterdam in 1999, I could explain, for example, the underlying idea of my most famous poem, 'A War Symphony' (1995, Figure 4.1) to a Russian engineer who was sitting in the seat beside me, by showing him the poem and using a few English phrases. The whole poem consists of many lines but only of four characters—兵, 乒, 乓 and 丘 (you may even say that it is composed of only one character 兵, since the other three characters can be seen as its variants). The first stanza is composed of hundreds of 兵 (*bing*), meaning 'soldier.' The second stanza is made up of 乒 (*ping*) and 乓 (*pong*), which look like one-legged soldiers; they are onomatopoeicwords, imitating the sounds of gunshots or collisions: when combined, they are associated with *ping pong* ('table tennis'). It turns out that there is a famous concrete poem by Eugen Gomringer that is also about 'ping pong' but at the time I wrote the 'A War Sym-phony' I was not aware of it. The coincidence is remarkable; I am also struck by the fact that Gomringer's 'Ping Pong' was written in 1953, and I was born the following year. In the last stanza of 'A War Symphony,' you see hundreds of 丘 (*qiu*) characters, which visually suggests a soldier without legs and literally means 'small hill,' having the implication of 'tomb.'

The Taiwanese artist, Xiu-jing Wu (吳秀菁), has made an animated version of the poem,[2] and it has been translated several times. Strategies used in the translation of my experimental poetry are discussed by Tong-King Lee (2015). The Polish poet Bohdan Piasecki, who teaches transla-tion in England, years ago translated this poem into English (Figure 4.2). In the first stanza, he substitutes 'A man' for 兵 ('soldier'). In the second

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Figure 4.1 'A War Symphony' (戰爭交響曲) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author.

stanza, 'Ah man' and 'Ah men' are used to replace the scattered ono-matopoeic words, 乒 and 乓. And in the third stanza, 丘 is replaced by 'Amen,' which may be interpreted as a prayer at the funeral. The translation represents a thoughtful attempt to reproduce the visual narrative and find functional equivalents in English for the Chinese characters.

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          Ah man Ah man   Ah men   Ah men Ah men   Ah man   Ah man   Ah men   Ah man   Ah men   Ah man
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          Ah man   Ah men   Ah man   Ah men   Ah men
                    Ah man   Ah men

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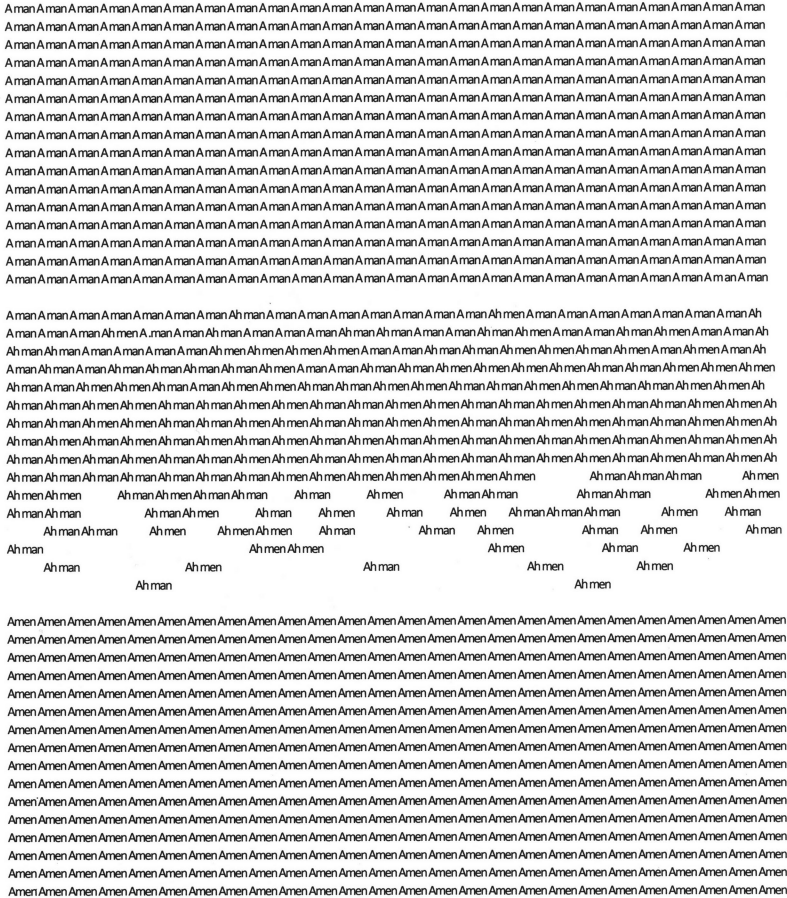
Figure 4.2 Translation of Chen Li's 'A War Symphony' by Bohdan Piasecki, by courtesy of the translator.

Another English version of the poem was composed by Professor Cosima Bruno who teaches at SOAS, University of London (Figure 4.3). Bruno's version is a comic-like presentation that draws upon Futurist poetics. It substitutes the Chinese characters with onomatopoeic words in upper and smaller case, in a variety of typefaces, such as tum, TUM, bom, BOM, BOO, bomb, BOOM, toum, TUUM, BOUM and TOUMB to imitate the sounds of the army marching or bombs exploding. In the first two stanzas, the lower-case words are capitalised and getting bigger in the latter half, which suggests the battle is getting closer, more violent and bitter. In the third stanza, the words are scattered with 'tomb' and 'TOMB' interspersed between, which suggests the soldiers are wounded, defeated or killed. In the last stanza, the capitalised word 'TOMB' is
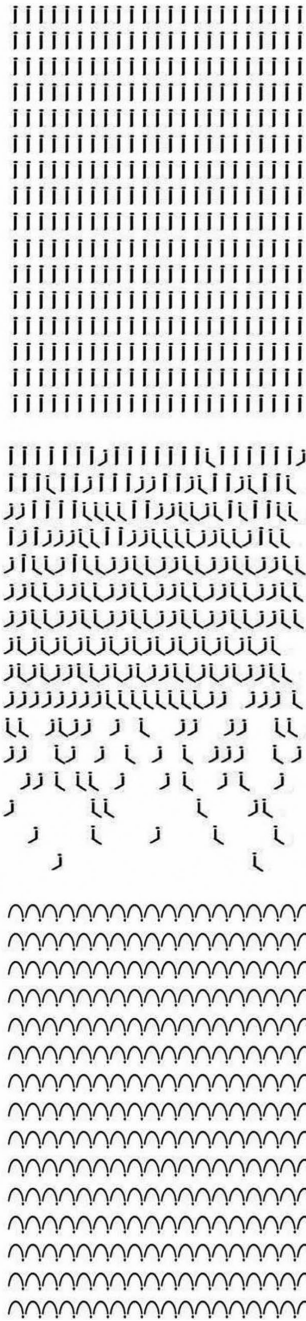
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Figure 4.3 English Translation of Chen Li's 'A War Symphony' by Cosima Bruno, by courtesy of the translator.

repeated numerous times but the typeface becomes smaller and fades away, which suggests that the dead soldiers may ultimately be forgotten and become insignificant to the world. Compared with Piasecki's version, it is more of a 'transcreation,' taking the original poem as the inspiration for a new creation, which adds new meanings.

A further translation of 'A War Symphony' is Professor Yi-ping Wu (吳怡萍) from Taiwan and her student Ci-shu Shen (沈碁恕) (Figure 4.4).

What is interesting is that Wu and Shen's version consists not of words but of lines in different shapes to present the battlefield and the graveyard. Instead of translating the poem into words, they draw shapes to show us the picture of the war. The straight line similar to the letter 'i' is very much like a soldier wearing a helmet; the crooked line similar to 'j'

Figure 4.4 Translation of Chen Li's 'A War Symphony' by Yi-ping Wu (吳怡萍) and Ci-shu Shen (沈碁恕), by courtesy of the translators.

implies a wounded or crippled soldier; the semi-circular bump or hunch in the last stanza suggests a corpse or of a tomb or grave. This 'non-verbal' translation of the poem appeals to the idea of concrete poetry as a universal medium, but it loses the aspect of musicality, which remains important, even to my visual poetry.

I admit that I was not always aware of the importance of musicality to my concrete poems. When I composed the poem 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist' (孤獨昆蟲學家的早餐桌巾; Figure 4.5) I collected all of the 347 Chinese characters with 虫 (meaning 'insect') as

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蚟蚠蚡蚢蚣蚤蚥蚦蚧蚨蚩蚪蚫蚬蚭蚮蚯蚰蚱蚲蚳蚴蚵蚶
蚷蚸蚹蚺蚻蚼蚽蚾蚿蛀蛁蛂蛃蛄蛅
蛆蛇蛈蛉蛋蛌蛍蛎蛏蛐蛑蛒蛓蛔蛕蛖蛗蛘蛙蛚蛛
蛜蛝蛞蛟蛠蛡蛢蛣蛤蛥蛦蛧蛨蛩蛪蛫蛬蛭蛮蛯
蛰蛱蛲蛳蛴蛵蛶蛷蛸蛹蛺蛻蛼蛽蛾蛿蜀蜁蜂蜃蜄蜅蜆蜇蜈蜉
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蜡蜢蜣蜤蜥蜦蜧蜨蜩蜪蜫蜬蜭蜮蜯蜰蜱蜲蜳
蜴蜵蜶蜷蜸蜹蜺蜻蜼蜽蜾蜿蝀蝁蝂蝃蝄蝅蝆蝇蝈蝉蝊
蝋蝌蝍蝎蝏蝐蝑蝒蝓蝔蝕蝖蝗蝘蝙蝚蝛蝜蝝
蝞蝟蝠蝡蝢蝣蝤蝥蝦蝧蝨蝩蝪蝫蝬蝭蝮蝯蝰
蝱蝲蝳蝴蝵蝶蝷蝸蝹蝺蝻蝼蝽蝾蝿螀螁螂螃螄螅
螆螇螈螉融螋　螌融螎螏螐螑螒螓螔螕
螖螗螘螙螚螛螜螝螞螟螠螡螢螣螤螥螦螧螨
螩螪螫螬螭螮螯螰螱螲螳螴螵螶螷　螸
螹螺螻螼螽螾螿蟀蟁蟂蟃蟄蟅蟆蟇
蟈蟉蟊蟋蟌蟍蟎蟏蟐蟑蟒蟓蟔蟕蟖蟗蟘蟙蟚蟛
蟜蟝蟞蟟蟠蟡蟢蟣蟤蟥蟦蟧蟨　蟩蟪蟫蟬蟭蟮蟯
蟰蟱蟲蟳蟴蟵蟶蟷蟸蟹蟺蟻蟼蟽蟾蟿蠀蠁蠂蠃蠄
蠅蠆蠇蠈蠉蠊蠋蠌蠍蠎蠏蠐蠑蠒蠓蠔蠕蠖蠗蠘
蠙蠚蠛蠜　蠝蠞蠟蠠蠡蠢　蠣蠤蠥蠦
蠧蠨蠩蠪蠫蠬蠭蠮蠯蠰蠱蠲蠳蠴蠵蠶蠷蠸蠹蠺蠻蠼蠽蠾蠿

Figure 4.5 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist' (孤獨昆蟲學家的早餐桌巾) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author.

their radical and presented them as a 'tablecloth' with blank characters dispersed to give the poem its visual symmetry. Because it is organised around a single radical, 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist' is more conceptual than 'A War Symphony'.

In her collected translations of my poems, Chang Fen-ling (2014) leaves the poem in its original form, translating only the title and adding an author's note in English explaining how to 'decode' the poem. As the whole poem is 'visually rhymed' with the same radical, this 'character tablecloth' possesses its own, special 'musical visuality.' At first I thought of the musicality of this poem as purely visual, since even I did not know how to pronounce some of the more obscure characters; it was not until it was better known, and taught in schools, that I was asked how it should be read aloud by schoolchildren.

I thought at first that it was unreadable in this way, until I realised that Google now has a function whereby if you copy the poem into the search bar, it will read the characters aloud, like gunshots. The polyphony of concrete poems often comes as a surprise, even to me! It was not until I was asked to read 'A War Symphony' aloud at the poetry festival in Rotterdam in 1999 that I realised that the final character 丘 (*qiu*, 'tomb') can evoke the sound of the wind blowing leaves over graves.

The gathering together and piling up of Chinese characters with the same radical in 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist' exemplifies what I call the 'law of large numbers', namely that beauty comes from plenty. I apply a similar strategy to two other concrete poems. In 'A Prayer of Gears' (齒輪經), 16 characters with the radical 齒 ('tooth/gear') are used to evoke the theme of this poem that life is an endless process of striving, gnawing and compromise. In 'Dada' (達達), 52 characters with the radical 辶 (pronounced as *chuo*, meaning 'walking/moving') are presented to add comic elements to a poem that has erotic and sensuous implications.

Many of my concrete poems take the shape of a square, a circle, a triangle or a pyramid, drawing on traditional Chinese pagoda poems (see Li Li, this volume). I also present them in many other poetic forms according to the messages I attempt to convey, such as shapes representing a butterfly, a vending machine and the Island of Taiwan (in '18 touches' 十八摸) as well as irregular or unnameable shapes. Here, I present only a few examples.

The poem, 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain' (消防隊長夢中的埃及風景照; Figure 4.6), recalls traditional Chinese pagoda poems; however, it is more abstract. The positioning of the Chinese character 火 'fire' in successive rows changes and intensifies the meanings (炎 'inflammation'; 焱 'flames'; 燚 'enormous flames'). The poem represents the eruption of a pyramidal inferno.

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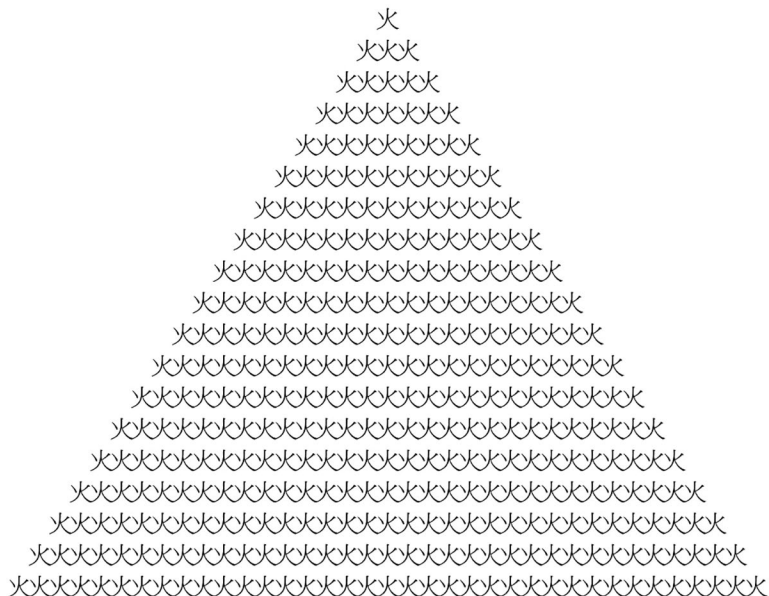
Figure 4.6 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain' (消防隊長夢中的埃及風景照) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author.

Another 'abstract' concrete poem 'White' (白; Figure 4.7) consists of two related characters: 'white' (白) and 'day' (日) plus a number of non-characters. The whole poem is a process of peeling off, or fading out, or declining: from characters to shapes to dashes, and then to dots, from solid lines to dotted lines, with shades of colour becoming paler. It is a process brightness becoming darkness, daytime becoming night-time, life becoming death. The space below the last dotted line represents the disappearance of the light, and finally the complete blankness which symbolises the deep of the night. Here lies the paradox: the deep of the night is not black, but white, since the paper on which the poem is written is white: after the night is over, the day is bound to reappear. In this way, I present the cycle of night and day, of dying and rebirth.

Only after this poem was completed, the paintings of Mark Rothko (1903–1970), an American painter whom I like very much, came into my mind. The poem may also remind the viewer of Ian Hamilton Finlay's 'Homage to Malevich,' a 'translation' of the Russian Suprematist's famous painting, 'Black Square', into a concrete poem that also takes the form of a black square made up of the alternating words 'black' and 'block'. Many of these connections are accidental or unconscious, and I only become aware of them after the process of composition is over, or they are pointed out to me by others.
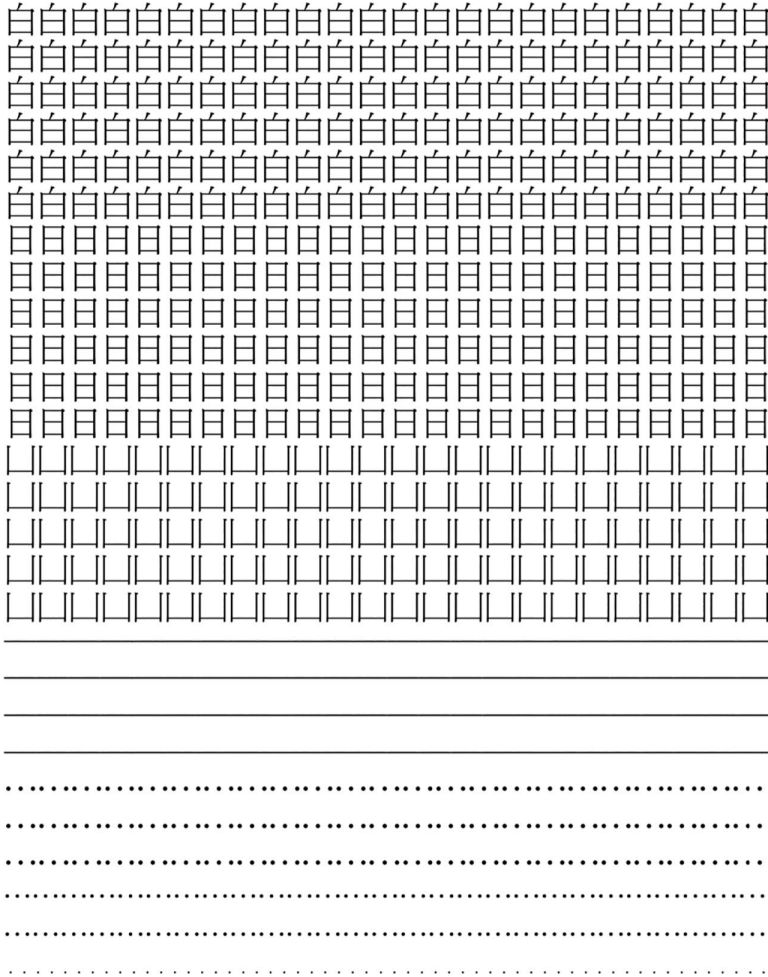
Figure 4.7 'White' (白) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author.

My volume of poetry *Light/Slow* (輕／慢, 2009) brings together another poetic form that plays upon the hieroglyphic nature of Chinese characters. It is part of the nature of the ideogram that several characters lie latent or hidden in one character. What I do is make those 'hidden' characters come on stage to play their roles. Professor Andrea Bachner has translated one of them, 'Country' (國 Figure 4.8), into English.

In *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*, Professor Bachner (2016, pp.112–113) observes:

In this poem Chen Li stages the 'abbreviated history of a country's decline' as an exercise in graphic form. The Chinese character for

國破衰亡簡史：	abbreviated history of a country's decline:
國，或，戈，弋	country, or, spear, arrow
匕，乚，丶，	dagger, hook, dot,

Figure 4.8 'Country' by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author. English translation
by courtesy of Andrea Bachner.

country, 國, is stripped of its power, one element, one stroke at a
time, until nothing is left but a single dot without any conventional
semantic meaning. That the elements of the Chinese character for
country refer to weapons—spear (戈), arrow (弋), and dagger (匕)—
transforms the second line and the beginning of the third line into
an appositional phrase, rather than a mere series in which 國 loses
more and more of its elements. The dot, the last remnant of the
character 國, together with the commas that separate the different
stages of decay, invoke an image of blood drops. This felicitous for-
mal structure leads to the execution of the word *country* and, by
extension, of the idea of nationhood, as if the graphic elements of
this Chinese character determined its semantic meaning. The impli-
cation is that the idea of *country* – and perhaps, more specifically,
the Chinese nationalism invoked by the character's use in the terms
國家 for 'nation' and 中國 for 'China' – is bound to lead to violence
and to self-destruction.

The characters or radicals或 ('or'), 戈 ('spear'), 弋 ('arrow'), 匕 ('dag-
ger'), 乚 ('hook') and 丶 ('dot') are all component parts of the character
國 ('country'). This poem can be seen as a variation of 'A War Sym-
phony': the gradual process of a solid and stable country falling apart.
The three lines are symmetrical in form: the first and the third lines con-
sist of seven components; the second line consists of eight components
(I follow this rule of symmetry in all of the 30 'character haiku' that I
write). A reader might argue that in poem the eighth character of the
third line is missing. I would respond that it is not missing because the
last entity is a blank, a component that exists by virtue of its absence,
here implying the country's complete destruction or non-existence.

   Some of my more recent haiku draw on obsolete Chinese charac-
ters. The poem 㞡 'Dan' plays with an obsolete character of unclear
meaning. It is made up of two characters: 尸 ('body' or 'dead body')
and 占 ('possess'). When the first character, 尸, is combined with other
characters, new meanings are formed, for example: 尸 ('body') + 比
('successive') → break 'successive' wind, and so 屁 ('fart'). A succession
of re-combinations results in a fresh and vital, if scatological, poem.

Similarly, 'Love Poem' (情詩) is made up of obsolete or rarely used Chinese characters and punctuation marks. The obscurity of the meaning of the characters helps reveal the theme of this poem: all words of love are meaningless or false; they are significant (or true) only to lovers falling in love. In the blind eyes of lovers, even meaningless words are loving and beautiful.

Reading and translating Japanese haiku inspired me to write about contemporary life using similar poetic forms. The result of such experimentation is my book of three-line poems: *Microcosmos: 200 Modern Haiku* (小宇宙: 現代俳句200首), whose title comes from Bartok's *Microcosmos*, a musical composition containing 153 piano pieces. These 'modern Chinese haiku' also play with form and visualisation. This experimentation can be seen in two complementary haiku. *Microcosmos* II:48 can be seen as a 'self-translation' of *Microcosmos* II: 47 (Figure 4.9). The Chinese punctuation mark '。' (a period) can be taken as the visual representation of a lit or unlit light bulb, which interrupts the silence (......), ending with a pause (,).

你的聲音懸在我的房間

切過寂靜，成為用

溫度或冷度說話的燈泡

Your voices suspend in my room

cutting through silence, to become

a bulb speaking with heat or chill.

(*Microcosmos*, II:47)

......

。

，

(*Microcosmos*, II:48)

Figure 4.9 From 'Microcosmos' (小宇宙) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author.

Finally, I found myself reworking the kind of haiku that I read and translated in my youth. One day in 2008, I spent a whole night skimming through a famous collection of *300 Tang Poems* on the internet which prompted me to write 12 poems which I called 'Tang Poetry Haiku'. I devised the following formula for composing them: with the original classical poem visible on the page, I made some characters faded or faint in order to highlight the characters I selected. The highlighted characters, combined in sequence, formed a new poem. The result can be seen in Figure 4.10, a reworking of Li Po's classic poem, 'Still Night Thoughts.'

*(In front of my **bed**: bright moonlight/I wonder if it **is** frost on the floor/Looking up, I see the bright moon/Dropping my head, I miss my **home town**.)*

In most of the Tang poems, I could find a 'hidden' message. However, I had a problem with the 12th poem. I had a good poem but failed to transform it with the rule I had set for myself. An idea struck me:

9

床前明月光，

疑是地上霜，

舉頭望明月，

低頭思故鄉。

——用李白〈靜夜思〉

Bed front bright moon light

Wonder is on floor frost

Looking up see bright moon

Dropping head miss home town

——*using Li Po's 'Still Night Thoughts'*

Figure 4.10 From 'Tang Poetry Haiku' (唐詩俳句) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author.

why not use an S-shaped proof-reader's mark to change the order of the characters? In this way I exchanged 線 ('line') with 遊子 ('wandering son'), transforming the traditional line of sewing thread into the modern thread of an internet conversation, and so twisting a classical Tang poem into a contemporary haiku. The original Tang poem speaks of a mother's love for her son being represented by a closely woven coat that she sews for him. Her love is so great that nothing can repay it. Inside this poem I found a 'hidden' modern message, 'Loving mother & wandering son's online intensive talk' (Figures 4.11 and 4.12), and so I brought the poem into the internet age, where their love is represented by a different kind of thread, namely, an intense online chat.

*(**A loving mother's** hand and a **line** of thread made the coat for the **wandering son**'s back./Before he left she made **intensive** stitches fearing that he would be slow to return../What was the **talk** that the gratitude of the inch-tall grass is enough for all the sunshine of spring?)*

As this chapter has shown, my experiments with concrete poetry relate strongly to Chinese traditions, as well as to influences from other cultures, whether Japanese, European or American. As I mentioned at the outset, not all of my poetry experimental but all of it is shaped by an engagement with Chinese traditions. Looking back over my visual

慈母手中線／遊子身上衣，

臨行密密縫，意恐遲遲歸，

誰言寸草心，報得三春暉。

Figure 4.11 'Tang Poetry Haiku' (唐詩俳句) by Chen Li, by courtesy of the author (Chinese Version).

AU: Is the addition of "Chinese Version" correct?

Loving mother hand in line ，／&wandering son's back on coat

Before left **intensive** stitches made, fearing he slow to return

Whose **talk** inch grass heart, enough for all spring sunshine

Figure 4.12 From 'Tang Poetry Haiku' (唐詩俳句) by Chen Li (English Version), by courtesy of the author.

poetry, I am struck by the fact that many poems, like 'A War Symphony' take the shape of square blocks, like the poems of Seiichi Niikuni that I read in an American magazine, when I was studying in Taipei. Others, like 'Country', pick apart the components of a single Chinese character to release hidden meanings. Those poems reveal, perhaps, my childhood interest Chinese riddles that require you to guess a word by recombining Chinese characters. I have also been long fascinated by palindromes, by visual symmetry. These fascinations help me to do what the ancient Chinese classical poets were also doing, and that is to devise and then break a set of rules, or constraints, to make a line of poetry surprising and fresh. The classical poets were the avant-garde poets of their time. They had their rules, and now we have to make our own rules, drawing on our traditions and our own experiences in a fresh way, to make our poetry new.

Notes

1 The English translations of Chen Li's poems in this chapter are by Chang Fen-ling and Chen Li, unless otherwise stated. The chapter is based in part on Chen Li's contribution to a seminar on 'Experimental Poetry Across Cultures' at the University of Macau, in October 2016, and in part on an interview given to Ting Huang and Luka Cheung during the same event. An edited recording of this interview can be watched on YouTube, 'An Interview with Chen Li' https://youtu.be/N-dn9XCG-j4 [Accessed 3May 2019].
2 Available on Youtube, 'Chen Li 陳黎: A War Symphony 戰爭交響曲' at https://youtu.be/jZjj5y-7e9Q [Accessed 3 May 2019].

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