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Abstract	<p>This self-reflexive case study by Lee and Chan proposes the idea of textual memes, defined as the thematic and/or formal economy of the source text fossilised in a particular configuration of signifying resources in the source language. Textual memes are abstract; they constitute the aesthetic logic or motif underlying a piece of writing, and are instantiated by concrete discursive units. As far as concrete poetry is concerned, translation responds to its source text by developing and extrapolating textual memes built into the latter, and does so by way of activating resources in the target language. The chapter illustrates this by responding to four concrete poems by Taiwanese poet Chen Li by way of advancing the authors' own English translations.</p>	

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# Transcreating Memes: Translating Chinese Concrete Poetry

Tong-King Lee and Steven Wing-Kit Chan

## Introduction

*The Edge of the Island* (島嶼邊緣) is a collection of Chinese poems, in English translation, by renowned Taiwanese writer Chen Li (陳黎; b.1954); the translations were produced by the poet's wife Chang Fen-ling (張芬齡) in consultation with Chen. Given the relationship between the translator and the poet and the close involvement of Chen in the translation process, the book is an excellent demonstration of how translation and creative writing work in tandem. Of particular interest to this chapter are the concrete poems found in the collection, most of which are merely paratextually treated rather than translated in the conventional sense; that is: while the main texts of the poems are left untranslated in Chinese, their titles are translated into English, and footnotes and explanatory notes are inserted in English to explicate the linguistic operations involved.

Paratextual treatment is premised on the understanding that the concrete poems are untranslatable by virtue of their appropriation of the material-sensory qualities of the Chinese language. More precisely, there is an abundance of pictographs and homophones in Chinese that readily lend themselves to creative exploitation by concrete poets, and the language specificity of these resources renders them *prima facie* untranslatable. In justifying why she has

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23 not attempted to translate the concrete poems in *The Edge of the Island*, spe-  
24 cifically 'A War Symphony' (戰爭交響曲), Chen's most acclaimed concrete  
25 poem, Chang explains that the piece taps into the visual and aural signifi-  
26 cation potential of Chinese characters, such that "any relinquishment of its  
27 Chinese characters [via translation] would mean the loss of its poetic charm  
28 and the significance of its technical form" (Chen 2014: 17; Chang, personal  
29 communication). Chang's strategy belies a conception of translation that  
30 privileges the semantic transfer of linguistic signs as its primary function. The  
31 problem is that while concrete poetry does communicate "meaning", the lat-  
32 ter resides not at the level of the individual signifier but rather at the level of  
33 the *gestalt*—the whole entity that is the poem. What distinguishes concrete  
34 poetry from other forms of literary discourse, then, is that the meaning of the  
35 holistic text is not a gradual accrue-ment of the semantic value of its constitu-  
36 ent signifiers, but a cognitive-perceptual effect that emerges from the work in  
37 its entirety as a result of its multimodal workings.

38 The concrete poems in *The Edge of the Island* raise general issues about liter-  
39 ary untranslatability. When one speaks of the untranslatability of concrete  
40 poetry, the implicit reference point is usually that of semantic substance; or,  
41 *what* is the poem *talking about*? The fact, of course, is that a poem, in particu-  
42 lar the concrete poem, can talk about virtually nothing at the level of the  
43 isolated word or utterance and yet afford intense "meaning"—not in the sense  
44 of a neatly articulated semantics but in the sense of an embodied affect.  
45 Untranslatability, then, turns into a relative notion: a text can be said to resist  
46 transfer into another language on the grounds that the referential value of its  
47 original words cannot be adequately communicated; this, however, does not  
48 prevent the text from eliciting a similar effect in another language.

49 This chapter develops the idea of translation as a response in a target lan-  
50 guage to a work written in a source language. This is done using a hands-on  
51 approach: we construct a case study based on our own rendition of four  
52 concrete poems from *The Edge of the Island*. The purpose of this reflexive  
53 exercise is to experience first-hand the embodied affect of Chen's poems, to  
54 produce our response to them in English, and also to theorize on this experi-  
55 ence. Methodologically, we seek to introduce an element of reflexivity into  
56 the case study approach, which typically calls to mind the descriptive analysis  
57 of an extant entity, whether it be an existing phenomenon or a corpus of  
58 published texts. The present chapter offers a twist to this method by engaging  
59 with works that specifically have not been translated and by using our own  
60 translations as the basis of analysis, thereby insinuating our subjectivities into  
61 the research process. This is pertinent to our notion of translation-as-  
62 response: in the course of this case study, we maintained close contact with

the poet, seeking clarification from him on points that were not immediately 63  
obvious to us, and having him critique our translations. The dialogism of this 64  
feedback loop exemplifies the potential symbiotic relationship between writ- 65  
ing and translation. Our reflexive case study, while still maintaining the usual 66  
stance of description and analysis, further adds to the poetic repertoire by 67  
way of producing new translations, construed as a creative extension and 68  
elaboration of Chen's *oeuvre*. These translations unveil possibilities of creative 69  
tension by pushing the envelope of perceived untranslatability, at the same 70  
time as they reveal the discursive limits of communicating concrete poetry 71  
beyond the bounds of its signifiers. Instead of situating ourselves outside of 72  
the case under scrutiny, we are embodied within the case itself by playing the 73  
dual roles of translators and critics, and all the while keeping the Chinese 74  
author in the creative loop. 75

## Translation as Response 76

The idea of translation-as-response moves us away from a source-centric 77  
notion of translation as verbal-semantic transference toward a functionalist 78  
stance that foregrounds the aesthetic agency of the translator. This theme is 79  
not new in translation studies: scholars have been looking at translation as a 80  
creative enterprise on a par with writing (Perteghella and Loffredo 2006; 81  
Bassnett and Bush 2007). This chapter pushes the translator's autonomy fur- 82  
ther by advancing a dialogic view of translation premised on the notion of 83  
stimulus-and-response: translation responds to its source text (the stimulus), 84  
“talks back” to it, by developing and extrapolating the memes built into the 85  
latter, and it does so by way of mobilizing the signifying resources of the 86  
target language. Response is not mimicry; it is a creative and calculated 87  
rejoinder formulated in the target language triggered by a prior stimulus, 88  
which is the meme of the source text. Richard Dawkins defines a meme as a 89  
“unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation”. According to Dawkins 90  
(1976: 206), “tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making 91  
pots or building arches” are some examples of memes, which, similar to 92  
genes, can “propagate themselves... via a process which, in the broad sense, 93  
can be called imitation”. In *Memes of Translation*, Andrew Chesterman adopts 94  
Dawkins to describe the spread of theoretical concepts, norms, strategies and 95  
values in Translation Studies, including what he calls the “supermemes” of 96  
source-target dichotomy, equivalence, untranslatability, free-vs.-literal, and 97  
all-writing-is-translation (Chesterman 2016: 3–10). In this chapter, we build 98  
on the same genetic metaphor, but depart from Chesterman to explore a dif- 99

100 ferent kind of meme in translation, namely the textual meme. By textual  
101 memes we refer to the thematic or formal economy of the source text that is  
102 fossilised in a particular configuration of signifying resources in this source  
103 text. Memes are abstract; they constitute the aesthetic logic or conceptual  
104 motif underlying a piece of writing—the DNA of the text if you will—and  
105 are instantiated by concrete discursive units, that is, the actual words or lin-  
106 guistic structures (the “fossils”) we encounter in the text. They can be mani-  
107 fested, for example, as a structural idea (e.g., an orthographic or phonological  
108 technique) embedded within poetic texts that can be propagated into other  
109 languages by way of transposition.

110 According to this view, the goal of a translation is to reproduce the meme  
111 that informs the source text, not its surface-level manifestation; or, discarding  
112 the “fossils” of a text and extracting, transmitting, and transmuted its DNA  
113 in the target language (cf. Ho 2004 on a similar idea of extracting genetic  
114 codes in advertising translation). In the case of a fairly straightforward text  
115 (e.g., a court report), the distinction between abstract meme and surface form  
116 may not be obvious, and hence a sufficient translation of this text would sel-  
117 dom come across as a response, but would more likely be treated as a verbal  
118 transfer. This motivates our use of concrete poetry as a test case in this chapter.  
119 Concrete poetry is an extreme text that is not meant to be read in the conven-  
120 tional sense, but rather to be simultaneously read (the verbal), seen (the  
121 visual), and heard (the aural)—and dare we say even touched (the tactile) in  
122 some cases. In other words, the capacities involved in processing a concrete  
123 poem are not so much interpretive-hermeneutic as they are cognitive-  
124 perceptual (Bruno 2012; Lee 2015; cf. Gibbons 2012). The multimodal  
125 nature of concrete poetry makes the translator’s creative transposition almost  
126 imperative, which makes this genre an exemplary site for the demonstration  
127 of an aesthetics of response in translation.

128 In the following paragraphs, we translate into English, with commentary,  
129 four concrete poems by Chen Li from *The Edge of the Island* as our response  
130 to the Chinese originals, and also to the way they are paratextually treated in  
131 the collection.

132 Our stance towards the case study method is characterized by a hands-on  
133 approach. By using Chen’s concrete poetry as a case of visual literature and  
134 translating some of his most visually stunning works ourselves, we propose  
135 this hypothesis: concrete poetry can be translated at the level of the meme—  
136 thematic and formal relations—of the source text, and in this process, transla-  
137 tion responds to the meaning potential (rather than simply “meaning”) of a  
138 poem using semiotic resources in the target language. In so doing we seek to  
139 demonstrate how we transcreate the meme in each of the poems in a deliber-

ately ludic manner, so as to participate in the experimental spirit underlying their creation. Our proposed procedure is to: (1) perceive the source text as a multimodal *gestalt*; (2) identify and extract its meme; and (3) transcreate the meme in the target language. Our principal argument is that concrete poetry is eminently translatable at the level of the meme; as we transcreate source text memes in other languages, we open up this text to semiotic extension, experimentation, and dissemination.

## Case Analysis

### Example 1: 'White' 白

Our first example is titled 'White' (Fig. 1). In this poem Chen Li exploits the graphical composition of a vertical series of morphing characters and strokes to create a visual sense of decrescendo. The poem depicts six rows of the character 白 (*bai*; white), which speaks to the title of the piece; this is followed by six rows of the character 日 (*ri*; sun, day), five rows of the radical 凵 (*kan*; "receptacle"), four rows of short, horizontal strokes, three rows of black dots, two rows of fainter black dots, and finally a row of small, light dots.

The visual motif of the poem is that of gradual degeneration; this is realized in the dwindling row numbers of the successive graphs and in their pictorial deconstruction. By itself 白 denotes "white", but, because of the juxtaposition with 日 in this instance, it acquires a contingent graphical interpretation that departs from its usual semantics. This is because the character 日 originates in a pictographic representation of the sun, and means "sun" or "day" in Chinese. Based on this understanding, the reader is guided to perceive the character 白 as a 日 appended with an extra stroke at the top left-hand corner. This gives rise to the interpretation "sun with an added ray of light", and incidentally the two characters do combine to form the compound word *bairi* 白日 which means "white light". The first two strata in the text can then be read as a visual transition from suns radiating beams of white light to "regular" suns without the extra shimmer (or simply "day"). As we move on, 日 turns into 凵, which resembles the shape of a valley—a topographical "receptacle" (cf. 山, the pictographic character for "mountain"). So we now have the sun shining upon a valley. Further down, 凵 corrupts into a horizontal stroke—, which, following the same visual logic, could represent flat land; the strokes then decompose into dots, which break down into yet smaller dots, and this could represent dust or sand reflecting the sunlight and reducing into minute particles.

白

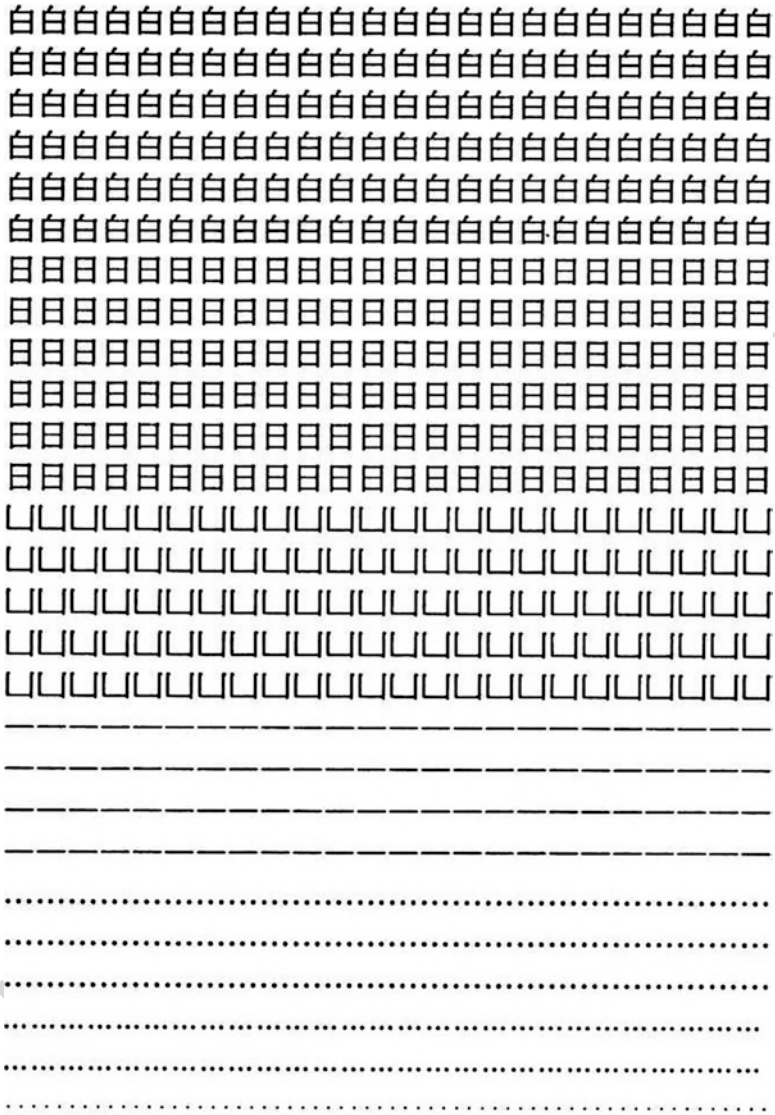


Fig. 1 'White'

175 If we look at the poem as a visual *gestalt*, it becomes clear that it is more  
 176 visual-graphical than verbal-discursive. It evokes, through the architectonic  
 177 dismantling of a proper character into its material elements, the gradual

movement of sunlight across the sky and the physical terrain. This is the meme 178  
of the poem; and now that we have identified the meme, how do we recreate 179  
it in English? This poem is certainly not amenable to translation in the seman- 180  
tic sense, but it can elicit a creative response that works on the same structural 181  
meme on the level of the visual *gestalt*. Our translational response, titled 182  
‘Aurora’, is shown in Fig. 2. 183

In ‘Aurora’ the subject matter of light and the visual motif of visual decom- 184  
position are reworked in English. The central signifier “aurora”, which refers 185  
to a radiant emission with a solar connection, responds to 白. This allows us 186  
to retain the theme of sunlight in the top stratum and also to invoke another 187  
sense of the word—“dawn”, corresponding to the character for “day” in the 188  
second stratum of the Chinese text. The second stratum consists of rows of the 189  
string “aura”. “Aura” speaks to the light theme and is orthographically and 190  
phonologically similar to but shorter than “aurora”, hence replaying the visual 191  
reduction from 白 to 日 in the Chinese text. In the next stratum “aura” 192  
morphs into “u”, which happens to resemble 凵 in the Chinese original and 193  
serves the same pictographic function. The letter “u” then turns into a curved 194

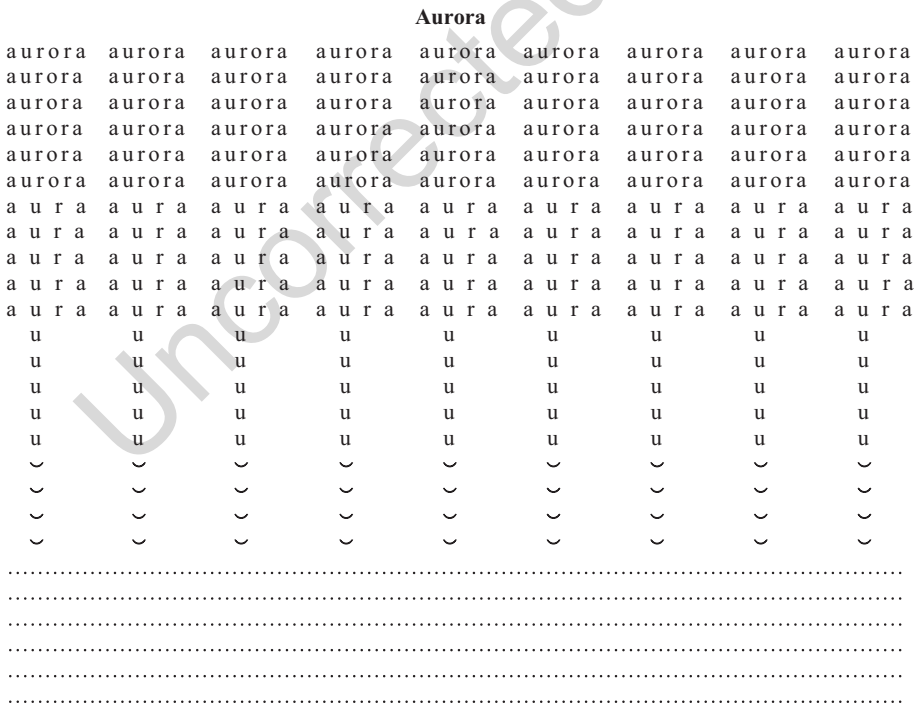


Fig. 2 ‘Aurora’



195 shape, as opposed to a horizontal stroke in the original. This intervention is  
 196 deemed necessary because “u” is rounded at the bottom, which means it can-  
 197 not reasonably be reduced to a straight line (cf. the angular ⊥). The strata of  
 198 dots toward the end of the Chinese poem are retained in the translation.

199 The concept behind ‘Aurora’ is to approach Chen’s ‘White’ primarily as a  
 200 visual artefact with a gradation effect, not unlike a painting that is layered  
 201 with colour shades. In this connection it is interesting to note that Chen  
 202 remarks in an essay that ‘White’ reminds him of the work of the American  
 203 painter Mark Rothko (Chen 2014: 245). A visual approach obliges the trans-  
 204 lation to disengage itself from the verbal semantics of the original and aim at  
 205 a semiotic answer to the visual stimulus represented by the source text. A  
 206 corollary to this is that the title of the piece will need to be changed, because  
 207 the original poem takes the first graph “white” as its title, but this has been  
 208 transcreated into “aurora” in the translation.

209 And since we are dealing not so much with words as with memes, a poem can  
 210 elicit more than one response even in a single language. Consider a variation on  
 211 ‘Aurora’ using the alternative series “solar”, “sol” (meaning “sun” in Latin), “o”, etc.  
 212 to replay the same visual motif and still remain relevant to the “sun” theme (Fig. 3).

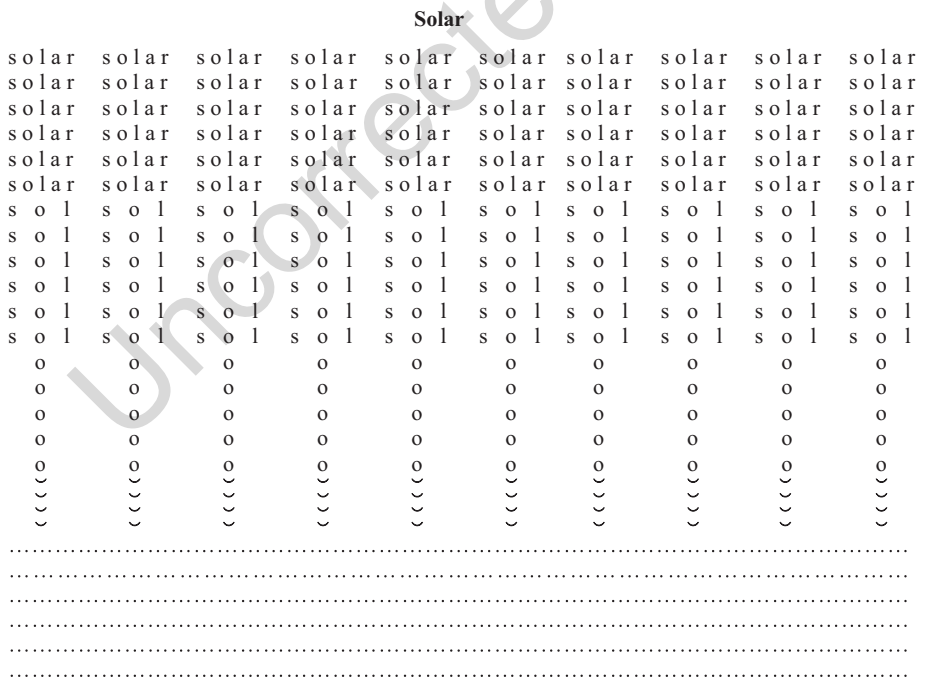


Fig. 3 ‘Solar’

Yet another possibility is to begin the poem with the Sanskrit word-  
 concept “Sunyata” (emptiness), and reduce this to “sun”, “u”, and so on  
 (Fig. 4). This response alludes to a line from the Buddhist scripture that  
 describes an act of meditating against the backdrop of a setting sun: “...  
 how does one visualize? All sentient beings with eyes that are not born  
 blind have seen the setting sun. One should sit properly, facing the west,  
 and visualize that the sun is setting” (‘Explication of the Sixteen  
 Visualizations’). The deconstruction of verbal strings provides a visual cor-  
 relate to this philosophical musing, while casting an eye on our “sun”  
 theme.

Our translations are meant only as tentative products; potentially many  
 more experimentations, either in English or in some other target language,  
 could emanate from the original Chinese poem. From the perspective of  
 translation-as-response, these various translated pieces are textual bodies  
 through which the meme in Chen Li’s Chinese poem continually dissemi-  
 nates and transmutes itself.

Sunyata

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Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata
Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata	Sunyata
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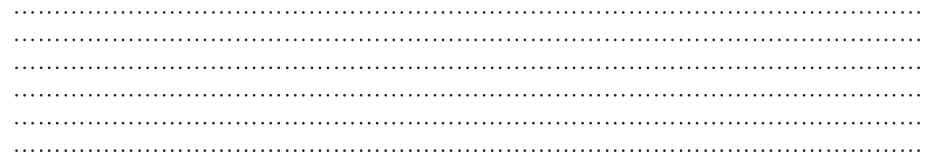


Fig. 4 ‘Sunyata’



ment in “reading” this poem: it appears unreadable, even though each character technically exists. The point, of course, is not about reading at all: the only discursive component is the poem’s title; the rest is eminently visual.

To translate this poem, we need to find a way to replicate the uncanniness and visual monstrosity of its graphs—the meme of the text. Since we are dealing with an insect or creature theme, we collected a list of 2218 names of common insect species from the online database of the Entomological Society of America (Entomological Society of America 2016). Most of these proper nouns have Latin roots, so even though they technically exist and are pronounceable, they are nonetheless dense and unfamiliar to the lay English reader, just as the insect characters in the original Chinese poem look complex and even disturbing to the lay Chinese reader. Our translation consists of a selection of abbreviated scientific appellations found in the database (*aspericollis*, *eurytheme*, *lineolatus*, *exsectoides*, *pensylvanicus* etc.) amassed and configured to the shape of the original poem.

On top of that, we use Microsoft Excel as the platform for our translation, initially because the individual cells of Excel spreadsheets match the angular shape of the original Chinese characters. However, the digital characteristics of Excel afford our translation a cybertextual twist, enabling us to generate a permutable piece of “tablecloth” based on a finite set of insect names. By using the *RANDBETWEEN* and *INDEX* functions, we randomly generated names from the list of 2218 items (using only the abbreviated scientific names) and pasted them onto a new spreadsheet in the shape of a block, deleting some cells to create holes as in the original poem (Fig. 6). By simply clicking on any blank cell and then pressing the Delete button, one can refresh the interface and generate a new image of the poem with another random selection of insect names.

This performative version of Chen’s poem shows how the multimodal potential of concrete poetry can be unleashed through its translation—here both in the sense of interlingual transfer and of intermedial transposition. Whereas in its original print format, ‘Breakfast Tablecloth’ consists of a given, unchangeable set of characters and is primarily visual, in our Excel version the poem transforms into a cybertext, defined here as a text (which can be digital but not necessarily so) whose discursive outcome can be influenced by readerly interception (Aarseth 1997: 4). It invites the reader to engage with the concrete poem not just visually but also kinetically, hence introducing a ludic element and turning poetry reading into an embodied event. Importantly, the translation generates flux and randomness to the surface manifestation of the poem, producing a text-machine that can churn out multiple variations on Chen’s poem. The visual meme of the original poem, therefore, has not only been developed across languages, but also extended into a different medial dimension.

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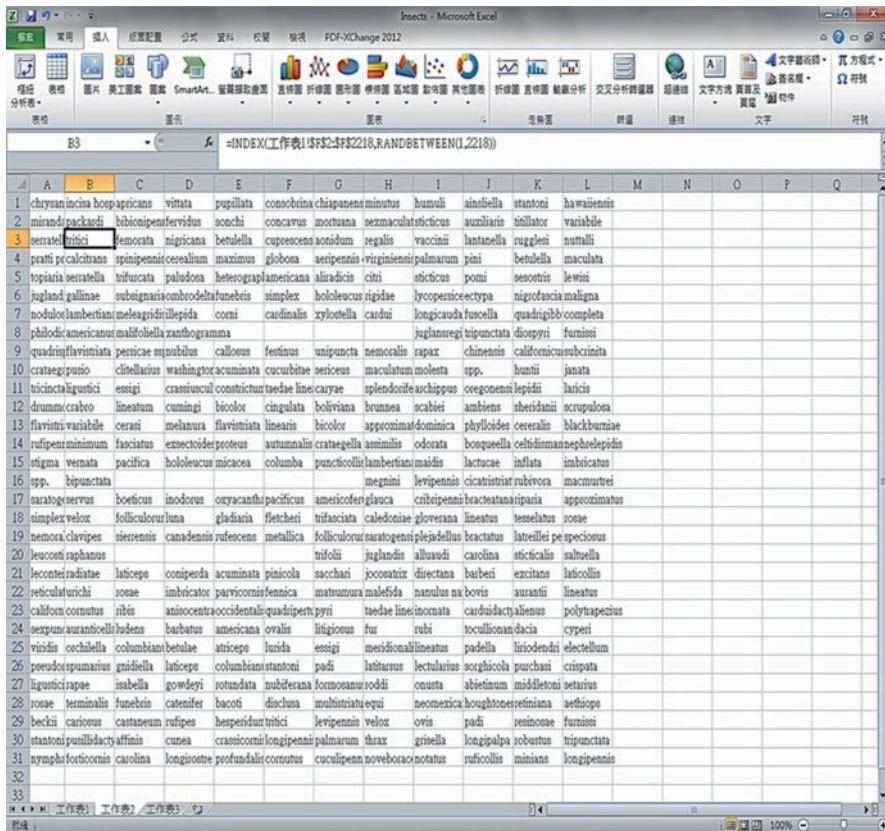


Fig. 6 Translation of 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist'

283 **Example 3 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream**  
 284 **of a Fire Department Captain'** 消防隊隊長夢中的埃及風景照

285 This poem takes the shape of a pyramid, constructed with the central radical  
 286 character 火 (*huo*), a pictograph representing “fire”. Visually, the poem depicts  
 287 a pyramid in flames, as conjured up in a fire department captain’s dream. The  
 288 Egyptian theme here is not frivolous, for it is the pyramid pattern that makes  
 289 it possible for two other characters to simultaneously emerge through the  
 290 replication of the central radical, namely: 炎 (*yan*; burning) and 焱 (*yan*;  
 291 flame). Together, the three characters—essentially made up of a single graph—  
 292 form several layers of overlapping visual frames. Within each frame, the spe-  
 293 cific character elicited is determined by the path of reading; reading any  
 294 discrete unit derives 火; a vertical reading produces 炎; and a “triangular”  
 295 reading gives 焱 (Fig. 7).

消防隊長夢中的埃及風景照

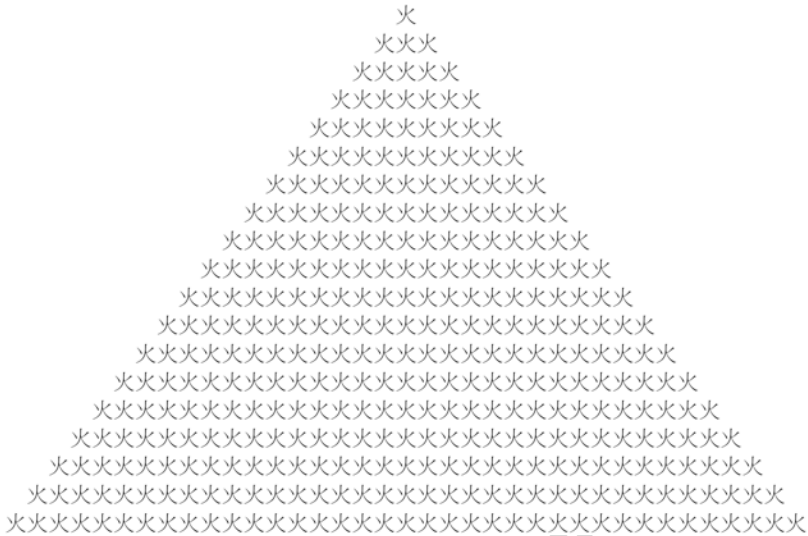


Fig. 7 Original text of 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain'

In *The Edge of the Island*, the main text of the poem is left as it is. On Chen's website, however, there is an English translation by Chang (2000). In this latter version, Chang substitutes all the 火 graphs with the word "fire". This method translates at the level of the word, but at the expense of the visual play that is the meme of the poem. We deem the poem untranslatable at the level of the word, but that does not prevent us from responding to it in an experimental way at the level of the meme; more specifically, we use a phrase that does not literally translate into "fire" but evokes the same image of conflagration: "red flare" (Fig. 8). We further conflate the two words to exploit the "-ed" ending of "red" and its formal coincidence with the past tense inflectional morpheme "-ed", and in so doing we create a portmanteau-like form: "redflared". In doing so we create an overlapping reading frame embedding two possible readings: "red flare" meaning "red flame", and "flared" (burning brightly). In other words, we translate the overlapping visual frame revolving around the graph 火 by inventing our own overlapping frame in English, while not deviating from the fire theme. In our translation, the word "red" is highlighted in red throughout the piece and the word "flare" italicized to intimate the shape of a wavering flame. These paralinguistic techniques make it easier for readers to identify the two embedded words or phrases; it is also intended as a compensation for the intense visuality of the Chinese graph in the original poem, which derives from the pictographic quality of the central character.

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**Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain**

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**Fig. 8** Translation of 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain'

317 **'A Serial Novel: Huang Chao Killed Eight Million People'**

318 連載小説:黃巢殺人八百萬

319 The poem 'A Serial Novel' (Fig. 9) describes a massacre that took place during  
 320 a civil rebellion in ninth-century China led by the rebel leader Huang Chao (  
 321 黃巢; 835–884). The brutal narrative is visually presented through the string-  
 322 ing together of the character 殺 (*sha*; kill) into a massive configuration that  
 323 calls into mind the image of a killing field. The graphic repetition suggests the  
 324 continuous and mechanical execution of people, and when read aloud the  
 325 phonetic repetition creates the chaotic soundscape of a warzone. The number  
 326 1095 below the title supposedly tells us the partial death toll and the word  
 327 “daixu” 待續 (to be continued) at the end of the poem indicates that this is  
 328 but part of a larger picture that would consist of incessant strings of the same  
 329 character *ad infinitum*.

330 The dramatic narrative created through concatenating the word 殺 is reli-  
 331 ant on the framing context of the Huang Chao rebellion, as explicated in the  
 332 original title. For readers who are not acquainted with this piece of Chinese  
 333 history, the poem would fail to evoke the sensory image of violence. In order  
 334 for this poem to work in another language, it is pertinent to retain its meme:  
 335 the theme of brutal killing and the visual-sonic motif of endless repetition,  
 336 and to achieve this it would be necessary to substitute the narrative frame.  
 337 Figure 10 shows a possible English response to the poem. The title sets a dif-  
 338 ferent historical context—that of Hitler's crimes during World War II, which







and O'Brien 2014: 209). On this account, concrete poetry qualifies as a case to be studied by virtue of its generic uniqueness: a hypothesis emanating from the study of concrete poetry in translation is not readily generalizable toward the translation of poetry in general.

Within the compass of case study categories laid out in Gabriela Saldanha and Sharon O'Brien's book (2014: 211–215), Chen's concrete poetry probably counts as an extreme case, where one aspect of the text, that is its material-sensorial quality, "is particularly striking (extreme) when compared to similar cases" (Saldanha and O'Brien 2014: 213)—that is, Chinese poetry in general. But we also consider it as a deviant case due to its apparent resistance to translation proper (whereas most poetry is amenable to procedures of interlingual translation, notwithstanding what might be lost or gained in the process). In this connection we might even argue that concrete poetry is a revelatory case, as it offers a special window through which we can explore the translatability of texts commonly perceived as untranslatable.

Whatever category Chen's case falls into, the primary thrust of this chapter is to advance a mode of case study research that is participative-reflexive, while not displacing the usual descriptive-analytical dimension. This mode of case study has not yet been accounted for in the literature. We begin with a set of concrete poems and their published translations, and identify the assumptions underlying these translations. Then we take a self-reflexive turn by assuming the dual role of translator and critic. While still keeping the earlier translations in view, we formulate our own thesis, return to the original poems with this thesis, and derive our own translations. Finally, we reflect on our new translations with reference to the theoretical proposition at hand and critically discuss how they might add value to the research literature.

This approach allows the researchers and the researched to participate and reflect on the process of translation. The strength of the approach lies in its potential to subvert assumptions inherent in pre-existing texts and models and to innovate changes based on a set of revised assumptions. Minimally, these changes can happen by way of introducing new textual objects to confront current theories; in some cases it can even bring about a paradigmatic shift in the field. The ensuing products and propositions could very well be subverted subsequently from new perspectives, and be replaced by new products and propositions, and we believe this is one of the ways a field of knowledge can continue to rejuvenate itself.

In the case of Chen's concrete poems, our methodology may be justified by the fact that existing translations are premised on the perceived untranslatability of the material (visual and aural) constitution of a poem. These translations, as we have noted earlier, are paratextually treated, where the translator

399 gives a Chinese poem its semantically equivalent English title while deploying  
400 footnotes and endnotes to explicate the linguistic “tricks” of the original work.  
401 The underlying assumption here is that the material substance of the source  
402 text, in this case the actual Chinese characters, must be preserved in transla-  
403 tion; but since this substance is language-specific insofar as its verbal-visual  
404 dynamic works only in the source language, to translate it is also to render the  
405 work null and void in the target language.

406 This chapter reverses the above assumption and postulates that the translat-  
407 ability of a poem is not exclusively centred on semantic equivalence. Following  
408 this postulation, it articulates a method of translating concrete poetry premised  
409 not so much on the notion of equivalence as on that of response. On this view,  
410 a translation responds to its source text in dialogic and performative mode. Just  
411 as in everyday communication, interlocutors make their conversational turns  
412 relevant to the subject at hand, so a translation responds to its source text by  
413 developing the latter’s theme and structural economy. As a performative  
414 response to a creative stimulus (i.e., the original poem), a translation need not  
415 be equivalent to its source text in any semantic sense—that would amount to  
416 mirroring, much like an interlocutor repeating what is said in a prior turn in a  
417 conversation. On the contrary, a translation-as-response *speaks to* the original  
418 poem, in the sense of invoking a new configuration of signifiers to comple-  
419 ment, even supplement, the source text in the target language. It is not about  
420 uprooting a poem from its original language and transplanting it in the target  
421 language, but rather about enunciating a viable counterpart in the target lan-  
422 guage capable of running as a parallel, autonomous line. The resulting transla-  
423 tions are irreversible; when back-translated, they become a completely different  
424 creature from the original text, which is testament to the fact that a measure of  
425 performativity has been built into the translation.

426 The translations we have advanced in this chapter enact this idea of  
427 translation-as-response. What emerges is a new product that does not so  
428 much correspond to the semantics of the original poem as respond performa-  
429 tively to its semiotics. This response is prompted, initiated, evoked by the  
430 meme of the source text. Thus, in ‘Aurora’ we respond to the meme of graphi-  
431 cal decomposition by substituting the central signifier of the Chinese poem;  
432 in so doing, we create a new configuration of signifiers that develops the same  
433 structural meme, which motivates a change in title. In ‘Breakfast Tablecloth’  
434 the governing meme is the inscrutability of alien characters, and we respond  
435 to this by replicating the meme in English by way of Latin appellations.

436 Conceptualising translation as a performative response enables a transla-  
437 tion to add value to its original text. Just as in genetic transfer a gene can  
438 mutate as it disseminates from body to body, so a textual meme can morph

and accrue to itself features inherent in the body of the host language and culture, as it moves from one text to another. Thus, in 'Breakfast Tablecloth', we playfully transform the medium of the poem by tapping into a permutation function in Microsoft Excel. Note that we did not do this out of a whim. The idea was triggered by the monotonous layout of strange-looking Chinese characters on the page; and since these characters are mostly unreadable, there is a suggestion that they are infinitely permutable, that is, we can substitute other Chinese characters and still keep the poem intact. Our response to this is, then, to technologize the permutation, and in the process of doing so, we introduce an element of cybertextual participation on the part of the reader. In 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery' we deploy typographical devices (italics and font colour) and overlapping reading frames in response to the multiple combinations of the radical for "fire" in the Chinese poem. This stance is also manifested in the 'Hitler' piece, which reconstitutes an episode of war in ancient Chinese history as the Holocaust. And rather than simply replicating the graph for "kill" as is done in the source text, we expand the meaning potential of the poem by creating a palimpsest that embeds layers of varied readings. In these cases, we attempted to unearth the aesthetic and linguistic memes from the original text and transplant them in another language.

Our translation experiments with Chen's poetry do not represent an exhaustive or "final" version; they serve as test cases for the hypothesis that the perceived limits of translatability, grounded in semantic equivalence, can be circumvented if we conceptualize translation as a performance. Concrete poetry is an exemplary genre in this regard exactly because semantic translation is not an option; it dares us to push the frontiers of translatability and position it within the interstices of interlingual transfer and creative transposition.

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