The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures

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THE SECRETS OF LANGUAGE

Chen Li’s Sinographic Anagrams

ANDREA BACHNER

In one of his poems from the 2009 collection *Light/Slow* (輕 / 慢), Taiwanese poet Chen Li 陳黎 formulates a critical genealogy of nationalism on the basis of a “found object,” the Chinese character for “country” (國):

國
國破衰亡簡史:
國,戈,矛
匕,匕,匕,匕

Country
abbreviated history of a country’s decline:
country, or, spear, arrow
dagger, hook, dot,

In this poem, Chen Li stages the “abbreviated history of a country’s decline” as an exercise in graphic form. The Chinese character for 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 (矛), 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, invokes an image of blood drops. This felicitous formal 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 implication is that the idea of country—and perhaps, more specifically, the Chinese nationalism invoked by the character’s use of the terms 國家 for “nation” and 中國 for “China”—is bound to lead to violence and to self-destruction.

Chen Li’s “Country,” with its graphically executed critique of violence and nationalism, is reminiscent of one of the poet’s best-known concrete experiments, his “War Symphony” (戰爭交響曲) of 1995. In “War Symphony,” Chen Li used only four characters—兵 (soldier), 丘 (tomb), and the onomatopoetic compound 乒乒 (ping pang)—to criticize the injury and death that are inevitable outcomes of war. As the ranks of soldiers (rows of the character 兵) are wounded and killed in combat—the onomatopoetic compound 乒乒 symbolizes both the sound of guns and, via a fake graphic reading, the soldiers’ (兵) loss of limbs—they give way to rows of tombs (丘). Although formal experimentation is a constant poetic force in Chen Li’s work, Light/Slow returns to graphic experiments with a vengeance. Many of its poems toy with the graphic force of Chinese characters, from poems reminiscent of “War Symphony” that abandon Chinese syntax to invest in the visual force of Chinese characters, to experiments that harken back to traditional Chinese genres in their play with the material and graphic characteristics of the Chinese script. Two distinct poetic genres drive Chen Li’s attention to a Chinese poetic tradition: poems constructed with Chinese characters from famous Tang poems, and poems such as “Country” in the tradition of the hidden-character poem (yinzi shi 隱字詩), a kind of poetic riddle based on anagrammatic principles. Both types of poems work with a reselection and recombination of elements, either on the basis of existing poems or, in the case of the hidden-character poems, on the basis of the graphic components of Chinese characters. Whereas Chen Li’s twist on Tang poetry exploits a highly canonical Chinese form—with the original poems visible on the page, though printed in a slightly faded font so as to highlight Chen Li’s recycled creations—the hidden-character poems hail from a more marginal Chinese tradition.

Although hidden-character poems are mentioned in Liu Xie’s 刘勰 literary treatise The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragon (文心雕龍), Liu Xie grants them only conditional entrance among canonical literary genres under the heading “Humor and Enigma” (谐隱), as a poetic form that may serve an expressive or moral purpose but is also prone to be used for frivolity and ribaldry. Indeed, even as poetry in Chinese became increasingly invested in the poetic and graphic possibilities of the Chinese script under the influence of Western modernism, for instance in the context of modernist experiments in Taiwan of the 1950s and 1960s, Chinese forms of graphic play received short shrift. While poets and critics drew heavily on Western models such as Ezra Pound, Guillaume Apollinaire, or E. E. Cummings, or even earlier forms such as George Herbert’s pattern poetry, by contrast Chinese pattern poetry, such as huiwen (回文 or 迴紋), or riddle poems, were dismissed as mere linguistic games, if they were mentioned at all. Chen Li’s use of the hidden-character poem in Light/Slow—they constitute one of three parts of the collection, which has more than seventy short poems in total—reactivates a marginalized genre. It claims literary nimbleness for this genre of
riddle poetry in which the character or characters to be guessed are given in the text of the riddle in disaggregated form.⁷

Unlike most riddles, hidden-character poems contain clues that are not merely related to content but, reminiscent of a rebus, concern the very linguistic materiality of the term or character that is the solution to the riddle.⁸ Most of Chen Li's riddle poems contain a threefold strategy for helping the reader to guess the correct answer: (1) the poem hints at the semantic content of the hidden character; (2) the poem includes a description of the shape of the character or its components; (3) the poem contains characters that are visually reminiscent of the hidden character. Usually, the title of each poem, when it is not the target character itself, features an element of the target character (for instance 口 for mouth, 木 for 柳, or 氏 for 氏). To solve the riddle, a reader needs to think of the Chinese characters concerned in concretely visual terms, reading for graphic elements and not only for semantic meaning. The poetic text often highlights such a graphic reading that requires a reader to put a character's elements back together. For instance, the description “比晶還要精” (“even purer than 晶 [also ‘clear’]”) allows a reader to guess that the character in question is 晶 (“product” or “commodity”), which resembles 晶 but, lacking the middle strokes, looks more transparent.⁹ To point a reader to the character 目, related to vision and eyesight, another poem describes it as “日復一日的凝視” (“a gaze that adds a 日 [also ‘day’ or ‘sun’] to a 目”), literally a doubling of the character 目 dependent on a gaze or fixed stare that results in a partial superimposition of both elements.⁰ Whereas this example works by combining two characters, others—such as the play on 晶 and目—work by subtraction. 目 is not only the partial doubling of 目, but also, as Chen Li's poem puts it, an instance of “斷肢的耳” (“a 耳 [also: ‘ear’] that has had its extremities cut off”).¹¹ In this way, Chen Li's hidden-character poems invite a reader's appreciation of the graphic conceits at the heart of each poem, as well as the combinatorial creativity of Chinese characters themselves. Not only does Chen Li's title for the section, “Hidden-Character Poems,” point directly to the genre of riddle and invite the reader to engage in (controlled) guesswork, the poet's comments after each poem or group of poems contain the solution to the riddles, or the titles directly reveal the target character. The aim of the poems is not to leave the reader puzzled, but rather to allow a reader to reconstruct the ingenious crafting of language in each poem and to celebrate the combinatorial creativity of the Chinese language and its components.

That Chen Li's Sinographic riddles depend on their linguistic material, namely the concrete form and components of the Chinese script, becomes clear in my attempts at translation, which are more description and commentary than translation proper and cannot do without the presence of at least some of the Chinese original, such as the Chinese characters that are most essential to Chen Li's graphic puns. In his postface, Chen Li effectively points to the profound untranslatability of the graphically invested poems in Light/Slow. As poetic experiments that highlight their graphic material, they are limited to a linguistically and culturally specific medium, the Chinese script:
Many of the poems in this collection are actually untranslatable (for instance the poems in the second part). In part this is because, from my collection *Worries and Freedom Well-Tempered* onward, I have been trying to unearth the specificity of Chinese writing or of *Chineseness* in my poems.

The poems Chen Li refers to here rely on their linguistic medium, the Chinese language, even more specifically than does poetry in general. To attempt a translation of poems in general presents the challenge of expressing content in another language and replicating some of the poetic features of the original, such as rhyme, rhythm, or assonance. Since the graphic shape of a poem or part of a poem, of a Chinese character or part of a Chinese character, is exploited for poetic effect in Chen Li’s poems, however, translation hinges not only upon a difference in language, but also upon a difference in writing system. Once the graphic qualities of a text become meaningful via the distribution and form of textual elements, rather than forming arbitrary textual contingencies, translation exposes the problems of transcription: not as a supposedly transparent, smooth transition between different scripts, but as the challenge of carrying across meaning (understood as signification and aesthetic impact) between different textual media.

And yet, Chen Li phrases the cultural specificity, and hence untranslatability, of his work in and through translation: the decisive factor of this type of poetic experiment, its “*Chineseness,*” is expressed in Chen Li’s text both in Chinese, as *zhongwenxing* (中文性), and (parenthetically) in English as “Chineseness”—a bilingual maneuver that my English translation of Chen Li’s “Chinese” original cannot adequately communicate. Whereas the English noun *Chineseness,* built on the basis of the adjective “Chinese,” remains open to different semantic values of “Chinese”—as an ethnic, cultural, national, or linguistic descriptor—the Chinese term, based on *zhongwen* (中文), functions as a linguistic category, one that highlights the Chinese written language (*zhongwen*) rather than speech, and thus repeats the even more specific phrase *zhongwenzi texting* (中文特性; the specificity of Chinese writing or Chinese written characters) that precedes it. The juxtaposition of three similar terms in two languages seems to raise a fundamental question. How are we to read Chen Li’s insistence on Chineseness as the basis for untranslatable poetic material, indeed as a marker of untranslatability?

Chen Li’s assertion might strike readers as an essentialist highlighting of the putative uniqueness of the Chinese language, thereby resonating with the notion of Chinese writing as the other script par excellence, alterity given concrete medial form—only now as a celebration of Chinese uniqueness from within a Sinophone tradition. And yet, as a poet from Taiwan, Chen Li has repeatedly underlined the hybridity of Taiwanese culture, in which the “Chinese” element is, at best, a placeholder for one strain of cultural influence among others. Indeed, Chen Li’s design on the Chinese script often counters any nationalist instrumentalization of the Chinese writing system.
His use of the Chinese script, such as the graphic “execution” of the idea of nationalism in his poem “Country,” carefully dissociates the creativity of the Chinese character and Chinese nationalism. Even as the poem activates the Sinographic mystique of the character 国—suggesting a connection between meaning and written sign beyond an arbitrary and conventional link—it sacrifices the Sinograph to execute 国. However, this “sacrifice” works only by invoking the mimetic force often attributed to Chinese characters by observers both within and outside the Chinese cultural sphere—namely, that characters in the form of pictographs or ideographs forge a nonarbitrary link between the written sign and its signified. But a strategic exploitation of ideographic appeal allows Chen Li to question essentialist notions of culture and language even more radically. In “Country,” Chen Li finds in the Chinese written signifiers the basis for undermining the idea of nation. In order to do so, he parasitically uses the aura of the Chinese script, only to de-sign it by parsing the elements down to its basic strokes, no longer imbued with meaning and thus no longer part of an ideographic reading that derives signification from a mere combination of equally meaningful parts. Even as the unique graphic creativity of written Chinese is highlighted in Chen Li’s poetic experiments that celebrate the materiality of the Chinese script, an analytical thrust can reach the extreme of pulverizing the Sinographic material, as in “Country.” How can Chen Li’s poetic riddles tell us about the status of the Chinese script, about translation, and about poetic language in general?

Poetic Transmediation

One famous reflection on the graphic specificity of the Chinese script, Ernest Fenollosa’s essay “The Chinese Written Character as a Medium for Poetry,” edited and published by Ezra Pound in 1919, also raises the question of writing’s graphic materiality and translation. Fenollosa’s essay contrasts English and Chinese as poetic media, crediting Chinese characters with special expressive power, one that highlights movement rather than stasis and concretion rather than abstraction. As the model for a poetic language closer to nature, understood as an infinite dynamic network of phenomena in action, Chinese stands in stark contrast to English as well as pointing the way to recuperating English as a powerful poetic language. For Fenollosa, under the Latinate straitjacket that constricts English, a different, more poetic English tries to fight free, one that could potentially function like Chinese.

In spite of many comparative examples in Fenollosa’s essay that show the dormant power of English, one of the most important traits that make Chinese a good medium for poetry is conspicuously absent from Fenollosa’s discussion of the English language: its graphic component. Unlike other linguistic characteristics of English that resemble Chinese according to Fenollosa, its alphabetic letters cannot compare to the graphic, indeed ideographic, potential of Chinese characters. What fascinated Fenollosa about Chinese poetry was its graphic creativity, the fact that the complexity of Chinese
characters allowed a vaster playing field for the poetic manipulation of language. If
the formalist critic Roman Jakobson in his essay “Linguistics and Poetics” defined the
poetic function of language as the application of paradigmatic criteria on a syntagmatic
level, as an added constraint of similarity and contrast that determined (consciously or
unconsciously) the selection of contiguous words, Fenollosa’s examples show an inter-
est in a similar understanding of linguistic poeticity with regard to graphic elements.15
The following example concludes Fenollosa’s essay (in Pound’s edition):

The overtones vibrate against the eye. The wealth of composition in characters
makes possible a choice of words in which a single dominant overtone colors every
plane of meaning. That is perhaps the most conspicuous quality of Chinese poetry.
Let us examine our line.

日 昇 東
Sun Rises (in the) East

The sun, the shining, on one side, on the other the sign of the east, which is the sun
entangled in the branches of a tree. And in the middle sign, the verb “rise,” we have
further homology; the sun is above the horizon, but beyond that the single upright
line is like the growing trunk-line of the tree sign. This is but a beginning, but it
points a way to the method, and to the method of intelligent reading.16

What Fenollosa describes in the synesthetic metaphor of visually vibrating overtones
in this passage is, to put it more prosaically, the fact of the repetition of one graphic
element in the three contiguous characters of a poetic line: 日 or sun. Of course, some-
body who does not read Chinese cannot spontaneously “parse” Chinese characters on
the basis of its components (as Ezra Pound would have it on the basis of Fenollosa’s
theory). Nor would a native reader of Chinese necessarily consciously reflect on each
graphic element, as opposed to taking in a character as a gestaltic whole. Irrespective of
the etymological (or etymographic) valence of Fenollosa’s reading, the poetic repetition
of one graphic element in this example poses a distinct challenge for translation.17 Can
this poetic phenomenon work with other linguistic and graphic material, such as the
alphabetic script of English?

The synesthesia in Fenollosa’s discussion of visual “overtones” in his Chinese exam-
ple seems to indicate one possible translational direction, from graphic form to sound.
If Chinese poetry resonates visually, maybe the overtones and poetic echoes in other
languages can be rendered by way of sonic resonances rather than graphic similarity.
This is an approach that the Brazilian concrete poet Haroldo de Campos espouses
in his essay on Fenollosa, “Ideogram, Anagram, Diagram: A Reading of Fenollosa”
(“Ideograma, anagrama, diagrama: Uma leitura de Fenollosa”), the introductory piece
to the 1977 edited volume Ideogram: Logic, Poetry, Language (Ideograma: Lógica, poesia,
linguagem), which contains a translation of Fenollosa’s essay and other works relevant
to an ideographic interest in the Chinese script. De Campos asks about the possibility
of putting into action a poetic practice of resonances like the one Fenollosa describes
as the ideographic method for "a phonetic language, written with alphabetic digits, noniconic in itself."\textsuperscript{18} Influenced by Roman Jakobson's definition of the poetic function and Ferdinand de Saussure's work on anagrams, de Campos proposes a "structural translation" that would allow an apparent disregard for semantic content in order to "take hold of the semiotic process of 'saturation' of 'visible and active' intracode."\textsuperscript{19} To illustrate this kind of translation, de Campos reiterates Fenollosa's example and juxtaposes it with a line from the long poem *The Wandering Guesa (O Guesa errante)*, written between 1858 and 1888 by the Brazilian poet Joaquim de Sousândrade. Fenollosa's example appears with two types of "translations," even before the appearance of the poetic line by Sousândrade that de Campos offers as the "result" of a structural translation. In addition to the translation of the three Chinese characters into English and Portuguese, de Campos also provides a schematic transcription of the characters in which 日 is replaced by the circular form of the sun while the other character elements are transformed into stick figures. This graphic translation—the schematization of 日—highlights the resonances with Sousândrade's line:

\begin{quote}
The sun at sundown (sad askunce!)
The SUN at SUNdown (sad aSkUNcec!)

O sol ao pór-do-sol (triste soslaio!).
O SOL ao pôr-do-SOL (triste SOsLaio!).\textsuperscript{20}
\end{quote}

As in the example of ‘日昇東,’ the word *sol*, made visible by de Campos's highlighting in big letters, appears three times in one line, from its appearance as stand-alone word to its combination (pôr-do-sol) to its latent presence in the word soslaio. For de Campos, the transformation of *sol* reproduces the repetition of 日 in the Chinese example: "In the syntagmatic sequence of the verse, the intermittent incidence of the 'sonic figure' SOL seems to reproduce, directly or in transformed shape, the same play of 'harmonies' that Fenollosa caught on the graphematic level of Chinese characters."\textsuperscript{21} In other words, since de Campos's emphasis is on the way the elements of a poetic text are interrelated, since they create internal echoes—they form, in de Campos's words, a "relational intracode"—it does not matter if such a resonance happens on the level of sound or graphic elements.\textsuperscript{22}

But there is one fundamental problem in this equation. For Fenollosa, the beauty of the ideographic method did not simply reside in the added aesthetic emphasis achieved by the repetition of elements, but rather in an added layer of meaning. In other words, the point of repeating 日 in Fenollosa's example lies in the way this illustrates the image of the rising sun. One condition needs to be in place for this poetic gamble to work: the repeated element needs to have semantic value (that its semantic value is motivated, i.e. that the relation between “日” and the meaning "sun" is wrought iconically, is an added bonus, of course). In other words, graphic repetition as envisioned by Fenollosa and de Campos has to be graphemic; it cannot simply reduplicate random graphic elements, but only those that are suggestive of a meaning. This is why de Campos highlights the
word SOL as an element of his graphic rendition of Sousândrade's poetic line, instead of going for the (lower-hanging) graphic fruit of underlining the letter o, such as:

O sOl aO pÔr-dO-sOl (triste sOsaiO!)

This alternative emphasis also highlights one of the underlying problems of de Campos's "structural translation." Rather than conceiving of letters and Chinese characters as signs with graphic and phonetic components, de Campos seems unable to think beyond phonemes or graphemes, which is to say elements that carry semantic meaning. De Campos's translation sets out on a quest for similarity with the aim of finding a method in alphabetic writing that would match the creativity of the graphic method that Fenollosa had seen in evidence in the Chinese script in general, and in its poetic uses in particular. However, by underlining the semantic-phonetic unit sol rather than graphic and phonetic units such as the o, de Campos disavows the multiplicity of poetic resonances that are possible in Chinese and in Portuguese: graphic, semantic, and phonic. De Campos's "translation" of Fenollosa's Chinese example into Brazilian Portuguese ends up cementing the difference between the two languages and the two scripts at work. Since de Campos limits the scope of translation to elements with conventionalized meaning—the character and radical 孔 and the word sol—even in translation Chinese and Portuguese remain inevitably at odds, one confined to its graphic facet, the other enshrined in its phonetic straitjacket. In other words, even in a tradition that seeks in the Chinese script a new source for poetic and graphic inspiration, Chinese is Chinese and English is English (or Portuguese is Portuguese). And this difference finds its basis in erecting the difference between the graphic and the phonetic into a symbolic absolute, rather than dwelling on the components shared by all languages and their scripts.

In spite of Fenollosa's and de Campos's interest in the poetic potential of the Chinese script in order to push their own languages beyond their comfort zones, their reflections still naturalize the fundamental difference between Chinese (equated with its graphic form) and English or Portuguese (as spoken languages). In spite of their fascination with graphic form, they end up echoing Ferdinand de Saussure's phonetic bias in his Course in General Linguistics (Cours de linguistique générale). Before working on what would become one of the most influential reflections on language of the twentieth century, one that continues to define the way in which we think about language in the context of literary and cultural studies, Saussure was deeply interested in anagrammatic phenomena. Much of his research, unpublished during his lifetime and made partly available as late as 1971 by Jean Starobinski in Words upon Words (Les mots sous les mots), was dedicated to the hypothesis that much of Indo-European poetry (Saussure's examples were drawn mostly from Latin, Ancient Greek, and Vedic) functioned in anagrammatic ways—where strict rules of phonetic repetition regulated poetry and, if such phonetic repetitions were traced and parsed, a secret text would start to appear. Poetry, in other words, was hiding key words, often proper names, under its surface meaning.
These "hypograms" or "paragrams"—Saussure never quite settled on one term—were not pure anagrams in which all the letters or components have to be rearranged to form new meaning, but a distribution or scattering of fragments of a key term or proper name over (and under) several lines or verses. In spite of the fact that the poetic material under scrutiny came to Saussure in written form—Starobinski underlines the importance of the critic's eye and ear for a successful anagrammatic reading—Saussure insists on the phonetic nature of this process, making phonemes the units of the anagrammatic process of permutation.\textsuperscript{24} Saussure's phonetic turn (not only in linguistics as such, but also in relation to the anagram) swerves away from the conventional graphic dimension of the anagram with its focus on letters as graphic, rather than phonetic units. As Starobinski emphasizes, this "research will have only a link of distant analogy with the traditional anagram, which functions only through graphic signs. Reading, in this instance, applies to deciphering combinations of phonemes not of letters."\textsuperscript{25} Even though Saussure abandoned his anagrammatic work, probably because he started to distrust his findings as he begun to see the same structures everywhere, almost as a kind of combinatorial paranoia, the implications of unearthing words under words would haunt Western theoretical approaches for several decades—as in the work of Julia Kristeva, Jean Riffaterre, or Haroldo de Campos.\textsuperscript{26}

What is striking in Saussure's work on anagrams for my purpose here is not the problem of the pervasive appearance of his hypograms, nor necessarily the related question of whether these phenomena were intentional poetic creations, unconscious artifacts of poetic processes, or a product of a reader's combinatorial fixation, but rather what appears to be a phonetic bias that underpins his reflections on the basic building blocks of language. For Saussure, the language that lies beneath language is necessarily the same as the language under which it hides: phonetic and not graphic, speech and not writing, double entendre, not double vision. In spite of the uncanny strangeness of anagrammatic processes, their linguistic alterity is relative as long as surface text and hidden text are thought of as confined to the same (type of) language and as functioning according to the same understanding of language. Privileging the combination of phonetic units, rather than graphic ones, downplays the multiplicity of linguistic expression in favor of sound. Saussure's definition of the hypogram as phonetic rather than graphic introduces a division in the realm of language (and different languages), one that pits scripts against speech and language against language.

**Beyond (and below) the Sinographic**

Do Chen Li's hidden character poems, with their reference to a Chinese poetic tradition, similarly cement a vision of absolute linguistic difference, albeit from within a Chinese scriptworld rather than fueled by a Western desire for alterity? Even though Chen Li's insistence on the untranslatability and the putative Chineseness of his experiments might suggest as much, his poetic practice opens up a wider, more complex perspective on work with
the Chinese script and thus on linguistic difference in general. Chen Li invokes Chineseness to point to the material and medial specificity of his poetic experiments. At the same time, his poems effectively open up the category of Chineseness to include its margins.

As Chen Li embraces the marginal genre of the poetic riddle, he not only dignifies this genre as high literature, but at times engages intentionally in an irreverent, even ribald tone. He thus reforges the negative connection of riddle poems and uncouth humor that Liu Xie had critiqued in The Literary Mind and the Carving of Dragons and gives it a positive, affirmative twist. For instance, Chen Li presents one subgroup of hidden-character poems that toys with Chinese characters for sexual organs or human excrement and turns abjection into carnivalesque pleasure as one of the examples of the genre par excellence. The five poems that graphically explicate the characters 尿 ("vagina"), 屁 ("penis"), 屎 ("fart"), 屎 ("shit"), and 尿 ("urine") are, as Chen Li explains in his commentary, yinsi shi (隱私 詩, "poems about private, or hidden, parts"), but furthermore, as such, by way of near homophony, they point to the genre of yinzi shi (隱 字 詩, "hidden-character poems"). Not only are these poems doubly "hidden"—both share the character yin (隱, "hidden"). As the commentary explains, they also point to another underlying riddle. The key characters of the five poems all share the same radical, 尸, which is the simplified form of the character 尸 (shī), meaning "corpse." Not only do these poems conceal characters (隱字, yinzi) or private parts (隱私, yinsi), they also conceal (the Chinese characters for dead) bodies (隱屍, yinshi).27

In contrast to such examples of tongue-in-cheek humor that gives poetic form to taboo topics, some of Chen Li’s hidden-character poems, such as “Country,” take up much more serious issues, such as the reinvestment of the margins of Chinese culture and a critique of sinocentrism. In such instances, the specifically sinographic technique of the hidden-character poem is often employed by Chen Li to problematize the idea of cultural and national essence, for instance in a group of five poems that thematize and contest Chinese visions of the cultural other, the non-Chinese: “Five Savages” (五獣). These five poems, written from the perspective of the “savage” produced through the culturally biased lens of sinocentrism, also debunk the concept of the “savage” as a discursive production. The genre of the hidden-character poem with its sophisticated play with and comprehension of the Chinese written character becomes the perfect instrument for a critique of Chinese ethnocentrism. “Five Savages” uses sinographically oriented poetic strategies to criticize the Han-centrism of Chinese culture. The first poem, “凶,” provides a particularly striking etymology of cultural bias:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{凶} & \quad \text{凶} \\
\text{You assert loudly that I am} & \quad \text{You assert loudly that I am} \\
\text{凶惡之徒} & \quad \text{
\begin{tabular}{l}
凶惡之徒
\end{tabular}} \\
\text{a ferocious guy [凶惡, or 凶惡]} & \quad \text{凶惡之徒}
\end{align*}
\]

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{凶} & \quad \text{凶} \\
\text{不, 我不凶} & \quad \text{No, I am not ferocious (凶)}
\end{align*}
\]
我是割下肉
I am—flesh (肉) cut off;

袒胸與你們交心的
my breast [袒＝胸] on your breast, baring my heart—

普通人
just a man

As in so many of Chen Li's hidden-character poems, the title of the work refers to a kind of reading, rather than to the poem's content. The key lies in one of the components of the word that the text describes: 朐 (pronounced “xiong”) as in 朐奴 Xiongnu, the name of a nomadic non-Han ethnicity in the northwest, which a Chinese Central Plains tradition had always treated as barbaric. The poem proceeds through a (pseudo-)analytical series, not only presenting the character in question in its component parts, but also alluding to the character itself as a truncated and biased form: 朐 is composed of the elements 亻 and 月, where the latter (better known in its alternative form 月) signifies “ferocious.” As a counter to the ethnocentric equation of the Other with savagery and the scripting of ethnic difference as ethic turpitude, Chen Li reminds his readers that 朐 is, after all, an alternative, “mutilated” version of 胸, meaning “breast” but also “person”: when you cut off one of its parts, its humanity—the radical for flesh, 肉—you reduce 朐 to the inhuman notion of the ferocious savage, 月 or 月. Here, racial profiling is likened to a process of castration, where the “human” part of the other is denied while also offering a clever pun in the poem’s rebus-like logic. In the end, the other (朐) reveals himself or herself to have been human all along: as Chen Li explains in a footnote, the character 朐, pronounced “qun,” means “people” in the language of this ethnic group. Through the graphic logic of this poem, notions of cultural and ethnic centrality are revealed as only a matter of perspective, and thus ethnocentrism should be given up for a wider, more inclusive definition of humanity.

Chen Li’s sinographic work in this poem stands out for its (pseudo-)etymographic wit that dissects a character into its parts, as well as drawing on alternative character versions. The seemingly superfluous component 亻 is filled with meaning through a different process: its graphic resemblance to 亻—which is one of the signs in Taiwan’s Zhuoyin phonetic transcription system and is pronounced “b”—allows the character 朐 to be read as meaning not only “human” but also “not evil” (亻 or rather 亻+月), since 朐 = 亻 = b = bu = 不 (meaning “not”). The poetic conflation of 亻 and 朐 is purely graphically motivated, yet it only becomes meaningful after a process of voicing. This example illustrates that Chen Li’s script poetics are not invested in a nostalgic return to a recovered graphic purity of the sinograph. The poet does not provide an etymology so much as trace a critical genealogy. Rather than exhuming the true meaning of Chinese characters by moving closer to their origin, the poet activates the possibility of the sinograph to point beyond its own scriptural and cultural tradition, while at the same time revealing its ethnocentric bias. It is in this sense that “a tiny Chinese character is often a miniature of the cosmos or its parts,” as the poet asserts in his postface—as material for poetic experimentation, not because of any mimetic claim inherent in the writing system as such.
As is customary in the tradition of Chinese riddle verse, Chen Li's anagrammatic experiments work with graphic, rather than phonetic, material. Its basic units are strokes, radicals, and characters, rather than phonemes or syllables. And yet, the graphic pun with 'י' and 'י' also pushes the unity of Chen Li's Chinese elements to the extreme: 'י' is not a character in its own right, but only a radical with a vaguely semantic charge; 'י', derived from 'י', is a sign in the character-derived Zhuyin phonetic script, and as such is stripped of any semantic value and reduced to a purely phonetic value. A similar process is at work in Chen Li's "Country," where the radical י, and the stroke י become invested with new semantic meaning, as are the commas that punctuate the series of Chinese characters, thus signaling that they form part of a syntactic construction, as well as constituting (pseudo-)iconic elements—with the dot י and the commas reminiscent of drops of blood. These elements—at once integral parts of and foreign intruders to the script in which they appear—accrue meaning only by way of their juxtaposition and contextualization, only because they require a reader to activate different facets and strategies of reading.

In Chen Li's poetic experiments, the language beneath language, then, does not simply constitute a superficial mirror and equivalent of its surface language. Rather, it produces meaning, not only through different combinations, but mainly because its building blocks are mutable and flexible: not merely graphemes or phonemes, but bits of language that can function in more than one way and that can be broken down into more than one type of unit. It is here that the language beneath language does not stabilize or naturalize its surface language, but rather opens up and contests conventional notions of what constitutes a specific language (such as Chinese), and, by analogy, of what constitutes or counts as language as such.

**UNTRANSlatABILITY REVISITED**

From the vantage point of his poetic practice, Chen Li's insistence on the untranslatability of his graphic poetry needs rephrasing. Instead of simply reiterating the age-old cliché of the untranslatability of poetry or entrenching Chinese in a position of linguistic incommensurability, Chen Li's riddle poems enact an alternative way of conceiving of linguistic difference. This difference—hence Chen Li's emphasis on the materiality of the Chinese script—is not only a question of meaning, of semantic non-coincidence, but also of the graphic and phonic materiality of a language, a question of sound as well as script. However, in order to circumvent the danger of solidifying barriers around languages and essentializing different languages and scripts, the radicalization of linguistic difference has to be accompanied by a complementary gesture of relativization: the difference between languages is not one of essences, of *phone* versus *graphe*, and thus a difference that is still peddled as the mainstay of the complete alterity of the Chinese script. Rather, languages are different because they mix the facets at play in all linguistic communication in unique ways. The very fact that spells the radical untranslatability
of linguistic expression, its unique phonic and graphic shape, also makes linguistic difference relative, a question of similar components in different selections and combinations rather than an essential divide.

One of the poems in *Light/Slow*, "A Difficult Poem that Is Easy to Read" (一首容易讀的難詩), addresses the question of translation directly by rephrasing it as an oscillation between untranslatability and commensurability. This poem contains four lines of cryptic characters, pseudographs that look like Chinese characters because they follow the graphic and combinatorial conventions of sinographs though without forming part of the Chinese lexicon. The pseudographs of "A Difficult Poem" are quoted from one of Chen Li's earlier poems, "A Love Poem" (情詩), a poem entirely crafted from cryptic characters. The last lines of "A Love Poem" are quoted in "A Difficult Poem," which is imagined as an opaque Chinese poem cherished by Pindar, the famously difficult ancient Greek poet:

他喜歡讀一首叫「情詩」的中文詩
因為這詩,據說
翻不翻成希臘文都一樣難懂33

He liked to read a Chinese poem called "Love Poem"
because this poem, so they say,
was equally difficult to read irrespective of if it was translated into Greek or not

At first glance, Chen Li's strange characters seem to embody the very idea of untranslatability: how can something that is unreadable in a given language be translated? At a second glance, even as Chen Li's pseudographic creations push untranslatability to an extreme, they circumvent translation altogether. Since these signs are "fake," they are not in need of translation; they are as cryptic to native readers of Chinese as to somebody who reads and writes in ancient Greek, such as Pindar.34 But even as these lookalike characters do not need translation, they are untranslatable, since how would one translate, or, indeed, transgraph pseudo-Chinese into pseudo-Greek?

But instead of merely celebrating the opacity of pseudographic text that would transcend the limits of specific languages in its universal unreadability, Chen Li's translational practice goes a step further. A group of his hidden-character poems actually gloss the supposedly unreadable characters from "A Love Poem" and "A Difficult Poem," using them as the key terms of poetic riddles. On one hand, this makes the character at the center of each riddle verse doubly cryptic, the core of an unsolvable riddle, since it calls on a reader to identify an unknown character, one that did not exist prior to the poet's creation. On the other hand, via the author's comment at the end of the group of poems, these Chinese characters are imbued with semantic and phonetic value: each of the cryptic characters is granted a pronunciation and signification.35 What had seemed unintelligible is now given meaning and context; what had seemed outside the bounds of language proper is now intelligible as one of its integral parts. Once we as readers have taken in Chen Li's character glosses, his inventions have become part of our
Chinese lexicon. Irrespective of the doubtful facticity of these glosses, Chen Li thus underlines the virtual limitation as well as openness of any linguistic system: linguistic strangeness does not lurk outside of the limits of our own language; rather, the linguistic unknown is a constant in our process of learning and reactivating what we perceive as our own language.36

At the same time, to push the boundaries of one's language and explore beyond its symbolic limits might be a conduit to linguistic enrichment and creativity. One of these lines of inquiry leads away from a consideration of language as a symbolic, ideological structure to a scrutiny of language as linguistic material for selection and combination. Anagrammatic experiments and reflections such as Ferdinand de Saussure's work on a phonetically understood anagram of Indo-European poetry, the reflections on poetic resonances in logographic and alphabetic scripts by Brazilian concrete poet Haroldo de Campos, or Chen Li's poetic revitalization of the genre of the hidden-character poem embark upon this route. Where not tempered by preconceived notions of total linguistic difference (between sound and script), interest in words under words, in the components of (and below) language that constitute language as a concrete practice, potentially conceives of language as duplicitous and multilayered. As Jacques Derrida reminds us in Shibboleth: For Paul Celan (Schibboleth: Pour Paul Celan), only a text that consists of multiple languages is truly untranslatable, since not only the linguistic specificity of one language, but the specific differences between the languages in play, will be lost in translation.37 But viewing language through an anagrammatic lens means not only potentially discovering another meaning below the linguistic surface, but also engaging in linguistic movement below and beyond our conventional relation to language as a medium of communication invested in expressing meaning without much detour. Anagrammatic work points to language not as a transparent medium of communication, but rather as a protean material reservoir that depends on the flexibility and malleability of its elements. If language is duplicitous—not other to itself, but other to our linguistic routines and expectations—then difference lies at the very heart of language and questions the possibility of linguistic ownership. While this pragmatically exacerbates the problem of translation, it also precludes discourses of untranslatability from erecting symbolic walls of incommensurability between languages: linguistic expression is already multiply in translation, even before another language comes into play.

Anagrammatic practices have a particular relationship to language. They highlight in miniature how language works. With their emphasis on the basic building blocks of language they can cement linguistic othering by discovering that what lies beneath language simply replicates our preconceived notion of (our own or another's) language, such as in Saussure's insistence on the phonetic nature of anagrams in Indo-European poetry or de Campos's strategic blindness (at least in his essay on Fenollosa) to the graphic force of the alphabetic script. And yet, since these practices push the possibilities of linguistic creation to their limits and open up a dimension of language below language, they can also render a language other to itself by putting into play the basic
units of language and its basic rules of combination. For instance, many of Chen Li’s hidden-character poems, while hinging upon graphic combinations, also probe phonetic elements or those that lie at the margins of linguistic significance, such as single strokes and dots or punctuation marks. The untranslatability of Chen Li’s sinographic anagrams—both as pragmatic extreme and in their symbolic relativity—resonates with Emily Apter’s celebration of untranslatability as a “linguistic form of creative failure,” albeit with a much stronger emphasis on creativity than on failure. It also teaches us as readers that we have to pay attention to linguistic specificity even as, or whenever, we want to think of language or translation in general. Being alert to specific textual turns, even down to the placement of a dot or a comma, will allow us to think about language without downplaying internal differences potentially disruptive to theoretical coherence, but without erecting linguistic difference into a fetish of incommensurability either.

NOTES

I would like to express my profound gratitude to Chen Li for permission to reprint and translate the poems analyzed in this chapter.

1. Chen Li, Qing/man 輕 / 慢 [Light/slow] (Taipei: Erya wenhua, 2009), 82. Unless indicated otherwise, all translations are my own.

2. See Chen Li, Daoyu bianyuan 島嶼邊緣 [The edge of the island] (Taipei: Jiuge, 2003), 102–104.

3. For a discussion of the ideographic fascination of the Concrete Poetry movement, especially the Brazilian Noigandres group, see Andrea Bachner, Beyond Sinology: Chinese Writing and the Scripts of Culture (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014), 74–82.


6. Even though the whole second section of Light/Slow bears the title “Hidden-Character Poems,” this section also includes other examples of visual poetry as well as Chen Li’s poetic recycling of Tang poems.

7. For a thorough discussion of riddle poems and other anagrammatic structures in Chinese literature and their terminological vicissitudes, such as xi zi (析字, “analyzing characters”)

8. In The Interpretation of Dreams, as well as other writings, Sigmund Freud likened the work of the unconscious in dreams both to the visual and textual riddle of the rebus and to non-Western scripts, such as hieroglyphs or Chinese characters. For a discussion of the graphic facets of Freud’s dream work, see Jean-François Lyotard, Discours, figure, 2nd ed. (Paris: Klincksieck, 2002), 238–270; trans. Antony Hudek and Mary Lydon as Discourse, Figure (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 233–267.

9. Chen Li, Light/Slow, 55.

10. Chen Li, Light/Slow, 56.

11. Chen Li, Light/Slow, 56. In this case, 目 is only part of the solution, as a component of the character 目.


13. For instance, in Chen Li’s epilogue to the collection Daoyu bianyuan 島嶼邊緣 [The edge of the island], he dwells on the special energy of Taiwan due to a history of transculturation and hybridity; see “Zai daoyu bianyuan (Ba)” 在島嶼邊緣(跋) [At the edge of the island (Epilogue)], in Daoyu bianyuan, 189–193.

14. Another poem in Light/Slow also toys with a dissection of the idea of nationhood. The poem “Nation” (國家) plays with the second part of this two-character word, “家,” whose root meaning is related to the ideas of family and home. When you take away the character’s roof element, what remains? A series of hogs (豕) under the cover of the nation. The signification of “nation” thus produced communicates deep sarcasm, not only vis-à-vis the idea of nation but also in relation to the ideographic myth attached to Chinese writing. See Light/Slow, 101.


20. I am bending orthographic rules here in order to express the combinatorial force of the line in my English translation.


22. de Campos, “Ideograma, anagrama, diagram,” 60.

23. Saussure treats writing in general only to distinguish its interference from what he sees as the true linguistic object, spoken language. Even then, with the exception of some remarks on nonphonetic scripts, his focus is on phonetic writing systems. See Ferdinand de Saussure, Cours de linguistique générale, ed. Tullio de Mauro (Paris: Payot, 1982), 40–54.
trans. Roy Harris as Course in General Linguistics (Peru, IL: Open Court, 2006), 21–31. For a critique of Saussure’s phonocentrism, see Jacques Derrida, De la gramma


27. See Chen Li, Light/Slow, 78.

28. Chen Li, Light/Slow, 57.

29. Chen Li’s procedure here is reminiscent of some of the strategies used in Chinese Internet language, the so-called Martian Script (火星文).

30. Even though Chen Li’s poetic practice highlights the graphic creativity of Chinese characters, sound asserts its importance constantly, for example in the glosses of rare or invented characters that indicate their voicing, or in the form of homophonous play, for instance in a group of hidden-character poems whose key characters share a common pronunciation; see Light/Slow, 90–92.


32. Chen Li, Kuaoyu ziyou de pingjiaou 舌懸與自由的平均律 [Worries and freedom well-
tempered] (Taipei: Jiuge, 2005), 125–126.

33. Chen Li, Light/Slow, 9.

34. A similar play with untranslatability is at work in Xu Bing’s 徐冰 installation “A Book from the Sky” (天書) with its massive display of made-up Chinese characters. For a discussion of Xu Bing’s politics of translation, see Stanley Abe K., “No Question, No Answers: China and A Book from the Sky,” boundary 2 25.3 (Fall 1998): 169–192.

35. Some of these signs are imagined and defined by Chen Li as characters of regions or ethnicities at the margins of Chinese culture. Only very few of them lend themselves to being parsed ideographically.

36. This assertion of the alterity of all language resonates with Jacques Derrida’s dictum “I have only one language, it is not mine” (Je n’ai qu’une langue, ce n’est pas la mienne), through which Derrida describes the politically fraught tension between language use and identity politics in order to theorize about the structural dispossession or alterity of and in language. See Jacques Derrida, Le monolingualisme de l’autre, ou la prothèse d’origine (Paris: Galilée, 1996), 13, trans. Patrick Mensah as Monolingualism of the Other; or, The Prosthesis of Origin (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 1, translation slightly altered.


38. This is a radical understanding of anagrammatic processes, one that makes the anagram a meeting place of different sign systems and implies that the elements of an anagram can go beyond (or rather, fail to measure up to) conventional units required for


**Works Cited**


