Poetic Experiments with Chinese Characters

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For the past two decades, I’ve taken great interest in exploring the specificity of Chinese writing. I have written many concrete poems, hidden-character poems, obsolete-character poems, non-character poems, and poems which I call “modern Chinese haiku” and “Tang poetry haiku,” attempting not only at visual and audio effects, but at the specific features of Chinese characters or “Chineseness.”

Here I would like to present some examples of my experiments.

● “A War Symphony” (戰爭交響曲)
“A War Symphony,” written in 1995, is possibly my best-known work. The whole poem consists of many lines but only of four characters—兵, 乒, 乓, and 丘 (you may even say it’s composed of only one character 兵, since the other three characters can be seen as its transforms). 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 onomatopoeias imitating sounds of gunshots or collision: when combined, they are associated with ping pong (table tennis). In the last stanza, you see hundreds of 丘 (qiu), which visually suggests a soldier without legs, and literally means “small hill,” having the implication of “tomb.”

(Allow me to show you a video of this poem—an animation made by a Taiwanese female artist, Xiu-jing Wu [吳秀菁]: https://youtu.be/jZj5y-7e9Q)

The Polish poet Bohdan Piasecki, who teaches translation in England, years ago translated this poem into English like this:
In the first stanza, he substitutes “A man” for 兵. In the second stanza, “Ah man” and “Ah men” are used to replace the scattered 兵 and 兵. And in the third stanza, 丘 is replaced by “Amen,” which may be interpreted as a prayer at the funeral.

The following are two other translations done by Professor Cosima Bruno (teaching at SOAS University of London), and Professor Yi-ping Wu (吳怡萍) from Taiwan with her student Ci-shu Shen (沈碁恕) respectively:
Bruno’s version is a comic-like presentation with Futurist dynamics, by using such onomatopoeias 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 lowercase words in the first half are capitalized and getting bigger in the latter half, which suggests the battle is getting all the 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 capitalized word “TOMB” is repeated numerous times but getting smaller and fading out, which suggests the dead soldiers may ultimately be forgotten and become insignificant to the world.

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, they draw 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 the crooked “j” is implicative of a wounded, handicapped, or crippled soldier; the semi-circular bump or hunch in the last stanza is easily associative of a corpse or of a tomb or grave:
Some reader mentioned on the Internet that there might be some relation between “A War Symphony” and the poem “Ping Pong,” written by the German poet Eugen Gomringer (1925-). I searched for the poem immediately and found I had never read it before. Yet this poem is very much like a translation version of part of the second stanza of “A War Symphony”:

ping pong
  ping pong ping
  pong ping pong
  ping pong

I think this may be regarded as a coincidental encounter of two authors who are strange to each other; Gomringer’s poem was written in 1953, and I was born in 1954.

● Visual Musicality

The Chinese characters are basically pictographic, monosyllabic, and are full of homonyms. Each character is like a picture-word, or word-picture. And often a character itself may contain two or three or more characters. For example, the character 明 (meaning “bright”) contains two characters: 日 (meaning “sun”) and 月 (meaning “moon”). A character usually has multiple meanings, and many characters share the same pronunciation or similar pronunciation. All of these make poets writing in Chinese easier to play on sound and shape.

(A video of the poem “A Lesson in Ventriloquy”: https://youtu.be/60zIukuRtnA)
I wrote the poem “A Lesson in Ventriloquy” in 1994. Ventriloquy is an art of speaking with no or little lip movements. This poem can be viewed as a variation on the theme of “the Beauty and the Beast,” monologue done by a man, or the beast, toward his beloved, the beauty. A man has wanted to speak words of love or make some confession to his beloved. He tries very hard to use ventriloquy to say “I am gentle and kind,” but somehow, he is too nervous or too shy to express himself properly. Before the right words are uttered, what come out are numerous twisted sounds which either seem unrelated or imply evil intentions. The beast produces a lot of odd-looking words with the same sounds. I found all the weird characters with the help of the computer for this audio-visually striking piece:

The first Chinese character in either stanza of this poem is the same (“惡”), but with different pronunciations and meanings. In the first stanza it means “hate,” and in the second “evil;” both are quite “negative” words. The other characters in each stanza are pronounced the same as the first one. This poem owes much of its spectacularity to the aid of both audio and visual elements.

In the poem “Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist” I collect all of the 347 Chinese characters with 虫 (meaning “insect”) as their radical. Although I believe hardly any reader can pronounce or define them correctly, still I think this poem musical. As the whole poem is “visually rhymed” with the same radical, this character tablecloth owns a special “visual musicality” in addition to the visual effect created by its poetic form:
The gathering and piling up of characters with the same radical in this poem exemplifies the “law of large numbers”—beauty comes from plenty. I apply the similar writing strategy to my two other poems to add up their meaning and interest. In “A Prayer of Gears” (齒輪經), sixteen characters with the radical “齒” (tooth/gear) are used to bring forth as well as clarify the theme of this poem: life is in itself an endless process of mutual strife, gnawing, and compromise. In “Dada” (達達), fifty-two characters with “辶” (pronounced “chuo,” meaning “walking/moving”) as their radical are included to add comic elements to the poem with erotic and sensuous implications:
A Prayer of Gears

父啊，我們

的一生是如此

如此吃力地

旋轉。咬牙

切齒的一組

齒輪，以你

為中心。以

夜為中心。無

止盡噬合

墜落的行星

系住我們的是

深不可測的

恐懼，是無所

不在的黑暗的

挑釁，永恆的

機械構件

被他物帶動

復帶動他物

絕不段的倫理

道德激情憤怒

父啊。我們在

宇宙旅行

嚴酷硬邊的

金屬家庭

以牙還牙。齦

齦齾齾，周旋

於無。用

卑微的身軀

摩擦生熱互相

取暖的寂寞的

刺蝟。包容

我們的齦齾

齦齾，包容

我們的沿議

傾軋鑽營

無止盡的

噬合墜落

不能不齒的

生命共同體

父啊，我們是

沉默的磨坊

在時間的牢獄

運轉，周而

複始噬合

的薛西弗斯

磨欲望，磨

苦惱，磨出

點點神秘

狂喜的粉末的

星光。讓死亡

暈眩的海洛英

讓夜驚懼的

惡之花，如此

吃力地噬合

旋轉。因為

父啊，他們將

循光看見

我們世襲的

靈魂的花園

Oh Lord, our

life is so,

so strugglingly

revolving, a set

of tooth-biting

gears, the planets

that bite and fall

ceaselessly, with you

as our center, with

night as our center.

What ties us is

the unfathomable

fear, the provocation

of omnipresent

darkness. We”re the

eternal

mechanism

led by others

yet leading others,

unable to twist off ethics,

morality, passion, and

fury. Oh Lord, we are

traveling in the universe,

the metal family

with grim hard edges,

an eye for an eye, a

tooth for a tooth, circling

in nothingness, the

lonely hedgehogs that

rub each other’s

humble bodies to keep

warm. Please tolerate

our discord and

friction, tolerate

our daily trivial

dirty fight for

power and profit,
I finally reached her
3-shaped bed,
a water bed floating on the sea of the world.
I, a weary swimmer, turned into a swinger,
as tired as ever, because of constant merrymaking.

She placed herself over me, in her
3-shaped bed,
ordering me to touch her with my external tiny body and
make her cry out “dada.”
I advanced, so did she.
I retreated, but not she. Her voices
zoomed in and out, out and in.
She pushed; I ushered her in and out.
We meandered, wandered, lingered and staggered, with
her part encountering mine over and over:
dadadadadadada...

We were carried away to where no motor, radar, or
vibrator could carry us to.
Please describe all the wonder and pleasure.
How... how do I put it?

The frontier we’ve reached is accessible to no others.
More Concrete Poems

Many of my concrete poems take the shape of a square, a circle, a triangle (or a pyramid). I also present them in many other poetic forms according to the messages I attempt to convey, such as shapes imitating a butterfly, a vending machine, and the Island of Taiwan as well as irregular or unnameable shapes. Here are some examples, along with brief notes or interpretations:

*“Three Poems in Search of the Composer/Singer”（三首尋找作曲家／演唱家的詩）

2 Wind Blowing over the Plain（吹過平原的風）

（噓 —— ）;

（ 噓 — — ） ;

\`

虚

口

虚

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3 Footprints in the Snow（雪上足印）

% % %

% %

% %

Note: The meanings of the four Chinese characters in the second poem are as follows—

噓 = hush; 口 = mouth; 虛 = empty; 人 = man.
The above “Footprints in the Snow” was written in 1995, but nineteen years before (1976) I had already written a poem with the same title, which comes from a piano piece by the French composer Claude Debussy, “Des pas sur la neige” (*Preludes*: Book 1, No.6):

因冷，需要睡眠
深深的
睡眠，需要
天鹅一般柔軟的感覺
雪鬆的地方留下一行潦草的字跡
並且只用白色，白色的
墨水
因他的心情，因冷
而潦草
白色的雪

Cold makes for sleep,
deep
sleep, for
a feeling soft as a swan.
Where the snow is soft, a hastily scrawled line is left
in white, white
ink,
hastily because of his mood, and the cold:
the hastily scrawled
white snow.

You may say my poem in 1995 was a translation version of the previous one, but this time I used non-character symbols and punctuation marks only.

* “Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain”
（消防隊長夢中的埃及風景照）

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Note: The Chinese character 火 = fire; 炎 = inflammation; 焰 = flames.
*“White” (白)

Note: The first half of this poem consists of two Chinese characters 白 (white) and 日 (day); the other part is made up of non-characters. 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 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 line, with shades of color getting pale. It is a process from brightness to darkness, from daytime to nighttime, from life to death… The space below the last dotted line hides the gradual disappearance of the light, and finally the complete blankness which symbolizes 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 appear. In this way, I present the cycle of night and day, of dying and rebirth.
*“White No.2” (白 No. 2)

Note: The Chinese character屌 = cock; 吊= hanging; 古 = old.

The following are interesting comments made by Chang Fen-ling on this poem—

Besides being seen as a process of ejaculation, this poem can be seen as a lament on the weakening or aging body, on the loss of energy. The function of屌 (the cock or penis), a symbol of masculine vigor, is deteriorating, from its sexual function to just hanging (吊) there, to getting old (古) and upside down. You can only pray to God (十), feel forsaken ( 1= alone), sigh in distress ( ! = exclamation mark). You may have something to say ( : = colon), but find yourself speechless. The “.” in the last two lines may be a period, which implies there is nothing to say about it, or a drop (of urine), which sadly implies the penis’ only function at the end of a man’s life.
*“A Square Cake”（一塊方形糕）

一如千嬌百媚之各方形體其妙感易難言耳
如塊塊美化轉化人心求人網色中不困於目
千塊方此幻覺現世人幽之細藍空實之拙口
嬌美此形容不出味道幽思豐之於意授吾人
百化幻容糕食其趣同乎情色秘發蜜函令悅
媚轉覺不食大喜大看見有風神散下甜糕屑
之化現出其喜方飛出不復為一體天示此糕
各人世味趣大飛翻轉如無形啊具現酥爽之
方心人道同看出轉為物實一在在皆顯其美
形求幽幽乎見不如物視神經隱現靈彩體味
體人之思情有復無實神覺乃理感性多通地
其細細豐多風為形一經乃味道美妙且豐滿
妙色藍之秘神一啊在隱理道覺得其纍纍如
感中空於發散體具在現感美得多重姿態多
易不實意蜜下天現皆靈性妙其重重嬌妙聲
難因之授函知示酥顯彩多且縹緲嬌之飛鳥
言於抽吾今糕此爽其體通豐紛態妙飛斜下
耳目口人悅屑糕之美味地滿如多聲鳥下塔

Note: This poem is shaped like a square cake. The topic sentence is hidden in its diagonal line: “A square cake generously turns into a leaning tower of the multiple senses of sight and taste”（一塊方形糕大方翻為視覺味覺多重之斜塔）。This poem can be read line by line either horizontally or vertically.
* “Nation” (國家)

Note: The poem is square-shaped like the contour of the Chinese character 國 (country), but inside the “frame” you find 368 “pigs” (豕). This poem reminds me of the opening scene of Charlie Chaplin’s film Modern Times, in which we see a herd of swine turning gradually into busy workers in a “modern” factory. You can interpret it in several other ways: homes (families) constitute a country (nation); the people of a country are safeguarded by the government just as pigs stay in their cozy pens (homes); in a country there are many pigs (corrupt officials or politicians)...

國= country; 家= home or family; 國家= nation; 豕= pig.
* “A Vending Machine for Nostalgic Nihilists” (為懷舊的虛無主義者而設的販賣機)

Please choose the button

Mother’s milk  ● cold  ● hot
Drifting cloud  ● large packet  ● medium packet  ● small packet
Cotton candy  ● instant  ● enduring  ● tangled
Daydream  ● canned  ● bottled  ● aluminum foiled
Charcoal coffee  ● with nostalgia  ● with passion  ● with death
Star perfume  ● with chirping of insects  ● with twittering of birds  ● pure
Sleeping pill  ● for vegetarians  ● for non-vegetarians
Misty poetry  ● two pieces in one  ● three pieces in one  ● aerosol
Marijuana  ● of Freedom brand  ● of Peace brand  ● of Opium War brand
Condom  ● for commercial use  ● for non-commercial use
Shadow facial tissue  ● extra-thin  ● transparent  ● water-proof
Moonlight ball pen  ● gray  ● black  ● white
奧林匹克風從奧林帕斯山吹下，把諸神的私房話、私房畫，壓縮在透明而超薄的光之碟片裡，周旋轉寄到五寰四方。在你沒注意時，輕輕掠過帕納塞斯山，被繆斯美眉們列印成詩……

奧林匹克風：慶典的，競技的，五環的……文字與文字的

慶典的、歡樂的、電動／遊戲的，古今通聯四海一家的。一手機即一體育場，一筆電即一神殿。

文字與文字的冷泉，溫泉，噴泉，三溫暖。洗神經也洗腳臭。翁媳同浴，異族同浴，鴛鴦同育：欲潔其身，欲孕育新風格，而亂大倫跨人神。

競技的，葉子們的韻律體操友誼賽，橄欖，月桂，歐芹，松枝……光把影子頒獎給優勝者。

諸神在黃昏退席為夜幕後的觀察員，以星光簽字。天河兩側，智／力與美閃爍不已的拔河。
Olympic wind gusts from Mount Olympus, compressing the gods’ private words and private works in transparent, ultra-thin discs of light, spinning and sending them on to reach the five realms and four sides, and, when you are not noticing, gently wafting over Mount Parnassus, to be printed as poems by the muses...

Of five rings, of five realms, of synergy: a self-breeding microcosmos. Swords and spears forge signposts. Hand basins adopt baths without bloodshed. The five continents’ ancient arms are renewed by laurels of rushing waves in the round basins; five-color bubbles foam up, a fairy tale serial.

Convivial, jovial, digital/gaming, the past links through the present, the four seas are one family, a cell phone is a stadium, a laptop is a temple. Drinks reward brains wracking, victory parties honor efforts, rings of perspiration pay homage to the earth as entertainment tax, a selfless celebration.

Of words and words: in ink, cold spring, hot spring, fountain, sauna, all cleanse nerves and foul odor. Father and daughter-in-law bathe together, black and white bathe together, Hermaphroditus bathes: mixing fine and foul to purify and innovate, a stunning Venus rises from foam, from a sea of words.

Competitive, a gymnastic friendly for leaf, olive, cinnamon, parsley, pine twig… Light presents shadows as awards to the winners. At dusk, the gods withdraw to be the observers behind the night screen, sign their names with starlight. Across the Milky Way, a dazzling tug-of-war between brain/strength and beauty.

English translation by Elaine Wong
“Five Rings”（五環）was written in 2013. The topic sentence (subtitle) of the poem is taken from a poem I wrote in 1995, “The Olympic”（奧林匹克風）: “Olympic: Convivial, competitive, of five rings…Of words and words”（奧林匹克風：慶典的，競技的，五環的……文字與文字的）. I divide the topic sentence into five parts, using each part as the first word(s) of each stanza (each ring). The rule of this five-ring poem is that since it is shaped in five interlocking rings, an identical Chinese character is used by both stanzas where any two rings interlock.

* “Butterfly-Mad”（迷蝶記）

那女孩向我走來
像一隻蝴蝶。定定
她坐在講桌前第一個座位
頭上，一隻色彩鮮豔的
髮夾，彷彿蝶上之蝶  

二十年來，在濱海的
這所國中，我見過多少
隻蝴蝶，以人形，以蝶形
挾青春，挾夢，翻
飛進我的教室？

噢，羅麗塔

秋日午前，陽光
正暖，一隻燦黃的
粉蝶，穿窗而入，迴旋於
分心的老師與專注於課業的十三歲的她之間

她忽然起身，逃避那
剪刀般閃閃振動的色彩
與形象，一隻懼怕蝴蝶的
蝶：啊她為蝶所驚，我因美困惑

That girl was walking toward me like a butterfly. Steadily she seated herself right in front of the lectern in her hair was a gaily-colored hair pin, a butterfly on a butterfly

For twenty years in this seashore junior high, how many butterflies have I seen, human-shaped, butterfly-shaped, carrying youth, carrying dreams, flittering into my classroom?

Oh, Lolita

That autumn day before noon, the sun so warm, a dazzling yellow butterfly entered through the window, circling between the distracted teacher and the 13-year-old girl concentrating on her lessons

Suddenly she rose, to evade the scissor-like glittering colors and shapes, a butterfly scared of butterflies: ah, she was startled by a butterfly and I confounded by beauty.

Note: This poem is shaped like a butterfly (or several butterflies). The third stanza is a central, pivotal line: “Oh, Lolita.” You may call this an Oriental “Lolita” poem.
*“18 Touches”（十八摸）*

趁黑，摸摸我們的心，修改
一下密碼，免得被失戀者盜用；
趁黑，摸摸我白得像瓷匙的手，
如果你渴，用它舀飲我胸前的夜色；
趁黑，摸摸夜空中那透明的ㄇ字，

KENKEN，我給你我的球門，給你ㄇ；
趁黑，摸摸它金黃的門柱，用似是而非
半推半就的語言和虛擬的守門員盪鞦韆；
趁黑，摸摸天階上的鋼琴，宇宙一世只租給
我們一次音樂廳，聽覺要攀走仙界的鋼索；
趁黑，摸摸我鼠蹊旁的香水瓶，用一次次的
深呼吸掀開它的瓶蓋，掀開我的人間——

c
趁黑，摸摸島嶼脊椎盡處的鵝鑾鼻，它也
有個鼻子在呼吸，它張開鵝鑾，我張帆；
趁黑，摸摸排灣族頭目的琉璃珠，越來越胖
的二百蛇變成鷹，羽毛插在我的髮當中；
趁黑，摸摸童話的鐵夾，中了陷阱的山羌
逃脫留下斷腳，做成一個小米粿的餡；
趁黑，摸摸我小米粿的餡，在我圓圓軟軟的
胸盤上，用它餵夜夜更夜，用它餵夜夜更餓；
趁黑，摸摸卑南小孩的歌，貓頭鷹會來抓眼睛，
睡吧睡吧在我肩上，催感傷的動物們入眠；
趁黑，摸摸中央巴宰海族的銅鑼，一邊
敲打一邊燒火，燒我身上的茭白筍田；
趁黑，摸摸紅頭嶼的芋頭，摸兩下他們說是
sosoli，快摸一下，啊 sosolì，變成我的乳房；
趁黑，摸摸三貂角的眼，不見貂影，只見
月光，在大划船划過的我肩胛的海岸線；
趁黑，摸哆哆飽滿的脣，金閃閃的溪流
穿峽谷，吹奏出口簧琴細秘的聲音；
趁黑，摸摸我肌膚上沉積的金沙銀沙，
你的立霧溪在我身上製糖製鹽；
趁黑，摸摸這一顆漂流的球，從
黑水溝漂流到我的白膝灣；
趁黑，摸摸你的金球鞋，
我給你球門，給你ㄇ，
你給我提腳，
送它入
門……
While it’s dark, touch our hearts and change
their ciphers lest they be embezzled by the lovelorn.
While it’s dark, touch my porcelain-spoon-like white hand.
If thirsty, use it to ladle and drink the moonlight on my breast.
While it’s dark, reach the sky to touch the transparent phonetic ㄇ₁.
While it’s dark, touch its golden posts and have a ride on the swing with
the virtual goalkeeper by using paradoxical and hesitative language.
While it’s dark, touch the sky piano; the universe rents us its music hall
just once in our lifetime, our hearing must walk on the heavenly wire.
While it’s dark, touch the end of the island’s vertebrae, Eluan Beak, which
also has a nose to breathe; it spreads its eluau, and I spread the sail.
While it’s dark, touch the Paiwan chief’s glass beads; the ever-fattening
hundred-pace snake turns into an eagle, whose feather is put in my hair.
While it’s dark, touch the iron clip in the fairy tale; the broken leg the trapped
muntjac left behind while escaping is made into stuffing for 101 millet cakes.
While it’s dark, touch the stuffing of my millet cakes on my round and soft
breast plates; eating it, night gets deeper, a hungry man gets even hungrier.
While it’s dark, touch Puyuma children’s songs—the owl will scratch the eyes;
oh, sleep, sleep on my shoulder—they’ll lull every sad animal to sleep.
While it’s dark, touch the copper gong of the inland Pazeh tribe; strike it and build a fire, burning the water bamboo field on my body.
While it’s dark, touch Red-headed Island’s taros; touching twice, they say, is sosoli, a quick touch, ah soso—it turns out to be my breast.
While it’s dark, touch the eye of Cape Santiago; I see no marten:
only the moon shines upon the coastline of my shoulders where galeras row across.
While it’s dark, touch Turoboan’s lips; the shimmering stream runs through the gorge, making delicate intimate sounds of mouth harps.
While it’s dark, touch the silver & gold sand deposited on my skin; your Liwu River is producing sugar and salt on my body.
While it’s dark, touch this drifting ball, which drifts from the Black Ditch to my bay of white knees.
I want you to raise your foot, give it a kick into
the goal…

Note: “18 Touches” (十八摸) is a Chinese popular song with erotic allusions ㄅ, ㄆ, ㄇ (similar to b, p, m) are three phonetic symbols of Chinese. Eluan Beak is the southernmost point of Taiwan. Eluan is a transliteration of the Paiwanese word for “sail.” Red-headed Island is also called Orchid Island, where the Yami (the Tau) people live. Sosoli is the plural form of “taro” in Yami language (soli, the singular form), and soso means “breast.” Turoboan, where the Liwu River runs through, is the ancient name of Hualien, famous for its Taroko Gorge. Black Ditch is the old name of Taiwan Strait. The original poem in Chinese is shaped to the contour of Taiwan. In some sense, this poem is a mini map of Taiwan’s history.
● Hidden-Character Poems

* “Country” (國)

More than seventy so-called “hidden-character poems” (隱字詩) are collected in my book of poetry *Light/Slow* (《輕／慢》, 2009). In writing these poems, I draw on the hieroglyphic feature of Chinese characters: several characters lie latent or hidden in one character. What I do is make those hidden characters come on the stage to play their roles. Professor Andrea Bachner discusses some of my hidden-character poems in the newly published *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Chinese Literatures*. Among my hidden-character poems are thirty three-line poems I called “Character Haiku” (字俳). She translates one of them, “Country” (國), as follows:

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國
國破衰亡簡史:
國，或，戈，弋
匕，乚，丶，
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Country
abbreviated history of a country’s decline:
country, or, spear, arrow
dagger, hook, dot,
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In the book she says, “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 (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 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 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”), 弔 (“arrow”), 亠 (“dagger”), 亻 (“hook”) and 丶 (“dot”) are all component parts of the character 國 (“country”). This poem can be seen as a variation of “A War Symphony”: a gradual process of a solid and stable country falling apart. The three lines are symmetric in form: the first and the third lines consist of seven entities; the second line consists of eight entities (I follow such a rule of symmetry in the thirty “character haiku” I write). You may argue, “But in this poem the eighth character of the third line is missing.” Well, it’s not missing because the last entity is a blank, which exists by means of its absence, implying a country’s complete destruction or non-existence.

* “Dan” (下半)

所占者身體的肥缺：除了死之外，誰
占有其位，誰就有活力。屁滾尿流
屎屙，且能屄屄屄。空著，等於死了

Those who stand here possess the fertile parts of the body: whoever, except death, holds the position gains vitality. Fart rolls, urine flows, shit’s out; you can fuck and be fucked. Leaving it blank, you are as good as dead.

Note: This poem is taken from a group of my poems named “Obsolete-character Haiku” (廃字俳). The title of the poem 半 (pronounced as “dan”) is an obsolete Chinese character, whose meaning is not clear. It is made up of two characters: 尸 (“body” or “dead body”) + 占 (“possess”). When 半 is combined with other characters, fresh and vital (though seemingly vulgar) meanings are formed:

屁 (fart)= 尸 (body) + 比 (successive) \( \rightarrow \) break “successive” wind;
尿 (urine)= 尸 (body) + 水 (water);
屎 (shit)= 尸 (body) + 米 (rice);
屄 (cock or fuck)= 尸 (body) + 吊 (hanging);
屄 (cunt)= 尸 (body) + 穴 (hole).
* “Love Poem”（情詩）

我等候，我渴望你：
—— Er wan ge zhe huo lang jue nuan

一粒骰子在夜的空碗裡
企圖轉出第七面
—— Jiu pi gan, zhun xi lu hu

极筷巋程扶蚊越，貪
巋砳达衰培。茼虻
簸音级抿侧侙衰呻
—— ji min nu ting chi fu xian, zhen

避恊略獅抜欧廿妙
拚削削抜拾挖：
差甾，裡季，仙異
匍豨喃釜噩תקשר——
—— pi yao ji jie wan jian he gun shen
die bo cuo pi zhe gu:
Lu shan, qi qi, jian qi
ju yu ran lu feng yan li—

璐睽，穆穆楸貒秕
（穆穆聲聞際步）
貣園繞綫撻柠，啞趁
捫 орг 有解縫鑲
—— Liu die, xi tiao nao han zhi

貦imagenry, 睬跛，煥旖
迴 Exhausted 零四。殊俠
案軀瀝，居蹙坯⋯⋯
—— pan kang yi min mang qian, po xian

นาน 會 一 給 穩
shen shen. Li qian, fang dong
dong min ga hao yi e. Qiu ci
cai mao you, dian mi qin...

(Romanization done by Google Translate)

Note: The whole poem is made up of obsolete or rarely-used Chinese characters (and punctuation marks). These characters are meaningless to readers now, which, in this sense, 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, every word is loving and beautiful.

● Modern Chinese Haiku

* Microcosmos（《小宇宙》）

Reading Japanese haiku inspires me to write about contemporary life in 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. Here are some examples of my “modern Chinese haiku”:

我等候，我渴望你：
—— En en fan pi pi, feng feng hong

一粒骰子在夜的空碗裡
企圖轉出第七面
—— cai mao you, dian mi qin…
I wait and long for you:
a turning die in the empty bowl of night
attempting to create the 7th side

(Microcosmos, I:14)

一顆痣因肉體的白
成為一座島；我想念
你衣服裡波光萬頃的海

White skin makes a mole
an isle: I miss the glistening
vast ocean within your clothes

(Microcosmos, I:66)

雲霧小孩的九九乘法表：
山乘山等於樹，山乘樹等於
我，山乘我等於虛無……

Multiplication table for kids of cloud and fog:
mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains times trees
equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness…

(Microcosmos, I:51)

婚姻物語：一個衣櫃的寂寞加
一個衣櫃的寂寞等於
一個衣櫃的寂寞

The story of marriage: a closet of loneliness plus
a closet of loneliness equals
a closet of loneliness

(Microcosmos, I:97)

The last two poems are written based on “pseudo-arithmetical” formulas. Maybe they could be seen as examples of how modern poetry in Taiwan creates surprise out of the commonplace.

爭鳴：
0歲的老蟬教0歲的
幼蟬唱“生日快樂”

Chirping competition:
0-year-old old cicadas teach 0-year-old
baby cicadas to sing Happy Birthday

(Microcosmos, II:2)
愛，或者唉？
我說愛，你說唉；我說唉唉唉，你說愛哀唉

Amour, or no more?
I say amour, you say no more; I say no more no more no more, you say amour I mourn no more *

*(Microcosmos, II:52)  *English translation by Jennifer Feeley

人啊，來一張
存在的寫真：
囚

Ah man, come and
take a selfie:
encaged

*(Microcosmos, II:58)

Note: The Chinese character “prisoner” (囚) looks like a man (人) encaged.

I presented previously two versions of my poem “Footprints in the Snow”: one of them seems a translation version of the other, written in non-character symbols and punctuation marks only. A similar self-translation appears in *Microcosmos*:

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)*

The latter poem is a visualization version of the former poem. The Chinese punctuation mark “。” (a period) is very much like a bulb which gives off sound in silence or with silence.
*“Tang Poetry Haiku”（唐詩俳句）*

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

——using Li Po’s “Still Night Thoughts”

12

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。

——用孟郊（遊子吟）

Loving mother hand in line                   & wandering son’s back.  (Lines of thread in the hand of a loving mother make the coat on the wandering son’s back.)
Before left intensive stitches made, fearing he slow to return (Before he left she made intensive stitches fearing that he would be slow to return.)
Whose talk inch grass heart, enough for all spring sunshine (Whose talk is it that the gratitude of the inch-tall grass is enough for all the sunshine of spring?)

——using Meng Jiao’s “Song of a Wandering Son”

One day in 2008, I spent a whole night skimming through the well-known Chinese collection 300 Tang Poems on the Internet and completed 12 poems which I called “Tang Poetry Haiku.” The following is my rule: with the original classical poem visible on the page, I made some characters faded or faint to highlight the characters I selected. The highlighted characters, combined in sequence, formed a new modern poem. However, I had problem with the twelfth poem. I came across a good poem but failed to transform it with the rule I set for myself. A good idea struck me: why not use an S-shaped proofreader’s mark to change the order of the characters? In this way I exchanged “線” (line) with “遊子” (wandering son),
transforming the traditional sewing line of thread into the modern internet line, twisting a Tang poem into a contemporary haiku: “Loving mother & wandering son’s online intensive talk.”

(The English translations of Chen Li’s poems here are done by Chang Fen-ling and Chen Li unless otherwise stated.)
Chen Li 陳黎 was born in Hualien, Taiwan, in 1954. After graduating from the English Department of National Taiwan Normal University, he returned to his hometown and taught in junior high school. He also taught creative writing at National Dong Hwa University. In recent years he has been the organizer of the Pacific Poetry Festival in his hometown. He is regarded as “one of the most innovative and exciting poets writing in Chinese today.” A winner of many important poetry prizes in his country, Chen Li has published 14 books of poetry and is also a prolific prose writer and translator. With his wife Chang Fen-ling, he has translated over 20 volumes of poetry into Chinese, including the works of Sylvia Plath, Seamus Heaney, Pablo Neruda, Octavio Paz, and Wisława Szymborska. He was listed as one of the “Top Ten Contemporary Poets of Taiwan.” In 2012 he was invited to the Olympic poetry festival (Poetry Parnassus) in London as the poet representing Taiwan. He was invited to the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 2014, to Athens World Poetry Festival, Singapore Writers Festival and International Poetry Nights in Hong Kong in 2015, and to Le Printemps des Poètes in France in 2016.