

Transcreating Memes: Translating Chinese Concrete Poetry

[Excerpt]

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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 (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 Li 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 text 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. In justifying why she has not attempted to translate the concrete poems in *The Edge of the Island*, specifically 'A War Symphony' 戰爭交響曲, Chen Li's most acclaimed concrete poem, Chang explains that the piece taps into the visual and aural signification potential of Chinese characters, such that 'any relinquishment of its Chinese characters [via translation] would mean the loss of its poetic charm and the significance of its technical form' (Chen 2014: 17; Chang, personal communication). Chang's strategy belies a conception of translation that privileges the semantic transfer of linguistic signs as its primary function. The problem is that while concrete poetry does communicate 'meaning', the latter resides not at the level of the individual signifier but rather at the level of the *gestalt* – the wholesome entity that is the poem. What distinguishes concrete poetry from other forms of literary discourse, then, is that the meaning of the holistic text is not a gradual accrual of the semantics of its constituent signifiers, but a *cognitive-perceptual effect* that emerges from the work in its entirety as a result of its multimodal workings.

The concrete poems in *The Edge of the Island* raise general issues about literary untranslatability. When one speaks of the untranslatability of (concrete) poetry, the implicit reference point is usually that of semantic substance; or: *what is the poem talking about?* The fact, of course, is that a poem, in particular the concrete poem, can talk about virtually nothing at the level of the isolated word or utterance and yet afford intense 'meaning' – not in the sense of a neatly articulated semantics but in the sense of an embodied affect. Untranslatability, then, turns into a relative notion: a text can be said to resist transfer into another language on the grounds that the referential value of its original words cannot be adequately communicated; this, however, does not prevent the text from eliciting an *effectual response* in another language.

This chapter develops the idea of translation as a response in a target language to a work written in a source language. This is done using a hands-on approach: we construct a case study based on our own rendition of four concrete poems from *The Edge of the Island*. The purpose of this reflexive exercise is to experience first-hand the embodied effect of Chen Li's poems, to produce our response to them in English, and to theorise on this experience.

Case Analysis

Example 1: 'White' 白

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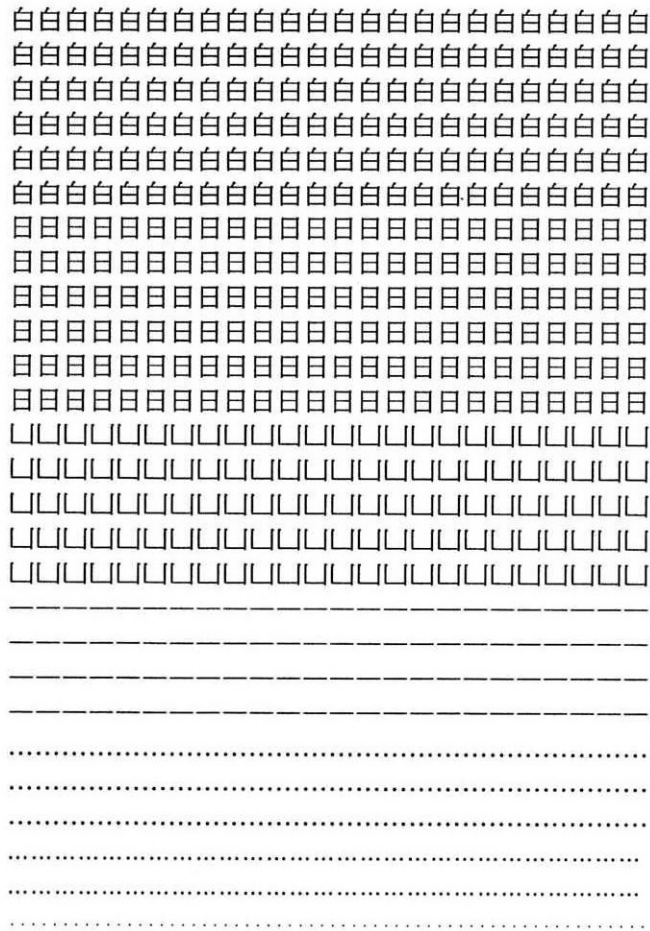


Fig. 1 Original text of 'White'

Aurora

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Fig. 2 Translation of 'White': 'Aurora'

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Fig. 3 Translation of 'White': 'Solar'

Sunyata

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Fig. 4 Translation of 'White': 'Sunyata'

Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist

The image shows a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet with a list of insect species names. The formula bar at the top displays the formula: `=INDEX(工作表1!F2:F2218,RANDBETWEEN(1,2218))`. The spreadsheet contains 31 rows of data, each representing a different insect species. The names are listed in columns A through Q, with some cells containing multiple names separated by spaces.

	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q
1	chiyuan	incisa	hosp	apricans	vittata	pupillata	conobovina	chiapansensis	minutus	humuli	ainsiella	stantoni	hawaiiensis				
2	mirand	packardii	bibionipennis	fervidus	sonchi	concavus	mortuana	sexmaculatus	sticticus	auxiliaris	titillator	variabile					
3	serratel	trifidus	femorata	nigricana	betulella	cuprescens	aonidium	regalis	vaccinii	lantabella	rugglesi	nuttalli					
4	prati	procalcitrans	spinipennis	coeruleum	maximus	globosa	acripennis	virginiensis	palmarum	pini	betulella	maculata					
5	lopiata	serratella	lufucata	paludosa	heterograp	americana	aliadicis	cili	sticticus	poum	sesostis	lewisi					
6	jugland	gallinae	subsignaria	ombrodelta	funebri	simplex	hololeucus	rigidae	lycopersice	ectypa	nigrofascia	maligna					
7	nodulos	lambertian	meleagridis	illepida	corni	cardinalis	xylostella	cardui	longicauda	fuscella	quadrigibb	completa					
8	philod	americanus	malifoliella	xanthogramma					juglanoregi	tripunctata	dicopyri	furnissi					
9	quadris	flavistriata	persicae	ssinubilis	callosus	festinus	unipuncta	neoralis	rapax	chinensis	californicus	subcincta					
10	crataeg	pusio	washington	acuminata	cucurbitae	sericeus	maculatum	molesta	spp.	hunii	janata						
11	tricincta	lugustici	essigi	crassiuscul	constrictur	taedae	linea	caryae	splendorite	archippus	oregonensi	lepidii	lanicis				
12	drum	crabro	lineatum	cumingi	bicolor	cingulata	boliviana	brunnea	scabiei	ambiens	sherdanii	ocropulosa					
13	flavistri	variabile	cerasi	melanura	flavistriata	linearis	bicolor	approximatus	dominica	phylloides	cereralis	blackburniae					
14	rufipennis	minimum	fasciatus	exsectoides	proteus	autumnalis	crataegella	assimilis	odorata	bosqueella	celtidisman	nephrolepidis					
15	stigma	vermata	pacifica	hololeucus	micacea	columba	puncticollis	lambertian	maidis	lactucae	inflata	imbricatus					
16	spp.	bipunctata							megnini	levipennis	cicatristriat	rubivora	macmurtrei				
17	saratog	severus	boeticus	inodorus	oxyacanthis	pacificus	americanus	feri	glaucia	critipennis	bracteslana	iniparia	approximatus				
18	simplex	velox	folliculor	luna	gladiana	fletcheri	trifasciata	caledoniae	gloverana	lineatus	tesseletus	rosae					
19	memora	clavipes	sierrensis	canadensis	rufescens	metallica	folliculor	saratogensis	plejadellus	bractans	latreillei	pe	speciosus				
20	leucoeti	raphanus					trifolii	juglandis	alluaudi	carolina	sticticalis	saltella					
21	lecontei	radiatae	laticeps	coniperda	acuminata	pinicola	sacchari	jocosatrix	directana	barbei	excitans	laicollis					
22	reticulat	unichi	rosae	imbricator	parvicornis	fennica	matsumura	malefida	nanulus	na	bovis	aurantii	lineatus				
23	califom	comutus	ribis	anisocentra	occidentalis	quadripert	pyri	taedae	lineinornata	carduidactyl	alienus	polytrapezius					
24	serpunc	auranticell	ludens	barbatus	americana	oralis	litigiosus	fur	rubi	tocullionan	dacia	cyperi					
25	viridis	ochiella	columbian	betulae	aticeps	lurida	essigi	meridionalis	lineatus	padella	lirodendri	electellum					
26	pseudos	pumarinus	gnidiella	laticeps	columbian	stantoni	padi	latitarsus	lectularius	sorghicola	purchasi	crispata					
27	ligustici	rapae	isabella	gowdeyi	rotundata	nubiferana	formosanus	rodii	onusta	abietinum	mittletoni	aetarius					
28	rosae	terminalis	funebri	catenifer	bacoti	disclusa	multistriat	equi	neomexica	houghtoni	retiniana	aethiops					
29	beckii	cariosus	castaneum	rufipes	hesperidun	trifidus	levipennis	velox	ovis	padi	resinosae	funissi					
30	stantoni	pusillidactyl	affinis	cunea	crassicornis	longipennis	palmarum	thrax	gnisella	longipalpa	robustus	tripunctata					
31	nymph	forticornis	carolina	longirostre	profundalis	comutus	cuculipenn	noveborac	notatus	ruficollis	minians	longipennis					

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

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

消防隊長夢中的埃及風景照

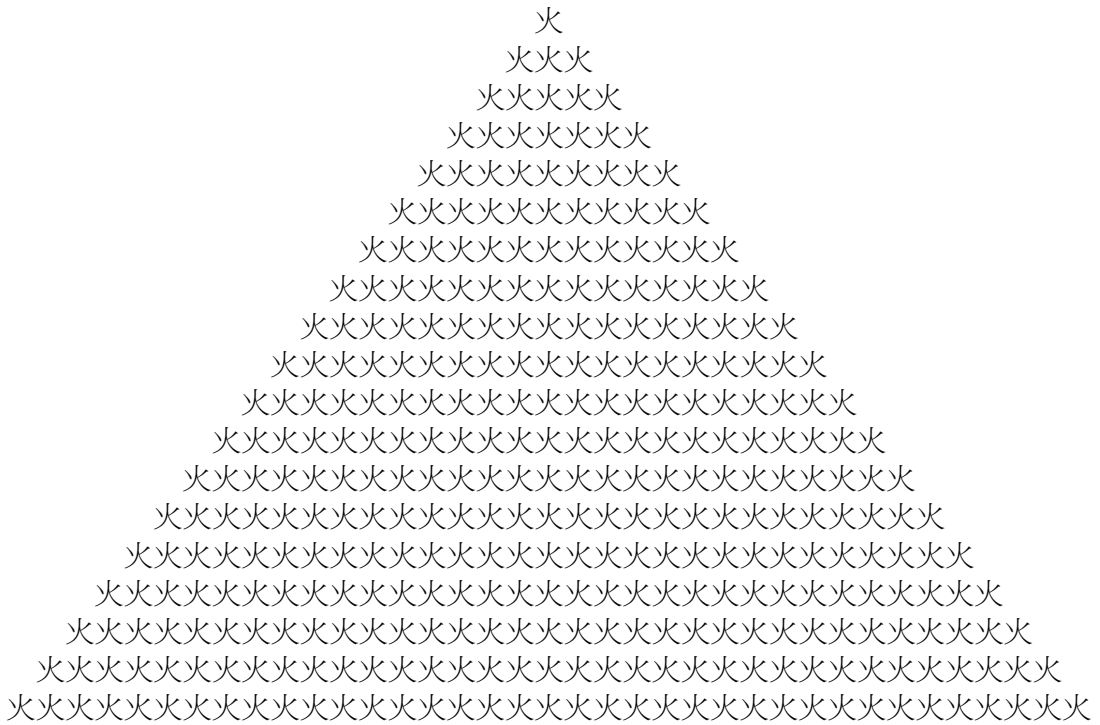


Fig. 7 Original text of 'Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain'

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'

