

*Traveling Between Languages*

## I

For the past few decades, the Chinese language used by the people in Taiwan has been in many ways different from that used by the people in mainland China. The differences lie not only in expressions, accents, pronunciations, and characters but also in linguistic “temperament.” In my opinion, the Chinese language used in Taiwan has some sort of vitality different from that used in mainland China. For one thing, whereas mainland China made great efforts to wipe out its traditions, started the Great Cultural Revolution, and implemented a simplified form of Chinese characters, Taiwan, under the rule of the Kuomintang after WWII, advocated the “Movement of Reviving Chinese Culture,” continued to use the traditional complex form of characters, and put Chinese classical literature and history on the examination list. The result of the different policies is that people or writers in Taiwan are likely to have a more profound understanding and a subtler perception of “the beauty of Chinese” than people or writers in mainland China. Also, being an island, Taiwan enjoys more liberal and freer living environments, which enables people to assimilate diverse elements more naturally to form a more flexible, energetic, hybridized, and colorful language.

Chinese, with its pictographs, monosyllables, homonyms, and characters with multiple meanings or similar pronunciations, has a savor that is rarely found in other languages. A Chinese poem written in traditional complex characters is likely to lose part of this savor if one should transcribe it in simplified characters. Thus, I feel that the Chinese or the Chinese poem I write in Taiwan has an essential quality that may be absent in works written by users of other languages or Chinese users in other areas. Judging from what modern Taiwanese poetry has achieved for the past few decades, the Chinese language in Taiwan has indeed evolved and created new sensibility and vitality.

In my poem, “Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist,” I collect all the Chinese characters with “虫” (“insect”) as their

radical.\* This “character tablecloth,” made of numerous strokes and swarmed with insects, would lose its distinctiveness if it were printed in simplified characters. For example, the traditional complex character “蝟” would be simplified into “猬”; the radical “虫” would be turned into “犴”(dog); “蠱” and “蠶” would become “蛊” and “蚕”; several “insects” would be missing:

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Years ago I wrote a poem, “A War Symphony,” which consists of many lines but only four characters—“兵,” “兵,” “兵,” and “丘” (you may even say it’s composed of only one character, “兵,” since the other three characters can be seen as its transformations):

\*In traditional Chinese, there are 214 radicals or root elements to the language. The “insect” radical, #142, occurs as the root element for such diverse creatures as louse, tapeworm, and tadpole.



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“兵” (*bing*) signifies a soldier. “乒” (*ping*) and “乓” (*pong*) are onomatopoeias that sound like gunshots but look like one-armed or one-legged soldiers; when combined, they are associated with ping-pong (table tennis). “丘” (*qiu*), meaning small hill, has the implication of “tomb.” This poem may be my best-known work, but I think it is hard to translate. Most translators simply translate its title and attach an annotation but leave the original intact. However, one day I surfed the Internet and found that Bohdan Piasecki, a Pole who taught translation in England, had translated the poem into English. 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 “乒” and “乓.” And in the third stanza, “丘” is replaced by “Amen,” which may be interpreted as a prayer at the funeral. It is an interesting translation: the translator recreates the poem.

I often tell others that I am not the real author of this poem. I was simply possessed by “Chinese characters”: one morning I woke up, turned on the computer, took five minutes to key in and duplicate those four characters, and then it was completed. In my prose piece, “The Delight of Animations,” I mention *Konflikt* (Conflict), an animation made by the Russian animator Garry Bardin in 1983. A green match troop comes into conflict with a blue match troop; they burn each other to death. This animation never crossed my mind when I was writing “A War Symphony.” Not until a female artist in Taiwan re-presented it in the form of animation did it occur to me. You may say my poem translates Bardin’s film. Some reader mentioned on the Internet that there might be some relation between “A War Symphony” and the poem “Ping Pong,” written in 1953 by the German poet Eugen Gomringer. I searched for the poem immediately and found I had never read it before. Yet this poem

is very much like a translated 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 writers while they are traveling in languages. And such a happy encounter transcends time and space.

2

Although I can't read Japanese, I have read and translated Japanese haiku and tanka through English translation and the original, because there are many Chinese characters in Japanese, and because I can always consult my father, who knows both languages. Reading these Japanese poems inspires me to write about contemporary life in similar poetic forms. The result of such experimentation is my book of three-line poems, *Microcosmos: Two Hundred Modern Haiku*, whose title comes from Béla Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*, a musical composition containing 153 piano pieces. Patterning after or imitating senior masters (or using allusions) is itself part of the convention of haiku. Some of my “modern haiku” are tributes to or variations of classical haiku or other art classics; others are evolved from poems written by senior writers, fellow poets, or myself. Traveling in the family of poetry is the most substantial and warmest link on the lonesome journey in the universe. (“Traveling in the Family,” the title of one of my poems and of one of my books, comes from the Brazilian poet, Carlos Drummond de Andrade, whose poem of the same title is translated in my *Anthology of Modern Latin American Poetry*.) My three-line poems are “Taiwanese” rather than “Nipona.” They manifest the savor of “Taiwanese Chinese”: at once Chinese and Taiwanese, classical and contemporary just like the island of Taiwan, which constantly assimilates and converges all the surrounding elements because of its geography and history. Take, for example, some poems I've read, translated, or written:

QTA: We can't find publisher info for this book. Please provide.

QTA: Was this anthology published under a variant title? We cannot find any info on a book of this title.

Picking chrysanthemums by the east hedge, at ease I see the  
south mountain.

— *Tao Chien*

At ease he sees the south mountain — this frog.

— *Kobayashi Issa*

Resting on the temple bell, asleep, a butterfly.

— *Yosa Buson*

Resting on the temple bell, glowing, a firefly.

— *Masaoka Shiki*

He washes his horse with the setting sun on the autumn sea.

— *Masaoka Shiki*

He washes his remote control  
with the moonbeams infiltrating  
between two buildings.

— *Chen Li, Microcosmos, I: 1*

I wait and long for you:  
a turning die in the empty bowl of night  
attempting to create the 7th side.

— *Microcosmos, I: 14*

A turning die in the empty bowl of the night  
creates the 7th side:  
oh God, you do exist.

— *Microcosmos, II: 25*

Multiplication table for kids of clouds:  
mountains times mountains equals trees, mountains times trees  
equals me, mountains times me equals nothingness

— *Microcosmos, I: 51*

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

— *Microcosmos, I: 97*

Just as the “frog” in Issa’s haiku defamiliarizes and freshens the perspective of the ancient Chinese poet, Tao Chien, I use the “remote control” to translate and update the elegantly lonely life-scene of Shiki. Both are resting on the temple bell — Shiki’s glowing firefly vividly stirs the serenity of Buson’s soundly sleeping butterfly. And in my poems the same die gives a different result at a different time and space, attesting to the ambiguity of the existence of God or miracles and to the anxiety and fragility of man. The last two poems are based on “pseudo-arithmetical” formulas. Maybe they could be seen as examples of how modern Taiwanese poetry creates surprise out of the commonplace.

3

In 1976 I wrote a ten-line poem, “Footprints in the Snow,” whose title comes from a piano piece by the French composer, Claude Debussy (*Preludes*, book 1, no. 6). I attempted to translate Debussy’s musical work into poetry:

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.

QTA: Should  
this poem be  
centered?

Several composers have set this poem to music; by so doing, they have translated it back into music. In 1995 I wrote another “Footprints in the Snow.” You may say it was a translated version of the previous poem, but this time I used noncharacter symbols and punctuation marks only:

%  
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A similar self-translation appears in *Microcosmos*:

Your voices suspend in my room  
cutting through silence, to become  
a bulb speaking with heat or chill.

—*Microcosmos*, 11: 47

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◦

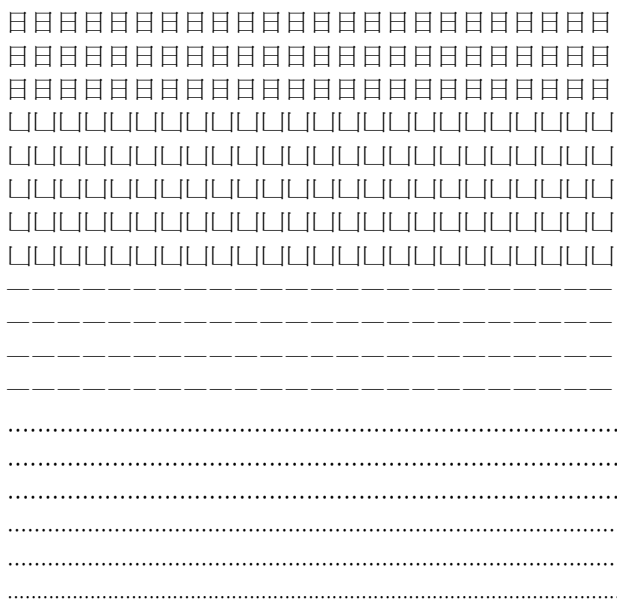
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—*Microcosmos*, 11: 48

The latter poem can be viewed as a translation or visualization of the former poem. The Chinese punctuation mark “◦” (a period) is very much like a bulb that gives off sound in silence or with silence.

Is writing some kind of translation, traveling between languages? Or do all writers create the same work, the pure blankness and the empty fullness overwritten again and again? Recently I wrote a poem called “White.” The first half consists of two Chinese characters, “白” (white) and “日” (day); the other part is made up of noncharacter symbols. After this poem was completed, the paintings of Mark Rothko came into my mind:

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*Translated from the Chinese by Chang Fen-ling*

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