Transcreating Memes: Translating Chinese Concrete Poetry

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

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

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not attempted to translate the concrete poems in *The Edge of the Island*, specifically 'A War Symphony' (戰爭交響曲), Chen'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 whole 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 accruement of the semantic value 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 a similar effect 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 affect of Chen's poems, to produce our response to them in English, and also to theorize on this experience. Methodologically, we seek to introduce an element of reflexivity into the case study approach, which typically calls to mind the descriptive analysis of an extant entity, whether it be an existing phenomenon or a corpus of published texts. The present chapter offers a twist on this method by engaging with works that specifically have not been translated and by using our own translations as the basis of analysis, thereby insinuating our subjectivities into the research process. This is pertinent to our notion of translation-as-response: in the course of this case study, we maintained close contact with

the poet, seeking clarification from him on points that had not been imme-
diately obvious to us, and having him critique our translations. The dialo-
gism of this feedback loop exemplifies the potential symbiotic relationship
between writing and translation. Our reflexive case study, while still main-
taining the usual stance of description and analysis, further adds to the poetic
repertoire by way of producing new translations, construed as a creative
extension and elaboration of Chen's *oeuvre*. These translations unveil possi-
bilities of creative tension by pushing the envelope of perceived untranslat-
ability, at the same time as they reveal the discursive limits of communicating
concrete poetry beyond the bounds of its signifiers. Instead of situating our-
selves outside of the case under scrutiny, we are embodied within the case
itself by playing the dual roles of translators and critics, and all the while
keeping the Chinese author in the creative loop.

Translation as Response

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

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

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

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

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

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

Case Analysis

Example 1: 'White' 白

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

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

白
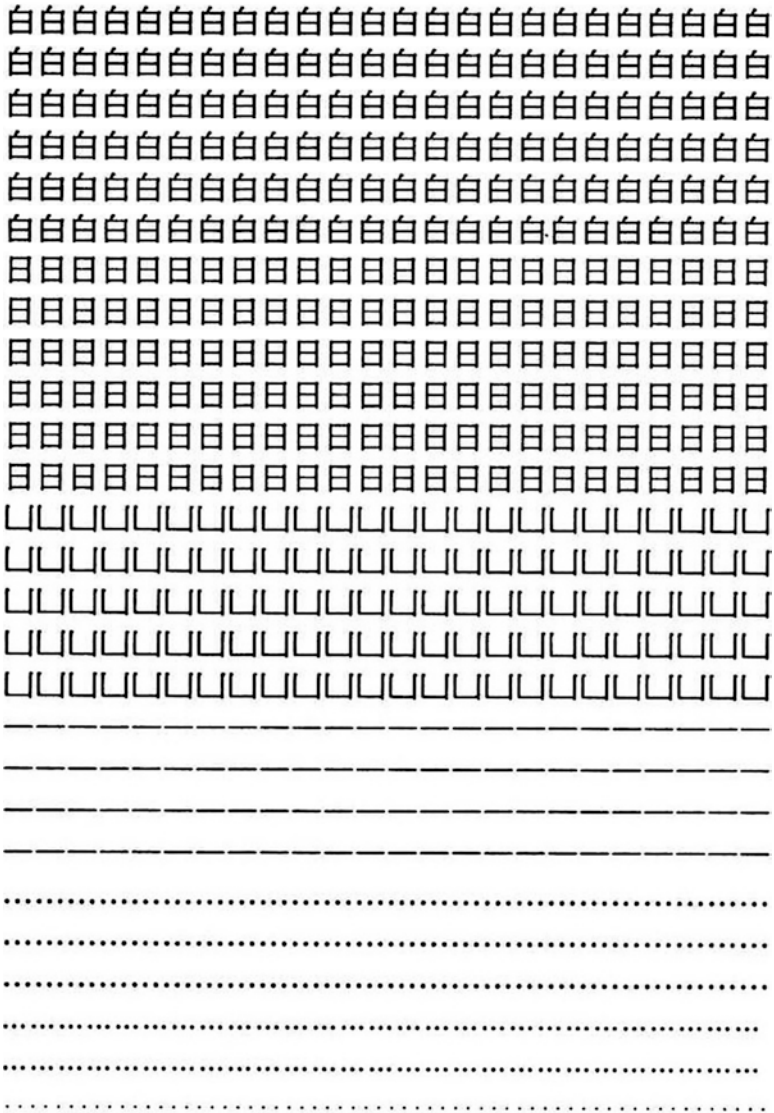
Fig. 1 'White'

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

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

In 'Aurora' the subject matter of light and the visual motif of visual decomposition are reworked in English. The central signifier "aurora", which refers to a radiant emission with a solar connection, responds to 白. This allows us to retain the theme of sunlight in the top stratum and also to invoke another sense of the word—"dawn", corresponding to the character for "day" in the second stratum of the Chinese text. The second stratum consists of rows of the string "aura". "Aura" speaks to the light theme and is orthographically and phonologically similar to but shorter than "aurora", hence replaying the visual reduction from 白 to 日 in the Chinese text. In the next stratum "aura" morphs into "u", which happens to resemble ⊔ in the Chinese original and serves the same pictographic function. The letter "u" then turns into a curved

Aurora

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Fig. 2 'Aurora'

shape, as opposed to a horizontal stroke in the original. This intervention is deemed necessary because "u" is rounded at the bottom, which means it cannot reasonably be reduced to a straight line (cf. the angular ⌐⌐). The strata of dots toward the end of the Chinese poem are retained in the translation.

The concept behind 'Aurora' is to approach Chen's 'White' primarily as a visual artefact with a gradation effect, like a painting that is layered with colour shades. In this connection it is interesting to note that Chen remarks in an essay that 'White' reminds him of the work of the American painter Mark Rothko (Chen 2014: 245). A visual approach obliges the translation to disengage itself from the verbal semantics of the original and aim at a semiotic answer to the visual stimulus represented by the source text. A corollary to this is that the title of the piece will need to be changed, because the original poem takes the first graph "white" as its title, but this has been transcreated into "aurora" in the translation.

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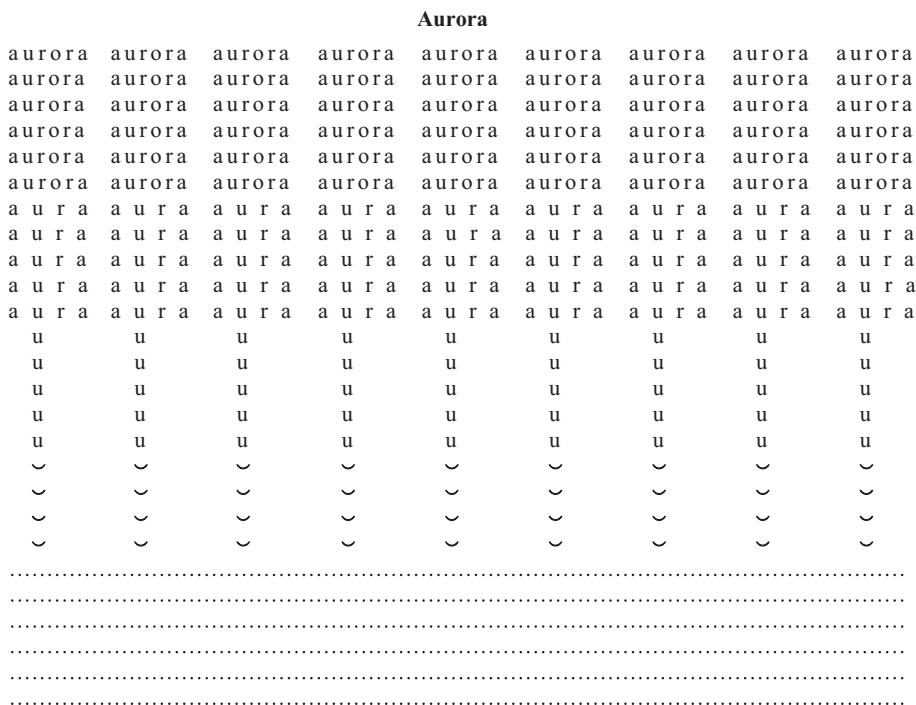

Fig. 3 'Solar'

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

Our translations are meant only as tentative products; potentially many more experimentations, in English or other target languages, could emanate from the original Chinese poem. From the perspective of translation-as-response, these translated pieces are textual bodies through which the meme in Chen Li's Chinese poem continually disseminates and transmutates itself.

<p align="center">Sunyata</p>

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Fig. 4   'Sunyata'

Example 2: 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist' 孤獨昆蟲學家的早餐桌巾

Our second example is a poem (Fig. 5) that taps into the visuality of alien-looking Chinese characters bearing the radical 虫 (insect). The text consists of a vertical assemblage of these characters, all associated with the "creature" theme; among these are interspersed a few vacant spaces. The poem's title tells us we are looking at a piece of tablecloth bitten through by insects—hence the empty spaces in the text block. The constituent graphs are therefore iconic in the sense that their shape reflects their meaning: the intricateness of their structural composition (we could almost imagine each character as an anatomy of an insect, which gels with the entomologist theme in the title), together with the litany of "insect" radicals, makes them resemble grotesque-looking insects. Most of these characters are rarely used and therefore unknown even to the native speaker; because of these qualities there is a sense of estrange-

孤獨昆蟲學家的早餐桌巾

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蜢蜣蜤蜥蜦蜧蜨蜩蜪蜫蜬蜭蜮蜫蜱蜯蜳
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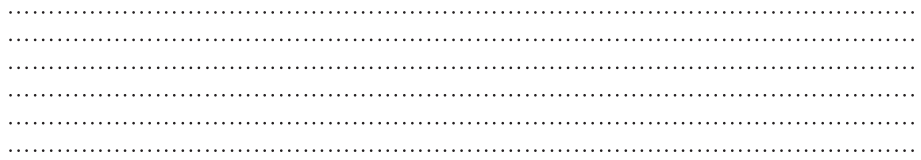**Fig. 5**   Original text of 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist'

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

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

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

This performative version of Chen's poem shows how the multimodal potential of concrete poetry can be unleashed through its translation—here both in the sense of interlingual transfer and of intermedial transposition. Whereas in its original print format, 'Breakfast Tablecloth' consists of a given, unchangeable set of characters and is primarily visual, in our Excel version the poem transforms into a cybertext, defined here as a text (which can be digital but not necessarily so) whose discursive outcome can be influenced by readerly interception (Aarseth 1997: 4). It invites the reader to engage with the concrete poem not just visually but also kinetically, hence introducing a ludic element and turning poetry reading into an embodied event. Importantly, the translation generates flux and randomness to the surface manifestation of the poem, producing a text-machine that can churn out multiple variations on Chen's poem. The visual meme of the original poem, therefore, has not only been developed across languages, but also extended into a different medial dimension.
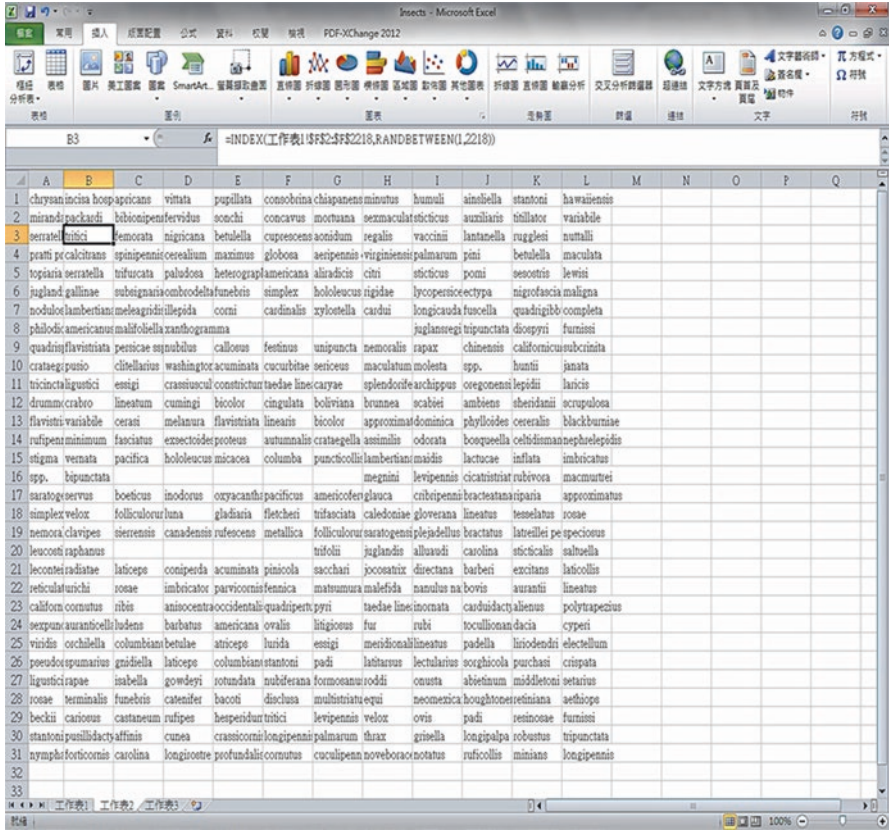
Fig. 6   Translation of 'Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist'

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

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

消隊隊長夢中的埃及風景照

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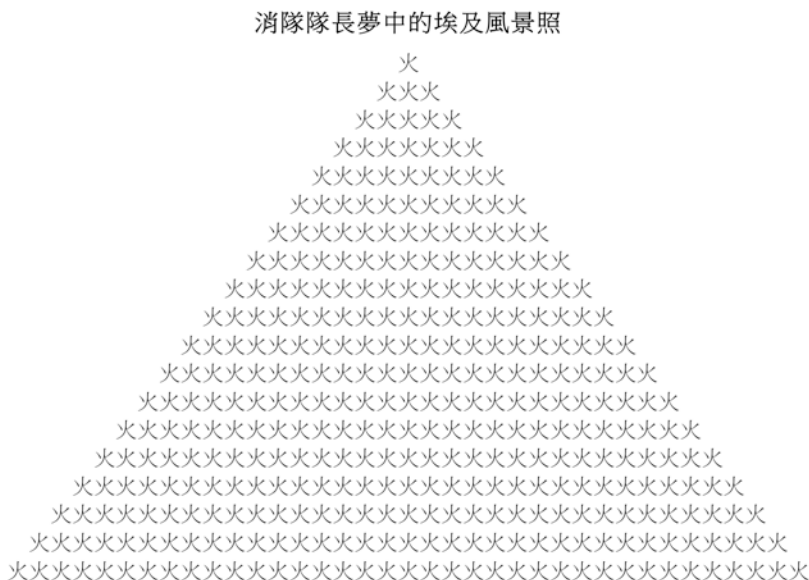火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火火

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

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

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'

'A Serial Novel: Huang Chao Killed Eight Million People'
連載小説:黃巢殺人八百萬

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

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

連載小説：黃巢殺人八百萬

1095

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（待續）

Fig. 9　Original text of 'A Serial Novel: Huang Chao Killed Eight Million People'

is here constructed as a corresponding frame to the Huang episode in Chinese history. The word "kill" literally translates the Chinese character 殺, but to resonate with the Hitler context, we invent a new formulation: "sskill", where *SS* is the abbreviation for the Nazi paramilitary squad *Schutzstaffel* (protective echelon). As with the earlier poem, this formulation offers a complex visual frame that gives rise to multiple readings: "sskill" (*Schutzstaffel* killing people); "killss" (people kill *Schutzstaffel*); and "sskillss" (members of the *Schutzstaffel* killing each other, which actually happened during the Second World War)

A Serial Novel: Hitler Killed Six Million

1095

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(To be continued)

Fig. 10 'Hitler Killed Six Million'

(Parker 2015: 139). In this way, the translation complicates the semiotics of the original Chinese poem while re-performing its meme in English.

Conclusion

Case study research presumes the existence of a real-life phenomenon, as opposed to an abstract entity such as an argument or hypothesis (Yin 2014: 34). In a Translation Studies context, the phenomenon in question can be an individual translator, a text (though not a decontextualized text fragment), a translation agency, or a literary system (Saldanha and O'Brien 2014: 207). It has also been noted that samples or examples cannot be considered as cases (Susam-Sarajeva 2009). This suggests that a case should be exemplary yet also "complete and interesting on [its] own merit" (Saldanha and O'Brien 2014: 208), and should not be seen as easily generalizable to other cases (Saldanha

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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