China Review International, V. 24, N. 1 (2017): 45—49.

Chen Li. ***The Edge of the Island***, poems translated by Chang Fen-ling. Taipei: Bookman Books, 2014, 255 pp. Paperback $6.60, ISBN 979-957-445-585-0.

Experimental art forms always present a challenge to our theory; poetry is no exception. Such is the case, for example, in genres that combine symbolic systems in ways that recast conventions and expectations. In the poems that we will examine the combining systems are linguistic and graphic. As a field of study now, poetics has to, in one way or another, come to terms with the new creative frameworks that poets propose to us, so to speak, when we study their work.

Following Lee and Chan's recent review of the English version of *The Edge of the Island*,[1] I will also mainly focus on the cross-language implications of the author's more recent work, in particular on four of the concrete poems included in this collection. Among other artistic features, in their review these bilingual aspects of the anthology are interesting because the experimental poems were not translated to English. Then directly relevant to the topic in this review is the title of the author's appendix: "Travelling between languages," theme which is continued in the translator's notes (pp. 247—255).

Concrete ("visual") poetry has a long history. In modern times perhaps the most memorable experiments can be traced to the Russian Futurists, the work on this "bi-modal" art form by Vasily Kamensky in particular. It was part of a broader movement of theorizing and testing the limits in the arts, reflected for example in the interest of poets of the time in Cubism. They asked what might verbal art learn from the fields of modern painting and sculpture. Following up on this question, writers looked to musical expression and musical perception as a model for understanding essential qualities.[2]

Chen Li's visual verses present us with a chance to look back on this poetic tradition, and then ask a related question: How do the singular design features of the Chinese writing system bring the problems of studying concrete poetry forward to our attention again. This is the opportunity that is presented to us in the present collection and by other poets from East Asia who have taken advantage of the same exceptional resources of the character orthography. In a previous study, Lee surveyed the field to give us an overview of this movement.[3] In particular, it is the iconicity of some Chinese characters (limited to a small subset) that allow for the opportunity. Even though identifiably iconic characters represent a very small percentage, vestige of the ancient origins of characters and radicals, artists are nevertheless able to exploit this feature for aesthetic effect, for example, by even introducing iconic

properties into a text, work of art, where none apparently existed before. In part this is possible because only morphosyllabic character systems (hànzì/kanji, 漢字, in China and in Japan) directly represent morphemes. Even given the marginal participation of iconicity in the system as a whole, it does exist, the unambiguous cases appearing prominently, visibly, to the literate speaker of the language.

Lee and Chan approach the questions of cross-language interaction from the vantage point of translation and meaning. This review will follow up on their analysis to examine the concrete poems more from the point of view of the patterns of language, writing and graphic scheme, one perhaps that would have been of interest to the Futurists because of the collaboration during the early years with their Formalist colleagues in St. Petersburg and Moscow.

In the following examples, we can try to mentally picture the patterns of language as they are combined with the visual patterns. To "picture" is the idea here, because of the hybrid form: language embedded in a graphic array.

"White"

This poem displays lines of characters, radicals, strokes and orthographic marks in rows successively transforming each set of rows by systematic reduction. The character for "white," or "clear" 白 [bái] is reduced, for poetic purposes, to "sun," or "day" 日 [rì] to the radical 凵 [kǎn], not a character, then to a series of stroke patterns (that could also be taken as the radical or character "yī" 一, although I don't think this was the poet's intention):

__ __ __ __ __ , followed by series of:

. . . . . . (which are neither character nor stroke pattern), reduced finally to:

. . . . . .

Shifting the series of dots from bold font to non-bold.

In this way, the visual effect of fading corresponds, or patterns upon, the series of reductions in the orthographic system applied by the artist.

In "Photo of Egyptian Scenery in the Dream of a Fire Department Captain," the visual display of a triangle (view from the ground facing the side of a pyramid) is composed of rows of the character for "fire" 火 [huǒ], rows of 1, 3, 5,... to 37. Here, the reader will perceive a kind of recursion in play, knowing the meaning-related character "inflammation" or "flame" 炎 [yán]. The successive (hypothetical, or perceived) reduplication would be the representation of

"blaze" 燚 [yì]. Taken as whole we can suggest parallel recursions (in a kind of duality of patterning). On one level of pattern, visually, the triangle shape of the pyramid face recapitulates the approximately triangular form of 火. Then linguistically, 火 combines with copies of itself to generate related meanings. After all, it's July and we are in Giza.

Perhaps Chen Li's most well-known poem is "War Symphony." Lines of "soldiers" 兵 [bīng], in formation, are given the appearance of advancing. In their forward march we notice that among the now dispersed ranks are individuals reduced to 乒 [pīng], and 乓 [pāng], onomatopoeia for "crack" and "bang." The perception of forward movement of the ordered ranks of 兵 we get from their dispersal and the selective "deforming" of the original, "intact," characters. The final rows repeat lines of the character 丘 [qiū] "mound," having the context-dependent metaphoric meaning of "grave" (in the specific context of this poem). They are now ordered again, in formation, in perfect rows.

In the Appendix, "Travelling Between Languages," pointed reference is made to Garri Bardin's "Konflikt" (1983) as a precursor: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CZDCjIhGJe0. Even though Chen had no knowledge of the work until after his own reading and animation of "War Symphony," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jZjj5y-7e9Q, he now takes "War Symphony" as a "translation" (re-creation) of the Bardin film, the Russian animator being the "original" author, in this sense: "…the real author of this poem" (pp. 238—239). The translation/re-creation, in this instance, is one that involves crossing modality.

"Breakfast Tablecloth of a Solitary Entomologist": In this poem, characters that may not at first reading appear as iconic, dramatically take on this property. It is the radical 虫 [chóng] indicating insect type creatures and lowly life forms such as bugs, worms, and insect larvae, as in 精虫 [jīngchóng] "spermatozoa." The sensation of swarming grotesqueness is achieved by the massive array of organisms (their names) each containing the same "anatomical" trait of 虫 in the form of this semantic radical.[4]

These examples of modern combined art form, of language and graphic pattern, we could also argue, make contact with the long tradition of calligraphy, widely appreciated and esteemed to this day. Readers will find these descriptions and reflections more telling upon reading the Sections II

and III (years 1990—2013) of the anthology and studying the full text of our four examples; then trace the development of Chen Li's work, in translation, from 1974 in Section I to get a more complete perspective.

For the broader panorama, the author reflects on cross-language aspects of literature in general, as in translation, for him a kind of language-travel: "In translating a work , I mistake it for my own, feeling that I'm writing again" (p. 233). Translation of poetry is re-creation, principal theme of the Lee and Chan review. Common among Taiwanese writers of Chen's generation, language-contact was prolific: Mandarin in school, Minnan at home, listening to his parents converse in Japanese, his mother to her relatives in Hakka. The study of the classical literature, as part of the school curriculum, completed the multilingual layering of his artistic education.

Creating "surprise out of the commonplace" is also made possible by the crossing between symbolic systems – for example, music and poetry (p. 243) – similar to the technique of combining them, as in the visual poems of *Edge of Island*. This guiding idea in art brings us back to the first question of our discussion: how do poetic experiments challenge theories of literary language? In the case of poets writing in Chinese, crossing boundaries and combining genres lead to us to reflect on the new forms in a way that appears to contradict assumptions about defining categories. An example of one such assumption is that the foundation of poetry is verbal, that its origin resides in the sound patterns of the human voice.[5] As a matter of historical fact, we might be able to show that this assumption is correct: as in all cultures, for thousands of years poems were composed and learned without knowledge of the characters, even prior to their invention as a means for recording language. Then, how do we account for new developments in art that appear to be extraordinary? Can they be considered, simply, as exceptions; or should we try to treat them more inclusively by widening our concept, "higher," onto a more abstract level? Then there is the logical alternative of doing both: incorporating experimental and avant-garde forms as exceptional, while at the same time recognizing primordial origins as foundational.

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Notes

1. Tong King Lee and Steven Wing-Kit Chan, "Transcreating Memes: Translating Chinese Concrete Poetry" in *The Palgrave Handbook of Literary Translation,* edited by Jean Boase-Beier, Lina Fisher and Hiroko Furukawa (Cham: Palgrave MacMillan, 2018), pp. 187—206.

2. Nina Gurianova comments on the connection between the two art forms, verbal and visual, in "A Game in Hell, Hard Work in Heaven: Deconstructing Canon in Russian Futurist Books" in *The Russian Avant-Garde Book 1910-1934*, edited by D. Wye and M. Rowell (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), pp. 24—32. She draws a parallel between the Futurists' experimentation with trans-sense verse, *zaum*, and concrete poetry. In both cases, their aesthetic proposal consisted in directing perception toward patterns: the sounds of language in the former (when the *zaum* poems are recited), and in the latter toward the visual patterns of words (when written) as they appeared in a broader graphic context. In the translator's introduction to *Edge of the Island*, Chang Fen-ling refers to this idea: "*what* the poems are about" can be backgrounded to bring forward a new "sensibility" for "*how* they are expressed" (p. 20). In part, this involves a defamiliarization "…of some of the Chinese characters and idioms in such a way that their conventional meanings can no longer be taken for granted." (p. 17). On this point, interested readers should consult the review of the work of writer Xu Bing in chapter 4 of Lee's *Experimental Chinese literature* for an example of how conventional meaning, in art, is challenged in a provocative way.

3. Tong King Lee, *Experimental Chinese literature: Translation, Technology, Poetics* (Leiden: Brill, 2015).

4. Lee and Chan get credit for noticing this deliberate use of the 虫 radical in how it creates the out-of-proportion sensation in "Breakfast Tablecloth." The special manner of displaying the characters, most of which are archaic or obscure for the native speaker, augments the sense of estrangement.

5. Ruth Finnegan, *Oral Poetry: Its Nature, Significance and Social Context* (Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 1977). Far from an ancient inheritance, long forgotten, poetic performance without writing as described by folklorists forms part of the modern artistic landscape, of significant popular following; for just one example, see Adam Bradley, *Book of Rhymes: The Poetics of Hip Hop* (New York: Civitas Books, 2009).